

32—Rolling Stone

103—ROLLING STONE

REBEL—7-9-75 (10)

MYSTERY TRAIN

Like the best rock & roll music Greil Marcus's *Mystery Train* is flashy and flamboyant. Like the best jam session it sounds both completely spontaneous and perfectly controlled. Like the best movies of directors like Robert Altman it formulates strong central themes. But its real joy comes from the stuff out on the periphery, the never-ending asides, digressions and assorted notions.

Marcus has done something original and significant by interpreting rock in the context of American culture and interpreting American culture as it has been reconstructed in rock music. He focuses on how rock expresses the dark currents in American life, gives voice to the repressed strains in the society, and finds ways to deal with otherwise taboo emotions.

To do this, he knew that he would have to write about rock differently than had been done before. No mere music criticisms, sociology or biography would suffice. Instead he would have to go with the tide and roll with the flow of his own ideas.

To introduce us to his perspective, he begins with a dazzling re-creation of a *Dick Cavett Show* that found Eric Segal, John Simon and Little Richard discussing the meaning of art. Marcus reminds us that there was one weirdo, one oddball, one rock singer from Macon, Georgia on the set—but only one artist, Little Richard.

Richard serves to define Marcus's image of the rock artist as a man who's created something which has made a difference, who has taken chances, broken rules and affected our lives in the process. Accordingly, Marcus focuses on six disparate entities who he feels have achieved that goal—the anonymous Harmonica Frank, the pivotal blues singer Robert Johnson, The Band, Sly Stone, Randy Newman and Elvis Presley. Once he enters into each man or group's artistic world, Marcus fills in the blanks, pushes away the underbrush and shows us the network of interactions that surround and define each vision. In discussing Johnson, he invokes the ideas of Calvinism and Puritanism that came before him, the writing of William Faulkner that coexisted with him and the images of the movie *The Night of the Hunter* that came after him.

~~Marcus's method is carried to some logical conclusion in the book's staggeringly detailed commentary on Elvis Presley. Marcus sees Presley as the unifier of American popular culture,~~

By
Von
Landau

~~William Faulkner that coexisted with him and the images of the movie *The Night of the Hunter* that came after him.~~

Marcus's method is carried to some logical conclusion in the book's staggeringly detailed commentary on Elvis Presley. Marcus sees Presley as the unifier of American popular culture, as well as a symbol for its stagnation and limitations. He approaches Elvis as a supreme figure of the entire American mythical pantheon. Through Presley's life, music, style and legend Marcus sees the presentation of every significant dichotomy in American life—as well as the dismissal of same. Presley emerges as a man who “. . . has gone to the greatest extremes: he has given us an America that is dead and an unmatched version of an America that is full of life.”

Marcus's strength as a writer is in his endless intellectual imagination and his ability to draw valid and surprising connections between seemingly unrelated phenomena. In his first-rate chapter on Sly Stone, he makes a remarkable connection between the pop star and the character in the ancient street song, “Staggerlee.” Through Sly, Marcus perceives the rise of a new black sensibility, a new, streetwise, antiromanticism that separates it from most popular black music of the past.

Marcus's limitation is that he is too free and promiscuous with his theories and observations. Too often he comes up empty handed, and his tendency to over dramatize becomes annoying. Marcus doesn't seem particularly interested in the purely musical aspects of rock. He falters when trying to deal with the music in particular and his judgments can be irritatingly arbitrary. To say that Elvis Presley's version of “Good Rocking Tonight” was a landmark of sorts is acceptable. But to say that it reduced Wynonie Harris's magnificent original to the status of a footnote is both arrogant and ignorant.

In Marcus's defense, it must be said that it is never his purpose to merely make an argument or to be strictly logical. His purpose is to interpret what rock has done to him, what it has done to the culture and what it has done to America. He has succeeded in doing that in a way that is true to rock music itself.

Marcus says he focused on the six figures in the book because to him they were more ambitious and took more risks than most others. As a critic he has done the same: taken stylistic, intellectual and creative risks in writing so original and ambitious a book about both America and rock & roll. Marcus has often quoted Robbie Robertson approvingly to the effect that “music should never be harmless.” The best thing about this wonderful book is that it never is.
