

Longing in our Bones:

A Study of the Blues

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Abstract

This paper explores the feelings of longing evoked by Blues music. It starts by giving a broad history of African slaves and their position in the American colonies. The aspects of African music are contrasted with European musical aspects, and there is a historical overview of early slave music. The relationship of spirituals and the blues is also examined. Scripture has much to say on longing and our desire for God, and this is given a large portion of the paper. The development of the blues and some of its key historical practitioners are discussed alongside the development of early jazz. The ultimate goal is to recognize the longing felt within in the blues is the longing to be reconciled with God.

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Introduction

I was formally introduced to blues music when I was seventeen years old. I was exposed to it while living in Memphis Tennessee, but didn't take notice due to my young age. But something clicked inside of me when I was shown a basic twelve bar shuffle pattern and the notes to play over it. From there I devoured anything with the word "blues" on it. This encounter has led to me to study jazz in college with the goal of becoming a musician.

I relay this story not to be autobiographical, but to prove a point. Blues music changed my life. I have come to appreciate and enjoy most forms of music that come my way, but few have captured my affections like the blues. Many forms of modern music that I enjoy trace their heritage to the blues. The stark honesty and simplicity found in the blues is hard to come by in our modern world.

America is known as a melting pot, and for good reason. Few countries boast such diverse heritage. The music that arose from this diversity is unlike any other. In particular the music of African slaves and their descendants has had a profound impact on the U.S. and around the world. Most modern forms of popular music stem from the combining of African slave music with the European classical music tradition and other forms of folk music. Out of this unlikely combination arose a unique musical style that would forever change the world's musical landscape.

This paper will examine American music. Much of this music was born in times of extreme distress, hardship and persecution. American history is filled with accounts of hard times and despair. Though many will never experience the hardship of slavery or

severe oppression, many people are confronted by some inner turmoil. We are humans fallen from a relationship with our creator. We long to be reunited, even if we do not know what to. The blues recognizes this turmoil, and resonates within our very being. The blues is a music of longing that speaks to downtrodden people. We will explore how this arose in the music, and how we still feel its effect today.

Thesis

The unique musical characteristics of the blues are a reflection of African Americans long journey to freedom out of slavery. Being birthed from the greatest of hardships, the blues speaks a universal language, one of longing.

Categorization

It is often hard to categorize the music that came out of the African American tradition. For instance, blues and gospel music share many similar musical characteristics. Often sacred subject matter is the only thing that differentiates a gospel song from a blues.¹ (With this fact in mind, clear distinctions will be made when possible.) The blues will be used as a “catchall” for much African American music throughout the paper. This is to recognize the all-encompassing nature of the blues, not to disregard cultural and stylistic differences.² In this way the blues can be thought of as a frame of mind, not just music.

Another difficulty that will be faced in this paper is giving a name to African slaves and their descendants. Names will be used that are historically accurate. As an

¹ Long, Worth. 1995. "The wisdom of the blues--defining blues as the true facts of life: An interview with Willie Dixon." *African American Review* 29, no. 2: 207. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed March 31, 2015).

² McNamee, Gregory. "Blues Vs. Rhythm and Blues." *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 90, no. 1 (Winter, 2014): 222-222,11.

example, when African Americans are referred to in this paper, it refers to the descendants of slaves. The first generation of slaves will largely be called Africans. At first, they were captives in a foreign land, and the colonists were their captor or conqueror, not their master. The term Negro will only be used in direct quotes, or in reference to the Negro Spiritual.

Historical Background

Blues and gospel music were born in the slavery of America's Deep South. It is important to understand the environment in which the blues began if we are to understand how it relates to us now. Black slaves arrived in America in the 1600s. These slaves were Africans, and the continent and culture to which they arrived was completely foreign. Slavery was not uncommon in Africa, so these captors would have been familiar with the idea. But an African enslaved in Africa did not experience "culture shock" as we would call it today. Leroi Jones puts this idea down best in his book *Blues People*. "To be brought to a country, a culture, a society, that was, and is, in terms of purely philosophical correlatives, the complete antithesis of one's own version of man's life on earth - that is the cruelest aspect of this particular enslavement".³

So the slaves came to a world where he couldn't speak the language, practice his religion or participate in family life in a normal way. He came to a land where he was considered sub human, subjected to treatment that was often worse than that of livestock. Dehumanizing the black man was the only way that colonial society could morally justify

^{3 3} Leroi Jones "Blues People" 1963 William Morrow and Company New York Pg. 1

this slavery. This topic has been widely discussed, and remains a dark spot on the history of America.

Slaves were forbidden from practicing their native religion, ceremonies and social activities. They were brought into post renaissance colonial America, with a near opposite worldview. This was psychologically devastating to the slave.

This was the country of the post-Renaissance man, the largest single repository for humanism in the New World. It witnessed the complete emergence of secular man. The Church and religion had become only a part of a man's life. They were no longer, as in the pre-Renaissance Western World, the one reason for man's existence. The idea that came through in the Renaissance and took hold of the West was that life was no mere anteroom for something greater or divine. Life itself was of value - and could be made perfect.⁴

American colonists were largely concerned with economics, and a sense of progress. Some colonial Americans had relegated religion to a small part of man's life, instead of the reason for living, as in the Middle Ages⁵. This was in stark contrast to the worldview of the African. African cultures had no separation of church and state. There was in fact no idea of a secular area of their life or a religious part. Religion was integrated into every aspect of an African's life.

These contrasting worldviews were fundamental in how the American viewed his African slave, and the development of African American culture.⁶ Man was the measure of all things in the view of the American. They viewed the mysticism and religion of the African as primitive. The ideas of the Africans seemed outdated or childish when viewed through the lenses of the Renaissance. The American colonist, like many other cultures, had no concept that other cultures had much validity.

⁴ Jones Pgs. 4-5

⁵ This is does not pertain to many colonists such as the Puritans or the Quakers, or religious revivals like the Great Awakening.

⁶ Jones Pg. 6

It would be of value to look at some of the cultural and musical traits of Africa, especially West Africa, where most of the slaves were captured, and contrast those with the New World culture they were brought into. In general, the character of African music is quite different than that we are used to, and would have been foreign to the colonial American. It is dangerous and ignorant to make broad sweeping generalizations about a continent's music, but there are some elements that seem common throughout.

Bruno Nettl, in his book *Folk and Traditional Instruments of the Western Continents* describes 8 characteristics common in African Music.

(1) Instruments are numerous; they are used individually, as accompaniment to singing and in small ensembles. (2) Polyphony and polyrhythms are common. (3) Percussion is the most common form of instrument. (4) Variations and improvisations on short melodic motifs dominate melodic structure. (5) There is a close relationship between language and music. (6) Melodies are built on major seconds and minor thirds. (7) Music is strongly associated with dance. (8) There is a tendency towards dualism, as in call and response or polyphony is broken into two parts.⁷

At this point, the only music that was unique to America was that of the Native Americans. The colonists kept their European musical heritage in art and folk traditions, and many Americans would travel to England to study if they wanted to become a musician. The music of Europe was greatly varied, just like the music of Africa, but most Americans would have only been familiar with classical composers, hymns they sang in church, and classic folk songs from Europe or their American adaptations.⁸

The first major difference in African music was improvisation on short melodic riffs, usually based on a pentatonic type scale. An African melody would often not have a

⁷ Bruno Nettl "Folk and traditional Instruments" Prentice Hall 1973 Pg.127

⁸ Jones pg. 10

theme that was repeated throughout, but would consist of improvisations on a small starting motif.⁹ The importance of improvisation in African music is in stark contrast to most Western music. Percussion instruments were often the focus of the music, compared to their background use in Western music. The last important contrast is the idea of call and response before groups. This can be found in Western music, but it was especially important in African music.

Slaves brought this musical heritage to America, but had to find a way to conform it to their world. The days were long and hard for a slave, who often worked from sunup to sundown seven days a week. Slaves were often restricted from engaging in African music and rituals at night with their fellow Africans. But they kept their music and culture alive by adapting it to their current situations. The field holler was the first form of African American music, with the spiritual being the second and more important.

Slaves sang field hollers while they worked. The song was usually sung in a call and response style with a leader singing a line and a group responding. The tunes were usually composed of a single, repeated and varied musical line that was sometime wordless; when lyrics were used they often were centered on work.¹⁰ The spiritual developed after the holler, and was the combination of the African's music with the hymn of the Christian church. This interesting combination of the two styles marks the beginning of a music that was uniquely African American, unlike anything heard before.¹¹

⁹ Nettl pg.128

¹⁰ Nettl Pg. 229

¹¹ Moore, Allan F. *The Cambridge Companion to Blues and Gospel Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. Print Pg.50

The psalm and hymn were the religious songs the colonials brought from Europe. Styles of hymns changed as the musical knowledge became more common in America. The four-part harmony we associate with hymns today was developed in the 1800s, with the church choir predominating over a congregation singing in unison.¹² American Independence from England and the second “Great Awakening” sparked a sense of individualism that became apparent in the American religious landscape, giving rise to folk hymns.

Folk songs were adapted to religious text by the new congregations on the frontiers and backwoods of Appalachia. It was in places like this we find styles like shape note singing. This new music was some of the first American music, if we may call it that. The “folk hymn” was usually learned by rote and passed on aurally. The folk hymn laid the foundation for the Negro spiritual. This merging of white and black music would become the basis for much American music.

In this context we see the rise of the first slave spirituals, which had an unusual start. At first, very few Christian groups tried to evangelize the slaves. Slaves were not thought to have souls by many slave owners, as explained by Leroi Jones.

When the first slaves were brought to this country, there was no idea of converting them. Africans were thought of as beasts, and there was no idea held among whites that, somehow, these beasts would benefit by exposure to the Christian God. As late as the twentieth century there have been books “proving” the Negro’s close relationship to lower animals that have been immensely popular in the South. The idea that perhaps slavery could be condoned as a method for converting heathens to the Christian God did not become popular until the latter part of the eighteenth century, and then only among a few “radical” Northern missionaries. There could be no soul-saving activities, N.N. Puckett points out in his book Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro, where there was no soul. But still Christianity was adopted by Negroes before the great attempts by missionaries and evangelists in the early part of the nineteenth century to convert

¹² Moore Pg. 45-46

them. The reasons for this grasping of the white man's religion by the North American Negro are fairly simple. First, his own religion was prohibited in this country. In some parts of the south "conjuring" or the use of "hoodoo" or "devil talk" was punishable by death or, at the very least, whipping. Also, the African has always had a traditional respect for his conquerors gods.¹³

Interestingly, many slaves converted to Christianity without being evangelized. Some denominations and missionaries evangelized slaves, at the opposition of many slave owners, at least at first. Plantation owners began to encourage their slaves to convert after seeing the positive effect it could have. They found that the newly converted slaves were often harder working, happier and less likely to run away. From these early converts we see the rise of gospel songs and spirituals. Integrating African culture with Christianity, the first seeds of the African American church were sown.

The Black slaves interpreted the hymns of the colonist and created the spiritual. The dialect, rhythm of speech and culture of these first African Americans varied hugely from their white captors, and in no place is this more evident than in the spiritual. The language of a song was often changed to suit the slave dialect, and to speak to their needs. Slaves composed their own songs based on scripture and other hymns as well.

The focus of spirituals was often the exodus of the Jews, themes of freedom and the Promised Land. Two of the most famous spirituals still sung today are *Sometimes I feel like a Motherless Child* and *Go Down Moses*. Both of these songs cover the topics mentioned above, dealing with oppression, freedom and the Promised Land.

Spirituals

The spiritual was in many ways the sacred precursor to the blues. These songs were the slave's first cry to the Christian God. We see common themes as mentioned

¹³ Jones Pg. 33

above, usually having to do with freedom. The tone of spirituals would set the stage for the downtrodden sound of the blues as well. But spirituals were often more than just church songs. There were often sophisticated messages of escape and protest hidden within these songs. “Follow the Drinking Gourd” was a message for runaway slaves to follow the North Star along the Underground Railroad. These hidden lyrical meanings and attitude of protest would have a profound impact on the bluesmen of later generations. The spiritual would later on develop into gospel music alongside the blues, and would be integrated into the rest of American culture much sooner than the blues. The blues would become the next music of hidden (or not so hidden) protest in the context of sorrowful times. There is legitimacy to both aspects of this music, the spiritual and the worldly.

Spirituals became one of the first American art forms. This was largely due to Harry Thacker Burleigh. Burleigh introduced the classical music world to the Negro spiritual. Born in Pennsylvania in 1866, Burleigh was one of the first classically trained African Americans and the first African American composer in a western sense. He has this to say about the spiritual in his songbook *Negro Spirituals*.

Success in singing these folk songs is primarily dependent on deep spiritual feeling. The voice is not nearly so important as the spirit; and then rhythm, for the Negroes soul is linked with rhythm, and it is an essential characteristic of most folk songs.

It is a serious misconception that of their meaning and value to treat them as “minstrel” songs, or to try to make them funny by a too literal attempt to imitate the manner of the Negro in singing them, by swaying the body, clapping the hands, or striving to make the peculiar inflections of the voice that are natural with the colored people. Their worth is weakened unless they are done impressively, for through all these songs there breathes a hope, a faith in the ultimate justice and brotherhood of man. The cadences of sorrow invariably turn to joy, and the message is ever manifest that eventually deliverance from all that

hinders and oppresses the soul will come, and man-every man- will be free.¹⁴

Included in his arrangements of traditional spirituals is *Motherless Child*. This classic spiritual is simple in melody and lyrics, but reaches to the depths of man's psyche. Following is the first page of Burleigh's arrangement of the song.

R.S.R.
MUSIC
#735
3

Sometimes I feel like a Motherless Child

Negro Spiritual
Arranged by
H. T. BURLEIGH

Lamentoso

Voice

Piano

pp *p ben sostenuto*

Some-times I feel like a moth-er-less chile,

Some-times I feel like a moth-er-less chile, —

Some-times I feel like a moth-er-less chile, — A long

*1) The original form of this measure was written  In order to facilitate vocalization I have taken the liberty of altering it as above. H. T. B.

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¹⁴ Burleigh, H. T. *Negro Spirituals Arr. for Solo Voice*. New York: G. Ricordi, 1917.

Print.

In this spiritual we find many characteristics that would later show up in the blues. Feeling of unrest, oppression and longing. We find an ultimate hope as Burleigh mentioned in his text, but the overall sense is one of longing.

The melody of *Motherless Child* is largely based off the pentatonic scale, which is a 5-note scale, typically based on the first, second, third, fifth and sixth tones of a major scale. It can also be based off the first, third, fourth, fifth and seventh tones of a natural minor scale. So a C major pentatonic scale would include the notes C, D, E, G, A, and an A minor pentatonic scale would include the notes A, C, D, E and G. This scale and its variants are found in folk music throughout the world, and it is prominently featured in African music. The simple but powerful nature of the pentatonic scale often gives a pure feeling to music.

This spiritual has been recorded by dozens of artists up to the present day, and has many memorable recordings. Paul Robeson, Odetta and Mahalia Jackson have recorded the most definitive versions of this song. The recordings vary in harmonization, instrumentation, melodies and ornamentations, but one thing remains constant throughout, the feeling of longing and discontent with a sense of final hope. This is one of the defining characteristics of early African American music, and continues to be to this day (it has made its way into many forms of American music.)

Blues and gospel were by no means the first musical idioms to express these deep-seated human emotions. (Many examples of early music express this sentiment, if nothing else.) One needs to only study early chant and vocal styles

found throughout the world to be aware of this.¹⁵ One could argue that there is a certain degree longing to be found in all styles of music. But the music that arose out of this time of slavery in America was a unique language of longing, unlike any other.

Longing in the Bible

Where does this sense of longing come from? We see a very clear explanation in scripture. Human beings are made in the image of God, made to be in perfect union with him. But we are fallen, sinful beings separated from God by our sin. Romans 5:12(ESV) says “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so spread death spread to all men because all sinned”. Sin is a part of the identity of humans. God did not create us this way, but we chose it and continue to. God cannot be in union with a sinful being, it is against his very nature.

In Exodus 34:5-7 (NIV), we get a taste of the nature of God.

Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. {6} And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, {7} maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.

God is merciful, but he can't let sin go unpunished. This is part of his character. This is where the problem of humanity lies. We long to be reconciled to something we can't be, even if we don't know it. Even an atheist like Bertrand Russell acknowledges his sense of longing for something outside our apparent existence.

The center of me is always and eternally a terrible pain—a curious wild pain—a searching for something beyond what the world contains—something transfigured

¹⁵ Nettl Pg. 51

and infinite . . . I do not find it, I do not think it is to be found—but the love of it is my life.¹⁶

This longing has not gone unexplored by philosophers and theologians. Many theologians use it as a proof for God. In his seminal speeches collected in *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis gives a thorough description of the longing that is at the core of humanity, and what it says about who we are, and what we are meant for.

“The Christian says, 'Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire that no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or to be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that country and to help others to do the same.’”¹⁷

Lewis describes (better than I ever could) the longing for something outside of our world. This can be experienced in countless ways, whether it be standing at the top of a mountain in complete isolation, or listening to Miles Davis’s playing on *Kind of Blue*. We have a desire for something that can never be satisfied by temporal pleasures. Good art does not fulfill this desire; rather it makes us all the more aware of it. As put by Dr. Allen Schantz” Good Art engages the heart, soul, mind and strength of the listener”. The longing found in the blues makes us aware that we were made for something other than

¹⁶ Russell, Bertrand. *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1967. Print.

¹⁷ Lewis, C. S. *Mere Christianity: A Revised and Enlarged Edition, with a New Introduction, of the Three Books The Case for Christianity, Christian Behaviour, and Beyond Personality*. New York: Macmillan, 1952. Print.

this world.¹⁸

And ultimately, scripture is the final testament. The Old and New Testament are both filled with passages talking about our deep desire to know God. The Psalms seem to focus on this idea in particular. Here are just a few passages that speak of longing in one-way or another.

I stretch out my hands to you; my soul longs for You, as a parched land. Selah.
Psalm 143:6 (NASB)

As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for You, O God. Psalm 42:1
(ESV)

In the New Testament we see Jesus addressing human desire and longing, saying he is the only thing that can satisfy.

Jesus answered and said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life. John 4:13-14 (NASB)

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst. John 6:35 (NASB)

Suffering, longing and desire are all a part of this life. We are faced with an inner turmoil, one that we cannot remedy on our own. Beauty and art remind us that there is something more, something outside our self.

Birth of the Blues

The blues is a broad term, and could be used to identify a wide variety of American music. We will identify different genres and styles of music by the name they are commonly called, such as the delta blues, big band swing, rhythm and blues, gospel

¹⁸ Schantz, Allen. Music, the Arts, and the Bible. Aesthetic Arts Press, 2015. Print, Pg. 36

etc.... This will hopefully dispel any confusion about the type of music that is being addressed.

If the roots of the Negro spiritual are easily traceable, the roots of the blues are not as clear. We know that the blues came from field hollers, gospel songs, folk ballads and spirituals, but there is no exact history of the early blues. It is probably best that there isn't. Mythology and mystery have always been an important part of the blues.¹⁹ The blues is a music steeped in legends and myths.

There are a couple of key differences between the blues and earlier forms of slave music. One of the differences was that the blues was a much more individualistic style of music. Field hollers and spirituals could be sung alone, but they were more commonly sung in groups, in a call and response style. The blues really came into being after the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation. The black man now had the possibility to become an African American, at least to a very small degree.²⁰ In their newfound freedom they were able to start down the slow road to becoming citizens.

The small degree of independence that the former slave found himself in had a profound effect on his music. The former slaves often had no choice but to continue working on a plantation for a very low wage. There were some former slaves that were able to become sharecroppers or save up enough money to buy a small farm. Others moved out of the Delta, to the Northeast or the Midwest.²¹

This move brought more hope than sharecropping, but there were other struggles involved. Slaves had been living communally, and as mentioned before, their music

¹⁹ Nettl Pg. 207

²⁰ Moore Pg. 20

²¹ Moore Pg. 22

reflected this. But the freedman often lived a lonely existence on his own farm, and this came to be reflected in the blues as well. And the work of a sharecropper or farmer in the Delta was by no means easy. The grueling and long work was intensified by the heat and humidity of the Deep South.²²In fact many things had not really changed. The life of the southern African American was still one of sweat, toil and turmoil.

It is after the Civil War that we see the rise of a new kind of musician, the traveling bluesman. Often portrayed as “bad men” or womanizers, these were folk blues singers who traveled from town to town, making their living playing the blues. Often these musicians could not find work, especially during times like the Great Depression. This was a role that was entirely filled by men, mainly because black women often had an easier time finding work in domestics. They also were migratory workers, going from farm to farm working the land. Many Delta bluesmen lived this lifestyle in one-way or another.²³

One of the most famous songs to come out of the Delta is *Cross Roads Blues* by Robert Johnson. Johnson is often considered the king of the Delta blues, with a significant amount of myths and legends surrounding his life. Johnson was born in Mississippi in 1911 and died in 1937 under mysterious circumstances. He was only 27. Legend has it that he sold his soul to the devil for his ability to play the guitar. Many of his songs do deal with the devil, or demonic forces, such as *Hellhound on my Trail* and *Me and the Devil Blues*. *Cross Roads Blues* has often been thought of as an allusion to his Faustian deal with the devil. A cross roads is a place where our world intersects with the

²² Jones Pg. 61

²³ Jones Pg. 64

spirit world, according to some folk legends.²⁴

The tale of Johnson and the devil was a myth started twenty years after his death; there is no recorded discussion of it during his lifetime. Nevertheless, he was fascinated by dark and terrifying imagery. The devil was obviously a reality to this man, but so was God's saving grace. He played guitar better than any of his contemporaries, and was able to play bass, harmony and melody simultaneously. His mixture of fingerpicking and slide guitar playing are the standard for Delta blues guitar playing. His wailing voice switches between a moaning belt and a pained falsetto, the standard for a country blues singer as well.²⁵ "Crossroads Blues" is really lament to God and to anyone else who will listen.

I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
Asked the Lord above "Have mercy, now save poor Bob, if you please"

Yeoo, standin' at the crossroad, tried to flag a ride
Ooo eeee, I tried to flag a ride
Didn't nobody seem to know me, babe, everybody pass me by

Standin' at the crossroad, baby, risin' sun goin' down
Standin' at the crossroad, baby, eee, eee, risin' sun goin' down I believe to my
soul, now, poor Bob is sinkin' down

You can run, you can run, tell my friend Willie Brown
You can run, you can run, tell my friend Willie Brown
That I got the crossroad blues this mornin', Lord, babe, I'm sinkin' down²⁶

One must understand some of the history of the South to comprehend the meaning of these lyrics. Johnson tells the story of a black traveler, trying to hitchhike to the next town or county. The narrator is in deep despair, because the sun is setting, and this has

²⁴ Garrett, Charles Hiroshi. *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*. New York, NY: Oxford Press, 2012. Print. Pgs. 517-518

²⁵ Moore Pgs. 23-30

²⁶ Johnson, Robert. *Robert Johnson, the Complete Recordings*. Columbia, 1990. MP3

sinister implications, and not just spiritual ones. There were often curfews in South for African American men, and in certain counties or towns there were signs proclaiming “nigger, don’t let the sun set on you here”. Organizations such as the Klux Klan would lynch an African American found out after sunset.²⁷ Besides this fearful interpretation, one can also evaluate the lyrics as lament of loneliness. Either way, the words are rather sorrowful to say the least.²⁸

This song was recorded in 1936, the lyrics being a reality 73 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, and the situation still wouldn’t change for many years to come. The spirit of the blues has often been described as sorrow, discontent, pessimism, and heartache. One needs to make only a quick evaluation of African Americans status in the South to understand why. Freed from slavery but not from oppression, African Americans were the recipient of a false promise. This kind of despair is one of the key ingredients to Delta blues.²⁹

But amidst all of this despair there was hope as well. Two other renowned bluesmen, Son House and the Reverend Gary Davis sang blues gospel songs about the hope of the resurrection. The Reverend Gary Davis was a blind street preacher/ bluesman that was a master of the twelve-string guitar. He was born April 30, 1896 in Laurens, South Carolina and died on May 5, 1972 in Hammonton, New Jersey. He experienced some degree of popularity during the folk music revival of the 1960s, and had many opportunities to record late in his life because of this. One such recording is “Crucifixion”. The defining lyric of this song is “Well, I done died one time

²⁷ Moore Pgs. 89-94

²⁸ Moore Pg. 89

²⁹ Jones Pg. 65

and I ain't gonna die no more ,Oh, glory, glory, hallelujah I done died one time and I ain't gonna die no more.” In Davis’ lyrics we see the final hope that H.T. Burleigh spoke of. Davis still sang songs of despair, but he contrasted them with hope. And his ultimate hope lay in his Christian faith ³⁰

Blue Notes

One of the defining musical characteristics of blues music is the blue note.

Bruno Nettl defines it as such:

The blue note is the flatted or sometimes slightly lowered third and seventh degree in a major scale. The origin of this phenomenon is not known, but it cannot be traced back to Africa with certainty. If indeed it is African in origin, it must have been selected from a considerable number of deviations from western scales (or, rather, differences between African and Western scales) that African music exhibits. Its survival must have a special reason, such as compatibility with Western musical patterns.³¹

This unique musical device is one of the most important tools used by blues and jazz musicians, and has found its way into rock and country as well. Blues and gospel singers mastered the art of singing a blue note, which often lays a quarter step in between the tone of a western scale. This technique was completely foreign when first heard by white listeners in America, and is one of the qualities that makes African American music unique. It became so indicative of this music that the most famous jazz record company, Blue Note, takes its name from this musical device.³²

A new scale was developed through the combination of the pentatonic scale mentioned earlier and this blue note, the blues scale. The blues scale often includes a flatted fifth scale degree as well, usually played in passing. The sound of the blues

³⁰ <http://www.reverendgarydavis.com/bio.html>

³¹ Nettl Pg.231-232

³² Kernfeld, Barry Dean. *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*. London: Grove, 2002. Print. Pg. 246

became very defined for another reason. The blues scale was often played over major chords. This created a tension within the music, unusual to many people in that time period.

The sound of a minor third played against a major chord creates a strong dissonance of a minor second, something not often found in folk or rural music. This kind of dissonance was mainly the foray of romantic and modern composers. It is surprising that a music that is largely based off of dissonance could become the basis for American popular and Art music, but it did just that.³³

In Western tradition, music is often broken into two categories regarding tonality, major and minor. When teaching beginners music theory, it is often stated that major keys and chords sound happy, while minor keys and chords sound sad. The blues is a juxtaposition of this idea. Although minor and major forms of the blues exist; they are fundamentally different from European minor and major keys. Most early forms of the blues used major chords for the harmonic structure, often adding a flatted seventh scale degree to the chord, making them a dominant seventh chord. Then melodies and improvisations would be played over this harmony, with notes often not in the chord. The blues uses the major third, minor third and a note in between the two, depending on the situation and the performer. The blues does not fit into the tonal or modal identity created in the Western musical tradition.

This juxtaposition was a musical manifestation of the world that African American found themselves in. The slave was now a free man, and his goal was no longer to gain freedom and return to Africa. The sense of tribe that the Africans had

³³ Kernfeld Pg.245

brought over was lost to the bluesman. Outside of the church, African American music had largely become a personal expression.³⁴ As a black man wandered the South looking for work, he began to have new troubles that needed expressing. Being hated, poor and lonely all weighed heavily on the soul. The notes being sung and played by this new generation of musicians were more than just a new musical device. It was their anguish, despair, economic situation and far-fetched hopes brought to life

The road of recovery from slavery has been a long one for African Americans. In light of current events in Missouri and Baltimore, it seems that it is still ongoing. But there was a great hope felt by the slave population when they were set free in 1865. One can only imagine the ecstasy of freedom after such a hard life. But as history shows, it took until the 1960s for real equality in America, and some would argue there still isn't today. The musical characteristics of the blues are a reflection of this long journey to freedom and equality.

The blues moved from the country land of the Delta into urban areas like New Orleans. New Orleans has always been unique in America. No other city can boast such a wide variety of cultural intermingling and influence. We cannot say with absolute certainty that jazz was born in New Orleans, but it certainly was the early center of it. jazz is sometimes thought of as a musical descendant of blues, but it is more accurate to think of it as an urban instrumental contemporary to the blues of the Delta. The range of influences found in early jazz could be attributed to the influence of American popular songs, ragtime, Caribbean, Latin and Creole music all found around New Orleans.³⁵

Early jazz was entirely instrumental, group based with marching band

³⁴ Jones Pg. 62

³⁵ Jones Pgs. 70-71

instrumentation being standard. The tunes played were less melancholy in comparison to their Delta counterparts, usually played at funeral parades. The first jazz bands originated from these funereal bands. Funerals are usually quite festive in New Orleans and musicians would improvise during the long parades that accompanied them.³⁶ One of the most famous songs adapted for early jazz is *When the Saints go Marching in*, a jolly tune compared to Robert Johnson's *Cross Roads Blues*. But the jazz players were expanding these popular songs, playing them with African and Latin rhythms, and exploring blue notes in their improvisation.³⁷

One of the main reasons for the difference in these musical expressions is the culture and environment they were fostered in. Although both black American expressions of music, the life of the African American in New Orleans was usually drastically better than in the rest of the south. Historically, in rural areas of the South there were white plantation owners, poor white farmers, tradesmen and black slaves. In New Orleans the lines were blurred between class, with people of African, Latin, and European descent marrying and creating Creole and Mulatto people groups. These groups enjoyed cultural and political freedoms that someone of purely African descent couldn't at the time. In some cases fairer skinned Mulattoes owned dark skinned slaves³⁸

The harsh and lonesome sound of the Delta blues was a reflection of the reality faced by people in the rural South, and the sound of New Orleans jazz the same for its practitioners. This is a trait that runs throughout the history of blues and jazz. Change and progressions of style reflected the spirit of the people making it. Eventually jazz and

³⁶ Kernfeld Vol. 1 Pg. 621

³⁷ Nettl Pg. 233

³⁸ Jones Pg. 72

blues both became commercial music at one point in their history, producing the swing era and the rise of rhythm and blues.³⁹

Pioneering musicians such as Charlie Parker, Thelonius Monk and Dizzy Gillespie responded to the commercialization of black music in the swing era with bebop, a contrast to the folk styles of early African American music. Bebop was the first African American music to break away from the folk and popular idioms of music into the realm of Art music, at the time only occupied by classical composers. Bebop developed in response to the popularity of big band jazz and blues in the swing era, dominated by the likes of Glen Miller, Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington and Count Basie. It took the already skillful playing of these bands and expanded it to a staggering sense. The big band of twenty players was condensed to a small combo of three to six, and soloing with speed over complex chords was prominently featured.⁴⁰

After bebop jazz split into many different styles, and began to fall out of the scope of popular music. Blues and country music combined to form rock and roll in the 1950s. Elvis Presley brought the sound of the blues to young white Americans, forever changing America's musical landscape⁴¹. British and American musicians took blues and rock and pushed it to another decibel level in the 60's and 70's creating blues based hard rock. Music has splintered in many stylistic directions since this time, but the influence of early African American music can still be felt.

The expanding of blues and jazz continues today, with people still finding new and exciting ways to interpret this music. The versatility of this music lays in its origins,

³⁹ Kernfeld vol.3 pg. 697

⁴⁰ Kernfeld Vol. 1 Pg. 270-271

⁴¹ McNamee, Gregory. "Blues Vs. Rhythm and Blues."

as a simple lament for help, a hope for change. This basic human emotion is infinitely translatable, speaking to people in all walks of life. The combination of sorrow and joy is something experienced by humans around the world.

Although we are often overcome by sorrow there is hope in the redemptive work of Christ. There is hope beyond the suffering of this world. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”¹ Peter 1:3(ESV).

The blues is an embodiment of the hardships experienced on this earth, and it draws forth longing for something beyond this world. Bluesmen put to words what they experienced daily, put to music their inner turmoil. This is hardship, perseverance and an aching for freedom kept alive through music. It is brutal honesty, unashamed hope for something better. “For through all these songs there breathes a hope, a faith in the ultimate justice and brotherhood of man. The cadences of sorrow invariably turn to joy, and the message is ever manifest that eventually deliverance from all that hinders and oppresses the soul will come, and man-every man- will be free.”⁴²

This ultimate hope is the work of Christ on the cross, his death and resurrection. We may be weighed down by the burdens of this world, but we are not defeated. We can hope for a better tomorrow, not only in this world, but, ultimately, in the one to come.

⁴² Burleigh, H. T. *Negro Spirituals Arr. for Solo Voice*. New York: G. Ricordi, 1917.

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