



Nilsson: The Life of a Singer-Songwriter

Alyn Shipton

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Paul McCartney and John Lennon described him as the Beatles' "favorite group," he won Grammy awards, wrote and recorded hit songs, and yet no figure in popular music is as much of a paradox, or as underrated, as Harry Nilsson.

In this first ever full-length biography, Alyn Shipton traces Nilsson's life from his Brooklyn childhood to his Los Angeles adolescence and his gradual emergence as a uniquely talented singer-songwriter. With interviews from friends, family, and associates, and material drawn from an unfinished autobiography, Shipton probes beneath the enigma to discover the real Harry Nilsson. A major celebrity at a time when huge concerts and festivals were becoming the norm, Nilsson shunned live performance. His venue was the studio, his stage the dubbing booth, his greatest triumphs masterful examples of studio craft. He was a gifted composer of songs for a wide variety of performers, including the Ronettes, the Yardbirds, and the Monkees, yet Nilsson's own biggest hits were almost all written by other songwriters. He won two Grammy awards, in 1969 for "Everybody's Talkin'" (the theme song for *Midnight Cowboy*), and in 1972 for "Without You," had two top ten singles, numerous album successes, and wrote a number of songs--"Coconut" and "Jump into the Fire," to name just two--that still sound remarkably fresh and original today. He was once described by his producer Richard Perry as "the finest white male singer on the planet," but near the end of his life, Nilsson's career was marked by voice-damaging substance abuse and the infamous deaths of both Keith Moon and Mama Cass in his London flat.

Drawing on exclusive access to Nilsson's papers, Alyn Shipton's biography offers readers an intimate portrait of a man who has seemed both famous and unknowable--until now.

Nilsson: The Life of a Singer-Songwriter Details

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From Reader Review Nilsson: The Life of a Singer-Songwriter for online ebook

Steve says

I enjoyed this biography, which I heard about through an author interview on public radio, and was hooked within the first few pages. If you're interested in 60s and 70s pop music, an inside view of songwriting and the music business during that time, the ups and downs of the "rock 'n roll lifestyle" (with the Beatles, Monty Python, the Monkees, Mick Jagger, Jimmy Webb and much of the rest of the pop/celebrity world in LA, NY and London through the early 90s), and its ultimate costs, you'll enjoy it too. Well-researched and -written, well-rounded bio with plenty of anecdotes of this nearly-larger-than-life character. Like most people, I had a vague idea of Nilsson's work, and didn't realize how many great pop songs and innovative production styles he created. Reading this will send you to iTunes (or, if you must, Spotify) to re-discover this under-rated (and ultimately rather tragic) figure.

Carol - Reading Writing and Riesling says

My View:

Let me preface my review with the statement – I am a big Harry Nilsson fan. And I thought I knew a lot about this musician, his music and his life. I have listened to and bought his music and have watched and enjoyed the documentary Who Is Harry Nilsson (And Why Is Everybody Talkin' About Him?) but in reality I knew nothing about this complex paradox of a man who inspired and was inspired by the world and what it had to offer. Nilsson produced so many more albums than I was aware of, he made movies, he acted, he wrote jingles for commercials, he wrote sound tracks for movies, he wrote musicals, he wrote kids books, he was a singer and a songwriter – he was prolific in output and somewhat manic in his behaviour. Nilsson worked hard and played even harder.

It took me a little while to get into this book – I was not aware of Harry's childhood or upbringing, in fact I hardly knew Harry existed before "One (Is the loneliest number)" or "Jump into the Fire" or "Without You". There was so much more to Harry than I had glimpsed on the popular music charts. There a library of music out there that I must discover and Shipton has opened my eyes and ears to it! I was not aware of the influence and relationship Harry had with so many well known and respected artists - this is a side of Harry that was unknown to me.

Once I started reading about times and song material that I was familiar with I was mesmerised by this story of the good time boy who partied and partied and wanted work to be fun! (Dont we all wish that?) Harry wished it and Harry lived it- to excess. Even though I was very aware before I picked up this book that Harry Nilsson was dead I still felt saddened when his demise was revealed on these pages. Harry Nilsson was by all accounts a likable rogue, an entrepreneur, an intelligent artiste who could see and work "outside of the box" and when you look at the body of work that was his life time achievements, the depth of his talent cannot be ignored. He was a truly gifted narrator of the journey of life; his words and music moving, passionate or funny, ironic, sad, entertaining and his observations of life poignant. I very much enjoyed delving into the life and times of Harry Nilsson and I look forward to re discovering his talent from his beginnings to his classic hits.

Aaron Badgley says

Well researched, well written about one of my favourite artists. A great read.

Ray Campbell says

This was a solid, highly detailed story of Harry and his career. While the book begins with his rather difficult childhood, Shipton's main concern is the music. As Harry's music career begins, Shipton tells the story song by song. Shipton includes details on everything from who played each instrument to what inspired the tunes. As Harry's career takes flight, the story goes from parties in London with the Beatles to LA for sessions with his Laurel Canyon friends.

I am a bit surprised that such a detailed study would be published for a song writer who spent so much of his career on the periphery. I am a fan and am thrilled, but the book spend pages on single lines from single album tracks on albums that barely broke the top 200. Conversely, this level of detail was welcome and exciting when regarding tracks I love. There is a whole chapter on the London staging of The Point!

I believe that Harry is one of the great tragic stars of my generation. He may have had one of the best voices of the 70s and he clearly wrote some of my favorite songs of the period. Even if you'd never heard of Harry, the details of the inner workings of the 70s music industry is fascinating. But if you haven't heard of Harry, spend an hour on YouTube. One, Without You, Everybody's Talkin', Me And My Arrow, Coconut, I Guess The Lord Must Be In New York City, 1941, Turn On Your Radio... The book is terrific and Nilsson is worth a listen.

Jeff says

Excellent. I disagree with the writer's point of view on some of Nilsson's work, especially the later stuff, but differences of opinion aside, this is a fascinating, sad, well-researched look at an artist who's long deserved the biography treatment.

David Siegel says

If you're a fan of Nilsson's music, you will love this.

A great rundown of Nilsson's life and music. A bit inadequate on the level of analysis regarding the fact that Nilsson was essentially an alcoholic and drug addict over the course of his entire adult life - the book delves deeply into his drug use, but never once uses the word, "addiction," which I found a bit jarring, honestly. I understand that it's about Nilsson's music, but really his descent into deep addiction (alcohol and cocaine) coincides specifically with his brilliance waning, early/mid-70's on. Which is to say, his most genius stuff happens to hit right before his addiction really kicks in - and then he has another 20-25 years of life that he kind of wastes, in terms of his art, in many respects.

That said, the analysis of the music is really interesting, and it's overall a really fun read - for a Nilsson fan! If you don't know his music but you are a fan of music from this period, it'll still be a fun read - the Beatles feature prominently, and so on. But Nilsson fans - for sure.

Tosh says

Harry Nilsson is a fascinating music artist. For me, he was someone that was around, but never the focus on any scene. On one hand he had direct contact with The Beatles (who admired Harry's work greatly as well as a friend) and on the other he was very much in tuned with the pop music market. In one way he can be seen as the bridge between music underground and music 'overground. He was very much the professional music songwriter and yet on his solo recordings took great chances. And I think now because he did took those chances, he is much and greatly admired.

Born in Bushwick Brooklyn (one would think there should be a statue of him at the Bushwick station) from a troubled family family came a songwriter who wrote incredibly moving songs about the bonding of friendship and parent & child. "Me And My Arrow" is without a doubt one of the great songs about a human and his dog. And as they about the milkman whistling a tune, I do the same for this song whenever I take a walk around the neighborhood. That song works on so many levels. Alyn Shipton's biography captures the essence of this talented man, who it seems was loved by his friends and family, but had a hard life of sorts. With respect to drinking, that seems to me close to the glory years of Errol Flynn and WC Fields. Him and Ringo, Keith Moon, and others... being in the same room with them doesn't sound like it is good for one's health, but nevertheless a lot of fun. The fact that one meets Harry for lunch usually means they get back home about two days later, is all part of his incredible personality and sense of fun and wonder.

It is unusual for Oxford to do a biography on a contemporary music figure, but this is a superb book. A must for all Nilsson fans of course, but also for the causal curious music geek who wants to know what it was like to be in the center of the pop world during the late 1960's and '70's. The later years are kind of sad, but without a doubt he was a remarkable figure in American music as well as iconic in his stance as the ultimate party boy. But in the end one is left with the albums, and that is a great journey to go on. Make sure you have this book as you take that trip....

Christopher says

Well written and researched, this is a fantastic biography of an incredible talent that wisely and welcomely gives equal focus to Nilsson's early life, his writing, his musical collaborators, his rambunctious social life, and his idyllic family life. Unlike most of the biographies and memoirs I've come across recently, Alyn Shipton's Nilsson doesn't thin out or lose focus toward the end; just about every conceivable aspect of Harry's life and career is covered. If there's any complaint to be made -- and this admittedly is a somewhat specious one -- it's that Harry's own voice (well represented through extended quotes from interviews and from his own unfinished autobiography) is so singular and witty, I wish there were a way to get more of his life story in his own words. A must read for Nilsson fans.

Jojo says

It is hard to separate a set of beautiful songs from what appears to be a rather shallow and unpleasant person based on this book. I guess I shouldn't mark the author by the content but when someone stops you wanting to listen to some good songs it is hard to be favourable - sorry

Jacob says

I actually finished reading this book a few months ago. I haven't read much in the time since, and this has been the longest I've gone without reading on a daily basis for a long, long time - probably about the last decade! I blame a combination of a change in jobs, plus no longer spending a few hours every day sitting on a train, plus just not really finding anything I felt a strong urge to read. It's been kind of nice, actually - sort of hitting the restart button.

Anyway, about the book: yeah, it's my favorite musician, getting the scholarly criticism he has long deserved, from no less than Oxford, so obviously, it was amazing. If you're a Nilsson superfan like me and you got your hands on the Complete RCA Albums box set as soon as it came out, this book is an essential counterpart.

Nilsson superfans likely have already devoured both the book and the box set by now, but if you're even slightly aware of Nilsson (or even if you have no clue about him), you won't be disappointed - the Nilsson story is one of the most unique in American recording history, and just so happens to involve some of the brightest lights in the last century of popular music - Phil Spector, John Lennon, Ringo Starr, Keith Moon, etc. etc.

Aaron Briggs says

For a Nilsson obsessive, this is a great look into Harry's life -- including many great details in his young life, which illuminated new meaning in many of his songs. It's also ripe with stories of his later life, both from his notes for an autobiography and from his friends and drinking buddies, which just furthers that cult of personality thing that makes it hard to be anything less than a Nilsson super-fan. That said, if you're not a super-fan, you might be scratching your head at why at least half the book is focused on the last 15 to 20 years of Nilsson's life, where he squandered his talents making disappointing records and drinking himself to death. (I found it fascinating, but I already knew that every record after *Pussy Cats* is some varying degree of trainwreck.)

If anything, I wish Shipton had spent more time delving into analysis of some of Harry's best songs. He starts by picking apart some of his early work to establish , but once the timeline picks up Harry's record-a-year output from 1967 on, many of his finest works get passed by rather quickly. I was disappointed with the lack of critical analysis of "Nilsson Sings Newman" as a studio artifact, where so much can be said about the innovation that went into that record. Almost nothing was said about "I'll Never Leave You," beyond a remark that it doesn't really fit on Nilsson Schmilsson (true, but it's among his best performances). And the pages around "Son of Schmilsson" are mostly focused on how Harry was truly self-destructive during the recording process, but skipped opportunity to deeply analyze how all the corners of that beautiful mess of an album truly reflect it.

•Karen• says

Idol of my lonely teenage nights, subject of Book of the Week at BBC Radio 4:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b038xmch>

"Paul McCartney and John Lennon described him as the Beatles' "favorite group," and yet no figure in popular music is as much of a paradox as Harry Nilsson. A major celebrity at a time when stadium rock was in its infancy and huge concerts and festivals were becoming the norm, Nilsson's instrument was the studio, his stage the dubbing booth, his greatest technical triumphs were masterful examples of studio craft, and he studiously avoided live performance.

He was a gifted composer of songs for a wide variety of performers, having created vivid flights of imagination for the Ronettes, the Yardbirds and the Monkees, yet Nilsson's own biggest hits were almost all written, ironically, by other composers and lyricists. He won two Grammies, had two top ten singles, and numerous album successes. Once described by his producer Richard Perry as "the finest white male singer on the planet," near the end of his life, his career was marked by voice-damaging substance abuse.

Kerry Shale reads extracts from this first ever full-length biography of Nilsson, in which author Alyn Shipton traces Nilsson's life from his Brooklyn childhood to his Los Angeles adolescence, and charts his gradual move into the spotlight as a talented songwriter. With interviews from Nilsson's friends, family and associates, and material drawn from an unfinished draft autobiography Nilsson was writing prior to his death, Shipton probes beneath the enigma and the paradox to discover the real Harry Nilsson, and reveals one of the most creative talents in 20th century popular music."

Credits:

NILSSON: THE LIFE OF A SINGER-SONGWRITER
BY ALYN SHIPTON

Read by Kerry Shale
Abridged by Libby Spurrier

Producer: JOANNA GREEN
A Pier production for BBC Radio 4.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HaHWCP...>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cuIC_w...

Suzinnebarrett says

Harry's voice was considered by many (including the author) to be the greatest male tenor in the the 70s. This biography starts off very strong, and that's not often the case with biographies, even the good ones. It

really surprised me that Harry Nilsson's life actually began in Bushwick, Brooklyn. There, it was tough going for Harry and family. The father basically abandoned them, and one day Harry and his mother got attacked by a gang of girls near their home. After that, the mother picked up and split, but Harry decided to stick it out a bit in Brooklyn, and then eventually traveled to California to meet up with mum and siblings. Having no money, he hitchhiked cross country. It's during those hard scrabble early years that the book really takes fire. Living a hand to mouth existence for quite a while, the reader experiences the full arc of a life truly ranging from rags to riches (and rags again.) No joke, Harry Nilsson was one self made man. For sure, no silver spoon or even the most basic support was ever provided to him. He did have an uncle in California that gave him a job however.

Nilsson was blessed with a keen mind, and there he was at the forefront of the computer revolution. He worked his way to the top at a bank where he specialized in computer systems, even though he didn't even have a high school diploma. Was even known to wash the windows at his job. And for quite a while, Harry hung onto this very position even though his songwriting career was taking off. His character's kind of nebulous and hard to pin down though, making it rather difficult for any biographer. Harry Nilsson lived below the radar, and the author emphasizes that he never played before a live audience. That's an overstatement because he did play short set(s) before a small crowd of people, but surely he never went on any kind of tour. And that's the way he wanted it, and that restriction kept a certain pressure at bay. Harry controlled his career, not the music industry. The surprise here are all the songs that I was very familiar with from the 1970s that were indeed Harry Nilsson's. Here's a tasty sample: "Everybody's Talking" (from film "Midnight Cowboy"), "The Lime in the Coconut," "Without You" and "Jump into the Fire" (utilized to great affect in Scorsese's "Goodfellas").

The story loses some momentum half way through, and then, as one would expect, things pick way up when Nilsson connects with the Beatles. Notoriously, Nilsson clicked immediately with John Lennon and also enjoyed a long friendship with Ringo Starr as well. Nilsson and Lennon's exploits in California are legendary, and most would agree that was an out of control part of Lennon's life. Drinking, drugging, smoking and most likely fornicating. You get the picture. Additionally, Harry bought a flat in London where he lived on and off for several years. He would lend out his place to his famous friends when he wasn't in town. Both Mama Cass and Keith Moon in fact died in that very apartment. In this same regard, Nilsson died way too young also, having suffered a major heart attack at 53. This happened a mere six months after losing his life savings via money mismanagement by a trusted associate.

Definitely a well written book that shines a light on a writer/performer who is somewhat forgotten, but whose songbook certainly deserves a revival.

Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

Christian Lynch says

Nilsson is a wonderful read for avid Harry Nilsson fans, but is likely unapproachable for those unfamiliar with his entire recording catalogue.

As one would expect from a biography, Shipton covers Nilsson's entire life chronologically -- starting with childhood, working into his banking days, then his early albums and seminal Nilsson Schmilsson recording, and finally his slow decline into drunken/drug-fueled obscurity -- contextualizing entire albums song-by-song. In this sense, the book is a tad bit clinical in the way it approaches its subject. You will find yourself repeatedly running to a computer for reference. Shipton's writing style is satisfactory, but the research is unrivaled. *Nilsson: The Life of a Singer-Songwriter* gave me a whole new appreciation of a (sadly) forgotten musical genius.
