

# **Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music Study Guide**

**Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music by Greil Marcus**

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## Plot Summary

In his book MYSTERY TRAIN: IMAGES OF AMERICA IN ROCK 'N' ROLL, Greil Marcus presents a profound statement about the beginnings of the genre of rock 'n' roll music. Marcus critiques not only the effect the music had on Americans, but also the effect that America and its condition at that time period had on the music that was being produced. Marcus begins his analysis with two little known singers who he believes to be the forerunners of rock 'n' roll music, then traces the development through Elvis, the "king" of rock 'n' roll.

This critique of rock 'n' roll music begins with singers Harmonica Frank and Robert Johnson. Marcus considered these singers to be the precursors to traditional rock 'n' roll music. Frank makes his mark on rock music with the idea of unbridled freedom that he portrays in his music and his lifestyle. Johnson, on the other hand, addresses the frustration that Americans face when they are not able to attain the American dream. Johnson also addresses the reality of evil in the world.

Marcus then moves on to discuss the music of the Band, Sly Stone, Randy Newman and Elvis. These groups are presented as representations of the first of the rock 'n' roll bands. Marcus discusses not only the music of each group but also the atmosphere surrounding the release of their music. Topics covered include racial tension, the pursuit of the American dream, the reality of evil, and the need for unity. Through his book Marcus also discusses the statement each musician hopes to make through their music. He also discusses the audience's reaction to the music as well as the artist's reaction to or relationship with their audience.

In conclusion Marcus believes the artists he writes about in his book are those that have in some way affected the course of America's growth and the lives of Americans. They each represent some portion of America that helps to make up the whole of the country. He finishes by equating these artists to democrats fighting an unending battle between art and politics.



# Prologue

## Prologue Summary and Analysis

In his book *MYSTERY TRAIN: IMAGES OF AMERICA IN ROCK 'N' ROLL*, Greil Marcus presents a profound statement about the beginnings of the genre of rock 'n' roll music. Marcus critiques not only the effect the music had on Americans, but also the effect that America and its condition at that time period had on the music that was being produced. Marcus begins his analysis with two little known singers who he believes to be the forerunners of rock 'n' roll music, then traces the development through Elvis, the "king" of rock 'n' roll.

Marcus opens his study with an example from the Dick Cavett Show. In this sketch, rock 'n' roll singer Little Richard interrupts a literary discussion between a New York book critic and Erich Segal, author of *LOVE STORY*. The brashness with which Little Richard interrupts the conversation and promotes himself as the best that ever was correlates to the way rock 'n' roll music broke into public consciousness. These same unbridled qualities that made rock 'n' roll popular are embodied in the eccentric Little Richard.

This opening sketch makes a point that must be kept in mind while reading the remainder of Marcus' work. Segal defends his work by telling Simon that since so many people liked his book, this means he is doing something right. Marcus, however, states that Little Richard is the only one among the five people on stage that night who qualified as an artist. By an artist, Marcus is referring to a person who uses his art to make a statement about something, regardless of whether or not this statement is accepted by the larger population. In the scheme of this book, Marcus concentrates on rock 'n' roll artists whom he believes have redefined America.

After this opening study, Marcus introduces the intent of his book. His objective is to describe the context of rock music as it relates to the American culture. Marcus chooses four main artists on which to base his discussion. He believes these artists see themselves primarily as representatives of American culture. The artists he chooses include the Band, Sly Stone, Randy Newman and Elvis. Marcus also showcases two singers who he views as the precursors to rock music. These singers are Harmonica Frank and Robert Johnson.

Marcus explains that these artists have created themselves and their vision of America based on past experience and personal ambition. One of the more important aspects of creating music involves the way in which an audience responds to the message the musician hopes to convey. Marcus suggests that through their messages the artists both tell the story of America's past and also help to redirect its future.



# Harmonica Frank - 1951

## Harmonica Frank - 1951 Summary and Analysis

Sam Phillips, owner of a recording operation in Memphis, Tennessee looks for a white singer with the sound and feel of a Negro blues singer. Phillips believes this sound could make him rich. Phillips grew up on a plantation in the old south where an old black man would sing the blues to him. Marcus describes this relationship as being the same as the relationship between Huckleberry Finn and Jim, the two main characters in the book *THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN*. In this fantasy by American writer Mark Twain, Huck, a young boy, and Jim, a black slave, escape the constraints of Huck's aunts to take an unsupervised rafting trip down the Mississippi River.

Harmonica Frank Floyd, who was known for playing a harmonica with one side of his mouth and singing out of the other was Phillips first attempt to record the new sound for which he was looking. Even though Phillips even recorded some of Frank's music on his own private label, the harmonica player's music never became famous. However, he created the kind of unique sound that Phillips was looking for, the sound for which he felt America was also waiting. The sound that Frank made is later echoed in the songs of Bob Dylan and Randy Johnson.

Marcus points out that it was not so much the popularity of Frank's music or even the tonal quality that was important, but Frank's freedom of expression. Marcus credits Frank with making a promise in his music to never settle down and then keeping this promise. In this way Frank lives out the story of Huck Finn. Frank revolts against the rules and regulations of the do-good American society in the same way that Huck breaks free from his prim and proper aunts.

Marcus then includes a digression in which he discusses Frank's similarity to Huck Finn as well as his similarity to Ahab. In the novel *MOBY DICK*, Ahab is the captain of the whaling ship named *The Pequod*. Ahab's intent for revenge against the whale who took off Ahab's leg eventually dooms the entire ship and all its crew except one to death. Shiphand Starbuck attempts to lead a revolt against Ahab's power but is not able to dethrone the mad captain. Marcus notes that while the image of Huck Finn is one of peace and the one of Ahab is one of violence and hate, the two characters share their desire to follow through with their own plans despite what anyone else thinks.

One real-life person who Marcus believes also shares Frank's love of life and desire to follow his dreams is former American president Lyndon B. Johnson. Johnson revolutionized politics with his uncouth behaviors and obscene language. Although he was not the typical do-good American president, Marcus believes Johnson and Frank would have hit it off had they ever met.

Marcus next switches gears and writes about the beginnings of rock 'n' roll music. Although this musical genre seemed to come from nowhere, Marcus and Phillips know

that it had its roots in singers like Harmonica Frank. Although Frank did not popularize this new musical genre as Phillips had hoped, Frank had the sound the Phillips believed the country needed.



# Robert Johnson - 1938

## Robert Johnson - 1938 Summary and Analysis

Marcus indicates Robert Johnson, an African-American, was also an artist concerned with freedom; however, he wants freedom from the constraints into which he was born. While it is the promise of America that the her inhabitants search for and find a better life, Johnson was one who knew what it was like to be betrayed by this American promise. Marcus uses the uninhibited way that Johnson explores this idea of American as a betrayer as a measuring stick by which to gauge the attempts of other artists to mimic his style.

In his music Johnson deals with ideas such as the non-existence of redemption or salvation. His songs almost always feature a devil or demon of some sort. This inclusion of a devil shows how real the knowledge of sin and darkness was to Johnson. Marcus appears to be most impressed with Johnson's ability to "go further into the blues than anybody else." Blues music is generally known for its use of low pitches and its depressive messages of hopelessness and loneliness.

One of Johnson's songs that makes a lasting impression on listeners but has never been duplicated is the song titled "Stones in My Passway." Another song about sex is Johnson's "Phonograph Blues," in which he tells a story about impotence through the example of a phonograph player that refuses to play explicit records. It is this type of symbolism and the drama he conveys through his singing that impresses Marcus the most. While Harmonica Frank lived out bodily freedom, Johnson enjoys a freedom in that he makes music that says what he wants it to say. Johnson finds freedom even in his bondage to and failure in realizing the American dream.

In another section of this chapter Marcus explores the rumor that Johnson sold his soul to the devil in order to have the singing and guitar playing talent that he had. Marcus believes this rumor may have been a true possibility because so many of Johnson's songs are about making deals with the devil or some other dark world creature. Although this story may or may not have been true, Johnson's songs deal with the struggle between good and evil. They show a disbelief in God and redemption and leave sex as the only good thing in life.

Marcus attributes these ideas that emerge in Johnson's songs to the original Puritan founders of America. The Puritans brought their ideas about religion to American with them, intending to live in a religious haven. They discovered even in this new land they were unable to live up to their idea of religious perfection. When they found that their work as not done completely for God, they believed they were instead working for the devil. It is the terrors of this Puritan devil that Johnson sings about.

Marcus writes that in the song "Stone in My Passway" Johnson sings about a terror that is too strong to even be embodied in the figure of the devil. The man in the song sings



about how he has lost power over his own soul and body because he has sold his soul to the devil. Marcus goes on to interpret the imagery and meaning of the imagery included in the song. Johnson not only tells the story with his words and the images he builds with the words of the song but also with the instrumentation and musical composition of the song.

In conclusion, Marcus indicates that Johnson has "caught up with us." He states that the only way to capture Johnson's spirit is for the musician to become one with and actually have Johnson's music become part of who the musician is. Musicians who have managed to allow Johnson to become part of themselves include Bob Dylan, Eric Clapton, Sly Stone and Randy Newman.





# **The Band - Pilgrims' Progress (Comprising sections Introduction through Crossing the Border)**

## **The Band - Pilgrims' Progress (Comprising sections Introduction through Crossing the Border) Summary and Analysis**

Marcus first heard the Band during their debut concert in San Francisco. Marcus' editor believed that the Band was going to be the next big group. Marcus adds in his introduction that the group's music was devoted to the basic idea of America. The group's songs capture ideas such as acceptance, rebellion, sex and humor.

In the first section of this chapter entitled, "Crossing the Border," Marcus talks about the number of years the members of the band played together before becoming famous. Marcus claims it is this well-molded group image that endeared the singers to the American public. In fact, Marcus points out that groups such as the Band are actually miniature representations of community. Through the rest of this section Marcus traces the career of this group as they got their start as back up artists with the band The Hawks. The result of all their time together as a group is a very experienced sound.

In the section entitled "Stranger Blues" Marcus starts by giving a brief analysis of the works of the Band. He describes the songs in their entirety as a story with each song adding to the context of the story. The hero of these stories, Marcus says, is the worried man. In the remainder of this section Marcus goes on to describe the travels of this worried man through the songs of the Band. This worried man appears first as a traveler. He carries with him on his travels the bewildering choices faced by Robert Johnson as well as Harmonica Frank's sense of humor. It is this sense of humor that keeps this worried man from taking the choices he faces too seriously.

In the album BIG PINK, the worried man first waits for Judgment Day but decides to move on before it comes. Although he is warned to turn back, he tries to find a home in the land of the tricksters, fortune tellers, cops and lovers. Marcus writes that the sounds the Band creates in BIG PINK describe the struggles of this worried man. Although it is difficult to understand the words of the album, Marcus indicates this understanding is not necessary. He seems to imply that much of the message of the music is carried through the intricate and sometimes random compositions.

The worried man, or quester, as he is sometimes called, first wants only to be left alone but finds himself unable to keep from being caught up in the lives and troubles of his fellow humans. Marcus makes note of a golden calf that chases this worried man through the music. Considering the context, this golden calf he refers to may be the one



the Israelites made while they were wandering in the desert after they escaped from Egyptian bondage. According to the Christian Bible, the Israelites leader Moses left the Israelites alone so Moses could converse with God on Mt. Sinai. Although the Israelites had pledged a faith in God, when Moses did not come back quickly enough for them, they created a golden calf and began to worship it instead of God. Throughout the rest of the album, the worried man seeks his own salvation as well as the salvation of others. This salvation comes both in the temporal and heavenly senses.

Marcus indicates this album shows a need for unity in a divided country. The worried man seeks to break through and connect with the people he meets. He concludes that this album shows in music what America could be like at its best.



# **The Band - Pilgrims' Progress (Comprising sections The Righteous Land through The Weight)**

## **The Band - Pilgrims' Progress (Comprising sections The Righteous Land through The Weight) Summary and Analysis**

In the section entitled "The Righteous Land," Marcus writes about the Band's second album. In this album the songs give the map for which the worried man in BIG PINK is looking. The worried man has a wife and kids, the typical American life, although not necessarily the ideal one. The remainder of the album intends to cross or patch the break between the things that divide humans. These things can include gender, race and geography. However, in their attempt to unite the country Marcus believes the Band lost touch with their audience.

The Band realized how far their music had taken them from their fans when they tried to tour with their second album. The Band had isolated themselves from their audience while recording their albums and had lost touch with how high the expectations of the audience would be. The Band is unable to live up to these expectations. Their more-than-disappointing performance leaves the crowd in anger. Marcus apparently attended this concert as he states that he had never seen a crowd so furious with singers anytime before or after this time. The next show, however, made up for the disappointments of the first. Marcus indicates that after this experience the Band never sang as badly as they had in the first show or as well as they did in the second show.

The Band's third album was ironically named STAGE FRIGHT. Even in this album Marcus notes the band seems to be coming apart, losing some of the connectedness that made the first two albums so pointed. Even though the Band continued to produce albums, they lost some of the life of their earlier songs. Marcus laments that the group stopped producing songs that mattered. Although still not performing as well as in its heyday, the Band puts out an album of oldies. Perhaps the most memorable of these songs is a rendition of "The Great Pretender." Throughout this album the worried man seems to be asking for love and acceptance.

In the concluding section "The Weight," Marcus discusses the impact of the audience on the Band. Before the Band began to tour they had a perfect representation of community in their own bounds. They protected and were protected by their group. Once they took the group public, however, this close knit group unraveled. It appears the Band must have stepped away from their audience and themselves. It is through a discussion with Dominique Robertson that Marcus lays out the facts of what happened to the Band. They had their own utopia in their closeness. This utopia protected the

group and its members from the dangers of America. She points out that it is these utopias and the sense of false security that they give that is actually the most dangerous aspect of American culture.



# **Sly Stone - The Myth of Staggerlee (Comprising sections Introduction through Riot)**

## **Sly Stone - The Myth of Staggerlee (Comprising sections Introduction through Riot) Summary and Analysis**

Marcus begins this section of the book with a quote by prisoner Bobby Seale explaining why he has named his child after the legendary Staggerlee. The prisoner seems to think the man and the legend represent the reality of black culture. Marcus then goes on to briefly sum up the legend of Staggerlee. Basically Staggerlee shot a man named Billy just to watch him die. Different versions of the story give the characters slightly different names, or they happen in different places, but the main idea of the story is the same. Staggerlee gets away with his violence because of who he is. The white sheriffs are afraid to arrest him, so he always goes free. In versions where Staggerlee is caught and put to death, he goes to hell where he displaces the devil and turns hell into a black man's paradise.

Marcus believes black singer Sly Stone lived the life of Staggerlee. While working as a radio deejay Stone put together a band he called Sly and the Family Stone. Unusual for its time the band consisted of both men and women, both blacks and whites. The band carried the sound of freedom and showed signs of bringing with it a whole new attitude. Sly Stone, the leader of the band, was his own person. Marcus uses the example of Staggerlee to describe Stone. Stone was the baddest black man in the world, but unlike Staggerlee, he didn't have to kill anyone to get this credit.

In the section entitled "Riot" Marcus describes how Stone music became quickly popular, being called the biggest hit at Woodstock. Soon Stone's image was cracked when he began showing up late or not at all for concerts. This sparked problems with promoters and caused lawsuits. When he finally released a new album, most listeners found it unpleasant and no fun. Marcus describes the message of the album as an exploration of the state of the nation. It was this album that allowed Stone to create a new audience for himself.

Marcus describes the music on this album of being the music written by the Staggerlee who is caught and given his just punishment for his crimes. Stone's first songs as Staggerlee were those of the winner, those on top. The album RIOT paints a completely different and more displeasing picture of one who is capable of being destroyed. Although not happy, these songs do possess a poetical nature. One of the songs on the album also talks about the importance of finding out which people in your life will turn on

you and which won't; however, these lessons were not the ones Stone's audiences wanted to hear.

In the conclusion of this section Marcus contends that it was Stone's attempt to live up the expectations of the role of Staggerlee that caused his downfall. Although he is a free man, Stone must live with the consequences of his actions. At the end Stone finds the role he has chosen for himself has been the one that will ultimately destroy him.



# **Sly Stone - The Myth of Staggerlee (Comprising sections Sly Versus Superfly through A Quiet Rebellion)**

## **Sly Stone - The Myth of Staggerlee (Comprising sections Sly Versus Superfly through A Quiet Rebellion) Summary and Analysis**

Marcus opens this section by discussing the pessimism of the album RIOT. In some places in Marcus' analysis it is difficult to tell if he is responding positively to an album or negatively. In this particular section he seems to be describing RIOT as containing highly difficult material to listen to, yet at the same time this material is important because it tells the reality of the world in Stone's time.

Marcus then turns to discuss other hit songs of the time that arise from the vein of reality struck by RIOT. The songs seem to discuss the reality of the life of black people at that time. This lifestyle as described in the movie THE GODFATHER was a life of poverty, violence and drugs. This theme of reality began to make its way into movies of the time where it was then played out in real life. Stone's music at this time appears to have added to the level of black violence of that time period as crimes involving drug dealers seems to have increased dramatically.

Following this time period of increased violence and reality in art, there was a turning to a more gentle, romantic view of life. This shows that people can only handle and only want, so much reality. Sly's music, however, did not allow this retreat into fantasy, making his music different from the other music of the time period. But Marcus argues that even that music that provided fantasy could not stand up against the reality of life. Although Stone's music dealt with the bleakness of reality, Marcus argues the music also gave people the strength to want to try again.

In the section titled "A Quiet Rebellion" Marcus discusses the album FRESH, the follow up album to RIOT. Marcus appears to be very critical of this new album saying the music on it is good but lacking the fire and risk associated with RIOT. Marcus also comments on a Stone concert he attended after the release of this album. He states that although Stone's attempt to make the concert a homecoming celebration was touching, the music was fraudulent and fake.

Marcus believes that in a way Stone tried to cover up the story and events perhaps spurred on by the contents of the album RIOT. In fact Marcus indicates that while the music may have helped to spur the break up of the Black Panther party, it also added to racial tension elsewhere. In conclusion, Marcus describes Stone's work as being "inescapably political" but also very personal. His only disappointment with Stone

seems to be that Stone allowed his audience to determine the course of his music instead of creating the music he wanted to create.





# Randy Newman - Every Man is Free

## Randy Newman - Every Man is Free Summary and Analysis

Marcus opens this chapter by discussing what he believes to be every artist's ambition. Every artist, he believes, has the desire to create something great that will be embraced by and perhaps even change culture. Pop music and artists, however, don't appear to be motivated by these deep issues. Randy Newman claims not to be affected by the lack of popularity of his music because he is rich. Marcus, however, notes that because he claims not to be affected by this lack of popularity, this may show Newman is actually very disappointed his music did not affect people the way he hoped it would.

In the section entitled "Newman's America, I" Marcus describes Newman's beginnings in the music business. Newman studied classical piano in college. He began composing and then recording because he did not like the way other people performed his songs. In Newman's singing style Marcus describes his voice as being almost blurry with his words sliding together and endings just fading away. Newman also uses movie-type music in his songs intended to illicit an expected emotion from his listeners; his words then take the listener in an unexpected direction.

Marcus recalls from a Newman concert he attended that the man was capable of making his audience laugh, but that he also had the ability to be thoughtless and cold. More than anything, Marcus remembers the way Newman made his music and the ideas set forth by his music matter to the audience. Marcus is also impressed by Newman's willingness to take risks in his art. However, it appears Newman also knew the possible dangers of these risks. Once an artist presents an idea to the world, the artist is unaware what the public might do with this idea. For instance, Newman felt he was taking a risk to sing from the viewpoint of a rapist. This action, he reasoned, could cause someone in the audience to act out the song.

Ultimately Newman's message appears to be that of freedom with limits. We as Americans are free to make our own choices, but once those choices are made, we limit the freedoms that are open to us. For example, Newman chose not to spend all his time on his musical career because he knew it would take away from his family. Therefore his music career never reached the peak it might have.

In the section titled "Newman's America: II" Marcus describes an event where Newman almost made a movie. In his test scene Newman is dressed as a slaver singing to Africans about the wonders of America. Through his song Newman convinces the Africans to give up their freedom in Africa for slavery in America where he convinces the Africans they will live like kings. Although the audience is aware this is an untrue depiction of the slave trade, the feeling given by the song is more important than the context. Through his story Newman tries to make his audience believe that America



really is a good country—that all the things that have been done in the American name, even if they have been bad, were done with the idea of future good in mind.

The next section titled "Newman's Failure" discusses why Newman's music was not more popular than it was. Obviously, Newman did not have a very large audience base, the first sign of failure for any artist. Newman believes this is because his songs are too deep to be appreciated by a mass audience. However, Newman wants to write and perform songs that matter. Songs that are often not appreciated by more than a select few listeners. In fact, Marcus states that it is Newman's own sensibility that keeps Newman from reaching American audiences.

In the concluding section titled "Coda: Newman's Success" Marcus talks about the public response to Newman's one hit song, "Short People." Despite its Billboard success, "Short People" was banned from many radio stations because it was said to be disturbing. The song, Newman says, was not about people of short stature, but bigots. It is during this time that Newman allowed himself to be swayed by the opinion of the crowd and tried to please his audience through his performances. Marcus goes on to write that after the anger sparked by "Short People" Newman probably realized this would be his only hit song. Marcus soon produces another parody of American culture, a song about a Christian devoted to greed titled "It's Money that I Love."



# Elvis - Presliad (Comprising sections Fanfare through The Rockabilly Moment)

## Elvis - Presliad (Comprising sections Fanfare through The Rockabilly Moment) Summary and Analysis

In the longest chapter of his book Marcus sets forth to critique the career of Elvis Presley, the most well-known of the early rock stars. Elvis' music is varied enough to appeal to people of all ages from all walks of life. As Marcus indicates, Elvis' career was great enough to take in the entire American experience. In fact, Marcus points out that Elvis' popularity as a man almost transcends the recognition he receives for the use of his talent. Marcus states that beyond the adoration of the man, Elvis' performances almost have a lifeless quality when one considers the musicality of his act. It is almost as if Elvis has to live up to his own legend, and this leaves no room for him to be a creative artist. However, Marcus indicates that the America that Elvis creates in his work is one that is big enough that anyone can be part of and be welcome in, no one is left out.

Marcus then moves on to discuss the lack of personality and emotion in Elvis' music. He references to one concert in 1968 when Elvis sang with an extraordinary amount of emotion. It was during the recording of a television Christmas special that Elvis began to let out the pent up frustrations that were inside of him. Marcus writes that it is during this show that Elvis sings as he has always wanted. Instead of just giving the crowd what they expect, he gives them his all. Marcus states that he believes this was the best performance of Elvis' life. As Elvis became more secure in his career, this quality of music disappeared.

For those who are great fans of Elvis, it may be hard for them to understand how Marcus can describe Elvis' music as lacking emotion and personality. This comment may even appear at first glance to be an insult. However, one must consider that Marcus also describes Elvis as a singer known more as a larger than life superhero, more specifically, a king, than an individual. Elvis didn't have to pour himself into his music in order for his fans to be happy with his performance. Marcus does note that the one time he remembers Elvis actually singing a song the way Elvis wanted to sing it, the result was magic. Because he was secure in his career, however, Elvis rarely sang with this same kind of intensity.

In the section titled "Hillbilly Music" Marcus attempts to describe the circumstances that helped to develop and define Elvis and his career. Marcus first notes the strong ties between Southern culture, the culture in which Elvis was raised, and music. He writes that few Southern singers were actually ever able to break ties with their Southern roots, at least not for long. Although they might sing for a while about the sins the culture stood against, these same artists would generally return and reunite with the Southern views.



An example of one of these singers is Hank Williams. Williams was, Marcus writes, closer to the soul of Robert Johnson's music than even the black singers of that time.

Country music, Marcus states, is a music that draws the Southern community together. However, it also dealt with the heartache and sadness of being alive. Marcus notes that even though this Puritan form of community held together by music is beautiful, it is also "intolerable." The picture of the Southern community as presented in this section sets the musical background of Elvis' career. It was in this deeply musical, deeply sentimental and deeply religious culture in which he grew up.

In the section titled "Raised Up" Marcus first tries to define what made Elvis so much different from all the other Southern singers of Elvis' time. Marcus indicates it was Elvis' ability and willingness to take risks that made him stand out from the others. Elvis also appears to have always had a feeling that he was different from others. He showed this difference in his manner of dress and grooming.

This difference was also heard in Elvis' music. He had no idea that the kind of music he was born to create would last. Other forms of music had come and gone in popularity. Rock 'n' roll, however, was different in that it was completely unlike any kind of music that had ever been made before. It spreads a simple message of a good time and peace of mind. In order to define how deeply Elvis wanted his career and how hard he worked for it, Marcus moves on to the next section of this chapter where he describes parts of Elvis' life of which Elvis' fans are often unaware. Marcus indicates it is necessary to understand the humbleness and poorness of Elvis' early life in order to understand the scope of his musical talent and ambition.

Elvis was born in Tupelo, Mississippi. He and his family moved from Tupelo to Memphis in 1948. The only thing that set Elvis apart from other poor children was that he liked to sing. His mother bought him a guitar in order to keep him out of trouble. During their early years in Memphis the Presleys lived in government housing on welfare. The family faithfully attended the Assembly of God where Elvis was exposed to all the religious tension this branch of religion offered.

Marcus notes that even if Elvis had not created rock 'n' roll music, there probably would have been another singer that would have come along and done the job for him. However, it is Elvis' humble background and distinctly American success story that makes him such an intriguing character. This background, paired with Elvis' talent and ambition, make him a unique, irreplaceable singer.

Marcus goes on to describe the conception of Elvis' first hit song in the section entitled "Rockabilly Moment." Sam Phillips of Sun Records was working with Elvis and a group of other musicians trying to lay down a track of music that worked. So far they had been having no luck. Finally the group begins to goof around and Elvis begins the tune to "That's All Right Mama." The other musicians join in and Phillips realizes they are on the verge of something big. He records the track and though he has his doubts about recording it, decides to release it. Although the genre was short lived, this song was the

first of the rockabilly music. This type of music, created by white artists but with a black sound, showed the world that whites could create the same types of music as blacks.



# Elvis - Presliad (Comprising sections Elvis Moves Out through Finale)

## Elvis - Presliad (Comprising sections Elvis Moves Out through Finale) Summary and Analysis

Of the three Arthur Crudup songs Elvis recorded, he remade them with his own rhythm, words and meaning. Elvis' first record which included these songs was released in 1954. The music met a mixed review. It was unsure what market the music was aimed toward, although it had the potential in all markets, particularly the blues. Elvis' first music touched on racial issues but also spoke of freedom. His early popularity is shown by his ability to draw 3,000 people to the opening celebration for a shopping center.

After the initial success, Phillips got Elvis quickly back into the studio. Marcus details the specifics of Elvis' version of "Good Rockin'." He includes in his description Elvis' timing, rhythm, and breathing. Marcus indicates that the greatest idea of the new rock music is that this particular form of music will take away the audience's blues.

Although Elvis' early music is thought to be spontaneous, it is actually the result of much hard work and repeated attempts at perfection. Marcus' intent is to show that although Elvis was naturally "cool" in his walk, dress and attitude, his easy sounding songs were the result of hard work. Marcus then discusses the musicology of "Milkcow Blues Boogie." Even if one is not familiar with this song, Marcus gives such a lively description that one can almost hear the music in the words he uses to describe it.

In the section entitled the "Boy Who Stole the Blues," racial issues involving Elvis' music are investigated. When Elvis' music first came out the public was unsure if he was white or black. Elvis' impact on the blues is that he made black music acceptable to white people. White people who successfully sing the blues are those who commit themselves to the values of the music. Although not obvious at first, black/white issues begin to grow around Elvis' music. For example, "Hound Dog" was written by two Jewish men who presented it to a dark-skinned white man to sing. After Thornton made the song a hit, Elvis completely reworked the song and made it a hit again. Although the song had so much white influence, "Hound Dog" was primarily a black song. Through this discussion Marcus seems to be asking if Elvis owes anything to the blacks. He seems to come to the conclusion that Elvis does not owe the blacks something because he made the black form of music his own.

In the section titled "The Pink Cadillac" Marcus writes about Elvis' album "Baby, Let's Play House." It is at this point in his life that Elvis realizes that his career will be successful. Included in the lyric to one of the songs on this album is the mention of a pink Cadillac. Elvis had just bought a similar car and Marcus believes that it is what this car stood for that was Elvis' undoing. He goes on to explain it was Elvis' attempt to



prove he was a master at all types of musical styles that kept him from finding a focus for his talent.

In the next section titled "Elvis at Home: The County Sides" Marcus discusses Elvis' blues and country music. Obviously, Elvis grew up listening to country music so this was the musical style with which he was most familiar. However, Marcus notes that when Elvis sings in the country style, there is no warmth or feeling. He indicates that if there is any feeling it is forced. In this section Marcus also notes that Elvis appears to be in rebellion against his country roots when he sings rock 'n' roll.

In the section titled "Mystery Train" Marcus tells the story of one song included on the last record Elvis made under the Sun label. The song "Mystery Train" is perhaps based on the tale told by the song "Worried Man Blues" by the Carters. This song, like "Mystery Train" is a tale of hopelessness. Although the cuts of the original song were exceptional, Elvis found a way to make it his own. Elvis rebels against the song by bringing back the girl the train stole away.

In conclusion, Marcus writes that Elvis' most powerful moments are those when Elvis' true self came through in his singing. All in all, Elvis seems to be the almost perfect representation of America. He sings of a land that is big enough to accommodate anyone who wants a place. From his poor background to his stunning success, Elvis represents what is good about America.



# Epilogue

## Epilogue Summary and Analysis

Marcus begins his epilogue with a list of eight headlines that could refer either to material found in rock songs or in legitimate news stories. He closes his study with a quote by Walt Whitman indicating that the author wanted his art to describe the experience of American life more than it determined the direction of the lives of Americans. Marcus believes the artists included in his book achieved this goal set forth by Whitman. In fact, he believes these artists even fulfill the ambition of engaging in a battle between art and politics, a battle which Marcus seems to indicate is merely a part of being American.





# Characters

## Elvis

Elvis is the most well-known artist included in Marcus' study of rock 'n' roll. In fact, Marcus dedicates nearly one-third of his book to this singer who earned the title of king of rock 'n' roll. Although he worked hard to become successful, Elvis came from humble beginnings. Elvis was born to poor parents in Tupelo, Mississippi. They later moved to Memphis, Tennessee where Elvis lived most of his life and wrote and recorded many of his songs. Elvis basically lived the American dream. A large portion of Elvis' attraction is that he created himself. Marcus indicates that while Elvis embodies the most negative characteristics of the American personality, he also embodies the best characteristics. He likes to brag, is showy and narcissistic, as well as materialistic. However, it is his lack of seriousness that allows America to forgive him all his faults. In his music Elvis presents an image of America that is big enough to allow anyone a place. Elvis represents what is good about America.

Marcus believes that it is this love that the audience has for Elvis that keeps Elvis from performing at his best. Elvis is in the uncomfortable spot of having to live up to his reputation. The crowd expects Elvis to present to them the same music, in the same style he has always presented it. Elvis becomes so involved with being a crowd pleaser that he lets this desire drown out his ability to create. Marcus indicates that Elvis had talent and ambition that was never utilized because Elvis wanted to give the crowd what they wanted to hear.

## Sly Stone

Sly Stone is a singer who addressed issues of race and violence in his music. While working as a deejay Stone started a band called Sly and the Family Stone for which he was the lead singer. This band was unusual for its time because it contained both men and women musicians who were both black and white. Stone was concerned with showing his audience the reality of the life of the black person in America. His music was produced during a violent time in America's history that might have been made more violent by the messages sent by this particular artist's music. Through his discussion of Stone, Marcus compares him to the legendary Staggerlee, a black man who kills another man over a Stetson hat, then receives no punishment for his crime. Marcus indicates that while Stone did not kill anyone, he still earned the reputation of Staggerlee. Marcus points out that it may have been this lifestyle and this stance that ultimately destroyed Stone.

## Harmonica Frank

Harmonica Frank was a white man in his forties known for playing harmonica with one side of his mouth and singing out of the other side. Although he sang his own version of



his music, and therefore fit Marcus' definition of an artist, Frank was never famous and his records did not sell. When Frank began singing, he didn't even know how to read or write music. In his own opinion and the opinion of Marcus, however, Frank was the first person to create the idea of rock 'n' roll music.

Marcus describes Frank as a vagabond who doesn't care what others think of him. In the one direct quote from Frank that is included in the book, it is obvious from his grammar and speech patterns that his is uneducated and unsophisticated. Marcus also states that much of Frank's music lacked tone and other important musical qualities. Marcus writes that Frank was, for the most part, just a noisemaker. However, he made the kind of noise, with the kind of free, unbridled spirit for which Marcus believed the people of America were looking.

## **Robert Johnson**

Robert Johnson was a blues singer who lived in the early 1900's. He died at the age of 27 when he was supposedly killed by a jealous husband. Johnson is remembered not for the positive image of freedom he presented in his music but for the idea that one could be free from the idea that all those who live in America should, without question, be happy and prosperous.

Much of Johnson's music could best be defined as the traditional black blues. Johnson also covers topics which signify the reality of the devil and diminish the ability of God to redeem or save the people. It is rumored that Johnson sold his soul to the devil in order to be able to play and sing the way that he did. Through his critique of Johnson's work, it is obvious that Marcus is deeply impressed by Johnson's ability to create a message not only with the words he sings but also with the sounds he creates in his musical composition.

## **Ronnie Hawkins**

Ronnie Hawkins was the lead singer for the group The Hawks. His backup singers left his group to create their own band, The Band. It was during the group's time with the Hawks that they banded together and created their musical community. Although Hawkins had a distinctive sound, he was not a great singer and required a band to make a good sound. Marcus' description of Hawkins portrays him as quite a character. Information included in the book indicates Hawkins claims to have recorded the first ever rock 'n' roll song even though no one but Hawkins has any knowledge of this song.

## **Randy Newman**

Although listed as one of the more influential rock 'n' roll singers of his time, Newman only had one hit during his singing career. Newman's greatest impact on rock 'n' roll music is his desire to make music that mattered. In fact, he sacrificed his audience and his career in order to make music that made the statements he wanted it to make.



Newman believed that if a song was simple enough to be understood by a large audience, it was not of any consequence. It was only for a short while after his one hit that Newman was swayed by the power of the audience. He soon realized, however, that he was doomed to have only one hit and a small audience.

## **Little Richard**

Little Richard is described by Marcus as being a rock 'n' roll singer and a "weirdo." In his prologue Marcus uses an incident during which Little Richard created a commotion while appearing on the Dick Cavett Show to present a picture of the attributes of a true artist. According to this representation, a true artist is one who is not afraid to shock people or even offend them with their opinions and attitudes. These true artists will present their views in their music despite how their actions are interpreted or if they are acknowledged by their audiences.

## **Sam Phillips**

Sam Phillips was owner of a recording operation in Memphis, Tennessee. His special passion was black blues because while he grew up on a plantation he befriended an old black man who used to sing this type of music to him. Phillips recorded the music of Harmonica Frank because he felt the music audiences were looking for a white man with the sound of a black man. Although Harmonica Frank never became widely popular, Phillips did give birth to a star when he began recording the music of Elvis Presley.

## **Richard Nixon**

Richard Nixon was a former president of the United States. He is associated with the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. He has been the only president who has resigned from his position before serving the full term. Nixon is mentioned in Marcus book during the chapters about Sly Stone, Randy Newman and Elvis.

## **Lyndon B. Johnson**

Lyndon B. Johnson was the 36th president of the United States. Although he was a political leader Marcus sensed in him the same carefree character that was present in Frank's music, and Huck and Ahab's personalities. For Johnson this character comes out in his uncouth ways of dealing with people and his obscene language. However, Marcus states that Johnson rises above the self-righteous view that America had of itself. He believes that had Johnson and Frank known each other, they would have been great acquaintances.



# Objects/Places

## Dick Cavett Show

A television talk show hosted by Dick Cavett.

## Moby Dick

Moby Dick is a novel about a crazed whaling ship captain who sends his ship and crew to their end in his unrelenting desire to get revenge on a whale that bit off his leg. Marcus often compares and contrasts the singers in his book with characters in this novel.

## The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Marcus borrows the characters Huck and Jim from this well-known American novel and uses them as examples of the unbridled spirit that singer Harmonica Frank embodies in his music and his lifestyle.

## The Band

An early rock band comprised of four Canadians and a drummer from Arkansas. Albums from the Band included MUSIC FROM BIG PINK and THE BAND.

## MUSIC FROM BIG PINK

This is the name of the Band's debut album. The album was named after the Band's big pink house.

## Golden calf

According to the Christian Bible this calf was made by the Israelites after they escaped from Egypt while they were wandering in the desert in search of the Promised Land.

## The Promised Land

The Promised Land is the land which the Lord promised to give the Israelites when they escaped from Egypt. This land, which is said in the Christian Bible to be "flowing with milk and honey," is often equated with heaven.



## **Judgment Day**

This day is referred to in the Band's song "To Kingdom Come." In the Christian Bible Judgment Day is the day when Christ will judge all people according to their belief in Him and their deeds.

## **Black Panthers**

Black Panthers were members of the Black Panther Party. The party was formed to promote black power.

## **Sun Records**

Sun Records is the name of Sam Phillip's private recording label. Both Harmonica Frank and Elvis recorded music under this label.

## **RCA Victor**

RCA Victor became Elvis' recording label after he left Sun Records.

## **Stage at the International Hotel in Las Vegas**

During the height of his comeback Elvis delivers an amusing autobiography from this stage.

## **Pink Corvette**

Not only did Elvis buy this famous pink car, it was also the subject of one of his songs.



# Themes

## Racial Issues

Throughout his criticism Marcus, indicates there were a variety of racial issues associated with the creation of rock 'n' roll music. Rock 'n' roll music seems to have stemmed from blues music, a form of music made popular by blacks. In his chapter about Harmonica Frank, Marcus writes how Sam Phillips hopes to find a white singer with a black sound. Although he wasn't sure exactly how it would happen, Phillips seemed to believe it would be this sound that would be the next big thing in music. In the chapter about Elvis, Marcus indicates that Elvis let blacks know that white people could sing their music. In fact when he first began singing, many people thought Elvis was a black person. Marcus touches on the idea that Elvis "stole" the blues sound from the blacks.

Sly Stone is another artist who seemed to deal deeply with racial issues. According to Marcus, Stone is a representation of a black Staggerlee, a legendary character who killed a man and got away with the crime. Stone's music represents and may have stirred up some of the racial tensions felt during the time period in which it was written. Despite these racial tensions, Stone makes a statement that there is room in music for all races and genders of people as his band was comprised of both blacks and whites, men and women.

Marcus also follows through with these racial issues with the use of the novel Huckleberry Finn as an illustration of the ideals of rock music. It is important to keep in mind that this example can be used to symbolize the break of rock 'n' roll music from the rules of the time, as Huck broke away from his aunts' rigid rules to raft the river with Jim. Note also that the trip of freedom is a trip that a black person and a white person take together. Instead of arguing whether blacks or whites made rock music popular or if it was made popular by the black or white talent, it should be considered that this form of music is actually a combination of the talents of blacks and whites. Instead of being concerned that Elvis stole a music form from the blacks, it should be more important that the music genre is one that drew from influences of both blacks and whites. Therefore, the creation of rock music in itself is a defining point in American culture in that it is one issue in which the races each made a valuable contribution to the art form.

## The Artist's Reaction to the Audience and Vice Versa

Unfortunately Harmonica Frank never had a large following so it is hard to determine exactly what effect he had on the people of his time period. Marcus says those who did see him perform viewed him as some sort of traveling clown with no talent in particular. In fact, Marcus writes that Frank often lost his audiences because he insisted on offending them in his music. However, Marcus indicates that Frank's music was not a completely lost art because there are echoes of his music in songs by Bob Dylan and



Randy Newman. Robert Johnson found greater musical popularity than Harmonica Frank. Johnson's music communicated most strongly with those who realized, like Johnson, that not everyone could attain the American dream. These disappointed people understood the frustration and hopelessness associated with this failure. Johnson's music also makes common reference to the devil as well as the reality of evil in the world.

The Band is one musical group that truly had a unique relationship with their audience. The Band's music was liked so well that the Band cracked under the pressure of their first live show. Although they redeemed themselves during their second show, the Band was never the same after this experience. For some reason leaving the protection of their own group and going out into the community was too much for the Band to handle. Their music lost its luster and meaning, and their group lost its connectivity.

Since Elvis is the most popular of the singers introduced in this book, his relationship with his audience is the most significant. Marcus indicates that Elvis' audiences adored Elvis more because of the idea they had of him more than his musical ability. In fact, Marcus indicates that Elvis was able to woo his audiences without ever even using any of the true musical talent that he had. Elvis knew what his audience wanted and he gave it to them. It is only at one point when Elvis was unsure of the remainder of his career that he allows himself to sing at his full potential.

## Statement

No matter how inconsequential or how popular each of the artists included in this book were, Marcus indicates they each had a statement to make through their music. Harmonica Frank made a statement about freedom by living out the freedom Americans had read about in the novel *THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN*. Robert Johnson, on the other hand, sings about the disillusionment that those who are not able to achieve the promised American dream feel. Johnson's songs strongly attest to the reality of the devil and evil forces in the world.

Music created by the Band discussed issues such as unity in terms of gender, race and location. Interestingly, although the Band was a highly-united group, they fell apart when they attempted to take their music into their community. Sly Stone's music, on the other hand, is very racially motivated. He does not seek unity as much as he tries to paint a true picture of the real life of most black Americans. Marcus equates his life to that of the legendary Staggerlee who kills a man but is able to get away free with his crimes. According to the book, crime seemed to increase as life followed the pattern set forth in Stone's music and movies that followed the production of this music.

Elvis' music was primarily feel good music. He created a variety of music to which almost anyone in America could relate. If he had painted a portrait of America his portrait would have been of a country big enough and accepting enough for anyone to find a place to belong. Marcus indicates Elvis himself seemed to make a louder statement than his music did. Elvis basically succeeded at capturing the American

Dream. He started out as a poor boy living in government housing but through nothing but ambition and talent he became one of the most well-known and most famous rock 'n' roll singers in history. Elvis is a symbol of what America is supposed to be.



# Style

## Perspective

Marcus' reason for writing this analysis of rock 'n' roll music appears to be an attempt to define American culture as it is portrayed in the lyrics of early rock 'n' roll music. Marcus also discusses the ways in which American culture has changed in response to this new form of music. He deals with artists, those who are not afraid to speak their mind through their music, even if it means offending or shocking their audience. Marcus also describes the way these audiences impact the songs and sounds that each artist creates.

Marcus is well-qualified to write this analysis primarily because he obviously enjoys music. According to information included in the book, Marcus lived during the time rock 'n' roll music was first becoming popular. He also attended many concerts given by the artists he includes in his book. Some concerts he attended as an observer while others he attended as a music critic. In addition, Marcus' biographical information included in the book indicates he holds degrees in American political thought. Marcus has also worked as editor and writer for ROLLING STONE, a rock 'n' roll news magazine.

The book is intended for anyone interested in rock 'n' roll music and the impact this music had on the country in which it was created. However, the reader should be aware that this is not a light critique. Marcus delves deeply into the thought process of the artists whom he showcases. He also utilizes his stores of political knowledge to explain the purpose he believes each artist hoped their music would fulfill.

## Tone

Marcus' tone is very subjective. Although he often uses information he has gotten personally from the artists themselves about their reasons for writing their music, Marcus injects his own opinions about the music and the political atmosphere of the time period in order to draw his own conclusions about the impact each artist made with his music. Since Marcus lived during the time period when the music was being created, he is also able to use his store of personal information about the time period in order to create his own opinions.

In a way, Marcus' way of presenting his information gives his readers a choice—they can either agree with Marcus' opinions or disagree with them. The most important fact to keep in mind while reading this analysis is Marcus' definition of an artist. Marcus believes a true artist is one who sings his music and makes his statements regardless of how the public receives this music. Although a singer may create great music and may have great popularity, s/he is not a true artist, according to Marcus, if s/he doesn't make a bold statement about the times in which s/he lives. Although readers may not

agree with this definition of an artist, it is crucial for them to read the book with this definition in mind in order to understand the points Marcus hopes to make.

## Structure

This book is divided into two main sections. The first 177 pages of the book comprise the main text of the book while the following 116 pages contain a complete discography of each artist highlighted in the main text. The discography section also contains additional notes on each artist and their work.

The main text of the book is divided into two sections, one covering the two artists Marcus considers to be the ancestors of rock 'n' roll music. Each of these two artists, Harmonica Frank and Robert Johnson, has one short chapter dedicated to their music and the events surrounding this music. The second section of the main section of this book is comprised of the inheritors. Each of these four inheritors has a chapter dedicated to their work and times. These inheritors include the Band, Sly Stone, Randy Newman, and Elvis Presley. Each of the four long chapters is titled with the author's name along with a short catch phrase that sums up the intended message of their music.

## Quotes

"Little Richard was the only artist on the set that night, the only one who disrupted an era, the only one with a claim to immortality. The one who broke the rules, created a form; the one who gave shape to a vitality that wailed silently in each of us until he found a voice for it." Prologue, pg. 3.

"They sang as if they knew they were destined to survive not only a few weeks on the charts but to make history; to displace the dreary events of the fifties in the memories of those who heard their records; and to anchor a music that twenty years later would be struggling to keep the promises they made. Naturally, they sound as if they could care less, so long as their little black 45's hit number one and made them rich and famous. But they delivered a new version of America with their music, and more people than anyone can count are still trying to figure out how to live in it." Prologue, pg. 4.

"The best popular artists create immediate links between people who might have nothing in common but a response to their work, but the best popular artists never stop trying to understand the impact of their work on their audiences." Prologue, pg. 6.

"Yet there was an edge to Frank's music, a fool's resistance to the only role he knew; and that, along with the vitality and invention of the sounds Frank made, was a key to the inarticulate desires shared by Sam Phillips and the impatient new audience whose presence he sensed." Harmonica Frank, pg. 12.

"It is a revolt against the hopeful morality of Twain's aunts and the tiresomeness of Ben Franklin doing good and being right; a revolt against pomposity, and arrogance." Harmonica Frank, pg. 14.

"Any musicologist, neatly tracing the development of music, can tell us that rock'n'noll did not come out of nowhere. But it sounded as if it did." Harmonica Frank, pg. 16.

"But in a way that cannot be denied, selling his soul and trying to win it back are what Johnson's bravest songs are all about, and anyone who wants to come to grips with his music probably ought to entertain Son House's possibility." Robert Johnson, pg. 28.

"Blues grew out of the need to live in the brutal world that stood ready in ambush the moment one walked out of the church." Robert Johnson, pg. 29.

"All the beauty of the world and all the terror of losing it is there in Eric Clapton's rock 'n' roll; Robert Johnson's music is proof that beauty can be wrung from the terror itself." Robert Johnson, pg. 35.

"He had to learn, in John Barth's line, that the key to the treasure is the treasure - that to be free is not to get what you want or settle for what you've got, but to begin to know what you want and to feel strong enough to go after it." The Band: Pilgrims' Progress, pg. 52.



"The problem with community, as the Band was to discover when they finally followed their records into the country, is that you have to live in it." *The Band: Pilgrims' Progress*, pg. 57.

"Performing involved all the psychic risks they had faced and dodged in the adventures of Big Pink; performing also demanded new links, no matter how tenuous, to the America their audience lived in, which was very different from their own - a scary place, violent with blocked hopes and bad dreams, a place where roots were not enough, where a good concert by the Band was like shelter in the storm, a means to strength and pleasure." *The Band: Pilgrims' Progress*, pg. 58.

"America is a dangerous place, and to find community demands as much as any of us can give. But if America is not dangerous, its little utopias, asking nothing, promising safety, are usually worse." *The Band: Pilgrims' Progress*, pg. 64.

"A musical vacuum was opening up, and the racial contradictions of the counterculture were coming to the surface. There was no music to work out the contradictions, and no music to fill the vacuum." *Sly Stone: The Myth of Staggerlee*, pg. 69.

"Sly's real triumph was that he had it both ways. Every nuance of his style, from the razzle-dazzle of his threads to the originality of his music to the explosiveness of his live performance, made it clear he was his own man." *Sly Stone: The Myth of Staggerlee*, pg. 71.

"Sly created a moment of lucidity in the midst of all the obvious negatives and the false, faked hopes; he made his despair mean something in the midst of a despair it is all too easy to think may mean nothing at all. He was clearing away the cultural and political debris that seemed piled up in mounds on the streets, in the papers, in the record stores; for all the darkness of what he had to say and how he said it, his music had the kind of strength and the naked honesty that could make you want to start over." *Sly Stone: The Myth of Staggerlee*, pg. 89.

"Rock 'n' roll is a combination of good ideas dried up by fads, terrible junk, hideous failings in taste and judgment, gullibility and manipulation, moments of unbelievable clarity and invention, pleasure, fun, vulgarity, excess, novelty and utter enervation, all summed up nowhere so well as on Top 40 radio, that ultimate rock 'n' roll version of America." *Randy Newman: Every Man is Free*, pg. 98.

"But on the surface and beneath it, Elvis transcends any real America by evading it. There is no John Brown in his "Battle Hymn," no romance in his "Dixie," no blood in his slave song. He sings with such a complete absence of musical personality that none of the old songs matter at all, because he has not committed himself to them; it could be anyone singing, or no one. It is in this sense, finally, that an audience is confirmed, that an America comes into being; lacking any real fear or joy, it is a throwaway America where nothing is at stake. The divisions America shares are simply smoothed away." *Elvis: Presliad*, pg. 124.



"You can hear the intensity, the echo of those memories of doubt, in the first notes of most songs Elvis sing on stage - just before he realizes again that the crowd cares only that he is before them, and that anyway, the music would be his if he wanted it, that his talent is so vast it would be demeaning to apply it." Elvis: Presliad, pg. 127.

"What I hear, most of the time, is the affection and respect Elvis felt for the limits and conventions of his family life, of his community, and ultimately of American life, captured in his country sides; and his refusal of those limits, of any limits, played out in his blues." Elvis: Presliad, pg. 146.

"Along with Robert Johnson, Elvis is the grandest figure in the story I have tried to tell, because he has gone to the greatest extremes: he has given us an America that is dead, and an unmatched version of an America that is full of life." Elvis: Presliad, pg. 175.



## Topics for Discussion

Research any of the three characters with whom Marcus compares Harmonica Frank and his chosen his way of life. Based on the information about Frank included in the book compare and contrast their personalities. The characters include Huck from THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN, Ahab from MOBY DICK, and American President Lyndon B. Johnson.

Do you think that the story that claims that Robert Johnson sold his soul to the devil in exchange for his musical abilities is true? Why or why not?

Compare and contrast Harmonica Frank's and Robert Johnson's ideas of freedom as expressed in their music.

Consider the idea of black/white issues as they relates to the creation of the genre of rock music. Why is it so significant that it was a white person who was the king of rock 'n' roll instead of a black person?

Discuss the relationship between the Band and their audience. In what ways did the Band allow their audience to control the music they produced? In what ways did Elvis allow his audience to control his musical style? Why did the audience not affect Elvis the way it did the Band?

Compare and contrast Sly Stone with the legendary Staggerlee. In what ways does Marcus indicate the two are similar? In what ways are they different?

Explore Randy Newman's attempt to create music that would relate to every American citizen. Why does he allow the money to make up for his inability to create widely popular music?

Consider Marcus' analysis of the roots of rock 'n' roll music. Do you believe Marcus is on target in his analysis of the intentions of these early rock musicians or do you think he may have over analyzed his subject matter? For instance, do you believe Harmonica Frank really intended to show Americans one could live out the dream of Huckleberry Finn or was that just the way he was? Did Elvis really want to prove whites could sing black music or was that just the kind of music he created? Give reasons for your answers.