



## Mystery train

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# Mystery train

*Greil Marcus*

**Mystery train** Greil Marcus

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424 pages

Extrait

AUTHOR'S NOTE Writing these opening notes reminds me of the prefaces to the American history books that were written during World War II, when the authors, looking back for the meaning of the Revolution or the Civil War or whatever, drew modest but determined parallels between their work and the struggle. They were affirming that their work was part of the struggle; that an attempt to understand America took on a special meaning when America was up for grabs. Those writers were also saying—at least, this is what they now say to me—that to do one's most personal work in a time of public crisis is an honest, legitimate, paradoxically democratic act of common faith; that one keeps faith with one's community by offering whatever it is that one has to say. I mean that those writers were exhilarated, thirty years ago, by something we can only call patriotism, and humbled by it too. Well, I feel some kinship with those writers. I began this book in the fall of 1972, and finished it late in the summer of 1974. Inevitably, it reflects, and I hope contains, the peculiar moods of those times, when the country came face-to-face with an obscene perversion of itself that could be neither accepted nor destroyed: moods of rage, excitement, loneliness, fatalism, desire. • • • Like a lot of people who are about thirty years old, I have been listening and living my life to rock 'n' roll for twenty years, and so behind this book lie twenty years of records and twenty years of talk. Probably it began when a kid pushed a radio at me and demanded that I listen to a song called "Rock Around the Clock," which I disliked at the time and still do. I know the music came together for me in high school, thanks to my cruising friend, Barry Franklin. We spent years on the El Camino, driving from Menlo Park to San Francisco to San Jose and back again, listening to Tom Donahue and Tommy Saunders on KYA, trying to figure out the words to "Runaround Sue" and translating "Little Star" into French. Later, we followed the sixties trail to college, Beatles shows, and Dylan concerts. About a month before the Beatles hit I met my wife, Jenny, who confirmed my enthusiasms and who has always kept them alive; it means more to me to say that this book wouldn't have been written without her than to say that it couldn't have been. The time I have spent talking rock 'n' roll with my friends Bruce Miroff, Langdon Winner, Ralph Gleason, Ed Ward, Michael Goodwin, and many more, has gone into this book; so has talk with my brothers Steve and Bill, with teachers and students, and with my daughter Emily, who picked "Mystery Train" as her favorite song at the age of two. My daughter Cecily is not as yet so discriminating, but I have hopes. As much as anything, rock 'n' roll has been the best means to friendship I know. I have been writing about the music since 1966—professionally, for publication, since 1968. Before I got up the nerve to see my efforts in print I put together a book of pieces by myself and some friends; one of them, Sandy Darlington, taught me a lot about music and a lot more about writing. After the book was finished I took over Sandy's music-space in the San Francisco *Express-Times*, then edited and inspired by Marvin Garson. Until the events of Peoples' Park sent it reeling into mindlessness, the *Express-Times* was the best underground newspaper in America, and I've always been proud to have been part of it. When it changed I moved across town to *Rolling Stone*, where I wrote and edited for a year. In 1970 I left, and ultimately ended up with *Creem*, a magazine that seemed like a place of freedom and was. *Creem* gave me the chance to try out many of the ideas that eventually found their way into this book. There would be little to those ideas without the study I did in American political thought and American literature with three Berkeley teachers: John Schaar, Michael Rogin, and Norman Jacobson. And there are a few books that mattered a great deal to the ambitions of my own book, and to its content: D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel*, James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Pauline Kael's *I Lost It at the Movies*, Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, and, in a way that is still pretty mysterious to me, Ernest Hemingway's short stories. Many people helped me in many ways while I was writing: Mary Clemmey, Greg Shaw, Richard Bass, Pat Thomas, Ms. Clawdy, Bill Strachan of Anchor Press, and Wendy Weil. Jenny Marcus, Peter Guralnick, Bruce Miroff, Bob Christgau, and Dave Marsh read every page of the manuscript, and made it far better than it would have been without their help. Bob and Dave deserve special thanks. They

have been part of my work from beginning to end; they encouraged it, at times inspired it, always cared about it. No critic could ask for better colleagues, and no one could ask for better friends. And I owe as much to my editor, Bill Whitehead. Without his commitment to the book, mine would have faded out a long time ago. What I have to say in *Mystery Train* grows out of records, novels, political writings; the balance shifts, but in my intentions, there isn't any separation. I am no more capable of mulling over Elvis without thinking of Herman Melville than I am of reading Jonathan Edwards (not, I've been asked to point out, the crooner mentioned in the Randy Newman chapter, but the Puritan who made his name with "Sinners In the Hands of an Angry God") without putting on Robert Johnson's records as background music. What I bring to this book, at any rate, is no attempt at synthesis, but a recognition of unities in the American imagination that already exist. They are natural unities, I think, but elusive; I learned, in the last two years, that simply because of those unities, the resonance of the best American images is profoundly deep and impossibly broad. I wrote this book in an attempt to find some of those images, but I know now that to put oneself in touch with them is a life's work. *Berkeley, August 9, 1974*

INTRODUCTION TO THE 2015 EDITION

Every seven or eight years, I've had the privilege, thanks to the publisher that, under different names, has stayed with *Mystery Train* for four decades, to dive into the Notes & Discographies back sections of the book and again take up the story it tried to tell. Of the six principals in the book—Harmonica Frank, Robert Johnson, the Band, Sly Stone, Randy Newman, and Elvis Presley—Garth Hudson and Robbie Robertson of the Band, Sly Stone, and Randy Newman are still alive, though only Newman performs in anything like the way that he did when this book first appeared. But there are always reissues to chronicle, and often there's music that was never heard in its time. New books, sometimes shaping an old tale in a new way, sometimes working from discoveries that upend what everybody thought they knew, are always appearing. There are movies inspired by the music traced in these pages. Novels. Poems. Plays. Countless new songs from the handful that are followed here. The great surprise I found, when I began to look at where those once fugitive, once looming figures stood today, was that the one who seemed most culturally alive—the one who was, after however many years, most the subject of a real and ongoing conversation—was Robert Johnson, the Mississippi blues singer who has been dead since 1938. When I wrote about him in 1975, almost nothing certain was known about him. But the discovery and publication, soon after that, of the facts about the identity of this once almost absolutely crepuscular artist did nothing to still the voices hiding in his songs—to fix *their* identity. For that matter the facts of Johnson's identity—his birth, real name, life, travels, death, even imposture—are probably more in dispute today than they have ever been, to the point that some people who have devoted a good part of their lives to the search for Robert Johnson now seem to be arguing that he may have never existed at all. Johnson may have a greater presence today than he has ever had. He may have a greater hold on the imaginations of individuals and the common, constructed memory, which is to say the story we tell each other about who we are and where we came from. That is partly because of the re-release of Johnson's music in 2011, to mark the putative centennial of his birth, in a form so clear and deep it was less that he seemed to step into the present than that he was able to transport any listener into the Texas hotel rooms where he recorded almost eighty years ago, because of the issue by Dogfish Head Brewery in that same year of "Robert Johnson's Hellhound on My Ale," or because in 2012 the president of the United States sang Robert Johnson's "Sweet Home Chicago" to close a celebration at the White House. But if Johnson's presence in culture were that simple it wouldn't exist. ••• I thank the people at Plume who have made this edition possible: editors Matthew Daddona and Philip Budnick, managing editor Norina Frabotta, senior production editor Lavina Lee, designer Eve Kirch, and for the cover the design firm the Heads of State, and proofreader Jennifer Rappaport. ••• Wendy Weil, who died suddenly in 2012, guided this book through many editions. I was in the Bill Clinton Library in Little Rock when her associate Emily Forland called with the news, and the version of the American story in the library, the Civil Rights Movement plaques marking vicious attacks on citizens witnessing and making history at the same time, the museums and blues lines painted on the windows of restaurants on President Clinton Avenue brought home, like a building collapsing, how central Wendy was to the books that, with her soft-spoken, often quizzical advice, I've had the chance to write. I am lucky now to continue to work with Emily Forland, now with Brandt &

Hochman, and as well with her colleagues Emma Patterson, who was also with Wendy, and Marianne Merola and Henry Thayer. They are the quickest people I have ever known in publishing, and the sunniest. *Oakland, February 1, 2015* INTRODUCTION TO THE 2008 EDITION When I took the title of Elvis Presley's last single for Sun Records as the title for this book, I had no argument to make for it. The words had an echo in them, that was all I knew. More than thirty years later, I know one thing more: it's been a good train to hitch a ride on. Over time, the idea or the image of the song has surfaced again and again, as a kind of talisman—of, I think, the need or the wish for mystery itself, as a dimension of life too often missing. I first noticed that this train was still running in 1986, with Thurston Moore's slow chant "Mystery train / Three-way plane" in Sonic Youth's "Expressway to Yr. Skull," the sound blowing up in a tiny nightclub but those first two words as clear as a fire alarm. That same year, I came across Lynn Turner's Harlequin Intrigue novel *Mystery Train* discarded on a beach. The jacket showed a clean-cut young man apparently attempting to rescue a clean-cut young woman, who seemed about to pitch off the back of a railcar. In the lower right-hand corner was a smaller picture of a dead woman facedown in a creek. Cut in under the first woman's windblown hair was an insert promising "SPECIAL OFFER WIN A GREAT PRIZE See inside No Purchase Necessary." The prize was detailed on the inside cover: "Lots of money." In 1989 there was Jim Jarmusch's film *Mystery Train*—three stories about foreign visitors holed up in the same Elvis-haunted Memphis hotel on the same night, but with the train that brings two Japanese rockabilly fans into town taking a turn that wasn't in the script. In the middle of the night, an Italian woman is awakened by a befuddled Elvis ghost; she asks him what he's doing in her room. "I don't rightly know, ma'am," he says; then he vanishes. The actor was Stephen Jones, perhaps the least convincing Elvis impersonator in the history of Western civilization, though a few years later Jones got his hands on American history, the real thing, when his wife, Paula—fronting for a slew of heavily funded right-wing groups—filed a sexual harassment suit against another sometime Elvis impersonator, a better one, especially in 1992, when he was elected president of the United States. "Mystery train"—it was a phrase that, once Elvis made it a metaphor for fate and desire, became a signpost, a doorway to a better world, a key to the truth, a philosopher's stone. Even in the fifties, Janis "The Female Elvis" Martin was asking the other Elvis for a ride on his mystery train, in her hands an image Elvis would not have likely associated with schedules and conductors; in 1969, in "Rock Is Dead," a miserable studio jam not released until 1997, Jim Morrison found his one moment of lucidity when he stumbled onto the long black train. From the Soft Boys to the Blake Babies to Ashtray to the Waco Brothers, from Robert Zimmerman in Hibbing, Minnesota, in 1958 (with his band the Golden Chords and their "Mystery Train" rewrite "Big Black Train") to Bob Dylan in Los Angeles in 1981 (a hammering version of the real thing, with saxophone and female shouters), as band after band has found itself scavenging pieces of the tune, ringing small changes on a song that, the performances seemed to say, was too big for them, you could hear the twentieth century itself riding the song's rails—riding them straight into the next century, where, as I write, in 2007, Bruce Springsteen is calling down the talisman, "searching for a mystery train" in a "Radio Nowhere" determined to give up no such thing. "'It takes a worried man to sing a worried song,' sang the Carter Family in the Victor studios one Saturday evening on May 24, 1930," the late Charles K. Wolfe wrote in the notes to the 1995 Carter Family reissue *Worried Man Blues*, speaking of the earliest recording of the folk ballad that Sam Phillips and Junior Parker would rewrite as "Mystery Train." "The record wouldn't be released until November of that fall—it would be one of their last really big hits for some time—and by then more than a few listeners were nodding their heads in sad appreciation of the lyrics. Out in the Midwest over a million farm families were being devastated by the drought . . . President Hoover was admitting that over four million other Americans were now unemployed, but denying that the government should offer direct aid to them. Across the South as furniture store owners wheeled Victrolas out on their sidewalks to play the new Carter Family records, families with grim faces and patched clothes gathered and listened." "It takes a worried man to sing a worried song," David Thomas sang in his tune "Enthusiastic" in 1984; in 1995 he was writing liner notes for his band Pere Ubu's *Ray Gun Suitcase*. "That's the way it goes at the lost, last outpost of American folk culture," he said, thinking back to the time he'd spent at the Days Inn on Brooks Road in Memphis, during Elvis Week '93. The delirium of the notes is more frantic, less

happily wishful, than the delirium in Thomas's voice as the record begins: "I want to hang around inside your Greyhound terminal . . . I want to ride the baggage car of your old mystery train." "No, I say to you," Thomas continued in his notes, "You be the judge—Oh, citizens, how CAN I leave the Right Here, the Right Now when clearly it's all happening RIGHT HERE RIGHT NOW? And gathering momentum—in the moment—moving in processions—in the moment—to the climactic candlelight walk on Graceland—in the moment . . ." "Is this where the train ends up? In no way—it can go in any direction, and off the tracks. In 2005 a video showing contractors working for Aegis Defence Services firing indiscriminately on cars and civilians as their huge vehicles pounded down Baghdad streets streamed over the Internet, with Elvis's "Mystery Train" pounding even harder in the background. Who understood the song? Who didn't? The train less crosses any map than leaves one in its wake, and on that map any place can disappear and reappear as readily as any other. Taking its title from the radioactive suitcase in Robert Aldrich's fantastically paranoid Cold War thriller *Kiss Me Deadly*, Pere Ubu boards a train that passes through a modern nation as if it were an ancient land, all ruin and portent, prophecy and decay. Thus the train makes the familiar strange, unseen—new. I wrote this book—in the mid-'70s, just about the time Pere Ubu was coming together in Cleveland as a dada experiment, as a punk band—out of a conviction that, in their music or in their public lives, a few blues and rock 'n' roll performers had at once drawn upon and transfigured certain bedrock, ineradicable strains of American experience and identity. The blues singer Robert Johnson died in 1938, Elvis Presley died in 1977, the medicine-show artist Harmonica Frank died in 1984, the careers of the Band and Sly and the Family Stone effectively ended soon after this book was published, with only the discomfiting Randy Newman pressing on—but the premise of the book remains the same. Few if any performers have carried it forward more completely than Pere Ubu, even if their music is far less at home in a romantic America, in the spiritualist historiscapes of Thomas Hart Benton, than in some Midwestern downtown so commonplace it can't even hold a name, in Edward Kienholz's seedy hotel rooms and rotting boarding houses, where chances are nothing will happen and anything can. "It was chance that we stopped at the Days Inn, Brooks Road," Thomas concluded in his *Ray Gun Suitcase* notes, with the Greyhound terminal and the mystery train still ready for him when he's ready to get out of town. "The Elvis people last night were saying, 'No it was fate.' But I know it was an accident. Like driving down a backroad out in the country and going through a ghost town and you think, 'This is the way it used to be,' and you never forget the sight because it's a perfectly shaped moment in time and space and like a vision of the distant future that will never be and you know it as you dream it, and you think, 'We can renovate one of these old store fronts and move out here,' and, of course, you know you never will but the vision has power because it answers a need. Some people find what they need in the darkness. Some people are transfixed by light. We checked in and we'll check out." • • • In this edition, the main text is little changed from what it was when the book was first published, in 1975. The "Notes and Discographies" section that follows has continued to grow; it has been completely revised and rewritten, with the expanding and contracting arcs of each performer's career followed as closely as I could manage. I have the chance, too, to thank some people who were not involved with this book when it first appeared, but who have helped keep it before the public: at the Wendy Weil Agency, Emma Patterson and Emily Forland; at the David Higham Agency, Anthony Goff and Georgia Glover; at La Nouvelle Agence, Mary Kling; at Paul & Peter Fritz, Peter Fritz and Christian Dittus; in Japan, over nearly thirty years, the infinitely resourceful Toru Mitsui; at Plume, Emily Haynes and Nadia Kashper; at Penguin in the U.K., Tony Lacey and Rosie Glaisher; at Rowohlt, Nikolas Hansen and Klaus Humann; at Rogner & Bernhard, Klaas Jarchow, Birgit Politycki, and Antje Landshoff; at Ullstein, Dorle Maravilla; at Nijgh & Van Ditmar, Vic van der Reijt; at Editions Allia, Gérard Berréby and François Escaig; Eric Vigne at Folio; at Faber and Faber, Lee Brackstone; and going back through many projects and almost as many publishers, Jon Riley. I thank as well Fritz Schneider, a fine translator, a great correspondent, and a shaming fact-checker; Chuck Death and Colin B. Morton; John Rockwell; Cecil Brown; John Bakke; and the late Ray Johnson. Along with many others they helped make the good luck I've had. *Berkeley, August 7, 2007*

PROLOGUE Our story begins just after midnight, not so long ago. *The Dick Cavett Show* is in full swing. Seated on Cavett's left is John Simon, the New York Critic. On Cavett's right, in order of distance

from him, are Little Richard, Rock 'n' Roll Singer and Weirdo; Rita Moreno, Actress; and Erich Segal, Yale Professor of Classics and Author of *Love Story*. Miss Moreno and Mr. Segal adored *Love Story*. Mr. Simon did not. Little Richard has not read it. Cavett is finishing a commercial. Mr. Simon is mentally rehearsing his opening thrust against Mr. Segal, who is very nervous. Miss Moreno seems to be falling asleep. Little Richard is looking for an opening. Mr. Simon has attacked Mr. Segal. Mr. Segal attempts a reply but he is too nervous to be coherent. Mr. Simon attacks a second time. Little Richard is about to jump out of his seat and jam his face in front of the camera but Mr. Simon beats him out. He attacks Mr. Segal again. "NEGATIVE! NEGATIVE NEGATIVE NEGATIVE!" screams Mr. Segal. He and Simon are debating a fine point in the history of Greek tragedy, to which Mr. Simon has compared *Love Story* unfavorably. "Neg-a-tive," muses Mr. Simon. "Does that mean 'no'?" Mr. Segal attempts, unsuccessfully, to ignore Mr. Simon's contempt for his odd patois, and claims that the critics were wrong about Aeschylus. He implies that Simon would have walked out on the *Oresteia*. Backed by the audience, which sounds like a Philadelphia baseball crowd that has somehow mistaken Mr. Simon for Richie Allen, Segal presses his advantage. Little Richard sits back in his chair, momentarily intimidated. "MILLIONS OF PEOPLE WERE DEEPLY MOVED by my book," cries Segal, forgetting to sit up straight and slumping in his chair until his body is near parallel with the floor, "AND IF ALL THOSE PEOPLE LIKED IT—" (Segal's voice has now achieved a curious tremolo) "I *MUST BE DOING SOMETHING RIGHT!*" The effort has exhausted Segal, and as he takes a deep breath Little Richard begins to rise from his seat. Again, Simon is too fast for him. Simon attempts to make Segal understand that he is amazed that anyone, especially Segal, takes this trash to be anything more than, well, trash. "I have read it and reread it many times," counters Segal with great honesty. "I am always moved." "Mr. Segal," says Simon, having confused the bull with his cape and now moving in for the kill, "you had the choice of acting the knave or the fool. You have chosen the latter." Segal is stunned. Cavett is stunned. He calls for a commercial. Little Richard considers the situation. The battle resumes. Segal has now slumped even lower in his chair, if that is possible, and seems to be arguing with the ceiling. "You're only a critic," he says as if to Simon. "What have *you* ever written? What do you know about art? Never in the history of art . . ." "WHY, NEVER IN THE HISTORY!" The time has come. Little Richard makes his move. Leaping from his seat, he takes the floor, arms waving, hair coming undone, eyes wild, mouth working. He advances on Segal, Cavett, and Simon, who cringe as one man. The camera cuts to a close-up of Segal, who looks miserable, then to Simon, who is attempting to compose the sort of bemused expression he would have if, say, someone were to defecate on the floor. Little Richard is audible off-camera, and then his face quickly fills the screen. "WHY, YES, IN THE WHOLE HISTORY OF AAAART! THAT'S RIGHT! SHUT UP! SHUT UP! WHAT DO YOU KNOW, MR. CRITIC? WHY, WHEN THE CREEDENCE CLEARWATER PUT OUT WITH THEIR 'TRAVELIN' BAND' EVERYBODY SAY WHEEE-OOO BUT I KNOW IT CAUSE THEY ONLY DOING 'LONG TALL SALLY', JUST LIKE THE BEATLES AND THE STONES AND TOM JONES AND ELVIS—I AM ALL OF IT, LITTLE RICHARD HIMSELF, VERY TRULY THE GREATEST, THE HANDSOMEST, AND NOW TO YOU (to Segal, who now appears to be *on* the floor) and to you (to Simon, who looks to Cavett as if to say, really old man, this *has* been fun, but this, *ah, fellow* is becoming a bit much, perhaps a commercial is in order?), I HAVE WRITTEN A BOOK, MYSELF, I AM A WRITER, I HAVE WRITTEN A BOOK AND IT'S CALLED—" "HE GOT WHAT HE WANTED BUT HE LOST WHAT HE HAD"! THAT'S IT! SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT UP! HE GOT WHAT HE WANTED BUT HE LOST WHAT HE HAD! THE STORY OF MY LIFE. CAN YOU DIG IT? THAT'S MY BOY LITTLE RICHARD, SURE IS. OO MAH SOUL!" Little Richard flies back to his chair and slams down into it. "WHEEEEE-OO! OOO MAH SOUL! OO mah soul . . ." Little Richard sits with the arbiters of taste, oblivious to their bitter stares, savoring his moment. He is Little Richard. Who are they? Who will remember Erich Segal, John Simon, Dick Cavett? Who will care? Ah, but Little Richard, Little Richard *himself!* There is a man who matters. He knows how to rock. A phrase that Little Richard snatched off Erich Segal stays in my mind: "Never in the history—in the *whole history of art* . . ." And that was it. 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 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. He is the rock, the jive bomber, the savant. "Tutti Frutti" was his first hit, breaking off the radio in 1955 to shuffle the bland expectations of white youth; fifteen years later the Weirdo on the *Cavett Show* reached back for whatever he had left and busted up an argument about the meaning of art with a spirit that recalled the absurd promise of his glory days. "I HAVE WRITTEN A BOOK, MYSELF, AND IT'S CALLED . . ." Listening now to Little Richard, to Elvis, to Jerry Lee Lewis, the Monotones, the Drifters, Chuck Berry, and dozens of others, I feel a sense of awe at how fine their music was. I can only marvel at their arrogance, their humor, their delight. They were so sure of themselves. They sang as if they knew they were destined not only to survive 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. ••• Well, then, this is a book about rock 'n' roll—some of it—and America. It is not a history, or a purely musical analysis, or a set of personality profiles. It is an attempt to broaden the context in which the music is heard; to deal with rock 'n' roll not as youth culture, or counterculture, but simply as American culture. The performers that I have written about appeal to me partly because they are more ambitious and because they take more risks than most. They risk artistic disaster (in rock terms, pretentiousness), or the alienation of an audience that can be soothed far more easily than it can be provoked; their ambitions have a good deal to do with Robbie Robertson's statement of his ambitions for the Band: "Music should never be harmless." What attracts me even more to the Band, Sly Stone, Randy Newman, and Elvis, is that I think these men tend to see themselves as symbolic Americans; I think their music is an attempt to live up to that role. Their records—the Band's *Big Pink*, Sly's *There's a riot goin' on*, a few of Randy Newman's tunes, Elvis Presley's very first Tennessee singles—dramatize a sense of what it is to be an American; what it means, what it's worth, what the stakes of life in America might be. This book, then, is an exploration of a few artists, all of whom seem to me to have found their own voices; it is rooted in the idea that these artists can illuminate those American questions and that the questions can add resonance to their work. The two men whose tales begin the book—white country hokum singer Harmonica Frank and black Mississippi blues singer Robert Johnson—came and went before the words "rock 'n' roll" had any cultural meaning at all. Both men represent traditions crucial to rock 'n' roll, and both are unique. They worked at the frontiers of the music, and they can give us an idea of what the country has to give the music to work with—a sense of how far the music can go. Harmonica Frank sang with a simple joy and a fool's pride; he caught a spirit the earliest rock 'n' roll mastered effortlessly, a mood the music is always losing and trying to win back. Robert Johnson was very different. He was a brooding man who did his work on the darker side of American life; his songs deal with terrors and fears that few American artists have ever expressed so directly. In this book, Frank and Johnson figure as metaphors more than musical influences. Their chapters are meant to form a backdrop against which the later chapters can take shape, a framework for the images the other artists have made. The Band, Sly Stone, Randy Newman, and Elvis Presley share unique musical and public personalities, enough ambition to make even their failures interesting, and a lack of critical commentary extensive or committed enough to do their work justice. In their music and in their careers, they share a range and a depth that seem to crystalize naturally in visions and versions of America: its possibilities, limits, openings, traps. Their stories are hardly the whole story, but they can tell us how much the story matters. That is what this book is about. . . . to be an American (unlike being English or French or whatever) is precisely to *imagine* a destiny rather than to inherit one; since we have always been, insofar as we are Americans at all, inhabitants of myth rather than history . . . LESLIE FIEDLER, "Cross the Border, Close the Gap" It's easy to forget how young this country is; how little distance really separates us from the beginnings of the myths, like that of Lincoln, that still haunt the national imagination. It's easy to forget how much remains to be settled. Since roots are sought out and seized as well as simply accepted, cultural history is never a straight line; along with the artists we care about we fill in the gaps ourselves. When we do, we reclaim, rework, or invent America,



or a piece of it, all over again. We make choices (or are caught by the choices others have made) about what is worth keeping and what isn't, trying to create a world where we feel alive, risky, ambitious, and free (or merely safe), dispensing with the rest of the American reality if we can. We make the oldest stories new when we succeed, and we are trapped by the old stories when we fail. That is as close as I can come to a simple description of what I think the performers in this book have done—but of course what they have done is more complex than that. In the work of each performer there is an attempt to create oneself, to make a new man out of what is inherited and what is imagined; each individual attempt implies an ideal community, never easy to define, where the new man would be at home, where his work could communicate easily and deeply, where the members of that ideal community would speak as clearly to the artist as he does to them. The audiences that gather around rock 'n' rollers are as close to that ideal community as anyone gets. The real drama of a performer's career comes when the ideal that one can hear in the music and the audience that the artist really attracts begin to affect each other. No artist can predict, let alone control, what an audience will make of his images; yet no rock 'n' roller can exist without a relationship with an audience, whether it is the imaginary audience one begins with, or the all-too-real confusion of the audience one wins. 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. That means their ideal images must change as their understanding grows. One may find horror where one expected only pleasure; one may find that the truth one told has become a lie. If the audience demands only more of what it has already accepted, the artist has a choice. He can move on, and perhaps cut himself off from his audience; if he does, his work will lose all the vitality and strength it had when he knew it mattered to other people. Or the artist can accept the audience's image of himself, pretend that his audience is his shadowy ideal, and lose himself in his audience. Then he will only be able to confirm; he will never be able to create. The most interesting rock 'n' rollers sometimes go to these extremes; most don't, because these are contradictions they struggle with more than resolve. The tension between community and self-reliance; between distance from one's audience and affection for it; between the shared experience of popular culture and the special talents of artists who both draw on that shared experience and change it—these things are what make rock 'n' roll at its best a democratic art, at least in the American meaning of the word democracy. I think that is true because our democracy is nothing if not a contradiction: the creed of every man and woman for themselves, and thus the loneliness of separation, and thus the yearning for harmony, and for community. The performers in this book, in their different ways, all trace that line. If they are in touch with their audiences and with the images of community their songs hint at, rock 'n' rollers get to see their myths and parables in action, and ultimately they may even find out what they are worth. When the story is a long one—a career—they find the story coming back to them in pieces, which of course is how it was received. Here is where a critic might count. Putting the pieces together, trying to understand what is novel and adventurous, what is enervated and complacent, can give us an idea of how much room there is in this musical culture, and in American culture—an idea of what a singer and a band can do with a set of songs mixed into the uncertainty that is the pop audience. Looking back into the corners, we might discover whose America we are living in at any moment, and where it came from. With luck, we might even touch that spirit of place Americans have always sought, and in the seeking have created.

ancestors  
HARMONICA FRANK

1951 In 1951 Sam Phillips was the owner of a shoestring operation that cut records by young black blues singers in Memphis, Tennessee. A few years later he would shape the careers of such founding rockers as Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Roy Orbison, and Jerry Lee Lewis; today, he counts his money. But at least one writer has stepped forward to call him "America's Real Uncle Sam," a title he might like. Phillips was raised on a plantation in Alabama; when he was a little boy an old black man named Uncle Silas Payne would take him aside and sing him the blues, playing Jim to Sam's Huck. In the fifties, bored by the music business and itching for something new, it would be quite natural for Phillips to look for someone to complete a role that was sketched out in his own past. "If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel," he was saying in those days (as Huck Finn met the Riverboat Gambler), "I could make a billion dollars."

Harmonica Frank Floyd, a white man in his early forties, who held a harmonica in one side of his mouth and sang out of the other, was Sam Phillips's first try. Harmonica Frank was never famous. Born in 1908 in Toccopola, Mississippi, a short ways from Elvis Presley's birthplace in Tupelo, he was a drifter, who left home at the age of fourteen and bummed his way around the country for the next forty years, a man who came up with his own idea of the country's music, black and white. In 1973, an old man, Frank wrote: "Just one thang I would love to say the first time I played a rock and roll tune on my oath I had never heard no one else do that type therefore I am almost sure I am the originator of rock and roll regardless of what you may have heard at the time I could not read or write music but now I can I am truly a hillbilly from the state of miss but have traveled all over played in old time vaudeville shows medicine shows on the streets barber shops court house lawns auctions sales woodman halls radios television you name it I've played it comedy fire eaters with carnivals tricks or magic so at least I'm an old showman picked cotton picked fruit dug mussel shells in Ark pan some gold in calif one time on KELW in Hollywood with Bustie steel and log cabin wranglers . . . . You see I played rock and roll before I ever heard of elvis presley I saw him in memphis before he ever made a record with sam phillips on north main in memphis tennessee . . ."\*Frank cut many sides in 1951 for Phillips, who leased a few to Chess, the Chicago blues label. They didn't sell. Phillips recorded two more tunes and put them out as a single on his own Sun label in 1954, just before Elvis Presley's first record was released, but the disc went nowhere. Harmonica Frank's music was a joke, mostly, because there was a little more money for a street-singer who could make people laugh. 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. "Old Sam Phillips only had one thing to tell me," Harmonica Frank says today. "Said it over and over. 'Gimme something different. Gimme something unique.'" In his own way Harmonica Frank was as much a maniac as Little Richard. He sounded like a drunken clown who's seen it all, remembers about half of that, and makes the rest up. He put together a style of country rock that did not really find an audience until years later, when Bob Dylan caught the same spirit and much of the sound with "Mixed-Up Confusion," his first single, a lot of the *Freewheelin'* album, and his "I Shall Be Free" songs. In a broader sense Frank can be heard every time a rocker's secret smile breaks open: when Randy Newman sings from the bottom of a bottle, or when Levon Helm gurgles "Hee, hee!" in the middle of "Up on Cripple Creek," the Band's sexiest song. Harmonica Frank was perhaps the first of the rock 'n' roll vocal contortionists—like Buddy Holly, Clarence "Frogman" Henry, and Bob Dylan—whose mission in life seemed to be the willful destruction of the mainstream tradition of popular singing and the smooth and self-assured way of life it was made to represent. Frank screeched, he bellowed, croaked, cackled, and moaned, carrying his songs and never mind about the tune. He was a noisemaker. What matters about Frank is the sense of freedom he brought to his music: a good-natured contempt for conventional patterns of life combined with a genius for transforming all that was smug and polite into absurdity. The result was a music of staggering weirdness, dimly anchored by the fatalism of the blues and powered by the pure delight of what was soon to be called rock 'n' roll. Frank wasn't sexy, like the rockabilly singers who were to make Sam Phillips's fortune; he was more like a dirty old man. He was ribald, and he had a flair. "I am," he growled in one of his numbers, "a howling tomcat." His only Sun single was his best—"The Great Medical Menagerist," a wonderful talking blues, backed by "Rockin' Chair Daddy," a first-rate piece of nonsense that really does set the stage for rock 'n' roll. Here he reaches for falsettos, talks to himself, corrects himself, roaring into town *Rock to Memphis, dance on Main Up stepped a lady and asked my name Rockin' chair daddy dont have to work I told her my name was on the tail of my shirt!* and pounding away to the finish: "Never been to college, never been to school, if you want some rockin' I'm a rockin' fool!" "The Great Medical Menagerist" is simply a triumph. Probably a miniature autobiography, it is a catalogue of all the prim and decent people Frank made asses of, and of the jobs his fun cost him. The first lines have the perfection of myth: *Ladies and gentlemens, cough white dodgers and little rabbit twisters, step right around closely, tell ya all about a wonderful medicine show I useta work with . . .* "We have Doctor Donicker here with us," he drawls, too sly to believe, "the Great Medical Menagerist . . . of the world." That

little pause charges the performance with wit and even menace; Frank sings with a squeak. Frank barely lets on that the menagerie is none other than Doctor Donicker's audience, which is to say, his. His most compelling record was "Goin' Away Walkin'," one of the sides on Chess. It is a classic country blues, and a kind of final statement. If the form is blues, though, the spirit and the sound come from the high, lonely whine of the white mountain music that goes back to the Revolution. The notes seem to hang in the air like ghosts; the song is bitter, unrepentant, and free. "I ain't gonna get married," Frank Floyd sings. "I ain't gonna settle down. I'm gonna walk this highway, till my whiskers drags the ground." That was his promise, and he kept it. Of all the characters who populate this book, only Harmonica Frank did more than keep the legend of Huckleberry Finn alive—he lived it out. He showed up, made his records, and lit out for the territory, banging his guitar and blowing his harp, dodging Greyhounds and working the fields, setting himself free from an oppression he never bothered to define. His humor, his cutting edge, came like Twain's from that part of the American imagination that has always sneered at the limits imposed by manners; the strain that produced both obscenity and the tall tale, two forms of a secret revolt against the Puritans who founded the country and against the authority of their ghosts. 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. And this revolt is powerful stuff, after all. How long would Ahab have lasted if he'd been up against a howling weirdo like Harmonica Frank instead of a dumb Christian like Starbuck? A DIGRESSION THAT MAY PROVE WORTHWHILE TO THOSE READERS WHO DO NOT SKIP IT Our latest Ahab almost had it both ways, because there was a lot of Harmonica Frank in Lyndon B. Johnson, once President of All the People; one of America's secrets is that the dreams of Huck and Ahab are not always very far apart. Both of them embody an impulse to freedom, an escape from restraints and authority that sometimes seems like the only really American story there is. That one figure is passive and benign, the other aggressive and in the end malignant; the one full of humor and regret, and the other cold and determined never to look back; the one as unsure of his own authority as he is of anyone else's, the other fleeing authority only to replace it with his own—all this hides the common bond between the two characters, and suggests how strong would be a figure who could put the two together. For all that is different about Ahab and Huck Finn, they are two American heroes who say, yes, they will go to hell if they have to. The obsessiveness and the wish for peace of mind that most easily set Ahab and Huck off from each other—on the surface, anyway—are cornerstones of how rock 'n' roll works and what it is for, but we will find the two spirits together more often than not. LBJ had his year on the road, quitting college and hobnobbing his way out to California, digging ditches and washing dishes, finally coming home after having gone far enough to say, years later, that any member of his generation that hadn't been a communist or a dropout wasn't worth a damn. Deeply contemptuous of Eastern gentility (and attracted by it too), Johnson coupled a devastating talent for obscenity that no Easterner could match with an image of himself as a latter-day Pecos Bill; the American, Johnson might have been telling us, is alive only as long as he is uncivilized. Thus Johnson carefully received his guests on the toilet—the "donicker"—because it threw them off guard. Bob Dylan was pouting that even the President of the Yew-Nited States had to stand naked, but LBJ was way ahead of him: he forced heads of state to strip for a swim and got the upper hand. He showed his scar and the *New York Review of Books* never forgave him. He told them his name was on the tail of his shirt. But Johnson's best defense was his verbal obscenity, that side of Huck that Twain left out of the book and kept for himself. Norman Mailer was the only one of Johnson's adversaries who understood this side of the man, and so he took LBJ on with *Why Are We in Vietnam?* It was the most gloriously obscene book Mailer could write, a book whose hero was in fact a Texas Huck on his way to becoming a Texas Ahab, changing fast from a reckless kid into a killer. The job, Mailer knew, was to find the sources of Johnson's power—not merely his political power, but his personal strength. That meant Mailer had to understand the language LBJ really spoke, and then beat him at his own game. And so the obscenity of Mailer's book, at first so funny, so full of honest rebellion, becomes more and more cruel, until finally it is part and parcel with brutality, and murder. But Mailer didn't win the fight with Lyndon Johnson. The richest, riskiest passages of his book cannot compare with the off-hand remark Johnson made when he was asked why he had not told the people

more about Vietnam: "If you have a mother-in-law with only one eye, and that eye is in the middle of her forehead, you don't keep her in the living room."\*If anything could redeem the arrogant obsessions of the man who introduced us to the obscenity of the burnt baby, it was a style of personal obscenity. This allowed Johnson to transcend, for a time, the self-righteousness (and righteousness pure and simple) of those who vilified him with every obscenity at *their* command. After all, compared to the crowds who hounded him with their mechanical chants, Lyndon Johnson was a poet. Perhaps, if the political language of America was as free as its secret language, LBJ could have made King Shit a title to be reckoned with. Perhaps, in the presidential election of our dreams, he could have beaten even Lenny Bruce. And maybe he would have kept Harmonica Frank on retainer, down there on the LBJ ranch. ••• Harmonica Frank's music, like LBJ's language, has a spirit that occasionally emerges to redeem those impulses in American life that are cold, bitter, and corrupt—just as that book about a river and a raft was meant to displace Mark Twain's dread of what, hard into the Gilded Age, the country seemed eager to believe it was all about. The idea that the two Americas are separable, I suppose, is the heart of our romanticism. A good part of the impact of rock 'n' roll had to do with its anachronistic essence, the way it seemed to come out of nowhere—the big surprise that trivialized the events that governed daily life. Rock 'n' roll gave the kids who had seen no alternative but to submit to those events a little room to move. Any musicologist, neatly tracing the development of the music, can tell us that rock 'n' roll did not come out of nowhere. But it sounded as if it did. It was one of those great twists of history that no one anticipated—no one, that is, except a few men like Sam Phillips, who were looking for it, looking for something to break the boredom they felt when they turned on the radio. Harmonica Frank was part of Phillips's quest for the weird, and weird it had to be if it was to crack the ice that was seeping into Memphis in 1951. When Phillips looked at his town he must have seen the thousands of good country people, the people who worked hard and prayed harder, who had migrated to Memphis after World War II. They wanted a home that was safe, orderly, and respectable, and as far as the old wide-open riverboat town was concerned, they were perfectly satisfied to visit it in a museum. There was a sense that life was set in a pattern; winding down. "It seemed to me that Negroes were the only ones that had any freshness left in their music," Phillips has said of those days when he was looking for a white man. Maybe it was a white man who sounded like a cross between a barnyard and a minstrel show—Harmonica Frank, say; maybe a cocky kid, child of those new Memphians, who sang a new kind of blues. Certainly it had to be someone who toyed with race, the deepest source of limits in the South. The alternative for Phillips, as a record producer, was the white country music of the Carter Family, Jimmie Rodgers, Hank Williams, Patsy Cline. But leaving aside the fact that Phillips was not likely to make a billion dollars on it, there was a problem with that music. It so perfectly expressed the acceptance and fatalism of its audience of poor and striving whites, blending in with their way of life and endlessly reinforcing it, that the music brought all it had to say to the surface, told no secrets, and had no use for novelty. It was conservative in an almost tragic sense, because it carried no hope of change, only respite. By the early fifties this music was all limits. Country music was entertainment that made people feel better, as all true American folk music is before it is anything else, but at its deepest country music was a way of holding on to the values that were jeopardized by a changing postwar America. Country music lacked the confidence to break things open because it was not even sure it could find space to breathe. Hank Williams was eloquent, but his eloquence could not set him free from the life he sang about; he died proving it, overdosing in the back of a car, on his way to one more show. Phillips had not even worked out the sound he wanted; it was music toward which he was only groping, and most important, ready to accept. Frank Floyd, a white man with some life in him, whose music wasn't exactly blues but was too strange to peddle as anything else, couldn't have sounded less like Hank Williams (though he might have picked up some of his twinkle from Jimmie Rodgers, whom he met on the road years before). Maybe Frank's music was something that would make people take notice if they heard him on the radio, which they rarely did; whatever it was, it was music to turn things around a bit—a clue to what Phillips was looking for, to what made rock 'n' roll happen and to what keeps it alive. What Phillips was looking for was something that didn't fit, that didn't make sense out of or reflect American life as everyone seemed to understand it, but which made it beside the point, confused things, and affirmed

something else. What? The fact that there *was* something else. What finally arrived was a music of racial confusion, Huck and Jim giving America's aunt the slip, no dead-end "white Negroes" but something new, men like Harmonica Frank and Elvis Presley, whose styles revealed possibilities of American life that were hardly visible anywhere else with an intensity and delight that had no parallel at all. The music unleashed by Elvis, Little Richard, and the rest of the early rockers was a thrill, and it was also unnerving. I recall hearing Little Richard's "Rip It Up" for the first time, loving the sound but catching the line, "Fool about mah money dont try to save," and thinking, well, that *is* foolish. Had Harmonica Frank's "Rockin' Chair Daddy" been on my radio, I would have been appalled that anyone could skip college *and be proud of it*. I know that when Elvis was drafted I felt a great relief, because he made demands on me. It was close to what I felt when the politics of the sixties faded—an ambivalent feeling of cowardice and safety. I loved his records—"Hound Dog" was the first I ever owned; "All Shook Up" the first I bought; and "(You're So Square) Baby I Don't Care" (the title may sum up this dilemma) my first private treasure, a record I loved that no one else seemed to like. But I didn't like—that is, didn't understand—what the Big E did to the girls I went to school with or the way he looked on the cover of his first album, demented, tongue hanging down his chest, lost in some ecstasy completely foreign to me. What was this? Harmonica Frank wasn't the source of this confused delight, not in terms of musicology anyway, because almost no one ever heard him. But he was in on it: he helped Sam Phillips open the doors the King walked through. More than that, he was a harbinger of a certain American spirit that never disappears no matter how smooth things get. ROBERT JOHNSON

1938 *When the train Left the station It had two lights on behind When the train left the station It had two lights on behind Well, the blue light was my blues And the red light was my mind. All my love's In vain.* ROBERT JOHNSON, "Love in Vain" *You know how it feels—you understand What it is to be a stranger, in this unfriendly land.* BOBBY "BLUE" BLAND, "Lead Me On" \*It may be that the most interesting American struggle is the struggle to set oneself free from the limits one is born to, and then to learn something of the value of those limits. But on the surface, America takes its energy from the pursuit of happiness; from "a love of physical gratification, the notion of bettering one's condition, the excitement of competition, the charm of anticipated success" (Tocqueville's words); from a memory of open spaces and a belief in open possibilities; from the conviction that you *can* always get what you want, and that even if you can't, you deserve it anyway. Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that had flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered to the last and greatest of human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder. No one ever captured the promise of American life more beautifully than Fitzgerald did in that passage. That sense of America is expressed so completely—by billboards, by our movies, by Chuck Berry's refusal to put the slightest irony into "Back in the U.S.A.," by the way we try to live our lives—that we hardly know how to talk about the resentment and fear that lie beneath the promise. To be an American is to feel the promise as a birthright, and to feel alone and haunted when the promise fails. No failure in America, whether of love or money, is ever simple; it is always a kind of betrayal, of a mass of shadowy, shared hopes. Within that failure is a very different America; it is an America of desolation, desolate because it is felt to be out of place, and it is here that Robert Johnson looked for his images and found them. Robert Johnson was a Mississippi country blues singer and guitarist, born in 1911; he was murdered, by a jealous husband, in 1938. He died in a haze: if some remember that he was stabbed, others say he was poisoned; that he died on his hands and knees, barking like a dog; that his death "had something to do with the black arts." Nearly forty years after his death, Johnson remains the most emotionally committed of all blues singers; for all the distance of his time and place, Johnson's music draws a natural response from many who outwardly could not be more different from him. He sang about the price he had to pay for promises he tried, and failed, to keep; I think the power of his music comes in part from

Johnson's ability to shape the loneliness and chaos of his betrayal, or ours. Listening to Johnson's songs, one almost feels at home in that desolate America; one feels able to take some strength from it, right along with the promises we could not give up if we wanted to. Like Charley Patton, Tommy Johnson, Son House, or Skip James—the men who worked out the country blues form in the late teens and twenties—Robert Johnson sang an intense, dramatic music, accompanied only by his guitar. He put down twenty-nine of his songs for the old Vocalion label in 1936 and 1937; his songs lasted, in the work of other bluesmen, long after Johnson was dead, and in the early sixties Johnson's original versions began to appear on albums. Today Johnson's presence can be felt behind many of the best modern guitar players; in a more subtle and vital way, his presence can be felt behind many of our best singers. And a good musical case can be made for Johnson as the first rock 'n' roller of all. His music had a vibrancy and a rhythmic excitement that was new to the country blues. On some tunes—"Walking Blues," "Crossroads Blues," "If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day"—Johnson sounds like a complete rock 'n' roll band, as full as Elvis's first combo or the group Bob Dylan put together for *the John Wesley Harding* sessions, and tougher than either. Johnson's way of looking at things, though, is just beginning to emerge. I have no stylistic arguments to make about Johnson's influence on the other performers in this book, but I do have a symbolic argument. It seems to me that just as they all have a bit of Harmonica Frank in their souls, the artistic ambitions of the Band, Sly Stone, and Randy Newman can at times be seen as attempts to go part of the way into the America Robert Johnson made his own; that since his journey into that America knew few limits, his music can help us understand the limits of other artists and the risks they take when they try to break through them. And as for Elvis Presley—well, his first music might be seen as a proud attempt to escape Johnson's America altogether. • • • Johnson's vision was of a world without salvation, redemption, or rest; it was a vision he resisted, laughed at, to which he gave himself over, but most of all it was a vision he pursued. He walked his road like a failed, orphaned Puritan, looking for women and a good night, but never convinced, whether he found such things or not, that they were really what he wanted, and so framing his tales with old echoes of sin and damnation. There were demons in his songs—blues that walked like a man, the devil, or the two in league with each other—and Johnson was often on good terms with them; his greatest fear seems to have been that his desires were so extreme that he could satisfy them only by becoming a kind of demon himself. When he sings, so slowly, in "Me and the Devil Blues," *Early this morning When you knocked upon my door Early this morning When you knocked upon my door I said, Hello, Satan I believe it's time, to go the only memory in American art that speaks with the same eerie resignation is that moment when Ahab goes over to the devil-worshipping Parsees he kept stowed away in the hold of the Pequod. That is a remarkable image, but Johnson's images were simply part of daily life. Me and the devil, was walking side by side Oooo, me and the devil, was walking side by side I'm going to beat my woman, until I get satisfied* It may seem strange that in the black country South of the twenties and thirties, where the leap to grace of gospel music was at the heart of the community, the blues singers, in a twisted way, were the real Puritans. These men, who had to renounce the blues to be sanctified, who often sneered at the preachers in their songs, were the ones who really believed in the devil; they feared the devil most because they knew him best. They understood, far better than the preachers, why sex was man's original sin, and they sang about little else. This side of the blues did not come from Africa, but from the Puritan revival of the Great Awakening, the revival that spread across the American colonies more than two hundred years ago. It was an explosion of dread and piety that Southern whites passed onto their slaves and that blacks ultimately refashioned into their own religion. The blues singers accepted the dread but refused the piety; they sang as if their understanding of the devil was strong enough to force a belief in God out of their lives. They lived man's fear of life, and they became artists of the fear. Or perhaps that is not the truth; perhaps Robert Johnson was very different from other blues singers. For all his clear stylistic ties to Son House, Skip James, and others, there are ways in which he stands apart. Part of this is musical—it has to do with the quality of his imagery, his impulse to drama, the immediacy of his singing and guitar playing—but mostly it is Johnson's determination to go farther into the blues than anyone else, and his ability, as an artist, to get there. Anyone from Muddy Waters to Mick Jagger to Michael Jackson could put across the inspired pornography of Johnson's "Terraplane [a good, rough car of

the thirties] Blues”—*I’m gonna get deep down in this connection Keep on tangling with your wires I’m gonna get deep down in this connection Keep on tangling with your wires And when I mash down on your little starter—Then your spark gonna give me fire*—but as for “Stones in My Passway,” which was the other side of sex, no one has been fool enough to try. Few men could brag like Robert Johnson: “Stuff I got’ll bust your brains out, baby,” he sang in “Stop Breakin’ Down Blues,” “it’ll make you lose your mind.” Women crowded around him at the back country juke joints to find out if it was true, and no doubt it often was. But such tunes gave way to songs like “Phonograph Blues,” where Johnson sings, with far too much emotion it seems, about his broken record player. “What evil have I done . . . what evil has the poor girl heard.” That one line shows us how far he is trying to go. The poor girl is the phonograph, softly personified; she refuses to play Johnson’s wicked records and breaks down. With a blazing insistence, Johnson intensifies his personification, unveils his metaphors. At once, you see him struggling with his machine, and in bed with his girl. The records are his sins; the phonograph his penis. The song ends as a confession that the sins his records embody have made him impotent. What Johnson found on his road was mostly this: “. . . the sense that life is essentially a cheat and its conditions are those of defeat, and that the redeeming satisfactions are not ‘happiness and pleasure’ but the deeper satisfactions that come out of struggle.” So wrote Fitzgerald to his daughter, about what he had found in Lincoln and Shakespeare and “all great careers.” His words make good company for Stanley Booth’s: “The dedication [the blues] demands lies beyond technique; it makes being a blues player something like being a priest. Virtuosity in playing blues licks is like virtuosity in celebrating the Mass, it is empty, it means nothing. Skill is a necessity, but a true blues player’s virtue lies in his acceptance of his life, a life for which he is only partly responsible. When Bukka White sings a song he wrote during his years on Parchman Prison Farm, ‘I wonder how long, till I can change my clothes,’ he is celebrating, honestly and humbly, his life.” When acceptance and celebration mean the same thing, or when the two words must fill the same space in the mind at once, we can begin to grasp the tension and the passion of Robert Johnson’s music— because when one accepts one’s life by celebrating it, one also asks for something more. In Johnson’s blues the singer’s acceptance is profound, because he knows, and makes us see, that his celebration is also a revolt, and that the revolt will fail, because his images cannot deny the struggles they are meant to master. It is obvious that man dwells in a splendid universe, a magnificent expanse of earth and sky and heavens, which manifestly is built upon a majestic structure, maintains some mighty design, though man himself cannot grasp it. Yet for him it is not a pleasant or satisfying world. In his few moments of respite from labor or from his enemies, he dreams that this very universe might indeed be perfect, its laws operating just as now they seem to do, and yet he and it somehow be in full accord. The very ease with which he can frame this image to himself makes the reality all the more mocking . . . It is only too clear that man is not at home in this universe, and yet he is not good enough to deserve a better. PERRY MILLER, on the Puritan view of the world\* When Robert Johnson traveled through the Deep South, over to Texas and back to Memphis, into the Midwest and up to Chicago, across the border to Canada and back to Detroit to sing spirituals on the radio, to New York City (the sight of this primitive blues singer gazing up at the lights of Times Square is not only banal, it is bizarre), to the South again, he was tracing not only the miles on the road but the strength of its image. It was the ultimate American image of flight from homelessness, and he always looked back: the women he left, or who left him, chased him through the gloomy reveries of his songs, just as one of them eventually caught up. Like a good American, Johnson lived for the moment and died for the past. Sometimes the road was just the best place to be, free and friendly, a good way to put in the time. In “From Four Until Late” there is even a girl waiting at the other end. *When I leave this town, I’m gonna bid you fair, farewell When I leave this town, I’m gonna bid you fair, farewell And when I return again, You’ll have a great long story to tell.* There is the grace and bitterness of “Rambling on My Mind” (which Johnson played with his walking bass figure that was to define Chicago blues, making the song sound just like a man pushing himself down the highway, half against his will); the slow sexual menace of “Traveling Riverside Blues”; the nightmare of “Crossroads,” where Johnson is sure to be caught by whites after dark and does not know which way to run; there is always one more “strange man’s town,” one more girl, one more drink; there is the last word of “Hellhound on My Trail.” *I got to keep moving, I got to keep*

*moving Blues falling down like bail, blues falling down like bail Blues falling down like bail, blues falling down like bail And the days keep on 'minding me There's a hellhound on my trail Hellhound on my trail, hellhound on my trail* It wasn't the open road, to say the least; more like Ishmael falling in behind funeral processions, because they made him feel more alive, and on good terms with death. You could imagine what the two travelers would have to say to each other: *This is no way for a young man to act! That spirit gives us what might be Johnson's most American image, these lines from "Me and the Devil Blues"—most American because, as a good, defiant laugh at fate, they are vital not only beneath the surface of American life, but on it. They are often called in as proof of Johnson's despair, and they are part of it, but also his most satisfied lines, a proud epitaph: You may bury my body, down by the highway side Babe, I don't care where you bury my body when I'm dead and gone You may bury my body, ooooo, down by the highway side So my old evil spirit Can get a Greyhound bus, and ride.* Robert Johnson had a beautiful high voice, a tragic voice when he meant it to be. In "Walking Blues" he wakes up to find that his woman has left him without even his shoes. He is plainly in awe of this woman ("Well!" he sings to himself, "she's got Elgin movements, from her head down to her toes . . . From her head down to her toes!"); when he says the worried blues are the worst he ever had, he's still too full of admiration for that woman to make you believe him. So he will sing, with a distracted, comic determination: *Lord I—feel like blowin' my, old lonesome home Got up this morning, my little Bernice was gone Now, up this light, ooooo, my lonesome home* and then with utter grace his voice rises, almost fades away, and there is a soft moan that could echo in your heart for a long time, a melancholy too strong to step around: *Well, I got up this morning . . . all I had, was gone.* Johnson was in his mid-twenties when he sang these songs (Don Law, the great recording engineer who handled the sessions, thought of him as a teenager). Johnson didn't have the worldly dignity of Son House or Skip James. Neither House nor James ever sounds confused; they sing as men who live deeply, but within limits. In Johnson's voice, there is sometimes an element of shock—less a matter of lost innocence than of innocence willfully given up and remembered anyway. Johnson seemed to take more pure pleasure out of making music than any other Delta singer; there is rock 'n' roll fun in his guitar playing you can hear anytime you like. He was, I think, working out a whole new aesthetic that rock 'n' roll eventually completed: a loud, piercing music driven by massive rhythms and a beat so strong that involvement was effortless and automatic. Yet Johnson also had more to say than other singers. His music was half seduction, half assault, meant to drive his words home with enormous force. His technique was not only more advanced, it was deeper, because it had to be. Only his weakest songs move on an even keel; the greatest shudder and break and explode, or twist slowly around quietly shaking strings into a kind of suspension, until Johnson has created a mood so delicate and bleak one feels he cannot possibly get out of his song alive. Johnson's most distinctive performances have the tension that comes when almost everything is implied, when the worst secrets are hiding in plain talk. With "Come on in My Kitchen" Johnson plays out the sound of a cold wind on his guitar, and his voice rides it; there is a stillness in the music. The loneliness is overpowering and the feeling of desolation is absolute. The most prosaic lines take on the shape of pure terror. *When a woman gets in trouble Everybody throws her down Looking for her good friend None can be found. You better come on, in my kitchen There's going to be rain in our door.* It was songs like this one—the combination of voice, guitar, words, and the mythical authority that comes when an artist confirms his work with his life—that made Eric Clapton see Johnson's ghost, and his own, in Jimi Hendrix's death. "Eric wanted to do a Robert Johnson," one of Clapton's friends said when Hendrix died. "A few good years, and go." Johnson's music is so strong that in certain moods it can make you feel that he is giving you more than you could have bargained for—that there is a place for you in these lines of his: "She's got a mortgage on my body, a lien on my soul." It is no exaggeration to say that Johnson changed the lives of people as distant from each other as Muddy Waters, who began his career as a devoted imitator; Dion, who made his way through the terrors of his heroin habit with Johnson's songs for company; and myself. After hearing Johnson's music for the first time—listening to that blasted and somehow friendly voice, the shivery guitar, hearing a score of lines that fit as easily and memorably into each day as Dylan's had—I could listen to nothing else for months. Johnson's music changed the way the world looked to me. Over the years, what had been a fascination with a bundle of ideas and dreams from old



American novels and texts—a fascination with the foreboding and gentleness that is linked in the most interesting Americans—seemed to find a voice in Johnson’s songs. It was the intensity of his music that changed fascination into commitment and a bundle of ideas into what must serve as a point of view. But commitment is a tricky, Faustian word. When he first appeared Robert couldn’t play guitar to save his life, Son House told Pete Welding; Johnson hung out with the older bluesmen, pestering them for a chance to try his hand, and after a time he went away. It was months later, on a Saturday night, when they saw him again, still looking to be heard. They tried to put him off, but he persisted; finally, they let him play for a lull and left him alone with the tables and chairs. Outside, taking the air, House and the others heard a loud, devastating music of a brilliance and purity beyond anything in the memory of the Mississippi Delta. Johnson had nothing more to learn from *them*. “He sold his soul to the devil in exchange for learning to play like that,” House said. ••• Well, they tell a lot of stories about Robert Johnson. You could call that one superstition, or you could call it sour grapes. Thinking of voodoo and gypsy women in the back country, or of the black man who used to walk the streets of Harlem with a briefcase full of contracts and a wallet full of cash, buying up souls at \$100 a throw, you could even take it literally. If there were nothing else, the magic of Johnson’s guitar would be enough to make that last crazy interpretation credible. 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. I have the feeling, at times, that the reason Johnson has remained so elusive is that no one has been willing to take him at his word. Let us say that Johnson sought out one of the Mississippi Delta devil-men, or one of the devil-women, and tried to sell his soul in exchange for the music he heard but could not make. Let us say he did this because he wanted to attract women; because he wanted to be treated with the kind of awe that is in Son House’s voice when he speaks of Robert Johnson and the devil; because music brought him a fierce joy, made him feel alive like nothing else in the world. Or let us say that the idea of the devil gave Johnson a way of understanding the fears that overshadowed him; that even if no deal was made, no promises passing from one to another, Johnson believed that his desires and his crimes were simple proof of a consummation quite beyond his power to control; that the image of the devil appealed to Johnson when he recognized (singing, “I mistreated my baby, but I can’t see no reason why”) that his soul was not his own, and, looking at the disasters of his life and the evil of the world, drew the one conclusion as to whom it did belong. 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. Unlike gospel, blues was not a music of transcendence; its equivalent to God’s Grace was sex and love. Blues made the terrors of the world easier to endure, but blues also made those terrors more real. For a man like Johnson, the promises of the church faded; they could be remembered—as one sang church songs; perhaps even when one prayed, when one was too scared not to—but those promises could not be lived. Once past some unmarked border, one could not go back. The weight of Johnson’s blues was strong enough to make salvation a joke; the best he could do was cry for its beautiful lie. “You run without moving from a terror in which you cannot believe,” William Faulkner wrote in one of his books about the landscape he shared with Robert Johnson, just about the time Johnson was making his first records, “toward a safety in which you have no faith.” We comfort ourselves that we do not believe in the devil, but we run anyway; we run from and straight into the satanic images that press against the surface of American life. I think of Robert Mitchum, the mad preacher in *Night of the Hunter*, with LOVE tattooed between the knuckles of his right hand, HATE tattooed between the knuckles of his left—and he seems, again, like the legacy of the men who began the American experience as a struggle between God and the devil, the legacy of a Puritan weirdness, something that those who came after have been left to live out. The dreams and fears of the Puritans, those gloomy old men, are at the source of our attempts to make sense out of the contradictions between the American idea of paradise and the doomed facts of our history; they emerge when “solving problems” is not good enough or even the point, when the hardest task is not to denounce evil, but to see it. Unlike Fitzgerald’s Dutch sailors, the Puritans did not take their dreams from the land; they brought them along. They meant to build a community of piety and harmony, what their leader, John Winthrop, called “a city on a hill”—an idea, in its many forms, that we have never gotten over, nothing less than America as the light of the world.

They had a driving need to go to extremes, as if they could master God and the devil if only they could think hard enough; that, and a profound inability to make peace with the world as they found it. They failed their dreams, and their community shattered. “This land,” Winthrop wrote before he died, “grows weary of her inhabitants.” The Puritans came here with a Utopian vision they could not maintain; their idea was to do God’s work, and they knew that if they failed, it would mean that their work had been the devil’s. As they panicked at their failures, the devil was all they saw. Their witch trials were a decadent version of their America—shlock, as it were, but their biggest hit. Their initial attempts to shape America, and their failures, set the devil loose in the land—as a symbol of uncontrollable malevolence, of betrayal, of disaster, of punishment. Just as the Puritans’ failures and compromises anticipated our own, there is something in us that responds, not always quite consciously, to the original image of American failure—to the terror that image can speak for. If the presence of that image has been felt from the Puritans’ day to ours, it is, perhaps, because that image is a way of getting to the idea of an American curse. The image of the devil is a way of comprehending the distance between Fitzgerald’s shining image of American possibility and his verdict on its result; it is a way of touching the sense (there in Fitzgerald’s beautiful image of America as “an aesthetic contemplation [man] neither understood nor desired”) that America is a trap: that its promises and dreams, all mixed up as love and politics and landscape, are too much to live up to and too much to escape. It is as if to be an American means to ask for too much—not even knowing one is asking for too much—and to trade away one’s life to get it, whatever it is; as if this is what makes America special, vital, murderous, and noble. The Puritan devil endures as a face on the betrayal of the promises we mean to keep; the Puritan commitment to extremes, the willingness to live in a world where the claims of God and the devil are truly at odds, has lasted as a means to comprehend the depths of the promise and the failure alike. This world may have survived most completely in the tension between the blues and the black church. Robert Johnson inherited this world, and, as a black blues singer, he made a new kind of music out of it. The image of the devil was played out within the matrix of Johnson’s struggle with women, and with himself. It was a drama of sex, shot through with acts of violence and tenderness; with desires that no one could satisfy; with crimes that could not be explained; with punishments that could not be escaped. The most acute Americans, in the steps of the old Puritans, have been suspicious, probing people, looking for signs of evil and grace, of salvation and damnation, behind every natural fact. Robert Johnson lived with this kind of intensity, and he asked old questions: What is our place in the world? Why are we cursed with the power to want more than we can have? What separates men and women from each other? Why must we suffer guilt not only for our sins, but for the failure of our best hopes? This is a state of mind that gives no rest at all. Even if you have sold your soul to the devil, you cannot rest with him; you have to keep looking, because there is never any end to the price you have to pay, nor any certainty as to the form that price will take. Every event thus becomes charged with meaning, but the meaning is never complete. The moments of perfect pleasure in Johnson’s songs, and the beauty of those songs, remind one that it is not the simple presence of evil that is unbearable; what is unbearable is the impossibility of reconciling the facts of evil with the beauty of the world. This shadow America comes to a verge with “Stones in My Passway.” It is the most terrifying of Johnson’s songs, perhaps because his desolation can no longer be contained in the old, inherited image of the devil—those lines from “Me and the Devil Blues” seem suddenly almost safe, comfortable, the claims of a man who thinks he knows where he stands. In “Stones in My Passway” terror is too ubiquitous to have a face: it is formless, elusive, overpowering. A few months before he recorded “Stones in My Passway,” Johnson sang these astonishing lines: *If I bad possession, over Judgment Day* *If I bad possession, over Judgment Day* *Then the woman I’m lovin’, wouldn’t have no right to pray* No right to pray—that is a staggering demand to make on life; it is to ask for the same power the devil has over one who has sold his soul. “Stones in My Passway” is the song of a man who once asked for power over other souls, but who now testifies that he has lost power over his own body, and who might well see that disaster as a fitting symbol of the loss of *his* soul. There is no way to “know”; there are no Gothic images in this song. The idea simply takes shape as the song draws in all the echoes of hellhounds, devils, the weirdness of blues walking like a man, draws in those images and goes past them. If those images were a means to expression, they are no

longer necessary—they are no longer good enough. Because not even his body is his own, Johnson cannot satisfy his woman. Because that matters more than anything else in his life, that fact, as a symbol, expands to create more facts, more symbols. Finally, with stones in every passway and no way clear, there is a way in which the singer's life is resolved: he has seen all around his life, for as long as he can hold onto the image. Because the stakes of the song are so high, every word and every note is fashioned to carry the weight of what Johnson wants to say. The four knife-stroke notes that open the song are like a warning; the song is stark. It communicates so directly any distance between the singer and the listener is smashed. *I got stones in my passway And my road seems dark as night I got stones in my passway And my road seems dark as night I got pains in my heart—They have taken my appetite.* The tune darts forward on a high, almost martial rhythm; one shattering note freezes the music and the image just before the last line of each verse. “Shock technique,” a friend called it. *My enemies have betrayed me Have overtaken poor Bob at last My enemies have betrayed me Have overtaken poor Bob at last And there's one thing certain—They have stones all in my passway.* If the passway is in his body, immediately it must stand for every invisible trap on the road; if the stones are at first the most direct, physical description of the sexual collapse that has made Johnson afraid to look his lover in the face, those stones must be made to stand for the men who will soon block the way to his lover's door. *I'm crying please—please, let us be friends And when you hear me howlin' in my passway, rider PLEASE open your door and let me in.* The song is enormous. I cannot put it any other way. The image of the words is subsumed into Johnson's singing, his guitar, into the eerie, inevitable loudness of the song. The music has its claims to make: no matter how low you set the volume, the music creeps up louder, demanding, and the only way to quiet this music is to shut it off. *I got three lanes to truck on Boys, please don't block my road I got three lanes to truck on Boys, please don't block my road But I been 'shamed by my rider—I'm booked and I got to go.* “Stones in My Passway,” like a few others of Johnson's songs—“Love in Vain,” “Come on in My Kitchen,” “Me and the Devil Blues”—is a two-minute image of doom that has the power to make doom a fact. One hardly knows if it is the clarity of the world Johnson revealed in his music, or Johnson's resilience as he made his way through that world that is most exhilarating; but that so many people—people who have never left the American mainstream that Johnson was never part of—respond to his music is perhaps not such a mystery. Because of our faith in promises, the true terror of doom is in the American's natural inability to believe doom is real, even when he knows it has taken over his life. When there is no way to speak of terror and no one to listen if there were, Johnson's songs matter. ••• What Robert Johnson had to do with other bluesmen of his time is interesting to me, but not nearly so interesting as what Johnson has to do with those discovering him now, without warning and on their own. The original context of Johnson's story is important, and it is where his story is usually placed; but a critic's job is not only to define the context of an artist's work but to expand that context, and it seems more important to me that Johnson's music is vital enough to enter other contexts and create all over again. Off in the Netherlands to teach college, my friend Langdon Winner wrote back: ... the truth of the matter is that in my first months here I found out a lot more about America than I did about Holland. Hundreds of things which are second nature to us just do not play a part here. Dissatisfaction, for example. Dutch musicians know the techniques pioneered by America's black masters. But they are not interested in extremes of rage, ecstasy, dissipation, or religious enlightenment. And this sums up the place: While jazz has long been popular in the Netherlands, *the blues has never arrived.* How can you understand Aeschylus, Augustine, Shakespeare, and Nietzsche if you can't listen to Robert Johnson in your own time? Which is to say that if Robert Johnson is an ancestor, or even a ghost, he is really a contemporary. It is the inescapable pull of Johnson's music that gives us Mick Jagger singing “Love in Vain” in the middle of a rock 'n' roll show—and a rock 'n' roll show is a celebration that is rooted in Little Richard's kind of revolt, or in Harmonica Frank's, far more than it is in Robert Johnson's. Robert Johnson is a presence these days, as rock 'n' roll fans find the world less of a home than it used to be, and yet accept more and more their inability to do anything about their displacement; Johnson is a sort of invisible pop star. He has caught up with us. The music that is animated by Robert Johnson today is not really found in new rock 'n' roll versions of his songs; Johnson's spirit is not so easy to capture. All of Eric Clapton's love for Johnson's music came to bear not when Clapton sang Johnson's

songs, but when, once Johnson's music became part of who Clapton was, Clapton came closest to himself: in the passion of "Layla" and "Any Day." Finally, after years of practice and imitation, Johnson's sound was Clapton's sound: there was no way to separate the two men, nor any need to. And perhaps to keep the story straight, there is, in "Layla," one lost echo buried under Clapton's screams and who knows how many guitars: "Please don't say / You'll never find a way / And tell me, all my love's in vain." This music sounds like real Delta blues to me, forty years after: Duane Allman's solos on Boz Scaggs's "Loan Me a Dime"; Sly Stone's "Thank you for talkin' to me Africa"; Randy Newman's "God's Song"; much of the Rolling Stones' music from *Let It Bleed* to *Exile on Main Street*; Bob Dylan's "All Along the Watchtower"; Eric Clapton's "Layla." If someone were to ask me where Johnson's spirit had found a home, I would play these songs. ••• 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. When Johnson sang his darkest songs, terror was a fact, beauty only a glimmer; but that glimmer, and its dying away, lie beneath everything else, beneath all the images that hit home and make a home. Our culture finds its tension and its life within the borders of the glimmer and the dying away, in attempts to come to terms with the betrayal without giving up on the promise. And so at the borders of Elvis Presley's delight, of his fine young hold on freedom, there is, in his "Peace in the Valley," a touch of fear, of that old weirdness: *And I'll be changed Changed from this creature That I am\** And at another frontier there is Robert Johnson, pausing for a moment in "Hellhound on My Trail," frightened, running down his road, but glancing over his shoulder with a smile: *If today was Christmas Eve, if today was Christmas Eve And tomorrow was Christmas Day If today was Christmas Eve And tomorrow was Christmas Day Aw, wouldn't we have a time, baby?*

**Inheritors**  
**THE BAND**  
**Pilgrims' Progress**  
**The Band**—four Canadian rockers held together by an Arkansas drummer—staked their claim to an American story from the beginning. The story had its veils, but the fact of the story was plain. "This is *it*," my editor Marvin Garson said in the spring of 1969, as he sent me off to cover the Band's national debut in San Francisco. "This is when we find out if there are still open spaces out there." Marvin was a New Yorker; living in California sometimes made him talk like Natty Bumppo, but his words were accurate. By out there he meant right here, and he was talking about the Band because it was obvious they were committed to the very idea of America: complicated, dangerous, and alive. Their music gave us a sure sense that the country was richer than we had guessed; that it had possibilities we were only beginning to perceive. In the unique blend of instruments and good rhythms, in the shared and yet completely individual vocals, in the half-lost phrases and buried lyrics, there was an ambiguity that opened up the world with real force. The songs captured the yearning for home and the fact of displacement that ruled our lives; we thought that the Band's music was the most natural parallel to our hopes, ambitions, and doubts, and we were right to think so. Flowing through their music were spirits of acceptance and desire, rebellion and awe, raw excitement, good sex, open humor, a magic feel for history—a determination to find plurality and drama in an America we had met too often as a monolith. The Band's music made us feel part of their adventure; we knew that we would win if they succeeded and lose if they failed. That was what Marvin Garson meant. It was a good feeling.

**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 MG's, 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 R&B 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, Carol—one, two, three, *four*— Don’t 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 course—rock ’n’ roll from Memphis, rock ’n’ roll from New Orleans—and 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 Nelson’s 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 Wolf’s 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. Wolf’s 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 Diddley's "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 Bland's hard-rocking "Further on Up the Road" and Muddy Waters's 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" doesn't really describe the music—though they were white, and the songs were blues—Levon's singing and Robbie's guitar playing fell into no genre. This wasn't 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 people's 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 45's, 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 Robertson's, half Manuel's, 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—or, 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's 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. Revue de presse

**Praise for *Mystery Train*:**

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Présentation de l'éditeur  
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