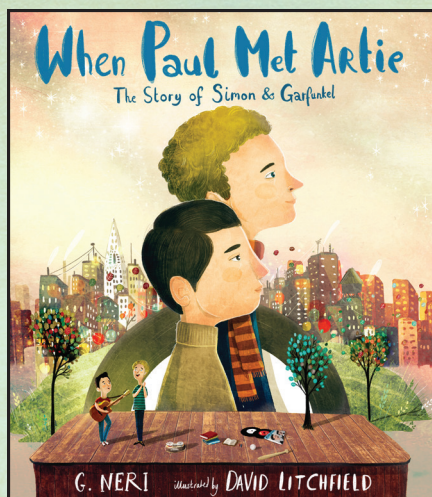




G. NERI on the inspiration behind

When Paul Met Artie: The Story of Simon & Garfunkel



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Why did you decide to write a book about Simon & Garfunkel?

Two reasons: *Bridge Over Troubled Water* was the first album my parents owned that I really listened to. Those harmonies and lyrics blew my mind—I'd never heard anything like it. And later, in my brooding late teens and early twenties, some of their songs became the soundtrack to my early traveling days across America and Europe. But the bigger reason that sparked the idea of writing a book was that I thought Paul Simon had a doppelgänger.

A what?

A friend had sent me a link to an early Simon & Garfunkel TV concert where Artie walks off and on walks Paul's brother, Ed—who looks exactly like Paul—and he could play, too! My mind immediately went to, *Wait a minute, did his brother sometimes take Paul's place and we never noticed?*

And that led to a book how, exactly?

Well, I immediately googled Paul's brother, and that's where I found out for the first time about Paul and Artie's childhood friendship—that they grew up as pals in Queens, where they met in a sixth-grade production of *Alice in Wonderland*, bonded over baseball and the birth of rock 'n' roll, and became teenage rockabilly sensations called Tom and Jerry appearing on *American Bandstand*, all before they were seventeen! I was like, *What? How come I never knew that?* I'd been a big fan all my life and yet nobody had told me that.

Why tell this story for kids?

Because, despite Simon & Garfunkel being bigger than the Beatles in the late sixties, it was their childhood friendship that really connected with me. It was almost exactly like the lifelong friendship between me and my best friend. While they were east-coast and a generation older and we were west-coast and bonded over movies, not music, the results were the same. My friend and I had met around the same age, in seventh grade—loners, outsiders—and became best pals because of our imaginations. I'd always wanted to tell a story of two best friends, and I'd also always wanted to write about the effect the birth of rock 'n' roll had on young kids in America. And here were both stories intertwined perfectly.



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Like a perfect harmony! Do you see this story as a continuation somehow of the Johnny Cash rags-to-riches story you told in your earlier picture book?

Maybe not rags to riches, but failure to success, definitely. *Hello, I'm Johnny Cash* was about the history of popular music from the Great Depression to the birth of rock 'n' roll, from country and blues to rockabilly and, well, Elvis. Paul and Artie's musical interests took off from there, from the other side of the radio, hearing Elvis and the Everly Brothers for the first time. Their world covered rhythm and blues, doo-wop, and folk rock. I love that Johnny was one of the sources behind the beginnings of rock on the radio and that Paul and Artie were the beneficiaries of what came out of the radio. That music inspired them so much, they decided as young teens they were going to make it on the radio themselves and started hitting the streets at fifteen trying to sell songs to record producers in Manhattan.

It's also a book about growing up and not giving up.

Yes. Most people don't know the incredible amount of failure these two had to overcome before they made it big. It's astounding that they got their big break at sixteen and were has-beens by the time they graduated high school. It took almost eight years of collective failure, from the death of the first wave of rock 'n' roll, when Elvis joined the army and Buddy Holly and Ritchie Valens died in a plane crash, to the emergence of folk, with Bob Dylan and Joan Baez. Most people would have given up in the face of that never-ending defeat. Paul and Artie broke up badly and went their separate ways to college, studying to be a lawyer and an architect. Later, Paul ran away to busk in Europe and Artie thumbed his way to Berkeley, and they both got caught up in the emergence of the folk music scene. When they came back to Queens, they randomly ran into each other on a bridge. Paul had written a few new songs (including "The Sound of Silence"), and Artie asked to hear them, unconsciously singing along to them in harmony. But even their first album together flopped. Only because some college radio started playing "The Sound of Silence" a year later and their producer, on his own, laid down some drums and bass to produce an electric version of the song did they go number one and Simon & Garfunkel was born.

It's a picture book, but it's dense, not necessarily for little kids.

No, it's for older kids, ages nine to twelve. For anyone who loves Simon & Garfunkel, it's a great way to expose their kids or grandkids to that music and to the history of music in the fifties and sixties. But more than that, it's the story of friendship and collaboration, and how two voices can be stronger than one.

