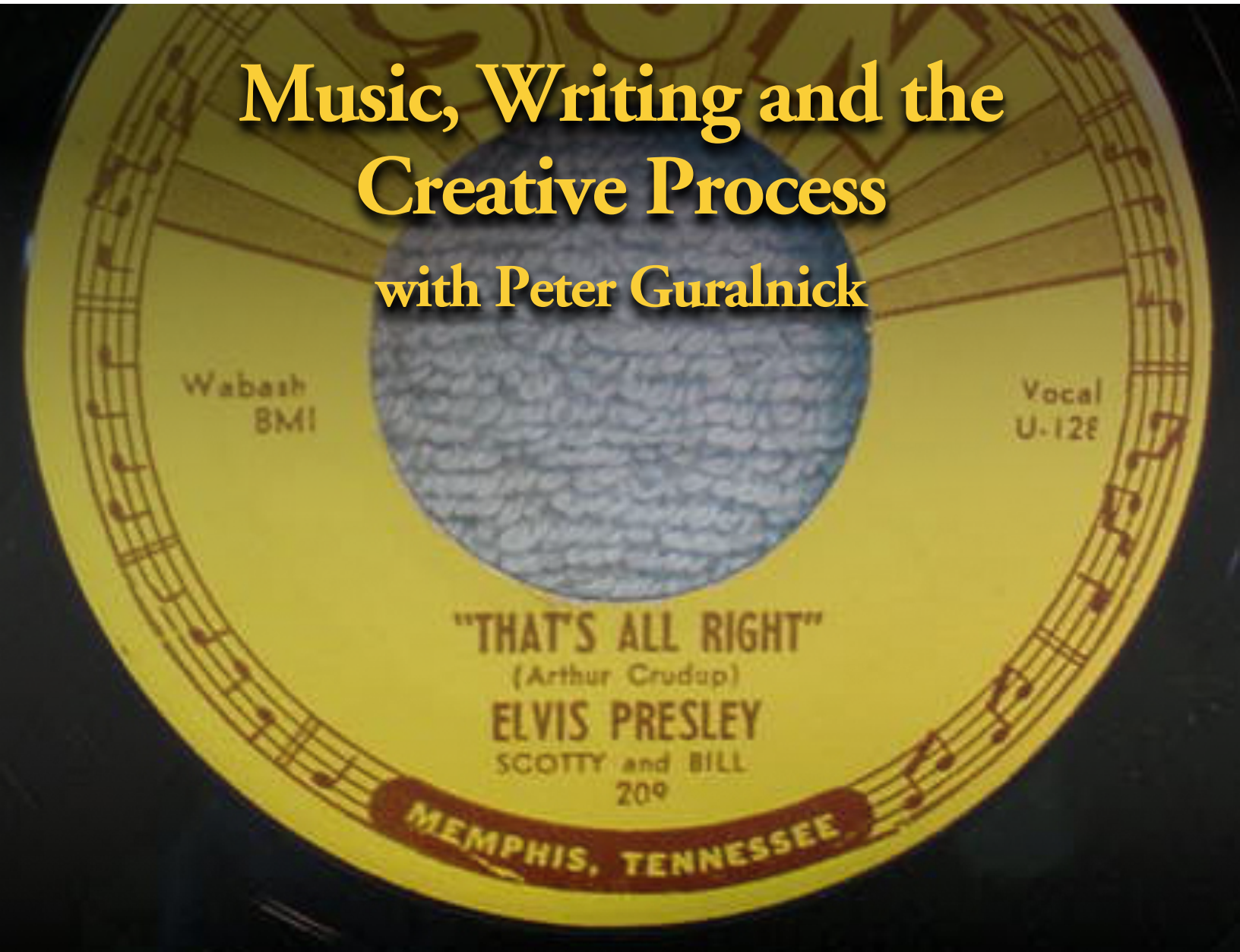
The Solari Report

MAY 29, 2014



Music, Writing and the Creative Process

with Peter Guralnick

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C. AUSTIN FITTS: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to The Solari Report. It is my absolute honor this week to introduce and welcome to The Solari Report, one of my favorite writers, and certainly favorite biographer of all time: Peter Guralnick, one of America's most prominent music writers and historians.

He has written many books. Let me just mention a few here: he has the marvelous trilogy on American roots music, *Sweet Soul Music, Lost Highway,* and *Feel Like Going Home;* his biographies include one on Robert Johnson, a recent one on Sam Cooke, and a two-volume biography of Elvis Presley. The first volume is called *Last Train to Memphis*, and the second, *Careless Love,* which I read in the '90s and absolutely consider as the finest biographies that have ever been written. Not only the best books ever written about Elvis, but marvelous insight into the history of America and the history of American music, and not to be missed. If you like to read, I can't recommend them enough.

He has written and co-produced a documentary (*Sam Phillips: The Man Who Invented Rock 'n' Roll*) about Sam Phillips, the founder of Sun Studio, and is currently working on a biography, which I can't wait to read. He blogs at his website, www.peterguralnick.com, and teaches Creative Writing during the spring semester at Vanderbilt.

So, Peter, it's an honor to have you on The Solari Report. Welcome.

PETER GURALNICK: Well, thanks so much. I really appreciate that. I don't know if I can live up to the introduction, but I'll do my best.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: We're going to talk today about creativity: creativity in

writing, creativity in music, and broaden out to how that creativity impacts a wider creativity in our society. As I was looking at my notes for this discussion, I realized: "This man is an entrepreneur, because he had a passion and a love, and he created a whole business." You apparently never went out and got a job; you just invented your work out of this passion, so you seem to know how to invent your world, as well. Start us off with how this began: how did you become a person who really documents and builds the history around this extraordinary period in American music? How did this begin? How did you start?

PETER GURALNICK: Well, really, it was just out of love for the music. When I was around 15, I just fell into the blues, and there's no real explanation for it. A friend of mine and I were exposed to some blues records; his brother had gone to Newport Folk Festival in 1959 or 1960, and came back with some records. We listened, and we just flipped over the blues.

That led me to absolutely everything. I always wanted to be a writer. My only two ambitions in life were to be a writer and a baseball player. I carried those as far as my talents could take me. Writing about music was not part of my plan at all. It just wasn't in my plan to write about music at all. I wrote my first novel when I was 18, and I still write fiction; I still write short stories and novels, and that was what I thought I'd do. When I had the opportunity (when underground press first started up, when rock magazines and *Crawdaddy!* started up), I guess I was around 25, 26, 27 — let me back up on that.

I was around 23 or 24 at the time, and I was invited to write about this. Anybody who knew me knew how much I loved the blues, and how much I loved Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Lightnin' Hopkins, and just this whole range. I was invited, both by this kid that I knew, Paul Williams, who had started *Crawdaddy!,* and then *Boston After Dark,* which became the *Boston Phoenix*, to write about some of these people, and really to write about them as an advocate. And that's what I did.

That's how I started writing about music. But from the beginning (I guess this is really what made a difference), I would have to say that I saw it as an avocation. Not a job, not as a vocation; it was an avocation.

It was just to have the opportunity to tell people about this music I thought was so great: to tell them about James Brown's show, or about Howlin' Wolf, or about Muddy Waters. This, to me, was just a tremendous privilege, and what I was writing was just an attempt to persuade people, to inform people, about something they might be missing out on.

But it never occurred to me, from that time until today, to write about anything that I didn't care passionately about. If there is a career, and there's any path to the career, that's what the path is.

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C. AUSTIN FITTS: One of the things that has always amazed me about your writing is that you have the ability to spend the time to dig out the facts. Many times, when I've read authors who are very excited about this kind of music, they don't take the time to sit down and reach back into some of these pasts, and get enormous amounts of true detail about their history. This is a whole part of our history that we must have done a good job of archiving and documenting. You seem to have enormous patience to do that, and dig that out without, in any way, distracting from your love and your passion for the music and the artists and the musicians who are doing this.

I said to you earlier: you seem to have a strong right brain and a left brain. I think it's extraordinary attention to the facts and the detail; the effort to be a true historian. From that emerges a much deeper, richer picture of the different musicians, and also the time. How many years did you spend writing *Last Train to Memphis*?

PETER GURALNICK: It came out in '94, and I started at the beginning of '88. So, I spent about six years on that, and I spent another five writing *Careless Love.* So, all in all, it took about 11 years of just focusing, pretty much exclusively, on Elvis.

It wasn't so much that I set out to do this particular thing. It was just the idea that you can't understand anything without understanding the context. If we were to continue this conversation off the radio, really the way we would want to communicate is to understand the context in which each of us came to whatever point we're at, and what the context of our lives is. Otherwise, we just wouldn't have any basis; we would just be talking, "Well, I like this, and you like that."

The question is, "Who are we talking to?" That was really, from the very beginning, what I was trying to do. When I was writing these profiles of Muddy Waters and Johnny Shines, what I wanted to do, as much as possible, wasn't as possible then, or at least, I didn't see the framework for it as fully as maybe I do now. I wanted to understand the world from their point of view. I wanted to understand the music from their point of view. I wasn't interested in imposing my own perception on what they did; I wanted to get what their perception was.

To start off with, I admired that music; I admired that spark of creativity; I admired that drive. That's what I was trying to do in these profiles that I wrote, *Feel Like Going Home* and *Lost Highway*, which, for the most part, are confined to the single person. There are other people that I speak to in the course of writing the profile, but probably not as many as I should.

It was just the idea of trying to understand: "What was the world like that you came up in?" Asking (this was sort of an interesting question, and one that I continued to ask, through the Sam Cooke one), "When the second World War broke out, how did that change your life?" Well, it didn't change their lives at all because, mostly, I was speaking to African-Americans who saw the war as something completely offstage, in terms of what they were doing.

They were dealing with their own problems, fighting their own battles. Muddy Waters was a tractor driver and was exempt from the draft. It really meant very little to them, whereas I thought I was asking a hugely-significant question. It was, for many people, but not for the world in which they lived.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: Yes. Well, one of the things that's so beautiful about *Last Train to Memphis* is I fell into the book, and before I knew it, I was in the '50s: I could smell the food, and I could hear the music, and I could feel what it felt like. It was a time that felt enormously different than our lives do now, and the context was extraordinary. You're capturing the culture that both produced Elvis, and then, the one he contributed to mightily.

You have the integration of these different traditions that came together in him, his life, and his music and you feel all of that come together. It's part of what makes it such a great biography, because you're tapping into this: "Where did this come from? Where did this amazing music and phenomena come out of?" You bring all those threads together, and it works.

PETER GURALNICK: Well, what I did in that was something quite different from the earlier books that I'd written: I removed myself altogether from it. Whereas I'd written more personally about people like Charlie Feathers, or about the experiences I had had, or Waylon Jennings, in this case, I removed myself altogether, and I wanted to remain totally in the moment which required a considerable discipline, in terms of the narrative approach. I didn't want to foreshadow anything; I didn't want to suggest. The whole point of the story of Elvis's early years is that nobody knows how the story's going to come out.

Many people have spoken about this kind of thing; I think David McCullough's spoken about it. Nobody lives in the past; we all live in the present. The point is that, as Elvis is coming along, as he's developing his ambitions, as he's growing up this shy, solitary kid (he can barely play the guitar in front of anybody else), he's harboring these tremendous aspirations.

At the time, there's no way of guessing that it's going to work out for him. He's turned down by the junior group of The Blackwood Brothers gospel quartet, because he can't sing harmony. He's just crushed that he failed this audition, which he thinks at the time is his last chance, or his first great chance, at fame and musical fulfillment.

Within a month or two, he's in the Sun Studio, recording for Sam Phillips. This audition session was not going to be a session at all; it was just an audition. It was his first full musical get-together with Scotty Moore and Bill Black, the guitarist and bass player who played with him as a trio for the first year and a half of his career.

They're just getting together, and they're running through songs, and all of a sudden, Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup comes up with *That's All Right,* the blues hit, almost out of desperation. It becomes this huge hit around Memphis, and regionally, throughout Texas and Louisiana, and he's on his way.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: I was just listening to the Sun sessions this morning, in response to something I read on your website. They're remarkable. I wanted to tell you a story: I once saw an album, or a video, done of Sting in the late '80s. He took a group of artists from very different traditions (Branford Marsalis from jazz, and some folks from reggae, and then his own musicians), and he put together a group. I don't know if you remember this one album; it was the one with *Fragile* on it. And he did a two-year global tour.

So, they did a video of this tour, and it started at their own chateau in France. Sting is very frustrated, because all these are very distinctly different musicians, and they're not melding. Finally, after much work, they come together, and the music sounds quite beautiful. At the end of the video, you see them in Tokyo, and the musicians have taken the music and gone beyond.

Something miraculous has happened, well beyond whatever vision he had at the beginning. There's something else that's emerged, and you listen to it, and you realize: "Oh, these guys are helping to unveil a whole new culture, because they're bringing these different cultures together, and they're somehow integrating them and communicating between them."

When I read your work, when you talk about all the African-American musicians during the Civil Rights Movement (Sam Cooke and Otis

Redding), you see them dealing across these different cultures, whether it's from gospel to secular, or from white to black, or from South to Nashville. The same with Elvis: bringing in these different strands, and putting soul music and gospel into secular. These guys are forging pathways between different cultures.

Somehow, I think, a lot of times it's the musicians who build those pathways for us. I see your work as describing, in very, very great detail, how that happened, musician after musician.

PETER GURALNICK: Well, I think that's true. I think that musicians don't see categories. You can say the same, I think, of artists of any kind: writers, visual artists. But nobody is looking to occupy one little square.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: Well, I came from the financial world, where everybody's trying to occupy a square and make it a square and not let it bleed into other squares.

PETER GURALNICK: In a way, the two ambitions of every musician I've ever spoken to or written about have been to reach the broadest possible audience on the one hand, and on the other hand, not to give up one ounce of their own singularity, or particularity.

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Sam Phillips' (who discovered Elvis, as well as Howlin' Wolf, and recorded B.B. King at the start of his career) label Sun just rocked the world out of a tiny little storefront studio. His great thing was, he insisted that the one thing that you sought in life (or the one thing you aspired to become in life, or achieve) was individualism in the extreme. From his point of view, every artist that he ever worked with embodied that quality, whether it was Elvis, or Rufus Thomas, or Howlin' Wolf, or Jerry Lee Lewis, or Johnny Cash.

All the artists I've spoken to, or that I've met, have sought that kind of

singularity. But at the same time, they don't see categories, as Sam Phillips did not see categories. The idea, in a sense, is to create a new ground of their own; not to see genres; not to see categories; not to make these distinctions which, essentially, set one off from another.

I'll never forget talking to Ray Charles, and asking him what kind of music he listened to now ('now' was the early '80s, at that point). He said, "Man, I just love to listen to those *Jackie Gleason Presents* albums." I didn't start laughing, but there must have been a note of skepticism in my voice. I said, "Really?" He says, "Oh, man. I could listen to that all day. The sweet sound of Bobby Hackett's trumpet."

I thought, "This is a lesson for me." I felt like, here, I'm being so high and mighty, or snobby, in a sense, and thinking, "*Jackie Gleason Presents*? He's not serious." But in fact, he was very serious, because he could listen. He, like Sam Phillips, could listen with "ears all around his head," without regard to categories; he could hear the sound of that trumpet.

I remember to talking to Howlin' Wolf about where he got his howl from. There were all kinds of African references that I might have found; there was no question in my mind that he was going to tell me that it was from Tommy Johnson (blues singer from around Jackson, Mississippi) or from the Mississippi Sheiks. But he says, "Oh, it was from Jimmie Rodgers. You know, that yodel of his."

Jimmie Rodgers is known as the father of country music. Then, Wolf started talking about Elvis Presley, about what a great blues singer he was. There was nothing ironic about the way he was talking. He was just saying what he felt, and speaking about how categories meant nothing. He referred to Elvis as "the boy who went to California and made such a success, but it was all built on the blues."

C. AUSTIN FITTS: I moved to a small apartment near Memphis in the late '90s. As I read *Last Train to Memphis*, I was struck by the power of Elvis's decision not to go to California and not to go to the East Coast, but to stay and do everything in Nashville. Then, you combine that with

Sun, and some of the other things that were going on, and what you realize was: there was a renaissance of music.

You see that in your trilogy, as you talk about Tupelo and Memphis and Muscle Shoals. There was a renaissance that was remarkable. Memphis was an incredible hub. One of the things I would love to talk about is, what in the world happened? Whether it's the cultural phenomena or the economic phenomena, you're talking about an amazing situation that somehow got lost.

PETER GURALNICK: Well, Memphis, of course, came out of the cotton culture. It was really the capital of the Delta; not just the Mississippi Delta, but the Arkansas Delta, and all of the rural environs. All of that is gone now, in the sense. Sam Phillips referred to Memphis as "big lights up the river," and that was the country people, within a 200-mile radius, or even a larger radius.

You had blacks and whites coming there; you had Beale Street, which was like the main street, "The Main Street of Negro America." As Sam Phillips, who first discovered it as a 16-year-old and had heard about it all his life, came into town, and he said, "The lights of Broadway could never burn brighter." He came in at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning, on his way to a revival meeting in Dallas, in 1939. It was pouring down rain, and he said the street was just so alive with activity.

He said what distinguished it was that every single person who was there, was there because they wanted to be there. That's really true for poor whites, as well; for rural whites who would come to Memphis. It was a confluence of black and white culture, and black and white music. On the radio, you had The Louvin Brothers and… I'm not even going to be able to do justice to all the people that you had. Elvis would go down as a teenager and listen to The Louvin Brothers, through live broadcasts at WMPS at noon.

It was just like a hub of activity. So, The Louvin Brothers are an enormous influence on all the country music that's followed, on The Everly Brothers, in particular. But the point was that Howlin' Wolf was

on radio at that time in West Memphis. Sonny Boy Williamson was on the radio at that time; first from West Memphis, and then from Helena, Arkansas. You had all of this music going on at the same time, and all of it was influencing everything else.

Elvis would walk along South Main, and he would hear the music coming out of a place called The Green Beetle. Meanwhile, you had all the music that's going on on Beale Street. Everything was happening simultaneously.

For somebody who was going to close their ears to it (because of either its class, or its racial origins), and there were lots of people who were not going to pick up on it, it was meaningless. They were not going to be affected by it. But for anyone who had their ears open, this was like getting a postgraduate education in the music of every sort.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: If you live in the Memphis area, what you know is that Elvis, among other things, was the world's finest local citizen. He did so many things for so many people. The most dangerous thing you can ever do is sit down in the middle of Memphis and say you hated Elvis Presley. We have an expression for that: "You need to kill 'em." It would be dangerous.

But there was a time when these folks did a great deal to lift up the whole place. That's why, to this day, I still shake my head and say, "How did it happen?" I know you spend part of the year, every year, in Nashville. Nashville grabbed ahold not of, necessarily, the rock n' roll, but certainly the country. And I guess it kept going in Nashville as country.

PETER GURALNICK: Well, Nashville was a company town. Nashville was a town made up of Rotarians, in a business sense. Macon, Georgia: look at all the talent that either came out of Macon or passed through Macon. Otis Redding and James Brown; just tons and tons of talent.

But it never developed as what you would call another business, "an industrial core." Memphis, the city, never recognized the music. They

never recognized it while Elvis was alive; they never recognized the music that the Stax was having; they never recognized the financial windfall or benefits that this music was bringing to the city while it was doing it.

So, there was never any sense of civic commitment. You could say it was racial, or you could say it was class; you could just say it was country club. But the point was, it didn't happen. Sam Phillips used to talk to me about how there was one person at the Rotary Club (I guess they had their offices down at the Peabody, where Sam was), who worked at the radio station, WREC.

Mr. Soderson was the executive secretary of the Rotary Club. That's the single person that ever gave him any encouragement within the business community. He got a lot of encouragement from people within the proper Memphis community; he got a lot of encouragement from people who worked outside of it.

People are always looking for an Achilles heel, which I think is not a real thing. But the thing about Memphis that so distinguished it, in terms of the music that it made, was that all of the music set out to be different from anything else that existed. It may have been because of limitations in musicianship in some cases. Johnny Cash and The Tennessee Two could barely get through a song when they started out.

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And Sam Phillips said, "That's what makes them different. That's what makes them so great and it's the simplicity of the music, which is an imposed simplicity because they couldn't play any differently." But all of the music that came out of Sun and Stax was really free-spirited. People like Kemmons Wilson started the Holiday Inn chain, or Clarence Saunders, was it, who built the Piggly Wiggly chain?

What Memphis has always taken pride in as a city is the individualism, the eccentricity, the difference of these difference-makers. But what none of them had was the ability to join together to form the civic organizations that Nashville did as it became the so-called Music City in the '50s.

The music that Nashville created, in some ways, was similar to the music that Berry Gordy created in Motown, and it was modeled, in a sense, on an assembly line prototype. It was the idea that you had one session after another. You had three-hour sessions of the music; you produced four songs; the same players played on all of these things. They showed tremendous adaptability. But there was always a clock, and the music, at its best, certainly transcended formula. But a great deal of the music was intended to sound like a great deal of the rest of the music, and that was just never the case in Memphis.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: Before then, I moved to the East Coast, and lived there when I was in a university. Everybody was expected to know the answer. Instead, around Memphis, it's the culture where it's fine to say, "I have no idea." You have permission to be stupid, which, as an entrepreneur, is essential. Because you can't figure something out unless you can first start by saying, "I have no idea. Do you understand this?"

It makes learning easier. In that sense, I find the South a much sweeter place to learn and try things, and to innovate. One of the things I'd mentioned to you is we just talked on The Solari Report about a wonderful PBS documentary, called *Music Makes a City*, about the alignment that happened in Louisville around the orchestra. You see the different sectors within the city support each other (the artists, and the business community, ect.), and they just created an air, and were able to do very extraordinary and innovative things.

That's one of the reasons I so appreciate many of your books. You get into what takes us from an extraordinary musician, to a concert musician, to someone like a Sam Phillips. Who makes it possible and who has that vision, and brings it all together, so that the music can really get recorded and packaged and distributed? That piece that

Phillips has done, I think, is so special now.

You're working on a book about Sam. I want to read this. When is it going to be available?

PETER GURALNICK: Oh, next year. I'm working on the fourth, and what I fully intend to be the final, draft. I hope to get it in by the end of the summer or by September, then have it come out next year.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: I was re-reading your trilogy this weekend. As I was going through it, I kept jumping up and going over to the computer to pull up, on YouTube, that artist. Then I thought, "Oh, it's too bad you can't make this a multimedia thing." I e-mailed you, and you came back and said, "Make sure you look at the enhanced version on Kindle." I went in and realized, "Oh, you've done this."

PETER GURALNICK: Well, to a certain degree, yes. I think Elvis Costello and Roddy Doyle both (and they might have said it about *Sweet Soul Music*) had great quotes about how much they enjoyed the book, and loved the book. They said, "But be prepared to dig deep into your wallet to go out and find all this wonderful music that's being written about."

That really is my aim. I'm writing about something that I think is great art and maybe that's pretentious.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: To me, it's the greatest art that's ever been known.

PETER GURALNICK: Well, yes. Whether it's Robert Johnson or it's Howlin' Wolf, or Elvis or James Brown, the point is that this should send you to the music. It should inspire you to seek out much more than what I'm writing about, because it should inspire the reader's own quest, and the reader's own enthusiasm.

So, that's very much part of the motivation. But one of the fun things about doing these enhanced eBooks (so far, we've done *Feel Like Going Home* and *Lost Highway*, and we're just finishing up *Sweet Soul Music* and the Sam Cooke biography) is to have conversations with so many

people that I've been friendly with over the years. Unfortunately, so many of them are gone; Solomon Burke would have been the featured conversation in every book I did.

But the point is, to be able to talk with friends, with people that I've known over the years like Sleepy LaBeef, or Roland James, or William Bell, or Dan Penn, or Rick Hall, or LC Cooke, Sam's brother. In addition to interviews about the music with me, I thought this would shed light about the book, to have these conversations with people. Not interviews so much as just conversations, with Dan Penn, about creativity; about the correspondence between songwriting and writing books. It was really cool, and was just a wonderful opportunity.

It's turned out to be much more work than I thought it was going to be. Well, I don't know what I thought. I didn't think anything. It just turned out to be a lot of work, but very rewarding work.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: I remember when I was in college, I had another friend who also loved the blues, and we drove hundreds and hundreds of miles to get to a concert. It was Buddy Guy and B.B. King. I just remember they went late through the night, and it was one of those things where it just rocked your world.

PETER GURALNICK: That's an amazing concert. I don't know; maybe they did lots of them together.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: No, I don't think so.

PETER GURALNICK: Buddy Guy came up so much under the influence of B.B. King, and then, of Guitar Slim in Louisiana, who was really his first hero. Between the two, he could have gotten this wild take on B.B. King's single-string approach to the blues.

Buddy Guy was one of the first people that I ever interviewed, very early on. This must have been around '67 or so; maybe a little later, maybe '68. He had just left Chess Records and was on Vanguard. He was disconsolate, in a way that no handler or PR person or publicity director

would allow their directed star to be today.

I remember talking, because he just didn't know where his career was going to go. He had made this album, which is really a fantastic album, for Vanguard, called *A Man and His Blues,* with Otis Spann on piano. It's really great, but completely different feeling than the Chess sides, which were just much more intense, and sort of frenetic. He just wasn't sure if he was going in the right direction.

It wasn't a great interview or anything, but that's what we talked about. That's the kind of thing that I've always wanted. I don't want to get the downside, but I want to get how people feel, and what they're trying to do, and what they think they can do. Just an honest reflection; just as you would with somebody you met in a social context, or in any other context.

Talk to people about their work: about the work that they do; how they do it; why they do it. Everybody wants to talk about that. It doesn't matter whether they're an electrician or a mechanic or a blues singer; I've rarely met anybody who didn't want to talk about that, if you show them the respect that they deserve.

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C. AUSTIN FITTS: There's a great moment (I forget which book it is; I think it may be in *Lost Highway)* where you come upon the realization that you have no interest in being a rock n' roll star.

PETER GURALNICK: Right. Yes.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: You realized, "This is really hard work: life on the road."

PETER GURALNICK: Well, I think it was not a sense of "the grass is always greener," but the sense that you have that somebody else's life is always harder. I was so admiring of the people that I was writing about. The

realization that I had, ultimately, was that I did what I did; they did what they did. I couldn't do anything about the world that I came from any more than they could do anything about the world that they came from. In other words: we can't change our backgrounds; we are just from where we are.

I don't think I recognized at the time what it was. But in a sense, it was an embrace of my own destiny. It's what I was meant to do. I wanted to be a writer, and that's what I always wanted to be.

In writing about the music, somehow or other, maybe I had an inferiority complex for a while, but for that long. Eventually, I realized, "Well, this is my mark, in a sense. Muddy Waters has his mark, and it's one that I admire enormously, but I have my mark, too, and there's no reason to feel apologetic. There's no reason to boast about it, but there's no reason to feel apologetic about it."

C. AUSTIN FITTS: So, when you are teaching your students at Vanderbilt about Creative Writing, what do you tell them? What do you teach them about how to find their voice?

PETER GURALNICK: Content always trumps style; it really does. This is a very unfashionable view.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: Well, if you look at your content and your suggested content, it requires enormous discipline, hard work, and time.

PETER GURALNICK: Well, no. The point is that they should care passionately about what they write about. That's really the first thing. I'm not going to start worrying about their grammar. With the MFA Program, these are graduate students; they're highly accomplished. To me, it's of very little consequence to write beautifully about something you don't care about.

You've got to really care about what you write about. Consider everything a draft, in a sense. Don't be inhibited by the idea, "Well, this isn't going to be perfect," because nothing you do in life is ever going to

be perfect. Sam Phillips frequently said, "How boring would that be, if it were perfect?" But you're always striving for perfection.

I teach one undergraduate course and one graduate course. In particular, I always cite Bob Dylan's line: "To live outside the law, you must be honest." The point is, "Take responsibility for your own." I said, "You can choose whatever you want to choose; that's your choice. I'm not going to be offended by it. But don't try to put it on me, and don't try to put it on external. Don't say, 'The dog ate my brilliant composition' or something."

Recognize that you're making your own choices, and be sure those are choices you want to make. If you're self-destructive, fine; but be sure that that's the choice you want to make. Don't try to put it off on someone else. They're life lessons more than writing lessons.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: One of the things that really struck me when I first went to Graceland (living where I do, I've been there many times), as you know, the Solari production team has been ordered to go, they may be at Graceland, and right about this week, as we post your interview. So, I'm very much looking forward to that.

But one of the things that got me about Graceland the first time was a wonderful investigative reporter that I knew up in Washington called me and said, "I'm driving to Memphis; I'm going to Graceland." I said, "Why?" She said, "Well, someone asked the estate if they could reissue something by Elvis, and it just hit number one in London, making it his 21st number-one hit, and that means he's got more number-one hits than The Beatles in London."

This was considered very newsworthy in Washington, so she was being sent to Graceland. We went, and it was right near the time of Elvis's birthday. There were just enormous numbers of flowers sent from fan clubs from all over the world. That was one of the great things about Graceland. Throughout the different parts, there are all sorts of videos that describe different aspects of his work, and his movies, and concerts. What you realize is what a global phenomenon he was.

At one point, in one of your interviews, you were talking about the goodwill that both soul music and Elvis (and all this work that you've written, and built so many histories for) has created globally for America. It's quite phenomenal. I'm sure those artists never dreamed that the world would love America because of their work, to the extent that's happened. It's quite remarkable.

Many of us inside the borders of America will begin to realize…

PETER GURALNICK: Well, no; it's an astonishing thing. All the good feeling that the music brought out in the world, and the way in which people who don't speak English (people who come from completely different cultures) can embrace the blues, or can embrace bluegrass music. Look at the current bluegrass in Japan, along with blues.

It points to something universal. I remember I had quoted this in the enhanced eBook of *Feel Like Going Home*; I included 11 or 12 minutes of my original interview with Muddy Waters. I was talking to him about his discovery by a European audience within relatively recent time when I first interviewed him, in '70. He was in the midst of a global discovery, which astonished him.

When I asked him, at the end of the interview, "Do you have any regrets?" He says, "Yes, I regret that this didn't all happen when I was younger, and I could put out more." It wasn't a bitter regret, but his point was, he embraced the idea that all of a sudden there was this. His music had taken on a larger scope; had reached a far vaster audience than he ever could have imagined when he was down on the Stovall Plantation in Clarksville, or even when he moved to Chicago, or even when he had his first hits on Chess. When Muddy Waters had hits on Chess, in '51, '52, '53, that meant they might have sold 25,000 or 30,000 copies. That was a big hit for Chess.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: Right. So, let's come up to now. Tell us about music now. Obviously, the Internet (YouTube) has been an enormous change, both in the cost of recording and producing. So we've seen the economics change; we've seen distribution change. What do you think is the

possibility for young artists today, and for the kinds of renaissances that you wrote about in Memphis happening, whether it's in Nashville, or any place in America today?

PETER GURALNICK: I think it's almost like there's a duality here. I think you're unlikely to have the kind of renaissance that occurred in Memphis or in Detroit with Motown, and in London with The Beatles, or Liverpool.

"You're unlikely to have the kind of renaissance that occurred in Memphis or in Detroit with Motown, and in London with The Beatles, or Liverpool."

Although, on the one hand, you now have a global audience, almost by definition; on the other hand, everything is a niche music. Everybody seeks out their own. I'll never forget Aretha Franklin, when *I've Never Loved a Man* came out. Being in Roxbury, in Boston, and outside Skippy White's Home of the Blues record shop. The song is coming out over the speaker, above the door. You just have this gathering of people, just listening to the music.

Well, you don't have to do that anymore; there aren't any record stores anymore. You can listen in the privacy of your own computer, and you don't even have to be in your own room. You can hear anything. In a sense, everything's available. But it's like going bowling; you do it alone. I suppose you could be in a bowling league…

But the point is that there's no sense of community. You can say, "Well, that community exists through all of the social networks," but…

C. AUSTIN FITTS: No, it doesn't.

PETER GURALNICK: Yes. I mean, I just don't see that as a real community, with people interacting, in which everybody is listening to the same thing at the same time. So, that's the one hand. On the other hand, it offers tremendous opportunities for the creative person who wants to pursue his or her own vision, musically, or any other way. I do think,

though, that the absence of any kind of centrality has a number of results.

One is that you're unlikely to have another Beatle, Michael Jackson, Bruce Springsteen, or Elvis Presley, where everybody comes together around the same thing. The other thing is that you've removed the economic structure, which supported music. It often could exploit artists. I don't mean to say it was an all-good thing. But the thing is that all art requires patronage of some kind, whether you go back to the Medicis, or you get a Guggenheim, or you get royalties for the books you write or the songs that you sing.

The Internet will erode those; both copyright protection and the payment that might once have been expected. That will have been deleterious, in a sense. Not on people creating things for themselves and their friends, or their communities, or their virtual communities, but it will have a deleterious effect on the broad possibilities of pursuing a career in the arts.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: I know crowdfunding has channeled a fair amount of money to both video games and documentaries. But I don't know if it's channeled much to musicians. Would you know, by any chance?

PETER GURALNICK: I don't know, no.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: It would be interesting to see if that happens. Well, Peter, I can't thank you enough for everything you do. I always say, "History is written by those that archive," and I think the contribution that you've made to digging in, and getting the facts, and documenting this phenomenal part of American culture and arts, is just phenomenal. I forget who it was who called you "a national treasure," or "a national gem," but I agree.

PETER GURALNICK: I think it was "a national resource," but it might have been better: "an endangered species."

C. AUSTIN FITTS: Well, before we close, is there anything that you would like

to add? Particularly on the topic of creativity, whether in writing or music, or business?

PETER GURALNICK: No. You asked me what I tried to convey to my students at Vanderbilt. Enthusiasm would be at the heart of it. I suppose that almost goes without saying. From the standpoint of pursuing a life in writing, I've never written anything that I didn't want to write. I don't mean that as a boast, and that's not an easy thing to maintain, and it has its own downsides, in a sense.

You have to be pretty resourceful to try to figure out how you can write, or pursue, exactly the path you want to pursue. But to me, that really is at the heart of everything that one should be seeking. You have to put food on the table; you don't want to see your kids starving. But fundamentally, you should be pursuing your own vision.

The other thing, in speaking of creativity, is what I've written about, whether fiction or non-fiction, it's intended to be responsive to human needs, human concerns, human joys, and human sorrows. One of the things that I think is the most valuable to me, in my writing, whether fiction or non-fiction, has been the things that I've done altogether outside of writing, in terms of experience; in terms of getting a broader range of human experience.

If I were living in an ivory tower, or an academic setting, or something like that, and I felt like it was invaluable for me to have… For about 23 years, I ran a boys' camp, that my grandfather had started. Like so many things in my life, I fell into it.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: It was in New Hampshire, right?

PETER GURALNICK: That's right. It was on Lake Winnipesaukee, in East Alton. The thing was, I did it because I was very close to my grandfather; he asked me to help him. Then he got sick, and I ended up doing it. It required so much more of me, and it exposed me to such a range of experiences and people.

Whether it was a matter of building tennis courts, or getting a new hot water heater, or to go buy a dishwasher, or dealing with all these different people and dealing with practicalities, like figuring out how to do a budget; how to reward people, reward the staff with as high a salary as I could, without sinking the entire enterprise, which everybody was so committed to.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: Well, it gives you a sense of how extraordinary what Sam Phillips accomplished was. He had to do it in the context of all these different, extraordinary tensions of class and race.

PETER GURALNICK: Absolutely. With no money of his own, and essentially having to try to figure out, "How can I survive in this, and still hold onto my dreams, to my ambition? To everything which I believe?" (which was the kind of music that he made, which nobody else had made, up until that time, that mix of black and white).

He had two nervous breakdowns; he had eight shock treatments each time. But he persisted, and when I met Sam Phillips for the first time in 1979 (I'd been trying for over 10 years to get together with him), finally, his son, Knox, was able to set up an interview. Sam didn't do any interviews at that time.

When I met him (it's the last chapter in *Lost Highway),* he preached to me. Listening to him was one of the most inspiring things in the world. Essentially, what he was talking about was how to live your life. So many of the ideas that he articulated so eloquently had to do with the things that I was trying to do at the camp. I just thought, "Oh my God. This is just so extraordinary, not that it matches my experience, but that it articulates and sets goals that I can embrace."

Then I knew him for 25 years after that, and he was one of the most charismatic people, as were Solomon Burke and lots of other people. Just one of the most charismatic people I'd ever met. But the point was, he took this seriously. He recognized all the different things that he had to balance and juggle in order to do what was more precious for him, or as precious as life itself to him, which was to make that music.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: Wow. I interrupted you on the camp. So, your second point was...

PETER GURALNICK: Well, the other thing was, had I just sat back (which I never could have done, or would have done) and written about the music from an armchair, or written about my views, my judgments, my criticisms, graded the music, or something like that. It has no attraction, and has no particular relevance to me.

But the point was to go out and to meet all these different people; to meet Deford Bailey, to meet Waylon Jennings, to meet Solomon Burke, to meet Sam Phillips. To go out and, in a sense, enter into their world and be welcomed into their world so generously, by so many different people, from so many different backgrounds. It just expanded my world in so many different ways. It created so much larger a context than anything I could ever have gotten by dwelling on my own thoughts or opinions or experiences.

"The point was to go out and to meet all these different people… To go out and, in a sense, enter into their world and be welcomed into their world so generously, by so many different people, from so many different backgrounds."

It expanded the horizons for everything that I wrote, for the novels that I was writing, and ultimately, for these biographies of Elvis, Sam Cooke, and Sam Phillips, where what I tried to do was portray a much wider world. I also tried that, to an extent, in *Sweet Soul Music,* which I conceived of as a narrative history.

But to give a sense of that broader world, of a world in which there's all this fervent creativity, and there are all these connections, which the people living in that world recognize, but the people who are outside of that world would be unlikely to ever perceive or experience, unless they're brought into it. So, I tried to bring them into it.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: Well, you paint a picture of the people who create our world. It's quite remarkable.

So, Peter Guralnick, thank you so much. Have a wonderful day, and thank you for joining us on The Solari Report.

PETER GURALNICK: Well, thanks. I've really enjoyed it. Thanks a lot.