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WHAT IS BLUES?

"The sorrow songs of the slaves we call Jubilee Melodies. The happy-go-lucky songs of the Southern Negro we call blues."¹

—W. C. HANDY, IN 1919

"I never did name one of my records the blues after all. Everybody else called my sounds what I made 'the blues.' But I always just felt good behind 'em; I didn't feel like I was playin' no blues."²

—JIMMY REED, IN 1975

THERE HAS PROBABLY BEEN MORE ROMANTIC FOOLISHNESS written about blues in general, and Robert Johnson in particular, than about any other genre or performer of the twentieth century. As white urbanites discovered the "Race records" of the 1920s and 1930s, they reshaped the music to fit their own tastes and desires, creating a rich mythology that often bears little resemblance to the reality of the musicians they admired. Popular entertainers were reborn as primitive voices from the dark and demonic Delta, and a music notable for its professionalism and humor was recast as the heart-cry of a suffering people. The poverty and oppression of the world that created blues is undeniable, but it was the music's up-to-date power and promise, not its folkloric melancholy, that attracted black record buyers.

When did blues emerge? We have all heard variations on a mythic answer:

*The blues been here since time began
Since the first lyin' woman met the first cheatin' man.*

Which is indisputably true, if we are talking about heartache rather than music. People have always had the blues, and as far as we know they have always sung about it.³ This is the source of Spanish flamenco, of Cape Verdean *morna*, and of country and western, all styles notable for lamenting lost and martyred love. However, if we are talking not about a universal emotion, but about the music filed in record stores as “blues,” matters become both more prosaic and more complicated.

Before going into the history of blues music, we first have to confront the fact that the term has been used for a lot of different styles over the years. Like all genre names, “blues” has always been, first and foremost, a marketing term. When the market is hot, the word gets tacked onto plenty of songs that fit no musical definition of the form. When it gets cold, even the most straightforward twelve-bar blues may get classified as folk, jazz, rock, or funk. I am not going to enter the meaningless debate over what is or is not blues—I have no problem with people using whatever definition they like, as long as they grant that it is not the only one. It is worth taking a moment, though, to look at a few common definitions and provide an idea of what the word means to me.

The simplest and clearest definition of blues is the one used by musicians, as when they say, “Let’s play a blues.” This is a certain sequence of chords, commonly known as the twelve-bar blues, and there have been literally thousands of songs composed in this pattern. All such songs are technically “blues,” though they have been played by ragtime orchestras, jazz bands, pop and rock groups, and have formed the bedrock for artists as different as Ma Rainey, Count Basie, Elvis Presley, James Brown, and Mose Allison.

While this definition has the virtue of simplicity, a lot of music that is generally considered to be blues does not fit the twelve-bar frame-

work. Much of Bessie Smith’s and B. B. King’s work, for example, is set to more varied and complex chord changes. As a result, folklorists and musicologists often say that the standard blues form can have twelve, eight or sixteen bars, or various other variations, and that the most important thing is a certain tonal feel created by the use of “blue notes” (in technical terms, the flatted third and seventh notes of the major scale). Such notes are common in many earlier African and African-American styles, as well as in quite a few other musics around the world, and they are usually described by Europeans and Euro-Americans as having a mournful, lonesome, minor-key sound.

The perception of this “blues feel” is to a great extent subjective, and different people hear it in different places. There is infinite argument, for example, over which jazz masters have and have not been able to get a blues feel in their music. In the wider world, some writers will argue that the Egyptian star Oum Khulthoum was a sort of blues singer, or the griots of Mali, or the Greek *rebetika* artists, while others fervently dispute the point. Even within the musics normally considered blues there is plenty of room for disagreement. I recently had a conversation with an expert who argued that most of the famous blues queens of the 1920s were not really singing blues, while white “hillbilly” artists like Dock Boggs often were.⁴

Where all the experts come together is in their irritation at the most common and influential definition of blues. This is the definition used by the true modern arbiters of genre, the people who market music and file it in record stores. Through their good offices, “blues” has come to be generally understood as the range of music found in the blues section when we go shopping for CDs. This commercial definition uses the word as a grab-bag term for all sorts of older African-American musics that cannot be filed elsewhere: The rule seems to be that if a black person played it before 1950, and it is not classifiable as jazz, classical or gospel, then it must be blues. In most record stores, fiddle hoedowns end up in the blues section if they were recorded by black players, as do work songs, children’s songs, and a good deal of ragtime. Even gospel music will usually be found there if the performer was black and accompanied him- or herself on guitar.

For music recorded after 1950, things are a little different. The

rock, R&B, and soul revolutions all included a lot of performers who used blue notes and recorded songs in the twelve-bar form. Jackie Wilson, James Brown, Aretha Franklin, Mick Jagger, and Janis Joplin have all been known to flat their thirds and sevenths like crazy, but are not generally filed as blues singers. This is because, for much of the last fifty years, the term “blues” has tended to be a synonym for “not successful enough to be remembered outside the blues audience.” While such stars as Ray Charles, Chuck Berry, and Dinah Washington will be found in the “soul,” “rock” and “jazz” sections, less successful contemporaries like Guitar Slim, Percy Mayfield, and Ruth Brown will be filed as blues singers. Then, of course, there are all the white players who came along after the 1960s. Many of them—Eric Clapton and George Thorogood are obvious examples—played a lot of blues, but are usually filed as rockers. Others, especially after the success of Stevie Ray Vaughan, are filed as blues even though they are no bluesier than Clapton or Thorogood.

Although the record marketers’ classifications make little sense from a musicological perspective, we are all fairly used to them and can usually find the records we want. And, in the end, that is what genre descriptions are good for. The jazz and classical categories are no more logical, both having long since expanded to include musics that would be unrecognizable to the earlier artists in those fields, filed together not because of shared musical characteristics but because of a shared cultural history. Rock has come to mean everything from Elvis Presley to symphonic productions, avant-garde art music, doo-wop, punk, and ska. Genres and categories are not descriptions of music, they are ways of grouping and marketing music. Or, to put it another way, such divisions do not deal with how music sounds, but how it is perceived.

I will use the word “blues” in various ways throughout this book, and while I will not be as lax as the record bin taxonomists, I will pay relatively little attention to musicological standards. That is because the musicologists and folklorists defined their terms after the fact, and their definitions would have seemed ridiculous to most blues singers and buyers. I have mentioned an expert who argues that Dock Boggs was a blues singer but that W. C. Handy’s songs were ragtime and

many recordings by Bessie Smith and her peers were Tin Pan Alley pop. Musicologically, that makes sense, but historically it excludes the very music that gave us the word.

“Blues,” in the parlance of the teens and early 1920s, meant the popular style purveyed by Handy and the blues queens. In succeeding years, it was expanded to include other, more or less related styles, such as those played by guitarists on the streets and farms of the deep South, but this was a marketing choice, spawned by the success of the commercial blues craze. To say that the artists who gave the music its name and established it as a familiar genre are not “real” blues artists because they do not fit later folkloric or musicological standards is flying in the face of history and common sense.

What is more, my main point in writing this book is to try to look at the blues scene from inside, as it evolved, rather than to apply the standards of modern fans, experts, or academics. Our present-day idea of blues has largely been determined by people who had little if anything to do with the culture that produced the music, and who codified their definitions after blues had ceased to be part of the mainstream black pop scene. For almost fifty years, blues history has also been filtered through the prism of rock ‘n’ roll, a music that is closely related but has quite different standards of quality. Because of all this, I prefer whenever possible to define the style not according to my own ears and tastes, but according to the judgments of the blues players and consumers of the times. My working definition of “blues,” at least up to the 1960s, would be: “Whatever the mass of black record buyers called ‘blues’ in any period.” I am not claiming this definition is perfect by any means, and I understand that there are plenty of situations in which it will not work. Nonetheless, it is a first step toward understanding how the idea of blues evolved through the years and, perhaps more importantly, how the musicians themselves perceived their music.

One result of applying the standards of the musicians and their original fans is that I will not assume that blues singers are deeper, better, or more authentic because of poverty, rural roots, or lack of musical training. Robert Johnson and his peers were intelligent professionals, well versed in the trends of their day and the tastes of their

audiences. Some were more sophisticated than others, but all were competent entertainers, and their music reflected the demands of a very active and critical public. Among other things, that public saw them as symbols of success, people who could flash fat rolls of banknotes and wear nice suits, and who did not have to sweat in the fields from sunrise to sunset.

The more familiar literary view—that blues was the heart-cry of poor, backcountry black folk—has its place, and it would be misleading to imply that it is totally an invention of later, mostly white writers and fans. It was part of the blues legend from the beginning, a colorful way of marketing a new style. The romantic roots of this stereotype can be seen in W. C. Handy's tale of the chance encounter that set him on the path to becoming one of America's defining pop composers. He had fallen asleep while waiting for a train in the Mississippi Delta hamlet of Tutwiler, and woke to hear music:

A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside me while I slept. His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages. As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who used steel bars. The effect was unforgettable. His song, too, struck me instantly.

Goin' where the Southern cross' the Dog.

The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard.⁵

With slight variations, this picture has been conjured up again and again over the succeeding decades. Writers of all sorts have pictured a parade of ragged, downtrodden minstrels, singing their strange, personal music on ramshackle porches across the deep South. Since the coming of the folk-blues revival in the late 1950s, hundreds of middle-class white kids (and some black kids as well) have built themselves blues personas that self-consciously mimic this image, donning a work shirt or overalls, hunching over their guitars, and mumbling in their best approximation of Mississippi field inflections.

What would Robert Johnson think of that, if he were alive? Would

he be amused or annoyed, or simply baffled? It is one of the eternally unanswerable questions, but there certainly have been plenty of blues artists who resented the image. Take Little Milton, a singer and guitarist from Jackson, Mississippi, who has been making a good living in the blues field for half a century:

Blues isn't all about some guy sitting on a corner, on a store porch or in a little dingy joint, with overalls on and patches on them, singing about his woman left him and took everything. You know, rich women leave rich men as well. Educated men, educated women leave each other, so I fail to see the significance of just the down and out, you know, that kind of thing. There's nothing wrong with coming onstage looking like you're somebody that's successful, smelling good, you know—the hygiene thing, the whole bit. I don't see anything wrong with that. I call that "class" of an individual; makes no difference what type music or profession they might be in.⁶

Look at that photograph of Robert Johnson, in his wide-lapel, pin-stripe suit, his tie with its broad diagonal stripes and shiny metal clip, his handkerchief neatly folded in the breast pocket, and his hat cocked jauntily on his head. "There's nothing wrong with coming onstage looking like you're somebody that's successful. . . ."

In any case, however romantic the image, the guitarist Handy saw in Tutwiler would not have called his music blues. As Son House would say, "The old songs they used to sing way back yonder, weren't *none* of them pertaining to no blues."⁷ That term arrived in most areas only in the teens, and even then was used not for rural back-porch moans, but for a hot new pop style, performed by professionals in fine gowns and fancy suits. The older black music that survives in the recordings of people like Mississippi John Hurt only came to be marketed as blues later on, because calling it that made it seem more up-to-date.

Blues certainly had roots in earlier Southern styles, but its trunk and many of its most fruitful branches were in Chicago and New York—and later in Los Angeles—in the recording studios and vaudeville theaters. In the 1920s, slavery was still a living memory for many

black families, and no one was feeling nostalgic for any “good old days.” Black record buyers were looking forward to a “new world a-coming,” in the words of the Harlem historian Roi Ottley, and blues was part of that, a down-home relative who had gone up north and made her fortune.

As Honeyboy Edwards, a friend and contemporary of Johnson’s, puts it:

When the people were slaves, they’d holler ‘cause it make the day go ‘long and they wouldn’t worry about what they were doing, and that’s what the blues come from. Then in the twenties, like, they named it the blues, with Mama Rainey and all, Ida Cox, Bessie Smith, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Lonnie Johnson. Before that come out, they just played a lot of ragtime stuff, like my father used to play. He played guitar and violin, and he played, like, “John Henry fell dead with the hammer in his hand,” “Stagolee,” and “Spoonful,” that kind of stuff.⁸

That “ragtime stuff” made up the core repertoire of older Delta players like John Hurt and Furry Lewis, and would be recalled by bluesmen like Big Bill Broonzy, a country fiddler until he moved to Chicago and learned guitar. It was not ragtime in the sense that Scott Joplin played ragtime. Though a few hotshot guitarists in the East had the technical skill to fingerpick piano rags on guitar, and black string bands from Dallas to the Atlantic seaboard played formal, multi-section compositions like “Dallas Rag” and “St. Louis Tickle,” Edwards uses the word “ragtime” much as a lot of people today use “blues”: as a catchall term for older African-American rural music. Someone who grew up in the rock era would call Mississippi John Hurt’s music blues. Edwards, who grew up when blues was a hot new trend, calls it ragtime. I do not know what it would have been called at the turn of the century, when ragtime itself was a flashy new pop sound—probably “reels,” a term many older black people in the South were still using in the 1920s to describe any secular country music, blues included.⁹ Edwards includes songs that most modern listeners would classify as blues in the “ragtime” category, because the black audience of his youth already considered them outmoded, fit only for hicks, old

people, and white folks. As he recalls, “When I was in Mississippi, a lot of white people used to give dances, they used to keep me playing a lot of places, and I played a lot of ragtime stuff then, like ‘Alberta,’ ‘Corinna,’ ‘Saint Louis Blues.’” That last song, for those unaware of the fact, was W. C. Handy’s biggest hit, the number that made blues an international sensation.

If Handy was the Father of the Blues—and his success in popularizing the term gives him a fair claim to the title—its mother was Ma Rainey, who may have been the first entertainer to stake her fortunes on blues singing. Gertrude Rainey was born in Georgia in 1886, and by 1904 she was touring as half of a song-and-dance team with William “Pa” Rainey. They appeared in minstrel troupes, tent shows, vaudeville theaters, and circuses throughout the southeastern United States. In her one known interview, Rainey told the folklorist John Work that she first came across what would become her trademark style in 1902, in a small town in Missouri. As Work recalled her story:

A girl from the town . . . came to the tent one morning and began to sing about the “man” who had left her. The song was so strange and poignant that it attracted much attention. “Ma” Rainey became so interested that she learned the song from the visitor, and used it soon afterwards in her “act” as an encore.

The song elicited such a response from the audiences that it won a special place in her act. Many times she was asked what kind of song it was, and one day she replied, in a moment of inspiration, “It’s the *Blues*. . . .”

She added that a fire destroyed some newspaper clippings which mentioned her singing of these strange songs in 1905. She added, however, that after she began to sing the blues, although they were not so named then, she frequently heard similar songs in the course of her travels.¹⁰

Rainey became a popular star on the Southern circuit, and by the early teens she and her husband were traveling with a circus and billing themselves as “Rainey and Rainey, Assassins of the Blues.” It is worth noting that this billing uses the word “blues” not for a

musical style, but in the old sense of misery, which their act would wipe out. It is not clear at what point she began calling her songs blues, and there is no evidence that she used the term any earlier than Handy did. Whether or not she gave the music its name, though, she did a great deal to put it on the map.

It is often argued that Rainey's girl in Missouri and Handy's railroad station guitarist are examples of the original blues singers, and that the professionals were just elaborating on and jazzing up a common rural style. Certainly, Handy and Rainey were building on earlier folk forms, and gave the credit where it was due. But they also created something new, a vibrant, theatrical expansion of the older moans and hollers, and it was this new creation that swept the country under the name "blues." They were so popular and influential that, since recordings of black rural musicians would not be made until well into the blues era, we can never have a clear idea of what the music sounded like before the professionals came on the scene. A handful of amateur folklorists in earlier years had transcribed scattered lines that seem like proto-blues lyrics, and it is possible that by the dawn of the twentieth century the deep South was full of people playing something that sounded more or less like what would come to be called blues. It is at least equally likely that such songs were rare, regional, and followed no set structures until Rainey and her peers shaped them, polished them, and made them into showstoppers.

It is also far from clear that even these pre-blues styles were ancient, rural creations. There has always been a coterie of New Orleans patriots who claim that blues arose in that city's red-light district. Jelly Roll Morton, who was born there in 1885, said that the style was already common in his childhood. Introducing his recording of "2:19 Blues," he recalled that it was the signature song of a whorehouse singer named Mamie Desdumes: "She hardly could play anything else more, but she really could play this number. Of course, to get in on it, to try to learn it, I made myself the can-rusher [the kid who would carry a bucket down to the corner bar to buy beer]."¹¹ This suggests that the style was already established in New Orleans almost a decade before Handy or Rainey came across it farther north. Since the city functioned as the main shipping center for the South and Midwest,

and especially for river states like Mississippi and Missouri, it is possible that a New Orleans style went feral in the countryside, and Handy and Rainey would have been in just the right places to rediscover it as rural folk music.¹²

Whatever the music's origins, by the time the first rural guitarists and singers began recording in the mid-1920s, blues had been a major pop style for over a decade, and all of them would have heard and been influenced by the polished work of the vaudeville and tent-show singers. When the record companies called their music blues, it was a commercial choice designed to link them to the popular recordings of the blues queens. The newspaper ads for their records might show an old man riding down a dirt road on a tired mule, or a wide-mouthed minstrel caricature, but to a young player trying to make a name in the entertainment world, the word conjured up pictures of good jobs, big money, and shiny cars. If someone had suggested to the major blues stars that they were old-fashioned folk musicians carrying on a culture handed down from slavery times, most would probably have been insulted.