Noise Makers

Posted: 09/02/2014 10:08 pm EDT Updated: 09/02/2014 10:59 pm EDT


Sometimes, Greil Marcus claims, "a song says what its words never could." It hints that some things cannot be captured in words or shouldn't be. Inside the loudness "is a complex of style and emotion" that brings out, forcefully, the individuality of the performer and gives listeners knowledge and truths about themselves they did not want to hear.

At its best, according to Marcus, rock 'n' roll inhabits us in just this way. And he ought to know. The first reviews editor at Rolling Stone magazine, Marcus is the author of more than a dozen books on popular music, including the iconic Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music. In his new book, which is surely one of his best and most beautifully written, Marcus revisits ten songs, recorded during the last sixty years, some of them long forgotten, in order to capture the pulsating and powerful language of rock 'n' roll.

Marcus reminds us of rock 'n' roll's signature themes. With the music "going where it needs to go, where it must," he emphasizes, rock 'n' roll often urged flight as freedom and reckless abandon, without regard to consequences, on young men and women who were "loose in the water" for the first time in their lives. Punk, he indicates, was a venomous one or two syllable primal scream by young Brits against poverty and privation, a class-based school system, a coarsening of life and a longing for style. Not "an occasion for explanation," punk was "an event."

Far more impressive, however, is Marcus's ability to evoke, in prose, the pulses and impulses of rock 'n' roll music, and to capture the distinctive qualities of the performers.

Buddy Holly, he writes, in a characteristically penetrating analysis, "walked into the room sideways," shying away from the emotionalism in '50s rock 'n' roll. Holly "looked for space in the noise," built a signature style "around silences, pauses, a catch in the throat, a wink," and managed to marry "an almost frightening sincerity" with adolescent innocence and a risk free sense of fun. Holly was, in a sense, "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, losing ground to the Pinkertons behind them and knowing they'll get away somehow."
When, just before they broke up, the Beatles covered Holly's "Crying, Waiting, Hoping," Marcus imagines that the Fab Four tried to capture what had attracted them to the song (and to Buddy Holly) in the first place. "Suddenly...everything they ever had shines more brightly, as they feel its absence, feel what has slipped away, what can never be recaptured."

In his rendition of "This Magic Moment," a song that is often dismissed as frothy, Marcus suggests, Ben E. King, barely twenty-one years old, sounds like a candidate running for office, his "stiffness and stentorian hesitation before each phrase" betraying a fear that people might not take him seriously, but also a determination to "make them believe what their faces tell him they will never believe." The force he puts into the line "Everything I want I have" is so great, Marcus writes, "there is no chance that what he wants, what he has, will of itself ever grow shopworn - this is a moment, not a life, a moment rescued from life, the moment you return to when life itself turns the truth of the feeling with which King endows the words into the lies the words contain. But you don't have to hear any of that."

Marcus' assessments of songs and singers are, inevitably, subjective. He acknowledges the "mastery" of Beyoncé, but maintains that "the longer you looked, the less there was to see." He admires Cyndi Lauper's rendition of "Money Changes Everything," which adds "shadows and hideouts" to "the comfort, even joy, in the way the melody sways into the trees." And he is enthralled with Amy Winehouse, "the leader of the pack without the pack," whose "commitment to the songwriter's craft," he insists, was brought to bear as she sang, "inseparable from her fandom," and whose death leaves her and "To Know Him Is To Love Him" "in limbo, out of time, no need to go forward, no need to go back."

Such judgments, of course, add to the attraction -- and the fun -- of The History of Rock 'n' Roll in Ten Songs. The book, I am certain, will compel readers to return to the songs Marcus has anointed, and to others. Even if they have heard them before, they will listen to them as if for the first time; they may well identify at least one that, through "vocal tricks, rhythmic shifts, pieces of sound that didn't follow logically one from the other" or make musical sense when looked at in pieces, has produced "its own manifesto, issuing its own demands on life, in its own new language."