

Lennon Law

How Leon Wildes helped John Lennon stay in the city he loved

"I didn't expect I'd be talking about the Bible this morning," says Leon Wildes, but it hardly slows him down.

"I was going to be a rabbi," he continues, "and in college I studied the Bible. And in the Bible, in some 34 instances, probably the most repeated mandate is 'Love the stranger.' I have found that as a kind of byword in my professional life."

Wildes wound up founding, not a temple, but Wildes & Weinberg, an immigration firm that takes to heart not only that biblical phrase but Emma Lazarus' words: "Give me your tired, your poor/ Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

Of course, Wildes' most famous client was hardly poor.

In 1972, Wildes represented John Lennon and Yoko Ono during what turned into a five-year deportation battle with the Immigration and Naturalization Service, which wanted to deport Lennon, ostensibly because of a drug conviction in England in 1968. It has since been revealed, however, that the Nixon administration wanted Lennon deported because of worries over his activism and power with young people. The 1972 presidential election, after all, would be the first in which 18-year-olds could vote.

The lawyer and the former Beatle were very different people but it's no stretch to say that "Love the stranger" is not far from "Imagine all the people/Living life in peace."

"No question about it," says Wildes. "He was very respectful of my religious views and we had a lot in common like that. He was concerned that religion was being confused and misused by the system. It wasn't being used as the common ground in society that it should have been."

In the 2006 documentary *The U.S. vs. John Lennon*, Lennon, in a clip from *The Dick Cavett Show* in the early 1970s, talked up his attorney. "Our lawyer's name is Leon Wildes," Lennon said. "He's not a radical lawyer. He's not a William Kunstler. Nothing like that. We went to an immigration lawyer who knew about immigration. And he has really been surprised because he's worked in immigration for 15 years. He's really been surprised by some of

the things that have gone on."

Wildes, himself a talking head in the documentary, says, "My original comment to them about the case was that I thought it was a loser. Why? Because most of my clients end up in a deportation proceeding, and, if they lose, that's the end of it. If they appeal that decision, they go to the Board of Immigration Appeals, and that is hardly ever successful."

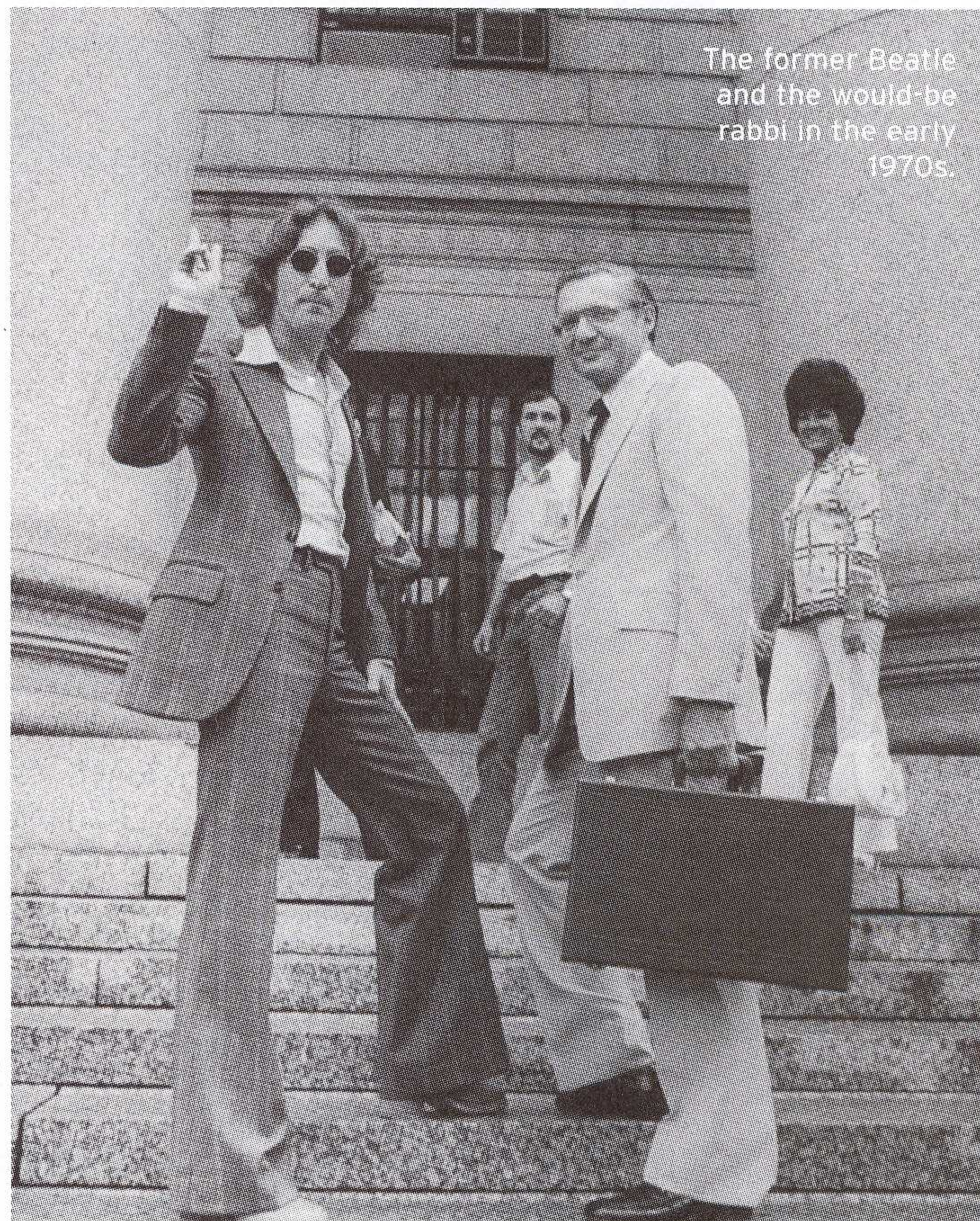
During this period, Wildes kept applying for stays and even sued Attorney General John Mitchell. Meanwhile, Lennon confided in him about a prescient sense of foreboding he had. "He was very concerned he was going to be shot," Wildes remembers. "We talked about that many times and that was in the background [during the trial]." At the same time, Wildes, adds, "He was not a guy to take a back seat."

Neither is Wildes. Post-9/11, the immigration battle rages more than ever.

"We deal with people who are completely strange to our ways, and often, through no fault of their own, end up on the wrong side of the law," he says. "And, unfortunately, the government takes an approach to violation of immigration status as though it was a criminal violation, which it isn't. [If] somebody is admitted to the United States and overstays, it's a civil matter."

Wildes' arguments are not only moral but economic: "Legalizing aliens and collecting all their tax money—that we're losing at this point—makes a lot of sense." He adds, "Essentially, we're all immigrants here."

In addition to his practice, Wildes teaches



The former Beatle and the would-be rabbi in the early 1970s.

immigration law at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law. He lectures, publishes, has testified before the U.S. Congress as an expert in immigration matters, and in 1989 was awarded the Edith Lowenstein Memorial Award for Outstanding Contributions to the field.

Here's one such contribution. In *U.S. vs. John Lennon*, Wildes recalls, with a smile, the moment the Court of Appeals ruled in their favor.

"I called John, and he said, 'Wait, what do you mean we won? You told us it was a loser.' I said, 'Yes, because I didn't want to build up your hopes too much.' And he said, 'Leon, I'm just going over to New York Hospital because Yoko is giving birth any minute. I'll call you from there.' At about 5:30 [the next morning]—I was bleary when he called—and he said, 'This is John.' And I said 'John who?' And he said, 'John Lennon, and I have a beautiful boy.'"

—Jim Walsh