

EARLY DOWNHOME BLUES IN AMERICAN CULTURE

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Introduction

People's traditional music and the way people behave when performing it are symbolic expressions of broad cultural pattern and social organization. In other words music is a part of men's learned heritage. Hence this study is about music in a given culture, specifically blues in American culture.

Allen Trachtenberg stated that blues songs are inheritance from the American past for negotiating black people's lives as Americans. In the experience of blues the African-Americans find themselves caught up in questions of self identity, authority, definition, and nationality. In its origin the blues has been black's music, but in its diffusion, the blues addresses and implicates both whites and blacks. For whites, the experience of the music is a relationship, a form of interaction: for whites to fill and claim the blues as part of their own inheritance means to recognize the blacks as Americans and to confront the continuing presence of race-definition inequalities in the common culture (Trachtenberg, 1994: xi-viii).

The blues urges all Americans to feel the rhythm, the lyric, and the innuendo and to learn their common paradoxical condition: the interchangeability of race and culture within the national identity.

Ought's a ought, figger's a figger;
All for the white and none for the niger
(White, 1965:383).

Blues indicates American conflict and struggle: the racial issues that are never far

from the beat of the downhome blues are transposed into a new space of contest and challenge (Trachtenberg, 1994: xii).

Scope and Approach of Discussion

There are two major types of early blues songs, namely downhome and vaudeville blues. Downhome blues is mostly sung by men, while Vaudeville by women singers. Originally downhome blues is folk music, but since 1920 with the recording industry it has become pop music. Vaudeville, on the other hand, is pop music right from the start. Most downhome singers sing accompanied by his own guitar-playing, whereas Vaudeville singers almost always sing in front of a jazz group. Vaudeville singers were mostly black women with backgrounds in musical shows; they were professionals taking pride in their ability to deliver any kind of songs. Vaudeville blues was popular music, not folk music, their lyrics were usually composed by professionals black musicians. Most vaudeville blues songs from the 1920s resembled that of today's musical comedies. Influenced by genteel white taste, vaudeville singers strove for dramatic delivery, enunciating the words of the lyrics in standard English pronunciation (Titon, 1994: xvii). Not minimizing the importance of vaudeville blues, this study will only concern with downhome blues, leaving the former for further study.

This discussion on downhome blues is utilizing an American Study Interdisciplinary Approach in an effort to explain the social and cultural meaning of downhome blues in American, especially Black American Culture.

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Downhome blues

The term downhome blues is offered by Jeff Todd Titon, a prominence blues scholar, to substitute the term country. He argues that the word country only denotes a place, whereas downhome means "both a place in time and a state of mind" (Titon, 1994: 29).

The word downhome means down South, the Southern parts of America. Originally the term downhome is used by Southern Black Americans who migrated to the North. Feeling homesick they call South as down south or downhome. The South is unique in the history of the United States: it experiences slavery, Civil War, the time of chaos after the Civil War, the reconstruction period, and the modern industrialized South at present. Before the sixties the country is mostly agrarian, legacy from the slavery time. After the Civil War, being free, Black families work the land as owners, as hired laborers, as sharecroppers and share-renter. Their dreams and chief goal in life is to become landowners. The land owning families mostly work its own land, and they are usually wealthier than tenant farmer or sharecroppers. Nevertheless, there are many Black landowners who are financially depended on the whites. In bad-crop years they have to borrow money from the whites with high interest. Poverty and debts compelled them to move from the countryside to cities, to the West and the North. This phenomenon is expressed in the lyric of *Down the Dirt Road Blues*.

Everyday seem like murder here
Everyday seem like murder here
I'm gonna leave tomorrow
I know you don't bid my care
(Evans, 1969: 26).

When the Blacks' dream of prosperity and becoming rich landowners fall out, they move to the cities dreaming of yet another success; but again, they are disillusioned. In the cities their lives get worse. It is difficult to find job and they live in slums. They begin to get nostalgic, they long for the life *downhome*, where they can be close to family and friends. Though life downhome had been very hard, they realized that on Saturdays they could have party time: barbecuing, frying fish, picnics, and other

family gatherings. This nostalgia for the South produces *feelings of blues*. They pour the feeling of melancholy, nostalgia, and frustration into Blues songs.

Blues

When blue singers are asked "what is the blues?" they do not respond with a structural definition; instead, they usually reply that blues is a *feeling*. Leonard "Baby Doo" Caston, a prominent blues singer describes it as: "Blues is a sound. It's not all the time the thing that rhymes, it's a feeling that a sound would put you into." Thus the word *blues* in *downhome blues* means both "a musical style based on particular sounds and a feeling associated with it; the juxtaposed *downhome* locates the feeling as a place in the mental landscape of Black America." (Titon, 1994: 23, xvi). Another blues singer, Reverend Robert Wilkins, asserted that "In blues it's what you call a felt-inward feeling – of your own self. It's not a spiritual feeling that you have.... It's something that happened to you and cause you to become sorry.... Then you would compose the song to that feeling that you have. And then you would sing it and after you begin to sing it, then you become accustomed to it through psychology that most anybody could have that same feeling as you did. It's universal, but it don't bring joy in the spirit." (Welding, 1968: 12)

Blues singers sometimes feel sad when they are singing. They compose songs from direct personal experiences, happy and sad, and there's associated emotions carried through in the singing of the song. Many blues singers being carried away by the nostalgic emotion cry while they are singing: the listeners heard and feel the agony in the song. Blues scholars assert that the phenomenon does not diminish the quality of the blues, instead it heightens its intensity: one should feel the blues in order to sing blues well.

I've got these blues reason I'm not satisfied
I've got these blues I'm not satisfied
That's the reason why I stole away and cried
Blues grabbed me at midnight and didn't turn me loose till day

Blues grabbed me at midnight didn't
turn me loose till day
I didn't have no mama to drive these
blues away
(Titon, 1994: 101)

In contrast to Reverend Wilkins, Rev. Rubin Lacy, another pastor-blues singer, maintains that it is not necessary to feel melancholic when you sing the blues. He says:

I've sung (blues) on many a day and never thought I had 'em. What did I want to have the blues for, when I had everything I wanted, all the liquor, all the money I needed, and more gals that I needed?... I was playing because everybody loved to hear me play 'em and I loved to play 'em... I was having fun. Sometimes I'd be kind of bothered and worried as any other man would be. I wasn't lively all the time.... But as a whole I had more blues since I been preaching than I ever had when I was playing the blues." (Evans, 1967: 7).

To him singing blues is just as singing any other songs, the chief goal is to entertain. The most important thing is that you have to insert feeling in your song whether it is of gladness or sadness.

Another definition of blues is that the blues is not sung merely for the tune but for the words. The lyrics carry themes such as loneliness, the desire for travel, and the desire for sex.

Now see see ride see what you
done done see what You done done
mm
See see rider see what you done done
You done made me love you now
you're tryin' to put me down
Well I'm goin' away lord won't be back
till fall won't be
Back till fall
Well I'm goin' away lord won't be back
till fall
If I meet my good gal mama won't be
back at all
(Titon, 1944: 95)

Most blues singers urge to have the lines of the songs rhyme in the last

syllables, believing that rhyme added impact to meaning :

- I had sense enough to try to make 'em rhyme 'em so they'd have *hits* to 'em with a meaning, some sense to 'em, you know.
- If it ain't rhymed up, it don't sound good to me or nobody else.
- If you don't rhyme it up, you don't understand nothing and you ain't getting nowhere (Titon, 1994: 46-47).

Early Downhome Blues

As mentioned earlier, Downhome blues begins as folk music and since 1920s by the coming of recording industry has emerges as pop music. At first downhome blues singers were farmers or laborers who drifted from plantation to plantation, entertaining at Saturday parties, picnics or any other family gatherings. They sang intimately surrounded by people who listen to the lyrics or dance to the tune. It is very informal and relaxing, nevertheless the singers regard themselves as semi professional because they get some donation in cash or food and whiskey. They sing traditional songs that fathers, uncles, or friends have taught them. At times they listen to other singer's songs and *borrow* them. This is typically folk music phenomenon: songs are handed down orally from one singer to the other. One other important feature of downhome blues is that singers always improvise.

Gradually singers weave their own songs from a body of traditional lyrics. They add and mix their own lyrics to the traditional stanzas. Thus blues songs with the same title might have different number of stanzas and different wording, even when the song is sung by the same singer. Let us take for example "Lonesome Blues" sung by Tommy Johnson in two different versions.

"Lonesome Blues," take 1

Won't you iron my jumper starch my
overalls
I'm gon' find my woman said she's in
this world somewhere

Well it's good to you mama sure lord
killin' me
Well it's good to you mama sure lord
killin' poor me
Well it's good to you mama says it's
sure lord killin' me

I wonder do my rider think of me
I wonder do my rider think of poor me
Cryin' if she did she would sure lord
feel my care

I woke up this mornin' said my mornin'
prayer
I woke up this mornin' I said my
mornin'
I work up this mornin' babe I said my
mornin' prayer
I ain't got no woman *speak in my
behalf*
I ain't got no woman now *speak in my
behalf*
I ain't got no woman to *speak in my
behalf*

Won't you iron my jumper starch my
overalls
Won't you iron my jumper starch my
overalls
I'am gon' find my woman said she's
in this world somewhere

She don't like me to holler tried to
murmur low
(Titon, 1994: 81)

"Lonesome Blues," take 2

Won't you iron my jumper starch my
overalls
I'm gon' find my woman said she's
in this world somewhere

I wonder do my good gal think of me
I wonder do my good gal think of poor
me
Cryin' if she did she would sure lord
feel my care

Honey good to you mama sure lord
killin' me
Honey good to you mama sure lord
killin' poor me

Say good to you mama but it's sure
lord killin' me
I woke up this mornin' said my mornin'
prayer
I woke up this mornin' I said my mornin'
prayer
I ain't got no woman to *speak in my
behalf*

Cryin' good to you sure lord killin' me
Well it's good to you mama sure lord
killin' poor me
Hey good to you mama says it sure
lord killin' me
(Titon, 1994: 83)

Downhome blues singers learn a song
by listening to other singers, memorize it
and fix it up with his own creation. Most
singers sing their song spontaneously,
forming and arranging the words to fit the
music as they go along singing. Thus many
singers almost never sing one song twice
with exactly the same stanzas and
wordings.

Blues singers draw upon personal
experience to build lyrics, often containing
double meanings that refer to daily con-
cerns including work, love, religion, friend-
ship, and betrayal. Most blues lyrics talk
about relationship between man and wo-
man and about the betrayal of a girl or a
boyfriend. The infidelity brings *blues* to
the betrayed. In *Long Lonesome Blues* the
singer has just lost his *gal* and the whole
night he could not sleep so in the morning
he got the blues.

I got up this mornin' these blues all
'round my bed
I got up this morning these blues all
'round my bed
Couldn't eat my breakfast and there's
blues all in my bread
(Titon, 1994: 114).

In another blues titled *That Will Be
Alright* the singer has just realized that his
girl friend (in blues girl friends are often
referred to mama, lover, baby, *gal*, etc.) is
unfaithful to him. She takes his money but
she sleeps with many other men.

Well look here mama see what you've done
Took all my money put me on a bum
But that 'll be all right
Oh no but that 'll be all right
Oh no don't you hear me talkin' to you
mama that 'll be all right

Now you wore your dresses up above
your knees
Serve some jelly to whom you please
But that 'll be all right
Oh no but that 'll be all right
Oh no don't you hear me talkin' to you
mama that 'll be all right

I knew we was gon' play it again

Now my baby said she loved me don't
see why she can
Caught her on the corner with another
man
But that 'll be all right
Oh no but that 'll be all right
Oh no don't you hear me talkin' to you
mama that 'll be all right

(Titon, 1994: 107-108)

Unfaithfulness sometimes is taken lightly
as in *That Will Be Alright* but many times
the man cannot easily forgive her, and he
takes revenge as in *44 Blues*.

Lord I walked all night long with my
forty-four in my hand
Lord I walked all night long my forty-
four in my hand
I was lookin' for my woman found her
with another man]

(Titon, 1994: 114)

When he found his lover with another
man, he killed her with his *forty-four* gun.

The stories of blues songs are not
always about unfaithfulness. There are
songs that tell about how a good woman
can change a man's life.

Whiskey Moan Blues

I been drinkin' and gamblin' bar
'lhousin' all my days
Mm drinkin' and gamblin' bar 'lhousin'
all my days

But I have found someone to love me
I'm goin' to change my ways

If your woman loves you she'll stand
by you to the end
Mm if your woman loves you she'll
stand by you to the end
Nobody can steal your place you can
leaver her with a bunch of men

Whiskey has been my pleasure good
time places I've always found
Whiskey has been my pleasure good
time places I've always found
But it seems so different now since I
have settled down

(Titon, 1994: 96-97).

Church and Blues in African American Culture

In general the blacks down home are
religious people. It goes back to slavery
time when the plantation white masters
thought that to christianized the slaves
make them docile and more manageable.
From the slaves' point of view Christianity
suited them since they saw their burden as
analogous to the suffering of Christ bearing
the cross. For African American nowadays
church is the most important thing in life
next to family. Most black people are church
goers whether voluntarily or compelled by
family and friends. Some of them embrace
Church of God in Christ some *Methodist*
and mostly *First Baptist Church*. Black
Christianity fused with African cultural le-
gacy, producing a unique church. The
downhome preacher does not rely much on
written sermons but on memory and upon
the spirit of the lord to guide him,
improvising as he goes along.

Singing and chanting are important
aspects in black churches. "After several
minutes of speech cadence, the preacher
moved his sermon into a hoarse, tonal
chant, the lines of which came out in two-
or three-second bursts. If the spoken part had
concentrated rationally upon works, now the
doctrine shifted to the chanted promise of
salvation for those who called upon Jesus.
By the end of the chant – which could last
for ten or fifteen minutes – preacher and

congregation were locked in an emotional, rhythmic communion (Titon, 1994: 18-19).

Down home black Americans find close relationship between listening to blues at Saturday parties and listening to Sunday sermons in church. Some black Americans regard blues and Saturday parties as evil, associating with vice in the act of erotic dancing, drinking, gambling, and sex; however, most of them regards blues songs and the dances as something positive, serving social functions between themselves. Down home society as Titon observes is "fluid, not rigid; people shared the same experience of *church culture* and *blues culture*. --- In such a fluid society it is not surprising to find that, as institutions, the church and the blues were structural and functional counterparts." (Titon, 1994: 18). Charles Keil in *Urban Blues* asserts that the blues lyrics and the sermon both show the listeners how to confront, analyze and work through a personal difficulty (Keil, 1966: 72-73). Persons who just lost their loved ones find solace in participating church ceremonies as well as listening to blues at Saturday parties. A feeling of frustration because of racial prejudices could be shared in church and at Saturday parties. Blues songs as well as the priest's sermons and chants are therapeutic features for the troubled blacks. Both have a spiritual power to drive the blues away.

From Folk to Pop

The beginning of the 20th century sees the coming of records industry. Blues is one of the prominent songs which is massed produced at this time. As mentioned earlier, blues starts originally as folk song. Before going on to further discussion, I would like to review (I know most of you are familiar with) the differences between folk culture, high culture and pop culture. (Let us look at the transparency). The three categories are interchangeable through time and eras: folk can switch into high or pop and vice versa. In classical music, for instance, a certain piece from Chopin "Nocturne" became pop song entitled "So Deep Is The Night." Pop songs of the Beatles seeped into classical arrangements and sung by prominent tenors. Many classical pieces by important

composers derive from folk songs such as from Germany, Russia, French, Checkoslovakia, etc. As in Blues, the mass produce of *race records* bring blues from folk songs to pop music. Talking about race records, one has to look back to American culture before 1960s. With the *Jim Crow* law issued in 1920s, the American society condoned racial discrimination. The law institutionalized separation between blacks and whites and support the stereotype that blacks are inferior in intellect and moral. In the case of race records we see the dualism and hypocrisy of the whites. The recording companies are very racial, they do not want the blacks recording their songs together with the whites. Hence, on one hand they establish *race records* for black music, on the other hand they enjoy the music and buy the records, juxtaposing that music is for the music sake. Here in a way blues show, as mentioned earlier, the diffusion of whites and black culture despite the racial phenomenon.

Though blues is first described as *weird*, *dismal*, *doleful*, and *course* by the whites, later it is accepted as a wonderful *entertainment*. Different from jazz which is performed both vocally and instrumentally, blues is always presented in vocal because as folk culture it tells a story in its lyrics. Hence it has to have a singer who at the same time play the music. With the booming of recording industry, the demand for singer increase and blues scouts flourish. The scouts go to the country to look for promising and locally well known blues singers. Since then the blues folk singers turn into pop blues stars. The progress of blues recording sales is phenomenal: in 1920 it begins with 50 up to 500 records sold, but then in late twenties it soars into five or six million a year and by 1927 it reaches ten million records per year. The main reason for this phenomenal sale progress is because so far black culture is neglected by other mass media like radio, motion pictures, and newspaper (Titon, 1994: 200).

The method of selling and advertising records are direct and simple. Records are sold to local dealers and they distribute it to record stores, grocery stores, drug stores, bakery, and even the post office. They

install a phonograph and let buyers listen to the newest record to lure them to buy one. Outside and inside the stores they hung large display of records, pamphlet, illustration, posters and photographs.

A mass culture artifacts such as the records of early downhome blues can be understood as items that generate the people's listening and behavior patterns if we consider the why, how, when and where people buy the records.

Conclusion

Some scholars maintain that musical analysis is not cultural studies. In this study, however, music is regarded as a part of culture. In other words, it is a manifestation of culture. In singing the blues the singers project their way of life, their set of cultural behavior, their dreams and their frustrations. From the point of view of the singers it might be said that blues belong to African American culture; however, if we regard the listeners and records buyers who are whites and black, we see the diffusion of the black culture into the main stream of the wider American culture. More so if we look at how many popular white singers since 1920 until nowadays has sung and played blues unreservedly like Sophie Tucker, Jimmy Rodgers, Bill Mourse, Janis Joplin, and even the Rolling Stones, led Zeplin, Eric Clapton, and many others. Thus, it can be concluded that blues is one of the products of black American culture that seeped into the main stream of American culture.

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