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 broader 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 Trachtengberg stated that blues songs are inheritance from the American past for ‘regulating 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 (Trachtengberg, 1994: xviii).

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 with national identity.

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

Blues indicate 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 (Trachtengberg, 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 professional 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: xvi). 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 oftened by Jeff Todd Titon, a prominence blues schol- iar, to substitute the term country. He ar- gues that the word country only denotes a place, whereas downhome means "both a place in time and a state of mind" (Titon, 1994: 26).

The word downhome means down South, the southern parts of America. Ori- ginally the term downhome is used by Southern Black Americans who migrated to the North. Feeling homestick 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 frenzy 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-men- ter. Their dreams and chief goal in life is to become landowners. The land owning fa- milies mostly work its own land, and they are usu-ally wealthier than tenant farmer or sharecroppers. Nevertheless, there are ma- ny 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 com- pelled 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

Everyday seem like murder here
Everyday seem like murder here
I'm gonna leave tomorrow
I know you don't bid 'my care

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 diffi- cult to find jobs and they live in slums. They begin to get nostalgia. 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 pitty time: barbecuing, fishing 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 struc- tural definition; instead, they usually reply that blues is a feeling. Leonard "Baby" Dick Caulston, a prominent blues singer describes it as: "Blues is a sound. Its not all the time the song that rhymes, its 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 men's landscape of Black America." (Titon, 1994: 25, 26). Another blues singer, Reverend Robert Wilkins, asserted that "In blues it's what you call a feel-in-the-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 by the spirit." (Welding, 1968: 12).

Blues singers sometimes feel sad when they are singing; They compose songs from direct personal experiences, history 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 try while they are singing: the listeners hear 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
sum 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 (Tilton, 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 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 (Tilton, 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 his to ‘an 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 (Tilton, 1994: 46-47).

Early Downhome Blues

As mentioned earlier, Downhome blues began as folk music and since 1900s by the coming of recording industry has emerged 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 improve.

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 gone find my woman said she’s in this world somewhere

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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' prayer
I ain't got no woman to speak in my behalf

Won't you iron my jumper stanch my overalls
Won't you iron my jumper stanch my overalls
I ain't got no woman to speak in my behalf

She don't like me tooller needed to runmur low

(Tilton, 1994: 31)

"Lonesome Blues," take 2

Won't you iron my jumper stanch my overalls
I gon' find my woman said she's in this word 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
Her good to you mama says it's sure lord killin' me

(Tilton, 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 stanza and wordings.

Blues singers draw upon personal experience to build lyrics, often containing double meanings that refer to daily concerns including work, love, religion, friendship, and betrayal. Most blues lyrics talk about relationships between man and woman and about the betrayal of a girl or a boyfriend. The intimacy 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 mornin' these blues all round my bed
Couldn't eat my breakfast and there's blues all in my heart

(Tilton, 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 alright
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

(Thomas, 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 “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 losin’ for my woman found her with another man

(Thomas, 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 ‘housin’ all my days
Mm drinkin’ and gamblin’ bar ‘housin’ all my days

But I have found someone to love me
I’m gon’ 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 leave 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

(Thomas, 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 christianize the slaves make them docile and more manageable. From the slaves’ point of view Christianity suited them since they saw their order 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 places 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 legacy, 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 cedience, the preacher moved his sermon into a hoiaric, interlent chant, the lines of which came out in two or three-second bursts. If the spoken part had incorporated rationally upon works, the do’keve shifted to the chanted promise of salvation for those who called upon Jesus. By the end of the chant—which could last in ten or fifteen minutes—the preacher and
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congregation were locked in an emotional, rhythmic communion. (Tilton, 1994: 18-19).

Down home black Americans find close relationship between listening to blues at Saturday parties and listening to Tuesday sermons in church. Some black Americans regard blues and Saturday parties as evil, associating even vice in the act of erotic dancing, drinking, gambling, and sex; however, most of them regards blues songs and the dance as something positive, serving social functions between themselves. Down home society as Tilton 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." (Tilton, 1994: 18).

Charley Keel 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. (Keel, 1966: 77-73). 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 recording industry. Blues like many of the prominent songs which is recorded 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 era: folk music can switch into high or vice versa, and vice versa. In classical music, for instance, a certain piece from Chopin's "Nocturne" became pop song entitled "Got a Date With a Siren." Pop songs of the Beatles seeped into classical arrangements are sung by prominent tenors. Many classical pieces by important composers derive from folk songs such as from Germany, Russia, French, Czechoslovakia, etc. As in Blues, the mass produce of rare records bring blues from folk song to pop music. Taking about race records, one has to look back to American culture before 1960s. With the Jim Crown law issued in 1958, the American society condoned racial discrimination. The law institutionalization 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, the 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, immoral, droll, and course by the whites, later it is accepted as a wonderful enter- tainment. 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 scours flourish. The scours 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 phenomenon sales progress is because so far black culture is neglected by other mass media like radio, motion pictures, and newspaper. (Tilton, 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 records to lure them to buy them. 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 mainstream 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 Sippie Turner, Jimmy Rodgers, Bill Mounce, Janis Joplin, and even the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, 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 mainstream of American culture.

BIBLIOGRAPHY