

KIRKUS REVIEWS

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Marcus, Greil. MYSTERY TRAIN: *Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music.* Dutton \$8.95.
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* Marcus is nothing if not ambitious, and in this probing study of a handful of our most important rock artists he is self-consciously asserting their claim to cultural significance beyond the blaring kilowatts of AM radio. As a one-time student of American Studies at Berkeley he claims that he is "no more capable of mulling over Elvis without thinking about Herman Melville" than he is of reading preacher Jonathan Edwards *sans* the wailing Delta blues of Robert Johnson for accompaniment. You'll have to forgive him for that; despite some pretentious twaddle, *Mystery Train* is an intriguing and ultimately convincing book—perhaps because Marcus has chosen his subjects with great care. Just for openers there's Harmonica Frank, the never-made-it white honky-tonker of the '50's and Robert Johnson whose restless, evil blues influenced everyone from Clapton to the Rolling Stones. Also, there's The Band with their *Big Pink* album, so "complicated, dangerous and alive" playing a "resurrection shuffle; prophecy cut with jive," and Sly Stone who has worked the mythic old black badman Staggerlee from every angle, and the laconic, grim and funny Randy Newman rendering America's most grotesque fantasies in a somnolent drawl. What Marcus is writing about, finally, concerns our most potent images and archetypes—the jester and the guilty Puritan, Huck Finn and Captain Ahab arguing over the stakes of life in America—its possibilities, limits, promises, traps. Worth tuning in, even if it requires some effort.