

POP MUSIC

BY ADAM BLOCK

On Jan. 4, 1954, a teen-age truck driver named Elvis Presley strolled into the Memphis studios of Sun Records and met the owner, Sam Phillips. Later that year, Phillips produced Elvis' first single, "That's Allright," and forever changed the face of pop music.

In other words, this is a momentous month in the history of rock. You could even call it a 30th birthday—a fit occasion for reassessment, nostalgia and a bit of disbelief. The landmark date comes from **The Rolling Stone Rock Almanac** (Collier Books, \$10.95), where you can also find such tidbits as the year of Bob Dylan's bar mitzvah (1954). The book offers a chronology of similar major events, along with weekly listings of the top pop and R&B records from 1954-82: a Mother Lode of entertaining information that can help to orient the reader in the history of rock. What was happening when you first turned on the radio, got laid, turned 21 or came out?

The music rolls out headlong, making it tough to recall, let alone decipher, what has gone by. But there is a growing body of literature to help the hapless. Here are some of the better recent offerings:

The Rock Yearbook 1984, edited by Allen Clark (St. Martin's Press, \$13.95), is the third in a series of expert roundups from the United Kingdom. It is brimming with astute essays, great photos and capsule reviews from several publications. Fans of charts will turn to **Billboard Top 40 Hits: 1955 to the Present**, by Joel Whitburn (Billboard, \$14.95), which lists all the U.S. Top 40 LPs and singles by artist and song title. The highest position held by a record, and its weeks on the charts, are clearly listed. There is also a week-by-week chronicle of all the Top 10 records for the years surveyed. Despite arguments about reliability (for a long time, calculations were made on the basis of records shipped, not sold), this remains the definitive argument-solver.

The New Rolling Stone Record Guide, by Dave Marsh and John Swenson (Random House, \$12.95), updates and improves the original 1979 edition. It includes ratings for 12,000 LPs as well as career reviews, organized by artist. Despite a tiresome East Coast bias, this is an informed and entertaining reference. Jazz listings have been withheld from this edition—saved for an upcoming companion volume. **The Trouser Press Guide to New Wave Records**, edited by Ira Robbins (Scribner, \$12.95), features colorless capsule reviews of records by 1,000 very colorful recent British and American bands.

If you are looking less for criticism than for hard information, turn to **The Rolling Stone Rock and Roll Encyclopedia**, edited by Jon Pareles and Patricia Romanowski (Summit Books, \$12.95). This dry but useful collection features 1,300 entries: largely scanty, if reliable, bios that capture the facts but seldom the spirit of the music.

For books you can actually curl up with and read, turn to some of the rock bios and memoirs. **Hellfire**, Nick Tosches' biography of Jerry Lee Lewis (Dell, \$6.95), is one of the best—a visionary parable of sin and of redemption denied. It is a frightening in-

vocation of American psychosis, idealism and rage rising out of the white-trash South, where one cousin begins speaking in tongues and takes up the cloth while another pounds great balls of satanic fire out of a standup piano and helps invent rock 'n' roll.

Reggaeophiles will want to tackle Timothy White's Bob Marley bio, **Catch a Fire** (Holt/Rinehart, \$9.95). White writes the whole tale in Jamaican patois, but in using the regional dialect he manages to pass uncritically on all manner of magic reality and divine revelation. The idea was somehow to capture the reality and verbal rhythms of Marley's world. The notion works in **Brother Ray**, an autobiography dictated by Ray Charles to David Ritz (Warner Books, \$2.75), full of salacious wit and sexual wisdom while charting an astounding career. Guitar aficionados will want to track down an artful biography of the late Michael Bloomfield, **The Rise and Fall of an American Guitar Hero**, by Ed Ward (Cherry Lane, \$8.95). A middle-class Jew became our first white blues guitar king, winning the praise of his black mentors and rising to the apex of mid-'60s hip legend. Ward charts the quirky course well.

Hope I Die Before I Get Old: The Story of The Who, by Dave Marsh (St. Martin's Press, \$10.95), is the year's big rock bio, and we're talking 546 pages. Marsh chronicles the band and the era, as teen-age discontent and democratic impulses slide from anarchic idealism into desperation and apathy. Marsh credits the interaction between gay manager Kit Lambert's grand camp fantasies and leader Pete Townshend's populist rage as being crucial to such landmarks as their "rock opera" *Tommy*. There is a wealth of wonder in this book, but, like the band, it is often overwhelmed by its own ambitions and its almost preposterous idealism.

For a delightful counterpoint, find **Rock Odyssey** by Ian Whitcomb (Doubleday, \$10.95). This is a memoir from the one-shot wonder of 1965 (with his falsetto thriller "You Turn Me On"), who tried to push vaudeville-pop with "Where Did Robinson Crusoe Go with Friday on Saturday Night?" and ultimately found himself producing Mae West's unlikely LP *Great Balls of Fire*. This dry eccentric writes a canny and bemused personal chronicle of the '60s through the eyes of an innocent abroad. He is campy, insightful and affectionate, offering grand cameos of Brian Epstein, Mick Jagger and others. Consider this unlikely scene: Whitcomb has bumped into Jim Morrison at an L.A. pancake house in 1967. The two are discussing late-Victorian gay poetry when two middle-aged queens cruise them.

"They like you," I said. "No, they like you," Morrison said. Then he shrugged, "I guess they like us both. You're the Evelyn Waugh lavender type, and I'm pure 'rough trade.'"

I wonder what Elvis would have thought of that exchange or what Whitcomb and Morrison would think seeing the same scene today, played out by Boy George and Billy Idol. Each made the next possible. Even after 30 years, the hits keep right on coming: reminiscence, nostalgia and disbelief.