

WILL ONE BAND
CHANGE THE
WORLD,
OR WILL
THE WORLD
CHANGE THEM?



A LETTER FROM DAVID MITCHELL

Dear Reader,

I envy writers who have a killer “light bulb story” about where, when, and how their latest book was inspired, because I never do. To be honest, even the word “inspired” brings me out in a mild rash. Ideas for my books arrive piecemeal, in fragments, over the months and years before I begin. But after handing in *Slade House* in 2015, I was in no doubt that my next novel was going to be about a psychedelic-folk-rock group, formed in the creative crucible of London’s Soho in the late 1960s.

Fragments can be questions—especially questions that nag at you until you give in and look for answers. Why is the end of the 1960s stuffed with so much evergreen music? Was it chance that such groundbreaking music appeared at the same time as a counterculture which envisioned a society dramatically different from patriarchal, white-dominated, ecology-trashing capitalism? (Sound familiar, fellow citizens of the 2020s?) Or did this revolutionary music enable the revolutionary ideologies (or vice versa) or was a symbiosis at work? Explorations of these questions turned into whole scenes.

Other fragments of *Utopia Avenue* were conversations with guitarists, singers, pianists, percussionists, and members of orchestras whom I sought out over the years and quizzed.

My own back catalog furnished particular fragments. Readers who have read more than one of my novels may have noticed my habit of “rehiring” characters from previous books, and reusing locations at different points in time. The name of my band’s lead guitarist is Jasper de Zoet, and I’ll say no more on the matter.

My final fragment is the memory of a feeling. Those of us who came of age in earlier decades remember a time when music was expensive, rare, and savored. It offered glimpses of a better, cooler, smarter version of yourself. I’d save my Saturday job money, cycle into town and flick the through the LPs in the record shop. Vinyl albums shot an updraft of air onto your face as you flicked through the racks. Once home, I’d unwrap the new arrival, inhale it, take pleasure in its heft and gleam, place it—carefully, or you’ll scratch it!—onto the turntable. Now lower the stylus onto the outer edge . . . a pop of static from the speaker. Here we go. Sit back and see where this new adventure goes. A lot like opening up a book.

David Mitchell

UTOPIA AVENUE PLAYLIST

Set the scene and transport yourself to the 1960s with these revolutionary songs.

"The Windmills of Your Mind" by Dusty Springfield

"Ruby Tuesday" by The Rolling Stones

"Days" by The Kinks

"If I Were a Carpenter" by Joan Baez

"See Emily Play" by Pink Floyd

"Cactus Tree" by Joni Mitchell

"Suzanne" by Leonard Cohen

"Happy Together" by The Turtles

"High Flying Bird" by Judy Henske

"I'd Rather Go Blind" by Etta James

"Farewell, Farewell" by Fairport Convention

"I Want a Little Sugar in My Bowl" by Nina Simone

"River Man" by Nick Drake

"California Dreamin'" by The Mamas & The Papas

"All Along the Watchtower" by Jimi Hendrix

"These Days" by Nico

"Sunshine of Your Love" by Cream

"White Rabbit" by Jefferson Airplane

"Within You Without You" by The Beatles

"Jolene" by Dolly Parton

"A Change Is Gonna Come" by Aretha Franklin



CLICK
TO LISTEN ON
SPOTIFY

DRINK: ROCK 'N' ROLLA



© David Malosh

Source: foodandwine.com/recipes/rock-n-rolla

Ingredients

- 1 1/2 oz. overproof bourbon, such as Booker's
- 1 oz. apple juice, preferably organic
- 3/4 oz. fresh lemon juice
- 1/2 oz. pure maple syrup
- 1/4 oz. St. Elizabeth allspice liqueur
- 2 dashes of Angostura bitters
- Ice, plus 1 large cube for serving
- Pinch of freshly grated nutmeg, for garnish

How to Make It

In a cocktail shaker, combine the bourbon, apple juice, lemon juice, maple syrup, allspice liqueur, and bitters. Fill the shaker with ice and shake well. Strain into a chilled double rocks glass over the large cube and garnish with the nutmeg.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Can artists influence society at large, or are they only the weather-vanes of change?
2. Discuss Elf's role in *Utopia Avenue* and the adversity she faces as a woman in a 1960s rock band.
3. Elf, Dean, Jasper, and Griff become more than bandmates and more like family. How does their relationship change over time? How does their relationship with each other compare to their respective families?
4. *Utopia Avenue* delves into the 1960s' shifting attitudes on sexuality, gender politics, fame, success, and mental health. Discuss how these topics and the stigmas associated with each of them intersect in the novel.
5. Elf writes, "Art is memory made public." What do you think about that idea? What art can you think of that is a recreation of someone else's memory? What can we gain, as a culture, from shared memories?
6. How does the trajectory of the band's success affect each member of Utopia Avenue?
7. Discuss Jasper de Zoet's relationship with Knock Knock, and how their worlds come together in "Timepiece" (*The Third Planet*, Track 4). Were any of the characters familiar to you from David Mitchell's previous works? If so, how does that familiarity enhance your reading experience?
8. Were you surprised by the ending? How did you think *Utopia Avenue's* story was going to evolve prior to the penultimate chapter?
9. In some ways, *Utopia Avenue* can be seen as a love letter to music. What music has shaped your life?