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# A SOUND FOR RECOGNITION: BLUES MUSIC AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

Remy Corbet

*Southern Illinois University Carbondale*, [remy.corbet@gmail.com](mailto:remy.corbet@gmail.com)

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A SOUND FOR RECOGNITION  
BLUES MUSIC AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

by

Rémy Corbet

Masters Degree, Southern Illinois University, 2011

A Thesis  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Masters in History in the Graduate School

Department of History  
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A SOUND FOR RECOGNITION: BLUES MUSIC AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN  
COMMUNITY

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Rémy Corbet

A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Masters Degree  
in the field of History

Approved by:

Dr. Robbie Lieberman, Chair

Dr. Jonathan Bean

Dr. Michael Brown

Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
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## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Remy Corbet for the Masters in History degree in American History, presented on August 3, 2011, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

**TITLE: A SOUND FOR RECOGNITION: BLUES MUSIC AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY**

**MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Robbie Lieberman**

Blues music is a reflection of all the changes that shaped the African American experience. It is an affirmation of the African American identity, looking forward to the future with one eye glancing at the past. It is a reminder of the tragedies and inequalities that accompanied African Americans from slavery to official freedom, then from freedom to equality. It is the witness of the development of African Americans, and of their acculturation to the individual voice, symbol of the American ethos, which made the link between their African past and their American future.

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Merci pour tout. Je vous aime.

Rémy.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
ABSTRACT .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iv
CHAPTERS	
INTRODUCTION.....	1
PART I - HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND RISE OF THE BLUES.....	9
CHAPTER I - Life in America from Slavery to Freedom.....	10
CHAPTER II - The Birth of African American Music.....	28
CHAPTER III - The Birth of Blues Music.....	43
PART II - THE GOLDEN AGE.....	60
CHAPTER I - Life in America from One War to the Next.....	62
CHAPTER II - The Race Records Era.....	67
PART III - BLUES AND THE AFTERMATH OF THE WAR: BETWEEN PROGRESS AND DEVELOPMENT.....	93
CHAPTER I - Being African American in America from World War II to the Civil Rights Movement.....	94
CHAPTER II - The Revival of Blues Music and its Evolution.....	105
CHAPTER III - Blues Singers as Symbols of Acculturation to the American Ethos.....	110
CHAPTER IV - Reuniting Past and Present.....	121
CONCLUSION.....	132

BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	137
VITA.....	154

## INTRODUCTION

The study of music is a complicated task, because it is such a vast subject that attempting to fully cover one genre, let alone the entire musical field, puts one at risk of generalizing and misunderstanding one's subject. One can study the melody, the instruments, the musicians, etc. Each musical genre has an extensive historiography, from the most generic to the most specific. Blues music is no exception, and proved to be more complex than it sounds. Indeed, Blues music is an African American musical genre, which means that it can be studied through another filter, another aspect of study; African American music. The historiography of Blues can be analyzed in four distinct areas, depending on which perspective this musical genre is studied.

The first area of analysis is perhaps the most generic, where Blues is presented and studied like any other musical genre. The depth of study is limited to the quantitative aspect of the music, that is to say who were the most famous singers over time, what are the most successful songs, etc. Among the numerous general studies on Blues, two present it in an interesting way. The first, *Music in the USA*,<sup>1</sup> puts Blues through the scope of American music as a whole. Blues is explained and developed from a strictly musical point of view, according to the "date of birth" of the genre. Going through this book and focusing on Blues music will tell one that Blues appeared in 1920 with the Classic Blues singers.<sup>2</sup> Even though, as one shall see in this study, this date appears to be reductive, but nonetheless provides a general understanding of the properties of Blues music. The second general publication focuses on African American music exclusively. In *The*

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<sup>1</sup>Judith Tick, *Music in the USA: a Documentary Companion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 399.



*Music of Black Americans: a History*,<sup>3</sup> Eileen Southern uses her experience as musicologist to tell the story of Blues and its artists, but also what these artists have accomplished, and what made them successful. Her approach, both quantitative and historical, allows her to recount what happened in a rather subjective way, and treats Blues music the same way she does with Jazz, Gospel, and other African American musical genres, ancient and modern. These two volumes look at the surface of Blues music, provide perspective to the reader, and establish the place of this music in the bigger picture of American and African American music.

The second area of analysis focuses on Blues music exclusively. As a result, the amount, but also the pertinence of the information conveyed are superior to what general studies on music provide the reader. In books such as *Blues*,<sup>4</sup> by Gerard Herzhaft, or *Blues Authentic: its History and its Themes*,<sup>5</sup> by Robert Springer, a more extensive presentation of this music and its origins is offered to the reader. Herzhaft describes Blues music with hindsight and subjectivity, using his own research and experience as a former Blues club manager in Paris, to tell the story of this music. Robert Springer, twenty years before Herzhaft, focused on a historical presentation of Blues music as well, adding geographic data to present the birthplace of famous artists and Blues styles. These two French scholars explore Blues with more depth than general music study. They focus on the different styles of music, and tell the history of artists. However, their analysis is mainly musical, in the sense that they do not cover the musical evolutions that lead to Blues music, nor do they provide a social and historical analysis of the people making and listening to this music, African Americans.

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<sup>3</sup> Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: a History* (3rd. edition, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Gerard Herzhaft, *Blues* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Springer, *Authentic Blues, its History and its Themes* (Paris: Filipacchi, 1985).

This perspective is analyzed through two more areas of studies. The musical aspect remains a dominant theme, but is seen through the eye of those who made this music. Thus, they provide their experience as musicians but also as African Americans during the twentieth century. Alan Lomax makes the link between studies such as Springer or Herzhaft, but also provides interviews of bluesmen, recording their experience as artists and African Americans living in the South. *The Land Where the Blues Began*<sup>6</sup> represents his most extensive work, and a recollection of the interviews and recordings he made throughout the South, from work camps to prisons, for the Library of Congress, continuing the research he started with his father, John A. Lomax. Lomax brings to the field the perspective of a musician and musicologist in his attempt to give the reader an idea of what it meant to be a bluesman. He also provides his analysis on the situation of the music and its meaning. Even though some of his thoughts seem to be male oriented—his analysis that Blues can only be sung by a man is debatable—he gives the point of view of a scholar whose objective is to give a voice to those who made the music.

Elijah Wald follows the same model, even though he reduces his analysis to the study of one artist. In *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of Blues*,<sup>7</sup> he uses the story of legendary bluesman Robert Johnson to look into the origins of Blues music and its relationship with the people of the Delta, Mississippi. He also devotes one chapter on how this music was perceived both by White and Black Americans during the first part of the twentieth century. This recent research also uses testimonies by White artists such as Eric Clapton and Keith Richards, when they evoke the influence Blues and Robert Johnson had on their lives. Wald was one of the

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<sup>6</sup> Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1993)

<sup>7</sup> Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of Blues* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 2004).

first ones to study the conflictual relationship between African American music and White people from the beginning of African American music.

History is best told through the voice of those who made it. Thus, the historiography of Blues music is full of testimonies “from the field” from artists or producers who recall their own experience, their role, but also the story of an epoch, and of the people who lived it. One can take for instance the example of bluesman Big Bill Broonzy who, in *Big Bill Blues*,<sup>8</sup> tells the story of his life, how Blues music entered it, and pushed him to become one of the most famous bluesmen of all time. Another interesting aspect of this testimony is how he describes the change of the vision of Blues music by an audience who, over the years, lost interest in it. This book being published in 1964, it does not capture the later development of this music, especially its openness to a White audience.

However, one of the most important testimonies comes from music producer and musician Perry Bradford who, in *Born With the Blues*,<sup>9</sup> describes the history of the first Blues song ever to appear on record. Even though the Blues he produced, as one shall see later, was not the same that Lomax recorded during his trips to the South, it opened the way for modern African American music. He also gives his analysis of the music industry, and of the role that African American artists and producers played, compared to the lack of recognition they were experiencing.

Music would be nothing without its audience, and knowing who it was and its history tells about its importance, what it really meant. Three authors embody this vision, with their own

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<sup>8</sup>Big Bill Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues: William Broonzy's Story, as Told to Yannick Bruynoghe* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1964).

<sup>9</sup> Perry Bradford, *Born with the Blues: Perry Bradford's Own Story: the True Story of the Pioneering Blues Singers and Musicians in the Early Jazz Age* (New York: Oak Publication, 1965).

analysis and interpretation. In *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*,<sup>10</sup> Lawrence Levine studies the roots of African American music, that is to say the African origins. In this analysis, he goes back to the original slave songs, along with the slave culture, to demonstrate that the founding of the African American history and culture can be traced back to slavery. Through his study, he shows how the music shaped the people, and how the people influenced the evolution of the music, following the African pattern of considering music as a daily and communal activity. This musical base engendered all modern African American music, such as Jazz, Gospel, and Blues. African Americans carried this tradition with them throughout the changes that occurred in their history. Although he stops his analysis at the beginning of the golden age of Blues, he provides the reader with precious hindsight on the genesis of this genre, but also on its audience.

In *Blues People*,<sup>11</sup> Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka uses the context of Blues to explain his assumptions concerning the relation between this music, the people who created them, and the larger American culture. In his assumed subjective analysis, he begins his study by saying that, “*Blues People* is not a chronicle. It is a pointed search for an explanation of black music and its essence.”<sup>12</sup> His study is African American oriented, in the sense that he focuses on Western music only when it interacts with the music of African Americans. The lyrics and their poetry do not matter to him, only the message does. According to him, “The essence (*of Blues*) is to be found in the relationship of African Americans to American Whites, the evolving recognition by blacks of themselves as a particular kind of Americans and the ways in which the tensions brought about by each change on their position in American society has created new sensibilities and

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<sup>10</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>11</sup> Amiri Baraka, *The Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* (Berkeley, Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

hence new musical styles.”<sup>13</sup> Richard Crawford, when reviewing Baraka’s work, asserts that, “He focuses on the tragic aspects of the Negro’s lot in America—on discrimination and suffering as constant companions and on the seemingly perverse way in which the commercial establishment in American music has been able to turn back musical innovation to its own profit.”<sup>14</sup> This analysis denotes a shift from a quantitative to a qualitative analysis of Blues and its audience, where messages matter more than lyrics.

This point of view, due to its overt militant content, was challenged and criticized by other scholars such as Ralph Ellison. In *Shadow and Act*,<sup>15</sup> Ellison contests Baraka’s analysis by saying that he gives little attention to Blues as lyrics, as form of poetry.<sup>16</sup> He qualifies Baraka’s work as a theory of African American culture that brings more confusion than clarity. He “tries to impose an ideology upon this cultural complexity. His version of Blues lacks the excitement and surprise of men living in the world.”<sup>17</sup> Ellison’s vision contrasts with Baraka’s in the sense that he puts emphasis on the lyrics and the poetry of Blues, which makes it “speak to us simultaneously of the tragic and the comic aspects of human condition.”<sup>18</sup>

This concise historiography shows how vast studies on African American music and Blues are. Thus, this work has no intention of being militant, nor of revolutionizing the genre. However, it aims at providing a historical analysis of the path Blues music and the African American

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Crawford, “On Two Traditions of Black Music Research”, *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 6 (1986), pp. 1-9, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 248.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 255.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 256.

community took, from marginalization to recognition. It seeks to discover why Blues music, and not Jazz for instance, became synonymous with the struggle the African American community had to face, and why Blues is considered an embodiment of the African American experience. Until one understands that this relation goes beyond the musical experience, and that Blues means more to the African American community than another way to make profit, part of the complete understanding of this genre and its importance will be left out.

Blues music is a reflection of all the changes that shaped the African American experience. It is an affirmation of the African American identity, looking forward to the future with one eye glancing at the past. It is a reminder of the tragedies and inequalities that accompanied African Americans from slavery to official freedom, then from freedom to equality. It is the witness of the development of African Americans, and of their acculturation to the individual voice, symbol of the American ethos, which made the link between their African past and their American future.

Music itself would be nothing without its audience. As a result, it appears difficult to study Blues music and the history of African Americans separately. Thus, throughout this work, both aspects are going to be analyzed simultaneously, to demonstrate that the musical and historical developments followed the same dynamic, from slavery to the end of the 1960s. The first part of this analysis will focus on the beginning of African American history, from slavery to the beginning of the twentieth century, as well as the early forms of music that developed along the way and introduced African American artists to the music industry. The origins, functioning, and themes of the Blues will be analyzed as well.

The second part will focus on the 1920-1940 era, when the United States went from the Roaring Twenties to the Great Depression, and on what it meant for the African American community in terms of rights and conditions of living. From a musical perspective, this part will be devoted to the Race Records era, where Blues and other African American music appeared and prospered—at least commercially—also known as “the Golden Age” of Black music.

The third part will explore the development of the status of African Americans during and after the Second World War, from the last days of the Jim Crow era to the Civil Rights Movement. This section will also focus on the latest change in Blues music. The study of the bluesman and of his audience will be treated to show how far the acculturation process went for this genre, to the point of witnessing the beginning of a shifting in its audience. It is to be hoped that this study will show how African Americans developed from slavery to segregation, to equality. Furthermore, because every story needs a soundtrack, this work will attempt to show that the emergence of Blues music was a reflection of the struggle the African American community went through, and that one cannot go without the other.

PART I:  
HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND RISE OF THE BLUES



## CHAPTER I

## LIFE IN AMERICA FROM SLAVERY TO “FREEDOM”

Alan Lomax was an American folklorist and musicologist. He traveled the south of the United States in search of rural music to record for the Library of Congress. In his travels, he met with African American artists and prisoners to record their music and their vision of life and of their music. In one of his interviews, he witnessed a conversation between two bluesmen, Memphis Slim and Big Bill Broonzy, about their vision of Blues music:

“The thing about the Blues is,” Big Bill said, his voice ringing out with authority, “it didn’t start in the North—in Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, wha’soever it is—it didn’t start in the East, neither in the North—it started in the South, from what I’m thinking.”

“Blues started from slavery,” Memphis muttered, half to himself.

“And the thing that has come to a showdown, that we really want to know why, and how come, a man in the South *have* the blues,” Bill went on. “I worked on levee camps, extra gangs, road camps and rock camps and rock quarries and every place, and I hear guys singin *uh-hmmmm* that, and I want to get the thing plainly that the blues is something that’s from the heart—I know that, and whensoever you hear fellows singing the blues—I always believed it was a really heart thing, from his heart, you know, and it was expressing his feeling about *how* he felt to the people.

I’ve known guys that wanted to cuss out the boss and was afraid to go up to his face and tell him what you wanted to tell him, and I’ve heard them sing those things—sing words, you know, back to the boss—say things to the mule, make like the mule stepped on his foot—say, ‘Get off my foot, goddam it!’ and he meant he was talking to the boss. ‘You son-of-a-bitch,’ he say, ‘stay off my foot!’ and such things as that.”

“Yeah, blues is kind of a revenge,” Memphis broke in. “You know you wanta say something, you wanta signifyin like—that’s the blues. We all have had hard time in life, and things we couldn’t say or do, so we sing it.”<sup>19</sup>

The South, slavery, heart, hard times, Blues music. What Lomax captured in this conversation from the 1960s is the importance of Blues to the African American community. Both men refer

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<sup>19</sup> Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1993), 460-461.

to a history that started long before their era. As a result, it is impossible to talk about Blues music without mentioning its origins. The same way, it appears difficult to talk about the African American community, which invented this music, without referring to its origins. The starting point is the same: slavery.

## A. S L A V E R Y

Many definitions of this word can be found. Slavery is a civil relationship where one person has absolute power over another, and controls his or her life, liberty, and future, through involuntary servitude. Over the course of history, slavery always existed. Indeed, it has been used in every culture and society. The Egyptians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, and of course Western European countries used this system. Slaves were prisoners of war, foreigners, with no rights in the country they were living in. At this time, as David Turley notices, ‘ The racial distinctiveness of slaves has not proved to be invariable attributes of slave systems.’<sup>20</sup> They could also be people with debts bondage or serfdom. This situation came across when the person taking on a debt offered as collateral for the debt his own services or those of someone he commanded and, failing to meet the debt, had to provide services for the creditor.<sup>21</sup>

The level of servitude depended upon the people since, in some cultures, they were more considered as servants than slaves. In other cultures, conditions could worsen. One can mention the Muslim world, where slavery lasted for more than one thousand years, but more especially be-

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<sup>20</sup> David Turley, *Slavery* (Oxford:Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

tween the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, where brutalities and inhumanities were more common than anywhere else in the world at the time, especially for non-Muslims.<sup>22</sup>

Being a slave depended on time and place. However, being a slave on the American soil for African Slaves was different from any other previous forms of slavery. The first time African people came to America was at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619, when twenty of them arrived on a Dutch Ship Called 'The White Lion.' At first, they were not considered as slaves but as servants who had to work for several years before earning their freedom. Moreover, they were listed as servants who happened to be from Africa.<sup>23</sup> The influx of African servants continued for about fifty years. This system was close to ancient slave systems. However, with time, slavery became an institution. The need for a larger workforce became more important since, as the population arriving in the colonies grew, the need for goods such as tobacco and cotton, for domestic consumption and trade, grew as well. Soon enough, due to several factors, issues arose.

The first factor was the incapacity for Whites living in the colonies to use Native Americans as slaves. This was a difficult process, first because of the great number of Native Americans at the time, but also due to their superior knowledge of the environment, making them very difficult to capture.<sup>24</sup> The second factor was the competition between African servants and White workers. Indeed, White servants were not numerous enough to cover the increasing demand for labor force. As a result, low wages would only bring low productivity. Furthermore, if they tried to escape, they were difficult to recognize among free men. Their social status was an issue as well since, as they were servants, they would not work as much as slaves would. The unwillingness of

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

<sup>23</sup> John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 53.

<sup>24</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 54.

free workers to do their labor can be added to the list of grievances. Indeed, sharecropping was a hard and painful activity that only few workers were willing to do. Besides, the amount of work they were asked to do was not equal to their salaries. In other words, English laborers were underpaid and underfed.<sup>25</sup>

As a result, slavery became the path to follow, and Africans appeared to offer a solution to every problem. Bringing them from Africa would cut them off their origins and habits, making them vulnerable to capture if they were to escape, due to the lack of knowledge of their environment, combined with the color of their skin. Furthermore, the military superiority of Europeans combined to the thirst for profits from native Africans increased the number of men, women, and children taken away from Africa. Slavery eased the plantation owners decision-making regarding labor since slaves could be forced to work longer and harder than servants or free workers. From an economic perspective, the absence of salary to be paid generated benefits as slaves, after their purchase, which was relatively cheap at first, could be taken care of as animals, that is to say housing and food.

Thus, slavery became legal in the colonies. The first one to legalize it was Massachusetts in 1641, soon followed by other colonies such as Virginia who, through the voting of a fugitive slave law, declared it legal in 1661.<sup>26</sup> As a result, a slave trade began between Africa and America, triggering a spectacular growth of slaves in the colonies. This increasing number of slaves began to raise concern among the White population. These concerns turned into fear when stories about rebellions and murders toward slave owners were reported.<sup>27</sup> To face this situation, slave

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<sup>25</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 67.

<sup>26</sup> John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 54.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

codes were created, which would reduce, if not erase, liberty or humanity for slaves. Each colony had its own code, but all of them were similar. The first slave code was introduced by the state of Virginia in 1694.<sup>28</sup> The main objective of these codes was to reduce slaves into properties instead of human beings, putting them into a permanent state of servitude.

Under these codes, slaves could not leave plantations without the approval of their masters. For those convicted of crimes, the punishment could go from corporal punishment to executions.<sup>29</sup> To these codes could be added the teaching of Christianity, the destruction of their personality, along with the systematic breaking of family ties and communal identity, all of which would make life on the American soil difficult, unfair, and hopeless.

Regardless where slaves were working, on plantations, inside houses, or in towns, conditions were difficult. On smaller plantations, the number of slaves was smaller and most of the time the master was working in the fields with his slaves, performing the same tasks. Thus, the treatment received was less brutal compared to larger plantations.<sup>30</sup> On larger plantations, the activities were the same but performed on a larger scale. Hundreds of slaves could be working on one plantation, making it look more like a factory. However, discipline differed.

Large plantations were owned by landlords and members of the aristocracy. They would consider farming as a way to make profits. Owning multiple acres of land, they could not supervise all plantations at the same time. As a result, they hired overseers to control the production and ensure the security of the fields, and the respect of discipline. Their activity consisted in scheduling daily activities between work and rest periods. To make sure the production was going at the

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<sup>28</sup> John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 55.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 56.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 116.

right pace, they did not hesitate to use force.<sup>31</sup> Sometimes, some slaves were asked to be overseers, bringing jealousy and feelings of treason to the plantation. Their housing, feeding, and clothing conditions relied on the master's decision. It depended on the plantation they were living on but, most of the time, slaves were living in huts with few belongings. No windows, poor walls, almost no furniture, they were sleeping on blankets with no protection against the cold.<sup>32</sup>

Clothing was not central for masters. Slaves were given jeans, linseys, kerseys, and onsnaburgs for men, calicos and homespun for women.<sup>33</sup> Food was a bigger priority for plantation owners. On some plantations, there was sometimes a common kitchen where food was cooked for all workers. On other plantations, slaves were given a ration of food for the day or for several days, and they had to cook their meals by themselves. For adults, the weekly ration consisted of a peck of meal and three to four pounds of meat. Sweet potatoes, peas, rice, syrup, and fruits would be given as well.<sup>34</sup>

Inside houses, slaves were considered more as servants than slaves. They would cook, wash, tend the gardens and look after the children. Thus, this was a more privileged position than working on plantations. Food was better as well, since they would eat the leftovers of what they would cook for their masters. Furthermore, education was the most beneficial aspect of being a house slave. Indeed, by taking care of children and by being close to their masters, especially the women, they could learn how to read, count, and transmit this knowledge to their friends and children.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 119.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 121.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 140.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 120.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 120.

Inside cities, slaves could be carpenters, masons, mechanics, but also tailors, shoemakers, painters, plasterers, etc. Thanks to their masters, some of them could learn how to trade. They could also work in factories, where the most talented ones could increase their own value and be more profitable for their masters.<sup>36</sup>

On fields, inside houses, or in towns, slavery became the backbone of the economy, especially in the South. Many slaves were involved in the construction of railroads, for instance. They helped building America for decades until the Civil War and the thirteenth amendment to the Constitution, ending slavery, was voted. During slavery, slaves were separated from their origins, families, and culture.

## **B. THE CIVIL WAR AND THE RECONSTRUCTION**

The Civil War was one of the bloodiest in human history with more than six hundred thousand casualties at the time. Put into nowadays' perspectives, this number would be close to five million casualties.<sup>37</sup> On both sides of the conflict, slavery was implicated. For the Union, toward the end of the war the objective was to end it. For the Confederates, the motivation was to keep it. To the North, slavery was a moral issue to be fought in the entire country, since the majority of slaves were living in the South. Furthermore, the Civil War was a means to prevent the expansion of slavery after the settlement of the Mason Dixon line that stipulated that, for each new state created, partiality had to be maintained between pro and anti slavery states. To the South, slavery was a central question because it represented the backbone of the economy and the cul-

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 142.

<sup>37</sup> Howard Zinn, *A people's History of the United States: from 1942 to the present* ( 2nd ed. London: Longman, 1996), 187.

ture. Indeed, slaves were used in fields, in factories, in urban as well as rural areas. Maintaining slavery and perhaps extending it appeared, thus, vital.

From the beginning, slaves were willing to join the war on the Union side but, at first, their request was denied. They were allowed to be drafted in 1862, and they did it “with alacrity and enthusiasm.”<sup>38</sup> Even though the drafting campaigns were efficient in the North, the majority came from the South. Among the one hundred and eighty-six thousand slaves fighting in this conflict, ninety-three thousand came from the seceded states by the end of the war.<sup>39</sup> Southerners used slaves in the war as well, but differently than in the North. Indeed, they were used in factories to produce arms and equipment for the confederate troops.

Not every slave would join the army. Most of them remained on plantations and kept working. Some refused to work, as an act of resistance, but most of them did not rebel, waiting to see what would happen. Approximately thirty-eight thousand African American soldiers died in combat, with a mortality rate forty percent greater than White soldiers. The poor equipment they were carrying, combined with inefficient medical care, the recklessness and haste in which they were sent to the battlefield, explains this rate.<sup>40</sup> However, their involvement in the war effort proved crucial to secure the Union’s victory. Howard Zinn claims that, ‘without their help, the North would not have won the war as soon as they did, and perhaps it could not have won at all.’<sup>41</sup>

The emancipation proclamation by President Abraham Lincoln freed two hundred thousand slaves during the Civil War. The remaining three-and-a-half million became free by the end of

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<sup>38</sup> John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 221.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 221.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 224.

<sup>41</sup> Howard Zinn: *A People’s History of the United States*, *op.cit.*, 190.



the war with the Thirteenth Amendment, outlawing slavery and involuntary servitude on January 31, 1865. The Fourteenth, repudiating the prewar Dred Scott decision by giving African Americans citizenship, and Fifteenth, giving them the right to vote, Amendments gave freed men an equal protection by the law. From this moment, they would be considered as legitimate citizens. However, this situation did not last.

Even during the war, one could imagine how the aftermath of emancipation would be. Indeed, segregation and inequalities already prevailed in the army. African American soldiers were used for the hardest work but were not receiving equal pay. While White soldiers would earn thirteen dollars a month, African American privates received ten dollars.<sup>42</sup> Only bloody demonstrations insured equal salaries in June 1864.

In the late 1860s and early 1870s, Congress passed a series of laws improving freed men's conditions of living. One of the most important decisions was the Civil Right Act of 1875, outlawing exclusions of African Americans from hotels, theaters, railroads, and other public accommodations. Thus, they could fully experience the Reconstruction era. African Americans took advantage of this situation to improve their condition and, to a certain extent, restore their past. Many former slaves left southern plantations to look for their families, scattered because of trades and escapes. They would go to Northern urban areas as well, to look for a job and live a normal life.

However, in the aftermath of the war, life was difficult both for Whites and African Americans. The entire country had to be rebuilt, especially the South where the countryside suffered the most from devastations, burnings, and disputes over the inheritance of the remaining land.

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 190.

This whole area, which was living an agrarian way of life, fell to starvation and diseases.<sup>43</sup> As life was hard, resentment against the African American community grew rapidly, resulting in measures taken to eliminate this supposed equality.

The emancipation process gave African Americans freedom to choose their job and, most importantly, to receive a salary for it. Migration to the North was the direct result of better opportunities, where factories were running full steam compared to the South. However, as employment opportunities were limited, many freed men went back to the South, becoming sharecroppers. Dependence toward Whites did not stop in 1865, and African Americans, who were free but did not own land, had to comply with the White land owners that enslaved them, putting them in a state close to slavery.<sup>44</sup> As early as 1865, laws preventing freed slaves from renting farmland were voted. Besides, the reinstatement of slave codes, which did not carry this name but were related with rights restrictions, made African Americans work as serfs on White-owned plantations. Howard Zinn cites Thomas Fortune, who was an African American editor for the 'New York Globe,' describing the situation:

"The average wage of Negro farm laborers in the South was about fifty cents a day, Fortune said. He was usually paid in 'orders,' not money, which he could use only at a store controlled by the planter, 'a system of fraud.' The Negro farmer, to get the wherewithal to plant his crop, had to promise it to the store, and when everything was added up at the end of the year he was in debt, so his crop was constantly owed to someone, and he was tied to the land, with the record kept by the planter or storekeeper so that the Negroes 'are swindled and kept forever in debt.'"<sup>45</sup>

Violence and intimidation were part of freed slaves daily lives in the North, mainly in the South, where a feeling of revenge added to the animosity directed toward them was omnipresent.

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<sup>43</sup> John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 208.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 251.

<sup>45</sup> Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: from 1492 to Present* (2nd edition, New York: Longman, 1996), 204.

Indeed, seeing these men becoming equals by law while they were not considered as human beings for centuries was unacceptable to many southerners. This growing hatred resulted in the creation of secret societies and terrorist organizations. In the late 1860s and early 1870s, groups such as the Knights of the White Camellia<sup>46</sup> or the Ku Klux Klan,<sup>47</sup> began to organize raids in which lynchings, beatings, rapes, etc., were common. As John Hope Franklin explains, “depriving Negroes of political equality became, to them, a holy crusade in which a noble end justified any means.”<sup>48</sup> It appears difficult to know how many people suffered from these raids, but the numbers were above a hundred lynching a year.<sup>49</sup> These intimidations were designed to deprive African Americans from their rights. As a result, acting against freed men’s right or desire to vote was common as well.

Intimidation was not the only means to prevent black men from voting. Many measures were taken to reduce their franchise. For instance, polling places would be set up in remote areas that

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<sup>46</sup> The Knights of the White Camellia was founded in May 1867 by confederate veteran colonel Alcibiades DeBlanc in Franklin, Louisiana. Similar to and associated with the Ku Klux Klan, it supported White supremacy and was opposed to Republican government. This organization was mainly composed of southerners who were or had been members of the high-class society, Civil War Confederate veterans for most of them. This organization began to decline in the late 1868 and ceased to exist by the end of 1870. J.P Fichou, *The Ku Klux Klan: a Study of a Secret Society from its Beginning to 1960-1965* (Caen: Université Caen Basse-Normandie), 1990.

<sup>47</sup> The original Ku Klux Klan was formed on the direct aftermath of the Civil War on December 24th 1865 by six Confederates from Pulaski, Tennessee. Their leader became Nathan Bedford Forrest. It is best known for advocating white supremacy and acting as terrorists while hidden behind conical hats, masks and white robes. It has a record for terrorism, lynching, and violence to intimidate, murder and oppress African-Americans, Jews and other minorities. The Klan resisted the Reconstruction by quickly using violent methods. It declined between 1868 and 1870 after having gained 550,000 members and was destroyed by President Grant in 1871. The second Klan was founded in 1915 and grew rapidly at a period of social tensions to reach 4 million people at its highest peak but its popularity just like its membership drop during the Great Depression and at World War II. The Klan still exists today but it has not the same number and the same political weight than it used to have since its number is estimated at 6,000 members.

J.P Fichou, *The Ku Klux Klan: a Study of a Secret Society from its Beginning to 1960-1965* (Caen: Université Caen Basse-Normandie), 1990.

<sup>48</sup> John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 254.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 256.

African Americans could hardly access, or voting centers would be displaced without notice.<sup>50</sup> In certain states, like Virginia, colored voters could not remain in the voting booth for more than two and a half minutes, preventing illiterate citizens from voting.<sup>51</sup> Other states would perceive them as “aliens whose ignorance, poverty, and racial inferiority were incompatible with logical and orderly processes of government (...), they had done nothing to warrant suffrage.”<sup>52</sup> All these measures led to a decrease of African American voters in the South, but also in the North. Disfranchisement would follow. The first state to officially reject African Americans’ right to vote was Mississippi, in 1890. South Carolina followed in 1895, and Louisiana in 1898. This movement continued at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, disfranchisement was only the first step, and it was soon decided that, for the sake of the two communities, African Americans and Whites had to be segregated.

### **C. THE JIM CROW ERA**

Jim Crow was the nickname given to a series of laws and customs practiced in the United States that ended the Reconstruction era. These laws were designed to separate members of racial minorities, especially African Americans, from mainstream White society and, therefore, to severely limit their participation in that society.<sup>53</sup> This separation, and the discrimination that came with it, was expressed in transportation, housing, education, employment, and in the use of other public facilities.

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 260.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 262.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 265.

<sup>53</sup> Charles George, *Life Under the Jim Crow Laws* (San Diego: Lucent Books, 2000), 6.

The name Jim Crow, before embodying these laws, had earlier origins, as historian Leon F.

Litwack explains:

“The term ‘Jim Crow,’ as a way of characterizing black people, had its origins in the early nineteenth century. Thomas ‘Daddy’ Rice, a white minstrel, popularized the term. Using burned cork to blacken his face, attired in the ill-fitting, tattered garment of a beggar, and grinning broadly, Rice imitated the dancing, singing, and demeanor generally ascribed to Negro character. [...] ‘Jim Crow’ had entered the American vocabulary, and many whites, northern and southern, came away from minstrel shows with their distorted images of black life, character, and aspirations reinforced. Abolitionist newspapers employed the term in the 1840s to describe separated railroads for blacks and whites in the North. But by the 1890s, ‘Jim Crow’ took on additional force and meaning to denote the subordination and separation of black people in the South.”<sup>54</sup>

The first Jim Crow law was adopted in Tennessee, where African Americans and Whites were separated on trains, depots, and wharves. This segregation was expanded in 1883, when the Supreme Court overturned the Civil Rights Act of 1875. From this date, African Americans were no longer accepted in White hotels, barbershops, restaurants, theaters, schools, etc. Rapidly, most southern states began to apply these laws. The situation kept worsening to the highest point of trouble, in 1896. That year, the Supreme Court declared segregation legal, through the separate but equal doctrine, in the Plessy versus Ferguson case. The Court stated that segregation could be enforced, providing an equal quality of services was proposed to both communities, as Justice Henry Brown writes: “We consider the underlying fallacy of the plaintiff’s argument to consist in the assumption that the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority. If this be so, it is not by reason of anything found in the act, but solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), xiii.

<sup>55</sup> Charles George, *Life Under the Jim Crow Laws* (San Diego: Lucent Books, 2000), 8.

Equality by law was only theoretical in the sense that African Americans were more penalized than Whites. Even though segregation was working both ways—some places would segregate White people—the finality of these laws was isolation for both communities, living together but separately. Each one had its own stores, trains, schools, even its own side of the street. Indeed, in the South, African American had to walk on the side of the street that was exposed to sunlight whereas Whites would always walk in the shade. Early twentieth century did not witness improvement. African Americans moved to urban areas in an attempt to escape their conditions of living. However, their troubles came along and new ones arose.

Housing was also an issue. Indeed, people coming from the countryside had to find places to live and, because of segregation, had to live in limited areas inside cities, which gave birth to ghettos.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, due to an obvious shortage of accommodations available, African Americans had to live in overcrowded buildings, with poor sanitary conditions and health, high mortality, crime, etc. These neighborhoods, or ‘Niggertowns,’ as they were often called at the time, are described by James Robinson, who used to live in such sections in Knoxville, Tennessee. He describes the houses in which African Americans were forced to live as “hardly more than rickety shacks clustered on stilts like Daddy Long Legs along the slimy bank of putrid and evil-smelling ‘Cripple Creek.’ Surrounded by a slaughterhouse, a foundry, and tobacco warehouses, in addition to the foul-smelling creek, the neighborhood was a world set apart and excluded.”<sup>57</sup>

Beyond segregation enforced by law, it was segregation by custom that dominated this era. It was a given for Whites that African Americans had to live a separate life from them. It was a be-

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<sup>56</sup> A ghetto is a part of a city, especially a slum area, occupied by a minority group, due to isolation or segregation in this case.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 336.

lief, but it was also a way to protect themselves from this community. As W. E. B. Du Bois explains, “There was one thing that the White South feared more than Negro dishonesty, ignorance, and incompetency, and that was Negro honesty, knowledge, and efficiency.”<sup>58</sup> This fear was transcribed in everyday life by a general disregard of African Americans’ lives, in the sense that every aspect of their lives would make them feel inferior to Whites. Greetings was the first example.

When addressing a White person, African Americans had to say, ‘Mr. or Mrs,’ while Whites addressed an African American by his or her first name. In her memoirs, Elizabeth Delany recalls her childhood, and the way African Americans were addressed by Whites: “When I was a child, the words used to describe us most often were colored, Negro, and nigger. I’ve also been called jigger-boo, pickaninny, coon—you name it, honey. Some of these words are worse than others, and how mean they are depends on who is saying them and why.”<sup>59</sup>

In other customs, African Americans were not allowed to touch or shake the hand of a White person, and if they had to go to a house where White people were living they had to go to the backdoor. Once permitted to enter the house, they had to wait for the owner’s permission to sit, or even talk.<sup>60</sup> Stetson Kennedy uses the testimony of a southern African American on how he would act when visiting a White person’s house: “When I go to a white man’s house I stand in the yard and yell, and wait for him to come to the door. If he tells me to come, then I go up to the door and talk to him, but I don’t go in unless he tells me. If he tells me, then I go in; but I don’t

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<sup>58</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam, 1989), 128.

<sup>59</sup> Sarah Delany and A. Elizabeth Delany with Amy Hill Heart, *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters’ First One Hundred Years* (New York: Kodansha International, 1993), 75.

<sup>60</sup> Charles George, *Life Under the Jim Crow Laws* (San Diego: Lucent Books, 2000), 23.

sit down unless he tells me.”<sup>61</sup> For White people visiting African American houses, the situation was different. They could enter houses without knocking, sit wherever they wanted to, without asking. In *Patterns of Negro Segregation*,<sup>62</sup> Charles Johnson uses a study on racial attitudes during the Jim Crow era to describe this situation: “When the Whites failed to wipe their feet and ‘slosh mud over the floors’ of Negro homes, it is interpreted by the Negroes as assuming that all Negro homes are dirty and a little more dirt won’t hurt.”<sup>63</sup> Housing was not the only example of how rules went one way only.

In public accommodations, where segregation against African Americans was strictly enforced, the White community could most of the time enter African American sections. In theaters for instance, Africans Americans had to go to the upper level of the building. However, Whites were allowed to go wherever they wanted to. An African American domestic worker in Marked Tree, Arkansas, recalls her experience:

“Colored people go upstairs in the movie here. It is either too hot or too cold up there. Colored buy tickets at the side window. You just stand there, as a rule, until all the white people go in. When they fill up downstairs some of the white fellows come up and set with the colored. Most of the time they are just young fellows. Sometimes they come up with their girl friends. It’s just like it always is—the white can come on your side, but you don’t go on theirs.”<sup>64</sup>

At restaurants, another highly segregated area, African Americans would most of the time not be served. If they were to be served, it would be at the back of the restaurant. They also had to

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<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Stetson Kennedy, *Jim Crow Guide: The Way It Was* (Boca Raton: Florida Atlantic University Press, 1990), 219.

<sup>62</sup> Charles S. Johnson, *Patterns of Negro Segregation* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1943).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 133.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Charles S. Johnson, *Patterns of Negro Segregation* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1943), 73.



pay attention to the quality of the food served to them, as a young teacher remembers a meal at a restaurant with a friend:

“We ordered the same thing—something *en casserole*. We waited almost an hour before it arrived. Both he and I noticed it looked peculiar and different from the same dish served other places. When we cut into it there was a hard crust of browned salt about one-half inch thick on top. Naturally, the salt had gone through and the stuff couldn’t be eaten. I looked at my friend and he caught my look. We were aware that the waiters and managers were watching us to see what we would do. We pretended to be discussing something else and we decided we would not send it back, as they might remove the crust of salt and add something worse—you know they will spit in food. I’ve heard that from kitchen help. We decided to eat what we could and pretend to enjoy it. That was what they didn’t want us to do, so we’d be game enough to spoil their fun. It was awful plowing through that food, but we did. They looked amazed when they removed our dishes. They then served our dessert, which appeared and tasted all right. The entire day was spoiled.”<sup>65</sup>

Even God appeared to be segregated during the Jim Crow era, in the sense that African Americans were not allowed to attend White churches. No contact was allowed on Sunday morning, and security would enforce the law. In *Discrimination, U.S.A.*,<sup>66</sup> Senator Jacob Javits recalls a story:

“It seems that a Negro started to enter one of the largest churches in a southern city when he was stopped by a policeman at the door. The policeman said: ‘You can’t go in here. Don’t you know this is a white church?’ The Negro replied: ‘Oh, that’s all right. I’m the janitor.’ The officer considered this reply for a moment, then said: ‘Well, all right. But you better be sure. Don’t let me catch you praying while you’re in there!’”<sup>67</sup>

Only a few things had changed since slavery for African Americans. The thirteenth and fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution freed them, Reconstruction gave them hope, but the Jim Crow era excluded them from the rest of the country. They were separate, but their history taught them that it would take time to be equal. The measures taken to silence them left music as one of

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 62.

<sup>66</sup> Jacob Javits, *Discrimination U.S.A.* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 235.

the few ways of expression available; and the period from slavery to Jim Crow gave them enough fuel for inspiration and development, both as a community and as individuals.

## CHAPTER II

### THE BIRTH OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC

From slavery to the Jim Crow era, music was part of the only activities African Americans were allowed to perform with relative freedom. Thus, it was used to depict joy, sorrow, and other emotions that were part of their daily lives. Furthermore, since over the years their life changed, music accompanied this adaptation, and transcribed the early stages of resistance to and acculturation toward the American ethos.

#### A. MUSIC DURING SLAVERY

Thomas Jefferson, when mentioning the relationship between slaves and music, commented: “In music, they are more gifted than the Whites with accurate ears for tune and time, and they have been found capable of imagining a small catch. Whether they will be equal to the composition of a more extensive run of melody, or of complicated harmony, is yet to be proven.”<sup>68</sup> These words reflect what the common belief at the time was concerning slaves and music. When a slave had special talent in a given domain, such as music, their value would increase. In newspapers, one could find, in the section devoted to the slave trade, a description of his or her musical talents. Music sung by slaves would entertain White communities. However, for slaves, music meant more than entertainment.

Music played a central role in slaves’ lives. Despite the attempts to break its roots, the African musical tradition survived in America, and was transmitted among slaves, whether they were

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<sup>68</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1954), 140.

born on the American or African soil. Specific African songs did disappear, but not the importance given to oral traditions, as well as improvisation. Music was part of daily lives for slaves. Slaves songs were divided into two different categories, depending on their activity. They would sing religious songs at church, but also among the family of their masters for special occasions such as birthdays, for Christmas, etc. Singing these songs was also a way for Whites to continue slaves' religious education.<sup>69</sup>

Among themselves, slaves would sing these songs, but could edit them. Modifying the lyrics was a form of rejection of the White authority, but it was also a question of faith. Indeed, slaves were following the scriptures of the Old Testament rather than the New Testament, identifying themselves with the Hebrew people. Moses became their symbol and was referred to in religious slave songs.<sup>70</sup> Slaves would also sing secular songs, children's songs, lullabies, etc., which would contain images and metaphors. The purpose of these songs was to laugh while teaching a lesson about life. Often, the target was the master, his family or, from a wider perspective, the White community.<sup>71</sup> They would sing these songs after work while dancing and gathering with other slaves at night before going back to work. With their masters' authorization, they could travel miles to meet other slaves in these reunions. Slave owners would use these meetings as a comforting argument to claim that the conditions of living were not so harsh on slaves as they were rumored to be, since they could find enough energy after work to dance or sing.<sup>72</sup> For slaves, it was a way to renew the African communal life and its traditions.

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<sup>69</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 4.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 84.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 121.

Nonetheless, work songs were the major use of music for slaves, since work constituted their main activity. Work and music being related, it was encouraged by masters, under certain restrictions. For instance, they were not allowed to use percussion instruments, such as drums, considered as being an incentive for revolt. However, they were allowed to use chords instruments, like the guitar or the banjo, the latter having being imported from Africa. This instrument was subjected to studies at the time, including by Thomas Jefferson, who called it the banjar. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*,<sup>73</sup> he stated: “The instrument proper to them is the banjar, which they brought hither from Africa, and which is the original of the guitar, its chords being precisely the four lower chords of the guitar.”<sup>74</sup>

The type of song depended on the activity slaves were performing. Those who were working in fields did not sing the same songs slaves working in a port or on railway were singing; lyrics differed. Agricultural workers would sing about working on fields, harvests, etc., whereas slaves working on railroads would describe their desires of traveling, or of going home. Lawrence Levin tells the story of Fannie Berry, a former slave, who described how the hired slaves from a plantation cut down trees and sawed them into ties for the railroad that was being built in Virginia during the late 1850s. As the slaves felled pine trees, they would sing these types of songs:

*A col' frosty mo'nin,  
De niggers feelin' good,  
Take yo' ax upon yo' shoulder,  
Nigger, talk to de wood.*<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1954).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 288.

<sup>75</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 7.

Lyrics mattered, but the most important aspect of work songs was rhythm. Indeed, these songs would provide the appropriate rate to follow. Through rhythm, slaves would pace their movement, collectively. Music was used by slaves to coordinate their movements, and thus, be more efficient. Indeed, in a workplace, one slave was named to ensure the pace and lead the other slaves in their activity, through rhythm and songs. He was also the one asked by the master or the overseer to adapt the rhythm according to their desire. This is one of the reasons why masters encouraged music because it permitted them to make sure that work was done at an appropriate speed.<sup>76</sup>

For slave owners, music was seen as a practical way to control slaves, as well as their production, their faith, and their beliefs. However, for slaves, music was experienced from a different perspective. Slaves were singing to describe and denounce their situation. Songs were interpreted in a language that Whites could not understand:

*Poor Massa, so dey say,  
Down in de heel, so dey say,  
Got no money, so dey say,  
Not one shillin, so dey say,  
God A'mighty bress you, so dey say.*

*We raise de wheat,  
Dey gib us the corn.  
We bake de bread,  
Dey gib us the crust.  
We sif de meal,  
They gib us de huss.  
We peel de meat,  
Dey gib us de skin.  
And dat's de way,  
Dey take us in,  
We skim de pot,*

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<sup>76</sup> John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 128.

*Dey gib us de liquor,  
And say dat's good enough for nigger.*<sup>77</sup>

Songs were used to communicate between slaves with less risk.<sup>78</sup> In some cases, like with field hollers, lyrics were replaced by moaning and screaming as a means of communication. Music gave slaves tools to express and figuratively free themselves. With music, they could heal the wounds of slavery and denounce this system through hidden forms; by editing the lyrics of Spirituals, by using metaphors to caricature their masters, and by communicating with one another. These processes gave them a psychological release, a way to ease their souls. Furthermore, it gave them the opportunity to resist slave owners' attempts to erase their past and their origins. Music reinforced these ties to their past and unified slaves. Their family was gone, but their community overcame.

Music was a way to improve and accomplish oneself, as an individual. Gifted slaves could improve their own situation by playing an instrument or by singing.<sup>79</sup> They could learn how to play from other slaves, or from their masters. In a similar way that they learned how to read and write, they could learn music through observation and reproduction. This form of learning had positive aspects in the sense that both slaves and their music could absorb other cultures and instruments to make them their own. For instance, the violin, the guitar, or the piano were instruments that had an impact on an emerging African American ethos, between African origins and European influence. This blending of influence can be seen in Blues and Jazz music today, where the guitar and the piano are widely used.

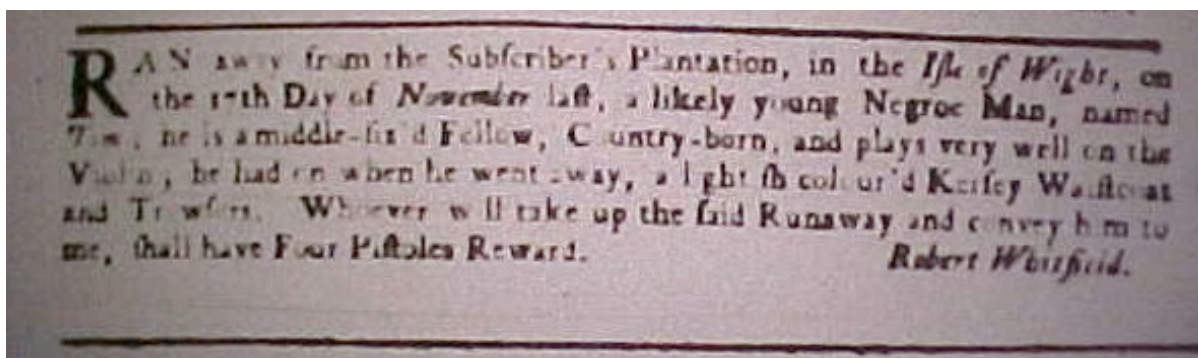
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<sup>77</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 12.

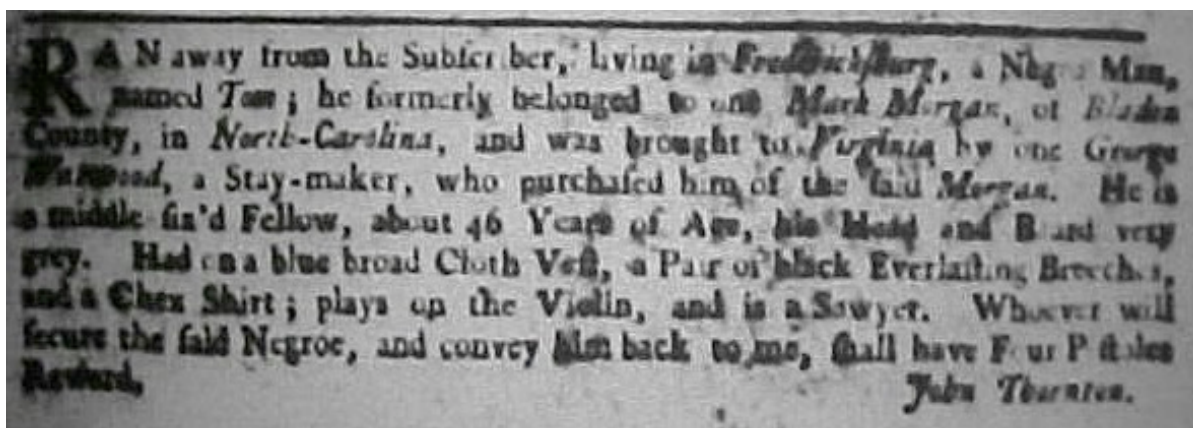
<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 93.

<sup>79</sup> John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 121.

Their musical talent was used to improve their situation among the White community as well as among other slaves. Indeed, music was so vital to them that gifted musicians were praised, and their value would improve. The musical ability of a slave was described in the newspaper sections where slaves were for sale or missing, as these two examples show:



*Library of Congress.*



*Library of Congress.*

When musicians were also singers, they could enjoy a specific position in the group, by leading the pace of work, but primarily, by embodying its voice and leading it through denunciations.

Slavery was a trauma that shaped African Americans' lives. Everything was done to prevent slaves from becoming something, or someone. They worked to build and develop a country to which they were brought in by force, to serve a system that enslaved them, and eventually be-



came dependent on them. Music was vital because it allowed them to express their frustration and hopes when nothing was allowed to them but work. It permitted them to maintain their African roots and traditions alive and to keep the communal aspect at the core of their culture at a time when the concept of identity for slaves was forbidden. Music made slaves think as ‘we’ where there was no place for ‘I.’ At the same time, they took inspiration and knowledge from Western musical culture.

During the Civil War, their musical abilities were used as well, on both sides. In the South, masters would bring their slaves on the battlefield. They would not fight but would accompany their masters, playing drums or fife,<sup>80</sup> mostly against their will. In the Union army, White officers commanding African American regiments decided to bring musical instruments and music teachers to form brass bands. On the African American level, it was a way to discover and learn new instruments. For the Union army, music would put enthusiasm in the troops to go and fight, carried by their shoutings. In letters sent to his wife and his mother, Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who was the colonel of the first African American regiment of the war, described the relationship between colored soldiers and their music: ‘So we partook of these various entertainments and responded with songs which the boys do very well, and some cheers before we left the camp.’<sup>81</sup> The end of the Civil War eventually freed slaves. However, the era that followed put them into different situations that kept shaping their social and musical identity.

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<sup>80</sup> A kind of small shrill flute used especially with the drums in military bands.

<sup>81</sup> Thomas Wentworth Higginson: *The Complete Civil War Journal and Selected Poems of Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 237.

## B. JIM CROW AND THE RISE OF SECULAR MUSIC

The rise of secular music occurred mainly after the emancipation process. Indeed, to quote Levine, “If during slavery it was the secular songs that were occasional and the religious songs that represented the ethos of the black folk, in freedom the situation began to reverse itself. Secular songs became increasingly important in black folk culture in the decades following freedom.”<sup>82</sup> Three main factors triggered this switch between religious and secular music. The first factor is related to the development of the country as a whole. After the Civil War and Reconstruction, the United States entered urbanization, especially in the North. Work was mainly to be found in factories instead of in the fields. Thus, religious songs about the toughness of agricultural life would no longer fit in this new context. The second factor is related to the mixture process between African American and White music. Although White music had already been influenced by the African American style, the White influence on the latter is undeniable, as one shall see later with Blues music. Furthermore, this mix occurred between African American genres as well, as Charles Kiel noted, “The African American tradition represents not only a variety of mixtures between European and African elements but a series of blendings within itself.”<sup>83</sup> One can take again the example of Blues music which borrowed influences from Gospel music, both from the lyrics and from the singers, a large variety of them having had their first contact with music through church. The third factor is that the evolution of musical patterns is one of the

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<sup>82</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 190.

<sup>83</sup> Charles Kiel, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 33.

values of African American music. Indeed, since music was considered a public activity based on gathering, it appears normal that parts of music become combined with others.

These factors, even though musical, denote an increasing distance from slavery, in the sense that the music that slaves used to sing to get relief, through God, from the figure of the master was not what African Americans wanted to listen to at the end of the nineteenth century and in the beginning of the twentieth. The example of Big Bill Broonzy shows this evolution. In *Big Bill Blues*, he recalls an event where people were disturbed by his music. “‘This ain’t slavery no more,’ I was told, ‘so why don’t you learn to play something else? The way you play and sing about mules, cotton, corn, levee camps and gang songs. Them days, Big Bill, is gone for ever.’”<sup>84</sup>

Industrialization changed life, and the way it was lived. It provided a timeline for each aspect of life; working time, eating time, sleeping time, and leisure time. While not working, African Americans did not want to hear songs about work, and how difficult it was. They wanted to listen to something new, and to take advantage of the emerging music industry. This new sound appeared through Jubilee songs, Ragtime, and “Coon songs.”

African Americans did not wait for Race Records and the early twentieth century to experience success with their music. The first genre to reach fame was Jubilee. Jubilee music was performed by African American classical singers. As a result, the emphasis was on their voice, instead of their music, which was most of the time minimal to nonexistent. For instance, the Original American Jubilee Singers troupe, which toured Europe between January 1895 and May 1896, consisted in two sopranos, one contralto, a first and a second tenor, and a pianist.<sup>85</sup> What is inter-

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<sup>84</sup> Big Bill Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues: William Broonzy's Story, as told to Yannick Bruynoghe* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1964), 30.

<sup>85</sup> Rainer E. Lotz, “The Black Troubadours: Black Entertainers in Europe, 1896-1915,” *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Autumn, 1990), 253-273, 254.

esting with jubilee troops is how well they exported to Europe at this time of history. Indeed, in 1896, more than one hundred African American performers were working in Germany.<sup>86</sup> This fact can be explained by how little segregation was in Europe at the time. As a result, singers were respected as artists, not as African Americans.

Concerning the repertoire of these songs, it depended on where Jubilee singers were playing. Abroad, they would perform conventional European art music, but in America, where the crowd was segregated, they would sing slave songs and spirituals, even though the content evolved.<sup>87</sup> These shows are explained by a representative of the Maggie Porter Cole's company, which toured in Europe in 1895.

"If we look for an explanation for the extraordinary success these singers had, it is mostly the usual collection of American songs and Negro tunes. No piece of classical music or modern music with any higher aesthetic value, as the usual concerts will offer us, was included in the Jubilee Singers performance. The different kinds of songs also provided a great contrast ranging, as they did, from pietistic religious hymns to cheerful songs with choirs of laughter. The religious parts may have been the biggest attraction and may explain the passionate enthusiasm of the audiences, largely consisting of persons not accustomed to profane music, and who now could make up for this deficit with a clear conscience."<sup>88</sup>

This example demonstrates the constant mixtures of genres, and how easy it was for the African American community to do so. Thus, Jubilee songs can be considered as the witnesses of evolution in the making for African American music. They also marked the entrance of African American music in the music industry, these records being printed as sheet music.

Ragtime emerged and developed toward the end of the nineteenth century as well, even though differences with Jubilee exist. The first difference concerns the singers. Indeed, since Ju-

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 262.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 257.

<sup>88</sup> Quoted in Rainer E. Lotz, "The Black Troubadours: Black Entertainers in Europe, 1896-1915," *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Autumn, 1990), 253-273, 257.

bilee was performed by mostly classical singers, it was difficult to take part in a troupe without receiving training in classical music education. The second difference is that, while Jubilee was famous abroad, Ragtime found success in the United States. As a result, it was more influenced by the historical events occurring in the United States, that is to say Jim Crow laws and segregation.

However, similarities exist between these two genres. The main resemblance can be found in the notion of travel. Indeed, both Ragtime and Jubilee artists were constantly moving from place to place to perform, either in Europe for Jubilee, or in America for Ragtime. The second important common point between these two musical genres was how successful they were. The reason for such success, nonetheless, differed, in the sense that while Jubilee was successful in Europe for what these artists could do, Ragtime artists were popular because of what they represented, that is to say African Americans singing to Whites.

From a technical perspective, Ragtime<sup>89</sup> “is a rhythmic treatment of a melody, or score, and consists in tying an unaccented note to an accented one. It also intensifies the accent.”<sup>90</sup> As a result, Ragtime music sounds fast paced and more concise. One of the most famous Ragtime pianists was Scott Joplin, who throughout the Ragtime era, produced and performed this music to the point of remaining famous today with songs such as “A Breeze from Alabama.”

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<sup>89</sup> Ragtime pieces are usually composed of five sections, often with the thematic format ABACD. A four-measure introduction may be present before first A section and before the C section. Each section consists of four four-measures phrases for a total of sixteen measures; any or all the sections may be repeated immediately. Other formats are ABCDE, ABACB, ABCDA, and ABCADE. Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. and Marsha J. Reisser, “The Sources and Resources of Classic Ragtime Music,” *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 4 (1984), pp. 22-59, 36.

<sup>90</sup> John Stillwell Stark, “Piano Ragtime Publisher: Readings from “The Intermezzo” and His Personal Ledgers, 1905-1908,” *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Papers of the 1989 National Conference on Black Music Research (Autumn, 1989), pp. 193-204, 199.



Scott Joplin: "A Breeze from Alabama"<sup>91</sup>

This type of Ragtime was mostly instrumental, and even though artists like Scott Joplin experienced success, the most popular genre of Ragtime music at the time was "Coon music."

When describing the historical context in which Ragtime and Coon songs developed, Lynn Abbott commented: "When Ragtime made its stunning leap from African American underclass culture into mainstream fashion, it provided the first real professional opportunities for a wide range of black performers; however, every prospect was mitigated by systemic racism."<sup>92</sup> This systematic racism was related to the Jim Crow era, with people's consciousness segregated more than anything else.

The word "coon" was used to describe African Americans in an offensive way. It corresponded to the general description of the African American community at the time, along with "savages, uncouth, bestial looking, dishonest, and idle."<sup>93</sup> Coon songs were part of circuses and vaudeville, which were moving shows playing all across the country, like tent shows. These

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<sup>91</sup> Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. and Marsha J. Reisser, "The Sources and Resources of Classic Ragtime Music," *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 4 (1984), pp. 22-59, 39.

<sup>92</sup> Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, "Coon Songs," and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 3.

<sup>93</sup> Robert J. Norrell, *Up from History: The Life of Booker T. Washington* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 118.

shows were selling miracle potions, playing musical, comical sketches, Musical-Hall shows etc., and at the end, Blues, to make the crowd emotional. However, since these shows were segregated, African Americans were performing in an annex tent called the sideshow. They were traveling with the circuses, helped building the tents, but were performing apart.<sup>94</sup>

One interesting part of this music was its appeal to both audiences, Whites and African Americans, despite the overt racism. The irony was that Whites were making profits disguised as African American singers. Indeed, at first, most popular Coon shouters were White women who would cover their faces with burnt cork to appear black. However, it was clear that with these artists it was the music that was applauded, not the color. Abbott uses the example of a White Coon shouter named Artie Hall, and of what she used to do at the end of her shows: “Artie Hall will persist in removing her gloves, together with wig in order to assure those assembled in front she really is a white person. If it brought applause, there might be an excuse, but the house applauds the singing, not the color.”<sup>95</sup>

Another interesting aspect of Coon songs was that the most successful of them were composed by African Americans. One can take for instance the song “All Coons Look Alike to Me,” which was the most popular song of this era to the point of selling more than a million copies after its release in 1896.<sup>96</sup> This song was written by Ernest Hogan, who was African American. Other African Americans made profits singing songs such as “The Alabama Coon,” “I’m the Father of a Little Black Coon,” “New Coon in Town,” etc. Ironically, it is while singing racist songs

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<sup>94</sup> Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, “Coon Songs,” and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 7.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

<sup>96</sup> Robert J. Norrell, *Up from History: The Life of Booker T. Washington* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 120.

and performing in segregated shows that the African American community began to change and started to make profit out of its music.

However, at the turn of the twentieth century, Coon Songs became less popular, and African Americans began to complain about the use of this word. Bob Cole, who was an editor of the African American newspaper *The Indianapolis Freeman*, asserted: “The word ‘coon’ is very insinuating and must soon be eliminated. I am going to crusade against the word ‘coon.’ The best class of white people in America abhor the word ‘coon’ and feel ashamed whenever they hear it used.”<sup>97</sup>

Segregation in circuses and vaudeville shows did not have drawbacks only. Indeed, being African American artists performing in front of an African American crowd gave more artistic freedom, and appealed to those who became tired of hearing Coon songs composed by White people aiming for profits. The segregated annex tents evolved to Big Shows and Minstrel Shows, where music and comedy were combined. These events would include between forty to sixty artists performing aerial acts, animal acts, magic, juggling, acrobats, and singing.<sup>98</sup> Over the years, these shows developed. Women singers began to have bigger roles, using Blues melodies backed up by a Jazz orchestra. The popularity of these songs made Blues and early Jazz emerge, and the various tours these companies made throughout the country spread these musical genres. Soon, these Big Shows became too small for the increasing popularity of this music, overshadowing the rest of the show. Abbott notices that, by the mid-1910s, Blues had become a special attraction that

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<sup>97</sup> Quoted Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, “Coon Songs,” and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 35.

<sup>98</sup> Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, “Coon Songs,” and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 158.



sustained the popularity of African American entertainers under the sideshow tents.<sup>99</sup> Artists such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, but also bluesman Charley Patton for instance, started as members of these shows, preparing themselves for what was to come.

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<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 184.

## CHAPTER III

### THE BIRTH OF BLUES MUSIC

Blues music can be considered as another step in the African American musical history. Its rise is the result of the previous musical genres that accompanied African Americans from slavery to the verge of the twentieth century. However, Blues has its own history that differed according to time and place. Understanding this music and its various aspects will provide a better understanding for its success, and for what it represents.

#### A. PRESENTATION AND FUNCTIONING

To understand the music, it is important to study the word, its etymology, and its origins. Why the word “blues”? What is its meaning when evoking music? When one looks at its definition, one realizes that it transcribes a feeling of sadness, melancholy, and depression. In his book, *Authentic Blues, its History and its Themes*,<sup>100</sup> Robert Springer, in his research based on the Oxford English Dictionary, found out that the word ‘Blues’ originated in the sixteenth century. Indeed, at this time, the blue color was the color of the devil, and every depressed individual was expected to experience these feelings because of those blue devils. Then, this term began to carry a more negative connotation, and one has to wait until the beginning of the twentieth century for the term ‘Blues’ to be associated with a musical genre.<sup>101</sup> The Blues is “nothing but a good man

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<sup>100</sup> Robert Springer, *Authentic Blues, its History and its Themes* (Paris: Filipacchi, 1985).

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, 37.



Like its message, Blues did not appear in the form one knows today. It followed a process of development, along with the African American experience. The African heritage influenced this music in the sense that it is the common root of all African Americans brought to the North American continent. The biggest influence can be found in slavery. Beyond slave songs and Negro Spirituals, the feeling of inequality had the biggest influence. It brought, in a non-elaborated way, the first signs of protest and expression. Afterwards, the emancipation process began to individualize African-Americans. As a result, field hollers, the individual version of work songs, appeared.

When African Americans were slaves, they used hollers primarily as a means of communication. After the emancipation process, the communication purpose remained but lost part of its importance and was further replaced by short songs workers were singing to themselves. Some of them took the form of one verse repeated constantly, according to the situation, and, as a result, were called over-and-overs.<sup>104</sup>

Following emancipation, there was another influence on the complete development of Blues. African Americans were then confronted with a White, Western culture; to their way of life, but also to their customs and traditions. Among them were the ballads.<sup>105</sup> A few songs from this repertoire were borrowed but the major influence to Blues concerns the structure of ballads. Indeed, they were following the rules of a very strict code that separates songs into various stanzas. This mix between White folklore and African American heritage resulted in the Blues structure one knows today.

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, 39.

<sup>105</sup> The ballad is the most distinguished of all the types of folk songs. These songs are intended to be sung solo instead of by groups. It is a longer song that has short stanzas. They usually tell a story, or an event. Judith Tick, *Music in the USA, a Documentary Companion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 34.

Blues music is by definition a feeling. As such, it appears difficult to codify. Nonetheless, one can assert that it follows a set of rules. It is most of the time made of several stanzas, of three lines per stanza. In them, the second line is a repetition of the first line, whereas the third line brings up a new element to the story. Usually, the three lines of each stanza follow the AAB rhythmical pattern. Each line has four measures, which gives every stanza twelve measures. However, the number of measures can be reduced to eight or expanded to sixteen.<sup>106</sup> The song ‘Cypress Grove Blues,’ by Skip James, illustrates this point.

*I would rather be buried in some cypress grove,  
I would rather be buried in some cypress grove,  
To have some woman, Lord, that I can't control.*

*And I'm going away now, I'm going away to stay,  
And I'm going away now, I'm going away to stay,  
That'll be alright pretty mama, you gonna need my help someday.<sup>107</sup>*

Concerning the rhythm, Blues is close to other genres of African American music since it is generally composed of two tenses with a syncopated melody.<sup>108</sup> With these rules, one could imagine that all the Blues would be the same. However, thanks to a large portion left to improvisation, almost every Blues song can be unique. Furthermore, these rules concern ‘commercial Blues’ mainly, since they appeared officially when this genre entered the music industry. Rules and patterns had to be followed to fit demand and ease duplication. With rural Blues, rules are more flexible and a larger portion is left to improvisation. From this perspective, this genre remains close to other African American types of music, such as Spirituals and Gospel for instance.

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<sup>106</sup> Robert Springer, *Authentic Blues, its History and its Themes* (Paris: Filipacchi, 1985), 45.

<sup>107</sup> Skip James, “Cypress Grove Blues.” Url: <http://www.harptab.com/lyrics/ly4873.shtml>. Consulted on July 9, 2011.

<sup>108</sup> A syncopated melody displaces the beats in a musical piece of a rhythm so that strong beats become weak and vice versa.

The interesting side of Blues rests in the combination of various influences to create something new. From the African American community, it took the communal aspect and the importance devoted to music. This communal aspect is developed through the ‘call and response’ activity, which means that if a Blues song is performed in public, interaction becomes possible, referring to the African heritage where expressing one’s feelings in front of the community to find a solution was common. Blues also borrowed the place of music, at the heart of everyday life and experience, from this African heritage. Undoubtedly, there is a Blues for every one and for every situation.

At the same time, Blues is the result of the contact with Western influence, both from the United States and from Europe. In this case, the main influence can be found in the message, and the music. Ballads influenced Blues in its structures, but not exclusively. As a result, traces of the American ideology, the importance given to the individual, can be found in Blues and in the way to consider music. Thus, while genres like Gospels and Spirituals used the communal aspect of an audience, for Blues it is not a mandatory condition. What Blues took from Anglo-American culture is the importance given to the individual. In other words, Blues can be sung alone. It is the reaction of an individual to a situation and, as such, feelings can be expressed without the help of anyone else. The “call and response” remains but, with Blues music, the singer speaks to himself. To sum up, identification with the bluesman’s message prevails over a direct dialogue with the crowd. One can listen to him if one wants to, but it is not a necessary condition.

Musical instruments have their share of influence as well. It is thanks to interactions with White people that African Americans expanded their knowledge of the use of various instruments. During slavery, learning how to play an instrument was done either with or without the

master's permission. During the Civil War, African Americans were used in brass bands and taught how to play. As a result, with emancipation, some of them were able to play a large variety of instruments such as the fife, the violin, the piano, the guitar, the harmonica, etc. These instruments, coming mostly from Europe and derived from classical music, had an impact on Blues as well as other genres. The difference is that, with Blues, the role of instruments went beyond being a musical background. They were used as a second voice that answers the bluesman; Blues 'makes instruments talk.'<sup>109</sup> The most common instruments used were the guitar, the piano, and the harmonica. Besides the piano, these instruments were used for practical reasons: they were relatively cheap, could be home made, and were easy to travel with. By definition, the bluesman is a traveler who wanders from crossroads to crossroads. Thus, using portable instruments was a way to carry music everywhere.

The guitar<sup>110</sup> is another example of ambivalent influence. Indeed, African Americans took this European descended instrument and transformed the way to play it by inventing new techniques, such as the bottleneck. This technique consisted of playing by wearing the neck or the mouth of a glass bottle around the fingers, producing special sound effects.<sup>111</sup> This new sound intensifies the role of the guitar as a second voice for the singer. With this technique, it sounds like the instru-

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<sup>109</sup> Robert Springer, *Authentic Blues, its History and its Themes* (Paris: Filipacchi, 1985), 18.

<sup>110</sup> The guitar came to the United States at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Texas. It was at first an instrument for poor Mexican people. The African-American community discovered it in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century when slaves were brought to this region. But is only at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that it came to be spread all over the country. Graham Wade, *A Concise History of the Classic Guitar* (Pacific: Mel Publications, 2008).

<sup>111</sup> This technique became very popular, especially in the Delta region where almost all bluesmen used it at some point or another. It was very influential for Blues of course but also for other types of music such as Rock n' Roll that, at some point of its history revisited the most famous Blues but kept this technique and even accentuated it. The most famous bluesmen who used this technique were Son House, Robert Johnson, Skip James and Charley Patton, considered as the founder of the Delta Blues.

ment is moaning with the singer. The harmonica<sup>112</sup> embodies as well this notion of musical response to the bluesman's discourse.

Blues music took inspiration from both the African American and White world. Having said this, it appears relevant to claim that Blues could not have existed during slavery, due to the limitation of interactions. These interactions were not uniform throughout the country; it is possible to make a distinction between three main areas where Blues music emerged in a particular direction. One would not listen to the same Blues in the Delta, on the East Coast, or in Texas.

The region of the Delta of the Mississippi is the place where Blues music began in the early twentieth century, in an area where segregation and isolation were the most extreme. Since relations between African Americans and Whites were almost nonexistent, the type of Blues that resulted was the least influenced by Western culture and largely influenced by African heritage. In this Delta Blues, melodies are simple and repetitive. The syncopation is more present than anywhere else. It is also in this area that the bottleneck technique was the most widely used. This music appears not to be elaborated, with a lack of evolution in the stanzas. However, the important use of metaphors creates a very poetic form.<sup>113</sup>

On the East Coast, conditions of living were different for the African American community. This variation is noticeable in the Blues of this region. Indeed, in this area surrounding North and South Carolina, but also both Virginias, Kentucky, the east of Tennessee and Georgia, Blues ap-

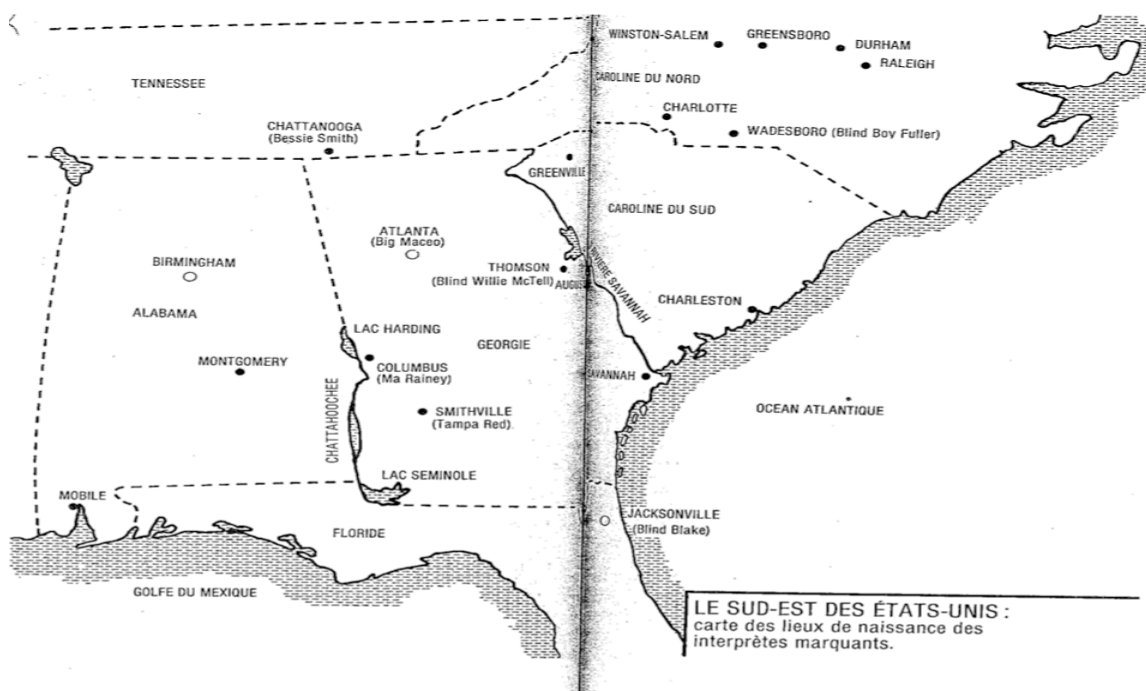
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<sup>112</sup> The Harmonica has been invented three thousand years ago, in China. Its name was Sheng at the time. A German explorer brought it back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It evolved during this century to become the Harmonica that we know now in 1821. Matthias Hohner commercialized it. Some of his cousins, who emigrated in the United States, spread it all around the country. Its first entrance into the African-American music was in jug bands, before being used in Blues.  
Randy Weinstein & William Melton, *The Complete Idiots' Guide to Playing the Harmonica* (Alpha: First Edition, 2001).

<sup>113</sup> Gerard Herzhaft, *Blues* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008), 34.



pears to be more casual in its melodies. The structures are almost the same, except for the syncopation, which was replaced by bass sounds. One can find the reason behind these differences in the sense that, in the 1920s, racism and segregation were used at a lesser degree than in the Delta. Again, music reflected their conditions of living.<sup>114</sup>



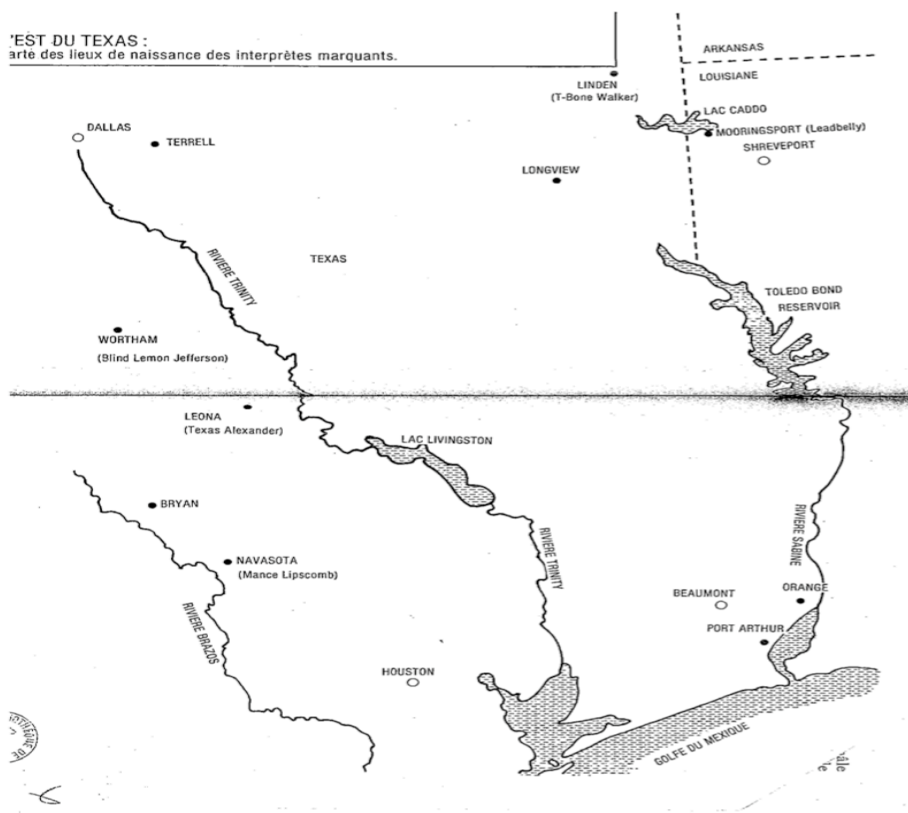
*Map of the East of the United States<sup>115</sup>*

A similar situation occurred in the Texas area, which also included Oklahoma, the southwest region of Arkansas and the west of Louisiana. This region, being isolated from other states of the deep South but open to the Spanish and Mexican influence, created its own traditions and styles. Blues music developed there in a context of slavery that lasted longer than anywhere else. Besides, the economic decline of the cotton industry, which was the main source of profit, resulted in great poverty. Thus, Blues from this region sounds even more primitive than in the Delta. Fur-

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

<sup>115</sup> Robert Springer, *Authentic Blues, its History and its Themes* (Paris: Filipacchi, 1985), 192.

thermore, the openness to Hispanic musical influence, Flamenco for instance, created a style on the fringe of African traditions. Songs in this region use more logic in the lyrics and even contain second-degree humor.<sup>116</sup>



*Map of the East of Texas*<sup>117</sup>

Blues took inspiration from everything and from everywhere. Using their different backgrounds, singers could use Blues to describe precisely what they were living, with their own words and their own music.

<sup>116</sup> Gerard Herzhaft, *Blues* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008), 40-41.

<sup>117</sup> Robert Springer, *Authentic Blues, its History and its Themes* (Paris: Filipacchi, 1985), 194.

## B. A BLUES FOR EVERYONE, A STORY FOR EVERYTHING

Memphis Slim,<sup>118</sup> when asked what Blues meant to him, had the following answer: "...You know you wanta say something, you wanta signifying like-that's the Blues. We all have a hard time in life, and things we couldn't say or do, so we sing it."<sup>119</sup> Blues is about all the aspects of life. Since life is not always the same, neither is Blues. The repertoire of Blues songs covers a large variety of domains and gives indications on how life was through the eyes of bluesmen. As daily activity influenced music, it also influenced the themes of this music. The number of songs for each theme varies from one area to the next, since the conditions of living were not the same in every part of the country. Nonetheless, one can distinguish a few recurrent subjects, such as women, hard times, denunciation, and discontent. Analyzing these themes appears necessary to capture the true essence of Blues music.

One of the most recurrent themes in Blues concerns the woman character. Love, hatred, or complaints about a woman can easily be found in this genre. Often, she is depicted as unfaithful or difficult to control, which provokes a lack of understanding, but also sadness in the singer. In these songs, the male figure is most of the time in the position of the victim, harmless. The female character is even sometimes associated with the devil. An example of this idea can be found in 'Devil Got My Woman,' performed in 1931 by Skip James:

*I'd rather be the devil, than to be that woman's man,  
I'd rather be the devil, than to be that woman's man,  
Aw, nothing but the devil, changed my baby's mind,*

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<sup>118</sup> Memphis Slim (September 3, 1915-February 24, 1988) was a famous Bluesman. He became recognized thanks to his piano playing skills.

<sup>119</sup> Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1993), 461.

*Was nothing but the devil, changed my baby's mind.*<sup>120</sup>

This vision of the woman, possessed by the devil, can also be found in 'Kind Hearted Woman Blues,' performed by Robert Johnson<sup>121</sup> in the 1920s. He adds to his Blues the image of the impossible love, another recurrent theme:

*I got a kind hearted woman,  
Do anything in this world for me,  
I got a kind hearted woman,  
Do anything in this world for me.*

*But these evil hearted women,  
Man they will not let me be.*

*I love my baby,  
My baby don't love me,  
I love my baby,  
My baby don't love me.*

*But I really love that woman,  
Can't stand to leave her be.*

*A-ain't but one thing,  
Makes Mister Johnson drink,  
I's worried 'bout how you treat me baby  
I begin to think.*

*Ooh baby, my life don't feel the same,  
You break my heart,  
When you call Mister So-and-So's name.*

*She's a kind hearted woman,  
She studies evil all the time,  
She's a kind hearted woman,  
She studies evil all the time.*

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<sup>120</sup> Skip James, "Devil Got My Woman." Url: <http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/martinscorsesebestoftheblues/devilgotmywoman.htm>. Consulted on July 9, 2011.

<sup>121</sup> May 8, 1911-August 16, 1938.

*You well's to kill me,  
As to have it on your mind.*<sup>122</sup>

What Robert Johnson and Skip James say in their songs, hundreds of bluesmen said it as well. They did it their own way, using their own words. However, the same idea is presented. In the African American family, the female figure often had power and made decisions. At the time, women were the stable figure of the family system, since they were the ones taking care of the children. They were the figure of authority. On the contrary, men who grew up without knowing their fathers cultivated this feeling of inferiority and suffered from it.<sup>123</sup> One can find an explanation in the slave system, where the family was often broken. This was especially the case in the areas where the contact between African Americans and Whites was the least common, as in the Delta and in Texas. Thanks to the use of metaphors in these types of Blues, one can also interpret a denunciation of the racial relationships between the two communities.

The White man was also targeted through these Blues.<sup>124</sup> The lack of power towards him was then denounced and expressed through images, and translated the pain that the entire African American community suffered during segregation. Segregation was sometimes denounced overtly. During the first part of the twentieth century, violence directed against African Americans were part of everyday life and depicted in music. Songs like 'Strange Fruit' made famous by Billie Holiday and 'On the Sunny Side of the Street' by Louis Armstrong witnessed the daily vio-

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<sup>122</sup> Robert Johnson, "Kind Hearted Woman," Url: <http://www.bluesforpeace.com/lyrics/kind-hearted-woman.htm>. Consulted on July 18, 2011.

<sup>123</sup> Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 69.

<sup>124</sup> Robert Springer, *Authentic Blues, its History and its Themes* (Paris: Filipacchi, 1985), 78.

lence and injustice. One can find these themes in Blues songs as well, as the following examples show.

The first song, entitled ‘Alabama Blues,’ and performed by J.B. Lenoir in the 1950s, relates the violence and the killings orchestrated by Whites against African Americans, as well as the involvement of the police in these actions:

*I never will go back to Alabama, that is not the place for me,  
I never will go back to Alabama, that is not the place for me,  
You know they killed my sister and my brother,  
And the whole world let them people go down there free.*

*I never will love Alabama, Alabama seem to never have loved poor me,  
I never will love Alabama, Alabama seem to never have loved poor me.  
Oh God I wish you would rise up one day,  
Lead my people to the land of pea’*

*My brother was taken up for my mother, and a police officer shot him down,  
My brother was taken up for my mother, and a police officer shot him down,  
I can’t help but to sit down and cry sometime,  
Think about how my poor brother lost his life.*

*Alabama, Alabama, why you wanna be so mean,  
Alabama, Alabama, why you wanna be so mean,  
You got my people behind a barbwire fence,  
Now you tryin’ to take my freedom away from me.<sup>125</sup>*

This song describes physical violence in a realistic way. Segregation was also a form of psychological violence and inflicted the African American community. Another Blues song describes the humiliation of a people supposed to be free and equal, but who were instead set apart. This song called “Get Back (Black, Brown, and White)” was performed by Big Bill Broonzy in November 1951:

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<sup>125</sup> J.B. Lenoir, “Alabama Blues.” Url: <http://www.lyrics007.com/J.B.%20Lenoir%20Lyrics/Alabama%20Blues%20Lyrics.html>. Consulted on July 9, 2011.

*This little song that I'm singing about,  
 People you all know that is true,  
 If you're black and gotta work for a living,  
 Now this is what they'll say to you,  
 They say: 'If you was white,  
     You's alright,  
     If you was brown,  
     Stick around,  
 But if you's Black, oh brother,  
 Get back, get back, get back.*

*I was in a place one night,  
 They was all having fun,  
 They was all buying beer and wine,  
 But they would not sell me none.  
 They say: 'If you was white,  
     You's alright,  
     If you was brown,  
     Stick around,  
 But if you's Black, oh brother,  
 Get back, get back, get back.*

*I went to an employment office,  
 I got a number and I got in line,  
 They called everybody's number,  
 But they never did call mine.  
 They say: 'If you was white,  
     You's alright,  
     If you was brown,  
     Stick around,  
 But if you's Black, oh brother,  
 Get back, get back, get back.*

*Me and a man was workin' side by side,  
 Now this is what i meant:  
 They was paying him a dollar an hour,  
 And they was paying me fifty cents.  
 They say: 'If you was white,  
     You's alright,  
     If you was brown,  
     Stick around,  
 But if you's Black, oh brother,  
 Get back, get back, get back.*

*I helped win sweet victories,  
 With my plow and hoe,  
 Now I want you to tell me, brother,  
 What you gonna do 'bout the old Jim Crow?  
 They say: 'If you was white,  
 You's alright,  
 If you was brown,  
 Stick around,  
 But if you's Black, oh brother,  
 Get back, get back, get back.<sup>126</sup>*

These lyrics translate the feelings of unfairness experienced by African Americans facing those laws. These two songs were written during the 1950s to denounce their conditions before the Civil Rights Movement emerged a few years later.

Life was the same, if not worse, twenty years earlier, when the Great Depression struck. In 'Alabama Blues,' J.B. Lenoir mentions leaving the place where he used to live. These words could have been used during the 1930s. Life was hard everywhere, as Skip James explains in 'Hard Times Killing Floor Blues.' It is important to mention the entire song because, when one listens to it, one can picture the effects of the Great Depression with people sleeping on the street, wandering, etc. Furthermore, no indications are made concerning the target of this song—neither Black, nor White people. One can assert then that the two communities could embody his words.

*Hard times is here and everywhere you go,  
 Times is harder than they ever been before.  
 You know that people are drifting for door to door,  
 But they can't find no heaven I don't care where they go.*

*People, if I ever can get up off of this old hard killing floor,  
 Lord, I'll never get down this low no more.*

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<sup>126</sup> Big Bill Broonzy, "Get Back (Black, Brown, and White)." Url: <http://www.lyricstime.com/big-bill-broonzy-black-brown-and-white-lyrics.html>. Consulted on July 9, 2011.



*Well you hear me singing this old lonesome song,  
People, you know these hard times can't last us so long.*

*You know, you'll say you had money, you better be sure,  
But these hard times gon' kill you just drive a lonely soul.<sup>127</sup>*

As life was hard, people tended to turn to religion. Thus, many religious references can be found in Blues. This was also a legacy of slavery, when people's relationship with religion was very important. In the 1920s and 1930s, bluesmen could sing Spirituals the same way they were singing Blues. One shall study the conflictual relationship between Blues and Spirituals or Gospel in further chapters. Helped by this belief, they could hope for better days and a brighter future. Among these halfway Blues-Spirituals songs, one can find an example of 'Trouble Will Soon Be Over,' performed by Blind Willie Johnson<sup>128</sup> in 1927. In this song, he expresses his hopes for better days, counting on the Lord's help for relief:

*Oh, trouble will soon be over,  
Sorrow will have an end,  
Trouble soon will be, oh,  
Sorrow will have an end.*

*Well Christ is my burden bearer,  
He's my only friend,  
Tell me the end of my sorrow,  
And tell me to lean on him.*

*God is my strong protection,  
He's my bosom friend,  
If trouble rose all around me,  
I know who'll take me in.*

*Though my burden be heavy,  
I won't let it crush me down,*

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<sup>127</sup> Skip James, "Hard Time Killing Floor Blues." Url: [http://www.lyricsfreak.com/s/skip+james/hard+time+killing+floor+blues\\_10216992.html](http://www.lyricsfreak.com/s/skip+james/hard+time+killing+floor+blues_10216992.html). Consulted on July 9, 2011.

<sup>128</sup> January 22, 2897-September 18, 1945.

*Someday I'll rest with Jesus,  
And wear a starry crown.*

*I'll take this yoke upon me,  
And live a Christian life,  
Take Jesus for my savior,  
My burden will be light.<sup>129</sup>*

Blues can fit every occasion. It has been the means of expression of the African American community for decades. Everyone was implicated in the themes used since, before being internationally recognized, Blues was made by African Americans for themselves. This music reminded them where they were from, but also what they had become. Mixing African American traditions and heritage combined with European cultures through styles and instruments, Blues showed this community a path to follow. The historical period between the two World Wars, when Blues knew its golden age, showed that it could be the mirror of the African American development.

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<sup>129</sup> Blind Willie Johnson, "Trouble Will Soon Be Over." Url: <http://www.justsomelyrics.com/1902169/Blind-Willie-Johnson-Trouble-Will-Soon-Be-Over-Lyrics>. Consulted on July 9, 2011.

PART II:  
THE GOLDEN AGE

The first half of the twentieth century can be summarized in two words: World Wars. During this time, the United States of America fought around the world to protect the freedom and eliminate oppression abroad. On the home front, however, the Jim Crow Laws and other segregation practices continued to tear the country apart, and being African American in the early years of the twentieth century was still synonymous with inequalities, violence, and poverty. After the first World War, America entered the roaring twenties, where the economy was booming and where the country emerged as a superpower in the making. Industrialization was running full steam, profits were made and people were happy. However, this was the White side of the story. African Americans tried to take advantage of this period and to follow this movement.

The African American community changed more during these years than during the previous centuries. It took pride, protests, and perseverance to at least get closer to racial equality. Nonetheless, transformations occurred; politically, socially, and intellectually. From a musical point of view, history remembers this era as the golden age of African American music, because it is during this time that colored artists began to have their music recorded, and their voice heard. The following chapter will attempt to explain these evolutions that put African American music on the map, and Blues inside homes.

## CHAPTER I

## LIFE IN AMERICA FROM ONE WAR TO THE NEXT

Blues emerged in the south of the United States, in the Delta, Mississippi, in particular. After the emancipation, thousands of African Americans decided to move to urban areas in the North. This wave of immigration that started at the beginning of the twentieth century intensified between 1915 and 1920, a short decrease occurring after the financial crisis of 1929. As a whole, over one million African Americans moved from the South to the North between 1915 and 1930.<sup>130</sup> Two main flows of migration can be observed during this period. One flow toward the East, led African Americans from the South to Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey. Another one brought them toward the Midwest, mostly to Chicago due to the railroad going from New Orleans, Louisiana, to Chicago, Illinois.<sup>131</sup> Furthermore, an African American community has existed in this city since the late 1840s.<sup>132</sup> One last wave of migration, directed to the West, occurred later.

Migration to the North was a success at first, due to World War I. Indeed, the looming conflict triggered a decline in foreign immigration, communication with Europe being considerably slowed down. Furthermore, preparing the country for war required an increase of production and, thus, of man power. As a result, African Americans leaving the South could find employment in the war industry, such as the manufacture of ammunition, but also iron and steel, to produce

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<sup>130</sup> Jon Michael Spencer, "The Diminishing Rural Residue of Folklore in City and Urban Blues, 1915-1950," *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 12, No 1 (Spring, 1992), pp. 25-41, 28.

<sup>131</sup> Robert Springer, *Authentic Blues, its History and its Themes* (Paris: Filipacchi, 1985), 161.

<sup>132</sup> Jon Michael Spencer, "The Diminishing Rural Residue of Folklore in City and Urban Blues, 1915-1950," *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 12, No 1 (Spring, 1992), pp. 25-41, 28.

automobiles and trucks.<sup>133</sup> Securing employment allowed African Americans to improve their conditions of living, and was an incentive to more migration.

However, this period of relative happiness did not last long, and the situation of African Americans was still problematic. Indeed, race clashes both in the North and in the South did not diminish, including lynchings. One can take for instance the revival of the Ku Klux Klan starting in 1915 in the South, but soon spreading throughout the country, combined with more than seventeen lynchings recorded in the first year after the war.<sup>134</sup> For soldiers coming back from war where they expected to be treated as heroes like any other soldiers, coming home to these inequalities was difficult to handle.

Nonetheless, postwar America brought benefits to the African American community. Even though improvements were not as important as for the rest of the population, life improved. African Americans who were working in northern urban areas remained there and established communities. The most famous one took place in New York City, with the Harlem Renaissance. This area located in the North on Manhattan became the center of attention for the African American communities. During the 1920s, social improvements could be witnessed. During these decades, the African American culture developed rapidly. Writers, poets, actors, but also singers, as one shall see, could be found in Harlem, which benefitted the entire African American community. The same phenomenon could be witnessed in other major urban areas, such as Chicago in the South side, or Los Angeles. In the South, however, conditions of living remained archaic and based on sharecropping, where general poverty and land exploitation prevailed.

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<sup>133</sup> John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 307.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid*, 311.

When the first signs of the Great Depression appeared, African Americans were among the first to be hit. Indeed, even before the crash of October 1929, thousands of them had already lost their jobs in the North, and were pulled to starvation in the South.<sup>135</sup> The Great Depression did not only affect African Americans, but the proportions it took among them were even more dramatic. For instance, John Hope Franklin relates that, by 1934, seventeen percent of Whites were incapable of self-support in any occupation. Concerning African Americans, this number grew to thirty-eight percent.<sup>136</sup> This number kept increasing as the overall situation worsened.

In 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected President. Soon after his inauguration, he enacted policy to pull the country out of this situation. With the New Deal, he installed drastic measures to restore the country through massive investments in the economy from the federal government. African Americans benefitted from these policies, even though inequalities remained. Among these policies, one can find the National Industrial Recovery Act, which sought to stimulate industries and introduce codes of fair competition among workers. Even though this act was eventually declared unconstitutional, it provided relief to African Americans in the North. In the South, they were affected as well by the various New Deal measures to provide relief to farmers and agricultural workers. As a result, farmers would receive cash benefits for plowing their crops.<sup>137</sup> Billions of dollars were risen for them, but this money was dissipated and misappropriated, since many landlords employing African American workers kept the money to themselves.

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<sup>135</sup> *Ibid*, 341.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*, 341.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid*, 352.

Housing was another field where the African American community received help from the New Deal policies. Indeed, the New Deal housing programs helped African Americans not only to keep their homes and acquire better living accommodations, but also provided employment in the building of new projects, both private and public.<sup>138</sup> However, these new opportunities came with inequalities, both from a housing and working point of view. For housing, few African Americans were granted loans by banks on the recovery. The reasons advanced were that they were regarded as risky investments but also because of the supposed poor future value of housing after African Americans had lived there.<sup>139</sup> For working conditions, they benefitted from the 1938 Fair Standard Act, providing minimum wage and limiting the weekly hours of work to forty. However, only a small portions of African Americans had access to these measures, being excluded from skilled work and, thus, from unions.<sup>140</sup> The majority of jobs offered to them were as unskilled workers, such as longshoremen, meat packers, servants, etc.

These disparities isolated the African American community from the rest of the population. Since the Jim Crow Laws were still in practice, African Americans, lived in segregated areas, used segregated transportation systems, studied in segregated schools. As a result, the feeling of belonging to a community became even more prevalent. It was a society within the society, with the church becoming the symbol of unity that the federal government could not provide. Furthermore, within urban areas, an African American middle class emerged, bringing new aspirations for a better future to the rest of the community. This portion of the population began to seek improvement in their condition of living, from a social as well as from an intellectual and artistic

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<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, 352.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid*, 353.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid*, 354.



point of view. The Harlem Renaissance showed African Americans how rich and varied their background was, and how empowering it could be. It was then possible for them to attend African American shows, to read African American literature. Music in clubs and theater was also important. However, to widen this wave of musical expression, African American music had to enter the recording industry to touch the masses. The transition was made through the Race Records era.

## CHAPTER II

### THE RACE RECORDS ERA

#### A. BIRTH OF THE RACE RECORDS

When African Americans made the move to the North, they brought music with them. Indeed, since life was difficult outside the South as well, Blues music was appropriate. As a result, Blues moved from the Delta in Mississippi to all over the country, triggering transformations of the genre. For instance, the melody of a Blues from Los Angeles performed by B.B. King would not sound the same if it would have been performed by Muddy Waters in Chicago, or by other bluesmen in New York. Nonetheless, this migration created a basis of Blues listeners around the country. As this basis grew, the music industry could not remain passive, since profits were to be made.

After the Great Migration, African Americans had the desire to maintain their musical patterns, to fight homesickness for instance. Even though Blues was known, identified, and recognized by the African American community, it was still absent from the music industry. No major recording companies<sup>141</sup> were willing to spend money on a music made for African Americans only. Geographic expansion made access to Blues music more difficult, even in major cities such as New York or Chicago. However, as demand grew, clubs began to open. The first African

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<sup>141</sup> In the music industry, a major is a record label associated with the marketing of music recording. Most commonly, it is a company that coordinates the production, manufacture, distribution, marketing and promotion of sound recordings and maintains contracts with artists and their managers. The most famous majors were Columbia, Warner etc.

American theater to open was the Lincoln Theater that opened in Harlem in 1909, featuring Blues singers from the South.<sup>142</sup> Other similar clubs were then founded and became very popular. This success eventually made the music industry review its judgement, but it took long and multiple attempts for the African American community to hear one of its own.

For years, African Americans tried to have their voices recorded, but music companies were against it. The place for “colored” musicians was in the background, to accompany White singers. As early as 1916, the African American newspaper, *The Chicago Defender*, commented that its readers had paid for many records by White artists but were now asking for African American ones. The newspaper campaign intensified to the point of asking each African American owner of a talking machine to send their names and address to the *Defender* office and petition for changes in the music industry.<sup>143</sup> Even though nothing happened at the time, voices started to be heard. The breakthrough came four years later, when Fred Hager, a famous record producer at the time, decided to produce music by an African American woman. Hager intended to use singer Sophie Tucker, but because of conflicts of contracts, she was not available.<sup>144</sup> The rest is history, and Perry Bradford, musician and producer at the time, tells it.

In his autobiography, he recalls the early times where recording African American singers was a fantasy, even for him. As he recalls:

“To tell the truth, hungry and with the rent due sole-less shoes, I used to talk to myself saying, ‘Perry, are you nuts?’ My friends were buzzing me with, ‘Perry, why don’t you forget the dream about a colored girl singing on phonograph records? That’s causing you to suffer from ‘miss-meal-cramps!’ Go back to the stage where you could always get the restaurant man to give you

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<sup>142</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness : Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 224.

<sup>143</sup> Robert Dixon & John Godrich, *Recording the Blues* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970), 9.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

credit.<sup>145</sup> But I was too stubborn to give up the idea because I had traveled all over the country singing and playing the Blues, and I knew the people were waiting for that sound on the record because it was the sound of America, Negro and White.”<sup>146</sup>

He finally recalls the day he persuaded producer Fred Hager to record and produce a song by a colored artist:

“So I woke up on a cold February morning in 1920. I walked, and walked, and I strolled around the Okeh studio at 145 W 45th Street to see Mr. Fred Hager again, with the intention of making my last stab at trying to sell a colored girl singing on records. All other attempts had failed. I’d walked out two pairs of shoes going from one studio to another, and my friends were pleading me to give up.”<sup>147</sup>

Once he got to talk to Hager, he told him that, “there’s fourteen million Negroes in our great country and they will buy records by one of their own, because we are the only folks that can sing and interpret hot Jazz songs just off the griddle correctly.”<sup>148</sup> Then, he introduced the name of Mamie Smith:

“As Miss Tucker was contracted to Vocalion Records, I rushed back and handed Mr. Hager this new line of jive. ‘There’s a colored girl, the one I told you about up in Harlem. Well, she will do more with these songs than a monkey can do with a peanut; she sings Jazz songs with more soulful feeling than other girls, for it’s only natural with us.’”<sup>149</sup>

The singer was Mamie Smith, and the song was “Crazy Blues.”<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Perry Bradford, *Born with the Blues: Perry Bradford’s Own Story: the True Story of the Pioneering Blues Singers and Musicians in the Early Jazz Age* (New York: Oak Publication, 1965), 13.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid*, 116.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid*, 117.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid*, 118.

<sup>150</sup> The original title of the song was ‘Harlem Blues,’ but was shortly after named ‘Crazy Blues.’ Perry Bradford, *Born with the Blues: Perry Bradford’s Own Story: the True Story of the Pioneering Blues Singers and Musicians in the Early Jazz Age* (New York: Oak Publication, 1965), 17.

*I can't sleep at night,  
I can't eat a bite,  
'Cause the man I love,  
He don't treat me right.*

*He makes me feel so blue,  
I don't know what to do.*

*Sometime I sit and sigh,  
And then begin to cry,  
'Cause my best friend,  
Said his last goodbye.*

*There's a change in the ocean,  
Change in the deep blue sea my baby,  
I'll tell you folks, there ain't no change in me,  
My love for that man will always be.*

*Now I can read his letters,  
I sure can't read his mind,  
I thought he's loving me,  
He's leaving me all the time,  
Now I see my poor love was blind,  
Now I got the crazy blues since my baby went away.*

*I ain't got no time to lose,  
I must find him today,  
Now the doctor's gonna do all that he can,  
But what you're gonna need is an undertaken man,  
I ain't nothin' but bad news,  
Now I got the crazy blues.<sup>151</sup>*

Shortly after the record was issued, Fred Hager came back to Bradford:

"I got good news for you. Mamie's record is selling very big in Philly and Chicago; the South, as you said, has gone head over heels for it, and down in Texas, Birmingham, and over Saint Louis, they are falling for the record just like leaves fall in autumn time."<sup>152</sup>

<sup>151</sup> Mamie Smith & her Jazz Hounds, "Crazy Blues."

Url: [http://www.justsomelyrics.com/1760883/Mamie-Smith-%26-Her-Jazz-Hounds-Crazy-Blues-\(1920\)-Lyrics](http://www.justsomelyrics.com/1760883/Mamie-Smith-%26-Her-Jazz-Hounds-Crazy-Blues-(1920)-Lyrics).

Consulted on July 23, 2011.

<sup>152</sup> Perry Bradford, *Born with the Blues: Perry Bradford's Own Story: the True Story of the Pioneering Blues Singers and Musicians in the Early Jazz Age* (New York: Oak Publication, 1965), 121.

What Hager described was a huge commercial success that sold over seventy-five thousand copies after the first month.<sup>153</sup> A retailer in Atlanta described the excitement over black music at the time of Mamie Smith: “We would get in five hundred of those records. The clerk wouldn’t even put them in a bag. Just take a dollar and hand them out—just like you were selling tickets.”<sup>154</sup>

As a result, Mamie Smith came back to the studio that year and became the figure of a new kind of records that was waiting for its name. Ralph Peer, who was working for Okeh Records, the label who discovered Mamie Smith, recalls how he came up with the name Race Records: “We had records by all foreign groups; German records, Swedish records, Polish records, but we were afraid to advertise Negro records. So I listed them in the catalogue as ‘race’ records and they are still known as that.”<sup>155</sup>

With this new name, it was the beginning of a new era. By the early 1920s, all major recording companies had their own race series, carrying numbers. These records were very popular around the country, even though, technically, it was not Blues music, but African American women performing learned how to sing and perfected their art in vaudeville shows.

What made Race Records a commercial success was their availability. They could be found at phonograph stores, but also at general stores, bars, and most importantly by mail, which made them available everywhere in the country, especially in the South where, despite migrations, a huge part of the African American population was still living. This population, as the early sales

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<sup>153</sup> David Brackett, *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 29.

<sup>154</sup> Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 192.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

demonstrated, wanted to listen to music, its own music. To feed demand, the catalogue of Race Records improved to cover every genre of African American music.

## **B. FROM CLASSIC BLUES SINGERS TO URBAN BLUES**

Listening to Race Records is like immersing oneself into the African American musical culture, since every genre can be found in these series. Gospel, Spirituals, Boogie-woogie, Jazz, and of course Blues. This generalization is to a certain extent reductive since eventually everything produced by African Americans became labelled Race Records. Nonetheless, three genres were more produced than others; Blues, Gospel, and Jazz.

Blues at the time of Race Records could be divided into two distinct genres, different in their creation, and in what they represented. Classic Blues, as one saw earlier, was the first of the two genres to emerge. Indeed, it consisted of African American women singing, surrounded by a small orchestra. Mamie Smith, for instance, was a Classic Blues singer and the complete name of her band was 'Mamie Smith and the Jazz Hounds.' Most of these artists did not compose their songs and were hired only because of their voice. This is what they were, a voice. The majority of them were actresses, dancers, or entertainers. Singing was first a profession and not a way to express a message, to denounce, or to survive. They were often singing about a lost love, and the pain it represented. The orchestra playing in the background was often a Jazz orchestra, performing to enhance the voice of the singer. Classic Blues was successful between 1920 and 1922, permitting these artists to reach fortune and fame.

Notwithstanding their name, these Classic Blues singers were far from representing “real” Blues, which appeared on records after them. Named Original Blues or Rural Blues, this genre had the essence of the music that appeared more than thirty years before, in the Delta. This music sounded like it used to in rural areas, since it was performed by original bluesmen who moved to urban areas to record their music. These Blues were composed by them, or were orally transmitted in the African American tradition. The themes were poverty, despair, but also protest, love, and hope. These records were popular until the aftermath of the Great Depression, the themes used being an adequate soundtrack for the period.

Gospel occupies a very special place in the African American culture. It is one of the ways to address God, and develop spirituality. Consequently, its importance in the Race Records catalogue appeared obvious. Recorded Gospel music was successful throughout the Race Records era, and remains popular today. The most recurrent theme is of course God, but different prayers are expressed, from praising God’s glory to declaiming hope, through religion, for a better life.

When one mentions Jazz with Race Records, it corresponds to the second era of Jazz, which began around 1917 and was marked by the appearance of Jazz bands on the front of the stage. They were no longer only used in the background, as ambiance music. Instead, what was sold on record was the music played by bands in urban clubs in New York or Chicago. It appears difficult to define a theme to Jazz music, since most of the productions were instrumentals or based on improvisation.

Race Records produced great music and saved genres that might have disappeared nowadays. Furthermore, it produced great artists who changed music, not only African American music, but music as a whole.



Among all the artists who put their voice on a Race Records, only a few remain famous today. Those who succeeded had something else that differentiated them from the rest. Talent was involved, but not only. Two notions mattered for these artists; credibility, and charisma. If one looks at singers such as Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, or Skip James, one realizes that they were artists before the Race Records era. Indeed, before the 1920s, Bessie Smith was dancing and performing in vaudeville, Louis Armstrong was playing Jazz in bars in New Orleans, Louisiana, and Skip James was working on a farm in Mississippi and singing Blues outside of churches to survive. Music to them was a way of life, a means of expression. They were discovered, not created, by Race Records, singing their music, not others'. They created their own music, instead of copying from other artists. This difference has its importance regarding the emotions shared. Everyone remembers Bessie Smith's voice or Louis Armstrong's way of playing trumpet, but who remembers Ivy Smith or Rosa Anderson?

Charisma was important as well. With time, music became a business, an industry, and handling it while keeping one's value requires charisma and personality. Artists who were lacking these values remained one-hit-wonders, others became legends. It takes charisma to fight a group of Klansmen and go back on stage like Bessie Smith did, or to refuse to perform solo on stage because it would put the rest of the band in the shadow, like Armstrong did. Those who did not have these notions did not survive history, and remained what they were hired to be, voices, used by the music industry to generate profits.

### C. THE MUSIC INDUSTRY

The evolution of the music industry is related to the advancement of broadcasting techniques. Indeed, without devices that spread the music beyond the sphere of concert halls, there would be no music industry. Without those technological devices, Blues music would have remained an oral tradition, trapped in the Delta where it was born. It would not have had the power and strength it acquired over the years.

The phonograph, or gramophone,<sup>156</sup> was the most common device for playing recorded sounds at the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century. Even though it was primarily designed for the recording of vocal conversations, it soon went beyond this function and became widespread as a device able to play music. Indeed, in the United States, approximately five hundred thousand phonographs were in use by 1900. By 1910, this number increased to two-and-a-half million.<sup>157</sup> By the 1920s, the phonograph was widespread in middle and lower class homes. In its early days, there were two types of recordings; on cylinders, or on discs, spinning seventy-eight times per minute, also known as 78s. The latter prevailed during the 1910s, and until the invention of the 33s, with discs spinning thirty-three times per minute, in 1948.

The expansion of this device, as Ludovic Tournès explains in his book, ‘Du Phonographe au MP3,’<sup>158</sup> is the result of two main factors. The first factor is the geographical expansion of urban areas that drove people away from theaters, clubs, or bars, which were located in downtowns.

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<sup>156</sup> Thomas Edison invented it in 1877.

<sup>157</sup> Ludovic Tournès, *Du phonographe au MP3 XIXe-XXIe siècle: une Histoire de la Musique Enregistrée* (Paris: Éd. Autrement, impr. 2008), 26.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

The second factor is cultural, and related to the new relationship with time in modern societies since the second part of the nineteenth century. According to him, from this period, time became rationalized, linear, quantified, and symbolized by the generalization of the clock compared to the ancient consideration of time, more rural, that considered time according to seasons, harvests, etc. He explains his theory with the example of Taylorism. This organization also brought the planning of not working time, that is to say leisure. This change in the relationship to time was the basis of the success of recorded music, which was listened to at home, after work.<sup>159</sup>

This theory concerns the entire population, including the African American community. In the 1920s, between ten to twenty percent of this community owned a phonograph.<sup>160</sup> For the African American population, the importance of the phonograph was tremendous, since it permitted music to enter houses and small communities. Thanks to this device, music could now be heard anywhere, at anytime. Langston Hughes remembers: ‘In Chicago in my teens, all up and down State Street there were Blues, indoor and out, at the Grand and the old Monogram theaters where Ma Rainey sang, in the night clubs, in the dance halls, and on phonographs.’<sup>161</sup> However, this device would be useless without discs.

The main material used for the standards 78s was Shellac,<sup>162</sup> but it was replaced by polyvinyl chloride, better known as vinyl. Discs were important for the music industry since they were the

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<sup>159</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>160</sup> Robert Springer, *Authentic Blues: its History and its Themes* (Paris: Filipacchi, 1985), 66.

<sup>161</sup> Langston Hughes, *I Remember the Blues*, quoted in Jon Michael Spencer, “The Diminishing Rural Residue of Folklore in City and Urban Blues, 1915-1950,” *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 12, No 1 (Spring, 1992), pp. 25-41, 33.

<sup>162</sup> Shellac is derived from a resin secreted by the female lac bug. The structure of this is first solid so you have to dissolve it in denatured alcohol to make liquid shellac. Once liquid it can be used in multiple uses, among them discs until late 1940s and beginning 1950s.

support for it, but it also modified its format due to technological reasons. As a means of communication for the masses, the influence of discs was tremendous.

Soon after the First World War, more than one hundred million records were sold.<sup>163</sup> These sales numbers influenced music both in positive and negative ways. The first positive aspect was the increase of the overall music quality. Indeed, to fit on a record, the song had to be perfect, flawless. It also saved some musical genres that might have disappeared otherwise. Another positive aspect was the availability of records for sale. Discs could be found in various places, such as specialized stores, but also general stores, or by mail orders. Furthermore, the advancement of technology reduced the cost of production and, subsequently, diminished the price of discs.

However, discs had drawbacks. One of the most important ones was related to the disc format. Indeed, discs standardized the music by imposing the twelve measure structure and reducing the length of each song. Because of its low capacity, 78s could only record from three to five minutes of music on each side. This format brought restrictions to artists who, to fit the format, had to edit their songs. Most of traditional Blues lasted approximately thirty minutes but could last longer, due to the large part left for improvisation. With this format, improvisation was impossible to maintain, forcing bluesmen to record alternative takes of their songs. As a result, Blues songs from the 1920s and 1930s on the Compact Disc format one knows today, no song would last more than three minutes, and one can find multiple alternative takes of songs, with different lyrics.

The length problem was gradually resolved with the advancement of technology, especially with the inventions of the 33s, and later with the LP records, which could carry up to thirty min-

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<sup>163</sup> Ludovic Tournès, *Du phonographe au MP3 XIXe-XXIe siècle: une Histoire de la Musique Enregistrée* (Paris: Éd. Autrement, 2008), 40.

utes of music per side. The conditions for recording were difficult as well, since in the beginning of the recording era, artists had to sing depending on how many copies were ordered. As for the length of the records, the advancement of technology was beneficial in the sense that, with these new techniques, the artist only had to sing a few times and make a lot more copies than they used to, at a lower price. Nonetheless, discs were the medium of music and they spread everywhere, not only in houses, but also in bars or in clubs, where it was a good opportunity to discover new songs and artists. All these possibilities were reunited in another device, the jukebox.

The jukebox was important for the music industry since it allowed people who did not own a phonograph to listen to music. Since its invention in 1889, the jukebox spread quickly in the United States and, in 1940, approximately three hundred and fifty-thousand jukeboxes were in use.<sup>164</sup> They were important both for bar tenders and for major recording companies, because it was a way to know what was successful with the audience and, depending on results, would provide feedback on what people wanted to listen to. It was also a way to listen to music as a substitution for live performances by artists.

The radio played the same role of broadcasting music for everyone. It went beyond, since, thanks to the radio, the audience could listen to music for free. It was an efficient promotional tool as well. However, the success of the radio was also a threat to record sales since, with this device, there was no need to pay for the listening, all one had to do was to buy the radio transmitter. This threat did not concern African American music at first since, at the beginning of the twentieth century, radios would not broadcast this music. As a result, Race Records never had to suffer decreasing of sales. Blues became dependent on the radio at the beginning of the 1950s.

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<sup>164</sup> Robert Springer, *Authentic Blues: its History and its Themes* (Paris: Filipacchi, 1985), 186.

The first radio station that created programs for the African American community opened in 1948 in Memphis, and was called WDIA. As early as 1951, all major urban areas had radio stations for African Americans. As all these devices helped the music industry as a whole, it helped Blues music as well, and contributed to the spreading of this genre for the African American community and, later, for the entire population. However, for this community, radios also carried a social function.

The phonograph permitted a large portion of the population to have access to music. For the African American community, it was more than that, for two reasons. The first reason concerns music itself and its transmission. The phonograph was a way for African Americans to listen to Blues songs from all around the country. For people living in the North, it became easier to hear songs and music that was in their heads when they were living in the South. As a result, the phonograph could be seen as a path to their origins, as a way to fight homesickness. Furthermore it allowed the settling of these songs into people's minds, to have a trace of them, and to transmit them easier. The phonograph played a role in keeping their heritage alive and to increase it even more with other local traditions that, thanks to the phonograph and to discs, could quickly be known and spread over the country.

The second reason concerns music in its way of spreading. Indeed, thanks to the phonograph, transmitting music was easier than before. In the 1920s, between ten and twenty percent of the African American population owned a phonograph, but a larger part of the population would listen to music through those devices. It permitted this community to gather while listening to it and to go back to the African tradition of considering music as a communal activity. The phonograph became the bluesman around which everybody would reunite and would identify with the

content of the record. Through this process, the phonograph became a social ritual. In the biography of Muddy Waters, Robert Gordon explains that, when Waters was a child, he used to listen to Blues from a phonograph with his family and friends at regular times. He relates that, at this time, people used to go and buy discs once they received their salaries, and that it became a ritual for people to meet up and listen to those discs together.<sup>165</sup> The phonograph was such an important part of everyday life that it had songs written about it. One can take for instance the song ‘Phonograph Blues,’ performed by Robert Johnson.<sup>166</sup>

Like the phonograph, discs had an importance as well for African Americans. It was a way to listen to the music they knew when they were living in the South, or for those who were still living in the South. Isolated people could buy discs and, to a certain extent, feel connected to the community. Buying discs was a widespread activity in the African American community. In the same communal spectrum, Robert Springer stated that this compulsive habit to buy records carries a symbolic importance, in the sense that they were purchasing *their* music, performed by African Americans and directed at them.<sup>167</sup> This would explain why Classic Blues singers were successful, even though the themes, styles, and structures, were far from what African Americans were used to hearing. It was an opportunity for them to give themselves credit and promotion. Discs became one of the only sources of musical entertainment since, when segregation was at its roughest, African Americans were not allowed to enter theaters or clubs where famous artists were performing. The geographical distance between the audience, mostly in the South, and the artists, mostly in the North, increased the significance of importing music.

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<sup>165</sup> Robert Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied: The Life and Times of Muddy Waters* (Little: Brown and Company, 2003), 17.

<sup>166</sup> Robert Johnson, “Phonograph Blues.”  
 Url: <http://www.lyricstime.com/robert-johnson-phonograph-blues-lyrics.html>. Consulted on July 9, 2011.

<sup>167</sup> Robert Springer, *Authentic Blues: its History and its Themes* (Paris: Filipacchi, 1985), 66.

The other way to listen to music could be found in the jukebox, which was nothing more than a giant phonograph. The same values can be given to this device concerning the communal aspect given to it. However, one aspect can be added regarding the broadcasting of music, in the sense that the jukebox was a way of promotion since, through it, African American artists could be heard everywhere, especially in the early 1950s, when Urban Blues was very popular.

From the African American world, Blues music took the message, the meaning of the music, and the emotional connotation. Through its definition, it allowed African Americans to express their feelings and to feel free from what they had experienced in the past. The economic and geographical development allowed the diffusion of the message to urban areas of a genre that appeared in the beginning of the twentieth century, in the rural region of the Mississippi Delta. Through this evolution, its themes were modified to fit new preoccupations of a community now confronted with the White Western world, and its culture. Its commercial success, from Race Records to the end of the 1950s, gave African Americans the proof and confidence that they could succeed in this world. Blues music benefitted from this ambivalent evolution, taking inspiration both from its origins and from what it became.

#### **D. HOLDING THE BUSINESS**

Every industry has its leaders, people who decide, and make it evolve. The music industry is no different. Leaders of the music industry are the record companies, the labels, and the producers. Before Race Records, labels and major companies were focused on popular culture and classical music. Furthermore, the rise of the radio in the 1920s allowed music advertisement. The most important companies at the time were Paramount Records, Columbia Records, and Victor



Talking Machine Company. These companies were directing smaller labels that searched for new talents, produced them, and submitted them to the head of the company, who had the final word on whether a record should be sold.

Until 1920, labels trying to give African Americans an opportunity to record music were smashed by the power of an all-White industry which, by the end of World War I, produced values worth more than three hundred and thirty-five million dollars. After 1920, the situation changed. New, independent labels, operating on their own without any directions given by major companies, appeared. As a result, Emerson, Vocalion, Okeh Records, and most importantly Black Swan, which was the first African American label, under the creation of Henry H. Pace, appeared. The objective of Black Swan was to give opportunities to the African American culture to express itself.

Mamie Smith recording “Crazy Blues” was the result of months of pressure from people and producers to allow African Americans to record music. Every time, they had to face the refusal of major companies, who were unwilling to invest in music for “colored people.” Mamie Smith’s success encouraged other labels to get to the market, looking for equal profits. The first record produced by Black Swan was issued in May 1921, and was instantly successful. Indeed, by the end of 1921, the label made a profit of three thousand and one hundred dollars on revenues of over one hundred and four thousand dollars. By the spring of 1922, the company sold over four hundred thousand records.<sup>168</sup>

Following this success, other record companies joined Okeh and Black Swan and began to produce Race Records. Every major company owned its own series. One can take for instance

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<sup>168</sup> David Suisman, *Selling Sound: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (London: Harvard University Press, 2009), 219.

Columbia Records, with the Bluebird Series. The dynamic of release was redundant. One artist would sign a singing contract, and if he or she was popular, immediately after other labels would start to produce copies of this song until the market would saturate. These songs were promoted in newspapers, sometimes multiple times in the same paper. Then, the same process would repeat for another artist. The consequence of this process was a homogenization of the music produced, and thus, a lack of creativity. As a result, by the end of the 1930s, original songs became sporadic. This process was even encouraged by record companies, in the sense that any song that did not sound the way they wanted had to be modified to fit the trend of the time. Bluesman Mississippi Jimmy Rogers remembers how recording sessions would take place: ‘The only time it’be a rerun would be something Chess (records) would want to change, and that would be the end of a good record. When he changed it, he’d take all the soul and everything from it. And that happened quite a few times.’<sup>169</sup>

To be the first setting a new trend, producers sent talent scouts into the South to look for new artists. These searches discovered great talent, such as Blind Lemon Jefferson, through radio announcements, contests, etc. Most of the artists discovered this way were hired to sing formatted hits that would slightly change what was already produced. These factory hits only had the objective to generate more profits. This quest for more profits was going against the nature of Blues music, especially the fact that no one really owns a Blues song. Most rural singers before the Race Records era would use different parts of different songs to express their feelings. Thus, when White talent scouts would look for new artists and would expect them to have four original

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<sup>169</sup> Mississippi Jimmy Rogers, quoted in Jon Michael Spencer, “The Diminishing Rural Residue of Folklore in City and Urban Blues, 1915-1950,” *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 12, No 1 (Spring, 1992), pp. 25-41, 36.

songs of between three and four minutes in duration to be considered for commercial recording, they would modify the communal nature of sharing music and lyrics.<sup>170</sup>

The objective of a company is to produce goods while generating profits. To generate the maximum amount of profits, the company has to produce goods in large quantities, even if it means reducing the overall quality of the product. If one would describe the functioning of Race Records, it would fit this statement. Indeed, when an industry produces more than fifteen thousand titles in twenty-five years, it appears difficult to believe that it is for the love of music. Palk Brockman, talent scout in the area surrounding Atlanta, explains his vision of the music industry: ‘My interest in Hillbilly music and Black music is strictly financial.’<sup>171</sup> After refusing to consider African Americans as a relevant audience, record companies decided to make profits out of them. Artists were not considered as such but as factory workers, hired to produce songs for consumers to buy them. In other words, quantity took over quality. It was not important if one title did not sell well, since records were cheap to produce and were sold at an expensive price for the time. Indeed, the average price for a record during the 1920s was seventy-five cents, and even though this price dropped to thirty-five cents during the 1930s, profits were still important. This money allowed major companies to buy out independent labels and recuperate their catalogue and reissue them, generating more profits. This is how, in 1925, Black Swan was sold to Paramount, and how Okeh Records was bought by Columbia. Soon after, the music industry surrounding Race Records was composed of White-owned major companies, controlling White-owned labels, hiring African American formatted artists to produce music for an African American audience.

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<sup>170</sup> Ralph Eastman, “Country Blues Performance and the Oral Tradition,” *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Autumn, 1988), pp.161-176, 171.

<sup>171</sup> Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 201.

## E. ADVERTISING THE BLUES: FROM IGNORANCE TO MASS PRODUCTION

The modern music industry took shape at the turn of the twentieth century. Music became manufactured, marketed, and distributed like any other product. It was the early days of the model one knows today. Looking at how Race Records were advertised gives an insight on how African American music was considered by record companies, and shows that following the trend was more important than enhancing the musical particularities of each singer.

When the first Classic Blues singers were advertised, there was no mention of their skin color, or of the fact that they were singing Blues music. Indeed, in 1920, these singers were still advertised as vaudeville singers. The *Chicago Defender* provides a multitude of examples of these artists with no color. One can take for instance an advertisement for new records on September 11, 1920, where Mamie Smith is mentioned for the first time:

**NEW RECORDS**

Lovers of phonograph music will be delighted to know that Miss Marion Harris, who sang for the Victor Co. and now under contract with the Columbia Co., has made a wonderful record of the St. Louis Blues, and also one of the Pace & Handy hits, "Long Gone." The latter will also be sung on the records by Miss Mamie Smith, who sang "That Thing Called Love" for the Okeh Phonograph Co.

*Chicago Defender: September 11, 1920*

Even major advertisements focused on Mamie Smith did not mention the fact that she was African American. This example tends to show that major companies were not certain that advertising Black artists was the right thing to do. It is not surprising considering that, during the first

part of the twentieth century, segregation was widespread and a White recording company advertising African American artists could have affected global sales among the Whites. As early as 1921, one could observe that recording companies other than Okeh Records began to compete and to advertise other artists. One can take for instance two advertisements next to each other for two Classic Blues singers produced on two different major recording companies. It was also one of the first times that the word 'race' became associated with African American Music.



**MAMIE SMITH**  
*The Greatest Race Phonograph Star can be heard only on*  
**Okeh Records**  
 THE RECORD OF QUALITY

4446 { DOWN HOME BLUES—Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Band.  
 10 in. ARKANSAS BLUES—Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Band.  
 85c.

4453 { LOVIN' SAM FROM ALABAM.—Mamie Smith and Her  
 10 in. Jazz Hounds.  
 85c. DON'T CARE BLUES—Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds.

Ask your dealer for complete list of Okeh Records by Race artists. He will be glad to play them for you.

GENERAL PHONOGRAPH CORPORATION, NEW YORK



**The Best BLUES SINGER in America Is**  
**ETHEL WATERS**

As proof we submit two BLACK SWAN RECORDS

2010 DOWN HOME BLUES  
 85c. 10H DADDY

2021 ONE MAN NAN  
 85c. 17THERE'LL BE SOME CHANCES MADE

Buy them from your nearest Dealer and you will give yourself some rare enjoyment.

**ALL BLACK SWAN RECORDS are GOOD**

Get the Complete Catalogue Every One Made by Colored Singers

Get These Hits From "Shuffle Along," the Colored Broadway Musical Play  
 Played by Hagerstran's Novelty Orchestra

2025 GYPSY BLUES  
 85c. SWEET LADY

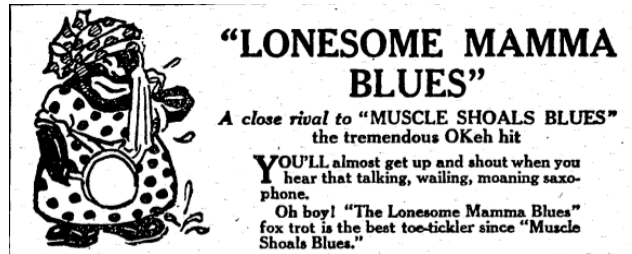
2023 LOVE WILL FIND A WAY  
 85c. JUNE LOVE

NOTE: BLACK SWAN RECORDS are made by the only Colored Phonograph Company in existence. Since we began to make records the white companies who previously refused to use Colored singers and musicians are using them to influence Colored people from buying records made by our own people. Don't be misled, but listen to our own BLAZE SWAN DISCOGRAPH which are as good as any record made and much better than most that enter the Colored field. In addition every singer and musician used in our records is Colored.

Made by PACE PHONOGRAPH CORP. HARRY H. PACE, President, 3288 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

*Chicago Defender: November 19, 1921*

Cartoons and caricatures began to be used in 1922, where they were displayed to illustrate the music advertised. Even though African American music was advertised, potent racism reminding of the Jim Crow character appeared obvious, tending to show that what these advertisements were showing how African American music was perceived by Whites.



*Chicago Defender: June 3, 1922*

Using emotions to promote records was a widely used practice in advertisement. Since these singers were singing the Blues, their supposed life was described as being awful, as if the only way to understand and relieve these singers from their pain was to buy their records. One advertisement provides this example in a song sung by Susie Smith, who only made one record in her ‘career.’

“Susie Smith: the Princess of all Blues singers, makes this marvelous double hit record. Tears streamed down Susie’s face when she sang these two wonderful blues numbers, for she herself was just overwhelmed with the sweet, lonesome words and haunting beauty of ‘Graveyard Bond,’ and just begged to have her other great hit put on the reverse side so as to make this record her masterpiece. Folks, judge for yourself—no words of ours can tell you what’s in store for the lucky people who insist on having this one. Remember the number—17075, and on AJAX RECORDS only.”<sup>172</sup>

This was one example of those “cries of despair” put on record. Many copies could be found in every edition of African American newspapers. Exploring advertisement gives an explanation of the words music *industry*. Indeed, African American artists were produced in chains, one identical artist replacing another one. Sometimes, the display in which an advertisement was presented was the same from one artist to the next, the only differences could be found in the picture

<sup>172</sup> *Chicago Defender*, December 13, 1924.

and the short description of the artist's "life." One can take for instance an edition of the *Defender* from November 6, 1926, where OKeh Records advertised two of its artists:<sup>173</sup>

**"MAIL BOX  
BLUES"**



by  
Henryette Davis  
and Clarence Black

OKeh Record No. 8395

**M**AMA gets a letter—  
and here's the sad  
news. Her daddy's been  
two-timing her. Now that's  
a sure enough low-down  
trick to play on a kind, lov-  
ing, hard working mama.  
No wonder she's moaning  
the blues. It's the broken-  
heartedest blues that's been  
moaned yet. And on the  
other side of the record  
Henryette sings another  
hit to make certain you'll  
get a heap for your money.  
75c for both, as usual.

**OKeh  
Race  
Records**

**"PIG FOOT  
BLUES"**



OKeh Record No. 8397  
by  
George McClenmon's  
Jazz Devils

**W**HAT it takes to  
put out red hot  
music, George McClen-  
mon and his Jazz Devils  
are all broke out with.  
"Pig Foot Blues" rings  
the bell. So does Cot-  
ton Club Stomp, on the  
other side of the record.  
Both hits are packed  
full of George's new  
tricks. Six bits is mighty  
little to pay for so  
much.

**OKeh  
Race  
Records**

*Chicago Defender: November 6, 1926*

This point of view challenges the idea that Race Records were primarily beneficial to African Americans. From an economic perspective, Race Records were a success. However, results varied, depending on what side of the phonograph one was standing.

Classic Blues singers were successful between 1920 and 1922. Then, their popularity decreased and, by 1925, they had all disappeared. Rural Blues prospered for a decade, then vanished for twenty years. This cycle embodies the story of Race Records, which can be seen in advertisement, where one genre followed the next. Each genre becomes popular, then is overused,

<sup>173</sup> *Chicago Defender*, November 6, 1926.

to only eventually fade away. The explanation can be found through the scope of credibility. Indeed, African Americans were compulsive buyers of their music, which would explain the commercial success of Mamie Smith, or Louis Armstrong. People were attracted by what has a message, *raison d'être*. However, they were less attracted to a title that sounds like an original, only less good. People think about what they buy, and thus, they vote. The results of these votes determine the sound they are likely to hear in the future.

Race Records gave African Americans the sound they were looking for. They brought past and traditions into their present, and Jazz clubs into their homes. On a wider scale, Race Records captured for everyone the music of extraordinary artists that might have disappeared. At the same time, they also altered music to a certain extent. Indeed, Race Records, due to technological restrictions, standardized the format. They also vanished musical genres because they were not commercially viable. Even though Race Records saved some musical genres, it appears nonetheless obvious that other genres will never be remembered. For artists, the fate of those who did not survive the competitive environment that is the music industry, life would come back to anonymity almost as fast as fame appeared.

The financial situation varied from one artist to the next. Nonetheless, there is one common point; how badly paid, if ever, they were. Signing a contract with a record company for an artist did not necessarily mean financial security. Artists had to pay attention to the type of contract they were signing. However, the signing procedure could prove to be problematic for artists who could not read. Indeed, they would sign what the record companies would ask them to sign, including giving up rights on the song, royalties, and everything that could be profitable for them. This type of incident could happen to literate people as well, even famous artists.



Bessie Smith, albeit nicknamed the empress of Blues, did not receive any payments for the one hundred and sixty songs she recorded for Columbia, nor did she receive royalty payments in the ten years she recorded for the company.<sup>174</sup> Louis Armstrong did not receive any royalties for the first records he made with Okeh Records. Skip James won a singing contest in Mississippi that would allow him to spend a few days in Chicago and record with Paramount. After two nights of recording, he went home and never received a dollar for what became the “Hard Time Killing Floor Blues Sessions.”<sup>175</sup> Successful or not, these events in the life of an artist during the Race Records era made it a more difficult time than it looked. Indeed, the average artist would earn a flat rate of twenty-five to fifty dollars per recorded side with no royalties. However, famous singers could earn more. Bessie Smith, for instance, at the height of her career would earn more than two hundred dollars per side, but still with no royalties.<sup>176</sup>

## F. RECORDING THE MUSIC

Other difficulties artists encountered were during recording sessions. Technology eased the process but during the first days of recording, singers were recording one song at a time. Thus, if the producers wanted to make two thousand copies of one title, the singer had to record it two thousand times. Because of the equipment used to press discs, the temperature of the recording

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<sup>174</sup> Matthew A. Killmeier, *St James Encyclopedia of Pop Culture*. Url: [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_g1epc/is\\_tov/ai\\_2419101005/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_g1epc/is_tov/ai_2419101005/). Consulted on February 25, 2011.

<sup>175</sup> Martin Scorsese, *Martin Scorsese Presents the Blues*, Vulcan Production, 2003.

<sup>176</sup> Ralph Eastman, “Country Blues and the Oral Tradition,” *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 8, No.2 (Autumn, 1988), pp. 161-176, 165.

room had to be high and humid. David Brackett, in *Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader*, describes a recording session:

“Recording is perhaps the most difficult task in the day’s work—or the lifetime’s. A slip may pass unnoticed in concert, whether across the footlights or over the radio, and even if noticed, it may be forgiven, since living flesh and sensitive will cannot always achieve mechanical perfection. But a slip of record after a time becomes the most audible thing in it. Everything else will be neglected to wait for the slip and to call the attention of someone else uninstructed in music to a great artist’s false note. So every composition has to be recorded until it is perfect. If things go fine from the first time, well and good; but if, from the three records of each number usually made, there is none which will quite pass the exacting standards of the committee, there must be another afternoon of making and remaking. Every faculty of the artist, emotional as well as physical, must be expended in producing a perfect result.’<sup>177</sup>

One can probably imagine having to record multiple times the same song, in a suffocating area, without being paid to do so. It appears easy to conclude that it was not the best moment to be a singer. Nonetheless, if one would find a producer respecting one’s life, conditions of living would improve. Was it a risk worth taking? Only singers could answer this question. However, looking at the number of one-hit-wonder artists who experienced their fifteen minutes of fame, it appears that it was.

Race Records were a trend, prosperous and profitable, but only a trend. What happened on a small scale was eventually applied to the entire genre. When it ceased to be profitable, major companies cut these series and replaced them by Rhythm and Blues, Rock n’ Roll, and other emerging genres of music. Labels and producers were involved in Race Records to make money. As the results showed, they could be considered the true beneficiaries of this era. Indeed, when success was here, they were here as well and when this success collapsed, they left this genre.

However, it would be a limited way to describe this period. Beyond record sales, it is an entire African American movement that benefited from Race Records. Indeed, it would be a mistake to

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<sup>177</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

conclude that Race Records did nothing more than reinforce the leading position of White producers. With hindsight, one would say that Race Records was one of the best things that happened to the African American community, culturally speaking. Of course, it was for the most part copies of previously known music, but it put African American music on the market. It permitted African Americans to have their voice heard, and to have an audience. Race Records were a proving ground for the revival of Blues music that occurred twenty years later.

PART III:  
BLUES AND THE AFTERMATH OF THE WAR: BETWEEN PROGRESS AND  
DEVELOPMENT

## CHAPTER I

### BEING AFRICAN AMERICAN IN AMERICA FROM WORLD WAR II TO THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

From one war to another, the United States of America experienced profits, depression, and rebirth. Preparing for the Second World War put the country on the path to world dominance. It rose as the challenger of oppression, brutalities, and tyranny that Germany and Japan were preparing the world for. At the same time, America was a country in which racism and segregation were part of daily life for African Americans. Midway through the twentieth century, their situation did not evolve as fast as the rest of the country. Between old demons and new issues, much remained to be done for them to obtain the equality they had been seeking for centuries. However, World War II and its aftermath brought signs of hope which, through more violence and protest, finally emerged.

#### A. DEALING WITH OLD DEMONS

The First World War did not stop the Jim Crow era, either on the battlefield or at home. Likewise, when the Second World War struck, African Americans and Whites were still segregated. The African American community itself did not expect the situation to change with the upcoming war. Indeed, as Franklin notes, “In contrast to their state of mind at the outbreak of World War I, African Americans had no illusions about the benefits they would derive from World War II.”<sup>178</sup> This point of view is understandable in the sense that the situation at home left no place for hope.

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<sup>178</sup> John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 403.

The Jim Crow laws were still heavily entrenched in the daily lives of African Americans in the South. They would still experience difficulties voting, even registering was complicated. Until 1965, African Americans had to pay poll taxes but also had to take literacy test, which they would rarely pass.<sup>179</sup> However, when they did pass the test, it did not mean they would be allowed to vote. Leon Litwack tells the story of an African American male trying to register in Mississippi. “When he passed the literacy test, the registrars momentarily became flustered. After a quick conference among themselves, they showed him a headline printed in Chinese and asked him if he knew what it meant. ‘Yeah I know what it means,’ he replied. ‘It means that niggers don’t vote in Mississippi again this year.’”<sup>180</sup> When they were allowed to vote, they could only vote for White candidates, since African Americans were often excluded from political party membership.

When White people did not want African Americans to have a voice whatsoever, they would erase their names off of voting lists. Charles George summarizes the procedure: “In Georgia, for example, the purge procedure was quite simple. Black people would be sent a legal summons to appear before the county board of registrars at a specified time—almost always during working hours—to ‘show cause’ why their names should not be dropped because of bad character, criminal record, or other reasons. If they failed to appear, their names were automatically stricken from the rolls. Even if they did appear at the hearing, their names sometimes mysteriously disappeared from the rolls anyway, at the whim of the registrar.”<sup>181</sup> In other words, voting demanded efforts that could eventually be useless.

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<sup>179</sup> Charles George, *Life Under the Jim Crow Laws* (San Diego: Lucent Books, 2000), 64.

<sup>180</sup> Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 224-225.

<sup>181</sup> Charles George, *Life Under the Jim Crow Laws* (San Diego: Lucent Books, 2000), 66.

They could even lose their job if they were to vote. Fannie Lou Hamer, who was a civil rights activist from Mississippi, tells how risky voting was for African Americans, especially in the South.

“Few could worry about voting when there were almost no jobs left picking cotton and no proper schooling to qualify a black person for whatever job did exist. Few could worry about voting when children went hungry and rain poured through holes in the roof, or when children died in fires caused by primitive stoves in unheated shacks. Or when people went to the hospital only to die. Or when the white world was deliberately leaving blacks further behind, and when its rear guard of white sheriffs turned their dogs on those trying to assert their rights, and men riding at night fired shotguns at them or tried to burn down their barns.”<sup>182</sup>

Justice was still unequal to them as well, they still did not have any rights in court and their punishments were not proportionate to the crimes they would commit. They also had to fear another form of unfair justice, police and brutality. In the South, African Americans had to deal with different rules than Whites, such as curfews which were only applied to them.<sup>183</sup> In *Why We Can't Wait*, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., explains this threat of being jailed:

“Jailing the Negro was once as much a threat as the loss of a job. To any Negro who displayed a spark of manhood, a southern law-enforcement officer could say: ‘Nigger, watch your step, or I’ll put you in jail.’ The Negro knew what going to jail meant. It meant not only confinement and isolation from his loved ones. It meant that at the jailhouse he could probably expect a severe beating. And it meant that his day in court, if he had it, would be a mockery of justice.”<sup>184</sup>

This testimony by Dr. King summarizes the feeling of the time for African Americans; life was still unfair, and opportunities were still reduced.

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<sup>182</sup> Quoted in Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: Dutton, 1993), 1.

<sup>183</sup> Charles George, *Life Under the Jim Crow Laws* (San Diego: Lucent Books, 2000), 40.

<sup>184</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 17.

## B. FIGHTING TWO WARS

As the country was preparing for the Second World War, the Great Depression was still a vibrant memory. Indeed, unemployment remained an issue and White unemployed workers were hired first. The only job opportunities available to African Americans were the ones Whites did not want to do or deserted for higher salary positions.<sup>185</sup> This situation remained until June 25, 1941, when President Roosevelt signed an executive order stating that, “There shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or Government because of race, creed, color, or national origin. [...] It is the duty of employers and of labor organizations to provide for the full and equitable participation of all workers in defense industries, without discrimination because of race, color, creed, or national origin.”<sup>186</sup> However, discrimination remained in practice and resulted in giving America the image of a country willing to send soldiers to defend liberties of the World while discriminating against its own people.

In 1940, there were less than five thousand African American soldiers in the army, and their ranks, besides privates, could not go beyond the grade of medical, or chaplain.<sup>187</sup> Under the Selective Service Act of 1940, more than three million African American men registered for service in the armed forces.<sup>188</sup> In the army, the first signs of equality could be observed. Indeed, besides the difficulties for African Americans to become officers, more than half a million African American soldiers served overseas.<sup>189</sup> This tends to show that even though segregation was ap-

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<sup>185</sup> John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 387.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid*, 388.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid*, 386.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid*, 389.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid*, 391.



plied in everyday life, this system would vanish when facing death. African American soldiers played such an important role that on April 30, 1945, the War Department said that the volunteer African American infantry “established themselves as fighting men no less courageous or aggressive than their white comrades.”<sup>190</sup>

This evolving situation for soldiers was contrasted by what was happening at home. Indeed, after the Executive Order signed by President Roosevelt, job opportunities could be sought by African Americans, which triggered a new wave of migration from the South to the North and West of the Country. For instance, between 1940 and 1945, the African American community in Los Angeles County increased from seventy-five thousand to one hundred and fifty-thousand people. In Detroit, more than four hundred and fifty-thousand African Americans came in three years.<sup>191</sup> As one can guess, the arrival of this new population resulted in tensions between the races, and, eventually, to violence. The most serious race riot that occurred during the war took place in Detroit, on June 20, 1943. This event started as a fist fight between a White man and an African American man, but quickly degenerated into a riot taking place all over Detroit, which ended through President Roosevelt who proclaimed state of emergency and sent six thousand soldiers to patrol the city. After more than thirty-nine hours of riots, twenty-five African Americans and nine Whites were found dead.<sup>192</sup>

Despite issues and violence, African Americans never stopped asking for more equality, both at home and overseas, as if they were fighting two separate wars. It appears indeed that, for African Americans, securing equal rights was as important as defending their country. Support began

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<sup>190</sup> *Ibid*, 393.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid*, 403.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid*, 404.

to come from the higher spheres of the society, and especially from Eleanor Roosevelt, who declared that, “The nation cannot expect colored people to feel that the United States are worth defending if the Negro continues to be treated as he is now.”<sup>193</sup> Change needed to happen, and it did at the end of the Second World War.

### C. HOPE FOR CHANGE: THE AFTERMATH OF THE WAR

During the years following the war, the global climate was more favorable for the improvement of the position of African Americans within the United States. Indeed, combined with the increasingly powerful voice of this community, the new world organization following the Second World War helped. This conflict gave America the leadership of the world and, along with it, an obligation to act as a model. However, defending liberties overseas while maintaining segregation at home was a controversial image that had to be cleared.

On December 5, 1946, President Truman, through an Executive Order, asked a committee of both Whites and African Americans to inquire into the condition of civil rights, but also to make recommendations for their improvement. This report, entitled ‘To Secure These Rights,’<sup>194</sup> strongly denounced the denial of civil rights to some Americans, including African Americans, as the introduction of this report shows:

Freedom From Fear is more fully realized in our country than in any other on the face of the earth. Yet all parts of our population are not equally free from fear. And from time to time, and in some places, this freedom has been gravely threatened. It was so after the last war, when organ-

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<sup>193</sup> Quoted in John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 405.

<sup>194</sup> Official Website of the Harry S. Truman Library and Museum. Url: <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/civilrights/srights1.htm>, VII. Consulted on May 21, 2011.

ized groups fanned hatred and intolerance, until, at times, mob action struck fear into the hearts of men and women because of their racial origin or religious beliefs.

Today, Freedom From Fear, and the democratic institutions which sustain it, are again under attack. In some places, from time to time, the local enforcement of law and order has broken down, and individuals -- sometimes ex-servicemen, even women -- have been killed, maimed, or intimidated.

The preservation of civil liberties is a duty of every Government-state, Federal and local. Whenever the law enforcement measures and the authority of Federal, state, and local governments are inadequate to discharge this primary function of government, these measures and this authority should be strengthened and improved.

The Constitutional guarantees of individual liberties and of equal protection under the laws clearly place on the Federal Government the duty to act when state or local authorities abridge or fail to protect these Constitutional rights.<sup>195</sup>

This report covers a large variety of topics, showing that inequalities were everywhere.

Among them, one could find information on the armed services, education, housing, employment discrimination, the "separate but equal" doctrine, etc. Recommendations were given on the grounds of morality, economic, and international relations. Among them can be found the reorganization of the civil rights section of the Department of Justice to increase sanctions in case of segregation. To enforce these measures, the creation, within the FBI, of a special unit of investigators trained in civil rights work was created. One can also find the implementation of a permanent commission on civil rights in the Executive Office of the President and measures were taken to ensure equality of franchise.<sup>196</sup>

This report was a recognition by the Federal Government of what African Americans were experiencing. However, this recognition from the Government did not erase the issues. In Northern cities such as Washington D.C., desegregation improved rapidly. Indeed, as Franklin notes,

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<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*

“Nowhere was the change in the status of blacks more dramatic than in the nation’s capital. As early as 1947 the larger hotels in Washington began to accept Negro guests, and by 1956 most of them were doing so. The motion picture theaters followed suit. The desegregation of the facilities of the Department of the Interior and the City Recreation Board made it possible for Negroes to use all the public parks, playgrounds, and swimming pools within the district of Columbia. In 1953, all restaurants in Washington were opened when the Supreme Court upheld the validity of an 1872 statute requiring such establishments to serve ‘all well-behaved’ persons.”<sup>197</sup> However, it was not the case everywhere, especially in the South. Indeed, as one saw earlier, the Jim Crow era was marked by two different kinds of segregation; segregation by law, but most importantly, segregation by custom. The aim of the South was to maintain segregation at all costs, including using violence. Nevertheless, desegregation policy kept giving more rights to African Americans.

Education was one of the domains where resistance against inequality was the most important, because an unequally educated youth would leave less space for improvement. Without education, it would have been impossible for the African American community to seek better employment opportunities, and to play a role in the economic, political, and cultural development of the United States. In other words, education was the key. Thus, it was where one of the first struggles against unfairness took place. This fight for education began before World War II. As early as 1938, a successful effort was made in Virginia to equalize salaries of Whites and African American teachers. This effort was expanded to graduate and professional education within African American colleges.<sup>198</sup> However, the most significant improvement regarding education occurred

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<sup>197</sup> John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 414.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid*, 438.

on May 17, 1954, with the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*.<sup>199</sup> This decision, which overturned the ruling made by the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case of 1896, declared the “separate but equal” doctrine unconstitutional, and authorized African American students to attend White schools.

Chief Justice Earl Warren delivered the unanimous decision of the Court:

“Segregation of White and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children, for it generates a feeling of inferiority that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone. [...] We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate facilities are inherently unequal.”<sup>200</sup>

This event proved to the African American community that it was possible for them to gain more rights.

A year later, in Montgomery, Alabama, another event helped improve African American rights. This time, it concerned public transportation. Rosa Parks, an African American worker, was asked to give up her seat to a White person. When she refused, the police was called and she had to leave the bus to be escorted to prison.<sup>201</sup> During her trial, African Americans living in Montgomery, influenced by religious groups and other organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of the Colored People, reacted by starting a bus boycott, advising African Americans to go to work using other means of transportation. This action, supposed to

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<sup>199</sup> This decision is a result of complaint made by thirteen families against the Board of Education of the City of Topeka, Kansas. These families called for the school district to reverse its policy of racial segregation. The named plaintiff, Oliver L. Brown, an African-American, had a daughter who had to walk six blocks to her school bus stop to ride to Monroe Elementary, her segregated school, whereas Sumner Elementary, a white school, was seven blocks from her house. When he tried to get his daughter admitted, she was denied access so he decided to call justice for this case, and he won.

Charles George, *Life Under the Jim Crow Laws* (San Diego: Lucent Books, 2000), 79.

<sup>200</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (3rd edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 147.

<sup>201</sup> She explained later that she refused to leave her seat because she was tired after having worked for the entire day. But this decision was more calculated than it looks since before going to Montgomery she passed an entire summer in a camp in the Highlander Folk School, Tennessee, a center where she learnt how to defend her rights, both with Whites and African-Americans.

Douglas Brinkley, *Rosa Parks: a Life* (New York, Penguin Books, 2000).

last for a day, ended up taking place for three hundred and eighty-one days.<sup>202</sup> The boycott, which witnessed the rise of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as a public figure, became efficient to the point where the bus company had to desegregate the entire transportation system of the city. This method of protest was used in other cities and accomplished to desegregate buses, or at least to revise the seating rule. Encouraged by these results, African Americans began to boycott White businesses that had discriminatory policies.

Though, over the years, the movement gained more power. It was met with resistance, arrests, violence, and intimidation. Marches embodied these ideas. Indeed, a large number of them were organized around the country, some more famous than others. One happened in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. In this city, demonstrators protested against the inequalities of treatment for forty days, despite the twenty-five hundred arrests among African Americans.<sup>203</sup> Another one occurred in Washington D.C. on August 28, 1963. More than two hundred thousand protesters, both Whites and African Americans, coming from all around the country, took part in a march from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial. Several speeches were given there, including the most famous one by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 'I have a dream.'

Through demonstrations, popular support increased. However, government support remained absent. It eventually came in 1964, with the Civil Rights Act passed under President Lyndon Johnson. This law became the most far reaching and comprehensive law in favor of racial equality ever enacted by Congress.<sup>204</sup> The major provisions of this act were the banning of discrimination in public accommodations and employment. However, difficulties did not disappear, and

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<sup>202</sup> Douglas Brinkley, *Rosa Parks: a Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 26.

<sup>203</sup> Charles George, *Life Under the Jim Crow Laws* (San Diego: Lucent Books, 2000), 82.

<sup>204</sup> John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 473.

issues in term of equalities are still part of the African American community's experience today.

Notwithstanding, the situation of this community changed for the better, and general improvements made it enter the once exclusive White world. This development can be found in music in general, and in Blues music in particular.

## CHAPTER II

### THE REVIVAL OF BLUES MUSIC AND ITS EVOLUTION

According to the music industry, African American music had disappeared before World War II. It had ceased to be profitable, and recording companies, using the war as a pretext, began to move away from it. However, this music and its genres were not dead for African Americans, since they didn't wait for commercial recognition to put importance in it. As old issues persisted and new ones arose, music remained a vibrant part of their lives. Denouncing daily inequalities and tortured feelings, Blues music reappeared and proved that, once more, it would be the soundtrack of African Americans' struggle, from past to present.

#### A. OLD BLUES FOR NEW PROBLEMS

Even before the end of the Second World War, Blues music, like other Race Records, were not produced at the pace they used to be. The production stopped officially because of the war and the need to save primary materials, that is to say shellac, to sustain the war effort. However, if one looks closer at the musical genres at the time, one realizes that only Race Records were cancelled. African Americans were the first to express their discontent and the unfairness they felt. The last time the term Race Records appeared in the *Chicago Defender* was on May 22, 1943, through an article written by Porter Roberts, in which he describes the cancelation of African American music compared to other musical genres:

"Hey, what is this? This putting a 'ban' on recordings? That came to pass, or was supposed to come to pass last August. But I tell ye that it seems to me that certain big bands are making as



many records as ever (and I don't mean colored bands). How come? Yeah, it does seem kinda strange, don't y'think? I go looking there, but 'they' always say, 'We don't have any RACE records.' Now, just who is trying to freeze out whom? As I said before, just what is this? Nope, I just won't rest until I get to the bottom of this. (Sure, I will pass it along.)"<sup>205</sup>

However, once there was no sign of improvement for African Americans, despite the New Deal era, Blues music made a comeback, articulated around two main trends. The first one was a return to Blues music from the past. At the time, it was a way for African Americans to denounce and express their conditions of living. Indeed, since only slight things evolved, the soundtrack remained the same. The themes of this music reappeared, fueling the desire for protest to end inequalities permanently. It is interesting to realize that it was neither the Classic Blues Singers nor the new Urban Blues, bestsellers during the Race Records era, that reached fame again, but Rural Blues. This tends to reassert that these other forms of Blues were only a trend designed mainly to make profit rather than being the voice of a silenced majority. Furthermore, it shows that, if one wants to use elements of one's past, one has to take inspiration from where it began.

As a result, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, people started again to listen to Robert Johnson, Son House, Charley Patton, Skip James, etc. More than who they were, it is their way of singing and the instruments they used that became famous again. The audience wanted to listen to a music that was original at the time it was played, not copies. This period of revival allowed these bluesmen to be recognized for their art. For those who were still alive, it was a way to get back on stage and perform again songs almost unknown to the public during the Race Records era. Skip James embodied this idea. He was discovered in the South during a contest he won. After his victory, he was sent to Chicago to record his songs in a better quality. At the time he did, none of his songs were available to sell, and he never received money for this recording session.

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<sup>205</sup> *Chicago Defender*, May 22, 1943.

He disappeared for thirty years, until, in the 1960s, his songs were rediscovered.<sup>206</sup> Son House was rediscovered in 1964, and Edward Komara describes this event:

“Fueled by reissues of House’s 1930 Paramount records and 1941-1942 Library of Congress performances, Dick Waterman, Nick Perls, and Phil Spiro sought for the musician himself. They located him, not in the Mississippi Delta or in Memphis or in any part of the South but improbably enough in Rochester, New York, on June 21, 1964, Father’s Day weekend. The rediscovery of Son House caught the imagination of the fledging Blues press and even the notice of the general news magazine *Newsweek*. With encouragement from Waterman and Perls, House resumed performing in public, playing anew the repertory heard previously on scarce and worn 78s. He enjoyed a distinguished Indian-summer career, a career made possible through his old records and his impassioned performances on them.”<sup>207</sup>

## B. NEW MESSAGES

However, Blues music during the Civil Rights Movement was not solely reduced to songs produced thirty years before. Indeed, bluesmen from the 1950s and 1960s found their own audience, with their own message, fitting the period they were experiencing. These Blues, closer to those known nowadays, became popular.

Concerning structures and forms, this music was close to Rural Blues, only the lyrics and the instruments used differed. Indeed, the electrification of guitars replaced acoustic guitars, but the function of Blues remained. It was still used to express feelings about life. As African Americans were involved in the Civil Rights Movement, they used *their* music. This can be explained by the background in which many bluesmen grew up, that is to say rural areas in the South. Muddy Waters, for instance, was born in 1913 in Issaquena County, Mississippi, a region of the Delta, where Blues music began. J.B. Lenoir was born in the same region as Waters, in Monticello,

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<sup>206</sup> Martin Scorsese, *Martin Scorsese Presents the Blues*, Vulcan Production, 2003.

<sup>207</sup> Edward Komara, “Blues in the Round,” *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Spring, 1997), pp. 3-36, 17.

Mississippi, in 1929. Thus, it does not appear surprising that the musical structures prevailed, only the message evolved.

Among the bluesmen who mentioned the Civil Rights Movement, J.B. Lenoir was the most prolific. During the 1960s, he sang the situation from his own perspective, as the next three examples of songs show. In “Vietnam,” performed in 1966, he links the war to the situation of African Americans:

*Vietnam, Vietnam, everybody crying about Vietnam,  
Vietnam, Vietnam, everybody crying about Vietnam,  
The law is all day killing me down in Mississippi,  
Nobody seems to give a damn.  
(...)  
Mister President you always cry about peace,  
But you must clean up your house before you leave,  
How can you tell the world we need peace,  
And you still mistreat and kill poor me.*<sup>208</sup>

Another example deals with the marches and the treatment received by demonstrators, in the song “Alabama March,” performed in 1965. Finally, he portrayed the attempted murder of Civil Rights activist James Meredith,<sup>209</sup> in 1966 through the song “Shot on James Meredith.”

As one realizes, violence and despair were still prevalent in 1960s Blues music. It fitted the era, like it did thirty years before. Violence was sometimes targeting bluesmen directly. Indeed, Blues singer Nat King Cole was once attacked while he was performing on stage in front of an all-White audience in Birmingham, Alabama.<sup>210</sup> As feelings and reality about those themes returned, Blues music came along.

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<sup>208</sup> J.B. Lenoir, “Vietnam.” Url: [http://moodpoint.com/lyrics/jb\\_lenoir/vietnam.html](http://moodpoint.com/lyrics/jb_lenoir/vietnam.html). Consulted on July 9, 2011.

<sup>209</sup> James Meredith was the first African-American student at the University of Mississippi. Various segregationists opposed his enrollment and his entrance required federal troops ordered by President J.F. Kennedy. After college, he became a Civil Right activist, involved in marches.

<sup>210</sup> John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 418.

The influence of Blues expanded to other musical genres, such as Rock n' Roll. Indeed, it influenced it at every level, from band names to techniques of playing the guitar. References to Blues were also made in Rock songs, where artists like the Rolling Stones or Bob Dylan were pushing their fans to listen to Blues.

This music fascinated Black as well as White people, as one shall observe later. They were moved by the rhythm, the melody, and the lyrics of Blues songs. However, this genre would not have been as powerful without the performer, the man behind the music. He occupied a greater role than only being the voice of the people he represented. None of the songs could have been transmitted without the bluesman's own personal feelings, which at the same time reflected an entire community and its development.

## CHAPTER III

### BLUES SINGERS AS SYMBOLS OF ACCULTURATION TO THE AMERICAN ETHOS

Blues music reappeared at the crossroad of the history of the United States. At a moment where America was working toward leaving the past and its inequalities behind, African Americans, through the figure of the bluesman, found a symbol of this change in the making, between remembering the African past and embracing the American ethos.

#### A. THE BLUESMAN

Bluesmen, like their music, evolved with time. The ancestors of the bluesman can be found in songsters. These singers are the direct descendants of the slavery tradition of musicians who were hired to sing at balls, special events, etc. They were used as entertainers, who, with their banjos or other instruments, sang what they were asked to, to fit the desires of their audience. More than their repertoire, their way of life survived in Blues music. These singers were living in rural areas, traveling from place to place to perform. With time, Blues songs became more important in their repertoire, and the most talented singers who could compose Blues began to sing their own productions. Transition was made this way, some artists incarnating this evolution; Charley Patton for instance began his career as a songster before becoming a bluesman.

These bluesmen were far from the superstars of music one knows today, such as B.B. King or Muddy Waters. Most of them were illiterate. Singing the Blues was not a profession, but a way to survive, both financially and psychologically. Singing was one of the only ways to make a living for those with handicaps, such as blindness. For others, being a bluesman was not even a full

time job. Living in the South, most of them were farmers or working on railroads or levee camps. They were singing to themselves, or to people around them. For those singing full time, daily life consisted in traveling, singing in clubs, at street corners, or near churches. Some stopped singing and became preachers, like Skip James. However, for those who would get a recording contract, they would move to urban areas, beginning a new life. They could become part time singers and performed in small clubs or bars to earn an extra amount of money. This situation changed their way of considering music.

First, in their cases, music became a source of revenue, allowing them to earn more money and thus, to live more decently. This situation was the opposite of rural bluesmen, to whom music was a secondary job. With urban bluesmen, money became a paramount factor and a primary motivation, especially for Classic Blues singers, since music was just a way for most of them to earn a living. It was not necessarily the case for bluesmen coming from the South. Indeed, even though the financial aspect determined their desire to move to urban areas, the message they wanted to share prevailed. Second, most bluesmen were often famous in rather small areas, even though later technologies like the record and the radio extended their recognition. The advancement of technology reduced their movements and made bluesmen more sedentary, moving from bars to clubs of the same city.

This category of semiprofessional urban bluesmen concerned the largest part of singers. However, over the years, with the increasing development of the music industry since the 1960s, some bluesmen managed to make a real career out of their music. Instances can be found with artists like B.B. King, but also other legendary figures like Muddy Waters or Ray Charles. This category of singers, the most successful ones, put the profession of the bluesman into a larger

scale. They were then performing all around the world, with a whole organization around them, their names becoming trademarks.

Yet, as examples from the Race Records era showed, only a small number became famous out of all the other singers who never made a dollar out of their music. Instead of trying to find explanations about luck, one can say that, if these bluesmen did not succeed, it was perhaps because they did not have what it takes to be a bluesman. Which pushes one to wonder what is a bluesman made of.

The figure of the bluesman is difficult to define since he can be anyone and no one at the same time. Anyone, because he is an average person who explains using his own words his personal reactions to a situation. In other words, anyone who has something to say can become a bluesman, especially since a Blues singer does not need an audience. He speaks for himself, to himself. Anyone can sing Blues songs because they do not belong to anybody. Race Records proved this fact to be true, when various versions of the same song were sung and sold. As a result, anybody can sing a blues song and make it his, thanks to improvisation. This is one of the reasons why hundreds of singer sang and are still singing without seeking for fame. This would lead one to think that the most important part of Blues is the lyrics. However, one has to observe famous singers to realize that there is something else. This myth, this mystery, would lead one to think that being a bluesman requires more than the ability to sing and play an instrument.

The first point one can assert about the bluesman is that he is a man. This might sound obvious but has to be accounted for. Indeed, except for the Classic Blues Singers, being a woman and singing the Blues was not seen as a positive activity. Even though women sang and are still singing the Blues, only a few of them do. A respectable woman should not sing Blues, but Spirituals.

According to scholars such as Alan Lomax, Blues can only be sung by men because their conditions of living, regarding working conditions, were harder than for women. Thus, only men could endure singing Blues music. He explains it by saying that, “It was the men, not the women, who created a song style meant to keep a team of mules surging in the collar from dawn till dark.”<sup>211</sup>

This vision can be discussed because it remains to be proven that men’s lives were harder than women’s. What Lomax tried to explain is that men were asked to use force at work, like working on railroads for instance. Thus, they could capture the physical toughness and turn it into music. However, examples of women Blues singers such as Aretha Franklin, Memphis Minnie, or Lizzy Miles prove that this theory has exceptions. Abbott and Seroff in *Ragged but Right* summarize the career of the latter, which went beyond Classic Blues singing and tent shows:

“No veteran of circus sideshow annex minstrelsy enjoyed a longer or more impressive career than Lizzie Miles. Between 1922 and 1939, this memorable New Orleans native recorded more than seventy titles, mostly Blues, often accompanied by legendary Jazz musicians. After World War II, she made a remarkable comeback and reigned through the 1950s as the matron saint of the New Orleans ‘Jazz revival.’”<sup>212</sup>

## **B. BETWEEN FAITH AND SURVIVAL**

Blues music, through its themes, departed from Spirituals. Indeed, the difference between being a bluesman and being a preacher was small. Similarities exist but both genres follow different directions. Learning the art was a common point. In Blues singing as in preaching, an experienced figure, another priest or bluesman, transmits the knowledge. The difference is that, with

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<sup>211</sup> Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1993), 362.

<sup>212</sup> Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Songs, “Coon” Songs, and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 178.



preaching, the learning process is devoted toward God, while with Blues it is directed to the Devil. Blues can be defined as the music of the Devil with the bluesman as an incarnation of it. The initiation consisted in giving up one's soul to the Devil so one can learn how to play. Alan Lomax summarizes this idea when he declares that:

"As part of the initiation into the voodoo cult, the Negro novice must learn to play the guitar. He goes to the crossroads at midnight armed with a black cat bone, and as he sits in the dark playing the Blues, the Devil approaches, cuts the player's nails to the quick, and swaps guitars. Thus the voodooist sells his soul to the Devil and in return receives the gift of invisibility and the mastery of his instrument. These practices explain why the religious often call an expert Negro folk musician "a child of the devil" or "the Devil's son-in-law."<sup>213</sup>

This affiliation was not restricted to the learning of the instruments but includes the entire person and his place in society. The comparison with the preacher remains by the opposing status it represents. Indeed, preaching was one of the best social situations an African American could reach, whereas the bluesman represented the worst. Charles Kiel's perspective illustrates this vision when he claims that, "Bluesman and preacher may be considered as Negro prototypes of the no good and good man, respectively."<sup>214</sup> This duality of vision explains why many bluesmen quit singing and became preachers, as a way to come back to the right path. Various instances exist, but two deserve analysis.

The first one concerns Robert Johnson, who, during his life, claimed that he had received his talents for the Devil in exchange for his soul. On his death bed, the legend says that he hung up his guitar and gave up his talents for music to die a Christian and go to Heaven.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> John F. Szwed, *Crossovers: Essays on Race, Music, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 28.

<sup>214</sup> Charles Kiel, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 148.

<sup>215</sup> Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of Blues* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 2004), 69.

The second one concerns J.B. Lenoir. Unlike other bluesmen, he was convinced that his talents were a God given gift, not a Devil-learned talent. Thus, he said that he would not sing Blues for a long time because playing Devil music with a God-given gift was not the right thing to do.<sup>216</sup> To sing the Blues, one has to accept doing something bad and taking the risk of living the life of a cursed person for the rest of one's life.

However, this duality between God's music with Gospel and Devil's music with Blues raises the question of religious music as opposed to secular music, which took its roots after the Emancipation process. This ambivalence appears as the result of African Americans' relationship with music. Indeed, when music is considered a communal activity with everyone coming with one's own influences, it appears normal that a mixture of genres occurs. Nina Simone, quoted in *The Sound of Soul*<sup>217</sup> by Phyl Garland, gives a similar opinion on the mixture of African American music: "Mama and them were so religious that they wouldn't allow you to play boogie-woogie in the house, but would allow you to use the same boogie-woogie *beat* to play a gospel tune. I just don't agree with this attitude because our music *crosses* all those lines. Negro music has *always* crossed all lines."<sup>218</sup>

Survival was also an important factor in whether to sing Blues, or Gospel music. Indeed, Gospel was and remains famous until today but, during the Race Records era, Blues was what record companies were seeking. As a result, money was in Blues music, not Gospel. As Ann Drinkard Moss explains, "You performed Gospel songs because you loved it, but secular music was attrac-

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<sup>216</sup> J.B. Lenoir, Introduction to "Vietnam Blues." Url: [http://moodpoint.com/lyrics/jb\\_lenoir/vietnam.html](http://moodpoint.com/lyrics/jb_lenoir/vietnam.html). Consulted on July 9, 2011.

<sup>217</sup> Phyl Garland, *The Sound of Soul: The Story of Black Music* (Chicago: Contemporary Publishing, 1969).

<sup>218</sup> Nina Simone, quoted in Phyl Garland, *The Sound of Soul: The Story of Black Music* (Chicago: Contemporary Publishing, 1969), 86.

tive because it presented you with more money. Those that saw a chance of making their living went over to secular music.”<sup>219</sup> As a result, this opposition between secular and religious music, between Blues and Gospel, was often dictated by the prevalent attitude African Americans had to adopt when facing life; survival.

The other aspect that only few people can have was charisma. This essentially goes with guitar playing techniques, behaving in front of a crowd, but also appearance. Indeed, having the right look proved to be an important factor. Bluesmen were most of the time wearing suits and hats, even if they were poor. The attractive aspect was important to captivate an audience. As Charles Kiel explains, “A Blues singer is not unconsciously mimicking Elvis Presley’s hairdo. (...) He is enhancing his sex appeal, nothing more.”<sup>220</sup>

Gender, belief, and charisma, are important features for a bluesman. However, soul is what matters the most, what makes the difference. The soul of a bluesman is what makes him who he is, what makes him perform the way he does, the testimony of what he has been through. The words of Kiel, when he quotes Al Hibbler’s<sup>221</sup> criteria, embody this notion when he declares that the only way to measure soul is by “what a man’s been through, being hurt by a woman and know what that slavery shit is all about.”<sup>222</sup>

What makes a bluesman is his ability to inspire people around him, to make his words become theirs, but with something else that makes him different from other people, at the same time

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<sup>219</sup> Ann Drinkard Moss, quoted in Hazel V. Carby, “In Body and Spirit: Representing Black Women Musicians,” *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Autumn, 1991), pp. 177-192, 183.

<sup>220</sup> Charles Kiel, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 27.

<sup>221</sup> Albert George Hibbler (August 16, 1915-April 24, 2001) was an African-American Jazz vocalist. He became famous with the song “Unchained Melody” and performed in several Jazz and Pop bands

<sup>222</sup> Charles Kiel, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 169.

among and above them. He becomes, with his own feelings and his own voice, the representative of an entire group, and reaches his true dimension.

### C. REMEMBERING THE PAST THROUGH BLUES

Blues music is made to feel better, or at least to make life more bearable. This cathartic vision is at the heart of the role of the bluesman. When performing in front of an audience, he reaches his true dimension. Beyond an ordinary singer, with his voice and his instrument, he leads people. Like a preacher, he makes individual problems more common through shared experience. However, differences remain in the spreading of his message. In the church, "Music is directed collectively to God; Blues are directed individually to the collective. Both perform similar cathartic functions but within frameworks."<sup>223</sup>

The bluesman manages to create an atmosphere in which the audience seems to be possessed by his words. This relationship can even go further. When interviewed by Charles Kiel about his interaction with an audience, B.B. King had this answer:

"It's like hypnotism. If you don't want to be hypnotized, Houdini himself hasn't got a chance of putting you to sleep. But if you are the least bit willing, a good hypnotist can put you under in no time. If you can get an opening, then you try to draw an audience in to what you are doing little by little."<sup>224</sup>

In his answer, King points out the notion of choice. This notion is interesting because it shows that, through choice, people need these hypnoses. They need Blues and the bluesman to feel better. This communal way of easing pain refers to the African tradition of shared experience. In this instance, people take the words of the bluesman as theirs to relieve themselves, thinking that they

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<sup>223</sup> John F. Szwed, *Crossovers: Essays on Race, Music, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 32.

<sup>224</sup> Charles Kiel, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 109-110.

are not alone with these feelings. This form of relief is profitable for the bluesman as well, since hearing that his message is understood is an incentive to keep singing. What makes the figure of the bluesman special is that, with his music, he manages to make people feel better, thanks to the properties of Blues music, especially the call-and-response. He is one, but becomes many in his way of thinking and sharing common experiences. This process puts every individual on the same level, all united in the search for relief.

“The sight and sound of a common problem being acted out, talked out, and worked out on stage promotes catharsis, and the fact that all present are participating in the solution creates solidarity. The constant repetition of phrases and driving intensity of the rhythm reflect the redundant patterns of ghetto life and all the persistent anguish that goes with it. As the song comes to an end, (the singer) has the audience in the palm of his hand. Whatever distance has existed between artist and audience to this point has been all but eliminated.”<sup>225</sup>

The whole crowd becomes one around the bluesman who, while singing, enters in a state where he appears possessed by his creation, music. This experience, which comes close to the state of trance, is described by Alan Lomax as he witnesses Son House singing to his friends at the back of a farm in Mississippi:

“At the center of all this was Son House, a man transformed, no longer the quiet, affable person I had met, but possessed by the song, as Gypsies in Spain are possessed, gone blind with music and poetry. [...] He sang, his words conjuring up nights of coupling in the tropical heat of Mississippi. His voice, guttural and hoarse with passion, ripping apart the surface of the music like his tractor driven deep plow ripped apart the wet black earth in the spring time, making the sap of the earth song run, while his powerful, work-hard hands snatched strange chords out of the steel strings the way they had snatched so many tons of cotton out of brown thorny cotton bolls in the fall. And with him the sorrow of the blues was not tentative, or retiring, or ironic. Son’s whole body wept, as with eyes closed, the tendons of his powerful neck standing out with the violence of his feeling and his brown face flushing, he sang in an awesome voice the *Death Letter Blues*.”<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> *Ibid*, 137.

<sup>226</sup> Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1993), 18.

Through trance and the communal aspect of dealing with problems, the bluesman allows himself and the audience around him to ease their personal troubles. At this point, he embodies the figure of the shaman. By using rituals, like singing in a different pitch of voice and hollering, to some extent, he sacrifices himself for the sake of the community by taking their own pain and relieving them from it. This form of shamanism is close to the African traditions and cultures like the Bori cult, which consisted of rituals, dances, and music to control spirits and heal souls. One cannot say that the bluesman embodies all the notions of shamanism since his abilities are limited to psychological release. However, to the African American community, he is the link between their African traditions and the American way of life, using ancient techniques to solve current problems. Beyond words, he transmits experience, feelings, spreading his message through sight and sounds. He uses everything he has in him to do it. From his instrument, he expresses emotions that words cannot say. He is the archetype of the dominant male figure. A man who takes responsibility for his own pain, and who is ready to carry an entire group to help it feel better. Able, with his soul, to be the voice of a People.

The singers able to perform this way are the true bluesmen. Even though Blues is a personal reflection upon life, the concept of sharing is essential to overcome difficulties. As John Lee Hooker said, "It is not only what happened to you, it is what happened to your fore parents and other people. And that is what makes the Blues."<sup>227</sup> Those who did not perceive music this way could not pretend to be bluesmen and their careers did not last.

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<sup>227</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 237.

#### D. A CHANGING ROLE IN A CHANGING WORLD

Over the years, with the professionalization of Blues singing, the primary purpose of this genre evolved. Instead of healing the audience, the main objective became to entertain it, especially for urban bluesmen who, to keep singing, became dependent on their audience, as well as on record companies. Jacques Lacava notes this change, stating that:

“As the Blues moved from the streets into small clubs, the performance became more and more sophisticated and more theatrical. [...] Bluesmen cared about the way they dressed, behaved, and moved on stage under the spotlights. For example, Buddy Guy is known for being a dramatic performer. During an interview he recalled that he was one of the first guitar players to reject sitting in a chair; instead he always used theatrics, jumping up on stage or running down the bar. He performed in this way in order to build a reputation.”<sup>228</sup>

From this point, roles were turned upside down, since the audience came to a position of helping the singer live better, financially speaking this time. When profit came before relief, part of the relationship between the bluesman and his audience broke, and only the best artists managed to associate both. Nonetheless, through their message, their charisma, and their ability to heal minds, bluesmen can be considered as legitimate voices among the African American community. Symbols, like their music, of the evolution of a community that found a way to evolve in modern society without forgetting its roots, its history, and the legacy it left.

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<sup>228</sup> Jacques D. Lacava, “The Theatricality of the Blues,” *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Spring, 1992), pp. 127-139, 129.

## CHAPTER IV

### REUNITING PAST AND PRESENT

#### A. TRADITION

Several elements of the African and early African American traditions are implemented in Blues music. On the one hand, from a rhythmical point of view, Blues appears similar to other genres of African American music, namely the number of tenses, often two, and the melody, usually syncopated. On the other hand, singing and vocal effects were borrowed from the African tradition. Falsetto singing, in the African tradition, was considered the essence of masculine expression.<sup>229</sup> The redundancy of tone and rhythm comes from the African way of singing as well. Another factor, as demonstrated earlier, is the importance of music and the central role it had in the expression of daily lives for African Americans.

Blues also borrowed the images of the African culture with metaphors to describe the oppressor in a disguised way. The entire bestiary that was describing bad spirits was used, first during slavery, then in other forms of music, including Blues; bad spirits being replaced by the boss, the Ku Klux Klan, etc. The target changed, but the way of denouncing it did not.

Blues music took from the African tradition the way of considering music as a communal experience, but also as a participatory activity. The sharing of experience, to solve a problem or to understand it, was a regular practice in African tribes, when people used to talk about their problems out loud and confronted them with others. Songs, dances, and other rituals accompanied

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<sup>229</sup> Charles Kiel, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 27.



these ceremonies. When the first slaves were brought to the American soil, they maintained this tradition of communal dancing, singing, to expiate their problems, as a group. This tradition survived and evolved with technology, the phonograph replacing the singer in families and neighborhoods. When Blues is performed on stage, the call-and-response is the other element that can be added to the similarities with ancient traditions. Performed this way, Blues resembles other genres of African American music in the sense that the audience answers the singer. One can mention the instances of church singing where the crowd answers the preacher, or of workers answering the lead singer.

Some of the ancient instruments were used during the first days of Blues, mostly the banjo for itinerant bluesmen who would use this instrument instead of the guitar to produce different types of sounds that could modify their voices or the atmosphere they wanted to create. One of the most famous bluesmen using the banjo was Lonnie Johnson, who used this instrument almost exclusively. Later, when Urban Blues became popular, drums, which have an African descent, were used more often. However, its reputation was strong since, during slavery, drums were forbidden for fear it could be used as a call for rebellion. All these ingredients can be considered as the basis of modern African American music.

More than characteristics and structures, it is important to understand that a way of life is expressed in this music. The African American community sings life as it lives it: together, and all the time. Often, it does it for the same reasons, that is to say to denounce, to express. It is the expression of who African Americans are, and of where they are from. Their early culture traces back to Africa. Indeed, as surprising as it may sound, despite the effort made from the slave sys-

tem designed to cut off any forms of memories from the African culture, their souls remembered. It is thanks to these African roots that African American music gained its own identity.

Blues music expresses these values, but not only. What makes it special is its differences, its variations. Indeed, even if it carries the same African roots, and is used for the same purposes directed to the community as other African American genres, Blues emerged with its own particularities that can be seen as a reflection of the evolution of the African American community.

## **B. ACCULTURATION**

The most important feature added to Blues is the importance given to the individual. To this extent, one can see this difference as a step toward acculturation to the Western culture. It marked the beginning of an era for the African American community, when an individual voice rose over a group cohesion to express an idea, a feeling. It is the “I” that has the voice and experiences to eventually transcribe them into words. This difference is noticeable, compared to the previous way of thinking for the African American community. Change occurred along the years and developed from the emancipation process, when African Americans had to work and survive on their own. It took centuries to think outside the circle imposed by White masters. Through Blues music, the emancipation process from the communal way of thinking appears achieved. It is not surprising that this evolution occurred through music, one of the only ways of expression for centuries.

Aside from Urban Blues bands, Blues singing is a solo activity. Indeed, the bluesman stands alone with his instrument and performs what he has decided to sing. This freedom of choice goes

with a power and authority to make decisions. He sings what he wants, when he wants. This situation puts singers above their audience because they are the deciding voice over a group of people, reinforcing their positions as leaders. The emancipation process ended the tutelage of the master over his slaves. With families separated, the mother figure became the head of the family, since women were taking care of the children and were the stable base in the family structure. African American men were in a dominated position and likely to leave or wander from one family to another. With Blues, the dominant position comes back to the male figure and puts the singer in a position where he can use his influence over a broader audience, and, most importantly, when he wants to. Only Blues can provide this for the African American community. Indeed, with Gospel, the preacher may lead his audience, but he cannot choose the direction of his preaching, directed to God. Furthermore, he sings songs that he did not write. In other words, the prism is too small for other genres of African American music. Thus, only Blues, through solo singing, can put the singer in a dominant position, portraying what John F. Szwed calls a “shifting social order.”<sup>230</sup>

This authority of the individual above the community can also be found in particularities from the African heritage, such as the call-and-response. This feature is the turning point of the differences and similarities between Blues and other African American genres. The call-and-response exists when a relation is created between the singer and his audience, which can be considered as the classic form. However, another form exists with Blues. Indeed, when he sings, the bluesman addresses himself. With his instrument, he answers himself as well; with his voice, when he hollers or sings, but also with his instrument. Many guitar solos performed between verses or at the

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<sup>230</sup> John F. Szwed, *Crossovers: Essays on Race, Music, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 31.

end of a song appear as another voice coming from the bluesman. This voice is used to express feelings, ideas, that words cannot describe, certain notes expressing certain types of emotions. As a result, these notes became associated with sadness or despair and constitute the repertoire of what is called “Blue notes.”<sup>231</sup> With this duality, the singer does not need anyone else. He sings, his instrument responds, and nothing else is necessary. Through Blues music, the singer has control over his own feelings and catharsis. He is the patient and the doctor at the same time, since he expresses his troubles and liberates them at the same time, by himself. With this music, the communal system is no longer necessary. His personal life comes before the experience of the community.

Even live, Blues music differs from other genres of African American music. When he performs in front of a crowd, the bluesman is seated above the audience, on stage. Thanks to this position, he is no longer among the other men, like he used to, with work songs for instance. While singing this way, his whole performance is orchestrated. As a result, “The Blues performance, (...) is in many ways closer to American folk music than to most of other Afro-American song forms.”<sup>232</sup>

In the American folk culture, there is a clear difference between the artist and his audience. The singer is the one who has the authority and control over the people who came to listen to him. He is the gifted one, which places him above the audience and creates a hierarchy between the two. This notion of hierarchy can be found in Blues music as well, especially with modern

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<sup>231</sup> A Blue note can be used both in Blues and Jazz. It is a note that is played at a slightly lower pitch than that of the major scale for expressive purposes.

<sup>232</sup> John F. Szwed, *Crossovers: Essays on Race, Music, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 32.

presentations, where the bluesman comes on stage, usually alone with lights around him, and performs in front of an audience who, instead of participating, comes to listen to him, seated. Post-World War II and the Civil Rights Movement put the African American community closer to the White community. By getting closer to equality, it got closer to the way of life of the rest of the population. The acculturation process was not a receiving-only dynamic for the African American community. It was a give-and-take process that influenced both communities.

Since slavery, African Americans played in front of White audiences. Even as free men, it was a common activity that permitted singers to survive. However, African Americans would not sing the same songs than in front of an African American-only audience. Indeed, they would sing what the audience wanted to hear, and it did not want to hear complaints about the slave system, nor about segregation and how unfair life was for African Americans. With hindsight, the relationship between African American music and White audience has been ambivalent and conflictual. These two notions come from the fact that African American music itself was recognized and appreciated, while the performers were rejected and segregated. However, over the centuries, this relationship evolved, along with new musical trends. The starting point of this ambivalent relationship occurred at the time when African American music started to flirt with the White audience and the music industry, that is to say in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Ragtime and “Coon songs” embodied this evolution.

Ragtime is, in its essence, an African American music. Scott Joplin for instance, who was arguably one of the most famous Ragtime piano players, was African American. Another example can be found in the song “All Coons Look Alike to Me,” which was composed by another African American, Ernest Hogan. These two artists were very popular, but other examples exist,

such as Irving Jones, who was nicknamed “the Ragtime Millionaire.”<sup>233</sup> The example of “Coon songs” is the most striking of all. Indeed, White “Coon” shouters met success copying the African American style of singing, dressing up and darkening their skins to sing racist songs composed, in the early days of the music, by African Americans. This attraction-rejection relationship occurred without the White audience realizing it, as Abbot and Seroff note when they state that, “Two-thirds of the white people at the time did not know that colored men write songs. It was hard to make them believe that Gussie L. Davis, one of the most popular song writers this country ever produced, was African American.”<sup>234</sup> In the context of segregation, Whites would listen to African American music, they would attend shows where white singers were disguised as African Americans, but they would forbid African Americans to attend the same shows, as the side shows demonstrate.

Race Records played a role in getting people together, regardless of the color of their skin. Besides the overall control of White producers over the African American music industry, Race Records gave the opportunity to the White audience to listen to African American artists, such as Louis Armstrong. Indeed, even though these records were advertised as made by African Americans for African Americans, it appears difficult to imagine that the only record sales were coming from an African American audience. Even though the music sold was controlled by record companies, Race Records were not about “Coon songs” anymore, and themes were closer to the African American experience, especially after the Classic Blues singers.

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<sup>233</sup> Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, “Coon Songs,” and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 34.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

These two examples demonstrate that, instead of the message, the aesthetic of African American music was appealing to White audience. As a result, Black and White people were not listening to this music for the same reasons. White audiences would understand the lyrics of these songs, but it was only music to them, in the sense that the meaning was different. Indeed, it appears difficult to image a White listener identifying with the lyrics of “Get Back,” by Big Bill Broonzy.

Post-World War II and the Civil Rights movement marked the beginning of the understanding by a White audience of the meaning of African American music and struggle. Indeed, in the 1960s, the African American cause gained support from a larger portion of the country. One has to watch footages or pictures from the march on Washington to realize that the audience was mixed. Furthermore, this mixed audience was not attending those marches to be entertained, but to show support and acceptance to the African American community. Instead of only hearing, the White audience started to listen to what African American leaders had to say. This evolution occurred in music as well, and thus, to Blues music, the soundtrack of the African American experience. The culmination of this vision found echoes in the Newport Folk festival of 1964.

### **C. THE NEWPORT FOLK FESTIVAL**

The Newport Folk festival is an annual music festival located in Newport, Rhode Island. Its first edition was founded by George Wein and took place in 1959.<sup>235</sup> This event was important for the Folk music scene, where various famous Folk artists came to perform, such as Bob Dy-

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<sup>235</sup> Official website of the Newport Folk Festival. Url: <http://www.newportfolkfest.net/history>. Consulted on July 22, 2011.

lan, who made his first national appearance on this stage.<sup>236</sup> In the early editions of the festival, African Americans were not part of the lineup, exclusively devoted to Folk music, Country music, and other ballads.<sup>237</sup>

The situation changed in 1964 when, for the first time, Blues was part of it. Indeed, that year, bluesmen such as John Lee Hooker, Mississippi John Hurt, Fred McDowell, and Skip James, were scheduled to perform.<sup>238</sup> This event marked the entrance of Blues, but also of African American music in the Folk, White ground. In front of seventeen thousand people,<sup>239</sup> Skip James performed “Devil Got my Woman,” “Cherry Ball Blues,” “Sick Red Blues,” and “Cypress Grove Blues.”<sup>240</sup> He performed songs he was performing thirty years before, in front of an audience, ready to listen to what he had to say. Even though most of the crowd did not know who he was,<sup>241</sup> it introduced to a wide audience what Blues was. Performances were such a success that, from that year on, African Americans are performing at Newport every year.

The Newport Folk festival can be considered a culmination point for the recognition of Blues music by a White audience, but also as a new beginning for this genre. It marked the beginning of a transition where bluesmen were not African Americans only. Indeed, as early as 1965, White Blues Bands were scheduled, with the Paul Butterfield Blues Band.<sup>242</sup> It appears obvious that

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<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>238</sup> Website of the lineup throughout the years. Url: <http://www.wirz.de/music/newpofrm.htm>. Consulted on July 22, 2011.

<sup>239</sup> Martin Scorsese, *Martin Scorsese Presents the Blues*, Vulcan Production, 2003.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>242</sup> Website of the lineup throughout the years. Url: <http://www.wirz.de/music/newpofrm.htm>. Consulted on July 22, 2011.



White Blues bands did not appear overnight, but it denoted a movement that went beyond acculturation. Aside from “Coon Songs,” White Blues was one of the first examples of the embracing by the White community of the African American message. These bands, even though White, were using African American music and songs to express their own feelings; the racism and the mocking of “Coon Songs” was gone. The acculturation went to the point of using the codes and rules of Blues music. For instance, the first album of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band featured songs composed by African American bluesmen such as Muddy Waters with the song “Got My Mojo Working.”<sup>243</sup> Over the next following years, multiple White Blues singers or Blues bands began to tour throughout the country, even sometimes along with African American bluesmen, such as Muddy Waters or B. B. King, who both toured with the Paul Butterfield Blues Band.<sup>244</sup>

From this point, Blues music changed. It was no longer performed by African Americans only, but also by White artists who understood how aesthetic this music was, but also how meaningful its message was. For African Americans, these two decades proved how far acculturation went, both musically and socially. These characteristics that one can find in Blues music can be seen as reflections of the American experience.

Solo singing, personal feelings and experiences over the communal way of thinking, affirmation of the masculine figure, all these notions are not derived from the African tradition, but from Western, American values. With Blues music, the African American community embraced the most important founding of the American ethos, the paramount importance given to the individ-

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<sup>243</sup> Official Website of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. Consulted on July 22, 2011. Url: <http://www.mikebloomfieldamericanmusic.com/1958-1965.htm>.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*

ual. Music and its message became dependent on the will of a single singer who would benefit first from this sharing, before the rest of the people listening to him.

Combining traditions and evolutions can be a way to describe what Blues music is. Tradition because it kept the communal aspect, the sharing of experience and the traditional use of music as an essential part of daily life as a way to get relief. The impact of slavery and of the emancipation process shows this point. In other words, Blues music never forgot its roots. However, it is related to change as well. Indeed, with this music, only one singer, one individual, rises. He is the symbol of the acculturation of the African American community to the American ethos. Blues music, through its ambivalence, makes the link between the two cultures, at the same time opposed, and united.

## CONCLUSION

During the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans denounced their condition of living and fought against discrimination, hoping for a better future. They used the memories of hard times in their past to fuel their fight for brighter tomorrows.

From slavery, African Americans had to deal with inhuman treatments. They were bought and sold as animals, separated from their origins and their culture. Their identity was slashed for the good of the southern economy, and their workforce was exploited to produce cotton and other goods. At this time, music was used to relieve them from those hard times. They used the fact that their musical talent was recognized and appreciated by Whites to express themselves and denounce their condition through metaphors. It was their music that permitted African Americans to communicate among one another and to express the daily frustrations of being a slave. Furthermore, it was their music, experienced communally, that tied them to their African roots.

During the Civil War and its aftermath, African Americans learned that the path toward freedom was not an easy nor a short one. Indeed, not only their role during the war was barely recognized, but the inequalities and violences following the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendment led them to believe that little had changed. Even though they were deemed legally free, the measures taken to prevent them from voting, the violence from terrorist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, and finally the Jim Crow era with the separate but equal doctrine showed them that people's minds did not always evolve as fast as law.

Over the course of history, the African American community was increasingly put into contact with the White, Western influence. Thus, change began to occur. As a result, African Americans began to absorb the American ethos and way of life, especially the importance given to the individual. This evolution was transcribed through the only means of expression available to them; music. One can take for instance the use of Western instruments in African American music, and how they became prominent in Blues music with the guitar or in Jazz with the trumpet.

The African American ideology and their music changed over time, but kept its central role in people's daily lives. For this reason, one could say that Blues could not have been invented by any other community. Blues music is the reflection of all the changes that defined the African American experience, from past to present. It never forgot its roots, and where it came from. However, this did not prevent the genre from becoming the music of an individual voice, as a symbol of a movement towards acculturation to the American ideology, toward equality. Blues music is an affirmation of the African American identity, looking forward to the future, with one eye glancing at the past. In other words, Blues helped African Americans remember their roots.

During the Civil Rights Movement, both past and present were represented and crystalized into the American people's consciousness. By never forgetting the days of slavery behind them, African Americans worked as a group in response to the voices of individual leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. It was during this time that Blues music was revived and its anthems were used. One could even consider bluesmen such as J.B. Lenoir or Muddy Waters to be close to these leaders, thanks to the way they used their voice to express the thoughts of a community.

Blues music was popular during the Race Records era, and then later during the Civil Rights Movement. However, after the 1960s, it began to lose its popularity. For some time, it was still

listened to by older generations, mainly in the South, but the youth was no longer listening to it. It became old fashioned, a souvenir of too many unpleasant memories. As a result, one could argue that the decline of Blues is a reflection of the African American community's readiness to focus on other things, both from cultural and political perspectives. From a cultural point of view, this evolution was transcribed into the emergence of Soul, Funk, or Rock n' Roll, but also from an increasing presence of African Americans on television, through the success of the *Cosby Show* for instance, or in motion pictures, with the example of Sidney Poitier who won an Academy Award as the best actor in 1963 for his performance in *Lilies of the Field*.<sup>245</sup> From a political point of view, the ideological struggles embodied by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., were replaced by Stokely Carmichael and more violent organizations such as the Black Panthers.

Another element explaining the decline of Blues music is the evolution of its singers and its audience. As one saw, during the 1960s, more White people began to sing and to listen to Blues music. Following the rules of the genre, old songs were sung by White artists, giving these songs a new atmosphere. Indeed, it appears difficult to envision Blues classics such as "Alabama," performed originally by J.B. Lenoir, sung by a White singer. Did acculturation go too far to the point where White artists sing covers of songs depicting the Jim Crow era? Where is the limit between identification with an idea and bitter irony? Can any Blues really be sung by anyone? If identification is fueled with the need for relief and with the aesthetic value of the music, the answer appears to be yes. If it is related to the roots and meaning of Blues music—namely slavery—the answer would be more debatable, even though further research, especially on the Blues

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<sup>245</sup> John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 432.

audience after the 1960s, would bring more elements and a more precise answer to these questions.

These covers led to a decline in the meaning of Blues, and to a loss of its essence. While it still carries values such as the denunciation of hard times, the historical background shifted. One could say that as long as human suffering will exist, there will be Blues music. However, it will not refer to the same music. On February 9, 2009, B.B. King stated, “ I believe that the Blues, during those days, is more important than it ever been, unless you have a lot of money.”<sup>246</sup> While it appears difficult to contradict such a legend, it seems like Blues does not carry the same connotation it used to. Blues will always be sung, it is in its history to evolve; from shellac records to MP3s, from street corners to stadiums.

From the influence it had on modern music, one can say that Blues is everywhere, from Rock n’ Roll to Hip Hop. Further musical and social studies would permit to find out more about how this transition occurred, as well as to know how Blues is perceived by present generations, not only in America but also over the globe.

African Americans were brought to America as slaves. At the time, the thought of having the right to vote and to be equal to the rest of the population was only a dream. However, through pain, violence, demonstrations, struggle, perseverance, and hope, this dream became, day after day, a little closer to a reality. Indeed, no one would have believed that, after centuries of slavery, an African American would be elected president of the United States.

Blues started in a small area in Mississippi, where African Americans needed a way to express these feelings. Record companies did not want to put their voices on records, thinking that no-

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<sup>246</sup> International Herald Tribune, February 9, 2009.

body would want to buy them. Nowadays, one can find Blues music everywhere in the world, which is probably far beyond what bluesmen like Skip James would have envisioned.

Looking back at both histories, one can say that one is the reflection of the other. They both symbolize a will to be heard. It took longer for the African Community as a whole than for Blues music, but one can say that one would not have been as successful without the other. Both fights are not over, and Blues, as long as hard times will be “here and everywhere you go,” will always be the soundtrack, not only of the African American community, but of the society.

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1920:

- July 31
- August 21
- September 11
- October 23
- November 6
- November 20
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- December 4
- December 11
- December 25

1921:

- January 1
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*1929:*

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*1930:*

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- *September 6*
- *October 25*

1931:

- January 10
- March 14
- September 12
- October 10

1938:

- November 28

1941:

- February 2

1942:

- February 2
- February 28

1943:

- May 22

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## VITA

Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University

Rémy Corbet

[remy.corbet@gmail.com](mailto:remy.corbet@gmail.com)

Université Caen Basse-Normandie, France  
Bachelors in English, June 2008

Thesis Title:

A Sound for Recognition: Blues Music and the African American Community

Major Professor: Dr. Robbie Lieberman