The crossroads at midnight: Hegemony in the music and culture of Delta blues

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INTRODUCTION.

Cornel West’s essay “On Afro-American Music: From Bebop to Rap” astutely outlines the developments in Afro-American popular music from bebop and jazz, to soul, to funk, to Motown, to technofunk, to the rap music of today.

By taking seriously Afro-American popular music, one can dip into the multileveled lifeworlds of black people. As Ralph Ellison has suggested, Afro-Americans have had rhythmic freedom in place of social freedom, linguistic wealth instead of pecuniary wealth (West 474).

And as the fount of all these musical forms West cites “the Afro-American spiritual-blues impulse,” the musical traditions of some of the earliest forms of black music on the American continent (474). The origins of the blues tradition, however, are more difficult to pin down; poor documentation at the time combined with more recent romanticization of the genre makes a clear, chronological explanation like West’s outline of more recent popular music impossible. I here propose to take seriously Afro-American music and explore its roots by analyzing the possible origins of the blues, the factors that shaped its development, and the phenomenon of romanticization by the revivalists of the 1950s.

There are as many and as varied origin stories of the blues as there are of humankind itself. Although the first recordings didn’t appear until the 1920s, anecdotal evidence dates the first blues music to as early as the 1890s (Titon xiv). W.C. Handy, the “Father of the Blues,” claims in his autobiography that the first time he heard the blues was in a train station from a “lean, loose-jointed Negro” whose “clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face
had on it some of the sadness of the ages.” The man and his guitar played heart-wrenching music Handy called “the weirdest music I had ever heard” (Handy 74). Whether or not this story is true, it provides a compelling (and marketable) image: a down-and-out person, alone, finding his only solace in heartfelt music; this is the kind of exoticized folk culture Handy aimed to sell through recordings and sheet music of his compositions. Trains, too, are a frequent theme in the blues, representing the search for better pastures and nostalgia for old times. Like any cultural product, however, the blues most likely developed not from one person’s innovation or even a group of people but from the evolution of pre-existing musical traditions under a specific set of conditions: the interaction of West African musical elements with Western ones under severe oppression and hardship, and continued evolution in response to a variety of audiences and contexts.

As a guiding framework I will be employing post-Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, which states that culture changes as a result of the push and pull between the elite ruling classes and the oppressed classes; cultural forms produced by the oppressed are co-opted and modified (or rejected and banned) by the elite in order to symbolically and literally maintain their supremacy over the culture. The modified cultural forms may then be taken up by the oppressed class, functioning as a kind of symbolic protest, and modified again, following which the process repeats itself in a constantly evolving power play that is the driving force behind what we call culture (Blackburn). Hegemony in today’s popular culture can be seen in pop star Miley Cyrus’s appropriation of twerking, a dance based in African movement, to foment her own public image while oppressively sexualizing her black female backup dancers, symbolically asserting her dominance as a member of the white wealthy class.
ORIGINS OF THE BLUES: FIELD HOLLERS, SPIRITUALS AND THE DELTA.

African-American music went through a number of significant developments before the blues. Field hollers and work songs were probably among the earliest; these were individual or group songs sung with no instrumental or rhythmic accompaniment, one or two lines repeated over and over; they had no chord changes as we think of them but were melodies based around one consistent tonal center (Springer 30). The appearance of spirituals, with a stanza form and chord changes in the Western style, probably came about through exposure to European-American ballads; the blues was likely simply the secular version of spirituals before it evolved to take on the character of delta blues with which we are familiar today. The infamous minstrel tradition also had a role in the development of blues. Eric Lott’s smart analysis of the race relations behind minstrelsy goes into depth on the issue of minstrelsy as a vernacular folk tradition.

“As has often been argued, the part played by the invention of “folk” cultures in the constitution of nationality cannot be overestimated, and is a chief means by which “indigeneity” may be constructed by postcolonial societies. It was in the nineteenth century, as Hugh Seton-Watson shows, that the vernacularizing drive was linked to the florescence of European nationalisms; and it was in this period as well (not immediately after the 1776 Revolution) that the United States went through a peculiarly “European” phase of vernacular self-discovery. True to the nation’s internally contradictory makeup, however,… America witnessed a simultaneous hybridization and proliferation of vernaculars, in which frontier lore, European elements, and various local or regional forms merged into an “American” vernacular even as the outlines of each of these elements sharpened” (Lott 93).

Minstrelsy contributed to the blues tradition in significant ways in that it opened the door in a way to performing such folk music as a career; as problematic as the practice was, it spread—or perhaps reflected—a deep-seated fascination with the lives of black Americans for white audiences. Minstrel acts borrowed liberally from African-American folk and plantation songs of the period, combining them with spoken comedy acts (at the expense of black Americans), but
many blues and vaudeville artists in turn borrowed material from traveling minstrel shows. This interaction between folk cultures—the hybridization of African-American culture with the dominant culture and at the same time the sharpening of borders between the two as outlined by Lott—set a precedent for the societal role occupied by blues music in the early 20th century, an expression of folk culture at the same time as it was a novelty act for white audiences.

The consistency with which certain themes appear in the blues can be attributed to the conditions of life experienced by blues musicians and their communities (See Table 1). Even after the abolition of slavery, many African-Americans remained as sharecroppers, a condition resembling slavery because they had to work the fields for their white bosses, who kept the ledgers and likely cheated their employees: most workers most years had to struggle just to break even.

“Normally no written records were given to the tenant proving his accumulated indebtedness or the value of his crop when sold. [Hortense] Powdermaker calculated that 17 to 18 percent of the Indianola-region tenant farmers made a profit in 1932; the rest broke even or went into debt...Because black people could not qualify to vote, hold office, or sit on juries, they had no effective legal challenge to landlords who cheated them. Powdermaker estimated that at least 70 percent of the tenant families were cheated” (Titon 15).

The only way to escape unfair debt, according to Titon, was simply to leave the farm and look for better conditions, or, eventually, to move to urban areas. It is likely for this reason that themes such as “leaving,” “mistreatment/persecution,” and “wandering” are so common in the Delta blues repertoire, ranked at 2, 4 and 5 most commonly occurring themes in a sample of 102 blues songs compiled by Springer (See Table 1).

Fair employment, and even unfair employment, became increasingly scarce as tractors replaced workers and the region began to feel the effects of the Depression (Burkart 1). African-Americans living in the Delta at the time of the birth of the blues also had very little access to
education; school was often held in churches for only a few months out of the year, as most of the year was devoted to farming (Burkart 3). It is understandable that under such economic circumstances romantic relationships would be difficult to maintain; the top-ranking theme in delta blues is “women’s infidelity,” speaking to the instability of relationships and reflecting the instability of life. The consistency of the theme of women’s betrayal also reveals the domination of the genre by men and the male perspective, supported by the ratio of men to women in delta blues performers—recordings of women performing Delta blues, at least in the early years, are virtually nonexistent. The themes of “man’s power over women” and “the conquering male” ranking at 14 and 18 in the table, speak to the patriarchal gender expectations held by blues performers in the period, while “man as woman’s slave” rejects the woman as essentially different and cruel, almost as bad as white slaveholders. The average African-American residence the Delta as described by Titon consisted of a 200-square-foot house in which families, sometimes with up to seven or ten children to help with farming, shared a single room. Children were often raised in non-nuclear families with support from neighbors and relatives (Titon 13).
TABLE 1. THE DELTA BLUES (102 titles)
From *Authentic Blues: Its History and Its Themes* (Springer 72).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of occurrences</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women’s infidelity</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The blues</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mistreatment/persecution</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wandering</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenge</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual pleasure</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s desertion</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfaction</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s ungratefulness</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejected man</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powerlessness</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man’s power over women</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worry</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prison/penitentiary</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mistrust</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The conquering male</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual need</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misery/squalor/poverty</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The <em>femme fatale</em></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The wish to mend one’s ways</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magic spells/Hoodoo</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual competition</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man as woman’s slave</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
ORIGINS OF THE BLUES: FORMAL AND STYLISIC CHARACTERISTICS.

Many formal elements of African-American music and in particular the blues are probably based in the musical traditions of the West African regions from which people were taken as slaves to the American continent. Gerhard Kubik’s thorough and insightful history of these musical traditions, *Africa and the Blues*, traces the importation of several African traditions and their implications for the development of the blues. Kubik draws a parallel between the bluesmen we picture today—solitary, traveling performers, often associated with the devil and countercultural lifestyles—with the African griot, similarly a traveling musical entertainer who was believed to “have a demonic character and to practice evil magic” (Kubik 64). Robert Springer also cites the griot as a predecessor to the American bluesman, describing griots as marginalized professionals who earned their living based on their music (Springer 17). Both usually accompany themselves on a stringed instrument and even compose lyrics with a similar tone, often a personal lament and usually with the lyric persona in the first person (Kubik 27).

As similar as griots seem to bluesmen, it is unlikely that an entire professional class would have been able to perpetuate itself in such a closely preserved form under the drastically different and violently enforced social environment transplanted griots and their contemporaries would have encountered under slavery. Even if the tradition resurfaced through oral histories after the abolition of slavery, the wandering solo bluesmen likely came about in the New World of their own accord due to the forces of hegemony. Even without the African precedent of the griot, social conditions in the United States repressed group music-making and encouraged the increase in solo musicians. The conditions of slaves in America were, of course, dismal; not just the state of enslavement, but, according to Kubik, being transplanted from a community-oriented lifestyle in West African societies to aggressively enforced individualism—slaves were barred
from making music together for fear that it would lead to conspiracy and uprising; slaves lived alone or in small numbers on isolated farms; only work was done in groups (28). For this reason, solo musicians accompanying themselves on portable instruments flourished while group music virtually disappeared in early Afro-American music, with the exception of work-related songs such as field hollers and chain-gang songs that were permitted because they helped maintain the rhythms of manual labor. Religion, too, played a part in the decrease of group music, as evangelical missionaries tried to eliminate all secular music, which made up the majority of West African community music making (Kubik 9). The forces of hegemony, in attempting to stomp out group communication by isolating the oppressed, cleared the way for the development of one of America’s most important forms of solo musical expression.

Traces of African traditions that are more likely to have remained in the rhetoric of African-American music than griots are instrumental and musical techniques found in West Africa, including melisma, polyrhythms, syncopation and scale structures. Kubik attributes the prominent presence of melisma, or the singing of several notes on a single syllable, to instrumental techniques from modern-day Mozambique and Angola, where musicians plucked or struck mouth-bows; this is a musical form that does not usually have vocal accompaniment (12). The slide-guitar techniques found frequently in the blues, as well as similar sliding vocal techniques, he attributes to the one-stringed zither, which was played by sliding the fingers to different pitches (17). Kubik, however, relies too heavily on the assumption that every stylistic element of American blues can be traced to a single specific instrumental or regional origin in Africa. To a certain extent, sliding effects and their proliferation in the blues can be attributed to not just the zither but to the semiotic meaning of these techniques: slides, particularly in the downward direction in which they are most often found in the blues, resemble a sigh or a moan.
This is one way that blues music creates and communicates meaning outside of the text of the lyrics, by emulating languageless human sounds to communicate emotion. Melismas similarly carry a semiotic meaning: singing syllables over a number of musical notes extends the chronological time over which the word occurs, creating the effect of slow, drawn-out speech to convey hopelessness or woe.

Another way in which blues music mimics speech is in the interaction of the vocal line with the instrumental accompaniment. Kubik writes that call-and-response forms—a common form in community music in West Africa—can be found in some blues guitarists’ styles, wherein the guitar line or riff will mirror the vocal line; others, he writes, have contrasting guitar lines and vocal lines (86). Even contrast between vocal melody and guitar accompaniment, however, often creates the effect of a musical conversation between the performer’s voice and his instrument. In Robert Johnson’s “Love In Vain,” analyzed in more depth on page 16, Johnson’s guitar riffs during the breaks in sung lyrics chime in with a simple three-note scoop that ends on the lowered seventh of the blues scale—a note that, to Western ears, requires a resolution to the tonic. The note hangs in the air like an unanswered question, pushing the flow of the song and lending more weight to Johnson’s response. It may be a contrasting line compared to the vocal melody, but the effect is rather like a spoken interaction—a call-and-response—between Johnson and his guitar, with the guitar filling the silence between Johnson’s phrases to ask leading questions and shout encouragement, like a preacher and his actively participating congregation. In this way, performers almost personify their guitars, transforming themselves from a solo performer to a member of a group. This not only locates their music within the public realm—a shared group experience instead of a solitary lament—it also reclaims some of the group music traditions that were almost stamped out by hegemonic oppression. In response to the stamping of
all but solo music, blues musicians symbolically pushed back against oppression and created a new group musical form using their instruments.

Blue notes, such as the lowered seventh in Johnson’s guitar accompaniment, have received pages upon pages of attempted explanation. “Blue notes” refers to the lowered third and fifth, and sometimes seventh, of the blues scale when compared to the Western major scale. Kubik’s argument in this case is thorough and convincing. Many regions in West Africa rely on the equiheptatonic (or sometimes equidecatonic) scale, a completely different method of organizing pitches in which the scale is equally divided between seven or ten pitches rather than Western music’s twelve. When West Africans encountered Western scales and, in particular, Western factory-produced instruments, equiheptatonic systems were all but erased—with the exception, perhaps, of the blue notes (120). With this background knowledge in mind, my interpretation of the perpetuation of blue notes in blues music is again a semiotic one. Titon charts out when blues musicians tend to use the flatted thirds, fifths and sevenths and when they do not; delta blues musicians, unlike their Western-music contemporaries, are more likely to use both the blue notes and the Western notes in a single song (159). That is, blues songs contain a greater and more variable range of pitches than European-American songs produced at the same time; blue notes may find their roots in Africa, but they survived in the blues because they allow musicians a greater melodic range of expression. A singer might go straight for the flatted blue note, semiotically implying lower spirits; or he might sing both the flatted note and the natural in a chromatically progressing line, allowing a melody modeled more closely on the subtleties of pitch in human speech. The blues, again, using both historical precedent and contemporary conditions, adapted its conventions to circumstances in a way that would mimic speech and thereby more effectively express human emotion. Western scales and factory instruments may
have nearly stifled African scales, but African tonal systems pushed back by modifying Western scales to allow a greater range of expression in blues music.

A tradition in African music that was even more difficult to eliminate than that of scalar systems or community music making is that of polyrhythms, the rhythmic system on which most of West African music is based. African drumming is a complex group event in which individuals may be heard while maintaining a tight connection with the activity of the rest of the group; due to the banning of African drums along with the banning of community music, rhythmic trends in America today are perhaps less complex than their African counterparts. African American rhythms retain, however, many important factors that have since shaped all of American music significantly: the use of body percussion; the incorporation of rhythmic elements into instrumental technique, like percussive strumming or tapping on the guitar; and the now-ubiquitous presence of syncopation (Springer 24). The hegemony at work here is on display in almost every pop song produced in this country in the last half a century. Every song with a rhythm based on syncopation, swung eighth notes, or most anything with two complex rhythms occurring at the same time—all of these concepts may be traced to African music. African rhythmic concepts have been hegemonically passed between all strata of culture and are now an integral part of American musical culture.

Any argument that considers blues music from a strictly Western perspective is inherently flawed. Blue notes, for example, are only considered “blue” or out of the ordinary at all when looked at from the perspective of the Western scale as the norm. Even the concept of a “piece” of music—that a song should be self-contained and have a unique identity—is a Western idea; in African music, musical activities are often open-ended and may not have the kind of identity expected in Western music. Thomas Brothers writes on African-American vernacular
music traditions: “When music is commodified, this orientation [toward flexible and open-ended music] can cause problems, for which one solution is the ‘fade out’ on commercial recordings” (Brothers 174). For all its early adaptations to Western musical traditions and oppressive conditions, African-American music and specifically the blues would continue to run into such “problems”—though I prefer to think of them as “growing opportunities”—when faced with white audiences and the recording studio.

COMMERCIALIZATION AND ITS EFFECT ON THE BLUES GENRE.

The American bluesman, like the African griot before him, occupied a unique social position during the 1920s and 30s when Delta blues was in its heyday. He was an outcast from the black community due to his secularism and his association with the devil; white audiences paid him to entertain, yet looked down upon him. Between the reject of his community and the professional-yet-Other of his employers was a kind of liminal space where the musician would bring traditions from his community but be forced to tailor them to the tastes of his mostly-white audience. The blues musician, for his white audiences, was largely a novelty, a relic of the fetishized folk culture of African-Americans. For years, black blues musicians were recorded and issued only by “race” record companies, placing their entire genre in an Other, lower, category. Yet the opportunity to perform still gave the musician a platform to express himself, subverting white expectations and dominance.

This liminality encountered by blues performers may in part explain the well-known trope of the blues musician who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for virtuosic mastery. His association with evil makes him untouchable to both cultures, but still an object of fascination, and a compelling performer at that. In the Coen Brothers film O Brother, Where Art Thou?, an
Odyssey-like story transplanted into the 1930s Delta, the three white heroes encounter a black blues musician at the crossroads just after he has sold his soul to the devil—a devil he describes as white (cf. Middleton 47). The devil in some ways, especially in this scenario, represents the blues musician’s white audience: an abuser, someone you’d rather not associate with, yet paradoxically gives you the opportunity to express yourself and become successful. Kubik writes that a similar trope is found in African tradition; although less dualistic, it was believed that in order to develop “extraordinary skills” a musician would have to make a deal with dangerous spirits. In fact, it was believed to be impossible to become successful without a deal of this kind; musicians purposefully encourage such beliefs (Kubik 24-5). Playing to their audience’s beliefs in the supernatural requirement for talent lends the musician’s reputation a hint of intrigue at the cost, perhaps, of moral respect. This is just the tip of the iceberg of the blues musician’s precarious relationship with his audience—respected as a performer, yet considered Other and lowly by his employers, requiring him to carefully craft his image; to carry an air of mystery, and with it, authority, and toe a delicate balance between playing the music he wants to play and pleasing an audience in order to stay in business. Abbott and Seroff argue that a hegemonic interaction between African American and Western musical traditions that favored the latter was the only way for the former to achieve any kind of recognition or commercial success.

“Blues in its various twentieth-century expressions was shaped by the historical interaction of two separate impulses and the dynamic tension between them, all under the influence of a confounding outside force—commercialization in a racist society. The first impulse was to perpetuate the indigenous musical and cultural practices of the African American folk heritage, which eventually formed the cornerstone of an independent black cultural image. The second, countering impulse was to demonstrate mastery of standard Western musical and cultural conventions. Through this impulse came the necessary formalizing structures, without which there could have been no composition, development, dissemination, and widespread popularization of ragtime, blues, and jazz” (402).
One response to the paradoxical demands of white-dominated audiences—for simultaneous novelty and entertainment by a skilled performer—can be found in the first commercial recordings that are considered blues, made by the “blues queens” of vaudeville blues. Vaudeville blues songs were often any type of slow, lyrical ballad about a melancholy feeling; strikingly, unlike in Delta blues, almost all of the big names in vaudeville blues were women, perhaps because vaudeville blues standards demanded full, beautiful voices that aimed for the standards of operatic style and clear enunciation—a clear mirroring of the impulse to show mastery over Western conventions. In a process similar to the one that caused almost all Delta blues songs to share the same format, many vaudeville blues songs carried a distinctly similar sound; pop songs today all closely resemble each other, but the effect was even stronger with Delta and vaudeville blues because of the more limited supply of record companies and recording artists. Vaudeville blues songs were usually accompanied by orchestras or pianos rather than guitars as in Delta blues; they were usually preceded by a spoken introduction over music that would set the tone of the song (Titon 63).

Vaudeville blues, as different as it was from Delta blues, acted as a foot in the door for other blues artists to be recorded and become professional musicians. The first commercial “blues” record was Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues” in 1923 on OKeh records (Titon 204)—vaudeville blues was more palatable for white audiences because of the way it resembled popular, white, forms of music. When the idea of blues became acceptable it eventually paved the way for increasingly gritty and sold-my-soul-to-the-devil forms of blues.

Before commercial recordings of the Delta blues, most blues musicians only performed for live audiences and toured only locally; in performances, most musicians had a “storehouse” of formulaic lyrics based in folk songs that they would recombine, sometimes for 20 or 30
minutes if required at a dance party, to form their songs. Some artists would even make up original lyrics on the spot, usually—though not always recognizably—following a theme (Titon 37). In this way, pre-commercial blues more closely resembled the African tradition of open-endedness in music as described by Brothers, a free form that could be modified in endless ways depending on the moment or the preferences of the audience. Titon describes interviews with blues musicians who performed in the 1930s in which he asked them to play a song, then, without specifying why, to play the very same song again; he recorded significant differences in word choice, melody and even verse order. The same was found of another blues artist in two different early commercial recordings, made about a month apart, of the same song (Titon 38).

During this time period, and especially before the blues began to be commercially recorded, the form of the blues was not as strict as it is now. Some songs that were labeled as blues were in the form of a spiritual ballad with verse and chorus; others an AAAB or AAA form in the lines of the verse; all had variable chords. Evidence of such variety is found in recordings of vaudeville blues, which only occasionally had the specific chord pattern and AAB form—the 12-bar blues—that we today recognize as an essential element of the blues (Titon 29). The earliest recordings of Delta blues, too, revealed other forms than the 12-bar blues. When blues songs began to be recorded, they had to be shortened in length from 20 or more minutes to about 3, changing the standard of song length in the genre; but in addition, the commercial distribution of blues songs by record companies disseminated almost exclusively the 12-bar, AAB-form, blues. The first few 12-bar form songs recorded ended up being most successful, and so it came to be the only type of song that companies were willing to record; “race” records had a bad enough reputation as it was that they wanted a sure bet that the song would sell. The next generation of blues musicians often learned their craft from recordings and began to imitate this
form. In this way the commercialization of blues—the tastes of their audiences, who were for the most part white because they could more easily afford to buy records during the early years of blues recording—channeled the multi-form and multi-length blues songs into a uniform genre.

In some ways, although they were catering to the taste of their audience, blues musicians found the more constricted form worked to their advantage. Their stock of lyrics, unified by a common rhythm, grew and allowed for greater diversity and ease of improvised singing: if more blues songs shared the same format, they could pick and choose verses from different songs and put them together without having to worry about the line fitting in the individual song’s rhythmic structure. The common form also allowed for greater creativity in crafting original lyrics. If a performer knew exactly which chords he was going to play, it would allow his mind to focus more on creating lyrics. In a similar way, there was greater ease of instrumental improvisation when the chords remained the same from song to song (Titon 30). Despite the time and formal constrictions imposed upon the genre by the process of commercialization, musicians still found ways to express themselves using their individual creativity and technique within the set form.

Robert Johnson, one of the earliest recording artists in the Delta blues genre, utilizes the 12-bar form in his songs. His lyrics and the way they work in conjunction with the musical techniques is a useful analytic tool to see the cultural reality of Delta blues singers and the conventions of the genre. In the song “Love in Vain” recorded in 1936 by Johnson, the lyrics follow a typical blues pattern that is inextricable from the music. Johnson is accompanied only by his guitar, with toneless rhythmic strokes and sparse plucked notes. The lowered seventh “blue” note is especially prominent in the guitar accompaniment, giving a sense of unresolved tension (see page 9). Johnson’s voice, without frills or adornments, sings the words:

“And I followed her to the station, with a suitcase in my hand
And I followed her to the station, with a suitcase in my hand
Well, it's hard to tell, it's hard to tell, when all your love's in vain
All my love's in vain"

Johnson gives a glimpse of the uncertainty of life that extends to romantic relationships. References to the train station reflect the theme of the importance of trains as transportation, particularly for people looking to move to a location with more opportunity. The first line hints at traveling with your sweetheart, perhaps in search of a better life; the expectation is increased by the repetition of the line, at the same time following the 12-bar blues format. Signaled by the word “well” at the beginning of the third line, expectations are shattered by the melancholy “it’s hard to tell” and reinforced by the statement “it’s hard to tell when your love’s in vain,” and finalized as a broken-hearted lament with “all my love’s in vain” in the last line. The first line of “Love in Vain” is sung accompanied by the tonic or I chord, then the tension is elevated in the first phrase of the second line with the IV chord, which in Western music would normally proceed to a V chord; here, however, Johnson returns to the I, increasing dramatic tension by postponing the musical release. He goes to the V in the third line before returning at last to the I chord at the end of the third line, where he remains for the last intonation of “All my love’s in vain.” For a visual representation of the hegemonic interaction between West African music and Euro-American music, see Fig. 1.

AUTHENTICITY AND THE BLUES REVIVAL.

I have been differentiating between early folk blues and other forms of blues—vaudeville, urban blues, and any form that developed after 1950—by terming it “Delta” blues. Scholars have called it by many names, including rural, downhome, and country blues, but the distinction was only made after the form had ceased to be as popular following the migration from rural areas to urban areas by the 1950s. Folk scholars like Alan Lomax rather than blues musicians and their
communities gave the genre the label. In the 1950s, folk scholars and blues aficionados—largely white—collected “genuine rural blues” despite the fact that most black people lived in urban settings and listened to urban blues. Only certain songs, however, fit the aficionados’ definition of “genuine.” The general search was for the lonely, poor guitar player in a train station, like the one envisaged by Handy, while many of the genuine but unfavorable elements—like the pervasive and at times explicit sexuality in lyrics—were ignored.

The attempt to classify blues musicians as Other came about, of course, before the authenticity movement. When blues first began to be recorded, the record companies would only release them as “race” records and advertised them as folk music. “By treating downhome blues as a kind of folk music, the industry put the black in his place: back in time and far away in the country, or newly arrived and in wonder at the city” (Titon 228). White audiences probably felt less threatened by the image of black musicians quarantined to the country rather than as city-dwelling, competent professionals. Advertisements from the period, the 1920s and 30s, reflect this attitude. Most ads for blues records either had a plantation-stereotype-based cartoon or a drawing with the photograph of the musician in a frame off to the side. By separating the narrative persona of the song from the musician with separate illustrations and photos, record companies further “put the black in his place” by removing the professional musician from his craft (see Fig. 2-3).

Even when the sexuality in blues songs was addressed, it was in such a way as to try to write it off as an exception to the rule. Paul Oliver’s 1959 analysis is an example of this tendency.

“It is to the credit of the folk blues that its treatment of sexual themes is frank and uncompromising, avoiding the arch and suggestive insinuations of much popular song which result from the marked puritanical strain that pervades American society. But ‘Empty Bed Blues’ [by Bessie Smith, one of the most popular blues songs of the 1920s] was clearly directed at a market seeking a vicarious satisfaction from pornographic recordings. Its rich but unsubtle imagery does not result from a fundamentally innocent
expression of libidinous instincts as may be noticed in many folk blues” (Paul Oliver, *Bessie Smith* (London, 1959), 54; qtd. in Hamilton, 133).

Oliver, like many of those who wrote about blues in the late 1950s and 60s, tries to preserve what he sees as a pure, authentic folk form by writing off the sexuality found there. Unfortunately his attempt further distances the blues musicians from reality by characterizing them as either “fundamentally innocent” or “pornographic,” a dichotomy that resembles the virgin/whore paradigm of women. This point of view on the blues takes away the performer’s individuality and humanity by writing off their individual sexuality, and further quarantines the form to an idealized, Other folk tradition. I take Oliver’s stance as fundamentally flawed; as Hamilton puts it, claims of authenticity in music “assert, in effect, that some expressive forms are more ‘real’ than others” (137). A musician is a craftsman, a professional, and if audiences enjoy his or her music it cannot be described as more or less “real” than a musician that happens to come from a different background. Oliver and his ilk were in search of a music and “folk culture that was ‘untainted’ by America’s commercial music industry,” (Ryan, 478) but as I have shown, blues as a genre was in fact in large part formulated by its relationship with America’s commercial music industry.

Ryan expands on this idea in an analysis of Beale Street, one of the biggest tourist destinations for modern-day fans of the blues. Blues fans visit the location for its tourist value, but most also venture beyond the street in search of a more “genuine” juke joint or blues bar. She gives the example of a blues fan who writes that, after a search for an authentic venue, he was disappointed to find the clientele was made up of frat boys instead of, presumably, old country black men. “The author does not indicate whether he found good music at the club, but rather makes it clear that the place is kept in business by its white clientele” (Ryan 484). This indicates that the blues fan was searching not for enjoyable blues music, but that he was interested more in
what the music represented; and it seems, from his fetishizing preoccupation with race, that what he thinks the music represents is a novelty folk culture. Such discourse, that which surrounds blues tourism and questions of authenticity, is in a way a continuation of the minstrel tradition that is centered on the fascination the white public has with the black body. It is also an attempt to more sharply define the blues genre to separate it from “white” music. As Ryan explains, blues musicians are professionals and should be treated as such, and this principle extends to white blues musicians (484).

Part of this tailoring of the blues image to an idealized folk form began with W.C. Handy. Known as the “Father of the Blues,” Handy began his musical career as a member of a traveling black minstrel crew. The musicians in the crew were poorly paid and were often the victims of racial threats and violence as they toured the South. One day Handy noticed a pair of Delta blues performers who were attracting a large and well-paying audience: “There before the boys lay more money than my nine musicians were being paid for the entire engagement;” of this experience Handy, one of the most famous Delta blues musicians of all time, says “Then I saw the beauty of primitive music” (77). In addition to “primitive” Handy describes the music as “low folk forms” in his autobiography (76). This side of the story makes Handy seem less like one of the “authentic” blues performers that were idealized by both Handy and the folk scholars and more like an exploitative businessman.

THE SEARCH FOR THE SPIRITUAL IN THE SECULAR.

Although the blues genre is commonly associated with secularism, low-down ways and the devil, the opposite trend in recent scholarship has been to treat the blues as a form of spiritual expression or enlightenment. Steve Cheseborough’s 2001 book on the Delta region and its
relationship to the blues, is titled *Blues Traveling: The Holy Sites of Delta Blues*. Tourists who travel to the region in search of blues music are often referred to as “blues pilgrims.” Titon’s book, too, leans toward this trend, evident in his comparison of bluesmen to preachers.

“He goes on to relate Saturday night juke parties, where blues music featured, and Sunday morning worship as two sides of the same ritual-based coin.

Even if the spiritualizing tendency is in some ways as reductive as the search for so-called authenticity, I consider it a more productive exercise. Under the frame of spirituality, this branch of blues discourse, instead of reducing it to a relic of a folk culture, praises the blues as a means of human expression. Furthermore, if singing the blues is a way to achieve transcendence, it follows that there must be something to transcend above. Therefore it seems that rather than ignoring unpleasant aspects of the blues, those who consider the blues a spiritual practice are taking into account the poverty and actual experiences of blues musicians and treating the music as a community activity that does not revolve around the lives of white people. “The large number of singers and listeners who have testified to feeling better after blues performances indicates that the ceremonies were effective, that people were renewed” (Titon 33).

Though not as simple as Cornel West’s version of Afro-American musical history, the blues tradition is a rich and highly complex one. The blues followed a largely hegemonic pattern of development through constant interaction with the dominant culture. In the study of the blues it is impossible to ignore the injustice suffered in this process. The academic perspectives on the
blues following its crystallization as a genre have been just as interesting and revealing as the music itself.
FIG. 1. HEGEMONY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF DELTA BLUES.

Influence of West African traditions

- West African musical techniques include melisma (singing / playing several notes on one syllable) and slides
- West African music uses equiheptatonic scales (octave divided equally between 7 tones)
- West African music often open-ended, with no time constraints or specific beginning, middle and end
- African musical forms mostly group activities, including drum circles and call-and-response
- West African call-and-response forms generally between two groups or a group and a leader
- West African music relies on system of complex and interconnected rhythms called polyrhythms

Influence of Euro-American traditions

- In the context of Western music, these techniques resemble human sighs or moans to convey melancholy
- Western scale (octave divided between 12 tones) enforced through factory-produced instruments
- Western audiences expect familiar format (verse, chorus, rhyme scheme, etc.)
- Western audiences, especially recording studios, expect pieces to have unique and unified purpose, specific ending
- Drums, dancing and most group activities—except manual labor—wiped out under slavery

Effects on the blues genre

- Blues tradition retains West African techniques that allow more emotional expression
- Vestiges of equiheptatonic scale remain in blue notes of blues music, the lowered 3rd, 5th and sometimes 7th scale degrees
- The 12-bar, or AAB-form, blues structure becomes popular and widespread
- Live Delta blues performances 20-30 minutes; recorded songs restricted to about 3
- Banning of group music encourages development of the blues as a solo performance
- In blues, the relationship between singer and his guitar resembles call-and-response, like a musical conversation
- Blues less rhythmically complex than African music but more so than Western; heavy use of syncopation, which is now ubiquitous in Western music
Bessie Smith, one of the “Blues Queens” of vaudeville blues, is depicted here in a tiny circular photograph while the “I” of the song is shown in reductive caricature. Illustrations were a common method of advertisement design, but “race record” ads were often exceptionally cartoonish and drew from plantation stereotypes.
This Paramount ad feigns innocence at the phallic implications of the boa constrictor, repressing the song’s inherent sexuality. The ad differentiates between the musician, who is shown in a photograph in a bubble to the side, from the song’s lyric persona. The illustration of the song itself features an attractive woman of ambiguous—but vaguely white-looking—race, appealing to the white consumers while relegating the black performer to a separate space.
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