

T H E S O N G

Happy Xmas (War is Over)

by Fergal Kavanagh



Yoko Ono and John Lennon in 1969.

LANGUAGE LEVEL
INTERMEDIATE

Track **16**

Speaker:
Rachel Roberts
(Standard British accent)

So this is Christmas / and what have you done / another year over / a new one just begun...
questa canzone di **John Lennon** è diventata un classico del periodo natalizio. In realtà fu scritta nel **1971** come protesta contro la guerra in Vietnam.

On March 20th, 1969 John Lennon married Yoko Ono and the couple celebrated by spending a week in bed in the Amsterdam Hilton Hotel as a “commercial for peace¹.” Two months later they repeated the “bed-in” in Queen Elizabeth Hotel in Montreal, Canada, recording “Give Peace A Chance” with various visitors. This was the year Lennon’s name became synonymous with the campaign for world peace, when he also returned his MBE² to the British government as a protest against its involvement in the Biafran War and its support of the U.S. in Vietnam. The Lennons celebrated Christmas that year by erecting billboards³ in 11 cities throughout the world with the message “WAR IS OVER! (If You Want It) Happy Christmas from John and Yoko.”

Two years later John and Yoko put together The Plastic Ono Band, and decided their first recording would be “Happy Christmas (War Is Over),” a song they had written in a New York hotel room because John “was sick⁴ of ‘White Christmas.’” With the help of veteran producer Phil Spector and the Harlem Community Choir, the song was recorded at the Record Plant in one all-night and one afternoon session in October 1971.

The song begins with Yoko and John whispering⁵ “Happy Christmas” to Kyoko and Julian, their children from previous marriages, and continues as a simple Christmas wish to all, regardless of age (*the old and the young*), health⁶ (*for weak and for strong*), wealth⁷ (*for rich and the poor ones*), or race (*for*

black and for white, for yellow and red ones). It is, of course, an anti-war song and in the first verse, after hoping everyone close to us (*the near and the dear ones, the old and the young*) has fun over the festive period, John wonders⁸ what has been achieved⁹ in the previous year (*So this is Christmas, and what have you done?*). The message is that we can stop war, if we really want to (*War is over, if you want it*), and look forward to being unafraid (*without any fear*) in the New Year.

At the time the song was not hugely¹⁰ successful in the American charts and its U.K. release was delayed by one year as publishers Northern Songs (owning all the Beatles songs) refused to recognise Yoko Ono as a co-songwriter¹¹. It was re-released in 1980 after Lennon’s death, when it became Britain’s top-selling single of Christmas week. Interestingly, it never actually went to Number One, as the charts at that time were not published in the final week of the year. Since then there have been many cover versions by artists such as Celine Dion, The Corrs and U2.

You can see the video to *Happy Xmas (War Is Over)* on www.johnlennon.com

(*This recording features a brief excerpt from “Happy Xmas (War is Over)” by John Lennon and Yoko Ono, 1971*).

Glossary

- 1 **commercial for peace** - spot pubblicitario per la pace.
- 2 **MBE - Member of the Order of the British Empire**, l'onorificenza che i Beatles ricevettero nel 1965 dalla Regina Elisabetta.
- 3 **billboard** - cartellone.
- 4 **sick** - stufo.
- 5 **whispering** - che sussurrano.
- 6 **health** - salute.
- 7 **wealth** - ricchezza.
- 8 **wonders** - si domanda.
- 9 **what has been achieved** - cos'è stato ottenuto.
- 10 **hugely** - terribilmente.
- 11 **co-songwriter** - co-autrice.

English Through Music...

Fergal Kavanagh, the author of this article, runs the website www.tuneintoenglish.com. The Students' Area features activities for learning English through pop music.

