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Meals in memoirs, write what you *don't* know, RICK BRAGG on finding the man behind the myth, tiny truths, and more

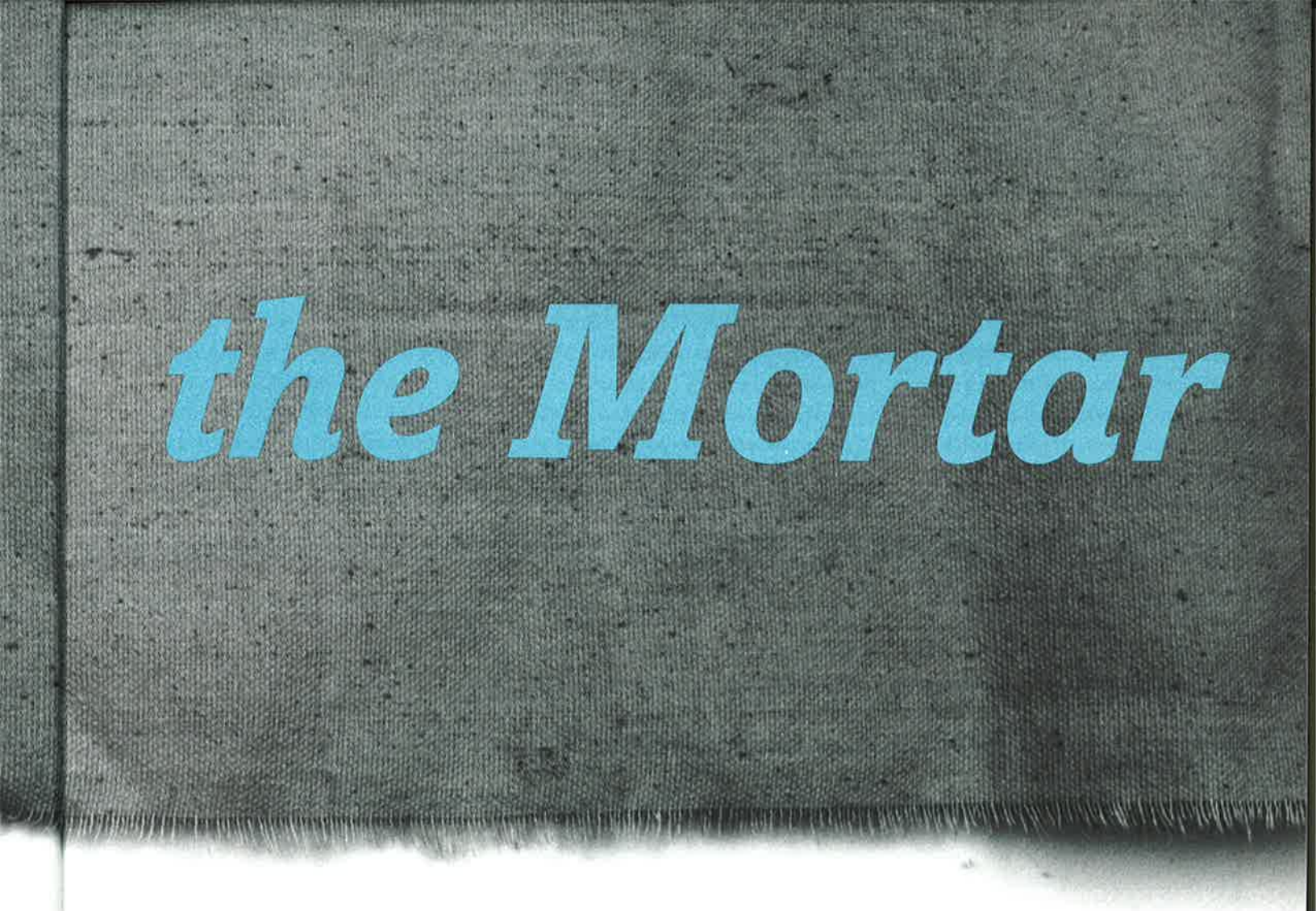
Providing

RICK BRAGG reflects on two years of bedside interviews with JERRY LEE LEWIS, the challenges of talking about "the hard things," and how to get the stories that haven't already been told.

RICK BRAGG IS NO STRANGER to creative nonfiction or cementing other people's stories together with his own words. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1996 for his feature writing for *The New York Times* and later penned the best-selling memoir *All Over but the Shoutin'*. Bragg is currently a professor at the University of Alabama, where he teaches magazine and feature writing and encourages students to strive for clarity in their work.

A son of the South, raised in Possum Trot, Alabama, Bragg says he was both excited and unnerved by the prospect of interviewing and writing the story of the notorious rock 'n' roll legend Jerry Lee Lewis, who's reported to have an itchy trigger finger, good aim, a short fuse, and an appetite for pills. In his recent *New York Times* bestseller, *Jerry Lee Lewis: His Own Story*, Bragg recounts his conversations with Lewis over the course of two summers. As you'd imagine, there are plenty of raucous tales from the man who set fire to the pianos he pounded, as well as revelations about Lewis's fears of making it to the great gig in the sky.

Bragg untwists some of the taller tales told about Lewis (while confirming a few) and gives heartfelt insight into a man who's been referred to as "The Killer." In a recent phone interview, Bragg talked about the high and low tides of sifting through Lewis's life.



CNF: Is this the first authorized biography of Lewis?

BRAGG: Jerry Lee has done numerous books in the past where he has had some voice in them, sometimes very little voice. This is a chance to listen to Jerry Lee in old age talk about his life, this unbelievable Southern gothic life. A lot of days, the reporting consisted of me saying, "I heard once that you—," or, "I read that you—," and then he would tell me what happened. He was kind of uninterested in the myth. It's not that he's not aware of his own myth or that he's not pleased with it being larger than life, but he sees a silliness in taking what was pretty interesting on its face and turning it into something cliché.

I would love to say it was brilliant reporting on my part, but most of the time, I just had to say, "Tell me what happened next," and that was the extent of my brilliant reportorial technique. "Tell me what happened next," and he would walk me through the story. Now, that doesn't mean that he did it always in a flowing, very Shakespearean way. Some days, it was like pulling teeth.

CNF: You said he found it silly the way some of these stories were mythologized, but after spending so much time with him, do you think it's fair to say he helped perpetuate the myth?

BRAGG: Oh, yeah. Sometimes Jerry Lee in the past—when he was drunk or when he was out of his mind or when he was angry—would say things just to watch people twitch. He would say things just to watch them kind of swing on the gallows of his moods. He said some things he certainly didn't mean, and he said some things that contributed to the outrageous picture of him. This book doesn't apologize for any of that; he did say some things sometimes.

Like after Elvis's death, for instance, when he fired back this unfeeling comment about how he was "proud" that Elvis was dead. Well, anybody who knew anything about Jerry Lee before this happened (or after) knows there were resentments. Both men took young women as wives: Jerry Lee married Myra when she was thirteen, and he did it defiantly; Elvis took Priscilla and put her behind the gates of Graceland and was applauded for being a sweet boy and having his mom and daddy look after her. Jerry Lee was crucified, so there were plenty of reasons to be resentful.

But throughout all that, they would meet. Jerry Lee would play the piano,

and Elvis would stand by the piano lid and just listen. They were friends. You know, it's been written that Jerry Lee came to hurt Elvis, came to kill Elvis. Well, getting drunk and running into the gates of Graceland and having a loaded Derringer on the dash—that all happened. But there is a long distance between that and wanting to kill Elvis. He was drunk—champagne drunk—and ran into the gate. That becomes legend, and tour guides at Graceland (I think) still talk about the night Jerry Lee Lewis "came to kill Elvis."

So, you see what I mean? Yeah, he's contributed. First of all, in a reasonable world, you don't go driving around Memphis, champagne drunk and with a loaded Derringer on the dash, to visit Elvis Presley in the wee hours. That doesn't happen in the straight world, but in the world that Jerry Lee Lewis lived in, it was just another night, something he had to do on the way home. Elvis called and said he wanted to see him. It doesn't happen to me and you. Elvis doesn't call us up. Mick Jagger ain't gonna call me up and say, "Let's go get a cheeseburger." It ain't gonna happen. But in Jerry Lee's world, these things did happen.

CNF: You said earlier that interviewing him was sometimes like pulling teeth. When you're reporting and you walk up to somebody and there's no known history about them, you just start from where you are. But with a guy like Jerry Lee Lewis—when there is so much public history—where do you start? And when it comes to teeth-pulling time, how do you nudge "The Killer" into talking?

BRAGG: Well, first of all, you go into it with the understanding that you're going to have to talk about the hard things. You go into it with the understanding that you're going to have to talk about dying. You're going to have to talk about the deaths of sons, the deaths of wives. You're going to have to talk about drug addiction. You're going to have to talk about airplanes where law enforcement comes on the plane and shakes [pills] out of the seat cushions. You're going to talk about all those things. You're going to talk about shooting your bass player in the chest with a .357. You're going to talk about seeing families come apart. And you're going to talk about falling from grace.

Clawing [his] way back—he was proud of that. He loved anything that involved defiance; he was proud to talk about that, too. The odd thing about being Jerry Lee Lewis is that a lot of things involved defiance.

[But a lot of it was hard.] Like, for instance, the death of his son—not the toddler, Steve Allen, who drowned in a swimming pool, but talking about Junior and talking about his freakish accident, which was in no way Jerry Lee's fault, was hard. It was a traffic accident, and drugs and alcohol were not involved. The son was pulling a car behind his Jeep. He hit, I think, a

guardrail or an abutment and crashed, and he died. When Jerry Lee walked me through that, when we got to the funeral, there was an awful lot of "What did you do then?" And it was so awful that I actually [held back a bit]. They covered the boy's face with a cloth, and Jerry Lee raised the cloth and kissed his boy on the lips and whispered something to him. I could have pushed and gotten what he said, but decided not to.

I wanted more about his childhood than he had ever told. I wanted more about his mom and daddy than he had ever told, because that stuff is interesting to me—what shaped and laid the foundation for who this guy was. In a lot of places, we took stories that had been told in a paragraph or two, but not with any real color or imagery or detail, and we would take those things and I would say, "What did you do that day?" "What did you wear that day?" "What did your mama feed you that day?" and "Were you scared?" Getting Jerry Lee Lewis to admit that he's scared was one of my great victories. Getting him to describe what the dirt looked like, all that, to me, was great fun. And then you would get to those places where he just—and I've said this before—where he would just physically turn away because remembering some of it was awful. And then we would call it a day.

CNF: Help me set the scene here. In my mind, I see you basically sitting next to an old guy in a bed with curtains drawn. Is that pretty much what I'm looking at?

BRAGG: Yeah. Without exaggeration, these are the things he dealt with during the course of the interviews. He has crippling arthritis—not in his hands, but in his back—so he was unable to sit for very long. So the choice was to either stand and do it, which meant the interviews would all be about thirty minutes long, or interview him in his bed. He would prop himself up in bed, and he would snack. The man literally, at one point, seemed to live on Coke and vanilla floats, chocolate macadamia nuts, Oreos, and grape soda. Judith, whom he married during the course of all this, would cook him these meals of country vegetables, which are his favorite things to eat, but he would snack a lot. He'd snack on things that if I ate them, they'd kill me in a day and a half. But he would lie there in bed. He had had shingles, and during the course of all this, he had a compound fracture of his leg that almost killed him because of the infection. He had hip trouble. He had at least two bouts of pneumonia. I'd actually have to sit down and make you a list [of all his physical problems]—and he was kicking this addiction, too. He had terrible stomach trouble, and he was kicking this lifelong addiction to pills and a later addiction to painkillers.

So he lay in bed with a quilt around his legs, and I sat in an old rocker close by, and we would start. Neither one of us is a morning person, so we would start in the early afternoon. We would talk sometimes until it got dark. Sometimes we'd talk a few hours, and sometimes we would talk into the early evening.

CNF: Knowing all of this about his health, knowing he's just shy of eighty, knowing about his notorious carousing in the past, was there the possibility at the back of your mind that—I know this sounds crass—he was going to buy the farm before you could get the story out of him?

BRAGG: I didn't have that. There's something about looking at someone day after day after day. You're looking at their face, and that makes death seem unlikely. Don't misunderstand me: he was not in great health when we did this, but he was clear. He was coherent. He could tell me a story about setting a piano on fire. He could tell me a story about his mama's tomato gravy. He could tell me a story about the day his daddy threw him into the backwater and tell me that story more or less start to finish. But yeah, he was weak, and he is much better now. He was weak, and I thought it could happen, but it seemed unlikely. He was able to get up and move around, and he was still playing the occasional show during all this. He's a tough old man. He really is, as he was a tough young man. Sometimes it really is spooky. It does seem like there's something beyond science that is holding him up. I can't say I ever rushed or that I thought anything was imminent. I did think this would probably be the last word on Jerry Lee, at least as far as books go. But, then again—and I say this without any exaggeration—hell, he may bury all of us.

There were days where he didn't feel good, and there were days when he was a little reticent, but most of the time we sat down, I asked him a question and he answered it. My job was to provide the mortar. My job was to do—hopefully—a little bit of pretty writing,

to cement all that together. There's probably more mortar in places where he was more reticent or more mortar where history needed to be told. You couldn't ignore—I mean, this is Jerry Lee Lewis's story, this is the way he saw it unfold—but you also can't ignore history. I actually had a good bit of fun just writing the history. Going back in time, for instance, and writing the history of his hometown and of Haney's Big House. Now, Jerry Lee didn't know all the history of Haney's Big House. He didn't know the entire history of the Assembly of God, so I had to do some history writing. I'm a rank amateur, at best, when it comes to writing history, but I do love it and had a good time doing it. It also provides some good color. But my job was to ask the questions and then later be the mortar.

CNF: You've written that the process of interviewing Lewis was "nowhere near easy or joyful."

BRAGG: Yeah. Nowhere near easy or joyful in spots, but you know as well as I do that there were days where anyone would be thinking, *I hate having to do this. I hate having to ask him this. I hate making him relive this.* But then there were days when we also laughed out loud. But it wasn't easy, no.

I've had easier gigs. I've covered the demise of the Las Vegas showgirl. That was easy. I've written about the traveling tour of Carolina barbecue. That was easy. But this was not. This was hard work. But there were times in it when we just laughed out loud.

My favorite days with him were when we would talk about something he screwed up, something he had done that he shouldn't have done but he ain't going to apologize for it because he's Jerry Lee Lewis. If things ever got slow, like I said, I'd just tell him something I had done that was stupid. He loved to hear about things I had done that were ignorant, like flipping a 1969 Camaro convertible or sticking a poinsettia berry up my nose when I was kid and having to get it surgically removed. He loved to hear about stuff like that.

CNF: After this entire experience, there's a book as a result, but what do you walk away with, from your own experience, that nobody else can touch?

BRAGG: In a selfish way, it was difficult at times and it was frustrating at times, but I got to be there. I got to sit there and listen to this piece of living history—and not just the history of rock and roll, but of American music, period—and get him to talk about making Elvis cry. Get him to talk about watching a singer named Roy Hamilton perform on stage and thinking, *That's the one man on earth I don't think I can follow*, or get him to talk about his place in it all. [I got to listen] to him talk about God and that fear, that genuine fear, of a lake of fire and whether or not—as he put it so beautifully—he will walk with his people in the New Jerusalem, whether or not a man can play rock and roll music and go to heaven. When he asked Elvis that, Elvis turned white as a bone and walked away. I got to listen to all that firsthand, and I think the book … If it works (and I think it's working)—well, if it works, then, the reader will get to experience that, too.

But we had to do it in a third-person narrative. I don't think that if I had tried to do like a Q&A or if I had put myself in every scene, we would have had nearly the book. We needed the mortar of history and story to give his tale a place to live, and so that's why third person. I could have never pretended to be Jerry Lee Lewis. I don't think anybody could.

CNF: Did you know beforehand that this was going to be in third person and that it couldn't be ghost written or a first-person perspective or even your own perspective?

BRAGG: Yeah, I never would have ghost written it because I'm fifty-five years old and I don't think my ego would have allowed it, to be brutally honest. I never could have ghost written it, and I also wasn't going to do an as-told-to book. I wanted to do a purely third-person book about Jerry Lee Lewis, but the publisher also wanted it clear that we got something other people don't have. We got Jerry Lee Lewis. So that's why the title: *Jerry Lee Lewis: His Own Story*. I just don't think there was any other option. I think the publishing house would have been quite happy if they could have gotten some kind of … not really ghost written story, but something like that, but I wasn't going to do it. I ain't gonna do it.

CNF: There are some times when the quotes from him are just sparse and very matter of fact, and I get the sense—it seems like—there had to be a lot of mortar being put down because I guess all he's really interested in, at times, are the bricks.

BRAGG: I think there are places in the book—for instance, in the introduction—where he's talking about faith and all I had to do was just wind him up and let him go. But he ain't Churchill, and he's not Roosevelt, and he's not Katharine Graham. He's not going to tell you who was at his dinner party; nor is he going to wax philosophical on things he doesn't care about deeply. Things he does care about—family and faith and the music and those kinds of things—he would talk at length about. But my job was to pull it together, piece it together, with his quotes as punctuation, which is something I tell my students.

You're not always going to have a soliloquy to work with, so your job is to provide the mortar, to provide the story that holds those quotes in place. If I did that, I'm actually tickled. The bottom line is: does it work as story?

CNF: When you're writing, what's your indication that it's working? Does it come while you're doing the first draft? Does it come in the editing? When do you get that gut feeling? I'm sure it probably varies, but when do you usually realize, *I'm onto this here. Now I know I've got a live one*?

BRAGG: Believe it or not, it's before then. I don't want to make myself sound like Grandpa Moses, but I've been doing this so long. I take my notes on legal pads: big, thick spiral-bound legal pads with a thick back so you don't have to rest it on anything. You can put it on your leg or on your knee. I used to use these things to cover trials when I was a reporter. When you're flipping back through the pages before you write, you can see the story take shape around those notes.

Like, for instance, Jerry Lee's daddy throwing him out of the boat when he was a kid to teach him how to swim. That's an old Southern story, but as he talks about it, as he talks about his daddy telling his boy to swim to the boat—"Get with it, boy. Come on, boy."—I can *see* that story. I wish it were as romantic as I'm probably making it sound, but you can see it come out in colors on that plain old white page with black ink on it. You can see the backwater. You can see the color of the water. You can smell a thousand years of rot and mud and dead leaves. You can see the egrets. You can see his daddy kneeling in this rickety old boat with his arms outstretched, beseeching: because if you've got a boy living in a place where water is everywhere, you throw him in the water because a boy can't be afraid of water in a place like that. As he is telling me, as I'm looking at those notes of him talking about that simple act of his daddy throwing him in the water, then if I can see all that scene around it, from common sense and experience and other things I've read about the place and its geography, plus the fact that I've seen it—I went there and looked

at it—if I can do all that, then I think I've got it. Sitting down and putting it together as a story—I should be able to do that at this point in my life.

CNF: What's the advice you give students? If you had to boil it down to one piece of advice to somebody who's engaged in this process of trying to represent reality through a narrative, what's your fundamental advice?

BRAGG: My advice has always been this: first, you have to have clarity. It doesn't matter how pretty the stuff is that you have. It has to be clear. You have to tell it in a way that the reader can follow, so you build on this foundation of clarity. Then, just remember that no one ever said, "I really like his writing. It's so nice and dull and plain and abrupt." The color and the imagery and the detail, those things, they're the reason people don't want a damn rice cake. I think I've only had two rice cakes in my whole life, and I don't think about rice cakes. I remember the best sausage gravy on a biscuit I ever had. As you deliver the story, that exaggeration—can it be rich? Can it be rich and smooth and compelling? Can it pull you from one line to the next, not just with gravity, but can it pull you down the page? You figure that out by reading it out loud. I would read sections of *Jerry Lee Lewis* out loud. I read the introduction out loud. It was a little bit too long, my first draft. The editor took it down a bit, and it worked.

I think the great trick for young people, for young writers, is this: is it rich and good? Or is it rich and fat and thick and baroque? Some people never quite figure that out. Some people think that big, long, flowing gothic lines are good writing, and some people know that the truth is as clear, rich, and compelling as possible. Anyway, that's probably the most highfalutin thing I'll ever say. ■

R. REESE FULLER conducted this interview for *CNF*. He is the author of the creative nonfiction collection *Angola to Zydeco: Louisiana Lives*, the curator of GumboRadio.com, and a teacher at Episcopal School of Acadiana in Cade, Louisiana.