

ROCK AND ROAD

Visibility is near zero," my brother Kenan muttered, squinting through a thickening veil of insects as our rented black Cadillac hurtled on cruise control towards Memphis. I slammed the radio in another near-futile attempt to elude "We Are the World." *The ADVOCATE's* Pop Music Desk was on the road.

In April, as anxiously awaited new albums by **Tom Petty**, **Prince**, **Graham Parker** and **The Eurythmics**, as well as the epochal *Peter Allen Live at Carnegie Hall*, were stacking up unopened, I was logging miles — doing research! My first stop was Austin, Tex.

I was headed out dancing, and the place to go in Austin is Club Iguana. The "club" is actually the invention of New Wave DJs Richard Luckett and Brad First, who rotate their talents through three gay clubs in the course of a week: the high-tech/yuppie Halls; the old-fashioned drags-welcome pit Oz; and the scruffy free-for-all Back Street Basics, where gay teens in mascara, in from San Antonio and ripped on XTC, rub shoulders with girls in Madonna-drag and their frat-rat boyfriends. Club Iguana is a child of Austin's queer clubs that has attracted, and enlightened, lots of heteros. Blame it on The Smiths, Bronski Beat and Madonna.

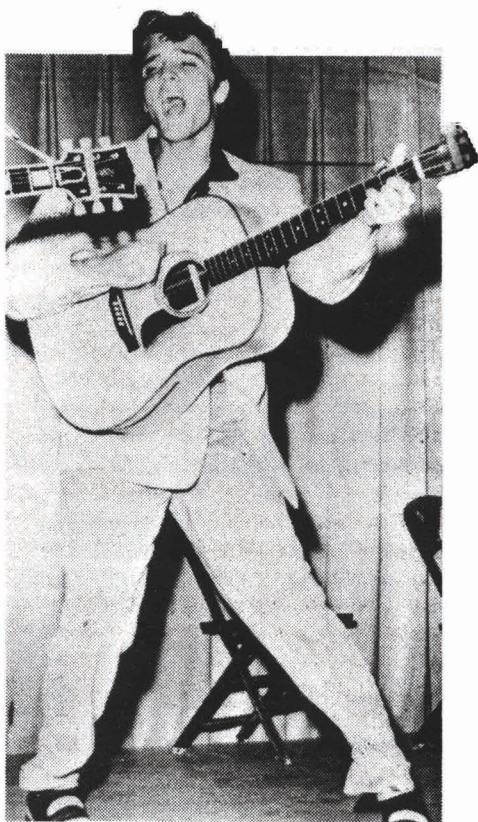
In Austin I listened to my friend Ed Ward, an expert on the arcana of pop music and barbecue, a familiar of the chicken shack that transcends all knowing. Ed is the hetero who first told me about Club Iguana. On the way to Threadgill's, where a teen-aged Janis Joplin used to belt the blues, and where you can still find the platonic chicken-fried steak with a side of okra and black-eyed peas, he slapped a cassette into his car stereo and announced, "You're about to hear one of the best albums of the year. It was recorded 22 years ago." What I heard was **Sam Cooke**, but Sam Cooke as I'd never heard him before — this was the funky, chitlin-circuit, ecstatic-gospel Sam Cooke, from *Live at the Harlem Club, 1963* (RCA), recorded in a steamy Miami nightclub with King Curtis' band and shelved by a record company that was grooming Cooke as a black Sinatra, ace makeout music crooner. The urbane, restrained, 1964, *Live at the Copa* album was released in its place.

That same year, Cooke was shot to death by the manager of a \$3-a-night motel. These tapes lay forgotten until Greg Geller came to RCA this year and pulled them from the vaults — exposing Cooke's ferocious sexual charisma in this conspiratorial performance: Cooke playing to an audience willing to celebrate the lust and dread he had tamed for white fans.

With that to ponder, the Pop Music Desk jetted off to New Orleans, a sweetly sordid city, seemingly fueled in its stupor on alcohol, corruption and an inspired voodoo that boggles forth in the best of its food and music. Take three tastes of glory: the crawgater — a 150-proof Slurpee served, by an alcoholic Baskin & Robbins called the Daiquiri Shop, in a Styrofoam cup at a temperature so low it forms a halo of ice around the straw as you suck it down; K-Paul's, which is not just the best Cajun restaurant in the country, but the best restaurant in the country; and **The Dirty Dozen** at the Glass House.

The Dirty Dozen are a brass band, with six horns and a couple of drums, who subsume Ornette Coleman, Charlie Parker and Thelonius Monk in classic Dixieland Jazz. On Monday nights, when they're not off, say, wowing Japan, they huddle on a one-foot-high stage in a miniature ghetto storefront, where for a buck you can hear them march anger and anarchy, humor and rhapsody in tandem and battle, as locals howl and parade. It's the sound of American music reinventing itself: jazz traditions slapping hands as they pass one another. An echo of that rapture is available on their record, *Feet Can't Fail Me Now* (Concord Jazz Records).

I lucked into all three of those delights my third night in New Orleans. My last night there I followed my crawgater and dinner at K-Paul's with a visit to the Blue Room at the Fairmont Hotel to see **B.B. King**. In the 200-seat nightclub where Huey Long used to cut shady deals as Ethel Merman belted showtunes, King roared through like a friendly hurricane. He currently has a hit video with his monumental rendition of "Into the Night" (MCA), but his hilarious, gut-bucket, sheet-tearing set made a footnote of that triumph. Thundering, camping — moaning and chiding with his guitar and voice — he drove a dozen black grandmothers at the next table into a near frenzy. After the show, a professionally skeptical friend announced, "That was the Alpha and the Omega." No one argued.



Young Elvis: "White trash, and we knew it"

As we bombed across the Bayou, Mississippi and Tennessee, the constant soundtrack from the ghetto-blasters of local kids was "Friends" (Jive/Arista) by **Whodini** and "King of Rock" (Profile) by **Run DMC** — New York street-wise rap-rock sensations that have percolated back down to B.B. King's hometown, Indianola, Miss., and Elvis' birthplace — Tupelo.

Memphis is a city that seems to have shot its wad, and maybe not figured that out yet. I saw two public statues: one of **Elvis Presley** and the other of the Confederate general who founded the Ku Klux Klan. I saw two historic buildings: the motel where Martin Luther King was shot, and Graceland. I can think of two reasons to go to Memphis: in search of great barbecue, and to pay your respects to Elvis. I was there for both.

I killed my first night at the massive local gay bar, where the whole crowd (wearing pressed Levi's and polo shirts) was gathered around an unbearably shrill drag show, out of Houston, which starred a 400-lb. creature who stripped to bikini lingerie, growled and swung white tassels that dangled from her pasties as patrons lined up to offer dollar bills. I escaped to an outdoor patio where a teenage drag queen from Buttfuck, Ark., acne visible through the Max Factor, sidled up and drawled, "Ahm Crystal. You're cute. About now ah'd gladly give you a blowjob for a jawnt." I demurred my way off to the cocktail lounge next door, where a wry local pharmacist, gay and 32, confided, "I know you came a long ways to see where Elvis lived, but we grew up with him, and believe me, that man was white trash, and we knew it."

The next day at Graceland, Ken Brixey, its marketing director, implied the same as he apologized: "I try to explain to people that you've got to think of Elvis as like some black athlete with no sophistication or education who suddenly earned this astonishing amount of money. Anything you see around here that might look like art is either a cheap copy or a fake."

What was never fake about Elvis Presley was the way he sang the blues, because in his guts he was as lowdown, as fervent, as untrammled and cornered as the blacks who first cut those songs. They have been lovingly collected, by Greg Geller again, on the freshly minted *Reconsider Baby* (RCA), with the by now seemingly obligatory "two previously unreleased tracks."

If that album has the ferocious feel of earned and invented freedom, Graceland feels a bit like a padded cell. It isn't really the interior decorator's nightmare some might hope for. It's awkwardly cozy — sort of a *My Three Sons* version of the Playboy Mansion. The opulence seems half-hearted, the decorations cursory. Most telling was Elvis' insistence upon having a TV, sometimes as many as three, in every room.

The privately owned Elvis Museum, which used to fester proudly in the shopping mall next to Graceland, exhibiting such memorabilia as the King's dirty underwear and empty Dilaudid bottles, had unfortunately lost its lease. After buying Elvis money-clips and swizzle sticks, and gravesite-photo-covered stash boxes, and after sampling transcendent barbecue at Leonard's and at Brady & Lil's, the Pop Music Desk (drawers rattling) hopped the train for Washington, D.C.

[Next issue: Further on down the road.]

— Adam Block