

Music Bios

Other than a complete thirty-years-in-the-making bookshelf devoted to all things Dylan, biographies and autobiographies of both historic and contemporary musical icons probably jumped into my reading wheelhouse back when Peter Guralnick's "His Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley" showed up in a box of books lent to me by my longtime reading *compadre* Stan Taggart back in the mid-'90s.

There had been others that I liked, of course, Woody Guthrie's "Bound for Glory," autobiographies by Merle Haggard and Miles Davis, and a Colin Escot book on Hank Williams come to mind. But by the turn of the millennium, when Guralnick's follow up, "Careless Love: The Unmaking of Elvis Presley," showed up in another box from Stan, I had become totally re-smitten with the genre.

The ensuing years brought books on the likes of Jimmie Rodgers, Robert Johnson, Thelonious Monk, and a host of others into the fold. Until about a month ago, however, the entire category seemed to have taken a few-years-long hiatus as far as getting my attention.

That changed when I finally got around to reading Keith Richard's "Life", which I had picked up in paperback at Dolly's Bookshop in Park City. That was followed in fairly-quick succession by two more music bios acquired from Stan, "Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone: The Carter Family & Their Legacy in American Music" and "I'll Sleep When I'm Dead: The Dirty Life and Times of Warren Zevon."

I've been infatuated with Keith Richards most of my adult life, having caught the Stones for the first time in concert at the Forum in L.A. in 1969 and then a few times more recently here in Utah. Along with my brother McGee, "Keef" and his mates were pretty much responsible for bringing "The Blues" into my musical consciousness.

"Life" is a brilliant memoir and if you haven't read it yet and are part of the Stones longtime tribe, you should get it in your filthy mitts immediately. It's flat-out wonderful, what can I say?

Having first become aware of the Carter Family as part of the '60s Folk Revival as seminal influences on a wide variety of bluegrass, country, Southern Gospel, pop and rock musicians, it was when I moved to Utah and began programming their music on the radio that I truly became a fan.

Made up of A.P. (Alvin Pleasant) Carter, his wife Sara, and his sister-in-law Maybelle, they would go on to become popular recording artists and then live radio sensations with such songs as "Wabash Cannonball," "Will the Circle Be Unbroken", "Wildwood Flower" and "Keep On the Sunny Side."

Maybelle's guitar finger-picking style, the "Carter Scratch," has had many imitators over the years. Flat-picking gurus such as Doc Watson, Clarence White and Norman Blake might have taken their art to higher technical levels, but they all bowed upon the altar of "Mother Maybelle."

The second generation of the Carter Family, made up of Mother Maybelle and her daughters Anita, June, and Helen performed from World War II well into the 1990s. June Carter, of course, would go on to marry Johnny Cash, with the family joining Cash's tours and TV shows.

Warren Zevon, I only saw live once. That was as opening act for the very first Los Lobos show in Utah out at the "Dirt Palace" at the Utah State Fairgrounds sometime

during the late '80s, I believe. I had first heard of him rhapsodized as a "genius" songwriter by the likes of Linda Ronstadt, Jackson Browne, and the Eagles when they were about to perform one of his songs.

I had also followed the wild man mythology that usually accompanied his mention in the rock and roll press of the time. But, for whatever reason I never bought his music until that show. During which, by the way, I contributed a cacophonous off-key harmony vocal to the sing-along chorus of "Werewolves of London."

With the acoustics being as poor as they were that night, what interested me about him most were his mannerisms and between-song banter. Among other quirks, he had kind of a "beat" sensibility that endeared him to my own bohemian leanings.

But it wouldn't be until I read "I'll Sleep When I'm Dead," written in a first-person anecdotal style by his many girlfriends, bandmates, agents, producers, friends and fans, that I truly got my arms around both the man and the myth.

Included in the text are hundreds of great stories by the likes of Carl Hiaasen, Hunter S. Thompson, Dave Letterman, Jackson Browne, Bonnie Raitt, Billy Bob Thornton, Bruce Springsteen, Dwight Yoakam, Mitch Albom, Stephen King, Dave Barry, the Everly Brothers, T-Bone Burnett, David Crosby, David Geffen, Paul Muldoon, and Thomas McGuane. Great stuff!

So there you have it, three books that truly bring Keith Richards, the Carter Family, and Warren Zevon to life. Check 'em out! Music bios rock!