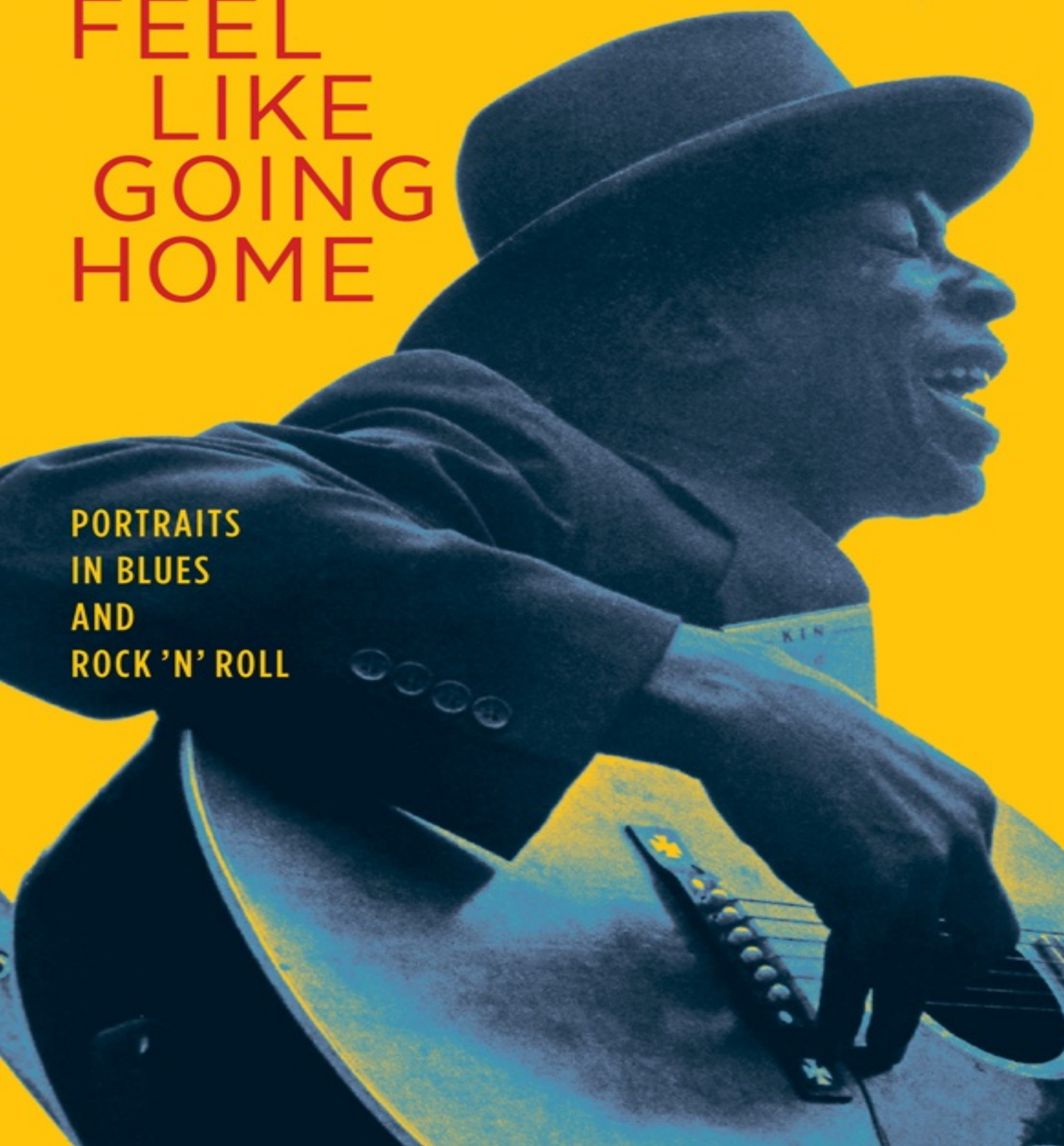


PETER GURALNICK

FEEL
LIKE
GOING
HOME

PORTRAITS
IN BLUES
AND
ROCK 'N' ROLL



Feel Like Going Home

Portraits in Blues and Rock 'n' Roll

Peter Guralnick



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[Photograph by Val Wilmer](#)

PREFACE



Photograph by Val Wilmer

I started writing about music as soon as anyone would listen. Long before the existence of *Crawdaddy!* or *Fusion* or *Rolling Stone* I wanted to do a history of Sun Records; I had mapped out the biography of Skip James. I had this intimation that what I was interested in could be of importance to other people, too.

When I did start writing serious uncritical pieces about my heroes in blues and rock 'n' roll, my intentions, I thought, were of the purest. I sought to publicize the artists; I wanted to call the attention of others to what seemed to me worthwhile; I tried to repay a little the enormous debt I owed to the musicians for opening up my universe.

Nothing ever turns out to be that simple. Writing, of course, is its own reward; in publication lie the pitfalls. It's flattering, after all, to see your own name in print. You become aware of the small degree of power that you exert. And although I have never written any piece out of anything less than personal enthusiasm, it is impossible to avoid becoming manipulative at least to a certain extent. At some point you even begin to get paid.

This book sprang originally out of a suggestion made many editors and over two years ago. A large publisher, riding the crest of the new youth market, wanted "the definitive history of the blues." I wasn't interested in that. Even ignoring my own lack of qualifications for the job, I tried to explain the breadth of the subject, also that it had been covered, probably as well as it could be, in Paul Oliver's *Story of the Blues*. My objections were waved aside. Develop your own treatment, I was told. Well, ultimately, this book is the result.

It is a book of profiles intended to show a kind of historical progression. This progression I hope will be obvious from the profiles themselves and from the very abbreviated history in [Chapter 1](#) which traces the development of the blues from traditional country roots up through Memphis and Chicago and into the first heady days of rock 'n' roll. Rock 'n' roll, of course, I took to be an extension of the blues tradition, and I am sorry circumstances prevented me from including Little Richard or Chuck Berry as an example of the black artist's adaptation of his own cultural experience for white popular consumption. The stories are interrelated in any case, and undoubtedly the reader will make his own connections as well.

Much more important than any specific progression, however, are the musicians themselves. Every one of them is an artist I've known and admired, if only from afar, for years. Every one of them is, I think, a significant artist; every one of them deserves your attention. What I wanted to do was present them in a way in which they had not been seen before, within the context of their own time and world. I wanted to explore in some ways how that world shaped them and how they in turn shaped it.

Obviously there are limitations to this kind of approach. Their experience is, in almost every case, foreign to my own, and I have had to make certain imaginative leaps even to begin to comprehend it for myself. It's an experience, on the other hand, in which I have steeped myself for the last twelve years, and I thought it important for this reason to give the reader a little bit of a clue to my own background and bias, the viewpoint by which the framework is necessarily limited. [Chapter 1](#), "Rock 'n' Roll Music," is an attempt to do just that and, I hope, in the process to suggest a kind of portrait of an era. Because it is that era, after all, which not only killed off the blues as a popular music but has now resurrected it, fifteen years later, out of guilt perhaps and out of necessity.

In the end, though, it's the music that counts. If this book moves you to listen, if it causes you to pay at least that minimal tribute to each artist's work, then it will have served some real purpose. Otherwise it's just empty rhetoric, and everyone knows we don't need more of that.

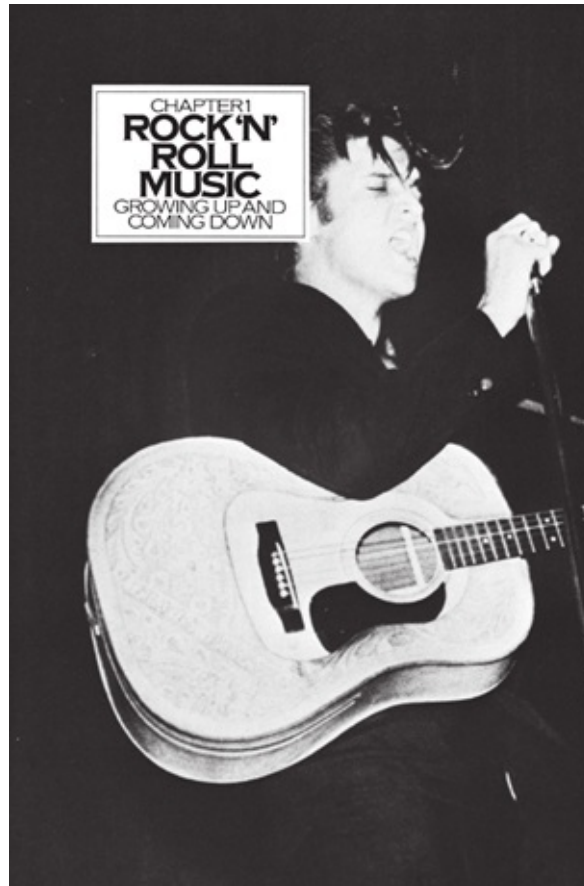
Peter Guralnick

Newburyport, Massachusetts

May 21, 1971

CHAPTER 1

ROCK 'N' ROLL MUSIC
GROWING UP AND COMING DOWN



[Elvis Presley/Michael Ochs Archives](#)

Like nearly everyone I knew I was unsure how to react to rock 'n' roll. I was twelve when Elvis scored his first success, and he wasn't much older. The excitement, the exhilaration, the *novelty* of the moment is something it would be impossible to recapture.

"Hail, hail, rock 'n' roll/Deliver us from the days of old." Rock 'n' roll *did* deliver us from the days of old in more ways than it could ever know. Its energy was explosive. It introduced us to a culture whose existence we had never previously suspected. It served as a vehicle for vague proletarian yearnings. It confirmed to us our own reality. Looking back on it from the vantage point of the present it seems hard to believe we ever lived through an era in which values were so circumscribed and distinctions so sharp. But those were the boundaries of our world. It was a world in which "crazy mixed-up kids" was a household word and dirty boogying an act of social defiance.

I don't mean to dwell on the era, because I don't know too much about it. Pegged pants and ducktail haircuts, raised collars and switchblades: these seem like familiar landmarks, but I don't know that they're anything more than the nostalgic by-products of an era. Growing up in it you don't imagine that what is going on around you can be of any great importance; afterwards nearly everything seems of equally momentous significance. From the viewpoint of the present, though, it seems to me that the overwhelming feeling my friends and I shared was that we must be doing something terribly wrong. We measured ourselves against the judgement of our elders and believed what they told us even when it rang false to our own experience. There were at that time certain immutable standards, and if they said that rock 'n' roll was a passing fad, like swing and Frank Sinatra, it seemed unimaginable that it was not.

That's why our first reaction was necessarily so ambiguous. There was, at least among my acquaintances, not the faintest suspicion of any Woodstock nation, not the least idea that there was anyone even remotely resembling us out there. We believed pretty much what we were told, though we sensed that it was wrong. Harry Belafonte had a hit with "Day-O" and calypso had supplanted rock 'n' roll. The next year it was Pat Boone with a clean-cut ballad or two, and the year after that by *Time's* report thrill-crazed youth had gone on a gospel kick which would never actually materialize. When the treacle period of the late fifties and early sixties engulfed us we recited the familiar litanies by now grown stale from repetition: Elvis in the Army, Buddy Holly dead, Little Richard in the ministry, Jerry Lee Lewis in disgrace and Chuck Berry in jail. We mourned the passing of our youth but took it as our due. It was this, I think, as much as anything else that contributed to the considerable staying power of our culture: that we were not overburdened with self-righteousness.



[Lightnin' Hopkins/Val Wilmer](#)

The great thing about it, in the beginning at least, was that there seemed to be no one in control. It was *our* music in more than just name not because it represented some kind of pure aesthetic (rock 'n' roll has always been the most commercial of musics) but because it was for the most part beneath the contempt of those who were marketing it. Almost by accident it sprang out of an industry that was only beginning to discover itself, and as a result it grew up free and unencumbered, its success not only uninstrucive but actually counter to good business methods.

“Like all great folk artists,” read the liner notes of the first Lightnin’ Hopkins album I ever bought. “like Ives, Lightnin’ Hopkins improvises easily.” To the record producers teenagers had just about the same status as blacks thirty years earlier and just about the same appeal, too. They represented a huge but totally unpredictable market subject to whims of taste and fancy no sane person could sensibly predict. “In selecting the songs for this new album,” boasted the liner notes to Little Richard’s second LP for Specialty, “Little Richard tried to top his first album... [and] included some unreleased material especially for his fans’ parents who still may not ‘dig the beat.’ He feels that if they’ll only listen to songs they remember like ‘Baby Face’ and ‘By the Light of the Silvery Moon’ done up in the Little Richard style, they’ll enjoy this new album, too!”

With advocacy like this who could blame us for a certain schizophrenia of our own? The first time I heard Little Richard’s “Tutti Frutti” was on the car radio on the way to school.

*A-wop bop a lu bop a lop bam boom
Tutti frutti, oh rooty
Tutti frutti, oh rooty*

It burst out at us. Our first reaction, I think, was one of chagrin. Somebody’s father was driving, and he expressed our discomfort before we could ourselves. What command of the English language, I said, and switched stations. We all laughed self-consciously because it was, after all, our fault.

Jackie Wilson’s “Lonely Teardrops,” The Diamonds’ “Little Darling,” The Platters, The Penguins, The G Clefs all met with similar reactions. We didn’t know what to make of this new music for the simple reason that we had never been exposed to anything like it before. Our first encounter with Elvis Presley was no different.

*You ain’t nothin’ but a hound dog
Crying all the time.*

You ain't nothing but a hound dog

Crying all the time.

*You ain't never caught a rabbit,
and you ain't no friend of mine.*

Even the irony of a male singer voicing these sentiments escaped us at the time. What do you think Elvis Presley? was the first business of social exchange, and your answer defined you politically, morally, sociologically. It was a little like asking a ten-year-old if he liked girls. You gave the answer you were expected to give—a sour look, a turned-up nose. You conformed to type.

Obviously mine is a very limited experience. Not everyone reacted with the same ambiguousness and rock 'n' roll appealed from the first to a huge audience which immediately claimed it for its own. I think that my experience was not isolated, however, because, whatever your outlook at that time, for all the youthful gestures of rebellion, you expected some day to take your place in adult society. You were aware of growing pains and stages that you were going through, and what doubts you had could be smoothed over by the certainty of the future and the reassurances of your elders. If rock 'n' roll had had no other value it would have been enough merely to dent the smug middle-class consciousness of that time and throw into confusion some of the deadening rigidity of that world.

For that was what it unmistakably did. To keep a comb in your back pocket was both a declaration of independence and an expression of political solidarity. Here we were, irretrievably middle-class, but what were we doing then in our baby blue jeans, our collars turned up, and torturing our hair into modified DAs? We went to the Big Beat shows, and if we did not we bitterly resented having listened to our parents' warnings and the humdrum security of our lives. We hung out on streetcorners and swaggered into the House of Pizza, got thrown out of bowling alleys and movie theatres and bused to pick fights we could never win.

What I think was happening quite clearly was the convergence of two warring cultures. Just as James Dean and Marlon Brando came to represent our unarticulated hurt, just as it was *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Stranger* that gave us our literary heroes—existential ciphers that refused to speak when spoken to—rock 'n' roll provided us with a release and a justification that we had never dreamed of.

The very outrageousness of its poses, the swaggering sexuality, the violence which the radio of that day laid at its door, its forbidden and corrupting influence—that was the unfailing attractiveness of rock 'n' roll. The hysteria of its terms, the absurdity of its appeal—Fats Domino bumping a piano offstage with his belly; Little Richard's outlandish screams and “jungle rhythms”; Jerry Lee Lewis's vocal gymnastics and theatrical virtuosity; Elvis's very presence and Carl Perkins's “Get off of my blue suede shoes”; with Chuck Berry all the while merrily warning, “Roll over Beethoven”—how could we deny it entrance into our lives? The ease with which you could offend the adult world, the sanctimoniousness of public figures and the turnabout that came with success (“Presley will never appear on my show,” said Ed Sullivan, shortly before Elvis's series of \$50,000 appearances), above all the clear line of demarcation between *us* and *them* made it impossible for us to turn our backs and ignore this new phenomenon. So from the first we were hooked. We were addicts without even knowing it.



Carl Perkins/Val Wilmer

II

But then rock 'n' roll died. It was over before it even had a chance to slyly grin and look around. In its place came a new all-synthetic product. I was only in the ninth grade when we entered what was then called the Philadelphia era of rock.

Even then we knew it was a fraud. Dick Clark's Brilliantine good looks, the sterility of *Bandstand* (but where are you now, Justine?), and the block which had been lucky enough to produce Frank Avalon, Fabian (who at least articulated the right sentiments: Turn me loose and I'm a tiger) and Bobby Rydell. What we did at the age of fifteen was to retreat into the past. The past year or two.

It's hard to remember the limits of our world at that time. For the longest time I had exactly two long-playing records. My mother gave me Elvis Presley's first and, perhaps to make up my debt to him, I went out and bought Little Richard's on my own. We listened to Jumping Joe Smith and Arno "Woo Woo" Ginsberg and occasionally, late at night, Symphony Sid, but we simply were not exposed to that much music. Instead, we played the records that we did have over and over until we knew the words to every song, and could anticipate each riff and drumroll.

Buying a record in those days was quite a production. To begin with, of course, there weren't many outlets and even fewer places to find them. But then, too, it was a commitment of taste; your self-esteem was on the line, your whole reputation could stand or fall on a single \$3.00 purchase. I don't know how many times we'd sit scrunched over in the listening booth at Briggs and Briggs, playing the same record over and over again and trying to avoid the saleslady's cold eye. That was standard operating procedure, though, and you never purchased a record before thoroughly evaluating the consequences. It was a tortuous process sometimes, but perhaps as a result there are few records from that period that I find myself regretting ownership of today. Of course I could hardly afford to. Even if I didn't like the record, the investment of time and energy would tell me otherwise. So this had to be a foolproof process.

Singles, of course, were a different story, and we all had scattered selections. Even so, the only people I knew with extensive collections of 45s were girls who went to every Tony Perkins movie. Or worshipped Elvis, or Tab Hunter. And we were rightfully scornful of that.

We considered ourselves not fans but connoisseurs. We could sit around and speculate endlessly on the reasons for Elvis's artistic decline, Little Richard's intellectual capabilities (he had entered Morehouse College, it said in the liner notes to his second album), Gene Vincent's amputated leg or Carl Perkins's speculated insanity. It was only by accident that we discovered Elvis's matchless Sun sides on the RCA albums (put out while he was in the Army). The legend of Sun Records was a wholly new phenomenon in itself. And we assembled our own selection of Golden Oldies to recall or invent new memories.

Towards the end of high school we painstakingly put together a rock 'n' roll tape of the best selections. Elvis had twelve, Jerry Lee ten and Little Richard eight. In our hierarchy that made Elvis king, Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis princes, and Carl Perkins, Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, and Gene Vincent archdukes. And that was our high school yearbook.

III

Blues grabbed mamachild, tore him all upside down

Robert Johnson

The only alternatives to rock at that time were cool jazz and folk music along the lines of The Kingston Trio. ~~Fancying ourselves beatniks we flirted with the one; out of snobbishness undoubtedly we toyed with the other.~~ Folk music never offered either the high spirits or the surging energy of rock 'n' roll; it did provide us with an introduction to Josh White and Leadbelly, though, and it was in this way that I first stumbled onto the blues.

The blues captured me initially by its directness of impact. I had never known a more searing expression of emotion. "The blues is a low-down shaking chill." From my first exposure to it, through a friend and through Samuel Charters's book, *The Country Blues*, I found myself enthralled in a way I had never experienced before; it struck some responsive chord which I cannot explain even today.



[Little Richard/Sepia magazine](#)

There are lots of reasons, of course, why blues should attract a white audience of some proportion. There is, to begin with, the question of colour. Most of us had never known a Negro. That didn't stop us, however, from constructing a whole elaborate mythology and modeling ourselves in speech and dress and manner along the lines of what we thought a Negro would be. Norman Mailer has expressed this attraction well in "The White Negro." It was, really, the whole hipster pose. But it was also, as Eldridge Cleaver has pointed out, that rock 'n' roll represented not only an implicit social commitment but the explicit embrace of a black subculture which had never previously risen to the surface, so that we were set up, really—I was, anyway, along with my friends—for the adoption of a purely black music and a purely black culture.

Blues offered the perfect vehicle for our romanticism. What's more, it offered boundless opportunities for embroidery due to its exotic nature, the vagueness of its associations, and certain characteristics associated with the music itself. For one thing it was an undeniably personal music; whatever the autobiographical truth of the words, each singer undoubtedly conveyed something of himself in his song. Then, too, the lyrics, in addition to being poetically abstract, were often vague and difficult to understand; the singer made a habit of slurring syllables or dropping off the end of a verse and the quality of the recording, often from a distance of thirty-five years, added to the aura of obscurity. The life of the singer, too, was shrouded in mystery. Blind Lemon Jefferson, Sleepy John Estes, Jaybird Coleman, Funny Paper Smith and Bogus Blind Ben Covington: bizarre names from a distant past about whom literally no facts were known. We were explorers in an uncharted land.

But most of all there was the vitality of the music itself. I knew it immediately, I still hear it today

And while I have gone on to any number of ancillary enthusiasms, it remains central in my life. For lesser attachments there are always explanations, but blues appealed to something deep-seated and permanent in myself, it just sounded right to me.

We never imagined we would see any of these shadowy figures from our mythology. We never dreamt that Son House, Skip James, Bukka White, Sleepy John Estes, all would be rediscovered. Part of the attraction, I'm sure, was that they were all tucked safely away in the past. For, as far as we were concerned, there were no contemporary blues singers. Encouraged by what we had read and helped by our own bias, we believed country blues to have stopped still with the Second World War and Lightnin' Hopkins, in Sam Charters's words, to be "the last of the great blues singers." We couldn't be bothered with such corruptions of style as amplification and popularity; we cavalierly dismissed Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters, as Charters had in his book. Instead we contented ourselves (at first anyway) with dubs from ancient 78s and our own elaborate fantasies. Robert Johnson we pictured as the tortured poet and tormented genius; Blind Lemon Jefferson froze to death in a snowstorm in Chicago. On Blind Willie McTell our imaginations really went to work. A sensitive, oddly wistful singer, he was, to us, a figure of mystery and determination, who had tenaciously clung to a recording career which stretched back to 1927. In 1935 he disappeared from sight only to resurface on some 1940 Library of Congress recordings. Then he was not heard from again until 1948 when, according to Charters, he just walked into the Atlantic recording studio and cut a record as great as any of his earlier sides. In 1961 Prestige announced an album of last sessions, but we didn't believe it. We expected him to walk in the door at any moment. Such was the stuff of which our dreams were made.

The first blues singer that we saw in the flesh was Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins. He appeared at Harvard at the Agassiz Theatre in a concert with Cisco Houston. He was received with that air of reverential silence which has come to characterize these gatherings, and he was hailed to us as "the epitome of the cool Negro" by a boy with a very posh accent. What contempt we lavished upon the preppe then, but really, I think, he was just voicing our secret sentiments.

Gradually blues became an all-consuming passion and music a very important element in our lives. It cemented old friendships and made new ones. It became the principal vehicle for conversation and subject of discussion. This was at a time—1961, '62—when popular music was almost universally scorned. Blues was respectable enough, but no one could understand how we could go on listening to Chuck Berry and Little Richard, and among blues purists our fantasies of a comeback for Bo Diddley and Jerry Lee Lewis seemed almost perverse.

I think a not untypical incident will illustrate some of the confusions of that period. The first time we saw Bo Diddley he was appearing at Boston College in 1964 in an afternoon concert. Receiving equal billing with him were The Rooftop Singers, who had recently had an enormous hit with a very innocuous version of Gus Cannon's "Walk Right In." Just as the concert was due to begin The Rooftop Singers announced that they would not go on. Bo Diddley was a rock 'n' roll singer, and they were folk artists dedicated to their art. The start of the show was delayed about an hour, and eventually it had to be announced that the programme was worded wrongly, that two separate concerts were to be given here today, the first by The Rooftop Singers. Then, leaving no room for doubt, they did a full concert performance, and Bo Diddley did not go on till after five, when he responded with a two-hour show of his own.

It didn't matter that Bo Diddley proved infinitely more entertaining to the audience and that The Rooftop Singers were heckled off the stage. What was at stake was Integrity, and, difficult as it now seems to believe, integrity was thought to reside entirely within the acoustic guitar or banjo or stringed instrument. That was what gave blues its respectability, of course. It was linked almost entirely in the

public mind with the folk revival of that time. It was even called Folk Blues, and its chief appeal to an audience obsessed with sterile images of its own virtue was its unassailable purity.

As for us, we dreamt of a day when all musics would be equal, even as we envisioned the dawn of a new era of equality and social justice. Elvis Presley, Fats Domino, Carl Perkins, all would be accorded their place in the pantheon. On a more mundane level we could imagine that Jim Jackson's "Kansas City" might be updated by someone like Elvis, that "Trouble in Mind" might become a new popular standard. Little did we dream that something like this would actually happen, that a group like Canned Heat, named after a Tommy Johnson song, would enjoy considerable success with a revival of Henry Thomas's "Going Up the Country," complete with pan pipes. We didn't even know if anyone else was listening at the time. We just kept to ourselves, forming a tight self-contained little enclave with private quotes and private fantasies and a blues lyric for every occasion. Some of our finest moments came from such occasions as these, when you could say to a girl, "Honey honey honey honey honey/Get up off of that money" in the face of her bewilderment and our own smug satisfaction.

IV

*I just got back from my tour over in England
Everybody talking about the rocking craze over in England
Well come on over, baby
Whole lotta shakin' going on.*

Little Richard, 1964

I was in England in 1963, the year The Beatles first burst into prominence. *Melody Maker* posed the question, "Can The Beatles Make It with the U.S. Market Where Cliff Richard Failed?" and there was a great flurry of excitement in Miller's, the local music shop, the day "Twist and Shout" came out. For us, though, The Beatles were of minimal importance. Like Dylan before them they just seemed another imitation of American blues and rhythm and blues artists. What was important to us was the seriousness with which the British took blues and rock 'n' roll. Jerry Lee Lewis made the Top Ten in Cambridge with his version of "Good Golly Miss Molly," and his tour was highly touted in the musical press. In the short time that we were there tours were undertaken or proposed for such singers as Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Jerry Lee, Fats Domino and the second American Folk Blues Festival which consisted of Sonny Boy Williamson, Muddy Waters and Big Joe Williams among others, none of whom we had had the opportunity to see at home. We bought records by Gene Vincent in Sweden and Speckled Red in Holland and came across a recognition of American genius which we had never encountered before. Not the least of which came from The Beatles themselves.

We haunted Dave Carey's Swing Shop on the outskirts of London, where you could not only pick up rare transcriptions by singers like Kokomo Arnold, Peg Leg Howell, Barbecue Bob, but actually engage in conversations with someone who knew and loved the music. In France we paid our respects at Bert Bradfield's Treasury of Jazz and listened to him mouth the lyrics of every Carl Perkins song we put on the record player. In Soho the salesgirl said, "Oh, that's the one where he chuckles, isn't it?" when we asked for Jerry Lee Lewis's "Mean Woman Blues." And we met a part-time mailman who played nothing but rock at his wedding and had rushed off from the reception to see Little Richard and Jerry Lee perform in person. Lots of crazy people, just as crazy as we were. We cut our own tour of the continent short to come back and Rock! Jive! Twist! Across the Channel with Jerry Lee Lewis

Which unfortunately we missed, and which for the second year in a row was denied landing in Bordeaux because of the rowdiness of the party. But I did get to see Gene Vincent, all dressed in leather from boots to gloves, leather jacket, leather vest, and leather pants, and flanked by sinister henchmen who escorted him on- and offstage in tight formation to hide the limp in his walk. I survived through two boring hours of well-meant English tribute to hear a ten-minute set which culminated, of course, in “Be Bop-a-Lu-La” and a stiff-legged vault of the microphone wire. It was worth it.



[Carl Perkins and Paul McCartney/courtesy of Carl Perkins](#)

When I came to England I had visions of settling there. I was disillusioned with the whole American system and thought the English much more respectful towards writers and democratic institutions. But after eight months of clipped speech and exaggerated politeness, after eight months of *articulateness*, I realized that what I was hungry for was hamburgers and ice cream sodas and baseball and bigness. Just like Chuck Berry said:

*I'm so glad I'm living in the U.S.A.
Where hamburgers sizzle on an open grille night and day
Anything you want, they got it right here in the U.S.A.*

V

Dig these rhythm 'n' blues!

Chuck Berry

I think our development just about paralleled that of The Rolling Stones. When they first appeared they were a blues group almost exclusively, and one of the things that most appealed to us about them was that their taste corresponded so exactly with our own: Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, Muddy Waters and Little Walter. On their first American tour they made the obligatory stop in Chicago, and when they appeared on *Shindig* they brought along Howlin' Wolf and sat mutely at his feet while he shook

and writhed, jumping up and down till it seemed as if the small stage would collapse, taking Wolf, The Stones, and *Shindig* dancers along with it. With the debut of Wolf on network television and the popularity of his “Little Red Rooster,” if only in The Stones’ version, we were in our heaven.

But if The Stones merely served to confirm our belief in the blues, in soul music they played a truly educational function. I don’t think I’d ever heard of Solomon Burke before The Stones recorded “Cry to Me.” And though we listened to WILD, the local soul station, for whatever blues they might play, we were largely indifferent to the rest of the music. Otis Redding, Don Covay, Wilson Pickett, Marvin Gaye—these were just indiscriminate names to me before The Stones singled them out and deposited them in our homes (just as they deposited blues in the guise of rock ’n’ roll for their large audience) in songs like “Hitchhike,” “Pain in My Heart,” “Have Mercy.” Because whatever else they have been, The Stones have always proved the best advertisement for American black music outside of the music itself. Where a group like The Beatles retreated quickly into studio seclusion and, more important, never really did anything to see that their influences were recognized, The Stones from the first have paid their respects.

They have recorded songs by artists as prominent as Muddy Waters and as obscure as Slim Harpo and the Reverend Robert Wilkins. They have showcased blues and rhythm and blues artists like Buddy Guy and Junior Wells, B.B. King, and Chuck Berry and even allowed themselves to be upstaged by James Brown (on film) and Ike and Tina Turner in person. It would be difficult to imagine many other performers paying such explicit dues, but then The Stones have always had a sense of high drama.

Of all their contributions to my own education, though, I would say that the one for which I was most grateful was the presence of James Brown in The Stones–headlined *T.A.M.I. Show* film. James Brown, of course, we had heard of, we knew his music a little, and his reputation as an entertainer preceded him. Nothing that we heard could have prepared us for what we saw even in the grainy, far-away quality of the film. The dynamism, the tireless energy and unflagging zeal, the apocalyptic drama of his performance were all unprecedented in our experience, and when we emerged from the theatre we had the idea that we could skate one-legged down Washington Street, defying gravity and astonishing passers-by. The Stones after that performance had been nothing more than an anti-climax and we watched in silent approval as the blacks trooped out one by one, leaving the field to the latecomers.



Mick Jagger with Howlin' Wolf

We saw James Brown lots of times after that, in Providence, at the Arena, at the Boston Garden. And we started going to the r&b shows at Basin Street East and Louie's Showcase Lounge and the seasonal showers of stars, lonely white figures in a sea of black faces, isolated, quite solitary individuals in a mass of hand-slapping friends.

We took these shows as ceremonial occasions, really, for which we wore our best clothes and we put on our best behaviour. There was something exhilarating in being a part, however peripheral, of a community which engaged in such public celebrations of the spirit, and we soaked up a little bit of the warmth of that world, the excitement and colour of mutual recognition and greetings, great waddling old ladies flinging their arms around each other, children moving to the music, and hipsters bopping up and down the aisle. And then it was Star Time, Ladies and Gentlemen! although a great deal of the time the star wouldn't show or you couldn't hear anything over the crackling PA system or there would be some unexplained interminable delay or some terrible comedian would tell second-hand crude and raucously received jokes. None of it seemed to matter, though; no one seemed to mind very much. For most of the audience these were social occasions above all else. As for us we were fascinated by the whole swirling drama of that world, we delighted in the music and the exchange, the unashamed emotionalism and the whole panoply of the performance.

Solomon Burke with his great corpulent presence and gold cummerbund tied about a bulging waist. Otis puffy and in electric green. Joe Tex preaching and Rufus Thomas walking his dog. Little Anthony and the Imperials with their acrobatic displays and Moms Mabley croaking a message of tolerance and integration. Above all, the preaching, at gospel shows and secular revues alike, and the audience testifying in a body with "That's right!" and "Tell the truth!" and hands raised in a preview of the clenched fist salute. A sense of real solidarity that might not survive the evening itself.



[*Chuck Berry/Vince Aletti collection*](#)

I can't say that we were ever exactly comfortable in these surroundings. In the beginning we were for the most part ignored, but by the time that Otis Redding died our presence was more and more openly resented and we frequently met with cold stares and hostile words. Whenever a fight broke out we started edging away for fear that its focus would shift to us, the conspicuous outsiders, and we

went out of our way to avoid confrontations.

Stokely Carmichael kept telling us we had nothing to worry about, if we were afraid to set foot on the streets of Roxbury it was only because we were honky racist cowards. Why shouldn't he, after all, be just as afraid to enter the lily-white suburbs? Well, I didn't know about that, but I did know our situation was increasingly precarious. I kept excoriating myself for being a racist, but it didn't drive out my fear.

The last show we were going to see was James Brown at the Boston Garden in 1968. Two nights before the performance Martin Luther King was assassinated. The show went on anyway, James Brown was widely credited with having cooled racial tempers in Boston, and it was a situation upon which everyone was to be congratulated—James Brown for his sense of responsibility and for performing the public service that he did; Mayor Kevin White for having allowed the show to go on at all; and Channel 2, the local NET outlet, for broadcasting it two or three times consecutively in an attempt to keep the kids off the streets. We stayed home and watched on TV, as James followed the by-now-familiar routine, mesmerizing the live audience with his grace and agility and the ritualistic conclusion of his act. At the end a couple of kids jumped up on stage, and then some more, and for a moment as the cops moved in it looked as if the fragile peace was about to be shattered after all. But James Brown indignantly motioned the cops back, his face furrowed with concern, as he pleaded with the kids, “Hey wait a minute, wait a minute, that’s not right. You’re ruining everything, you’re making me ashamed of my colour. What’s it coming to if I can’t get respect from my own people?”



[James Brown with valet, 1964/Don Paulsen](#)

We were far from it all, afraid to go out on the streets that night, and sorrowing in our own way for the death of a man and the death of a promise which held out nearly as much hope for us as whites as it did for any black.

You say that music's for the birds

You can't understand the words

Well, honey, if you did, you'd really blow your lid

Baby, that is rock and roll.

The Coasters, 1959

The Man Can't Bust Our Music

Columbia Records, a Division of the Columbia Broadcasting System, 1970

That was the difference of a decade. And perhaps it is the difference of a world. It is in any case indicative of the change in attitudes which took place and the difficulty rock 'n' roll would have in maintaining itself as an effective counter-culture today. In the end everything gets absorbed into the cultural mainstream, and rock 'n' roll was no different. Today there are just too many other outlets for disaffiliation for it to serve a truly subversive function. They've even gone and changed the name, and what was once a kind of secret metaphor (like "ball" and "Miss Ann" and "brown-eyed handsome man") has become instead just another explicit Anglo-Saxon epithet.

Maybe it's wrong to question such a state of prosperity. With the success of The Beatles and The Rolling Stones all our old heroes were brought back to life. Not just Skip James and Son House but Chuck Berry and Little Richard, Carl Perkins and even Elvis himself awakened from his long Hollywood slumber. We made mad dashes of up to 250 miles to see Muddy Waters at Hunter College, Chuck Berry in his New York Concert Debut, Bo Diddley at the Ebb Tide and Jerry Lee Lewis at Canobie Lake Park in Salem, New Hampshire. And, oddly enough, we were never disappointed. The old-time glamour, the practised way in which they manipulated their audience, the thorough professionalism of a performance that hovered on the continual edge of hysteria never failed to appeal to a sense of ourselves that was rooted deeply within us. And yet that, too, in the end proved futile. Little Richard got wrapped up more and more in the frenzy of his own claims and each artist confronted an audience that demanded not music so much as instant nostalgia. The spectacle of Chuck Berry relentlessly grinding out his old hits became more depressing than exhilarating after a while, and for all the exuberance of the performance, for all the mastery of the stage art an inescapable bitterness crept into the music itself.

The white artists have had a slightly better time of it, as they have one by one returned to the country field from which they first emerged, sometimes with notable success. Elvis Presley, of course, never had to look back, nor did Johnny Cash. But for Carl Perkins, Roy Orbison, Conway Twitty, Marty Robbins, Sonny James, there will always be a home in country music, whatever the fluctuations of the pop marketplace. And Jerry Lee Lewis, for a brief spell chief claimant to Elvis's throne, has remained a legend in the country field.

They're better off there. They're in touch with a real market that has stayed loyal to the kind of music they've played over the years. They're removed, too, from the scrutiny of the critics, and from books like this one which can only feed the growing self-consciousness of a music that was originally meant to deny the rigidity of claims. And they're playing to an audience of men and women very much like themselves, who grew up on a diet of hillbilly songs mixed in with Negro blues and made rock 'n' roll at one time the truest kind of folk music.

Rock 'n' roll today, to my mind at least, is a middle-class phenomenon almost exclusively. What for us was a liberating act—like getting your licence or getting laid for the first time—has become part and parcel of the times and created a whole new set of definitions of its own. It is admirable

eclectic, it offers a dazzling variety of choices within its own terms, and it has become in the process something a great deal more serious and infinitely less important.

That's why all attempts at revival are bound to fail. To bring it back you'd have to bring back the Eisenhower Era and the McCarthy Hearings. You'd have to bring back gang wars and the high school hop and all the crippling inhibitions of that time. For me rock 'n' roll was just what The Coasters said: a secret message delivered with a sneer and taken with a grain of salt. For us it was a source of endless energy and boundless amusement, and that it can have become camp in our time is only evidence of the terrible attrition of time and the voraciousness with which our culture devours its young.

At some point, obviously, the romance wore off. I'm sure there are lots of reasons. Getting older. Writing about music. The absence of political panaceas. The terrible surfeit of material. Just knowing too much. There are lots of things I don't like about some of the music—the loudness, the self-congratulation and lack of professionalism—but the one thing I find insufferable is that rock 'n' roll should become in its turn the same respectable and bland emulsifier that pop music was for us in 1954.

The Rolling Stones alone have retained the star image. It isn't always benign (as witnessed at Altamont), but they are undeniably rock 'n' roll stars. And they sing rock 'n' roll music. The Beatles, whatever you may say of them, never really did that. Dylan is into something quite different. And Elvis is a ghost from a recollected past. But The Rolling Stones give us rock 'n' roll in all its glory: pimples and adolescent defiance, energy and endemic bad taste, with all the beauty and all the painful ugliness.

On their 1969 American tour they did the *Ed Sullivan Show* in somewhat muted form except for the blues that featured acoustic and slide guitar.

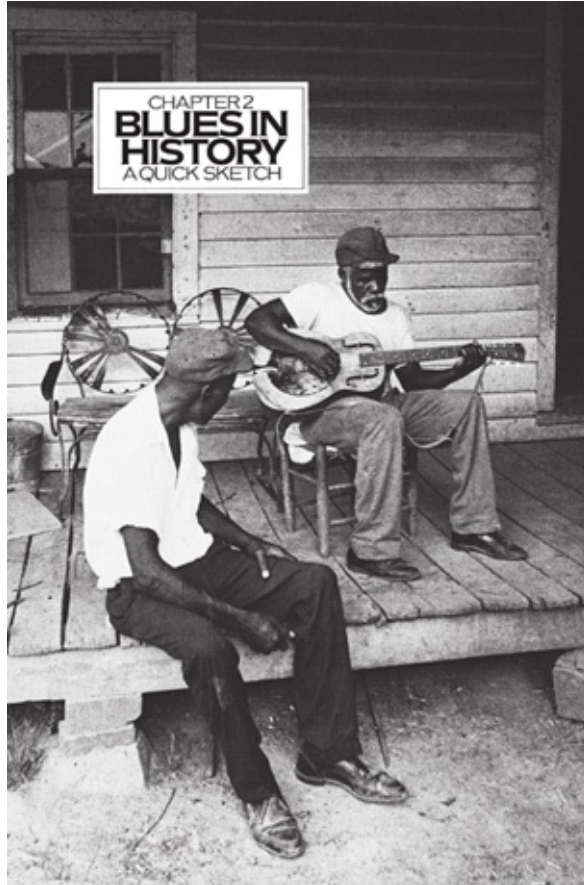
*The blue light was my blues
And the red light was my mind.*

It was Robert Johnson's "All My Love in Vain," thirty years after Johnson himself had died, resurrected on national TV in front of fifty million viewers. I thought to myself, what if Johnson himself were around to see this, and I could fantasize that he was alive somewhere in Mississippi, out in L.A. watching a TV he still owed payments on, and thinking—what? The only consolation must be that the music has been preserved.

CHAPTER 2

BLUES IN HISTORY

A QUICK SKETCH



Photograph by Val Wilmer

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