

Marcus's Magical Mystery Train

Mything American music

By Ken Emerson

These are indeed, as Greil Marcus writes, "times when pop culture and politics have lost their grander mythic dimensions, when there are no artists and no politics to create community, and every fan is thrown back on himself" — playing possum, as Carly Simon sings. (And she and her husband comfortably embody this era of reduced expectations in which we applaud the Rolling Stones not because they still challenge or change us but because, well, they're still the Stones. I'm not at all sure that the '70s are to be deplored. Because we (to use the '60s' favorite pronoun) are no longer as one the '70s enjoy a musical pluralism the previous decade never knew. That Bob Dylan, Eugene McCarthy, Huey Newton and everyone else you might care to name have been whittled down to size, that this is a time without heroes (only *People*), may be an occasion for sadness, but certainly not for despair. Like growing up, disillusionment is painful, but there are worse things to be thrown back on than one's self, and if it can be disheartening, it is also very necessary to learn to make the best of a diminished thing. The marvel of Greil Marcus's *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music* (Dutton, 275 pp., \$8.95) is that it grimly registers the diminution yet at the same time heroically restores, not only to pop culture

but to America itself, their "grander mythic dimensions." It is, quite simply, the finest book ever written about rock 'n' roll.

Marcus takes his cue from Leslie Fiedler, whom he acknowledges and quotes: . . . *to be an American (unlike being English or French or whatever) is precisely to imagine a destiny rather than to inherit one; since we have always been, insofar as we are Americans at all, inhabitants of myth rather than history . . .*

(It's surprising that Marcus doesn't make more use of Fiedler, whose famous observation that most classic American books seem written for young boys, for example, would enhance Marcus's thesis that rock 'n' roll, still primarily the music of teenagers, is very much a part of the American cultural tradition.) Because ours is a new country, the argument runs, and we, the offspring of immigrants, are often still newer to it, our visions of ourselves and of the place we inhabit are not historically preordained but imaginatively created. Rock music is as much a mythic undertaking as other media of American culture, high and low; like Henry James, Elvis Presley is a self-made man.

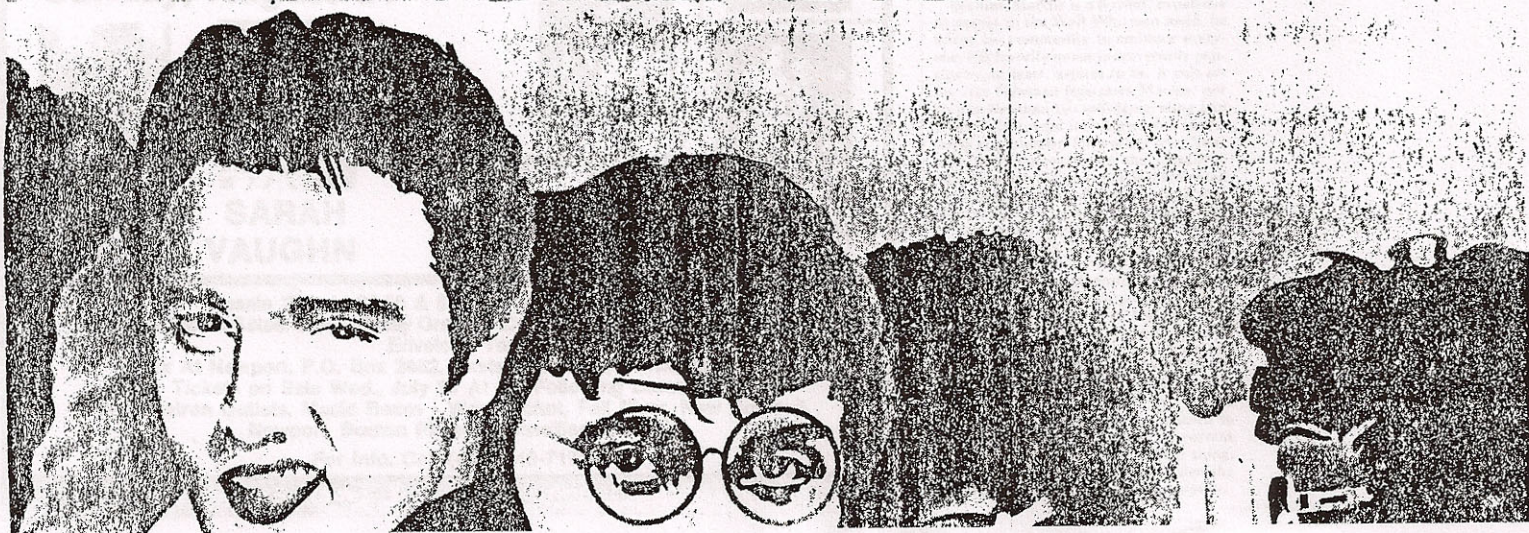
And *Mystery Train* is a mythic undertaking. To read it as history would be folly, for it renders the past in facile carica-

ture: the Puritans, for instance, become "those gloomy old men," as if Nathaniel Hawthorne had had the last word on them. Marcus devotes each chapter to one performer or group, but what he gives us are not quite biographies (the facts are too sketchy) and, although there is a wealth of insightful criticism, not quite critiques (the hyperbole is too extreme, the judgments too subjective). Instead, Marcus is writing legend, making Harmonica Frank, Robert Johnson, the Band, Sly Stone and Elvis Presley seem larger than life (whereas today even the biggest stars seem smaller than their stardom), making popular music matter as it so rarely seems to in the '70s, when it has been reduced to "Random Notes" in *Rolling Stone*.

Enacting the very fictive process it celebrates, *Mystery Train* creates myth by infusing each career with high drama, by making for its subjects exorbitant claims with such earnest energy that one is swept into a suspension of disbelief. Is it really true, as Marcus writes, that Robert Johnson "seemed to take more pure pleasure out of making music than any other Delta singer"? It probably isn't (did Mississippi John Hurt derive *less* pure pleasure?), but one doesn't stop to debate. Does the Band deserve to be called, twice, "the best band in the world"? Marcus

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“Marcus cares about America with a passion that the last ten years have drained from most of us. But these ten years and their enervating horrors seem to have impelled Marcus to delve all the more deeply into America in order to comprehend them.”



Ensemble

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 seem recitation" on "Illistrum") are over-
 long and tedious. "Barnyard Scuffel
 shuffle," a Bowie throwback to funkier
 days with a tough Jarman tenor, is light
 and fun; more substantial are Mitchell's
 "Nonash," a pointillistic horn frame for
 Abrams' jagged piano, and the Asiatic
 ambience created by intertwining flute
 and piccolo on Jarman's "What's To
 Say."

After these less than satisfying Atlan-
 tic recordings, the pursuit of individual
 paths may have been the wisest prescrip-
 tion, or so the recorded and concert evi-
 dence suggests. *The Roscoe Mitchell Solo
 Saxophone Concerts* (Sackville), from
 late 1973, finds Mitchell successfully
 lending his deliberate developmental
 methods with the full range of horn tech-
 niques. Two versions of "Nonash" are
 rife and blazing, the well-paced bass sax
 aspect of "Tutankhamen" and the
 composed emotion of Mitchell's tenor on
 "Eel-two" more reflective. Bowie's *Fast
 as!* (Muse), by contrast, is an ensemble
 record, introducing several members
 of the St. Louis-based Black Artists
 Group, which is a counterpart to Chi-
 cago's AACM. The trumpeter tends to
 overplay his role as leader, though he
 lays a typically quirky "Hello Dolly" for
 his first idol, Louis Armstrong.

Jarman's June concert in Boston was
 militarily impressive, with the saxophon-
 ist aided by local luminaries Stan Strick-
 land, Stanton Davis and Hayes Burnett.
 "People who recognize the tenets of the
 real Black Music movement," says Jar-
 man. "When you find people with that
 spirit, it feels like you've been playing

together for eternity.") Disparaging "poli-
 tical" approaches to both his music and
 that of the Art Ensemble, Jarman iden-
 tified a more transcendent creative impu-
 tus: "The country is still engaged in a civ-
 il war. It's no longer a physical war be-
 tween the North and the South, but a
 mental and spiritual civil war between
 various factions of the community. . . . I
 know some places you can go, and just be-
 cause your hair is long people with the
 same complexion as you will hate you and
 attack you. You're talking about the prob-
 lems that exist in the environment —
 which have nothing to do with the music
 we're playing.

"We're trying to be hopeful, trying to
 express some love. That's why we have
 so much fun when we all get together. It
 wasn't a perfect concert tonight. . . . but
 that's not the important thing. The im-
 portant thing was to come together in a
 collective effort to express a manifesta-
 tion of the universal love through music."

Since 1966 the collective efforts of Mit-
 chell, Bowie and Favors, plus Jarman
 (permanently since 1969) and Moye
 (1970), have been the most daring and
 successful expressions of the movement
 begun by Coleman, Coltrane, Taylor, *et
 al.* in the early '60s. While all too many
 musicians have chosen the path of least
 resistance and retreated from the fron-
 tiers of free expression, the Art Ensemble
 of Chicago and the other members of the
 AACM continue to pursue the paths of
 freedom. Their total commitment, to each
 other and their musical heritage, has pro-
 duced a black music that has earned the
 right to call itself great. Perhaps more lis-
 teners will accept the music, with all its
 beauties and difficulties, as the AACM
 (and the Art Ensemble) enters its second
 decade.

Marcus

(Continued from page 5)
 persuades with his enthusiasm, not his
 objectivity. The same goes for this gush-
 ing accolade:

*The words Sly wrote for Riot are some
 of the most imaginative and forceful in
 all rock 'n' roll. The images are per-
 fectly developed. . . . Not one image,
 not one note, is wasted. Nothing is gra-
 tuitous.*

To argue with such an overstatement is to
 misunderstand Marcus's intentions. He's
 not rating so much as inflating the greats
 so that we may, once again, feel the won-
 der that pop music used to inspire.

The second way in which Marcus elevates
 pop music is the more exciting: he makes
 it part of the American experience and
 makes that experience gripping even
 when it is sordid. Marcus cares about America
 with a passion that the last ten years
 have drained from most of us. But these
 ten years and their enervating horrors
 seem to have impelled Marcus to delve all
 the more deeply into America in order to
 comprehend them. Twain, Melville and
 Harmonica Frank are enlisted to explain
 Lyndon Johnson. In his finest chapter
 Marcus weaves the legend of Stagger Lee,
 the rise and fall of the Black Panthers, the
 similar arc of Sly Stone, the soul music of
 the '70s and "blaxploitation" pictures in-
 to a striking dramatization of the black
 experience. By placing pop music in a liter-
 erary and political context, Marcus en-
 hances not only pop music, but literature
 and politics as well, and he shows how all
 of them help compose a still greater con-
 text, America, which is his ultimate sub-
 ject and ultimate myth (as it was D.H.

Lawrence's in *Studies in Classic American
 Literature*, which Marcus credits):

*What I have to say in Mystery Train
 grows out of records, novels, political
 writings: the balance shifts, but in my
 intentions, there isn't any separation. I
 am no more capable of mulling over
 Elvis without thinking about Herman
 Melville than I am of reading Jonathan
 Edwards. . . . without putting on
 Robert Johnson's records as back-
 ground music. What I bring to this
 book, at any rate, is no attempt at syn-
 thesis, but a recognition of unities in
 the American imagination that al-
 ready exist.*

Such a cast of mind could be disas-
 trous, dissipating the music in a welter of
 cross-references and name-dropping. But
 Marcus never loses sight of the songs and
 their singers, and he loves rock for its fri-
 volity as well as for its import. Perhaps
 the shrewdest sentences in *Mystery Train*
 are occasioned by a line from "Eight Days
 a Week." Marcus wonders if it is "a deep
 idea, or a trivial one, or any kind of idea at
 all? The joy of pop is that it can deliver you
 from such questions by its immediacy
 and provoke them by its impact." Marcus's
 purpose is not to lend rock legiti-
 macy by dressing it up in august allu-
 sions. Rather, he suggests ways to think
 about rock in relation to everything else
 we think about. This is an inestimable
 service because one of the reasons pop
 music seems less important to so many to
 whom it meant so much in the '60s is that,
 as they have aged, they have learned that
 there is a lot more to life. Rock has be-
 come simply one of many pleasures and
 concerns, and one not always easy to re-
 late to the rest. When it became appar-
 ent, for instance, that rock would not
 prompt a revolution, it was too swiftly
 concluded that the music was of no polit-
 ical consequence whatsoever. Once peo-
 ple realized that calling rock "Art" took
 away all its fun, they too readily assumed
 it had nothing at all to do with high cul-
 ture. *Mystery Train* restores significance
 to pop music by showing that our experi-
 ences need not be so tightly compart-
 mentalized, and in so doing it encourages
 those of us who care about rock to lend
 more integrated lives.

Marcus is, above all else, interested in
 breaking down barriers, especially those
 between people. He cherishes commu-
 nity and the way rock can create one out
 of its audience, yet he appreciates how op-
 pressive that community can be. The ten-
 sion between artist and audience is *Mys-
 tery Train's* persistent theme, just as the
 tension between the individual and so-
 ciety has been a persistent theme in Amer-
 ican history at least since Anne Hutch-
 inson's expulsion from the Massachusetts
 Bay Colony and in American literature
 at least since *The Pioneers*, the initial
 entry in Cooper's Leatherstocking Saga.
 "The Presliad," Marcus's often giddy
 final chapter, relishes the rude energy
 with which Elvis burst the bonds of his so-
 ciety at the same time that it respects El-
 vis's regard for those bonds. Occasion-
 ally, however, Marcus's esteem for com-
 munity becomes an intellectual limita-
 tion. It causes him to lapse into nostalgia
 for the specious "we" of the '60s: ". . . we
 thought that the Band's music was the
 most natural parallel to our hopes, ambi-
 tions and doubts, and we were right to
 think so." And it is partly responsible for
 the only chapter of *Mystery Train* that is
 an outright failure, the one on Randy
 Newman.

Because Marcus is a fervent, expansive
 democrat in the Walt Whitman mold, he
 wants his community to embrace every-
 one. His favorite music is universally pop-
 ular or, at least, aspires to be. A cult ar-
 tist like Newman frustrates Marcus: not
 only is Newman too self-deprecating and
 ironic to be turned into legend, but his re-
 cords are intended for a select few. New-
 man is characteristic of the pluralistic
 '70s, in which the audience is fragmented
 into a rich diversity of musical camps that
 Marcus does not appear to welcome. This
 is one reason why Marcus takes a dim-
 mer view of this decade than its music
 warrants, and why much of his recent
 journalism has apotheosized Dylan and
 the Stones in overblown prose. He pines
 for the universal buzz of the '60s, that
 magical air of community which was none
 the less intoxicating because it was so
 largely illusory. What he wants is the
 myth that *Mystery Train* so compellingly
 creates, even as it documents that myth's
 dissolution; what he needs is to learn to
 delight in the multiplicity of current
 music, even if it is a diminished thing,
 and yet not lose the keen passion that the
 myth infusing *Mystery Train* inspires.

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