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1 Introduction

This work is about historical and social factors that influenced the development of the blues. For the blues is not only a music which can be characterised by a certain musical scheme or verse form but mainly by its feelings and intention. Austin Sonnier Jr. describes this as following:

“The blues is a noble spirit that is able to communicate more than one emotion at the same time. It is [...] a way of life for some; for others it is an escape from life. The blues is not merely a marriage of words and music. Its lyrics tell one story and its music tells another. It penetrates deeply into the soul and pulls out what does not belong there, replacing it with what does. It is a good-time music that sings of life and at the same time cries about and laughs at life’s problems.”¹

Several authors believe that this kind of blues developed because African slaves were brought to America and were thus confronted with a new situation: they were forced to become Americans, and to deny their African origin on the one side, but on the other side were rejected at the same time because of their different colour.

It is difficult to say when and where the blues was born exactly, but it is clear that its roots go back to August 1619, when a Dutch ship dropped off twenty Africans at Jamestown, Virginia, and started the black man’s journey through America. Music of African origin, as an important means for the slaves to bear life and to keep at least a part of their identity, was influenced by European music and a development began from African work songs, holler shouts and spirituals through the early kind of blues to a more sophisticated one and up to contemporary blues and Jazz, an independent type of music but strongly influenced by the blues.

A lot of musicians made themselves a name because of their “life-long devotion to playing the blues and the style in which they have chosen to champion the music.”² As there are so many, I mention only a few of them who gave the blues its shape, importance and popularity: the “father of the blues” William Christopher Handy, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith and a few other.

Therefore this work is about historical and social influences on the blues, which consequently concludes the people within this society who “wrote” the history of the blues.

¹ Austin Sonnier, Jr.: *A Guide to the Blues*. (Westport, Connecticut: 1994 by Greenwood Press), p. xiii

² Austin Sonnier, Jr., p. xiv

2 African influences on the blues – historical and musical development

From the ninth to the sixteenth century three of the largest and most famous African kingdoms flourished in the western Sudan, an area known to the Muslims as the Land of the Black People. These kingdoms of Ghana, Mali and Songhay played an extremely important part in the history of Africa. Having connections with North Africa and the Near East, these states served as a channel through which ideas and merchandise passed between the West Africans and the Arabs, as well as between the West Africans and the Europeans to the north. Pilgrims' travels to Mecca constantly brought the African rulers and their courts into contact with the latest developments in the Islamic world. The caravan routes that crossed the Sahara not only brought Arab and European culture to the black world, but also transported the treasures of black Africa all the way to the Mediterranean world.

European and Islamic influences also affected the local musical style. This can, for example, be seen in the way music of black Africa parallels European folk music. On both continents there can be found religious and ceremonial music, social sounds, political songs, work songs and so on. While both continents have a history of work songs, the work song in black Africa not only deals with the subject of labour, but is also accompanied by the rhythmic movements of the work, thereby making the tasks easier.

The most striking thing about the forms of African music is their dependence on short units, and, in many cases, on call-and-response techniques. Solo performance is common on Africa, but the most characteristic African music is performed by groups and gives occasion for the use of alternating performance techniques. This type of performance is more developed in Africa than anywhere else in the world, and it is this element that, among others, has been retained by the black culture in the New World.

To some extent African rhythms are more highly developed than the rhythms of other cultures. The more spectacular rhythmic complexity of black African music appears in the superimposition of several rhythmic structures (rhythmic polyphony) and is found in drumming. This rhythmic complexity is also present in the combination of several voices or, more frequently, in the combination of instrument with voices. The simultaneous use of various meters is widespread among black Africans. Rhythmic polyphony of a rather complex type can be performed by a single person who may sing in one meter and drum in another. This superimposition of double and triple meters, called hemiola rhythm, is a basic ingredient of much black African rhythmic polyphony.

Another characteristic of black African music is its enormous variety of musical instruments. Far from being a land of just drums, black Africa is a land in which instruments and instrumental music play a role equal to that of the voice and vocal music. There is a great deal of music for solo instruments in all of Africa, and there are instrumental ensembles of unrelated instruments or of several instruments of the same type as well. These musical instruments are also used to accompany singers. Especially the central African musical area is distinguished by its great variety of instruments and musical styles, but also by the polyphonic emphasis on the interval of the third. The main characteristics of the West Coast musical area are the metronome sense, the accompanying concept of “hot rhythm” or the simultaneous use of several meters, and the responsorial form of singing with an overlap between leader and chorus.

In light of this diversity of styles, it can be assumed that the music of western Africa and certain parts of central Africa definitely was instrumental in asserting a strong influence on the early development of the blues. This music, with its tertial and quartal harmonies and parallelisms, reflects the simple but intense melodic and harmonic features that early Afro-American musicians incorporated into their music. The areas that collectively comprised the Slave Belt were rich in a music that contained polyphony, harmony, and melodic phrases of the slaves who were transported from these areas were, as a matter of course, deeply rooted in this melodic and harmonic tradition.

Listening to recordings of African music from this area, there can be found several pentatonic scales (5 different tones) which construction is based entirely on major seconds and minor thirds being the distinguishing factor in identifying the tone row.³

The positions of the minor thirds in these scales are immensely important when comparing West African tonal organisation with the melodic qualities of the blues. Blues scales are readily identified by the constant and peculiar appearance of the minor third, e.g. the heptatonic blues scale (7 tones) with the minor thirds between the first and third scale degrees and the fifth and seventh scale degrees.

Another scale that is of widespread use in West Africa is the heptatonic scale which, similar to the Major scale in European tradition, contains whole and half steps, but also incorporates two major seconds (which are a bit smaller than minor thirds) between the third and fourth degrees and the seventh and eighth degrees. The blues scale, particularly in its use by post-New Orleans jazz musicians, also contains a similarity to this tonal function. The major second between the third and the fourth degrees in both scales (in contrast to the half step in the

³ Austin Sonnier, Jr., see p. 8 ff.

major scale at the same position) have a close relationship as well as the lowered seventh (E b in the key of F) in both scales have. These characteristic notes, the lowered third and the lowered seventh within the blues scale, are called blue notes. They oppose the European major/minor tonality.

Another factor in which African music contrasts European music is harmony. African music is not harmonically complicated in structure, although harmony does exist. In the form known as polyphony it is a very well developed factor of the African musical heritage. While the European verticalisations are extremely sophisticated in structure, the African harmonic elements are comparatively simple in that they incorporate, for the most part, two- or three-voice movements of the octave, fifth, fourth and third. African harmony is not based on a system of block chords as in European music. It arises out of the horizontal process and, therefore, is closely associated with scales and melodic movements. Because of this horizontal (polyphonic) approach, much parallelism exists in the music. There are parallel thirds, fourths, fifths and, in rare cases, sixths. Other intervals are seldom used. This is exactly the case in early forms of the blues.

In addition to, and also in accompaniment of, Africa's rich rhythmic and vocal tradition, its music's melodic character, supported by stringed instruments of various timbres, asserted a strong influence on the birth and development of the blues. The traditional approach to playing the strings survived in the early Afro-American's technique on Western-made musical instruments such as the guitar and banjo, and the discipline of polyphonic lines and harmonies of the minor third, perfect fourth, and perfect fifth readily became basic elements of the blues language.

3 The New World – Social aspects

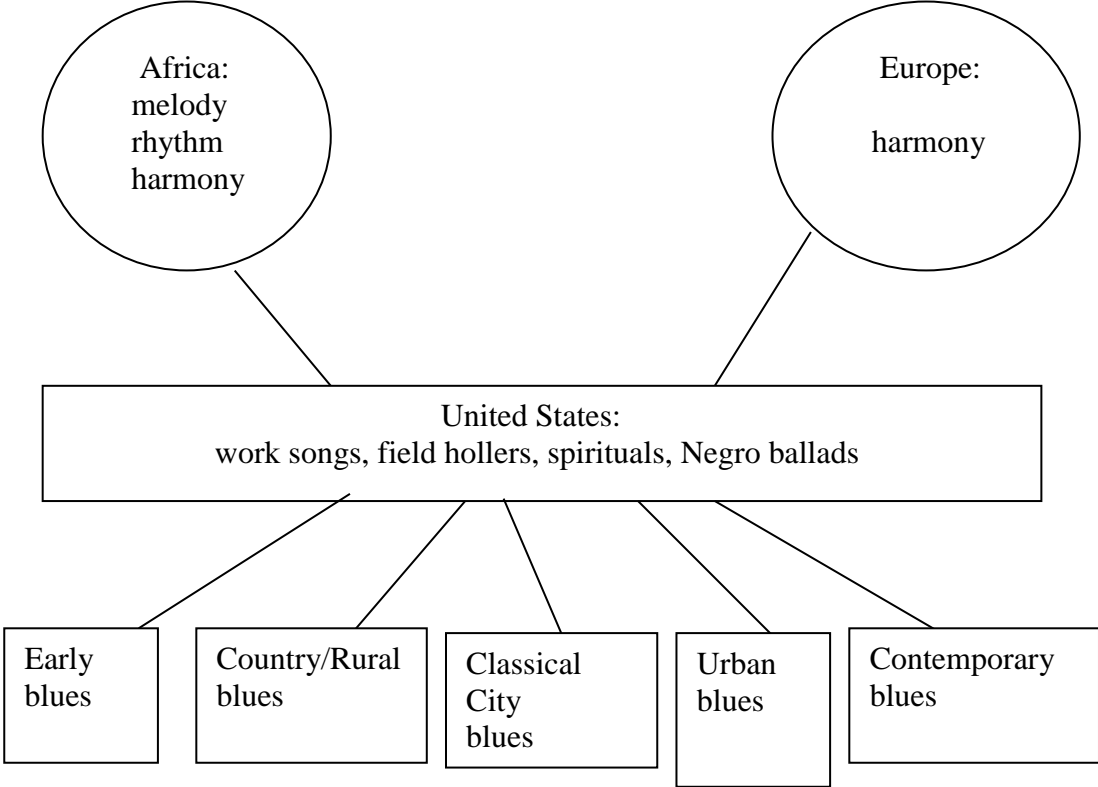
3.1 Predecessors of the blues

When the Portuguese first made contact with western Africa at the beginning of the fifteenth century, they found a number of well-established kingdoms along the Guinea Coast and at the mouth of the Congo River. Slavery was essentially an institution of the state and the kings. Furthermore, the number of slaves in Africa was not very great, and protection was provided in law as well as in tradition. However, when the Portuguese established trading relations with these kingdoms, one of the first items of commerce was slaves. By 1444 there was a thriving market for African slaves in Portugal.

The discovery of America by Columbus in 1492 gave rise to both greed and idealism in Europe. Unfortunately, greed frequently motivated the actions taken by Europeans in the New

World. Faced with the unsuitability of the Indians as a labour force, the colonisers turned to Africans for slaves. For them, a hard and terrible time followed. How the Africans brought to America as slaves and their descendants were able to overcome the considerable odds against them and develop a culture is a fascinating story. Though slave owners tried to destroy all vestiges of the African past in their slaves, much of it survived. An important vestige of the black people’s past was a profound appreciation of music as an integral part of life with implications far beyond that of simple entertainment. Songs and music, often moulded in the context of the inhumane experiences of slavery, helped the slaves to tolerate the often oppressive conditions under which they worked. Music relieved the burden of their spiritual and physical problems and at times served as a lead for the slaves to entertain themselves. The early slave music consisted of the expression of many human passions rooted in oppression. Work songs, holler shouts and spirituals are some examples of their music that echoed despair as well as jubilation and optimistic yearning for a place, anywhere, without the conditions of slavery. Indeed, the movement from field hollers to work songs to the spirituals formed a musical way that ran up to and through the blues as well as to other more popular forms of contemporary black American music. The diagram in figure 2.1 is a geographical development of the blues from its early pre-American roots to its present various divisions.

Figure 2.1:



Spirituals and the blues were indeed closely related. The Negroes were very much interested in Christian religion. They interpreted the Bible stories literally and adapted hymns and white spirituals to suit the needs of their intensely emotional form of worship in song. Some Negro spirituals were highly dramatic, strongly rhythmic; others were sad, slow songs which told of the wanderings of the lost tribes of Israel, in whose plight the slaves saw their own echoed: these were the blues in feeling, if not in kind.

It is often difficult to draw a clear dividing line between the blues and some kinds of spirituals. Many spirituals convey to listeners the same feeling of rootlessness and misery as do the blues. The spiritual is religious, however, and tends to be more generalised in its expression than specific, more figurative in its language than direct, and more expressive of group feelings than individual ones. Despite these differences there cannot always be made a clear distinction between these two kinds of songs. As a result, some songs are even classified as “blues-spirituals”.

Work song and spiritual were also frequently one and the same, the labourers followed the sung exhortations of their leader as they did the preacher in their choral responses. For a long time, the work song was the only way for slaves to express their feelings and pains because drumming or dancing were mostly forbidden by law. Therefore and for the reason that work was strenuous and the slaves had no time at all to play an instrument while working, these songs were purely vocal songs. Their basic rhythm simply corresponded to the movements of the slaves at work. A variation of the work song were the so-called field hollers or holler shouts. These could be described as rhythmic texts which were partly sung, partly cried and partly yodelled. Sometimes, workers even became known by their particular hollers, which they improvised interminably, repeating the lines until new ones came to mind. A musical device which also characterises the blues. Last but not least, the Negro ballad, which began to appear in the second half of the nineteenth century extolling the virtues of coloured heroes and closely patterned on the sixteen-bar or eight-bar ballads of Anglo-Saxon origin, has also been a direct forerunner of the blues. This one seems to have developed as a blend of these individual elements as can also be seen in figure 2.1.

4 The emergence of the blues

4.1 Characteristics

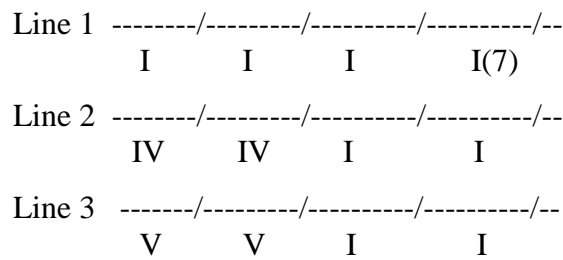
After the abolition of slavery in the United States in 1863, blacks were, wholly in the interest of continued economic gain, given the choice either to remain on the farms and plantations or to leave and search out a livelihood elsewhere. No matter, what the decision was, this new

lifestyle proved to be different and extremely difficult for the ex-slave. For a people who were descendants of those who embraced music as a life agent, a functional art of everyday, this change brought considerable need for a new musical form of expression and relief. The work songs and field hollers were hardly still effective. They served another purpose and could not give vent to these new experiences and the passions they influenced. It was about this time that the first strains of the blues started to surface. No one knows exactly what the sound of the blues was like at its beginning, but it is apparent that musically it grew out of the African's tonal tradition and the lyrics related to the new experiences of free life.

Although work songs and hollers had largely disappeared, they lived on in the blues. In its repeated lines and falling, crying notes it owes much to the hollers. But the discipline imposed by the use of instrumental accompaniment, which now began to grow, gave the music shape. Early blues seem to have had verses of eight and sixteen bars in common with the ballads; and the three-chord European harmony of both ballads and spirituals is that on which the blues is based. At the close of the century the guitar became extremely popular. The long, whining notes that are more easily achieved on this instrument than on the staccato banjo, which, as an authenticated African ancestry, was usually used next to the fiddle, allowed instrumentalists to copy the shadings and flattenings that were favoured in the hollers. The moans of their voices were imitated by sliding the strings and by the use of what later became known as "blue notes".

In the process of development a more sharply defined form evolved, based on the familiar tonic, subdominant, dominant progression - the "twelve-bar blues". This development was caused by a need for solid, structural logic. In the beginning the music was totally melodic and unmeasured. It consisted mainly of lyrics and linear accompaniment figures, and since the music was performed by only one musician, little regard was given to bar measurement. The performer had total control of beginning, development and end. When musicians began playing the blues together as a group, though, the need for structure arose. There had to be a definite design relating to melodic/harmonic content and musical direction to determine where the music and musicians were at any given time in a piece. Therefore, the twelve-bar blues developed. In this, the most common blues structure, the verses are constructed of three lines, each four bars in length. The three-line stanza can be traced back to African origins, for it is uncommon in American and European folksong repertoire. The first four bars are played on the tonic chord, though the last half of a bar may move to the seventh of that chord: thus, in the key of E, much favoured by blues singers, there will be three and a half bars in E, half a bar in E7. The next two bars are played on the subdominant chord A, returning to the tonic

chord for the closing two bars of the second line, while the final and third line consists of two bars on the dominant seventh B7 and two bars again played on the tonic .



While an individual blues singer might deviate from this harmonic structure in actual performance, the diagram represents the normal procedures.

This three-line stanza permits the singer to conceive a line and then to repeat it while inventing a third as the three lines often consisted of two identical lines followed by a contrasting statement. This is shown in the following examples:

Woke up this morning, feeling sad and blue,
 Woke up this morning, feeling sad and blue,
 Didn't have nobody to tell my troubles to.

or

I've got the blues, but I'm too darn mean to cry,
 I've got the blues, but I'm too darn mean to cry,
 Before I'd cry I'd rather lay down and die.⁴

Mostly, the melody is condensed into a little more than two measures of the four-measure phrase; this allows for a pause or “break” at the end of each vocal line, during which the accompanying instrument improvises, and the singer interjects spoken asides, such as “Oh, Lord”, “Yes, man” or “Oh, play it” etc. The resulting effect is that of call-and-response, the instrumental improvisation representing the “response” to the voice’s “call”, which is reminiscent of the work song.

As a musical form it may be limited in scope, but within its limitations it is capable of infinite variations, according to the inventiveness of the blues singer and instrumentalist.

Improvisation gives the blues one of its main characteristics, namely that the blues takes on its shape and style during the performance. This may be one reason for the difficulty to say when and where the blues has exactly been born as many styles and forms of blues or related song forms have never been committed to paper or have died before they could be recorded.

Approximate dates and probable birthplaces will be examined in chapter 4.1 and 4.4.

⁴ Eileen Southern: *The Music of Black Americans – A History*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1983, 2nd edition), p. 334

Unlike the ballads of an earlier tradition, the blues seldom tell of the exploits of folk heroes, for the singer is usually the central character in his theme. In his blues he comments broadly on the social scene, but almost invariably from a purely personal point of view. He sings of love and sex and loneliness, of drinking and drugs, of murder, disasters and death. If his blues is frequently based on melancholy themes, it is because he sings as a member of an underprivileged class. By singing about his misery, the blues singer achieves a kind of catharsis and life becomes bearable again. "Blues to drive the blues away."⁵ Obviously, "blues" has two closely related meanings that are derived from each other and could be compared to "cause" and "reaction": on the one hand "blues" means the troubles the singer has in his heart such as loneliness or melancholy. On the other hand, he reacts on these sorrows by singing the blues to cheer up and to be able to laugh again, though it is not of the easy, complacent kind. But this is an important characteristic of the blues: although it was drawn, like all Negro folksongs, from a "well of sorrow", this one is not a "well of despair"!

"Almost always there is a note of irony or 'humour' in the blues as if the blues singer is challenging fate to mete out further trouble. Sure, he has lost his job, and his woman has left him, and he has got the blues. But he will go out the next morning to look for another job, and perhaps his woman will return, or perhaps another will come into his life. Like other black folk songs, blues texts are rich in imagery – generally of a very earthy quality"⁶

talking about problems which can be understood by everybody who lives within the "world of the blues". The blues singer may be an individualist who sings primarily for himself, but his appeal to others in his race lies largely in the fact that, in singing of a common predicament and of common experiences, he sings also for them. His hearers share his blues, for the troubles are also their own.

4.2 Date of birth

Many theories have been propounded to account for the growth of the blues and widely different dates, covering a period of more than one century, have been given for the first appearance of this song form. Opinions are divided because no collectors turned their attention to the blues before the turn of the century, and serious, informed study was not to be made until a score of years later. And that was the time when problems cropped up. Not only that the reminiscences of singers have often proved to be prejudiced or unreliable, but it was also the case that no records were made until 1920 that were remotely related to the blues. It even was not until the mid-1920's that recordings of Negro folk singers were made available,

⁵ Walter Davis: *Worried Man Blues* in Paul Oliver: *The Story of the Blues* (Philadelphia: 1969), p. 85

⁶ Eileen Southern, p. 333

and these to the coloured market only. Therefore, the date of the first blues will probably never be known.

“The more researchers learn, the earlier it seems to have been. African songs of ridicule, pity and sorrow were probably the source of this music. While spirituals might have been sung by slaves who received a convert’s rather ‘second-hand’ picture of Christianity, the blues songs were more likely to have been shaped by the slaves of the field and their descendants, who remained closer to their African traditions.”⁷

This could be a reason for the fact that the blues will not “cover up reality with the idea of a future utopia, as do the spirituals, but instead come to grips with life and its frustrations, hardships, and unfavourable personal encounters.”⁸

4.3 Father of the blues

Although it cannot definitely be said when the first blues songs developed, it is, however, possible to say who created an unprecedented vogue for that kind of music. This was William Christopher Handy (1873-1958), also called *the father of the blues*. He was a minister’s son who became a musician despite the protests of his father and taught himself how to play the cornet. After studying the theory of music from books to become a good-enough musician to qualify for the job of a bandmaster, he joined Mahara’s Minstrels, a black minstrel show, in 1896 when he was twenty-three years old. Later, he was a bandmaster at the A & M College in Huntsville, Alabama, but then returned to minstrel life again –this time as director of brass bands for Mahara’s Minstrels. About 1903 he left minstrelsy and for the next five years was active in the Mississippi Delta region as a bandmaster and director of dance orchestras. He then settled at Memphis, Tennessee, where he continued his band activities and also founded a music publishing company with Harry Pace, a businessman and lyricist. In 1918 Handy and Pace moved their company to New York. Handy soon became an important figure in New York music circles. His company published popular music that was sung by the leading entertainers of the period – for example, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, which was featured by blues singer Alberta Hunter and white torch singer Sophie Tucker – and pamphlets and small books from time to time. Handy also toured with his blues bands and other music groups, made recordings, played the trumpet with various groups, and staged concerts. Through the years he continued to write music, arranging spirituals and blues, and composing marches, hymns, and miscellaneous songs. His best-known collections were *Blues: An Anthology*

⁷ Austin Sonnier, Jr., p.25

⁸ Sonnier, p. 25

(1926) and *Book of Negro Spirituals* (1938). His autobiography, *Father of the Blues* (1941), has been an invaluable contribution to black-music history.

The title *Father of the Blues* was given to him because Handy has often been referred to as the man who invented the blues. But this is not the case. The blues existed as traditional folk-blues melodies before 1909, when Handy composed a political campaign song that he called “Mr. Crump” and which was published in 1912 as “Memphis Blues”. In addition, there were two pieces that actually appeared in print prior to Handy’s “Memphis Blues”. The “Baby Seals Blues”, written by the rag pianist Artie Matthews, was published in August, 1912; the “Dallas Blues”, written by the songwriter Hart A. Wand, appeared the following month. Handy’s blues piece came out three weeks later. Nevertheless, it can be said that, while among the old musicians the blues continued to thrive in their country style, it was Handy who began a tradition of composition in the twelve-bar form that could be played by others, thereby leading to its popularisation.

4.4 Birthplaces of the blues

Where was the blues born? Some say Tennessee, some say Louisiana, and the claim has been made for many another state. Mississippi is perhaps most frequently cited, and on grounds of the density of its coloured population and on the number of important bluesman that the Delta area has produced, there would appear to be some justification. To Paul Oliver, however, it is

“more than probable that the blues had a more or less simultaneous origin in many different areas, arising from identical circumstances. The spirituals, the ballads, the work songs and the hollers had a wide distribution through many states, and the logical evolution of the blues from these may have been equally widespread. Regional differences would have occurred, without doubt, but the great migration of Negro workers which commenced in the 1870’s and gained considerable strength at the turn of the century would have spread the music rapidly. By 1910 the northward migration that was to last for another score of years was well under way, and the over-all distribution of the blues was effected without question. Even so, when recordings were made of folk blues singers, from the late 1920’s to the Second World War, regional differences were still detectable.”⁹

These differences are described by Oliver in the following quotation:

“The high-pitched, declamatory but sad voices of the great Blind Lemon Jefferson from Texas, with his rapid arpeggio guitar breaks, contrasted with the richer voices and ballad-influenced blues of Barbecue Bob or Peg Leg Howell in Georgia. Traces of guitar rags and minstrel songs were to be found in the work of Blind Boy Fuller, from the Carolinas, while the work songs survived in the singing of Louisiana-born Huddie Ledbetter, who spent many years in the state prison farms. Several regional styles were to be noted in Mississippi, from

⁹ Paul Oliver, p. 91

the rough chords of Bukka White to the shrill moaning of Kokomo Arnold or Robert Johnson, whose knife blades and bottle necks made their guitars wail in sympathy.”¹⁰

4.5 Different blues styles

The differences in the blues styles, also of those mentioned above, can be assigned to three separate and distinct expressions which were emitted from three separate and distinct lifestyles. These areas of development are the rural, the urban, and the commercially popular style performed by women called the “classical blues”, probably because of its polished presentation. These three different styles can also be seen in figure 2.1 next to the contemporary blues and the early blues, which is characterised in chapter 4.1.

“In the rural South, blues singers are usually found in three principal contexts: singing for their own satisfaction and the enjoyment of their family, friends or cellmates in prison; blind and disabled bluesmen singing in the streets for tips; singing for picnics, barbecues and dances. A singer is likely to work his way into a piece slowly via a spoken narration that puts the song in context and the listeners in the mood while he simultaneously retunes his guitar or runs through a few chords. In the course of the song he is likely to add a measure or two to his choruses and ‘fool around’ a bit with the beats between stanzas, thus squeezing a maximum duration from each selection.”¹¹

When this singer was now accompanied by “urban instrumentalists”, these, who usually were accustomed to standard forms, were very much confused by the liberties within the structure of the country blues singer. And this is the principal distinguishing feature of country blues – it is performed by one man accompanying himself, usually on an unamplified guitar, and as a consequence the “style” is marked by wide diversity and structural deviations. Another characteristic of the country blues is his earthiness and raw intensity, which the blues of Bessie Smith is said to have despite her sophistication. She, however, was a popular female singer in the classical blues era, where she played an important role and became one of the most famous female blues singers.

Women in general have played an important role in the blues since its early development, a lesser, however, than men in the early days of country blues. Usually the men were more able to move around, leaving their jobs to make a living on the road with music while the women were left behind to care for the children. Still, there were many women like Josie Bush, for instance, who lived in Drew, Mississippi, with Willie Brown, one of Charley Patton’s constant musical buddies when Patton was at the plantation. Josie could sing and play the blues just as well as Brown. During his career Patton frequently played with women, one of them being his last wife, Bertha Lee, with whom he recorded in 1934. But the pattern of rural

¹⁰ Paul Oliver, p. 91

¹¹ Charles Keil: *Urban Blues*. (Chicago: The University Press, 1970, 6th edition), p. 57

life seems to have been such that women played a secondary part, mainly following the men who were regarded as the best entertainers for plantation dances and house parties.

In the urban areas women had always played a more prominent role in the black church and also served as the main strength and backbone of many families. At this point in history many black families were forced to accept a female head because some men, unable to provide properly for his family under extreme social and economic pressures, had to take to the road to survive. The man's departure usually left the woman to face the problems of rearing a family on her own. Understandably, in the new, striving urban communities both in the North and in the South, some found in the women blues singers the stability of the maternal figure. These women came to be known as the "classic" blues singers, a term very loosely applied to singers from tent and vaudeville shows and those who worked with jazz bands. Many of them had warm, beautiful voices. While they had the moaning, down-home quality of Southern rural blues, their style had little of the overall inconsistencies of the male singers. They projected power and strength, and their style was more formal due in great part to their work with large, jazz-oriented bands.

The importance of these women singers in blues history is overwhelming. They were the first big stars in the business and the names of singers like Bessie Smith ("Empress of the Blues") and Gertrude "Ma" Rainey (also called "Mother of the Blues") have become symbols of America's contribution to popular culture. These women frequently worked with jazz bands that, in contrast to the general isolation of the male rural blues singers, provided a visible display of togetherness and unity.

The name "classic blues", however, leads back to a more sophisticated way of playing the blues. This music showed many elements of the popular American music, especially that of theatre and variety. Furthermore, the classic blues reflected the Negro's increasing attention for a more instrumental style in contrast to the strongly vocal nature of other blues styles. The classic blues developed at about the same time as the ragtime, which was closely connected with the theatre of the late 19th and early 20th century, and which contributed a lot to the development of blacks' music from an almost purely vocal tradition up to the incorporation of melodic and harmonic structures to form a music of strongly instrumental nature.

In social respect, the classic blues represents the Negro's entry into the world of professional popular music. Usually, everybody could sing the blues. A musical education was not part of the African tradition – music used to be like any other art the result of natural talent. Once being endowed with the ability to play the blues, there could be no special method for the singer to learn it. Song texts were most important for the verse form and they directly arose from life. Now, the classic blues was of a certain degree of professionalism, of conscious

artistry. There were no groups any more which sang to “drive the blues away” or to be able again to bear life with all its problems. A music developed which entertained the people in a different way. The professional blues singer had come into being for whom the blues was not simply a job on the side but a possibility to earn his living.

This professionalism had its roots in the Negro’s theatre: blues singers and little or big bands gave performances in black “Minstrel Shows” (shows which mainly caricature the black man’s life), in “Travelling Road Shows”, in “Medicine Shows”, in “Vaudeville Shows” (variété), in “Carnivals” and in “Tiny Circuses”. “Travelling Shows” entertained the populace for a brief period of time before moving on to the next district. The vendors of patent medicines and pills could be assured of sales in Negro areas, where doctors and hospital beds were virtually unknown, and to attract attention to their wares they would employ blues singers and entertainers to put on “medicine shows”. Such medicine shows have flourished for more than half a century, and by working in them many blues singers served their apprenticeship as semi-professional artists, met other singers and toured throughout the South. Guitarists like Will “Casey Bill” Weldon and Po’ Joe Williams, harmonica players like Jaybird Coleman and later, Sonny Terry, worked with the “medicine men”, earning in experience what they lacked in wages. Here, the great Negro singers and entertainers, such as guitarist Jim Jackson or pianist Charles “Cow Cow” Davenport, came face to face with their people, and here in the travelling tent shows were made the “classic blues” singers, who stood with one foot in the tradition of vaudeville-minstrel entertainment and the other firmly planted in the folk tradition of the blues. As a conclusion, the classic blues can be distinguished from earlier blues-forms by the content of its song texts, by instrumental accompaniment and by the fact that it became professional entertainment mostly performed by female singers. The Depression beginning in 1929, however, was the end of the “classical blues era”. Many record companies did not survive these terrible, lean years, and countless folksingers and musicians disappeared in the anonymity of the vast segregated Negro areas of the Northern cities, while others, disillusioned, returned to the South and were forgotten. It was the end of true vaudeville, and the majority of the great “classic blues” singers were heard for the last time. By the late 1930’s Ma Rainey was in retirement and Bessie Smith had died. Their form of blues with its close links to vaudeville and jazz, had died though a little of it survived in the tent-shows that were still touring the rural South.

The end of the classical blues era, however, had already started before the Great Depression. Beginning in 1924, recording companies shifted their interest in blues from the classic city blues to the rural blues which had developed into a music which was mainly performed by males to the accompaniment of a guitar, banjo, a string band or jug band – the former

consisting of fiddles, banjos, guitars, mandolins and string basses; the latter of ordinary crockery jugs, banjos, harmonicas, mandolins, toy instruments called kazoos and household washboards. This country blues varies from the “original” one described on page 11. It could perhaps be called “citified country blues” as it was played in the rural areas but added city blues features such as standardised form and being performed by more than one instrument up to bands of several players.

About twenty years later, after the Second World War, small independent companies, called “indies”, entered the industry to compete with the major companies for the newly expanding market. Since the leading bluesmen were under contract to the giants, the indies had to seek new talent, who brought new sounds into the recording studios and, as well, into the blues bars and night clubs. The music of this period has been labelled “urban blues”. Its distinctive features were the amplified guitars and the development of the blues band, which added drums, boogie piano and sometimes also clarinet, saxophone or trumpet to the traditional guitar accompaniment. In contrast to the country blues, the urban blues was usually based on standard forms and arrangements.

Today Chicago, a city that stands apart from others with its own highly emotional style of blues playing, is the undisputed home of the blues. In the early years lovers of the music were fond of calling that blues style “urban blues” to distinguish it from the more primitive country blues that was played in the juke joints of the rural South. Today it is simply called Chicago blues, taking the name of the centre of the urban style and the city where the blues was recorded the most.

Big Bill Broonzy was the first to take the Chicago blues to Europe and it was this style that strongly influenced the development of rock groups in England. In 1958 Broonzy recommended Muddy Waters to his fans and Waters began touring overseas. A few years later, the Rolling Stones and other English groups began recording the blues of Muddy Waters and other Chicago bluesmen, thereby launching the blues revival of the 1960’s, which continued into the 1980’s.

With the emergence of B. B. King, Jr. Parker and Bobby Bland we had the models for nearly all contemporary blues forms.

As a short summary of changes that occur in blues styles from old to contemporary patterns, some basic changes are listed now: more instruments have been used and the role of each instrument has become more specialised. Volume and density have increased proportionately, especially as first guitar, then bass, and finally harmonica became electrically amplified.

Beginnings and endings of songs have become more clearly defined, standardised and instrumental (as opposed to spoken). And last but not least, a broader variety of structure has

developed and more contrastive elements used, such as tags, codas or breaks. The latter is also a characteristic element of the jazz, which has been profoundly influenced by the blues. Paul Oliver even says that “it is unlikely that jazz music would have followed the course it has, had it not been continually fed by the blues.”¹²

As we have seen, the blues with all its different styles has not only historically developed from early African music but was also created because of social factors, the most important one to Paul Oliver being the peculiar position of the Negro in America: “He was forced to conform on the one hand, yet rejected by virtue of his colour on the other.”¹³

LeRoi Jones even claims that the blues would not have come into existence when African slaves had not become American slaves.¹⁴

¹² Paul Oliver, p. 85

¹³ Paul Oliver, p. 87

¹⁴ LeRoi Jones: Blues People. Schwarze und ihre Musik im weißen Amerika. (Darmstadt: Joseph Melzer Verlag, 1963)

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