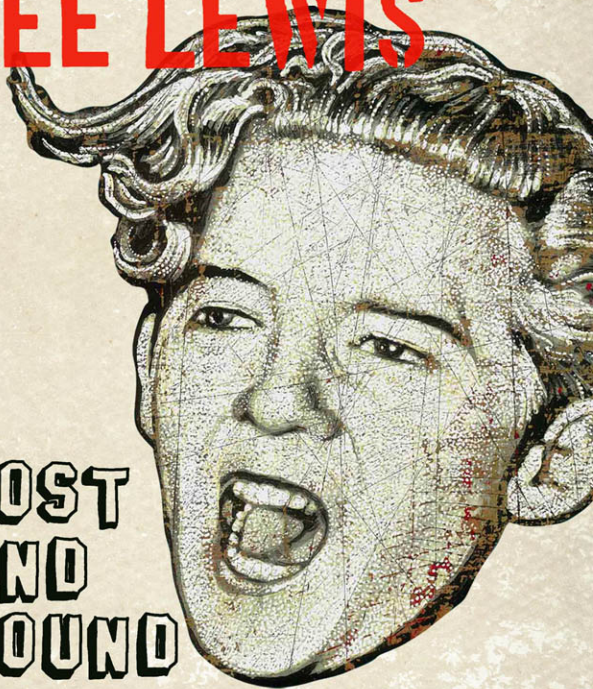


# JERRY LEE LEWIS



**LOST  
AND  
FOUND**

**JOE BONOMO**

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LOST *and* FOUND

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Joe Bonomo



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*For Amy*

**ego:** that which is symbolized by the pronoun I; the conscious thinking subject . . .

(Also, humorously, “self.”), *Oxford English Dictionary*



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## INTRODUCTION

*Sincerity* has been with us as long as we've been with each other. The word first appeared in print in England in the middle of the sixteenth century, in reference to Christ's purity. Humans have dealt sincerely (and not) with each other since well before the Renaissance, but its toehold in language is relatively recent. The word derives from the Latin *sinceritas*, which originated from *sincerus*, meaning "sound, pure, whole"; linguists suggest that *sincerus* might have grown out of the idea of "one growth" — that is, not a hybrid or a mix. At its bedrock, sincerity means, simply and profoundly, that which emerges from that which is not falsified.

Blow off the dust, take a few long strides into the twenty-first century, and you get the truth — lived-in emotion. No bullshit.

*Jerry Lee Lewis: Lost and Found* is about sincerity. Jerry Lee's greatest music — which is not, as popular opinion holds, exclusive to his late 1950s recordings — is among the most passionately delivered and distinctive in popular music; his lesser is hollow, artificial, and rote. In this career

there's a lot of treasure and a lot of garbage. In between is a story of rise and fall, and of the noise made at the intersection between art and commerce, and, a little further down the block, between integrity and insincerity. Because Jerry Lee is such an audacious original, his artistic highs are as dangerous as his lows. After I listened to hundreds of his songs scattered over a half-century's worth of albums, singles, and bootlegs, and after I deflected the tinny racket made by popular reconstructions and myths of the man, what I felt thrumming in his best work is sincerity: a pure sound, rock & roll and country, Gospel and Americana, that rises whole from its sources. When he was distracted — by whiskey, pills, producers, women, the *Billboard* charts, God, ego, Satan — Jerry Lee Lewis often gave rote performances, in the studio and on stage. When plugged in by part if not by all of the above, he often gave great, untouchable performances.

At the heart of this book is an extended exploration of “*Live*” *At The Star-Club*, the remarkable album that Jerry Lee Lewis recorded with the Nashville Teens in Hamburg, West Germany on April 5, 1964. It's one of the most honest and shockingly rocking albums ever made, by a man who many in his own homeland considered a stained and wicked has-been during a brutal passage in his career where he had to dig deep to find what moved him. I've conducted new interviews with members of the Nashville Teens, the album's producer Siggie Loch, and other musicians and fans who were at the show. Bookending my look at Hamburg and that album are historical overviews of how Jerry Lee got there and what he had to prove afterward. I cock my ear toward the sincerity of the recordings made before and after 1964, particularly his great Sun recordings of the late 1950s and his great

country recordings of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Throughout, I come in and out of focus as a listener, both skeptical and converted.

Sincerity can be as stormy and elusive a foe as a friend. Jerry Lee Lewis' battles with it give shape to one of the great stories of popular culture.

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## LOST

The megalomaniac differs from the narcissist by the fact that he wishes to be powerful rather than charming, and seeks to be feared rather than loved. To this type belong many lunatics and most of the great men of history.

—Bertrand Russell



A blonde in a close-up smiles from an album jacket, wearing a football jersey, the number 20 stretched across her chest, her hair glowing, her teeth white and strong, her lips glistening, a wet tip of a tongue sneaking from the corner of her mouth. She was a flaxen model straight from central casting, but I didn't care how daunting or daring or original she wasn't. She was gorgeous. The family rec room in Wheaton, Maryland, the 1970s. I'm 11 or 12, sitting in a rocking chair in front of the stereo listening to a record that will soon pass into family lore.

The double-album remains indelible, and when I now gaze at the cover I feel something close to what I felt back then. The kicker was the back jacket. Remember now, I'm in sixth grade: the same model, composed in a medium shot, is still smiling flirtatiously, but her arms are frozen in the act of lifting her shirt, revealing a stomach shocking in its sudden whiteness. I'd stare at those teasing raised arms — the photo's placement on the back cover assured its semi-lewdness — and for long stretches dissolve into slack-jawed catatonia.

It didn't hurt that the girl looked a lot like Loretta Swit, who was then co-starring as "Hot Lips" Houlihan in *M\*A\*S\*H* on Saturday nights, smacking her lips in the direction of Frank Burns while filling her uniform to bursting. I think that I pretended that it really was Swit on the album, and told lurid lies to that effect on the playground at St. Andrew the Apostle where I went to school. Nor did it hurt that her jersey was blue and gold, the same colors emblazoned on my older brothers' high school gym bags and book bags at Our Lady of Good Counsel High School, branding her as a denizen from an older world where girls spoke to men without shrieking or giggling, teasing out dates from them and maybe luring them into