



Songbook

Nick Hornby

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“All I have to say about these songs is that I love them, and want to sing along to them, and force other people to listen to them, and get cross when these other people don’t like them as much as I do.”

—Nick Hornby, from *Songbook*

Songs, songwriters, and why and how they get under our skin... *Songbook* is Nick Hornby’s labor of love. A shrewd, funny, and completely unique collection of musings on pop music, why it’s good, what makes us listen and love it, and the ways in which it attaches itself to our lives—all with the beat of a perfectly mastered mix tape.

Songbook Details

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Author : Nick Hornby

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Laura says

Haciendo bandera del abandono de aquellos libros que no tenemos ganas de leer, pienso que en la adolescencia me hubiese enganchado con el juego de escuchar y conocer cada una de las canciones elegidas por Hornby, que me cae muy simpático por haber visto adaptaciones como High fidelity o About a boy, para luego sumergirme en la lectura de estos artículos.

En esos años de leer con avidez suplementos jóvenes y revistas como Los inrockuptibles o la Rolling Stone, este libro hubiese encajado a la perfección.

Hoy en día, simplemente prefiero estar leyendo otras cosas.

Arsnoctis says

Un percorso originale tra 31 delle canzoni che hanno fatto di questo autore l'individuo che era nel periodo in cui scrisse questo librercolo -2003, circa-. Lettura decisamente consigliata a chi stia cercando di ritrovare la propria voce nelle canzoni altrui, a chi stia inseguendo lo swing perduto, a chi stia imparando a conoscere se stesso...e anche a tutti gli altri.

Se la musica non avesse avuto un impatto così profondo nella mia vita, mi sarei attenuta alle canoniche 3 stelle del "mi è piaciuto", ma non è questo il caso. Dopotutto si tratta di Hornby, non penso che mi pentirò di essermi sbilanciata.

Lascio qui, perlomeno per gli utenti di Spotify, la playlist -quasi- completa delle canzoni in questione [Link alla playlist su Spotify](#)

Nickyty says

(Reposting an old review)

A few pages into book brought me to the observation. It's not the typical Nick Hornby piece. Don't expect to find yourself in the psyche of some middle-aged guy coming to terms with his personal foibles and neuroses. The book is a collection of essays on selected songs that Hornby relates to certain moments in his life – his personal soundtrack so to speak.

Granted, the topic is boring or, at the very least, uninspiring. His song selection is quite esoteric. Only two of the songs and a third of the artists rang a bell. And what do I care about Nick Hornby's life? I read books to amuse myself on their content, not to catch a glimpse of the author's adolescence or religious beliefs.

Nevertheless, there's one thing that I could not deny. Reading the book was sheer pleasure.

I guess that's what makes a writer like Nick Hornby so popular. He can captivate his audience even with the most mundane topic at hand.

Somewhere in the book, Hornby refers to himself as a “prose stylist”. I consider him more of a “prose stylist extraordinaire”. It is not the idea he is communicating that piques my interest, but the manner through which he communicates them. I end up reading the book for the sake of reading, as if reading itself provided a satisfaction separate and distinct from the ideas Hornby wishes to convey. Next thing I know, anecdotes on Hornby’s first visit to America or his inspiration for a particular chapter of High Fidelity have become as enticing as a tall tale of witchcraft and wizardry.

It’s like going to a restaurant and, for one reason or another, choosing the fish over the steak, despite knowing that steak has more inherent taste and flavor. You expect to be moderately sated by a bland entrée that surprisingly outclasses even the finest of beef.

That’s what Hornby does. He evokes the sublime out of the ordinary. He is a literary master chef who magically seasons a flavorless main ingredient with a spice repertoire of wit, sarcasm and an uncanny use of metaphors.

In his review of the song So I’ll Run, Hornby himself cleverly discusses this dilemma of writing about the ordinary –

“ It’s all very well writing about elves and dragons and goddesses rising out of the ground and the rest of it – who couldn’t do that and make it colorful . . . But writing about pubs and struggling singer-songwriters – well, that’s hard work. Nothing happens. Nothing happens, and yet, somehow, I have to persuade you that something is happening somewhere in the hearts and minds of my characters, even though they’re just standing there drinking beer and making jokes . . . ”

In differentiating music and lyrics in another review, he says “music is such a pure form of self-expression, and lyrics, because they consist of words, are so impure, and songwriters . . . find that, even though they can produce both, words will always let you down. One half of [the] art is aspiring towards the condition of the other half, and that must be weird, to feel so divinely inspired and so fallibly human, all at the same time. Maybe it’s only songwriters who have ever had any inkling of what Jesus felt of a bad day.”

See what I mean.

Hence, after going through the entire book once and selected chapters several times, I still find myself lifting the book from my shelf and revisiting a chapter or two – for the sake of sheer hedonism.

julieta says

But sometimes, very occasionally, songs and books and films and pictures express who you are, perfectly.

I might not have the same music taste as Nick Hornby (I mostly related to the references to Sex Pistols, The Clash and Patti Smith) but we feel and are driven by our love for it which is exactly what this book is about. Although, I do feel it got dragged by the end of it and the songs didn't feel as meaningful as the first ones and could've done without.

Dynamopiev says

Absolute shit! Some terrible, terrible song choices - Nelly Furtado!! It's embarrassing! Like hearing your dad telling you he watched the fratellis on Jools Holland and thought they were great! Awful, awful book!

Kitty-Wu says

Bueno, no es una novela, ni un ensayo, ni una crítica musical (como se esfuerza en recordarnos el autor constantemente)... es una mirada sobre 31 canciones que de alguna manera u otra han calado en Hornby, bien sentimentalmente, bien por otros motivos más "musicales". No puedo evitarlo, Hornby me cae bien, me gusta como escribe, y es un fan de la música, como yo, aunque no tenga su nivel de conocimientos seguramente... pero el libro destila pasión y eso es lo que me atrapa, aunque no compartamos totalmente los gustos, hace que se contagie su entusiasmo por lo que escribe. Todo ello sazonado con un gran sentido del humor... y además escoge "Thunder Road" para abrir el libro.... que más se le puede pedir.

P.D. Creo también que "Thunder Road" forma parte de mi historia, al igual que "Born to Run" y otras muchas canciones (igual un día hago una reco como él); Thunder es una canción que, como Hornby, no identifico con un momento de mi vida o una imagen en concreto, porque me lleva acompañando muy a menudo desde los 14 años, por lo que es como una banda sonora... y curiosamente no envejece, es vigente para mí, es "redonda" sencillamente, tanto en la amarga versión acústica como en la imponente versión más rockera. Ais..... ese Boss.....

FEBRERO 2011 - RELECTURA

Sarah says

I wavered between giving this book three or four stars, but decided on three because of several essays in the middle that I didn't find particularly interesting and could have done without. In general, these essays provide an insightful look at music in general, how it plays a part in our lives and its impact on culture.

Because the essays are written by Nick Hornby, they are often quite funny, and almost always well-crafted. I love his general lack of pretension about his music tastes, and that he recognizes he's a middle-aged white man who probably isn't always the best judge of modern music (and he's okay with that).

I have not heard many of the songs he wrote about, but that didn't matter. The songs themselves were often only periphery to the main points he was trying to make about culture or music tastes or the importance of music in our lives. I thought the first few essays started off strong, and then the book started to lag in the middle, but overall I enjoyed it.

My edition also came with five extra essays reprinted from The New Yorker, but most of them were album reviews and didn't feel like they fit with the rest of the book. Still, even album reviews are quite insightful in the hands of Hornsby. And the fifth of these essays, where Hornby decides to listen to the 10 best-selling albums in the U.S. based on the Billboard charts, contains one of the best and funniest insults I've heard of a band's lyrics (but I'll let you read for yourself).

Núria says

Tal como su título ya da a entender, '31 canciones' se trata de una disección de 31 canciones que por diversos motivos han impactado y llegado al autor. No importa que la lista que ha escogido Hornby no tenga ningún parecido con la que hubiéramos escogido nosotros, ni que ni siquiera hayamos oído las canciones de las que habla, porque consigue transmitir perfectamente el amor que siente por estas canciones en concreto, y por la música en general, con un estilo que mezcla crítica musical, ensayo y autobiografía. Hay momentos verdaderamente memorables: como cuando defiende la "música pop" ante los que la consideran superficial y simplona; cuando relata el efecto que tiene la música en su hijo autista; cuando explica lo que es adorar un grupo que nadie conoce o descubrir una canción nueva que logra emocionarnos; cuando nos cuenta cómo en su juventud sólo adoraba (y se decidía a escuchar sólo) música "ruidosa", pero que con el pasar de los años ha ido perdiendo todos sus prejuicios musicales.

Sin embargo, mi momento preferido es cuando nos cuenta cómo podemos llegar a odiar una canción que habíamos descubierto por casualidad, simplemente porque la empiezan a poner a todas partes y a todas horas. Es algo que inevitablemente nos habrá pasado a muchos y algo que yo nunca hasta ahora me había parado a analizar. Hornby argumenta que es porque es imposible "amar o conectar con una música que está tan omnipresente como el monóxido de carbono", porque la música es algo que nos habla directamente a nosotros, sobre nuestra intimidad. Y a partir de aquí también he descubierto porque siempre es tan especial encontrar en la radio esa canción que para ti es en algún modo especial, simplemente porque es la oportunidad de compartir por una vez algo que tienes muy dentro, algo que te define como persona. Y por todo esto creo que es un libro imprescindible para todos los que aman la música.

Todd says

turns out i don't give a shit what nick hornby's favorite songs are.

Redfox5 says

When I put this on my wishlist, I thought it was a novel. I just read a couple of Hornby's books and decided I wanted to read them all. I was a little disappointed when I discovered it was just him talking about 31 songs he liked, especially when I looked at the list of songs and either don't know or don't like any of them.

But this isn't really about those particular songs. This is a musical journey that pretty much everyone can relate to. Even though the songs are different, they way he's gone through genres at certain stages of life, echos my own.

I laughed out loud when he mentioned starting to look towards country music, as it tends to be like heavy rock music where it's not that mainstream and you still feel like you have something special to you. I am loving country music at the moment, I must have reached that age!

Everyone who starts to notice they are getting older will relate to not understanding the music of today. My niece was playing some rap song for me yesterday, kept going 'boys, not hot'. And I was judging it for being stupid. This book has made me remember that I love the song 'Barbie Girl' and I will sing along to 'The Cheeky Girls' if it's being played. And I'm guessing my parents didn't understand why I liked those tunes, as their parents no doubt didn't understand what they were listening to.

Still can't get over that all the songs I like are now being played on 'Magic' . A radio station that used to be reserved exclusively for songs my mum liked.

Hornby injects his trademark humor into the writing and although I did try and listen to a few of the tracks on youtube, they are not my thing. But that doesn't matter. Like I said before, this is about the relationship people have with music. Very relatable.

Lavinia says

I was playing Queen for my daughter today, thinking it's 24 years since I first consciously listened to their music and irremediably fell in love with them (read Freddie, mostly) and I just realized I didn't say a word about this little lovely book.

"Sometimes, very occasionally, songs and books and films and pictures express who you are, perfectly. And they don't do this in words or images, necessarily; the connection is a lot less direct and more complicated than that"

This quote really sums up what 31 Songs (Songbook) is about. There's a lot of love in it, for music, obviously, for Danny, his autistic son, for friends, for places, for Bruce (Springsteen), for Lee (not Bruce Lee, though :-)), there's sadness and there's joy. It's almost like an open invitation to introspection. I'd love to do it, but I'm not sure I'm ready to dig so deep into myself.

Zac says

What could perhaps be described as autobiographical music criticism. Anyone who knows me knows I frequently cite the often miss attributed quote "writing about music is like dancing about architecture" (Costello? Monk? Mingus? Kant?) so this book is kinda like that. Plus, Hornby frequently comes across as an old, liberal fart, especially in his descriptions of 21st century pop music and hip hop BUT HE KNOWS HES AN OLD LIBERAL FART AND HE REALLY LOVES Nelly Furtado so that sort of makes it OK doesn't it? Not really. I don't even know where to begin with that one.

Still, his passion for music made me pull out a couple CD's I'd bought out of guilt and/or curiosity and listen to them, only to realize I still didn't like them.

John says

"You could, if you were perverse, argue that you'll never hear England by listening to English pop music. The Beatles and the Stones were, in their formative years, American cover bands that sang with American

accents; the Sex Pistols were The Stooges with bad teeth and a canny manager, and Bowie was an art-school version of Jackson Browne until he saw the New York Dolls.”

So begins Nick Hornby’s chapter on why England’s national anthem should change (shouldn’t they all?) from “God Save the Queen” to Ian Dury & The Blockheads “Reasons to be Cheerful.” And he lays down astute reasoning behind his wry suggestions.

In Hornby’s personal survey on music, “Songbook,” he ponders many ideas, among them how many Dylan discs are really enough. Apparently five is all you need even though he amassed 20+ discs and collections as we all did. And he’s right; he’s right about so many songs and artists and pop movements that you can’t help but stop and cue up Youtube. You’ll even cue up “Late for the Sky” by Jackson Browne just to see if Hornby’s post-40s sensibilities align with your growth from The Ramones to songs with meaning.

Often they do. Hornby’s re-examined musical history is right on. “I can’t afford to be a pop snob any more, and if there is a piece of music out there that has the ability to move me, then I want to hear it, no matter who’s made it.” In the case of Hornby’s re-assessment of Browne and the “delicate Californian flowers” and his cross reference of Mojo Magazine’s top 100 Greatest Punk Singles as proof that sometimes we get some music at certain times in our lives and sometimes we’re just not attuned to other efforts is spot on. He’s right, there really isn’t 100 great punk singles, most are simple awful, but he does recognize it’s a moment in life that we hold dear. And then it’s time to move on.

Hornby’s “Songbook” isn’t clear-cutting nostalgia. He appreciates greatness and what moves us. “What must it have been like, to listen to “Like a Rolling Stone” in 1966, aged nineteen or twenty?” Hornby asks. “I heard “Anarchy in the UK” in 1976, aged nineteen, but the enormous power those records had then has mostly been lost now.” Songs got faster, louder, and shorter, so they lost the shock. Dylan, being Dylan, we mine it deeper, because it was meant to be mined. Or so we thought, and that may be why we get exhausted by ‘serious’ artists, Dylan, Zeppelin, Springsteen, until the fun is gone. As Hornby points out, “Like a Rolling Stone,” still sounds perfect. It just doesn’t sound fresh anymore.”

“Songbook” starts with an assessment of Springsteen and a mention of Dave Eggers’ theory that we play songs over and over because we have to ‘solve’ them. That may be true, but we still love the evanescence of what moves us. Then Hornby ends “Songbook” with a look at Patti Smith. “One of the things you can’t help but love about Smith is her relentless and incurable bohemianism, her assuaged thirst for everything connected to art and books and music. In this one evening she named-checked Virginia Woolf and Tom Verlaine, William Blake and Jerry Garcia, Graham Greene and William Burroughs.” While Springsteen worries about being The Boss, and as perfect as he can be, and he can be absolutely perfect, witness his song “The Rising” in response to 9/11, Smith on the other hand “seems blissfully untroubled about her status as an artist: she just is one, and it requires no further contemplation on her part.”

Hornby wrote that after seeing a transformative Patti Smith performance, and I’m convinced, as he was that night, that great artists, those that make us feel the music and art and writing channeled through them, make us all better human beings.

Alison says

A couple of times a year I make myself a tape to play in the car, a tape full of all the new songs I've loved over the previous few months, and every time I finish one I can't believe they'll be another. Yet there always is, and I can't wait for the next one; you need only a few hundred more things like that, and you've got a life worth living.

I love Nick Hornby. I love his voice. And I love that he's so neurotically obsessive about the things that he loves.

Here he dissects 31 of his favorite songs. I have a hard time believing that these are his actual favorite 31 songs. I felt like they were 31 good lead-ins to 31 essays, in a way. He had some points to make about music, and these particular songs, or artists helped to illustrate them.

I was most intrigued by the song "notes." I looked up each one on You Tube so that I could hear them as I read. He listed pretty specific details on some, and it was fun to catch on to what he was talking about. I was introduced to some songs and artists I'd never heard. Some struck a chord with me, some didn't. I made a list of some I'd like to hear again. (OK music freaks, I know you want specifics...how about Rufus Wainwright doing "One Man Guy"...or "Caravan" by Van Morrison?)

Hornby here writes like a magazine music critic. He likes to explain the "why" behind a song. He reminds me of a Biology professor, carefully dissecting a frog. There's a nerd, and a poet within him.

Only three stars because there were some uninteresting parts (did I really need a whole essay about why Los Lobos makes a good boxed set, but not Stevie Nicks? Aren't boxed sets already dated anyway, in this day of digital downloads?) But there were some highs, too, including Hornby devoting an essay to the musical interests of his autistic son--a very tender moment. Love you, Nick! You can make me a mix anyway.

Lynx says

Nick Hornby contemplates the souls connection to music, and how it shapes our lives and culture while sharing with us 31 of his own favourite tunes and his personal connection to them. Hornby's essays, as with all his novels, are beautifully written with equal parts humour and insight and even if you're unfamiliar with the song in that chapter, completely relatable.

I made a point to listen to every song while reading each chapter which added to my enjoyment as well as introduced me to some gems I'd never heard before.

A must read for those with music running through their veins.

David says

the original hardcover edition is the one to get. it's all made up nice to resemble a mix tape you made back in high school and handed, sweaty palm and all, to the girl you were madly in love with. she was all long brown hair and old striped izod shirts that were hand-me-downs from her older brother or father. and afterwards. days later. you sat on a guardrail in a parking lot and talked about the songs. and the sun was setting over telephone wires on beat-up cars and still. it was a perfect landscape. and you held hands and looked her in the eye and watched the last light leave the day. that is pretty much this book.

Marla says

Nick Hornby is a good writer and it is obvious with this book. But this was a really boring book. As I was reading about songs I didn't know or could care about I wondered how this book even got made and who

would really buy it. I fill like it was something he just did to fulfill an obligation. I'm glad I could read it in a day.

I won this book on Goodreads and thank the publisher for my copy.

Butterfly says

This book inspires me to discover and get inspired by good music (again).

Now I need to skim it again from cover to cover while looking up every single song I don't know on YouTube.

GloriaGloom says

Alcuni giorni fa ho ricevuto un bellissimo regalo: un cuscino poggiatesta per la vasca da bagno. Oggetto che desideravo da tanto tempo. E' la sua anima arrogante e inutile travestita da manufatto con finalità d'uso ad attirarmi. Esattamente come le canzoni. La prima volta che presi coscienza dell'esistenza di un simile oggetto fu in un cinema, secoli fa, incauto spettatore di Nightmare e l'unico ricordo che ho di quel film è una scena, assai secondaria, in cui una mamma raccomanda al figlio (o era una figlia?) di utilizzare nella vasca il poggiatesta per evitare di affogare (!) al sopraggiungere di un eventuale colpo di sonno. In prima battuta pensai che diavolo di popolo è un popolo che affoga in una vasca da bagno, e soprattutto un popolo che progetta costruisce vende e consuma poggiatesta da vasca? Poi conclusi che in fondo è lo stesso popolo che è riuscito a rendere industria globale un oggetto assai più immateriale e bizzarro come la canzone.

Da felice possessore di poggiatesta ho ripreso in mano questo libello di Nick Hornby -libro da leggerci obbligatoriamente in vasca- scrittore poggiatesta per eccellenza, della cui produzione ho letto molto ma ricordo poco, come certi filmetti horror o talune canzonette, scrittore inutile e, a volte, piacevole appunto come un poggiatesta da vasca. Qui Hornby, una volta tanto, lascia da parte l'usurata formuletta del chik lit per maschietti e adotta una lingua rozza, discorsiva, quasi da bar, adattissima all'argomento trattato. Un elenco di 31 canzoni che spazia dal molto alto (Dylan, Patti Smith, Van Morrison) al molto basso (Nelly Furtado) senza soluzione di continuità. Ma non ha alcuna importanza. Le 31 canzoni possono essere tranquillamente sostituite da altre qualsiasi 31 capate a caso dal canzoniere universale per portare avanti il giochetto volutamente ingenuo innescato da Hornby. La tesi di fondo, esplicitamente non dichiarata, ma ovvia cordicella che infila tutte le 31 false perle, è il domandarsi (e risponderci) come può un adulto trasferire un tot di passione (un bel po' di tot) verso quei quattro minuti quattro di esile trama musicale, quell'innocente approssimazione di una rappresentazione estetica della realtà quale è la musica pop. E' una domanda che insegue tutti noi, attempati e suggestionabili idioti che corrono dietro al nulla in musica.

Su una cosa io e H. siamo d'accordo: il corpo a corpo con la canzone è un corpo a corpo con il mistero, non è importante tirar giù il vestito musicale a certe creature fragili, si avrebbero solo brutte sorprese, gli ingredienti è buona regola lasciarli segreti, il disvelamento interrompe il gioco, meglio quindi bendarsi gli occhi e cercare a tentoni una qualunque di quelle 31 maniglie che aprono la porta di quel mondo parallelo. Siamo persone predisposte alla fede e all'abbaglio, alla fede nell'abbaglio.

Su molte altre siamo in netto disaccordo, ma non importa, in fondo mi sono sempre posto un paio di domande intorno agli inglesi: la prima è quale cortocircuito culturale sia l'origine dell'invenzione di una cosa come il porridge, la seconda è perché esiste Rod Stewart. A una delle due, Hornby mi ha risposto. E tanto basta

Hannah Polley says

It is not really this book's fault that I hated it because it really is not my thing. However, I like to give every book that comes my way a chance so I gave it a go.

This is a book about Nick Hornby's favourite songs. My problems were that I don't know who Nick Hornby is, I don't care what he thinks about certain songs, and we clearly have different tastes in music.

I tried to read it carefully but after the first few songs, I just skimmed through it.

Not for me at all.
