

“Put Me In, Coach, I’m Ready to Play”: Greil Marcus’s *Real Life Rock*

1. Between 1978 and 1983, Greil Marcus (“GM”) wrote a music column called “Real Life Rock.”¹ Ironically named after a strikingly pretentious album title (Magazine’s *Real Life*), this column ended with a “top ten” list.² In his short introduction to *Real Life Rock*, a massive book that brings together all of the “Real Life Top Ten” entries that he published in various magazines between 1986 and 2014,³ GM says that the subject matter of an entry could be “anything,” “anything under the sun” – “songs, albums, commercials, ads, maybe a comment on a dress Bette Midler wore at an awards show.” In time, “anything” came to include “music, movies, fiction, critical theory, ads, television shows, remarks overheard waiting in line, news items, [and] contributions from correspondents,” and then, later still, it took in “more formal art, more politics, more novels, more critical absurdities.” In short, GM’s “Real Life Top Ten” column was (and still is) a series of well-chosen citations of and highly educated responses to American culture, to America’s vibrant cultural life, as it was (and still is) experienced day to day by a particular human being with a love of language and a real gift for observation.⁴

2. Many of the entries contained in *Real Life Rock* are reviews, that is to say, judgments of aesthetic value and interest. These reviews can be positive or negative (*check this out, but avoid that*), which somewhat complicates the 1-to-10 ranking system (how can a “negative” review of something appear higher on the list than a “positive” review of something else?). These reviews can be “long” (around 70 words or more) and stuffed full of interesting material, some of which eventually found its way into one of GM’s books, or very short and vehement, a mere sentence.

Almost inevitably, given the format – ten entries crammed into a 700-word-long column – the one-liners are the most memorable moments. For example: the Gang of Four’s album *Mall*, described as a place “where you don’t pick up pennies because you don’t want anyone to think you have to” (column for May 1991); Beck’s *Midnite Vultures* dismissed with no more than “This is embarrassing”

¹ I need to register my objection that, to my lights, the phrase “Real Life Rock” should include a hyphen (“Real-Life Rock”).

² To access these early columns online, plus much more, visit www.greilmarcus.net.

³ Greil Marcus, *Real Life Rock: The Complete Top Ten Columns, 1986-2014* (Yale University Press, 2015).

⁴ At the very end of his Introduction, GM notes (half-jokingly, it would seem), “I know I use variants of ‘black hole’ and ‘heart on his sleeve’ far too often.” To my mind, the phrases he overuses are “displacing” and “bottomless.”

(December 13, 1999); or Patti Smith, the singer of “This is the Girl” (a tribute to the late Amy Winehouse), described as “the Madame Defarge of rock ‘n’ roll” (September 2012).

There’s also a sentence about Tom Petty, which comes at the end of a mid-size entry, but stands out as a great one-liner: “It’s by the book but it can sound like Petty’s got the only copy” (November 1991). And then there’s this very funny line, which comes at the end of a review of *American Psycho* that notes that “Walking on Sunshine,” described by GM as a “horrifying bright” song by Katrina and the Waves, is “leaking out of Patrick Bateman’s headphones as he heads into his office, serves as a hideous wake-up call in [the movie] *High Fidelity*, and chirps from your TV in incessant ads for Claritin allergy pills”: “No wonder everyone has to die” (May 1, 2000).

3. Not all of the entries are reviews; some of them are devoted to simply quoting (and thus preserving) notable material that might otherwise have slipped through the cracks and gotten lost.⁵ In these instances, the column serves as a kind of memory-support system or an antidote to cultural amnesia. “Pics or it didn’t happen,” people say these days. Well, GM’s entries are “the pics,” the contemporaneous *news reports* that prove that, yes indeed, the crazy shit you heard about really did happen. “Amy Fisher is out and Paula Jones is in as Tonya Harding’s *Celebrity Boxing* opponent, Fox announced Saturday,” GM quotes CNN.com as reporting. “Jones [...] told the Arkansas *Democrat-Gazette* she’s not concerned about the notorious skater. Her only fear: the safety of her new nose job” (#1 in column for March 11, 2002).

4. GM didn’t write all the entries included in *Real Life Rock*. In May 2000, he started including contributions from “correspondents,” that is to say, people who’d sent him references and/or responses that they thought he would appreciate. As he notes in his Introduction to this book, some of these correspondents, “under their column names [see below] or their real names, are still sending in items today, treating the column as a forum, or a good site for gossip, or the everyday conversation it has always wanted to be.” And that’s because 2014 didn’t mark the end of the column, which is still being published online, once a month, by Barnes & Noble.⁶

5. I like to think of these Real-Life contributors as pinch-hitters on the Orioles, Coach Marcus’ baseball team. Here they are, all 27 of them, in order of appearance, along with my estimation of their hits and appearances at bat (*kill the*

⁵ Note well the anonymous, introductory blurb printed on the book’s inner sleeve says that *Real Live Rock* offers “a subtle and implicit theory of how cultural objects fall through time and circumstance and often deliver unintended consequences, both in the present and the future.”

⁶ Greil Marcus, “Real Life Top Ten.” <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/review/tag/real-life-rock-top-10>, last updated January 2018.

umpire!): Emily Marcus (aka New York Eye), 3-3; Howard Hampton (Mojave Sam), 1-6; Mark Sinker, 0-1; “a correspondent,” 0-1; “a friend,” 0-4; Lindsay Waters (Boston Blackie), 0-1; Steve Weinstein (Magic Rat), 1-5; Michael J. Kramer, 0-1; Cecily Marcus, 1-3; Wayne Robbins, 0-1; “a friend who works in theater,” 0-1; Charles Taylor, 2-5; Sarah Vowell, 1-4; Ken Tucker (Widerpool), 1-4; Southern Tip, 1-3; Sausalito Slim, 0-1; Sean Wilentz, 0-1; Jane Dark, 0-1; Genevieve Yu (Muzot), 0-1; Barry Franklin, 0-1; Michele Anna Jordan, 0-1; Dave Marsh, 1-1; Oliver Hall, 1-2; Robert Polito, 0-1; Jacob Mikanowski, 0-1; Mary Davis, 0-1; and Eric Dean Wilson, 1-1.

In case you are interested, the team’s batting average is .250, which is well above the “Mendoza Line,” named after the don’t-go-any-lower-than-this batting average (.200) of a baseball player named Mario Mendoza, who was kept on the Pittsburgh Pirates because of his abilities as a fielder, not as a hitter. (The band from Georgia named The Mendoza Line is, perhaps inevitably, mentioned several times in the pages of *Real Live Rock*.)

6. I’m mentioned in the book three times: I’m acknowledged in the back as one of dozens of people who “have contributed to the columns collected here, sometimes by name, sometimes not, and here noted not alphabetically, so that those looking for their names will see what good company they’ve kept.” The eleventh issue of my situationist fanzine, *Not Bored!* is praised – “a critical-theory fanzine dedicated to the proposition that not all received ideas are bad, especially if you can play with them” – in the column dated March 10, 1987, and a videotaped performance of George Orwell’s *1984* by the Surveillance Camera Players, a pro-privacy group that I co-founded and directed, “comes across [succeeds]: because it’s so familiar a few slogans and the right setting can call the whole thing back, especially when weird organ-like music is leaking in from another corridor, people pass by the show as if it’s invisible, and the primitivism of the dramaturgy reduces Orwell’s prophecy to the scale of litter” (April 3, 2000).⁷

7. In “A Conversation with Greil Marcus,” which is printed on the book’s inner sleeves, GM says apropos of his column: “It’s fun to write. It *ought* to be fun to read.” Yeah, *fun*, in the same way that taking a ride on a rollercoaster is “fun.” *Just don’t stand up while the ride is underway!* Asked in the “Conversation” to name one of his favorite entries in the book, GM says, “hearing the Ass Ponys’ ‘Swallow You Down’” – summarized in the column for April 3, 2000 as “the guys in the band are promising a suicidal friend they won’t walk away, not ever” – “and

⁷ Though unmentioned in *Real Live Rock*, the following works have been praised by GM in personal correspondence: my review of Thomas Pynchon’s *Vineland* (May 1990); my review of the Gang of Four’s version of the Bob Marley song “Soul Rebel” (1991); and my performance of “41 Curses, Crisis and Conspiracies of Everyday Life” at a conference at the University of California at Berkley held in May 1992, which GM attended.

wondering if I could even get a fraction of the pain in the song [down] on the page.” Wait – pain is fun?

8. Roller-coasters are fun for people who like roller-coasters; they are trips through hell – living nightmares – for people who don’t. For me, reading GM is always both fun *and* a living nightmare. I experience all kinds of sharp and conflicting emotions while I coast up and down on his rollers.

I remember when the column was published in *The Village Voice* and then *Artforum*. I’d run out and buy a copy as soon as it was available, often just to read what GM had to say. I was always filled with excited anticipation – I *knew* I was going to learn about something new, something good – and I was rarely disappointed. I took great pleasure in tracking down what he had written about, listening to it (or reading it or seeing it) for myself, and then finding out if what he’d said – the surprising things he’d located and shared with his readers – were *really there*, for me to be able to discern, too, and not some made-up bullshit.⁸ He was almost always right; it *was* really there, and I could get at it, too. I’d feel wonderful. I felt part of something; I felt that GM was my teacher, my friend, even my kin, an older brother, if not the father I’d always wished I’d had, but didn’t.

With all those judgments floating around – a song judging the world (its own writers, the people singing it and hearing it sung, even those who knew nothing about it), GM judging the song, readers such as myself judging his judgments – it was inevitable that I, too, should be judged, in my turn. On occasion, I might feel that I’d caught something that GM didn’t or that I was able to carry the analysis a little further than he’d been able to carry it. But any feelings of superiority I might feel were short-lived and always quickly followed by a sense of being an utter failure. “If I’m *that* good, as good or sometimes *even better* than Greil Marcus,” I’d ask myself, “why don’t *I* have a column in *The Village Voice*?” The answer was obvious: I didn’t have a column in *The Voice* – lord knows I had my share of rejection letters from *The Voice*’s Bob Christgau and Jon Pareles at

⁸ I can’t believe that GM takes seriously Luc Sante’s absurd idea (“The Birth of the Blues,” *Yeti* #2, reviewed in the column dated April 23, 2003) that the blues “did not emerge, evolve, develop, or come to be in any folk sense,” which is, unless I’m mistaken, *precisely GM’s contention*, but that, “sometime in the 1890s, in East Texas or the Mississippi Delta, the blues surprised everyone, black and white, ‘could only have been invented,’ by a ‘particular person or persons,’ just as ‘the x-ray and the zipper and the diesel engine were invented in the same decade’ by particular persons.” The analogy is species: unlike the x-ray machine, the zipper or the diesel engine, the blues is not a physical object (despite the fact that John Lennon said that the blues was a chair), and it doesn’t require advanced production techniques (other machines) to be produced. But what if we removed this specious analogy? We’re left with Mel Brooks’ “Two Thousand Year Old Man,” who, when asked, “Do you believe in any Superior Being?” answered, “Yes, a guy named Phil.” *That’s* who singlehandedly invented the blues sometime in the 1890s, in East Texas or the Mississippi Delta: a guy named Phil.

The New York Times – because I didn’t deserve one. I just wasn’t good enough and would never be good enough to have one.

I know now exactly what my limitation is: I can’t see the difference – I keep conflating the difference – between “creative acts” and “real, disguised or fake autobiography” (column for February 2014). I keep forgetting that, “if there is an ‘I’ in an artist’s work, it ceases to refer back to the person writing, painting, singing: the person whose name is on the work has momentarily replaced herself with a made-up person who can say or do anything.” As a result, I am a “cretin”: I’m one of the “critics who try to reduce an artist’s work to her life” (column for June 30, 2004). This is why my book about Lou Reed⁹ is pointless.

I’d feel ashamed, ashamed of my pretensions, of my laughable impatience and frustration with not getting what I didn’t deserve. I knew that I should just give up, forget about writing about music and critical theory, and concentrate on – what? Making a living, having to make a living, trying to keep my own mind from driving me insane. I felt resentful, angry, even or especially (irrationally) towards GM himself.¹⁰ Sure, it would be a fuck of a lot easier to write a “Top Ten” list every week or even every month if record companies and book publishers were constantly sending *me* complimentary copies of their products! I could just sit on my ass and read and listen to music and watch movies all day. “No, that’s not you,” I’d tell myself bitterly, knowing that that wasn’t what Greil was like either; “that’s everyone else around you – lazy and complacent.” And then somehow, still a bit angry but no longer depressed, I’d find the energy to start a new project.

9. Few would disagree that the terrorizing attacks¹¹ that took place in New York City, at the Pentagon and elsewhere on September 11th 2001 were the most important “world-historical” events that took place in the United States during the period that GM was writing the columns that would end up in *Real Live Rock*. Significantly, perhaps, those attacks occurred almost right in the middle of that period: 15 years after its start date (1986) and 13 years before its last entry (2014). In fact, the first mention of September 11, 2001 occurs on page 268, almost exactly halfway through the book’s 522 pages.

And yet, despite the centrality of the attacks to recent history, they do not dominate the second half of *Real Live Rock*. They appear in it, have their moment, albeit a noisy one, and then they disappear. (There are also no references

⁹ Bill Brown, *Words and Guitar: A History of Lou Reed’s Music* (Colossal Books, 2013).

¹⁰ I cringed when I read GM’s response to Sinead O’Connor ripping up a picture of the pope: “Even if you were with her all the way – after the fact – you had to realize that someone this intransigent will sooner or later put you on the other side” (column for December 1992). I’m intransigent, too, though I wish I were not.

¹¹ I use this phrase to acknowledge that the attacks did in fact terrorize people, but that they may not have been perpetrated by people who are best described by the word “terrorists.”

whatsoever to the mass protests against the war on Iraq – justified in the name of a response to “the terrorist attacks of September 11th” – that broke out in March 2003.) I think I know the reason for this disappearance: speaking about September 11th requires some sort of encounter with what are all-too-casually labeled and dismissed as “conspiracy theories.” It requires taking seriously a remark such as this: “the theft of the 2000 election,” GM writes, “laid the foundation for the Bush administration as such: if they could get away with that [...] they could get away with *anything*” (column for September 2008, emphasis added). Yes, *anything*: even the pre-meditated murder of thousands of “fellow Americans.”

Like many people, GM chose to believe the official explanations for what happened on September 11th (“19 men,” he writes in the column for November 26, 2001, “came from elsewhere” and “destroyed thousands”). He mentions Osama bin Laden, who allegedly ordered, funded and organized the attacks. In a chilling passage, he says that OBL and his henchmen placed the USA in “actual physical jeopardy”; that Al Qaeda constituted “a real enemy,” as opposed to someone like George W. Bush and his henchmen, who merely threatened to bring the country closer “toward autocracy and secret government”; and that this real enemy had managed to attack “the country itself, not a few buildings,” and had thereby demonstrated that the USA was “more vulnerable than its enemies ever imagined it was” (column for September 23, 2002). But did Al Qaeda really *underestimate* the USA’s vulnerability, which on September 11th seemed to be complete and total? On the contrary: it would seem from the official explanations that OBL and his men somehow managed to get this country’s degree of vulnerability just right. They went for a home run, a Grand Slam even, and they somehow managed to hit one.

Unlike others, GM was not interested in *why* America’s enemies would attack both “a few buildings” (the World Trade Center and the Pentagon) and “the country itself.” To determine their motives, he says, one would need the ability to “read minds” (column for October 1, 2001),¹² as if Al Qaeda had never revealed its opposition to the U.S. military’s presence in Saudi Arabia and the U.S.-supported Israeli occupation of Palestine, when, of course, it had made these positions abundantly clear several years previously,¹³ or as if the Project for a New

¹² This is a poor excuse for an argument – it is actually a slur: “Oh! *You* know what the terrorists want? Then you must be able to read minds, too.”

¹³ Cf. Dominic Tierney, “The Twenty Years’ War,” *The Atlantic*, 23 August 2016: “[In 1996] within a few months of his arrival, [Osama bin Laden] issued a 30-page fatwa, ‘Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places,’ which was published in a London-based newspaper, *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, and faxed to supporters around the world. It was bin Laden’s first public call for a global jihad against the United States.” <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/08/twenty-years-war/496736/>

American Century had never claimed in *Rebuilding America's Defenses* (issued September 2000) that, “the process of transformation, even if it brings revolutionary change, is likely to be a long one, absent some catastrophic and catalyzing event – like a new Pearl Harbor,”¹⁴ which is precisely what September 11th turned out to be.

One of GM’s interviewees (Mary Weiss) wanted to know, “Where is our national security? How in the world could a plane ever fly directly over the Pentagon and the White House?” (column for October 1, 2001). These are *excellent* questions, and they can and *should be* answered, but no one in power seems to be able to do so: neither the Bush Administration nor NORAD nor the official 911 Commission has done it. GM doesn’t even try, and so, in the pages of his book, these burning questions remain unanswered.

A singer of one of the songs GM likes “sees the World Trade Center, and then what’s left of it – *nothing*” (Sleater-Kinney’s “Far Away,” reviewed on September 9, 2002, emphasis added). But no one in power has ever given any plausible (*i.e.*, physically possible) explanation of how both the steel-framed high-rise buildings struck by planes on that day (the “Twin Towers”) could completely collapse, as if by controlled demolition, when they were both designed to survive the impact of large jet planes full of fuel and no other steel-framed high-rise had *ever* collapsed completely before, not even the ones that had caught on fire. No one in power has been able to explain how or why the ruins of the collapsed buildings contained far less rubble and debris than should have been the case (no huge blocks of concrete, no desks, no toilets or sinks, no smashed window panes, very little steel, etc.) and were in fact “pulverized” in mid-air (to quote then-Governor George Pataki) and turned into huge clouds of dust.¹⁵ Neither the Sleater-Kinney song in question nor GM himself even broach these questions, not to mention try to answer them.

GM was in fact only interested in people’s *responses* to the attacks, not the attacks themselves. “The language of the event,” he writes: “not the language of those who perpetrated it, but the language of people trying to make sense of it, to translate it, to at once accept and resist its reality” (column for August 26, 2002). But there’s a big problem here, an epistemological one. The “reality” that one is to “at once accept and resist” – the official explanation of what took place – might *not* be reality, at all. It might be a blatant fake, an *obvious* lie, and one so big and ugly that one is afraid to call it what it is – the Big Lie. And if that is the case, and I

¹⁴ Preserved here:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20130817122719/http://www.newamericancentury.org/RebuildingAmericasDefenses.pdf>

¹⁵ Cf. Pataki’s statements on CNN, preserved here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CcvvhVv-cAE>.

believe it is, then the act of “trying to make sense of it” is a waste of time, and the act of “translating it” into a “language” that one can understand is simply the process by which the Big Lie is accepted as truth and protected from all meaningful resistance.

10. Though this book has got a couple of other problems – it was designed by its publisher, Yale University Press, apparently without any input from GM himself, which means that it has an atrocious cover (the author with a green face and glasses that totally obscure his eyes) and includes only two images (both black and white) – *Real Life Rock* is a must-buy. Fans of the writer, who is certainly one of America’s very best cultural critics, will treasure it for its density, for the *thousands* of tips and tales and twists and turns that it contains. Readers who have found GM’s many other books to be “hard to get into,” confusing, even impenetrable (or maybe they simply don’t like Dylan or Elvis or punk, three of his cultural obsessions) may well find that the amazing variety of the subject matter, as well as the shortness of the entries, opens entrances they couldn’t previously find.

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