

Participating in the Presley legend: Marcus gives a solid overview of the America that rock 'n' roll is all about.

the resultant article would be one that any rock mag would be proud to have. But Marcus has always pursued something a lot bigger than a mere profile, something about which Robertson, for all his articulateness, is merely one of several valuable informants encountered along the way.

What Marcus is after is nothing more or less than a good, solid overview of the America that rock 'n' roll is all about. To this end, he has divided *Mystery Train* into chapters on Harmonica Frank, Robert Johnson, The Band, Sly Stone, Randy Newman, and - the huge essay where all the book's themes converge - Elvis Presley. A wise choice of topics - each performer has staked an important claim in the shared imagination of rock 'n' roll America.

And so we have them: Harmonica Frank, the right man in the right place (Sun Records) at the wrong time. He could have been Sam Phillips' long-sought white guy who sings colored, but he arrived too early, and he was too old. As Marcus points out, he embodied the spirit that would become rock 'n' roll, even if the form itself didn't yet exist. Robert Johnson, a difficult enough man to write about since so little is known about him, nonetheless managed to imbue much of the American popular music that came after him with his spirit. Marcus develops a fascinating analysis of Johnson's relationship to the Puritan mainstream of American thought - a view of the blues that has been hinted at, perhaps, but never expounded upon this well before.

The three contemporary artists (Elvis doesn't count) are touchstones. The Band chapter gives Marcus a chance to talk some about Dylan (although his ultimate Dylan piece is yet to come) but more importantly it gives him space to talk about these young Canadians who have somehow more than any other band epitomized and crystallized the American mythos. The Band really believe in America, and from their faith have come some of rock's most brilliant moments.

The only chapter I quarrel with is the one on Sly, based as it is on an analysis of Sly's career as Stacklerlee, focusing on the *Riot* album, a work whose purchasers I sincerely doubt saw in it even a small percentage of what Marcus sees. But it is, once again, testament to Marcus' skills that I read this chapter enthralled with his overview of white attitudes towards black music, his political-cultural analysis of the state of modern soul music, and Sly's rather revolutionary stance vis-a-vis his audience without even for a minute believing that the over-self-conscious and numbingly

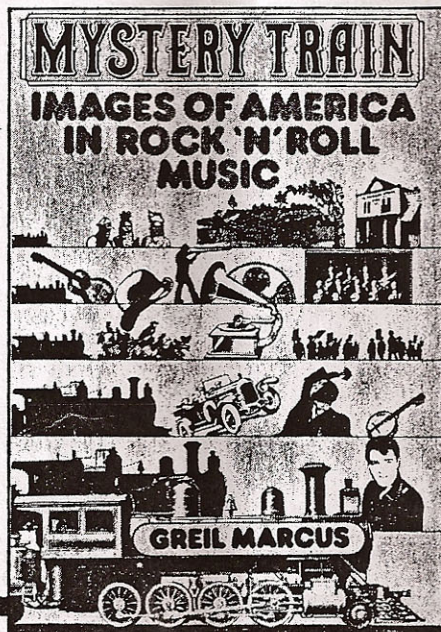
Survival On The American Express by Ed Ward

MYSTERY TRAIN
Images Of America In Rock
'n' Roll Music
By Greil Marcus
(E.P. Dutton)

Mystery Train is the first "rock book" that make total sense to me. True, there have been histories, and some of them have been very good indeed. There have been biographies of individual performers and groups, and some of these have been excellent, as far as they went. Anthologies dedicated to articles and criticism had their day, and were mostly unreadable. The lamentable truth is that most rock writing has been the product of people more interested in grandstanding their own egos than using their intellects to make a cogent statement that might broaden a reader's understanding of the topic under discussion or the broader context in which any art must exist. Greil Marcus, a writer with a scholarly bias (he has taught American Studies at UC Berkeley) is not interested in taking the easy way out.

A good example of his approach to rock is Marcus' relationship with Robbie Robertson of the Band. Over the past couple of years, Marcus and Robertson

have spent quite a bit of time talking about various mutual interests, which include Bob Dylan, the Band, and rock and roll in general. Now, most "rock writers" would instantly seek to capitalize on the situation - the Band is hardly overexposed in the rock press - by writing up the conversations in a feature article. Considering the depth and breadth of the stuff they've discussed,



dull album that occasioned the analysis was all Marcus makes it out to be.

Randy Newman is the grim poet of the Promised Land, California, and America's Eden, southern (Los Angeles) California in specific. A small, but important, chapter, since to write about rock 'n' roll America one should mention the myth of the Promised Land which has drawn so many people to it through the efforts of those, like the Beach Boys and, in his own way, Newman, who glamorize it.

The most important chapter - the one which has clearly been Marcus' obsession throughout his entire rock 'n' roll listening career - is the one on Elvis; he calls it the "Presliad." Here is where the currents that feed American rock 'n' roll culture, its music, its literature, and its art, all meet. Elvis is a figure whose accomplishment was at once so simple and so complex, so easy and so difficult, that even an essay as long and as economically written as this can hardly do him justice. Still, one can hardly accuse any writer of overstating Elvis' myth - Colonel Tom Parker does *that* for a living.

Elvis really did put all the themes that have cropped up in the book so far together - from the Puritanism of Robert Johnson to the racial daring of Sly to the homespun Americana of the Band to Randy Newman's sly suburban squareness. He is a Bunyan of American music, a man who mixed the oil and water of black and white and watched it go down the country's throat like honey. He melded country music's repressions and yearnings with the sexual bravado and flat-out lunacy of then-current rhythm-and-blues and touched a chord in the nation's youth that had been begging for it for as long as it could remember. And he got rich doing it, rich enough to indulge himself in the way he'd always wanted to do. He became a king, but an American king. He was the poor boy who made good. And he became the rich boy who was so rich that he not only didn't have to do anything anymore to keep where he was or get bigger - he could fucking well cut his own throat, seemingly demean and belittle everything he stood for and STILL win the adoration and applause that the audience reserves only for the very great - the people who make their myths.

Marcus goes to town in the "Presliad," brilliantly mixing observation, fantasy (a series of "Elvis Echoes" similar to footnotes run throughout the chapter containing odd sidelights, speculations, or random observations that don't quite fit into the tightly-woven fabric of the main text), analysis, and his conclusions (that Elvis is the sole performer ever to immerse himself in the blues and yet transcend their down-

ward pull just as he transcended country music's self-pity, for instance) are no less exciting and original than the discographic content of the chapter which is, when all is said and done, merely the ten sides that Elvis released on Sam Phillips' Sun label. This chapter alone justifies buying the book. Once you've read it, you feel like you've participated in the entire Presley legend - personally - all over again.

No less fascinating than the chapters themselves are the notes, by the way. Containing a painstakingly researched and annotated discography, there are also complete explication of and follow-ups on leads dropped in the text of each chapter so that a Martian (or your parents) with absolutely no background in this music could trace each reference as far as necessary. An aside in the Sly Stone chapter leads Marcus to attempt tracking down the actual historical Stacklerlee, and, with the help of Tennessee newspaperman Pat Thomas, he has actually done so, an event that would make anybody else write a whole book around it. Marcus' back pages only look like footnotes.

And, lest I've given the wrong idea, the very best part of the whole of *Mystery Train* is this: for all that it bats around capital-I-Ideas, for all that it is sedulously researched and profoundly thought out, for all - in short - its awesome intellectuality, *Mystery Train* remains utterly readable and clear, and communicates its essence with consummate ease. It reads like a charm, bringing new and vital ideas to a field long in need of them, and if it doesn't get you to *thinking* about some of this stuff, nothing will. If we are to learn anything from the cultural and political events of the last decades, we are going to need thinkers and writers like Greil Marcus. Maybe *Mystery Train* will bring some of them out of the woods.

Off The Wall

THE GUITAR BOOK by Tom Wheeler (Harper & Row):: Everything you ever needed to know about guitars, all collected in one volume. How to buy, string, build, amplify, care for, and play a guitar. Wheeler loves his subject, and although the price is steep, any similarly enamored guitarist will find it most worthwhile.

TALES OF POWER by Carlos Castaneda (Simon & Schuster):: The absolute last don Juan book, possibly the last Castaneda book, and by now what can you say about this series except if you've gotten hooked on it, get this one, too. If you haven't discovered everybody's favorite Yaqui, start with the first book and read 'em sequentially. E.W.