

The Hothouse Project

Charles Shaar Murray's Journalism as Craft and Art writing course

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Autumn 2013 coursework

MARK HOFFMAN: The Killer In Autumn

Elvis screwed me. Again. Even in death, his hand had reached down into my pocket and taken whatever cash and loose change was there. He'd done it many times before and it really shouldn't have been a surprise.

This time it wasn't Elvis himself, of course, but the next best thing: a visit to Graceland. An Elvis by proxy experience. Graceland was like a bad record with no redeeming features, or one of the truly awful films like "Double Trouble" where Elvis sang "Old MacDonald's Farm". But, boy, did they charge. Jeez!

Afterwards, rifling through the local newspaper, there was a small but important advert on the bottom of page 5: Jerry Lee Lewis, last of the noble Sun rockers, was opening his ranch to the public.

This was the latest manifestation of a battle which had waged since the mid-'50s. In Jerry Lee's mind, he was in a contest with Elvis to be crowned the King Of Rock ' N' Roll. Of course, in pure sales terms, it was a battle that Jerry Lee had lost long ago, but this was a quest for the crown of auteurship, for the dubious honour of being the Orson Welles of Rock.

Jerry Lee, after all, had the God-given talent. That's why he gave up Bible college. He wasn't going to Hell. After all, Sam Phillips, the Sun label owner, who looked like Moses now with that crazy red beard, hadn't he told him he could do good by rocking? He was a better singer and piano motherhumper than that cissy mama's boy anyhow. He was honest too. His new wife was thirteen, he told the British newspapers, neglecting to mention that he'd failed to divorce his first. Elvis had been sneaky and hidden his little girl away at Graceland years before they married. Anyway, even though the cissy was in the ground, he was going to show him and anyone else that he was the King. The Killer!

There was no signage to indicate Jerry Lee's ranch. Just a spray painted garden wall with the legend *The Killer Rocks Nesbit Mississippi*.

Ringling the doorbell elicited a curt "What do ya want?"

“The tour.”

“Okay. Wait!”

A fat second cousin twice removed or something like that appeared. He motioned me through the gate. Then we proceeded to the garage.

“That's Jerry Lee's Cadillac and that's another one.”

Clearly he'd completed his tour guide course part 1.

We wandered around the grounds for a while and then finally entered the modest ranch house. There was a maze of corridors running off the central hallway. We sped down one corridor and then another, jinking left and then right until we reached the living room. And there, perched on a sofa, was the Killer himself, dressed in a loud Hawaiian shirt, shorts, tennis shoes and munching a cigar.

“Hey, Jerry, this guy's from England”

“Oh. Yeah,” said the Killer as he watched a football game on the T.V.

“Sit dahn, boy!”

I sat down. There was silence for what seemed like ten minutes. Then the Killer spoke. “You wanna hear some music?”

Without waiting for a reply, he sauntered to a baby grand piano and proceeded to pound the living keyboard out of it. After a minute he stopped, and went back to his seat as if no one was there. Suddenly he started rummaging at the side of the sofa and produced a truly hideous china caricature of himself sporting a large nodding head.

“Ain't these great?” he asked.

Silence.

He rummaged some more and produced some sheet music.

“Sheet music” he confirmed. “I'll sign it \$20 for the sheet and \$20 for the porcelain, okay?”

This was bizarre. One of the founding fathers of rock'n' roll had turned salesman.

“Tell you what. If ya buy both yoo can have 'em at \$30.”

A deal was struck. That done he dismissed me. Sent me on my way without a word but with a wave of the hand.

The Killer had screwed me, but he was alive. And..... he gave me a discount!

Mark Hoffman: Retired ex banker(sorry) but gave up banking and redeemed myself studying for a History BA. Currently doing MA at London university.