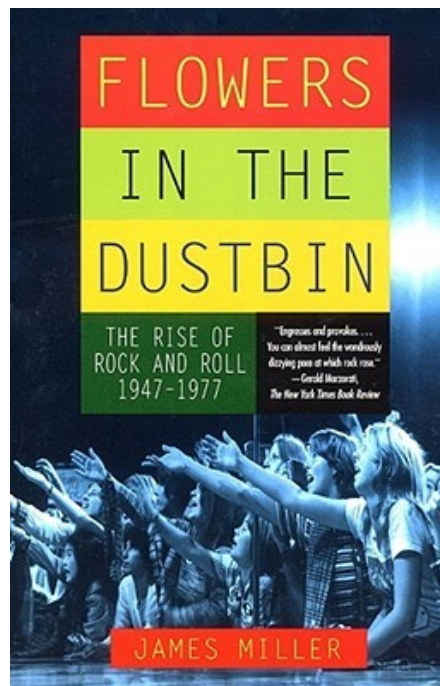




Flowers in the Dustbin: The Rise of Rock and Roll, 1947-1977

James Miller

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The Barnes & Noble Review

David Lee Roth said that the beauty of rock and roll is that "they're no rules and no schools. You just make it up as you go along." Certainly, the history of the plugged-in genre seems more like a mad romp than a logical development. James Miller sets out here to capture the evolution of early R&R as an industry and as a force in American life. Without descending into diatribe or veering towards critical theory, this former Michel Foucault biographer writes about the metamorphosis of casual basement jamming into a sometimes devious multi-million dollar business. Strewn along the way are epiphanies of music history: Bob Dylan turning the Beatles onto marijuana at their first meeting in 1964; Berry Gordy producing his first big hit by instructing Jackie Wilson to imitate Elvis Presley; the less-than-endearing first appearance of the Sex Pistols on British TV. Both literate and unpretentious, Miller catches the frantic surrealism of the rock scene. As Jerry Garcia said, "By comparison, real life is very dull."

— *Jules Herbert*

Flowers in the Dustbin: The Rise of Rock and Roll, 1947-1977 Details

Date : Published September 19th 2000 by Touchstone (first published 1999)

ISBN : 9780684865607

Author : James Miller

Format : Paperback 416 pages

Genre : Music, Nonfiction, History, Cultural, Culture, Pop Culture, Counter Culture

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Andrew says

We all hear the bullshit line, "oh, I was just born in the wrong decade". We should instantly realize how idealistic and insensible this statement is. We can always make the past appear more rosy than it actually was. Jim Miller did live through the 60s though, and even he thinks it was better than it was.

Jim Miller reviewed the latest Jimi Hendrix album Axis: Bold as Love (Dec, 1967) in the Rolling Stones issue of June of 1968. He derided the album stating: "Jimi Hendrix sounds like a junk heap...his songs too often are basically a bore, and the Experience also shares with Cream the problem of vocal ability." This is the album that is ranked #82 on the Rolling Stone's 500 greatest albums list.

Miller was one of the few early Rolling Stone's reviewers to strike a long-lasting career in music reviews. In 1999, 30 years after his initial review Miller wrote a book called Flowers in the Dustbin: The Rise of Rock & Roll: 1947-1977. The book has Miller chronicling the "critical moments in the advent of rock and roll" including the famous moment when Hendrix lit his guitar on fire at Monterey. "At the end of the set, when he sent his Fender up in flames, the bonfire did not seem gratuitous," Miller writes. "It seemed rather a gesture of innocent gratitude, a burnt offering to the unknown pagan gods who had blessed this harvest of creativity, and granted one man-child a moment of rare bliss." Only ten months later, Miller incredulously finds Hendrix sounding like a junk heap. In fact, many of the then present music writers were highly critical of Hendrix's stage antics and guitar heroics.

The history of rock as viewed through rose-tinted glasses.

Babs M says

I really enjoyed the first half of the book because it told me a lot of early artists that no longer get their due. However he neglected some key players in my opinion and praised others a bit too much, i.e. Bruce Springsteen. I highly recommend it up to the Beatles point of the book because you will already pretty much know the rest of what he is going to tell you.

Gwen says

Flowers in the Dustbin is a good synopsis of the rise of rock and roll, just not all inclusive or complete. Buddy Holly has barely a mention (and his death has been touted as the day the music died) nor do the prefab four, the Monkees (while a put together band they did have an impact on rock and roll and how it was marketed and perceived). While some might argue Buddy and the Monkees aren't rock and roll it is my contention they are as much rock and roll as some of the other artists/events mentioned in the book. I do understand not everything or everyone can be included in a book, but the inclusion of these two artists would not have made the book substantially larger.

I do recommend this book to anyone interested in the history of rock.

Burak Türkel says

rock'n roll'un tarihine ???k tutan, ba?ucu kitab?.

M. D. Hudson says

I loved this book -- by far the best rock n roll crit book I've encountered. My only complaint is that it wasn't longer. Unlike so many rock books, this one focuses on individual songs rather than trends or movements or Motown or whatever. There is some general cultural background, but this is always very relevant and very very interesting. Really, I wish this book had been twice as long.

East Bay J says

I think I've been waiting for a book like *Flowers In The Dustbin* for a long time. There are countless books on rock 'n' roll that glorify and idealize the music and performers, but very rarely is there a book that not only takes an honest look at rock music but also examines and determines its state along the way.

What I mean is, rock 'n' roll lost any innocence it may have had a good fifty years ago. For a very long time, it has been little more than a commodity on the grand scale. Sure, people continue and will continue to get excited about making and hearing rock 'n' roll music, but the ideas a lot of folks have, that rock 'n' roll is some kind of youth music, something pure and unsullied, a voice for change and so on, are absurd.

So, what I enjoyed the most about Miller's book is that, in it, he comes right out and says it. He gives praise to the creativity and spirit of various performers but he doesn't hold back when saying these musicians were untrained (and in some cases not very good), that Elvis turned into a mess, that the hype surrounding Springsteen was, in fact, unwarranted. Miller remains level headed and honest while still acknowledging how great the music was.

I also dug the connections Miller made, the narrative he chose to highlight. He doesn't cover every major event in the history of rock 'n' roll but what he does cover more than adequately illustrates the ideas he's trying to convey. These essays/chapters work just like a novel, taking the reader from 1947 to 1977, following the mystery of what rock 'n' roll is and what it means.

Another great point Miller makes is that music started as being only regionally divided in this country. It took the involvement of the music industry to create the idea of musical genres. At one time, an album like *Sgt. Pepper* unified people across the board. This kind of thing may never happen again because we've been taught to fit our tastes to demographic friendly categories.

Flowers In The Dustbin is well written and insightful. Definitely pretty essential reading for people interested in rock 'n' roll as a worldwide cultural phenomenon and in the greater implications of rock 'n' roll since it began.

Grindy Stone says

Not quite as bad as other reviews would have you believe. Some reviewers take exception to the amount of space given over to Elvis and The Beatles, but that's like squawking about a general baseball history that pays too much attention to the Yankees. However, there are some gaps in here - no mention of The Who or Led Zeppelin.

Dan says

A good general overview of the history of rock and roll, this includes ink on all your favorite heavy hitters (Sam Phillips, Elvis Presley, Alan Freed, The Beatles, The Sex Pistols, etc). No new ground is really tread on here, but Miller has a great style that flows without being stuffy. My favorite chapters were on rock's more "B-Roll" material: "Sympathy for the Devil" and the Godard film featuring the Stones, Bowie's introduction of Ziggy Stardust as a stage character, a brief bio of Wynonie Harris and a closer look at the song "Shh Boom Shh Boom".

Don't let this be the only book you read on the subject. It's a great companion to Greil Marcus' "Mystery Train" or "The Label" by Gary Mamostein (a hefty history of Columbia Records).

Scott says

An essential read on the pre-history of rock and roll, an indispensable summation of the golden age of rock, James Miller spoils the effect by summarily dismissing and disparaging much of the punk movement of the seventies. He also bungles the timeline of New Wave by placing it concurrently with that of the early punk bands.

This dismissiveness surely speaks to Miller's personal taste, an attitude not apparent in the earliest sections. Worthwhile but disappointing.

M.L. Rio says

The first half of this book is much better than the second. It's understandable; in the early years Miller provides a detailed and fascinating history of the birth of rock and roll from the blues, but with the explosion of rock after about 1965, he starts to lose his grip and spends way too much time on certain artists (we get it, the Beatles were a watershed) while neglecting to mention others at all. There's also a whiff of bitterness in the later pages; Miller clearly thinks something went wrong with rock, not surprisingly right around the time it started to make big money. But his pessimism or nostalgia or whatever it is seems to willfully ignore the fact that some great pieces of music appeared after and in spite of capitalism having its way.

Nicholas Bobbitt says

While this book has a definitive story and sticks to that story, I believe it does so at the expense of large

portions of actual rock history. Were this book to ignore Motown entirely, include Woodstock and hard rock more than passingly, include more about the 1950s rock scene outside of Elvis (Johnny Cash is barely mentioned, for example, despite having had a career which surpassed Elvis'), and perhaps dialed back the mentions of Dylan and the Beatles and the Stones to a level which would have allowed for more artists to receive more than passing mentions when in reality even the author recognizes that he's giving them short shrift, then the book would have been better. However, as it stands, the book covers the history of popular music from 1947 to 1977 fairly competently.

Jill Hutchinson says

I read this book in spurts since it is comprised of stand-alone chapters which can be read at leisure. I have mixed feelings about it. While it does have some good fact filled and unbiased rocker profiles (Jim Morrison, for example), it omits some of the greats who helped shaped what we call "rock and roll". Very little information on doo-wop, nothing about Led Zep and way too much about the Beatles. It would probably take ten volumes to examine all the influences and artists that were instrumental in the creation of rock and we all have our own opinions about who they were.....the author tried but it wasn't quite enough for me.

Wileyacez says

This book came from Bookstock this year. I think that the author did a very good job of laying down the skeleton of the rise of rock and roll (I was very glad to see Louis Jordan, whose music is such an obvious precursor). The history of rock and roll is so densely populated that choosing which elements to include must have been daunting, but I think Miller did an excellent job of using the more salient players to illustrate the utopian ideal of rock as a medium of the rebellious masses juxtaposed against its crass, commercialized side. Truly a good read on the topic.

Andrew says

A skeptical history of rock and roll.

Joseph says

Another instance where it would be nice to be able to add 1/2 stars to the ratings. *Flowers* is a great read, and it's highly informative. Regrettably--but predictably--it's also highly canonical. Long sections are devoted to chronicling how The Beatles changed everything with *Sgt. Pepper's* and how brilliant Dylan was/is/forever will be. Then, strangely enough, bands like Led Zeppelin are completely overlooked, mostly because Miller seems to have written them off entirely as, I dunno, commercial or something. And all the while, bands like Love, who were racially integrated (one of the book's central tensions hinges on white appropriations of black music forms) and who were contributing interesting, complex voices to rock history, are completely ignored, because, of course, they weren't The Beatles.
