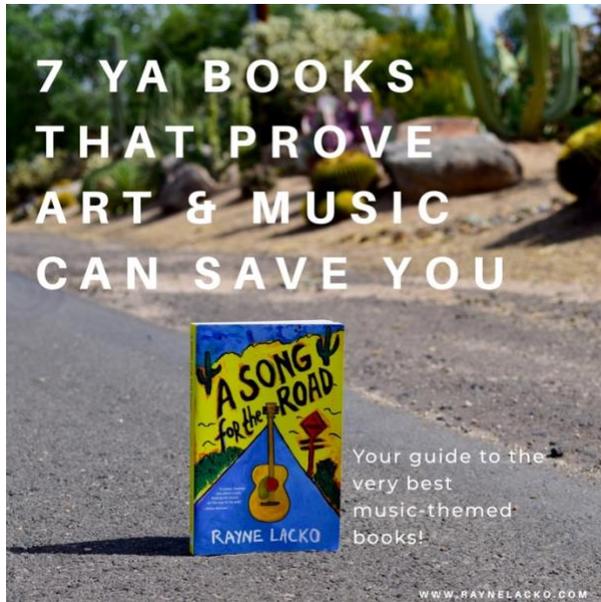


8 YA Books That Prove Art & Music Can Save You

By Rayne Lacko



I work with a lot of creative teens, and continually observe how making art alleviates pain. Writing, drawing, and listening to music help you realize what’s going on inside, and bonds you with others. Music and art don’t judge, they consider the whole person, and they just may save your life — literally. (But sometimes your figurative self needs rescuing, too.) Creativity is the innate language of teenagers who, like a lot of people, struggle to express their feelings. Music and art allow you to finally feel understood, and give you a way to communicate your feelings when words alone are not sufficient. I believe the purpose of art is to express something we’re not yet, but we can become. If you’re curious about how music or art can save you, allow me to recommend these music- and art-themed YA books exploring high school life, family relationships,

depression, substance use, body image, dating, and the future.

“In writing songs I’ve learned as much from Cezanne as I have from Woody Guthrie.”

—Bob Dylan

1. WHEN THE BEAT DROPS by ANNA HECKER

I love the juxtaposition between seventeen-year-old Mira’s passion for jazz, and the excellent writing about rave and festival culture. This story dives deep, uncovering dark truths about substance abuse, without being preachy. You can feel the music on every page.

A music prodigy in a family of athletes, jazz trumpeter Mira looks forward to her audition to a prestigious jazz conservatory. Her two best friends are at music camp without her, so she plans to spend the summer focused on jazz and nothing else. She only goes to the warehouse party in a last-ditch effort to bond with her older sister. Instead, she falls in love with dance music, DJing, and Derek, a gorgeous promoter who thinks he can make her a star. Suddenly trumpet practice and old friendships are taking a backseat to packed dance floors and sun-soaked music festivals, outsized personalities and endless beats. But when a devastating tragedy plunges her golden summer into darkness, Mira discovers just how little she knows her new boyfriend, her old friends, and even her own sister. The music brought them together. But will it also tear them apart?

2. THE INFINITE PIECES OF US by REBEKAH CRANE

This one has a special place in my heart because, like my new novel, *A SONG FOR THE ROAD*, Crane’s story is set in an unexpected area of the American Southwest. Like my book, this story promises a journey of self-discovery and new beginnings, and will resonate with readers seeking answers to life’s big questions.

Pondering math problems is protagonist Esther Ainsworth’s obsession, but when her family is “exiled” to Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, it’s to erase a big secret from Esther’s past. When Esther finds friendship in Jesús from the local coffee bar; Color, who finds beauty in an abandoned video store; Beth,

the church choir outcast; and Moss, a boy with alluring possibilities, she confesses her secret to them. Crane's latest is an emotional read with a well-rounded cast of characters. While true-to-life and artists in their own right, trust me, Crane's characters are definitely quirky.

3. GIRL IN PIECES by KATHLEEN GLASGOW

Seventeen-year-old Charlotte Davis has had a harrowing life. She's been homeless, neglected, and abused — and carries both physical and emotional scars from her past. While she is in therapy, *GIRL IN PIECES* doesn't follow the simple, neat narrative of recovery, starting at rock bottom and steadily climbing to the top. Recovery is an up-and-down process, and Charlotte sometimes finds herself course-correcting after setbacks. One of the ways she is able to make sense of her circumstances is through drawing. Charlotte is an artist, but finding her tribe and a sense of community are also important pieces she needs in her life. If drawing has ever comforted you, or helped you deal with your own struggles, you may feel a connection with this book.

4. I'LL GIVE YOU THE SUN by JANDY NELSON

You may remember Jandy Nelson's powerful YA debut, *THE SKY IS EVERYWHERE*, about a grieving teenage girl who embraces poetry to come to terms with her sister's unexpected death. In this beautiful follow-up, Nelson explores visual art. Like my novel *A SONG FOR THE ROAD*, family relationships are its heart. Nelson's new book is about fraternal twins Noah and Jude, both of whom are visual artists. Both Jude and Noah express themselves through their art, but for vastly different reasons, and those reasons are both heartbreaking and heartwarming at the same time. At 13, Noah's drawing talent singles him out for acceptance in a prestigious art school, but at age 16, it's Jude who's attending the school. (Obscure music nerd trivia: Something similar happened in the 1940s to internationally-beloved Greek folk singer Nana Mouskouri and her sister.) The mystery of what happened, what twisted their relationship and their family dynamic, and how they unravel and untangle themselves from the threads of artistic and sibling jealousy —and admiration — that bind them holds this book together.

5. INFANDOUS, by ELANA K. ARNOLD

This novel has been described as "beautiful, almost dreamlike." Sephora Golding is a teenage girl who creates found-object sculptures. Closely attached to her mother, Sephora imagines her mother's life and past through the lens of fairy tales. However, she crafts a much different story about herself through her art. Some very dark stuff went down way back when, and how Sephora discovers and comes to terms with the consequences grips the reader until the twist is revealed. Sephora's sculptures allow her to express her horror — even before her mind can fully comprehend it. Art helps us heal, and make sense of our world, and *INFANDOUS* is a testament to this beautiful truth.

6. ON THE COME UP by ANGIE THOMAS

Art is an expression of our inner world. It's something we create, whether from our heart, mind, or some other power. All humans are naturally creative. It's when we stop expressing ourselves that feelings of isolation creep in, feelings of being misunderstood. Rap is also art, and sixteen-year-old Bri wants to be one of the greatest rappers of all time. But as the daughter of an underground rap legend who died right before he hit big, Bri's got massive shoes to fill. When her mom unexpectedly loses her job, food banks and shut-off notices become as much a part of her life as beats and rhymes. With homelessness staring her family down, Bri no longer wants to make it — she has to make it.

Art sparked author Angie Thomas's passion for storytelling and continues to inspire her to this day. *ON THE COME UP* is about fighting for your dreams, even as the odds are stacked against you. This memorable book explores the struggle to become who you are — not who everyone expects you to be.

7. THE POET X by ELIZABETH ACEVEDO

I'm including this gem because it's next on my TBR (to be read) pile. Described as, "Magnificently crafted," and a "stunning account of a teen girl's path to poetry," this collection of award-winning poems follows Xiomara Batista, a sophomore in a largely Dominican community in Harlem, her twin brother Xavier, and her journey through the sacrament of Confirmation. Xiomara has blossomed into a woman's body (she describes her body as "un-hideable" — as though she ought to hide it?) and doesn't necessarily appreciate or welcome the reactions it provokes in others. Her poetry illustrates her internal struggle with these projections, while also grappling with those of her strict, religious mother. But Xiomara is becoming a woman, regardless of how the world reacts, and art for her proves euphoric, taking the form of poetry, secret kisses with a crush, and an open mic performance. Personal side note: By sixth grade, I was already mistaken for an adult, so I imagine I'll connect deeply with this story.

8. The MIDNIGHTS by SARAH NICOLE SMETANA

The MIDNIGHTS is Smetana's coming-of-age debut about loss, creativity, and finding your voice while you're still finding yourself. I'm drawn to all those themes; art is all about finding your voice. Much like Carter Danforth, the main character in my novel, *A SONG FOR THE ROAD*, Susannah Hayes has never been in the spotlight, but dreams of the rock star life her father achieved. But as senior year begins, Susannah is convinced that if she writes the perfect song, her father might stop obsessing about the past long enough to see her. When he dies unexpectedly, her dreams—and her reality—shatter. Grief-stricken, her mother moves them to a new city in Southern California. Susannah realizes she can reinvent herself however she wants: a confident singer-songwriter, member of a hip band, embraced by an effortlessly cool best friend. But Susannah is not the only one keeping secrets, and her life is threatened to unravel again.

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), and guided journal DREAM UP NOW (Free Spirit Publishing, 2020)

Photo: Susan Doupé Photography

