

MUSICAL EVENTS

Rock, Etc.

IN 1953, Sam Phillips and Junior Parker wrote a blues called "Mystery Train." Its strange lyric (adapted from the old folk song "Worried Man Blues") went, "Train I ride, Sixteen Coaches long, Well, that long black train Carry my baby and gone. . . . It took my baby, it's gone do it again." On the original record, the singer (Parker) was trapped in an uncanny paradox, riding his train (how long? to where?) even as it slipped away, along with his hopes for love. Two years later, Elvis Presley cut his own version of the song for Phillips's Sun Records, and completely transformed its spirit: he challenged the inexorable mystery train ("It took my baby—BUT IT NEVER WILL AGAIN"), stole his baby back, and ended with a shout and a laugh. That reversal, with all that it implies about the relation of blues to rock and roll, and the relation of both to America as myth and reality, is a key image in Greil Marcus's "Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music" (Dutton). As well as one image can, it suggests the sort of territory that Marcus is trying to map in this remarkable book.

Marcus is a committed rock-and-roll fan who has been writing about the music in various periodicals since 1968; he is a former record editor and associate editor of *Rolling Stone* and a contributing editor of *Cream*. He also has an academic background (he studied at Berkeley during the sixties and taught there in 1971 and 1972), a fine analytical head, and a considerable knowledge of American literature and history. In "Mystery Train" he fuses two critical genres—analysis of American culture in the tradition of Leslie Fiedler and D.H. Lawrence (both of whom he cites as influences), and what might be called the rock-as-social-history approach to pop journalism. The combination is not an easy one to pull off. Rock criticism does not generally benefit from erudition—like the music itself, it tends to be best and truest when it is serious in an unserious way, achieving its effects obliquely—and "Mystery Train" sometimes bogs down in one literary allusion or historical parallel too many. But Marcus's excesses, like Bob Dylan's, are forgivable because they come from passion rather than pedantry; he wants to *get it all in*. He proceeds from the notion that his

job as a critic is to explore the widest possibilities of his subject rather than fit it into some preconceived intellectual framework. A basic premise of "Mystery Train" is that the author's love for rock and his fascination with certain books and ideas have a common source in his experience of the world: "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 background music. What I bring to this book, at any rate, is no attempt at synthesis, but a recognition of unities in the American imagination that already exist."

If "Mystery Train" is about unities, it is also obsessed with dualities; for Marcus, rock embodies the central contradictions of American life. The book begins with a section about two men whom Marcus calls "ancestors." Harmonica Frank Floyd, an obscure white Southern singer who was a pre-Elvis protégé of Sam Phillips, anticipated the irreverent, noisy, joyous fool-about-my-money-don't-try-to-save-hedonism of Elvis and Little Richard—the element in rock and roll (and in the American spirit) that, like Huck Finn, refuses to be "sivilized." Robert Johnson, perhaps the greatest of the country-blues artists, prefigured the dark side of rock: the suffering, terror, and rage that surface when the American promise that we can have it all, are entitled to it all, meets implacable limits.

The rock performers ("inheritors") that Marcus goes on to discuss have all, in one way or another, struggled with these disparate realities, are all in some sense exemplary Americans. Marcus depicts The Band as failed pilgrims—a group of Canadians who had faith in the possibilities of an America that many young Americans had rejected; who set out to inspire us with their vision of community and instead were infected by our fragmentation and self-doubt. Sly Stone is seen as a contemporary version of Staggerlee, the ultimate black outlaw-hero, who beat the Devil at his own game. Unlike his prototype, Sly aspired to be a winner without killing or dying for the privilege—his weapon was the utopian optimism of the sixties—but in the end he turned bitterly against his own fantasy with the no-exit album "There's a Riot Goin' On." For Randy Newman, who



comes from that exemplary American city Los Angeles, the only possible response to inhabiting a culture whose logic is equally likely to produce the Beach Boys and Charles Manson is an ironic pop consciousness that acknowledges both complicity and distance. Yet, as Marcus demonstrates, Newman's sensibility creates its own contradictions: his complicity makes him crave mass popularity, but his distance attracts—and makes him settle for—a cult.

Finally, there is the giant beside whom, as Marcus says, "the other heroes of this book seem a little small-time." "Elvis: Presliad," the long essay that concludes, dominates, and sums up "Mystery Train," is an extraordinary piece of writing. A celebration of and a protest against nothing less than the American epic as American tragedy, it traces Presley's career from his early, legendary singles on Sun to his current status as a cultural icon equally revered by rock freaks, middle-aged housewives, and even Richard Nixon, who once invited him to the White House and made him an honorary narcotics agent. To Marcus, Presley is the man who embraced the contradictions, lived out the promise, and achieved a mythic success that is nevertheless its own kind of failure: having defied all the usual limits—black and white music, art and schlock, dirtiness and piety, Memphis and Las Vegas, blue suede shoes and pink Cadillacs—Elvis has succumbed to the complacency that comes of having no more limits to defy.

And so it seems that there is no way out: that every rock-and-roll image of America, pursued far enough, yields its image of defeat. Which is not to say that "Mystery Train" is a pessimistic book. For Marcus, none of the defeats are final; in the end, he reminds us that Elvis still has his great moments, and suggests that they represent "his refusal of all that he can have without struggling." The truth is that Marcus is more romantic about America than he has any right to be if he values his sanity—but, of course, that is precisely his point. There was a time when our most desperate need was to strip away false optimism and face the horror underneath; the imperative that now confronts us—in art, in politics, in love—is to fling joy and hope in the teeth of the horror. Marcus, as a good American, accepts the challenge. One of his most important metaphors is The Band's song "Across the Great Divide": the Divide, he observes, is where the two sides of the country separate but also where they meet.

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Marcus believes that art should be risky—the performers he admires all have grand ambitions that allow the possibility of equally grand disasters—and he does not hedge his own bets; it takes a certain audacity to assert, for example, that Lyndon Johnson, America's Ahab, had more than a little in common with Huck. "Mystery Train" tackles difficult, often painful subjects: the aspirations and betrayals of the sixties; black aesthetics and politics; the meaning of freedom for a popular artist. Marcus also takes risks with his prose, abandoning straightforward discourse for an episodic style that reflects his dialectical structure. At times, his writing attains an elegiac eloquence that echoes the blues; at other times, it is pure effluvium of pop, crammed with digressions and amplifications and throwaway insights and the endless bits of information a fan can't bear to leave out. (I should mention here the wonderful "Notes and Discographies" appendix.)

My major reservation about "Mystery Train" is that it virtually ignores women, and thus perpetuates and elaborates a set of myths about America that are only half true. It's not just that Marcus doesn't write about female performers—thereby overlooking crucial themes—but that, except in some remarks on black machismo and a brief account of a conversation with Dominique Robertson (Robbie's wife), he does not deal with the relation of the male myths to a female perception of reality which remains largely unwritten, unsung, unacceptable, and even unconscious. The result at times is an uncharacteristic obtuseness, as when Marcus takes Randy Newman's affection for the rapist-narrator of one of his songs to be a triumph of imaginative empathy rather than a version—however benignly Newmansque—of an all too common male fantasy. It is easy, and probably accurate, to say that only a woman could correct this sort of bias. But that lets Marcus off the hook—and perhaps underestimates him. Greil Marcus owes it to his own vision of America to try and cross this most dangerous divide of all.

—ELLEN WILLIS

The newlyweds have a good deal in common, not least that their fathers both maintained good relations with the military junta that ruled Greece until a year ago and were interested in building a major oil refinery on the same land.

—*The Times*.

If that doesn't bring two lovebirds together, what will?