

An Avid's Guide to Sixties Songwriters

Peter Dunbavan

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Music fanatics will find plenty of material to mull over; casual fans are rewarded with a better understanding of music history.

It's easy to take music from a previous era for granted without understanding how it shaped the modern repertoire. In his ambitious book, *An Avid's Guide to Sixties Songwriters*, English musician and researcher Peter Dunbavan compiles a definitive canon of songwriters who created the recognizable hits of the 1960s, many of which are still covered and performed today.

The book is arranged like an encyclopedia. Songwriters are listed alphabetically, and each new section begins with the songwriter's birth date, an archival image of a representative record, and a few lyrics from well-known hits. This thoughtfully designed template is followed by informative tables showing how the writer's songs charted in the UK and the US, and which artists performed those songs. The meat of each entry is a descriptive biography of the songwriter. Dunbavan pulls from books, interviews with music magazines, and other sources to illuminate the lives and careers of big names and lesser-known names alike.

The writing is mostly clean and crisp, and demonstrates a certain liveliness and enthusiasm for the subject. At least once, though, the book's zeal slips into condescension, using the off-putting word "philistine." But it's hard not to appreciate the author's relish. "For any music enthusiast, a record or song is your footprint in time," Dunbavan writes in the introduction. His personal passion and critical appreciation are evident throughout.

The book's high notes are its interesting insights into music history. Some of these insights are anecdotal. For example, the section on songwriter Bill Dees offers charming backstory on how "Oh, Pretty Woman" became a major hit for Roy Orbison. Other insights are broader and more complex. The book connects several songwriters to the formative years of Motown, and highlights how African-American musical styles became popular "crossover" music for white audiences. And while the author states his intention to avoid wasting space on well-covered artists like Bob Dylan, he does include a section on Paul McCartney and John Lennon that focuses on collaborative songs either written for other artists or not performed by The Beatles.

An Avid's Guide to Sixties Songwriters is a book that can be revisited for its authoritative and encyclopedic qualities as well as for its entertainment value. The guide is formidable in scope, but each individual entry is thoroughly engaging. Music fanatics will find plenty of material to mull over, and can look up individual artists depending on their own aesthetic tastes. The casual fan, too, will be rewarded with a better understanding of music history.

SCOTT NEUFFER (July 20, 2017)

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