

Peter Guralnick. **Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley**. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1994. Pp. xiv + 560, photographs, bibliography, index. \$24.95 cloth.

Morris S. Levy
Indiana University

Leonard Bernstein once said that Elvis Presley was the greatest cultural force in the twentieth century. Presley may have played a part in a revolution, but he was no revolutionary. Or, at least, he never intended to be one. As Peter Guralnick's *Last Train to Memphis* clearly shows, Presley's overriding goal during his ascension was to stay sane within the maelstrom of fame and notoriety.

Guralnick pulls off a biography of the most significant force of change in American music by stating his aim simply:

to keep the story within "real" time, to allow the characters to freely breathe their own air, to a voice imposing the judgment of another age, or even the alarums that hindsight inevitable lends. (xii)

For Guralnick, "real" time means summarizing Presley's early life in Tupelo, Mississippi, and his high school years in Memphis in two chapters. Each subsequent chapter represents three to six months of Presley's life, ending, almost prophetically, with Presley's mother's death and his departure for Germany one month later as a member of the U.S. Army in 1958.

Guralnick aptly manages to capture what it must have been like to have lead Presley's life. As in Guralnick's previous works, *Last Train to Memphis* represents a conglomeration of skillfully assembled voices who bring an icon back to the level of personhood. For Guralnick, the musicians, family members, girlfriends, songwriters, engineers, producers, and actors are essential to the narrative. Somewhat surprisingly, it is often Presley's voice that is the most jarring to read, if only because one rarely assumes he was able to articulate much. We are usually lead to believe that Presley's manager, Colonel Tom Parker, closed the door on access to Presley, but the book is filled with quotes from newspaper articles and magazines of both wide and limited readership.

Subtitled *The Rise of Elvis Presley*, the book promises a second volume. *Last Train to Memphis* is the most significant Presley biography since Jerry Hopkins's *Elvis: A Biography*, originally published in 1971 and long out of print. Guralnick paints a vivid picture of the first five years of Presley's career; however, we have nineteen more years to go before Presley's death in 1977. I sincerely hope that Guralnick's next volume, no matter how encapsulated a story it may tell, lives up to the promise of the first volume.