

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

Mark Binelli



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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.

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