



★ REWRITING THE ★ ROCKSTAR NARRATIVE

HOW BOOKS AND MOVIES BASED ON REAL LIFE MUSICIANS IMPACT OUR
UNDERSTANDING OF THE REALITIES OF ROCK 'N' ROLL

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BEING SEVERAL DECADES REMOVED FROM the 1970s and 1980s, most representations of musicians from these bygone eras in movies, television, and books are done in a state of glamorized nostalgia. From *Almost Famous* to *Daisy Jones and The Six*, the allure of these fictionalized takes is clear. Musicians lead rather fantastical lives—particularly those from the golden era of rock 'n' roll—and raucous tales of drinking, drugs, and debauchery are easy to get swept up in. The rockstar narrative is fairly familiar as an audience member, largely because it's one that draws from the real lives of many musicians of the time. In a sense, it's a story we've all heard before. The framing of these stories, though, can dramatically impact the public perception of the musicians they're based on, and things are never quite as simple as "it was just what they did back then."

Some fictional pieces follow their inspirations closely while others take large creative liberties. Often the characters are a conglomeration of assorted real life musicians, though the lens of storytelling is entirely up to the creators—whether they want to replicate an artist's real life or completely rewrite history. But if the plot is essentially a report of real people and events with names changed, is it really fiction? And more crucially, is it ethical storytelling? Yet on the flip side, without a grounding in real world examples, does a story lose its believability? How much the final output mirrors the inspiration is where things fall into the gray.

Take *Daisy Jones & the Six*, which showcases a fictional 1970s rock group in its original release as a novel in 2019 and subsequent adaptation into a television series in 2023. Taylor Jenkins Reid, the

author of the book, was open in interviews about how Fleetwood Mac heavily inspired the titular band. From messy romantic relationships between bandmates to the style of their music ("The River" might as well be "The Chain"), it follows a similar timeline to the real group's lives when they were recording the iconic *Rumours* album. Now, are the events of the plot things that *actually* happened to the members of Fleetwood Mac? No. Could someone convince you that they were? Probably.

That ambiguity is arguably the sweet spot for fiction inspired by real people. Reid isn't asking you to believe that these things happened to Fleetwood Mac, but is using the band as a model to draw comparisons. Finding inspiration from something or someone in reality is the basis of just about all art. As long as the reflection of the people it's



inspired by isn't malicious or directly ripping off real events, the bounds are just about endless.

Even from a legal perspective, what's allowed when telling stories based on real people is pretty murky. Writers and filmmakers are not obligated to get the life rights from an individual—this is true even for biopics that directly name the person they're about—if they are creating a story based on publicly known events. Going through the effort of securing an agreement around these rights is mainly a preventative measure; it protects creators from potential litigation from the individual if the book, movie, series, or other art form presents them in a defamatory way. But more simply, it's just the ethical thing to do. If you are about to venture into writing a story about someone's life (or a fictionalized version of it) that is going to be seen on a worldwide scale, the least you can do is talk to them about it.

So what does this all mean for the real musicians behind the stories? Well, much like the ethics behind the creative process of this type of media, it's muddy. It boils down to how the story is told and how much the real musicians see themselves in the character. For stories that don't paint their inspiration kindly, the impact can range from annoying to exploitative. It can breed shame, resurface painful memories one has grown from, and narrow a person's entire life down to a select few moments.

Conversely, it can help them commemorate their successes and relive the good ol' days. For *Daisy Jones & the Six*, the fictitious stand-in for Stevie Nicks

actually garnered support from the real life singer. Nicks—who wasn't involved in the production of the series or novel—posted on social media that Riley Keough's portrayal of Daisy felt like seeing her own memories, and that she got emotional while watching the series. It's a strange sort of catharsis, though it makes a certain sense as Daisy's arc is one of resilience and empowerment, and ends in a positive light.

Like all art forms, fiction inspired by real musicians is about the intent and angle behind its creation. Making something just to feed the trite narrative that all musicians at the height of rock were big partiers who regularly used assorted substances is not only lazy storytelling, but harps on destructive tendencies rather than taking a more holistic view. People are greater than the sum of their parts, even those who are frequently narrowed, like rockstars. Limiting these iconic performers to clichéd elements paints a false history, romanticizing an era without any of its nuance. Your favorite song probably wouldn't be the same if it was just the melody, right? Viewers and creators of these stories are better off taking a page from musicians themselves and looking for the harmonies, backing instruments, and other lesser considered elements until you get a song worth singing along to (or rather, a story worth reading).

