

Mapping the Blues Genes

Preface: This essay, *Mapping the Blues Genes*, explores the first three decades of the printed history of early blues music. All life, and all music, can be analyzed by an examination of its genomic structure. With earthly animal life forms, the chromosomes that help determine shape, character, colors, mind and emotion contain segments that are called genes. Variations in a specific gene are called alleles. In plants and animals some alleles are dominant, and others are recessive—and the individual’s development is determined by the genomic mixture and the dominant/recessive struggle. Musical styles provide many parallel features. In the late 1800’s musical evolution started a dendritic evolution which led, by the early 1900’s, to ragtime, jazz and the blues. The melodic, harmonic and lyric features of these styles are usually attributed to human adoption and adaptation. Fiscal, technical and societal factors can also affect musical styles. The evolution from harpsichord to piano, the change of performance venues from cathedral to chamber-room to music hall, cyclic monetary conditions, and shifts in leisure-time all altered other musical styles. This essay will examine how technical developments, the fiscally dynamic early 1920’s and the subsequent plunge into Depression in 1929, and many other complex societal factors determined the fabric of the blues. “Blue” is a color that conveys many emotions to us. The music called blues is also associated with many other colors and feelings—green, black, brown, white, and red—that will assume various forms and hues as we

Explore the Fabric Of The Blues



Printed scores of prototype blues appear as early as 1904. These “blues” are usually brief introductions to more established and accepted forms of the period, such as ragtime. The music titles often include the word “blues” but this is often used in a titular fashion, a tendency which became very common as the popularity of the blues increased beginning in ~1910.

The first pages of some sophisticated scores date from 1904 (*One O, Them Things?*), and 1908 (*I Got The Blues*). You can hear the blues beginnings!

The essay uses original blues’ lyrics as it travels through the spectrally colored landscape, and combines prosody and poetry to paint the players and emotions.

But there were other evolutions, possibly progress, in areas other than musical styles.

I Got The Blues.

A. MAGGIO.

Alligretto.

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Respectfully Dedicated to all those
Who have the Blues.

I GOT THE BLUES

Characteristic
RAGTIME
TWO STEP.

AN UP-TO-DATE
RAG.

By
A. MAGGIO.

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ONE O, THEM THINGS?

RAG TIME TWO-STEP.

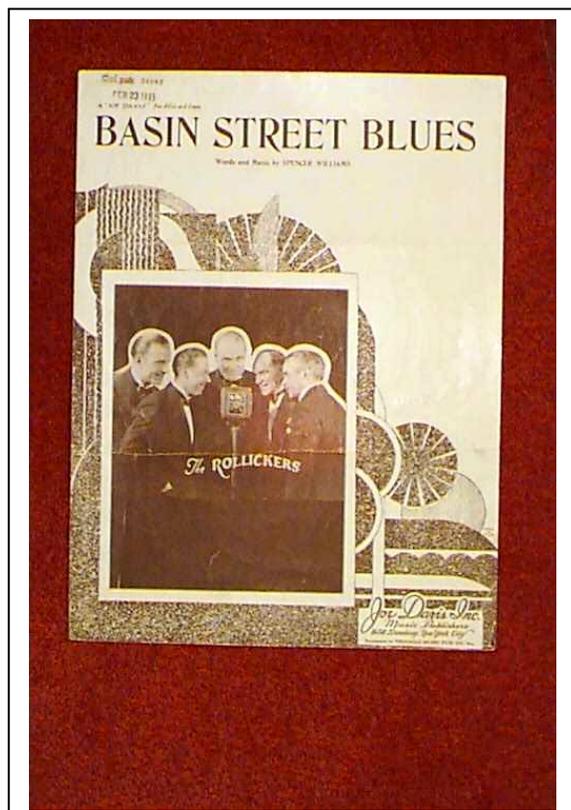
By JAMES CHAPMAN
(Composer of "POOR JIM"
and
LEROY SMITH.

Slow.

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Emancipation, inter-racial tensions and prejudices, WW I, and the Roaring '20s all affected the development and migration of the Delta Blues to the North. But technology played an important role in dissemination, cultural cross-over and expansion of the musical style. Intra-racial tensions also added new notes to the tune. This essay explores the interaction of these factors.

For example, row-crop tractors, boll weevils, sheet-music, phonographs and radio all had mutating effects on the genes of the musical style called blues.



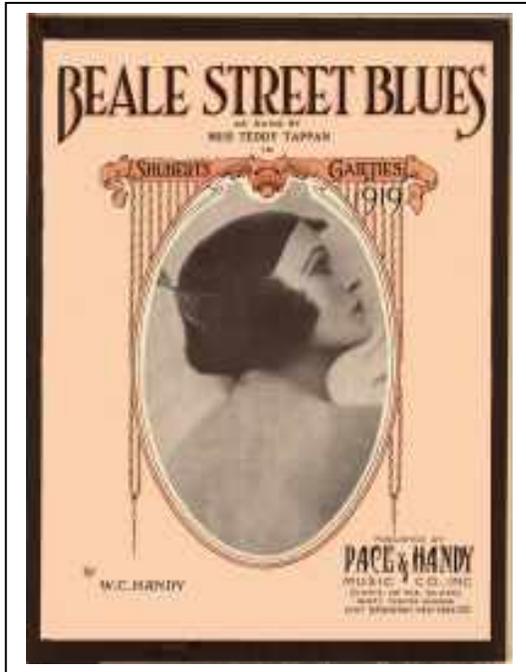
The 1926 International Harvester row-crop tractor dramatically reduced the need for farm labor in the Mississippi Delta region. That labor demand had already been tragically reduced by earlier boll weevil cotton crop damage.

Multi-media, multi-racial dissemination of the many forms of blues music accelerated as sheet-music, records and radio saturated the growing interest by Blacks and Whites alike. NBC microphones appear on one cover. Green money, jobs, and opportunities for work and music were Memphis and Chicago bound.

This essay is based on the many primary sources cited, but it is unusual in its use of materials found from micro-fiche reading of the 'Feature' and 'Entertainment' sections of nearly two decades from the Sunday editions of the eminent Negro newspapers—the *Chicago Defender* and the

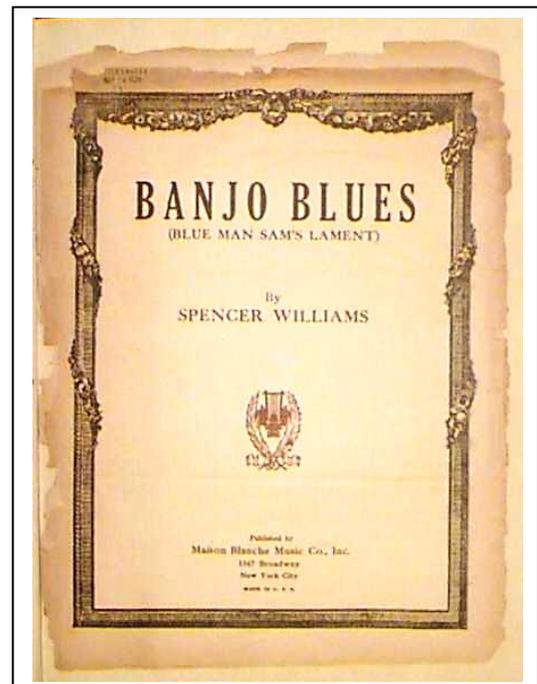
Indianapolis Freeman.

Most music historians focus on a rather racially segregated distribution of race-records versus radio. However, advertisements aimed at juvenile readers in Negro newspapers (*Chicago Defender* 1925) for inexpensive radio kits indicate that this medium had crossed the color-line. Sheet music covers obviously targeted whites and blacks. Sales statistics on records are sparse and subject to misinterpretation. History is supposedly real, but it is re-written the moment it has passed.



The image is a vintage advertisement for "The Little Wonder Radio Set" priced at \$12.98. It features a central diagram of the radio set with various components labeled. The text includes:

- "The Little Wonder Radio Set Complete With Tube \$12.98"
- "W H only for a GREATLY IMPROVED CRYSTAL RADIO RECEIVING SET prepared in the portable THE LITTLE WONDER is not a portable receiver. It will BRING IN KRYPTONITE IN THE AIR TO YOUR HOME BYTES 100 to 1500 MILES. You think of doing in your home and listening to sensational news, wonderful speeches and the best music in the world. It is the only receiver in the world that can be used in any place. It is guaranteed to do everything we claim for it. THE LITTLE WONDER RADIO SET. This is now a home-made set."
- "NOT A CRYSTAL SET: The construction of THE LITTLE WONDER RADIO RECEIVING SET is of the highest quality. HIGH-GRADE CONDENSER, SPECIAL LOW-CAPACITANCE COILS, and is guaranteed to do everything we claim for it. THE LITTLE WONDER RADIO SET. This is now a home-made set."
- "SEND NO MONEY: Now write your address in the coupon below and mail it in THIS IS YOUR ONLY chance to get THE LITTLE WONDER RADIO SET. We will send you the set and a tube free of charge. If you do not wish to pay for the set and tube, we will refund the money."
- "DARWAL CORPORATION DEPT. D-107 799 Broadway New York"
- "Send this COUPON" (diagonal banner)
- "NAME _____ ADDRESS _____"



Blues Lament

My guitar's full of music,
 And my mouth's full of moan;
 My fingers want to frolic,
 But I'm all alone;
 Strings hum on the fret-board,
 And my pick is mighty hot;
 But I do need help my Lord,
 'Cause one tune's all I got.

However, the spirit of the blues can always be distilled into a *Blues Lament*—

Mapping the Blues Genes :

Technology, Economics, and Society- The Alleles of Early Blues;
A Spectral Analysis, 1900-1930

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The dead tan odor of oxidizing paper crawled down my throat; disintegrating, crackling yellow fragments filled my fingerprints; and fading bleached colors stained my eyes. The collection of music scores, so lovingly husbanded, was slowly vanishing in the heat and humidity of the Garden District of New Orleans. It will not survive the end of the century in which it all began. A vibrant, virile music coupled with an earthy poetry born of soul and sorrow would vanish, to live only as vibrations in the air from the thousands of recordings that listeners collected, rerecorded, anthologized, discographized, and eulogized. But this music has a prepotency which has left a trail through world music, and even floods the World Wide Web with homepages of praise, adoration, and fanaticism. The blues! Listen to what one Afro-American writes:

It is the Blues

It is the blues/crawling over evening for a feast.

Nobody hears my dungeon screams

as loneliness tap-dances inside my skull.

The windmill of moans churns

and the long gulf of pain stretches in veins. ...

It is the blues/lowdown in evil.

Sending their spikes through teeth and spines.

The upset stomach of dreams/dizzy and longing for rest. ...

It is the blues. The long road/crooked with yesterday's steps

and zigzagging with tomorrow's trails.

The wandering journey through blistered feet. It is the blues¹

Sterling Plumpp (1985)

BIG ROAD BLUES: This brief tour of early blues starts with the obligatory "guessistory" of the origins, passes through a somewhat irreverent analysis of its maturation, and ends with a more detailed reprise. The route is marked with appropriate signs.* The road examines the synchronicity among various blues forms, technology, the market place, politics, and society which made the music.

* The imbedded score covers represent two decades of blues—from 1908 through 1928: *I Got the Blues*, 1908; *Hesitating Blues*, 1915; *Pensacola Blues*, 1922; *Jelly's Blues*, 1923; *Basin Street Blues*, 1928. Some are titular blues. Note the racial "crossing" in some covers. The imbedded musical scores are early proto-blues. The boll-weevil (1920), the International Harvester tractor (1924), and the radio advertisement (1925 *Chicago Defender*) represent non-musical driving forces. Many section heads refer to seminal works cited as references. The indented poetry sections in Times New Roman font are cited quotations; those in Arial font are by the author.

The blues are a century old, and a century young. They are a crop that grew well in the fertile Mississippi Delta from seeds that were brought from Africa, nurtured by the sweat and sadness of an uprooted people who sang, stomped, and strummed on the only instruments allowed. Like the didjeridu, they are a much more complex medium than a first glance conveys. Even the name has an enigmatic aspect. Examine the *Oxford English Dictionary* for usages:

Is the root within the mysterious plasma of a flame as some have suggested?

1594 Shaks. *Rich. III*, v. *iii*. 180 The Lights burne blew! It is now dead midnight.

1611 Beaum. & Fl; *Knt. Burn. Pestle*, Ribands black and candles blue, For him that was of men most true.

1726 De Foe *Hist. Devil* x, That most wise and solid suggestion, that when the candles burn blue the Devil is in the room.

Or, does it lie in some mysterious festering of the soul?

1600 *Rob. Hood (Ritson) ii. xxxvi. 84* It made the sunne looke blue.

1840 Disraeli *Corr. w. Sister* (1886) 15 Great panic exists here, and even the knowing ones...look very pale and blue.

1861 *Sat. Rev. 23 Nov. 534* We encounter...the miserable Dr. Blandling in what is called...a blue funk.

1883 *Harper's Mag. Mar. 600/1* I'm not a bit blue over the prospect.

Whatever the source, by the beginning of this century *Blues* was a word in common use by Afro-Americans:

Blue

Standin' at de winder, Feelin' kind o' glum,
Listenin' to de raindrops, Play de kettle drum,
Lookin' cros de medders, Swimmin' lak a sea;
Lawd 'a' mussy on us, What's de good o' me?

Mandy, bring my banjo, Bring de chillen in,
Come in f'om de kitchen, I feel sick ez sin.
Call in Uncle Isaac, Call Aunt Hannah, too,
Tain't no use in talkin', Chile, I's sholy blue.²

Paul Dunbar (1872-1906)

The word seemed a natural paint for the songs that grew in the Delta, and created a family that eventually "covered the Earth".

This essay will look at the early blues, in music and lyrics from 1900-1930, capturing a collecting expedition that has spanned the globe- grabbing, buying, copying, and photocopying tracks on paper before it all disappears. But why capture on paper music that, by its very nature, does not fit on the staff of the Western World? The aural media

of records and CDs might seem a better home. It is not simply because it is there; it is because we need to have it here- to have the music and lyrics before our eyes so one can create customized variations. The blues are a quintessential personal experience. The song is never the same thing twice. It flickers in the shadow of our emotions, and flames when exposed to our fears.

THE PLACE: Drained and cleared just before the Civil War, the Mississippi Delta, a flat, black expanse of alluvium stretching from Memphis to Vicksburg, and bounded on the west by the Mississippi River and on the East by the Yazoo, is now split by Highway 61. The country, Delta, or folk blues that grew here migrated along the highways and rails to become the city or urban blues. It spread to Chicago, Texas and West Coast blues. It infused jazz, and its genes are found in rhythm-and-blues and country music. Our mapping will be limited to the early years, the first 30 years of this century. It will focus, not on the people, whose memories have been enlarged to legends, but on the simple words and music that need no idolatry.

THE HISTORY: The Senegambia Slave Coast in Africa was dry, and had no great forests. Instead of the great wooden drums found further south, there was a wealth of stringed instruments, ranging from one stringed gourd fiddles to two- to four-stringed guitar-like lutes. Because of close contact with the Berber and Arab cultures to the North there was a vocal tradition of solo singing and long melodic lines unusual in African music. Group singing was polyphonic and polyrhythmic. The harmony was not the resolving harmony of European music, but parallel melodies sung at intervals of a third, or a fourth and fifth, from each other.³ The latter two diodic harmonies did not mix with the former.⁴

Further south, in the Congo-Angola region, where Bantu and pygmy influence was felt, the choral music was among the most highly developed in Africa. Even in call/response singing the leader and chorus often overlapped. Solos, duets, and trios emerge from a dense choral background. Some vocal music included whooping (jumping an octave) and falsetto.

The music in general was participative, where anyone could join in response; or involved hocketing, where a multitude of one or two-note parts blended in a complex polyphony. But paramount was the vocality of the music. The Yoruba and Akan people speak a pitch-tone language, like Chinese, in which a syllable's meaning depends upon pitch profile. In Chinese "ma" can mean mother-in-law, horse, and several other things. In the African pitch-tone languages, a dropping frequency often conveys deep emotion. In their music flutes, drummers, xylophones and partially vocalized dialogue entwined in figurative or literal speech patterns. Instrumentalists, especially flutists, sang or hummed while blowing to give voice-like character to their music. Voice masking, originating in ceremonial face masks, led to the incorporation of bizarre chest growls, and false bass notes. The rhythmic quality of "swing," not in the jazz-sense, but of "a forward-propelling directionality" was prominent. All these are found in the blues.

Woke up this mornin', with a sound in my head,
 Woke up to new sounds, rattlin' round in my head,
 Singing of things, things that were long, long dead.

THE BLENDING: All that merged and blended as the Africans were forcefully migrated to the American South. The musical strain was re-hybridized with Southern white religious songs, British folk music, and plantation orchestral themes. This, in turn, was reshaped by the need of spirituals to encourage the soul, work-songs to relieve drudgery, field shouts to communicate or relieve loneliness in the vast acreage, ring shouts for emotional Christian worship, jump-ups (short, unrelated lines over chorded accompaniment), narrative ballads, and a pervasive rhythmic percussion of hand, feet, and body. Not being hampered by keyboard instruments, the vocal tradition used intonations determined by natural vocal harmonic resonances.^{5 6}

Easy Rider, what's your music done?
 See See Rider, where's your music from?
 If I don't catch you, I'll have lost my fun.

THE EMERGENCE: By the end of the nineteenth century an oral and aural tradition of narrative phrases, and inexpensive, simple stringed musical accompaniment provided a pool from which talented performers could improvise music for themselves, and for others. The original country blues usually have as common features a twelve measure AAB structure, bent or flattened blue notes, a shuffling triplet rhythm, a half-speaking vocal quality, a pervasive syncopation, and a special modality. The blues mode will not work without syncopation, and the twelve measure scheme will not work without the blues mode. Among the framework of the mode are the flatted blue notes-- a microtonal affair of a quarter-tone, or even a semitone as they must be on keyboard instruments. They may involve a glide either upward or downward, a slur between notes a semitone apart so that there are two blue notes, or even a microtonal shake. This, and the inherent vocalization of the melody line, makes the genre a natural for the recorder which can both play music and speak. The decreasing frequency of blue note use is the third, seventh, fifth (and the sixth). Any selection of the blue notes can be found mixed up with ordinary major intervals. They provide a kind of melodic instability, analogous to harmonic dissonance, which can be resolved.^{4 7}

That theory stuff's OK, a'hangin' on your wall,
 Oh Yeh, theory's OK, a'hangin' on your bare wall,
 But theory's no good at all, when you get that Blue's call.

Why an awkward interval like the minor third comes so naturally to the human voice, and to the blues, is an interesting question. But it has precedent, such as Gregorian chant and schoolyard songs. The origin may lie in the filtering of musical notes by the basic formant frequencies of the vocal tract. Men, women, and children are a minor a major third apart, respectively, in this regard. Some musicologists divide the blues mode into two tetrachords. The flatted seventh mirrors the flatted third in this analysis. Others examine tribal quartal and quintal harmonies, and note that fusion of the two

diotic forms produces a scale that contains all the blues notes. We'll let you decide, as others theorize, whether or not the origin of blue notes involved pentatonic African scales that didn't "fit" diatonic Western scales. This speculation suggests that slaves, attempting to resolve the misfit, bent some notes out of shape to fuse the two. Whatever happened, worked.

What my seat can't stand, Mama, my mind won't bear,
 What my mind don't stand, Mama, my ear won't hear,
 I like the blues, Mama, it's the theory I fear.

The center of gravity of the blues lies toward the beginning, in contrast to much Western music where it lies toward the end. The dropping frequency of the blue notes may reflect the tendency in pitch-tone languages in Africa to drop for conveyance of emotion. The blues mode is a ladder of thirds that often goes a third above the dominant, or a third below the tonic. Sometimes it does both in the same tune. In folk music the contrast between relative major and minor is so slight that the modes almost fuse into one. There are some blues tunes which are entirely in the major, and others where every third is minor, and an infinite number of combinations in between. Both Cecil Sharp, the song-catcher of the Appalachians and England, and his contemporary, Percy Granger, commented on the "single loosely knit modal folk-song scale" of folk-music from the U.K., and their exports to the southeastern U.S..⁴ The blues is a unique American fusion about whose origins there is much confusion.

It takes a long handled shovel, to dig a six foot hole,
 It takes a long handled hammer, to break a great big stone,
 It takes a long-winded theory to satisfy my soul.

THE RHYTHM: The African cross-rhythm influence on blues rhythm is often blatant, sometimes subtle. In the blues the distinction between simple and compound time breaks down, with duplets and triplets freely interspersed. Think about the hemiola of courant and galliard dances. It became concretized in the triple time of the waltz and minuet. But its relationships (1,2;1,2;1,2 vs. 1,2,3;1,2,3) to African drum rhythms is obvious. In the blues, the distinction is not so much between simple and compound, but between simple and [compound+simple]. It is uncommon for a common-time beat in the blues to go on without being disrupted by some irregular rhythm. Particularly at the end of phrases, four/four patterns will be broken by two/four or three/four patterns.

Syncopation methods may involve (1) a Scotch snap, creating an accent where it would not normally be found, (2) a note replaced with a rest, or (3) a premature accented note. These techniques are not exclusive to the blues, and may be found in British folk-dance music, American banjo tunes, and Celtic music. The mixing and hybridization that took place in the planting fields as African slaves and immigrant indentured servants from the British Isles worked together can't be ignored. Just don't be afraid to lean (delay) your notes to get the rhythm you want, when you want it.

I'm a long-line skinner, from places out West,
 I'm a long-line skinner, waitin' for a rest,
 Lookin' for the teacher, that'll teach me best.

MELODY AND ACCOMPANIMENT: The interaction between the singing and instrument, or in their alternation, is characteristic of the blues. The bluesman is not accompanied by the instrument; he sings with it. Therefore the metrical precision, the accuracy of the notes, and the melody as a whole are less important than the emotion of the synergy. Let yourself go in that relationship. Bend (flatten) the notes where you wish, lean (delay) them where you want, and let the harmony follow. This is in keeping with the blues' general independence of melody and accompaniment.

To many theorists the "traditional" twelve measure blues instrumental bass accompaniment pattern of I IV I V I seems to resurrect memories of the Gregory Walker I IV I V: I IV I-V I pattern (ca. 1530), rather than the usual I IV V I pattern of the European classics. The Walker pattern was probably kept alive by semi-professional musicians who found audiences liked the potential to-and-fro pattern, and by the mid-1800s it was undergoing a revival. Many historians tie together Gregory Walker/blues pairs such as *Darling Nellie Gray/Railroad Bill*, *Before I'd Be a Slave/Hattie Bell*, and *Beckie Dead/Troubled in Mind*. Others tie the basic harmony to the diody in parallel fourths and fifths referred to earlier. But as the blues matured, increasingly complex chordal sequences appeared.

One is not dealing with classical harmonic progressions. Although African and European architectures fused in the blues, it's dangerous to analyze too deeply. Some authors have even examined the possibility of attempted incorporation of the Neapolitan or German augmented-sixths into traditional blues! The concept of a double tonic suggests an actual modulation to a new key, and does give some idea of the abrupt nature of the changes often found. But, Van der Merwe prefers the term "shifting levels," since it is more vague and non-committal.⁴ A shift of level is a basic and primal matrix. Renaissance dance music used the technique, and it faded before the pressures of the Baroque. In the twentieth century, blues reinvented it for its own reasons (cf. boogie-woogie bass). As the song lyrics say, "Why they changed it I can't say, Maybe they liked it better that way" (from *Istanbul*, by Kennedy and Simon). It's probably best to leave the theorists at this point, with their arguments of who was most adept to adopt or adapt, and just live and grow with the blues.

Oh Mama, It's just a little stick of wood,
 Mama, Just a lot of bitty holes and wood,
 But, Mama, it'll let my soul leak out if I could

THE WORDS: A blues stanza consists of a rhymed couplet, each line divided by a caesura (strong pause) and end-stopped. The vocal part of the blues phrase (the call) generally ends before the phrase itself is completed. Inspirations for an improvised section (the response) may be drawn from the preceding melody, or involve entirely new material. Samuel Charters, the famous blues researcher, always implied the question— "Is poetry necessarily the work of a single mind?"⁶ If so, the blues fail

the criterion. But, if you accept folk-artists who blend traditional phrases in new ways, listen to the moods and messages of these verses:

"When a woman gets the blues, she wrings her hands and cries,
I say, when a woman is blue, she pulls her hair and cries,
But when a man gets the blues, he grabs a train and rides."
(unidentified)⁷

"You can lead a horse to water, can't make 'em drink,
Send your kids to school, but can't make 'em think,
Dig a pit for someone else, 2 to 1 you'll trip in it yourself."
(sung by Brownie McGhee, *Life is a Gamble*)

"The water keeps risin', families sinkin' down,
Fifty men and children, come to sink and drown,
I couldn't see nobody home, and was no one to be foun'."
(Charley Patton, 1927 Mississippi Flood, *High Water Everywhere*)

"Early one mornin', just about half past three,
You done something, that's really worryin' me,
Come on Baby, take a little walk with me,
Back to the same old place, where we long to be."
(Robert Lockwood, *Take a Little Walk With Me*)

"Just listen to this song I'm singin brother, you know its true,
If you're black and got to work for a living, here's what people
will say,
Now if you're white, you're all right, And if you're brown, stick
around; But if you're black, oh brother, Get back, get back, get back."
(Big Bill Broonzy, *Black, Brown, and White Blues*)

Sleepy John Estes said:

The blues is a feeling. You got something happen to you, and then you can sing it off.
It's a feeling that comes to you when there's anything you want to do and can't. And
when you can sing it off in a song, that gives you a thrill."⁷

THIS HOUSE ON FIRE: The blues fire has been burning for a century, and its smoke permeates the air of American music. But the fog of time obscures our vision of the first two decades of the blues. Myth and reality mingle, history is continuously rewritten. From where does the excellent blues book, *This House on Fire*, derive its name? Is it from John Donne, which led to William Styron's book title *Set This House on Fire*, referring to the *body*? Does it come from Edward Taylor's poem?

An anvill Sparke, rose higher,
And in thy Temple falling,
Almost set this house on fire.⁸

Does it come from Bacon's comment, "It is the nature of extreme self-lovers, as they will set a house on fire, and it were but to roast their eggs"? Or, is it really from *Southern Blues* by Ma Rainey?

House catch on fire, and ain't no water 'round,
Throw your trunk out the window, buildin' burn on down.⁸

That's the gamut of the blues. It is easy to create a maze of truth in any desired image.

My first whiff of the psychogenic and addictive charm of the blues began in the musty rooms of the William Ransom Hogan Archives at Tulane University, where I held the sheet music for the Furber-Braham *Limehouse Blues*, a titular blues published in 1922. This curious mixture of jazz, dixie and blues has since become a staple with John Coltrane, Stan Kenton's *Festschrift* Mellophonium Orchestra, and Bobby Byrne:

Like a long, long sigh, Never go away;
Queer sob sound, Sad, mad blues.

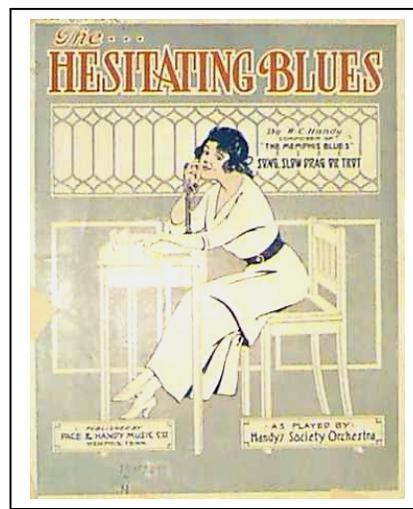
(Limehouse Blues)

Our passion for sound, and sound recordings, tends to focus attention on a blues' life that begins with the first "race" recording in 1920 of *Crazy Blues*, sung by Mamie Smith, and composed by Perry Bradford. Ralph Peer of Okeh records coined that term to include blues, gospel, jazz and ragtime. Bessie Smith recorded *Down Hearted Blues* for Columbia in 1923, and Ma Rainey made her first cut that year of *Bo-Weavil Blues*.⁹ But the blues had obviously already painted the docklands of London, and Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* was just a year away. The blues was poised to jump from the Mississippi Delta farmlands to the foyer of Carnegie Hall, where W. C. Handy and the Jubilee Singers played in 1928. What had seemingly so suddenly created such a matured and varied collection?

Some perspective: Scott Joplin wrote *Maple Leaf Rag* in 1899. America's popular music from 1900-1920, sheet music, was heavily populated by black composers. The first jazz recording was made in 1917. Louis Armstrong, and the Hot Five, recorded for Okeh in 1925 with trumpet, clarinet, sax, trombone and banjo! A lot of music and memories fed this blues fire. Copies of old black newspapers advertising and reporting the blues were already beginning to yellow with age in 1923.

DEEP BLUES: Most views of the blues are a phantasmagoria of illusions painted with modern pastels: bone-weary, dusty, bib-overall clad performers with row crops for a background, sequin-gowned songstresses in a broken down bar; a raunchy tune in a juke joint. It is, of course, a vibrant art form that is reborn every generation in new minds. Today's record and CD listeners, often focusing on the anguished or blatantly suggestive lyrics, don't think about the psychological distance between the performers and their original live audiences, a distance which might have made the lyrics close to humorous, and certainly the rhythm right for stompin'.

Our retrospective image, reflected from the spinning black disk, is usually of a blues canvas of realism that was bi-colored; first with a ground color of

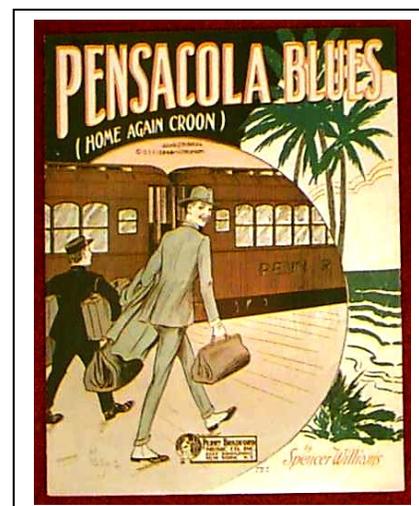
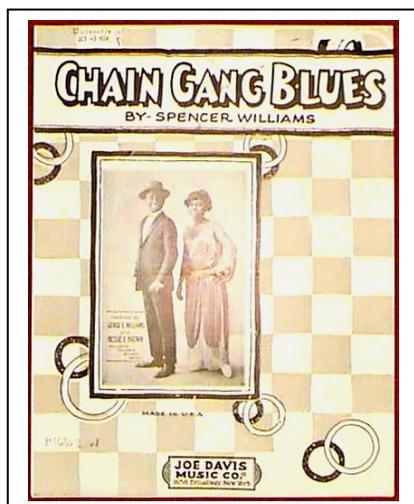


lost loves, lost hopes, lost futures, and then with accentuating speckles and blobs of raunchy lyrics. Does it paint a perfect portrait of a people and an era before civil rights and equal opportunity, a Hogarthian image of the ills an insensitive society had created?

The race records' frat-house double *entendres* of squeezed lemons, broken yo-yos, black snakes, mountains, valleys, or jelly-rolls, may seem somewhat sophomoric by today's standards, but they caught someone's ear. The records appeared under Decca, Columbia, Paramount and Victor labels, as well as those of Vocalion, Okeh, Bluebird and Black Swan. Sometimes the titles were segregated into a different catalogue, sometimes they were at "the back of the bus," sometimes they were mixed with spirituals, sermons and novelties. What was the origin of the themes, their distribution and impact four generations ago? If such songs were exclusively from, prominent in, and characteristic of the black culture, they risked being seen as reinforcement for the fears of sexual prowess, lasciviousness and miscegenation that walked by night with the xenophobic Klan and lynch mobs. The 'teens were still a time of lynching and race riots. Perhaps they originated in the half-buzzed humor that seems funny the night before the morning after. Quite probably they were pieces inserted in the market stream for purchase inducing shock value. But, if so, who created the personae? One might ask the same question about *KISS*, *MegaDeth*, *Skid Row*, *Pantera*, or *Marilyn Manson*. Bessie Smith seems to have recorded anything she wanted, as did many of the most famous guitarists. They paid the piper and could play the tune. But, did the rest also lead, follow, or were they pushed? Tolstoy (*Anna Karenina*), and the Greeks who preceded him, pointed out that "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way".

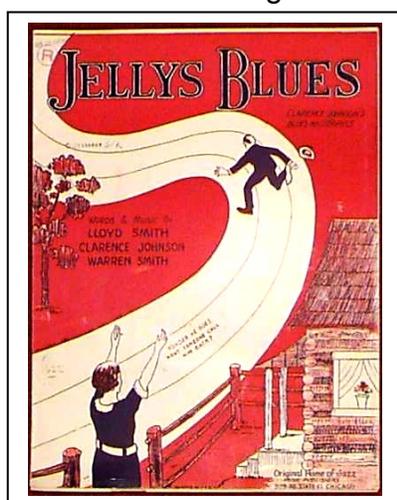
The latter affords more permutations for pathos, plots and songs. Society's taste-buds switch from Austin's *Emma* to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (and back again) for many reasons. The brushes, pens, and tones of art follow the beat. Even country music now enfolds *Achy Breaky Heart* (Cyrus) and *The Whiskey Ain't Workin'* (Tritt). Timing for the blues was perfect.

World War I resulted in some nine million dead, and ~125,000 American soldiers killed. It ended on the morbid note of the 1918-19 Spanish Flu pandemic that resulted in ~3 times as many deaths, some 600,000 in the United States. The shocks disturbed the Nation's view of itself and of life. Old social patterns were beginning to fracture. People of all colors were on the move. In Chicago, the population had increased by one-third since 1900, but the frustrated black population had quadrupled. Part of society wanted music of its own to claim. Part wanted a trip to a foreign country; and it didn't want to worry about its own problems, just listen to someone else's. The color of blues shifted with time and latitude: folk-like country



blues, a synergistic fusion of instrument and voice; classic blues, entertaining, sophisticated music and lyrics supported by female vocalists and small bands; and city blues, slicker, harder, crueller. What determines what's popular to whom? The composers? The society? The publishers? It is possibly imprudent and unwise to totally ignore "business" and psychoanalyze blues performers and their society on the basis of lyrics, a time-warped social conscience, and a need to create a romantic vision. Simply put- what sells, plays. It's difficult to know what was in the minds of the very early blues composers and performers. Certainly one of the things in the minds of the record publishers was money. They were well aware of the moods, sensitivities and mores of the period. Performers of a different race who could push the envelope were a license to stamp bestsellers for blacks, and some whites.

Statisticians become concerned when the sampled population is biased. Paul Oliver, and his colleagues, comment— "The roles of talent scouts and music salesmen ... both in promoting and, by the limitations of their tastes and spheres of contact, in limiting the range of singers they put on wax, has only slowly been recognized."¹⁰ The original mensuration and selection of blues materials generated a long stack of black dominoes, shellac records that fed back music into the originating environment, changing the creation process by encouraging cloning of successes, and altering the memories of the creation and the creators. Even field studies affected the genre. The force of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle is inexorable: measuring something alters it.



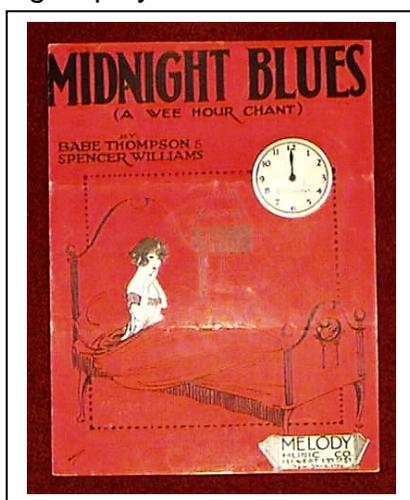
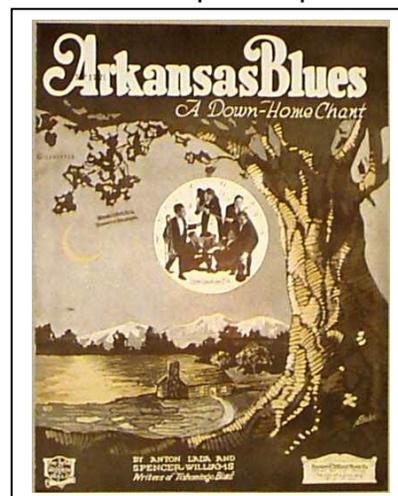
But the same authors then proceed to psychoanalyze a biased population:

Throughout blues there runs a strong vein of complaint which sometimes finds expression in words of anger. Frequently it tends to be laconic or passive and occasionally has more than a note of self-pity. If blues was expressive of the human condition of individuals rather than an orchestration of protesting voices, it did not have much to say about personal relationships. Often chauvinistic and blatantly sexual, but gaining from its honesty and forthrightness, blues was affirmative in its glorification of the life-force. Probably three-quarters of recorded blues are about the relationship between the sexes, but the high proportion of these that convey

sublimated aggression, bitterness, and disappointment suggests that they are symbolic of more profound psycho-social problems. Seldom does the blues have more than an oblique element of protest which is communicated more by canalizing frustration or anger into statements of broken relationships than through overt declarations of resistance or defiance. ... Some ... describe disasters or personal incidents; crime, prostitution, gambling, alcohol and imprisonment have always been popular themes. Many are aggressively sexual, and there is much in ... that is consciously and subconsciously symbolic of the (artist's) perception of his relationship with society.

You can fill in the ellipses with the "blues," or equally with any of the following words- movies, TV, rock, heavy metal or books. A differential diagnosis of the case isn't clear.

NOTHING BUT THE BLUES: Most histories of the blues are often monophonic paeans that ignore the counterpoint with social, technical and political surroundings. The blues' beginnings in field-shouts, coon songs, gospel, and black personal tragedy cannot be denied. The influx of blacks into the Delta in the late 1800s and early 1900s created a musical mixing pot. Early performers, black and white, exchanged techniques as they attempted to please their audiences. It involved an awkward triangle of musicians made up from suppressed slave descendants, a rising Afro-American middle class, and indigenous whites. In the possibly apocryphal 1902-3 encounter at Tutwiler Station by Handy, when he first heard a "lean, loose-jointed Negro" play the music that would label him the "Father of



the Blues," one can easily sense the class distinctions between skins of the same color— "His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages."¹¹ At the same time, somewhat musically segregated white musicians played to racially segregated audiences. This musical *potpourri* slowly matured in the heat of the Delta sun. But then change came. Agricultural and industrial technology began to push and pull people off the land and into the cities— first towns like Memphis, and then further North. Some say the music became more sophisticated; others feel it was stained by commercial exploitation.

The first black owned publishing company, N. Clark Smith and J. Berne Barbour, was established in 1903. By 1920 there were three more on Tin Pan Alley, including Perry Bradford. *Mayor Crump Blues (Mr. Crump Don't Low It)* was written in 1909, and the derived *Memphis Blues* was published in 1912 by W. C. Handy. That was also the year of Leroy "Lasses" White's *Nigger Blues*, Lloyd Garret's *Dallas Blues*, all titular blues; and the Wand/Garrett 12 bar *Dallas Blues*. Some label the Ayer/Brown 1911 hit *Oh, You Beautiful Doll*, with its opening 12 measure format, as the first published blues. Handy's eclectic *St. Louis Blues* was a late-comer in 1914. And then came the Great War. The need for manual labor to feed the factories led to further migration, and the American melting pot was given a big stir. Blacks and whites were more strongly mixed, and a sharper grayness began to develop. After the Armistice, a heady sense of euphoric release and a desire for personal freedom swept the Nation. Society moved at a dizzy pace, despite further tensions created by recession in the early '20s. The technical world was ready to make things hum, sing and dance.

The tinfoil phonograph cylinder of 1877 had, by the early 1900s, evolved into a plethora of platters and players-- National Gramophone (Berliner); Victor (Berliner, Johnson); National Phonograph (Edison);



Columbia (Bell-Tainter); Vanitrolas; Zonophones; and Polly Portables. Berliner's hard rubber media gave way to Duranoid, a shellac-based plastic. At the turn of the century, Gramophone's talent scout, Fred Gaisberg, had signed Caruso, and record-making turned serious. In 1917 the Original Dixieland Jazz Band cut its first record. Subsequently, ASCAP was formed assuring that someone would be paid for performances. By 1920 lapsing phonograph patents opened the doors to over 200 "generic" manufacturers. The \$75-150 sticker prices began to drop. By the mid-1920s, the box-lid stylus and paper diaphragm speakers, which replaced the large metal and paper horns, made the portable possible.¹² A 1926 version looks modern!

The New Orleans sound walked in the door of white homes and became a national craze. Mark Thornton writes:

National prohibition of alcohol (1920-33)--the 'noble experiment'--was undertaken to reduce crime and corruption, solve social problems, reduce the tax burden created by prisons and poorhouses, and improve health and hygiene in America. The results of that experiment clearly indicate that it was a miserable failure on all counts.

Except one— it built a thriving speakeasy culture around jazzmen and bluesmen who brought their sound to Chicago. Record companies capitalized on the captive pool, producing label and generic race records that had the lure of skin color and racy tones. Electronic recording opened up the percussion section of the combo and sounds that used to make the stylus bounce could make the room hop. The treble and bass of recorded music improved.

In 1919 RCA was in a strong position in wireless communication. It held substantial patent rights from the Marconi Company, the DeForest patents of the triode valve, and the Westinghouse patents on heterodyne reception and regeneration. In 1916 its contracts manager, David Sarnoff, had proposed that stations be built for the purpose of transmitting speech and music, and that a radio music box be designed for sale to the general public. In 1920 Horne's Department Store in Pittsburgh began selling Army surplus wireless sets for \$10. Westinghouse began mass production and signed on-the-air with KDKA. Soon the country was listening to more wireless stations than could fit in the bandwidth. By late 1922 there were over 200 stations and ~1,000,000 receivers in the United States and Canada. A 1923 desk-top receiver was sophisticated. By 1924 there were more than 1400 stations in operation in America. But spectrum crowding and business maneuvers darkened the airwaves, and by 1926 there were only ~800, as NBC began network consolidation with 25 stations. In 1927 it split into the Red and Blue networks, and later started a third. Many homes had access to a radio, and airwaves are color blind. Hear it, like it, buy it, play it. No wonder in 1927 almost 1,000,000 phonographs were produced, ~100,000,000 records sold.^{13 14}



Entrepreneurs saw the opportunities in "cover" artists that swept record buyers into a feeding frenzy that followed certain selected performers. The blues bulge began with the female classic blues singers, but by 1928 Blind Lemon Jefferson, Papa Charlie

Jackson, and Mississippi John Hurt had strummed their style and the guitar into the blues. Jackson recorded *Lawdy Lawdy Blues* for Paramount in 1924. The public, black and white, became attuned to the blues, and scores of male performers were lured to the recording studios. Blind Lemon Jefferson certainly left some of his other musical material behind as he made his first trip to Chicago in 1926, where he cut *Long Lonesome Blues* and *Got the Blues* for Paramount. The Southern songsters' large and varied repertoire was chopped to emphasize the blues. But what blues? Mississippi Delta blues-- a symbiotic relationship between a harsh guttural guitar and raspy voice; East Texas blues-- leaner guitar, breathier, higher voice, more percussive; and East Coast Piedmont blues- more complex, folk music fusion, ragtime styling. The Delta and Texas styles migrated easily to the city blues. The moans became a flood; and then came the Great Depression. In 1932 only 40,000 phonographs were made, 6,000,000 records sold. Another Boom had become a Bust. Free radio and the talkies (*The Jazz Singer*, 1929) became the popular escape. And then came another war.

The blues encysted, survived the '40s, were revived in the '60s, then re-revived once more. Along the way Time's Arrow had lengthened the triangle of artisans into a prism, whose other end represented the various city and regional blues, titular blues, and all the blues' descendants. The faces of this triangular money prism mirrored changing tastes in popular music, the fiscal flights of record publishing houses, and the maw of the communications industries. Performers and song writers are continuously specularly and diffusely reflected, refracted, bent and shaped by passage through that prism. Market and money make the music, rather than the music making the market. Taste and technology do the rest. Electric guitars and amplifiers generated acoustic bursitis in the finger picked runs and ragtime rhythms of Piedmont blues. The American Federation of Musicians strike in 1942-1943, championed by James C. Petrillo, banned new commercial recording. When Victor and Columbia refused to pay AFM royalties, they lost preeminence. The smaller companies that filled the vacuum stressed gospel and rhythm 'n blues and the Piedmont sounds faded. The hues of the blues changed forever. Most artists change their style to meet the demands of a bulimic, but fickle, producer, press and public. Big Bill Broonzy couldn't or wouldn't, and paid the price. B. B. King did, and does, and gains the rewards; but you can occasionally see his soul in his eyes as he plays what is demanded. Time warps all music, but perception of the blues has also been molded by our minds and needs.

BLACK, BROWN, TAN, WHITE and GREEN: Jazz is largely an instrumental sound. It could, and did, migrate from black to white quickly. The lyrical blues evolution proved more difficult. Most white performers originally lacked the experience and vocabulary, and couldn't or wouldn't make the journey. The blues were black. The white Austin brothers' *Chattanooga Blues* (Columbia 1927) was issued under the race series, and the composers sought "insult" relief damages of \$250,000.¹⁵ Other white composers/performers just chose black-face pseudonyms. It took World War II, social change and a different name, to create a new white blues minstrel show. With the white rediscovery of blues in the sixties, the fan-tasia altered the blues sounds and memories drastically. Musty songs in the music bins that would never have played well to solely black audiences were rehabilitated; and blues' origins were again re-sculpted. The

color of money is always green, but the blues have many shades. Francis Davis comments¹⁶:

The blues revivalists of the civil rights era tended to be acoustic ideologues, white liberals in the awkward position of rejecting as tainted goods the amplified blues to which masses of black adults in rural as well as urban areas then still listened. The rigid, qualitative distinction drawn between “country” and (“city”) blues must have amused such performers as Lightnin’ Hopkins and John Lee Hooker, who were used to changing with the times and giving an audience whatever they perceived it to want. Ironically, by the end of the 1960s, (city) blues was all the rage. It was the country performers who were eclipsed. As Peter Guralnick points out in *Feel Like Going Home* ‘To the record producers of the late 1950s teenagers had just about the same status as blacks thirty years earlier and just about the same appeal. They represented a huge but totally unpredictable market subject to the whims and taste and fancy no sane person could possibly predict.’ ... You won’t get many of them to admit it, but some of the idealistic white men who were going South to hunt for elderly blues singers must have been bitterly disappointed. ... On records as young men, the singers of the twenties and thirties sounded like black men risking their necks (literally) to assert their right to be treated as men. ... What a shock it must have been for the whites to realize that these were men who had survived as long as they had by saying as little as possible around white folks.”

NO SUCH THING AS THE BLUES: But we need heroes and heroines, and we create myths to perpetuate some lost part of our existence. To paraphrase Timberlake Wertebaker: “Myths are oblique images of a yearned for truth reverberating through time”. Why else would we recast and deify the blues-men and -women. Think about the truth and roles of Ned Kelly and Wyatt Earp, or George Custer, and “Chinese” Gordon. Explain Madonna and Michael Jackson. Try to find reality in the reworked histories and mysteries of Son House, Robert Johnson, or Leadbelly. A writer, Tyehimba Jess, paints in poetry a sketch of Leadbelly describing his teacher, Blind Lemon Jefferson:

...he found my true face, stretched those knuckles jointed roots from ebony trunk of wrist and ashen palm to grow as one with the wood of his twelve string. There, he told me how a man can trade pieces of himself for a song. An eye here, and ankle there, a ball if he’s not careful, and the fret board’s friction that turns silken skin to callus. I remember how he bottlenecked blues caught between the teeth of each tin pan alley tune, nailed it in a patent leather stomp, moved streetcorner crowds down another mile of his train tracked voice with every beat. I remember how every song stitched together my story ...¹⁷

The heroes and heroines of the blues’ myths are unusual. Blemishes aren’t hidden, they are enhanced. Tragedy is accentuated, made mysterious by convoluted, conflicting tales. A palpable sense of self-guilt often creeps into readers’ minds. Perhaps that is the point. It all makes good reading, focuses the attention, and pulls you into the music. The lyrics, harmony, and persona become a synergistic trinity. Of late, it has often had a subliminal or overt social message

How good were the early bluesmen and women? Stephan J. Gould has written, in his collected essays entitled *Full House*, about the right-hand wall that represents the limit of human performance.¹⁸ In areas where we are distant from that wall it is

necessary to make temporally relative comparisons of individual achievement. We generally move closer to that wall as knowledge of an area accumulates. Our expectations of performance increase, transcendence is required, and comparisons of non-contemporary individuals gentler. With recent advances in biochemistry and genetics, for example, Pasteur might otherwise be labeled incompetent in comparison to Watson and Crick; whereas in Pasteur's time he was beyond the cutting edge. With advances in biogenetics, Watson and Crick might be otherwise considered inferior to a brand new Ph.D.. On the other hand, once we come within touching distance of the right-hand wall there is hardly room for improvement. Performance variance decreases around the mean. This is certainly true in many sports, such as baseball, male marathon running, and horse racing. In human activities the wall is reached as our understanding and control of the psychomotor and kinetic facets mature, and mind/body limits are reached. In musical performance, which has been near the wall for some time, fingers can only move so dexterously and fast, vocal expression and articulation have reached their limit. Each generation can have its "best," with rigorous absolute standards. Continuous transcendence is not demanded, repetition of maximal excellence is the goal. Evaluations between "the best" non-contemporaries are illusionary. Would you care to claim that Liszt was better than Gould? Or Biggs than Bach? Try comparing Robert Johnson with B. B. King or Eric Clapton.

Yet deification of music performers occurs. The phenomenon is not new. Lisztomania was certainly real. But, new ingredients in the fame factory were introduced with the phonograph, radio, and TV. We can admit that blues performers' variance was greater in the early 1900s, although the mean hasn't shifted much. Certainly the luthier's art is currently better than it has ever been. We certainly recognize that a performer's prominence has increasingly become dictated less by open public evaluation and more by controlled and manipulated public exposure. But, the boundary between nostalgia and nostomania is as thin as that between fan and fanatic. Pantheons of the past and present are easy to erect, harder to deconstruct, particularly in popular music. There is no danger, however, unless we begin to believe our dreams.

THE BLUES LINE: Listening to an old 78 RPM recording with all its surface noise in our personal surround-sound entertainment center, walkin' a CD that has more fidelity than it ought, or rompin' in a grassy bowl snaked with a Laocoon tangle of video-camera cables can't bring back what once was. Our skin is too thick, our ears too insensitive, our images too bright, our minds in a different age. I like to play solo blues on an alto recorder as a solitary escape, creating halcyon days. Is that a comfortable venue for the blues? Busking the blues in Bonn, Brussels, and Basel is as close as I can come to the real world of the early blues. The street crowds are a challenge. When the audience starts to fidget, that's the time to switch it. And the blues always brings them back. The *Freie Strasse* in Basel, with francs at my feet. Crowds in the *rue de L'Aspic* in Nîmes, but no coins in the cup. It made me think of the white-stubbled brown face reflecting from the wet cement during a cold autumn drizzle in New Orleans— his sax blowing cold blue blues. A man with no audience. A musician more skillful than I. What was he thinking? We can put our mind in gray-scale mode, and try to sense in an Ansel Adams world what his blues mood might have been.

The blues notes had been strumming the courses of the twelve stringed instrument called the musical staff for “quite a spell” before the Depression ended in another war. Where has all the music gone? Some of the primary sources lie partially catalogued in seminal collections such as the Hogan and the Performing Arts Collection of the Library of Congress. Superb transcriptions of the recorded works have been lovingly crafted by the Lomaxes (*père et fils*), Stefan Grossman, Jerry Silverman, and others. Publishing houses have carried the tune, particularly Hal Leonard, Creative Concepts, and Mel Bay. Sporadic specialty books focus on the heroes and heroines of the blues. For the rest, blow dust off the scattered piles on the floor, gently smooth the wrinkled pages, brush the fly-specks off the covers, and find the blues.

Digging out the old blues is an archeological expedition in melody and lyrics. Until multimedia books are common, we'll have to make-do here with just some covers and words that typify the drifting blues. Let's examine some of the strata of those very early years:

LUCY'S BONES BLUES: In 1974 Johanson and Taieb unearthed the most complete *Australopithecus* skeleton yet found. Over 40% of the skeletal framework is available. The bones belonged to a twenty-year-old female who died about three million years ago. She walked erect, but still retained arboreal abilities. She was named after the popular song *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds*.

Oh, my music is black,

Yeah, my music is tan,

It'll catch the blues any which way I can.

(“black-and-tans,” Reconstruction term for a mixed black and white constituency)

The “Lucy's Bones” of the blues poses a more difficult problem, even though we are closer to the source. Bones survive; sounds fade in the air, paper crumbles, and memories alter. The blues' evolutionary highway is traveled by a triple helix of black, brown, and tan strands whose make-up was described earlier in this essay: (1) the black songster strand reaching back to West Africa, (2) the growing black middle-class stretching back for over a century, and (3) the mixed white immigrant American population. Historically, the strands are held together by bonds that are sometimes strong, sometimes weak. The relative thickness, robustness, and contribution of each strand varies with time, and the helix takes on tertiary structures that kink and bend along the evolutionary highway, like the proline amino-acid bends in proteins. A vehicle often out of control, the various blues strands veered back-and-forth across the racial center-line of musical evolution.

Our historical dilemma would be solved if the musical equivalent of the Human Genome Project were possible, permitting a complete, week-by-week analysis of the strands. One valuable tool would be a melodic concordance of all the available scores, looking for the musical equivalent of DNA fingerprints among the notes. Science envisages a mapping of the sequence of the three nucleotide bases contained in the some 100,000 human genes, involving 10^{10} base pairs. A search involving groups made up from 12 notes in some 50,000 tunes seems somewhat easier. A six note sequence would have ~three million combinations. Software approaches to the musical concordance are possible using a Standard Music Descriptor Language. A prosodic

verse analysis is within our reach as a result of work done for the emerging digital libraries. Much of the raw material is available in various collections, but it is unfortunately not in electronic form. Some of the best collections, like submitted copyright materials, are a database management nightmare. Wayne Shirley, of the Library of Congress, has suggested that this source might be scanned for those blues entries showing “1C” notation (submitted but not printed), and “2C” notation (submitted and published).¹⁹ One could then plot, graph, and statistically analyze structure and commercialization of the various blues types. Several of us have manually addressed such an attack and found it productive, but daunting. It is a technique that could fill in the existing time gap between the Jim Crow laws and Handy’s reputed “first” publication of a blues tune, and possibly resolve the blues/ragtime co-evolution. The fossil record is there, like *Australopithecus*. But, what can be done about material that has vanished, leaving lacunae in a triple helix? The only available approach appears to be suggesting possible connections between extant musical materials and historical knowledge, similar to James Burke’s *Connections*.

SPECTRAL COLORS: It is appropriate at this point to examine more closely the interlocking jig-saw puzzle of technological, societal and political forces that blended the blues. A musicologist with a passion for blues history must follow a tortuous and disappointing path like the hero of *The Tales of Hoffmann*. Idealized love or certain clarity disappears in a collection of connections that are a snare of scores, poor libraries of lyrics, and lost sound bites. Much of the music wasn’t published, many of the lyrics were modified after the fact, and our knowledge of *who* bought *what* sheet music or records *where*, and *who* listened to *what* music on *which* radio stations is incomplete.

Much of the material in this essay was originally collected as the nucleus of a Semester long Undergraduate Honors Colloquium involving students from the humanities, business, social and political science, and the physical sciences at Virginia Tech. It illustrates how tightly intertwined are society, technology, and music. It suggests how music courses can attract a diversity of students and create an historical awareness.

If myths are yearned for truths, imagine a student seminar that discusses the following mixed spectrum:

Were the **blues** all **black**?

How **green** were the **blues**? (money and the blues)

Didn’t the **whites** hear the **blues**?

Did **black**, **brown**, **tan** and **whites** mix?

Were the **blues** “radio”-active?

How **blue** were the **blues**?

Some of these points have been reified by repetition, and *le brouillard* is thick. My spectral analysis will assemble data from secondary sources as well as newspaper reports extracted from samplings from the 1906-1928 period, with particular emphasis on the *Indianapolis Freeman* (1906-1916), the *Chicago Defender* (1921-1929), and *Billboard* (1915-1928). Some 10-15% of the issues were randomly selected. During these periods the national editions of these three weekly publications had, for various times, superb black music and stage critics-- Sylvester Russell, Tony Langston, and J. A. Jackson, respectively. Four other influential critics were concurrent- Romeo

Dougherty of the *Amsterdam News*, Lester Walton of the *New York Age*, W. E. B. DuBois of *Crisis*, and Theophilus Lewis of the *Messenger*. Their attitudes towards “taste” and intra- and inter-racial matters were often subtly different, but those of Lewis were quite unique. He advocated low down theatre for lower-class black audiences. Anthony Hill has described him nicely: “He recognized the promiscuity of the Roaring Twenties might be temporary, so he wanted to take advantage of it”. Lewis’ views make interesting reading, and are applicable to certain classes of music and people today.²⁰

²¹ These views were antithetical to those of his compatriots, who are quoted below. The filtering action of the more conservative elements certainly affected what passed to the printed page, and may paint a cloud over our perception.

Black, White- The perceived musical elements associated with white ballads and English/Scottish folk tunes in early blues are recognized. Many workers have commented that the small holdings in the Eastern Piedmont would have encouraged twining of the black and tan strands. Cowley, Lornell and Spottswood²² have discussed similarities with West Indian ballad structure evolution, and how a glissade to the blues might have been accomplished. The triangular trade of “the peculiar institution” would support such a view. West African slaves were commonly seasoned in the Caribbean before transport to the United States. Songs like *Aurore Pradere* and *Oh Graveyard!* might be considered an example of “Bluesopithicus”.

I know moonlight, I know starlight. I lay dis body down
I walk in de moonlight, I walk in de starlight, I lay dis body down
An’ my soul an’ your soul will meet in de day, When we lay dis body down.²³

A typical Anglo-Scottish folk song predecessor might be the traditional Scotch dirge sung by Laurel Massé of *Manhattan Transfer* fame:

Here I am in sorrow, Here I am in pain;
Here I am in ruin, Here I am in shame;
I am left so forlorn, please come encircle me.

(concert transcription, 1997, with permission)

Another set of bones—ragtime--started as a random collection of syncopated themes. As it evolved, march rhythms and old-world dance materials were absorbed. Three or four themes might be involved, each played and repeated with embellishments, before others entered. The concept is non-developmental in the classical sense, and does not involve the improvisation on a theme of jazz. Ragtime was the musical language for the two decades straddling the century mark.²⁴ By 1910 everything that was syncopated was called a rag. Sylvester Russell, of the *Freeman* described its origin in his year-in-review column of January 1908: “The original two-step music of broken-time played without tuition to undeveloped buck and wing dancing by the slaves created the music now called rag-time”. It therefore wouldn’t be surprising to find rags and blues mixed. Van der Merwe has published a fascinating interpretation. In 1896 Ben Harney introduced New York’s ragtime craze with *You’ve Been a Good Old Wagon but You’ve Done Broke Down* and *Mister Johnson*. *Old Wagon* is related to *Mister Frog*, dating back before 1880. *Mister Johnson* is related to *Pretty Polly*, supporting the contention that Anglo-American song types crept in and out of the early

Afro-American repertory. *Mister Johnson* is “a folk tune turning into a twelve bar blues”.⁴ Harney’s rags were only part of a general folk influx of the time. The middle classes neither knew nor cared whether they got their Scotch snaps or pentatonic figures from the black or the Irish”. The bluesy element in rags grew steadily. Indeed there are two that some consider the first of the published proto-blues.²⁵ In Maggio’s *I Got the Blues* (1908) a twelve bar blues in G is followed by a section in G minor, ending with a rag riff. Chapman and Smith’s *One O’ Those Things* (1904) is an earlier blues/rag mix. White’s *Original Chicago Blues* (1915) is a later blues/rag amalgam, as is *The Memphis Blues*. The tempo of the early rags was much slower than the later virtuoso pieces, as the playing instructions on many of the above mentioned scores indicate. White and black mind’s-ear views of the musical strains were different, but there was a mixed gene pool.

White/Black- In the Delta country the strands separated in the postbellum period, encouraging a growing individualism in what became “black blues”. This separation would have been accentuated by the tragedies of the Jim Crow laws. These laws, named for an antebellum minstrel show character, were late nineteenth century statutes passed by legislatures in the Southern states that created a racial caste system in the United States. In 1883 the Supreme Court was inclined to agree with white supremacist thinking, and declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional. In 1896 the Court legitimized the “separate but equal” concept in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*.²⁶

During the period 1903-1910, field studies by “song-catchers” E. C. Perrow and H. Odum in Mississippi, and J. Lomax and W. Gates in Texas, found examples of what would eventually be recognized as proto-blues. Many of the lyrics they collected then, later turned up on blues records.⁷ Bessie Smith and W. C. Handy both reported a new musical sound in the South around ~1903. The brown strand of a triple helix drove developing titular blues toward the white side of the highway as the music became popular, appearing in sheet music in the early teens. Sheet music implies a readership with money to spend for instruments and tutelage. *Baby Seal Blues*, *Kansas City Blues*, and *Dallas Blues* helped spread the blues news toward the darker strands.

Technology, biology, and politics all conspired to change the black strand in the seminal 1917-1923 period.²⁷ The boll weevil munched its way across the cotton



plantations, forcing workers to the cities. By 1908, state legislatures were asking for Federal aid to help farmers combat the menace. By 1920, cotton plantations that had produced thousands of bales were producing a few hundred. It would be the mid-1920s before acreage yields would catch up with the pre-weevil days. The end of World War I brought European demand for cotton, and cotton prices rose, reviving the dream of fields of white gold

that had made Mississippi fourth in per capita income before the Civil War. But the boll weevil bred, and the need for black labor bottomed. The introduction of the International Harvester (IH) row crop tractor hastened the black exodus. In 1924 IH introduced the first practical two-row row crop tractor. It had been field



tested in 1923 to a very responsive audience. By 1928, that company had gained a 50% market share, preempting Ford's position in the field. By 1929, IH had a 60% share. From a high market share position of 75% in 1923, Ford sales dropped to a level where it was forced to shift manufacturing operations to Ireland and then to England. The IH tractor was a forward driving tricycle, with an arched rear axle giving a ground clearance of 30". Its wheel spacing allowed it to straddle two 40" spaced crop rows, with the front wheel treading the empty space between rows. The unit could deliver 18 HP brake, and 9 HP draw-bar. It displaced both the horse and slave labor from the farm.²⁸

Southern lynching didn't help "keep 'em down on the farm". Lynching continued after World War I at the following levels; in 1919 there were 76; 1920, 53; 1921, 59; 1922, 51; 1923, 29.^{29 30}

In the period 1910-1920, ~1/3 of a million black people moved north. In the next decade a larger number followed. Black workers in some of the Northern industrialized areas began to have discretionary income for the first time, money to invest in music **Blues and Green-** Existing post-war over-production of phonographs was exacerbated by the loss of patent control through the *Victor v. Starr* verdict, opening the market to low overhead companies.

Victor and Columbia controlled all the patents for lateral (phonograph) recording, in which the needle moved from side to side in the groove. When Edison ... decided to enter the disc business in 1912 he had no choice but to make 'hill and dale' records, in which the needle moved vertically in the groove. Hill and dale records could not be played on Victor or Columbia gramophones. ... In 1918 Starr produced lateral-cut disks and Victor immediately brought suit for patent infringement. ... Eventually the Supreme Court pronounced in favor of Starr. Any company was now free to make lateral-cut records.⁹

Columbia's sound ground down toward bankruptcy. Phonograph record marketing groups saw salvation in black ethnic records at a time when the United States was experiencing an attack of isolationism and European immigration was restricted, eventually by a Congressional bill fueled by eugenic pseudo-science. The growing urban black population was the ideal target for "race records". Many of the classic blues straddled the highway. The tensions created by the housing- and labor- induced race riots of the period increased the musical segregation of the harsher country blues.

The trade magazine *Talking Machine World* had run an article in 1918 entitled "How Recognition of the Pride of the Race Will Increase Record Sales". In a few years cuts of country and classic blues, sprinkled with the hot spices of bawdy, raunchy tunes, were tastelessly mixed with sermons and gospel. We know roughly how many of these records were sold, but not their demographics.

Incidentally, the first recordings used wax cylinders that were difficult to mass-produce. Berliner produced flat 7" disks, 70 RPM, with a 2 minute capacity in 1888, making hard rubber *vulcanite* copies from zinc master disks. Edison succeeded in making "gold mold" cylinders with hard wax surfaces in 1901, and in 1912 introduced celluloid blue Amberol cylinders using diamond styli. Edison Diamond Disks were made from phenolic resins in 1913. Eventually cylinders floated away. After 1900 shellac became the common disk material. Shellac is a resin secreted by the scale insect

Coccus lacca to form a protective coating. This is collected, purified, and formed into thin shell-like plates for use. Shellac disks are about 25% shellac, the remainder being inorganic filler. The surface noise of shellac is rather high, and surface aging and weathering is a severe problem. The limitations of these early black platters may have affected the *form* and *feel* of the blues. Martin Williams has commented: “Traditionally the improvised music was played as long as the performer could come up with new improvisations. A ten inch recording could accommodate about 4 blues stanzas.”³¹

RCA took an abortive step towards using polyvinyl chloride for disks in 1932. It has excellent properties. However, the current phonograph arms were too heavy, and caused excessive wear. Shellac was eventually replaced by polyvinyl chloride (vinyl) around 1945 as lightweight pickups became widespread.^{12 32}

Radio broadcasts from the Lyric Theatre in New Orleans in 1922 put black music on the airwaves. Lonnie Johnson and Putney Dandridge sang blues over Chicago’s WATM radio station, Robert Wilkin aired the blues in Memphis, and Bessie Smith did radio spots in the cities where she performed. Dozens of reports of radio “active” blues airings are found in spot checks of the newspapers of the period. Many of these will be listed and discussed below. It would be nice to know the market penetration of this medium. Try phoning your favorite radio station to determine what music was played a month ago! How many people, and which ones, own copies of Oy music; how many heard it before the German government ban?

The two technologies, radios and phonographs, are synergistic, as disk-jockeys know. But in 1924 they collided. Victor’s sales were down 60%, and Edison phonographs were down more than 50%. By 1924 there were an estimated three million radio sets in the U.S., and 1400 stations. The AM band was ~500-1500 KiloHz. With a modulation of 5000 Hz, this band would permit only 100 stations if all were capable of being heard across the United States. With 1400 stations, even at reduced power, the early cacophony on the airwaves was jarring. By 1927 the Federal Communications Commission was permitted to assign licenses, frequencies and regulate power levels.

The world was tuning into radio because of its booming, brilliant sound. The first step for the phonograph’s recovery was to introduce electronic recording, where a condenser microphone converted sound waves into electrical currents that drove the electromechanical cutter of the master disk. The nature of the hearing process, combination tones, and auditory illusions will fill in lower fundamentals, but the timbre of the replayed sound was “metallic”. Electronic recording extended the frequency range at both ends: 100-5000 HZ (F₂-C₈+). At best, the acoustic recording process was limited to the range of 168-2000 Hz (E₃ - C₇). The pressed daughter records could be played on acoustic phonographs, but they often sounded too strident. One solution was a six-foot-long folded (reentrant) horn, and Victor won back part of its losses in late 1925 with the Orthophonic player. Clear sibilants and deep bases resulted. Brunswick produced the first all electric system— turntable, pickup, amplifier, loud speaker, and turntable— called the Panatropé, also in 1925-1926. The lateral motions of the stylus in the track created an electrical signal that was amplified, and then fed to an electromagnet at the base of a paper cone, causing it to vibrate in-and-out.³³

Toward the end of the decade all the players were electrified, and some took the “brave” step of providing both the phonograph and radio in one housing. However, at

first this was just a shelf to hold someone else's radio receiver. In 1928, 250,000 phonograph-radios were produced that had a common amplifier. The home entertainment center was on its way.

Black, Brown, Tan, White- However, other colors than the blues were also changing. In 1918, returning black servicemen had "seen the elephant," or at least another part of the world. They chafed at their restricted degrees of freedom. When America declared war against Germany in April 1917, only a few blacks were members of the standing army. The selective Service Act, applying to all male citizens, led to the eventual induction of some 367,000 Negroes, 31% of those registered. Only 26% of the whites registered were called. The blacks served in segregated units, and many were assigned menial tasks. However many saw fighting, and the 369th was the first American infantry unit to reach the Rhine. The returning Negro soldiers brought new experiences and changed attitudes with them. These altered the expectations of a race, and the nature of subsequent race riots in the United States.³⁰ Many of the black veterans became discouraged by continuing racial discrimination. Some rallied around Marcus Garvey's red, black and green banner: Back-to-Africa. Most struggled at their new home, unsatisfied with the "mind of the South". Race riots occurred in East St. Louis (1917), Houston, Texas (1917), Washington, D.C. (1919), and Chicago (1919) as well as five others in 1919.^{34 35} Unemployment, housing, and insensitivity were the triggering issues. In the 1920s, large inward immigration of blacks and mulattos from the West Indies occurred. Many had a good education, a history of position, and often professional experience. American black society was changing; so was the white.

Supreme Court decisions were altering the horizon for Afro-Americans. Voting rights (*Guinn v. United States*, 1915), housing rights (*Buchanan v. Warley*, 1917), and jury rights (*Moore v. Dempsey*, 1923) were doors slowly opening. Concurrently, Klan membership and activity increased in the post-war years, and by 1923 it had an estimated membership of ~2 million. Prohibition also opened up new venues. Although the red-lights of Storyville in New Orleans and the Levee in Chicago were dead or dim, the Vice District of Chicago erupted-- twenty square blocks harboring hundreds of saloons, concert halls, and brothels. Chicago became the scene of the "black-and-tans," night-clubs which employed blacks to entertain segregated audiences of blacks and whites. Chicago's Black Belt was now lit by artificial light, and the black's own night was bright.

New York's Harlem, a high-density "suburban development" that was desperate for tenants, was seen as an opportunity by a black real-estate agent, Phillip Payton. It became *the* place. The Harlem Renaissance was beginning and soon night clubs hired black entertainers to play jazz and blues to white audiences. The bejeweled and the be-furred whites flocked to Harlem to hear the great black entertainers at Small's Paradise, Connie's Inn, and the Cotton Club. Some Harlem cabarets maintained a strict nonwhite policy, but many after-hour spots had no racial barriers.³⁶ "Rafe's Paradise in Atlantic City was a big club with mostly white patrons".³⁷

Midnight rambles were common in the 1920s. The blues word was spreading, and it was country, classic, and city-- blues hues serving black, brown, and tan-- as well as white. Newspaper reports of various types of contact suggest the stark picture painted of the blues/white segregation has been somewhat overstated. Segregated audiences, "separate but equal" shows, even mixed audiences are reported. Some

typical reports appear below and others are appended.^{38 39} Time and geography often hardened segregation, but entertainment helped soften the barriers.

- Indianapolis newspaper report: Community conditions here are such that any colored show, albeit of indifferent merit, would at least make good. It stands to reason that a combo like The Smart Set would be a furor. ... The audiences were not made up of a single class, thousands of whites jostled and elbowed their black neighbors trying to see what the company had to put on. *Freeman* 23 December 1906
- Sylvester Russell discusses the negro race and the colored theater problem: "One glimpse ... tells us conclusively that people have no special preference of color regarding places of amusement or performers. White people went to a colored man's theater and the colored man hired white performers to act upon his stage and a mixed race of people went to see the show, but mostly all colored people, because of the theater being located in a colored district. When a new theater was erected by white men in the same colored district, the colored people flocked to the white man's theater. ... What people wanted was good accommodations, a good show for their money, and a reliable policy of admission. This they have succeeded in getting at the new Grand Theater, where people can sit where they please, and where the color lines are obliterated." *Freeman* 11 May 1912
- A quote from William Allen White of the Emporia *Gazette*: "A Minstrel Show's Lesson-- The obvious success of the show (at the Normal Theatre) proved that white people will accept at its true value any artistic offering coming from any kindred, any tribe on this terrestrial ball. The audience accepted the performance not in any patronizing way, not because it was given by colored people, but as a good show." *Billboard* 04 December 1920
- The Sid Perrin's Co. played a special performance for whites after the usual show on Thanksgiving night at the Lyric Theatre New Orleans, and packed the house. *Billboard* 18 December 1920
- "The Page," J. A. Jackson: Three cabarets in Harlem, while ostensibly colored, derive much of their patronage from Broadwayites, who motor to them rather than have the shows brought down town. ... The practice of presenting midnight shows in otherwise strictly colored theatres in Washington, Indianapolis, Richmond, Cincinnati and New Orleans and the successful tours of Negro companies of vaudeville artists headed by Mamie Smith and Ethel Waters are mentioned to show that the belated interest in the Negro performance is not local to Broadway. ... *Billboard* 05 August 1922
- The custom of having special performances for whites originated at the Lyric Theatre in New Orleans. The practice soon became widespread. In 1923 Bessie Smith closed her Atlanta engagement with a midnight special for whites only.^{40 36}
- There were nightly shows and Thursday nights were set aside for whites and coloreds at separate performances. Features of the presentations were the "Midnight Rambles"- late shows in which the blues were especially popular.¹⁵
- Letters to Langston from the field are filled with information about vaudeville and comedy shows, and the blues: "Dear Friend, Am writing to inform you that Miss Sarah Martin, the Okeh record blues singer, is having a great success in the Southland. We played a midnight ramble at the Grand (Keith House) to a packed audience." *Defender* 10 March 1923
- At the Dreamland Cabaret in the mid-twenties "one could hear Ollie Powers singing with Mae Alix, and press on to the Monogram Theatre to catch Alberta Hunter from Memphis

singing with Lovie Austin at the piano. Or there was the chance to hear Bertha “Chippie” Hill with her abrasive voice singing with King Joe Oliver at the Palladium Dance Hall. Most of these spots were open to white people, and as yet they weren’t eyed with the suspicion that they were slumming.”¹⁵

- Report of Cyrena van Gordon, Chicago Civic Opera who stated “I would like to hear some real negro jazz”. They went to the Palace Theatre on Beale Street, Memphis, and witnessed the performance of The Broadway Rastus Company, who were giving a midnight ramble exclusively for white people. *Defender* 07 March 1925

Blue Blues- Who made some blues blue? How did their off-colors compare with those of other cultures? Were there clashes between black classes? Newspaper reports of the era have a complex *mousseline glass* pattern.⁴¹ Let’s trace some trails.

The *Freeman* of 27 April 1912 has a letter to the editor from Paul Carter, of the Carter Trio. It discusses his analysis of the source of the “smutty and suggestive” in stage performances. He blames it on the audiences, and presents a theoretical dialogue as follows:

When a performer meets another that has played the theater he intends playing next week, he will ask how things are over there. This will be the answer ‘Oh, they like a little smut and things with a double meaning. If you don’t put it on you can’t make it there.’ He then says to himself, ‘I guess I’ll have to frame up some junk for that bunch.’ He then lays aside his music for his regular opening, and when he gets to the theater for rehearsal he will say to the piano player, ‘When I come on just play the blues’ .

The letter coincides with this report from the 12 March 1912 *Freeman*:

“Baby Seals at the Monograph, Chicago, where Ada Banks sang her latest *Honey Babe Hun*. Her *Shake It Babe* was too risky in order to capture.” Carter continues:

A great many of the colored manager’s *cater to only one class*. I think if they would cater to all classes, and demand nothing but up-to-date acts on the bill, and train the patron in the same way, it would do away with all the vulgar the performer has to do now to get by. ... The Carter Trio are now playing the Olio Theater in Louisville, and this manager is a very nice gentleman, but must have had lots of troubles with performers for in the dressing rooms are more rules printed than I ever saw in a hotel-- rules that are really very good-- against fighting and intoxication, etc.. Had he not had trouble with some of them he would not have those signs up.” It is very often a disgrace to see some of the things performed on the stage. There are young girls ??? attending these theaters, and when they see some of these things on the stage it has a tendency to lead them away from home.

The implied class clash is related to W. C. Handy’s unusual comment- “in a community of cultured white folks there will be found a similar group of colored people”. Carter’s letter began by focusing on one element: the audience. It ends by talking about the performers and their society. What do other reports have to say? The 21 March 1908 issue of the *Freeman* was sensitive to the issues involved:

Conduct of certain elements of colored patrons to the Park Theatre is causing no little comment among the better classes of the racethis theatre is the only one in the city allowing the colored people equal privileges with the white.

The 13 August 1921 issue of the *Defender* continues the blue blues theme in one of the many fascinating letters to Tony Langston:

The first thing a manager puts before us is ‘Hooten, have you a clean act? I do not want any smut at all.’ Afterward it’s grand to have him say ‘Hooten, you have an act that is really appreciated, especially here down in the South.’ Hooten and Hooten, Dreamland Theatre, San Antonio, Texas.

J. A. Jackson, in the “The Page” of the 05 August 1922 *Billboard*, comments:

The American Negro may be regarded precisely as is any other citizen in the land. There are different types, grades, and classes; and they differ in degrees of wealth and intelligence. In New York there are two classes of colored entertainment seekers- the mass of workers who seek mediocre entertainment pretty much as do their white prototypes, and the group of intelligent people who shop for their amusement with a full purse, but decline to pay additional charges in the form of mental embarrassment and torture. ...

The rapid increase of theatres catering strictly to colored patronage with almost all Negro talent has created a situation with some problems that concern the colored artist. To care for these matters, so distinctly different from those of the group playing on the circuits catering to the general public there has been organized the Colored Actors Union.

The 19 August 1922 *Billboard* reprinted a piece from *The Nation*, written by Oswald Garrison Villard, which described changes in other social groups in strong terms:

Berlin had earned the reputation before the war of being more degenerate than Paris. Today, both cities show with pitiful clearness the effect which war has upon womankind and womanhood. 70% of all the paper used in the production of German books is being used for off-color literature. These things ... are more than ever being considered normal. ... If one were to stray into six or seven of the plays running in Berlin and should see nothing else, one would be compelled to despair of Germany and believe her new found liberty has degenerated into disgusting indefensible license.

“The Page” of the 16 December 1922 *Billboard* continues:

Some few years back the Queen, a vaudeville house, educated its city with smut. The management used barrel-house acts and the better class of colored folks did not patronize this house. To see a clean show they were compelled to climb to the roof of the Loew or Keith vaudeville houses. But the fight for clean entertainment has been won by the stage manager and with the little help that I give. Acts playing the Queen (now) have to come clean or stay away.

And, the 02 December 1925 issue of *Variety* caustically notes:

Scot, Alan, and Lee “hot” singing trio (in Plantation Review) inclined to be suggestive in their maneuvers are adequately placed in this café. This is the sort of entertainment that pleases these patrons most.

It would seem that all elements bear the burden for blue blues; *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*. Popular music becomes popular from the positive feedback in the incestuous circle of performer, audience, and society. Novelty fades fast. This year’s fad is next year’s failure. As any talent-less artist knows, there is only one option-

escalate the *double entendre*. Examine the recent Royal Academy of Arts exhibit *Sensation*. The piece *Holy Virgin Mary* was a likeness surrounded by dung, an escalation of a crucifix suspended in urine, which is an extension of Marcel Duchamp's signed urinal of 1917, *Fountain*. However, our view of the prurience of an age is also possibly blurred by the screening process of historical preservation and the human lizard brain. The sensational is more readily preserved, more salaciously savored, and giggled about. Tom Ball summarizes the situation nicely in the forward to his 1995 collection *The Nasty Blues*.

Within both schools of blues, classic and (country), artists soon began to push the envelope of "respectability". Ma Rainey recorded her (somewhat expurgated) version of *Shave 'Em Dry* in 1924, at which time Bessie Smith's *Nobody In Town Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Role Like Mine* had already been selling well for a year. But the phenomenon was not limited to the blues. As early as 1923 the FCC had already denied airplay to Gershwin's *Do It Again*. Of course, the vaudeville tradition has always been far less than squeaky clean. The BBC banned scores of "offensive" records, including such classics as *I'm a Bear in a Lady's Boudoir* by Ukelele Ike, and other scorchers as *Nellie, The Nudist Queen ... Let's All be Fairies, A Guy What Takes His Time* by the inimitable Mae West, and virtually everything by Sophie Tucker. Country and Western was not without its risqué sense of humor. As early as 1931 the legendary Jimmie Rodgers (The Singing Brakeman) waxed a rude little piece entitled *What's It*. Roy Acuff's first record, *When Lulu's Gone*, was so offensive it had to be (re)issued.⁴²

Many of the bawdy themes in blues were later picked up by white, rural "hillbilly" performers. There are scores of examples of white country hokum being adapted into blues. This racial cross-pollination of musical and lyrical ideas (at least among the working class southern musicians) was more common than is generally perceived. White upper-classes ignored both traditions equally, and many upper-class blacks disdained the blues out of concern that the content would contribute to racist stereotypes of black "immorality". W.C. Handy complained in his autobiography about "the flock of lowdown dirty blues" recordings then currently in vogue: "Just plain smut."

But then, what *is* the blues? LeRoi Jones claims that "The classic blues singers brought the music as close to white America as it could get and still survive. But the music that resulted from this craze had little, if anything, to do with legitimate blues."⁴³ Who has the right to decide "what is the color of the blues?" 1920 ads in *Billboard* for Pace and Handy's blues reads: "Don't be misled by imitation blues when the real and original blues may be had from us for the asking."⁴⁴ A Black Swan Records ad of 1923 for the artist Josie Miles asks,

Have you ever heard snatches of song sung by Negro section hands on Southern railroads? Do you recall how their plaintive melodies struck a responsive chord in you? How strongly contrasted are these songs springing from the depth of the laborer's soul, to the commonplace dance tunes that we are accustomed to call the blues.

⁴⁵

In 1997 Wayne Shirley asks "What do you call blues- the music that Bessie Smith sang, or that loud guitar sound"?

Did this academic question bother performers? When it was suggested that it (the music) might have been exploited, overused, Shirley's alternate interpretation of the question, suggesting exploitation of the people, led to the comment:

That's a myth created by left-wing card-carrying members of a self-serving group that feel comforted by such attitudes. Bessie Smith sang what she wanted to sing. Sometimes she didn't even bother to rehearse, as you can tell from some recordings. (personal communication)

Whatever the blues is, we've deified it for a number of reasons: a sense of history and pride, a sense of humanity, or because it is just good listening. It is no coincidence that the white rediscovery of the blues in the 1960s coincided with the civil rights movement, and real or assumed guilt was one factor. It is equally disconcerting and disorienting to read polemics in blues publications and on the Web stating white men-- can't, shouldn't or won't-- play and sing the blues". It is likewise ludicrous that some modern critics refuse to review white performances because "they don't have the suffering in their souls".⁴⁶ One wonders what they do with Dvorák or Marcia Ball. Perhaps Eastern European males and Cajun females don't count.

Radio-“Active” Blues: The phonograph certainly was the prime vector for transmission of the blues during the 1920s. But newspaper records suggest that the radio had more effect than has been suggested. By 1927 there were five million sets, and by the early 1930s some twenty million. Black newspapers often ran regular radio columns. The technical level and longevity of the *Defender* column by Ulysses Coates, quoted extensively below, suggests there was a race audience:

- Once you have owned, used, and learned to appreciate a radio scrap book you will never be without one. A scrap book contains station information, technical data, etc., ... *Defender* 10 January 1925
- If sets which use a variometer to tune the plate circuit fail to regenerate on the higher wavelengths a 25-35 turn honeycomb coil may be placed in series with the variometer to increase the inductance. *Defender* 17 January 1925
- Ad for Little Wonder Radio Set, complete with tube, \$12.98. A one-tube 3 circuitry receiving set. Darwal Corp., 799 Broadway, NY, NY. *Defender* 17 January 1925
- Probably the simplest method for controlling regeneration in an RF set employing transformers for the interstage coupling is to use a potentiometer connected across the A battery with the lever connected to the grid return of the amplifier tube.” *Defender* 28 March 1925
- The present trend is toward sets using electric lighting current for both filament and plate voltages. *Defender* 15 January 1927

And other newspaper reports suggest that there were indeed people listening.

- Review of Bessie Smith, Beale Street Palace, 1923. “The spirit of the Old South came up from Beale Street at 11 o'clock last night to give the world a concert of Negro folk songs that will be remembered by WMC (Memphis) as long as *midnight frolic* is broadcast from the roof of the Commercial Appeal (building). Bessie Smith ... gave the air some currents that it will not forget as long as ... Memphis has a Beale Street. Perhaps the greatest hit Bessie registered last night for WMC was *Outside of That He's All Right With Me*”. She repeated the number upon the request of a large number, who telephoned to the studio and wired from the Memphis territory.” WMC was owned and operated by the Memphis Commercial Appeal, and the audience consisted for the most part of white Southerners. The performance

was repeated in February, 1924. In March, the largest race record dealer in Pittsburgh sponsored a radio program on that city's WCAE during Bessie's engagement at the Lincoln and Star Theatres.³⁶

- Ethel Waters was the first colored entertainer to broadcast over the *Times-Picayune* radio station in New Orleans in 1923.³⁷
- WTAM, Cleveland *Plain Dealer* broadcasting station, puts out an all colored program under the title of "A Night in Dixie". "Air fans have demanded more, and it has reached the point of being a regular event." *Defender* 17 January 1925
- WGBS (NY) had Clarence Williams and his Blue Five performing with vocal assistance from Eva Taylor and Clarence Todd. ... The opening number was *Santa Claus Blues* ... The song of twilight has been dispelled at last by the hilarious blues lights. *Defender* 17 January 1925
- Fletcher Henderson dished out the usual Monday night assignment of syncopation from WHN. *Billboard* 08 December 1925
- Mamie Smith, widely known blues singer, who is appearing at the Beale St. Palace Theatre, Memphis, will this week be heard over WMC radio. *Billboard* 18 December 1926
- Velma Nally, blues singer, returned to Kansas City last week from an eight months tour of the Middle West. Miss Nally resumed her singing over WDAF The Kansas City Star's Station on July 10th. *Billboard* 21 July 1928
- Smiling Billy's Boys play for the Kiwanians (Kinston, NC). The band often gives concerts over radio stations and broadcast Monday evening from station WPTF, Raleigh, NC. *Defender* September 14, 1929⁴⁷

And there were other avenues open to advertise the blues:

- Sarah Martin has the distinction of being the first colored woman to demonstrate songs in a (retail outlet) when she went onto McCrory's (Department Store) in New York boosting the recorded Clarence Williams numbers. Lucille Hageman's records are being featured with displays in department stores in New York and other metropolitan centers. *Billboard* 16 December 1922
- And Vaughn De Leath (the "radio girl") sang hits of the day and classical blues over WJZ.⁴⁸

These waves in the *æther* suggest that the commonly accepted distribution patterns of the blues might need to be re-examined.⁴⁹

OLIO: Paul Oliver has made a punning proposal for what he terms "Past recording and future research ... Next Week, Sometime ...?".⁵⁰ But *sometime* may be equivalent to never, or impossible, particularly as the paper of the old blues scores oxidizes. Further research is needed on early sheet music, tracking of first-sale and subsequent distribution, early performances, and demographics. Lynn Abbot and Doug Seroff have recently made a bold step in exploring some of the sheet music and Southern vaudeville areas in "They Cert'ly Sound Good to Me".⁵¹ Before the curtain falls, let's flip through the film of newspapers past, and taste the titles of blues scores, and the progression of the blues mood. These tantalizing reports shrilly ask more questions: "Where did all the sheet music go? Who played them? How common was white purchase of race records?". This *potpourri* contains many of the titles of songs collected in my own passionate search, a sentimental journey into a personal virtual reality.

- Beginning of a series of ads from Wm. Foster, State St., Chicago, advertising sheet music (15 cents each) for popular hits- *Monkey Rag*, *Alexander's Rag Time Band*, and *Honey Man*, *Oh You Beautiful Doll*, *Piano Man*, *Undertaker Man*, *Stop Kickin' My Dog Around*. *Freeman* 20 January 1912
- May and May at the new Crown Garden: "String Beans has an improvement on the kinds of work he does over that of the others. His blues gets 'em, and his *Balling the Jack* is his feature. The audience screams for more and he gives them more. At times the yelling was deafening." *Freeman* 17 January 1914
- Prof. Eph Williams and the Silas Green Co., although not a gold band, is the feature of the street demonstrations, and stinging is the applause when they are through pealing forth the silvery strains of the *Memphis Blues*. A bystander remarked, "Dey play d'em blues, dat's all". *Freeman* 21 February 1914
- Listing in *Billboard's* "Song Hints" (Reliable Guide to the Best Songs in the Catalogs of the Leading Publishers) *The Hesitating Blues* (Pace and Handy Music Co., Memphis, TN)- A hesitation novelty with ginger and go. *Billboard* 21 August 1915
- Miss Lizzie Thompson, the blond Eva Tanguay, is stopping the show with the *Hesitating Blues*. *Freeman* 15 January 1916
- *I've got the Army Blues*, a real distinctive novelty of the season. ... The only question is whether a stage song will prove a real seller. ... Jobbers are already ordering the number before it is in print. *Billboard* 15 July 1916
- In the Song Hits listings: *The Blue Blues* (Francis Newman, Drumright, OK) Featured by Leroy "Lasses" White; Take a tip, get it. *Billboard* 15 July 1916
- In the Song Hits listings: *The German Blues*, "It's Neutral" (Lewis Zeeler Music Co., Louisville, KY)- Best burlesque song on the boards *Billboard* 28 October 1916
- The blues rained and reigned in the early 1920s. Tintinnabulous Tin Pan Alley had tinnitus as side-by-side ads for sheet music in the *Billboard* appear: ad for *Sweet Mama*, a riot as a deep "dyed in the wool" blues, Jack Mills, NY, NY; ad for *Blue Law Sunday Blues*, Triangle Music, NY, NY; and an ad for *Dying With the Blues*, Arrow Music Co., NY, NY; *Billboard* 11 December 1920..⁵²
- The week following, an ad for sheet music from W. C. Handy, writer of *St. Louis Blues*, *Memphis Blues*, *Yellow Dog Blues*, *Beale Street Blues*, *Jogo Blues*, *Long Gone*, and *Shoebot Serenade*, announcing *Loveless Love*, as well as *That Thing Called Love*, and *Pee Gee Blues*. *Billboard* 18 December 1920
- Then this collection, also in one newspaper issue- ad for Mamie Smith's songs- *Don't Care Blues*, *That Thing Called Love*, *You Can't Keep a Good Man Down*, *Crazy Blues*- 30 cents each- Perry Bradford Music Co., Broadway, NY; ad for GRS Rolls (\$1.25), records (\$1.25) and sheet music (30 cents) of *Loveless Love Blues* from Pace and Handy Music Co., W. 46th St., NY; and an ad for Lucille Hageman, Colored contralto and the Blue Flame Syncopators, records, rolls and sheet music for *Arkansas Blues*, *He's My Man*, *Neglected Blues*, *Jungle Blues*, Francis Clifford Music Publishing, Chicago, and sold at Williams and Piron (State St., Chicago), and the Vendome Music Shop (47 East 31st St., NY). *Defender* 02 April 1921
- A 6 column inch ad for Spencer Williams, and his music *Paradise Blues*, *Tishomingo Blues*, *Yama Yama Blues*, *Meditation Blues*, published variously by McKinley Co. (Chicago), Stern Co. (NY), and Shapiro and Bernstein (NY). *Defender* 16 April 1921

- By 1922 everyone was publishing sheet music: Ads for *Houston Blues*, *Muscle Shoals Blues* from George Thomas Music Co., Chicago; *Soldier Bonus Blues* from Randolph Music Co., Wichita, KA; *You Can Have Him, I Don't Want Him, Didn't Love Him Anyhow Blues* from Goodman and Rose, NY, NY.; and *Tropical Blues*, Charles Roat Co., Battle Creek MI. *Billboard* 05 August 1922
- “Bessie Smith’s white-only show at the “81” Decatur Street Theatre in Atlanta: “The program was greatly enjoyed by the white people who filled the house after the regular performance. ... Few white homes are without her records. ... A prominent white music dealer told a reporter of the Preston News that Bessie Smith’s records actually outsell everything else in the catalog.” Pittsburgh *Courier* February 13, 1924
- Musical scores were often sold at intermissions. At the Frolic Theatre, Birmingham, AL, in 1923, “Buzzing” Harris hawked the sheet music for Bessie Smith’s *Gulf Coast Blues* in the aisles during intermissions. *Bessie*, Chris Albertson, Stein and Day, NY, 1972
- Ad for Bessie Smith’s: “Sing ‘Em Bessie,” featuring *Cause They Sound Good To Me*, *Sinful Blues*, *Hateful Blues*, from Perry Bradford Music Publishing, 1547 Broadway, NY, NY. *Defender* 17 January 1925

A SCRATCHED RECORD CURTAIN: Too much repetition, the talkies,⁵³ and then the depression, drew the needle, scratchily, across the blues record for a while. Decline in discretionary money and a sense of malaise made the blues too real to hear with any comfort. In 1924 Jackson, on “The Page,” wrote:

There has been a recent falling off in the demand for blues singers, and there is a reason for it aside from the fact that the record companies have just about plugged these folks so persistently that the public is growing a bit tired of them. There is no mistaking the fact the audiences like the blues style of music. It is the vocal expression of their inner selves. The woman singers of the Race ... have made fame and fortune for the record companies ... and the girls, too, have fared well. ... With the gates opened there came a flood. Every woman who could sing at all became obsessed with the desire to be recorded. The market was flooded with blues records. BUT-- and a big BUT-- they became a gang of imitators. To see one was to see them all. ... a low blues number, a change to a slightly better dress while the usually mediocre pianist does a solo bit, then a risqué song about “Never Loved, but,” with something about “another woman’s man”. Girls, get some originality about your presentation. *Billboard* 13 December 1924

The male blues guitarists began to rewrite the records and left us “The meanest, moanin'est blues that ever tickled your ears.” That phrase was first used in 1923 to describe Gladys Bryant, the Beale Street Mama, but times were changing.

Beggin’ Back Blues

Listen here mama, I’ll be good,
 Make your wine, cut your wood.
 When I do, it wouldn’t do,
 I got another, and I don’t want you.

Blind Lemon Jefferson, 1926

Poignantly, prophetically, an ad in the 28 December 1928 *Defender* reads: “Elzadie Robinson sings *Arkansas Mill Blues*”, and the lyric lines:

When I hear that whistle blow, ther'll be no more work for that man of mine;
 The old pond dries up, the last steam blows the whistle,
 And everybody moves to a new place.

In nine months the stock market delivered the Depression.

Fortunately, the new place still had the blues. Unfortunately, to paraphrase a review of *Who Said Dixie*, written in 1918 for *Billboard*— “When the Lord found out He made the best, He called it Dixie, then took a rest.” Would that the writers of “the blues” had decided to do what the Lord did. Finding scores is not too difficult; finding good ones is.⁵⁴ The multiple blues’ tracks waxed and waned on technology, politics, and society; but they all eventually foundered due to overproduction, overexposure, and over-cropping. Records, radio, movies, TV, and CDs- all in their own time- discovered rapidly how to kill songs quickly.

I Don't Like It Second Hand

I want ev'ry bit of it or none at all
 Cause I don't like it second hand
 I want all your kisses now or none at all
 Give me lots of candy, hon, then love is grand
 Mama craves affection both night and day
 I don't like no two-time that is what I say
 I want ev'ry bit of it or none at all
 Cause I don't like it second hand, no
 I don't like it second hand.

Clarence Williams and Spencer Williams⁵⁵

And, as to authenticity, Big Bill Broonzy's standard reply, when asked about authenticity of his material, was- “I guess all songs is folk songs. I never heard no horse sing ‘em.”⁵⁶

THE BLUES AS SUCH: The difficulty in spectrally analyzing the blues is that diffraction and refraction of history, and obsessions with oblique images of the past make revisionism rife. The present is turbulent, the future disconcerting; a self-defined past is more comforting. But, imagine if history had been different! What if some other mutations had occurred in the DNA helix? What if the row tractor had been developed a decade earlier, accelerating Northern migration from the South, leap-frogging the critical country, classic, city dendritic period? What if electric guitars had been developed a decade later, letting the seminal Piedmont blues grow in strength? What if the Supreme Court had swung the other way in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and the Civil Rights movement had immediately followed the race riots? What if the record industry had delayed electronic recording beyond 1925, and radio had become the preeminent distribution media? And then, what if the AFM strike and ASCAP boycott had then occurred a decade earlier, ~1932, nucleating a rhythm ‘n blues with roots?⁵⁷ Finally, what if the motion picture industry had pressed full length sound productions in 1924— after all, in 1923, Lee De Forest's phonovision premiered a two hour "talkie" at New York's Rivoli Theatre, including performances by Sissle and Blake.⁵⁸

Whatever-- we'd have to say: **It Ain't Our Blues.**



**My windows are broken and black,
The creepers and thorns block the view,
My age and the myths hold you back,
But my songs open doors for you.
Run your stick down the framin' side,
And the beat of the blues will cry,
Shoutin' all the colors we hide,
So the tunes of our soul won't die.**

The thematic pictures used are of subjects relevant to the time period covered. On the Home-Page, the Martin guitar shown is ~ 1935. The barn is located on the Glen Alton Plantation, NFS. In the *Preface*, the loom shown is in an outbuilding on the Smithfield Plantation, VT. The closing window photo is from an old home on Dry Run, NFS.

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Boll-weevil: <http://insects.tamu.edu/fieldguide/bimg198.html>, From the book: *Field Guide to Texas Insects*, Drees, B.M. and John Jackman, 1999, Gulf Publishing Company, Houston, Texas, Photo by W. Sterling.

Portable Phonograph: Victor's portable known as the "2-55," with automatic brake. It features the No. 5 sound-box, better known as the Orthophonic Sound-Box. (April 1928 issue of *The Voice of the Victor*).
<http://www.gracyk.com/portable.shtml>

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This is a third, and final, attempt to analyze the early blues genes. Each succeeding evolutionary step, larger than its predecessor, has drawn heavily on excerpts and paraphrases from its ancestor. The author gratefully acknowledges the kind permission of the original copyright owners in this progress. The first magazine-version cited below has limited text space, but excellent scores and some illustrations. In the second book-version listed below the text grew appreciably; but, still, space constraints led to reduction of much newer material, and the potential cost of color-printing and third-party commercial royalty fees reduced the illustration material printed. With considerable new added textual content, re-insertion of the redacted material, and liberal use of photo-images, this web-version brings everything together.

Yet, each of the two ancestors have unique attributes—particularly excellent editing, good companion articles and chapters, and a traditional reading format. You are urged to explore these sources that first published much of the material. Bibliographic and URL information appear below.

A shorter version of this material appeared in the September 1996 issue of *American Recorder* as an article entitled "The Recorder Blues" by Ray and Lee Dessy. © American Recorder Society

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A longer version, "Mapping the Blues Genes", without significant illustrations, was first published as Chapter 3 in the book *Perspectives in American Music 1900-1950*, Ed. M. Saffle, Garland Publishing, 2000, NY, ISBN 0-8153-2145-7. © Garland, Taylor and Francis

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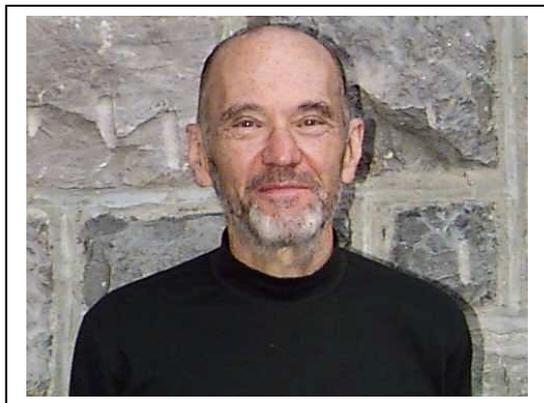
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- ¹⁸ Stephan Gould, *Full House* (New York: Random House, 1996).
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- ²⁰ <http://www.bobwest.com/ncaat/anthill.html>
- ²¹ The black critics response to *Shuffle Along* indicate how difficult it is to grasp the origins of the suggestive sexual humor in the Blues. Jackson, DuBois, and Lewis all had their own views of the appropriateness of double entendres, fast paced dancing and scantily clad girls. Lewis recognized the promiscuity of the Roaring Twenties, but his comments don't always ring true.

Reflect for a moment on the hard lot of the poor but prurient stevedore or dramatic critic. He wants his ration of salacious amusement no less than the millionaire. He craves to see attractive women take off their clothes and parade back and forth across the bedroom.

The gay, boisterous and sinful world of yesteryear has been transformed into one huge lamasery for emasculated monks; but it provides no outlet for the average man's desire for libidinous pleasure except dreams. The world is still gaudy enough for rich men and preachers, of course, for those fortunate fellows are always assured of an adequate supply of private women. But for the luckless ledger clerk or chauffeur,

life is a pretty drab proposition. It is to this repressed and sex-starved citizen that the modern musical show brings a royal bounty of color, hilarity and vicarious sin. Lewis, "Survey of the Negro Theatre—III," *The Messenger* VII, #10, October 1926, 302.

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²⁴ David Jasen and Trebor Tichenor, *Rags and Ragtime* (New York: Dover, 1989).

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³¹ Martin Williams, "Recording Limits and Blues Form," in *The Art of Jazz*, ed. Martin Williams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

³² The recording industry faced difficulties three times in the early life of the Blues; in ~1920, ~1924-25, and again ~1930: from overproduction, the advent of radio, and then the Depression. In the latter case companies struggled to address the precipitous drop (>90%) in sales volume brought on by loss of discretionary income. A quote from Edward Wallerstein (1891-1970), developer of the LP record, describes one attempt.

"RCA had made (LP records) in 1932 and, as a matter of fact, when I became general manager of the Victor Division of RCA on July 1, 1933, my first act was to take them off the market. The idea was good and they might have sold, but there were technical problems. Most of the records were made from Victorlac, a vinyl compound developed by Jim Hunter; the pickups available at that time were so heavy they just cut through the material after several plays. The complaints from customers all over the U.S. were so terrific that we were forced to withdraw the LPs. If you could get a new pressing of one of these records today and play it with a modern lightweight 2-mil pickup, it probably would sound pretty good. In 1933 records had fallen into disuse to such an extent that the problem was to find some way to get people to listen to them again. RCA developed at Camden the Duo Jr. player, which could be attached to your radio. There were by this time 20 million radios in the U.S., and it seemed to me that this was our big hope in trying for a comeback of the business that had shrunk nationally to probably only \$10 million. It worked beautifully, and the little attachment, which was sold at our cost, \$9.95, was instrumental in revitalizing the industry. Years later I was able to use this idea again with the LP."

<http://www.kcmetro.cc.mo.us/pennvalley/Biology/lewis/crosby/lphist.htm>

³³ "Talking Machine World was quick to blame the record slump of 1924/25 on a failure to innovate in the face of new technology, and was optimistic that the new sound of recordings would win back an audience that had been lost to radio and motion pictures." *Talking Machine World*, 23 (15 Jan. 1927: 29, 90)

³⁴ *Beauharnais v. Illinois* #118, 343 U.S. 25.

year	Chicago Population	
	total	Negro
1900	1.8M	31k
1910	2.4	47
1920	3.0	115
1930	4.0	250

The Chicago riots, triggered by a racially induced injury at a swimming area resulted in ~35 killed, 500 injured.

³⁵ Special Committee Authorized by Congress to Investigate East St. Louis Riots

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³⁶ Chris Albertson, *Bessie* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972).

³⁷ Ethel Waters with Charles Samuels, *His Eye is on the Sparrow* (New York: Doubleday, 1951).

³⁸ The Western Vaudeville and B. F. Keith-Orpheum Circuits booked acts for colored audiences who could watch from the peanut galleries in the segregated theatres, but there was a need for a theatre chain for negroes. This the Theatre Owners Booking Agency (TOBA) provided (1909).

³⁹ “When black musicians appeared before white customers (In Manhattan) they did so ..in the “black and tans” or visit(ed) elite nightclubs. Connie’s Inn was a major site ... but its fame was overshadowed by that of the Cotton Club. Its building had originally been owned by Jack Johnson, the first black heavyweight boxing champion. From 1922-1935 the club presented black musical shows for whites. For African’s, jazz thrived in white-owned clubs like Chicago’s Lincoln Gardens, where the audience were segregated. Harlem’s Savoy Ballroom was also white owned and patronized, although there were some black dancers. South Side Chicago’s “Stroll” around 35th and State St. also saw white customers, although blacks dominated. Harlem’s Lenox Avenue, Pittsburgh’s Hill District, and South Central Avenue in Los Angeles was by and for black people.” *Jazz in American Culture*, Burton Peretti, Ivan R. Dee, Bel Canto, Chicago, 1997, pp 45-47

⁴⁰ Dr. Anthony Hill, *Strategies for a Renaissance: The Role of Early Writers in Shaping Black Theatre*, <http://www.bobwest.com/ncaat/anthill.html>.

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⁴³ LeRoi Jones, *Blues People* (New York: William Morrow, 1963).

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⁴⁵ *Defender* 10 March 1923

⁴⁶ cf. Bluesworld home page www.Bluesworld.com

⁴⁷ In 1922 Fletcher Henderson scored huge success at the Lyric Theatre in New Orleans, and in radio broadcasts originating from it. In 1923 New York’s WNH broadcast his music. The first black musicians to be broadcast with regularity over network facilities were bandleaders Duke Ellington and Noble Sissle. The disc-jockey concept was pioneered by Jack L. Cooper who first aired *The All Negro Hour* over WSBC in Chicago in 1929. His first efforts were live variety with local black talent, but he soon switched to recorded music to reduce costs. By the turn of the decade he had a stable of Afro-American DJs working on black-appeal programs broadcast over two stations. Similar programs came to other cities in the ‘40s: Memphis, WDIA, Nat Williams; Detroit, WCHB, Martha Stienberg; Baltimore, WBEE, Maurice Hulbert. The first black-owned radio station was Atlanta’s WERD (1950), owned by J. B. Blayton. *Encyclopedia of Afro-American Culture and History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

⁴⁸ De Leath was the first woman singer to gain recognition over the radio. A concert singer from her teens, she made her first appearance on radio in January 1920 over De Forest’s experimental station singing *Swanee River*. In 1921 she helped open WJZ. She sang songs like *I’m Just Wild About Harry* (Sissle-Blake), *Nobody Knows What a Red-Headed Mama Can Do* (Mills-Fain) and many classic Blues which she recorded for Okeh, Gennett, Edison and Columbia earlier.

⁴⁹ Paul Oliver has summarized readily available statistics on record production and apparent utilization.⁴⁸ One study (1927-1934) around Atlanta suggested that 19% of the 323 rural black homes studied had phonographs, none had radios, but 23% had pianos or organs. A similar study in 1920 in Macon County, Alabama, of 612 black families, showed that 12% had phonographs, and 4.5% had organs or pianos. A 1935 study of a reputed sample of 25,000 black families throughout the South had a more complicated set of results- phonographs being favored in rural areas, radios in urban areas, and piano ownership correlated with rising income. What of fiscal reality?

Ads in the *Freeman* for 1912 show: *Big Music Book*, 35 pieces, \$3.00, Victor-Victrola Phonographs, \$10-150, and used pianos and player pianos, \$95-385. Ads in the *Freeman* in 1914 show Victor-Victrolas for \$15-200 and Victors for \$10-100, and discontinued or refurbished pianos and player pianos for \$150-500. Ads in the *Defender* during 1923-5 show that radio sets were ~ \$15-100 depending upon the quality and reception potential. In the mid-twenties *Defender* ads from Vocalion were offering free portable phonographs to those who purchased one hundred records by mail at prices of 75 cents each. Typical Chicago wages then were \$0.50-1.00/hour. This purchase/use arena deserves a more thorough evaluation.

⁵⁰ Paul Oliver, *Songsters and Saints* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

⁵¹ Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, “‘They Cert’ly Sound Good to Me,’ Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues,” *American Music*, 14 (Winter) #4, 1996, pp 402-454.

⁵² Tin Pan Alley’s native songwriters, white and black, poured the Blues out in the late teens and ‘20s: *The Alcoholic Blues* (1917, Laska-von Tilzer), *Left Alone Blues* and *Blue Danube Blues* (1920-21, Kern), *Home Again Blues* and *Schoolhouse Blues* (1920-21, Berlin), *Wabash Blues* (1921, Ringle-Meinken), *Wang, Wang Blues* (1921,

Wood-Meuller), *Yankee Doodle Blues* (1922, G. Gershwin-De Sylva), *Lovesick Blues* (1922, Mills-Friend), *Hometown Blues* (1923, Ringle-Coots), *The Half of It, Dearie, Blues* [Lady, Be Good!] (1924, I. Gershwin), *Washboard Blues* (1926, Parish-Carmichael), *How Long, How Long Blues* (1929, Ann Enberg-Carr), and *Bye, Bye Blues* (1930, Hamm, Bennett, Gray) which became the signature for Bert Lown and the Hotel Biltmore Orchestra. In 1926 the *Birth of the Blues* in *George White's Scandals of 1926* featured Margaret and Dorothy McCqrthy singing *The Memphis Blues* and *The St. Louis Blues*.

⁵³ The silent film was not silent. Before 1928 movies were accompanied by sound effects, live music, live singers, actors, and phonograph records. The French Phon-Cinema toured during 1900-1901, and the French dominated the sound movies of the first decade of commercial motion picture. The first significant U.S. success in making the silent movies "talk" occurred in 1923, when Henry Stoller and Harry Pfannenstiehl used separate electric motors to drive the camera and disc recorder, coupling them to achieve synchronization. (Vitaphone v. ERPI, 1933, pp 357-362) A 16" platter which recorded from the inside toward the rim, like modern CDs, was used. It rotated at 33 1/3 RPM to extend the playing time to match reel length. Short test films were made. Although the motors were synchronized, there was still the phonograph's manual starting process to contend with upon playback. Coincident with the German demonstration of a sound track on film, Lee DeForest showed that the intensity of a light beam could be modulated by the current from a microphone, and record the sound image photographically on the edge of the film. Synchronization was automatic. His short Phonofilms were shown in 1923, and William Fox used a derived technique to make short newsreels. Meanwhile, General Electric developed a technique which used the sound energy to change the width of the sound strip on the film, and Western Electric developed a method which changed the strip's density. The goal was full length feature sound synchronization.

Western Electric chose in the short-run, however, to pursue sound disks of traditional nature.. Warner Brothers licensed the technology, and the Vitaphone Corporation was formed in 1925 to provide musical accompaniment to movies. Musical synchronization was more forgiving than the problems speech presented. Vitaphone's *Don Juan* of 1926 was received well by the audience, but executives were cautious. But radio kept eating into the silent movies market share. The 1927 *Jazz Singer* had moments of disk recorded speech that were lip-synched, and the audiences cheered. By 1928 the move to disk sound tracks became a flood. Over 1000 installations of Western Electric disk sound systems were made. But synchronization was still a problem.

In 1927 GE's variable area system on film was used to make RKO's *Wings*. Although Germany's UFA studio produced the first film with an optical sound track, the *Jazz Singer*, 1927, was the first popular "talkie". Western Electric's variable density system was used in a 1929 full length feature. By 1930 film sound tracks had silenced the "silents," and the Blues were also entering a dark night.

⁵⁴ SCORE SOURCES

- a) William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University, New Orleans
(the finest collection of printed and manuscript music, recorded sound and oral history; some 50,000 pieces of popular sheet music; will photocopy at about 50 cents/page)
- b) Archives of American Folk Songs, Library of Congress
(some 100,000 recordings, vast, **loosely** catalogued sheet music)
- c) Jerry Silverman, *110 American Folk Blues*, Compiled, Edited and Arranged for Voice, Piano, and Guitar
(New York: MacMillan, 1958), (excellent starting point).
- d) *All-American Blues*, Vol. 1 and 2 (Ojai, CA: Creative Concepts, no date), (superb catholic collections of country and city blues; 160 scores).
- e) *The Book of the Blues*, ed. Kay Shirley (New York: MCA Music, 1963), (over 100 classic, country, and city Blues).
- f) *Bessie Smith Empress of the Blues* (New York: Schirmer, 1975), (a collection of sophisticated City Blues)
- g) *Best of the Blues Series*, individual volumes for Sonny Boy Williamson, Slim Harpo, John Lee Hooker, Howlin Wolf, Jimmy Reed, B.B. King, Elmore James, Bobby Bland, Junior Parker, Johnny Ace and Little Walter (Ojai, CA: Creative Concepts, no dates).
- h) Stefan Grossman, Stephan Calt, Hal Grossman, *Country Blues Songbook* (New York: Oak Publications, 1973).
- i) Stefan Grossman, *Texas Blues* (New York: Oak Publications, 1984).
- j) Stefan Grossman, *Reverend Gary Davis/Blues Guitar* (New York: Oak Publications, 1974).
- k) Stefan Grossman, *Ragtime Blues* (New York: Oak Publications, 1970).
- l) Many superb collections from Mel Bay Publishing, Dailey Industrial Park, Pacific, MO, 63069

⁵⁵ Library of Congress, Special Collection, Typescript Lyrics, try M 1630.2.W

⁵⁶ quoted in a *Wall Street Journal* column 13 November 1997 by Martha Bayles, author of *Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

⁵⁷ Strikes by the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) from 1942 to 1943, banning new commercial recording, and boycotts of radio networks by the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) beginning in 1940 changed the direction of popular musical sound. As indicated earlier, Victor and Columbia lost market position in recordings due to the AFM strike, opening the window of opportunity for smaller companies with new sounds. The ASCAP boycott led 256 stations to form a consortium that led to the formation of their own copyright organization, Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI). Their compass needle pointed, not to printed music, Broadway and Tin Pan Alley, but to performance styles, vocalists, and southward. The needle swung from swing, a new rhythm was added to the blues, and the color was bleached from race records.

⁵⁸ Robert Kimball, William Bolcum, *Reminiscing With Sissle and Blake* (New York: Viking Press, 1973).