



The Autobiography of Donovan: The Hurdy Gurdy Man

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Donovan's autobiography charts his life from a post-war, Glaswegian childhood to the height of an international career as one of the leading figures of the 1960's music scene. Always feeling like an outsider, he found relief through music and poetry. The book reveals how he came to be influenced by Buddhist teachings, and the music of Woody Guthrie and Joan Baez. The book explores the significance of falling deeply in love with the woman who was to become his muse, and the profound sense of loss he felt when their relationship came to an end, and how the loss affected him both personally and creatively. A leader of the folk revival in both Britain and America, the book recounts how he rose to be an international star, releasing songs such as "Mellow Yellow" and "Catch the Wind", and his most successful album, "Sunshine Superman". Donovan is acknowledged as one of the most significant cultural icons of the 1960's. The book provides a frank account of his early experiments with drugs and his search for self. He reveals the story of how he developed friendships with Baez, Dylan and the Beatles, with whom he shared a spiritual sojourn to meditate with the Maharishi in India. Donovan's autobiography offers first-hand insights into his music and poetry, recollects his rise to fame and the way in which destiny was to play a hand by re-uniting him with the lost love of his life through a chance meeting.

The Autobiography of Donovan: The Hurdy Gurdy Man Details

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Jenny says

I have been a Donovan fan since I heard him croon the most wonderful song (and my namesake) "Jennifer Juniper." I knew I was in love. Imagine the surprise that overcame me when I discovered that Donovan had written an autobiography. I just had to have it.

I was not disappointed. This is a fabulous look at the 1960's from a true bohemian point of view. Although some may not agree, he describes his influences and muse without being too pretentious. After all, he did spend a summer in St. Ives strumming his guitar. So what if he met and became friends with the Beatles and Dylan? It was part of his story, and something that we needed to hear.

All in all, this book is another example of self discovery, and a love story that spans decades. Now that I finished this memoir about the Hurdy Gurdy man, I know some of the stories behind the beautiful lyrics that I cannot seem to get out of my head. "I'm just mad about Saffron...."

Belinda says

I admit it--I have always loved Donovan. Probably not surprising for those who know me well, I am a mass of personalities and one of them is definitely a hippie. I fell madly in love with Donovan when I was a little girl and they would play his videos on the defunct but fabulous MTV show (remember back before it was taken up with intelligence-sucking reality shows and they played music?) Closet Classics. I loved "Sunshine Superman" and "Atlantis" and of course "Mellow Yellow". He was a cute little hippie with a Scottish accent--what's not to love? As I got older I explored his music further and continued to be a fan. He's not for everyone, I suppose--and definitely not for the "I am oh so cool and cynical" types--he's a total flower child--optimistic and sweet. After reading this I am pleased to say he has not changed that.

This is a very engaging and informative autobiography. It's also a really good way to set the record straight. Donovan has gotten a really raw deal. His musical importance has been overshadowed by both the Beatles (whom he was friends with) and Bob Dylan (he was also friendly with Dylan) and because he left the business fairly young to follow a more spiritual path and raise his kids. He also lived a more healthy lifestyle and did not let ambition rule his life. He does come off a bit self-aggrandizing at times--only slightly and I believe that part of that is due to being treated as a piece of fluff by many in the musical community and of course among the vultures of the journalism business. He did do many things first that more famous musicians did later and I suspect anyone would get tired of seeing things they did first heralded by the world as revolutionary when done by others. What is amazing about this is that the very people he's accused of imitating or riding the coattails of, have come forward themselves to give him credit including the Beatles, Joan Baez and Bob Dylan. I personally am not a fan of Dylan (he is compared to Dylan most of all)--I never have been--I can admit to his song writing ability but I would rather be tied to a chair and beaten with a rubber hose than forced to listen to his nasal whining and I think he is incredibly overrated. But even Dylan himself has gone on record to say he liked Donovan, learned things from Donovan and gave Donovan his due. He released many critically acclaimed albums in the last decade and was involved in many of the big and important music festivals during the 60's. He's had a long and strong marriage and raised his children with his wife as well as her son by Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones. He's continued to write music and poetry. And he comes off as an overall nice guy.

I found that he loves many things that I also love--Pre-Raphaelite painting and style, antiques, nature, and Indian mysticism. He's also an accomplished guitar player and writer. He even lived in Gypsy caravans (another of my eccentricities--I want to own a caravan and my boyfriend has promised to build me one --thank goodness he's an accomplished woodworker and craftsman). Admittedly this makes me love him more. But even stepping aside from my personal fondness for him, he's a good writer--funny and with the gift of making you feel as if he's sitting around talking to you as a friend, but also explaining musical techniques and journal entries and owning up to his flaws. From reading some of the other reviews of this book I can see that his attempts to defend his contributions have not been totally successful, but there will always be those that have to run down others to make their own heroes sound bigger. I don't feel that need but I am glad to see that he's had the best revenge--a long, happy and art filled life.

Andy says

I don't even care if this book sucks. Donovan rules!

Okay, I'm done with the book. It's lame. Donovan still made some great records, though.

Amy says

Clearly it was time for a biography to be written about Donovan. And since nobody else was going to do it, Donovan had to shoulder that burden himself.

At best Donovan's memoir captures the Zeitgeist of the sixties straight from the horse's mouth, in his own clumsy yet earnest, somewhat-stream-of-consciousness style. Sure, his dialect is embarrassingly beatnik at times, but what else would you expect from the man who gave us *Mellow Yellow*? It feels like the genuine artifact; i.e., the gawkishness of the writing is evidence that it's probably not ghostwritten. And the book offers many laughs—some deliberate, though more often they are the unintended byproducts of his God-given hubris and bad prose-poetry.

At its worst, it's unabashedly self-aggrandizing, rife with typos, and indiscriminately preachy. The scope of Donovan's influence on music and the world at large is—according to him—too vast to enumerate. But for humor's sake, let's list a few of the things Donovan gifted the universe with: inventor of psychedelia and Celtic rock, first use of the sitar on a Western stage, Andy Warhol's banana cover for the Velvet Underground, the experimental use of horns on *Sgt. Pepper*, first to feature the electric violin, the catchphrases “Flower Power” and “Love, Love, Love,” world music as we know it.

Throughout the book, you have to wonder at the veracity of the portrayal. Sure, everyone's entitled to a perspective, but Donovan seems to completely forget his likely audience, pointing out the obvious or reinventing it. His need to convince the reader of the novelty and significance of his music—not to mention lifestyle, philosophy, and theology—verges on pathetic, especially considering that most people reading his autobiography are probably already fans to begin with. The entire book reads as a study in how underrated he was, and yet he manages to effortlessly rank himself among The Beatles, Bob Dylan, and The Rolling Stones in terms of influence. By the end of the novel (because that's what it is, truly), Donovan comes to the

conclusion that he must forsake the evils of fame and fortune for true love and a simpler life. Hence his decision to drop out of the music world in 1970, and the book comes perfectly full-circle. Of course, a quick Allmusic.com search brings up a slew of widely unpopular albums and tours stretching from 1970 to the present...

But let's cut him some slack. Ok Donno, maybe Bob Dylan wasn't making fun of you in "Don't Look Back." Maybe John Lennon didn't come to see your show because he was reluctant to let Beatlemania steal any of your thunder. Or MAYBE he just thought you were a total dork, like most everyone else did.

But you know what, Donovan? You ARE a total dork, and that's why I love you. And somehow the essence of that fact—and the idea that only a man with a little moondust in his brain could compose such stirring music about mermaids, fairies, and staying groovy—still shines through. And that's why I can't give this book less than 3 stars: one for being—in his writing if not his facts—shamefully honest, one for adapting the book as a love story (awwww), and one for ending the story in 1970.

OK, and maybe a half-star for resembling Bilbo Baggins.

Raeche1 says

Loved this Donovan book - if i was like Donovan I'd say i was the first person ever to have read it, but i guess Donovan was the first person ever to have read it and I would just be bad vibin' him if i was to say i'd been there first :0) As much as i love him, this book is hilarious for all the wrong reasons. Ego is a very funny thing...

Pete daPixie says

I found out Donovan worked in the same St.Ives restaurant in Cornwall, and hung out in the same places, and dossed in the same woods as I did. His St Albans early sixties period was interesting for me too, especially his guitar playing development.

Typical sixties hippy trippy mantra from flower child minstrel Donovan.

Alana says

I love Donovan's music and the book of poetry he wrote many years ago (Dry Songs and Scribbles) was brilliant. He writes very sweetly- his lyrics are beautifully and romantically structured.

But I was extremely disappointed in this book; as a long time fan of Donovan, I got no perspective into his journey into the creative process nor a new understanding of his relationship to music, writing or the people around him. Much of the book seems to be a listing of names ('we were at ... with- followed by a list of famous persons' names) with no substance as to why the friends were together. I had the feeling that someone was talking about a party with the admonition 'you had to be there to understand.'

I will continue to eagerly wait for his new music as I think has a real grasp of the poetry of romance. I did

not find his genius to this autobiography.

Lizzie says

When I first flipped through this book it looked fascinating, and I couldn't wait to find it used. Now I have no idea what I saw in it - it's a vapid, rather boring account of Donovan's rise to fame with a subplot of whether or not he'll reunite with Linda (Brian Jones' ex!), the girl he pushed away but who is his true love. Since I looked through the photos before I started it and saw pictures of their wedding, I ruined the suspense for myself and am ruining it for you. The early parts about his musical influences and how he learned technique from anyone who'd teach him are fairly interesting but once he gets famous it's mostly name dropping. It's a pretty good picture of the rock scene of the 60s but it's not like the world was waiting for another of those.

Donovan had his first hit in 1964 when he was 18 or 19 and had a number of big hits after that, so he's been famous for most of his life, and it shows. He's very full of himself. The book is filled with asides that he was the first recording of a harpsichord in a pop song, his song "Sunny Goodge Street" used the phrase "love, love, love" YEARS before the Beatles sang "All You Need Is Love", he put out a box set (which he designed!) TWO YEARS before George Harrison did, the term "flower power" was coined to refer to him, his session to record "Hurdy Gurdy Man" with John Paul Jones and Jimmy Page was what got them to form Led Zeppelin, etc., etc. Well Mama pin a rose on you! Also there's lots of descriptions of smoking dope and hash and of various dalliances with girls, resulting in a couple of kids, though it was Linda all along. Really.

I got a mild kick out of a mention of Bongo Wolf who was associated with P.J. Proby and was also a fringe character in LA science fiction fandom, where I grew up.

Besides all that, it's poorly edited with lots of spelling and continuity mistakes.

Leilani says

This book was very good. I do not understand why it is that people think it is improper for Donovan to tell of his accomplishments, for he does it in a straight forward way. And personally, I feel like no one else talks of them, so he has every right to do so.

I enjoyed the casual way he writes and tells his story, very beatnik.

Philip Dodd says

The Hurdy Gurdy Man by Donovan I found an absorbing, always interesting book to read. Needless to say, you need to like his songs to like his book. Before I bought it, I read some of the reviews of it on Goodreads and Amazon and was puzzled to read some reviewers complain that it was full of typographical errors. The book was published by Arrow Books, which is part of the Random House Publishing Group, so it would have been read by proof readers and editors before it was published, which is why the complaints in some reviews of typographical errors puzzled me. Now that I have read the book I would like to say in its defence that it contains no typographical errors at all. In Childhood, the first chapter of his book, in which he writes of his childhood in Glasgow, Scotland, Donovan decided to write as he spoke then, in Glaswegian dialect. So

he writes 'oot' instead of out, 'efter' instead of after, 'windaes' instead of windows. 'Oor wee battle over, we climbed the wae intae a ruined tenement - against the rules' he writes, using some Glaswegian dialect words. In plain English that same sentence reads: 'Our little battle over, we climbed the wall into a ruined tenement - against the rules.' Donovan's use of Glaswegian dialect words is confined to the first chapter, his memories of when he was eight, living with his mother, father and elder brother in a tenement in Glasgow, playing among the bombed ruins left behind by World War 2. From Chapter Two, titled Teenage, in which he records his time living with his family in Hatfield, Hertfordshire, in the south of England, from the age of ten, onwards, he writes in plain English with the occasional use of Beatnik slang words. So what some reviewers of the book read as typographical errors are really Donovan's use of Glaswegian dialect and Beatnik slang words.

Now that I am sixty five, I find myself looking back at times on my past. In particular, I have been listening to the songs I liked when I was a teenager in the 1960's. I am pleased to say that the songs I liked then by The Beatles, Neil Young, Leonard Cohen, Simon and Garfunkel, the Incredible String Band, Fairport Convention, Bob Dylan and, among others, Donovan, have stood the test of time. After listening to some of Donovan's songs, I decided to buy his autobiography and I am glad I did. His prose is clear, direct, like his lyrics, a pleasure to read. His story brought back many happy memories. He writes of his first appearance on Ready Steady Go on British television on the 30th January, 1965. At the time he was eighteen and had been recently living as a Beatnik on the beaches of Cornwall. I remember seeing him on Ready Steady Go, introduced by Cathy McGowan, very well. In those days, there were only two channels on British television, the B.B.C. and Granada. While the B.B.C. had the pop music programme, Top of the Pops, Granada had Ready Steady Go. Donovan stood out on Ready Steady Go because he was a solo folk singer, alone on stage with his acoustic guitar and harmonica. All of the other performers were pop groups.

It was interesting to read of how the documentary A Boy Called Donovan was made, which I watched when it was shown in 1966. What matters about Donovan is his songs and I was glad that he wrote in his book how he was inspired to write some of them. It was interesting to read his version of what happened when he met Bob Dylan and took part in the documentary, Don't Look Back, and what happened when he went to India in 1968 with The Beatles to study Transcendental Meditation. At the heart of the book is a love story, the tale of how he met and eventually married his wife, Linda.

Some reviewers of the book complained that Donovan blows his own trumpet in it too often and too loudly, boasting that he started this and that movement in music in the 1960's. I just smiled through it all. Having a sense of humour gives you a sense of proportion. Certainly, I remember when listening to The Beatles, the double album released by The Beatles in 1968, which even they refer to as the White Album, that I thought some of the songs on it, namely Dear Prudence, Julia, Mother Nature's Son, and Blackbird, showed the influence of Donovan. Most of the songs on the double album were written in India. It was Donovan who taught John Lennon the folk guitar finger picking style, which can be heard in his songs, Julia and Dear Prudence.

Catch the Wind, Turquoise, Colours, Sunshine Superman, There Is A Mountain, Jenifer Juniper, Hurdy Gurdy Man, Atlantis, Goo Goo Barabajagal, were all great singles from Donovan during the 1960's. All of them he writes of in his book. I was interested to read of how he came to write the songs on A Gift From A Flower To A Garden, the double album which my friends and I listened to a lot at the time. Listening to it now, it is the songs on the second record of the double album which have stood the test of time best for they are about timeless things, the changing of the seasons, birds, the sea shore, dreams. Songs like Isle of Islay, The Magpie, The Tinker and the Crab, Lullaby of Spring, and Widow With Shawl, which are on that second record, are some of the best songs he ever wrote, I think. I am glad that he writes in his book that the sea gull is his totem bird for no songwriter has ever mentioned sea gulls in their songs as much as he has. Turquoise begins with the line: "Your smile beams like sun light on a gull's wing," for example.

I did see Donovan in concert in Newcastle City Hall in the early 1980's. He sat on a chair and sang his songs with his acoustic guitar with Danny Thompson, who used to be in Pentangle, playing double bass behind him. Of course, it was all about nostalgia, for his time was between the years of 1965 and 1970. "This is the

first song I ever wrote," he said, as he introduced *Catch the Wind*.

Donovan is seventy one now and I think his book deserves five stars simply for the pleasure he has given me and many others through his songs since 1965.

Heather says

Verrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrry boring and disappointing. I like several of Donovan's songs and I thought I would learn more about him by reading his autobiography. I didn't learn very much about him at all. It seemed that one day he was a beatnick, heading for life on the road, and the next day he's a musician. Then, the day after that, he's on Ready, Steady, Go and has a record deal. I read several books while I was reading this one because it was quite boring. I still like his music, but this book did not move him higher on my list of favourite musicians.

John Read says

I always thought Donovan got a raw deal in the endless comparisons with Dylan. I still think he is better. (They 'hung out' together quite a lot.) For anyone who was around in the 60s this is a great read. Donovan socialised or worked with just about any 'name' you can think of from those days of 'free love.' And Donovan got plenty of that too. The speed at which he moved from bumming around St Ives and learning guitar to releasing records and performing major gigs is amazing. Less than a year. I never realised how huge he was in the USA. Bigger than the UK.

A lot of the book reads as though Donovan is still smoking exotic substances. Much of his speech is straight from the flower power groovy chick era. But for me that just helped send me right back to those days. It's amazing to realise that he had done it all and quit the business by his early twenties.

It's a measure of any book if you are sad to reach the end. I was. Highly recommended to ageing hippies everywhere.

"Touching, illuminating and frank." New York Times.

"Entertaining and indisputably personal account." Mojo

"An unqualified delight." *Observer*.

"Spellbinding autobiography." Daily Mail.

"An extraordinary read." Daily Express

Mohamed Eid says

a very interesting book by a great musician of the 60s, he simply reveals what his fans wish to know about his personal life and his song writing process... etc

Liz says

If we are to believe everything Donovan tells us in this book, then he invented the 60's, the beatles, the rolling stones, Dylan, LSD, marijuana, Ravi Shankar & the indian inspired music and fashion of the time and anything cool or ground breaking for the 60's. In fact he would lead us to believe that he was the forefront of every movement social, musical or otherwise that occurred from 1960's onward.

Yes Hurdy Gurdy Man is a cool song, but I'm hard pressed to remember any others. I wasn't there but I feel pretty confident that Donovan was probably a big thing for the first few months of 1964 then he faded into oblivion only to resurface to write this book to tell us that "man if you remember me and the 60's, then you weren't really there man!" Yeah good cover Donovan.

Michael says

i'm not going to lie, i could care less about how much this guy loves his shirt. i'd never take donovan seriously, and i bought this for my wife for xmas, she's quite the fan. i read it for the hell of it. and...well, i really enjoyed it. i never knew much about his early career or all the things that he accomplished at such a young age. yeah, not the biggest donovan fan ever, and there's lots of ego stroking going on but after reading the book i decided to take a crack at sunshine superman (the book makes it sound like a complete masterpiece) and you know what? it's a great fuckin' record.
