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# Moanin' at midnight: Patterns, themes, and imagery in blues songs by Howlin' Wolf

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**MOANIN' AT MIDNIGHT: PATTERNS, THEMES, AND IMAGERY IN  
BLUES SONGS BY HOWLIN' WOLF**

**A Thesis**

**Presented to the**

**Department of Communication**

**and the**

**Faculty of the Graduate College**

**University of Nebraska**

**In Partial Fulfillment**

**of the Requirements for the Degree**

**Master of Arts**

**University of Nebraska at Omaha**

**by**

**Craig Edmundson**

**November 1995**

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College,  
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Committee

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## ABSTRACT

Blues music originated in the Deep South where it matured into a recognizable style, known as the country blues. Socioeconomic changes in the 1920's and 1940's encouraged large numbers of blacks living in the rural South to migrate northward. Chicago, Illinois was a destination for many blacks from the Mississippi Delta region, and the country blues was similarly transplanted to an urban environment. In this new setting, the familiar music of the country began to change and a new style of blues evolved, urban blues. One way to better understand the links between the country and urban styles would be to look at the country and urban features in the lyrics of a performer who played in both styles, Howlin' Wolf. This study explores the country and urban features of Howlin' Wolf's music during the 1950s through an analysis of the patterns, themes, and imagery in his song lyrics. The lyrics are analyzed in the context of three theories: oral formulas in blues composition; the bluesman as fictional persona; and thematic patterns in blues lyrics. The thematic patterns in blues lyric theory proved to be the most useful in identifying the patterns, themes and imagery in the sample. The results indicate a nearly even split in the sample between country and urban lyrical features. The sample indicates that Howlin' Wolf's music did change after he migrated northward; but it retained many of the major features of the country blues style.

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Lastly, I would like to thank my regular First Thursday lunch buddies: Simon Danigole, Vic Paul, Hugh Reilly, and Kevin Warneke who, in the course of our rambling conversations, shared with me a wealth of advice regarding their theses experiences and in the process made things a whole lot easier for me. God bless you all.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Blues music is a uniquely American form of expression.<sup>1</sup> The term *blues* dates back to around the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>2</sup> Almost from the start, the term has been used somewhat loosely – even by early 1900s black musicians, who would use the word ‘blues’ in the title of ragtime songs or ballads.<sup>3</sup> This practice has persisted, and through the years there have been numerous examples of popular and country/western songs that use the word ‘blues’ in the title, yet the music itself isn’t blues. Adding to the confusion is fact that there are a wide variety of styles or types of blues, each sharing some (but not always all) of the features that make the blues music ‘the blues.’ Thus, definitions of the blues can be as numerous as the varieties of the music;<sup>4</sup> and it can be hard to define the blues in a very specific way. Instead one winds up talking about general musical *tendencies* – e.g., blues songs tend to follow a twelve-bar, AAA or AAB verse forms; they tend toward melodies composed on a five note scale, with a tendency to play the third note flat.<sup>5</sup> While tendencies such as these allow for the inclusion of a

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<sup>1</sup>Lawrence N. Redd, “Rock! It’s Still Rhythm and Blues,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 13 (Spring 1985): 33.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues* (New York: The Viking Press, 1981), 42.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>4</sup>Robert Springer, “The Regulatory Function of the Blues,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 4 (Fall 1976): 278.

<sup>5</sup>Palmer, “Deep Blues,” 43.



wide variety of compositions into the blues canon, another more satisfying approach is to think of the blues in terms of *styles* based on localities. In this manner, it is possible to discuss, for example, the style of the blues from the Mississippi Delta region, a style which is based on “the work of all the blues singers who learned their music from oral tradition in the Delta.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, it’s possible to discuss the Chicago blues style fairly unambiguously, by analyzing the music of artists who lived and played in Chicago in the 1950s.

Arguments have been made suggesting that blues music transcends art and entertainment for both the creator and the listener. One theory is that the music serves as a cathartic emotional release for the performer and the audience.<sup>7</sup> Others have argued that blues music serves as an outlet for aggression, regulating and channeling it away from the white majority so as to prevent possible white backlash toward the black community.<sup>8</sup> Whether the blues is art, catharsis, or social regulator, the music and the people making it retains a fascination for researchers working in such diverse disciplines as history, sociology, ethnomusicology, music, poetry, linguistics, and African-American studies.

Along with the diversity of opinion about the function of the blues, over the years there have been many uncertainties about how the music got its start. Current thought

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 76.

<sup>8</sup>Springer, “Regulatory Function,” 279.

holds that it is unlikely that the blues evolved from a single folk genre. Instead, the blues is the result of a combination of elements from many sources: English ballads, field hollers, and church music.<sup>9</sup> These sources were in turn influenced by African musical traditions: rhythmic and percussive elements; performance characteristics; instrumentation and melodies.<sup>10</sup> The way in which each individual blues performer mixes these various elements (and in what proportion) determines his particular blues 'style.'<sup>11</sup> Many of these individual styles share common tendencies,<sup>12</sup> thus it is possible to speak of certain styles, such as 'country blues' or 'urban blues' as subcategories within the larger domain of the blues.

Several attempts have been made at developing classification systems based on styles of blues. Charles Keil developed a classification system for blues in which he categorized the music as country blues, city blues, and urban blues. He then subdivided these categories further: delta blues, hill country blues, Texas blues, "citified country" blues, Kansas City blues, Memphis blues, "urbane" blues, and industrial blues.<sup>13</sup> Others have devised similar triadic systems, including an archaic-classic-post classic

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<sup>9</sup>Palmer, "Deep Blues," 43.

<sup>10</sup>Robert W. Stephens, "Soul: A Historical Reconstruction of Continuity and Change in Black Popular Music," *The Black Perspective in Music* 12 (Spring 1984): 22.

<sup>11</sup>Palmer, "Deep Blues," 43; Stephens, "Soul," 22.

<sup>12</sup>Palmer, "Deep Blues," 43.

<sup>13</sup>Keil, "Urban Blues," 217-18.

classification, and a primitive-classic-city taxonomy.<sup>14</sup> This study will focus on two styles, country (archaic, primitive) and urban (post-classic, city.)

Another useful way to think about the blues is to consider the art form as primarily a vocal genre,<sup>15</sup> where certain textual themes are common in all blues styles; while other themes might occur only in a specific style. For example, themes that deal with relationships between lovers are common to all styles of blues.<sup>16</sup> Style specific themes can be found in both country blues and in urban blues styles. For example, 'sharecropping' and 'a geographic sense of place' emerge as frequent themes in country blues.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, urban blues performers down-played references to their country heritage in favor of "images of an environment free of familiar and undesirable conditions"<sup>18</sup> (i.e., sharecropping on the Mississippi delta).

The common thread running through the various definitions of the blues, the different classification systems, and throughout the literature of the blues, is the clear

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<sup>14</sup>Patrick J. O'Connor, "Discovering the Rich Differences in the Blues: The Rural and Urban Genres," *The Midwest Quarterly* 33 (Autumn 1991): 29; LeRoi Jones, *The Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1963), vii.

<sup>15</sup>Stephens, "Soul," 22.

<sup>16</sup>Jeff Todd Titon, "Introduction to Special Blues Issue," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 42 (January-December 1978): 1.

<sup>17</sup>Stephens, "Soul," 22.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 28.

distinction between blues created in the rural South and blues created in the urban North. There has been a tendency in the past to treat the two as incompatible fields of study: the former as 'folk blues,' a legitimate type of folklore; and the latter as 'popular blues,' unsuitable as an object of folkloric inquiry (but still of interest to ethnographers and social historians ) Yet it has been proposed that the two genres are inseparably connected, as "the student of blues cannot shut his ears to either folk blues or popular blues if he would understand either, for the two traditions are intermingled."<sup>19</sup> One of the purposes of this study is to explore the links between the rural and urban genres.

#### *Central Research Question*

What happens to style specific themes when a performer migrates from one geographic area to another, specifically, from the agrarian South to the industrial urban North? Does the performer's music change? If so, how does it change? Thus, a central research question emerges: What happens to the patterns, themes and imagery in a bluesman's music when he moves from the rural south to the urban North? One way to answer these questions would be to study the music of a bluesman who, over the course of his performing career, played both country and urban blues. One such bluesman was known as The Howlin' Wolf.

Howlin' Wolf was born Chester Arthur Burnett on June 10, 1910 somewhere

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<sup>19</sup>Titon, "Introduction to Special Blues Issue," 6.

between West Point and Aberdeen, Mississippi.<sup>20</sup> At age 13, his family moved to a plantation on the Mississippi River Delta near Ruleville, Mississippi. Prior to this move, Burnett's musical experience had been confined to singing in the Baptist church on Sundays. At age 18, his father gave him a guitar and around the same time he met Charley Patton, an influential blues performer.<sup>21</sup> Taking a liking to the young man, Patton showed Burnett the basics of the Delta Blues style. For the next five years, Burnett farmed full time with his family while occasionally singing and playing at weekend fish fries and Saturday night parties.<sup>22</sup>

In 1933, the Burnett family moved onto a plantation near Parkin, Arkansas, where Burnett learned to play harmonica from Sonny Boy Williamson, another influential Delta blues musician.<sup>23</sup> He teamed up with Williamson, abandoned farming, and began moving around the Delta. Playing in bars and on the streets, Burnett became "well known amongst the itinerant musicians of Mississippi...."<sup>24</sup> During his wanderings, Burnett

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<sup>20</sup>Mike Rowe, *Chicago Breakdown* (New York: Drake Publishers, 1975), 135.

<sup>21</sup>Palmer, "Deep Blues," 35. Patton is described as one of the "seminal figures in the first decades of Mississippi Delta Blues." For a biography of Patton, see John Fahey, *Charlie Patton*, (London: Studio Vista, 1970).

<sup>22</sup>Bez Turner, "Howling Wolf-An Appreciation," *Blues Unlimited* 118 (March/April, 1976): 4.

<sup>23</sup>Rowe, "Chicago Breakdown," 136.

<sup>24</sup>Turner, "Howlin' Wolf," 4.

crossed paths with “almost every major Mississippi artist”<sup>25</sup> but he seemed most impressed with Patton’s brand of showmanship. Burnett incorporated some of Patton’s act into his own, performing tricks such as dropping to his knees, or lying on his back while whooping and hollering.<sup>26</sup>

Burnett continued to roam the Delta, singing and playing until 1941 when he was drafted. After his discharge in 1945, Burnett returned to Parkin for a brief period of time. He then farmed on his own in Penton, Mississippi for two years. In 1948, Burnett moved to West Memphis Tennessee, formed a band of his own, and gave up farming in favor of a career in music. Touring Arkansas and Mississippi, Burnett and his band “built a solid reputation for themselves in the Delta jukes.”<sup>27</sup>

Burnett’s career-making break came at age 38, when he was given the chance to perform a weekly show on a West Memphis radio station, KWEM.<sup>28</sup> In between songs, the program advertised grain and farm implements. The show was so successful, that Burnett was offered a job selling advertising to local store owners, a job he held until leaving for Chicago in 1952.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Rowe, “Chicago Breakdown,” 135.

<sup>26</sup>Turner, “Howlin’ Wolf,” 4.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Rowe, “Chicago Breakdown,” 136.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

It was during his stint at KWEM that Burnett first began using the name, Howlin' Wolf, which he had heard on a Funny Papa Smith record.<sup>30</sup> Up until that time, Burnett performed under various stage names, including Big Foot Chester and Bull Cow.<sup>31</sup> However, the name Howlin' Wolf was particularly suited to his "fierce singing style, (which was) punctuated with falsetto whoops and howls."<sup>32</sup>

The success of the radio program opened the door for Wolf's first phonograph recording, made in Memphis in 1950, and released on the Chess record label. The 78 RPM record, *How Many More Years* and *Moanin' at Midnight* sold 60,000 copies,<sup>33</sup> a major hit at the time. The success drew the attention of a rival record label, RPM, and for a period of 18 months, both the Chess and RPM labels fought over the rights to Wolf's recordings.<sup>34</sup> A contractual agreement was finally reached, and in the fall of 1952 Wolf settled down in Chicago, where he recorded exclusively for Chess for the remainder of his career.

In terms of sales, Wolf's recording career peaked in 1956, however he remained a

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<sup>30</sup>Rowe, "Chicago Breakdown," 137.

<sup>31</sup>Turner, "Howlin' Wolf," 4.

<sup>32</sup>Rowe, "Chicago Breakdown," 137.

<sup>33</sup>Turner, "Howlin' Wolf," 5.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

featured artist at Chess.<sup>35</sup> He enjoyed a resurgence in popularity during the mid-1960s, when he toured Europe extensively as part of a Chess blues revival show.<sup>36</sup> During this period, popular British rock and roll bands such as the Rolling Stones began recording his songs and asking him to be the 'warm up' act on their tours.<sup>37</sup> Standing six-foot, six inches, and weighing close to 300 pounds, Howlin' Wolf had a commanding stage presence that few who witnessed it could ever forget. Shouting in a voice born in the bottom of a gravel pit, whooping and hollering, furiously blowing into a harmonica over the wail of electrified instruments, Wolf was capable of 'bringing down the house' while simultaneously "scaring its patrons out of their wits."<sup>38</sup>

Toward the end of his career, Wolf was plagued with chronic kidney trouble and would perform only in cities where he had access to a dialysis machine. A friend recalled, "after each exhaustive treatment, he'd go straight to his gig."<sup>39</sup> Chester Arthur Burnett, a.k.a. The Howlin' Wolf, passed away on January 10, 1976, at the Hines

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<sup>35</sup>Turner, "Howlin' Wolf," 4; Donald E. Wilcock and Buddy Guy, *Damn Right I've Got the Blues* (San Francisco: Woodford Press, 1993), 35.

<sup>36</sup>Willie Dixon and Don Snowden, *I Am the Blues* (New York: DeCapo Press, 1989), 136.

<sup>37</sup>Paul Williams, liner notes to Howlin' Wolf, *More Real Folk Blues* (Chess LP 1512), released January, 1967.

<sup>38</sup>Cub Koda, "Howlin' Wolf," *All Music Guide: CD-ROM Edition* (Big Rapids, MI: Matrix Software, 1993).

<sup>39</sup>Wilcock and Guy, "Damn Right," 141.



Veterans Administration Hospital in Chicago, Illinois.

Howlin' Wolf was a seminal figure in the development of the Chicago blues style. His fierce, growling voice, punctuated by his trademark falsetto 'howl,' carried with it the primitive energy of the country blues he learned as a young man on the Delta.<sup>40</sup> He successfully made the transition between the country style and the urban style, and in doing so, he was one of a handful of artists who shaped and defined the emerging urban blues sound.<sup>41</sup> Literally hundreds of artists (his contemporaries included) have claimed him as an influence, and equal numbers have recorded their own versions of his songs.

This study made use of commercial recordings in order to explore the patterns, themes and imagery in the songs recorded by Howlin' Wolf during the 1950s. Early blues research concentrated on collecting and interpreting the songs of relatively unknown bluesman living in the South, while neglecting the music of artists who had made commercial recordings.<sup>42</sup> In the 1970s, some scholars realized that this lack of treatment of "artists that are considered 'commercial' . . . (had) resulted in major gaps in

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<sup>40</sup>Chris Morris, brochure notes for Howlin' Wolf, *The Real Folk Blues*, MCA-Chess CHD-9273.

<sup>41</sup>Pete Welding, brochure notes for Howlin' Wolf, *Change My Way*, MCA Records CHD-93001.

<sup>42</sup>Pete Lowry, review of *The Devil's Son-in-Law: The Story of Peetie Wheatstraw and His Songs* by Paul Garon in *JEMF Quarterly* 9 (Summer 1973): 85.

knowledge.”<sup>43</sup> This realization led to a number of studies based on commercially available sound recordings, including efforts by Titon, Barnie, Taft, and Oliver.<sup>44</sup> The research undertaken here is based on this more recent methodological paradigm.

Data collection consisted of transcribing the lyrics of songs written and performed by Howlin' Wolf. A convenience sample of songs was drawn from three commercially available compact discs. After transcription, the lyrics were analyzed for patterns, themes and images that characterize either the country blues or urban blues genres; or are common to both. A unique feature of this study was to analyze the lyrics in the context of three different blues theories: *the bluesman as fictional persona*,<sup>45</sup> *oral-formulas in blues composition*,<sup>46</sup> and *thematic pattern in lyrics*.<sup>47</sup> These theories provided a basic framework for the exploration of Howlin' Wolf's music during the 1950s; a time when his country-based music helped define the emerging characteristics of the Chicago style of urban blues.

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Jeff Todd Titon, "Thematic Pattern in Downhome Blues Lyrics," *Journal of American Folk* 90 (July-September 1977); John Barnie, "Oral Formulas in the Country Blues," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 42 (January-December 1978); Michael Taft, "The Lyrics of Race Record Blues, 1920-1942: A Semantic Approach to the Structural Analysis of a Formulaic System," *Dissertation Abstracts International* 38 (May 1978): 6862-63A; Paul Oliver, *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

<sup>45</sup>Dennis Jarrett, "The Singer and the Bluesman: Formulations of Personality in the Lyrics of the Blues," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 42 (January-December 1978): 31-37.

<sup>46</sup>Barnie, "Oral Formulas in the Country Blues," 30-51.

<sup>47</sup>Titon, "Thematic Pattern in Downhome Blues Lyrics," 316-330.

## Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

### *Introduction*

Some of the earliest blues research was carried out by sociologists Howard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson, who collected the songs of black Americans at work and play in the South in the early 1920s. Blues research in this vein continued sporadically through the 1960s. This folkloric paradigm resulted in primarily ethnographic studies, carried out mainly in the deep South, that concentrated on traditional or country blues. During this time span, folklorists eschewed commercially successful artists, considering their music somehow 'tainted by success.' The rationale for this attitude was that the very act of recording a blues song transformed it from a purely black cultural expression into something less valuable, by virtue of the rules and regulations imposed on black artists by the white-owned record companies. The fallacy of this argument is that black artists recorded their music for black listeners, who bought the records despite whatever restrictions may have been imposed on the artists. Thus commercial recordings can still be considered valid expressions of black culture.

The folklorists' reliance on field work and emphasis on the so called 'pure' practitioners of blues music came to be criticized for overlooking other important aspects of the blues, such as the relationship between the blues and black society.<sup>1</sup> When

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<sup>1</sup>Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966) and LeRoi Jones, *The Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1963) use blues music as a framework for discussing the development of black culture.

investigators began to use recordings as primary artifacts, they validated the words of folklorist John Wesley Work: "the phonograph recording of these (blues) songs does not destroy their 'folkness'."<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, listening to records has become an acceptable method of data gathering. The majority of research under review for this study has relied on data derived by listening to phonograph recordings.

Frequent topics of blues research include: the singing, scales, lyricism, origins of the blues, blues ideology, the 12 bar format, the development of a commercial blues market, and the singers' own points of view.<sup>3</sup> With such diverse areas of interest, it is more meaningful to discuss the literature in terms of three major themes in the research: 1) those efforts which have looked to the performances and lyrics for glimpses into black society; 2) attempts to understand the social function served by playing the blues; and 3)

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<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Phillip McGuire, "Black Music Critics and the Classic Blues Singers," *The Black Perspective in Music* 14 (Spring 1986): 105.

<sup>3</sup>Burt Feintuch, review of *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in Folk Blues* by David Evans, In *Journal of American Folk* 96 (July-September 1983): 489. The reader interested in the history of the blues should note that Paul Oliver, *The Meaning of the Blues* (New York: Collier, 1963); LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow, 1963); and Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966) have contributed thorough chronicles of the history of the blues. Readers interested in the development of different geographical blues styles should note that Samuel Charters, *The Country Blues* (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1959); William Ferris, Jr., *Blues From the Delta* (London: Studio Vista, 1970); Mike Rowe, *Chicago Breakdown* (New York: Drake Publishers, 1975); Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1977); Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues* (New York: Viking Press, 1981); and David Evans, *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) have significantly advanced our understanding of the blues styles associated with specific geographic regions.

techniques of blues composition. The literature review that follows consists of two parts. Part One discusses the three major research themes; and Part Two consists of a focused discussion of the blues tradition, the country blues style, and the urban blues style. Given an understanding of blues traditions and styles, it is possible to begin exploring this study's central research question: what happened to the patterns, themes and images in Howlin' Wolf's music when he moved from the rural south to the urban North?

#### Part One: Overview of Major Themes

##### *Glimpses into Black Society*

Researchers that look to the blues for glimpses into black life use the music as a means of portraying and understanding the people. A basic tenet is that the blues "invariably reflects the social environment in which it develops (sic)."<sup>4</sup> The idea being that the blues reflects not only the concerns of the performer, but also those of black society; otherwise there would be no audiences.<sup>5</sup> The blues is seen as one part of a continual process of social and cultural change.<sup>6</sup> A central point of debate within this

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<sup>4</sup>Robert Springer, "The Regulatory Function of the Blues," *Black Perspective in Music* 4 (Fall 1976): 286.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 279.

<sup>6</sup>John F. Szwed, "Musical Adaptation Among Afro-Americans," *Journal of American Folklore* 82 (April-June 1969); Eddie S. Meadows, "African World View in Blues: A Prefatory Analysis," *Blues Unlimited* 148/149 (Winter 1987); Jonathan L. Kamin, "Rhythm & Blues in White America: Rock and Roll as Acculturation and Perceptual Learning," *Dissertation Abstracts International* 37 (September 1986); and Robert W. Stephens, "Soul: A Historical Reconstruction of Continuity and Change in Black Popular Music," *The Black Perspective in Music* 12 (Spring 1984).

paradigm is whether the blues reflects an African world view<sup>7</sup> (as opposed to a Euro-centric world view) and is a primarily a product of Africa, re-shaped through the accumulated black experience in America; or whether it is primarily Anglo-American music, “refashioned by African sensibilities.”<sup>8</sup>

Some view the social and musical history of the black American as causally related phenomenon, paired elements in an on-going “appropriation-revitalization process.”<sup>9</sup> In this view, black music is seen as a reference point for black solidarity. As a style of music emerges from the black community it is subsequently appropriated and commercialized by white America. The black community responds by revitalizing its music into a new sound it can call its own. In this view, the “song forms and performances are themselves models of social behavior reflecting strategies of adaptation to human and natural environments.”<sup>10</sup> This theory may be useful explaining the links between gospel, the blues, jazz, soul, funk, and rap.

A popular way to look at black culture has been to analyze blues lyrics, looking at patterns and themes in the subject matter; and at how blacks use language in composing

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<sup>7</sup>The concept of ‘world view’ is discussed by John M. Hellmann, in “‘I’m a Monkey’: The Influence of the Black American Blues Argot on the Rolling Stones,” *Journal of American Folklore* 86 (October-December 1973): 367-368.

<sup>8</sup>Szwed, “Musical Adaptation,” 112.

<sup>9</sup>Charles Keil, review of *The Blues People: Negro Music in White America* by LeRoi Jones, In *Ethnomusicology* 9 (January 1965): 62.

<sup>10</sup>Szwed, “Musical Adaptation,” 112.

lyrics. It has been suggested that these patterns and themes were the result of “the pressures of a dominant white culture.”<sup>11</sup> One author has suggested that freedom from mistreatment and racial discrimination were the “overarching themes in postwar downhome blues lyrics.”<sup>12</sup> On a similar global level, blues lyrics frequently refer to male/female relationships and often display patterns of imagery and themes dealing with a complaint (such as an unfaithful spouse) and a coping strategy (such as leaving town.)<sup>13</sup> Patterns and themes of this nature tend to support the notion that blues lyrics reflect a male, working class view of love, sex, and economic concerns, while ignoring the “feelings and aspirations of middle-class black Americans”<sup>14</sup> – issues such as education, raising children, and church. This brings up one of the contradictions in the blues: the expression of a secular world view that contrasts to the religious view of the majority of blacks. This idea of a the sacred-secular dichotomy is explored by Keil and Szwed, where the blues is seen as a form of dialectical tension between the sacred and the profane; between the Saturday night party and church the next morning.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Hellmann, “Blues Argot,” 367.

<sup>12</sup>Jeff Todd Titon, “Thematic Patterns in Downhome Blues Lyrics,” *Journal of American Folklore* 90 (July-September 1977) 323.

<sup>13</sup>Loretta S. Burns, “A Stylistic Analysis of Blues Lyrics,” *Dissertation Abstracts International* 38 (May 1978): 6687A.

<sup>14</sup>Jeff Todd Titon, review of *The Legacy of the Blues – Art and Lives of 12 Great Bluesmen*, by Samuel Charters, In *Ethnomusicology* 22 (September 1978): 521.

<sup>15</sup>Keil, “Urban Blues,” 40-41; Szwed, “Musical Adaptation,” 113-117.

Analyzing the lyrics has also yielded insight into ways that blacks use the English language. Ferris describes a “language of blues . . . a cultural code in the sense that few whites would grasp its sexual and racial levels of meaning.”<sup>16</sup> The language of this ‘cultural code’ allowed blues singers to conceal protest in their songs; and also provided a way to sneak overt sexual references past record company censors. For example, the mule represents the white farm boss, and in mistreating the mule, the singer can tell a tale of getting even with the boss. As sex is a frequent topic in the blues, many words carry a sexual connotation; the words *rooster* and *spike driver* are common blues references to male sexual prowess.<sup>17</sup>

Another way to look at blues and black society has been to explore the role of the performer. This viewpoint has been made possible due to the northward migration of African-Americans from the South, which created a change in the social function of blues music. The role of a blues musician changed from one of performing primarily part-time at informal social gatherings to that of a full-time professional entertainer.<sup>18</sup> It is traditional in black culture (as in some African cultures<sup>19</sup>) to place a high value on

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<sup>16</sup>William R. Ferris, Jr., “Racial Repertoires Among Blues Performers,” *Ethnomusicology* 14 (September 1970): 440.

<sup>17</sup>Hellmann, “Blues Argot,” 369.

<sup>18</sup>Christopher Lornell, “The Effect of Social and Economic Changes on the Uses of the Blues,” *JEMF Quarterly* 11 (Spring 1975): 43-48.

<sup>19</sup>Meadows, “World View,” 18.



verbal eloquence and it has been suggested that the same holds true for song.<sup>20</sup> Aware of their cultural status, blues performers consciously project an image toward their audience ranging from stylish self-confidence to self-pity.<sup>21</sup> They also share themes related to their lives as performers, such as: the performer's first instrument and learning to play it (e.g. Howlin Wolf's teacher, Charlie Patton); how the bluesman viewed his role in a community where the blues were regarded as the devil's music; and what inspired the bluesmen to start (and keep on) playing the blues.<sup>22</sup>

#### *Function of the Blues*

'I've got the blues' is a slang expression that describes a type of melancholy once called the 'blue devils' in Elizabethan England. 'The blues' as both a phrase and a state of mind was familiar to blacks and whites at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> The idea that blues singing serves as a "psychological release of emotion"<sup>24</sup> and an outlet

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<sup>20</sup>Harriet J. Ottenheimer, "Catharsis, Communication, and Evocation: Alternative Views of the Sociopsychological Functions of Blues Singing," *Ethnomusicology* 23 (January 1979): 83.

<sup>21</sup>Dennis Jarrett, "The Singer and the Bluesman: Formulations of Personality in the Lyrics of the Blues," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* (January-December 1978): 37.

<sup>22</sup>Barry L. Pearson, "The Life Story of the Blues Musician: An Analysis of the Traditions of Oral Self-Portrayal," *Dissertation Abstracts International* 38 (February 1978): 4971A.

<sup>23</sup>Palmer, "Deep Blues," 25.

<sup>24</sup>Ottenheimer, "Catharsis," 75.

for “various types of social and personal frustrations”<sup>25</sup> (the process of which supplants the music’s entertainment value) is a long standing tenet of blues research. Slavery, segregation, and discrimination serve as the justification for the ‘blues function’ research paradigm.

Keil made the distinction between the individual catharsis of the rural blues singer and the more collective audience-directed catharsis of the urban blues singer.<sup>26</sup> Tilton described blues performances as a type of ‘secular ceremony,’ where after a blues performance, both singer and audience “feel better.”<sup>27</sup> In the sharing that occurs in a blues performance, “the performer finds his burden easier to bear as a result of musical communion with a group.”<sup>28</sup> A blues performance results in “satisfaction and comfort both to the singer and to his companions.”<sup>29</sup>

Pearson discusses the role of blues music as a philosophy and a guide for life. One approach to playing the blues has been to view it as both an inward directed experience for the performer and at the same time an outward directed expression toward

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<sup>25</sup>Simon J. Bronner, review of *Blues From the Delta*, by William Ferris, In *Journal of American Folklore* 94 (April-June 1981): 244.

<sup>26</sup>Keil, “Urban Blues,” 76.

<sup>27</sup>Jeff Todd Tilton, *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis*, (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 33.

<sup>28</sup>Harry Oster, *Living Country Blues* (New York: Minerva Press, 1975), 59.

<sup>29</sup>Paul Oliver, *The Meaning of the Blues* (New York: Collier, 1963) quoted in Ottenheimer, “Catharsis,” 75.

a social group.<sup>30</sup> The blues is seen as a personal reaction to life's pain and sorrow; portrayed all the while by a talented performer who may or may not be "personally involved in the emotional content."<sup>31</sup> In this view, we see how Howlin' Wolf can sing the lyrics, *One summer day, she went away/She gone and left me, she gone to stay*; with riveting conviction, while in reality, he was married to the same woman his entire adult life.

It has been posited that the first generation of blacks born into freedom after the Civil War were so disappointed by the disparity between what they hoped freedom would bring and the stark reality of segregation, that they were compelled to release their feelings of discouragement by singing the songs that have since evolved into the blues.<sup>32</sup> As slaves, blacks did not sing what we now refer to as blues music, because "the masters and overseers did not welcome exhibitions of grief."<sup>33</sup> However, spirituals and work songs (often called 'field hollers') *were* allowed because they seemed to help slaves "abide the merciless rigors of field work."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Barry Lee Pearson, review of *Blues From The Delta* by William Ferris, Jr. In *Journal of American Folklore* 85 (April-June 1972): 193.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>David Evans, *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982).

<sup>33</sup>Patrick J. O'Connor, "Discovering the Rich Differences in the Blues: The Rural and Urban Genres," *The Midwest Quarterly* 33 (Autumn 1991): 30.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

Proponents of functional blues theories propose that the principle purpose of blues singing is the release of pent up emotions (the result of experiencing racial discrimination on a daily basis) that express ideas and complaints not acceptable in everyday discourse in a predominantly white society.<sup>35</sup> “Behind every blues...is a buildup of experience and emotion which needs an outlet.”<sup>36</sup> This release is commonly referred to as ‘catharsis’ or ‘liberating catharsis’<sup>37</sup> The “slow, haunting” blues sung near the turn of the nineteenth century has been described as a “cathartic dialogue between a burdened soul and his or her guitar, banjo, harmonica, or piano.”<sup>38</sup>

There are three assumptions of the cathartic view of the function of the blues:

- 1) some emotions and topics are so inflammatory that they can't be expressed in speech;
- 2) these emotions and topics *can* be expressed in song, however; and 3) expressing these feelings results in psychological relief. Palmer writes of the Delta blues as containing

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<sup>35</sup>Harold Courlander, *Negro Folk Music U.S.A.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963); Paul Oliver, *The Meaning of the Blues* (New York: Collier, 1963); Alan Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964); Melville Herskovits, “Freudian Mechanisms in Primitive Negro Psychology,” in *The New World Negro: Selected Papers in AfroAmerican Studies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1966).

<sup>36</sup>Courlander, *Negro Folk Music U.S.A.*, quoted in Ottenheimer, “Catharsis,” 75.

<sup>37</sup>Springer, “Regulatory Function,” 278.

<sup>38</sup>Lawrence N. Redd, “Rock! It’s Still Rhythm and Blues,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 13 (Spring 1985): 33.

“aggressive impulses that had to be severely repressed in everyday life.”<sup>39</sup> Merriam, in 1964, described blues singing as “a psychological release for the participants” allowing them to express “ideas and emotions not revealed in ordinary discourse.”<sup>40</sup>

It has also been argued that blues music is a way of releasing feelings of aggression for blacks, a way of maintaining distance from their troubles. As a source of tension release, the blues plays “an important role of social control within the black group, regulating the flow of aggressiveness, channeling it away from its normal target, thereby preventing any white backlash from coming down on the individual and his group.”<sup>41</sup> Through the use of black language code, the blues provides the singer with “an indirect way of protesting his condition.”<sup>42</sup> Singing the blues is a means of “escape in fantasy from the repressions imposed upon him by society.”<sup>43</sup> For some blues musicians, the blues is an “outlet – a way of expressing powerful feelings directly and immediately.”<sup>44</sup> Singing or listening to the blues is a way to handle the highs and lows of

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<sup>39</sup>Palmer, “Deep Blues,” 18.

<sup>40</sup>Alan Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964) quoted in Ottenheimer, “Catharsis,” 75.

<sup>41</sup>Springer, “Regulatory Function,” 279.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 283.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 279.

<sup>44</sup>David Sidman, “Chicago Bob Nelson and Luther Johnson: The Blues Today,” *JEMF Quarterly* 12 (Winter 1976): 188.

daily existence, of coping with “the absurdity of life in America as it appears to blacks.”<sup>45</sup>

Ottenheimer offers a dissenting view of the cathartic function of the blues, rejecting the theory that repressed emotions are released in blues singing. In comparing the speech patterns and lyric patterns of twelve blues singers in New Orleans, she discovered that they were “not using the blues to sing what they cannot say.”<sup>46</sup> She concluded that blues singing was an emotional event which served a “mood matching function between singer and audience, but did not serve as a catharsis for either singer or listener.”<sup>47</sup> She offers alternative functions of the blues: as emotional intensification (evocation) and communication.<sup>48</sup> Blues singing may evoke a ‘blue feeling’ in the audience, or match a feeling that already exists. When the bluesman is successful in mood matching or intensifying the mood of the audience, he also experiences an emotional satisfaction similar to enjoying one’s work. Based on the similarities between lyrics and speech patterns in her subjects, Ottenheimer hypothesizes that the blues may also serve a communicative function. This view is also expressed by Oliver, who states,

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<sup>45</sup>Springer, “Regulatory Function,” 286.

<sup>46</sup>Ottenheimer, “Catharsis,” 79.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 82.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 79.

“Song, speech and music are frequently one in the blues.”<sup>49</sup>

Plausible as her theory may be, Ottenheimer is a lone dissenter in her opposition to the blues as catharsis. Keil maintains that the blues is a “special domain of Negro culture, wherein black men have proved and preserved their humanity. This domain...may be broadly defined as entertainment from the white or public point of view and as ritual, drama, or dialectical catharsis from the Negro or theoretical standpoint.”<sup>50</sup> In this view, the blues is both a source of black cultural resistance to white dominance and a means of promoting a self-identity for blacks. The blues is seen to represent “a legacy of struggle, of defiance, of joy, and ultimately of the power that energizes black self-identity.”<sup>51</sup> Bobby Robinson, the Chicago record producer who ‘rediscovered’ Elmore James, has put this same concept into less lofty terms. He urges the blues listener to, “close your eyes, you’ll see the slave ships, the auction blocks, the cotton fields, the bare backs straining, totin’ that barge, liftin’ that bale. You’ll smell the sweat, feel the lash, taste the tears, see the blood, and relive 300 years of the Blues.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Oliver, “Meaning of the Blues,” 9.

<sup>50</sup>Keil, “Urban Blues,” 15.

<sup>51</sup>Barry Lee Cooper, review of *Looking Up at Down: The Emergence of a Blues Culture*, by William Barlow, In *Journal of American Culture* 14 (Spring 1991): 91.

<sup>52</sup>Bobby Robinson, notes to Elmore James, *History of Elmore James*, Trip Records TLP 8007- 2.

*Techniques of Composition*

With a few exceptions, almost all of the research into the techniques of composition deal with the blues as a 'rule-governed system.' The investigator attempts to discover rules about patterns in the music or text. Interest in this area has ranged from patterns found in vocal pitch, to rules a performer uses in creating rhyming couplets.<sup>53</sup> While some authors, such as Szwed and Jones, take exception to the rule-governed view,<sup>54</sup> it is well accepted by many blues researchers. A major subset of rule governed research involves interest in discovering the 'formulas' that bluesmen use to create songs.

When researchers discuss the text of blues songs in relation to 'oral-formulaic composition,' they are referring to the concept that "a singer . . . creates his songs in the act of performance . . . with the aid of an extensive repertoire of formulas."<sup>55</sup> The basis for these formulas is a half-line unit of two or three stresses (e.g. *My mama she done told me*) which singers combine with other half-line formulas during a performance, yielding a formulaic stanza. These memorized formulas allow the singer to create rhyming stanzas

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<sup>53</sup>R. Douglas Clark, "Pitch Structures in Vocal Blues Melody," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 42 (January-December 1978) and Michael Taft, "Willie McTell's Rules of Rhyme: A Brief Excursion Into Blues Phonetics," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 42 (January-December 1978).

<sup>54</sup>John F. Szwed, review of *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, by LeRoi Jones, In *Ethnomusicology* 9 (January 1965): 63.

<sup>55</sup>John Barnie, "Oral Formulas in the Country Blues," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 42 (January -December 1978): 40. See also, Michael Taft, "The Lyrics of Race Record Blues, 1920 -1942: A Semantic Approach to the Structural Analysis of a Formulaic System," *Dissertation Abstracts International* 38 (May 1978): 6862-63A.



that make sense. For example, Elmore James combines the half line units, *Worried 'bout my baby/She's gone away from me* into a formulaic stanza.<sup>56</sup> Evans found that blues singers rely on these formulaic stanzas and will occasionally vary them from performance to performance.<sup>57</sup> The formulaic half-line units and stanzas allow the singer to mix and match ideas or themes in order to create new compositions. Improvisation in the blues allows the singer to be an individualist while at the same time performing songs the audience wants to hear.

A singer will “often show a preference for a particular coupling of formulas, so that in *his* blues that coupling becomes ossified – a set piece committed to memory.”<sup>58</sup> Elmore James does this in his cover of Robert Johnson’s *Dust My Broom*. The song uses a three-line stanza structure, and Johnson sings, *I’m gonna write a letter, telephone every town I know/I’m gonna write a letter, telephone every town I know/If I can’t find her in West Helena/She’s in east Monroe I know*.<sup>59</sup> James uses the same first two lines of the stanza, but substitutes *If I don’t find her in Mississippi/She’s over in west Memphis, I know* for the final line.

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<sup>56</sup>Elmore James, “I’m Worried,” *King of the Slide Guitar*, Capricorn 942006-2.

<sup>57</sup>David Evans, “Techniques of Blues Composition Among Black Folk Singers,” *Journal of American Folklore* 87 (July-September 1974): 246.

<sup>58</sup>John Barnie, “Formulaic Line and Stanzas in the Country Blues,” *Ethnomusicology* 22 (September 1978): 457.

<sup>59</sup>West Helena, Arkansas and Monroe, Mississippi.

Because these formulaic stanzas occur so often among a wide range of performers and geographic locations, they are thought to reflect both the values of the singer and his social group. "Pleasure in the concise expression of a widely held truth goes far to explain the cohesion and wide distribution of such stanzas in the country blues."<sup>60</sup> While there is always the potential for individual variation on a line, some lines (and stanzas) "express a recurrent idea so effectively that many singers...repeat them with little or no alteration."<sup>61</sup> This concept of social values is also the basis for the theory that the bluesman presents "a kind of fictional self . . . distinct from the singer-composer."<sup>62</sup> A singer projects an image which is based on the use of lyrical formulas that are familiar to the audience, and provide the singer with "a generic personality, epitomizing the persona of a bluesman."<sup>63</sup>

It is important to remember that within this the rule-governed paradigm, half-line units and formulaic stanzas are not "rigid clichés (but) substitution systems."<sup>64</sup> A singer's "mind is free to think about the words. Even if they have been memorized, the words do

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<sup>60</sup>Barnie, "Formulaic Line and Stanzas," 458.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 460.

<sup>62</sup>Jarrett, "The Singer and the Bluesman," 31-32.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>64</sup>Jeff Todd Titon, "Everyday I Have the Blues: Improvisation and Daily Life," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 42 (January-December 1978): 77.

not return by rote; they must be retrieved or invented before they are sung.”<sup>65</sup>

### *Criticism of Past Research*

The body of blues literature has not evolved without its critics, and much of the criticism focuses on methods and subject matter. Evans noted that, “research has tended to focus on the lives and lifestyles of blues singers, on the content of the songs and its relationship to Black American Society, and on the history of the blues genre.”<sup>66</sup>

Historical methods are criticized for being “strong on history and biography...but weak on almost all other accounts,”<sup>67</sup> and others would like to see an emphasis placed on the process of creating the blues, rather than on the song as text<sup>68</sup> or the “more colorful eccentricities of the performers.”<sup>69</sup>

Titon raises a complaint about research that emphasizes the “blues song as an ‘item,’ an artifact of material culture contained in a tangible, physical thing (the disc) that can be housed, catalogued, transcribed and analyzed as ‘text’ in itself.”<sup>70</sup> His concern is

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 90.

<sup>66</sup>Evans, “Techniques of Composition,” 242.

<sup>67</sup>Kip Lornell, review of “Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis,” by Jeff Todd Titon, In *JEMF Quarterly* 14 (Summer 1978): 104.

<sup>68</sup>Barry Lee Pearson, review of *Blues From the Delta*, by William Ferris, Jr., In *Journal of American Folklore* 85 (April-June 1972): 195.

<sup>69</sup>Palmer, “Deep Blues,” 18.

<sup>70</sup>Jeff Todd Titon, review of *Blues Lyric Poetry: An Anthology*, by Michael Taft, In *Ethnomusicology* 30 (Fall 1986): 558.

that emphasizing the artifact tends to ignore the vital process of creating the blues. Palmer contends that the blues cannot be understood by analyzing records or even performances. To understand the blues, one needs to appreciate that the blues are created by "particular people who (make) particular personal and artistic choices in a particular place at a particular time."<sup>71</sup>

While some have criticized blues research with regard to methods and topics of interest, others have taken to task the ethnocentrism of individual scholars. "Too much attention is focused on the same tired, old, worn stereotypes and myths as appear in earlier books about Black folk. Some day in the future, blues specialists will come to realize that Black folk are pretty much like other folk except for the colour of their skins, and that the blues they produce is simply another kind of folk music."<sup>72</sup> Another author points out that, "more recent research in Black culture has recognized the need to be 'afrocentric' rather than ethnocentric."<sup>73</sup>

However, one author offers a different perspective on the 'problem' of ethnocentrism and the blues. In documenting the influence of wandering Mexican minstrels (trovadors) on the blues, Narváez contends that by focusing only on "African role-model origins blues scholars might well be neglecting a much more obvious and

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<sup>71</sup>Palmer, "Deep Blues," 19.

<sup>72</sup>Eileen Southern, review of *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis*, by Jeff Todd Titon, In *The Black Perspective in Music* 6 (Spring 1978): 97.

<sup>73</sup>Meadows, "World View," 18.

geographically immediate model in the Mexican trovador.”<sup>74</sup>

While these points are not lost upon the author of this study, in keeping with with post-positivist axiology,<sup>75</sup> this author believes that objectivity is impossible and that any endeavor will necessarily reflect the ‘centrism’ of the investigator. Rather than try to uncover some hidden universal truth about the blues, this research will offer one person’s best attempt to explain what can be learned about the blues artistry of Howlin’ Wolf through *listening* to what his music says.

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<sup>74</sup>Peter Narváez, “Afro-American and Mexican Street Singers: An Ethnohistorical Hypothesis,” *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 42 (January-December 1978): 78.

<sup>75</sup>For a concise summary of the axiological assumptions of the post-positivist paradigm of inquiry see Yvonne S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985), 38. See Chapter Seven for a comprehensive treatment of the role of value systems in inquiry.

## Literature Review Part Two: The Blues Tradition, Country Blues, and Urban Blues

### *The Blues Tradition*

Throughout the literature of the blues, the phrase 'the blues tradition' is used repeatedly, as if everyone knows exactly what the blues tradition is. Yet, a concise definition of 'the blues tradition' is hard to come by without resorting to tautology. There seems to be no short summary of whatever the social, cultural, and musical elements are that comprise the blues tradition. Since an understanding of the blues tradition is essential to this study, the following discussion attempts to piece together major characteristics of the blues tradition based on numerous fragmentary references from the literature.

When discussing the blues tradition from a musical perspective, it is important to remember that the blues is an amalgamation of a diverse range of musical influences. "Blues is a musical idiom that has drawn on numerous sources, including jump-ups, field hollers (which it most closely resembles melodically), songster ballads (which it borrowed some imagery and some guitar patterns), church music (which influenced the singing of many blues musicians), and African-derived percussive music (which furnished some rhythmic ideas)."<sup>76</sup> However, some generalizations may be made about the blues tradition: it encompasses elements of musical practices (such as individual, self-accompanied performances) and lyrical approaches (such as the use of plain language); it

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<sup>76</sup>Palmer, "Deep Blues," 43.

has a primarily rural, male orientation;<sup>77</sup> and its performing styles feature “grainy vocal textures and an emphasis on rhythmic momentum.”<sup>78</sup> There are however, a variety of other factors that influence the evolution of the blues tradition, ranging from African cultural influences to commercial recording industry policies. Within a diverse range of influences, separate geographical, commercial, African, social, and lyrical characteristics emerge as common themes. Taken together, these characteristics may all come to mind when speaking of the ‘blues tradition;’ however, sometimes it is helpful to use the phrase ‘blues tradition’ in conjunction with a qualifier – such as, the lyrical blues tradition or the geographic blues tradition.

A way of looking at the geographic component of the blues tradition is to consider it a fusion of many ‘local’ blues traditions, unique to a certain geographic area. Rowe cautions against thinking of blues styles in terms of state boundaries; rather it is “more accurate to define a style by a county or sometimes a village even”.<sup>79</sup> In the early part of the 20th century, lack of communication (some remote areas of the south were out of the range of commercial radio broadcasts)<sup>80</sup> and geographic isolation promoted various

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<sup>77</sup>Bronner, review of “Blues From the Delta,” 244.

<sup>78</sup>Palmer, “Deep Blues,” 41.

<sup>79</sup>Mike Rowe, *Chicago Breakdown* (New York: Drake Publishers, 1975), 11.

<sup>80</sup>Michael Haralambos, *Right On: From Blues to Soul in Black America* (New York: Drake Publishers, 1975), 30.

style peculiar to a specific region or community.<sup>81</sup> With little else in terms of recreation in these isolated communities, “musicians were plentiful...the most accomplished of them were in demand for picnics and house parties and obviously had the greatest influence”<sup>82</sup> in creating a local style. Drew, Mississippi qualifies as one such locality, having been home to Charley Patton and Tommy Johnson, “two of the most celebrated of country performers to record in the 1920s.”<sup>83</sup> Bogalusa, Louisiana is another local area with a modern day blues tradition. A number of the musicians in Bogalusa learned to play country blues in their original hometown of Tylertown, Mississippi. A 1971 recording of these musicians demonstrates the same blues tradition played in Bogalusa.<sup>84</sup>

The performers in these localities comprise a “musical network characterized by certain shared features of repertoire and style,”<sup>85</sup> the result of their social relationships and experiences in the community. A geographic blues tradition emerges as musicians socialize and share experiences with other blues players from the same region. These shared experiences might include: identifying with a musical role model at an early age; attending and then playing at ‘suppers;’ and how the bluesman acquired his first

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<sup>81</sup>Rowe, “Chicago Breakdown,” 11.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

<sup>83</sup>Feintuch, review of “Big Road Blues,” 489.

<sup>84</sup>Roosevelt Holts, *Roosevelt Holts and His Friends* (Arhoolie 1057).

<sup>85</sup>Feintuch, review of “Big Road Blues,” 489.



instrument.<sup>86</sup> All of these traditions can be seen in the life of Howlin' Wolf. His local musical role model was Charley Patton; his first performances were at fish fry suppers; and his father gave him his first guitar.

The commercial record industry was another influence on the blues tradition, with its censorship policies and the exploitative effects of its 'race record' system.<sup>87</sup> Since a majority of blues lyrics deal with relationships between the sexes, which Keil describes as "poetic yet starkly realistic,"<sup>88</sup> in order to "get past record company vigilance,"<sup>89</sup> blacks developed a "coherent sexual code"<sup>90</sup> for use when referring to the sex act. Thus, in this way, there is even a place for the automobile in the blues. With its power, comfort, and the slang connotations of 'riding,' the automobile "developed into a an obvious symbol of sexual potency early in its history."<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>86</sup>Barry Lee Pearson, review of *From Blues to Pop: The Autobiography of Leonard 'Baby Doo' Caston*, by Jeff Todd Titon, In *Journal of American Folklore* 91 (January-March 1978): 608.

<sup>87</sup>Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis* (Urban, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1977); and Philip McGuire, "Black Music Critics and the Classic Blues Singers," *The Black Perspective in Music* 14 (Spring 1986). For a discussion of the history of the term 'race records' (a term applied to recordings made by blacks during the 1920s and '30s) see Redd, "Rock!," 34.

<sup>88</sup>Keil, "Urban Blues," 53.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., 66.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid.

<sup>91</sup>Paul H. Fryer, "'Brown Eyed Handsome Man': Chuck Berry and the Blues Tradition," *Phylon* 27 (Spring 1981): 64.

It has been argued that the commercial pressure of the recording companies to launch an artist who sounded like their competitor's best selling artist stereotyped the blues and robbed artists of their individuality. Policies such as this may be one of the reasons that folklorists so adamantly avoided blues artists who had made records, since recordings of the blues are "not a sensitive barometer of black taste, but . . . the commercial interpretation . . . of the mood of the black masses."<sup>92</sup>

The vocal and lyrical characteristics of the blues tradition owe much to African cultural and musical elements. It has been suggested that the African characteristics contained in the field hollers of slaves "distilled the very essence of innumerable African vocal traditions."<sup>93</sup> In surveying a broad range of black musical styles, one investigator found that "Afro-American musical traditions rest on an African base stressing rhythm and spontaneous improvisation."<sup>94</sup> A major African contribution to black music of all styles has been the use of polyrhythm, where a single musician executes "elaborate rhythm patterns in several different meters simultaneously."<sup>95</sup>

Another African tradition (by way of the field holler) that had a major impact on the blues was the use of falling pitch (usually by flattening the third tone of the

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<sup>92</sup>Rowe, "Chicago Breakdown," 15.

<sup>93</sup>Palmer, "Deep Blues," 33.

<sup>94</sup>Kamin, "Rhythm and Blues in White America," 1805A.

<sup>95</sup>Palmer, "Deep Blues," 38.

pentatonic blues scale) to signify rising emotion. Blues singers frequently use falling pitches to “raise the emotional temperature of a performance.”<sup>96</sup> Players in the Delta tradition also used falling fifths, “often with shattering emotional effect.”<sup>97</sup>

Whooping, a type of yodeling, is another African tradition that was prevalent in field hollers. Also known as *octave jumping*, whooping made the transition from the Delta to Chicago, via Delta-bred singers such as Howlin’ Wolf and Muddy Waters.<sup>98</sup>

Voice masking is an African vocal technique that found its way into the blues by way of a sacred musical influence. In Africa, some of the masks used in village rituals had mirliton (a toy pipe resembling a recorder) membranes mounted in the mouthpieces so when sung through, the voice took on a “buzzing timbre, not unlike a kazoo.”<sup>99</sup> Voice masking was used often by “seminal figures of...Delta blues.”<sup>100</sup>

African influence is also evident in lyrical traditions of the blues. These include the use of ironic humor, frank treatment of male/female relationships, a mixing of sacred

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<sup>96</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid., 35.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid. The author of this study witnessed a variation of this vocal technique while in Haiti in 1978. A street musician sang to passers-by through a thin membrane of uncertain origins while accompanying himself on a single-stringed instrument fashioned from a rusty one-gallon gasoline can, a long stick, and a piece of wire.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid.

and profane imagery, and the trading of insults.<sup>101</sup> In Africa, “quick-witted improvisers were highly valued”<sup>102</sup> and the use of innuendo is consistent with the African tradition of indirection.<sup>103</sup> The use of irony can be found “in all Afro-American songs to which the blues is related.”<sup>104</sup>

In addition to the African influences on lyrical themes, there are several distinctly American social characteristics of the blues tradition, one being that the blues evolved under conditions of poverty. “The blues have always been a collective expression of the ideology and character of black people situated at the bottom of the social order in America.”<sup>105</sup> When the blues began to take form in the early 1900s, there was a wide cultural gap between prosperous blacks in the North and the working poor blacks of the South; and the blues “starkly reflected the moods and notions of the underclass blacks – not the entire race.”<sup>106</sup> For blacks tied to the almost feudal system of sharecropping, the blues is seen as a way to express the “helplessness and impotence one feels in the face of

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<sup>101</sup>Trading insults (or *signifying*) is a wide-spread black cultural phenomenon. For an concise overview of this frequently practiced ritual, see Carol D. Lee, *Signifying as a Scaffold for Literary Interpretation* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1993), 11-16.

<sup>102</sup>Palmer, “Deep Blues,” 36.

<sup>103</sup>Springer, “Regulatory Function,” 282.

<sup>104</sup>Ibid., 284.

<sup>105</sup>Cooper, review of “Looking Up at Down,” 91.

<sup>106</sup>O’Connor, “Rich Differences in the Blues,” 41.

a miserable, but unchangeable situation.”<sup>107</sup>

Based on black dissatisfaction with life in a white dominated society, other traditions have evolved, one being the importance of the hero in black culture. During the Reconstruction, traveling black musicians, known as *songsters* moved away from performing popular sheet music and began to create ballads of their own about events in black life, including songs that “celebrated black badmen (and) black heroes.”<sup>108</sup> The hero figure, who strives toward “immortality or notoriety,”<sup>109</sup> has given rise to the “boastful bluesman (who) uses his imagination to create himself anew,”<sup>110</sup> and thus escape the oppression of this surroundings.

Another feature of the blues tradition that arose out of black dissatisfaction is the use of irony as a “subtle kind of protest against the way the white system works.”<sup>111</sup> Springer notes that there is very little “direct complaint to white people about the injustice of segregation,” because “concealment and discretion protect the singer from reprisals.”<sup>112</sup> Because direct satire or ridicule occurs rarely in the blues, the use of double

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<sup>107</sup>Sidman, “Chicago Bob Nelson and Luther Johnson,” 188.

<sup>108</sup>Palmer, “Deep Blues,” 42.

<sup>109</sup>Fryer, “Brown Eyed Handsome Man,” 67.

<sup>110</sup>Springer, “Regulatory Function,” 280.

<sup>111</sup>Ibid.

<sup>112</sup>Springer, “Regulatory Function,” 281.

meanings and symbols evolved as a way to criticize white society, concealing racial protest and obscenity through the use of language that only blacks could understand.<sup>113</sup>

Keil alludes to this tradition in describing blues lyrics: "Usually each phrase consists of a fairly simple and concrete image, a trope or Negro idiom of some kind that stands for a complex set of associations and connotations."<sup>114</sup> He gives as an example the phrase, *the eagle flies on Friday, and Saturday I go out to play*; which "conjures up in a Negro listener's mind a multitude of activities associated with payday and the pleasures of Saturday night."<sup>115</sup>

Within the framework of dissatisfaction are two other related themes, bragging and the naming of geographic places. Themes of bragging and wishing occur frequently, and are seen as a weapon against repression which serves to "deny the limitations which reality imposes"<sup>116</sup> upon the bluesman's freedom. The naming of geographic locations is based on the idea that distance implies the possibility of a better future; and travel implies a method of release and escape from present dissatisfaction.<sup>117</sup>

As the blues has evolved, some contemporary traditions can be identified. Among

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<sup>113</sup>William R. Ferris, Jr., "Racial Repertoires Among Blues Performers," *Ethnomusicology* 14 (September 1970): 442.

<sup>114</sup>Keil, "Urban Blues," 52.

<sup>115</sup>Ibid.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid.

<sup>117</sup>Keil, "Urban Blues," 63.

these are: the traditional instruments of the blues band – guitar, bass guitar, drums and piano; and the common practice of a bluesman revamping his older songs and of adapting other singers' compositions.<sup>118</sup> A related tradition involves combining a stock repertoire of verses with improvised verses to create a new blues song that matches the particular situation or performance. Within the blues tradition, a performer relies on a set of memorized verses that can be combined in different ways while relating to each other in terms of imagery, mood, and emotion. In this manner, a performer can personalize the song and retain control over it each time it is played.<sup>119</sup>

#### *Country Blues*

In 1903, popular black composer/performer W.C. Handy (sometimes erroneously referred to as the 'father of the blues') heard a country blues singer for the first time, and described it as "the weirdest music he had ever heard."<sup>120</sup> Yet at the same time, he found its plaintive style "oddly compelling."<sup>121</sup> Handy had fallen under the same spell that has over the years drawn countless listeners to blues of all styles.

In addition to sharing many features of the blues tradition, country blues can also be identified by several musical and lyrical characteristics. Musically, country blues has

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<sup>118</sup>Ibid., 61.

<sup>119</sup>Pearson, review of "Blues From The Delta," 194.

<sup>120</sup>O'Connor, "Rich Differences," 30.

<sup>121</sup>Ibid.

been described as having a “slow, droning sound.”<sup>122</sup> Country blues is also characterized by “intense, emotional singing and highly rhythmic guitar accompaniment, most often in the bottleneck style.”<sup>123</sup> The country Delta blues style is distinguished from other geographic styles by the use of open tuning (the guitar strings tuned to a chord, usually E), and the use of a ‘bottleneck slide’<sup>124</sup> to fret the strings, which results in an “eerie, whining sound.”<sup>125</sup>

Country blues is most often identified as being performed by a single vocalist, accompanying him- or herself on guitar.<sup>126</sup> The player may shorten or extend the usual 12 bar verse, and the voice and instrument interact with one another. Sometimes the guitar underlies the voice, at other times the guitar seems to be “taking up where the voice left off and becoming an extension of the voice itself.”<sup>127</sup> Palmer describes the country blues performers of the Delta region as “singing with unmatched intensity in a gritty,

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<sup>122</sup>William R. Ferris, Jr., review of *Roosevelt Holts and His Friends*, Arhoolie 1057, In *Ethnomusicology* 17 (May 1973): 394.

<sup>123</sup>Rowe, “Chicago Breakdown,” 12.

<sup>124</sup>Musicians have been imaginative in finding items to use for slides – hollowed out bones, broken-off necks from pop bottle (hence the term, *bottleneck*), pieces of steel pipe, and knife blades.

<sup>125</sup>O’Connor, “Rich Differences,” 35. Some people are reminded of ‘Hawaiian music’ upon first hearing the Delta slide guitar sound.

<sup>126</sup>Lars Bjorn, “From Hastings Street to the Bluebird: The Blues and Jazz Traditions in Detroit,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 25 (Spring 1986): 257.

<sup>127</sup>Rowe, “Chicago Breakdown,” 11.



melodically circumscribed, highly ornamented style. (M)any Delta artists mastered the art of fretting the instrument with a slider or bottleneck; they made the instrument 'talk' in strikingly speech like inflections."<sup>128</sup> The performer uses the guitar to set up an intricate pattern of rhythmic accents that achieve the effect that the guitar is "talk(ing) back to the singer."<sup>129</sup> It is this interplay between voice and guitar that allows country blues performers to generate "astonishing variety within this basically very limited form."<sup>130</sup>

Lyricaly, the lyrics of country blues could be either "light, mocking, or risque" or full of "highly charged subject matter;" topics which were often dealt with in frank terms.<sup>131</sup> Palmer points out some of the common themes of Delta blues songs: "the intimate details of love, sex and desire; a fascination for travel for its own sake that was rooted in years of captivity; the fantastic...imagery of dreams; and the practice and tools of magic and conjury."<sup>132</sup>

Keil notes that an extensive sample of country blues songs would yield examples of "every conceivable aspect of Negro life – mules, boll weevils, highways, trains,

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<sup>128</sup>Palmer, "Deep Blues," 44.

<sup>129</sup>Ibid., 46.

<sup>130</sup>Rowe, "Chicago Breakdown," 11.

<sup>131</sup>Palmer, "Deep Blues," 18.

<sup>132</sup>Ibid.

boxing, prisons, hurricanes, floods, bloodhounds, lawyers, chauffeurs, Pearl Harbor, fire departments, cities, rivers, gambling, beer, whiskey, voodoo and sex.”<sup>133</sup> He notes that while most of the titles listed in race record catalogs from the 1920s and 1930s “pertain to love or the lack of it...there is a large share of blues on such topics as prisons, highways, and natural catastrophes as well.”<sup>134</sup>

While the term ‘country blues’ can refer to styles of blues played in many diverse geographical areas, the blues style of the Mississippi Delta region was one of the most influential of all country blues styles.<sup>135</sup> In many respects, the Mississippi Delta blues style is the archetypical country blues style – of all the various geographic styles, the Delta blues has the most in common with African music and is “least like Anglo-American folk music.”<sup>136</sup> An understanding of the features of country blues, and specifically, the Mississippi Delta blues is important because the urban blues style played in Chicago during the Post WWII era was a direct manifestation of the Mississippi Delta style: “Of all the postwar styles, Chicago has the closest links with the country blues of the Delta.”<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>133</sup>Keil, “Urban Blues,” 70.

<sup>134</sup>Ibid., 71.

<sup>135</sup>Palmer, “Deep Blues,” 42.

<sup>136</sup>Titon, review of “Blues Lyric Poetry,” 561.

<sup>137</sup>Haralambos, “Right On,” 25.

*Urban Blues*

The emergence of the urban style of blues was the result of two coinciding phenomenon, one social, the other technological. At the same time that a large number of blacks were migrating from the deep South to large urban centers in the North, advances in technology were making possible the availability of the electrified instruments that characterize the urban style.

The spread of black rural cultural traits that eventually resulted in the formation of the urban blues style began during World War I, when labor shortages and high wages (compared to those in the South) lured close to one-half million blacks to cities like New York, Detroit and Chicago.<sup>138</sup> After the war, technology helped to further disseminate black culture, as the phonograph opened up a market of 14 million blacks for music “recorded by one of their own,” as Perry Bradford put it.<sup>139</sup>

In 1920, Bradford was influential in signing Mamie Smith to a record label – she was the first black artist to make a phonograph record. Her recording of *Crazy Blues* sold 75,000 copies in one month and spawned an entire new recording industry – race records.<sup>140</sup> The result was that a performer’s race began to determine whether he/she recorded for record labels with nation-wide distribution, or for labels marketed primarily

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<sup>138</sup>Ibid., 27.

<sup>139</sup>Quoted in O’Connor, “Rich Differences,” 33.

<sup>140</sup>O’Connor, “Rich Differences,” 33; McGuire, “Black Music Critics,” 103.

in the South.<sup>141</sup> Despite the handicap of a segregated marketing, many of the more popular blues artists were able to achieve sales similar to those of Smith. At a time when record albums sold for 75 cents, and the average wage of sharecroppers in the South was one dollar a day, these sales figures give an indication of the appetite of black consumers for blues music.

It was during this period of northward migration that the blues shifted away from the solo vocalist and “took on more urban characteristics such as the replacement of the guitar by a piano or the addition of rhythm instruments.”<sup>142</sup> The onset of the piano in the blues was a result of the music moving from the fields into the clubs, where there was usually a piano on the premises.<sup>143</sup> As singer-guitarists migrated north, they were more likely to begin playing with other musicians, most often a pianist (who was “more likely to be heard over the noise of drinking and dancing.”)<sup>144</sup> The effect of these pairings was to begin to smooth over the rough “country zeal of the blues guitarist.”<sup>145</sup> The urban style was being formed, and the end of the Depression gave rise to “the beginning of the

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<sup>141</sup>Ronald C. Foreman, Jr., “Jazz and Race Records, 1920 - 32: Their Origins and Their Significance for the Record Industry and Society,” *Dissertation Abstracts International* 30 (July 1969): 349A.

<sup>142</sup>Bjorn, “From Hastings Street to the Bluebird,” 257.

<sup>143</sup>Rowe, “Chicago Breakdown,” 13.

<sup>144</sup>*Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>145</sup>*Ibid.*

intense development of the urban blues proper.”<sup>146</sup>

During this first wave of northward migration, the country blues singers “carried with them their own musical inheritance, and from their records of the late ’20s and early ’30s, these local traditions can be detected.”<sup>147</sup> This is an important idea with regard to this investigation, as it provides at least partial justification for the premise that it is possible to identify characteristics of the blues tradition in Howlin’ Wolf’s recordings.

The decade before and after World War II saw the next great wave of black migration as 1,600,000 blacks left the South between 1940 and 1950 to work in the factories of the North.<sup>148</sup> For many of these blacks, hearing the familiar music of their past was reassuring among the uncertainties of life in the big city.<sup>149</sup> It was during this era that the traditional blues of the Delta underwent a transformation from acoustic rural music to an electrified urban style.<sup>150</sup>

At the time the Chicago urban blues style was evolving, so too were unique styles in Memphis, Detroit, Texas, and California. It was during this time of simultaneously emerging regional styles that players of the new urban style demonstrated that “the blues

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<sup>146</sup>Rowe, “Chicago Breakdown,” 15.

<sup>147</sup>Ibid., 12.

<sup>148</sup>Haralambos, “Right On,” 35.

<sup>149</sup>Ibid., 37.

<sup>150</sup>Sidman, “Chicago Bob Nelson and Luther Johnson,” 185.

could be up-tempo and joyous as well as slow and mournful.”<sup>151</sup> As rural migrants arrived in Memphis, Chicago, and other cities, they eventually became oriented and established in their new community, losing the need for “hanging on to the past as a part of everyday life.”<sup>152</sup> The familiar ‘downhome and dirty’ sound of the country blues from the Delta lost favor to a ‘cleaner’ sound, a derivative of the Memphis blues style. The Memphis sound could “bring back memories of the ‘old country’ without forcing the listeners to identify themselves”<sup>153</sup> with the dirt-poor life they left behind in the South. The Memphis influenced urban blues style was more sophisticated than its country cousin, “lighter in texture with the emotional power turned down and the beat turned up.”<sup>154</sup>

Pearson and others have noted that the development of the blues in Chicago included “interaction with a wide variety of musicians and styles.”<sup>155</sup> This tendency appears to be a logical extension of the rural tradition identified by Evans, where “learners, once they become established musicians, probably affected their teachers’

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<sup>151</sup>Redd, “Rock!,” 34.

<sup>152</sup>Haralambos, “Right On,” 37.

<sup>153</sup>Keil, “Urban Blues,” 157.

<sup>154</sup>Rowe, “Chicago Breakdown,” 15.

<sup>155</sup>Pearson, review of “Baby Doo,” 609.

music as much as they themselves had been affected by it.”<sup>156</sup> A common thread tying all these styles together however, is that the majority of musicians playing urban blues had all migrated from the South.<sup>157</sup>

As a direct descendent of the country style, urban blues shares a number of the same traditions in terms of composition (4/4 beat, twelve bar structure, and AAB stanzas) as well as the lyrical tendency toward direct discussion of male/female relationships. There a number of additional musical characteristics however, that help set the urban style apart from country blues. Among these are electric guitars, additional instruments (such as piano, drums, and saxophone), and the use of a heavy backbeat (which made the music easy to dance to.)<sup>158</sup> Keil notes several other features that distinguish urban blues from its country origins: beginnings and endings of songs are more distinct; more tempos are used, and the tempo is more strictly adhered to; diction is clearer and the voices less nasal; and the singers uses the lyrics to tell a story, in contrast to the country practice of linking together general phrases that create an emotional mood.<sup>159</sup>

Keil notes that in the majority of urban blues lyrics, “sex is the dominant theme

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<sup>156</sup>Bruce Bastin, review of *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in Folk Blues*, by David Evans, In *JEMF Quarterly* 17 (Spring/Summer 1982): 95.

<sup>157</sup>Haralambos, in “Right On,” 39, notes that “nearly all the recorded postwar blues singers were born in the Southern states.”

<sup>158</sup>Bjorn, “From Hastings Street to the Bluebird,” 261; Keil, “Urban Blues,” 54.

<sup>159</sup>Keil, “Urban Blues, 55.”

and is treated in patterned ways.”<sup>160</sup> He identifies three recurring approaches (attitudes, or “stances”) in the urban bluesman’s treatment of the subject of sex: 1) lyrics built around double entendres (*It’s Tight Like That*, *Let Me Roll Your Lemon*); 2) a lyrical emphasis on bravado and virility (*Got My Mojo Workin’*, *Tiger In Your Tank*); and 3) songs in which the singer paints a picture of helplessness (*Who Will Be The Next?*, *You Gonna Wreck My Life.*)<sup>161</sup>

The above discussion of the blues tradition, country blues, and urban blues has pointed out some of the generally agreed upon and readily identifiable characteristics of blues music. Knowing “what to listen for” in the blues allows for the development of a research design for exploring the country and urban blues characteristics in the music of Howlin’ Wolf.

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<sup>160</sup>Keil, “Urban Blues,” 71.

<sup>161</sup>Ibid.



### Chapter Three: Methods

The majority of past research has utilized either ethnographical or discographical methods. Ethnographical research emphasized recording (either on wax acetate records, or on magnetic tape) and transcribing the lyrics of blues performances captured in a naturalistic setting, such as in the performer's home, or in a cotton field as sharecroppers sang field hollers. These studies of bluesmen usually utilized a combination of 'on-location' audio recordings of song performances and subsequent interviews with the performers. This type of research was conducted primarily in the rural South. However, at least one study was carried out in an urban setting.<sup>1</sup>

The discographical approach takes advantage of technology by utilizing commercially available phonograph recordings as primary sources of data. Using this approach, the researcher can transcribe songs, analyze their content, combine the data with historical information about the artist, and draw conclusions about the music and the person making it. The research for this thesis followed this discographical paradigm.

The question, 'What happens to the patterns, themes and imagery in a bluesman's music when he moves from the rural south to the urban North?' seemed ideally suited to a research design that: a) emphasizes exploration and description,<sup>2</sup> b) relies on the words

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<sup>1</sup>Harriet J. Ottenheimer, "Catharsis, Communication, and Evocation: Alternative Views of the Sociopsychological Functions of Blues Singing," *Ethnomusicology* 23 (January 1979): 76.

<sup>2</sup>Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989), 46.

of the subject as the primary data,<sup>3</sup> and, c) due to its exploratory nature, retains the flexibility necessary for refining the central research question and addressing new questions as they present themselves.<sup>4</sup> The research design used here meets these criteria. By using the words of a performer's songs as the primary unit of data, it explored what happened to elements of the country blues tradition when the performer moved from the country to the city. The research design was flexible in that during the initial stages of data analysis, the researcher purposefully avoided overly rigid content categories, as subsequent analysis revealed patterns, themes and images that were previously unexpected, and led to new, more narrowly defined research questions.<sup>5</sup> Also, some patterns and themes that were originally thought to exist were not present at all, leading the researcher to ask the question, 'why not?'

As the literature has shown, there are a number of agreed upon characteristics of the blues tradition, of country blues and of urban blues. By studying the specific case of Howlin' Wolf, this research sheds light on the larger domain of social, lyrical and musical traditions in the blues.

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 26. The authors also discuss the importance of design flexibility on pages 43-45.

<sup>5</sup>Marshall and Rossman warn that strict adherence to preconceptualized content categories can lead to, "premature coding, forcing data within a theoretical framework, closing off alternate conceptualizations and precluding discovery of hidden, secret, unrecognized, subtle, 'unimportant' data, connections, and processes." In "Designing Qualitative Research," 115.

Following Burns, Jarrett, Ottenheimer and others, the method for analyzing the patterns, themes and images in Howlin' Wolf's lyrics involved listening to a convenience sample of his blues songs and transcribing the lyrics.<sup>6</sup> A blues song was defined as a song with a secular theme, generally consisting of an AAB verse form within a 12-bar pattern, and composed in 4/4 time using a pentatonic scale.<sup>7</sup>

The sample songs were collected from Howlin' Wolf recordings from the 1950s, re-issued on three compact discs.<sup>8</sup> Care was taken to exclude from the sample songs whose authorship is not credited to Chester Burnett (Howlin' Wolf); and songs recorded before 1952 or after 1959. This time frame was chosen for two reasons, one theoretical, and the other practical. First, songs recorded after 1952 were included because that is the

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<sup>6</sup>Loretta S. Burns, "A Stylistic Analysis of Blues Lyrics," *Dissertation Abstracts International* 38 (May 1978); Dennis Jarrett, "The Singer and the Bluesman: Formulations of Personality in the Lyrics of the Blues," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* (January-December 1978); Harriet J. Ottenheimer, "Catharsis, Communication, and Evocation: Alternative Views of the Sociopsychological Functions of Blues Singing," *Ethnomusicology* 23 (January 1979); Robert Springer, "The Regulatory Function of the Blues," *Black Perspective in Music* 4 (Fall 1976); Michael Taft, "Willie McTell's Rules of Rhyme: A Brief Excursion Into Blues Phonetics," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 42 (January-December 1978); and Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1977), are representative of researchers who have used transcriptions of lyrics from records as their primary source of data.

<sup>7</sup>See Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 51-53 for a detailed discussion of the musical structure of a blues song.

<sup>8</sup>Howlin' Wolf, *The Real Folk Blues* (MCA-Chess CHD 9273); Howlin' Wolf, *More Real Folk Blues* (MCA Chess CHD 9279); Howlin' Wolf, *Change My Way* (MCA-Chess CHD-93001).

year Howlin' Wolf moved to Chicago and began associating and recording with urban musicians there. Secondly, songs recorded after 1959 were excluded because in the convenience sample available to the researcher, none of the songs recorded after 1959 were written by Howlin' Wolf.

Transcriptions of the lyrics were made and checked for accuracy.<sup>9</sup> The text of each song was then scrutinized for every possible topic that seemed to suggest itself.<sup>10</sup> This approach allowed for identifying *themes* at both a macro-level (the overall theme of the song) and a micro-level, where themes were identified within a line, or half-line of a stanza. The micro-level of analysis approach is appropriate for discovering *patterns* and identifying *images* in the lyrics.<sup>11</sup>

Tables were constructed to aid in grouping similar macro and micro-level findings. The tables generated were: General Features of the Compositions (Table II);

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<sup>9</sup>After triple checking the transcriptions, they were given to a fellow blues enthusiast for review. An exhaustive library search yielded no transcriptions of Wolf's canon. An electronic mail query to the 1,200 - plus member *blues-l* Internet discussion group elicited a response from author Paul Garon (quoted elsewhere in this study) who confirmed that, to his knowledge, no such transcriptions exist.

<sup>10</sup>Ottenheimer, "Catharsis," 77.

<sup>11</sup>Several authors have stressed the importance of the micro-level of analysis over the macro-level: John Barnie, "Formulaic Line and Stanzas in the Country Blues," *Ethnomusicology* 22 (September 1978); John Barnie, "Oral Formulas in the Country Blues," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 42 (January -December 1978); David Evans, "Techniques of Blues Composition Among Black Folk Singers," *Journal of American Folklore* 87 (July-September 1974); Ferris, Jr., *Blues From the Delta* (London: Studio Vista, 1970); and Michael Taft, "Willie McTell's Rules of Rhyme: A Brief Excursion Into Blues Phonetics," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 42 (January-December 1978).

Macro Level Features of the Lyrics (Table III); and Half-Line Formulas in the Lyrics (Table IV.)

Since it was expected that many of the groupings of similarities within the song texts would emerge from the data during the analysis stage, the initial set of categories for grouping data was kept general: *patterns*, *themes* and *images*. In the initial stages of data analysis, three guiding hypotheses were used as tools to “generate questions and search for patterns.”<sup>12</sup> These three theories were: *the bluesman as fictional persona*,<sup>13</sup> *oral-formulas in blues composition*,<sup>14</sup> and *thematic pattern in lyrics*.<sup>15</sup>

Once the data was organized within the general categories, it was possible to begin identifying specific country and urban blues characteristics of the texts. As the data was refined, trends emerged that enabled the researcher to make observations about the relationship between Howlin’ Wolf’s urban blues and the country blues tradition.

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<sup>12</sup>Marshall and Rossman, “Designing Qualitative Research,” 44.

<sup>13</sup>Dennis Jarrett, “The Singer and the Bluesman: Formulations of Personality in the Lyrics of the Blues,” *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 42 (January-December 1978): 31-37.

<sup>14</sup>Barnie, “Oral Formulas in the Country Blues,” 30-51.

<sup>15</sup>Titon, “Thematic Pattern in Downhome Blues Lyrics,” 316-330.

## Chapter Four: Results

### *Introduction*

Prior to transcription, the 22 songs in the sample were ordered chronologically and numbered for reference purposes (see Table I). During the transcription process the lyrics were organized into stanzas, and where applicable, the caesura<sup>1</sup> was represented by the || character. The caesura was included in the transcriptions in order to give the reader a better feel for the duration pattern of the singer's phrasing; and to facilitate the researcher's discovery of patterns and themes when analyzing the lyrics as half-line units. Upon completion of the transcription process, the transcribed lyrics were triple-checked for accuracy by the author and also checked by a colleague.

The songs were first analyzed at a macro level to get an overall "feel" for the compositions and to generate categories of general themes and features of the songs (see Tables II and III). A subsequent analysis was undertaken at a micro level (individual lines and half-lines) at which time a list of words and phrases was compiled to aid in identifying patterns and recurring themes (see Table IV).

The reader should note that although most the songs in the sample display an autobiographical, first-person format, early in the analysis stage a decision was made to treat the lyrics as figments of the writer's imagination rather than to assume the lyrics were a realistic portrayal of Howlin' Wolf's personal experiences. This decision is

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<sup>1</sup>The caesura is the break or pause in a line of verse.

supported by Jarrett's *bluesman as fictional persona* hypothesis and by Titon's assertion that the bluesman casts himself in the "conventional role of mistreated victim...because of that convention, it cannot be assumed that the words, often traditional anyway, speak directly for the singer."<sup>2</sup> Also supporting the decision to treat the lyrics as fiction were admissions by two blues singers that their song's weren't autobiographical.<sup>3</sup> Albert King comments on the problem with treating blues lyrics as autobiography: "I wouldn't be here today if it all happened to me."<sup>4</sup>

The concept of a black language code also influenced the decision to treat the lyrics as "fiction;" specifically regarding Wolf's use of the word "baby." While in the sample the singer referred to his loved one as *baby, babe, woman, darlin'* and *little girl*, nowhere does he address her as his *wife*. Even though the word "baby" may refer to a spouse,<sup>5</sup> and even though Wolf experienced a stable, lifelong marriage, it is still presumptuous to assume from the lyrics that he was singing about (or to) either his wife

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<sup>2</sup>Jeff Todd Titon, "Thematic Patterns in Downhome Blues Lyrics," *Journal of American Folklore* 90 (July-September 1977): 323.

<sup>3</sup>Dennis Jarrett, "The Singer and the Bluesman: Formulations of Personality in the Lyrics of the Blues," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 42 (January-December 1978): 31. The singers are Albert King and Bobby Bland.

<sup>4</sup>Michael Haralambos, *Right On: From Blues to Soul in Black America* (New York: Drake Publishers, 1975), 57.

<sup>5</sup>Clarence Major, *Dictionary of Afro-American Slang* (New York: International Publishers, Inc., 1970), 22. Major notes that baby "is a term of address for one's lover or spouse but also a word used in general, irrespective of the sexual identity or personal or social relationship."

or a girlfriend. Refusing to assume that the lyrics are personal also lends additional support to the *bluesman as fictional persona* theory, as it would seem that no marriage could weather as many storms as Wolf sang about in the decade covered by the sample.

As a result of the decision to treat the lyrics as fiction, a convention will be followed when referring to the male and female characters in a song. Rather than referring to them as 'husband and wife' or "Wolf and his wife," the male will always be referred to as the "singer." The female subject of the song will be termed the "lover." In a few cases, the singer refers to his lover's *other* lover. In these cases, the "other man" will be referred to as "other lover" so as to distinguish this character from the singer.

The presentation of results that follows includes some general observations about the sample and the blues tradition; a discussion of the fit between the lyrics and the study's three guiding hypotheses;<sup>6</sup> the identification of themes at the macro level of analysis; a micro-level look at the patterns in the compositions; a discussion of the country blues and urban blues features found in the sample; and a treatment of frequently recurring imagery in the songs.

#### *General Observations Regarding the Compositions:*

A little over half of the songs (12) tell a complete story, with a concrete beginning, middle, and end (see Table II). The remaining songs follow the country blues tradition of loosely connected ideas, strung together so as to create a mood, or evoke

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<sup>6</sup>The theories are *oral formulas in blues composition*, *bluesman as fictional persona*, and *thematic pattern in blues lyrics*.



certain feelings.

The majority of songs (16) deal with love relationships. The remaining six songs deal with poverty and hard times, overt sexuality, and social relationships. The subject matter of one song – *Natchez Burning* (# 11) – is so unique as to defy categorization within the blues tradition.

The sample is consistent with the blues tradition of using plain language and a straight forward treatment of the subject matter, whether the subject be light – as in the playful chiding found in *Neighbors* (# 6) – or intense, as in the threatening tone of *I'll Be Around* (# 5). This direct approach is used throughout the sample, even in songs dealing with emotionally charged subject matter, such as infidelity:

I didn't know || you was lovin' somebody else  
 No I didn't know babe || you was lovin' somebody else  
 I didn't know || but I know now.

In more than half of the songs (14) Wolf followed the blues tradition of composing stanzas in the AAB format, a mono-rhymed triplet with the second line repeating the first. The first two lines (AA) set up a complaint or situation, and the last line (B) addresses the complaint or draws a conclusion about the situation. For example,

(A) Well my momma don't love me || daddy don't love me no more  
 (A) Well my momma don't love me || daddy don't love me no more  
 (B) I might leave ya babe || I'm going down on the coast.

In eleven of the songs the singer directs the lyrics toward his lover and in eight songs the lyrics are directed toward a bystander (the listener.) However in four songs, the

singer utilized a country blues tradition and switched between addressing his lover and addressing a bystander, as in *I Love My Baby* (# 4)

Lord I got a woman || she nice lovin' in every way.  
 Lord I got a woman || she nice lovin' in every way.  
 Now she wants to leave me || have me worried everyday.

Lord I hate to see you leave me darlin' || well I hate to see you get away  
 Lord I hate to see you leave me darlin' || well I hate to see you get away.  
 No matter where you go || you gonna come back home someday.

Well I love my baby || I can't stand to see her go  
 Lord I love my baby || well I can't stand to see her go  
 Well if you leave me darlin' || I'll have to stand to see you go.

So long, so long || I'll cry when you're gone.  
 So long || I cry when you're gone  
 Lord everybody 'round here know || little girl I have treat you wrong.

This song also serves as an example of how the lyrics sometimes evoke different images and feelings from the listener as the song progresses. This is consistent with Ottenheimer's contention that the function of the blues was to match and intensify a variety of moods.<sup>7</sup> In the first stanza, the singer elicits the sympathy of the listener because his lover "wants to leave me || have me worried everyday." The singer continues to present himself as the object of sympathy though the next two stanzas. Then in the final stanza, the previously sympathetic listener finds out that the lover is leaving because the singer mistreated her. Now the listener's feelings are turned upside down and the

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<sup>7</sup>Harriet J. Ottenheimer, "Catharsis, Communication, and Evocation: Alternative Views of the Sociopsychological Functions of Blues Singing," *Ethnomusicology* 23 (January 1979): 83.

singer is no longer a sympathetic character. The listener must view the singer as “getting what he deserves” – especially since he admits that “everybody ’round here know || little girl I have treat you wrong.”

*Oral Formulas in Blues Composition Theory*

John Barnie’s *oral formulas in blues composition* theory argues that country blues singers use a system of “formulas” when creating songs.<sup>8</sup> A “formula” is defined as “a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea.”<sup>9</sup> While many whole-line formulas exist (one example being ‘my momma told me’ which is almost always followed by ‘my daddy told me too’), the most basic and frequently used formula is the half-line (see Table IV for a listing of half-line formulas used by Howlin’ Wolf). Additionally, it is common to use a formula in the first half-line of a verse that is “sufficiently generalised (sic) to allow a range of formulas or non-formulaic phrases in the second half-line.”<sup>10</sup> For example, Wolf uses six variations on the generalized statement, ‘I’m going away,’ all of which allow him to follow up with a statement regarding how long the singer will be gone or why he is leaving.

The formulas are not necessarily static, they can be changed and can themselves

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<sup>8</sup>John Barnie, “Oral Formulas in the Country Blues,” *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 42 (January-December 1978): 40.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Barnie, “Oral Formulas,” 43.

generate new formulas. The key is that the “essential idea” remains intact across formulas of a certain type. For example, Wolf used eight variations on the formula ‘I spend my money,’ each conveying the “essential idea” of someone exploiting the singer financially.

Barnie also argues that “tags” - words such as ‘well’ (added before a formula ) and ‘baby’ (added to the end) are integral to the system of formulas because of the repetitiveness of the AAB format. By adding or removing a tag, the singer can change the stress pattern of the line and avoid “potentially monotonous verbal repetition.”<sup>11</sup> This sample supports this idea due to both the number of tags used by the singer (126) and the number of songs (14) composed in the AAB format.

#### *Bluesman as Fictional Persona Theory*

Dennis Jarrett’s *bluesman as fictional persona* theory is based in part on the above *oral formulas* theory, and argues that a blues singer presents “a kind of fictional self ... distinct from the singer-composer.”<sup>12</sup> Jarrett calls this “fictional self” the *bluesman*, and argues that the personality of a bluesman is contained within his rhetoric. The blues singer “relies on lexical formulas which can be varied somewhat without losing their identity,”<sup>13</sup> and by using them the singer develops his own personality.

Using this approach to analyze the sample, a feature of the singer’s personality

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 45.

<sup>12</sup>Dennis Jarrett, “The Singer and the Bluesman: Formulations of Personality in the Lyrics of the Blues,” *Southern Folklore Quarterly* (January-December 1978): 32.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 33.

that stands out is his reluctance to take any blame for his troubles. Of all the songs where the singer's lover was leaving, in only one does the singer admit to mistreating his lover. In the songs where the singer is leaving, it's the lover's fault that the relationship went bad. Although there are three songs where the singer admits to mistreating his lover, in only one song does the lover actually leave the relationship. In one of the other songs, even though admitting to mistreating his lover, the singer blames his behavior not on himself, but on "nature" as he sings: "Ah that is nature || won't let me treat you right" and "I'm sorry baby || nature caused me to mess up my life." This unwillingness to accept blame is consistent with Titon's findings that "downhome blues singers do not usually admit fault."<sup>14</sup>

Another personality trait that emerges is that of a hard working man who willing spends his money on his lover up until the point that he feels he is being exploited financially, at which time he begins to plot his revenge:

Well I spend my money || trying to make you satisfied  
 Well, I have spent my money darlin' || tryin' to make you satisfied  
 Well, the woman who took my money and took my home and || oh the  
 Wolf gonna wreck her life.

Although in the above example (and in one other, where the singer threatens to stab his lover) the bluesman takes on a vengeful personality, in the other seven songs where the lover mistreats the singer, he either leaves the relationship, accepts the

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<sup>14</sup>Jeff Todd Titon, "Thematic Pattern in Downhome Blues Lyrics," *Journal of American Folklore* 90 (July-September, 1977): 324.

mistreatment, or tries to change his lover's behavior. The different personality traits reflected by these approaches are consistent with Jarrett's contention that the bluesman purposefully projects alternating images that may be moralizing and didactic ("I want to love you baby || but you keep driving me from your door"); bragging and bad ("yes so many people || dead and in the grave; I better leave ya now darlin' || 'fore I get out my blade") and self-pitying ("now I'm old and gray || got no place to go; you got yourself a youngster || and you can't stand me no more").<sup>15</sup> This allows the singer to "function openly as a projection of the fantasies of his audience."<sup>16</sup>

#### *Thematic Patterns in Blues Lyrics Theory*

Jeff Todd Titon's *thematic pattern in downhome blues lyrics* theory argues that the blues singer casts himself in the conventional role of mistreated victim. The songs enlist the sympathy of the listening bystander – who is drawn into the drama of the song – the outcome of which depends on how the singer handles the mistreatment: accept it, try to reform the mistreater, or leave the relationship. Songs that fit this scenario reveal a pattern that begins with the singer's recognition of mistreatment, which leads to an indictment against the mistreater by the singer, which leads to a resolution.<sup>17</sup> The following song, *Who Will Be The Next?* (# 9), demonstrates this idea:

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<sup>15</sup>Jarrett, "The Singer and the Bluesman," 37.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Titon, "Thematic Pattern in Downhome Blues Lyrics," 329.

**(Recognition)**

Who will you hurt next || how will you start  
 Who'd be the next one || baby you tear apart

**(Indictment)**

Blessed be your heart || cursed be your name  
 Blessed be your heart || cursed be your name  
 Who'd be the next one darlin' || that you'd put to shame?

Will it be the one || give you his gold  
 Or will it be the young one || take all you hope  
 Babe I'll forget my pride || just to keep you by my side.

**(Resolution)**

Cheat if you want to darlin' || treat me unkind  
 Cheat if you want to darlin' || treat me unkind  
 Come back and love me || when you can find a little time.

This song is one of three in the sample where the singer resigns himself to accepting the mistreatment. Titon notes that “usually the victim, declaring his independence, steps out of his role with an ironic parting shot and leaves.”<sup>18</sup> For example, in *Howlin' Blues* (#17), the same pattern of recognition, indictment and resolution is present. But rather than accept the mistreatment, he leaves, the irony being that although he says he “broken hearted,” and hates to go, it easy to do so because there was nothing in relationship to lose anyway:

I'm going to New Orleans || I'm worried about you  
 I be so broken hearted || I won't know what to do  
 So good bye babe || I hate to go  
 Here's nothin to lose.

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

The majority of songs in this sample do however, differ with Titon's conclusions regarding the singer usually leaving. Of the nine songs involving the lover mistreating the singer, the singer left in four, accepted the mistreatment in three, and tried to change the lover's behavior in two songs.

#### *Macro Level Themes*

A macro level theme is the general topic or subject matter of a song (see Table III). A majority of songs (16 out of 22) involve male/female relationships. In 14 of the songs the relationship was portrayed negatively; in two of the songs, the overall mood of the song was positive. The negativity was expressed either through direct negative statements about the lover ("Who will you hurt next || who will you scorn?") or by complaints about the relationship ("I want to love you baby || but you keep driving me from your door"). In one of the rare positive depictions of the male/female relationship, the singer unabashedly tells his lover: "I'm in love with you baby || you know you look so fine" and "I know little girl || you the prettiest little girl in town."

Mistreatment is a frequently recurring theme, and involves either the singer being mistreated by a lover, or the singer mistreating a lover. The singer was mistreated by his lover in nine songs; in three songs the singer admitted to mistreating the lover.

Of the 14 songs portraying a negative male/female relationship, a common theme was that of leaving. A subset of the leaving theme concerns the reasons given for leaving. In four of the songs, the singer left due to mistreatment by his lover; in one



song the lover left the singer due to mistreatment; and in one song the lover left the singer for another man. In three additional songs, the lover left the singer but no explicit reasons were given.

In three songs, the subject of infidelity was dealt with candidly. In one of these songs, the singer seems resigned to his lover's unfaithfulness:

Cheat if you want to darlin' || treat me unkind  
 Cheat if you want to darlin' || treat me unkind  
 Come back and love me || when you can find a little time.

Conversely, another song finds the singer trying to change his lover's behavior and the overall mood is dark and menacing, as the singer tells her:

I'll be around || yes I'll be around  
 To see what you're puttin' down.

Another subset of the male/female relationship theme concerns the role of money in the relationship. In four cases, money was a contributing factor to trouble in the relationship. The singer complains to his lover "You done spend my money || throwed it all away;" giving the singer a reason to leave the relationship, or to mistreat his lover.

Sometimes the situation has the singer spending all his money on his lover, or the singer finding out after the fact that his lover had spent all of his money without his approval. In some cases, the singer spent his money on an ungrateful lover, or the lover took his money and spent it on another man:

I had that money || to buy you a diamond ring

I had that money || to buy you a diamond ring  
 I found out || you give it to your other man.

### *Micro Level Themes*

The second stage of data analysis involved examining the lyrics using the line and half-line as unit of analysis. Here the intent was to identify not only generally recurring themes (such as “leaving”) but also to aid in discovering patterns and images in the lyrics. In this stage of analysis, a chart was made listing all of the half-line formulas (e.g., *I'm gonna leave this town*) that were repeated (along with their variations) at least once in the sample (see Table IV). The songs in the sample yielded 14 separate half-line formulas, with 53 variations on them. Overall, eight of the songs demonstrated a reliance on the formulas, where at least half of the stanzas in the song contained a formulaic half-line. Analysis of these half-lines shows the singer preoccupied with leaving and with money; leaving was the most frequently recurring theme in all of the half-lines. The reasons given for leaving included infidelity, a trouble over money, the lover leaving for another man, or the lover leaving with no reason given.

### *Country Blues Features of the Songs:*

Ten of the songs demonstrate the country tradition of linking together loosely connected ideas to create a mood, or overall sentiment. For example, the song *I Better Go Now* (# 20) creates a dark, almost misogynistic mood, as the singer recounts how he

better leave before he stabs his lover. The song begins with the chorus: "I better go now || 'fore I get out my blade." Then in the first verse the singer tells us why he might be justified in stabbing his lover:

You done spend my money || throwed it all away  
I had that money || to buy us a home  
When I come home || the money was gone.

The chorus repeats the singer's advice to himself to leave, then in the next stanza, he intensifies the threatening mood of the song considerably by implying that he just might make good on his threat with the knife, as he has done in the past:

So many people || dead and in the grave  
So many people || dead and in the grave  
I better leave ya now darlin' || 'fore I get out my blade.

In the last verse, the singer makes a loose connection to the first, stating that he wanted to use the money to buy his lover a diamond ring, but she had given his money to another man. The chorus repeats and as the song ends the singer repeats "I better go now, I better go now," leaving the listener somewhat relieved that the singer is exercising his better judgment and leaving. If viewed as a story with a beginning, middle and end, the song is somewhat fragmented. But in terms of the country blues tradition of creating moods,<sup>19</sup> it holds up well. The song starts out with the threat of violence, picks up on the theme of a unfaithful lover, evokes images of the harshness of black life and adds irony (also a blues tradition) to the situation by mentioning a

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<sup>19</sup>Ottenheimer, in "Catharsis, Communication, and Evocation," also investigates the "mood creating" aspect of the blues.

diamond ring, which implies not only lasting commitment, but some measure of wealth as well. Here we see how a listener struggling to make ends meet might sympathize with the singer whose lover had given his money to another man.

Evans, Barnie, and Jarrett found that country singers relied on a system of formulas when composing songs.<sup>20</sup> The lyrics in the sample give strong indication that this was true for Howlin' Wolf, at least part of the time. As the data in Table IV shows, Wolf used 14 different half-line formulas (dealing with complaints and coping strategies) in various ways. He mixed and matched these ideas to create new songs. For example, the songs *I've Got A Woman* (# 2) and *I Love My Baby* (# 4) tell nearly identical stories of the singer's lover leaving him. In the former, Wolf uses the formulaic line 'It hurt me so bad, see my baby get away.' The singer has nothing more to say to her and bids her farewell with the song ending on a note of resignation:

Lord fare thee well || I ain't got no more to say.  
Fare thee well || got no more to say.  
It hurt me so bad || see my baby get away.

In the latter version, the formulaic line is altered slightly - 'I'll cry when you're gone' - and the song ends on a note of regret, with the singer admitting he treated his lover badly.

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<sup>20</sup>David Evans, "Techniques of Blues Composition Among Black Folk Singers," *Journal of American Folklore* 87 (July-September 1974); John Barnie, "Oral Formulas in the Country Blues," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 42 (January -December 1978); Dennis Jarrett, "The Singer and the Bluesman: Formulations of Personality in the Lyrics of the Blues," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 42 (January -December 1978).

So long, so long || I'll cry when you're gone.  
 So long || I cry when you're gone.  
 Lord everybody 'round here know || little girl I have treat you wrong.

Howlin' Wolf showed a preference for the coupling of certain formulas and repeated them often. As the results in Table IV show, Wolf used six variations of the half-line formula 'I'm worried about you' and he used them in six different songs. The half-line formula 'I'm gonna leave' was used 10 different ways in six songs.

African-influenced country blues lyrical traditions were also present in the sample. These include the use of ironic humor, frank treatment of male/female relationships, and the use of innuendo. The use of innuendo is consistent with the African tradition of indirection,<sup>21</sup> and the use of irony can be found "in all Afro-American songs to which the blues is related."<sup>22</sup> An example of innuendo is found in the song *I'll Be Around* (# 5) where the singers states:

You know you told me that you loved me  
 You know you told me and I hope it's true.

The implication being that something unpleasant might happen to the lover if she didn't truly love the singer. This is not an insinuation without some basis in fact, as in *I Better Go Now* (# 20), when the singer threatens to "get out (his) blade" and put his lover "dead and in the grave."

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<sup>21</sup>Robert Springer, "The Regulatory Function of the Blues," *The Black Perspective in Music* 4 (Fall 1976): 282.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 284.

There are also a number of examples of irony in the sample. "Cheat if you want to darlin' || treat me unkind, Cheat if you want to darlin' || treat me unkind, Come back and love me | when you can find a little time." In another song, the singer's lover has left him, yet he doesn't worry because he is "sitting' on top of the world." In the song *Didn't Know* (# 16), the singer, with a considerable amount of irony, laments his unfortunate role as a cuckold:

I didn't know || you was ridin' him in my car last night  
 No I didn't know || you was ridin' him in my car last night  
 Well I do know darling || you don't treat me right.

This song is also an example of the use of a sexual code as Wolf combines images for a double shot to the male's ego. Not only the singer's lover "riding" another man, but to adding insult to injury, she is flaunting the singer's sexual potency by "ridin' him" in the singer's own car.

One of the country traditions absent in Wolf's lyrics was the mixing of sacred and secular images. Occasionally Wolf uses the word "Lord" to begin a lyric, but this practice seems to be mostly to provide an additional syllable to a line to match the beat. An examination of the sample shows that the themes of the songs are entirely secular.

Another country blues characteristic was the highly personal nature of the lyrics. Every song in the sample was written either wholly or partially in the first person.

#### *Urban Features*

An urban characteristic of the blues is for the singer to tell a story with a

beginning and end. A little over half (12) of the songs in the sample are structured this way. The sample is also consistent with the urban tradition of distinct beginnings and endings for the songs themselves.

Another feature of urban blues is the tendency to downplay geographical references, and the sample bears this out as Wolf made some, but not extensive use of the country tradition of naming a city or town. A specific place held the possibility of a better future, and traveling represents an escape from a present, dissatisfying situation:

I might leave ya babe || I'm going down on the coast.

Only four times did the singer name a specific geographic place (New Orleans, Natchez, Jackson, and Chicago.) This is consistent with the idea that as rural migrants became more familiar with their surroundings, they felt less of a need for hearing lyrics that reminded them of the past. Evidently Wolf underwent this change himself, because even though he had at one time been a full-time farmer, the sample is devoid of any references or images regarding life on the farm. It was almost as if he made a conscious effort to suppress his past. What he did do frequently, to give the audience a “touchstone” – something familiar to identify with – was to name a generic setting, such as ‘home’ or ‘town,’ instead of naming a specific city or town. Wolf mentioned ‘home’ 15 times in the sample, but always in the contemporary sense, not in the sense of *going home to Mississippi*.

While Wolf's music can be readily classified as urban when viewed in musical

terms; lyrically, the sample does not yield many clear cut examples of the urban genre.

### *Patterns in the Compositions*

At the micro level, the patterns discovered deal with the methods of composition. For example, Wolf relies on a an AAB format in 14 of the songs, and uses a three stanza format in seven of the songs in the sample. Another area of composition where patterns presented themselves dealt with the rhyming sounds and words used by Wolf.

Most of the AAB stanzas were composed so that the last word in the AA lines rhymed with the last word in the B line. The rhyming pattern for the three stanzas of the song *I've Got a Woman* (# 2) is typical of this preference: first stanza - *way/away*; second stanza - *say/away*; third stanza - *May/away*. This example is also one of four songs where Wolf used the same word at the end of each line in at least one of the stanzas in the song. Wolf's preference was to rely on one rhyming sound for the majority of stanzas in a song, 14 of the songs used the same rhyming sound in at least half of the stanzas; four of the songs used the same rhyming sound in all of the stanzas of the song; four used the same sound in all but one stanza.

Wolf also showed a preference for the long vowel rhyming sounds: *a* – *day/stay*; *i* – *kind/time*; and *o*- *more/door*. These three sounds comprise the majority of rhyming sounds in the sample, and are used by Wolf in 37 out of 60 stanzas.

Another pattern concerns Wolf's use of "tags" either at the beginning or end of a



line. All but five of the compositions make use of a tag. A clear pattern was to use the tag “well” to begin a new line, as was done in 46 instances. Reliance on a tag to this degree suggest that it was a staple among Wolf’s half-line formulas.

### *Imagery in the Compositions*

As the majority of songs deal with male/female relationships, much of the imagery revolves around the mistreatment of the singer by his lover: “Well you keep me worried darlin’ || bothered all the time;” or “You got yourself a youngster || and you can’t stand me no more.” Several images of the singer are portrayed: as the cuckold (“I didn’t know || you was lovin’ somebody else”); as the vengeful, jilted lover (“Well, the woman who took my money and took my home and || oh the Wolf gonna wreck her life”); as the forgiver (“Cheat if you want to darlin’ || treat me unkind || Come back and love me || when you can find a little time”); as a victim resigned to mistreatment (“Babe I’ll forget my pride || just to keep you by my side;” “How many more years || are you gonna wreck my life.”)

Contrasting these images of the singer as victim of mistreatment are the less frequent images of the singer as the mistreater: “Ah that is nature || won’t let me treat you right;” “My baby said that ain’t right || I’ll admit that is true || She said daddy, daddy || you got to change the way you do.” Of the 14 songs in which the relationship is portrayed negatively, in only three of the songs does the singer cast himself as the mistreater.

A recurring image is that of the singer's emotional distress brought on by his lover's leaving him for another man:

Keep on havin' a good time now || just like the flowers that come in May  
Ahhh, it hurt me so bad || to see my baby get away.

Here the singer compares the nature of the relationship to that of annual flowers. The relationship will be pleasurable but fleeting. The singer resigns himself to the fact that just as Spring blooms fade, so also will his lover's desire for him fade.

Another recurring image casts the lover as an opportunist, interested in the singer only for his money: "You done spend my money || throwed it all away;" or "just as soon as you get my fortune || she said what in the world I want with you?" In some cases, the images are combined, and the singer suffers the double indignity of being cuckolded by an opportunist:

I had that money || to buy you a diamond ring  
I found out || you give it to your other man.

In one instance however, the tables are turned and the singer is portrayed as the opportunist:

Yes they call me the rocker || I can rock you all night long  
I can let you down easy || when I think your money's gone.

Not all of images deal with mistreatment by a lover. In the few songs in the sample that treat the love interest positively, the singer presents glowing images of his lover's attributes (usually physical): "I love the way she kiss || she loves me all the time;" "I know little girl || you the prettiest little girl in town". Also, in two of the songs,

the primary images are of loneliness and poverty, as in this example:

Well, well, well, well || I'm a long way from home  
I'm a poor boy || I'm a long way from home.

Having thus identified themes, imagery, and patterns in the sample at the macro and micro-levels of analysis, the next chapter will summarize these findings and explore the relationship between the results and the central research question. Also, conclusions will be drawn about the extent to which the sample allows for making inferences about how a country blues performer's style changed when he moved to an urban environment.

## Chapter Five: Summary and Conclusions

### *Summary*

As stated in Chapter Three, the research questions driving this inquiry were: What happens to style specific themes when a performer migrates from one geographic area to another; specifically, from the agrarian South to the industrial urban North? Does the performer's music change? If so, how does it change? What happens to the patterns, themes and imagery in a bluesman's music when he moves from the rural south to the urban North?

Several features of country blues lyrics were identified in the review of literature: a majority of songs deal with some aspect of male/female relationships; the presentation of a complaint of mistreatment and the singer's reaction to it; a black language code which conceals criticism of white society; the use of sexual code words; a realistic treatment of male/female relationships (intimate details of love, sex and desire); the use of plain, direct language; the use of ironic humor; the use of innuendo; bragging (including references to virility); the naming of geographic locations; a fascination with travel for its own sake; references to magic and conjury; and the stringing together of loosely connected ideas to create a mood.

Also identified were features of the urban blues style: distinct beginnings and endings of songs; lyrics that tell a complete story, in which a problem is presented and a solution offered; and a preoccupation with male/female relationships. It was also noted

that urban style lyrics frequently treated the subject of sex in one of three ways: through the use of double-entendres; by an accent on bravado and virility; or by the singer proclaiming helplessness in his attempts to succeed in the relationship.

Some of characteristics of the sample that indicate a break with the country tradition can be found in the relative absence of these country features: the use of a black language code to conceal criticism of whites; the naming of a specific geographic place; the mention of travel for its own sake; and in the total absence of magic and conjury. The lack of references to magic was somewhat surprising, as two of Wolf's contemporaries and prime exponents of the urban style, Muddy Waters and composer Willie Dixon, (both also originally from the Delta) made frequent use of references to voodoo and conjuring in their songs.

Although minimized in the sample, the absence of the above features is not sufficient enough evidence to prove that Wolf made a clean break with tradition, because the sample yielded the presence of an equal number of country features. The use of plain, direct language in the realistic treatment of male/female relationships stands out as a major indicator of a strong country influence in the lyrics. The frequency with which loosely connected ideas were strung together to create a mood is another example of a heavy reliance on the country tradition. Additionally, Wolf made use of irony, innuendo, and bragging, all of which are frequently found in country lyrics.

When the sample is analyzed in terms of urban features, it does meet several

criteria of this style: distinct beginnings and endings to the songs; slightly more than half of the songs tell a complete story; frequent references to helplessness; and several references to bravado and virility.

The three guiding hypotheses of this study (*oral formulas*, *bluesman as fictional persona*, and *thematic pattern*) were useful in identifying major attributes of the sample and did provide a framework within which to categorize the data. The *oral formulas* theory was most helpful in that it provided a way to break the songs down into manageable units which in turn allowed for the identification of patterns, themes, and images.

While the *oral formulas* theory showed that over one-third of the songs *relied* on this country technique, almost all of the songs contained *at least* one oral half-line formula. It appears that, with respect to this sample, the *oral formulaic lines* theory is not a useful means of categorizing a song as either country or urban.

The *bluesman as fictional persona* theory helped focus attention on the personality of the singer, who while sometimes bragging and boastful, was most often portrayed as a victim of circumstances beyond his control, or for which he was not to blame. When he did try to take control of the situation, as in *Mr. Airplane Man* (#18), he was likely to fail in his attempts to change the behavior of the victimizer. Taken alone, this theory was not helpful in determining whether a song could be classified as either country or urban.

The *thematic patterns* theory provided a useful framework for determining the extent to which the sample followed a conflict model of the blues, where the singer recognizes he is being mistreated, subsequently indicts the mistreater, and then resolves the conflict by leaving, staying, or changing the mistreater's behavior. According to the theory's author, the most frequent resolution to conflict was for the singer to leave the relationship; sometimes leaving town altogether. The significance of this country blues theory was reinforced when analysis of the sample showed *leaving* to be a less favored response than *accepting the mistreatment*, or *trying to change* the mistreater. This result would indicate that Wolf's music was more urban than country, with respect to its treatment of male/female relationships.

As stated earlier, one of the characteristics of the blues is to use straightforward language. However, the existence of a black language code (for use when referring to sex) is also widely recognized. An unexpected result in this study was that the sample showed little evidence of Wolf using such a code. The phrases "rock you," "ridin' him," and "hip shakin'" were the only code words discovered.

Nor were there any concealed references protesting the dominant white culture. The song *I've Been Abused* (#21) might *possibly* be taken as an indictment against society, but could just as easily be an example of a song directed to a lover. Based on the sample, it is difficult to draw conclusions about Howlin' Wolf's attitude toward white society. It is possible he didn't write direct protest lyrics, which is consistent with the

country blues tradition. However, the possibility exists that he did write songs of containing direct protest, but they were excluded from the study due to the use of a convenience sample.

*Relationship Between the Results and the Central Research Question*

Overall, the sample provided answers to a part of, but not all of the central research question. The patterns, themes and imagery in his music stayed pretty consistent with their country origins. Wolf's urban lyrics displayed some non-country blues features, but not an overwhelming majority, not enough so that one could say with certainty that he developed a completely urban style.

The most significant *patterns* evident in the sample dealt with the AAB format of the stanzas and Wolf's reliance on certain rhyming sounds and "tags" or filler words. These patterns address compositional and performance features more than lyrical or thematic attributes and appear to offer little insight into the ways Wolf's music may have changed in the urban environment.

One of the most noticeable features about *imagery* in the lyrics is the lack of references to the farm, or to country life, given that Wolf spent nearly half his life on the farm. While Muddy Waters complained to his lover about "another mule kicking in your stall;" Wolf chose a more urban allegory: "I didn't know you was ridin' him in my car last night." If, as has been argued elsewhere, the urban blues of Chicago were supposed to provide listeners with a comfortable reminder of their recent past in the Delta, then in



Wolf's case it did so mostly on the basis of the "sound" of the music and not the lyrics. Only in the few references to specific geographic locations and the few references to traveling can one envision a transplanted Mississippian listening to a Wolf lyric and imagining him or herself "back home in the Delta."

The results indicate little change in the general *themes* of Wolf's music after moving to Chicago. A major theme of country blues is the relationship between man and woman, and the same held true for the sample. The sample also bears evidence of other frequently recurring country themes: mistreatment by a lover, and leaving as a solution to a problem. The latter theme however, points to one way in which Wolf's urban lyrics differ from their country origins: In country blues, leaving is the preferred reaction to mistreatment by a large margin, while in the sample, the singer stayed and accepted mistreatment nearly as often as leaving. When this 'accepting' solution is combined with the singer's other choice, to try to change the mistreater's behavior, leaving as a solution to a problem becomes the least preferred choice. As has been noted, the migration of blacks to urban cities created a large population of people caught in unfamiliar surroundings. Perhaps leaving a relationship in the Delta, where one had "roots," was easier (and therefore a more common solution ) than leaving a relationship while living in a strange city.

### *Conclusions*

It is difficult to categorize the sample in absolute terms, as definitely country or

definitely urban based solely on the presence/absence of either country or urban features; the sample demonstrates a pretty even distribution of features distinct to each style and features common to both styles. One approach to solving this dilemma might be to weight the features in order of importance or distinctiveness to each style.

In such a weighting scheme, a decision would have to be made regarding the most singular features of each style. The first step to this end would be to discard from consideration all the features that are common to both styles (which could also provide at least a partial definition of the elusive "blues tradition" that is oft mentioned but rarely defined.) Thus, for the purpose of devising a weighting scheme, the following common features will be discarded: the preoccupation with male/female relationships; the presentation of a complaint and the reaction to it or solution offered; and the use of bragging and references to virility. Once these common features are removed from consideration, the following discretely country and urban features remain: Country - a black language code; use of plain direct language; use of irony and innuendo; naming geographic locations; fascination with travel for its own sake; references to magic and conjury; and loosely stringing together ideas. Urban - distinct beginnings and endings of songs; telling a complete story; dealing with sex through the use of double-entendres; and the singer proclaiming helplessness in resolving the problem or complaint.

One of the simplest methods of weighting these remaining features would be based on frequency. As the results have shown, the most frequently recurring country

feature of the sample involves the method of composition - loosely connected ideas that create a mood. And the most frequently recurring urban feature of the sample is that about half of the songs tell a complete story. Thus, giving these two features the most weight, neither style gains enough advantage over the other to warrant making a claim as to which is dominant.

However, the almost even split in the sample between songs in the country tradition of 'loosely connected ideas' and songs in the urban style of a 'complete story' can be revealing. Chronologically, the split is consistent from the earliest recordings to the latest; which tends to rule out explanations based on an evolutionary style of composition. That is, if all of the 'loosely connected idea' songs fell into the first half of the decade, and all of the 'complete story' songs came afterwards, one might confidently argue that Wolf's music had changed as a result of his continued exposure to urban influences. However, the sample does not support this idea, and leaves unexplained the phenomenon of Wolf composing in both styles throughout the time line of the sample (i.e., long after his move to Chicago.) The country compositions are interspersed evenly among the urban songs throughout the time period of the sample. It is possible that he wrote a great number of songs early in his career (thus favoring the country tradition) and then "dusted them off" later in his career whenever he needed material for new recordings. Another possible explanation is that the country tradition was so heavily ingrained in him that he never lost touch with this style of blues composition, and when

pressed for new material, he fell back on “what came naturally.”

Perhaps a potential answer lies in future research into the process of writing and recording the songs. Were the songs written out in advance, or were they composed in the studio, at the time of recording? In addition to his recording own compositions, Wolf also recorded songs written by others, suggesting that he might also have composed songs before entering the studio. Further investigation into the processes involved in recording the songs in this sample may yield clues as to which songs were written in advance and which were created after the “tape was rolling.” If the songs that display the urban style of telling a complete story were written in advance, and the songs that loosely connect ideas were written in the studio, it may be possible that under the pressure of recording, Wolf reverted to the compositional style that was most familiar to him, the one he had learned as a young man on the farm.

It appears that when composing, Wolf was most comfortable when examining the male/female relationship from a negative perspective (mistreatment, a country blues feature.) He then recycled a few varying circumstances of mistreatment over and over. Most of the time the singer was mistreated by a lover who then added to the humiliation by leaving him. Less often the singer left because his lover was mistreating him. In an almost equal number of cases, the singer stayed and accepted the mistreatment.

Keil, Titon, and others have suggested that the bluesman gives his audience examples of problems that might occur in their lives and provides them with different

solutions to those problems. In this study, Howlin' Wolf appears to endorse the idea that the man should stay in the relationship, even in the role of a cuckold. While overall, the lover is portrayed negatively (she does the majority of both the mistreating and the leaving the relationship) she is still seen as something desirable and worth being mistreated for. In this respect, while it might seem that Wolf was slightly misogynistic, since the woman was almost always portrayed negatively, on the whole it appears that Wolf was less inclined to vilify women than to worship them.

Even though a basic assumption of the analysis of the data was that the lyrics were fiction, based on this notion of the stabilizing influence of Wolf's marriage, it might be argued that Wolf did write from experience; it's just that the majority of experiences he found worth writing about revolved around his love for a woman and the stable home life a steady relationship provides. The circumstances of mistreatment, both on the lover's and the singer's part, are probably entirely fictional. But at the core of his creative endeavor, Wolf was writing about what he knew best: love. Even his handful of excursions into different subject matter focus on issues related to the home, or life in the home. In *Neighbors* (#6) the setting finds the singer at home, where his "mama" is keeping track of the money. In *Poor Boy* (#13) the singer is "a long way from home;" and in *I've Been Abused* (#21) the singer has been "kicked out" (the implication being, kicked out of the house.) When taken as a whole, the picture of Howlin' Wolf that emerges from the lyrics is one of a relatively simple man, devoted to his wife and home.

The descriptions of a conjugal relationship in the sample are overwhelming negative; which is consistent with the overall blues tradition where the singer presents a complaint to the listener and offers a potential solution to the problem. Since this trait is found in both country and urban styles, it is less useful as an indicator of any change in Wolf's music. However, this negativity does point to possible inferences about black society; as Keil (and others) have argued that blues music is a reflection of its "immediate social milieu."<sup>1</sup> While the country blues singer performs the blues "primarily to ease his worried mind,"<sup>2</sup> the urban bluesman "senses a broader and deeper obligation to the community. . . . He must not only state common problems clearly and concisely but must in some sense take steps toward their analysis and solution."<sup>3</sup>

When viewed through such a 'lens,' Howlin' Wolf's lyrics send apparently confusing signals to the audience. At times, the singer advocates leaving (both for the male and female) as a solution to the troubled relationship. Other times, he advises the listener to accept the situation, and try to make the best of it. Less frequently the singer's advice involves trying to change the female's behavior. And although rare, the singer does mention violence as a possible resolution to a conflict.

The problem with the "reflection of immediate social milieu" viewpoint is

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<sup>1</sup>Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 76.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

apparent when taken in the context of the overall negativity of the sample. Based on the songs, one would get the impression that for blacks during the 1950s, a marriage was a constant battle against infidelity and misplacement of trust. A potential area for further study would be to determine the divorce rate for blacks residing in urban areas during the era covered by the sample.<sup>4</sup> A high rate of divorce proceedings would allow one to infer that the lyrics were indeed a statement of "common problems." A low divorce rate would lend credence to Tilton's observation that the themes presented in the blues are not representative of the black middle class; while at the same time reinforcing another one of his assertions: that "exploitative situations provide (blues) artists with the opportunity to explore a universal human theme."<sup>5</sup> While the theme is presented in a context specific to blacks, due to its universality, it might appeal to listeners of all races. The aforementioned 'problem/solution' aspect of the blues, when combined with a 'universal human theme' may be a possible explanation for the popularity of the blues among listeners of varying cultures.

Since Howlin' Wolf was but one of several exponents of the Chicago style, a replication of this study might look at a different performer and, using the three guiding

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<sup>4</sup>The 1960 census was the first by the U.S. Bureau of the Census that included data regarding divorce and race. For the population of black males 18 years old and over, 2.2 percent were divorced. For the population of black females 18 years old and over, 4.8 percent were divorced. In U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1980*, Vol. 101 (Washington, D.C., 1980): 83.

<sup>5</sup>Jeff Todd Tilton, "Thematic Pattern in Downhome Blues Lyrics," *Journal of American Folklore* 90 (July-September, 1977): 327.

hypotheses utilized here, analyze the country and urban features in another artist's lyrics. It has been hypothesized that Chicago style performers, except for using electrified instruments, changed little else in the music they learned on the Delta. The music in this study partially supports this hypothesis - it shows features of both, especially in terms of compositional style (loosely connected ideas versus complete story). It would be interesting to see if the music of other performers demonstrated a similar split between compositional styles; or if the singer accepted mistreatment in a relationship more often than leaving, as did the singer in the sample.

A weakness of this study (that may be addressed by choosing a different subject) was that many of the conclusions are built upon inferences, because recordings of Howlin' Wolf as a country blues performer are not available. A direct comparison of country and urban samples would have been preferable to comparing an urban sample with what the literature says about the country blues tradition. The underlying assumption of the central research question in this study assumes that Howlin' Wolf *was* a country blues performer and his music actually conformed to the country blues tradition. To this point, the sample generated enough examples of country blues features that, when combined with what is known about Wolf's early life, his association with country blues contemporaries, and what is known about *their* country blues recordings, it seems reasonable to accept the assumption that Howlin' Wolf *at one time*, played music that fits into the country blues category.



Another weakness of this study deals with trying to answer the central research question while drawing on only one feature (the lyrics) of the music for the data. As the literature has shown, there are several distinguishing features of both the country and urban styles in addition to the lyrics (e.g., instrumentation, tuning, vocal inflections, and tempo.) Expanding the categories of data for comparison might allow for a more complete understanding of the relationship between the two styles.

In spite of these weaknesses, this study was worthwhile in several ways: it tests the usefulness of three different blues hypotheses; it provides future Howlin' Wolf researchers with lyrical transcriptions of a portion of his canon; and it sheds light on the work of an influential artist who has been overlooked in the blues research of the past. Hopefully future researchers will be add to what was discovered here, and in doing so, increase our understanding of how the familiar music of a country bluesman changed when he migrated northward to strange surroundings and new beginnings.

Table I

## Songs Titles and Lyrics

Note: Where applicable the caesura dividing the line into half-line units is represented by the || symbol. The year the song was initially released is in parentheses.

1. *Just My Kind* (1953)

Just my color || ooh you're just my kind  
Well you're just my color || ooh you're  
just my kind  
Well you keep me worried darlin' ||  
bothered all the time.

Well I told my baby || cried all night long  
I told my baby now || cried all night long  
Well you just my color darlin' || you just  
my kind.

Well I wrang my hands || cried all night  
long  
I wrang my hands || cried all night long  
Well you just my color darlin' || you done  
me wrong.

2. *I've Got A Woman* (1953)

Lord I've got a woman || she's nice lovin'  
to me every way  
Lord I've got a woman || she's nice lovin'  
to me every way  
You know it hurt me so bad || see my  
baby get away.

Lord fare thee well || I ain't got no more  
to say  
Fare thee well || got no more to say  
It hurt me so bad || see my baby get away.

Keep on havin' a good time now || just  
like the flowers that come in May  
Keep on havin' a good time now || just  
like the flowers that come in May  
Ahhh, it hurt me so bad || to see my  
baby get away.

3. *Work For Your Money* (1953)

Get your hands on your money || mine  
all while you're gone  
Get your hands on your money || mine  
all while you're gone  
I'm gonna leave this town and I || ain't  
comin' back no more.

Well my Momma don't love me ||  
Daddy don't love me no more  
Well my Momma don't love me ||  
Daddy don't love me no more  
I might leave ya babe || I'm going  
down on the coast.

Well goodbye baby || if I don't see you  
no more.  
Well goodbye baby || if I never see you  
no more.  
I want to love you baby || but you keep  
driving me from your door.

4. *I Love My Baby* (1953)

Lord I got a woman || she nice lovin' in  
every way.

Lord I got a woman || she nice lovin' in  
every way.

Now she wants to leave me || have me  
worried everyday.

Lord I hate to see you leave me darlin' ||  
well I hate to see you get away

Lord I hate to see you leave me darlin' ||  
well I hate to see you get away.

No matter where you go || you gonna  
come back home someday.

Well I love my baby || I can't stand to see  
her go

Lord I love my baby || well I can't stand  
to see her go

Well if you leave me darlin' || I'll have to  
stand to see you go.

So long, so long || I'll cry when you're  
gone.

So long || I cry when you're gone

Lord everybody 'round here know || little  
girl I have treat you wrong.

5. *I'll Be Around* (1954)

Well I'll be around to see ya baby

Well I'll be around no matter what you  
say

I'll be around, yes I'll be around  
To see what you're puttin' down.

You know you told me that you loved me  
You know you told me and I hope it's  
true

Well I'll be around, yes I'll be around  
To see what you're puttin' down.

You know I called you in the morning  
You know I called you darling to come  
in the \_\_\_\_\_.

But I'll be around, yes I'll be around  
To see what you're puttin' down.

You know I loved you for myself  
You know I love you, I don't love  
nobody else

Well, I'll be around, I'll be around  
I dont want you runnin' around.

6. *Neighbors* (1954)

When I had a lots of money  
I had friends to give a good time  
I went out with my friends  
We drunk beer and whiskey all night  
The next time I take-a 'em out  
They didn't have a dime to spend.

I told my neighbors I ain't gonna spend  
no money no more

I love my neighbors I can't spend no  
dime no more

I works too hard for my money to  
throw my money away

My mama keep my money I ain't  
gonna spend no money these days.

I love my neighbors, I love my  
neighbors,

Bui I have no dime to spend.

Well every Monday morning, my  
neighbor knockin on my door  
My neighbor done tell me, I want some

ready dough  
 Well I told my neighbor, can't spend no  
 money no more  
 Neighbor he got mad, and walked on  
 away from my door.

7. *I'm The Wolf* (1954)

You know I'm the Wolf baby || you  
 know I stays in the woods  
 You know I'm the Wolf babe || you  
 know I stays in the woods.  
 Well when you get in trouble || you call  
 the wolf out of the woods.

Well you want my money || well you  
 want me to spend it on you  
 Well you want my money babe || you  
 want the Wolf to spend it on you  
 Just as soon as you get my fortune || she  
 said what in the world I want with  
 you?

Well I spend my money || trying to  
 make you satisfied  
 Well, I have spent my money darlin' ||  
 tryin' to make you satisfied  
 Well, the woman who took my money  
 and took my home and || oh the Wolf  
 gonna wreck her life.

8. *Rockin' Daddy* (1954)

Yes they call me the rocker || I can rock  
 you all night long  
 Yes they call me the rocker || I can rock  
 you all night long  
 I can let you down easy || when I think  
 your money's gone.

I can rock you easy || don't want you to  
 hesitate  
 I can rock you easy || don't want you to  
 hesitate  
 I can let you down easy like-a || like  
 jelly on a plate.

Some twistin' and shakin' || don't  
 mean a thing to me  
 Some twistin' and the shakes || don't  
 mean a thing to me  
 I'm a hip shakin' daddy || I can shake  
 like a willow tree.

They call me the rocker || I can really  
 rock a while  
 They call me the rocker || I can really  
 rock a while  
 With a real gone mama || don't let me  
 fake your style.

I can rock you easy || you don't want to  
 hesitate.  
 I can rock you easy || you don't want to  
 hesitate.  
 I can let you down easy || like jelly on a  
 plate.

9. *Who Will Be The Next?* (1955)

Who will you hurt next || how will you  
 start  
 Who'd be the next one || baby you tear  
 apart

Blessed be your heart || cursed be your  
 name  
 Blessed be your heart || cursed be your  
 name  
 Who'd be the next one darlin' || that

you'd put to shame?

Will it be the one || give you his gold  
Or will it be the young one || take all you  
hope

Babe I'll forget my pride || just to keep  
you by my side.

Cheat if you want to darlin' || treat me  
unkind

Cheat if you want to darlin' || treat me  
unkind

Come back and love me || when you can  
find a little time.

10. *I Have A Little Girl* (1955)

Yes I got a little girl || only eighteen  
years old

Yes I got a little girl || only eighteen  
years old

Yes I love my baby || to my heart and  
soul.

I love the way she kiss || she loves me all  
the time

I love the way she kiss || she loves me all  
the time

You know I can't help it || I can't get her  
off my mind.

Yes I got a little girl || she's just only  
eighteen years old

Yes I got a little girl || just only eighteen  
years old

I love my baby || to her heart and soul.

She's got great big pretty legs || teeth that  
shine like pearls

She's got great big pretty legs || teeth just

shine like pearls

Well if you see her shake || man it's out  
of this world.

11. *Natchez Burning* (1956)

Did you ever hear about the burning,  
That happened way down in Natchez  
Mississippi town.

Did you ever hear about the burning,  
That happened way down in Natchez  
Mississippi town.

Those buildings got to burning, there's  
my baby layin' on the ground.

Charlotte Jones was there, Luiza was  
there

Rosie Mae was there, Louise was there  
Did you ever hear about the burning,  
That happened way down in Natchez  
Mississippi town.

I stood back, was lookin', and the old  
building come tumble down.

12. *You Can't Be Beat* (1956)

Now go to sleep || go to sleep  
Go to sleep little darlin' || go to sleep  
little darlin'

Go to sleep little darlin' || you know  
you can't be beat.

I'm in love with you || I'm in love with  
you

I'm in love with you || I'm in love with  
you

I'm in love with you baby || you know  
you look so fine.

I know || I know

I know || yas I know  
 I know little girl || you the prettiest  
 little girl in town.

Don't you worry || don't you worry.  
 Don't you worry little darlin' || don't  
 you worry little darlin'  
 Don't you worry little darlin' ||  
 everything is alright.

Don't worry me || don't worry me  
 Don't worry me || don't worry me  
 Don't worry me boy I'm || talkin' to  
 my baby now.

13. *Poor Boy* (1957)

I'm a poor boy || I'm a long way from  
 home  
 I'm a poor boy || I'm a long way from  
 home  
 What the others do || the world can't do  
 me no harm,  
 I'm a poor boy || a long way from  
 home.

Babe I can't stay here long || babe I  
 can't stay here long  
 What the others do || the world can't do  
 me no harm  
 I'm a poor boy || I'm a long way from  
 home.

Well my || baby's dead and gone  
 Well my || baby's dead and gone  
 Well, well, well, well || I'm a long way  
 from home  
 I'm a poor boy || I'm a long way from  
 home.

And the world || can't do me no harm  
 And the world || can't do me no harm  
 Oh , no no no no || I'm a long way  
 from home  
 World can't do me no harm  
 World can't do me no harm  
 World can't do me no harm

14. *Sittin' On Top of the World* (1957)

One summer day || she went away  
 She gone and left me || she gone to stay  
 But now she's gone || and I can't worry  
 Because I'm sittin' on top of the world.

Worked all the summer || worked all  
 the fall  
 Had to take Christmas || in my overalls  
 But now she's gone || and I don't worry  
 Sittin' on top of the world.

Goin' down to the freight yard || catch  
 me a freight train  
 I'm gonna leave this town || work done  
 got hard  
 But now she's gone || and I don't worry  
 Sittin' on top of the world.

15. *Nature* (1957)

Ah that is nature || won't let me treat  
 you right  
 Ah that is nature || won't let me treat  
 you right  
 I'm out lookin' || on the other side.

You know I love you || want to stay  
 with you day and night  
 You know I love you || I want to stay  
 with you day and night

I'm just out lookin' || I'm losin' my  
sight.

I'm workin' babe || day and night  
I'm workin' baby || day and night  
Ah, that's nature || won't let me come  
to your side.

I'm sorry baby || I'm sorry baby  
I'm sorry baby || I'm sorry baby  
I'm sorry baby || nature caused me to  
mess up my life.

16. *I Didn't Know* (1958)

I didn't know || you was out last night  
baby  
No I didn't know baby || you was out  
last night  
Well I do know || you don't treat me  
right.

I didn't know || you was ridin' him in  
my car last night  
No I didn't know || you was ridin' him  
in my car last night  
Well I do know darling || you don't treat  
me right.

I didn't know || you was down in New  
Orleans last night  
No I didn't know || you was in New  
Orleans last night  
Well I do know sweetheart || you don't  
treat me nice.

I didn't know || you was lovin' somebody  
else  
No I didn't know babe || you was lovin'  
somebody else

I didn't know || but I know now.

17. *Howlin' Blues* (1958)

I'm gonna leave you || I'm goin' away  
I'm gonna leave || I'll be back someday  
Oh well I can't stay here || no need in  
me stayin'  
Here's nothin' for me to lose.

Wooooo || woooooo,  
Wooooo || I'm goin' away,  
Well I can't stay || 'til you hurt my  
feelings  
I'm goin' away.

I'm going to New Orleans || I'm  
worried about you  
I be so broken hearted || I won't know  
what to do  
So good bye babe || I hate to go  
Here's nothin to lose.

18. *Mr. Airplane Man* (1959)

Mr. Airplane man || will you fly down  
to Jackson for me  
Mr. Airplane man || will you fly to  
Jackson for me  
I want you fly to my baby || and give  
her this here message for me.  
Ahhoooooo, ahoooooo || ahhhooooo  
ahhhooooo.

My baby not at home || you didn't  
worry about knockin' on her door  
My baby not at home || you didn't  
worry about knockin' on her door  
Ahhoooooo, ahoooooo || ahhhooooo  
She might be visitin' || at the next door

neighbor's you know.

If you don't find my baby || come on  
back to Chicago to me  
If you don't find my baby || come on to  
Chicago to me  
Ahhoooooo, ahoooooo || ahoooooo  
come on back to me.

19. *Change My Way* (1959)

I'm got to change my way of livin' ||  
this life I'm livin' ain't no good.  
I'm got to change my way of livin' ||  
this life I'm livin' ain't no good.  
I leave home in the morning || don't  
come back 'til the break of dawn.

My baby said that ain't right || I'll  
admit that is true  
My baby said that ain't right || I'll  
admit that is true  
She said daddy, daddy || you got to  
change the way you do.

You know I leave in the mornin' || and I  
don't come back 'til dawn  
You know I leaves in the mornin' || and I  
don't come back 'til dawn  
My baby looked me in the eyes || and said  
daddy, you got to change your evil  
way.

20. *I Better Go Now* (1959)

I better go now  
I better go now baby  
I better go now 'fore I get out my blade.

You done spend my money || throwed  
it all away  
I had that money || to buy us a home  
Yes I had that money/ to buy us a  
home  
When I come home || the money was  
gone.

I better go now,  
'Fore I get out my blade.

So many people || dead and in the  
grave  
Yes so many people || dead and in the  
grave  
I better leave ya now darlin' || 'fore I  
get out my blade.

I had that money || to buy you a  
diamond ring

I had that money || to buy you a  
diamond ring  
I found out || you give it to your other  
man.

I better go now || I better go now.

21. *I've Been Abused* (1959)

All my life || I've caught it hard  
All of my life || I have caught it hard  
I've been abused || and I've been  
scorned.

I feel so bad || it ain't gonna last  
I feel so bad || this ain't gonna last  
I've been scorned || and I've been  
kicked out.



I've been abused || I've been talked about  
 I've been abused || I've been talked about  
 I've been scorned || sure as you born.

I'm so mad || I can shout  
 I'm so mad || I can shout  
 I've been abused || and I've been kicked  
 out.

22. *You Gonna Wreck My Life* (1959)

How many more years || are you gonna  
 wreck my life  
 How many more years || are you gonna  
 wreck my life  
 Well the way you done || you gonna  
 wreck my life.

How many times || you gonna treat me  
 like you do  
 How many more times || you gonna  
 treat me like you do  
 You took all of my money || and all of  
 my love too.

Now I'm old and gray || got no place to  
 go  
 Now I'm old and gray || got no place to  
 go  
 You got yourself a youngster || and you  
 can't stand me no more.

I'm going to the stairs || I'm gonna beg  
 ya for my clothes  
 I'm going to the stairs || I'm gonna beg  
 ya for my clothes  
 For where I go || nobody knows.

Table II  
General Features of Compositions

Feature	Song Number *
Song tells a complete story	2, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 15, 16, 18, 19
Song loosely connects ideas	1, 3, 7, 8, 13, 14, 17, 20, 21, 22
Reliance on formulaic lines/half-lines (used in at least two of the songs stanzas)	2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 17, 21, 22
AAB format	1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 10, 12, 15, 16, 18, 19, 21, 22
Song directed to lover	1, 3, 5, 8, 9, 12, 15, 16, 17, 20, 22
Song directed to bystander	6, 10, 11, 13, 14, 18, 19, 21
Song directed to both lover & bystander	1, 2, 4, 7
Male/female relationship subject matter	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22

\* See Table I for corresponding song title.

Table III  
Macro Level Features of Songs

Feature	Song Number *
Song depicts male/female relationship positively	10, 12
Song depicts male/female relationship negatively	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22
Singer mistreats lover	4, 15, 19
Lover mistreats singer	1, 2, 3, 7, 9, 16, 17, 20, 22
Lover going to leave or has left singer	2, 4, 7, 9, 14, 18
Singer going to leave lover	3, 17, 20, 22
Money a factor in negative relationship	3, 7, 20, 22
No direct reason stated for lover leaving	2, 14, 18
Lover left for another man	9
Lover left with singer's money	7
Lover left due to mistreatment	4
Singer left due to mistreatment	3, 17, 20, 22
Mistreating situation resolved by singer leaving	3, 17, 20, 22
Mistreating situation resolved by singer accepting it	1, 9, 14
Mistreating situation resolved by singer changing lover's behavior	5, 18

\* See Table I for corresponding song title.

Table IV

## Half-Line Formulas and Variations in Songs (N=22)

Half-line Formula	Variation
I'm worried about you	Well you keep me worried darlin' You keep me worried Have me worried every day Don't worry me And I don't worry Bothered all the time
you done me wrong	You can't stand me no more you hurt my feelings you gonna wreck my life gonna wreck her life
You know it hurt me so bad	I feel so bad I'm so mad I've been abused I've been scarred Ahh, it hurt me so bad
I hate to see you leave me	Hate to see you get away I can't stand to see her go See my baby get away she went away gone and left me I'll cry when you're gone
Well I love my baby	I love my baby You know I love you... I'm in love with you baby
You want my money	You want me to spend it on you As soon as you get my fortune

Half-line Formula	Variation
I spend my money	You done spend my money I have spent my money throwed it all away the money was gone I had that money Well the woman who took my money Ain't gonna spend no money no more Can't spend no money no more
You know I (leave in the mornin'; can't help it; love you; called you in the morning)	You know you (told me that you loved me; can't be beat; look so fine)
I'm goin' away	I'm gonna leave this town I'm gonna leave you I better go now I hate to go I leave home in the morning I better leave ya now darlin' I ain't comin' back no more I can't stay here long I can't stay here No need in me stayin' catch a frieght train I'll be back someday
You don't treat me right	You won't let me treat you right You don't treat me nice You treat me unkind cheat if you want to you was lovin' somebody else
Got no place to go	I've been kicked out For where I go, nobody knows long way from home
How many more years	How many times
Lord I've got a woman	Yes I've got a girl

Half-line Formula	Variation
Rock you all night long	really rock awhile
The world can't do me no harm	Nothin' for me to lose
Tag Variations (number of uses)	Well (46) You know (19) Yes (12) Bah (10) Now (9) Lord (8) Ah (4) No (4) <i>word</i> - a (2) Oh well (1) So (1)

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