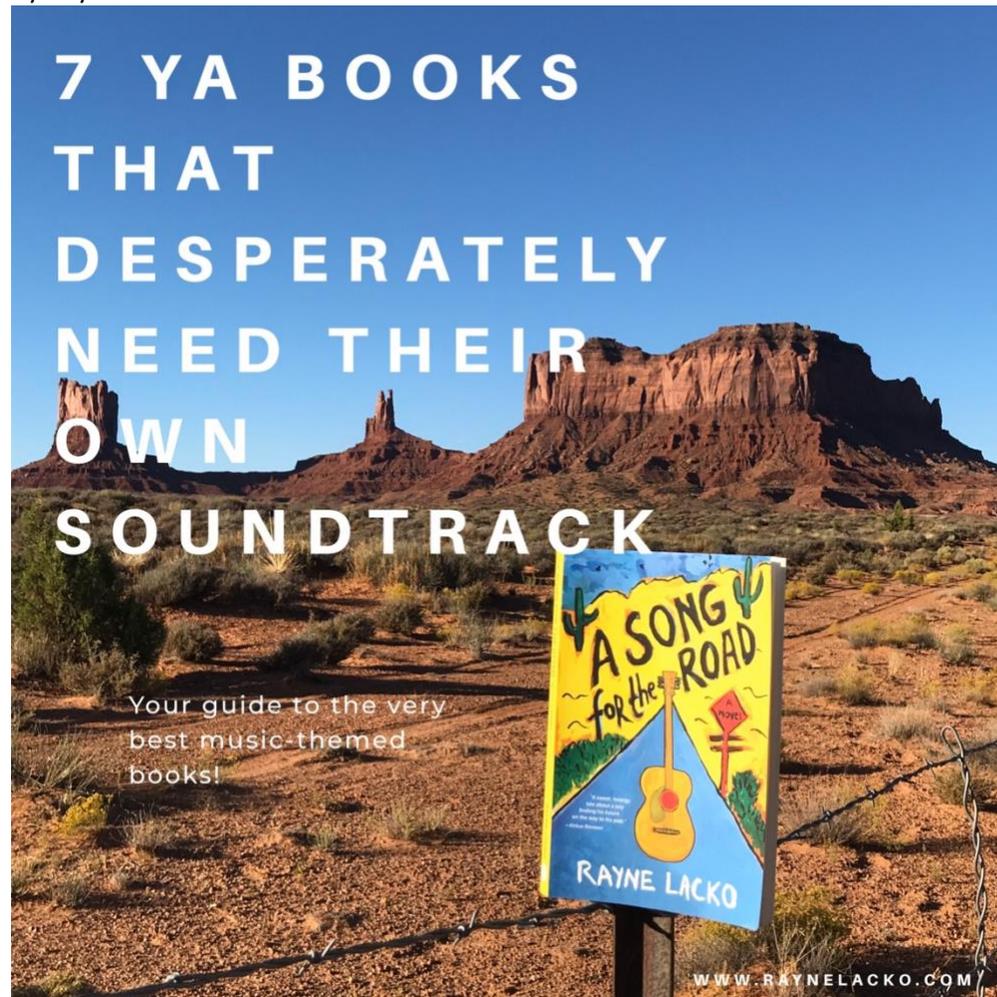


## 7 YA Books That Desperately Need Their Own Soundtrack

By Rayne Lacko



In the heart of every YA reader, there is a soundtrack representing our lives: the highlights, the darkest days, and the rotation of songs filling our headphones or AirPods every day. We love music, and our taste has evolved over the years, frequently crossing several genres. In the spirit of the diverse universe of Young Adult music lovers everywhere, I'd like to recommend these seven books featuring music-obsessed teen protagonists, in addition to my own new YA release, *A SONG FOR THE ROAD* (SparkPress, 2019).

Between you and me, I'm a bit of a closet musicologist. I love tracing the roots and origins of modern music, finding the birthplace of various forms of music. I can't help but notice how contemporary songs and artists are influenced by music's earliest pioneers. If you geek on this stuff too, check out the music innovators and influencers I've highlighted in each category to start building your own historically significant (and straight up cool) playlists.

"I wondered whether music might not be a unique example of what might have been – if the invention of language had not intervened — the means of communication between souls."  
—Marcel Proust (*REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST*)

### **1. SOMEDAY, SOMEWHERE by LINDSAY CHAMPION (Classical)**

If there's one crush most YA female characters are attracted to, it's a good-looking, smart, talented musician. When Dominique, a high school junior from a gritty neighborhood in Trenton, witnesses the brilliant Ben Tristan playing violin at Carnegie Hall like his life depends on it, she is transfixed. Posing as an NYU student, Dom sneaks to New York City to track down Ben, a magnetic genius who whisks her into a fantasy world of jazz clubs and opera, infatuation and possibility. Each sees something in the other that promises to complete them. Dom's web of lies grows. Ben's genius, while captivating Dominique, conceals a secret, and the challenges of Dom's life may make it difficult for her to help him. **Innovators and Influencers:** Johann Sebastian Bach, Ludwig van Beethoven, Hector Berlioz, Georges Bizet, Frederic Chopin, Claude Debussy, Georg Friedrich Handel, Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Giacomo Puccini, Maurice Ravel, Richard Strauss, Giuseppe Verdi, Antoni Vivaldi

### **2. BEIGE by CECIL CASTELLUCCI (Punk)**

From the author of BOY PROOF and THE QUEEN OF COOL comes an edgy L.A. novel full of humor, heart, and music. This book speaks to me on so many levels. I loved punk music in my teens, and like Castellucci's protagonist Katy, I too was "exiled from Canada." (My exile was self-imposed. I left Vancouver for sunny Southern California and learned how to surf.) Carter, the main character in my book, A SONG FOR THE ROAD, also has a famous musician for a father, and can totally relate to Katy. And don't even get me started on his relationship with mom back home. Carter and Katy really ought to grab coffee. BEIGE is a music-lover's must-read.

**Early Innovators and Influencers:** Adam & the Ants, Boomtown Rats, Buzzcocks, The Cramps, Dead Kennedys, Iggy POP, The Jam, New York Dolls, Public Limited Ltd, The Runaways, Sex Pistols, Siouxsie and The Banshees, Social Distortion, Talking Heads

### **3. ABOUT A BOY by NICK HORNSBY (UK, 90s/2K)**

Music is the cornerstone of many of Hornsby's books. If you enjoy this story, be sure to check out his non-YA titles. He's an excellent writer and worth discovering if you haven't yet. At its heart, ABOUT A BOY isn't technically YA. There is as wide a variety in age and life experience in this story as there are genres of music. But in this fascinating British tale of finding oneself, struggling with a loved one's mental health, and dressing to impress, the adults make an effort to understand their teen counterparts' musical tastes. How rare is that? This book became a movie, and Badly Drawn Boy created the music for the official soundtrack. However, let's look at popular bands from across the pond between 1998, when the book was released, and 2002 when the movie came out.

**Innovators and Influencers:** Blur, Boyzone, The Cranberries, The Chemical Brothers, Coldplay, Fatboy Slim, George Michael, Oasis, Orbital, Radiohead, The Spice Girls, The Stereophonics, The Stone Roses, Suede, Supergrass, U2, The Verve, Will Young

### **4. A SONG FOR THE ROAD by RAYNE LACKO (Southern-flavored rock and blues)**

When his house is destroyed by a tornado, fifteen-year-old Carter Danforth steals his mom's secret cash stash, buys his father's guitar back from a pawnshop, and hitchhikes old Route 66 in search of the man who left him as a child. Mark Sarvas, author of the award-winning MEMENTO PARK, says it's a journey that will define Carter "as an artist, a son, and a man. Beautiful music abounds in these pages; in the story, the language, and the hearts of those well-defined characters. Tune up your six-string, grab a mic, and join Carter as he takes his memorable song on the road."

**Innovators and Influencers:** Louis Armstrong, Patsy Cline, Bob Dylan, Woody Guthrie, Buddy Guy, Buddy Holly, Janis Joplin, BB King, Roy Orbison, Ma Rainey, The Rolling Stones, Bessie Smith, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, T-Bone Walker, Muddy Waters

## **5. THE CARNIVAL AT BRAY by JESSIE ANN FOLEY (90s grunge/alternative)**

This is definitely moving to the top of my must-read pile. It explores a time of radical change in the music scene, and embraces travel to wildly different locations that can't help but blow open new perspectives for its protagonist, sixteen-year-old Maggie Lynch. It's 1993, and Generation X pulses to the beat of Kurt Cobain and the grunge movement. Maggie is uprooted from big-city Chicago to a windswept town on the Irish Sea. Surviving on care packages of Spin magazine and Twizzlers from her rocker uncle Kevin, she wonders if she'll ever find her place in this new world. When first love and sudden death simultaneously strike, a naive but determined Maggie embarks on a forbidden pilgrimage that will take her to a seedy part of Dublin and on to a life-altering night in Rome to fulfill a dying wish. Through it all, Maggie discovers an untapped inner strength to do the most difficult but rewarding thing of all, live

**Innovators and Influencers:** 7 Year Bitch, L7, Alice In Chains, The Breeders, Bush, Foo Fighters, Green Day, The Jesus & Mary Chain, Jane's Addiction, Lunachicks, Mudhoney, Nine Inch Nails, Nirvana, Pearl Jam, The Pixies, The Smashing Pumpkins, Sonic Youth, Soundgarden, Sublime, Tool

## **6. HARLEM HUSTLE by JANET MCDONALD (Rap)**

I admire this book that asks its protagonist to put everything on the line, when everything is against him. This gritty, urban story holds gritty truth, reminiscent of PROJECT GIRL, McDonald's memoir about her early life in Brooklyn, and her struggle to achieve an Ivy League education.

Abandoned to the streets to raise himself, Eric Samson knows life won't be easy, beginning with the choices he must make. The fast cash of the streets still tempts him, but the threat of getting locked up—again—is daunting. Maybe Eric's way out is as Harlem Hustle, the rapper he dreams of being. By his side are Manley "Ride" Freeman, surrogate brother and best friend, and Jeannette Simpson, the college-bound "round-the-way" girl he hopes will be more than a friend. But does Eric have the strength to leave the familiar street life behind and the courage to reach for his dream?

**Early Innovators and Influencers:** 50 Cent, Andre 3000, Drake, Dr. Dre, Eazy-E, Missy Elliott, Eminem, Ice Cube, Lauryn Hill, Jay-Z, LL Cool J, Wiz Khalifa, Queen Latifah, Lil' Kim, Lil Wayne, Ludacris, Nikki Minaj, Janelle Monáe, Notorious B.I.G., Snoop Dogg, T.I., Tupac, Kanye West

## **7. ON THE ROAD by JACK KEROUAC (Jazz of the Beat Generation)**

I'm offering this classic title to you as a wild card, and a personal challenge. In 1948, Kerouac introduced the phrase "Beat Generation" to characterize the underground, counterculture, and anti-conformist youth in New York at that time. The Beat philosophy stressed the importance of bettering one's inner self over material possessions. World War II had ended and Kerouac observed young people were feeling, "beat, meaning down and out, but full of intense conviction." To them, jazz was a way of life, and a different way to approach the creative process. The Beat Generation was influenced by 1940s genres of African American music such as Bebop. In NYC, 52nd Street was epicenter of Beat, with hipsters and beatniks hanging in jazz clubs up and down its length.

ON THE ROAD is an epic road-trip *roman à clef* based on the travels of Kerouac and his friends across the United States. It is considered a defining work of the postwar Beat generation, with its protagonists living life against a backdrop of jazz and poetry. Many Beat movement influencers are represented by characters in the book, including William S. Burroughs as Old Bull Lee; Allen Ginsberg as Carlo Marx; Neal Cassady as Dean Moriarty; and Kerouac as the narrator Sal Paradise. (Obscure music nerd trivia: Kerouac penned a draft of the book in a series of notebooks in the late 40s, then typed it out on a continuous reel of paper over three weeks in April 1951.) Published by Viking Press in 1957, the New York Times hailed it as "the most beautifully executed, the clearest and the most important utterance yet made by the generation Kerouac himself named years ago as 'beat,' and whose principal avatar he is." Yes, the [NYT used the word, "avatar" in 1957](#).

**Early Innovators and Influencers:** Paul Bley, Betty Carter, Miles Davis, Ella Fitzgerald, Dizzy Gillespie, Billie Holiday, Abbey Lincoln, Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, Max Roach, Nina Simone, Lennie Tristano, Sarah Vaughn, Dinah Washington, Lester Young

*Rayne Lacko believes music, language and art connect us, and she explores those themes in her Young Adult novel, A SONG FOR THE ROAD (SparkPress, 2019), and guided journal DREAM UP NOW (Free Spirit Publishing 2020)*

Photo: Susan Doupé Photography

