

## MARK DAVID CHAPMAN

### Murderer

**BORN:** May 10, 1955; Fort Worth, Texas

**MAJOR OFFENSE:** Second-degree murder in the death of John Lennon

**ACTIVE:** December 8, 1980

**LOCALE:** Central Park West, New York City, New York

**SENTENCE:** Twenty years to life imprisonment

### EARLY LIFE

The formative years of Mark David Chapman (CHAP-muhn) in Decatur, Georgia, were troubled by an oversolicitous mother and an emotionally detached, abusive father. Early in life he imagined he was the ruler or hero of a city of “little people” whom he either had to save or had to destroy because of their waywardness. He became addicted to drugs and obsessed with the pop music group the Beatles but at sixteen rejected his past and turned to evangelical Christianity. His disillusionment with the Beatles increased both with the claim by musician John Lennon that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus and with the 1971 release of Lennon’s *Imagine* album, which called forth an idealist vision of a world beyond religious sectarianism, capitalist consumerism, and international war. Chapman psychologically identified with Holden Caulfield, the antisocial protagonist of J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), who ran away to New York to sort out his life.

Before Chapman made his own way to New York City, he worked for the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) in Georgia, Russia, and Beirut, Lebanon. He then attended Dekalb Community College in Clarkson, Georgia, and fell in love with Jessica Blankenship. He followed her to the conservative Christian Covenant College in Tennessee but left as a result of a mental breakdown.

### CRIMINAL CAREER

In the 1970’s, Chapman worked as an armed security guard but became dissatisfied with life and flew to Hawaii, where he twice attempted suicide. In 1979, he traveled to Asia and married Gloria Abe, a Japanese American travel agent who had arranged his trip and who reminded him of Yoko Ono, Lennon’s wife. The couple returned to Hawaii, where he again became ob-

**CHAPMAN & LENNON**

I feel that I see John Lennon now as not a celebrity. I did then. I saw him as a cardboard cutout on an album cover.

—Mark David Chapman

sessed with Caulfield and began debating with his “little people” whether to kill Lennon.

On October 30, 1980, he flew to New York to kill Lennon, convinced that Lennon was a phony for rejecting Christianity and a hypocrite for singing about an ideal world without borders and war and people without greed or money. Unable to buy bullets in New York, Chapman left to buy them in Georgia and returned on November 10. However, Abe convinced him to return home, where his demons were temporarily quelled.

Chapman returned to New York City on December 6; two days later he staked out Lennon in front of Lennon’s residence, the Dakota. That afternoon, he had Lennon autograph *Double Fantasy*, the recently released album by Lennon and Ono, before the couple departed for their recording studio. When they returned at 10:50 P.M., Chapman, with *The Catcher in the Rye* in his pocket, shot Lennon with four hollow-point cartridges. Lennon died shortly thereafter.

**LEGAL ACTION AND OUTCOME**

Chapman was charged with second-degree murder. The threat of public lynching was so great that he was transferred from Bellevue Hospital, where he had been taken for a psychiatric examination, to Rikers Island jail. After dozens of tests, six psychiatrists were prepared to testify that Chapman was psychotic; three were prepared to testify that his delusions fell short of the legal definition of psychosis. Chapman rejected the advice of his lawyer and the defense psychiatrists and pleaded guilty, saying that was what God wanted. On June 22, 1981, his plea that he intentionally caused the death of Lennon was accepted, and he was sentenced to twenty years to life in Attica State Prison. Despite being a model prisoner, he was denied parole in 2000, 2002, and 2004.

### IMPACT

For many Americans, the assassination of Lennon signaled the end of an era. Mark David Chapman murdered a highly visible icon for peace activism and the counterculture that dominated the United States and Europe from the mid-1960's through the mid-1970's. The Chapman case brought to light the relatively new phenomenon of abnormal psychology associated with crimes against celebrities and highlighted the ongoing problematic way that psychopathic individuals are treated in the American justice system. Lennon is still mourned by friends and fans, and Chapman has refused any treatment for his illness while in prison.

### FURTHER READING

Bresler, Fenton. *Who Killed John Lennon?* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989. A speculative account claiming that Chapman was programmed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) through drugs and hypnosis to assassinate Lennon for political reasons.

Hamilton, Sue. *The Killing of a Rock Star: John Lennon (Days of Tragedy)*. Edited by John Hamilton. Minneapolis: Abdo & Daughters, 1989. Brief children's version of Lennon's biography and Chapman's role in killing him.

Jones, Jack. *Let Me Take You Down: Inside the Mind of Mark David Chapman, the Man Who Shot John Lennon*. New York: Villard Books, 1992. Based on personal interviews, the book gives a thorough account of Chapman and the mental conditions that led him to murder Lennon.

—Jules Simon

**SEE ALSO:** John Hinckley, Jr.; Yolanda Saldívar.