



Lit Riffs: Writers "Cover" the Songs They Love

Matthew Miele (Editor), Neil Strauss (Introduction)

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Following in the footsteps of the late great Lester Bangs -- the most revered and irreverent of rock 'n' roll critics -- twenty-four celebrated writers have penned stories inspired by great songs. Just as Bangs cast new light on a Rod Stewart classic with his story "Maggie May," about a wholly unexpected connection between an impressionable young man and an aging, alcoholic hooker, the diverse, electrifying stories here use songs as a springboard for a form dubbed the lit riff.

Alongside Bangs's classic work, you'll find stories by J.T. LeRoy, who puts a recovering teenage drug abuser in a dentist's chair with nothing but the Foo Fighters's "Everlong" -- blaring through the P.A. -- to fight the pain; Jonathan Lethem, whose narrator looks back on his lost innocence just as an extramarital affair careens to an end -- this to the tune "Speeding Motorcycle" as recorded by Yo La Tengo; and Jennifer Belle, who envisions a prequel to Paul Simon's "Graceland" -- one that takes place at a children's birthday party replete with a real live kangaroo.

With original contributions from Tom Perrotta, Nelson George, Amanda Davis, Lisa Tucker, Aimee Bender, Darin Strauss, and many more -- riffing on everyone from Tom Waits and Bruce Springsteen to the White Stripes, Cat Power, and Bob Marley -- this is both an astounding collection of short stories and an extraordinary experiment in words and music.

Soundtrack available from Saturat
ion Acres Music & Recording Co.

Lit Riffs: Writers "Cover" the Songs They Love Details

Date : Published June 15th 2004 by MTV Books (first published 2004)

ISBN : 9780743470261

Author : Matthew Miele (Editor) , Neil Strauss (Introduction)

Format : Paperback 432 pages

Genre : Music, Short Stories, Fiction, Adult



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From Reader Review Lit Riffs: Writers "Cover" the Songs They Love for online ebook

Chloe says

I really wanted to like this book, I really did. Instead I was bored, frustrated and a little angry that someone thought this was the best that this premise had to offer. I've read a lot of short fiction anthologies in my day from either required reading for the fiction programs I was in during 2 of my stints in higher education or my feeling that they are a good way to discover new authors without having to commit to a whole novel. This was a great idea for a collection after all all writer's wish they were rockstars and rockstars wish they were writers (or is that artists or actors, I've heard all 3. Maybe, everyone wants to be a rock star, but once they become one they just wish they were someone else.)

Anyway, I still think it's a good idea, someone just needed to do a little more curating and a little less letting their friends' sub-par pieces make it into the final product.

Jennifer says

I admit, I didn't read every single piece in this book. Like most anthologies, this was uneven, and the opening piece, "Maggie May" was so wonderful and strong, that I found myself comparing other pieces to it as I read. J.T. Leroy's sample was unremarkable and annoying. It's a nice conceit though, and best read with iTunes open. I really liked listening to a song and then reading the author's riff -- many were really inventive in the direction that they went. Bottom line, it made me want to write!

Kim says

I wasn't particularly a big fan of short stories until I read this book. I was intrigued by the "writers cover their favorite songs" sub title. What could possibly be greater than that?

My personal favorites were 'Bouncing', inspired by Paul Simon's "Graceland", which reminded me a little bit of my story 'Hound Dog' that I'm getting published this fall. It also takes a music buff to know that not only is the story's title a Paul Simon song, but that the writer was using Paul's family fictionally. Paul actually has a son named Harper :) I also liked the use of "Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover" when the characters let the live kangaroo go, and Paul says: "Just slip out the back Jack." Now that's a good song.

I also enjoyed 'Why Go' written by Lisa Tucker. I myself am fascinated by the Vietnam War.

'Swamphroat' was a story about true friends and discovering the people you can really trust.

I think my favorite story of all was 'Dying on the Vain' about a woman who was writing a novel based on what the reconciliation of she and her former lover. That one had the most influence on me of all the stories.

Melki says

This was ordered from Amazon's sale table. Upon opening the package, I was horrified to see it was published by **Mtv BOOKS**. Is that an oxymoron, or what?

This is a mixed bag of short stories "inspired" by popular songs. Some are good, some are VERY good, and the rest will fade from memory faster than last year's music videos.

The best of the bunch took just the barest *whiff* of a song and turned it into good fiction.

Bad things happened when the authors tried to literally translate the lyrics into stories.

- A man named Paul travels to Graceland, taking along the child of his first marriage.

- A man named Bob shot the sheriff, but he claims it was in self defense.

Why, oh why, does no one ever care who shot the deputy?

Hannah says

It is sort of difficult to review this book overall since it is a collection of short stories, all by different authors; some of the stories i did not like that much, and i would individually would have rated about a 3, but there were also quite a few five-star stories, which is why i rated five stars overall. my favorite stories were the ones by aimee bender, lester bangs, johnathan lethem, darin strauss, elissa schappell, ernesto quinonez & amanda davis.

Tara says

Several great stories, standouts thus far being "Bouncing" by Jennifer Belle, inspired by Paul Simon's "Graceland," in which a middle-aged woman from NYC attends a suburban birthday party and realizes the depths of her loneliness, and the potential to escape. Also Tom Perrotta's "Dirty Mouth," about a kid who refuses to curse, based upon Tom Petty's "I Won't Back Down" as well as Johnny Cash's cover of the song. Perrotta's tale was almost too short for my liking...he captures 70's/80's suburban life so well, it's like I'm transported back to my own childhood. I am giving this a 3.5 rating because I loved some of the stories while others left me lukewarm. Why did it leave me somewhat disappointed? The idea of writing short stories with

songs as the influence is fabulous, but the individual writers take great leaps of imagination and some stories feel like they have nothing to do with the song. But that's what songs do--they transport us to places other people cannot imagine. Sometimes it's better not to know an artist's intention so we can derive personal meaning from the melody and lyrics.

Bruce Snell says

This was an interesting sounding concept (short stories inspired by songs), but, for me, the end result was weak. A couple of the stories were good, but most were uninteresting. Perhaps I am just not sufficiently avant-guard but most of the stories simply seemed to try too hard to be hip. As with any short story collection, different stories will appeal to different people, so I recommend that people read with lowered demands, skipping stories that don't grab them right from the start.

Brownguy says

I was thinking this would be good cos I like a lot of the songs, but it was a pretty tired series of stories. I couldn't even get through Lester Bang's first one. The ones I liked the best were from songs I didn't know but none of them really stood out to me.

Alan says

Lester Bangs was a phenomenal writer, and I don't even like the song Maggie May...much. Lethem's story is great, Perrotta even better. LeRoy's pretty good too. A great idea, but very hit or miss collection where nothing really stands up to the original inspiration of Bangs's 40 page story I reference above.

Jj Burch says

I didn't love it, but I didn't hate it. Not the greatest collection of short stories, but some were great (Graffiti Monk, Heroin King, and the Springsteen one).

Mesa says

Pick a favorite song, and write about it. There is something very dear to my heart about this book, and though some stories stand out more than others, I appreciate a good project, and compilations with a prompt are always fun, especially when they pay tribute to music which each author clearly feels passionate about.

Lauren Brasher says

This is a good collection of stories. However, I think that the idea itself is better than the thing as a whole. Most of the songs 'covered' are among my favorites, and it was nice to see the art stretched.

Michael Borshuk says

A compelling idea that's, for the most part, very poorly executed. Fiction writers "cover" tunes they love by writing short stories inspired by favorite songs. The contributors who do it best here (Jonathan Lethem, Tom Perotta, Ernesto Quinonez) are often the least literal, striving instead to capture the ethos or the feel of the song they cover. The writers that are least successful seem, often, merely to be transcribing the lyrics to the song and adding a bit of narrative tissue to fill it out. (I'm thinking of, say, Toure's godawful take on Bob Marley's "I Shot the Sheriff" or Jennifer Belle's tedious "rendition" of Paul Simon's "Graceland.) Also, the book is absurdly long. Many of these stories could have been cut, offering as they do a cover version that's about as compelling as that offered by a mediocre bar band.

Jill Guccini says

I was really pumped about this book - music, books, what could be a better combination? But I increasingly learned as I read more that perhaps it is just impossible to write stories that are about songs. Inspired by songs, perhaps, but "inspiration" is a very loose thing, so that this doesn't really stick out to me as a collection of stories about songs but really just a collection of very random stories. (With the exception of a few, like Toure's, which are very obviously about a specific song, and which I enjoyed very much.)

I also find it very disconcerting that Bookreads lists this as a book "by Jonathan Lethem," when there are *so* many stories in the book, and Lethem's isn't even one of the best ones, honestly. It should obviously be listed under the editor of the collection, Matthew Miele.

Kristin says

Some stories were great (5 stars). Others were blah (2 stars). Worth a perusal if you are up for an adventure...the stories (and songs) did not follow any particular style, so you never knew what you were getting until you dove in. Some authors tried to tell a back story for the song that inspired the piece, while others just matched a feeling that the song gave them. I almost wish that the authors did not give details about their inspiration....a couple of times it almost ruined the story. This collection was a great idea that kind of fell flat. I felt like some of the stories were filler; like the deadline was approaching and they didn't have as many stories as they had projected.

In my opinion, the stories in this collection that were the most well written, listed in no particular order, were "A Simple Explanation of the Afterlife" by Victor Lavalle, "Milestones" by Hannah Tinti, "The Bodies of Boys" by Julianna Baggott, and "Smoking Inside" by Darin Strauss.

****This collection is for a mature audience.
