

Rock and its place in American culture

MYSTERY TRAIN: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music, by Greil Marcus (Dutton, 275 pages, \$8.95).

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Greil Marcus has written a book that takes rock 'n' roll seriously. Maybe too seriously. But the sheer intelligence with which he approaches recent American popular music is so evident and so unusual, and the sheer passion that motivates his love of this music so transparent, that his book can be most heartily recommended to almost anybody.

The book begins with two short essays on men Marcus calls "ancestors" — Harmonica Frank, an eccentric white man whom few have heard of but whom Marcus considers a direct precursor of rock, at least in spirit, and Robert Johnson, a black bluesman from the 1930s who has influenced every rock musician.

The core of the book is divided into four

chapters: on The Band, Sly Stone, Randy Newman and Elvis Presley. Although each of these chapters has a focus, none is limited to its ostensible subject. Marcus broadens the discussion to include not only other musicians but more crucially broader themes in a consideration of American culture.

The Band chapter is thus really about "groups (as) images of community" and about the questionable solution that rural retreat suggests for contemporary America. The Sly chapter is about black sensibility and politics as reflected in black music. With Randy Newman — the least commercially successful of his central foursome — Marcus concerns himself with the tension between popularity and artistic value, and affirms his own populist's belief that, in a democracy, an artist denies his deepest nature by ignoring the country as a whole.

With Presley — whose chapter is almost as long as the other three together — Marcus sums up his search with the man beside whom "the other heroes of

this book seem a little small-time." For him, Elvis is the ultimate American myth made real — the little man who made himself big on his own terms and changed the country's consciousness as he did so. Even Presley's decline into schlock (with periodic bursts of the old vitality) strikes Marcus as symptomatic of America, and somehow he manages to maintain an underlying optimism even as he chronicles that decline.

The book ends with a long section of Notes and Discographies, which is as valuable a part as any other. Here Marcus reserves the hard-core devotee's fascination with records and performances that he has largely pruned from the rest of the book. The four principal chapters deal with the music, of course, and most perceptively. But the argument isn't overburdened with a fan's enthusiasms about the various disks of his idols. Marcus is a fan; however — he couldn't have written with such proselytizing ebullience if he weren't — and at the end he shares his knowledge with his readers.

Thus this book is by no means meant only for rock fans. It is meant, perhaps most of all, for people concerned with what this country and its culture are all about.

At his worst, Marcus comes across as a self-satisfied academic rhetorician, spinning out indulgent theories that owe more to themselves than to a perception checked continuously against reality. Or he's like a minister who has to preach every Sunday, even if he doesn't always have anything special to say.

But that's only at his worst, which isn't very often. At his far more frequent best, he is a writer of rare perception and a genuinely innovative thinker. Cultural history deals in the relation of culture to the wider forces of history, and usually it slights one or the other. Marcus remains sensitive to both, and his blend of love and expertise should be read by anybody who cares about America or its music.