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Two steps from the blues: Creating discourse and constructing canons in blues criticism

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TWO STEPS FROM THE BLUES:
CREATING DISCOURSE AND CONSTRUCTING CANONS IN BLUES CRITICISM

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of American Studies

The College of William & Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

John M. Dougan

2001

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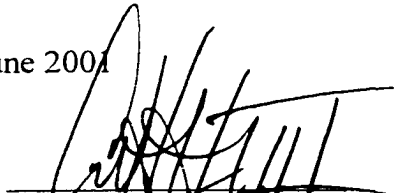
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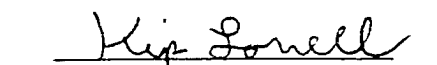
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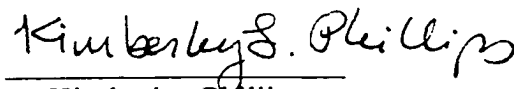

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In Memory

Richard Dougan and Mark Tucker

Il miglior fabbro

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Gonna get my Ph.D.
I'm a teenage lobotomy.

Joey Ramone (1951-2001)
"One of us"

I am the boogie man

John Lee Hooker (1917-2001)

I have often (perhaps too often) referred to my tenure in graduate school as my "midlife crisis." I had no idea what I would encounter or how it would all turn out, but I felt that, despite my relatively advanced age, it was worth the risk. Thankfully, I was right. I can say that now because I had the good fortune to attend William & Mary when I did, and meet a group of scholars who, almost from the moment I arrived, treated me more like a peer than a student, and taught me more than I could have possibly imagined. Principal among this group is Arthur Knight. As my advisor and project director, Arthur was (and remains) unwaveringly supportive of my work. I envy the qualities that make him a fine teacher and scholar: analytical precision, thoughtfulness, insight, and his Zen-like ability to remain calm when I was anything but. There are few people from whom I have learned so much, and even fewer I admire more. While I recognize that this is a frequently overused expression, I can honestly say that I couldn't have done this without him.

Many students may make this claim, however I am confident that, from the start, I had the best dissertation committee: Dale Cockrell, Kip Lornell, Kimberley Phillips, and Anne Rasmussen who, along with Arthur, provided me with encouragement and enormously helpful criticism. My efforts were made better by their involvement.

During my tenure at William & Mary, I was extremely fortunate to learn from so many talented faculty: Joanne Braxton, Mel Ely, Philip Funigiello, Grey Gundaker, Cindy Hahamovitch, Rich Lowry (whose comprehensive knowledge of basketball is second only to mine), and Scott Nelson. I would especially like to thank Bob Gross for not only being a great teacher, but for convincing me to attend William & Mary.

I also greatly benefitted from befriending an incredibly intelligent group of fellow grad students: Jody Allen, Anthony DeStefanis, Wendy Gonaver, Amy Howard, Jen Luff, Emily Mieras, and James Spady. I will see you all on the other side. Thanks to Scott Barretta at *Living Blues* for the book loans and advice, and to all of my students at William & Mary and Thomas Nelson Community College.

It is not overstating the case one bit to say that I would not be in the position to write this had I not met Tom Shea over twenty years ago. Although my resume at the time read: college dropout, record store clerk, and rock drummer, Tom thought I had the skills and attitude to be a rock critic, and managed to talk an editor at the *Springfield Daily News* into giving me a job. Whatever intellectual life I now have had its beginnings there. Thanks Tommy, I owe you one.

* * *

Sadly, there are two very important and influential people not here to share in the completion of this project. First is my father Richard, who passed on to me his love of

music and was directly responsible for my first memorable musical experience which consisted of my singing and dancing to Louis Armstrong as a toddler. Not surprisingly, our musical paths diverged wildly around the time the Beatles appeared on the *Ed Sullivan Show* -- my rock and roll was his "noise"-- but as we both got older, we discovered how much common musical ground we had. And while he never really understood exactly why I was doing this (certainly keeping the career I had beat going to grad school) he was proud of me in his own taciturn, quintessentially Irish way.

Mark Tucker also was not able to see this project through, one he had an enormous hand in shaping. It was my extreme good fortune to work with him for the short time he was at William & Mary, and had it not been for Mark this dissertation would have never gotten off the ground. While I was thrashing about offering up one unwieldy idea after another, it was Mark who helped me define the topic and kept me focused as I struggled with the early writing. I miss his advice, wit, insight, and intelligence. His chapter comments always concluded "victory is assured," a sentiment I wish had been true of the far more serious struggle he faced.

* * *

My deepest and most profound debt, however, goes to my wife Carol Smith. Carol had the hardest job, being the principal breadwinner while I was indulging my intellectual proclivities. I hope that now, with the breadwinning roles reversed, I can somehow begin to pay her back. She inspires me and remains at the center of my life, as she has from that life-changing moment on Pratt Street in Boston many years ago. It was her encouragement and understanding (not to mention her organizational skills) that helped me get through the worst of times (and there were plenty), and I am ever grateful

that she has been with me on what has turned into a long, strange trip. I wouldn't have wanted to make the journey with anyone else.

Lastly, there is our son Eamon whose interests are more inclined to Scooby Doo and Pokemon than the blues. He is a constant source of pride and joy and though only five, has taught me so much about what it means to be a man.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the development of blues criticism in its myriad forms from the 1920s to 1990s, its role in the emergence of a blues discourse and history, and the codification of a blues canon. I analyze blues discourse principally as the creation of critics, historians, and musicologists, but also as the result of series of complex, imbricated relationships among writers, musicians, fans, record collectors, and independent entrepreneurs.

Beginning in the 1920s, I outline a pre-history of blues discourse by examining the metamorphosis of the blues as a cultural text shaped by the folklore scholarship, criticism and reportage in the popular press, and the commercial ascendancy of the blues on record. Of special interest is the blues writing in the African American press and how these writers debated the cultural politics of music and interpretations of racial uplift ideology.

In the post-World War II era, I focus on the works of Samuel Charters and Paul Oliver, specifically the former's *The Country Blues* and the latter's *Blues Fell This Morning*. I examine how their writing influenced the blues revivalists of the 1960s, and the impact of their work on later blues scholars, journalists, and record collectors. It is the last group, record collectors, that I examine in detail and their work as the musical archaeologists, culture brokers, and keepers (and creators) of multiple blues canons. Lastly, I analyze the work of women blues writers, their rhetorical approach to the genre, and the impact they have had on decentering the male-authored blues canon and recreating contemporary blues discourse.

TWO STEPS FROM THE BLUES

CREATING DISCOURSE AND CONSTRUCTING CANONS IN BLUES CRITICISM

Introduction

In the summer of 2000 I was invited to present a paper at a blues conference at a large northeastern university. Along with providing me the opportunity to test-out some of my research before an audience of blues-loving colleagues, I was also looking forward to hearing from the other participants, and what I hoped would be new and interesting ways of approaching the blues as vernacular musical culture. I had the good fortune of participating on a panel dealing with the origins and evolution of blues criticism, a topic I felt had been generally neglected (or at least undervalued) in blues scholarship. One participant gave an exciting, intellectually rigorous, and well-written presentation on the guitarist Buddy Guy. He analyzed and historicized Guy's considerable instrumental prowess, his influence on white blues players such as Eric Clapton, Stevie Ray Vaughan, and how more recently Guy, in a moment of perverse irony, has begun to imitate the sound of the white players who copied him. He also insightfully addressed Guy's role as a participant in the construction of blues discourse (or a blues sensibility) through his (ultimately failed) entrepreneurial efforts as the owner of a Chicago blues club.

Luckily, I did not have to follow his presentation and, at its conclusion, was looking forward to the Q&A session. The first hand went up in the audience and the questioner launched into a critique of the aforementioned scholar's work. "You said Buddy Guy was such a great guitar player," the questioner argued, "but I can think of 10-15 guitar players in Chicago that are much better than Buddy Guy." Then, in a moment right out of Nick Hornby's novel *High Fidelity*, he started listing these guitarists, all of

whom were unknown to me and, from a quick glance at nearby faces, many others too. Almost immediately there was veritable Greek chorus of affirmation of the questioner's criticism. As the presenter struggled to clarify his point (which, frankly, I thought was abundantly clear), the Q&A dissolved into what my father used to call a pissing contest over the "facts:" who was a better guitar player, and why they were better than Buddy Guy, and what about so-and-so, and blah, blah, blah.

At some point, the word "minstrelsy" came up which led to a (thankfully) brief "discussion" of the film *Blues Brothers 2000*, the John Landis-directed sequel to the hugely popular 1980 Dan Aykroyd/John Belushi star vehicle, *The Blues Brothers*. While I would add my voice to the chorus that these films (especially the sequel) represent the worst kind of white stereotyping of African American vernacular culture, the opportunity to discuss minstrelsy in a more nuanced manner *vis a vis* the blues was lost among many audience members taking the opportunity to feel good about expressing their outrage and indignation over a lousy film that had been almost completely ignored by the American public. Finally, and with some exasperation, I suggested that if we wanted to talk about minstrelsy and the blues, we might want to consider some contemporary issues such as the problematic marketing of African American stereotypes by "authentic" deep blues label Fat Possum records, and the stylized caricature of blues performance presented by white cult rock bands like the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion. My suggestions were met with polite, disinterested silence. The discussion then shifted to what is the current state of the blues (one of the questions posed at the conference was "What can America's youth learn from the blues?"). I suggested that youth are learning about the blues, in a myriad of ways, in hip-hop, through cult rockers like Jon Spencer, and most prominently in the sampling of dozens of Alan Lomax field recordings by DJ/producer Moby on his

multiplatinum CD *Play*. Again, more silence.

I did not think that what I was suggesting was revelatory, nor was it my intention (then and now) to be self-aggrandizing, but rather to encourage different discursive strategies. Unlike some of the more vociferous conference participants, I was not one who fetishized and worshiped the blues as an unchanging same. I considered myself a blues fan who, as did many baby boomers, learned about the blues by listening to white (mostly English) guitarists (Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, Jimmy Page), and bands (Rolling Stones, Kinks, Yardbirds, Pretty Things). According to the aesthetic line towed by revivalist ideologues I had been poisoned by rock and roll and wasn't hearing "the real thing." But to my 13 year old ears, it rocked, and that was real enough. It was not until many years later that my ongoing interest in the blues -- nurtured by the recordings of these white interpreters -- led me (at times kicking and screaming) to the music of Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Charley Patton, Robert Johnson, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and many others.

Ultimately, what I found disappointing about the conference was that, at times, what passed for discussion and debate, was a kind of male, schoolyard, one-upmanship, "my facts can beat up your facts." There were some present who wanted to talk about the blues in new and expansive ways, but there were just as many who wanted to denounce Eric Clapton as a poor guitarist (!!), argue over what Albert Collins record was his best, why Robert Cray doesn't really play blues anymore, or reiterate the argument that only the acoustic country blues are "authentic," and were forever ruined by electricity and the backbeat heavy cover versions by the white guitar gods of the 1960s.

It was then I realized that, in terms of a dissertation topic, I was on the right track. I wanted to understand the intellectual origins of these debates. Originally, I had

conceived of this as a project using the blues to show the cultural connectedness between America and England and the white fascination with blackness. Luckily, Mark Tucker suggested that I attempt something a little less unwieldy (although this project proved unwieldy for different reasons) and use my background in rock criticism to examine how a blues discourse and canon emerge through criticism and scholarship. I wanted to analyze, and hopefully, better understand the extramusical elements that contribute to a diverse epistemological and ontological understanding of the blues, and how that is manifested in popular journalism, scholarly writing, record collecting, and the entrepreneurial outgrowth of collecting, the reissue LP/CD.

Mark's topic suggestion came with some required reading, John Gennari's doctoral dissertation, "The Politics of Culture and Identity in American Jazz Criticism" (University of Pennsylvania, 1993) which provided me with a methodological template in which to examine blues criticism. As does Gennari, I wanted to look at blues writing historiographically, in a manner that connected writers with their approaches to writing. As important, was to examine how a blues taxonomy, canon, and rhetoric are created and mediated by critics, and folklorists, in concert with record collectors, entrepreneurs, the music industry, and consumers. In doing this, I wanted to better understand how we come to know the blues, and how we selectively apply this genre designation. And, as a direct result of attending the conference, I wanted to examine how, historically, criticism has shaped discursive strategies, and how they are publically debated, accepted and rejected. It was an approach to blues scholarship I felt was underrepresented.

* * *

When I was a freshman in college in 1961-62, my most precious possessions were my blues records and portable stereo phonograph ...

From time to time I read and reread Samuel Charters's pioneering *The Country Blues*, published in 1959, for its poetic descriptions of a music that seemed as remote as Kurdistan and destined always to remain so.

-- Peter Guralnick, *Searching for Robert Johnson*

This formative experience recounted by Guralnick, broadly speaking, establishes the parameters of this dissertation. Samuel Charters's groundbreaking book-length examination of the blues was quickly followed by Paul Oliver's *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (1960) and both books, along with the earlier recorded work of Alan Lomax and avant-garde folklorist Harry Smith, set the tone for succeeding generations of blues scholarship. This dissertation examines the development of blues criticism in its myriad forms, from the 1920s to the 1990s, its role in the emergence of a blues discourse and the codification of a blues canon. I analyze blues discourse principally as the creation of critics, music historians, and musicologists, but also as the result of a series of complex, imbricated relationships among writers, musicians, fans, record collectors, and independent entrepreneurs. As a part of American vernacular music history, this blues discourse will be examined within a broader cultural and political context that considers race and gender in the making (and re-making) of a blues canon.

My interest in blues critics, scholars, and record collectors is, to paraphrase John Gennari (who borrowed the idea from historian and jazz critic Eric Hobsbawm), due to their role as members of a "secondary public," a vast group of "outsiders" (Hobsbawm's word), an audience both black and white "whose relationship with the music," Gennari writes, "has been mediated by various filters: concerts, radio programs, records, criticism, photographs, television shows, and films." These American and English blues critics form a part of the secondary public as fans/consumers who wrote about and published

their experiences played a major role in shaping the attitudes and experiences of other fans, and created an epistemological understanding of the blues as part of American vernacular culture. Along with Samuel Charters and Paul Oliver, Amiri Baraka, Charles Keil, Tony Langston, Sylvester Russell, Dave Peyton, James A. Jackson, Valerie Wilmer, Mary Katherine Aldin, Angela Davis, and Sandra Lieb are the subjects of this work, who as critics, historians, and most importantly, fans, have shaped blues historiography, and the experiences of other members of the secondary public.

While the written work of the aforementioned authors is central to the dissertation, blues-as-commodity-culture is also examined, specifically the impact of the 78-rpm record as a means of capturing the aural history of the blues. Blues record collectors turned independent entrepreneurs play an important role in the creation of blues discourse by making much of the rarest music available to consumers. I study the relationship between these entrepreneurs, critics, and fans as a means of illustrating how canon formation develops ideologically through debates over a performer's talent and popularity (or obscurity). I also scrutinize aesthetic issues, such as how race and class (i.e., representations of the black working class) function as symbolic authenticity, and the "purity" of acoustic blues versus the "vulgarization" of electric blues. These discursive elements contribute to a contested taxonomy and history of the blues, while shaping a canon of artistry.

In Chapter One (itself a monograph in waiting) I outline a pre-history of blues discourse as it developed in the early twentieth century by examining the metamorphosis of the blues as a cultural text shaped by the combination of interrelated factors: the formalizing structure of folklore scholarship, criticism and reportage in the popular press, and the commercial ascendancy of the blues on record. Of special interest is the creation

of an early blues taxonomy by folklorists and musicologists, and the rhetorical shift in blues writing in the popular press with an emphasis on black blues critics (specifically Tony Langston) in the African American press. It was in the black press where pro- and anti-vernacularists (the latter group best represented by Dave Peyton of the *Chicago Defender*) debated the cultural politics of music, gender, and race and representation, building their arguments upon contested interpretations of racial uplift ideology.

The focus of Chapter Two is Samuel Charters and Paul Oliver, specifically their seminal books *The Country Blues* and *Blues Fell This Morning*. I historicize their writing in a manner that examines how they expanded upon earlier influential American and British blues scholars of the 1930s and 1940s (e.g., Rudi Blesh, Ian Laing, and Max Jones). In analyzing their approach to blues scholarship, I address their different methodological approaches, their roles as white creators and keepers of a (mostly) black blues canon, Charter's romanticization (and construction of) the primitive bluesman, Oliver's use of hermeneutics in building a canon of artistry, the impact of these books as principal factors in the reanimation of blues scholarship in the post-World War II era, and the earliest critics of Charters and Oliver to pen blues tomes and offer different discursive strategies, Charles Keil and Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka).

Chapter Three centers on the 78-rpm record, specifically the efforts of blues record collectors and their work as musical archaeologists, culture brokers, and creators and keepers of (multiple) blues canons. Using the groundbreaking work of Harry Smith and his seminal 1952 *Anthology of American Folk Music* as a paradigm, I study record collecting as a means by which canons are formed and disseminated to the secondary public of consumers, and how record collecting itself becomes an explicitly gendered and racialized form of connoisseurship.

Chapter Four returns to the theme of Chapter One in that I again analyze blues scholarship that has historically maintained a status somewhere beneath the surface of recognition. In this case it is women writing about the blues, their rhetorical approach to the genre, and the impact they have had on decentering a male-authored blues canon. I look at the work of two journalists, Valerie Wilmer and Mary Katherine Aldin, and three academically affiliated scholars (Sandra Lieb, Daphne Duval Harrison, and Angela Davis), who, using a theoretical undergirding of feminism and class consciousness, argue for a reconsideration of the music of the classic blueswomen of the 1920s.

As I mentioned earlier, this was supposed to be a less unwieldy project than what I had originally proposed, something that, during the writing, I had to keep reminding myself. The fact remains that there are lacunae. I do not spend any significant time with the blues acolytes who combined their love of this music with academic study, some of whom (David Evans, John Fahey, Barry “Dr. Demento” Hansen) studied together in the Folklore and Mythology program at UCLA in the mid-1960s. Others contributing important work (Jeff Todd Titon, Giles Oakley, Bill Ferris) are also not part of this study, but will be in an expanded version. As will some of the white musicians (e.g., John Hammond, Jr., Al Wilson, Bob Hite, John Koerner, Dave Ray, and Tony Glover), and black musicians (Bobby Rush, Benny Latimore, Denise LaSalle, Millie Jackson) who, through recordings and in performance, offer different versions of the blues canon that speak to very different, and still largely middle-age African American audiences.

Gerald Early noted recently that one of the problems with jazz historiography is that not enough attention is paid to the impact jazz criticism has on canon formation. The same is true of the blues. Part of understanding the blues, ontologically and epistemologically, is recognizing the complicated and contested relationships among

scholars, journalists, record collectors, and consumers – cultural mediators who, to varying degrees, have had an impact in shaping American vernacular music history. Over the last seven decades, from Tony Langston’s columns in the *Chicago Defender* in the 1920s, to Angela Davis’s most recent work, blues criticism continues to (re)create discourse and (re)construct canons, affecting both what we hear, and how we hear it.

* * *

Lastly, a few words about the title. Before I had written a word of this, I knew it would be called “Two Steps From the Blues.” When asked to expound upon the title’s significance, I would usually answer that by broadly focusing on writing and records, I was dealing with two mediating structures that affected the public’s relationship with the blues. That, and the notion of it being part of the discourse developed by the “secondary public,” I thought was a reasonably clever take on the notion of two degrees of separation. The truth is, while I believe that, I wanted to title it after my favorite song by Bobby “Blue” Bland, one of the greatest, and most authentic, blues voices ever.

Chapter 1

Uplifting the Blues: Making History and Creating Discourse

It was confusing to see some of those “Hate Blues” hypocrites, who were preaching and brain washing before the public how much they detested the blues, yet whenever the same so-called sophisticated intellectuals and top musicians would hear some low-down blues sung and played at a House Rent Party or some hole-in-the-wall speakeasy, they’d let their hair down, act their age, be themselves and go to town by belly rubbing and shouting. “Play ‘em daddy -- if it’s all night long.”

--Perry Bradford (1965)¹

Time has come when ignorant antics will no longer be accepted as talent. . . specific training in voice culture, correct posture, walking, speech, language, and music are a necessity today.

--James A. “Billboard” Jackson (1923)²

Play the blues for me
Play the blues for me
No other music
‘Ll ease my misery.

--Langston Hughes (1923)³

Writing with all the temerity, candor, and surety that bespeaks youthful bravado, 24-year-old Langston Hughes, in his 1926 essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” fired a critical salvo that indicted the racial culture of the “high class Negro” as little more than a facsimile of “Nordic manners, Nordic faces, Nordic hair, Nordic art (if any).”⁴ Hughes championed instead the “eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul -- the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world.”⁵ Beating this drum until reaching a furious crescendo, Hughes called upon jazz and the blues to represent and

articulate his case against the anti-vernacularist faction of African America's talented tenth: "Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand."⁶

Hughes continued his attack some months later in a two-part article published in the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Originally titled "These Bad New Negroes: A Critique on Critics," the piece ran under the headline, "The Best Negroes Not Really Cultured." Hughes again railed against a black middle-class that revered and replicated Eurocentric artistic standards to the near exclusion of African American vernacular expression:

Art is a reflection of life or an individual's comment on life. No one has labeled the work of the better known younger Negro writers as untrue to life. It may be largely about humble people, but three-fourths of the Negroes are humble people. Yet, I understand, I am sorry and I wish some one would put them into a nice story or a nice novel. But I fear for them if ever a really powerful work is done about their lives. Such a story would show not only their excellencies but their pseudo-culture as well, their slavish devotion to Nordic standards, their snobbishness, their detachment from the Negro masses and their vast sense of importance to themselves.⁷

Calling on the blues once more, Hughes argued for its importance as poetry, noting that "authorities in the study of Negro folk verse," such as James Weldon Johnson, Dorothy Scarborough, and Carl Van Vechten concurred with this literary assessment. It was Van Vechten, the white patron of the Harlem Renaissance, who championed the blues in general and in particular the vocal talents of Bessie Smith, Clara Smith, and Ethel Waters in the pages of *Vanity Fair*. Describing the blues as the "disconsolate wails of deceived lovers and cast-off mistresses," Van Vechten predicted a future of vast cultural influence for the music noting, "it will not be long before the Blues will enjoy a . . . resurrection

which will make them as respectable, at least in the artistic sense, as the religious songs."⁸

The capitalization of "Blues" is notable insofar as this emphasis indicates the contentiousness of the debate among New Negroes and fellow travelers over issues of racial culture and vernacular representation. To Hughes and Van Vechten (with whom Hughes worked closely during this period), "Blues" was African American vernacular culture writ large, the indelicate poetry of common folk living indelicate lives. Hughes's argument for the blues exhibiting specific and important cultural meaning for African Americans was not the first to situate vernacular music as a part of a larger black cultural discourse. It was, however, indicative of the active role played by African Americans in this nascent blues discourse during the intellectual and cultural foment of the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes's essays came at a time when the debate surrounding the importance of the blues, issues of cultural representation, and the genre's developing history and attendant discourse was experiencing a discursive shift away from scholars and folklorists, to a broader, potentially more inclusive debate played out publically by music critics in the African American press, in the prose and poetry of the Harlem Renaissance, by sympathetic white critics and scholars writing for daily newspapers and general interest magazines and, most notably, by an active audience of black and white consumers who, in the mid-1920s, were purchasing blues records by the millions, a commercial trend that would continue throughout the decade ending with the onset of the Great Depression.

These diverse elements combined to make up a "secondary public" that John Gennari, writing about jazz, has described as an audience, both black and white, "whose relationship with music has been mediated by various filters" such as radio, live performance, sheet music sales, reportage in the popular press and, most importantly, the

record.⁹ It was within this community, this secondary public consisting primarily of fans/consumers, critics, entrepreneurs, and artists both musical and non-musical, that a blues discourse was shaped. What makes the blues discourse shaped by this secondary public of special interest is that it mediates the discourse of the “primary public,” a small group that, to paraphrase Eric Hobsbawm (by way of Michel de Certeau), participated in the creation of music as a routine part of their everyday lives,¹⁰ and is engaged in a dialectical relationship with a “tertiary public” of academically affiliated ballad hunters and folklorists whose scholarly publishing contributed to an understanding of the blues in what Ann Douglas calls its “pre-media, pre-literate,” state. As important, is the blues discourse of the secondary public that, due to its mediative status, broad dissemination and popular usage, emerges as the dominant discourse.

Defining blues discourse

Although the term discourse is more commonly understood as a formal and lengthy written or spoken discussion of a subject, the term itself resists a fixed, singular meaning. My conceptualization of a blues discourse draws from Roger Fowler’s assertion that discourse is “speech or writing seen from the point of view of the beliefs, values, and categories which it embodies. . . [which] constitute a way of looking at the world, and organization or representation of experience -- ‘ideology’ in the neutral non-pejorative sense.”¹¹ This definition is especially useful in that it speaks to some of the core issues of blues discourse within the secondary public, namely the way one looks at the world, and the organization and representation of experience into a form of ideology. Adding nuance to Fowler’s definition is Michel Foucault who argues that among the ways discourse is constituted is as an individualizable group of statements, that is

speaking and writing that “seem to have a coherence and a force” in common.¹² This is consistent with what Fowler calls the embodiment of beliefs, values, and categories, and makes it possible to talk specifically about a discourse of the blues.

Borrowing from these sources I am constructing what I hope is a practical definition of blues discourse that views it as a metadiscourse existing on two intersecting planes. First there is the discourse of artistic expressivity within the genre itself (i.e., blues as a vernacular representation of African American culture in the twentieth century). Second, is the discourse developed by the members of the secondary public, one that integrates a consensual understanding of the music (what could also be called a vernacular ontology) and the various filters by which it was (and is) mediated. For purposes of clarity, I use the phrase "blues discourse" to comprehensively represent these linked musical, rhetorical, and ideological strategies.

Like the music, the blues discourse of the early twentieth century was in a state of flux. By the time Langston Hughes had written "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," the cultural and taxonomical debate over the blues was into its second decade and the recorded sound of the blues was experiencing a stylistic shift away from the classic blues of Mamie Smith, Bessie Smith, and Ma Rainey, to the country blues of Blind Lemon Jefferson and Blind Blake -- the latter a style that, while captured on record after the recordings of Smith and Rainey, essentially preceded them as a form of live blues performance, would define the genre musically and iconographically for much of the twentieth century.

Establishing the history of blues discourse as it developed in the early twentieth century -- the subject of this chapter -- involves examining the metamorphosis of the blues as a cultural text shaped by a combination of interrelated factors: the formalizing

structure of folklore scholarship; criticism and reportage in the popular press; the commercial ascendancy of the blues on record; performers and entrepreneurs; and an active audience of consumers and their role as critics and vernacular theorists. This dominant understanding of the blues results from musical and rhetorical strategies developed within these intensely imbricated relationships. Of special interest is the rhetorical shift in blues criticism in the early 1920s around the time of "Crazy Blues," and the development of a critical aesthetic in blues writing in the popular press, particularly in African American newspapers. It was in the black press that blues criticism, both as an evaluative method and cultural reportage, became part of what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as the larger "battlefield over taxonomy," a tumultuous cultural arena where pro- and anti-vernacularists vociferously debated the cultural politics of music, gender, race, and representation, continuing the ongoing taxonomical debate over the blues and how it was to be defined both ontologically and epistemologically. According to Bourdieu these "winners and losers [and the] stakes, boundaries and rules of the game are in constant dispute."¹³

The sociopolitical parameters of blues discourse and the battlefield over taxonomy during this era can be viewed as a cultural critique problematized by the concurrent debate over the ideology of racial uplift and its function as a form of cultural politics. Borrowing from Stuart Hall, ideology in this case refers to "mental frameworks -- the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the system of representation -- which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works," and the general process of the production of these beliefs and ideas.¹⁴ As an ideological component of African American anti-vernacularists' attempts to codify black cultural embourgeoisification,

racial uplift was a means for elite blacks to devise "a moral economy of class privilege, distinction, and domination within the race, often drawing on patriarchal gender conventions as a sign of elite status and race progress."¹⁵ These were the cultural aims of the "best New Negroes" that Langston Hughes railed against, the race leaders and preachers, and members of the talented tenth that dismissed blues as so much retro-minstrelsy, yet still "flock[ed] to Harlem cabarets." These "hate blues" hypocrites who yelled "play 'em daddy -- if it's all night long" at speakeasies and rent parties that confused and angered musician and entrepreneur Perry Bradford. Such was the contradictory nature of the constituents of this secondary public, a choir of contested voices that would contribute significantly to the establishment of the blues discourse in the early twentieth century.¹⁶

The "blues sensibility" before and after "Crazy Blues"

The search for origins is a vexed and disputatious historical process inevitably yielding "beginnings" that are moments of cultural contestation and collision rather than unsullied, organic starting points. Charles Keil notes that "those who seek the origin of the blues are sticking their heads in the sand."¹⁷ The same could be said of those searching for the origins of blues criticism, history, and discourse. A more satisfying methodological approach is searching for moments of cultural convergence, when events coalesce synchronically, offering a wider window of opportunity to unpack and analyze the epistemological moments that contribute to the creation of a discourse. Keil's dismissive "ostrich" metaphor calls to mind Manny Farber's termite artist feeding its way through the walls of particularization, not as a means of avoiding harder issues, but rather searching for the discursive elements lurking in the grain just beneath the surface of

recognition, and this is the method I adopt for my historical critical inquiry. In this instance however, this termite strategy operates most effectively by starting in the middle and working slowly backwards and forwards.

At the time of Hughes's attack against anti-vernacularists and Van Vechten's second *Vanity Fair* piece in 1926, the blues was not commonly understood to be the music of "a man in faded overalls sitting on a ramshackle porch in the Mississippi Delta with an old hollow-body guitar," but rather music performed by "women in sequins and ornate dress with feathers and wraps on the dark stage of a rundown theater" whose musical backgrounds were in cabaret and vaudeville.¹⁸ This "classic blues" period of the 1920s signaled the beginning of the commercial explosion in recorded blues, also known as the race record era, with the success of Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" in 1920. Written by Perry Bradford and released on the Okeh label, "Crazy Blues" sold a then-unprecedented 75,000 copies (at one dollar each) in a month, and over one million copies in its first year of release. "Crazy Blues" was a transitional moment in blues history that, as Ann Douglas notes, marked a shift in African American vernacular music from folk culture, i.e. a pre-technological oral tradition, to a form of mass art "transmitted . . . via the media to the widest possible audience for the largest possible profit."¹⁹

The runaway success of "Crazy Blues" had an impact on the changing nature of who contributed to the blues discourse of the early twentieth century and the means by which this discourse was mediated and the music disseminated. Sales patterns of "Crazy Blues" indicated that the new record buying audience was "largely black and working class," and from this point forward the debate over the cultural importance of the blues implicitly involved a growing audience of black consumers. Douglas emphasizes the relative lack of education and working-class make up of this new audience of black

record buyers, noting that "most educated Negroes condemned the blues as crude and illiterate, a racial embarrassment."²⁰ David Levering Lewis writes that during the Harlem Renaissance "Afro-American music had always been a source of embarrassment to the Afro-American elite . . . its feelings about urban spirituals -- the blues -- and about jazz sometimes verged on the unprintable."²¹ It was precisely this bourgeois-inspired anti-vernacularity that moved writers such as Hughes and Van Vechten to venerate publicly the blues as foundational in understanding the breadth of influence of African American musical culture, and, in Hughes's words, to write about "low life" while asking disapproving middle-class African Americans whether "life among the better classes [was] . . . more worthy of the poet's consideration."²²

Mamie Smith's widespread success and the medium by which her song was disseminated helped the working-class audience shape an epistemology of the blues, a vernacular template derived from an understanding of the music as both communal-based oral/aural folk art and packaged, commercialized popular entertainment. As Lynn Abbot and Doug Seroff note, "The era of popular blues music was not suddenly set into motion by Mamie Smith's 1920 recording of 'Crazy Blues' . . . the blues was an American entertainment institution with an abounding legendary and firmly established father figure" (i.e., W.C. Handy).²³ Abbott and Seroff contend that the blues was shaped by the tension between the perpetuation of "indigenous musical and cultural practices of the African American folk heritage. . . [forming] the cornerstone of an independent black cultural image, and a countering impulse to demonstrate mastery of standard Western musical and cultural conventions."²⁴ It was these impulses, shaped by the dynamic forces of commercialization, that produced the "formalizing structures" without which there would have been no "composition, development, dissemination, and widespread

popularization of . . . [the] blues." This nexus of black folk heritage, Western conventions, and commercialism was, prior to "Crazy Blues," accomplished by the "two main, intersecting avenues to commercial success in the broader entertainment business . . . sheet music and the vaudeville stage."²⁵

While it may not have introduced black audiences to the blues *per se*, the success of "Crazy Blues" did affect the size and make-up of the blues audience, and simultaneously altered the nature of the music's commercial ascendancy by virtually wiping out sheet music sales. As the blues became commercially transformed into a "mechanically mediated oral tradition,"²⁶ millions of working class African American consumers helped form the growing secondary public participating in the nascent blues discourse. The ten-inch, 78 rpm record was a democratizing commodity freeing the individual from the "tyranny" of sheet music and its prerequisite need for an instrument, musical ability, and musical literacy. The 78 allowed individuals and extended (imagined) communities a participatory role where the object (the record and the phonograph) was owned by the individual and could be used at his or her own convenience. According to Evan Eisenberg, this turned the cathedral of culture into a supermarket, providing individuals with the opportunity to take home their purchases and enjoy them in any manner they pleased. Armed with this affordable commodity, a new audience could avail itself of blues music, repeatedly enjoy the experience and, if so inclined, develop musical skills through oral/aural mimicry of the pre-technological folk tradition, all without employing the skills required to read and interpret sheet music, or having to witness a live performance. Mechanical invention "had met capitalism's need to recreate all of life in its image" and in doing so offered a commodity form with a fixed musical text that provided limitless potential for this new black working class audience to

establish repeated contact with its rich cultural heritage and change its role in the making of a larger, mainstream blues discourse from observer to participant.²⁷ It was a commercial/technological transition that would affect not just the post-migration urban North, but the rural South as well. "In the delta of Mississippi," wrote Dane Yorke in 1932, "it was not unusual to find a ramshackle carpetless dark shanty boasting a bright red mahogany \$250 Victrola."²⁸

As liberating as the ten-inch 78 rpm record was, this does not suggest, however, that the role of commodification and capitalism offered working class audiences nothing but limitless cultural agency, emancipation, and democratization -- altruism has not traditionally been a core business philosophy of record companies at any point in the twentieth century. Some blues historians argue that the technologically driven transition from folk art to mass art standardized, diluted, and trivialized the blues, to the point of offering songs that were little more than cannibalized facsimiles that valued predictability over individual creativity and authenticity.²⁹ "Capital now mediated the relationship between artist and audience," writes William Barlow, "that is, between the producers and the consumers of blues disks [sic]. An expression of cultural resistance had been converted into a new form of capital capable of generating large profits for record companies."³⁰

As a cultural marker signifying the transition by which one heard blues music, "Crazy Blues," with its endlessly repeatable text, fundamentally altered the make-up of the audience of blues consumers and the attendant blues discourse. With the ascension of the 78 as the primary means of disseminating music, the blues was no longer strictly an allographic entity (written down and replicated through performance) but an autographic one (the sound of a song, commonly understood to be "owned" by a specific artist and

therefore representative of the genre).³¹ However if, as Abbott and Seroff argue, "Crazy Blues" was not the sole element that set the era of popular blues into motion, then what elements contributed to an understanding of the blues, especially to an audience that could not yet purchase it on record? How was an understanding of "the blues" constructed through scholarly writing and popular journalism? Moreover, who was writing about the blues and what were they writing about?

Samuel Charters notes that "until Hart Wand, 'Baby' Seals, and W.C. Handy had published their blues songs in 1912, the blues were a confused and endlessly varied musical form."³² Broadly speaking, Charters's assessment is correct in that songs bearing the name "blues" were composed by blacks (Seals and Handy) as well as white songwriters such as Hart Wand and Irving Berlin who, stylistically, were more closely associated with the sound of Tin Pan Alley. Marshall Stearns summed up the stylistic breadth of the genre in the first quarter of the twentieth century by speaking of the "blues, near-blues, and non-blues-called-blues."³³ In effect, once its popularity was established through live performance and sheet music sales "the blues," despite some stylistic similarities, was essentially any song that had the word "blues" in its title. Prior to the success of Mamie Smith, the most popular blues recording was by Russian-born vaudeville star Sophie Tucker, a veteran of vaudeville blackface, whose 1917 version of W. C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues" became the first record categorized as blues to sell one-million copies.³⁴

In the era before "Crazy Blues" a vernacular ontology and (albeit rough) taxonomy of the blues existed despite the genre's vicissitudes. As early as 1908, blues discourse, or "a trail of blues sensibilities," was established through the work of black and white performers on the Southern vaudeville circuit, and the publication and performance

of songs like Antonio Maggio's composition "I Got the Blues," which is considered "the earliest published composition to link the condition of having the blues to the musical form that would become popularly known as 'the blues.'"³⁵ These were not, however, isolated instances representing the work of a few individual writers and performers, but rather as David Evans describes it, a "cultural, social, and musical *movement*."³⁶

However, understanding what the blues was in an era dominated by sheet music sales required that audiences be either able to perform the music themselves or hear it performed. For the blues to be more broadly understood as a musical genre, and for the discourse to grow in the pre-recording era, audiences needed to establish an aural and/or visual relationship with blues performers. For working class populations (many of whom lacked the means and musical literacy to read sheet music), understanding the blues in its myriad manifestations came, primarily, from touring vaudeville shows. It was a network of culturally independent black vaudeville theaters opening in the South and Midwest after the turn of the century that provided a commercially viable enclave of cultural autonomy for African American audiences:

By 1910 almost every black community in every city in the South had a little vaudeville theater. It was nothing more than *black commercial entertainment for a black audience*, but once this dynamic context was firmly established, the stage was set for a cultural revolution. These little theaters provided the principal platform for the concrete formulation of popular blues and for the subsequent emergence of the blues from its rural southern birthplace; a culturally distinctive brand of vaudeville emerged, with the blues as one of its primary components.³⁷

With the stage now set for this "cultural revolution," the African American press, despite a conflicted and ambivalent relationship with the blues as representational cultural, was now an important part of the developing blues discourse as the "primary

vehicle through which the Afro-American masses were introduced to the classic blues singers and their attendant vaudeville acts."³⁸ One of the earliest publications to report on the rise of the southern vaudeville circuit was the *Indianapolis Freeman*. The *Freeman*, a nationally distributed newspaper, began reporting on touring road shows in southern black communities as early as 1901. As important, *The Freeman*, more than a decade prior to Langston Hughes's *Pittsburgh Courier* editorials, offered one of the earliest forums for the debate over racial culture and vernacular representation. Black vaudevillian Paul Carter decried the blues in a *Freeman* editorial published in 1912, blaming an uncritical black audience and greedy theater managers for encouraging musical performances that were little more than "smutty sayings and suggestive dancing." Rebutting Carter's criticisms (ones shared by many white northern theater writers) was H. Franklin "Baby" Seals, composer of what is considered to be the first vocal blues song "Baby Seals Blues" (1912). Defending what he perceived as an attack on the celebration of the cultural heritage and self-determination of working class black southerners, Seals imploringly wrote, "why all this criticism about your sister and brother performers from the South? . . . let my brothers and sisters of the North wait until we fall, frost or prove otherwise. Then jump on us with both feet. One race of people on top of us is enough for the present."³⁹

One thing was clear: black audiences, especially those in the South, responded enthusiastically to the blues music composed and performed by "Baby" Seals and others like him on the black vaudeville circuit. As Abbott and Seroff emphatically note, this was the result of the audience's understanding of the "folk-blues concoctions" in performers' repertoires, "the audience shouted in recognition; if the southern public was prepared to celebrate the singing of 'any old' ragtime or blues song, it was simply

celebrating itself -- it's own uncompromised pride of identity."⁴⁰ It is this uncompromised pride of identity that speaks to the symbiotic relationship between performer and audience, one that links the ontological question "What is the blues?" with the epistemological query, "How do we know it when we hear it?" The understanding and recognition of these "folk-blues concoctions" by audiences served a discursive function as tactical practices that "show[ed] the extent to which intelligence is inseparable from the everyday struggles and pleasures it articulates."⁴¹ To Paul Carter this was the sound of African American culture falling apart; to "Baby" Seals it was the sound of the everyday life of black folk, the sound of regional race pride.

Paul Carter's demurrals, similar to those that, years later, enraged Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten, were part of occasional anti-blues (and anti-jazz) editorializing in the African American press. For despite enthusiastic writing by some scribes, not all African American critics were supportive of this increasingly popular form of black vernacular musical culture. The anti-blues rhetoric of Paul Carter in the *Indianapolis Freeman*, undergirded by his belief in a more responsible form of cultural representation that emphasized racial uplift, provides an aesthetic and ideological template for similar attacks by later black journalists such as the *Chicago Defender's* Dave Peyton and *Billboard* magazine's James A. Jackson. Such was the tumultuous cultural arena wherein blues discourse was being shaped both by journalistic reportage and the cultural politics of racial uplift, debates followed by a national audience of African American readers who, in the wake of "Crazy Blues," were now blues consumers.

Before discussing the blues and racial uplift ideology, and the black press as taxonomic battlefield, I will briefly examine the formalizing structure of scholarly blues writing (focusing primarily on the work of Thomas Talley and Howard Odum), and its

influence on a style of semi-academic cultural journalism published in upscale "special interest" magazines with predominantly white readerships. I will also examine blues criticism in the African American press as cultural reportage, analyzing the aesthetic criteria used by critics (most notably Tony Langston of the *Chicago Defender*) in contributing to a vernacular ontology of the blues, and its influence shaping blues discourse among consumers, the fastest growing part of the secondary public.

Shaping scholarly discourse: Thomas Talley and Howard Odum

From 1900-1930 blues criticism was, broadly speaking, two separate (and not always equal) worlds of scholarly writing and newspaper journalism that divided blues-as-folklore from blues-as-commodity-culture. Folklorists, more interested in documenting the rural musical traditions of working-class southern blacks ignored virtually all of the blues sung by the classic blueswomen. Similarly, the blues critics of the black popular press, more interested in sophisticated reinterpretations of rural folk traditions, wrote exclusively about the spectacular performances of Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, Alberta Hunter, Ida Cox, and Ethel Waters, the signature performers of the first era of blues music dominated by commercial recordings, the period more commonly known as the "classic blues era."

William Barlow writes of the three methodological strains of scholarly blues writing: blues as folklore, blues as oral culture, and blues as cultural history. The blues scholars of the first quarter of the twentieth century, in an effort to establish the blues (although hardly any of them called it such) as a vernacular music worthy of serious study, approached the blues as folklore by documenting "the existence of rural blues traditions in the Mississippi Delta (Charles Peabody, Howard Odum, E.C. Perrow), Texas

(Gates Thomas, Will Thomas, Prescott Webb), and the Piedmont (Howard Odum and Guy Johnson)."⁴² Early scholarly blues writing from a "folkloristic aesthetic"⁴³ (which represented virtually all blues criticism until 1920) remained primarily the province of white anthropologists, sociologists, and folklorists whose work appeared in books, academic journals, or "highbrow" general interest magazines (e.g., the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, and *Vanity Fair*) with largely white readerships.

While initial encounters with African American vernacular music had been noted by such nineteenth century writers as Lafcadio Hearn, Frances Anne Kemble, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, it was archaeologist Charles Peabody, researching Indian burial mounds near the Mississippi Delta town of Clarksdale in 1901 whose description of the songs sung by his black work crew was the first scholarly writing on African American music in Mississippi. Though not a folklorist and with little formal musical training, Peabody, awestruck by this "autochthonous music," found its haunting beauty irresistible, and his references to these "strains of apparently genuine African music," along with his attempts at musical transcription became a significant part of his 1903 article for the *Journal of American Folklore*.⁴⁴ Peabody's documentation and analysis of the lyrics sung by his work crew, established a methodological model that, with only slight variation, set a research standard replicated by numerous ballad hunters of the early twentieth century, the most significant contributions coming from Thomas Talley and Howard Odum, two sons of the South, one black, one white, both career academics.

Thomas Washington Talley was a 52-year-old chemistry professor at Fisk University in Nashville when *Negro Folk Rhymes (Wise and Otherwise)* was published in 1922. Written partly as a rejoinder to the research of fellow Fisk professor and folklorist John Work II, who asserted that the only worthwhile black folk music was religious

music,⁴⁵ *Negro Folk Rhymes* was the first substantial collection of black secular folk music and the first anthology to demonstrate the richness and complexities of the black folksong tradition. Also significant was the fact that the anthology represented "the first collection of secular folksongs by a black scholar, and the first by a black scholar born into and raised in the traditional culture he studied."⁴⁶ Confining his research to middle Tennessee, Talley categorized his findings thematically (e.g., dancetime rhymes, nursery rhymes, marriage rhymes, etc.) and regularized dialect spelling in order to maintain, in his words, "a true record of the language." As Charles Wolfe notes, "In using the strong reproduction of phonetic dialect, Talley was setting the stage for later collectors of black folk songs, including [Dorothy] Scarborough, [Howard] Odum and [Guy] Johnson, and Newman I. White."⁴⁷ Talley's anthology received much critical acclaim in America and Europe in both the black and white press: W.E.B. Du Bois praised it in the pages of *The Crisis*, the *London Times Literary Supplement* specifically noted the importance of Talley's observations on the use of the banjo and fiddle, and the music trade publication *Billboard*, enthused that "composers, producers, etc., will find a wealth of suggestion within its covers."⁴⁸

The significance of Talley's contribution to early blues discourse was in setting a high standard for thematic categorization, helping to preserve the black folksong tradition, and rejecting the rigid genre categories that separated vernacular folk song traditions along racial lines. As with Charles Peabody, the songs collected by Talley may not have been blues *per se*, but they were "blues in embryo."⁴⁹ Charles Wolfe notes that, "very few of the items Talley collected look[ed] or sound[ed] like blues." Talley himself never referred to the music he was collecting and transcribing as blues, preferring the term "black hillbilly music."⁵⁰ Although the term "blues" was used as a synecdoche by

folklorists (John Lomax) and songwriters (W.C. Handy) to describe black secular music many years prior to Talley's research, the musical tradition that Talley sought to preserve was soon "eclipsed by faddish fascination with blues and spirituals." To record companies interested in recording vernacular music there were only two marketable genres: "blues," which encompassed all black performers; and "old time music" (also known as "hillbilly" music), which included all white performers. Although Talley had offered significant documentation proving a tradition of fiddle and banjo "hillbilly" music among African Americans, these musicians countered the prevailing record company-created stereotypes and as such were simply ignored. Like the music of many of the African American hillbilly musicians he researched, Talley's groundbreaking work was ignored to the point of invisibility. Despite initial critical acclaim, Talley, who as a rule worked alone and without university support and funding, went back to teaching chemistry. He wrote a lengthy follow-up to *Negro Folk Rhymes*, but it was not published in his lifetime, and as a result his contributions to vernacular music studies are frequently overlooked.⁵¹

Talley's work documenting the rural black folk music traditions of Tennessee ultimately stood at odds with a nascent recording industry's need to simplify and codify black (and white) vernacular music categories for marketing purposes. As the blues made its transition from the pre-media to a post-media era, sound recordings, notwithstanding the dire predictions of many folklorists, would have a significant impact on the creation of the music, the growing, participatory audience of consumers, and the nature of blues discourse. Perhaps no researcher of American vernacular music of the 1920s understood this better than Howard Odum.

Born in Georgia in 1884, Odum, at the time of his death in 1954, was revered as

the South's pre-eminent social scientist of the first half of the twentieth century. With an educational background that embraced the traditions of the best southern universities and the Ivy League, Odum "absorbed the spirit of the great Progressive-era teachers and orators who believed that science could reveal the secrets of social phenomena and pave the way for major leaps forward in the human condition," and in doing so committed himself to the study and preservation of black southern cultural history.⁵² It was while researching his Master's thesis in classics at the University of Mississippi that the 21-year-old Odum began documenting and collecting black folksongs songs he heard in rural Mississippi and Georgia. From 1905-1908 he transcribed the lyrics to hundreds of songs that, according to his study, "reflected the secular life and mental imagery of 'the Negro'."⁵³ In an article published in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1911, Odum, though not referring to these songs as "the blues," established a taxonomy of African American folk song styles: current popular songs, modified versions of popular songs, and original compositions. His conclusion was that, despite their distinctiveness, these groupings provided musicians with a wider array of stylistic choices to draw from, noting that often "individual performers sang a mixture of songs from all three classes."⁵⁴

Although some of Odum's early writing about black sacred and secular music treats the black secular community as an undifferentiated mass and suffers from a tendency toward racist psycho-social profiling, what makes his work remarkable for its time was his awareness of the impact technology and commercialization had, and would continue to have, on later generations of blues performers and researchers.⁵⁵ In his 1926 book *Negro Workaday Songs* (written in collaboration with Guy B. Johnson) Odum remarked upon the difference between "folk blues" (blues music totally unmediated by the various filters of commercialism), and "formal blues" (the composed blues music

popularized primarily on record).⁵⁶ Odum and Johnson presciently argued that the boundaries between these two blues styles were so fluid that it was "no longer possible to speak with certainty of the folk blues, so entangled are the relationships between them and the formal compositions."⁵⁷ According to Odum and Johnson, this stylistic fluidity and its impact on blues composition, was directly linked to the popularity of records:

When a blues record is issued it quickly becomes the property of a million Negro workers and adventurers who never bought it and perhaps never heard it played. Sometimes they do not even know that the song is from a record. They may recognize in it parts of songs familiar to them and think that it is just another piece which some songster has put together. Their desire to invent a different version, their skill at adapting stanzas of old favorites to the new music, and sometimes their misunderstanding of the words of the new song, result in the transformation of the song into many local variants. In other words, the folk creative process operates upon a song, the origin of which may already be mixed, and produces in turn variations that may later become bases of other formal blues.⁵⁸

Odum's and Johnson's notion of stylistic fluidity resulting from the commercial popularity of blues recordings, and their call to future generations of folklorists to "[know] the phonograph records of today" as folkloric documents countered the more prevalent theory that championed the folk blues as "primitive" musicmaking (and by extension non-commercial, more authentic, and inherently more valuable) and critiqued formal blues as a corrupted folklore facsimile packaged as commercial entertainment.⁵⁹ This aesthetic bifurcation (one that, David Sanjek argues, "is a matter of semantics, not musicology")⁶⁰ reflects the beginning of a shift in folklore studies from the more orthodox evolutionism to the vibrant utilitarianism of functionalism. Evolutionism, the dominant theoretical trend in folklore scholarship since the nineteenth century, was rooted in a nostalgic yearning for a simpler time wherein the purity of folk song was untrammelled by the "pernicious forces of change."⁶¹ Functionalism argued that the survival, transmission,

and reinterpretation of folk culture by successive generations indicated an inherent strength and vitality that "saw folklore as fundamentally vibrant, not endangered." While evolutionists regarded all aspects of folk culture as "brittle relics" to be collected and preserved, functionalists, though similarly concerned with collection and preservation, were more interested in "exploring how culture was created and transmitted."⁶² The research of Odum and Johnson was functionalist in spirit and represented the earliest flickerings of what would become an almost complete displacement of evolutionism in folklore studies by the mid-1930s,⁶³ and lays the groundwork for the post-World War II blues discourse, when the voice of the scholar/record collector emerges.

While the conclusions reached by Odum and Johnson influenced later adherents of functionalism such as Alan Lomax and Zora Neale Hurston, many of Odum's and Johnson's contemporaries argued a more conservative evolutionist approach that clearly separated commodity from culture. Dorothy Scarborough's 1926 study, *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs* warned that commercialization would sound the death knell for this autochthonous music and that the black vernacular musical traditions would soon be "killed by the Victrola, the radio, the lure of cheap printed music."⁶⁴ Sharing this sentiment was Newman I. White whose *American Negro Folk-Songs*, published in 1928, reiterated Scarborough's folkloristic purism and, in another swipe at Odum and Johnson, dismissed the "popular blues of the cabaret singers, sheet music, and phonograph records" as little more than "factory product."⁶⁵

Scarborough's and White's dire predictions aside, by the time their research (and Odum's and Johnson's) was published, the "invasion" of the Victrola was well underway and sales of blues records were being measured in the millions. Always anxious for new releases, blues and jazz fans would make record buying a regular part of their weekend

entertainment. Pullman porters "would buy up dozens of copies of hit records and sell them in rural districts for a profit."⁶⁶ Zora Neale Hurston wrote that vast majority of rural black populations she studied as a graduate student spent a considerable amount of leisure time "in the motion picture theaters or with the phonograph."⁶⁷ Clarence Williams, a pianist for Bessie Smith who went on to become a major entrepreneurial figure in the commercial blues culture of the 1920s, noted that at his Chicago record store, "colored people would form a line twice around the block when the latest record of Bessie or Ma [Rainey] or Clara [Smith] or Mamie [Smith] come in. . .sometime these records they was bootlegged, sold in the alley for four or five dollars apiece."⁶⁸ (A considerable mark-up from the regular price of one dollar.)

The well-meaning cultural protectionism of Scarborough, White, and other evolutionists had little if any influence upon a growing secondary public of African Americans hungry for blues music recorded by other African Americans. As musician, entrepreneur, and composer of "Crazy Blues" Perry Bradford argued, "[T]here's fourteen million Negroes in our great country and they will buy records if recorded by one of their own."⁶⁹ This overwhelming response to the blues as commercial culture signaled that in the autographic era the text making the greatest impact on the vernacular formalizing structure created by working-class African Americans was the 78 rpm record. For evolutionists concerned with preserving the brittle relics of folk culture, the great irony lay in their open disdain for the most influential and widely disseminated brittle relic of all.

The “Father of the Blues”

With Thomas Talley setting a high standard for research, and Howard Odum the first folklorist to recognize the significant changes to the blues (and to its study) wrought by records, technology and commercialization, the stage was set for the emergence of someone who could represent Odum's and Johnson's interlocking concept of folk and formal blues, and the discursive intersection of folklore studies with commercial entertainment, preferably doing so with an almost evangelical zeal. No one was better suited to this task than William Christopher (W.C.) Handy. A native southerner, composer, performer, entrepreneur, and part-time folklorist and putative "Father of the Blues," Handy perhaps best represents the nexus of black folk heritage and commercialism, as well as the past and present of black secular music.

Handy's reputation as the most significant African American voice contributing to the blues discourse of the 1920s was solidified with the 1926 publication of *Blues: An Anthology*. With an introduction and critical text written by white Wall Street lawyer and folk music enthusiast Abbe Niles, *Blues* was a compendium of blues compositions (many of them his own), that Handy had collected over a more than twenty year period and was "the first book to examine black secular music and its impact on pop and jazz."⁷⁰ The publication of Handy's anthology was not the beginning of his analysis of the blues, but rather the culmination of informal study he had engaged in since the turn of the century. In 1903, the year of Charles Peabody's groundbreaking article on black secular music in Mississippi, Handy, in perhaps the most famous and often repeated first-person account of "discovering" the blues, heard the plangent sounds of an anonymous slide guitar player at the train station in Tutwiler, Mississippi.⁷¹ Struck by the music's "disturbing monotony" Handy wrote that it was at this moment that he "saw the beauty of

primitive music." And, in a moment of entrepreneurial alacrity, after seeing how much money this itinerant musician made from passers-by, Handy also knew that much greater profits could be made writing sophisticated arrangements of this primitive music.⁷²

After his epiphany in Tutwiler, Handy composed his first blues song in 1909 for Memphis mayoral candidate Edward Hall Crump. And while a rewritten version of this campaign song "Mr. Crump" was turned into the popular "The Memphis Blues" in 1912 (from which Handy never saw a dime),⁷³ Handy's fame as a composer was assured with his 1914 composition "St. Louis Blues." According to David Jasen and Gene Jones, by 1920 it was the most famous blues song in the world, and a decade later it was the best selling song in any medium -- sheet music, recordings, and piano rolls.⁷⁴ More importantly, the publication of Handy's *Blues* combined with the notoriety he had already achieved as a composer "legitimized him and his blues [as the] public began to think of him as the channeler, the bringer of the most distinctive 'American' elements to American music."⁷⁵ More than any folklorist preceding him, W.C. Handy, after the publication of *Anthology*, was generally viewed "as someone above the workaday world of the pop music business [and as] someone serving a higher good."⁷⁶ Reviewing Handy's *Anthology in Opportunity*, Langston Hughes contributed to this assessment, calling the book "beautiful . . . filled with invaluable information for the student of Negro folk music and folk poetry."⁷⁷

Although Handy's continuing reputation as the "Father of the Blues" is built upon his autobiography of the same name (ghostwritten by Arna Bontemps), and the enduring success of both "St. Louis Blues" and *Blues: An Anthology*, his role in the development of blues writing in the African American press is frequently overlooked. In a 1919 article for the *Chicago Defender* entitled "The Blues" (reprinted in the *Indianapolis Freeman* as

"The Significance of the Blues"), Handy argued for an understanding of the blues as a form of African American vernacular music remarkable for its ability to "chase away the gloom." He enthused that "the songs of the slaves represented their sorrow rather than their joys," adding that, instead of the plaintive sound of one's burden, the blues were rather, "the happy-go-lucky-sound of the Southern Negro."⁷⁸ Whether or not readers agreed with his conclusions (which reflected his musical education on the minstrel show circuit) or were critical of his penchant for self-aggrandizement,⁷⁹ Handy, despite not having an extensive career in journalism, or being the first to write about the blues in the popular press, was still a formidable presence in blues criticism simply by the overwhelming aura of authority (much of it self-created and self-perpetuated) he brought to any public discussion of the blues. Handy's fingerprints were on nearly all of the commercial filters mediating the relationship between the audience and the music. Along with being a successful composer, arranger, performer, author, and lecturer, Handy's entrepreneurial skills extended to commercial sheet music publishing which, despite its almost total collapse in 1920, was another element contributing to a blues discourse that bore Handy's fingerprints. And although Handy was never involved in the early record business as deeply as his former partner Harry Pace (founder of Black Swan records), nor did he embrace or discuss the popularity of the folk blues era, his position as the "Father of the blues," though occasionally challenged since his death in 1958, remains essentially undiminished (and marketable) to this day.

The music of W.C. Handy represents the "factory product" disdained by evolutionists like Dorothy Scarborough and Newman I. White. However, to dismiss the concerns of Scarborough and White as shortsighted jeremiads is a tad disingenuous and misses an important point. Through his popularity and considerable influence as a

performer, author and entrepreneur, W.C. Handy, by pioneering the publication of blues scores for professional musicians, and proving that the blues could make money, became the most significant agent in the blues' commodification from folk art to middlebrow mass art. The music of the anonymous blues player in the Tutwiler train station undoubtedly awakened Handy's interest in the secular music of southern blacks, but it also set off the sound of cash registers.

In *Father of the Blues*, Bontemps, quoting Handy, writes, "their music wanted polishing, but it contained the essence . . . it should be clear by now that my blues are built around or suggested by, rather than constructed of, the snatches, phrases, cries and idioms such as I have illustrated."⁸⁰ This notion of "polishing the essence," and a compositional style resembling aural bricolage, reflects the transactions and compromises that result in the creation of middlebrow art. Pierre Bourdieu writes that middlebrow art is "a productive system dominated by the quest for investment profitability [creating the need to reach] the widest possible public."⁸¹ It was the evolutionists who claimed that these transactions and compromises (which Bourdieu derisively calls an "oscillation between plagiarism and parody") produced the dreaded "factory product."⁸² However, for many Americans, whose relationship with the blues was (and always had been) mediated by the commercial filters of sheet music, live performance, records, and reportage in the popular press, Handy had invented the blues or, at the very least, had organized it into a coherent whole. A notion promulgated by Abbe Niles who, in his introduction to *Blues: An Anthology*, asserts that until Handy began writing them down, the blues (i.e., rural folk blues) was a chaotic, shapeless mass of traditional elements.⁸³ During the 1930s Handy was a fixture on the college lecture circuit as the *de facto* spokesman for the blues, and while later critics would charge that his music had little if anything to do with authentic

or “legitimate” blues,⁸⁴ Handy became a cultural icon who was not simply contributing to blues discourse, but rather, was blues discourse.

Semi-academic writing and the popular press

With the field research of Peabody, Talley, Odum, and others appearing in the pages of academic journals, Handy’s *Anthology* was different in that, while its approach to the blues was earnestly intellectual, it was not designed to be intimidating and difficult, but useful to a diverse popular audience. Niles’s historical notes were combined with Handy’s musical notation, piano and voice arrangements, a chart of guitar chords, and a bibliography, creating a comprehensive source that appealed to those interested in the genealogy of the blues, and those who simply wanted to play the music. “The *Anthology* was a powerful reminder of what the classics were, where they came from, and how rich they could be,” writes David Jasen and Gene Jones, an argument indicating that the text’s discursive power derives partly from its combining social history and ethnomusicology, along with the tools for practical application. Legitimized by Handy’s status as blues paterfamilias, and the book’s popularity with audiences, *Blues: An Anthology* emerges as a significant element of blues discourse in the 1920s.

Handy’s *Anthology* is also important for contributing to a rhetorical shift in blues writing that had been going on for nearly a decade. Popular “highbrow” magazines were reviewing the scholarship of Howard Odum, Dorothy Scarborough, Newman White, and James Weldon Johnson,⁸⁵ but their work was shared principally among a small group of like-minded academics and students. In order to bring their analyses of lyrics, and the sociological and historical implications of African American vernacular musical culture to a wider audience, these articles needed to transcend the relative confinement of

academic journals for a place in the more widely circulated popular press. In 1917, the *Nation* published John Lomax's article "Self-Pity in Negro Folk-Songs,"⁸⁶ one of the earliest studies of meaning and content in the blues printed in a "mass market" magazine, one whose primary readership was white and, at the very least, middle-class. Using lyrics transcribed from fieldwork done in his native Texas, Lomax's article was "the first after [Howard] Odum's to attempt any significant analysis of the songs."⁸⁷ "Self-Pity in Negro Folk Songs" signaled the beginning of a discursive shift in blues criticism and scholarship from the formalizing structure of academic folklore studies to a different formalizing structure that, in its attempt to present scholarly research in a general interest publication, can be accurately called semi-academic. Lomax refers to the folk songs he heard as "the blues," but applies the term judiciously, referring specifically to the "burden of [a woman's] plaint." In fact, Lomax goes so far as to say that "men and women alike sing it, changing its words frequently to suit their own purposes. But though I have heard it many times, it always seems to me the woman's song." He writes of a "lithe chocolate-colored woman, with a reckless glint in her eye," named Dink living in a levee camp who sings a song "of the deserted [and] lonely woman, a song with lyric beauty and pathetic appeal."⁸⁸ And despite reducing the blues to a form of musical self-pity, Lomax's assessment is interesting in that, in this pre-media era antedating the music of the classic blueswomen, he considers the distinguishing sound of the blues to be female.

What followed in the wake of Lomax's article could hardly be called a deluge, but more and more magazines with predominantly white writers and readers were taking an interest in the blues. Despite simplistic sociological contextualization that frequently distorted the music's history by overstressing the genre's (and performers') musical primitivism, sedimented violence, underworld associations, and libidinous outlaw culture,

enthusiastically supportive articles on the blues by white writers appeared with increasing frequency in the popular press of the 1920s.⁸⁹

Abbe Niles wrote a series of essays in the literary magazine *Bookman* containing some of the first reviews of commercially available folk and blues recordings. In a 1926 article entitled, "Blue Notes," Niles, as was the common practice of many white writers of this time, offered a succinct musicological history of the blues. Calling it the most "interesting and significant examples of Negro folksong," he attributed the "trickle of the blues" into a national musical consciousness as starting with W.C. Handy. Niles, as expected of the person who wrote the introduction and historical and critical text for *Blues: An Anthology*, applauds Handy for being the "first of his race. . .able and willing. . .to write more in the tradition."⁹⁰ Along with Handy's considerable influence, Niles's amateur musicology also draws on the early folklore scholarship of Thomas Talley, John Lomax, Howard Odum and Guy Johnson, and Dorothy Scarborough in its "orderly documentation" (Handy's phrase) and technical description of what made the blues the blues.

[If] the singer wished to accompany himself, he could do so with just three chords: the common chords of the dominant and subdominant and the chord of the dominant seventh. The melody would be a four-bar phrase favoring a syncopated jugglery of a very few notes; the second phrase would vary somewhat the first, suggesting to the musical ear an excursion into the subdominant; the third would give a final version. Play between the keynote and its third characteristically coincided with the antepenultimate syllable of the line. And in these as in other Negro songs, the singer was apt, in dealing with this particular note, to slur from flat to natural or vice versa in such a way as to furrow the brow of anyone who might attempt to set the tune down on paper.⁹¹

Upon reading this it is reasonable to assume that Niles's description would furrow the brow of many blues fans given to exuberant shouts of "play it all night long." But

Niles's musicological lingua franca, in its rarified way, exposed the folkloristic aesthetic developed by scholars like Talley, Odum, Scarborough, and Lomax to a wider (and whiter) audience. As Niles was well aware, however, codifying black vernacular musical structures by using European notation and theory was (and often remains) the principal method of analysis and legitimation. It was an attempt not only to impose a formalizing structure upon the blues as a means of understanding it ontologically and epistemologically, but also to take up Langston Hughes's call to beat the tom-tom of revolt against the dismissive, overtly racist tone of critics such as Henry Osgood who characterized the blues as "pretty poor stuff. . . improvisations out of the mouths of musical illiterates," criticism that was as influential and widely read.⁹²

Perhaps the most significant blues criticism written by a white writer of the 1920s was by Carl Van Vechten. Van Vechten, a former *New York Times* music critic, white patron of the Harlem Renaissance, author of the controversial novel *Nigger Heaven*, and "Harlem's most enthusiastic and ubiquitous Nordic,"⁹³ wrote for *Vanity Fair* that were among the first articles to bring "the popular blues of the black female singers in New York to the attention of sophisticated white readers."⁹⁴ Van Vechten's rich, descriptive prose relied less on technical, musicological analysis and more on stylized, literary, emotionalism. He was less concerned with how a singer negotiated the play between the keynote and the third, or whether it coincided with the antepenultimate syllable of the line, favoring instead an enthusiastic first-person account of the performance-as-spectacle and the blueswomen at the center of these performances. Bessie Smith is lovingly described as wearing a "rose satin dress, spangled with sequins, which swept away from her trim ankles. Her face was beautiful, with the rich, ripe beauty of southern darkness, a deep bronze brown, like her bare arms."⁹⁵ A few paragraphs later he comments on her

changing into a "clinging garment fashioned of beads and silver steel. More than ever she was like an African empress, more than ever like a conjure woman." And, in two breathlessly descriptive paragraphs, Van Vechten vividly describes Smith's entrance:

Then, to the accompaniment of the wailing muted brasses, the monotonous African beat of the drum, the dromedary glide of the pianist's fingers over the responsive keys, she began strange rites in a voice full of shoutin' and moanin' and prayin' and sufferin', a wild, rough Ethiopian voice, harsh and volcanic, released between rouged lips and the whitest of teeth, the singer swaying slightly to the rhythm.

And now, inspired partly by the expressive words, partly by the stumbling strain of the accompaniment, partly by the power and magnetic personality of this elemental conjure woman and her plangent African voice, quivering with pain and passion, which sounded as if it had been developed at the sources of the Nile, the crowd burst into hysterical shrieks of sorrow and lamentation. Amens rent the air. Little nervous giggles, like the shivering of Venetian glass, shocked the nerves."⁹⁶

Van Vechten's critical aesthetic was built upon binarisms that valued the smooth over the rough and the sophisticated over the (blatantly) salacious – aesthetic distinctions, that were varying and permeable from performer to performer. Despite his great love of Bessie Smith, Van Vechten considered Ethel Waters the greater artist. While Bessie Smith represented the "true folk-spirit of the race," Waters was "superior to any other woman stage singer of her race." According to Van Vechten, Waters's greatness was due to the fact that she "refines her comedy, refines her pathos, refines even her obscenities."⁹⁷ His repeated use of "refines" is important in that, as will be seen in the blues criticism of the African American press, this was part of the critical consciousness of the blues critics of the 1920s to praise the more sophisticated of the classic blues women. In nearly all of his writing (fiction and non-fiction) Van Vechten engaged in "othering," a process "where the dominant culture renders the subordinate culture in terms of difference, and that difference allows the dominant culture to define itself,"⁹⁸ and

constructs a primitive “them,” to a unified, powerful “us.”⁹⁹ As a rhetorical and ideological strategy, othering was common among early blues scholars (e.g., John Lomax’s portrait of the blues singer Dink), and would continue with the work of Samuel Charters and the blues revivalists of the 1960s, and in the 1990s with the “deep blues” neo-traditionalists at Fat Possum Records. Meant as a counterpoint to the racist dismissals of black vernacular musical traditions, “othering” created its own set of problems as later critics, many of them African American, accused writers such as Van Vechten and Charters of paternalism, of de-intellectualizing black popular culture, and romanticizing a history of poverty and racism.

Van Vechten’s writing relies “a set of [tropes] that have slipped from their original metaphoric status to control perceptions images of primitives.”¹⁰⁰ Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters become eroticized subjects in Van Vechten’s criticism, representing a libidinous and mystical, primitive id force, one savage, one (slightly) civilized. This results in a description of Bessie Smith that compares her to “a Voodoo priestess [who] renders her songs with the throbbing savagery and wild ecstasy of the African jungle,” while the refined Ethel Waters is an “expert at tonal effects [and] appeals to the more sophisticated Negro and white public.” Ultimately, Bessie Smith is considered “crude and primitive,” and Waters “characterized by a subtle skill.”¹⁰¹ To whites readers Van Vechten’s prose was lingua franca consistent with their negotiation of this exotic and “primitive” black cultural world, but to African Americans (especially working-class blacks), Bessie Smith was not an “exotic oddity,” but a serious artist who “explored unknown terrains of the blues and honed and stretched the form to its very limits.”¹⁰² By reducing the sound and look of the blues to a set of (gendered) stock characteristics¹⁰³ understood by white readers who were “[resisting] the racism that located the blues in a

racially restricted cultural space,”¹⁰⁴ Van Vechten was, to paraphrase bell hooks, not seeing but *overseeing* black subjectivity in a way that presumed authoritative knowledge of the “primitive other” he had created.¹⁰⁵

Angela Davis argues that, while Van Vechten was pivotal in introducing Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, and other classic blueswomen to a white audiences, his writing reveals “the racist assumptions behind. . . powerful whites’ appreciation of black cultural forms.”¹⁰⁶ It is a “romantic version of racism,” the result of hip whites who cast blues musicians as natural geniuses and “invoke primitivist ideas of the African American artist unspoiled by (white) culture and civilization.”¹⁰⁷ But while Van Vechten was fomenting blues discourse by utilizing a discursive strategy that spoke primarily to white readers, there was a parallel discourse occurring in the pages of the African American press. The music of the classic blueswomen of the 1920s was regularly featured in the entertainment pages of black newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*, where a mostly male group of black writers were also contributing to blues discourse and creating gendered black subjectivity using a rhetorical style and aesthetic criteria that, at times, sounded only slightly different from that of Carl Van Vechten. It was criticism imbued with the ideology of racial uplift at odds with the writing of more conservative black columnists. These anti-vernacularists, equally motivated by uplift’s potential for social, cultural, and political enfranchisement, were dismissive of vernacular music (and many other aspects of black popular culture) as the appropriate way to destabilize white cultural hegemony. As was the debate between Paul Carter and “Baby Seals” in the pages of the *Freeman*, this was a debate over cultural representation but, more importantly, it was African Americans celebrating an uncompromised pride of identity.

Blues Criticism in the African American Press

[It] is perfectly natural that the idea persists that the Negro press is yet an instrument solely of uplift, whose activities should be the helping of the race, collectively and individually.

--Roy Wilkins (1927)¹⁰⁸

Blues criticism in the African American press of the 1920s can be more accurately described as promotional reportage than what one associates with evaluative criticism in the contemporary sense of, say, jazz and rock criticism. Rarely was there a critique of a singer's intonation, phrasing, or a band's virtuosity (or lack thereof). Instead, these critics and entertainment reporters preferred lavishing praise upon a performer's wardrobe, hairstyle, and breadth of popularity. An unattributed report on a 1924 Bessie Smith performance published in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, provides this "critical" nugget:

Blues Queen Goes Over Big at New Lincoln

Bessie Smith, known all over the United States as one of the greatest Blues singers, opened at the New Lincoln Theater, Wylie Avenue, for one week's engagement to one of the greatest throngs that ever witnessed a performance of this kind.

Early in the evening crowds started to gather and by 7 o'clock in the evening the street car traffic was blocked. Thousands of people were turned away and those who did attend actually stormed the theater.

Miss Smith, accompanied by her own original pianist, Mr. Irving Johns, and her violinist, Mr. John V. Snow, do their act in such a manner that they win instant favor with the audience. Miss Smith surely sings the blues 'just as they should be sung.'¹⁰⁹

In a similar vein is this *Chicago Defender* review of Alberta Hunter:

MAKES BIG HIT

Alberta Hunter Creates Sensation With Blues Rendition

Port Washington, Wis., Dec 20 -- Miss Alberta Hunter, one of America's foremost entertainers, who has been engaged for some time past in the recording of song numbers for the New York Recording Laboratories, Inc., of this city, created a splendid impression upon the occasion of her recent visit here. The talented lady captivated all who met her by her pleasant and unassuming manner, and the rendition of her first song number, "Down Hearted Blues," elicited a demonstration which lasted for fully half an hour. Her dancing was accorded a great deal of applause and so was her second song, "Don't Pan Me." Miss Hunter has been circularized as 'the greatest of all Blues singers' and if the opinions of hundreds of the local people who had the privilege of hearing her stand for anything she certainly justifies her billing.¹¹⁰

The writer who perhaps best exemplified this style of review was the *Chicago Defender's* Tony Langston. It was Langston (along with fellow *Defender* scribe Bob Hayes and Sylvester Russell of the *Pittsburgh Courier*) who left behind the most comprehensive documentation of the performers and performances of the classic blues era.¹¹¹ Writing with an almost palpable exuberance and cheerfulness -- his columns often opened with the epigraph: "The inner side of every cloud is bright and shiny, I therefore turn my clouds about, and always wear them inside out to show the lining." -- Langston provided his national audience of *Defender* readers with as complete a first-hand, journalistic history of the classic blues singers as they were likely to find. For people in far flung rural and semi-urban locales (especially in the South) Langston's column offered audiences detailed descriptions of a performer's stage show right down to the particulars of a performer's wardrobe, providing a rich source of information for the growing audience of black, working-class blues record buyers.

Harsh criticism was not Langston's forte; his columns always included

platitudinous remarks about a singer's "fine ability" and the lengths they went to please their fans.¹¹² Generally speaking, what separated a great performance from one less-great (for Langston to suggest that a performer was mediocre was to read him at his most damning) was the tone, timbre, or phrasing, qualities that made up the grain of the singer's voice. Langston was predisposed to vocalists with smooth clear voices, whose diction and enunciation could be heard over the blare of a raucous backing band. He complimented Lucille Hegamin for her "quiet manner in putting over songs," a vocal style that marked Hegamin as "an artist of the higher type."¹¹³ Of Trixie Smith, Langston awkwardly noted that "the manner in which she is putting over her routine of blues shows plainly why the Black Swan record people declare her to be their best asset as a recorder of numbers of this type."¹¹⁴ Rarely concealing his enthusiasm, Langston exhibited unwavering loyalty to certain singers, particularly to Mamie Smith. The following is indicative of the general tenor of Langston's assessment of her performances:

Mamie Smith and Jazz Hounds are the special features here this week. Miss Smith, as usual, is tremendously popular and was the recipient of an ovation at each show on Monday night. The songs offered by her are new and well selected and she lives up to the reputation long ago gained by her as being "The Queen of the Blues." Her gowns are a complete knockout and comments from the ladies throughout the house greeted each change of wardrobe. Her Jazz Hounds are as warm a group . . . as was ever seen anywhere and their special selection got a great reception.¹¹⁵

While generally supportive and uncritical of nearly all of the classic blueswomen, Langston's writing exhibits the tendency to approach criticism not as fact *per se*, but rather the exploration of a self-created musical utopia, an aesthetic model that, with occasional variation, should be replicated as to best represent the musical genre in question. In Langston's case his preference for clear-voiced singers with good diction,

singers was implicitly critical of performers characterized as "country," or "downhome," singers that, for writers far more critical of the blues than Langston, included Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith (although Langston was a fan of both). The critical rhetoric of the day suggests an aesthetic distinction between blues performers considered "sophisticated" and those deemed "too suggestive" or "nitty-gritty." In his entertainment column in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Sylvester Russell lauded the voice of Ada Brown as "sweet" and "robust."¹¹⁶ The *Courier* also described Bessie Smith as having "a strong clear voice [and she] enunciates very distinctly."¹¹⁷ The *Chicago Defender's* D. Ireland Thomas noted that Georgia-born singer Baby Benbow was "a dainty little singer with a deep contralto voice."¹¹⁸ W. Rollo Wilson, a *Courier* writer better known for his sports reporting, offered this assessment of Ethel Waters's featured role in the musical/comedy revue *Africana* that speaks directly to how a "refined" performer with proper training can make the blues acceptable to middle-class audiences and middlebrow tastes:

[Waters'] work and her appearance have improved steadily and today she has reached the heights. Hard study and thorough training have at last produced something which I thought was impossible -- and ideal "blues" songstress. "Blues" songs, to my mind, have always been put over by their suggestiveness and by the blatant coarse mannerisms of the singer. But Miss Waters has taken this type of melody out of the common class and dignified it with a winsome personality and with a mellowed voice which does not grate on the sensitive ear. In other words, she has made music out of noise.¹¹⁹

Writing about Waters in the same issue of the *Courier*, columnist Geraldyn Dismond noted that the "downhome" quality of Waters's speech was an affectation indicative of her considerable acting ability:

Those who know Ethel Waters from her phonograph records and over the footlights believe almost to a person that she is the daughter of the sunny

Southland. She has at her command the trick of pronouncing certain words that leads the casual listener to the immediate conclusion that she is a native of either Georgia or Alabama. But that is far from true. The lady who thrills millions was born in Port Chester, Pa., on its famous Front Street, 29 years ago last Hallowe'en. All of her people are Philadelphians and her southern dialect is an art which she has acquired and which other artists find most difficult to imitate.¹²⁰

As a contributing factor to blues discourse, the critical binaries of rough/smooth, downhome/urban, and crude/sophisticated form a consensual, aesthetic criterion used by critics to separate good blues performances from bad and encourages a performance model that helped the race collectively and individually. These distinctions were selectively applied and, along with reflecting the intensely personalized and subjective nature of criticism, were used pejoratively to denote when a performer was perhaps too suggestive or salacious. This suggests that, while enthusiastically "pro-blues," Langston and others were also conscious of (and influenced by) the cultural politics of racial uplift in that, to borrow W.C. Handy's expression, he wanted to hear the "polished essence" of this black secular music tradition. However, it would be disingenuous to suggest that these African American blues writers were overly critical when it came to suggestive performances. As mentioned earlier, although Tony Langston preferred "soft, smooth, feminine voices," he too enjoyed the grittier, downhome style of Ma Rainey. "Ma's songs are excellently put over," Langston wrote, "and she brought the house down." The enigmatic critic known only as "The Scribe" wrote of Rainey's vocal style, "she sang -- or I meant to say moaned -- the blues into the hearts of her listeners and registered a decided hit."¹²¹ Bessie Smith, considered the greatest of the classic blueswomen, enjoyed a warm relationship with the African American press, despite being a much more visceral and intense singer (i.e., in the "Ma" Rainey mold) than Ethel Waters, Ada Brown, or the

dainty contralto Baby Benbow.

While a handful of black women were writing about music in the African American press of the 1920s, only Geraldyn Dismond discussed, albeit infrequently, the blues. Other significant black women writers of the day (i.e., Nora Douglas Holt and Maude Roberts George) confined their music coverage to "the performance of concert music . . . stage music, and occasionally the new music called jazz"¹²² The blues criticism of this era (and every era since) was dominated by men. However, what makes the criticism and reportage of the classic blues era different from folk/country blues or post-World War II Chicago blues was that the men dominating the ranks of professional critics were writing about a musical performance culture defined by African American women, and a cultural marketplace equally influenced by the buying power of female fans. Critics such as Tony Langston and Sylvester Russell understood that these popular female blues singers attracted a large number of women to their performances and often included the reactions of female fans as a legitimating strategy lending a certain verisimilitude to their reportage. By focusing on female fans' reaction to a performer's dress, the critics, many of whom were as interested in obvious displays of wealth and status as they were the music; assumed that the women in attendance responded in kind.¹²³ Writing about Lucille Hegamin, Tony Langston noted "her gowns are a complete knockout and comments from the ladies throughout the house greeted each change of wardrobe," and that "[Hegamin] flashes several gowns which produce gasps of admiration from the feminine portion of her audience." As for Mamie Smith, he enthused that "her gowns are in themselves a show and add wonderfully to her natural charm and personality."¹²⁴ Sylvester Russell, in a review of Bessie Smith, mentioned that her "stunning snake colored spangled wrap, heavily beaded, created comment among the

females."¹²⁵

Descriptions of a performer's sartorial opulence and its effect upon the "feminine portion" of the audience served a practical journalistic purpose. Langston and his peers had to report, in detail, what was an African American cultural event. While it was patronizing for critics to describe the reactions of the women in the audience as first attuned to fashion, then to music, they did, at least, acknowledge the active role of women as blues consumers -- as audience members and, perhaps more importantly, record buyers. Record collector and blues writer Gayle Dean Wardlow argues that, especially in the South, blues record buyers were overwhelming female. "People like Bessie Smith [and] Ma Rainey were big," he writes, "ninety percent of Speir's [H.C. Speir, a Jackson, Mississippi-based talent scout and record retailer] customers were black. Of that 90 percent, probably 90 percent were women." According to Wardlow, the economic realities and attendant patterns of consumption were simple: "The woman who worked for the white man as a cook or a maid in his home bought the records -- she had the money. . . women bought the records, not the men; the women owned the Victrolas; not the men."¹²⁶

It is with this understanding that the recollections of gospel music pioneer Thomas A. Dorsey illustrate how this nexus of black folk culture, commercialization, and female consumption was represented in performance. Dorsey, who prior to his religious conversion was a blues pianist/singer by the name of "Georgia Tom," was the musical director of Ma Rainey's Wildcats Jazz Band. Here he describes a typical "Ma" Rainey stage entrance:

Ma was hidden in a big box-like affair built like an old Victrola . . . A girl would come out and put a big record on it. Then the band picked up the

"Moonshine Blues." Ma would sing a few bars inside the Victrola. Then she would step out into the spotlight with her glittering gown that weighed twenty pounds and wearing a necklace of five, ten, and twenty dollar gold pieces. The house went wild . . . Ma had the audience in the palm of her hand.¹²⁷

Dorsey's comments are revealing in that a significant part of the performance spectacle is the representation of the technological achievement that allowed for the widespread dissemination of the blues. Ma Rainey's entrance from a huge mock Victrola reinforces Ann Douglas's contention that the blues had been transformed from the orality of folk art to the aurality of mass art, something that Rainey, whose music emphatically reflected the black folk traditions of downhome blues, understood.¹²⁸ Similarly, drawing from Wardlow's account of the gender of record buyers, the giant Victrola and 78 at once celebrated the powerful influence of commodity culture in providing a way for singers such as Rainey to build and sustain their careers, and as a cultural/technological touchstone that resonated deeply with this growing, female, record-buying audience. Dorsey's description is equally significant in that it exposes, briefly, the larger cultural question of "how we know," an epistemological moment revealing the imbricated relationships among performers, fans, commodity culture, and the writers chronicling these events, mediating factors contributing to the larger blues discourse.

Although Tony Langston and Sylvester Russell thought that costumes were on the minds of female fans as much as the music, the fact that women were at the center of this epistemological moment as performers and fans is significant in that their collectivity constituted an "alternative form of representation, an oral and musical woman's culture that explicitly addresses the contradictions of feminism, sexuality and power"¹²⁹ Sandra Lieb writes of the intense bond that developed between the classic blues singers and their

female fans due mainly to the music revealing a "specifically female awareness, especially about the nature of love."¹³⁰ Concurring with Lieb, Angela Davis adds that the music, "permitted the women's blues community -- *performers and audiences alike* -- to engage aesthetically with the ideas and experiences that were not accessible to them in real life."¹³¹ Occasionally, the blueswomen themselves essayed their own definitions of the blues in the pages of the black press. In the *Pittsburgh Courier* Bessie Smith noted that, "[The blues] are not funny songs . . . original blues songs are deep emotional melodies, bespeaking a troubled heart."¹³² Ethel Waters, speaking to a reporter from the *Chicago Defender*, noted that feeling the blues was as important as simply singing them, something, she argued, that was second nature to African Americans: "The blues are our own and they originated not from religious hymns as many people think, but from the feeling of sorrow and oppression born with the darky."¹³³

Waters's claim that the blues "are our own" indicates that just as the blues metamorphoses musically, so too does the taxonomy of who is (and is not) considered a blues performer. In the era after "Crazy Blues," whether on record, in performance, or in newspaper accounts, a blues performer was commonly understood (among black *and* white audiences) to be a well-dressed, black woman, backed by a well-rehearsed six or seven piece band, with a flamboyant, entertaining stage show. The pre-"Crazy Blues," pre-race record era of the blues as "endlessly varied," an era in which the blues of Sophie Tucker and Irving Berlin, had passed into one where race (and for a brief period) gender became the primary genre rules for stylistic authenticity -- categories whose importance was reaffirmed by the blues critics of the black press and buying habits of blues consumers.

Despite their somewhat muted criticism, writers such as Tony Langston, Sylvester

Russell, Bob Hayes, notes Philip McGuire, contributed significantly to a wider understanding of the blues and its relationship as an important aspect of the entertainment of African Americans:

Those critics who regularly reviewed the classic blues singers in their columns helped to create a recorded and living legacy for the generations of Americans who have come after the 1920s. They brought the blues singers and their vaudeville shows into the front ranks of Afro-American musical entertainment and broadened the singers popularity; they helped to stimulate a developing 'race-record' industry; they spurred white record companies to record black artists; they encouraged Afro-American acceptance and support of the blueswomen; and they served indirectly as promotional agents for the blues singers and their revues.¹³⁴

What McGuire does not mention, but is also true of the efforts of these early blues critics, is the impact they had shaping blues discourse during the race record era. This critical reportage, linked with the purchases of record buyers and their attendance at live performances, combine to establish "genre discourse," a level of cultural communication that requires "a certain sort of shared musical knowledge and experience."¹³⁵ More importantly, the shared knowledge and experience between performers, writers and readers links the ontological and epistemological questions of "what is" and "how we know" through musical value judgements derived from a consensual understanding of the music's aural characteristics, and ways in which the music's meaning is conveyed. For the blues discourse to function as genre discourse requires the interplay and articulation of "musicians, listeners, and mediating ideologues" be it Ethel Waters claiming the blues as "our own," Tony Langston ebulliently describing Bessie Smith, or hundreds of anxious record buyers queuing up for the latest blues 78. However these value judgements, the result of interplay and articulation, only make sense as part of an argument, and arguments are always social events.¹³⁶ As it relates to the debate over the blues as

representative of the best of African American culture, this argument includes the anti-vernacularists who brought their own brand of evolutionism and racial uplift ideology into the pages of the black press.

Uplifting the Blues

If you are now in a jazz band, do not give up proper study on your instrument. You may be called upon to render real service and to play good music.

--Dave Peyton (1928)¹³⁷

Some Negroes tell me that the old style of blues is carrying Negroes back to the horse-and buggy-day and back to slavery. . . and they say to me: 'You should learn, go and take lessons and learn to play real music.' Then I will ask them: 'Ain't the blues real music?'

--Big Bill Broonzy (1955)¹³⁸

In 1903, the year Charles Peabody published his findings on black secular music in Mississippi, and W.C. Handy experienced his blues epiphany in Tutwiler, an editorial appeared in *Negro Music Journal* warning readers of the ruinous effects of ragtime on American culture. According to the journal, ragtime was "an evil music that has crept into the homes and hearts of our American people regardless of race and must be wiped out as other bad and dangerous epidemics have been exterminated."¹³⁹ At the turn of the twentieth century, long before the blues was generally considered the devil's music, ragtime, the music of "urban whorehouses and middle-class parlors" had attained a similarly demonized status. Among its many purported sins, ragtime was part of a "medicomoral discourse" that insisted this degraded form of American music was capable of disrupting "normal heart rhythms [and interfering] with the motor centers of the brain

and nervous system."¹⁴⁰ The criticism of ragtime in the pages of *Negro Music Journal* was hardly surprising given that a year earlier editor J. Hillary Taylor wrote that among the journal's goals would be to, "get the majority of our people interested in that class of music which will purify their minds, lighten their hearts, touch their souls and be a source of joy to them forever."¹⁴¹ According to Taylor "good music," a common euphemism for classical music, would be the tool by which African Americans, through cultural refinement, would contribute to racial uplift.

The concept of racial uplift had had mixed meanings for African Americans since the late nineteenth century. Uplift embraces a myriad of liberatory ideas from the concept of spiritual collectivity as a means of transcending oppression to education as the firmament upon which racism can be undermined. There is also the racial uplift ideology of black elites that emphasized "self-help, racial solidarity, temperance, thrift, chastity, social purity, patriarchal authority, and the accumulation of wealth."¹⁴² As a form of cultural politics, racial uplift was seen by many middle-class African Americans as the key component in challenging the sedimented racism of whites by their recognizing "the humanity of middle-class African Americans. . . [elite] blacks believed they were replacing the racist notion of fixed biological racial differences with an evolutionary view of cultural assimilation, measured primarily by the status of the family and civilization."¹⁴³ These bourgeois cultural values "that came to stand for intraracial cultural differences -- social purity, thrift, chastity and the patriarchal family -- affirmed their sense of status and entitlement to citizenship."¹⁴⁴

The intellectual template for this middle-class cultural ideology appeared the same year that *Negro Music Journal* argued for the elimination of ragtime. W.E.B. Du Bois's seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk*, along with instilling a sense of collective

historical destiny for generations of race men and women, "provided a vehicle for an incipient black middle-class cultural sensibility."¹⁴⁵ Among its considerable intellectual offerings in *The Souls of Black Folks* are Du Bois's thoughts on black vernacular music. Much has been made of his preference for sacred music (what he refers to as "sorrow songs") and his contempt of black secular music he calls "debasements and imitations."¹⁴⁶ But in 1903, Du Bois had no real understanding of the blues as such and was responding to the music of black minstrel show songsters as well as the attendant ephemera of the vaudeville stage (costumes and performance), and the commercialization of the music.¹⁴⁷

By the time the classic blues era was in full swing Du Bois had adopted a new position on secular music, a shift initially indicated by his 1913 essay "The Negro in Literature and Art" and, more significantly, explicitly demonstrated by his tenure on the board of directors of Black Swan records.¹⁴⁸ While it might be easy to regard this, albeit lukewarm, turnabout as Du Bois giving in to the forces of commercial popular culture, it would detract from the fact that racial uplift ideology and black embourgeoisification were multifaceted and contingent and "represented a myriad of responses under changing historical circumstances to the fundamental ambivalence of being black in America."¹⁴⁹

It is not surprising that African Americans would be offended by negative representations of blackness (specifically white-constructed images of black working class laziness and immorality) regularly parading the vaudeville stage. But for some outraged members of the black middle-class, cultural vindication would come only as the result of cultural assimilation, and the use of "eurocentric images and ideals of respectability [which became] essential to elite blacks's aesthetic tastes."¹⁵⁰ This move toward cultural assimilation based on eurocentricity was the basis for what elite African Americans hoped would be a fusion of black and European cultural forms. Kevin Gaines

writes that the model for African American musical culture was the composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor who "transcribed and orchestrated Negro spirituals and West African folk melodies for the concert stage."¹⁵¹ Coleridge-Taylor's ability to polish the essence of black folk music was noted by another significant proponent of racial uplift, Booker T. Washington who, in 1904, writing in the preface to *Twenty-Four Negro Melodies Transcribed for the Piano by S. Coleridge-Taylor*, noted the "Negro song is in too many minds associated with 'rag' music and the more reprehensible 'coon' song, the most cultivated musician of his race, a man of the highest aesthetic ideals, should seek to give permanence of the folk-songs of his people by giving them a new interpretation and an added dignity."¹⁵²

Washington's encomiums notwithstanding, Coleridge-Taylor's career ended prematurely (he died in 1912 at the age of 37), and was overshadowed by the widespread popularity of minstrelsy-based black musical comedy, and the genre's greatest performer Bert Williams. Although he represented the antithesis of middle-class blacks' concept of an African American/European high culture fusion, Williams was also singled out for praise by Booker T. Washington who, in 1910, wrote that through his skill in reproducing the natural humor and philosophy of black vernacular culture Williams illustrated the "peculiar genius . . . of the Negro."¹⁵³

The veneration of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor and the popular celebration of Bert Williams reinforces the cultural hierarchy of highbrow and lowbrow. However, it is but one example indicating how representations of African American musical culture in the early 20th century were contested between those members of the black elite who associated themselves with the most consecrated (and usually European) works of culture, and others -- popular journalists, consumers -- who championed the

transformative energy of black popular culture. (Interestingly, and somewhat ironically, Du Bois and Washington could claim affiliations with either group.) As it relates to the blues and its emerging taxonomy and discourse during the classic blues era, this battle between cultural elitism and populism would play out in the pages of the black press. The pro-blues criticism of Tony Langston and Sylvester Russell that lauded the music, dress, and performance style of the classic blueswomen, was a version of racial uplift ideology that recognized the cultural empowerment of vernacular expressivity and was at odds with the anti-blues and anti-jazz rhetoric of the two loudest voices of racial and musical uplift, Dave Peyton and James A. "Billboard" Jackson.

Critical hostility to jazz and blues in the pages of the black press in the 1920s and 1930s was not uncommon. In 1947, Morroe Berger wrote that "[the leaders] of Negro communities have spoken out against the influence of jazz. This is to be expected of those 'race leaders' who believe that Negroes can improve their status mainly by acceptance of the standards of the white community, which clearly disapproved of jazz as barbaric and sensual."¹⁵⁴ Chadwick Hanson found it ironic that music critics in the black press, specifically at the *Chicago Defender*, exhibited a dislike for jazz since the *Defender's* editorial policy was "no friend of white middle-class gentility."¹⁵⁵ And while his research does not account for the support of jazz and blues by Tony Langston and Sylvester Russell, Hanson suggests, in what would become a popular explanation for the disinterest by African Americans in older forms of vernacular musical expression, that African Americans felt "[compelled] to reject a music identified. . . with a degraded past, and [replaced] it with the socially acceptable popular music of the white middle-class majority."¹⁵⁶

No black critic of popular music in the 1920s advocated the Eurocentric aesthetic

paradigm more than Dave Peyton of the *Chicago Defender*. If Tony Langston was black journalism's most vocal fan of the classic blues, then Peyton, sometimes writing on the same page as Langston, wanted little if anything to do with a genre he referred to as "clown music." Born in Chicago in 1885, Peyton's musical training began in public school and continued at Chicago's American College of Music. In 1908 he landed his first regular job as a professional musician playing piano in Povey Moore's Burlesque Show (his burlesque experience is something he shares with Jackson). At the age of 27, Peyton became the music director of the Grand Theater on Chicago's south side and, in a manner reminiscent of W.C. Handy, began his involvement in all facets of the music industry and quickly became known as a prominent member of Chicago's black musical "establishment." While director of the Grand, Peyton worked as an arranger for Watterson, Berlin, and Snyder music publishers, was president of Local 208 of the Musicians' Union (which gave him a great deal of authority when it came to booking jobs for other musicians) and, inspired by James Reese Europe, organized his own small symphony orchestra.

In October, 1925 Peyton's column "The Musical Bunch" debuted in the *Defender*. Not one to pull his punches ("Jazz is on the wane," Peyton enthused in 1926, "and the better class of music is coming back into favor with the critical public."), he became the self-proclaimed conscience of black musicians, not just in Chicago, but everywhere the *Defender* was distributed.¹⁵⁷ He gave advice on how musicians should become community role models, how they should adhere to only the highest standards of professional behavior, behavior Peyton defined as conforming to "white middle-class values rather than the rough and tumble [behavior] of the black entertainment circuits."¹⁵⁸ In order to be successful, Peyton argued that black musicians should emulate white

players and refine their musicianship by adding "symphonic elements to the modern syncopated score." A race man and uplift propagandist in the tradition of pioneering black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux, Peyton advised musicians to reject the "fast" lifestyle favored by many jazz musicians and not spend their money frivolously. "These days of high salaries will not last," he wrote in his column, "let the automobile alone. . . You don't need them now . . . the thing to do is invest your money in real estate. . . or gold bonds that mature in from two to ten years."¹⁵⁹

Peyton's motivation as a proponent of racial and cultural uplift was partly the result of living in a city experiencing a significant increase in its African American population. The Great Migration, the period between 1916-1919, saw between 50,000 and 75,000 black southerners relocate to Chicago.¹⁶⁰ According to E. Franklin Frazier, these southern blacks were under the influence of popular culture: films, slick magazines, advertising, and jazz and blues.¹⁶¹ To this population settling into Chicago's South Side these manifestations of popular culture, "had the glitter of the dimly apprehended golden streets of heaven."¹⁶² As a national newspaper for African Americans, the *Chicago Defender* had played an important role in encouraging this migration, and now writers like Peyton, who believed the black press was an instrument of uplift, used his role as a prominent music critic to recognize that African Americans had "made one step toward escaping from a vicious and degrading social situation and, [in a] desire to continue this escape, [rejected] the hated past and [replaced] it with something better."¹⁶³ In a 1928 "Musical Bunch" column subtitled "Opportunity," Peyton castigates black musicians for fooling themselves into thinking they knew how music should be played. "So few of us," he writes, "have the time to visit the grand symphony orchestras, the deluxe picture houses and the other places where things musically are done correctly. . . [A] new era is

dawning upon Race musicians. . .In the pits of the deluxe houses things are done machine like. . .The opportunity is here, the door has opened for us, we have entered. . .let's make good."¹⁶⁴ As Kathy Ogren notes, Peyton and his supporters, "wanted to put 'Southern,' and distinctly Afro-American black performance characteristics far behind them."¹⁶⁵

While Tony Langston and Sylvester Russell valued refinement and not-too-salacious professionalism (along with the occasional eye-popping stage effect) from the classic blueswomen, Dave Peyton valued instrumental skill and technique, a kind of idealized instrumental prowess that separated experts musicians from what he referred to as "hams." In a column essaying this orchestral taxonomy, Peyton recounts a musical meeting with a German musician pseudonymously named "Von Cello:"

I remember a few years when I was the leader of a vaudeville house playing big time acts of both races. An act came in by the name of Von Cello, a German musician of no mean ability. He played the entire overture of the "William Tell" on the cello in presto tempo. The orchestra was wringing wet when the overture was finished, but they played it, and when it was over I was proud of my orchestra. What would have been the result if the orchestra had been made up of mediocre musicians? All of them were qualified to accompany this master cellist.¹⁶⁶

These expert musicians who skillfully managed to keep up with the frenetic playing of Von Cello, were members of the Vaudeville Orchestra, in Peyton's eyes, a type of orchestra that could only employ "first class musicians." This is compared to the over-commercialized hackwork of the Cabaret Orchestra:

Squeaks, squawks, moans, groans, and flutters are the standout features that make the cabaret orchestra popular. If these things are not in evidence the band does not hit with the crowd. In the cabaret orchestra the 'ham' musician finds a comfortable berth. He doesn't have to stick to the score; a mistake can be counted as a 'trick figure' and will be applauded by the crowd, and you can hear different ones saying all around you, 'Ain't that boy hot?'

The crowds seem to go where the 'noise' is and I guess, after all, it is what the crowd says that counts. The 'gut bucket orchestra' today is what the people want and the leader who is not versatile enough to give the crowd this kind of orchestra will have to seek another musical field in the legitimate environment. The hip liquor totter wants sensational noise. They have no consciousness of what real music is, and if you don't give it to them they won't patronize your place, so that's that. Let the box office ring.¹⁶⁷

Peyton's idealized view of a world where music is played either correctly or incorrectly (and where less ignorant black audiences do not encourage the sensational noise of the gut bucket orchestra) is indicative of the black elites' concept of the fusion of African American and European cultures, albeit in a manner that privileged "nonblack aesthetic criteria."¹⁶⁸ However, as Du Bois was soon to find out after the public disinterest in Black Swan's initial offerings of light classical music, audiences (black and white) preferred hot jazz and blues. The New Orleans jazz of Louis Armstrong and the vaudeville blues of Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith et. al provided audiences with a "participatory tradition [that] provided a refreshing alternative to the typical 'European' theater atmosphere."¹⁶⁹ Peyton's somber, intellectualized approach to music, one that valued sophisticated technique and demanded an audience educated enough to appreciate it, devalued both spontaneity and audience participation. This cultural reality, and challenges to the assumption that the black press was primarily an instrument of uplift (Roy Wilkins argued that, contrary to the opinions of elite blacks, "the Negro press has become of necessity a business proposition first, and an uplift agency second."¹⁷⁰) may have hastened Peyton's departure from journalism and return to fulltime musicmaking. In August, 1929, almost four years to the day it debuted, "The Musical Bunch" ended its run in the pages of the *Defender*.¹⁷¹

James A. Jackson: education, insight, and advancing the race

On January 22, 1921, in a story written by Charles T. Magill, the *Chicago Defender* noted: "Evidence that The Billboard, an old established (white) amusement weekly made no mistake when they added James A. Jackson to their editorial department, may be found in the increased interest among our people in general, that the magazine has created."¹⁷² It was a significant moment in entertainment journalism history in that James A. Jackson, who would soon be more widely known by colleagues in the black press as "Billboard" Jackson, became the first black journalist with a regular column in a white publication. Jackson, not unlike Dave Peyton, was a vigilant promoter of black musicians and black musical entertainment as an agent of racial uplift. As he wrote in his first *Billboard* column Jackson's goal was "to see the profession [black entertainment] accorded a place in the history of race progress that is in keeping with its importance as an artistic and economic asset."¹⁷³ Convinced that black entertainers had qualities that would make them role models in both black and white society, Jackson saw their performance skills as "[providing] an important education and insight that could be utilized in advancing the race."¹⁷⁴ While Jackson's enmity of black vernacular music was nowhere near that of Dave Peyton (nor was Jackson as vociferous a proponent of a European aesthetic) he and Peyton were concerned with professionalism and ridding black entertainment of "dirty acts" and other debased cultural stereotypes that demeaned the race.

Jackson was born in Bellafonte, Pennsylvania, in 1876, the eldest of fourteen children. His father, Abraham Valentine Jackson, was a black entertainment pioneer and an original member of the McMillan and Sourbeck Jubilee Singers, a group patterned on the Fisk Jubilee Singers. When Jackson turned 20 he began a professional apprenticeship

as an advance agent with Ed Wynn Big Novelty Minstrels, Richard and Pringle's Georgia Minstrels (featuring Billy Kersands), and Field's Minstrels. During his time on the minstrel circuit Jackson learned about managing acts, performing (for a while he worked in some of the shows as "the college bred interlocutor"), co-managing a theater, and even reading letters for the illiterate performers. Jackson's minstrelsy career ended in 1904 and he went on to work for The Chef Club, a black musicians organization with ties to James Reese Europe, and the National Association of Negro Musicians.

Jackson's career in journalism began not writing about entertainment but about social issues. His article "Underlying Causes of the Racial Disturbances" published in *The Globe and Commercial Advertiser* shortly after the 1919 Chicago race riot, argued that this unrest was directly attributable to limited educational opportunities for blacks, as well as the limited skills of the newly arrived migrant population; further alienation, he asserted, would be resolved by more and better paying economic opportunities for black laborers. Influenced by Booker T. Washington, Jackson felt that if provided the opportunity to advance economically, African Americans would assist in "the advancement of the race and contribute to the larger society."¹⁷⁵ It was this concern with black economic self-determination and his background in show business that made Jackson an attractive candidate for *Billboard's* expanding coverage of black cultural activity, whose editorial staff had no problems with his 'race conscious' journalism.

His column, titled "The Negro Actor, Artist, and Musician conducted by J.A. Jackson," occupied one-quarter page when it first ran in 1920. By 1923, Jackson's column, now called, "J.A. Jackson's Page: In the Interest of Colored Actors, Actresses, and Musicians of America," had expanded to two full pages. Jackson wrote about virtually every aspect of African American culture including boxing and the Negro

Continental Baseball League. Using his column to critique cultural events, Jackson also used "The Page," as it was more widely known, as means of communicating with, in his words, "our element within the profession." He would offer career advice, regularly list boarding houses across the country that accommodated traveling African American performers, and always promote a positive image of African American entertainment figures -- often championing their moral character and professionalism -- as a means of promoting race progress. As he wrote in his debut column, "These columns may help you to a better understanding of the Negro artist and his problems: understanding begets tolerance and humanity."¹⁷⁶

A fan of Ethel Waters, Jackson was not as dismissive of the blues as was Peyton. In fact, it is reasonable to view Jackson as a more ideologically driven Tony Langston. The difference being that while Langston enjoyed the occasional salaciousness and sexual forthrightness of the classic blueswomen, Jackson fought, tooth and nail, for black performers to maintain their dignity and professionalism onstage.¹⁷⁷ "'Good timing' and pool room reputations are no longer assets to the performer who would succeed." Jackson wrote in 1923. "Neither will SMUT put over a performer devoid of talent and personality. Hamtree Harrington, today a Broadway favorite, told the writer that the farther he got from the sort of slimy comedy he started with. . .the higher went his opportunities and his salary."¹⁷⁸

After a year at *Billboard*, Jackson, outraged at what he perceived as the moral decline of black entertainers, began using his column to wage an anti-smut campaign. Primarily attacking black minstrel show comedians and sexually explicit blues performers, who he was convinced hid a dearth of talent underneath gratuitous vulgarity, Jackson countered by using cornetist Perry J. (P.G.) Lowery as the best example of

performance professionalism and racial uplift. Jackson lauded Lowery's skills as a musician with the ability to play everything from a concert repertoire to jazz to "circus and carnival music" (Lowery regularly toured with the Barnum & Bailey and Ringling Brothers circuses). Jackson considered Lowery a well-disciplined conductor who projected an image "that suggested a sense of self-esteem and accomplishment to enhance race pride."¹⁷⁹ As Charles Stevens notes, "this perception of the role of black entertainment provided the dynamics for Jackson's journalism. It was the concern with the image of the Negro and his potential for economic productivity that permeated his activism."¹⁸⁰

Jackson used his influence to mobilize his colleagues in the black press, as well as members of the entertainment community to launch his anti-smut campaign. With reformist zeal, Jackson challenged performers who refused to take him seriously by publically condemning their "dirty acts" in the pages of *Billboard*. Despite his threats, what Jackson did do was celebrate the performers, venue owners and managers who changed their entertainment styles and booking policies to reflect this new entertainment morality. The anti-smut campaign lasted until 1923 with Jackson, as did Peyton, comfortably occupying the role of arbiter of vernacular culture. "The Page" continued as a regular feature in *Billboard* until 1925 when it and Jackson were abruptly dropped from the magazine due to a "lack of sufficient black advertisers." Jackson continued to work for the African American press and returned to the business side of music he had left years earlier.

Conclusion

Toward evening the train drew up at the station where quite a party of farm laborers, fresh from their daily toil, swarmed out from the conspicuously labeled colored waiting room, and into the car with [Dr.] Miller. . . [They] were noisy, loquacious, happy, dirty, and malodorous. For a while Miller was amused and pleased. They were his people, and he felt a certain expansive warmth toward them in spite of their obvious shortcomings.

--Charles Chesnutt (1901)¹⁸¹

Kevin Gaines argues that the cultural politics of racial uplift were formed in the hope that "unsympathetic whites would relent and recognize the humanity of middle-class African Americans. . . . [Elite] blacks believed they were displacing the racist notion of fixed biological racial differences with an evolutionary view of cultural assimilation."¹⁸² In propagating this view Dave Peyton and James A. Jackson were cultural apostles assiduously advocating, in a manner akin to that of Matthew Arnold, an aesthetic that represented "our best selves." This "correct" approach to black cultural expression indicates that despite some differences, Peyton and Jackson saw the value of a legitimation process guided by heteronomous artistic expression, wherein the greatest artistic value is directly the result of the "widest recognition and the greatest social usefulness."¹⁸³ Racial uplift, as cultural ideology, was really never in dispute among these writers, but rather how uplift could best be represented musically without reverting to minstrelsy stereotypes. Tony Langston, Sylvester Russell, Bob Hayes, Geraldyn Dismond all were, to varying degrees, "pro-blues." They all recognized how the polished essence of this black vernacular tradition offered a revisionist version of American history and how offering insight into the hardscrabble lives of the black working class was in fact "protest art against the particular historical set of circumstances and tactics

that relegated black men and women to the lowest ranks of American society."¹⁸⁴ And, during the era of the classic blueswomen, every shimmering rhinestone dress, every glistening diamond tiara, and every eye-popping entrance from a giant Victrola was a spectacular representation and reaffirmation of black musical culture, moments that were "tales of hopes [and I would add dreams] raised [and] deferred."¹⁸⁵ Peyton and Jackson, on the other hand, interpreted the cultural politics of racial uplift as in line with a "literal, mainstream interpretation of black behavior," where cultural assimilation and its attendant art was the only way to respond to a racism.¹⁸⁶ This meant aspiring to create something less "crude and illiterate," racially embarrassing, and redolent of poverty, slavery, and the South, and more defined, measured, complex, and difficult to access.¹⁸⁷ The black middle class, by and large, "wanted no subculture, nothing that could connect them with then poor black man or the slave."¹⁸⁸ To both men, culture was something that was created by and for the few, and was under constant threat from the masses who were too ignorant and uneducated to recognize it.

Ultimately, the dispute over racial uplift and the place of the blues in African American culture was not unlike the "battle" between folklore's evolutionists and functionalists, in that they are debates fundamentally about cultural protectionism, wherein a genre's aesthetic principles and presuppositions (and the methods by which the genre is mediated), are called into question in a continuous process of purification. For Dave Peyton and James Jackson it was varying degrees of cultural assimilation leading to a more or less middlebrow vernacular culture that sought to transform a pejorative concept of race into an affirming vision of cultural distinctiveness. For evolutionists such as Dorothy Scarborough and Newman I. White it was the fear that autochthonous vernacular music would be mass-merchandised out of existence.

Dave Peyton and James Jackson were more than simply aesthetic cranks with axes to grind, they were part of Chicago's black musical establishment and as such, voices to be reckoned with. And as a part of the metamorphosing blues discourse of the time, their status in the community, together with their musical and cultural manifestoes, represented the homology between the "position" of writers and their "position-takings," or what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as the relation that exists between the writer and his aesthetic and intellectual inventions.¹⁸⁹ In this instance, especially in the case of Dave Peyton, adherence to this position and position-taking was a means by which African Americans could become, in Du Bois's words, "full-fledged citizens," by no longer propagating a negative image of "the stage Negro" that, according to middle-class blacks, mainstream white America understood as "the essential black person." While white America had "first" families and "captains" of industry, black America, especially the new black middle-class, wanted to be more than just freedmen or former slaves, they wanted full citizenship, something that was conferred upon them by the status as members of the professional class of doctors, lawyers, ministers, who were the heads of the new black society; men like Charles Chesnut's Dr. Miller who was among the crowd, but not of them.¹⁹⁰ To Dave Peyton, this meant aspiring to an African American musical tradition that privileged non-black aesthetic criteria as an evaluative model, something that infuriated intellectuals like Du Bois who felt that African American culture should be "reviewed and acclaimed by our own free and unfettered judgement."¹⁹¹ As for James A. Jackson, his aesthetics were more middlebrow and he, like W.C. Handy, wanted only the polished essence of the black vernacular musical experience to represent black culture; smut and vulgarity, associated with the minstrel show, only reinforced white America's racist stereotypes. Gilbert Seldes, a white, Harvard-educated critic for *The Dial*

magazine, and vocal champion of popular culture (or as he called it "the lively arts") who wrote during the same time as Peyton and Jackson, argued that it was precisely this type of middlebrow approach that was the enemy of culture. The "faux bon" as Seldes called it was art with highbrow aspirations that lacked the courage to be as audaciously vulgar as lowbrow art, an overly refined, intellectualized approach that resulted in such cultural creations as second-rate grand opera, pretentious drama, and "high-toned" movies.¹⁹²

But Seldes, unlike Peyton and Jackson (and Handy as well), was not engaged in the intense critical self-observation and scrutiny redolent of the double-bind of double-consciousness. As middle-class black men uplifting the race (and the race's culture), Peyton and Jackson were keenly aware of the judgmental gaze of whites and the impact it had on how they viewed not only themselves, but other African Americans as well. By not wanting to Africanize America, Peyton and Jackson, offering a variation on the model of assimilation, sought what Du Bois called "self-conscious manhood" that would lead to future where "a man [could] be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit on by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face."¹⁹³

However, the writing of pro- and anti-blues critics in the black press, the "canonization" of the blues as the "authentic sound of the Negro" by white enthusiasts such as Abbe Niles and Carl Van Vechten, and the folk art vs. mass culture debate between folklore evolutionists and functionalists, while crucial in the formation of the blues ontologically, expose discursive gaps filled by the record buyers, the working-class blues consumers who were lining up for blocks to buy the latest Mamie Smith, Bessie Smith, or Ma Rainey record. Some of them were not unlike the noisy, happy, dirty, farm laborers sharing the "colored only" car with Dr. Miller who, despite their "obvious

shortcomings," were celebrating an uncompromised pride of identity. This was enough to prompt an enraged Dave Peyton to complain in the pages of the *Chicago Defender*, to these blues fans this was their culture -- a document of how one lived one's life.¹⁹⁴ Their enjoyment of the blues (and minstrelsy) can be viewed not simply as the promulgation of stereotype by an ignorant, undereducated black audience, but as an "affirmation of cultural values that, while deprecated by the larger society, had been covertly extolled by blacks since arriving in America."¹⁹⁵ As blues consumers and members of the secondary public, working class African Americans, despite the prevarications of many members of the middle-class (who, according to Amiri Baraka, "wandered completely away from the blues tradition, becoming trapped in the sinister vapidness of mainline American culture.")¹⁹⁶ attended blues performances and bought millions of records and contributed to a blues discourse in a way that rejected the faux bon of middlebrow art for the lowdown seriousness of the blues.

To conceptualize a blues discourse in the early twentieth century means taking into consideration the multiple conversations occurring more or less simultaneously -- debates over performers and performing, consumers and consuming, scholars and journalists (black and white) crafting an ontological and epistemological understanding of the blues, and perhaps most important, the debate over racial uplift and the search for a vernacular cultural identity that was separate from, but not vilified by, the dominant white culture. But, as Perry Bradford was wont to note, even the so-called "hate blues" hypocrites were up for some belly rubbing and shouting if the band was tight and the music was good. It is that war between the mind and (lower) body that lies at the heart of this complicated discourse, and is borne out by middle-class blacks misreading (or ignoring) the interests of working class black consumers who seemed to tacitly

understand that the blues, even after its essence had been polished, articulated the struggles and the pleasures of everyday life.

Notes for Chapter 1

1. Perry Bradford, *Born with the Blues: Perry Bradford's Own Story by Perry Bradford* (New York: Oak Publications, 1965), 97.
2. James A. Jackson, "It's Up to the Performer," *Chicago Defender*, May 19, 1923.
3. Langston Hughes, "Misery," from *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed., Arnold Rampersand (New York: Knopf, 1994), 77.
4. Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," from *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed., Angelyn Mitchell (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 58.
5. *Ibid.*, 59.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Langston Hughes, "The Best New Negroes Really Not Cultured," *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 9, 1927.
8. Carl Van Vechten, "The Black Blues," *Vanity Fair*, August 1925.
9. John Gennari, "The Politics of Culture and Identity in American Jazz Criticism" (Ph.D.

dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1993), xi.

10. Ibid., xi.

11. Roger Fowler, *A Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*, ed. Jeremy Hawthorn (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), 48.

12. Michel Foucault, *Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994 [1970]), 46.

13. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 198.

14. Stuart Hall, *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds., David Morley, Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 26. Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 13.

15. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 17.

16. Perry Bradford, *Born with the Blues*, 97.

17. Charles Keil, *Urban Blues*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990 [1966]), 11.

18. Samuel Charters, liner booklet essay for *Blues Masters, Volume 11: Classic Women Blues*, Rhino R2 71134 compact disc.
19. Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1995), 387.
20. *Ibid.*, 391.
21. David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 173.
22. Langston Hughes, "The Best New Negroes Not Really Cultured," *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 9, 1927.
23. Lynn Abbot and Doug Seroff, "'They Cert'ly Sound Good to Me': Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues," *American Music*, Vol. 14 no. 4, Winter 1996, 402.
24. *Ibid.*, 402-403.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Evan Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel: Explorations in Phonography* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1987), 29.

27. Ibid.

28. Andre Millard, *America on Record: A History of Recorded Sound* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 75.

29. William Barlow, *Looking Up at Down: The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 114.

30. Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 114. Ted Drozdowski, "Passage From Africa," Pulse!, September 1999. Drozdowski interviews guitarist/musicologist Taj Mahal who, like Barlow, argues that the introduction of the 78 had a negative impact on the creation of folk culture by delimiting the parameters of creativity. "Man the invention of the 78 was the worst," the veteran bluesman ventures. "This style of music comes from being able to play as long as you could so people could dance. If you play three-minute songs at a dance, you're not going to work! Records erased that whole side of the blues." Mahal's conservatism reveals a folkloristic purism that, to paraphrase Charles Keil, regards folk artists as more valid than the "performers," a pejorative appellation indicting the musicians who acquiesced to the machinations of the race record industry and, by extension, the industry itself.

31. Katz, "Making America More Musical Through the Phonograph," *American Music* Vol. 16, No. 4, Winter 1998, 449.

32. Samuel Charters, *The Country Blues* (New York: Da Capo, 1975 [1959]), 43.

33. Marshall W. Stearns, *The Story of Jazz* (New York: Mentor/New American Library, 1958), 73.

34. David A. Jasen and Gene Jones, *Spreadin' Rhythm Around: Black Popular Songwriters, 1880-1930* (New York: Schirmer, 1998) 236. William Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 127. Barlow writes that it was Sophie Tucker who almost got the first crack at recording "Crazy Blues" when white businessman Fred Hager agreed to record some of Perry Bradford's compositions for Okeh if they were sung by Sophie Tucker. Prior commitments prevented Tucker from making the session and Mamie Smith, with Bradford's urging and in spite of what Hager had said, recorded "Crazy Blues." It should also be noted that Bradford had originally titled the song "Harlem Blues," as it was written for a musical revue called *Made in Harlem*. He changed the title to avoid a copyright suit by the revues financial backers. Also see website: www.hub.org/st.louis.blues.

35. Abbot and Seroff, "They Cert'ly Sound Good to Me," 406.

36. David Evans, *American Music*, Vol. 14, No. 4, Winter 1996, 399.

37. Abbot and Seroff, 412.

38. Philip McGuire, "Black Music Critics and the Classic Blues Singers," *Black Perspective in Music*, Vol. 14, no. 2, Spring 1986, 122.

39. Ibid. Abbot and Seroff note that in 1911 “Baby” Seals had struck an enterprising arrangement with the editor of the *Freeman* to use the paper as the main advertising and mail-order base for his recording “Baby Seals Blues.” The first ad was printed on October 19, 1912 and ran intermittently through January 10, 1914. Given the nature of their business relationship it is not surprising for the paper to provide Seals with the space he needed to contribute an editorial rebuttal to Paul Carter. It was through these open letters published in the *Freeman* that Seals became widely known as “the spokesman for the southern entertainer,” and as such made significant contributions to the pro-vernacular blues discourse.

40. Abbot and Seroff, 415.

41. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) xx.

42. Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 344.

43. Evans, *Big Road Blues*, 87.

44. Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues* (New York: Viking, 1981), 23-25.

45. John W. Work, *American Negro Song and Spirituals* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1940).

46. Charles K. Wolfe, *Thomas Talley's Negro Folk Rhymes*, ed. Charles K. Wolfe (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), ix.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid., xviii

49. The phrase "blues in embryo" was coined by Rudi Blesh.

50. Wolfe, *Thomas Talley's Negro Folk Rhymes*, xxiii.

51. Talley's second collection was eventually published as *The Negro Traditions*, ed. Laura C. Jarman (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1996). Wolfe, *Thomas Talley's Negro Folk Rhymes*, xix. Talley's invisibility persists. Even a cursory glance at David A. Jansen's and Gene Jones's *Spreadin' Rhythm Around* reveals no mention of Talley, as does David Evans's *Big Road Blues*, Robert Palmer's *Deep Blues*, and William Barlow's *Looking Up at Down*.

52. Wayne D. Brazil, "Howard Odum," from *The Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, eds. Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 296.

53. Evans, *Big Road Blues*, 37.

54. Howard W. Odum, "Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry As Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes," *Journal of American Folklore*, 24 (1911), 255-294.

55. Evans, *Big Road Blues*, 51. Benjamin Filene, "Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Vernacular Music in the Twentieth Century (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1995), 44.

56. Howard Odum and Guy B. Johnson, *Negro Workaday Songs* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1926), 17.

57. *Ibid.*, 22-23.

58. *Ibid.*, 25.

59. LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1963), 89.

60. David Sanjek, "The Wild, Wild Women of Rockabilly," from *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (New York: Routledge, 1997), 142.

61. Filene, "Romancing the Folk," 210.

62. *Ibid.*

63. Ibid., 211.

64. Dorothy Scarborough, *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), 264.

65. Newman I. White, *American Negro Folksongs* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), 389.

66. Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 226.

67. Zora Neale Hurston quoted in Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 227.

68. Clarence Williams quoted in Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 226.

69. Ibid., 224.

70. Jasen and Jones, *Spreadin' Rhythm Around*, 249. The preeminent status the authors award Handy again ignores the contributions of Thomas Talley.

71. The speculation circulating among blues historians is that this anonymous guitarist playing at the Tutwiler train station was Henry Sloan, a worker on Will Dockery's nearby plantation. Dockery's plantation, founded in 1895, was located near the Mississippi Delta towns of Drew and Ruleville. By the early 1920s, Dockery's employed hundreds

of black laborers, among them Sloan and Charley Patton. Little is known of Sloan, who began playing blues in 1897 making him, according to Robert Palmer, “one of the first blues musicians anywhere.” He did, however, serve as a musical mentor to Patton, who followed him around, copied and reworked his style of playing to fit his own needs. Sloan migrated to Chicago in 1918, while Patton stayed in Mississippi. David Evans argues that, rather than Sloan, the musician at the train station may well have been Charley Patton who in 1903 (at age 22) was an accomplished blues guitarist. See David Evans, *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues*, (New York: Da Capo, 1982).

72. W.C. Handy, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography* (New York: Da Capo, 1991 [1941]), 80-82.

73. According to David Jasen and Gene Jones, Handy never saw a dime from “The Memphis Blues.” In 1914 two instrumental recordings, one by the Victor Military Band, the other by Prince’s Orchestra, became hits. By the summer of the same year, Vernon and Irene Castle were using the song to introduce America to their new dance sensation, the Fox Trot. In 1915 a vocal version by Arthur Collins and Byron Harlan was also successful, and as late as 1927 bandleader Ted Lewis would have a hit with it. Handy had been undermined by a Denver music publisher Theron Bennett. Bennett had reached an agreement with Handy where he would act as Handy’s sales representative and recommend retailers stock the sheet music for “The Memphis Blues” while he was making his regular rounds to stores. Handy quickly agreed to the deal as the best for his music to have national exposure. However, despite the song’s popularity in Memphis,

Bennett told Handy the music was not selling taking him to the leading department store in the city (Bry's) and showing him a stack of a thousand unsold copies of "The Memphis Blues." Dismayed, Handy sold the song's copyright and printing plates to Bennett for \$50. Bennett, with the help of a sales clerk at Bry's, had conned Handy into thinking the music had stiffered, in reality the "unsold" copies shown to Handy was a reorder, the initial order of a thousand had sold out in less than a week. After the deception, Bennett placed an order for 10,000 copies of the sheet music and began, quite successfully, plugging it nationally. See Jasen and Jones, *Spreadin' Rhythm Around*.

74. Jasen and Jones, *Spreadin' Rhythm Around*, 236.

75. *Ibid.*, 248.

76. *Ibid.*

77. *Ibid.*, 249. Hughes neglects to mention in his review that he contributed lyrics to the song "Golden Brown Blues" published in Handy's *Anthology*.

78. W. C. Handy, "The Blues," *The Indianapolis Freeman*, September 6, 1919.

79. Handy's sobriquet "The Father of the Blues," irritated Jelly Roll Morton who, for years, argued against Handy's claim on the grounds that, when asked Handy simply could not play the blues. After listening to a 1938 radio program called *Believe It or Not* that, once again, identified Handy as the originator of the blues and jazz, Morton made his

displeasure known in a letter to *Downbeat* magazine. “Mr. Handy cannot prove that he wrote any music,” wrote Morton. “He has possibly taken advantage of some unprotected material that floats around. I would like to know how a person could be the originator of anything without being able to do at least some of what they created.” For more details see Alan Lomax, *Mr. Jelly Roll: The Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole and “Inventor of Jazz”* (New York: Da Capo, 1993 [1950]). Also agreeing with Morton was Rudi Blesh who wrote, “Even to claim, or accept, the title of ‘Father of the Blues,’ as W.C. Handy has done, is as absurd as it is presumptuous.” See *Shining Trumpets: A History of Jazz* (New York: Knopf, 1958 [1946]), 146.

80. Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 81, 148.

81. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 126.

82. Ibid.

83. W.C. Handy, *Blues, An Anthology, With a Historical and Critical Text by Abbe Niles* (New York: Macmillen, 1972 [1926]), 12.

84. Jones (Baraka), *Blues People*, 148.

85. Robert Littel, “Negro Songs Without Music” (review of *The Negro and His Songs* by Howard Odum and Guy Johnson), *The New Republic*, September 9, 1925. Arthur Huff Fauset, “The Negro’s Cycle of Song,” *Opportunity*, November 1925. Janet Ramsey,

“Afro-American Concord” (review of *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs* by Dorothy Scarborough), *The New Republic*, December 30, 1925.

86. John Lomax, “Self-Pity in Negro Folk-Songs,” *The Nation*, August 9, 1917.

87. Evans, *Big Road Blues*, 38.

88. Lomax, “Self-Pity in Negro Folk-Songs,” 143.

89. Evans, *Big Road Blues*, 88.

90. Abbe Niles, “Blue Notes,” *The New Republic*, February 3, 1926, 292.

91. Ibid.

92. Evans, *Big Road Blues*, 90.

93. David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 182.

94. Evans, *Big Road Blues*, 88.

95. Carl Van Vechten, “Negro ‘Blues’ Singers,” *Vanity Fair*, March 1926.

96. Ibid.

97. Ibid.

98. Mike Daley, "Representations of the Other in the Blues Revival,"

<http://www.finearts.yorku.ca/mdaley/revival.html>

99. Marianne Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 4.

100. Ibid., 8.

101. Van Vechten, "Negro 'Blues' Singers."

102. Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 142.

103. Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 12.

104. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 142.

105. Bell Hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 22.

106. Davis, 147

107. Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 76. Ingrid Monson, "The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 48, no. 3, Fall 1995
108. Roy Wilkins, "The Negro Press," *Opportunity*, December 1928.
109. Pittsburgh Courier, March 15, 1924.
110. *Chicago Defender*, December 23, 1922.
111. It is important to note that Tony Langston's tenure as critic and entertainment editor of the Chicago Defender was not during what is known as the "classic blues" era. That taxonomical appellation was given to the women blues singers of the 1920s by jazz critic Rudi Blesh in his 1946 book *Shining Trumpets: A History of Jazz*. To Langston, his colleagues, and the audience, this music was, simply, the blues.
112. Philip McGuire, "Black Music Critics and the Classic Blues Singers," 114.
113. Ibid.
114. Tony Langston, *Chicago Defender*, May 26, 1923.
115. Tony Langston, *Chicago Defender*, December 29, 1923.

116. Sylvester Russell, *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 30, 1927.

117. *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 15, 1924.

118. D. Ireland Thomas, *Chicago Defender*, November 24, 1923.

119. W. Rollo Wilson, *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 17, 1927.

120. Geraldyn Dismond, "Through the Lorgnette of Geraldyn Dismond," *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 17, 1927. Assessing her own vocal talent and acting ability, Ethel Waters writes, "I had a sweet, bell-like voice. On a clear night you could hear me singing from five block away. However I seldom depended on my voice to win social recognition. I developed into a really agile shimmy shaker. I sure knew how to roll and quiver, and my hips would become whirling dervishes. It was these completely mobile hips, not my voice, that won me friends and instant admiration." See Ethel Waters and Charles Samuels, *His Eye Is On the Sparrow* (New York: Doubleday, 1951), 71.

121. McGuire, "Black Music Critics and the Classic Blues Singers," 111.

122. *Ibid.*, 109.

123. Chadwick Hansen, "Social Influences on Jazz Style: Chicago, 1920-30," *American Quarterly* Vol. 12, Winter 1960, 499.

124. Tony Langston, *Chicago Defender*, December 29, 1923, and September 23, 1923.

125. Sylvester Russell, *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 5, 1927.

126. Gayle Dean Wardlow, *Chasin' That Devil Music* (San Francisco: Miller/Freeman Books, 1998), 143. Although Wardlow has spent over three decades researching the blues music and musicians of his native Mississippi his assertion that 90 percent of record sales were made by women, while tantalizing, is somewhat speculative as there are no reliable sales records indicating the gender of record purchasers. Wardlow's evidence is that many of the old blues 78s he purchased in the rural south while canvassing in the early 1960s were bought from women. That and the recollections of people like H.C. Speir. While 90 percent might be an exaggeration, Wardlow's larger point should not be lost: women, in large numbers, purchased blues records.

127. Sandra Lieb, *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 30.

128. *Ibid.*, 50.

129. Hazel Carby, "In Body and Spirit: Representing Black Women Musicians," *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 11, no. 2, Fall 1991, 178.

130. Lieb, *Mother of the Blues*, xiii.

131. Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 66.

132. *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 15, 1924.

133. *Chicago Defender*, December 25, 1926. Given the stilted sound of the quote, it is almost impossible to verify whether Waters actually said this or had it paraphrased for her by the anonymous writer.

134. Philip McGuire, "Black Music Critics and the Classic Blues Singers," 122.

135. Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On The Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 87.

136. *Ibid.*, 90.

137. Dave Peyton, "The Musical Bunch," *Chicago Defender*, April 3, 1926.

138. Yannick Bruynoghe, *Big Bill Blues* (London: Cassel and Co., 1955) 125.

139. Quoted in Tom Lutz, "Curing the Blues: W.E.B. Du Bois. Fashionable Diseases, and Degraded Music," *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 149.

140. *Ibid.*, 149.

141. Ibid.

142. J. Hillary Taylor quoted in Mark Katz, "Making America More Musical through the Phonograph," *American Music*, Vol. 16. No. 4, Winter 1998, 451.

143. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 2.

144. Ibid., 3.

145. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 76.

146. Ibid., 10.

147. W.E.B Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam; Definitive Jubilee Edition reprint, 1989 [1903]), 182.

148. In his provocative essay "Curing the Blues," Tom Lutz wonders, "Why did W.E.B. Du Bois hate the blues?" which is a tad hyperbolic in the sense that Du Bois was not a "blues hater" as much as he was a cultural protectionist reacting negatively to the commercial mediation of black secular music that reduced it to coon songs.

149. Although Du Bois became involved with race record industry, he did so by recording Ethel Waters, of whom Carl Van Vechten noted, "refines even her obscenities." Du Bois and Harry Pace were less interested in rougher sounding vocalists such as Bessie

Smith (who, in an often repeated piece of blueslore was rejected by Black Swan for precisely this reason) preferring someone like Waters who recalls a discussion between Pace and arranger and bandleader Fletcher Henderson as to whether she should sing popular or “cultural” numbers. They decided on the former, and Waters’s first Black Swan release “Down Hearted Blues,” “proved a great success and a best seller among whites and coloreds,” she recalls “and it got Black Swan out of the red.” See Ethel Waters, *His Eye Is On the Sparrow*.

150. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 10.

151. *Ibid.*, 76.

152. Booker T. Washington, preface to “Twenty-Four Negro Melodies Transcribed for the Piano by S. Coleridge Taylor, Op. 59 (Boston: n.p., 1904), ix.

153. Booker T. Washington, “Interesting People, Bert Williams,” *American Magazine*. (September 1910), 600.

154. Morroe Berger, “Jazz: Resistance to the Diffusion of a Cultural Pattern,” *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 32, 1947, 465.

155. Chadwick Hansen, “Social Influences On Jazz Style,” *American Quarterly*, 496.

156. This argument for African Americans to reject a “degraded past” is explored in great

detail in Michael Haralambos' *Right On: From Blues to Soul in Black America* (London: Eddison Press, 1974). Related to this is Chadwick Hansen's suggestion that anti-jazz and anti-blues rhetoric extended to the intentional misspelling of performers' names (e.g., "Fred Morton" or "Jelly Roll Marton,") an indication of the "supreme indifference. . . of the record companies which sold their music" – something that, not surprisingly, stopped when a performer started selling lots of records. Other times, the names would be absent from the record label, or a company executive would fabricate a pseudonym for (unbeknownst to) the performer.

157. Dave Peyton, *Chicago Defender*, April 3, 1926.

158. Kathy Ogren, *Jazz Revolution: Twenties America and the Meaning of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 50.

159. Dave Peyton quoted in Ogren, *Jazz Revolution*, 115.

160. James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 4.

161. E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in America* (New York: Dryden Press, 1948), 92.

162. *Ibid.*

163. Hansen, "Social Influences on Jazz Style," 493.
164. Dave Peyton, *Chicago Defender*, April 4, 1926.
165. Ogren, *Jazz Revolution*, 51.
166. Dave Peyton quoted in Ogren, *Jazz Revolution*, 116.
167. Ibid.
168. Gaines, 76.
169. Milt Hinton quoted in Ogren *Jazz Revolution*, 51.
170. Roy Wilkins, "The Negro Press," *Opportunity*, December, 1928.
171. After "The Musical Bunch" ended its run in 1929, Peyton never returned to journalism in the same capacity, content to spend his time leading an orchestra at Chicago's Regal Theater, and working as a solo pianist. In 1935 he recorded "Baby O' Mine" for Decca. Peyton died in 1955.
172. Charles Magill, *Chicago Defender*, January 22, 1921.
173. James A. Jackson, *Billboard*, November 6, 1920.

174. Charles Stevens, "J.A. (Billboard) Jackson and the News: Pioneer in Black Musical Entertainment and Journalism," *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 16, no. 1, 1992, 32.

175. James A. Jackson quoted in Stevens, "J.A. (Billboard) Jackson and the News," 32.

176. James A. Jackson, *Billboard*, November 6, 1920.

177. Tony Langston and Jackson were good friends. Langston occasionally guest-edited "The Page," and Jackson's *Billboard* columns were reprinted in the *Chicago Defender*.

178. James A. Jackson, *Chicago Defender*, May 19, 1923.

179. Stevens, "J.A. (Billboard) Jackson and the News," 32-33.

180. Ibid.

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191. Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 178.

192. Gilbert Seldes, *The Seven Lively Arts* (New York: Sagamore Press, 1957 [1926]), 28.

193. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 5.

194. Jones (Baraka), *Blues People*, 181.

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196. Jones (Baraka), 181.

Chapter 2
(Re)constructing a Music "Wild and Unaccountable":
Samuel Charters, Paul Oliver and the (Re)birth of Blues Criticism

If, as a political act, what I did lacked reality, at least it had a kind of simple honesty about it.

-- Samuel Charters¹

The American environment which produced the blues is still with us, though we all labor to render it progressively smaller. The total elimination of that area might take longer than we now suspect, hence it is well that we examine the meaning of the blues while they are still falling upon us.

-- Richard Wright²

Instead by our interpretive acts, we constructed the very thing we thought we had found. This is not to say there was nothing "out there" called the blues. . . .Rather, I am saying that the various activities of the blues revivalists constituted a commodity called "blues" that came to be consumed as popular music and a symbol of stylized revolt against conservative politics and middle-class propriety.

-- Jeff Todd Titon³

The emergence and popularity of country blues performers such as Blind Lemon Jefferson and Blind Blake in the mid-1920s caused a shift in not only blues discourse, but in the vernacular ontology of the blues. Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Alberta Hunter, and other female performers of the early 1920s, who had essentially defined the blues to a growing audience of consumers, did not simply vanish but, in the wake of the increasingly popular country blues, became virtually invisible. By the late 1930s, the two most popular classic blueswomen were dead: Bessie Smith in a car accident in 1937, and

Ma Rainey, the Mother of the Blues, succumbed to heart failure at the age of 53 in 1939.⁴ Other early blueswomen such as Ethel Waters, Sara Martin, and Alberta Hunter moved “blithely from blues to pop to jazz,”⁵ while still others such as Sippie Wallace, Lucille Bogan, and Victoria Spivey, specialized in rougher, sexually explicit songs that showed little, if any, traces of the songwriting traditions of vaudeville and Tin Pan Alley.⁶

If the emergence of the country blues informally announced the beginning of the end of the era of the classic blueswomen, then the Great Depression (whose impact was presciently predicted in Bessie Smith’s definitive recording of “Nobody Knows You When You’re Down and Out,” which preceded Black Friday by a mere five months), more definitively announced its end, as well as being the harbinger of bad times ahead for the race record industry in general. For live entertainment, the situation was much worse, especially considering that by the end of 1935, 20 percent of the total population was receiving some form of public assistance, a figure that, among African Americans living in the North, was closer to 50 percent. Records were the new luxury entertainment item and Francis Davis writes that, despite a number of record companies filing for bankruptcy or going into receivership:

[The record labels] that continued to target blues releases to a black buyership increasingly focused their efforts on self-accompanied rural singer/guitarists who wrote their own material or drew it from traditional sources. It wasn’t as though black audiences of the 1930s suddenly outgrew their infatuation with female blues vaudevillians. It was just that singer/guitarists from Mississippi or Texas or the Carolinas were cheaper to record. Unlike the women, they didn’t require songwriters or backup musicians. They sometimes didn’t even require a recording studio.⁷

There is an ideological tension that imbues this historical and cultural shift and its attendant discourse in that, from this point on, the status of the classic blueswomen is seen as secondary in importance to that of the country bluesmen. Sexism, which seems

the most obvious reason, is but one, albeit an important, contributing factor. The impact of the Depression created a precipitous decline in attendance for black performers on the T.O.B.A circuit, and without this performance infrastructure, black vaudeville and tent shows could no longer supply the kind of regular income performers and their side musicians required. Consequently, the image of the nomadic blues performer, an image codified by the two writers under consideration in this chapter, as exclusively male, is partly true. Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith were, in contemporary parlance, road dogs too, always accompanied by (and supporting) an entourage of musicians and opening acts, something that Depression era economics made increasingly impossible to continue. The archetypal image of the Depression era blues musician, was not a myth, as noted by Jeff Todd Titon in the opening of this chapter, but an interpretive act, one in which the freewheeling, cultural primitive is romanticized as “[the] nomad riding the freights from town to town, performing in railroad stations or disorderly juke houses or wherever there was a crowd, keeping one eye out for the law and the other for the coins tossed in his direction.”⁸

However, had it not been for the commercial inroads made during the meteoric rise and fall of the classic blueswomen, male singer/guitarists might have had a harder time reaching consumers. As noted in Chapter one, a blues sensibility existed among black audiences long before Mamie Smith recorded “Crazy Blues,” and the millions of records sold (and advertised) during the early days of the race record era, coupled with the coverage of the blueswomen in the pages of the African American press indicates that consumers had developed a vernacular ontology of the blues that resisted sharply drawn stylistic distinctions between the vaudeville stylings of the classic blueswomen and the downhome blues of Blind Lemon Jefferson. While some blues scholars have argued that

the country blues emerged as a by-product of the Depression and the death of vaudeville, both styles in the eyes (and ears) of those buying the records retained an essential “downhomeness.”

As the blues metamorphosed stylistically, so too did blues scholarship. While advertisements for the recordings of Charley Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Blind Blake were ubiquitous in the black press, none of them received the same amount of coverage in the entertainment pages as did the classic blueswomen, nor were their records reviewed.⁹ Partly this was the result of their not playing the theaters that writers like Tony Langston and Sylvester Russell were used to attending, and partly it is the result of a not-so-subtle anti-vernacularism on the part of these writers who, though blues fans, considered this music too unrefined, too backward-looking. Since the Depression had put an end to large scale touring, so much a part of the T.O.B.A.’s success, country blues performers reverted to more informal style of touring redolent of the medicine show tradition. Although black journalists were not covering the country blues in the same manner as they did the blueswomen of the 1920s, African American writers, most notably Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, Sterling Brown, and Zora Neale Hurston were contributing to Depression era blues discourse keeping the tradition alive through both scholarly analysis, ethnographic research, and poetry.

During the 1930s and 1940s, there was a dearth of popular journalistic writing that dealt substantively with the blues, and what writing there was fell into the academic or semi-academic categories. In America, the most notable, and comprehensive work was being done by the Lomaxes. John and his son Alan were documenting a wide range of vernacular musical traditions that included a significant amount of blues for the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress.¹⁰ Lesser known (among the general

public), yet important work was contributed by Mary Wheeler, Lawrence Gellert (the first to seriously examine the blues as an element of African American protest), Lyle Saxon, Robert Tallant, Edward Dreyer, Carl Carmer, and Russell Ames. It was Ames who, in a 1943 article entitled “Implications of Negro Folksongs,” argued that blues music compared “favorably with modern English poetry [and that] blues contained important social meaning.”¹¹

Ames’s literary comparison is important for just as the blues was legitimated musicologically by scholars who compared it to European (and ancient Greek) musical and storytelling traditions, so too was its lyrical content legitimated by comparing it to even older oral storytelling tradition dating back to the ancient Greeks. This intellectual approach, that focuses on tradition defined as the tight communal life shared by performer and audience, was refined and codified by classicists, such as Albert Bates Lord whose 1960 book *Singer of Tales*, provided the methodological framework that was freely adapted by later blues scholars such as Jeff Todd Titon and David Evans.¹² Evans was a student of Lord’s at Harvard in the early 1960s, and was greatly influenced by the noted classicist:

I was interested in the process of tradition [and] it quickly occurred to me... that this country blues that was being reissued on albums was in many respects a traditional music, that there were a lot of musical ideas that were shared. These seemed to be not so much a process of just covering or imitating, but a sharing of a tradition. I had studied formally a bit about traditions at Harvard. I was a major in classical languages and I studied with Albert Lord. . . .He was a student of Homer [and] was basically showing that Homer had come out [of] the living tradition of epic poetry. I had also been interested in mythology, which of course is a product of an oral tradition. So, through the study of folklore I developed sort of a theoretical framework for understanding the blues.¹³

Evans’s groundbreaking doctoral dissertation which analyzed tradition and creativity in the folk blues, would be published in 1982 as *Big Road Blues*. But his

interest in the blues, piqued while a Harvard undergraduate, was the result of listening to reissued folk blues recordings, notably the Samuel Charters-produced LP *The Country Blues*, and reading the 1959 book of the same name. The following year, Englishman Paul Oliver, who had never set foot in America, and used rare 78s as a kind of aural Dead Sea Scrolls of African American vernacular music, wrote a detailed, historicized analysis entitled *Blues Fell This Morning* that was the scrupulously researched yang to Charters's sweeping, romanticized yin. It is these two texts that are the focus of this chapter. Their publication announced the end of a period of relative dormancy in blues scholarship and, despite current revisionist criticism, continue to function as twin Rosetta Stones of blueslore, the beginning of what Francis Davis refers to as the more or less "official version" of blues history.

The Country Blues and *Blues Fell This Morning* also announced the start of a modern era of blues scholarship in which white, male writers become the de facto keepers (and framers) of the blues canon, either through the research and journalistic writing that followed in the wake of Charters and Oliver, or the blues revivalists/record collectors of the 1950s and 1960s (the focus of Chapter 3), some of whom were spurred into action after reading Charters and Oliver. While I will approach the work of both men historiographically, I will also address some of the attendant issues of contemporary (i.e., post-World War II) blues discourse that emerge from these texts, specifically canon formation, the romanticization of the primitive as the hypostasis of blues authenticity (a form of ethnographic and musicological "othering" similar to that of writers such as John Lomax and Carl Van Vechten), and the role of Charters and Oliver (and some later revivalists) as white mediators (and curators) of a black canon.

Samuel Charters: Organizing a (Symbolic) Cultural Revolt

In a phrase that would make a good epitaph, Francis Davis wrote that Samuel Charters was "the man who turned countless white adolescents on to the blues."¹⁴ Jeff Todd Titon, noting Charters's preeminence, wrote that in the United States, "the [blues] revival [of the 1960s] was launched in 1959 with the publication of Samuel Charters's *The Country Blues*, along with an accompanying record of the same name."¹⁵ In the history of blues criticism there is a no more singular event in the refinement and (re)creation of blues discourse in the 20th century than the publication of Charters's book. Ending the relatively fallow period of scholarly (and non-scholarly) blues monographs, *The Country Blues* brought an American voice to a genre of music that, since the end of World War II, had been analyzed most significantly by European critics. "We are deeply indebted to Mr. Charters," wrote jazz historian Marshall Stearns in his December, 1959 book review in the *New York Times*, "for opening the door on a vitally significant area of American music."¹⁶ Stearns's review set the tone for what would be repeated by other widely-read music critics, such as Ralph J. Gleason, who noted that Charters had provided enthusiasts of American vernacular music with "a document that is essential to any thorough knowledge of jazz and American folk music. . .a vivid sociological history of an important segment of our culture."¹⁷ Historian and jazz critic Eric Hobsbawm, writing under his pen name Frances Newton, considered the book "an invaluable history of the Negro popular taste and mood, as reflected in the record companies catalogues."¹⁸

As true as these critical observations were (and, for the most part, remain) regarding Charters's contribution to historical musicology, perhaps the most important (and problematic) element of the book is his ontological contribution to blues discourse through the romanticized image of the solitary, guitar-playing, anguished, and

impoverished black bluesman. While this was not the first time that African American musicians had been part of the process of "othering," (e.g., John and Alan Lomax),¹⁹ Charters's romanticization of the "authentic" bluesman-as-folk-artist spoke directly to the purist, anti-popular culture impulses of white folk and blues revivalists, many of whom had either rejected rock and roll's commerciality outright or, upon hearing blues songs reconfigured by early rock and rollers, chose to seek out the "original" pre-War acoustic recordings by the "original" artists.²⁰ Fans of rock and roll and the blues, mindful of the former's egregious commercial impulses, embraced the electric post-War Chicago blues sound, a version of the blues that some considered merely a vulgarization of the country blues aesthetic.

As an element of canon formation, and as a virtual canon itself, the considerable impact of *The Country Blues* was partly the result of good timing. Harry Smith's six-LP set the *Anthology of American Folk Music* (which I discuss in detail in Chapter 4) had been released in 1952, and as a carefully assembled aural artifact of American vernacular music recordings of the 1920s and 1930s, "offered a seductive detour from what, in the 1950s, was known not as America, but as Americanism"²¹ – a rejection of Eisenhower era complacency by predominantly white, middle-class, male college students who feared the inevitability of what Norman Mailer called "a slow death by conformity with every creative instinct stifled."²² Beat literature and its "interest in the black American jazz musician as existential role model," also figured into this cultural shift, contributing to white fascination with blackness (something most significantly and problematically revealed in Norman Mailer's infamous 1957 essay "The White Negro"), and paving the intellectual way for those "looking for something that would mark them as nonconformist [to come upon] the blues."²³ Lastly, in 1959, the year *The Country Blues* was published,

rock and roll was in severe decline. A mere five years removed since the emergence of Elvis Presley, many of rock and roll's early stars were either dead, in jail, or had their careers in ruin.²⁴ What was left was the sound of manufactured white teen idols such as Fabian and Frankie Avalon, performers that, while extremely popular with teenagers (especially girls), reinforced the folk and blues revivalists assertions that pop music and rock and roll were at best a bastardized simulacrum of black vernacular music, at worst a de-ethnicized commercial sham.

When *The Country Blues* was published, Charters was not part of the college student/revivalist scene, but rather a 30-year-old jazz lover (as well as clarinetist) who had been researching and writing about African American musicians since 1950. Growing up in Pittsburgh during the Depression (his birth preceded Black Friday by three months), Charters was raised in a jazz loving (and playing) family. "I grew up with people like Jack Teagarden drifting through the house," he recalls, "and [listening to] Benny Goodman records, and Bessie Smith records. It never dawned on me that everyone else was not having the same experience."²⁵ It was in 1950, while researching what would become the musical biographical dictionary *Jazz New Orleans*, that he began making field trips into Texas looking for Robert Johnson and Blind Lemon Jefferson. "As a jazz musician in the 40s playing with laboring Dixieland bands in San Francisco," he notes, "we knew about the blues because all the records we were finding in the Salvation Army stores and junk shops were jazz, but there were blues too. And they looked the same, so we listened to those at the same time. They were just names, Sleepy John Estes, Furry Lewis -- who were these people?"²⁶

Helping Charters sort out some of these musical mysteries was the writing of Rudolph Pickett (Rudi) Blesh.²⁷ An Oklahoma native educated at Dartmouth and

Berkeley, Blesh was a member of the music faculty at Queens College, an avid record collector, owner of the jazz reissue label Circle Records, and host of the short-lived, but extremely influential, radio show "This is Jazz." Considered one of jazz's most vociferously conservative "moldy fig" jazz critics (he thought jazz began its decline in the late 1920s), his 1946 book *Shining Trumpets: A History of Jazz* made a significant impact on Charters's approach to studying the blues, as well as influencing his emotionally charged prose. Originally conceived as a series of lectures presented at the San Francisco Art Museum in 1943, Blesh's jazz history included a two chapter taxonomy of the blues that, along with being well-versed in the work of Dorothy Scarborough, Newman White, Howard Odum, and Guy Johnson, situated (and explicated) the genre both musicologically and culturally. Blesh, replaced the folk/popular dichotomy propagated by the early folklorists with three distinct categories (what he called "phases") of blues: The first was the "archaic" or "preclassic" blues. Blesh reckoned this to be the most authentic of the blues phases primarily due to its being "sung in the country throughout the South, in the hamlets and towns, and carried along the dirt roads by the wandering singers who pack their troubles and hopes with their battered guitars." Second was the "classic" blues, the appellation given to the music of Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and the other blueswomen of the 1920s. Compared to the preclassic, the classic blues "show a growth in expressive means and in communicated power," but when cheaply vulgarized constituted the third phase which Blesh derisively referred to, in a somewhat contradictory manner, as the "decadent" or "sophisticated" blues. This pornographic element that had infected the blues was the result of whites "in quest of such prurient stimulation [black blues] singers are encouraged [to sing in a manner] that elicits white approval."²⁸

Blesh's writing veered from technically detailed descriptions (e.g., "The microtonally flatted fifths also occur, although with far less frequency than the blue notes. . . .this solo puts the semitonally flatted third and fifth in phrasal conjunction and then rises to include the seventh and the blues third and fifth an octave above."²⁹) to impassioned, purple tinged, metaphorical ruminations on the cultural significance of the blues:

We shall look at many aspects of the blues which explain this music in outward detail. But this is what it is within itself: a little song yet an epochal expression of the human spirit; something as simple as a sphere yet as complex as a tree or as a moth wing under the microscope. It is that almost incomprehensible thing, a form comprised in movement as flexible and as ceaselessly stirring as the invisible wind. This is not a flight of birds, but that ethereal tide, itself flight, which sustains the feathered body, holds up and enfolds the thrashing wings.³⁰

Blesh also wrote at length about Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith both of whom "made dramatic works of art out of the folksong which they inherited," dismissed W. C. Handy's claims to being "The Father of the Blues" as "as absurd as it is presumptuous," heard African voicings in the blues, criticized Billie Holiday's singing as "agreeable but enervated," and offered some of the earliest critical insight into the work of the most romanticized of all blues figures, Robert Johnson, "[His] strident voice sounds possessed like that of a man cast in a spell and his articulation, like speech in possession, is difficult to understand."³¹ Arguably the most important writer shaping blues discourse in early post-World War II America, Blesh's opinions and views on performers set a new standard that many later blues scholars (the result of reading Charters) continued to use. Along with British critic Max Jones (who will be discussed later) Rudi Blesh "set the stage for modern blues scholarship by writers who were oriented toward commercial recordings."³²

Of all the images in Blesh's short blues taxonomy, perhaps the most indelible, and the one most affecting Charters, was that of the solitary, "preclassic" bluesman. If, as Blesh argued, this was the most authentic of the three blues phases, then these were the most authentic blues musicians. As would many later writers, Blesh constructed this image after listening to Robert Johnson's "Hell Hound on My Trail." (Much has been written about Johnson, the most popular and recognizable of all the pre-World War II blues players, who remains the foremost embodiment of blues authenticity by his neatly delimited body of work, Faustian legend, and early death.) Blesh's concluding paragraph of the chapter titled "Blues: One" is pure romantic rapture, a spectacular piece of "othering" wherein the doomed Johnson, relentlessly chased by his demons is transformed into a virtual metonym for the blues:

The voice sings and then -- on fateful, descending notes -- echoes its own phrases or imitates the wind, mournfully and far away, in *huh-uh-uh-ummm*, subsiding like a moan in the same ominous, downward cadence. The high, sighing guitar notes vanish suddenly into silence as if swept away by cold, autumn wind. Plangent, iron chords intermittently walk, like heavy footprints, on the same descending minor series. The images -- the wanderer's voice and its echoes, the mocking wind running through the guitar strings, and the implacable, slow, pursuing footsteps -- are full of evil, surcharged with the terror of one alone among the moving, unseen shapes of the night. Wildly and terribly, the notes paint a dark wasteland, starless, ululant with bitter wind, swept by the chill rain. Over a hilltop trudges a lonely, ragged, bedeviled figure, bent to the wind, with his *easy rider* held by one arm as it swings from its chord around his neck.³³

Blesh's prose moved Charters to envision his own book to be less about cultural musicology and sociological analysis and more about the celebration of African American vernacular music. "What I was doing," Charters wrote, "wasn't academic, and it wasn't scholarly, but it was effective." Through his example, Charters hoped that his conscious romanticization of the musicians and their environment, likeminded revivalists

would be moved to pick up the gauntlet he had thrown down. "I wanted people to record them to document their lives, their environment, and their music. . . .I was trying to make the journey to find the artists as glamorous as possible."³⁴

Relocating to the South to find these people was, initially, not Charters's primary goal -- it was to become a better clarinetist. Upon settling in New Orleans he took weekly lessons with jazz master George Lewis; for five dollars a session the 21-year-old Charters played duets with Lewis. More important, however, were their lengthy conversations. It was then that Charter's learned for the first time how much of jazz history remained unwritten. He was also discovering the impact of racism on the lives of these musicians. "So there were two sides to what I was doing," he asserts, "I was attempting to save a dying musical culture that was being swept away. . . .[and] I was attempting to show the evil of racism by contrasting it to the creativity, the genuine impulse behind black music."³⁵ Charters's assertion of his active role in "saving a dying musical culture" is the trope at the heart of not only *The Country Blues*, but the blues revival as well. As a cultural trope, the image of the "white blues savior" has, over time, proven to be problematic. The implication of Charters's "saving the blues" is that in his own visionary way, he recognizes the genre's value and the need to preserve it in its most "authentic" form, something that seems to have been missed by the African American audience.³⁶ And while critics championing this revisionist tack accuse Charters of acting as "the benevolent master . . .[retrieving] the dying tradition from the clutches of decadent black culture, [re-animating] it, even [improving] it,"³⁷ by the time *The Country Blues* was published, black audiences, with the exception of enclaves in the deep South, Chicago, and Detroit, seemed decidedly disinterested in the blues, especially the country blues of the pre-World War II era. To white revivalists such as Charters and those he

influenced, it was as if the blues had been discarded by the very people who should have been rediscovering and celebrating it.

Whites, Blacks and the Cultural Necessity of the Blues

According to Michael Haralambos, the movement away from blues and to soul by black audiences in the 1950s and 1960s, in a very pragmatic and utilitarian way, had much to do with the rejection of the past and embracing the possibilities of a better tomorrow:

Blues does not present a mirror image of black society nor an exhaustive catalogue (sic) of black culture. A particular view of the world is presented. The picture is selective. It holds forth few promises, portrays few images of a better way of life. In fact it concentrates on many of the harsher aspects of life as it exists. This selective view has important consequences. By defining life as hard and unrewarding and, by implication, the future as the same, blues tends to maintain aspirations and expectations at a low level. It prepares its audience for the future. the expectation of hardship cushions the experience and preconditions people to accept it.³⁸

Haralambos's thesis centers on the assertion that, in many instances, economic and social conditions had changed for African Americans to such a degree that the blues was no longer in accord with their lives. Positing a slightly modernized version of 1920s racial uplift ideology, Haralambos concludes that the rejection of the blues was a class-based reaction born of the middle-class aspirations of working-class blacks who no longer wanted to be associated with the "lowdown" nature of the blues. "They see the future in terms of better jobs, housing, and education. . .the way of life portrayed in many blues is something black Americans want to leave behind, not because its unrespectable but rather because it is undesirable."³⁹ Black audiences were also getting younger and, especially during the heyday of Motown in the early and mid-1960s, were more attuned to Berry

Gordy's attempts to reach them (and whites as well) with what he called "the sound of young America." However for many younger African Americans (and those not so young) for whom the country blues represented a pre-Civil Rights world, it was soul music that articulated "the reevaluation and redefinition of black identity, experience, behavior, and culture." Or, in the words of black disc jockey Reggie Lavonge, "Soul music is an expression of how we feel today, blues was how we felt yesterday."⁴⁰

Although Haralambos's model, first posited 26 years ago, retains its currency when broadly applied, it was not as if all African Americans, in some sort of cultural *mea culpa*, were throwing away their Charley Patton 78s *en masse*. Despite the fact that the enormous African American migration northward in the early 20th century indicated a conscious rejection of the political and ideological oppressiveness of the South, many African Americans did not leave the South culturally. "It is no difficult task to get people out of the South," stated an editorial in the black newspaper the *Chicago Whip*, "but you have a job on your hands when you attempt to get the South out of them."⁴¹ The new black arrivants, in dress, song, and food culture retained their Southern ties, and in doing so maintained an ambivalent connection with all that was considered "downhome." In *Black Boy*, Richard Wright articulates this regionally inscribed cultural bifurcation: "I knew that I could never really leave the South, for my feelings had already been formed in the South, for there had been slowly instilled into my personality and consciousness, black though I was, the culture of the South."⁴² Although this cultural connection grew more ambivalent and seemed more distant to later generations, it meant that there was still a black blues audience, albeit one that was regionally circumscribed, shrinking, and aging.

Norman Dayron was a white Ph.D candidate at the University of Chicago, and

part-time janitor at the famed blues/r&b studios of Chess Records (home to Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf). Located on Chicago's South Side and described as being "surrounded on three sides by ghetto and one side by Lake Michigan,"⁴³ the University of Chicago became one of the centers of white blues revivalism in the early 60s. Dayron and fellow student/blues enthusiasts Paul Butterfield, Elvin Bishop, and Nick Gravenites "formed the nucleus of the University of Chicago branch of the white blues kids." According to Dayron, who was already listening to Josh White, Big Bill Broonzy, and Leadbelly, as a member of the University's active folk music society, it was impossible to live in this part of Chicago and avoid the blues music emanating from the homes of the black residents living near the University. "On a spring day," he notes, "people would be sitting out on their porches playing Charlie Patton or Otis Rush. You just heard it everywhere."⁴⁴ It was not long before Dayron and friends traveled beyond the University's walls, into the South Side's black blues clubs like the Blue Flame Lounge. Although they were rabid about the blues and African American culture, musicians like Butterfield, Gravenites, Bishop, and most significantly, Michael Bloomfield deliberately distanced themselves from what they saw as the "white negro" pose.⁴⁵ "They were the white guys who spoke with pseudo-black accents and drove big pimp cars," Bloomfield recalled in an interview in the early 1980s, "I was always an urban Jew, a very well off urban Jew, and I never wanted to be anything but that. I didn't want to be a white black guy. That wasn't my scene at all."⁴⁶

The Chicago revivalists, cognizant of the ease with which some coopted black vernacular cultural and turned it into minstrelsy, were (like Charters) involved in their own process of "othering." As a group of (mostly) college age, suburban white men rejecting the slow death of post-World War II cultural conformity and commercialization,

they were attracted to the potential danger and chaos lurking inside Chicago's black blues clubs. "The black society was morally. . .whatever you want to call it. . .a lot looser than white," recalls Nick Gravenites. "The clubs we played in were all wild clubs. People would really get down. We weren't used to that in white society. . .I think that was the main allure. It was a lot more fun."⁴⁷ This transgression of public space, in an explicitly racialized way, served two purposes: first, as an authenticating strategy in which personal experience created a more complete understanding of the blues as a part of African American performance culture; second, as way for white enthusiasts to simultaneously repudiate "square white culture" and offer themselves as the keepers and standard bearers of this black musical tradition. "See, I don't think their own kids were much interested in what their fathers were doing," noted Michael Bloomfield, "here [I] was, a young man who had learned a good deal of this tradition and seemed to want to carry it on, and I think they were only too glad to have a competent musician who wanted to carry on that tradition."⁴⁸

As they transgressed the public (and private) space of the black blues club, Dayron, Bloomfield, Butterfield, and Gravenites romanticized what they perceived as the more relaxed morality of the black blues audiences. By offering their services to carry on in the tradition, they acknowledged that, despite many older black blues fans who still played their Charley Patton records, a younger generation of African Americans and middle-class African Americans were disinclined to curate and preserve this part of black musical culture. Norman Dayron, who eventually worked his way up from janitor to engineer to producer at Chess Records notes, "[middle-class blacks] didn't want to hear pain, reminders of the old days in the South, guttural accents and primitive sorts of things. Middle-class blacks were disgusted with the blues, just the same as my parents would have been."⁴⁹

This working-class, deep South, countrified image that middle-class African Americans wanted to get away from was precisely what revivalists like Charters wanted to celebrate. This was a "truer" version of American history sung by its have-nots, socially and politically marginalized voices representing an "authentic" America where (folk) life equaled (folk) art when defined by "suffering, depravation, poverty and social exclusion."⁵⁰ The white revivalists believed, conceptually anyway, in an imagined village, a precapitalist utopia where the "poor are art because they sing their lives without mediation and without reflection, without the false consciousness of capitalism and the false desires of advertising."⁵¹ (A theory awash in contradiction insofar as the main method of disseminating the music -- the 78 rpm record -- the advertising used to sell it, scholars and journalists writing about it, and the talent scouts selecting the musicians and songs, contribute to the construction of the genre's authenticity.) The lone bluesman, carrying his guitar from juke joint to juke joint became a contemporary version of the wandering European minstrel, a vernacular musical poet, albeit with a more heightened sense of existential dread. Alan Lomax, writing in 1993 and using words that bear more than a passing resemblance to Rudi Blesh's aforementioned rumination on Robert Johnson, noted, "They had made their way safely and even pleasantly through their violent world, their guitars slung around their necks like talismans. Wearing these talismans, they had entered into all the secret places of this land, had moved safely through its most violent jungles, past all its killers, who, seeing their talismans, had smiled upon them. They lived the magic life of fools."⁵² Lomax's observation, written after more than 50 years of fieldwork and research, perpetuates the revivalist tradition of romanticizing the innocence of pre-modern folk culture combined with an affinity for African American music, music that replaced the feeling that there was "a deficiency of

some sort in the American mainstream."⁵³

Lightnin' Hopkins: Hero of *The Country Blues*

The Country Blues is framed by the presence of one such a man and his talisman, Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins who, according to Charters, "was the last of the great blues singers." Born in Centerville, Texas, in 1912, Hopkins began his professional career as a teenager, getting his first big break at the end of World War II working the club scene in nearby Houston, playing guitar for his cousin Alger "Texas" Alexander. In 1946, a brief sojourn to Los Angeles led to him recording for Alladin records, but by 1947 he was back in Houston recording for Bill Quinn's Gold Star Records. After Hopkins snuck off to New York to re-record some of his unreleased Gold Star sides for a label in New York, Quinn promptly dropped him from the label. Undaunted, Hopkins spent the next ten years recording close to 200 sides for literally dozens of record labels. After a professional career that Charters described as "a series of clumsy mistakes," Hopkins, only 47 years old, vanished and was presumed to be missing in action, or dead.⁵⁴

After considerable detective work, Charters located Hopkins in Houston in early 1959, and persuaded him to record a handful of songs that would eventually be released on Moses Asch's Folkways Records.⁵⁵ It is here that the facts of Charters meeting with Hopkins fuel the romanticized odyssey of the white blues scholar who coaxes the "forgotten" musician out of "retirement" by awkwardly negotiating the social contours of the bluesman's terrain.⁵⁶

[Hopkins] had almost stopped playing in the late 1950s, and it was difficult to know where to find him. A cousin was working as a cook in a restaurant in New Orleans where I ate, and he told me to look for Lightning in Houston. At first all I could do was find Lightning's guitar. It was in a pawn shop on Dowling Street. The taxi drivers I asked, even

Lightning's sister and his landlady were carefully vague when I asked where he was. But the word was passing, and the next morning a car pulled up beside mine at a red light, and a thin faced man wearing dark glasses rolled down the window and called out, "You looking for me?" Lightning had found me.⁵⁷

Charters goes on to note that that only after convincing Hopkins that he was serious about releasing these recordings did the bluesman agree to play, on two conditions: First, Charters had to pay get his guitar out of hock, and second, buy him a bottle of gin. In his description of this recording session -- the chapter that opens *The Country Blues* -- Charters sets an appropriately "bluesy" mood: "In a poor, shabby room in the colored section of Houston, a thin, worn man sat holding a guitar, playing a little on the strings, looking out the window. It was a dull winter day, a heavy wind swirling dust across the yard. There was a railroad behind the houses, and a few children were playing on the rails, shivering in their thin coats."⁵⁸ In the book's concluding chapter, Charters revisits Hopkins and, inspired by Rudi Blesh's thoughts on Robert Johnson, imagines Hopkins as embodying the tradition of the country blues as well as the "stringent poverty and racial terror of black rural life."⁵⁹

Lightnin', in his way is a magnificent figure. He is one of the last of his kind, a lonely bitter man who brings to the blues the intensity and pain of the hours in the hot sun, scraping at the earth, singing to make the hours pass. The blues will go on, but the country blues, and the great singers who created from the raw singing of the work songs and the field cries, the richness and variety of the country blues, will pass with men like this thin, intense singer from Centerville, Texas.⁶⁰

The relationship between Charters and Hopkins illustrates the connection and contrast between the normative, empowered, white, literate, middle-class or better "we" of European ancestry, and the darker, primitive "them" of African ancestry.⁶¹ Although Charters does not use the complex and problematic term "primitive" when writing about

Hopkins, the term had become sedimented in blues discourse, mainly as a taxonomical category designed to define vernacular musicmaking practices (and songs) that were deemed "crude and barbarous" (read: too black, too working class, too salacious). Rudi Blesh offered a less pejorative definition of "primitive" blues (which he argued were the most authentic form of blues) that stressed a "stark and simple completeness [that] requires a simple and heartfelt style of singing, a lack of self-consciousness and naturalness almost naive" – a definition that Charters embraced.⁶²

"To study the primitive," writes Marianne Torgovnick, "is. . . .to enter an exotic world which is also a familiar world." A world structured by (frequently racialized) ethnographic tropes that define primitives as childlike, irrational, dangerous, violent, mystical, promiscuous, and, ultimately and enviably, free. It is this combination of miscellaneous and contradictory factors that forms the grammar of primitivist blues discourse, the discourse of self and other fundamental to the scholarship of Charters and many of the white revivalists of the 1960s.⁶³ As much as the forgotten, anguished bluesman "rediscovered" by a white blues aficionado/record collector is the trope that animates 1960s blues revivalism, it is actually part of a series of tropes that create discursive structures representing the white revivalists' sense of their own identity, as well as the lived experiences that form the reality for these black musicians. Charters, who wanted to open the consciousness of white Americans (himself included) to a fuller understanding of the new possibilities for creative expression and self-awareness through involvement with black culture, employed the discursive strategy of "disidentification," a process that locates and isolates the construction of the author (and his/her intended audience) as subject, simultaneously mapping out terrains "in which [author and audience] can construct different and potentially more liberating ways [in which] to

exist."⁶⁴ Charters and his largely white audience become the "we" to the black bluesmen's primitive, marginalized "them." The goal, as Charters suggested, was to encourage a shared cultural understanding and, for white America, the opportunity to reconsider its racial attitudes.⁶⁵

Historically, ethnographers have given voice to the primitive as if it were "a ventriloquist's dummy" that tells Euro-Americans (i.e., "us") what we want to hear. However, in its creation of shifting and imbricated subject positions, disidentification in blues scholarship can lead to what seems to be an intense *identification* by the author, one that contributes to a paternalistic view of the subject. Generally, this is the result of the white author's use of the primitive to construct more liberating ways to exist, a perceived utopian freedom that is the result of the bluesman's dignity in the face of poverty, racism, and his marginalized social status. The magnificence that Charters sees in Hopkins is not simply the result of his considerable musical talent, but rather, a combination of his talent, and his suffering. This element of blues discourse is what Peter Stallybrass and Allon White refer to as the discovery that the primitive (what they call the low-Other) is a "constituent of [the dominant culture's] own fantasy life, [resulting in a] mobile, conflictual, fusion of power, fear and desire in the construction of subjectivity."⁶⁶ Charters establishes a cultural paradigm where the music and the context in which it is produced are based upon on a set of characteristics "associated with the unremitting physical, passionate, ecstatic, emotional. . . black world of [Charters' et al] imaginations."⁶⁷ This is not to say that Hopkins's loneliness, bitterness, and poverty were not real or were in some way exaggerated by Charters (although Hopkins's loneliness and bitterness is presumed by Charters), but they become essential elements of his rhetorical strategy, one that romanticized the lives of marginalized African Americans who created

remarkable music, and suffered with great dignity. As well-meaning as his intentions were, one can only guess that Lightnin' Hopkins might have traded the magnificence bestowed upon him by Charters for a steady income and a better place to live.

Samuel Charters was not the first blues critic and scholar to use this type of rhetoric (e.g., Carl Van Vechten's essays on the classic blueswomen in *Vanity Fair* in the 1920s are filled with examples of romanticized "othering") to support the thesis that the chief value of the blues was its "intensely personal expression."⁶⁸ "We knew about jazz a little bit," Charters recalls, "jazz is a hybrid between black and white elements. But the blues was just black. It was pure expression. And with the words, because I am a writer, the texts of the blues were so crucial, and so, for me, it was as though I had discovered an incredible hidden treasure."⁶⁹ Equating the blues with blackness and "pure expression" reveals not only a "romantic enthusiasm born of existential commitment," but is at the heart of Charters's construction of a "domain he called the blues."⁷⁰ It is within this domain, which for Charters is a method of canon formation, and a trope that animates blues scholarship: that the "spontaneous human expression of African [American] communities contrasts positively with the alienated rationalism of the European Bourgeoisie."⁷¹ The blues as "just black" reflects the sentiment of Charters and Oliver (and many others) that this kind of primitive, semi-improvised musical creativity is an inherently more valuable form of vernacular expression than "rule bound musical interpretation."⁷²

Paul Oliver: Analyzing and Organizing Meaning(s) in the Blues

As a British teenager during World War II, Paul Oliver worked in a "harvest camp," which employed mostly young men to work as farmers while the older adult

males were released for military service. This experience led to his employment at a logging camp in Stoke-by-Clare in Suffolk where he had close, albeit infrequent contact with African American GIs. Stan, a slightly older co-worker, whom Oliver had befriended and often with whom he discussed music, took the inquisitive teenager to hear the songs sung by the black soldiers digging trenches for the new American Army base under construction nearby. "These military camps were not supposed to be segregated," Oliver recalls, "but the only men I saw doing the heavy manual work were black."⁷³ Hiding behind a hedge the two listened to what he later described as "the most eerie sounds. . . swooping, undulating, unintelligible words, and the back of my neck tingled." Oliver, momentarily dumbstruck, asked Stan to identify this music, to which he responded simply, "They're singing a blues." Sufficiently moved, Oliver wanted Stan to tell him all he knew:

Stan, it turned out, had a collection of records which he kept in an orange box. They were blues records, he explained, and when he got back from the camp he played them to me over and over again. A while after he himself went into the Army, under age, and I never saw him again. But I'd started my own collection and soon there were quite a few friends who were doing so too, all of us prepared to cross London in spite of the difficulties of wartime transport and complete blackout, in order to purchase a 78 rpm record.⁷⁴

Paul Oliver's introduction to the blues was a common enough story among acolytes; a quasi-religious conversion experience followed by an almost insatiable hunger to learn all there was about the genre and its artists. Oliver listened to BBC radio programs featuring American folk and blues (many of them supervised by John Lomax's son Alan Lomax), diligently scribbling down the lyrics into a notebook. Curious as to the social and political history of black America during the early blues era, Oliver began amassing a personal library that included favorites such as Julia Peterkin's study of life in

the Georgia Sea Islands, *Roll Jordan Roll* (1933), and Charles Johnson's history of sharecropping, *The Shadow of the Plantation* (1934). "[These books] filled out the background to the records I was buying," Oliver notes, "some words were explained, some allusions made clear, and I began to seek other books that would help to create a picture in depth of the music that was taking up so much of my time."⁷⁵

Oliver's search for more recent critical writing on the blues led him to Ernest Borneman's monograph, *A Critic Looks at Jazz* (a 1946 British reprint of a long article entitled "An Anthropologist Looks at Jazz" originally published in 1944 in the *Record Changer*), and Rudi Blesh's *Shining Trumpets*. Both Borneman and Blesh situated the blues as part of the jazz tradition, rather than as a separate genre of black vernacular music. In 1943, British writer Iain Lang, better known as the China correspondent for the *Sunday Times of London*, published a 60 page booklet, with the help of the Worker's Music Association, entitled *The Background of the Blues*. Laing, like Borneman and Blesh, considered blues to be an element of jazz history, but gave it greater importance as a self-contained genre of African American music. "The blues is not the whole of jazz, but the whole of the blues is jazz, having no existence apart from this idiom," Laing began enthusiastically. "It forms a bridge between Southern folk music -- work song and gospel songs -- and the organized harmonic and rhythmic complexities of the improvising band."⁷⁶

Although, as Oliver later admitted, his own research and understanding of the blues called into question Laing's opening statement, he devoured the monograph (as did many others, it sold in the thousands and the WMA could not keep up with the demand), and in doing so, was introduced to a blues ontology that, along with reiterating the genre's musicological traits, connected the American blues tradition to the European styles of Andalusian *cante hondo* (deep song) and Portuguese *fado* singing.⁷⁷ *Background*

of the Blues also contained lyrical analyses, something that greatly appealed to Oliver who heard these songs as first-person accounts of African American social history. Oliver was also struck by Laing's familiarity with African American writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes, who both wrote about the blues and used it as a stylistic and thematic element in their writing. Most intriguing, however, and unlike much blues criticism of its time, was that Laing was also familiar with Lawrence Gellert's articles on black vernacular music published in the *New Masses* and, perhaps befitting of a book published by an organization called the Worker's Music Association, expanded on Gellert's notion of the blues as "negro songs of protests." Although he did not consider blues to be *de facto* social criticism, Laing did contend, rather presumptuously, that while African American blues singers may not have a sophisticated understanding of the forces of capitalism, they experienced its more pernicious and violent real-life consequences:

The blues singer may have a very dim idea of the elaborate organization of government in a capitalist State, but cannot help being sharply aware, from everyday experience, of its lesser agents -- ward-healers, district attorneys, magistrates, police captains, and baton-twirling cops. In America between the wars you could not live in among the mills and factories without realizing that the wages you earned and the hours you worked were finally settled by tear-gas bombs, guns and blackjacks wielded by sheriffs's deputies, strike-breakers and riot squads -- the muscle men of the State. In the world of Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge -- and of Sacco and Vanzetti and Tom Mooney -- 'crime doesn't pay,' and unless you have the power to make the law obey you it's best to obey the law. If you don't, if you get caught up in the machinery -- well, it hardly matters whether you refuse to talk or not; it would, most likely, be too late at any stage of the proceedings; and if you can face the last thirteen steps with a smile it's as much as you can do.⁷⁸

Along with reading virtually every piece of blues scholarship he could lay his hands on, Oliver began collecting records, trading his swing records to American servicemen for their blues recordings. He, like Charters, was drawn to performers with

what seemed to be bizarre and curious names: Peetie Wheatstraw, Bumble Bee Slim, the Yas Yas Girls, and song titles that seemed equally obscure, "CWA Blues," "The Dirty Dozen," and "The Death of Walter Barnes." "I tried finding out everything I could about [these performers and songs]," Oliver recalls, "becoming in the process a well-known face at the American Embassy Library." By now the teenage Oliver had amassed a considerable personal library of blues, historical, and literary scholarship.⁷⁹

In 1946, an essay by Max Jones entitled "On Blues" appeared in an anthology titled *The PL Yearbook of Jazz*. Jones was a formidable figure in British music criticism as a staff writer for the widely-read music news weekly *Melody Maker*, and as a co-founder and editor of *Jazz Music* magazine. This essay, to Oliver, was "the first serious analysis and classification of the blues to be published anywhere."⁸⁰ Synthesizing and critiquing a range of scholarship that included the work of Borneman and Gellert, as well as W.C. Handy, E. Franklin Frazier, Howard Odum, Newman White, Alan Lomax, and Dorothy Scarborough, Jones freely appropriated from these sources (occasionally dismissing them as well) and created an approach to blues discourse that rejected the distinction made between "folk" and "popular" blues. He acknowledged that distinctive blues styles were forged by a "rural-urban continuum,"⁸¹ that some blues songs "carried a note of social protest,"⁸² that multiple meanings were submerged within what seemed to be "meaningless stanzas" and "nonsense verses," and that the creation of blues music occurred *in performance* (his emphasis) from "scraps of verse and melody known to the community as a whole." Most intriguing is Jones's awareness that despite there being a "considerable revival of interest in the Negro folk idiom,"⁸³ this revival was happening almost entirely among white enthusiasts:

There is little doubt that [blues albums] are selling to primarily white

collectors and enthusiasts today; an indication that authentic blues, like true jazz, has almost passed out of currency among the folk who originated the style. In Harlem, and many other vast Negro centers, the evidence points to a growing dislike of the earthy folk-style of, say, a Leadbetter. Perhaps the modern Negro frowns upon any reminder of his former low estate. Certainly his popular music acclaim goes to singers like Johnny Temple and Frankie Jaxon, and the blander-toned women such as Rosetta Howard, Georgia White, and Blue Lu Barker. This type of singer, consequently has enjoyed a recording boom. While many of their performances are trivial a small percentage have lasting appeal.⁸⁴

For Oliver, the importance of "On Blues," was its comprehensiveness along with Jones's deftness at historicizing and contextualizing the music, traits that provided the methodological foundation of Oliver's work. By the early 1950s Oliver was regularly publishing blues criticism in *Jazz Journal*, and a few years later contributing a regular column, "Sources of Afro-American Music," for the magazine *Music Mirror*. His writing led to radio work, and soon Oliver had developed a working relationship with the BBC that continues to this day. Although finances prevented him from traveling to America, he was exposed to live blues in Paris through friend and colleague Hughes Panassie, a critic, record collector, and concert promoter who had introduced both Big Bill Broonzy and Blind John Davis to enthusiastic French audiences. Back in England in the late-1950s, Chris Barber (the English equivalent of Hughes Panassie, except that Barber was a musician too) was instrumental in bringing American blues performers to tour the United Kingdom. In a two-year period Oliver attended performances by Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, Muddy Waters, Otis Spann, Roosevelt Sykes, Speckled Red, Little Brother Montgomery, and Champion Jack Dupree. He was now a featured contributor to *Jazz Monthly*, and frequently "[got] to know the singers personally, [invite] them to our home, and [talk] to them at length [and have them help me] unravel what many singers in record were singing about." It was through these interviews that Oliver visited the

American South while living in London, and the information made not only for a series of articles but helped him “with the book I had been working on for a number of years about meaning and content in the blues.”⁸⁵

Oliver had completed his manuscript for *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* in France during the winter of 1957-58. A two-year strike by British printers forced his publisher to delay publication of the book until 1960; Oliver’s timeline, however, indicates that he and Charters were working on their respective books almost simultaneously. But while Charters’s book is rooted in the romantic intellectualism of Rudi Blesh, Oliver’s book, while equally passionate about its subject, is a more methodical exercise in textual analysis. Considering that he was a record collector from almost the moment he heard secular black music, and that he was influenced by the work of Max Jones, it is not surprising that as a critic and historian Oliver exhibits a “collector’s fascination with facts: names, dates, [and] place.”⁸⁶ Oliver’s evidence was close readings of 350 pieces of textual evidence, all taken from heyday of early commercial blues recordings (periodized somewhat generously by Oliver as lasting from the mid-1920s to the mid-1950s) which he insisted, “give us the most accurate picture we are likely to have of the blues when it was solely the music of the black community.”⁸⁷ This assertion places Oliver in the tradition of the scholars framing blues discourse in the early twentieth century, and makes him a direct intellectual (and methodological) descendent of Howard Odum and Guy Johnson. As did Odum and Johnson, Oliver came to understand that the blues, as an element of modern culture is, to paraphrase Stuart Hall, relentlessly material in its practices and modes of production.

While this statement clearly indicates that he was focused on the blues as a vernacular musical tradition birthed and disseminated with the race record industry, what

is interesting is that in *Blues Fell This Morning*, Oliver is less interested in negotiating the complex relationship between artists and their record labels and the potential impact it had on tradition and creativity. The Copyright Act of 1909 effectively codified what constituted originality and encouraged the talent scouts to dissuade blues performers from recording anything considered “not blues,” specifically popular songs enjoyed by black and white audiences. Similarly, Oliver does not delve into the pressures imposed by talent scouts to encourage blues singers to record specific types of blues songs – i.e., novelty and topical songs – based on the demands of the marketplace (something that he responds to in the revised edition of the book). Oliver’s interest in commercial recordings were as texts that, as Langston Hughes suggested some 30 years earlier in the pages of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, reflected the social history of African Americans in music. “My intention in writing this book was,” notes Oliver, “to show that the thematic content of the blues related to many aspects of the black experience during the period in question.”⁸⁸ While this approach, deemed “blues sociology,”⁸⁹ is at the heart of Oliver’s book, *Blues Fell This Morning* is built upon Oliver’s role as a classifier and categorizer, one who understands the blues as a complex musical genre and form of cultural expression that did not develop in a unilinear manner, but could be best understood “by facts and evidence and not preconceived notions.”⁹⁰ As a critic and cultural historian waging an ultimately losing internal battle between subjectivity and objectivity, Oliver believed (and still believes) that revealing the facts about the music and understanding the context and circumstances under which it was created are fascinating and sufficient enough secure its place in history and as a living tradition.

More than any work that preceded (and influenced) it, *Blues Fell This Morning*, due primarily to Oliver’s copious reading of African American social and political

history, set a new standard for research and analysis. In its nearly 300 densely written pages, Oliver was unraveling a mystery. Whereas Charters in *The Country Blues* politicized research that he himself deemed neither academic nor scholarly, Oliver assiduously filled in gaps and organizing the blues into a meaningful whole that represented African American social history and vernacular expressive traditions. He combed through lyrics with the trained eye of a literary critic to unearth the elusive truths embedded in these secular scriptures. “Always I started from the lyrics of the blues,” Oliver notes, “rather than from sociology or history.”⁹¹ Oliver, however, was not searching for fixed meanings, but rather understood that the blues “has many meanings for many different people, starting, of course, with the blues singers themselves.”⁹² “Blues is,” writes Oliver, “above all, the expression of the individual singer. Declaring his loves, his hates, his disappointments, his experiences, the blues singer speaks for himself, and only indirectly, for others.”⁹³

As one of the framers of contemporary blues discourse, Oliver, throughout *Blues Fell This Morning*, employs a hermeneutic approach to lyric study that is conscious of the dialogic nature of vernacular culture -- that is to say that the blues is a living dialogue that engages past and present. Oliver’s interpretive strategy is not unlike that of literary theorist Hans-Georg Gadamer in that he understands that meaning in the blues is not exhausted by the intentions of the author; “as the work passes from one historical or cultural context to another,” argues Gadamer, “new meanings may be culled from it which were perhaps never anticipated by its author or contemporary audience.”⁹⁴ Where Oliver differs from a more liberal application of Gadamer’s theory is that, the earlier meanings reflecting the social conditions of the music’s creation retain a validity and stability that become part of the very character of the work itself and of the individual

creating it.⁹⁵ “Blues,” writes Oliver, “is a very individualistic form of music and the arbitrary classification of so personal an art must necessarily force singers into categories which do not adequately represent their particular merits, but rather tend to minimize them in the process of fitting them into a general pattern of conformity.”⁹⁶

Oliver’s notion of a general pattern of conformity (a methodological model shared by Charters) is a discursive strategy he employs that “constitutes a way of looking at the world, and an organization and representation of experience.”⁹⁷ Arguably it is this scholarly “ideology,” rooted in hermeneutics (the science or art of interpretation used to establish a more or less “official” textual reading), that becomes the model for blues discourse in the 1960s (and beyond), but also forms the intellectual basis of canon formation used not only by Charters and Oliver, but by the blues record collectors who (as will be seen in Chapter Three), in various ways, were spurred into action after reading these books. Hermeneutics becomes such an important discursive element because as a method of critical scholarship, it focuses on the works of the past and “suggests that criticism’s main role is to make sense of the classics.”⁹⁸ What Oliver refers to as a general pattern of conformity in hermeneutics is called the “organic unity.” As did the blues revivalists/record collectors, both Charters and Oliver sought to fit each element of a text into a complete whole, what is known as the “hermeneutical circle,” wherein “individual features are intelligible in terms of the entire context, and the entire context becomes intelligible through the individual features.”⁹⁹ As these texts become intelligible they reveal a cultural dialogue among blacks, whites, men, and women, participants who frequently did not all occupy equal positions when it came to the creation and comprehensive understanding of the discourse itself. As Oliver writes:

For those who had the blues, for those who lived the blues, for those who

lived with the blues, the blues had meaning. But for those who lived outside the blues the meaning of the blues was elusive. For the blues was more than a folk song, and through it meaning became clearer with an understanding of the content of the verses, the reason why Blacks sang the blues and listened to the blues is not wholly explained. But though the blues may frequently be associated with a state of depression, of lethargy, or despair, it was not solely a physical, nor a mental state. It was not solely the endurance of suffering or a declaration of hopelessness; nor was it solely a means of ridding oneself of a mood. It was all of these and more; it was an essential part of the black experience of living.¹⁰⁰

Constructing Authenticity and the Road Less Traveled

The young American Narcissus had looked at himself in the narrow rocky pools of New England and by the waters of the Mississippi; he also gazed long at a darker image.

--Constance Rourke¹⁰¹

Taken as a whole, the domain of *The Country Blues* and *Blues Fell This Morning*, as ontology, taxonomy, and a putative canon of artistry, is ultimately about the mythologizing crucial to constructing the parameters of cultural authenticity. When Newman I. White and the scholarly evolutionists of the 1920s argued that the forces of commercialization would turn vernacular music into factory product, they were arguing that authenticity was something that could be identified (and objectified) as a vital element of the unrecorded rural folk tradition. To white intellectuals such as Charters and Oliver, searching for icons of opposition to fit their status as nonconformists and to better understand the vernacular culture of African Americans, they found fidelity in the sound of black men singing the country blues. This was not a new discovery, nor was it a new construction of authenticity, but it was consistent with the working class, masculine world of folk music as defined by John Lomax in the early twentieth century. In *Blues Fell This Morning*, Oliver asserts that the blues as “a form of folk expression [was] at its

best when least self-conscious, when least sophisticated; an art created by and for the black working-class.”¹⁰² For Charters the blues was a music “wild and unaccountable,” the “emotional outlet for Negro singers in every part of the South,” and most important, and most akin to Oliver’s description, “[was] the fabric of Negro life itself,” especially when said Negro was living in the kind of poverty of Lightnin’ Hopkins.¹⁰³

For both men the blues was the sound of the “other,” “more authentic” America; black expressivity shouting out against the forces of white bourgeois conformity. However, it is important to note that what Charters termed a “political act,” is a construction of authenticity (what sociologist Richard Peterson calls a “fabrication” of authenticity) that is the result of the content of culture being influenced by the several milieus in which it is created, distributed, evaluated, and consumed. The construction of “authentic blues” is not simply the province of the critics, collectors, and folklorists who deem it so; it is rather a negotiated interplay between performers, commercial interests, and fans, essentially a mediated negotiation between the primary and secondary public. During the heyday of the race record industry (and a model still very much a part of the current pop music industry) performers made music, the industry (here represented by the early A&R men) adapts the music to create a marketable product, and consumers accept some and reject others. The entrepreneurs then try to understand consumer selectivity and create, it is hoped, more successful models as possible. Years later, writers like Charters and Oliver, offered a second order curation that reinterprets the past in a manner that, while not claiming to be definitive, is purported to be, more or less, normative, and thus naturalize a particular construction of authenticity. It is, however, the role of the interpreter to negotiate the contours of this discourse, frequently doing so by personal selection and experience, unpacking meanings, and fitting diverse performers into a

general pattern of conformity. "To complete the interpreter's hegemony over the artist," argues Jeff Todd Titon, "he must deny 'authority' to the artist."¹⁰⁴

While the work of Samuel Charters and Paul Oliver announced the beginning of a new (and ultimately more prolific) era in blues scholarship and blues discourse, there was not a deluge of academic or semi-academic book-length studies to immediately follow them. As had been the case in the 1920s when Carl Van Vechten began writing about the classic blueswomen in *Vanity Fair*, blues as a cultural topic was regularly featured in the early 1960s, in "highbrow" general interest magazines such as *Saturday Review*. Pete Welding, Charles Edward Smith, Frederic Ramsey, Jr., and Wilder Hobson were *Saturday Review* mainstays, their bylines appearing on dozens of book and record reviews, and many of the latter reissue recordings of country blues performers. *Down Beat* which, by the early 1960s, had become the jazz magazine of record, reviewed blues recordings; a majority of these were written by Pete Welding. In the African American press, *Ebony* magazine ran the occasional story about blues artists but more frequently featured soul and rhythm and blues performers. In England, there were a number of blues-oriented magazines (*Blues Unlimited*, *Blues World*, and *R and B Monthly*) all of which featured the contributions of Paul Oliver. Perhaps the most significant blues journal to be published in the wake of *The Country Blues* and *Blues Fell This Morning* is the (now) international blues magazine of record *Living Blues*.

Founded in 1970 by Jim O'Neal and Amy van Singel, *Living Blues*'s editorial policy was drawn from the race and class-based arguments (most popularly understood from reading Charters and Oliver) that the blues, ontologically speaking, was "black American working-class music" "with its own historical, cultural, economic, psychological and political determinants."¹⁰⁵ While an entire chapter could be devoted to

the impact *Living Blues* has had on shaping blues a blues sensibility over the last three decades, its most notable and controversial contribution to discourse and canon formation has been ideological, specifically the magazine's "blacks only" editorial policy, which drew the ire of Charters, Oliver, and many other blues scholars as exclusionary essentialism. Articulated by then-editor Paul Garon in 1973, race and racism became the essential elements to create the blues as a musical genre and blues as an African American cultural trope. "It was [blacks] and [blacks] alone who produced the blues," Garon argued; "deprived of its historical base. . .the blues as purveyed by whites, is no longer the blues, and thus is not the concern of *Living Blues*."¹⁰⁶ Garon more fully expressed this theory in his 1975 book *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* arguing that it was racist sociological, political, cultural, economic, and psychological forces *and nothing else*, that produced the blues. In a marked departure from the work of Charters and Oliver (both of whom were well aware of the impact of white racism in creating the poverty experienced by many working-class African Americans), Garon crafts a blues ontology wherein creativity is purely reactive and not dynamic. As much as Charters and Oliver were criticized for constructing authenticity and building a methodological model upon a general pattern of conformity, Garon reduces black artistic agency to an angry response, as if it had no creative force of its own, in a kind of hermeneutical circle of artistry built upon negative energy.¹⁰⁷

Influenced by Charters's and Oliver's work, Paul Garon chose an ideological road less traveled by arguing that the creation of blues discourse and the construction of authenticity were, first and foremost, a political struggle. After *The Country Blues* and *Blues Fell This Morning*, and prior to the explosion in blues criticism that comes in the mid to late 1970s (e.g., David Evans, Jeff Todd Titon, Giles Oakley, Tony Russell, Albert

Murray, Sandra Lieb, Daphne Duval Harrison), the parameters of blues discourse were expanded by the publication of LeRoi Jones's (Amiri Baraka) *Blues People* (1963) and Charles Keil's *Urban Blues* (1966). Both men brought a heightened political sense to their respective works, redolent of the long term affects of a protracted civil rights struggle. *Blues People* was especially important in that Baraka, became the first African American writer in the post-World War II era to pen a book-length analysis of the blues.¹⁰⁸ "This book should be taken as strictly a theoretical endeavor," he asserted the book's introduction. "Theoretical in that none of the questions it poses can be said to have been answered definitively or for all times. In fact, the book proposes more questions than it will answer."¹⁰⁹ As for Charles Keil, the underlying political motivations for his book were made abundantly clear in his introduction:

I had decided to dedicate this book to Malcolm X some months before he was assassinated. Now that he is gone, I find it much more difficult to articulate my reasons for doing so. Our frequent discussions during my senior year in college had a profound affect upon my understanding of the American malady, and his remarkable evolution as a person since that time (1960) was a primary source of inspiration for me during the period when most of these chapters were written. An 'invisible man' who was becoming preeminently visible, he represented a perfect target for those powerful and malevolent forces in our society that are unalterably opposed to any black American who seeks freedom. He embodied so many of my hopes for a real cultural pluralism in these less than United States; now that he has been silenced, the loss I feel is immeasurable.¹¹⁰

Also, the title of Keil's book indicated a break from the tradition of Charters and Oliver in that Keil sought out contemporary blues performers, specifically B.B. King and Bobby "Blue" Bland, and celebrated the still emerging tradition of post-War electric blues, and the persistence of the blues tradition in the stunning soul and rhythm and blues sung by Bobby Bland. These blues derivations were not always welcome among the

revivalists who valorized the acoustic blues as the only truly “authentic” blues form.

These acoustic ideologues were (and are) “engage white liberals in the awkward position of rejecting as tainted goods the amplified blues to which the masses of black adults in rural as well as urban areas still listened”¹¹¹ – a group of cultural ascetics that Paul Oliver remembers recoiling in horror when American blues musicians toured England in the late-1950s and early 1960s playing loud, electric, Chicago blues. As the confused bluesmen frequently noted, these audiences expected overall-wearing, acoustic guitar-picking, sharecroppers -- part of the “real South” of their romantic imaginations.

If Oliver, and to a slightly lesser extent, Charters were the ones who attempted to clarify and organize the blues and virtually all the blues scholarship that preceded them into an aesthetic canon, then Baraka and Keil wanted to destabilize this discursive structure. It was not simply knee-jerk, ahistorical revisionism, but an effort to move away from blues scholarship that was beginning to resemble the “moldy fig” conservatism exhibited by critics. Keil went so far as to name Charters, Oliver, along with Harold Courlander, Mack McCormick, Harry Oster, Pete Welding, and Alan Lomax as the writers most preoccupied with this search for “real blues” singers, the criteria, according to Keil (in an insightful parody of the rules governing authenticity), consisting of:

Old age: the performer should preferably be more than sixty years old, blind, arthritic, and toothless (as Lonnie Johnson put it, when first approached for an interview, ‘Are you another one of those guys who wants to put crutches under my ass?’). Obscurity: the blues singer should not have performed in public or have made a recording in a least twenty years; among deceased bluesmen, the best seem to be those who appeared in a big city one day in the 1920s, made from four to six recordings, and then disappeared into the countryside forever. Correct tutelage: the singer should have played with or been taught by some legendary figure. Agrarian milieu: a bluesman should have lived the bulk of his life as a sharecropper, coaxing mules, or picking cotton, uncontaminated by city

influences.¹¹²

Keil and Baraka heard the blues as a cultural force that was contingent, fluid, and complicated. In *Blues People*, Baraka, writing as “the insider looking out,”¹¹³ insightfully addresses the issue of racial uplift and the cultural divide over the blues between black America’s middle and working classes. Although he does not address contemporary blues performers the way Keil does, Baraka does hear the linkages between the country blues and performers such as T-Bone Walker and Jimmy Witherspoon, but in a moment of moldy fig taxonomy, argues that this rhythm and blues sound overwhelms the blues content and is therefore “less personal.” Keil himself is critical of Baraka’s argument, suggesting that as the result of his middle-class upbringing “[Baraka’s] exposure to the blues has been less thorough and less personal than he would have us believe and that the ethnic pose is at rock bottom exactly that -- a pose.”¹¹⁴ Taken together, Charles Keil and Amiri Baraka form a contentious pairing, but they, especially in their arguments for a more liberal application of blues as a musical category, represent a shift in blues discourse and canon formation that refines and questions the work of Charters and Oliver. Both Samuel Charters and Paul Oliver agreed that the blues represented “the fabric of Negro life itself,” but Keil and Baraka brought to this argument an ideological dimension that saw the blues as a sensibility that, while articulating the lived experiences of African Americans, was also the fabric from which virtually all aspects of commercial black secular music were made. It was undoubtedly a form of categorization and canon construction, but one capacious enough to include Jimmy Witherspoon and Bobby Bland alongside Charley Patton and Robert Johnson.

Conclusion

Samuel Charters and Paul Oliver, now both in their 70s, are still widely (and rightly) regarded and celebrated, as the founding fathers of contemporary blues scholarship and discourse. Their longevity and celebrity are due partly to their continually renewing their relationship with the blues (Oliver more than Charters) and producing a comprehensive body of work (Oliver's bibliography alone is considerable). Their success and status as blues *eminence grise* reflects the quality of their work, despite any "moldy fig" conservatism, romanticization of black social and economic disenfranchisement, or over reliance on a general pattern of aesthetic and cultural conformity. Despite the slings and arrows of revisionist critics, many of whom make valid points, the continuing importance of *The Country Blues* and *Blues Fell This Morning* is that they explicitly link the blues criticism and discourse from 1920s, with the nascent blues revivalism (and its attendant politics) emerging in the mid-1950s. In that sense, both Charters and Oliver were prescient (or perhaps understood) that there was a burgeoning audience of (primarily) white blues aficionados keen for a cultural history, regardless of its shortcomings, that both animated the musicians and demystified and explicated the circumstances under which the music was created, recorded, and disseminated.¹¹⁵

Therefore, it could be argued that *The Country Blues* and *Blues Fell This Morning* represent the beginning *and* the end of an era of blues discourse, a summation of the old that establishes a foundation for a newer, more sociopolitically attuned approach to the blues as music, and cultural trope. In terms of the first wave of blues revivalism that would follow these books (peaking with the Ann Arbor Blues Festival in 1970), Charters and Oliver encouraged those so inclined to get involved in documenting,

researching, and rescuing this vernacular music. “The goal of those who heeded Charters’s call in the early 1960s,” writes Francis Davis, “was to come back from the South with as many singers from the bygone decades as were still alive (or, in the case of those who weren’t, death certificates and the personal recollections of family and friends).”¹¹⁶ This revivalist spirit, however, was about protecting the past and, in the spirit of folkloristic evolutionism, preserving a tradition and constructing a canon of authenticity. This is the kind of curatorial conservatism that Charles Kiel lampooned less than ten years later in *Urban Blues*, arguing that nostalgia as an element of critical inquiry was a dead end and that for blues scholarship to retain its vitality “blues” needed to be redefined, more broadly applied, and understood as a more complex and fluid form of cultural expressivity.

Keil’s criticisms notwithstanding, it was this notion of preserving the past, that contributed to the popularity of Charters and Oliver, and provided the intellectual basis for the record collectors and “bluesfinders” they inspired. While some collectors were out searching for these aural texts, long before the publication of either of these books, many more were inspired to take up record collecting as a form of musical archaeology and canon making after reading these books, and listening to Harry Smith’s seminal *Anthology of American Folk Music*. These acolytes, who are the subject of the next chapter, were (and are) all white men, a fact that reinforces the problematic nature of recent blues discourse, in its paternalistic romanticization of the “primitive,” and the ongoing “othering” of its subjects.¹¹⁷ Alan Lomax, writing in the early 1990s, illustrates this persistence of this mythologizing in a heartfelt passage where he becomes *envious* of the black inmates he met while recording their prison songs in the 1940s:

I longed and was unable to talk freely with these newfound brothers of mine whose songs triumphed over their misery. The guards were on their way. I lay awake scheming how I might write down their lives and their thoughts. Burdened with the guilt of my adolescent peccadillos and fantasies, I felt myself as criminal as they, subject to arrest at any moment. Every police whistle, every cruise-car siren blew for me. I fantasized committing some crime so that I, too, could experience what they were experiencing and thus write about them with real understanding.¹¹⁸

“The discursive,” writes John Frow, “is a socially constructed reality which constructs both the real and the symbolic and the distinction between them.”¹¹⁹ This is at the theoretical heart of both *The Country Blues* and *Blues Fell This Morning*, as well as the aural canon of blueslore formed by record collectors and the entrepreneurs reissuing this music. In the era immediately following the publication of *The Country Blues* and *Blues Fell This Morning*, the relationship between record collectors and scholars would become closer (it was one thing to read about the blues, another altogether to listen to it), but also more contentious, as questions of authenticity, commercialism, and who best represented and understood the blues canon became part of the internecine battles over the real and symbolic and the distinction between them. It was (and remains) a dispute wherein cultural notions of “normative,” “natural,” or “official,” were in reality ongoing acts of mediation.

Notes for Chapter 2

1. Samuel Charters, *The Country Blues* (New York: Da Capo, 1975 [1959]), xvi.
2. Richard Wright, introduction to Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990 [1960]), xvii.
3. Jeff Todd Titon, "Reconstructing the Blues: Reflections on the 1960s Blues Revival," from *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined*, ed., Neil V. Rosenberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 223.
4. She may have been the "Mother of the Blues" but Ma Rainey's death certificate listed her occupation as "housekeeper."
5. Francis Davis, *The History of the Blues: The Roots, The Music, The People, From Charley Patton to Robert Cray* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 81.
6. Lucille Bogan was without a doubt the raunchiest of the bunch on record. Her 1934 recording of "Shave 'Em Dry" was so explicit it went unreleased until the late-1980s. Along with claiming to have the skills to make a "dead man come," Bogan boasted, "I fucked all night and all the night before, baby, and I feel just like I want to fuck some more."
7. Davis, 83.

8. Ibid., 85.

9. The definitive analysis of blues record advertising in the black press is Jeff Todd Titon's "The Cultural Significance of Race Record Advertisements," from *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis* 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1994 [1977]).

10. While the Lomaxes were documenting their findings, many of the field recordings languished in the archives at the Library of Congress until recently, when a full-fledged Alan Lomax revival was initiated with a program that will release 100 compact discs of his recordings.

11. Russell Ames, "Implications of Negro Folk Song," *Science and Society*, Vol. 15, 1943, 167.

12. The intellectual connection between blues scholars such as David Evans and Jeff Todd Titon and classicist Albert Lord was made explicit in Titon's introduction to an 1978 issue of *Southern Folklore Quarterly*. "The guiding hand of Albert Lord behind the majority of articles in this issue cannot go without acknowledgment. His years of productive teaching and influential scholarship have fundamentally redirected the study of oral literature and inspired generations of folklorists and literary scholars. For that reason, I gratefully dedicate this special blues issue of *Southern Folklore Quarterly* to my friend and teacher, Albert Lord." *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No.1, 1978.

13. Rob Hutten, Interview with Dr. David Evans, January 27, 1996.
14. Davis, *The History of the Blues*, 212.
15. Titon, "Reconstructing the Blues," 223.
16. Marshall Stearns, "They Sang a Song of Sadness," *New York Times*, December 27, 1959.
17. Ralph J. Gleason, "The Country Blues," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December, 1959.
18. Frances Newton, *The New Statesman*, January, 1960.
19. The concept of "othering," which is at the theoretical and methodological center of much of the blues discourse of the revivalists of the 1960s, is best articulated in Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 3.
20. The term "originality" is always a loaded one when discussing the blues, especially during the race record industry era when performers were appropriating ideas from recordings and refashioning them into "new originals." Also contributing to an general understanding of originality was the Copyright act of 1909, which legally codified what constituted "original" music.

21. Greil Marcus, *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1997), 96.

22. Norman Mailer, "The White Negro," from *Legacy of Dissent: Forty Years of Writing From Dissent Magazine* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), 153-174.

23. Titon, "Reconstructing the Blues," 223.

24. In many respects 1959 was a nadir for rock performers: Elvis was in the army; Chuck Berry began serving a two-year jail term for transporting a minor across state lines "for immoral purposes," a violation of the Mann Act; Jerry Lee Lewis's career was in ruins after his admission that not only had he married his 13-year-old second cousin, but had neglected to divorce his first wife; finally, and most tragically, were the deaths of Buddy Holly, Richie Valens, and J.P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson.

25. Ed McKeon, "Charter Accounts," *Folk Roots*, May 1989, 13.

26. Ibid.

27. David Evans, *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity ion the Folk Blues* (New York: Da Capo, 1982), 97.

28. Rudi Blesh, *Shining Trumpets: A History of Jazz* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1958 [1946]), 113.

29. Ibid., 106.

30. Ibid., 100.

31. Ibid., 121-146.

32. Evans, *Big Road Blues*, 98.

33. Blesh, *Shining Trumpets*, 122.

34. Charters, *The Country Blues*, xii.

35. McKeon, "Charter Accounts," 13.

36. There are numerous stories among white record collectors of salvaging rare blues 78s from, literally, the garbage. Or many stories of collectors buying huge collections or rare individual recordings for next to nothing. Of these, collector Joe Bussard (who, as a canon maker, will be examined in Chapter 3) purchased a number of extremely rare Black Patti recordings (some worth thousands of dollars), for less than twenty dollars in the late 1960s. Dick Spottswood happened across three Charley Patton Paramount recordings that had been placed in the trash. These are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to record collecting stories of the casually discarded rare find.

37. Of the revisionists, Francis Davis makes perhaps the most compelling argument due

to his knowledge of, and grudging respect for, the work of Charters and Oliver. Other critics, such as Mike Daley and Angela Davis take a more polemical approach that, while bringing out valuable points, at times impose a rigidly ideological presentism and (virtually) neglect the context in which these books were written. It is as if they did not read the revised prefaces to later editions. See Mike Daley, "Representations of the Other in the Blues Revival," www.finearts.yorku.ca

38. Michael Haralambos, *Right On: From Blues to Soul in Black America* (London: Eddison Press, 1974), 80.

39. *Ibid.*, 67.

40. *Ibid.*, 118.

41. Quoted in James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 154.

42. Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, quoted in Grossman, 155.

43. Michael Bane, *White Boy Singing The Blues: The Black Roots of White Rock* (New York: Da Capo, 1982), 185.

44. *Ibid.*

45. Of all the white revivalists associated with the University of Chicago scene, Michael Bloomfield was there first, going to black clubs in the late-1950s.

46. Bane, 191.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid., 193-194.

50. Marcus, *Invisible Republic*, 27.

51. Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 8.

52. Alan Lomax, *The Land Where The Blues Began* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 467.

53. Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990 [1966]), 49.

54. Charters, *The Country Blues*, 261.

55. There is some debate about whether it was Charters or Arhoolie Records founder Chris Strachwitz who actually “discovered” Lightnin’ Hopkins first.

56. Again, terminology used regarding the blues and blues performers is tricky. Just who is doing the “forgetting” here? The assumption among the white revivalists was that these performers were no longer popular among black audiences. This is due, partly, to changing tastes, but also a recording industry that underpaid, overworked and, ultimately, abandoned its artists, elements that make it extremely difficult to sustain a career.

57. Samuel Charters, liner essay, *Lightnin’ Hopkins*, Smithsonian Folkways SF 40019 LP.

58. Charters, *The Country Blues*, 15.

59. Lomax, *Land Where The Blues Began*, 472.

60. Charters, *The Country Blues*, 266.

61. Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, 4.

62. Blesh, *Shining Trumpets*, 108.

63. Torgovnick, 8.

64. Michel Pecheux, *Language, Semantics, and Ideology: Stating the Obvious* (London: MacMillan, 1983), 42.

65. Charters, *The Country Blues*, xiv.

66. Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 5.

67. Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 12.

68. Titon, "Reconstructing the Blues," 228.

69. McKeon, "Charter Accounts," 14.

70. Ibid.

71. Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On The Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 133.

72. Ibid., 230.

73. Paul Oliver, *Blues Off the Record: Thirty Years of Blues Commentary* (New York: Da Capo, 1984), 2.

74. Ibid., 3.

75. Ibid.

76. Ian Laing, *Jazz in Perspective: The Background of the Blues* (London: The Jazz Book Club, 1957), 102.

77. Laing even connected poet W. H. Auden with the blues. “W. H. Auden has experimented in the blues idiom, and it is significant that when he has been merely experimenting -- as in his *Funeral Blues*, written for a cabaret singer -- he has produced verse as cute and phony as:

He was my North, my South, my East and West
My working week and my Sunday rest
My noon, my midnight, my talk my song
I thought that love would last forever; I was wrong.

But when he has not been self-consciously slumming, when, as in *Refugee Blues*, he is moved by a passion of pity and indignation, the result is as authentic as:

Saw a poodle in a jacket fastened with a pin
Saw a door opened and a cat let in
But they weren't German Jews, my dear, they weren't German Jews. . .

Dreamed I saw a building with a thousand floors
A thousand windows and a thousand doors
Not one of them was ours, my dear, not one of them was ours.”

Laing's connection of the latter Auden verse to any notion of authenticity is interesting, and arguable, given how blues authenticity was constructed by writers like Blesh, Charters, and Oliver. What Auden is doing Laing rightly calls experimentation with a superficial thematic resemblance to the blues. Few, I would guess, would confuse it with Charley Patton.

78. Laing, *Jazz in Perspective*, 140.

79. Paul Oliver, "Overseas Blues: Europeans and the Blues," from *Sounds of the South* ed., Daniel W. Patterson (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Southern Folklife Collection, 1991), 59.

80. *Ibid.*, 60.

81. David Evans, *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues* (New York: Da Capo, 1982), 97.

82. *Ibid.*, 75.

83. Max Jones, "On Blues," from *PL Yearbook of Jazz* ed., Albert McCarthy (London: Editions Poetry, 1946), 103.

84. *Ibid.*

85. Oliver, "Overseas Blues," 62.

86. Titon, "Reconstructing the Blues," 227.

87. Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, xxiii.

88. *Ibid.*, xxiv.

89. David Evans coined the phrase "blues sociology" as a description of Oliver's work.

90. Hutten, Interview with Dr. David Evans.
91. Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, xxiv.
92. Hutten, Evans Interview.
93. Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, 276.
94. Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1993), 142.
95. Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, 276.
96. Ibid.
97. Roger Fowler, *A Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory* ed., Jeremy Hawthorn (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), 48.
98. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 74.
99. Ibid.
100. Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, 284.

101. Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986 [1931]), 104.
102. Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, 283.
103. McKeon, "Charter Accounts," 15.
104. Titon, "Reconstructing the Blues," 231.
105. Peter Narvaez, "The Paradoxical Aesthetics of the Blues Revival," in *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined* ed., Neil Rosenberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 248.
106. Ibid.
107. The editor's chair at *Living Blues* is now occupied by blues scholar and sociologist Scott Barretta whose take on the blues is decidedly less focused on essentialism. However, it is difficult imagining that the magazine's editorial policy (which still does not feature articles on white blues performers, but will accept their advertising), given how active the former editors and writers are in preserving the magazine's original editorial mission, will change any time soon.
108. There was not a deluge of African-American blues writing after *Blues People*, but during the rise of the Black Arts movement (of which Baraka was a putative leader), there

was more blues scholarship by African-Americans in the late 1960s and early-1970s, some of which appeared in the collection *The Black Aesthetic* ed., Addison Gayle, Jr., (New York: Doubleday, 1971).

109. Leroi Jones, *Blues People* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1963), ix.

110. Keil, *Urban Blues*, viii.

111. Davis, *History of the Blues*, 14.

112. Keil, *Urban Blues*, 35.

113. *Ibid.*, 40.

114. *Ibid.*, 41.

115. Although many (myself included) lump the work of Charters and Oliver due to its emerging nearly simultaneously, the fact is the two men are not close, nor have they ever been. Curiously, while neither comments publically on the other's work, there is a feeling among some blues writers that they are not particularly fond of one another's research. While both men have written a number of books on the blues, and continue to frame and influence blues discourse, it is Oliver who has written the most extensively about the music, and has the higher public profile as the preeminent, internationally known blues scholar. Charters seems content pursuing other literary interests such as

short fiction and poetry. Recently Charters donated his manuscripts, recordings, and unpublished materials to the University of Connecticut, where he (and his wife Ann, an English professor and Beat literature scholar) teaches.

116. David, *The History of the Blues*, 212.

117. Both *The Country Blues* and *Blues Fell This Morning* were popular books, but mostly among white readers. Charters himself wanted *The Country Blues* to be read by middle-class whites in an effort to bring them closer to African-American vernacular culture. However, given the nature of the blues revival, that its audience consisted primarily of white, male, college students, it is probably safe to assume that most of the readers of these (and later) books on the blues were white. Although it is clear that prominent African-American journalists, fiction writers, and cultural historians (e.g., Amiri Baraka, Richard Wright, Ortiz Walton, Ron Wellburn) were reading them too.

118. Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 287.

119. John Frow quoted in Sara Mills, *Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 15.

Chapter 3 Objects of Desire: Collecting Blues Records

“No, I’m not going to be intimidated,” Thayer insisted, his big Adam’s apple protruding, his eyes watering behind the thick lenses, as Jerry learned they always did when he got excited. He was the oldest of them, thirty-four then, and had been involved in the exotic world of blues collecting for the longest time. He had three Charley Patton 78s in mint condition, a library of green-sleeved originals from the ’20s and ’30s, and a wife and children and career. He was a Marxist theoretician who would later become prominent in the Free Speech Movement, after he got tenure. Still he seemed to Jerry irredeemably self-centered and bourgeois in his protective mechanisms. “I won’t be intimidated,” he repeated, “by a bunch of crackers and racists.”

--Peter Guralnick¹

At a more intimate level, rather than grasping objects only as cultural signs and artistic icons, we can return to them. . . .not specimens of a deviant or exotic ‘fetishism’ but *our own* fetishes.

--James Clifford²

Howard Odum and Guy Johnson were the first folklore researchers to argue for the relevancy of blues recordings as textual evidence to be studied by future generations of vernacular music scholars. In 1925, they estimated that African Americans were buying anywhere from five to six million records per year. More recently, blues scholars have argued that this estimate is extremely conservative and have revised Odum and Johnson’s estimate to be closer to ten million.³ The success of Mamie Smith’s recording of “Crazy Blues” had validated composer Perry Bradford’s claim that America’s 14 million blacks would buy records if recorded by one of their own. More importantly,

"Crazy Blues," initiated a deluge of blues recordings that sparked the expansion of the genre from a regional to a national craze and sales that, in 1926, peaked at \$128 million.⁴

Despite the robust nature of this very young recording industry, 1926 was the last year sales would be this high -- by 1933 sales bottomed out at a mere \$6 million. Partly this was the result of the Depression, competition from radio and motion pictures, and record labels "economizing" in the face of dwindling sales by increasing releases by established artists rather than recording new ones, and opting for a cheaper, faster (one-take only) assembly line approach to recording.⁵ But, 1926 also marked the beginning of the end of the classic blues era and the start of what Jeff Todd Titon calls "the first major period of downhome blues recording."⁶ Some of the earliest commercial recordings of folk blues by Blind Lemon Jefferson and Blind Blake, issued by Paramount, sold extremely well, and although he only recorded 75 sides for Paramount, Blind Lemon Jefferson quickly became the most successful of the early rural bluesmen and, from 1926-1929, was a star equal in status to Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith.⁷ As successful as he was, however, Jefferson's legacy was cemented in blueslore by his dying young (30) under tragic circumstances (hypothermia on a Chicago street during the winter of 1930).

The commercial success of Blind Lemon Jefferson is significant insofar as it represents a transitional moment in blues history from the woman-centered ensemble sound of the classic blues to the solo, male-dominated acoustic sound known interchangeably as folk, country, traditional, and downhome blues. The image, defined by Samuel Charters and others of a black man in faded overalls sitting on a ramshackle porch in the Mississippi Delta with an old hollow-body guitar,⁸ replaced that of the lavishly costumed and bejeweled Ma Rainey elaborately entering the stage from a giant Victrola. But the displacement of the classic blues in sound and performance by the

country blues was not a musical revolution guided by popular taste. Blues fans did not suddenly turn their backs on Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith after hearing Blind Lemon Jefferson. As consumers, they were not making these fine stylistic distinctions, to them it was all "the blues." As Francis Davis notes, "to black record buyers of the twenties and thirties, all of these men (and I would add, women) were blues singers. . .[d]istinctions between different kinds of black singers were applied retroactively, and not by the performers themselves or the people who [initially] bought their records."⁹

The rise in popularity of country blues performers and the decline of the classic blueswomen was a shift in taste helped along by record labels. In an industry that has frequently lived by the marketing credo "anything worth doing is worth overdoing" (especially if it increases profit margins), the success of Blind Lemon Jefferson indicated to labels in the race record business that nothing breeds success like replication. And after Jefferson's second Paramount release, "Got the Blues/Long Lonesome Blues" became a big seller, other labels quickly followed suit. Talent scouts were dispatched to comb the rural South in an attempt to "discover" performers, in the manner that Paramount's producer and A&R chief J. Mayo Williams (the only African American record executive in the white-owned race record business) had discovered Jefferson, playing in the streets of Dallas. Williams's search for a performer like Jefferson was prompted by repeated requests from southern record dealers convinced that, if given the chance, records made by these mostly itinerant street musicians would sell.¹⁰

While talent scouts dragged their heavy, cumbersome, "portable" recording equipment throughout the south in the hopes of discovering the next Blind Lemon Jefferson, the classic blueswomen were facing the reality of fewer and fewer venues in which to play. Competition from radio and motion pictures had cut deeply into the

profits made by venue owners, producers, agents, and performers on the T.O.B.A (The Theater Owners Booking Association or "Toby") circuit, the principal source of live bookings for the classic blueswomen. In 1930, T.O.B.A. manager Sam E. Reeve surveyed the damage and found an organization crippled by the depression and plagued by limited funds and poor attendance at shows -- shows that producers hastily slapped together featuring a mediocre assortment of amateur acts. The 1930 fall season was canceled and as Sandra Lieb notes, "[An] entire style of music died as a means of professional employment." Or, as Thomas Dorsey succinctly noted, "The blues ran out."¹¹

The Depression crippled the race record industry, but did not wipe it out. The rush to record country blues performers slowed considerably with the onset of the depression and the death of the genre's biggest star, Blind Lemon Jefferson in 1930. Record sales had been on what seemed an uncontrollable decline since the industry's peak in 1926. During the heyday of the classic blues the average race record release sold upwards of 10,000 copies. By 1930 that number had dwindled to 2,000. In 1932, a mere 400.¹² It was not until the late 1930s that the race record industry rebounded thanks in large part to the popularity of the jukebox. By 1939 more than a quarter-million jukeboxes were in use and 13 million records were needed to fill them. At the close of the 1930s, this technological shift, requiring an significant increase in the production of records, helped yearly sales inch closer to \$10 million.

It is the record, specifically that brittle relic of the early blues era the ten-inch 78 rpm shellac disc, that is at the center of this chapter. The blues 78, as noted in chapter one, spectacularly announced the transition of the blues from a pre-technological oral tradition to a form of mass art. Or, as Richard Nevins notes, the blues as "a frame of

reference [was] mostly a marketing strategy, birthed alongside the record industry."¹³ As text, the 78 functions on (at least) two levels, explicitly as a form of commodity culture meant for entertainment purposes, and implicitly as means of transcribing cultural history. In this metatextual sense the 78 is linked in a cultural and cognitive process as a commodity "not only produced materially as [a] thing, but also culturally marked as being a certain kind of thing."¹⁴ The fluidity between its explicit and implicit cultural function is diachronic in that it may be treated as a commodity at one time and not another. In other words, one person's junk in 1930 becomes, thirty years later, another's cherished artifact.

This fluidity reflects the relationship of the mostly African American consumers of blues 78s in the 1920s and 30s and that of the mostly white, male record collectors of the post-World War II era. As ad hoc keepers of the canon, record collectors treat blues recordings as a series of secular scriptures discoverable and attainable by hard work and occasional subterfuge. Many of them are immersed in ongoing arguments over canon formation -- primarily questions of who is more/most influential and where they belong in the artistic pantheon -- as well as less intellectualized, but still contentious, debates over who ripped-off whom to get a rare record. They are organic intellectuals, cultural populists who possess a daunting amount of factual information and reject what they consider the academicization of the blues and the elitism of archival institutions that keeps the music from "the people." They are also as a group, aging. Most are now in their 50s and 60s, and more and more of them are passing away. Nearly all of the significant blues record collectors came of cultural age during the folk and blues revivals of the 1950s and 60s and shared a cultural aesthetic that, "[seemed] to be protesting the innocuousness of . . . 'mass culture.'¹⁵ As Jeff Todd Titon notes, blues revivalists and

record collectors represented "a white, middle-class love affair with the music and lifestyle of marginal blacks." To these record collectors, blues 78s were "exotic mysteries engendering endless theorizing."¹⁶

Musical archaeology, the search by record collectors for these long thought lost cultural artifacts is the focus of this chapter. This indefatigable group of men, whose determination and desire is frequently described as fanatical and obsessive, have contributed significantly to the creation of a blues canon by rescuing, cataloging, and re-releasing these records. Regardless of one's feelings as to the dubious methods sometimes employed to acquire these rare recordings, these collectors, many of them inspired to this independent research after reading Samuel Charters and Paul Oliver, are crucial to the epistemology of the blues because they are the culture brokers who provide access to the genre's soundtrack. As culture brokers, record collectors function in a manner not unlike that of the record label talent scouts of the 1920s and 1930s (men such as Ralph Peer, H.C. Speir, and Mayo Williams) who contributed to blues discourse and canon formation as curators by selecting already existing materials for recording, and as producers urging performers to record in specific styles, thereby slowing (and virtually stopping) the recorded development of certain race record sub-genres such as African American stringband music and sacred harp styles. In their role as cultural mediators record collectors perform a second order curation by selecting from a selection, organizing, re-conceiving, and labeling "the blues," creating a narrower ontological framework that combines personal taste with critical historiography, leading to a second order production culminating in the release of the blues reissue LP (a kind of condensed version of the canon) and, more recently, compact disc.

In historicizing and analyzing the efforts of blues record collectors as musical

archaeologists, culture brokers, and creators and keepers of a blues canon, I will also examine how collecting has developed into an explicitly gendered form of connoisseurship. Combining equal measures of hipness and nerdishness, record collecting functions as a masculinist strategy built upon the mastery of factual information and the "controlled economy of revelation, a sense of how and when things are to be spoken of."¹⁷ Before record collecting can be discussed, I will provide a brief history of the early race record industry, highlighting some of the product that, among the collecting cognoscenti, would become prized artifacts. I will also consider the impact of the 1952 Harry Smith compilation *Anthology of American Folk Music*, not strictly as a collection of blues music, but as an aural text representing one collector's attempt at turning a hobby into a personalized canon of American vernacular music, and why few record collectors have replicated his taxonomical model.

Race Records

During the race record era (1920-1945),¹⁸ four labels dominated the recording of African American music: Columbia, Okeh, Paramount, and Brunswick/Vocalion.¹⁹ Founded in 1889, the Columbia Phonograph Company sold graphophones and dictating machines as well as phonographs and, along with the Edison and Victor, was one of the "Big Three" companies dominating record sales in the "talking machine" era of 1900-1915. Columbia's commitment to the race record market began in 1923 with the signing of Bessie Smith. It was a prescient move made by Columbia's artist manager Frank Walker; Smith almost single-handedly saved the label and offset the company's dwindling sales in nearly every other category of recorded music. Her debut recording "Downhearted Blues" sold close to one million copies in its first six months of release,

and her prolific output (300 sides) was among the most popular music of the classic blues era. Her total sales, somewhere in the vicinity of six million discs, provided Columbia with the cash it needed to survive the precipitous drop-off in record sales during the Depression.²⁰

Okeh was founded in 1918 by German phonograph and record industry pioneer Otto Heinemann. It was Heniemann's intent that Okeh recordings reflect the popular music tastes of its audience, a kind of populist marketing strategy built upon the old show business maxim "give the people what they want." Okeh's initial releases were primarily vaudeville performers and ethnic music, and while the music and performances were often "uninspired," Okeh's early success was the result of selling the first vertically cut records that "could be played, with relatively minor adjustments, on any type of phonograph."²¹ Heniemann's business acumen extended to his assembling a staff, one that featured music director Fred Hager and, more importantly, Hager's assistant Ralph S. Peer who would become one of the most influential talent scouts of the race record era. However, it was Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" that put Okeh and Heinemann on the map (a success facilitated in no small way by the marketing intuition of the song's composer and arranger Perry Bradford) and would inspire Paramount, Vocalion, and the larger Columbia to become actively involved in releasing popular music by and for African Americans.

Paramount was a subsidiary of the Wisconsin Chair Company, manufacturers of low-cost furniture, record player cabinets, and later phonographs. Turning a furniture company into a force in the blues record business was the doing of British expatriate Arthur C. Satherly who came to Wisconsin in search of the Old West he had read about in dime novels.²² Although Satherly did not find the Old West of his imagination, he did

become fascinated by the process of sound recording. When Wisconsin Chair discovered that consumers were more likely to purchase phonographs from companies that could also supply records, Satherly was hired to run the company's small record operation. Recording sessions were held in New York and Chicago, and the records were pressed and distributed from the label's headquarters in Grafton, Wisconsin. At first Paramount's releases were almost exclusively ethnic music by German, Scandinavian, and Mexican performers, records that appealed to these immigrant populations, many of whom had settled in the Midwest. After Wisconsin Chair's sales territory had expanded into the South, traveling salesmen reported back to the Grafton office that they were receiving numerous requests for more blues and country recordings, almost immediately, Paramount began to incorporate blues and country music into its releases. Unfortunately, the cheaper and faster production model favored by the Wisconsin Chair Company was also employed at Paramount and the label became infamous for the shoddy quality of its records. Long after most companies had gone to automated pressing, Paramount continued to use the old hand-stamping method. As David Jasen and Gene Jones note, "Paramount had the poorest sound of any seventy-five-cent record: thin, with erratic levels and, often, with scratches built in."²³

Propelled by an aggressive advertising campaign that told consumers "if your preferences are not listed in our catalog, we will make them for you, as Paramount must please the record buying public," Paramount quickly became "the pioneer in recording authentic folk blues."²⁴ And while Satherly's marketing strategy (taking its cue from Otto Heinemann) of giving people what they wanted, along with advertising heavily in African American newspapers, turned Paramount into a force in the blues business, it would have ended as quickly as it had begun had the label's main talent scout (and the industry's lone

black executive) J. Mayo "Ink" Williams not recruited singers like Alberta Hunter, Ida Cox, Elzadie Robinson, and Priscilla Stewart. Paramount's first big star was Ma Rainey whose status as the label's best selling artist was unchallenged until 1926 when the label turned to country blues performers and found considerable success with Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charley Patton, and Blind Blake.

The Brunswick label was part of the Dubuque, Iowa-based Brunswick-Balke-Collender Company manufacturers of billiards and bowling equipment. BBC started producing "talking machines" as early as 1916 and moved into record production in 1920. In 1924, BBC purchased the Vocalion label from the Aeolian Piano Company and, two years later, set about changing the label's image from one that recorded concert hall music to one that recorded jazz, blues, spirituals, and hillbilly music. This conversion was orchestrated and overseen by Jack Kapp the son of a door-to-door record salesman and retail store owner who, along with brother David, opened a record store on Chicago's West Side a few blocks from the city's second largest African American neighborhood. Vocalion, offering its listeners "Better and Cleaner Race Records," experienced unremarkable sales until Kapp hired J. Mayo Williams who had been forced out of Paramount in 1928.²⁵ The addition of Williams proved to be Vocalion's salvation as the label hit with its release of Frankie "Half-Pint" Jaxon's recording of "Georgia" Tom Dorsey's and Tampa Red's salacious "It's Tight Like That." A significant departure from the company's credo of issuing "cleaner" race records, and as much boogie-woogie as blues, the success of "It's Tight Like That" prompted Williams to recruit piano players such as Cow Cow Davenport and Clarence "Pinetop" Smith to the Vocalion roster. And while many labels fell on hard times at the onset of the Depression, Vocalion entered the 1930s with a strong, stable, and popular roster of artists that included Bertha "Chippie"

Hill, Memphis Minnie, and the duo of Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell.

Despite the hegemony of white-owned and operated companies, the overall success of race records prompted black entrepreneurs to try their hand at establishing independent labels. In 1921 Harry Pace, who with partner W.C. Handy had founded the Pace and Handy Music Company, left Handy to start the Pace Phonograph Company the nation's first African American-owned record company. Influenced by Vocalion's notion of producing cleaner race records, Pace conceived of the company's record label, Black Swan (named after 19th century concert singer Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield) as recording race music that would appeal to "middle-class Black listeners who often deplored both earthy blues and raucous jazz."²⁶ With a board of directors dominated by the presence of W.E.B. Du Bois (whose support for the blues was at best lukewarm), and symphonic composer William Grant Still, Black Swan's race proud marketing slogan was "The Only Genuine Colored Record -- Other Are Only Passing For Colored." Its initial release was a light operatic song entitled "Thank God for a Garden" sung by C. Carroll Clark and Revella Hughes. The record went virtually unnoticed and, cognizant of the success Okeh had with Mamie Smith, Black Swan quickly began releasing blues records. One of its first blues releases, Ethel Waters's "Down Home Blues" sold a half-million copies in six months and, with addition of Alberta Hunter, Black Swan's future seemed bright. By the end of 1922 the Pace Phonograph Company was showing a profit of \$100,000 from record sales.

This success, however, was short-lived. Lacking the capital to maintain his own pressing plant, Pace had to contract out all of Black Swan's record pressing to chief rival Paramount. By the summer of 1923 Black Swan's sales had suffered a precipitous drop. Ethel Waters was no longer hitting the half-million sales mark, and the label's other star,

Alberta Hunter, defected to arch-rival Paramount. More importantly, as an undercapitalized independent, Pace simply could not compete with the Paramount and Okeh who could outproduce, outdistribute, and underprice him. The Pace Phonograph Company declared bankruptcy in December 1923 and the Black Swan catalog was sold to Paramount in April 1924.²⁷

Even shorter-lived was the Black Patti label. Founded in 1927 by E.J. Barrett, the initial capital investment of \$30,000 was lent to Barrett by Richard Gennett, brother of the owner of Gennett Records (an independent label that recorded jazz, blues, and hillbilly music). Barrett, who was white, persuaded Mayo Williams, who had grown increasingly dissatisfied with the internal politics at Paramount, to run the Black Patti while maintaining his job at Paramount. Williams's choice of Black Patti as a label name was an homage to African American opera singer M. Sissieretta Jones who, when compared to the white European opera singer Adelina Patti, was more popularly known as the "Black Patti."²⁸ Initially, Black Patti, with no new artists recording for the label, simply reissued obscure Gennett sides. The records sold poorly and Williams could not produce enough new recordings to spark interest. Adding to his problems was a conspicuous lack of cash that prevented him from pressing more than a few hundred copies of each release, and performers (e.g., Blind Richard Yates, Long Cleve Reed, and Little Harvey Hull) who, despite their talent, never caught on with the public. After only seven months and 55 records released, Black Patti folded and Williams went back to work for Paramount. Little did Williams realize that forty years later the inability to press more than a few hundred copies, coupled with the public's disinterest in Black Patti's (recycled) stable of performers would make them the most obscure and coveted of blues 78s, commanding large sums of money among collectors.²⁹

Black Swan was the most significant of the black-owned, and Black Patti the most significant of the black-operated race record labels, but they were not the only ones, labels such as Sunshine, C&S, Merritt, and Echo vanished almost as quickly as they had appeared, leaving behind a handful of rare recordings by obscure performers that, almost three decades later, would send record collectors into paroxysms of bliss. More significantly, the demise of the African American owned labels of the 1920s meant that the white hegemony would go unchallenged until 1959 when Berry Gordy, Jr. founded Motown Records.³⁰

With the rise of the race record industry came the new culture brokers a "new class of white middlemen, entrepreneurs of recorded sound who not only sold phonograph products but scouted for new race talent in the South."³¹ These influential musical and cultural mediators were the prototype for the contemporary A&R (Artist and Repertoire) "man," the person responsible for finding and developing talent. But while the chief responsibility of the A&R man in the post-Elvis era has been one of linking an artist with an audience and "encouraging" the artist to record music that appeals to said audience, the cultural middlemen of the race record era were more interested in developing and promoting artists they liked. In Atlanta, Polk Brockman found local talent for Okeh. Frank Walker brought Bessie Smith, among others, to the attention of the executives at Columbia. Ralph Peer, the man who coined the term "race recordings," worked for both Okeh and Victor. Lester Melrose turned Bluebird (Victor's budget label) into an extremely successful imprint. And the aforementioned Art Satherly (along with fellow British expatriate Art Laibly) and Mayo Williams at Paramount, Jack and David Kapp at Decca, and Mayo Williams at Paramount, Decca, and Black Patti, selected the artists, chose the recordings that would be released, influenced the artists to record certain

types of blues songs, monitored their sales, and decided who would remain with the label and who would not.³²

Perhaps the most influential of all the early talent scouts was Henry C. Speir. Speir approached "talent brokering" (his expression) as a natural adjunct to his music store which he opened in 1925. Located at 225 North Farish Street in the heart of Jackson, Mississippi's black business district, Speir installed a recording machine on the second floor and for a fee of \$5 would cut a test record for (almost) anyone who could afford it. Rather than rely on a performer's local or regional popularity, or whether or not the artist in question had a large black following, Speir trusted his own ear and how the performer sounded on record. He told David Evans in 1966 that he was "not motivated by commercial standards, [that he] simply chose artists that appealed to him personally."³³ Paramount was the first label to benefit from Speir's knack for spotting talent, and Speir was responsible for nearly all the Southern artists Paramount recorded from 1929-1932. And while he worked closely with Paramount's Art Laibly and Mayo Williams (Paramount would record any artist Speir recommended), Speir's loyalties were not confined to one label. Okeh sought him out in 1930, and later in the 1930s so too did the American Recording Company. As a blues talent broker, Speir was peerless. Among the dozens of musicians he discovered and recorded were such seminal blues players such as Charley Patton, Skip James, Tommy Johnson, Son House, Bo Carter, and the Mississippi Sheiks. According to record collector and blues writer Gayle Dean Wardlow, "Speir was the godfather of the Delta Blues. [He] was to 20s and 30s country blues what Sam Phillips was to 50s rock and roll -- a musical visionary. If it hadn't been for Speir, Mississippi's greatest natural resource might have gone untapped."³⁴

"The canon," writes David Hollinger, referring to what he calls the

academicization of modernist literature, "was a very special agenda adopted by a loosely organized community of literary critics."³⁵ Hollinger could have just as easily been referring to Speir and the other talent scouts of the race record era. The main difference being that the talent brokers were not cognizant of or interested in canonization, they simply wanted to find artists they thought would sell. Their purely commercial motives notwithstanding, the talent scouts, as a loosely organized community of culture brokers, helped shape blues discourse and craft an early blues canon by combining personal choice with consumer demand. Even H.C. Speir, who claimed to be nonplused when it came to commercial potential, might not have lasted in the talent brokering business had none of his artists sold records or had he not observed the buying habits of his predominantly black, working-class clientele. But, as David Evans notes, "since [Speir] grew up in Mississippi hearing and enjoying folk blues, we can assume that his taste and aesthetic standards in blues differed little from those of most black people in the state,"³⁶ a good thing considering that working-class black blues fans were not passive consumers, reflexively purchasing anything and everything record companies released. Lawrence Levine writes that as competition for blues singers increased, "the companies began to heed the letters flooding in from southern customers recommending local singers."³⁷ He also notes:

The Negro market not only existed, it was able to impose its own tastes upon the businessmen who ran the record companies and who understood the music they were recording perfectly enough so that they extended a great deal of freedom to the singers they were recording. Son House, who recorded for Paramount Records, told John Fahey that the recording engineers exercised no control over what he recorded and that the same was true of Charlie Patton, Louise Johnson, and Willie Brown whose recording sessions he attended. Skip James, who also recorded for Paramount corroborated this. Different takes of a number were made, they insisted, only when they themselves were dissatisfied with their first performance. This non-directive policy was typical. There was probably

never a period when it was easier for singers to get auditions. Both [John] Fahey and Samuel Charters have demonstrated that in the late 1920s almost any black singer could get a test. 'By 1931,' Fahey has concluded, 'the companies had been performing for three or four years the function of passively allowing hundreds of Southern Negroes to sit in the studios and record songs which they had been singing for decades.'³⁸

Shaping a Blues Canon

While it is clear that black audiences had an impact on the kinds of blues performances that made up the race record market, it was contested cultural terrain where talent scouts and record companies (despite offers of unlimited artistic freedom) also had considerable influence in shaping a performer's repertoire. A musician's potential was based almost entirely on the amount of original songs he had written. Originality in this instance was an aesthetic designation defined by copyright law and meant, to all those involved in the race record business, that a song could not show the influence of anything previously recorded or published.³⁹ Since almost all of the prominent race record labels owned publishing companies, talent scouts and label executives discouraged artists from recording popular, non-blues songs that would require the label to pay a 2 cents per side royalty to a competitor who owned the song's copyright, this meant that "white entrepreneurs wanted African Americans to sing the blues. . .to the nearly total exclusion of the popular songs that appealed to a large number of whites and at least some blacks" encouraging an "entrepreneurial attitude toward folk music traditions [that] resulted in records that sounded both familiar and different to those who liked the blues."⁴⁰ While the definition of "original" seemed sweeping and somewhat impractical to enforce, Ralph Peer revealed that he and the artists would frequently conspire to record old tunes with new lyrics and new titles thus making them new "originals."⁴¹

This conflation of mediating influences is, broadly speaking, what Franco Fabbri

refers to as one of the "set of socially accepted rules" that define musical genres. Fabbri argues that musical genres are in fact a set of musical events governed by rules that fall into five categories: formal and technical (the genre's particular aural characteristics), semiotic (rhetorical aspects of the music that effect the way its meaning is conveyed), behavioral (how the music is represented in performance), social and ideological (the image of the musician and its relation with a musical community and the world at large), and commercial and juridical rules (the means of production: ownership, copyright, revenues).⁴² Fabbri's model is useful, but his rigid categorization flies in the face of popular music's inherent fluidity and cross-genre borrowing. During the race record era aesthetic choices were influenced (if not defined) by commercial and juridical rules, wherein the parameters of "originality" were shaped by copyright law. While a performer's popularity was, ultimately, decided by consumer purchases, it was the talent scouts and record label owners who chose what would be heard. And that is Fabbri's point as it relates to blues in the race record era: that commercial and juridical rules determined how musical events come into being.⁴³

While choices made by audiences, talents scouts and record label executives form a foundation, they do not amount to canon construction *per se*. They do, however, provide the textual (and contextual) evidence required for further selection and categorization generally done at a later date by professional and amateur music historians. David Hollinger posits that canonization requires that analysis be done "text by text and author by author," . . . [hence] the basic medium for developing and reinforcing the mystique of the canon was the critical appreciation of individual artist-heroes." This critical appreciation of artist-heroes (or in some instances artist-anti-heroes) guides the loosely organized community of record collectors who approach canonization (despite

not thinking of it that way) as a text by text analysis where the formal and technical, the semiotic, the behavioral, the social and ideological, and the commercial and juridical are discussed and deciphered "on behalf of anyone with the capability of following the discussion and understanding the extraordinary importance for 'our culture' of the items on this particular agenda."⁴⁴

At its core, canon formation among blues record collectors involves organizing and defending a set of selections made from several possible sets of selections. The resulting "canon" represents the essence of the tradition, and the connection between the texts and the canon reveals the veiled logic and internal rationale of that tradition.⁴⁵ The criteria generally used in selecting appropriately canonical texts involves bringing together works considered "essential" by artists deemed "crucial" or "central" to the tradition in question. These designations, however, are not always self-evident or absolute. The relationship between the canon and its keepers is built upon the work of academic literary critics, whose expertise was needed to decipher and discuss a "body of difficult and forbidding literature."⁴⁶ While the imprimatur of academia granted these critics a certain expert status, within the blues tradition expertise is more diffuse, scholarly work is one aspect of canon formation (and discourse creation) that includes critical writing by journalists and record collectors -- professionals without academic affiliation, some of whom distrust the work of scholars, musicologists, and institutions.⁴⁷ As a loosely organized community of experts, they contribute to an ongoing critical reevaluation and historical revision that simultaneously shapes canon formation and creates new canons. And while one facet of this community cannot always claim a dominant voice in the debate, it is the record collectors who supply the most compelling aural evidence.

Expert status is generally conferred upon a record collector by other record collectors, many of whom covet items in the expert's collection. The main criterion of an expert collector is that he (and they are overwhelmingly male) place a greater value on quality than quantity -- thereby turning compulsive hoarding into "meaningful desire."⁴⁸ "The good collector," writes James Clifford, "is tasteful and reflective. Accumulation unfolds in a pedagogical, edifying manner. The collection itself -- its taxonomic, aesthetic structure -- is valued, and any private fixation on single objects is negatively marked as fetishism."⁴⁹ And while this is true of record collectors, as a group they are not immune from fetishism and private fixation even if it damages relationships among them. But when it comes to blues 78s, a collection's value and its canonical import is influenced by the monetary value placed upon a particular record. "When you put a price on a record," notes collector Dick Spottswood, "you're assigning a certain cultural/historical status to that performance."⁵⁰ However, in order to make this assigned value real, a transaction must take place, be it the actual sale of a rare record, or a buyer's willingness to pay a seller's asking price.⁵¹ Further complicating matters and adding considerably to a record's value, is its scarcity. For years the original Vocalion recordings of Robert Johnson were considered the *sine qua non* of blues 78s, so much so that contemporary rock performers who were fans of Johnson (e.g., Eric Clapton, Keith Richards) paid thousands of dollars for a copy of one of his rare 78s. To a voracious record collector like Joe Bussard, who owns the largest individual collection of Black Patti recordings, Clapton and his ilk are little more than "moneybag dupes." Bussard's contention is that the availability of Johnson's recordings are run-of-the-mill compared to a one-of-a-kind treasure such as Skip James's Paramount recording "Drunken Spree," which Bussard proclaims to be a superior record (Johnson having become in the words of

one writer "a former god usurped by rock geeks"). Bussard's claim, though arguable, is lent verisimilitude by the breadth and durability of James's influence in blues and rock and roll, itself the result of James's "rediscovery" by collector/revivalists. It is also interesting to note that Bussard himself owns the only known copy of "Drunken Spree."⁵²

While price may be a factor in assigning cultural and historical significance to a particular artist and performance, monetary value as a contributing element to canon formation works in concert with aesthetic evaluation and organization, critical acts creating subjectively defined parameters that reinforce a collection's overall quality rather than quantity. Ultimately the monetary value of a record, is less important (and often less thrilling) than the taxonomy of collecting. According to jazz record collector and historian John Johnson, "[Collecting is] about classifying and categorizing and filing everything on fiberboard shelves, in a worthy but vain hope that in doing so you could gain ownership over the thing that owned you."⁵³ When it comes to record collectors such as Joe Bussard, Gayle Dean Wardlow, or Nick Perls, their collecting embodies "hierarchies of value, exclusions, [and] rule governed territories of the self."⁵⁴ When Joe Bussard came across 14 mint Black Patti records while canvassing door-to-door in the late 1960s, he immediately recognized their monetary value, but also knew that these records contained music that he loved: blues, jazz, and gospel from the 1920s and 1930s. This conflation of values -- the monetary and the aesthetic -- creates private collections that stand as "authenticating cultural representations" in that, as museums do with artifacts, "record collectors arrange their discs into something that represents 'blues.'"⁵⁵ However, in order for collectors to have an impact on canon formation, their personal treasures must be made available to the public. Dick Spottswood notes that the impact collectors have on canon formation occurs only when they become archival producers

and use their expertise in selecting material to be reissued. "The choices we make tend to be the choices one should make," he notes, "whether we intend for that to be the case or not."⁵⁶

Collectors, collecting, collections

Within the semi-underground and insular world of blues record collecting many of the most significant collectors -- Jim McKune, Joe Bussard, Nick Perls, Gayle Dean Wardlow, Richard Nevins, Don Kent, Bernie Klatzko, Pete Whelan, Bob Koester, and John Fahey -- remain shadowy figures, known only (Fahey being the notable exception) as names listed in the credits of LP and CD reissues. As a group these men have (or in some cases had, McKune died in 1971, Perls in 1987, Welding in 1995, Klatzko in 1999, and John Fahey in 2001) acquired some of the rarest blues 78s in existence and maintain collections that are the backbone of labels such seminal reissue labels as Origin Jazz Library (founded by Pete Whelan), Delmark (founded by Bob Koester), Yazoo (founded by Nick Perls), and Shanachie (home to both Don Kent and Richard Nevins who took over Yazoo after Perls's death), as well as the bible of serious collectors of 78s, *78 Quarterly*, published by Pete Whelan, more or less continuously (there was a twenty year gap between issues one and two), since 1969. Many of the aforementioned collectors were part of the 1950s folk revival which, by the early 1960s, had metamorphosed into the blues revival. Jeff Todd Titon writes that as a group these blues revivalists, many of whom grew up in the "intellectual wasteland of the Eisenhower era," embraced the music of "people who seemed unbound by conventions of work, family, sexual propriety, worship and so forth."⁵⁷ As much as this was a love affair with the lives of marginalized blacks, it was also a love affair with records: listening to and collecting them. For these

collectors blues 78s were "exotic mysteries engendering endless theorizing" and their bohemian refusal of what they saw as the egregious commerciality of rock and roll allowed them to wed the collecting of obscure vernacular music with their anti-consumerist ethics.⁵⁸ Titon notes that the "collector strain in the revival was scientific in method if not in spirit; blues music was objectified on recorded artifacts. . .[A] dialectical energy involving the acquisitiveness and fantasy fueled the revival."⁵⁹

If there was any hope of locating these exotic mysteries there needed to be a guide telling collectors what was, in theory anyway, available to collect. Record collecting had, until the early 1960s, been somewhat hit and miss in relation to what was found and what had been recorded. That situation changed considerably with the publication of Robert Dixon and John Godrich's *Blues and Gospel Records 1890-1943* in 1964. A massive volume of information and testament to discographical science, *Blues and Gospel Records* gave collectors the factual information (e.g., artist, record label, matrix number) they needed. As compilers, Dixon and Godrich were driven by scientific objectivity; there was not a critical word written of any of the recordings listed. And it is precisely this non-analytical template that made Dixon and Godrich's tome one of the guidebooks for the blues revival -- collectors learned the discography much like a librarian learned the bibliography.⁶⁰

The purported objectivism of Dixon and Godrich had an ontological impact on canon formation due to their particularized (and exclusionary) blues taxonomy. Blues, according to the parameters of *Blues and Gospel Records*, did not include popular records recorded by white artists, nor did it include the more fluid application of the term "blues" by African American consumers, many of whom did not make such rigid distinctions between blues, r&b, and jazz. "The paradox," notes Jeff Todd Titon, "is that while the

collectors assumed they were merely providing information about something that already existed in the world, their discographies came to define the blues canon. If a record was listed, it was blues; if not, it wasn't."⁶¹

Although the publication of *Blues and Gospel Records* to a degree codified the blues canon through Dixon and Godrich's selection and organization, their ability to verify the existence of some of the recordings was due to the fact that collectors had been out canvassing for old blues records since the 1940s, a period Dick Spottswood refers to as "the golden age, before there were a lot of collectors, before we knew these records were so collectable, and before they had been melted down to make new Perry Como records."⁶² These proto-collectors, who influenced and in some instances trained the collectors of the 60s blues revival, were a loosely organized community that acquired discs by knocking on doors, trading buy/sell lists, and looking for ads in magazines such as the *Record Changer*, the primary source for collectors seeking to buy, sell, and trade 78s. Along with Harry Smith (whose contributions to collecting and canon formation will be discussed later) one of the pioneering, influential, and enigmatic of the early record collectors was James McKune.

McKune's record collecting dates back to the late 1930s and those close to him remember a talented writer employed as a rewrite man in the Brooklyn office of the *New York Times*, and a lover of country blues who was especially zealous when it came to the music of Charley Patton. But McKune was also given to acute depression and, although a tee-totaler for much of his early adult life, began drinking heavily as he got older. He left the *Times* to work as a postal employee and lived (always with his large and treasured record collection) in increasing destitution and penury, first at the Y.M.C.A and later, at the time of his death in 1971 (murdered in a case that remains unsolved), in a skid row

hotel on the lower East Side. *Origin Jazz Library* founder and *78 Quarterly* publisher

Pete Whelan was a McKune acolyte:

I got interested in blues collecting around 1952. And it was thanks primarily to the influence of James McKune. . .nobody knew about him but he was brilliant. . .I met him one after noon in 1954 at Big Joe's Jazz Record Center. He lived in one room in the Y.M.C.A. and he had all his records in cardboard boxes under his bed. He would pull one out and say 'Here's the greatest blues singer in the world.' I'd say, 'Oh yeah?' cause I had just discovered this guy Sam Collins, who was great. . . Jim pulled out this Paramount by Charley Patton. I said 'Oh yeah, sure' and of course, he was right.⁶³

Dick Spottswood, who knew McKune but was not a close friend, recalls a visit to his cramped apartment and remembers that the idiosyncratic McKune stored his collection in large metal filing cabinets. "McKune is a romanticized, perhaps overromanticized figure," Spottswood notes, "but he was able to get great records back when they were cheap and, to a certain degree, plentiful. And he made the most of it. He had fabulous stuff for 1960."⁶⁴ Although occupying an obscure status in blueslore, McKune's lasting legacy was his record collection, a personalized canon of material evidence passed on to Whelan and Bernie Klatzko, another collector influenced by McKune.

Whelan's collecting blues records in 1952 made him one of the earliest of the collector/ revivalists who would later reissue these rare recordings. Mississippi native Gayle Dean Wardlow, whose collection of 3,000 78s is considered one of the two or three best private blues collections in the world, started in 1954. In the early 1950s Dick Spottswood was scouring auction lists, reading the *Record Changer* and "paying for records with money earned on my paper route."⁶⁵ And while they and other collectors of the day (e.g., Pete Kaufman, Jake Schnieder, Henry Renard, Pete Kuykendall) were caught up in expanding their personal collections, there was a seismic shift about to occur

when one record collector, in need of some quick cash, decided to sell most of his large collection.

Harry Smith: A Rich, Recorded American Heritage

Harry Smith was born in 1923 and began collecting records as a high school student in Bellingham, Washington. Precocious and intellectually curious, as a teenager Smith was also a budding folklorist who recorded the tribal ceremonies of the Swinomish Indians. "I took portable recording equipment all over the place," Smith told Ed Sanders, "and recorded whole long ceremonies sometimes lasting several days."⁶⁶ In 1942, Smith went to the University of Washington to study anthropology and, more importantly, got a job working nights for Boeing. The money was good and provided Smith with capital he needed to deeply immerse himself in the acquisition of 78s. With a boundless passion and enthusiasm for race and hillbilly recordings, he scoured every store in the Seattle area, began writing to other collectors across the country, and eventually started advertising in the *Record Changer*. Although Smith, like McKune, was searching for records during the era when they were "cheap and plentiful," the drive to collect laminated records and melt them down for the shellac, all part of the war effort, meant that many of the records Smith was searching for were in danger of vanishing, a fact that contributed extra energy to his obsessive collecting. Although the government drive for shellac hastened the disappearance of some titles, it also encouraged Americans to root around in their cellars and attics for 78s they no longer wanted and for Smith that meant, suddenly, thousands of records were easy to find. "There were big piles of 78s -- enormous groaning masses of them," Smith recalled. "I rapidly amassed many thousands of records. It became like a problem. . . [It] was an obsessive investigative

hobby."⁶⁷

At the end of World War II Smith left Seattle for Berkeley, California and a bohemian climate more suited to his artistic pursuits. He was already a legend in record collecting circles mainly for the size and breadth of his collection and his encyclopedic knowledge of the artists. His tiny apartment in Berkeley became the model for virtually all of Smith's future housing: crammed with books, art, film equipment, and thousands of records. Luis Kemnitzer was a 19-year-old freshman at Berkeley when he made a pilgrimage to Smith's lair:

[We talked] about record collecting, blues, jazz, hillbilly music, gospel music. We shared a love for the records themselves as well as the music encoded in them. The labels, the record jackets, the catalogs, and the announcements from the early thirties and before were sensual tokens of the eras, and we felt, saw, and smelled what the music was expressing. We also shared a sense of awe and discovery of beauty and the edge of something ineffable and profound around the music and its context . . . At the same time that Harry was immensely protective of his record collection and greedy about getting more records, I had the impression that he considered himself more of a custodian than the owner of these records. He hinted few times that the Collection was going to go to an institution to be curated. Certainly he was more protective of the records than of anything else in his room. He would lend out books that he thought you might want, gave away paintings and collages, but once a record came into his room it never left.⁶⁸

Smith left Berkeley in 1948 for San Francisco, but after only three years there he decided that, with the rise of McCarthyism, the best place for an avant-garde artist/record collector immersed in radical politics was New York City.

It was while in New York that Smith, in desperate financial shape, approached Moe Asch (who had recently begun the Folkways label) about buying a sizeable portion of his record collection. Smith brought Asch what he considered the cream of the crop and was paid 35 cents per record. When Asch realized how much Smith knew about each

record and performer he suggested that Smith organize a sequence of songs from his vast collection.⁶⁹ The result was the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, assembled, edited, and annotated by Smith. Released in 1952 it was collection of 84 songs spread over six LPs (the LP itself being a relatively recent technological phenomenon) and became (along with the publication of Samuel Charters' *The Country Blues* in 1959) a sourcepoint for the blues collector/revivalists.

Programming the music topically, Smith offered an American vernacular music canon that was a testament to biracial, cross-cultural interdependency. "The white and black folks found herein," writes John Fahey, "listened to and drew from each other's musics in a landscape of musical interchange nonexistent during this same period between any other traditions to be found under the rubric of 'American' music."⁷⁰ Smith himself thought that collective power of the recordings could change American society. "I felt social changes would come from it," he noted. "I'd been reading from Plato's *Republic*. He's jabbering on about music, how you have to be careful about changing the music because it might upset or destroy the government."⁷¹ To Smith, a vernacular music canon could best be represented when the racial stratification of the performers and the music -- the heart of both folklore and ethnomusicological discourse and the race record/hillbilly music marketing of the 1920s -- was either obscured or eliminated. In Smith's musical utopia, Jimmie Rodgers was as much a bluesman as Charley Patton; racialized cultural categories undermined his belief that the concept of a nation existed in sound of the music that made up the *Anthology*. As Robert Cantwell writes, "the racial line has not been drawn across [the *Anthology*] because it can't be drawn." This is due to the fluidity of what Cantwell calls "discrete cultural elements" that leave traces throughout the *Anthology* reinforcing the theory that articulated in this music is the

commonality of lived experience, "where the mutual absorption of singer and song so confounds the division of style and subject that they become one."⁷² As a cultural touchstone, Smith's editing of the *Anthology* understood how, in profoundly mythic ways, popular music reflects the theater of popular desires and fantasies, and how the creation and articulation of self is part discovery, part manipulation, and part imagination.⁷³ Perhaps this is why the *Anthology* is filled with the music of what Smith himself called eccentrics ("a lot of [these songs] were selected because they were odd") that taken as a whole create a utopian vision of America that Greil Marcus calls "Smithville," a mystical body of the republic, a kind of public secret: a declaration of what sort of wishes and fears lie behind any public act, a declaration of a weird but clearly recognizable America within the America of the exercise of institutional majoritarian power."⁷⁴

Among the blues and hillbilly record collecting cognescenti, Smith's *Anthology* was a singular moment in musical archaeology. Its selection and organization legitimized collecting and canon formation by record collectors; suddenly there seemed to be a method to the madness of these shadowy, enigmatic obsessives who sought out these shellac-encased exotic mysteries. "Everyone was caught up in the revelation that Harry Smith's collection provided," affirms Dick Spottswood.⁷⁵ Echoing this sentiment is John Fahey:

You might say that Harry made us feel a whole lot better. Here was somebody who knew more than we knew, and by issuing his encyclopedic collection, legitimized our interest and passion. I hate to admit it, but we did very much need this imprimatur for social purposes. Peers (and they were legion) who did not share our obsession with the great home-grown product considered us oddballs, at least, even perverts. Suddenly, we were, well at least a little more popular with normal folks.⁷⁶

While Smith's canon formation might have made collectors a little more popular with

normal folks (the operative term being "little"), the notion of "normal" was something that Harry Smith seemed pathologically driven to reject. Motivated by personal penury Harry Smith had created a "memory theater," an aural documentation of America wherein one could hear the "complete breakdown of the old cultural geography."⁷⁷ No other record collector has organized and edited a personal collection that has had the lasting impact of *The Anthology of American Folk Music*.

Although Smith's vernacular music canon established an aesthetic template that would affect many blues record collectors to come, curiously, almost none of them (Spottswood and Richard Nevins being notable exceptions) would adopt his fluid aesthetic model. Partly this is the result of specialization, the majority of blues record collectors compile collections synonymous with (and dependent upon) principles of organization and categorization. Thus one's "representative collection" becomes a hermetic world wherein the records exist within a context that is "reframed by the selectivity of the collector."⁷⁸ While he certainly created a hermetic world (or universe) with his records, Harry Smith was generally disinterested in organization and categorization (beyond the thematic), and especially disinterested in racially circumscribing the *Anthology*'s content. "That's why there's no such indications of that sort [color or race] in the albums," Smith told John Cohen. "I wanted to see how certain jazz critics did on the blindfold test. They all did horribly. It took years before anybody discovered that Mississippi John Hurt wasn't a hillbilly."⁷⁹ Essentially, what Smith was attacking was years of blues discourse and scholarship (both academic and semi-academic) that distinguished between African and Anglo-American vernacular music. "[Smith] did. . . what the discourse of folklorists and ethnomusicologists. . . could not do," notes Robert Cantwell, "drive home the essential integrity, in American folk music, of

African and European traditions -- for the very language of scholarship preserves the distinctions that scholars want to eliminate."⁸⁰ This is not to say that all record collectors were inflexible in the kinds of vernacular music they collected (along with blues, a few of them collected hillbilly and bluegrass records); however, as a group, they were less interested in Harry Smith's colorblind categorization, preferring a thematic and stylistic taxonomy of vernacular music that was also organized, in a manner similar to the record industry of the 1920s, by race and gender.

Really, Really the Blues: Finding and Reissuing the Blues

The blues reissues labels that came in the long, sustained wake of Harry Smith's *Anthology* were less the result of collectors' dire financial situations and more about making their private treasures available to the public. The motivation to do this was supplied, somewhat accidentally, by the publication of Samuel Charters's *The Country Blues* in 1959. Charters's evocative, emotionally charged prose lacked the aridity and musicological lingua franca of much earlier academic and semi-academic blues scholarship. However, what galled virtually all of the blues record collectors who read Charters was his disinterest in mastering a corpus of information that centered around dates, places, record labels, and matrix numbers. Charters, arguably the most romantic of the blues revivalists, was more interested in writing prose that reflected what he saw as the genre's essence: its ability to convey intensely personal expression.⁸¹ "We are deeply indebted to Mr. Charters," Marshall Stearns wrote in his *New York Times* review of *The Country Blues* "for opening the door on a vitally significant area of American Music."⁸²

In order to make the musicians in his book come alive, Charters supervised the release of an accompanying record, also called *The Country Blues*, that contained

commercial recordings of the 1920s and 1930s by some of the era's seminal performers: Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Willie McTell, Cannon's Jug Stompers, Robert Johnson, Bukka White, Leroy Carr, and Sleepy John Estes. American vernacular music historian Peter Guralnick who, as a teenager "devoured" Charters's book, said of the accompanying record, "I think there could not be a more entrancing introduction to the country blues."⁸³ But if Charters's book and record amounted to a *de facto* blues canon that helped jumpstart the blues revival, it created dissent among the collecting cognescenti. The first to respond was Pete Whelan.

Whelan had started collecting records at the age of 12. After serving an "apprenticeship" with the brilliant, but troubled Jim McKune, Whelan and Bill Givens, a friend from boarding school, decided that while Charters's work was important, his research and conclusions were flawed.⁸⁴ In 1960, Whelan and Givens began Origin Jazz Library, the first label exclusively dedicated to reissuing country blues recordings of the 1920s and 1930s. Their debut release was a rebuttal to Charters.⁸⁵ With a record entitled *Really! The Country Blues*, Whelan and Givens sought to expose the work of more obscure Mississippi-based performers such as Tommy Johnson, Son House, Skip James, and Charley Patton as the real progenitors of the blues style that influenced many of the performers that Charters wrote about. "[The Country Blues] was real," notes Whelan in a moment of canon formation, "but not real enough." As did Whelan, many collectors felt that Charters main error was not paying enough attention to blues from the Mississippi delta. Along with correcting that oversight, *Really! The Country Blues* and many of Origin Jazz Library's subsequent releases (e.g., *The Mississippi Blues* and *Country Blues Encores*) contributed to canon formation by offering aural evidence supporting Whelan's argument (an argument traceable to Charles Peabody in 1903) that the music of the

Mississippi delta was the Ur-text of the blues tradition.⁸⁶

While the releases on Origin Jazz Library exposed the delta blues tradition to wider audiences, the records also reflected the limited information available about the performers. On *Really! The Country Blues*, Skip James's track "Devil Got My Woman" is accompanied with these liner notes: "No details. Said to have been from Louisiana. Was proficient on both guitar and piano. Present whereabouts unknown." This was all the biographical information available on James until he was found recuperating in the Tunica County Hospital in Mississippi in 1964 by John Fahey and fellow collectors Bill Barth and Henry Vestine. (The late Vestine played lead guitar in Canned Heat with another avid blues collector the late Bob "The Bear" Hite.) As one of the first blues revivalists to seek the whereabouts of these performers, Fahey successfully located Bukka White in 1963 by sending a postcard addressed to "Bukka White -- Old Blues Singer, c/o General Delivery, Aberdeen, Mississippi." As improbable as this seems, the card was forwarded to White who had been living in Memphis since the 1930s. Fahey and Ed Denson (his partner in their label Takoma Records) coaxed White out of retirement and recorded him for Takoma. "He was an angel," Fahey remembers. "He was helpful and friendly, a very gregarious person." The same, however, could not be said of the reception Fahey, Barth, and Vestine received from Skip James. "Fuck him, he wasn't worth it," spits Fahey some thirty-plus years after the fact. "He was condescending and a real jerk." James was irritated that it took them so long to find him, going so far as to accuse the three devotees of not being particularly intelligent. "Before we met him we were in awe of him," notes Fahey. "It was a shattering experience."⁸⁷ Despite it all, Fahey went on to supervise the release of James' recordings for Takoma.⁸⁸

Fahey was the first of many record collectors who felt that the next logical step in

the archaeological process was to search for whatever remained of these singers as a way of filling in significant historical gaps. Mississippi native Gayle Dean Wardlow, a record collector since the mid-1950s, considered research a natural extension of his record collection. "There was very little information about these early bluesman," he notes. "I became determined to learn where these guys came from and as much as I could about them."⁸⁹ Fahey also headed south to search for old blues and country 78s, having been baptized into blues revivalism in 1956 when Dick Spottswood played him Blind Willie Johnson's "Praise God I'm Satisfied," an experience Fahey likened to an "hysterical conversion." However, the seeming innocuousness of this activity is complicated by the fact that, in many rural areas, record store were virtually nonexistent, the real finds were made going into black neighborhoods and knocking on doors. As Fahey told Edwin Pouncey:

In the South they were used to having salesmen come by all the time. . . A lot of older people [were] lonely and look[ed] forward to having someone call, and that's the kind of house you would canvas: well-kept, neat, lots of flowers in the garden. I'd knock on the door and say 'Hello there. Do you have any old records you'd like to sell?' They could see I was just some harmless kid looking for old records and they wanted to get rid of them. Nobody valued them, they needed money. If they had any I would be invited in to look through the Victrola. I'd offer them a price, I'd try to be fair.⁹⁰

Among blues record collectors, the house with flowers in the garden or in window boxes was a sign that treasures might lurk within. "I had the best luck with older women who had flower pots on the porch," recalls Gayle Dean Wardlow. "So I learned to look for flower pots. The pots indicated that someone had lived at one location for a long time."⁹¹ Joe Bussard, perhaps the most driven and obsessed of the record collectors, was also well-schooled in recognizing the signs: old lace curtains, flowerpots on the porch, smoke

snaking from the chimney, that meant a home's current residents had been there for decades. "These were the people who had long ago bought the records that Bussard was now after. And they would still have them, because mountain folks never throw anything away, whether it be a broken refrigerator, a tin coffee can, or old Victrola records they haven't played in years."⁹²

Assembling and Reissuing a Canon: Nick Perls and Yazoo Records

In New York City, a group called the "blues mafia" met weekly to discuss their musical obsession. "We would have meetings at a different person's house every week," notes mafia member Larry Cohn. "They were really very loose, and the purpose was just to play records and really have a dialogue. Bernie Klatzko and Nick Perls and Charters for a period of time, Don Kent, most of the New York East Coast collectors. Pete Whelan, Steve Calt. . . [and] then Washington had it's own collector's contingent, guys like Dick Spottswood, Bill Givens, a whole bunch of people. It was great fun."⁹³ Before long these blues mafiosi began heading south to find out where the real treasures (and performers) were buried.

Nick Perls and Stephen Calt met as undergraduates at City University of New York in 1962. Calt was less interested than Perls in collecting records, envisioning himself as more of a historian of vernacular music. Perls, however, wanted records, and to fellow collectors (who came from more modest backgrounds than the wealthy Perls) it seemed as though he wanted to own *every* country blues record in existence. Nick Perls was the son of Klaus and Amelia Perls, owners of the Perls Gallery on Madison Avenue and among the most significant art collectors and art dealers of the 20th century. After six decades in the business the Perls's (now in their 80s) closed their gallery in 1995 and

began selling their private collection at auction. In 1996 they donated thirteen works of twentieth century art by Picasso, Modigliani, Braque and Leger to Metropolitan Museum of Art -- a collection believed to be worth between \$60 million to \$80 million.⁹⁴

Collecting art and making large sums of money doing it was a Perls's family tradition. Nick's grandfather Hugo studied law in Germany leaving his practice at the end of World War I to open the Hugo Perls Galerie in Berlin. Specializing in Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings, it became one of Berlin's leading art gallery's and it was not long before Hugo had amassed a sizeable personal collection of rare artwork. Frank Perls, Nick's uncle, was also an internationally known art dealer and collector who owned a gallery in Beverly Hills, wrote numerous articles on art history (his expertise was uncovering forgeries), was a close friend of Picasso and Matisse, and in 1968 significantly outbid all contenders at auction for Juan Gris's painting "Still Life with a Poem" and George Rouault's "Le Chinois." This tactic of outbidding the competition by a wide margin was something that Nick learned well and used to his advantage as he began collecting records and alienating other collectors.

Given his family's business and the conspicuous wealth in which he was raised, it is not surprising that Perls sought to combine his love of delta blues music and his personal wealth (left a sizeable trust fund, Perls could afford to collect records full-time), in an attempt to turn record collecting and blues reissues into another Perls family success story. "He wanted to show his family he could make money and be successful too," recalls Gayle Dean Wardlow. "Something that made him extremely difficult to trade records with."⁹⁵

In the beginning Wardlow's relationship with Perls was that of teacher and student, albeit a student with a seemingly inexhaustible bank account who could buy

entire collections at the drop of a hat. Perls's and Calt's interest in the blues led them to Bernie Klatzko who, in 1963 had gone canvassing with Wardlow in tiny Mississippi delta towns looking for Charley Patton records and researching Patton's life. Klatzko told these two young (Perls and Calt were in their early 20s), enthusiastic acolytes how he and Wardlow had knocked on doors looking for records. Perls, especially, was caught up in the romanticism of the delta and the simplicity and directness by which one could acquire records. There was no other way, he had to go "door knockin'" down south. Klatzko suggested they get in touch with Wardlow during the summer of 1964, what would come to be known in civil rights history as Freedom Summer. Wardlow remembers:

So [Perls] and Calt, they buddied up and they came south in the summer of 1964, like August, same summer those civil rights workers [Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodwin] was killed, right up here about 39 miles [in Philadelphia, Mississippi]. . . When they got here I said, 'Oh no, we're not goin' with no New York license plate.' See what happened was, this organization called the SNCC [Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee], they were sending white college kids from the north to register [black] voters. It was hot, a lot of tension. I took [Perls and Calt] in my car, Mississippi license plates, and we went to Vicksburg and over into the Louisiana Delta, and I taught Perls how to canvass.⁹⁶

Under Wardlow's tutelage, Perls amassed a considerable collection in a very short time, and representing what James Clifford refers to as the "good collector," Perls's collection unfolded in a pedagogical, edifying manner, reflecting his very specific interests. "His focus was on black blues," notes Dick Spottswood. "At its biggest I don't think Nick's collection was ever more than 2,000 records. He was not out to get all the early jazz or hillbilly records -- just the ones he liked."⁹⁷ However, as is the case with many record collectors the "good collector" is never immune from fetishism, and for Perls this meant owning all the blues 78s he could even if it meant ending friendships. "I fell out with Perls in 1967," recalls Wardlow. "I sent some records to Bernie [Klatzko] to

carry to Perls to tape and he never paid me the money we agreed on." Wardlow was also put-off and angered by Perls's arrogance. "He never wanted to admit that anyone else knew as much or more about Mississippi blues as he did."⁹⁸

As his family had done with visual art, Perls wanted to exhibit his collection by starting his own version of an art gallery, a reissue label. Started in 1967, Perls originally called his label Belzoni (pronounced Belzone-ah) a reference to the Mississippi delta town situated between the cities of Greenville and Greenwood, but after two or three releases he changed the name to honor another Mississippi city, Yazoo. By combining his record collection with Stephen Calt's liner notes, Yazoo records quickly became the most important blues reissue label. Partly this had to do with quantity. At Origin Jazz Library, Pete Whelan and Bill Givens were taking a year or more in between releases, at Yazoo, Perls averaged three releases per year. If Whelan and Givens had piqued the interest of the revivalists and (slightly) less obsessed blues connoisseurs, Perls tried to give them as much music as possible. "[Perls] helped the music become popular," notes Wardlow, "especially in Europe." In America, Yazoo was almost singlehandedly responsible for exposing country blues to a wider audience. And, although their relationship would remain estranged until Perls's death in 1987, Wardlow considers Perls to be the pivotal figure in popularizing country blues during the 1960s. "He deserves every accolade," Wardlow affirms, "without the Yazoo reissue program the blues would not be nearly as popular as it is today."⁹⁹

Of all the blues reissue labels Yazoo releases had the most distinctive look. The label's logo (a peacock with spread feathers) was an image lifted directly from the old Black Patti label. The cover art (especially those designed by Perls) were often enlarged photographs, crudely cut-and-pasted over bright orange or yellow backgrounds. Artist

and record collector Robert Crumb was an early Yazoo supporter and illustrated many album covers (most notoriously, the anthology of hokum blues entitled *Please Warm My Weiner*) along with a series of trading cards, itself a portable canon of the country blues, called *Heroes of the Blues*. Yazoo went to greater lengths to clean up the sonic imperfections of the original recordings. "The sound on Yazoo records is considerably improved," writes Peter Guralnick, comparing them to releases on Origin Jazz Library, "preserving a lot more of the highs without increasing distortion."¹⁰⁰ Stephen Calt's liner notes, while lacking the emotional fervor of Samuel Charters, fill numerous factual gaps while retaining a semblance of scientific objectivity. "[Barefoot] Bill's vocal style," Calt notes on *The Blues of Alabama 1927-1931*, "with its sustaining tones and its abrupt changes in volume and pitch, is anticipated by Ed Bell's slow-paced "Mean Conductor." This kind of dry, accessible prose that placed a premium on the journalistic presentation of the "facts" became *pro forma* for Yazoo releases.

Calt did, however, pen occasionally funny and slightly caustic, liner notes. For example the 1973 release *Please Warm My Weiner: Old Time Hokum Blues* uses a fictional academic blues conference entitled "Hokum and the American Folk Tradition" as the setting to lampoon those attempting to define blues discourse and use the blues as a bully pulpit for their personal political agendas. Among the participants is one "Sam Farters," a vain, egotistical "noted blues author," infuriated that he (and his work) is not accorded more respect. "Farters" is questioned by the nameless "Moderator:"

SF: (reddening) If you people out there aren't going to be a little more courteous I'm going to leave. In answer to your question -- if I may be allowed to proceed -- there are more important values than profundity. Speaking as an individual -- not simply as a blues expert -- I happen to place a high priority on sincerity. If you ask me whether Jim Jackson was sincere when he sang "I'm gonna move to Kansas City," I'd have to answer that I'm just not cynical enough to believe that he would sing such

a lyric if his real intention was to move to Binghamton. But how sincere was Bo Carter when he sings "Please warm my weiner?"

M: That was well put indeed. You may quarrel with Sam's opinions but you can't argue with his sincerity or his right to express them. Let me ask you a toughie, Sam, though I know it's one you can handle: does the word "hokum" come from Africa?

SF: Well, it sounds like an African word to me. . .

M: What part of Africa do you think. . .

SF: Gee, that's hard to say. Africa's a pretty big country. . .

Calt does not stop with Sam Charters, but also attacks liberal sociologists, feminists, and black activists all of whom are represented in this parody as broad stereotypes spewing essentialist rhetoric that intentionally misrepresents and misunderstands the blues musically and culturally. After an indignant "Farters," "firey black activist" Jerry Groid, and "crusading spokeswoman for women's rights" Diane (Bunny) Barrett walk out on the conference, the moderator is left to sum up the contentious proceedings:

M: Say, I really want to thank you fellas for doing such a swell job. Sorry things got a little heavy there. Christ, I should have known better than to put that black dude on the panel, but you know how it is with the Black Students Union! Sam can be a real pain in the ass, but he sure knows his blues! I guess anyone who's that much into the blues gets a little weird. A year ago the students wouldn't have cared enough about the subject to even boo him. I think kids these days are turning away from drugs and on to Hokum. And that's hopeful.

Calt's satire, while crude and underdeveloped, does reinforce the collectors' distrust of scholars and the (over)interpretation of vernacular music by political opportunists (Jerry Groid complains about the blues performers of the 1920s not having afros, and argues that a gun is worth at least 10 hokum records) or, as in the case of

Charters/"Farters," humorless, self-appointed experts who lack the necessary factual information. And, as it relates to Perls's reissue aesthetic and selection criteria, it depoliticizes the blues, as Perls himself noted, the essence of the blues is "dance music... whether it's Charley Patton... or Blind Lemon Jefferson."¹⁰¹

With each release Yazoo contributed to canon formation through "a somewhat uncomplicated process of communication by phonograph record."¹⁰² And, as was the case with Whelan's and Givens's releases on Origin Jazz Library, Perls (and Calt) in disseminating this music to a wider audience, reinforced the canonicity of their musical selections as representative of the "real" rather than the "ersatz." Despite his wealth and desire to own every significant country blues recording, Perls functioned as a musical curator in a manner not unlike that of Harry Smith. He understood how canon formation is a discourse of power that reinforces the values of the canonizers, something he no doubt learned by watching the family business. But among this particular group of record collectors, power is the cumulative result of personal ownership of the mechanically reproduced cultural text and a mastering of factual information that provides the biographical and sociological context for the text's creation. This process, notes Alain Touraine, uses historicity, what he defines as the integration of knowledge and material culture in a social praxis that becomes "an autointerpretive medium of self-reproduction."¹⁰³ For a blues canon maker like Nick Perls, canonicity is reified by the creation of a hierarchy of founding fathers (e.g., Charley Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson) and the placing of other performers into a hermeneutical circle, that seeks to fit "each element of a text into a complete whole."¹⁰⁴ For Perls and Yazoo these textual elements were recordings by lesser known blues players such as Clifford Gibson, Edward Thompson, Big Boy Cleveland, and Marshall Owens, all of whom, stylistically and

geographically, become part of a complete whole.

But canon formation begs simple, crucial questions: Who and what gets in? And, if canon formation has to remain faithful to a musical tradition, what are the essential qualities needed for one to be included in that tradition. T.S. Eliot argued that canons are not immune from influence from within, a work's meaning and significance changed with every addition to the canon.¹⁰⁵ "No poet, no artist of any art, has complete meaning alone," wrote Eliot in 1920. "You must set him for contrast and comparison, among the dead. . .as a principal of aesthetic, not merely historical criticism."¹⁰⁶ This is the founding-father-hierarchy approach that many collectors-turned-reissue-entrepreneurs favored. This process historicizes (or "heroicizes") contributions made by lesser known practitioners of the country blues who remained stylistically faithful (more or less) to the tradition (i.e., sound) of the genre's seminal figures. For performers to be "in the tradition," meant that collectors sought country blues recordings they considered authentic, performances that (again reinforcing the founding father hierarchy) were believable relative to a more or less explicit model. Originality was valued, but mimesis was not necessarily a detriment, after all, as Harry Smith emphasized with his *Anthology*, this music and these forgotten musicians, sang from the commonplace songbook of our shared culture.¹⁰⁷ And, as did Smith, the songs that were heard were the one's the collectors owned, or were willing to share for the purpose of a reissue. Yazoo Records was the result of Nick Perls making his private collection public and it is his choices (contextualized by Stephen Calt's liner notes) of these cultural products that give a clear and informed expression to the discourse.¹⁰⁸

The Reissue as Canon

In 1979, in a move that must have made his uncle Frank smile, Perls purchased the combined collections of Pete Whelan and Bernie Klatzko for the then unheard of sum of \$20,000 increasing his personal holdings, providing Yazoo with many more years of reissue material, and linking him with Ur-collector Jim McKune. Although the label never made huge profits, Perls kept his catalogue in print and maintained the label's status as the *sine qua non* of blues reissuers. Yazoo's dominance as the premier country blues reissue label remained relatively unchanged until Perls's health began to fail in the mid-1980s. Perls was openly gay, and rumors of his promiscuity were rife among collectors. On July 22, 1987 Nick Perls died, an early casualty of AIDS. Determined not to let his collection and record label lay dormant Perls, in the last year of his life, arranged for Yazoo to be sold to Richard Nevins, a fellow collector and friend of over 20 years. Nevins agreed to the arrangement under the provision that Yazoo's catalog of 74 titles, now to be distributed by the equally esoteric label Shanachie, were to remain in print.

While arguably the most significant label reissuing country blues, Yazoo (and Origin Jazz Library) was by no means the only label doing so. Bob Koester, a jazz and blues record collector and cinematography student at St. Louis University, began selling blues 78s out of his dormitory room in 1953, which marked the start of Delmark Records, a label less tradition-bound than Yazoo and Origin Jazz Library in that Koester was a fan of the electrified big-beat of post-World War II Chicago blues, as well as avant-garde jazz. Koester served as a business mentor to Pete Welding who started Testament Records in 1963. Welding collected records but Testament was the result of his wanting to record blues and folk singers living in and around his native Philadelphia. Although Welding later went on to work in A&R for Capitol Records (where he supervised the

compact disc reissues of blues and r&b originally released on the Imperial and Aladdin labels), he supervised all Testament releases until his death in 1995. German-born Chris Strachwitz, who discovered hillbilly and Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins on Mexican radio station XERB as a teenager growing up in Southern California, started his Arhoolie label in 1960. Originally conceived as a label that featured his field recordings, Strachwitz expanded Arhoolie's roster giving neglected vernacular musicians a place to record, something he continues to do as Arhoolie celebrates its 40th year of operation.

Of these labels, the scientific objectivity of Dixon and Godrich's discography is best represented by Document Records. Founded in Vienna, Austria by Johann Ferdinand (Johnny) Parth in 1990, Document's mission is to release every extant recording of every vernacular music artist from 1890-1943 in chronological order. Using Dixon and Godrich's discography as a guide, the label releases not only blues but African American gospel, ballads, and work songs, both commercial recordings and field recordings made for the Library of Congress. If canon formation is a selection process built upon the few who get in, then Document's output (which as of this writing number 700) is the anti-canon, with Parth preferring exhaustive completeness to the imposition of *any* aesthetic criteria, even if it means releasing recordings that are sonically compromised by wear, surface noise, skips, and other significant imperfections. Parth envisioned Document as a scholarly project whose library-like massiveness would appeal to both fans of vernacular music as well as musicologists and cultural historians. Parth's magnanimity notwithstanding, Document has frequently been criticized by fellow collectors and reissue label entrepreneurs for the poor sound quality of its releases, and for using aesthetic relativism to justify reissuing the work of mediocre artists.¹⁰⁹

Although Document's history as a CD reissue label goes back only a decade, Parth

himself casts a long and influential shadow in the world of blues record collecting. Born in a Vienna suburb in 1930, he studied art and worked professionally painting portraits. Parth was introduced to African American vernacular music during World War II by friends who were children of Nazi resistance fighters. By the late 1940s Parth, though still painting, had amassed a huge personal collection of blues and jazz 78s and developed an international network of like-minded collectors. In the mid-1950s Parth started two jazz-oriented reissue labels Jazz Perspective and Club de Vienne which, despite the microscopically small pressings (no more than 40 per title), sold well among hardcore European jazz collectors. In the early 1960s Parth began moving more toward the sound of the country blues, partly as a result of reading Rudi Blesh's *Shining Trumpets*, Paul Oliver's *Blues Fell This Morning*, and Samuel Charters, *The Country Blues*. Parth admits that while these texts revived his interest in the blues, hearing the tracks by Son House and Tommy Johnson on *Really! The Country Blues* was the major turning point.¹¹⁰ Soon after, Parth contacted Chris Strachwitz for details on Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins (in 1959 Strachwitz had "rediscovered" Hopkins in Houston, a claim also made by Samuel Charters) and this conversation led to Strachwitz's suggestion that he and Parth collaborate on a reissue of vintage country blues recordings on Parth's new label called, simply, Roots.¹¹¹ Parth quickly produced Roots' first blues release of Blind Lemon Jefferson. Limited to a pressing of only 300 copies, the sound of these rare 78s (in what would become Document's dubious trademark) were transferred to LP with a minimal (if any) input from the sound engineer. With this release and the expansion of his collecting network Parth became friendly with Bernie Klatzko and Nick Perls, both of whom lent him rare recordings to reissue. The Roots label (though always difficult to find in America) maintained moderate success and, when he closed up shop to return to painting

in 1970, Parth had reissued 60 LPs.

After a break of 15 years, Parth returned to the record business producing reissues of Austrian folk music for the Earl Archives label. In the early 1980s, EMI and Columbia hired him to do the same. It was in the mid-1980s when Parth returned to the world of blues reissues on a mission to release everything listed in Dixon and Godrich's discography that he could find. Not surprisingly, given its enormous size, Parth could not find a record company willing to commit to the project. However, Rudi Staeger, head of the RST reissue label told Parth of a pressing plant in Budapest that would not only produce the records in quantities as small as 100 per title, but would also cut the metal masters for free. Parth then decided that if he could not interest a major label to underwrite this project, he would do it himself.

Compared to the snail paced production of Origin Jazz Library, and even the relatively rapid pace Nick Perls established at Yazoo, Document's releases came in bunches, sometime as many as three per week. Unlike virtually all the other reissue labels, Document was a concept designed, and best suited for, the compact disc era. Parth could fit up to two dozen tracks on each release, with running times in excess of an hour. Despite his continued unwillingness to significantly tamper with the fidelity of the recordings, the initial wave of Document releases were greeted with the same kind of enthusiastic praise that, thirty years earlier, had been showered on *Really! The Country Blues*. Ken Romanowski, a collector and writer who was early participant in the Document remembers, "Each time another CD came out there was a great sense of excitement amongst all of those who were closely involved. There would be a wonderful feeling of achievement every time an artist's full work had been covered."¹²

Over the last decade Parth has expanded the labels' coverage to include vintage

country, early jazz, gospel and boogie woogie, and gospel. And although his critics remain convinced that his evaluative insouciance is the wrong way to go about reissuing vernacular music, Parth seems content to leave canon formation up to the individual consumers. While this is not quite the semiotic guerilla warfare between producers and consumers that John Fiske writes of, it is similar insofar as Parth/Document produce a repertoire of goods in order to attract an audience. But where Fiske's scenario of cultural warfare fought between the hegemonic forces of homogeneity and the resistant forces of heterogeneity pits financial economy against cultural economy, Document's output, as a discursive text, creates the ultimate heremenuetical circle: individual features are intelligible in terms of the entire context and the entire context becomes intelligible through the individual features. It's the job of the listener, alone and in concert with others to figure out how it all does (or does not) work, as well as to argue about the missing songs and performers that, ultimately, make this aural history incomplete and the circle broken.¹¹³

It's a (White) Man's, Man's World: The Gendered Connoisseurship of Record Collecting

In the rarefied air of the collector he found a companionship, a sense of belonging, if only at a distance, that allowed him to share secret passions, secret obsessions, a secret language, that encouraged an exchange of views, an animated debate, an *engagement* that excluded the casual outsider.

--Peter Guralnick¹¹⁴

We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children.

-- Alice Walker¹¹⁵

I had been canvassing more as I could afford. I hadn't learned to drive yet, so I hit various parts of town using a three speed bicycle for transportation just to get some feel for the place. Up towards north Memphis I knocked on the door of a lady who had just thrown her records in the garbage. She volunteered to show me where. We went back out, and she lifted the garbage can lid. I took a look and then reached and pulled out a half a dozen 78s she had placed neatly in the bottom of the garbage can. Fortunately nothing else had been thrown out onto them yet, and for the then price of a quart of milk I walked away with a . . . Joe Evans record and a few other good ones as well.

-- Bill Barth¹¹⁶

John Fahey, referring to the importance of Harry Smith's *Anthology* in legitimating the research of record collectors, noted that Smith's work suddenly made collectors "at least a little more popular with normal folks." His us-and-them dichotomizing reinforces the prevailing stereotype of record collectors as obsessive nerds pushing the envelope of "normal hobby" until it veers wildly into a "secret obsession" that excludes the casual outsider. Record collectors, by and large, occupy a cultural insider/outsider status, their collections simultaneously representing a public display of power and knowledge and private refuge from the corrupting influences of contemporary popular culture.¹¹⁷ John Sheppard goes so far as to suggest that male hegemony in music (and by extension, music collecting) is created "through strategies whereby men render silent and inert a social world that is bubbling, evanescent and constantly rubbing up against us."¹¹⁸ This willful obscurantism on the part of many blues collectors represents a refusal and repudiation of mainstream popular culture (Kip Lornell, who collects blues 78s and writes about more contemporary forms of black popular music such as Go Go, is

a notable exception), one that, for the most curmudgeonly of these collectors, verges on full-blown misanthropy. As Eddie Dean, writing about collector Joe Bussard, notes:

More than just hippie-haters. . .these men loathe the very idea of popular music, right back to the time of the foxtrots and Al Jolson, the Jazz Age clichés often mistaken for the soundtrack of their beloved era. . .[their] Jazz Age is strictly the music of poor whites and blacks: wild-ass jazz and string-band hillbilly, surreal yodels and king-snake moans, lightening bolt blues and whorehouse romps and orgasmic gospel. . .[It is] all anti-pop, anti-sentimental: the raw sounds of the city gutter and the roadside ditch. More important, it was captured on disc for all time at a crucial historical juncture.¹¹⁹

Joe Bussard, according to other envious collectors, owns the most historically important private collection of early 20th century American vernacular music. Blues collector and musician Tom Hoskins notes, "It's one of the glory holds, probably the finest in the world. He was canvassing earlier than most, and he's been at it longer, and he took everything."¹²⁰ So rare are some of Bussard's treasures that there are surviving examples of American music that would no longer exist were it not for him. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that Bussard's loathing of post-World War II American popular culture borders on the pathological -- a fact that does not marginalize him within the ranks many blues collectors, but rather places him squarely within the aesthetic parameters of a group that, for the most part, came of age in the 1950s and 1960s rejecting what they regarded as mass-merchandised dreck. To Bussard and his ilk the blues, jazz, and hillbilly music of the 1920s and 1930s was the "sound of [America] before the modern world fucked it up."¹²¹ In a nakedly revealing moment in Terry Zwigoff's 1994 documentary *Crumb*, the film's subject, cartoonist Robert Crumb, states that when he listens to old music, "[it's] one of the few times that I actually have a kind of love for humanity. You hear the best part of the soul of the common people, you know

their way of expressing their connection to eternity or whatever you want to call it. Modern music doesn't have that calamitous loss. People can't express themselves that way anymore."¹²²

To collectors like Bussard and Crumb canonicity is temporally circumscribed and, in their construction of vernacular music authenticity, is a spontaneous, emotional creation, virtually unmediated by the forces of commerce and the function of the marketplace. The calamitous loss heard by Robert Crumb is the undoubtedly the same sound that Harry Smith heard of the "old, weird America," the difference being that Harry Smith heard this sound in the music of 1960s avant-garde, beat poetry reading, agent provocateurs, such as the Fugs (whose first album he co-produced), and the Holy Modal Rounders, while Crumb thought it had been buried with the original performers. To moldy fig collectors, the blues was not an evolutionary style of music; it existed briefly in its original (read: purest) form and vanished from the face of the earth. Similarly, their record collections are hardened skeletons resistant to the evolutionary forces of popular culture. As Susan Stewart notes, "In the collection time is not something to be restored to an origin; rather, all time is made simultaneous or synchronous within the collection's world."¹²³ As long as they have their records and their cultural havens, collectors like Joe Bussard and Robert Crumb, have the power to stop time and reconstruct the world, effectively shutting out the one in which they live. Something that makes them, and Nick Perls, with their intensity and take-no-prisoners attitude, unique even among the most idiosyncratic record collectors. "All collectors are tarred with the same brush and are written about when they do something strange," argues Dick Spottswood, "Perls and Bussard were the extremes."¹²⁴

Male Collectors and Female Non-Collectors

As with Nick Perls, collecting rare 78s has been the only job that Joe Bussard has ever had. Living off a fortune made by his grandfather in the farm supply business, Bussard is the most driven of all of the collectors, one who has sacrificed friendships and his family in the pursuit of records. "Joe as a private person engaged on a practically full-time basis, has built up a really important private archive," says Dick Spottswood. But Spottswood also admits that this came with a price few other collectors were as willing to pay, "Joe is a bit overenthusiastic, sort of the extreme expression of the collecting mentality," he adds, "It's when the collecting instinct overrides any other instinct of social equity or decency. . . [He] has not led an unproductive life. . . I just think that the personal cost is more than I would have cared to pay."¹²⁵ That personal cost is an estranged relationship with his wife of 35 years, who long ago resigned herself to playing second fiddle to her husband's records, and a daughter who no longer speaks to him. "Even though I sometimes feel resentful and bitter," notes Esther Bussard, "I still respect him for what he has done. He has a fantastic collection, and I realize this because I appreciate music, and I appreciate his saving it for history."¹²⁶

Bussard's collection reveals itself in a pedagogical and edifying manner, yet it also reveals his fetishistic impulses: a pathological need to have everything, and an equally strong desire to make it available to the public.¹²⁷ Typical of this would be his storied acquisition of fourteen Black Patti recordings (for the sum of \$10) in Tazewell, Virginia in the late 1960s. Bussard was accompanied on this expedition by fellow collector Leon Kagarise, a close friend since the mid-1950s. For nearly two decades, Bussard and Kagarise went record hunting together until, sick of Bussard's hogging all the good finds, Kagarise began canvassing alone in the 1980s. Their first dispute was over the Black

Pattis. According to Kagarise, he and Bussard were to split any finds 50-50. Bussard recalls the deal being his getting first dibs on everything. Although it is impossible to imagine Kagarise agreeing to such a proposal, he continued to canvass with Bussard, but ultimately, the disagreements became too much, and since Kagarise went on his own the two have not spoken in 15 years. Kagarise was also not fond of Bussard's aggressive technique when it came to negotiating a price for the records. Once in West Virginia, Bussard got into a screaming match with an elderly woman who would not agree to his offer. "He's in there for maybe 15 minutes," Kagarise recalls, "and then I hear yelling, and they come to the door. Joe's yelling at her and she's yelling at Joe, and he shouts, 'I hope they put those 78s in your casket and bury you with them!' She was in her late 70s or early 80s. He could have given that old lady a heart attack."¹²⁸ Bussard preferred not giving sellers the opportunity to say no, and hastily closed deals that resembled theft as much as they did a sale. "This one lady let me look through her records," Bussard recalls, "but then she starts hemming and hawing, and I couldn't stand it. These were beautiful records, so I finally just shoved \$50 in her box and ran out the screen door down to my car and [was] gone. I didn't even wait for her to say yes or no."¹²⁹

The elderly woman in West Virginia was not the last with whom Joe Bussard has had a contentious negotiation over old records, and it is this dynamic -- an elderly woman, often African American, negotiating with a young, white, male record collector -- that emerges as the trope of blues record collecting, especially during its "golden age" in the early to mid-1960s. (For the best example of this see Robert Crumb's comic "Hunting For Old Records: A True Story," *Oxford American*, Summer 1999.) As musical archaeology, record collecting is, by and large, a male dominated activity described by Will Straw as the "unofficial relocation of objects from the public

commercial realm into the domestic environment.”¹³⁰ From this unofficial relocation of objects comes the stereotypical images of the collector, his collection, and his configuration of his creation of domestic space: there is the collector whose living space seems to be “collapsing into disorder among the chaos and the clutter”(e.g., Harry Smith), and his organizational alter ego, whose living space functions as a compulsively ordered archive (e.g., Joe Bussard).¹³¹ In both instances, the space allocated to house these collections functions as a masculine refuge “from the noise and interruptions which come with married or family life.” A refuge perhaps best exemplified by Joe Bussard’s basement-cum-shrine:

Spending time in Bussard’s windowless, smoke-filled lair can be an exhausting experience. As he rushes around his immaculate archive, whose only index is in his head, he might as well be on an unmapped island. When the outside world intrudes by way of a phone call for his wife, he won’t be distracted for more than a moment: He’s rigged up a system to relay such messages without having to leave the basement, barking through a microphone hooked to an upstairs speaker.¹³²

Joe Bussard’s basement-refuge is a private haven of cultural power and knowledge intentionally situated away from the sexual and social world. While Bussard’s estrangement from his wife and daughter clearly indicates his preference for his private haven to the intrusions of the outside world, it also re-emphasizes the “masculinist politics” of record collecting in that it “provide[s] the raw materials around which the rituals of homosocial interaction take place.”¹³³ As noted by Peter Guralnick in the epigraph that opened this section, there is a sense of belonging radiating from the shared world of collectors, one that reinforces exclusionary engagement among those fluent in the lingua franca of collecting. The goal of the collector (beyond having the most coveted collection) is to keep this imagined community small and rooted in a shared

understanding of the collection as both private haven and cultural monument. “Just as ongoing conversation between men shapes the composition and extension of each man’s collection,” writes Will Straw, “so each man finds, in the similarity of his points of reference to those of his peers, confirmation of a shared universe or critical judgement.” This “insider” discourse (revealed to outsiders in the form of blues reissues) is how collecting becomes connoisseurship, through the mastery of a domain of knowledge -- generally speaking, a corpus of factual information -- which excludes outsiders, and represents the systematicity and organization “which typically grounds the masculinist inclination to collect.” Whether employed consciously (e.g., Bussard and Crumb), or unconsciously, the ground rules of connoisseurship preserve the homosocial character of the record collector’s world by blocking female entrance, or valuing information that, for women “[is] of little use in navigating the terrains of social intercourse.”¹³⁴ It is within this shared, male universe of critical judgement that discourse is formed and canons are, often contentiously, created.

This critical judgement, however, reflects record collectors’ connoisseurist musical tastes. Even the recordings of the better-known figures in country blues (Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charley Patton, Blind Willie Johnson), remain fairly obscure even to those fans of popular music with fairly eclectic taste, the notable exception being Robert Johnson. Among collectors, obscurity functions as a necessary element of a record’s monetary value (e.g., the rare Black Patti recordings that were considered commercial and aesthetic flops when originally released, years later become the most treasured of collectables), and reflects the collectors’ rejection of not just mainstream popular culture, but mainstream impulses within the insular world of collecting. This willful obscurantism accounts for Joe Bussard regarding Skip James’s “Drunken Spree” as

superior to anything recorded by Robert Johnson. Partly it has to do with Johnson's music being "mainstreamed" by commercial success, and James's recording being extremely rare (one in existence), but it also it has to do with Bussard's loathing of contemporary (which in Bussard's world is anything after the early 1930s) rock (and jazz) fans who have deified Johnson. To Bussard and those like him, collecting is all about valorizing the obscure, and living in a world in which "the boundaries between the acceptably collectable and the vulgar or commercial are strengthened and perpetuated as the only available and heroic basis for political claims."¹³⁵ This is, as James Brown once said, "a man's, man's world" wherein each participant has a stake in the bohemian refusal of the commercial, while simultaneously casting themselves as "adventure hunters, seeking out examples of the forgotten or illicit."¹³⁶

So, why are there no women collecting blues 78s and contributing to discourse and canon construction? While I argue in the following chapter that women are contributing to blues discourse by challenging a putative, male-defined canon in both scholarly and journalistic writing, the same cannot be said of women actively pursuing record collecting. Although women and men function with similar intensity when it comes to acquiring objects, it is the accumulation of objects by men that are more often defined as "collections." The difference, according to Ferderick Baekeland, is that while women amass personal possessions that exceed practical need (e.g., dolls, clothing, shoes, china), these intimate and transient objects are "used until they are worn out or broken, and then. . .discarded," the object's limited utilitarian values and disposability marks it as "non-collectable." (Baekeland does, however, ignore the fact that there are women and men who collect dolls, old clothes, shoes, and china.) Men's collections, conversely, have a clear thematic emphasis and "standard, external reference points in public or

private collections, [thus] women's collections tend to be personal and ahistorical, men's impersonal and historical."¹³⁷

Whites and Blacks and Collecting Blues

Along with there being a dearth of women collecting rare blues 78s, so too are African Americans virtually non-existent as curators of blues recordings. The history of blues record collecting runs counter to Alice Walker's claim that a people do not throw away their geniuses -- and when they do, white collectors like Bill Barth rescue them from the trash. Robert Crumb's searching for old blues and jazz records in black neighborhoods in Delaware, Gayle Dean Wardlow's stories of canvassing for old blues records in predominantly black rural Mississippi towns, and the Freedom Summer collecting trip made by the members of the blues mafia, are but a few examples of white revivalists' efforts to collect and preserve this music. Which begs the question, why have African Americans not actively participated in the this archival process? In *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, Nelson George argues that it is the difference between white scholars preserving the musical tradition by curating the material culture, and black performers (the best example of which is Jimi Hendrix) who preserve the essence of older forms of black vernacular music (secular and sacred) by interpolating it into music that is "in the tradition, yet singular from it." George writes:

The black audience's consumerism and restlessness burns out and abandons musical styles, whereas white Americans, in the European tradition of supporting forms and styles for the sake of tradition, seem to hold styles dear long after they have ceased to evolve. The most fanatical students of blues history have all been white. These well-intentioned scholars pick through old recordings, interview obscure guitarists, and tramp through the Mississippi Delta with the determination of Egyptologists. . .Blacks create and move on. Whites document and then recycle.¹³⁸

One could infer from George's analysis a slightly dismissive tone, as if the archival pursuits of the white revivalists/collectors lacked a certain dimensionality, especially when compared to the performative odyssey upon which black artists like Hendrix, Sly Stone, and George Clinton took the blues.

For white blues enthusiasts like Dick Spottswood and Gayle Dean Wardlow, record collecting (at least initially) lacked an ideological component since they were motivated by a love for the music, and the reality of its diminishing availability. The fact that younger African Americans were disinterested in the music (as was pointed out in Chapter 2) had to do with the blues representing slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and any number of unpleasant circumstances and experiences. By the time Spottswood, Wardlow, Perls, Bussard, et al were out canvassing for records, "the moods and conditions of black Americans [had] changed to a degree where the blues [was] no longer in accord with them."¹³⁹ This assessment, Spottswood argues, is salient when compared to the experiences of a younger generation of white southern professionals who grew up in working class families. "I don't think you'll find many [white southern professionals] listening to hillbilly music," he notes. "To them that's the sound of a past they would rather escape."¹⁴⁰ For Gayle Dean Wardlow, growing up white in a segregated South, record collecting gave him the opportunity for social interaction with his black neighbors, "This was a chance to stop and visit with people with whom I would have no other reason, method, or even way to make this kind of intimate social connection."¹⁴¹

If there has been any lingering resentment among African American blues scholars over the ownership of blues recordings it has been minimal; compact disc reissues are democratizing to the extent that an enormous amount of blues music is

available for consumption. “Writers like [Amiri] Baraka and [Albert Murray] have tended to polarize things in their music history studies,” Dick Spottswood notes, “[but] I’ve never heard them come down on record collectors. Maybe because they didn’t know they were out there. Ultimately, you’re grateful to whoever does it as long as something is preserved, republished, and disseminated. Because if the records weren’t out there [these writers] couldn’t learn from them either.”¹⁴² This is the prevailing sentiment among blues record collectors, that it is preferable that white collectors amassed these collections, preserved and studied the music, than to abstain from this activity because they felt it was exploitive. “There will come a time,” says Spottswood, “when African Americans, especially as their economic status collectively rises, when they are going to find it comfortable to collect and enjoy this music as well. I think it’s already happening, the Robert Johnson phenomenon (he is referring to the 1991 *Complete Recordings of Robert Johnson* that became the largest selling blues reissue in history) extended into black communities, which really surprised me.”¹⁴³ What is a tad ironic about Spottswood’s prediction, is that the elements he sees contributing to a blues Renaissance among African Americans (improvement in their material conditions) were the same factors that, in the 1920s, were part of the racial uplift ideology that would lead to middle-class blacks away from the blues and toward their own version of the European classical tradition.

Conclusion

As was noted by Richard Nevins at the beginning of this chapter, the blues as a frame of reference was, for the most part, a marketing strategy born with the industry. To purists, Nevins’s assertion is tantamount to heresy, but it was the 78 rpm record that, for

good and for ill, was the chief form of disseminating the blues, simultaneously entertaining audiences and inspiring some to imitate the sounds they heard on record. It was this brittle artifact that helped fuel the blues revival that emerged in the wake of the studies of Samuel Charters and Paul Oliver and provided the material evidence of this vernacular music tradition. However, recordings are, to paraphrase Jed Rasula, vexatious documents that disturb the historicizing impulse in that the record collectors who salvaged these bits and pieces of musical history are arranging and codifying a blues canon (and musical history) that has already been composed and made audible by the artists themselves.¹⁴⁴ Before the record collectors of the 1950s and 1960s contributed their second order curation, the talent scouts and A&R men of the race record era were mediating the blues in a manner that valued certain musical and performance styles over others. It was also a primary curation affected by copyright law that benefitted the recording industry, wherein “originality,” as an aesthetic concept, was legally defined, and employed by the talent scouts primarily to avoid paying royalty fees to the publishing arm of rival record labels.

Notwithstanding their idiosyncracies and obsessions, the contribution of the blues record collectors to blues discourse and the construction of a blues canon is significant in that, as culture brokers, they are rescuing American vernacular music from neglect. They are also functioning in a manner not unlike that of scholars by presuming that history and canonicity are things they offer to an audience of likeminded enthusiasts, and what they see as a primitive and ahistoric people not always cognizant of their role in the evolutionary musical destiny. While many collectors may regard what they do as a (somewhat) neutral exercise in empirical investigation, their underlying assumptions as they go about collecting records, organizing their collections, and assigning monetary

values to their records, is less methodological and more ontological. Although few if any subscribed to the fluid, colorblind aesthetic template offered by their putative guru Harry Smith, the record collectors, as a group, offer a blues canon built upon a founding father hierarchy of artists supplemented by the contributions of other more obscure performers in a hermeneutical circle where the individual performers become part of a taxonomic whole, creating aesthetic continuity -- or, as is said, is in the tradition.

As gendered connoisseurship, record collecting creates a masculinist rhetoric expressed through the mastery of factual information, a boys-only insularity, a refuge from the world beyond the one captured on record, and a cultural elitism that rejects more commercialized forms of blues-derived music. As a manifestation of canon development and blues discourse, many of the record collectors coming in the wake of Charters and Oliver sought out (and valorized) the work of the country bluesmen. These musicians best articulated the unpolished essence of the blues, the Ur-text of hardscrabble working-class black life that, among many of the white, middle-class, men collecting blues, was a cultural panacea to the banal post-World War II popular music. This also meant that blueswomen would occupy a different taxonomic status in blueslore now fit into the category known as "classic" blues, which was still the blues, just stylistically different, and, implicitly, less authentic. A brief glance through Yazoo Record's set of trading cards *Heroes of the Blues* (a pocket-sized blues canon created by Nick Perls and Stephen Calt, with illustrations by Robert Crumb) reveals one woman, Memphis Minnie, among its 36 heroes.

Although among the record collectors there were (and are) ongoing debates over taxonomy and canonicity, the work of Charters and Oliver combined with the collecting (and collective) efforts of men like Jim McKune, Pete Whelan, Gayle Dean Wardlow,

Nick Perls, Joe Bussard, codify and represent a blues canon through reissue recordings. As members of the “secondary public” they participate, in concert with the consumers purchasing these recordings, in the broad dissemination and popular usage of this music. While the collector/entrepreneurs see themselves as experts apart from this larger group, it is within this at times contentious and chaotic community of collectors and consumers, that a discourse is shaped, refined, and ultimately, revised. Perhaps no effort at revising the blues canon has been more vigilant than that of women blues writers. Arguing for a recentering of the female voice in blues discourse, these journalists and scholars, examined in the next chapter, regard the music of the classic blueswomen as occupying a space both inside and outside of the male-centered tradition, contributing to what bell hooks defines as a radical black subject presence engaging in an explicitly counter-hegemonic discourse. More specifically, it is about the a private discourse made public that articulates a consensual, vernacular representation of sexual politics, a world that many of the canon-making male collectors avoided.

Notes for Chapter 4

1. Peter Guralnick, *Nighthawk Blues* (New York: Seaview Books, 1980), 92.
2. James Clifford, "On Collecting Art and Culture," from *The Cultural Studies Reader* ed., Simon During (New York: Routledge, 1993), 53.
3. Howard Odum and Guy Johnson, *Negro Workaday Songs* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1926), 26. William Howland Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 129. Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis*, 2nd ed (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994 [1977]), 204.
4. William Barlow, *Looking Up at Down: The Emergence of a Blues Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 115.
5. Titon, *Early Downhome Blues*, 211
6. *Ibid.*, 210.
7. Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 67. Titon, 95.

8. Samuel Charters, liner booklet essay from *Blues Masters Vol. 11: Classic Blues Women*, Rhino compact disc R271134.

9. Francis Davis, *The History of the Blues: The Roots, The Music, the People From Charley Patton to Robert Cray* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 86.

10. Neil Rosenberg, "Notes on Harry Smith's Anthology," from liner booklet to *Anthology of American Folk Music*, ed. Harry Smith Smithsonian Folkways Recording compact disc, 35.

11. Sandra Lieb, *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 44-45.

12. Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 133.

13. Richard Nevins, quoted in Grant Alden
www.nodepression.net/nodepression_5/depts/nfa_5c.html

14. Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization and Process," *Consumption and Identity* ed., Jonathan Friedman (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994), 101.

15. Irwin Silber quoted in Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 332.
16. Jeff Todd Titon, "Reconstructing the Blues: Reflections into the 1960s Blues Revival," from *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined*, ed., Neil Rosenberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 225.
17. Will Straw, "Sizing up Record Collections: Gender and Connoisseurship in Rock Music Culture," from *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender* ed., Sheila Whiteley (New York: Routledge, 1997), 8.
18. I am using Jeff Todd Titon's timeframe for the race record era which he, somewhat generously, suggests goes from 1920-1945.
19. Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life*, 111.
20. Andre Millard, *America on Record: A History of Recorded Sound* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 77.
21. Kenney, 115. In the early days of recording, records were cut either "laterally," with the needle moving side-to-side in a groove of uniform depth, or "vertically," also known as the "hill-and-dale" cut. The Victor and Columbia labels jointly owned the patent rights to the process of lateral recording, therefore records cut in this manner could only be played on phonographs manufactured by Victor and Columbia. Vertical cut recording

could only be played on phonographs manufactured by much smaller companies such as Emerson and Pathe Freres. As Kenney notes, "The chances of a family . . . owning a turntable that could play an Emerson or Pathe record were slight; most were likely to own a Victor or Columbia Machine."

22. Dave Lührssen, "Those Old Wisconsin Blues," *Metro Milwaukee Weekly*, April 4, 1998.

23. David A. Jasen and Gene Jones, *Spreadin' Rhythm Around: Black Popular Songwriters, 1880-1930* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1998), 312.

24. David Evans, *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues* (New York: Da Capo, 1982), 66.

25. Williams, who had been Paramount's best talent scout, was put on a straight salary and received no more royalties of records sold. It was an economic slap in the face that he could not abide and, after making a cash payment to the Paramount's owners relinquishing any future royalty claims in songs owned by the company, he left the label. See Jasen and Jones, *Spreadin' Rhythm Around*.

26. Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life*, 124. In what is one of the most often repeated stories in blues history Bessie Smith, considered to be the greatest of the classic blueswomen, failed her audition for Black Swan for being too "earthy." Instead, the label jumped at the chance to sign Ethel Waters and Alberta Hunter.

27. Kenney, 125. Jasen and Jones, 246-247.
28. Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1995), 349.
29. Long Cleve Reed and Little Harvey Hull's 1927 recording of "Original Stack O' Lee Blues" of which one copy is known to exist, now fetches offers of \$30,000.
30. Kenney, 131.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Evans, *Big Road Blues*, 73.
34. Gayle Dean Wardlow, *Chasin' That Devil Music* (San Francisco: Miller Freeman, 1998), 149
35. David Hollinger, *In the American Province: Studies in the History and Historiography of Ideas* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 81.
36. Evans, 73.

37. Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 227.

38. *Ibid.*, 228.

39. Kenney, 139-140. This is a direct result of the Copyright Act of 1909 which, Kenney notes, “defined a composers’ rights in the mechanical reproduction of his work on phonograph records.” This was referred to as the law’s “mechanical clause” which remained a part of the Copyright Act until 1976 and allowed to the author of a musical composition, *or to whoever legally possessed the rights to its mechanical reproduction* (Kenney’s emphasis), royalty payments of 2 cents per reproduction. Heavily structured to benefit the recording companies the law put composers at a legal disadvantage. “Once the composer allowed one firm to make a reproduction of his work,” notes Kenney, “any other firm might do so in a similar manner provided they filed in the copyright office a notice of intent and paid to the copyright holder the 2 cent royalty. This allowed anyone to record a song after the first permission had been granted. Under this law, the composers’ rights in their recorded music ended with the record company’s sale of the record. They had no control over any commercial uses to which the records were subsequently put.”

40. Kenney, 132.

41. *Ibid.*, 133. Alan Lomax writes that, in many instances, this entrepreneurial attitude resulted in a greater interest in the bottom line than on the quality of the music being

recorded. “Moreover [these producers], notes Lomax, “were men of vulgar tastes, interested only in the bottom line – in sales. They had a crude sense of which songs and which types of music had sold well, and they insisted on having more of the same. . .It is to the credit of the players and their tradition that some of the beauty still shines through. But the main result was commercial catalogues filled with miles of trash, routinely performed, and the public gradually lost interest.” *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 446-447.

42. Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On The Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 93.

43. Ibid.

44. Hollinger, 81.

45. I am paraphrasing Henry Louis Gates, Jr., see *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

46. Hollinger, 81.

47. It is difficult to find a record collector who speaks favorably of an institution like the Smithsonian or the Library of Congress; many of them charge both institutions with keeping too much important music from the people. Joe Bussard, perhaps the most infamous (and successful) of the 78 collectors argues that his formidable collection

(considered by many to be one of, if not the, best private collection of American vernacular music) will not allow his records to “institutionalized.” Although the Library of Congress has expressed interest in Bussard’s collection, he remains adamant, “I’m not giving [my records] to any of those places. If you give it to them they shove it back in some hole, and there it sits.” Echoing this sentiment is head of Yazoo Records and longtime collector Richard Nevins who asserts that “all the institutions are bogus nonsense, they don’t do any good at all. . .the asshole Library of Congress refuses to tape 78s for people, not that they have anything worth taping.”

As for the, sometimes unfriendly, debates among scholars and collectors, David Evans and Gayle Dean Wardlow have argued over the origins of a single performer for over 20 years. In 1967, Wardlow published an essay in *78 Quarterly*’s debut issue titled “King Solomon Hill.” In it he argued that the musician King Solomon Hill was in fact one Joe Holmes from Louisiana, an assertion based on his interviews with Homes’s estranged wife, and residents of Holmes’s hometown of Sibley, Louisiana. Rebutting this was David Evans who, in an article titled “The King Solomon Hill Fiasco” (*Blues World*, October 1968) somewhat patronizingly accuses Wardlow of poor research, claiming that his own research made it abundantly clear that King Solomon Hill was known by no other name and lived and performed in the McComb, Mississippi area. Wardlow later uncovered that King Solomon Hill was in fact a community in Louisiana. Evans was unimpressed and, while other blues collectors and historians came to Wardlow’s defense (most notably Stephen Calt) the debate over King Solomon Hill lasted until 1986. Using U.S. Postal Service records, Wardlow not only verified the existence of the community of King Solomon Hill, but found a rural mail carrier who worked in that area during the period that Joe Holmes lived there, virtually eliminating the possibility of a Mississippi

connection. See Gayle Dean Warldow, *Chasin' That Devil Music* (San Francisco: Miller/Freeman Books, 1998) 2-10.

48. James Clifford, "On Collecting Art and Culture," 54. This notion of meaningful desire is exemplified by the collection of Yazoo Records founder Nick Perls who, although he bought thousands upon thousands of records, had a personal collection of less than 2,000 records, nearly all of them country blues. While to the average music consumer, 2,000 records seems like a lot, in the world of record collecting, it is what passes for restraint.

49. *Ibid.*, 55.

50. Dick Spottswood, interview with author, June 6, 2000.

51. Joe Bussard is the owner of the aforementioned lone recording of "Original Stack O' Lee Blues," and has repeatedly turned down offers of \$30,000 for it.

52. A blues magazine editor, who wishes to remain anonymous, told me that there are many (potentially apocryphal) stories of collectors who would destroy one of two remaining copies of a rare record they own to make the last existing copy more valuable.

53. Lee Jeske, "The Dead, The Living, and The Near-Mint," *Jazziz*, March 1999, 41.

54. Clifford, 55.

55. Titon, *Transforming Tradition*, 226.
56. Spottswood interview.
57. Titon, *Transforming Tradition*, 225.
58. Will Straw, "Sizing Up Record Collections," 10.
59. Titon, 226.
60. Spottswood interview.
61. Titon, 226.
62. Spottswood interview.
63. Pete Whelan interview, by Joel Slotnikoff, February 13, 1997. www.bluesworld.com
64. Spottswood interview.
65. Kip Lornell writes, "Started in Fairfax, Virginia, in 1942, *The Record Changer* was the first jazz-oriented record collectors magazine. It also dipped into other areas such as blues and popular music. This publication featured not only auctions and discographies, but also ran articles showcasing some of the early writings of Frederic Ramsey and

Charles Edward Smith as well as photos by Bill Gottlieb. . . *The Record Changer* was important because it served as an informal podium for people interested in jazz.

Furthermore, it affected what people thought and what they listened to. Among its early subscribers were two teenagers, Martin Williams and Larry Gushee, who read the magazine beginning in the late 1940s and who eventually wrote erudite and serious scholarly works on jazz history, jazz aesthetics, and jazz artists.” Kip Lornell, “The Cultural and Musical Implications of the Dixieland Jazz and Blues Revivals,” *Arkansas Review*, Vol. 29, No. 1, April, 1998.

66. Ed Sanders, liner booklet essay from *Harry Smith's Anthology of American Folk Music, Volume 4*, Revenant Records RVN 211 compact disc, 2000, 4-5.

67. *Ibid.*, 8.

68. Luis Kemnitzer, “West Coast Record Collector,” liner essay from *Anthology of American Folk Music Edited by Harry Smith*, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings compact disc, 1997, 29.

69. Robert Cantwell writes that Smith’s discographical knowledge came from “consulting scholarly discographies, among which was Library of Congress document called *American Folksongs on Commercially Available Records*, issued in 1937, [Smith] learned the names of the artists: Memphis Minnie, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Willie Johnson, the Carter Family. Finally, by one of those turns of fate that seem to characterize his whole career, Smith found himself living in Berkeley one floor below the

ballad scholar Bernard Bronson, with whom he exchanged records of mountain ballads.”

See Cantwell, *When We Were Good*, 203.

70. John Fahey, liner essay from *Anthology of American Folk Music Edited by Harry Smith*, Smithsonian Folkways compact disc, 1997, 9.

71. John Cohen, “Interview with Harry Smith (1968),” from *Harry Smith’s Anthology of American Folk Music*, Volume 4, 39.

72. Cantwell, *When We Were Good*, 220.

73. Stuart Hall, “What is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” from *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 474.

74. Greil Marcus, *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1997), 125.

75. Spottswood interview.

76. John Fahey, liner essay from *Harry Smith’s Anthology of American Folk Music*, Volume 4, 84.

77. Cantwell, 194.

78. Stewart, *On Longing*, 153.

79. Cohen, "Interview with Harry Smith," 40.

80. Cantwell, 220.

81. Titon, *Transforming Tradition*, 228.

82. Marshall Stearns, *New York Times*, December 27, 1959.

83. Peter Guralnick, *The Listener's Guide to the Blues* (New York: Quarto Marketing Ltd., 1982), 3.

84. According to Whelan, Givens was not much of a collector and preferred running the business.

85. Three decade later, Whelan still claims (rather unconvincingly) that *Really! The Country Blues* as a rebuttal to Charters was completely unintentional.

86. To Whelan, the blues of the Mississippi delta was more significant than that of any other country blues performer of the day, including Blind Lemon Jefferson. "There's only one [Jefferson] recording I like," notes Whelan. "I don't know why, he just turns me off. . .it's like he doesn't swing enough. . .there's something missing there."

87. Edwin Pouncey, "Blood on the Frets," interview with John Fahey, *The Wire*, August 1998, www.johnfahey.com

88. According to Gayle Dean Wardlow (who had been looking for James for over a year) Fahey, Barth, and Vestine gave \$35 to Ishmon Bracey who told them where to find James. Bracey, a delta blues performer who recorded for Paramount in the 1920s, gave up playing the blues to become a preacher.

89. Gayle Dean Wardlow, "The Blues World Interview," interview by Joel Slotnikoff, November 18, 1998. www.bluesworld.com

90. Pouncey, "Blood on the Frets." Fahey's comment, "I'd try to be fair," is interesting insofar as it gets to the heart of the monetary transaction between collectors and the non-collectors. Based on personal experience buying and selling collectable records through the mail and at conventions, the standard rule among record collectors is try to pay as little as possible for a record you regard as very valuable, that is, has a high resale value -- a variant on the stock market dictum of "buy low, sell high." However when canvassing in the rural south, purchasing records from what are poor, working folk, many of the collectors (Joe Bussard being the notable exception) wanted to pay a "fair" price for records, but in a way that did not indicate to the seller (many of whom, Fahey notes, needed the money more than the records) that the record might be worth thousands of dollars. From Fahey's comment one could infer that he recognized this and was conflicted, or guilty about it. So while "fair" is a fluid concept when it comes to record collecting, in this context it means a price equal to the record's original cost (i.e., \$1-\$2),

which is then doubled or sometimes tripled allowing the seller a sense of satisfaction, that they were getting something useful for this “junk.”

91. Tim Gracyk, “Knocking on Doors for 78s: Buying Race Records in the South,” *Victrola and 78 Journal*, Summer 1996, 10.

92. Eddie Dean, “Desperate Man Blues,” *Washington City Paper*, February 12-18, 1998,
3. www.bluesworld.com

93. Lawrence Cohn quoted in Jim O’Neal, “I Once Was Lost , But Now I’m Found: The Blues Revival of the 1960s,” from *Nothing But The Blues: The Music and the Musicians*, ed., Lawrence Cohn (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993), 376.

94. This donation made the Klaus and Amelia Perls one of *Slate Magazine*’s Top-10 philanthropists of 1995.

95. Wardlow, “The Bluesworld Interview,” 46.

96. *Ibid.*, 25.

97. Spottswood interview.

98. Wardlow, “The Bluesworld Interview,” 29.

99. Ibid.

100. Guralnick, *The Listener's Guide to the Blues*, 38. Guralnick asserts that despite its many releases, Yazoo did not have the best musical selections, Origin Jazz Library did.

101. Larry Kelp, "Nick Perls: A Tribute," *Blues and Rhythm, the Gospel Truth*, December, 1987.

102. Krin Gabbard, "The Jazz Canon and its Consequences," from *Jazz Among the Discourses* ed., Krin Gabbard (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 8.

103. Alain Touraine quoted in Jed Rasula, "Records in Jazz History," from *Jazz Among the Discourses* ed., Krin Gabbard (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 149.

104. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 74.

105. T. S. Eliot quoted in John Gennari, "The Politics of Culture and Identity in American Jazz Criticism" (Ph.D. dissertation University of Pennsylvania, 1993), 31.

106. Ibid.

107. Gates, *Loose Canons*, 21.

108. Sean McCann, "Reintroduction of the Specialists," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No. 1, March 1997, 187.
109. Spottswood interview.
110. <http://www.document-records.co.uk/document.htm>
111. Originally the Roots label specialized in field recordings of Austrian folk music.
112. Document website.
113. In March, 2000 Parth, now 70, sold the label and the new owners moved its base of operations to Scotland.
114. Guralnick, *Nighthawk Blues*, 97.
115. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983 [1967]), 92.
116. Bill Barth, "Confessions of a Psychedelic Carpetbagger," www.bluesworld.com
117. Will Straw, "Sizing Up Record Collections," 4.
118. John Shepherd, "Music and Male Hegemony," from *Music and Society: The Politics*

of Consumption, Performance, and Reception (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 155.

119. Dean, "Desperate Man Blues," 7.

120. *Ibid.*, 5.

121. *Ibid.*, 7.

122. *Crumb*, dir. Terry Zwigoff, 119 min., Columbia/Tristar, 1994, DVD.

123. Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, 151.

124. Spottswood interview.

125. *Ibid.*

126. Dean, "Desperate Man Blues," 12.

127. While in many instances the complaints of record collectors that large institutions keep the music from the people begs the question, how do "the people" access a private collection without having to visit the collectors' home? Joe Bussard offers a taping service as a solution. Bussard will send you a list of his recordings and for a small fee per song, will fill up one 120-minute cassette. Blues enthusiasts from Australia, New

Zealand, and elsewhere have taken him up on his offer.

128. Ibid., 13-14.

129. Ibid.

130. Straw, "Sizing Up Record Collections," 5.

131. Ibid.

132. Dean, "Desperate Man Blues," 10.

133. Leerom Medovoi, "Mapping the Rebel Image: Postmodernism and the Masculinist Politics of Rock in the U.S.A.," *Cultural Critique* 20, Winter 1984, 153-188.

134. Straw, 8.

135. Ibid., 12.

136. Ibid., 10.

137. Frederick Baekeland, "Psychological Aspects of Art Collecting," in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susan M. Pearce (London: Routledge, 1994), 207.

138. Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Plume, 1988), 108.

139. Spottswood interview.

140. Ibid.

141. Gayle Dean Wardlow interview by Joel Slotnikoff, www.bluesworld.com

142. Spottswood interview.

143. Ibid.

144. Jed Rasula, "The Media of Memory: The Seductive Menace of Records in Jazz History," in *Jazz Among the Discourses*, ed., Krin Gabbard (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 136.

Chapter 4
I Ain't Goin' to Play No Second Fiddle: Women Write the Blues

On certain things I'm gonna call your hand
So now, daddy, here's my plan
I ain't gonna play no second fiddle, I'm used to playin' lead

--Bessie Smith¹

In its expressivity, its musicality, its orality, in its rich, deep, and varied attention to speech, in its inflections toward the vernacular and the local, in its rich productions of counternarratives, and above all, in its metaphorical use of the musical vocabulary [black popular culture] has enabled the surfacing, inside the mixed and contradictory modes even of some mainstream popular culture, of elements of a discourse that is different -- other forms of life, other traditions of representation.

--Stuart Hall²

The black blues critics of the 1920s, despite their notoriety, critical clout, and readership, have historically maintained a status somewhere beneath the surface of recognition. Theirs remains a hidden history, a facet of the larger blues discourse overshadowed by more "serious," academic folklore studies that, for all practical purposes, refused to recognize the popularity of commercial blues recordings and the growing secondary public of African American blues consumers. While most historians of blues criticism have treated the careers and work of Tony Langston, Sylvester Russell, Bob Hayes, with little more than casual interest, equally hidden and more conspicuously marginalized have been the efforts of women blues writers. Although men have dominated blues discourse since the days of Paul Carter and "Baby" Seals duking it out in

the pages of the *Indianapolis Freeman*, women, especially during the classic blues era, occupied a central role both as performers and consumers. Their relative invisibility as critics and journalists was partly the result of the patriarchal realities of the newspaper business of the 1920s that saw an extremely limited number of jobs available to women. And while these jobs were few, the majority of the musical coverage by the handful of women music journalists writing for the black press in the 1920s ignored the blues (and jazz) in favor of the more uplifting sounds of gospel and classical music. Nora Douglas Holt and Maude Roberts George, both influential and widely read columnists, adopted anti-vernacularist attitudes more akin to those of colleagues Dave Peyton and James A. "Billboard" Jackson and shared by folklorist Maude Cuney Hare who, in *Negro Musicians and Their Music*, curtly dismissed black secular music stating, "the songs of the untutored can never be the full expression of the cultured."³

Despite the anti-vernacularism expressed by Hare, Holt, George, and others, Geraldyn Dismond was the rare woman writing sympathetically, albeit infrequently, about the blues.⁴ Zora Neale Hurston, though writing slightly after the heyday of the classic blues, repeatedly centralized folk culture in her work calling it the "boiled down juice of human living," as well as recognizing the pervasiveness of the new technology of radio and record players on the lives of the rural black southerners she chronicled.⁵ However, Dismond's and Hurston's pro-blues stance was the notable exception. Generally speaking, most African American women writing for the black press of the 1920s, be it the result of circumstance and/or choice, did not "take advantage of the golden opportunity to write critically about, or even comment upon, the blues or the classic blues singers."⁶

To conclude, however, that this dearth of criticism indicates that women had little

to say publically about the blues ignores the contributions offered in the songs of the classic blueswomen. In her biography of Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Sandra Lieb writes that despite the fact that two-thirds of Rainey's songs were composed by men, Rainey's performance "clearly articulated female perspective in [her] delivery and performance."⁷ Similarly, Angela Davis argues that "women's blues cannot be understood apart from their role in the molding of an emotional community based on the affirmation of black people's -- and in particular black women's -- absolute and irreducible humanity."⁸ Hazel Carby asserts that the classic blueswomen were at once both organic intellectuals and liminal figures engaged in a proto-feminist discourse exploring the "the various possibilities of sexual existence. . . [the classic blueswomen] attempt to manipulate and control their construction as sexual objects."⁹ Central to these arguments is the notion of black female communal expressivity, a private discourse made public articulating a consensual, vernacular representation of "a cultural and political struggle over sexual relations: a struggle that is directed against the objectification of female sexuality within a patriarchal order but which also tries to reclaim women's bodies as the sexual and sensuous objects of women's songs."¹⁰ As John Coltrane once noted, although the singer was singing "I", the audience heard "we."¹¹

The songs of the classic blueswomen suggest that developing outside the pages of the black (and white) press was a kind of surrogate journalism, a form of cultural reportage that contributed to the blues ontologically while serving as a musical documentary of black women's lives. If the blues are, in Albert Murray's words, an attitude of affirmation in the face of difficulty acknowledging that "life is a low-down dirty shame [to be confronted] with perseverance. . . humor, and, above all, with elegance,"¹² then the chronicles of the classic blueswomen become discursive structures

combining journalism, criticism, and reportage, that fill in some of the gaps left in the pages of the popular press. These song lyrics, "as either straight journalism, humorous and risqué allusion, or strange and beautiful poetry, reflected the urban experiences of the women of their times in songs about subjects they knew well: sex, love, fear, drudgery, violence, drugs, and death."¹³

The music of "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, Alberta Hunter, and others articulated a black female cultural consciousness undermining the notion that women were generally silent when it came to contributing to blues discourse; however, the history of women writing about the blues can be seen as an extended conversation fraught with frequent interruptions, gaps, and silences, lacunae revealed by a cursory glance at the dearth of women's blues scholarship in the seven decades from the publication of Dorothy Scarborough's *On the Trail of Negro Folk Songs* (1926) to Angela Davis's *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1998). The focus of this chapter is on more recent work by women blues journalists and scholars who have contributed to a reinterpretation of blues history (and canon) that argues for a repositioning of the music of the classic blueswomen. The three main works under consideration: Sandra Lieb's *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey* (1981), Daphne Duval Harrison's *Black Pearls: Women Blues Singers of the 1920s* (1987), and Angela Davis's *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1998), are linked in that they offer a reinterpretation of blues scholarship with a theoretical undergirding of feminism and class consciousness that concentrates on women's blues as a site of resistance and empowerment through the public expression of black, working-class women. These texts, implicitly and explicitly, critique, challenge, and (especially in the case of Angela Davis) attempt to destabilize the canonicity of male dominated blues scholarship. By focusing on the classic blueswomen and their music, Lieb, Harrison, and

Davis represent the conflictual nature of blues discourse, an ideological struggle between discursive structures formed by the “systematicity of the ideas, opinions, concepts, ways of thinking, and behaving which are formed within a particular context. . . and the effects of those ways of thinking and behaving.”¹⁴ This female blues discourse uses the music and performance styles of the classic blueswomen to analyze how relations of power are negotiated, its impact on the music as entertainment and social criticism, and the discursive frameworks within which the authors define themselves and the women they write about as gendered (and racialized) subjects.

Before examining these books, however, I will look briefly at two women who have made similarly significant contributions to blues journalism, and who have played important roles in the reshaping blues discourse in the popular press. Although she has written more extensively about jazz, Valerie Wilmer as a journalist/photographer is, along with Paul Oliver, the most important British chronicler of African American vernacular musical culture. Her status as one of the few woman writing about and photographing jazz and blues musicians for many of the major British music publications of the 1950s and 1960s, along with her political activism, led to her describing herself (and being described by the musicians she wrote about) as an “insider” with an “outsider’s” view, a concept reinforced both geographically (as a young, white British woman writing about African American musicians) and by gender (a young, white British woman operating within the predominantly male world of jazz and blues). Adopting a conversational intimacy with her subjects, Wilmer is sensitive to how the imbricated social constructions of gender, sexuality, and race affect her chronicling the music and musicians, and her own cultural and intellectual coming-of-age.

Mary Katherine Aldin, a journalist, essayist, and radio personality for over 30

years, has produced a body of work that reevaluates the discourse and history of the classic blueswomen, and has written about some of the great male blues musicians of the twentieth century. Less explicitly concerned with the uncovering vernacular music's political possibilities than Wilmer, Lieb, Harrison, and Davis, Aldin, is an autodidact who (as did Wilmer) valued an alternative, experiential approach to vernacular music education that was helped along by supportive male and female mentors, many of whom encouraged her to speak her mind, and make her own way.

Valerie Wilmer: Going Places, Being, and Doing

In her memoir, *Mama Said There'd be Days Like This*, Valerie Wilmer recounts her first experience buying records in a London shop in the early 1950s:

I was about 12 years old when I walked into the Swing Shop in Streatham, south London, and asked if they had any jazz records. I remember what I was wearing: a navy-blue windcheater and pleated grey flannel shorts, the tomboy outfit I put on to play football and cycle around the common, smoking cigarettes stolen from unlocked parked cars.

The Swing Shop as it happened, sold *only* jazz records. But Bert Bradfield, massive behind the counter in his loud checked shirt and thick horn-rimmed glasses, was probably relieved that I didn't want the Beverly Sisters. I'm sure he was hiding a smile as he indicated the three modest secondhand racks: 'There's one or two over there.'

I sifted through the 78s in their cardboard sleeves until I came to a familiar name: 'Fidgety Feet' by the Humphrey Lyttleton Band seemed a lively enough title, and it cost only half a crown. Bert said I could have it for two shillings and I rushed home right away with my prize. The gramophone was an ancient portable covered in green imitation crocodile-skin, bought for seven shillings and sixpence in a junkshop. I cranked up the clockwork mechanism and dropped the steel needle on to the shellac. My mother rushed into the room. 'What's *that*?' she demanded in total amazement. 'That's jazz' I said, looking her dead in the eye.¹⁵

This was the first of many visits by Wilmer to the Swing Shop where, with help from her first musical mentor the shop's owner and gentle giant, Bert Bradfield, she "got to know

the literature of jazz as well as the music.”¹⁶ Her epiphany listening to the Humphrey Lyttleton Band began a 30-year career (which continues to flourish) writing about jazz and blues and photographing the men and women who made the music. Her moment of clarity listening to ‘Fidgety Feet’ also coincided with feminist stirrings that rejected the “traditional” domestic work role deemed acceptable for women coming of age in post-World War II England. “I don't think it ever crossed my mind to consider the usual female options,” writes Wilmer, “resolutely opposed as I was to anything that smacked of feminine pursuits and did not involve going places, being and doing.”¹⁷

Wilmer's insistence on going places, being, and doing, combined with her youthful bravado, and passion for the music and musicians resulted in her involvement with some of the seminal figures in British blues and jazz journalism.¹⁸ At 15 she was corresponding with *Jazz Music* co-founder and *Melody Maker* staff writer Max Jones who, prior to Paul Oliver, was Britain's leading authority on African American music. Jones's curiosity was piqued by the fact that, in this decidedly male world of musicians and critics who understood music as a mythic masculine force, he was receiving inquiries about Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington from a London schoolgirl, one who spent a significant amount of her spare time listening to them as well as Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, and Stan Getz, and who dreamed of writing a biography of clarinetist Johnny Dodds. Sufficiently impressed, Jones met with Wilmer, gave her stacks of magazines to read and, more importantly, became an early supporter of her work. From Jones Wilmer adopted his "confidential" style of writing, a style that implied an almost "presumptuous familiarity"¹⁹ with the musicians being profiled (and a style not too dissimilar from that of American jazz critic Ralph Gleason). While other writers rejected this journalistic insiderism as the fastest way to lose critical objectivity, Wilmer was far less motivated

than many of her colleagues to wield a sharp critical axe.²⁰ She was decidedly uninterested in establishing her career, at the expense of musicians, a stance that went against the method of reportage encouraged by the popular music weeklies. To Wilmer, this was little more than a writer's (and editor's) ego in conflict with a musician's intentions which, in her estimation, led to uninformed writing that was, ultimately, more about the critic than the musician. "If you knew someone personally," she notes, "it was less easy to write irresponsibly about what they were doing."²¹

With Jones mentoring her journalism, Wilmer's musical education continued with her passion for records. As with the bluesfinders, records were totemic; for Wilmer they were an historical transcription providing the most readily available doorway into the music and culture of African Americans. And while Wilmer's trips to the Swing Shop and her conversations with Bert Bradfield became more frequent, it was Brian Rust, a friend of Max Jones, who provided Wilmer with an insiders' knowledge of record collecting. Rust was a clean-cut, exceedingly polite, eccentric BBC employee who, like Jones, was intrigued by the zealotry of this schoolgirl jazz obsessive. A meeting led to a friendship and soon Rust was instructing Wilmer on how to look for records and what to look for, especially when it came to old blues recordings. "[Rust] made me aware of the relative values of 78s other than jazz and, armed with a list of desirable items, I'd rummage through stacks of old records on my way home from school. With my beady eye primed for the telltale labels sought by collectors -- I hoped to find early Bessie Smiths bearing the legend 'vocal novelty'."²²

The advice offered by a serious record collector like Brian Rust, while enormously valuable to the adolescent Wilmer in its historical appreciation of the earliest days of the record business and the science of discography, never imbued her with the

“collector mentality” that fetishizes catalogue numbers over the music and musicians. “[The] music itself was the important thing,” notes Wilmer, “a living entity rather than a piece of plastic stuck in a sleeve.”²³ To Wilmer the budding journalist, the record, despite its enormous importance as a means of musical dissemination and education was no replacement for flesh and blood performers. Collecting old blues and jazz records in the 1950s in Britain and America was synonymous with a scientific approach to discography that, in an effort to destabilize a commonly held theory, rejected the marketing of the music as solely “the creation of ‘stars’”²⁴ and stressed collectivity in musical creativity and the recording process. As a result, obscure side musicians (the more obscure the better) were singled out and valorized for their previously unheralded contributions. This “bottom-up” approach to musical history recognized the creative input of the “humble as well as the mighty,” rightfully repositioned lesser known players in the jazz/blues pantheon, and offered a more holistic approach to criticism that challenged celebrity-centered canonicity, and appealed to the “non-critic” in Wilmer.²⁵ However, unlike the vast majority of collectors, Wilmer wanted to do more than reduce these musicians to bits of information; a corpus of facts used to display power and knowledge. “[Some would argue],” she writes, “that a knowledge of who played what, when and with whom was a substitute for the real thing . . . [but] I’d experience the thrill of recognition when an older trumpet player climbed on the bandstand and it turned out to be Herman Autry, who’d cut dozens of sides with Fats Waller before I was born . . . a name from the card index files made flesh.”²⁶

As teachers, Max Jones and Brian Rust wanted to impart their wisdom born of experience to refine what they perceived as Wilmer’s raw, undisciplined taste; she was a fan that needed maturing in order to be taken seriously as a journalist. And in passing on

this experience critics like Jones and collectors like Rust, perhaps unknowingly, reinforced a canon of African American music that frequently diminished or dismissed outright the contributions of women performers:

As time went by I discovered that a number of early 78s by women singers were sought after for the rare trumpet accompaniments by people such as Louis Armstrong rather than for the name on the label. When it came to the women themselves, only the redoubtable Bessie Smith and a handful of other so-called 'classic' blues singers . . . were considered worth owning in their own right.

So deep did this collectors' prejudice against women artists go that it took almost half a century for such 'obscure' singers such as Ida Cox, a massive record-seller in the 1930s, or just about any of the early female instrumentalists, to achieve recognition or anything approaching their own terms. Men were seen as the architects of Afro-American music, the upholders of its rites and rituals. Sad to say, I, too, was influenced by the prevailing standards of white male 'authorities' . With the notable exception of Derrick Stewart-Baxter, another of my early supporters and source of encouragement, who wrote lovingly about the women of the 'classic' period, women were very much regarded as also-rans. I liked Billie Holiday, of course, Bessie Smith and her teacher Ma Rainey, and a handful of others, but for quite a long time few representatives of womankind were allowed on my shelves.²⁷

Such was the attitude of many of the men that mentored Wilmer's early career.

However, to someone as strong-willed and determined as she, her interest in African American music coincided with her growing interest in leftist politics (around the time of her first published article in *Jazz Journal* in 1959 she joined the Young Communist League), feminism, and sexual politics, which led to her coming out as lesbian in the early 70s. At first, being gay was something she "just happened to be," but Wilmer came to understand that her cultural identity as a lesbian was important in that she "realize[d] that whatever happened in my life was not unconnected with my gender, sexuality, and, indeed, my race."²⁸ As imbricated constructs, gender, sexuality, and race, while not boldly announcing themselves in Wilmer's writing, inform her work as a chronicler of

what she perceives as musical outsiders. Partly this was the result of the discographical training learned from collectors like Brain Rust that sought to illuminate and venerate unheralded side musicians, but it was also due to Wilmer's identification with and support of marginalized musical (and political) voices and her "outsider" status as a white British woman writing about (mostly male) African American musicians. Archie Shepp noted that Wilmer's understanding of African American culture came from her looking for secular expressivity in the voices of "the urban or rural illiterate 'outsider,'" and that her insightfulness was partly due to her having an "the outsider's view."²⁹

Living in New York City in the early 1970s, and writing for the British pop music weekly *Melody Maker*, Wilmer penned numerous essays about the post-Coltrane era "new music" and its free jazz-meets-black nationalist politics cultural dialogue spoken by a new generation of African American avant-gardists (e.g., Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp, Clifford Thornton, and Milford Graves). Now reading the essays of Amiri Baraka and the poetry of Sonia Sanchez, Wilmer relied upon a new group of mentors, a group of African American poets, artists, and musicians to help her interpret these polemical signs, "[They] 'pulled my coat' to countless aspects of the art of Black Survival that might otherwise have gone imperceived [sic] by me, the outsider."³⁰ With the help of her mentors, Wilmer was embraced by these artists and musicians, granted temporary insider status, and her experiences culminated in the 1977 publication of *As Serious As Your Life: The Story of the New Jazz*, a collection of interviews with black avant-garde jazz players, that exudes a warmth and intimacy that, doubtlessly, made Max Jones proud.³¹

Despite living in, as she characterizes it, the jazz world, Wilmer developed a similar intimacy with the blues. An organic intellectual and autodidact who valued learning experientially by going places, being, and doing, Valerie Wilmer could not have

scripted a better scenario than when she found herself in the middle of a full-fledged African American musical invasion of late 1950s England. For one who made meaning by doing, this was a once-in-a-lifetime post-graduate education and it marked the start of her journalism career and the end of her photography studies at art college. A regular attendee at rhythm and blues night at London's ultra-hip Flamingo Club (put on by the leaders of the British blues scene Chris Barber, Cyril Davies and Alexis Korner), Wilmer's initial exposure to blues scholarship came from reading Rudi Blesh's two chapters devoted to the subject in his influential 1946 jazz history *Shining Trumpets*. More importantly, it was through the work of Paul Oliver (whom Wilmer refers to as a fellow outsider) that Wilmer was schooled in blues music as a vernacular representation of the culture and politics of African Americans. Oliver befriended Wilmer and championed her writing and, continuing in the tradition of Max Jones, encouraged her to contextualize the music and explore the lives of the people who made it. It was while reading Richard Wright's introduction to *Blues Fell This Morning* (the most important imprimatur offered by an African American author to any book on the blues) that Wilmer began immersing herself in African American literature and how the blues functioned (and continue to function) within the black literary tradition. Wilmer was transfixed by the documentary realism of Wright's fiction. It was Wright's "powerful folk-history of Afro-America in words and pictures" *Twelve Million Black Voices*, his 1941 *cri de coeur* for the black working class that, along with Paul Oliver's 1965 photo/essay of his southern travels, *Conversations With the Blues*, influenced the creation of Wilmer's own 1975 photo journal *The Face of Black Music* wherein portraits of the humble (Reverend Genie Carruthers) were juxtaposed with those of the mighty (Duke Ellington).³²

As she had with Bert Bradfield, Max Jones, Brain Rust, and Paul Oliver, Wilmer

was helped and supported by another musician/writer/collector/entrepreneur turned mentor, Chris Barber. If any one person can rightfully be called the leader of the British blues boom of the pre-Beatlemania late-1950s and early-1960s it is Chris Barber. Barber not only performed the music in his own jazz and blues band but, more importantly, arranged U.K. tours for American bluesmen Otis Spann, Big Bill Broonzy, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, Champion Jack Dupree, and, the most influential of them all, Muddy Waters.³³ He was also an avid record collector who traveled to America to shop at the famed Rainbow Records in Harlem returning from his buying trips with boxes of blues and gospel records, most of which were impossible to locate in England, many of them played on the shows of popular pirate radio station disc jockeys like Mike Raven.³⁴ As a fan/entrepreneur Barber's considerable reach included, with help from fellow musician Cyril Davies, opening London's first blues/jazz club, the Blues and Barrelhouse Club in 1957, and founding the National Jazz League, whose mission was to disseminate what they referred to as the "blues message."³⁵

It was through Barber (and his wife, singer Otilie Patterson) that Wilmer was introduced to African American rhythm and blues and blues musicians such as James Cotton, Louis Jordan, Jesse Fuller and Jimmy Rushing. Although only 16, Wilmer, camera at the ready, followed the Barber-organized 1958 blues tour of England featuring Muddy Waters, the first major tour of American musicians in the United Kingdom since the 22-year American and British musicians union ban was lifted in 1956.³⁶ With Barber's and Patterson's help Wilmer wormed her way backstage to find many of the musicians only too happy for a little "female company after all those earnest record collectors with their talk of forgotten sessions and obscure locations."³⁷ Waters, and pianist Otis Spann, dealt politely with the male fans (especially when plied with

whiskey), but grew weary and impatient with what seemed to be a bombardment of trivial inquiries. Not surprisingly, as many male musicians are wont to do, their attentions turned to Wilmer whom, they assumed, was less interested in arcane recording information, and more interested in the possibility of temporary, intimate companionship. Their primary motivations notwithstanding, they were gentlemanly, notes Wilmer, who remembers a shy and reserved Otis Spann who, after removing himself from a group of earnest, but annoying, white male blues obsessives “squeezed my hand and expressed the hope that we might meet again,” and in doing so seemed glad to find someone “even less sure of themselves (sic) than he.”³⁸

This was not the first time black American blues musicians had played in Britain and the rest of Europe; Lonnie Johnson and Josh White had toured the continent in the early 1950s. However, Wilmer notes that, despite being treated like royalty by adoring fans, they were forced to play up the country boy persona “in order to deliver the fantasy version of the Deep South that listeners . . . craved. [In Europe] they had to play minstrel, despite the professed liberalism of their audience.”³⁹ Muddy Waters's 1958 British tour was different in that it was electric; the loud, modern blues of Chicago's southside. When he plugged in his white Fender Telecaster there were “gasps of disbelief in the audience.” This audible shock came from the traditionalists, moldy fig country blues purists who expected the “hand-on-the-plough kind of stuff that Big Bill Broonzy brought over.”⁴⁰ But as Wilmer notes, Muddy Waters had “long ago scraped the cotton-bolls off his trousers when he quit Stovall's plantation and left Mississippi behind” and his amplified deep blues, which appealed to younger fans who had no problem with electricity and volume, sparked the British blues boom of the early 1960s.⁴¹

As a young journalist covering such a significant cultural moment, Wilmer's

writing reveals a passion and exuberance that echoes the descriptive prose of Carl Van Vechten more than the backward-looking analysis of the scholarly evolutionists, the fetishized "info-speak" of record collectors, and the aesthetic conservatism of moldy fig jazz (and blues) traditionalists. Her diaristic, first-person accounts are built around her centrality to the events and the musicians she chronicles. However, she is careful not to let her presumptuous familiarity become obtrusive; Wilmer is vigilantly sensitive to her subject's voice. "I could have translated the musicians words into my own," she writes in the introduction to her photo/essay collection *Jazz People*, "and thus posed as the great commentator on the psychological makeup of the jazz musician and the sociological makeup of the jazz scene, but I prefer to let the musicians do the talking themselves."⁴² Wilmer writes not with the critic's assumed superior taste and aesthetic authority, but rather, obsessively, as a fan moving excitedly from one musical epiphany to another. Her brief encounter as a teenager with Big Broonzy is recounted some 40 years later with undiminished enthusiasm: "Big Bill had certainly touched me with his music . . . now that he brushed against me before going on his way it was like a laying on of hands and I was newly baptized."⁴³

Valerie Wilmer's journalistic credo was to get to the "inner core" of both the music and the musicians she profiled. As one of the few women writing about blues and jazz in the late 50s and early 60s, hers was an experiential approach imbued with a fan's exuberance that rejected passivity and reflected her need to assert her presence in a jazz world where women were largely considered sexually available window dressing by many male musicians and critics.⁴⁴ (In fact, it was other jealous male critics who began circulating rumors that Wilmer's access to these musicians was the direct result of her having sex with them.) Going places, being and doing, is a common enough mantra

among male critics, but it takes on special significance when attached to a female writer so resolutely opposed to traditional feminine pursuits. The importance of Valerie Wilmer to the multidimensionality of blues discourse (something consistent with all of the women writers under consideration in this chapter) is that, as discursive practice, her writing (and photography)⁴⁵ functions less like an isolated text and more like a systematic practice that forms her sense of reality and identity by demarcating the boundaries within which she negotiates what it means for her (and her subjects) to be gendered, and in doing so creates a discursive conflict. Since discourses do not exist in a vacuum, but rather “in constant conflict with other discourses and other social practices which inform them over questions of truth and authority.”⁴⁶ This series of conflicts results not in the production of an unassailable truth or representation of the “real” but reveals the social and cultural mechanisms (e.g., institutional support, access to funding, the respect of peers, and the general population) that contribute to the production of a dominant discourse. What is left are opposing, “unconventional” discourses that are treated with suspicion, or regarded as attacks against the artistic canon.

Creating discourse in a similar but, less overtly politicized way, Wilmer's closest American counterpart, Mary Katherine Aldin, began her career in blues journalism as an enthusiastic young fan who found herself in the middle of the 60s blues revival (as well as the era's attendant political and social upheaval). As did Wilmer, Aldin received a vernacular music education from a mostly male group of mentors that included writers and musicians, rejecting the role of observer for that of participant, and constructing, what she considers, a more intellectually fulfilling and liberating existence.

Mary Katherine Aldin: Preaching the Blues

Growing up in New York City in the early 1950s, Mary Katherine Aldin's formal education ended upon completion of the sixth grade, her musical education, however, began a few years later on the "fringes of the . . . folk scene" working at the folkie hangout the Gaslight Café in Greenwich Village. It was through her folk music contacts that she met Pete Seeger who in turn introduced her to Woody Guthrie and Josh White, and Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee. These formidable musical figures became primary sources of inspiration and education for Aldin who learned about vernacular musical traditions from the musicians themselves.⁴⁷ At the time, however, blues was not considered a separate genre and virtually all secular vernacular music fell under the rubric of "folk." "Both black and white musicians were then described by themselves and everyone else as folk musicians," Aldin notes, "I never heard the term 'blues' used."⁴⁸ This changed when another folkie friend, Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul and Mary, took Aldin (who had moved to Los Angeles in 1962) to the 1963 Newport Folk Festival where she "heard rural and urban blues along side, but clearly distinct from, the folk music of the day. I fell in love with all of it -- cajun bands, John Lee Hooker, white hillbilly and mountain musicians, everything."⁴⁹

Newly (re)invigorated, Aldin returned to Los Angeles and her job as manager of the Ash Grove, one of the city's hippest folk/blues clubs. During her years at the Ash Grove her education that began on the fringes of the New York folk scene continued with Aldin establishing close friendships with blues musicians such as Mance Lipscomb, Willie Dixon, and, her personal favorite, Muddy Waters. As did Valerie Wilmer, Aldin valued going places, being and doing, and getting to the inner core of the music and the musicians. And, despite the growing interest in blues as a subject for book-length

studies, Aldin, initially, preferred her self-directed experiential approach to learning and understanding the blues. "I never 'studied' the blues," she notes, "and until I began writing liner notes and producing reissues I had never read a single book on blues music." Once established as a writer, however, she began reading what she calls the "standard" blues texts, namely Samuel Charters's *The Country Blues* and Paul Oliver's *Blues Fell This Morning*.⁵⁰

Managing the Ash Grove led to an increasing number of linked entrepreneurial activities centered around preserving and documenting the blues. Aldin opened a record store that specialized in "American traditional music," she organized and produced blues and bluegrass festivals in California, in the mid-1970s she hosted "Preaching the Blues" for Pacifica Radio, founded the Southern California Blues Society, and most importantly, launched a series of blues, bluegrass and country LP (and later CD) reissues that featured her main source of writing, the liner essay.

Unlike Valerie Wilmer, who wrote primarily for popular music journals and specialty jazz publications, Aldin's writing was slightly less public in that reading her work often required purchasing a record. Still, among blues enthusiasts buying these reissues, the liner essay remains a valuable source of information. Blues reissues offered writers like Aldin (and many male collectors and bluesfinders) one of the few places that printed lengthy essays historicizing and contextualizing the music and the artists. As documentarians of American vernacular music, these revivalist/collectors turned writers were not offering evaluative criticism but rather, as was Aldin, writing only about artists that interested them -- artists they believed to be essential to an understanding of the blues canon.

In crafting her essays what is most evident about Aldin's writing is her

enthusiasm. “What makes good writing,” she insists, “is having good music to write about, first, and then having a real true love of and feeling for that music, and the need to convey that love as strongly as possible to others.”⁵¹ And while this rhetorical strategy is not unlike Valerie Wilmer's, Aldin rejects the notion that her gender has any bearing on how she approaches her writing. “I don't produce reissues or write liner notes as a woman,” she notes. “I produce as a producer and write as a writer. My sex has nothing more to do with my work than does the color of my eyes.” And in general, Aldin's passionate reportage reflects her skills at “writing in equal parts about the music and the musician talk[ing] some about the genre, its history, its development some biographical notes [about the musician] and perhaps a discussion of her or his earlier work.”⁵² However, this does not mean that Aldin's writing, especially when it comes to the assumed “maleness” in the performance and recording of blues music and the construction of a blues canon, completely avoids questions of gender and representation. In a recent liner essay for a collection of recordings by women blues singers, she writes:

The marriage of women and blues music seems, at first glance, an odd coupling if there ever was one. Blues is perceived as a genre of rough, forthright, and sometimes downright nasty lyrics and tough, aggressive musicianship while back in the early days of recording technology ladies were supposed to be, well, ladies [some] of these women were better known than others; some spent their lives perfecting their music, while others were one-hit (or one non-hit) wonders; but each was an important piece of the whole. Separated by then-immovable differences of gender, class and caste from their male counterparts, they had to find expressions of their own ‘Protected’ by a series of fathers, brothers, husbands and sons, they were told what songs to sing and given roles to play. It didn't slow them down much, though.

The debt owed to these pioneers, who faced and overcame numerous challenges imposed by society because of their race and gender, is an incalculable one. It's thanks to their efforts that women blues artists of today have the right to play their songs and strut their stuff.⁵³

What Aldin defines here reveals an understanding of aesthetics as being more than a philosophy or theory of culture, but something that articulates how women inhabit space as performers, contributors to a blues discourse, and blues canon, by establishing a “way of looking and becoming.” Her opening sentence (which has a tongue-in-cheek quality to it) sets up the gender and class boundaries faced by female performers, and inverts conventional ways of thinking about women and the blues that, ultimately, argues that, as hooks writes, “the power of art resides in its potential to transgress [these] boundaries.”⁵⁴ And, as a contributing element to blues discourse, Aldin’s politicized repositioning of women in the blues maps out a subject identity at odds with the institutions and social practices that have shaped them.⁵⁵

Although the liner essay is clearly Aldin's metier she did contribute regularly to journals such as *Living Blues*, *Blues and Rhythm* (which she also co-founded), and *LA Weekly*.⁵⁶ And despite being involved in blues journalism since the early 1970s, Aldin considers her Grammy Award-nominated 1989 liner notes (co-written with the late Robert Palmer) for the three-CD Muddy Waters boxed set to be her big break as a writer. Although she did not win the award, the nomination gave her added visibility and credibility, and led to her writing an essay on the history of women in roots music for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Awards program in 1993 (a prestigious assignment much sought-after by music critics), and being the only woman to contribute to the award-winning anthology *Nothing But The Blues*. But this added visibility did not significantly increase Aldin's public profile and she remains venerated by her peers yet virtually unknown to many self-described blues fans. According to Aldin, this anonymity suits her, “I’m not a celebrity and want no part of ever becoming one,” she emphatically notes, adding, “it has always seemed rather pretentious and arrogant [to think] my views have

more importance in the world than anyone else's."⁵⁷

Part of why Valerie Wilmer and Mary Katherine Aldin write so authoritatively about blues music and musicians is that before they were dedicated writers, they were dedicated, sympathetic, and well-versed members of the audience. Along with being fans turned music historians, Wilmer and Aldin are linked by the shared sense of endless possibility born out of a rejection of gender stereotypes, and assumptions about female sexual availability, impediments designed to reinforce the male hegemony of blues discourse. While learning from and working with some of the most important men in music and journalism, Wilmer's and Aldin's careers were not simply by-products of these relationships.

Undoubtedly influenced by the canon these journalists (and record collectors) helped create, they did not simply propagate scholarly ideology but, almost from the start, trusted their own tastes and instincts to make their own way in the world. As women in punk rock were wont to note, it was the crucial difference between being recognized as the guitar player rather than the guitar player's girlfriend.

The mere existence of women like Valerie Wilmer and Mary Katherine Aldin offer a counterpoint to blues scholarship's male hegemony. To paraphrase Jean Collet, they both understood life in the old world and the need to invent a new one. And while Wilmer and Aldin wrote most frequently about blues*men*, it was the classic blueswomen of the 1920s that presented them (especially Aldin) with the opportunity to revise the blues canon. Valerie Wilmer watched her male record collector friends wrongly dismiss much of the classic blues (in a fit of neo-evolutionism) for lacking the primitive authenticity of the country blues. Similarly, Mary Katherine Aldin called for a greater appreciation of the classic blues as oral history, songs written primarily by men and sung

by women that candidly documented the lives of working-class black women. However, it would be an overstatement to suggest that this kind of musical analysis, one emphasizing the impact of historical and political contexts, was intrinsic to blues writing by women. Paul Oliver, and Amiri Baraka, most significantly, had woven historical and political narratives throughout their analyses of the blues. Nevertheless, the classic blues era remains a site of ongoing cultural revisionism and the source point for the majority of feminist-inspired, book-length blues scholarship. The scholarship, like the music itself, is nothing if not dialogic, "the product of an ongoing historical conversation. . . .one embedded in collective history and nurtured by the ingenuity of artists fashioning icons of opposition."⁵⁸ It is the search for these icons of opposition, their place in the blues canon, their contribution to blues discourse, and their relative invisibility that intrigues journalists like Wilmer and Aldin. These same concerns fuel the work of like-minded feminist academics such as Sandra Lieb, Daphne Duval Harrison, and Angela Davis, all of whom have contributed to the shape and tenor of this counter-hegemonic scholarship.

Sandra Lieb: (Re)Discovering Ma Rainey

Sandra Lieb was not the first person to write at length about Gertrude Pridgett "Ma" Rainey. In 1970 British blues and jazz critic Derek Stewart-Baxter published *Ma Rainey and the Classic Blues Singers* which, in an attempt to be comprehensive, devoted a mere ten pages to Rainey's life and work.⁵⁹ Stewart-Baxter's brief chapter was not the product of laziness or disinterest but rather an attempt to encourage other writers to more fully examine Rainey's life and work. Four years later, Sandra Lieb, then a graduate student at Stanford University, took on Stewart-Baxter's challenge and made Rainey the focus of her doctoral dissertation. She was prompted by what she saw as a decade-long

revival in interest of the music of the classic blues era, due in large part to Columbia Records reissuing all of Bessie Smith's extant recordings in the early 70s. Lieb's book, *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey*, published in 1981, remains the most comprehensive study of Rainey's life and work, and is the earliest woman-authored feminist-inspired study to rearticulate the meaning and importance of the classic blueswomen and advocate rethinking their contribution to blues discourse and place in the blues canon. "[Mine] is the first [book] to focus exclusively on the songs of Ma Rainey and to examine expressions of women's attitudes about love," writes Lieb in the introduction, adding "it is my contention that the body of Ma Rainey's recorded songs constitutes a message to women, explaining quite clearly how to deal with reverses in love and how to interpret other areas of life."⁶⁰

Lieb's scholarly foundation was built upon books she deemed "important thematic studies of the blues," chief among them Paul Oliver's *Blues Fell This Morning* and Paul Garon's *Blues and the Poetic Spirit*, published in 1975.⁶¹ The methodological approach employed by Oliver and Garon (lyrical analyses that contextualized the music socially and politically) appealed to Lieb who sought to do the same with Rainey's own compositions (approximately one-third of her recorded material), as well as her interpretations of songs written by men, as a means of exploring how Rainey "gave a clearly articulated female perspective [in] delivery and performance."⁶² In doing this Lieb borrows largely from Garon's controversial psychological and literary analysis of the blues dubbed "psychopoetic," an analytical strategy that attempts to transcend standard sociological interpretations of the blues by examining the music as a complex system of thought and language, one that reacts to repression through the communication of aggression and desire. Undergirding Garon's psychopoetic study was his ideological

unpacking of how specific “sociological, cultural, economic, psychological, and political forces faced by working class African Americans -- forces permeated with racism -- produced the blues.” As it pertains to Lieb's work, these forces are permeated with sexism as well.⁶³

Lieb's study of Rainey, while important in explicating the “womanist” (Lieb's word) perspective on the classic blues, is striking too for its nuanced negotiation of the artificially constructed genre barriers that for decades had separated the commercial, female sound of the classic blues from the male-centered folk/country blues. Lieb does not reject these genre designations but rather, sees them as permeable boundaries that Rainey effortlessly (and regularly) transgressed.⁶⁴ Lieb's account of Rainey's early days as a member of the Rabbit Foot Minstrels connects what she calls the “dynamic interaction between black professional entertainment and folk blues,” a conflation of styles that included blues “comedy, dancing, novelty, and topical songs, as well as the latest ‘ballits’ -- song sheets from the city.”⁶⁵ Rather than relegate the music of the classic blues to simply the commercialized, polished essence of the folk tradition, Lieb refers to it as a stylistic “synthesis of folk blues melodies, themes, and images, and a style of black minstrelsy and Toby-time vaudeville.”⁶⁶ And while Rainey, who performed in heavy makeup, elegant gowns, and shimmering tiaras, seemed visually to be a far cry from the image of overall-clad, folk bluesman, Lieb argues that, as a composer and interpreter, Rainey served as a conduit connecting rural and urban blues traditions, presenting them to an audience who understood and celebrated how these “folk-blues concoctions”⁶⁷ reflected their everyday lives:

[She] frequently used a core of traditional lyrics, to which she added new material, and by performing her own compositions she retained at least the appearance of speaking from her own experience. Structurally, her recorded material reveals an overwhelming dominance of the blues --

composed blues to be sure, but with a great number of twelve-bar blues and a close relationship to the folk heritage. That folk blues survived and flourished in her work may be seen in the twelve-bar blues form with its conventional chords, three-line stanzas, and rural imagery; in her rough unsophisticated voice with its imperfect diction, blue notes, moans, and slurs. . . .Ma Rainey's great accomplishment was to perfect a synthesis of these two modes, folk blues and black show business, in such a manner that her material in performance became the blues, regardless of its technical definition.⁶⁸

By extolling Ma Rainey as “the strongest single link between folk blues and black show business,” Lieb is, in essence, arguing a case for Rainey living up to the literal meaning of her sobriquet “Mother of the Blues.” However, Lieb contends, this is a black mother figure who used sexual expression as a means of creating a new female symbol, one disengaged from the “minstrel stereotypes of suffering mammies [and] tragic mulattoes.” Ma Rainey's sexual frankness and her uncloseted bisexuality become a source of expressive power. “While the culture frequently views heavy women as ugly, and mothers as asexual,” writes Lieb, “Ma Rainey could be both big and sexy, both maternal and erotic. . . .[Bisexual herself] she was fully alive to the varieties of sexual experience and expression.”⁶⁹ It is the politics of pleasure and sexual expression that become key elements in the reevaluation of the music of the classic blueswomen by women scholars. Partly, this is the result of using music as a way of analyzing how women, individually and collectively, negotiate relations of power, but also how female subject identity is (re)constructed by “exploring marginal locations as spaces where [women] can best become whatever [they] want to be,” producing a discourse of sexuality that asserts an empowered presence.⁷⁰ Lieb (and her colleagues) set out to investigate these discursive feminist texts interrogating representations of feminism, sexuality, and power in black women's lives. As important as it was for Lieb to historicize Rainey as a performer who, almost singlehandedly, represented the collision

between “the unchanging aphorisms of folk poetry and the nervous rhythms of modern life,”⁷¹ it was equally important to analyze the messages to women in her songs. In doing so, Lieb makes a case for a discursive shift in the blues canon, one that no longer relegates the music of the classic blueswomen to a denigrated status as little more than bastardized commercialism. Lieb was sensitive to the idea that “the women who sang the blues did not typically affirm female resignation and powerlessness, nor did they accept the relegation of women to private and interior spaces.”⁷²

While it did not set off an avalanche of scholarly revisionism on the classic blueswomen, Lieb's examination of Rainey's proto-feminism was embraced by those female academics keen to continue in the tradition of Zora Neale Hurston (and the feminist tradition of Anna Julia Cooper) and study the cultural politics of black female vernacular musical expression. Although she has written very little on the blues, Hazel Carby's 1986 essay, “It Just Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues,” is a part of this tradition and functions as an important intellectual bridge between Sandra Lieb's groundbreaking analysis of Ma Rainey and later studies of classic blueswomen by Daphne Duval Harrison and Angela Davis.⁷³

Carby's brief essay examines how a discourse of sexuality is produced (and consumed) by African American women, and how this women's blues discourse “articulates a cultural and political struggle over sexual relations.”⁷⁴ Using Sandra Lieb's work (and by extension Paul Garon's psychopoetic analysis) as a guide, Carby argues for an understanding of the classic blues as a site of struggle over male-female power relations, a struggle dramatically affected by migration:

The music and song of the women's blues singers embodied the social relations and contradictions of black displacement: of rural migration and the urban flux. In this sense, as singers, these women were *organic*

intellectuals (my emphasis); not only were they a part of the community that was the subject of their song but they were also a product of the rural to urban movement.⁷⁵

As organic intellectuals engaged in a cultural and political struggle over sexual relations, the classic blueswomen are engaged in articulating the “entwined phenomena of discourse, communication, and social practices.”⁷⁶ This moment of praxis, built upon the expressivity of everyday life through music, provides the opportunity for the classic blueswomen to create what Ray Pratt has called an “enclave of opportunity,” a space that allows for the creation of an alternative psychological reality.⁷⁷ As Carby notes, the figure of the woman blues singer “has become a cultural embodiment of sexual conflict” and as such occupies a privileged space allowing her to take her “sensuality and sexuality out of the private and into the public sphere.”⁷⁸ Implicit in her argument is how the music of the classic blueswomen functions as vernacular theory in its ability to “speak a critical language grounded in local concerns” and in doing so explicitly reject cultural containment.⁷⁹

Picking up where Sandra Lieb left off, Hazel Carby's essay expanded the parameters of blues scholarship by and about women by interpolating black feminist theory into her close reading of lyrics. And while Lieb's methodology clearly influenced (and perhaps inspired) Carby, Carby's conflation of Gramsci, Sterling Brown, and Sherey Anne Williams, combined with her own lyrical analysis, offered a method of interrogation that allowed for a clearer reading of women's blues as an alternative form of representation, and how the audience heard “we” when the singer sang “I.”

Daphne Duval Harrison and Angela Davis: Black Pearls, Blues Legacies, and Black Feminism

After Sandra Lieb and Hazel Carby the most significant and wide-ranging examination of the classic blueswomen was Daphne Duval Harrison's *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* published in 1988. While Lieb chose to narrow her focus to Rainey as representative of the nexus of folk blues and urban blues and proto-feminism, Harrison took on the more daunting challenge of providing a “comprehensive profile of the blues women of the 1920s and their contributions to American music history.”⁸⁰ Harrison's motivation was partly due to her interest in using history as a means of challenging a persistent scholarly mentality that still marginalized the music of the classic blueswomen. However, she was also interested in examining these women as “pivotal figures in the assertion of black women's ideas and ideals from the standpoint of the working class and the poor.”⁸¹ As did Sandra Lieb and Hazel Carby before her, Harrison argued for a more nuanced understanding of the lives and music of the classic blueswomen as a means of better understanding their “dynamic role as spokespersons and interpreters of the dreams, harsh realities, and tragicomedies of the black experience in the first three decades of this century.”⁸²

Harrison's methodological influences read like a who's who of blues scholarship and cultural history: Paul Oliver, Samuel Charters, Paul Garon, Jeff Todd Titon, Lawrence Levine, and Amiri Baraka. However she notes that while these writers were significant in crafting blues history and a blues canon, as well as influencing her own blues education, they did so focusing almost exclusively on male performers. Seeking to fill this gap, Harrison turned to pioneering work in women's jazz studies, specifically books by Linda Dahl and Sally Placksin, both of whom had included some of the classic

blueswomen in their studies.⁸³ More importantly, Harrison cited Sandra Lieb's work on Ma Rainey as particularly influential in that Lieb was the first to historicize and contextualize a female blues singer and her work in a way that celebrated the performer as a "distinct personality and creative artist." While Dahl's and Placksin's books provided a rhetorical strategy for Harrison (i.e., the biographical overview as cultural history), it was Lieb's study of Ma Rainey that influenced the book's analytical framework. "My main objective," Harrison writes in her introduction, "is to identify some of the most outstanding women of that era in terms of their particular styles, popularity, and influence; and in the cultural context of the black experience of the 1920s, to discuss the blues these women sang."⁸⁴ This sentiment is in keeping with Lieb's assertion that what the classic blueswomen contribute to the larger blues discourse is a particularly female awareness.

As was Sandra Lieb, Harrison was familiar with Paul Garon's *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* and its usefulness as a method of extracting and decoding lyrics articulating the black women's experience. Using Ida Cox's proto-feminist rallying cry "wild women don't have the blues" as a chapter title, Harrison issues what amounts to a challenge to a male dominated blues canon by arguing for an analysis of women's blues that considers the emerging feminist perspective of "the black woman as a free-standing person who articulates the intent and desire to break away from sexual, as well as racial oppression."⁸⁵ In this argument Harrison posits a more inclusive blues history that includes the particularized expression of the classic blueswomen as an alternative view of the black experience that incorporates an emotional and spiritual toughness.

The blues women of Ida Cox's era brought to their lyrics and performances new meaning as they interpreted and reformulated the black experience from their unique perspective in American society as black females. They

saw a world that did not protect the sanctity of black womanhood, as espoused in bourgeois ideology; only white middle or upperclass women were protected by it. They saw and experienced injustice as jobs they held were snatched away when white women refused to work with them or white men returned from war to reclaim them. They pointed out the pain of sexual and physical abuse and abandonment. They sought escape from the oppressive controls of the black church but they did not seek to sever their lives from home, family, and loved ones. They reorganized reality through surrealistic fantasies and cynical parodies such as 'Red Lantern Blues,' "Black Snake Moan," and "Stavin' Chain."⁸⁶

Reaffirming this are the voices of the blueswomen themselves, voices that make up a significant portion of *Black Pearls*. Rather than re-examine the lives and careers of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, Harrison chose instead to write about living classic blueswomen, some of whom were still performing in their 80s. These were not obscure figures rescued from the margins of blues history, but singers such as Alberta Hunter, Victoria Spivey, Sippie Wallace, and Edith Wilson, all of whom were recording stars during the 1920s. By allowing the artists to speak for themselves Harrison used oral history in a manner not dissimilar from the confidential style of journalism employed by Valerie Wilmer. While Harrison the cultural historian is interested in framing these stories within a social and political context, she does so to articulate the links between the performers lifestyles and their chosen mode of expression.⁸⁷ Also, using oral history in the manner she does, Harrison recenters these performers in the blues pantheon offering a new version of the blues canon that incorporates the contributions of the classic blueswomen not only as part of a marginalized sub-genre, but as part of the larger blues discourse, one that clarifies "the role of black women in American history." As a woman rewriting the history of women in the blues Harrison is motivated by the dialogic nature of this cultural history and the search for these icons of opposition who, she concludes:

[introduced] and refined vocal strategies that gave lyrics added power.

Some of this instrumentality, voices growling and sliding like trombones, or wailing and piercing like clarinets; unexpected word stress; vocal breaks in antiphony with the accompaniment; syncopated phrasing; unlimited improvisation on repetitious refrains or phrases. [They presented] alternative models of attitude and behavior for black women during the 1920s. They demonstrated that black women could be financially independent, outspoken, and physically attractive. [They] filled the hearts and souls of their subjects with joy and laughter and renewed their spirits with the love and hope that came from a deep well of faith and will to endure.⁸⁸

Without the groundbreaking research of Sandra Lieb and Daphne Duval Harrison (helped along in no small way by Hazel Carby) it would be nearly impossible to conceive of a book such as Angela Davis's *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*. With its publication in 1998 Davis became the highest-profile African American feminist to contribute to the blues discourse, weighing in on the lives and music of three blueswomen. Occupying a space somewhere between Lieb and Harrison, Davis chose specificity over comprehensiveness by selecting Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday, examining how their music articulated a black working-class feminist ideology and historical consciousness.

That Davis should reach this conclusion is unsurprising. Her public life as the most recognizable female black radical of the 1960s, FBI fugitive (landing briefly on the bureau's ten most wanted list), and vice-presidential candidate as a member of the Communist Party, has been well-documented in the press and by Davis herself in her self-titled 1974 autobiography. As a scholar, she has written numerous essays on political and judicial reform, feminism, and the sociology of poverty, as well as book length studies such as *Women, Race, and Class* (1982) and *Women, Culture, and Politics* (1988). As Joan Elliot notes, Davis's polemics "interpret the women's place in industrial capitalism historically and attack the collusion of traditions and practices that work

against women."⁸⁹ Davis considers *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* to be a continuation of issues she explored in *Women, Race, and Class*: "Both texts are concerned with unearthing black women's unacknowledged historical contributions to discourses on race, gender, and class, as well as with offering an alternative vantage point from which to examine the history of this country, and of black people's presence in it."⁹⁰

Davis's work continues in the tradition of Lieb and Harrison insofar as her analysis of the blues is textual (and contextual) rather than strictly biographical or musicological. Important too is the influence of Zora Neale Hurston from whom Davis freely adapts her theory of vernacular culture as a "[Big] old serving platter. . . each plate [having] a flavor of its own because people take the universal stuff and season it to suit themselves."⁹¹ Hurston also saw the political struggle embedded in vernacular culture noting that rural communities used folkloric traditions as a kind of existential struggle, a way of "asking infinity some questions about what is going on around its doorsteps."⁹² As a complex interpretive strategy, Davis's use of these feminist readings of the blues, Marxist cultural theory, and African American literary theory is in keeping with her scholarly emphasis on attacking the collusion of traditions and practices that work against women:

Not a lot has been written about Rainey and Smith, and most of the material that does exist is either biographical or it focuses in a technical way on the music. . . . [There] has been a great deal of material written about Billie Holiday, almost all of which also is biographical in nature. And what tends to happen -- and this is illustrated dramatically in the case of Billie Holiday -- is that the focus on the individual life of the artist, the sexual relationships, the drinking, the experiences of racism, etc., tend to detract from or completely obliterate any interest in her vital historical contributions. Biographical studies tend to foreground their subjects as 'characters' and often fail to situate the individuals in the larger historical/social/political contexts in which they live or lived. Rainey, Smith, and Holiday all are part of a long and rich cultural continuum, but

they also are part of a tradition of struggle and resistance that we more readily associate with the Black Women's Club Movement, the NAACP, and individuals like Mary Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells, who had access to certain avenues, like written texts, that were not readily available to the majority of poor and working-class women, either as consumers or producers.⁹³

At the core of Davis's argument is an unwavering belief in the music of the classic blueswomen as part of an ongoing historical conversation fashioned by icons of opposition, an argument challenging a scholarly blues tradition that frequently deemphasized the music's potential as political critique and the performers as agents of historical change. This conscious depoliticization of vernacular expression, she contends, has long been an accepted premise in scholarly blues codified by both Samuel Charters and Paul Oliver. Davis criticizes Charters's failure to consider the analytical and interpretive strategies of the audience and his treatment of potential protest as so constricted by white racism as to be virtually undetectable. As for Oliver, she vehemently disagrees with his theory that the lack of overt protest in the blues was the result of African Americans being "nothing more than the product of their material circumstances," arguing that he (and Charters) fail to address male dominance as a subject worthy of social protest.⁹⁴

Davis's politicization of communal expressivity reflects Lawrence Levine's contention that music, as a survival strategy, offers a potential outlet for the expression of individual feelings while drawing the individual back into a communal presence, allowing one to "bask in the warmth of shared assumptions of those around him." She is also constructing "radical black subjectivity" by situating the classic blueswomen and their music as a site of political resistance that exists outside of a context that circumscribes them culturally "where white people. . .are trying to maintain cultural

hegemony."⁹⁵ This connection between an individual supported by a like-minded community forms the theoretical foundation for a study of resistive agency using vernacular theory.

As one interested in music as a community-building force, Davis uses vernacular theory as an alternative way of engaging with the music and recognizing that cultural meaning is often made by those "who lack cultural power and who speak a critical language grounded in local concerns."⁹⁶ This theoretical tack, which conflates the Foucauldian paradigm of the production of "naive knowledges located. . .beneath the level of cognition and scientificity" with black vernacular culture's representation of identity politics, argues for vernacular theorizing as a means of better understanding this larger imagined community of female blues performers and fans.⁹⁷ As Davis notes, "Black women who heard Bessie Smith sing about a frustrating employment situation or a two-timing man could feel themselves a part of a larger community; the blues were a remedy for feelings of isolation, and the process of naming one's problems."⁹⁸ This kind of personal political expression Davis interprets as vernacular theory that, in the music of the classic blueswomen, is a discourse against power created by these icons of opposition, a tactic for personal survival that, as Hazel Carby noted, recognizes and rejects cultural containment.

Davis's interpretive strategy argues for an understanding of the cultural specificity of the blues as a site of an emerging black, working-class, feminist consciousness. And while her book expands the discursive parameters set by Lieb and Harrison, as well critiquing the putative blues canon for depoliticizing and marginalizing women, it does so controversially. Davis, more so than her scholarly blues sisters, places a great value on being a provocateur and, like Amiri Baraka, Houston Baker, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.,

before her, this means a study of African American culture that sees the blues not just as music, but as a trope. Blues and jazz writer Francis Davis, himself the author of scholarly study of the blues that, like Angela Davis's, both embraces and debunks the blues canon, criticizes *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* for its over reliance on "Marxism gone post-modern: a tool for the analysis of literary and other 'texts,' not necessarily a call for the exploited masses to rise."⁹⁹ Although he notes that her book is "filled with powerful ideas," he critiques Davis's lyrical analyses for occasionally being "dogmatic and bizarre." While he is in agreement with her assertion that blues as an expression of the black working class "derived its power from its rejection of the standards of propriety embraced by the emerging black bourgeoisie," Francis Davis is more in line with Samuel Charters and Paul Oliver when it comes to the blues as a site of coded (and not so coded) resistive agency. "If you accept the official version," Davis writes in his canonically titled *The History of the Blues*, "blues songs are rarely vehicles of overt protest."¹⁰⁰ And, in a brief critique aimed at those (like Angela Davis) who would offer ideologically driven interpretive strategies, Davis suggests that "there are many ways of hearing the blues and one of these is as an oppressed race's sublimated *cri de coeur*. Blues singers always seem to be saying more than the words to their songs literally say, and that sometimes encourages us to hear things that simply aren't there."¹⁰¹ But the argument put forth by Angela Davis (and Sandra Lieb and Daphne Duval Harrison and Hazel Carby) is that these messages *aren't simply there*, that double-voiced discourse is part of the inherently polysemic nature of popular music. This is a literary process that Mikhail Bakhtin identified as heteroglossia, a means of expressing authorial intent in a refracted way that creates a double-voiced discourse that serves two speakers at the same time, expressing two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking

and the refracted intent of the author. What is important is that within this refracted discourse there are two dialogically related voices, each one cognizant of the other, a concentrated dialogue of "two voices, two world views, two languages."¹⁰² This process, employed by artists like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith to articulate the suppressed meanings into the public sphere that, like the blues scholarship that unearthed them, emerge through the fissures of patriarchal discourse.¹⁰³

Conclusion

"The modern canon," writes David Hollinger, "was a set of ciphers, an agenda of mysteries, a collection of secular scriptures in which were embedded certain elusive but profound truths that could be discovered only by hard work."¹⁰⁴ Hollinger is referring to a literary canon, but he could easily be talking about the blues. For the most part, this hard work, the parsing out of meanings, the search for these elusive and profound truths, were done by men, many of whom had limited the contributions of the classic blueswomen as secondary to the secular scriptures of male country blues performers. Valerie Wilmer became cognizant of this watching her record collector mentors deem classic blues as worthwhile only for the presence of obscure male backing musicians. Mary Katherine Aldin understood that the music of the classic blueswomen had a thematic specificity that bordered on aural journalism. And the linked scholarly works of Sandra Lieb, Daphne Duval Harrison, Hazel Carby, and Angela Davis advocate a recentering of women in the blues canon and an understanding that the sub-genre "classic blues" is ultimately too limiting to be useful. These women all understood that whether it was sung onstage at the Cotton Club or in a juke joint in the rural south it was "the blues" -- similar in kind though different in place," or, as Daphne Duval Harrison notes, "[what

counted] was that the audience for the recordings accepted and endorsed them as blues."¹⁰⁵

Whether it was in the pages of the popular music press, in liner essays, or in book-length studies, what these writers offered, implicitly and explicitly, was a challenge to a putative blues canon that frequently deemed the sound of the classic blues as inauthentic, depoliticized, or worse, supper club music.¹⁰⁶ And while the sound of the classic blueswomen defines what W.C. Handy meant by the "polished essence" of the country blues, it retains, as Stuart Hall puts it in the epigraph that opened this chapter, "elements of discourse that are different from other forms of life [and] other traditions of representation."¹⁰⁷ This discourse, by women and about women, understands popular music as an arena in which women as performers, writers, and audience members, discover and play with identifications and representation, and in doing so forge an independent meaning capable of, and arguing for, historical transformation.

Notes for Chapter 4

1. Bessie Smith, "I Ain't Goin to Play No Second Fiddle," from *The Essential Bessie Smith*, Sony/Columbia compact disc, 1999.

2. Stuart Hall, "What is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" from Stuart Hall: *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds., David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 467.

3. Maude Cuney Hare, *Negro Musicians and Their Music* (New York: Da Capo, 1975 [1936]), 34

4. The fact that her weekly column in the *Pittsburgh Courier* was called "Through the Lorgnette of Geraldyn Dismond" indicates that despite her somewhat muted enthusiasm for the blues, ultimately she was interested in more sophisticated forms of musical entertainment.

5. Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 160.

6. Philip McGuire, "Black Music Critics and the Classic Blues Singers," *Black Perspective in Music*, Vol. 14, no. 2, Spring 1986, 125.

7. Sandra Lieb, *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), xiv.
8. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*,
9. Hazel Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," *Radical Amerika* 20, no.4 (1986), 12.
10. Ibid., 15.
11. John Coltrane quoted in Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime," 33.
12. Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (New York: Da Capo, 1976), 33.
13. Mary Katherine Aldin, liner booklet essay for, *Women Blues Singers*, MCAD2-11788, compact disc.
14. Sara Mills, *Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 7.
15. Valerie Wilmer, *Mama Said There 'd Be Days Like This* (London: The Women's Press, 1991), 3.
16. Ibid., 15.

17. Ibid., 4.

18. In her memoir Wilmer admits that what fueled her fascination with jazz was wanting to know “how it worked,” something, she notes, applied to all of her early interests. “On Saturday I’d visit the Science Museum with its beautifully constructed working models of machinery, all shiny brass and precision engineering; and, whenever the opportunity arose, I’d dismantle any clocks that had ground to a halt, though the task of remedying their condition proved too much for inexperienced fingers. . . I read boys’ story-magazines, *Hotspur* and *Rover*, as well as the more acceptable *Girls’ Crystal* and *School Friend*, and when I wasn’t painting cavaliers or cowboys was constantly involved in scientific pursuits,” 4.

19. Wilmer, *Mama Said*, 135.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 22-23.

23. Ibid., 24.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., 25.

28. Ibid., 149.

29. Archie Shepp, introduction from Valerie Wilmer, *The Face of Black Music* (New York: Da Capo, 1975), 1.

30. Wilmer, *Mama Said*, 239.

31. Wilmer's book has been reprinted with the slightly amended title, *As Serious As Your Life: John Coltrane and Beyond* (London: Serpent's Press, 1998).

32. Wilmer, *Mama Said*, 313.

33. Bob Brunning, *Blues: The British Connection* (New York: Blandford Press, 1986),

12. Brunning chronicled and participated in the British blues boom of the 1960s as an early member of Fleetwood Mac.

34. In post-World War II cultural history, pirate radio, ships located off the British coast broadcasting pop, blues, and folk music, offered a much-needed link to a larger world of

American vernacular music for Britons. Pirate radio (which lasted into the 70s punk era) was a clear alternative to the restricted playlists of the anti-vernacularist, pop-loathing BBC. In an ironic turn of events, Mike Raven, perhaps the most influential pirate DJ playing blues music, ended up as a radio personality on BBC1.

35. Brunning, *Blues: The British Connection*, 13.

36. In 1934, the British Musician's Union, in a move designed to protect their members ability to work both in the U.K. and in America, instituted a ban on American musicians playing anywhere in the United Kingdom. Occasionally a performer would slip through by appearing as a variety act (e.g., Coleman Hawkins, Fats Waller). In 1956 an "exchange agreement" was reached between the BMU and the American Federation of Musicians allowing bands to perform in the U.K. A ban on solo jazz musicians stayed in effect until 1961.

37. Valerie Wilmer, "The First Time I Met The Blues," *Mojo* (Sept. 1995), 87.

38. *Ibid.*

39. Wilmer, *Mama Said*, 33.

40. Wilmer, "The First Time I Met The Blues," 88.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Valerie Wilmer, *Jazz People* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), 3.

43. Wilmer, "The First Time I Met The Blues," 88.

44. Wilmer admits that as one grows older, "fan exuberance" is often met with cynicism and disdain from those who consider it a suitable response from teenagers. Also, it occasionally was at odds with her feminist beliefs and those of other feminists. "I've often wondered what some of the women who come to see me make of brawny Bobby 'Blue' Bland or tattooed and bescarred Otis Spann staring out at them from under their pompadoured hair. On their walls they have feminist posters, everything from 'Solidarity With African Women' to Marlene Dietrich and 'Justice Demands the Vote.' Some of my images are so macho I've wondered about it myself on occasion, but dammit, the cats were my heroes -- still are -- and the music is still in my veins." *Mama Said*, 315.

45. A case could be made for Wilmer's photography as containing critical elements that function in a specific, visually discursive way (e.g., how the subjects are represented, how photographs are selected and juxtaposed within the text). That is a subject for further inquiry.

46. Sara Mills, *Discourse*, 18-19.

47. Mary Katherine Aldin, interview with author, February, 21-23, 1999.

48. *Ibid.*

49. Ibid. Robert Cantwell, writing on the cultural significance of the Newport Folk Festival notes: “Newport was not, for its audience, a rite of passage; but like any other festival, it provided for the eruption into daylight social space the hidden underground life of an emergent youth culture, and for the symbolic elaboration of an inverted social order, in which many solitary ordeals of ritual anointment were taking place in a festive realm beyond the commercial marketplace. In place of the repudiated official elders were an elevated and revered folk; in place of the official ordeals of education and career were the revivalists’ private struggles to incorporate an invented, imaginary music in which they could dimly discern the outline of a desired ideal world. More accurate then, to see Newport as a kind of mass pilgrimage to a site made holy by the miracle of self-transformation: their resurrection of prewar blues and mountain musicians out of the tar pits of reissue records and into the living presence of their admirers.” *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 305-306.

50. Generally speaking, the blues revivalists were more interested in historicizing an artists’ catalog than critiquing it -- the assumption being that by writing the liner notes they were “fans” of said musician. Any evaluative criticism was revivalist/critics arguing among themselves as to who had better taste, and a more refined sense of who belonged in the blues canon.

51. Aldin interview. Of authors currently writing about the blues, Aldin sees her work as being most like that of Peter Guralnick. “Of all the books I’ve read on the blues,” she notes, “I’m most fond of Peter’s, especially his ability to get inside his subjects and

project a genuine enthusiasm for what he is writing about. That may be his greatest skill.”

52. Ibid.

53. Mary Katherine Aldin, liner booklet essay for *Women Blues Singers*, MCAD2-11788, compact disc.

54. Bell Hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 109.

55. Diane Macdonnell, *Theories of Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 7.

56. Along with her multiple Grammy nominations, Aldin has received a W.C. Handy award, as well as recognition from *Living Blues* magazine and the National Association of Record Distributors and Manufacturers (NAIRD). And despite her lacking a formal education, Aldin has taught and lectured at Tulane University, the University of New Orleans, the University of Mississippi, the University of Southern California, and Columbia College Chicago.

57. Aldin interview. This is an interesting, if curiously humble statement coming from one whose opinions become part of public blues discourse.

58. George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 99.

59. Although only ten pages long, Derek Stewart-Baxter's essay on Ma Rainey was, until Leib's biography, the best source of information on her life and career. Hettie Jones used much of his material for her chapter on Ma Rainey in her 1974 children's book, *Big Star Fallin' Mama: Five Women in Black Music*.

60. Sandra Lieb, *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), xvi.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

63. Paul Garon, *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* (New York: Da Capo, 1990). Of the many writers contributing to the larger blues discourse, Paul Garon has frequently been a lightning rod for controversy. His critical theorizing, which situates the effects of racism on African Americans as central to the creation and understanding of the blues, is at the heart of *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* and, years earlier, in his founding of what has become the pre-eminent American blues magazine *Living Blues*. In 1993, Garon defended the magazine's policy of not publishing articles on white musicians arguing that, "only the very specific sociological, cultural, economic, psychological, and political forces faced by working class African Americans – forces permeated with racism –

produced the blues. *Nothing else did*" (his emphasis). Reducing the development of the blues to one issue seems, on the surface, to be foolish and shortsighted. Compounding this is Garon's unwillingness to consider black agency in this cultural creation. Therefore the blues become simply black reaction to racism, lacking any creative energy of its own.

Lieb's work on Ma Rainey was influenced by Chadwick Hanson (to whom she dedicates the book). Hanson's 1960 essay "Social Influences on Jazz Style: Chicago, 1920-30" examines the impact of the Great Migration on the blues and how vaudeville performers remained attached to and influenced by the "downhome" sound of the rural South, and was one of the first scholarly essays to consider the relationship between blues music and performers and the middle-class racial uplift ideology propagated in the pages of the *Chicago Defender*. Although Hanson correctly identifies black bourgeois biases against the blues (i.e., Dave Peyton), he never mentions Tony Langston.

64. Lieb, *Mother of the Blues*, xvi.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid., 48.

67. Lynn Abbot and Doug Seroff, "They Cert'ly Sound Good to Me: Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendency of the Blues," *American Music*, Vol. 14, no. 4, Winter 1996, 415.

68. Lieb, *Mother of the Blues*, 50.

69. *Ibid.*, 122.

70. Hooks, *Yearning*, 21.

71. William Barlow, *Looking Up at Down: The Emergence of a Blues Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 140-141. Barlow contends that it was the classic blueswomen who mediated the transition from rural folk blues to urban popular blues. “The best of them were neither modernists nor traditionalists in any strict sense; instead, they drew on both schools with equal facility.” It was the classic blueswomen who, by connecting these competing black musical traditions, developed a personal style of blues that was at the forefront of the commercial music industry, and introduced the blues to white audiences, otherwise known as the mainstream of American popular music. This theory is expanded by W.T. Lhamon, Jr. to include minstrelsy in mediating this transition, “By [the 1920s], blues practice was thoroughly mixed up with minstrelsy. . . [the performers] may not have blacked up (although some of them did) but they sang to crowds that blackface capers had animated. The minstrel show was the conduit connecting all this material.” *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip-Hop* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 110.

72. Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 20.

73. Carby’s essay coincided with a series of LP reissues of women blues singers on Rosetta Records, some in the classic blues style, others more country blues, one of women’s accapella singing from the notorious Parchman Farm Penitentiary.

74. Hazel Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometimes: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," *Radical Amerika* 20, no. 4 (1986), 14.

75. Ibid.

76. Calvin O. Schrag, "Praxis," from *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 639. This is a concept that I have applied to potential meanings in the r&b singing of the Prisonaires, see John Dougan, "The Mistakes of Yesterday, The Hopes of Tomorrow: Prison, Pop Music, and the Prisonaires," *American Music*, Vol. 17, no. 4, Winter 1999.

77. Ray Pratt, *Rhythm and Resistance: The Political Uses of Popular Music* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 24.

78. Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometimes," 18.

79. Thomas McLaughlin, *Street Smarts and Critical Theory: Listening to the Vernacular* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996) 20-21.

80. Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 10.

81. Ibid.

82. Ibid.

83. Linda Dahl, *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1989). Sally Placksin, *American Women in Jazz 1900 to the Present: Their Words, Their Lives, Their Music* (New York: Seaview Books, 1982). Among the blueswomen under consideration were Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith.

84. Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 10.

85. Ibid., 100. Harrison's assertion here is a more eloquent (and more nuanced) paraphrasing of Paul Garon's ideological emphasis.

86. Ibid., 64.

87. Ibid., 15

88. Ibid., 221.

89. Joan Elliot, "Angela Davis," from *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, eds. William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 201.

90. "Angela Davis Writes About the Blues," *interview*
<http://go.borders.com/features/mmk98013.xcv>. February 18, 2000.

91. Zora Neale Hurston, "Folklore and Music," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 12, no. 1 (1991), 183.

92. *Ibid.*, 186.

93. Davis interview, <http://go.borders.com>

94. Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 92-94. Using Charters as an example, Davis's argues that he (and Oliver) are not alone in "[displaying] notions of black subjectivity that reek of paternalism," and that this attitude becomes a veritable trope among, purportedly anti-racist, white blues scholars of the 1950s and 1960s. As for Oliver, she critiques his work as "[peremptorily announcing] that black people are nothing more than the product of their material circumstances." Davis is critical of Oliver's assessment of southern blacks being unconcerned with politics and more concerned with figuring out ways in which to (unequally) co-exist with whites and make the best of a their circumstances. Davis's argument is that, especially in the light of the civil rights movement (which was well underway the year that Oliver's *Blues Fell This Morning* was published), Oliver is representing (again somewhat paternalistically) black southerners as apathetic and "less politically mature than any other people."

95. Hooks, *Yearning*, 21. Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 33. While Davis finds Levine's notion of the survival strategies created by

the communal celebration and performance of secular music methodologically sound, she is critical of his gendering of those performers he collectively refers to as the “spokesmen” of the blues.

96. Thomas McLaughlin, *Street Smarts and Critical Theory*, 20-21.

97. Michel Foucault, “Intellectuals and Power,” in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* by Michel Foucault, trans. Donald Bouchard and Sherry Smith (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 209.

98. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 122.

99. Francis Davis, “Ladies Sing the Blues: How Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday Helped Shape Black Consciousness,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1998.

100. Francis Davis, *The History of the Blues: The Roots, The Music, The People From Charley Patton to Robert Cray* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 18. It is interesting that Davis uses the expression “official version,”(implying the Charters and Oliver version of blues history as being more or less canonical therefore more or less “official”) but it is unclear if he is simply stating fact or being ironic. My guess is that he is being a little bit of both, although when push comes to shove, he would agree with the argument that the blues is (needlessly?) politicized by agent-provocateurs like Angela Davis.

101. Ibid.

102. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination, Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 342-25.
103. W.T. Lhamon, Jr., correspondence with the author, May 6, 1996. Lhamon explores this idea in greater detail in *Deliberate Speed: The Origins of a Cultural Style in the American 1950s* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990) 48-50. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, xi.
104. David Hollinger, *In The American Province: Studies in the History and Historiography of Ideas* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 81.
105. David Sanjek, "The Wild, Wild Women of Rockabilly," in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (New York: Routledge), 142. Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 122.
106. Sanjek, "The Wild, Wild Women of Rockabilly," 143.
107. Stuart Hall, "What is This Black in Black Popular Culture?" from *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds., David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 474.

Conclusion

How to Sing the Blues¹

1. Most blues begin, “woke up this morning”
2. “I got a good woman” is a bad way to begin the blues, unless you stick something nasty in the next line:
 I got a good woman –
 with the meanest dog in town.
3. Blues are simple. After you have the first line right, repeat it. Then find something that rhymes. Sort of.
 I got a good woman –
 With the meanest dog in town.
 He got teeth like Margaret Thatcher
 and he weighs about 500 pounds.
4. The blues are not about limitless choices
5. Blues cars are Chevies and Cadillacs. Other acceptable blues transportation is the Greyhound bus or a southbound train. Walking plays a major part in the blues lifestyle. So does fixin’ to die.
6. Teenagers can’t sing the blues. Adults sing the blues. Blues adulthood means being old enough to get the electric chair if you shoot a man in Memphis.
7. You can have the blues in New York City, but not in Brooklyn or Queens. Hard times in Vermont or North Dakota are just a depression. Chicago, St. Louis and Kansas City are still the best places to have the blues.
8. The following colors do not belong in the blues
 - a. violet
 - b. beige
 - c. mauve
9. You can’t have the blues in an office or a shopping mall. The lighting is wrong.

10. Good places for the blues
 - a. the highway
 - b. the jailhouse
 - c. an empty bed

11. Bad places for the blues
 - a. ashrams
 - b. gallery openings
 - c. weekend in the Hamptons

12. No one will believe it's the blues if you wear a suit, unless you happen to be an old black man.

13. Do you have the right to sing the blues?
Yes if:
 - a. your first name is a southern state – like Georgia
 - b. you're blind
 - c. you shot a man in Memphis
 - d. you can't be satisfied
No if:
 - a. you were once blind but now can see
 - b. you're deaf
 - c. you have a trust fund

14. Neither Julio Iglesias nor Barbara Streisand can sing the blues

15. If you ask for water and your baby give you gasoline, it's the blues. Other acceptable beverages are:
 - a. wine
 - b. whiskey
 - c. muddy water
Blues beverages are not:
 - a. any mixed drink
 - b. wine kosher for Passover
 - c. Yoo Hoo (all flavors)

16. If it occurs in a cheap motel or a shotgun shack, it's a blues death. Stabbed in the back by a jealous lover is a blues way to die. So is the electric chair, substance abuse, or being denied treatment in an emergency room. It is not a blues death if you die during liposuction treatment.

17. Some blues names for women

- a. Sadie
- b. Big Mama
- c. Bessie

18. Some blues names for men

- a. Joe
- b. Willie
- c. Little Willie
- d. Lightnin'

Persons with names like Sierra or Sequoia will not be permitted to sing the blues no matter how many men they shoot in Memphis.

19. Other blues names (a starter kit)

- a. Name of physical infirmity (Blind, Cripple, Asthmatic)
- b. First name (see above) or name of fruit (Lemon, Lime, Kiwi)
- c. Last name of President (Jefferson, Johnson, Fillmore, etc.)

Despite its obvious function as parody, the above guidelines for blues authenticity (which has circulated as an e-mail for a number of years) are telling in that, underneath the comic intent, lies a putative blues epistemology. This joke would not be funny were it not for the persistence of an “official version” of the blues canon, and a musicological and taxonomical understanding of the genre that, while formed long before the work of Samuel Charters and Paul Oliver, was classified and categorized in *The Country Blues* and *Blues Fell This Morning* – influential books read by a large, sympathetic audience. To some degree, both Charters and Oliver were messengers, articulating a blues discourse that had started to take shape even before Paul Carter penned his outraged anti-blues editorials in the pages of the *Indianapolis Freeman*. They, like any other cultural historians, were making critical choices as members of a “bystander audience,” what Peter Narvaez describes as “highly enthusiastic, aesthetically critical, financially supportive, seemingly passive bearers of [the] African-American blues tradition.”² This notion of passivity is attributable to the fact that this bystander role has been facilitated by

records (and to some extent radio) which provide “enjoyment in a variety of private and public contexts [that] allow for close scrutiny of redundant, almost identical-sounding performances, by persons spatially, temporally, and socially distant from original performance contexts.”³ It is the 78 rpm record that allowed for the cultivation of an aesthetic and the construction of a blues canon for it is an item that can be collected and organized (something that cannot be done with musical performance) and is subject to the vagaries of critic/scholars/collectors who select and argue the canonicity of their personal favorites.

As important as Charters and Oliver are in linking early blues discourse with the present and redefining the blues ontologically, what I have argued is that discourse and discursive strategies, when applied to vernacular music, are intensely complex and contingent relationships. There are simply too many voices for an understanding of the blues to be anything less than diverse. Yet, to even the most casual listener, what is more frequently the case is that the blues is the instantly recognizable unchanging same. Even those whose relationship with the aforementioned scholars and many of the early country blues recordings is limited or non-existent have an I-know-the-blues-when-I-hear-it kind of attitude. Recently, I played a recording of Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues” to a classroom of undergraduates and asked them if that was the blues. Their answer was a resounding, “No.” “That’s jazz,” they confidently remarked. Next I played Charley Patton, “Revenue Man Blues.” With equal confidence they dubbed Patton’s recording “real blues.” Finally, I played the track “Honey” from Moby’s *Play*, which is built around a sample from an Alan Lomax field recording from the late-1950s. “What do we do with this version of the blues?” I asked hoping for some direction and insight. A student shouted, “Dance!” (Good answer.) “So, when you think of blues performers,” I

asked, “who leaps to mind.” “Leadbelly,” said one student. “Robert Johnson,” said another. “What about Bessie Smith?” I asked. Silence. Then a few cautious, nodding heads. “Anyone else?” I asked. A young woman raised her hand. “Miles Davis,” she said emphatically. The impulse is to say that she is wrong, Miles Davis is quite obviously a jazz musician, but since blues and jazz history frequently intersect, what would be more illuminating and helpful is understanding why she thinks Miles Davis is a representative blues performer. There is hardly a popular music lover on the planet who, when asked, could not identify what they consider the blues. What is important is to try and understand how they came to this identification whether it was from W.C. Handy, Bessie Smith, Robert Johnson, Charley and Oliver, Eric Clapton, the Rolling Stones, or the Blues Brothers.

Yes, the Blues Brothers. While it is *de rigueur* to kick Jake and Elwood around (and the intellectual equivalent of shooting fish in a barrel) critic Francis Davis is right when he, semi-seriously, admits that “the real turning point in America’s perception of the blues ... was the release of *The Blues Brothers* in 1980.”⁴ Underneath the minstrel mask was a parody of blues performance and discourse. While their love of the blues was evident, Dan Aykroyd and John Belushi were spoofing the “breed of white enthusiast who comes to think of himself as black,”⁵ and whose understanding of the blues as cultural history derived from marathon listening sessions to reissue LPs, and reading the criticism and historiography of white blues scholars “who have long assigned their own connotations to the music of their black countrymen” and determined what the blues was supposed to mean.⁶ However, what most viewers of *The Blues Brothers* film (who were also buyers of the multimillion selling album soundtrack) had reconfirmed was that the blues was, for the most part, the soundtrack to an endless party. In *Stomping the Blues*,

Albert Murray argues a similar case for the celebratory quality of the blues, but Murray connects what he calls “a reaffirmation and continuity in the face of adversity”⁷ with the hardscrabble lives of its performers. Murray’s connecting the blues to an historical musical and critical past was far less important to the “blues fans” consuming the discourse (and ignoring or missing the internal parody) of *The Blues Brothers*. Therefore, John Belushi’s imploring listeners to “buy as many blues records as you can,” despite being exactly what Charters, Oliver, Pete Whelan, and Nick Perls wanted, fell on deaf ears. The minstrel show, with its simplified, clichés of blues music and culture, was far more entertaining, and all the discourse they really wanted.

The reality is that, in spite of scholars’ claims that there is (or at least was in the 1990s) a resurgence of interest in the blues, the audience of consumers within the secondary public are separate and unequal, and represent how blues discourse remains taxonomically and aesthetically stratified. Critic John Morthland writes:

The audience for blues is primarily made up of middle-class whites in search of borrowed “authenticity” and a guitar hero. They’re the fans who put Buddy Guy and John Lee Hooker and, to a certain extent, B.B. King on the *Billboard* charts. Yet they ignore Malaco’s contemporary spin on the blues, which remains firmly traditional even as it modernizes (with synthesizers and the like). Nobody, it seems, buys Malaco records except the generation of black Southerner who grew up with the blues and soul -- an aged, grassroots demographic that the rest of the music business shuns. . . [however] despite only three Top Ten pop records (the last in 1976), Malaco is still going strong. In parts of the South -- say from Memphis in the Delta to East Texas -- Malaco singles are often played alongside the latest hip-hop from New Orleans’ Master P, or “contemporary urban” from Atlanta’s Babyface. Meanwhile, most of music-loving America has never heard of Malaco.⁸

Morthland, writing about the Jackson, Mississippi-based label Malaco, gets to the heart of where blues audiences are at aesthetically (and racially). There are the “mainstream”

white blues fans who champion black guitar heroes like B.B. King and Buddy Guy and a seemingly endless array of mostly white performers (e.g., Omar and the Howlers, Tinsley Ellis, Johnny Lang, Anson Funderburgh) who reverently regurgitate clichés that reinforce Blues Brothers' minstrelsy without the self-conscious parody, while performing at the one of the many corporatized juke joints in the chain more commonly known as The House of Blues.⁹ There is also the white hipster, the descendent of Norman Mailer's 1950s cultural rebel and the early folk/blues revivalists, who prefers the deep blues and punk rock attitude (while downplaying or ignoring the problematic racialized aesthetic profiling) of Fat Possum Records. To these demi-connoisseurs, blues is fundamentally about chaos and anarchy -- a feral, existential dread musically exorcized in as crude a manner as possible. This is the new "authenticity" which, like the primitivism romanticized by Rudi Blesh and Samuel Charters, uses disenfranchisement, poverty, and social dysfunction, as a way to mythologize the "real" blues, and dismiss the slick, endless boogie hypermarketed to the House of Blues crowd. Complicating this scenario is that while Fat Possum has (in my opinion) released the best recent blues recordings, they market the most egregious behavior of their artists, especially when it involves violence, mental instability, sexual promiscuity, substance abuse either separately or (even better) together.

As for the contemporary black blues audience, a label like Malaco, as opposed to Yazoo or Document, is the best place to locate them, and to track contemporary black blues discourse. What has often been described as a "blues reclamation label" Malaco remains in business by successfully reaching their black, middle-age target audience.¹⁰ To many, however, the sound of Malaco is not that of the blues. In the ongoing ontological and taxonomical battle over the blues, many of Malaco's artists are

considered (by a majority of the aforementioned white, blues-loving audiences) to be soul singers. This despite the fact that Malaco's biggest hit record was 1982's "Down Home Blues," written by George Jackson and recorded by the late Z.Z. Hill, a perfectly-titled song that became "an instant anthem ... still performed today by seemingly every black blues band in the south."¹¹ Jackson's song, beautifully interpreted by Hill, gracefully interpolates the feel of the delta blues with that of the deep soul sound of Stax, effortlessly linking a musical and cultural past with the present. Although critics quickly labeled Hill a soul singer, the title of his next album, *I'm A Blues Man*, made his intentions abundantly clear.

Which brings me back to the "How to Sing the Blues" primer, and the students who said Mamie Smith sang jazz. Perhaps all this is simply semantics -- one person's blues is another's jazz, or soul, or funk, or r&b, or go-go, or hip-hop. I prefer to think it is a little more complex. Blues discourse and canon formation is ultimately too nuanced and contingent to be simplified in a cultural "guidebook" like the recently published *Blues for Dummies*. Our epistemological understanding of the blues, what we know to be the blues, is the result of a discourse that, through music and the written word, embody a way of looking at the world and the organization and representation of experience, what David Evans calls "blues myths [that] can be divided into two broad categories: myths of origin and evolution, and myths of ideology and meaning."¹² However, these persistent myths, discursive strategies that have shaped blues discourse over the last 70 years, need to be reexamined, Evans suggests, to prevent "uncritical acceptance."¹³ As one whose own work has contributed to a mythologizing of the blues, Evans's argument is fairly radical. "As scholars of American music," he writes, "we are particularly well-positioned to join in this effort to demythologize the blues -- first, by encouraging quality research

and writing on the subject, and second, by correcting our students' misconceptions about this venerable tradition."¹⁴ This would mean a critical rereading of what he calls the tropes of blues scholarship, such as the myth of the purity of the country blues becoming corrupted by electricity and "popular, commercial, urban influences," the geographical expansion of the blues from the Mississippi Delta to Chicago to London, the theory of blues-as-chaos (aka the Fat Possum marketing strategy), and the myths that have emerged in the contemporary Afrocentric blues scholarship of Julio Finn, Jon Michael Spencer, and James Cone (e.g., the bluesman as direct cultural descendent of the African griot, the bluesman as trickster deity, and the myth of black essentialism in the blues). What Evans is arguing for is nothing less than a major overhaul of the intellectual and methodological approaches to the blues.

"Like many popular myths and stereotypes," write Evans, "these blues myths are based on some degree of fact, truth, or observable reality ... they function as easy and reassuring explanations of the blues for those who are newcomers to the genre, for those who have an ideological axe to grind and want to use the blue as a weapon in their battle plan, and for those who are uncomfortable with some aspect of the blues or its purveyors."¹⁵ Evans's argument has Foucauldian echoes in that we, as blues fans/critics/collectors/consumers, make allowances for what is a complex and unstable process where discourse can be both an instrument of power and "a point of resistance and the starting point for an opposing strategy."¹⁶ Now more than four decades after the publication of *The Country Blues* and *Blues Fell This Morning*, the challenge issued by Evans is to rethink blues discourse in more complicated ways that can potentially destabilize a scholarly canon built on putative, unchanging myths. Women writers like Sandra Lieb, Hazel Carby, Daphne Duval Harrison, and Angela Davis have begun this

process as a means of reclaiming the female blues voice, and perhaps their methodological models will be used to reinterpret the rhetoric of bluesmen. As Sterling Brown presciently noted in 1930, writing about blues poetics, the discourse that emerges from the blues proves any preconception of African-American folk life, *as well as its opposite*. Seventy years later that remains as good an intellectual foundation as any to begin the blues discourse of the twenty-first century.

Notes for Conclusion

1. Mark Tucker, correspondence with author, December 9, 1998.
2. Peter Narvaez, "Living Blues Journal: the Paradoxical Aesthetics of the Blues Revival," from *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined* ed., Neil Rosenberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 246.
3. Ibid., 247.
4. Francis Davis, *The History of the Blues: The Roots, the Music, the People From Charley Patton to Robert Cray* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 242.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 243.
7. Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (New York: Da Capo, 1976), 6.
8. John Morthland, "In the Company of Soul," *Oxford American*, Summer 1999, 119.
9. Dan Ackroyd (aka Elwood Blues) was one of the principal investors, and public faces in the creation of the House of Blues chain.
10. Morthland, 119.

11. Ibid.

12. David Evans, "Demythologizing the Blues," *Institute for Studies in American Music Newsletter*, Fall 1999, 8.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., 13.

15. Ibid., 8.

16. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Discourse: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock, 1970), 100-101.

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