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'Lewis' is insightful, perceptive

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"Jerry Lee Lewis: His Own Story" by Rick Bragg. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2014. 512 pages, \$27.99.

JERRY LEE LEWIS
HIS OWN STORY
RICK BRAGG



"He has played over seven decades, from pubs to palladiums, from soccer stadiums to Hernando's Hideaway South of Memphis, for thousands, or hundreds, or less, because even when there was no one to play for but a handful of drunks or hangers-on, there was still the talent, and when you have a jewel, you do not hide it in a sock drawer," Rick Bragg explains near the beginning of "Jerry Lee Lewis: His Own Story," his new book about the life and times of a true American original.

"Raw and wild in the 1950s, almost forgotten in the mid-1960s, a honky-tonk chart-topper by the early 1970s, and a Rolls-Royce-wrecking, jet plane-buying crazy man in the late 1970s and 1980s, he always played," Bragg continues. "He absorbed scandal – 'Rolling Stone' virtually accused him of murder – and played when he could barely stand. He spent two decades wandering the wilderness, overmedicated, set upon by the tax man, divorce lawyers, everything but a rain of toads. There were more fights and pills and liquor and car crashes and women and discharge of firearms – accidental and on purpose – than a mortal man could be expected to survive, but he played."

This brief passage sums up the life of Jerry Lee Lewis. It also illustrates the author's literary style in microcosm: succinct yet with a surprisingly comprehensive level of detail. Some writers build their ideas in more concise segments, but Bragg believes in packing as much as he possibly can into each sentence. The style can sometimes be difficult to follow; more than once I found myself re-reading various sections because I lost sight of the initial intent as I made my way through the labyrinth he meticulously constructed. At the same time, the approach works because it tends to mirror the life of the individual being profiled. If the prose seems to meander aimlessly in certain places, it is simply mimicking the life of the enigmatic musician it seeks to illuminate.

Bragg is a professor at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. He completed a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard University in 1992. He won the Pulitzer Prize for feature writing in 1996 for his work at the New York Times, although he resigned from his post there in 2003 after it was determined that he should have shared the byline for an article about oystermen culture on the Gulf Coast. A prolific and versatile author, his previous books, many of which became bestsellers,

include “Ava’s Man,” “The Prince of Frogtown,” “I Am a Soldier, Too: The Jessica Lynch Story” and “The Most They Ever Had.”

“Jerry Lee Lewis” is comprised of 17 relatively easy to digest chapters sandwiched between an introduction and an epilogue, and it includes two pictorial sections consisting of 32 pages of black-and-white and color photographs documenting the singer’s lengthy career. Bragg brings the material to life by quoting the performer extensively and by integrating relevant song lyrics into the narrative at key points. The story flows effortlessly from the earliest years of the artist’s life to his most recent recordings, including two recent re-releases.

The so-called British Invasion of the 1960s, which was built on the foundation laid by Lewis and his contemporaries during the preceding decade, constitutes my earliest memories when it comes to music. The first group I remember following was Herman’s Hermits; I fell in love with “I’m Henry the Eighth, I Am” when I was in second grade. At the same time, I was acutely aware of the founders of the genre: Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Buddy Holly, etc. Even at a very young age, I knew important things were happening in the world and that those things were being reflected in the music I was continually exposed to on the radio.

Although the torch had been passed to a new generation, the influence of rockers like Lewis was still very much evident in the music scene of the mid-1960s. Bragg manages to capture an important dimension of the time period through his eloquent and gritty description of Lewis’ escapades. For example, consider the following passage from “American Wilderness,” the 10th chapter, which deals with life on the road in 1963:

“Underneath the chemicals was a plain streak of ornery, with bright flashes of outright crazy. He began to collect guns, nickel-plated .357s and even machine guns, carried them with him in the touring cars, on private planes, and even took pocket guns onstage, a habit that would continue for years and years. There were threats, and rumors of threats, and they still had to fight their way out of the beer joints they played. He had learned to take the microphone off the stand and fling it out like a rock on the end of a rope at a rude fan or a drunk, holding to one end of the cord so he could snatch it back if he missed and fling it to the offending target again.”

What is sometimes missing from Bragg’s chronicle, however, is an emphasis on the music itself. Lewis was an authentic rock pioneer, yet the volume tends to focus much more intensely on his personal quirks than his musical legacy. Still, a few passages do hint at the importance of his contributions, which were not insignificant. Witness the following from “I Been Wantin’ to Meet that Piano Player,” the sixth chapter:

“The stage had become a kind of laboratory for Jerry Lee, and he was the mad scientist. Onstage he mixed and matched songs and versions of songs, stitched together some parts and discarded others. Putting on a show was like flipping the switch on Frankenstein’s monster, then watching it show the first signs of life. By the time he finished, the people were out of their seats, and the constables were looking antsy.”

In the final analysis, I found Bragg’s biography to be an insightful and perceptive account of one of the architects of contemporary American culture. By the time you make your way to the end of this brutally honest portrait of a complex and challenged but extraordinarily gifted human being, you will no doubt see Lewis in a new way. I recommend it highly.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.