

Funky Towns

A spate of recent books chronicle Twin Cities' music scenes

JOHN DOUGAN

IN THE PARLANCE of the music business, the Twin Cities are not, in the strictest sense, collectively known as an “industry town.” In contrast to music-industry hubs like Los Angeles, New York, and Nashville, Minneapolis and St. Paul lack a widespread, interconnected infrastructure of recording studios, music publishing, performance-rights organizations, major record labels, and talent agencies. That said, the Twin Cities are (again, collectively) highly regarded as a “talent town,” with a remarkable history of popular music. From rock ‘n’ roll and its various permutations to soul, funk, disco, rhythm and blues, and, more recently, hip-hop and indie rock, the Twin Cities remain a veritable gold mine of ingenuity and creativity. Recently, the Chicago-based reissue label Numero Group provided compelling aural evidence of this impressive breadth of music culture with the release of 2013’s *Purple Snow: Forecasting the Minneapolis Sound* (1970s and early 1980s funk and rhythm and blues just prior to the emergence of Prince) and 2017’s *Savage Young Dü* (the early recordings of St. Paul’s preeminent hardcore punks Hüsker Dü). These two excellent releases hint at a far more complex and fascinating story. Digging into that story, several recently published books, taken collectively and discussed in this article, tell this talent town’s musical history in illuminating and arresting detail.

WHEN TACKLING such a daunting corpus of information, perhaps the best place to start is with *Star Tribune* music critic Chris Riemenschneider’s ***First Avenue: Minnesota’s Mainroom***, a remarkably detailed history of one of the state’s best-known music venues. Not simply a Minneapolis landmark, First Avenue enjoys an international reputation, due in part to the

club’s association with Prince (who, it turns out, only performed there nine times) and his 1984 film *Purple Rain*, but more importantly to its longevity. Few, if any, iconic equals have survived for nearly 50 years in the volatile live-performance market. Riemenschneider’s prose humanizes the club’s physical space (which includes both the large Mainroom and the much smaller 7th Street Entry) by focusing on the extraordinary cast of characters who transformed what had been the Greyhound bus terminal into first the Depot (1970–71); then Uncle Sam’s (1972–79) and Sam’s (1980–81)—transitioning from live performance venue to disco nightspot and back to live performance—and, finally, First Avenue (New Year’s Day 1982).

Riemenschneider’s narrative begins with a brief prehistory of the club’s utilitarian beginnings as a transportation hub but very quickly introduces readers to Allen Fingerhut, “the guy with the money”; his accountant, Byron Frank; and Danny Stevens, “the one with the rock ‘n’ roll connections [and] the liquor license.” Together, the three men turned the “unusually shaped” two-story building on the corner of Seventh Street and First Avenue North in downtown Minneapolis from a bus depot into the Depot, a space that, as Fingerhut recalls, “looked like it was meant to be a rock and roll club.” As important as they were, Fingerhut, Frank, and Stevens represent the tip of a very deep iceberg of committed and, at times, eccentric individuals—many of whom Riemenschneider writes about with deep affection—who made significant contributions to both the club’s musical aesthetic and its tumultuous history. Of this group, however, no individual is more closely associated with First Avenue than the indefatigable Steve McClellan, the club’s general manager and principal talent buyer for 25 years who is, as Riemenschneider notes, “the guy most responsible for First Avenue becoming a local institution.”

As one fortunate to have attended a number of shows in both the Mainroom and Entry (some of the best concertgoing



First Avenue: Minnesota’s Mainroom, Chris Riemenschneider (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2017, 264 p., Cloth, \$34.95.)

Heyday: 35 Years of Music in Minneapolis, photography by Daniel Corrigan, with text by Danny Sigelman (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2016, 224 p., Cloth, \$34.95.)

Bar Yarns and Manic-Depressive Mixtapes: Jim Walsh on Manic-Depressive Music from Minneapolis to the Outer Limits, Jim Walsh (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016, 304 p., Cloth, \$22.95.)

Gold Experience: Following Prince in the ‘90s, Jim Walsh (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017, 176 p., Paperback, \$16.95.)

Complicated Fun: The Birth of Minneapolis Punk and Indie Rock, 1974–1984, Cyn Collins (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2017, 392 p., Paperback, \$19.95.)

Everybody’s Heard about the Bird: The True Story of 1960s Rock ‘n’ Roll in Minnesota, Rick Shefchik (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015, 352 p., Cloth, \$30.)

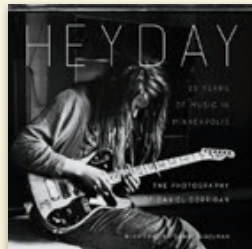
Got to Be Something Here: The Rise of the Minneapolis Sound, Andrea Swensson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017, 256 p., Cloth, \$24.95.)

I Live Inside: Memoirs of a Babe in Toyland, Michelle Leon (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2016, 224 p., Cloth, \$19.95.)

BOOK REVIEWS

experiences of my life), I may not retain one iota of objectivity, but I find it hard to imagine that anyone interested in popular music history, and the public spaces wherein people celebrate their lives and the music they love, wouldn't find this story compelling. First Avenue has suffered many wounds—both physical and financial—over the decades, including a period in the early 2000s when it seemed that the end was nigh. Luckily for Twin Citians, that unusually shaped two-story building remains intact, still features great music, and now has had its story expertly told.

While it is impossible to imagine the Twin Cities' music scene without First Avenue, so too is it impossible to assess the scene's visual history without the work of photographer Daniel Corrigan, which is featured in **Heyday: 35 Years of Music in Minneapolis**. A self-described hockey-playing “kind of a nerd kid” from Stillwater, Corrigan wields considerable skills, especially his unerring ability to capture the essence of a musician's live performance, that place him squarely in the pantheon of such celebrated music photojournalists as Baron Wolman,



Annie Leibovitz, Jim Marshall, and Mick Rock. This coffee-table-sized compendium of Corrigan's work is both a dazzling pictorial chronicle of his three-plus-decade career and of the vibrant, rich history of music in the Twin Cities. Admitting to “never being overwhelmed by anyone's star power,” Corrigan often captures in

his best photos the ineffable qualities that deeply and emotionally define an artist irrespective of wildly varying degrees of popularity and celebrity. Whether it's Prince commanding the stage at First Avenue, Michael Jackson holding court as the “King of Pop” at Bloomington's Met Center, Henry Rollins's imperious stare, the ebullience of the Doomtree Collective, or a shot of Spider John Koerner carrying a battered guitar case that's more duct tape than case, Corrigan's artfully crafted images are evocative mini-biographies.

For nearly as long as Daniel Corrigan has been photographing Twin Cities musicians, Jim Walsh has been writing about them. Perhaps no one can lay claim to chronicling this scene and these musicians with equal passion. Walsh's columns and essays are proof of his considerable reportorial and critical skills; now he has collected them in two titles: **Bar Yarns and Manic-Depressive Mixtapes** and **Gold Experience: Following Prince in the '90s**.

Bar Yarns is the more eclectic of the two. Organized thematically, it demonstrates Walsh's knack for using music as a springboard for writing about people's lives and the communities they inhabit. He's an elegant, succinct writer who, given the space limitations of a daily newspaper, is never overly discursive or oblique—he gets right to the point. And it is pre-

cisely that kind of direct emotionalism that draws you into his storytelling. Whether it's a tribute to the long-gone Uptown Bar & Grill, how a visit to an estranged uncle in a nursing home is woven into a review of a Joe Henry album, or an account of smoking weed with Peter Tosh, Walsh's intimate, nuanced prose makes you feel as if you've known him, and the people he writes about, for years.

Gold Experience is a collection of Walsh's writing about Prince from 1994 to 2002. What makes this slender volume fascinating is that Walsh's access to His Royal Badness was unprecedented, at least from what I can tell. During the period the book chronicles, Prince was a decade removed from the



international mega-stardom that followed *Purple Rain* (1984) and he was waging war against Warner Bros. Records. He was also preferring to use as his stage name either an unpronounceable glyph (the love symbol) or the lengthy acronym TAFKAP (The Artist Formerly Known as Prince), while recording music for an industry that could no longer figure him out. To his credit, Walsh doesn't

fawn over Prince. He is too principled a critic—one who Prince once called “his only friend in the media”—to be so obsequious, but even at his most confused and disappointed, as in the essay “An Open Letter to Prince: Best Gift You Can Give Is a Great New Record,” Walsh remains (despite now regretting his tone) a deeply loyal fan who, I think, saw Prince as less an international celebrity and more like a very talented friend from North Minneapolis.

Cyn Collins's exhaustive oral history, **Complicated Fun: The Birth of Minneapolis Punk and Indie Rock, 1974–1984**, is undoubtedly the definitive word on the Twin Cities rock scene as it morphed from punk into new wave into indie rock from the mid-70s to the mid-80s. Following a construction similar to Legs McNeil's and Gillian McCain's *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* (1996) and John Robb's UK-focused *Punk Rock: An Oral History* (2012), Collins lets the participants do the talking—a group described by former First Avenue DJ Kevin Cole as “pioneers, misfits, punks, and musical mavericks who paved the way for what became the most original and exciting music scene of that era.” Some may dismiss Cole's statement as tinged with hyperbole. After reading *Complicated Fun*, however, it's easy to see how the Twin Cities was held in such high regard locally and nationally as one of the more important of the “faraway towns” to embrace the do-it-yourself (DIY) punk aesthetic spreading from New York and London, the seeds of which

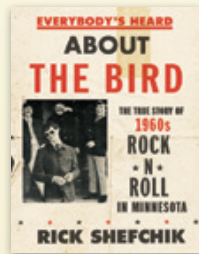


were sown when the New York Dolls performed at the 1974 Minnesota State Fair, an epiphany that fired the imaginations of like-minded musicians such as legendary Minneapolis ur-punks the Suicide Commandos.

Complicated Fun is packed with a surfeit of detail and, to Collins's credit, she leaves no stone unturned or person un-interviewed. While most oral histories are generally not brisk reads, this one is a moving story about people, the music they made, and the communities they created just before the Twin Cities scene "arrived" on the national stage after being feted in publications such as *Rolling Stone* and the *Village Voice*. The book is also, sadly, an encomium to many places (and people) that are gone: Duffy's, Jay's Longhorn, Goofy's Upper Deck, Oar Folkjokeopus (later renamed Treehouse Records), and beloved First Avenue sound engineer Monty Lee Wilkes. Collins, however, is not the kind of writer who eulogizes the past as a means of grumpily dismissing the present. *Complicated Fun* is anything but a jeremiad; in fact, it is a celebration of yesterday and today.

To get a complete picture of the history of midcentury popular music in Minnesota, it would be interesting to alternate chapters between Rick Shefchik's ***Everybody's Heard about the Bird: The True Story of 1960s Rock 'n' Roll in Minnesota*** and Andrea Swensson's ***Got to Be Something Here: The Rise of the Minneapolis Sound***. Shefchik's meticulously researched history is the authoritative document of this early, fertile era of rock 'n' roll. A former journalist at the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Shefchik has a reporter's eye for detail but never lets a litany of facts overwhelm what is a great interconnected story: young (predominantly white) musicians running on pure adrenaline, the business people who saw rock 'n' roll as a get-rich-quick scheme, the DJs who promoted it (WDGY's Bill Diehl), and the bands—both those that had national chart success (the Trashmen and the Castaways) and other far less well-known groups (the Underbeats, the Gestures, the Diablos, Stillroven), who never even achieved one-hit wonder status. What links all the bands, in the words of musician and rock historian Lenny Kaye, is that they "[reveled] in the berserk pleasure that comes with being onstage [and] the drive and determination offered only by rock 'n' roll at its finest." From the moment you meet Augie Garcia, the Twin Cities' pioneering rock 'n' roller whose quintet tears up the local club scene, you'll be caught up in this fascinating story wherein, even for the briefest moment, rock 'n' roll dreams come true.

Garcia also makes an appearance in Andrea Swensson's outstanding *Got to Be Something Here*, but the story she tells is of the rhythm and blues, soul, and funk emerging from the Twin Cities' African American community, which provided the formative soundtrack for a young Prince Rogers Nelson.

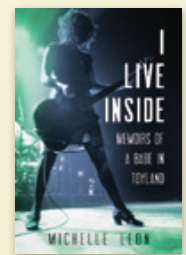


Starting in 1958, the year of his birth, Swensson approaches her topic with the keen eye of a cultural anthropologist. She writes not only about the musicians, clubs, and entrepreneurs but



also about how local and national politics, civic ordinances, and urban development fundamentally alter this metropolitan area in ways that created new opportunities for the majority white population while disenfranchising and displacing black residents and even, in the case of St. Paul's Rondo neighborhood, wiping a thriving community off the map. By combining these political and cultural realities, Swensson provides readers with a comprehensive vision of not only the best in popular music studies but also how individuals within disrupted neighborhoods can survive and prosper nonetheless, making sense, finding relevance, and taking pleasure in their everyday lives.

The last title in this collection of rock books is a memoir. So hungry are publishers to print rock memoirs that we are currently adrift in a sea of tomes. Far too many of these stories rely on the tried-and-true formula of rise, fall, and redemption, offering little insight. The worst simply grind axes and settle scores. Only a few are as brave, honest, and compellingly written as Michelle Leon's ***I Live Inside: Memoirs of a Babe in Toyland***. In this document of her time as the bassist in Babes in Toyland, from 1987 to 1992, Leon has written one of rock's most essential personal accounts, one that is celebratory, introspective, angry, and emotionally raw—sometimes all at once. Leon faces hard truths and emotional devastation with unflinching candor. The chapters detailing her relationship with the late roadie Joe Cole are profoundly moving and, ultimately, heartrending, as is her loving yet fraught connection with bandmates Kat Bjelland and Lori Barbero as they become a formidable, electrifying trio. The book's epigrammatic structure—which includes occasional childhood flashbacks—perfectly suits Leon's graceful, innately lyrical style. Much more than a memoir, *I Live Inside* is a gift to be cherished.



After discussing all of these books, we are still left with questions: Why the Twin Cities? How did this isolated urban area become the talent town it remains today? To paraphrase DJ Kevin Cole, it was precisely this isolation that led to the area becoming a cultural mecca in which its participants created a scene (or, more appropriately, scenes) for themselves. It wasn't done for validation or recognition or to be like somewhere else. Nowhere else can lay claim to being like the Twin Cities and, for all the artists and musicians young and old still living there, they wouldn't want it any other way. ▣



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