

Presley as Paradigm

DEAD ELVIS: A Chronicle of a Cultural Obsession

By Greil Marcus

Doubleday: \$25; 235 pp., illustrated

by David Foster Wallace

This review may well be subjective to the point of ickiness, because this reviewer has believed Greil Marcus is a genius ever since I first read the essay on Elvis in his 1975 "Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music."

That book, like all Marcus' best work, is a study in social aesthetics, an enterprise concerned not so much with why certain artworks are entitled to certain predicates, but with just how and why some very few artists are able to move audiences, move them radically, terribly, redemptively and forever. Because he is interested in art that is jacked pretty much directly into people's emotions, Marcus writes about music, and because he is interested in these transferences of feeling and value on a large scale (and because he is an American), he specializes in popular music, rock and its progenitors.

The central concern of Marcus' work—why some pop music moves audiences and has meaning for them—devolves into two big questions. The first is why certain seminal rock 'n' roll performers are able to change the way whole groups of people feel about themselves in the world. Marcus' 1975 "Elvis: Presliad," one of the greatest essays ever written about music, traces the career and appeal of Elvis Presley as a synecdoche of America itself.

Rather than just being the lucky white guy who first discovered how to breed Negroid blues with Caucasian country, Marcus' Elvis illustrated the American tension between the confirming community of white pop and the dangerous adrenaline of delta blues. Marcus locates Elvis' early genius in his ability to focus tension rather than resolve it, and in all seriousness and with impressive argumentation, Marcus portrays Elvis as no less an enveloping American symbol than Melville's whale or Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha.

What was brilliant in the "Presliad" was Marcus' ability to present Elvis as emblematic of American popular culture and then pop culture itself as America's deepest self-perception writ large and bright. If pop is the argument between sub-culture (as conceived by the cultural outsider when that outsider happens to be a genius) and the redemptive, relentlessly consuming appetite of the community, then the arc of Elvis' career, from starving white trash to musical insurgent to heartthrob to B-movie mainstay to corpulent Vegas schmaltz-king "performing a kind of enormous victory rather than winning it" ("Mystery Train"), limns also the living and fatal paradox of all popular U.S. art: that this art, which is produced via raw difference, the special fecund anguish of non-inclusion,

attacks, seduces and is devoured by a mass-art market that redeems and even deifies the artist while it drains his productions of the denial and pain that is its voice.

The Elvis of the years before his death, for Marcus, was the transcendent purveyor of America's Empty Yes, an artist who didn't so much fall into as thrive on the pop trap of satisfying the audience's surface craving for confirmation instead of its deeper, more ragged need to be moved—"He sings with such a complete absence of musical personality that none of the old songs matter at all, because he has not committed himself to them; it could be anyone singing, or no one. It is in this sense, finally, that an audience is confirmed, that an America comes into being; lacking any real fear or joy, it is a throw-away America where nothing is at stake. The divisions America shares are simply smoothed away" ("Mystery Train").

Since so many of the awesome and hideous public phenomena that have attended the death of Elvis Presley in 1977 were predicted and explained in Marcus' "Presliad," I approached "Dead Elvis" feeling simultaneously that there was no one more qualified to write about "the ubiquity, the playfulness, the perversity, the terror, and the fun of this, of Elvis Presley's second life," and that Marcus' virtuoso dissection of the living King in the earlier book makes any present post-mortem kind of redundant.

But "Dead Elvis" isn't otiose at all. It's different from the "Presliad," less rhetorical, more a travelogue than an argument, but no less precious, since it carves out and addresses the second of Marcus' great informing questions: What is it about the audience that is America that makes it receptive to the combination of art and junk and appearance and reality and devotion and repulsion an idea like Elvis purveys?

Marcus observes—sometimes analyzing, but mostly observing, raptly, in pellucid prose—the culture that has risen around the unrisen Elvis Presley, his image's persistence in black velvet, ashtrays and liquor bottles, films, night-club impersonations, novels, McDonald's commercials, poetry, tabloids, the jagged spirituality that still defines the margins Elvis came from, avant-garde art, the Whole Elvis Thing, "a great common art project, the work of scores of people operating independently of each other, linked only by their determination to solve the same problem: Who was he, and why do I still care?"

Thus, like the "Presliad," "Dead Elvis" is less about Elvis than it is about our popular culture, "the culture he inherited, the culture he made, and the culture that then to such a great degree remade itself according to these promises, complexities, contradictions, and defeats."

"Dead Elvis" is a collection of Elvis-related pieces Marcus has written from 1977 to 1990. There are "Presliad"-esque essays like 1981's "Elvis: The Ashtray" and 1990's "Still Dead: Elvis Presley Without Music." There are sharp, dark reviews of books

about Elvis and rock music, schlock and otherwise. There are parodic screenplays, discussions of William Eggleston's photographs of a very empty Graceland, illustrations, lavish photos of Elvis with German whores in 1959, Elvis as usurped and abstracted by contemporary artists, in underground conceptual archetryptychs—Elvis Hitler, Elvis Christ—Elvis in underground comics, Elvis as sung about by nihilist punks who love the King too well for betraying all he'd been consigned to stand for.

A lot of "Dead Elvis" is just listening to a huge national conversation. Greil Marcus is a great listener. 1989's "The Last Breakfast" describes a San Francisco morning DJ's Breakfast With Elvis show, in which listeners call in each weekday morning with menus—from the exotic to the troubling—for feeding a King "as he dropped dead on 16 August 1977: a glutton bloated beyond memory." The piece is hilarious and moving, then scary when counterpointed by 1990's "A Corpse in Your Mouth," a weird discussion of cartoons, postcards, album covers and underground fanzine jokes about eating Elvis, Elvis-burgers, Sid-Vicious-patties, the ultimate consumption of what celebrity offers.

We could go on. This is a marvelous and I think profound book about a cultural symbol of cultural symbol-making. The critical acuity of the "Presliad" has, in "Dead Elvis," become emotional genius. Marcus acknowledges that the cults that have "oozed from the fissures of culture" since Elvis' death could easily be reduced and explained in terms of "working-class bad taste or upper-class camp."

Maybe they should be, but Marcus offers eloquent testimony to the contrary. He chases and witnesses the spasms of love, hatred, devotion, betrayal, lust and art that Elvis Presley's explosion has sent raining out and down, witnesses with neither Warholian fake-hip credulity nor ironic fake-hip condescension.

He writes for two glass-clear pages about a woman who divorced her husband after seeing "Blue Hawaii" on her honeymoon. She now lives in Memphis, a professional pilgrim. A sort of priestess. She is known as the Button Lady—"She wears so many Elvis badges she clinks when she walks. . . . You can't laugh at her; you can't even blink."

Marcus' rapt attention to what Elvis continues to mean is both transmitted and justified in a splendid piece of critical art.

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