

**Popular Music and Young Adult Literature**

Whitney Winn

IS 426

June 7, 2007

Music plays an important role in youth culture today. It can help to shape one's identity and to convey that identity to others. According to a 2006 study, 27 percent of 16 to 22-year-olds, the largest percentage, listed music as the most important characteristic that defines their identity, over other features like religion, ethnicity and race.<sup>1</sup> Subcultures like emo, punk and goth heavily base their uniqueness around the music of that subculture.

Popular music is also increasingly pervasive in a teen's life. They hear music on the radio, at parties and school dances, in television, movies and advertisements and piped in to clothing stores. The internet also serves as an important platform for learning about and acquiring new music. One of the central features of the social networking site MySpace is its capacity to stream music over the internet and the ability for users to add music to their personal profiles. It's another way for teens to broadcast their identities via music and new media.

Likewise, music does not exist as a standalone entity. Most teens do not sit down to listen to an album and only listen to an album. They may be simultaneously writing a term paper and chatting with friends online. Indeed, "more and more, kids report using two, three and even more media at the same time."<sup>2</sup>

While it is fairly clear that music is important to teens and appears as constant background noise to their lives, the way books fit into this multimedia environment is not immediately apparent. For example, 8- to 18-year-olds spend an average of 43 minutes per day with print media (books, magazines and newspapers) versus an hour and 44 minutes of exposure to music, with 15- to 18-year-olds spending over two hours listening to music

---

<sup>1</sup> New America Media, "California Dreamers: A public opinion portrait of the most diverse generation the nation has known," April 25, 2007, 11.

<sup>2</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation, "Generation M: Media in the lives of 8-18 year olds," March 2005, 26-27, <<http://www.kff.org/entmedia/7251.cfm>>.

daily.<sup>3</sup> By in some way incorporating music into young adult literature, authors are at once reflecting the youth culture about which they are writing and appealing to their interest in the music itself. Not surprisingly, many of the authors of these books are musicians themselves, so music clearly plays a big role in their lives.

Many young adult books feature music in some way. There are books that mention music in passing, those that include musicians and those that are about music-loving teens. Popular paperback series like *Gossip Girl* tend to fall into the first category, dropping band names alongside designers and celebrities. There are plenty of titles about aspiring young musicians including *Rock Star Superstar* by Blake Nelson and *Fat Kid Rules the World* by K.L. Going. The focus here, though, is on the fiction books that feature music-loving teens and the bands they listen to. Several recent and popular titles fit into this category — all except *Perks of Being A Wallflower* are included on the 2007 Best Books for Young Adults List. I will explore the way music is used in these particular books, examine the common themes present therein, and discuss the way in which music can be used to enhance the book-reading experience both in and out of the library.

*Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist* by Rachel Cohn and David Levithan offers the most overt musical themes. Both the title characters live and breathe music. Nick plays bass in a band and makes sappy mix tapes for his now ex-girlfriend. Norah follows the music scene in the city, privy to the benefits of having a record executive father. The two meet at Nick's rock show and bond over their common love of music and the New York music scene.

---

<sup>3</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation, "Generation M: Media in the lives of 8-18 year olds," March 2005, 59, <<http://www.kff.org/entmedia/7251.cfm>>..

In *Just Listen* by Sarah Dessen, Annabel starts the school year friendless and alone in the lunchroom. She shares her lunchtimes with fellow loner, Owen, who spends most of his time lost in his headphones. The two bond and Owen introduces Annabel to the world of music through mix CDs and his radio show. Eventually, Annabel finds a reason for listening: “As long as I had something to listen to, I could blur the things I didn’t want to think about, if not block them out completely.”

*The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky features a lot of popular music, which the main character Charlie comes to love. The song “Asleep” by the Smiths deeply moves him and acts as a character itself in the story. He references other songs and makes mix tapes for his friends. The prominence of music in this book makes sense considering it is published by MTV Books.

The main character of *King Dork* by Frank Portman is also a huge music fan. He generally listens to classic music of the 1960s and ’70s, with strong opinions about certain bands. For example, at a party he reluctantly attends, he comments, “The music on the stereo was all Small Faces and the Who and the Kinks and the Jam. Not too shabby.” He and his best friend also have a makeshift band that they constantly reinvent with new band names and album titles, though never really get far with the actual music making.

All of the books mentioned above include characters that love music and name particular singers and bands. Interestingly, they also include the names of fictional bands. Citing real musicians that are popular now can create some problems for a book’s longevity — what’s hip and now when writing a book may not even be cool when the book comes out a year or two later, let alone stand test of time on library shelves. *Perks*, since it’s set in the early ’90s uses music to anchor the book in time and characterize Charlie. The Smiths are an

established classic rock band of that time, so it makes sense that Charlie listens to their music. *Just Listen* and *Nick and Norah's* each use both real and fictitious bands. It seems that 'current' bands are made up — Where's Fluffy, for example — while 'classic' bands are real, like Belle and Sebastian or The Clash.

Several authors, including some of those listed above, extend the reading experience onto the web. The site for *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist*, for example, provides readers with a list of all the songs in the book, playlists for the two title characters, and the ability for readers to submit their own playlists.<sup>4</sup> Stephenie Meyer, the author of *Twilight*, offers a playlist that she envisioned while writing the novel, even though the book does not feature music itself.<sup>5</sup> Cecil Castellucci has a blog for her newest novel *Beige* where she posts punk rock playlists from other young adult authors and celebrities to complement the punk scene present in the book.<sup>6</sup>

A possible emerging trend is the production of a book soundtrack. While many authors are doing this informally as outlined above, there are a few examples of albums produced especially to complement a book. Tanuja Desai Hidier's young adult novel *Born Confused* published in 2004 has a companion soundtrack (though packaged separately), which is perhaps the first example of this phenomenon. The original songs are based on the book and written and performed by the author's own band. Similarly, Top Shelf Productions released an instrumental soundtrack inspired by Craig Thompson's *Blankets*. According to a *Wall Street Journal* from last year, the trend seems to be primarily in the young adult market perhaps because of their heavy music-listening habits.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> "Nick & Norah's Infinite Playlist," <<http://www.randomhouse.com/teens/nickandnorah/>>.

<sup>5</sup> "Twilight Playlist," < [http://www.stepheniemeyer.com/twilight\\_playlist.html](http://www.stepheniemeyer.com/twilight_playlist.html)>.

<sup>6</sup> "Beige Is Punk!" <<http://isbeigepunk.blogspot.com/>>.

<sup>7</sup> Jurgensen, John, "Reading, Writing — And Rocking Out," *Wall Street Journal*, August 19, 2006.

The prepackaged book soundtrack certainly has its appeal, but the cost of music licenses can be prohibitively expensive so official soundtracks are not usually possible. With the proliferation of music downloads, though, teenagers are adept at grabbing singles to compile playlists themselves. Soundtracks and playlists posted on author's websites or MySpace profiles fit into the online environment in which teens function. Acquiring music listed is usually just a click or two away and gives the teen a sense of ownership over a playlist's creation. This sort of sharing also inspires creativity in making one's own mix based on a reading experience.

While it is clear that authors are taking advantage of the multimedia opportunities on the internet, young adult librarians can do more in this arena. More musically inclined librarians can create their own playlists for certain young adult titles and distribute them via bookmarks in the selected books or display them on the teen section's website or MySpace profile. This could also be a project for teen councils to get involved with. Programming like this could also highlight the library's own music collection. Perhaps a librarian could make displays that pair books with albums mentioned in them or that complement them in some way. For example, pair *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* with The Smiths' *Louder Than Bombs* or *King Dork* with The Who's *Quadrophenia*. Another consideration is having computers capable of playing audio files from sites like MySpace or the publisher's sites, so users can listen to the playlists if they do not have personal computers.

While this paper focuses on popular music, especially that of the rock variety, there are certainly titles which deal with other music genres. The hip-hop and rap genre is currently the most popular among all teens and even more so among Black and Hispanic

youth, so it requires as much attention or more in a library's collection.<sup>8</sup> Whatever the genre, though, the inclusion of popular music-oriented literature in a young adult collection and the marketing of those books will help to draw more teens into the library.

---

<sup>8</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation, "Generation M: Media in the lives of 8-18 year olds," March 2005, 29, <<http://www.kff.org/entmedia/7251.cfm>>.

## Books Mentioned

Castellucci, Cecil. *Beige*. 2007. Candlewick, \$16.99. (ISBN-10, 0-763-63066-7; ISBN-13, 9780763630669).

Chbosky, Stephen. *The Perks of Being A Wallflower*. 1999. Pocket Books, \$14.00. (ISBN-10, 0-671-02734-4; ISBN-13, 9780671027346).

Cohn, Rachel and Levithan, David. *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist*. 2006. Random House/Alfred A. Knopf, \$16.95. (ISBN-10, 0-375-83531-8; ISBN-13, 9780375835315).

Dessen, Sarah. *Just Listen*. 2006. Penguin Group USA/Viking, \$17.99. (ISBN-10, 0-370-06105-0; ISBN-13, 9780670061051).

Going, K. L. *Fat Kid Rules the World*. 2003. Penguin Putnam/G.P. Putnam's Sons, \$17.99. (ISBN-10, 0-142-40208-7; ISBN-13, 9780142402085).

Hidier, Tanuja Desai. *Born Confused*. 2002. Scholastic Press, \$16.95. (ISBN-10, 0-439-35762-4; ISBN-13, 9780439357623).

Meyer, Stephenie. *Twilight*. 2005. Little, Brown Young Readers, \$17.99. (ISBN-10, 0-316-16017-2; ISBN-13, 9780316160179).

Nelson, Blake. *Rock Star Superstar*. 2004. Viking Juvenile, \$17.99. (ISBN-10, 0-670-05933-1; ISBN-13, 9780670059331).

Portman, Frank. *King Dork*. 2006. Random House/Delacorte, \$16.95. (ISBN-10, 0-385-73291-0; ISBN-13, 97803857324918).

Thompson, Craig. *Blankets*. 2003. Top Shelf Productions, \$29.95. (ISBN-10, 1-891-83043-0; ISBN-13, 9781891830433).

Von Ziegesar, Cecily. *Gossip Girl*. 2002. Little, Brown, \$9.99. (ISBN-10, 0-316-91033-3; ISBN-13, 9780316910330).

## Further Resources

### Books

Ellingham, Mark. *The Rough Guides Book of Playlists*. 2005. Rough Guides, \$9.99. (ISBN-10, 1-843-53603-X; ISBN-13, 9781843536031).

Lewitinn, Sarah. *The Pocket DJ*. 2005. Simon Spotlight Entertainment, \$9.95. (ISBN-10, 1-416-90723-8; ISBN-13, 9781416907237).



## Electronic Resources

All Songs Considered <<http://www.npr.org/programs/asc/>>: The website for the NPR program includes audio downloads of current and past shows as well as a live show archive.

iTunes <[www.apple.com/itunes/](http://www.apple.com/itunes/)>: Mostly a vehicle to download the popular music management software, the web version includes various top 10 lists to see what's currently popular.

Largehearted Boy <[blog.largeheartedboy.com](http://blog.largeheartedboy.com)>: A daily blog that includes short music and book news and reviews as well as a "Book Notes" column where authors share playlists for their books.

MySpace <[www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com)>: The most widely used social networking site allows musicians to stream their music and interact with listeners. A good way to research local and up-and-coming bands. Many young adult authors also have extensive profiles.

Pandora Radio <[www.pandora.com](http://www.pandora.com)>: A free internet-based music player that generates playlists based on listener inputted preferences. Type in the name of a band you like and the player will play songs from that artist and similar artists.

Pitchfork <[www.pitchforkmedia.com](http://www.pitchforkmedia.com)>: The ultimate resource for fans of independent music — a review from Pitchfork can make or break an indie band's success. Also a reliable source for album release dates and concert schedules.

Stereogum <[www.stereogum.com](http://www.stereogum.com)>: A popular music gossip blog that posts samples of new music, interesting music-related videos and other miscellanea. Very snarky and very fun.

YA-MUSIC electronic discussion list, <<http://lists.ala.org/www/info/ya-music>>: A new discussion list from YALSA devoted to talking about music in YA collections.

## Magazines

Blender, Filter, Entertainment Weekly, Paste, Rolling Stone, Vibe