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In Their Lives: Great Writers On Great Beatles Songs



Synopsis

For readers who loved *Tune In* and Nick Hornby's *Songbook*, an anthology of essays from a chorus of twenty-nine luminaries singing the praises of their favorite Beatles songs. The Beatles' influence on their contemporaries, on our cultural consciousness, and on the music industry ever after is difficult to overstate. We all have a favorite song from the band that made us want to fall in love, tune in, and follow our dreams. Arranged chronologically by the date of the song's release, these essays highlight both the Beatles' evolution as well as the span of generations their music affected. Whether they are Beatlemaniacs who grew up listening to the iconic albums on vinyl or new fans who stream their favorite songs on their phones, all of the contributors explore that poignant intersection between Beatles history and personal history. With contributions from twenty-nine authors and musicians • Roz Chast on "She Loves You," Jane Smiley on "I Want to Hold Your Hand," Rosanne Cash on "No Reply," Gerald Early on "I Am a Loser," Rick Moody on "The End," Maria Popova on "Yellow Submarine," David Duchovny on "Dear Prudence," Chuck Klosterman on "Helter Skelter," David Hajdu on "You Know My Name (Look Up the Number)," and more • the breadth of the band's impact is clear. From musings on young love and family strife to explorations of racial boundaries and identity, these essays pay tribute to a band that ran the gamut of human experience in a way no musical group has done before or since. Timed for the fiftieth anniversary of the release of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, this anthology captures the full spectrum of reasons fans still love the Fab Four after all these years. *In Their Lives* is full of pleasant surprises. • New York Times

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Customer Reviews

Great compilation. I found myself admiring many of the writers' offerings---enough to peek my interest as to their other works. Now it's out of control! Superb anthology. I enjoyed every page.

Wish they would have focused on some of the lesser known, but better, songs. Maybe Volume II?

Excellent book. Stories that has the scent and flavor of vanilla, gin and tonica and lost flames.

Lovely Sergeant Penguin!

Andrew Blauner, the editor of *Great Writers on Great Beatles Songs* is a serial anthologist. This is his sixth. In this instance he apparently asked twenty-eight people to write about their favourite Beatles songs (although their responses cover much more than twenty-eight songs). According to the introduction the songs are presented chronologically according to the date of the song's release but whilst the arrangement is mostly sequential two songs from Sgt. Pepper Lonely Hearts Club Band (*Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* and *She's Leaving Home*) are actually presented out of order. The subtitle of the book is *Great Writers on Great Beatles Songs* but although all of the contributors write well it is a stretch to call them all great writers and some of their choices, notably *Helter Skelter* and *You Know My Name (Look Up My Number)*, would not be regarded as great Beatles songs even by even the most hardcore fans. In terms of the years when

the Beatles were recording the coverage is pretty comprehensive and well balanced, with fourteen contributions covering the period up to and including *Revolver* and the remaining fourteen essays covering the singles and albums thereafter. Honours are also fairly even divided between John and Paul but curiously George only gets one song: *Here Comes the Sun* which is, moreover, somewhat bizarrely considered in tandem with *There's a Place*. This relative neglect appears even more unjust when one considers that Ringo not only gets one song as writer/lead vocalist (*Octopus Garden*) but also another as lead vocalist (*Yellow Submarine*). As to the writings on the songs themselves they are, predictably, a very mixed bag in terms of length, character and quality. Some, like David Duchovny (*Dear Prudence*) elect to speak about the song purely as they recollect it, whilst others, such as Ben Zimmer (*Am the Walrus*) have chosen to research the song extensively and share their findings. Both of these approaches can work well. Still others write about the personal impact or influence of a song, which means that the reader learns a lot about some aspect of their lives but next to nothing about the song itself (Roz Chast on *She Loves You* and Elissa Schappell on *Octopus Garden*). This is less satisfactory. The book is also not free from factual error. For example, *Tour* states that *Rubber Soul* was the first Beatles album without covers, which would be true if he were talking about UK releases but is not true of US releases, as the US version of *Help!*, unlike its British counterpart, omitted *Act Naturally* (by Johnny Russell and Voni Morrison), which appeared as the B-side to *Yesterday* in the States, and *Dizzy Miss Lizzy* (by Larry Williams), which was on *Beatles VI*. Such is the extraordinary richness of the Beatles catalogue that everybody is likely to lament some omissions (for me first and foremost *Come Together* and *While My Guitar Gently Weeps*) but despite this and despite the other shortcomings mentioned above, this book still has much to commend it. At its best the writing can shed new insights into the songs or raise interesting questions about how they were created and how they've been interpreted (or misinterpreted). I am certainly grateful to have learned, for example, that Lennon's *goo goo ga joob* (like Paul Simon's *coo coo*

ca-choo (Mrs Robinson) may owe a debt to Helen Kane or even Baby Esther's syncopations. In short, *In Their Lives* isn't the best book on The Beatles. It may not even be the best book on The Beatles to be published this year. But it certainly contains more than enough of merit to justify its purchase and keep its readers' interest.

3.5 stars | generally really enjoy compilations of this sort where songs or art work are written about by a variety of authors, and *In Their Lives* was no exception. *In Their Lives* includes a series of essays written about Beatles songs chosen by each author in chronological order from *She Loves You* to *Two of Us*. In addition, Paul McCartney has written a brief note at the beginning. I knew some of the songs and had never heard of others. I had fun listening to each song before I started the essay about that particular song and felt that enhanced my reading of each composition. Some of the essays are fabulous; Jane Smiley's tale about "I Want to Hold Your Hand" was highly entertaining. Others focus more on the intricacies of the chords or certain sections of the song or even some random topic unrelated to the song about which the individual was supposed to be writing. Those selections I did not like as much. Beatles fans and most music lovers will find much to like in this compilation and may find themselves skimming through an essay or two. Thanks to Blue Rider Press and NetGalley for the chance to read this ARC in exchange for an honest review.

At this point in time there have probably been more books written about the Beatles than there are Beatles songs (for those playing along at home, the Beatles recorded and released 409 songs, including the outtakes on the Anthology albums, live albums and other ephemera). Some critics have been questioning for years the need for more Beatles books. Those critics don't understand the deep emotional impact that those songs (and the lads who made them) have had on so many disparate people all over the world, including myself. Consider this: when John Lennon was killed I told my girlfriend's mother that I didn't know why Lennon's death seemed to be affecting me more than the death of my own father had. She pointed out "You probably knew John Lennon better than you did your own father." The implicit tragedy of that observation aside, it points to the way in which the Beatles have become important in so many

people's lives. The editor of this book mostly chose as participants professional writers with essay skills. While this can make for reliably good writing, I did have the feeling that some of the essayists approached the writing with an "I can write about anything" approach rather than express a strong affinity for how a Beatles song impacted their life. The writing by people with strong ties to music, then, come off as more interesting over the people for whom music is more incidental to their lives. Essays of particular note are those contributed by Alan Light, who makes manifest the joyous "I Saw Her Standing There"; Rosanne Cash writing about how "No Reply" can be revisited throughout her life and find new meaning therein; and Jon Pareles plumbing the inexhaustible depths of "Tomorrow Never Knows". Several of the other essays come off as academic exercises; not uninteresting, by any means, but lacking a certain emotional intensity that would show that the music of the Beatles made a real impact on their lives. For example, Gerald Early writes very well indeed, but I remain unconvinced of the influence the Beatles had on him after reading his essay. At most, the Beatles seem to be his version of a guilty pleasure. Perhaps the most confounding contribution is Joseph O'Neill on the ebullient "Good Day Sunshine". In an apparent effort to keep from incurring song license fees to reprint the lyrics, he comes off as a Victorian novelist writing an academic exercise. Is this parody? I wonder. I'm still glad that I read it, just as I'm glad that the Beatles' music is forever part of my life.

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