



Jerry Lee Lewis: His Own Story: His Own Story by Rick Bragg

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New York Times Bestseller

The greatest Southern storyteller of our time, *New York Times* bestselling author Rick Bragg, tracks down the greatest rock and roller of all time, Jerry Lee Lewis—and gets his own story, from the source, for the very first time.

A monumental figure on the American landscape, Jerry Lee Lewis spent his childhood raising hell in Ferriday, Louisiana, and Natchez, Mississippi; galvanized the world with hit records like “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On” and “Great Balls of Fire,” that gave rock and roll its devil’s edge; caused riots and boycotts with his incendiary performances; nearly scuttled his career by marrying his thirteen-year-old second cousin—his third wife of seven; ran a decades-long marathon of drugs, drinking, and women; nearly met his maker, twice; suffered the deaths of two sons and two wives, and the indignity of an IRS raid that left him with nothing but the broken-down piano he started with; performed with everyone from Elvis Presley to Keith Richards to Bruce Springsteen to Kid Rock—and survived it all to be hailed as “one of the most creative and important figures in American popular culture and a paradigm of the Southern experience.”

Jerry Lee Lewis: His Own Story is the Killer’s life as he lived it, and as he shared it over two years with our greatest bard of Southern life: Rick Bragg. Rich with Lewis’s own words, framed by Bragg’s richly atmospheric narrative, , this is the last great untold rock-and-roll story, come to life on the page.

Jerry Lee Lewis: His Own Story: His Own Story by Rick Bragg Details

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From Reader Review Jerry Lee Lewis: His Own Story: His Own Story by Rick Bragg for online ebook

Chris Langdon says

When I had read somewhere that Rick Bragg was writing a book on Jerry Lee Lewis I got very excited that I would be able to once again read a Rick Bragg book. I of course knew of Jerry Lee Lewis but not all that much as he was a bit before my time when he was a huge star. Sometimes when you anticipate something for a long while and you finally get to it there is a disappointment of not living up to the hype. Well I just finished the book and it delivers on all levels. Not only did I get to go back in time to the birth of Rock-N-Roll and how it all began I also was treated to the incredible journey of a life with more ups and downs than a honeymoon bed written by my favorite contemporary author who weaves together the knotted pine hard tapestry that is Jerry Lee Lewis's life and times. Rick Bragg's writing to me is as enjoyable as is the book itself. He has a God's gift with words just as Jerry Lee Lewis has a God's gift of music. I know I have read a truly great piece of literature when I am saddened by its conclusion like losing a new friend too quickly after you have just met. To anyone who reads this review, if you have any interest in Jerry Lee Lewis, music in general or are a fan of great writers this is a must read. Enjoy the ride.

Marti says

At 80 years old, Jerry Lee is the last man standing of the "Million Dollar Quartet" (Elvis, Johnny Cash and Carl Perkins). However, it's not due to healthy living. I knew he was a wild man, but did not realize he probably outdid Keith Moon. In fact he seemed to have no internal filter. And despite the fact that he partook of alcohol, pills and made a living playing the "Devil's music," he seems genuinely religious and fearful he may go to Hell because of it.

The author is a fellow Southerner which is probably how he was able to establish an unusual rapport with his subject, getting him to remember things he might otherwise have forgotten. I really enjoyed the parts about his childhood in Louisiana: taunting his playmates while standing on the railing of a suspension bridge over the Mississippi, sneaking into juke joints and finally, dropping in on Sun studios to demand a recording contract.

The scandal involving his wedding to his 13 year old cousin is covered in a way that makes the whole incident seem excusable (in his milieu people married their cousins all the time and his own sister married at 14). The tragedy is, the lucrative bookings and record sales dried up and he was reduced to slogging it out on the road, literally getting into fist fights with hecklers. We'll never know what kind of great records he might have made if TV, radio and larger venues had not blacklisted him.

It was only when it got to the 1960s, when interest in his music picked up again, that I felt the author skipped over a lot of things I was interested in. But then again I, unlike the author and his subject, am a fan of the Beatles and the whole British Invasion. For instance, I wanted to hear more about his time in Hamburg with the Nashville Teens. I also wanted to hear a lot more about his appearance on the Monkees' "33 1/3 Revolutions Per Monkee" TV special, which was written off in one sentence, "he even survived the Monkees." (He thought most of that stuff was "sissy music" except the Rolling Stones).

In any case, I definitely enjoyed reading this and it made me want to listen to some of the more obscure recordings mentioned.

Shelby *trains flying monkeys* says

Rick Bragg's writing is about the only thing I really liked in this book. You have Jerry Lee Lewis's story, but now he is a recluse waiting to die? (Or that's what I got) He is scared of going to hell because of the years he was bad and was playing the devil's music. He does so much more crap than that.

Then the ego....and more ego..and so on.

This might have worked more if I had been more of a Lewis fan.

Amanda says

I have very mixed feelings about this book. In full disclosure, I received this book in advance for free in a Goodreads giveaway. I understand that Rick Bragg is telling Jerry Lee's story as Jerry Lee Lewis believes and remembers it, but I wish Rick Bragg would have pressed him harder on some of the controversial aspects of Jerry Lee Lewis' life and career. It is most definitely a sympathetic (and egotistical) telling of a life filled with questionable actions and choices.

Perhaps the most difficult part of his story to swallow is his marriage to his 13 year old cousin, Myra, when Jerry Lee was 22. I felt that Rick Bragg told his side of the story much too sympathetically. Throughout the book they describe 13 year old Myra as a woman trapped in a child's body, claim that she threw herself at him, and chalk the whole marriage up to Jerry Lee's "southern culture". It felt like a revisionist history in an attempt to make a young girl seem like a predator, and Jerry Lee Lewis the victim.

That aside, Jerry Lee Lewis truly has had a monumental musical career. His relationship with Elvis, rivalries with Johnny Cash and other great musicians makes for interesting reading.

Lindsay Hunter says

I'm a huge JLL fan and now I'm a huge Rick Bragg fan as well. Impeccable.

Susan says

Excellent book on a complicated subject. Hate Jerry Lee or love him...I one thing is for sure.... He is a larger than life figure in southern history and definitely in the history of Rock n roll! Bragg explores the complicated man... Whether it's the conflicted Jerry Lee.... The convicted Jerry Lee... The jealous Jerry Lee or the megalomaniac Jerry Lee. Interesting portrait of a Mississippi legend.

Michelle says

The highly acclaimed Pulitzer Prize winning author, journalist, and notable southern storyteller Rick Bragg presents this superb captivating biography of the wild man of rock n roll, "the Killer", who clearly lived life very large and on his own terms: Jerry Lee Lewis (1935-).

From Ferriday Louisiana, raised by poor, hardworking, believing Pentecostal parents, young JLL show-cased his God given musical talents playing the piano and singing in church. His famous cousins Jimmy Swaggart and Mickey Gilley, were boyhood companions. A rebellious youth, having no interest in academics, JLL dropped out of school at a young age; living for his music, just to perform and play the piano. Bragg illustrated a deeply conflicted JLL, troubled by his consuming passion for rock n roll often proclaimed from the pulpit as the "devil's music", and his righteous belief/faith in the power of the "holy ghost".

Discovered by Sam/Dewey Phillips of Sun Records, JLL would also claim to be shortchanged and his career not fully promoted by his various record labels. Scandal exploded while JLL was touring in England at the height/peak of his fame (1957) when it was revealed JLL was married to his 13 year old cousin Myra Gale Brown (m.1957-1970); she was not his first wife but his third! Nearly overnight JLL went from performing in arenas/coliseums making \$10,000 per show to making \$250.00 per night touring night clubs/beer joints. JLL toured in Europe during the 1970's where he recovered some of his popularity, and was featured in the first concert ever held in Wembley Stadium, U.K. in 1972.

This book was richly detailed with the history of rock and country music. JLL discussed his admiration for Hank Williams Sr., also his experiences with Elvis, Fats Domino, Sam Cooke, Ray Charles, Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly, and the Righteous Brothers. JLL's "crocodile smile", combing his hair on stage, his "loutish behavior" was sneered at by critics. By 1965 he was addicted to pills, in the "whiskey rich atmosphere" where he maintained his edge and high energy to entertain/perform and party without interruption. The women, so many that followed and flocked to famous musicians, JLL would steal wives from husbands, he often seemed out of control: "Don't no woman rule me!" he declared, also that he was "unmanageable". Perhaps he could have avoided the heavy tax burdens/penalties that plagued his career in later years, if he had hired professional management.

There was much controversy surrounding the deaths of his 4th wife Jaren Elizabeth Gunn Pate (m.1971-1982) and his beautiful young 5th wife Shawn Stephens(m.77 days from June-August 1983). An article appearing in Rolling Stone Magazine suggested abuse of Stephens and implied JLL may have been responsible for her death. I remember this article well, fans were surprised when JLL married Karrie McCarver (1984-2004). JLL remarried for the 7th time in 2012.

"Great Balls of Fire" was the 1989 epic movie of JLL life starring Dennis Quaid, based on the memoir written by Myra Gale. JLL received a "Star" on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and would later receive many more notable awards from 1995-2007 in recognition of his contribution to Rock/Country Music. In 1998 JLL opened his ranch in Nesbit Mississippi to fans for guided tours. JLL is still performing and looking for record deals at (over) 80 years of age. There are pages of great photos included.

Julie says

I don't know how it would be possible to love this book more. Rick Bragg has always been one of my favorite authors, and this book exceeded all my expectations. It's superbly written and beautifully balanced. I didn't know much about Jerry Lee Lewis before reading this book, but now I'm ready to go out and buy his music, and I hope it lives up to this writing about it.

Anna (Curiosity comes before Kay) says

An interesting, if sometimes long-winded in descriptions/scene setting, portrait of a man who has led a wild life (on and off stage). He is a rock 'n roll legend and although Bragg does seem to go soft on some of the harsher periods of Lewis' life (the drugs, drinking, cheating, multiple marriages, and the deaths of family members), he is honest about everything that happened. However, we are only getting Jerry's side of the story, as this is the first biography he's given interviews for and endorsed. You have to wonder if it's all the truth or not. Either way it's only one-side of the story. I'd recommend this book to fans of his music, who are interested in the life he lived while making history. Or even just people who know he married his thirteen year old cousin, and are curious what the Hell he was thinking at the time!!! Thanks to Edelweiss for the review copy.

Bob Schnell says

Rick Bragg's perseverance with his subject pays off handsomely in this rollicking, funny and touching tribute to one of rock and roll's founding fathers, Jerry Lee Lewis. That Jerry Lee is still alive and able to recall so many incidents from so long ago is miraculous enough, but Bragg really captures his essence along with the family and culture that made him.

I'll only add that if you only know a dozen or less songs by Jerry Lee (I'll include myself in that group) you'll want to hear every song mentioned in the book to add that extra dimension. I know I immediately downloaded about 20 of them. Good rockin' tonight!

Gary Anderson says

Jerry Lee Lewis, the aging rock legend, sits up in his bed in a darkened room with a loaded pistol on the nightstand and tells his life story to Rick Bragg, our finest chronicler of Southern lives. The result, *Jerry Lee Lewis: His Own Story*, is mesmerizing.

Jerry Lee Lewis isn't the most ... linear communicator, but Rick Bragg listened to Jerry Lee's version of things and captured the closest version to the truth that we're ever likely to get. Bragg tells not only the story of Jerry Lee's entire wild life, but he gives readers The Killer's way of looking at things. Jerry Lee Lewis never backs down, never gives up, and always does things his way. For example, Elvis Presley received a draft notice and spent two years in the Army that devastated his career. Jerry Lee Lewis received a similar draft notice, tore it into pieces, threw them in the river, and never heard another word about it. The

controversies are covered here too: the marriages, deaths, addictions, and criminal run-ins. Bragg brilliantly provides Jerry Lee's version of things from the perspective of old age while setting the events in a larger, more objective context.

If you like reading about rock history, this book is for you. If you're a Jerry Lee Lewis fan, you will treasure this book. If you're a Rick Bragg fan, this book will become one of your favorites. If you're a fan of both men, as I am, *Jerry Lee Lewis: His Own Story* will shape the way you think of them for years to come.

Schuyler Wallace says

Jerry Lee Lewis is not a likeable guy. His entire life has been spent acting the spoiled brat; throwing tantrums, slapping convention in the face, and being totally self-immersed. Rick Bragg, the author of "Jerry Lee Lewis: His Own Story," to his credit, doesn't try to hide this unfortunate quirk. He simply reports it.

Lewis has to be considered a prodigy. He can't read music but can replicate any song after hearing it a couple of times. His piano playing is masterful and he can do it with his shoes or his butt as well as with his fingers. And he has been able to do it since he was a young child. Name a song and he knows it. Name the style and he can reproduce it. I suspect he can play "Moon River" in his raucous rock and roll style after kicking his piano bench into the wings. His fans would love it.

But he's a stoner and a drunk. He's a fighter and a fornicator. He's an egomaniac with an attitude. In spite of the wrinkles, he's also one of the biggest stars to ever come to fame.

How does a respected writer such as Rick Bragg handle all this? With style and class and glorious prose. And without any apparent view, good or bad, exactly the way I like my autobiographies and the way they should be written. Bragg once again demonstrates why he has to be considered one of America's best writers. He has no equal as an interviewer, and is able to transcribe even the most inane responses, or even nonresponses, into totally gripping reporting. His research and ability to assemble a lifetime of events into an intense and revealing study of his subjects is incomparable.

In Bragg's Acknowledgements section he talks about his relationship with Lewis, the laughs and the broken hearts, the lack of guilt for the way he's reported the man's life. "Life is dirty and hard, and he reminded me that even in the middle of that junkyard there is great beauty, if you only listen."

If you are a music buff and interested in the ways of our musical icons, this is your book. Don't miss it.

Franc says

No Truth in Labeling issues here. The title says it all. Jerry Lee telling his "own" story. "Who's barn? What barn? My barn" would have also made an excellent title for the book. Of course, others may well have seen some of these events differently, but that will not matter to you during the hours you are lost in this story. What's different about this book is that it's written by one of the best southern novelists out there right now,

Rick Bragg. So we get The Killer's wonderful bayou braggadocio larded with Bragg's excellent narrative and commentary. I don't really know of another example of such and excellent pairing. outside of flashes of this as Mohammad Ali speaks to Norman Mailer in "The Fight".

The most interesting part of the book — as it also always is the comic books that Jerry Lee's is constantly reading — is the Creation Myth. Bragg brings to life the places, music, and artists, black and white, that influenced The Killer and made him what he is. The portraits of his Sun fraternity brothers, Elvis, Johnny Cash, and Carl Perkins highlight the fierceness of the competition and just how different the Million Dollar Quartet members were, despite their common backgrounds.

What the book does best is capture the excitement of the era and how much fun it must be to be Jerry Lee on a good night. I recommend reading it while listening to the miracle of his album "Live at the Star Club." Stop as you read and watch some of the YouTube clips of performances mentioned in the book, and listen to as many of the songs by others that he discusses as influences and peers. I was also particularly surprised to hear for the first time his country hits of the 70s, a period Bragg deals with at length. Until now I'd assumed all great Jerry Lee music was finished after Heathrow Airport in 1958.

The Jerry Lee that emerges was the best there ever was and he ain't afraid to tell you so. He's a charming, albeit potentially sociopathic, example of the Southern species of raconteur of that includes Ty Cobb and Davey Crockett. Now at the end of an implausibly long life, we see him coming to terms with the good and evil that have battling inside of him. He seems now to be committed to finishing his live on the side of the angels, but isn't sorry for his life of devilment, because he sees it as essential to what he created. Bragg refers to a Tom Waits song, itself based on a quote by the poet, Rainer Maria Rilke: "If my devils are to leave me, I am afraid my angels will take flight as well." Rilke wrote this to a friend in 1907 on deciding to leave psychotherapy after learning its aims, fearful that it would effect his poetry. Bragg ends the book asking a question often asked about such geniuses: if God or some psychiatrist had been able to "fix" Jerry Lee, would we be poorer for it?

Jay says

I've read a lot of books recently about Johnny Cash, including Robert Hilburn's excellent "Johnny Cash: The Life". When I saw that one of my favorite authors, Rick Bragg, was writing the life story of Jerry Lee Lewis, one of Cash's "bandmates" in the Million Dollar Quartet and fellow Sun recording star, it was only a matter of time before I read his book. In reading "Jerry Lee Lewis: His Own Story" I was certainly comparing to Hilburn's Cash book as well as Bragg's downhome Southern personal stories. "His Own Story" was quite a bit different from both.

One big difference from the Cash book, and somewhat from Bragg's family stories, is that Jerry Lee is being interviewed and his remembrances are written into his life story. Bragg always knows how to tell a story, but here he comes back to his subject, being interviewed from his bed, along the way. Bragg's family books hadn't mixed past and present in quite that way, and Hilburn's book was written after Cash had died. Bragg makes it work, but you have a feeling of watching a TV show and going back to a talk from the narrator right before going to commercial break. It really feels different from just letting the story run chronologically without Jerry Lee's reflections. I was expecting the Jerry Lee Lewis of the movie "Great Balls of Fire", sort of a doofus. You don't get that here. You see Jerry Lee is a character, but an extremely talented one, with his own ideas about a successful life. You see he's odd, you see he worships music, but you also see he's not stupid. His reflections are telling.

Also interesting is the take on drugs. In the Cash book, drug abuse is truly a theme throughout. In the Lewis

book, drugs are more a phase that appears to have little negative impact for years at a time. With Lewis as the main source, you wonder if this area of his life was “sugar-coated”, given the big impact on Cash’s life.

I learned quite a bit about Lewis throughout these pages. Most surprising to me were the country hits – I didn’t realize he had so many, from back in the time that’s all that was played in my house. Also, his work as a Shakespearean actor was quite a surprise, although with the kind of character Lewis is, you could imagine something like that happening. Overall, I enjoyed the book and have listened to a few of his greatest hits collections since starting – always a sign that a book about a musician is working.

Julie says

Jerry Lee Lewis : His Own Story by Rick Bragg is a 2014 Harper publication. I was provided a copy of this book by the publisher and Edelweiss in exchange for an honest review.

Jerry Lee Lewis is one of the most colorful characters in musical history and perhaps also one of the most misunderstood as well. This book is written by Pulitzer Prize winner Rick Bragg and he does an excellent job of telling Jerry Lee's story. It's Jerry's life, his memories, his voice that literally jumped off the pages and I found myself utterly absorbed in his tale. From a rock and roll pioneer to a huge country star, then back to his rock roots blended with blues and gospel, “The Killer” may not be the same physically, but in his heart and spirit he is still as wild and dangerous as ever.

The one thing that came to my mind as I read this book is my own experience with Jerry Lee Lewis at a live country music show my parents dragged me to as a child. I don't remember much about the show except I hated country music and did not want to go in the first place and once we arrived at the auditorium and the show started, I promptly fell asleep... until a commotion in the crowd woke me up and I saw people heading toward the exits in droves. But, when I looked to the stage area, Jerry Lee Lewis was standing up yelling at the crowd to sit down because he wasn't finished yet. He was mad as hell and tore his shirt off and threw it on the floor, then sat down at the piano and started playing “boogie woogie”. The story my parents tell me is that Jerry came out as the closing act that night and was not in the mood to dive right in, so he messed around with the piano a little, but mainly he just talked and talked. It was edging toward midnight by this time and people decided if he wasn't going to perform they would be going home. But, believe me, they changed their minds, took their seats again, and the place became electric. It was the best show that entire night... at least for me. I had never before seen anything like that, so now 40 years later I still remember it vividly. From that day forward I was a huge Jerry Lee Lewis fan. He rocked the house that night even if he did get off to a rocky start For me it was pure magic.

Having spent the first 9 years of my life in Louisiana I understood things many may not about the south, rural areas in particular, and the time period in which Jerry grew up. I understood his dialect, knew from hearing my family speak of those hard times, what kind of foundation Jerry had and understood the effect it had on him and the way he lived his life.

On his marriage to his thirteen year old third cousin:

“He really believed there were things in his life that were the world's business and things that were his business, like the things that happened between a man and his wife. He believed it. After all, he was the king of rock and roll. Elvis had said so. And one thing for sure he would never give it up, never just hand it off in tears. They would have to take it from him.”

To this day the man makes no apologies for that marriage. While he knows it damaged his career he still refuses to acknowledge anything wrong or scandalous about it. After all he never hid the marriage from the public, not like Elvis hid Priscilla at Graceland for most of her teenage years.

For many, this scandal is the first thing they think of when they hear the name Jerry Lee Lewis. His biopic “Great Balls of Fire” starring Dennis Quaid was a cartoonish portrayal of Jerry that certainly didn't do him justice. The movie focused on Jerry's rise to fame and ended with the scandal and fall out of his marriage to Myrna. Thankfully, the internet has made it possible to see Jerry Lee Lewis as he really was.

Jerry did a lot of living after his initial fall from grace. He did struggle mightily after his marriage to Myrna, but after a time, he found himself carving out a second career as a country music star. He was even invited to play the Rhine Auditorium years after they shunned him.

Jerry would follow this pattern on and off all the way up to present day. He was wildly successful, then hit hard times, would go on a winning streak, then hit the skids again. He struggled with many very serious health issues and nearly died on three occasions. He married seven times, lost two sons and two wives, had epic battles with the IRS and struggled for years with addictions to pills and other drugs.

But, as he retells his story here I couldn't help but feel that power in the man, something that emanated from him. He has a real fire inside him he was born with and he just never gave himself over to conformity. It never crossed his mind. He is street smart, can be very funny, and dabbled in things most may not be aware of. Such as coming face to face with Janis Joplin somewhere around the Port Arthur area. The brazen Joplin actually slapped “Killer” across the face over a perceived insult and the two nearly came to an all out brawl... or Jerry Lee's first encounter with the Rolling Stones, a band he found he could relate to much more than the wildly popular Beatles.

“While backstage, he noticed a skinny, big-lipped kid on the stage, jamming like an over- excited teenager, waving a movie camera around. It was Mick Jagger. “He was rolling on the floor with his camera,' says Jerry Lee. ' He had every album I had ever made-- with him. I told him , 'I'm not going to sign all them albums.”

Many probably don't know Jerry was in a stage production of a rock opera based on Shakespeare's Othello called “Catch My Soul”. Jerry played the part of “Iago” the notorious villain of the story. He stole the show, but backed out of taking the show to Broadway. (Something he now regrets)

While Jerry's life was marred by tragedies and mistakes, hard living, and health issues, his musical talent has never lost it's edge. He is still out there, still on occasion he performs a show here or there. He may not have the ability to play the piano with his butt anymore, but he still maintains that quality that is uniquely Jerry Lee Lewis. He did what he wanted the way he wanted it more often than not. He was not someone that could be bottled and sold like Elvis was. He had a dangerousness about him, an edge, a determination, grit, and an iron will. He worked hard in good times and bad times. There was nothing left out, nothing sugar coated or glossed over.

Out of all those who signed with Sun Records Jerry is the only one still standing. He's survived Elvis, Cash, and many others a long the way. Written off many times, Jerry has lived to tell his story, his way. Jerry just steam rolled through his life going ninety miles and hour. While he has regrets, he rarely apologizes for anything, rarely admits sorrow or pain, and certainly never showed a weakness, at least not in public.

The author did an outstanding job with this telling of a man's life story. He set the stage well, digging deep into Jerry's childhood roots, leading us through his future success, and the incredible life of the music legend that was Jerry Lee Lewis- The Killer. While Rick Bragg weaves his own style into the book, it's his ability to

allow Jerry Lee Lewis to shine through, to allow the reader to get a realistic look at who the man is and how he lived his life. His work on this book is outstanding. I promise you will find this book absolutely fascinating and will turn the last page in awe of the performer, the man, the music, and the author of this book. 5 stars
