



When We Get to Surf City: A Journey Through America in Pursuit of Rock and Roll, Friendship, and Dreams

Bob Greene

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In a dazzling and exhilarating display of narrative on-the-road reporting, award-winning journalist and New York Times bestselling author Bob Greene takes readers on an unforgettable American journey of music, memories, and universal longing.

Running away to join the circus is a dream we're told to put away once we're no longer young. But, as Bob Greene writes, "just when in our lives we give up on capturing the freedom and bright mornings of our world when it was new, sometimes something happens to keep the sun high in the sky a while longer. Sometimes we find something we weren't even aware we were looking for."

For fifteen years beginning in the 1990s, Greene stepped into a universe that, out in the country every summer night, is hiding in plain sight: the touring world of the great early rock bands who gave America the car-radio and jukebox music it still loves best. Singing backup with the legendary Jan and Dean as they endlessly crisscross the nation, Greene takes us to football stadiums and minor-league ballparks, to no-name ice cream stands and midnight diners, to back roads and carnival midways as he tells a riveting story of great fame and lingering sorrow, of unexpected friendship and lasting dreams, of the things that keep us going in the face of all the things that threaten to stop us.

Striking chords of recognition and yearning, *When We Get to Surf City* glistens with cameos by the men and women with whom Greene traveled the United States on his deliriously unlikely journey, including Chuck Berry, Martha and the Vandellas, the Everly Brothers, Jerry Lee Lewis, the Beach Boys, the Monkees, the Kingsmen, James Brown, Lesley Gore, the Drifters, Little Eva, and the Coasters.

All of them—not just the people on the stage, but the people in the audiences, too—are seeking their private versions of the mythical destination Jan and Dean came up with all those years ago: Surf City as the perfect, cloudless place we all believe is out there, if only we can find it.

Hilarious and heartbreaking, moving and brilliant, this is the trip of a lifetime, a travelogue of the heart, accompanied by a thundering guitar chorus of Fender Stratocasters. It is a story destined to touch readers not just today, but for generations to come, as long as the music itself echoes.

When We Get to Surf City: A Journey Through America in Pursuit of Rock and Roll, Friendship, and Dreams Details

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Jeff says

All right, this book is no "Gone With The Wind." I'll give you that. Having said that, I must say that this book hit all of the buttons for me. Maybe it's because I grew up listening to Jan & Dean way back when. Maybe it's because I like the writing of Bob Greene. Whatever. I just know that this was a fun, feel good read for me. I couldn't put it down. The only thing that could have made it better would have been if he had toured with the Beach Boys instead.

Jennifer Rootham says

I've included & read pretty much all the books (mostly non-fiction, but poss. one or 2 fiction), by this author. He was an award winning columnist for the Chicago Tribune, so enough said. His writing style is impeccable!! The only bad thing, is when I come to the last page, with whatever book of his, that I am about to finish reading!

Trish says

This is written by a man who toured with the group for 15 years. Bob Greene is also a columnist/author, and he uses his usual style of relaying vignettes in the course of this phase of Jan and Dean's career. This is especially effective in that the book is written both from the perspective of a band member as well as that of a fan. I attended many of the concerts of which he writes, and it was really refreshing getting the different perspective.

Margaret says

I loved this book. It was a perfect summer read. Bob Greene is an excellent writer. This book just made me wish I had been to some of these concerts. It's not just a book about the music but is about friendships too. I have read several of his books and have enjoyed them all, especially "And You know you should be glad" about a lifetime friendship of boys growing up in Ohio and "Once upon a town" the story of the miracle of the North Platte Canteen during WW two.

Joe Rodeck says

On the road with Jan and Dean. Bob Greene joins the summer tours as Jan and Dean sing at many a rock and roll revival at state fairs and music fests. There are lots of laughs and times to celebrate, fairly counterbalanced by Jan's health decline or the kind of diss that occurs when the one time Surf City kings have to open for the Monkees. The best part of the memoir is when Bob meets old rock and roll stars whom

we get to know better: Frankie Avalon, the Everly Bros, the Beach Boys, Chad and Jeremy . . . Give me more!

It's a refreshing change from the usual sex and drugs brag books. The closest they get to that is the occasional beer that goes with supper or the man who asked "Can you sign my daughter's ass?"

Easy reading. Mostly recommended for rock and roll fans who'd remember Gene Pitney or Gary U.S. Bonds.

Claire Hall says

"When We Get To Surf City" is Bob Greene's story of his multi-year odyssey as a member of Jan and Dean's touring band. Greene is a long-time columnist for the Chicago Tribune and Esquire, as well as the author of several previous books. The opportunity to play with Jan and Dean came about as a one-time event, but the surf rockers saw how much fun he was having, and invited him back. Soon Greene was flying across the country to join the band whenever he could, a gig that stretched on for many magical summers.

Jan and Dean were pop music stars of the early 60s, and topped the charts in 1963 with the hit that provides the title for this book. The Jan and Dean story appeared to come to an abrupt end in 1966 when Jan Berry, who also produced their albums and wrote many of their hits, was involved in a near-fatal auto accident. He spent years battling back from those injuries, and well over a decade after the accident, began touring with Dean Torrence again.

Greene is a marvelous storyteller, and the most poignant moments of the book unfold as he portrays Jan's heroic struggles to get through each day. Fans of a certain age will remember the made-for-TV movie, "Deadman's Curve," which told the story of the first phase of Jan's comeback. But even those who remember that film will find themselves moved by the degree of struggle Jan Berry faced every day for the last 38 years of his life. Greene observes Jan before shows and wonders why he is listening intently to and singing along with recordings of the hits he wrote decades earlier. It turns out he has to re-learn the lyrics every single time due to the lasting brain damage he suffered in the accident.

Greene's gift is to interweave the nostalgia for innocence and youth with the realities of the present day. He does a wonderful job of evoking the beauty of a warm summer night, with music and laughter in the air and that mythical place called Surf City just around the next curve in the road.

As a long-time fan of Bob Greene's books, and of Jan and Dean, I couldn't pass this one up, and once I started it, I couldn't put it down.

Lisa says

#90 of 120 books pledged to read in 2017

Billy Reed says

Another terrific Greene book. Our interests are so much alike it's scary. I would have loved to tour with Jan

& Dean -- or any other group, for that matter.

Kellie says

If you know the music you'll love the book. So much that I didn't know and Bob Greene is simply amazing to share these stories with us

David Ward says

When We Get To Surf City: A Journey Through America in Pursuit of Rock & Roll, Friendship, & Dreams by Bob Greene (St. Martin's Press 2008) (973.9209). Another NPR contributor has written a great book. I've come to dislike and mistrust the "A Journey Through America in Search / Pursuit etc....." genre, but this book demands my highest rating. As a sixteen year old, Bob Greene adored the Beach Boys and Jan & Dean when they first hit the radio in 1964? – 1966?. As a forty-five year old many years later in the course of a story, Greene met and was befriended by Jan & Dean's current drummer on the oldies / amusement park tour and became a pal of the band and an unpaid / official band member on rhythm guitar for ten years. This is funnier still because I heard Jan & Dean do a promotional radio interview in Emerald Isle, NC in 1980. Jan Berry had been a wonder boy, brilliant, ready to move on past the number one hits. He had already been accepted to medical school in the mid-60's when a car crash (his fault, rear-ended a truck while speeding in his convertible) crippled him and left his speech and communication hard to understand. This was made more ironic by the titles of some of Jan & Dean's hits: they wrote and sang "Dead Man's Curve" years before this wreck. At any rate, during the 1980 interview, I didn't know their background – I didn't know whether Jan was drunk or epileptic – but I do know that, on the air, he tried to pick up a girl; after inviting her to the night's show, he asked her age and she replied "Thirteen". They also spoke to a young man who, after the singers blustered on about their former fame, when asked if he had any questions for Jan & Dean, asked "Yeah. What are some of your songs?" (Aside: that's akin to Knoxville DJ Phil Williams in the 1980's doing a pre-New Year's show with a Knoxville Police Officer with a breathalyzer on air to measure and demonstrate the loss of control when one drives while drunk.. Phil drank a shot of whiskey every fifteen minutes all morning and got well beyond wasted – he talked through and over the songs, his cohorts etc. After three-plus hours of this (which included periodic breathalyzer tests to demonstrate his ever-increasing blood alcohol content), they prepared to roll Phil out of the studio, pour him into the back seat of a car, and take the poor drunken sap home. As he was departing, Phil was asked if he had any final comments for the listening audience to wrap up the show about the dangers of drunk driving. Our intrepid host said as follows: "Well, I want ya'll to know that even though I'm drunk, I can tell you one thing: I can still drive.") That was one of the funniest and most inappropriate things I ever heard in my life! My rating: 8.75/10, finished 2011.

Michael says

Bob Greene wrote an outstanding book about life on the road with an oldies rock group. Greene, known more as a Chicago newspaper columnist, used his reporter's keen eye to take the reader behind the scenes in the world of rock and roll, which may appear glamorous on the surface, but takes a lot of sacrifice, hard work, and humility. Greene was invited to play with the band over several years. He admits that it was a dream come true, especially since he grew up listening to their music. Jan and Dean were one of the top acts in music in the early 1960s. That ended when Jan Berry was involved in a near-fatal car accident. Jan never fully recovered from the accident, but through sheer perseverance, returned to the stage. And Greene's tells

us his story of courage and heartbreak; inspirational and sad. And he shows the compassion and quiet determination of Dean Torrence in taking care of his longtime band mate and keeping the show on the road. Along the way Greene introduces the reader to the likes of Freddy "Boom-Boom" Cannon, Gene Pitney, some of the Beach Boys, Frankie Avalon, the Monkees, and even Frank Sinatra. This book is much more than about music. It's about life on the road and the importance of friendship.

Jim says

Bob Greene is asked to play back-up for Jan and Dean by their keyboardist, Gary Griffin. The book chronicles 15 years of playing the Midwest at lesser venues. The book concludes with Jan Berry's death in 2004. Greene, Bexley native, grew up on Roosevelt Ave., talks about the fellowship, great fun and residual power of these fun-in-the-sun surf songs. He muses on what drives these guys to do it and he finds that they love singing the songs and having one more summer. And one more summer after that. And another. The book is sentimental without being mawkish.

John Orman says

I did not know this, but for 15 years, Bob Greene sang backup for Jan and Dean as they toured America. Wonder if he was with them when I saw Jan and Dean perform in Albuquerque's Tingley Coliseum--maybe around 2003?

So here is a tale of great fame and sorrows. Along with the retro band touring, Greene meets up with Chuck Berry, the Everly Brothers, Beach Boys, Monkees, the Drifters, and the Coasters.

What a wild, magic carpet ride!

Donna says

I wanted to read this book for 2 reasons: The author grew up in Columbus, Ohio, where I live, and I have enjoyed several of his other books. I also wanted to read it because of my job in the media biz at an Alternative Rock radio station-- which gave me an "inside look" at the rock & roll lifestyle, not to mention the opportunity to meet many well-known entertainers, and all the rock band tee-shirts I could handle!! Greene's vivid pictures of being "on the road with the band" -- very entertaining.

Seth says

This is a fun read about being on the road as part of Jan and Dean's backing band in the '90s and '00s. Bob Greene's usual themes are in here: friendship, the passage of time, nostalgia for a time when people were more decent to one another, kitschy Americana, the superiority of the Midwest, the power of summer, tasty cheeseburgers. The best parts of this one are about the encounters with other acts on the oldies/county fair/corporate event circuit.
