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Lipstick Traces: A Secret History Of The Twentieth Century, Twentieth Anniversary Edition



Synopsis

Greil Marcus, author of *Mystery Train*, widely acclaimed as the best book ever written about America as seen through its music, began work on this new book out of a fascination with the Sex Pistols: that scandalous antimusical group, invented in London in 1975 and dead within two years, which sparked the emergence of the culture called punk. “I am an antichrist!” shouted singer Johnny Rotten—where in the world of pop music did that come from? Looking for an answer, with a high sense of the drama of the journey, Marcus takes us down the dark paths of counterhistory, a route of blasphemy, adventure, and surprise. This is no mere search for cultural antecedents. Instead, what Marcus so brilliantly shows is that various kinds of angry, absolute demands—demands on society, art, and all the governing structures of everyday life—seem to be coded in phrases, images, and actions passed on invisibly, but inevitably, by people quite unaware of each other. Marcus lets us hear strange yet familiar voices: of such heretics as the Brethren of the Free Spirit in medieval Europe and the Ranters in seventeenth-century England; the dadaists in Zurich in 1916 and Berlin in 1918, wearing death masks, chanting glossolalia; one Michel Mourre, who in 1950 took over Easter Mass at Notre-Dame to proclaim the death of God; the Lettrist International and the Situationist International, small groups of Paris-based artists and writers surrounding Guy Debord, who produced blank-screen films, prophetic graffiti, and perhaps the most provocative social criticism of the 1950s and 1960s; the rioting students and workers of May 1968, scrawling cryptic slogans on city walls and bringing France to a halt; the Sex Pistols in London, recording the savage “Anarchy in the U.K.” and “God Save the Queen.” Although the Sex Pistols shape the beginning and the end of the story, *Lipstick Traces* is not a book about music; it is about a common voice, discovered and transmitted in many forms. Working from scores of previously unexamined and untranslated essays, manifestos, and filmscripts, from old photographs, dada sound poetry, punk songs, collages, and classic texts from Marx to Henri Lefebvre, Marcus takes us deep behind the acknowledged events of our era, into a hidden tradition of moments that would seem imaginary except for the fact that they are real: a tradition of shared utopias, solitary refusals, impossible demands, and unexplained disappearances. Written with grace and force, humor and an insistent sense of tragedy and danger, *Lipstick Traces* tells a story as disruptive and compelling as the century itself.

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Customer Reviews

A coruscatingly original piece of work, vibrant with the energy of the bizarre happenings it maps out. (Terry Eagleton New York Times Book Review) That Marcus can kick off and end his exhaustive, but always clear-headed, cross-epochal trek with the Sex Pistols and make it all cohere is but one indication of how fully he meshes the academy and the gutter. (Katherine Dieckmann Village Voice Literary Supplement) Lipstick Traces has the energy of its obsessions, and it snares you in the manner of those intense, questing and often stoned sessions of intellectual debate you may have experienced in your college years. It was destined, in other words, to achieve cult status. (Ben Brantley New York Times) In 1989, Harvard University Press published Lipstick Traces, the second book by the American writer and critic Greil Marcus. It was a dazzling creation, mapping out an untold 'secret history' which connected the Sex Pistols, the Dadaists, the Parisian movements of 1968, that legendary subversive clique the Situationist International and an Anabaptist revolt in 16th-century Germany, led by a notorious libertine named John of Leyden. Among the book's most ardent fans, it sparked real epiphanies. It stands as a singularly idiosyncratic product of a genre-cum-tradition rooted in the business of writing about musicians and the whirl of ideas that once surrounded them. [Marcus] manages some of the finest music writing ever to make it on to the page. My 20-year-old copy of Lipstick Traces is the one book I would save from my proverbial burning house. (John Harris The Guardian 2009-06-27) For anybody who wants to go deeper into the ontology of an idea that animates a kind of music, or is illuminated by that music, read Greil Marcus's Lipstick Traces, just reissued in an expanded edition for the book's twentieth anniversary. I often say that Traces is the best book ever written about music, even though it's not actually about music: it is about the life of an idea. (Sasha Frere-Jones

New Yorker online 2009-10-21)I first read Lipstick Traces as a penniless traveler, hiding in the bathroom of a late-night express train from Cologne to Berlin. My paranoia was considerably eased as I delved into the lives of various misfits and aesthetic revolutionaries throughout the twentieth century. As dawn broke and the train pulled into the station, I disembarked, feeling not shell-shocked from the conductor's repeated passes to my stall, but decidedly refreshed. (J. Scott Burgeson East Bay Express 1998-01-01)The 'secret' of Marcus's history is its poetry—widely separated persons and events call out to each other and 'connect' precisely because so many of ordinary history's causal and syntactic arrangements have been positively negated. (Jerome McGann London Review of Books 1989-01-01)Greil Marcus has developed an ability to discern an art movement, or an entire country, lurking inside a song. (New Yorker 2004-01-01)Probably the most astute critic of American popular culture since Edmund Wilson. (D. D. Guttenplan London Review of Books 2007-01-01)

Greil Marcus is the author of The Doors, Mystery Train, and other books.

Reads like some of the boring text box I had in college. There is some interesting information but it's pretty dry .

Without even commenting on the actual content, the style of this book is the complete opposite of our current oversimplified, dumbed down swill. The prose is dense and stream of consciousness styled, and necessarily complex. Greil Marcus drills down deeply, as far back as medieval times to synthesize an explanation of the Punk movement. He used documented but suppressed or forgotten historic events and movements to prove that Punk is not simply raw youthful rebellion, but part of a larger, self-validating philosophical paradigm. This coherency of this paradigm has evolved over the centuries, and it is never articulated in readily accessible form, but always lurking in the shadows. And it had repeatedly caused radical, worldwide change. Read this book if you dare, and if you can. Embrace complexity.

So far, the condition & content of the book have completely met my expectations (of which there were not many but had it been a piece of crap, my rating would have reflected this). I've found no complaints, just trying to keep up with the pacing of the book that Greil Marcus has provided which is quite rapid and jumps around in time quite a lot while loading the text heavily with historical, cultural references that at times escape me. It's a lot to take in at once but I'm enjoying this product

nevertheless.

Magnificent view on the counterculture of Punk and its influence over the years. It is far better than Simon Reynold's *Retromania* (although this one highlights the pop culture). I want to read it over and over again. Every detail that is mentioned adds up to a new whole. It also makes plausible connections between different movements and artists, which leads to new thoughts about music in general.

Terrific, indescribable, indispensable contribution to cultural history. If you're at all interested in where "today" came from, check out this extraordinary book.

The novel features basic characters and a simplistic plot that is too similar to *SaTC* in style, characterization and content to really be noteworthy. A trio of high-powered New York career women navigate hiccups in their plans in their forties. Not really a story that did a good job of plot or character development, but a fun, quick read to pass the time.

I bought this book when it first came out more than twenty years ago now, and couldn't put it down. And still today I have similar reading fits whenever I pull it off my shelf. Similar to the previous reviewer, while reading *Lipstick Traces*, I was introduced to cultural and political figures and movements such as Guy Debord, Dada, Theodor Adorno and the Situationists for the first time. In *Lipstick Traces*, punk and the Sex Pistols provide a historical pivot around which Marcus weaves his narrative, an alternate narrative; alternate to the received history of the twentieth century we've all been given. I've loved Marcus' writing since discovering his first book 'Mystery Train' in the stacks of my high school library in the mid-1970s. I subsequently stole that library copy and to this day have not returned it. *Mystery Train* remains for me the most important book ever written about rock-n-roll and the music's place in American culture. And that book's influence is immeasurable. *Lipstick Traces* is different in that its focus is international and less specifically American than *Mystery Train's*. In *Lipstick Traces*, Greil Marcus goes to great lengths connecting the Sex Pistols with cultural/political movements such as the Situationists. John Lydon in an interview following *Lipstick Traces's* release, called such connections "rubbish," leading me to wonder what Marcus would have to say about Lydon's comment. Which isn't meant in the least to dissuade you from reading *Lipstick Traces*: Like all of Marcus's writing, it's full of ideas, rich in history, and deeply intriguing: All qualities missing from much of popular music at present. In any case, *Lipstick Traces's* subtitle alone should

make you want to read it.

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