punk were always being sucked back into the aesthetic vortex that was one condition of their actualization. And the searing rage, likewise, forced itself into a hopeless *ménage* with the existential ugliness which punk felt it was privileged to exploit.

Of course, the same can be said of Dada, thus making the book an activist's nightmare, a troublesome tale of movements and gestures that could not accommodate themselves to any lasting form of political efficacy. If the Situationists, the most theoretically sophisticated of the lot, eventually formed a cultus "armed with the dispensations of poetry," then the stakes – as Marcus tells it – are invariably metaphysical, even when the gamblers are clear-sighted Marxists defying the odds in a vast, postwar videodrome of consumer capitalism. Rather than being revolutionary and reconstructive, the language of paradox and negation is, it seems, provocative and dissipative, like the social energies it unleashes. In piecing together the secret history, or in unknowingly reassuming a titanic and essentially private responsibility for its debts, the "revolutionary," like the liberal critic, comes upon "a map made altogether of dead ends, where the only movement possible [is] not progress, not construction, but ricochet and surprise."

Here Marcus sounds uncannily like a West-coast heir of Emerson. Even more so when he claims that Jonathan Richman's "Road Runner" shows that "the power of rock 'n' roll was all in its leaps from one moment to the next, in the impossibility of its transitions." I am awed by this simple revelation, perhaps because of its analogue in Emerson's *Self-Reliance*: "Power ceases in the moment of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim."

There are many images in Marcus of compressed intensities, microcharged synaptic leaps, risks hurled across the void and originating beneath all thresholds of consciousness – images that deny the wicked pieties of the past, the fatalism of the future, and the paralyzing reifications of life in the capitalist present. Therefore, if ultimately too slight, too romantic in its political commitments, the book keeps reminding you that its operative word is "secret," and it begs for a patient anagogic response – a corollary to the probing, mature anguish that compels a middle-aged man to come to terms with the teenage *revenant* in his psyche. ◆

Lorenzo Buj is a graduate student in the Department of English at the University of Michigan.

an interview with Greil Marcus

Lorenzo Buj: For me the most remarkable fact about this book is not its great range, but how utterly personal it is, how much you confess without actually sounding confessional.

Greil Marcus: I thought a lot about whether to write the book that way, with that kind of voice, but it seemed to me that after 20 years of writing about music and other things, that I had the right to write as a public person, to step out, not because whatever I had done, or seen, or thought, had more validity than whatever anyone else had done, but because it would be dishonest for me to pretend I've written this book as some sort of disinterested, historicist study, which it isn't. I don't write to explain. I write to make things happen. I overdramatize, but I'd much rather overdramatize than overexplain. The fact is we have all been socialized, and educated, and brainwashed to think that the kind of culture we live in our everyday lives, and most care about, is worthless, empty, and merely amusement, and if we actually were truly moral people we wouldn't waste our time with it. I'm trying to make the case in a dramatic way that that's totally false.

You didn't write very much about punk in America.

No, not really. I wrote about God and the State. I think the only American punk band I would have written about would be X. Just given their first album, which I think is as extreme as anything that came out of England, and as shapely, and as convincing and as upsetting. But this is not a book about punk, and this is not a history of Dada, this is not a treatise on the Situationists. It's a book about a voice, about a movement through time of a certain impulse, and how that impulse catches up various

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people. I had a great time writing about all these people, but I never made any effort to be definitive or completist. On the other hand, I do think that there is nothing English on Dada remotely like what I wrote. Everybody starts off saying Dada was an anti-art movement, so let's talk about the art. And I wanted to not talk about the art. I wanted to talk about Dada and not talk about art at all, and one of the reasons that I focused on Richard Huelsenbeck is that he is the one original founding Dadaist who was not an artist. He did a little art here, and he did a little bit there, but that's not what he was about. He was a noisemaker, he was a trouble-maker, he made people unhappy, he pissed people off.

There's this passage somewhere in Faulkner where he describes the Satanic figure as "the splendid dark incorrigible one," and then he says this figure – and this struck me as a sentence you might have written or incorporated – "did not only decline to accept a condition just because it was a fact, but he wanted to substitute another condition in its place." Wasn't that the point you were making when you were talking about social facts suddenly being shattered and reorganized around a pitch of the voice, a snarl?

If I'd known that line from Faulkner, believe me, it'd be in this book somewhere. That sums up what so many of the people I write about tried to do and believed they were doing, particularly with the word "satanic."

Black music. Where has it been in the 80s, where is it now?

I think the great tragedy of black music in the last decade is the failure of reggae to break through as a major commercial force. Of course, it got heard and got popular; it became a cult music for many people; Bob Marley became an enormous international saint, you know. Bob Marley becoming a star was a way of ghettoizing the music. "We'll pick one guy; he'll be the star, then we won't have to listen to all the other shit." What was going on in Jamaica in the 70s was absolutely extraordinary. It was as alive a music scene as there had ever been in terms of people talking to each other, talking to all of Jamaica, talking to the world. But I think because it didn't break through, and because everybody in Jamaica thought that it would, there was a tremendous let down, a tremendous amount of energy went out of the music combined with a vast intensification of violence in Jamaican politics which led to the attempted assassination of Bob Marley, which probably had a lot to do with Peter Tosh's murder, which had a lot to do with a lot of people just shutting up and going for the hills, which had a lot to do with the whole spirit of the music contracting and becoming much safer.

But what's been going on in the 80s is the emergence of hip-hop as the absolutely dominant form in terms of culture, in terms of money, in term of what white kids want to listen to, what blacks want to listen to, and what it's done is pushed every other kind of black popular music to the side and made it irrelevant, made it marginal, made it quaint, which is what always happens when one form takes over. What worries me is that hip-hop hasn't discovered a subject or its subjects, I don't think. I think the music over the past five or six years has just expanded enormously as music, as sound, but it hasn't expanded equivalently at all in terms of what it's talking about, and I think ultimately that's going to kill the musical expansion. I hope I'm wrong, but it's kind of weird that after all these years people are still talking about how tough they are, what a hot-shot they are, how they can stomp anybody else. I mean, you sort of would have thought it would have gone past that a long time ago, and it hasn't.

Prince. What was his place in black music in the 80s?

That's a good question. I don't think Prince ever wanted to be known as, understood as, heard as, a black musician. He did not want to be ghettoized. He wanted to be number one in every way possible. He wanted to be the best, the most famous, the richest, the most powerful – and he's done alright. At the beginning of his career, just like Bob Dylan put out all those phony stories about who he really was and how his parents were dead, how he ran away when he was 14 and he played with Carl Perkins, played with Gene Vincent – Prince's line was that his father was black and his mother white. Not true. That he was part Indian and part Italian, he was the ultimate American. Which he may be, but not that way. The whole uncertainty around the time Prince was making *Dirty Mind*, as to whether he was black or white, whether he was gay or he was straight or bisexual – some people thought he was actually female – I think was all part of his attempt to refuse to recognize any of the boundaries that we all immediately set up around anybody. His music was not strictly black by any means. There was a lot of punk in it. There was a lot of soul music, which, at the time he was working, was anything but the mainstream of black music. He was obviously the kind of music fan that Sly Stone was. He obviously loved the Beatles. He listened to everything. He learned from everything. He was, I mean, the ultimate anti-racist. He was

Moments of history calling to each other across time through passageways that can't be charted.

an omni-American, to use someone else's phrase.

Prince has gone his own way. You know, there really have been no successful Prince imitators. He did his best to make lots of them, all the Paisley Park bands and the Family. Just like there are no real Madonna imitators. She's one of a kind. Which says a lot about their limits. I mean, truly great pop figures are imitated by thousands and thousands of people in ways that are productive. People start out as imitators, and then through that imitation of the Beatles, or Elvis, the Sex Pistols, they find their own voices. Through James Brown, Ray Charles, they find their own voices, and they start saying things the people they're imitating would never say, in ways they would never say it. So that says a lot about Prince and Madonna being just who they are, and not more.

Has there been a negationist moment or a moment of the absolute, of the kind you discuss in this book, in black music in the past ten or 20 years?

Well, probably there has, but I haven't heard it. If you want me to pick a negationist moment from black music I'd have to go all the way back to "Concrete Jungle" on the Wailers' second album, *Catch a Fire,* 1973. The guitar solo in that recording is just [pause] the ultimate shiver. With the way the rhythm is going behind, the rhythm is so inexorable, and the guitar solo is pure desire, and the rhythm behind it swallows that desire and just makes it disappear. An incredible moment. And that guitar solo was played by Wayne Perkins, a white Nashville guitarist, and that's because the original recording of the song didn't have that solo, and when it was gonna be released in America, Chris Blackwell who ran Island records, said, "We wanna make this music sound, you know, a little more accessible," i.e. a little more white. So he got Perkins and some other people to do overdubs on the Wailers' stuff, and it's one of those moments where this utterly corrupt, racist, capitalistic, patriarchal, hierarchical, active suppression and erasure ended up creating something that I think is stronger than what was there before.

But I'm just talking about what I've heard; I'm not saying it isn't there. The strongest music, the music that's most akin to what I write about in this book, and not just the music, that I've heard recently is from the Czech band Pulnoc. They're a band made out of what was left of The Plastic People of the Universe. That was a Czech band that formed in the 70s, played Frank Zappa and Pink Floyd, stuff like that. They were imprisoned, they were banned. They've just been subjected to the worst kind of repression over a 20-year period. Two or three of them formed a new band with a couple of new people, and they played the United States last year, and that stuff was truly spooky. It really spoke for a kind of history, a kind of Eastern, Central European history, that ever since the war and in many ways long before it, a lot of people have done their damndest to erase, to pretend it never existed. But you cannot erase the deepest cultural, religious impulses. You can lose generations in between, but they get passed on.

That's interesting because you speak about moments of history calling to each other across time through passageways that can't be charted, but only after having said "The question of ancestry in culture is spurious." For you the secret history is really the irruption of the "absolute" *into* history, a kind of repetition without genealogical program.

Well, that's right. A lot of what the book is about is reversibility, the idea of the reversible connection factor: the idea that one intervention does not act on what it's attacking in a dialectical way, it just makes it disappear. And the people that I write about, whether they're heretics, whether they're Communards, musicians, revolutionary writers – I think it's that wish for reversibility which is much cruder, much simpler, much more violent than a dialectical conception, that really drives them.

Anyway, I don't think dialectically. I don't pretend to. Like I said, I'm a much cruder thinker than that.

Can one generate a politics or an ethics out of a book like this?

It's not for me to say. This book is not written to tell anybody what to do or what they should think. It was written out of a tremendous despair and loathing of what the United States has become over the last ten years, and began to become when I began the book, and became in an ever more intense way as I wrote. This is not a book written by someone who sees many good things in the future. It's a very deeply pessimistic book, and yet it's full of moments that say anything is possible, anything can happen. ◆