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## Why Piano Owned By John Lennon Is Touring America

It Pops Up in Places Known  
For Violence and Tragedy,  
From Waco to Virginia Tech

By ANN ZIMMERMAN

The piano on which John Lennon composed "Imagine," his famous ode to peace and healing, is on a yearlong magical mystery tour of the U.S. with a macabre twist.

The nutmeg-colored Steinway upright, believed to have been in Mr. Lennon's country home in Ascot, England, is crisscrossing the country to show up at some of the nation's most horrific sites of violence, death and destruction.



John Lennon

It has popped up here and there with little fanfare, transported by white-gloved attendants in a moving truck who carefully unload the instrument to display it in parking lots, grassy fields and on street corners.

British pop singer George Michael and his longtime partner, Kenny Goss, a Dallas gallery owner, are the force behind the tour. Mr. Michael bought the piano from a private collector at a Sotheby auction for \$2.1 million in 2000. He had kept it at the couple's

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## Why John Lennon's Piano Is on U.S. Tour

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country home outside London, occasionally playing it for guests and using it to record some tracks on his 2004 "Patience" album.

So far the exhibit has been greeted with a mixture of skepticism, reverence and queasiness. When Libra LaGrone, a music curator at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans, was first approached in May about showing the piano in the hurricane ravaged city, she thought it was "creepy," she says.

She researched the project on the Internet to satisfy herself that it was legitimate. "Then I saw what it was doing for people," she said.

Lori Blanc, a Virginia Tech Ph.D. candidate in biological sciences, is a huge John Lennon fan, but she was still surprised at how she was drawn to the piano. "I am a scientist and not a sentimental person," said Ms. Blanc.

The piano was displayed on the campus of Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Va., where 32 students were massacred by a lone gunman in April. People drove from as far away as Washington, D.C., on Memorial Day weekend to see it. Some wanted the chance to play "Imagine" or other songs on it. Others simply ran their fingers over the cigarette burns Mr. Lennon had left on it.

Ms. Blanc spent more than an hour with the piano, playing a song she had composed for a friend who was murdered a few years ago. "It was symbolic and healing," she said.

The piano hasn't always been welcomed. Administrators at Columbine High School outside Denver, still suffering from publicity fatigue eight years after two students killed 13 people there in 1999, refused to allow the piano on the school campus. And officials at Ford's Theater in Washington, where President Lincoln was assassinated, ignored requests that they play host to it. When it showed up anyway one morning on the sidewalk in front of the theater, actors rushed out to see it.

Messrs. Michael and Goss shipped the instrument to Dallas to appear at a Goss Gallery exhibit of war photography. "We thought the piano provided a great juxtaposition," Mr. Goss said in an email from Russia, where he was accompanying Mr. Michael on a world concert tour.

The success of the gallery appearance led to the countrywide tour of disquieting places, which Messrs. Michael and Goss call "The Imagine Piano Peace Project."

Messrs. Goss and Michael aren't making any appearances with the piano. They chose Caroline True, a veteran music-video producer from Britain, to choreograph the instrument's tour, which they hope to turn into a video and book with the proceeds going to a charity yet to be named.

"There is a sense of oddity about the whole thing," said Ms. True. "But it is odd in such a kind, quirky way."

In the past four months, the piano has been to more than 10 sites, from the Memphis motel—now a museum—where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968 to a Texas prison on the eve of an execution. It showed up at a ceremony commemorating

1976 movie called "The Town that Dreaded Sundown." Ms. True planted the piano at a park near where the body of 16-year-old Paul Martin was found shot. A local musician played "Imagine" for a handful of spectators.

When the piano arrived in New Orleans a few days later, Ms. True faced another quandary. "Where do you put the piano in this enormous amount of devastation?" she wondered. A local man suggested the Ogden Museum, one of the first cultural institutions to reopen after 2005's Hurricane Katrina. After overcoming her initial skepticism, Ms. LaGrone, the curator, arranged for the piano to share the stage with one of the performers at the museum's weekly concerts.

"We all had our pictures taken with the piano—and we're not the type to take pictures with famous musicians," said Ms. LaGrone.

While letting Ms. True run the show, Messrs. Michael and Goss did insist on one stop for the piano: the home of Gabi and Alec Clayton in Olympia, Wash., whose story they found while researching gay hate crimes on the Internet. Twelve years ago, the Claytons' 17-year-old son killed himself after suffering a beating at his high school by an antigay gang.

The tour has paused for now while Ms. True wraps up business in London and the piano rests in the home Messrs. Goss and Michael share in Dal-

las. It is to be displayed this summer at a local mall. Ms. True hopes to resume the tour with an appearance on 9/11 near the World Trade Center site. Ground Zero has special poignancy for Ms. True, who had arrived in New York just hours before the bombing and watched the second tower fall from the balcony of a SoHo hotel with singer Lenny Kravitz.

Fittingly, she expects to conclude the tour in December at the Dakota, the Manhattan building where John Lennon lived and died at the hands of Mark David Chapman in 1980. Mr. Lennon's widow, Yoko Ono, was not consulted.



John Lennon's piano, at Virginia Tech in May.

the lives lost during the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, then 12 hours later was unveiled in Waco, Texas, at a service for the 80 members of a religious sect known as the Branch Davidians who died in a 1993 blaze after a 51-day standoff with federal officials.

"It gives people a distraction from grief and it's been a silent peace protest of sorts," Ms. True said.

While planning the piano road trip, Ms. True also wanted to include lesser-known, though no less horrible, tragedies. She searched the words "violent crime" on Google along with the names of towns along their route. That's how the piano came to Texarkana, a city of about 60,000 on the Texas-Arkansas border that is still haunted by the 1946 unsolved murders of five young people by a man only known as the Phantom Killer.

The murders were the subject of a

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ONLINE TODAY: See footage of the piano's tour in Oklahoma City and elsewhere, at [WSJ.com/Video](http://WSJ.com/Video).