

Book Reviews: Angel with Drumsticks

A scathing indictment of the Vatican and its handling of *La Messa Dei Giovani*, this emotive book chronicles a well-known story from a hitherto silent perspective; the founder of the band Angel and the Brains.

Jennifer Edmonds. ★★★★★

Fascinating account of a band that became a phenomenon in Italy and were poised for worldwide tour and promotion when it appears the Vatican (who had asked the young men to perform music for a mass in the first instance) suddenly caused every country to pull out of the tour due to internal debate and pressure around the use of "beat" music.

In the meantime careers and young lives were destroyed with repercussions echoing 50 years later. Although the book is not written "against" the church the reader can clearly see the great injustice done to all these young men who had only ever followed what they had been asked to do.

This book should be heavily promoted in Italy and for anyone who is interested in a memoir outlining a fascinating event and the devastating impact a church can have on individuals that the church has never apologised for or at the very least acknowledge the wrongfulness of their actions. An engaging read for music lovers also.

Jenny Hayworth. ★★★★★

A short interesting read that typifies the struggle of the 60s between youthful freedom and the establishment. In this case the mere mention of the parties involved, a pop (later rock) band and the Vatican, will arouse the reader's curiosity.

The many photographs interspersed within the text nicely depict the ambience of the 'beat' movement in Rome at that time and the main protagonist, the band Angel and the Brains. Those who remember this group should definitely read this chronicle of the injustices inflicted upon them by the Catholic Church.

Nathan Veerasamy. ★★★★★

Angel With Drumsticks tells the absorbing story of a group of talented young musicians in the 1960s who were squashed by the Vatican.

I admit that, before reading *Angel With Drumsticks* I had never heard of the 'Rock Mass', 'Beat Mass', or 'Mass for the Young' as it was variously called. I had never thought of Italian bands experimenting and working hard to develop an 'Italian beat', influenced by the Beatles, but certainly no carbon copy of them.

This was the dream of Angelo Ferrari and the teenage boys who joined him to write and practice songs and hope for performing breaks. They called themselves 'Angel and the Brains'. As Pamela King says in her preface, they were 'good Catholic boys who responded to an invitation from a church representative to fulfil the new desires of Vatican II to be more appealing to young people.'

The Mass, performed in a church, and including two groups besides Angelo's - the Bumpers and the Barrittas - was phenomenally successful in attracting a young audience; but the response of the Vatican hierarchy was as swift as it was unexpected. The band members were

excommunicated (though the order was later rescinded). A proposed tour, including playing at the Albert Hall, was cancelled, all sponsors and venues pulling out simultaneously; the small company, Ariel, which had recorded the Mass went broke, and the three bands suddenly discovered that they could not even get gigs in small Italian towns. Those priests who had supported the Mass were moved to remote postings.

'Angel and the Brains' played in Tunisia for a while before breaking up, and Angelo's promising musical career was finished.

King has interviewed Angelo, who emigrated to Australia, and quotes his own thoughts and feelings, still vivid after nearly fifty years. Angel With Drumsticks contains some fascinating photographs and newspaper articles, providing insights into the furore over the rock mass and the way the controversy has continued to re-surface over the years. It is a balanced account and at the same time a very personal one. The force and speed of the Vatican crackdown, when the bands believed the church had initiated the experiment in an endeavour to attract young people, remains a mystery. I highly recommend this book.

Dorothy Johnston. ★★★★★

I was surprised by how interesting I found this memoir. The synopsis clearly states it is about the results of an 'experiment' authorised by the Vatican.

The tale is basically about how some Italian young people responded to an enterprise resulting from the Vatican II council. As the book explains the aim of the council was to 'make the Church more relevant to the young people, to modernise the Church and to be more welcoming to entice them to follow its spiritual path, rather than exhort them to do so.' The memoir shows how a young band's countrymen acclaimed them a success and how their 'professional' lives changed as a result. However, as tends to occur with each new generation, there was some conflict, well at least friction, between traditionalists and the up and coming generation of young people. I should point out these young men were in fact not out to be contradictory or to undermine the Roman Catholic Church but wished to help and support the fulfilment of Vatican II aims. In truth they were grateful to have been asked to be part of the project 'La Messa Dei Giovani'.

As a rule, when reviewing, I try and avoid including spoilers. However, in this case the synopsis, or blurb as some like to call it, sets out clearly what the memoir is about and indicates the consequences for the protagonists of their willing participation in a new venture.

In all honesty I have to say that on the surface this memoir would only appeal to a limited audience:

- Those interested in the decisions etc. of the Vatican II council.
- People who would like to know how the conclusions of Vatican II were or were not implemented.
- Critics of the Roman Catholic Church.
- Vatican conspiracy enthusiasts.
- Conspiracy theorists.
- Historians with a particular interest in The Catholic Church.

Nevertheless, having said the above, I would still strongly encourage others to read this memoir. I confess it is not something that would normally catch my attention but, if I had ignored it, I would have missed out on an interesting and informative read.

Clearly a lot of research has gone into the writing of this book. And the historical photographs and media add a fuller comprehension and understanding to the well-presented facts and

information. The book would benefit from further proof-reading; there are numerous minor errors. These however, are mostly typographical or wrong word order and do not detract from the tale.

Cover: Because so many readers appear to be put undue emphasis on covers when selecting their next read I feel obliged to comment on covers when writing a review. In this case there can be no doubt the Vatican is involved. Therefore it would immediately appeal to anyone interested in Vatican or Roman Catholic Church history and activity. The inclusion of the angel above should raise some curiosity in other readers. So to that end I think the cover does its job.

Rating: I frequently mention how I consider most books realistically fall within the three star rating. Anyone who has followed my blogs or read my book reviews over a period of time will understand my opinion of the rating systems used by such sites as Amazon and Goodreads. I do not propose to reiterate here. Consequently my starting point for this book was three stars; it definitely does not warrant anything less. However, a lot of research has gone into this book and the historical details are presented in a readable and clear manner. The book merits more than three stars and therefore I am very happy to rate it at four (4) stars.

My copy: Though this has not influenced me in the least I should mention the author Pamela King had kindly agreed to review one of my books long before asking if I would review Angel with Drumsticks. Her acceptance of my book was unconditional. She did subsequently ask if I would consider hers and I was more than happy to do so; I enjoy reading other people's memoirs. Pamela then kindly provided me with a free copy. I must emphasize this did not influence me in the least; I firmly believe, if the rating system is to have any value, we need to be honest in our reviews. To be otherwise does no favours to readers or the authors.

Conclusion: I reiterate how I unexpectedly found this memoir to be an interesting and informative read. Also how I feel I would have missed out by not reading it. In addition the author has presented all the facts and information in a concise and clear manner and avoided making the book unduly long; the length varies depending upon the device or means you use to read it but on average it only comprises 97 pages, including photograph's and media extracts. I would recommend this to anyone interested in; a different type of memoir; modern history; music history; Vatican/Roman Catholic history.

T.R. Robinson 

Angel with Drumsticks is a history of the beginning of Beatles-era rock music in Italy. Without giving the story away, it recounts how a promising Italian Rock group developed the music originally at the request of the Catholic Church for a new style Catholic Mass that they hoped would encourage more young people to become involved in the Church. As in many situations, subsequent events did not turn out as expected, for the church or the musicians, and the influence of Italian rock music, compared to the British rock groups for example, was minimized. The story is well researched and written, and students of the history of rock music should find this an interesting and informative narrative.

Lee Davis. 