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Mark Binelli turns his sharp, forceful prose to fiction, in an inventive retelling of the outrageous life of Screamin' Jay Hawkins, a bluesman with one hit and a string of inflammatory guises

He came on stage in a coffin, carried by pallbearers, drunk enough to climb into his casket every night. Onstage he wore a cape, clamped a bone to his nose, and carried a staff topped with a human skull. Offstage, he insisted he'd been raised by a tribe of Blackfoot Indians, that he'd joined the army at fourteen, that he'd defeated the middleweight boxing champion of Alaska, that he'd fathered seventy-five illegitimate children.

The R&B wildman Screamin' Jay Hawkins only had a single hit, the classic "I Put a Spell On You," and was often written off as a clownish novelty act -- or worse, an offense to his race -- but his myth-making was legendary. In his second novel, Mark Binelli embraces the man and the legend to create a hilarious, tragic, fantastical portrait of this unlikeliest of protagonists. Hawkins saw his life story as a wild picaresque, and Binelli's novel follows suit, tackling the subject in a dazzling collage-like style.

At *Rolling Stone*, Binelli has profiled some of the greatest musicians of our time, and this novel deftly plays with the inordinate focus on "authenticity" in so much music writing about African-Americans. An entire novel built around a musician as deliberately inauthentic as Screamin' Jay Hawkins thus becomes a sort of subversive act, as well as an extremely funny and surprisingly moving one.

Screamin' Jay Hawkins' All-Time Greatest Hits: A Novel Details

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From Reader Review Screamin' Jay Hawkins' All-Time Greatest Hits: A Novel for online ebook

Aengus says

While "Screamin' Jay Hawkins All-Time Greatest Hits" is clearly labeled a novel, it's really an impressionistic biography. After an opening riff on Hawkin's thoughts while inside his coffin (he began his shows carried onstage by a team of pallbearers), it starts looking like a normal biography.

What follows are a series of vignettes taken from different stages of Hawkin's life (adopted misfit in Cleveland, underage WWII soldier, driver for Tiny Grimes, profligate womanizer (75 children!), novelty act in decline). They offer a portrait of a man trapped by race, by his own stage persona; trapped in a coffin of his own making. Funny, weird and moving.

Loring Wirbel says

Unlike the genres of speculative fiction and alternate histories, where one certainly understands the broader contemplation aroused by playing "what-if" games, I've never really understood the purpose of (or even what is meant by) fictional biographies. The very idea of the genre has a certain creepiness attached to it, like the later historical books by Bob Woodward covering the Bush years, where the author admits to manufacturing White House conversations out of whole cloth. Sure, we all love a good story, but what is the purpose of turning lives actually lived into modern unreliable myths?

It seems as though *Screamin' Jay Hawkins' All-Time Greatest Hits* follows the trajectory of the life of its protagonist fairly closely. The book has bite-sized vignettes making up brief chapters that are easy to read, full of good writing, and telling interesting tales, such as the reunion of illegitimate children of Hawkins, his years in World War II stationed on a Pacific island near New Guinea, and a few hilarious road tales. But what are we supposed to gain from all this?

If Binelli has something larger to offer about race relations in America, or the two-timing inherent in the rise of 1950s rock and roll, it sure wasn't clear. If he's trying to paint a portrait of Hawkins as the classic one-hit wonder talent with a Boris Karloff shtick who should have been treated with better respect by fans and the music industry, well, that doesn't come across clearly either.

If this was billed as a Hawkins joke book, it might have been more true to its intent, but who wants a joke book about Screamin' Jay Hawkins? There are all too many nonlinear, cut-and-paste, jumping-around American novels these days that don't seem to go anywhere by the time the book is finished, and this is one of them.

It's interesting to note in the acknowledgements that Binelli lists Manuel Gonzales as one of the first readers of the manuscript. Gonzales is the author of 2016's *The Central Office is Under Attack!* a novel about superhero women assassins that likewise goes nowhere. Is this a new art form, the purposeless novel? If so, Binelli and Gonzales win the two top awards for 2016. Meanwhile, maybe I'm just too old and grumpy to understand what is going on.

Mike says

Screamin' Jay Hawkins was an early pioneer of the "shock rock" style of performing, during his prime he would be carried onto the stage in a closed coffin from which he would emerge and begin performing, often adding aspects of magic or voodoo into his stage act. He came from an era when entertainers often "embellished" or, just as often, completely created their own biographical backstory from half-truths or complete fiction.

Screamin' Jay Hawkins' All-Time Greatest Hits by Mark Binelli is very clearly categorized as a novel on the front cover. I'm guessing (but I don't actually know) that this means some of the things related in the book have been "enhanced" or recreated to give a better understanding of how young Jalacy Hawkins of Cleveland, Ohio became the wild entertainer known as Screamin' Jay Hawkins. Then again, the way it's written it could be a case of fiction sprinkled with truth.

It is difficult to tell, at times, where fact ends and fiction begins... or rather it is difficult to say how much of the "truth" is true. For example the claim that Hawkins was repeatedly visited by the ghost of Jimmy Gilchrist, the man whose death was responsible for his big break opening on tour for Fats Domino... or just how much of his stage costume and manner might have been inspired by a chance nighttime encounter with a Kumbai tribesman in New Guinea... and then there is Hawkins claim to have sired over 70 children (after his death over 30 of his children attended a staged "family reunion" media event).

The book isn't a linear biography (again, the author calls it a novel so biographical novel might be the best label). The plot is told in segments from different periods of Hawkins' life. Going back and forth in time from early years to peak celebrity to has-been novelty act and back again. It put me in mind of many random late night conversations over time that one might have with a friend after last call at the local tavern. The friend telling you about different significant moments in their life. After a few months or years of these conversations you get a fuller picture, a better understanding, of who your friend is and how they became the person they are today. That's kind of how this novel unfolds.

Screamin' Jay Hawkins is largely forgotten today, if he is remembered at all it is usually for his best known hit "I Put a Spell on You". I must admit that I had only a vague knowledge of who he was prior to reading this book, being more familiar with the Creedence Clearwater Revival version of 'I Put a Spell on You'.

I didn't realize that Hawkins had participated in some of legendary disc jockey Alan Freed's famous concert shows with early rockers like Jerry Lee Lewis. In fact, it was Freed who first suggested Hawkins' trademark coffin entrance. It seems that in his day he was seen as something of a contemporary to those early rock pioneers before his career stalled and he became more identifiable as a novelty act.

Even had there been no real life Screamin' Jay Hawkins the book would read as an interesting story of a fictional celebrity. As it is, it reads as something of a cross between a biography and a fantasy. An odd book about an odd man - a little uneven at times but well worth a read.

There is some (limited) strong language and suggestions of sexual behavior - not terribly explicit but might be considered offensive by a sensitive reader.

Kristy says

This is a rather experimental fictional biography of one of the world's biggest storytellers and most unknowable musicians, Screaming Jay Hawkins. Binelli puts his journalism background to good use and the known facts of Hawkins' life shine through as we move through childhood, military service, years on the road, brief stardom, jail time, and obscurity (not necessarily in that order). The tone is pitched just right for a biographical novel on Rock and Roll's own wild man, and the change in tone and time and rhythm match up to the music of the man. I liked this even more than I thought I would -- it's a risky genre that could have gone very wrong, but in this case went very right.

Alex says

This book was a brilliantly put together collection of stories about the life of Jalacy Hawkins. Initially, I began thinking that it was a biography, even though the front said novel, but I realized that how Jay lived was the part that was supposed to be fiction. Jay Hawkins is notorious for something called self-mythologizing, where he would make up stories about himself. Like how he was raised by wolves in the woods until he was 8, or how he fathered 76 children, or how he could talk to birds. I soon realized that the book was referring to his stories when it talked about his hits. Mark Binelli does an excellent job of painting a vivid picture of just how crazy his life really was, and I think his writing really lives up to the life that Jay Hawkins live. I would recommend this book to anyone, and I thought it was truly fantastic. I give it 5/5 stars.

Mark says

Jalacy Hawkins, aka Screaming Jay Hawkins, was born in Cleveland Ohio, in 1929. He is known, for exactly one classic song: "I Put a Spell on You".

This novel, looks at his life, which is filled with the epic mythmaking, Hawkins created for himself, along with his outrageous, stage show. He would arrive on stage, in a coffin, with a bone clamped to his nose.

This is an interesting little book, but it has a choppy narrative and it never quite connects, the way I hoped it would. If this brief summary, holds any interest for you, give it a try.

Salt344 says

This is a strange book. It's a fictionalized meditation on aspects of the life of Screamin' Jay Hawkins who is remembered primarily for the song "I Put a Spell On You." Screamin' Jay was perhaps the first cross over rock and roll artist to employ truly outrageous theatrical effects -- being carried on stage in a coffin for example. The overall effect is impressionistic and does not cover his life comprehensively. It's worth reading if your a fan of the "Old Weird America" genre.

Mike says

A creative combination of bio material and imagined events, encounters.

NOTES:

- A string of inflammatory guises.
 - 2 epilogues, Bill Broonzy & Montaigne (The cannibals wore no breeches.)
 - fog of war ... joined army at 14 ... penchant for self-mythologizing
 - 12.. Blues is an artful contrivance
 - 25.. Feast your eyes, gloat your soul, on my accursed ugliness! .. Lon Chaney in the Phantom of the Opera 1925 (cf Maurice Tillet)
 - 31.. Weissmuller & Eleanor Holm Jarrett, champion Olympic swimmers (search for Weiss at Venice Beach)
 - 81 boxing
 - 99 cutting contest, doing the dozens
 - 129 .. Elvira Snodgrass, lady wrestler ... early 50s ... teammate Sooeey Generous
 - 145 .. jailhouse rock ... prison slang for anal
 - 178 .. 2001 doc: "I put a spell on me"
 - 180 .. 1979 w/Keith Richards: Armpit No. 6
 - 182 .. Jarmusch ... Stranger than Paradise
-

Michelle says

“Screamin' Jay Hawkins' All-Time Greatest Hits: A Novel” is a colorful exciting biographical music novel with a flair of supernatural intrigue, authored by Mark Binelli. The contributing editor of Rolling Stone and Men’s Journal, Binelli’s work has been featured in the NYT and other notable publications, he has authored novels and bestselling non-fiction about Detroit, Michigan where he was raised and currently resides in New York.

There was a note found with the infant abandoned at the Cleveland St Jude orphanage in 1929, likely from his mother saying she had been disowned by her family, and she called her baby “Jalacey”. Eventually adopted by a loving minority family, they provided Jalacey with swimming and piano lessons, exposure to opera; he attended school at the Cleveland Institute of Music. Underage, Hawkins joined the Army in 1943 and served during WWII. Hawkins music career began in Atlantic City following his military service in 1951.

Billing himself as a singer or piano player, quite an entertainer, he toured with many popular acts including “The Fat Man” (Fats Domino). Hawkins quickly gained confidence with the ladies: his pick-up line, “Why don’t you come upstairs? The emperor needs a male heir” got a drink tossed in his face, but most often the lady would change her mind. Jay would later claim in interviews he had fathered 75 children outside of marriage, he had married six times before his death in 2000.

The freak show event organized in 2001 in Los Angeles to promote the documentary of Jay Hawkins life and reunite his numerous offspring. They ranged in ages of a child at 7 with her mother, to a 53 year old surgeon from Toronto. Marvin, was the 13th male child and the 24th of Jay Hawkins kids, was aware his father had

been a famous entertainer, but had secretly wished he would turn out to be Marvin Gaye or one of the Temptations. The implications of so many related kin that had grown up fatherless, had to resort to listening to a music CD to hear Hawkins voice, and search in a crowd of half-siblings for family resemblance was disheartening and unsettling.

The idea of shock rock- emerging from a coffin for a grand entrance and unforgettable impression originated with disc jockey Alan Freed (1921-1965): “Back with the axe little girls!” who promoted his popular shows to packed audiences of screaming black and white teens.

Binelli further described Hawkins as superstitious, claustrophobic, sweating with anxiety inside the errie coffin before slowly raising the lid, rising, and belting out his hit song “I Put a Spell on You” in his grand act of showmanship. Despite the popularity and fascination, Hawkins act was denounced by the NAACP, Dick Clark refused to feature it on American Bandstand, nor would radio stations play Hawkins music. Fans of the hit song will likely remember the remake version by Nina Simone or CCR.

The ties to paranormal activity were apparent with the ghost of Jimmy Gilchrist appearing to Hawkins before a performance advising him: “The thing about dope is it doesn’t necessarily mess with your playing. Hard boozers are the ones who get sloppy because they can’t regulate their intake, not like junkies can. Whiskey, gin, another brand of whiskey will get you drunk in different ways and your musicianship will be affected accordingly.”

If Hawkins listened or took advice from others could be material for another biography. Binelli’s novel provides a fascinating and excellent place for inspiration and insight to begin research. ~With thanks to the Seattle Public Library.

Cindy says

Jay Hawkins wasn’t called “Screamin’” for nothing. Outlandishly dressed and carried onstage in a casket, his operatic screams and moans during his only hit (the classic “I Put A Spell on You”) tapped into rock and roll’s early energy. This equally energetic and freewheeling historical fiction follows the arc of his life: an African-American adopted by a Native American family, conservatory student, WWII veteran, boxer, and finally, performer with one hit to sustain him. Hawkins, to the concern of other black musicians, seemed to embrace the caricature of white America’s fears of black men. Hawkins didn’t experience respect when he was alive, but his classic song has been recorded countless times since his death. Binelli, a reporter for Rolling Stone, is the perfect medium to conjure this larger than life, supremely fascinating, and ultimately tragic individual.

Matthew says

My high school boyfriend owned Screamin' Jay Hawkins' Greatest Hits album and so it never occurred to me that he really only ever had one hit. The book mentions, but also mostly sidesteps, the part where he's actually famous, focusing mostly on the before parts and the after parts. It's a quick read, too, not unlike some of the 33 1/3 books I've read. (Picked this one up randomly while scsnning the New Fiction shelf at the library; I hadn't heard anything But it before.)

Evan says

I received an advance reading copy of this book, for free, through Goodreads First Reads program in exchange for my honest review.

Screamin' Jay Hawkins' All-Time Greatest Hits: A Novel, by Mark Binelli, is an odd tale about an odd character. The titular Screamin' Jay Hawkins was the quintessential one-hit wonder. His one hit song, "I Put a Spell on You", is an instantly recognizable classic. It has been covered by hundreds of artists, most notably Creedence Clearwater Revival and Nina Simone.

Although certain elements of his story seem fantastic, the book has the feel of a biography. However, in the title, the book is clearly identified as a "novel". So, which parts of Hawkins' story are true, and which are merely fiction? The reader will soon discover the "All-Time Greatest Hits" (plural) mentioned in the book's title, is not a reference to Hawkins' music. After all, he only had the one hit song. The "hits" instead are the stories he concocted, embellished, and/or invented over the years to add to his mystique. Is it true that Hawkins was raised by a tribe of Indians? As a young man, did he aspire to be an opera singer? How about the time he supposedly defeated the boxing champion of Alaska? Did he really father 75 illegitimate children?

Tales like these make Binelli's book a spellbinding read. It spans 70 years and takes the reader around the world from Cleveland to Paris, and everywhere in between. Along the way, there are encounters with Johnny Weissmuller, Fats Domino, Elvis Presley, a Voodoo priestess, and even a ghost. Hawkins' life was an interesting one, at times unbelievable. Despite having only one hit song, his over-the-top persona and theatrics on stage influenced generations of shock rockers such as Alice Cooper, KISS, and Marilyn Manson.

Screamin' Jay Hawkins' All-Time Greatest Hits will definitely put a spell on you!

Laura Harrison says

This title is quite different from what I usually read. I am a pretty eclectic sort, too. It is pretty quirky and I do have a fondness for quirk :) So it gets 4 stars.

Jean-Pierre Vidrine says

Fascinating, hilarious, and quite sad all at once. Parts of the narrative were about as surreal as expected, but only parts. Only a few segments a bit after the middle struck me as the kind of reality bending weirdness the synopsis promised. For the most part, the book reads as a standard biography of a famous person, that duly debunks a number of myths and assumptions about the man.

All in all, an interesting portrait of an interesting artist that tries hard to include everything, even those facts that weren't true.

Phil Overeem says

Binelli's fact-and-fiction approach in examining the lives of musical figures is not new (try Geoff Dyer's 1995 *BUT BEAUTIFUL* for an earlier, deeper, and more poetic example), but he puts it to work nicely in this irreverent, breezy attempt to plumb the depths of the Jalacy Hawkins enigma. I didn't know a guy with this much style wrote for *ROLLING STONE* (well, there's Taibbi).
