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“WHY I SING THE BLUES”: THE BLUES AND THE INDIVIDUALS WHO  
PLAYED THEM

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
History

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by  
Daniel Jordan Byrd  
May 2023

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Accepted by:  
Dr. Abel Bartley, Committee Chair  
Dr. Vernon Burton  
Dr. James Burns

## ABSTRACT

Blues music is profoundly important to not only Black history but also to American history as a whole. While the blues has been examined by several scholars and writers throughout the years such as Samuel Charters, Paul Oliver, and Elijah Wald, much of the work done seems to be geared toward biographical information on these artists or defining what exactly the blues is. In my thesis, I argue that blues is important for another reason: it speaks to the individualism that was found within the African American community following Emancipation and this can be found primarily through a robust examination of the blues lyrics themselves. In this work, I focus on the early blues from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up until World War II. These pre-war blues can be divided into three distinct regions: the Mississippi Delta, Texas, and the Piedmont. As a result, this work focuses in on major representatives in the blues of these three areas: in the Mississippi Delta with Robert Johnson, Son House, Charley Patton, Big Bill Broonzy, and Skip James, in the Piedmont region with Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Reverend Gary Davis, Blind Willie McTell, and Joshua White, and finally in Texas with Blind Lemon Jefferson. By examining three distinct themes in the blues, including religion, leisure, and relationships, I show how the blues lyrics themselves were important to understanding the lived experiences of these African American artists and the Black community at the time.

DEDICATION

*To my wife and child.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I must first start by acknowledging and thanking my thesis advisor, Dr. Abel Bartley. Without his guidance I do not believe that I could have taken on such a large, important task. Dr. Bartley continually read my drafts, pointed me to key sources, and helped me formulate my thoughts and organize them in a way that could be presentable and do justice to the topic at hand.

I would also like to thank Dr. Vernon Burton and Dr. James Burns as well for being willing to be on my committee. I appreciate all of the valuable input given to me by Dr. Bartley, Dr. Burton, and Dr. Burns in the process and for their encouragement as I finished this endeavor.

I am also extremely grateful for the support of my family and friends. To my wife who stood by me throughout the entire process, to my father who introduced me to the blues at an early age, to my mother who encouraged my love for history, to my friends in the history department that sat and listened to me ramble on about Robert Johnson for the past two years and helped me flesh out my ideas, I am grateful to you all.

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## INTRODUCTION

The blues seemingly sprouted out of nowhere in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century across the American South. This music formed in the Mississippi Delta, the small towns of Texas, and the mountainous regions of the Piedmont among recently emancipated African Americans and would eventually spread to major American cities such as Chicago, Memphis, St. Louis, New York, and even Los Angeles. This mysterious music may, on the surface, seem to be simply another genre of music that arose in the American cultural landscape; however, a further examination of the blues, particularly the lyrics, show that it is much more than that. The blues is a story. It is a vehicle that African Americans use to express their views on important topics, their frustrations with the American system, and, perhaps most importantly, an expression of individualism found within the Black community following emancipation. In this work, my intention is to allow the blues artists to speak for themselves and examine what they were expressing through their music.

Before one can understand how the blues are an expression of African American thought, they must first have an idea of exactly what the blues are and why this music is so important to American history. Musically speaking, the blues are defined by identifiable, often used musical qualities that provide the foundation for the genre. One of the most important components of blues music is the twelve-bar approach. Blues writer Elijah Wald explains the twelve-bar approach as follows: “A twelve bar format follows the same pattern each time: a verse will begin with four bars of the root note or chord, then two bars of the ‘subdominant,’ two bars of the root note or chord again, a bar of the



‘dominant seventh,’ a bar of the ‘subdominant,’ and then the phrase is concluded by returning back to the root note or chord for a final two bars.”<sup>1</sup> While there are certainly different formats found in the blues, the eight- and sixteen-bar structures are a couple of examples, this template is one of the first ways a listener could identify that they are hearing the blues.

The twelve-bar structure allows for another key factor of blues to take hold: the African influence of the “call and response.” The African slaves brought the musical style of “call and the response” with them and incorporated it into their music during American slavery. The southern “work songs” in the prison yards of the Jim Crow era and the blues themselves incorporated this style. “Call and response” is when either one artist or a group of people sing a line first and then another artist or part of the group either repeat the line or respond with the next line of the song. The “twelve-bar blues AAB verse format” would do just that with the artist singing the first line twice and then ending the verse with a conclusion, or a “response.” This would not only be a defining component of the blues, but it would also link the genre directly back to West Africa.<sup>2</sup>

Along with the twelve-bar structure and the “call and response” found in the blues, another important piece of the blues was the notes that were used. In 1915, African American musicologist John Work discovered in his studies of southern African American music that while traditional African music was built around a five-note scale, called the pentatonic scale, black artists in the American South had added a “flat

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<sup>1</sup> Elijah Wald, *The Blues: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2-5.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth M. Stone, *Music in West Africa: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 64.

seventh.”<sup>3</sup> This flatted seventh note of a major scale would also accompany a flatted third note and would become foundational to the blues, eventually earning the name “blue notes” for how frequently they were used in the blues.<sup>4</sup> As Samuel Charters points out in his pivotal work on the blues entitled *The Bluesman*, the “blue notes” are “best described as falling somewhere between what tradition Western or European” music would call major or minor notes.<sup>5</sup>

Along with these various musical elements, the blues also followed a particular descending melodic line. It was discovered that African music had a common theme of a descending melodic line, meaning that the notes would lower in pitch as the melody progressed, whereas Western music commonly followed the ascending melodic line structure. This is important for the blues as well. Citing a study done by musicologist A.M. Jones, Charters points out that Jones found that out of 251 blues songs that he examined, 191 of them followed the pattern of a descending melodic line.<sup>6</sup> This finding did not only link blues music to African ties, but it also aided in defining the parameters into which blues music often fell into. Altogether, the observable, identifiable musical qualities of the twelve-bar format, the “call-and-response,” the use of the pentatonic scale along with the “blue notes,” and the descending melodic lines make up what can be called blues music.

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<sup>3</sup> John Wesley Work, *Folk Song of the American Negro* (Nashville: Fisk University Press, 1915), 42.

<sup>4</sup> Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), 65.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Charters, *The Bluesmen: The Story and the Music of the Men Who Made the Blues* (New York: Oak Publications, 1967), 17.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 18-19.

After defining the blues, the question remains of why the blues should even be examined. There have been a multitude of musical genres that all had their distinctive musical elements, does that alone merit a deeper consideration of a music? It is not just the uniqueness of the blues that makes it worth examining; rather, it is the importance of the music itself to not only Black history but to American history at large that makes it worth an extensive examination. There are two main reasons that the blues are vitally important to American history. The first reason is that the music itself has been highly influential to American music. In the book *The History of the Blues*, blues historian Michael V. Uschan asserts that blues was the “first original music created in the United States” and it would go on to help shape the “development of other types of music and has influenced styles of music that followed it.” To support his claim, Uschan quotes renowned music critic Tom Piazza who wrote:

It may be helpful to see the blues as a huge river through the middle of our culture. Almost every notable form of American music in the twentieth century is a city, or a village, along that river. Jazz, rock and roll, rhythm and blues, bluegrass, and even so-called serious or classical music have all drawn strength, power, and refreshment from, and so much of their character from the blues.<sup>7</sup>

The blues’ influence on and importance to American music is not the sole reason that it holds an important place in United States history, the blues also gives profound insight into African American culture and thought at the time that it was being written and performed. Perhaps one of the most important works illustrating this point is a book called *Blues People* by LeRoy Jones, who would later change his name to Amiri Baraka.

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<sup>7</sup> Michael V. Uschan, *The History of the Blues* (Detroit: Gale Cengage Learning, 2013), 46.

In this book, Jones makes the central argument that black music, particularly the blues, is crucial for examining African American thought when he writes: “And it seems to me that if the Negro represents, or is symbolic of, something in and about the nature of American culture, this certainly should be revealed by his characteristic music.”<sup>8</sup> Jones would go on to profoundly write that the blues was the story of black men and women’s “experience in this country in *his* English” and was the beginning “of the Negro’s *conscious* appearance on the American scene.”<sup>9</sup> Both of these points are salient and important in explaining just why the blues are so vital to American history. It is not simply another genre, a relic of a by-gone era; rather, it is a direct window into the very mind and soul of a people.

It is for this reason that a comprehensive examination of what the blues said is so important. For the purposes of this work, the blues that will be examined will be pre-war blues, this is the blues of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century up until the Second World War. This is not to say that the blues of Muddy Waters, B.B. King, Howlin’ Wolf, Buddy Guy, or any other titan of the blues is not worth examining; rather, it is to say that the beginning of the blues offers a unique perspective to that of post-war blues. This unique perspective is of a people who are one to two generations removed from enslavement discovering the various freedoms African Americans subjected to the cruel institution of slavery never got to enjoy. So, the question becomes: What did pre-war blues music say about the

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<sup>8</sup> LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), ix.

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

expression and desire for individual liberties and pursuits of African Americans in the South following emancipation?

By examining key themes in the blues such as religion, relationships, and leisure, it is clear the pre-war blues were a way for African Americans to express their desire for individualistic pursuits following the end of slavery. In the first chapter, the theme of religion will be closely looked at in the blues. What can be seen in this is the tension within the African American community between those who wanted to cling to their Christian roots dating back to the conversion of the slaves and those who wanted to abandon Christianity wholesale. In the second chapter, the theme of leisure will be examined. In their blues, these men and women were expressing their desire to do whatever they pleased. Whether this was picking up and leaving the South to pursue the dream of a good job, less racial segregation and violence, and economic progression in the North, the desire to drink alcohol and have a good time even when the American government was legislating that it was illegal to do so during Prohibition, or expressing what they sought to do in order to escape the hardships of the Great Depression, the artists would often use their blues to express their individuality and desires for leisurely pursuits. In the third chapter, the theme of relationships in the blues will be explored. This deeper examination will show how each individual blues artist expressed their desire for finding love, sex, and joy in relationships while also wrestling with infidelity, domestic abuse, and heartbreak specifically along gender lines.

Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, there have been many books, articles, and works published on blues history; however, there are key blues historians and writers that have

become the dominant voices in this area, particularly: Samuel Charters, Paul Oliver, and Elijah Wald. Charters and Oliver represent the original scholarship coming out on the blues around the 1950s and 60s, while Wald has been a leading voice of the modern blues history movement of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While each has made significant contributions to the field of blues history, particularly dealing with the origins of the blues, the development of the blues, and biographical studies of the blues musicians themselves, they have not focused enough attention on the actual lyrics of the blues artists and what these lyrics have to say about African American thought and culture during the time. This is where this work will seek to focus its attention.

Samuel Charters, one of the progenitors of the blues history field, wrote in his book *The Bluesmen* that “one of the most distinctive song forms that has grown out of the confusion and the violence of the twentieth century is the blues of the American Negro.”<sup>10</sup> Charters would also write in his first book on the blues entitled *Country Blues* that the blues “is a personal song, with intensely personal emotional characteristics. The blues became the emotional outlet for Negro singers in every part of the South, and as the rich confusion of music from fields began to fall into loose patterns, the blues became a part of the fabric of Negro life itself.”<sup>11</sup> While in both of his books Charters certainly examines lyrics, he does not do much to expand on how the lyrics lent themselves to the idea that the blues were both an individualistic expression of African Americans while also being a communal expression of black people in the American South. Charters tends

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<sup>10</sup> Charters, *The Bluesmen*, 15.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Charters, *The Country Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1975), 19.

to lean on biographical information instead. While biographical information is certainly important, it alone seems to be insufficient in producing enough evidence to support his claims throughout both of his major works.

Paul Oliver, a contemporary of Samuel Charters, offers a different interpretation of what the blues is. Oliver viewed the blues as a “story of humble, obscure, unassuming men and women and it is the story of some whose names became households words – in black households, that is.”<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, he argues that the blues told the story of “social upheaval” in the black community that occurred after the American Civil War and became a new cultural expression of freed black, southern men and women.<sup>13</sup> While there is certainly truth in Oliver’s argument, namely that blues often dealt with the social injustices faced during the Jim Crow era, this does not tell the full story of the blues. Blues was much richer than simply being a music of an oppressed people lamenting over the injustices they faced. The blues was an expression of individualism in the face of oppression, an expression of what brought Black men and women joy and enjoyment in a time where it was difficult for them to find it, and an important contribution to both American music and American history.

Perhaps the blues scholar that this work will contend with the most will be Elijah Wald. In his book *Escaping the Delta*, Wald argues that blues is simply a “working-class pop music” and that “its purveyors were looking for immediate sales, with no expectation that their songs would be remembered once the blues vogue had passed.”<sup>14</sup> Wald argues

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Oliver, *The Story of the Blues: The Making of a Black Music* (London: Pimlico, 1997), 12-13.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>14</sup> Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, 73.

the idea that blues is a cultural expression of poor, oppressed southern African Americans was found in “so much of the early historical writing on the blues” and was done by “people with progressive political views, who were celebrating the music as a vital cultural expression of black Americans.”<sup>15</sup> This argument does not take into account the blues in its entirety nor does it acknowledge the depth and sophistication of the blues. If the blues were simply a capitalistic venture, then the question remains: why did many blues artists continue to record, play shows, and go from southern city to city playing the blues despite making little to no money? If the blues were simply a ploy for these men and women to make money, then why do many of their songs include taboo subjects such as the rejection of Christianity, rebellion against Jim Crow laws, overtly sexual lyrics, and making specific references to Black culture and thought? This work with its examination of the lyrics will counter the view that the blues was simply a pop music that African Americans had no intention of being a vital expression of their individuality and their culture.

This work will not be a biographical endeavor, though there certainly will be pertinent biographical information addressed; rather, it will be an examination of eleven selected pre-war blues artists: Robert Johnson, Son House, Skip James, Charley Patton, Big Bill Broonzy, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Willie McTell, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Reverend Gary Davis, and Joshua White. While there are certainly many others who were also vitally important to the pre-war blues, these eleven were selected for a variety of reasons. The first reason is their body of work. Each of these artists recorded

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<sup>15</sup> Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, 108.



extensively; therefore, they have a substantial corpus of songs from which to draw. Secondly, each of these artists represent the three major regions of the pre-war blues in the South: Johnson, House, James, Patton, and Broonzy represent the Delta region, McTell, Rainey, Smith, Reverend Davis, and White represent the Piedmont region, and Jefferson represents the Texas blues region. Thirdly, these selected artists offer unique perspectives across the board and that will give insight into the various themes that will be explored in this work. With religion for example, Reverend Gary Davis was both a bluesman and a preacher who would go on to reject the blues because of his devout religious beliefs while Son House was both a bluesman and a preacher who would go on to leave the church to play the blues and live that lifestyle. Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith offer their own unique perspectives as they sang the blues from not only an African American perspective, but from a woman's perspective as well.

By looking at the lyrics of these great and profoundly important early blues musicians, it will be clear to see just how deep the blues went. Each blues musician offered his or her own perspective on a range of different topics, but at the core of it all a deep cry of individualism can be found. While it can be easy to become lost in the mysterious music and the equally mysterious stories of those who played it, the importance of what each of them were saying in their lyrics cannot be overstated and should be given a closer, more intensive look.

## CHAPTER ONE

### “YOU MUST HAVE THAT PURE RELIGION”: HOW BLUES ARTISTS EXPRESSED THEIR INDIVIDUALISM REGARDING VIEWS TOWARD RELIGION

In his book *Charley Patton*, blues historian and biographer John Fahey makes a very interesting claim when it comes to the expression of religion in the blues. Fahey writes that “with rare exceptions, blues lyrics are in complete agreement with Christian values as expressed on preachin’ records and endless Sunday sermons, but simply take a different angle.” He goes even as far to say that the implication found in the blues is simple and clear: “religion is true.” The stories told in blues songs, particularly early blues of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are warnings to those who would try and follow in the blues artists’ footsteps as they strayed from the path of righteousness.<sup>16</sup> In other words, blues artists were, for the most part, devout Christians who were simply trying to share their stories of how they had regrettably chosen to leave their lives of faith in search of worldly pleasures only to come back to their faith and express their sorrow for ever leaving it in the first place.

This approach to the blues and those who wrote it, however, does a great disservice to just how deep and complex African American thought on religion was as expressed in the blues of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. A more wholistic examination of the blues and its lyrics does not support this idea that the blues artists, and the African American community at large, were united in their undying allegiance to Christianity and

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<sup>16</sup> John Fahey, *Charley Patton* (New York: Dover Publications, 2001), 161-162.

its tenants; rather, it shows a more nuanced individualistic expression of what religion meant to each blues musician as he or she sang their lyrics. Now, this is not to say that there is no merit to Fahey's argument here, as many blues musicians were in fact Christian and even had deep ties to the Christian church in the South. Reverend Gary Davis of South Carolina was an ordained minister. Son House was not only a pioneer of Mississippi Delta blues but was also an accomplished minister in both the Baptist and Colored Methodist Episcopal churches. Bluesmen such as Blind Willie McTell and Blind Lemon Jefferson produced and released a plethora of spirituals.<sup>17</sup> One of the most famous bluesmen of his time and the later blues revival of the 1960s Skip James even attended a Christian theological school in Dallas.<sup>18</sup> Despite these facts, it is still not the case that blues lyrics were entirely supportive or affirming of Christian values and teachings across the board.

Instead, blues lyrics put forth individualistic views of the various blues artists who composed the works. There are three major themes of religious thought that can be explored to examine this further. The first theme is that of what blues artists had to say about the church itself. While many of the blues artists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century certainly had a background that involved the church, each had their own unique view of the church and its role in society. Some were highly supportive of the church and organized religion, while others were combative towards the church and its doctrines. Another theme that

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<sup>17</sup> Ian Zack, *Say No to the Devil: The Life and Musical Genius of Reverend Gary Davis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 99.

<sup>18</sup> *Blues and the Soul of Man: An Autobiography of Nehemiah "Skip" James (From Interviews with Stephen Calt)* (Fenton, Missouri: Melbay, 2019), 81.

shows the differing, individualistic thoughts of these blues artists is the various references to Hoodoo and the Devil. By looking at the multitude of references to Hoodoo beliefs and practices, it can be determined that these blues artists did not in fact share a uniform belief system; rather, they had their own individualistic beliefs. This goes along with the various expressions of the Devil in the music itself. While some of the blues artists expressed the Devil as the mainstream Christian teachings would, primarily as the enemy of God and His people, other blues artists portrayed the Devil as a whimsical friend who walked alongside them on their various journeys. Lastly, the theme of death and the afterlife are heavily explored in the early blues of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Again, with this topic, blues artists did not share the same opinions on the afterlife nor on death. Instead, they each expressed unique, individualistic expressions of what their beliefs were on the subjects. These themes taken together clearly show the individualistic thoughts of these blues artists and perhaps serve as a window into the diversity of religious thought that was beginning to bloom in the African American community in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

***“The Devil’s Music” v. God’s House – An Examination of Blues and the African American Church***

In his classic 1903 work *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois observed that “the Negro church of today is the social centre of Negro life in the United States, and the most characteristic expression of African character.”<sup>19</sup> DuBois argued in this seminal work that “practically every American Negro is a church member” and this would hold

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<sup>19</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin Books, 1969), 213.

true particularly in the American South. Even if they were not active members of these churches, he argued that they still as a “proscribed people” needed a “social center” and that center was in fact the black church.<sup>20</sup> This assertion was born out by the empirical evidence of the time as well. Memberships in black churches rose across censuses taken in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and it was discovered that between the years of 1890 and 1906 the number of black Baptist, one of the most important denominations of the African American church in the South, ministers grew from 5,500 to over 17,000.<sup>21</sup>

It should come as no surprise that the black churches of the South were growing. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, these churches were not merely focused on the spiritual wellbeing of their congregations as they also sought to serve a purpose outside of theological teachings and worship. As the esteemed African American academic Eddie S. Glaude Jr. points out in his work *African American Religion*, the church “provided for families in economic need, helped locate housing, delivered day-care services, offered adult education classes and job training.”<sup>22</sup> They truly did become the center of African American communities in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet despite this fact, there was still a growing discontentment within the black church that would be expressed in the blues itself.

DuBois noticed as much when he wrote that he found there to be “two great and hardly reconcilable streams of thought and ethical strivings” within the religious black

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<sup>20</sup> DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 215.

<sup>21</sup> Eric C. Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 28.

<sup>22</sup> Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *African American Religion: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 61.

community. On the one side, there were black folks who were “almost ready to curse God and die” and on other were those who were “wedded to ideals” found in the Christian church.<sup>23</sup> It was those that would fall into the former category rather than the latter that would express themselves the most openly in the blues. Not surprisingly, the blues would be largely rejected by the mainstream African American churches for this reason, and many others that will be expanded upon later. The blues would show the divide between those in the black community who were loyal to and grateful for their deep Christian roots and values and those who, as DuBois writes, found their worship turning into “a complaint and a curse, a wail rather than a hope, a sneer rather than a faith.”<sup>24</sup>

Before diving deeper into the actual lyrics of various blues artists, it is important to understand that the church did nearly uniformly reject blues music. From its inception in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the modern day, the blues, sometimes referred to as the “Devil’s music” by those in the church, has had a contentious relationship with the church to say the least. This can be seen in a multitude of cases with different blues artists. Following the death of his first wife and their baby, Robert Johnson was blamed for the tragedy by his wife’s religious family who stated her death was on his hands because he chose to pursue the “godless lifestyle as an evil musician” who was out playing the “devil’s music.”<sup>25</sup> Son House said in an interview that he, like

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<sup>23</sup> DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 222.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 222.

<sup>25</sup> Bruce Conforth and Gayle Dean Wardlow, *Up Jumped the Devil* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2019), 203.

many in the church, “just hated to see a guy with a guitar” playing the blues, but his eventual conversion to becoming a bluesman would force him to leave the church and his vocation as its pastor altogether.<sup>26</sup> Skip James would have to go listen to blues at house parties in secret due to the fear that his grandmother would find out he was listening to the blues, or what she called the “devil’s music.”<sup>27</sup> As blues historian Alan Govenar astutely points out in his work *Texas Blues*, blues music was “often considered sinful” by the black church and “blues singers were often stereotyped as ‘backsliders’ in their own communities,’ merely followers of that horrid “devil’s music.”<sup>28</sup>

This distaste in the church for blues was not just limited to the early days of the music, however. In their 1990 work entitled *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya conducted a survey of African American ministers that revealed interesting findings on the attitude towards the blues in the modern-day black churches. Of the 2,150 black churches across the United States they surveyed, they found that only 448, a mere 20.8%, said they approved of the use of black music such as blues and jazz in the church. What was even more astonishing was that of those 448, there were only forty in small, southern rural areas that said approved of blues and other black music being in the church.<sup>29</sup> That is to say that despite the blues revival of the 1960s and the emergence and acceptance of the blues across the globe, religious institutions located where the blues actually began still disapprove of the music.

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<sup>26</sup> Daniel Beaumont, *Preachin’ the Blues: The Life and Time of Son House* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 39-44.

<sup>27</sup> *Blues and the Soul of Man*, 29.

<sup>28</sup> Alan Govenar, *Texas Blues* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 12.

<sup>29</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 379.

Returning to John Fahey's point, if the blues artists nearly always lined up with Christian teachings and values in their lyrics, why then were they so often rejected by the church?

The answer is clear: while some blues artists did convey Christian thought and doctrine in their lyrics, there were many who openly rejected it.

Son House may be the best example of the juxtaposition of religious thought found in the blues lyrics of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In one of his songs entitled "John the Revelator", House sings lyrics that would be widely accepted in the church as he goes through the story of God creating Adam and Eve found in the book of Genesis, to the gospel accounts of Jesus and his apostles, to the resurrection story of Easter morning, and constant mention of "John the Revelator.":

*You know God walked down in the cool of the day, called Adam by his name.  
And he refused to answer, because he's naked and ashamed.*

*You know Christ had twelve apostles and three he led away.  
Said, "Watch with me one hour, till I go yonder and pray"*

*Christ came on Easter morning, Mary and Martha they was down to see.  
"Go tell my disciples to meet me in Galilee."*

*Tell me who's that writin'? John the Revelator.  
Tell me who's that writin'? John the Revelator.  
Wrote the book of the seventh seal.<sup>30</sup>*

Why exactly is this song so important in the study of how blues expressed individualism when it comes to religion? The answer comes by examining what Son House had to say about religion and the church in his other works.

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<sup>30</sup> Son House, "John the Revelator," Track 10 on *Martin Scorsese Presents The Blues: Son House*, Sony Music, 2003, Spotify.



On the surface, Son House was a former pastor and sang songs, precisely like “John the Revelator,” that could be classified as “spirituals” and would certainly uphold the mainstream Christian theology of the church. Yet, why is it that Son House was forced to leave the church following his life of the blues? Perhaps the most obvious answer comes when examining a biographical song that Son House performed called “A True Friend is Hard to Find.” In this song, House clearly critiques the church and the Christian religion. He begins the song by making light of the minister’s position, particularly the Baptist ministers:

*I’m gonna get me a religion, I want to join me a Baptist church  
I’m gonna get me a religion, I want to join me a Baptist church  
I say I wanted to be a Baptist preacher, so I wouldn’t have to work.*<sup>31</sup>

House would repeat this line in another one of his famous songs called “Preachin’ Blues” as well and in both songs, it is clear that Son House is not only making light of the Baptist church, but also admitting that his intentions when he became a Baptist minister were perhaps not out of a genuine faith and devotion to the church.

House would go on in the song to continue to say things that certainly would not be allowed in any church, Baptist or any other denomination for that matter. He openly admits to apostasy when he sings:

*I grabbed up my suitcase, I say I took off down the road  
I grabbed up my suitcase, I say I took off down the road  
Oh I said, “Farewell now church, may the good Lord bless your soul.”*<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Son House, “A True Friend Is Hard to Find,” Track 4 on *Live at Oberlin College, April 15, 1965*, RockBeat Records, 1965, Spotify.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

Not only was this stanza biographical as that is exactly what Son House chose to do in following a life of the blues, but it also implied a controversial aspect of African American life: Son House did not have an issue with God in this song, his issue lies with the church itself. This is in line with the movements in the African American community that saw the “emergence of diverse black religious expression in the 1920s and 1930s,” with several new religious faiths and spiritualism that would captivate the hearts and minds of black men and women in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>33</sup>

Not only did Son House make light of the church and its ministers, speak on his own apostasy, imply that he could still be religious apart from the church, but he also expressed the sentiment that many of the blues artists would have shared: a life of blues often meant openly leaving the church. Son House expressed as much in the final lines of this song:

*I said I'mma preach these blues, I'mma choose my seat and sit down  
I said I'mma preach these blues, I'mma choose my seat and sit down  
I just wanna tell you now church, I ain't got no crown.*<sup>34</sup>

In this line, House is expressing a very profound, individualistic notion: he chose to leave the church, while still holding onto his religious beliefs, in order that he may be able to go and do what he wanted to do, which was to play the blues. An examination of Son House's works regarding the church shows his own expression of how he viewed religion and its importance in the African American community. House, however, was not the only blues artist that dealt with these themes as they sang about religion and the church.

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<sup>33</sup> Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *An Uncommon Faith: A Pragmatic Approach to the Study of African American Religion* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018), 26.

<sup>34</sup> House, “A True Friend Is Hard to Find.”

Another blues musician that offered a complicated view of religion is Piedmont blues legend Blind Willie McTell. As previously mentioned, Blind Willie McTell did in fact record many spirituals alongside his blues. Many of these songs supported the morality and teachings of the church and the Christian religion. Perhaps one of the most obvious examples of that can be found in a song entitled “God Don’t Like It.” In this song, McTell seems to condemn the drinking of alcohol, a teaching that would have been in line with most denominations at the time:

*Some say they done cut whiskey out, but you can have a little wine  
Most everybody gets on a drunk by drinkin’ this ol’ moonshine  
Now God don’t like it and I don’t either.*<sup>35</sup>

On the surface, it would seem that this song would be endorsed by the church, but as McTell goes on, it is clear that he also seeks to critique those in the church.

McTell begins by calling into question the actual members of these churches when he sings: “*Some of our members gets on a drunk they speak their sober minds, and when they raise the devil, they put all the blame on shine. Now God don’t like it and I don’t either.*” If this were not questionable enough for the church, McTell goes on to directly call out the ministers of the churches, much like Son House in his blues:

*Some of our preachers just as bad as the members about this ol’ moonshine  
They’ll try to make love with every woman they meet, just to find they drinkin’  
shine  
Now God don’t like it and I don’t either.*

At the end of his song, he acknowledges that what he says will most likely not be accepted by the church or anyone else: “*I know you don’t like this song just because I*

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<sup>35</sup> Blind Willie McTell, “God Don’t Like It,” Track 66 on *Blind Willie McTell – Statesboro Blues – The Early Years 1927-1935*. Document Records, 2005. Spotify.

*...speak my mind, but I'll sing this song as much as I please, because I don't drink shine.*"<sup>36</sup>

Interestingly enough as will be on full display in the later chapters, Blind Willie McTell did not actually practice what he preached in this particular song; nevertheless, it was still a profoundly individualistic view on religion and the church in general.

This would not be the only controversial song McTell wrote that would deal with religion. In his song "Broke Down Engine Blues" he seems to put forth the notion that religion and the church did not mean that much to him; rather, his relationships with women mattered more. In this work, McTell sings:

*I went down to my prayin' ground and fell on bended knees  
I went down to my prayin' ground and fell on bended knees  
I ain't cryin' for no religion, Lordy, give me back my good girl please*

*If you give me my baby, Lord, I won't worry you no more  
If you give me my baby, Lord, I won't worry you no more  
You ain't gotta put her in my house, Lordy only lead her to my door.*<sup>37</sup>

McTell's relationship with religion here is undoubtedly complicated. It would appear that he placed a higher emphasis on his relationships than on his religion.

This was not all that uncommon in the African American community in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Glaude Jr. points out in his book *An Uncommon Faith*, in the 1920s and 1930s there was a "process of secularization" in the African American community that saw "otherwise faithful individuals" turn "into unfaithful people, or minimally, privately faithful people."<sup>38</sup> Whether or not Blind Willie McTell or Son House rejected their

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<sup>36</sup> McTell, "God Don't Like It."

<sup>37</sup> Blind Willie McTell, "Broke Down Engine Blues," Track 21 on *Blind Willie McTell – Statesboro Blues – The Early Years 1927-1935*. Document Records, 2005. Spotify.

<sup>38</sup> Glaude Jr., *An Uncommon Faith*, 26.

religion completely is not the point of their songs; rather, it would seem that they had a complicated relationship with the church and the Christian religion. Regardless of their personal beliefs, their songs show that there was certainly conflict between the blues and the church. Scholars like Fahey who try to hypothesize that there was not much distance between many the content of many blues artists' songs and the church itself still have their work very much cut out for them.

Yet, on the other side of this coin there is the bluesman Reverend Gary Davis. If Son House and Blind Willie McTell represent an individualistic expression of a complicated relationship with religion and the church, then Davis represents an equally individualistic expression of an undying devotion to the church and religion through his music. Davis was an ordained minister, much like Son House, who did the inverse: left the blues behind and devoted his life to the church.<sup>39</sup> While his music certainly followed the same musical structure of the blues, Davis's messaging was significantly different when it came to religion. In one of his songs entitled "Pure Religion" Davis repeats a very simple yet profound statement: "*God said you must have that pure religion, must have religion and your soul converted; can't cross there.*" As the song goes on, Davis openly calls out certain lifestyles that would have been endorsed by the blues yet rejected by the church: lying, gambling, and drinking to name a few.<sup>40</sup>

Much like Son House, Reverend Gary Davis also wrote a biographical song that expressed his views on religion. Unlike House, however, Davis was complimentary of

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<sup>39</sup> Zack, *Say No to the Devil*, 99-101.

<sup>40</sup> Reverend Gary Davis, "Pure Religion," Track 4 on *Harlem Street Singer*, Fantasy, 1992, Spotify.

religion and the church in his song “Great Change Since I Been Born.” In the piece, he references the life that he used to live, a life of blues and all its pursuits, and he talks of how God saved him from that: “*The road that I used to would walk, I don’t walk no more. Great change since I been born.*”<sup>41</sup> The rest of the song almost sounds like a worship song or hymn that you would hear deep in the woods in a small country church of Davis’s home state of South Carolina. The theology and Christian ideals that Davis sang about in his music show that the relationship between blues and the church was certainly complicated.

A closer examination of these lyrics show the idea that the majority of blues music and the artists who sang them were uniformly supporters of the church is flawed; however, so is the notion that the blues are simply the “devil’s music” hellbent on going against the church and God. The blues were both, depending on who was singing and writing them. There were those in the blues music scene, like Son House and Blind Willie McTell, who wrote music that challenged the church yet still affirmed Christian theology and ethics, while there were still others, like Reverend Gary Davis, who openly supported the church and its place in African American society. What can clearly be seen is that these were expressions of individuals who held their own beliefs about religion, God, and the church in the black community.

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<sup>41</sup> Reverend Gary Davis, “Great Change Since I Been Born,” Track 5 on *Harlem Street Singer*, Fantasy, 1992, Spotify.

### *Hoodoo and the Devil in the Blues*

Another theme found in blues that shows there were individualistic, diverse thoughts on religion being expressed is the volume of references to both Hoodoo and the Devil. As can be seen through a closer look at these lyrics dealing with the Hoodoo religion and the place of the Devil in everyday life, there were varying religious beliefs being expressed by the blues artists. Blues artists such as Robert Johnson and Ma Rainey made express references to Hoodoo practices and beliefs. At the same time, Johnson, Skip James, and Reverend Davis were making references to the Devil in their lyrics as well. What is clearly on display is the fact that the blues expressed the beliefs of these individuals and certainly cannot be lumped together with the claim that most of their lyrics expressed an agreeing opinion on religion.

Before looking at the connection between Hoodoo and the early blues, it is important to understand exactly what Hoodoo is. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a great deal of important work done by both anthropologists and historians in uncovering exactly what Hoodoo was and how it manifested within southern black culture. Several authors across a multitude of works interviewed hundreds of local black men and women who were either practitioners of Hoodoo or who had first-hand experience of it within their cultures. One of the most important pieces of scholarship in this field comes from the anthropologist Zora Hurston in an article she wrote entitled “Hoodoo in America” in 1931. Through the interviews she conducted, she discovered vitally important details about Hoodoo, stating that Voodoo “is the European term for African magic practices and beliefs, but it is unknown to the American Negro. His own name for his practices is

hoodoo, both terms being related to the West African term *juju*. ‘Conjure’ is also freely used by the American Negro for these practices.”<sup>42</sup>

Hoodoo’s origins can be traced back to the Ewe tribe in West Africa, specifically modern day Ghana, and is entirely of African origin.<sup>43</sup> While there are some later scholars who have asserted that Voodoo and Hoodoo are marginally different, what is clear is that Hoodoo places a high emphasis on magic and conjure and while is not necessarily theologically complex, it still has ties to a belief in the gods of ancient West Africa.<sup>44</sup> As Hurston points out, Hoodoo was found in African American communities throughout the country, but the highest concentration of the religion was found in the South, particularly along the Gulf coast and in the city of New Orleans.<sup>45</sup> These discoveries would show that Hoodoo religion was infused within the African American community of the South. Therefore, its presence in the lyrics of many blues artists would certainly show that there were individuals who expressed their religion differently than the mainstream Christian church’s faithful would. One of the most obvious examples of this is found in the works of one of the most famous blues musicians: Robert Johnson.

In Robert Johnson’s song “I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom,” he begins the song by singing “*I’m gon’ get up in the morning I believe I’ll dust my broom.*” As the song continues, it is clear that he is singing about a woman who had cheated on him with

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<sup>42</sup> Zora Hurston, “Hoodoo in America,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 58, no. 174 (1931): 317.

<sup>43</sup> Newbell Niles Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926), 15, 166.

<sup>44</sup> Anthony B. Pinn, *The African American Religious Experience in America* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006), 20-21.

<sup>45</sup> Hurston, “Hoodoo in America,” 318.



several men.<sup>46</sup> This would put the Hoodoo practice that Johnson was referring to into its proper context. There were several Hoodoo practices that involved broomsticks and actions that could be taken to ward off enemies or those who have wronged you. In the 1930s, anthropologist Harry Middleton Hyatt found several Hoodoo beliefs about this in his interviews with African Americans, one being that if you swept “salt and pepper out the door when” an enemy would “leave and they’ll never be able to come back.” Another belief expressed to Hyatt regarding a broomstick was that “dusting one’s broom with magic powder” and then sweeping the house would “free it of unwanted guests.” This banishment of enemies from one’s house would explain why Johnson would go on to sing “*You can mistreat me here, babe, but you can’t when I go home.*”<sup>47</sup>

Another important Hoodoo reference made in Robert Johnson’s work was that of the crossroads. In Hoodoo belief, there is a tradition of “crossroads” encounters where someone goes to make a deal at a crossroads with the “devil” in order to obtain supernatural powers. These beliefs were confirmed by dozens of accounts provided by both Hurtson and Wyatt in their works.<sup>48</sup> In one of Robert Johnson’s most famous songs entitled “Cross Roads Blues” he includes a reference to the idea of the crossroads. He begins by singing, “*I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees, asked the Lord above, ‘Have mercy, save poor Bob if you please.’*”<sup>49</sup> It is worth noting that this reference to the

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<sup>46</sup> Robert Johnson, “I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom – SA.2581-1,” Track 2 on *The Centennial Collection*, Sony Music, 2011, Spotify.

<sup>47</sup> Conforth and Wardlow, *Up Jumped the Devil*, 398.

<sup>48</sup> Jeffery E. Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 98-99.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Johnson, “Cross Road Blues – SA.2629-1,” Track 12 on *The Centennial Collection*, Sony Music, 2011, Spotify.

Lord should not be mistaken for a solely Christian religious reference, however. Hoodoo was known for its willingness to adapt and conform other religious beliefs, particularly Christian beliefs and practices, to be a part of its own beliefs and practices, so Johnson was certainly keeping with this tradition here. In addition to this, Robert Johnson was known throughout his community as someone who was openly disrespectful to the idea of God and the Christian religion and on multiple occasions, as attested to by eyewitness Memphis Slim, to have “called God some of the worst names you ever heard of.”<sup>50</sup> It would seem, therefore, the main source from which Johnson would have drawn the imagery of the crossroads was squarely rooted in Hoodoo and that is the crucial foundation of the song.

Along with these themes, Hoodoo also had several practices that involved using magic in order to impact other people around you, whether it was a lover, a friend, or an enemy. Johnson certainly used this aspect of Hoodoo in his songs as well. One important example of this is a reference to “foot powder.” In Hoodoo belief, if one mixes together “foot powder” and “moving powder,” then their “enemies leave so that they will not come back... These you will sprinkle where your enemies are sure to walk over it and mash on it with their feet.”<sup>51</sup> Robert Johnson made a clear reference to this Hoodoo belief in his song “Hell Hound on My Trail” when he sang “*You sprinkled hot foot powder all around my door ... It keeps me with a ramblin’ mind, rider, ev’ry old place I go.*”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Conforth and Wardlow, *Up Jumped the Devil*, 205.

<sup>51</sup> Hurston, “Hoodoo in America,” 347.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Johnson, “Hell Hound On My Trail – DAL.394-2,” Track 26 on *The Centennial Collection*, Sony Music, 2011, Spotify.

Similarly, there is the Hoodoo practice of “foot-track magic” which involves using magic to lay traps in the path of someone to cause them physical harm. In Johnson’s song “Stones in My Passway,” he makes direct reference to this throughout the song saying that someone had placed traps in his path, and it has caused him physical harm, or as he sings *“I have pains in my heart, they have taken my appetite.”*<sup>53</sup>

Although Johnson’s works present perhaps the clearest representation the religious plurality and individual beliefs rooted in Hoodoo, he was not alone in his references to the African religion. In Ma Rainey’s song entitled “Black Cat, Hoot Owl Blues,” she starts the song by singing about a black cat, a very important animal in Hoodoo beliefs:

*Black cat on my doorstep, black cat on my windowsill  
Black cat on my doorstep, black cat on my windowsill  
If one black cat don’t cross me, another black cat will.*<sup>54</sup>

In Hoodoo practices and beliefs, the black cat carried with it immense power and could spell trouble coming for those who saw it. In her studies and interviews, Hurston found that there were several uses for black cats by Hoodoo followers. One Hoodoo follower claimed that if “you throw a black cat into the sea it will cause a great wind to rise.”<sup>55</sup> Another claimed that one could use a black cat to bring about someone’s death by simply trapping the cat and a black chicken inside of a grave and performing certain rituals.<sup>56</sup> It was also believed that you could take the hair of a black cat along with hair of a black

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<sup>53</sup> Conforth and Wardlow, *Up Jumped the Devil*, 507.

<sup>54</sup> Ma Rainey, “Black Cat, Hoot Owl Blues,” Track 14 on *Ma Rainey*, Fantasy, 1992, Spotify.

<sup>55</sup> Hurtson, “Hoodoo in America,” 325.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 363.

dog and after performing a ritual involving red pepper and the names of people that you desired to see have a great deal of conflict, they would begin to “fuss or fall out with each other.”<sup>57</sup> While these are only some of the beliefs that Hurston found dealing with the black cat, it is clear that Ma Rainey is making a reference to Hoodoo beliefs and practices with this section of her song.

Ma Rainey concludes this song with an interesting confession:

*I feel my left eye jumpin', my heart a-bumpin', I'm on my P's and Q's  
I feel my brain a-thumpin', I got no time to lose  
Mama's superstitious, tryin' to overcome these blues.*<sup>58</sup>

This seems to be a direct reference to the Hoodoo religion itself. As can be seen, Hoodoo deals with a great many superstitions and rituals, particularly with the belief that an individual can manipulate or affect other individuals. What is not completely known by their lyrics is if blues artists like Ma Rainey and Robert Johnson sincerely believed the tenants and practices of Hoodoo; however, what is clear is that by referencing these Hoodoo beliefs, Rainey and Johnson were expressing their own views on religion, views that would not exactly coincide with the notion that blues artists uniformly endorsed Christian teachings and the church.

The references to Hoodoo beliefs and practices went along with the many references to the Devil also found in the blues, together they illustrated that these artists were expressing their own individualistic thoughts when it came to religion. As previously mentioned with Robert Johnson's “Cross Road Blues,” the Devil played a

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<sup>57</sup> Hurston, “Hoodoo in America,” 391.

<sup>58</sup> Rainey, “Black Cat, Hoot Owl Blues.”

unique role in African American religious thought, and this was certainly born out in the lyrics of the blues. This can be seen in not only Johnson's works but also in Skip James's and Reverend Gary Davis's. Each share a unique view of Satan, which reinforces the idea that the blues did not necessarily embody a singular view of religion as put forth by some scholars; rather, it was an individualistic expression of each blues artist as they sang their lyrics.

It is worth noting that many blues artists made references to a personalized devil or even called him Satan, the name given to the adversary of God in the Bible. In 1924, blues singer Clara Smith's song "Done Sold My Soul to the Devil," was full of references to Satan and the claim that she had sold her soul to the devil. In 1928, Peg Leg Howell stated that the devil was "*right by my side*" in his song "Low Down Rounder Blues." Bessie Smith, included in her 1929 song "Blue Spirit Blues" that the devil "*came and grabbed my hand, took me way down to that red hot land.*"<sup>59</sup> Yet, Robert Johnson, in particular, made a name for himself with references to the Devil. This perhaps had to do with the legend that is also associated with his music. The story goes that Robert Johnson sold his soul to the devil at a crossroads in Mississippi in exchange for the mastery of the blues. In any case, there are several clear references to the Devil in his works.

Aside from the references to the crossroads in his works, Johnson had one song that is worth examining when it comes to how blues artists expressed their beliefs of Satan or the Devil. In a song entitled "Me and the Devil Blues," he offers a controversial

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<sup>59</sup> Conforth and Wardlow, *Up Jumped the Devil*, 288-293.

line that would go against the Christian beliefs and teachings that dominated the culture around him:

*Early this mornin' you knocked upon my door  
Early this mornin' you knocked upon my door  
And I said "Hello Satan, I believe it's time to go.*

*Me and the Devil, were walkin' side by side.*<sup>60</sup>

Whether Johnson actually believed in a Devil or Satan is not expressly known just by these lyrics, what is known however is that Johnson did not go along with the mainstream Christian thought and expressed a differing view on this topic than would be accepted by the church. Johnson certainly seemed to be carrying on with the tradition that was there before him of characterizing the Devil as an almost whimsical trickster deity, something that would have resonated with those who practiced Hoodoo, with whom he walked with rather than an evil, malicious enemy of God who was seeking to destroy Christians.

Another early blues musician who directly referenced the Devil in his works was Skip James. While James had extensive training in Christian theology, he offered a unique perspective on his beliefs pertaining to the Devil in his song "Devil Got My Woman." While there are references to the Devil throughout this song, there is one line that is particularly important in analyzing James's beliefs on the Devil in the song. James sings: "*Nothing but the devil changed my baby's mind.*"<sup>61</sup> While there could be a wide

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<sup>60</sup> Robert Johnson, "Me And The Devil Blues – DAL.398-2," Track 28 on *The Centennial Collection*, Sony Music, 2011, Spotify.

<sup>61</sup> Skip James, "Devil Got My Woman," Track 1 on *The Complete 1931 Sessions*, Black Swan Music, 2022, Spotify.

variety of theological points that James was trying to make, he spoke to what he was trying to convey through this line in an interview he gave:

The Devil have dominion, to a certain extent. He still have agenices out now... That is, you can lay down happy at night. You and your companion will be in harmony. Everything goin' well. Satan'll creep in that house overnight. She may get up next mornin' and you can't get a good word out of her. Why? Because Satan has got the bill of sale over her.<sup>62</sup>

What James expressed in his song and the interview seems to be his own beliefs on the Devil. It does not seem to necessarily fall squarely into Christian doctrine as it has hints of Hoodoo belief in being able to control loved ones through the Devil or conjuring. What it clearly shows is an individualistic expression of religious thought, however.

While Johnson seemed to view the Devil as a whimsical friend in his works and James seemed to view the Devil as someone who could control loved ones in his works, Reverend Gary Davis offered a more mainstream Christian idea of who the Devil was. In his song "Lo, I Be with You Always," Davis has a particular line that deals with Satan:

*Pray that you never get worried, what Satan do to you, try to bind you  
Lo, I be with you always*

*Stay on your knees, keep your mind on Jesus, then keep this old wicked world  
behind you  
Lo, I be with you always.*<sup>63</sup>

Both the morality and the view of Satan in this work are simple and straightforward. Davis is calling on people to follow Jesus, abandon the wicked ways of the world, and is

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<sup>62</sup> *Blues and the Soul of Man*, 23.

<sup>63</sup> Reverend Gary Davis, "Lo, I Be With You Always," Track 10 on *Harlem Street Singer*, Fantasy, 1992, Spotify.

implored his listeners to offer up prayers that God would protect them from Satan. This certainly would line up with any mainstream Christian thought at the time.

What do the Hoodoo references and diversity of thought about the Devil say about the blues that is important to this discussion pertaining religion? It reinforces the idea that the blues artists were not of one accord and should not simply be viewed as a collective when it came to their thoughts on religion and faith. Clearly there were nuances and differences between each of the artists. Again, the lyrics of the blues show individualistic expressions of religious thought and not uniform, collective group think as scholars like Fahey and others would imply.

### ***The Blues, Death, and the Afterlife***

Examining the blues artists' lyrics as they dealt with the church and religious doctrines as well as the expressions of Hoodoo and the Devil are not the only reasons that blues can be seen as an expression of individualism as it pertains to religious thought. Another clear indicator of this fact is found in the blues lyrics that dealt with the topic of death and the afterlife. Much like their views on organized religion, dogma, religious plurality that included Hoodoo, and the role that the Devil played in their lives, blues artists used their lyrics to express individual notions of what they thought about death and the afterlife in a religious context. This can be seen in all three major regions of the blues in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: in the Delta of Mississippi with Son House, Charley Patton, Skip James, Big Bill Broonzy, and Robert Johnson, in the Piedmont with Blind Willie



McTell, Reverend Gary Davis, Bessie Smith, and Joshua White, and it can be seen in the Texas scene with Blind Lemon Jefferson.

This is where the thoughts of W.E.B. DuBois become vitally important once again. In his pivotal work *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois noticed something as it related to African American religious thought dealing with death and the afterlife. For all the suffering in slavery, the oppression of Jim Crow laws, and the open discrimination and terror that black men and women in the American South faced daily, it left many focused on the life to come, the one they would enter after death. DuBois wrote that “the Negro, losing the joy of this world, eagerly seized upon the offered conceptions of the next.”<sup>64</sup> This notion was certainly captured in many of the blues artists’ lyrics; however, as can be seen with a further examination, there were still those who denied there was any hope to come after the physical body died.

Beginning in the Delta of Mississippi, there were several blues artists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that addressed death and the afterlife, perhaps none more confusing than Son House. As was evident in the aforementioned works of Son House, he seemed to offer both sides of the religious debate. He would sometimes affirm Christian doctrine and thought while at other times he would seemingly disavow it. House would be no different when it came to the views on death and the afterlife that he conveyed in his songs. In many of his songs, House seems to convey that he certainly believed in the Christian afterlife. In one of his most famous songs called “Death Letter Blues” he sings of a

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<sup>64</sup> DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, 219.

woman that he loved that died unexpectedly. He repeats throughout the song that he will see her again on Judgment Day:

*Well, I walked up right close and I looked down in her face  
You know she was good ol' gal, she got to lay here 'till Judgment Day.*

*Yeah, I slowly walked away  
I said, "Farewell, farewell, I'll meet you on Judgment Day."<sup>65</sup>*

It is clear from these lyrics that Son House was presenting the Christian idea that he was going to see this woman that he loved again on Judgment Day when it is said that "the dead, great and small" will be judged before the throne of God.<sup>66</sup>

This is not the only song that Son House presented a Christian view of death and the afterlife. In another song, "Yonder Comes My Mother," he conveys a fairly similar idea to the one found in "Death Letter Blues:"

*When that roll is called up yonder, yes way, out on the mountaintop  
There ain't gonna be no separation, bid farewell to every nation.<sup>67</sup>*

Again, House is presenting a very Christian view of the afterlife. The idea that the "roll" will be called is precisely the same idea found in Revelation when it speaks of the Judgment Day. House, being a trained ex-minister, would have known exactly what response he was eliciting from his listeners with these word choices. Yet, not every song he sang affirmed that he believed in the Christian afterlife or Judgment Day as he had presented in these two songs.

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<sup>65</sup> Son House, "Death Letter Blues," Track 1 on *The Original Delta Blues*. Sony Music, 1965. Spotify.

<sup>66</sup> Revelation 20:12 (HCSB).

<sup>67</sup> Son House, "Yonder Comes My Mother," Track 18 on *Father of the Delta Blues: The Complete 1965 Sessions*, Sony Music, 1992, Spotify.

In a song entitled “My Black Mama,” House presents a totally different view on the afterlife. He simply says in one part of the song, “*Ain’t no heaven, ain’t no burnin’ hell, where I’m goin’ when I die, can’t nobody tell.*”<sup>68</sup> Why would he go against what he proclaimed to be true in other songs? These songs do not give all the answers when it comes to that; however, what they do show is that House’s religious views on death and the afterlife were complicated. He was expressing his individual religious views on these profound topics and while at times it seems contradictory, these views were his and do not need to be generalized as simply a collective thought pattern that was expressed in all of the blues.

Charley Patton was a contemporary of Son House and widely considered one of the most important Delta bluesmen to ever pick up a guitar. He too had a great deal to say about death and the afterlife. While his overall premise of essentially all blues upholding Christian values and doctrines is flawed, John Fahey does an astute job in his biographical work on Patton. Fahey affirms that Patton was deeply religious and that “religious songs were an integral part” of his “performance repertoire.”<sup>69</sup> One of those religious songs was called “Lord, I’m Discouraged.” In this song, Patton affirms his Christian faith’s view on death and the afterlife:

*There’ll be glory, wondrous glory when we reach that other shore  
There’ll be glory, wondrous glory when we reach that other shore  
There’ll be glory, wondrous glory, praising Jesus evermore.*<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Son House, “My Black Mama, Pt. 1,” Track 1 on *Martin Scorsese Presents The Blues: Son House*, Sony Music, 2003, Spotify.

<sup>69</sup> Fahey, *Charley Patton*, 165.

<sup>70</sup> Charley Patton, “Lord I’m Discouraged,” Track 16 on *Presenting Charley Patton*, Paramount Records, 1929, Spotify.

As the song goes on, Patton echoes the sentiment that DuBois wrote about when he said that the difficulties of African Americans' life in the South caused them to look to the afterlife for comfort:

*Sometimes I have no religion, feel a-hopeless and despair  
Sometimes I have no religion, feel a-hopeless and despair  
Well, I think of sweet King Jesus's great kingdom in the air.*<sup>71</sup>

Patton would even go as far to proclaim in another song entitled "I'm Goin' Home" that he found his primary satisfaction in the idea of the afterlife: "*I'm satisfied, satisfied, satisfied, if I never see you anymore. I'm satisfied, satisfied, satisfied, I'll meet you on that other shore.*"<sup>72</sup> Unlike Son House with his views, Charley Patton seems to clearly be affirming that he held mainstream Christian ideas when it came to death and the afterlife.

Skip James would also join Patton in expressing mainstream Christian beliefs on death and the afterlife. This can be seen primarily in his song "Be Ready When He Comes." In this work, James presents the idea of Jesus's return to earth:

*Be ready when He comes, be ready when He comes  
He's coming again so soon.*

*Jesus is coming to this world again, coming to judge the hearts of men  
Don't let him catch your heart filled with sin, He's coming again so soon.*<sup>73</sup>

Like Son House, James is speaking to the Christian belief in Judgment Day, and perhaps while not as expressly as Patton, he is also speaking to his ideas on death. A cursory knowledge of the Christian doctrine on Judgment Day, a knowledge that James would

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<sup>71</sup> Patton, "Lord I'm Discouraged."

<sup>72</sup> Charley Patton, "I'm Goin' Home," Track 15 on *Presenting Charley Patton*, Paramount Records, 1929, Spotify.

<sup>73</sup> Skip James, "Be Ready When He Comes," Track 6 on *The Complete 1931 Sessions*, Black Swan Music, 2022, Spotify.

have had in abundance as he had attended theology school, would allow the listener to know James's intent: he was conveying the idea of Jesus returning to judge the dead, some to eternal life and others to eternal damnation.

Patton would not be the only Delta bluesman that directly supported the Christian beliefs on death and the afterlife. Known for being one of the most important bluesmen because of his transcendence between both the Delta blues and the Chicago blues scenes, Big Bill Broonzy had one particular song that fell in line with Patton and mainstream Christian dogma. The song was called "This Train (Bound for Glory)." In this work, Broonzy continues to lay out who can and cannot enter into "glory." He denounces gambling, lying, drinking alcohol, and people he refers to as "high flyers" before announcing that the train, the vehicle in which Broonzy is using to be a metaphor for transporting people's souls to heaven, "*don't carry nothing but the righteous and the holy, this train is bound for glory.*"<sup>74</sup> The key point in his song is one that would agree with Patton's interpretation and the majority of Christian thought when it comes to death and the afterlife.

If Son House was difficult to pin down as to what exactly his religious beliefs about death and the afterlife were and Charley Patton and Big Bill Broonzy were clear with their upholding of Christian beliefs on the subjects, then Delta bluesman Robert Johnson was clear on his denouncing of the Christian idea of the afterlife. As previously mentioned, Johnson had a contentious relationship with religion to say the least and this

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<sup>74</sup> Big Bill Broonzy, "This Train (Bound for Glory)," Track 22 on *Trouble in Mind*, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 2000, Spotify.

showed in his songs. The multiple mentions of the devil, the Hoodoo references, the overtly sexual lyrics that will be discussed in later chapters, they all pointed to a man who disavowed any Christian faith, but it was in a subtle, spoken section of one of his songs that he presented his ideas on death and the afterlife.

In his song “Me and the Devil Blues,” Johnson sings the lines:

*You may bury my body down by the highway sign  
You may bury my body down by the highway sign  
So my old evil spirit can catch a Greyhound bus and ride.*<sup>75</sup>

It is clear enough in the song that Johnson was not affirming Christian beliefs on death or the afterlife as he speaks of his “evil spirit” riding a Greyhound bus, not a train to glory. Yet, it is in the spoken words between the second and third line of this verse that Johnson truly expresses his opinion on death and the afterlife: “Babe, I don’t care where you bury my body when I’m dead and gone.”<sup>76</sup> This statement taken by itself would be hard to interpret, but coupled with the idea that his spirit could ride the Greyhound bus, it certainly did not support any Christian notion of death or the afterlife. What is even more interesting about this statement is the fact that it is attested to by Skip James in an interview he gave where he said, speaking on his own song “Cypress Grove Blues:” “I heard those old people sing a song about, ‘I don’t care where the Lord bury my body; I don’t care where you bury my body at, since my soul’s gonna be with God.’”<sup>77</sup> If this was a popular line in the religious music of the Mississippi Delta, then it is plausible to think

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<sup>75</sup> Johnson, “Me And The Devil Blues – DAL.398-2.”

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> *Blues and the Soul of Man*, 34.

that Robert Johnson would have heard it and perhaps used satire to make light of it in his own way by taking out any mention of God in his references to death and the afterlife.

The blues artists of the Piedmont region had a good deal to say about their religious beliefs pertaining to death and the life there after as well. There were two artists in particular that wrote many songs about death explicitly: Blind Willie McTell and Reverend Gary Davis. McTell certainly did speak of the Christian Judgment Day in his song “Lord Have Mercy If You Please” when he sang:

*We will shout hallelujah on our knees  
We will shout hallelujah on our knees  
We will all ride together and face the rising sun, Lord have mercy if you please.*<sup>78</sup>

Or again in his song “We Got to Meet Death One Day” when he sings: “*We’re going to meet old death one day, I’m going to judgment after a while.*”<sup>79</sup> Reverend Gary Davis spoke of Judgment Day and the afterlife as well, particularly in his song “Pure Religion” when he sang:

*God said you must have that pure religion, must have religion and your soul converted  
God said you must have that pure religion, must have religion and your soul converted  
Can’t cross there.*<sup>80</sup>

While these references to the Christian idea of Judgment Day are certainly important in understanding both McTell’s and Davis’s individual expression of their religious ideas, it is their emphasis on death itself that highlight their religious views the most.

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<sup>78</sup> Blind Willie McTell, “Lord Have Mercy If You Please,” Track 39 on *Blind Willie McTell – Statesboro Blues – The Early Years 1927-1935*. Document Records, 2005. Spotify.

<sup>79</sup> Blind Willie McTell, “We Got To Meet Death One Day (Take 1),” Track 61 on *Blind Willie McTell – Statesboro Blues – The Early Years 1927-1935*. Document Records, 2005.

<sup>80</sup> Davis, “Pure Religion.”

McTell's song "Don't You See How This World Made a Change" is a prime example of the attention that he gave to the subject of death in his works. In this song, he states the following:

*Don't you see how this world made a change?  
You can see every day how the people passing away.*<sup>81</sup>

As the song progresses, McTell speaks on who exactly he sees is dying when he sings:

*Now some of our mothers have left us here alone, they go on to heaven while we weep and moan  
They're marching around the throne with Peter, James, and John.*<sup>82</sup>

What is obvious even in the imagery of the Christian afterlife is the emphasis placed on death, particularly the death of mothers in his community. This is not the only song that McTell speaks on the death of mothers either. In his song "Death Room Blues," he sings that "early one morning, death walked into my room. Oh, well it took my dear mother, early one morning soon."<sup>83</sup> Why did McTell place such a high emphasis on death, but even more specifically the death of mothers?

To answer that question, Reverend Gary Davis's work must also be examined first. In one of his most haunting songs called "Death Don't Have No Mercy," Davis expressed his views on death openly and without any reservation. The theme of the song is that death, almost given a personification, comes to every house in the land and begins to take people. In one verse, he sings a line that is similar to that which is found in McTell's songs:

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<sup>81</sup> Blind Willie McTell, "Don't You See How This World Made A Change," Track 40 on *Blind Willie McTell – Statesboro Blues – The Early Years 1927-1935*. Document Records, 2005. Spotify.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Blind Willie McTell, "Death Room Blues (Take 1), Track 48 on *Blind Willie McTell – Statesboro Blues – The Early Years 1927-1935*. Document Records, 2005. Spotify.



*Death will go in any family in this land.  
Well, he never takes a vacation in this land, well old Death never takes a vacation  
in this land.  
Well he'll come to your house and he won't stay long, well you'll look in the bed  
and your mother will be gone.*<sup>84</sup>

Much like the phraseology used in McTell's works to express death, Davis not only personifies death in his song, but he also makes it a point to highlight the death of mothers. Why is that?

The simple answer may be that for Davis, at least, it was biographical in nature. In 1934, Davis's mother died leaving him the only surviving member of his ten-person family.<sup>85</sup> Without a doubt, Davis had experienced no mercy from death in his land. Yet, there seems to be something much deeper going on here as the death of mothers is also referenced in the works of McTell. Through extensive census examination, Dr. Douglas C. Ewbank of the University of Pennsylvania made some fascinating discoveries about morality rates in the African American community of the Piedmont around the time that McTell and Davis would have been writing these songs. The first discovery that would help to explain why there was such a high emphasis in these songs on the death of mothers was that in the 1870, 1880, and 1900 censuses there was "an excess of female deaths between ages 10 and 44." In fact, Ewbank goes on to say that "one of the unusual features of black mortality during this period is that female adult mortality exceeded that of males." He discovered that in the early 1920s in areas with at least five percent black population, the life expectancy for black males was at least two years higher than that of

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<sup>84</sup> Reverend Gary Davis, "Death Don't Have No Mercy," Track 6 on *Harlem Street Singer*, Fantasy, 1992, Spotify.

<sup>85</sup> Zack, *Say No to the Devil*, 98.

black females because of the sheer number of them that were dying.<sup>86</sup> These startling facts may lend themselves to explaining why both McTell and Davis saw the need to place such attention on not only death, but specifically the death of mothers in their works.

What has been seen clearly in both McTell's and Davis's songs is the expression of joy in the Christian afterlife while also a fear of death as they saw it all around them. Still, there were others in the Piedmont region that did not place as high of an emphasis on death and instead shifted their focuses to expressing their individual views on the afterlife. In her song "Moan, You Moaners," Bessie Smith sang about hell and the torment that waited for any of the poor souls who chose to not follow the Lord:

*Hear, you sinners, hear my call. Satan's waiting for you all.  
Better get your souls washed white, better see the light.  
Fire is burnin' down below, if you ain't right, down you'll go.  
To a region of hot brimstone, unless you start right in to moan.  
You better get down on your knees and let the good Lord hear your pleas.*<sup>87</sup>

This was interesting as not many blues artists focused on Hell; rather, they spent more of their time singing about the glory that was to come in Heaven when Jesus took them there. Smith, however, decided to express her beliefs about the darker, torturous side of the Christian afterlife.

Joshua White is another Piedmont bluesman that expressed his views on the afterlife in his works. In his song "Jesus Gonna Make Up My Dying Bed," White speaks

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<sup>86</sup> Douglas C. Ewbank, "History of Black Mortality and Health before 1940," *The Milbank Quarterly* 65, no.1 (1987): 109-110.

<sup>87</sup> Bessie Smith, "Moan, You Moaners," Track 28 on *The Essential Bessie Smith*, Sony Music, 1997, Spotify.

of how Jesus is preparing him a place in eternity with Him and that he will reach the “Promised Land.” White also expressed that he did not fear death when he sang: “*Well, so I can die easy, Jesus gonna make up my dying bed.*”<sup>88</sup> This would not be the only song that White sang of his immense hope in the afterlife. In the song “King Jesus Knows I’m Coming,” he joyfully sings:

*King Jesus knows I’m coming, you people listen to my story  
I’m going to walk in God’s glory.*<sup>89</sup>

The blues artists of the Mississippi Delta and Piedmont regions were not the only ones that expressed their individual religious beliefs on death and the afterlife, however. Texas native Blind Lemon Jefferson, would also express his own beliefs in his works. Instead of focusing on the afterlife or Judgment Day, Jefferson anchored his hope for an eternal glory in the gospel story of Jesus in the song “He Arose From the Dead” when he sang: “*He rose, He rose, He rose from the dead and the Lord shall bear my spirit home.*”<sup>90</sup> In another song entitled “See That My Grave’s Kept Clean,” he would go on to speak about the idea of Judgment Day and the afterlife, however:

*Well my heart stoped beating and my hands turned cold, now I believe what the Bible told  
There’s just one last favor I’ll ask of you  
See that my grave is kept clean.*<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Joshua White, “Jesus Gonna Make Up My Dying Bed,” Track 2 on *Joshua White 1933-1941*, Wolf Records, 1994, Spotify.

<sup>89</sup> Joshua White, “King Jesus Knows I’m Coming,” Track 16 on *Joshua White 1933-1941*, Wolf Records, 1994, Spotify.

<sup>90</sup> Blind Lemon Jefferson, “He Arose from the Dead,” Track 70 on *Presenting Blind Lemon Jefferson*, Paramount Records, 1926, Spotify.

<sup>91</sup> Blind Lemon Jefferson, “See That My Grave’s Kept Clean,” Track 3 on *Presenting Blind Lemon Jefferson*, Paramount Records, 1926, Spotify.

Unlike some of his Delta and Piedmont counterparts, Jefferson seemed to only write songs that affirmed a Christian view of death and the afterlife; however, he still did it in a way that expressed his own personal beliefs as he chose to focus more on the story of Jesus's resurrection than seemingly any of the others did.

What is clear in the examination of the themes of death and the afterlife in the works of these blues artists is that there was no uniform approach to these songs. Some of the artists rejected the idea of Heaven or Hell, some sang joyfully and even yearned for the day they would die and see their Savior, and still others expressed a fear of death while still trying to hold on to any hope that the afterlife may bring. No matter what their beliefs were, the songs themselves expressed their individualism and the diversity of thought found within the blues community and the African American community at large.

### ***Conclusion***

What exactly does this examination of blues lyrics pertaining to the church and religious doctrines, references to Hoodoo beliefs and practices and the Devil, and the varying beliefs on the subjects of death and the afterlife have to say about the blues itself? The answer is that it shows these blues artists were complex, deep individuals who each had their own opinions and beliefs. To try and lump them altogether with a simple statement implying they all seemed to fall in line with Christian teachings is far too simplistic and desperately flawed in its approach. What this examination also shows is the depth of blues music itself. This was certainly not just a music created for the sole

purpose of making money as some blues scholars like Elijah Wald would argue. These lyrics are deep and deal with important and difficult to grasp theological concepts and social issues pertaining to religion.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “I’M GOING TO DO JUST AS I WANT’’: EXPRESSIONS OF INDIVIDUAL LEISURE IN THE BLUES

When it came to expressions of individualism and Black thought, religion and the afterlife were not the only areas that the blues artists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century focused on. They also placed enormous focus on the present life and all the possibilities it could offer. In other words, these blues artists focused on the idea of leisure in their work and the individual liberties that they desired to enjoy. What I mean by leisure in their work is to say a focus on activities that they were unable to enjoy during slavery and the subsequent Jim Crow era. The turn of the century saw new opportunities afforded to Black men and women that had previously been unimaginable because of oppression, slavery, segregation, and discrimination. While there has been an abundance of scholarship on the idea of blues as a social expression of rebellion against the political powers that undermined Black progress, there is still another area that needs to be examined to better understand the Black spirit and thought during this time. Once again that perspective can be seen in the lyrics of the early blues.

Perhaps Bessie Smith’s words in “Taint Nobody’s Bizness If I Do” gives the best summation of what many blues artists at the time had to say about leisure and the expression of individual liberties. In the song Smith declares: “*There ain’t nothin’ I can do or nothin’ I can say that folks don’t criticize me but I’m going to do just as I want to*

anyway.”<sup>92</sup> These words carry the weight of what so many African Americans expressed in their blues. Despite what anybody told them, they were going to do what they wanted to do. The blues of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century juxtaposed an expression of frustration against the government and the economic situation that tried to oppress several of their individualistic leisure desires with a message of hope and excitement over the idea that for the first time in American history, Black people could begin to spend their free time as they saw fit.

There are several ways that one could examine this idea within the context of the blues, but the best way is to split the blues of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century up thematically as they address three distinct time periods in American history that greatly affected African Americans and their individualistic leisure pursuits. The first section of this chapter will be a focus on the Great Migration of the early- and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The blues that focused on this major historical event showed the expression of these individuals’ desires to relocate in attempts to find a better life for themselves. By examining the various blues artists and their music, I will show the common theme expressed by these individuals, namely that they wanted the freedom to establish a better life for themselves in the North and the West, for economic as well as reasons pertaining to their standard of living. The second section of this chapter will focus on Prohibition. For Black Americans, Prohibition became yet another era where the American government legislated what they could and could not do. With a deeper examination of the Prohibition era blues that

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<sup>92</sup> Bessie Smith, “‘Tain’t Nobody’s Bizness If I Do,” Track 3 on *The Essential Bessie Smith*, Sony Music, 1997, Spotify.

directly addressed Prohibition and the blues artists' thoughts on alcohol, I will show that they expressed their own viewpoints on how they sought to express their individual rights to consume alcohol no matter what the government had to say on the matter. The third section will be a focus on the Black response to the Great Depression. What I will examine is that even before white Americans felt the Great Depression with the stock market crash of 1929, Black America had already been experiencing various degrees of economic hardships, particularly in the American South. In the blues lyrics of these artists that were experiencing these hard times, they expressed the pain of the economic despair of the Great Depression. Like all Americans, they wanted to make money, find good jobs, and get back on their feet. While this chapter is not intended to be an exhaustive examination of the legal or historical elements of these three major events in American history, I will offer a cursory overview of them as well in each section so that I may be able to better highlight the importance of the blues lyrics on each of these time periods.

What I hope to do is blend all three of these major events in the light of the blues lyrics themselves to show the importance of the blues as an expression of individualism. In each of these sections, it will be demonstrated that the blues artists expressed their own individual desires to move, to drink alcohol, to find good jobs, to make good money, but ultimately to do whatever it is that they wanted to do in life. From the Mississippi Delta to the plains of Texas to the mountains of the Piedmont, blues musicians of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century expressed this desire through their work. Much like with religion, the blues again stands as an important primary source of not only the Black cultural expression, but of



the individual expressions of these blues artists themselves on the ideas of leisure and the pursuit of individual liberties.

### ***The Blues and the Great Migration***

Simple stated, the Great Migration refers to the movement on mass of Black Americans from the South, primarily the Deep South, to the North and the West following the American Civil War. It is difficult to precisely pinpoint when the Great Migration began, but perhaps the beginnings of this movement can be observed as early as 1879 or 1880. During that time, there was an estimated 40,000 to 60,000 Black men and women who moved from the South to Kansas in search of what historian Eric Foner said was “political equality, freedom from violence, access to education, and economic opportunity.”<sup>93</sup> This trend would continue through the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and culminated during both World Wars. While most of the historiography on the Great Migration implies that Black Americans were nearly forced to leave the South due to the oppression they faced, the perspective of blues artists offers a more nuanced view of this phenomena that simultaneously expressed the desires for leisure and individualistic liberties and pursuits.

Historically speaking, Foner is correct in his assessment that Black Americans left the American South for several reasons, not just economic or political reasons either. I will demonstrate this by examining the music of Robert Johnson, Skip James, Charley Patton, Big Bill Broonzy, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Willie McTell, and Ma Rainey.

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<sup>93</sup> Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 651.

Beginning with Johnson, he expressed one of the most common desires of Black Americans at the time: to move north in search of a better life. In his famous song “Sweet Home Chicago” Johnson expressed his desires to call Chicago his new home when he sang:

*Oh, baby, don't you want to go?  
Oh, baby, don't you want to go?  
Back to the land of California, to my sweet home Chicago.*<sup>94</sup>

The desire to pack up and leave for Northern cities and Western lands was again expressed in his song entitled “From Four Until Late” when he sang: “*I believe to my soul that your daddy's Gulport bound*” and expressed that “*from Memphis to Norfolk is a thirty-six hour ride, a man is like a prisoner and he's never satisfied.*”<sup>95</sup> Johnson, however, was not the only Delta bluesman to plainly express his desire to move on from his place of origin.

Skip James also made his intentions very clear in his song “Illinois Blues” when he sang:

*You know, I been in Texas and I been in Arkansas, but I never had a good time till I got to Illinois, up in Illinois, up in Illinois.*<sup>96</sup>

Charley Patton joined Johnson and James in the theme of expressing his desire to move North, specifically to Illinois in his song “Down the Dirt Road Blues” when he sang:

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<sup>94</sup> Robert Johnson, “Sweet Home Chicago – SA.2582-1,” Track 3 on *The Centennial Collection*, Sony Music, 2011, Spotify.

<sup>95</sup> Robert Johnson, “From Four Until Late – DAL.379-1,” Track 25 on *The Centennial Collection*, Sony Music, 2011, Spotify.

<sup>96</sup> Skip James, “Illinois Blues,” Track 17 on *The Complete 1931 Sessions*, Black Swan Music, 2022, Spotify.

*“I’m goin’ away to Illinois, I’m worried now, but I won’t be worried long.”*<sup>97</sup> Likewise, fellow Delta bluesman Big Bill Broonzy, who actually had a booming career in Chicago after leaving the Deep South, sang about the lands of the West and his desire to move there in search of a better life in his song “Mountain Blues” as he sang:

*One of these mornings, it won’t be long, you gonna look for me baby and Lord I’ll be gone.  
I’m gonna leave here in the morning, I’m going way out West.  
I’m going up in the mountain, where the eagle builds his nest.*<sup>98</sup>

Blues musicians from the Delta were not the only ones that expressed this desire to leave their homes for the North and the West either. Blind Lemon Jefferson from Texas sang in his song “Lonesome House Blues” that *“I’m goin’ away mama, just to wear you off my mind, so if I live here in Chicago, money’s gonna be my crime.”*<sup>99</sup> In the Piedmont region, Blind Willie McTell sang that *“I’m leaving town, baby, gonna leave my home/ I’m going where, baby, I’m better known”*<sup>100</sup> while Ma Rainey added *“I’m running away tomorrow, they don’t mean me no good/ I’m gonna run away, have to leave this neighborhood.”*<sup>101</sup>

In their own ways, each of these blues artists were making their own individual desires known, primarily in this case as it pertained to the ability to pick up and leave their homes in the South and move either North or West. This Black Mobility, as it is often referred to today by many scholars, was most certainly a way for Black Americans

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<sup>97</sup> Charley Patton, “Down the Dirt Road Blues,” Track 1 on *Presenting Charley Patton*, Paramount Records, 1929, Spotify.

<sup>98</sup> Big Bill Broonzy, “Mountain Blues,” Track 9 on *Volume 1: The Pre-War Years*. BMG Rights, 2007. Spotify.

<sup>99</sup> Blind Lemon Jefferson, “Lonesome House Blues,” Track 20 on *Presenting Blind Lemon Jefferson*, Paramount Records, 1926, Spotify.

<sup>100</sup> Blind Willie McTell, “Mr. McTell Got The Blues (Take 1),” Track 4 on *Blind Willie McTell – Statesboro Blues – The Early Years 1927-1935*. Document Records, 2005. Spotify.

<sup>101</sup> Ma Rainey, “Runaway Blues,” Track 24 on *Ma Rainey*, Fantasy, 1992, Spotify.

in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to exercise their personal liberties and pursue their own leisurely pleasures, namely, to live where they please and do what they wanted to. This autonomy expressed in these blues represented a great deal of southern Black men and women in this time period. It has been estimated that between 1910 and 1920, when these artists were writing and beginning to record many of their works, around half a million African Americans moved away from the South to larger cities in the North and the West. One of the best examples of this mass exodus of Black Americans to the North was the city of Chicago. It is no coincidence that this large northern city is one of the most often referred to metropolises in the early blues. In 1910, the Black population in Chicago was 44,103 and in 1920, the Black population increased to 109,458 people. That is a 148.2 per cent increase of Blacks in the city.<sup>102</sup>

This initial boom in the Black migration from the South would be “dwarfed” by yet another wave of the Great Migration following the start of World War II in the 1940s. It was estimated that somewhere around 700,000 Blacks boarded what were often called “liberty trains” to leave their homes in the South and relocate in major industrial cities in the North and the West.<sup>103</sup> There have been three major waves of Black migration beginning with the one in 1879, followed by the one between 1910 and 1920, and then the great migration of the 1940s. The blues gives a glimpse why so many Black Americans decided to do this. After all, as LeRoy Jones so aptly and correctly states in *Blues People*: “It was a decision Negroes made to leave the South, not an historical

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<sup>102</sup> Foner, *Give Me Liberty*, 755.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, 879.

imperative.”<sup>104</sup> The blues gives greater insight into why these individuals decided to leave the American South in droves.

Nearly all the reasons that Black Americans migrated from the South to larger cities in the North and West can be linked to individual choices that pertained to leisure and individual freedoms. There is no doubt that there were personal economic stakes at play with many of those who decided to uproot their lives and move north. As Jones states, “economically, the South was lagging behind the rest of the country in its move toward industrialization.” To make matters worse for the Black men and women in the South, it was the Black “man who suffered most because of it.”<sup>105</sup> This desire to leave the economically stagnant South was clearly expressed in several of the blues artists’ works.

Again, returning to Robert Johnson is very important for analyzing blues at this time. In one of his most successful songs entitled “Terraplane Blues,” Johnson expressed his desire for a better economic life that was often not afforded to Black men like himself in the American South:

*When I feel so lonesome, you hear me when I moan.  
When I feel so lonesome, you hear me when I moan.  
Who been drivin’ my Terraplane for years since I been gone?*<sup>106</sup>

He sang of a 1936 Hudson Terraplane car that he had admired from a distance while growing up as a young boy in the booming city of Memphis.<sup>107</sup> For Johnson, he saw the life that blues could afford, the life of moving up to Chicago and pursuing his dreams of

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<sup>104</sup> Jones, *Blues People*, 96.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, 95.

<sup>106</sup> Robert Johnson, “Terraplane Blues – SA.2586-1,” Track 7 on *The Centennial Collection*, Sony Music, 2011, Spotify.

<sup>107</sup> Conforth and Wardlow, *Up Jumped the Devil*, 357.

being a successful musician, as the pinnacle of pursuing individual liberties and the various leisure activities and material goods he desired. As blues historians Bruce Conforth and Gayle Wardlow said of Robert Johnson in their biography, he used blues music to “further his quest for fame and freedom from the burdens of sharecropping,” the epitome of the dead-end economy that Black men and women faced in the American South.<sup>108</sup> In an interview given to the authors, members of Johnson’s family said that he was known to proclaim that “I don’t wanna work. I’m tryin’ to learn how to make my livin’ without pickin’ cotton. I got this here old guitar music on my mind and that’s what I wanna learn more.”<sup>109</sup>

The idea of an economic “Promised Land” in the North because of higher paying jobs and economic gains was certainly something that many other blues artists expressed as well. Bessie Smith sang in her song “Work House Blues” that because she could not find a job cooking or cleaning in the South that “*if I run away wouldn’t that be good, cause I’m going to the Nation, goin’ to the Territor’, I got to leave here, I got to get the next train goin’.*”<sup>110</sup> Skip James would explain in an interview that the “Nation and the Territory” spoken often in the blues was just another way of saying big cities like “New York” or perhaps the “rurals” of the American West.<sup>111</sup> Yet as Jones states, economic gain was not the only reason that Black men and women decided to leave the South in droves. This theme can be seen in the works of both Skip James and Charley Patton. In

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<sup>108</sup> Conforth and Wardlow, *Up Jumped the Devil*, 53.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, 167.

<sup>110</sup> Bessie Smith, “Work House Blues,” Track 4 on *The Best of Bessie Smith*, Sony Music, 1923, Spotify.

<sup>111</sup> *Blues and the Soul of Man*, 55.

his song “If You Haven’t Any Hay Get Down the Road,” Skip James expressed his desire to leave his home in Mississippi for various reasons, but he offers a unique perspective about the Deep South. James sings in this song that “*I’m going, I’m coming here no more/ If I go to Louisiana, mama, Lord, Lord, they’ll hang me sure.*”<sup>112</sup> Interestingly enough, Mississippi and Louisiana held two of the highest numbers of lynching of Black Americans in the United States between the years of 1877 and 1950. During that time, there were 656 lynchings in Mississippi while Louisiana was only slightly lower with 549.<sup>113</sup> In any case, it is clear to see that hangings were something that James was very weary of and a significant reason that he expressed his desires to move from the South.

Racially motivated hangings were not the only form of violence that many Black Americans sought to escape from, however, as Charley Patton clearly illustrated in his works. Patton was known to have sung “*I’m goin’ away, pretty mama, don’t you wanna go?/ Take God to tell when I’ll be back here anymore*”<sup>114</sup> and much like James, escaping violence was a major theme in why he desired to leave. In his song “Down the Dirt Road Blues,” Patton expressed a trend that he saw with his own eyes in Mississippi:

*Every day seem like murder here.  
Every day seem like murder here.  
I’m gonna leave tomorrow, I know you don’t bid my care.*<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Skip James, “If You Haven’t Any Hay Get on Down the Road,” Track 2 on *The Complete 1931 Sessions*, Black Swan Music, 2022, Spotify.

<sup>113</sup> “Lynching in America: Racial Terror Lynchings,” Lynching in America, Equal Justice Initiative, accessed on March 13, 2023, <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/explore>.

<sup>114</sup> Charley Patton, “Screamin’ and Hollerin’ the Blues,” Track 37 on *Presenting Charley Patton*, Paramount Records, 1929, Spotify.

<sup>115</sup> Patton, “Down the Dirt Road Blues.”

The historical context of Patton's comments here in this song are vitally important to understanding not only his desire to leave the South, specifically Mississippi, because of the violence in the region, but also to examine the desire of many Black men and women's desires as well.

Mississippi was known for its abnormally high murder rate at the time that Patton wrote and released this particular song. For example, in 1933 the murder rate for the entire population of the United States fell somewhere around 9.3 for every 100,000 people. In Mississippi, however, that rate was around 20.5 per 100,000 people. This dramatic leap in homicides hit the Black community particularly hard in Mississippi. It was discovered that somewhere around sixty-six percent of the murders in Mississippi were committed by Black folks and of those cases, ninety-five percent were found to be Black people killing other Black people.<sup>116</sup> The data clearly supports the message that Patton and others were trying to convey in their music when they spoke of the violence that they saw. It should come as no surprise then that escaping both racially motivated lynchings described by James and the high homicide rate in the Delta of Mississippi would be reasons that they and many other Black Americans would desire to move North or West and escape these conditions in the South.

Still, there was yet another reason that blues artists offered as to why they and other Black Americans would want to pick up and leave the American South. Not only were they seeking better paying jobs, but they were seeking a way out of the harsh work

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<sup>116</sup> Hortense Powdermaker, *After Freedom: A Cultural Study in the Deep South* (New York: The Viking Press, 1939), 170.



conditions that they faced daily as a Black individual in the South. Robert Johnson makes mention of the harsh conditions that Black men and women faced as they worked in the South, but only briefly in his song “Last Fair Deal Gone Down.” In this song, he mentions the common theme that many Black Americans in the South faced: a cruel, spiteful boss: “*My captain’s so mean on me, good Lord on this Gulport Island Road.*”<sup>117</sup> While Johnson was not as upfront about this particular issue with the working conditions, Skip James would expand more on this in his songs and interviews given to blues historian Stephen Calt.

James expressed his desire to escape harsh work conditions in the South in his song “Hard Luck Child” when he sang: “*You work, I’ll sit way out on a long old lonesome road/ I’ve got to leave from her, gotta catch the first train that blows.*”<sup>118</sup> In this particular case, work was the subject for James when the topic of leaving the South was the question in this song. In an interview, James went even further in his explanation of the harsh working conditions. He often spoke about the lack of importance placed on a Black man’s life in the workplaces of the American South, stating that “if you don’t die” after sustaining an injury on the job, then “they might throw you in the hospital, but most of the time they hardly ever did.” In a particularly crude expression that was apparently spread by the various bosses on these worksites in the South, if they decided to kill a mule, then they could simply buy another and if they decided to kill a Black man, then

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<sup>117</sup> Robert Johnson, “Last Fair Deal Gone Down – SA.2631-1,” Track 14 on *The Centennial Collection*, Sony Music, 2011, Spotify.

<sup>118</sup> Skip James, “Hard Luck Child,” Track 3 on *The Complete 1931 Sessions*, Black Swan Music, 2022, Spotify.

they could simply hire another. According to first-hand accounts, James believed that “well, they meant that.”<sup>119</sup>

James expanded on the idea that Johnson presented in his song as well when it came to the harsh bosses themselves. In his interview, James gave a personal account of the horrible bosses and rampant violence that he experienced while working at various sites in the South and his subsequent desire to leave as a result of it:

We had three bossmen – one was named Charlie Moran, one named Pres Moran, and one named Tate Lorraine. Tate Lorraine was a bear: he’d kill a man in a minute. And he’d tell you, ‘Now if that wheeler, or that mule-team go in that river, go behind it.’ And a lot of them do it; they didn’t wanna have some trouble or get killed. Sometimes they would get drowned. Now he’d shoot you off in there if you didn’t go behind the mules, unless you beat him to it. I didn’t wanna get killed, and I didn’t wanna kill nobody. I was gonna try to shoot first before I got killed, if I could. But they were gettin’ a little too rough on me, so I just said, ‘The best thing for me to do is pull on the string.’ So I left the place.<sup>120</sup>

What is clear from his interview here is that James, like Johnson and so many other Black Americans at the time, saw the horrors of the workplace and the fate that met many of those who stayed behind to work in the American South. For James, many other blues artists, and Black southerners overall, this was sufficient reason to relocate from their homes in the Great Migration.

In summation, Jones aptly states my position on what the blues artists were expressing in their works regarding the Great Migration of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: “Whatever the peculiar reason for any one individual’s flight northward, the significant idea is that the North now represented for Negroes a place where they could begin again, this time,

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<sup>119</sup> *Blues and the Soul of Man*, 57.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*, 56.

perhaps, on more human footing.”<sup>121</sup> This is exactly what the blues artists were portraying in their works. To move away from their homeland of the South was no easy decision, many Black Americans decided to not leave the South despite the difficulties experienced there. They had a true “feeling of closeness to the soil” and thoroughly enjoyed the physical labor and humble lifestyle that was afforded in the agricultural American South.<sup>122</sup> Yet, the blues artists offered their own unique, individualistic perspectives that were certainly wrapped up in their desire to pursue whatever leisurely pursuit they saw fit. Whether it was for purely economic reasons, to escape abject violence, or to leave behind the harsh and life-threatening work conditions found in the South, the blues artists expressed their desire to join the hundreds of thousands of Black Americans who left the South during the Great Migration.

How does this express individualism as it pertains to leisure? Simply put: it shows the common threads that were seen at large in the Black community at the time but on a personal, individual level. Robert Johnson wanted to be able to freely pursue his passions of music and material gains such as Terraplane cars. Skip James and Charley Patton wanted to escape the violence and homicides that ran rampant in their communities. Blind Lemon Jefferson echoed these sentiments and wanted to make a better life for himself in Chicago as so many other Black Americans desired to do as well. All this falls under the umbrella of leisure, as they all wanted to pursue whatever it is that brought them happiness or fulfillment in their life. If they did not want to work in harsh

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<sup>121</sup> Jones, *Blues People*, 96.

<sup>122</sup> Powdermaker, *After Freedom*, 113-114.

conditions, be subjected to economic hardships, or be threatened with the violence that surrounded them, then they expressed that they had a right and a desire to exercise their own autonomy and to follow whatever leisurely pursuit they so craved, even if it was something as simple and fundamental as choosing the place one calls home.

### ***The Blues and Prohibition***

Beginning primarily in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many organizations and people were clamoring for the passage of the national prohibition of alcohol; however, it would not reach its culmination until 1917. Congress passed the Eighteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in that year. It was then ratified by the states in 1919, and it became the law of the land and in full effect at the beginning of 1920.<sup>123</sup> The amendment consisted of three main parts. The first section of this amendment stated that “after one year from the ratification” of the article, the manufacture, sale, and transportation of “intoxicating liquors” in the United States would be expressly “prohibited.” This section would be the crux of Prohibition’s legal reach as it simply outlawed not only the selling of alcohol, but even its manufacturing which would essentially outlaw the consumption of it as well. The second section of this amendment would give the federal government as well as the states the right to “enforce this article by appropriate legislation.” This would help in the creation of several law enforcement initiatives and coalitions that will be further discussed in this paper. The third and final section of this amendment stated that the amendment itself would be “inoperative unless it shall have been ratified as an

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<sup>123</sup> Foner, *Give Me Liberty*, 742.

amendment to the Constitution” by the states within seven years. This proved to be a non-issue as it was quickly and decisively ratified within that time frame.<sup>124</sup>

There was little to no actual debate in Congress over the ratification of Prohibition as the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution. In fact, there were no committee hearings in Congress whatsoever on Prohibition and the entire debate lasted less than six hours. Most of that time was spent debating the “time limit for ratification.” Thereafter, it only took a month before the states ratified the amendment.<sup>125</sup> Although passing and ratifying the amendment was relatively easy, the real dilemma for the United States government would be found in enforcing this new law of the land. The blues would express the opinions of Black men and women in the South not only on the law itself but on how they would circumnavigate or flat out reject the Prohibition laws on the books.

On the surface, Prohibition was both an easy, quick legislative victory in 1919 and an equally quick, crushing legislative defeat in 1933. By looking at the social context of Prohibition, however, there was much more going on than just the passage of a new amendment that would soon be revoked by another. The culture of the United States dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century created the political climate that allowed for the speedy passage of Prohibition, but it also became the culture that saw to it that Prohibition did not endure more than a decade and a half. Understanding this social context will be vital in understanding where the blues artists fit in the narrative of Prohibition and people’s thoughts and attitudes toward it.

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<sup>124</sup> David Wagner, *The Heritage Guide to the Constitution*, ed. Edwin Meese III (Washington: The Heritage Foundation, 2005), 416-417.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid*, 416.

To better grasp the culture that bred Prohibition, it is important to begin by looking at the movements that began in the country shortly after the conclusion of the Civil War. As historian Eric Foner points out, while there were certainly temperance movements preceding the Civil War, it was the strength and magnitude of the temperance movement after the war that really brought the country to eventually adopting Prohibition as the law of the land. In the 1880s and 1890s, the nation saw the rise of highly influential organizations such as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, National Reform Association, and Reform Bureau. These organizations shared similar goals, namely to campaign for “federal legislation that would ‘christianize the government’” by outlawing what they deemed as “sinful behavior” which included gambling, prostitution, polygamy, and most certainly the “consumption of alcohol.” As Foner points out, these organizations “set the stage” for many pieces of legislation that would deal with these vices, particularly setting the stage for Prohibition itself. Their efforts to impose their moral, religious convictions onto legislation were particularly impactful in the American South, where these blues artists would be born and raised.<sup>126</sup>

These organizations and Prohibitionists would start their campaigns by mainly focusing on states. With their strong Christian message of ending the vice of alcohol on the society, their platform resonated greatly within the southern and midwestern states where there was a low immigrant population coupled with strong concentrations of Protestant denominations that were vehemently opposed to the consumption of alcohol as well, mainly the Baptists and Methodists. In fact, by 1915, there were already eighteen

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<sup>126</sup> Foner, *Give Me Liberty*, 631.

southern and midwestern states where alcohol was either prohibited, creating “dry states,” or there were laws in place to greatly inhibit people’s ability to obtain it.<sup>127</sup> These strong showings from the various organizations, the Protestant denominations, and the Prohibitionists in these states would pave the way for Prohibition to become not only law on the state level, but to reach the federal level and become wide sweeping over the entire land.

It is important to note that religious Black men and women, particularly Baptist and Methodists, were in line with these organizations and their efforts to do away with alcohol. As early as the mid-1880s, it was documented that Mississippi Prohibitionists included both white and black members in their various organizations, even having organizations that were led by Black men.<sup>128</sup> What this shows is that were many Black folks who were often in agreement with most of the American culture on this matter and involved in these various organizations. This makes an examination of the blues dealing with Prohibition even that much more important as it offered the counter perspective found in the Black community at the time as well.

The church was one of the most important cultural centers of the Black community following the end of the Civil War, so it should come as no surprise that Black people at the time aligned with the thoughts and message of the temperance movement that was so prevalent in the American South. As historian Lisa Andersen points out in her book *The Politics of Prohibition*, the “people’s desire to eliminate the

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<sup>127</sup> Foner, *Give Me Liberty*, 742.

<sup>128</sup> Lisa M. F. Andersen, *The Politics of Prohibition: American Governance and the Prohibition Party, 1869-1933* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 68.

liquor industry” could be directly “measured by their church membership, by the resolutions of church meetings.” This would lead to drastic changes in alcohol laws in so many of the southern states that these blues artists were active in. By 1908, for example, Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and North Carolina all became dry states, twelve years before it even became a national law.<sup>129</sup>

Beginning in the Delta of Mississippi, there was a very rich history of blues that addressed both Prohibition and the general opinion of the blues artists on alcohol. These songs told significant stories about how Black people in the Deep South reacted to Prohibition laws and did their best to circumnavigate them. One of the most famous examples was from a bluesman by the name of Tommy Johnson. In his song “Canned Heat Blues” he sang about drinking Sterno, which blues historian Ted Gioia points out was an infamous branded cooking fuel at the time that was “sometimes used by alcoholics as a substitute for liquor.” This song clearly showed that Prohibition would drive “drinkers to imbibe these semi-legal alternatives” despite the adverse risks to their health that they brought. Gioia points out that in March of 1930 newspapers not only in Mississippi but also across the country spoke of an “apparent epidemic of neurological problems, popularly called ‘jake leg’” that afflicted those who drank not only Sterno but abused patent medicines that were alcohol based. In another Delta bluesman’s song, Ishmon Bracey sings: “*I drank so much jake, I feel it settlin’ in my knees.*” What was clear from these early songs in the Delta blues was that “southern blacks were disproportionately hit” by these afflictions that came with attempting to go around the

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<sup>129</sup> Andersen, *The Politics of Prohibition*, 236.



law and use alternative methods to drink alcohol, but as a further look into the corpus of Mississippi Delta blues will show, there was also a disregard in general for Prohibition and the laws that were on the books as well as a weariness that came along with yet another government mandate that restricted their personal freedoms.<sup>130</sup>

One of the single most famous Mississippi Delta bluesmen, and blues players in general, to have ever been recorded was most certainly Robert Johnson. While there were rumors and legends involving Johnson selling his soul to the Devil in exchange for mastery of the guitar that can never be affirmed, one thing that certainly is true about him was he left his mark on blues history. With Johnson's repertoire of songs recorded and later remastered, he has become certainly one of the most accessible early bluesmen to date. While Johnson was perhaps better known for his songs about women, the Devil, and the crossroads, he had two songs that spoke to his view on Prohibition and alcohol.

The first Robert Johnson song worth examining regarding Prohibition was entitled "Malted Milk." The song begins with a simple refrain: "*Malted milk, malted milk, keep rushing through my head. And I have a funny, funny feeling, and I'm talking all out my head.*"<sup>131</sup> This line, and indeed the entire song, has been the subject of debate between blues historians for the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and persists to this day. In one of the most recent biographies of Johnson, blues historians Bruce Conforth and Gayle Dean Wardlow postulated that the artist may have been singing about a beverage that was

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<sup>130</sup> Ted Gioia, *Delta Blues: The Life and Times of the Mississippi Masters who Revolutionized American Music* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 243.

<sup>131</sup> Robert Johnson, "Malted Milk – DAL.396-1," Track 28 on *The Centennial Collection*, Sony Music Entertainment, 2011, Spotify.

famous in Memphis, where Johnson briefly lived during his childhood, called “Horlick’s Malted Milk.”<sup>132</sup> Though this is an interesting hypothesis, the context surrounding the Malted Milk in this song, particularly Johnson’s mention of how it gave him a “*funny, funny feeling, and I’m talking all out my head*” have led many blues historians and writers, such as Elijah Wald, to conclude that the song “clearly refers to some sort of alcoholic beverage.”<sup>133</sup>

This makes sense given his history with alcoholic consumption. Indeed, throughout his life, Johnson was known to many as a heavy drinker, even throughout the years of Prohibition. According to one particular interview with a contemporary of his, Johnson was known to drink “more often than not,” beginning as earlier as his childhood, with his drinks of choice all being hard liquor, particularly bourbons and corn whiskeys.<sup>134</sup> Johnson, particularly in the late 1920s, was known to frequently play “jukes,” which were house parties where alcohol was illegally served and he would be paid “as much as five dollars, plus free food and whiskey” to play music.<sup>135</sup> What becomes clear through examining his biographical information and the context of the song itself, there is good reason to believe that “Malted Milk” was indeed a song about alcohol and Johnson’s opinions on it.

If there were any questions about what “Malted Milk” was about, there are no doubts what Johnson was trying to convey in his song “Drunken Hearted Man.” One of

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<sup>132</sup> Conforth and Wardlow, *Up Jumped the Devil*, 325.

<sup>133</sup> Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, 335.

<sup>134</sup> Conforth and Wardlow, *Up Jumped the Devil*, 349.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid*, 110.

the most prominent and telling lines in the song comes when Johnson sings, “*I’m a drunken hearted man, my life seems so misery. And if I could change my way of livin’, it would mean so much to me.*”<sup>136</sup> As Conforth and Wardlow aptly assert, this song “was clearly about sorrows both caused by drink and being drowned in it.”<sup>137</sup> It is not merely that these two songs explicitly mention alcohol that makes them so profoundly important in examining how the blues artists expressed their opinions on Prohibition; rather, it was the context of Johnson’s time that makes these songs so important. What exactly were these songs conveying?

What is important to note here is that Johnson did not record either of these songs during Prohibition, both were recorded after the passage of the Twenty-First Amendment in 1933. So, what do these songs have to say about Prohibition then? The answer is found in the history of the actual location of Johnson’s songs. While he recorded these songs in Texas, Johnson spent most of his blues career in Mississippi. While Prohibition was longer the law of the land on a national stage following the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, it continued in Mississippi long after this. Mississippi was one of three states that continued to be a “dry state” and would retain these restrictions on alcohol longer than any other of the states. In fact, it would not be until 1966 that Mississippi would finally do away with the Prohibition regulations and laws. One way that Johnson would get around the strict laws of Mississippi would be by frequently playing “jukes” at a Mississippi Delta town called Friars Point. This town was located across the river from

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<sup>136</sup> Robert Johnson, “Drunken Hearted Man – DAL.397-1,” Track 29 on *The Centennial Collection*, Sony Music, 2011, Spotify.

<sup>137</sup> Conforth and Wardlow, *Up Jumped the Devil*, 328.

Helena, Arkansas, where Prohibition had ended in 1933 and liquor was legal and became a “weekend hangout” and “active bootlegging center.”<sup>138</sup>

While he may not have been one of the earliest to do so, Johnson wrote and recorded songs that openly defied the laws of his state. The theme was clear in his life and his works: the laws on the books may in fact be the prohibition of alcohol, but he neither cared about nor followed the law of the land. This was not only seen in Johnson’s songs, however. Another Mississippi Delta bluesman who preceded Johnson would also express open defiance of Prohibition laws. Perhaps one of the most influential and considered by many to be a pioneer of blues, Son House, a former Baptist minister who left the church to pursue a life of blues and all its trappings, would also express his thoughts and attitude toward Prohibition in his songs as well.

It was no secret that Son House was a heavy drinker, some who knew him went as far to say he was an alcoholic. Daniel Beaumont, a prominent House biographer, concludes in his book *Preachin’ the Blues* that House was drawn away from his religion on account of three things in his life: sex, the blues, and alcohol.<sup>139</sup> It should come as no real surprise then that Son House would often sing about his love of alcohol, but perhaps no more clearly than his song “Clarksdale Moan.” In this song there is a particular line that is significantly important regarding Prohibition: “*Every day in the week I goes to Midtown Drugs and get me a bottle o’ snuff and a bottle o’ alcohol.*”<sup>140</sup> This line is

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<sup>138</sup> Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, 184-185.

<sup>139</sup> Beaumont, *Preachin’ the Blues*, 175.

<sup>140</sup> Son House, “Clarksdale Moan,” Track 15 on *The Delta Blues of Son House*, Grammercy Records, 2010, Spotify.

important for a very distinct reason: it shows that Black people in the area knew of precise places that they could go to obtain alcohol, presumably illegally.

House's account in his song is not the only admission of this fact. In an interview given to the once popular blues magazine entitled *Blues Unlimited*, St. Louis blues pianists and brothers Aaron and Marion Sparks spoke of a place that they would go in their own community to obtain alcohol during Prohibition:

Oh, a great big place, as big as eight rooms and they had dancing and piano playing and sold whiskeys in the back and everything. That was way back, you know, when Prohibition was. Dirty Inn, that's what they called it – go down and ask about the Dirty Inn, down by Jefferson and Delmar and everybody around there, all them wineheads will tell you.<sup>141</sup>

What places like the Dirty Inn as attested to in this interview or Midtown Drugs as spoken of in Son House's song show is that throughout the South, Black people had designated areas that they knew they could go to illegally purchase alcohol. What was so amazing about this is that they would openly sing about it as Son House did here in this song.

Widely considered to be one of the first, if not the first, pioneers of Delta blues music, Charley Patton was also known to commentate about his positions on alcohol and Prohibition. One of his songs, entitled "Jim Lee Blues," may have either been biographical or spoke of those he knew of, but regardless Patton sang about the punishment some in his community would face during Prohibition: "*When I got arrested,*

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<sup>141</sup> Mike Rowe and Charlie O'Brien, "Well, Them Two Sparks Brothers They Been Here and Gone: Aaron Cleveland Sparks Interview," *Blues Unlimited* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 780.

*what do you reckon was my fine? Says they give all coons eleven twenty-nine*<sup>142</sup>, *It was moonshine, don't pay me no mind, 'Cause I did not let no coons have mine.*"<sup>143</sup> Patton, like so many of the blues artists, expressed that he fully understood the law of the land, but he just did not seem to care enough to not break it.

Patton would not only convey his overall disregard for Prohibition laws; rather, he would also use his blues to directly address the Christian temperance movement. In his song "High Sheriff Blues," Patton makes a clear statement on his thoughts regarding Christian teaching and alcohol: "*It takes booze and blues, Lord, to carry me through, but it did seem like years, in a jail house is no booze.*"<sup>144</sup> For Patton, the idea of drinking alcohol and calling upon God were not mutually exclusive. In one of the most acclaimed and reliable biographies of Charley Patton, blues historian John Fahey points out that Patton did not regard drinking as a mortal sin, even though Patton was certainly devoutly Christian. Fahey goes on to say that Patton's works never seem to contain a "denunciation of various sins" and perhaps the reason for this is because Patton's theology was grounded in the idea that it would be "hypocritical" to call out folks for things, such as drinking alcohol, and the idea that he was saved, and nothing could change that fact.<sup>145</sup>

Delta blues artist Big Bill Broonzy echoed many of these themes. While he was born in the Mississippi Delta and played in the style of these Delta blues artists, much of

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<sup>142</sup> It is worth noting here that I considered omitting or changing the verbiage used here; however, I ended up deciding against it in order to stay true to the original source and keep Charley Patton's words intact.

<sup>143</sup> Charley Patton, "Jim Lee Blues, Pt. 1," Track 5 on *King of the Delta Blues*, Shanachie Entertainment, 1991, Apple Music.

<sup>144</sup> Charley Patton, "High Sheriff Blues," Track 20 on *Pony Blues*, Wolf Records, 1990, Apple Music.

<sup>145</sup> Fahey, *Charley Patton*, 167-168.

his pre-war career took place in Chicago. Even still, he is an important source to look at as he grew up in the same culture and time as Robert Johnson, Son House, and Charley Patton. Broonzy arrived in Chicago right as Prohibition was beginning, so he offered a unique perspective of both the rural, Bible-belt towns of the South and the urban, bustling cities of the North. Blues scholar and Broonzy biographer Kevin Greene notes that once Broonzy arrived in Chicago in the 1920s, he sought to “change his image and style in hopes of gaining respect outside of racial stereotypes that defined black behavior in both the North and the South.” While this included new cars, new suits, new shoes, the way he wore his hair, and even dating white women exclusively (a truly revolutionary choice for a black man during these times), perhaps the most crucial lifestyle change he took was the heavy drinking of alcohol, even coming from the dry state of Mississippi. Greene states that “sobriety and temperance were aspects of respectability ideology that Broonzy ... openly defied.”<sup>146</sup>

This open defiance of Prohibition and the temperance movement can clearly be seen in many of Broonzy’s works, but perhaps the most important one was entitled “New Shake ‘em On Down.” This song conveys a similar message to Charley Patton’s “High Sheriff Blues” regarding the Christian view of alcohol at the time: “*Gots me some whiskey, wine, and gin, listen to me baby because it ain’t no sin.*”<sup>147</sup> Much like Patton, Broonzy disputed the idea that the temperance movements and organizations’ claim that

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<sup>146</sup> Kevin D. Greene, *The Invention and Reinvention of Big Bill Broonzy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 44.

<sup>147</sup> Big Bill Broonzy, “New Shake ‘em On Down,” Track 13 on *Vol. 1: The Pre-War Years*, BMG Rights, 2007, Spotify.

alcohol was a sinful vice that must be done away with was absurd. In the song he goes on to directly address the idea that these temperance movements put forth of alcohol leading to misbehavior and sinful actions when he sang: “*When I get drunk, I don’t clown, I just feel good and want to shake ‘em on down.*”<sup>148</sup>. What is evident from this work is a direct defiance to the ideas espoused by the Prohibitionists and Christian temperance movements that Broonzy would have been surrounded by in both the Delta of Mississippi and Chicago.

Broonzy also offered the most salient perspective when it came to the weariness often felt by these blues artists and other Black Americans when it came to their response to Prohibition. In one of his most famous songs, “Black, Brown, and White,” expresses many trials that he faced as a Black man in America and even makes historical references to how Black men and women felt the impacts of the Jim Crow era. In one particular verse, Broonzy sings “*I was in a place one night, they was all having fun, they was all buyin’ beer and wine but they would not sell me none. They said if you was white, you alright. If you was brown, stick around. But if you black, mmmm brother, get back.*”<sup>149</sup> In this song, Broonzy states clearly what Patton must have felt when he was singing about the arrests as a result of drinking alcohol in the dry state of Mississippi or what Son House expressed in the various locations Black people would have to go to obtain alcohol during Prohibition: Black people felt a particular weariness and weight of Prohibition that was not felt by their white counterparts. On top of the oppression of Prohibition, Black

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<sup>148</sup> Broonzy, “New Shake ‘em On Down.”

<sup>149</sup> Big Bill Broonzy, “Black, Brown and White,” Track 12 on *An Introduction to Big Bill Broonzy*, Fuel 2000 Records, Apple Music.



folks had to also endure segregation and various holdovers from the Jim Crow era. As Broonzy so profoundly states in this song, even if they could find locations that illegally sold alcohol during Prohibition, they were still faced with the oppression of systematic racism in the form of segregation and discrimination.

The Mississippi Delta blues artists offered the unique perspective of Black people who were living in a state that was both dry before and after Prohibition became enshrined in the Constitution; however, there were even more, equally profound perspectives found in the early blues. One of the major scenes of the earlier blues was found in Texas. While there were many significant blues artists that came from Texas including Lightnin' Hopkins and T-Bone Walker, few were as significant as Blind Lemon Jefferson. As blues historian Alan Govenar points out in his book *Texas Blues*, Jefferson was the first “guitar-playing bluesman to attract a national audience and thereby was a catalyst for the recording of hundreds of blues singers, male and female, black and white.” His records were heard by thousands of people across the nation, and he was pivotal in placing the Texas blues scene on the map.<sup>150</sup>

Jefferson, much like Patton, was deeply religious and recorded many spirituals, yet he still addressed his thoughts on alcohol during the height of Prohibition in the 1920s. In one of his songs “Rabbit Foot Blues” he sang: “*I have Uneeda biscuits gal and a half a pint o’ gin, the gin is mighty fine but them biscuits are a little too thin.*”<sup>151</sup> Like many of his peers from the Mississippi Delta, Jefferson did not hide the fact that he had

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<sup>150</sup> Govenar, *Texas Blues*, 22.

<sup>151</sup> Blind Lemon Jefferson, “Rabbit Foot Blues,” Track 5 on *Got the Blues*, Suncoast Music, 2015, Apple Music.

access and was consuming alcohol despite the sweeping legislation of the Eighteenth Amendment. Even more blatant an admission is found in his song “Chock House Blues” when he sang: “*Baby, I can’t drink whiskey but I’m a fool about my homemade wine, ain’t no sense in leaving Dallas they makes it there all the time.*”<sup>152</sup> As blues historian Paul Oliver points out in his book *The Story of the Blues*, “chock-houses” were places, frequently found in Dallas and other Texas towns and cities, “where a crude form of alcohol” would “cost a matter of cents” and blues musicians would be providing live music to crowds of people.<sup>153</sup> In these two primary works, Jefferson both admitted to possessing alcohol and attending places in Dallas that he would go to get more alcohol during Prohibition. This coupled with the fact that his music was so widespread in its consumption during this time, intensifies the importance of Jefferson’s lyrics dealing with alcohol and Prohibition.

Although Mississippi and Texas produced important blues music, blues artists in the Piedmont region of the South also had much to say about Prohibition. While this region is often overlooked when discussing the most important blues musicians of the time, the works and musicians of this area certainly as capable, important, and lyrically deep as any of the Mississippi Delta or Texas blues artists. One of the most important in the Piedmont region at the time who also had one of the most extensive corpuses when it came to addressing alcohol and Prohibition was named Blind Willie McTell.

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<sup>152</sup> Blind Lemon Jefferson, “Chock House Blues,” Track 49 on *Presenting Blind Lemon Jefferson*, Paramount Records, 1926, Spotify.

<sup>153</sup> Oliver, *The Story of the Blues*, 91.

Perhaps not as nationally recognized as Blind Lemon Jefferson or as historically important as Robert Johnson, there is no doubt that McTell's playing style and type of blues was vitally important not only to the Piedmont blues scene but to pre-war blues. Originally from Georgia, McTell offers one of the most extensive perspectives on Prohibition and alcohol in the Piedmont area. "Come On Around to My House Mama" offered an admission of his love for alcohol when he sang: "*I love my corn and I love my booze, I really give your man the blues.*"<sup>154</sup> "Drive Away Blues" somewhat comically tells of McTell's borderline alcoholism and the effects of alcohol on him: "*I drink so much whiskey mama, I can't hardly talk, hardly talk, sweet mama, hardly talk. Well it's done addled on my brains, people I can't hardly walk.*"<sup>155</sup> In "Warm It Up to Me," McTell talks about how he would go with his friends to drink moonshine, singing "*Now look here boy, if you going to be my friend, let's go drink moonshine again.*"<sup>156</sup>

While all these songs admitted that the artists possessed and consumed alcohol during Prohibition, the most interesting songs regarding the law of the land are by far "Rough Alley Blues" and "Bell Street Lightnin'," as they both dealt with open admissions of McTell's knowledge of places one could go to purchase alcohol during Prohibition. He would also use these songs as warnings to let people know about the law enforcement in these particular areas as well. In "Rough Alley Blues," McTell sang "*I'm going down this alley and get me two more drinks of booze,*" he then interrupts the

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<sup>154</sup> Blind Willie McTell, "Come On Around To My House Mama," Track 12 on *Blind Willie McTell – Statesboro Blues – The Early Years 1927-1935*. Document Records, 2005. Spotify.

<sup>155</sup> Blind Willie McTell, "Drive Away Blues," Track 15 on *Blind Willie McTell – Statesboro Blues – The Early Years 1927-1935*. Document Records, 2005. Spotify.

<sup>156</sup> Blind Willie McTell, "Warm It Up To Me," Track 34 on *Blind Willie McTell – Statesboro Blues – The Early Years 1927-1935*. Document Records, 2005, Spotify.

singing to interject a speaking part in the song and audibly says, “They have police down there, they’ll sure arrest you,” before ending the verse by singing “*I’m drunk now, mama, and I’ve got those rough alley blues.*”<sup>157</sup> Whether McTell is referring to a specific location in Georgia or just the idea that there were multiple “rough” allies that one could go to obtain alcohol during Prohibition is not clear; however, what is clear is that McTell was telling people there were places while simultaneously warning people about the law enforcement around the area. Similarly, in his song “Bell Street Lightnin’,” McTell speaks of a specific place where one could go to buy whiskey as he sang: “*You can get booze down on Bell Street for two bits and half a throw. They’ll make you send out your mother and father, to just break down the jailhouse door.*”<sup>158</sup>

McTell’s open admission that he consumed alcohol at various locations while warning people about the potential law enforcement around the area highlights a historical point about Prohibition: it was very hard to enforce for the United States government, particularly in the South. In June of 1930, the Bureau of Prohibition released a publication where they stated that they had obtained assistance from railroads in the southeast to help “check the flow of smuggled liquor along the Atlantic coast.” The Bureau did this because they found that in this “section of the United States, particularly along the lower coast line of Georgia and Florida, liquor smuggling has always been an enforcement problem.” They even cited a particular case around the time of this

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<sup>157</sup> Blind Willie McTell, “Rough Alley Blues,” Track 24 on *Blind Willie McTell – Statesboro Blues – The Early Years 1927-1935*. Document Records, 2005. Spotify.

<sup>158</sup> Blind Willie McTell, “Bell Street Lightnin’,” Track 56 on *Blind Willie McTell – Statesboro Blues – The Early Years 1927-1935*, Document Records, 2005, Spotify.

publication where a freight car was seized in Savannah, Georgia that contained upwards of 500 cases of liquor that they claimed was “imported by smugglers.”<sup>159</sup> This historical context helps to better frame the lyrics of McTell, who was living in these regions that the government found so difficult to enforce Prohibition laws in.

McTell was not the only Piedmont blues musician addressed Prohibition and alcohol with their lyrics, however. One of the single most famous and listened to blues musicians of the time was Bessie Smith. Smith, born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, would become one of the most significant figures in blues history. In his biographer about her, Paul Oliver makes that claim that she was the “greatest” Black “recording artists of her day and one of the most outstanding figures in the whole history of American music.”<sup>160</sup> While this is a lofty claim considering the plethora of accomplished black artists at the time, there is certainly no denying her prowess and importance to not only blues, but American music in general. Smith, unlike the other blues artists mentioned thus far, also offered the unique perspective of women and their thoughts during Prohibition.

While many of Bessie Smith’s songs mentioned alcohol, the most interesting and telling one was entitled “Me and My Gin.” What is interesting in this work is Smith’s opinion of bootleggers, those who would illegally supply and distribute alcohol throughout the country during Prohibition. In this song, she sang “*Any bootlegger sure is a pal of mine, ‘cause a good ol’ bottle o’ gin will get it all the time.*”<sup>161</sup> This is very

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<sup>159</sup> U.S. Treasury Department, *Public Cooperation in Prohibition Law Enforcement* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1930), 18-19.

<sup>160</sup> Paul Oliver, *Bessie Smith* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1959), ix.

<sup>161</sup> Bessie Smith, “Me and My Gin,” Track 24 on *The Essential Bessie Smith*, Sony Music, 1997, Spotify.

interesting in light of the findings in Hortense Powdermaker's seminal 1939 work on Black history in the American South entitled *After Freedom*. In this book, she observed a different sentiment regarding bootleggers, particularly Black bootleggers, than Smith presented in her song:

A position held in low esteem during the Prohibition years was bootlegging. Although one or two bootleggers made more money than some of the upper class, they were looked down by the 'respectable' element, and none would have been rated above the lower middle class. It was felt that they reflected discredit on their people as well as themselves.<sup>162</sup>

Despite these findings, Smith presented an individualistic opinion in her lyrics, one that may have been shared by many of those who wanted to obtain alcohol during Prohibition. This may not wholly discredit Powdermaker's findings from her study, but it certainly shows that the opinion of bootleggers in the Black community during Prohibition was not wholly negative, particularly when a well-known, highly successful recording artist was conveying a different message.

What can clearly be seen in the blues of Prohibition is the individualistic desires of these Black men and women to enjoy their own leisurely desire to consume alcohol no matter what the American government or the society at large had to say on the matter. It is my contention that once again blues becomes an important primary source for these artists to express that desire in. With the American government bearing down on any and all that dared opposed these laws, blues artists stood up to express that they would not simply go along with it; rather, they would pursue their own pleasures and not allow the government to infringe upon their own individualistic desires and liberties.

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<sup>162</sup> Powdermaker, *After Freedom*, 115.

### *The Blues and the Great Depression*

Along with the Great Migration and Prohibition, many of these early blues artists also expressed their individual desires pertaining to leisure during the Great Depression as well. While the nation was hit particularly hard by the Stock Market Crash of 1929, Black Americans were once again affected negatively at a disproportionately high rate. Often referred to as the “last hired and first fired,” Black men and women who had previously been able to obtain jobs that many white Americans deemed as vocations “beneath them” were now having to compete with those same white folks now that unemployment had skyrocketed during the Depression. This led to the Black unemployment rate being double that of whites in the United States.<sup>163</sup>

As Jones writes in *Blues People*, the Depression “was the first real economic crisis” in United States history in which Black people truly experienced the hardships “based on the general fortunes of the entire society.” His claim is based on the idea that with the previous major economic downturns in American history, Black folks had either been enslaved or subjected to such harsh legal oppression that the struggle of the country’s economy at large was of “no great importance” to a Black individual. He goes on to claim that “the movement by Negroes into the mainstream of American society had also placed them in the path of an economic uncertainty that they had never known before.”<sup>164</sup> Citing the fact that by 1932, nearly 14 million people were unemployed and many of those were Black men and women who had moved North during the Great

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<sup>163</sup> Foner, *Give Me Liberty*, 838.

<sup>164</sup> Jones, *Blues People*, 118.

Migration to find jobs in factories such as the Ford industry in Detroit, Jones argued that the Depression saw the “dramatic ending for the era of the classic blues singer.”<sup>165</sup> While it is certainly true that Black men and women felt the sting of the Depression perhaps even more than any other group in the United States, the way that they felt it in the industrialized North was significantly different the way they felt in the agrarian South. While record sells and concerts of the blues artists in big northern cities like Chicago and New York certainly took a major hit during the Depression, the country blues artists of the South continue to write and produce music through this difficult time. It is in their work that the unique perspective of Black individuals in the American South during the Depression is clearly expressed.

Long before the beginning of the Depression, Black Americans had been subjected to the harsh conditions and poverty of the sharecropping system in the American South. In his song “Country Farm Blues,” Son House sang that “*down South, when you do anything that’s wrong, they’ll sure put you down on the country farm*” and he goes on to sing that these conditions were so bad that you would “*wish to God you hadn’t never been made.*”<sup>166</sup> These hard times faced by Black Americans in the South were even more clearly expressed in his song “Dry Spell Blues”:

*Dry spell blues have fallen, drive me from door to door  
The dry spell blues have put everybody on the killing floor.*

*Now the people down South sure won’t have no home  
Because the dry spell have parched all this cotton and corn.*

*Pork chops forty-five cents a pound, cotton is only ten*

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<sup>165</sup> Jones, *Blues People*, 117.

<sup>166</sup> Son House, “Country Farm Blues,” Track 12 on *Delta Blues*, Shout! Factory, 1991, Spotify.



*I can't keep no woman, no, no, nowhere I been.*

*So dry old boil weevil turned up his toes and died  
Now ain't nothing to do bootleg moonshine and rye.<sup>167</sup>*

In this one song there is so much to unpack about the individual expressions of Black southerners living through the Great Depression and House's words here are attested to not only by historical context but also by his peers in the blues as well.

Beginning with the first stanza of House's song, it is important to note the Black Americans in the South faced the Great Depression differently than those who lived in the North. For House and his southern contemporaries, the South, as previously mentioned, as still very much agrarian as opposed to the industrialized North. This was particularly true in Mississippi where House was from. In the Yazoo Delta of Mississippi where much of the Delta blues music was born, cotton was the primary cash crop of the communities. In 1930, it was estimated that seventy percent of the "cultivated land in the Delta was planted in cotton" and on its highest yielding years, this region would produce around 265 pounds of cotton to the acre annually. While this would be economically advantageous for Black farmers in good years of crop yield, it ran the risk of economically depending too much on this one crop, thereby making outside factors, such as weather in this song, crucial to their success. This would include droughts, or "dry spells" as mentioned in this song, as well as the increased "possibility of flood" in the area as well.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Son House, "Dry Spell Blues, Pt. 1," Track 3 on *Martin Scorsese Presents The Blues: Son House*, Sony Music, 2003, Spotify.

<sup>168</sup> Powdermaker, *After Freedom*, 75-76.

The third stanza of House's song speaks to the prices that were on the rise for goods and services during the Great Depression while the price they could sell the cotton was declining at the same time. In his interview, Skip James spoke about how before the Depression, the cost of living in the South was "real cheap" and that people could often use "two or three dollars" to get "supplies for a month." With the wages being somewhere around "usually a dollar and half to two dollars a day," James said that as long as "you weren't extravagant and kind of economic in cooking and so forth," then someone could be well off for a while. That was until the Great Depression hit. James expressed that "times was pretty tight then," as wages dropped and the prices of goods increased.<sup>169</sup> In his song about the Great Depression called "Hard Time Killin' Floor Blues," James expressed these very sentiments:

*Hard times are here and everywhere I go, times is harder than ever been before  
People are driftin' from door to door, can't find no heaven, I don't care where  
they go.*

*You know, you say you had money, you better be sure.  
Lord, these hard times goin' kill you, just drag on slow.<sup>170</sup>*

Delta blues artists were not the only ones expressing the hardships that they faced during the Great Depression, however. In Texas, Blind Lemon Jefferson sang in his song "Broke and Hungry" that "*I'm broke and hungry, ragged and dirty too*"<sup>171</sup> and lamented in "Bad Luck Blues" that he did not even have clothing as he sang "*Well, I wanna go*

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<sup>169</sup> *Blues and the Soul of Man*, 56.

<sup>170</sup> Skip James, "Hard Time Killin' Floor Blues," Track 10 on *The Complete 1931 Sessions*, Black Swan Music, 2022, Spotify.

<sup>171</sup> Blind Lemon Jefferson, "Broke and Hungry," Track 24 on *Presenting Blind Lemon Jefferson*, Paramount Records, 1926, Spotify.

*home, but I ain't got sufficient clothes.*"<sup>172</sup> In the Piedmont, Joshua White proclaimed in his song "Hard Time Blues" that "*folks had nothing, was a sin and a shame, everybody say hard times was bad. Great God Almighty, folks feelin' bad, lost everything they ever had.*"<sup>173</sup> White even spoke of the lower wages and higher prices of the Depression that James had mentioned in his interview when he sang "*I work all week in the blazin' sun, can't buy my shoes, Lord, when my payday comes.*"<sup>174</sup> Suffice to say, Black Americans across the South were feeling the pain of the Great Depression and it was most certainly expressed in their blues.

As previously mentioned, the Black men and women of the South also had faced economic hardships during the Depression and even before due to their heavy reliance on agriculture for money and food. In the fourth stanza quoted above of House's song he makes mention of the Boil Weevil and this would prove to be a common issue during the Depression and before it as well for these blues artists and their surrounding communities. Charley Patton, a contemporary of Son House in the Mississippi Delta, sang "*You can plant your cotton and you won't get half a bale, Lordy, Bo Weevil, Bo Weevil, where's your native home?*" in "Mississippi Boveevil Blues."<sup>175</sup> In her book *After Freedom*, Hortense Powdermaker observed that in an agricultural community of Mississippi in the 1930s that "incests are always a menace" to the crop yield but that

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<sup>172</sup> Blind Lemon Jefferson, "Bad Luck Blues," Track 4 on *Presenting Blind Lemon Jefferson*, Paramount Records, 1926, Spotify.

<sup>173</sup> Joshua White, "Hard Time Bleus," Track 21 on *Joshua White 1933-1941*, Wolf Records, 1994, Spotify.

<sup>174</sup> Joshua White, "Southern Exposure," Track 23 on *Joshua White 1933-1941*, Wolf Records, 1994, Spotify.

<sup>175</sup> Charley Patton, "Mississippi Boveevil Blues," Track 6 on *Presenting Charley Patton*, Paramount Records, 1929, Spotify.

“few can vie with the boll weevil in completeness of devastation and imperviousness to attack.”<sup>176</sup>

Returning to interviews given by Skip James, the blues artists mentioned a specific occurrence that he witnessed of these nuisances wreaking havoc on the crop yields of Black Mississippians even before the Great Depression. James noted that when he was a child, his community experienced a “depression prior to this 1929-30-31 stuff” and he believed that it occurred somewhere around 1907 or 1908. He noted that at the time, people could not “hardly get five dollars for a bale of cotton” and it could all be linked to “all those boll weevil plagues that would eat up most of the crops.”<sup>177</sup> James’s memory served him well in this interview. It had been observed that beginning around 1892, the boll weevil had moved across Texas into the cotton fields of at least five southern states and was waging war on the cotton crop. It was estimated that during this time in these states, the boll weevil was responsible for the destruction of around four million bales of cotton which was worth “roughly” \$238 million in 1908 which amounts to around \$6 billion in today’s money.<sup>178</sup> House, James, and Patton all expressed what hundreds of thousands of Black Americans in the South were facing when it came to the economic devastation caused by this insect.

Despite all of these hardships faced by Black Americans in the South and expressed profoundly in the blues, there was still a strong individualistic desire for leisure

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<sup>176</sup> Powdermaker, *After Freedom*, 75-76.

<sup>177</sup> *Blues and the Soul of Man*, 78.

<sup>178</sup> James C. Giesen, “The Truth About the Boll Weevil,” *Mississippi History Now*, March 2015, accessed on March 10, 2023. <https://www.mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/issue/the-truth-about-the-boll-weevil>.

articulated in the blues of this time. One of the main ways that these artists did this was to express their desire to own and purchase things that would satisfy their individual, leisure thirsts. In his pre-war song “Just a Dream,” Big Bill Broonzy sang “*I dreamed I played policy and played the horses too, I dreamed I win so much money, I didn’t know what to do. But it was just a dream, just a dream I had on my mind.*”<sup>179</sup> For Broonzy, the desire for money during the Depression times was heavily linked to his desire to consume whatever he desired that would enjoy in his leisure. In his song “I Want My Hands on It” he expressed plainly and clearly that “*I don’t buy nothing, unless I got my hands on it.*”<sup>180</sup> It is clear that in Broonzy songs he is expressing his own individual desire that even during the Depression, he wants to spend his money on whatever leisure-related items or activities that he desired.

As I previously mentioned with Robert Johnson’s “Terraplane Blues,” many blues artists expressed their desire to own specific cars, even during the Depression. In his song “34 Blues,” Charley Patton sang about how the Depression, specifically for him the year 1934, had taken everything from him and he was “*broke as I could be.*” He went on to comically speak of people in his community who were still purchasing cars that he himself wanted in this time: “*Carmen got a little six Buick, big six Chevrolet car*” but remarked that during the Depression it “*don’t do nothin’ but follow behind Holloway’s farmer plow.*”<sup>181</sup> In the Piedmont, Blind Willie McTell sang of his desires for a new car

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<sup>179</sup> Big Bill Broonzy, “Just a Dream,” Track 15 on *Volume 1: The Pre-War Years*, BMG Rights, 2007, Spotify.

<sup>180</sup> Big Bill Broonzy, “I Want My Hands on It,” Track 12 on *Volume 1: The Pre-War Years*, BMG Rights, 2007, Spotify.

<sup>181</sup> Charley Patton, “34 Blues,” Track 30 on *Presenting Charley Patton*, Paramount Records, 1929, Spotify.

in “Warm It Up to Me:” “*I want you to sit in a Cadillac, sit in a Ford/ You do that strutting on the running board.*”<sup>182</sup> These individualistic expressions of their desire to have material goods for their leisure show yet another reason that blues is important to analyze in regards to this.

What the blues of the Great Depression showed was two distinct, individualistic expressions by these blues artists pertaining to leisure. The first is that the Depression affected the Black Americans in the South differently than the Black Americans in the North. While those in the North faced the high unemployment rates found in the American factories, in the South they faced unemployment rate, the growing competition of unemployed whites, and the devastation of the droughts, flooding, and boll weevil infestations that plagued their crops and agriculture during this time. The second expression found in the blues of this time was that despite all of this, these blues artists still kept the dream that they spoke of in the blues of the Great Migration, namely: to make money and enjoy the trappings that could use to enjoy their own means of leisure. What is evident in all of their blues is the unique perspectives and desires articulated in them.

### ***Conclusion***

These three important events in American history, the Great Migration, Prohibition, and the Great Depression, all affected Black Americans throughout the country. What this deeper analysis of the blues found in these three periods and that

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<sup>182</sup> McTell, “Warm It Up To Me.”

addressed the various aspects of the time shows is that these were individuals who were expressing their desires to do what they wanted, purchase what they desired, and to spend their time as they saw fit. Whether it was expressing their desire to relocate for a better life in the North or the West during the period of the Great Migration, drink alcohol and circumnavigate both the law and the social institutions that attempted to stop them from doing so during Prohibition, or to buy whatever they pleased even during the Great Depression, these Black men and women expressed their own individualistic desires to pursue their individual liberties and means of leisure in their blues. Once again, as with religion and all its themes, the blues artists all approached these events differently and with their own unique perspectives; however, what they showed in that was the blues was indeed an art form where these men and women expressed their desires, thoughts, and beliefs.

## CHAPTER THREE

### “I’VE GOT A KIND HEARTED WOMAN”: HOW BLUESMEN AND WOMEN EXPRESSED THEIR THOUGHTS ON RELATIONSHIPS

Of all the themes that I have examined thus far, there is none so individualistic as what the blues artists had to say about relationships. Nothing defines an individual more than their personal relationships and experiences. In the examination of the early blues lyrics on relationships, one finds a microcosm of both the cultural expressions of Black Americans while simultaneously observing an individualistic expression of love, heartbreak, sexual freedom, and personal preferences.

This chapter expands on two topics. Firstly, it seeks to show the individualistic expressions of each of the blues artists themselves. As with the theme of religion and leisure, while many of these blues musicians shared commonalities in their approaches toward and beliefs on relationships, they each expressed it in their own way. Robert Johnson, for example, expressed a plethora of themes regarding his views on relationships while Blind Willie McTell remained consistent in the themes he presented. Secondly, it will show that there was also a variety of thoughts toward relationships along the gender lines. While both men and women sang about relationships in their blues, they did not seem to present the same themes nor express the same emotional thoughts as each other. As a result, this chapter will be separated into two distinct sections, one on bluesmen’s thoughts in this time period and the other on blueswomen’s thoughts in this



time period. Both sections, however, seek to show that they still upheld their own individual beliefs and varied slightly from one another, even within their own gender.

After examining the lyrics of these artists, I chose Robert Johnson, Skip James, Son House, Blind Willie McTell, Big Bill Broonzy, and Charley Patton for the section on the bluesmen's thoughts about relationships. Reverend Gary Davis and Joshua White do not factor in as much as these other blues artists do when it comes to the subject of relationships, as Davis dealt more with religious themes and White dealt more with socioeconomic and political themes in their works. This is not to say that they never dealt with relationships, but it certainly was not the primary focus of their corpus as it was with the others. With the women of the blues, I will examine both Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, respectively. While there were other women at the time, Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey present two unique perspectives that made their works advantageous to this examination. While the works of great blues women like Ida Cox, Mamie Smith, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Big Mama Thornton, and many others were seminal, they are not included in this particular study.

Within the section on the thoughts of the bluesmen, I found it useful to break it up into six areas of thought. The first is the general mistrust of women and the unfaithfulness that characterized their relationships. In their works, many of the bluesmen expressed suspicions of women, particularly in regard to their fidelity. The second area is the juxtaposition of the first, it is the examination of the hypocrisy of these bluesmen's desire for women to be faithful and show them love, while at the same time expressing their lack of willingness to reciprocate either love or faithfulness themselves. Thirdly, I will

examine a topic that is congruent with their lack of love or faithfulness; violence, abuse, and the possessive nature they demonstrated toward women that bluesmen often expressed in their works. In the fourth section, I will examine the other side of the men's blues which dealt with the idealization of the relationship and expressions of love towards women. The fifth area often went along with the fourth, that is overtly sexual references found in the blues music that would sometimes be linked to their love interests. The sixth and final area of examination in the works of the bluesmen is what would classically be called "blues" material: the simple, sad expression of losing love, the end of a relationship, unrequited love, and the cynicism toward relationships that followed it.

In the women of the blues's section, I found it necessary to split their thoughts up into seven areas. The first will be an examination of the concern expressed about their significant other either cheating on them or leaving them or in many cases doing both. The second area of examination followed the first in many cases, that is looking at the violence and retribution toward men who cheated on them and the women their men cheated with that is found in the works of the blueswomen. This naturally would lead to the third theme expressed in their blues which was the general mistrust of men at large because of their infidelity. The fourth section examines another way that women of the blues expressed mistreatment by their significant others: what they often called "mean treatment" and even physical abuse. The fifth section will be on the theme of broken heartedness in their blues. While men often expressed this theme as well, it was significantly different in the blues of the women. In the sixth section, I will turn to the

theme of economic gain that these women found in being in relationships and the views they expressed on the matter. In the seventh and final section, I will examine the theme of these women exuding great confidence and self-worth even in the midst of mistreatment and abuse.

### ***The Bluesmen and their Thoughts on Relationships***

#### *Mistrust of Women and Unfaithfulness*

One of the major themes that reoccur in much of the blues of men during the pre-war period is a general sense of mistrust toward women, mainly based on the idea that they are unfaithful in their relationships. This thought resonated throughout the blues, from the country blues of the Delta, Piedmont, and Texas up to the urban blues of Chicago, St. Louis, and Memphis. While this theme would continue in the 1960s and 70s with blues works such as “I Got Some Help I Don’t Need” by B.B. King, “Damn Right, I’ve Got the Blues” by Buddy Guy, or “Shame, Shame, Shame” by Jimmy Reed, it was in the early blues that this idea was first teased out.

Turning back to Robert Johnson, this theme was clear and often used in his works. Johnson, a womanizer of the highest degree, spoke many times of women either cheating on him or his suspicion that they were doing exactly that. In his song “Kind Hearted Woman Blues” he sang:

*Ain’t but one thing that makes Mr. Johnson drink, I’s worried ‘bout how you treat me  
Baby, I begin to think  
Oh babe, my life don’t feel the same*

*You breaks my heart, when you call Mr. So and So 's name*<sup>183</sup>

In this, Johnson not only expresses his mistrust of women, but he directly links it to the fact that he suspects there is some nefarious unfaithfulness occurring. In the same song, he speaks ill of these “evil hearted women” that would be unfaithful to him when he sang: *“I got a kind hearted woman, do anything in this world for me, but these evil hearted women, man they will not let me be.”*<sup>184</sup>

In his song “I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom,” Johnson expands more on his idea of just who these “evil hearted women” are in his estimation and continues to express his distrust of women at large. In this song, Johnson speaks of a woman who he is romantically involved with but that he cannot find. He immediately goes to suspicions of infidelity and that she is “running around” when he sings: *“I’m gonna write a letter, telephone every town I know/If I can’t find her in West Helena, she must be in East Monroe I know.”*<sup>185</sup> After further rumination, Johnson links this woman with the kind of women he mistrusts and wants no part of:

*I don’t want no woman, wants every downtown man she meets  
I don’t want no woman, wants every downtown man she meets  
She’s a no good dooney, they shouldn’t allow her on the street.*<sup>186</sup>

For Johnson, he clearly had the worry that his love interest was going to cheat on him and maybe even with somebody close to him, as he expressed in many of his songs. In his song “Come On in My Kitchen,” Johnson expressed this very worry when he sang:

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<sup>183</sup> Robert Johnson, “Kind Hearted Woman Blues – SA.2580-1,” Track 1 on *The Centennial Collection*, Sony Music, 2011, Spotify.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Johnson, “I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom – SA.2581-1.”

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

“*The woman I love, took from my best friend, some joker got lucky stole her back again.*”<sup>187</sup> This theme would reappear in one of his more famous songs “Phonograph Blues:” “*Beatrice, I love my phonograph, honey, I broke my windin’ chain/And you’ve taken my lovin’ and give it to your other man.*”<sup>188</sup> Or again in “If I Had Possession Over Judgement Day” when he sings: “*Lord, I went to the mountain, far as my eyes could see/Some other man got my woman and lonsesome blues got me.*”<sup>189</sup> As a result of this purported, frequent infidelity he witnessed, Johnson would often express a general mistrust of women as appears in his adaption of an older Skip James song called “22-20 Blues.” In Johnson’s “32-20 Blues,” his mistrust of women leads him to interrogate his spouse by asking: “*Aw baby, where you stay last night? You got your hair all tangled and you ain’t talkin’ right.*”<sup>190</sup>

Johnson may have been the most vocal about his distrust of women and accusations of infidelity, but he certainly was not the only Delta bluesmen that expressed their thoughts on this subject. Son House sang in his song “A Down the Staff” that “*You know it’s so terrible, laying down by yourself/Them blues got you and your woman got somebody else.*”<sup>191</sup> In Skip James’s “Devil Got My Woman,” he sang a similar line to Johnson, who most likely took it from James and adapted it for his own song, when he

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<sup>187</sup> Robert Johnson, “Come On In My Kitchen – SA.2585-1,” Track 20 on *The Centennial Collection*, Sony Music, 2011, Spotify.

<sup>188</sup> Robert Johnson, “Phonograph Blues – SA.2587-1,” Track 8 on *The Centennial Collection*, Sony Music, 2011, Spotify.

<sup>189</sup> Robert Johnson, “If I Had Possession Over Judgement Day – SA.2633-1,” Track 16 on *The Centennial Collection*, Sony Music, 2011, Spotify.

<sup>190</sup> Robert Johnson, “32-20 Blues – SA.2616-2,” Track 9 on *The Centennial Collection*, Sony Music, 2011, Spotify.

<sup>191</sup> Son House, “A Down the Staff,” Track 16 on *Father of the Delta Blues: The Complete 1965 Sessions*, Sony Music, 1992, Spotify.

sang: *“The woman I loved, took her from my best friend, but he got lucky, stoled her back again.”*<sup>192</sup> Big Bill Broonzy presented his mistrust of women in his song “C.C. Rider” where he seems to imply that a woman enticed him to love her almost like a story of a Greek Siren when he sang: *“You C.C. Rider, see what you done done/You done made me love you and now your man done come.”*<sup>193</sup>

This expression of mistrust of women due to suspected infidelity was not exclusive to the blues of the Delta of Mississippi, either. In the Piedmont region, Blind Willie McTell had several songs where he expressed similar sentiments to his Delta counterparts in this area. In his song “Stomp Down Rider,” McTell tells the story of a woman that was his love interest at one time but then turned to a life of unfaithfulness and other activities that he deemed unacceptable:

*When I first met you Mama, you was so nice and kind  
You done got reckless and changed your mind  
But you’re the stomp down rider  
You’re the stomp down rider, but you’re much too drunk for me.*<sup>194</sup>

The clue in this particular song that McTell was singing about a woman who was unfaithful to him comes in a term that has already appeared in many works that have been cited thus far: “rider.” This term was vernacular that would have been used by many at the time and it typically meant a woman who the artist was having sex with, but in many of the context of these blues songs it implies that the woman was having sexual relations

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<sup>192</sup> James, “Devil Got My Woman.”

<sup>193</sup> Big Bill Broonzy, “C.C. Rider,” Track 12 on *Trouble in Mind*, Smithsonian Folkways, 2000, Spotify.

<sup>194</sup> Blind Willie McTell, “Stomp Down Rider,” Track 22 on *Blind Willie McTell – Statesboro Blues – The Early Years 1927-1935*. Document Records, 2005.

with many men.<sup>195</sup> McTell reinforces this view in his song “Stole Rider Blues” when he sings: “*When you see two women, running hand in hand/Bet you my last dollar, one done stole the other’s man.*”<sup>196</sup>

In the blues of many of these men they presented a mistrust of women based on the idea that they believed women were often likely to cheat on them. In its historical context, this is particularly interesting for two reasons. The first reason was the general attitude toward adultery that was supposedly held by Black men in the middle and lower classes of the South. In one of the seminal anthropological works done on Black men and women in a specific Mississippi community, Hortense Powdermaker made the argument that, based on her observations in the 1930s, “toward adultery... middle and lower classes do not seem to regard breaking it as a sin.”<sup>197</sup> By looking at the laments of these bluesmen, one may be tempted to say that this interpretation by Powdermaker was a misrepresentation of their views; however, upon further inspection, it would seem that this was exactly the case. This leads directly to the second reason that these lyrics about the mistrust of women due to infidelity is particularly interesting. For all their supposed heartbreak and agony at the thought of their love interest going out and cheating on them, there was a hypocrisy in their lyrics as they decided to do the very same thing, they accused the women of doing: “running around” on them.

*The Hypocrisy of Wanting Faithfulness and Love but Not Being Willing to Give It*

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<sup>195</sup> Conforth and Wardlow, *Up Jumped the Devil*, 240.

<sup>196</sup> Blind Willie McTell, “Stole Rider Blues,” Track 2 on *Blind Willie McTell – Statesboro Blues – The Early Years 1927-1935*. Document Records, 2005. Spotify.

<sup>197</sup> Powdermaker, *After Freedom*, 150.

On the surface, the blues lyrics of these men presented the complaints of people who were wrongfully treated in their relationships, the songs of people who desperately wanted monogamous relationships full of love and affection, but the women of their communities were just unwilling to give them that. This, however, was not the case. For all the complaining that these men did about infidelity and mean treatment on the part of these women, they were just as likely to partake in the same practices themselves. This hypocrisy would be a major theme in the early blues of these men in the Delta and elsewhere.

Returning to the works of Robert Johnson, he would often present the fact that many of his relationships were purely physical and did not mean much to him outside of sex. He says as much in his famous song “Stones in My Passway” when he sings: “*I got a woman that I’m loving, boy, but she don’t mean a thing.*”<sup>198</sup> In his song “Traveling Riverside Blues” he expands even further on his sexual conquests and opinions of these women. In one stanza, Johnson openly admits to having multiple lovers when he sings “*I got womens in Vicksburg, clean on into Tennessee, but my Friar’s Point rider, now, hops all over me.*” In the song, he continues to talk about how returns to his “Friar Point rider” for sexual pleasure and that no matter what a woman does for him, he is not going to stop doing just that: “*You can squeeze my lemon ‘till juice run down my leg, but I’m going back to Friar’s Point, mama, rocking to my head.*”<sup>199</sup> Men like Johnson that would go

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<sup>198</sup> Robert Johnson, “Stones In My Passway – DAL.377-2,” Track 23 on *The Centennial Collection*, Sony Music, 2011, Spotify.

<sup>199</sup> Robert Johnson, “Traveling Riverside Blues – DAL.400-1,” Track 32 on *The Centennial Collection*, Sony Music, 2011, Spotify.



from place to place in search of sexual relationships were even a topic of blues song by Charley Patton called “Some Summer Day” where he sings:

*It was late last spring, one sad old day  
Oh, when he left you, he's gone to stay  
And now Harry's gone, Sally don't you worry  
'Cause he's stealing here some summer day.*<sup>200</sup>

Unfortunately, Johnson's infidelity that he sang so openly about in these songs ended up catching up to him. In 1938, he had an affair with a married woman by the name of Beatrice Davis and her husband Ralph allegedly poisoned Johnson in revenge.<sup>201</sup> Despite the dangers associated with going after married women, Johnson was not the only bluesman to do this or sing about in his works. Blind Willie McTell was infamous for singing about his many sexual conquests, his unfaithfulness to his relationships, and his pursuit of married women. In his song “Writing Paper Blues,” McTell sings that “*I wrote you a letter, put it in your front yard/I would love to come and see you, but your good man's got me barred.*”<sup>202</sup> Though, like Johnson, McTell too faced and acknowledged the dangers of trying to enter into affairs with married women. In his song “Searching the Desert for the Blues” he sings openly about the violence he has faced because of chasing after married women:

*I used to say a married woman was the sweetest thing that ever been born  
But I've changed that thing, you better leave married women alone  
Take my advice: let these married women be  
'Cause their husbands'll grab you, beat you ragged as a cedar tree.*<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Charley Patton, “Some Summer Day,” Track 55 on *Presenting Charley Patton*, Paramount Records, 1929, Spotify.

<sup>201</sup> Conforth and Wardlow, *Up Jumped the Devil*, 292.

<sup>202</sup> Blind Willie McTell, “Writing Paper Blues,” Track 1 on *Blind Willie McTell – Statesboro Blues – The Early Years 1927-1935*. Document Records, 2005.

<sup>203</sup> Blind Willie McTell, “Searching the Desert For The Blues,” Track 33 on *Blind Willie McTell – Statesboro Blues – The Early Years 1927-1935*. Document Records, 2005. Spotify.

Still, in the rest of the song McTell flaunts his multiple sexual relationships that he would have at any given time when he sings “*I’ve got two women, and you can’t tell them apart/I’ve got one in my bossom and one I got in my heart.*”<sup>204</sup> Perhaps his most explicitly obvious song regarding his infidelity came in the form of “Three Women Blues.” In this song, McTell is unabashed about his multiple affairs. He sings “*Got three womens: yellow, brown, and black. It’ll take the Governor of Georgia to judge one of these women I like.*” As the song continues, he is open about why he has these multiple relationships going, they are simply for sexual enjoyment and some sense of companionship: “*One for in the morning, one for late at night/I got one for noontime to treat your old daddy right*” and again he sings “*One is a Memphis yellow, the other is a Savannah brown/One is a Statesboro dark skin, she’ll really turn your damper down.*”<sup>205</sup>

What is quite apparent is the paradox presented by and the hypocrisy of these blues singers regarding faithfulness and love in their relationships. On the one hand, the bluesmen seem to say that they desire love and faithfulness and blame the women in the relationship for not being able to have either. Yet, on the other hand, there are these brazen declarations of infidelity with seemingly no care about love or building some strong, monogamous relationship with these women. This goes to show just how individualistic blues were. Individuals are severely complicated; they can say one thing and do another. This is precisely what these blues artists did both in their life and in their

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<sup>204</sup> McTell, “Searching the Desert For The Blues.”

<sup>205</sup> Blind Willie McTell, “Three Women Blues,” Track 6 on *Blind Willie McTell – Statesboro Blues – The Early Years 1927-1935*. Document Records, 2005.

works. The paradox and hypocrisy found in the blues of these men regarding to relationships does not end with infidelity, however.

*Violence Against and Possessive Attitudes Toward Women*

There was a darker side to the blues of some of the men. Many songs casually mentioned physical abuse as well as possessive attitudes towards the women that there were either romantically or sexually involved with. Unfortunately, according to anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker this was not all that uncommon for the time. Speaking of “wife beating,” Powdermaker observed that it figured “so prominently in some of the cases” as infidelity did. The reasons that men would physically beat their spouses were numerous according to Powdermaker, whether it was “prompted by jealousy or suspicion of infidelity” or a “man may beat a woman just because he is ‘mean.’” Men would even beat their wives or spouses because they were jealous of their mistress. Alcohol often played a role in physical abuse as well.<sup>206</sup> In fact, this is why many Prohibitionist movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were spearheaded by women who were hoping to curtail the domestic abuse they were facing.<sup>207</sup> Abuse was a national issue and it certainly appeared in the works of these early bluesmen.

In Robert Johnson’s song “32-20 Blues,” he echoed a line that also appeared in Skip James’s “22-20 Blues,” where he violently threatens a lover when he sings “*If she gets unruly, thinks she don’t want do/ Take my 32-20 and cut her half in two.*” As blues writer Elijah Wald points out, there was little doubt to the listener that this was in

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<sup>206</sup> Powdermaker, *After Freedom*, 164.

<sup>207</sup> Foner, *Give Me Liberty*, 742.

reference to a caliber of gun.<sup>208</sup> This is made evidently clear as the song goes on as Johnson sings “*I’m gonna shoot my pistol, gonna shoot my Gatlin’ gun*” and eventually makes the threat very clear to his estranged lover by singing “*I sent for my baby, man, and she don’t come/All the doctors in Hot Springs sure can’t help her none.*”<sup>209</sup> The theme of violence against women is on full display here, obviously, but there is also another theme at play here. Though it does not appear as obvious in this song, there does seem to be the idea that the man has dominion over the women as the first threat mentioned is tied directly to if the woman does something that Robert Johnson did not want her to do and deemed “unruly.” Both these themes would also appear in the works of other bluesmen at the time.

Blind Willie McTell had multiple songs that dealt with these themes, but perhaps no two as obvious as “Love Changing Blues” and “Southern Can is Mine.” In the former song, McTell talks directly of his view of women, namely that he views them in the sense of utility, in other words he presents the case that he only wants a woman who will be submissive to him and do exactly as he says: “*What do you want with a woman when she won’t do nothing you say.*” As the song continues, he breaks for a small speaking part to answer this question he poses by saying, “I don’t need her.” Then, as he ends the stanza, he makes a metaphor to again imply that he has no use for a woman if she does not do exactly what he wants: “*What do you want with a rooster when he won’t crow fore*

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<sup>208</sup> Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, 229.

<sup>209</sup> Johnson, “32-20 Blues – SA.2616-2.”

day.”<sup>210</sup> What this song clearly presents is that for McTell women’s significance for and value to him were based on what they could do for him and if they remained submissive to him. This is a rather possessive view of women presented in this work.

In McTell’s “Southern Can Is Mine” he expands more on his possessive view of women and expresses the physical abuse that he threatened, and may have even committed, against his love interest:

*Now looka here mama let me tell you this  
If you wants to get crooked, I’m gonna give you my fist  
You might read from Revelation back to Genesee  
But if you get crooked, your southern can belongs to me.*<sup>211</sup>

Like Johnson’s “32-20 Blues,” McTell threatens violence against the woman he is with based on the idea that if she does something he does not like, or what he deems “crooked,” then he will certainly exact physical harm on her. This is coupled with the fact that he at the end says that her “southern can” would belong to him, yet another possessive statement being made. Big Bill Broonzy also expressed a similar possessive notion in his song “Keep Your Hands Off Her,” albeit the threat of violence is directed at the man who his spouse cheats with and not to her directly:

*I’ve got a gal here in this town, don’t want nobody to bother but me  
‘Cause she’s strictly, tailor-made, boy, she ain’t no hand me down  
Catch you messin’ with her, boy I’ll sho’ shoot ya down  
Now, keep yo’ hands off her, don’t ya dare to touch her  
You know she don’t belong to you.*<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Blind Willie McTell, “Love Changing Blues,” Track 17 on *Blind Willie McTell – Statesboro Blues – The Early Years 1927-1935*. Document Records, 2005. Spotify.

<sup>211</sup> Blind Willie McTell, “Southern Can Is Mine,” Track 20 on *Blind Willie McTell – Statesboro Blues – The Early Years 1927-1935*. Document Records, 2005. Spotify.

<sup>212</sup> Big Bill Broonzy, “Keep Your Hands Off Her,” Track 10 on *Volume 1: The Pre-War Years*, BMG Rights, 2007, Spotify.

It was certainly not all bluesmen, nor was found it in the entirety of all their works, but it is worth noting that these two themes of abuse and possession over women were certainly prevalent in the blues of the time. Moral judgment is easily passed on this; however, the historical story that this tells is complicated. Once again, this goes to show how individualistic blues truly are. These works are the expressions of complicated men who were able to hold two thoughts at once. One was the thought that domestic abuse was justified if a woman was doing something that they disagreed with or if they suspected them of infidelity. The justification for these actions came with the territory of believing that the woman was to be submissive to his will because she was his to command. Yet, this thought also lived alongside the idea that there was true love in relationships. There was an idealization of relationships and a desire to give and receive love and they were not alone in this second thought.

#### *Idealization of Relationships and Love*

The paradox of these bluesmen's expressions persisted in how they would sometimes idealize relationships and the idea of love. In short, they would write blues songs that were essentially love songs, differing from the songs that have been examined in this chapter thus far. In a sense, the blues artists were romantics, wrapped up in their passions. This is certainly no excuse for their derogatory speech towards women in their songs; however, they appeared deeply emotional and tied up in their relationships at times. This shined through in these works where they expressed their love for their spouses or love interests.

For all of Robert Johnson's womanizing, he too had a romantic side to him. In his song "Honeymoon Blues," he sang about one specific woman named Betty Mae. Johnson biographers Bruce Conforth and Gayle Dean Wardlow speculate that Johnson was perhaps singing about a woman he had a romantic interest in. While they admit Mae was a common middle name in the South at the time, Conforth and Wardlow also point out that Johnson had promised a girl by the name of Willie Mae, whom he may have had a romantic interest in, that he would put her name in a song. The name Willie Mae does appear in his song "Love in Vain," and it is possible that in this song Johnson is slightly modifying the same woman's name to Betty Mae.<sup>213</sup> In any case, whoever this particular woman is, it is clear that in "Honeymoon Blues" that Johnson is singing of his love for her.

He makes his declaration of love and states his intentions with her when he sings: "*Betty Mae, Betty Mae, you shall be my wife someday.*" For a man like Johnson, who was known to travel around and have sexual encounters with several women, this statement of a desire for a monogamous relationship was a departure from his normal views of relationships found in his works. It shows the complexity of thought, deepness of emotion, and individuality that is so often found in the blues, especially the blues of Robert Johnson. As the song continues, he sings a beautifully romantic line about this woman: "*Betty Mae, you is my heartstring, you is my destiny/And you rolls across my mind, baby, each and every day.*"<sup>214</sup> The individualistic desire for love and marriage,

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<sup>213</sup> Conforth and Wardlow, *Up Jumped the Devil*, 252.

<sup>214</sup> Robert Johnson, "Honeymoon Blues – DAL.401-1," Track 33 on *The Centennial Collection*, Sony Music, 2011, Spotify.

something that to this point in 1938 was so often suppressed or even outlawed for Black men and women in American history, was on full display in this particular Robert Johnson work.

Johnson was not the only bluesman to sing about his love for a particular woman or his desire for marriage and a life together. Big Bill Broonzy also dedicated some of his lyrics to this topic. In his song “Mississippi River Blues,” Broonzy sings about a woman that he loves but is far away from him at the time. His singular desire, then, is to be with this woman and he expresses that he will go to great lengths to be with her. In one part of the song, Broonzy sings: “*Ain’t it hard to love someone when they are so far from you/Lord, I’m on’ get me a boat and paddle this old river blue.*”<sup>215</sup> Like Johnson, Broonzy showed his depth of emotion and romantic side in this song despite also writing songs that paradoxically presented distrust of women and possessive attitudes toward them. This, however, was not the only song that displayed the individualistic desires of Broonzy. In his song “Just a Dream,” he sings of his desire to get married and to have children:

*I dreamed I got married and started me a family  
I dreamed I had ten children and they all looked like me  
But that was just a dream, just a dream I had on my mind  
Now, when I woke up, baby, not a child I could find.*<sup>216</sup>

These expressions from Johnson and Broonzy of their individualistic desires for love, marriage, and children show the complexity often found in the early blues. This

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<sup>215</sup> Big Bill Broonzy, “Mississippi River Blues,” Track 6 on *Volume 1: The Pre-War Years*, BMG Rights, 2007, Spotify.

<sup>216</sup> Broonzy, “Just a Dream.”



shows just how individualistic the blues were. Johnson and Broonzy were able to hold multiple, seemingly contradictory viewpoints about women, relationships, and marriage at the same time because they were complex individuals who had unique thoughts. The blues gave them a chance to present all sides of themselves regarding their views on relationships. This theme of love and the idealization of relationships is a prime example, then, of individuality and desires expressed in the blues.

### *Overtly Sexual References*

Along with the paradoxical expressions of love and relationships that these bluesmen presented in their blues, they also often expressed open views of sexuality in their works. In deeply religious Black communities in the South, this could be received as taboo and inappropriate. Nevertheless, these bluesmen held little to nothing back when it came to the subject of sex in their music. While several of them shared similar terminology, each bluesman expressed their own individual thoughts on the topic.

In perhaps his most famous song, certainly the best-selling of his time, Robert Johnson used the metaphor of a Terraplane car several times throughout the song when talking about sexual relations he was having with a lover. As Johnson biographers Wardlow and Conforth point out, this song “featured the fast-car image with highly developed sexual overtones.”<sup>217</sup> This can be seen in three stanzas. In the first, Johnson sings: “*I said ‘I’ll flash your lights, mama, your horn won’t even blow’ ... Got a short in this connection, well, babe, it’s way down below.*” As the song continues, he goes on to sing about what seems to be some sort of sexual impotence on his part, a theme that also

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<sup>217</sup> Conforth and Wardlow, *Up Jumped the Devil*, 198.

comes up in Johnson's "Phonograph Blues" as well, when he sings: "*Now, you know the coils ain't even buzzin', little generator won't get that spark/Motor's in a bad condition, you gotta have these batteries charged.*" Toward the conclusion of the song, Johnson begins to make metaphorical connections between parts of a car and both his and his lover's genitals: "*I'm gonna get deep down in this connection, oh well, keep on tanglin' with these wires/And then I mash down on your little starter, then your spark plugs will give me fire.*"<sup>218</sup> These statements were understood at the time to be "sexual innuendoes" and brought Johnson into the tradition found in the blues of producing what were called "get dirty" lyrics. These records usually sold very well, and this was certainly true for Johnson as "Terraplane Blues" was one of his best-selling songs at the time.<sup>219</sup>

Robert Johnson was not the only bluesmen to use overtly sexual themes in his work. Big Bill Broonzy released a song called "How You Want It Done?" where he sang about his sexual stamina: "*Why don't you tell me, lovin' mama, how do you want your rollin' done? Lord, I give you satisfaction, now, if it's all night long.*"<sup>220</sup> It is important to note that in Black culture at the time, the term "rollin'" was "slang for performing consistently in bed."<sup>221</sup> In the Texas blues scene, Blind Lemon Jefferson also produced songs with strong sexual innuendos as well. Perhaps his most obvious example of this would be found in his song "Bed Spring Blues." The title itself is already suggestive, but as the song progresses, it becomes evidently clear what Jefferson was making references

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<sup>218</sup> Johnson, "Terraplane Blues – SA.2586-1."

<sup>219</sup> Conforth and Wardlow, *Up Jumped the Devil*, 198.

<sup>220</sup> Big Bill Broonzy, "How You Want It Done?" Track 4 on *Volume 1: The Pre-War Years*, BMG Rights, 2007, Spotify.

<sup>221</sup> Conforth and Wardlow, *Up Jumped the Devil*, 241.

to. In one stanza, Jefferson sings: “*I’ve got something to tell you, make the hair rise on your head. Got a new way of gettin’ down, make the springs tremble on your bed.*” He continues by singing: “*My gal got a new way of tremblin’ down, make a crazy man leave his home. When she grabs you and turns you loose, makes the flesh tremble on your bones.*” If there was any doubt what this song was about, Jefferson sang toward the end of his song: “*I say, don’t blame me mama, talking out my head. I’m worried about the movements you’ve got and those springs tremblin’ on your bed.*”<sup>222</sup> Much like Broonzy’s song, Jefferson made use of slang terminology in this song that would have been recognized by Black listeners as explicitly talking about sex when he continued to use the term “tremblin’ down.” This was very similar to the popular slang phrase for sexual intercourse often used in the works of Johnson: “quiverin’ down.”<sup>223</sup> It is certainly true that these bluesmen used slang and metaphors like these to express overtly sexual tones in their works.

This is important because it once again shows the individuality found in the lyrics of the blues. The blues were not just solely used to make money or music that simply was a whim that would go on to obscurity once the blues fad was over. This music, rather, was intensely personal and projected deep, individual thought. This can be seen in the sexual themes of the early blues. Why would bluesmen willingly cut off a good portion of Black listeners at the time, namely the religious Black men and women who, as Conforth

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<sup>222</sup> Blind Lemon Jefferson, “Bed Springs Blues,” Track 56 on *Presenting Blind Lemon Jefferson*, Paramount Records, 1926, Spotify.

<sup>223</sup> Conforth and Wardlow, *Up Jumped the Devil*, 240.

and Wardlow point out, never “would have dared purchase such a record?”<sup>224</sup> The answer lies in the fact that they were not just trying to make money from their music, and they were not beholden to any uniform modes of expression in their music. They were concerned with expressing their own individual thoughts about a variety of subjects, including sex, that would deeply resonate with the Black community.

*The Typical “Blues” of Losing Love and Relationships, Unrequited Love, and Cynicism*

Perhaps the most common and recognizable theme in blues is singing about love lost, about loving someone who does not love you back, and ultimately a cynicism presented about love. These themes could be explored in perhaps any genre of modern music from country to rock n’ roll to pop music; however, in the early blues, it set the tone for a tradition of blues singers such as B.B. King, Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, and so many others that would follow these bluesmen. While this may be a theme that shares commonalities with many genres, it is still important to briefly examine how these bluesmen presented these themes in their own words.

Robert Johnson had several songs in which he most certainly presented his thoughts on these themes. In “Kind Hearted Woman Blues,” he clearly expresses the pain that he felt loving a woman that did not love him back, despite all of his pursuits of and efforts toward her: “*I love my baby, my baby don’t love me. But I really love that woman, can’t stand to leave her be.*”<sup>225</sup> In another song entitled “When You Got a Good Friend,” Johnson expresses remorse for mistreating a lover whom in hindsight he saw the value of their

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<sup>224</sup> Conforth and Wardlow, *Up Jumped the Devil*, 198.

<sup>225</sup> Johnson, “Kind Hearted Woman Blues – SA.2580-1.”

relationship: *“I mistreated my baby and I can’t see no reason why. Every time I think about it, I just wring my hands and cry.”* In his grief over love lost, he seeks to implore the listener to not fall into the same missteps that he did: *“When you got a good friend that will stay right by your side, give her all your spare time, love and treat her right.”*<sup>226</sup> In both these songs, Johnson expressed an emotional expression that had not been featured in his other songs, namely: love lost and remorse for some of the actions, such as mistreating his lover or infidelity, that he seemed almost joyfully to undertake.

For all of Johnson’s songs that talked about picking up and leaving his spouse, he also sang about the sadness he felt over a woman leaving him. In a song that follows a narrative format, telling the story of a woman leaving him at the train station and presumably not coming back, called “Love in Vain,” he sings extensively about the pain he felt over a lover abandoning him: *“I followed her to the station, with her suitcase in my hand. Well, it’s hard to tell, it’s hard to tell, when all your love’s in vain. All my love’s in vain.”* As the song continues, Johnson continues to express that his “love’s in vain,” there is nothing he can do to get his lover to stay with him, until she finally leaves him standing at a train station feeling the torment of her leaving: *“When the train rolled up to the station and I looked her in the eye. Well, I was lonesome, I felt so lonesome, and I could not help but cry. All my love’s in vain.”*<sup>227</sup> In his song “Walkin’ Blues,” a blues standard that would

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<sup>226</sup> Robert Johnson, “When You Got A Good Friend – SA.2584-2,” Track 19 on *The Centennial Collection*, Sony Music, 2011, Spotify.

<sup>227</sup> Robert Johnson, “Love in Vain Blues – DAL.402-1,” Track 41 on *The Centennial Collection*, Sony Music, 2011, Spotify.

later to go on to be adapted by Muddy Waters and covered by Eric Clapton, he even goes as far to sing about a specific woman who left him feeling lonely and seemingly depressed:

*Lord, I feel like blowin' my old lonesome horn  
Got up this morning, my little Bernice was gone  
Lord, I feel like blowin' my old lonesome horn  
Well I got up this mornin' all I had was gone.*<sup>228</sup>

What is fascinating about these types of songs from Robert Johnson is that it showed the depth of his emotion as well as the depth of the individual's expression featured in the blues. For Johnson, it showed the multi-faceted nature of human nature as he expressed the joy he felt in relationships, the pleasure he derived from sexual expression, and the pain he endured when he was heartbroken. For a Black man at this time, there was perhaps no better outlet for these deep, personal emotions than the blues. Through his blues, Johnson was able to express a range of emotions and thoughts on love. Johnson was not the only bluesmen that expressed these deep emotions when it came to the heartbroken nature of the blues, however.

Son House, a predecessor of Johnson's, wrote several songs that expressed his thoughts and feelings about love lost, unrequited love, and the cynicism that he felt toward relationships as a result of it. In a song entitled "Am I Right or Wrong?," House expressed the frustration he felt after he did everything he felt he could do to keep a spouse, but it was not enough for her: "*Look here honey, what you want me to do? Done all I could to get along with you. Now honey, was that right along?*" Even when the woman leaves him, House tries to present a confidence, at least enough to declare that he would not beg to get

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<sup>228</sup> Robert Johnson, "Walkin' Blues – SA.2630-1," Track 13 on *The Centennial Collection*, Sony Music, 2011, Spotify.

her back: “*You need not think because I’m black, I’m gonna beg you to take me back.*” Ultimately, House still had to struggle with whether or not letting her go and not trying to persuade her to stay with him was the correct thing to do as he sings: “*Now honey, was that right or wrong?*”<sup>229</sup>

This theme of trying to remain confident in the face of despair over a spouse leaving him was one that reappeared in the works of Son House. In his song “Sundown,” House tries to convince the woman who left him, and maybe himself as well, that she would regret her decision to leave him: “*Your little trouble is coming home someday. Yeah, you’ll be sorry, that you treated poor old me this way.*” Yet, even in his confidence, House is brokenhearted and expresses that with her leaving he lost not only his lover but his best friend: “*Oh, little girl, yeah you done broke my heart. You know it so sad to say, that the best friends they have to part.*”<sup>230</sup> A womanizer, much like Johnson, he may have been, but here House shows the depth of his emotion with his sadness over losing the monogamous relationship that he desired. For House, more so than Johnson, this loss of love did not just lead him to sing that his love was in vain, but to express a great deal of cynicism toward relationships.

One of the most common, reoccurring lines found in the blues of Son House is a simple phrase that shows this thought. In his song “My Black Mama,” House uses this very line when he sings: “*Hey, black mama, what’s the matter with you? Said it ain’t no*

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<sup>229</sup> Son House, “Am I Right or Wrong?” Track 3 on *The Delta Blues of Son House*, Grammercy Records, 2010, Spotify.

<sup>230</sup> Son House, “Sundown,” Track 8 on *The Original Delta Blues*, Sony Music, 1965, Spotify.

*satisfaction, don't care what I do.*"<sup>231</sup> Clearly House was talking about unrequited love, but he goes on in his song "Downhearted Blues" to use this same line to expand on why this leads him to hold a cynical view about relationships: "*Did you ever love when they don't love you? You know there wasn't satisfaction didn't care what in the world you do.*" As this song continues, House makes a broad sweeping statement about love in general: "*You know, love, love, is a worried old heart disease, look like the very one you be lovin' is so hard to please.*"<sup>232</sup> For House, it would seem that he spent a good deal of attention to the idea of loving someone who did not love him back and this seemed to inform his opinions on love in general. The cynicism toward love even began to extend to his thoughts on interpersonal relationships outside of the romantic or sexual context:

*You know your mother would talk about you, your sisters and your brothers too  
Don't care how you try to live, talk about you still  
Yes, bear this in mind, a true friend is hard to find  
Don't mind people grinnin' in your face.*<sup>233</sup>

House was not alone in his expressions of cynicism toward love because of the hurt he felt because of either love lost or unrequited love. His fellow Delta bluesman Skip James devoted several of his lyrics to this very topic as well. In his song "Cypress Grove Blues," James goes as far to say that he would rather be dead than to be with a particular woman, certainly a cynical view of relationships: "*I would rather be buried in some Cypress Grove, to have some woman, Lord, that I can't control.*" While on the surface it may appear that James was expressing a similar possessive view of women that was examined in an earlier

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<sup>231</sup> House, "My Black Mama, Pt. 1."

<sup>232</sup> Son House, "Downhearted Blues," Track 11 on *The Original Delta Blues*, Sony Music, 1965. Spotify.

<sup>233</sup> Son House, "Grinnin' In Your Face," Track 14 on *Martin Scorsese Presents The Blues: Son House*, Sony Music, 2003, Spotify.



section, as the song continues it seems that the closer reading of his lyrics seems to suggest that he was heartbroken over a woman who was mistreating him and what he meant here by “control” was a desire that she would no longer mistreat or cheat on him: *“I would rather be dead and six feet in my grave, than to be way up here, honey, treated this a-way.”*<sup>234</sup>

James’s cynicism toward love, much like that of Johnson’s and even more so House’s cynicism, seemed to be rooted in the idea that his lover was going to leave him. In a song that has similar themes and metaphors as Johnson’s “Love in Vain,” James sings about a woman who was boarding a train and was set on leaving him. In “How Long ‘Buck,’” James sings once again that his love interest was mistreating him: *“How long, how long, has my Crow Jane treat me wrong? So long, baby so long, baby so long.”* Like Johnson, James then expresses the sadness he felt as he had to watch this woman board a train and leave him for good: *“I got to the station, she left town, I’m blue and disgusted and nobody been down.”*<sup>235</sup> With these expressions, James was able to convey his own individualistic thoughts and feelings associated with the themes of love lost and the cynicism that he felt as a result of it, much like the blues of Robert Johnson and Son House.

What is evidently clear in the works of these early bluesmen when it came to the subject of love and relationships is that they displayed deeply personal and individualistic thoughts on the subject. Seemingly contradictory at times with their expressions of mistrust

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<sup>234</sup> Skip James, “Cypress Grove Blues,” Track 18 on *The Complete 1931 Sessions*, Black Swan Music, 2022, Spotify.

<sup>235</sup> Skip James, “How Long ‘Buck?’” Track 7 on *The Complete 1931 Sessions*, Black Swan Music, 2022, Spotify.

of women and their own desire to have as many sexual partners as they could while simultaneously filling their lyrics with a multitude of passionate metaphors, desperate cries for their lovers to return to them or sorrow expressed over their lover leaving them, or the pain over unrequited love shows the depth and complexity of the blues these men sang. Works of these complexity can only come from the equally complex human spirit and mind. For these men, the blues were a way they could openly express their individual views on, and emotions associated with love and relationships. Yet, it was not only the men that would do this. The women of the early blues period would express their own thoughts and feelings about love and relationships and while they shared many commonalities, they also expressed their individualistic thoughts as Black women at the time.

### ***The Women of the Blues and their Thoughts on Relationships***

The early blues of the women shared many commonalities with the blues of the men; however, they also shared unique perspectives that really only Black women could express, and Black female listeners would relate to. As Daphne Duval Harrison aptly writes, the themes of women's blues lyrics "are generally the same as those of the men's – infidelity, alienation, loneliness, despondency, death, poverty, injustice, love, and sex" but "women responded to these concerns differently."<sup>236</sup> Harrison continues by correctly stating that the blues lyrics of women from this pre-war era "interpreted and reformulated the black experience from their unique perspective in American society as black

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<sup>236</sup> Daphne Duval Harrison, "'Wild Women Don't Have the Blues': Blues from the Black Woman's Perspective," in *A Turbulent Voyage*, ed. Floyd W. Hayes III (Lanham: Collegiate Press, 2000), 180.

females.”<sup>237</sup> While there are certainly many women of the time that could be observed, perhaps the two most important are Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey as they represent not only Black women and their individuality expressed in the blues, but they also represent the urban scene (with Bessie Smith) and the rural scene (with Ma Rainey) and much of their corpus was actually written by them, while other blues women had their songs written by “professional songwriters such as Clarence Williams, Chris Smith, Perry Bradford, and W.C. Handy.”<sup>238</sup>

*Concern Over Their Spouse Cheating on and Leaving Them*

One of the more popular and common themes that appear in the early blues of women was the concern they expressed over their spouses cheating on them or leaving them, oftentimes both concerns went hand in hand. As has been examined already, this theme is also found in the blues of the men as well. The women, however, seemed to focus more on the side of their spouses cheating on them rather than the other way around. While many of the men expressed their desire that their spouses or love interests should not cheat on them, they often also sang songs that conveyed the idea that they themselves were entangled in affairs and seemed to have little or no remorse about that. This can be found in the blues of women, as it is in Ma Rainey’s song “Chain Gang Blues” where she sings: “*Chains on my feet, padlock on my hand. It’s all on account of stealing a woman’s man;*” however, it is much more the case that these women expressed

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<sup>237</sup> Harrison, ““Wild Women Don’t Have the Blues’: Blues from the Black Woman’s Perspective,” 177.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid, 179.

sorrow and concerned over their spouse's infidelity and rarely expressed that they themselves were pursuing an affair.<sup>239</sup>

In her book *After Freedom*, anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker made the claim that in the 1930s she observed that Black women in the South “apparently experience no conflict in accepting infidelity on the part of their mates or in practicing it themselves.” She goes on to say that “it is not unusual to find” Black women “able to enjoy extra-marital affairs without feelings of guilt or regret, and at the same time to feel assured that they love one man best.”<sup>240</sup> While this may have been a perspective that Hortense observed in her time, it was not the only perspective and a deeper examination of the blues of these women show that they offered unique, individualistic expressions that went against this narrative.

Returning to the works of Ma Rainey, perhaps one of the most obvious examples of the concern she expressed about her love interest cheating or leaving her is found in her song “Jealous Hearted Blues.” In this song, Rainey begins by stating how much she loves her spouse and seems to beg another woman to leave her man alone: “*You can have my money, baby, everything I own but for God’s sake, leave my man alone.*” As the song continues, she makes it clear that she worries that her love interest will leave her in the dead of night, most likely to go out and cheat on her as the phrase “midnight creep” suggests: “*Going to buy me a bulldog, to watch him while I sleep, just to keep my man from making his midnight creep.*”<sup>241</sup> For Rainey, she is clearly expressing the opposite of

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<sup>239</sup> Ma Rainey, “Chain Gang Blues,” Track 6 on *Ma Rainey*, Fantasy, 1992, Spotify.

<sup>240</sup> Powdermaker, *After Freedom*, 160.

<sup>241</sup> Ma Rainey, “Jealous Hearted Blues,” Track 1 on *Ma Rainey*, Fantasy, 1992, Spotify.

what Powdermaker hypothesizes in her work. Rainey was clearly very concerned with her spouse cheating on her and did not approve of it nor was she content with it.

In another one of her songs, Rainey continues to express the trepidation she felt when she thought about her love interest leaving her or going out to cheat on her. In her song “Daddy, Goodbye Blues,” she sings: *“Met my man this morning, standing in my door, when I got back, he said ‘I don’t want you no more.’ Goodbye, goodbye, Daddy, goodbye.”* As the song continues, Rainey links her fear of her man leaving her with the knowledge of his infidelity. She sings that *“can’t always tell when they ain’t treated right, your man go out from you, stay out all day and night.”*<sup>242</sup> Perhaps like the sentiments found in the works of Son House, Rainey is presenting a concern, largely rooted in cynicism and negative self-consciousness, that her spouse will go out and leave her soon.

What is clear with this theme is that Ma Rainey presented the theme of women being frightened and concerned that their men might leave them or go out and have an affair. It is too simplistic to conclude, as Powdermaker does, that many Black women did not care about infidelity and they frequently partook in it. While this certainly could have been true of some women, Rainey’s success with Black listeners, Black women included, shows that her individualistic expressions of concern over her spouse leaving or cheating on her was a lived experience for many. This was not the only theme of the blues of women that showed the individual expression regarding their views on love and relationships.

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<sup>242</sup> Ma Rainey, “Daddy, Goodbye Blues,” Track 20 on *Ma Rainey*, Fantasy, 1992, Spotify.

### *Violence Against People Because of Their Spouse's Infidelity*

Another interesting theme in the early blues of women was their propensity to express violence towards people who were involved in their spouse's infidelity. Whether it was violence toward the man they were with who cheated on them or toward the women that their spouses cheated with, the women of the blues offered a unique perspective when it came to retribution against those who hurt them with their affair. As Daphne Duval Harrison writes: "Women, at least in song, used violence, or the threat of violence, as one means of retaliation."<sup>243</sup> This once again goes against the idea put forth by Hortense that many of these women simply did not care about infidelity. On the contrary, this theme as well as the previously examined theme of the concern that women expressed in their blues about their spouses cheating on them show the opposite.

A prime example of this theme of violence towards those that were involved in the infidelity is found in Ma Rainey's song "Wringin' and Twistin' Blues." This song is a narrative that tells the story of a woman who went to speak with a gypsy who revealed to her that her man was indeed having an affair. As the song progresses, Rainey begins to sing about the violence that is planned against this woman who the spouse is cheating with:

*He told me that he loved me, I found it wasn't true  
'Cause he's done gone and left me, I've nothing else to do  
But if I know that woman, that caused my heart to moan  
I'd cook a special dinner, invite her to my home.*

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<sup>243</sup> Harrison, "Wild Women Don't Have the Blues': Blues from the Black Woman's Perspective," 180.

As the song progresses, it becomes quite clear what Rainey meant by a “special dinner.” She proclaims that this dinner will be poisoned and lead to the death of the woman who her spouse cheated with: *“If she eats what’s on my table, she will be graveyard bound. I’ll be right there to tell her, when they put her in the ground, ‘You’re the cause of me having those wringin’ and a-twistin’ blues.”*<sup>244</sup>

The blues of the women also expressed violence against the men who cheated on them as well. In Ma Rainey’s “Sleep Talking Blues,” she warns against her love interest divulging the name of his mistress while he sleeps: *“When you talk in your sleep, be sure your mama’s not awake. You call another woman’s name, you’ll think you wake up in a earthquake.”* Rainey then makes it clear what the punishment she seeks to carry out as a result of this infidelity: *“I warned you, daddy, nice as a mama could do, you hear me talkin’ to you: undertaker will be visiting you.”*<sup>245</sup> These are the individualistic expressions of someone who is feeling a great deal of passion and anger, not one who is apathetic in any way toward their spouse’s infidelity.

For all of the lyrics of Ma Rainey that spoke to threats of violence against her spouse or the one who her spouse cheated with, there was perhaps no more straightforward example of this theme than in Bessie Smith’s song “Send Me to the ‘Lectric Chair.” This song is graphic and gruesome in her threats and elaborations of the violence that she seeks to carry out against the man who cheated on her:

*Judge you wanna hear my plea, before you open up your court  
But I don’t want no sympathy, ‘cause I done cut my good man’s throat  
I caught him with a triflin’ Jane, I warned him ‘bout before*

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<sup>244</sup> Ma Rainey, “Wringin’ And Twistin’ Blues,” Track 8 on *Ma Rainey*, Fantasy, 1992, Spotify.

<sup>245</sup> Ma Rainey, “Sleep Talking Blues,” Track 18 on *Ma Rainey*, Fantasy, 1992, Spotify.

*I had my knife and went insane, and the rest you ought to know  
Judge, Judge, please mister Judge, send me to the 'lectric chair.*<sup>246</sup>

As Harrison points out, this threat in Smith's song was consistent with the way that she lived her life. Smith was "known to not take any foolishness from anybody, male or female" and there was even one reported instance where she got into an altercation with her husband and began to shoot at him with a gun "while he stood on the railroad tracks pleading his case."<sup>247</sup>

These expressions of violence against the men who cheated on them and the women who they cheated with were grand expressions of individualism in the blues of the women. They were impassioned cries of independence or as Harrison asserts, they were Black women's "declaration of independence," reminders that "they were members of a sisterhood that did not have to tolerate mistreatment."<sup>248</sup> Both Rainey and Smith were able to express their own anger and discontentment with the infidelity that they faced while simultaneously speaking for many Black women who felt similar.

### *Mistrust of Men*

If the blues of the men expressed a general negative view of women seeped in distrust, the blues of the women reciprocated these feelings right back to them. Both Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith devoted specific songs and lyrics to this theme of mistrust toward men. What this shows is two things. One, it shows that there seemed to be suspicions of the other gender that went both ways for Black men and women in their

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<sup>246</sup> Bessie Smith, "Send Me to the 'Lectric Chair," Track 22 on *The Essential Bessie Smith*, Sony Music, 1997, Spotify.

<sup>247</sup> Harrison, "'Wild Women Don't Have the Blues': Blues from the Black Woman's Perspective," 186.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid*, 188.



blues. Two, it shows that women were willing to express their individual thoughts and concerns toward the men in their life. The women of the blues were not going to be shy about their feelings toward men, especially the ones who had affairs.

Ma Rainey put it clearly throughout the song and in the very title of a song called “Trust No Man.” In this song, it appears that Rainey is singing directly to women and warning them of the danger associated with trusting men: *“I want all you women to listen to me, don’t trust no man no further than your eyes can see.”* Much like the blues of the men, Rainey anchors her mistrust in a specific event: *“I trusted mine with my best friend, but that was bad luck in the end.”* As the song progresses, Rainey’s mistrust informs her cynicism toward men: *“Don’t trust a man no further than your eyes can see. He’ll tell you he loves you, swear that it’s true, then the next minute he’ll turn his back on you.”*<sup>249</sup> For Rainey, her mistrust in men was not some philosophical or dogmatic view that she held simply because she found the view to be solid; rather, she held this view because it was connected to deeply personal events in her life and it was her individualistic expression of how she felt about her lived experiences.

Bessie Smith echoed the sentiments of Ma Rainey’s mistrust in men based on infidelity in her song “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.” In this song, Smith sings that:

*My heart is sad and I’m all alone, my man’s treating me mean  
I regret the day I was born and that man I ever seen  
My happiness is less today, my heart is broke  
That’s why I say, Lord, a good man is hard to find.*

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<sup>249</sup> Ma Rainey, “Trust No Man,” Track 10 on *Ma Rainey*, Fantasy, 1992, Spotify.

Much like Rainey, Smith goes on to link this mistrust that men are decent to the fact that she has experienced the pain of their infidelity: *“You always get another kind, just when you think he’s yoru pal, you look and find him foolin’ ‘round some old gal.”*<sup>250</sup> This once again shows a very personal expression in the blues of Bessie Smith as she is speaking directly about lived experiences that have influenced her thoughts about men.

Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith shared a song together in which they both expressed this same theme of mistrust toward men. This song, entitled “New Boveavil Blues,” made metaphorical connections between men and the Boveavil, a well-known and hated pest of the Mississippi Delta. As the song continues, Smith and Rainey sing: *“I don’t want no man to put no sugar in my tea. Some of them are so evil, I’m ‘fraid they might poison me.”*<sup>251</sup> Interestingly, this is not a mistrust toward men based on the fear that they will cheat on them; rather, it is directly linked to the fear of experiencing violence and even death at the hands of men. Nevertheless, both Smith and Rainey added to the tradition found in women’s blues of expressions of mistrust toward men. Unfortunately, violence toward women was a theme often explored in the blueswomen’s works.

#### *General Ways Men Mistreated Them, Including Abuse*

As previously examined in the blues of the men at this time, there was a particularly pernicious side to these relationships, namely domestic abuse, and physical violence against women. The men expressed in their blues violence as a means of retribution or even a means of discipline toward their love interests. While the women of

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<sup>250</sup> Bessie Smith, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” Track 23 on *The Essential Bessie Smith*, Sony Music, 1997, Spotify.

<sup>251</sup> Ma Rainey, “New Boveavil Blues,” Track 13 on *Ma Rainey*, Fantasy, 1992, Spotify.

the blues did express threats of violence toward men as retribution as well, they also spoke to the fear and agony they felt as a result of physical abuse that they endured.

In her song “Victim of the Blues,” Ma Rainey seems to express a fear that she was worried about her very life when it came to a particular man she was with: *“It’s awful hard to take it, it’s such a bitter pill. If the blues don’t kill me, that man and mean treatment will.”*<sup>252</sup> In her other works, Rainey expounds on why she felt the need to fear for her life. In “Sweet Rough Man,” Rainey sings about several physical abuses that she had to endure in a relationship. One line says: *“I woke up this mornin’, my head was sore as a boil. My man beat me last night with five feet of copper coil.”* Another line says: *“He keeps my lips split, my eyes as black as jet.”* As the song continues, Rainey sings that this abuse had been happening for years: *“Every night for five years, I got a beatin’ from my man.”*<sup>253</sup> Whether or not this instance happened to Rainey or not is not clear in the song, what is clear however is that this type of violence toward women was commonly observed by Rainey and expressed in other songs of hers as well.

In “Black Eye Blues,” for example, Rainey follows the story of a woman by the name of Nancy. In this narrative song, the theme of abuse against women is prevalent. Rainey sings: *“Nancy and her man just had a fight, he hit miss Nancy ‘cross her head, then she rose to her feet and said, ‘You low-down alligator, just watch me soon or later, gonna catch you with your britches down.”* As the song progresses, it seems that Rainey

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<sup>252</sup> Ma Rainey, “Victim Of The Blues,” Track 17 on *Ma Rainey*, Fantasy, 1992, Spotify.

<sup>253</sup> Ma Rainey, “Sweet Rough Man,” Track 21 on *Ma Rainey*, Fantasy, 1992, Spotify.

steps out of the narrative form and begins to speak once again on her views of domestic abuse in a relationship:

*You abuse me and mistreat me, you dog around and beat me  
'Till I'm gonna hang around  
Take all my money, blacken both of my eyes  
Give it to another woman come home and tell me lies.*<sup>254</sup>

Unlike the blues of the men, the blues of the women does not promote nor glorify abuse as either a retribution tactic or a mode of discipline. The women are quite clear on their opinions toward this subject: they believed that it diminished the relationship and induced fear in them. Sadly, Ma Rainey's words echoed what Hortense Powdermaker found in her studies of a specific Mississippi community where she said that some Black women took physical abuse "as part of what they must endure."<sup>255</sup> For Rainey, she expressed her disdain for it but she also expressed an individualistic belief that she would stay by her spouse's side even with the domestic abuse. She even went as far as to sing "*My man, my man, Lord, everybody knows he's mean. But when he starts to lovin', I wring and twist and scream.*"<sup>256</sup> This was the complexity of the blues, however. For these women in the blues, they conveyed a willingness to endure the pain of these physical abuses in turn for the love that their spouses showed them at other times. It led to the complicated view of men that these blueswomen seemed to portray in their lyrics. It can best be summed up by returning to both Bessie Smith's and Ma Rainey's song "New Boveavil Blues," where they lament about the things that men do and all the

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<sup>254</sup> Ma Rainey, "Black Eye Blues," Track 22 on *Ma Rainey*, Fantasy, 1992, Spotify.

<sup>255</sup> Powdermaker, *After Freedom*, 164.

<sup>256</sup> Rainey, "Sweet Rough Man."

mistreatment they give, yet in the end, they still sing about their desire for companionship and relationship and conclude that “*I’m gettin’ tired of sleeping by myself.*”<sup>257</sup>

### *Broken Hearts*

As with the blues of the men, there is perhaps no more universal expression that each individual woman gave in her blues than the lamenting of a broken heart. This was central to the blues, though it was presented differently in the blues of the women. For the men, a broken heart often seemed to be pointed at the outward. The bluesmen were upset, but they were upset at the woman for leaving or cheating, upset at the circumstances, or upset enough to “*leave my baby, well, she treats me so unkind.*”<sup>258</sup> For the women of the blues, however, it seemed to be more of an inward reflection. They sang of their feelings, their despondency, and their broken heart. As B.B. King once asked in his song “How Blue Can You Get?”: “*How blue can you get baby? The answer’s right here in my heart.*”<sup>259</sup> For the women of the blues, that’s precisely what they did: express the pain of their hearts.

In “Jelly Bean Blues,” Ma Rainey sings of her heartbreak and the depressive state that she entered into upon the leaving of her love interest: “*If you ever wake up with your good man on your mind, my daddy left me this morning, that’s why I moan and cry.*”<sup>260</sup> For Rainey, this kind of heartbrokenness was pervasive and all-encompassing in her life. In one of her most powerful songs entitled “Slave To the Blues,” she makes the powerful

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<sup>257</sup> Rainey, “New Boveavil Blues.”

<sup>258</sup> Robert Johnson, “Ramblin’ On My Mind – SA.2583-1,” Track 4 on *The Centennial Collection*, Sony Music, 2011, Spotify.

<sup>259</sup> B.B. King, “How Blue Can You Get?” Track 4 on *Live At The Regal*, Geffen Records, 1965, Spotify.

<sup>260</sup> Ma Rainey, “Jelly Bean Blues,” Track 3 on *Ma Rainey*, Fantasy, 1992, Spotify.

metaphor to slavery, one that many Black listeners just a generation or two removed from the bondage would both shudder at and relate to. She sings: “*Ain’t robbed no train, ain’t done no hangin’ crime. It’s that I’m a slave to the blues, even ‘bout that man of mine.*”

As the song goes on, Rainey powerfully displays her deep, personal emotions:

*You see me raving, you hear me crying  
Oh lord, this wounded heart of mine  
Folks I’m grieving from my head to my shoes  
I’m a good-hearted woman, but still I’m chained to the blues.*<sup>261</sup>

These deeply personal blues of Ma Rainey exhibited just how much the lyrics of a blues artists could express profoundly individualistic and complex thoughts and emotions.

Bessie Smith also was known to convey her hurt from a broken heart in her own lyrics as well. For Smith, her lyrics conveyed that she cherished companionship in her relationships and that to lose a lover was to also lose a best friend for her. In “After You’ve Gone,” she sings that “*you’ll feel blue, you’ll feel sad, you’ll miss the dearest pal you’ve ever had*” when singing about a man leaving her.<sup>262</sup> This loneliness and loss of companionship was what drove Smith to her lowest points in her lyrics. This can clearly be seen in her song “Baby Won’t You Please Come Home.” In this song, she laments that “*I have tried in vain, evermore to call your name. When you left, you broke me part.*” Smith goes on to convey just how important her relationship was and how it devastated her to lose it:

*I’ve got the blues, I feel so lonely, I’ll give the world if I could only  
Make you understand, it surely would be grand  
I’m gonna telephone my baby ask him won’t you please come home*

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<sup>261</sup> Ma Rainey, “Slave To The Blues,” Track 5 on *Ma Rainey*, Fantasy, 1992, Spotify.

<sup>262</sup> Bessie Smith, “After You’ve Gone,” Track 18 on *The Essential Bessie Smith*, Sony Music, 1997, Spotify.

*'Cause when you're gone, I'm worried all day long.*<sup>263</sup>

The blues of a heartbroken woman, especially when the lyrics are wielded by the mastery of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, are perhaps the single most personal and individualistic expressions found in the early blues. No two artists can sing about heartbreak the same because no two individuals can feel the exact same pain associated with love lost. As Daphine Duval Harrison writes, blues women “usually do not joke” about love lost and “are more likely to sing about their grief and its results: extreme depression, bad health, hallucinations and nightmares, suicide attempts, or violence.”<sup>264</sup> While the bluesmen wrote powerfully, they did not seem to go as deep or as personal as the women did in their lyrics about their heartbreak. Without a doubt, the blues of both the men and the women that addressed their heartbreak show just how powerful blues could be as an individualistic expression.

#### *Economic Gain Associated with Relationships for Women*

One theme that shows up in the blues of women, though not nearly as much as the other themes thus far explored, is the economic gain that women would receive by being in a relationship. This theme shows up most notably in Bessie Smith’s “Baby Won’t You Please Come Home.” Although this song has more to say about Smith’s broken heart and her subsequent plea to her love for them to return to her, she does make a brief reference to another reason that she would want to be in relationship with this man:

*Landlord gettin' worse, I've got to move May the first  
Baby won't you please come home*

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<sup>263</sup> Bessie Smith, “Baby Won’t You Please Come Home,” Track 2 on *The Essential Bessie Smith*, Sony Music, 1997, Spotify.

<sup>264</sup> Harrison, ““Wild Women Don’t Have the Blues’: Blues from the Black Woman’s Perspective,” 182.

*I need money.*<sup>265</sup>

While on the surface this may not seem like much in the way of expressions of individualism, it does go hand in hand with the research that Hortense Powdermaker undertook in the Deep South of the 1930s. Powdermaker noted that in both Black and white households, the “usual reasons for marrying” were “love, desire to escape from unpleasant home environment, or hope of economic gain.” She goes on to acknowledge that she found it was more likely that these women were marrying for the first two reasons rather than the reason of economic gain; however, “the economic motives often figures in marriage plans and hopes” for both Black and white women. Interestingly enough, what Powdermaker found was a difference in opinion around this theme that was divided among racial lines. She asserted that the “white pattern regards love and economic interest as mutually incompatible” while “this dissociation is not in force” for Black women “below the upper class; possibly it is never so strong with women who are self-supporting.” What Powdermaker found in her research and interviews with Black women, particularly any who were below the upper class, was that “most women in these classes frankly announce that they would like a husband to support them.” While it may have been true that a “majority seem to marry on the basis of affection or attraction,” they neither “forgot.. or denied” the “economic aspect” of marriage.<sup>266</sup>

There may not be much to go off, but clearly Bessie Smith is presenting a view in this song that goes along with the research Powdermaker conducted. For Smith, it would

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<sup>265</sup> Smith, “Baby Won’t You Please Come Home.”

<sup>266</sup> Smith, “Baby Won’t You Please Come Home.”



seem that there was economic utility in a relationship and she was not shy about expressing her desire for that advantage. This is not to say Smith was economically dependent on any man nor was she advocating for a life where a woman was. It seems, rather, that she was expressing a personal belief about relationships in this stanza, namely: both parties in the relationship should bear economic responsibility and there was utility in a relationship because of this. As with any theme in the blues, it was certainly an individualistic opinion. As Powdermaker found in her interviews, both Black and white women varied on their views around the economic utility of relationships or if it was even appropriate for the idea of love and relationship to be linked to the notion of economic advantage. Regardless, Smith displayed that for her, at least, she thought it necessary to express her personal belief that the man should bear economic responsibility in the relationship and that she linked the value of the relationship, in part, to this quality.

### *The Confidence of Black Women*

For all of the torment, agony, and heartbreak that is expressed in the early blues of these women, it was not to be outdone by the expressions of confidence and security in who they were as Black women. As Angela Y. Davis writes, the themes of “female sexual desire” in the blues of these women gave them a “historical voice to possibilities of equality not articulated elsewhere.” They had “no qualms about announcing female desires.”<sup>267</sup> These women knew their own worth and were able to vocalize what they wanted from these relationships, and this was firmly rooted in their self-confidence. As Dapine Duval Harrison astutely writes of women’s blues:

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<sup>267</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 23-24.

The choice of performing style, inflection, emphasis, and improvisation on certain aspects of the lyrics gave a perspective and expressiveness that had profound effect on their listeners. They introduced a new, different model of black woman – more assertive, sexy, sexually aware, independent, realistic, complex, alive. Though the themes they addressed were universal, their renditions linked them to other women who identified with the realities of which they sang.<sup>268</sup>

In Bessie Smith's song "You've Been a Good Old Wagon," she expresses her confidence in herself by boldly proclaiming that the man she is with no longer lives up to her standard: "*You've been a good ole wagon, Daddy, but you done broke down.*" This refrain in the song is reinforced several times by Smith's vocal acceptance of individuality and independence. In one stanza, for example, she sings: "*Looka here, Daddy, I want to tell you, please get out of my sight. I'm playin' quits now, right from this very night.*" The autonomy, rooted in the self-confidence that she did not need to be in this relationship, of Bessie Smith is on full display here. As the song progresses, Smith clearly asserts that she has a standard for her relationships and this man does not meet it: "*There's nothing about you to make a good woman fall. Nobody wants a baby when a real man can be found.*"<sup>269</sup> For Smith, she expressed her confidence in herself as a Black woman by openly and defiantly going against the narrative that she needed a man. For her, she valued herself enough to hold a high standard for who she was in a romantic relationship with and she would not waver or settle for anything less.

Another way that Bessie Smith exuded her confidence in her works was in another way that she addressed the topic of infidelity. In this work so far, the angle on

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<sup>268</sup> Harrison, "'Wild Women Don't Have the Blues': Blues from the Black Woman's Perspective," 197.

<sup>269</sup> Bessie Smtih, "You've Been a Good Old Wagon," Track 11 on *The Essential Bessie Smith*, Sony Music, 1997, Spotify.

infidelity that has been observed in the blues of the women has been more of heartbreak and anger, but this was not the only response that was put forth. Rooted in her confidence that she deserves to be “playin’ lead” and being her spouses only first and only love interest, Smith sings:

*Let me tell you Daddy, Momma ain't gonna sit here and grieve  
Pack up your stuff and get ready to leave  
I stood your foolishness long enough  
So now I'm gonna call your bluff  
For certain things, I'm gonna call your hand  
So now Daddy here's my plan  
Ain't gonna play no second fiddle 'cause I'm used to playin' lead.*

Smith boldly and directly stood up to her cheating spouse with confidence rooted in the idea that she, as an individual Black woman, was worth more than to be treated this way. As the song continues, Smith addresses that this man probably underestimated her and insulted her intelligence: “*You must think that I am blind, you've been cheatin' me all the time. You still flirt, and you'll notice it hurts to see you with my chum, do you think that I am dumb?*”<sup>270</sup>

The power and confidence that these lyrics showed cannot be overstated. Smith was tapping into a theme that in the works previously examined had not shown up: reasons for a Black woman to be confident and know her self-worth. In many of the blues of the men, Black women were denigrated, regarded as adulterous and almost Siren like creatures who were hellbent on destroying men, and overall weak in their dependence on the men. In some the blues of women, even some of Bessie Smith ironically, these ideas

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<sup>270</sup> Bessie Smith, “I Ain’t Goin’ to Play Second Fiddle,” Track 14 on *The Essential Bessie Smith*, Sony Music, 1997, Spotify.

were echoed. Yet, in these empowering blues of women, a new narrative was beginning to be written. These women were presenting themes of Black empowerment and women's equality and worth in society long before the rest of the culture was catching up in these areas. It is reasonable to assert, then, that the blues of these women, used to express deeply personal and uniquely individualistic themes, were ahead of their time and these women were trailblazers, not only for the future generation of blueswomen but for Black women around the country.

### ***Conclusion***

It is clearly seen throughout this analysis of the various themes that presented themselves in the blues of both men and women that dealt with love and relationships that there are three major takeaways. One, both men and women of the blues in the pre-war period addressed similar topics that dealt with relationships such as infidelity, unrequited love, the desire for monogamous relationships, distrust of the opposite gender, and dealing with mistreatment within a relationship. Two, the blues that dealt with relationships and love were deeply personal and unique to each artist. Robert Johnson and Son House may have both sang about their heartbreak over their spouse leaving them, both the way Johnson sings about it in "Love in Vain" is significantly different than the way Son House sings about it in "Sundown." Blind Willie McTell sang about his mistrust of women while Ma Rainey sang about her mistrust of men. Three, the themes may have been shared between the bluesmen and the blueswomen, but the approach, the topics within these themes, and the words used to express themselves were unique. All of this

paints a picture of what the blues are: a deeply, personal form of art where an individual expresses themselves and all their complexities and implicit contradictions. For a Black man or woman in the early- to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, this art form was not just about making money or joining some fleeting fad of music, it was about expressing themselves, their thoughts, and their lived experiences.

## CONCLUSION

The blues offers a perspective of history that is often overlooked, particularly when histories of Black men and women are being constructed: the history of individuals. While there is great need for grand narratives dealing with slavery, emancipation, the terrorism and horrific violence faced by Black Americans during Reconstruction and the years that followed it, the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, and many other events that paint the broad picture of the Black experience in the United States, these must be coupled with history examined on the individual level. Were we only to look at the oppression and injustice faced by African Americans, we would lose sight of the brilliant contributions that Black individuals have made to the country in the face of these hardships. The blues offers an opportunity to explore other venues. It is a look into the souls of individuals and on a broader scale it is a look into a music that would go on to shape nearly every single American musical genre that followed it.

Before there was B.B. King, Buddy Guy, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Muddy Waters, Jimi Hendrix, or Howlin' Wolf playing the electric blues that would light up cities across the country like Chicago, Memphis, and New York or before the British invasion of the Rolling Stones, Cream, or Eric Clapton that would play blues standards to their mass of fans globally and in the States, there was first the raw, early blues of artists that have been examined in this work. Whether it was in the hot sun of Texas, the rich soil of the Mississippi Delta, or the mountains of the Piedmont, these men and women of the blues were doing something that was totally revolutionary in American music: they were expressing their individuality in the form of music. Recently freed from the tragedy of

American slavery, these men and women of the Deep South finally had the freedom to and modes for expressing their thoughts and have thousands of their fellow Black and white Americans hear them. The importance of the blues cannot be overstated.

This work that I have embarked in is not an all-encompassing examination of the entire corpus of each of these artists nor is it a broad sweeping analysis of every blues artist that recorded during this era of blues. What it is, I hope, is a start to what should be a vital part of American historiography. There could be volumes dedicated to the works of each of these distinct blues artists and their works. While there may already be biographies and broad books on the blues that include these musicians, they often tend to focus more on the lives of these artists. They tell stories and share facts about where Robert Johnson was born and raised, who Blind Lemon Jefferson signed his first record deal with, how Ma Rainey got her first major live performance, or how Joshua White visited the White House to speak with President Franklin D. Roosevelt. There is a place in historiography for their stories and it is a very important part; however, if we as historians are seeking to begin to turn our attention to the stories and histories of the marginalized in American society, then we must allow these men and women to speak for themselves.

This is, ultimately, why this work is so necessary. The blues for these artists were ways they could express their own thoughts and feelings about their various lived experiences. It is true that in the 1960s, there was a great deal of interests expressed in the blues and interviews were given to blues artists from the Deep South like Joshua White, Big Bill Broonzy, Skip James, and Son House; however, the blues historiography itself

has not done justice to how deep and profound these lyrics were. Historians and writers like Samuel Charters, Elijah Wald, and Paul Oliver have written extensively on the blues, but they approach it as almost a political analyst or worse, they try to speak for the blues artists. What is the merit in this? Why not let these bluesmen and women speak for themselves? There is no better way to learn what these Black individuals were thinking and saying than to look at what they wrote and played in their songs.

Throughout this work that has been the main goal: to allow these artists to speak for themselves. Through the various blues works that addressed religion and the church, I sought to show how these were individuals that had varying opinions on the afterlife, the role of the Church, and death. Reverend Gary Davis's blues expressed a traditional Christian viewpoint, one that would be shared by many Black listeners at the time. Son House and Robert Johnson offered an entirely different perspective, a perspective that would also be shared by many Black listeners. With my examination of leisure in the blues, I aimed to show the individualism of each of these artists and how they expressed their thoughts on the major issues of the time such as Prohibition and the Great Depression. Lastly, I turned my attention to the theme of relationships, perhaps the most individualistic endeavor that can be undertaken as a human, in the blues. With each topic, my hope is that the individualism of these distinct, important blues musicians shined through. Blues music was not a fad, it was not pop-music designed only by those who wanted to make money; rather, blues music was an expression of the Black lived experiences in the United States. It was the individualistic expressions of ordinary African Americans like Robert Johnson, Son House, Charley Patton, Big Bill Broonzy,



Blind Lemon Jefferson, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Reverend Gary Davis, Blind Willie  
McTell, Joshua White, and so many other Black Americans who wanted to share their  
stories with listeners across the racial, political, and economic divides of the United  
States.

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