

**Signifyin' on the Blues:
West African Retentions, American Music, and the Blues in the Hands of Eric Clapton**

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ABSTRACT

Signifyin' on the Blues: West African Retentions, American Music, and the Blues in the Hands of Eric Clapton

Saesha Mary Senger

In a sense, the blues tradition was born when the first West African slaves were brought to North American soil in 1619. From then until now, West African and European culture have intermingled in a process of syncretization as blacks and whites have shared not only the American landscape but one another's cultural traditions. The blues began its development as an agent of not only personal expression but also as a source of income and an object of commodification after the Civil War, when African Americans entered the workforce as free citizens and transformed work songs and spirituals into the foundational musical genre which has since informed much of American popular music as well as that from around the world – perhaps most notably that from Great Britain.

Beginning in the late 1940's, British jazz enthusiasts began to search for the origins of the African-American music of which many had grown enamored. This quest for history led to the blues. In time the blues, as well as its derivatives Rhythm and Blues and Rock 'n' Roll, came to dominate the British popular music scene to an extent that continues to this day. This thesis provides not only a narrative of this process but also a critique of the history constructed to explain the origins, evolution, and nature of the blues – who created it (and where), what is “authenticity” in the context of blues performance and style, and who is capable of making a valuable contribution to the tradition. The document culminates in a comparison of selected recorded works of the country bluesman Robert Johnson and the British musician Eric Clapton and a discussion of how each artist's position in society, access to technology, and musical-cultural influences combine to inform these performances.

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The Foundation

Like the work of any musician, Eric Clapton's music has been influenced by his upbringing and environment. Born in 1945, Clapton came of age when the blues and Rhythm and Blues became popular in his native Great Britain. Inspired by music that originated with people of a different race, from a different country, Clapton's musical contribution led some to call him "God" for his skill and originality while others questioned the validity of his work because he is white and British.

There are some who say that the blues is strictly an African-American genre – that only an individual who possesses the cultural memory with ties to Africa, slavery, and subsequent experiences can contribute positively to this genre's cultivation. However, cultural ties exist in the form of inherited cultural memory as well as that which begins with an outsider's appreciation, develops through study, and comes to maturity through experience. Determining the validity of a musician's work is never as simple as identifying his race. Eric Clapton's work is a case in point.

While the issues surrounding such a debate are not specific to any particular artist, an examination of one musician's work can illuminate the broader division perceived between an inherited tradition and an adopted one and how the value of each is determined from different perspectives. The purpose of this study is to examine the parameters of these two traditions as well as the accompanying value judgments through a more general historical lens and then to determine how the music of an outsider such as Clapton contributes to the cultivation of the blues.

Expressive traditions reflect the state of the culture that creates and perpetuates them; beginnings are as multifaceted and messy as their subsequent evolution as these traditions respond to and reflect the environment that sustains them. Notions of purity do not apply, for this merely implies that one true, proper, original form initially existed. In reality, living traditions evolve, and this continual state of transformation is essential for survival. Supporting the notion of one true origin for a tradition provides a simplified framework for intellectual analysis and political discourse and even a certain degree of comfort, just knowing we have something “figured out.” However, what may seem like an end brought about by justifiable means more often serves to limit the degree of insight that can be gained from a particular examination.

Nowhere is this more true than in the analytical principles of a great many blues scholars; this situation serves as proof that the instinct to isolate blindly and categorize from an arbitrary or convenient interpretive foundation is a powerful one. The effort to understand such a complex, significant, and ever-changing tradition leads many to simplify it by perceiving and analyzing it with what Gary Tomlinson calls a “strategy for exclusion.”¹ When it comes to the blues, this exclusion tends to take the shape of determining which music is “authentic” and which deserves only scorn because it fails to meet predetermined criteria for legitimate manifestations of this tradition. While this strategy certainly leads to some very convenient conclusions for those employing it, all too often it cuts off avenues of potential enlightenment. Such discrimination tends to reveal more about the person passing judgment than it does about the research subject.²

¹ Gary Tomlinson, “Cultural Dialogics and Jazz: A White Historian Signifies,” *Black Music Research Journal* 11 (Autumn 1991): 245.

² Paul Gilroy, “Sounds Authentic: Black Music, Ethnicity, and the Challenge of a ‘Changing’ Same,” *Black Music Research Journal* 11 (Autumn 1991): 122-123, 125.

Any music is a product of its culture, and in the case of the blues the nature of the circumstances that created it has engendered an intense feeling of ownership. Not only did the subject matter for this music originate from the inhumane treatment of African Americans before and after emancipation, but in the eyes of many, those who continued this oppression and exploitation did not deserve to appropriate and profit from the music born out of this sorrow. Many claim that only the blues of an African American represents the genre with any credibility since it is those with ties to Africa and slavery who have the most obvious link to an idealized authenticity, a purity of heritage. If this purity exists and only African Americans can claim its origins and participate in its proper maintenance, the hegemonic culture is excluded – for once whites feel the effect of being cut out of something.³

The problem with the establishment of guidelines for authenticity in the blues is that no tradition exists in a pure form. The blues began in various places, at various times, and, as a result, never existed as an expression of one homogeneous culture. There never was just one style of the blues, nor a single stylistic or geographic center of origin; arguments made assuming that such things ever existed provide little insight into this music and its culture but rather engage participants in and supporters of this fairy tale in what V. Kofi Agawu calls “the us-them dichotomy.” More about the principle of empowerment through excluding whites than actually understanding the culture and evolution of the blues, this approach forms what Tomlinson describes as a “nondialogical cult of otherness,” consisting of “a monologue of empowered speakers speaking with themselves about marginalized and excluded others.”⁴

³ Tomlinson, “Cultural Dialogics,” 247; LeRoi Jones, *Black Music* (New York: William, Morrow, and Company, Inc., 1967), 180-211; Peter R Aschoff, “The Poetry of the Blues: Understanding the Blues in its Cultural Context,” in *The Triumph of the Soul: Cultural and Psychological Aspects of African-American Music*, ed. Ferdinand Jones and Arthur C. Jones (Westport: Praeger, 2001): 37-39.

⁴ Tomlinson, “Cultural Dialogics,” 238; Kofi V. Agawu, “Representing Black Music,” (Unpublished Manuscript, 1990): 23; Jones, *Black Music*, 180-211; Aschoff, “The Poetry of the Blues,” 37-45; Amiri Baraka, “The ‘Blues

To gain insight into the blues, a cognizance of any perspective's limitations is necessary; we must be as aware of the conclusions we make based on our mode of reasoning as we are of what this particular version of the truth leaves out. In the words of Paul Ricoeur, "When we discover that there are several cultures instead of just one and... when we acknowledge the end of a sort of cultural monopoly... we are threatened with the destruction of our own discovery. Suddenly it becomes possible that there are just *others*, that we ourselves are an 'other' among others." In essence, we all stand alone as individuals, and the cultures that we join to create – as well as our perceptions of them – reflect that as much as they reflect our interdependence on one another. When we recognize this variability, we are in a better position to understand our culture as an extension of our individual selves.⁵

The blues, with its roots in Africa and serving as "the foundation for every form of American popular music in the twentieth century," not to mention the popular music in many other parts of the world, requires and deserves this kind of dialogical, vernacular consideration. Its complexity and character demand it, for if we perceive the blues from a narrow mindset we limit our understanding while denying this tradition its due credit as one of the most influential cultural/musical traditions the world has ever known.⁶

Charles Simic stated that, "like all genuine art, the blues belong[s] to a specific time, place, and people which it then, paradoxically, transcends."⁷ The birth of an art form involves syncretization, as does its transcendence from these origins. Individuals from a variety of socio-economic groups with differing personal perspectives and agendas take and contribute what they

Aesthetic' and the 'Black Aesthetic:' Aesthetics as the Continuing Political History of a Culture," *Black Music Research Journal* 11 (Autumn 1991): 101-109.

⁵ Tomlinson, "Cultural Dialogics," 234, 240; Mudimbe, V.Y. *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988): 34, 177.

⁶ Douglas Henry Daniels, "The Significance of Blues for American History," *The Journal of Negro History* 70 (Winter-Spring 1985): 16; Tomlinson, "Cultural Dialogics," 231-232.

⁷ Robert Switzer, "Signifying the Blues," *Alif: The Journal of Comparative Poetics* 21 (2001): 26.

feel is necessary for their own work in a process that can be described as group collaboration for personal gain. It is in this manner that a continuously evolving musical tradition is adapted by individuals to include compatible and useful characteristics of another. No culture is pure in its home environment or static in the process of cultivation; determining the authenticity of a tradition in an acculturated condition proves too complex for evaluation by a rubric of stylistic purity. This applies to the blues as much as to any other tradition. It seems as though the perspective one takes in the matter depends upon whether one defines this musical tradition as properly maintained only by the culture credited with creating it or if one can accept the idea that engagement through a process of acculturation can also lead to valuable contributions.

In an attempt to evaluate the characteristics of the blues in various stages of its evolution, this thesis will discuss the evolution of this tradition in terms of the incorporation of African and European traits during the formation of the genre after the Civil War and its subsequent stylistic evolution, in the end attempting to determine how thoroughly the British, and specifically Eric Clapton, absorbed the foundational traits of the blues – both cultural and specifically musical.

Beginning in the late 1940's, the British became enamored with the blues, first imitating the music of African-American masters and then expanding upon this foundation as they interpreted this musical and cultural influence from a British standpoint.⁸ Without question, the work of these musicians has proved extremely influential; what has prompted debate among scholars and critics, and what this study argues can be resolved to some degree, is whether a musician who is British and white can interpret the blues well, and if he even has the right to do so.

⁸ Roberta Freund Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues: The Transmission and Reception of American Blues Style in the United Kingdom* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 17.

A productive examination of these issues will presuppose a dialogical approach rather than an imposition of a rigid viewpoint based on an ethnocentric or political agenda. The goal of this study is to describe the condition of the foundation as we now know it and gauge just what has been achieved. In other words, most people make music because they have something they need to express; the goal is to remain aware of the inherent partiality of human knowledge as I work to gain insight into the adoption of the blues by the British, and Clapton in particular, and discover how such instances of syncretization have affected the knowledge and cultivation of this tradition.

Chapter 1:
The Fountainhead

While the blues coalesced as a genre after the emancipation of African Americans in the United States, the story of this tradition begins far earlier. Slaves headed to North America primarily originated in West Africa, and traditions from this region of the continent would remain foundational in the performance and preservation of the blues and its derivatives. While stylistic traits can be identified and analyzed, following them geographically from Africa to North America to Great Britain and beyond, and temporally from 1619 to the present day, the most insightful observations of this tradition come from examination of its roots in African spirituality due to the importance of its attendant practices in West African music.¹

All performance traditions essentially exist to express elements of the cultures from which they grow; politics, sociology, and economics all play a part. The culture the blues came from includes, quite conspicuously, the traditions of West Africa that survived, in various forms, in what would become the United States.² Scholars of an earlier era claimed that the trauma of slavery had deprived enslaved Africans of their cultural memory. This belief in a lack of African-American cultural memory contributed to the refusal to value blacks' cultural

¹ Oliver, *Savannah Syncopators: African Retentions in the Blues* (London: November Books Limited, 1970), 17-18, 84, 86, 91-92; Samuel Floyd Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 19; Floyd, "Ring Shout!: Literary Studies, Historical Studies, and Black Music Inquiry," *Black Music Research Journal* 22 (Autumn 1991): 265-287.

² Baraka, "The 'Blues Aesthetic,'" 101-105; Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 43; Waterman, "African Influence on the Music of the Americas," 17-26; Oliver, "African Influence on the Blues," 57-59; Evans, "Africa and the Blues," 64-67; Oliver, "Echoes of the Jungle?," 70-74; Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 35-57.

contributions and achievements when in fact West Africa survived in the memory and customs of these people living in diaspora.³

An important factor in the overall preservation of West African traditions was the consistency of spiritual beliefs and customs and the musical traditions that served to express them in the areas from which slaves originated. From the savannah to the rain forest, those inhabiting this vast region shared many cultural practices. Significant traits, in terms of spiritual ideals, rituals, and specific musical customs held in common by Africans from a wide variety of areas allowed slaves to preserve their heritage throughout the many areas to which they were transplanted.⁴

Sterling Stuckey discusses the manner in which slaves in North America, through commonalities in the many West African cultures from which they were taken, preserved their psychological integrity by preserving features of this culture. First discovered during the voyage through the middle passage, these shared traits formed the basis for African-American culture. Stuckey describes the slave ships as “the first real incubators of slave unity across cultural lines, cruelly revealing irreducible links from one ethnic group to the other.” Ethnic groups that had previously regarded themselves as distinct melded eventually into a relatively homogeneous race. What Olly Wilson regards as “an interrelationship of large areas of Africa in terms of culture or certain aspects of culture” allowed important elements of African religion and its attendant expressive media to survive in the harsh environment characteristic of slavery practiced in the United States.⁵

³ Ernst-Alexander Ansermet, “Bechet and Jazz Visit Europe, 1919” in *Reading Jazz: A Gathering of Autobiography, Reportage, and Criticism from 1919 to Now* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996); Olly Wilson, “The Significance of the Relationship Between Afro-American Music and West-African Music,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 2 (Spring 1974): 3.

⁴ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 14-15; Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 10-11.

⁵ Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 3-4, 10, 22; Wilson, “Afro-American Music,” 4, 6.

A significant commonality in African spiritual customs that slaves preserved in America was the ring shout. The presence of the ring in many West-African cultures contributed significantly to the homogeneity of these expressive traditions and to the transmission of many characteristics of African culture to the New World. According to Stuckey, “the ring in which Africans danced and sang is the key to understanding the means by which they achieved oneness in America” because it was “the main context in which Africans recognized values common to them.” The conventions of the ring reflected the belief in multiple deities – characterized more accurately as spirits existing on different planes of power and importance – openness about human sexuality, the inseparability of music and dance, the importance of the burial ceremony, and the centrality of music to the expression of the entire realm of spiritual practices. Spirituality formed the basis for everything in West-African life, and music was an expression of this all-inclusiveness.⁶

The notion of elements of life unconnected to spirituality – the division between the sacred and secular – was absent from the majority of West-African belief systems, and the nature of musical customs reflected this. The fact that music was everywhere reflected the constant presence of spirituality in African existence.⁷ However, the fact that spirituality permeated African life and music with such consistency did not inspire corresponding consistency among various manifestations of musical expression. Such variation in style related to the nature of the function the music served in its appropriate context, not to whether or not an expression of spirituality was the objective. The concept of the profane was not part of African life, so all music served as a vehicle for the expression of spiritual ideals. As Paul Oliver explains, ceremonies, education, work, and other occasions had their own music to accompany them – to

⁶ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 21-22, 26, 43, 57; Floyd, “Ring Shout!,” 266-269; Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 11-12, 16, 22.

⁷Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 15.

heighten an experience in a more formal spiritual manner or simply to make it more pleasant. While music was everywhere, it was not the case that one set of performance practices served in every situation. The ceremony of the ring shout, for example, performed as part of African worship rituals, was institutionalized and governed by rules; it had a place and purpose as the medium through which worship was practiced. Stuckey observes that the ring shout held great importance in ancestor worship in many West African cultures and served to honor and amuse the dead, although it also formed an important part of many other ceremonies.⁸

While the ever-present nature of African spirituality accounted for the similarities between different types of music, the absence of a conception of heaven and hell played a part in determining the function of music as well. Because all humans were believed to be reborn at some point after death, celebrations of life focused on the present rather than on influencing an individual's fate in the afterworld. Instead of viewing the spiritual realm as monotheistic with God and the Devil in opposition, West-African religions tended to assign powers and responsibilities to a number of spirits. None of these divinities possessed good or evil characteristics by definition – they merely played particular roles in supporting, challenging, or punishing mankind.⁹

One supreme God, described as an “Absentee Landlord” by Stuckey, was believed to preside from a distance over both the spiritual and earthly realms, but in many cultures the spirits and living-dead also formed part of the conception of the spirit world. According to Samuel Floyd's observations, these spirits or gods “sometimes acted as intermediaries between God and the people,” while the almighty God played less of a role in everyday life. Spirits also existed on a higher plain than the living-dead, or the ancestors of the living, but in many cases both groups

⁸ Oliver, “African Influence on the Blues,” 57; Oliver, *Savannah Syncopators*, 96-98; Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 11,17; Wilson “The Significance of the Relationship Between Afro-American and West African Music,” 17-18.

⁹ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 15-18; Baraka, “The ‘Blues Aesthetic,’” 101-109; Sharma, “Poetic Devices,” 1.

were perceived as having more direct influence over worldly affairs than the supreme God. Spirits were often anthropomorphized, and humans who were no longer living continued to maintain their place in society as long as those they left behind in their communities remembered them. These divinities' presence in day-to-day life ensured permeation of spirituality in the earthly realm, as human beings danced and drummed to venerate the almighty creator.¹⁰

Another method of reinforcing African spiritual and social norms was the oral transmission of myth. In the realm of West-African mythology, tales about the figure known as the trickster –as well as by many other names – served to demonstrate and encourage African creativity while providing moral guidance. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describes the trickster in all its incarnations as “the sole messenger of the gods, he who interprets the will of the gods to man” as well as possessing “individuality, satire, parody, irony, magic, indeterminacy, open-endedness, ambiguity, sexuality, chance, uncertainty, disruption and reconciliation, betrayal and loyalty, closure and disclosure, encasement and rupture.” In African ceremonies such as the ring, trickster stories were told to amuse ancestral spirits, while in everyday life these stories served to teach moral values and entertain. In these tales, the trickster presents a distinctive interpretation of cultural characteristics but also causes trouble by disregarding acceptable human behavior as he makes his own rules. The trickster's traits allow him to change form from one animal to another and to interpret a situation from the vantage point of a being that exists simultaneously in this realm and that of the supernatural. This mutability reflects his interpretive skill and his link with a higher plane of existence, thus his importance in African expressive media: if so much of human expression was intended to communicate to another realm, a being who possessed heightened creative skill was endowed with abilities of great importance. The

¹⁰ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 15-18; Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 57.

trickster represented survival skills in the form of defiance and creativity, both of which were connected to an ever-present and influential spirituality.¹¹

Such spiritual concerns motivated creativity; thus, the means for this expression – the technical components of African music – must be examined as well. As previously discussed, how these ideals found musical expression varied according to the context in which the music was made. However, these varied manifestations of spirituality found expression in basically the same harmonic, melodic, rhythmic, and timbral ideals and practices. While harmony may not have existed in an intentional way in every society of West Africa, this region is one of the few that can claim musical composition by harmonic considerations. While the genre of the blues employed harmonic practices that may have been significantly influenced by Western European musical traditions, slaves brought to the New World were not without their own conceptions of harmony.¹²

Polyphony and heterophony defined the texture of much African music, while melodic procedures employed within these textures included heptatonic and pentatonic scales. From the perspective of Western harmony, the variations of pitch on different notes of a major or minor scale constitute alterations – thus, the “blue” and “bent” notes commonly referred to. But scales employed by Africans included these pitch-classes within the scale itself, so the presence of an alteration exists only for those who assume that the Western scale is natural.¹³

¹¹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 5-6; Floyd, “Ring Shout!,” 269; Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 24-25; Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 17.

¹² Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 56; Waterman, “African Influence of the Music of the Americas,” 17-18, 21-24; Oliver, “African Influence on the Blues,” 57-59; Oliver, *Savannah Syncopators*, 12-15, 19, 96; Floyd, “Ring Shout!,” 266-269; Wilson, “The Significance of the Relationship Between Afro-American and West-African Music and West African Music,” 17.

¹³ Oliver, *Savannah Syncopators*, 94-95; Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 56, 76; Waterman, “African Influence on the Music of the Americas,” 21-24; Oliver, “African Influence on the Blues,” 57-59; Floyd, “Ring Shout!,” 266-269; Gerhard Kubik, “The African Matrix in Jazz Harmonic Practices,” *Black Music Research Journal* 25 (Spring-Fall, 2005): 192.

In his paper “The African Matrix in Jazz Harmonic Practices,” Gerhard Kubik discusses the function of the natural harmonic series in African harmony. Kubik describes African harmony as built upon the foundation of a “nonobjectified single fundamental,” a tone upon which both the horizontal and vertical considerations of harmony are built. Rather than determining the horizontal (scalar/melodic) and vertical (harmonic) content of the music based on the material available within the twelve equal-tempered pitch-classes of the Western scale, such musical materials in much West African music are actually partials over a fundamental – not aberrations at all but unaltered members of the natural harmonic series. Sometimes deeply buried by distant partials, this fundamental is what binds the pitch content of West African music together. From a simplified perspective, Wilson described the phenomena of West African harmony as short progressions “not dependent upon large-scale harmonic relationships” that demonstrate “the usage of much melodic dissonance.” The complexity of the argument aside, the fact remains that, just as with many other manifestations of West African expressive media, these harmonic practices survived to some degree in the United States, informing the musical customs of African Americans.¹⁴

This variety of scales and the pitches within them relates in some degree to timbral ideals and, by extension, to choices of instruments and methods of playing. Africans favored a wide variety of tone quality rather than the homogenous tone sought after in much Western European music. A variety of timbres were easily achieved by the human voice in the form of grunts, vocables, and other devices, while instrumentalists often imitated vocal sound production techniques. Such practices often fulfilled timbral ideals within a polyphonic or heterophonic

¹⁴ Kubik, “The African Matrix in Jazz Harmonic Practices,” 192-196; Benjamin V. Boone, “A New Perspective on the Origin of the Blues and Blue Notes: A Documentation of Blues-Like Speech” (Paper, University of North Florida, April 2005): 8; Wilson, “The Significance of the Relationship Between Afro-American and West African Music,” 17.

texture. In Africa, stringed instruments were played in a variety of settings; some of these, most notably the banjo, were recreated in the New World, and in many cases more advanced and capable European instruments such as the violin and guitar were adapted to meet the needs of the slaves' transplanted, rapidly evolving musical tradition – a tradition that they strove to cultivate in this radically different and unusually brutal environment through both preservation and syncretization.¹⁵

While the human voice was prominent in West-African musical practice, the most important and most common instrument in West Africa was the drum. Percussion instruments not only communicated messages and enforced group solidarity in ceremonies in which community members also danced and sang, but they also most effectively expressed the all-important musical characteristic of rhythm.¹⁶ True polyrhythm and the expression of an overriding timeline, essential as they were in West Africa, did not survive entirely intact in North America. Drums were outlawed in many areas to protect slave owners from a potential uprising, and without these instruments and the requisite group collaboration, complex African rhythmic characteristics simplified considerably. However, the use of other instruments and practices, including the clapping of the hands, also known as “patting juba,” allowed for the survival of cross-rhythms in work songs, spirituals, ragtime, the blues, jazz, and other genres. The influence of European-American music is more like to have supplied syncopation than polyrhythm; Wilson points out that the “rhythmic displacement” in African-American music is often too prolonged to qualify as syncopation but is actually closer to polyrhythm. The fact that it is more pronounced

¹⁵ Martin Scorsese, dir., “Feel Like Going Home,” *The Blues: A Musical Journey*, DVD, Produced by Martin Scorsese (San Diego: Sony, 2003); Oliver, *Savannah Syncopators*, 25, 87-88; Oliver, “African Influence on the Blues,” 58; Evans, “Africa and the Blues,” 64-65, 71; Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 27, 28; Wilson, “Afro-American Music,” 15.

¹⁶ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 19, 28-32.

and occurs with much greater frequency in African-American music than in music influenced primarily by European tradition indicates the influence of West-African musical characteristics.¹⁷

Responsorial procedures, more accurately labeled “call and response,” not only survived the middle passage but also thrived in North America, serving as an example of compatibility that assists survival. Due to both its importance in African music and to the existence of antiphony in Western European traditions, this musical characteristic continues to inform music of African lineage. Although Western-European and West-African musical traditions shared the characteristic of one “voice” answering another, the similarity between expressions of this trait ends at its foundation. As Floyd describes it, West-African call and response, more than a musical technique, is a way of reinterpreting previous musical material in an individual way. In Africa, spirits were contacted and appeased through music with the skills of the trickster; such creativity guided the alteration of preexisting material in a unique and often unanticipated but still contextually relevant way – in other words, through improvisation. Although the nature of the spirits changed somewhat in the New World, this reinterpretation, or “signifyin’,” continues to the present.¹⁸

Adaptation

African spirituality formed the fountainhead not only of African music but also of African-American music, much American vernacular music, and more generally every other musical tradition influenced by the music of enslaved Africans and their descendants. The fact that certain elements of African spirituality found continued expression in the ring shout meant

¹⁷ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 53-55; Waterman, “African Influence on the Music of the Americas,” 24; Oliver, *Savannah Syncopators*, 87-88; Oliver, “African Influence on the Blues,” 58; Waterman, “African Influence on the Music of the Americas,” 22; Wilson, “Afro-American Music,” 6-7.

¹⁸ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 72-73, 81, 92-99; Floyd, “Ring Shout!,” 269-281; Wilson, “Afro-American Music,” 6, 17; Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 30.

that the technique and ideology of the music incorporated in this practice survived as well. African spiritual ideals and practices informed the choice of timbres, rhythms, and harmonies as well as the meaning and function of this music in African-American society. When Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)¹⁹ emphasized that the blues is a cultural phenomenon, not a musical one, this is what he meant.²⁰

The expressive media formed out of the interaction between enslaved African Americans and their white captors in the United States demonstrates both the suppression and alteration of certain African customs at the insistence of the hegemonic white culture. This culture interacted to a more significant degree with slaves in the United States than in other parts of the New World. The work of Richard Alan Waterman and that of Melville Herskovits illustrates this point. Herskovits's "Scale of Intensity of New World Africanisms," published in 1945, compares the degree to which African customs survived in areas to which Africans were brought to work as slaves. This chart indicates that only music and folklore demonstrated the retention of African customs in the United States to a significant degree. As Herskovits discusses in *The Myth of the Negro Past*, the environmental conditions, nature of life on plantations, ratios of blacks to whites, and greater contact between whites and blacks in the United States caused the imposition of European culture on African modes of expression in this region. By comparison, in areas such as South America and Haiti, Africanisms often thrived in their new environment. In spite of the brutal living conditions that slaves endured in these locations, African cultural traits survived to a greater extent due to similar climatic conditions, a higher ratio of blacks compared to whites, and a greater degree of segregation between the two races. Under more

¹⁹ The names "LeRoi Jones" and "Amiri Baraka" have already been cited and will continue to be mentioned throughout this text; both refer to the same person. I will use each name as an authorial reference for the text in question and cite the texts accordingly in my footnotes and bibliography.

²⁰ Baraka, "The 'Blues Aesthetic,'" 101-108; Jones, *Black Music*, 13-14, 180-211; Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 15.

culturally favorable conditions, the victims of a cruel capitalistic enterprise maintained cultural customs through the isolation and population ratio maintained by those enslaving them.²¹

Another factor that determined the survival of African cultural traits was compatibility among the different African cultures combined in the New World as well as their interactions with European culture. Given that the multitude of West African cultures from which slaves were taken shared many characteristics, Africans found themselves among similar people in many ways, strengthening their ties to tradition while they coped with the horrors of slavery. However, certain elements of European culture differed greatly from those of African origin, and the process of syncretization engaged in by slaves was quite complex. Wilson's illustrates a general trend in how these West-African cultural traits were influenced by European ones when he says, "only those elements of a foreign culture which are compatible with the original culture will be adapted." Assuming that the "original" culture is that of West-African origin and the "foreign" culture is of Western-European lineage, Wilson's statement describes the pattern of slaves' incorporation of compatible elements of their captors' cultural practices into their own. According to Waterman, in a manner similar to the technique of call and response previously discussed, the harmonic practices of West Africa and Western Europe were similar enough to allow for easy adaptation by slaves. It was simply a matter of "new musical ideas to be worked out in terms of African concepts and techniques." This accounts for the survival of some traits of African harmony: it was preservation through the reinterpretation of white culture.²²

One source of this oppression of African culture is found in forced conversion to Christianity. Although both African and Christian theology have encouraged the worship of a

²¹ Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York: Harper, 1941; reprint, Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 111-142; Melville Herskovits, *The New World Negro* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), 53. Waterman, "African Influence on the Music of the Americas," 20-23.

²² Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, 85; Wilson, "Afro-American Music," 17, Waterman, "African Influence on the Music of the Americas," 19.

supreme God, indigenous Sub-Saharan African religion, even with the influence of both Islam and Christianity, has tended more towards polytheism and animism. By contrast, Christianity was established upon a foundation of monotheism. Adaptation to a generally monotheistic theology greatly influenced the culture of slaves in the United States regardless of which denomination held sway in a given region. However, depending on whether Catholicism or a sect of Protestantism prevailed in a given area, varying traits of African religion found support. Under Catholicism, African spirits took the form of the saints of that faith, allowing the belief in gods subordinate to the almighty God to continue under a different guise. More Africanisms survived among blacks who practiced Catholicism than among those who adopted Protestantism, which emphasized the worship of one all-powerful god over the belief in numerous saints with different powers. Protestantism prevailed over Catholicism throughout much of the southern United States; as a result, fewer Africanisms survived among slaves living in this region.²³

While conversion to Christianity brought many changes to slaves' spiritual and expressive traditions, Africans and their descendants continued to fight for their freedom and culture throughout the period of slavery and after emancipation, ensuring the survival of not only the belief in spirits but in the folklore that kept the characteristics of these spirits alive. The trickster, as an important figure of African spirituality and creativity, is one Africanism that survived the conversion to Christianity and suppression of African culture in the United States, albeit in an altered form. Maintaining the tradition of adopting animal forms, the trickster is known most commonly as Brer Rabbit and the Signifying Monkey. Stuckey describes Brer Rabbit as a somewhat faithful continuation of the African tradition of the trickster: "keeper of the faith of the ancestors, mediator of their claims on the living and supreme master of the forms of

²³ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 38-39; The Blues, *Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 4th ed., edited by Colin Larkin, on *Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/epm/62401> (accessed March 7, 2011): 2; Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, 142.

creativity.” In keeping with tradition, the trickster has connections to the living and the dead, but in this case his musical ability alone provides his power. For Gates and Floyd, the trickster is more commonly referred to as the Signifying Monkey and has his most significant connections to the Devil, but this figure still serves the same purpose as a link to another realm and as an interpreter of black culture: a being who exists at the crossroads between this realm and another as well as serving as “the great trope of Afro-American discourse.”²⁴

Slave owners in the United States restricted the kind of music performed in both religious and secular settings in various ways. As discussed previously, drums were frequently outlawed, leaving slaves to express the remnants of polyrhythm by means such as patting juba, foot stomping, creative vocal utterances, and the playing of different instruments – some of them, such as the banjo and rattles, adaptations of African instruments.²⁵ As Christian theology replaced the polytheistic religions of the ring, this ritual was transformed to adapt to the situation; drumming in the ring, for example, was replaced by clapping and foot stomping, while according to Herskovits in some Protestant denominations the circular shuffling dance of the ring shout survived in the confines of certain churches where it transformed into “leaping.” Where the ring was absent from church services, it was often performed afterward as a continuation of worship. As time went on, the segregation of music took on a different character as slaves slowly accepted the notion of opposing sacred and profane parts of life.²⁶

The distinction between sacred and secular music formed during this period reflected a separation in the spiritual life of African Americans that increased as they continued to absorb Christian values. Separations in function existed in West-African societies, but in the New

²⁴ Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 18; Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 21; Floyd, “Ring Shout!,” 296-271; Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 48-49, 73.

²⁵ Oliver, *Savannah Syncopators*,” 16, 87; Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 52.

²⁶ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 37-46, 53-55; Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 57-58; Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, 138, 142.

²⁷ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 45-46.

World music was divided more and more by content. While genres performed outside the church, such as work songs, field hollers, and eventually the blues consistently expressed spiritual values just as they did in Africa, this music also expressed elements of life and African myth, such as sexuality and the trickster, that were not typically incorporated into the Christian spiritual world. Throughout this period, sexual mores increasingly took on the restrictive character of European cultural expectations; no longer was eroticism something universally accepted and celebrated. Expression of sexuality remains a trademark feature of African-derived music, but a significant segment of society – most notably middle-class blacks adopting white Christian values – has consistently frowned upon this.²⁷

In spite of such changes in African-American culture, in comparison to the expectation of European-derived culture, the division between sacred and secular music has never been as conspicuous as it has been in white Christian culture. As Wilson points out, “musical styles, instruments, specific songs, and even the musicians themselves have been commonly shared by both the church and the dance hall.” The spiritual nature of all African-American music accounts to some degree for this similarity – spirituality is still a significant part of everyday life, and music created by slaves and their descendants often functions to communicate directly with a higher power during a worship service, in the process of completing an arduous task, or in times of inward reflection.²⁸

Sacred African-American musical genres of the spiritual, and later gospel, reflected the confluence of African and Western European-derived practices. Maintaining timbral variety, polyrhythmic features, call and response, traits of African harmony, and other survivals, such music dominated the musical aspect of worship, fulfilling the expression of spirituality

²⁸ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 45-52, 89-90; Baraka, “The ‘Blues Aesthetic,’” 104.

²⁹ Wilson, “Afro-American Music,” 17-18; Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 24, 64-65.

associated with a Christian theology that whites found acceptable but infused with cultural understanding drawn from an African perspective.²⁹

In the secular realm, work songs and field hollers, and later the blues, accompanied long hours of toil and periods of contemplation outside the church. Demonstrating the importance of spirituality to African-American life, the spiritual was the most popular musical genre among black Americans before jazz and the blues became dominant. Spirituals and “pseudo-spirituals” were both published for mass dissemination and performed by choirs and soloists.³⁰ In fact, the sacred spiritual of Christian worship was an influential foundation for the blues, a secular genre – proving that although the media of expression for basic West-African social mores had changed, those ideals still survived both inside and outside the church with some stylistic and thematic similarity.

In other words, spirituality continued to permeate the existence of Africans and their descendants. Spirituals expressed worship of a higher power and the desire for freedom and a better life; work songs, field hollers, and the blues added erotic subject matter, further expression of myth, and other elements of life deemed improper for inclusion in Christian worship services. In spite of oppression and change, as well as the loss of many manifestations of West African culture, the underlying foundation for it all – all-encompassing spirituality – survived the middle passage and slavery.³¹ This convergence of cultures continued to bring about the evolution of a genre that only the melting pot of the United States could generate – an American genre.

³⁰ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 38-45; Kubik, “The African Matrix in Jazz Harmonic Practices,” 196; Boone, “A New Perspective on the Origin of the Blues and Blue Notes,” 8.

³¹ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 32, 39, 52, 59.

³² *Ibid.*, 32 – 73- 78.

Chapter 2:
Becoming the Blues

The fact that there is still some argument over both the “birthplace of the blues” and the significant features of its evolution owes a great deal to the fact that we know very little about developments in the genre from the period between the end of the Civil War to the early 1920’s. This is the time period during which the blues took shape and was disseminated not with the aid of recorded performances but rather by travelling bluesmen, minstrel singers, and vaudeville stars. This lack of documentation has also contributed to the construction of a variety of histories, all claiming validity from a particular perspective.

As I have discussed at some length previously, music is a product of the culture that inspires it. While this is often true for history as well, we must rely on certain established historical “facts” when forming a foundation for understanding what happened, how it happened, whom it affected, and how it affected them. When it comes to the blues, we can ascertain that the possibilities and burdens of freedom led to the expression of responses to those circumstances in a different kind of music – one that was at once the property of the people and of a capitalistic economy. The changes wrought by emancipation brought both triumph and struggle to African Americans in the South, as the ideal of choosing one’s own destiny met with the realities of racism, economic conditions, and the effects of war.

These changes were reflected by the blues: the prevalent theme of mobility represents both the ability to look for a better life elsewhere and the motivations for doing so. Supplemented by our knowledge of race relations and economic conditions in the South, we find a deeper understanding of the music, just as analyzing it adds to our understanding of history.

For instance, after examination of both blues lyrics and history it is evident that blacks migrated not only because they could but also because they sometimes had no choice. The backlash of whites against blacks that began after Reconstruction ended in 1877 led to the dramatic worsening of conditions for African Americans caused in large part by the passage of a succession of oppressive legal measures meant to maintain blacks' second-class status. It was these Jim Crow laws, along with the economic problems that plagued the agriculture industry of the South, which motivated many to seek better economic opportunity and a better social environment during the end of the nineteenth century. In addition to World War I, the second decade of the twentieth century saw the continuing migration of African Americans to cities. At this time, migration north dominated, as many northern cities offered the promise of work in factories as well as escape from Jim Crow laws. Thus, symbols of mobility such as the train that were employed frequently in blues lyrics reflected reality; as reality changed, so did the symbols and how they were used.

Evaluations of particular characteristics of the blues tradition – lyrics, specific musical characteristics, and the motivations of performers and the context in which they performed – vary depending on the particulars of history one is aware of and those which seem pertinent, depending on the perspective and motivations of the historian. There is no single history of the blues, no definition of this tradition that satisfies everyone. Each version documents the blues in different ways; this one aims to argue that this tradition possesses an inclusiveness that transcends race and nationality. In this chapter, I will further discuss the circumstances that

formed the blues as well as its evolution, describing basic textual, musical, and sociological characteristics that shaped the music.¹

Ultimately, the blues that rose from the ashes of the Civil War gets its conspicuous qualities from its roots in Africa, the influence of European-derived culture, the conditions of slavery, and its candid reflection of African-American life post-emancipation. Through time and distance, with the help of capitalism and technology, the music and its audience evolved. The relationship between these two essential parts of a performing tradition have provided a glimpse both into how the blues developed musically and into what it has meant to everyone who has contributed to it. To those who celebrate it, the blues is a valuable method of self-expression, an appealing form of entertainment, a way to make a living, a welcome connection to tradition, and a historical resource. But for many African Americans, this music has represented a reminder of a painful past and a resource for those who have worked to deny them equal rights; spurning this part of the tradition has meant supporting an improved quality of life. Before this music could come to mean so much, before it was even called the blues, it had to *become* the blues.

As discussed in the previous chapter, slaves taken from Africa brought with them varying traditions that had many unifying traits. Throughout their tenure as unpaid workers, slaves acquired new expressive traditions as they became Christianized and as they spent more time working long hours in the fields of the American South and co-existing with their white owners. The music itself changed in this environment, but perhaps more importantly, the concept of a division between the sacred and secular changed what music was allowed to express

¹ Oliver, *Broadcasting the Blues*, 29; Lynn Abbott and Dough Seroff, "They Cert'ly Sound Good to Me:" Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendency of the Blues," *American Music* 14 (Winter, 1996): 413; Burton W. Peretti, *Jazz in American Culture* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997), 11, 23-26.

inside and outside the church. Certain characteristics of African spirituality were suppressed – but not suffocated – by the prevailing values of Christian practice, placing everyday musical expression and any discussion of sex or African myth outside the realm of the spiritual.

While the genre of the spiritual demonstrated many survivals of African music and was a significant part of the ring ritual that still held an important place in religious practice, and continued to inform all African-American music, it differed in many ways from the music performed during work and recreation. The spiritual existed in the world of black Christian faith, in which slaves sang about biblical figures in their coded pleas for freedom from slavery, while music that was not sung in the church “in substance or form, directly or indirectly, derived from African ritual and performance practice.” Spirituals certainly found their way outside the church both intact and in the form of their influence on the blues. However, this was essentially a one-way street, since the majority of the music sung outside the church was deemed inappropriate in the setting of Christian worship. As Peter R. Aschoff notes, Christian music and that which thrived outside the church were driven by two different spiritual foundations: Christianity and African beliefs. Or, according to Willie Dixon, the blues is “dedicated to the earth and the facts of life,” while spirituals and the gospels that succeeded them dealt primarily with “heaven and after death.” As a result, these two traditions have often portrayed different values in terms of both supernatural philosophy and everyday morality.²

Coordination of labor, a way to pass the many hours spent working in the field, an outlet for the suffering brought on by being denied freedom and recognition of one’s humanity, a connection to ancestral spirits worshiped in a world long gone: work songs were part of the culture that Corey Harris described as “the one thing [whites] could never take away from black

² Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 42-43, 45-46; Floyd, “Ring Shout!,” 267-268, Aschoff, “The Poetry of the Blues,” 54-56; Worth Long, “The Wisdom of the Blues – Defining Blues as the True Facts of Life: An Interview with Willie Dixon,” *African American Review* 29 (Summer 1995): 208.

people.” African music is known for being functional, and the calls, cries, and hollers of its North American descendants are no different. Among the primary antecedents of the blues, these vocal performance styles provide insight into the genre they helped create. Without recordings of the secular songs of slaves, we must rely on what we know of African song and on contemporary descriptions and recordings of these three particular types of song perpetuated by African Americans. While Floyd describes the calls and cries as performing similar functions by similar means, Ashenafi Kebede notes that calls “communicate messages” and cries “express a deeply felt emotional experience.” Whether making arrangements for a social function or expressing grief, both forms of communication tend to be brief and without a noticeably intentional rhythmic pattern. The specific melodic and timbral characteristics of a call or cry helped to communicate a particular message as it perpetuated not only the African practice of employing this method of communication but also the accompanying musical ideals. The heterogeneous sound quality valued in African music was present in these calls and cries, as demonstrated in the more elaborate renderings. Regardless of what the particular message was, the use of such a wide array of vocal timbres provided a deeper meaning than the words alone could convey and allowed performers to transform – or signify on – the original material. Employed in a somewhat different context than calls and cries, hollers were used to convey messages over longer distances and often employed yodeling.³

Just as life and religious customs in Africa motivated particular performance practices and the conditions of slavery brought the spiritual and work songs into existence, emancipation created the blues. In the nineteenth century, many African Americans continued their existence as farm workers with limited opportunities, but the fact that they were free citizens created the

³ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 46-47; Ashenafi Kebede, *Roots of Black Music* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1982), 130; Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 64; Scorsese, “Feel Like Going Home.”

perception of unlimited possibilities. The potential for mobility, solitude, and leisure existed for blacks to a degree that it never had before, and these alterations to life found expression in music. Cries, calls, and hollers served well as several slaves worked together, united under common ownership and an absence of basic human rights. But as slaves became individual citizens and had to make their way in the world, the songs of the master's fields evolved into the songs of a different life, a life of freedom. As LeRoi Jones stated, "the work song is a limited social possibility." As African-American life evolved from the communal to the individual, the music adapted to the burdens and blessings of freedom to become the blues.⁴

It seems fairly obvious that contemporary observers of such transformations noticed that the music had changed and then tried to ascertain the motivation behind such alterations. To those looking back, the "why" is often automatically integrated with the "how" as the frame of reference includes not only historical information but also the perceived advantage afforded by hindsight. When it comes to the blues, the music and the world that motivated and witnessed its creation and evolution are inseparable; the blues itself is a sort of history, a commentary on a unique way of life provided candidly by those who lived it. In light of these facts, it is important to consider the historical events that contributed to the tradition's creation and evolution as well as the perspectives of those who interpreted these events through the medium of the blues.

The bluesmen documenting the story of blacks in America were "southern, rural, agrarian, working- and lower-class, and black" – as Peter R. Aschoff describes the "demographics of the blues" in their first incarnation after the Civil War. One thing Aschoff does not list in his criteria is "from the Mississippi Delta." Many areas of the south – such as

⁴Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 66; LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music that Developed From it* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1963), 60-63; David Evans, "Folk and Popular Blues," in *Write Me a Few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader*, ed. Steven C. Tracy (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999): 119.

Texas, Tennessee, and South Carolina, in addition to northwest Mississippi – had large numbers of slaves, who all suffered under similar conditions and used the West-African cultural traditions that they had either brought directly from Africa or inherited from their forebears to cope with those realities. With similar conditions, coming from similar backgrounds – it makes more sense that the blues developed in a number of places around the same time than does the idea of the Delta serving as a single origin for the birth of the tradition. Assuming that life in this part of the South produced a peculiar magical formula of suffering and creativity that spawned the blues leaves other regions without recognition of their cultural heritage and their own need to cope with the struggles of African-American existence. The disproportionate attention given to the Mississippi River Valley is largely a case of taking the mythology inherent in this tradition too far.⁵ When it comes down to it, “no one knows who sang first the blues, or where they sang it, or when.”⁶

What we do know is that “the blues meant different things to different performers at different times in different venues.” What the blues has meant to individuals and society as a whole has been determined not only by its lyrics and the pictures they painted but also by its relationship to the music of both Africa and the United States in terms of function, timbre, form, and the use of instruments. Since the blues drew most of its inspiration from songs sung in the field, this genre originated as primarily a vocal music. In large part, it is the vocal nature of the blues that makes it a means by which we can observe the lives of the people the music represents. Due to the nature of this genre’s transmission, though, the oeuvre as a whole is unreliable as a source of specific historical information.

⁵Jones, *Blues People*, 62; Aschoff, “The Poetry of the Blues,” 40-41, 46; Larkin, ed., “The Blues,” 1; Floyd, “The Power of Black Music,” 91.

⁶Marybeth Hamilton, “Sexuality, Authenticity, and the Making of the Blues Tradition,” *Past & Present* 169 (November 2000): 139.

While in many ways the blues is a highly personal music, a mirror held up to a person legally granted but still fighting for the rights of an American citizen, songwriting often involves the prevalent use of what Floyd calls ““traveling”” lyrics incorporated to suit the performer’s taste. These “formulaic lines,” as David Evans describes them, form the foundation for songs that possess originality and improvisation to varying degrees, depending on the intentions and skill of the performer. Dennis Jarrett describes the use of certain words, phrases, and formulas as helping the bluesman communicate in a familiar, often non-narrative manner as he constructs his individual musical personality. Words such as ““satisfy,”” incomplete phrases such as ““The blues ain’t nothin’ but...”” that were filled in as seemed fitting in context, sexual metaphors such as “lemon” and “let me keep your kitchen clean”” as well as metaphors such as the train or the crossroads that represented freedom or an encounter with the Devil serve to create music that fits the expectations that the audience has for the genre as well as the identity of the bluesman, allowing him to “function openly as a projection of the fantasies of his audience.” In this way, the audience can relate to, rather than be alarmed by, lines such as “I’m gonna beat my woman until I’m satisfied.” These songwriting and performance methods also serve as vehicles for the emotions and fantasies of bluesmen as well. Commonly-used formulaic material can convey the situation of the individual because these expressions often reflect frequently experienced events or emotional states; at the same time, adopting an alternate identity allows the performer to convey exaggerated, and sometimes violent, messages convincingly that the listener may find unbelievable or disturbing otherwise.⁷

⁷ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 76; David Evans, “Techniques of Blues Composition Among Black Folksingers,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 87 (July-September 1974): 242, 245; Dennis Jarrett, “The Singer and the Bluesman: Formulations of Personality in the Lyrics of the Blues,” in *Write Me a Few of Your Lines*, 195-199; Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 73-74, 76-77.

While constructed from a blues “core,” these lyrics are original in that the performer presents them in a highly personal manner, both textually and musically. These songs maintain a cumulative tendency in that they incorporate a varied assortment of these common phrases as they are combined by the performer to create a song. Lines are often strung together in a manner indicative of the overall non-narrative nature of blues lyrics. The prerogative of the performer creates a blurry collage of common issues faced by African Americans, telling the story of many through the whims of one. The oft-repeated statement “the blues is a feeling” applies not only to the emotional state of an individual but to the general insight provided by the lyrics; we get a feeling for a bigger picture rather than insight into particular events.

Some of the same songwriting traits apply to original compositions. The songwriter must create a compelling impression with his lyrics and an image that resonates internally and with his audience. The non-narrative tendency, as well as the heavy use of metaphor and of improvisation, prevails in original compositions as well. Robert Johnson’s “Phonograph Blues” demonstrates a novel use of metaphor to describe the problems and their causes in a frustrating romantic relationship. Johnson portrays himself as a victim suffering from the misdeeds of an unfaithful woman.

Beatrice I love my phonograph – but you have broke my windin’ chain
 Beatrice I love my phonograph – Hon’y, I’ve broke my windin’ chain.
 And you’ve taken my lovin’ – and give it to your other man.
 Now, we played it on the sofa, now, we played it ‘side the wall.
 My needles have got rusty, baby, they will not play at all.
 We played it on the sofa – and we played it ‘side the wall.
 But my needles have got rusty – and it will not play at all⁸

⁸ Evans, “Techniques of Blues Composition Among Black Folksingers,” 245-246; Jarrett, “Folklore and the Blues,” 196-198; Besham R. Sharma, “Poetic Devices in the Songs of Robert Johnson,” *Transcultural Musical Review* 3 (1997): 2-3.

Whether completely original or not, songs that seem to refer to a specific event often reflect empathy rather than actual experience. It is possible that Johnson was motivated to write “Phonograph Blues” by real-life problems, but he could have simply felt inspired to write a song on the common themes of infidelity and impotence. In an interview conducted by Paul Oliver, John Lee Hooker said, “It’s not . . . that I had the hardships that a lot of people had throughout the South and other cities throughout the country, but I do know what they went through.” Even though Hooker had not lived through the 1927 flood in Mississippi that he sang about, he felt compassion and kinship towards these victims because, as African Americans, they dealt with the same marginalization that he did; a natural disaster merely amplified these problems.⁹

Given Hooker’s explanation, which reflects the perspective of many in his position, it is easy to see that as a historical resource, the blues can be particularly valuable because lyrics written to reflect upon a particular situation provide a perspective that would otherwise not exist. In a racially segregated society that limited the degree to which blacks could participate in documenting their own history, the blues often served in this capacity. Whites, for the most part, were writing the newspapers and books, while blacks who lived under the conditions above were often denied the opportunity to pursue the education and vocational path necessary to participate in conventional journalistic or historical practices. Survival came first, and the creativity that sprang from this struggle produced the blues – our most reliable first-hand account of impoverished African Americans’ lives. Peter Aschoff cites one particular song that documents the flood of all floods that devastated the Mississippi Delta in 1927: Walter Roland’s “Red Cross

⁹ Evans, “Techniques of Blues Composition Among Black Folksingers,” 242, 245; Paul Oliver, *Broadcasting the Blues: Black Blues in the Segregation Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006): 113-116.

Blues.” The lyrics of the song center on a couple’s struggle to obtain basic goods without sacrificing pride.¹⁰

Say, you know them Red Cross folks there, they sure do treat you mean.
 Don’t want to give you nothin’ but two, three cans of beans.
 Now, I told ‘em “No” ... Great Lord, said “I don’t want to go.”
 I said, you know I cannot go to Hills. I’m got to go yonder to that Red Cross Store.

Lyrics also expressed the realities of freedom, including the ability – and sometimes necessity – to leave in order to search for prosperity or to end an unhealthy romantic relationship. But in addition to the personal histories of a downtrodden group of people, these lyrics provide an illustration of a much bigger picture: the complex impetus for this mode of expression. The form and content of blues lyrics, as well as the context in which this genre was born, provide important anthropological insights into the culture of African Americans: where they came from and who they had become.

The blues grew from the West-African tendency to incorporate music into all parts of life. During slavery, music continued to provide expression to cope with all manner of circumstances, but the escalating effects of Christianization encouraged a separation between strictly spiritual music and that which combined the consideration of both God and everything deemed improper to discuss in a Christian setting. God, sex, relationships, leisure, work, segregation, unfairness within the legal system – the lyrics of the blues represented the personal viewpoints of their creators and perpetrators with a frankness and accessibility that has had lasting appeal. The nature of these lyrics have also made clear this genre’s ties to Africa in their

¹⁰ Barry Lee Pearson, “Appalachian Blues,” *Black Music Research Journal* 23 (Spring-Autumn 2003): 24; Aschoff, “The Poetry of the Blues,” 37, 46-48; Evans, “Techniques of Blues Composition Among Black Folksingers,” 242, 245.

reference to African myth and in their openness about both the complex post-abolition relationships between black men and women and the power of sexuality.

Whether this music was received with appreciation by those who felt a kinship to its messages or with concern by those who wanted to distance themselves from a culture that was not held in high regard by mainstream society, the fact remains that the messages and the methods of performance and transmission were rooted in both honest reflections on life as well as the survivals of African culture that had melded to some extent with that of whites. As opposed to work songs, which were inspired primarily by agricultural labor, the blues was from the beginning music of leisure and personal reflection. The soloistic quality of the blues is one indication that some parts of this tradition were not brought from West Africa – this particular trait is “a manifestation of the whole Western concept of man’s life” as seen through the eyes of African Americans. However, as blacks learned to make their way through the world as individual citizens, they continued to interpret many situations with the remnants of an African moral sensibility. Mobility was a major theme in the blues if only because it was possible and often necessary, and it often factored into accounts of personal relationships that, by Christian standards, came off as lacking appropriate values. But by West-African standards, premarital sex was not only allowed but was often encouraged, and, as discussed in Chapter 1, the topic of sex in general was far from taboo. African values and myth have informed the frankness and imagination with which the blues dealt with the topic of sex; men are given animal-like qualities, such as in Bertha Lee’s “Yellow Bee” (“Well, he buzzed me this morning’, . . . been lookin’ for him all day long. . .”) while the sexuality of women is seen as powerful, as Sonny Boy Williamson’s “Eyesight to the Blind:”

I remember one Friday mornin' we was lyin' down cross the bed . . .
 . . . Man in the next room was dyin' . . .
 Stopped dyin' an' raised up his head, an' said . . .
 "Lord, ain't she pretty, and the whole state knows she's fine.
 Every time she start to lovin, she brings eyesight to the blind."

One of the consequences of racial segregation, despite its overall destructive impact, has been the preservation of a distinctive culture among African Americans. Among the characteristics of West African culture that survived in this forced segregation is the role of sex, as demonstrated by the music of Lee and Williamson. Increased mobility as well as changes in gender roles and the nature of intimate relationships brought on by urbanization and industrialization only enhanced this trait of African-American music.¹¹

Examination of just how these words found musical expression links the blues to both African and European tradition. The influence of each is undeniable, although the manner and extent are debatable. Aside from the content of the lyrics, one of the most important features of the blues song's construction is its form. Some, such as Samuel Floyd, Michael Coolen, and LeRoi Jones, argue that the AAB form of the blues comes from Africa. To Jones, "the three-line verse of the blues springs from no readily apparent Western source." This form was a feature of the shout, from which the blues "issued directly." This case is made more persuasive by the fact that, almost thirty years later, Coolen linked the large proportion of African Americans of Senegambian *gewel* (or *jali*) heritage to "the structural and tonal similarities between the blues and the Senegambian *fodet*." He finds that not only the AAB structure but also the "alternated use of tonic and secondary tonal centers" have been consistent features of this African genre.¹²

¹¹ Aschoff, "The Poetry of the Blues," 44, 49, 53, 58-64; Jones, *Blues People*, 64-66; Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 67; Martha Bayles, "Hollow Rock and the Lost Blues Connection," *The Wilson Quarterly* 17 (Summer 1993): 15; Hamilton, "Sexuality, Authenticity, and the Making of the Blues Tradition," 139.

¹² Michael Coolen, "Senegambian Influences of Afro-American Musical Cultures," *Black Music Research Journal* 11 (Spring 1991): 9; David Brackett, "At the Crossroads with Robert Johnson, As Told by Johnny Shines," in *The*

The influence of Africa is not up for debate, but the fact that blacks were also influenced to varying degrees by whites is undeniable. While the twelve-bar, I-IV-I-V-I form that bluesmen quickly codified as well as the AAB structure of their lyric are often traceable to African origins, these features were also prominent in English ballads. In fact, Richard Waterman argued that these formal mainstays of the blues were actually absent from African music. In the process of explaining the development of the blues from its “primitive” form to that which has been in use for most of the genre’s existence, Jones cites the English ballad as the source of a formulaic foundation. However, he makes the case that the blues was founded upon something European but became more African over time, stating that the blues developed “out of what seemed like imitations of European music into a form (and content) that was relatively autonomous.

Primitive blues is much more a Negro music than a great deal of the music it grew out of.”

Waterman and Jones argue the same point in rather different ways as they illustrate the influence of the English ballad upon the blues: the ballad was first learned as an artifact within Anglo-American culture then internalized and adapted to include West-African retentions.

At this point it is obvious that such issues of origin have engendered a good deal of debate. Given that both European and African influences were present during the formation and evolution of the blues, giving credit to both seems like a logical assumption – that is, after all, part of what makes it American music. However, explanations in history are invariably constructed out of more than just logical evaluations of the available information. In the different perspectives that form the body of blues scholarship, the unavoidable bias and lack of complete data present in any historical account take on a significant degree of importance. An examination of the various perspectives included in the previous discussion illustrates this point.

An advocate of Black Nationalism, Jones finds validity in claiming sole African-American ownership of the blues in an effort to resist the hegemony of white culture. Waterman feels no such motivation, as he labels European influences as foundational. By citing evidence of Senegambian influence that was out of Jones' reach at the time of his writings in *Blues People*, Michael Coolen has established a greater degree of credibility for the West African influence on harmony and form. Samuel Floyd presents a more balanced approach, offering evidence for the influence of both African and European influences along with the observation that acculturation has been part of African-American life from the beginning. However, he does find that African culture was foundational, putting him at odds with Waterman's views. To quote him directly, "the emerging African-American genres were not formed by the insertion of African performance practices into the formal structures of European music. . . but were molded in a process that superimposed European forms on the rich and simmering foundation of African religious beliefs and practices. The foundation of the new syncretized music was African, not European." Each of these viewpoints has a certain degree of validity that is tainted by the unavoidable humanity of history.¹³

In attempts to illuminate African survivals in the blues we are best left to discuss characteristics of the genre that European music could not claim. These characteristics of the tradition can be defined in three categories: the manner in which this particular oral tradition has been composed and transmitted, the technical features of the music, and the influences of African spirituality that undergird much of the music. The process of oral transmission is traceable to the particular process indebted to African lineage, as opposed to that demonstrated in Anglo-

¹³ Jones, *Blues People*, 62, 68-69, 76-77; Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 75, 85; Coolen, "Senegambian Influences of Afro-American Culture," 3; Lynn Summers, "African Influence and the Blues: An Interview with Richard A. Waterman." *Living Blues* 6 (Autumn 1971): 36.

American culture. While the obvious influence of mainstream culture exists in some blues records in the use of thirty-two-bar song form and thematic lyrical construction, one of the blues' most distinguishing characteristics, along with the AAB, twelve-bar form, is its generally non-narrative construction of African origin. This compositional practice is both stable and unstable in that performers continue using familiar material while individualizing it to meet the expectations of personal expression or the perceived needs of the audience. When a blues becomes associated with a particular singer's performance, others are hesitant to perform the song differently – whether it was an original composition or just a well-known and frequently reinforced performance. The age of radio and recordings have made closer imitation of established versions more common, especially since many musicians use recordings to learn their craft. However, David Evans notes that “black singers in general tend to personalize their songs and are less likely to see themselves as simply carriers or vehicles for the performance of traditional pieces.” While the static form of a recording significantly influenced the transmission of the blues, the survivals of West African tradition – in this case, improvisation and the cumulative nature of blues lyrics – continued to inform the transmission of the blues after the advent of recording technology.¹⁴

Other methods of personalization and transmission of myth are of indisputable African origin. Floyd notes that “early blues melodies were based on a pentatonic arrangement that included blue notes – or the potential for blue notes.” While the use of pentatonic scales is certainly not limited to West Africa, the particular manner in which these scales have been performed is more characteristic of this tradition than of the Anglo-American traditions with which African Americans engaged. Included among other African retentions that survived in the

¹⁴ Bayles, “Hollow Rock and the Lost Blues Connection,” 13; Evans, “Techniques of Blues Composition Among Black Folksingers,” 240-249; Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 76.

blues are “wide use of call-and-response figures, elisions, repeated short phrases, falling and pendular thirds, timbral distortions, ululations, vocables, hums, moans, and other devices typical of music derived from the ring.”

While the use of the human voice to transmit these characteristics dates from the first days of slavery, the use of musical instruments was quite limited until after emancipation, which, of course, coincides with the birth of the blues. African-Americans’ greater access to financial reward for their labor enabled them to purchase instruments, and the advent of marketing techniques such as mail order catalogues in the late nineteenth century provided them with a method by which to do so. Use of the guitar among bluesmen probably related to the instrument’s similarity to the fiddle and banjo (both of which resemble African instruments), the ability of the guitar to provide both harmony and a variety of timbres, and the relative ease with which one could learn to play reasonably well. In general, instrumental playing replicated the West African practice of vocal imitation of instrumental timbres. Vocals certainly conformed to some extent to the limitations of instruments, but instrumental playing also adapted to the expectations of the vocal genre that had already been established. Employing this array of survivals from the West African musical tradition, whether by means of the voice or a guitar or piano, provided performers and their audience with a connection not only to African music but also to the mythical ideals that had originally motivated it.

The blues is a reaction to and reflection of the society of its creators and those who sustain it. It provides perspective into contemporary life, but is also a reflection on the cumulative history of the tradition. The lyrics of bluesmen – their content as well as their methods of composition – as well as the predominant African-American musical traits of improvisation, the heterogeneous sound ideal, and call and response – serve to perpetuate a

crucial aspect of the ring – the act of signifyin’. These devices are tools of interpretation, the embodiment of Esu, Legba, Brer Rabbit, the trickster, or the Signifyin’ Monkey – all variants of the same spiritual figure in West-African myth that represent mediation, trickery, creativity, and the influence of the spiritual figures in day-to-day life. They “carve out a space for signifying practice,” allowing performers to transform “material by using it rhetorically or figuratively.”¹⁵

African-American music has been built on this concept of transformation, linking it to the myth of the trickster. As discussed in Chapter 1 (and to some extent just previously), the African trickster is a figure of mediation and cultural interpretation who often distorts rules and uses figurative language to cause trouble or obtain something for himself. In America, the trickster continued to take the form of an animal – a monkey or rabbit for many African-Americans – but the aspect of musical creativity and the trickster’s relationship to the spiritual realm increased in significance. The perceived relationship between musical ability and spiritual power added to the image of bluesmen as tricksters. This spirituality was seen as the source of creativity and was often reflected in blues lyrics. Something that also changed was the fact that blacks were no longer telling stories about tricking “the master;” they were now free but highly disadvantaged second-class citizens, and the message of the trickster changed to reflect that. As a figure who lives “outside the margins of society,” the trickster could be someone who operates with the goal of improving life for himself by bending or breaking the rules or a drifter who takes no part in society and makes his own rules. The latter group clearly includes the ideal of the lone wandering bluesman who got his musical gifts from the Devil. Robert Johnson, who often sang

¹⁵ Floyd, “Ring Shout!,” 271.

about the Devil and the “crossroads,” where Johnson is said to have met the Devil, has been a frequently cited example of such a figure.¹⁶

With a foundation in West African and European music and the subsequent inspiration of profound social and economic changes following emancipation, the music of the fields became music commonly identified with a race. The blues expressed the suffering and joys of free African Americans in a way that nothing else could, whether they were in the North or the South, the country or the city. As time has shown, though, seeking to define a genre that means something to so many people – both black and white – leads to a variety of frequently contradictory perspectives. “Masterful,” “grotesque,” “corrupted,” “authentic,” “adulterated:” historians and critics have used such terms to characterize a multitude of blues lyrics and instrumental accompaniments without any pattern of consensus. Conceptions of authenticity, morality, and ownership saturate the viewpoint of everyone who has an opinion. The source of the music, its message, and its audience all inspire debate. The chapters that follow will continue this discussion of these perceptions and conflicts and how they affect not only how we interpret the blues but also how the music is made and who deserves to make it, including Eric Clapton.

¹⁶ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 72-76, 78; Jones, *Blues People*, 69-70; Ayana Smith, “Blues, Criticism, and the Signifying Trickster,” *Popular Music* 24 (May 2005): 180, 183; Floyd, “Ring Shout!,” 269, 271; Sharma, “Poetic Devices in the Songs of Robert Johnson,” 1.

Chapter 3:

Signifin' on Dialogism

A worn-out, lonely transient with only his guitar, his voice, and his music to keep him company as he travels from town to town transmitting an almost sacred tradition as a means of spiritual survival. Of all the interpretations of the blues tradition, this has perhaps been the most powerful one. Steeped in the African myth of the crossroads and the trickster as well as the reality of the itinerant African-American male, the image of the free black man roaming the South out of a mystically-derived creative impulse, curiosity about the American landscape he was finally free to roam, or the search for employment is a foundation for many a critique on both future and contemporaneous incarnations of the blues tradition. For a people who have been enslaved, marginalized, beaten, and legislated into submission, and to this day denied equal opportunity, this narrow definition of the blues provides evidence of the greatness of black culture and the suffering African Americans have endured as well as a way of excluding the influence of both capitalist industry and of people who cannot claim to be part of this heritage. This noble set of creative customs belongs to African Americans and to no one else.

While the romance of such notions is beautiful and not entirely without value outside of its affective power, the truth is that the blues has always been more than that. Itinerant performers share credit with the professionals of the minstrel and, later, vaudeville traditions, as well as recording companies and professional songwriters such as W.C. Handy, for transmitting the blues tradition and contributing to its evolution in a rapidly changing cultural landscape. For the practitioners and audience who supported the blues both before recordings became available in 1920 and throughout the height of the popularity of this tradition in the 1930's, such credit

was normally given, for it was not always the source but the content of this music that motivated judgment. It has largely been at the hands of scholars that the blues was defined to exclude anything not supporting the existence of a pure tradition that makes suffering seem noble and profit a sin – a tradition that excludes the possibility of growth through embracing new musical influences and an expanding ranging of participants. This realm of impossible purity is no place for Eric Clapton.¹

The primary failing of this point of view is not an absence of valid contributions to the body of knowledge concerning the blues tradition but an apparent lack of awareness of the validity of other points of view. Rather than retaining “the memory of its own partiality,” this version of history is a monologue that frequently builds a position of privilege through the rejection of other worldviews. However, assumptions of universality are not unique to blues purists; this “aversion. . . to the dialogical complexity of our construal of the world around us” applies to every historical perspective that rejects the hermeneutics of another based only on the need to support one’s existing conclusions. It also applies to the disdain for contributions to the blues by those labeled as outsiders based on the denial of variation within the tradition itself. From this perspective, the blues is also a monologue, one employing a unique and unchanging code; alterations of this code render it inauthentic, and the use of it by outsiders is shallow at best. A dialogue between historical and critical discourses creates an expansion of awareness first by allowing each perspective the potential for validity in its own right and then using this acceptance of validity to enlarge competing points of view.

In this way, the blues can be both black and white, both rural and urban, country and classic, American and British. Content is both admissible and questionable, depending on the critical perspective, but nothing is deemed “inauthentic” because legitimacy is possible from

¹ Hamilton, “Sexuality, Authenticity, and the Making of the Blues Tradition,” 141, 152, 157.

some vantage point. In what Gary Tomlinson calls a “‘parallactic’ conception,” each contribution to the body of knowledge concerning the blues offers something unique, just as each addition to this expressive tradition adds to its richness in some way. The contextual and the critical have shaped one another and the evolution of the music in significant and varying ways. It is to these matters that I now turn.²

While most would agree that the blues was mainly a child of the work songs of the South, such a consensus on the genre’s coming of age is harder to come by. Determined by a variety of power structures, some of which have incorporated the application of various forms of Christian values, definitions and criticism of various branches of the blues tradition abound. In developing a comprehensive understanding of the blues, it will be productive to examine the sociological and economic background that influenced not only these evaluations but also the development of the music itself.

For African Americans, emancipation brought hope of a better life, of equality. But reality brought the recognition that such things would be hard to come by. The economic and social changes of the late nineteenth century only accelerated in the twentieth, as industrialization, a decrease in European immigration, and worsening racial discrimination in the South motivated blacks to move not only to cities but further north, where opportunities for a better life seemed to lie waiting. And while conditions were certainly better in many ways, with higher-paying jobs and the absence of Jim Crow laws, African Americans still had to contend with the racial prejudice of the whites who protested the increasing presence of blacks in a number of ways. As the emphasis of the individual over community brought about by African

² Tomlinson, “Cultural Dialogics and Jazz: A White Historian Signifies,” 237-238, 262-263, 240.

Americans' entrance into the realities of a capitalist economic system intensified, the relocation of millions of blacks to urban centers during the Great Migration also intensified tensions between blacks and whites as groups. African-American soldiers fighting in the world wars returned home assuming that they had earned their right to true equality through their contributions to the war effort; many other blacks felt as though this participation, in addition to their own, should have been considered in altering the manner in which whites engaged with them. In spite of these factors, the second-class citizenship of African-Americans remained in place, and the inevitable integration in various urban centers resulting from migration resulted not in acceptance but in adamant resistance. The violence of race riots and the hardships brought by employment and housing discrimination as well as the general refusal of acceptance of blacks into white society, led African Americans to develop "a level of cynicism that would have a significant consequence: a renewed and intensified mistrust of white society." As much as blacks still aspired to achieve the same level of prosperity as whites and often shared similar Christian moral values with the dominant culture, the realization of equality remained distant. At this point, African-American identity became progressively shaped by a bitterly accepted distance, or "otherness," from white society. As much as they wanted many of the same things as their Caucasian countrymen, African Americans became increasingly aware that as a people they would always be different.³

One of the means by which African Americans coped with their situation was the tropological device of signifyin'. While I have discussed signifyin' mostly in terms of its connection to African myth and improvisation, another dimension of this practice grew in significance in the twentieth century. As Samuel Floyd says, "tropological thought, repetition with difference, the obscuring of meaning..." became a means to "...achieve or reverse power,

³ Peretti, *Jazz in American Culture*, 25-26; Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 91-92.

to improve situations and to achieve pleasing results for the signifier.” In a sense, the trickster took on the role of defining black culture as consistently original and deliberately inaccessible through an emphasis on a process of revision that was alien to much of white society.⁴

It is this practice that has enabled some to say “‘it’s a black thing; you wouldn’t understand’” in discussions of the blues⁵. The signifyin’ that takes place within this music in the form of the call-and-response between vocal and accompaniment – in both vocal and instrumental music – is a form of reinterpretation that places emphasis on the evolution of the musical material through the process of performance rather than on the literal restatement of previous material. While the practice of signifyin’ is a survival of African culture, arguments that such manifestations of this culture must be limited to African Americans are doomed to failure upon critical inspection. The admission that music is a product of culture implies that the musical practices for which some critics claim exclusivity could potentially be adopted to the same extent that any aspect of culture can be learned. As significant as the differences are between the political and economic realities of whites and blacks in the United States as a result of continuing racism, the fact remains that cultural traits are not inherently perpetuated through genetics. In the words of Paul Gilroy, “[T]he most important lesson music still has to teach us is that its inner secrets and its ethnic rules can be taught and learned.”⁶

Claims of exclusivity become even more questionable when considering the influence that white culture and participation have had on the blues from its inception. It is not only European-derived formal and harmonic practices that have at least partially shaped this tradition, although blacks did so on their own terms as part of a syncretic process; the participation of

⁴ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 95.

⁵ Gilroy, “Sounds Authentic,” 125.

⁶ Gilroy, “Sounds Authentic,” 123, 134; Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 96; Tomlinson, “Cultural Dialogics and Jazz,” 247.

white performers and songwriters has also played a role in the genre's evolution. Labels such as "hillbilly," "race," and "rhythm and blues" have provided the music industry with a means for targeting the marketing of products while continuing to shape dialogue to a rather unfortunate extent. Rather than reflecting the actual circumstances of cultural interaction and musical evolution, these labels distort the truly varied origins and development of musical traditions; when scholars and critics rely on such distinctions the frequent result is misinterpretation that suits a desired conclusion and perpetuates the simplistic messages of the music industry. Rather than proving the exclusivity of valuable black cultural products, the point of view that excludes whites from participation demonstrates "the effect of racism's denials not only of black cultural integrity but of the capacity of blacks to bear and reproduce any culture worthy of the name." Considering the actions ranging from the hurtful distortions of black culture portrayed in the minstrel show to the real-life Jim Crow antics that legalized segregation and second-class citizenship and have encouraged violence against blacks, the desire for even white scholars to exclude the influence of white culture in their discussion of black culture is understandable. The fact remains, though, that the influence of white culture on that of African Americans has been part of a complex acculturative process that has taken place over hundreds of years and includes both the condescension of the minstrel show and the more positive contributions of European-derived form and harmony.⁷

The effects of capitalism, many and complex, have been interpreted in myriad ways, depending on the originating perspectives and objectives of the voices being projected into the

⁷ Gilroy, "Sounds Authentic," 123-124; Peter Navaréz, "The Influences of Hispanic Music Cultures on African-American Blues Musicians," *Black Music Research Journal*, 14 (Autumn 1994): 204; Charles Woolfe, "A Lighter Shade of Blues: White Country Blues," *Write Me a Few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader*, ed. Steven C. Tracy (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999): 515-516; Kyle Crichton, "Thar's Gold in Them Hillbillies," in *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader: Histories and Debates*, ed. David Brackett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005): 29.

discourse. Since the first blues recording, Mamie Smith's rendition of "That Thing Called Love," was released on Valentine's Day of 1920, both positive and negative comparisons have been made between the "race records" of the women of the blues, such as Mamie Smith, Bessie Smith, and Ida Cox, and the bluesmen who began making recordings in 1923, such as Blind Lemon Jefferson and Leadbelly (Huddie Ledbetter), who are considered to be of closer lineage to the itinerant performers whose recordings have either been lost to obscurity or never existed in the first place. Degrees of authenticity, based largely on the perceived evils of urban life and the moral values derived from Christian theology at the time have all played some part in determining how the two primary branches of recorded blues of the 1920's and '30's have been critiqued in relation to each other in terms of both the values of performers and their audience and of the influence that industry has had on the evolution and dissemination of the music.⁸

Given the negative effects capitalism has wreaked on society, the existence of a significant segment of the blues tradition without connections to the industrial society associated with capitalism in the 20th and 21st centuries would strengthen the case for claims that independence from such an influence is a requirement for artistic purity. The fact remains, though, that emancipation put African American musicians in the marketplace with everyone else. Musical performances have been commodified since the time people could expect to make money from them. In the words of Gary Tomlinson, "Music created with an eye to eternal genius and blind to the marketplace is a myth of European romanticism sustained by its chief offspring, modernism."⁹ If the definition given for the blues incorporated only those who performed music for pleasure without the expectation of monetary compensation, the scope of the genre would be infinitesimal. The vast majority of the musicians who played the blues

⁸Larkin, ed., "The Blues," 3; David Evans, "Musical Innovation in the Blues of Blind Lemon Jefferson," *Black Music Research Journal* 20 (Spring 2000): 83-84.

⁹ Tomlinson, "Cultural Dialogics and Jazz," 253.

needed to make money just as did any other citizen of the United States, and as a result they often performed a variety of musical styles in a number of circumstances.

Along with the necessity to please an audience, the repertoires of African-American performers reflected the acculturation that had already taken place. By the time the Civil War had ended, some blacks could trace their North American heritage back over two hundred years; even the earliest commercial blues recordings were made by people who were not even alive during the period of slavery. They were born as free Americans and as such exhibited the cultural qualities of both their West African ancestors and their former masters. To free blacks, the music of whites had melded inseparably into African-American traditions as both a form of personal expression and a way to make a living. For blacks, the process of acculturation included not just a process of syncretizing but of signifyin' on the fruit of the former process. The practice of signifyin' had been employed at least since after the Civil War to resist the harm caused by the caricatures of the minstrel, and blacks syncretized this particular tradition to signify on it and transform the message. Whether wearing the figurative "minstrel mask" to achieve some remnant of equality with whites, deforming it to establish a separate and powerful African-American heritage, or acting out the dehumanizing minstrel tradition with financial gain as the primary motivation, blacks found ways to profit from it.¹⁰

After Emancipation, the lifting of restrictions on social gatherings of African-Americans led to a greater variety in what blacks did in their newfound leisure time. Activities of the church were supplemented and sometimes replaced by secular gatherings. It was in juke joints, medicine shows, circuses, the minstrel show, and in vaudeville that blacks performed and danced to ragtime, jazz, popular ballads, and the blues transmitted by oral tradition, the dissemination of sheet music and, later, records and radio. By the end of the nineteenth century, the vaudeville

¹⁰ Floyd, "The Power of Black Music," 87-88.

tradition had overtaken the minstrel show in popularity. By the first decade of the twentieth century, many towns and cities in the United States had a vaudeville theatre of some sort, in which a variety of performances, including some by African-American performers in the minstrel show's characteristic blackface, entertained enthusiastic black audiences. One of the most important means of dissemination for the blues was on the vaudeville stage, marking the beginning of a trend for dissemination of the blues by vaudeville performers. The first popular blues records were made by female vaudevillians. These records reflect a facet of the tradition's dissemination that had existed for thirty years while perpetuating musical characteristics of the genre that demonstrated both its rural roots and its urban transformations.

The blues was also performed, along with almost any other music requested by customers, in establishments that fostered circumstances contrasting quite a bit with those of a medicine show or a vaudeville stage. A fair number of these juke joints were dangerous places in which violence erupted among drunk and jealous patrons. During a performing partnership that began around 1912 and probably lasted for about a year, Leadbelly and Blind Lemon Jefferson performed in a number of seedy locales. As Leadbelly describes some of these performing circumstances, "We musicians were the center of attention and all the girls crowded around us. That made their boyfriends angry, and so there were many fights and knifings."¹¹ High levels of poverty and frustration among African Americans were definite contributors to the situation, and the addition of alcohol certainly did not help matters. The lyrics of the blues often reflected this state of affairs. In Bessie Smith's "Dirty No-Gooder Blues," she describes a man who would "treat you nice and kind till he win your heart and hand/Then he git so cruel that many you just could not stand." This song, released in 1929, reflects the penchant for

¹¹ Lornell, "Blind Lemon Meets Leadbelly," 23; Henrietta Yurchenco, "'Blues Fallin' Down Like Hail,': Recorded Blues, 1920s-1940s," *American Music* 13 (Winter 1995): 462. Yurchenco describes this secondary source as "Personal communication to author, 1940."

exaggeration exhibited in many blues lyrics as well as the tension between the sexes that escalated as a result of changing roles in the increasingly urban African-American population.

As an example of the variety of music performed by many musicians who are commonly deemed “authentic” by some blues scholars, Jefferson and Leadbelly’s repertory included not just the blues, which each of them are known to have composed, but also popular ballads, ragtime tunes – whatever patrons requested that either or both of them could reproduce. The goal was to make money by performing music, and for Leadbelly and Jefferson, as well as for countless other performers, the idea of transmitting a pure tradition that scholars, critics, and citizens could promote as a demonstration of the independence of African-American creative traditions was not a consideration. They had to play what people would pay them to play. They were all “songsters.”¹²

While there is no doubt that capitalism had a significant impact on the music of both independent performers and those who toured on the vaudeville circuit, there is uncertainty as to how – and to what extent – this sort of public performance influenced the genre’s development. Significant factors in the construction of many arguments about the effects of industry on the blues are the often-cited evils of industrialism and urban life. Ignoring the fact that the blues was born and brought to the public during the Industrial Revolution, numerous scholars have cited the influence of the music industry as a factor in the dissemination of a lewdly tainted version of what was once a pure tradition. But the fact is that the blues was always “tainted” – by the influence of European-derived culture and by the business of making money through the dissemination of an art form. The sexually explicit language in the recorded blues of Bessie

¹² Floyd, “The Power of Black Music,” 66-67, 108; Abbott and Seroff, ““They Cert’ly Sound Good to Me,” 405, 412; Henrietta Yurchenco, ““Blues Fallin’ Down Like Hail:’ Recorded Blues, 1920’s-1940’s,” *American Music* 13 (Winter 1995): 449-450, 462; Larkin, ed., “The Blues,” 2.; Lornell, “Blind Lemon Meets Leadbelly,” 28-29, 31; Bayles, “Hollow Rock and the Lost Blues Connection,” 15.

Smith and others has been blamed on the influence of the music industry, when in fact the eroticism of the blues is of West African origin and reflected the role of sex in African-American life, so it has always been a part of the genre. While the motivations of ambitious recording companies cannot be denied, for the most part the language changed as the people changed, not just because “sex sells.”

This lack of understanding among critics and historians regarding the origin of eroticism in the blues and of the relationship of this trait to the changing roles between the sexes that began in the late nineteenth century and accelerated in the twentieth has figured prominently in the dialogue over the years. While the blues has always approached the topic of sex with frankness and openness, as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth and urbanization came to define the evolution of African-American culture, what Marybeth Hamilton describes as the “sexual tension [that] lay at the heart of early twentieth-century black life” was reflected in the music. The sexual metaphors and innuendo that had always been present became more dominant as urban life affected the balance of power between African-American men and women. When judged from the standards of Christian moral values and of those who equate making money with artistic degradation, the development of the blues from an impossible purity to a commercially successful performing tradition that freely discusses the sex in its lyrics will be seen as exploitation by the music industry. If this music is not judged on its own terms we can only understand it on the terms of something that really never existed; from that point of view, we cannot understand it. The conviction that the only blues worthy of admiration were those that fit an image of a type of performer and tradition created in the imaginations of puritanical or ethnocentric historians and critics has led to more storytelling than useful contributions to historical discourse. And the stance ““what sells must be bad”” reveals little about the music and

a great deal about the rigid economic theories used to devalue the work of a great many performers of the past, present, and future.¹³

At times it seems as though the influence of the music industry is used to explain away things that a critic does not like about the blues and the environment that inspired it. Urban life caused many changes in African-American life and culture, which are reflected in the music of urban blues musicians. Looking to the music of an artist defined as untainted by considerations of materialistic values, it is easy to see reflected in such music a world that has retained the moral values seen as lost in modern society – the importance of community and traditional gender roles in particular. Hamilton describes such a perspective as being “impelled by a conviction that something precious in the human soul is threatened by the urban industrial order, and . . . creating or salvaging authentic culture is a key step towards getting it back.” The image created in this endeavor is a romanticized version of poverty and oppression that, for those apprehensive about the rapid social changes of the twentieth century, represented a world rich in the values of community and devoid of the evils of urban life: “mass production, mass consumption, and modern technology.” Nostalgia distorts the past when we are dissatisfied with the present, but in this case romanticizing the deplorable living conditions of most African Americans in the idealized American South makes it seem as though maybe they did not have it so bad.

The imagined benefits of the austere living conditions blacks endured in the South extend to the morality found within the music emanating from these circumstances. The economic and social purity perceived in the rural South provide the foundation for the idea that the music of country blues artists such as Robert Johnson and his contemporaries is more appropriately

¹³Tomlinson, “Cultural Dialogics and Jazz,” 252; Hamilton, “Sexuality, Authenticity, and the Making of the Blues Tradition,” 134, 138-139, 141-146, 148; Bayles, “Hollow Rock and the Lost Blues Tradition,” 15.

reticent in its portrayals of sex than its commercial counterparts, thus more accurately reflecting the values of “decent” African-American culture. Historians have placed such values on portrayals of sex in what have been labeled “country” and “classic” branches of the blues, even though “the distinction between ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ blues. . . had no meaning for the music’s original listeners: it appears nowhere in early blues advertisements.” Such labels rarely originate with the performers themselves, either. The labels of the music industry, historians, and critics are created and employed to separate and simplify complex traditions in the process of commodification and evaluation. Their limitations as descriptions of musical content serve the purpose of the music industry in their quest to market effectively a product that actually embodies a great deal of complexity. For those in a position to elaborate on the intricacies of the tradition, using these terms to define the music merely perpetuates a practice that delineates distinct and separate musical styles and genres that in reality often interact a great deal.

For blues lovers of the 1920’s, ‘30’s, and ‘40’s these perceptions did not exist. If the music of Bessie Smith did not speak to African-Americans they would not have bought her records. But for historians offended by the frankness of Sara Martin in “Mean Tight Mama,” these distinctions allow them to remove this music from the space it would have shared with anything at all by an “authentic” bluesman such as Robert Johnson. The blues that enjoyed the support of commercial enterprise in its dissemination did not enjoy the support of blues historians, even though the content of many of these songs provides valuable insight into the life of African Americans. The song “Bloodhound Blues,” sung by Victoria Spivey, describes one dimension of the suffering that African-American women endured both before and during incarceration:

Well, I broke out of my cell when the jailer turned his back,
But now I'm so sorry, bloodhounds is on my track...
Well I know I done wrong, but he kicked me and blacked my eyes,
But if the bloodhounds ever catch me, in the electric chair I'll die.

Unfortunately, songs such as this have suffered from an association with the terms “classic” or “urban” in the evaluations of many blues historians. In the blues revival that began in the 1950's, aficionados and historians promoted music that has reinforced ideals of authenticity rooted in the disdain for anything that does not fit the mold of the “pure” blues tradition. The frank sexual language, association with vaudeville, and connections to the music industry often leaves the “classic” blues out in the woods to this day.

On the other end of the spectrum, the music of penniless black, rural performers has become the core of the tradition, representing an aura of truth for a way of life that many blues scholars feel has been free of the corrupting influence of the music industry and white mainstream culture. This philosophy places performers such as Robert Johnson and Charley Patton at the center of a tradition lacking the entanglements of urban African-American life that do not fit within the constructed history of the blues. The suffering, the eroticism, the violence, and the reality of expressive traditions performed and supported by blacks because they met both spiritual and emotional needs as well as the need to make a living are neither pure nor romantic and thus have frequently been absent from the blues narrative. The up-front sexual language in some lyrics has been labeled “pornographic” by some who ignore the fact that this music reflects the lives of the millions of African Americans who lived in the urban centers of the North by the time blues recordings were made.

The music of the rural musicians idolized by purists was created and performed with the same motivation – to reflect the conditions in that environment. And the blues of rural African

Americans was looked down on in the first half of the twentieth century in much the same way as the blues of urban blacks has been criticized since the late 1940's; the openly erotic lyrics were frowned upon by many scholars of the 1920's. The music of rural performers was no more "pure" than the music associated with the taint of capitalism but merely employed the language of a culture that had not experienced the kinds of social and economic changes that were characterized as the evils of urban life; even Robert Johnson, the oft-appointed patron saint of the country blues, "spent most of his career working as a human jukebox."¹⁴

While a good deal of criticism of the blues's sexually explicit lyrics has come from outside the African-American population and the practice of the blues tradition, evaluations of the blues from the standpoint of Christian values have actually come from blacks. As both an inevitable product of acculturation and a result of "wearing the minstrel mask," many blacks rejected the traits of African-American culture that prompted the condescension of mainstream society. Among the casualties of this assimilation were traditional black values concerning sexuality, spirituality, and general standards of behavior. Over time, the core of black values was altered to the extent even African Americans scorned the culture of some strata of black society. While the emphasis on the erotic was brought from West Africa, and the expressive culture of African Americans reflected the role of sex in a significant portion of black society, for many this music was either further evidence for discrimination or a tradition that conflicted with values that had become ingrained in African-American belief systems. As the Negro Renaissance that began in the 1890's in Harlem manifested itself in the support for African-American expressive traditions that would add to those associated with high culture, the blues

¹⁴ Hamilton, "Sexuality, Authenticity, and the Making of the Blues Tradition," 138, 146, 149-154; Bayles, "Hollow Rock and the Lost Blues Tradition," 12; Yurchenco, "'Blues Fallin' Down Like Hail," 454, 457.

was rejected as a form of entertainment that did nothing to advance the development of a genre that could be considered enlightened by the standards of the hegemony's high culture.¹⁵

Any perspective on the blues tradition is potentially valuable provided one is aware of the subjectivity informing that view. While bias is present in all arguments, cognizance of this partiality is rarely acknowledged. Rather, an insistence of singular correctness replaces the potential to illuminate parts of the tradition through a variety of critical frameworks to create a multi-dimensional understanding. It is important to recognize separately the evolution of the tradition from the standpoint of West-African spirituality, Christian values, traditional African-American culture, and the changes that occurred as a result of mass migration to urban centers, while maintaining an awareness of the influences of recordings and radio on the dissemination and development of the blues. But it is more important to recognize that one is considering only one facet of a complex tradition and work with an awareness of this fact. The blues has been valuable in different ways to different people, and when this multivalent character is not reflected, the result is that the true breadth and power of the tradition is distorted. The music supported by the most powerful voices reaches the masses, creating a false truth that cheats everyone involved.

The partiality of any one version of history is influenced by both the limits of human intellect and on the bias inherent in any value system. In a sense, all of history is constrained by both our intellectual limitations and our principles as we determine not just the facts of existence but the characteristics of life that give these facts meaning. The values from which the history of the blues has been variously constructed have determined what belongs in the tradition and what does not – which music and performers are authentic and which ones can aspire only to

¹⁵ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 67, 108.

imitation. While each author claims to present the truth, given the complexities of the African-American experience and of the origins and styles of expressive traditions that have reflected that experience, it is clear that no single attitude could possibly account for who is a “real bluesman.”

When Eric Clapton and other white aficionados discovered the blues in the 1950’s and ‘60’s, their first encounters were not limited to later developments of the genre – rhythm and blues and rock ‘n roll. They also absorbed the music of the blues artists of an earlier generation: Big Bill Broonzy, Muddy Waters, T-Bone Walker, and Robert Johnson. Among the various social and economic forces that brought African-American music first to the British and then back to whites (and even some blacks) in the United States, one of those most prominent influences was the work of scholars who had proclaimed the purity of some artists because they represented an ideal of a place and a culture frozen in time. It was through the lens of Robert Johnson’s hagiographers that the blues was initially discovered.

There is certainly a degree of comfort coming from a tradition that never changes and never reveals new insights that challenge our confidence in a particular perspective. But as time has passed, research into the tradition has uncovered a complicated and ever-changing cultural entity. It has become increasingly evident that the blues as it really was and always has been, from the time slaves became citizens and musicians made music to please paying customers at least as much as themselves, was much more than the ragged, lonely bluesman, fresh from meeting the Devil at the crossroads and motivated to perform only to feed his own soul. It is perhaps wise to admit that this is just another perspective, one that will find adherents and opponents at the present time and in the future. It is attractive as a historical and critical focus for this document because as much as it dismisses certain viewpoints in favor of embracing the diversity of the blues tradition, it is difficult to ignore that this diversity, this inclusion of

multiple influences, resources, and participants, has been demonstrated within the blues tradition throughout its existence.

From the beginning, the blues signified on the instability that characterized both rural and urban African-American life and on itself, demonstrating that music represents a dialogue between culture and creator. As whites from the United States and, later, Great Britain, took up the tradition of the blues, “repetition with a difference” acquired a different significance, as a tradition that had epitomized African-American life grew to represent the trials of people far-removed and often unaware of the spiritual practices of West Africa, the expressive traditions of slaves, and the varied performing activities of the free yet struggling African Americans from post-1865 to the 1940’s.

Chapter 4:

If the Difference Was the Same:

Historiography for a Flexible Tradition

Strictly speaking, music is transmitted through sound waves; in reality, the process of transmission is more complex. Transmitted through ideals of race, class, gender, morality, and nationality, music is not only a product of the culture that creates it – how it is received and interpreted is dependent upon the culture of the audience as well. As Floyd says, “works of music are not just objects, but cultural transactions between human beings and organized sound.”¹ In the discourse on the blues – both literary and musical – the myriad attempts at classification reflect the seemingly infinite perspectives afforded by individual experience as these explanations both illuminate and obfuscate a cultural phenomenon that increasingly defies classification.

Much of the history and criticism of the blues has been composed by those outside the tradition – ironically enough, by outsiders to an outsider’s tradition. Much has been made of the blackness of the blues when in fact multiple musical and cultural influences came together in the formation and evolution of this tradition. Blacks and whites have performed and listened to the blues in a number of contexts from the genre’s inception to the present day. In many cases, the people surprised by that are those who stand to gain from segregation, either out of fear of mixing races and cultures, anger over the consequences of racism, or fascination with perceived African-American exoticism. The cultural position of the Other is a threat, a burden, and an attraction.

¹ Floyd, “Ring Shout!,” 278.

The inherent biases of human intelligence have formed the foundation for these constructions of human existence that we call history and criticism, and these perceptions have informed not only blues scholarship but the evolution of the music as well. Nowhere has this been truer than in Great Britain, where from the 1940's to the present day aficionados and performers have performed and struggled to understand the blues from a position well outside its original context. Ideals of purity and perceptions of African-American and American culture have shaped the way the British have encountered this tradition as it has transformed from the music of exotic others to a transplanted folk idiom informing much of British popular music.

As this thesis has already demonstrated, the story of the blues began in West Africa; the story of the British blues revival began, of all places, in Great Britain. British fascination with African-American music began with jazz and spirituals, sometimes performed by visiting artists from the United States but often encountered in available recordings and the performances of British musicians who did their best to portray the intricacies of musical traditions about which they initially knew very little. Black music did not gain immediate acceptance by respectable society, but as time passed it was increasingly perceived as worthy of admiration and study. In fact, according to Neil A. Wynn, "Europeans... were among some of the first to write scholarly works dealing with [this music]" – and, as the most prominent representative of African-American music to in Great Britain at that point in time, this music was jazz. Eventually, scholars, critics, record collectors, and musicians attempted to formulate a history of the tradition, and in this process discovered its connection to the blues.²

A productive examination of any musical tradition incorporates relevant cultural influences; for the music of African Americans, and the blues in particular, the perception of not

² Neil a. Wynn, "“Why I Sing the Blues:’ African-American Culture in the Transatlantic World,” in *Cross the Water Blues: African-American Music in Europe*, edited by Neil A. Wynn. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007): 4, 14; Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 17.

just black but American culture proved to be at least as powerful a force in the British discourse as it was in that of the Americans. The allure of American culture, compounded with the romanticism of African-American history, added a layer of intrigue to the “fantasy version of the South.” Not only was this music from another country, it was the music of people who had been torn from their homeland, enslaved, and finally granted freedom in a society that continued to withhold opportunity and basic human rights from those whose suffering should have earned such things. To those who have been drawn to or repulsed by African-American music and culture, purity has been essential, either to remove from white culture the perceived inferiority of black cultural influences or to maintain the belief that black culture is the distinct product of a predominantly segregated and more compelling African-American experience. For British jazz and blues lovers, the latter conception was often adopted in both the initial approach to this music and its originating culture as well as to the evolving scholarship, criticism, and performances.³

The centrality of this romanticism to the British reception and interpretation of this tradition has a great deal to do with the degree and nature of access that was available to this tradition following World War II. Roberta Schwartz notes that “importing records from the United States was prohibitively expensive for many aficionados and from 1949 to 1960 it was technically illegal.” While some records were available in specialty shops and to individuals wealthy and bold enough to exchange British currency for American and order records from the United States, access to this material was quite limited for most people. The situation improved in the late 1940’s as labels responded to the demands of blues fans by printing reissues of popular blues records. British labels such as EMI, Decca, and Vogue released reissues of

³ Neil a. Wynn, ““Why I Sing the Blues,”” 14; Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor, *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2007), 44, 49-51, 56-57.

American blues records, often after obtaining a lease to do so from American companies. Smaller labels often released batches of 99 copies or less to avoid the 33.3 percent tax applied to larger numbers of records. For those who could not purchase records, record recitals and radio broadcasts provided temporary access to the popular blues recordings of the time. This limited access to recordings satisfied demands to a limited extent while continuing to ignite curiosity and debate on the origin and nature of the blues tradition.⁴

While recordings provided a glimpse into the musical and textual content of the blues and the emerging field of British blues scholarship had begun piecing together the history of the tradition, live performances often provided validation of the conclusions already being made. The increasing association of jazz with a cultivated style removed from folk culture made the allure of the blues even stronger for some. As a result, the blues musicians who enjoyed successful tours in Great Britain and Europe presented themselves as lacking polish and sophistication to varying degrees and were often advertised as having more of a rural quality than they actually did. Artists such as Big Bill Broonzy downplayed his long career as an urban musician in Chicago and played performances in England that featured a repertoire of older material performed in a more raw style that conformed to the ideals of authenticity supported by his transatlantic audience.

The irony in such situations is that the British were looking for blues musicians who had protected their music from the taint of urban life and commodification by the music industry. The result was the establishment of a canon of recordings, literature, and performances that supported a fantasy, for not only did the purity they admired as a symbol of artistic triumph and rejection of capitalistic influences by the black proletariat never exist in the first place, it had to be fabricated by the artists themselves. It has always been common for blues musicians to

⁴ Roberta Freund Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 27-32.

perform music in a variety of styles in order to please their audiences in the United States; when visiting performers arrived in Great Britain they did the same thing by performing rural blues in a rough and moody manner. This is hardly surprising. After all, it is not often the artists who yearn for authenticity but those outside the tradition who seek to define it. Performers benefit from flexibility, while blues scholarship has aimed to establish limits. Broonzy himself was introduced as “ex-plowhand Bill Broonzy,” even though he had lived in Chicago for twenty years and often played in bands that included electric guitar, saxophone, and drums – the makings of an R&B group that would never have won the approval of blues purists at the time.⁵

Broonzy’s actions and the misconceptions of the British blues lovers who encouraged this behavior have been interpreted in a myriad of ways. The context of Broonzy’s performances and their reception illustrates a common situation for the blues revival in both the United States and Great Britain: blues musicians, primarily men, dressed down for the occasion of revealing the authentic folk tradition to whites in awe of the exotic tradition’s apparent simplicity and expression of deeply felt, unadulterated human emotions. The degree of validity was assessed by how close to the ideals of the rough, unsophisticated bluesman a performer seemed to be.

Audiences for blues performances in Great Britain were often populated by people who spent a great deal of time educating themselves on the music and history of the blues. In a sense, the assumption that the blues was only valid as a rough and simple tradition transmitted by a rough and simple people revealed a tendency towards primitivism – a perception that rarely intersects with exaltation in the dissemination and evaluation of a culture. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, this primitivism translated into an idealized conception of the blues tradition and rural African-American culture that drew a great deal of support – enough to

⁵ Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 32-41; Paul Garon, *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* (New York: Da Capo, 1978), 46-47.

encourage more than a casual interest in studying the blues tradition. For those weary of the expectations and sacrifices inherent in modern life, this condescension actually translated into reverence, as the constructed simplicity of this pure and static tradition and culture constituted a much-needed escape from the pressures of modern life.

While the inaccuracy of this vision is troubling, the motivation behind it is, in a sense, honorable – by honing in on the characteristics of the blues and rural African-American life that were missing in their own culture, white blues fans – both British and American – found an appreciation for a form of a musical tradition that had been ignored by mainstream America and abandoned by African Americans. As such, the blues in this incarnation was brought back to life and eventually became more significant than it would have been had such interest never existed. And in Great Britain, other forms of blues-influenced music, from R&B to skiffle to Rock ‘n’ Roll, eventually gained acceptance among a significant portion of the population; a resulting development has been a broader, more realistic understanding of African-American music and culture. In the words of Paul Oliver, one of the first blues scholars (who also happens to be British):

There was an evangelical element in my talking about the blues, I realize now, an urgent need to get the message across to as many people as I could in as many ways as I could. Like any enthusiast for a subject who feels passionately about it and about its neglect, I wanted the blues to be recognized and enjoyed.⁶

A significant contributor to these inaccuracies regarding the perception of the blues tradition was a lack of information – records were in short supply in both number and variety, and the rules of the Musicians’ Union made it difficult for the musicians who performed in Great Britain to represent themselves as they would in the United States because they were typically

⁶ Garon, *Blues and the Poetic Spirit*, 45-48; Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 41, 44-45 27.

only allowed to perform as soloists or with British backing. Either bluesmen accompanied themselves on an acoustic instrument or were accompanied by people who had very limited experience in playing the blues. Even if these African-American musicians had been free from the boundaries of the authenticity envisioned by their British hosts, they would have had difficulty performing like themselves.⁷

Perceptions of the blues tradition took on a significant influence when, according to Schwartz, “between 1952 and 1956 contemporary genres, which demonstrated the variety of possible approaches to the blues, arrived in Britain and challenged the perceptual dichotomy of folk authenticity or commercial compromise.” The blues had slowly found recognition as part of the jazz tradition and over time gained support as a separate style with a unique and compelling culture and history. Definitions of authenticity weighed heavily in British perceptions of the music, but “in the early 1950s authenticity was an aesthetic whose parameters were in constant flux, updated and refined by each new experience with the blues and its performers.” The ideals previously discussed – mainly, roughness and simplicity – were favored, but as the newer blues-based music of urban blues musicians and former members of defunct touring swing bands found its way across the Atlantic Ocean, this definition, along with the fan base for African-American music, began to expand.⁸

While the initial critical reactions to this music often centered on complaints of loudness and a perceived lack of emotional depth in the lyrics, this new music – R&B – found a much larger audience than the incarnations of the blues that had previously been available. The blues itself had been only slowly accepted by jazz aficionados, many of whom were ignorant of the slow acceptance of jazz when they complained of the issues they had with the blues (in

⁷ Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 39.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 47-48, 40.

particular, this music's apparent monotony and lack of musicality). In light of these facts, the hostile critical reception of R&B in the early 1950s comes as no surprise. A contributing factor to this situation was the simultaneous presence of prominent and revered blues musicians such as Big Bill Broonzy, who continued touring as this energized and urbanized music took hold among British youth. Broonzy himself acted in the best interest of his reinvention as a traditional bluesman when he denounced the music of other artists who may have been threatened "his monopoly as a purveyor of authenticity."⁹

In spite of some adamant critical rejection, there were many who saw the commonalities of R&B, jazz, and the blues and recognized the potential in this newer style of music. The term "Rhythm & Blues" (R&B), first used by *Billboard* in 1949 as an all-encompassing term for African-American music, had also come to denote a distinctive mixture of jazz and electrified blues. In a sense, this music took the place of swing for African-Americans when post-war economics reduced the financial viability of large touring swing bands while it simultaneously expressed blacks' increasingly urban culture. R&B had limited influence among white Americans until white musicians began making cover records of R&B hits and the music was relabeled Rock 'n' Roll.¹⁰

When R&B first reached Great Britain, its greatest influence was through the work of its African-American originators, not the white artists who covered the hits of black musicians. While white Americans, mostly teenagers, were more than happy to idolize Bill Haley, the Crew Cuts, Pat Boone, and others, the awareness among British scholars, critics, and aficionados of African-American musical accomplishments that had been created through exposure to and

⁹ Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 25, 51 47-48, 39, 53; Howard Rye, "Rhythm and Blues," *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, 2nd ed., edited by Barry Kernfeld, *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/J676400> (accessed October 15, 2011): 1.

¹⁰ Reebee Garofalo, "Crossing Over: From Black Rhythm & Blues to White Rock 'n' Roll," in *Rhythm and Business: The Political Economy of Black Music* (New York: Akashic Books, 2002), 114, 121, 124; Rye, "Rhythm and Blues," 1-2.

research of jazz and the blues altered the way R&B and Rock 'n' Roll were received. To some, R&B was an updated version of the blues, relevant to the context of urban life. To others, it was a bastardized form of a pure tradition – as Albert McCarthy said, “It expresses perfectly the basic emptiness of modern America.” The popularity of the music – its obvious aim to please an audience – was seen as the music’s surrender to commercialism. Louis Jordan, one of R&B’s most influential early artists, reflected upon the evolution of his style by saying, “I wanted to play for the people, not just a few hep cats.” Jordan’s comment highlights the relationship between R&B and bop – the former was far less interested in the lofty ambitions of the bop sophisticates, and to some critics and musicians, mass popularity and artistic viability have always been mutually exclusive. In any case, observers recognized that, although this music was related to the exalted tradition, it was not the same. For some, these changes were almost criminal, transforming almost sacred music that they had defined as a folk art free from the evils of capitalism into a commodity. But for British youth who had not followed African-American music in the past, the exposure to R&B marked the beginning of an awareness of black music; for these people, comparisons to the musical traditions of the past would come a bit later.

While R&B was not initially widely popular, even among British youth, the music slowly gained popularity. The energy of the music was appealing to those willing to accept that modernization and corruption were not inseparable, that perhaps the ideal of African-American music and culture could stand to be updated. In this context, biased evaluations of authenticity continued, but these judgments allowed for the evolution of the music. It is hard to say what exactly made a particular R&B artist authentic to a British critic. The subjectivity that guided critics as they searched for something authentic in the new music makes it difficult to discern consistent criteria for such evaluations. It seems that the relationship of the old to the new

played an important role, especially for those more attached to the ideals of the rough-hewn Southern bluesman. As it had been in the past, the definition of authenticity was influenced both by the perceived cultural background of the performers and by their apparent connection (or lack thereof) to capitalistic influences. It was often the case that if, for any number of reasons, the writer had gotten a sense of a natural evolution of style rather than accommodation to the industry, the music was deemed an authentic representation of post-war African-American culture.

Artists such as Muddy Waters, Buddy Guy, and others had adopted electric guitars, drums, and other instruments and presented lyrics that were a far cry from those performed by their Southern rural forebears, but many qualities of the blues had survived. The West-African preference for heterogeneous timbres, the rhythmic vitality of the music as well as the polyrhythmic qualities of “swing,” the imitation of vocal qualities by instruments, the interaction among members of the ensemble, and the content of the lyrics: all of these traits, quite common in R&B, recall the frankness and functionality and call-and-response, or signifyin’, of all African-American music. R&B also represented the metamorphosis of African-American life that had occurred since the blues was born – from rural to urban, and from early to mid-twentieth century, a great deal had changed. However, the emphasis on spirituality and relations between men and women remained. While it was no longer possible to accurately claim that the music coming from blacks in the United States was entirely a rural folk tradition, it was apparent that many important musical and cultural qualities had survived.¹¹

By the mid-1950s, it became evident that R&B was a fad as interest in the music faded. However, it did not take long for skiffle and Rock ‘n’ Roll to gain a degree of popularity that

¹¹ Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 49-52, 55, 58; Garofalo, “Rhythm & Business,” 124-125; Rye, “Rhythm and Blues,” 1; Albert McCarthy, “Rhythm and Blues,” in *Jazzbook ’55* (London: Cassel, 1955), 88.

R&B never reached. While these styles were clearly indebted to R&B, they altered the landscape of popular music in a way that surpassed the influence of both R&B and the blues at the time this music appeared within British culture. Skiffle and much of early Rock 'n' Roll were the products of whites adopting characteristics of black music, sometimes note for note, but it was this acculturation that ultimately introduced the music of African Americans not only to the British but to Americans as well (after all, the Beatles, in their first incarnation as the Quarrymen, were part of the skiffle craze).¹²

The first Rock 'n' Roll record to find success in Great Britain was "Rock Around the Clock" by Bill Haley and the Comets – not the original version recorded by black artist Sonny Dae. This fact says much about the relationship of race and music in the United States and the effects it had on the dissemination of this music throughout the world. However, while Rock 'n' Roll owes a great deal to R&B, the relationship between these two styles is not so simple as a change in name, or even a change in race.

Alan Freed has been given credit for popularizing Rock 'n' Roll as a distinct style through his power as a popular disc jockey, but the underlying causes of this separation are much more complicated than the name of a popular radio show. While a common assumption is that Freed renamed his show the "Rock 'n' Roll Show" to avoid deterring white teenagers from tuning in, it seems likely that racial motivation had little to do with why Freed chose this particular name. After moving to New York from Cleveland, Freed discovered that the existing name for his program – "The Moondog Show" – would have to go, as Louis Hardin had already taken that name. The term "Rock 'n' Roll" was a frequent euphemism for sex in the blues and

¹² Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 58, 67.

R&B, and Freed could have decided on this term based on its popularity in the lyrics of the music he had been playing on his show since he started his R&B show in Cleveland in 1951¹³.

Freed himself certainly played a part in the exploitation of black artists, sometimes even receiving royalties as a songwriter for music he played no part in creating. However, he did not feel that “R&B” and “Rock ‘n’ Roll” were entirely separate styles. The fact that he used the terms “R&B” and “Rock ‘n’ Roll” interchangeably indicates such a conviction. However open-minded Alan Freed may have actually been in some respects, some of his actions serve to justify a certain degree of doubt both in his motivations and in the genuineness of his appreciation for the music. Historians, critics, and musicians alike have seen racism and greed at the heart of many of the actions of the music industry. Case in point: even if Freed renamed his show due to necessity and familiarity with the music, the industry undeniably perpetuated use of the term “Rock ‘n’ Roll” over “R&B” to rid the music of its association with African Americans. While we will never know for sure how Freed actually felt about the music he promoted and the industry in which he worked, there is no doubt that racism and greed have been powerful forces in the music industry from its inception to the present day – so powerful, in fact, that sometimes it is difficult to hear the music itself.¹⁴

As I have discussed previously in this thesis, segregation as it occurred in everyday life was often portrayed with a great deal of inaccuracy in the dissemination of American vernacular music. Black and white musics were frequently defined as originating in and reflecting completely different traditions and cultures. The blues, gospel, bebop, and R&B are still considered distinctly black, while swing, Tin Pan Alley pop, country and western, Rockabilly,

¹³ Lawrence N. Redd, “Rock! It’s Still Rhythm and Blues,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 13 (Spring 1985): 35-38.

¹⁴ Arnold Shaw, “Researching Rhythm & Blues,” *Black Music Research Journal* 1 (1980): 74; Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 58.

and Rock ‘n’ Roll are defined as white. The reality is that not only do the styles of music marketed separately to whites and blacks have a great deal in common, but the styles of music thought of as separate from one another have a great deal in common as well, as it has often been the case that, even when whites and blacks were not sharing the same physical spaces in every day life they were sharing the same music, and this music shares many stylistic traits. While commercial interests and racist ideology have shaped the dissemination and reception of popular music, the fact remains that “[t]he store of African music in America is . . . one of incessant miscegenation.”¹⁵

R&B, Rockabilly, and Rock ‘n’ Roll are prime examples of the intersection between the cosmopolitan nature of American popular music and the segregationist impulses of society at large. Generally, these styles have been considered separate – R&B a mixture of urbanized blues and jazz, Rockabilly a combination of urban blues and country and western, and Rock ‘n’ Roll a conflation of R&B, Rockabilly, and pop. R&B has typically been interpreted as the African-American style from which white Rockabilly and Rock ‘n’ Roll artists derived most of their stylistic influences. “Black roots, white fruits” is the term used by Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo to describe the general trend of black creativity and white appropriation and exploitation. The music of Rockabilly artists in particular has illustrated that this concept does not adequately explain the complexity of American popular music. Artists such as Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, and the Everly Brothers have been credited with combining the R&B of African Americans with white country and western to create a style that appealed to white Americans. However, the roots of R&B are not entirely black, and country and western is not entirely white – like the blues, this music defies racial segregation.

¹⁵ Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor, *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 39.

In the South, impoverished blacks and whites often lived and worked in close proximity to one another, sharing not only their economic status but also one another's music. As Jimmy Witherspoon noted, Chuck Berry is considered a highly influential Rock 'n' Roll artist, but if he were white his style would probably have been classified as country and western.¹⁶ Elvis has been described as a minstrel who stole black music, but the impetus for his style was the music of the black people he grew up around. In many cases, black artists have not received the recognition and financial compensation they have deserved for their contributions to American music, but a trend that centers largely on the practices of the music industry does not accurately reflect the cultures of American popular music that inspired the creation and evolution of this music. The practice of hijacking the original material of African-American artists to make more lucrative cover records and the general mistreatment of African-American musicians has proven influential, but that does not tell the whole story.¹⁷

Major record companies countered the effectiveness of independent companies at discovering and recording music that proved to be very popular with American youth – both white and black – by making white cover records of black music. The inadequacy of copyright laws and the major labels' greater promotional resources provided companies with the ability to cheat the original artist out of both royalties and recognition while these covers of R&B hits – and the artists who performed them -- became more popular than the originals. Participation in this practice was not limited to major labels. In their desire to increase profits, independent labels would often bring the material of their R&B artists to major labels to be covered, on the assumption that releasing and promoting the original would generate less profit. Major labels

¹⁶ Arnold Shaw, *Honkers and Shouters: The Golden Years of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Collier Books, 1978), 215.

¹⁷ Redd, "Rock! It's Still Rhythm and Blues," 32, 38, 40; Rye, "Rhythm and Blues," 1; Chapple and Garofalo, *Rock 'n' Roll is here to Pay*, 231, 240-243; Bruce Tucker, "'Tell Tchaikovsky the News:' Postmodernism, Popular Culture, and the Emergence of Rock 'n' Roll," *Black Music Research Journal* 22 (2002): 33-34.

¹⁶ Chapple and Garofalo, *Rock 'n' Roll is here to Pay*, 234; Garofalo, "Rhythm and Business," 120, 126.

had access to a much more powerful production and promotion apparatus that included radio, movies, television (by the mid-1950s), and trade journals. What they lacked in musical inventiveness they made up for with their ability to drown out the voices of black artists.

These were white people promoting the recordings of white people to other whites. As if the segregation and mythology that existed in the minds of American and British audiences were not enough, the music industry added another layer of sophistication to the veil that had distorted the true nature of American musical culture. While R&B had made headway in the pop markets and may have continued to rise in popularity without the unfortunate intervention of these cover records, it was these revised (and often inferior) versions of black musicians' original work that brought this new music to the masses – in both the United States and Great Britain. Although it was influential, the success of this particular practice was short lived – “by 1956...this initial suppression of black music was less generally successful...and the original versions of songs were in demand by a more sophisticated white audience.”¹⁸

As a projection of the culture in which it has originated and evolved, as well as how it has been disseminated, American music has performed the task of transmitting various traits of its social and economic environment with messages that, while not always accurate, are often compelling. These communiqués to the masses have shaped the way music has been marketed, received, critiqued, and how it has evolved. From the music of the rural black sharecropper to the stylized gyrations of the R&B performer and the fact that it was Bill Haley, “a middle-aged, slightly balding guitarist” whose musical heroes were the stars of Western swing (Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys) who was the performer who brought Rock ‘n’ Roll to Great Britain, it is clear that the effects of racism have shaped not only the analysis of these traditions but also the contexts in which they encounter the cultures of other nations. “In defining America’s most

‘authentic’ musics as those that seem most racially pure, cultural authorities ranging from the most racist to the most well-meaning have repeatedly isolated certain strains of American music out of the racial stew, and subsequent musics have been built on those foundations.’¹⁹

The foundations of British blues scholarship, criticism, and performance of the American popular music that reached Great Britain after World War II were shaped by factors similar to those that influenced British blues scholarship and criticism. While most Americans had limited access to African-American music and culture in their own country, the British were affected even more severely by the distortions of American musical culture and, moreover, had the limited availability of recordings and live performances with which to contend. However, by the time Bill Haley became a hit, a small but fervent community of blues lovers had come to admire African-American music and culture. R&B had proven relatively popular as a fad but had done little to spread knowledge of the blues. It was skiffle and Rock ‘n’ Roll that opened the door to African-American music and the gospel of the authenticity of the blues.

The Rock ‘n’ Roll success of Bill Haley and the Comets represents the larger racism and greed of the music industry, whereas the work of Elvis Presley illustrates the racially mixed nature of American popular music. The nature of British worship of African-American music resulted to a significant extent from the rejection of both of these realities. The segregation of American music had crossed an ocean, but instead of serving the purpose of keeping black music out of the dialogue, it often excluded integration for the purpose of valorizing an “authentic” black music – one that connected its newest exponents to its originators through often fictional, or at the very least exaggerated, cultural commonalities and the desire to continue a tradition that

¹⁹ Garofalo, “Rhythm and Business,” 131; Barker and Taylor, *Faking It*, 97.

seemed free of the economic and social pressures weighing down so heavily on white British youth.²⁰

In light of all this, it comes as no surprise that any consensus on the blues tradition in its many incarnations has been elusive. However, understanding that at the heart of black music is the need to signify makes clear that the differences in the perception of the blues tradition are as inevitable as the changes in the music itself. To signify is to revise, to improve, to personalize, to evolve – and also, in a sense, to dissent from what has been known. From the signifier's own perspective and capabilities, a statement is both reinterpreted and reborn. Continuity provides a foundation for the difference, but without change a tradition and our perceptions of it run dry and become irrelevant as the world continues to turn. The survival of the blues tradition has owed as much to its history as to the flexibility of its evolution, but when the appropriation of black music has often brought out many damaging customs of human behavior, a challenge to perceptions of the tradition, or a degree of variation in performance that is difficult to accept, both the signified and the signified-upon face an inquisition of sorts that challenges change as it illuminates the biases of human knowledge. The music itself has changed much more easily than the historiography and criticism constructed to explain it.

The music of white British bluesmen in general and that of Eric Clapton in particular has endured this manner of appraisal. As critics, scholars, audiences, and musicians struggle to define the blues, R&B, and Rock 'n' Roll historically, culturally, and stylistically, the rights not only to participate in but also to explain this tradition are equally contentious. After all, if it is true that white people cannot play the blues, the fact that they have so authoritatively written its history and criticism gives one pause.

²⁰Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 63-71.

It all comes back to signifyin' – according to Floyd, “a complex rhetorical device that requires the possession and application of appropriate modes of interpretation and understanding on the part of listeners.”²¹ These words reveal nearly as much confusion as elucidation. After all, what exactly are these modes, who possesses this understanding, and who are the listeners? Floyd does not provide a clear answer to these questions, but perhaps that is the point. As one signifies, one reflects the dynamic nature of culture and our understanding of it; any rules we make will probably be broken (if they have not been already).

In a basic sense, signifyin' seems to mean that everyone comes from somewhere and has something to say. The past and present of the blues tradition are under constant revision as both performers and historians signify on what is known, how we know it, and what we do to express the tradition. When evaluating the music of Eric Clapton, the work begins not simply with identifying his race and nationality but also with understanding his perspective and attempting to decipher his message.

²¹ Floyd, “Ring Shout!,” 270.

Chapter 5:

Romanticism, Reality, and the Survival of the Blues Tradition

The nature of music involves a reflection of the lives of the people who both inspire and make it. Lives change and music changes, but the inevitability of this symbiotic relationship seems to have bypassed a great deal of blues criticism and scholarship. Regardless of how much the conception of the tradition has changed, many of the fundamental principles of authenticity remain. In the early years of British blues scholarship, the general lack of information, compounded by the geographic and cultural distance from African-American culture, influenced how Britons knew and loved the blues. However, to a large extent the addition of new information merely supported the mythical foundation upon which the knowledge structure had been built. In a sense, one must feel dismayed at the primitivism and essentialism that colored the way most whites saw this music. Even so, these are the primary characteristics that drew many people to this music and, as African Americans had moved on to create and disseminate further transformations of vernacular music, helped the blues survive. The taint of racism notwithstanding, this ardent romanticization of the blues tradition often came from a place of confused adulation for a way of life that seemed to retain what had been lost in the modern urban world.

The small doses of African-American music – performed by both blacks and whites – that had reached Great Britain by the mid-1950s spread awareness of it to a broader audience, but the music's following was still relatively small. The vehicle through which the blues became popular in Great Britain was not scholarship or the recordings and live performances of American artists but the skiffle fad. The masterminds at the major American record labels could

not popularize this music to the extent to which young British musicians did by playing blues, R&B, and Rock 'n' Roll songs. Drawing on numerous qualities that attracted many young people who felt both trapped by the personal choices available to them due to the limitations of the British economy at that time as well as entranced by both the values perceived in the blues and the release that playing this music offered, skiffle was anti-commercial and encouraged a level of participation never before seen in Great Britain. In the style's brief period of popularity, from approximately 1956 to 1958, thousands of Britons not only listened to this music on records, on the radio, and eventually on television, but also learned how to play it. Much of the repertoire consisted of blues songs, and the style reflected those of R&B and Rock 'n' Roll, as well as British folk music.

From a music that had been on the fringes of society and had relatively few followers – including both scholars and performers – just a few years before, the music of African Americans was disseminated through recordings as well as through the gradually evolving musicianship of British youth and others who took part in the craze. Critics' negative reactions to this music tended to focus either on the poor musicianship of some skiffle groups or on the perceived distortion of African-American musical tradition that this music represented. In fact, the best reviews of skiffle suggested that, after the fad was over, these skiffers would turn to the music that inspired the trend to begin with and add a new depth to the British knowledge of and increased participation in African-American folk music. These predictions were correct, but the critical reactions to the ways in which these new British blues lovers ultimately showed their appreciation for the music have been at least as varied as the manifestations of the blues being critiqued.¹

¹ Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 63-71.

During the next decades, as the skiffle craze faded, and British R&B and Rock 'n' Roll grew in popularity and evolved, the perceptions of the tradition changed as well. However, rather than appreciating the cosmopolitan nature of the blues tradition and its ever-present association with varying degrees of commercialism, time and again the same basic ideas found restatement. The notion that the only authentic blues was that of the rural black men untainted by industrial urban life was challenged in the mid-1950s when the British government relaxed restrictions on foreign imports. More recordings were made both available and affordable through re-releases by British and American recording companies, and a greater number of bluesmen performed in the country. Those who had followed the skiffle craze found themselves investing in the recordings of artists who appeared to establish and maintain the foundational characteristics of the blues. In addition, blues scholarship and criticism were modernized in the sense that urban incarnations of the tradition were more widely accepted as providing a more accurate reflection of modern African-American life than the country blues.²

While R&B was initially considered a bastardized derivative of the country blues, the onslaught of recordings and performances by African-American musicians spread the acceptance of this music; before long, British musicians began to emulate the blues musicians they worshipped in their own performances. In the eyes of most scholars and critics, though, this music was criticized as a poor imitation of the real thing. For the most part, this observation was correct. Most of these performers took on public engagements before they had developed into decent musicians, resulting in performances that would have been considered of poor quality regardless of the type of music being played. The criticism of British R&B was especially harsh for these musicians because they were engaging with a tradition that many believed to be the sacrosanct property of African Americans. In fact, the degree to which the British blues was

² Ibid, 74-75, 81.

imitative was sometimes purposeful, as alterations were often seen as “sacrilege.” Blues aficionados had welcomed the contemporary music of black musicians as long as it seemed to reflect the populist ideals and musical and lyrical expectations that had always informed the majority of blues scholarship, but to many the tradition has always been defined as music about blacks by blacks. Even when it became clear that many British musicians had become skilled enough at playing the blues that there was no audible difference that separated their style and the quality of their performances from those of their black mentors, critical acceptance was scant. The ideals that many whites had formulated all along while assessing the tradition have made it impossible to reconcile the race and nationality of British musicians with the identity of those most immediately associated with the blues.³

The way some African-American bluesmen portrayed the nature of the tradition as well as the capabilities of white players helped perpetuate certain misconceptions about the blues. In addition to changing his image to match British expectations and downplaying the significance of artists who threatened his grip on the British blues audience, Big Bill Broonzy also informed scholars that certain bluesmen had passed away when they were later found alive. His need to conform to certain conceptions in order to promote his career is understandable, but it seems as though he had no qualms with misrepresenting others for his own personal gain. Considering such behavior, it seems quite likely that the information Broonzy provided about some bluesmen from the South was either an intentional misrepresentation of men he knew to be alive or an effort to appear more knowledgeable about the blues tradition and other African Americans who had participated in it than he actually was.

According to Tom McGuinness of the blues-based band The Yardbirds (of which Eric Clapton was a member), John Lee “Sonny Boy” Williamson exaggerated the difficulties of

³ Ibid., 139-142.

playing with the group by telling the musicians to play in one key and then proceeding to play in another, after which Williamson would indicate to the audience that such issues served as proof that whites were incapable of playing the blues. Williamson had offered varying views on the British blues, from saying “those cats in England want to play the blues so bad. And that’s how they play ‘em – so bad” to observing that British musicians had improved a great deal and would become a significant part of the tradition in the future. The incident with The Yardbirds discussed above occurred after he made the previous comment, making it difficult to discern how Williamson actually felt about the music itself but easy to conclude that he found it beneficial at times to make white British blues groups appear unable ever to gain the necessary know-how to play the blues.⁴

While self-interest is an obvious motive in some circumstances, if there were an underlying sense of resentment of the success of these white musicians behind some negative comments and misrepresentations, that would come as no surprise. As Eric Clapton was being called “God” for his musicianship, the bluesmen from whom he had appropriated the blues tradition were often long forgotten and struggling to survive. African Americans had worked for years while either being ignored or exploited as they suffered as second-class citizens. White British musicians took up the blues and found a great deal of success while having the privilege of being born the “right” color. They often misunderstood the nature of the tradition and sometimes knew very little about the actual lives of African Americans that had informed the music they were now taking on as their own tradition. Some groups were magnanimous in giving creative credit and financial compensation to blues artists, but this was not always the case. Even in the event that African-American artists received such remuneration, it was minor

⁴ Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 100, 111, 141, 151-152, 175; Paul Oliver, "Williamson, Sonny Boy," *Grove Music Online*, in *Oxford Music Online* <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/41364> (accessed January 26, 2012).

in comparison to the wealth and fame whites found when they played the blues and its derivatives. Suffering is part of human life, but the kinds of hardships endured by blacks in America have been uniquely horrible and incredibly long lasting. Despite the fact that whites themselves have also experienced their own struggles and triumphs, credibility is still an issue. To many scholars and critics, musicians who comment on these issues through the medium of the blues do not sound sincere – no matter how hard life is for whites they will always have the privilege that comes with being white.⁵

It is quite clear in light of all this that race is at the nexus of the blues universe. This factor has motivated and defined the tradition from multiple perspectives. The marginalization of African Americans has provided the necessity to create music as singular as the situations that inspired it. As the blues has demonstrated a unique and evolving mixture of European and African influences in its documentation of the human condition, it has also reflected performers' need to make a living. Aside from the influence of simple human greed, the otherness made inescapable by segregation has also led to blacks not receiving the rewards for their contributions to the cultural fabric of society. In the end, though, the perception of blacks as separate and not much the same as whites has attracted scholars, critics, performers, and audiences to the blues in a way that has contributed significantly to the longevity and scope of the tradition.

This thesis has discussed in detail how the miscegenation of American music has been conveniently ignored in an effort to maintain a sense of purity. At times, this was done out of disdain for black culture, while in other circumstances the perpetuation of this perspective has preserved a sense of romanticism surrounding black life and culture that would not exist if African-American existence was understood otherwise. Suffering in this light can be noble,

⁵ Schumacher, *Crossroads: The Life and Music of Eric Clapton*, 33-34, 69; Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 235-236.

making the horrors of racial segregation easier for whites to tolerate; the music that would thrive under such conditions would resist greed and dishonesty while providing a means for rebellion, or at least for a certain kind of emotional expression. This is certainly worship, but of the oddest kind, for it presupposes that bluesmen who have been objects of admiration must wish to maintain the very marginalization that brought about suffering and second-class status in the first place.

Idols are meant to be exceptional, even exotic. For African Americans, the things that made their lives and culture most interesting to whites were often the things that had made them the most unhappy – social and economic conditions that for the most part have been part of a troubling history for many years. The implication behind the word “worship” is that it is veneration from the outside. Focusing on the characteristics of black culture that appear to be the most foreign keeps the interest alive, but it also makes the evolution of this culture as well as the adoption of it by outsiders especially problematic.⁶

Just as with degrees of African-American and white contributions and participation in the American popular music that made its way to Great Britain, so too the influence of such factors varies from one person to another. As the behavior of Sonny Boy Williamson demonstrates, these perceptions can also be different coming from the same person but in varying circumstances and time periods. Beyond the seemingly rigid foundation of scholarship, people and their perspectives are nebulous formations that often fluctuate from one location of the blues universe to another, where truth is subjective and adapted to the situation. While Williamson criticized the British blues, he also praised it. Artists such as “Howlin’ Wolf” (Chester Burnett) recognized the accomplishments of British blues musicians and the significant role they would

⁶ Barker and Taylor, *Faking It*, 44, 48-49, 57; Hamilton, “Sexuality, Authenticity, and the Making of the Blues Tradition,” 138, 154; Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 168.

continue to play in disseminating the music; when working with the Yardbirds he told Eric Clapton that learning to play the music properly was crucial because it would not be African-American youth carrying on the tradition but white Britons.⁷

The reason the blues tradition has survived is because it has remained responsive to changes in society. As it transitioned from an oral tradition to one which has also been recorded and transcribed through the means of Western musical notation, the music has reflected both the history and the current state of both performers and audiences. Whether rural or urban, well-known or obscure, black or white, the blues has served as a powerful mode of expression as well as a foundation for the transformation necessary for relevancy and, ultimately, survival. It is this realization that guided Howlin' Wolf as he encouraged white bluesmen such as Clapton to carry on the tradition.

Rather than defining the blues on terms that are – literally and figuratively – black and white, the complexity of the tradition lends itself to a more expansive description, one that elucidates the significance of particular contributions in a manner more illustrative than is suggested by the terms “authentic” or “inauthentic.” In this sense, the blues is confined to a particular location, time, race, and economic status, but under these terms a great deal of music is either imitative or contaminated. Envisioning this tradition as functioning along a continuum makes space for the contributions that would be too urban, too commercial, or too white to find approval otherwise. Rather than ignoring this music, we can better understand its impact. Like it or not, approaching a contribution to the blues tradition with a condescending attitude does not automatically negate its significance. In fact, an attitude of exclusion actually serves to promote ignorance that is often undetectable due to the arrogance and intolerance that frequently

⁷ Bill Wyman and Richard Havers, “Stone Freed” in *Bill Wyman's Blues Odyssey: A Journey to Music's Heart and Soul* (London: DK Publishing, 2001); Paul Oliver, “Blues,” *Grove Music Online*, in *Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/03311> (accessed January 26, 2012).

perpetuate it. If there is no place for R&B, Rock 'n' Roll, or even for modern interpretations of earlier performances of the blues in a standard definition of this tradition, then the definition needs to change. Rather than the single point that stands for purity, the blues tradition must be understood as existing on a continuum.

On the continuum of the blues, Williamson was alternately resentful, fatalistic, and supportive. And Clapton in his lifetime has been at once idealistic, respectful, and possessive of the tradition out of which he has made not just a career but also a way of life by maintaining, developing, and disseminating the blues. Like all bluesmen, his work exists on a continuum of intentions and circumstances that have revealed themselves most clearly through their manifestations in musical sound. Evaluations of Clapton's work have generally not reflected this sort of versatility. He is white. He is British. He cannot play the blues. Or, music is music – Clapton is God. Of course perspectives exist between these extremes, but on the whole white blues has either been accepted or rejected based on whether one believes that the tradition can be appropriated by whites yet project a high degree of authenticity. Often acceptance comes with conditions that place the contributions of whites on a lower rung than those of the original masters; many have stated that whites can play instrumental blues but cannot sing the lyrics because they lack an intuitive grasp of the music's soul. If a white musician does succeed as a blues vocalist then these performances are imitative; he or she "sounds black." If the blues really just belongs to rural, poor African-Americans living in the South, then in a sense the music has been fading for quite some time; it is in large part an artifact of a previous era that many blacks have forgotten or ignored. If the blues really cannot belong to whites, one wonders what to make of this music's significance to so many people.⁸

⁸ Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 233; Aschoff, "The Poetry of the Blues," 52-53.

Imitation may be considered a compliment, but often a symptom of mastery is the move beyond imitation to something that represents one's native traditions as well as the ones that are adopted. All of the white British blues players began by imitating the masters, and when British R&B became popular in the early 1960's the "do-it-yourself ethos" motivated many musicians to perform before they had developed a distinct style, or even consistently acceptable technical ability. Over time, the best artists did accomplish these tasks, but the unevenness of the initial quality of performances and the myriad ways in which the tradition was interpreted once it was mastered defy simplistic analyses of the music. Efforts to determine the level of mastery of all whites who play the blues with a blanket assessment of this development have often been grounded more in racial ideology than evenhanded observations of the material; it really does not seem as though such oversimplified evaluations are all that valuable.⁹

Rather than trying to construct relatively simple definitions for complex large-scale cultural phenomena, a productive examination of one artist's work is much more manageable. Such an endeavor allows for a greater depth of analysis and a more thoughtful placement of the music's qualities in what seems an appropriate location on the continuum of the blues tradition. Perhaps examining the work of one of Britain's most revered blues musicians will yield helpful insights into what whites may have contributed to this tradition. Understanding how one of the best has signified on the universe of African-American music may help us grasp not just the dynamic ways in which one white bluesman can function within the continuum of the tradition but also the many conceptions that contribute to how we understand the blues.

Like many British youth, Eric Clapton discovered the blues through R&B and skiffle. After this initial exposure, he found that the roots of the music went much deeper. It was this

⁹ Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 139-140.

discovery that prompted what has proven to be a lifelong passion for the blues, in some ways hagiographic but in others unidealized and learned through his musical life experience.

Born in 1945 in Ripley, Surrey, England, Clapton was raised by his grandparents, Rose and Jack Clapp. His sixteen year-old mother Pat chose to avoid the controversy of raising an illegitimate child in a small town with conservative values by leaving Ripley and allowing her mother and step-father to raise her son. Around the age of nine or ten, Clapton began collecting records and spent hours listening to the music of the bluesmen he discovered, forming a conception of the tradition's scope in the process. After his grandparents bought him his first guitar at the age of fourteen, he began the process of teaching himself how to play the music of the blues masters he idolized. Before too long, he was playing with groups that had been inspired as much by the music of American musicians as by the do-it-yourself attitude of the skiffle fad.

Eventually, his devotion to mastering the music of his African-American idols earned him a reputation as a great guitarist as he demonstrated his knowledge and skill with bands such as the Yardbirds (1963-65), John Mayall and the Bluesbreakers (1965-66), and Cream (1966-69). It was in the midst of his success with Cream that Clapton concluded that he had failed in achieving the purpose underlying his passion for music – continuing the blues tradition as he understood it. After the dissolution of the group, Clapton resumed the pursuit of what he believed to be his personal destiny. However, he interpreted the blues from the perspective that had been developing for years among blues scholars in both the United States and Great Britain. For Clapton, a personal musical journey that engaged with ideals of authenticity and African-

American culture resulted in a body of work that has reflected technical mastery and cultural naiveté, as well as humility and a dose of primitivism.¹⁰

In part because his mother had left him when he was two years old to be raised by his grandparents, Clapton grew up with the sense that he was different from others. Aside from the disenchantment of many young people in the 1950s with the economic and social possibilities available to them, Clapton had his own reasons for being drawn to the blues. For British youth who believed that they were probably destined for an unsatisfying, materialistic middle-class existence, the romantic notions associated with the blues and its derivatives represented a choice to forge one's own path and avoid the doom of "embourgeoisement." In Clapton's own words:

I felt through most of my youth that my back was against the wall and that the only way to survive was with dignity, pride, and courage. I heard that in certain forms of music and I heard it most of all in the blues, because it was always an individual. It was one man and his guitar versus the world...when it came down to it, it was one guy who was completely alone and had no options, no alternatives other than just to sing and play and ease his pains. And that echoed what I felt.¹¹

In regard to such sentiments, commentary often ridiculed the most outrageous cultural practices of the London blues scene that may have been motivated in part by the misguided adoption of the African-American bluesman's stereotypical lifestyle. However, for many participants this unorthodox behavior grew from the need to explore alternative definitions of prosperity and to express the growing mistrust of the government's handling of nuclear armament. One manifestation of this was the Aldermaston Marches, which took its name from the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment in Aldermaston, England and occurred from 1959 to 1963. Both these marches and the culture surrounding them were a component of the anti-war

¹⁰ Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 74; Terry Gross, *All I Did Was Ask* (New York: Hyperion, 2004), 277-283; Clapton, Eric, *Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 4th ed., edited by Colin Larkin, in *Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/epm/4991> (accessed March 7, 2011): 1-5.

¹¹ Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 74-75; Christopher Sanford, *Clapton: Edge of Darkness* (New York: Da Capo, 1999): 22.

movement and inspired a considerable amount of media coverage. For instance, in May of 1965, the magazine *Anarchy* published an article by Ben Covington entitled “Blues in the Archway Road” that took note of the “beat” faction of the anti-war movement two years after the last of the marches and when the blues had become quite popular among British youth. Covington began this critique of the British blues by stating, “Looking at the posters that litter the side streets of central and suburban London, one might be forgiven for assuming that the Blues was created by a post-Aldermaston generation of art students rather than by the afflicted negro population of the American Deep South.”¹²

While such commentary on this facet of the London blues scene trivializes it by characterizing it as a fad, it does illuminate the movement’s association with and embrace of certain elements of African-American life that had been emphasized by blues scholarship for quite some time. While the realization had been made by many that electrified blues could be considered part of the folk tradition, the vision of the quintessential bluesman remained: a troubled yet wise artist, removed from the society that he understood more deeply than anyone else and performing not for profit but to experience and disseminate a venerable expression of human dilemmas and joys. Youth who wanted to drop out of society saw an attraction to this marginalization, but instead of society placing this burden on them they chose to marginalize themselves. Identifying an unfamiliar or threatening culture by its most exotic elements has been a hallmark of blues scholarship and a stereotypical understanding of African-American existence; in turn, “many musician followers [sic] behaved as though they believed that the most excessive aspects of their heroes’ lifestyles actually *generated* [sic] musical creativity.”

¹² Ben Covington, “Blues in the Archway Road,” *Anarchy* 51 (May 1965), 129; Charles Radcliffe, “The Seeds of Social Destruction,” July 1966, Situationist International Online, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/seeds.html> (accessed January 26, 2012); *Collins English Dictionary*, London: Collins, 2000, “Aldermaston,” <http://www.credoreference.com.www.libproxy.wvu.edu/entry/hcengdict/aldermaston> (accessed January 26, 2012).

Observing this trend in the London blues scene, Covington states that “[T]he mythology of the r ‘n’ b [sic] clubs is the mythology of the angry, dishevelled [sic] reject of orthodoxy, the protesting bum.”

For young musicians such as Clapton, the R&B mythology actually provided a reason to work, to become successful as a means of spreading the music that spoke to their needs more than anything else available to them at the time while providing them with a way out of the dreary future lives they regarded as the alternative to life as a musician. From what was frequently a limited understanding of African-American struggles, British blues musicians found traits that appealed to their personal issues and artistic ambitions. A person may be genuinely interested in learning about another culture and in respectfully appropriating elements of it, but no matter how much one knows, that information can only be understood through the lens of his own life experience. In the in the words of James Baldwin, “[h]e will face in your life only what he is willing to face in his.”¹³

Clapton had spent a great deal of time learning the blues before beginning art school in London in 1961, and moving to a city with such a thriving blues scene opened up new opportunities as he intensified his individual study of the guitar. While Clapton’s choice of graphic design as his subject of study might appear to have separated him from the rather notorious art school blues scene associated with the fine arts focus, he did ultimately immerse himself in these activities. After he relinquished the idea of becoming a graphic designer, there were opportunities for him to develop his playing outside of obsessive individual practice. The environment was supportive of those who could play relatively well, encouraging both

¹³ Monson, “The Problem With White Hipness,” 414; Ben Covington, “Blues in the Archway Road,” *Anarchy* 51 (May 1965): 131; Baraka, *Blues People*, 219; Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 236; James Baldwin, “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985): 292.

challenges to the mainstream lifestyle that seemed to offer little promise of happiness for most people and an identification with African-American music. These young people were open-minded and felt as though music that sprang from the marginalization of blacks expressed their frustration with the options available to them. The Who, the Rolling Stones, the Yardbirds, and other groups were inspired and supported by this scene.¹⁴

Within a few years, though, Clapton came to realize that certain perceptions he held about the life and motivations of a bluesman were “phony” representations of the reality of that life. He first became aware of this when, as a member of the Yardbirds, he toured with Sonny Boy Williamson. While a learning experience in a strictly musical sense, Clapton also found a great deal of disparity between what he had assumed about the bluesmen he admired and the realities of their personalities and ambitions. Williamson was not a lonely, wandering, tortured troubadour of the American South; he was touring Europe to make money. Having received his musical education from obsessively listening to the music and studying British scholarship, Clapton says, “I was deliberately trying to live what I assumed would be a bluesman’s lifestyle.” He has spent most of his career as a blues guitarist and vocalist, and while notions like the one described above did not survive long, some ideals of the bluesmen’s lifestyles that are persistent in blues scholarship and criticism have continued to inform his work to varying degrees.¹⁵

In fact, much of the criticism of Clapton’s work stems from his dedication to preserving the blues tradition in a way that perpetuates certain myths about the lives and ambitions of black bluesmen. While Clapton realized that his idols were not saints in the way he had imagined, he continued to worship their musical accomplishments, even to the extent of describing his own work as second best to the real thing. However, public performance and selling records are

¹⁴ Michael Schumacher, *Crossroads: The Life and Music of Eric Clapton* (New York: Citadel Press, 2003), 16-21; Bracken, “Art School and the British Blues Revival,” 182-184; Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 73-74.

¹⁵ Gross, *All I Did Was Ask*, 279-280; Schumacher, *Crossroads: The Life and Music of Eric Clapton*, 9, 19, 32.

predicated on the assumption that the music is worth hearing, that it does have something important to communicate to an audience. Admitting that his social status places him outside the context believed to be at the heart of the blues, Clapton seems to accept the notion that he operates with an outsider's perspective on the tradition. But by playing the music in a way that has long since moved past imitation, he demonstrates a belief that his interpretations do have something valuable to offer, and they are not just attempts at some kind of rustic purity.

Illustrative of Clapton's emulation of various blues musicians is his 2004 album *Me and Mr. Johnson*, made in homage to Johnson while still reflecting Clapton's own high degree of artistic maturity. After having spent his entire adult life revering Robert Johnson's work and lifestyle, Clapton decided to record an album covering fourteen of Johnson's songs. Although demonstrating a high level of originality and technical proficiency, Robert Johnson's recordings were not particularly popular in his lifetime. Even so, his life story has enforced the myths of otherness and of retentions of African spirituality that connect musical creativity alternately to the Signifying Monkey and to the crossroads of the Devil. These cultural expressions have drawn people to the music and but have also often negated the influence of performers who cannot claim African-American heritage or Johnson's position outside mainstream culture.

Perhaps the most significant survival of Johnson's body of work is its influence – on contemporaneous bluesmen as well as on future generations who encountered this music through the surviving recordings. Artists such as Muddy Waters, Elmore James, and Howlin' Wolf share many stylistic similarities with Johnson, often as a result of having performed with him or with someone else who did, thus demonstrating a certain degree of lineage with this particular artist. However, it is more Johnson's recordings, despite not reaching a significant number of people

until the 1960's, that have reinforced the adulation of his music and life rather than the rather limited reach he had as a moderately successful traveling musician.

Johnson's recording career comprised five recording sessions – in San Antonio on November 23rd, 26th, and 27th in 1936 and in Dallas on July 19th and 20th in 1937. However, some of these recordings were not even released until the 1960's, when white aficionados began to purchase a series of several releases that have eventually come to encompass all of Johnson's known recorded material. Below is a discussion of Johnson's original recordings of "When You Got a Good Friend," "32-20 Blues," and "Traveling Riverside Blues," each followed by a comparison with Clapton's 2004 interpretations. These selections were chosen from the available recordings of Johnson and Clapton because they each illustrate of different stylistic traits of each artist, and in the case of Clapton's recordings, varying degrees of success resulting from alterations to the original material.¹⁶

As with all of these selections, "When You Got a Good Friend" begins with a brief instrumental introduction, which establishes the particular tempo chosen to begin this song. In this case, the tempo holds steady throughout the recording at 102 beats per minute. The quality of Johnson's voice reflects the emotional intensity of the lyrics; combined with a rhythmic flexibility that suggests polyrhythmic qualities, the vocal part of this performance stands in contrast to the steady guitar accompaniment. In fact, the accompaniment for each chorus tends to follow a pattern that includes minimal interaction with the vocals and none of the pitch-bending characteristic of Johnson's renowned bottleneck guitar technique. During each of the A lines of the standard AAB blues chorus, he provides harmonic support with a dotted eighth note-

¹⁶David Evans, "Early Deep South and Mississippi Valley Blues," in *The Blackwell Guide to Blues Recordings*, ed. Paul Oliver (Oxford: Basil Blackwell: 1989): 40; Paul Garon, "Postwar Chicago and the North," in *The Blackwell Guide to Blues Recordings*, 199, 202-203; Edward Komara, *the Road To Eric Clapton* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2007), 56-57, 63-65; Gary A. Galo and Edward Komara, "Robert Johnson: The Centennial Collection – The Complete Recordings," *ARSC Journal* 42 (Fall 2011): 283-287.

sixteenth note rhythm, with a single note (or in a few cases two to four) in the higher range of the instrument that sounds simultaneously with the first beat of the first two measures, followed by a rather sparse response in the two measures after the lyrics are sung. The B lines exhibit more elaborate guitar involvement, with Johnson abandoning the steady rhythmic support of the previous two lines for a more melodic response to his vocals that also leads to the next chorus. This response is similar to the playing that ends the song, but rather than the melodic upward motion of the B response gestures, he plays chords in the same register and basic rhythm that sound mandolin-like, as though they have been dampened.

This is a relatively simple performance when compared with those of some of Johnson's other songs. One wonders whether this was intentional or whether he simply had not had the opportunity to compose a more complex guitar accompaniment to his vocals. Having been recorded during the first session, on November 23rd, 1936, after he already had a great deal of experience playing live shows and composing original material, perhaps this rendition represents all he ever intended for this song. Another possibility is that Johnson played a great deal of non-blues repertoire during his performances and at this point had not taken the time to develop each of his original blues songs to an equal extent.

In a sense, Clapton's recording represents a more complete version of Johnson's song. While he does begin the track with a four-measure guitar introduction, the newer version goes beyond the example that inspired it and includes a measure of syncopated notes that could indicate the influence of polyrhythm. These measures also highlight Clapton's ability to demonstrate heterogeneity of sound that ranges from that which is clear and smooth to that which is deliberately distorted so as to maintain the listener's interest and add textural variety. Just as in the 1936 rendition, the tempo in the 2004 version remains stable but is slightly slower

at 96 beats per minute. Due to the addition of an instrumental chorus, the latter track is slightly longer – three minutes and twenty seconds to Johnson’s two minutes and forty seconds.

The instrumental forces on Clapton’s recording are much more substantial and reflect those of the Chicago style of the blues: amplified guitars, harmonica, piano, bass, and drum set. The increased complexity of this enlarged ensemble is reflected in both the texture of sound and the interplay that takes place between the band and Clapton’s vocals. During each line of text in the A part of the chorus, the harmonica dominates in accompanying the vocals with rhythmic repeated notes as the rest of the band provides basic rhythmic and harmonic support that has been modeled after Johnson’s eighth-sixteenth figures. However, what follows each of these lines is a theme that is evocative of Johnson’s B responses as it draws upon thematic material played in Clapton’s version. To Johnson’s upward gestures, Clapton plays descending ones, creating a connection between old and new (while creating unity within the track itself).

Johnson varied his accompaniment somewhat throughout the song, but in Clapton’s rendition the instrumental responses, while more thoroughly developed, are uniform throughout. A notable addition to this accompaniment is a syncopated line at the end of the fourth chorus played by an electric guitar in its upper range that reflects the material played by Clapton in the introduction. This indicates an impressive level of contemplation on Clapton’s part to create coherency between the introduction and the guitar solo – both are solo material performed by the same person and on the same instrument.

While many details were added or altered in the 2004 performance, the character of the song remains the same. This is due in part to the tempo and the band’s performance, but a great deal of Johnson’s vocal style is reflected in that of Clapton. Clapton’s sense of rhythm sounds flexible in the manner of the original – both performances treat 4/4 time as a foundation that can

be imbued with a great deal of freedom in execution. Of all the qualities for which white bluesmen have received criticism, their vocal performances have encountered the greatest disparagement. It seems that, in this case, Clapton has succeeded in not just replicating but in internalizing African-American blues vocal style.

Johnson's "32-20 Blues," recorded in San Antonio on November 26, 1936, presents a similar manner of accompaniment as "When You Got a Good Friend" during the A lines of each chorus, but the responses to the vocal "calls" are distinct, and both remain consistent throughout the song. What does not remain consistent is the tempo – Johnson begins at 80 beats per minute and ends at around 96 beats per minute. Considering that this track is almost three minutes long, perhaps Johnson was told to speed things along. Another explanation for this is that the increase in tempo may be meant to indicate the narrator's (Johnson's) increasing apprehension as he sings each chorus. The song begins with Johnson indicating that his "baby" is ill (perhaps psychologically). He suggests that if need be he will resolve the situation by cutting "her half in two." As the song progresses, more information is given – for instance, her romantic involvement with another man and the fact that doctors have been unable to improve this woman's condition. Johnson seems to provide an increasingly solid case for resolving the situation with his 32-20 shot gun as the description of the situation grows more troubling, but he conveys a sort of dark humor in his vocal performance. As Dennis Jarrett has indicated, such dark and graphic depictions of violence are often part of the bluesman creating a persona rather than a likely course of action. Although the increase in tempo could be related to the textual content, it seems that, given that "32-20 Blues" is comprised of 10 choruses, the former explanation is more plausible.

Upon examination, Johnson's lyrics contain duplication with a degree of variation – what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. may call “repetition with a difference,” or “signifyin,”” and David Evans might identify as a reflection of common blues composition practices.¹⁷ Choruses one, four, and eight contain almost identical lyrical material, bringing to mind “verse-chorus” form. However, choruses three and seven share different material, as do six and nine. Six and ten both start with “Ah” in Johnson's rendition, but their similarity ends at that point. Due to this manner of repetition, it seems as though Johnson composed (or at least performed) this song in a more improvisatory manner.

Whatever the lyrics' origin or how these alterations are described, Johnson's delivery of them demonstrates a sense of rhythmic flexibility that is typical of his recorded performances. The setting of the last three words of each A phrase is particularly interesting. Rhythmically, he tends to group these words as a unit, but at times he superimposes a triple subdivision in presenting these words over the overriding duple subdivision of the instrumental accompaniment. In other instances he simply elongates the first word, shortening the next two to accommodate this alteration. It is this rhythmic variation, in addition to textual variety, that adds to the spontaneity and interest of the recording.

Clapton's version of “32-20 Blues” is stimulating as well, but in this case this adjective is used in a very different light. While this newer rendition clearly results from the same level of research, planning, and technical competency as the other tracks on this album, it seems also to result from a misunderstanding – or at least a misrepresentation – of the lyrics. “32-20 Blues” describes the rather curious predicament Johnson finds himself in with his troubled female companion and his suggestion of violence as a possible resolution to the situation. The original recording is far from remorseful, but Clapton's renovated version sounds downright jubilant.

¹⁷Jarrett, “The Singer and the Bluesman: Formulations of Personality in the Lyrics of the Blues,” 195-199.

The texture on this track is quite dense and includes three basic layers: a background rhythm section that consists of guitar, drum set, and bass, a more melodic layer consisting of occasional harmonica flourishes that provide a sense of textural contrast to the thematically dominant layer of piano and vocals, which interact throughout. Setting the tempo at approximately 100 beats per minute, the track begins with a virtuosic piano solo comprising an entire chorus that sets an upbeat tone for the entire recording. In addition to this introductory solo, the piano plays virtuosic material throughout and plays an additional solo chorus later in the song. Given that this track was based on a Skip James's piano record "22-20 Blues," it seems as though including the piano in this track and allowing it to dominate to a certain extent was probably motivated by the intention to represent this influence.¹⁸ During Clapton's recitation of the lyrics, the piano holds back but then responds with more soloistic material that is surely meant to sound improvisatory but fails to convey this intention.

The predictability of the instrumental accompaniment is matched by Clapton's vocals, which demonstrate a formulaic quality that is ironic given his obvious effort to instill the performance with a sense of spontaneity. Clapton begins each line on the pick-up to beat two and groups the last three words of each A phrase together in the same manner each time – as a drag triplet. Rather than credit Clapton with the adoption of polymeter, in this instance the imposition of a triple subdivision over duple does not reflect the flexibility indicative of a performer who is comfortable with this rhythmic quality. Perhaps Clapton is simply not comfortable singing this particular song, or maybe the tempo is just too fast. It actually seems as though he might realize on some level that he went a step too far in performing such dark lyrical content in an up-tempo dance number. Despite the thorough preparation and a high degree of technical facility demonstrated in this performance, the result is ultimately disappointing.

¹⁸ Komara, *The Road to Robert Johnson*, 59, 87.

Johnson's "Traveling Riverside Blues" was recorded in the second Dallas, TX session on July 20, 1937, but it was not released as single. In fact, along with some of his other records, this one did not find commercial dissemination until 1961, when the compilation *King of the Delta Blues Singers* was first released. Considering the level of craftsmanship demonstrated by Johnson both vocally and instrumentally, it seems likely that the lack of public interest is to blame for the delayed release of this and other recordings. He apparently dealt with the same difficulty in maintaining the beginning tempo as he did in "32-20 Blues," but in this case, it does not appear that he should have been rushed for time. The track is only two minutes and forty seconds long, yet the tempo steadily increases from around 96 beats per minute at the beginning to 115 at the conclusion of the song. Of course, this is not accomplished through a sudden jump but by steadily increasing the speed of playing. In light of Johnson's flexible rhythm, such a change comes across as much less obvious than it would be otherwise.

Questions regarding velocity aside, this track demonstrates a high level of detail both in terms of the interaction of the guitar and vocals and in terms of Johnson's nuanced guitar playing. In a sense, the guitar supports and responds to the voice while also responding to itself. Pitch bending abounds, creating a playful and intriguing interaction between an instrument and itself. Each of the five choruses presents different text and is accompanied differently by the guitar. Vocally, Johnson demonstrates an alteration between placing weight on the first and third beats of the first measure and then allowing the second measure more rhythmic freedom. During the last chorus, Johnson responds in a spoken voice to the first two lines, highlighting a level of comfort and engagement with this song that makes it distinctive even among his recordings.

The rendition of this song on *Me and Mr. Johnson* is one of the best on the album. Everything from the ensemble's performance to Clapton's guitar solos and his vocals portray a

sense of understanding, as though Clapton had written this song himself. Clapton models his introductory guitar solo on the original but takes ownership of it – this is *his* solo. After the introduction, the guitar continues with only minimal drum set accompaniment, which then evolves into a drumroll, welcoming the rest of the ensemble into the mix. Within relatively few measures, a great deal occurs, but it is so well-suited to the material and so well-executed that it sounds completely natural, as though it could never have been played any other way.

Throughout this song, Clapton sings the lyrics as though they are his own – sometimes with a growling quality, sometimes cracking upward slightly toward the end of a word, and towards the end speaking as Johnson did, but on only one line and with a slight alteration. In “32-20” blues, the entire track sounds forced, but even the two added instrumental choruses in “Traveling Riverside Blues” succeed in preserving the spontaneous character of improvisation that makes Johnson’s version so appealing. Rather than a band playing a written-out arrangement, this sounds like a cohesive ensemble capable of maintaining a semblance of order while allowing the music to happen.

When compared to the relative starkness of Johnson’s original, Eric Clapton’s recordings represent a startling contrast in many ways. In fact, each track of *Me and Mr. Johnson* demonstrates the fullness of texture and complex interactions that come from playing with a larger ensemble. Overall, playing with a group this size constrains spontaneity. The group plays at a steady tempo throughout each track, and the only prominent polyrhythmic tendencies come from Clapton’s vocals (which sometimes lack the spontaneity and flexibility of Johnson’s) and the solos played during the added instrumental choruses. What actually becomes even more impressive upon repeated listening is the level of detail within each of Clapton’s recordings. Whether one applauds the choices of elaboration, alteration, or imitation, the amount of study

and planning poured into these recordings not just by Clapton but also by the entire ensemble is commendable.

The limits of technology may have restricted Johnson's recordings to fewer than three minutes, but twenty-first century technology places no such restrictions on musicians. Given such issues, it is certainly feasible that Johnson arguably played instrumental choruses in live performances but omitted them in the context of recording because of time constraints. In this light, Clapton's added material is not an aberration at all but actually more accurately reflects the manner in which Johnson performed this music in a live setting than do the recordings made by the master himself. In addition, the plain fact that Johnson's 78 RPM records would never sell enough copies to recoup the cost of paying an entire ensemble's worth of musicians meant that, even if had he wanted to employ them, larger instrumental forces were out of his reach anyway. As an internationally acclaimed artist who has sold millions of records, Eric Clapton has almost limitless resources at his disposal. Whether he was attempting to illustrate the influence of the piano or harmonica blues on Johnson's songs through the use of a larger ensemble or whether he drew upon other influences (such as that of the Chicago blues, which will be discussed shortly) is difficult to ascertain. What is known with complete certainty is that, due to technological and financial resources, he could interpret these songs in any way he desired and that he most certainly did. Everything from the tempo to the instrumentation to the addition of instruments and choruses (and subsequent added recording time) reflect choices he made, and those choices must be scrutinized to understand his interpretations.

The tempos Clapton chose reflect his own rhythmic and stylistic preferences in the context of interpreting Johnson's work. In some cases, the newer version comes across as more laid-back than Johnson's because of a reduced tempo, but the overall character of the songs does

not change drastically. In the case of tracks such as “32-20 Blues,” however, Clapton’s tempo and instrumentation completely alter the emotional message conveyed by the song. Judgments of whether these changes result in an effective performance may differ from one person to another; to this critic, for this particular song it does not. In any case, though, a cogent evaluation of a musician’s work incorporates the fact that an artist can only interpret the work of others from his own perspective, demonstrating the unique and dynamic combination of musical influences that form the basis for creative output.¹⁹

In Clapton’s case, the influence of the Chicago blues comes into play. While purists may have tended to favor the stylistic traits of the rural blues, many British blues lovers found this branch of the tradition appealing as well. The subject matter was often borne out of urban life, making it relevant to white Britons living in an industrialized society. In addition, the electrified state of this music and moderate size of the ensemble not only made it more practical for traveling groups who played engagements at crowded bars, it also inspired young guitarists such as Clapton to enlarge their technique. Generally associated with the American post-war period, this style actually had its initial bloom in the late 1930s. This chronology, in addition to the stylistic lineage and contributions of this music’s earliest practitioners, is not just a reminder of R&B’s roots in the work of Southern bluesmen – it also indicates that blues musicians associated with the rural blues in the late 1930s could have incorporated some stylistic elements of this music.²⁰

Robert Johnson has often been portrayed as the model of the troubled troubadour, the idealized progenitor of the cultural interpreters Esu-Elegbara and Legba of West-African spirituality and the Signifying Monkey of African-American mythology. He is frequently seen

¹⁹ Eric Clapton, *Me and Mr. Johnson*, Compact Disc (Burbank: Warner Brothers, 2004); Robert Johnson, *King of the Delta Blues Singers* (San Diego: Sony, 1998).

²⁰ Paul Garon, “Postwar Chicago and the North,” 195-196.

to stand for an embodiment of not just these spiritual retentions, but also for a more primitive way of life of African Americans. The fact remains, though, that Johnson traveled quite a bit, performing in not only his native Mississippi but also in mid-South cities such as St. Louis, Missouri and West Memphis, Arkansas to as far north as Detroit, Michigan and Windsor, Ontario. Johnson's recordings were made all made in Texas, and Johnson himself had some access to the recorded music of other bluesmen. In fact, Roberta Schwartz notes that he was influenced more by "big city blues singers than by Son House," who has been considered a rural bluesman. Considering the somewhat cosmopolitan nature of his influences, one has to wonder what is meant by David Evans's statement, "[W]hile Johnson drew from the past, his greatest importance lies in the fact that his blues foretold a musical future." The syncretic qualities of his music have certainly inspired such statements to a certain extent, but it seems as though the myth itself has been more powerful than reality. Scholars, critics, and musicians who encountered Johnson's music far removed from its original context of creation and reception found in this particular bluesman the linchpin they were looking for, the celebrity whose work could constitute a focus for historical explanations and artistic adulation. The question is whether Johnson provided a link between the older Southern styles and those of the urban North as his stylistic variety influenced the work of contemporaneous bluesmen or whether researchers ascribed such a high degree of importance to him, fabricating this manner of contribution to the tradition posthumously. After all, fame is not created and sustained by the famous but by their admirers.²¹

Clapton's instrumentation reflects multiple sources of musical inspiration, as do certain characteristics of Johnson's playing. In a way, the Clapton's choice of instrumentation reflects not only his regard for the Chicago style but also Johnson's. The fact that *Me and Mr. Johnson*

²¹ Floyd, "Ring Shout!," 269; Komara, *The Road to Robert Johnson*, 53, 57, 63; Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 223; Evans, "Early Deep South and Mississippi Valley Blues," 40.

was made at all indicates that Clapton, too, is part of the fan club – however deserving such admiration may be.

In all of these choices lie differences that some may find troubling – the synthesis of style that makes Johnson authentic becomes, when adopted by Clapton, the reason he is denied the same level of credibility. However, if Clapton had recorded these tracks with only an acoustic guitar accompanying his vocals, following all of Johnson’s idiosyncrasies as closely as possible, he would be called an imitator. As it becomes more acceptable to recognize that the blues is a living, breathing tradition that has always reflected the situation of the performer and his audience, it makes sense to consider that that the alterations of a musician’s songs could result in varying levels of aesthetic effectiveness. The blues had already been in a process of evolution when the first recordings – many of which have become sacred articles of the tradition – were made. And it kept on changing, with certain stylistic features passed on in a manner that reflected the complex nature of African-American life. When it comes to the reality of the blues, there is no either/or, no authentic or inauthentic. There is only “how does this sound?” In *Me and Mr. Johnson*, just as in the recordings of Mr. Johnson himself, sometimes the answer is positive, and sometimes it is not.²²

Clapton has operated all these years under the assumption that he has a responsibility to keep the blues tradition alive as he has understood it – “if I didn’t do it, no one would.”²³ Clapton left the Yardbirds in 1965 to work with John Mayall because he felt that the former group was becoming too commercial, and he felt little remorse after the dissolution of Cream because he felt that his work with that group had led him astray from representing the blues

²²Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 206, 223; Komara, *The Road To Robert Johnson*, 56-65; David Evans, “Early Deep South and Mississippi Valley Blues,” 40-41; Big Al Pavlow, *The R&B Book: A Disc History of Rhythm & Blues* (Providence, R.I.: Music House, 1983), 9-10.

²³ Mike Figgis, dir., “Red, White, and Blues,” *The Blues: A Musical Journey*, DVD, produced by Martin Scorsese (San Diego: Sony 2003).

tradition in the way he felt was necessary. In a sense, he felt that his purpose was higher than what playing in any of these groups could achieve, demonstrating both a reverence for the tradition as he saw it and perhaps a sanctimonious attitude towards his own contributions to the blues.

Even Clapton himself admits to having been quite full of himself as a younger man. Recalling his attitude in his younger years about whites playing R&B, Clapton said, “I was very pompous in my attitude toward white blues groups . . . my ego made me regard it as being all right in my case, but not in anybody else’s . . . so that I didn’t like any other white guy’s playing.” However, after all these years of playing the blues and its derivatives, Clapton still says, “I still don’t think I’ll do it as good as a black man.” However, for as much as he advocates the tradition he tries to maintain, he also promotes his own contribution to the music. Clapton has always felt as though his particular mission was an important one, so in promoting the blues he also promotes himself.²⁴

While a great deal of his work has been innovative and influential, including both songwriting and enlarging the timbral palette of the guitar, he has also frequently recorded and performed covers of various blues songs by his idols, *Me and Mr. Johnson* being the primary example. In these acts of homage, Clapton has perpetuated ideals about the history of the blues even as he plays the music on his own terms. He was drawn to this music by his own personal struggles, which reflected what he knew of Robert Johnson’s life: the sense of isolation he has felt since a young man in addition to his later issues with substance abuse and difficulties in maintaining romantic relationships. He felt at ease playing the part of the wandering, troubled

²⁴ Schumacher, *Crossroads: The Life and Music of Eric Clapton*, 115, 313; Gross, *All I Did Was Ask*, 280-283; Hamilton, “Sexuality, Authenticity, and the Making of the Blues Tradition,” 160; Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 142.

²⁴ Hamilton, “The Making of the Blues Tradition,” 135-136.

bluesman in life and as a musician, but he also felt protective of a tradition he held in high regard.²⁵

Clapton's more traditional work only reinforces these ideas, often drawing attention away from the degree of stylistic variety in his oeuvre. In "Trying to Find an Identity: Eric Clapton's Changing Conception of Blackness," Ulrich Adelt claims that the music that best represents Clapton's full assimilation of African-American musical influences is his work with John Mayall and the Bluesbreakers and Cream. According to Adelt, Clapton first came into his own as a guitarist with Mayall's group as he demonstrated "an innovative use of controlled feedback and rich sustain by playing with an unheard-of volume in the studio, creating the same 'natural' distortion and fuzz he did when playing the London clubs." The evolution of Clapton's development as a guitarist continued with the hybrid of jazz, pop, the blues, European classical music, and psychedelia that he performed with the super-group Cream. To Adelt, the music produced during this period of less than three years, resulting from Clapton's internalization and mediation between European and African-American musical style, represents the apex of his entire creative output; everything after that has been dominated with his superficial desire to "be black."

There have been misperceptions and exaggerations of African-American culture for hundreds of years; Clapton has certainly not been immune to this. However, evaluating his musical output by what may or may not have been his attitude towards African-American culture devalues the music without really explaining all that much about it. Admiring black music and culture and adopting certain elements of these phenomena do not by themselves indicate that Clapton has been trying for most of his life to reject his racial identity, and it does not relegate his less revolutionary music to the status of pathetic, confused imitation. In any case, his body of

work reveals that, while he has focused for a significant portion of his career on playing more straightforward blues, he has demonstrated a desire to explore many different styles of music throughout his career. He has played with B.B. King but also with Delaney and Bonnie, The Beatles, Duane Allman, and many others. It seems as though race has been less of an issue to him than to Mr. Adelt.²⁶

Looking at the big picture, it seems as though the blues has served as a foundation for his musical identity from the beginning. As he has grown as an artist and a person, his demonstrated musical influences have expanded to include pop – as in “Tears in Heaven,” which he wrote in honor of his son Connor – and jazz – which is apparent in his cover of “Autumn Leaves” – in addition to rock and blues. If anything, his work demonstrates a great deal of variety, and Ulrich’s observations regarding Clapton’s attraction to black music reveal less about one particular musician’s possible confusion about race and culture and more about the dialogue on race and the dichotomy that often exists between critics’ evaluations and performers’ motivations.

The doubt frequently cast on white blues, even by Clapton himself, is at its heart based on whether whites “get it” when it comes to black culture. But considering the varied nature of black culture and the integration between white and black culture that has always existed but has become undeniable since the latter half of the twentieth century, one wonders whether it is even possible for anyone to “get it.” There has never been just one white and one black culture in America; these constituencies were never either homogenous or separate. Moreover, each person understands his own culture and that of others differently, resulting in a plethora of equally significant viewpoints. Indeed, it seems as though the only consistent factors agreed

²⁶ Adelt, “Trying to Find an Identity,” 439-445.

upon in this debate have been the disparities in opportunities for economic and social equality and remuneration for creative contributions from which blacks continue to suffer.²⁷

There are many who would agree with Clapton's doubts regarding the authenticity of his work, denigrating his music because he is white and British, and also because he has made millions from playing the blues when most of the people he learned from never had the opportunity to do so. Blues criticism and scholarship are intended to add to the understanding of the body of work, but at times these efforts serve the function of supporting a pre-existing set of assumptions concerning the blues tradition and its attendant issues of authenticity. The segregation of black and white music and culture has always been a myth to a certain extent, but it has served its purpose for whites who were either not prepared for integration or were entranced by ideals of African-American cultural purity and for blacks who support this ideal of purity and therefore treat the cultural contributions of whites with condescension.

In this light, it seems as though so much criticism functions to denigrate the work of one group or person for the purpose of making it less threatening – if Eric Clapton's contributions to the blues tradition are considered less worthy of praise than those of African Americans, even by him, then they will fade quietly into the history of pop culture, and the music remains strictly black. But the fact remains that the blues, as well as other popular music that has influenced Clapton, ultimately cannot be confined to a race or a social class. As music that defines the heterogeneity of American (and to a certain extent Western European) culture, no one group can claim ownership of it without redefining reality to fit the argument.

Rock 'n' Roll, first regarded as a threat to white adolescents, illustrates the methods by which cultural authorities try to undermine the significance of some branches of American

²⁷ Adelt, "Trying to Find an Identity," 433-449.

popular music as a means of maintaining the cultural power structure of American society. As previously discussed, both whites and blacks have reasons to maintain current perceptions about American vernacular music, and given the complex interactions between blacks and whites in the arena of Rock, efforts at segregation have been both passionate and problematic.

Initially received as the corrupting music of African-American Otherness, Rock 'n' Roll was interpreted in time as a teenage fad – black performers such as Little Richard exaggerated their performance practices to the extent that they appeared too comical to be threatening, and later on whites took over as the popular rock stars, neutralizing the threat of African-American culture. The blues of white people are downplayed with references to Norman Mailer's romanticized "white negro," who understands black culture only in terms of its most exotic elements, or with scholar Paul Garon's claim that white blues musicians are only capable of imitating the real thing in an attempt to please the father figure of their dreams – the black man. At times it seems as though some people will do whatever it takes to make it clear that blacks and whites are separate and different, and that crossing the rigid boundaries perceived between them will only lead to cultural expressions unworthy of serious consideration.

In the same chapter of his book *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* as his dream analysis, Garon poses this question: "Can anyone pretend that 'white blues' are any more creative and less imitative than, say, reproductions of Eskimo sculptures turned out by white suburbanites?"²⁸ The assumption Garon makes is that blacks and whites in both America and Great Britain are as separate in geographic location and cultural practices as Eskimos and white suburbanites. While in no way ignoring the effects of slavery, racism, and segregation on African-American

²⁸ Tucker, "'Tell Tchaikovsky the News:' Postmodernism, Popular Culture, and the Emergence of Rock 'n' Roll," 39, 42; Adelt, "Trying to Find an Identity: Eric Clapton's Changing Conception of 'Blackness,'" 434; Paul Garon, *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* (New York: Da Capo, 1978), 54-56, 61.

existence, I feel confident in stating that life for whites, both British and American, has not been so different from that of blacks as to make cultural assimilation impossible. Since the seventeenth century, African-Americans and whites have shared in the process of participating in and transforming a variety of musical styles, which ultimately has its roots in both African and European lineage. It is American, after all.

Eskimos vs. Suburbanites: Eric Clapton Builds an Igloo

In *The Power of Black Music*, Samuel A. Floyd Jr. states that “As an artistic analogue of the human struggle-fulfillment pattern, music transforms these experiences into symbolic form.” In the blues one can find commentaries on any number of historical events and technological innovations as well as human traits. The scholars and critics in this field have argued that they seek to discover and reflect the true nature of the blues, but in reality have often confirmed their own preexisting ideals of race, culture, and segregation.

If there is one strand that runs through this entire narrative it is that of race. We have African heritage to thank for many musical and cultural traits that have combined with those of European ancestry to create music of enduring vitality and inventiveness. However, focusing on otherness has provided the justification for atrocious violations of human rights as well as the distortion of cultural interaction and the rejection of contributions that do not fit the mold of segregation – white blues, for example.

LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) describes the situation from the black activist’s point of view: “Stealing Music...stealing energy (lives): with their own concerns and lives finally, making it White Music.” To Jones and many others, this will most likely always be the truth. After years of being labeled as “primitive,” African-American music and culture was deemed good enough for whites to steal, and in response the music of whites is described as underdeveloped, while black music is “about something that is actual in the world and substantiated by the life of the man singing it.” Finally, the white man’s culture is primitive. On the other side of things, whites will argue for their inventiveness and their ability to assimilate

the music of this culture into their own, in some cases without comprehending more than the most exotic or desirable elements of African-American life.

These two viewpoints, of course, represent the extremes of the dialogue on the blues tradition. Not all African-Americans feel that white people should steer clear of the blues, and not all white people believe that they are capable of playing it authentically. The latter opinion applies most significantly to blues criticism and scholarship, since it has been white people – white British people in particular – who have contributed the most to this argument under the assumption that the written word qualifies as a more inclusive kind of cultural expression than music. It seems that high-quality literature in this field is viewed as a product of reasoned, possibly impartial, research and that music is purely instinctive. Interpretations of music, however, are no less subjective than their objects of study.

Houston A. Baker says, “...all accounts of art, expressive culture, or culture in general are indisputably functions of their creators’ tropological energies.” Much has been made of the “trope of tropes” known by the name of “signifyin,’” but only in the sense that this concept and practice applies to the work of art itself and an audience’s immediate reaction to it. Perhaps those who write about the blues feel that they have separated themselves somehow from this phenomenon; it is certainly the case with some that even the idea is completely foreign to them. Whether one is observing African-American culture from a record, a crowded bar, a television, the porch of an old southern black man, or a written document, the observer is still part of the audience and is part of the tropology that is so often perceived as confined to the circumstances of performance. As Baker notes, we cannot assume that something is art – such a judgment is a subjective one made in reaction to the object of study.¹

¹Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 81; Houston A. Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 9-10.

Partiality is to be expected in the course of evaluating both musical traditions as well as the associated body of literature. Accepting this will not only change our understanding of the blues, it will also enable a better understanding of the various interpretations of this music. For many blues scholars, musicians, and aficionados, true cognizance of the musical tradition is not possible without an awareness of some portion of the literature that has been produced on the subject. In the process of engaging with this resource, developing an understanding of various writers' perspectives makes it possible to understand the true meaning of how others represent their knowledge of the blues. In a sense, partiality creates the possibility for investigation into what the music means to the various individuals who study it. Rather than merely engaging with the literature and the music associated with it, the opportunity exists to engage with the possible motivations of others and of ourselves.

Take, for instance, the work of Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones). Baraka has contributed to our knowledge of the blues with insightful reporting on the origins and evolution of the tradition, but he writes almost exclusively about African-American contributions to music's origins. He approaches the use of Western harmony as an imposition in a manner analogous to blacks' adoption of white mainstream values.

In describing his "Blues Aesthetic," Baraka confers upon African religion and culture terms of veneration, giving the impression of some sort of utopia in which all things are equally valued and all good things thrive, while describing Western culture – and monotheism in particular – as judgmental and limited, deforming the desires and values of its followers. Referring to the Christian cross as a "death sign," it is clear where Baraka stands on the role of this particular cultural influence. Despite Baraka's visions of an African utopia and an inherently deviant Western culture, the fact remains that Africans turned other Africans over to

Europeans in the context of a business transaction, thus implicating both populations in the horrific institution of slavery in America. This insistence on separation from and rejection of white culture is ironic, considering that the reason Baraka desires it is the fact that whites have rejected blacks as equal members of society. As he argues for what he believes would be a better life for his people, he engages in what Gary Tomlinson calls “solipsistic monologue.” In spite of Baraka’s position of resistance to African-Americans’ marginalized status, his words “serve to reinstate the subjugation of others.”² His work is certainly not something to discard entirely, but it is important to realize the viewpoint that informs many of his observations and statements. His engagement in such a monologue ultimately finds support among those who already agree with him, while certain areas of his output are sometimes easily ignored due to an easily-made assumption that this monologue is a taint upon all of his work.

While moderation certainly exists, and many blues lovers have come around to the fact that life for blacks in the rural South was not filled with the sort of beauty and spiritual riches that African Americans were eager to protect from any kind of progress, enough scholarship has been published to keep these ideas alive. The work of some American and British scholars in the 1960s included seeking out former bluesmen who could often no longer carry a tune and then presenting them to white audiences as the “real thing.” As recently as 1993, Alan Lomax argued for a single location of origin for the blues tradition in his *The Land Where the Blues Began*, well after this idea had been discounted by a great deal of research. Dedicated to “the black people of the Delta, who created a Mississippi of song,” Lomax’s monograph provides a valuable account of his observations of black musical life in the South but still carries the weight of this particular misperception.

²Amiri Baraka, “The ‘Blues Aesthetic’ and the ‘Black Aesthetic:’ Aesthetics as the Continuing Political History of a Culture,” *Black Music Research Journal* 11 (Autumn 1991): 101-109; Tomlinson, “Cultural Dialogics and Jazz,” 238.

Many scholars and critics have contributed a great deal to the knowledge and appreciation of the blues, but their work seems as partial as that of Baraka, only it reinforces otherness from a different perspective. The issues with this literature have been discussed previously in this thesis, so I will refrain from doing so again. The point that needs to be made at this juncture is that, while the observations of these scholars have vastly expanded the knowledge of and interest in the blues, we must be aware of their limitations and examine the motivations behind them. Such recognition is crucial -- dialogues unaware of their own partiality are merely self-serving monologues and fail to offer new insights.³

The temptation at this point is to muse upon what Eric Clapton thinks of his own work – deep down, where no interview, article, or monograph could reach. Does he think he is a fake? And what about Johnson – what would (or did) he say about the blues, about his own contribution, about the tradition? It is quite possible that he would not identify this music as a “tradition,” at least not in the manner adopted by scholars and critics. Perhaps that is the point: it is not often the views of the music’s creators that hold the most weight. It is what those who write about the blues discover and maintain that finds its way into print and into the hands of others who have the power to disseminate these evaluations further.

It is with my knowledge of West African retentions, the history of blues criticism, and observations about the music itself that I attempt to do the same thing – make a definitive statement on the transmission of the blues from African-Americans in the United States to whites in America and Great Britain. And it is with the experience gained while researching and writing on the topic that I make the following statement: whites have demonstrated both reverence and ignorance, both triumph and failure, in their adoption of various elements of the

³ Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 175-176; Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Delta, 1993), “Dedication.”

African-American tradition known as the blues, but this music has influenced whites' cultural domain in as unique and significant a way as it has for African Americans. As an example of this phenomenon, Eric Clapton's music represents some of the most glorious instances of whites' blues-based music as well as some attempts that could at best be called "learning experiences." The point is that he comes to the music well informed, well prepared, and highly skilled.

Praised by the musician Steven Van Zandt as "the most important and influential guitar player that has ever lived, is still living, or will ever live," and as "the only guitar player who ever influenced me" by Eddie Van Halen of the rock group Van Halen, Clapton is a modern incarnation of the idolized bluesmen that artists such as Robert Johnson have come to represent. Each generation and social group, it seems, needs its celebrities, and in the realm of the blues tradition Eric Clapton is often defined as a twentieth and twenty-first century musical God on par with Robert Johnson. Whether he succeeds or falters, he stands with musicians of his caliber, as well as scholars and critics, in making a contribution to this effort at understanding and coping with human existence called "the blues."⁴

⁴ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 227; LeRoi Jones, *Black Music* (New York: Akashic, 1959), 234, 236; Steven Van Zandt, "55: Eric Clapton," *rollingstone.com*, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/100-greatest-artists-of-all-time-19691231/eric-clapton-19691231?print=true> (accessed January 10, 2012); Eddie Van Halen, "2: Eric Clapton," *rollingstone.com*, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/100-greatest-guitarists-20111123/eric-clapton-19691231> (accessed January 10, 2012).

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