

# ROCK 'N' ROLL WOMEN

*Portraits of a Generation*

NEW POEMS BY

**Jonah Raskin**



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Dedicated to the *ones* I love

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### ***Rock 'n' Roll Is Here to Play***

**R**OCK 'N' ROLL BROKE INTO MY LIFE when a teenage girl older than I blasted Bo Diddley on her record player. She was a dishwasher with curly hair. I heard the music come out of her bedroom window and could not get it out of my head. Later, at school at lunch hour in the gym when guys danced with girls, I heard Carl Perkins and I haven't been the same person since. I had grown up on folk music and on rhythm and blues—I played Leadbelly records everyday for a year—and rock 'n' roll sounded in my ears as though it had come out of black bars, the black ghetto, and the juke joints of the South.

Soon after the British Invasion of the 1960s, when rock 'n' roll bands such as the Beatles and the Stones, came to the States, I went to England and lived with an American who played the guitar and sang the blues in British pubs. When I came back home and started teaching literature, I attended rock concerts on campus with tens of thousands of students and heard The Beach Boys, the Jefferson Airplane, and other bands. Mostly, I listened to rock 'n' roll with others, rarely by myself, and often in the company of women, many of whom show up in these poems and to whom I mean to remember and

## *Introduction*

to pay homage. Moreover, I wrote these poems explicitly for the purpose of performing them in public and so I have paid particular attention to the sounds of the words on the page. Hopefully you'll hear music in the background even when you read this work quietly at home.

About thirty women show up in *Rock 'n' Roll Women* plus one man. I didn't want to leave men out completely; some might say that the one man I have included isn't a very good example of American manhood. To that I would say, I am not trying to provide good examples of anything. Rather, I aim to capture a specific person, place, and time from the 1950s to the present day when I'm still likely to listen to rock 'n' roll on CD or on radio stations such as KWMR that broadcasts from Point Reyes Station in Marin and that must know that I'm listening and that there are others out here beside me who want to hear rock 'n' roll, too.

Jonah Raskin  
February 2012

*Jonah Raskin*

**SUE & ELVIS**

Letters by mail that rend his heart,  
you, Sue, at college, and so far apart.  
He's listening to Elvis,  
you're dating somebody else  
in the frat house,  
looking for a diamond ring and  
he's at home alone,  
dancing with you in the dark,  
Rock 'n' Roll woman.

***ELLEN & THE BEATLES***

Your guitar, an old Martin,  
your hair, raven black,  
you, Ellen, held his rough hands,  
braved the Beatles,  
raced downhill fast,  
tip-toed round your mother,  
swayed to his rhythm  
without his blues,  
wiggled, reeled on the floor,  
no way you would or could ever stop,  
Rock 'n' Roll woman.

**LOUISA & BOB DYLAN**

Did you really download Dylan  
all day every day, replay,  
push the self-pity button,  
sit in the dark at the Roxy,  
watch *The Big Sleep* with  
salty, buttery popcorn  
until you, Louisa, fell asleep.  
Usher woke you, roused you  
sent you home in taxi and you  
washed, dried sadness away,  
Rock 'n' Roll woman.

***LINDA & THE GRATEFUL DEAD***

When did it happen, mother?  
When did the day arrive?  
When did you, Linda, stop looking back,  
just looked ahead with  
curious eye of your own kids,  
hearing Grateful Dead first time,  
wanting to know now what you knew  
'bout Jerry then,  
how he died, where, and when,  
had to hear it from your ruby lips,  
Rock 'n' Roll woman.

## ABOUT THE POET



Jonah Raskin has been writing poetry since the 1950s, when he went to high school, played football, and listened to rock 'n' roll—like the Beat Generation writers, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg whom he admired and aimed to imitate. He is the author of *American Scream*, a biography of Ginsberg's poem *Howl*, and the author, too, of six poetry chapbooks: *More Poems*, *Better Poems*; *Bone Love*; *Public Places, Private Spaces*; *Auras*; *Jonah Raskin's Greatest Hits*; and *Letters to a Lover*.

Raskin has also written a number of books including *The Mythology of Imperialism*; *Out of the Whale*; *The Weather Eye*; *Puerto Rico*; *Homecoming*; *My Search for B. Traven*; *For the Hell of It*; *American Scream*; *Natives, Newcomers, Exiles, Fugitives*; *The Radical Jack London*; and *Field Days*.

Raskin's latest book, *Marijuanaland*, was published in 2011. He lives in Santa Rosa, California.