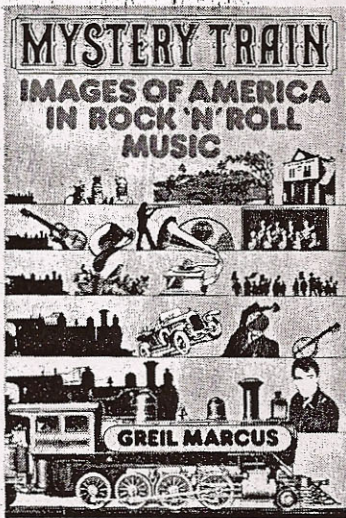


Hot Off The Shelf

by Toby Goldstein



MYSTERY TRAIN: Images of America in Rock'n'Roll Music, by Greil Marcus, (Dutton, \$8.95).

For a music that was treated as a "straw in the wind" when it first appeared some twenty years ago, rock'n'roll has exhibited a remarkable staying power. Its original creators fought battles of self-preservation on many levels: against charges of perverting the youth of America in matters of sex and violence, against the charges of "nigger music" and other epithets, against the backers of both jazz and classical music who held that rock was some sort of aberration, forgetting the frequent charges placed against those two musical forms in their time. Obviously, a great deal of thought and countless dollars later, opinions have changed. The rebels of the 50's set down the groundwork for a mammoth social and financial industry, which today is one of the most unalterable cultural landmarks to be found. With the publication of "Mystery Train," rock has now reached a zenith point in its evolution given popular acceptance, academic approval, the music taken for its own sake while at the same time given to mean as much as any other part of America's heritage.

Marcus has done no less than win a musical revolution in the course of one book. Even before commencing to read, one takes a look at the back-flap kudos emanating from the likes of Martin Duberman and Edgar Z. Friedenberg. Seeing the stamp of approval given by names that were made holy in Sociology 1, I knew immediately that this was to be no mere recap of rock chronology patting itself on the back. Marcus had much higher aspirations in "Mystery Train" . . . to weave the essence of American rock music into the fabric of history which spawned it. To prove by painstaking analysis tempered with outright love that rock is no more or less than America itself, with our most universal hopes and fears illustrated in the nutshell of a three-minute song. To a large extent thematically, and without ever making his subjects lose their fascination, Marcus succeeds, and not so incidentally creates one of the best-written books to emerge from the mass of good, bad and indifferent rock literature. If Marcus owes literary debts, they are to all his history courses, splashed over by R. Meltzer's "Aesthetics of Rock," the only other essay to see rock history for more than its dates.

"Mystery Train" sets its focus on four different artists plus two "ancestors," explaining in great detail how the music of each intertwines with basic threads of American history and folklore. The comparisons are as visible as The Band's *The Weight* symbolizing the burdens of Everyman, or as subtle as the role of Sly Stone as Staggerlee, a black man simultaneously in rebellion against and caught up within an impenetrable social framework. Randy Newman, in his least unified chapter, fights against succeeding with the pop music he creates, and Elvis Presley, truly the book's hero, is Marcus' total American, a conglomeration of success and failures all wrapped up in dreams. The foursome is foreshadowed and shown in relation to two rock predecessors, the devil-may-care Harmonica Frank and the devil-obsessed bluesman, Robert Johnson. These men are Marcus' bedrock for the later-born music, their alternating rebellion and fatalistic acceptance pave the way for equal parts of *Hound Dog* and *Lonely at the Top*. Johnson, in particular, is brought to life in all his bewildered splendor by a tightly-laced presentation of images. Says Marcus, "The moments of perfect pleasure in Johnson's songs, and the beauty of these songs, reminds one that it is not the simple presence of evil that is unbearable; what is unbearable is the impossibility of reconciling the facts of evil with the beauty of the world." In their best moments, The Band, Sly, Newman, Presley and hundreds of others will make such a basic, tenderly expressed truth work to exquisite advantage.

Marcus' choice of subjects is a compelling and diverse group, but for him, the sum total of Americans is invested in the person of one man, Elvis Presley. Presley is rarely more than a shadow figure in 1976, yet, when he chooses to emerge for a series of concerts or even comes out of seclusion for a short while, he quickly regains his full stature. Elvis, says Marcus, is more than the King; he is a as much folklore as a Paul Bunyan myth. It is enough that people see him onstage, no matter the caliber of his performance, for he is larger than life. Presley is the American dream of bigness, fortune, power, a reliance on no man (except maybe Parker the manager), overshadowing if never totally concealing the small human being underneath who believes with all his might that wishing will make it so. The chapter is appropriately titled *Presliad*. Like the Iliad of ancient Greece, the search for America within Presley takes on epic proportions. What is at stake is no less than our most cherished fantasies. Without them to collect us, we are no more than a bunch of citizens descended from scattered immigrants.

"Mystery Train" is the glue that seeks to bind the wild streams of rock into a common ancestry, providing a means to pull thought-provoking material together. Pop and the shallower stuff is given its place, for the great ad campaigns are as much a part of the American scene as anything else, though I would have wished for a lengthier chapter on that field, since *Sugar Sugar* is as much a part of history as *Sail Away*. These are minor quibbles though, easily viewed in hindsight, and draw nothing away from the book as a whole. Greil Marcus has combined his M.A. in American Studies with a love of both rock'n'roll and America that can only come straight from the heart to write the first book that refuses to isolate rock from the mainstream. If the music is a separate river, it could not exist without continuous in-flow from tributaries, and both start and empty within the land itself.

Fig 4/76