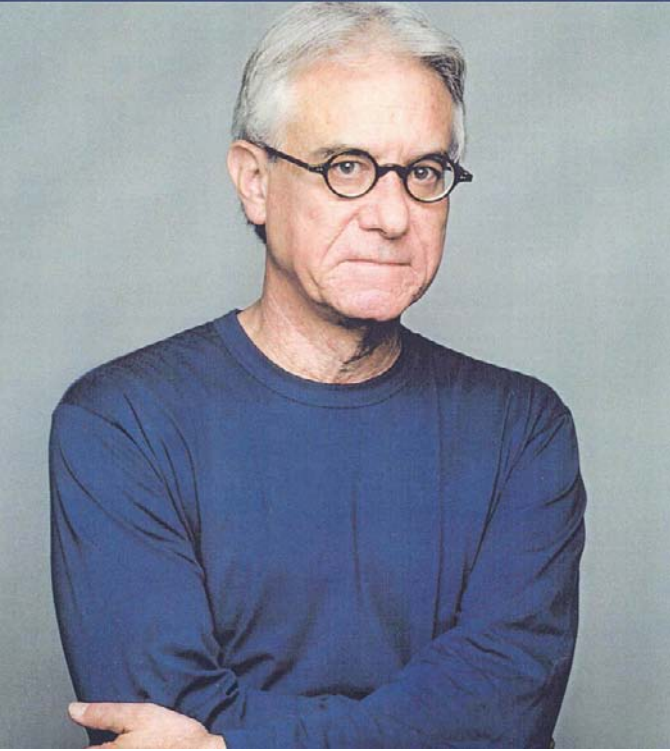


CONVERSATIONS WITH

Greil Marcus

EDITED BY JOE BONOMO



Conversations with Greil Marcus

Literary Conversations Series
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Conversations with Greil Marcus

Edited by Joe Bonomo

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Dead Elvis: A Chronicle of a Cultural Obsession. New York: Doubleday, 1991.

In the Fascist Bathroom: Punk in Pop Music, 1977–92, New York: Doubleday, 1993. (Originally published as *Ranters and Crowd Pleasers*)

The Dustbin of History. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.

The Old, Weird America: The World of Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes. New York: Henry Holt, 1997. (Originally published as *Invisible Republic*)

Double Trouble: Bill Clinton and Elvis Presley in a Land of No Alternatives. New York: Henry Holt, 2000.

The Manchurian Candidate. London: British Film Institute, 2002.

Like a Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads. New York: PublicAffairs, 2005.

The Shape of Things to Come: Prophecy and the American Voice. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2006

When That Rough God Goes Riding: Listening to Van Morrison. New York: PublicAffairs, 2010.

Bob Dylan by Greil Marcus: Writings 1968–2010. New York: PublicAffairs, 2010.

The Doors: A Lifetime of Listening to Five Mean Years. New York: PublicAffairs, 2011.

AS EDITOR:

Stranded. New York: Knopf, 1979.

Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung (by Lester Bangs). New York: Knopf, 1987.

With Sean Wilentz, *The Rose & the Briar: Death, Love and Liberty in the American Ballad*. New York: Norton, 2004.

Best Music Writing 2009. New York: Da Capo, 2009.

With Werner Sollors, *A New Literary History of America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.

Greil Marcus's books have been published and reissued throughout the world, often in updated editions. See Chronology for details.

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Introduction

“There is an infinite amount of meaning about anything,” Greil Marcus said to an interviewer. “And I free associate.” For more than four decades, Marcus has explored the connections among figures, sounds, and events in culture, relating unrelated points of departure, mapping alternate histories and surprising correspondences. He is a unique and influential voice in American letters, and a collection of his interviews is overdue.

Marcus was born in 1945 in San Francisco, California, and he lived there and in Palo Alto, Menlo Park, and Berkeley, where he settled and wrote until 2010 (he currently lives in Oakland). He received his B.A. in American studies in 1967 and, a year later, his M.A. in political science, both from the University of California at Berkeley. In 1968 he published his first piece, a review of *Magic Bus: The Who on Tour*, in *Rolling Stone*, where he became the first records editor. Renowned for his ongoing “Real Life Top Ten” column, Marcus has been a writer for a number of magazines and websites, and is the author and editor of eighteen books. His critique is egalitarian: no figure, object, or event is too high, low, celebrated, or obscure for an inquiry into the ways in which our lives can open outward, often unexpectedly. When Marcus listens to a song, reads a book, or watches a film, he hopes to be surprised, allowing cultural associations, suggestions, and evocations to materialize on the surface of his thinking, whether he’s essaying the Sex Pistols, Bill Clinton, Appalachian balladry, Elvis’s legacy, a contemporary American novel, or last week’s Top 40 hit. His work is characterized by native curiosity and precise patience borne out of respect for these as-yet-unheard correspondences, for the ways in which assumptions about a given text might prismatically move through that text to project revelation and discovery.

Little of Marcus’s personal life is revealed in these wide-ranging discussions. Skeptical of the autobiographical impulse, Marcus remarked to Tony Fafoglia in 1988:

I think that if you want to use the word “I” in a piece, you have to earn the right. I don’t mean that you have to be around a long time. I mean that in terms of the writing of a given piece, you have to justify leaping out, and you have to see that somehow the authority is backed up. You can’t just assume that the reader ought to give a shit about you or anyone else.

Two years later, in a conversation not included in this book, Marcus was struck by interviewer Lorenzo Buj’s interpretation of a line in *Lipstick Traces*: “Lost children seek their fathers, and fathers seek their lost children, but nobody really looks like anybody else. So all, fixed on the wrong faces, pass each other by.” Buj pointedly asked Marcus if he is one of these sons or fathers. Marcus replied, “Well, to explain that passage I’d have to get very personal,”

and I’m not going to do it. That is one of those things that any writer stumbles on. That’s a line I wrote, and I wrote it because it made sense of what I was trying to explain and describe at that point in the book, with no personal motive for me at all. . . . And it was only later, rereading that passage that I realized that was probably the most autobiographical or confessional line in the entire book.

A decade and a half later, Marcus remarked to Oliver Hall, “I just have a very strong sense of privacy. There are things about my family background that I find actually interesting, and sometimes I talk about them, but I don’t think my life itself is very interesting.”

Marcus sifts these “things” in his important 2008 memoir “Tied to History,” revealing a complex past as the source of lifelong critical passions. “I’m perfectly aware that there is this theme running through all of my work, and I know what its sources are,” he acknowledged to Asbjørn Grønstad and Øyvind Vågnes in 2010. “I know what its personal neurotic sources are, and I’ve even written about that recently. I took me a long time. I didn’t think that it was anyone’s business or that anyone would care. But then there was an occasion to do it, so I did it.” The occasion was “Telling Childhood: New Stories about a Strange Country,” an event in 2006 at the Richard Hugo House in Seattle where a group of writers gathered to discuss childhood. “As time for the talk approached I realized I had nothing to say,” Marcus told me. “I knew nothing in particular about childhood, it wasn’t something I thought about. So my own childhood was all I had to work with. I don’t write about myself, and I’m not particularly interested in myself, so this was not exactly something I was inclined to do. But it seemed to reach people

very directly, including my own brother, oldest except for me, Bill Marcus, who died in 2007.” Marcus read the talk again a year later at the New York University Humanities Center in a series organized by Lawrence Weschler. Wendy Lesser ran the piece in the Spring 2008 issue of the *Threepenny Review*.

“Usually people write memoirs—this is my sense anyway—out of a great sense of self-importance,” Marcus remarked to Robert Loss at *PopMatters* in 2010, “or because it’s a way of justifying themselves in public for things that really can’t be justified. Most memoirs are exercises in self-congratulation.” Yet “Tied to History” is anything but narcissistic. In the essay, Marcus reveals that his father Greil Gerstley died in the Philippines typhoon that sank the *USS Hull* destroyer in 1944; Marcus’s mother Eleanore was three months pregnant with Greil. In 1948, she married Gerald Marcus, and Greil was adopted and his surname changed. The tragedy of the *Hull* and of Greil Gerstley’s fate was never discussed in the family, a covert narrative which came to define Marcus. “The situation never changed,” he writes in “Tied to History.” “When I grew older, the habit of not speaking about the past became a kind of prison. I didn’t know how to break out of it. I didn’t ask, and nobody told.” This absence, he writes,

lay behind what I ended up doing with my life: rewriting the past, pursuing an obsession with secret histories, with stories untold—with what, to me, were deep, fraternal connections between people who never met: such people as the Dadaist Richard Huelsenbeck in Zurich in 1916, the revolutionary theorist Guy Debord in Paris in 1954, and the punk singer Johnny Rotten in London in 1976.

Marcus’s fixation with the past originates in this shadowy memory. “I used the cultivated mystery of my own past as a spur to reconstructing events both as they happened and as they didn’t—as they might have,” he says, adding: “I became a writer, and this is always the route I’ve traveled.”

Marcus learned more about the *Hull* incident one evening when he watched a television documentary; later, he learned more from a historian who shared with Marcus harrowing firsthand accounts of *Hull* survivors. Referencing the opening sequence of David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet*, its imagery associated not with any individual’s past but with American culture at large, Marcus acknowledges that as he now possesses the facts of the tragedy, he “can make sense of them, or hold them in my mind, only as scenes from movies—the likes of *The Cruel Sea*, *Victory at Sea*, the documentaries *The World at War* or *Why We Fight*—or from the movie that, someday, someone

might make.” He adds: “But if any such movie were ever made, the story that I have, as a personal story, would be even less mine than it is now—and the truth is that, now, it isn’t mine at all. It is a contrivance—it is a story that I might now remember, but don’t.” In “Tied to History” Marcus essays the random ways in which the past evolves into the present, and the ways in which what we create in the present—whether it’s a public act or a private secret—evolves into a future that is impossible to know.

Marcus is interviewed often, usually on the occasion of a new book. In choosing the fourteen pieces included here I selected among interviews ranging from 1980 to 2011. A conversation with Marcus is marked by a complex and lively engagement with issues that, given its origins in popular culture, never strays into rarefied ether. “Real ideas,” he argued to Thom Jurek, “are exchanged in plain language.” Marcus has been blessed with smart, well-prepared interviewers; his answers are erudite and carefully composed, conversational and meaty. It’s helpful to the reader that Marcus speaks in paragraphs, and that he’s well versed in the vernacular: his answers are driven by a voice that’s inquiring, intelligent, and never condescending. He’s funny, too.

In conversation, Marcus might discuss a current book or column as well as his critical methodology and broad approach to his material, signaled by a generosity of spirit leavened with aggressive critical standards. “I try and write as if the distinctions that are always being thrown in our faces between high culture and popular culture, fine art and pop art, are meaningless,” he told Brent Brambury, “because I don’t hear them, I don’t see them.” To Mark Kitchell: “My role as a critic is to intensify the experience other people might have with a given incident or object.” To John King, in an early interview: “I can’t write about music in a purely aesthetic manner. It doesn’t intrigue me.” He was quick to insist to Fafoglia several years later that, “The last thing I want to do is lead someone not to enjoy something they in fact already do enjoy.”

In editing *Conversations with Greil Marcus* I strove to maintain balance among decades, books, and well-known and obscure subjects, to select interviews that moved between a book under discussion and expansive, inter-related issues, and to minimize the inevitable repetitions that occur over decades. There are radio interviews here as well as print and online interviews, and I’ve blended recognizable sources with the less well-known, conventional formats with the unconventional. It’s interesting to watch Marcus react in real time to hot-button issues of the era (i.e., federal funding for the

arts, censorship, “We Are the World,” Reagan/Bush), name and honor his influences and contemporaries, wrestle with his ambivalence with rap and hip-hop, and defend his steadfast and frankly surprising dismissal of the New York punk scene of the late-1970s, an unorthodox position that places him at odds with many cultural observers.

Keith Richards has said that rock and roll is music for the neck down; Marcus has spent the better part of his career expanding that definition. Though he’s considered by most people a music critic—“Most of the time music is where I start,” he concedes to David Weich. “Something musical makes a breach, opens up questions that I wind up pursuing”—these interviews illuminate Marcus’s considerable breadth of interests and knowledge. He’s equally poised discussing film, literature, or politics as he is Dylan, punk, or indie rock; his expansive co-interview with noted scholar Werner Sollors on the occasion of *A New Literary History of America* serves as a primer on American studies. Mark Kitchell’s interview from 1984, published here for the first time, is a wonderfully conversational, lengthy account of Marcus’s undergraduate experience with the Free Speech Movement at University of California at Berkeley, an event to which Marcus acknowledges comparing everything in his life. The extended interview at RockCritics.com from 2002 is especially lively, given that various readers emailed questions to which Marcus responded, and the resulting range in content and tone of the questions—some deferential, some provocative—leads to a spiky, vigorous conversation.

No single collection of interviews with Marcus can be comprehensive; his interviewers are too numerous; his erudition too broad. The possibilities for conversations are abundant: for the record, I hope that future interviewers ask Marcus about the cultural value of Flannery O’Connor, the novels of Larry Brown, Marcus’s Bay Area neighbors Green Day, collage artist Winston Smith, Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, Davis Grubb’s *The Night of the Hunter*, and Michael Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*. Regardless of the subject, Marcus is pointed, provocative, obstinate, witty, and discursive in these interviews, never sacrificing a thoughtful response for a canned answer, always eager to do a conversation justice, to explore the deep mysteries his subjects embody.

I have many people to thank in editing *Conversations with Greil Marcus*, first among them Greil himself, who was enthusiastic and obliging from the initial stages of the book to its completion. Early in the process, with help from his daughter Cecily, he sent me print and radio interviews, several of

which would've been exceedingly tough to locate given their short circulation life, and directed me to others; he also generously offered to fact-check the manuscript. His cooperation was invaluable. I'm grateful also to the many people who've asked Marcus thoughtful questions over the decades, to Walter Biggins, Anne Stascavage, and the staff at the University Press of Mississippi, to the staff at Founders Library at Northern Illinois University, and to all in low and high places who helped during the arduous permissions process.

Above all thanks to Amy, who was here from the very start of this book a long time ago, and whose love, support, enthusiasm, and critical eyes were crucial along the way. Thanks, favorite.

JB

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Key Resources

The following are important interviews with Marcus that because of space limitations I could not include in the book (listed in order of publication/broadcast).

- Interview, National Public Radio, broadcast December 9, 1980.
- "A Connoisseur of the Void: A Conversation with Greil Marcus," Gary Kamiya, *Fris-ko*, Summer 1989.
- Interview [with Phil Proctor and Peter Bergman of Firesign Theatre], *Roger Steffens Show*, KRCW-FM Los Angeles, CA, broadcast April 20, 1989.
- Interview, Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio, broadcast June 19, 1990.
- "Hearsay & Heresy: An Interview with Greil Marcus," Chris McAuliffe, *Tension* (Australia), August–September 1990.
- "An Interview with Greil Marcus," Lorenzo Buj, *Border/Lines*. Winter 1990/91.
- "A Hunka' Hunka' Burnin' Text: Greil Marcus on Dead Elvis and Other Pop Icons," *Lingua Franca*, August 1991.
- "Anarchy in the U.S.: Music, Film, and the Breakdown of Society," Ted Drozdowski, *Boston Phoenix*, November 15, 1991.
- "Rock of Ages: Berkeley Writer Greil Marcus Talks about What Elvis, Madonna, Nirvana, and Jesus Have in Common," Gina Arnold, *Express: The East Bay's Free Weekly*, February 21, 1992.
- "Fictional Elvis," Julian Stringer /1993, *Million* (U.K.), July–August 1992.
- Interview, Gabriel Roth, unpublished, 1993.
- "A Surfer on the Zeitgeist," Andy Beckett, *Independent* (U.K.), May 23, 1993.
- Interview, Ray Pratt and Sarah Vowell, KGLT-FM Boseman, MT, broadcast April 28, 1993.
- "Down the Rabbit Hole with Greil Marcus," J. W. Bonner, *Green Line*, September–October 1993.
- "The Critic at Large: An Interview with Greil Marcus," Dave Haslam, *Puncture*, 1st Quarter 1994.
- "Lipstick Traces," Andrew Goodwin, *SOMA*, Spring 1994.
- "Bob Dylan's Invisible Republic: Interview with Greil Marcus," Paolo Vites, *Jam Magazine* (Italy), 1997.
- "A writer writes to be read': Interview with Greil Marcus," Nate Seltnerich, *Rock-Critics.com*, 2004.
- "Interview: Greil Marcus," Christopher Gray, *Phoenix*, January 21, 2009.

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Chronology

- 1945 Greil David Gerstley born June 19 in San Francisco, the only child of Greil and Eleanore (Hyman) Gerstley. Gerstley dies in the Philippines typhoon that sank the *USS Hull* destroyer in 1944. Eleanore marries Gerald Marcus in 1948; Greil is adopted and his surname is changed. Family grows to include three more boys and one girl. Marcus lives in San Francisco until 1950, Palo Alto 1950–55, Menlo Park 1955–63, Berkeley 1963 until 2010 when he moves to Oakland. Raised as a Stanford fan, immediately switches allegiance to Berkeley in 1963 when he attends University of California at Berkeley.
- 1966 Marries Jenelle Bernstein, June 26.
- 1967 Receives B.A. in American studies (individual major) from the University of California at Berkeley.
- 1968 Receives M.A. in political science from the University of California at Berkeley. Publishes first piece, a review of *Magic Bus: The Who on Tour*, in *Rolling Stone*, where he becomes the first records editor. Becomes music columnist for the *San Francisco Express-Times*.
- 1969 Daughter Emily born December 10.
- 1970 Begins five-year contributing editorship at *Creem*.
- 1971 Teaches American studies honors seminar at University of California at Berkeley.
- 1972 Daughter Cecily born April 12.
- 1974 Writes television column for *City* (San Francisco)
- 1975 Publishes his first book, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music* with Dutton. The book comes out in revised editions in the United States in 1982, 1990, 1997, and 2008, and is published in the U.K., Germany, Spain, Greece, the Netherlands, Japan, Italy, China, and France. Begins a five-year stint as a book columnist for *Rolling Stone*.
- 1978 Begins writing “Real Life Rock” column for *New West* (later *California*) (Los Angeles), reprinted in *Music Magazine* (Tokyo).

- 1979 Edits *Stranded* with Knopf; editions appear in 1996 and 2007. Joins Board of Directors of Pagnol & Cie, operators of Chez Panisse restaurant in Berkeley.
- 1981 Serves as book columnist for *California*.
- 1983 Begins writing music column for *Artforum* (New York). Named to Board of Directors, National Book Critics Circle. Serves until 1989.
- 1986 Begins writing “Real Life Rock Top Ten” column for the *Village Voice*.
- 1987 Edits *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung*, by Lester Bangs, for Knopf. The book is published in the U.K., France, and Brazil.
- 1989 Publishes *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* with Harvard University Press. The book is published in the U.K., Italy, Germany, Spain, France, Portugal, and Turkey. Begins writing “Real Life Rock Top Ten” column for *Artforum*. Co-curates exhibition *On the Passage of a Few People through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International, 1957–1972*. Musée national de l’art moderne, Paris, at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, and at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston.
- 1991 Publishes *Dead Elvis: A Chronicle of a Cultural Obsession* with Doubleday. The book is published in the U.K., Germany, Japan, Austria, and France. Begins writing a cultural column for *San Francisco Focus*.
- 1992 Begins writing “Days between Stations” column for *Interview*. Named to Executive Board of College of Letters and Science, University of California at Berkeley; serves until 1998. Member of Critics Chorus in Rock Bottom Reminders, all-author rock ‘n’ roll band.
- 1993 Publishes *Ranters and Crowd Pleasers: Punk in Pop Music, 1977–92* with Doubleday, published in the U.K. as *In the Fascist Bathroom: Writings on Punk, 1977–92*. The book is published in Germany and Brazil. Soundtrack for *Lipstick Traces* released on Rough Trade Records.
- 1995 Publishes *The Dustbin of History* with Harvard. The book is published in the U.K., Germany, and Argentina.
- 1997 Publishes *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes* with Henry Holt. The book is published in the U.K., the Netherlands, Italy, Germany, France, and China. Appointed Regents Lecturer in American Studies, University of California at Berkeley.

- 1998 Curates *1948—From the Permanent Collection* at Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, January-March.
- 1999 Theatrical adaptation of *Lipstick Traces* staged in Austin, Texas, and New York City by Rude Mechanicals of Austin. *Dead Elvis* reissued by Harvard. Begins writing “Real Life Rock Top Ten” column for Salon.com.
- 2000 Picador USA reissues *Invisible Republic* as *The Old, Weird America: The World of Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes*. Publishes *Double Trouble: Bill Clinton and Elvis Presley in a Land of No Alternatives* with Henry Holt, also in the U.K. Appointed Chevalier de l’ordre des arts et des lettres, République Française. Teaches undergraduate seminar “Prophecy and the American Voice” at Berkeley, and again in the fall as Anschutz Distinguished Fellow in American Studies at Princeton, where he also teaches a faculty seminar on Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music*.
- 2001 Restaging of *Lipstick Traces* in New York City, and later in Columbus, Ohio; Iowa City; Minneapolis; Seattle; Los Angeles; Raleigh, North Carolina; Chicago; and Salzburg, Austria.
- 2002 Publishes *The Manchurian Candidate* with British Film Institute.
- 2003 University of California Press publishes *The Manchurian Candidate*. Begins writing “Real Life Top Ten” column for *City Pages* (Minneapolis).
- 2004 Edits, with Sean Wilentz, *The Rose & the Briar: Death, Love and Liberty in the American Ballad* with Norton. Soundtrack to *The Rose & the Briar* issued by Columbia Records.
- 2005 Publishes *Like a Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads* with PublicAffairs. The book is published in the U.K., Germany, France, Italy, Japan, and Spain.
- 2006 Publishes *The Shape of Things to Come: Prophecy and the American Voice* with Farrar Straus Giroux. The book is published in the U.K. and France. Begins writing “Elephant Dancing” column for *Interview*. Teaches graduate seminar “Prophecy and the American Voice” at University of California at Berkeley. Teaches seminar “Practical Criticism” as Ferris Professor at Princeton. Presents “Obsessive Memories” at “Telling Childhood: New Stories about a Strange Country” at the Richard Hugo House in Seattle. Eleanore Marcus dies December 25.
- 2007 Teaches lecture course “The Old Weird America: Music as Demo-

- cratic Speech, from the Commonplace Song to Bob Dylan” as Distinguished Visiting Professor at the New School in New York, and again in 2009, 2010, 2011, and 2012.
- 2008 Begins writing “Real Life Rock Top Ten” column for *The Believer*. Appointed Una Lecturer, University of California at Berkeley. Teaches seminar “The Old Weird America” as Winton Chair Fellow at the University of Minnesota. Publishes “Obsessive Memories” as “Tied to History” in the *Threepenny Review*.
- 2009 Edits, with Werner Sollors, *A New Literary History of America* with Harvard. Publishes updated and redesigned twentieth anniversary edition of *Lipstick Traces* with Harvard. Edits *Best Music Writing* with Da Capo Press. Teaches seminars on cultural criticism at the New School, New York City, and again in 2010 and 2011, and at New York University in 2010 and 2011.
- 2010 Publishes *When That Rough God Goes Riding: Listening to Van Morrison* with PublicAffairs. The book is published in the U.K. and Germany (editions in France and Italy not yet published). Publishes *Bob Dylan by Greil Marcus: Writing 1968–2010* with PublicAffairs. The book is published in the U.K. and Italy (editions France and Germany not yet published).
- 2011 Publishes *The Doors: A Lifetime of Listening to Five Mean Years* with PublicAffairs (editions in U.K., France, Germany, Spain, Italy, and China not yet published). Picador USA publishes revised edition of *The Old, Weird America*. Gerald Marcus dies March 25.

Conversations with Greil Marcus

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A Critic on His Music

John King/1981

From *OutTakes*, January 16, 1981. Reprinted by permission of the author.

Not many rock critics have made a name for themselves. The musical form is over twenty-five years old, yet most reviews still consist either of strings of superlatives (“the awesome vocal is propelled by thunderous guitars and a pounding bass”) or snide putdowns (“Dobrewski sings like an albino orangutan in heat”). Intelligent, vivid writing is all but unknown.

It does exist, however, and Greil Marcus proves it. For twelve years he has written about the music and the world it affects; he writes regularly for everything from *Rolling Stone* to the *Village Voice* to *New West*, the California magazine where his “Real Life Rock” column appears.

He has also published two books recently. One he edited: *Stranded* (1979), for which he had twenty rock critics write essays on the one album each would take to a desert island. One he wrote: *Mystery Train* (1975). The latter is nothing less than the finest study done of popular music’s complex role in American society.

“Well, then, this is a book about rock and roll—some of it—and America. . . . It is an attempt to broaden the context in which music is heard; to deal with rock and roll not as youth culture, or counter culture, but simply as American culture.”

This goal would not even *occur* to most rock critics, but—using Elvis Presley, The Band, Sly Stone, and Randy Newman as examples—Marcus succeeded in showing how rock ties into American life and American dreams.

“Echoing through all of rock and roll is the simple demand for peace of mind and a good time. While the demand is easy to make, nothing is more complex than to try to make it real and live it out. . . . Finally, the music must provoke as well as delight, disturb as well as comfort, create as well as sus-

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