

BED-IN AMSTERDAM

March 2019 sees the 50th anniversary since John Lennon and Yoko Ono spent their week-long honeymoon in room 702 of the Amsterdam Hilton, protesting the Vietnam war in front of the world's media. Andrew Day stays in the suite that pays homage to the now-legendary bedtime story

March 1969, and the Vietnam War is raging. Richard Nixon has been elected president on the promise of ending the conflict, but two months after taking office he has yet to begin a troop withdrawal. Images of bombs dropping, villages burning and a country showered with Agent Orange is seen every night on television, sparking a wave of violent protests and uprisings across the US.

Meanwhile, 4,000 miles away on a quiet edge of Amsterdam, an alternative to the “active” resistance is being staged at the Hilton hotel. Into the anti-war movement step John Lennon and his wife, conceptual artist Yoko Ono.

Following their wedding in Gibraltar, the Lennons checked into the Presidential suite – now room 702 – for their honeymoon, and immediately announced that a “happening” was about to take place. John Lennon, of course, was one of the Beatles, so attracting journalistic attention did not prove difficult; more than 50 reporters and cameramen clambered to the scene, where, to their surprise, found the newlyweds sitting in their white pyjamas talking peace and non-violence.

Between 25 March and 31 March, John and Yoko received visitors from 9am to 9pm. They cuddled babies, sung with rabbis, argued down conservative media figures, penned songs – four tracks from the experimental LP, *The Wedding Album* were written and recorded here – and conducted countless interviews about their self-styled protest.

“Our honeymoon was bound to make headlines anyway, so why not turn it into an advertisement for peace?” Lennon told reporters.

Half a century later, I find myself staying



in the suite. While guests could book 702 before, the Hilton has remodelled the room to commemorate the event. The 538-square-foot space is now a museum of sorts, where archival photographs, framed album covers and sketches by Lennon himself adorn the walls.

That bed

But most people, I suspect, don't book 702 for the nice smattering of sketches. No, the main event here is the Bed-In area; the very stage where John and Yoko held court 50 years ago. Behind the oversized bed, the windows exhibit permanent decal reproductions of the famous “Hair Peace” and “Bed Peace” drawings, and fittingly, on the sky-painted ceiling, lyrics to the Beatles' song *The Ballad of John and Yoko*:

*Drove from Paris to the Amsterdam Hilton,
Talking in our beds for a week.*

*The newspaper said, “Say what you doing
in bed?”*

*I said, “We're only trying to get us some
peace.”*

The suite's aesthetic is light and calming,

with a homely living space featuring a Japanese-style wooden screen, Bose sound system, and if you're so moved, a guitar in the corner for strumming. There's also a fantastic balcony, which overlooks the designer shops and snug cafés of Oud-Zuid (Old-South) and a modern bathroom with a huge oval bathtub.

Bagism

Of particular interest is a TV, half-covered by a duvet. I figured this was probably related to the couple's ‘Bagism’ performance, when journalists summoned to Vienna's Sacher Hotel found themselves confronted with a large cloth bag containing – judging from the voices inside – the Lennons. The point? To preserve their visual anonymity and challenge the assumptions we make based on gender, age, ethnicity and dress. Classic Yoko.

Overall, the décor is only mildly evocative of circa-'69. Would it have been more absorbing to recreate the suite's former incarnation? Perhaps. But interestingly, the current furnishings were



Left: John and Yoko during their 'bed-in' in March 1969

Above: The suite includes John and Yoko artwork and memorabilia

Above, right: Sign on the door of suite 702. (Image: © Andrew Day)

Right: The renovated suite



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devised in consultation with Yoko herself: wood throughout represents nature, the stone elements are a nod to Central Park (where the couple spent much time), and glass is emblematic of transparency.

At the time, the 'hairy hedonists' received a hefty dose of criticism – especially from the British press. *"This must rank as the most self-indulgent demonstration of all time,"* one columnist wrote, while *"Beatle Lennon and his charmer Yoko have now established themselves as the outstanding nut-cases of the world,"* ran another.

Looked at now, the idea that sitting in bed for a week might cause Richard Nixon to revise his foreign policy sounds hopeful, to say the least. Once in office, Nixon only increased US military presence, extending a brutal aerial bombardment to Cambodia and Laos. It would be another four years before US troops pulled out of Vietnam, during which time tens of thousands of

Americans were killed, along with perhaps a million Vietnamese.

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All we are say-y-ying...

But the couple's most significant gift to the peace movement would be a song. Two months later, on May 26, the couple flew to Montreal, and staged their second week-long Bed-In, where Lennon put music to a simple phrase, *"All we are saying is give peace a chance."* And so the movement had its anthem. Come November, half a million anti-Vietnam protesters sang *Give Peace a Chance* at the Moratorium Day parade in Washington. Lennon said it was, *"One of the biggest moments of my life."*

Many hotel rooms have found

themselves at the centre of an extraordinary story; from Claude Monet's prolific stay at the London Savoy, to the speakeasy being run out of Al Capone's Biltmore suite in Miami. But perhaps John and Yoko's Bed-In is the most extraordinary of all: a living, breathing work of conceptual art, exploiting the world's media in the name of peace and non-violence. Now stories don't get much better than that.

Decades later, Yoko would reflect on Amsterdam: *"John and I thought, 'The war is going to end'. How naive we were, you know? But the thing is, things take time. I think it's going to happen. I mean, that I think we're going to have a peaceful world. But it's just taking a little bit more time than we thought."* ●

If you are a John & Yoko fan, you can follow in their footsteps and stay a night in the suite. Prices start from £1,315 per night.