

THE LITERATURE OF THE BLUES AND BLACK CULTURAL STUDIES

By

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A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2004

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank my wife Liz for her love and gourmet cookery. I also want to thank Bill McKeen for the inspiration to write about music as if it mattered, Bob Thomson for the friendly talks in his office, Mark Reid for the Black Theory and the smile, and Brandy Kershner for his friendship.

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School
of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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August 2004

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Major Department: English

Everything that has been written about the blues--more than 40,000 bibliographical entries--constitutes a discourse of “what has already been said” about the blues. The actual facts of blues history remain poorly documented. Most scholarly work on the blues has dealt with blues music and lyrics as “sources” for African American poetry and novels, particularly from the Harlem Renaissance. This work is more in the realm of Cultural Studies and centers around the use of the blues in advertising, corporate sponsorship, festivals, and tourism: How is it that the blues is a signifier of authenticity and anti-commercialism even as it is used to create an image for companies like Volkswagen? How does the discourse surrounding the blues create “colonial subjects” by perpetuating stereotypes? The blues is best thought of as a form of colonial discourse in which matters of race, literacy, sexuality, and class are negotiated.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Scholars have paid a lot of attention to the blues in the last fifty years.

Ethnomusicologists have studied the form since the 1930's. Blues historians have kept busy supplying copy for those lavishly illustrated coffee-table books that are published annually. In the literary world, the blues has long been a topic of interest, mainly as source study, because the blues are considered an important influence on the Black poets of the Harlem Renaissance. It is with the increased acceptance of Cultural Studies in the academy that a study of the blues can be carried out without regard for the literary creations that were inspired by them. With the general opening up of accepted ideas about what constitutes a "text," the blues themselves begin to look more and more like literary creations--or "orature," for lack of a better word. As a result, blues critics no longer feel the need to justify their study of the blues by relating it to a literary text as critics have traditionally done. Now the blues, that strange mixture of folklore, art, and popular entertainment, can be studied as a cultural production in and of itself.

The blues is a form of performance art that has more in common with bardic performance than with most other forms of musical entertainment. Like epic poetry, it is sung, and the singer accompanies his voice with a simple harp-like instrument. In order to differentiate between the blues as they were sung in black communities in 1920 and the blues as heard on phonograph records, I hypothesize a blues performance, an actual performance that, like bardic poetry, takes place in a ritual space and follows certain strict conventions with which the audience is mostly familiar. The ritual space involved is a

juke joint, a Black-owned drinking, eating, and gambling establishment. Meaning is created by the previous blues experiences of the audience as much as by the performance of the bluesman himself. I use the term “blues performance” not to make any value judgments about what is or isn’t blues, but rather to distinguish between actual blues performance and representations of blues performance in films and recordings. It is these representations, and the way they have constituted blues performance, that I am most interested in. We see the blues today through a glass darkened by those representations. We can only get a sense of the ritual of actual blues performance through secondary representations like 78 records or third and fourth hand representations like House of Blues concerts or PBS documentaries. There are still some small clubs on unpaved roads in rural Mississippi that might offer up a fairly accurate simulacrum of blues performance. But our ideas about the blues come from media representations--the phonograph record, the documentary film, the blues museum.

Blues performance, as we think of it today, is largely a reflection of the political ideology of the men who have collected it. Collectors of song like Alan Lomax, whose status as a representative of the Library of Congress made his influence the most enduring, put their own stamp on the music they collected. The recordings and films that Lomax made of the blues singers that he liked the best are the *ex officio* canon of authentic blues. Lomax went out of his way to collect music that was untouched by commercial, white, or jazz influences. He clearly had preconceptions about the nature of the blues. Lomax’s idea was that the essential nature of the blues remained a community-based folkloric expression, and that whatever commercialization had occurred should be ignored. But as Francis Davis points out in his *History of the Blues*, by the time the young

Lomax began collecting on his own, the blues had been a commercial genre for a long time (Davis, 62). The reason folklorists failed to take it very seriously was that almost from the beginning, the blues had been “tainted” by commercial success (Titon, SFQ, 6). But Lomax’s idea of what the blues ought to be has definitely shaped modern notions of what the blues is all about. The body of recordings that came to be known as “the blues” is, after all is said and done, a reflection of Alan Lomax’s personal tastes.

As Mike Figgis’s film *Red, White, & Blues* argues, the blues went to England and came back to America as British pop music in the 1960’s (Figgis). Simultaneously, there was a great folk revival in the 1960’s in which the blues were reaffirmed as “folk music” and their commercial roots downplayed, despite the fact that the blues had been a commercially successful genre between 1910 and 1937. Whether or not the blues are folkloric creations or commercial productions seems of little consequence now. The point is that “the blues” is a political touchstone. It is so entangled with the mechanics of race, stereotyping, and hegemony that few people can approach the subject with anything like equanimity. I argue that the blues should not be revered or denigrated as “folklore.” The blues only resembles folklore, only pretends to artlessness, and the characterization of blues as folklore has had unfortunate consequences.

There is a stigma of condescension attached to anything called folklore. To call the blues “folklore” lowers it to the level of the “subject” of an anthropological study. It is mistaken, in my view, to regard the blues as the cultural productions of the unwashed, or in the current lingo, the colonized subject. Folklore suggests the activities of a primitive people who carry on their quaint traditions because they have for one reason or another

been cut off from the modern world. Bluesmen were modern artists who were very much in the world.

But what is this thing, this blues that is recognized as a treasure by the world audience and mostly ignored by Americans? Almost all of the more than 40,000 books and articles that have been written about the blues begin with a definition. Defining the blues really is part of the work of blues scholars, but once someone has decided they know what the blues is (I know it when I hear it), it is a stultifying task for them to read yet another definition. Especially since everybody who writes about the blues agrees that Son House and Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters *are* the blues--even as they disagree about almost everything else. But there are plenty of people who do not know what it is. They may know it only from Blues Brothers movies or they might confuse it with bluegrass. Many have never heard it performed, or have never heard of it at all. And even among people who do know what it is and know plenty about it, there is much room for disagreement about its true nature.

Not every record with the word blues in the title is blues, and not every player who claims to play the blues can do so. And there are disputes about who has the right to play the blues, who has suffered enough, who is or is not an African American, and a hundred other debates that divide the blues community--like whether it is possible for white people to play the blues, or whether or not there are African retentions in the blues. So why not define the blues as the work of the canonized few and be done with it?

But to define the blues based on authority alone is to miss a lot that is important about the blues. It is not a cult of personality. The blues, after all, along with jazz and the skyscraper, is one of only three American-born art forms. It is the closest thing

Americans have to a Homeric tradition, an orally composed body of poetry that underlies the written tradition of Langston Hughes, Richard Wright and James Baldwin. Blues is best defined as a tendency in American culture, and not as a body of cultural productions.

“The blues” (with its attendant article “the”) has a long history as a signifier, and its meaning has always been slippery. The blues had one meaning in 1900--it was a highly codified, community-based form of entertainment, a crude variation of ragtime with certain expressive and improvisatory possibilities. It has an entirely different meaning in 2003--one that has something to do with primitivity, authenticity, and American originality.

To talk about the blues as a “signifier” implies that the word “blues” refers to something in the real world, however provisionally. To talk about blues as a “sign” implies that the word (the sign) contains both signifier and signified, and has meaning only in relation to other signs (Saussure, 65). That this meaning is elusive, even indeterminate, that it changes with time and distance, is fairly well accepted (Derrida, 7). The word “blues” suggests a depressed emotional state. Why that particular color came to be associated with an emotional state is anyone’s guess. I suspect it is unmotivated. The emotional state was characterized by the phrase “blue devils” or “the blues” long before the musical form came into existence. Suzanne Langer writes about musical forms and their correspondence to emotional states, their “attenuation,” their “ebbing and flowing” as bearing some relation to the play of emotions (Langer, 27). Perhaps at one time in the history of the blues, this connection between emotional state and musical form was more pronounced than it is today. Most writers on the blues have noted this linguistic

connection to sadness. There is some question about whether or not the blues is necessarily sad, but it is clear it sometimes is.

The blues today means something different entirely, and today we hear it everywhere; for instance, in a soundtrack for a Chevy truck television commercial in 2003, or in ads for Kraft Macaroni and Cheese in the “blue” box in 2002. The blues as a variety of Vaudeville entertainment circa 1930 had a meaning different from the blues as played on the stage of the Newport Jazz Festival in 1959, and so on. These variants on the blues may or may not have a single referent. Still, we must have a working definition of the blues, a place to start, a body of texts.

Among the false impressions created by an attempt to cobble together a working definition is the idea that “the blues” are attached to a certain performer or group of performances, recorded or lost, real or imagined. To think of the blues as having a literal or denotative meaning separate from its connotative meaning, or trying to delimit the parameters of performance that can be considered authentic blues may be an exercise in futility. Yet, in order to talk about that tendency in American music that we call the blues, it is necessary to refer to something outside of the world of signifiers--a referent, if you will. And to do that may be possible, if not definitive in the usual sense. In fact, it would be possible to compile a list of recordings (the most direct means we have of accessing early blues performances) that most scholars and enthusiasts would agree are seminal works of blues performance.

Having said that, I will preface my discussion of the literature that surrounds the blues by making a partial and completely provisional list of the most commonly accepted blues singers from the Pre-War Era. All of these singers/instrumentalists were African

Americans who performed extensively in the years from 1910 to 1937. Commercial phonograph companies recorded all of these performers, although some of them were first recorded in the field by folklorists and only later represented on commercial recordings. This list is just a starting point, not intended to be complete or even optimal, just a list of a few artists who *no one* would claim are *not* blues artists.

Charley Patton, Son House, Willie Brown, Robert Johnson, Geeshie Wiley, Ishmon Bracey, Muddy Waters, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Lightnin' Hopkins, Tommy Johnson, Tampa Red, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, Louise Johnson, Memphis Minnie, and Nehemiah "Skip" James.

First, with an examination of three blues songs, I will attempt to show the way the formal structure of the blues has changed over time, and I point out some of the inherent differences between folklorically collected blues and commercially recorded blues. My own interest is in those commercial recordings of the blues made between 1920 and 1937, and I suggest they be given greater consideration than they have previously been shown. In a reading of these songs I try to shed some light on the sources of these songs, and in the following chapter, I examine the notion of "origins" as it applies to the blues and blues creation. In the next chapter, I turn my attention to the study of blues in the context of literature, with attention to the ways in which the blues came to represent black vernacular culture for the critics of the Harlem Renaissance, and how it became the center of debates about assimilation and black culture. Then, through an analysis of a different kind of blues literature, the blues histories and biographies that have shaped the modern reader's understanding of blues as a cultural product, I will show that the constitution of blues as folklore has had a marginalizing effect. And finally, I will try to interpret the various ways the blues are used in popular culture and marketing.

Throughout this work it is my not-so-humble desire to re-historicize the figures of the

bluesman and the blueswoman, with the aim of restoring them to their proper place in the history of American music.

CHAPTER 2 THREE BLUES SONGS

Instead of talking about blues performance in a general way, I take as my text three representations of blues performance in the form of phonograph records. Of the three, one (“Mississippi Delta Blues”) is a field recording and the other two are commercial recordings. The first is a song by Charley Patton, a first generation bluesman who is credited with “writing” his own songs. But the word has little meaning in the context of blues formulation. Though much has been said about originality and authority in the blues, these qualities are really beside the point in a discussion of the authorship of a given blues song. Blues songs are by their nature tradition-bound creations. The building block of the blues, the smallest unit in which meaning may be found, is the blues line or half-line, and all attempts to trace the most important ones to their source have been inconclusive. Blues lines and blues songs are always pre-existing, available for any bluesman to use in any way he sees fit. No one can say for sure where any blues line or blues lyric comes from, except to say it is not (as most writers have suggested) taken directly from the daily lives of the blues singers themselves. They come from somewhere else. Though many blues lines echo common conversational ploys, and seem to be adapted from common speech or taken from vernacular sources, it would be more accurate to say that they come from almost anywhere *but* the daily lives of the singers. It would probably be more useful to imagine, to paraphrase Paul de Man in his ruminations about textual originality, that any originality in a blues song is the result of a misreading, or inept recreation of some previous performance (de Man, 280).

Race and gender enter into the question of “authenticity” in blues. I have tried to sidestep some of these inherent difficulties by limiting my definition of what constitutes authentic blues performance to those cultural productions that almost all writers and critics already agree are “blues.” In other words, my arguments do not depend too much on rethinking the blues canon. Talent scouts for record companies, the record-buying public, and a previous generation of blues writers have already decided on the “canon” of the blues. At the beginning is Charley Patton and Blind Lemon Jefferson, at the zenith is Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters. Certainly a few amendments to that canon should be made, mostly along the lines of giving more attention and credit to female performers. On the other hand, few things are as well documented in the blues as the contributions of female singers in the Classic Era.

It is in that era that the blues finds its most recognizable structure. The common blues stanza is a pattern wherein one line is sung and then repeated with minor variation, followed by a third line that rhymes and completes the promise of the first two. “Woke up this morning, felt round for my shoes--woke up this morning, and I felt round for my shoes--Oh lord I had em those mean old walkin blues” Line two is basically a repetition of the first line, although there is often some minor variation, as in our example (from “Walkin’ Blues” by Robert Johnson) in which “and I” is sung in line two while only implied in the first line.

After the first two repeated lines, the poetic effect is such that the listener is left hanging, waiting for some conclusion to (or comment on) the first two lines. This is partly due to the caesura or pause that occurs in the bar structure. In a 12 bar blues, the lyrics are sung over bars one and two, five and six, and nine and ten--bars three and four,

seven and eight are usually vocal pauses, as are bars eleven and twelve, commonly called the “turnaround.” This kind of structure is common in many folk music forms like ballads and is presumably a characteristic of orally composed verse. Rhyme is present for its mnemonic qualities (it helps the singer recall memorized verses---the last word of the third line rhymes with the last word of the first two, limiting the possibilities or serving to “jog” the memory of the singer) as well as its poetic qualities (pleasant to the ear of the listener). The structure of the stanzas gives the singer a few moments to think about what line is coming next, or possibly to improvise an upcoming line in the two bar interval that comes between the lines, or enables the singer to repeat line one as line two, even while singing line two, freeing some part of his brain to think about the next line, the next verse, etc. Additionally, the two bar vocal pause at the end of each stanza gives the singer a moment to think about the upcoming verse. These kinds of structures, employing repeated rhymes, vocal pauses, repetitive instrumental passages, etc., are the hallmarks of orally composed lyric performance.

The repeated lines of the blues stanza (lines one and two) have a somewhat different character from the third or final line. Rarely could one sort of line be substituted for another. The first two lines “set up” the third. The first line is often a prosaic statement of fact or a description of a mundane activity--“I woke up this morning.” The third or “answer” line is most often a universalized, aphoristic statement of sentiment. It answers the concerns or situation delineated in the first line, or concludes the thought initiated by the first line.

I ain’t never loved but three women in my life

I ain’t never loved but three women in my life

My mother, my sister, and my best friend’s wife.

As these lines from another Charley Patton song “Bird’s Nest” illustrate, there is almost always an element of surprise, a feeling of non sequitur, or a “punch-line” effect to the third line of the stanza, as if the first two lines are the set-ups of the joke and the third line is the capper or punch line. The first line is often predictable or reminiscent of colloquial speech, and is often lifted verbatim from overused conversational ploys. This twelve bar structure, in which the first line is repeated followed by a third line sung only once, is a relatively late development in blues lyric structure. In the earliest Delta blues, it is much more common for singers to employ a simpler two line version.

“Boll Weevil Blues” (Charley Patton)

An example of the older structure that predates the twelve bar blues, this Charley Patton song’s historical importance is well known. Natural disasters like floods and crop failures have been chronicled in blues songs from the beginning. This song is of interest for its structure, a structure that at first seems simple by virtue of its lack of harmonic development. Instead of shifting its melodic structure from the tonic chord to dominant and sub-dominant like the modern blues song, Patton just repeats a one-bar riff over and over with constant variation. The complexity of the song’s poly-rhythms and the interplay of Patton’s voice and guitar are what gives the song its power.

First time I saw the boll weevil, he was flyin through the a---air

Next time I saw him, he had his whole family the----ere

Later singers would have probably used the more familiar (nowadays) three-line pattern--as in

First time I saw the Boll weevil, he was flyin through the a—air

(Chord change to the IV chord)

First time I saw the boll weevil, he was flyin through the a—air

(Chord change to V chord)

Next time I saw him he had his whole family the---ere.

This modern variation on the blues verse, using more harmonic complexity, could be considered a bastardization or improvement, depending on your point of view. It is definitely a concession to popular song forms, with more emphasis on harmonic possibilities (it replaces what is basically a one-chord form with only “implied” harmonic changes with a three chord form that loses some of the polyrhythmic idiosyncrasy of the older form) and less on rhythmic variation. It does open up the possibility of a more “group-oriented” music by creating a predictable harmonic structure with regular chord changes. The older form is more forgiving of the solo performer’s tendency to vary bar length and structure.

This radical shift from what was basically a one-bar form to a more complex harmonic form causes problems in definition of blues structure--i.e., characterizing the blues as a 12-bar structure--because the earliest blues were usually not structured that way. Some of the basic elements of even the earliest blues structure do seem to bear similarities to a number of performance conventions (not necessarily African American). One is a practice called “lining” that was common in rural church singing. In congregations too poor to have printed books of hymns, or in areas where most of the congregation could not read, song leaders would “line” the hymns as they were sung. The song leader would sing out, usually in double time, the words to the upcoming verse, so that the members of the congregation would be reminded of the words to the next line. In practice, it would go like this. The preacher, or song leader, would sing

Amazing grace how sweet the sound...

And the congregation would then sing the same words at the regular tempo

A-A-ma-zing Grace, how sweet the sound...

And so on for every line of the hymn.

Another practice often related to blues structure is “call and response,” something familiar to Christian worshippers wherein a kind of dialogue takes place between the leader and the rest of the congregation. This structure is also found in the work songs that help workers work together with a common rhythm, as in the task of “linin’ track” in which railroad workers use a kind of rhythmic song to co-ordinate their physical efforts. (Lining track and lining a hymn are two unrelated forms of “lining” despite the similarity of the terms.) In lining track, the idea is to move a heavy piece of extruded railroad iron (the track section) into position so that it can be secured with an iron spike. This is done by a group of men (six or so) who each position a large pry-bar under a ten-foot section of track and move it in a sideways direction for an inch or so along the wooden ties until it is bent into the proper path--the work is coordinated by a “line boss” who sings in a rhythm that is slow and predictable, so that all six men can coordinate their effort to move the track into position with their pry-bars. The six men respond to the line boss’s rhythm by singing/grunting as they apply force to their bars and lever the track into position. It is widely accepted that singing together makes the work go easier, whether the effect is psychological or physiological. Perhaps it has a soothing effect on the workers in addition to its practical function--the synchronization of effort.

A musicological way of describing blues and differentiating it from most Western European music is that--unlike most popular music--it relies exclusively on the minor pentatonic scale. As the name implies, the minor pentatonic scale is a five-tone scale that can be seen as a simplification of the western European way of dividing an octave. In a given key, for instance A, the blues scale relies *almost* exclusively on five notes--A, C

(minor third), D (fourth), E (fifth), and G (seventh). Blues songs are composed using only these five notes, a simple scale compared to most of the scales used in western popular music, classical music, etc. The third note of the scale (major third) is characteristically “flatted” in blues performance, giving it a “between major and minor” feel. This “flattening” of the major third is so common in blues that it is often referred to as the “blue note.”

In sociological forms of definition, the blues are seen as the community-based reaction to historical and economic processes. In other words, blues are the product of a certain class, race or geographical and temporal situation. These definitions of the blues usually state that the blues are a result of slavery, Jim Crow, Reconstruction, sharecropping systems, lack of African American mobility, etc. Neither of these methods of definition (folkloric or sociologic) is very satisfying, and it is a tempting rhetorical move for writers who write about the blues to fall back on yet another form of definition.

The responses of the blues singers themselves to the question “What is Blues?” form a body of “poetic definitions” of the blues. Steven Tracy’s excellent anthology of blues writing begins with a collection of these poetic definitions culled from interviews with actual blues singers, and Tracy offers them as a kind of antidote to the more analytical definitions of blues writers (Tracy, 10). While these ruminations of bluesmen on the nature of the blues are cryptic, evasive, and poetic by their very nature, they are often offered as the final word. “The blues ain’t nothing but a low-down heart disease,” or “The blues comes from walkin behind a mule.” As poetic and cryptic as these definitions may be, they at least have a ring of authenticity. Singing to mules, plowing, errant women, and whiskey figure prominently in these attempts at definition. Many of

the more “poetic” definitions of blues tend to focus on the subject matter of the lyrics. It is striking to note, for instance, the differences in subject matter between the blues and other lyrical popular music of the same period. The most glaring difference is the total absence in blues of the positive romanticism that is a staple of popular music lyrics in non-blues songs of the period. Blues songs are fundamentally different in subject matter from the “love songs” that make up the bulk of American popular song in the early Twentieth Century.

Often the best evidence that primitivity and authority are related in the blues comes from the oft-quoted sayings of the bluesmen themselves, who are very accommodating in meeting the expectations of white theorists with folksy sayings about the nature of the blues: “You get the blues walkin behind a mule,” “The blues is a low-down heart disease,” etc. These kinds of statements are the blues, but they may not adequately define the blues, much less adequately explicate them for our purposes. I would only point out that if you define blues as a primitive folk music uninfected by mainstream culture (Lomax’s stated purpose), and then go out to collect and analyze it, your conclusion is likely to be that the blues is a primitive folk music uninfected by mainstream culture. A researcher who believes in direct transmission of folklore would be likely to find the blues a personal expression of sorrow by illiterate persons moved by a poetic spirit, and would be put off if a singer/informant were to mimic a phonograph record. Such a researcher would be more likely to believe that each singer of blues brings to the genre his own highly personal stamp directly based on his own life experiences, and to reject the notion that blues singers just repeat lyrics they have heard from jukebox recordings. In one sense, blues historians have had to face the same realizations formulated

somewhat earlier by literary critics--that the non-literary experiences of a scriptor have little to do with the script.

“Mississippi Delta Blues” (William Brown)

Another blues text I would like to consider is “Mississippi Delta Blues” from Alan Lomax’s field recording of William Brown in Coahoma County in 1937. A look at this song reveals some of the ironies associated with the study of folk music in an age of mechanical reproduction. I take as my text William Brown’s guitar part from the song. The story of how Frankie Carle’s “Sunrise Serenade” became William Brown’s “Mississippi Delta Blues” points out the fragility of the distinction between commercial and vernacular forms of expression.

One afternoon in the Library of Congress, I cued up a series of field recordings made by Alan Lomax of performances by William Brown. I saw from the field notes that this was not Willie Brown—a well-known collaborator of Robert Johnson’s I was investigating at the time—but William Brown, another Mississippi-born singer/guitarist of lesser importance. I decided to listen to a little of it anyway. I started with “Mississippi Delta Blues” because the title was so plain and classic sounding. On the archival recordings of Mississippi bluesmen recorded by Lomax in the 1930’s, the tapes are unedited dubs of Lomax’s original disc recordings, and I could hear Lomax talking to the musicians between takes. What Lomax seems to be most concerned with is that the musicians perform traditional songs, songs they learned in their own communities from direct transmission, and not some versions of popular songs, Broadway tunes, or Tin Pan Alley creations. He did not want to record jazz or commercial music, either, and he keeps asking Brown where the songs came from. He would say, “you didn’t learn that from a record, did you?”

Brown, for his part, clearly was worried that he was not giving Lomax the answers he wanted to hear. He was being evasive and non-committal about where he had learned the songs. When Brown allowed that he had made up the song more or less by himself, it seemed to mollify, if not satisfy, Lomax, so Brown stuck to that story. I got the idea that Lomax really wanted to hear that the songs had a noble lineage, or some kind of provenance. Lomax wanted to hear Brown say he had learned his songs at the knee of Charley Patton or Robert Johnson. I am just as guilty. Hadn't I first gotten interested in a recording by William Brown because I thought it might have been by the Willie Brown who was known to accompany the great Robert Johnson? It made me wonder how the narrative tendencies that might have been operating in the minds of the great folklore collectors might have affected the canon of recorded music that exists.

As I listened to Brown's "Mississippi Delta Blues" I was struck with the conviction that I had heard this melody somewhere before. Something about it was a little too light-hearted to fit into a collection of authentic Delta Blues. It reminded me of a piano piece my grandmother used to play, an instrumental number made popular by the king of white ragtime schmalz, the bandleader Frankie Carle. On the field tapes, I could hear Brown warily assuring Lomax that he made up the song all by himself. The irony is that Willie Brown did learn "Mississippi Delta Blues" from a record, a commercial recording instead of the preferred method of direct transmission. In fact, he must have learned it from the Frankie Carle record. It would be hard to imagine a less likely source for a classic blues tune than Frankie Carle. Keep in mind that "Mississippi Delta Blues" by William Brown has become the gold standard of Delta Blues guitar. Not only did Alan Lomax and John Work collect the song on their first trip to the Deep South, but also several generations of

blues singers have made Brown's song an essential standard often heard in guitar competitions. Brown can be heard on the field recording denying the song's origin, but "Mississippi Delta Blues" is nothing but William Brown's attempt to recreate the piano styling of Frankie Carle on an acoustic guitar. Brown just tacked on some standard blues lyrics to make the song his own.

The reason I make a point of this is not to belittle William Brown but rather to make an important point about blues transmission and how wrong folkloristic assumptions about them can be. Frankie Carle is about as far from the popular notion of a blues singer as one can get. First, he was white. Second, he was a mainstream popular bandleader—and a "sweet" (a term for "commercial") band at that.

The only reason I knew about Frankie Carle is that he was my Grandmother's favorite recording artist. Could it be that no one had noticed that Brown had "borrowed" his song from Frankie Carle? Or is it possible that Frankie Carle had heard Brown's version and stolen it? It seems to me that there are at least three reasons why it is more likely to have been Brown stealing from Carle rather than Carle stealing from Brown: many guitarists are drawn to playing piano pieces on the guitar as a mark of their virtuosity; Carle's song was a hit in 1926 and Lomax recorded Brown in the 1930's; and finally, Carle was a prolific composer and arranger, while Brown claims only "Mississippi Delta Blues" as an original composition.

A casual look at the folkloristics of blues collection and canonization reveals them to be largely a reflection of the prejudices of folklorists. White folklorists like Alan Lomax went in search of "African influenced blues music played by old guys uninfected by mainstream culture" (Lomax iii) and found exactly what they were looking for. By

“mainstream culture,” Lomax meant jazz and white popular music. Examination of the remarks made by researchers like Alan Lomax on unedited field recordings reveals a prejudice against a number of things that at first glance seem innocuous: mechanical reproduction, urbanity, sophistication. Consider first the limited scope of artistic interaction that would have been possible between black men and white men in the 1920’s in the Deep South. Against such a backdrop, the giant shadow cast by the “white man with a microphone” looms larger and larger. Even as late as the 1960’s, during a second wave of blues collection in which blues scholars actively sought out first generation bluesmen and encouraged them to come out of retirement, black “informants” report a high level of intimidation during these encounters. Artists like Mississippi John Hurt and Skip James, who were both rediscovered by white scholars in the 1960’s, report that in their world when a white man told them to get in a car, they did it without thinking. When a white man suggested they make a record, they would answer “yes sir” and they were not likely to ask any questions, like how much they were getting paid. Hurt recalls that when two white men suggested he return with them to Boston to play in a coffee house, he never considered that he could say no, nor did he negotiate with them about financial arrangements.

“Kindhearted Woman” (Robert Johnson)

“Kindhearted Woman” has a special place in the Robert Johnson repertoire. He evidently used it as an “audition” piece. Johnson recorded two versions or “takes” of the song on the master tape from the first session in San Antonio. Indications are that “Kindhearted Woman” was the first song recorded in the session, and it is the only song on which Johnson plays an instrumental break or “solo” passage on the guitar. “Kindhearted Woman” is also singular in its lyrical content. While most of Johnson’s

songs have lyrics that are unified intra-stanzaically, “Kindhearted Woman” not only repeats the first verse in lieu of a second, but the subsequent verses seem oddly unrelated to the first thematically. To put it plainly, the woman he sings about in verse one and two could hardly be the same woman he sings about in subsequent verses, one being overly subservient and the other uncaring. This is hardly the case with other Robert Johnson songs, which have more than the normal amount of inter-stanzaic unity.

In blues, the “work” of the blues singer is in the assemblage of blues lines in new and inventive ways. The line (or half-line) is the operative unit, not the song. Robert Johnson’s lines and indeed whole verses (and in some cases entire songs) can be traced to recordings by older singers like Son House, Kokomo Arnold, and Tommy Johnson. There is little difference—other than the title—between Kokomo Arnold’s “Kokomo Blues” and Johnson’s classic “Sweet Home Chicago.” Yet it is commonly acknowledged that Johnson’s songs create a kind of thematic unity often not seen in the works of “lesser” blues singers. By that I mean that his lines hang together and form verses that have a kind of intra-stanzaic unity, and his verses in most cases do have a thematic unity rare in early blues music. All the verses of a Robert Johnson song sound as if they belong together; they are not usually four or five blues verses strung together with no narrative or lyrical unity. By this I mean that all the stanzas or verses are based on a common theme—they appear to be about one thing. You don’t expect to find a protagonist who is poor in one stanza and rich in another, or male in one stanza and female in another, or any inter-stanzaic incongruities that would suggest that they had been composed independently at different times by different singers.

This is best illustrated by the exception that proves the rule. “Kindhearted Woman” is one Johnson composition that does *not* display the kind of inter-stanzaic unity I’m talking about. The first verse of the song seems to be inexplicably at odds with the second.

I got a kind-hearted woman, do anything in this world for me.

I got a kind-hearted woman, do anything in this world for me.

But these evil-hearted women, just won’t let me be.

I love my baby, but my baby don’t love me.

I love my baby, but my baby don’t love me.

It hurts me so bad to see that girl in misery.

It seems incongruous for the singer to brag of his hold over a woman in one verse and complain about her lack of regard in another. Assuming of course that “his baby” is the same in both verses, who is mistreating who? Some critics have labored to reconcile this seeming absurdity, or lack of inter-stanzaic unity, by suggesting that Johnson is not being careless with his juxtaposition of existing lines or line fragments, but rather is expressing a kind of poetic subtlety by way of this seeming contradiction, a kind of oxymoronic rhetoric that suggests a complex heterosexual relationship in which it would be possible for a woman to not love someone that she would do anything for, or to do anything for someone she did not love. That the willingness to do anything for someone is not necessarily the same thing as love, I will admit. But I can’t find this kind of oxymoronic rhetoric in any of Johnson’s other 28 songs, and it seems to me the far more likely explanation is that Johnson *did* carelessly juxtapose two irreconcilable verses in his effort to come up with suitable lyrics to “Kindhearted Woman Blues” The fact is that

most of Johnson's lyrics do not demonstrate this particular failing (or what would be considered a failing by New Critical standards which insist on the poem being an eidetic, unified whole, the effect of which would be ruined by replacing a single word). It is also a fact that "Kind-Hearted Woman" was one of the first sides Johnson recorded at his first recording session, suggesting that it was most probably among the most carefully crafted of his songs, a kind of audition piece. It therefore seems strange that Johnson would be careless in its lyric construction, when he takes such evident care in most of his other compositions like "Come on in my Kitchen," "Love in Vain," and "If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day."

The guitar "solo" has become an accepted part of blues performance practice, but in Johnson's time it was unusual. The guitar was considered to be a simple accompaniment. There were brief solo figures between sung lines and at the end of verses, but no actual guitar instrumental solos wherein the performer's voice dropped out and the guitar played a prominent lead figure that was different from the accompaniment in the other verses. The fact that "Kind-Hearted Woman" is the only one of the 29 songs we have by Robert Johnson that utilizes a guitar "break" may be some indication that Johnson's arrangement had not been finalized.

It is through analysis of "Kindhearted Woman"--in opposition to Johnson's more carefully crafted songs--that the nature of the blues "song" and the circumstances of its production can be understood: an orally-composed pastiche of lyrics and melodies recalled from a traditional repertoire. In Johnson's recordings, what we see is the transition from spontaneous performance to crafted commercial product.

CHAPTER 3
“ORIGINAL” BLUES

Problems of Origin

When it comes to blues history and scholarship, more than the usual amount of attention is given in the literature to “origins.” Paul Oliver considered the question of African Retentions in the blues to be of paramount interest to blues scholars and late in his life lamented the declining ferocity of the argument among scholars on this point (Oliver, *Echoes*, 69). Stephen Tracy’s anthology of blues writing, to date the most definitive collection of blues texts in print, devotes a long chapter to the subject, framing the debate as it appeared in the pages of *Living Blues Magazine* in 1990. The debate begins with Richard Waterman’s study of 1953, in which he dismisses the idea of African retentions in Western music. His argument could be characterized as the “fusion” or “hybridity” argument. He argues that the blues, by most definitions, first appeared around 1900. By then most tribal cultures had been lost, mostly as a result of intentional diasporic dilution (slavetraders supposedly separated slaves of similar tribal origin). There are some problems with this argument, notably that some slave owners imported slaves specifically from a single region, i.e. South Carolina slave owners desired to own slaves from the rice-growing cultures of Africa, etc. The political problem with Waterman’s “hybridity” argument is that it tends to reinforce the long-time argument that African American slaves were a kind of “tabula rasa” on which hegemonic culture could be easily inscribed. This was an argument that had been popular with slave owners. But the strength of Waterman’s argument lies in his observation that West African music isn’t

all that different from Western European music in the first place. The fact that the two kinds of music share common notions of scale divisions makes new world hybrid music possible in the first place. This kind of fusion that has occurred in the music of the Americas might have been impossible between two world musics that do not share the same scale; for instance, Chinese music and African music.

Scholars are divided over the exact date, but most agree that the blues first arose as a distinctive tendency in American community-based music somewhere around 1900 (Oliver and Palmer). A few argue for 1890 or even 1880 (Titon). All are in agreement that the single most important source in the documentation of early blues is the Fisk University/Library of Congress Coahoma County Study of 1941-42, a project that investigated the living conditions of African Americans in the Mississippi Delta. Part of this sociological study focused on the music and folkways of the region, documenting and recording blues singers along with other forms of vernacular expression like sermons, ring-games, work songs, etc. I would argue that the choice of Coahoma County as an area of study (chosen because of its large number of black sharecroppers, not for its promise as a musical wellspring) is the main reason why the blues is said to have its origins in the Delta, as opposed to several other regions of the American South. But the fact remains that most, if not all, of the “informants” consulted by the team from Fisk/Library of Congress are now undisputed mainstays of the blues canon: Son House, Bukka White, and Muddy Waters being the three most celebrated. Perhaps it is not too impertinent to suggest that if the Fisk study had focused on rural Tennessee instead (a possibility that was considered seriously at the time, owing to the considerable savings that would have resulted from directing the study at a region closer to the city of

Nashville where Fisk is located), the story of the blues might have unfolded quite differently. It goes without saying that a study of cultural phenomena like the Fisk study is more “constitutive” of reality than “reflective” of an external reality (Hall, 24).

Blues is a form of African American vernacular expression that emerged as a recognizable genre on the heels of ragtime, in the wake of minstrelsy. I speak of “blues” or “the blues” as a plural noun, as if they were a single man. The blues is both plural and singular in that they are seen as an eidetic whole. This type of anthropomorphism is one that was practiced by the singers themselves, as in Robert Johnson’s line “Saw the blues this mornin’, walkin’ just like a man.” This kind of personification of the blues is a key metaphor in blues lyrics. Blues arose from the street corners, juke joints, whorehouses and work camps of the Deep South. It may have begun in Texas or Mississippi, moving eastward, or it may have cropped up simultaneously all over what is now the southeastern United States. Like Hollywood films and jazz, it is one of a very few uniquely American art forms. Blues arose about the same time as, but separately from, early jazz as it was played in New Orleans’s Congo Square. It is related to jazz, but developed in isolation from it. Several local style variants exist in Mississippi alone, including the Delta, Bentonia, and Hill Country styles, all clearly distinguishable to the practiced ear. Exactly when and where in the American South the blues first arose cannot be known. Despite the folklorists’ obsession with origins of time and place, the trail gets cold as we approach 1900, and the exact origin of the blues depends on how you define the genre. The search for origins has led researchers down a blind alley, at the end of which are Blind Lemon Jefferson, the Texas-born blues singer/guitarist who was the first to record successfully, and Charley Patton. Jefferson was a blind street performer whose successful recordings

paved the way for other performers, most of whom, like Charley Patton, were Mississippians. The majority of the bluesmen who recorded commercially 1910-1937 were either Mississippi natives or men who spent a lot of time there. It seems reasonable to suppose that Jefferson and Patton learned at least some of their songs from earlier singers, but no earlier name appears in the blues literature. There is some evidence that the blues appeared in several other places around the South at about the same time that it appeared in Mississippi: the Piedmont in the Carolinas, Alabama, even Florida. It seems that the blues appeared throughout the south anywhere that African Americans lived in large numbers. As far as regional disputes go, the honor of claiming to be the home of the blues has been a polite contest.

A far more bitter debate than the where and when question of the origins of the blues centers on the sources of the blues. To the professional folklorist, there are, to state it simply, three non-mutually-exclusive categories of cultural production that are possible sources of the blues: 1) African musical or narrative traditions, especially the shamans (medicine men) and griots (narrative poets) of West Africa. 2) European ballads and folk songs, American hymns, American popular song. 3) Native American (and Hawaiian) music and folklore.

The very fact of origins, the possibilities in a search for origins, has been thoroughly deconstructed by Nietzsche and Foucault. The French vogue as of this writing is to view the structure of cultural relationships as rhizomatic--a metaphor developed by Gilles Deleuze to describe a different kind of structure, one not linear or tree-like or intensely hierarchical, but one like the rhizome of the plant world. Rhizomatic structure is like creeper grass or potato vines--cut through the integuments at any point and the

organism continues to grow and multiply. Connections can be made in a number of ways, and as one avenue is denied, another opens up. The structure makes possible rampant growth and seemingly unstructured systems, or at least systems with no discernable hierarchy (Deleuze, 54).

How does it function, the blues? Does it reinforce the colonial ideologies while pretending to subvert them? Does it present a real danger to the status quo? Present new possibilities for gender roles in society? Does it keep alive African traditions and pre-Christian cosmologies? Have the African retentions in the blues lent themselves to easy co-optation by Christianity, a religion that some say was developed for slaves and is therefore friendly to the idea that the slave mentality makes a virtue of passivity and has a marked tendency to dream of utopia instead of organizing for social change? Or does the blues function as a form of heresy--inviting sanction and excommunication for ideas that gradually infect the mainstream and become part of dogma? For the Marxist critic, the blues are a condition of the world of work, one bargaining chip in the libidinal economy of the 20th Century, a kind of safety valve that functions like the *carnival* in feudal and early capitalist society. It is a commonplace that feudal society brought about new relationships between the peonage and the land, new relationships with animals, populations, etc. That with the advent of industrial capitalism, rulers became rulers of a population more than a tract of land, that rulers began to exert control through control of a population rather than an area of land. Data began to be collected about this new population. How many were there? What was their birth rate?

Among that population was number of ex-slaves. Property-less, but no longer tied to the land, they had come down in the world--from the status of a valued slave to no

status at all. It is often said that the blues were born of slavery, and that statement is misleadingly inexact in lots of ways. For one thing, slavery had been over for 30 years or more before the first blues song was sung. It would be more accurate to say that blues is the product of sharecropping as an agricultural system and Jim Crow as a political one. But the psychology of the blues, especially as it relates to white culture, is about the master/slave relationship. The relationship of man to animal is also an important one in the blues, mostly in the regard shown for mules and ponies and the reliance of men on these beasts for their livelihood. When it comes to subject formation, whichever theory one accepts, Freud's or Deleuze's, the formation of the slave subject is wholly dependent on the nature of the master, whether or not the master's subject formation is dependent on the slave's (other). The resulting double consciousness of the African American is an important factor in interpreting or decoding the lyric and gestures of the blues. This double-consciousness that has been written about at length by Fanon and Gates is a result of the Negro's need to be constantly aware of how his actions might appear to his master. Any white man is therefore a threat to his autonomy because any white man has the power to accuse him in lieu of his master, or inform on him to his master. In later phases of racial uplift, the black man is always conscious of not conforming to stereotypical ideas that whites may have naturalized about blacks, thereby reinforcing them wittingly or unwittingly. This concern manifests itself in trivial ways such as an unwillingness to eat watermelon in public, and in more serious ways, like maintaining an attitude of meek passivity at all times, never giving the appearance of "shifty" or suspicious behavior. The result of all this is that the Negro, besides having the usual concerns of making a living, raising a family, and the other stresses that accompany daily life, is faced with an

additional set of concerns--how will it look to the white man? If a white woman responds to him in a sexual way, for whatever reason--either the simplest of reasons or more complex reasons caused by enforced repression or troubles in her own community--how can he respond without facing censure? Blacks who reside in the South even today and especially in the past are extremely sensitive to the psycho-sexual demands put upon them by domestic relations with white people. They are in a no-win situation in which they cannot afford to appear too lazy or too industrious, too ignorant or too savvy for their own good. As Gates points out, this situation creates the necessity for the black man to speak in code whenever the white man is within earshot. His real concerns have to be masked, as in the famous Dunbar poem, "We Wear the Mask." The lyrics to his songs can tell of crossing Jordan but never of fleeing to the North. His gestures can speak of sexual rapaciousness but must be encoded in animal imagery. Soon this habit of encoding becomes second nature, and he employs it even when there are no white men around. It becomes a rhetorical device that is pervasive in his "vernacular"--a term Baker defines as "of the master's plantation." Because the bluesman's culture is oral, it can never be entirely secreted away and confined to his intended audience like *samizdat* or underground pornography, it is out in the air by the campfire, floating through the flimsy walls of the juke joint, the church, the line shack, for the master to hear. He says everything in a roundabout way, with indirection, chiasmus, and metaphor the operative rhetorical devices. Part of the pleasure in the audience is the active participation involved in decoding the words and gestures of the performers, and like epic poetry, the factors of shared sacred space, prior knowledge of the operative narratives (what am I doing when I

dust my broom?) and formulaic set pieces (I woke up this morning...) are crucial in the transmission of meaning from performer to audience.

The debate over the possibility of the existence of African retentions in the blues has caused a lot of ink to be spilled. The blues carries with it some racial baggage that won't go away. For one thing, the blues arose in the Deep South under Jim Crow, a form of legalized segregation. The blues is widely reckoned to be the result of (or the aftershock of) the peculiar institution of slavery. If the blues is one of a very few uniquely American art forms, it is certainly the only one that can be practiced only by African Americans. For this reason, the blues bears the stamp of the South's shameful past. It is said that white people can't play the blues. Many Black people don't want to be reminded of the blues because of its relation to "slavery times." Any study of the blues should consider the viewpoint of black theorists, though white males, many of who are English or Western European, have done most of the writing about blues. All the Mississippi bluesmen were black. Most white critics who have written about the blues have done so for complicated psychological reasons. Paul Garon has written the definitive work on the psychology of the blues in which he deals with the white writer's fascination with the "other" and the "primitive." For Garon, the white writer or performer's obsession with the blues stems from the fact that the bluesman represents "the Black father (Garon, 211)."

What Has Already Been Said About The Blues

The following are things that have been said over and over about the blues until they have come to be accepted as truth. Blues revisionists are dubious about most of these things. Nevertheless, these things that have been said about the blues make a good story. It is the narrative power of these myths that has sustained them.

There was a time, the story goes, that African Americans gathered in their own communities and shared a Black vernacular tradition--an oral tradition that was all the more important within a Black community because so few African Americans could read or write. At the beginning of the 20th Century, a cultural purity prevailed in these communities. The people shared a folklore tradition largely unaffected by the literate culture of the white community. African traditions persisted in the new world despite the fact that slaveholders had discouraged them, the diaspora had weakened them, and almost 100 years had passed since most Negroes, as they were called, had survived the middle passage. Christianity neatly subsumed "pagan" customs and holidays, even spiritual beliefs, but some African "retentions" remained in Black culture, especially in food and music.

The drum, the principal instrument in African music, was outlawed everywhere in North America with the exception of Congo Square in the port of New Orleans. Yet Negroes adapted the musical instruments of the west to their own purposes, and played them with a rhythmic intensity once reserved for the hollowed out log, the skin-covered gourd. White people looked the other way as Negroes made liquor and music on Saturdays; it was thought to be a kind of "safety valve" that relieved the constant pressure of agricultural drudgery and made the back-breaking labor of the rest of the week bearable. It also made rioting and rebellion less likely by offering a kind of outlet that is similar in function to the European carnival, a limited period wherein the usual hierarchies are inverted and licentious behavior is temporarily allowed, with the effect of finally reinforcing, not subverting, the standard hierarchies.

And the pull of African tradition made itself felt in American Negro music. It manifested itself in the syncopation of Ragtime, the ritual dancing of the cakewalk, the march and second line rhythms of parades and funerals, even in the buffoonery of the mindless coon song. Minstrelsy arose as a white adaptation of this Negro impulse. Around 1890 to 1900 this African impulse found its most profound expression in two American musical forms that arose separately and spontaneously, seemingly from nowhere: jazz and blues. Though the two forms began at around the same time, jazz is said to draw on the blues for its roots, while the opposite is never said of the blues. These two American art forms are among the only truly American art forms, both born and developed here in the new world. And we have the Negro to thank for blues and jazz.

Of these two forms, jazz and blues, blues was the more primitive and unsophisticated, untouched by European musical tradition. Jazz was transplanted onto American popular song forms, improvisations on the familiar 32 bars of the Tin Pan Alley song. Blues remained a folk music while jazz dominated the pop music universe and eventually rivaled the music of the conservatory in terms of cultural capital. Jazz for the most part is wordless, improvisatory, and harmonically complex--while blues is simpler, cruder, and significant because it is the basis for jazz, and the single greatest source for the poets of the Harlem Renaissance.

The blues is sung and played by the common man, usually by men and women with no formal musical training. Most blues singers can sing *only* blues and are incapable of playing Jazz. Jazz musicians, however, often play the blues and use it as a springboard for their harmonic invention. The blues is innate, never learned, it comes from inside. And the blues is connected to evil, the devil, voodoo, disease and badness. It is the

opposite of church music, it is profane and secular, and many blues singers “give up” the blues and become Baptist preachers.

Blues singers were itinerant, poor, usually infirm, blind or lame. They were outsiders, shunned by upright citizens of either color. According to legend, their virtuosic talents were the result of Faustian deals with the devil, a tradition, by the way, that has a parallel in African Culture. African folklore and culture is full of Faustian figures, men tricked by griots, shamans, and even demi-gods like Esu-Elegba, the African trickster cited by Gates as the source of the signifyin’ monkey (Gates, *Signifyin(g)*, iii).

It goes without saying that blues singers were Negroes. And they were mostly male until the Classic Blues Era when white entrepreneurs began to promote gaudily feathered female singers on the vaudeville stage and on race records made by the second labels of the phonograph companies, the so-called Race Records. These “Classic Blues” women were really just costumed dancers who fronted jazz bands manned by professional (music-reading) musicians, singing “blues” songs that were highly derivative of earlier hits, what Albert Murray calls “the blues *as such* (25).” The real blues had been created a generation before by a generation of male singers about whom little was known.

It was an accident of technology, we are told, which caused the female singers to be the first ones preserved on record. They were only imitating what male singers had been doing for years. The “fad” for female blues singers happened to coincide with the invention of the phonograph record, and as a result we have thousands of 78 rpm records from the 1920’s that feature the women singers of the Classic Blues. Male singers never recorded until a male street singer from Texas, Blind Lemon Jefferson, had some considerable success. After that, the 1930’s became the era of the male country-blues

“recording artist.” But by then times were hard and sales were down. These records by male singers in the 1930’s often repeated themes and lyrics from popular records of the 1920’s (by women), but we must understand that it was the male singers who originated these devices. The Classic Blues singers were derivative copiers of the male singers, male singers who did not record until a decade later!

The race records of the 1930’s were recorded in the hope of making a profit from a small but enthusiastic group of Negroes who had the means to buy a gramophone. The record business was in its infancy, and the business strategy of companies like Paramount, Okeh, and Vocalion was to put out a lot of records--even if they didn’t make any money--so that there would appear to be plenty of media available to play on the new gramophones. This strategy was deemed necessary because there was initial resistance to the new technology. People didn’t want to buy the new gramophones if they couldn’t get anything to play on them. Companies like Paramount and Victor made their profit from selling the players, not the discs, but they saw the need to have a variety of “software” available to justify the purchase of the “hardware.”

In the 1940’s, a white audience had come to appreciate the purity and nobility of this Negro music. The music of the common working man, oppressed first by slavery, then sharecropping, then Jim Crow, had wide appeal to populists and leftists. White intellectuals began to see the possibility that America too had a folklore of its own--at a time when Europeans had become obsessed with preserving their folklore.

White folklorists began going to the American south--from Harvard, from the Library of Congress, the WPA. They sought out the men who had made those records the decade before, most of whom had returned to a life of obscurity. In trying to find the

Robert Johnsons or the first generation of bluesmen, they discovered a second generation of men like Muddy Waters.

In the 1950's and 60's, record collectors and Jazz historians followed in the footsteps of the folklorists. They sought out ever more obscure forgotten heroes. They brought the forgotten heroes north to Cambridge coffee houses and to the Newport Folk Festival, even to the capitals of Western Europe; sometimes supplying them with guitars and appropriate costumes. Meanwhile, some of the forgotten heroes had moved north to Memphis, Chicago, and Detroit, following the good paying jobs and the disposable income the jobs created.

White attitudes towards the blues were changing from amused tolerance to cultural regard. Blues singers were now unthreateningly wise old men who carried tradition in their souls, but who showed none of the anger of the young men who clamored for their civil rights in the streets of the cities. Young white musicians longed to play with them and be accepted by them. White audiences greeted them reverently even as black audiences turned to Motown, soul and progressive jazz for musical sustenance and cultural identity.

There came about, we are told, a blues revival. A newfound respect for the origins of Negro music, which is, after all, the only American music that is not a pale imitation of European forms like opera and symphonic music. Negroes, however, began to be a little embarrassed by the blues. African Americans began to listen to more modern forms of music untainted by old traditions. Blues singers reminded everyone of Jim Crow and Minstrel show. While this was comforting to whites, the nostalgia that made country blues appealing to northern blacks had worn itself out with black audiences. While Black

people from the south who had recently moved to northern cities were drawn to the down-home style of Muddy Waters' first commercial records in Chicago, the next generation of Blacks tended to be more offended than comforted by the old styles of music. Race aside, what generation embraces fully the music of its parents?

Poets of the Harlem Renaissance, we are told, found inspiration in the blues. Some, like Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown, inserted actual found blues lyrics into their own original poetry. College professors began to teach courses on the poetry of the blues, or the blues as poetry, or the blues as a source of African American poetry. The blues came to be recognized as an important source, a wellspring of African American vernacular art, and subsequently the basis of Black literary achievement now that certain blacks had learned to read and write well enough to have literary careers. Langston Hughes, the first African American to make a living as a professional writer, used blues lyrics and themes in his poetry (Tracy, *Blues*, 7).

Doubts About What Has Been Said

This discourse on the history of the blues holds up pretty well even to this day. The story of the blues as it has been written fits in neatly with the story of the post-bellum south, reconstruction, northward migration, and the Black diaspora. It is a discourse that tends to reproduce the stereotypes of the shiftless Negro, the lazy avoider of manual work, spreader of sexual disease, licentiousness, and alcoholism. It contributes to the assumptions of whites about black-on-black violence--that it is inevitable. Even as it rails against the exploitation of Blacks under slavery, it denies that same kind of exploitation in an industrial, northern setting. It reproduces a familiar typology: the black "buck," the prostitute, the pimp, the dope addict, the "interlocutor" of the minstrel show. It perpetuates the myth of natural rhythm. These stereotypes are spun out not only in the

lyrics of the blues songs themselves--the blues offer an exhaustive array of white supremacist ideas about skin color and a generally essentialist point of view about race--but in the literature and history of the blues as written primarily by whites.

And what makes it so gratifying to repeat this history of the blues over and over? A history repeated mostly by white men enamored enough of the blues to write about it seriously? Foucault points out that besides the obvious tendency of lazy or careful historians to repeat “what has already been said” about the past, there is the attraction of something he calls the “speaker’s benefit (Foucault, *Foucault Reader*, 295).” The speaker of blues discourse, by writing transcendently about the blues, gives the appearance of transgression, the big “fuck you” to white racists who deny the very existence of black art. The blues historian identifies himself with the repressed, the outsider, the Black man who cannot speak eloquently for himself. Tomorrow, thanks to the blues historian, the world will see the subtle beauty of that it has spat on, denigrated, ignored. The speaker, by championing the black impulse in American art, points to a future of liberation from the repressive grip of racism. By pointing out racism at work, he proclaims his own color-blindness, a poor substitute for the end of racism, but a mark of personal liberation, nonetheless. I am not a racist, he proclaims, I steal from the black man only what he has plenty of: Music.

But one can raise three serious doubts about this history of the blues. First doubt--Is the blues really folklore? One of the reasons it has never been taken too seriously by folklorists is the fact that it was, almost from the beginning, contaminated by contact with commercial interests (Titon, SFQ 6). And isn’t our notion of the blues shaped by the men who collected it? These are purely historical questions. Second doubt--Doesn’t the blues

have more in common with European forms--Appalachian reels, English ballads, etc., than any kind of African music?

Third doubt--Doesn't white liberal championship of the blues really have the effect of perpetuating white hegemony through racial stereotyping? This is largely a political question. I raise these doubts not to disprove the African retention hypotheses put forward by Oliver, Charters, et al, or to denigrate the literary usefulness of the blues--I am not so much interested in origins of the blues as I am in the "discourse" that surrounds the blues and how it impacts notions of racial identity and power. To be clear, I agree that the blues, like African Americans themselves, are a hybrid of African, American, and Native American strains. That is self-evident (Waterman, 7). The thing that makes the blues unique in the story of race in America is the way that the blues are *by definition* an African American creation.

The Original Bluesman

Blues history can only hint at the seminal talents of one Henry Sloan, a bluesman who lived on the Dockery plantation in the Mississippi Delta from about 1880 to about 1923. Sloan was the first bluesman whose name has been chronicled, the singer for whom there is no antecedent. It is most likely that no recordings of Henry Sloan were ever made, and if they were, they have not survived. Sloan's claim to fame is that he was most likely the man who taught the blues to Charley Patton, the bluesman regarded as the founder of the Dockery Plantation School of the Mississippi Delta Blues. Blues historians regard the Dockery Plantation as ground zero of Mississippi Delta Blues, and Delta Blues are accepted as the prevalent, purest form with the greatest claim to origin, though a case is sometimes made for East Texas. I suppose a case for the serendipitous nature of this attribution to origin could be advanced--the Fisk/Library of Congress field research done

in Coahoma County in 1941-2 was done in Coahoma County because of the large concentration of Blacks in the area, especially among the prison population. Perhaps the assumption that the blues began in the Delta is more a function of where ethnographers chose to look than any other single factor, since there is some evidence to suggest that the blues sprang up in many locations throughout the south at about the same time (1900), including Texas, Mississippi, Arkansas, the Carolinas, Florida and Georgia.

There is one surviving photograph of Patton that, to some observers, hints at Charley's Mexican or Native American origin, and there are some forty surviving recorded performances. While Charley Patton is the oldest known male Delta performer to make a record, in blues research and historiography it is Henry Sloan who is the end of the line. He is the 'Ur' bluesman, the folklore informant who has eluded those researchers--and there have been many--who have sought the original bluesman. Known mostly by virtue of his reputation, mentioned in interviews with blues informants, Sloan is a historical personage, but his importance in the history of the blues is necessarily metaphoric. He is a symbol of authenticity, an exemplar of originality, a creation of the need to understand the past as pure and essential. No living person, no singer for whom a recording survives could fill his position in the history of the blues.

Perhaps it was Henry Sloan that W.C. Handy heard sing and play the blues in the railroad station at Tutwiler, Mississippi, in 1906. There is no evidence that this is so, but the musicologist R. Crumb, a man better known for his counter-culture cartoons from the 1960's, suggests as much in his illustrated blues history (Crumb, *Best*). But if we were to have recordings of Henry Sloan singing and playing what we now think of as the original Delta Blues, we would only be plagued by the need to find another man--the man that

Henry Sloan learned from. This is what happens at the end of the line in the search for the original. So, in a way, the story of Henry Sloan is a biography of someone we know nothing about.

The historian Michel Foucault identifies a time one hundred years in the past as an important watershed in historical consciousness, not just because it's a good round number, but because it's the amount of time that removes a past event from both the historian's direct experience, and the direct experience of anyone the historian might be able to talk to. For Foucault, in his discussion of Late Victorian history, the passing of one hundred years is just such a time for the modern historian. It is worth noting that the origin of the blues took place about one hundred years ago, about the same time period, ca. 1890-1900, that Foucault is talking about in his essay "We 'Other' Victorians" from *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*. "For a long time, the story goes, we supported a Victorian Regime, and we continue to be dominated by it today. Thus the image of the imperial prude is emblazoned on our restrained, mute, and hypocritical sexuality." Foucault's point is that Victorians were not prudish about sex, yet for some reason Twentieth Century writers often portray them as such, despite historical evidence of a healthy discourse about sex (Foucault, *Foucault Reader*, 292). Blues historians today face a similar problem. The possibility of interviewing a first generation bluesman is gone, and the likelihood of interviewing anyone who might have direct experience of early blues performance is equally unlikely.

The performances of American blues singers between 1900 and 1937 constitute a body of cultural production that is collectively called "pre-war blues" or "country blues." Some aspects of these performances have been preserved on recordings; both on

commercially recorded discs as well as on field recordings by folklorists. The thousands of commercially released 78 rpm recordings representing these blues performances give a rough idea of what these performances must have been like, though admittedly, the constraints of acoustical recording technology and the vagaries of the record business had a profound effect on their form and content. Before the invention and development of magnetic tape as a recording medium, these field and studio recordings were captured on wax or metal discs—media that had limited recording space. A discrete song or ‘side’ had to be less than three minutes--when presumably, in a typical juke-joint performance, one song or theme might have lasted much longer. The performances that found their way onto commercial recordings and into folklore collections were also delimited by factors other than technology: the lack of access some blues performers might have had to talent scouts and record agents, the aesthetic determinations of record agents and folklorists, and literally hundreds of other factors that might have resulted in one performer finding his way onto record while another did not (Oliver, 26).

The fact is that we know very little about the early bluesmen of the first generation, the men who first sang the blues songs: “the identity of their creators and their point of origin are lost in the obscurity of the past. Their geographical distribution is usually unclear. They were collected belatedly, frequently by men and women who had only a rudimentary knowledge of their culture from which they sprang, and little scruple about altering or suppressing them (Levine, 120).”

Although the only real documentation we have of early blues performance is by way of these commercial recordings and folklore collections, there exists a perception in the literature of the blues that these early recordings are somehow not representative of

authentic blues performance, which in the writing of the first blues historians is characterized as a particular kind of community-based folk expression, lying behind and somewhat to the side of the surviving corpus of recorded blues. And clearly, a lot of the earliest blues recordings, beginning with the very first record made by an African American woman in 1920, represent a particular kind of blues, more professional, more accessible to a wider audience than most of the music that blues historians have privileged as “authentic blues.” Historians call these earliest recorded blues sung by women “Classic Blues” or “Vaudeville Blues,” and the inference is that these blues were a commercialized aberration; only distantly related to the community-based folk music that is the ‘real’ blues. Yet blues historians are forced to admit “the gramophone record still remains the basis for any discussion on the subject, for it is the only means by which those interested can consider the merits of an identical example of the blues (Oliver, 20).”

That the “primary texts” of the blues, the recordings that survive today, constitute a system of representation that is deeply encoded is self-evident. The simple task of transcribing the lyrics from these recordings can be a daunting one, even for scholars who are familiar with the tradition. Many of these recordings are of degraded aural quality, the diction of the singers is unclear and unfamiliar to modern ears, loaded with idiosyncratic localized expression, technical terms related to forgotten farming practices, local custom, etc. Foley writes of the importance of “immanence” in oral tradition, the “taken-for-granted familiarity with plot, characters, etc., that allow an audience to make sense of a performance (Foley, *Singer*, 95).” Likewise, literary critics have noted this deeply encoded quality in other forms of African American vernacular expression (Gates, *Signifyin(g)*), (Baker, *Blues*). Thus writing about the blues becomes a secondary system

of representation that produces meaning in the first. This secondary system functions as myth. Blues critics have both created and relied on this secondary system of representation, this blues myth, to derive meaning from the blues. This myth of the blues consists of everything that has been said or written about the blues, including histories, documentaries, biographies, ethnographies, and scholarship. Some of this blues writing has taken on a mythic quality (as myth is defined by Roland Barthes), and some has quite literally taken the form of myth, as in the cultural myth of the crossroads wherein the blues singer receives his talent in return for his mortal soul at midnight at the crossroads. This rather persistent myth has its origins in European folklore (it was rumored about the violinist Paganini) and attached itself to both Tommy Johnson (as recently as in the film “Oh Brother, Where Art Thou”) and Robert Johnson (in the film “Crossroads”).

The meaning of the blues in American literature was framed by the high culture/low culture debates of the Harlem Renaissance, and again by the folklore explosion of the 1960’s in which the blues were re-invented as folk music--and as a source for subsequent forms of American music. The blues, one of a series of commercially important fads created by economic forces (the need to sell gramophones) came to occupy a privileged space of origin, authenticity, artlessness, and essence. The literature of the blues is everything that has been said about the blues, its definition, origin, and theories of development.

The Myth of Origin

If the genealogist listens to history, he finds there is something ‘altogether different’ behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms.

–Michel Foucault (Foucault, *Nietzsche*, 78)

People write of the Delta Blues as if it were an autochthonous development, born of the soil of the Mississippi Delta. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that the Delta created a demand for blues more than it created a supply. The Delta of the 1900's was an immense factory farm that drew the blues to itself the way the turpentine camps of East Texas and the tobacco warehouses of Carolina drew the blues, the way that any area with a concentration of African American workers with disposable income would draw itinerant artists and entertainers.

When Mamie Smith stood in front of an acoustical horn (the microphone had not yet been invented) at the studios of Okeh Records in 1920 to make the first recording ever made by a black woman, people had been playing and dancing to blues for some twenty years or more. The only reason Mamie got a chance to record on that day was because the white artist Sophie Tucker couldn't make it to the session, and Perry Bradford, a black songwriter, saw a chance to record Mamie singing his composition. Bradford was convinced that a black singer could have a positive impact on a blues record's popularity. The musicians were in the studio, as was Mamie, and as Bradford pointed out, otherwise the studio time would have gone to waste. The (white) producer gave the go-ahead to record the side. The resulting song was marginally successful, enough to justify a second session, and it was the record that Mamie cut at her second session at Okeh, "Crazy Blues," that changed the music business overnight, making blues the "killer ap" software for the gramophone of the 1920's. Suddenly, everyone in the African American community had to own a phonograph, a development that was not foreseen by the manufacturers, who had neglected to market the new technology to Negroes. A blues craze followed, in which almost any black woman named Smith could

make a record. It would be more than seven years before a *man* would make a commercial blues record (Blind Lemon Jefferson in 1927).

Even before blues appeared on record, blues in performance was bifurcated along the lines of commercial appeal into two camps--1) the commercial, vaudeville-based blues of the female blues singers, who were usually dressed in outlandish costumes and backed by large professional jazz bands, and 2) the male singers who performed alone or in small groups, accompanied most often by a single guitar. The Classic Blues women were national celebrities, and women like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith were household names. The male singers were well known regionally, but they worked in venues like lumber camps, juke joints, barbecues, and medicine shows, while the blues women worked theaters and tent shows.

If you stipulate that these unheard, unrecorded blues performances--i.e. the ones by men before "Crazy Blues" and after--constitute some kind of idealized authentic reality (a highly suspect notion) and then posit that the corpus of recorded blues is a secondary representation of blues performance, you could then attempt to measure the "distortion" that exists between the reality (actual blues performance) and the representation (blues recordings), and in fact, this is what most blues historians have attempted to do. It is equally clear that these blues historians have concluded that authenticity is a function of gender (male), locus (rural), and commercial bias (anti). The most cursory investigation of blues lyrics from records of the period demonstrates that the records of the Classic Blues singers had as least as much influence on the male singers as the legendary male singers had on the females--yet the assumption of most blues historians is that the Classic blues were a derivative re-working of the blues *man*'s art. In any case, the demand for

female blues singers begins to disappear as suddenly as it had started in about 1930, until by the middle of the Thirties all but the best known of the Classic Blues singers had taken up new occupations. Only Bessie Smith remained a popular draw. From 1927 on, the men began to come into their own, largely because, as some critics have suggested, the public began to develop a taste for blues of the more ‘down-home’ variety, rejecting the Classic Blues as slick and commercial. It is true that these early blues recordings are at best only an approximate representation of what actual live performances in front of an audience might have been like. The records certainly represented the more commercial strain of that music collectively called the blues, and in the oppositional hierarchy of “community-based” versus “commercial,” blues historians have typically privileged the community-based side of the equation. The party line of the blues historian is that the Classic Blues were slick commercial imitations/exploitations of a pre-existing folk music. One could just as easily posit that the blues derived from commercial genres like cakewalk and ragtime, exploded into national consciousness with the advent of mechanical reproduction technology, and became subsequently imitated by unschooled semi-professional musicians.

The primal myth of community-based performance is best exemplified by a story that first appears in W.C. Handy’s autobiography, *The Father of the Blues*. Handy was a Black musician and bandleader, a literate composer of the decidedly commercial sort. He is credited with the first blues compositions to be published in sheet music form. One day while waiting for a train in a small station in Tutwiler, Mississippi, Handy encountered a local musician playing guitar and singing for small change. Handy noted that the guitarist was using a knife blade as a slide, making a particularly mournful sound on his guitar.

Handy cited this chance meeting with an unknown musician in 1905 as the inspiration for his blues compositions “Yellow Dog Blues” and “St. Louis Blues.” These W.C. Handy compositions are not really structured like a typical blues--they are really only ragtime pieces with a twist. Their structures are complex, more like show tunes than blues songs, with theatrical codas, intros and “middle eights (Handy, *Father*, 17).”

Virtually every history of the Blues mentions this particular story, and it serves as the template for the many myths of origin surrounding the blues. The meaning of this story, or at least the meaning that resonated with most writers on the blues, is that the blues began as a non-commercial, community-based, anonymous folk art, uncorrupted (until Handy happened along) by the music business, copyrights, or greedy promoters. Perhaps it was an accident that blues came along at a time (ca. 1900) that marked the age of mechanical reproduction of music. But this myth of origin of the blues, so central to the literature of the blues, strikes me as a perfect illustration of Foucault’s views on Nietzsche’s critique of the search for origins—what Nietzsche referred to as *ursprung* in *The Genealogy of Morals*.

History also teaches how to laugh at the solemnities of the origin. The lofty origin is no more than a ‘metaphysical extension which (sic) arises from the belief that things are most precious and essential at the moment of their birth.’ We tend to think that this is the moment of their greatest perfection, when they emerged dazzling from the hands of a creator or in the shadowless light of a first morning. The origin always precedes the Fall. It comes before the body, before the world and time; it is associated with the gods, and its story is always sung as a theogony. But historical beginnings are lowly; not in the sense of modest or discrete like the steps of a dove, but derisive and ironic, capable of undoing every infatuation (Foucault, *Nietzsche*, 79.)

If the blues did spring from humble folkloric beginnings, after 1920 it had become a vital commercial force of a power that is difficult for the modern reader to grasp. The word “fad” is applicable, but not sufficient to describe the initial blues craze that swept

the U.S. in the 1920's. In that decade, the blues was indisputably female. At least in terms of recording it was an exclusively female art. Literally thousands of recordings were made, most with the word "blues" featured prominently in the title, by female blues singers. Gramophone manufacturers underestimated the public's pent-up demand for the early phonographs, but once they geared up their production to meet the demand, dealers complained that the unavailability of new "software" was a drag on sales. Customers were reluctant to buy the players as long as the supply of records was so limited. Players and recordings were at first sold in furniture stores, and furniture store owners--like H. P. Speirs of Jackson, Mississippi--were pressured by the record companies to find southern performers who could duplicate the success of Mamie Smith and "Crazy Blues," a record that could be heard blaring from every cabin in the colored section of Jackson.

The major record companies of the day started "race record" divisions because they thought their regular classical and popular music recording labels would suffer from association with Negro music. But the record companies were astounded by the sales figures from the race records that were intended to appeal to Black buyers. They had assumed that the small disposable incomes of such poor people, most of whom were unable to afford the expensive machines, would limit sales of the records, even though they were priced at a loss (about 75 cents) in an effort to sell more players. The manufacturers could only conclude that either they had underestimated the demand in the black community for recorded music by Black artists or white people were buying race records in the industry's first "crossover."

CHAPTER 4 BLUES AND LITERATURE

The rise of Cultural Studies in the English Departments of universities world-wide has opened up the possibility of a fresh approach to the blues, one that would allow for research into the blues performances and practices of the early Twentieth Century that is not dependent on the “literary source” approach that has characterized most academic writing on the blues. While work in Cultural Studies since the 1950’s has provided a vocabulary and a theoretical framework for the study of blues performances, the field has produced very little in actual writing about the blues. Although a review of the important theorists in oral theory, post-structuralism, and Cultural Studies turns up no explicit critique or approach to the blues, or even mention of the blues, these fields have provided a basic vocabulary and a theoretical framework that is appropriate to a study of the blues.

Though relatively few literary critics (Baker, Gates, Tracy) have written about the blues per se, non-literary scholars have produced some 40,000 published books and articles on the blues. Many of these fall into the category of scholarly work in a variety of fields: anthropology, sociology, ethnomusicology, and folklore. Although it seems to me that the blues are under-represented in the research of American folklorists, Howard Odum and John and Alan Lomax have done the most important work in documenting the early blues. The British writer Paul Oliver has written some of the best historical work on the blues. Samuel Charters and Robert Palmer have written extensively and beautifully on the subject. Among the many less scholarly texts on the blues are hundreds of so-called histories of the blues, travel books, biographies, and memoirs. Some of the most

cogent and fastidiously researched writing on the blues to date has come from record collectors and enthusiasts who frequently surpass the scholars in their knowledge and feel for the subject matter.

The literature that surrounds the blues and constitutes a secondary form of representation, the various histories of the blues, the biographies and mostly ghost-written autobiographies of bluesmen, the blues travelogues, the displays in blues museums, the liner notes on reissued albums, the various film documentaries, scholarly analyses of blues lyrics and musical forms, the conclusions of the ethnomusicologists, the articles in blues magazines, the work of folklorists, the memoirs of record collectors and concert promoters, even the work of certain literary critics, constitute a text, a literature of the blues. This literature of the blues has always depended on a number of assumptions that deserve to be challenged. Among them are the notions that the blues are primitive, chthonic, primal, and somehow tied to the land where they first appeared. Another common assumption has been that the origins of the blues can be determined, and that they somehow directly relate to African cultural practices. This notion of African “retentions” in the blues has been particularly attractive to blues theorists. These assumptions, while reflecting a white liberal bias towards the validity of black expression, have their roots in a more insidious, more deeply rooted essentialist vision that is based on white supremacist ideology.

The body of writing *about* the blues constitutes a “literature of the blues” or secondary system of representation that transforms the blues (which is already a “sign”) into signification. A myth of the blues has developed from this vast literature about the blues—a myth that functions as a kind of “second-order semiological system.” In the

field of Cultural Studies, a lot of early work focused on the “distortion” that exists between reality and its representation in the media, but recent theory suggests that a “constitutive” approach to media is more useful by far. Instead of the classical approach, which posits some degree of distortion between an event, its representation, and the second order representation or myth (in this case blues performance, blues recordings, and writing about the blues), it might be more useful to think about blues recordings and blues writing as constitutive representations that do more than passively reflect on the music that is blues (Hall, 12). In a constitutive model of culture, representation is a more significant practice than it is in a classical or reflexive model in that it creates or constitutes reality instead of merely reflecting on it. This body of blues literature has had a profound effect on the definition of blues and the canonical formation of what has come to be considered “authentic” blues.

If we return for a moment to the notion that authentic blues performance underlie recorded blues, we see that an analysis of media representations of the blues as a constitutive system would involve at least three levels of representation: 1) authentic, community-based blues performance, largely unrecorded and lost in the ozone 2) surviving artifacts of recording media 3) everything that has been written about the blues. To make this a constitutive model would require the assumption that the first level of representation, blues performance, is affected by the second and third, and most scholars would agree that this is so. There is ample evidence that suggests that community-based blues performances were significantly influenced by the phonograph record, that many blues singers learned songs from records and juke boxes and recycled them into their own performances. Folklorists, who want to believe in the primacy of direct transmission, will

admit that direct transmission begins to be disrupted and is eventually replaced by new media in the age of mechanical reproduction--in this case, the phonograph record. Radio was not a factor until after 1930. Likewise, writing about the blues had a profound effect on the way that the blues were recorded and collected.

Blues and Literary Criticism

The usual approach in blues scholarship is to show that “the blues” are an important source of inspiration for the literate poets and novelists of the Harlem Renaissance. My research takes the opposite approach; instead of studying the effect the blues had on written texts, I am more interested in studying the various ways that ‘writing’ about the blues has altered not just our perceptions of them, transforming what began as a wildly successful commercial fad of the 1920’s into folklore, but the way in which representations of the blues have shaped the blues performances themselves in a constitutive manner. This transformation of the blues from commercial art to vernacular folk art begins with the work of the artists and critics of the Harlem Renaissance, during which time the blues came to represent the vital primitivity of “low” culture, and continues through the folk revival of the 1960’s, when blues collectors and critics “elevated” the blues to the privileged status of orally transmitted folklore. Recently, with the advent of Cultural Studies in English departments, debates about what constitutes Black Cultural Studies have raised the possibility of studying blues as cultural production, a kind of orature that is lifted to equal status with “literature.” The blues critic is no longer limited to writing about blues in the work of Jean Toomer or Langston Hughes, but he or she can now reflect on Son House or Robert Johnson as if their cultural productions were texts to be read and interpreted. In other words, the blues singers of the first half of the 20th century can now be “lifted” from the sinkhole of folklore and

vernacular expression they were assigned to by literary critics, and treated as primary sources worthy of critical study in their own right. Angela Davis's study of three female blues singers is one of too few examples of this approach by academic writers. (Davis, *Blues Legacies*)

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. is the scholar most often identified with the formulation of a blues theory developed as a post-modern approach to black literary criticism. Gates's theory of the Signifyin(g) Monkey posits that the blues are a form of highly codified speech, a language that could be understood by certain segments of the black community while remaining impenetrable to whites. Gates's theory, to simplify it greatly, is that all African American texts have this kind of codification, this double voice that mirrors the vernacular speech of the Negro subject, a direct result of the dual consciousness so necessary to the survival of the black underclass. This 'doubling' is necessary because the black subject must always be conscious of how his speech and action would appear to any white man within earshot, as well as the usual concerns of his own identity. The device Gates uses to express this in metaphoric terms is the signifying monkey of African folklore, a trickster figure that Gates sees as central to meaning in African American texts. By using this figure, Gates presupposes a major role for retentions of African elements in American blues without offering any real folkloric evidence that they exist (Gates, *Signifyin(g)*, ii).

Houston Baker is another prominent critic who uses the blues as a foundation for post-modern criticism of African American texts. Baker's operative theory is based on his definition of *vernacular*, which he defines as "of the master's plantation." Like Gates, Baker sees that meaning in the blues is a coded message, deliberately obscured from the

white ruling class. And like Gates, he goes on to extrapolate his theory of blues as vernacular to include other more literate African American texts. Both Gates and Baker see the primary importance of their work to be the development of a modern theory in which their insights into blues meaning can be applied to literate texts (Baker, 3).

Stephen C. Tracy is a white critic who is devoted to the study of blues on its own merits. He has published what is by far the best anthology of critical writing on the blues, *Write Me a Few of Your Lines*, a volume that brings together some of the most important critical work on the blues. A lot of Tracy's own work has taken the classical approach to blues, and has concentrated on the influence of blues as a source for the poet Langston Hughes. But Tracy's work on Hughes is so intensive in its approach to the meaning of the blues songs themselves, one gets the impression that Tracy considers the blues lyrics themselves to be equal if not superior to the literate poems so influenced by them, and that Tracy is concentrating on Hughes simply because Hughes is a canonized writer, and a fitting subject for scholarship at a time when blues singers like Robert Johnson or Charley Patton may not have been.

The work of the oral theorists (notably Parry, Lord, and Ong), though none of them ever wrote specifically about the blues, offers similar insights to those of the Black Theorists like Gates and Baker. Parry and Lord developed a theory of how meaning is generated in orally composed and performed Epic Poetry that depends on notions of shared life experiences, actual presence in a ritual space, shared narrative tradition, paralinguistic clues, etc. These same factors operate in blues performance just as they do in the oral narrative poetry of the Greeks or Britons. (Parry, *Singer*) Likewise, Walter Ong's theories of oral formulation, though they have come under a lot of critical fire in

recent years, can be quite useful in understanding how it might be possible for a bard (or blues singer) to keep a pre-literate audience spellbound for hours without benefit of memorization (which implies a written text) and the role played by improvisation and tradition in the production of oral performances. (Ong, *Oral*)

The blues, once written about as sources of material and inspiration for the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, have now emerged as a vernacular American art form in their own right. This will undoubtedly lead to a whole new set of critical problems, but up until recently, the problem that has beset folklorists and historians, even those with the best intentions, has been a kind of ghettoization of the blues caused by several factors: the internalized white supremacist assumptions of both the blues writers and the bluesmen themselves; the natural prejudice of scholars (men and women who read and write for a living) to value literacy; the concomitant prejudice against “illiteracy,” “pre-literacy,” or “vernacular,” all terms that privilege literacy over orality; the curious slowness with which the literature of the blues has come to embrace a view of the blues informed by either post-structuralism or Cultural Studies.

I believe that a historicization of the figure of the bluesman in the period 1900-1937, stripped of the usual conceits of the folklore myth, will reveal that the legendary bluesmen are not the amateur folk savants they have been made out to be by folklorists and ethnomusicologists, but thoroughly modern artists working in a commercial genre. Their music is in no way primitive. The interplay of guitar and voice that characterizes their music is quite sophisticated rhythmically and unique in American music. The music they played was not ‘limited’ harmonically or absent of polyphony as has often been suggested, nor was blues the only genre in which they were capable of performing.

Almost all bluesmen were capable of playing the popular music of their day and did so when called upon. Likewise, a study of the economic status of bluesmen in their own communities shows that these men were commercially valued and well-compensated—i.e. they earned more money than most members of their audience and most male workers in their communities.

The Harlem Renaissance

The most basic definition of blues places them within that category of orally transmitted texts that have found their way into literary creations. Texts that are taught in “Poetry of the Blues” courses in schools around the world fit neatly into the canon of those texts that owe their existence to a pre-existing orature—a kind of “writing” that existed before the actual technology of writing was developed. This definition places transcriptions of blues lyrics (and “borrowings” of blues lyrics as they appear in the work of literate writers) in the company of other, more canonical works that are understood to be more or less transcriptions of vernacular or oral productions—like *Beowulf* or *The Odyssey*, for instance, and other texts that are understood to be based on orally transmitted orature—like Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, *The Oresteia*, Plato’s Dialogues, Icelandic sagas, the Uncle Remus stories, etc.

The discourse of American literary criticism allows for this tendency (literate writers borrowing from the vernacular) in twentieth-century American verse and fiction. Early in the twentieth century, poets and novelists began to be influenced or inspired by blues and jazz, generally defined as African American vernacular arts. The Blues, according to this form of critical discourse, were a major influence on American writers like Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, and other poets and novelists associated with what has come to be known as the Harlem

Renaissance. Langston Hughes, to name one poet in particular, included fragments of blues lyrics in his poems. Hughes, Sterling Brown and others (even a few outside the Harlem Renaissance, like Allen Ginsberg) used the rhythms and cadences that they heard in the blues in composing their own original poetry. Jean Toomer's poem/novel *Cane* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are often referred to as 'blues novels' because their characters and subject matter reflect on the blues life. The 'blues life' is understood to mean the activities of lower class Blacks, their work, their recreation and social interactions.

The great artistic struggle of the Harlem Renaissance was fought over this central question: Who and what should the Negro artist write about? One side held that it was the responsibility of black artists to portray African American life in the best possible light. These advocates of uplift fiction included many of those African Americans who had achieved something like middle class status—intellectuals like Alain Locke and W.E.B. Dubois. To these advocates of uplift fiction the only proper subject matter for black artists was the doings of the black bourgeoisie, the so-called "Talented Tenth." Their idea was to present the Negro race in the best possible light in order to promote racial uplift. Intellectuals on the other side of this debate held that the only honest black art comes from portraying the lower classes in all their colorful squalor. Many white intellectuals and patrons took this position, and these patrons encouraged those writers who shared their views. One such patron, Mrs. Charles Osgood Mason, helped both Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. Mrs. Mason felt that American art desperately needed an injection of the kind of 'primitivity' that Negro artists were uniquely positioned to provide. This raw, primitive material was needed to counteract the "staleness" of

American art--art that in all its forms relied too heavily on shopworn European models. This view was common among the new generation of Black writers who emerged at the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance, and is evident in the work of writers like Richard Wright and Jean Toomer.

Now that the dust has settled and sixty or seventy years have gone by, the second of these positions (celebration of the primitive) has proclaimed a lopsided victory. Langston Hughes's poetry that evokes the vernacular arts has entered the canon along with Zora Neale Hurston's novel and Jean Toomer's poetry, while hundreds of novels that attempted to be "uplift fiction" have been pulped and forgotten, consigned to the scrap-heap of outmoded literary fashion. I'm not sure what lesson can be learned from this—that the arts can only re-enforce the status quo, even while appearing to be "subversive?"—-that progressive social movements make for perishable, preachy cultural productions?

Raymond Williams in *Keywords* recognizes "culture" as pivotal among controversial words. Williams defines the related word "folk culture" by tracing it to its roots in German Romanticism, when a folk culture emerged that offered an "alternative idea of human development: alternative, that is to the ideas now centred (sic) on 'civilization' and 'progress'." Williams' description of the complications of the folk culture movement in Germany seems perfectly adequate to explain the folk culture revival of the 1960's in America.

This application was exceptionally complicated. It was used to emphasize national and traditional cultures, including the new concept of folk culture. It was made to attack what was seen as the 'mechanical' character of the new civilization then emerging: both for its abstract rationalism and for the 'inhumanity' of current industrial development. Politically, as so often in this period (German Romantic), it veered between radicalism and reaction and very often, in the confusion of major social change, fused elements of both (Williams, 79).

In Eldridge Cleaver's statement about some of the negative aspects of folklore, the essay "As Nappy as We Wanna Be," he takes the position that African Americans should root out of their culture those elements of folklore that are detrimental to the cause of race pride. This was the Black Nationalist view of denigrating folklore, that it should be purged or rewritten. But that is easier said than done--folklore is hard to police. If there was once a time when such a stance made sense, it has long since passed. This question was the subject of debate much earlier than the 1960's when Cleaver's essay appeared. The central debate of the Harlem Renaissance was the use or non-use of folk elements in African American literature. Writers like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston were for it. The forgotten writers of uplift fiction, who devoted themselves to chronicling the lives of the upper class black bourgeoisie, were against it, largely for the same reasons that Cleaver was against it. The problem with this "rooting out" of folklore as an enterprise is that it is extremely difficult to either self-consciously create new folklore or self-consciously destroy old folklore. Cleaver brings into the debate an item of folklore that probably more than any other epitomizes folklore at its least supportive of race pride, the toast: "If you white all right, if you brown stick around..." It is one thing, Alan Dundes says "to resent such rhymes, it is quite another matter to rescind oral tradition (Dundes, 9)."

Why not take another look at the pioneers of that thing called the blues, accept them for what they are, even their internalized white supremacist beliefs and prejudices about skin color--without accepting the white supremacist interpretation of what they were doing? Why accept characterizations of early bluesmen as illiterate primitives? Why not read against the grain of the literature of the blues- a literature written mostly by

white men—to see what can be discovered about the bluesman and his place in African American culture? If their personal lives prove to have been less than exemplary, why then so be it. It can do them little harm now. If they are found to be a source of shame or non-supportive of race pride, then we can then proceed to try and forget them—but not until we are sure we understand them and know what made them tick.

If you could wave a magic wand and do away with all African American folklore it might be a good thing for racial pride, but it's not possible to do that. You can't censor folklore, any more than you can self-consciously create it or suppress it or silence it. And blues lyrics are like folklore in that they are not the intellectual property of an individual creative mind. They do not conform to Tin Pan Alley rules of songwriting, they are not written in a vacuum, or in an office at the Brill Building. The lyrics may resemble African American vernacular, and the lives of the bluesmen is African American folklore, but the blues as musical form is more than folklore. It is commercial art. It is Music that you can use in your daily life, like the water fetching songs of the Sahara. But it is not African music. It sounds a whole lot more like either ragtime, minstrel songs, hymns, spirituals or ballads than any African music ever recorded.

What if we regarded the bluesman as someone fulfilling an important commercial function in his community, instead of the spiritual Africanesque function of a griot or shaman? Why is it we can't see that bluesmen were well-dressed, relatively affluent performers--modern artists, not folklore informants. Let's put an end to the debates raging in the blues community about what came from Africa and what was derived from European ballad sources and what might be Native American about the blues. Blues musicians, like most musicians, steal whatever they like from wherever they find it. One

thing that research can decide, is that there are many instances wherein the blues canon can be seen to have been infected by popular music influences.

There are two things I have been told by the teachers who have guided my research, and I have found these things to be true myself. One is that all music is folk music, and the other is that folklore tells more about the people who collect it than it does about the people who use it. The statement “All music is folk music. I never heard of a mule that could sing” is attributed to Louis Armstrong. Armstrong’s remark makes fun of both the question and the questioner who poses the question “What is folk music?” or in this case “Is your music folk music?” But it goes farther than that. His signification suggests an encoded message. The message is one that anthropologists discovered twenty years ago. Any attempt to divide the world’s music into primitive and sophisticated, commercial and folk, good and bad is a useless exercise that will only result in all parties finding exactly what they expect to find. Armstrong implies what we now know to be true about ethnographic investigation, that there is no such thing as race, primitivity, or whiteness. The fact remains that many light skinned people feel superior to darker skinned people. Everywhere on the globe people play music and most places have been colonized at some time in the past. There is a dominant culture and a sub-culture. Music arises from both. The vibrancy of American music, I believe, is due to the music that arises from various sub-cultures. For Armstrong to remind everyone that we are all folk is one of those anthropological moments. Because in the minds of many, folklore still means what it meant in 1900, a study of the quaint cultural practices of isolated groups in Western Europe. When folklore scholarship was subsequently turned on the rest of the world, it like anthropology, began to be used as a force for subduing the colonized. Studying

primitive man was a way of controlling modern non-European man by making the cultural practices of Africans a kind of folklore--the National Geographic-ization of African culture. Prick a folklorist and find a racist. Even anthropologists, hurt by the stain of their science's beginnings as a means of imperial control, admit that these issues are unavoidable when a white ethnographer and a black informant come face to face.

Postcolonial revisions of early modern history have become the vogue in literary studies. It seems almost inevitable that someone would effect a postcolonial revision of the history of the blues, and that is a fair assessment of what this text is trying to accomplish. That the African Americans of the late 1800's were colonized bodies, though not the indigenous victims of a colonizing power, can hardly be questioned. That those African Americans were colonial subjects once having the social status of slaves, recently set free and of uncertain status, seems clear, even though their colonial subjectivity was not of the usual kind. They were not indigenous peoples colonized by a foreign power, but a captured people forced to endure an ocean crossing, and subsequently compelled to work as slaves in a new world. But many of the same circumstances that we think of as typical colonial subjectivity characterized the situation of the American Negro.

In the Twentieth Century, when the story of the blues came to be written, the blues took on a load of extra philosophical baggage: somehow, the blues became charged with the responsibility of becoming an antidote to the overweening eurocentricity of American culture. Patrons of the arts who were active at the time of the Harlem Renaissance felt that the contributions of African Americans to the arts would serve to counter the stale wind of European imitation, would inject a dose of much-needed primitive vitality into literature and music.

In the 1920's the blues became the center of a debate about the difference between high and low culture, highbrow and lowbrow entertainments. Especially within the cultural framework of the HR, there were two schools of thought about the inclusion of low culture in African American literature. One school, most famously supported by Mrs. Charles Osgood Mason, held that a dose of African primitivity was just the thing to bring American art out of the doldrums. The other school of thought held that Negroes should be portrayed in the best possible light--the so-called "uplift" argument. Modernity in general was dealing with the erosion of certain assumptions about high vs. low culture. The very existence of terms like middlebrow, highbrow, and lowbrow are proof that people were wont to make such distinctions, distinctions that have softened or blurred since then.

The characterization of cultural productions as highbrow or lowbrow stems from the Nineteenth Century's fascination with Phrenology, a science that sought to make connections between the shape of peoples' heads and their intellectual capacity. At the same time, a public acceptance of Darwin led to a notion that some people were more highly evolved than others. The sloping forehead of the Cro-Magnon man was seen as evidence of his small cranial capacity. The tall, vertical forehead of the Northern European was seen as a mark of intelligence. The blues was associated with lowbrow culture, and those who championed its validity as a source for the artists and poets of the Harlem Renaissance were making an argument that was strikingly modern: great art can come from the meanest of circumstances.

I would prefer to rewrite the history of the blues in Foucauldian terms without mentioning Foucault, and without using the jargon of postcoloniality. I would leave out

his name altogether if I were writing for a more general audience. But Foucault's work on the Classical Age changed the way historians see the world. It is impossible today to think of history as a process of finding the objective truth (whatever that is) or retelling events (whatever they are). Historians today are more likely to write about what constitutes an event. Who gets to say what the truth is. How power is transferred, not in a gradual way, but in a series of disruptions. And perhaps most importantly, today's historians are less likely to decide who was good and who was evil, and more likely to concentrate on how power shifts from one group to another. Not because they hold no "values," but because "values" get in the way of the job they do, the same way that preconceptions get in the way of a good experiment.

Clearly Foucault never intended for his work on madness and imprisonment in the Classical Period to be used as a way to understand blues history. Certainly Foucault himself never gave much thought to blues history and there's no indication that he even knew what "the blues" was. But something about Foucault's affirmation of Nietzsche's (Foucault, *Nietzsche*) cynicism about how history is made, how discourses are governed, kept nagging at me as I read more deeply into blues literature. Who has the power to write the history of the blues? Who gets to say that it's folk music and not pop music or commercial production? Who gets to decide what performances are collected? What records and artists are important?

Blues Theory

What is blues theory? There are a number of "theories" that are based on the blues. There is a form of blues theory advanced by black intellectuals like Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston Baker that approaches a Black Literary Theory or Black Theory. They all begin, philosophically at least, with Franz Fanon's idea that there are a lot of white

people who consider themselves superior to darker skinned people. And then there's the blues, the musical reaction to that sad and funny fact. Baker, with his vernacular theory, and Gates with his "signifyin'" insights, have attempted to bring African American Literary Studies into the realm of post-modern theory associated with Barthes, Derrida, de Man. While the blues, and by that I mean the actual blues performances and recordings from a given era, are part of an important vernacular tradition, they are considered important mostly insofar as they have influenced or inspired more literate (written) texts, most often those texts associated with the Harlem Renaissance, a literary period that is a catch-all for everything written by blacks from 1920 to 1937. A certain bias towards literacy is forgiven in college professors, surely, but it always struck me as odd that lines appropriated from traditional blues into a poem by Sterling Brown or Langston Hughes were seen as legitimate parts of a canonical text, while the blues songs themselves were relegated to the category of "source" or "folk" material. I always felt that Ma Rainey was at least as good a poet as Sterling Brown. I began to regard even seminal figures like Charley Patton and especially Robert Johnson as more like Homeric figures in the sense that they didn't really write the stuff they were performing, they just happened along at a time when a new technology made recording possible. In the case of Homer, the technology was writing. In the case of Robert Johnson, it was sound recording.

Gates' theory is that the blues is a kind of code by which black people impart meaning from one to another. Not like a Morse Code, for which efficiency and universality are the goals, but like a spy code or enigma machine that seeks to transmit information while concealing it from unauthorized persons, in this case, white people, all

of whom represent the slave master. An example of this would be the reinterpretation of the popular song “Bye-Bye Blackbird,” especially when played slowly and sadly, that suggests the flight north of runaway slaves, and the way their friends and family might have felt to see them go. Nor is this reinterpretation an isolated phenomenon. As Garon points out, the meaning of a phrase like “I slipped across Mississippi clean” has an entirely different meaning when sung by a black man of a certain age than it does when sung by a young white man with no knowledge of Jim Crow excesses in certain parts of the Deep South. It would have no meaning if sung by the young white man just described. It seems to have a different meaning when sung by Elvis Presley than when sung by Chuck Berry, who used the line in “Promised Land (Garon, *White, I*).”

CHAPTER 5
THE BLUES AND CULTURAL STUDIES

As Stuart Hall writes in his introduction to *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, “High culture versus popular culture was, for many years, the classic way of framing the debate about culture (Hall, 24).” Hall reminds us that the traditional definition of culture was “The best that has been thought and said in a society.” A new definition is what Hall calls the “anthropological” definition of culture or “whatever is distinctive about the way of life of a people or group.” This latter definition takes into account the popular culture or mass culture of a people, high art as well as low. Hall’s work has made it clear that representation can no longer be viewed as purely mimetic or representational, that it is untrue to its name in either of the conventional meanings of representation 1) taking the place of or standing in for someone who can not be present 2) re-presenting that which has previously been presented. While Hall does not go so far as to deny the pre-existence of material reality (that would verge on the absurd), he does insist that no “meaning” can exist outside of discourse. So cultural representations, while they cannot create material objects like stones or balls, are at least partially responsible for the creation of meaning in a cultural context. One example that is often used by Hall is that of the football (soccer ball). A ball can exist and even be kicked outside of culture but it can have no meaning. A “football” can only exist within a culture and can only have meaning in a context of the rules of a game that is highly codified---when you can touch it with your hands and when you cannot, when it is out of bounds, what constitutes a “goal,” etc.

The critical consensus on the issues of the Harlem Renaissance reflects this outcome of the tension between high art and low art that existed among Black artists and intellectuals, while the underlying question of whether or not African Americans should assimilate economically and politically into the white mainstream has remained a volatile issue. What one takes away from critical writing on the Harlem Renaissance is that American culture would be a pale imitation of European and British culture without the “spice” or “spark” or “primitivity” of African American contributions. Blues and Jazz are often cited as the two truly American art forms. This idea of “American-ness” defined as the absorption of African American vernacular forms into mainstream culture has its parallels in European “Modernity” being defined as the return of the primitive. (Picasso’s *Demaiselles d’Avignon*) It’s interesting to note that African Americans in the 1920’s had a somewhat different view. James Weldon Johnson, writing in the introduction to his highly influential *Anthology of Negro Poetry*, identified the Cakewalk, Ragtime, and Tap Dancing as the three important American art forms developed by African Americans (Johnson, *Anthology*, 5). In the intervening years, blues has been differentiated from jazz and other cultural forms by its re-invention as folklore. Whether this has had the effect of denigrating the blues or sanctifying them remains to be seen. But if we declare the blues to be folklore (as opposed to commercial productions), as folklore they have been given scant attention.

The 1950’s--Richard Waterman

The blues craze of the 1920’s died out with the Harlem Renaissance. It was as if the nation, for a decade fascinated with all things African American, lost interest gradually as the Depression years wore on. Folklorists like Odum had collected and written about blues throughout the 1920’s and even earlier, and Black intellectuals had argued about

the blues through the 1920's, and Black poets and novelists had borrowed from the blues during the Harlem Renaissance, but blues had not yet come into the sights of the blues historian, the sociologist, and the ethnomusicologist. The first important writing that can be said to be a "literature of the blues"--writing that self-consciously theorizes about the blues and its origins and meaning--comes after World War II.

The musicologist Richard Waterman pointed out quite early in the history of blues literature (1951) that the various musics of Western Europe and West African have more similarities than differences, and it is the very similarity of the music of Western Europe to the music of Africa that makes the hybrid music of the Americas possible in the first place. Waterman completely accepts the notion that formal music is fundamentally different from folk music, and excludes the academic music of the cities of Western Europe from his analysis, stating that such academic music has little to do with the folk process, that somehow the "complexity" of what we would call European "classical music, the music of the great conservatories, royal courts, etc. " puts academic music in another category from western European folk music (Waterman, *Write, 18*)."

Today it would be child's play to deconstruct the idea that the music of the "great conservatories" is in a wholly different category from other "folk" music. Waterman's willingness to make such distinctions aside, his research makes more sense than most of the less ethnomusicologically inclined writing of the early blues historians. Waterman notes that the musical scales employed by African and European music are similar--both musics make use of the diatonic scale, for instance. Many other musics, like Arabic or Chinese music, use different scale structures and microtonal divisions that would make hybridization with western musical styles unwieldy if not impossible. Waterman also

notices that African music, while it does seem to rely more on complex polyrhythms than polyphony, is not without polyphonic or polytonal complexity. Nor is African music devoid of melody and harmony as was once concluded by ethnomusicologists, many of whom came to that conclusion from studying field recordings that they had not collected themselves, a practice no longer followed by serious ethnomusicologists. In many cases, the recordings had been collected improperly or collected by anthropologists with no expertise in music. Waterman was the first to bring even a quasi-scientific analysis of blues music to the ethnographic literature. Waterman's research, like Herscovitz's sociological studies of the same period, laid the groundwork for intense debates about African American culture in the 1960's.

Answers to Waterman, and critiques of Waterman by Paul Oliver, Paul Garon, David Evans, and others have kept the debate alive over the years, culminating in an exchange of letters to the editor of *Living Blues Magazine* in 1985 that are reprinted in Tracy's anthology. This football of 'blues origins' has been kicked all over the Savannahs of Central, Eastern, and Western Africa, and concern the existence (or absence) of string band traditions in various areas, Griot and Shaman traditions, and the influx of Islamic tradition into Central Africa.

The Sixties Folk Revival

The blues enjoyed a second craze in the late 1950's and early 1960's thanks to the folk revival of that period. Americans showed a renewed interest in folk culture as American culture came to be valued as unique and separate from Western European culture. The literature of the blues really takes off in this period, and it is through the lens of the critics and historians of the blues revival that modern attitudes about the blues as a cultural production begin to be formed. It was a period in which blues historians sought

out retired artists and encouraged them to perform again at festivals, and record collectors scoured the countryside looking for the black gold of the phonograph records made by obscure artists before the war. Blues writers transformed speculation about the past into a new kind of folkloristics that was all about digging up and altering the past to suit their notions of the “primitivity” of the blues. They transformed the blues from a commercial genre into folklore.

When Langston Hughes used the word “blues” he was most likely referring to a kind of blues that is today denigrated as “Vaudeville Blues” or “Classic Blues,” the recorded blues of the women blues singers like Bessie Smith or even Ethel Waters. When jazz musicians use the word they are most likely referring to an instrumental form--a particular 12 bar pattern that is useful as a base of improvisation for musicians who haven't rehearsed together. For many of us who came of age in mid-century, the word “blues” evokes that group of older black musicians from the deep south that were “discovered” during the folk revival of the 1960's.

Most of the people who write about the blues are scornful of any definition that is overly inclusive--one that is too quick to embrace related forms like rock and roll or jazz. Many in the general public only know the blues from popular culture representations like that of the comedy team “The Blues Brothers,” the success of which has spawned an industry of blues clubs and blues bands. Still others think first of more recently active artists like B.B. King when you say the word “blues.” My use of the term, as reflected in the bibliography, is that body of guitar or piano accompanied vocal music that thrived from 1910 to 1937 and is sometimes called the Country Blues or Mississippi Delta Blues. I am aware that the term “the blues” means different things to different people, and there

are many other kinds of blues, but the blues played by the country bluesmen are the acknowledged wellspring of all blues, and an important influence on other American art forms as well.

Defining the blues as the music of Black Americans perpetuates essentialism and contributes to the racial tension surrounding the blues. But it can't be denied that the blues are by definition an African-American form, an activity in which white people can play no part. Thus there is an atmosphere of white paternalism that surrounds the blues. The modern view is that race is culturally or socially constructed, originally as a way to justify slavery in Christian societies, and is perpetuated as a way to create a permanent underclass. Race is a concept that has no basis in scientific observation--as opposed to 'species,' which does yield to the distinctions of science--i.e. organisms of different species are unable to procreate. There is virtually no way to accurately differentiate separate 'races' within the same species, or even to distinguish between black and white peoples, much less people of the colors in between. Race doesn't exist in a biological sense, since members of different 'races' can successfully breed fertile offspring. Yet the effects of racism can be seen almost everywhere in western society. Though well-meaning people everywhere claim to be color-blind or indifferent to matters of race, racial prejudice is still a problem in almost every part of the world, though there is hope the problem can be solved by way of reason.

In the literature of the blues, which usually takes the form of a white man writing about a black man's art, there is more than a taste of white supremacist paternalism. One illustration of this paternalism is the widespread stereotyping that led concert promoters to send Big Bill Broonzy onstage at Carnegie Hall wearing old worn coveralls. In 1937,

at the time of the historic Spirituals to Swing concert at Carnegie Hall (said to be the first presentation of American roots music on a New York stage), Broonzy had been appearing in Chicago night spots wearing flashy silk suits and fronting a five-piece band. Yet the stage manager at Carnegie Hall insisted that Broonzy wear coveralls and appear with only his guitar as accompaniment (Palmer, 36). That same attitude can be found in the eternal debates about African retentions in the blues, in the stories of Bessie Smith being refused a life-saving transfusion at a white hospital, in the myths of superstition that surround Robert Johnson. This paternalism masks a worship of old black folk practitioners and the guilt that white musicians have about exploiting them. This paternalism is entering the post-colonial stage, but it still makes itself felt in writing about the blues as “primitive.”

Blues and Black Cultural Studies

Richard Dyer theorizes that entertainment forms acquire “emotional signification” in relation to the “social-cultural situation in which they are produced (Dyer, 275).” Blues as practiced in the jukes and porches of the black community in the early part of the 20th Century functioned as improvisatory self-expression, similar to the function of jazz in the same community at about the same time. In the Medicine Show of the same era, blues were played with a jolly mindlessness in accord with minstrelsy’s image of the Negro. In Vaudeville, it was instrumental and vocal virtuosity that was prized, as part of Vaudeville’s celebration of the machine and the brilliant performer. There are residues of all these significations in modern media’s use of the blues song and the blues image.

The blues as they are used in the modern television commercial, whether evoked by classic recordings, modern compositions with ‘bluesy’ feel, or images that evoke the blues, is intended to be received by the consumer as representing a kind of authenticity,

populism, or uniquely American cultural treasure. Visual images of old black men playing acoustic or electric guitars, harmonicas or diddley-bows, images of weathered one-room shacks, cotton bolls, the flat fields of some Mississippi of the mind--all reflect a nostalgia for a rural life that never was, but a life nonetheless filled with barbecues and dirt-floor frolics, good-quality home-made liquor, and carefree hours filled with song and sexual libertinage. Blues music and blues images evoke 'the country', the real thing, the non-material values of the African American, the wisdom of African tradition. The reference is to a collective consciousness and sense of belonging in which the whole village raises the children, women are available for a song, and men are hard-working, uncomplicated, and given over to the pursuit of pleasure in the form of unrestricted travel, fried chicken, and non-marital sex.

Cultural historians have noted the process by which one generation's popular entertainment becomes the next generation's high art. They cite the numerous instances of popular writers who subsequently ascend to canonical status: Dickens, Shakespeare, etc. Patrick Brantlinger documents the history of popular culture, and points out that so-called 'popular entertainments' have always been seen as a sign of degeneracy, and he traces the strain of this idea back to antiquity. It seems that critics have always associated popular culture with a decline in values, a degeneracy of artistic expression. R. B. Kershner, in his study of popular literature and its relationship to serious literature (James Joyce), deconstructs the aesthetic barrier previously assumed to exist between popular and serious fiction (Kershner, Joyce, Bakhtin, *Introduction*). In the history of the blues, a similar assumption has usually been made between the "authentic" blues of artists like Son House and the "commercial" blues of artists like Mamie Smith. I propose that the

distinctions are more political than aesthetic, more motivated by sexism and white paternalism than by any intrinsic differences between the performances themselves.

There were two groups of critics--with their own axes to grind--who contributed to this peculiar bifurcation of authenticity and commerciality in blues history. The first group was made up of those literary critics in the 1920's (mostly white, but including a select group of modernist black artists and intellectuals--notably Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Sterling Brown) who wished to define the blues as a primal vernacular form representing everything "primitive" and "seminal" about African American culture. Their attempt to place the blues at the center of a black vernacular that could inform a new black literature demanded that the blues be seen as a primitive African style of community-based expression. This was also the intent of the most notable white patrons of the Harlem Renaissance--especially Mrs. Osgood Mason, at one time or another the enthusiastic and generous patron of two of the three aforementioned black literati. (Hughes and Hurston) This view of the blues, this valorization of country blues as a wellspring of African American vernacular, was then used to validate the poetry of young black poets like Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes who used blues lyrics and blues "lifestyles" freely in their poetry. Ironically, the blues that Hughes and Brown wrote about and were most familiar with was the music of the Classic Blues singers like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, the same singers who would later be minimized by blues historians as derivative and inauthentic.

The second group of critics with a stake in transforming the blues from popular fad to vernacular form was the folklorists. The folklorists tended to be racially tolerant and politically liberal. After all, they appreciated an art form that most whites dismissed as

“nigger music.” Yet they too were the victims of a certain paternalistic turn of mind, and regarded their informants as troublesome and childlike. These sociologists and ethnomusicologists who chronicled the music of the early 20th Century tended to have communist leanings or sympathies, and they showed a strong preference for informants who were illiterate, rurally isolated, and commercially unsuccessful. The first of these were the folklorists who collected the work of blues singers as early as the 1930’s. These pioneers (notably John Lomax, Howard Odum, Alan Lomax and John Work) recorded the first and second generation of bluesmen in the field. Often, the same bluesmen recorded for both the folklorists and the commercial record companies (though the bluesmen clearly preferred the commercial alternative). A second wave of British folklorists was really the first to write with an appreciation of American blues. The most prominent and influential of these was the late Paul Oliver. The last of the folk crowd were those creators of the folk revival of the 1960’s--a group of historians, writers, collectors and folklorists who first theorized the existence of a uniquely American folk music and went about the business of rediscovering it or in some cases recreating it--in extreme cases going into the Mississippi Delta to look for blues singers from the 1930’s who had retired and bringing them back to perform for Northern coffeehouse audiences. In the most extreme cases, these blues revivalists went so far as to teach the older bluesmen the repertoire that they had forgotten (in the case of Skip James, this is well-documented).

The relationship between the poorly defined worlds of high and low cultures is somewhat complicated in the case of the blues. Critics began to regard the community-based folk blues as a kind of authentic “high” culture, and to denigrate the faddish

popular blues of the vaudeville stage, the recording industry, and the blues women as a form of popular or “low” culture. This fits into Brantlinger’s paradigm insofar as it posits a “folk” or “vernacular” culture that lies beneath and informs the popular culture. It is this lower than low culture that is valorized into a new kind of “high culture.” There is a vast body of blues literature that incorporates these assumptions about “authentic” blues forming a kind of elite cultural product. This blues literature is the product of critics, historians, record collectors, folkies, scholars, and enthusiasts of every stripe, but they fall generally into four major groups: literary critics of the so-called Harlem Renaissance, British jazz critics, folklorists and archivists, and modern literary critics.

Those Harlem Renaissance critics who sought to justify the portrayal of lower-class black life in literature (a tendency much reviled by black intellectuals), saw the mystery and power of the blues as proof of a purely African vernacular that owed little to European culture. Most of the writing that takes this position falls back onto vague signifiers—praising the music of the first-generation blues singers (male) as “primitive,” “seminal,” “original,” “traditional,” “authentic”—and characterizing the practitioners of this vernacular art as part-time amateur musicians who were largely illiterate, poor, alcoholic, syphilitic, blind, itinerant, and simple-minded, yet possessed of some mysterious primal power to communicate--and an innate rhythmic sense that could only be of African origin. The music is described as having its roots in slavery, demeaning labor, and ignorance of European refinements and musical sophistication. Oddly enough, these same critics harbored no illusions about the origins of the so-called “spirituals” or “sorrow-songs” whose lyrics and melodies were borrowed from the Book of Common Prayer. The European origins of these songs were readily acknowledged, although critics

stressed that the African Americans who used them vastly improved them by virtue of the “style” with which black singers performed them.

Adding to this mystification of the blues that the Harlem Renaissance critics began in the 1920’s, another group, the folklorists and blues historians of the 1950’s and 60’s, came also to privilege the illiterate informant, the supposed African retentions, the lack of commercial appeal of a community-based music. These left-leaning folklorists and historians tended to ignore or marginalize singers and artists who were literate, unduly influenced by European forms, or commercially successful. The conception that these writers and folklorists had with regard to what exactly constituted authentic blues performances was by far the most influential of all the groups I have mentioned, because this group of folklorists and collectors made aesthetic (or political) judgments that had a great effect on the canon—in other words, the decisions made by collectors like Odom and Lomax would forever influence the body of performances that were preserved—they would in effect decide what was blues on behalf of the Library of Congress and their decisions would ultimately decide who was allowed into the folklore collection and who was not. Later collectors (like Iglauer) would also have an effect on blues canon formation, but the decisions of the first wave of song hunters would forever alter the course of the blues.

It is worth mentioning that in many cases the decisions made by these song collectors were not that different from the choices made by the commercial recording industry executives who were mining the same vein. The men who were charged with finding and recruiting Black singers and musicians for commercial recording outfits were motivated purely by the promise of commercial success. Those singers whose early sides

proved to be commercially viable were recorded over and over. But evidence from record company catalogs and sales reports indicates that blues records sold pretty well and were profitable ventures even in marginal cases. Unlike the record business today, when a few tremendously successful records make enough money to make up for the thousands of “misses,” almost all recording ventures were considered successful, because it took relatively few sales to break even--and demand for records was such that even marginally talented regional performers found their way onto record. Most singers who had managed to achieve some following locally managed to sell quite well nationally, and all indications were that the demand for blues records was sufficient to ensure some profitability, even for the records by less-successful singers. The number of records released by female singers accompanied by piano with the word “blues” in the title in any given year in the 1920’s is quite staggering. A Scottish record company, Document Records, has released exhaustive reissues of the “race records” made in the U.S. in the 1920’s, and even assuming that their reissues approach a complete history of the genre (probably not the case), then these records by forgotten blues singers numbered in the thousands. Some of these records are quite painful to listen to. The sheer volume of these blues records extant suggests that the commercial record companies were eager to record almost anyone who had the ambition to record a blues song--probably because the cost of producing these masters was quite low.

Ironically, the first wave of blues recording artists came to be marginalized by blues historians as “derivative,” “commercial,” or “Vaudeville Blues.” This reevaluation of the earliest manifestations of the blues as derivative and inauthentic despite their earlier chronological position (how can 1920’s music be seen as derivative of 1930’s

music?) led to a lot of critics jumping through hoops. The critics were inclined to theorize that the Classic Blues singers were stealing material from as yet unrecorded community-based performers (not-so far-fetched idea in light of the fact that this is precisely what W.C. Handy had done ten years before)--and that when these same community-based performers were finally recorded (once a market for records by male blues singers had developed in the 1930's) they weren't using material or lyrics they had learned from records, they were doing the original versions of the songs made popular by the blues women. There was certainly some of this happening, but it is ridiculous on the face of it to insist that records made in the 1930's had an influence on recordings from the 1920's. Why not just admit to the much more likely possibility that every blues singer learns from every blues singer he or she hears, on record or in person?

After all, the recorded evidence shows that every blues singer that has ever lived has stolen lines and entire stanzas (not to mention musical ideas) from his or her contemporaries as well as predecessors, for that is what it means to be part of a musical tradition. A better explanation may be that male critics of the mid-century were too quick to label female singers as "derivative." The fact that all of the earliest blues singers were female undoubtedly contributed to their exclusion from blues authenticity, as Angela Davis and others have pointed out. Davis attributes this minimization of the creative influence of the "Classic Blues" singers to mid-century sexism and homophobia (many female blues performers were openly homosexual). Davis goes on to theorize that early blues singers like Ma Rainey were responsible for creating new possibilities for black female sexual identity.

It would be both self-congratulatory and self-indulgent for us to condemn as sexist or racist the ideas of folklorists and blues historians of the Mid-Twentieth Century. These writers were, after all, unusually enlightened for their time as evidenced by the fact that they valued this kind of music at all. Those who characterized blues music (and bluesmen) as “primitive” (or by any other term that we would today recognize as code words of white supremacist ideology) were simply products of their time, and it is difficult to criticize them without invoking what Foucault calls the “speaker’s benefit.” Foucault notes in his introduction to *The History of Sex* that critics are fond of saying that the Victorians were sexually repressed because by saying so they are asserting that they themselves (the critics) are not. I certainly do not want to imply that I am not sexist or racist because I most certainly am, and the fact that I try to rid myself of the remnants of whatever white supremacist or patriarchal notions that I may have been inoculated with doesn’t give me any moral high ground to stand on from which to attack anyone, much less someone from another place and time. Still, it is difficult to deny the part that racism might have played in the general lack of interest that folklorists have taken in the blues. In the major journals that publish articles on American folklore, there has been only one special issue devoted to blues folkloristics, and very few individual articles dealing with blues subjects have appeared in other editions. One possible explanation for this may lie in the general reluctance of black scholars to get involved in folklore studies, perhaps because of the persistence of racism in black folklore. White supremacist notions abound in black vernacular, and appear to be virtually indestructible. As Eldridge Cleaver points out in his influential essay, one can neither suppress racism in existing folklore, nor

successfully promote politically correct folklore. Folklore is an area that seems to be slow to resist any political or ideological change.

We can see that literary critics and folklorists, in their efforts to promote the transformative power of blues as a vernacular art, have given short shrift to its commercial importance. They have instead confined the blues to a nether world of tradition and amateurism. Despite the fact that this characterization of the blues is motivated to some degree by the racist, sexist beliefs of critics and folklorists themselves (not to mention the general atmosphere of a white supremacist, patriarchal culture), there is some truth to this concept of blues. The history of blues music, or rather the history of blues tendencies in American music, follows a circuitous path. Initially, the blues did arise from community needs. Early forms of blues were highly localized in areas of the Deep South. Blues began as a part of local tradition, and it does owe something to the existence of vernacular forms: the work song, the field-holler, the sorrow song. But the blues has always had more in common with popular music forms like the cakewalk, the European ballad, and Ragtime. Apart from some highly dubious and unprovable suppositions about the pre-history of the blues--African retentions, black balladry, etc.--it's clear that whatever "purity" or "authenticity" the blues may have had in 1900 was almost immediately compromised by its use in mainstream commercial ventures. Indeed, the very notions of "purity" and "authenticity" with respect to the blues are suspect, and come from the very critics and folklorists I am accusing of misrepresentation.

Even if we accept the notion that early blues was folkloric expression, it was almost immediately co-opted and turned to more commercial uses by both black and white performers and producers. Beginning with W.C. Handy's well-documented use of

vernacular expression in his own compositions as early as 1906, and with Perry Bradford/Mamie Smith's use of blues in commercial recordings for white producers of "race records" beginning in 1920, the widespread dissemination and immense popularity of blues records tainted forever the notion of direct transmission as a "folk process." Blues singers began learning their tradition from phonograph records, and blues entered the age of mechanical reproduction.

What does seem to be a difference in the musical traditions of Africa from those of Europe is the sense that there is no perceived distance or separation between the performer and the audience. In Western tradition, the musicians are separated from the audience by a proscenium arch or raised platform, and the audience is expected to listen quietly and not to participate in the music making. In African tradition, though there are some individuals designated as master musicians, or more talented than other members of the community, they are not separated from an audience by a physical barrier, and members of the audience are free to participate in the performance. So much so that western concepts like "audience," "performer," "amateur," lose all their meaning in a system where music is so much a part of community life that almost every activity is associated with and accompanied by a certain kind of music. Here again, to call the music that always accompanies the washing of clothes a "song" is to introduce a foreign concept. The clothes washing song is not a song in the same way that "New York, New York" is a song. Nonetheless, singing clothes washing music at a wedding ceremony is not something it would occur to an African to do.

One of the hallmarks of the blues is its lack of social conscience, its resistance to conform itself to the demand that it become protest music. The blues is always about an

individual, never about a group or a people. Its grammar is the first person singular, it is always inner-directed. It never describes satisfying social relationships, never a good woman or a happy family. It celebrates the nomadic, yet another similarity to Deleuze's thesis of nomadic art. For Deleuze, it is the nomad, the wanderer, who is the artist. The bluesman celebrates the new-found mobility of the once-enslaved and bound to a parcel of land. The bluesman is always leaving, going somewhere, missing his home. He gives no thought to the hardships of his fellow man, only to his own, and expresses only his own joy. He rarely mentions his master; as some have noted, the blues is a world without white people. When the master does appear, as in early examples like Patton's "Tom Rushen's Blues," he is spoken of with something like respect, especially for his ruthlessness and propensity for violence. The blues lyric abounds with loving reference to the animals of the agrarian world, the mule, the rooster, the crow, the pony. Everywhere, too, are the references to the minutiae of racial marking within the African American community, those attributes of facial feature, hair quality, and variations in skin tone from yellow to black that dominate early blues half-lines. The bluesman identifies with the beasts of the barnyard and the work camp in such a way as to emphasize his animality, his atavism. At every turn the bluesman has grimly accepted the judgments of the white supremacist, has scrupulously learned his hierarchical ideology. If you're black get back, if you're brown stick around, if you're white, alright. In this the blues is no different from the ragtime tunes and coon songs that are its father. Although the search for origins is a suspect enterprise, it is here where the true origins of blues lie, Africa notwithstanding. It is in the demise of ragtime, in the needs of the recording industry, that the origins of the blues lie. It also comes from unexpected places.

Hawaiianisms in the Blues

Every history of the blues makes note of the passage from W.C. Handy's autobiography that describes Handy's first exposure to the blues. Handy was waiting for a train one night in Tutwiler, Miss. and heard an itinerant musician playing bottleneck guitar. This incident took place in 1903 and is the basis for the Congressional "Year of the Blues" in 2003. Yet another blues revival, or more precisely, centennial. This incident has taken on the aura of origin, and if not apochryphal, would indeed mark, if not the beginning of the blues, then certainly its passing into the literature in the form of sheet music. What first struck me as an offhand comment about that incident may have some further meaning. Handy writes: "As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of a guitar in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who use steel bars (Handy, 12)."

This offhand comment, not taken at face value by most blues historians despite the fact that most of them quote this passage as the first written account of a community-based blues performance, seemed to be a clue to the actual origins of blues guitar style in a way that had never been acknowledged before. Could it be that slide guitar styles of Mississippi Delta musicians like Charley Patton, Son House, et al, owed more to the influence of Hawaiian music than to any retentions from the musical traditions of West Africa? Notice that Handy used the term 'popularized' when referring to the slide guitar techniques of the Hawaiian guitarists. Just how 'popular' was this kind of Hawaiian music? How prevalent could its influence have been in the black community of the American South at the turn of the century?

The answer to that question can be answered in part by looking at the musical instrument catalogs of the period, in particular those of the Dopyera brothers, who were developing a new guitar technology at the time of the blues explosion. Between the era of

the acoustic guitar, sufficiently loud to initiate dancing in a small juke joint, and the era of the electric guitar, loud enough to move the tradition northwards and compete with the urban noise of the night club, the el train, the street markets of Chicago, there was an intermediate step--the resonator guitar. Poised halfway between acoustic and electric technologies, the resonator employs a speaker cone to amplify the vibrations of a string stretched over a saddle, producing a ringing tone that is noticeably louder than the sound from a vibrating guitar top alone. The sound is tinnier, less warm, admittedly, but when further amplified by being plucked with metal picks, attacked with metal slides, has the volume and harshness needed to cut through the usual crowd noise at a small gathering where the sound of drinking, laughing, and conversation can easily drown out the sound of a traditional acoustic guitar.

There is a lot of confusion, even among people who are musically knowledgeable, as to the distinctions between the various hybrids of Hawaiian guitar. The terms are confusing, to say the least. It's necessary to clarify the definitions of the following terms: Resonator guitar, dobro, steel guitar, steel-bodied guitar, Hawaiian guitar, lap steel guitar, pedal-steel guitar, slack key guitar, ukulele. It is common to see blues guitarists both today and in the 1920's playing slide guitar on steel bodied instruments. These instruments have some kind of resonator systems, usually either single resonator or tri-cone resonators. These were popular with both Hawaiian style guitarists and country blues guitarists. These guitars often have etched on decorative elements, often with Hawaiian motifs—palm trees, hula dancers, etc. These guitars were made by the National Company. The company also made wood-bodied guitars with the same kind of resonating systems. These systems were patented by the Dopyera Brothers, from whose name comes

the generic name “Dobro” which indicates a guitar variant played exclusively with a steel bar, while being held on the lap, or by a strap in a horizontal manner. To facilitate variation of intonation and clarity of tone, the nut and saddle are both raised so that the strings are suspended quite far above the neck and frets, the guitar not actually being fretted (the strings do not actually touch the frets or the fretboard). In this configuration, the guitar is usually called a “dobro” and is most commonly seen as a fixture of bluegrass bands or so-called “old-time music,” the precursor of bluegrass. These dobros are most often the wooden bodied variant of the resonator. A resonator guitar or “steel guitar” is the metal bodied variant of the guitar that has a more normative bridge and saddle height, allowing the guitar to be fretted like a standard guitar (the action is low enough to allow the guitarists to press the strings to the fretboard, fretting in the usual way when not employing a slide) but high enough to allow for slide playing. Blues guitarists who employ a slide usually use the slide somewhat sparingly, voicing only some of the notes with the slide while fretting other notes at the same time. Various implements are used as sliders, knife blades, bottle necks removed from wine bottles and sanded smooth, sections of metal conduit, pieces of bone, etc.

The modern lap steel and pedal steel are two other variants of the Hawaiian guitar that are usually associated with country music (though an African American school of pentecostal pedal steel persists in certain parts of the south and Midwest). Ukulele and slack-key are two other musical traditions from Hawaii that have been quite influential in American music. Neither of these techniques involve sliders. Slack-key is normally played on a steel stringed wooden bodied guitar in fingerstyle technique that involves

open tunings. Ukuleles are normally four nylon strings on a small-bodied koa-wood guitar, and are usually strummed chordally.

It was always assumed by musicologists that the great wave of popularity of Hawaiian music in the states was a result of servicemen in World War Two who were stationed in the Pacific, and there was a fad for Hawaiian culture during and after WWII, when servicemen returned home with ukuleles and Hawaiian-print shirts, with plans to build their own pool-side tiki bars. Women signed up for hula classes, people took up surf-riding in record numbers, and Hawaiian culture became a part of the American mainstream with statehood for Hawaii finally coming in the 1950's. But the initial wave of popularity for all things Hawaiian came much earlier than that, dating as far back as captain Cook's voyages and growing in popularity with the annexation of Hawaii as a territory in 1895. Musical instrument catalogs of the early 20th Century are full of "Hawaiian style" guitars designed to be played face up across the lap, and they often had square-profile necks and high actions that prohibit them from being played in the usual fashion. Collectors know that most of these instruments were later converted for regular use after the fad for things Hawaiian had died down. Notably, the Gibson Guitars produced under the Nick Lucas name became so popular among guitarists that virtually all of them set up "Hawaiian style" were later converted by either shaving down the square necks to conventional shape or replacing the neck, and then lowering the action by replacing the nuts and saddles so the guitars could be fretted and played in the normal vertical position associated with Spanish guitar. Thus the record of the popularity of this style of music has been largely lost, so much so that it is puzzling to the modern collector when he first begins seeing the evidence of the popularity of Hawaiian style instruments

in the catalog literature of the early 20th Century. It is only at about mid-century that cowboy singers and Hawaiian musicians began to disappear in the advertisements for musical instruments, replaced by pop musicians and TV personalities as endorsers of the latest guitar models.

Blues musicians were quick to utilize the new technology of resonator instruments, and they used them in a way that their makers had not envisioned. This is the sort of thing that post-modern theorists make much of in their analysis of both punk and hip-hop music styles, the irrepressible creativity of urban youth in their use of available technology, but it's really something that has always existed in any culture, the borrowing of the past, the reinvention of the present, the vision of the future. The Dopyera brothers hardly had Son House in mind when they developed the Dobro, a design that is still being produced today by the original patent holder, National Guitars, as well as every other major guitar manufacturer today (Gibson, Fender, etc).

Blues Africanists attribute the development of the slide guitar style in the blues to the pre-existent "diddly-bow"--a new world version of the one-string bow found in African society. The early rock and blues pioneer Bo Diddley (Elias McDaniel) who currently lives outside of Gainesville, Florida, is said to have taken his name from an inversion of the name of this primitive instrument--Diddley Bow becomes Bo Diddley. It is said that sharecroppers, as a result of some dim memory of African traditions, affixed steel strings made from broomwire to the walls of their wood cabins, and played them using some kind of slider to change the pitch. Some present-day musicians, Lonnie Pitchford, notably, have mastered this instrument and adapted it for stage use at festivals and concerts where it is accepted with reverence as an example of the early roots of

blues. Like most evidence of the African retentions in North American blues, it is merely a fanciful romantic notion that can never be proved or disproved. But given the prevalence of Hawaiian music styles and instruments available in the U.S. at the turn of the century, I believe it is much more likely that the proliferation of slide guitar styles among early blues musicians can be attributed to the Hawaiian music fad and the subsequent availability of lap-style guitars.

CHAPTER 6 COMMERCIAL BLUES

An enormous amount of what passes for writing about jazz stems from an ideological position, the result of an externally imposed or self-assumed false consciousness. The thrust of such writing is systematically to obscure, if not deny, the black roots of the music...it (social history) makes it difficult for them (jazz writers) to accept jazz and the Negro as its true innovator (Kofsky,11).

I quote Frank Kofsky because he is a Black Nationalist critic who dealt with issues of race and music. None of that era's critics, other than Cleaver, who was writing about a certain kind of folklore, dealt with the blues in their discussions of jazz, and even Cleaver did not mention the blues or any blues artists by name. Black intellectuals have always been dismissive about the blues, claiming them as African heritage, but always pointing to jazz musicians as the real representatives of black artistry. The reverence for black bluesmen has come from another quarter entirely, that of the white (often English!) male. Even the famous argument about African retention is an argument among whites. Black scholars of the blues, should they exist, have yet to weigh in on this issue in any significant way. I could find none who have dealt with this issue. At any rate, Kofsky's comments are about jazz, not blues. I bring up Kofsky's statement not to liken blues to jazz and apply Kofsky's comments to blues, but to show how in the ideological battle between white and black, the blues and jazz are two parts of the same puzzle. What applies to one does not necessarily apply to the other.

Trying to understand the meaning of this passage has troubled me at times. First of all, jazz history is a frequently-argued subject. I suspect that most of today's jazz writers have moved on to new "ideological positions" by now. Isn't it pretty well accepted that in

jazz as in blues, the greatest innovators were all black? In the blues world, there has never been an attempt to obscure or deny the black roots of the music, in fact the reverse is true. Not only are the roots black but the trunk and branches are too. No one to my knowledge has been moved by a white supremacist ideology to deny the black roots of the blues. I have argued here that some have been moved by that same ideology to ignore the blues altogether. Or could it be that the early adoption of the jazz form by white bandleaders put pressure on historians to minimize black innovation? Could it be that jazz was somehow forced to become “whiter” than the blues? If so, this puts the blues critic who argues against the influence of African retention in the same camp with the white jazz critics who were ignoring or denying the true innovators. Not exactly Holocaust Denial, but questionable.

If one examines the origins of the blues in a skeptical way, one can only conclude that origins are themselves only fantasies and holy grails of blues literature. It is not as if I am trying to give credit to a single white musician for the least input into the blues tradition. I am suggesting that bluesmen borrowed from a variety of sources, none directly retained from African culture. But I don't see that this is any way like what Kofsky calls “denying the black roots.”

While collectors were busy in the field recording blues singers, record companies were also capturing the very same material in “recording studios.” A cultural studies approach gives these blues texts--the phonograph recordings made by the race record industry between 1927 and 1938--a greater weight in blues history. These recordings were made with one purpose in mind: to persuade Blacks to buy gramophones. The sale of the records themselves was not a profitable enterprise, but the customers wanted to see

plenty of Black records before they would buy a gramophone, and gramophones were highly profitable items. The artists who made these records were scouted and recorded by men like H.C. Speir, who owned a furniture store in Jackson, Mississippi. He acted as a talent conduit for Paramount Records. While there is some indication that H.C. Speir eventually developed some personal aesthetic judgments about the singers that he auditioned in his furniture store--he would later say about Charley Patton that "Patton was a good one"--he would have been just as happy to make money on something he didn't like. Speir today views his role in the preservation of African American Vernacular Arts as something of a nuisance. He has trouble remembering the names of singers. It is possible that Speir didn't care who went to Grafton, Wisconsin, to record. It was America's most backward recording studio, a studio that had been built for acoustic recording rather than the newer technology of electric recording.

The arrangement was that Speir would locate blues musicians, give them a few dollars for transportation to Grafton, and keep a steering fee of about fifty dollars for himself. Speir regarded his role as that of a loyal dealer of Paramount's product line of phonographs and phonograph records. The company saw the lack of "product" that would appeal to middle-class blacks in the form of blues records as a problem holding back sales of their players. Speir was doing what he could to help them out. He knew from his own retail experience that black people weren't about to buy a record player if all they had to play on it was Sousa and Caruso.

Primitivity and Primitiveness

"Primitivity" is not a real word. I can not find it in my dictionary. But we need a word to describe that state of mind in the west that says to itself "while *we* are advanced and modern, other races in other places are primitive, childlike and incapable of

governing themselves.” Primitivity, like Orientalism, refers to something created in the minds of westerners to differentiate themselves from “the other” or “the colonized.” Most writers speak of the blues as “primitive,” or, somewhat less offensively, as “primal,” or “seminal,” if they speak of it at all. Could you imagine anyone referring to the music of a black jazz musician that way?

The lives of the bluesmen are always presented in a way that focuses on their supposed “primitivity.” Despite their acceptance of modern technology, their relative affluence and musical sophistication, the early bluesmen have always been portrayed as primitive, atavistic throwbacks. Anthropologists have abandoned such notions about the cultures they study for some time now, yet this conception of the blues as primitive folk art persists in most writing on the blues. The only conclusion that I or other folklorists I have talked to can come up with is this: white supremacist ideology.

Black Theory is about recognizing white supremacist ideology. It begins with Fanon’s simple statement from the 1960’s: “White people consider themselves superior to darker skinned people (Fanon, 22).” This ideology resulted in a critical practice that simultaneously aestheticized and denigrated the blues to inferior status, even within that larger construct of “folk music,” for no other reason than this: the blues is by definition an African-American art form. By declaring the blues to be “primitive,” the blues could be conveniently relegated to the lower status of other non-commercial folkways like quilt making, ring games, and toasts. This paternalistic denigration is a familiar tactic of “positive” stereotyping.

Defining the blues as the music of Black Americans perpetuates essentialism and contributes to the racial tension surrounding the blues. But it can’t be denied that the

blues are by definition an African-American form, an activity in which white people can play no large part. The modern view is that race is culturally or socially constructed, and that race as a concept has no basis in science. It is accepted as self-evident that there is virtually no way to accurately distinguish between black and white peoples, much less people of the colors in between. Race doesn't exist in a rational world. Yet the effects of racism can be seen almost everywhere we look. Race may not matter to well-meaning whites, as so many of them claim, but it is still a problem for everyone who is perceived as Black.

The literature of the blues is mostly a white man writing about a black man's art, and in it there is more than a taste of the kind of paternalism that made the stage manager at Carnegie Hall send Big Bill Broonzy onto the stage wearing old coveralls instead of the silk suit he arrived in. (Palmer, 111) The same attitude can be found in the debates about African retentions in the blues, in the stories of Bessie Smith being refused a life-saving transfusion at a white hospital, in the myths around Robert Johnson. What this paternalism masks, this worship of the old authentic bluesman, is the guilt that white musicians have about ripping them off. This paternalism is entering the post-colonial stage, but it still makes itself felt in writing about the blues as "primitive."

But if there is no such thing as race, then there is no such thing as blues. Defining the difference between blues and other music is like distinguishing wolves from dogs. It is the categories themselves that are at fault, not our ability to categorize. Still, the blues is black music. African-American music. At least that is the editorial stance of the editors of *Living Blues Magazine*, a magazine that is published at the University of Mississippi, probably the best and certainly the classiest of the blues magazines. Their policy has been

to expand the notion of what the blues genre contains by covering those black performers who play music that verges on other genres like Soul, R&B, and Rock. They resolutely refuse to consider covering white performers, and part of their rationale is that most of the white players their readers want to read about, like Eric Clapton or Stevie Ray Vaughan, already get plenty of coverage in other publications.

Of all blues, the Delta blues has always been seen as the deepest, the most authentic, the most primitive. This music was the province of black males who sang with guitar accompaniment only. “Primitivity” was a necessary component of this music. Delta blues was especially prized for its primitive beauty. By the 1960’s the blues had been assimilated into folk music. The sixties blues revival was a subset of the folk music craze, and folk music in the sixties was largely fueled by urban liberal, progressive labor, or socialist sentiments. It was convenient politically to consign to the blues a cultural space once occupied by work songs and African retentions. Considering the prominent part that the African American spiritual played in the civil rights movement, and the part that early soul music played in the same movement, it seems now curious that African Americans would abandon the blues as the music of a shameful past in favor of other forms of vernacular expression. Blues always bore the brunt of the politics of the best foot forward that dominated Integrationist thought.

Consider first the interaction possible between black men and white men in the 1920’s in the Deep South. Even as late as the 1960’s, during a second wave of blues collection, black “informants” report a high level of intimidation in their encounters with white folklorists.

With another look at the commercial recordings of the era, these early blues performances begin to emerge as a remarkably modern genre. Complex polyrhythms emerge from what was once thought to be sloppiness or careless musicianship. In unraveling the encoded messages a kind of lyric poetry emerges, not the “original” lyrics of the Tin Pan Alley songwriter, but a rich profusion of lines and half-lines that are the units of meaning in all Blues. There is lyrical facility of the highest order, and more polytonal effects than was previously thought. In contrast to most other forms of commercial popular music, there is almost no mention of love or family. It is not romantic music. Is it minstrelsy, or is it the antidote to minstrelsy?

The Bluesmen, always presented as illiterate, primitive men who played folk music, begin to emerge as something else again--artists working in a tradition. Professional musicians who moved easily in the big cities, not illiterate men who sang of their own personal experience (the miseries of poverty, etc.) but modern artists and musicians who learned their craft from listening to records as well as from direct contact with other musicians. Today in the academy, the study of blues is encouraged because it seems to satisfy the urge towards multi-culturalism.

The Meaning of the Blues in Popular Culture Today

The dismissal of blues lyrics as folklore is the most harmful of the inheritances from the folk revival, only partly redressed by a new tendency to view them as poetry in the modern academy, or more recently as a proper subject of Black Cultural Studies. I would argue that the pre-war blues were less folk expression than commercial production. The bluesmen of the Deep South were relatively affluent, well-traveled, mostly literate performers who were “modern” artists in every sense of the word. The primitivity that was prized by the collectors of blues as folklore, and for that reason

collected in great profusion, is largely a construct shaped by the white supremacist attitudes of mid-century folklorists.

In today's commercial arena the blues has come to occupy a special place in the marketing of consumer goods. I take for my text the use of blues sounds and images in television commercials and documentaries. The meaning of the blues as signifier today can be examined by a reading of how these elements (sound and image) of the blues are invoked in advertising and commercial music.

In contemporary advertising we find the use of blues music when advertisers want to project an image of authenticity or "down-homeness" (country blues) or urban grittiness (city blues). Also common is the use of visual images that suggest the blues—as in older black men with beat-up guitars, sepia-toned photos of Mississippi landscapes, weathered boards, rusted tin roofs, cotton fields in flower, and other images that suggest a return to an earlier, purer, more wholesome, less commercialized past.

Blind Melon Chitlin'

To show the tremendous breadth of signification possible in the blues, and to display the entire gamut of stereotypes that cling to them, I could pick no better text than a familiar comedy routine by Cheech and Chong called "Blind Melon Chitlin'."

Country Blues today is regarded as a primitive, unlettered phenomenon of the past, and naturally is connected in the public mind with the superannuated performers brought back to the concert and nightclub stages by white promoters in some Northern cities. One brilliant satire of the wide-spread acceptance by white audiences of older, nearly dead black performers as 'authentic' or historically important, is a routine performed on stage by Cheech and Chong in the 1980's and preserved in the film "Cheech and Chong's Still Smokin'."

In this well-polished vaudeville routine, Cheech and Chong, famous for a brand of ‘stoner’ comedy that was popular with the counter-culture in the 1970’s, satirize the propensity of their own core audience to affect a kind of bluesman worship. In the process, the comedy team utilizes the time-honored techniques of blackface comedy. The racial stereotyping that is at the core of the performance is so exaggeratedly over-the-top that the comedy seems to avoid censure by virtue of its extreme self-consciousness. They are poking fun at racial stereotypes while perpetuating them, like all minstrelsy is likely to do, but the real target of their barbs are the white liberals who have bought into the whole blues-as-folk-music mind set of the 60’s blues revival. In other words, they are not mocking blues revival artists like “Son” House and “Honeyboy” Edwards so much as poking fun at the sort of people who feel obliged to seek some kind of authentic blues experience.

Tommy Chong plays the title character, ‘Blind Melon Chitlin’, and his portrayal implies a critique of the standard blues history that is worth exploring. The fact that this routine by Cheech and Chong was so universally accepted suggests that many more people enjoyed it than those who understood its ironic intent. In fact, the routine employs many of the gestures of minstrel show entertainment, and in a less politically correct time and place could be enjoyed as a purely comic invention, and probably could be even today by some members of Cheech and Chong’s audience who might enjoy seeing old crippled black men made fun of in a non-ironic fashion. Black intellectuals may forgive Tommy Chong for pandering to the unenlightened sensibilities of the baser members of his fan base, if that is what he is doing. They may also forgive him for resuscitating the art of blackface comedy, if that is what he is doing, as long as his performance is

outlandish enough, or ironic enough, or satiric enough in the right direction. There was a lot of criticism by black intellectuals directed at Spike Lee for his updated revival of blackface in his film “Bamboozled,” and plenty of criticism of Ben Vereen’s tribute to Bert Williams in his performance at the Reagan White House. For some reason, the critics left Chong alone. Perhaps they sensed that his portrayal of ‘Blind Melon Chitlin’, while unquestionably in bad taste, is a sly dig at mid-century folkloristics.

Cheech Marin introduces Blind Melon Chitlin to the audience as a “156 year old blues singer who sings on the street.” Chong then shuffles onto the stage wearing a dirty raincoat and slouch hat that covers all but his face and hands, both of which are corked up to a shiny black color. He is in full blackface makeup, face and beard covered with blacking. Even his hands, which are visible to the audience as he fumbles with the microphone, are made to look like the darkest imaginable Negro, hands black as night on the back side, and reddish pink on the palms and the insides of his fingers.

Because Blind Melon is in fact blind, his partner, Cheech Marin, has to lead him onto the stage. There is a lot of stage business—waving to the crowd, fussing with chairs and microphone locations. Blind Melon gropes for the microphone with his hands, but can’t locate it even though it’s right in front of him. Cheech introduces him again, waving his hands in front of Blind Melon’s face to indicate to the audience that he is indeed blind, telling the audience “He’s blind, ladies and gentlemen, but he can hear you, so let’s give him another big hand” as a way of milking the audience of more applause.

Chong (Melon) cups his hands as if choking a harmonica, leans forward into the mike, and makes a farting sound. He then realizes that he has misplaced his harmonica. He begins searching the pockets of his raincoat absently, looking for the missing harp.

Cheech comes to his aid and another dumb show develops over the business of handing an object to a man who is blind. The audience gets the idea. Blind Melon is really blind!

Finally, with harmonica in hand, properly positioned at the microphone, Blind Melon is ready to go. In a raspy, ancient voice, he says to the audience “My name is Blind Melon Chitlin and I’m a hundred and fifty-six years old and I can still get it up....(laughter) I just can’t get it in!” (more laughter). At this point, Melon opens up a trick ring on his finger, like a poison ring with a little compartment, and he snorts an unknown substance into his nose, one sniff in each nostril, as if he is snorting cocaine. Then he says “I wrote this song when I was beatin my wife. It’s called I’m goin downtown to see my baby.”

He starts tapping his left foot as if to set a tempo for the upcoming number, but it is yet another false start. Like an automaton, his leg begins to operate independently of his will. First he can’t get it started. Then it starts so violently that he loses control of the hand that is holding the harmonica, once again delaying the start of the performance.

Finally, Blind Melon manages to blow a single wheezy note on the harmonica--not even a blue note or a well-articulated note, but a completely inconsequential and tuneless wheeze. Then he begins to sing.

“I put one leg over my shoulder,
I put two legs over my shoulders”

And then he rubs the back of his hand over his mouth to mimic an act of cunnilingus.

At no time during the “performance” does Chong/Melon display the slightest musical talent or competence. The emphasis of the act is on the physical aspect of the performance, the fussing with microphones and chairs, the introduction, the between-

song patter—until the content of the performance is reduced to nothing. The performance is nothing more than a series of crude jokes about blindness, drug use, fart noises, and oral sex. The elaborate introduction manages to touch on every possible blues cliché: blindness, consumption of unappetizing hog parts, drug abuse, illiteracy, itinerance, homelessness, blackness, minstrelsy. Melon tries to sit down in a chair that is not placed properly, he gropes for microphones, the harmonica, searches his pockets, snorts from his ring. He sets his foot to tapping like an automaton—and looks at it reproachfully when it does not perform like a robotic drum machine, a nod to the myth of the natural rhythm of the Negro, the magic internal clock that effortlessly divides time into equal segments, thus relieving the audience of the burden of keeping the time, facilitating surrender to the primitive, unthinking beat.

The entire performance is carefully calculated to play on every sense of difference and prejudice that white people have been conditioned to expect. The blindness, probably a result of congenital syphilis, preventable childhood disease, or other poverty and race related causes, the surname “Chitlin” that brings to mind the chitterlings that are the stereotypical food of the black underclass (the intestines of a hog), the references to feces and flatulence, the suggestion of drug use, the jokes about oral sex, these sophomoric attempts at humor would surely offend even a white stoner audience were they not so outrageous that no one could take them seriously, not even those few African Americans in Cheech and Chong’s audience. But the white audience immediately grasps these wild, over-the-top references to racial stereotyping. The minstrel show is still active in our collective unconscious. The fact is that these attitudes towards the blues and blues singers that Chong spoofs as Blind Melon Chitlin are not so far from what most people believe

about the men who practiced the trade of the blues singer. And some of these same attitudes can be seen in the actions of blues promoters and festival organizers even today.

Blues Archaeology

It may seem at first a minor matter, but the discovery of a new photograph of Charley Patton, the first bluesman to have recorded extensively, and the earliest bluesman that we know anything about, or what he might have sounded like or looked like, is a significant discovery in a field where almost everything is presumed to have been discovered already. The photo in question is furthermore a professional publicity photo that was found in a collection of memorabilia saved by a newspaper reporter from the files of the Paramount Recording Co. that was located in Grafton, Wisconsin. The photograph suggests, by its commercial nature alone, a new evaluation of the role of blues singer as recording artist even in the earliest known stages of blues development. The only previously known photograph of Patton is by contrast a grainy head shot, clearly of a non-professional nature. The newly discovered photograph is much sharper, giving us a much clearer idea of what Patton looked like, with an even stronger suggestion of Mexican heritage than is suggested by the old photo. The new picture has serious implications, if only to fanatical blues theorists, and suggests two things by its visual information alone: the blues as a form may be even more southern in nature than has been previously believed, and by that I mean that Mexican songster traditions have been more influential in birthing the blues than previously supposed, and that blues artists were commercially important even at a time when blues music was considered 'community-based.' The new portrait of Patton shows him to be more professional entertainer than plantation favorite.

A second, more important find was the release on DVD of several hours of programming filmed by a German television producer of several blues musicians who traveled to Europe in the 1960's to take part in a traveling blues festival known as the American Folk Blues Festivals 1964-68. Some of the performers were filmed at live concert venues, and some were filmed at a television studio in Germany. All the performances and the production values are of the highest quality. This Blues Revival Era document was shot on black and white film, with the studio performances supported by elaborate stage sets to evoke the mood of a country blues performance, and one might expect the films to pander to the kind of social and racial stereotyping typical of American productions. Even though there are sets meant to portray juke joint exteriors, gasoline filling stations, and other "authentic" locations, the shots are so well art directed that you could almost believe they were shot on location in the American South. For some reason the sets don't detract from the quality of the performances. These films, which had been all but forgotten by the people who made them, resurfaced only last year. Blues historians had not been aware of them. It was as if some time machine had appeared offering a glimpse into blues performances in the 1960's, but with a difference, blues performances as imagined by the sensibilities of European blues enthusiasts. The performances themselves show a higher degree of show biz polish than one might be used to from American revival footage. For one thing, these films are of the most popular and important blues artists of the era performing their most polished signature tunes, and with excellent production values that underline the respect these artists were shown in Europe at the time. No similar footage (of comparable quality) by an American producer or film crew exists. The addition of performers like Lonnie Johnson, Otis Rush, and T-

Bone Walker shows that the European conception of country or “folk” blues was much broader than it was in the states. These performers would have been considered urban or jazz artists by American audiences and might not have been accepted as folk music.

Blues and Black Nationalism

Francis Davis points out in his *History of the Blues* that although there have been a few black critics who have written about the blues, none of their texts have really concentrated on the lives or the art of the early generations of bluesmen. Perhaps they too shared a little of the black middle class’s eagerness to forget the blues and everything else about the South, slavery, etc. Bluesmen like Pink Anderson, Willie Brown, Lemon Jefferson, all made their living playing on the street for coins, or appearing with the many medicine shows that traveled through the Jim Crow south. Critics like Albert Murray and Leroi Jones have written book-length texts about the blues that are heavy on the poetry and African-ness of the blues, books that go on at some length about Jazz players who like to play the blues and popular entertainers who use the blues like Duke Ellington and the great saxophonist Charlie Parker but you will often find no mention of earlier country blues styles in general, and no mention of individual artists like Son House or Charley Patton. Albert Murray and Leroi Jones have both written thoughtfully authoritative books on “the blues” without mentioning the Mississippi singers most closely associated with the genre. It clearly wasn’t the intention of books like Gates’s “Signifyin’ Monkey” to detail the lives of early bluesmen, but I do find it odd that most Black writers--like Langston Hughes, Albert Murray, and Leroi Jones--celebrate the blues without seeming to know much about early blues. Jones’s book, *Blues People*, mentions very few names, as if to emphasize his conviction that the creation of individual geniuses is a device designed to diminish the impact of African Americans in musical history, and Murray’s

book has a lot more to say about urban blues artists like Ellington and Miles. Likewise, both Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates, both Black males who are full professors at major research universities, have written scholarly works that are the basis for a “blues theory,” yet they write about the blues in very general terms, and seem less knowledgeable about early blues than some British writers and historians. My point is that that Black Intellectuals are as quick as anyone to use the blues for political ends, defining the blues to suit their own political purposes.

In his *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, Harold Cruse examines Duke Ellington’s rejection for the Pulitzer Prize, and concludes, in rather restrained tones: “Here was an affront to the entire musical heritage of every Negro in America.” Affront though it may have been, it surely was not unique. Even now, in 1969, for all the greater acceptance of black art and culture this country is said to have achieved, only a single black musician, Ornette Coleman, has ever been the recipient of a Guggenheim Foundation Award for his work in jazz. So far as the white Anglo-Saxon-Protestant-dominated ruling-class Establishment is concerned, serious black art is beneath consideration.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mr. Evans is from Jacksonville Beach, Florida. He graduated from Robert E. Lee High School in 1967, the summer of love. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Columbia University in 1971, when a student strike was resolved by agreeing to let everybody graduate with honors. There he learned invaluable lessons about leftist politics. He received an M.B.A. from Jacksonville University in 1981, and an M.A. in English from the University of North Florida in 1997. Mr. Evans has worked as a commodities broker, blues guitarist, wedding singer, and teacher. Most of his teaching has been at UNF as a visiting instructor in African American literature.