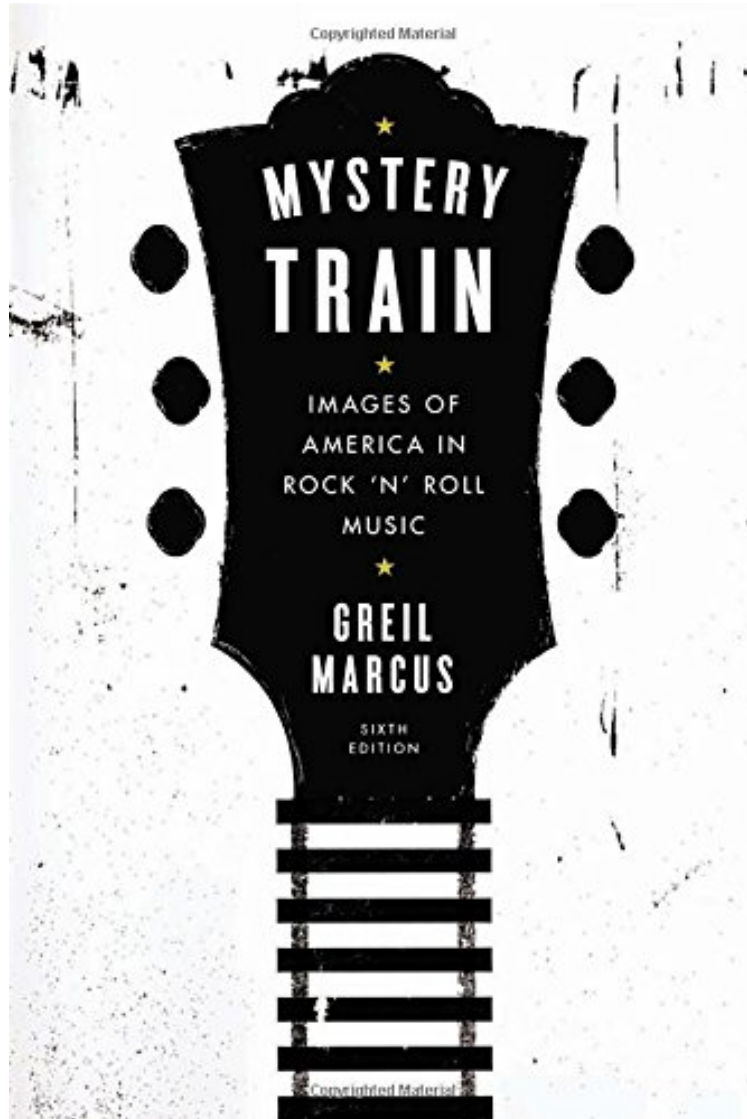


(Mobile book) Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music: Sixth Edition

Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music: Sixth Edition

Greil Marcus

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#214566 in Books Marcus Greil 2015-04-28 2015-04-28 Original language: English PDF # 1 9.00 x .90 x 5.90l, .90 #File Name: 0142181587448 pages Mystery Train Images of America in Rock n Roll Music Sixth Edition | File size: 47.Mb

Greil Marcus : Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music: Sixth Edition before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music: Sixth Edition:

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In 1975, Greil Marcus's *Mystery Train* changed the way readers thought about rock n roll and continues to be sought out today by music fans and anyone interested in pop culture. Looking at recordings by six key artists: Robert Johnson, Harmonica Frank, Randy Newman, the Band, Sly Stone, and Elvis Presley, Marcus offers a complex and unprecedented analysis of the relationship between rock n roll and American culture. In this latest edition, Marcus provides an extensively updated and rewritten Note and Discographies section, exploring the recordings' evolution and continuing impact.

Praise for *Mystery Train*: "Mystery Train changed a lot of things for me. Most basically, it plugged me into a lifetime's worth of listening. Because of it, I erased 'English lit' as my college major and inked in 'American lit.' It remains the book I can't help measuring critical writing against... I plan to give a copy of Mr. Marcus's book to each of my children when they leave for college. It speaks intimately to a part of the cultural heritage that, in my haphazard way, I've tried to give them." Dwight Garner, *The New York Times* "Gets as close to the heart and soul of America and American music as the best of rock 'n' roll." Bruce Springsteen Perhaps the finest book ever written about pop music. Alan Light, *The New York Times Book Review*, 2005 Greil Marcus developed an ability to discern an art movement, or an entire country, lurking inside a song. *The New Yorker*, 2004 Probably the most astute critic of American popular culture since Edmund Wilson. D.D. Guttenplan, *London of Books*, 2007 The 1975 appearance of Greil Marcus' first book, *Mystery Train*, was an explosion as unexpected and indelible as the first records Elvis Presley had cut almost exactly twenty years before. Mark Rozzo, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, 2006 About the Author Greil Marcus was one of the original staffers at *Rolling Stone*. He teaches at the New School in New York and lives in California. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. **CROSSING THE BORDER** When the Band surfaced in 1968 with *Music from Big Pink* they had been playing rock n roll music for more than half as long as there had been such a thing. What mattered most, though, was that they had put in their years together, as a group. A rock n roll group is a banding together of individuals for the purpose of achieving something that none of them can get on their own: money, fame, the right sound, something less easy to put into words. But what begins as a marriage of convenience sometimes takes on its own value. An identity comes into being that transcends individual personalities, but does not obscure them; in fact, it is the group, sometimes only the group, that makes individuals visible. The Beatles, after all, were the most satisfying and complex testament to the limits of self-reliance most of us have ever known; they were also proof of the limits of a common bond. Groups are images of community. That the Band had created itself through the years, and had come to our attention bent on demonstrating just what their years together had been worth, was perhaps the most potent image of all. Like John Lennon and Paul McCartney, Booker T. the MGs, Bob Dylan, and a few thousand others, drummer Levon Helm, guitarist Robbie Robertson, piano man Richard Manuel, bass Rick Danko, and organist Garth Hudson started out in the high school bands that appeared overnight in the flash of the first great rock explosion.* Still in their teens in the early sixties, they came together in Toronto as the Hawks, back-up band for Ronnie Hawkins, a small-time Arkansas rockabilly singer who had brought Levon north with him around 1958. Hawkins, though he brushed the charts twice in 1959 with a Chuck Berry remake and an RB cover, was too little and too late to pass for the next Elvis Presley; his task was to keep himself alive. In the U.S.A. he was one of too many; in Canada, where authentic American rockers were a solid commercial rarity, Hawkins could bill himself *The King of Rockabilly* and get away with it. Sometimes he liked to call himself Mr. Dynamo. It was, as so many have testified, better than working. Ronnie Hawkins was a windjammer in the grand style. He claimed to have picked cotton right alongside Bo Diddley; to have made the first rock n roll record of all, back in 1952 (no one, so far as I know, has ever found it, but Hawkins, keeping his story straight, says it was the first version of Bo Diddley); to have passed up a chance for stardom when he graciously offered the sure-hit *It's Only Make Believe* to his old pal Conway Twitty; to know more back roads, back rooms, and backsides than any man from Newark to Mexicali. His singing was only fair, though in one sense it was

quite distinctive: Hawkins is the only man I have ever heard who can make a nice sexy song like My Gal Is Red Hot sound sordid. None of us rock n rollers could understand all that fuss about Jerry Lee Lewis marrying a thirteen-year-old girl, he is reputed to have said. All us Southern cats knew she was only twelve. Hawkins was no fool; he needed a band to carry him, and when the razorbacks he had imported began to scatter, he and Levon recruited the Canadian kids one by one. As characters in the classic bildungsroman that tells of the wise old philosopher who initiates innocent young boys into the mysteries of life, Hawkins and his Hawks played their way through the collected works of Gene Vincent, Chuck Berry, Larry Williams, Fats Domino, and the rest, filling out their shows with tunes about the whores they met. Robbie wrote his first song, Hey Boba Lu, which Hawkins recorded; on stage, Manuel and Levon handled most of the singing. When Ronnie sang, Robbie remembers fondly, we had to count out the beat for him. It was, Oh, Carolone, two, three, four Dont let him steal...The Hawks were looking for their music. When Robbie was fifteen Levon took him into the South, with hopes of putting the Bush Beaters back together. That came to nothing, but the trip changed something in Robertson; just what it was is elusive even to him, but listening to the man retrace his steps, one gets the sense that an enormous creative ambition was set free when he discovered that the place that had put magic into his life was real. There had been the music, of courserock n roll from Memphis, rock n roll from New Orleansand Robbie already had the beginnings of his idea that the land makes the music. But there were also the family histories and local legends Levon had told him; the inexplicably exciting foreign names, suddenly right there on billboards and coming over the drifting Southern radio dial in between the fiddles and sermons, names like Dr. Pepper and Ko-Ko bars; there was the fact of seeing people, black and white, living out the sounds he had heard on his records. The reality only made the magic that much more fierce. Here was a different world, with more on its surface than Canada had in its abyss; you could chase that world, listen to it, learn from it. Perhaps you could even join it. Before too long, Howlin Wolf, Junior Parker, Bobby Bland, and other bluesmen were climbing the Hawks charts, and Hawkins repertoire no longer seemed so romantic. Robbie had tried to get Jimmy Ray Paulman, Hawkins original guitarist, to teach him how to play Paulman, with a good eye for the competition, told the kid to get lost but now Robbie was in a position to feel the competition himself. For a white boy, that meant James Burton, star of Suzie Q and hero of Ricky Nelsons hits; Roy Buchanan, the lonesome master of the blues; Lonnie Mack, who sang from the church and played straight from the alley. To live up to all that Levon had shown him, and to satisfy his own brash self, Robbie had to be better than any of them. He was listening hard to Wolfs guitarists: Willie Johnson on How Many More Years and Hubert Sumlin on Wang-Dang-Doodle. Johnson and Sumlin had created a guitar style so chaotic and fast it demanded a rhythm section as quick as it was hard just to keep a performance from flying to pieces. There was none of the polite formality of a band setting up a solo, taking turns; there was no showcasing. Wolfs best records came on like three-minute race riots. The drums, bass, piano, and harp converged on the beat, hammering, shoving; for a moment they let the beat take the song, let you think you had the sides sorted out and the picture clear, and then the guitarist leaped in, heaved himself through the crowd like a tornado, and the crowd paid no attention and went right on fighting. This was the sound the Hawks were after, and on an unbelievably demonic recording of Bo Diddleys Who Do You Love, they got it. Hawkins vocal (his only real claim to greatness, but it will do) was one ghastly scream; Robbie fought back with a crazed, jagged solo that to this day has never been matched. It is still possibly the most menacing piece of rock n roll ever made. The Hawks, however, did not need their front man fooling around in the studio after the dry sessions for Hawkins Mojo Man LP, Levon took over the mike for Bobby Blands hard-rocking Further on Up the Road and Muddy Waterss slow and sexy Nineteen Years Old, and the group left behind the most exciting white blues recordings since the early days of Elvis Presley. White blues doesnt really describe the music though they were white, and the songs were blues Levons singing and Robbies guitar playing fell into no genre. This wasnt like the early Paul Butterfield Band, or John Hammond, Jr., to be judged on how precisely the white music matched the sound of the black idols. The Hawks were a long way past questions of technique; the problem was to find out what they could do with that technique. Unfortunately, they were making music in a vacuum; in America, those great sides were never released, not that they would have fit the commercial demands of the radio anyway. Like most of the best bands forming at the time, the Hawks were a walking jukebox that played only other peoples hits, and the jukebox was a few years out of date to boot. Over in Hamburg, the Beatles too were jamming out five sets a night, as John Lennon shouted Dizzy Miss Lizzy with a toilet seat around his neck; Van Morrison and the Monarchs were peddling their Ray Charles imitations to homesick GIs in Germany; the Rolling Stones were up all night trying to figure out how Sonny Boy made his harp sound like that; Elvis was having fun in Acapulco; and Creedence Clearwater, calling themselves the Blue Velvets, were scuffling up and down the road from Sacramento to San Jose, fighting a battle of the bands with Peter Wheat and the Breadmen while John Fogerty scribbled the bayou fantasies that would lift him out of a world he hated. In the early sixties, rock n roll was a waiting game. After a year or two apprenticed to Hawkins, Levon led the Band out on their own as Levon and the Hawks, sometimes as the Crackers, sometimes as the Canadian Squires. They traveled Hawkins circuit of honky-tonks and dives a tough, loud band that played, as Garth Hudson once put it, for pimps, whores, rounders, and flakeouts. We had one thing on our minds, Robbie says. Stomp. They cut occasional 45s, whenever they found someone to let them into a studio: Go Go Liza Jane, the old folk song; a good hard punch-out of a record called Leave Me Alone; an odd, churchy paean to this

righteous land with the even odder title of *The Stones I Throw (Will Free All Men)* crude stuff, but hopeful. Down in L.A., you know they got everything, Levon sang on Uh-Uh-Uh. Moved out there, became the new Southern King. This was not earthshaking. By 1965 the Beatles and the Stones were running the scene, and from their name to their nightclubs, the Hawks were an anachronism. Still, they built up a vague word-of-mouth reputation on the East Coast; eager to take on the world with a new sound and perhaps feeling a bit anachronistic himself, Bob Dylan got in touch. The combination clicked: suddenly Dylan was singing like a demon, and the Hawks never introduced, always anonymous, twisted around him with a noise that not even they could have been prepared for. The Hawks backed Dylan through the rough, mean tours of 1965 and 1966, and the Stones sat in the audience. The Hawks left the stage as the best band in the world. Levon, a pro when Bob Dylan was still hard at work scaring his high school principal, did not go along; the Hawks, after all, had been his band. But when the Canadians followed Dylan to Woodstock once the tours were over, Levon joined up again, and the Band made a second founding. Out of all this they fashioned a music that sounded not at all like what had preceded it; they seemed to draw less on their old music than on the friendship they had discovered making it. Calling themselves *The Band* was proof of their arrogance, but there was a depth of experience in their music that could not be denied, and the fans they won had no wish to deny it. It was, in fact, precisely what a lot of people were looking for. In 1968 rock n roll was coming out of its San Francisco period psychedelic music, rebel energy, *Father-Yes-Son-I-Want-To-Kill-You*, drum solos, drug visions, bright and happy dancing crowds a fabulous euphoria in the middle of a war, innocence and optimism running straight into the election of Richard Nixon. It had been a fine time, with many chances taken and many chances blown, but it was over, it was soft underneath the flash and it had exhausted itself. There was a peculiar emptiness in the air, and in the music; Sgt. Pepper, generally enshrined a year earlier as the greatest achievement in the history of popular music by some, in the history of Art now seemed very hollow, a triumph of effects. The Yippies showed up to take over the politics of the decade, and defrauded them. There were heroes and heroines of the era just past who had only a year or two to live; some of the political heroes had already been murdered. We had gone too far, really, without getting anywhere. With Bob Dylan, the Band had seen much of this world from the inside, seen it as it was born, even helped bring it into being; but they came through on the other side, in a place very much of their own making. They stepped out, very consciously, as an alternative. The pictures inside *Big Pink* of the Band, their friends and relatives, and their ugly but much-loved big pink house caught some of what they had to say. Against a cult of youth they felt for a continuity of generations; against the instant America of the sixties they looked for the traditions that made new things not only possible, but valuable; against a flight from roots they set a sense of place. Against the pop scene, all flux and novelty, they set themselves: a band with years behind it, and meant to last. Many young Americans had spent the best part of the decade teaching themselves to feel like exiles in their own country; the Band, particularly songwriters Robbie Robertson and Richard Manuel, understood this, and were sure it was a mistake. They had come here by choice, after all. They had fallen in love with the music, first as they sought it out on the radio and on records, later as they learned to play it, and, wonder of wonders, define it. Coming out of Canada into the land that had kicked up the blues, jazz, church music, country and western, and a score of authentic rock n roll heroes, playing their way up and down the spine of the continent, they fell in love with the place itself. They felt more alive in America. They came to be on good terms with its violence and its warmth; they were attracted by the neon grab for pleasure on the face of the American night, and by the inscrutable spookiness behind that face. American contradictions demanded a fine energy, because no one could miss them; the stakes were higher, but the rewards seemed limitless. The Band's first songs were a subtle, seductive attempt to get this sense of life across. Their music was fashioned as a way back into America, and it worked. **STRANGER BLUES** With *Music from Big Pink*, the Band presented a rough moral drama. It had none of the mythic clarity of, say, John Ford's movies; it came through a modern haze, something like Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, obscure in its plots, dialogue hard to catch, communicating with a blind humor and a cryptic intensity nothing in rock n roll has ever remotely touched. They began with *Tears of Rage*, an eerie invocation of Independence Day, dragging the organ and their secretive horns across a funeral beat, changing the Fourth of July into an image of betrayal, and of loneliness: America betrayed by those who would no longer be part of it. The Band made a claim to an identity others no longer wanted, and the album opened up from there. In its stories, its feel for place and language, its music, and most of all in its quest, this was an American mystery. The liveliest songs (half Robertsons, half Manuels, and all of a piece) shared an oddly familiar actor: the voice of Lonesome Suzie, *Caledonia Mission*, *To Kingdom Come*, *We Can Talk About It Now*, *Chest Fever*, *The Weight*, and *Long Black Veil*. * His part is taken by Levon (guttural, carnal, bewildered, always hanging onto the end of his rope), Rick Danko (quivering, melancholy, hesitant), Manuel (the Band's great sentimentalist, devastated and bursting with joy by turns), Robbie (anxious, yelping), or the four of them at once; but as I hear them now, years after I thought I knew this record, the vocals, like the writing, complete a single story. The hero of this story (such as I find him, and I ought to note that I am setting the story down, if you like, making it up simply as I hear it, without much regard for song sequence, cross-checked lyrics, or other formalities) has *Big Pink* pretty much to himself. He almost disappears on the next album, *The Band*, returns with *Stage Fright*, loses his voice on *Cahoots*, and perhaps hits the end of his road with Richard Manuel singing on a handful of the rock n roll classics that make up *Moondog Matinee*. To follow his trail is to leave out a good bit of what

the Band has done wonderful tunes like Get Up Jake and Strawberry Wine, and their work with Bob Dylan. But there is a storyteller in their music, and in one form or another, his tale is the one I'm after, because it seems to be the one the Band tells best: the story of the worried man.