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Fans and Critics: Greil Marcus's Mystery Train as Rock 'n' Roll History

Mark Mazullo

Since its first appearance in 1975, Greil Marcus's *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music* has been acclaimed as a classic of its genre.¹ It has been discussed in classrooms devoted to the study of American "popular music"; it has been widely recognized as one of the first attempts to understand rock 'n' roll in terms of the broader context of American culture; and it received spectacular notices in both the scholarly and popular presses upon its publication. Its impact, both on the community of "countercultural" rock commentators of the late 1960s to the mid-1970s and on today's academics concerned with popular music, has been considerable.

Mystery Train is not simply a book about music. Many of its tenets, in fact, derive directly from certain specific views of the academic discipline of American Studies, which Marcus studied during his years at the University of California, Berkeley, in the mid-to-late 1960s.² Like many scholars of American literature before him, Marcus constructed a view of the rock 'n' roll tradition in order to explain the "exceptional" characteristics of American culture. His primary assertion was that the rock 'n' roll repertory should be understood *not* as an expression of certain subcultures of class and race but rather as a musical expression of a more general national identity. The author thus described his project as "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."³ Paradoxically, then, rock 'n' roll was best understood as a cultural form that worked *against* the American grain, because of its "antiestablishment" message, while still representing a distinctive national character. In other words, clinging to the countercultural images and agendas of the late 1960s, Marcus posited a notion of "Americanism" that would embrace rock 'n' roll in its entirety.

Mystery Train identified the bedrock of a rock 'n' roll canon for the mid-1970s by distinguishing six figures as the most telling representatives of this musical style: two "Ancestors"—Harmonica Frank and Robert Johnson—had influenced four diverse "Inheritors"—The Band, Sly Stone,

Randy Newman, and Elvis Presley—through their expression in a potent subcultural musical style.⁴ The rock 'n' roll medium had allowed these artists to communicate a “version of America” that, for Marcus, exposed the idiosyncrasies of the nation’s unique cultural sphere. He viewed this music from the perspective of America’s larger artistic canon, seeking to claim for certain musicians the same aesthetic and historical significance that has been accorded to such American writers as Whitman, Melville, and Hawthorne. His culture-critical project was thus positioned within the broader context of American literary studies: he argued that the music under discussion, like the nation’s great literature, “dramatize[s] 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 . . . is rooted in the idea that these artists can illuminate those American questions and that the questions can add resonance to their work.”⁵ In the end, Marcus’s claim was that all American artists were best thought of as “symbolic Americans.”⁶

In what follows, I would like to consider *Mystery Train* as a central text in the tradition of writing on rock 'n' roll. Rather than merely revisiting one influential source and considering its continuing discursive power, I wish instead to use this examination of *Mystery Train* as a means of entering into a larger historiographical discussion of the writing of rock histories. Historiographical inquiries have recently found themselves at the center of musicological discourse. Investigations of the historical reception of certain classical-music repertoires have brought to the discipline a growing awareness of the social and cultural uses to which music has been put. Music history textbooks, music criticism in the popular press, and discussions of music in literary works are a few of the many critical-historical genres that have come under scrutiny as the musicological community attempts to confront its own past while claiming continued legitimacy in the current situation of curricular and disciplinary reforms.⁷ Equally indicative of musicology’s current state is the broadening of its concerns to include the realm of popular music. If the study of popular music is to be considered a concern of musicology, it seems clear that the same lines of historiographical questioning that have revealed the agendas of certain institutions of high culture should also be applied to the broad and varied literature on popular music. Because historiography lends itself so well to mapping the cultural space that music occupies, one of the potentially rich studies awaiting today’s musicologists is an examination of the ways in which music scholars and critics have treated different music-historical repertoires.

At issue is the kind of writing that the rock 'n' roll repertory has received and its mediating function on the music it discusses. Equally important to this enterprise is a discussion of the many roles that writers

on music play: the way a music scholar and/or critic fulfills the roles of fan, critic, and historian will determine the kind of history being written. Again, the attitude of the scholar toward the object or repertory of investigation has been taken up as a topic in recent musicological discourse.⁸ As the critical-historical discourse on popular music comes to be considered, a sensitivity to these roles will guide the reception of these texts—just as the writers' conception of their own roles had determined their treatment of their musical subject at hand.

Mystery Train embodies strategies implicit in rock history writing that derive from larger trends in American intellectual history. The written history of rock 'n' roll is directly related to the history of those social groups whose concerns and ideals this music has come to represent—most characteristically, the American counterculture. Because, as much current musicological work has demonstrated, the written history of a musical repertory is dependent at least in part on its historical-critical reception, the connection between rock and its historians becomes a central aspect of rock's history itself. A broadening of the study of popular music to include an examination of the narratives proposed by one powerful literary arm of the rock community makes possible an interpretation of the social group that creates these historical accounts as an "institution." In current literary theory, such socially constructed, self-perpetuating institutions are recognized as crucial to the production and reception of cultural texts. The thesis proposed here, influenced by work in literary studies, is that a musical repertory's reception in various social spaces becomes a central and intrinsic aspect of its historical "meaning." Thus, an investigation of the much-read narratives of certain segments of the rock community should not be content with noting only their sociological implications, but rather should explore their powerful role in the spheres of cultural production and reception.⁹

Finally, any contextualization of written histories also necessitates taking their own historical location and corresponding cultural matrix into account. The institutional claims made for rock 'n' roll changed significantly during the late 1960s and early 1970s—a period of perceived crisis for this musical tradition. The role of these claims in the formation of a rock-historical narrative should not be underestimated. It is in this context that I will consider Marcus's *Mystery Train*. The author's close tie to one of the rock institution's most prominent mouthpieces, *Rolling Stone* magazine, is also crucial to some of the historical and ideological constructions that emanated from that source.¹⁰ Rather than read these documents as transparent windows into rock 'n' roll's "real history," we might consider instead what is at stake when a written history emerges in times of crisis. What kind of history is produced? *Whose* crisis is made apparent?

And how is the *subject* of this history employed by these groups in acts of their own cultural and political legitimation?

In the 1970s, many countercultural intellectuals considered rock music to be experiencing a time of pivotal crisis. Thus it was argued that the “authentic” style of the mid-to-late 1960s was fighting a losing battle on several fronts. Many iconic rock stars from this period had recently died—most from an excess of drugs and alcohol. New genres and styles were challenging the hegemony of the 1960s rock sound: the work of such singer-songwriters as Carole King, James Taylor, and Carly Simon; the art rock or progressive rock movements; the increasingly threatening sounds of disco; and so on. In addition, rock’s former bastions had been disgraced after the violent eruptions at the Altamont music festival in the summer of 1969 and the decline of San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury district into slum conditions. Finally, and most disturbingly to this group, rock’s so-called antiestablishment message was being challenged by what was thought to be a large-scale disavowal of the political sphere on the part of young people across the country.¹¹

As the upheaval that characterized the 1960s waned, many involved in that decade’s alternative projects sought continued social and political expression by producing historical accounts of its culture. In particular, *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll* (1976) helped to construct a view of rock ‘n’ roll’s history from this perspective.¹² In its multi-authored effort to explain rock ‘n’ roll’s continued relevance in American society, this text reached back to the early history of rock ‘n’ roll as well as to related genres of American popular music, such as the blues. By doing so, it manufactured an uninterrupted narrative of rock’s trajectory of social and political dissent. Accordingly, it employed the term “rock ‘n’ roll” consistently to signify the musical style as a whole, preferring the inclusivity of this terminology to the more common convention that refers to music after the mid-1960s as simply “rock.”

Established in 1967 in San Francisco, *Rolling Stone* magazine flowered in the early-to-mid-1970s through its association with the New Journalism, through its ostentatiously self-described influence on the nation’s leftist political activities, and through its many satellite projects, launched by the Hearstian ambitions of its publisher, Jann Wenner. *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll* was perhaps the most important of these publications: for the first time, it assembled the viewpoints of all of the magazine’s major critics into a comprehensive narrative of rock ‘n’ roll’s history. The most interesting thing about this book is that while it represents a variety of opinions and remembrances of the rock ‘n’ roll tradition, it also provides a unified statement from a certain generation on

that tradition. Not surprisingly, Marcus's sweeping conception of rock 'n' roll culture as broadly and inherently "American" was adopted by *Rolling Stone*: as *Mystery Train* was being written, the editors there also attempted to broaden the horizons of the journal. In 1974, for instance, Wenner changed his official description of the magazine from "just a little rock 'n' roll newspaper from San Francisco" to "[a] biweekly general interest magazine covering contemporary American culture, politics, and arts, with a special interest in music."¹³

The format of an *illustrated* history allowed *Rolling Stone* to capture the visceral essence of rock 'n' roll, thus providing an option for fans who did not care to wade through the lengthy written passages. In accordance with the style and format of the parent magazine itself, *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll* also underscored rock 'n' roll's function as a constituent of America's increasingly image-driven culture. At the very front of the book one found three illustrations whose placement preceded the introduction by the editor, Jim Miller, and which were doubtless intended to encapsulate the key features of the musical style. In the first, the little-known 1950s rocker Ersel Hickey represented the quintessential image of stylized, white, working-class rock 'n' roll—the electric guitar, the cuffed pants, the turned-up collar, and the duck-tailed hair. The second, a two-page spread depicting an energetic crowd of teenage girls held back by a middle-aged police force, reminded the viewer that rock 'n' roll was and always has been a phenomenon both charged with sexuality and at odds with authority. The third, a studio portrait of the Five Satins, who became famous with the 1956 hit "In the Still of the Nite," highlighted the importance of the musical traditions of black America within rock 'n' roll's history. It was with these three photographs that the editors of the *Illustrated History* prefaced their story—to be told through the lens of the 1970s. This was a tale that evoked the participatory society that rock 'n' roll was believed to have created through rebellion, style, sexuality, and inclusivity of race, class, and gender.

In the editor's introduction, Miller confirmed this message and broadened its scope. He began by appropriating the traditions of folk music: here was a "history of rock 'n' roll" that began not with Elvis Presley, nor even with rhythm and blues, but with an anecdote about Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, as they brought their 1960s-style folk back on the road in the 1970s. The easy conflation of "folk music" (of a particularly politicized cast) and rock 'n' roll, an introductory strategy that provided the narrative with more overtly political credentials than it could have mustered without the association, was matched by a second appropriation in the opening chapters, this time of the blues.¹⁴ Finally, throughout the book one read the same aesthetic refrain: rock 'n' roll was no mere fad for

the young but a *bona fide* artistic medium whose texts represented, in their maturity, the summoning forth of social, political, and economic freedom.

The many chapters in the *Illustrated History* written by the critic Greg Shaw demonstrate even more evocatively the rock-historical position held by the *Rolling Stone* community. In his essays “The Teen Idols,” “The Instrumental Groups,” and “Brill Building Pop,” Shaw argued that the period between Buddy Holly’s and Ritchie Valens’s deaths in 1959 and the first American visit by the Beatles in February 1964 was a problematic one in the history of the tradition, mainly because “nobody could say for sure which were the essential ingredients for success in this new, mysterious and incredibly lucrative field of teenage music.”¹⁵

Shaw’s writing also evoked the facile rhetoric of the “revolution” that so characterizes rock ‘n’ roll history writing of this period. For instance, in his chapter on the obscure instrumental groups of the first “post-rock-and-roll” phase (ca. 1958–64), he argued that “As if in response to this amputation of rock & roll from its roots, in the late Fifties white instrumental bands began appearing throughout the country, helping to keep the music alive at a local level and directly influencing the English bands that would bring rock out of its doldrums later on in the Sixties.”¹⁶ Because rock ‘n’ roll is so predominantly a vocal style, this essay would seem to hold little or no importance in the grander scheme of things. Yet Shaw attempts to make clear this period’s significance in the shaping of a rock ‘n’ roll aesthetic:

Instrumental groups were almost without exception a regional phenomenon, a product of the local music scenes that have been the source of virtually every significant innovation in rock & roll. As a general rule, professional musicians in the music capitals—New York, Los Angeles and London—had become insulated from influences outside the music industry, while local bands, playing every night in front of audiences with whom they had a direct rapport, initiated new styles, dances and music developments. The immediacy of this interaction between fans and musicians has been crucial to rock’s evolutionary process.¹⁷

Of note here is the message regarding rock ‘n’ roll’s authenticity—the argument that a direct link to fans was *the* determining factor in any repertory’s potential for inclusion in the institutionalized history of rock ‘n’ roll. In all, Shaw’s contributions to the *Illustrated History* exemplify the position that so many of the contributors would take: authentic rock ‘n’ roll began with Elvis and the rockabilly generation, suffered a setback between 1958 and 1964, and was rejuvenated with the arrival of the Beatles.

But more important than the creation of a narrative from the mid-1950s forward was the attempt to find earlier roots for rock ‘n’ roll in the

annals of American experience. In his introduction, Miller characterized the style as one that defined its audience's "sensibility, style of life, and fantasies." But of the many powers of rock 'n' roll that Miller summoned, one—"the evocation of an heroic American past"—stands out as the most telling. Just as Miller began this history by adopting for the history of rock 'n' roll various other related American musical traditions, his colleague Greil Marcus, one of *Rolling Stone's* premier critics, had in the previous year attempted to appropriate for this narrative nothing less than all of America's mythic past.

Despite a debate in the mid-1970s over the continued relevance of rock music in that decade, *Mystery Train* received overwhelming support from the community of countercultural intellectuals. Marcus's reputation was, by this point, secure. As rock 'n' roll's strongest link to the intellectual academy, he was a rare breed of rock 'n' roll critic: both a fan *and* a scholar, he confronted the music's passion and sexuality while making politically proper and intellectual sense of its messages. His standing among the countercultural literati was made clear by the editor's acknowledgments in the introduction to the *Illustrated History*. Here, Miller described his colleague—using hip French lingo, alliteration, and a literary reference to a popular novel of the time—as *Rolling Stone's* "coordinating editor, San Francisco liaison, Berkeley bon vivant, and the once and future king of rock raconteurs."

The reviewers of *Mystery Train* shared the same admiration for Marcus. In a discussion in the *New York Review of Books*, for example, Mark Crispin Miller regretted that rock 'n' roll's spirit had been stripped of its authenticity and culturally co-opted in the mid-1970s, and he bemoaned the fact that "unfortunately, the time is right for a history of rock 'n' roll."¹⁸ Miller went on to discuss several new contributions to the burgeoning rock 'n' roll literature; more than these other histories, he wrote, *Mystery Train* was capable of telling "the continuing story of a finished thing."¹⁹ Thus, while he regretfully found rock 'n' roll to be a dead cultural phenomenon, Miller affirmed both Marcus's politicized message and his methodology.

Marcus located the different periods of rock 'n' roll's history at various points in a repeating cycle: it emerges, rebels, slips back into conformity, and waits in an almost hibernatory state until it amasses enough discursive power to speak eloquently again of its cultural milieu. He read into the rebellion of rock 'n' roll its immortality. Though Miller disagreed with this healthy prognosis, he could not resist its appeal, for in it lived the regenerative hopes of the counterculture. Accordingly, he argued that Marcus "puts certain pretentious critics to shame. In fact, there is more of rock's

spirit in this book than there is in rock music.” Here, rock ’n’ roll’s ideology—as institutionalized in this reading—shines through: the tradition is cast as a cultural movement that, for the most part, is not to be discussed in established intellectual arenas. Its powerful means of cultural signification are most likely to be misunderstood by those who do not passionately confront rock ’n’ roll’s line of fire. Instead, it takes the inexhaustible rock ’n’ roll fan—and all the better if this fan has the rare academic credentials—to blend the otherwise incompatible systems of rhetoric into an enlightening and moving analysis.²⁰

In an extended review in the *Village Voice* entitled “Elvis Presley as Moby Dick,” Frank Rich also emphasized Marcus’s stature as a man of letters.²¹ He began with an affirmation of Marcus’s vision of America: “Marcus sets out to define that heady space where our history and our art merge into a single, durable vision of our country—a vision that is capable of illuminating the deepest and darkest recesses of our collective democratic soul.” Rock ’n’ roll was now seen as an institution with roots, like other “adult” forms of culture, in America’s past. Rich saw no problems with digging into the nineteenth century for the “meaning” of rock ’n’ roll: “It’s a measure of how long and rich a view Marcus takes of these musicians and, concurrently, a vindication of the value he places in their work, that it never becomes necessary to shove Watergate or Vietnam into our faces to give the rock of *Mystery Train* its share of meaning.”

Again, Marcus had provided the necessary myth by which to remove rock ’n’ roll from the political failures of the 1960s. Although initially an outspoken radical, rock ’n’ roll had been transformed from a mirror of the troubled contemporary social panorama to an expression of America’s glowing past. Rich concurred with both Marcus’s vision of America and his reading of rock ’n’ roll’s complicity in the shaping of our cultural identity. He concluded that the music, a force of great social agency, “may not be doing such a bad job of keeping our democratic vistas intact.”

To understand Marcus’s work and its broad appeal, it is helpful to investigate his own reliance on at least three influential accounts of American intellectual history. As an undergraduate at the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1960s, Marcus had fashioned his own major in American Studies and had immersed himself in the celebrated midcentury constructions of American literature. In the work of the American literary critics F. O. Matthiessen and Leslie Fiedler and the British writer D. H. Lawrence, Marcus came upon an impressive tradition of cultural criticism that provided him with several ideas central to his own critical methodology. In the author’s note, for instance, he included Lawrence’s *Studies in Classic American Literature* and Fiedler’s *Love and Death in the American Novel* in

a list of “books that mattered a great deal to the ambitions of my own book, and to its content.”²²

Matthiessen’s widely read *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941) had left a strong impression on mid-century American literary criticism. In his opening manifesto, Matthiessen had maintained that the artistic program of five canonical American writers represented American cultural politics at its most basic: “Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville . . . all felt that it was incumbent upon their generation to give fulfillment to the potentialities freed by the Revolution [and] to provide a culture commensurate with America’s political opportunity. . . . What emerges from the total pattern of their achievement . . . is literature for our democracy.”²³

Although Marcus mentioned neither *American Renaissance* nor its author, early readers such as Frank Rich commented that *Mystery Train* was “determinedly and proudly in the tradition of such ground-breaking works of American cultural criticism as . . . Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance*.”²⁴ Like Matthiessen, Marcus was clearly involved in manufacturing a canonical community of “democratic” artists whose grouping in one volume could, in Matthiessen’s words, “make each [artist] cast as much light as possible on all the others.”²⁵ Along these lines, Marcus asserted that “in a democracy, an artist denies his deepest nature by ignoring the country as a whole,” and “to do one’s most personal work in a time of public crisis is an honest, legitimate, paradoxically democratic act of common faith; . . . one keeps faith with one’s community by offering whatever it is that one has to say.”²⁶ And just as America’s earliest fiction was linked to the anxiety of post-Revolutionary society, so too, argued Marcus, did these rock ‘n’ rollers step in at a time when the country was, in his words, “up for grabs.”

If Matthiessen’s work seems to have provided a general model for Marcus’s thought, an even deeper influence came from D. H. Lawrence, whose advocacy of the liberation of the body, writings on psychoanalysis, and general dissatisfaction with established cultural sensibilities had turned him into a youth-culture icon. Lawrence’s work was widely read during the 1960s; the resurrection of his ideas responded to the counterculture’s desperate search for legitimate intellectual ancestors.²⁷ As Marcus mentioned, Lawrence’s *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923) greatly affected the ideas he expressed in *Mystery Train*. He evoked Lawrence’s most trenchant words on American artistry: “The artist usually sets out . . . to point a moral and adorn a tale. The tale, however, points the other way, as a rule. Two blankly opposing morals, the artist’s and the tale’s. Never trust the artist. Trust the tale. The proper function of a critic is to save the tale from the artist who created it. Now we know our business in these studies: saving the American tale from the American artist.”²⁸ Marcus quoted a portion of this

passage in his discussion of Sly Stone and in the same vein sought out the “American tale” in the work of all of his canonical rock ’n’ rollers.

Both Lawrence and Marcus espoused the doctrine of American exceptionalism, an entrenched intellectual tradition asserting that America’s social, political, and economic conditions inevitably give rise to a unique—that is, “exceptional”—cultural sphere.²⁹ For exceptionalists, one of the unique qualities of American art lies in the relationship that it fosters between the artist and the audience. Lawrence had written that Melville “was a real American in that he always felt his audience in front of him.”³⁰ Marcus also viewed the performer-audience dynamic as a crucial component of rock ’n’ roll’s artistic potential, one that could be generalized into an individual-community dynamic and serve as a model for democracy. This paradigm acts in accordance with one central theme in Lawrence’s writing: the conflict in twentieth-century America between extreme individualism and the desperate yearning to escape from it. In a key passage from *Mystery Train*, Marcus identified this same dialectic as the underlying essence of rock ’n’ roll: “The tension between community and self-reliance; between distance between one’s audience and affection for it; between the shared experience of popular culture and the special talent 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.”³¹ This dichotomy is explored most thoroughly in Marcus’s expansive and widely admired essay on Elvis Presley, which serves as the heart of *Mystery Train*. He quotes Lawrence extensively on the topic of freedom and argues that Presley’s work captures the fundamentally American dialectic between individual freedom and community responsibility: “There is a modesty of spirit [in Elvis’s country-style singles]. In this world you will hope for what you deserve, but not demand it; you may celebrate your life, but not with the kind of liberation that might threaten the life of someone else. The public impulse of the music is not to break things open, but to confirm what is already there, to add to its reality and its value. This is the kind of freedom D. H. Lawrence had in mind when he wrote about America in an essay called ‘The Spirit of Place.’ ”³²

Finally, Marcus and Lawrence also shared an insistence on art’s proper function as critique. Lawrence had praised American literature for the indirectness of its symbolism: “Americans refuse everything explicit and always put up a sort of double meaning. They revel in subterfuge.”³³ He had been mesmerized by the Americans, who “keep their old-fashioned ideal frock-coat on, and an old-fashioned silk hat, while they do the most impossible things. . . . Their ideals are like armour which has rusted in, and will never more come off.”³⁴ The heart of American aesthetic criticism is

the removal of this “spiritual get-up.” Because “authentic” rock 'n' roll, as Marcus and his colleagues constructed it, should always convey a potent and unspoiled social message, Marcus preferred that it imitate classic American literature by offering a metaphorical or veiled critique instead of succumbing to the pedestrian or “solipsistic” methods of social criticism that were prevalent in the music—even much of the rock music—of the mid-1970s.³⁵

The American literary critic Leslie Fiedler had also acknowledged D. H. Lawrence's work as epochmaking in the understanding of American culture. In his influential *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) Fiedler had portrayed American life as a continuous cycle of related themes: “There is a pattern imposed both by the writers of our past and the very conditions of life in the United States from which no American novelist can escape, no matter what philosophy he consciously adopts or what theme he thinks he pursues.”³⁶ This view is echoed by Marcus in his assertion that rock 'n' roll embodies “a certain American spirit that never disappears no matter how smooth things get.” Similarly, he claimed to illuminate “unities in the American imagination that already exist.”³⁷

In his work, Fiedler had attempted to determine the fundamental nature of the American psyche by applying a psychoanalytic criticism to the American novel. Like Lawrence, Fiedler regarded American novels as texts from which the critic can extract the secrets of a collective American culture, its soul, its archetypes, and so on. Thus, just as Fiedler had interpreted the character of Fedallah in Melville's *Moby-Dick* as representing “the Faustian pact, the bargain with the devil, which our authors have always felt as the essence of the American experience,”³⁸ Marcus's chapter on the blues singer and guitarist Robert Johnson was based on precisely the same interpretation. With Fiedler obviously in mind, he wrote:

There were demons in [Johnson's] 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. . . . The only memory in American art that speaks with the same eerie resignation [as Johnson's “Me and the Devil Blues”] is that moment when Ahab goes over to the devil-worshipping Parsees he kept stowed away in the hold of the *Pequod*.³⁹

The thematics of Johnson's work could not have played more perfectly into Marcus's transposition of Fiedler's ideas on the American novel into the field of rock 'n' roll. And yet, although Marcus wanted to claim Johnson as one of that tradition's two most important ancestors, he wrote that “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.”⁴⁰

This statement, and many others like it, was central to Marcus's whole project. Among other things, it revealed his reliance on the kind of history and criticism that his predecessors had also espoused. Distrustful of an analytical or empirical "history of [stylistic] processes" or events, these writers had offered instead a "mythical" stance, which emphasized the spiritual bond between the artist, the text, and the rock 'n' roll fan (i.e., the critic). Fiedler, for example, had introduced his literary study with the following: "This is not . . . an academic or scholarly book, though it is indebted throughout to works of scholarship. . . . I have not . . . written what is most often meant these days by a 'critical' study, mere textual analysis, ahistorical, anti-biographical."⁴¹ And Lawrence, in a passage on James Fennimore Cooper, had written that "*The Last of the Mohicans* is divided between real historical narrative and true 'romance.' For myself, I prefer the romance. It has a myth meaning, whereas the narrative is chiefly record."⁴²

Over a decade before *Mystery Train* was written, the American historian Richard Hofstadter had identified features of this style of writing as "anti-rationalism" and had discussed this mindset in the larger context of American anti-intellectualism.⁴³ Though Hofstadter had agreed that "anti-intellectualism is not the creation of people who are categorically hostile to ideas," he nevertheless asserted that "the common strain that binds together the attitudes and ideas which I call anti-intellectual is a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition constantly to minimize the value of that life."⁴⁴

Such a definition is useful in that it articulates the antagonism between groups with opposing historical or critical perspectives. Thus, when Mark Crispin Miller argued that Marcus, "with his lively anecdotal style, puts certain pretentious critics to shame," we gain a clue toward understanding Marcus's similarly derogatory assessment of the institution of mid-century American musicology. Marcus refers to musicology on several occasions throughout *Mystery Train*, asserting that empirically or analytically based musicology could only *describe* historical and aesthetic processes. On the other hand, a critical method that focused sympathetically on the workings of myth could go further: it could *explain* these phenomena. Academic musicology thus represented a merely mechanical historical consciousness, one that only produced objective chronicles and could not enter the deeper recesses of personal or national experience.

It was surely for this reason that Marcus apologized for "going into the musicology" of a certain Elvis Presley recording when he discussed stylistic aspects of the song throughout its recorded history. His musical analyses always remained subordinated to the mythical commentary that

it served only as a tool. On Robert Johnson's guitar playing, for example, he evaded specific musical commentary with such statements as "[his] technique was not only more advanced, it was deeper, because it had to be."⁴⁵ Finally, Marcus preferred to valorize psyches and personas—that is, mythical entities—over what he felt to be the ineffectual histories of processes and events:

The question of history may have been settled on the side of process, not personality, but it is not a settlement I very much appreciate. Historical forces might explain the Civil War, but they don't account for Lincoln; they might tell us why rock 'n' roll emerged when it did, but they don't explain Elvis any more than they explain Little Peggy March. What a sense of context does give us, when we are looking for someone in particular, is an idea of what that person had to work with; but for myself, it always seems inexplicable in the end anyway. There are always blank spots, and that is where the myths take over.⁴⁶

In 1978, three years after the appearance of Marcus's *Mystery Train*—and quite independently from that work—the Canadian historian Sacvan Berkovich commented upon a characteristic style of American writing that has persisted since its inception with the Puritans. Berkovich, along with other current scholars of the Puritan period, called this genre the “American jeremiad.” Berkovich characterized it as “an officially endorsed cultural myth . . . one major thread in the process of self-justification, the myth of America.”⁴⁷ The authors of the many jeremiads discussed by Berkovich shared two features: they first highlighted America's sense of a national mission, and they then lamented their own generation's lack of success both in remaining true to that mission and in building a better world.

In his analysis of American jeremiads, Berkovich was both fascinated by their abundance and astounded that this rhetorical style had lasted over centuries “in a country that, despite its arbitrary territorial limits, could read its destiny in its landscape, and a population that, despite its bewildering mixture of race and creed, could believe in something called an American mission, and could invest that patent fiction with all the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual appeal of a religious quest.”⁴⁸ Berkovich cited several examples of the jeremiad:

Here was the anarchist Thoreau condemning his backsliding neighbors by reference to the Westward errand; here, the solitary singer, Walt Whitman, claiming to be the American Way; here, the civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, descendant of slaves, denouncing segregation as a violation of the American dream; here, an endless debate about national identity, full of

rage and faith, . . . conservative politicians hunting out socialists as conspirators against the dream, left-wing polemics proving that capitalism was a betrayal of the country's sacred origins.⁴⁹

From this perspective, *Mystery Train* can be read as belonging squarely within this tradition; it was, indeed, a particularly telling jeremiad for the generation of the 1960s. As Marcus wrote: "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 of money, is ever simple; it is always a kind of betrayal, of a mass of shadowy, shared hopes."⁵⁰ In Berkovich's view, the jeremiad as a genre was essential to the forging of an idea of American national identity. "It was a ritual designed to join social criticism to spiritual renewal, public to private identity, the shifting 'signs of the times' to certain traditional metaphors, themes, and symbols."⁵¹ Marcus's *Mystery Train* strove to do just that, and to do it precisely at a time when its institutional frame of reference and corresponding generation were undergoing a profound identity crisis. Its response to the perceived crisis involved three points of argumentation: the celebration of certain types of past rock 'n' roll perceived to be conducive to alternative culture; the effort to dispel the warnings of its imminent death; and, through linkage with a mythical image of a past "exceptional" America, the providing of selected genres of rock 'n' roll with an opportunity for immortality. This may be what Mark Crispin Miller meant when he asserted that there was more of rock 'n' roll's spirit in this book than there was in the music itself.

Berkovich argued that "even when they are most optimistic, the jeremiads express a profound disquiet. Not infrequently, their affirmations betray an underlying desperation—a refusal to confront the present, a fear of the future, an effort to translate 'America' into a vision that works in spirit because it can never be tested in fact."⁵² Into Marcus's optimistic project, then, we can read an effort to test the American soil for the possibility of growing a renewable counterculture mythology. And because for these exceptionalists the central category of the American imagination was a rebellion against authority, this particular construction of rock 'n' roll's historical narrative was based on the debatable premise that any truly "authentic" rock 'n' roll must inevitably be antiestablishment. In the prime years of what rock ideologues termed authentic rock 'n' roll (or "rock")—that is, the mid-to-late 1960s—"antiestablishment" referred to anyone who encouraged such things as a more free and inclusive participation in an integrated society; a deep suspicion of socially validated norms of education, evaluation, and economic advancement; an acceptance of spontaneously liberated sexualities; and so on. The history of

myths is particularly well suited to such a stance. As Benedict Anderson put it in a now famous description of the manner by which the idea of a national community is constructed, the “imagined community” is justified through myth, for myths transcend reality, historical boundaries, and any need for empirical verification.⁵³ Marcus sought to locate this ideal community in rock 'n' roll culture: “In the work of each performer [discussed in *Mystery Train*] 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 members of that 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.”⁵⁴ Thus, as rock 'n' roll's public intellectuals decided that the American experience was not to be substantially altered via direct political action, they fashioned instead an idealistically participatory world, in which America's institutions were inexorably undermined by rock 'n' roll culture. Further, the tradition's early history quickly became appropriated within this narrative as well; the result was a group of written histories positing a supposedly linear and uninterrupted underground phenomenon.

It is through such jeremiads as *Mystery Train* that the notion of community has become a central image in rock 'n' roll writing. And, since the conflation in the 1960s of the heretofore distinct music-historical traditions of rock 'n' roll and folk, any discussion of the “rock community” must consider the influence of the ideology of folk on the creation and development of such communities. The literature on folk music is vast, however, and does not always intersect with that on rock 'n' roll. Still, partly because of the real historical interactions between the two musical styles and partly because of the imagined conceptions of folk community on the part of rock writers, some writers have nevertheless found it useful to consider the role of the “folk” in the creation of rock 'n' roll history and criticism. In the inaugural volume of the journal *Popular Music* (1981), for instance, Simon Frith charged that certain writers on rock 'n' roll had (mis)understood this music as a type of folk music. Such an equation was anathema to Frith's “sociological point of view.” For the Marxist sociologist, folk and rock 'n' roll are very different forms of music making: folk is created via “pre-capitalist modes of music production,” while rock 'n' roll “is, without a doubt, a mass-produced, mass-consumed commodity.”⁵⁵ Further, issues of social class, generation, and patterns of leisure activity complicate the likening of such disparate music-historical phenomena as folk, rock, and rock 'n' roll. Still, Frith's larger point in exploring these accounts of popular culture was to note that “rock is *used* by its

listeners as a folk music—it articulates communal values, comments on shared social problems.”⁵⁶

The writers to whom Frith was referring, those active in the late 1960s and early 1970s, borrowed the ideology of folk for the purposes of explaining rock 'n' roll, thus claiming that the rock community was in essence synonymous with the folk community. While Frith argued that the foundations for this mythical rock community were not based on any sociological facts, he nevertheless understood the myth-making process as integral to an understanding of how music works socially: “The importance of the myth of rock community is that it is a myth. The sociological task is not to ‘expose’ this myth or to search for its ‘real’ foundations, but to explain why it is so important. Just as the ideology of folk tells us little about how folk music was actually made but much about the folk scholars’ own needs and fancies, so rock myths ‘resolve’ real contradictions in class experiences of youth and leisure.”⁵⁷ In other words, according to Frith, when these and other narratives about rock 'n' roll's history and significance appeared in the late 1960s and early 1970s, claiming rock 'n' roll's centrality in American culture, they employed an ideological argument in order to legitimize their own social, political, and cultural agendas. And while he found the sociological basis of their claims faulty to the core, Frith clearly felt that the function and power of these claims was attractive enough to merit discussion.

For Frith, the “rock ideologues of the 1960s—musicians, critics and fans alike,” claimed that “rock 'n' roll's status as a folk music was what differentiated it from routine pop; it was as a folk music that rock 'n' roll could claim a distinctive political and artistic edge.”⁵⁸ Ironically, the anti-historical and antisociological argument made by these writers also downplayed the necessity of confronting the specifically musical attributes of the repertoires in question. As Frith put it:

The cultural claims made for rock by the end of the 1960s . . . derived from the assertion that the music was the authentic experience of a youth community. . . . The rock claim was that if a song or record or performance had, in itself, the necessary signs of authenticity, then it could be interpreted, in turn, as the sign of a real community—the musical judgment guaranteed the sociological judgment rather than vice versa. There was no need to provide an independent, non-musical description of the rock “community,” nor to describe how such a community came to make music for itself. What was at issue was a set of musical conventions.⁵⁹

Frith also found the rock ideologue's understanding of these musical conventions wanting: the acceptance or rejection of any musical utterance was based entirely on a “judgment” that had no real foundation beyond that of the sound's ability to move a listener to accept the values of the ideological community.

After examining the discrepancies between the actual American folk movement and the ideology of the rock community, Frith turned his attention to the issues of class and the conflating of distinct music-historical repertoires: "The most interesting question about rock is its class basis: how did rock 'n' roll, the working-class form of the 1950s, get institutionalized as a feature of middle-class suburban youth culture?"⁶⁰ Frith answered partially that "the street experience of leisure . . . has been sentimentalised, distanced, organised into the rock 'n' roll experience. Rock 'n' roll, in other words, has celebrated street culture both for its participants and for its suburban observers, and by the mid-1960s such a celebration meant more to the latter group."⁶¹ A further inquiry, one sensitive to Marcus's argument and its success in the rock community, would address the manner by which the idea of the class- and generation-based community was transformed into that of the national community.

Understood differently, with Marcus's work in mind, Frith asks whether the meaning of "antiestablishment" in 1950s rock 'n' roll signified the same thing that it did after the student protest movement began in the early 1960s. Or perhaps the construction of rock 'n' roll as chronically antiestablishment and inevitably bound up with leftist politics is a manufactured historical image, crafted out of a self-willed blindness toward the historicity of the terminology. Frith described the historical transformation of rock 'n' roll into rock:

The rock 'n' roll experience was an experience of community—teenage community, dance-hall friendships—but this was not really central to it. The music created its community by keeping other people out, and the resulting society was transient—people grew up, tastes changed, real friends and relations were everywhere, at home and work. Rock 'n' roll made cultural sense not as an experience in itself, but in the context of a specific experience of work and power. When rock 'n' roll became rock in the 1960s it was removed from these contexts and drained of its original significance. Consciousness of class becomes a matter of self-indulgence; the rock 'n' roll experience was something which could be consumed; culture became commodity. . . . What has happened is less a change in the ways music is made than in the ways that it is used and interpreted.⁶²

Frith's regard for the social and historical specificity of different musical repertoires is exemplary. We may disagree with his particular way of constructing the disparate cultural movements, but the important thing is that they are treated separately, and that the social and political use of musical repertoires—in other words, rock 'n' roll's mediation through these writings—becomes a necessary historical complement to the music itself.

In the 1970s the proponents of the new institutionalized narrative—mainly middle-class adolescents, rock fans, now turned older—asserted that rock was keeping alive the only representation of democracy left in the “silent seventies,” when the establishment’s warped democratic ideal was holding the nation hypnotized. At the same time, these print-culture intellectuals found new vitality, historical sanctuary, and the support of a pseudo-nationalist ideology in their own literature’s glimpses backward. It would appear, however, that this construction of authentic rock ‘n’ roll as an unassimilable, quintessentially antiestablishment phenomenon could flourish institutionally only after the 1970s had triggered this response from a generation in search of its own cultural legitimacy. Writers from this generation capitalized on an ideology of folk music in order to explain rock ‘n’ roll as a music with direct ties to a fundamental American essence. For the historiographer, such motivations must themselves be regarded as significant components of the musical tradition’s history.

Beyond the scope of the history of rock ‘n’ roll, these ideas constitute one of the most common strategies involved in the making of countercultural narratives. Historical writing on rock ‘n’ roll illuminates the strange paradox of the American counterculture: on the one hand asserting an antiestablishment position on social, cultural, and political matters, while on the other arguing, in its historical constructions, for a totalizing description of a characteristic American essence. For the purposes of writing rock ‘n’ roll history from this perspective, then, the only authentic rock ‘n’ roll would be that which, through its association with the folk movement, identifies this specific national character. In this way, the work of such American thinkers as Emerson and Whitman can be related to the message of the historians of antiestablishment rock ‘n’ roll: that a society is best served by a constant infusion of artistic material deriving from the fundamental character of its folk.⁶³

Because of the fortuitous merger of rock ‘n’ roll and folk in the 1960s, this national character could be constructed from the ground up. A familiar syllogism thus arises: a nation’s soul is in its folk; rock ‘n’ roll music is folk music; therefore, rock ‘n’ roll is the discourse of the uniquely American experience. Further, the ardent appeals of the rock ‘n’ roll fan—who is able to tap into this national essence via the music’s visceral power—are transformed into powerful historical and critical tools. But the rock ‘n’ roll history proposed by Marcus and his colleagues in the “silent seventies” could only have been written after the folk-rock movement in the 1960s redefined that music’s sociohistorical claims. It is the inclusion of 1950s rock ‘n’ roll into this narrative and the widespread disparagement of other forms of “inauthentic” pop (and even some forms of rock) that did not conform to the antiestablishment claims that become the concern of

today's historian. Stated differently, the historiographical problem is the conflation of music-historical epochs—the manner by which the history of one period (and musical style) is told according to the terms of another, vastly different, system. The message is simple: the complex history of this musical tradition cannot be adequately addressed with a paradigm that is ahistorical.

Notes

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Finding accurate (and meaningful) terminology in the study of popular music has been problematic. On the one hand, we can differentiate between such styles as folk, rock, and rock 'n' roll on the basis of musical, historical, and sociological criteria. On the other, the popular usage of these and other terms has been so loose as to have warranted a dilemma. The wish to differentiate between "rock 'n' roll" and "rock," for instance, is made troublesome by the many sources and publications, such as *Rolling Stone* magazine, which in places refer to "rock 'n' roll" as the entire movement since the mid-1950s. In another famous history of music from this period, the author, Charlie Gillett, even argued for a distinction between "rock 'n' roll"—which "petered out around 1958"—and "rock and roll"—which "is a posthumous classification for music that shared similar qualities of 'rock 'n' roll.'" See Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock 'n' Roll*, rev. ed. (London: Souvenir Press, 1982), 3. Because of such discrepancies in the sources, in this essay I will, with a few pointed exceptions, refer to the entire movement as "rock 'n' roll."

1. Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1975; rev. 1982, 1990, 1997). Since *Mystery Train*, Marcus has written prolifically on American music and culture. However, because my concern in this essay is with the way in which rock 'n' roll history was constructed during the early to mid-1970s, this other work, while it retains several of his most characteristic metaphors, ploys, and so on, is not of relevance here.

2. Some details of Marcus's education and career can be found in the author's note in *Mystery Train*. See also Robert Draper, *Rolling Stone Magazine: The Uncensored History* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 40–42, 109–11. According to Draper, as an undergraduate at Berkeley in 1964, Marcus "fashioned his own major, American studies, then became a political science graduate student [there]" (109). By 1970, he was one of *Rolling Stone's* "most respected music critics" (41).

3. Marcus, 4.

4. Marcus's choices were indicative of his time: he wrote *Mystery Train* between fall 1972 and late summer 1974, when these artists were active and popular (see the author's note in *Mystery Train*). In revised versions, he includes an introductory note that describes the idiosyncrasies of these choices and notes the failure of certain of these artists to make as great an impact on the history of rock 'n' roll as he had originally prophesied. Marcus did not call his book a history, nor did his reviewers take it as such specifically. But its moves toward the manufacturing of a canon—be it personal, subjective, or heuristic—is unmistakable. Thus

Mystery Train functioned as a history at least in the sense that it told one music-historical tale by emphasizing certain participants and events over others. The book, however, certainly did not overtly seek or claim to be canon forming in the sense with which this term has been characterized in the current culture wars. Also at issue here is the multiplicity of potential historical explanations. I do not suggest that Marcus (or any other writer on the subject) claimed that his story was *the only* one available. But since his account and many others have remained influential in the popular understanding of rock 'n' roll's history and sociocultural significance, one would wish at least to understand the discursive power inherent in such constructions. It may be a commonplace assertion that "real" or "true" histories are an impossibility. The historian's task, however, is to understand the mechanisms behind the creation of the multiple accounts, and it is such a project that concerns me here.

5. Marcus, 4.

6. Marcus, 4.

7. In particular, these investigations have focused chiefly on the influential tradition of German music criticism of the nineteenth century. See, for example, Stephen Rumph, "A Kingdom Not of This World: The Political Context of E. T. A. Hoffmann's Beethoven Criticism," *19th Century Music* 19 (Summer 1995): 50–67; Sanna Pederson, "A. B. Marx, Berlin Concert Life, and German National Identity," *19th Century Music* 18 (Fall 1994): 87–107; and Scott Burnham, *Beethoven Hero* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995). My work here is meant to represent the kind of historiographical concerns expressed in these and other sources.

8. The polar positions on this topic have been voiced perhaps most strongly in the recent polemical debate between the musicologists Gary Tomlinson and Lawrence Kramer. See Kramer, "The Musicology of the Future," *repercussions* 1 (1992): 5–18, and the interchange that ensued: Tomlinson, "Musical Pasts and Postmodern Musicologies: A Response to Lawrence Kramer"; Kramer, "Music Criticism and the Postmodernist Turn: In Contrary Motion with Gary Tomlinson"; and "Gary Tomlinson Responds," *Current Musicology* 53 (1994): 18–24, 25–35, 36–40.

9. One central text for "institution theory" is Peter Bürger and Christa Bürger, "The Institution of Art as a Category of the Sociology of Literature: Toward a Theory of the Historical Transformation of the Social Function of Art," in Bürger and Bürger, *The Institutions of Art*, trans. Loren Kruger (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992). By "institution of art," the authors do not mean, in a mundane sense, "social formations such as publishers, bookstores, theatres, and museums" (4). Rather, they understand the idea of the institution *conceptually*; theirs is "a theory of the historical transformation in the social function of art" (5). The theoretical claim, then, is that the function of art or any cultural practice (in this case, rock 'n' roll) can be discerned at least in part in the narratives produced by its surrounding communities. Of course, we can acknowledge the existence of several narratives at any given time, which may indeed disagree with one another. My focus on a certain narrative here should not imply that "the institution of rock 'n' roll" is monological; it comprises many separate but interrelated spheres, so one encounters ambiguities in its messages. But, insofar as it makes truth claims, the narrative that I discuss here nevertheless operates as an influential force. For the Bürgers, whose work investigates the specific sphere of autonomous art, a multiplicity of institutionalized narratives is not problematic: "the singular term 'institution of art' highlights the hegemony of *one* conception of art. . . . This does not preempt the institutional claims of alternative conceptions. . . .

Nevertheless, we may assume that the hegemony of the autonomous conception of art compels rival conceptions to define themselves against it" (6–7). One further task, then, would be to discern the discursive power of the claims formulated by the "institution of rock 'n' roll." Such an investigation must initially take place under the auspices of reception history.

10. Marcus's career as a writer on rock 'n' roll began in the late 1960s, when he worked in San Francisco for the underground newspaper *Express-Times*. He began working at *Rolling Stone* in 1969 and also worked during this period at *Creem*, probably the second most influential rock 'n' roll publication in the country at this time. See Marcus, xv–xvii.

11. Popular histories of American culture and society written in the mid-1970s also highlighted this political situation. For instance, the historian Marty Jezer began writing his *The Dark Ages: Life in the United States 1945–1960* (Boston: South End Press, 1982) in 1973, "at a time when American society, polarized by the Vietnam War, seemed to be coming apart" (1). His main desire in explaining the period between 1945 and 1960, in fact, was "to explore the causes of the social and political disintegration" of the mid-1970s (1). In one of the most celebrated histories of rock 'n' roll, *The Sound of the City* (cited above), Charlie Gillett discusses at length an earlier crisis of rock 'n' roll's "authenticity"—that which took place at the end of the 1950s, when the first wave of rock 'n' roll began to lose steam as it was co-opted by the capitalist forces of the music industry. Of course, it is the area of politics that differentiates the crisis of the 1970s from this earlier one, when the discourse surrounding rock 'n' roll's waning "authenticity" centered mainly around its musical attributes.

12. Jim Miller, ed., *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll* (New York: Rolling Stone Press, 1976). During this same period, the magazine that most clearly rivaled *Rolling Stone*, *Creem*, also published its own book-form version of rock's history: *Rock Revolution* (New York: Popular Library, 1976). The editorial group of this smaller volume shared many of the contributors to the *Rolling Stone Illustrated History*: Lester Bangs, Dave Marsh, Ed Ward, and Greg Shaw.

13. Draper, 286.

14. The significant role of the blues in the history of rock 'n' roll is not, however, to be discounted. My point here is to emphasize the project by which the editors of *Rolling Stone* conflated various traditions of American popular music—subgenres, so to speak—into a single monolithic sociohistorical web. For one of the most recent discussions of these various streams (i.e., subgenres), their interconnectedness and their contrariety, see Philip Ennis, *The Seventh Stream: The Emergence of Rocknroll in American Popular Music* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1992). Ennis's work is useful to the investigation of the rock institution in that he defines a "musical stream" as "a palpable part of social reality, made up of several elements: an artistic system, an economic framework, and a social movement" (21). Accordingly, he argues that each of the various historical streams that together form the sphere of American popular music needs to be explained in its totality—that is, with sensitivity to what distinguishes each in terms of its production, distribution, and reception.

15. Greg Shaw, "The Teen Idols," in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History*, 112.

16. Greg Shaw, "The Instrumental Groups," in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History*, 124.

17. Shaw, "The Instrumental Groups," in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History*, 124–25. This same argument was used elsewhere in the volume by Marcus to criticize the post-*Rubber Soul*

work of the Beatles, who, it was argued, had sacrificed that crucial link with their fans as they recorded more and gave up the nightly live performances that had characterized their early years. See Marcus, "The Beatles," in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History*.

18. Mark Crispin Miller, "Where All the Flowers Went," *New York Review of Books*, 3 Feb. 1977, 31. Miller's title refers not only to the folk song made popular by Pete Seeger but also to the aging of rock's followers, their absorption into mainstream society, and their ideological shifts from countercultural demonstrators to more general, and in some cases academic, cultural commentators. Relevant to this discussion is Hans Robert Jauss's view that histories of the "authentic period" of any art form are always formulated under the assumption that the "authentic enterprise" had already reached its peak. See Hans Robert Jauss, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti, vol. 2 of *Theory and History of Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 3–45.

19. Along with *Mystery Train*, Miller discussed the following texts in his review essay: Jim Miller, ed., *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll* (New York: Rolling Stone Press, 1976); Tony Palmer, *All You Need Is Love: The Story of Popular Music* (New York: Penguin, 1976); Dick Clark, *Rock, Roll, and Remember* (New York: Cromwell, 1976); Roy Carr, *The Rolling Stones: An Illustrated Record* (New York: Harmony Books, 1976); Ben Fong-Torres, ed., *What's That Sound?* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1976); and Anthony Fawcett, *John Lennon: One Day at a Time* (New York: Grove Press, 1976).

20. This type of criticism might be characterized with the term "fan-as-critic," a paraphrase of some of Theodor Adorno's comments on the problems in distinguishing between the jazz fan and the jazz "expert" or critic. See, for instance, his "Perennial Fashion—Jazz," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 119–32. Of course, such a formulation is problematic in today's academic climate, with competing critical methodologies claiming social and political legitimacy for their own system. I acknowledge this problem but stand with those who maintain that distance from one's subject of study is necessary to yield significant historical-critical observations. For a sharp and especially insightful criticism of the trend in cultural studies to remain in fan mode while writing cultural criticism, see Jochen Schulte-Sasse, "Can the Disempowered Read Mass-Produced Narratives in Their Own Voice?" *Cultural Critique* (fall 1988): 171–99.

21. Frank Rich, "Elvis Presley as Moby Dick," *Village Voice*, 26 May 1975, 41.

22. Marcus, xvii.

23. F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), xv.

24. Rich, 41.

25. Matthiessen, xiv.

26. Marcus, xv.

27. See Tony Pinkney, *D. H. Lawrence* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990).

28. D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Viking Press, 1923), 2. It seems as if Lawrence had taken his cue from Hawthorne, who was obsessively concerned with the idea of a moral in the preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*. Hawthorne had written: "Many writers lay very great stress upon some definite moral purpose, at which they profess to aim their works. Not to be deficient in this particular, the

author has provided himself with a moral—the truth, namely, that the wrong-doing of one generation lives into the successive ones, and, divesting itself of every temporary advantage, becomes a pure and uncontrollable mischief.” See Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* (New York: Heritage Press, 1935), xvi.

29. The tendency to singularize the American experience, a position commonly attributed to the field of American Studies for obvious reasons, is as old as the nation itself. Often hostile to European intervention in matters of cultural criticism (one manifestation, perhaps, of Americans’ anxious defensiveness regarding their deference to European culture in general), exceptionalist critics maintain that the American model is unique and therefore misunderstood by critics who espouse foreign paradigms. In the years after World War I, for instance, American intellectuals responded to foreign ideological explanations for the gargantuan world crisis by thematizing the democratic and egalitarian nature of American culture. On this point, see David Noble, “The Reconstruction of Progress: Charles Beard, Richard Hofstadter, and Postwar Historical Thought,” in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, ed. Lary May (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 61–75. American exceptionalist scholarship also thrived during the Cold War, when liberal thinkers, confronting the anxieties of an increasingly internationalist governmental policy, countered this political maneuvering with a narrative that constructed the people of our nation as distinct from those Europeans who had succumbed to the forces of fascism and Stalinism. See Thomas Hill Schaub, “Introduction: The Liberal Narrative,” in *American Fiction in the Cold War* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991). Even today, exceptionalism is thriving. In a recent essay on American literary studies, Philip Fisher, professor of English at Harvard University, suggests that “ideology,” in the strict sense of the word, is an impossibility in American society. Fisher claims that the “speculative society” fostered by advanced American capitalism is a force strong enough—and rooted so deeply in our tradition—to dispel any single model of domination and power, such as those offered by the Frankfurt School critics and, later, Michel Foucault. He finds in the absence of a centralized American state a system of multiple “rhetorics” that function more or less independently and locally in the creation and maintenance of America’s unique culture. See Philip Fisher, “American Literary and Cultural Studies Since the Civil War,” in *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992), 232–50.

30. Lawrence, 146.

31. Marcus, 6.

32. Marcus, 163. Lawrence’s essay appears in *Studies in Classic American Literature*.

33. Lawrence, viii.

34. Lawrence, 146–47.

35. In lamenting the absence in the 1970s of the “grander mythic dimensions” of rock ‘n’ roll of the 1950s and 1960s, Marcus argued that “so much of the rock ‘n’ roll of the post-Beatles era is closed-off and one dimensional, like the politics it serenades and reinforces [and] the aesthetic of solipsism is freezing the imagination and our ability to respond openly” (107). The “problem” of rock ‘n’ roll in the 1970s—particularly progressive or art rock—is a vast one. Compare this problem with the analogous situation at the end of the 1950s, when critics bemoaned Elvis Presley’s “decline toward melodramatic popular songs.” See, for instance, Gillett’s discussion of this period in *The Sound of the City*, 55.

36. Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960), xi.
37. Marcus, xvii.
38. Fiedler, xxii.
39. Marcus, 22.
40. Marcus, 21.
41. Fiedler, vii.
42. Lawrence, 58. Again, Lawrence is drawing on Hawthorne. In the same preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne had written: "When romances do really teach anything, or produce any effective operation, it is usually through a far more subtle process than the ostensible one. The author has considered it hardly worth his while, therefore, relentlessly to impale the story with its moral, as with an iron rod—or, rather, as by sticking a pin through a butterfly—thus at once depriving it of life, and causing it to stiffen in an ungainly and unnatural attitude. A high truth, indeed, fairly, finely, and skillfully wrought out, brightening at every step, and crowning the final development of a work of fiction, may add an artistic glory, but is never any truer, and seldom any more evident, at the last page than at the first." Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, xvii.
43. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Knopf, 1963).
44. Hofstadter, 21, 7.
45. Marcus, 27.
46. Marcus, 128.
47. Sacvan Berkovich, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), xii, xiv.
48. Berkovich, 11.
49. Berkovich, 11.
50. Marcus, 20.
51. Berkovich, xi.
52. Berkovich, xiv.
53. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991).
54. Marcus, 6.
55. Simon Frith, "'The Magic That Can Set You Free': The Ideology of Folk and the Myth of the Rock Community," *Popular Music* 1 (1981): 159.
56. Frith, 159.
57. Frith, 168.
58. Frith, 159.
59. Frith, 159–60.
60. Frith, 167.

61. Frith, 168.

62. Frith, 166.

63. For an excellent discussion of the sources of this intellectual position, see Gene Bluestein, *The Voice of the Folk: Folklore and American Literary Theory* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972). Bluestein's work is most illuminating in its tracing of the folkloristic position from Herder through the Americanists discussed here. His discussion primarily concerns the literary folklore tradition. But his arguments pertain with equal significance to the musical sphere. For instance, Bluestein argues that "a major tendency to identify the folklore of a supposed outcast and lowly segment of our people as the locus of the highest spiritual and esthetic values . . . , first affirmed by Emerson and Whitman, was reinforced and expanded by the work of John and Alan Lomax" (116). The pertinence of this passage for the history of rock 'n' roll becomes clear when one recalls that the very first paragraphs in the first chapter of *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll—"Rock Begins,"* by Robert Palmer—detail the very same work by the Lomaxes that Bluestein discusses here.