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A classic underdog story about a local band that *almost* hits the big time.

Everyone knows the price of fame. *Hitless Wonder* measures the price of obscurity. What happens when you chase a dream into middle age and, in doing so, risk losing the people you love?

Hitless Wonder: A Life in Minor League Rock and Roll Details

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From Reader Review Hitless Wonder: A Life in Minor League Rock and Roll for online ebook

Jack says

If you have ever been in a rock band, or thought that you would like to be in a rock band or wondered what it would be like to be in a rock band, you need to read this book.

Brian says

I have expressed over and over that rock memoirs are a guilty pleasure. Maybe it's because I suck as a musician and am probably tone deaf. Can't sing either. But one thing I geek out about is music--live rock and roll music even better! Deafening distorted guitars. A blasting, devil-may-care drummer and stick-with-you-for-weeks pop lyrics. Doesn't really matter for the venue--could be an arena where your sharing in the ecstasy with ten-thousand cheering fans, or a run down graffiti-ed, bar with a teeny stage.

What Joe Oestreich does in this book is allow you a glimpse into the latter, and flirtations with the former. What a fascinating and sincere memoir. That's refreshing in spite of the recent best-sellers from rockers like Steven Tyler and Keith Richards. Mr. Oestreich is a NORMAL guy! He has a "normal" life outside of playing music that can be related to by any of us pressing on to middle age. And yet this is also reminder of how playing music and performing is life-long addiction that takes its toll on the physical and emotions of everyone involved--band-mates, roadies, managers...and most especially, family--no matter how minor or major league your band is. This memoir really is 2 stories. His band of over 20 years, Watershed from Columbus, OH, is out on a brief tour in support of an indie-label album, playing for anyone from hundreds in their hometown to barely a couple in places like Baltimore and Detroit. In between there is the stories of how they got together, how he met his girlfriend/then wife and reminisces into the 1990's and their signing with Epic Records then only to be dropped 18 months later. (The great thing about the internet is I can search on YouTube for videos songs and live shows he is referring to get an even deeper appreciation)

After 20 years and a brief glimpse into the big-leagues during the hey-day of alt-rock signings, how and why do they still do it? Their contemporaries have all but given up as they grew older and resigned to the 9-to-5 drudgery, and Mr. Oestreich is tempted by those same inner voices of reason. As a 15 year Navy man, I have heard those same voices telling me that "it's time to settle down and get a real job" and "be with the family who misses you."

This memoir is dripping with sincerity and heart-tugginrg honesty as he fights to keep his dreams of still being a band that matters. Each gig, no matter the size, has the risk that it could be the one that pushes them over that edge...or completely over the cliff into not only has-beens, but "never-weres" and possibly tearing apart families and loved ones. But Joe and his mates are okay with that risk. They do it for simply the love of doing it and their families reluctantly accept it. I did get choked up a bit at a couple moments when I could sympathize in reading emails or having conversations with his wife about his future. THAT moment in the book was indeed the watershed moment, or so it felt.

The book is sprinkled with pop-culture references straight from my own childhood in the mid-west. The conversations between his band-mates are a hilarious dose of comic relief. Since he and I are roughly the same age, there are common tastes in pop-rock music as well. Oh and healthy sports analogies just like any

mid-westerner sprinkles into our own daily conversation. Also you must definitely read it with brief internet searches for songs to get the complete enjoyment (note to Mr. Oestreich: maybe even add a playlist to the back!) Hopefully this book can be found in most book stores and he isn't relegated to "minor league" author. Recommend it to rock-music fans and anyone who has been a band of their own.

A terrific read without getting too bogged down and dense into the details of drunkenness, drugs, and groupie partying as some rock memoirs bore you with. An honest memoir to dreaming big.

Brian says

Yaa-Ha! I did it! I finished this god damn book. I just don't have enough time to actually read books, its mostly audiobooks for me. So, this is read a few pages at a time before I pass out with the kindle on top of me. But about the book.

This book just was not compelling enough. The story was good enough and interesting enough but it jumps back and forth from the heyday of the band Watershed to present day Watershed, and sometimes it is difficult to keep up where you are at. All of the characters are the same and many of the problems are the same between the timelines and it just isn't clear enough when we are talking about.

Mostly this is about the present day and the mini tour this band goes on playing to sparse crowds and wondering if it is worth it after 20 years. I feel like I might have been more invested and it might have been more compelling if there were a linear timeline and the highs of the band were driven harder home. Or maybe I should have just read it quicker.

Nita says

Ever wonder what life in a rock n' roll band is really like? I'm not talking about your won-the-rock-n-roll-lottery type band, but the average band. Now spin that out over twenty years. There you have Watershed, the band that wouldn't die. Oestreich's memoir of his adventures in Watershed beginning in 8th grade (Oestrich is now a college professor) lays it bare. It's a fun read as real as it gets. And yes, I'm proud to say I know Colin, Oestreich's bandmate, and that I write at Colin's Coffee, the little coffeehouse that wouldn't die, just around the corner from my home. Notwithstanding my bias, the book is well-written and fun. The band may be a Hitless Wonder, but Oestreich has a hit with this memoir.

Mark Sinnott says

I devoured this book!

I played with the author and his band a few times back in my music days, so this book spoke pretty specifically to me. Watershed made it a few steps further than my band did and we always admired their tenacity and stage effort. I've played in 95% of the clubs mentioned in the book, done the tours, recorded the albums, had the brushes with fame, spent hour upon hour in a van listening to the drone of the road in order to play for 35 minutes in front of ten people.

Joe does a great job of describing the life. Unlike me, he's still going with Watershed even though he is a talented writer as well. I've left it behind to be involved with other things, but for me, this book was like looking into the past 20 years of my life right along with Joe.

Oh, and thanks for the tip, mom.

Kenny Weissberg says

Having written my own rock 'n' roll memoir ("Off My Rocker"), I spend an inordinate amount of time reading others. I consider myself a rock 'n' roll lifer and love reading about others who were stung by the bug early in life and can't shake the disease. Bob Dylan's "Chronicles, Volume One," Patti Smith's "Just Kids," Levon Helm's "This Wheel's On Fire" . . . ooze the sweat, joy and frustration of leading a life devoted to music.

I just finished reading an incredible memoir and would be remiss if I didn't tell you about it. Written by an unknown singer/songwriter/bassist (Joe Oestreich) in an unknown band (Watershed), "HITLESS WONDER: A Life in Minor League Rock and Roll" is a love story. About the love of music, the love of your bandmates, the love of the road, the love of a woman. Watershed, like so many other bands, had several "almost made it" moments in their quest for rock 'n' roll stardom. A deal with Epic Records, opening slots for their heroes Cheap Trick, showcases at CBGB's and SXSW, making a record at the Record Plant, headlining an outdoor radio music festival in front of thousands of fans who sang along with every song . . . and yet . . .

Oestreich gave up the normal path of going to college and getting a real job to chase his rock 'n' roll dream. Watershed was the biggest band in Columbus, Ohio regularly playing sold out clubs and theaters. Drive a few hundred miles to Detroit (or virtually anywhere else in the country) and they'd play before a throng of five people, sell one CD and not even pay for gas money. Year after year after year.

I've heard this story before as I have a lifetime of friends who have come soooo close to the brass ring only to limp home, return to college in their 30s and prepare for another career. But no one has articulated this story as well as Joe Oestreich (now, in his 40's, a creative writing professor at Coastal Carolina University).

I won't give anything away, but the greatest thing to me is that Watershed is still making music. So many musicians sell their gear, give away their axes and even abhor the thought of playing a club again. But not Watershed. After finishing the book last week, I binged on their YouTube videos (1994-2015) and Watershed kicks ass with hook-laden, melodic power pop that I sang along with before the first spin ended.

Oestreich wrote the book in 2012 but it could have been written in the late 50's or twenty years from now. I (obviously) loved it and related to everything about it.

Neil McGarry says

We've all heard the story of a band goes from fame to flameout, but what about those bands that never even got to step one? That's the topic of *Hitless Wonder: A Life in Minor League Rock and Roll*, and rocker-turned-author Joe Oestreich takes readers aboard his band's tour bus for quite a ride.

Not that Watershed could afford a tour bus. Formed in Columbus, Ohio, by Colin Gawel and Joe Oestreich, Watershed was the scrappiest of the scrappers, taking gigs where they could get 'em and putting everything on the line in hopes for success. Their bet did not pay off, but that hasn't stopped them from spending the next fifteen years touring, cutting albums, and doing everything they could not to be Those Guys Who Used to Rock.

The story is told in two tracks: the present day tour of the Midwest and Southeast; and the earliest days of the band when Colin and Joe first picked up their instruments. Oestreich spins an engrossing tale, and treats the reader to moments both of glorious victory and cringeworthy defeat, and everything in between. I found myself both cheering and wincing, and always looking forward to turning the page to find out what would happen next. Although the title of the book clued me in that there would be no golden Hollywood ending, I couldn't help but hope that this time Watershed would end up with the silk purse and not the sow's ear.

Although the transitions between past and present are sometimes a bit blurry, Oestreich's prose is crisp, light, and gracefully spans the wryly humorous and poignantly personal. *Hitless Wonder* is a delightful read, and one that will make you wish you'd had a seat in the ratty van that stands in for the Watershed tour bus. Five stars.

Diamond says

I have read many memoirs, mostly rock & roll or film, and this is hands down one of the best. Author Joe Oestreich is one of two founding members, along with Colin Gawel, of the band Watershed from Columbus, Ohio. The band formed on the bus ride home after a Cheap Trick concert in eighth grade, when Colin turned to Joe and simply said, "We have to start a band." While they never made it arena big, the limelight swept over them briefly in the 1990's with a short-lived contract under Epic. They even got a chance to open for Cheap Trick during this period.

Joe's prose is so wonderfully conversational and warm that you feel like you have gotten a true sense of these guys. You can totally see yourself kicking back with them after a performance, having a few beers and just shooting the shit. These are lifelong friends who have been through a lot together, and are completely prepared to go through even more in the years to come.

Alternating between the story of a recent tour promoting their second live album and the story of how they got here, the book is equal parts cautionary tales and inspirational anecdotes. This book should be required reading for any kid who wants to start a band, to show them that the road they are about to embark upon can be as treacherous as Cormac McCarthy's while it can also be as rewarding as Dorothy Gale's. Sometimes at the same time.

Mike says

This one hits it out of the park. The throughline is, of course, the story of Watershed, a band from Columbus, Ohio, that just missed the pros — its creation, the twists and turns of its journey. But along the way, the scope shifts widely, swinging from the particularities of individual relationships to the wide view of the music business in the United States, stopping along the way to consider the place of the Midwest in the American cultural landscape. It's a terribly hard trick to pull off, but in Joe's hands it's smooth as glass.

And did I mention that it rocks? Because it does. This is ballsy writing, kicking ass and taking names. Crack a beer or six, sit yourself down on a barstool, and read the shit out of Hitless Wonder; it's an enormously entertaining and exciting ride, and you won't regret it.

Lindsay Hickman says

I thought I had written a review of this book and much to my surprise I found out that I didn't yet. Full disclosure I know the author-he was one of my professors in college-but he didn't make my class read the book of anything like that.

I have read the book multiple times because I just love the story. The plot is this an unknown band almost makes it big time but they fall short. But the more interesting part of the plot is that even though the band never reaches U2 status they still play in bars, concert halls and smaller venues even after each of the members grows up, has a family and has to have careers.

The book has tons of subplots and it really is a great call for everyone to not completely give up on your dream. Yes, you might have to work a day job, and the reality might not end up exactly as planned but it doesn't mean you can't appreciate what you've been able to accomplish in pursuit of the goal.

What is interesting to me is seeing the main character develop as a writer, which is eventually what his day job becomes-so seeing him go from future rockstar to writer is a great evolution.

I love how the main hero in this book ends up not being a producer, band mate or even a parent but the author's then girlfriend now wife. It is a great twist. Plus it is always a bonus to know that even after this book has been published and the author has continued on with his life that he still is able to play music and the band stays together.

I'm honestly surprised this hasn't been turned into some kind of movie with a few comedy stars showing that growing old doesn't mean you have to completely grow up or give up on your dreams.

Mike says

Too much tell and not enough show earns this one only an "I liked it" from me. And I'm not sure I would have liked it all that much if I didn't love the band Watershed. I was also disappointed the book did not touch on the band The Dead Schembechlers, which is a side project of the author and his Watershed cofounder.

Mike Ingram says

Two relevant disclaimers: 1) I am a sucker for rock-band memoirs. 2) The literary journal I co-edit (Barrelhouse) published both an excerpt from this book and an earlier essay of Joe's.

It's funny, because I've met Joe, and obviously I'd read about some of his experiences in Watershed, but I had no idea how close they'd come to being a Big-Ass Band. I mean, I knew they'd been doing it a long time, and that the book was largely about that perseverance, but the book is also a good reminder for anyone pursuing a creative/artistic endeavor about how fickle the world can be, and how even the smallest turns of luck (good or bad) can make all the difference.

The book is a fascinating look at the ins and outs of the record business at a particular historical moment, one which has probably already passed, or is in the process of passing, as things become increasingly fractured

and increasingly online. I'm sure that new model presents an entirely new set of dilemmas for bands. But what's interesting about Hitless Wonder is how much Watershed was at the mercy of other people: to put their records out, to promote them, to manage things the right way, etc.

Of course by the time Watershed came along plenty of bands had jumped ship from that business model and embraced a punk-inspired DIY ethos, which Oestreich is well aware of. But Watershed wasn't that kind of band. They wanted to believe in the recording industry. They wanted to believe they could be rock stars. And they came really, really close.

Nate Trier says

A memoir by the bassist of a Midwestern rock band that you've never heard of. In the right hands, this could have been a darkly humorous, insightful book, but the author isn't quite able to objectively look at his past, analyze his motives, and relay them to the reader. The first and last quarters of the book are filled with a sort of "I'm in a band, and yet I'm not living a life of rock and roll excess - how could that be?!" myopia that I get from a lot of rockers (is it possible an entire generation took Dire Straits "Money for Nothing" at face value?)

The middle section of the book, however, is worth the price of admission. It's a brutally honest look at a band that almost got their big break during the signing alt-rock frenzy of the 90's. Almost got their big break, and then their big break fell through. Then it ALMOST happened again, and then it fell through again. And then it ALMOST happened again, and...you can guess how it goes. You end up rooting for his band and admiring their pugnacious determination. Oestreich is frank and doesn't sugarcoat the workings of the business.

For anyone with an interest in the music business (or anyone who ever heard a Midwestern alt-rock band on the radio in the 1990's - they almost all make cameos), most of this book will be a great read.

Diane says

This is a great rock-and-roll memoir. Joe Oestreich is a wonderful writer who guides us through a comeback tour with his band, Watershed, alternating between the present tour and the history of the band, which Joe and his buddy Colin started when they were in eighth grade in Columbus, Ohio. (They were inspired after seeing a Cheap Trick concert.) Joe never calls Watershed the hardest working band in America, but man, after more than *two decades* of van trips and sound checks and playing clubs all over the country, they could win that title.

Watershed made it big for a while, sort of. In the '90s they had a record deal with Epic, but eventually got dropped because of low album sales, just like so many other hundreds of bands that aspired to fill rock arenas. But even if you haven't heard of Watershed, it doesn't mean their story isn't meaningful. Joe's stories about rock in the minor leagues remind us how rare it is for a band to stay together as long as Joe and Colin have. So what if they never played the Staples Center? Those guys still take the stage with the intent to ROCK.

I saw Watershed play in a Chicago club after the release of their album, "The More it Hurts, the More it Works," which is my favorite album of theirs. The guys rocked the place and the crowd loved them. If that isn't a mark of a successful band, then I don't know anything.

This isn't one of those rock memoirs that was ghostwritten by someone. Oestreich has a master's degree in creative writing, and his style is so smooth and inviting that I read the book in almost one sitting. It's warm and funny and inspiring and it made me wish I grew up in Columbus so I could have attended all of those Watershed shows.

And be sure to read Joe's liner notes as you go along -- they're filled with great behind-the-scenes stories. The only way "Hitless Wonder" could have been better is if it came with its own CD of Watershed music. Rock on, Joe and Colin!

John says

Utterly charming. A love story about rock music, friendship, persistence, more than a few failures, some indifference from the world, and the places where we grew up. In other words, a love story about life.
