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Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s (review)

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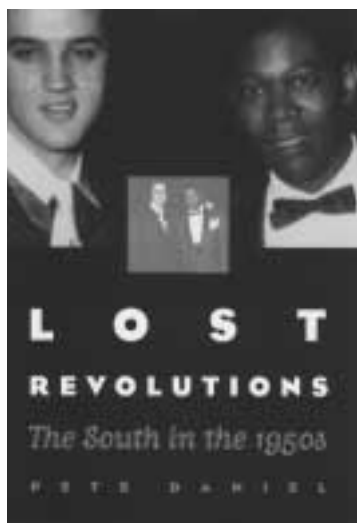
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## Lost Revolutions

The South in the 1950s

By Pete Daniel

University of North Carolina Press, 2000

378 pp. Cloth \$48.00, Paper \$19.00

Reviewed by **Fred Hobson**, Lineberger Professor in the Humanities at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the author most recently of *But Now I See: The White Southern Racial Conversion Narrative*, from Louisiana State University Press, 1999.

The photograph on the front of *Lost Revolutions* captures what Pete Daniel's book is about as well as any single image can. In Ellis Auditorium in Memphis in 1955, twenty-year-old Elvis Presley, one year removed from obscurity, stands with his arm around bluesman B. B. King. Race and class and the changing idea of culture all intersect in that one photograph. Sociologically speaking, Presley is undeniably poor white—that class of southerners in whom the most virulent brand of racial prejudice was said to reside. Yet, in embracing a black man he is doing something few “respectable” white southerners would have done at the height of post-*Brown v. Board of Education* “race-mixing” hysteria, particularly in a public place. In a deeper sense, in his music Presley always embraced elements of black culture that most genteel southerners—black as well as white—would not touch.

Of course, Elvis was hardly representative of anything, and a great deal of racism did indeed reside in the poorest of white southerners, as it also did in better-off, better-educated whites. That did not change in the 1950s, despite a number of opportunities for substantial change. What did begin to change—although the change wouldn't be altogether apparent for a couple more decades—was the definition of southern culture itself. When Mencken, W.J. Cash, and other South-watchers wrote of “culture” in the 1920s and 1930s and found Dixie culturally deficient, they had in mind high culture—the sort of thing measured by museums, libraries, and symphonies; or, they might have included, as a sort of footnote, “folk culture.” But they did not mean that mix of rural culture with working-class culture with mass culture that led to the creation of what Daniel calls (not disparagingly) “low-down” culture. That's where Elvis belonged. That's where rock 'n' roll belonged, along with country music and stock car racing and other elements of the “wild” life that southerners brought into cities as they fled the farm during and just after World War II. It is in describing this rise of low-down culture that Daniel's book is particularly effective.

Daniel begins his book by setting the southern scene at the end of the war: southerners, displaced by mechanization and eager for new opportunities, were indeed flocking into towns and cities—“from the beginning of World War II to the end of the 1950s, half of the South’s farm families left the land”—and other southerners, liberated to some extent by the war, were also thinking in a different way. Even those who remained on the farm had reason for hope: electricity, running water, telephones and paved roads had either come or were on the way. Black southerners in particular had reason for optimism: they had, after all, fought against racism and for democracy, and many of them now had the vote for the first time. (Black voter registration in the South increased from 200,000 in 1940 to 600,000 in 1946.) “At few times in southern history,” Daniel writes, “had the path to revolutionary change seemed so clear.” But that change was not to come, not substantially, for more than a decade: “Lost opportunities littered the southern landscape in the years between World War II and Freedom Summer.”

Daniel, then, tells the story of the South during that period from the late forties to the early sixties, covering some of the same material that John Egerton covers in the last section of his magisterial *Speak Now Against the Day*—although Daniel doesn’t focus as exclusively on race as Egerton does and his book lacks the stylistic flair of Egerton’s. Daniel is at his best in his description of fifties working-class culture. He devotes a chapter to the rise of NASCAR, its origins in North Carolina moonshine-running and its ascent to semi-respectability under racing czar Bill France, as well as two superb chapters to the growth of the “low-down” music industry, particularly as it operated in Sam Phillips’s Sun Studio in Memphis. (Besides Elvis, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, Roy Orbison and a number of others walked into Phillips’s studio.) He discusses the sexual revolution of the fifties, such as it was, and the still-closeted gay and lesbian life.

In the lengthy final section Daniel returns to race, chronicling white responses to the 1954 Supreme Court decision, the rise of the Citizens Council and other middle-class groups who billed themselves as nonviolent but devised all manner of strategies to avoid the implementation of the Court’s decision. He includes mini-biographies of a number of southerners, black and white, who did seek racial progress—well-known figures such as Lillian Smith and Medgar Evers but also little known crusaders for racial justice. He discusses in detail the integration of Little Rock’s Central High School in 1957, bringing into his account the role of class and fundamentalist religion in the white opposition at Little Rock. He concludes with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement in the early sixties, locating the end of his story in Freedom Summer and the refusal of the Democratic Party to seat the Mississippi Freedom Democratic delegation at the 1964 convention: “When Freedom Summer ended, so did the promise of spontaneous grassroots revolution. The moment was lost.” One of the excellent features of Daniel’s book

is the inclusion of more than a hundred photographs of 1950s scenes and persons high and low. In his narrative he draws on a number of sources, including the correspondence of southerners prominent and obscure, and he draws as well on interviews and diaries. If at times he is too inclusive—we are told more than we need to know about Ezra Taft Benson's agricultural policy and the fire-ant eradication campaign of the 1950s—that excess can be forgiven in an otherwise exemplary portrait of an age.