

Daisy Jones and The Six by Taylor Jenkins Reid

I recently read and reviewed music journalist, David Hepworth's book about the music industry in 1971. It is a musical era that fascinates me due to my age and the fact that I was just beginning to develop my own listening tastes during those heady first few years of the 1970s; but, also, it is hard to not be excited about this era when the pop sounds and flower power artists morphed into the variegated rock sound that has been so influential for contemporary music. That's why I was drawn to this novel set slap bang in West Coast America, the coolest place for music then, about a fictional band whose fame blazed brilliantly before ending abruptly and mysteriously. Even though there have been many books about that particular scene by the artists, journalists and even groupies who were there, this book takes the madcap mayhem and beautiful creativity of that scene and brings it fully to life in the story of Daisy Jones and The Six.

This is a story familiar to many young people following the rock gods of this time – a band rises from seemingly nowhere to create music, television appearances and concerts that mean so much to their massive fan base and then it just as quickly disintegrates. Often the band splinter around the cliché of creative differences, more often the accompaniments of fame (sex, drugs, alcohol and too much too soon) become impossible for these youthful and, predominantly working class, artists to handle. Burnout, breakdown, break up and, in some cases, death (Morrison, Hendrix and Joplin from the famous 27 club) were the results. And these were all lived out in the newly intrusive media of the 70s to the worldwide attention of fans who were alternately saddened at the demise of their heroes and ghoulishly fascinated by what seemed the glamorous bohemian excess of the times.

In this novel, we are made aware that the reason for the bright but transient trajectory of Daisy Jones and The Six has remained a mystery for decades and only now is the true story of their rise and fall emerging. And to get at the truth, Reid presents the novel as a series of interview responses from all the people who were there at the time – the band, management and promoters, roadies and studio engineers, family and friends, rock journalists and anyone else who was a witness to the band's story. We have a sense that someone is pulling together all these accounts (and we eventually find out who and why this person is looking so far back into rock's past); but the voices are unmediated and often contradictory in their perspectives of the past.

We start with the back story of the two key but different elements of the band that were the reason for the creative tension which inspired their one perfect album and so fascinated the fans. The Six were set up by Billy Dunne and his brother along with four other musicians in the late sixties. They were making a name for themselves touring and releasing tracks and they knew they were good. To be more precise, Billy knew they were good and he knew he was the biggest reason why as the band's songwriter and charismatic lead vocalist. In these early stages, we quickly grasp the tensions in the band. The book's structures give them all a voice and their admiration and frustration with Billy are clear as is the fact that they are all talented artists with their own ideas and belief about the contribution they make to the obvious chemistry in the band.

Daisy is a strikingly beautiful and intelligent young woman from LA, unnoticed by her family who, therefore, finds a new family in the clubs along Sunset Boulevard with all the groupies, drug dealers and itinerant musicians. It is her passion for music that saves her from being totally swamped by drink and drugs. Her voice and song writing as well as her charisma and beauty begin to get her noticed. And then a prescient producer has a eureka moment and sees the potential of putting Daisy and the band together.

From that point on, we are plunged into a world of hyper-creativity, artistic and sexual tensions and a series of descriptions about concerts and recording sessions told by those who were there, with a tang of authenticity. That is one of the main appeals of the book: as Billy, Daisy and the other band members shape the lyrics, experiment with different musical choices as well as make sudden short leaps of inspiration, it's hard not to believe that this is how great records get made.

The other strength of this novel is the attention paid to all the characters. Billy and Daisy, the song writers, of course, get plenty of attention and they leap off the page. Neither is perfect and their prickliness is part and parcel of their artistry. Yet they respect each other's talent. However, Daisy understands the need to fight her corner in an industry even more patriarchal than the prevailing society. Billy's appreciation of her talent is touched with a tinge of condescending paternalism. At the start of the book during The Six's first tour the hedonistic adrenaline rush of touring and adulation sends him off the rails. His drink and drugs fuelled breakdown nearly causes him to lose Camilla, his soul mate and rock. Her strength brings him back from the brink and, thereafter, he brings a puritanical professionalism to his music career and Daisy's talent. This gives the band drive and purpose but, occasionally irritates his more chilled band mates. When Daisy joins them, her independent spirit refuses to fall in line. The band to her is a democracy not the Billy Dunne project.

Camilla, along with Daisy and the Six's keyboard player Karen, is one of three excellently presented female characters. Reid does not allow them to be outshone by Billy's charisma and they help to highlight the passions competing within him whilst remaining utterly their own persons.

Perhaps the final pleasure of this book is that there is ample opportunity to guess which real life artists inspired the different members of the band and other musicians and celebrities they encounter. Fleetwood Mac is an obvious choice but not the only one. And Reid does that Zelig thing of inserting real people into the action to entrench the sense of time and place.

Yet for all the nostalgic pleasures this story evokes, the greatest pleasure is finding out what happened to all these fascinating characters who for a short time gave to the world music that meant so much.

As you can tell, I really like this book. Don't take my word for it, though. Here's what my good friend and avid reader Dave Smith emailed to me: Just read "Daisy Jones and The Six", by a distance the best fiction I have ever read about music.

