ForeWord Reviews

Falling Stars: Air Crashes That Filled Rock And Roll Heaven
Rich Everitt
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This book is a persuasive argument for staying on the bus. The author gives a surprisingly detailed accounting of twenty-four fatal airplane crashes that collectively took the lives of such musical stars as Buddy Holly, Patsy Cline, Otis Redding, Ronnie Van Zandt, Ricky Nelson, John Denver, Stevie Ray Vaughn, Aaliyah, impresario Bill Graham, and many others. The common denominator in most of these tragedies was human error—too little pilot training, too much weight for the aircraft and, always, too much haste to get back home or on to the next show.

A pilot himself who has logged time on a variety of aircraft, Everitt seeks out and summarizes the official investigations that followed each crash. Where there were survivors—and there were few—he reports what they recalled about the fatal flights. In John Denver's crash of his light, experimental plane, for example, Everitt concludes that the singer's troubles began when he failed to check his fuel level—beyond glancing at the unreliable gauges—and then declined the airport's offer to have his tanks filled. He was over Monterey Bay when his engine stopped. The official theory, says the author, is that Denver turned in his seat to reach the control behind him to switch fuel tanks and, in so doing, accidentally pushed the right rudder pedal that sent him plummeting into the sea. Other impatient pilots, sometimes urged on by their famous clients, disregarded weather warnings and promptly died for their imprudence.

Everitt does an excellent job of reducing to a few pages or paragraphs the musical history that brought each of these performers to his or her final journey. He seasons each of his major stories with a section called "Oddities and Ironies." He notes, for instance, that it was Don McLean who encouraged Jim Croce to become a singer/songwriter and that McLean had made his own reputation by writing and singing "American Pie," a song about the Buddy Holly crash. It was only a year after that song became a hit that Croce's plane went down.

In addition to his chapters on the most famous doomed performers, Everitt also offers shorter pieces on the crashes of lesser known musicians, among them Steve Canady (Ozark Mountain Daredevils), Walter Hyatt (Uncle Walt's Band), folksinger Stan Rogers, Christian music singer Keith Green, John Felton (the Diamonds), Harold "David" Box (the Crickets), and

the Reba McEntire Band. Jim Reeves is also allotted only an abbreviated section, which is unfortunate given Reeves's enduring importance in country and pop music.

Everitt, a news anchor for a Georgia NBC affiliate, has worked at several television and radio stations. While all the stories that he tells here end the same way, the characters involved and their manner of exit are fascinatingly different.

Edward Morris