



# Kent Looks At Books

**MYSTERY TRAIN: IMAGES OF AMERICA IN ROCK AND ROLL MUSIC** by Greil Marcus. (Dutton, paperback, \$3.60.)

As America pauses to reflect upon two centuries of history it is appropriate also to consider two recent decades of the American experience as amplified by its rock and roll music.

Greil Marcus identifies the originators of rock as having delivered a new version of America with their music. And he adds: "More people than anyone can count are still trying to figure out how to live in it."

"Mystery Train" is not a history, nor a musical analysis, nor a portraiture of rock personalities. It is, rather, an attempt to broaden the context in which the music is heard; to deal with rock and roll not as a youth culture, but as American culture.

In his text, Marcus focuses on six artists: "Ancestors" Robert Johnson and Harmonica Frank; and "Inheritors" Sly Stone, The Band, Randy Newman and Elvis Presley. Yet Marcus looks beyond these men to such other potent images and archetypes in American history as the "guilty Puritan," Huck Finn and Captain Ahab to discover a sense of what it is to be an American.

The beginnings of rock 'n' roll are described by Marcus as "one of those great twists of history that no one anticipated." He describes the music as "something that didn't fit, that didn't make sense out of, or reflect American life as everyone seemed to understand it, but which made it beside the point, confused things and affirmed something else."

Speaking of The Band and Sly Stone, the author explains: "There was an enormous freedom to the band's sound. It was complex, because freedom is complex." "Sly's work was deeply personal and inescapably political; innovative and tough in its music; literate and direct in its words; a parody of the past and an unflinching statement about the present."

Similarly shaded are the subsequent portraits as well credentialed Marcus links America's dark experiences of the past two decades to the musical expressions of which best illuminate them.

Of Randy Newman, Marcus observed: "Newman represents some kind of opening up of the classic archetype of the keeper of the American imagination."

Elvis Presley, America's giant contradiction, is identified by Marcus as a "massive road-show musical of opulent American mastery." He suggests that the vision of the American dream that is Elvis' performance is blown up again and again to contain more history, more people, more music, more hopes. Although "the air gets thin," Marcus asserts, "the bubble does not burst, nor will it ever." Completing the longest essay of the book, Marcus depicts Elvis as the epitome of all that is bad about America — but much of that which is good, too.

In sum, Greil Marcus tries to depict what is novel and adventurous and what is enervated and complacent not only in musical culture, but American culture. Through music, Marcus affirms that we might discover whose America we are living in at any given moment and where it came from.

Marcus has done a remarkable job of combining a love of music with a deep respect for history and language. He convinces this reader that the way to a nation's heart might well be through its music.

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