

▶ INTERVIEW

PETER GURALNICK'S AMERICAN ROOTS

BY CATHERINE ELCIK

Peter Guralnick has made a career chronicling the music of America's heartland. Whether you're talking blues, rock, gospel or soul, if it's music that can be traced to the roots of American pop music, Guralnick's likely tackled it.

Guralnick has written for *Rolling Stone*, *The Village Voice*, *The New York Times*, and *The Boston Phoenix* among others. He moved into books in 1971 with the publication of his first essay collection, *Feel Like Going Home: Portraits in Blues and Rock 'n' Roll*. He followed that with *Lost Highway: Journeys and Arrivals of American Musicians* in 1979 and *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* in 1986. He's written a novel, *Nighthawk Blues*, but is perhaps best known for his critically acclaimed two-volume biography of Elvis Presley: *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* in 1994 and *Careless Love: The Unmaking of Elvis Presley* in 1999. His most recent biography—still in hardcover—is *Dream Boogie: The Triumph of Sam Cooke*.

Critics praise Guralnick's writing for allowing the music to sing through portraits of iconic Americans as they really were—warts and all—and to capture the spectrum of public lives that swung wildly between the lows of normal human vulnerability and the highest of creative highs. We spoke recently about the techniques he uses to capture the flesh and blood lives of the country's biggest musical personalities.

In *Dream Boogie*, you include internal dialogue for Sam's wife, Barbara, as she "[waits] for the fucker" to come home the night Sam was killed. As a biographer, what other fictive techniques do you use?

My idea in writing the biographies is to represent each point of view—each perspective—as truly as I can and to try to understand what the motivation is for each of the people. I want to bring each scene to life.

Barbara's language was so vivid and her attitude about events and people was so colorfully expressed, but her syntax didn't always translate well. So I tried to bring to life the story she told me in the language that she used. Telling it in indirect discourse rather than direct discourse did more justice to the flavor of what she was actually saying.

Your books are filled with specific detail—instead of a cluttered house you write that the room was littered with music charts, acetates, and "little Mama's extensive collection of ceramic figures." How do you get such specific detail?

I want to just be there as the fly on the wall as much as possible. The moments at which people become unaware of your presence can be moments of genuine spontaneity in which you observe something that's altogether different from what you're going to get from a formal interview. To do that you have to go into the interview with as

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much knowledge as you can about people so you're able to nudge them toward topics and then follow their leads.

I think most of those details about the apartment were volunteered, but it's these kinds of specificities of character and scene that make the story come alive, so if your subject isn't volunteering that kind of information, you might just have to pursue it—sometimes to the point that people say, "what are you asking me *that* for?"

You use a tape recorder. What do you say to journalism professors who say a notebook's the only way to go?

I think it's bad advice because you can't possibly know what you're missing if you're editing as you go. When I met J. W. Alexander [Sam Cooke's friend and manager] in 1982, he gave me unbelievable detail about things I had no possible ability to understand, whether it had to do with a deal he made for Sam or any of a hundred things that took me over twenty years to research to the point I knew what year we were even in. Without a tape recorder, I'd have missed all that.

How did you manage to write about Memphis and Chicago with a home base in the Boston area?

With Elvis, for four or five years I was going out to Memphis or LA for three weeks at a time and then I'd be home for two weeks.

You asked about advice for people starting out? The big thing is to try to figure out not how to make what you want to do pay for itself, but how to be able to afford to do what you want to do. I looked for freelance assignments to help finance the trips. I always tried to piggyback things so I'd never have to write something I didn't want to write. You're better off waiting on tables or painting houses if that will enable you to do the things that you most love rather than trading on your craft and doing stories you don't want to do.

Your research for *Dream Boogie* spans a decade or more. When do you stop researching and start writing?

You start when you have to. With Sam, I'd been doing interviews for ten years off and on and realized that I could go on doing interviews for another four or five years and feel no closer to the end. So I started.

What advice do you have for writers who struggle with pre-interview jitters?

I don't have any advice except to do it. I never felt anything but fear at the beginning, and I still feel a real sense of nervous anticipation going into almost any interview I do. I forced myself to do those early interviews, whether it was with Skip James or Buddy Guy or Muddy Waters or Jerry Lee Lewis. I mean, I was *thrilled* to do them, but I forced myself to get past my nerves because I believed greatness such as this would not pass my way again.

As boys, Elvis and Sam felt destined for successful artistic lives. Can we bottle that



certainty and distribute it to all the Grub Street writers?

No.

Damn!

(Laughs) I think what's so extraordinary in the story of creative sensibilities is the extent to which the dreams they dream give shape to the lives that they live. You have to believe in your creative vision. That doesn't mean you have to be confident of it—Elvis, in a sense, used self-deprecation as a weapon—but in some way or another, you have to be prepared to pursue it to the fullest. ☺

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