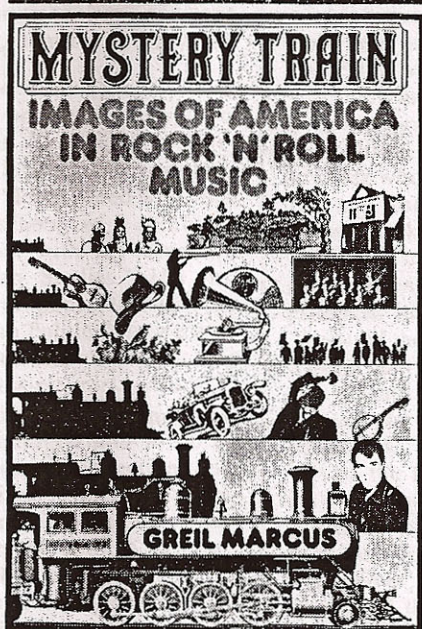


Books



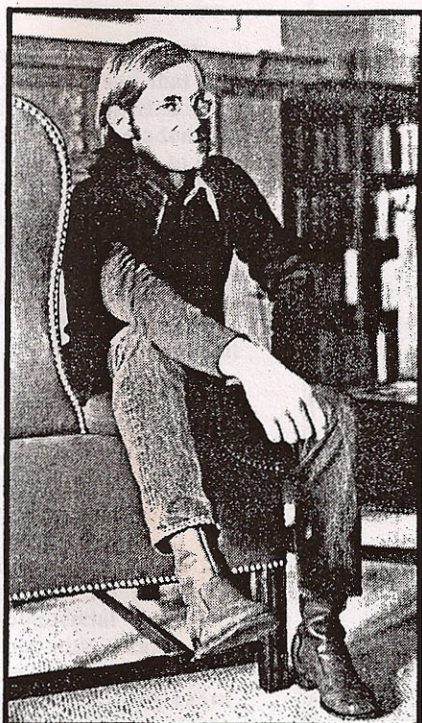
By Greil Marcus '67, M.A. '68
(Dutton, \$8.95)

Reviewed by Paul Desruisseaux

Originally the book was to be called *Greil Marcus Answers All Your Questions About Rock 'n' Roll*. In the writing, however, Marcus found that explaining who put the *bop* in the *bop-shu-bop-shu-bop* was far less interesting than trying to answer larger questions about rock music as a product as well as reflection of the American experience. He decided to make the book a more pioneering effort. Blazing a trail of ideas from Puritanism to psychedelia, he produced *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music*, the most ambitious work ever written about rock and an inspired document on our culture.

Mystery Train combines the best elements of rock criticism with literary interpretation, historical analysis, and musicology. But the author doesn't try to make everything fit some grand equation. "What I bring to this book," he writes, "is no attempt at synthesis, but a recognition of unities in the American imagination that already exist."

He works on a small scale: only four rock performers or groups are discussed. The selection represents a cross-section of society as well as of rock music. Randy Newman, The Band, Sly and the Family Stone, and Elvis Presley "each catch an America that has shape within an America that is seamless," he writes. "Their stories are hardly the whole story, but they can tell us how much the story matters." As for the missing heavyweights of rock: "I decided not to write about anybody who had already been written about too much or about whom great stuff had already been written, like Dylan and Chuck Berry."



music were spirits of acceptance and desire, rebellion and awe, raw excitement, good sex, open humor, a magic feel for history — a determination to find plurality and drama in an America we had met too often as a monolith."

With Sly Stone, the author connects the dots in a pattern that links the oldest of black America's musical legends, that of Staggerlee, to the politics of the Black Panthers, then explicates the connections between both of them and Sly's music. In a fascinating bit of reporting, he traces Staggerlee's legend to its origins. His interpretation of its significance is impressive. "It is a story that black America has never tired of hearing and never stopped living out . . . Locked in the images of a thousand versions of the tale is an archetype that speaks to fantasies of casual violence and violent sex, lust and hatred . . . a fantasy of style and steppin' high. At a deeper level it is a fantasy of no-limits for a people who live within a labyrinth of limits every day of their lives."

Elvis Presley, as he's portrayed here, is America in microcosm. "Elvis's story is so classically American (poor country boy makes good in the city) that his press agents never bothered to improve on it. When Elvis sings 'American Trilogy,' he signifies that his persona, and the culture that he has made out of the blues, Las Vegas, gospel music, Hollywood, schmaltz, Mississippi, and rock 'n' roll, can contain any America you might want to conjure up."

His success, however, has carried him too far from his roots, his connection to the land. Ultimately, "The version of the American dream that is Elvis's performance is blown up again and again, to contain more history, more people, more music, more hopes, the air gets

His ideas are refreshing and provocative. This book doesn't answer all your questions about rock and roll; but it raises a host of new questions, important and worth pondering, about a country and its music.

* * * * *

Marcus began writing seriously about rock music when he was a Berkeley undergraduate. "It was a matter of frustration," he says. "I was bored with what I was doing in school, so I combined my hobby, music, with my academic interest, American Studies." His first effort was a term paper titled "New Horizons in Group Politics" for a course in American political thought. The groups were, of course, rock groups.

Thinking Marcus was on to something, his teachers encouraged him to go on making intracultural connections between music, politics, history, and literature. "My academic training was absolutely essential to the kind of writing I do," he says. "The courses I took at Berkeley were the foundation of everything I know." He has particular praise for his political science courses with Mike Rogin, Norman Jacobson, and Jack Schaar. "Their classes had fewer disciplinary limits than other courses. They taught you to think."

After completing his Master's degree, Marcus spent more time on his writing. He became music columnist for the San Francisco *Express-Times*, then record editor of *Rolling Stone*. In 1971 he returned to Berkeley to teach American Studies, but decided after a year that teaching and a Ph.D. didn't matter as much to him as his writing, which has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Newsday*, *Creem*, Boston's *Real Paper*, and other publications. Currently he is a regular contributor to *The Village Voice* and book critic and columnist for *Roll-*

ing Stone.

Why did he write this book? "There were things I wanted to say that just couldn't get said in a magazine. The book was an attempt to broaden the context in which music is heard; to deal with rock and roll not as youth culture or counter-culture, but simply as American culture. I wanted it to be interesting to those who didn't care about rock and roll and knew nothing of it as well as those who knew everything about it."

Today's music, he feels, is "good, but not good enough to stay around." Nevertheless, he still finds rock sustaining. "I would no more own a car without a radio than I would one without wheels. But it's not as exciting as when I was a freshman at Berkeley and the Beatles happened."

And the future of rock? "There just isn't any question that it's incredibly powerful as a commercial force; it's become totally at one with its capitalistic side. Four or five companies control almost all the rock music that's heard, and as a result it's going to become more predictable, standards will lower, it will be much less interesting."

"The thing that's important to me about rock and roll and the blues," he says, "is that listening to it made me more interested in American culture, period. It enlivened the whole business. I wouldn't be as interested in it as I still am if it didn't connect with all these other things."

Marcus has no plans, however, to further explore connections between America and its music. "I've said what I had to say about rock and roll and American culture," he explains. "Probably the next book I write will be about the Puritans. It'll be the Ph.D. dissertation I never wrote, except it won't be a Ph.D. dissertation." □