

Willie & CSN&Y: Two books, and music, for the ages

It's rare to find a coffee-table book that is great reading, but thanks to my friend, Ron, I just finished one. It's a wonderful book about Willie Nelson (and his songs), called *Energy Follows Thought: The Stories Behind My Songs*, with co-authors David Ritz and Mickey Raphael (HarperCollins Publishers, 2022).



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I've read other great books about the origins behind songs, including those by the Beatles and by Bob Dylan, but this one may be the best so far.

Willie's book begins with this: "When it comes to songs, I'm a patient man. I don't try to push or prod them. I just let them happen, like this book is happening. I never thought about separating my words from my music. They go together like ham and eggs, and I don't cook them at the same time."

Willie, who was born in 1933 in Abbott, Texas (now a population of 352), about 25 miles north of Waco, got his first guitar at age six. While he had a strict Christian upbringing, Willie became the king of country 'outlaw' music, writing about themes that many would hardly consider to be religious (spiritual, surely, but not traditionally Christian). Willie was a song-writer making \$50 per song when he moved to Nashville in the sixties, and his current income is estimated at more than \$4 million per year, which includes royalties.

You'll learn what inspired great songs like "The Party's Over" and "Night Life". And the extraordinary background on his great song "Crazy", made famous by Patsy Cline.

Perhaps the book's unique treat: Willie's wisdom, including these lines: "I say that as a storyteller I make up stories that most of the time have nothing to do with me" and "...Maybe because songs came to me so easily, I never considered them work. Consequently, I didn't understand their monetary worth. I barely had enough money to buy food..." and finally, this admission, "...the bottom line is that, for me, there's nothing funny about drinking. If I hadn't put down the bottle, I'd be dead long ago..."

Now, at age 90, four-times married, the father of eight kids, five grandkids and four great-grandkids, Willie Nelson has become legendary across many genres of music.

Going from Willie Nelson to Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young (CSN&Y) is a little like going from Lula to Little Five Points—but this second book is worth your time.

It begins with this scene described by author David Browne: "Crosby was the shoot-from-the-hip rebel who couldn't help but stick it to the man. Stills, especially during his early years, was the driven careerist—always on the go, go, go—eternally unrequited romantic. Nash was the sensitive lady killer with the taste for quality possessions, the proto-yuppie. Young was the elusive, changeable outsider who couldn't quite commit to any one thing at any one time."

This begins an engaging look at Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, which, according to the book's subtitle, "The Wild, Definitive Saga of Rock's Greatest Supergroup" (DaCapo, 2019), is a story of both the genius and chaos of four musicians who seldom got along, but when they did, it was just right.

Author David Browne is a senior writer at Rolling Stone and has also written extensively about James Taylor, Simon & Garfunkel, the Beatles and Jeff & Tim Buckley. This book is written in four parts, covering CSN&Y's rocketing first two albums that introduced such classics as "Carry On", "Teach Your Children", "Helpless" and "Our House."

You will get a look at both the camaraderie of this group and also, its tensions. Graham Nash often tried to alleviate the near-constant tension between David Crosby and Steven Stills—and Neil Young, the Canadian, who joined the group after their first album, but was seldom seen around them off-stage (although it was Young's anthem "Ohio" that took this folk-rock band to an even greater level of popularity).

Browne details Crosby's "problem child" high school troubles and how he later started playing folk songs with Roger McGuinn. The two formed The Byrds (McGuinn was later instrumental in organizing the Traveling Wilburys).

While all of this going on, Steven Stills, a Texas native, who grew up in a military-type high school in Florida, had already formed Buffalo Springfield and launched a major hit with "For What It's Worth". His other guitarist in that band was Don Felder, who later came to fame with the Eagles.

The fourth member of Buffalo Springfield, Neil Young, who always shunned any media attention and was uncomfortable in most public settings, and later joined Crosby, Stills & Nash. He was to cut only one album with CSN&Y, the 1970's classic, *Déjà Vu*.

There are other books that have been written about this so-called super group (they no doubt were that, although Blind Faith and the Traveling Wilbury's may have been just as great).

Lisa and I last saw Crosby, Stills & Nash at the Fox Theatre in 2014, when (even without Young), they still had those incredible vocals that made them so popular.

This book by David Browne is a tribute to the meteoric rise of CSN&Y (sometimes in spite of themselves) and is great reading for anyone who loved their music.

David R. Altman lives in Hoschton with his wife, Lisa. He is a member of the National Books Critics Circle and is a former Georgia Author of the Year nominee. His latest poetry collection, Cold Remembered, was published in 2023 (Finishing Line Press).