

# The Rainbow Trail Leads to Rock Studios

**MYSTERY TRAIN. Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music. By Greil Marcus. E.P. Dutton; 275 pps; index; \$8.95**

*Reviewed by  
Ralph J. Gleason*

WHEN THE heavy thinkers who write the heavy books get around to figuring out what the 1950s and 1960s were all about, I suspect that those of us who have read Greil Marcus' brilliant book will be 'way ahead of them.

The popular songs of the nation, as Andrew Fletcher once observed, are really more important than the laws. At least he was willing to settle for making the songs. And at no time in history has popular song, rock 'n roll or whatever, been of such paramount importance to a major portion of the population, as every survey today shows it to be.

In the 20s, 30s and 40s, the images of America were cast upon the screens from the Bijou to the last movie house. It was to those themes, to those images, to those specific stars, if you will, that young America aspired.

Thus every Greyhound and Trailways bus rolling into Los Angeles brought another cadre of refugees from Middle America dedicated to the proposition

that wealth and fame were to be found in the ineluctable process of discovery by Sam Goldwyn in a drive-in restaurant.

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TODAY, as a few historians, sociologists and other scholars (especially Greil Marcus) are aware, the rainbow trail leads not to the silver screen but rather to the 24 recording track studio. There all those electronic cowboys and cowgirls, children of a world separated by more

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*This was the last contribution by Ralph Gleason before his recent death.*

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than time from the Bijou of their parents' youth, hope to become stars via seven-inch plastic discs that make 45 revolutions per minute of 12-inch plastic discs that spin 33 1/3. And if they are successful, rather than see their own image up there on the drive-in screen, they will hear their own voices coming back at them from the thousands of radios, juke boxes and phono-

graphs that are as much a part of our lives now as hayfever and hot dogs.

This is not only a book about rock 'n roll, although it is that, too. It is much more; it is a book about the American character and the American soul in this time. As such, it is the best thing I have read in ages. I read it straight through, and it reminded me more than once of Melville's "The Confidence Man" and of Parrington, too.

Marcus chooses the vehicle of ostensible commentary on Elvis Presley, Sly Stone, the Band and other contemporary performers to really examine what America is today. It is a brilliant job, fully as seminal in concert and execution as the work of Paul Goodman and proof that the generation Goodman described grew up, not absurd, but deeply perceptive.

The best trick in writing about a serious subject is to make the prose sparkle and the wit rampant. Thus Christopher Hill's "The World Turned Upside Down" and thus Greil Marcus' "Mystery Train." There is no more illuminating book in print on our condition today. The fact that Marcus has written this out of an interest in rock 'n roll is only proof again that what the established structure has seen as trivia is, in fact, genius.