

**REENGAGING BLUES NARRATIVES:
ALAN LOMAX, JELLY ROLL MORTON
AND W.C. HANDY**

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In November 2005 I attended the Historic Brass Society Conference, jointly sponsored by the Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University. I was grateful for the interest shown by Trevor Herbert (Open University), David Sager (Library of Congress, Washington D.C.) and Ed Berger (Rutgers University, New Jersey). This conference set in motion a series of events that has been central to this work; including making contact with Bruce Raeburn, (Hogan Jazz Archive).

The 2005 conference took place within months of Hurricane Katrina which devastated New Orleans; fortunately the Archive had sustained little damage and plans were made to visit the Archive the following spring. Bruce very generously allowed me to scan the oral history files of more than one hundred interviews conducted with early New Orleans jazz musicians for my research.

Bruce also advised me to contact Lawrence Gushee, who although we have not met, has exercised a considerable influence over this work. His generosity in sharing his own unpublished findings assisted me significantly in my work.

Through Bruce I met Lynn Abbott of the Hogan Jazz Archive, whose published work, in conjunction with Doug Seroff, on the commercial blues and vaudeville, had already caused me to significantly rethink my earlier work. Lynn's importance to this dissertation is difficult to overstate. He has read draft chapters and given critical advice, he has kept me supplied with research material, shared his own research notes and encouraged me to write for the *Jazz Archivist*.

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In February 2007 I attended the Southern American Studies Conference (Oxford, Mississippi) on the recommendation of Michael P. Bibler, (University of Mary Washington), who I had met the previous year. The Mississippi conference enabled me to visit the Mississippi Blues Archive and meet its curator Greg Johnson and the editors of *Living Blues*. The conference also put me in contact with Paul Garon of Beasley Books, Patricia R. Schroeder of Ursinus College and Azusa Nishimoto of Aoyama Gakuin University, who took an interest in my paper to the conference. My paper to the conference went on to win the 2007 Critoph Prize and I look forward to their assistance and advice in preparing this paper for publication in *American Quarterly*.

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Introduction

This dissertation is about the *development* of the blues rather than the *origin* of the blues, although origin is an issue that cannot be ignored. The distinction between the *development* of the blues and the *origin* of the blues may appear subtle, but I would argue that it is an important distinction. The *development* of the blues is knowable. The *development* of the blues has left its imprint in the oral histories, in newspaper reports, in sheet music and in other identifiable sources. The *origin* of the blues is speculative. Jazz and blues scholars have long pondered the *origin* (or *origins*) of the blues, but nobody knows where or when the blues began or for that matter whether or not the blues does have an *origin*.

The blues appeared as sheet music, in the repertoire of emerging jazz bands, sung on the vaudeville stage and in the repertoire of rural songsters in the early years of the twentieth century. I shall argue that none of these blues genres showed any clear primacy. Despite the blues being performed for around a century and studied by folklorists, musicologists and enthusiasts, we still don't know where and when the blues began. If there is any evidence that could lead researchers back to the origin of the blues it has eluded those that have tried to find it.

The purpose of this dissertation is to bring together that which is known about the *development* of the blues and to show how this impacts on speculative theories about *origin*. I would argue that unless we have a comprehensive knowledge of how the blues *developed* that any *origin* theory is premature. Despite this a number of blues researchers have been tempted to speculate.

Both Samuel B. Charters in *The Roots of the Blues: An African Search* (1981)¹ and Paul Oliver in *Savannah Syncopators: African Retentions in the Blues*, (1970)² explore the idea that the origin of the blues is to be found in Africa. Neither produced any compelling evidence that Africa is where the blues originated and Charters finally concluded that the blues “was essentially a new kind of song that had begun with the new life in the American South.”³

Paul Oliver argues that the origins of the blues “are admittedly obscure,” but the roots of the blues lie “buried deep in the fertile ground of the Revival hymns, the spirituals, the minstrel songs, the banjo and guitar rags, the mountain ‘ballits’, the folk ballads, the work songs and the field hollers.”⁴ This would suggest that the blues is a composite music made up from elements of a number of pre-existing, predominantly rural musical traditions.

¹ Samuel B. Charters, *The Roots of the Blues: An African Search* (Boston: Marion Boyars, 1981).

² Paul Oliver, *Savannah Syncopators: African Retentions in the Blues* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970).

³ Charters, 127.

⁴ Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: The Meaning of the Blues* (London: Cassell, 1960; reprint, 1963), 5.

The assumption that the blues is essentially a rural folk-music is widespread. It is widely assumed that the blues began as a rural folk-music and that subsequently it became commercialised. This is a line of thought taken up by David Evans.

The blues did not long remain purely a folk product, passed orally from one performer to another, sung mainly in small groups, and drawn largely from traditional material. Commercialisation and popularisation were soon to have an effect on them.⁵

Recent research has tended to suggest that the relationship is rather more complex than a simple transition from rural to commercial blues. Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff demonstrate in both *"They Certainly Sound Good to Me": Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues*, (1996)⁶ and also in *Ragged But Right: Black Travelling Shows, "Coon Songs" and the Dark Pathway to the Blues* (2007),⁷ that the commercial blues had begun to appear in sheet music and also in the repertoire of the travelling shows in the first decade of the twentieth century. This was before we have any compelling evidence to suggest that the blues was being played by rural songsters.

Peter Muir in his dissertation *Before "Crazy Blues": Commercial Blues in America 1850-1920* (2004)⁸ also identifies a number of early compositions which have some of the features of the blues, but which pre-date named "blues" compositions by as much as a decade. What this could suggest is that the commercial environment of the early years of the twentieth century played a rather larger part in the consolidation of the blues than has until now been assumed. Aspects of the development of the commercial blues are also considered in Elliot S. Hurwitt's *W. C. Handy as Music Publisher: Career and Reputation* (2000).⁹

Sources and Methodology

In the early period of my research I found that there were three broad categories of blues writers and scholars. There were the folklorists of the early years of the twentieth century; the jazz writers in the mid century and the revivalist blues writers of the 1960s. Because each of these groups were writing at different times and were focusing on different aspects of the blues, each group of writers had come to radically different beliefs about the origins and development of the blues. Most of the early folklorists considered the blues to be principally a commercial music and consequently few took an interest in collecting early rural blues. For the jazz writers the blues was seen as an essential and integral part of jazz. For the blues writers of the baby-boom generation the blues was a folk music played by men on guitars.

⁵ David Evans, *Big Road Blues: Tradition & Creativity in the Folk Blues* (Da Capo Press, 1982; reprint, 1987), 59.

⁶ Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, "'They Cert'ly Sound Good to Me': Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues," *American Music* 14, no. 4 (1996).

⁷ Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Ragged but Right: Black Travelling Shows, 'Coon Songs' and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

⁸ Peter C. Muir, "Before 'Crazy Blues': Commercial Blues in America 1850-1920" (PhD, City University of New York, 2004).

⁹ Elliot S. Hurwitt, "W. C. Handy as Music Publisher: Career and Reputation" (PhD, City University of New York, 2000).

There were three different narratives that had been constructed by these three different constituencies about the origins and development of the blues.

African American secular songs were not systematically collected in the early years of the twentieth century, and consequently there is little hard evidence of the development of the blues in the rural South from before this date.¹⁰ Most jazz narratives tend to focus on the recorded history of jazz and the blues from 1917, by which time the blues was firmly established within the jazz repertoire. The country blues writers of the 1960s focused primarily on the rural singers that had begun recording the blues after 1926 and on their rediscovery in the 1960s. By 1912 the blues began to appear regularly in sheet music of the period, but all three narratives of the blues were unable to shed any significant light on the development of the blues in this early period. Clearly a review of the secondary sources would not be sufficient. It was therefore necessary to consult primary sources.

Primary Sources

One issue I identified in this early stage of research, which seemed to have the potential to shed light on the development of the blues before 1912, was the relationship between the blues and jazz. To begin to explore this issue I used the oral history files held at The William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive in New Orleans. I was able to consult more than one hundred interview transcripts and digests, and in a few cases the original audio tapes of interviews conducted with the early jazz musicians of New Orleans.

The interviews that I selected were based upon the interviewee having been born before 1900, and in the majority of cases born outside of New Orleans, although I also included a few of the older musicians born within New Orleans. In almost every case these interviewees also appear in *New Orleans Jazz: a Family Album*,¹¹ which provides a reference source to nearly one thousand musicians that have influenced the musical life of the city. The purpose was to see what evidence there was to support the proposition that the blues may have entered jazz as rural musicians, from the outlying plantations of Louisiana and elsewhere, migrated into New Orleans.¹²

I was also able to consult interview transcripts in the Mississippi Blues Archive and in the American Folklife Center, of the Library of Congress, for evidence of the early blues development in the rural South. I also looked at interview transcripts in the Alan Lomax Collection, which included his interviews and notes from his visits to Coahoma County, Mississippi in the 1940s.

¹⁰ Howard Odum, "Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes," *The Journal of American Folklore* 24, no. 93 (1911).; Howard Odum, "Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes (Concluded)," *The Journal of American Folklore* 24, no. 94 (1911).

¹¹ Al Rose and Edmond Souchon, *New Orleans Jazz: A Family Album*, third ed. (Baton Rouge & London: Louisiana State University Press, 1984).

¹² The paper that resulted from this research, "The Blues and New Orleans Jazz: Coming in From the Country?" and is being revised for *Jazz Perspectives*.

Alan Lomax made a significant contribution to jazz scholarship through his interviews with Jelly Roll Morton. The Lomax collection holds around eight hours of recordings of interviews, which Lomax used as the basis for *Mister Jelly Roll; the Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole And "Inventor of Jazz"* (1950).¹³ In 2006 *Jelly Roll Morton: The Complete Library of Congress Recordings by Alan Lomax* was issued as a box set edited by John Szwed.¹⁴

I also consulted the archive of William Russell, (held in the Williams Research Center of the The Historic New Orleans Collection), who had made a life long study of Morton. Much of this material has been published posthumously in *"Oh, Mister Jelly": A Jelly Roll Morton Scrapbook* (1999).¹⁵ I also consulted reports from the *Indianapolis Freeman*, an African American publication that included news of the travelling shows, for the period 1907-1912, to see what could be verified about Morton's movements during this crucial period of the development of the blues. This section of my research was extremely detailed and in my view essential, as it is this work that may provide an insight into why the blues simultaneously appeared in the repertoire of rural songsters, vaudeville performers and jazz musicians around 1908-1910.

To further investigate the development of blues within jazz I began to research the work and life of R. Emmet Kennedy. Kennedy was a folklorist, and a musician who collected folk-song in the New Orleans, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He is believed to have performed the blues in concert recitals in New Orleans around 1905.

I also consulted the John Robichaux collection held at the Hogan Jazz Archive which includes Robichaux's music library. Robichaux led one of New Orleans' premier bands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. His arrangements provide a valuable insight into the changing musical fashions in New Orleans.

I also made considerable use of the collections of sheet music of the period held in the Performing Arts Reading Room of the Library of Congress. These compositions were checked against the folklore record and repertoire of the emerging jazz bands of New Orleans in an attempt to discern likely transitions of material pertinent to the development of the blues.

Structure

This dissertation is structured in two parts. The first part explores the narrative that would suggest that the blues is principally a folk-music that subsequently became commercialised. The second part explores the narrative that would suggest that the blues is principally a

¹³ Alan Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll: The Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole and 'Inventor of Jazz'* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1950).

¹⁴ *Jelly Roll Morton: The Complete Library of Congress Recordings by Alan Lomax* (Cambridge Mass.: Rounder Records Corp., 2006).

¹⁵ William Russell, *'Oh, Mister Jelly': A Jelly Roll Morton Scrapbook* (Copenhagen: Jazz Media, 1999).

commercial, urban music that subsequently became absorbed into the rural repertoire. Each part is divided into two chapters.

In the first chapter “The Father of the Blues?,” I shall argue that it was the blues composer W. C. Handy who was primarily responsible for developing the idea that the commercial blues were based upon folk-music. In publishing *The Father of the Blues* (1941)¹⁶ Handy set out his own explanation of how he came to write “The Memphis Blues” (1912). At the time of the publication of *The Father of the Blues*, it was believed that “The Memphis Blues” was the first commercial blues publication. In the book Handy gives various accounts of where and when he first heard the blues, and also what it was that inspired his blues compositions. But on one point he was quite consistent - his commercial blues were based upon folk-songs.

In this first chapter I shall also begin to consider exactly what is meant by the term “blues.” There is evidence of the use of the term “blues” to describe a particular kind of music from 1910 in vaudeville,¹⁷ but according to W. C. Handy and a number of other informants, the term “blues” was not used to describe a kind of music before this time. What distinguished the “blues” from other music was a number of *formal* features, which included a twelve-bar structure and a “blue-note” melody which was based upon the use of alternating minor and major thirds and a number of other features that will be discussed in greater detail in this chapter.

Later, the ballads and rural folk-songs that preceded the emergence of named “blues” on vaudeville and sheet music became retrospectively referred to as blues. This confusing situation continues up to the present day such that people will speak of “blues-ballads,” “folk-blues,” “proto-blues,” and “pre-blues” to describe a music that has only retrospectively been called “blues.”

The folklorist Howard Odum had begun collecting African American folk-song around 1908, for two papers *Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negro* (1911).¹⁸ Odum does not refer to the “blues” by name in these papers, but by 1926 in *Negro Workday Songs* he retrospectively distinguished between “formal blues” to describe the blues as sung on vaudeville, which had the formal characteristics of the blues as opposed to the “folk blues”¹⁹ which was the body of folk-song that he had collected before 1911 and which didn’t, for the most part, have the formal characteristics of the blues.

Howard Odum also formed the view that the “formal blues” were not folk-song:

In fact, the great mass of present-day Negro songs may be divided into three classes, the third constituting the folk songs: First, the modern “Nigger songs,” popular “hits” and “blues”; second, such songs greatly modified and adapted

¹⁶ W. C. Handy, *Father of the Blues* (London: Sedgwick & Jackson, 1941; reprint, 1961).

¹⁷ *Indianapolis Freeman*, April 16, 1910; Abbott and Seroff, “‘They Cert’ly Sound Good to Me’: Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues,” 413.

¹⁸ Odum, “Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes (Concluded).”

¹⁹ Howard Odum and Guy B. Johnson, *Negro Workday Songs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1926), 34.

partially by the Negroes; third, songs originating with the Negroes or adapted so completely as to become common Negro song.²⁰

Dorothy Scarborough, a folklorist from Texas, took a rather different view and interviewed W. C. Handy around 1916. Handy confirmed her suspicions that the blues were based on folk-songs and it is this view that has prevailed.²¹

It is W. C. Handy's account of hearing the blues in Mississippi in 1903, sung by a guitarist in Tutwiler, which has particularly captured the attention of later blues scholars. Despite Handy's contradictory accounts of where and when he heard the music that inspired his blues compositions, Handy's recollections of the blues in the Mississippi Delta have been privileged over his other recollections. It is here that we begin to find the emergence of a popular belief that the Mississippi Delta has a particular significance in the development of the blues. This is the subject of the second chapter, "The Land Where the Blues Began?"

In 2005 I submitted a paper for possible publication in *American Music*, titled "The Rural Origin of the Blues: Reasons to Doubt," which was rejected for publication, but the anonymous readers' comments were most useful. Despite having carefully addressed my remarks to "The Rural Origins" in general, rather than the "Delta Blues" in particular, one reader commented that:

Scholars and enthusiasts have long pondered the origins of the blues. I cannot cite who it was who first posited the theory that the Mississippi Delta was the birthplace of the blues – nor does the author of this piece. Rather, he sets up something of a straw man by quoting the views of modern filmmakers on the question.²² The paper would be greatly strengthened by the addition of a thorough review of the scholarly literature of the Delta=birthplace [*sic*] notion. This would offer a firmer basis for setting forth an alternative argument.

This raises some interesting questions. First, there is clearly a highly pervasive belief that the blues began in the Mississippi Delta. This had not been the direct focus of my paper, but nevertheless the reader had interpreted it in this way.

A review of the scholarly literature was good advice, but as this no-doubt well-read reviewer had pointed out, he "could not cite who it was who first posited the theory that the Mississippi Delta was the birthplace of the blues." This of course is the nub of the problem, the belief that the Mississippi Delta is the birthplace of the blues is so pervasive that we rarely if ever question why this is popularly believed. With the exception of Alan Lomax in the *The Land Where the Blues Began* (1993)²³ there are few authorities on the blues who have

²⁰ Howard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson, *The Negro and His Song* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1925), 149.

²¹ Dorothy Scarborough, *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Song* (Cambridge (MA) Harvard University Press, 1925), 264-80.

²² Ken Burns and Lynn Norvick, *Jazz* (London: BBC, 2001), Martin Scorsese, *Feel Like Going Home* (London: BBC, 2003).

²³ Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (London: Methuen, 1993).

openly stated this belief. But there are a good number who at the very least assume that the Delta blues are the paradigm by which other blues should be judged.

Robert Palmer argues, “Blues in the Delta, which may or may not have been the first blues anywhere but certainly is the first blues we know much about, was created not just by black people but by the poorest, most marginal black people.”²⁴ That the blues was “created” by marginalised black people, is of course speculation, since nobody knows who “created” the first blues.

Peter Guralnick, while falling short of actually claiming that the Mississippi Delta is where the blues began, singles out the “Delta style” as of particular significance:

The so-called Delta style of blues singing and playing actually originated around Drew, in the heart of the Delta, about the time that Robert Johnson was born [circa 1911]. It centered around a singer named Charley Patton, born in the late 1880s, who was living on Willie Dockery’s Plantation, between Drew and Boyle, at the time.”²⁵

In recent years books have begun to appear that have questioned this Delta-centric view of the blues. Foremost among these was Stephen Calt and Gayle Dean Wardlow’s *King of the Delta Blues: The Life and Music of Charlie Patton* (1988)²⁶ which investigated the myths and legends surrounding Patton and argued that “it is improper to extol Patton as a blues pioneer in any circumstances, for no one knows when blues developed, or where they developed.”²⁷ They also made the following observation:

Though the past twenty years have brought Charlie Patton recognition as a towering blues figure, they have not necessarily brought about a clear understanding of Patton and his music. Indeed, the two typical views that govern assessment of Patton are fundamentally distorted, and only hinder sensible understanding of his place within the scheme of blues history. The first of these views is that Patton was a ‘folk musician’ playing a ‘folk form’ of blues; the second consists of the notion that Patton was a blues pioneer who molded [*sic*] the ‘Mississippi blues’. The former view is an intellectually dishonest attempt to fit Patton’s music into an incongruous framework; the latter is simply historically and aesthetically invalid.²⁸

While Calt and Wardlow focused on the historical detail surrounding the life of Charlie Patton, Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta* (2004)²⁹ questions the purist view of the Delta blues and Marybeth Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues: Black Voices, White Vision* (2007),³⁰ considered why this “White Vision” has come to dominate our beliefs about the emergence of the blues.

²⁴ Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 17.

²⁵ Peter Guralnick, *Searching for Robert Johnson* (London: Pimlico, London, 1990; reprint, 1998), 14.

²⁶ Stephen Calt and Gayle Dean Wardlow, *King of the Delta Blues: The Life and Music of Charlie Patton* (New Jersey: Rock Chapel Press, 1988).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 301.

²⁹ Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta* (Harper Collins: 2004).

³⁰ Marybeth Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues: Black Voices, White Vision* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007).

My first two chapters will attempt to describe why we have come to the view that the blues is essentially a folk-music, and why the Mississippi Delta has assumed such significance in our beliefs about the emergence of the blues.

Critical to this investigation is a reappraisal of the work of Alan Lomax, who as America's foremost authority on American folk-song in general, and on the blues in particular, is the figure who (as far as I have been able to discover) first came to the view that the blues began in the Mississippi Delta.

Given the evidence that Lomax had to hand from his years of collecting African American folk-song, it is possible to see why Lomax may have come to this conclusion, and given how little was known about the Delta Blues before the blues revivals of the 1960s it is not surprising that Lomax's thoughts came to dominate beliefs about the origins of the blues in the second half of the twentieth century.

There was in the 1960s a blues revival and a quest to rediscover *authentic* bluesmen, fuelled in part by the belief that it was the isolated rural songsters who were the most *authentic*, having been least tainted by urban culture and commercialism. Two books in particular led the way toward this revival, Samuel B. Charters's *The Country Blues* (1959)³¹ and Paul Oliver's *The Blues Fell This Morning* (1960).³² According to Oliver these two books together "disengaged blues from its customary acknowledgment as a late branch of black folk song, or as a tributary to jazz, and distinguished the idiom as a phenomenon to be studied in its own right."³³

The disengagement of the country blues from the context of its development has produced considerable benefits. In the 1960s country blues recordings from the 1920s and 1930s were reissued and a number of rural bluesmen were rediscovered, recorded and introduced to new audiences. The recordings they made and the interviews they gave shed considerable light on development of the blues within the rural environment.

As Oliver quite correctly realised, the country blues narrative of the development of the blues has since the 1960s been considered in isolation from the context of the development of the blues in general. The country blues narrative has been privileged by its disengagement from the development of the blues within vaudeville, sheet music, jazz and folk-song "to be studied in its own right."³⁴ Whilst this has brought considerable benefits it has also hindered a more comprehensive understanding of the development of the blues. With the country blues "disengaged" from the wider context of the development of the blues in general, it has become inevitable that the development of the blues has become synonymous with the development of the country blues.

There is a considerable body of evidence that suggests that the blues began to impact on the lives of both urban and rural African Americans around 1910 and that these blues were

³¹ Samuel B. Charters, *The Country Blues* (London: The Jazz Book Club, 1959; reprint, 1961).

³² Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: The Meaning of the Blues*.

³³ Paul Oliver, "Blues Research: Problems and Possibilities," *The Journal of Musicology* 2, no. 4 (1983): 377.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

disseminated by the travelling shows that toured the South. There is also some evidence that the blues was known in some urban centres before the blues appeared in the repertoire of rural songsters.

The third chapter, “The Original Jelly Roll Blues?,” will look in some detail about what Jelly Roll Morton had to say to Alan Lomax about the blues in New Orleans. In 1938 Jelly Roll Morton a New Orleans born piano player, composer and self styled “Inventor of Jazz” recorded for Alan Lomax at the Library of Congress. He told Lomax of his role as the inventor of jazz and also recorded blues songs that he had known in New Orleans from the early years of the twentieth century. Lawrence Gushee has researched much of Morton’s early years and produced what he described as *A Preliminary Chronology of the Early Career of Ferd “Jelly Roll” Morton* (1985),³⁵ which confirms that much of what Morton said about his early years, and the blues piano players of New Orleans, is verifiable. Morton’s baptismal certificate seems to confirm that Morton was around five years younger than he claimed to have been when he was interviewed by Lomax; once this five year discrepancy is factored into his recollections, a good deal of what Morton describes can be independently verified.

Morton described to Lomax in some detail how in 1910, as a member of the Tri-State Vaudeville Circuit, which had theatres in Arkansas, Mississippi and its headquarters in Memphis, Tennessee, he would travel out to three different vaudeville theatres in Mississippi with known blues performers. By 1910 the “blues” was performed on the vaudeville stage in Memphis and elsewhere and it seems likely that the performers of the Tri-State Vaudeville Circuit were responsible for introducing the “blues” to the theatres of Mississippi and elsewhere as they performed throughout the South.

This chapter is somewhat detailed, and regrettably does not confirm with certainty where Morton was at any particular time. The evidence does however confirm that much of the information that Morton gave to Alan Lomax relating to who he worked with and where he was in the years 1908-1915 can be verified from contemporaneous press reports.

Alan Lomax published a biography of Jelly Roll Morton, *Mister Jelly Roll: the Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole and “Inventor of Jazz”* (1950),³⁶ which tended to gloss over Morton’s time working in vaudeville. From what Morton had said it would have been possible for Lomax to have constructed an entirely different narrative of the emergence of the blues in the Mississippi Delta. From what Morton told Lomax it seems quite possible that the blues may have been introduced to these rural communities by the travelling shows, as we know that by 1910 these travelling shows included “blues” performances, and this could explain why the “blues” first begins to appear in the repertoire of rural songsters from around this date.

Critically Morton claims that the “blues” was known in New Orleans, around the turn of the twentieth century. If this could be independently verified then this would suggest that the

³⁵ Lawrence Gushee, “A Preliminary Chronology of the Early Career of Ferd “Jelly Roll” Morton,” *American Music* 3, no. 4 (1985).

³⁶ Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*.

principal transmission of the blues was not from rural folk-song to urban commercial blues, but the other way around.

My final chapter, “The Birth of the Blues?” explores the relationship between jazz and the blues. What this reveals is that the blues is unlikely to have developed from a simple one way transition. When the relationship between jazz and the blues is considered, it emerges that the relationship is rather more complex than a simple transition in either direction. There is a complex interrelationship between the repertoires of the rural songsters, the commercial blues and the emerging jazz bands.

The first known twelve-bar “blues” composition appeared in 1908 and was published in New Orleans. “I Got the Blues” was written by Anthony Maggio and was based upon a melody that he heard a guitarist play on a levee in Algiers, Louisiana, on the opposite bank of the Mississippi River to New Orleans. Although Maggio explained that this is how he learned the “blue-note” melody from the guitarist, he does not explain why he decided to fit this melody into the twelve-bar form of the blues. The final chapter will consider whether or not the twelve-bar form of the blues was known in New Orleans before 1908, using two principal sources: the oral history files of the Hogan Jazz Archive and the recollections and writings of the New Orleans folklorist R. Emmet Kennedy.

The interviews conducted with the early jazz musicians were conducted predominantly in the 1950s. These interviews confirm that a music called (perhaps retrospectively) “blues” was played in New Orleans in the early years of the century and was principally associated with Buddy Bolden, the cities first known “cornet king.” The second collection that also sheds considerable light on the development of the blues within jazz is John Robichaux’s music library. Robichaux unlike Bolden came from a privileged Creole background and was well educated in music. A review of the stock arrangements that Robichaux played indicates that the twelve-bar form was being played by Robichaux and his band from around 1900 and in 1908 he included his first titled “blues” “I Got the Blues” by Anthony Maggio. He also had in his library “The St. Louis Tickle” (1904), the second strain of which closely resembles a tune that became known in New Orleans as “Buddy Bolden’s Blues.”

Finally I investigate what can be learned from the folklorist R. Emmet Kennedy and his recollections of growing up among the predominantly African American community of Gretna, Louisiana. R. Emmet Kennedy was of Irish descent and began notating African American song from around 1885. He was also known to have performed African American spirituals and folk-song in New Orleans with a niece from around 1905. His niece compiled a scrap-book of Kennedy’s life which survives and includes a record of his performances, programs, and press cuttings.

Kennedy was born in 1877 and among his published output there are a number of secular songs that apparently relate to his early years in Gretna, one of which is a fully harmonised twelve-bar blues, although not a titled “blues.” Using the Kennedy scrap-book and his published output and recollections it does seem likely that all of these secular songs that Kennedy collected were transcribed before 1910.

If we connect together the evidence of the twelve-bar form in the repertoire of the emerging jazz bands of New Orleans, the folklore evidence from R. Emmet Kennedy and what Jelly Roll Morton told Lomax of the blues in New Orleans, it seems likely that the twelve-bar form of the blues was known in New Orleans up to a decade before it is known to have appeared consistently in the repertoire of rural songsters.

I shall argue that the rural blues, the commercial blues and the blues within jazz, have been generally considered in isolation from each other. This has presented three different narratives of the emergence of the blues. It is the rural blues narrative that has, until recently, been privileged. I argue that it is necessary to bring together what is known about the development of the blues in the rural environment, on the vaudeville stage, in sheet music publishing and in the emerging jazz bands, to develop a comprehensive picture of the development of the blues.

My purpose in this dissertation is not to posit an alternative *origin* theory of the emergence of the blues but rather to show how our increasing knowledge of the *development* of the blues impacts on existing theories of *origin*. I would argue that before we can speak meaningfully of origin, we need a comprehensive picture of the development of the blues. A pre-condition for this is the *reengagement* of the country blues narrative with the other blues narratives of the commercial blues and the emergence of jazz.

Chapter 1: The Father of the Blues?

The development of commercial blues is dominated by the man who would become known as the *Father of the Blues*, W. C. Handy. Handy claimed to have published the first blues sheet music, “The Memphis Blues” (1912) and although it is now known that there were earlier blues publications, it was W. C. Handy’s name that has become synonymous with the early commercial blues. After the initial success with “The Memphis Blues” many more blues compositions were to follow, including his most commercially successful, “The St. Louis Blues” (1914). In 1926 Handy published *Blues: An Anthology*, a work that included his own substantial back catalogue of blues compositions and a number of blues by other composers. When Handy came to write his autobiography published in 1941, he initially titled it *Fight it Out*, however, he was persuaded that this title didn’t reflect a musical career and he subsequently re-titled it *The Father of the Blues*.

The story that Handy tells of how he came to write “The Memphis Blues” is that in 1909 he was employed by a Memphis politician Edward H. Crump, as part of his election team. For the campaign Handy composed “Mr Crump.” One novel feature of this tune, according to Handy, was the opening twelve-bar strain which preceded the sixteen-bar theme. The use of different strains within ragtime pieces at the time was quite usual; however the strains typically used in ragtime pieces in the early years of the twentieth century were of eight or sixteen bars. It was the presence of the twelve-bar strain according to Handy that made it difficult for him to find a publisher. In 1912 it was published under the title of “The Memphis Blues,” but it was still subtitled as “Mr Crump.”

“The Memphis Blues” was one of the earliest blues publications that brought together a number of features that would typify the blues. One of these features was the formulation of the title, which rather than be a song about having the blues was a self-referential blues. A self-referential blues (as I use the term) follows the formulation “The (X) Blues,” rather than the formulation “(X) Has Got the Blues.” I use the term “self-referential blues” to refer to the term “blues” as a *type of music*. In the other formulation the term “the blues” is a reference to a *type of condition*.³⁷

The concept of having the blues as a *type of condition*, in the sense of melancholia, or depressed state of mind goes back to the mid-nineteenth century and perhaps earlier. In 1850 the condition appeared in American popular song with the publication of “I Have Got the Blues To Day!”[sic] described as a comic ballad. The song was written by Miss Sarah M. Graham, with music composed by Gustave Blessner, and scored for guitar and piano by the publishing company of Firth Pond & Co. of New York. The lyrics of the song clearly demonstrated that by the nineteenth century the concept of having the blues, as a state of mind was in common currency. With a chorus:

Then I was gay-est of the gay, But I have got the blues to day

³⁷ Peter Muir uses the term “auto-referential blues” to describe all titled blues. Muir.

*Then I was gay-est of the gay, But I have got the blues to day*³⁸

By the 1880's references appear from a number of sources to confirm that the concept of having the blues was a term used widely. For example Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, whilst on a lecture tour in Britain in 1880, replied to a letter from his wife saying "your second letter this morning with enclosed cards – it came like sunshine – in the midst of London fog – and cheered me up in spite of my blueness. I have been in the blues all day."³⁹

In literature too the concept of having the blues appears. The *Century Magazine* published a poem in 1891 titled "To an English Sparrow" with an opening verse:

*Is it springtime, my pert little sparrow?
I hear your voice, honest and shrill.
I see you out there on the narrow
Promenade of my bleak window-sill.
When the blues came, my spirits to harrow,
You darted in sight like an arrow,
Piping, "Cheer up! Cheer up!"
So loud on your tiny, blithe quill.*⁴⁰

A year later in an article in the *Phonogram* of 1892 (a trade publication for the emerging recording industry) there is a suggestion that "negro melodies" may be able to cure the blues. "We commend to our readers the laughable negro melodies, which are characteristic delineations of the colored preacher, as made by the Louisiana Phonograph Co. in their amusing series of 'Vasner Records.' They will drive away the blues."⁴¹ This was a theme taken up some years later by some in the medical profession. In 1904 Dr. Albert Abrams, published *The Blues: Its Causes and Cures*.⁴²

I would argue that there is a distinction to be drawn between blues titles such as "I Have Got the Blues To Day!" (1850) and "I've Got De Blues" (1901) these were songs about *having* the blues. Whereas "The Memphis Blues," and Handy's later "St. Louis Blues" (1914), "Yellow Dog Blues" (1914), "Joe Turner's Blues" (1915), etc., were self-referential blues; the term "blues" is not a reference to a condition, it is a reference to a *type of music*.

The second feature that marks out "The Memphis Blues" is the opening twelve-bar strain. This feature can be found in some earlier published ragtime tunes, such as James Chapman and Leroy Smith's piano rag "One o' Them Things!" (1904) and also Anthony Maggio's "I Got the Blues" (1908), but this was a novel feature at the time and one that would be repeated

³⁸ Gustave Blessner & Sarah M. Graham "I Have Got The Blues To Day!" (1850), American Sheet Music, (1820-1860), Library of Congress (Online).

³⁹ The Alexander Graham Bell Family Papers, Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, November 26, 1880 - [Transcription](#), (Series: Family Papers, Folder: Mabel Hubbard Bell, Family Correspondence, Alexander Graham Bell, July-December 1880), Library of Congress, (Online).

⁴⁰ Eva Wilder McGlasson, "Two Seasons," *The Century Magazine* 42, no. 4 (1891): 640.

⁴¹ *Phonogram* Nov. 1892, 261, Tim Brooks, *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890-1919* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 89.

⁴² Albert Abrams M. D., *The Blues: Its Causes and Cures* (New York: Treat, 1904).

many times by Handy and other blues composers. The repeated use of the twelve-bar strain in blues compositions has led the twelve-bar form to be considered the standard blues form.

A further feature of “The Memphis Blues” that was novel was the use of *blue-notes* in the melody. This is a melodic device where the melody contains the intervals of both the major and minor third. This was unusual; in that most popular music of the period was either written in a major key or a minor key and would usually only contain either the major or the minor third interval accordingly. Again this is a feature that can be found in other earlier named blues publications, Anthony Maggio’s “I Got the Blues” (1908) and “Baby Seals Blues” (1912) for example. This feature of using both the major and minor third intervals in blues tunes quickly became a recognised feature of blues compositions. The 1913 reprint of “The Memphis Blues,” a version as performed by George Evans’ “Honey Boy” Minstrels, notes that the tune is “Founded on W. C. Handy’s World Wide ‘Blue’ Note Melody.”⁴³

Despite the relative scarcity of previous blues publications, the blues as a type of music was probably better known in 1912 (at least among the buyers of Handy’s sheet music) than Handy would go on to claim in later years. An indication of the popularity of the blues by 1912 was that the tempo marking that Handy gave in the 1912 edition of “The Memphis Blues,” is given simply as “Tempo de Blues;” no explanation of this was provided and we can reasonably assume that the buyers of sheet music in 1912 already knew that the blues was played slowly.

One feature that was absent from the 1912 version of “The Memphis Blues,” despite the tune having originated as a campaign song, were lyrics. “The Memphis Blues,” as first published, was an instrumental, a piano reduction of a piece that had been originally been played by Handy’s brass band.

Handy’s next published blues was also an instrumental “The Jogo Blues” (1913) also known as “The Memphis Itch.” This tune did not become as popular as “The Memphis Blues” although it contained a further example of the use of the twelve-bar strain. According to Handy “Jogo” was slang word for Negro.⁴⁴ In his next blues composition Handy added lyrics, and this turned out to be his most commercially successful. The lyrics of “The St. Louis Blues” (1914) display a characteristic that was to typify blues lyrics, the AAB stanza form of the blues, where a lyric is repeated and followed by a rhyming line to complete the three-line stanza.

*I hate to see the ev'nin' sun go down
Hate to see the ev'nin' sun go down,
'cause my baby, he done left this town*

By 1914 W. C. Handy had combined all of the elements that today we associate with the blues in his compositions. He was using the twelve-bar form of the blues, a three-line stanza

⁴³ “The Memphis Blues,” by W. C. Handy (Theron C. Bennett, ©) Joe Morris Music Company, New York, 1913, (The Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University, New Jersey).

⁴⁴ W. C. Handy, *Blues: An Anthology* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1926; reprint, 1974), 117.

lyrical construction and blue-notes in his melodies. The question that I shall be exploring is how these features came together in Handy's compositions.

William Christopher Handy

William Christopher Handy was born on November 16, 1873, in Florence, Alabama,⁴⁵ the son of a Methodist pastor who was fiercely opposed to his son's interest in music, declaring that he would rather see him "in a hearse" than hear that he had "become a musician."⁴⁶ Despite these warnings William obtained a rotary valve cornet and began to take lessons secretly. After leaving school he first worked as a teacher in Florence but left in 1892 to take a teaching exam and a post in Birmingham. This was short lived. After the announcement of the World's Fair, Handy decided to make his way to Chicago and pursue his musical ambitions. When Handy discovered the World's Fair had been postponed until the following year, he made his way to St. Louis where he found work at the Elliot Frog and Switch Works. While in St. Louis, Handy fell on hard times having been cheated out of his wages, but later commented that "the misery of those days bore fruit in song. I have always imagined that a good bit of that hardship went into the making of the *St. Louis Blues*, when much later, the whole song seemed to spring so easily out of nowhere, the work of a single evening at the piano."⁴⁷

After St. Louis he went to Evansville, Indiana and found work with a paving gang. He also made contact with a number of local brass bands in the area, which eventually led him to Henderson, Kentucky where he worked as a janitor for a German singing society that was directed by a Professor Bach. By doing odd jobs for the professor Handy claimed to have "obtained a postgraduate course in vocal music – and got paid for it."⁴⁸ In August 1896 Handy received an offer to join Mahara's Mammoth Colored Minstrels;⁴⁹ he accepted, and quickly established himself within the troupe. Within a year he was leading the band, however, he left for a while in June 1900 to teach at Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical College, where he performed the duties of musical director to the college. He later rejoined Mahara's Minstrels.

In 1903 Handy left Mahara's Minstrels to join the Knights of Pythias, a black band which was based in Clarksdale, Mississippi. It was in Mississippi in 1903 that Handy claims that he was inspired to compose "The Memphis Blues."

Then one night in Tutwiler, as I nodded in the railroad station while waiting for a train that had been delayed nine hours, life suddenly took me by the shoulder and wakened me up with a start.

⁴⁵ Brooks, 410.

⁴⁶ Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 11.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 32.

⁴⁹ Brooks, 411.

A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plucking a guitar beside me while I slept. His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages. As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar in a manor popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who use steel bars. The effect was unforgettable. His song, too, struck me instantly.

Goin' where the Southern cross' the Dog.

The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard. The tune stayed in my mind.⁵⁰

The events that Handy described led David Evans to speculate that the lone singer on the station was the legendary Charlie Patton who is believed to be one of the earliest Delta blues singers.

Tutwiler is only seventeen miles north of Drew, and Cleveland is only five miles west of Dockery's plantation. It is even possible that the singer at Tutwiler was the young Charlie Patton, who was able to play knife-style guitar and who recorded that very stanza ["Goin' Where the Southern cross the Dog"] twenty six years later in his "Green River Blues" (Paramount 12972).⁵¹

Although it is highly unlikely that this singer at Tutwiler was Charlie Patton,⁵² it does show how W. C. Handy's recollection of the singer at Tutwiler has captured the attention of blues scholars.

According to Paul Oliver the events at Tutwiler are significant because "it's one of the earliest datable references to a specific blues and is important because of the evident folk character of the singer, the location, the idiom – which W. C. Handy later used in his *Yellow Dog Blues* – and the technique of playing the guitar."⁵³ Given the significance of these events to the development of the blues, it is worth expanding on Oliver's comments.

Oliver notes that this is one of the earliest datable references to the blues, however there are at least two earlier credible references to the blues. The first of these comes from the musicologist John J. Niles writing in *The Musical Quarterly* in 1930, where he recalled hearing a song called "Jail-House Shouting Blues" in 1898:

The first shouter I ever knew was a Negress. That was in 1898. She did the current ragtime things, but was most effective in the native blues. Her name was Ophelia

⁵⁰ Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 74.

⁵¹ Evans, 174-5.

⁵² According to Calt and Wardlow: "Although Charlie Patton's sister once told her son that he learned the guitar as a ten or eleven year old and 'come up playin', Patton himself told his protege [*sic*] Booker Miller that he began to play guitar around the age nineteen or twenty. Assuming that he reckoned his birth year as falling between 1887 and 1890, this account would firmly place the beginning of his career sometime between 1906 and 1909, when he had spent at least five years in the Delta. The earlier date is preferable, since he was already a musician when he met Millie Barnes in 1908." Calt and Wardlow, 85.

⁵³ Paul Oliver, *The Story of the Blues* (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1969), 26.

Simpson, although to me she was “Black Alfalfa,” shouter and moaner in Dr. Parker’s Medicine Show.⁵⁴

The lyrics of “Jail-House Shouting Blues” display one of the classic characteristics of the blues, the three stanza AAB form, where the first line is repeated and the third stanza is novel and rhymes with the repeated lines.

*“I ain’t got not a friend in dis town,
I ain’t got not a friend in dis town,
‘Cause my New Orleans partner done turned me down.”*

The story that Niles tells is that Ophelia Simpson was arrested in Louisville, Kentucky for the murder of her husband, Henry “Dead Dog” Simpson, who was found dead in the winter of 1898. Niles dates this account by recalling that his father had given him the news of Simpson’s arrest wearing the uniform of the State Militia that was being sworn in for service in the Spanish American War. He goes on to say that she sang this song whilst awaiting trial. Quite how he was able to hear her sing this song he does not explain. He also says that the terms “shouter of blues” or a “coon shouter,” as he describes her, “came along a little later.”⁵⁵

What makes Niles’s account a little difficult to accept was his age at the time, as he was born in April 1892, and lived in Louisville, Kentucky until the family moved to Jefferson County, Mississippi in 1904. This would suggest that if Niles did indeed hear this song in Louisville, Kentucky, he would have been quite young. Taken at face value, we are asked to believe that a white child of six years of age wrote down these lyrics from a black woman in prison arrested for murder. Most accounts of Niles’s collecting of folk-songs suggest that he began collecting after moving to Jefferson County and according to his own recollections he began composing around 1908.

In 1908 my father had in his employ a Negro ditch-digger known as Objerall Jacket. As he dug, he sang, "Go way from my window, go way from my door" -- just those words, over and over again, on two notes. Working beside Jacket all day (I was sixteen at the time), I decided that something had to be done. The results were a four-verse song dedicated to a blue-eyed, blond girl, who didn't think much of my efforts. The song lay fallow from 1908 to 1929, when I arranged it and transposed to a higher key. "Go 'way from My Window" was first sung successfully in Berlin, Germany, in 1930. It has gone a long way since.⁵⁶

A second early account of the blues comes from the tent show and vaudeville singer “Ma” Gertrude Rainey, who says that she learned the blues from a girl who visited her tent when

⁵⁴ John J. Niles, "Shout, Coon, Shout!," *The Musical Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1930): 519.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*: 521.

⁵⁶ Ron Pen, John Jacobs Niles’ biographer (as yet unpublished in November 2007) wrote to me: “Niles wrote many versions of that story and told it a variety of times in concert as well. I think that this particular version came from the liner notes to Niles’s recordings made for the Clancy Brothers’ Tradition label TLP 1023 and S2055...the story is found in his autobiography and corroborated by manuscript field notebooks such as JJNC 45/1 45/2 and 47/6 found in the Niles Collection at the University of Kentucky.”

she was appearing in a travelling show passing through Missouri in 1902. According to John Work who interviewed her around 1940:

“Ma” Rainey heard them [the blues] in 1902 in a small town in Missouri where she was appearing with a show under a tent. She tells of a girl from town who came to the tent one morning and began to sing about the “man” who left her. The song was so strange and poignant that it attracted much attention. “Ma” Rainey became so interested that she learned the song from the visitor, and used it soon after in her “act” as an encore.

The song elicited such response from the audience that it won a special place in her act. Many times she was asked what kind of song it was, and one day she replied, in a moment of inspiration, ‘It’s the *Blues*.’

That is what “Ma” Rainey said when she allowed me to interview her in the Douglas Hotel in Nashville, where her company was playing. She added that a fire destroyed some newspaper clippings which mentioned her singing these strange songs in 1905. She added however, that after she began to sing the blues, although they were not so named then, she frequently heard similar songs in the course of her travels.⁵⁷

Rainey’s first public appearance was at the age of twelve in 1898, when she appeared in a show in her home town of Columbus Georgia in *A Bunch of Blackberries*. At eighteen she married William “Pa” Rainey, who was a dancer, singer, and comedian and the pair toured between 1914 and 1916 with Tolliver’s Circus and Musical Extravaganza billed as “Rainey and Rainey, Assassimators of the Blues.”⁵⁸ “Ma” Rainey appears to have travelled extensively through the American South before coming to the attention of a wider public in 1923, as the *Mother of the Blues*, when she began recording for Paramount Records.

Her claim to have named the blues is interesting because it would not be until later that her songs would be called blues. It is also tempting to question when she had this “moment of inspiration.” Presumably it was after 1905, and after the newspaper clippings were destroyed by fire, since as Rainey asserts the blues “were not so named then.”

In fact the newspaper cuttings that do survive suggest that “Ma” Rainey didn’t sing the blues any earlier than her contemporaries. None of these 1905 accounts of her singing the blues have been found, and the newspaper accounts from the *Indianapolis Freeman* suggest that “Ma” Rainey’s repertoire was quite conventional for the time.

A report from 1906 when Will and Gertrude Rainey were leading the Alabama Fun Makers states: “Mr Rainey is making a hit with his ‘old man’ turn and ‘Let Him Without Sin, Cast the First Stone,’ while Mrs. Rainey is giving, ‘I’ll Be Back in a Minute, and I’ll Do the Same

⁵⁷ John W. Work, *American Negro Songs and Spirituals* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1940), 32-3.

⁵⁸ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, *Ma Rainey and the Classic Blues Singers* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970), 38.

for You.”⁵⁹ There is no obvious reference to the “strange songs” that “Ma” Rainey claimed to have used as an encore.

Toward the end of 1906, Will and Gertrude Rainey joined the Rabbit’s Foot Company, where they remained through the season of 1907-1908. A Rabbit’s Foot correspondent of June 1, 1907 says, “We also have with us this season the Rainey’s, the monologue and sketch artists.”⁶⁰ During this period they were also billed as “Black Face Song and Dance Comedians, Jubilee Singers [and] Cake Walkers.”⁶¹ From a newspaper report of June 15, 1907 we learn that “Allen Moore, the human ‘Bed Bug,’ is singing ‘Mister Greenback,’ ‘All In Down and Out,’ and is making good. Gertrude Rainey is making a hit singing ‘The Man in the Moon’ and ‘Miss Jane.’ The team [Rainey and Rainey] is singing ‘I’ve Said My Last Farewell.’”⁶²

In 1909 Rainey’s repertoire is still conventional. A correspondent from the Star Theater in Montgomery, Alabama, proclaimed, “Gertrude Rainey always brings down the house when she renders a late and up-to-date coon song,”⁶³ and a year later a 1910 report from The Belmont Street Theater in Pensacola, Florida, referred to “Mrs. Gertrude Rainey, our coon shouter.”⁶⁴

When exactly “Ma” Rainey added blues to her repertoire is unclear. We know that by 1915 she was being billed as “The Assassinator of the Blues.”⁶⁵ By 1915 the blues was being sung extensively in the tent shows and on vaudeville. The title of “Assassinator of the Blues” suggests that there was still a strong comic element to the performances that “Ma” Rainey gave. It is interesting to note that Clara Smith who was on the same bill with “Ma” Rainey was being billed as ‘a Rattling Good Talker and Queen of the “Blues.”’⁶⁶ Clara Smith was also apparently known as “Miss Blue.”⁶⁷

It seems unlikely that “Ma” Rainey’s repertoire was in any way ahead of its time or that she held some kind of pre-eminent position among her peers, other than that she was a little older than many that she appeared with. There is nothing in surviving newspaper reports to substantiate her claim to have heard the blues in 1902 and included the blues in her repertoire from around that time.

With these exceptions there are few other credible accounts of the blues that pre-date Handy’s claim to have heard “Goin’ where the Southern cross’ the Dog” in 1903. To that extent Oliver is justified in his assertion that “it’s one of the earliest datable references” to a music that is connected to the blues; however, it is far less clear that this is a reference to “a

⁵⁹ “The Stage” *Indianapolis Freeman*, August 25, 1906, Abbott and Seroff, *Ragged but Right: Black Travelling Shows, ‘Coon Songs’ and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz*, 261.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 262.

⁶³ “The Stage,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, November 20, 1909; *Ibid.*, 261.

⁶⁴ “Belmont Street Theater, Pensacola, Fla.,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, February 19, 1910; *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁶⁶ “C. W. Parks-Tollivers Musical Comedy Company,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, November 28, 1914; *Ibid.*, 126.

⁶⁷ “C. W. Park’s Musical Comedy Company,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, November 28, 1914; *Ibid.*

specific blues” as Oliver claims. Although Handy makes reference to these events in his 1914 composition “The Yellow Dog Blues,” (originally titled “The Yellow Dog Rag”) it is far from clear that what Handy claims to have heard in 1903 was a *specific* blues or for that matter a blues at all. The only sense in which the line “Goin’ where the Southern cross’ the Dog,” is a specific blues, is in relation to W. C. Handy’s later commercial blues, “The Yellow Dog Blues,” and in the recorded repertoire of rural songsters such as Charlie Patton who may well have come to know the stanza from Handy’s composition.

Goin’ where the Southern cross’ the Dog.

When Handy asked the guitarist about what the words of his song meant he was told that the singer was going to Moorhead, the place where the Southern Railroad track crossed the Yazoo Delta tracks. According to Handy the Yazoo Delta Railroad had become known as the “Yellow Dog” Railroad because of its initials.

In the late 1890s whilst laying track between Clarksdale and Yazoo City, a travelling salesman had asked of one of the track-layers, why the locomotive following the progress of the track laying had the letters “Y. D.” painted on the side of the coal car. He was told “Yaller Dawg, I reckon.” According to Handy, “this story was circulated and the idea spread until one branch of the Yazoo Delta was known as the North Dog.”⁶⁸ With this explanation Handy constructed a consistent explanation for the origin of the lyric; the “loose jointed Negro” was waiting for a train at Tutwiler intending to go south to Moorhead where the Southern Railroad crossed the “Yellow Dog” track. Given the significance of the line “Goin’ where the Southern cross’ the Dog,” it may prove fruitful to investigate this further.

The Southern Railway was established by Samuel Spencer in 1894. According to Burke Davis, in *The Southern Railway*:

Spencer opened operations with a main stem reaching from Alexandria, Virginia; Greensboro, Salisbury, and Charlotte, North Carolina; Spartanburg and Greenville, South Carolina; and Gainesville, Georgia, to Atlanta. There were key branch lines to Strasburg, Richmond, and West Point, Virginia; Durham, Raleigh, Goldsboro, Winston-Salem, Asheville, and Murphy, North Carolina; and to Athens, Georgia.

Two months after operations began, Southern’s mileage more than doubled from the acquisition of the East Tennessee, Virginia & Georgia, with its 1,791 miles; the Charlotte, Columbia & Augusta, with 191 miles; the Columbus & Greenville, 165 miles; the Georgia Pacific, 660 miles; and the Louisville Southern, 123 miles. In the same period, two independent lines came under Southern control: the Danville & Western, 83 miles; and the Blue Ridge, 34 miles. At the opening of 1895, Southern owned or operated more than 4,500 miles of line in seven states.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 71-2.

⁶⁹ Burke Davis, *The Southern Railway* (Chapel Hill: The University of Chapel Hill Press, 1985), 29.

The county map of 1895 shows the Southern Railroad running east-west through Moorhead, but there is no railway line running north-south on the map. This is because the Yazoo Delta Railroad only obtained a charter to begin work in the same year.

The Yazoo Delta Railroad began construction of a line from Moorhead, north to Ruleville in 1895, however, the venture was short lived. By 1897 the Yazoo Delta Railroad was bought out and incorporated into the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad. By 1899 the Y&MV Railroad had completed the line from Ruleville to Tutwiler in the north of the County and also the section from Moorhead to Isola, to the south. Thus the Yazoo Delta Railroad only existed by this name for the two years between 1895 and 1897 and the line wasn't completed until two years later in 1899; by then it was already operating as part of the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad.

Max Haymes⁷⁰ suggests that the term "Yellow Dog" may refer to "Yellow Dog Contracts" preventing railroad workers from joining a trades union. This was an important issue in the Railroad industry in the 1890s. Eugene V. Debs established the American Railways Union in 1893. The new union had had initial success in preventing wage cuts on the Great Northern Railroad and as a result the membership of the union was growing by around 2,000 new members per day. These included some of the employees of George Pullman, whose company (the Pullman Palace Car Company) began to lay off many of his workers, and cut wages of those remaining by about 25%, in response to the general economic slowdown that was taking place in the mid-nineties. In June 1894, after the company refused arbitration, Debs and the American Railways Union called for a boycott on the hauling of all Pullman-built cars, but its members were instructed to continue to deliver the mail. The railroad employers retaliated by hitching Pullman cars to the mail cars, giving President Cleveland the excuse to call in the Federal troops, imprison Debs and break the strike.

This had been a national railway dispute which resulted in many railway workers becoming blacklisted or being required to sign "Yellow Dog" contracts stating that they would not join a union, or take strike action before they could be reemployed.⁷¹ It is therefore not inconceivable, given the recent history of industrial action in the industry, that the newly established "Yazoo Delta Railroad Company" may have required such a commitment. Had they have done so it is quite possible that someone could suggest that the initials Y.D., stood for the "Yellow Dog" railroad. But it far from clear that the term "Yellow Dog" was applied to non-union contracts until after the First World War. In an article on the development of "The Yellow Dog Contract" in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* in 1932, the term is described:

'Yellow Dog' a general term of contempt, was applied to obnoxious house leases in the West Virginia coal field as early as 1902. [...] It was 1922 before the term came into general use as applied to contracts.⁷²

⁷⁰ <http://www.earlyblues.com/Yellow/Dog.htm>.

⁷¹ John F. Stover, *History of the Illinois Central Railroad* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1975), 22.

⁷² Joel I. Seidman, "The Yellow Dog Contract," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 46, no. 2 (1932): 353.

What is more the article goes on to say, “In the street railway industry the individual, non-union contract has for years been called a “master and servant agreement.”⁷³ It therefore seems unlikely that there is a connection between the “Yazoo Delta Railroad” and “Yellow Dog Contracts,” as the term was not in use in 1895. Instead the term “master and servant agreement” was more likely to have been applied.

Another possibility is the term “Yellow Dog” as a term of “contempt” was applied to the whole region of the Yazoo Delta, since it does seem that the term “Yazoo Delta Railway” was being used in 1913 to refer to the track now run and owned by The Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Company,⁷⁴ simply because the track ran through the Yazoo Delta. If this were the explanation then why should the Yazoo Delta region get known as the Yellow Dog?

According to an 1877 report of an archaeological dig that had taken place on the Mississippi Valley Mounds, one possible explanation does emerge. According to the report “The only result was a skeleton, near the surface, heartlessly recorded by the press as of the *canis flavus* or Yellow Dog variety, with the indications of having had a prehistoric kettle tied to its tail.”⁷⁵ It is not inconceivable that this event could possibly have resulted in the Yazoo Delta becoming known as the “Yellow Dog,” because at the time, the term was used as term of contempt, to describe something that was of little value, which may well have been how the inhabitants of the Delta viewed their environment. If the “Yellow Dog” does indeed refer to the Yazoo Delta as a whole then perhaps this begins to explain why Handy had a different story to tell in 1916.

In the *New York Age* December 7, 1916; in the piece called “How I Came to Write ‘Memphis Blues’” Handy tells the story of hearing the song that would inspire “The Memphis Blues” for the first time. The difference is that the location is changed from Tutwiler to “a plantation in Mississippi.”⁷⁶ This earlier account of how Handy encountered the blues is, in the light of the possibility that the “Yellow Dog” may refer to the whole of the Yazoo Delta, far more credible.

If “Goin’ where the Southern cross’ the Dog” simply referred to going where the Southern Railroad track crosses the Yazoo Delta then Handy could well have heard this lyric from a guitarist on a Delta plantation around 1903 and have accurately reported years later. Perhaps in an effort to make his story a little more convincing he changed the location to explain the lyric that in all probability he didn’t fully understand himself.

In the 1916 account of hearing the blues for the first time, Handy doesn’t mention the lyric “Goin’ where the Southern cross’ the Dog,” but he does give some important additional information that was not repeated in his 1941 account.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ <http://www.earlyblues.com/Yellow/Dog.htm>.

⁷⁵ “The Contributors’ Club,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 40, no. 202 (1877): 240.

⁷⁶ W. C. Handy, “How I Came to Write the ‘Memphis Blues,’” *New York Age*, December 7, 1916. (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

On a plantation in Mississippi I was awakened by a Negro singing a typical “Blues” accompanying himself with a guitar tuned in the Spanish key and played in true Hawaiian style with a knife.⁷⁷

We know from recordings of country blues in the late 1920s that the technique of using a knife was commonly associated with tuning the guitar to an open chord, which is what Handy means by “Spanish key,” an open tuning to the chord of G major. Typically when the technique of using a knife with an open tuning is used there is no harmonic variation; the player remains on the tonic chord. So it seems then that what Handy is describing as a “typical ‘Blues’” may refer to a song form that is not a typical blues in the sense that we would use the term today, but rather more typical of some of the songs that were recorded by country blues singers, from Mississippi and elsewhere that do not have the harmony of the blues.

According to Handy the singer repeated the line “Goin’ where the Southern cross’ the Dog” and this would be consistent with what folklorists describe as *one verse songs*, where a single line is repeated over and over until such time as the singer decides upon a new line. According to the folklorist Howard Odum, “These songs are practically without number. Parts of every song known by the negro may be sung line by line, or a single line that is especially pleasing may be sung for an hour at a time.”⁷⁸

Handy claimed that it was the singer guitarist in Tutwiler (or on the plantation) that inspired his composition “The Memphis Blues” (1912), but one could question why Handy didn’t publish “Yellow Dog Blues” until 1914, some five years after writing “Mr Crump” in 1909. If these events of 1903 were indeed the inspiration for Handy to begin composing the blues, why did he not make reference to the “Yellow Dog” in his earlier compositions?

Part of the answer to this may also be contained in the 1916 article.

Later, while playing an engagement in the same state [Mississippi], with a first class orchestra using New York hits, we failed to please. The local band was called in, only three in number, but how they could play the “Blues!” They received more for the hour than we did for the whole night. I then say [*sic*] that the “Blues” had a commercial value.⁷⁹

It was perhaps not the Tutwiler (or plantation) guitarist that inspired his later blues compositions, but rather the band that played blues for dancing. In the 1916 article Handy doesn’t give any details about what he heard this three-piece band play, however, when he expanded on this in *Father of the Blues*, it is clear that he is once again referring to a “one verse song,” or to use Handy’s terminology an “over-and-over.”

⁷⁷ W. C. Handy, “How I Came to Write the ‘Memphis Blues’,” *New York Age*, December 7,.

⁷⁸ Odum, “Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes (Concluded),” 373.

⁷⁹ Handy, “How I Came to Write the ‘Memphis Blues’.”

The music they made was pretty well in keeping with their looks. They struck up one of those over-and-over strains that seem to have no very clear beginning and certainly no ending at all. The strumming attained a disturbing monotony, but on and on it went, a kind of stuff that has long been associated with cane rows and levee camps.”⁸⁰

It seem from this description that what Handy witnessed was played “over-and-over” with no discernable grouping of the repeats to give any structural form. This would also suggest that there was no harmonic variation either, since this would have provided structure. This could explain the “disturbing monotony” that Handy experienced.

At the time Handy was not convinced that this simple “over-and-over” form could be applied commercially. “As a director of many respectable, conventional bands, it was not easy for me to concede that a simple slow-drag and repeat could be rhythm itself. Neither was I ready to believe that this was just what the public wanted. But we live to learn.”⁸¹

The association of the slow-drag and the blues is commonly made. Lucius Smith, who played banjo with Sid Hemphill’s string band in Mississippi, clearly disapproved of the slow-drag dance that replaced the older reels and quadrilles:

Blues is, I’d say, a whole lot of difference. It’s owing to the dances, new dancing. Now the blues is swinging dancing, like double together, you know...That done ruined the country. The blues done ruined the country...Just make ‘em go off at random [...] Now such as “Walking in the Parlor” and all them other old pieces, that’s dancing on a set,...calling figures, promenade, swing your right partner, all that you know, object partner, you see. But the “Memphis Blues” and all that, it done brought about a whole lot of it you know, I’d say trouble.⁸²

Everything that Handy says is entirely compatible with what we know of rural music making in the early years of the century. We know that there were one verse songs and we also know that the slow-drag was danced by couples.

According to Odum it was usual for the lines of a one verse song to be grouped in some way. “Usually the [single] line [of a one verse song] is repeated with regularity, so it makes a stanza of two, four, or six lines, sometimes three or five. The last repetition is usually preceded by some word of exclamation, as “oh,” “my,” “well,” “so,” “yes,” and others.”⁸³ This is consistent with Handy’s description of the song he heard in 1903, but Handy goes further in his explanation of the events at Tutwiler than this when he says that:

Southern Negroes sang about everything. Trains, steamboats, steam whistles, sledge hammers, fast women, mean bosses, stubborn mules – all became subjects for their songs. They accompany themselves on anything from which they can extract a musical sound or rhythmical effect, anything from washboard to harmonica.

⁸⁰ Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 76.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Evans, 47.

⁸³ Odum and Johnson, *The Negro and His Song*, 151.

In this way and from these materials, they set the mood for what we now call the blues. [...] In the Delta, however, I suddenly saw the songs with the eye of a budding composer. The songs themselves, I now observed, consisted of a simple declaration expressed usually in three lines and set to a kind of earth-born music that was familiar throughout the Southland half a century ago. . Mississippi with its large plantations and small cities probably had more colored field hands than any other state. Consequently we heard many such song fragments as *Hurry Sundown, Let Tomorrow Come*, or

*Boll Weevil, where you been so long?
Boll Weevil, where you been so long?
You stole my cotton, now you want my corn.*⁸⁴

If this song is indigenous to Mississippi then this song is unlikely to date from before 1908, since the weevil first struck the Delta in this year. Six years later the entire area, as well as the whole state of Mississippi, was infested. Surprisingly however, cotton production in the Yazoo Delta was not retarded by the Boll Weevil infestation. On the contrary, it rose by 20 per cent, from 376,042 bales in 1909 to 452,064 in 1915.⁸⁵

Despite the appearance of the AAB structure in Handy's account of this song about the Boll Weevil, this song may well have been more closely related to a one verse song. The Mississippi blues singer Charlie Patton made a recording of "Mississippi Bo Weevil Blues" many years later in June 1929. This version of the song does not have the harmony of the blues, but is a simple one chord song where the basic two note melody is accompanied by a single unchanging chord. Certainly Patton was capable of producing quite complex harmonic progressions as a many of his other recordings demonstrate; it could well be that he was accurately performing the kind of song that would have been sung in Mississippi around 1908.

A second song that Handy cites is a version of the ballad "Stack O' Lee," also known as "Stagolee:"

Clarksdale was eighteen miles from the river, but that was no distance for roustabouts. They came in the evenings and on days they were not loading boats. With them they brought the legendary songs of the river.

*Oh, Kate's up the river, Stack O' Lee's in the ben',
Oh, Kate's up the river, Stack O' Lee's in the ben',
And I ain't seen my baby since I can't tell when.*⁸⁶

This is a song about two well known steamboats. The *Kate Adams* was a side wheel paddle steamer that carried cargo and mail between Memphis and Arkansas on a route that included

⁸⁴ Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 74.

⁸⁵ Robert L. Brandfon, *Cotton Kingdom of the New South: A History of the Yazoo Mississippi Delta from Reconstruction to the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967), 123.

⁸⁶ Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 75.

Friars Point, Mississippi. She was registered in Memphis to R. R. Donnelly & Sons.⁸⁷ There were three steamboats named the *Kate Adams*: the first two were wooden hulled whereas the third, with a steel hull, was known by the rousters as the *Lovin' Kate*.⁸⁸ It was the *Lovin' Kate* that had a particular rivalry with the *Jim Lee*, which also carried mail between Friars Point and Memphis. A striker who worked on the maiden voyage of the *Jim Lee* in 1898 recalled that, "if the *Kate Adams* had a good cargo of cotton we could pass her, and sometimes we did. But when the boats were equally loaded, the *Adams* could go round the *Lee*."⁸⁹

Captain James Lee (born Dec. 15, 1808),⁹⁰ founded the Lee Line of packers before the Civil War and named his boats after his six children; four sons and two daughters. One of the largest of the steamers was the *Stacker Lee*, she was known colloquially as "The Stack," "The Big Smoke" "Stack o' dolluhs," and the "Bull of the Woods." The *Stacker Lee* was based in Memphis, travelling out to Cincinnati and Vicksburg at different times of the year.⁹¹

Jim's son, Stacker Lee was born circa 1847, in Dover City, Stewart County, Tennessee.⁹² By the 1880 census Stacker's father James, gave his own occupation as "Retired Str. Boatmen," and is aged 71; he is with his son Stacker in Memphis, Tennessee. Stacker Lee gives his occupation as "Capt. Str. Jas. Lee."⁹³ I suspect that at the time of the census (see figure 1) the *James Lee* was moored in Memphis and possibly moored on the North levee.⁹⁴ Along with Stacker and his father there are also a further twenty males aged between 18-42 living in this "family," whose occupations are given as steamboat clerks, of which there were three, two steamboat mates, a pilot, four engineers, a steward, a bar keeper, a mail agent, a baker, and three sailors. This boat the *James Lee* was damaged by fire in October of 1883 and although she was rebuilt, she was retired from service in 1884.⁹⁵

It was not until 1902 that the steamboat *Stacker Lee* was built; skippered by Captain Shep Lightner, running between St. Louis and Memphis. She continued to operate until she sank four miles above Memphis on Oct. 21, 1916.⁹⁶ From this we can be reasonably certain that the song that Handy heard about the *Kate Adams* and the *Stacker Lee* must have circulated after the *Stacker Lee* was built in 1902.

⁸⁷ Photograph of *The Steamer Kate Adams, of Memphis/ R. R. Donnelly & Sons*, circa 1884 (Local History & Genealogy Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁸⁸ Mary Wheeler, *Steamboatin' Days* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1944; reprint, 1969), 11.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁹⁰ James L. Lee, "Family Data Collection-Births", Dover, Stewart County, Tennessee, (Ancestry.Com).

⁹¹ Wheeler, 54.

⁹² 1850 Census of the United States, Stewart County, Tennessee, page 465 line 2, there is also a birth certificate for a Samuel Stacker Lee, Birth year: 1845; Birth city: *Dover*; Birth state: *TN*. I believe this may be an older brother, rather than being Stacker Lee, (Ancestry.Com).

⁹³ 1880 Census of the United States of America, Shelby County, Memphis, Tennessee, 27, (Ancestry.Com).

⁹⁴ The census clearly states "River" but what follows is difficult to read.

⁹⁵ Frederick Way Jr., *Way's Packet Directory 1848-1983: Passenger Steamboats of the Mississippi River System since the Advent of Photography in Mid-Continent America* (London: Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, 1983), 241.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 432.

There are two types of “Stacker Lee” songs. The first relate to the steamboat the *Stacker Lee* and are clearly associated with the river. The other “Stacker Lee” songs are of the “bully song” genre. In this capacity “Stagolee” was:

The hero of the race: his deeds are marvelled [*sic*] at. Perhaps he is the most interesting figure within the whole field of activities. Certainly he is a distinct character, and has a tremendous influence upon the conduct of his people. He is admired by young and old; and those who do not approve of his deeds or example marvel at his powers.⁹⁷

The bully songs about Stacker Lee could perhaps be associated with Captain Stacker Lee. In some versions of the bully songs about Stacker Lee he has a rival Billie Lyons which could perhaps be a reference to William Lyons of Lyons Bros., who ran steamships. Other than the coincidence of name, I am unaware of any other connection. A more likely explanation I would suggest is that the bully Stacker Lee is a different person who took his nickname from the *Stacker Lee* steamboat, naming himself after one of the largest and most powerful vessels on the river.

*Stacker Lee is lookin' fo' the Bully, The Bully can't be found,
Now we're going to walk the levee roun', roun', Goin' to walk the levee roun',
I'm lookin' fo' the Bully uv yo' town. I'm lookin' fo' the Bully,
The Bully mus' be found, I'm lookin' fo' the Bully boys,
To lay the body down, I'm lookin' fo' the Bully uv yo' town.*⁹⁸

The bully songs about Stacker Lee seem to be derived in part from May Irwin's 1896 “Bully Song.” There is no mention of Stacker Lee by name in the lyrics of the published version of the “Bully Song” (see figure 2), but many of the other lyrics are similar.

It is interesting to note that May Irwin's “Bully Song” has a three-line stanza construction and is set in a twelve-bar form. This could perhaps begin to explain why a number of bully songs that were collected in rural Mississippi also use the three-line stanza form.

One version of “Stacker Lee” collected by Howard Odum in Mississippi and published in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1911, has a three-line stanza construction with a refrain.

*Stagolee, Stagolee, what's dat in yo' grip?
Nothin' but my Sunday clothes, I'm goin' to take a trip,
O dat man, bad man, Stagolee done come.*

*Stagolee, Stagolee, where you been so long?
I been out on de battle fiel' shootin' an' havin' fun,
O dat man, bad man, Stagolee done come.*

*Stagolee was a bully man, an' ev'y body knowed,.
When dey seed Stagolee comin', to give Stagolee de road,
O dat man, bad man, Stagolee done come.*⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Odum, “Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes,” 287-8.

⁹⁸ Wheeler, 100.

MAY IRWIN'S "BULLY" SONG.

Words and Music by
CHARLES E. TREVATHAN.

Moderato.
PIANO.

Have yo' heard a-bout dat bul-ly dat's just come to town? He's
I'se gwine down the street with my ax in my hand; I'm
round a-mong de nig-gers a lay-in' their bod-ies down. I'm a
look-in' for dat bul-ly, and I'll sweep him off dis land. I'm a
look-in' for dat bul-ly, and he must be found. . . . I'm a
look-in' for dat bul-ly, and he must be found. . . . I'll

Copyright, 1896, by CHARLES E. TREVATHAN.

(2)

Figure 2: "The Bully Song" (1896), by Charles E. Trevathan (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress)¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Odum, "Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes," 288.

¹⁰⁰ "The Bully Song" (1896), by Charles E. Trevathan, (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress.)

Odum also reported a version of “Stagolee” that he said was more common in Georgia that he said was “sung to different music” and with the repeated refrain “*Stagolee done kill dat Bully now.*” A number of observers have tried to connect these three-line stanza *one verse songs* and other three-line stanza constructions to the emergence of the blues and have suggested that it was the three-line stanza that led to the AAB stanza form of the blues. An example of this line of thought is provided by Jeff Titon.

It is likely that the beginning of the improvised AAB downhome blues song form was marked by the coincidence of these AAA songs with the small number of three-line, twelve-bar, AAB song models whose stanzas were more or less in predetermined order. Singers simply added a rhyming punch line after repeating the first line, and in so doing they formed the three-line, AAB songs with improvised, interchangeable stanzas.¹⁰¹

If there is a connection between these early three-line stanza songs and the emergence of the blues form, as Titon suggests, then this connection was never made by the folklorist Howard Odum. Writing in 1911 Odum states:

The great mass of negro songs may be divided into three general classes, the last of which constitutes the folk-songs as commonly used, - first, the modern ‘coon songs’ and the newest popular songs of the day; second, such songs greatly modified and adapted partially by the negroes; and, third, songs originating with the negroes or adapted so completely as to become common folk-songs.¹⁰²

It will be noted that at this time there is no reference to the blues, perhaps because at the time the term “the blues” as a reference to a kind of music was not widely known. David Evans argues that:

Odum stated that the secular songs of the blacks fell into three general classes: the current popular songs, such songs greatly modified and adapted, and the folk songs proper that were the originals creation of the blacks. The blues would have fallen into the third class.¹⁰³

This was not Odum’s view in 1925. When he reviewed his notes for publication in *The Negro and His Song*, he wrote:

In fact, the great mass of present-day Negro songs may be divided into three classes, the third constituting the folk songs: First, the modern “Nigger songs,” popular “hits” and “blues”; second, such songs greatly modified and adapted partially by the Negroes; third, songs originating with the Negroes or adapted so completely as to become common Negro song.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Down Home Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 29.

¹⁰² Odum, "Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes," 259.

¹⁰³ Evans, 36.

¹⁰⁴ Odum and Johnson, *The Negro and His Song*, 149.

Quite evidently if there was a connection between any of the *one verse songs* that Odum had collected, for the 1911 paper, and the blues, the connection still escaped him fourteen years later. By then he was familiar with the blues as a type of song and concluded that the blues should be grouped among popular hits rather than with folk-songs.

In *Negro Workday Songs* (1926) Odum made a telling distinction between two different kinds of blues, the type he described as “formal blues” and the other type as “folk blues.”

It may be worth mentioning that the majority of these formal blues are sung from the point of view of women. [...] Among the blues singers who have gained a more or less national recognition there is scarcely a man’s name to be found.

It is doubtful whether the history of song affords a parallel to the American situation with regard to the blues. Here we have the phenomenon of a type of folk song becoming a great fad and being exploited in every conceivable form; of hundreds of blues, some of which are based directly upon folk productions, being distributed literally by the million among the American people; and the Negro’s assimilation of these blues into his everyday song life. What the effect of these processes are going to be, one can only surmise. One thing is certain, however, and that is that the student of Negro song tomorrow will have to know what was on the phonograph records of today before he may dare to speak of origins.¹⁰⁵

Odum goes on to say that:

The folk blues will also undergo modification, but they will always reflect Negro life in its lower strata much more accurately than formal blues can. For it must be remembered that these folk blues were the Negro’s melancholy song long before the phonograph was invented.¹⁰⁶

Odum is clearly making a distinction between what he retrospectively called folk blues, the songs that he began collecting around 1908, and the formal twelve-bar blues as sung by vaudeville women. This book was published in 1926, before Blind Lemon Jefferson had begun to impact on the virtual monopoly of commercial blues recordings of the women blues singers of vaudeville. It was also before any of the songsters and bluesmen from the rural South would be recorded. We can therefore be quite certain that when Odum speaks of folk blues, he is not using the term to describe the country blues singers of the Mississippi Delta and elsewhere, but rather an older repertoire of folk-song that he had collected many years before.

Given the distinction that Odum makes between folk blues and formal blues, it is difficult to be sure how to interpret Odum’s remarks about the origin of the blues, when he argued that “the blues originated, of course, with Negroes who had access to few instruments other than the banjo and the guitar.”¹⁰⁷ If he is using the term blues to refer to the folk blues then this

¹⁰⁵ Odum and Johnson, *Negro Workday Songs*, 33-4.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

seems quite probable. It is less likely that he is suggesting that the formal blues as sung on vaudeville originated on guitar and banjo.

Also open to interpretation is Odum's remark that "there is no doubt that the first songs appeared in print under the name of blues were based directly upon actual songs already current among Negroes."¹⁰⁸ W. C. Handy in particular went on to make the case for his blues being based upon songs that were already current among African Americans.

The Blues as Folk-song

By 1916 the folklorist Dorothy Scarborough had begun to question the relationship between the blues and folk-song in an article that was written for the Folklore Society of Texas titled *The 'Blues' as Folk Song*. She wrote:

There is a fashion in music as in anything else, and folk-song presents no exception to the rule. For the last several years the most important type of Negro song has been that peculiar, barbaric sort of melody called "blues," with its irregular rhythm, its lagging briskness, its mournful liveliness of tone. It has a jerky tempo, as of a cripple dancing because of some irresistible impulse.¹⁰⁹

The blues that Scarborough is referring to are the commercial blues of W. C. Handy and others, as she makes clear later in the article.

Blues, being widely published as sheet music in the North as well as in the South, and sung in vaudeville everywhere, would seem to have little relation to authentic folk-music of the Negroes. But in studying the question, I had a feeling that it was more or less connected with Negro folk-song, and I tried to trace it back to its origin.

Negroes and White people in the South referred me to W. C. Handy as the man who had put the bluing in the blues. But how to locate him was the problem. He had started this indigo music in Memphis, it appeared, but was there no longer.¹¹⁰

Having located Handy Scarborough secured an interview which she reported as follows.

To my question, "Have blues any relation to Negro folk-song?" Handy replied instantly, "Yes, they are folk-music."

"Do you mean in the sense that a song is taken up by many singers who change and adapt it and add to it in accordance with their own mood?" I asked. "That constitutes communal singing in part, at least."

¹⁰⁸ Odum cites James Weldon Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, x-xiv; Dorothy Scarborough, *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs*, 269-70; *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁰⁹ Scarborough, 264.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

“I mean that and more,” he responded. “That is true, of course, of blues, as I’ll illustrate a little later. But blues are folk-songs in more ways than that. They are essentially racial – the ones that are genuine (though since they have become the fashion many blues have been written that are not Negro in character), and they have a basis in older folk-song.”

“A general or a specific basis?” I wished to know.

“Specific,” he answered. “Each one of my blues is based on some old Negro song of the South, some folk-song that I heard from my mammy when I was a child. Something that sticks in my mind, that I hum to myself when I’m thinking about it. Some old song that is a part of the memories of my childhood and of my race. I can tell you the exact song I used as a basis for any one of my blues. Yes, the blues that are genuine are really folk-songs.”¹¹¹

Handy then goes on to cite three examples of folk-songs that are the basis for his blues compositions: “Joe Turner’s Blues,” “Loveless Love” based on “Careless Love” and “Long Gone.” Speaking about “Joe Turner’s Blues” Handy said:

That is written around an old Negro song I used to hear and play thirty or more years ago. In some sections it was called Going Down the River for Long, but in Tennessee it was always Joe Turner. Joe Turner the inspiration of the song, was a brother of Pete Turner, once governor of Tennessee. He was an officer and he used to come to Memphis and get prisoners to carry them to Nashville after a kangaroo court. When the Negroes said of anyone, ‘Joe Turner’s been to town,’ they meant that the person in question has been carried off hand-cuffed to be gone no telling how long.¹¹²

“Joe Turner” is Joe Turney the brother of Peter Turney (1827–1903) Governor of the State of Tennessee between 1893 and 1897. Peter Turney’s principal achievements as Governor were in education and in prison reform. In his term in office he abolished the system of lease labour that he inherited from his predecessor John Price Buchanan, where prisoners were leased out to companies and plantations as forced labour. It seems from Handy’s account that his brother Joe did not share Peter’s enthusiasm for prison reform.

An interesting feature of two of the earliest versions of the song “Joe Turner” collected is that they have a three-line stanza construction. One version of “Joe Turner” was collected from a visiting singer in Lafayette County in Northern Mississippi by Odum, who comments that “in ‘Joe Turner’ an ideal is hinted at. Each line is sung three times to make a stanza.”¹¹³

*Dey tell me Joe Turner he done come,
Dey tell me Joe Turner he done come,
Oh, dey tell me Joe Turner he done come.*

¹¹¹ Ibid., 265.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Odum, “Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes (Concluded),” 351.

Come like he ain't never come befo'. : (three times)

Come with that fohty links o' chain. : (three times)

*Tell a me Joe Turner is my man. : (three times)*¹¹⁴

Another version of the song collected by E. C. Perrow in Mississippi and published in 1912 also begins with the three-line structure.¹¹⁵

*Tell me Jo Turner's come to town; (thrice)
He's brought along one thousand links er chain;
He's gwine ter have one nigger fer each link,
Gwine ter get this nigger fer one link.*¹¹⁶

The folklorist Newman I. White writing in 1928 says that the song “Joe Turner” developed between 1892 and 1896, and says that “Joe Turner” is probably “the source of almost all the typical blues tunes.”¹¹⁷

The second tune that Handy cites from his childhood is “Careless Love” which is the basis for his later composition “Loveless Love.” According to a recent Encyclopaedia of the Blues, “Careless Love” is “one of the most important and frequently recorded of American folk songs.”¹¹⁸

It is not strictly a blues song—in fact, it predates blues probably by some decades—though it has important blues characteristics and has long been a favorite of blues singers. Its roots are obscure, though it is usually thought to have developed out of an Anglo-American Southern mountain melody some time in the second half of the nineteenth century. Though W. C. Handy stated his band played it as early as 1892, apart from a 1911 transcription of the text by Howard Odum (titled “Kelly's Love”), the song leaves little trace until 1921 when Handy published an updated version entitled “Loveless Love.”¹¹⁹

A version of “Careless Love” was collected in Mississippi in 1909 from “country whites,”¹²⁰ supporting the suspicion that the song has Anglo-American origins.

*I'm going to leave you now;
I'm going ten thousand miles.
If I go ten million more,
I'll come back to my sweetheart again.*

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ E. C. Perrow, “Songs and Rhymes from the South,” Ibid.25, no. 96 (1912): 155.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Newman I. White, *American Negro Folk Songs* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1928), 388.

¹¹⁸ Edward Komara (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Blues* (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 181.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ E. C. Perrow, “Songs and Rhymes from the South,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 28, no. 108 (1915): 147.

*Love, oh, love! 'tis careless love (twice)
You have broken the heart of many a poor boy,
But you will never break this heart of mine?*

*I cried last night when I come home (twice)
I cried last night and night before;
I'll cry to-night; then I'll cry no more.¹²¹*

Despite the fact that most of the earliest folklore reports of “Careless Love” come from white singers, another consistent source of reports of this song come from New Orleans. By the turn of the century there is good reason to believe that the tune “Careless Love” was played by Buddy Bolden, the first cornet “king” of New Orleans. A number of older New Orleans jazz musicians say that Bolden played the tune and we can be quite certain that these references must date from before 1906, as a year later he was committed to a mental asylum and never performed publicly again. Some New Orleans jazz musicians such as Wooden Joe Nicholas, (b. N.O., 1883) suggest that Bolden may have composed the song himself.¹²² However, Handy claimed quite a different origin for the song which he describes as a blues ballad, saying the song “narrated the death of the son of a governor of Kentucky. It had the mythical ‘hundred stanzas’ and is widely current in the South, especially in Kentucky, a number of years ago.”¹²³

Although this song was known in New Orleans, how well it was known in rural Louisiana is also open to question, since a number of musicians from around Louisiana who went on to play with the New Orleans bands say that the first time that they heard the tune was in New Orleans. An example of this is John Joseph who was born in Jamestown, St. James Parish, about eleven miles from Donaldsonville, Louisiana around 1878. Joseph was asked when he had first heard “Careless Love.” He replied, “‘Careless Love’? When I came down here [New Orleans]; that was the first time I heard it. That’s pretty old, too.” And he says that he first heard the song “Around 1900, 1906, yes.”¹²⁴

If Buddy Bolden was indeed the composer of “Careless Love” this would raise the obvious question as to how Handy could have known the tune as a child. Bolden was not known to have been musically active until 1895, by which time Handy was already a young man.

What are we to make of the apparent inconsistency of Handy’s accounts of having heard the blues? On the one hand he claimed in his autobiography that he first heard the song that would inspire him to compose “The Memphis Blues” in 1903 in Mississippi, whereas in a 1916 interview with Dorothy Scarborough he says that he heard blues songs such as “Joe Turner,” “Careless Love,” and “Long Gone” as a child.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Joseph “Wooden Joe” Nicholas, “Interview Digest, November 12, 1956,” ed. William Russell and Charlie DeVore (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

¹²³ Dorothy Scarborough, “The ‘Blues’ as Folk Song,” *Folklore Society of Texas*, 1916; Karl Koenig, *Evolution of Ragtime & Blues to Jazz* (Running Springs, Ca.: Basinstreet Press, Undated), 117-8.

¹²⁴ John Joseph, “Interview Transcript, November 24, 1958,” ed. William Russell, Richard B. Allen, and Nesuhi Ertegun (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

Perhaps Odum's distinction between folk blues and formal blues is useful in this case. Today we consider the standard blues form to be a twelve-bar blues. By the time Handy came to write his autobiography this paradigm was well established, a paradigm that Handy had himself in no small way contributed to. It had been in part Handy's consistent use of the twelve-bar form of the blues in his compositions after 1912 that had firmly established the twelve-bar blues as the standard form; however, in 1916 this standard form was still in the process of becoming established.

This twelve-bar form of the blues was clearly established as the standard blues form with the publication of Handy's *Blues an Anthology*. As Abbe Niles comments in the *notes to the collection*, "*Careless Love*, despite loose references to it in some books, is obviously not a blues."¹²⁵ It seems that "*Careless Love*" was not, in the view of Niles a blues, because it does not conform to the twelve-bar structure of the blues. This is further borne out by Niles' remarks concerning "Joe Turner." He stated that "many of the verses in the folklore are in the blues spirit, yet are excluded from the blues form. [...] In this usage, it was only the verses that could be fitted into the three-cornered tunes like *Joe Turner* that came to be called "blues," and, conversely, they would say of a new melody to which they could not sing one of their three-line verses: 'That ain't no blues!'"¹²⁶

Niles can be understood to be suggesting that folk-songs that pre-dated the widespread appearance of the formal blues were retrospectively adapted to fit into the new twelve-bar form of the blues. But this cannot be the whole story. There were some eight and sixteen-bar songs that were also (probably retrospectively) called blues, such as "*Careless Love*."

Perhaps when W. C. Handy used the term "the blues," in 1916, he was not necessarily referring to the blues in the sense that we would generally use the term today. It could be that in 1916 in speaking about "*Careless Love*," Handy was using the term "blues" to mean African American folk-song in general rather than as a reference to any particular form or structure. Unlike Howard Odum, W. C. Handy was not making a clear and explicit distinction between "formal blues" and "folk blues." This explanation would also be consistent with another folk-song that Handy also claimed inspired a later blues composition.

In 1892 Handy was forced to sleep rough in St. Louis where he heard a couple of "shabby guitarists picking out a tune called 'East St. Louis.' It had numerous one-line verses and they would sing it all night."¹²⁷

*I walked all the way from Old East St. Louis,
And I didn't have but one po' measly dime.*¹²⁸

Again what Handy is claiming is that he heard a *one verse song* because he goes on to say "that line was an entire stanza," and that it was this experience that influenced his later, most successful blues publication "*The St. Louis Blues*" (1914). He goes on to say that "the

¹²⁵ Abbe Niles, "Notes to the Collection," 1947 edition, Handy, *Blues: An Anthology*, 206.

¹²⁶ Abbe Niles, "Foreword" to the 1947 edition, *Ibid.*, 17.

¹²⁷ Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 142.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

tonality of these men's singing may well have contributed to my writing of the *St. Louis Blues*, but it should be clear by now that my blues are built around or suggested by, rather than constructed of, the snatches, phrases, cries and idioms such as I have illustrated.”¹²⁹

We need therefore to make a clear distinction between what it is that Handy is claiming, and what it is that others have claimed on his behalf. Handy himself says that his blues are “built around or suggested by” the rural songs that he has heard. He also told Scarborough that his blues were “based on some old Negro song of the South.” He did not claim that he had faithfully copied or reproduced a form of African American folk-song in the way that a folklorist might. Rather he had taken elements of existing folk-song and combined these elements in a new way.

Handy also mentions a song that he was playing in 1893 as having influenced his use of the three-line structure in “The St. Louis Blues.”

The three-line structure I employed in my lyric [in “The St. Louis Blues”] was suggested by a song I heard Phil Jones sing in Evansville during my sojourn there.

*Gwine take morphine and die, Lawd,
Gwine take morphine and die, Lawd,
Gwine take morphine and die.*

*Ain't got no friend nowhere, Lawd,
Ain't got no friend nowhere, Lawd,
Ain't got no friend nowhere.*

*Got no more home than a dog, Lawd,
Got no more home than a dog, Lawd,
Got no more home than a dog.*

Phil Jones called the song *Got No More Home Than a Dog*. It was a blues, but the word formed no part of its title. What we now call the blues, to the folk musicians meant a kind of song; individually they bore no such designation. They were known by simple titles like *Stack O'Lee*, *Brady*, *Frankie and Johnnie*, *John Henry*, *Stavin' Chain*, *Lost John*, *Joe Turner*, and the like.¹³⁰

When W. C. Handy recorded a version of “Got No More Home Than a Dog,” in 1938, he accompanied this *one verse song* with conventional I-IV-V harmony on guitar.¹³¹ If this is an accurate reflection of what he heard in 1893 then one has to ask what was the significance of hearing the guitarist at Tutwiler (or on a Mississippi plantation) ten years later. And are we to interpret this as a folk-song or as a minstrel song, given that Phil Jones led a minstrel band in Evansville?

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 142-3.

¹³¹ W. C. Handy, interviewed by Alan Lomax, Washington D.C. May 1938 (Library of Congress, AFC 1621 A3 & B1).

Blues Ballads

The songs that Handy remembered from his early years, which he retrospectively called blues, such as “Stagolee,” “Brady,” “Frankie and Johnnie,” “John Henry,” “Stavin’ Chain,” “Lost John” and “Joe Turner” all have one feature in common that distinguishes them from the later blues. They are all ballads. “Stagolee” and “Joe Turner” are ballads of the *bully song* genre, as is “Brady,” who is a bully that is killed playing poker. Two songs are of the *hero* genre. “John Henry,” is celebrated for killing himself in an effort to drive more steel than a steam hammer, and “Stavin’ Chain,” is a celebrated roustabout who it is believed worked on the steamship the *Joe Fowler*, and who could out-work the other roustabouts.¹³² “Frankie and Johnnie” is a ballad about Frankie who, finding her man with another woman, kills her lover.

As Stephen Calt notes, “of the thousands of blues recorded between 1920-1941, there are probably fewer than half a dozen that are not sung from the first person.”¹³³ One obvious difference between the songs that Handy retrospectively describes as blues, and the blues as they came to be recorded, is that the blues as we know them today are songs of self-expression, sung in the first person. They were not ballads.

In most cases we only have the lyrics to these songs as collected in the early years of the century. However, one interesting exception to this is “Frankie and Johnny,” of which many versions were collected and at least two versions were transcribed. “Frankie and Johnny” (also known as “Frankie and Albert”) is a ballad that tells the story of Frankie and her lover, who is having an affair with another woman. Frankie kills her lover and is, in many versions, convicted and executed. There are however many different versions, and Dr. R. W. Gordon remarked in 1932, “that he knows no song in America today with so many different texts.”¹³⁴ A convincing explanation for the appearance of the song relates to a killing that took place in St. Louis, Missouri, on October 15, 1899, when Frankie Baker shot her 16 year old lover Allen Britt who was having a relationship with a woman named Alice Pryor.¹³⁵ As Frankie Baker later retold the story she went home to 212 Targee Street, (now known as Johnson Street), rather than confront Britt who had gone to a party with Alice.

About 3 o'clock Sunday morning, Allen Britt came in... Pansy opened the door and let him in. I was in the front room in bed asleep and he walked in and grabbed the lamp and started to throw it at me. I jumped up out of bed and says, 'What's the matter with you, Al?' and he says, 'What the hell are you doing in this bed?' I says, 'I've been sick and come in where I could get more air,' and he walked around the bed and started to cut me, like this, twice. I asked him, 'Say, are you trying to get me hurt?' and he stood there and cursed and I says, 'I am boss here, I pay rent and I have to protect myself.' He run his hand in his pocket, opened his knife and started around this side to

¹³² Wheeler, 16-7.

¹³³ Stephen Calt, *I'd Rather Be the Devil: Skip James and the Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 44.

¹³⁴ Mellinger E. Henry, "Review: Frankie and Johnny by John Huston," *The Journal of American Folklore* 45, no. 176 (April 1932).

¹³⁵ John R. David, "Frankie and Johnnie: The Trial of Frankie Baker," *Missouri Folklore Society Journal* VI (1984): 6.

cut me. I was standing here, pillow lays this way, just run my hand under the pillow and shot him. Didn't shoot but one time, standing by the bed.¹³⁶

There are a couple of points of detail that differ between the ballad “Frankie” and the events in St. Louis in 1899: the first of these is that in many versions of the ballad, Frankie goes looking for Albert (Al Britt) and shoots him in a bar rather than at home; the second is that in a number of versions she is convicted and sentenced to death.

I went to trial on Friday, November 13, 1899, and the bad luck omens didn't go against me. Why the Judge even gave me back my gun. Don't know what I did with it. Guess I pawned it or gave it away. Everybody carried a gun in those days. Guess I wasn't so very guilty, if the judge gave me back that gun, was I? You know, I was afraid of Albert. He beat me unmercifully a few nights before the big blow-off. My eye was festered and sore from that lacin' when I went before Judge Clark. He noticed it, too.¹³⁷

Another theory connects the “Frankie” ballad with the story of Frankie Silvers. On Dec. 22, 1831, Charles Silver was murdered at his cabin in Burke County, N.C. His body was dismembered and parts subsequently found at various locations in and around the cabin. On Jan. 10, 1832, his wife, Frances (“Frankie”) Stewart Silver, her mother Barbara Stewart, and brother Blackstone Stewart were taken to Morganton, North Carolina, and charged with the crime.¹³⁸ There are a number of reasons to doubt that this is the basis of “Frankie.” First, Frankie and Charles were married and there was no third party in the relationship; the murder was committed with an axe not a gun, and it was committed in a remote rural location. Perhaps most telling of all, the song associated with Frankie Silver is a confession ballad that she reputedly sang before her execution.

Howard Odum collected a song that was closely connected with “Frankie” under the title of “Lilly,” however as Odum notes “the song, sometimes called respectively ‘Pauly,’ ‘Frankie,’ ‘Lilly,’ is the story of the murder committed, and of the conviction of the murderess.” Again we find a three-line stanza construction with a refrain.

*Lilly was a good girl — ev'ybody knows,
Spent a hundred dollars to buy her father suit o' clothes,
Her man certainly got to treat her right.*

*She went to Bell Street — bought a bottle of beer;
"Good-mornin', bar-keeper, has my lovin' man been here? "
My man certainly got to treat me right.*

*It is Sunday an' I ain't goin' to tell you no lie,
He wus standin' over there jus' an hour ago,
My man certainly got to treat me right.*

¹³⁶ *St. Louis Star Times*, 16 October 1939; *Ibid.*: 6-7.

¹³⁷ Dudley L. McClure, “The Real Story of Frankie and Johnny,” *Daring Detectives Tabloid*, June 1935; *Ibid.*: 7.

¹³⁸ Sharyn McCrumb, *The Ballad of Frankie Silver* (Rockland, MA: Wheeler Publications, 1998), 44.

One of the limitations of the folk-songs collected by Odum is that only the lyrics survive, which makes it difficult to assess how closely these three-line stanza songs related to the blues. Fortunately Dorothy Scarborough did notate two versions of “Frankie,” saying that one version was “the more common air,” and that this was the version that she had always heard in her home state of Texas.¹³⁹ The similarity between the lyrics from “Lilly” as given by Odum and “Frankie” as given by Scarborough does suggest that the same tune could well have been sung to both.

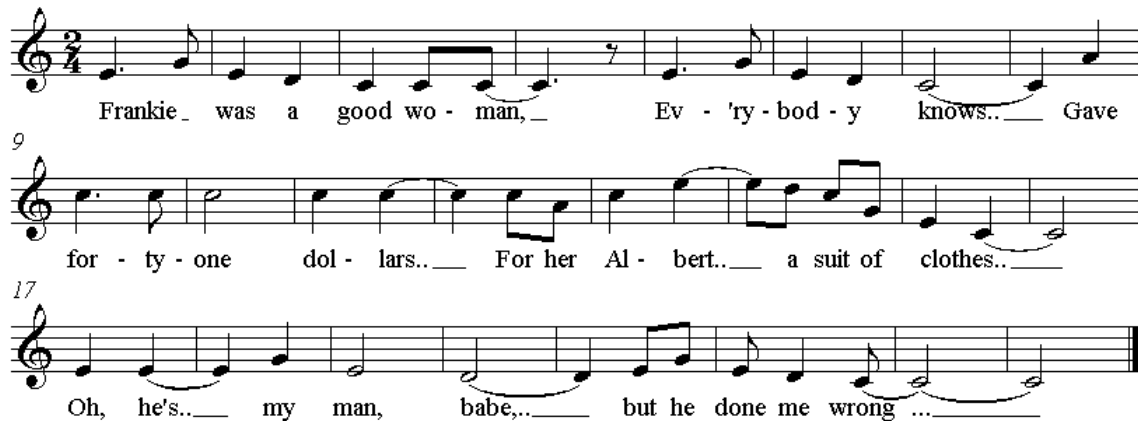


Figure 3: “Frankie,” as given by Dorothy Scarborough, (*On the Trail of Negro Folk-Song*, 1925)

Had this song have been notated in 4/4 it would have had a twelve-bar form, however, the melody is diatonic and without the “blue-notes” associated with the blues, and it could be argued that “Frankie” has another substantial difference that distinguishes it from later blues: the way the phrases are grouped. According to Stephen Calt:

The building block of the blues is a four-bar phrase divided into two unbalanced parts: a ten beat vocal phrase, followed by a six-beat instrumental phrase. It is this unvarying phrase, repeated three times, that makes for a twelve-bar blues, and is the unique insignia of the form, removing it from the spiritual or any other song form.¹⁴⁰

An example of typical blues phrasing is W. C. Handy’s “The St. Louis Blues,” where each phrase ends on the first beat of the third bar of each line, which makes it possible for an instrumental response to complete the four bar phrase.

¹³⁹ Scarborough, 83.

¹⁴⁰ Calt, *I'd Rather Be the Devil: Skip James and the Blues*, 35-6.



Figure 4: “The St. Louis Blues” (1914), by W. C. Handy (*Blues an Anthology*, 1925)

A further feature of blues phrases that John Barnie calls attention to is the way they are often divided into two halves, but not always of equal length; this is the characteristic that Barnie calls “half-line formulas.”¹⁴¹ Again “The St. Louis Blues” provides an example of this where each phrase is divided between the first two bars of each four bar phrase.

Calt further argues that:

Since the essential building block of the twelve-bar pattern is the 10/6 (or 9/7) series of vocal/instrumental beats, which amounts to a four bar phrase, it is likely that the earliest recognizable blues consisted of eight or twelve-bars, depending on whether two or three phrases were employed to create a stanza.¹⁴²

This line of thinking would suggest that it is not the three-line stanza itself that is the essential characteristic of the blues, but rather the way that the phrases are themselves constructed within a four bar statement, and that songs such as “Careless Love” with its sixteen bar chorus could also be considered a blues from this perspective. This is a feature also found in Handy’s version of “Careless Love.”



Figure 5: “Careless Love” (1925), by W. C. Handy (*Blues an Anthology*, 1925)

¹⁴¹ John Barnie, “Formulaic Lines and Stanzas in the Country Blues,” *Ethnomusicology* 22, no. 3 (1978): 458.

¹⁴² Calt, *I’d Rather Be the Devil: Skip James and the Blues*, 43.

In all these blues we find a two bar (9 beat) vocal phrase followed by a two bar (7 beat) instrumental section, which is absent in “Frankie” as transcribed by Scarborough. In “Frankie” the lyrics are sung continuously without any instrumental breaks. One explanation for this difference may be that the blues ballads may have developed as unaccompanied songs whereas songs using the 9/7 blues phrases may have developed from instrumental, or instrumentally accompanied music.

A classic example of the question and answer phrasing between voice and an instrument in the blues can be found among guitar playing bluesmen, who will typically sing a phrase and then play an answering phrase on their guitar to complete the four bar statement. While this question and answer phrasing can also be found in work songs and spirituals (sung by a number of singers together) if sung solo, an instrument is required to complete the four bar phrase. It therefore seems reasonable to ask what instruments were available on which blues phrasing could have developed when the blues began to be sung solo.

The Guitar and the Blues

Robert B. Winans has assessed the thirty-one volumes of the ex-slave narratives collected in the 1930s for references to musical instruments and concludes that the fiddle and the banjo were by far the most popular instruments in the nineteenth century among those questioned.

The fiddle was apparently used alone (or with another fiddle) in more than half the references in which it was mentioned. The banjo, on the other hand, was played alone (or with another) in only a third of the references, it being found more often in combination with other instruments. While nearly any possible combination of the instruments listed here might be found in the narratives, the most common combination was the fiddle and the banjo, either just the two or supplemented by other instruments. Another way to look at the data is to say that in half of the instances in which the banjo appeared, it was in combination with the fiddle. And in one quarter of the instances in which the fiddle appeared, it was in combination with the banjo.¹⁴³

What emerges from this is that the banjo was usually played in combination with another instrument and there is a known repertoire of reels and jigs that are associated with the combination of these instruments. There are occasional examples of songsters and blues singers using the banjo but their number is small, and generally found in combination with other instruments, an example being Gus Cannon and his Jug Stompers.

Another interesting comparison that Winans makes is between the ratios of references of the fiddle to the banjo on a state by state basis.

¹⁴³ Robert B. Winans, "Black Instrumental Music Traditions in the Ex-Slave Narratives," *Black Music Research Journal* 10, no. 1 (1990): 45.

This percentage is highest for Virginia (14 over 10, or 140 percent) and North Carolina (100 percent), suggesting that black banjo playing was especially strong in these states. These are followed by Georgia, Alabama, and Louisiana, where the banjo-to-fiddle ratio is in the 60-70 percent range. The banjo tradition was apparently less strong in Arkansas, Kentucky, and Texas, where the ratio is 40-50 percent, and quite weak in South Carolina and Mississippi, where the ratio is 25-30 percent. The data for the other states are too sparse to hazard this analysis.¹⁴⁴

Given that in Mississippi there were few banjos in relation to fiddles it seems unlikely that the folk-songs that both Odum and Handy reported hearing in Mississippi had originated on the banjo. According to Winans the guitar was a relatively recent addition to the instruments used by African Americans in the South.

The relationship of the guitar to the fiddle and banjo in this list makes it clear that widespread playing of the guitar by blacks was a post- [Civil] war phenomenon. Most of the guitar references come from Rankin and Simpson Counties in south-central Mississippi.¹⁴⁵

It is possible that the guitar only began to appear in the rural South after the Civil War because before this time there were relatively few guitars being made in America. The few instruments that there were in the South would have been imported.

The first American-made guitars were built by the firm of C. F. Martin in 1833 in New York and were sold in his retail store. Martin entered into distribution agreements with a variety of teachers, importers and wholesalers, including C. Bruno & Company Henry Schatz, and John Coupa, but at this time production and distribution was quite limited.¹⁴⁶

By 1838 Martin had relocated the company to Nazareth, Pennsylvania and company records from this time show that guitars were shipped to centres of trade including Nashville, St. Louis and New Orleans in the South. The instruments that Martin supplied were few in number. Even in the 1890s they only produced around 220 guitars a year and they were not primarily intended for the folk market.

The largest producers of guitars in America in the nineteenth century were Lyon and Healy, a company that began as a sheet music distribution company but turned to manufacturing guitars in 1888 under the Washburn label. Their principal significance was that they were the main supplier of stringed instruments to the mail order catalogues, such as Montgomery Ward and Sears Roebuck. This in turn led to guitars becoming available and affordable in the rural South. By the turn of the century the demand for guitars was substantial; Lyon and Healy's output in 1900 was claimed to be 100,000 guitars per year.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.: 46.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.: 45.

¹⁴⁶ <http://www.mguitar.com/history/ourstory.php?chptr=2>.

¹⁴⁷ George Gruhn and Walter Carter: *Acoustic Guitar and Other Fretted Instruments – a Photographic History*. San Francisco: GPI Books, 29-30; Darryl Martin, "Innovation and the Development of the Modern Six-String Guitar," *The Galpin Society Journal* 51 (1998): 93.

The expansion of the railways and the emergence of mail-order selling in particular made city goods available in rural areas. Local retailers in rural areas were unable to carry a large stock and they also needed to mark-up heavily the products that they did stock. The advantage that mail-order offered was the economies of scale. The first to successfully exploit this potential was Aaron Montgomery Ward. Montgomery Ward & Co. had started selling mail-order from Chicago, Illinois in August of 1872 with 163 articles for sale. By 1883 the company's catalogue had grown to 240 pages and 10,000 items. It is believed that they were the first company to offer guitars for sale by mail-order but when exactly this was is not clear. The 1895 catalogue of Montgomery Ward lists nine different guitar models; all were American made. The cheapest was the "Leader" at \$3.75, then the "Kenwood" at \$6.00. Then there were rather more expensive models that boasted a "rosewood finger board," the "Columbian Standard," "Concert" and "Grand Concert" at \$9, \$11 and \$13 respectively. Then there was the "Windsor" and "Windsor Concert" at \$12 and \$14 and two Washburn models at the top of the range in standard and concert sizes for \$22 and \$26. The catalogue also included a number of guitar accessories such as capos, tail pieces (to be used if steel strings were preferred) guitar cases and gut and steel strings.¹⁴⁸ The first serious competition that Montgomery Ward faced as a monopoly supplier of goods through mail-order came from Richard Sear with the founding of Sears Roebuck.

Richard Sears had started out selling watches as an agent of The Minneapolis and St. Louis Railroad in North Redwood, Minnesota. By 1887 he had moved his distribution centre to Chicago at the centre of the railroad network to the South. The first catalogue of Sears Roebuck appeared in 1891, but musical instruments were not included until 1893. It is uncertain when exactly guitars were first offered for sale; they may have been offered in the 1893 catalogue but it is more likely that they were included in the 1894 edition. It was not until 1895 that the catalogue proclaimed "the following departments [including musical instruments] are now complete in every respect." By 1897 there was a page devoted to guitars, offering a year's guarantee, with prices from \$3.25 to \$27.00 for a Washburn.¹⁴⁹ The prices of guitars seems to have been quite stable in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as the 1908 edition of the Sears Roebuck catalogue shows that similar prices had held for ten years.

The expansion in demand brought new manufacturers into the market. In the early 1890s Orville Gibson began to make stringed instruments whilst holding down a full time job as a clerk in a shoe store. In 1896 he filled a patent for an arch-topped mandolin but the Gibson Mandolin-Guitar Manufacturing Co., Limited was not formed until October 1902 in Kalamazoo, Michigan. The newly structured company went on to successfully exploit Gibson's original innovation and also led the way in further innovative designs.

Certainly the guitar became a popular instrument among rural African Americans but there is some doubt as to when the instrument was first used for playing the blues in Mississippi.

¹⁴⁸ Montgomery Ward & Co, *Catalogue and Buyers' Guide, No. 57, Spring and Summer 1895* (Dover Publications, Inc.; reprint, 1969), 243-4.

¹⁴⁹ Bruce Bastin, *Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 17.

Emma Williams recalls from a time “before nineteen-hundred” in a town near Yazoo City: “I used to hear ‘em playin’ on harps, on git-tars and so on like that, some, and whoever was playin’ a git-tar or something, they’d sing. But I don’t know nothing about them blues much.”

¹⁵⁰ Skip James (b. 1902) recalled that between 1908-1910 house ‘frolics’ of his native Bentonia were given over to “Alabama Bound,” “Drunken Spree” (a square dance tune based on “six-two” patterns), and “Slidin’ Delta,” a version of “East St. Louis,” all played with violin as lead instrument. “...I hadn’t heard of blues then,” he noted. “But after a little period of time ...I heard my mother and them speak about ‘singin’ the blues’...I wondered what the blues was then.”¹⁵¹ “Robert Wilkinson (b. 1896) heard only what he called ‘rag’ pieces like *Spoonful* and *Make Me A Pallet On The Floor* [...] as a youth in Hernando. ‘They started about 1904, somethin’ like that,’ he said of the latter tunes, which were featured by Delta migrants at his sister’s house ‘frolics’.”¹⁵² Sam Chatmon born around 1897 in Bolton, Mississippi, recalled from his childhood guitarists playing “Pearlee” and “My Bucket’s Got A Hole In It” and said, “That’s all they knowed back in them days...I ain’t never heard nobody pick no blues till my brother Bud and Charlie Patton, they’s about the first...”¹⁵³

What becomes clear is that guitars only became available and affordable in any number to songsters in the rural South after 1890, and that in less than twenty years a new song form the “blues” as distinct from *blues ballads* began to appear in their repertoire. One possible explanation for this is that the blues developed among these rural songsters as the guitar made it possible for the songsters to use the instrument as an answering voice. In this way, it could be argued, the characteristic (9/7) blues phrase could have developed.

As well as providing an answering voice to the blues singer, the guitar can also provide harmonic support for the blues song. One of the features of the “formal blues” is a consistent harmonic structure. To explore the issue of the relationship between the guitar and the emergence of blues harmony we need to look in more detail at the harmony of the blues.

Blues Harmony and Structure

In the twelve-bar blues there is a direct correlation between the twelve-bar form and the harmonic sequence that is associated with it. In most cases there is a basic underlying harmony based upon the tonic (I), the subdominant (IV) and the dominant chords (V) of the relevant key. Interestingly Handy does not claim to have composed this himself; he claims that this harmonic sequence was already common among African American musicians.

The twelve-bar, three line form of the first and last strain, [of “Mr. Crump,”] with its three-chord basic harmonic structure (tonic, subdominant, dominant seventh) was that already used by Negro roustabouts, honky-tonk piano players, wanderers and others of their underprivileged but undaunted class from Missouri to the Gulf, and had

¹⁵⁰ Paul Oliver, *Conversation with the Blues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 23.

¹⁵¹ Calt and Wardlow, *King of the Delta Blues: The Life and Music of Charlie Patton*, 63.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 63.

become the common medium through which any such individual might express his personal feelings in a sort of musical soliloquy. My part in their history was to introduce this, the “blues” form to the general public, as the medium for my own feelings and my own musical ideas.¹⁵⁴

One feature of Handy’s description that does support the premise that some of the three-line stanza songs were accompanied with blues harmony is that Handy seems to attribute this harmonic form to a slightly different musical constituency. Handy says that I- IV- V harmony was a “common medium” among “Negro roustabouts, honky-tonk piano players,” and “wanderers.” These are not the settled farmers and plantation workers of the Mississippi Delta but rather a group of people with urban contacts. The roustabouts worked on the river, and piano players were generally to be found in the towns and cities rather than on the plantations.

In the formal blues this twelve-bar harmonic structure is usually associated with a three-line lyric structure. In discussing the development of the lyrical structure of “The St. Louis Blues,” Handy is clear that he used the three-line structure, from songs such as “Got No More Home than a Dog,” but the concluding line was an idea that he adopted.

While I took the three-line stanza as a model for my lyric, I found its repetition too monotonous. I figured it would have taken too long to tell my story if I had repeated every thought three times. Consequently I adopted the style of making a statement in the second line, and then telling the third line why the statement was made. Thus I said in *St. Louis Blues*:

*I hate to see de eve’-nin sun go down
Hate to see de eve’-nin sun go down
‘Cause my baby, he done lef’ dis town.*

*Feelin’ tomorrow lak Ah feel today,
Feel tomorrow lak Ah feel today,
I’ll pack my trunk and make ma get-away.*¹⁵⁵

What exactly Handy is claiming here is open to interpretation. When he says he “adopted the style” of the AAB form, he could be claiming he invented it, or that he adopted from some other source. But it does suggest that this “adoption” was not based upon any previous, widespread convention within folk practice.

There were some examples of three-line stanza songs, which were collected, with a repeated refrain as in some versions of “Stagolee.” What are far less common are references to three-line stanza songs in the form AAB where B is a novel line that rhymes with the preceding two lines. One earlier example has already been discussed “Jail-House Shouting Blues,”

¹⁵⁴ Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 99.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 143.

which was according to John Jacob Niles collected by him when he was six years old in 1898.¹⁵⁶

Other references to early AAB stanza form are suggested by David Evans,¹⁵⁷ from a paper presented to the Texas Folk-Lore Society in 1912, by William H. Thomas, he cites “The Railroad Blues.”

*I got the blues, but I haven't got the fare,
I got the blues, but I haven't got the fare,
I got the blues, but I am too damn'd mean to cry.*

*Some folks say the rolling blues ain't bad;
Well, it must not have been the blues my baby had.*

*Oh! where was you when the rolling mill burned down?
On the levee camp about fifteen miles from town.*

*My mother's dead, my sister's gone astray,
And that is why this poor boy is here to-day.”¹⁵⁸*

Whether this single example of a three-line stanza from 1912 substantially weakens Handy's claim is open to interpretation. The features that distinguish the AAB form of the blues from other three-line forms are that the concluding line of the stanza is novel, and it usually rhymes with the preceding lines. In “The Railroad Blues” we have just one three-line stanza. All three of the lines begin with the phrase “I got the blues” which could also argue for this final line just being a repetition of the first two lines with a variation which does not rhyme with the preceding lines.

There is also a possibility that the line “I got the blues, but I am too damn'd mean to cry,” is a reference to Chris Smith's and James T. Brymn's hit “The Blues (But I'm Too Blamed Mean To Cry)” (1912).¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ Niles.

¹⁵⁷ Evans, 37.

¹⁵⁸ William H. Thomas, *Some Current Folk-Songs of the Negro and Their Economic Interpretation: Read before the Folk-Lore Society of Texas*, (1912.) (Austin: Folk-Lore Society of Texas, 1912), 9.

¹⁵⁹ “The Blues (But I'm Just Too Blamed Mean to Cry)” (1912), by James T. Brymn and Chris Smith, © No. E274998, January 12, 1912, New York (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress).

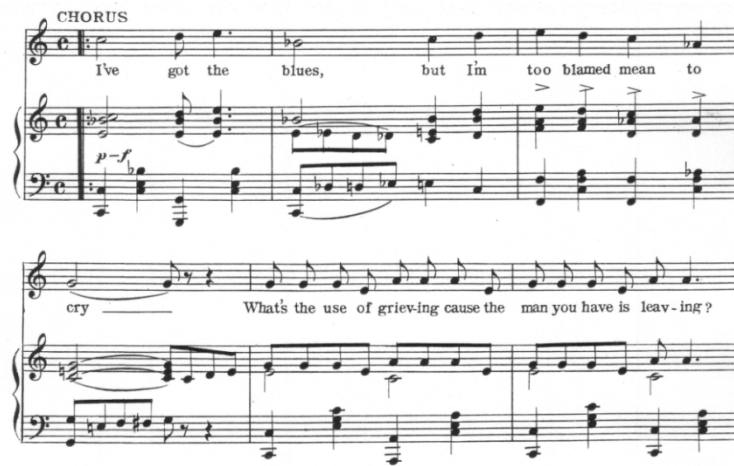


Figure 6: “The Blues (But I’m Too Blamed Mean to Cry)” (1912), by James T. Brymn and Chris Smith (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress)

Another example suggested by Evans as an example of AAB stanza form is “Frankie” which Thomas describes as a “tragedy in nine acts.” However as is usual with this particular ballad, it has a repeated first line with a refrain, which doesn’t rhyme with the preceding lines.

Jeff Titon argues that “Handy did not invent the three-line, AAB blues stanza form; he reported hearing it while touring with his orchestra in the Mississippi Delta in 1903.”¹⁶⁰ In support of this he gives the examples given earlier of “Boll Weevil, where you been so long?” and “Oh, Kate’s up the river, Stack O’ Lee’s in the ben’.”¹⁶¹ The difficulty here is corroborating the date of 1903, and also it seems a little illogical that Handy was both citing an earlier example of the AAB and claiming to have invented the form. Perhaps this argues for acceptance of the view that Handy only adopted and not invented the form.

A second example that Titon gives to demonstrate that Handy didn’t invent the AAB stanza form is “Thought I Heard the K. C. Whistle Blow,” as collected by Odum for his 1911 paper. Reproduced below is the song as given by Odum; the third stanzas could be interpreted as being in the AAB form although this is varied with AAA and AA stanzas and at the end two rhyming couplets.¹⁶²

/: Thought I heard that K. C. whistle blow,:/
Oh, I thought I heard that K. C. whistle blow!

/: Blow lak’ she never blow befo’,:/
Lawd, she blow lak’ she never blow befo’.

/: Wish to God some ole train would run,:/
*Carry me back where I come frum. [sic, ...]*¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ Titon, 28.

¹⁶¹ Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 74-5.

¹⁶² Titon, 28.

¹⁶³ Odum, “Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes,” 287.

The examples given are, as far as I know, the sum total of the evidence that supports the view that the AAB stanza form was performed by rural songsters in the South before Handy published his "The St. Louis Blues" in 1914.

There is however clear evidence that the form was known among vaudeville performers at an earlier date. In 1912 Leroy "Lasses" White, a white minstrel performer, deposited a manuscript for copyright of "The Negro Blues," with fifteen consecutive AAB stanza verses.¹⁶⁴

*I've got the blues but I'm too mean to, I said to, I mean cry
I've got the blues but I'm to mean to cry
I feel so bad I could lay myself down and die*

*The Blues ain't nothing but a good man feeling, I said feeling, I mean bad,
The blues ain't nothing but a good man feeling bad.
That's a feeling that I've often had.*

*When a man gets blue he takes a train and, I said train and, I mean rides.
When a man gets blue he takes a train and rides.
But when a woman gets blue she hangs her head and cries. [etc...] ¹⁶⁵*

As Abbott and Seroff comment:

Obviously Lasses White did not *compose* these floating verses; for the most part, at least, he had to have *overheard* them, "collected" them in the streets and vaudeville theaters of Dallas's emerging African American entertainment community. The title of the song identifies in generic fashion, the original source of the words and music.¹⁶⁶

This also identifies the most likely source of Handy's *adoption* of the AAB stanza form. By 1912 it is clear that the AAB stanza form was in circulation on the vaudeville stage, and elsewhere.

Was Handy the Father of the Blues?

When in 1941 W. C. Handy published *The Father of the Blues*, there was no reason to doubt his claim to have published the first blues in 1912. There were at the time no known earlier published blues. His claim as *The Father of the Blues* was further secured by his prolific output of blues compositions. With the benefit of hindsight and in the knowledge that earlier blues had been published it is easy today to underestimate the significance of W. C. Handy in the development of the blues and to come to the conclusion that he was a plagiarist who

¹⁶⁴ Abbott and Seroff, "'They Cert'ly Sound Good to Me': Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues," 409.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.: 409-10.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.: 410.

passed off folk-songs as his own. In fact Handy made no secret that he “based” his compositions on existing folk material. He never claimed to have simply copied what he heard; what he claimed was that he “saw the songs with the eye of a budding composer.”¹⁶⁷ Whilst Handy’s creative input can be questioned it would nevertheless be a remarkable achievement (if it were true), if he converted a solo song played on the guitar using a knife, into an election song scored for brass band.

Whatever credence we may give to Handy’s claim to be the “father of the blues,” in one sense his contribution has been enormous. Today in the popular imagination we think of the Mississippi Delta as the birth place of the blues. It is W. C. Handy’s autobiography *The Father of the Blues*, and his accounts of having heard the blues in the Mississippi Delta that would lead to popular acceptance of the idea that this was where the blues began. It was through Handy’s interview with Dorothy Scarborough that folklorists would begin to question the relationship between the folk blues and the formal blues and it would be in the light of Handy’s recollections of his time in Mississippi that the work of the early folklorist such as Howard Odum would be viewed by later generations.

W. C. Handy’s autobiography *The Father of the Blues* does not argue convincingly for a belief that the Mississippi Delta is the birthplace of the blues; there are far too many internal contradictions for that. He recalled hearing “Careless Love” and “Joe Turner” as a child in Alabama; he also heard the blues song “Got No More Home Than a Dog” in Evansville, Indiana in 1893, long before hearing the guitarist at Tutwiler, Mississippi. It is not that Handy convincingly argues for the Delta being where he first heard the blues; it is rather that later generations of blues writers have chosen to privilege Handy’s Mississippi recollections over his other statements. Where W. C. Handy is consistent, is in his statements that he used rural folk-music as the basis for his later compositions. It is through Handy’s recollections that it has become widely accepted that the blues is a folk-music that became commercialised. Handy presents in *The Father of the Blues* and in his interview with Dorothy Scarborough, a clear account of the transition from rural folk-song to commercial blues.

Although the folklorist Dorothy Scarborough played an important role in developing the idea that the blues had its origin in folk-music, today she is largely forgotten in this role. It would be a later generation of folklorists that would build on the foundations she had laid. It was against this background that a later generation of folklorists would visit the Delta and begin to collect material in the depression years of the 1930s. Foremost of these was Alan Lomax, who would go on to write *The Land Where the Blues Began* (1993),¹⁶⁸ in which he would claim that the Mississippi Delta was the land where the blues began. In so doing, he would consolidate the belief in the primacy of the Delta blues.

¹⁶⁷ Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 74.

¹⁶⁸ Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*.

Chapter 2: The Land Where the Blues Began?

After a lifetime of collecting and recording folk-songs from around the world, Alan Lomax's last significant work was the publication of *The Land Where the Blues Began* (1993). This book looked back to his earlier years and in particular to his recollections of collecting the blues.

Alan Lomax (1915-2002) began his career as a folk-song collector in 1933 accompanying his father John A. Lomax on field trips to the southern United States. Their early trips together were not specifically orientated towards the blues as they were interested in collecting all kinds of folk-songs from both black and white performers. When they reported their findings a year later in *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1934),¹⁶⁹ they listed just 11 songs that they categorised as blues, from the total of 271 songs that they published.¹⁷⁰

They also discovered Huddie Leadbetter, better known as Lead Belly, in a prison in Louisiana.

Lomax liked to record in state prisons, reasoning that men serving long sentences and therefore unexposed to recent commercial recordings were ideal sources for older Negro songs. In Leadbelly, Lomax found more than he bargained for. Here was a man whose repertoire of blues, lullabies, and cowboy songs, extended back to the previous century.¹⁷¹

In the introduction to their book, *Negro Folk Songs As Sung by Lead Belly* (1936),¹⁷² John and Alan Lomax observed:

Lead Belly, born 1885, in his early years escaped the influence of jazz, though his inheritance was rich from the Negro minstrel class. Even the 'blues' came later. Living in the country, he first learned simple tunes set to stories about taking water to thirsty plowmen [*sic*], of picking cotton, of shooting a goose flying South – songs dealing with nature, sung by men at work in the fields.¹⁷³

Lead Belly was born near Mooringsport, Louisiana, and left home in 1901 to go to Shreveport before settling in Dallas, Texas, where he met Blind Lemon Jefferson. Together they would sing songs such as "The Titanic" and "Careless Love," which Lead Belly claimed

¹⁶⁹ John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (New York: Macmillan 1934).

¹⁷⁰ Of these 11 songs, three had a three-line stanza construction; these were "Woman Blues," "The 'Cholly' Blues," "Fare The Well Babe" and there was a fourth, "Dink's Blues," which contained both four and three-line stanzas. Other songs that they included as blues were "My Li'l John Henry," and the long established "Alabama-Bound."

¹⁷¹ Francis Davis, *The History of the Blues* (London: Secker & Warburg 1995), 166-7.

¹⁷² John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1936).

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, xi.

had been first popularized in the Dallas area by Jefferson.¹⁷⁴ The two of them went on to work as a duo with Lead Belly playing mandolin and accordion and Blind Lemon playing guitar in a Hawaiian style.¹⁷⁵ It is difficult to judge when the duo began to play the blues. One blues song that Lead Belly recalled that they played was “Fort Worth and Dallas Blues,” of which he says “Me an’ Blind Lemon would play dat song, an’ de womens would come runnin.”¹⁷⁶ There was also his own blues, the “De Kalb Blues,” about the Texas town from which he was sentenced to thirty years imprisonment, in 1918.¹⁷⁷

As a child Lead Belly had learned to play the accordion and one would expect that as folk-song collectors the Lomaxes would have been interested in this early repertoire. Despite this Lead Belly made just four recordings playing the accordion, and none of these before 1942.

The Lomaxes seem to have been similarly uninterested in Lead Belly’s popular songs and jazz repertoire as they noted that:

For his programs Lead Belly always wished to include ‘That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine’ or jazz tunes such as ‘I’m in Love with You Baby.’ But in these he was only a poor imitator, though he could never understand why we did not care for them. We held him to singing the music that first attracted us to him in Louisiana, some of which he had ‘composed,’ at least partly. [...] Intellectual people and the most lowly loved best his folk tunes and his manner of rendering them.¹⁷⁸

From the perspective of what was known about the blues in the 1930s it is perhaps understandable that the Lomaxes took such a view of Lead Belly’s jazz repertoire and tried to hold him to performing the blues. In Lead Belly they had found someone who had personal contact with Blind Lemon Jefferson, the first successful male recording artist of the blues. Together it must have seemed that both Lead Belly and Blind Lemon Jefferson were representatives of the earliest development of the blues. But there was also an obvious contradiction with what Alan Lomax would come to believe: since both Lead Belly and Jefferson had both developed their blues repertoire in Dallas Texas, why should Alan Lomax later argue that it was in the Mississippi Delta that the blues began? Why was it that towards the end of his life when he looked back on his career as America’s foremost collector of folk-song that he had come to the conclusion that the blues developed in the Mississippi Delta?

In *The Land Where the Blues Began*,¹⁷⁹ he stated unequivocally in the first paragraph of the introduction:

Although this has been called the age of anxiety, it might better be termed the century of the blues, after the moody song style that was born sometime around 1900 in the Mississippi Delta.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁴ Kip Lornell, “Blind Lemon Meets Leadbelly,” *Black Music Research Journal* 20, no. 1 (2000): 29.

¹⁷⁵ Jared Snyder, “Leadbelly and His Windjammer: Examining the African American Button Accordion Tradition,” *American Music* 12, no. 2 (1994): 158.

¹⁷⁶ Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, 136.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 52-3.

¹⁷⁹ Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*.

Coahoma County

The Land Where the Blues Began begins as an account of two visits that Alan Lomax made to the Mississippi Delta in 1941 and 1942. These visits were part of a joint project between the Library of Congress and Fisk University to prepare a full sociological study of a single region in the South. Initially there was some discussion concerning the suitability and stability of the regions that were under consideration. On July 30, 1941 Lomax wrote to Charles Johnson of Fisk to ask his advice.

A number of people have suggested that southwestern Tennessee, which is slightly more stable than the Delta area, would be a better region for work than the one we have thought of already. I would like to have your suggestions on this subject so that I can be thinking about them before I see you in Nashville.¹⁸¹

On August 9, 1941, Johnson replied saying that “Southwest Tennessee, in many respects, is not very different from the Mississippi Delta; that is if you have in mind such areas as Shelby, Fayette and Haywood counties. They are not very far from the Delta counties, Coahoma and Bolivar, that we had originally in mind.”¹⁸²

In the event the decision was made to base the project in Clarksdale, the principal town of Coahoma County. It is likely that Coahoma County was chosen as the area for this study because this had already been surveyed by Charles Johnson of Fisk, for his book, *Growing Up in the Black Belt: Negro Youth in the Rural South* (1941).¹⁸³ No doubt Lomax was pleased that a region in Mississippi had been chosen, as he had written to his father the previous year that “the idea of going to a plantation in Mississippi is one that makes my mouth water.”¹⁸⁴

John Work, who had instigated the study on behalf of Fisk, and Alan Lomax made an initial visit, described as a “scouting trip”¹⁸⁵ to survey the area, with a view to begin the main recording visit soon after. Fisk also sent some of their people into Coahoma in the summer of 1942 to report on developments. Although all the participants hoped for a quick return to the Delta, the main visit was delayed until November of 1942. As the preliminary report prepared by Lewis Jones of Fisk University from Clarksdale advised:

In the enterim [*sic*] between my visits cotton had advanced in price and picking was now \$1.50 a hundred instead of 75 cents. At the end of the week the wages for cotton pickers had advanced to \$2.00 a hundred. Not since 1926 had the wages reached that

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., ix.

¹⁸¹ Alan Lomax, July 30, 1941, correspondence, (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, AFC 2004.)

¹⁸² Charles Johnson, August 9, 1941, correspondence, (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, AFC 2004.)

¹⁸³ Charles S. Johnson, *Growing up in the Black Belt: Negro Youth in the Rural South* (Washington D.C.: American Council on Education, 1941).

¹⁸⁴ Alan Lomax, July, 26, 1940, correspondence, (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, AFC 1933.)

¹⁸⁵ Report on Preliminary Work in Clarksdale, Mississippi (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, AFC 2004.)

level. Everybody was in the fields. People who had been working for meagre wages in the town quit their jobs.¹⁸⁶

Consequently the town was deserted and the plantation owners needed all the labour they could get. In a letter to Lomax, Charles S. Johnson explained that “Mr. Pete Williams, who is probably the most important man in that county, and the plantation owners generally, are urging that the actual recording that may require some time be done after November 1st. They said around November 15th, when people can relax again.” The letter concluded that “it looks as if we will have general support for the project if we accede to their suggestion, and a bit of opposition and actual difficulty in catching the right people if we do not.”¹⁸⁷

In the interim, Lewis Jones, an African American sociologist and assistant to Charles S. Johnson, who was working at Fisk as the supervisor of field studies, used the time to continue to prepare for the visit. Among the material that he collected was an interview with Stack Mangham.

Stack Mangham was the man who had invited W. C. Handy to come down to Mississippi in 1903; he combined his job as a clerk in Planters Bank with playing the clarinet. As the digest of the interview reveals, Handy and Mangham were still in contact up to a year before the interview. Mangham recalled a time around 1903 when Handy came to the Delta:

I didn't pay much attention to the blues and that music until Handy came here. He didn't either when he first came here. I remember when we first became conscious of it. We were playing down at Cleveland [Mississippi] for a dance and the people had been dancing but they had gotten tired and sleepy and noboyd [*sic*] was dancing much except a few couples on the floor. We took an intermission and three fellows came in there with a guitar, a mandolin, and a bass violin and started to play. When they played the people began to get wild. Everybody woke up and got interested and began to dance. Handy got the idea. He went back in the corner and took his pencil and a piece of paper and copied a part of what they [*sic*] were playing. That part he copied went like this (here he did a little tune). When Handy wnet [*sic*] from here to Memphis he finished the piece after work[i]ng on it for a couple of years and called it Mr. Crump and later the Memphis Blues. It's the same thing we heard that night at Cleveland (again the tune). We caught on and when we came back to play we played that part we remembered and improvised to make out.¹⁸⁸

This digest corroborates much that Handy had written in *Father of the Blues*, particularly about his time in Cleveland, and does shed some light on when Handy started to collect fragments of folk material to use in his blues compositions.

¹⁸⁶ Report on Preliminary Work in Clarksdale, Mississippi (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, AFC 2004.)

¹⁸⁷ Charles S. Johnson, September 16, 1941 (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, AFC 2004.)

¹⁸⁸ Stack Mangham, interview digest, September 10, 1941 (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, AFC 2004.)

Another way that Lewis Jones used his time in Clarksdale was to list the records that were being played on the juke boxes of five of the local bars. This gave an insight into the then popular tastes of the residents of Clarksdale. By the 1940s people in Clarksdale danced principally to recorded music on juke boxes which they called “Sea-Birds” – a corruption of the name Seeburg, one of the makers of Nickelodeons.¹⁸⁹

At the “Chicken Shack” the more popular artists were Sister Rosetta Tharpe and her recordings of “There’s Something Within Me,” and “Stand By Me.” Another favorite was Count Basie with “Down, Down, Down,” and “Going to Chicago,” and Louis Jordan with “Saxa Woogie” and “Pan Pan.” The jazz piano player Earl Hines also had two tracks available, “Jelly Jelly” and “I’m Falling for You.” On the same juke box could also be found Woody Herman, Lil Green, Artie Shaw, Walter Davis, Fats Waller, Ollie Shepard, Bob Crosby, Sammy Kaye, Bing Crosby, Ella Fitzgerald and Memphis Slim with “Beer Drinking Woman.” A similar repertoire could be found on the “Sea Birds” at the “Dipsie Doodle,” “Lucky’s” and “Messenger’s Café.” The only artists that appeared on all the juke boxes surveyed were Count Basie and Louis Jordan. It seems that by 1941, jazz and swing was, at least among the people who frequented these juke joints, the music of preference, with popular songs a close second and the blues way down the list. There were no records available by local Delta musicians. As a sociologist Lewis Jones tried to account for these trends.

Jones had two years earlier submitted his M.A. thesis titled *Occupational Stratification among Rural and Small Town Negroes before the Civil War and Today* (1939). He was interested in how urban development was changing the lives of African Americans living in the Delta. As Jones saw things at the time “the whole life experience of the people [of the Delta] is organised about the means of communication and transportation.”¹⁹⁰ This led him to the view that there were four generations of people living in the Delta and that these groups could be categorised on the basis of the principal mode of transportation. He argued that “the four generations living [in the Delta] may be considered as being the river generation – the oldest people, who are in their seventies and eighties; the railroad generation, from sixty to forty; the highway generation, in their twenties and thirties; and the youth and children.”¹⁹¹ The changes in the means of transportation had, according to Jones, impacted on the culture of the region and cultural changes could be directly ascribed to the economic circumstances that prevailed. He went on to say:

The railroad era witnessed a more formal and less spontaneous expression of attitudes and feelings. Men were singing their thoughts and fancies on the levee, on the railroad, and in the field, but these expressions were confined to the spot of their making. The social song was no longer the traditional ring play and dance. These songs were divided into the respectable and the wicked. The respectable were popular

¹⁸⁹ Robert Gordon and Bruce Nemerov, *Lost Delta Found: Rediscovering the Fisk University –Library of Congress Coahoma County Study, 1941-1942* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005), 84-6.

¹⁹⁰ Lewis Jones, "Report on Field Experience, August 20, 1942," (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress AFC 2004).

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

written music, while in the brothels in the red light district the blues were taking form and identification. The spirituals were sung less an[d] less, while the 'Dr. Watts' song, with its standardized form became increasingly popular. The 'gospel' songs were beginning to appear in the churches.¹⁹²

According to this line of thinking, the urbanising influences in the railroad era were the blues and gospel music, and these musical forms had been dominant in the tastes of those that he identified with this age group, those between forty and sixty years old. However, the younger people belonged to the highway generation, and preferred jazz.

Jones invites us to look at the Delta as it was in the early 1940s and not the Delta where men and mules had turned the soil. This time had already passed. The tractor had replaced the mule. Musical tastes also reflected this increased mechanisation and urban influence, as Jones concludes in his report.

The radio and the juke box have made for a standardization of music tastes. There remains a little of the river [culture], much of the railroad [culture], along with the confused beginnings of the highway culture.¹⁹³

Jones reported to Charles S. Johnson who would have been sympathetic to Jones's approach. Johnson's early work, *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of race Relations and a Race Riot* (1922), was a full sociological survey of conditions in Chicago that led to race riot of 1919. This was followed by *Shadows of the Plantation* (1934), a study of Macon County, Alabama. What this study makes clear is that Johnson believed that the blues was an urban musical form.

These blues, which by the way, first gained recognition as a form of popular ballad in night clubs in Beale Street, Memphis are the natural idiom of the Negro proletarian, just as the "spirituals" have been, and to a very considerable extent still are, the natural expression of the mind and mood of the plantation Negro. The distinction between the folk of the villages and the open country and the proletarians or populus [*sic*] of the city is expressed and symbolized in the difference between the folk song and the popular ballad, the spiritual and the blues¹⁹⁴

In his more recent book *Growing Up in the Black Belt* (1941), Johnson had turned his attention to some of the other plantation regions of the South and had assessed the relative wealth, and concluded that Coahoma County in the Mississippi Delta was a relatively high income area.

Variations between income exist among the counties studied. The very lowest incomes appear in the two decadent plantation counties: Green County, Georgia, with a median income of \$329, and Macon County, Alabama, with a median income of

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Charles S. Johnson, *Shadows of the Plantation* (Chicago Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1934), xiv.

\$352. Shelby County, Tennessee, also shows a low median income of (\$386). In this county the cotton economy is in decline, although the nearness of a large city (Memphis) provides an influence tending to delay general economic collapse. The two counties where the plantation system still flourishes (Bolivar County and Coahoma County in Mississippi) have relatively high median incomes (\$554) and (\$604). The income level in Johnston County, North Carolina, and Madison County, Alabama, is about the same as that in Bolivar County while the highest median income is \$667 in Davidson County, Tennessee.¹⁹⁵

It seems that Lomax welcomed this broadly based sociological approach that was being applied to the Coahoma project and he wrote to his father:

The Fisk recording job is going to be done, I believe, more thoroughly and objectively than any that has yet been done in the United States in any field by any recordist. At least, if our outline is followed it will be.¹⁹⁶

He also clearly realised the advantage of co-operating with the African American academics from Fisk University, as he notes in a letter to his father on September 5, 1940.

I just spent a very exiting week in Coahoma County, Mississippi, which has the highest ratio of Negro population of any county in America. I'm extremely pleased so far with the collaboration with the Fisk people. It seems to me that we establish very close contact with the Negro community on very short notice, working with these people.¹⁹⁷

The Fisk sociologists were focusing on Coahoma County as it was in 1941, a place that was changing in response to urban influences. These urban influences were not in themselves new. The river had from the earliest days of settlement, ensured contact with the cities along its course. The coming of the railroad had also greatly increased access for both people and goods too and from the region, and now the roads were continuing this process.

But there was another aspect of the Delta that was of particular interest to Lomax and that was its blues heritage.

Robert Johnson and Son House

On November 6, 1941, prior to the main visit, Alan Lomax wrote to Charles Johnson saying:

I wonder would it be possible for one of your people on their way to and from the field, preferably Lewis Jones, to stop in and see Son House at Robinsville, Mississippi, and get from him a long interview about Robert Johnson. It might also be a good idea to interview Robert Johnson's parents, who live near by, since Mr.

¹⁹⁵ Johnson, *Growing up in the Black Belt: Negro Youth in the Rural South*, 54.

¹⁹⁶ Alan Lomax, Correspondence, October 3, 1941 (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, AFC 1933.)

¹⁹⁷ Alan Lomax, Correspondence, September 5, 1941 (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, AFC 1933.)

Johnson is the most important folk musician that this area has produced. I'd like very much to see what they can get on him, particularly on the subject of his death, which seems to have occurred under mysterious circumstances.¹⁹⁸

It seems that Lomax had come to know of the blues singer Robert Johnson through the jazz promoter John Hammond. Robert Johnson had recorded for Columbia Records in 1936, and Hammond discovered the unpublished masters from these sessions when he was working for the company.¹⁹⁹ Much of Robert Johnson's life was, and still is, surrounded in myth and mystery, and it is this, along with the durability of his repertoire, that has earned him a place as the quintessential bluesman.

At the time of the Coahoma visit very little was known about the rural bluesmen of the Delta. Lomax later admitted that his "guess at the time was that Robert Johnson probably had been one of Lemon's brilliant disciples, since Johnson's style seemed to resemble Blind Lemon's – the high-pitched delivery, the brilliant countermelodies between phrases, for example."²⁰⁰

In fact the relationship was a little more complex than Lomax imagined. When Lomax did interview Son House he was given an insight into the way that blues musicians in the Mississippi Delta had been influenced by the recorded blues of Blind Lemon Jefferson, rather than through personal contact.

How it came about that he [Robert Johnson] played Lemon's style is this – Little Robert learned from me, and I learnt from an old fellow they call Lemon down in Clarksdale, and he was called Lemon because he had learnt all Blind Lemon's pieces off the phonograph.²⁰¹

Son House didn't begin playing guitar and singing the blues until sometime after 1925. Prior to this time he had been a minister of the church, but he did come from a musical family as he told Jeff Titon:

Nine of my uncles, all them played but they had a little band. Yeah, my daddy and all his brothers, they had a little band what they played, with the horns and things; oh, it was the whole outfit, you know, what they'd use. [...] I never did try to blow none of them horns. I didn't even try. I might have could it [*sic*] I'd have tried but I didn't even try. And I did blow a harp, a little, and so finally then I got to the idea that I wanted to play the guitar. My daddy, he play a guitar. So I got that idea from him.²⁰²

Jeff Titon then asked "Did your daddy play blues?"

¹⁹⁸ Alan Lomax, Correspondence, November 6, 1941 (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress).

¹⁹⁹ Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 13.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 16.

²⁰² Son House, interview with Jeff Titon, May 8, 1971, Minneapolis, Minnesota (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress AFS 19155); *Living Blues* no. 31, March-April 1977.

Well, he'd try sometime, he'd try to play, but he couldn't, they couldn't play nothing like that. Like what us play now, no, not no blues like that. They didn't hardly even know what them kind of blues was (laughs) when you say blues, no.²⁰³

Another influence on Son House was Charlie Patton,²⁰⁴ whose life and death are shrouded in nearly as much myth and legend as Robert Johnson. Peter Guralnick has suggested that, “the so-called Delta style of blues singing and playing actually originated around Drew, in the heart of the Delta, about the time that Robert Johnson was born. It centred around a singer named Charley Patton, born in the late 1880s.”²⁰⁵ If it is true that Patton was one of the first guitarists to play the blues in the Delta, then where did Patton learn to play the blues?

Patton told his protégé Booker Miller that he began to play the guitar when he was about nineteen or twenty years old, which would suggest that he may have begun playing in 1906.²⁰⁶ According to Miller, Patton claimed his first guitar effort as “If You Take My Women, I Won’t Get Mad With You” of which Miller said, “Now he could play that good,”²⁰⁷ but according to Stephen Calt and Gayle Wardlow:

In its original form, *If You Take My Women* may not have been a guitar piece at all: its basic melodic line occurs in jaybird Coleman’s harmonica piece, *Trunk Busted-Suitcase Fulla Holes* (1927), as well as in fiddle-guitar duets like Andrew and Jim Baxter’s *Bamalong Blues* (1927), the Alabama Sheiks’ *Travelin’ Railroad Man Blues* (1931), and Henry Sims’ *Come Back Corrina*, which featured Patton’s unmelodic backing guitar.²⁰⁸

The other tune that Patton told Miller was one of the first he learned was “Maggie,” which although it “formed one of the cornerstones of his performing repertoire had only limited currency among blues singers.”²⁰⁹ The inspiration for this song is not known although it has been suggested that it may have been connected with the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

The title lyric of *Maggie* was apparently suggested by a nineteenth century spiritual. A song that the Fisk Jubilee Singers featured in concert tours of the 1870s [...] But the phrasing of *Maggie* used a free melodic line that amounted to a series of vocal riffs rather than a fixed tune. Whereas melodic variations were incidental in most blues or spirituals, they were fundamental to *Maggie*, which stands as the only genuinely improvisatory blues melody found in 1920s’ recordings.²¹⁰

There is perhaps another explanation for the title. The steamboat *Maggie* worked the Vicksburg, Sunflower, and Yazoo rivers, and could well have been known to Patton. *Maggie*

²⁰³ Son House, interview with Jeff Titon, May 8, 1971, Minneapolis, Minnesota, (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress AFS 19155); *Living Blues* no. 31, March-April 1977.

²⁰⁴ Patton’s first name is often spelt Charley and also Charlie. I have adopted the spelling used by Calt and Wardlow, *King of the Delta Blues: The Life and Music of Charlie Patton*.

²⁰⁵ Guralnick, 14.

²⁰⁶ Calt and Wardlow, *King of the Delta Blues: The Life and Music of Charlie Patton*, 85.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

was lost on May 1, 1907 following an accident above Greenwood, Mississippi; an event that would have had consequences for the plantations of the region.

According to Nathan (Dick) Bankston who recalled Patton's repertoire around 1910, Patton had already developed many of the pieces that he would record at the end of the 1920's. "Among these pieces were *Pony Blues*, *Banty Rooster*, *Down the Dirt Road Blues*, *Screamin' And Hollerin' The Blues*, and *Mississippi Bo Weevil Blues*."²¹¹ Tunes that Miller recalled were still favourites in his live performances two decades later. "Even when Patton was at the peak of his popularity in the late 1920s, Miller recalled, audience tastes ran to three of his tunes: *Pony Blues*, *Down The Dirt Road*, and *High Water*. In addition his *Banty Rooster* and *Spoonful* were popular repertoire pieces."²¹²

Given the significance of Patton to the story of the Delta blues, it is perhaps worth looking in detail at the songs that formed the basis of his blues repertoire. The song "Mississippi Bo Weevil Blues" can be dated to no earlier than 1908 since this is the date when the weevil was first reported in Mississippi; it went on to infest the whole of Mississippi by 1914.²¹³ "Mississippi Bo Weevil Blues" (recorded June 1929) does not have the harmony of the blues but is a simple one chord song where the basic two note melody is accompanied by a single unchanging chord.

"Banty Rooster" is a twelve-bar blues but the comic nature of the lyrics suggest that this song may have its origins in vaudeville, and according to Calt and Wardlow: "One guesses that of all of Patton's bedrock pieces, *Banty Rooster* was the least likely to have been his creation."²¹⁴

"Pony Blues" as recorded by Patton in 1929 is a twelve-bar blues based upon a melody that Patton employed regularly in his blues recordings and its origin is unknown. According to Wardlow "Pony Blues" is one of the two main melodies he employs for almost all of his recordings.²¹⁵ Although it is possible that Patton may have come up with this melody himself some of the lyrics are probably borrowed from other songs, in particular the second stanza.

*Hello Central, the matter with your line?
Come a storm last night an' tore the wire down.*

This is a verse from "Hesitation Blues," a song that Lead Belly recalled from Louisiana around the same period,²¹⁶ and which according to Calt and Wardlow despite its title "had no

²¹¹ Ibid., 114.

²¹² Ibid., 118.

²¹³ Brandfon, 123.

²¹⁴ Calt and Wardlow, *King of the Delta Blues: The Life and Music of Charlie Patton*, 102.

²¹⁵ Gayle Dean Wardlow, *Chasin' That Devil Music: Searching for the Blues* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 1998), 110.

²¹⁶ According to Calt and Wardlow: "Lead Belly recalled its popularity in Louisiana "around 1910, 1909, 1908 and seven". (Cf. *Leadbelly's Last Sessions*: Folkways Fa 2942). W. C. Handy made a national hit of it in 1916, after learning it from 'a wandering musician who said he had learned it from a hymn.' (Handy: *A Treasury Of The Blues*: 1949 reprint of the 1926 edition: Charles Boni: New York. 243-244)." Calt and Wardlow, *King of the Delta Blues: The Life and Music of Charlie Patton*, 58.

musical kinship with blues. It is basically a vocal ditty without true instrumental figures.”²¹⁷ There also never was a central telephone exchange anywhere in Mississippi; this is an exchange name that was used in large cities such as Chicago, St. Louis and Dallas. If “Pony Blues” did indeed originate with Patton then it seems, at the very least, he borrowed some existing stanzas from other popular songs of the day.

“Down the Dirt Road” is a blues where “each verse is thirteen-and-a-half bars”²¹⁸ and which again shows evidence of non Delta influences in the lyrics, particularly in the line: “I been to the Nation, oh Lord, but I couldn’t stay there.” The nation in question is a reference to the “Indian Nation,” which had been established by the Indian Intercourse Act (1834) and ended in 1907 when Oklahoma entered the Union. It seems likely that Patton took this lyric from an existing song.

What this suggests is that Patton was borrowing at least some of his repertoire from sources outside of the Delta. This raises the question, where could he have come into contact with such songs? Recent research by Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff does provide one possible explanation.

The Tent Shows

At some time around 1900 the tented minstrel show began to appear. Companies like Allen’s New Orleans Minstrels, the Rabbits Foot Company and the Florida Blossom Minstrels²¹⁹ performed in vast canvas theatres throughout the South.

The earliest reports of the singing of the blues in the minstrel tent shows come from the *Indianapolis Freeman* in 1914. In Oklahoma, with The Sunny Dixie Minstrels, end man Wee Willie Nelson was “sure some class when he sings the ‘Memphis Blues.’” Later that year Huntingdon’s Mighty Minstrels were performing with Jolly E. Davis, who was “bringing the house down with ‘his original blues.’ He sings them like no one else can.” Likewise a report from Barfield’s Georgia Minstrels in the spring of 1915 described Lucille McGinty, “leaving them spellbound with the ‘Low Down Blues.’”²²⁰

These shows worked a circuit through the South going to wherever they could earn a living. One of the most lucrative times for tent shows was cotton picking time in the Mississippi Delta. Reports from around the time of the First World War present a picture of the Delta awash with tent shows as Abbott and Seroff describe:

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Sleeve notes to “Charley Patton: Founder of the Blues,” Yazoo L-1020.

²¹⁹ Abbott and Seroff, *Ragged but Right: Black Travelling Shows, 'Coon Songs' and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz*, 210.

²²⁰ Mrs. Frankie C. Latham, “The Sunny Dixie Minstrels,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, April 18, 1914; “news From the F. C. Huntingdon Minstrel Co.,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, October 31, 1914; “Barfield’s Georgia Minstrels,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, April 17, 1915; “Notes From J. C. O’Brien’s Famous Georgia Minstrels No. 1,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, September 4, 1915; Ibid., 211.

During the fall of 1915 tent shows were stacked on top of each other in the Delta. Robinson's Old Kentucky Minstrels reported from the crossroads town of Bobo late that year: "we have been only a few days behind Prof. Eph Williams, Big Silas Green Co. and also the Rabbit Foot Co. ...A show in every town every day in the week and all do a big business...Rosedale, Miss., and Greenville, Miss. Were banner houses for the season."²²¹ At Rosedale, members of the Old Kentucky Minstrels "had the pleasure of shaking hands with J. C. Miles and his happy bunch from the Jones Circus."²²²

From the Silas Green Company in September 1916:

Well, we are still in Mississippi, playing to large crowds, and the way people turned out, why, it seemed as if we were the first show to enter the town, but we were not, for there are several others, such as the Kentucky Minstrels, J. C. O'Brien, the World Follies and the Wooden's Bon Tons, and in spite of all we are turning them away nightly ...The Bon Tons showed Jackson, Miss. One week, as they started...and they were the talk of the town all Sunday and Monday, but when Prof. Eph [Williams'] Silas Green Co, opened their doors Monday night, and taking 800 people, paid admission, and about 75 comps, why it didn't seem as though the Bon Tons had ever been there.²²³

Max C. Elliott, a freelance agent for a number of shows reported in the *Freeman* of October 27, 1917:

I will now give you an idea of what shows are now in the Cotton State of Mississippi.

In the first place, the State is overrun with one and two-car shows, theatrical companies and carnivals are a thing of the past when it comes to the good old State of Mississippi. Carnivals are barred out of the biggest lot of the towns, while theatrical companies have to make big jumps in order to find houses to play in.

Nearly all the circuses have made the state and have cleaned up. The Barnum and Bailey circus came first followed by the Wallace Circus, Sun Bros., John Robinson, Sells Floto and the Hagg [*sic*] circus. Now comes the rumour of the Ringling Show and the Cole Bros. In the minstrel game first to come was the Mobile Minstrels, followed by the Rabbit's Foot, A. G. Lions [*sic* Allen's] Minstrels, Prof Eph. Williams, Silas Green shows, Hunt's Old Kentucky Minstrels, Brown and Bowers White Minstrels Under Canvas, Jones Bros. Georgia Smart Set Minstrels, Worden's Alabama Minstrels, Campbell Bros.' New Orleans Minstrels, Joe Herbert's Greater Minstrels, Pete Worthley Florida Blossoms, and G. A. Corbin Minstrels, Price and Bornell's Minstrels. And they are doing a big business, in fact, reaping a harvest from the American Cotton Picker, as the colored people and white people of Mississippi like plenty of minstrel companies. Of the minstrel companies under canvas will say I

²²¹ "Robinson's Old Kentucky Minstrels," *Indianapolis Freeman*, December 18, 1915; *Ibid.*, 217.

²²² Dennis West, "Notes from Old Kentucky Minstrels," *Indianapolis Freeman*, December 18, 1915; *Ibid.*

²²³ "Notes of Silas Green Co.," *Indianapolis Freeman*, September 30, 1916; *Ibid.*, 214.

have seen just two and they were Robert Russell Company under canvas and the Eph. Swain, as W. I. Swain is in the army. I met one musical show under canvas, white, Johnny Calvin Company. He packed them in at Greenville the night I saw the show.²²⁴

On Thursday, October 11, 1917, four major tent shows converged on the little town of Greenwood. The *Freeman* published the following account filed by a New Orleans-based newspaperman:

October 11, at Greenwood, furnished enough shows for Greenwood, Mississippi and vicinity to last them for the next ten years. With the greatest show on earth, Barnum & Bailey, and their gorgeous parade, viewed by thousands along the line of the march, was closely followed by the Georgia Smart Set Minstrels, then A. G. Allen's Minstrels, at four-thirty came Old Kentucky Minstrels, from which I understand from various agents of the above latter shows, it was planned to 'buck' the Georgia Smart Set Show, as it was their first visit to the state.²²⁵

A clear example of how early in the century these travelling shows had begun to influence the tastes and repertoires of Mississippi songsters comes from an account of an archaeological excavation on a mound in Coahoma County in 1901 and 1902. Charles Peabody was able to observe the music making of a gang of men he employed to dig trenches.

The music of the Negroes which we listened to may be put under three heads: the songs sung by our men when at work digging or wheeling on the mound, unaccompanied; the songs of the same men at quarters or on the march, with guitar accompaniment; and the songs, unaccompanied, of the indigenous Negroes, - indigenous opposed to our men who had been imported from Clarksdale, fifteen miles distant.²²⁶

He goes on to say that "Our men had equal penchants for hymns and 'ragtime;'" saying that of the ragtime melodies "'Molly Brown' and 'Googoo Eyes' were great favourites."²²⁷ He also mentions another rag that was popular with the men called "Nigger Bully."²²⁸ Charles Peabody had also formed an opinion as to where these trench diggers had learned these songs. He believed they were "undoubtedly picked up from passing theatrical troupes."²²⁹

The suspicion that these songs were picked up from passing theatrical troupes can be confirmed from the published sheet music of the period. "Googoo Eyes" can be identified as "Just Because She Made Dem Goo-Goo Eyes" a song "Successfully Introduced by George

²²⁴ Ibid., 215-6.

²²⁵ Charles Davis Wright, "Minstrels and Barnum & Bailey at Greenwood, Miss.," *Indianapolis Freeman*, October 27, 1917; Ibid., 216.

²²⁶ Charles Peabody, "Notes on Negro Music," *The Journal of American Folklore* 16, no. 62 (1903): 148.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid.: 151.

²²⁹ Ibid.: 149.

Primrose, in *Primrose and Dockstader's Minstrels* in 1900,²³⁰ with music by Hughey [sic] Cannon and lyrics by John Queen. The song opens with a twenty-four-bar verse which is in fact two twelve-bar strains accompanied by simple I-IV-V harmony. This is of course a feature that would later be associated with the blues. The melody of the verse shows a striking similarity to the later blues in that it is based upon alternate minor and major thirds.

Perhaps the song's popularity, as a minstrel song and also among rural performers, was based upon its simple harmonic structure. Even the sixteen-bar chorus does not venture far from the harmony of the opening verse. As Charles Peabody noted, the trench diggers "singing at quarters and on the march with the guitar accompaniment was naturally mostly 'ragtime' with the instrument seldom venturing beyond the inversion of the three chords of a few major and minor keys."²³¹ It seems likely that they were attracted to songs that they could easily play.

From Blitzen to Venus. 3

JUST BECAUSE SHE MADE DEM GOO-GOO EYES.

By JOHN QUEEN.
& HUGHIE CANNON.

Moderato.

Copyright, MCM, by Howley, Haviland & Co.
English Copyright Secured.

Trotter-Cannon & Co. 3

Figure 7: “Just Because She Made Dem Goo-Goo Eyes” (1900), by Hughey Cannon and John Queen (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress)

²³⁰ “Just Because She Made Dem Goo-Goo Eyes,” by Hughey Cannon and John Queen, © deposited June 18, 1900, No.9379, Howley, Haviland & Co. (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress).

²³¹ Peabody: 151.

“Nigger Bully” is, as Charles Peabody noted, May Irwin’s “The Bully Song,”²³² which was submitted for copyright by its composer Charles E. Trevathan in 1896.²³³

The “Bully Song” was sung “with great success” in the show “The Widow Jones,” by May Irwin, who played the lead role of the widow Jones. This was a comedy in which Beatrice Byke, played by Irwin, poses as a widow although her husband is not dead. One scene from the comedy was filmed, in which May Irwin kissed her co-star John C. Rice. This made cinematic history as the first screen kiss.

Again we find a twenty-four-bar opening strain which is in fact two twelve-bar strains repeated although the harmony of “The Bully Song” is more complex than a simple I-IV-V, it could have been adapted for a simpler harmony.²³⁴

A convincing account of where Charles E. Trevathan, the composer of “The Bully Song,” learned the tune comes from James L. Ford in his book *Forty-Odd Years in the Literary Shop*.²³⁵

There was at one time on West Forty-second Street [New York], opposite the park, a hotel called Campbell House, kept by the brother of May Irwin and sheltering many members of the dramatic profession. [...] I was a frequenter of the Campbell and greatly enjoyed the social advantages that it offered among which was my acquaintance with Charles E. Trevathan and his colored boy, Cooley. With the characteristic lack of foresight I made no note of this circumstance, little dreaming that I was then actually present at the birth of a school of music that has since gone all over the world.

Trevathan was an easy going Southerner employed on the [*New York*] *Journal* and sometimes in the capacity of judge at the western race tracks. [...]

While living at the Campbell [Hotel], Trevathan devoted much of his time to re-making the words and music of the songs that Cooley picked up in more disreputable resorts of his race. Master and man worked well together and many a time I have heard the former say: “Ah feel awful cur’is this mawnin’; Ah feel so cur’is that Ah don’t want to work. Cooley, go get the banjos an’ we’ll rag over a coupla songs.” [...]

I often listened to them without suspecting that rag-time was being created by their nimble fingers. It was thus that I heard the “Frog Song,” the “New Bully” and “Crappy Dan,” long before Miss Irwin gave them their great vogue.²³⁶

If this is correct Cooley presumably collected “The Bully Song” from “disreputable resorts of his race” in New York, and passed these songs on to Trevathan.

²³² May Irwin’s “The Bully Song” (1896), by Charles E. Trevathan (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress). I was unable to locate the copyright date and number.

²³³ May Irwin also recorded “The Bully” May 20, 1907, Victor (31642).

²³⁴ See (figure 2) page 29.

²³⁵ James L. Ford, *Forty-Odd Years in the Literary Shop* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1921). 275-76; Muir, 257.

²³⁶ Ford, 275-7.

Peter Muir gives reference to “The Bully Song” being performed “in the early 1890s by Mama Lou, a black singer in a St. Louis brothel called Babe Connor’s.”²³⁷ He also claims that “St. Louis was also where W. C. Handy first heard the song, sung on the levee by roustabouts, before the song reached the mainstream.”²³⁸ The earliest specific reference to the song is from a Kansas City black newspaper, the *Leavenworth Herald*, of December 8, 1894, almost a year before the copyright date of the first printed version:

Kansas City girls can't play anything on pianos except "rags" and the worst "rags" at that. "The Bully" and "Forty Drops" are their favorites.”²³⁹

The sophistication of the harmony and also the urban context of these reports would suggest that if this was a rural folk-song originally, it had undergone considerable transformation before it was sung by May Irwin. What does seem clear though is that the version collected by Howard Odum in Mississippi for his 1911 paper was based upon May Irwin’s “The Bully Song”

The excavation in Coahoma County in 1902 is from a time before the “blues” by name entered the repertoire of the travelling shows, but both of these songs had a twelve-bar strain. Soon after songs such as “Goo-Goo Eyes” and “The Bully Song” became popular with the travelling shows, they could be found in the repertoire of rural guitarists in Mississippi; there is no reason to think that the same did not happen to similar songs when the term “blues” came into use.

It is doubtful that any of this would have been known to Alan Lomax in 1942. From his perspective at the time, he knew the names of some of the bluesmen that had recorded in the late 1920s; he also knew that a good number of them came from the same area of the Mississippi Delta. Charlie Patton, Son House, Willie Brown, and Robert Johnson all lived in or around Drew in the heart of the Delta. Even if he had known about the tent shows in the early years of the century this would not necessarily account for why so many bluesmen who recorded commercially came from the same place.

At least part of the explanation as to why so many Delta bluesmen did record is that a white music store owner in Jackson Mississippi was on the lookout for blues talent. The success of the records made by Blind Lemon Jefferson in 1926 had led the recording companies to look for other blues singers to record.

H. C. Speir

In 1925 Henry C. Speir opened a music store in Jackson. To attract business to his store, he would act as a scout for the recording companies, in which capacity he travelled widely in search for new artists to make test pressings in his shop, and if successful he would pass these artists on to commercial recording companies.

²³⁷ See Norm Cohen, album notes to *Minstrels and Tunesmiths*, JEMF LP 109; Muir, 258.

²³⁸ *Father of the Blues*, 118-9; Ibid.

²³⁹ Ibid., 259.

There is scarcely a Delta bluesman who recorded in the 1920s and early thirties whose recording career was not in some way connected to H. C. Speir. Among the better known were Charlie Patton, Son House, Skip James, Robert Johnson, The Mississippi Sheiks, Tommy Johnson, Ishmon Bracey, and Kokomo Arnold.

The difficulty that Speir faced was not to find singer guitarists who were willing to record, but rather to find singer guitarists who had a repertoire of more than just a couple of songs. Speir required that to make a recording the singer should have at least four different, new songs to record. There were some like Charlie Patton who could easily meet this standard, having spent most of his adult life making a living from music; others found it more difficult. Tommy Johnson, who was no relative to Robert Johnson, was only able to perform two different original songs at the first audition with Speir in 1928.²⁴⁰

Although Speir was involved directly with recording many Mississippi bluesmen he was only indirectly involved in getting Son House to record, as was explained by Gayle Wardlow.

In May of 1930, Charlie Patton had moved from Dockery to Lula, Mississippi, and he ran into Son House and Willie Brown. He had played with Willie Brown many years earlier, but he met Son House. So what happened is, Laibly wired Speir.²⁴¹ Paramount wanted to get Patton back for a third session in May of 1930, after Speir had been up there in April. He didn't want to go up himself and carry them, so he went to Patton and gave Patton the information. Laibly got the name and the address where Patton was, Laibly came down to see them, gave them expense money, and they drove up to Grafton. Had it not been for Speir, Laibly would never have found Patton, House, and Willie Brown. So Patton actually arranged for Willie Brown, Son House, and the piano player Louise Johnson to go with him to record the third time. But Speir was indirectly responsible.²⁴²

This was Son House's only recording session before recording with Lomax for the Library of Congress. In 1941, Son House recorded 8 sides but there was no recorded interview relating his recording career. In 1942 he recorded 10 sides and a short interview about the recording session in 1930. First he plays a blues and then Lomax asks:

Lomax: How old is that one?
House: Oh' that one's about ten years old.
Lomax: Did you make it up?
House: Yes I made it up [unintelligible] I recorded that a long time ago for Paramount people at Grafton, Wisconsin, on the AC label a long time [unintelligible], but I didn't name it that, I called it "Walking Blues."
Lomax: You called it the "Walking Blues?"
House: Yes, I didn't name it that. [There is some confusion here]

²⁴⁰ Evans, 74.

²⁴¹ Art Liably was another talent scout that secured recording artists for Paramount Records.

²⁴² Gayle Dean Wardlow, interview with Pat Howse & Jimmy Phillips, *Peavey Monitor* (1995), 34-44.

Lomax: Tell me about how you met those people?
House: I was living down here in Lula, Mississippi an' the Delta big four, was a quartet, that was the name of the quartet that lived at Lula, they had them singing making records for them for a good while, so they was living there and I was too. He heard of me at Clarksdale, and come back up that road looking for me; Charlie Patton he was living there too then, so that's the way they got in touch with me there.
Lomax: How much did they pay you for your work?
House: We got thirty dollars a record.
Lomax: Any royalties?
House: No Sir.
[...]
Lomax: Was that record ever printed?
House: Yes Sir, then different places, I heard it several times.
Lomax: Did Charlie Patton play on that too?
House: No Sir, he never did play with me on that.²⁴³

It seems unlikely from what Son House had to say that Lomax would have known about H. C. Speir and the role that he played in getting so many Delta bluesmen to record. Speir was not directly involved with Son House and it was not until 1964 when Gayle Dean Wardlow “rediscovered” Speir that the extent of his involvement with the promotion of early blues began to be recognised.

What Lomax was finding was a lineage that seemed to run from Charlie Patton, to Son House and on to Robert Johnson. This lineage is expanded further by David Evans.

Dockery's was founded in 1895 by Will Dockery, and two years later the Patton family moved there. Charley Patton was born in 1881, or possibly a few years later, in the hill country between Bolton and Edwards, Mississippi, about twenty miles west of Jackson and about 120 miles south of Dockery's.²⁴⁴ There he began learning to play guitar at the age of fourteen with members of the Chatman (or Chatmon) family, a large clan of musicians spanning several generations. In fact, Patton may have been related to the Chatmans, as Sam Chatman has been quoted as saying that he and Patton were half brothers.²⁴⁵ After the family moved to Dockery's in 1897, he would frequently return to his native area to visit and make music. At Dockery's he learned to play well by following an older musician named Henry Sloan, who played blues

²⁴³ Son House, author's transcription of interview with Alan Lomax 6607-B-3 (b), Friday July 17, 1942 (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress).

²⁴⁴ According to Evans: “Viola Cannon, Patton's sister gave me this date but has elsewhere given the date 1887. See Bernard Klatzo, notes to *The Immortal Charlie Patton*, Origin Jazz Library 7, 12” LP. Patton's death certificate indicates that he was born in 1889 or 1890. See Gayle Wardlow and Jacques Roche, ‘Patton Murder: Whitewash or Hogwash?’ 78 *Quarterly*, 1 No. 1 (Autumn 1967), 13.” Evans, 175.

²⁴⁵ Evans' footnote: “Fahrey, 18. This is denied, however, in Kip Lornell, “Sam Chatmon,” *Jazz Journal*, 25, No. 6 (June 1972), 18.” Ibid.

and was probably a major influence on the young Patton. It is quite unlikely that Patton had brought any knowledge of the blues with him to the Delta.²⁴⁶

In a similar vein Robert Palmer expands on this saying: “We know that [Henry] Sloan was already playing the blues in 1897, making him one of the first blues musicians anywhere.”²⁴⁷ The idea that Henry Sloan may have influenced the blues of Charlie Patton or have been “one of the first blues musicians anywhere” is not supported by Sam Chatmon. Born in Bolton around 1897, he recalled the songs from his childhood being “Pearlee” and “My Bucket’s Got A Hole In It”: ““That’s all they knowed back in them days...I ain’t never heard nobody pick no blues till my brother Bud and Charlie Patton, they’s about the first...”²⁴⁸

Alan Lomax also had the opportunity to interview Sam Chatmon. According to Chatmon his father had been a fiddle player. Lomax asked if he could recall the songs his father played. “Yeah, I remember practically all of um. All of um is just ol things bout *Can’t Get the Saddle on the Old Grey Mule* and *Little Lisa Jane*.” Sam Chatmon came from a large musical family:

All us could play. Have you ever heard Charley Patton? Well, Charley Patton's my brother. Charley Patton picked the blues. He was a good bluesman, but he could clown better than he could pick. He'd take his guitar and put it all behind his head and all tween his legs and keep a-pickin. Nothin but the blues.²⁴⁹

Given the evidence that he had all that Alan Lomax could safely have concluded was that Charlie Patton was one of the first to play the blues in the Mississippi Delta. He was told by Son House, Sam Chatmon and others that they were the first generation that played the blues in Mississippi. But just five years after his visit to Coahoma County in 1942, Lomax was to record an album that made it clear, that he interpreted this to mean that the blues began in the Mississippi Delta.

Blues in the Mississippi Night

In 1946 Lomax brought together Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Slim and Sonny Boy Williamson to reminisce about the blues. The release of the recording *Blues in the Mississippi Night* was delayed until 1959. When it was released the sleeve notes that Lomax provided made clear his claim that the origin of the blues was the Mississippi Delta.

So in the Yazoo Delta country, south of Memphis, where the conditions described on this record were typical, there emerged this new dance music, the work of many hands and voices. The guitar, mandolin, mouth harp and piano players learned to make their instruments sing the tunes. At the same time they composed bass patterns which at their best sound like two or three drums playing complex counter-rhythms. The singers, meanwhile, wove fragments of the

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Palmer, 57.

²⁴⁸ Calt and Wardlow, *King of the Delta Blues: The Life and Music of Charlie Patton*, 63.

²⁴⁹ Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 384.

work-songs and hollers into the simple stanza-form; at first, one line, repeated four times; then three lines with a rhyming or punch line; then two lines with a rhyming line.²⁵⁰

What Lomax claimed in 1959 was that it was in the delta formed between the Yazoo and Mississippi rivers, commonly referred to as the Mississippi Delta that the blues was born. What is also clear is that he is not referring to the blues as African American folk-songs in general; he is specifically claiming that the AAB stanza form of the blues developed from the one verse song form and that this transformation took place the Mississippi Delta among the rural singers and musicians of the region.

Disguising the identity of the performers, the album sleeve notes provide a fictional background to the recording:

I met them [the three Mississippi Delta bluesmen] at a country dance, where I was recording rural folk-songs. They played for me for several evenings and we made friends. They liked me because I knew and understood their songs. Early one Sunday morning, after a dance, when I judged the proper moment had come, I put the microphone in a far corner of the room near the piano, where Leroy, the tall and handsome piano player was singing the blues. Natchez, the guitar player, and Sib, the harmonica-player were sitting nearby. [...]

After Leroy had finished his blues, I put a question to them. I asked them to explain to me, a white man, what the blues were, where they had come from, why people sang them. This was the only question I was allowed to ask in the two hours that intervened. My friends were ready to talk, and soon they forgot all about me and my recording machine and talked to each other, pouring out experiences and feelings, that were the accumulation of a lifetime. Natchez led the discussion, like some rural black Socrates, skillfully [*sic*] drawing the two other men out, and guiding the conversation deeper and deeper into the heart of the matter.²⁵¹

The theme of the album is in many ways summed up by the performer identified as Leroy: "it takes a man who had the blues to really play the blues. Yeah, you got to be blue to sing the blues, and that's the truth."²⁵² The implication was that the plantation workers of Mississippi sang the blues as a reaction to the deplorable circumstances that they described. The lynchings, the daily humiliation and segregation - this for Lomax was the source of the blues.

The realisation that the blues were the product of oppression had come to Lomax during the war, when as a new recruit to the army he was to experience the humiliation (admittedly on a milder scale) of basic training, a system designed to break the will of the new recruit and force him to conform. After one particularly soul-destroying day Lomax found that he could for the first time in his life sing a field holler.

²⁵⁰ Alan Lomax, "Sleeve Notes," *Blues in the Mississippi Night*, (United Artists UAL4027).

²⁵¹ Alan Lomax, *Blues in the Mississippi Night: The Real Story of the Blues, Sung and Told by Three Mississippi Delta Blues Men* (United Artists 1959).

²⁵² Lomax later attributed this quote to Lead Belly. Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 274.

“How come,” I ask myself, “how come I can manage these hollers now, when I never could before.” [*sic*]

And then a remark of Leadbelly’s came back to me. “It takes a man that have the blues to sing the blues.”²⁵³

Field and levee camp hollers formed an important part in Lomax’s theory of the way that the blues developed, and in particular why he came to view the Mississippi Delta as the land where the blues began.

The levee-camp holler therefore seems definitely to be Delta or at least Western in provenance. In fact, repeated recording trips into the area revealed the existence of an extensive genre of song, called hollers, in the Delta region. For example every black prisoner in the penitentiary, we discovered, had a holler that was, in effect, his personal signature. Heard at a distance, another prisoner could say, “listen at old so-and-so. Don’t he sound lonesome this morning.”²⁵⁴

The significance for Lomax of these hollers is that he found them to be similar in character to blue-notes.

All these hollers share a set of distinctive features. They are solo, slow in tempo, free in rhythm (as opposed to work songs), composed of long, gliding, ornamented and melismatic phrases, given a melancholy character by minor intervals as well as by blued or bent tones, sounding like sobs or moans or keening or pain-filled cries, even when they were performed with such bravura that they resounded across the field.²⁵⁵

What Lomax describes as a “Delta holler” could also to be found in the river lands of Texas according to Lomax.

My father and I recorded scores of these “field hollers” or “old corn songs” or “levee camp hollers,” as they were variously called. They were thickest in the river-bottom country, south and west of Memphis all the way into the river lands of Texas. Most of those we found in the Southeast had been imported from the Delta. You can recognize the Delta holler because they have a shape different from the majority of black folk songs, which tend to be short-phrased, to conform to steady beat, and to be performed by groups. By contrast, Delta hollers are usually minority solos, sung recitative-style in free rhythm, with long embellished phrases, many long-held notes, lots of slides and blue notes, and an emphasis on shifts of vocal color. They are impossible to notate and difficult to sing.²⁵⁶

This line of argument does have a certain synergy with Marxist theory. The underlying rationale for this argument is that cultural products are determined by the mode of production

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 232.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 273.

and that isolated sharecroppers would develop a solo repertoire. In a prison camp where song is used to regulate the pace of the work, it would follow that these songs would be rhythmically structured and sung as a group, or in call and response form. Some crops by the nature of their production, such as sugar cane, require processing before shipment, which leads to a more co-operative and industrial form of work organisation. This may account for why the Louisiana plantations often would have organised brass bands and collective music making. Cotton on the other hand can be share-cropped; in this more isolated mode of production it would be reasonable to expect that field hollers would be sung as Lomax describes. Free of the constraints imposed by group singing and the regulation of labour a singer would be free to sing any pitch, any pitch duration in any rhythm that he found pleasing. A similar line of thought was to be advanced by Amiri Baraka in *Blues People*.

But the small farms and share croppers' plots produced not only what I think must have been a less self conscious work song but a form of song or shout that did not necessarily have to be concerned with, or inspired by, *labor*. Each man had his own voice and his own way of shouting – his own life to sing about.²⁵⁷

If these shouts are in some way connected with the blues it seems doubtful that these feature are consistent with the “formal blues.” It is the standardised twelve-bar form with its attendant standardised harmony and the use of the AAB stanza which typifies the blues, and which stands in stark relation to some of its other less regulated features. It is somewhat counter-intuitive to argue that sharecropping could have led to both inconsistency and conformity.

Another difficulty rests with the assumption that in some way these irregular intervals are connected to another standardized convention, the “blue-note.” This term came into common usage in 1913 with the reprint edition of “The Memphis Blues.” The principle evidence that suggests that there is a connection between a melody composed for a minstrel brass band using alternating minor and major thirds and field hollers sung using “lots of slides and blue notes,” comes from W. C. Handy. He claimed that he composed “The Memphis Blues,” using “the transitional flat thirds and sevenths in my melody, by which I was attempting to suggest the typical slurs of the Negro voice, were what have since been known as ‘blues notes’”²⁵⁸ The existence of earlier publications using blue-notes is one good reason to believe that this is not how Handy came to develop his “blue-note” melody. At the time there was no reason for Lomax to doubt what Handy was saying, because by the time he came to record *Blues in the Mississippi Night*, he had read *The Father of the Blues* and Handy’s explanation for his “blue-note” melodies and could have reasonably have come to the conclusion that there was a connection.

Parts of the transcript from *Blues in the Mississippi Night* appeared in 1948 in the journal *Common Ground*, under the title of “I Got the Blues.” In it the musicians describe conditions in the Delta.

²⁵⁷ LeRoi Jones, [Amiri Baraka], *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), 61.

²⁵⁸ Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 99.

"So the white man rode to town and he got him a gang and come back after my uncle. My uncle shot four or five of them, but they finally caught him and hung him. So that's the story of him! Yeah, that's the story of my crazy uncle."

"Lynched him," Sib muttered.

"Fifty or sixty of them come out there and killed him." Natchez began to speak with mounting rage. "That was on account of him trying to protect his own wife. Because he didn't want his own wife to work out on the farm when she had a new baby there at the house an' was expecting another one pretty soon."²⁵⁹

Seen against the background of African American troops returning home at the end of the war, to a segregated South that was arguably as oppressive as the fascists that had been defeated, it can be seen how controversial these remarks were. When the recordings were played back to the three bluesmen they asked that the recordings be destroyed, as Lomax explains.

This was America in 1948, but these three great artist of the blues, [...] were terribly afraid.

So I promised to conceal their identities if the recordings were ever released – an unlikely event as far as I could see – and I kept my promise until 1990.²⁶⁰

He did indeed keep his promise, and when Lomax returned to America in the late 1950s, having spent the intermediate years in Europe, he persuaded United Artists to issue the recording, but with the identities of those involved disguised. This is confirmed in an agreement that was drawn up between United Artists and the performers saying that their real names would not appear on the record "since it was your express wish not to have your names appear." It was not until the CD was reissued in 1990 and the publication of *The Land Where the Blues Began* in 1993, that the full story emerged.

When they [Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Slim and Sonny Boy Williamson] came to New York, they slept over at my place in the Village in order to save hotel money. They entertained my daughter Anna and sampled our Southern cooking. That night in 1946 the trio tore down the house at Town Hall, discovering that their Delta music was appreciated by an audience they had never known about. The moment seemed right for a productive session. They were eager for it. I took them to Decca, where we could have a whole studio to ourselves that Sunday. We had a couple of drinks. I put my little one-celled Presto disc recorder on the floor, and sat at their feet, flipping the discs, as they reminisced.²⁶¹

²⁵⁹ Alan Lomax, "I Got the Blues," *Common Ground* (1948), 49.

²⁶⁰ Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 473. According to Chris Smith, "On a BBC radio programme in the 50s, Lomax didn't disguise their names, presumably feeling that the Atlantic Ocean was protection enough." Sleeve Notes, Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Slim, and Sonny Boy Williamson, *Blues in the Mississippi Night* (Sequel Records, 1990).

²⁶¹ According to Lomax: "This innovative dramatic interview was first presented as a lecture to the New York Folklore Society in 1947. It was first published as "I Got the Blues" in *Common Ground* (1948) and later

In fact these musicians were not strictly speaking Mississippi bluesmen at all. Big Bill Broonzy was born in Mississippi, although he had left with his parents as a child and spent his formative years in Arkansas. The other two participants Memphis Slim and Sonny Boy Williamson could both claim, as the sleeve notes to *Blues in the Mississippi Night* (1959) said, to be born south of Memphis, but not to be rural Mississippi bluesmen. At the time Memphis Slim was working with a jazz band and Williamson was pioneering the use of amplification with the harmonica.

In many ways this only deepens the mystery as to why Lomax believed that the blues began in the Mississippi Delta, as his principal piece of evidence turns out to be bogus. These are not Mississippi bluesmen and the only coherent argument is that the blues are a reaction to oppression, which of course was not confined to the Delta.

It does seem that since the *Common Ground* article doesn't claim specifically that the blues began in the Mississippi Delta that perhaps Lomax's original intension in making this recording was only to highlight the conditions in the Mississippi Delta, rather than to promote any argument about the origin of the blues. That at least would go some way to explain his somewhat doubtful methods of presenting his case. Perhaps it would not have been possible to persuade three real Delta bluesmen to have recorded so frank an interview.

Lomax was clearly concerned that the African American perspective on the South was not being adequately represented as prior to the Coahoma visit he had written:

Naturally, the Negro looks to the South with different eyes than the white man, but it seems to me that while neither point of view is exactly right, before a decision can be reached in a democracy both sides must be allowed to have their say: and before the Negro will do the job right he perhaps has to get things off his chest.²⁶²

In relation to the Coahoma project before the War he had gone on to say "However, this recording project will not be a propaganda means for anyone."²⁶³ It is possible that by the end of the War he was less concerned about the methods he employed, if the ends were justified.

Lomax had spent his war years preparing propaganda for the United States war effort. In a document titled "The Archive of American Folk Song in the National Defence Program" the war-time role of the archive was set out.

Objective:	To let the American people explain for themselves in the democratic language of folk-lore, the nature of American Democracy.
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included in Alan Dundes's anthology *African American Folklore, Mother Wit from the Laughing barrel* (1973). The recording of the interview, *Blues in the Mississippi Night*, was first released by United Artists (UAL 4027) in 1959. In all these cases the identity of the participants was disguised as they had requested. It was not until the interview was released by Rykodisc (RCD 90155) in 1990 that the true identity of the bluesmen was made public." Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 449-50.

²⁶² Alan Lomax, Correspondence, October 3, 1941 (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, AFC 1933).

²⁶³ Alan Lomax, Correspondence, October 3, 1941 (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, AFC 1933).

Techniques; Radio programs, documentary films, song books and the whole wealth of American Folk Lore and Folk Songs and cultural background made available to creative writers for the first time in the field of selective regional and subject indices.²⁶⁴ [sic]

As one of the “creative writers” Lomax was to write *Transatlantic Call: ‘People to People’* a series of radio shows which purportedly put British and American workers in contact with each other. One programme was produced connecting steel workers in Pittsburgh with their counterparts in Sheffield. The theme of this broadcast on October 24, 1943 was the need for women to work on war production.

Terwilliger: I've been on this here job for twelve years and I've put in__ years here in this plant. Right now they need us old duffers; they need everybody they can get they're even hiring women....

Lomax: Women in a steel mill?

Terwilliger: Yes sir, as sure as any name's Sam Terwilliger, women are working; in this steel mill, several right here on the scrap yard....Hey, Gracie.

Gracie: (off) Hello.

Terwilliger: Come over here a minute, will you?

Gracie: Sure. (still off)

Terwilliger: This fellow didn't believe we had women in the mill and I wanted to show him....

Gracie: Well, here I am, overalls and all.

Terwilliger: Pretty husky, isn't she?

Gracie: Aw quit your Kidding, Sam.

Lomax: What's your job here, Gracie?

Gracie: Oh I'm on what they call the labor gang. That's where they start us girls to sort of toughen your muscles up an[d] get us ready for the heavy work in the mill. Right now I'm sorting scrap, here in the yard. Last week was digging dirt for a foundation.

Lomax: Pretty heavy work for a girl, wasn't it?

Gracie: Yes it *was* hard work, but every shovel load I digged, I said to myself there's another load goin' in some Jap's face.²⁶⁵

In another program school children discuss what America will be like after the war, and in another *Our Singing Country*, the cynicism of soldiers' songs are used to show how humour can triumph in adversity. These shows were carefully scripted representations, rather than actual steel workers and school children speaking for themselves.

Perhaps this experience had persuaded Lomax that similar techniques could be employed to expose the harshness of segregation after the War? If it could be justified to use these propaganda techniques to fight fascism, why not use the same methods against racism and

²⁶⁴ (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, AFC 1933).

²⁶⁵ Script of *Transatlantic Call ‘People to People’* October 24, 1943 (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, AFC 1933).

segregation? Perhaps in this way Lomax could justify using three professional musicians, who had grown up in the South, to represent three Delta bluesmen.

But even this doesn't really explain why he chose Mississippi, when there were many parts of the South where the daily lives of African Americans were harsh? In economic terms at least the income levels in Mississippi for farmers were higher than in most other plantation regions.

The answer to this may well be contained in an interview that Lomax made on May 9, 1938 for the Library of Congress with W. C. Handy. It would be another three years before *The Father of the Blues*, was to appear, so in this interview Lomax was probably hearing Handy's account of how he came to write his blues for the first time.

Alan Lomax begins the interview by asking about the first blues that Handy had heard "and where you heard them and what they were like and what they were called?"

Mr. Handy: I think I can tell you about the things that evolved until I wrote what we called the first blues. We didn't call them blues in those days. We sang about steam-boats, mean bosses, pretty women, stubborn mules, fast trains, everything, and called our songs by such names as *Joe Turner*, *Stavin' Chain*, *Stackerlee*, *Lost John*, *Olius Brown*, etc. But the term, blues, was not used in those days. The first thing that gave me/an [sic] impression as to make me want to make such music was a song that I heard on the levees of the Mississippi River, sung by the Roustabouts. It went something like this:

*I walked all the way from old East St. Louis,
And I didn't have but one, poor, measly dime.*

*Tain't but one thing worries my weary mind,
What makes my baby treat me this-a way.²⁶⁶*

This is the stanza that in his later book *Father of the Blues*, he would claim he heard in St. Louis in 1892, but this book had not been published in 1938.

W. C. Handy played this eight-bar song for Lomax on the guitar in the key of A. If one looks at what Handy says, he attributes this song to "Roustabouts" on the Mississippi River levees. These are itinerant workers who have come from elsewhere. It should also be noted that the Mississippi River levee system is not confined to the state of Mississippi. Handy then goes on to say:

You notice that these were two – line stanzas and of a particular tonality I cannot describe in my singing. We still didn't call them blues, but I think this was the number that inspired me to write the *St. Louis Blues*.

[...]

²⁶⁶ W. C. Handy, interview transcript, May 9, 1938, (American Folklife Centre, Library of Congress AFC 1620).

This first song I sang for you is in two-line stanza. You notice that folk blues are / three – lines. I’m going to give you an example of one of them, one of the early ones I played around Evansville, Indiana in 1892 and 3.

*Got no more home than a dog,
Lawd, got no more home than a dog,
Lawd, got no more home than a dog.*

*Ain’t got no friend no where,
Lawd, ain’t got no friend no where,
Lawd, aint got no friend no where.*

*Take Morphine and die,
Lawd, take morphine and die,
Lawd, take morphine and die.²⁶⁷*

In *The Father of the Blues* Handy said of this song “the three-line structure I employed in my lyric [for “The St. Louis Blues”] was suggested by a song I heard Phil Jones sing in Evansville during my sojourn there.”²⁶⁸ In this interview, rather than associate the song with the minstrel band that Phil Jones led, he said that this was an example of a three-line “folk blues.” He performs the song on guitar using simple I-VI-V harmony.

Handy then goes on to sing “Joe Turner” and repeat much of the information that he gave to Dorothy Scarborough, and a version of “Careless Love,” this he says is the version they sang “fifty years ago,” which would place the song around 1890. Handy is then asked if he got the word “blues” (that he had used in “The Memphis Blues”) from a folk source. His answer was that several times he had “heard the word used by bar-room pianists and vagrant guitarists,” and this is why he had used the term.

Again Handy seems to be attributing this music to migratory workers and piano players rather than any settled farming community. This is a theme that is continued when he goes on to talk at some length about rousters and how they would engage in “sit-down strikes,” and refuse to “go aboard, won’t work any more until they get rid of the second mate or get rid of the first mate or get rid of the captain even.” Their demands were often met “because the river boats were very much dependent upon this roustabout or stevedore labor.” A consistent picture is beginning to emerge of these songs being sung by roustabouts who work on the ships and levees of the Mississippi River. These are people would have had much more urban contact than the local plantation workers. It was these roustabouts who, according to Handy in *The Father of the Blues*, brought the songs of the river to Clarksdale.²⁶⁹

Alan Lomax seems to have been confused by Handy’s conflicting accounts of when and where he first heard the blues. In the interview having heard that the “East St. Louis” stanza was first heard on a levee on the Mississippi River, he asks:

²⁶⁷ W. C. Handy, interview transcript, May 9, 1938, (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress AFC 1620).

²⁶⁸ Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 143.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

Question: Where did you hear the St. Louis Blues refrain first?
Mr. Handy: I didn't hear the St. Louis Blues refrain.
Question: But this thing about I ain't got but One Poor Measly Dime?
Mr. Handy: Oh, I heard that in St. Louis in 1893.

It would be another three years or so before Lomax would be able to put this interview within the context of *The Father of the Blues*. A copy of the book was received by the copyright office at The Library of Congress on July 2, 1941 and was subsequently entered into the library collection of the Archive of American Folk-Song.²⁷⁰ On the back page of the book in Lomax's hand, are pencil written notes of the pages that were of particular interest to him, and one section he wrote out in full.

Among the pages that he marked were those that referred to "East St. Louis" and "Got No More Home Than a Dog," and he wrote out in full Handy's account of hearing a three piece band play an "over-and-over" in Cleveland, Mississippi around 1903 and entered this into his papers.

We can only guess the extent to which Handy's recollections may have influenced Lomax's thinking, but what he was being told was consistent with his emerging view that the blues began in the Mississippi Delta. The only thing that can be said for sure is that when Lomax wrote the sleeve notes to the 1959 issue of *Blues in the Mississippi Night*, this is what he believed. Why he believed this seems in part to be because there was no obvious alternative, and in part because of what he must have perceived to be the mounting evidence. He knew that there were a high number of Delta bluesmen that had recorded in the 1920s and that blues singers could still be found and recorded for the archive. He had also recorded levee and field hollers that bore a striking resemblance to the blues particularly around the Mississippi Delta. His own personal experiences had led him to accept what he was being told by some blues singers, that the blues was the product of oppression. Finally, W. C Handy the composer of what was then believed to have been the first published blues recalled Mississippi as being the place that first inspired him to write the blues. This had to some extent been verified in both the 1938 interview and in *Father of the Blues*, information that was confirmed in the interview with Stack Mangham during the Coahoma visit.

When *Blues in the Mississippi Night* came out in 1959, musical tastes were undergoing transition. In the United States musical tastes among the young *avant-garde* tended toward new developments within jazz, and in particular bebop, whereas in Europe where Lomax had been in the intervening years, bebop seems to have had less of an influence. In Europe there was a considerable traditional jazz revival. Evidence of the differing tastes can be seen in the way that the Louis Armstrong consistently won European polls as the best trumpeter. In some U. S. polls Armstrong didn't even make the top ten.²⁷¹

The other principal development was rock-and-roll in America and its British variant skiffle. The historian Eric Hobsbawm, who wrote as a jazz critic of the *New Statesman* under the

²⁷⁰ Now called the Archive of Folk Culture at the American Folklife Center.

²⁷¹ Francis Newton, [Eric Hobsbawm], *The Jazz Scene* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1959), 244.

pen-name of Francis Newton, argues that the British version of skiffle was closely related to the New Orleans revival movement.

‘Skiffle’(1956-8). This may be regarded as a modification of revivalist jazz to suit an even more completely unqualified and lay public. The movement was quite spontaneous. Left-wingers had long pioneered ‘ballad and blues’ sessions on both sides of the Atlantic, and produced a modest cabaret political and *avant-garde* vogue for artists like Josh White, Leadbelly, Burl Ives, Woodie Guthrie, Pete Seeger – or in Britain, Ewan McColl and Isla Cameron. Revivalist bands in Britain had taken to allowing a guitarist-singer with rhythm accompaniment to sing such blues and songs (mainly from Leadbelly repertoire) between band sets: the arrangement was called ‘skiffle’ a term dug up from the obscure recesses of American jazz history, and virtually without meaning for anyone in the USA.²⁷²

Alan Lomax was very influential in these developments in the U.K., having produced *Kings of Skiffle* for Decca in 1957. In Europe very little was known about the music that had inspired skiffle. All that was about to change!

When Lomax returned to the States and *Blues in the Mississippi Night* was issued in 1959, Lomax was one of the few authorities on the subject of the blues; however a number of writers had begun to take an interest. Most influential of these was Samuel Charters who published *The Country Blues* (1959),²⁷³ which provided detailed information about country blues performers. The following year Paul Oliver published *The Blues Fell this Morning* (1960),²⁷⁴ in the U.K. Combined, these two books, according to Oliver, “disengaged blues from its customary acknowledgment as a late branch of black folk song, or as a tributary to jazz, and distinguished the idiom as a phenomenon to be studied in its own right.”²⁷⁵ The other issue that both books began to question was the role of W. C. Handy as the “father of the blues.” This was in part because Charters had uncovered two blues publications that pre-dated “The Memphis Blues.” The first of these was “The Dallas Blues,” by Hart A. Wand.

The Dallas Blues

Charters tells us that, “Hart was a young musician who lived with his family in Oklahoma City. His father had been one of the first men into the Indian Territory, and he had set up a tent drugstore in the new city,”²⁷⁶

Hart’s father John Wand came to the United States in 1874, having graduated from Vienna University. He originally worked as a clerk in a drugstore in Brenham Texas, before opening his own business in Oklahoma City in 1877, selling drugs and fancy goods including a cigar

²⁷² Ibid., 254.

²⁷³ Charters, *The Country Blues*.

²⁷⁴ Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: The Meaning of the Blues*.

²⁷⁵ Oliver, “Blues Research: Problems and Possibilities.”

²⁷⁶ Charters, *The Country Blues*, 25.

lighter that he imported from Birkungen in Prussia which his own father had invented. A year later John Wand married Miss Belle Ancker from Cincinnati, Ohio,²⁷⁷ and a son Hart Ancker Wand was born on March 3, 1887. Hart was still at school in 1900,²⁷⁸ and it seems likely that when he did leave he went straight to work with his father. Adverts from the *Ada Evening News* of 1905 advertise the services of WAND & SON, OKLAHOMA CITY, makers of rubber stamps, “notarial [*sic*] seals, chocks, stencils and badges.”²⁷⁹ The 1910 census lists Hart’s occupation as “manufacturing rubber stamps.” Charters also reported that Hart A. Wand played the violin, and he often practiced in the back room of his father’s store.

There was a little tune he’d made up to play with his orchestra; he doesn’t remember hearing it anywhere, and he used to play during the afternoons when he was practicing. There was a colored porter working for them, who had come into the territory from Dallas. He used to whistle the tune along with Hart’s playing. One afternoon as he stood listening, leaning on his broom, he said, ‘That gives me the blues to go back to Dallas.’²⁸⁰

At the time of composing “The Dallas Blues,” Wand was an amateur musician playing violin with an orchestra that he led. Even after the publication of “The Dallas Blues” he did not consider himself to be a professional musician or composer. By the time he was drafted for the First World War he was living in East Oak Street in Chicago Illinois, and listed his occupation as a self-employed “manufacturer,” giving his home address as his place of work.

The final piece of information that Charters gives us about Hart A. Wand and the publication on “The Dallas Blues” is that as a violinist he was not able to arrange the tune that he, and his orchestra, had been playing. To produce a piano arrangement he had enlisted the help of a piano playing friend Annabelle Robbins.

He published the first edition himself in March of 1912.

The first printing was gone in a week. He had a second one done and started taking it to other towns near Oklahoma City. Orders began coming in from music stores in other cities. The second printing went almost as fast as the first. It was a sensation. He didn’t even have time to copyright it until it was in its third edition. He finally sent a copy of the third edition to the copyright office and it was entered on September 12, 1912.²⁸¹

Given that W. C. Handy didn’t get to the copyright office until September 27, 1912, this seriously undermined Handy’s position as *father of the blues*. Charters noted that:

²⁷⁷ William G. Cutler's *History of the State of Kansas*.

²⁷⁸ 1900 Census Oklahoma City Appendix.

²⁷⁹ *Ada Evening News* Jan 4, 1905 (Ancestry.Com).

²⁸⁰ Charters, *The Country Blues*, 25. Charters did not explain how he got this information, but it is possible that he was able to interview Wand as he lived until 1961.

²⁸¹ Charters, *The Country Blues*, 26. Copyright was actually granted on the September 6, 1912 (United States Copyright Office, Library of Congress.)

The Late W. C. Handy, a colored bandleader from Memphis, always called himself the “father of the blues,” and he certainly was one of the earliest and most successful blues writers, but his first “blues” composition, “Memphis Blues,” was not a blues at all, and it was the third published piece in 1912 to be called a “blues.” The first was Hart Wand’s “Dallas Blues,” published in March; the second was Arthur Seals’s “Baby Seals’ Blues,” published in August; Handy finally brought out his blues in September. Both Handy and Arthur Seals were Negroes, but the music they titled “blues” is more or less derived from the standard popular musical style of the “coon-song” and “cake-walk” type. It is ironic that the first published piece in the Negro “blues” idiom, “Dallas Blues,” was by a white man, Hart Wand.²⁸²



Figure 8: “The Dallas Blues” (1912), by Hart A. Wand, third edition (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress)²⁸³

This seemed to finally end any doubts about Handy’s creative involvement in the blues. Handy had simply copied a “standard popular” style of music and passed it off as his own. The “Dallas Blues” on the other hand, according to Charters, was an authentic blues in the “the Negro ‘blues’ idiom.”

“Dallas Blues” is still popular, and the original arrangement itself is a fine melodic composition. There is only one strain and it is played twice, first as a simple blues melody with a simple bass line, then with considerable embellishment. Between the two arrangements almost every characteristic of later commercial blues writing was

²⁸² Ibid., 35. (1959 edition).

²⁸³ Hart A. Wand, “The Dallas Blues” (1912) third edition (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress).

introduced. The melody is a simple twelve-bar blues, in three four-bar phrases, very similar to the later blues pattern; then there is a short phrase on subdominant harmony – which Handy later used as the first line of the chorus of “Atlanta Blues” – and the last phrase of the first group is repeated. Twenty bars in all.

As Charters quite correctly notes each strain is a total of twenty bars in all. Embedded in the first twelve bars is the twelve-bar harmonic sequence of the blues. The last eight bars of the twelve-bar sequence are repeated making a total of twenty bars. What we actually have is a twelve-bar melody embedded within a twenty-bar strain.

Charters also suggests that there was a close affinity between the blues compositions of the two African American composers, Handy and Seals, and singles out Wand’s composition for containing “almost every characteristic of later commercial blues writing;” this is debatable.

DALLAS BLUES

Very Slow
Tempo di Blues

HART A. WAND
Composer of “TANGOLITS” & “READY MONEY”

Copyright, MCMXII, by Hart A. Wand
Published by Wand Publishing Co., Oklahoma City, Okla.
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Dallas Blues, 2

Figure 9: “The Dallas Blues” (1912), by Hart A. Wand, printed edition (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress)²⁸⁴

To begin to unpick this we need to begin with the third edition of “Dallas Blues,” which was the edition that Wand submitted for copyright (figure 8). This edition is, as Charters describes, with two twenty-bar strains. There were a number of subsequent hand printed editions and a copy of edition fifteen is held at the Hogan Jazz Archive. This edition is basically the same as the third edition. Some of the accidentals have been corrected but the melody, harmony and structure are the same. At some later time Wand had a typeset version printed of the “Dallas Blues” and this version is very different (figure 9). This version had two repeated twelve-bar strains, the first of which is completely new. The opening strain is a new melody that did not appear in the earlier hand printed editions. The second strain is the first twenty-bars of the older hand printed editions.

²⁸⁴ “The Dallas Blues” (1912), by Hart A. Wand, printed edition (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress).

In 1918 words were added to this new twelve-bar blues by Lloyd Garrett, and later still W. C. Handy included “The Dallas Blues,” credited to Wand, in *Blues an Anthology* (1926). Quite when “The Dallas Blues” changed from being a twenty-bar blues to a twelve-bar blues is unclear, but it was after the fifteenth edition (only the copyright date of 1912 is given) and was therefore likely to have been after W. C. Handy had published his “Memphis Blues.”²⁸⁵

The Dallas blues does however have some claim to primacy in the history of the blues; it was the first published blues that was collected by a folklorist as sung by a rural songster. In an article that appeared in *The Journal of American Folklore*, in 1915, there is the journal’s first reference to the blues by name. In the article folklorist W. Prescott Webb tells of finding a songster in Beeville, Texas, named Floyd Canada. The title he gave for his song was “The Railroad Blues.” Webb goes on to say of the song:

It is remarkable, if for no other reason, because of its length, for it is among the longest ballads in existence. It contains eighty stanzas of four lines each, rhyming in couplets. While the song has little narrative unity, it has a certain unity of subject-matter. Pervading nearly every line is a spirit of restless wandering, —the Wanderlust and desire for a long freight on which to ride away from trouble. It, like all the popular ballads, sings itself. Floyd says it is sung to the tune of ‘The Dallas Blues.’²⁸⁶

The interesting question is how Floyd Canada had learnt the tune. One possibility is that Canada had heard the tune (although not necessarily first hand) from a commercial source, such as vaudeville, a minstrel show, or a medicine show.

What then of “Baby Seals’ Blues,” which Charters also claimed pre-dated Handy’s copyright deposit? When one puts “Baby Seals’ Blues” along side “The Dallas Blues,” the relationship is obvious. Both compositions are in the key of B^b which is not the most obvious key for Wand, a violinist, to have written in; this is generally a key used in association with brass instruments. Both compositions have an opening twenty-bar strain and Seals’ first twelve bars also follow the same I-IV-V harmonic structure that is found in “The Dallas Blues,” but rather than repeat the preceding eight bars as Wand had done, Seals goes on to write another eight bars of new music. He then writes a chorus of twenty-eight bars of original material, whereas Wand had simply repeated his first twenty-bar strain with embellishments.

There is a strong suspicion that Wand had simply imitated the first twelve-bars of Seals’ blues, and unable to come up with any new material he simply repeated the last eight bars to form a twenty-bar strain, which he then repeated with embellishment for the same reason. If we compare the melody of the opening twelve-bars of music in both compositions this would tend to confirm the suspicion.

²⁸⁵ The editions are not dated other than to show the copyright date of 1912.

²⁸⁶ W. Prescott Webb, “Notes on Folk-Lore of Texas,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 28, no. 109 (1915): 292.

The contour and rhythmic placement of the two compositions is similar and the melody note of the fourth bar in both compositions is A^b which harmonised against the tonic triad of B^b produces B^b7 in preparation for E^b in the following bar. In bar six both melodies ascend to D^b which in the “Dallas Blues” is simply harmonised with an E^b triad, producing E^b7. Seals also ascends to D^b in the sixth bar, but chromatically alters his bass note to E^b, rendering the resulting harmony E diminished seventh; this is the more complex blues harmony found in later jazz blues.

Baby Seals Blues
Sing em-they sound good to me.

Words & Music by
BABY F. SEALS.
Arr. by Artie Matthews

Very Slow

VAMP.

I got the blues
Hon - ey babe

can't be sat - is - fied I
pup's ain't mad with you to - day - I

got them had want to lay down and die I Oh
love you brown skin dont care what you do

Copyright 1912 by Seals & Fisher.

Chorus. Slow.

She Honey ba-by mamma do she do she double do love you (Spoken) YEA - HOO I

Baby Seals Blues etc. &

Figure 10: “Baby Seals’ Blues” (1912), by H. Franklin “Baby” Seals (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress)²⁸⁷

A look at Seals’ career also strongly suggests that Seals’ composition came earlier. Originally from Mobile, Alabama,²⁸⁸ H. Franklin “Baby” Seals could be found working in Southern vaudeville in May 1909, as the pianist at The Lyric Theater in Shreveport, Louisiana.²⁸⁹ Early in 1910 he was based in New Orleans, where he published his first sheet music hit, “Shake, Rattle and Roll,”²⁹⁰ before moving on to Houston, Texas,²⁹¹ where he came into contact with

²⁸⁷ “Baby Seals’ Blues” (1912), by H. Franklin Baby Seals (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress).

²⁸⁸ Sylvester Russell, “Baby F. Seals at the Monogram,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, Mar. 2, 1912; Abbott and Seroff, “‘They Cert’ly Sound Good to Me’: Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues,” 415.

²⁸⁹ “Lyric Theater, Shreveport,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, May 8, 1909; Ibid.

²⁹⁰ “You Got to Shake, Rattle and Roll, or My Money Ante [*sic*] Gwine”, by Baby F. Seals (New Orleans, L. Grunewald, 1910); “‘You’ve Got to Shake, Rattle and Roll, or My Money Ain’t a-Gwine,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, Feb. 12, 1910; Ibid.

²⁹¹ “People’s Theater, Houston,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, Feb. 26, 1910; Ibid.

the piano player H. “Kid” Love . Correspondence from the July 16, 1910, edition of the *Freeman* declared, "Mr. Kid Love is cleaning with his 'Easton Blues' on the piano. He is a cat on a piano."²⁹² In November 1910 Seals teamed up with Miss Floyd Fisher, "The Doll of Memphis,"²⁹³ and for nearly five months beginning in November 1910, they ran the Bijou Theater in Greenwood, Mississippi.²⁹⁴

It seems likely that November 1910 is the first probable date that Seals could have written “Baby Seals’ Blues,” unless it was adapted from an earlier composition, because “Baby Seals’ Blues” is a duet. In the sheet music “HE” and “SHE” indicates who is to sing, which suggests that the song was composed at some time after Baby Seals and Miss Floyd Fisher teamed up and moved to Greenwood, Mississippi.

By 1911 Seals and Fisher could be found working in black vaudeville in Chicago and Harlem.²⁹⁵ By the spring of 1912, they were in Louisville, Kentucky, at The Olio Theater and said to be featuring “Blues” in their act²⁹⁶. By the autumn of 1912 Fisher and Seals had published “Baby Seals Blues,” and were selling copies from the stage. They also ran an advertisement in the *Indianapolis Freeman*, October 19, 1912, inviting dealers to "write for special terms." The advert included the first eight bars of “Baby Seals Blues,” an idea that was similar to the practice of including the first page of compositions on the inside cover or back of sheet music to generate sales. Placing the first eight bars of the melody and the lyrics in a newspaper advert was a novel idea; that may have assisted in the song’s widespread popularity.

We are told that in 1913 "Little Pet takes the house when she sings 'Please Don't Shake Me Papa, While I'm Gone' and 'Baby Seals Blues!'"²⁹⁷ There were other southern vaudevillians featuring "Baby Seals Blues" during 1913 included future race recording artists Edna Benbow (Hicks),²⁹⁸ Laura Smith,²⁹⁹ Gonzelle White,³⁰⁰ and Charles Anderson.³⁰¹

H. Franklin “Baby” Seals died on December 29, 1915 in Anniston, Alabama.³⁰² His early demise probably ensured that W. C Handy would have no serious contender for the title of “father of the blues.”

What then of Handy’s “The Memphis Blues” that Charters dismissed as “not a blues at all,” a composition that Charters considered to be in the “standard popular” style. “The Memphis Blues” opens with a clearly defined twelve-bar blues strain, in the key of F. This, from what Charters knew at the time, was the first blues to be published with a twelve-bar strain, rather

²⁹² “Palace Theatre, Houston, Texas,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, July 16, 1910. Ibid.: 416.

²⁹³ “The Stage,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, Aug. 6, 1910; Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Baby F. Seals, “Bijou Theater, Greenwood, Miss.,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, Jan. 21, 1911; Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Gossip of the Stage,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, Dec. 16, 1911; Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Jas. H. Price, “The Olio, Louisville, Ky.,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, Apr. 27, 1912; Ibid.

²⁹⁷ "The Team of Jenkins and Jenkins," *Indianapolis Freeman*, Feb. 1, 1913; Ibid.: 418.

²⁹⁸ “Galveston, Tex.,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, Sept. 6, 1913; Ibid.

²⁹⁹ “Alcazar Theater, Galveston, Texas,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, Dec. 20, 1913; Ibid.

³⁰⁰ *Indianapolis Freeman*, Dec. 27, 1913; Ibid.

³⁰¹ Walter S. Fearance, “St. Louis, Mo.,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, Aug. 23, 1913; Ibid.

³⁰² “Baby Seals, Passed Away,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, Feb. 5, 1916; Ibid.

than having the sequence embedded in a twenty-bar structure. The melody of the opening strain is based upon the minor and major thirds respectively in the key of F. This melodic device would come to be known as a “blue-note” melody. Similar melodic characteristics can be found in both “Baby Seals’ Blues” and “The Dallas Blues.” However stylistically Charters does have a point; “The Memphis Blues” is stylistically closer to earlier ragtime compositions than it is to later country blues recordings.

The Memphis Blues
or
(Mister Crump)

3

By W. C. HANDY

Tempo di Blues

Copyright transferred MCMXII to Theron C. Bennett Co.
Copyright MCMXII by W. C. Handy
Memphis, Tenn.

Figure 11: “The Memphis Blues” (1912), by W. C. Handy (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress)

An issue that Charters raises that does require some examination is the relationship between Handy's 1909 "Mr. Crump" and his later "The Memphis Blues" (1912). Handy had always claimed that the campaign song that he had written based on "Mama Don't Allow" had simply been renamed after the city in which the electoral contest had taken place. The issue that Charters raises is that the melody of "Mama Don't Allow" sits uneasily within Handy's twelve-bar theme; it is not at all clear what the connection is. Perhaps Charters was unaware that when Handy published the lyrics in 1940, these were set to the second strain which was of sixteen bars.³⁰³

The thrust of Charters' argument is that if these two songs are related, and "Mr Crump" was written in 1909, then it is possible that Handy could have written the first blues. Conversely if it can be established that they are not related then this would undermine Handy's claim. But there are a number of musicians who do corroborate that this is the same tune. One member of Handy's band from his time in Memphis was "Uncle Bob" Young:

Handy wrote 'The Memphis Blues' as he stood at the cigar counter in Pee Wee's Saloon which was then downstairs, just underneath where we are sitting now, [317-19 Beale Street,...] Some folks say he wrote the song in his office in the old Solvent Savings Bank Building on Beale, but that's wrong – Handy didn't have an office until long after that, because he couldn't afford one. [...] Up to that time, the words had read 'Pappy won't low no easy-riders here,' but in honor [*sic*] of Mr. Crump Handy changed the lines to read 'Mister Crump won't low [*sic*] no easy-riders here'³⁰⁴

It seems unlikely that a musician who had played in Handy's band would not have noticed if this were a different tune or if three years later "The Memphis Blues" had acquired a new opening twelve-bar strain. Surely the musicians themselves would have noticed such a radical modification. Another informant is Joe Campassi.

We were both working at a saloon called Pee Wee's on Beale Street in Memphis when Handy wrote the Memphis Blues. But it was called 'Mister Crump.' We were having an election for mayor and Handy was hired by E. H. Crump to help get in the votes. All the candidates had bands, but Handy wrote this song 'Mister Crump' and Crump won the election. He later changed the name of the song to 'Memphis Blues'. It was the first.

"I was young in those days, 1910, only 16, helping manage Pee Wee's saloon, and selling policy (a gambling game also known as Louisiana [*sic*] Lottery.)"³⁰⁵

The only point at issue that seems to arise among those that recall the election is not whether "Mr. Crump" and "The Memphis Blues" are the same tune, but rather where it was written. The musicians tend to say it was in Pee Wee's bar, whereas his family say it was in an office. Perhaps Handy's brother Charles gets close to the truth when he says:

³⁰³ Hurwitt, 83.

³⁰⁴ "Uncle Bob" Young interviewed by Clarke Porteous, *Memphis Press-Scimitar* Staff Writer, Dec 1, 1953 (Handy file, Mississippi Blues Archive, Oxford, Mississippi).

³⁰⁵ *Clarksdale Press Register* August 1976 (W. C. Handy file, Mississippi Blues Archive, Oxford, Mississippi).

It was always displeasing to W. C. that he was told that he wrote his blues in a saloon, [...] The truth is that he wrote them in the office we had. What he did do was meet with his musicians in the saloon and hand out parts, and he would sometimes change the orchestration for a musician on the bar.³⁰⁶

Whatever the merits of the different arguments one thing appears clear, the impression that Charters left with his readers was that it was “ironic that, the first published piece in the Negro ‘blues’ idiom, ‘Dallas Blues, was by a white man, Hart Wand.”³⁰⁷

Charters’ book was ground breaking for its time. The country blues had been largely ignored up to this time and exceptions to this like Lead Belly were considered within the context of the prevailing New Orleans jazz revival. But for some Charters did not go far enough in dissociating country blues from jazz and commercial music. Charters was principally looking at the recorded history of the blues, and given how little was known at the time, tended to focus on the recording artists who had sold well in the 1920s. However, by the late 1950s there were a few specialist record collectors had begun to take a somewhat different line, an example being James McKune who began collecting blues in the 1940s. In a response to Charters *The Country Blues* in the British magazine *VJM Palava*, titled “The Great Country Blues Singers,” McKune made the following observation:

This is my important point. I know twenty men who collect the Negro country blues. All of us have been interested in knowing who the *great* country blues singers are, not who sold best.

On his own basis, best-selling blues singers, Charters may be all right. But I write for those who want a different basis for evaluating blues singers. This basis is their relative greatness, or competency, as country blues singers.³⁰⁸

If this line of thinking is taken to its logical conclusion it could be argued that the least commercial bluesmen were the “great bluesmen,” not least because their records were scarce and therefore commanded the highest prices at the time. This was especially true of the Delta bluesmen who had never sold particularly well in Mississippi in the late 1920s, or anywhere else for that matter.³⁰⁹ These were the records that the collectors prized the most.

1960 also saw the establishment of the Origin Jazz Library, a blues collector label that focused on the re-release of recordings made by country blues singers for the race catalogues in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The first release on the new label was *The Immortal Charlie Patton*,³¹⁰ followed by *Really! The Country Blues* which included the first re-issue of Tommy Johnson, Son House, Skip James, and Ishman Bracey and some other non Mississippi singers. Their next two releases were a little more regionally diverse; including *Henry Thomas Sings the Texas Blues*. Known as “Ragtime Texas” he was probably the oldest

³⁰⁶ Charles Handy, interviewed by Clark Porteous, *Memphis Press-Scimitar* Staff Writer, January 14, 1972 (W. C. Handy file, Mississippi Blues Archive, Oxford, Mississippi).

³⁰⁷ Charters, *The Country Blues*.

³⁰⁸ Hamilton, 183.

³⁰⁹ One possible exception is Charlie Patton who did sell rather better than most.

³¹⁰ *The Immortal Charlie Patton*, OJL-1 (1962).

blues singer to record in the 1920s. Born in 1874, he was more than fifty years old before he entered a recording studio.

The next release was *The Great Jug Bands*, which drew from various regions, to be followed by *Mississippi Blues*, their fifth release in just two years. There was of course an assumption that lay behind the establishment of the Origin Jazz Library and that was that in seeking out country blues singers, rather than the rather more commercially successful, like Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Slim, Sonny Boy Williamson, they were getting to the origins of the music as the name of the company implied.

Blues research was in its infancy in these years and in the place of solid research and study it was only to be expected that conjecture and myth would fill the vacuum. One thing is clear as Elijah Wald notes:

As white urbanites discovered the “Race records” of the 1920s and 1930s, they reshaped the music to fit their own tastes and desires, creating a rich mythology that often bears little resemblance to the reality of the musicians they admired. Popular entertainers were reborn as primitive voices from the dark and demonic Delta, and a music notable for its professionalism and humor were recast as the heart-cry of a suffering people.³¹¹

In this environment it is possible to see how the publication of *Country Blues* in 1959, which had undermined Handy’s role as “father of the blues,” and the issuing of *Blues in the Mississippi Night* in the same year, which claiming to represent the authentic Delta blues, uncorrupted by commercialism, could complement the aesthetic of the blues collectors who placed such value on scarce recordings. These records were not only valuable because they were rare; they were valuable because they represented the essence of the blues. Their authority for saying so was none other than Alan Lomax, who had an unrivalled position as America’s foremost folk-song collector. The irony had they known it, was the three Mississippi bluesmen on *Blues in the Mississippi Night* were in fact three of the most successful commercial blues recording artists of all time. This of course they didn’t know because Lomax would not reveal their true identity for another thirty years.

Had the identity of these performers been revealed in 1959, it seems doubtful that the blues revivals of the 1960s would have taken quite the form that they did, but events had developed to a point that what was to follow had its own inevitable logic, as Charles Keil observed:

Samuel Charters, Paul Oliver, Harold Courlander, Harry Oster, Pete Welding, Mack McCormick – even Alan Lomax until recently – share a number of interests or preoccupations, first and foremost of which is the quest for the “real” blues. The criteria for a blues singer, implicit or explicit, are as follows. Old age: the performer should preferably be more than sixty years old, blind, arthritic, and toothless (as Lonnie Johnson put it, when first approached for an interview, “Are you another of those guys who wants to put crutches under my ass?”). Obscurity: the blues singer

³¹¹ Wald, 3.

should not have performed in public or have made a recording in at least twenty years; among deceased bluesmen, the best seem to be those who appeared in a big city one day in the 1920's, made from four to six recordings, and then disappeared into the countryside forever. Correct tutelage: the singer should have played with or been taught by some legendary figure. Agrarian milieu: a bluesman should have lived the bulk of his life as a sharecropper, coaxing mules and picking cotton, uncontaminated by city influences.³¹²

Despite this climate it should be said that most writers on the blues have been somewhat more circumspect in their claims regarding the origin of the blues. Paul Oliver in *Blues Fell This Morning*, published in 1960, speaks of "obscure" origins.

With some speculation on the origins of the blues, which are admittedly obscure, it has been possible to trace its process of evolution and change in a sequence which becomes progressively more clear after the turn of the century. Buried deep in the fertile ground of the Revival hymns, the spirituals, the minstrel songs, the banjo and guitar rags, the mountain 'ballits', the folk ballads, the work songs and the field hollers, lie the roots of the blues which began to take form at some indeterminate time in the late nineteenth century. Above all the meandering, interminable 'arwhoolies' and hollers, improvised by field-hands of a thousand Southern plantations influenced the growth of this *ex tempore* song. They were sung by men at work but the blues evolved as a song primarily created by men at leisure, with the time and opportunity to play an instrumental accompaniment to their verses. With fiddle, banjo and, most of all, guitar they were able to add a second, answering voice which amplified the meaning of their own song. In accepting the certain restrictions that the instrument imposed they fell back on the simple three-chord harmony – tonic, subdominant and dominant of the hymnals and ballads, but the shadings, the bending and the flattenings of notes which had so delighted the field Negro were preserved in the vocal delivery and found instrumental expression in the employment of flatted thirds, dominant seventh chords and the whining notes achieved by sliding the strings, and the use of other unorthodox techniques.

From such beginnings evolved the folk blues, which originally had eight- and sixteen-bar forms related to the spiritual and ballads, but ever more frequently took shape in a pattern of twelve bar stanzas of three lines each, wherein the first line was repeated giving the singer an opportunity to extemporize a third and if he so wished, a rhyming line.³¹³

Although the Delta is not mentioned specifically the implication is that wherever the blues began they did so in a rural environment. The question then is: if the blues did not begin in the Mississippi Delta, is there any other rural region in which they could have begun?

³¹² Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: The University Press of Chicago, 1991), 34-5.

³¹³ Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: The Meaning of the Blues*, 5-6.

Other Blues Regions

Despite Lomax's public assertions, there is some evidence to suggest that in private he had his doubts about the Delta origins of the blues, which he expressed to Jeff Todd Titon.

In *Early Down Home Blues* (1977),³¹⁴ Jeff Titon took issue with Charters' concept of "country blues" on the grounds that this described the blues by a location. In many cases early blues singers were not from the country at all, they were from large cities. What united these blues musicians was not place but rather a style of playing, although this style was nonetheless rooted in the South. Titon had adopted the phrase "down home blues" from the guitarist Lazy Bill Lucas, who had told him "Down home, that mean down South, on the farm," and also from the blues singer Jo Jo Williams, who said "the word *down home*, it mean back to the root, which mean where it all start at, this music, the blues and the church music, and so far as I can understand, it came from the country, the fields and the shacks and the towns that weren't but wide spaces in the highway."³¹⁵

It is not necessary for a blues singer, according to Titon, to have actually come from a rural background if the player adopts a *down home style*. He refers to Blind Lemon Jefferson who was from Dallas, as a "downhome recording artist,"³¹⁶ and speaking of Papa Charlie Jackson from New Orleans he says "although he was a minstrel-show veteran, his down home blues credentials are at least as good as those of some, such as Jim Jackson, who had the good fortune to record after Blind Lemon Jefferson."³¹⁷ One successful blues artist of the 1920s that is however considered to be outside of the *down home* style by Titon is Lonnie Johnson whose "records inspired young guitarists who wanted to learn something different from the downhome style."³¹⁸

A consequence of trying to bring together predominantly male, self-accompanied blues singers under the rubric of "downhome blues" is that the question of geographical origins becomes less significant. According to this approach origin can be considered not from the perspective of region but rather on the basis of what Titon describes as "polygenesis;" his own conjecture on the appearance of the blues:

Where the form appeared first, and when, is open to conjecture; polygenesis is a likely possibility. Wherever it was invented, the tradition developed most fully in east Texas and the Mississippi Delta region during the first decade of the twentieth century. Its development lagged about a decade in the Southeast, where the influence of Anglo-American traditional music was stronger. Blues was known perhaps as early as 1900 in other sections – New Orleans, for example, and certain Midwestern cities – but it did not become the staple of the musical diet that it was down home.³¹⁹

³¹⁴ Titon.

³¹⁵ From interviews conducted by Jeff Titon, Aug. 13 and 20, 1969, Minneapolis, Minn.; *Ibid.*, 3.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 212.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

The point that I would like to pursue here is not whether the blues was fully developed in the Mississippi Delta in the first decade of the century; this has been extensively discussed earlier. Nor for the moment do we need to consider whether the blues was known in New Orleans in 1900. The issue is why Titon developed the notion that east Texas may be of some special significance in relation to where the blues form first appeared. Looking to the footnotes we find the answer.

In New York, Nov. 11, 1972, Alan Lomax told me that his many years collecting black American folksongs had convinced him that the blues originated in Texas; as an afterthought he cited the formulaic line “Well, the blues come to Texas, lopin’ like a mule”³²⁰

This is in marked contrast to the public statements that Lomax had made in *Blues in the Mississippi Night* (1959), and that he would go on to repeat in *Land Where the Blues Began* (1993).

Texas

What is there to suggest that the blues may have first appeared in Texas? Whilst it is certainly true that Blind Lemon Jefferson, from Dallas, was the first successful male self-accompanied blues recording artist, it doesn’t necessarily follow that that he was playing the blues any earlier than anyone else. He didn’t begin his recording career until 1926, and after the craze for female blues recordings had peaked in the early twenties. There had been a few other male blues singers that had recorded earlier. In 1924 OKeh issued “Barrel House Blues” and “Time Ain’t Gonna Make Me Stay” by Ed Andrews, accompanying himself on his own guitar,³²¹ but these releases were not a commercial success. It was the recordings of Blind Lemon Jefferson for Paramount that encouraged the major companies to seek out male blues singers, as Dixon and Godrich describe.

Paramount, because of their mail order service, had more rural customers than the other companies and some of these were requesting recordings by country blues singers. In 1925 Sam Price – later to become a well-known race artist in his own right, but then working in a music store in Dallas – wrote to Mayo Williams recommending Blind Lemon Jefferson, a rough itinerant singer and guitar-picker from Texas. He was at once called to Chicago; Paramount – overall a smaller company than OKeh and lacking the justification provided by an extensive hillbilly catalogue – made no field trips in the south. Blind Lemon’s first two selections, on Paramount 12347, were *Booster Blues* and *Dry Southern Blues*: [...]. They were unlike anything that had appeared on record before.³²²

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Robert M. W. Dixon and John Godrich, *Recording the Blues* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970), 33.

³²² Ibid., 34.

Jefferson was not only a bluesman. Quince Cox recalls that his repertoire included dance tunes of the day and said that "Lemon played anything that he had to play. And he played pretty good, too. What did we call them songs? Reels...He could play anything you asked him to play."³²³ He also played Tin Pan Alley songs like "Beggin' Back," ragtime tunes such as "Hot Dogs" along with sacred songs such as "All I Want Is That Pure Religion."³²⁴

One bluesman that remembers Blind Lemon Jefferson from his time in Dallas is Mance Lipscomb who was born on April 9 1895 in Brazos County, Texas. Lipscomb learned the rudiments of music from his father, a professional fiddle player who also taught himself to play guitar. Mance recalled the first song that he heard his father practicing on guitar.

Now I was here when my daddy first started out to playin. First song he ever let us know what he was doin: "Whoa Mule, Let Me Git the Saddle on Ya." I got that gittah banja tunin:

*Hit that Mule, he wouldn't gee,
Cross his head wit a singletree.
Whoa, mule, let me git the saddle on ya. Whoa, mule.*

*Foedy-dolla mule an a foedy-dolla saddle
Gion out west ta herd them cattle.
Whoa, mule, let me git the saddle round ya. Whoa, mule.*

*That mule gonna kick, that mule gonna pitch,
Hold that mule til I git im hitcht.
Whoa, mule, let me git the saddle on ya. Whoa, mule.*

*You take Sally, an I'll take Sue
Taint no diffunce between the two.
Whoa, mule, let me git the saddle round ya. Whoa, mule³²⁵.*

He also said that his father played W. C. Handy's "The St. Louis Blues:"

Back when that came out, people was playin blues an didn't know it was *blues*, what they was playin. They was playin blues fur years befoe inbody give it a name. Say, 'What kinda song is that you playin? Too slow ta two-step wit it.'

Say, 'Oh, I'm jest playin my feelins, what stirring me inside.' When the blues first come round here, I'd say long about nineteen hunnud, nineteen an ten, had a slow way a playin it. Set yo mind ta thankin, maybe you'd motion, sway to an fro in yo chair,

³²³ Alan Govenar, "Blind Lemon Jefferson: The Myth and the Man " *Black Music Research Journal* 20, no. 1 (2000): 8.

³²⁴ Kip Lornell, "Blind Lemon Meets Leadbelly," *Ibid.*: 29.

³²⁵ Mance Lipscomb, *I Say Me for a Parable: The Oral Autobiography of Mance Lipscomb, Texas Bluesman*, ed. Glen Alyn (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 125.

get out on the dance flo an shuffle yo feet. It wadn no dance piece. But this ‘Saint Louis Blues,’ well you could dance ta it.³²⁶

According to Mance Lipscomb the kind of blues that they were playing in Texas around 1900 or 1910 was a tune that he knew as “Out an Down” which he said was the second tune that he himself learned to play on guitar. These are the first couple of verses of his version of “Out an Down”

*On my way to East Saint Louis
Didn have but the one thin dime,
Didn have but the one thin dime,
Didn have but the one thin dime.*

*Befoe I would spend it, fur my own use,
Save it fur the lady friend of mine,
Save it fur the lady friend of mine,
Save it fur the lady friend of mine.*

That’s befoe the blues predicted. I was playin right then what we call the old style a blues in *my* time commin up. We didn know nothing bout ‘The Blues,’ but we *had* the blues right *on*. Then, after while people commenced to naming a song like that ‘The Blues.’³²⁷

There is a striking resemblance in the first verse of Lipscomb’s “Out an Down” to the repeated stanza that W. C. Handy recalled from his time in St. Louis in 1892 that inspired his “The St. Louis Blues”:

*I walked all the way from old St. Louis,
And I didn’t have but one po’ measly dime.*³²⁸

The significance of this is that Mance Lipscomb believed that “Out an Down” was the original blues song, and he also said that it was part of Blind Lemon Jefferson’s repertoire from his time in Dallas circa 1917.

Blind Lemon pickt up that song [“Out an Down”]. He was doin that when I tuck the interurban up there ta Dallas, ta hear him sang an play. Nineteen-seventeen: he’s standin there on the ground, on the railroad tracks playin that song. He imitated the blues behind that. First man that ever knowed what ‘The Blues’ was made outa. Well then here come ‘The Blues,’ stept in behind that song.

An then they invented it from that: ‘The Blues’ style. Now it’s a thousand million blues they playin. This here’s the original blues: that old ‘Out an Down.’³²⁹

³²⁶ Ibid., 129.

³²⁷ Ibid., 190-1.

³²⁸ Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 142.

³²⁹ Lipscomb, 191.

There is a possibility that “Out and Down” is related to “All in Down and Out,” a minstrel show song with music by Chris Smith and Billy B. Johnson and words by R. C. McPherson.³³⁰ First published in 1906, it contained some of the lyrics that went on to be included in “Nobody Knows You When You’re Down and Out,” and later recorded by Bessie Smith and the blues revivalist Eric Clapton.

Although Mance Lipscomb would listen to Blind Lemon Jefferson play, he never actually made contact with him, saying: “No, I never did go interfere wit im. He was a big husky fella. I was a country guy, you know. He had sich a variety a sangin. An people gave him ta be the best songster around in the place an precinct.”³³¹ Lipscomb also didn’t make contact with another well known blues singer who was in Texas at the same time, Lead Belly. He recalled that he had “served his time right out in Sugar Land penitentiary, below Houston. No, I never did see im. I was scared of that man.”³³²

Much of Mance Lipscomb’s own repertoire he learned from the circus shows. He particularly recalled the Barnum and Bailey show. “They had a clown tag it on the stage, an sang an ply like that song ‘Hesitin Blues’”³³³ He also recalled learning “Alabama Bound” from Barnum and Bailey’s show in 1915 saying “See, jest pickt up my gittah an strum along til I got it, oh, ranged where I want it.”³³⁴

There are a couple of interesting points here; the first of these is that there is nothing significantly different between the repertoire that Lipscomb describes and the repertoire of the Mississippi musicians of the same generation. Songs such as “East St. Louis,” “Alabama Bound,” and later, “Hesitatin’ Blues” and “The St. Louis Blues” could be found throughout the South. The second interesting point is that Lipscomb clearly distinguishes between “old style” blues and “The Blues.” This is strikingly similar to the distinction made by Howard Odum between the “formal” blues and “folk” blues. Again we find a repertoire of rural folk-song and ballads that seems to pre-date the repertoire of “The Blues.”

Louisiana

Another region where it could be suggested that the blues began was on the plantations of Louisiana. Jim Robinson was born at Deer Range on December 25th 1892, the youngest of four boys, all of whom played music. Robinson took up the guitar about the age of fifteen which would have been around 1905. Richard Allen interviewed him for the Hogan Jazz Archive in New Orleans.

³³⁰ “All in Down and Out,” (1906), by Chris Smith and Billy B. Johnson, words R. C. McPherson (Cecil Mack) © Dec 7, 1906 xxc 136267 Gotham-Attucks Music Co. (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress). New York.

³³¹ Lipscomb, 201.

³³² Ibid., 210.

³³³ Ibid., 223.

³³⁴ Ibid.

[Allen]: I was wondering about those – you mentioned there were guitar players around Deer Range, huh?
 [Robinson]: Oh, they had plenty of guitar players around there; they had plenty of fellows play guitar, you know.
 [Allen]: What Would they play?
 [Robinson]: Oh, they play like I play: blues and different things, songs, [different things they were?]³³⁵

This would strongly suggest that the blues was being played by rural Louisiana guitarists, but when he is specific it emerges that he is using the term “blues” to refer to ballads.

[Allen]: Would they sing?
 [Robinson]: Oh, yeah, some of them could sing. [unintelligible] Some of them used to have a harmonica [fastened] to a little piece of wire over their mouth, understand –
 [Russell]: Around their neck, huh?
 [Robinson]: They’d play the harmonica and play the guitar, too.
 [Allen]: You don’t remember any of the names of the songs?
 [Robinson]: Oh, them old songs – there’d be “Steamboat Bill,” all that [kind of old numbers?]; “Casey Jones,” all them numbers was out then.
 [Allen]: And the blues, what kind of blues?
 [Robinson]: Oh, there wasn’t much blues then, at the time then.
 [Allen]: What about the blues?
 [Robinson]: There wasn’t much of a blues then, understand; didn’t nobody fool with blues that much at that time.
 [Russell]: Not as many blues then as now?
 [Robinson]: No, not like now, uh-uh. Blues ain’t been long; just a few years been out. [People was playing the blues not like today; it wasn’t proper like in the time I come up in?]³³⁶

Charles “Sonny” Henry was born on Magnolia Plantation on November 17, 1885. There was no little town or settlement at Magnolia “just a plantation.” raising sugar cane.

[Russell:] Did they have any blues in those days?
 [Henry:] Well...
 [Russell:] You don’t remember?
 [Henry:] ...no, I don’t remember no blues.³³⁷

Willie Foster, born December 27, 1888, in McCall, Louisiana, first learned to play mandolin and violin. At the age of twelve he took up the guitar, and with his younger brother George “Pops” Foster, they would play for banquets on plantations. Recalling plantation dances that they played for Cajuns in the backwoods of Louisiana, Willie’s younger brother George says that the bands were “small, sometimes consisting of guitar, violin and bass, or mandolin,

³³⁵ Jim Robinson, "Interview Transcript, December 10, 1958," ed. Richard B. Allen William Russell, Bill Simmons (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University). Inclusions in parentheses are as they appear in the transcript.

³³⁶ Ibid. Inclusions in parentheses are as they appear in the transcript.

³³⁷ Charles "Sunny" Henry, "Interview Transcript, Jan 8, 1959," ed. Richard B. Allen and William Russell (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

guitar and bass.” He also says that “you played old numbers like “Chicken on a Reel;” slow blues; ally blues; old straight blues, waltzes, tangos, [unintelligible].”³³⁸ What the distinction is between “slow blues,” “alley blues” and “old straight blues” is unclear. One song that is identifiable is “Chicken Reel” which was to become a tune associated with “Big Eye” Louis Delisle, (a.k.a. “Big Eye” Louis Nelson) after 1910. It was also recorded in 1911 by Arthur Collins and appeared as sheet music.

William Russell asked Willie Foster if he had heard any blues on the plantation when he was young, and Willie Foster replied that “that’s where the blues come from” and that he had heard them from the railroad songsters [i.e. workers]. He says ‘Frankie and Johnny’ came out while he was growing up, and ‘In The Good Old Summertime.’”³³⁹ Russell asks if he remembers “Stack O’ Lee,” and if the song was about a real person. Foster says he doesn’t know about the real person, but the song was the first thing that he played on guitar. Continuing about the origin of the tune, Foster says the song came from the railroad, and it was the only one that a lot of the railroad men could play on the guitar. Ralph Collins asks if the railroad men sang the blues when they worked; Foster says they did. Russell asks if the first guitarists Foster heard were on the plantation; Foster says they were, and that sometimes “there might be three or more players sitting around playing.”³⁴⁰

Other examples include Punch Miller who was born in Raceland, Louisiana on May 10, 1894 (or 1895); his real name was Earnest Burden. He says that he recalls hearing songs out in the country like “Oh, You Beautiful Doll, Take Your Hands Away,” and claims that “they had a lot of people playing the blues.” “Grizzly Bear” and “Everybody’s Doing It” were other songs that he says they played when he was a child.³⁴¹ But he also says that “in the country they didn’t do much singing, just played; they didn’t sing the blues much.”³⁴² According to the digest,

Punch plowed out in the country and made sugar cane. He would get lonesome on the farm and always wanted to leave there from when he was a little kid. It never was in his mind to stay there. He would sing some kind of blues or something to himself when he was plowing. When they were cutting the sugar cane, almost everyone would be singing. He would sing something like: ‘I want to leave this place and find a better home.’³⁴³

As this is the only lyric he gives this could perhaps be an example of a one verse song.

³³⁸ George “Pops” Foster, “Interview (Digest), Reel B Track 2, 1969,” ed. Tom Stoddard (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University). Taken from the audio tape rather than the digest.

³³⁹ Willie Foster, “Interview Digest, January 21, 1959,” ed. William Russell and Ralph Collins (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Punch Miller, “Interview Digest, August 20, 1959,” ed. Richard B. Allen (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Ibid.

Miller also recalled that when he was young “there was a right smart of guitar players. Used to see guys walking up and down the levee with guitars on their shoulders all the time.”³⁴⁴

Just as in Mississippi and Texas, we find a repertoire of ballads being retrospectively referred to as blues and once again it is the migratory workers such as the railroad workers that are principally associated with these ballads. There are of course various other parts of the south where blues could be found, but once again whenever such singers were interviewed they confirm the already established picture. The “formal” blues was not known until around 1910.

Blind Willie McTell recalled his early years in Georgia saying, “I’m talking about the days of years ago. Count from 1908 on up to the original years. Back in the years of those days blues have started to be original, in 1914. From then until the war time people always had times from blues on up to original blues. Then on up to 1920 they changed blues. After then there was more blues. After then it became the jazz blues.”³⁴⁵ Or Gary Davis, bluesman from Greenville, South Carolina, born 1896. In response to a question as to when he first heard the blues he replied: “That broke out in 1910. I couldn’t tell you where it came from. I first heard them from a fellow coming down the road picking a guitar and playing what you call ‘the blues.’ They played other songs. The blues, they just began to originate themselves.”³⁴⁶

Either the blues in the “formal” sense simultaneously emerged throughout the South and became established throughout the region within just a few years, or there is something very wrong with the simple notion that the blues is a folk-music that became commercialised. If the “formal” structures of the blues, the twelve-bar structure, the harmonic conventions and the AAB form did indeed come together and consolidate in the rural environment, they did so in a remarkably short period of time and undetected by the performers themselves.

There is a possible counterargument that may be worthwhile exploring, and that is that the blues is essentially an urban music, music of the cities that spread to the countryside along the rivers and railroads. This could begin to explain why it was that the earliest accounts of music making, that closely resemble the “formal” blues, are generally associated with railroad workers, roustabouts, honky-tonk piano players and minstrel performers, all of which have urban contacts and associations.

It is not a matter of speculation that such urban musicians existed, or that they travelled into the Delta. Alan Lomax had interviewed Jelly Roll Morton in 1938, and had received at first hand an account of Morton’s time working his way up through Mississippi playing pool and the piano. For some reason Lomax seems to have never factored this in to his account of the development of the blues. Although Morton had given a very clear description of the kinds of music he was playing in the early years of twentieth century, Lomax chose to discount this from his understanding of the emergence of the blues.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

³⁴⁵ Blind Willie McTell, “Monologue on History of the Blues,” recorded November 5, 1940 in Atlanta (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress AFS-4072-A-1), Bastin, 130.

³⁴⁶ Stephan Grossman, *Rev. Gary Davis: Blues Guitar*, (New York: Oak Publications, 1974), 10; Ibid., 171.

In the next chapter we shall look in some detail at what Jelly Roll Morton had to say about the music he was playing in the early years of the twentieth century and what that may tell us about the emergence of the blues in Mississippi. Before we do so this is perhaps a good point at which to review where we have got to so far.

The Rural Narrative of the Blues

I have argued that the idea that the blues developed from folk-song is one for which W. C. Handy is primarily responsible. In an effort to explain his early blues compositions he confirmed the suspicions of the folklorist Dorothy Scarborough that the blues that were “genuine [...] have a basis in older folk-song.”³⁴⁷ This was an argument that Handy was to repeat in his autobiography *The Father of the Blues* (1941). This line of thinking suggested two things: that the blues had rural origins, and that those folk-songs that pre-dated the appearance of the commercial blues were an embryonic stage in the development of the blues.

These arguments ran counter to the view of the folklorist Howard Odum who argued that:

In fact, the great mass of present-day Negro songs may be divided into three classes, the third constituting the folk songs: First, the modern “Nigger songs,” popular “hits” and “blues”; second, such songs greatly modified and adapted partially by the Negroes; third, songs originating with the Negroes or adapted so completely as to become common Negro song.³⁴⁸

Odum also clearly identified two types of blues, “formal blues” which he associated with vaudeville singers and “folk-blues,” which included the material that he had collected before 1911 and which he *retrospectively* called blues.

Despite the contradictory accounts that W. C. Handy gave as to where and when he was first influenced to compose his blues, later folklorists and blues writers have tended to accept Handy’s accounts of hearing the blues in the Mississippi Delta. They have accepted his explanation that his blues compositions were commercial adaptations of existing folk material, rather than question the relationships between his compositions and commercial music of the period.

Despite the absence of compelling evidence to support the view that the blues has rural origins, a myth has developed that the blues began in the Mississippi Delta. This appears to be the product of three principal factors: the accounts that W. C. Handy gave of hearing the blues in Mississippi around 1903, Alan Lomax’s belief that the blues was the product of racial injustice in the South and the circumstances surrounding the recording of *Blues in the Mississippi Night*, where three commercial recording artists were used to represent three Mississippi bluesmen.

³⁴⁷ Scarborough, 265.

³⁴⁸ Odum and Johnson, *The Negro and His Song*, 149.

By the early 1960s books on the country blues, a blues revival and the re-issuing of recordings of country blues singer from the 1920s and thirties, served to disengage the country blues from the context of its development.

As Paul Oliver noted this reappraisal of the country blues “disengaged blues from its customary acknowledgment as a late branch of black folk song, or as a tributary to jazz, and distinguished the idiom as a phenomenon to be studied in its own right.”³⁴⁹ But the disengagement of the country blues from the context of its development has restricted a wider understanding of the development of the blues in general.

The songsters and bluesmen themselves who came to prominence in the blues revivals of the 1960s clearly indicate that the blues, in the formal sense was not known in the rural environment until around 1910. Songsters from throughout the South say that they were the first generation to play the blues. Guy B. Johnson who collaborated with Howard Odum in the 1920s summed this up when he said; looking back on a lifetime of collecting folk-song that he could recall “no singer or musician who had learned the blues from his father or his grandfather.”³⁵⁰

Recent research, in particular the work of Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, does suggest an entirely different explanation for the appearance of the blues in Mississippi and elsewhere in the rural South around 1910. The *Indianapolis Freeman* reported weekly on events within African American tent shows and the emerging African American vaudeville circuits of the South. We know that these travelling shows influenced the repertoire of local songsters because songs such as “Goo-Goo Eyes” and “The Bully Song” were reported in the early years of the twentieth century being sung by rural songsters before the “blues” were known by name.

I will go on to show in the next chapter that by 1910 a music called the “blues” was being performed in the travelling shows, and that these travelling shows brought the music of New Orleans, Memphis and other urban centres into the country. Once a repertoire called the “blues” did emerge, and was sung in the tent shows and on vaudeville there is evidence that this repertoire was exported throughout the rural South and into the Mississippi by the travelling shows.

First it will be necessary to demonstrate that the blues was known in New Orleans in the early years of the twentieth century and also in Memphis. In 1938 Jelly Roll Morton recorded around eight hours of disks for the Library of Congress, charting his version of the history of jazz. These recordings include several twelve-bar blues and other blues that Morton says were played from around the turn of the century in New Orleans.

Jelly Roll Morton goes on to describe to Alan Lomax how he was a part of the “Tri-State Vaudeville Circuit” and that he took the blues of New Orleans and Memphis to three different vaudeville theatres in Mississippi from late in 1910 onward. This can be confirmed

³⁴⁹ Oliver, “Blues Research: Problems and Possibilities.”

³⁵⁰ Guy B. Johnson, conversations with Bruce Bastin, October 22, 1972; Bastin, 4-5.

from the pages of the *Indianapolis Freeman*, and provides a possible explanation for why so many rural bluesmen recall that it was around 1910 that they first heard the blues. It was around 1910 that the “blues” by name began to appear in the repertoire of vaudeville performers, and it was also in 1910 that artists, such as those of the “Tri-State Vaudeville Circuit,” began to regularly perform a repertoire that included “blues” before a rural audience.

My final chapter will show that there is independent verification that the twelve-bar form of the blues was known in New Orleans from the early years of the twentieth century, as Morton had claimed. Using the interviews of early jazz musicians held at the Hogan Jazz Archive and also surviving sheet music it becomes apparent that the emerging jazz bands performed a music that they (perhaps retrospectively) referred to as blues. This repertoire is principally associated with Buddy Bolden, the first known “Cornet King” of the city.

Also surviving sheet music in the John Robichaux collection confirms that as New Orleans’ premier band leader, Robichaux included twelve-bar compositions in his repertoire from around 1900.

The New Orleans Folklorist R. Emmet Kennedy also transcribed and performed a twelve-bar song that he heard in New Orleans along with other secular songs that contemporaries described (perhaps retrospectively) as blues and it seems likely that all of these songs were collected before 1910.

If we bring together the interviews, the sheet music and the recollections of Kennedy, it seems very likely that the twelve-bar form of the blues was known and played in New Orleans in the early years of the twentieth century.

What this suggests is that the development of the blues was a complex interaction and exchange of material between the urban and the rural and between the commercial and the folk. The evidence does not argue for the blues being simply a rural folk music that became commercialised and urbanised, nor does it argue for the blues being a commercial urban music that simply became adopted by rural performers. These relationships are complex and the full extent of these complexities only becomes apparent when all aspects of the development of the blues are considered. The evidence argues for a reengagement of the blues narratives within the rural tradition, vaudeville and the emerging jazz bands as a way forward to understand the development of the blues.

Chapter 3: The Original Jelly Roll Blues?

When Alan Lomax began interviewing Jelly Roll Morton for the Library of Congress on May 23, 1938, he began a process that would eventually lead to one of the most in-depth biographies of any jazz musician. As a piano player and band leader Jelly Roll Morton had recorded in the 1920s with various jazz ensembles including his own band the Red Hot Peppers. He was an instrumentalist, a noted composer and the self-styled “inventor of jazz.”

When William Russell came to review Alan Lomax’s book on the life of Jelly Roll Morton, *Mister Jelly Roll: The Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole and “Inventor of Jazz”* (1950),³⁵¹ Russell noted that “Jelly Roll might have objected to the ‘quotes’ around the ‘Inventor of Jazz,’ which seems to indicate that someone thinks the claim is false or at least notworthily [*sic*] exaggerated. Jelly never used any quotes around ‘Inventor of Jazz,’ etc. on his stationary or on the 2 different business cards I’ve found. He *believed* it.”³⁵²

The question of whether any individual can be said to be responsible for the invention of jazz was, and still is, controversial. In 1938 the radio broadcaster Robert Ripley interviewed W. C. Handy and somewhat clumsily introduced him as, “the originator of *jazz, stomps* and *blues*.”³⁵³ Morton wrote to Ripley to challenge this. In an article that appeared in *Down Beat*, in August 1938, titled “I Created Jazz in 1902, Not W. C. Handy,” Morton set out his claim. “It is evidently known, beyond contradiction, that New Orleans is the cradle of *jazz*, and I, myself, happen to be the creator in the year 1902, many years before the Dixieland Band organized.”³⁵⁴

This was a reference to the white Original Dixieland Jazz Band’s recording of “The Livery Stable Blues” in 1917, which Nick LaRocca the band’s leader claimed “was the first novelty record ever issued by any phonograph.”³⁵⁵ In the light of the success of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, LaRocca argued:

Talents [*sic*]scouts was sent to New Orleans to find bands that could play our type of music. They recorded every white and every colored band. That can be attested by the living people who have work in the phonograph places on Canal St. [such as Werlein’s] [*sic*] cause they’re several people that have express ideas on this thing. And they couldn’t find no jazz bands in New Orleans. So they went to Memphis,

³⁵¹ Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*.

³⁵² William Russell, “William Russell Collection, Mss 500 Series ‘Alan Lomax,’ Folder 22,” (New Orleans: Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection).

³⁵³ Jelly Roll Morton, “I Created Jazz in 1902, Not W. C. Handy,” *Down Beat*, August 1938, 3. (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress).

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁵ Nick LaRocca, “Interview May 21, 1958,” (New Orleans: The William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

Tennessee, and they selected W. C. Handy who was to become the father of jazz and the creator of the blues and who could neither play blues or jazz.³⁵⁶

It seems that both Nick LaRocca and Jelly Roll Morton both claimed to have invented jazz and both dismissed any claim by W. C. Handy. In fairness to W. C. Handy it should be pointed out that he never did claim to have invented jazz and replied to Morton's letter saying "Jelly Roll Morton says I cannot play 'jazz.' I am 65 years old and I would not play it if I could, but I did have the good sense to write down the laws of jazz and the music that lends itself to jazz and had the vision enough to copyright and publish all the music I wrote so I don't have to go around saying I made up this piece and that piece in such and such a year like Jelly Roll and then say somebody swiped it."³⁵⁷

This was the weakness in Morton's claim; he had said "The first stomp was written in 1906, namely *King Porter Stomp*. *Georgia Swing* was the first to be named *swing*, in 1907. You may be informed by leading recording companies. *New Orleans Blues* was written in 1905, the same year *Jelly Roll Blues* was mapped out, but not published at that time."³⁵⁸ The difficulty that Morton had substantiating his claim was that unlike Handy, he could not back up what he was saying with published sheet music or copyrights.

The discussion about who had or had not invented jazz seems to have largely been a diversion from the other issue that resulted from Ripley's incautious introduction of Handy as the "the originator of jazz and the blues."³⁵⁹ This introduction had deflected attention away from Handy's claim to be the "father of the blues." Just as Handy made no claim to have invented jazz, Morton made no claim on the blues, as he went on to explain. "Please do not misunderstand me, I do not claim any of the creation of the blues, although I have written many of them even before Mr. Handy had any blues published."³⁶⁰ It is here that Morton has a potentially stronger case to make.

Mamie's Blues

In Morton's interview with Alan Lomax for the Library of Congress in early 1938, he had already recorded a detailed, if anecdotal account of the blues as it was performed in New Orleans in the early years of the twentieth century; before Handy had published his first blues "The Memphis Blues" in 1912. One of his earliest recollections of the blues is of a woman that lived next door to his godmother; her name was Mamie Desdunes.

"This is the first blues, I no doubt heard in my life. Mamie Desdunes, this was her favourite blues, she hardly could play anything else more, oh, but she really could play this number."³⁶¹

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ W. C. Handy, "I Would Not Play Jazz If I Could: W. C. Handy Says Jelly Roll's Attack Is the 'Act of a Crazy Man'," *Down Beat*, September., 5, (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress).

³⁵⁸ Jelly Roll Morton, "I Created Jazz in 1902, Not W. C. Handy," August 1938, 3.

³⁵⁹ Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*, 236.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 237.

³⁶¹ Jelly Roll Morton, "Mamie's Blues" (R-2573, December 16, 1939: New York).

In the interview with Lomax, Morton gives further details “Two middle fingers of her right hand had been cut off, so she played the blues with only three fingers on her right hand. She only knew this one tune and she played it all day long after she would first get up in the morning.

*I stood in the corner, my feet was dripping wet,
I asked every man I met...
Can't give me a dollar, give me a lousy dime,
Just to feed that hungry man of mine...*

“Although I had heard them previously I guess it was Mamie first really sold me on the blues.”³⁶²

Documented evidence of Mamie Desdune living in New Orleans comes from the 1900 census. At the time she was living under her married name of Mary Degay with her husband George Degay. They were living at 2328 Toledano in the 12th ward and the census gives Mary’s date of birth as May 1880. Living in the same house was John Desdune born 1882, her brother, and also Edna Desdune and a 13-year old sister born in April 1887.³⁶³ A little research has made it possible to construct a family tree that confirms that this is Mamie Desdune.³⁶⁴

Figure 12: 1900 Census, New Orleans, 7th Precinct, lines 75-78, (Ancestry.Com)

³⁶² Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*, 20-1.

³⁶³ Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, “7th Precinct, Ward 12 sheet 4 B, lines 75-78,” (Ancestry.Com).

³⁶⁴ For further details: Gushee.

A search of the 1910 census shows that a Mamie Desdune³⁶⁵ lived in Clara Street in the 11th Ward in the Garden District and that she was 29 years of age, which would correspond with a date of birth of 1880. She was the head of the household, single and had no occupation. In the same house was her brother Louis Desdune who was 21, single and worked as a labourer. The third member of the household was a single boarder born in Mississippi, George Dugue.³⁶⁶ Despite a resemblance between the names and ages of George Dugue and George Degay, her former husband, George Degay was born in Louisiana.

Figure 13: 1910 Census, New Orleans, Part of Precinct 10, lines 64-66, (Ancestry.Com)

By 1910 Louis and his sister Mamie had adopted the spelling Desdune;³⁶⁷ this is how it is given in both the 1910 census and on Louis' draft card in 1917. The draft card also gives Louis' date of birth as June 6, 1890. Louis does not appear with Mamie in the 1900 census because at the time he was living with his grandmother, Ophelia Walker in Saratoga Street in the 11th Ward.³⁶⁸

A search of the 1880 census shows that Mamie's grandmother Ophelia Walker and her husband John were living at 2123 Toledano Street, New Orleans, with five daughters. Clementine is 20 and the other four are much younger, Effie is 8, Ophelia is 4, and Celina is just 1 year old.³⁶⁹ The 1870 census confirms that Clementine had no older sister,³⁷⁰ therefore the only daughter old enough to be the mother of Mamie is Clementine.

³⁶⁵ This is the spelling she had adopted by this time.

³⁶⁶ Thirteenth Census of the United States 1910, "10th Precinct, Ward 11 sheet 5 B, lines 64-66," (Ancestry.Com).

³⁶⁷ Her name is spelt "Desdunes" in the Library of Congress transcript and recorded by Morton under the title "Mamie Desdome's Blues."

³⁶⁸ Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, "9th Precinct, Ward 11, sheet 1 A, lines 16-22," (Ancestry.com).

³⁶⁹ 1880 United States Census, "Parish of Orleans, New Orleans, 28, lines 35-43," (Ancestry.com).

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SCHEDULE 1.—Inhabitants in 11th Ward, New Orleans, in the County of Orleans, State of Louisiana, enumerated by me on the 13th day of June, 1870.

Post Office: New Orleans William H. Phelps, Asst Marshal.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8		10	11		13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
							8	9		11	12								
1	716	Bond James	28	m	W	Plasterer		400	Ireland	/	/								
2		Anna	21	f	W	Keeps House			Louisiana	/									
3		Doria	1	m	W				Louisiana										
4		Peter	24	m	W	Plasterer			Ireland	/	/								
5		Honora	18	f	W	At Home			Ireland	/	/								
6	717	Rulon Mary	32	f	W	Seamstress		100	Hamburg	/	/								
7		Charlotte	9	f	W				Louisiana	/									
8		Clara	7	f	W				Louisiana	/									
9		Mena	5	f	W				Louisiana	/									
10	730	Orger Michael	50	m	W	Bookman			Wintenburg	/	/								
11		Sophia	17	f	W	Keeps House			Louisiana	/									
12	718	Welf George	44	m	W	Carpenter	2000	500	Baden	/	/								
13		Elizabeth	45	f	W	Keeps House			Bararia	/	/								
14	719	Fisher Henry	40	m	W	Blacksmith	1000	1000	Kentucky										
15		Annika	45	f	W	Keeps House			Georgia										
16		West	26	m	W	Lamp lighter			Louisiana										
17		William Charles	23	m	W	Lamp lighter			Louisiana										
18	720	Williams Lane	21	f	W	Wash & Sew			Louisiana										
19		Mary	2	f	W				Louisiana										
20	724	Walker Ophelia	27	f	W	Wash & Sew			Louisiana										
21		Clementine	13	f	W				Louisiana										
22		Esther	8	f	W				Louisiana										
23		John	38	m	W	Jack Driver			Louisiana										
24		William Paul	22	m	W	Wagon Stambolt			Louisiana										
25		Lack Louisa	60	f	W	Domestic Servant			Louisiana										
26	721	Vodch Charles	37	m	W	Carpenter	1600	200	Prussia	/	/								

Figure 14: 1880 Census, New Orleans, 11th Ward, lines 20-23 (Ancestry.Com)

On the 25th March 1879 Clementine Walker gave birth to Mary Celina Desdunes and the birth record gives the father as “Rudolphe L.”³⁷¹ On July 31, 1881 she gave birth to a son John Alexander Desdunes; this time the record just gives the initials of the father “R. L.”³⁷² John is the brother that Mamie (Mary Dugay) was living with in 1900.

The question of who the father is can be easily cleared up by looking at the 1880 Census³⁷³ where Rudolphe L. Desdunes is described as “mulatto” and married with a young family and

³⁷⁰ 1870 United States Census, “11th Ward, In the Parish of Orleans, New Orleans, 99 lines 20-23,” (Ancestry.com).

³⁷¹ New Orleans, Louisiana Birth Records Index, 1790-1899, Vol. 74, 79 (Ancestry.com).

³⁷² New Orleans, Louisiana Birth Records Index, 1790-1899, Vol. 77, 800 (Ancestry.com).

³⁷³ 1880 United States Census, Parish of Orleans, New Orleans, page 53, lines 29-35 (Ancestry.com).

working as clerk. It would seem that Clementine was his mistress and Clementine's children took their father's name.

Page No. 3

Supervisor's Dist. No. 19

Enumeration Dist. No. 19

SCHEDULE I.—Inhabitants in New Orleans, in the Parish of Orleans, State of Louisiana, enumerated by me on the _____ day of June, 1880.

Received July 24, 1880.

400

22

In Argonne.

No.	Name	Age	Sex	Color	Marital Status	Occupation	Birth	Month	Day	Year	Place of Birth
29	Walter Woods	28	M	W	Married	Book	La.	10	10	1852	La.
30	Jacobs	24	M	W	Married	House Keeper	La.	10	10	1856	La.
31	Richard	24	M	W	Married	House Keeper	La.	10	10	1856	La.
32	Thomas	24	M	W	Married	House Keeper	La.	10	10	1856	La.
33	John	24	M	W	Married	House Keeper	La.	10	10	1856	La.
34	John	24	M	W	Married	House Keeper	La.	10	10	1856	La.
35	John	24	M	W	Married	House Keeper	La.	10	10	1856	La.

Figure 15: 1880 Census, New Orleans, lines 29-35 (Ancestry.Com)

From this we can be sure that Mary Degay and Mamie Desdune are one and the same person, and that in 1900 she lived at 2328 Toledano Street. Lawrence Gushee also confirms the same address a year later from the City Directory.³⁷⁴

We are told by Morton that Mamie Desdune lived next door to his Godmother and from an autobiography that Morton began but never completed, we learn that “My godmother, Eulalie, would always take me around, passing me off as her child (I was supposed to be a pretty baby) and one day she loaned me to one of her friends to also make believe. Somehow

³⁷⁴ Gushee: 392.

the woman was arrested and she refused to relinquish ‘her child’, so we both went to jail.”³⁷⁵ From Jelly Roll’s own chronology we get further details about his Godmother. We learn that his mother died in 1899 and from then on he “lived with grandmother and godmother. [...] Godmother, Eulilie Echo [Haco]³⁷⁶ married Paul Echo, a cooper. Later she married Eddie Hunter.”³⁷⁷ It seems from this that Morton’s godmother was also his grandmother.

If we take what Morton is saying literally then there is a problem in reconciling Morton’s recollection that Mamie Desdunes lived next door to his godmother. Mary Dugay’s address in 1900 is at 2328 Toledano, and his godmother’s address at the time at 2621 4th Street. They were several blocks apart. As Gushee notes it was after 1901 that Morton “spent considerable time with his loving godmother, Laura Hunter/ Eulalie Hécaud, at one or another address in the black uptown ghetto of the tenth and eleventh wards.”³⁷⁸ It is possible that at some time after 1901 the women became close neighbours or perhaps this is to interpret what Morton is saying too literally.

Game Kid and Tony Jackson

If “Mamie Desdune’s Blues” is one of Morton’s earliest recollection of the blues and probably dates from no earlier than 1901, then this casts some doubt about his dating of a blues that he attributes to Game Kid.

“At that time, back in 1901 and 1902, we had a lot of great blues players that didn’t know nothing but the blues...

*I could sit right here and think a thousand miles away
Yes, I could sit right here and think a thousand miles away,
I got the blues so bad I cannot remember the day...*

This blues was a favourite of a musician we called Game Kid and it made Game Kid the favourite of the Garden District.”³⁷⁹

This blues, as he performs it, begins with an eight-bar introduction, but the vocal is a twelve-bar blues. The use of different strain lengths of eight, twelve, and sixteen bars and other variants is a feature of the early published blues and ragtime tunes of the period.

In discussing piano players with Lomax, Morton singles out Tony Jackson as the best piano player in the early years of the century in New Orleans, saying he will “play a blues by one of the most great— Play a blues by— it was by a great pianist, maybe one of the best the world

³⁷⁵ Jelly Roll Morton, *Jelly Roll Morton's Auto Biography*. Handed to Roy Carew in Washington 1938; part of which appeared in “*Record Changer*,” MSS 506, folder 134, “William Russell Collection,” (New Orleans: The Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection).

³⁷⁶ As it appears on his baptismal certificate. Gushee.

³⁷⁷ Jelly Roll Morton, “From a typewritten reproduction of an article in Jelly Roll’s hand in the Tempo Music files, prompted by an April 1938 article in *Down Beat* by Marshall Stearns,” MSS 506, folder 134, (Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection).

³⁷⁸ Gushee: 394.

³⁷⁹ Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*, 51.

has ever seen. He, he enjoyed wearing the title of the ‘World’s Greatest Single-Handed Entertainer.’ Playing all the classes of music in the style they was supposed to be played in, from blues to opera and he sang one of these numbers, considered music.”³⁸⁰

Tony Jackson was older than Jelly Roll Morton and was 28 years old when he left New Orleans in 1904 to tour with the Whitman Sisters. It is said that “the singing of Tony Jackson and Baby Alice Whitman usually brought down the house.”³⁸¹ Morton recalled a tune that Jackson played in 1905 called “Michigan Water Tastes Like Sherry Wine,” which he recorded for Lomax, which was recorded under the title “Michigan Water Blues,” saying, “I’ll show you the different types that he played it in.”

*Yes, Michigan water tastes like sherry,
I mean sherry, crazy ‘bout my sherry,
Michigan water tastes like sherry wine,
Yes, Michigan water tastes like sherry wine.*

*Mama, mama, look at sis,
She’s out on the levee doing the double twist,
Mama, mama, won’t you look at sis,
She’s out on the levee doin’ the double twist.*

*She said, “Come in here, you dirty little sow,
You tryin’ to be a bad girl, you don’t know how,
Come in here, you little dirty little sow,
You tryin’ to be a bad girl that you don’t know how.” etc.*

Each stanza is four lines made up from two rhyming couplets, and sung within the twelve-bar form of the blues. The first couplet is sung within the first four bars and the second couplet is sung in the remaining eight bars, using conventional blues phrasing, two bars sung and two bars instrumental.

Tony Jackson is also remembered by Roy Carew, a white amateur piano player who moved to New Orleans in 1904. Carew worked as a clerk to the New Orleans Acid and Fertilizer Company that was in Gretna on the opposite bank of the Mississippi River to New Orleans.

As a sidewalk listener I first heard Tony Jackson playing at the establishment of Antonia Gonzales, and later at Gypsy Shaeffer’s, and whenever I heard Tony playing I stopped my errant feet, and from the banquettes I listened to the man “who knew a thousand songs.” A little later I was very much pleased to find Tony playing in the white cafe at the corner of Bienville and Franklin Streets, which was indeed a piece of good fortune for me, since I could step inside, take a place at a table near the piano, buy my drink and listen to Tony. He never disappointed. Tony Jackson, the man who wrote the nation-wide hit, *Pretty Baby*, and other good popular songs, and the dean of

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 248.

³⁸¹ Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface: A Source Book on Early Black Musical Shows* (Metuchen, N.J., & London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1980), 103.

the early Negro piano players; began playing in 1894 in uptown New Orleans. Largely self taught, he could play anything on piano, in any key, and was gifted with an extraordinary voice. When I first heard him, probably some time during the winter of 1904-1905, ragtime held almost completely in popular music, and Tony was a master performer, both as a player and as a singer. After I began to drop into the cafe to listen, it wasn't long before Tony knew me, and also knew what music I liked, although anything he played always pleased me.³⁸²

There were also less skilled piano players in New Orleans who made a living working in the bars and honky-tonks. In response to a question from Alan Lomax regarding what they used to play "down the lower class districts," Morton responds:

Well, they played, for an instant, around the honky tonks like, like Kaiser's honky tonk, and the Red Onion, and Spano's. Those were honky tonks. [...] It was really dangerous to anybody that would go in there that didn't know what it was all about. And they always had an old broke-down piano with some inferior pianist. And they would play something like this.³⁸³

Morton then proceeds to play a twelve-bar blues instrumental "Honky Tonk Blues,"³⁸⁴ suggesting this was typical of the kind of blues that was played in these places. We can get further information on the repertoire of the piano players in at least one honky-tonk, Spano's, a bar, from the New Orleans guitarist Lemon Nash.

A piano player and a man beating with sticks on a chair provided music there; they played old tunes: 'Stack-O-Lee', 'Winter Night', 'Junk Man Rag', 'Basin Street [Blues]', 'St. Louis Blues,' '[It's a] Long Way to Tipperary,' 'Yes, We Have No Bananas,' 'Steamboat Bill,' 'Casey Jones' and others [*sic*] then popular numbers.³⁸⁵

The song "Casey Jones" is a ballad about a railroad accident in 1900 which became very popular when it was published in 1909, and there are many versions of "Stack-O-Lee." Some refer to the steamboat *Stacker Lee* built in 1902 and others are of the bully song genre.³⁸⁶ "Basin Street Blues" was first published in 1928, and given the inclusion of "The St. Louis Blues" (1914) and "It's a Long Way to Tipperary" (1912) it seems likely that this recollection dates from around the time of the First World War at the earliest, when Nash would have been in his late teens.

Nash was asked later in the interview to sing a blues as would have been sung at Spano's. Talking about a period around 1913, which he said was "before his time," he plays and sings a twelve-bar blues "Went to the Station." Later in the interview he also plays and sings "Keep on Drinking," a blues that Nash claims could "make a blind man catch a freight train." This is

³⁸² Typescript "Jelly Roll Morton and his Library of Congress Recordings" by R. J. Carew circa 1949-Feb 1950, "Carew, Roy," MSS 519, folder 158, (Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection).

³⁸³ "Transcript of the 1938 Library of Congress Recordings of Jelly Roll Morton," ed. John Szwed (2006): 18.

³⁸⁴ Jelly Roll Morton, (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress 1643 B).

³⁸⁵ Lemon Nash, "Interview Digest, June 20, 1961," ed. Richard B. Allen and Russell Levy (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

³⁸⁶ Way Jr., 432.

a line he claims to have got from Blind Lemon Jefferson, saying he “knew Jefferson in New Orleans.”³⁸⁷

Whilst the recollections of Lemon Nash are probably of a later date than those of Jelly Roll Morton, they do at least add some weight to Morton’s recollection that music that could in retrospect be considered as blues was played in the honky-tonks of New Orleans.

See See Rider

Morton went on to provide Lomax with a number of names of piano players who played the blues in New Orleans, saying: “For instance, when I first started going to school, at different times I would visit some of my relatives per permission, in the Garden district. I used to hear a few of the following blues players, who could play nothing else – Buddie Carter, Josky Adams, Game Kid, Frank Richards, Sam Henry, and many more too numerous to mention – what we called ‘rag-men’ in New Orleans.”³⁸⁸ An example from this repertoire is “See See Rider.”

“Sometimes, Josky Adams— I was quite small, but I’d get in on those pans occasionally. Josky was much larger than me and much older. [...]

Why, I used to go with Josky’s sister. He had a beautiful sister, and I always had it in my mind that I wanted to marry her. And I used to come— sometimes go over to his house and hear him play the blues and he’d sound like this. That would be behind his sister’s and mother’s back.”³⁸⁹

*See, see, rider, see what you have done,
See, see, rider, see what you have done,
You made me like you, now your man done come.*

*I want a mama that’s gonna be good to me,
I want a mama that’s gonna be good to me,
I want a mama, one as sweet as can be.*

*I want a gal that works in the white folks’ yard,
I want a gal, works in the white folks’ yard,
I want a gal that works in the white folks’ yard.”³⁹⁰*

Lemon Nash claims that “See See Rider” was the first blues he paid any attention to and that it was sung by an Indian woman, who he believed came from Okalahoma, called Anna. He claims that he heard her sing this song when he was a “small, small boy”.³⁹¹ From the

³⁸⁷ Nash.

³⁸⁸ Nat & Hentoff Shapiro, Nat, *Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya: The Story of Jazz by the Men Who Made It* (London: Penguin Books, 1962), 247.

³⁸⁹ Jelly Roll Morton, (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, 1662 A).

³⁹⁰ Jelly Roll Morton, (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, 1662 B).

³⁹¹ Lemon Nash, interview (audio tape) September 28, 1960, (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

context of the tape recording it seems to relate to a time before “The St. Louis Blues” (1914). Asked to perform “See See Rider” Lemon Nash says “I’m gonna play it like it really goes, not like they got it on the record,”³⁹² and proceeds to play a twelve-bar blues, imitating the picking style of Anna the Indian woman whom he first heard play the song. The conversation then switches to medicine-shows, which could suggest that Anna the Indian woman was working in such an organization. He does later reveal that around 1917 he worked on a medicine-show with “Big Chief Indian and Western Cowboy.”

One possibility is that the song “See See Rider” is connected to the Shelton Brooks composition “I Wonder Where My Easy Rider’s Gone” (1913) which is based around the mystery surrounding the Jockey Jimmy Lee, who disappeared after becoming a favourite with the punters by winning every race on the card at Churchill Downs. The *Louisville Times* of June 6, 1907, ran the headline “Black Star Shines, Jockey Lee Rides Six Winners.” He then went on to further spectacular victories in Latonia and New Orleans; his subsequent disappearance from the track was the subject of some speculation. The *Thoroughbred Record* carried his obituary on May 15, 1915; he had died at the age of 28.³⁹³

A composed blues that did draw on the “Easy Rider” story was W. C. Handy’s “Yellow Dog Rag” (1914) as he freely admitted. “The *St. Louis Blues* was followed by *Yellow Dog Rag* (*Yellow Dog Blues*), a song in which I undertook to answer the question raised by Shelton Brooks in his remarkable hit, *I Wonder Where My Easy Rider’s Gone*. The country had gone stark, raving mad over the sweet-loving jockey with the easy ways and the easy disposition.”³⁹⁴

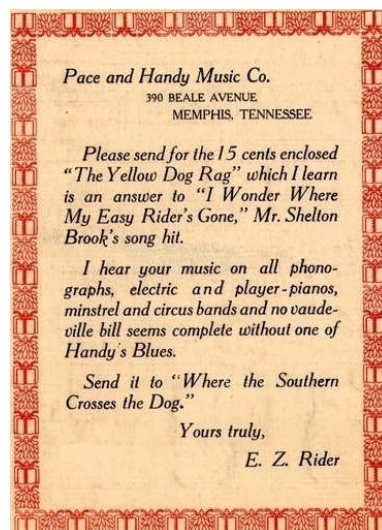


Figure 16: “Yellow Dog Blues” (1914), by W.C. Handy, back cover (Historic American Sheet Music, Duke University Library)³⁹⁵

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ http://www.bourbonlibrary.org/aahistory_thoroughbreds.htm (Paris-Bourbon County Public Library, Kentucky). Accessed Nov 20, 2007.

³⁹⁴ Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 123.

³⁹⁵ W. C. Handy, “The Yellow Dog Rag” (1914) (*Historic American Sheet Music*, Duke University Library).

Morton also recorded “Hesitation Blues” for Alan Lomax which he admitted to have taken from existing sheet music. “Long time, people thought I wrote this tune. I used to sell ‘em just a little bit of lead copies for thirty-five cents there. I kept the sheet music so nobody could see it.”

*If I was whiskey and you was a duck,
I'd dive to the bottom and I'd never come up,
Oh, how long do I have to wait?
Can I get it now — do I have to hesitate?*

*If I had a woman, she was tall,
She make me think about my parasol,
Oh, how long do I have to wait?
Can I get it now — do I have to hesitate?*

*Know an old lady by the name of Jane,
I hit and knocked her right off her cane,
Oh, how long do I have to wait?
Can I get it now — do I have to hesitate?³⁹⁶*

New Orleans Blues

A blues that Morton claimed he did write was “New Orleans Blues” which may be the same tune as “Indian Blues,” which the cornet player Freddie Keppard played; it was also known as “The New Orleans Joys.” Morton gave various dates for its composition “around 1902” for the Library of Congress recordings and 1905 in a letter to the radio broadcaster Robert Ripley.³⁹⁷

*I could sit right here and think a thousand miles away,
Sit right here and think a thousand miles away,
Have the blues, I cannot remember the day.*

*Tell me, babe, what's on your mind,
Tell me, baby, what's on your doggone mind,
Tell me, baby, what's on your doggone mind.*

*I never believe in havin' no one woman at a time,
Never believe in havin' one woman at a time,
I always have six, seven, eight, or nine.³⁹⁸*

At the time of the recordings made by Jelly Roll Morton for the Library of Congress in 1938, Lomax had few ways of checking the information that Morton gave him. Today after nearly seventy years of jazz research it is possible to confirm that many of the piano players that Morton recalled playing the blues in New Orleans were historical figures whose repertoires

³⁹⁶ Jelly Roll Morton (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, 1652 B).

³⁹⁷ Gushee: 394-5.

³⁹⁸ Jelly Roll Morton (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, 1655 B).

can to some extent be confirmed by other musicians who would later be interviewed for the Hogan Jazz Archive.

The Jelly Roll Morton Symposium

Alan Lomax looked back at the recordings he made with Jelly Roll Morton in 1938 for a symposium held on May 7, 1982. At Tulane University in New Orleans, he set out the circumstances of the recording.

I think you have to remember the context of the interview on which so much of this discussion is being made. At that time, there was no jazz criticism, or jazz history. Jelly Roll made an incredibly brilliant attempt to stabilize the whole history of the popular music of the United States. He wasn't a scholar. He was simply a genius who had lived through the thing.³⁹⁹

This is perhaps a bit of an overstatement; there had been earlier jazz criticism and historical analysis on both sides of the Atlantic. Notable among the European publications was *Hot Jazz: The Guide to Swing Music* by Hugues Panassié. The first edition, in French, came out in 1934 and an edition in English was published in 1936. This book is remarkable, not least because it was compiled by a Frenchman who at the time had never set foot in America. He had only his record collection, and information from visiting American musicians. Despite this he succeeded in developing a jazz canon that, for the most part, survives to the present day. The “hot” artists that he singled out as significant - Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington etc., are still among the most celebrated whilst the “sweet” society jazz bands have been marginalised in most histories of jazz.

The important distinction that Pannassié made was that musicians such as Armstrong were “hot.” They played a largely improvised music with origins in African American musical practice exemplified by the blues. In an attempt to explain the emergence of “hot jazz” and the blues (terms which he often used interchangeably) Pannassié quoted the French trumpeter Ray Binder who had published a series of articles titled “Historique au Jazz” in *Jazz-Tango-Dancing*, in 1931 and 1932.⁴⁰⁰ Pannassié describes these articles as contributing “the most likely hypothesis so far produced.”

There was once a place where Negroes, loaded down with chains, worked as slaves for their owners in New Orleans. This region was in the southeast section of the United States; its principal artery was the Mississippi. About this time it became necessary to build levees along the river, which constantly threatened the neighboring cotton farms. Negroes imported from Africa were used for this work.

These Negroes were intensely unhappy; most of them worked at driving enormous stones into the earth and, to make the work easier, they executed this work in rhythm,

³⁹⁹ "Tulane University 'Jelly Roll Morton Symposium' May 7, 1982" (Dixon Hall), 24.

⁴⁰⁰ “Historique au Jazz,” *Jazz-Tango-Dancing*, December, 1931, March and June 1932.

a rhythm evidently slow and regular. Their lamentations inevitably became rhythmic songs, and it seems logical enough to find in this the origin of the blues. Negroes do not forget easily; years later the black slave, now become free citizen, would teach his children as he strummed on an old banjo these sad songs of his ancestors: *Saint Louis Blues*, *Memphis Blues*, *New Orleans Blues*, and so forth. This is a national repertory which all American Negroes know and respect just as we revere our French songs.⁴⁰¹

That Pannassié and Binder chose to celebrate “The St. Louis Blues” and “The Memphis Blues,” both commercial compositions by W. C. Handy and “New Orleans Blues,” by Jelly Roll Morton, as representative of an ancestral slave repertoire, indicates just how little good information there was in Europe at the time. It also shows to what extent the views had already formed that “hot jazz” was the product of slavery, and that the blues were the essence of “hot jazz.”

It would not be until a year after the Morton recordings for the Library of Congress that the influential *Jazzmen* (1939) would appear in the United States. *Jazzmen* was an anthology of essays with contributions from a number of authors. William Russell wrote on “New Orleans Music,” “Louis Armstrong,” and “Boogie Woogie.” Charles Edward Smith wrote on “White New Orleans,” “The Austin High School Gang,” and “Land of Dreams.” Fredrick Ramsey Jr. contributed articles on “King Oliver and His Creole Jazz Band,” and “Return to Chicago.” E. Simms Campbell wrote a section “Blues,” Edward J. Nichols wrote on “Bix Beiderbecke.” Wilder Hobson, who would also produce in the same year his own book *American Jazz Music*⁴⁰² contributed to *Jazzmen* “New York Turns on the Heat,” and “Fifty-Second Street.” Otis Ferguson provided an essay on “The Five Pennies.” The dancer and critic, Roger Prior Dodge wrote “Consider the Critics,” while Stephen W. Smith wrote on the subject of “Hot Collecting.”

In many ways this final article best described what it was that united these authors; they all had an interest in collecting “hot jazz” records. Much like the blues collectors of a later generation discussed in the previous chapter, these collectors were interested in rare recordings, which inevitably tended to be those records that were the least commercial. This tended to lead them toward the “race issue” recordings of the 1920s, rather than the recordings by the white, “sweet” orchestras, such as Paul Whiteman’s. Where white musicians were celebrated, like Bix Beiderbecke and the Austin High School Gang, it was because these white musicians were heavily influenced by the “hot jazz” of New Orleans, which for the most part seemed, to the contributors to *Jazzmen*, to be rooted in African American musical practice and the blues.

⁴⁰¹ Hugues Panassié, *Hot Jazz: The Guide to Swing Music* (London, Toronto, Melbourne & Sidney: Cassell, 1936), 25.

⁴⁰² Wilder Hobson, *American Jazz Music* (New York: W. W. Norton & CO., 1939).

Stephen W. Smith had also intended to write an essay on piano players, which was never completed and this, according to William Russell, is why Jelly Roll Morton gets hardly a mention in *Jazzmen*.⁴⁰³

In 1938 it seems that the distinction that jazz enthusiasts drew between “hot” and “sweet” jazz was a one that Alan Lomax was generally untroubled by. For him jazz was a commercial music, as he explained to the seminar:

At that time, jazz was my worst enemy. Through the forces of radio, it was wiping out the music that I cared about—American traditional folk music.

I looked at him [Jelly Roll Morton] with considerable suspicion. But, I thought I'd take this cat on, and see what he could do.

I started him out. I said, I'll see how much folk music a jazz musician knows.

The first recording began by asking if he knew "Alabama Bound." He played me about the most beautiful "Alabama Bound" that I had ever heard.⁴⁰⁴

The irony was that there is a good probability that Lomax had chosen to test Morton with one of his own compositions, as according to Morton, “I wrote a blues in 1907 entitled *Alabama Bound*. Some one heard the number and had it published in New Orleans. A copyright doesn't always prove the rightful owner to a piece of music.”⁴⁰⁵

Alabama Bound

In 1909 the theatre pianist Robert Hoffman, who was based in New Orleans published a piano score for “I'm Alabama Bound” subtitled “The Alabama Blues;”⁴⁰⁶ a year later vocals were added by John J. Puderer, the proprietor of the “Music Shop” on Canal Street, New Orleans.⁴⁰⁷

“I'm Alabama Bound” was a very popular song among folk singers and many versions were collected by folklorists throughout the south. One version was also heard in New Orleans in 1915 “sung by deck hands”

*De preacher in de pulpit put his bible down,
And all the niggers in the cornfield shouted,*

⁴⁰³ William Russell interview with Richard Allen, February 16, 1976 (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive).

⁴⁰⁴ Alan Lomax, "Tulane University 'Jelly Roll Morton Symposium' May 7, 1982".

⁴⁰⁵ Jelly Roll Morton, "Jelly Roll Morton Calls Handy a Liar," *Down Beat*, Sept., 31.

⁴⁰⁶ “Alabama Bound” (1909), by Robert Hoffman (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

⁴⁰⁷ “I'm Alabama Bound” (1910), by Robert Hoffman and John Puderer (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress). See also Mrs. Robert George Hoffman, "Interview with Tad Jones, January 25, 1975," (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

*"I'm Alabama bound."*⁴⁰⁸

Newman I. White, who collected a number of versions of "Alabama Bound," noted that: "He [the "Negro"] loves to be "goin' down the road." Very commonly he is "Alabama bound" on a mule, but this is merely a conventional particular expression of a general state of mind – he does not commonly travel on a mule nor does he show a special preference for Alabama except as a popular refrain."⁴⁰⁹

The song "I'm Alabama Bound" was also known to the jazz musicians of New Orleans. Born in 1870 in Bourbon Street, New Orleans, Albert Glenny was asked whether they had blues when he was first playing. He replies "Blues? Oh they used to play blues, but they used to play the real blues. They don't play no blues now."⁴¹⁰ Enquiring about the real blues, William Russell asks "Is it slow or fast?"

[Glenny]: Slow.
[Russell]: Real slow?
[Glenny]: I can show you the time. I can dance and show, you. I used to dance it myself.
[Allen]: ✓[sic]
[Glenny]: Huh, yeah that's right.
[Allen]: Well, knock it out for us. Give us a beat, huh!
[Glenny]: Yes.
[Allen]: Stomp off. (So he hums and beats out melody and rhythm) (See "I'm Alabama Bound" below)
[Ertegun]: Did that have a name; this song you just sang?
[Glenny]: That's the blues.
[Ertegun]: That's the blues!!!
[Glenny]: That's your real blues. Now, they got that "St. Louis Blues" you understand.
[Ertegun]: That came later.
[Glenny]: Yeah, that comes later. What I'm talking about. That's the old time blues I'm talking about.
[Allen]: What year was that old times blues?
[Glenny]: It was in 1804 -- 1904.
[Allen]: 1904 they were playing that here?
[Glenny]: Yes, sir.⁴¹¹

Glenny also associates "I'm Alabama Bound" with the dance the slow drag. When asked "what was a slow drag?" Glenny proceeds to sing "I'm Alabamy [sic] Bound."

[Ertegun:] What was a slow drag?
[Glenny:] "I'm Ala----", I'm gonna show ya; I'm gonna sing it to you.
[Ertegun:] Please do.
(Glenny sings "I'm Alabamy Bound")

⁴⁰⁸ White, 308.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 291.

⁴¹⁰ Albert Glenny, "Interview Transcript, March 27, 1957," ed. Richard B Allen and Nesuhi Ertegun (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

[Glenny:] "I'm Alabamy Bound and if you want me, my baby, you got to kiss me right [laughter]. Then that other part. Then they start like a swing. (Glenny scats again) Lemme see, they gotta word [s] for that. Yeah-- yeah my babe.
 [Ertegun:] ah, huh.
 [Glenny:] That's right, that's one."⁴¹²

Albert Glenny is asked if he can show the interviewers how to dance the slow drag. "Ask an old man like me for the slow drag. [Laughter] You see how the slow drag-- you see, they play the slow drag, it's just like this, you let your leg see, you put your leg like that, you see, you know, and you go--put your feet on--[hums "I'm Alabama Bound"]. It goes like that. [Laughter] That's right. That's the truth. That's right."⁴¹³

Albert Glenny considered "I'm Alabama Bound" to be a blues that was played for dancers of the slow drag in New Orleans in the early years of the twentieth century. For Glenny "I'm Alabama Bound" is an example of "the real blues" which is in some way different from "The St. Louis Blues" of W. C. Handy, published in 1914.

This is an important distinction that Glenny makes, and it is reminiscent of the distinction that the folklorist Howard Odum also made, although he used different terms. What Glenny speaks of as "the real blues," Odum describes as *folk blues* to distinguish these songs from the *formal blues* of composers such as W. C. Handy. A similar parallel can be found where Mance Lipscomb distinguishes between "old style" blues and "The Blues." Again we find in New Orleans a distinction being made retrospectively between an older blues repertoire and the later twelve-bar blues form.

It is not at all clear whether "I'm Alabama Bound" started as a rural folk-song and entered the circus shows and vaudeville, or whether the song began on the stage and was subsequently adapted by rural songsters. Newman I. White noted that the first time he heard "I'm Alabama Bound" and "Dr. Cook's in Town," "they were sung by white men on the vaudeville stage."⁴¹⁴

All but one of the versions of "I'm Alabama Bound" collected by White are based upon rhyming couplets, the exception being an example that circulated after the sinking of the Titanic in 1912.

*Where wus you when the big Titanic went down?
 Where wus you when the big Titanic went down?
 Standing on the deck singing "Alabama Boun'".*⁴¹⁵

"I'm Alabama Bound" continued to be popular among rural singers, and was still considered to be blues into the depression years, as John and Alan Lomax lists this song as a blues in *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1934).⁴¹⁶

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ Ibid.

⁴¹⁴ White, 28.

⁴¹⁵ Reported from Auburn, Ala., 1915 -1916, MS. of W. H. Blake, Jr., Ibid., 348.

Whether “I’m Alabama Bound” is or is not a folk-song and whether or not Morton or some other composer had written “I’m Alabama Bound” is not the critical point. The point is that in 1938 when Lomax chose to test Morton with this song, he believed it was a folk-song, and he was clearly impressed with Morton’s rendition.

I ran all the way upstairs into the office of my chief - chief of the music division - and said, 'Harold, we have an absolute great jam here. I want to get permission to use 50 blank aluminium discs. I think he'll have something to say.' I think they probably cost, altogether, about \$100 - maybe \$200 – to record this man.

On the way back down, I decided to do a full-scale interview. I was at top speed. I sat down. I had a bottle of whiskey in my office. I put it on the piano. I sat down at his feet, and asked him how he began.⁴¹⁷

In a report in the *Washington Daily News* of Saturday, March 19, 1938, a full two months before the recording took place, in an article headed “Jelly Roll Charts Jazz” it becomes apparent that Lomax’s decision to acquire “50 blank aluminium discs” and do a “full-scale interview” was not as spontaneous as he claimed. The article states:

The recordings will not get under way until May. The man Jelly Roll, also a singer of real calibre, will tell stories into his records, old song legends of the South, particularly New Orleans. The piano as a secondary medium will illustrate the stories. In short, history illustrated with music. The records will be for the archives of the Library of Congress. [...] He [Morton] figures that 100 recordings will hardly encompass the projected history.⁴¹⁸

What emerges from this is that Morton had a very clear idea of what he wanted to do in these recordings, well in advance of the first recording session of May 23, 1938. He was either uncannily accurate in his prediction that it would take 100 sides, or negotiations had been going on for some months to determine what was to be recorded.

According to William Russell, who would make a lifetime study of Morton, culminating in the publication of *Oh! Mister Jelly: A Jelly Roll Morton Scrap Book* (1999):

A fellow by the name of Sidney Martin was probably the first one to discover that Jelly was in Washington, and he wrote a little piece, maybe only a couple of inches long on Jelly, in *Down Beat*. And Charles [Edward] Smith was down there soon after working for the Government. Anyway, I don’t know who suggested – It might be it was Sidney Martin who suggested, I think, to Lomax that he record Jelly talking about New Orleans history, and the Music.⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁶ Lomax and Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs*.

⁴¹⁷ "Tulane University 'Jelly Roll Morton Symposium' May 7, 1982".

⁴¹⁸ Harold Phillips, “Jelly Roll Charts Jazz,” *Washington Daily News*, Saturday March 19, 1938 (Newspaper and Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁴¹⁹ William Russell interview with Richard Allen, February 16, 1976 (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive); Bruce Boyd Raeburn, "'New Orleans Style': The Awakening of American Jazz Scholarship and Its Cultural Implications" (PhD, Tulane University, 1991), 106-7.

When Jelly Roll did begin to “chart the history of jazz,” what is clear is that Lomax’s initial suspicions about jazz were quickly dispelled. In fact what happened was that Lomax was mesmerised by Morton as he would later recall.

This man who had been associated with gun thugs - living in this very cruel environment [...] - proceeded to speak in the most fantastically elegant, and sensitive, English about culture, and character, and so on. I really just fell in love with him.⁴²⁰

What seems to have attracted Lomax to Morton was the seamier side of his life. He was fascinated by this one time pool-shark and pimp, who had hustled his way from the sporting houses of Storyville (the New Orleans red-light district) and who had made it to the big-time against the odds, and was now suffering at the hands of the “amusement industry” that Lomax so despised.

Lomax would present him “as a member of the group that had invented jazz, and had developed it - was... [*sic*] his back was against the wall because jazz had literally been taken away from its inventors by the amusement industry.”⁴²¹ Rather than see Morton as a musician who was struggling to regain commercial success, Lomax argued that “by the time Jelly Roll got to me, he had been literally wiped out. After all, he was our first, and greatest, American composer probably. This man had been wiped out by this awful industry that he was trying to defeat.”⁴²²

Mister Jelly Roll

In trying to bring together the recorded interviews and the notes of these sessions for publication in *Mister Jelly Roll* (1950) Lomax faced a daunting task. As he commented in his introduction, “Jazz musicians are strong on downbeats but weak on dates. There are almost as many versions of every happening as there were men in the band.”⁴²³

“Jelly Roll could juggle his age as it suited him – writing 1888 on his insurance policy, giving 1885 on the Library of Congress records since this year put him in Storyville earlier than most other jazz men and gave him plenty of historical elbow room, and telling his wife the year was 1886.”⁴²⁴

It is likely that none of these dates is correct. His most likely date of birth, according to his baptismal certificate is October 20, 1890,⁴²⁵ and this also seems to be consistent with what little we know of Jelly Roll’s early career. An earlier date of 1885 has been suggested by Sam Davis, born October 8, 1885 and a fellow New Orleans piano player. He claimed his mother,

⁴²⁰ "Tulane University 'Jelly Roll Morton Symposium' May 7, 1982".

⁴²¹ Alan Lomax, *Ibid.*

⁴²² Alan Lomax, *Ibid.*

⁴²³ Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*, xvi.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴²⁵ Gushee: 392.

Annette Robinson, was Jelly Roll's godmother and Jelly's mother was Sam's godmother, "we were carried at the same time," he is quoted as saying.⁴²⁶

On the other hand Jelly Roll says: "Sammy Davis, one of the greatest manipulators, I guess, that I have ever seen in the history of the world on a piano. And a gentleman was - had a lot of knowledge in music. I may mention."⁴²⁷ Morton's deference to Davis does, I think suggest that there may well have been an age difference between them.

If we assume the later date of 1890 and add around five years to the dates that Morton gave Lomax then many of the events that Morton recalls can be independently verified. While it is not possible to confirm with certainty where Morton was at any time much before 1913, he clearly had a detailed knowledge of the performers and venues of Southern vaudeville.

According to Lawrence Gushee:

It is not easy to determine where or when Morton first worked as a pianist. While he probably played in Hilma Burt's sporting house at 209 Basin Street, sometime between 1905 and 1910, it is my opinion that his playing career in the district or anywhere in New Orleans was sporadic and perhaps quite brief. Very few of the musicians interviewed for the Archive of New Orleans Jazz have recollections of the youthful Morton, let alone playing with him.⁴²⁸

There are a number of possible reasons why the New Orleans musicians may not recall playing with Morton. Perhaps because as Morton said, "Orchestra's did not use piano's when I first started in N.O."⁴²⁹ If he was working alone at Hilma Burt's or one of the other sporting houses, he would have had few opportunities to work with other New Orleans musicians. The other possibility (as Gushee suggests) is that most of his early playing was done outside of New Orleans, particularly along the Gulf Coast where his godmother had a summer retreat.

If Morton did indeed play his first jobs for Hilma Burt, he may have inadvertently told Lomax when he first played there. In Lomax's notes he recorded Morton as saying "At the age of 17 I went around to gambling houses." Morton then tells of how the piano player in one of the houses became sick:

[I was asked] would I like to make a few dollars. I went there to sing and play. They had a legitimate white pianist there - nothing hot. I went in there and started on the job. In a week I had plenty of money in my pocket. Miss Burt asked me if I wanted to work steady. 'If you think you can come steady, I will be glad to have you. Everybody likes your work very much.'⁴³⁰

⁴²⁶ John G. Heinz, "Sam Davis" MSS 506, folder 60," (Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection).

⁴²⁷ "Transcript of the 1938 Library of Congress Recordings of Jelly Roll Morton," 13.

⁴²⁸ Gushee: 397.

⁴²⁹ Jelly Roll Morton, "Tempo Music Co. Files," *A Short Autobiography* (1938), MSS 506, folder 134, (Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection).

⁴³⁰ AFC 1938/001 (F1) subfolder 1 (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress).

This appears to relate to the period around 1907 because Morton recalls that “there was a slump and they had some kind of draft checks around. Drafts were as good as a gold dollar. At this time, working in small time sporting houses and they would call you when they needed you.”⁴³¹ If Jelly Roll was born in 1890 as indicated in his baptismal certificate he would have been around 17 in 1907 when what has come to be known as the “Wall Street Panic” caused banks to issue bonds to protect their currency reserves.⁴³² The height of the run on the banks took place in October 1907. This was followed by a depression and widespread unemployment which could have resulted in the kind of sporadic work for piano players in the district, as Morton describes.

When Morton did start to look for work outside of New Orleans he seems first to have worked around the sporting houses of the Gulf Coast.

I'd get a job at one of these little honkey-tonks along the Gulf Coast, playing piano. [...] My system was different from most of the piano players I met along the coast – Skinny Head Pete and Florida Sam, they didn't work because they were kept by women. [...] I made a lot of towns in those days learning how to be a half-hand bigshot – McHenry, Hattiesburg, Jackson, Vicksburg, Greenwood, Greenville – but I spent the biggest part of my time in Gulfport and Biloxi.⁴³³

An interview with Billy McBride (b. 1883) and Mary McBride (b. 1891) who headed the theatrical troupe Mack & Mack (also known as Mack's Merry Makers) confirms that Skinny Head Pete, “was one of those red-light players too, and he played in Mobile mostly.”⁴³⁴ Billy McBride also provides an interesting insight into Jelly Roll's early years.⁴³⁵

I had a show from 1908 until 1959 and the feature of the show was this New Orleans music. Anybody from New Orleans went over big in the show. We had four or five musicians. One tour we had in the band, Mutt Carey, cornet; Johnny Dodds, clarinet; Steve Lewis, piano; and “Little Mask”, the drummer. That was his nickname. Sometimes [Kid] Ory would go out with us. Bud Scott traveled with the show too for a while. He was a neighbor of ours when we lived over in Algiers. He lived right behind us. Also Willie Humphrey was with the show. He had three boys and they all played music. One boy, the trombonist Earl, traveled with us too.⁴³⁶

From this we glean that Steve Lewis was the regular piano player with Mack and Mack; however it does seem that early in 1910 Jelly Roll began to play with this show.

About 1910 we used to watch Halley's Comet every night in the western sky. (April 1910) People were afraid of it; they thought the world was coming to an end. At that

⁴³¹ AFC 1938/001 (F1) subfolder 1 (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress).

⁴³² Joseph French Johnson, “The Crisis and Panic of 1907,” *Political Science Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (1908): 454-67.

⁴³³ Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*, 113.

⁴³⁴ “Mack and Mack” Interview, Chicago November 23, 1970, MSS 506, folder 138, (Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection).

⁴³⁵ Ibid.

⁴³⁶ “William Russell Collection.”

time we were rooming at Jelly Roll's grandmother's house in Bay St Louis, Mississippi. About that time we met Jelly Roll. He was just a young fellow then but he played in the red-light district, and he played piano in our show. We were playing along the Gulf Coast, coming that way from the East Coast by the way of Charleston, Savannah, Charlotte and Atlanta.⁴³⁷

It was between May 14 and May 22, 1910, that the comet was at the height of its brilliance, but it first became visible to the naked eye in April.

At times when we moved in with Jelly's grandmother in Bay St. Louis he [Morton] would come home and stay week ends and then go back to New Orleans. He played for house parties, cabarets, and in the red-light district – anyplace where he'd make money.⁴³⁸ [...] Jelly Roll was not a regular member of the band that played for the show. He had what we called a speciality act but he played solos in the pit (where the piano was located) and the band gave him background music. They played up on the stage and were part of the attraction. They were considered an act in my show. It was a review and we had six or seven girls in the show, two comedians, a straight man, and this band. And my wife, she used to sing the blues then. She was part of the show too. [...] Jelly used to sing too, some of his own numbers. That was quite a treat, you know, for the audience. He had a song he liked to sing. I don't remember the lyrics – *I'm the Windin' Boy, I don't deny my name*. He sang that in the show. It was very popular then.⁴³⁹

"Windin' Boy Blues"⁴⁴⁰ was one of the tracks that Morton had recorded for Lomax saying "This happened to be one of my first tunes in the blues line, down in New Orleans, in the very early days when people first start to playing piano in that section."⁴⁴¹

*I'm the winding boy, don't deny my name,
I'm the winding boy, don't deny my name,
Winding boy, don't deny my name,
Pick it up and shake it like Stavin' Chain,⁴⁴²
I'm the winding boy, don't deny my name.*

*Winding boy, don't deny my name,
I'm the winding boy, don't deny my name,*

⁴³⁷ Ibid.

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁰ Originally recorded under the title "Winin' Boy Boys" 1656 A.

⁴⁴¹ Jelly Roll Morton, 1687 A, track 1, June 12, 1938. "Transcript of the 1938 Library of Congress Recordings of Jelly Roll Morton."

⁴⁴² John Szwed's footnotes: "In his jacket notes to 1936 recordings by Stavin' Chain II (AFS-94B2 Library of Congress, 1936), John A. Lomax wrote that Stavin' Chain was "a Negro hero a la Paul Bunyan. John Henry could only manage that hammer, Stavin' Chain could do anything. He was the great woman man of the South." See Jelly Roll's description of him in "Unrecorded Interview Material and Research Notes by Alan Lomax, 1938-1946" [...]. The name may originate in the term for a chain stretched across a port to enforce the payment of harbor taxes; it also refers to a device used to control ejaculation." Footnotes "Transcript of the 1938 Library of Congress Recordings of Jelly Roll Morton," 46.

*I'm the winding boy, bred to fame,
I shook that thing like it's game,
Winding boy, and don't deny my name.*

*I seen that gal, she's sitting on the stump,
I seen that gal, she was sitting on the stump,
I seen the gal, sitting on the stump,
I screwed her till her pussy stunk,
I'm the winding boy, don't deny my name.*⁴⁴³

Mary McBride also confirms that Morton worked with them around the Gulf Coast saying: “yes we worked together with Jelly Roll on the Gulf Coast. He played piano in our show, played for vaudeville with us. He taught me some songs, some that he wrote too – Blues.”⁴⁴⁴

It seems likely that Morton's musical activities were largely confined to New Orleans and the Gulf Coast up to 1910, because Billy McBride is adamant that “Jelly Roll didn't travel with any of the other shows that I know of, up until then, and Jelly didn't go anywhere with us.”⁴⁴⁵

Kenner and Lewis

It seems likely then that up to the spring of 1910 Morton was playing his own compositions which included his “Windin' Boy Blues,” in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast. He could perhaps also have toured with Kenner and Lewis to Pensacola, Florida, because he would later claim that “after playing piano for sporting houses I played road shows with [William] Benbow, Kenner & Lewis Stock, Pensacola,” Florida.⁴⁴⁶ If he did go on the road with Kenner and Lewis it is likely that this would not have been before 1909, as we are assured by the *Freeman* that Kenner and Lewis were:

Real Southern boys, born and reared in New Orleans, La. [...] They have not only studied how to do team work, but are versatile performers, and know just what to do with a manuscript, and know how to play almost any part that may be assigned to them, and it can be truthfully said they are forging to the front rapidly, and are being dubbed as the Williams and Walker of the South. They left New Orleans September 9, 1909, and have been performing steadily ever since and have not lost a week's work since being out there.⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴³ "Transcript of the 1938 Library of Congress Recordings of Jelly Roll Morton," 46.

⁴⁴⁴ “Mack and Mack,” MSS 506, folder 138, (Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection).

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁴⁶ Jelly Roll Morton, Letter to Earl Cornwall, April 27, 1938, (Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection); Gushee.

⁴⁴⁷ “Kenner and Lewis in vaudeville in the South,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, November 19, 1910 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

Kenner and Lewis did make a brief tour in the winter of 1908, but this tour did not include Pensacola. Instead they went to “Brookhaven, Jackson Miss., Hammond, La., Magnolia, Miss., McComb City, Miss., where they done very well under the management of L. C. Quinn.”⁴⁴⁸ There is news of them rehearsing this show “Prince Bumpapka” and the full cast is given inclusive of “Prof. Jno. P. [sic] Robichaux orchestra leader; Albert Carroll, musical director.”⁴⁴⁹ These were again musicians that Morton had told Lomax about. In the unrecorded interview material we find that Morton judged that “John Robichaux had the best ragtime band in New Orleans — the best for many years — 1904–1905 and earlier.”⁴⁵⁰ And in the recorded interview he had told Lomax that in “New Orleans see, because, you see, in the Frenchman’s, we had, uh, Alfred Wilson and Albert Carroll. They both great pianists. Both of those boys were colored.”⁴⁵¹ He also recorded “Albert Carroll’s Tune” for the Library of Congress recordings.⁴⁵² If Morton did tour with Kenner and Lewis a more likely date is the winter of 1909 as Lomax noted that:

Jelly Roll back to New Orleans and Kenner and Lewis going to Pensacola (straight and came out of New Orleans) — needed piano player — went on to Pensacola, job waiting, works at the Belmont Theatre (Jacobi, manager) near depot — there three months, broke the record for holding one job.⁴⁵³

Once we move forward to 1910 Morton’s movements are a little clearer. In *Mister Jelly Roll* the chapter “Alabama Bound” chronicles Morton’s touring days beginning in 1905, however if we move the date forward to 1910 a good number of the events that Morton recalled taking place five years earlier can be verified.

Lomax recorded around eight hours of Jelly Roll Morton’s songs and stories about himself and his experiences onto acetate disks. He also took extensive interview notes from Morton and instructed a secretary to write down anything that Jelly Roll said when he was not around. Some of this material was used in *Mister Jelly Roll* and some was not. From a section of Lomax’s notes titled “Road Shows” we learn that “William Benbow, an actor from Mobile’s Dixie Park, planned a road show and Jelly Roll went with him. ‘Himself, his wife and me made up the show.’ Benbow would do straight, blackface, dance, sing duet, and do mind reading with Roll.”⁴⁵⁴ According to Morton:

Later on String Beans joined the show in Jackson. He was the greatest comedian I ever knew, and a very, very swell fellow. He was over six feet tall, very slender with big liver lips, and light complexioned. His shoes were enormous and he wore trousers impossible to get over his feet without a shoe horn. He always wore a big diamond in

⁴⁴⁸ *Indianapolis Freeman*, January 2, 1909 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁴⁴⁹ “Kenner and Lewis Amusement Company,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, November 14, 1908 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁴⁵⁰ Jelly Roll Morton, unrecorded interview material, “Transcript of the 1938 Library of Congress Recordings of Jelly Roll Morton,” 184.

⁴⁵¹ Jelly Roll Morton, *Ibid.*: 16.

⁴⁵² 1688 B, June 12, 1938 (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress).

⁴⁵³ “Transcript of the 1938 Library of Congress Recordings of Jelly Roll Morton,” 193.

⁴⁵⁴ Russell, *‘Oh, Mister Jelly’: A Jelly Roll Morton Scrapbook*, 49.

his front tooth. He was the first guy I ever saw with a diamond in his mouth, and I guess I got the idea for my diamond from him. I put mine in one time when I had so many diamonds I didn't know what to do with them all, so I said I might as well put one in my mouth. People will do very, very foolish things when they're young and have plenty money.⁴⁵⁵

Born Butler May on August 18, 1894 in Montgomery, Alabama, "String Beans" was just fourteen when he joined Will Benbow's Chocolate Drop Company "to perform at the Belmont Street Theater in Pensacola, Florida."⁴⁵⁶ A note from Pensacola in the *Freeman* of April 17, 1909, assured, "The show is still making good ...Gertie Raney [sic], our coon shouter, is making good with her late hit, 'If the World Don't Treat You Right, Why Don't You Come Home.' Butler May, our funny man, is still pleasing."⁴⁵⁷ As Doug Seroff and Lynn Abbott note "also on the roster was Jelly Roll Morton's girlfriend Stella Taylor, and quite probably Morton himself was present for Butler May's stage 'debut' in Pensacola."⁴⁵⁸ Lawrence Gushee also tentatively gives "1908? [Morton] leaves New Orleans, tours for a year with Will Benbow."⁴⁵⁹

I would question whether Jelly Roll joined Benbow before 1910 on two counts. The first is that Mack and Mack say that in 1910 "Jelly Roll didn't travel with any of the other shows that I know of, up until then."⁴⁶⁰ The second reason is that Jelly Roll said that "String Beans joined the show in Jackson,"⁴⁶¹ whereas Will Benbow recalled in a 1915 "Special to *The Freeman*" that he had given Butler May his professional start: "I [was] the first to take him away from home and put him in a small stock company in Pensacola,"⁴⁶² which is consistent with the report in the *Freeman* of April 17, 1909. If we assume that Mack and Mack are correct and Jelly Roll didn't begin touring before the spring of 1910, there is a possible explanation for why Morton recalled String Beans joining the show in Jackson. The following sections relating to Morton's movements are detailed, but the detail does seem to confirm that String Beans did join Benbow in Jackson in 1910.

Memphis and W. C. Handy

In Lomax's book *Mister Jelly Roll*, Morton leaves Mississippi with "Jack the Bear," going first to Yazoo, Mississippi and then on to Clarksdale and Helena, Arkansas and then Memphis.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., 50.

⁴⁵⁶ Seroff & Abbott's endnote: "Black entertainment trailblazer William Benbow, who was also from Montgomery, recalled in a 1915 'Special to *The Freeman*' that he had given Butler May his professional start: 'I [was] the first to take him away from home and put him in a small stock company in Pensacola.'" Doug Seroff and Lynn Abbott, "The Life and Death of Pioneer Bluesman Butler 'String Beans' May: 'Been Here, Made His Quick Duck, and Got Away'," *Journal of the Alabama Folklife Association*, no. 5 (2002): 11.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁹ Gushee: 395.

⁴⁶⁰ "Mack and Mack," MSS 506, folder 138, (Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection).

⁴⁶¹ Russell, *'Oh, Mister Jelly': A Jelly Roll Morton Scrapbook*, 50.

⁴⁶² Endnote 4, Seroff and Abbott: 48.

When I went to Memphis, I went there with a fellow from Jackson, Mississippi I had met there. It was very often, the boys, to be recognized as somebody, would use alias names. This is a little bitty guy. Seems like he stole his name from some other big tough guy. He named himself, I believe, "Jack the Bear." Maybe you heard that through your travels, did you? Jack the Bear said, "Let's go to Memphis."⁴⁶³

From Helena, they took a boat, the *Natchez*, to Memphis. In Memphis Morton got into a cutting contest with Benny Frenchy in the Monarch Saloon, on Beale Street, which he told Lomax "was run by a white fellow name of Mike Haggerty."⁴⁶⁴

Stayed in Memphis and worked in theater in Buddy Magill's (legitimate pianist) job — the Savoy for Fred A. Barasso — in show Bessie LaBelle (the first baritone woman singer), tall and beautiful Creole — Baby Cox (the most versatile performer in the business, today comedian, dancer, etc.) used to work in Connie's Inn — she was one year old then working.⁴⁶⁵

This period Morton dated to 1908, however if we move this forward by two years to 1910 this accords more closely with contemporaneous documentation. On August 6, 1910 the *Freeman* announced "Manager F. A. Barrasso will soon have his chain of houses open and the circuit will be known as the Tri-State Stock Vaudeville Circuit, taking in Memphis, Tenn.; Helena, Ark.; Vicksburg, Jackson and Greenville, Miss,"⁴⁶⁶ which is almost exactly what Morton told Lomax.

Barasso [*sic*] was planning the first Negro vaudeville circuit to play the four houses in Greenville, Vicksburg, Jackson, and Memphis. He asked me to go out in the number one show. That was the reason I stayed on in Memphis for some time and happened to meet Handy, who had just arrived from his home town – Henderson, Kentucky.

The one who introduced me to Handy was a guitarist named Guy Williams. Guy had a little blues of his own he was always playing, named *Jogo Blues*. This man later joined Handy's band in 1911 and in 1913 Pace and Handy published the *Jogo Blues* under the same title and then later changed it somewhat to make it the *St. Louis Blues*. At the time I'm speaking about, in 1908, when Handy and his band was already playing Sundays at Dixie Park in Memphis, I requested them to play the blues and Handy said that *blues couldn't be played by a band!*⁴⁶⁷

If these events actually occurred in 1910, this would raise the obvious question, of why, if Handy had been playing "Mr. Crump" for the election campaign of E. H. Crump in 1909, he did not know how to play blues with a band in the summer of 1910. This of course assumes that "Mr. Crump" was written for the 1909 Memphis elections. There is good reason to believe that in fact it was for Crump's re-election campaign in 1911.

⁴⁶³ "Transcript of the 1938 Library of Congress Recordings of Jelly Roll Morton," 71.

⁴⁶⁴ AFC 1938/001 (F10) "Memphis," (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress).

⁴⁶⁵ Jelly Roll Morton, "Transcript of the 1938 Library of Congress Recordings of Jelly Roll Morton," 186.

⁴⁶⁶ "Barrosso's Big Colored Sensation Co., Greenville, Miss." *Indianapolis Freeman*, August 6, 1910.

⁴⁶⁷ Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*, 141.

An article that appeared in the *Memphis Press Scimitar* April 11, 1938, titled “Believe-It-or-Not Ripley Wanted Crump on the Air,” told of how the radio broadcaster Robert Ripley had invited E. H. Crump to appear on his “Believe-It-or-Not” radio show.

Robert (Believe-It-Or-Not) Ripley called E. H. Crump, Shelby political leader, from New York about ten days ago and invited Mr. Crump to come to New York and appear on his program.

It was to have been in a dialog on a program telling the widely circulated story of how W. C. Handy negro [*sic*] blues composer, helped elect Mr. Crump mayor of Memphis in 1909 with a campaign song.

“I told him the story was not true and declined his invitation,” Mr. Crump said. “He was much surprised.”

“Handy is a good man. The story (about Handy writing a campaign song) has been written up time and again of the country, The New York Times once carried a full-page story about it.” [...]

“But the truth is that Handy came into my office in 1910, about a year after I was elected. He had the words of the song written out on a big piece of brown wrapping paper. He asked me to read them and asked my permission to name the song ‘Mr. Crump Blues.’ I told him it would be all right.”⁴⁶⁸

A little background to the 1909 Memphis election and Crump’s re-election in 1911 will perhaps put this in some context. In 1909 Crump was elected with a very small majority and didn’t take office until January of 1910, because the result was contested in the courts. Part of the reason for the vote being so close was that Crump had failed to mobilise the African American vote. For the 1911 election campaign things were rather different.

In 1911 Harry H. Pace, business manager of a Memphis Negro publication called the *Moon*, and partner of W. C. Handy, organized and became president of the Colored Citizens Association of Memphis, Tennessee. As election time approached, Pace interviewed both Williams [Crump’s opponent] and Crump to secure pledges of concessions for Memphis Negroes. In reporting back to the organization, Pace recommended that Negroes vote for Crump. “For,” said he, “the other candidate promises everything and I fear he will do nothing; but this red-headed fellow frankly declines to promise some of the things we want, but convinced me that he will fulfil the promises that he did make.”⁴⁶⁹

It seems that Handy was playing his part in delivering the African American vote for the 1911 election that Crump won with a majority of more than seven thousand votes. The extent

⁴⁶⁸ *Memphis Press Scimitar*, April 11, 1938 (Tennessee State Library Archive).

⁴⁶⁹ Merah Steven Stewart, *An Economic Detour: A History of Insurance in the Lives of American Negroes* (New York, 1940), 75-81; William D. Miller, *Mr. Crump of Memphis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 104.

to which the campaign song influenced the vote is not clear, but now we can date this tune to late 1910 or early 1911, this raises the issue about the authorship of “Mr. Crump.”

Between 1908 and 1910 the Gem Theater in Memphis came under the management of a husband and wife comedy team the “Too Sweets” sometimes known as the “Two Sweets,” Willie Perry and Susie Johnson.⁴⁷⁰

In September 1912, as Handy was going to press with “The Memphis Blues,” the Too Sweets publicly warned that they would “prosecute anyone using our original songs,” including “Mama Don’t Allow No Easy Talking Here”⁴⁷¹ One year later, when they introduced their newest southern vaudeville hit, “I’m So Glad My Mamma Don’t Know Where I’m At,” the Too Sweets issued a second warning: “Miss Two Sweet has had this song copyrighted in order to keep it from the pirates. She says she will prosecute anyone who sings it. Her other song ‘Mamma Don’t Allow No Easy Talking,’ was stolen from her.”⁴⁷²

The suspicion that Handy may have used the “Two Sweets” song as the basis of his “Mr. Crump,” is given added impetus by an article that appeared in the *Freeman* on November 4, 1911, when the “Too Sweets” were performing at the Crown Garden Theater, Indianapolis “Mr. Sweets new song ‘Nothing New Under the Sun’ with localised verse, was a big hit. [... He] has put together several stanzas of a local political nature that set the house wild with laughter.”⁴⁷³ It seems that the “Two Sweets” may not only have been responsible for the theme, but perhaps also for the political satire.

The Tri-State Vaudeville Circuit

In 1903 there were only a few African American owned or operated theatres in the South where vaudeville shows were regularly performed. These included the Blue Room in Louisville, Kentucky, Tom Baxter’s place in Jacksonville, Florida, Tom Golden’s place in Savannah, Georgia, and a vaudeville house in Galveston and one in Houston, Texas, and the Hottentot in Pensacola, Florida.⁴⁷⁴

In the years that followed, a number of other theatres in the South opened to cater for predominantly African American audiences. “The Globe [Theatre, Jacksonville, Florida,] originally opened as the Bijou and was founded by Frank Crowd. It first opened on July 16, 1908 with a seating capacity of 218,”⁴⁷⁵ and “following closely upon the advent of the erection of black theatres in Chicago and New York, the first vaudeville house opened in

⁴⁷⁰ Abbott and Seroff, “‘They Cert’ly Sound Good to Me’: Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues,” 428.

⁴⁷¹ Advertisement for Willie and Lulu Too Sweet in the *Indianapolis Freeman*, Sept. 21, 1912; Ibid.: 437.

⁴⁷² “The New Crown Garden Theater,” the *Indianapolis Freeman*, Sept. 27, 1913; Ibid.: 438.

⁴⁷³ *Indianapolis Freeman*, November 4, 1911 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁴⁷⁴ Sampson, 11.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 125.

Philadelphia in 1910. This theatre, the North Pole, was opened and managed by John T. Gibson."⁴⁷⁶ Usually these vaudeville theatres had their own stock company that would provide the entertainment.

Quite when the blues began to appear on the vaudeville stage is unclear, but by the spring of 1912 it was already sufficiently established to draw protest from the veteran entertainer Paul Carter: "laying 'blame' for the by then rampant vaudeville blues phenomenon at the feet of 'the colored audience'"⁴⁷⁷

The first known contemporaneous report of the blues on the vaudeville stage is from the April 16th, 1910, edition of the *Freeman* reporting from Jacksonville that:

This is the second week of Prof. Woods, the ventriloquist, with his little doll Henry. This week he set the Airdome wild by making little Henry drunk. Did you ever see a ventriloquist's figure get intoxicated? Well, it's rich; it's great; and Prof. Woods knows how to handle his figure. He uses the "blues" for little Henry in this drunken act. This boy is only twenty-two years old and has a bright future in front of him if he will only stick to it.⁴⁷⁸

John W. E "Johnnie" Woods grew up in Memphis and had begun his early stage career in the local theatres including the Gem Theater and Tick's Big Vaudeville.⁴⁷⁹ A month after performing at the Jacksonville Airdome, Johnnie Woods and Henry could be found performing back in Memphis, at the Pekin Theater, appearing on the same bill as Porter and Porter, the comedy duo that Jelly Roll says he was working with in Memphis.

Our show is doing fine, playing to full houses nightly. The team of Porter and Porter is cleaning up. Miss Porter takes three or four encores nightly. [...] Mr. Johnnie Woods and little Henry are doing fine. Mr. Woods is one of the best ventriloquists of his race.⁴⁸⁰

Later in the same year two of the most famous singers that would become known for their blues repertoires were appearing in Memphis. "Bess Smith, a favorite Tennessee coon shouter; Gertrude Rainey is still holding her own" at the Pekin, Theater, Memphis.⁴⁸¹ Bessie Smith (b. Chattanooga, Tennessee, April 15, 1894),⁴⁸² a newcomer at the time, would go on to be known as the "Empress of the Blues," and Gertrude "Ma" Rainey (b. April 26, 1886)⁴⁸³ would become known as the "Mother of the Blues."

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 123.

⁴⁷⁷ Abbott and Seroff, "'They Cert'ly Sound Good to Me': Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues," 414.

⁴⁷⁸ *Indianapolis Freeman*, April 16, 1910, quoted in part in Ibid.: 413.

⁴⁷⁹ "Plant Juice Medicine Company," *Indianapolis Freeman*, July 24, 1909; Ibid.

⁴⁸⁰ "Pekin Theater, Memphis, Tenn.," *Indianapolis Freeman*, May 21, 1910 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁴⁸¹ "Pekin Theater Memphis, Tenn.," *Indianapolis Freeman*, September 3, 1910.

⁴⁸² This is the date given on her 1923 application for a marriage licence. Chris Albertson, *Bessie* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003), 7.

⁴⁸³ Some sources suggest an earlier date of 1882.

It is widely believed that Rainey was an early influence on Bessie Smith, but piano player Thomas A. Dorsey, claimed that he spent more time practicing with newcomers, like Bessie than “Ma” Rainey did.⁴⁸⁴ Dorsey recalled: “It was about 1913 or 1914 and Bessie was already a star in her own right, [...] and I don’t recall Ma Rainey ever having taken credit for helping her.”⁴⁸⁵

Whether or not the “Mother of the Blues” influenced the “Empress of the Blues,” is perhaps beside the point. Both Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith must have been influenced by the blues craze which was sweeping Memphis at the time. The same would also be true of W. C. Handy, as a bandleader whose livelihood depended on being up to date with local musical trends. He must have been influenced by the blues being performed all around him.

Just across the street from the “Too Sweets” in the Gem Theater, the Amuse U Theater opened for business in January of 1909,⁴⁸⁶ under the management of Fred A. Barrasso. By the summer of 1910, Barrasso was looking to expand his operations, from his headquarters at the Savoy Theater, Memphis (where Morton says he was working) to include a string of vaudeville theatres using his own Savoy Stock Company and a number of other stock companies to keep these theatres supplied with acts. The following advertisement appeared in the *Indianapolis Freeman* on September 24, 1910:

Performers wanted for F. A. Barrasso Tri-State Circuit—Savoy Theater, Memphis, Tenn.; American Theater, Jackson, Miss.; Amuse Theater, Vicksburg, Miss.; Royal Palm Theater, Greenville, Miss.—Single acts, sister teams, novelty acts. Can also use two more A 1 producers. Fifteen weeks at the best salary that the South can afford. But you must have the "goods" or there's "nothin' doin'." Good time to follow this. Salary sure. Prize fighters, see Jack Johnson; Boozers, see Carry Nation. I pay all transportation over my circuit after joining. Write or wire. Wardrobe must be A 1. Fred A. Barrasso, Sole Owner and General Mgr. 121 to 123 South Fourth Street, Memphis, Tenn.⁴⁸⁷

This was a novel enterprise. Stock companies to this time had tended to take open ended engagements at a single theatre. Barrasso’s idea was to have a number of Stock Companies that could work between his five theatres. To achieve this he needed experienced Stock Company leaders. The leader of one of his companies was John H. Williams.

Known as the "Original Blue Steel," John H. Williams specialized in the comic adaptation of the up-to-date southern folk idioms from which blues was gleaned. He

⁴⁸⁴ Rev. Thomas A. Dorsey, interview with Daphne Duval Harrison, Chicago, February 7, 1977; Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 36-7.

⁴⁸⁵ Albertson, 15.

⁴⁸⁶ "The Stage," *Indianapolis Freeman*, Jan. 9, 1909; Abbott and Seroff, "They Cert'ly Sound Good to Me": Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues," 428.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.: 433-4.

arrived in Memphis in August 1910, following a ten-week engagement in Greenville, South Carolina."⁴⁸⁸

When Williams got to Vicksburg, Mississippi at the start of October 1910 the *Freeman* reported that:

The show at Vicksburg, Miss, headed by John H. Williams, the king of all comedians in the South; who takes three and four encores singing "Alabama Bound," "Shake Rattle and Roll," "Tie Your Little [Bull] Outside."

"I'm Alabama Bound" was subtitled "The Alabama Blues" when it was published by Robert Hoffman. "Shake Rattle and Roll," was a composition by Franklin Baby Seals, who would go on to compose "Baby Seals' Blues," and the final song should have read "Tie Your Little Bull Outside," a 1910 composition by James Brockman. Over the next few years Williams started to feature his own compositions "The Sanctified Blues"⁴⁸⁹ and his signature "Blue Steel Blues."⁴⁹⁰

Heading up another company was William Benbow.

William Benbow and his wife, Edna Landry Benbow, arrived at the Savoy on July 27, 1910, following an extended engagement in Oklahoma.⁴⁹¹ William Benbow was a central figure in the ascendancy of southern vaudeville. Born in Montgomery, Alabama, he had been performing in parks, theaters, and tent shows throughout the South since 1899.⁴⁹² In 1905 his Old Plantation Minstrels included a ten-piece band from New Orleans.⁴⁹³ Originally from New Orleans, Edna Landry was Lizzie Miles's half-sister. After joining hands with Benbow in 1909, she quickly established a place among the first generation of popular blues singers. She would record extensively during the early 1920s under the name Edna Hicks.⁴⁹⁴

In the summer of 1910 Fred Barrasso organised a tour into Greenville, Mississippi under the name of "Barrasso's Big Colored Sensation Co." It could be that this was why Jelly Roll Morton was held back at the Savoy in Memphis, while "Miss Julia Jones and Mr. Joe White, the prince of all trap drummers," went to Mississippi.⁴⁹⁵ Late in 1910 Barrasso's Tri-State Circuit was fully operational and Morton was pleased to be leaving Memphis:

Myself, I was glad to get out of Memphis with the Number One company on Benbow circuit. [...]. The band consisted of a drummer and me on piano. Buster Porter was the main comedian, until he was later replaced by Stringbeans and Sweetie May; Edna

⁴⁸⁸ "The Savoy, Memphis, Tenn.," *Indianapolis Freeman*, Aug. 20, 1910; *Ibid.*: 433.

⁴⁸⁹ Notes from the Florida Blossoms Company," *Indianapolis Freeman*, Jan. 1, 1916; *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁰ J. L. Williams, "The Florida Blossoms Show," *Indianapolis Freeman*, Aug. 14, 1915; *Ibid.*

⁴⁹¹ "Notes from Savoy Theater, Memphis, Tenn.," *Indianapolis Freeman*, Aug. 13, 1910; *Ibid.*

⁴⁹² "The Airdome Theater at Guthrie, Okla.," *Indianapolis Freeman*, June 25, 1910; *Ibid.*

⁴⁹³ "The Stage," *Indianapolis Freeman*, Dec. 30, 1905; *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁴ Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, "Lizzie Miles: Her Forgotten Career in Circus Side-Show Minstrelsy, 1914-1918;" *78 Quarterly* 1, no. 7 (1992), 57-70; *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁵ "Barrasso's Big Colored Sensation Co.," *Indianapolis Freeman*, August 6, 1910 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

Benbow sang the blues; Will Benbow was the straight man and manager. The show was a hit and we toured for two years.⁴⁹⁶

One slight discrepancy in Morton's account is that Benbow led what was known at this time as the No. 3 Company, but everything else that Morton says can be verified. By October 1910 William Benbow's Company was at the Temple Theater in New Orleans, with Buster Porter the main comedian.

The team of Benbow and Benbow are still with us and getting theirs as usual. The team of Porter and Porter, Charlie [Buster] and Willie, has a high class act. [...] manager Fred A. Barrasso is very well pleased with his No. 3 company. This company will leave Vicksburg for Jackson, Miss., and the No. 2 company from Memphis will take this house. All good acts coming this way write F. A. Barrasso.⁴⁹⁷

Morton says that Buster Porter was replaced as the principal comedian by String Beans. His delay in joining the tour was the result of String Beans completing his contract as stage manager of the Queens Theater, in Montgomery, Alabama. At some point between August and November 1910, String Beans, as Morton said, joined Benbow's Company. An article in the *Freeman* from the end of October may shed some light on where String Beans joined Benbow.

The Barrasso Stock Company opened the American Theater, Jackson Miss., Tuesday evening, week of the -7th to a packed house. The company made good on the opening night. It will hold fourth [*sic*] indefinitely in Jackson from which place companies will be sent out to various places.⁴⁹⁸

By the end of October, Jackson Mississippi was being used as base of the operation rather than Memphis and it seems likely that, just as Morton said "String Beans joined the show in Jackson,"⁴⁹⁹ which was where Benbow was stage manager at the time.

Although there is no record of String Beans appearing at Jackson at this time, String Beans appeared in New Orleans, at the Temple Theater, which was a theater that Barrasso had just secured. In November Benbow opened in New Orleans with String Beans in the company and "the charming little song bird Stella Taylor," Morton's girlfriend, in the cast.⁵⁰⁰

Barrassos [*sic*] Alabama Rosebuds, under the management of William Benbow opened here Sunday Matinee, November 6. [...] May and May, better known as the

⁴⁹⁶ Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*, 143.

⁴⁹⁷ *Indianapolis Freeman*, October 1, 1910 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁴⁹⁸ *Indianapolis Freeman*, October 29, 1910 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁴⁹⁹ Jelly Roll Morton, "Unused Library of Congress Interview Material" MSS 506, folder 134, (Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection).

⁵⁰⁰ *Indianapolis Freeman*, November, 12, 1910 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

“String Beans Duo,” was a tremendous hit from their very first appearance, and are great favourites. The rendition of “Casey Jones” received several encores.⁵⁰¹

Jelly Roll Morton gave Alan Lomax quite a bit of information about String Beans and his repertoire.

Well, this String Beans grew very famous on this circuit. He used to bring down the house when he sang *I Got Elgin Movements in My Hips, With a Twenty Year Guarentee* [sic] and *What Did Deacon Jones Do, My Lord, When the Lights Went Out*, or *Gimme A Piece of What You’re Settin’ On* (meaning the girl was settin’ on a piece of cake), and such stuff as that. He sang all those songs to the same tune, but when he would wobble those big feet of his nobody noticed the difference and they liked him right on.⁵⁰²

“Elgin Movements in My Hips” is a song that uses the slogan of the Elgin Watch Company as a sexual metaphor. This was topical at the time as the company had marketed the first wrist watches in 1910.⁵⁰³ The song seems to have been popular on the vaudeville stage. Morton also associated the song with Tony Jackson; there is also a reference to “Little Minnie Jones” singing “The Elgin Movement” at the Olympic Theater, in Charleston, South Carolina in the Christmas 1910 edition of the *Freeman*.⁵⁰⁴ And at the Ruby Theater, Louisville, Kentucky, we learn in October of 1911 that, “Mrs. Love pleads in song for the Lord to send her a man, when Mr. Love brings in a good one, ‘You’ve got to have Elgin movements’.”⁵⁰⁵

The lyric also appears in later blues songs, including Blind Blake’s “Panther Squall Blues” (1928.)

*I got a sweet mama: she ain’t low at all
She got the kind of loving: will make a panther squall
She got Elgin movements: and a twenty year guarantee
I bet you my last dollar: she don’t put them jinx on me.*⁵⁰⁶

News from the Benbow Company (now known as the No. 2 company) with String Beans still in the cast, in December, notes that Sadie Whitehead “tickles the ivories,”⁵⁰⁷ which suggests if Morton was with the tour he was not the pianist. On the other hand it could be one of the periods that he left the show. He told Lomax that “the show was a hit and we toured for two

⁵⁰¹ “Temple Theater, New Orleans,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, November 12, 1910 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁵⁰² From material not sound recorded for the Library of Congress but obtained from interviews and not used in *Mister Jelly Roll*, MSS 506, folder 134, (Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection).

⁵⁰³ Originally the “National Watch Company” 1864, it became the “Elgin National Watch Company” in 1874.

⁵⁰⁴ *Indianapolis Freeman*, December 24, 1910 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁵⁰⁵ “Ruby Theater-Louisville, Ky.” *Indianapolis Freeman*, October 7, 1911 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁵⁰⁶ Blind Blake, “Panther squall Blues,” Paramount 12723, Chicago circa May 1928; Michael Taft, *Blues Lyric Poetry: An Anthology* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1983), 29.

⁵⁰⁷ *Indianapolis Freeman*, December 10, 1910 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

years, although I quit from time to time because I could make more money catching suckers at the pool table.”⁵⁰⁸

Further evidence to suggest that in December Morton was not with the Benbow Company comes from the *Freeman* of December 17 at the Royal Palm Theater, Greenville, Mississippi.

Everybody is making big hits. Edna Benbow singing “Stop that Rag” and “Some of These Days,” is leaving them screaming. Mack and Mack in their singing and talking act, keep the audience in continual uproar.⁵⁰⁹

Mack and Mack had been adamant that they did not tour with Jelly Roll Morton in 1910. It seems unlikely they would have forgotten their first encounter with Morton on the road in December, had he been there.

One final piece of the jigsaw relating to Morton’s movements that may also fit into place is a remark that Morton made to Lomax about Stella Taylor, who had been in the cast with Benbow and String Beans in New Orleans.

Good looking girl named Stella Taylor — found later she was a sporting girl — couple of colored takers named Goldstucker. Jim Goldstucker was going with landlady at the house she lived in — honoured to eat at same board with Jim. Stella would run around with other fellows while Jelly Roll on job — Jim and landlady told Jelly Roll to beat the hell out of her — Jelly Roll beat her up too bad and she called the police — Jim and landlady told him what to do — to leave town — on Sunday — only thing leaving was on a boat — got to Mobile.⁵¹⁰

If Morton did indeed leave Benbow in New Orleans this could provide an explanation for his sudden departure.

It seems that the String Beans Duo also left Benbow and the Barrasso Tri-State Circuit early in 1911 because there is a report from “May and May” who by this time are at the Pekin Theater, Savannah, Georgia, which was managed by W. J. Stiles and not part of the Barrasso circuit.⁵¹¹ By February of 1911, Benbow was in Mobile Alabama, with Bessie Smith, “the girl with educated feet and a great coon shouter, [...] Trixie Smith, the little singing soubrette from South Carolina,”⁵¹² who would go on to record the blues in the 1920s. The principal comedian is now Billy Mills.

In February 1911 Barrasso added another theatre, the Majestic Theater, Hot Springs, Arkansas, to his circuit, with what appears to be a new company that included Mamie Whitman of the Whitman Sisters with whom Tony Jackson had performed many years

⁵⁰⁸ Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*, 143.

⁵⁰⁹ “Royal Palm Theater, Greenville, Mississippi” *Indianapolis Freeman*, December 17, 1910 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁵¹⁰ “Transcript of the 1938 Library of Congress Recordings of Jelly Roll Morton,” 193.

⁵¹¹ *Indianapolis Freeman*, January 28, 1911 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁵¹² F. A. Barrasso’s Tri-State Circuit, Mobile, Ala.,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, February 11, 1911 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

before. A week later Porter and Porter arrived, but there is no mention of Benbow.⁵¹³ He later “secured the service of Mr. Tim Owsley as the stage producer for the Majestic Theater.”⁵¹⁴

By the end of February we get news of the No. 3 Company was now playing at Greenville Mississippi, under the leadership of Ed. D. Lee. This is another stock company leader that Morton claimed to have worked with.⁵¹⁵ If Morton was with Ed Lee at this time, he was not holding down the piano job as this was held by “Mrs. McMahon.”⁵¹⁶ At Barrasso’s American Theater Jackson, Mississippi, the new stage manager could offer “Miss Bessie Smith, our star,” who was “sending them away screaming with ‘Lovey Joe’.”⁵¹⁷ In April the Amuse U. Theater in Vicksburg, Mississippi, could offer Fred Harris making “a big hit singing ‘Casey Jones,’”⁵¹⁸ and at the Bijou Theater, Greenwood Mississippi, (which was not part of Barrasso’s circuit) Baby F. Seals had taken over as proprietor and Director of Amusement.⁵¹⁹

By June 17, 1911 the *Freeman* advertised what was to prove to be Fred A. Barrasso’s final act of expansion. Barrasso had joined forces with Joel and Bailey to form the “Southern Vaudeville Circuit,” which could boast of 20 of the Principal Theatres in the South, and offered performers 60 week contracts, to work in a vaudeville tour of the South. The tour would open at the Central Theater, Atlanta, Georgia and then go on to Athens, Macon, and Augusta, Georgia, before moving on to Charleston [*sic*] and Columbus in South Carolina. From there the tour went on to Jacksonville and Pensacola, Florida and then Mobile and Montgomery, Alabama. The final leg of the tour took in Meridian, Mississippi, Hot Springs and Texacana, Arkansas and Muskogee, Oklahoma, before finishing up at the Savoy Theater Memphis.⁵²⁰

On June 25, 1911, Fred A. Barrasso unexpectedly died,⁵²¹ but the Tri-State Circuit continued to operate under the management of his father G. A. Barrasso⁵²² who advertised for performers for the Savoy Theater, Memphis, Tennessee; the Majestic Theater, Hot Springs,

⁵¹³ F. A. Barrasso’s Tri-State Circuit, Mobile, Ala.,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, February 11, 1911 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁵¹⁴ *Indianapolis Freeman*, March 18, 1911 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁵¹⁵ Morton Correspondence, “Earl Cornwall Letter,” April 27, 1938, MSS 507, folder 1, (Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection).

⁵¹⁶ *Indianapolis Freeman*, Feb 25, 1911 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁵¹⁷ *Indianapolis Freeman*, March 18, 1911 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁵¹⁸ *Indianapolis Freeman*, April 1, 1911 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁵¹⁹ *Indianapolis Freeman*, March 25, 1911 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁵²⁰ *Indianapolis Freeman*, June 17, 1911 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁵²¹ Fred A. Barrasso obituary, *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, June 26, 1911; Abbott and Seroff, “‘They Cert’yly Sound Good to Me’: Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues,” 434.

⁵²² *Indianapolis Freeman*, September 23, 1911 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

Arkansas; the Royal Palm Theater, Greenville, Mississippi and the Amuse U Threater, Vicksburg, Mississippi.⁵²³

The impact of Fred A. Barrasso's Tri-State Circuit on the musical lives of the people of Mississippi must have been profound. Although the venture itself was relatively short lived, the establishment of permanent vaudeville theatres, rather than the somewhat seasonal migrations of the tent shows and circuses, provided continuous access to the latest songs and fashions in entertainment. The circuit provided an opportunity for rural plantation workers of Mississippi to access the culture of the cities. One author has described the origin of the name "vaudeville" to mean *voix de ville* or "voice of the city."⁵²⁴ Whether this is indeed the origin of the name, no other explanation so accurately describes the impact that Barrasso's Tri-State Circuit must have had. Barrasso and his five stock companies were quite literally taking the voices of the city of Memphis, to Jackson, Vicksburg and Greenville, Mississippi, and the songs that they sang included a body of material that was increasingly becoming referred to as "blues."

Where exactly Jelly Roll Morton was at any particular time may never be determined with any certainty, but what is important is that Jelly Roll Morton tried to describe these events to Lomax. Lomax knew that Jelly Roll Morton sang the blues and that he had worked for The Tri-State Vaudeville Circuit, taking his blues songs to four different Mississippi theatres.

Billy Kersands

From Lomax's notes we learn:

Jelly Roll joined Billy Kersands' show in Memphis. Sammy Russell was the comedian. The show became stranded in Hot Springs, Arkansas. Jelly had no money but could make some by playing pool. If he lost and got in an argument, he would knock a guy out with a cue.⁵²⁵

Billy Kersands (1842-1915) was one of the earliest and most successful African American comedians and dancers that worked in black-face in the minstrel shows. Billy Kersands was remembered by Willie Foster, born December 27, 1888, in McCall, Louisiana, just a few miles from Donaldsonville. Willie Foster recalled that Billy Kersands had a good show and that they travelled by train from place to place, and that "they played in theaters, not in tents; the show carried its own band."⁵²⁶

According to Morton he joined "Kersands' show in Memphis, [and] Sammy Russell was the comedian."⁵²⁷ It seems very likely that he was hired as a comedian rather than as a musician,

⁵²³ *Indianapolis Freeman*, November 18, 1911 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁵²⁴ Robert W. Snyder, *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁵²⁵ Russell, 'Oh, Mister Jelly': *A Jelly Roll Morton Scrapbook*, 52.

⁵²⁶ Foster, "Interview Digest, January 21, 1959."

⁵²⁷ Russell, 'Oh, Mister Jelly': *A Jelly Roll Morton Scrapbook*, 52.

because for some time he seems to have worked as Sammy Russell's straight man. From Lomax's unrecorded notes:

Sam Russell had plenty of money and asked Jelly to go to Houston, Texas and work as his straight man.

Texarkana was their first jump. "I might as well be the best straight man on earth," and he was a hit. Next jump was Houston. Sometimes Jelly Roll did a "single" in black face, imitating String Beans.

After two months in Houston, they jumped to the Lincoln Theatre in Galveston, then Dallas, Shreveport [LA], Greenville [MS] and Denison. One time Sammy Russell and Jelly had to do a 45 minute show by themselves but did OK.⁵²⁸

It was during this period that Morton acquired the nickname "Jelly Roll."

How I happened to get the name myself thrown on me as an alias was due to the fact, in the show business, with one of my old partners, a black-face comedian and the first eccentric dancer in the United States — Sammie Russell, who was later known as Barlow, the teammate of Sandy Burns. One night, while working ad lib on the stage doing comedy, Sam said to me, "You don't know who you talking to." I told him I didn't care, and we had a little argument. I finally asked him who was he. And he stated to me, he was Sweet Papa Cream Puff, right out of the bakery shop. That seemed to produce a great big laugh.

While I was standing there mugging, as you call it, the thought came to me that I'd better say something about the bakery shop. I said to him, he didn't know who he was talking to. He finally wanted to get acquainted, so he asked me who was I. And I stated to him, I was Sweet Papa Jelly Roll with the stovepipes in my hips, and all the women in town was dying to turn my damper down.⁵²⁹

Morton's earliest sighting on the vaudeville stage comes from January of 1913. "Daddy Jenkins and Little Creole Pet" were at the Elite Theater in Selma, Alabama, with their accompanist, Jelly Roll Morton: "Little Pet takes the house when she sings 'Please Don't Shake Me Papa, While I'm Gone' and 'Baby Seals Blues'."⁵³⁰

Probably Morton was in Houston Texas with Sammy Russell a little later that year, according to a remark that he made to Lomax that "I tried to organize a stock company in Houston but relatives ruined it."⁵³¹ Lawrence Gushee has consulted the 1913 Houston City Directory and noted that:

⁵²⁸ Ibid.

⁵²⁹ "Transcript of the 1938 Library of Congress Recordings of Jelly Roll Morton," 56.

⁵³⁰ "The Team of Jenkins and Jenkins," *Indianapolis Freeman*, Feb. 1, 1913; Abbott and Seroff, "'They Cert'ly Sound Good to Me': Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues," 418.

⁵³¹ Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*, 136.

It lists as residing at 207 Robin Street three Lamothes, all colored: Edward, a bricklayer; Henry, a chauffeur; and Oscar, a cook. None of the three is listed in the 1912 and 1914 directories. I take it that Morton's natural father, Edward J., a bricklayer by trade, had made a temporary move to Houston.⁵³²

Lamothe was Morton's name before he anglicised it to Morton. By the summer of 1913 Morton was in Greenville, Texas, according to Gushee:

The item presumably mailed by Morton from Greenville, Texas, to the *Freeman* and published in its August 9, 1913, issue acquires much added interest from the list of show-business friends to whom he sent regards (I have suppressed the whimsical altered spellings, e.g., "the JaJames Sisters"): Tony Jackson, Harry Bernard, Willminor [*sic*] Cook, String Beans, Porter and Porter, Baby Seals, Leroy White, Ford and Ford, Homer Broadenax, the James Sisters, Bessie LaBelle, and Sam Russell. All of them can be tracked, with the help of the *Freeman*, along the southern black vaudeville circuits and in Chicago.⁵³³

Another touring show that Morton told Lomax he had worked with was "McCabe's Minstrels,"⁵³⁴ which is confirmed by the "The Spikes Brothers," Johnny and Reb.

Jelly Roll did a comedy act in black face . . . he didn't hire on as a musician . . . the show's band had a pianist. Before long, Jelly displayed his ability . . . soon took over the piano stool in that band!"⁵³⁵

This would seem to place Morton in St Louis in February of 1914, as Morton told Lomax:

After I arrived in St. Louis, and I decided to not tell anybody I could play piano— My goodness, the snow was piled up, you couldn't see the streetcars! I never seen such a snow in all my life. I just had left, uh, Johnny and Reb Spikes, the boys that wrote "Someday Sweetheart." In fact their name is on it. So of course they've got the full claim to it. We had left McCabe's Minstrel. I quit the show in St. Louis, and that's why I happened to be there."⁵³⁶

Although St. Louis often had hard winters, Gushee persuasively argues that the most likely date of this event is February 13, 1914 when the following headline appeared in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

"Snowstorm to Continue Tonight; Suburban Trolleys Forced to Abandon Schedules; City's Traffic Tied Up; Trains Late; Fifteen Inches of Snow Falls in Two Days; Deep Drifts Form," accompanied by a photograph of a city streetcar blocked by snow.⁵³⁷

⁵³² Gushee: 400.

⁵³³ Ibid.

⁵³⁴ "Transcript of the 1938 Library of Congress Recordings of Jelly Roll Morton," 42.

⁵³⁵ "The Spikes Brothers—A Los Angeles Saga," *Jazz Journal* 4, no. 12 (Dec. 1951); Gushee: 401.

⁵³⁶ "Transcript of the 1938 Library of Congress Recordings of Jelly Roll Morton," 42.

⁵³⁷ Gushee: 402.

The June 13, 1914, edition of the *Freeman*, in an item titled “Morton & Morton, Comedy, Music, Dancing,” we find a picture of “Ferd Morton as New Orleans Jelly Roll.” He is shown in baggy clothes a bowler hat and in blackface make-up. We are told that:

Ferd and Rose Morton are an interesting pair, who do a number of good talking stunts. Miss Morton is a wide awake performer, helping out the fun all the way through. She puts over the “Blues” to the satisfaction of the audience who for some reason take very kindly to that kind of singing. Her voice is of good quality.

Mr. Morton, “Jelly Roll,” is a slight reminder of “String Beans,” He does a pianologue in good style. He plays a good piano, classics and rags with equal ease. His one hand stunt, left hand alone, playing a classic selection, is a good one.

They do an amusing comedy bit, singing “That Ain’t Got ‘Em.” This is sung by both of them in a duo style. They make a hit in this, which is Morton’s own composition. In fact he composes most of his own songs and arranges his other work. As a comedian Morton is grotesque in his makeup and sustains himself nicely through the work. They are a clever pair, giving a pleasing show.

Lawrence Gushee suggests that “That Ain’t Got ‘Em” could be a song that Morton acquired from his time with Billy Kersands, whose troupe briefly included the clarinettist Henry W. Paschal, composer of “That One Ain’t Got ‘Em Babe” (1910). Gushee goes on to say: “The song as it stands is not a dialogue number but could easily be made into one. In light of the statements Morton made that many of his works were falsely claimed by others, it would only be poetic justice if the reverse were true.”⁵³⁸

Morton told Lomax about the music scene in St Louis saying:

There wasn’t very many good piano players around there, with the exception of Tom Turpin. And even a little earlier than that, uh, Scott Joplin. He was around. And, uh, Louis Chauvin⁵³⁹ no doubt was among the best. And none of these boys read any music, with the exception of Artie Matthews, to amount to anything.”⁵⁴⁰

Morton went on to describe to Lomax a time when Artie Matthews had tested him on his music reading ability, until Matthews realised that Morton knew by heart all the parts that he was being tested with. According to Morton when Matthews realised he “grabbed the tune from in front of me, which was *Poet and Peasant*, and said, ‘Hell, don’t be messing with that guy. That guy’s a shark.’ And I told ‘em, ‘Boys, I been kidding you all the time.’ Say, ‘I knew all these tunes anyhow.’”⁵⁴¹

Artie Matthews was a composer and arranger of ragtime tunes for Stark Music in St. Louis. His own compositions “Pastimes” (no. 1 though 5) were considered a little too advanced for

⁵³⁸ Ibid.: 403.

⁵³⁹ John Szwed’s footnotes: “Louis Chauvin (1883–1908), Creole composer and pianist from St. Louis, is best known for his ‘Heliotrope Bouquet’ rag (1907) composed in collaboration with Scott Joplin.”

⁵⁴⁰ Jelly Roll Morton 1653 B, May 23, 1938 (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress).

⁵⁴¹ “Transcript of the 1938 Library of Congress Recordings of Jelly Roll Morton,” 45.

immediate publication by Stark. Matthews' significance to the development of the blues is that he arranged "Baby Seals' Blues" (1912) for publication by H. Franklin Baby Seals.

By the end of 1914, Jelly Roll Morton was in Chicago, which is where he wrote his "Original Jelly Roll Blues," of which Morton says: "I'm going to try to play the "Jelly Roll Blues" for you. One of the numbers that's supposed to have had more originality to it than any other hot tune or blues in America, according to, uh, musicians, publishers, and so forth and so on — members of the music world."⁵⁴² However this was not its original title. To begin with it was known as the "Chicago Blues." According to Morton it was named "The Jelly Roll Blues" by the people of the city of Chicago."⁵⁴³

*In New Orleans, in New Orleans, Louisiana town,
There's the finest boy for many miles around.
Lord, Mister Jelly Roll, affection he has stole.
What? No! I sure must say, babe,
Certainly can't abuse, just can't confuse.*

*Isn't that a shame?
Don't you know the strain?
That's those "Jelly Roll Blues."*

*He's so tall, so chancy, He's the ladies' fancy.
Everybody knows him, Certainly do adore him.*

*When you see him strolling,
Everybody opens up. He's red hot stuff,
Friends, you can't get enough,
Play it soft, don't abuse.
Play them Jelly Roll Blues.⁵⁴⁴*

This is a twelve-bar blues which as Morton says is typical of the "way we used to sing in the Elite" No. 2 club in Chicago. The vaudeville singer Lucille Hegamin recalled that "Yes, Jelly worked with me at the [Café] De Luxe the first time he came to Chicago, and that was when he wrote *Jelly Roll Blues*; I have the original manuscript he gave me."⁵⁴⁵

Jelly Roll Morton led a seven piece orchestra for the opening night of the Deluxe Café at 3503 State, on November, 28, 1914 and he appears to have stayed in Chicago until June 1916 when he left for Detroit. He obtained copyright for "Jelly Roll Blues" in Chicago on September, 22, 1915.⁵⁴⁶

We can now review what Morton had told Lomax about his early musical experiences. Lomax was told that Morton had first heard the blues in New Orleans in the early years of the century from Mamie Desdunes and others, and had then begun working in sporting houses in

⁵⁴² Jelly Roll Morton, 1659 B (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress).

⁵⁴³ Jelly Roll Morton, 1659 B (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress).

⁵⁴⁴ Jelly Roll Morton, 1660 A (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress).

⁵⁴⁵ Stewart-Baxter, 19.

⁵⁴⁶ Gushee: 404.

both New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast. He joined Benbow's Stock company for around two years, where he worked with String Beans, Billy Kersands and Sammy Russell and McCabe's Minstrels, before arriving in Chicago and putting his first copyright on a composition, "The Original Jelly Roll Blues" (1915).

Not only had Morton told Lomax that the blues was being played in New Orleans at the turn of the century. He had also provided a mechanism by which these urban blues were disseminated throughout the South, and in the case of the Tri-State Vaudeville Circuit, in Mississippi in particular. He had also told Lomax about a number of other blues performers that he had worked with. For some reason Lomax glosses over this period of Morton's life and instead concentrates on his gambling, his pool playing and life in the sporting houses. To gain an insight into why Lomax never seems to have recognised the significance of what he was being told, we need to revisit the Jelly Roll Morton Symposium of 1982.

Tulane University 1982

By the time the Tulane University symposium on Jelly Roll Morton convened in May of 1982, a good deal of research had been done into Morton, his music and his life. On the panel were Alan Lomax who had started the process by collecting interviews from Morton in 1938, William Russell and Fredrick Ramsey Jr. who had both been contributors to *Jazzmen* (1939) and Richard B. Allen who along with William Russell had begun the "Oral History Project" for the William Hanson Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane University in New Orleans. Also on the panel was Al Rose who co-authored *New Orleans Jazz: A Family Album*,⁵⁴⁷ a source reference that provides basic biographical details for nearly one thousand New Orleans musicians, as well as information about bands and venues. There were also Trebor Tichenor the ragtime composer and Danny Barker (b. Feb 13, 1909, New Orleans),⁵⁴⁸ a guitarist who had known Morton from his time at the Rhythm Club in New York in 1930.⁵⁴⁹ Another panellist was Lawrence Gushee who two years earlier had published "Would You Believe Ferman Mouton?"⁵⁵⁰ Gushee's work would begin to establish the verifiable facts of Morton's life, and also enable the later "A Preliminary Chronology of the Early Career of Ferd 'Jelly Roll Morton'."⁵⁵¹ His research also made it possible to confirm that much of what Morton had told Lomax was essentially correct once an allowance had been made to compensate for an 1890 date of birth.

From Lomax's early remarks to the symposium it becomes apparent that he was principally concerned with anthropology and musicology, rather than the minutiae of historical detail.

⁵⁴⁷ Rose and Souchon.

⁵⁴⁸ Danny Barker, "Interview Digest June 30, 1959," ed. Richard B. Allen (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

⁵⁴⁹ Danny Barker, "Interview Fall of 1983," (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

⁵⁵⁰ Lawrence Gushee, "Would You Believe Ferman Mouton?," *Storyville* 98 (1981).

⁵⁵¹ Gushee, "A Preliminary Chronology of the Early Career of Ferd 'Jelly Roll' Morton."

What I want to contribute here was that he [Morton] was feeling his way to the realization that all anthropology, and all musicology has come to see more, and more, and more.

That is that African style was able to be crystallized here in this town [New Orleans], and probably written down first by this man that we're talking about today.⁵⁵²

According to Lomax the polyphony of New Orleans jazz was a product of African polyrhythm.

If you listen to a long piece of African music, there's a change of leader. Every two, or three, or four, minutes, somebody else takes over, and puts in his new statement into the composition. This is constantly happening all the way through the New Orleans jazz thing. [...] Jelly Roll transmutes the ensemble style of orchestral playing, which is basically African co-polyrhythms, co-overlapping parts into his right hand.⁵⁵³

In a statement that is somewhat reminiscent of the single origin theory of the blues in the Mississippi Delta, Lomax would make a similar claim for jazz. "He [Morton] made certain that we all know that jazz was black, and Creole, and New Orleans, and happened nowhere else."⁵⁵⁴

It was Danny Barker, an African American musician who had worked with Jelly Roll Morton, who took Lomax to task on his understanding of jazz and Jelly Roll Morton.

I've heard hundreds of records of, [and] [*sic*] from Africans. African is nothing like no New Orleans music. I have seen Africans look at American jazz music just the way Japanese look at it. It's strange to them.⁵⁵⁵ [...]

That has nothing to do with Africa. You ain't gonna sell me Africa. I don't want to hear nothing about Africa. You sold me on the river, so don't come to me with nothing about Africa. I know all about that, you understand. Jazz is New Orleans. Gumbo, pralines. When you get it here, you ain't got that in Africa.⁵⁵⁶ [...]

Jelly Roll is self-made. Jelly Roll plays Jelly Roll, and it's not African. Excuse me.⁵⁵⁷

Certainly Barker's view of Morton would coincide more closely with Morton's view of himself, as Morton denied that he had any African heritage.

Well, I'll tell you. As I can understand, my folks were in the city of New Orleans long before the Louisiana Purchase. And all my folks came directly from the shores — or not the shores, I mean from France. That's across the world, in the other world. And

⁵⁵² Alan Lomax, "Tulane University 'Jelly Roll Morton Symposium' May 7, 1982".

⁵⁵³ Alan Lomax, *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁴ Alan Lomax, *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁵ Danny Barker, *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁶ Danny Barker, *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁷ Danny Barker, *Ibid.*

they landed here in the New World years ago. I remember so far back as my great-grandmother and great-grandfather.⁵⁵⁸

In 1938 Morton had responded to a suggestion by Robert Ripley that “‘Tom Toms’ came on the Mayflower from the jungles of Portugal, which were considered the first step in jazz,” by saying “I contradict this since the first ‘Tom Tom’ was known to come from China, the home of the crash, and in no way did the ‘Tom Tom’ of any jungle have anything to do with jazz.”⁵⁵⁹

Morton’s own explanation for his invention of jazz was connected to his own technical limitation, rather than any African heritage.

It was the year if 1902 that I conceived the idea, probably through force, New Orleans has always been the hot bed, for hot outstanding musicians with the exception of the violin, which was played the same way all over the world. However, all other instruments always strived to play their own individual style, it just was the style that I had which grabbed the world by the throat with a strangle hold. My reason for trying to adopt something truly different from ragtime, “was,” that all my fellow musician’s were much faster in manipulations I thought than I & I did not feel as though I was in their class of course they all seemed to classify in the No.1 Class, men like Alfred Wilson, (Won piano playing contest St. Louis exposition 1904) Tony Jackson, (Worlds greatest single handed entertainer. Could play & sing from Opera to Blues in its correct formation, knew everything that probably was ever printed) Albert Cahill, [Albert Carroll,] with his (so soft, sweet non exerting perfect perfection of passing tones & strange harmonies cool & collective style.) Sammy Davis, (with his original ragtime idea, four finger bass & speed like the electrified streamline & etc) these men set a pace for everyone entered N.O.⁵⁶⁰

There were perhaps some features of Morton’s style that may be connected to African musical practice, such as the “Spanish Tinge,” of which Morton says “if one can’t manage a way to put the tinges of Spanish in these tunes, they’ll never be able to get the right season, I may call it, for jazz music.”⁵⁶¹ Habanera and clavé rhythms are most closely associated with Latin American and Caribbean music, which for geographical reasons would be expected to have influenced the music of New Orleans. It is however an enormous leap of faith on the part of Lomax to argue as he did that:

I think it the constantly amazing thing about Jelly Roll. How he's handling, both the European heritage in an extremely skilled way, and giving up very little of the African background.⁵⁶²

⁵⁵⁸ "Transcript of the 1938 Library of Congress Recordings of Jelly Roll Morton," 8.

⁵⁵⁹ “Jelly Roll Says He Was the First to Play Jazz” *Down Beat*, September 1938, 3, (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁵⁶⁰ Jelly Roll Morton, Letter to Earle Cornwall, April 27, 1938, MSS 507, folder 1, (Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection).

⁵⁶¹ "Transcript of the 1938 Library of Congress Recordings of Jelly Roll Morton," 104.

⁵⁶² "Tulane University 'Jelly Roll Morton Symposium' May 7, 1982".

Cantometrics

In the summer of 1961 with a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, Alan Lomax and a musicologist assistant, Victor Grauer, were able to assemble, and to review approximately 400 sets of recordings and tapes from about 250 cultural areas. Rather than study these recordings in purely musical terms, the aim of the Cantometric Project, was that “ethnomusicology should turn aside, for a time, from the study of music in purely musical terms to study a music in context, as a form of human behaviour.”⁵⁶³ According to Lomax:

The usefulness of cantometrics is, perhaps, most quickly apparent in relation to the troubling problems of musical acculturation. The American folklore school, led by George Pullen Jackson (1943), studied the available musical scores and concluded that most of the so-called Negro melodies were variants of old European tunes. Africanists, such as Melville Herskovits (1941), pointed to the survival of African musical habits and institutions in the New World. A comparison of the cantometric profiles of song performance from Negro Africa and from a wide sampling of Afro-American groups provides the answer to this apparent paradox.⁵⁶⁴

What Lomax proposed was a set of thirty-seven different criteria be used to assess the similarities and differences between African and African American music making. These criteria would include “melodic shape” and “melodic form” and “interval width” but would exclude pitch relations and harmonic form, it would include “orchestral relationship” but exclude instrumentation; would consider “phrase length” and “number of phrases” but would exclude considerations of two-part or three-part stanzas.

As the cantometric system excluded the features that were particular to the blues, it is somewhat unsurprising that Lomax concluded that “in most respects the African and Afro-American performance profiles are identical and form a unique pair in our world sample.” Lomax argued that “The main thing that we found in the cantometric study of world music, that Africans did to their music when they brought it over here, was to adopt all of the European melodic forms, and harmonic forms, that they ran into,”⁵⁶⁵ which perhaps provided a justification for excluding any consideration of harmony and formal construction from cantometrics.

By the time Lomax came to reflect on the music of Jelly Roll Morton, he had clearly come to the view that New Orleans Jazz could also be considered as a music that retained African musical practices, apparently putting to one side his earlier view that “this system is usable only for the coding of accompanied or unaccompanied singing. Purely instrumental music is beyond the scope of this system.”⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶³ Alan Lomax, “Song Structure and Social Structure,” *Ethnomusicology* 1, no. 1 (January, 1962): 1.

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid.*: 8.

⁵⁶⁵ Alan Lomax, “Tulane University ‘Jelly Roll Morton Symposium’ May 7, 1982”.

⁵⁶⁶ Alan Lomax and Victor Grauer, *Cantometric Coding Book* (pre-publication edition) copyright 1967, (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress).

Whatever the merits of the cantometric system, there is an interesting issue that this discussion gives rise to: what is the relationship between jazz and the blues? Lomax had believed back in 1938, when he began recording Jelly Roll Morton, that jazz was a commercial music that was destroying the folk-music that he cared about. By the time of the Jelly Roll Morton Symposium he had completely changed his view of jazz. His work on cantometrics had persuaded Lomax that jazz had its origin in African musical practice as did the blues. Jelly Roll Morton had told Lomax that the blues was being performed in New Orleans in the early years of the twentieth century and at much the same time that Jelly Roll claimed to have invented jazz. It seems unlikely that these two musical developments were unconnected. It is therefore necessary to explore in more detail the issue of the relationship between jazz and the blues. This is the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 4: The Birth of the Blues?

When the Original Dixieland Jazz band recorded “The Livery Stable Blues” on February 26, 1917, they not only recorded what is generally regarded to be the first “jazz” recording, they also began a legal dispute that goes to the heart of the issues that this chapter seeks to consider - the relationship between jazz and the blues.

The point at issue was that the Chicago music publisher Roger Graham had produced the sheet music to “The Livery Stable Blues,” and so too had Leo Feist of New York. Under the title “The Barnyard Blues,” Feist’s edition had a front cover stating that this was identical with the “Livery Stable Blues,” as recorded on phonograph by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band.

Variety of October 19, 1917 reported on the court proceedings noting that the case had caused much merriment and had been reported by the daily papers as “a comic feature story” however; despite the judicial “horse-play” this court case was of “considerable importance in the profession.” In an effort to resolve the issue an expert witness was called. *Variety* reported:

Professor White accomplished during his testimony what numberless others have failed to do. He defined “blues.” The answer came when White told the judge he was the author of several hundred compositions, including several “blues.”

“Just what are blues?” Asked Judge Carpenter

“Blues are blues, that’s what blues are,” replied the professor. The answer was written into the record and will stand as the statement of an expert.”⁵⁶⁷

There are a number of interesting issues that this court case raises. The first of these is how difficult it was (and still is) to define the blues, without simply discussing the blues in relation to itself.

A second issue that the case raises is the issue of ownership of the blues. It is telling that when an expert witness was required by the court, it was to an African American musician that they turned to for advice. This strongly suggests that by 1917, despite argument to the contrary from the white musicians of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, there was a view developing that the blues was an African American music.

The third issue that this court case raises is the relationship between jazz and the blues. With the release of the “Livery Stable Blues,” the Original Dixieland Jazz Band made their claim to be the “creators of jazz.” But what was in dispute was not the term “jazz” the dispute was over the term “blues.”

⁵⁶⁷ *Variety*, October 19, 1917; Koenig, 126-7.

From the earliest days of jazz on phonograph the blues has been a part of jazz, an essential ingredient in the jazz mix. But surprisingly little is known about how the blues became a part of jazz. An article in *Atlantic Monthly*, of August 1922, titled "Jazz a Musical Discussion," suggests that "jazz is ragtime, plus 'Blues,' plus orchestral polyphony."⁵⁶⁸ If this is indeed an accurate description of the jazz mix then this raises the question of how did the emerging jazz bands come to know the blues. This is an issue that Paul Oliver questioned in a paper in 1991.

The role of ragtime, because the published compositions are specifically datable, is less contentious, while the presence in New Orleans of known black brass marching bands in the 1880s and 1890s is well-documented. But what is the evidence of the presence of blues in New Orleans as an idiom distinct from jazz which could have exercised an influence upon it? Did New Orleans have a vocal blues tradition? If so, who were its exponents? If not, were its musicians first exposed to blues within the city (and if so, how?) or were they in contact with it while on tour, or in some other way? Were the New Orleans musicians the first to play blues-inflected jazz, or was it developed in another context altogether? The questions still remain. If there was any solid information on this subject it seems to have eluded most jazz historians, though the recollections of various jazz musicians have been cited by some and must be similarly re-examined.⁵⁶⁹

The assumption that Oliver makes is that the jazz musicians of New Orleans needed to be "exposed" to the blues, by which he seems to assume that the blues is an outside "influence" upon jazz. But the recollections of Jelly Roll Morton could suggest that the blues was known in New Orleans before it became known elsewhere. From what Jelly Roll Morton told Alan Lomax in the Library of Congress recordings in 1938, it seems very probable that the blues was being played in New Orleans from perhaps as early as the turn of the twentieth century.

A number of the blues that Morton recorded for Lomax were of a twelve-bar construction, so it is clear that Morton was not using the term "blues" (at least in these instances) to refer to folk-songs or honky-tonk music in general, but is specifically referring to the formal twelve-bar blues. One issue that this chapter will explore is whether there is any further evidence to support the view that the twelve-bar form of the blues was known in New Orleans in the early years of the century.

If the "formal" blues was known in New Orleans around the turn of the century this would further undermine the credibility of the rural origin theory of the emergence of the blues. From the interviews that were conducted with rural bluesmen it becomes apparent that the blues in the formal sense was not known much before 1910 in the rural South. Consistently rural songsters tell of being the first generation to play the blues and of first hearing the blues around 1908-1910. This raises obvious questions relating to the popular myth that the blues became a part of jazz because of the influx of rural songsters into New Orleans, as described by Ken Burns.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid., 110.

⁵⁶⁹ Paul Oliver, "That Certain Feeling: Blues and Jazz...In 1890?," *Popular Music* 10, no. 1 (1991): 18.

About the same time, [as ragtime developed circa 1890,] New Orleans musicians began to hear the blues. A steady stream of refugees from the Mississippi Delta was now pouring into New Orleans, in flight from Jim Crow laws. People for whom labouring on the city docks promised a better life than any they could hope to have back home chopping cotton or cutting cane for someone else's profit. The blues was part of their baggage.⁵⁷⁰

If the blues (in the formal sense) was known in New Orleans before it was known in the Mississippi Delta, then this cannot be the explanation as to how the musicians of New Orleans learned the blues.

I Got the Blues

One thing that we can be sure of is that the twelve-bar blues was known in New Orleans in 1908. In that year "I Got the Blues" (1908) was published in New Orleans composed by a classically trained musician who lived and worked there at the time

In an article, "The Birth of the Blues," that was published in 1955 in the journal of Local 47 of the American Federation of Musicians, Anthony Maggio, a musician of Sicilian descent claimed to have been responsible for the birth of the blues.⁵⁷¹ In the article of around 400 words, Maggio tells of a visit to Algiers on the opposite bank of the Mississippi to New Orleans in 1907.

I took the ferry boat from New Orleans across the Mississippi river to Algiers. On my way up the levee, I heard an elderly negro with a guitar playing three notes for a long time. I didn't think anything with only three notes could have a title so to satisfy my curiosity I asked him what was the name of the piece. He replied, 'I got the blues.'

Quite why the elderly guitarist on the levee in Algiers chose to call the tune "I Got the Blues" we are not told; however one possibility is that it was in some way related to "I've Got De Blues" (1901), the first major hit for the African American vaudeville entertainers Chris Smith⁵⁷² and Elmer Bowman. This tune was issued in sheet music and on piano roll.⁵⁷³

*I've got de blues,
I beg to be excused
My heart is breaking and my head is aching
That is why I refuse
I'm all confused, ma gal I 'spects to lose,*

⁵⁷⁰ Burns and Norvick.

⁵⁷¹ Anthony Maggio, "The Birth of the Blues," *The Overture* 35, no. 9 (1955). (The Professional Musicians, Local 47 Archives Department).

⁵⁷² Chris Smith went on to have his biggest hit in 1914 with "Ballin' the Jack" which was co-written with Jim Burris and starting a dance craze that lasted a decade.

⁵⁷³ "I Got De Blues," by Chris Smith & Eugene Bowman, Music for the Aeolian Grand (piano roll) 40898 (1906).

*I can't make no toast tonight ,
Because I've got de blues*

One reason to believe that there may be a connection between the melody of “I’ve Got De Blues” (1901), a song about a soon to be jilted toast-master, and Maggio’s composition, “I Got the Blues” (1908) is that they both use a similar chromatic melody.



Figure 17: “I’ve Got De Blues” (1901), Chris Smith & Elmer Bowman (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress)

If this elderly levee worker were simply playing a repeated version of the opening notes of the melody to “I’ve Got De Blues,” transposed to the key of G it is quite possible that he would have played something very like the simple melody that Maggio recalled.



**Figure 18: The melody that Maggio recalled hearing on the levee
(*The Overture* 35, no. 9, 1955)**

Although “I’ve Got De Blues” (1901) by Smith and Bowman was not a twelve-bar blues, Jelly Roll Morton remembered that “The first publication with the title “blues” as far as I can remember was a tune written by Chris Smith, who still resides in New York and may be located through Shapiro-Bernstein, Publishers.”⁵⁷⁴ The tune “I’ve Got De Blues” was clearly known to Morton and could therefore have been known elsewhere in New Orleans.

Morton was however, wrong in his assertion that this was the first publication with “blues” in the title. There were a number of earlier published songs that used the word “blues” in the

⁵⁷⁴ Jelly Roll Morton, *Down Beat*, September 1938, 4 (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress).

title, but none of these had features that we normally associate with the blues. One of these earlier “blues” titles that may have been connected to Smith and Bowman’s composition was “Oh Aint I Got the Blues” (1871); which was performed by Welch, Hughes & White Minstrels and composed by A. A. Chapman and published by J.W. Smith, Jr. in Fulton Street, New York.⁵⁷⁵ The chorus of “Oh Aint I Got the Blues” uses a similar rhyming couplet found in the previous example, using the words “blues” and “excuse”:

*Oh aint I got the blues!
My sadness you’d excuse,
If you knew like me what ‘tis
to have such a terrible fit of the blues*

An even earlier “blues” title is the 1850 comic ballad “I Have Got the Blues To Day” written by Miss Sarah M. Graham with music by Gustave Blessner and published by Firth Pond & Co. in New York.⁵⁷⁶ The lyrics of all these songs make it clear that the concept of *having the blues* was identified with a depressed state of mind, for more than half a century before Maggio heard a simple melody that inspired his composition “I Got the Blues” in 1908.

Maggio goes on to say, “I went home. Having this on my mind, I wrote ‘I Got the Blues,’ making the three notes dominating most of the time.”

The same night [that he had been to Algiers] our five-piece orchestra played at the Fabaker restaurant (in New Orleans) ‘I Got the Blues’ which was composed with the purpose of a musical caricature, and to my astonishment became our most popular request number. In a very short time all of the negroes in New Orleans with street organs were playing the Blues.

During this time people asked me for copies, but I only had my manuscript. I had no intention of publishing it because my interest in music was entirely classical. However, the people’s demand by now was so overwhelming that our first violinist, Barzin (later to play first viola with Toscanini at the Met) persisted until I finally consented to publish 1000 copies for piano, 500 for band and 500 for orchestra which were printed in Cincinnati [*sic*] by Zimmerman Publishing house. This took place in 1908. The copies were sold in a very short time. I wasn’t interested in another edition for the reason already explained.

Much of this can be verified. Leon Jean Barzin is recorded in the 1910 census for New Orleans and he did indeed play viola with Toscanini at the Met (as did his rather more famous son, Leon Eugene Barzin). “I Got the Blues” was published in 1908 as he says, and it seems that Maggio made little effort to exploit his position as a pioneer in the publication of the blues, although he did write another twelve-bar tune in 1910, “Bad Rag,” which was

⁵⁷⁵ “Oh Aint I Got the Blues,” (1871), by A. A. Chapman, published by J.W. Smith, Jr. in Fulton Street, New York (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁵⁷⁶ “I Have Got the Blues To Day,” (1850), by Miss Sarah M. Graham & Gustave Blessner, published by Firth Pond & Co., New York (Duke University Library, Historic American Sheet Music 1850-1920).

never published, the only known copy being a manuscript in the Music Division of the Library of Congress.⁵⁷⁷

Maggio believed that it was his composition “I Got the Blues” that W. C. Handy had used as the basis for his own blues compositions, as he noted at the end of the article.

Handy came to New Orleans in 1910 or 1911 and heard this blues which was still playing on the streets. He later went to Memphis and wrote the Memphis Blues in 1912 and later came the St. Louis Blues in 1914. Handy took full advantage of the three basic notes. The original copy is still in my possession.

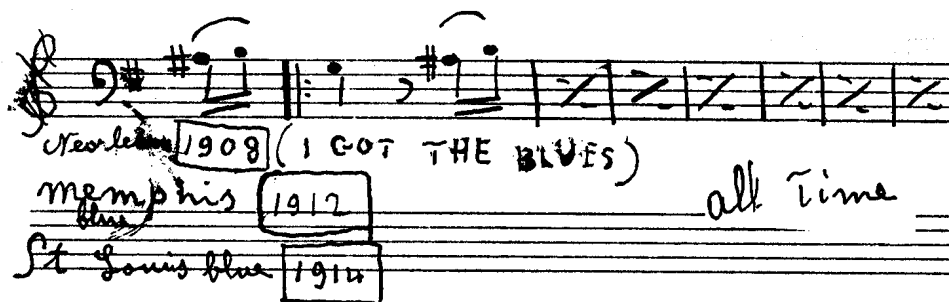


Figure 19: Maggio’s copy of the melody he heard, as reproduced in “The Birth of the Blues” (*The Overture* 35, no. 9, 1955)

Whilst it is possible that Handy may have visited New Orleans and have heard “I Got the Blues,” it could also be argued that Handy may have come to know “I Got the Blues” through obtaining a copy of the sheet music.

Maggio’s publisher was The Cable Piano Company on Canal Street in New Orleans,⁵⁷⁸ but the composition was printed by Zimmerman & Co., in Cincinnati. They were specialist music printers who attracted work from around the South. When Otto Zimmerman died in 1932, the company was “said to be the largest music publishing firm west of New York City”⁵⁷⁹

Otto Zimmerman had been brought by his parents to the United States from Switzerland when he was just four years old in 1867. He was brought up in Newport, Kentucky and by 1880 he lists his occupation as a printer, which was not his father’s trade.⁵⁸⁰ Ten years later he was running his own specialist music printing company as the Cincinnati Ohio Directory of 1890-1 lists Otto Zimmerman “music printer, works” at 171 W. 4th Cincinnati Ohio.

Maggio and his publishers instructed Zimmerman to produce three different versions of his composition, 1000 copies for piano, 500 for band, and a further 500 copies for string orchestra. They clearly assumed that there was an organised band and string orchestra market for his composition, alongside the home piano market. It is not inconceivable that Handy acquired a copy of the brass band music.

⁵⁷⁷ Muir, 311.

⁵⁷⁸ Abbott and Seroff, “‘They Cert’ly Sound Good to Me’: Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues,” 406.

⁵⁷⁹ “Publisher Dies,” *Zanesville Signal (Ohio)*, September 8, 1932 (Ancestry.Com)

⁵⁸⁰ 1880 census, Newport, Kentucky (Ancestry.Com)

When In 1912, Handy was having difficulty getting his “The Memphis Blues,” published he too used Zimmerman’s. However I doubt that Handy did copy the melody of “I Got the Blues” as the basis of his “The Memphis Blues,” as Maggio believed. By the time that “The Memphis Blues” was published a number of melodies had been published using alternating minor and major thirds. There was even one earlier example of a twelve-bar composition with a “blue-note” melody.

One O’ Them Things!

If we compare the piano versions of “I Got the Blues,” and “The Memphis Blues,” both have an opening twelve-bar strain and both melodies have a blue-note motif, but there is one significant difference. The melody of “I Got the Blues,” uses only the minor third and major third resolution to the tonic, whereas “The Memphis Blues,” has a similar, minor, major third, tonic, melody, but it also has a parallel melody of the diminished fifth resolving to the perfect fifth. In other words “I Got the Blues” is a single note melody that can be played on a single note instrument. The melody of “The Memphis Blues” is a two note melody that can only be played on an instrument that can easily play two notes at the same time.

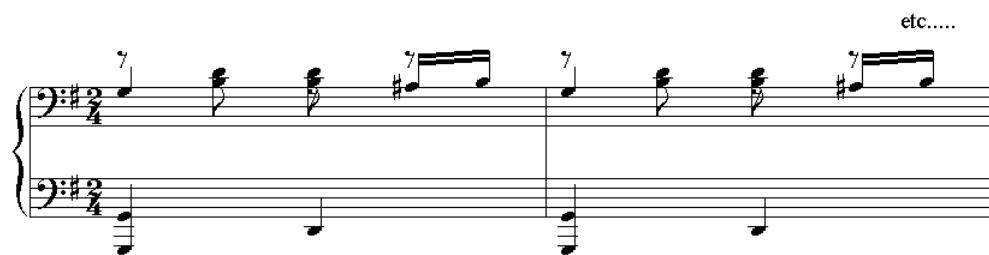


Figure 20: “I Got the Blues” (1908), by Anthony Maggio (Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University)



Figure 21: “The Memphis Blues” (1912), By W. C. Handy (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress)

If the melody of “The Memphis Blues” is played on the piano, the piano player’s right hand strikes two notes on the keyboard at the same time (G and a B^b) before ascending in parallel semitones (G[#] and B) and resolving (A and C). This melody is rather more reminiscent of an

earlier twelve-bar composition “One O’ Them Things!” (1904), a ragtime two-step by James Chapman and Leroy Smith.⁵⁸¹



Figure 22: “One O’ Them Things” (1904), James Chapman and Leroy Smith, (Harriet Ottenheimer, "The Blues Tradition in St. Louis," 1989)

This composition uses the same chromatic parallel movement in the melody and the same rhythmic placement in its opening phrase transposed to a different key. If W. C Handy did take his blue-note melody from a previous twelve-bar composition, it is rather more likely that it was “One O’ Them Things!” (1904) by Chapman and Smith, rather than Maggio’s “I Got the Blues” (1908).

Where “One O’ Them Things!” differs from “I Got the Blues” and “The Memphis Blues” is that the harmony of “One O’ Them Things!” is based on simple three-note (triadic) chords. The principal exception to this is the (V) chord of G7 which is a four note chord. The second feature that is unlike later blues is that the harmony of “One O’ Them Things!” is diatonic, in that the chords are derived from the notes of the C major scale. There are no sharpened or flattened notes in the harmony.

In “The Memphis Blues,” (which is in the key of F) the harmony is based upon four note harmony. In the second bar of the twelve-bar strain of “The Memphis Blues” the bass moves to E^b this results in a chord of F7, likewise in bar six where the harmony has moved to B^b the appearance of A^b renders this chord as B^b7. Neither E^b nor A^b are notes within the key of F major and consequently the harmony of “The Memphis Blues” is not diatonic. A^b is the minor (or flat) third interval in relation to F and E^b is the minor (or flat) seventh. This turns simple I-IV-V triadic harmony into a series of four note chords, where all three chords appear as dominant four note harmony; this is a subtle but distinct departure from diatonic harmony and one that is a characteristic of blues harmony.

What this demonstrates is that the blue-notes of the flattened third and seventh of the diatonic major scale have both melodic and harmonic implications in the blues. It is not as some observers have suggested that the blues is bi-modal⁵⁸² or that the harmony is major and the melody is in a minor mode or key, but rather that these blue-notes appear at specific places within the twelve-bar structure. In the first four bars of “The Memphis Blues” the melody

⁵⁸¹ R Foreman, "Jazz and Rare Records. 1920-1932" (PhD, University of Illinois, 1968).; Harriet Ottenheimer, "The Blues Tradition in St. Louis," *Black Music Research Journal* 9, no. 2 (1989): 139.

⁵⁸² Leroy Ostransky, *Understanding Jazz* (Prentice-Hall Inc., 1977), 92-3.

resolves to the major third (A \sharp) as a harmony note of F7. In bars five and six the resolution is to the minor third (A \flat) with the harmonic implication that this chord is rendered as B \flat 7.

Blues Harmony

Commentators began to notice quite early in the development of jazz that there was a distinct difference between the diatonic harmony of early ragtime and the harmony of the blues. In 1922, in “Jazz a Musical Discussion,” an article that appeared in *Atlantic Monthly*, the point was made that:

Between the earlier ‘rag’ and the ‘blues’ there was this distinction: the rag had been mainly a thing of rhythm, of syncopation; the blues were syncopation relished with spicier harmonics.⁵⁸³

An article the following year by the music critic Gilbert Seldes in *Dial*, July/Dec. 1923, titled “Toujours Jazz,” takes up a similar theme.

It is not only syncopation that makes us indebted to negro music. Another element is the typical chord structure found there, the characteristic variations from the accustomed. Technically described on[e] of the most familiar is the subdominant seventh chord with the interval of a minor instead of a major seventh—a method of lowering the leading tone which affects so distant a piece as *A Stairway to Paradise* where the accented syllable of “Par’-adise is skilfully lowered. (By extension ragtime also uses the minor third). The succession of dominant sevenths and of ninths is another characteristic, and the intrusion of tones which lie outside our normal piano scale is common.⁵⁸⁴

Early in the development of jazz it was realised that the harmony of jazz and by extension the blues, as played by jazz bands, were based upon a “succession of dominant sevenths and of ninths,” and that these chords were often arranged in a “cycle of fifths” such that each successive chord was a perfect fourth above, or a perfect fifth below, the preceding chord.

If a tune begins away from the tonic this is described as “funnel tonality” by Donald Johns. An example he gives is “There’ll Be Some Changes Made.”

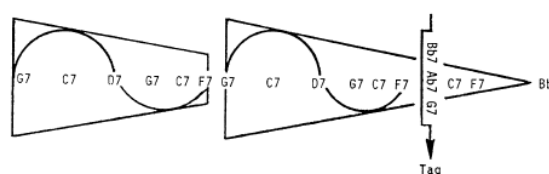


Figure 23: “There’ll Be Some Changes Made” (1921), by W. Benton Overstreet, Harmonic Design (Donald Johns, "Funnel Tonality in American Popular Music, 1993)

⁵⁸³ “Jazz a Musical Discussion,” *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1922; Koenig, 101.

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

Johns argues that:

Simply put, “funnel tonality” is a convenient term for pieces that begin away from the tonic, out of the key, or in an otherwise unstable tonal state. It is a dynamic process in which the composer seeks to *achieve* a tonality, to reach an ultimate arrival point that is appropriate, that sounds right, but is not always obvious from the beginning.”⁵⁸⁵

This harmonic scheme is a characteristic of some eight-bar blues. It is also common in eight and sixteen-bar strains in early published blues, an example being the second strain of Maggio’s “I Got the Blue” (1908), where the chords G7-C7- F7-Bb7-Eb are used.⁵⁸⁶

The dominant cycle also appears as a turn around in twelve-bar blues. An example of this is Louis Armstrong’s solo chorus on “Chimes Blues” of 1923.⁵⁸⁷ In this example (in the key of C) from bar eight we find “cycle-of-fifths” turn-around (A7-D7-G7-C)



Figure 24: “Chimes Blues” (1923), Louis Armstrong’s first solo chorus (*Dixieland Fake Book Vol. 2.*)

The secondary dominant “cycle-of-fifths” turnaround can also found in the earliest guitar blues recordings of more sophisticated guitarist such as Blind Lemon Jefferson. According to David Evans:

He [Jefferson] also appears to have been aware of the VI-II-V-I circle-of-fifths harmonic progression typically found in many ragtime tunes, the chords often containing the flat seventh note as a lead-in to the next chord, this VI7-II7-V7-I. jazz bands and pianists often inserted this progression into the twelve-bar blues form, starting with the VI7 harmony in the last measure of line 2 (m.8) and then beginning

⁵⁸⁵ Donald Johns, "Funnel Tonality in American Popular Music, Ca. 1900-70," *American Music* 11, no. 4 (1993): 460.

⁵⁸⁶ This example is in E^b.

⁵⁸⁷ As transcribed in David W. Littlefield, *Dixieland Fake Book Vol. 2.*

the third line (m. 9) with the II7 harmony, followed by the V7 (m.10) and back to the tonic (I) chord for measures 11 and 12.⁵⁸⁸

In later country guitar blues recordings the harmony tends to be simplified to I-IV-V, which actually suggests that the harmony of the blues has become less, rather than more complex over time. In other words, what we have retrospectively identified as *blues harmony* could in fact be the rationalised form of harmonic practices that may have begun as more complex progressions within jazz and ragtime. A similar simplification process can also be seen in relation to form. Early published “blues” titles typically had a number of different strains. In later rural blues, and also in later jazz recordings, it was only the chorus strain that was retained. This reduced a complex form to a single repeated cycle.

The use of harmony based upon the cycle-of-fifths, using secondary dominant chords, can also be found in barbershop singing which was also popular throughout the South in the late nineteenth century.

That Barbershop Chord

Before the publication of *Play That Barber Shop Chord: A Case for the African American Origin of Barber Shop Harmony* (1992) it was widely believed that Barber Shop harmony was principally a white musical tradition. Instead Lynn Abbott convincingly argues that by the 1890s and early 1900s “for the male population, at least, [barbershop...] was nothing less than a black national pastime.”⁵⁸⁹

Jelly Roll Morton recalled singing in a barbershop quartet in his recordings for the Library of Congress:

In New Orleans, why, we’d often wonder where a dead person was located, ‘cause anytime we had somebody that was dead, we know we had plenty good food that night — plenty ham sandwiches, cheese sandwiches, with mustard slapped all over the bread.

Those days I belonged to a quartet. And we, of course, we specialized in spirituals for the purpose of finding somebody that was dead. And we could sing ‘em too, I’m telling you. The minute we’d walk in — of course, we’d have our correct invitation — and that would be right to the kitchen where all the food was.⁵⁹⁰

He then proceeds to sing “Steal Away” and “Nearer, My God, to Thee,” demonstrating “some of the harmony we’d use. The boys had some beautiful harmony they sang. And, of

⁵⁸⁸ David Evans, “Musical Innovation in the Blues of Blind Lemon Jefferson,” *Black Music Research Journal* 20, no. 1 (2000): 94-5.

⁵⁸⁹ Lynn Abbott, “‘Play That Barber Shop Chord’: A Case for the African-American Origin of Barbershop Harmony,” *American Music* 10, no. 3 (1992): 290.

⁵⁹⁰ “Transcript of the 1938 Library of Congress Recordings of Jelly Roll Morton,” 28.

course, we got together and made all kinds of crazy ideas of the harmony, which made it beautiful and made it impossible for anybody to jump in and sing.”⁵⁹¹

Another New Orleans jazz musician to recall barbershop singing from his teenage years before World War I was trumpeter Lee Collins:

There used to be lots of guys around New Orleans who could sing real good. They got up quartets—my Aunt Esther's husband was the head of many a one—and would go around to some of their friends' homes to sing and eat and drink beer [... .] That was some of the most beautiful singing you would ever hope to hear. After every one was drunk, the last song would always be their old favorite, "Sweet Adeline.”⁵⁹²

Perhaps the most famous of all New Orleans jazz musicians, Louis Armstrong, also started out singing in a quartet when he was around eleven years old. Armstrong later recalled how he had:

Started up a singing quartet with three of the best singing boys from my neighborhood. . . . We used to hear the old timers sing around a bucket of beer—them beautiful chords—and we dug it. We was Little Mack, Big Nose Sidney, myself and Georgie Grey. Red Head Happy was in and out. . . . I was the tenor. I used to put my hand behind my ear, and move my mouth from side to side, and some beautiful tones would appear.⁵⁹³

In the early years of the twentieth century in New Orleans, two barber's shops in particular catered for local musicians. “Joe Sarpy's Cut Rate Shaving Parlor was ‘Headquarters for Dining Car and Railroad Men,’⁵⁹⁴ and, because Sarpy had a vested interest in the vaudeville activity at old Lincoln Park, it was the hangout for local singers and performers.⁵⁹⁵ Another such hangout was Dewberry's Shaving Parlor and Social Club, on the corner of Gasquet and Franklin streets, in the old ‘Black Storyville’ section.⁵⁹⁶ Proprietor J. B. Dewberry boasted in 1914 that, ‘All the theatrical world knows me. I have a barber shop and a suit of rooms upstairs to entertain them.’”⁵⁹⁷

We are informed by Donald Marquis that “Barbershops in those days were meeting places for musicians, since without telephones it was necessary to have rendezvous points where

⁵⁹¹ Ibid.: 29.

⁵⁹² Lynn Abbott's footnotes: “Frank J. Gillis and John W. Miner (ed.), *Oh, Didn't He Ramble: The Life Story of Lee Collins as Told to Mary Collins* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 62. (Aunt Esther is named elsewhere in the book as one of Collins's mother's sisters. Her husband is identified only as ‘Mootsey.’);” Abbott, “Play That Barber Shop Chord: A Case for the African-American Origin of Barbershop Harmony,” 314.

⁵⁹³ Armstrong, *Swing*, 4; Meryman, *Louis Armstrong*, 13; Armstrong, *Satchmo*, 30; Ibid.: 315.

⁵⁹⁴ Allen T. Woods, *Woods' Directory: Being a Colored Business, Professional and Trades Directory of New Orleans, Louisiana* (vol. 1) (New Orleans: Allen T. Woods, 1913), 50; Ibid.: 291.

⁵⁹⁵ “The Stage,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, July 3, 1909; Ibid.

⁵⁹⁶ Allen T. Woods, *Woods' Directory: Being a Colored Business, Professional and Trades Directory of New Orleans, Louisiana* (vol. 1) (New Orleans: Allen T. Woods, 1913), 50; Ibid.

⁵⁹⁷ “Gossip of the stage,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, August 22, 1914; Ibid.

personal contacts could be made for lining up jobs.”⁵⁹⁸ But Barbershop quartet singing was by no means confined to New Orleans; it was common throughout the South.

Famous vaudevillian Billy McClain recalled that when he was in Kansas City during the late 1880s, “about every four dark faces you met was a quartet.”⁵⁹⁹ His recollection was echoed by such authoritative spokesmen as James Weldon Johnson and Laurence C. Jones, founders of the well-known Piney Woods School, who both flatly stated, in print, that “Any four colored boys are a quartet.”⁶⁰⁰

In barbershop singing the aim is to take an existing melody and to improvise on the harmony avoiding the doubling of any note. The result is inevitably four note harmony. One common technique used in barbershop singing is the “swipe.”

The Swipe is a typical barbershop convention for coloring a major chord with a dominant seventh. The baritone leaves its position on the fifth and sounds the minor seventh. The bass in order to fill the now empty chord, rises to assume the fifth vacated by the baritone, and a full, four-part chord is created. The now dominant-sounding III7 is compelled to lead toward the submediant of the key. Rather than presenting the submediant in its expected minor form, however, the progression offers the VI7 as another secondary dominant. Similarly, this leads to II7 (another secondary dominant), which progresses to the V7, which resolves to the tonic.”⁶⁰¹

In other words the “swipe” results in the same cycle-of-fifth chord progression that uses successive secondary dominant seventh chords, as is found in jazz and blues harmony.

Another unusual chord that is sometimes found in New Orleans blues is the flat-sixth chord (^bVI). An example of this chord is found in “Chimes Blues,” (above) where the opening chord of C is followed by A^b7. Again this unusual chord can be found in barbershop harmony.

One particularly unusual chord that has persisted among barbershop groups is the flat-VI or flat-VI7 chord. While not built on the blues scale, the flat-VI chord is related to it. Keep in mind that barbershop is founded on improvisation and the quest to find “‘weird,’ organically blended harmonies,”⁶⁰² the flat-VI allows a melodic blue third to be harmonised with the barbershop chord of choice, a major chord. When one adds

⁵⁹⁸ Donald M. Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden: First Man of Jazz* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 41.

⁵⁹⁹ Billy McClain, “The Man Who Originated the Cake Walk,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, April 23rd, 1910; Abbott, “Play That Barber Shop Chord: A Case for the African-American Origin of Barbershop Harmony,” 290.

⁶⁰⁰ James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*, (New York: Viking Press, 1925); Ibid.

⁶⁰¹ James Earl Henry, “The Origins of Barbershop Harmony: A Study of Barbershop’s Musical Link to Other African American Musics as Evidenced through Recordings and Arrangements of Early Black and White Quartets” (PhD, Washington University, 2000), 18.

⁶⁰² Abbott, “Play That Barber Shop Chord: A Case for the African-American Origin of Barbershop Harmony.” 290; Ibid., 197.

the blue fifth to this sonority the result is the even more irresistible secondary dominant chord.⁶⁰³

An issue that James Henry raises here is the relationship between the blue-notes and blues harmony,⁶⁰⁴ as he notes that “the flat-VI allows a melodic blue third to be harmonised with the barbershop chord of choice, a major chord.” The relationship between blues melody and harmony is a particularly perplexing question when considered from the perspective of polyphonic music, whether of a vocal quartet or of an early jazz band.

If we consider blues harmony and melody from the perspective of a singer that accompanies himself on a guitar, it is quite possible for the guitarist to play major chords and to sing the minor intervals associated with what have become known as the “blues-scale” at the same time. In polyphonic music this is simply not possible; any note that is sung or played will have harmonic implications when combined with the other notes.

In European classical music, diatonic harmony developed from the rules of counterpoint; rules that composers were required to study in method books such as the *Gradus Ad Parnassum* (1725).⁶⁰⁵ The rules of counterpoint stipulated that only the notes of the mode or key could be used, which ensured that when notes were set against other notes, the resulting harmony would be in one mode or key.⁶⁰⁶ These complex rules required years of study to master, but once learned consistent harmonic relations would result.

The early jazz of New Orleans had a similar polyphonic texture, but as Wilder Hobson noted in 1939, the idea of “*jazz counterpoint*” “has often appalled academic musicians, who have said that it was impossible, or at least that the musical results would be impossible.”⁶⁰⁷ It is certainly difficult to see how in the absence of any rules, that an apparently improvised polyphonic music can give rise to consistent harmonic relations.

If the emerging jazz bands of New Orleans had used the principles that had been developed within barbershop quartets and applied these to brass instruments this could perhaps explain how *jazz counterpoint* may have functioned. Evidence to support this conjecture comes from Louis Keppard.

Louis Keppard, who was active in the New Orleans brass band tradition before 1920, explained how one band member “would give us an idea, and we would memorize [i.e., harmonize] [*sic*] behind them. Of course, we could only do that because we could chord with one another. That's what made it sound good; we'd organize like a

⁶⁰³ Ibid., 197.

⁶⁰⁴ For an early exploration of blues scales and related issues, Winthrop Sargeant, *Jazz: Hot and Hybrid* (Da Capo Paperback, 1938; reprint, 1976).

⁶⁰⁵ Johann Joseph Fux, *Gradus Ad Parnassum*, trans. Alfred Mann (London: J.M Dent & Son, 1725; reprint, 1965).

⁶⁰⁶ There are two example of successive secondary dominant harmony in classical compositions given in Henry, “The Origins of Barbershop Harmony: A Study of Barbershop's Musical Link to Other African American Musics as Evidenced through Recordings and Arrangements of Early Black and White Quartets”. J. S. Bach's Suite II in A Minor “English Suites” 163 and Liszt's Nocturne No. 3 in Ab major, 164.

⁶⁰⁷ Hobson, 58.

quartet, like about six or five or four mens. Bass, baritone and alto. Everybody got their own parts.”⁶⁰⁸

It seems that Keppard and his band were intentionally imitating the harmony of barbershop quartets. If this was done successfully it seems inevitable that the harmony that they produced would be similar to the harmony of barbershop singing. If they employed the “swipe” technique this would give rise to the cycle-of-fifths based on a series of secondary dominant chords and if they played a minor third in the melody this could be harmonised with a major chord by using the flat VI chord. These harmonic features are to be found in some of the earliest New Orleans tunes that were associated with the blues.

Buddy Bolden’s Blues

Charles Joseph “Buddy” Bolden was born on September 6, 1877⁶⁰⁹ and is generally regarded as the first cornet king of New Orleans. It seems likely that Buddy Bolden began playing professional jobs around 1895.

Louis Jones said that Buddy took his first formal lessons from a neighbor, Manual Hall, who lived at 467 South Liberty between Jackson and Philip streets. Thus we can speculate that because Jones did not move to New Orleans until September, 1894, Buddy began lessons around that time and was unlikely to have played any professional jobs before 1895.⁶¹⁰

It was on Labour Day in 1906 that Bolden is believed to have played his last professional job.⁶¹¹ His mental health had been deteriorating and he was eventually admitted to East Louisiana State Hospital, where he would remain until his death in 1931.

Buddy Bolden is remembered by a number of the older jazz musicians that were interviewed for the Hogan Jazz Archive in New Orleans. Consistently we are told that Buddy Bolden played the blues.

Willie “Old Man” Parker, born on March 4, 1875, says “Oh, he was, he was the blues king, he brought them blues out, old Buddy Bolden.”⁶¹² We are also told that he was an improvising musician and he played by ear rather than by notation. For example Peter Bocage, born on July 31, 1887, in Algiers, was asked by Richard Allen “Who do you think was the first band to ever play any jazz or ragtime?”

⁶⁰⁸ Andy Ridley interview with Louis Keppard, quoted in Andy Ridley, *I’m Just A Plain Ordinary Guitar Player. . . But I’ll Scare the Best of Them: The Autobiography of Louis Keppard*, unpublished manuscript, 1985; Abbott, “Play That Barber Shop Chord”: A Case for the African-American Origin of Barbershop Harmony,” 318.

⁶⁰⁹ Marquis, 12.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid., 38.

⁶¹¹ Ibid., 116.

⁶¹² Willie “Old Man” Parker, “Interview Transcript, November 7, 1958,” ed. Richard B. Allen (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University). The transcript at one time read who was the “finest band to ever play any jazz or ragtime?” This was a transcription error that has now been corrected to “first band.”

Well, I attribute it to Bolden, you know; I mean, cause – the simple fact, the way that thing come about – you see, Bolden was a fellow, he didn't know a note big as this house you understand what I mean; and whatever they played, they caught [learned by hearing] or made up, you see? Say – they made their own music, and they played it their own way, you understand? So that's the way jazz started, you understand? – just through the feeling of the man, you understand? – just his, his improvison [improvisation], you see. And then the surroundings – the surroundings at that time was mostly people of – oh, you might say of a fast type, you know – exciting, you understand? And those old blues and all that stuff, you know just come in there, you see. And eventually the jazz business started to going, you see.⁶¹³

Tom Albert was born in Algiers, on the opposite bank of the Mississippi to New Orleans on December 23, 1877.⁶¹⁴ From the digest of Albert's interview we learn that:

Buddy Bolden's band was about the best band when Tom was growing up. Buddy's band was a ragtime [i.e., jazz]⁶¹⁵ band, with the blues and everything. He was loud; you could hear him at 4 o'clock in the morning across the river in Algiers. He played like he didn't care; he could hit the notes, but Tom never saw him read a piece of music. "He [Buddy] would never bother with [written] music-routine [fake] all the time. Buddy played mostly all blues."⁶¹⁶

John Joseph was born in Jamestown, St. James Parish, about eleven miles from Donaldsonville, Louisiana around 1878. Asked by William Russell, "Did those bands up in the country ever play any blues at all, very much?" He responds:

[Joseph]: Well, didn't know much about blues
 [Russell]: When did you ...
 [Joseph]: The first man that ever played blues here was, ah, that guy, ah, you asked me about his name the other day, what was his name?
 [Allen]: What instrument did he play?
 [Joseph]: Trumpet. Used to live right here on this block. I told ya.
 [Allen]: Buddy Bolden.
 [Joseph]: Buddy Bolden is the first man that ever played a blues for dancin'. And later on Edward Clem, ya heard of him? [...].⁶¹⁷ "Edward Clem, he, uh, he was a pretty good trumpet player, him and Buddy Bolden was the two first men that ever played blues for dancing. That's right. Yeah."⁶¹⁸

Eddie Dawson born in New Orleans in 1884 said the first time he remembered "hearing a

⁶¹³ Peter Bocage, "Interview Transcript, January 29, 1959," ed. Richard B. Allen and William Russell (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

⁶¹⁴ Tom Albert, "Interview Transcript, September 25, 1959," ed. William Russell and Ralph Collins (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

⁶¹⁵ The insertion in parentheses are as given in the digest.

⁶¹⁶ Albert. (Insertions in parentheses are as given in the digest).

⁶¹⁷ My ellipses points.

⁶¹⁸ Joseph.

band play blues was when he heard Buddy Bolden, playing at Miss [Betsy] Cole's lawn, on Magnolia Street.”⁶¹⁹ And Wooden Joe Nicholas, born New Orleans 1883, says that Bolden “played all kinds of numbers, blues more than others. One tune that Nicholas believed Bolden made up was “Careless Love,”⁶²⁰ a tune that W. C. Handy included in *Blues an Anthology* (1926).

Careless Love

“Careless Love” was a tune that John Joseph recalled hearing for the first time in New Orleans.

- [Russell:] For a minute I want to ask about some of the old tunes, when you first heard them. Pieces like "Careless Love": when did you first hear that? When did you play it?
- [Joseph:] "Careless Love"? When I came down here, that was the first time I heard it. That's pretty old, too.
- [Russell:] When you first came to New Orleans, around 1906?
- [Joseph:] Around 1900, 1906, yes.⁶²¹

A feature of “Careless Love” that is of interest is the harmony. There is no recording of Buddy Bolden playing “Careless Love,” but Wooden Joe Nicholas, who styled his trumpet playing on Bolden, did record a version in 1945. He began by playing three choruses of a standard twelve-bar blues, before introducing the “Careless Love” theme.



Figure 25: “Careless Love,” Wooden Joe Nicholas’s forth chorus, (American Music, MX803)⁶²²

⁶¹⁹ Eddie Dawson, "Interview Digest August 11, 1959," ed. William Russell and Ralph Collins (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

⁶²⁰ Nicholas.

⁶²¹ Joseph.

Of particular interest is the B7 chord in bar 12, which is the \flat VI7 chord in the key of E \flat , the unusual chord which enabled the harmonisation of the minor-third against a major chord. In this example the G \flat (F \sharp) is harmonised as the fifth of a B7 chord.

“Careless Love” went on to become a standard of the New Orleans bands. One musician who made a speciality of the tune was Chris Kelly, who was remembered by Sidney Brown (born July 19, 1894).⁶²³ Sidney Brown left Deer Range Plantation, Louisiana where he was born and raised to go to New Orleans sometime before 1915, at much the same time as Chris and Ben Kelly who also had lived on the plantation. He says of Chris Kelly he was “famous for playing the blues; his featured blues was ‘Careless Love.’”⁶²⁴ Sidney Brown also says that Chris Kelly “didn’t play blues in Deer Range, just brass band music,” which in turn suggests that he first knew the tune in New Orleans rather than at Deer Range.

Make Me a Pallet on the Floor

Peter Bocage recalled that Bolden played mostly blues and that one tune Bolden played was “Make Me A Pallet on the Floor,” but that “Bolden didn’t know what he was doing [i.e., didn’t know written music], nor did he play in many keys, preferring the keys of F and B flat. The band played nothing faster than a medium tempo.”⁶²⁵

Another New Orleans musician that recalled Bolden playing “Make Me a Pallet on the Floor,” was Manuel Manetta, Born in Algiers on October 3, 1889. He recalled hearing Buddy Bolden, as a young man, saying “Bolden’s cornet style was mostly straight, but loud, except when he played blues and tunes such as ‘Make Me A Pallet On The Floor,’”⁶²⁶ of which he says he “first heard Buddy Bolden, the originator, play that tune.”⁶²⁷

“Make Me a Pallet on the Floor” is another tune that John Joseph recalled early in the century.

[Russell:]	Do you remember "Pallet on the Floor" ["Make Me A Pallet On the Floor"]? ⁶²⁸
[Joseph:]	Yes, I know all them things around that time.
[Russell:]	Were they doing that then or later?
[Joseph:]	Around the same time--same year, [1900-1906] ⁶²⁹ I believe. ⁶³⁰

⁶²² My transcription of Wooden Joe Nicholas “Careless Love” recorded Artesian Hall, New Orleans, May 10, 1945 (American Music MX803).

⁶²³ Sidney “Little Jim” Brown, “Interview Digest, May 27, 1960,” ed. William Russell and Ralph Collins (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Archive, Tulane University).

⁶²⁴ Ibid.

⁶²⁵ Peter Bocage, “Interview Digest, February 5, 1962,” ed. Barry Martyn and Richard Knowles (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University). Insertion in parentheses are as in the digest.

⁶²⁶ Manuel Manetta, “Interview Digest March 21, 1957,” ed. Nesuhi Ertegün William Russell, Richard B. Allen, Robert Campbell (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

⁶²⁷ Manuel Manetta, “Interview Digest, March 28, 1957,” ed. William Russell, et al. (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

⁶²⁸ Insertion as in the transcript.

“Make Me a Pallet on the Floor” is a tune that Jelly Roll Morton recalled being played in New Orleans in his Library of Congress recordings.

This one of, this was one of the early blues that was in New Orleans, I guess, many years before I was born. The title is “Make Me a Pallet on the Floor.” A pallet is something that— you get some quilts— in other words, it’s a bed that’s made on a floor without any four posters on ‘em. A pallet is something, uh, that I can define in New Orleans. For an instance, you have company come to your home, and you haven’t enough beds for you and your company. So what you do, in order to get ‘em to spend the night over, is to make yourself a pallet on the floor. So you’ll say to your guests— You’ll say to your guests, uh, “Well, you can stay overnight. Uh, it’s perfectly all right. You’re my friend, and I think it’s rather dangerous—” During that time there was a lot of kid— kidnappers in New Orleans, and there was no law against it, but only that you had the privilege to kill them. “It’s rather dangerous, so maybe you better stay over night and, uh, sleep in my bed, and I’ll make me a pallet on the floor.” So that, that’s where the word “pallet” originated from. I don’t think it’s in the dictionary, though. [...]

*Make me a pallet on your floor,
Make me a pallet on your floor.
Make me a pallet, babe, on your floor,
So your old man will never know.*

*Are you sure your man is hard at work,
Are you sure, sweet baby, your man is hard at work?
Are you sure, sweet mama, babe, your man is at work?
Don’t you let that dirty, no-good son-of-a-bitch shirk.*

*I wanna pitch some peter with you today, bay-bay-bay-baby,
I wanna pitch some peter with you today, baby—*

W. C Handy published “Make Me a Pallet on the Floor” under the title “Atlanta Blues” in his 1925, *Blues an Anthology*.

⁶²⁹ My insertion.

⁶³⁰ Joseph. My insertion of [1900 – 1906], taken from the preceding text.



Figure 26: “Atlanta Blues (Make Me One Pallet On Your Floor)” (1924), by W. C. Handy, Harmonic Reduction (*Blues an Anthology*)⁶³¹

A version of the song was also collected by Howard Odum, under the title “Make Me a Palat on de Flo’” in Lafayette County, North Mississippi, from visiting singers.

*"Make me a palat on de flo',
Make it in de kitchen behin' de do'.*

*"Oh, don't turn good man from yo' do',
May be a frien', babe, you don't know.*

*"Oh, look down dat lonesome Ian',
Made me a palat on de flo'.*

*"Oh, de reason I love Sarah Jane,
Made me a palat on de flo'."⁶³²*

An early mention of “Make me a Pallet on the Floor,” not connected with Bolden, can be found in a report from Pine Bluff, Arkansas, sent to the *Indianapolis Freeman* by the Dandy Dixie Minstrels: “The Texas Teaser, Bennie Jones sang ‘Make Me a Pallet on Your Floor’ with howling success” (“Gossip of the Stage” 1906).⁶³³ The sixteen-bar melody is also found in 1908 as one of five “Strains from the Alleys” included in Blind Boone’s Southern Rag Medley no. 1, published by the Allen Music Company of Columbia, Missouri.⁶³⁴

The song was known in rural Louisiana. Edward Kid Ory was born about thirty miles outside of New Orleans on Woodland sugar plantation in LaPlace on Christmas Day 1886. At around the age of seven he made himself a banjo, a guitar and a bass. Ory says that there were no

⁶³¹ “Atlanta Blues” (1924), by W. C. Handy, Harmonic reduction; Handy, *Blues: An Anthology*, 140.

⁶³² Odum, “Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes,” 278-9.

⁶³³ Jane Bowers and William Westcott, “Mama Yancey and the Revival Blues Tradition,” *Black Music Research Journal* 12, no. 2 (1992): 175.

⁶³⁴ Trebor Jay Tichenor, ed. *Ragtime Rarities* (New York: Dover. 1975), 33-7; Ibid.

musicians in his family, and that he became interested in music because he heard the Pickwick Brass Band and the Onward Brass Band, but that these were not the New Orleans bands of the same name, these were bands from LaPlace and Reserve about three miles away. Ory then started his own band, to play with other local kids at local fish fries, using homemade instruments, which was called the *Woodland Band*.

Asked “what tunes did you play then?” Ory replies, “We used to play ‘Make Me a Pallet On the Floor,’ ‘I Think I Heard Buddy Bolden Say,’⁶³⁵ and quite a few more that I can't recall, you know, old numbers,” and that they also played waltzes and schottisches.

Ory recalled that on paydays bands would come and play where he was living; he recalls a band led by Dave Payton, which seems to have been principally a string band from Ory's description, and one led by Charlie Galloway which “had horns”⁶³⁶

He says that Buddy Bolden and the band would regularly pass through LaPlace and play from the baggage car of a train on route to Baton Rouge on the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad. The train would stop and the band would play to attract passengers for Baton Rouge, where the band would play for an afternoon dance, returning to LaPlace around 8pm.

These visits seem to have influenced the repertoire of local bands because he says that Dave Payton's and also Charlie Galloway's bands played “mostly all Buddy Bolden tunes”⁶³⁷ which also appears to have been the case with his own band. Asked where Buddy Bolden got these songs from he says: “He got most of them from the Holy Roller Church.”⁶³⁸ Asked for an example he cites “‘The Saints’ and all that stuff like that.”⁶³⁹ He says Bolden wrote “ ‘Make me a Pallet on the Floor,’ that was Bolden's own number, you know.”⁶⁴⁰ Later he qualifies this by saying “That was a popular number. The first one I ever [heard] play it was Bolden, and he claimed it, so I don't know if it was.”⁶⁴¹

Funky Butt (Buddy Bolden's Blues)

One song that it is widely claimed as Bolden's is “Funky Butt” (also known as “Buddy Bolden's Blues” and “I Thought I Heard Buddy Bolden Say”) which it is believed relates to an incident which occurred when Bolden was playing at Kenny's Hall in New Orleans.⁶⁴² Bolden ordered the windows be opened because the smell was becoming unbearable. Funky

⁶³⁵ Edward "Kid" Ory, "Interview Transcript, April 20, 1957 (for Life Magazine) ", ed. Nesuhi Ertegun and Robert Campbell (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

⁶³⁶ Ibid.

⁶³⁷ Ibid.

⁶³⁸ Ibid.

⁶³⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁴¹ Ibid.

⁶⁴² Also known as McKenna's Hall, Kinney's Hall sources differ. According to Donald M. Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden*, “In the early 1900s the hall was officially titled Union Sons and was also called Kenny's Hall. The site is now part of the Louisiana State Office Building complex and is directly across the street from New Orleans City Hall.” Marquis, 61.

was slang for smelly at the time, and from then on the hall became known as Funky Butt Hall. This version of events is consistent with the lyrics of Jelly Roll Morton's recording of "Buddy Bolden's Blues."

According to Jelly Roll Morton "Buddy Bolden's Blues," a song that he dates to 1902 "is about one of the earliest blues. This is, no doubt, is the earliest blues that was the real thing. That is a variation from the real barrelhouse blues" He goes on to say:

The composer was Buddy Bolden, the most powerful trumpet player I've ever heard or ever was known. The name of this was named by some old honky-tonk people. While he played this, they sang a little theme to it. He was a favorite in New Orleans at the time.⁶⁴³

*I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say,
You're nasty, you're dirty, take it away.
You're terrible, you're awful, take it away.
I thought I heard him say.
I thought I heard Buddy Bolden shout,
Open up that window and let that bad air out.
Open up that window and let that foul air out.
I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say,
I thought I heard Judge Fogarty say,
Thirty days in the market, take him away.
Give him a good broom to sweep with, take him away.
I thought I heard him say.
Thought I heard Frankie Dusen shout,
Gal, give me the money, I'm gonna beat it out.
I mean give that money like I explain to you,
I'm gonna beat it out.
'Cause I heard Frankie Dusen say.⁶⁴⁴*

There are a number of New Orleans musicians who recall Buddy Bolden playing "Funky Butt" including Frank Amacker (b. N.O., 1890)⁶⁴⁵ and Willie "Old Man" Parker (b. N.O., 1875)⁶⁴⁶

"Buddy Bolden's Blues," as recorded by Jelly Roll Morton is not a twelve-bar blues, but does have a similar harmony to the later twelve-bar blues. As recorded by Morton it has an eight-bar structure, which follows the conventional twelve-bar blues harmonic changes within its eight-bar form (see figure 27).⁶⁴⁷ The melody is also based around the use of alternate major and minor thirds; this could perhaps be part of the reason why so many of his contemporaries credit Bolden as being the first man to play the blues.

⁶⁴³ "Transcript of the 1938 Library of Congress Recordings of Jelly Roll Morton," 51.

⁶⁴⁴ Marquis, 110.

⁶⁴⁵ Frank Amacker, "Interview Digest, July 1, 1960," ed. Richard B. Allen and Paul R. Crawford (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

⁶⁴⁶ Parker.

⁶⁴⁷ "Buddy Bolden's Blues," Jelly Roll Morton, R-2570 December 16, 1939 (New York).

The tune also appeared (under a different title) in published sheet music of the period. Morton commented to Lomax that:

Later on this tune was, uh, I guess I'd have to say, stolen by some author I don't know anything about — I don't remember his name — and published under the title of "St. Louis Tickler." But with all the proof in the world, this tune was wrote by Buddy Bolden. Plenty old musicians know it.

The publication of "The St. Louis Tickle" (1904) coincided with the World's Fair in St. Louis that year. The melody of the opening strain used the same parallel movement and blue-note melody that was used in Chapman and Smith in "One O' Them Things!" but it is the second strain that is of particular interest.

The composition "The St. Louis Tickle," by Barney and Seymore, uses a version of "Buddy Bolden's Blues" for the second strain in their "Rag Time Two Step,"⁶⁴⁸ and it is this strain that Morton believed had be "stolen" from Buddy Bolden.

Buddy Bolden's Blues

Transcribed and Edited by (I Thought I Heard Buddy Bolden Say) J. Lawrence Cook *Words and Music by FERDINAND J. MORTON (Jelly Roll)*

Blues moderato

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Figure 27: "Buddy Bolden's Blues" (1939), by Jelly Roll Morton (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress)⁶⁴⁹

⁶⁴⁸ "St Louis Tickle" (1904), by Barney and Seymore (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress).

It is thought that "Barney & Seymore" was a pseudonym for Theron C. Bennett (1879-1937), a Missouri pianist best known for purchasing W. C. Handy's "The Memphis Blues" in 1912.⁶⁵⁰ It is not inconceivable that Bennett may have employed a pre-existing tune such as "Buddy Bolden's Blues" in his "The St. Louis Tickle." It could also be that he may have come to know the tune from some other source.

It is suggested by Donald M. Marquis that variants of the tune were in general circulation along the Mississippi River. He claims that:

The tune of the song was catchy and conducive to parodies and extemporaneous words. It was sung in the towns up and down the Mississippi and had probably been carried to New Orleans by upriver boatmen.⁶⁵¹

One example that he gives is a variant that was sung in Gretna, opposite New Orleans. Roy Carew reports hearing a white office boy singing, "I thought I heard Miss Suzie shout, / Open up the windows and let the breeze blow out,"⁶⁵² at some time after he moved there in 1904.

It may be that Theron C. Bennett had adapted a song that was in general circulation or that he had adapted "Buddy Bolden's Blues" and published it as "The St. Louis Tickle," but it is also possible that Bolden may have adapted a popular song or Bennett's composition.

John Robichaux

According to Donald Marquis:

In 1905 when black New Orleans was in tune with the new music and Bolden was at his height, his primary rival was John Robichaux, a Creole who nevertheless lived Uptown on Tchoupitoulas Street and competed with Bolden in some of the rougher spots. Robichaux was in many ways the epitome of the New Orleans Creole of Color. Born January 16, 1866, in the bayou county town of Thibodaux, he was older than Bolden and had the advantage of an excellent musical education. When he moved to New Orleans in 1891 he promptly became the drummer for Theogene Baquet's highly regarded Excelsior Cornet Band; shortly thereafter he organized his own band. By 1893 those playing for him were James Williams and James McNeil on cornet; Charles McCurdy, clarinet; Baptiste Delisle, trombone; Edward "Dee Dee" Chandler, drums; Henry Kimball, bass; and Wendell McNeil, violin. Robichaux himself played violin and led the band, though he came to be more concerned with arranging music and managing the group.⁶⁵³

⁶⁴⁹ "Buddy Bolden's Blues" (1939), by Jelly Roll Morton (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁶⁵⁰ David A. Jasen and Trebor Jay Tichenor, *Rags and Ragtime: A Musical History* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), 46-7. and Muir, 352.

⁶⁵¹ Marquis, 109.

⁶⁵² Ibid., 111.

⁶⁵³ Ibid., 79-80.

Manuel Manetta, as a child, recalled hearing Robichaux's band playing in Lincoln Park in New Orleans.

I heard Robichaux's band when I was still in short pants and attending school. I would borrow my brother's long pants to go to Lincoln Park in Carrollton, where Robichaux's band was the usual attraction. He was the famous band of the town. Dancing at Lincoln Park, held on Sunday, began at 4 pm. The personnel of Robichaux's band which was a full band: Robichaux-violin, Jim Williams-trumpet, Batiste Delisle-trombone, George Baquet-clarinet. The band strictly played from music, including Scott Joplin numbers. The only number they played by ear was 'Home Sweet Home.' The Robichaux Band played in the open weather permitting, from 4 pm until 7 pm. After a break of one hour-for meals, etc. they played in the dance hall at the park from 8 until 4 am.⁶⁵⁴

Bud Scott recalled one of the legendary contests that took place in Lincoln Park between Buddy Bolden and John Robichaux:

I joined John Robichaux in 1904. There were 7 men in the band (no piano). guitar, violin, Jim Williams was on trumpet (he used to use a mute), Baptiste Delisle on trombone, Dee Dee Chandler on drums and the greatest bass player I ever heard in my life-Henry Kimball. They played for the elite and had the town sewed up. In about 1908, Robichaux had a contest with Bolden in Lincoln Park and Robichaux for the contest added Manuel Perez. Bolden got hot-headed that night, as Robichaux really had his gang out.⁶⁵⁵

It is fortunate for jazz scholars that John Robichaux's musical library was donated to the Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane University in New Orleans. There are 6,092 orchestrations and 1,164 piano scores. Within this collection is seen the complete evolution of dance and jazz styles from 1877 to the 1940's.⁶⁵⁶ One of these arrangements from 1904 is "The St. Louis Tickle," which Morton claimed was "stolen" from Buddy Bolden. Given that Bolden's principal musical rival was playing "The St. Louis Tickle" at much the same time that Bolden was playing "Buddy Bolden's Blues," it does raise the question is it possible that Bolden learned the tune from Robichaux?

It is believed that Buddy Bolden and his band were poor readers, but nevertheless they managed to play a mixed repertoire of the dance tunes of the day. We learn from Beatrice Alcorn, a member of the Blue Ribbon Social Club circa 1904, that Bolden's band "played waltzes, quadrilles, the two-step and slow drag – all dance music and no fast or 'jazzed-up stuff'."⁶⁵⁷ If Bolden and his band were poor readers, then they would have needed to have learned these waltzes and quadrilles by ear. This raises the possibility that Bolden may have

⁶⁵⁴ Karl Koenig, *Trinity of Early Jazz Leaders: John Robichaux, 'Toots' Johnson, Claiborne Williams* (Basin Street Books, undated), 19.

⁶⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid., 21.

⁶⁵⁷ Marquis interview with Beatrice Alcorn, June 23, 1971; Marquis, 94.

learned what became known as “Buddy Bolden’s Blues” by listening to John Robichaux or other reading bands play “The St. Louis Tickle.”

“Buddy Bolden’s Blues” is a song, and songs may not have been typical of Bolden’s dance repertoire in 1904 as Beatrice Alcorn says that when Bolden played “no one sang lyrics as they might have done at other dances.”⁶⁵⁸ Being a song we do have the advantage in being able to see what if anything the lyrics may tell us that would help in the dating of “Buddy Bolden’s Blues.”

*I thought I heard Judge Fogarty say,
Thirty days in the market, take him away.
Give him a good broom to sweep with, take him away.
I thought I heard him say.*

The lyric is a reference to Judge John J. Fogarty, who was born in New Orleans in 1865, and became the presiding judge of the First Recorders Court in 1904. In the Behrman Administration Biography published in 1912, it was noted that, “He and his fame have been celebrated in poetry and song and a certain popular ditty may be heard every day on Canal Street.”⁶⁵⁹ Judge Fogarty’s grandson Joseph also recalled:

I remember the song that was later recorded by Jelly Roll Morton. I can remember my father singing it. The way I always heard it – “I thought I heard Judge Fogarty say, ‘25 dollars or thirty days.’” My father also told me that when they had vaudeville shows at the Orpheum they were constantly cracking jokes about Judge Fogarty from the stage. And another thing, when people play poker in New Orleans, if they hold three tens, they call it “Judge Fogarty” – thirty days.⁶⁶⁰

The amendment of lyrics to existing tunes, to make fun at the expense of local politicians and dignitaries, seems to have occurred from time to time on the vaudeville stage. Other examples already mentioned are “Mr. Crump,” and also the “Two Sweets” with their new song “Nothing New Under the Sun” where “several stanzas of a local political nature that set the house wild with laughter.”⁶⁶¹

It is not inconceivable that the melody of the “St. Louis Tickle” could have been used as the basis of a vaudeville song that could be adapted to comment on local events and people, such as Judge Fogarty, Buddy Bolden, and Frankie Duson. All these events date from around the time of the publication of “The St. Louis Tickle” and from a time when John Robichaux would have been popularising the tune around New Orleans.

A further political lyric is also given by Marquis.

⁶⁵⁸ Marquis interview with Beatrice Alcorn, June 23, 1971; Ibid. There are reports of Lorenzo Staultz (guitarist) improvising vocals with Bolden’s band probably around 1906. Marquis, 78-9 and 108 for other songs Bolden’s band are reported singing.

⁶⁵⁹ John Fogarty, “Vertical File” (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

⁶⁶⁰ Joseph E. Fogarty, “Interview Transcript June 18, 1969,” ed. William Russell and William Hogan (New Orleans: William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

⁶⁶¹ *Indianapolis Freeman*, November 4, 1911 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

*I thought I heer'd Abe Lincoln shout,
 Rebels close down them plantations and let all them niggers out.
 I'm positively sure I heer'd Mr. Lincoln shout.
 I thought I heer'd Mr. Lincoln say,
 Rebels close them plantations and let them niggers out.
 You gonna lose this war, git on your knees and pray,
 That's the words I heer'd Mr. Lincoln say.*"⁶⁶²

This would appear to be a reference to "Emancipation Day," a song that the editors of *Jazzmen* claimed originated with Bolden, and which they say was "inspired by some 'low-life' woman who had worked on a boat with the band. The words of the song, which later became his 'theme' song, went:

*I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say,
 'Funky-butt, funky-butt, take it away.'*"⁶⁶³

Uptown and Downtown

The question that the relationship between "Buddy Bolden's Blues" and "The St. Louis Tickle" raises is the relationship of the reading and non-reading or "faking" bands in New Orleans. If the non-reading bands wanted to play the up-to-date tunes they needed first to hear these tunes performed by musicians that could read music. In general the downtown musicians have been characterised as the better readers whereas the uptown musicians are usually thought of as the faking musicians.⁶⁶⁴

The repertoire of the downtown Creole musicians is well documented. Lucas R. Wyatt notes that: "In studying the music of the period 1850-1900, it becomes clear that the dance forms of black Creoles, consisting of waltzes, polkas, mazurkas, marches, and quadrilles, contained elements that were used in the formation of jazz."⁶⁶⁵ And in the case of John Robichaux, we have his library, and a clear picture of what he played.

What is less clear is what was being played by the uptown bands, as much of their music was un-notated. What we do know is that by the middle of the 1890s the uptown and downtown musicians were forced together due to the imposition of segregation. Before this time the downtown "Creoles of Color," enjoyed a privileged position in relation to their uptown neighbours. With the imposition of segregation all non whites were classed as "colored" without distinction. This removed the privileged position of the "Creoles of Color," as drummer Warren 'Baby' Dodds recalled: "'The colored fellows didn't get any of the better jobs.' eventually and against their will, they went uptown and 'sat in' with their darker

⁶⁶² Marquis, 109-10.

⁶⁶³ Fredrick Jr. Ramsey and Charles Edward Smith, *Jazzmen* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939; reprint, 1972), 13.

⁶⁶⁴ Marshall W. Stearns, *The Story of Jazz* (London: Sedgwick and Jackson, 1957), 55-75.

⁶⁶⁵ Lucius R. Wyatt, "Six Composers of Nineteenth-Century New Orleans," *Black Music Research Journal* 10, no. 1 (1990): 126.

brothers. They could play European instruments correctly and they could read music. But, at first they couldn't play jazz."⁶⁶⁶

The Creole violinist Paul Dominguez had a different perspective: "See, us downtown people, we didn't think so much of this rough Uptown jazz until we couldn't make a living otherwise [...] If I wanted to make a living, I had to be rowdy like the other group. I had to jazz it or rag it or any other damn thing...Bolden caused all that. He caused these younger Creoles, men like Bechet and Keppard, to have a different style altogether from the old heads like Tio and Perez. I don't know how they do it. But goddamn, they'll do it. Can't tell you what's there on the paper, but just play the hell out of it."⁶⁶⁷

These distinctions can be easily overstated, as many of the uptown musicians could read, or found as they progressed to better jobs, that they needed to learn. It would also be wrong to assume that trained musicians like Robichaux didn't, as the occasion required, use improvising "hot" musicians.

We can also detect from Robichaux's library that as the blues began to appear in sheet music, Robichaux also began to include the blues in his performances. The earliest titled blues that he had in his library was "I Got the Blues" (1908), by Anthony Maggio. It seems likely that as a prominent band leader in New Orleans, John Robichaux would have played his part in popularising this tune, for as Maggio recalled, after its publication "in a very short time all of the negroes in New Orleans with street organs were playing the Blues."⁶⁶⁸

On the other hand "I Got the Blues" is not a tune that became a New Orleans jazz standard. This may have been because it was in the key of G major, a legacy of "I Got the Blues" having been written for a string orchestra, rather than for a brass band. Robichaux's parts are arranged for piano, two violins, viola, cello, contra bass, flute, clarinet in A, cornet in A, Trombone and drums. These transposing instruments were expensive. Wind players with Robichaux would consequently have needed to have invested in instruments that could play in keys that were favoured by string players. Perhaps the uptown musicians had less incentive to purchase transposing instruments.

Of the later blues to enter Robichaux's library, "The Memphis Blues" (1912) is of particular significance. Robichaux didn't have a stock arrangement for W. C. Handy's earliest blues composition until 1914, but he did have an earlier manuscript arrangement. In the Robichaux library there are just twelve tunes for which Robichaux wrote a special arrangement, which does suggest that Robichaux recognised how essential it was to have this piece in his band's repertoire.⁶⁶⁹

Robichaux didn't have a copy of W. C. Handy's "The Jogo Blues" (1913), but wrote part of it on the back of his "The Memphis Blues" manuscript. He did have a stock copy of "The St.

⁶⁶⁶ Stearns, 63.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid., 55-6.

⁶⁶⁸ Maggio.

⁶⁶⁹ David Chevan, "Written Music in Early Jazz" (PhD, City University, New York, 1997), 166-79. Chevan argues that the arrangement was probably derived from the piano sheet music.

Louis Blues” (1914) but this was a 1927 reprint, which may have replaced an earlier edition, as this tune became a staple of the New Orleans bands. Robichaux also had a copy of W. C. Handy’s “Joe Turner’s Blues” (1915).

Karl Koenig who catalogued the Robichaux library for the Hogan Jazz Archive compiled a list of blues publications in Robichaux’s library and the year they were published. The peak years were 1916, with 16 new blues tunes, 1919 with 18, 1921 and 1922 with 20 in both years and 1923 with 18 blues, before falling back into single figures by the end of the decade. This corresponds with popular taste and blues publishing trends in general.

The peak years 1916-1923 were the years in which the blues had become firmly established in vaudeville. The recording of “Crazy Blues,” by Mamie Smith in 1920 began a blues craze on phonograph. By 1922 *Metronome* declared that “every phonograph company has a colored girl recording the blues.”⁶⁷⁰

Ross Russell reminds us that: “The Twenties produced a generation of female blues singers which have never been equalled. Ma Rainey, who toured for years with her small jazz-cum-blues band the Georgia Minstrels, and Ma Rainey’s protégé, Bessie Smith, the so-called empress of the blues, were the first. Other headliners were Ida Cox, Clara Smith, Trixie Smith, Alberta Hunter, Victoria Spivey, Edmona Henderson, Eva Taylor, Lizzie Miles, Virginia Liston, Bertha Hill, and Sippie Wallace. All were given an opportunity to record, some abundantly, during the period of competition between the majors and independents to build race catalogs.”⁶⁷¹ Other headlines were Ethel Waters, Edith Wilson, Rosa Henderson, then from Texas: Bernice Edwards, Lillian Glinn, Bessie Tucker, Monette Moore (a.k.a. Susie Smith), Mary Dixon, and Maggie Jones. Some other vaudeville blues singers who were perhaps less well known were, Hattie Burleson, Cleo Gibson, Katherine Henderson, Margaret Johnson, Mattie Hite, and Hannah Sylvester, to name but a few.⁶⁷²

What becomes apparent from this list of women blues singers of the 1920s is that women singers completely dominated the blues genre on record and within vaudeville, as the

⁶⁷⁰ Dixon and Godrich, 10.

⁶⁷¹ Ross Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 13.

⁶⁷² Stewart-Baxter. See also Harrison. Other women blues singers of the 1920s include Bessie Brown, Josephine Carter, Helen Gross, Ethel Hayes, Edna Hicks, Leitha Hill, Edith Johnson, and Grace White. On the *Black Swan* record label there was Fae Barnes, at *Brunswick* Mary Johnson, Viola McCoy, and Lena Wilson; at *Columbia*: Eliza Brown, Martha Copeland, Mary Dixon, , Dorothy Everett, Lillian Glinn, Hattie Hudson, Ann Johnson, Fae Barnes (recording under the name of Maggie Jones), Jewell Nelson, Ethel Ridley, Louise Ross, Mary Stafford, and Leona Williams. The *Emerson* label had Lillyn Brown, Ethel Finney, and Hazel Meyers; *Gennett* had Josie Miles. *Okeh* records had Helen Baxter, Gladys Bentley, Lucille Bogan, Lena Bolden, Ada Brown, Kitty Brown, Martha Copeland, Fannie Goosby, Elizabeth Johnson, Margaret Johnson, Daisy Martin, Hattie McDaniel, Sally Roberts, Irene Scruggs, and Laura Smith. At *RCA Victor* there was Edna Benbow Hicks and for *Paramount* Marie Bradley, Gladys Bryant, Memphis Julia Davis, Sodarisa Miller, and Priscilla Stewart. *Pathé* recorded Lavinia Turner and *Perfect* recorded Mamie Harris, Caroline Johnson, Mary Stafford, Nettie Potter (a.k.a. Monette Moore). And at *Vacalion* Mae Harris, Luella Miller, Sally Ritz, Gladys White, and Bessie Williams all recorded.

folklorists Howard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson noted. "Among the blues singers who have gained a more or less national recognition there is scarcely a man's name to be found."⁶⁷³

The early twenties was also a period when African American theatre flourished with more than 360 African American theatres employing approximately 600 acts.⁶⁷⁴ It was during these peak years of the blues that John Robichaux conducted the Lyric Theater Orchestra, in New Orleans; from the opening night in 1918 to the final curtain in 1926. The Lyric Theater catered principally for African American audience, but the theatre also hosted the "Midnight Frolics" that were "For Ofays Only."⁶⁷⁵

The *Chicago Defender* of November 11, 1922 reported from the Lyric Theater, "A good show can't help but go 'over the top' in New Orleans with Prof. Robicheaux's [*sic*] jazz orchestra of six pieces 'hitting on all six'."⁶⁷⁶

Robichaux was in a fortunate position as the orchestra leader of the premier African American theatre in New Orleans. Music publishers were keen for him to promote their new songs. One such company was Waterson, Berlin and Snyder, who wrote to the Robichaux Orchestra on Oct. 19th, 1921:

Dear Mr. Robichaux:-

We are herewith enclosing an orchestration of "I WONDER IF YOU STILL CARE FOR ME" by Ted Snyder

This number is arranged as a Waltz, and on the reverse side as a Fox Trot, so that you may play it in either tempo.

Arthur Lange has spared no effort in making this arrangement, and has some special choruses which are very effective. The song has all the ear-marks of being a great big hit, and it is being sung by the leading Vaudeville Artists throughout the Country. We would like to have your co-operation in making this composition a big hit, and herewith wish to take this opportunity to thank you for the co-operation you have given us in the past, on our numbers. In return we will try to give you such arrangements as will do justice to your Audience and to your Orchestra.

We will be glad to have you express your opinion as to the merits of the number we are herewith sending you.

Very truly yours,

Les Lewis

Manager Orchestra Dept.⁶⁷⁷

⁶⁷³ Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, 91.

⁶⁷⁴ Marshall & Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Dance* (New York: Da Capo 1994), 140.

⁶⁷⁵ Lynn Abbott, "'for Ofays Only': An Annotated Calender of Midnight Frolics at the Lyric Theater," *The Jazz Archivist: A Newsletter of the William Hogan Jazz Archive* XVII (2003).

⁶⁷⁶ *Ibid.*: 3.

In this way Robichaux could stay abreast of the changing musical fashions and play a significant part in introducing the popular tunes of the day to both black and white audiences and also to the non-reading bands of New Orleans. Which raises the question as to when he began introducing the music that would come to be known as the blues to audiences and musicians in New Orleans?

Although Robichaux's earliest titled blues was "I Got the Blues," of 1908, this was not the first twelve-bar composition in his music library. The earliest composition with a twelve-bar strain was "Just because She Made Dem Goo-Goo Eyes" (1900), which the arranger J. W. Chattaway noted could be played as a "March or Two Step." The eight bar introduction is followed by a repeated twelve-bar strain in E^b using simple I-IV-V harmony.

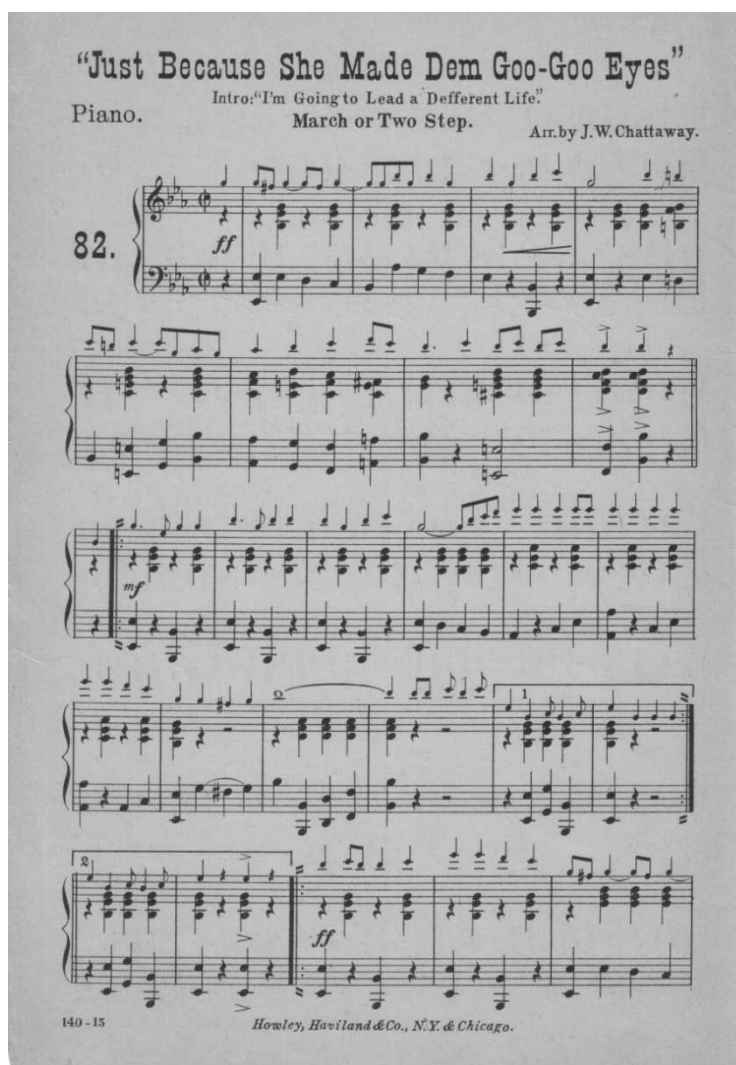


Figure 28: "Just Because She Made Dem Goo-Goo Eyes," (1900), piano part, John Robichaux Collection (Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University)

⁶⁷⁷ Koenig, *Trinity of Early Jazz Leaders: John Robichaux, 'Toots' Johnson, Claiborne Williams*, 16-7.

The 1900 sheet music to Hughie Cannon's original composition "Just Because She Made Dem Goo-Goo Eyes," has an opening twenty-four bar verse, which is a twelve-bar blues repeated. It is not written like this on the original sheet music, as this would have made it difficult to have printed the lyrics. In Robichaux's instrumental arrangement it is shown as a repeated twelve-bar strain and is arranged for piano, two violins, viola, bass, piccolo, clarinet in B^b, two cornets in B^b, trombone and drums.

"Just Because She Made Dem Goo-Goo Eyes" was a very popular song throughout the early years of the twentieth century and, as already noted, it had become part of the repertoire of rural guitarists around Clarksdale, Mississippi by 1902.⁶⁷⁸ An interesting feature of "Goo-Goo Eyes" is the harmony of the verse. The piano part is shown below.

In the standard twelve-bar blues progression it is usual for there to be two bars on the subdominant (A^b), but in "Goo-Goo Eyes," there are three bars of subdominant harmony. This is a feature found in a number of early blues compositions.⁶⁷⁹

The twelve-bar harmonic sequence where the subdominant chord is held for three bars is described as the "Frankie" sequence by Peter Muir, because of its association with the ballad "Frankie and Albert (or Johnny)." It is interesting to note that this sequence seems to be principally associated with early blues compositions.

The "Frankie" sequence is rare in commercial music after 1913. Auto-referential blues from the 1910s hardly ever use it: Shelton Brooks's "Love-Sick Blues" from 1918, and W. C. Handy's "Hesitating Blues" from 1915 are the only exceptions I have found. In the 1920s it is even rarer: in terms of published sheet music, I have found only a single blues, "Jackass Blues," a fairly successful composition from 1925 by white bandleaders Art Kassel and Mel Sitzel,⁶⁸⁰ which uses the regular sequence in the verse, and the "Frankie" sequence in the chorus ("Hesitating Blues" also mixes the two forms).⁶⁸¹ Just as the "Frankie" sequence effectively disappears after 1913, the regular sequence starts to appear with increasing frequency with the rise of auto-referential blues from 1912.⁶⁸²

A second twelve-bar composition that Robichaux had in his library was "Since Bill Bailey Came Back Home" (1902). The composition by Seymour Furth with words by Billy Johnson was a reference to Hughie Cannon's "Bill Bailey, Won't You Please Come Home?" (1902). The verse of "Since Bill Bailey Came Back Home" is a twenty-four bar strain in E^b, followed by a thirty-two bar chorus. This form is essentially two twelve-bar strains repeated, but this strain doesn't use conventional blues harmony.

⁶⁷⁸ Peabody.

⁶⁷⁹ Examples include Maggio's second twelve-bar composition "Bad Rag" (1910), and W. C. Handy's rendition of "East St. Louis," that he recorded for Alan Lomax at the Library of Congress in 1938.

⁶⁸⁰ Chicago: Melrose Music, 1925, Muir, 359.

⁶⁸¹ Muir's footnotes: "The only non-auto-referential commercial blues composition from the 1920s which uses the 'Frankie' sequence is Duke Ellington's 'Creole Love Call' (Victor 21137, 1927). I should add that the sequence is also extremely rare in records by hillbilly and African-American folk artists of the 1920s and 1930s, except in instances where they are performing what were by then archaic genres such as blues ballads." Ibid.

⁶⁸² Ibid.

The Robichaux arrangement by J. W. Chattaway is transposed to D major and the opening chorus is written as a twelve-bar strain repeated, with clarinet and cornets using transposing A instruments.

Since Bill Bailey Came Back Home.

Intro. SMOKE, SMOKE, SMOKE. *arr. by J. W. Chattaway.*
MARCH or TWO STEP. Since Bill Bailey came

1st Violin .

151 *back home.* *ff* *mf* *f*

Brass. *f* *ff* *Smoke, Smoke, Smoke.* *ff* *mf-ff* *fff* *ff*

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Figure 29: “Since Bill Bailey Came Back Home” (1902), John Robichaux Collection (Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University)⁶⁸³

⁶⁸³ I have given the 1st violin part as the piano part is in poor condition.

By 1908 John Robichaux had three twelve-bar stock arrangements in his repertoire: “Just Because She Made Dem Goo-Goo Eyes” of 1900, “Since Bill Bailey Came Back Home” of 1902 and Anthony Maggio’s “I Got the Blues” of 1908. It is therefore possible that the twelve-bar form of the blues was known in New Orleans from as early as 1900 and that “Just Because She Made Dem Goo-Goo Eyes” was being played by John Robichaux and his band in New Orleans at much the same time that it was making its appearance in the repertoire of rural songsters in Clarksdale, Mississippi.

The evidence of composed twelve-bar tunes and songs in the repertoire of the John Robichaux’s band could well suggest that the blues entered the repertoire of the brass bands of New Orleans in much the same way that the rags and other popular songs did. Reading bands such as the one led by John Robichaux would of necessity have had to have learned the blues melodies from sheet music, and it could be argued that the non-reading bands may have learned these new melodies from listening to John Robichaux and other reading bands. On the other hand it is also possible that the blues was already being performed in the honky-tonks and elsewhere in New Orleans and perhaps in other urban centres before blues sheet music began to appear.

To investigate the possibility that the twelve-bar form of the blues may have been known before the turn of the century in New Orleans we need to turn to R. Emmet Kennedy a folklorist and native of Gretna, who may well have been the first folklorist to transcribe the blues.

R. Emmet Kennedy

The folklorist R. Emmet Kennedy was born on January 11, 1877 on Second Street Gretna, Louisiana.⁶⁸⁴ The family moved to “8th Street Corner” shortly after Emmet’s birth, which is now 425 8th Street,⁶⁸⁵ in the centre of the East Green area of Gretna, a predominantly African American community.

Although Emmet was of Irish descent, as a child he lived in close daily contact with the local African American community. At the back of the house was the New Hope Baptist Church on 7th Street, which was attended by the woman that cooked and cleaned for his family, known to Kennedy as Aunt Julie Sparks. Her two sons Sammy and Johnny were his childhood playmates and his next door neighbours.

Kennedy recalled how as a child he would stand on a chair at the back of the house and try to sing along to the spirituals that were being sung by the congregation of the New Hope Baptist Church; as he learned musical notation he began to write down what he heard, which he later published, saying:

⁶⁸⁴ <http://www.jefferson.lib.la.us/news&events/kennedy.htm>

⁶⁸⁵ <http://www.jefferson.lib.la.us/news&events/kennedy.htm>

In making the settings of these songs and spirituals it is my desire to give faithful transcriptions as my memory recorded the singing of the Negroes in my native town. Some of them were taken down at first hearing, sometimes with slight variations if sung by more than one singer. I have tried to follow as closely as I know how the intuitive harmonies and instinctive rhythmic peculiarities of these musical people, and have tried to suggest in the accompaniments the primitive, rudimental element so marked in all their productions.⁶⁸⁶

One of the earliest songs he heard and wrote down was “Angel Done Changed My Name,” which he dates to the year of 1885;⁶⁸⁷ the year that The World’s Fair came to New Orleans. A second early transcription from childhood was “Free at Las’, Free at Las’.”⁶⁸⁸ The words of the first two lines of this song are the words that Martin Luther King, Jr., used in his famous “I have a dream” speech in August of 1963.⁶⁸⁹

At some time before 1910 Kennedy began to write down secular songs that he heard, of which he said:

Many years before the songs “Casey Jones” and “Steamboat Bill” were heard on the vaudeville stage and became popular throughout the country, a melody almost identical was sung by the Negroes in various sections of the South. I recall how great was my surprise the first time I heard the song “Casey Jones,” because of the fact that several years previously I had taken down the song of “De Ole Mule” from the singing of a young colored man called Willie, the only name by which he seemed to be known to anyone.⁶⁹⁰

“Casey Jones” and “Steamboat Bill” were popular songs that could be heard throughout the South. Jim Robinson from Deer Range plantation in Louisiana also identified these songs as being sung before the blues became established.

[Robinson:] They’d play the harmonica and play the guitar, too.
 [Allen:] You don’t remember any of the names of the songs?
 [Robinson:] Oh, them old songs – there’d be “Steamboat Bill,” all that [kind of old numbers?]; “Casey Jones,” all them numbers was out then.
 [Allen:] And the blues, what kind of blues?
 [Robinson:] Oh, there wasn’t much blues then, at the time then.
 [Allen:] What about the blues?
 [Robinson:] There wasn’t much of a blues then, understand; didn’t nobody fool with blues that much at that time.⁶⁹¹

⁶⁸⁶ R. Emmet Kennedy, *Mellows: A Chronicle of Unknown Singers* (New York: A. and C. Boni, 1925), 30.

⁶⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 35-6.

⁶⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁶⁸⁹ Joseph Borel, “Short Biography of R. Emmet Kennedy,” prepared for Kennedy memorial Tulane University 1995.

⁶⁹⁰ Kennedy, 163.

⁶⁹¹ Robinson. Insertion as it appears in the transcript.

Casey Jones and Steamboat Bill

The events surrounding the legend of Casey Jones have been long established. John Luther (Casey) Jones was a railroad engineer who died in a railroad accident on 30th April 1900. According to Jones's fireman Sim Webb, "We had finished our regular run into Memphis on No. 382 but we took over the Cannonball because its regular engineer was ill," he said. "Mr. Casey was mighty tired. We were about half an hour late."⁶⁹²

By the time the Cannonball reach Vaughan, 200 miles south of Memphis, at around three-thirty in the morning the Cannonball had made up on lost time. A freight train ahead had gone into a siding but the rear coaches had not cleared the points on the main line and Jones had insufficient time to brake. He ordered Webb to jump, while he himself stayed with the engine and was killed.⁶⁹³

The first known reference to the song "Casey Jones" appeared in the *Railroad Man's Magazine*, in March of 1908.

An engineer friend asks us to tell him the words of a song written in memory of Casey Jones, an engineer on the Southern, near Memphis, Tenn.⁶⁹⁴

When the text was published two months later it appeared with the opening lyrics:

*Come all you rounders, for I want you to hear
The story told of an engineer.
Casey Jones was the rounder's name,
A heavy right-wheeler of a mighty fame.*⁶⁹⁵

This version of the song seems to be based in the Anglo – American tradition of balladry with its "Come all you rounders" enticement. But there is a possibly older version which may have originated with an African American railroad worker Wallace Saunders. We are informed that Wallace, who worked in the Canton roadhouse, "had a gift for improvising ballads as he labored at wiping engines or shovelling coal. He would sing in rhythm with his muscular activity; and one of his creations, as innumerable witnesses agreed, was the original version of "Casey Jones."⁶⁹⁶

Saunders had known Casey Jones, and sang a version of "Casey Jones," but there is no reliable evidence of what he sang. On April 7, 1909, T. Lawrence Seibert and Eddie Newton, obtained copyright for "Casey Jones (The Brave Engineer)," based upon a song they reportedly heard while passing through New Orleans, "hummed by some Negro boys ... it occurred to Seibert that this song could be easily re-vamped into a comedy number."⁶⁹⁷ The lyrics they used were virtually identical with the 1908 lyrics printed in *Railroad Man's*

⁶⁹² "Railroaders Hear Straight Story on Casey Jones' Famous Ride;" Norm Cohen, "'Casey Jones': At the Crossroads of Two Ballad Traditions " *Western Folklore* 32, no. 2 (1973): 77-103.

⁶⁹³ "Railroaders Hear Straight Story on Casey Jones' Famous Ride;" Ibid.

⁶⁹⁴ *Railroad Man's Magazine*, 5 (1908), 384; Ibid.: 85.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁶ Freeman H. Hubbard, *Railroad Avenue*, Ibid.: 83.

⁶⁹⁷ James J. Geller, *Famous Songs and Their Stories*, (New York, 1931), 231; Ibid.: 79.

Magazine, complete with the balladeers invitation to “Come all you rounders.”⁶⁹⁸ One version of the ballad was collected by Howard Odum, from a resident of Lafayette County, Northern Mississippi, sometime between 1908 and 1911. This version omits the “Come all you rounders,” lyric, but in common with the other two versions comments that about the “two locomotives an’ dey bound to bump.”⁶⁹⁹

We can be reasonably certain that the version that R. Emmet Kennedy was referring to was based on the 1909 sheet music, as this is the version that was “heard on the vaudeville stage and [which] became popular throughout the country”⁷⁰⁰ The other song that Kennedy mentions was “Steamboat Bill.”

“Steamboat Bill” first appeared as sheet music in 1910, with words by Ren Shields, and music by the Leighton Brothers.⁷⁰¹ This song quickly became a favourite on vaudeville, Miss Brady could be found singing “Steamboat Bill,” at The Monogram, Chicago, Dec 17, 1910,⁷⁰² and a month later Elmore Taylor sang “Steamboat Bill,” at The Houston Threater, Louisville, Kentucky.⁷⁰³

The lyrics to the sheet music celebrate a race between the presumably fictional *Steamboat Bill* and the paddle steamer the *Robert E. Lee* that held that fastest time between New Orleans and St Louis, a record established against the *Natchez VI* in 1870. It is unlikely that the song dates from this early given its association with “Casey Jones.” There is a clear thematic connection between “Casey Jones” and “Steamboat Bill,” as Steamboat Bill is killed when his boiler explodes, which was incidentally not the fate of the *Natchez VI* - she lost the race because she ran aground.

“Steamboat Bill” was not among the songs collected by Howard Odum for his 1911 paper, which could suggest that this song was a commercial re-working of the “Casey Jones” theme, rather than an independent song. A comparison of the choruses of the printed versions of the two songs does show a very obvious resemblance. The first chorus of “Casey Jones” is:

*Ca-sey Jones! Mounted to the cabin
Ca-sey Jones with his orders in his hand
Ca-sey Jones mounted to the cabin
And he took his farewell trip to that Promised land.[sic]*

Whereas the last chorus of “Steamboat Bill” is:

⁶⁹⁸ “Casey Jones (The Brave Engineer)” (1909) by Eddie Newton & T. Lawrence Seibert, © E202519, (Performing Arts Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁶⁹⁹ Odum, “Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes (Concluded),” 352.

⁷⁰⁰ Kennedy, 163.

⁷⁰¹ “Steamboat Bill” (1910), by Ren Shields, and the Leighton Brothers, New York F. A. Mills (St. Louis Mercantile Library).

⁷⁰² *Indianapolis Freeman*, December 17, 1910 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

⁷⁰³ *Indianapolis Freeman*, January 28, 1911 (Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress).

*Steam-boat Bill, missing on the Mississippi,
Steam-boat Bill, is with an angel band.
Steam-boat Bill, missing on the Mississippi,
He's a pilot on a ferry in that Promised Land.*

A significant melodic difference is that the three syllables of the words “Ca-sey Jones” are set to the major third and two notes of the fifth degree of the scale, and is therefore a diatonic melody, whereas the syllables “Steam-boat Bill” are set to a minor third, major third and tonic. In other words “Steamboat Bill” uses a “blue-note” melody. A comparison between these melodies and the melody of “De Ole Mule” shows that “De Ole Mule” is a diatonic melody, and therefore is more closely related melodically to “Casey Jones” than it is to “Steamboat Bill.”

De Ole Mule

Given that Kennedy says that “De Ole Mule,” was sung to the same tune as “Casey Jones” “many years before” it was sung on the vaudeville stage, it seems reasonable to suppose that “De Ole Mule” was collected many years before 1910.

The story that Kennedy tells is that Willie, who sang “De Ole Mule,” was employed as a levee guard on the night shift and would visit him and his family to get drinking water and coffee, before beginning work. Willie would sing his songs and accompany himself on the banjo which he always carried with him.

During the high-water stage of the Mississippi River the levees are guarded day and night in the towns wherever there are weak spots which might cave in and thereby cause a crevasse. This colored man called Willie was one of the guards at night, and every evening he would come to the "big house" for a jug of drinking water. He was a tall, gaunt young man, over six feet high, with bushy, kinky hair, clothes which appeared to be several sizes too short for him, and accoutered after the fashion of a true minstrel, he never wandered forth without his trusty banjo.

His nightly visit for water was always a welcome one; and after being greeted with a cup of hot coffee and smiles of encouragement from each member of the family, he forthwith expressed his appreciation by taking a seat on the back gallery and singing his quaint songs and ballads for us, to a banjo accompaniment nothing short of ravishing.

By 1910 R. Emmet Kennedy no longer lived at the “big house” with his family; by this time he had moved into an apartment in Gretna on Amelia Street, on the corner of 2nd Street which he shared with a cousin Catharine Landu.⁷⁰⁴ In 1900 he had still been living with his parents, which confirms that Kennedy must have heard “De Ol’ Mule” before 1910.

⁷⁰⁴ Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, “Jefferson Parish Louisiana, Ward 3 sheet 16 B,” (Ancestry.com).

Honey Baby

One secular song that R. Emmet Kennedy collected that can be dated rather more accurately is “Honey Baby.”

Roy Carew, had befriended Jelly Roll Morton while he was in Washington in the late 1930s and accompanied him on at least one of the Library of Congress recording session. When the editor of the Washington Post ran an article saying that W. C. Handy was the father of the blues, Carew wrote a letter to the Post, titled “Birth of the Blues.”

To the editor of The Post – Sir: I notice in certain articles appearing in recent issues of The Post, in regard to the National Folk Festival that W. C. Handy is referred to as the “internationally known Negro composer who introduced the indigo hue to music and gave the Nation its first blues songs.” He also is referred to as the “father” and “granddaddy” of the blues.

For the sake of the record, I would like to say that the “blues” were known, played and sung in and about New Orleans years before Handy published his first blues number, “The Memphis Blues.”

For proof I refer to the book written by R. Emmet Kennedy, entitled “Mellows,” published by A. & C. Boni. Among the songs in “Mellows” is one called “Honey Baby,” a blues song. I know personally that Mr. Kennedy arranged this song and presented it in an entertainment several years before “The Memphis Blues” came out.

Mr Kennedy is a well known musician in New Orleans and vicinity and I have no doubt he remembers other blues numbers that were sung about the time he arranged “Honey Baby.”

There is in Washington right now a Negro musician who can give some interesting history in regard to ragtime, blues and jazz, and their development in New Orleans. I refer to Ferd Morton, who has a local night club. He is a talented pianist and composer, having composed several blues numbers as well as other compositions. He has been known as “Jelly Roll” Morton for many years having been given the nickname after he composed the “Jelly Roll Blues.” Morton was a top notch entertainer in New Orleans in the “old days.” He speaks with authority on the subject, and I am sure that he can testify that the blues were well known in New Orleans long before Handy got started with them.

I wish Handy the best of success possible with the blues. He composed quite a number of them and deserves all he can get out of them. But let’s keep the record straight. He isn’t the “granddaddy” nor the “father” of the blues – in fact the blues gave him his start to fame and have been more like a father to him.”⁷⁰⁵

⁷⁰⁵ Roy Carew Letter to the *Washington Post*, May 6, 1938.

Roy Carew had known R. Emmet Kennedy in New Orleans and Carew decided to contact Kennedy to find out when he had collected “Honey Baby.” The response was recorded in the foreword to William Russell’s “*Oh Mister Jelly!*”: “A *Jelly Roll Morton Scrapbook*” a book which Russell claimed “Roy Carew should have written.”⁷⁰⁶ Carew wrote that in 1904:

Diagonally across the corner of the fertilizer plant office was the office of the Chicasaw Cooperage Company. Their office man was R. Emmet Kennedy, one of the most talented men I ever met, being a poet and author, as well as a gifted musician. Always interested in Negro music, Mr. Kennedy began collecting their songs when about thirteen years old. He was author of several books, among which two, *Mellows* and *More Mellows* contain the Negro folk sings [*sic*] and spirituals. Emmet arranged the first complete blues song I ever heard, *Honey Baby* and his niece sang it.

Some readers may remember the wordy battle between Jelly Roll and W. C. Handy in *Down Beat* in 1938 as to the origin of the blues. It seems that Handy permitted himself to be introduced over the air by “Believe It or Not,” Ripley, as the originator of the blues, jazz and stomps, which naturally peeved Jelly Roll. As Handy’s first blues, *The Memphis Blues* or *Mr Crump* was not published until 1912, I was prompted to write to Mr. Kennedy and ask him when he arranged *Honey Baby*. He replied to my letter from New York, where he had lived for may years, and he had the following to say about the song I heard in 1906: “Regarding *Honey Baby*, included in my book *Mellows*, I feel certain that it goes back further than 1905. I had known it a long time before I arranged it for the piano...” So, from my personal knowledge, blues were known and played around New Orleans at least six years before the first blues numbers was published by Handy.”⁷⁰⁷

What we do know is that “Honey Baby” was collected before 1910, because in that year R. Emmet Kennedy had two books published in his Celtic name, Robard Emmet Ua Cinneidig. The first of these books was published in January; a small book of twelve Irish poems *The Songs of Aengus*, which Kennedy had printed at Myers’ printing House Ltd., in New Orleans.⁷⁰⁸ His second book of 1910, *Remnants of Noah’s Ham (According to Genesis)* was a book that was a “privately printed edition of two hundred and fifteen copies; done on Fabriano hand made paper, with original photographs by the author.” The intention of this second book was to provide:

little sketches of negro life [that were] meant to show the better side of negro nature, in contra-distinction to the rough, belligerent side which is familiar to many that have seen the portrayals of the minstrel platform, and to many more who have listened to

⁷⁰⁶ William Russell, “Carew, Roy,” MSS 519 folder 176, (Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection).

⁷⁰⁷ Roy Carew, Russell, ‘*Oh, Mister Jelly!*’: *A Jelly Roll Morton Scrapbook*. (unpublished manuscript) “Carew, Roy,” MSS 519, folder 176, (Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection).

⁷⁰⁸ R. Emmet Kennedy, *The Songs of Aengus* (New Orleans: Myers' Printing House Ltd., 1910).

the modern 'coon song' melodies that have taken so strong a hold on the general public.⁷⁰⁹

Kennedy's book contained twelve examples of verse in dialect including "Lonesome," "Honey Baby," "Rainy Sunday," "Aunt Kizzie's Troubles," "Sistuh Mary," "In the Lane," "Ceased, O Angel" (melody and words), "Ole Sirreel's Philosophy," "Dina," "Grumbellin' People," and "Mistuh Dan Buketayshun," of which two would later appear in *Mellows*, fully transcribed and harmonised, "Honey Baby" and "Grumbellin' People."

"Honey Baby," according to Kennedy:

was sung and whistled by Negroes of the East Green in Gretna and I got it in broken parts from Hattie Sparks, Michel Clay and a colored man called Cunjuh. By reconstructing the whole with the assistance of George Riley, who, though he denounced it as a 'sinful ballet' and was not in sympathy with my interest in it, I was enabled to arrive at a version very close to the original through his memory of having heard it sung frequently on the streets and at meetings where 'levity was free and in the ascendant.'⁷¹⁰

The final chorus of "Honey Baby" is:

*Hello Centul, won't you gimme long distun foam?
O Miss Exchange-lady, wont you gimme long distun foam?
O please young lady, won't you gimme long distun foam, -
I wan' foam to my baby day I'm stahtin' on my journey home.*

We know that Kennedy used this lyric in May of 1909 as part of a two act play called *Dress Rehearsal*, described as "A Laughable Nothing Done Into Music in Two Parts," by John T. Curlett and R. Emmet Kennedy which contains a "Barytone [*sic*] Solo.....Hello Central, Won't You Gimme Long Distan' Foam," in the first act.⁷¹¹

This lyric is somewhat reminiscent of Gus Cannon's "Poor Boy Long Way from Home,"⁷¹² which contains the lyric "I cried hello Central: give me your long-distance phone."⁷¹³ The "Hello Central" theme is also picked up by Jelly Roll Morton in "Doctor Jazz," and in W. C. Handy's "Hesitating Blues" (1915). Neither "De Ol' Mule" nor "Honey Baby" had the twelve-bar form of the blues but one secular song that Kennedy collected did.

⁷⁰⁹ R. Emmet Kennedy, *Remnants of Noah's Ham (According to Genesis)* (New Orleans: Myers' Printing House, Ltd., 1910). Foreword.

⁷¹⁰ Kennedy, *Mellows : A Chronicle of Unknown Singers*, 179.

⁷¹¹ Program of *Dress Rehearsal*, May 18, 1909, Karl Koenig, *The Scrap Book of R. Emmet Kennedy* (Basin Street Books, 2007).

⁷¹² Gus Cannon, "Poor Boy Long Way from Home," Chicago, November 1927 Paramount 12571.

⁷¹³ Taft.

My Baby in a Guinea-Blue Gown

Another secular song that Kennedy gives in *Mellows* is “My Baby in a Guinea-Blue Gown,” which first appeared in print as a love song in *Black Cameos* (1924).⁷¹⁴ The significance of this song is that it has a twelve-bar structure, with conventional twelve-bar harmony.

Kennedy gives no clues as to when and where he collected this song. All of the songs in *Mellows* are attributed to his younger years in Gretna and he gives no indication that this is not the case with this song. The earliest reference to this twelve-bar song that I have found is from Wednesday, October 25, 1916, when Kennedy performed “Coopuhzannah’s Love Song” with “Words and Music” at Holmes Hall, at a concert on behalf of the New Orleans Educational Association.⁷¹⁵ In the book *Black Cameos*, (1924) the song “My Baby in a Guinea-Blue Gown,” is the song given in the chapter “Coopuhzannah’s Love Song.”⁷¹⁶

MY BABY IN A GUINEA-BLUE GOWN

ain' gwine stay no
lon - guh. Gwine-I pack mah bun - dle an' go. 'Cause
way o - yuh yon - dah in a gui - nea blue gown. Dey got a
la - dy I use to know, O git yuh read - y in de

MY BABY IN A GUINEA-BLUE GOWN 169

maw - nin', in go - in' a - way — To mah ba - by in a
gui - nea blue gown. —
(2nd Verse)
met de la - dy one eve - nin', She was
goin' home all a - lone — I say you bet-tuh lem-me come an'
go long fo' comp - ny an' I cah'y you theoo de dahk clean
home, O git you read - y in de maw - nin' I'm go - in' a - way
— to my ba - by in a Gui - nea blue gown. —

**Figure 30: “My Baby in a Guinea-Blue Gown,” transcribed by R. Emmet Kennedy
(*Mellows: A Chronicle of Unknown Singers*, 1925)**

That this melody was well known and had many variants is made clear by Kennedy in his remarks about the song he says “the melody of this song is one of those vagrant airs of the gypsydom of folk-music. It has several variants, each one sung to a different set of words.”⁷¹⁷

⁷¹⁴ R. Emmet Kennedy, *Black Cameos* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1924; reprint, 1970).

⁷¹⁵ Koenig, *The Scrap Book of R. Emmet Kennedy*.

⁷¹⁶ Kennedy, *Black Cameos*, 175-8.

⁷¹⁷ Kennedy, *Mellows: A Chronicle of Unknown Singers*, 166.

Kennedy also gives us what he believed were the original words of which he had only been able to secure two stanzas.

*“Mama bought-a me coffee,
Mama bought-a me tea,
Mama brought me evvything, babe,
But de jail-house key;
O turn me over, turn me slow.*

*“Turn me over easy,
Turn me over slow;
Turn me over easy, babe,
‘Cause de bullets hurt me so;
O turn me over, turn me over slow.”*⁷¹⁸

If we take the second stanza that Kennedy collected first; we find that it is closely related to one of the most widely collected of American folk-songs. This is one of the many versions of “Frankie” that contains the stanza.

*“Roll me over, doctor,
Roll me over slow.
Bullet in my left side
And it pain my body so!”
“Oh, he was my man, but he done me wrong!”*⁷¹⁹

While it is possible that Kennedy heard a complete version of “Frankie,” that doesn’t fit with the first stanza about the jailhouse, which doesn’t usually figure in the “Frankie” ballad. But it does suggest that since this stanza was original sung to a standard twelve-bar accompaniment, that “Frankie” may well have been harmonised in this way too, at least in New Orleans.

When Kennedy published a harmonised version of this song he harmonised it using conventional I- IV- V harmony as a twelve-bar blues in the key of E. The only embellishment was that in the sixth bar the subdominant chord of A is chromatically altered to A minor, another harmonic alteration found in jazz blues, but less common in country blues.

The other stanza that Kennedy gives to this twelve-bar song using conventional twelve-bar harmony is even more interesting in relation to the development of the blues. The first to record this stanza on phonograph was Sam Collins, who was a native of McComb, born 1887 in Louisiana,⁷²⁰ in his “Jailhouse Blues” (1927)⁷²¹

*Lord she brought me coffee,
And she brought me tea
Fell dead on the floor,*

⁷¹⁸ Ibid.

⁷¹⁹ Scarborough, 83.

⁷²⁰ Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who’s Who: A Biographical Dictionary of Blues Singers* (New Rochelle N.Y: Arlington House, 1979), 127.

⁷²¹ Sam Collins, “Jailhouse Blues,” Richmond Indiana, 23 April 1927 (12736) Ge – 6167 OJL -2.

With the jailhouse key.

Known as “Crying Sam” Collins, born in Louisiana in 1887, he was raised in McComb, Mississippi, and moved to Chicago in the 1930s where he died of heart disease in 1949. It is interesting to note how this stanza is associated with one of the oldest songsters to record, but he was not the oldest.

Another version of the stanza appeared on phonograph was sung by Henry “Ragtime Texas.” Thomas was born 1874, in Upshur County, Texas⁷²² and was in his fifties when he went into the recording studio to record “Don’t Ease Me In.”⁷²³

*She brings me coffee,
And she bring me tea,
She bring me everything
Except the jailhouse key.*

One other singer to record a variant of this stanza in the 1920s was Rube Lacy, who was of a much younger generation born in 1901 in Rankin County, Mississippi,⁷²⁴ in his “Mississippi Jail House Groan” (1928).

The stanza can also be found in a number of folklore accounts John and Alan Lomax collected a version of the stanza as “The Midnight Special.”⁷²⁵

*“Lord, Thelma say she love me;
But I b’lieve she tol’ a lie,
‘Cause she hasn’ been to see me since de las’ July.
She brought me a lil coffee,
She brought me a lil tea,
She brought me nearly ev’thing
But de jail-house key.”*

Other versions have been found by Harold Courlander, *Betty and Dupree*,⁷²⁶ and also in Daryle Dance, “*From My People: 400 Years of African American Folklore*”⁷²⁷

Of particular interest is a version of this stanza found in another recording by Henry “Ragtime” Thomas, which is worth reviewing in total.

*I was standing in the corner, a – talking to my brown
I turned around sweet mama, I went across town
Says I’ve got a girl, and she working hard
She had a dress she wear loving babe, says it’s pink and blue
She brings me coffee, and she brings me tea
She bring me everything, except the jailhouse key*

⁷²² Harris, 507.

⁷²³ Henry Thomas, “Don’t Ease Me In,” Chicago, 13 June 1928, (Vo – 1197 OIL3).

⁷²⁴ Harris, 315.

⁷²⁵ Lomax and Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, 74.

⁷²⁶ Harold Courlander, *A Treasury of Afro-American Folklore* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc, 1976), 399.

⁷²⁷ Daryl Cumber Dance, *From My People: 400 Years of African American Folklore*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 2002), 495.

*Yes I'm going away, and it won't be long
 Just sure as the train leaves out the yard, she's Alabama bound
 I'm going away, and it won't be long
 Just ease your train eleven days, I'm Alabama bound
 Says the boat's up the river, and she won't come down
 I believe to my soul pretty mama, she's water bound
 I look to the east, and I look to the west
 If she heads to the South great God, she's Alabama bound*⁷²⁸

This is clearly a version of “I’m Alabama Bound,” as sung by Henry “Ragtime Texas” Thomas, a singer of a much older generation than most of the country singers to record in the 1920s. He was of a generation that have come to be regarded as songsters rather than bluesmen. The distinction denotes a number of features, the first being that the older ragtime repertoire usually required that the repertoire be studied rather than improvised. Samuel Charters made the following observation regarding Thomas.

The blues singer has to expose himself as a person in his blues, but the songster is more a reflection of an area’s musical interest than his own concern. [...]

Thomas seems to have been almost a pure songster. Once he’d learned a song he didn’t change it, even if he’d only half learned it at the beginning. [...]

Little of what Thomas sang continued in the Texas blues traditions, and he is a half-forgotten figure in the development of Texas music. Through Thomas, however, it is clear that the music of Texas has its own line of development going back almost as far as the earliest Mississippi style, going back, at least, to the point where the songster Henry Thomas first heard and remembered it.⁷²⁹

This raises the obvious question as to where a Texan, born in 1874 learnt a stanza that R. Emmet Kennedy, born in 1877, knew in New Orleans? When R. Emmet Kennedy transcribed this melody and harmony he was quite possibly the first folklorist to transcribe a twelve-bar blues. The twelve-bar blues that Kennedy transcribed was originally, according to Kennedy, sung with the “She brought me coffee etc.” stanza, in its earliest form. The stanza is also associated with the oldest songster to record, Henry “Ragtime Texas” Thomas, who could well have been developing his repertoire by the 1890s. What is intriguing is the stanza’s association with “I’m Alabama Bound,” which was subtitled “The Alabama Blues” when it was published in New Orleans in 1909. “I’m Alabama Bound” used the formulation *The (X) Blues* in its subtitle, and as such is arguably the first self-referential blues title. The title that Ragtime Thomas gave for his version of “I’m Alabama Bound” was “Don’t You Leave Me Here.” Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff have observed that “the relationship of Hoffman’s composition [“I’m Alabama Bound”] to the blues Morton later recorded as ‘Don’t You Leave Me Here’ is obvious.”⁷³⁰

⁷²⁸ Taft, 268.

⁷²⁹ Charters, *The Country Blues*, 190-5.

⁷³⁰ Abbott and Seroff, “‘They Cert’ly Sound Good to Me’: Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues,” 406.

The association of “I’m Alabama Bound” with “Don’t You Leave Me Here” is given further credence by listening to Papa Charlie Jackson’s version of “I’m Alabama Bound.”⁷³¹ Not much is known about Papa Charlie Jackson’s life, other than he was born around 1890 in New Orleans and worked in vaudeville singing and playing a guitar banjo. He also recorded in the 1920s with Freddie Keppard’s Jazz Cardinals. When he came to record his version of “I’m Alabama Bound” in 1925 the final verse was as follows:

*Now don’t you leave me here,
Don’t you leave me here,
Before you and your partner get ready to go,
Leave a dime for beer*

Why did a Texan songster call his version of “I’m Alabama Bound” by the same name that Jelly Roll Morton used, and how does this relate to the folk-songs that R. Emmet Kennedy collected or the published sheet music of “I’m Alabama Bound”?

I do not propose to hazard an answer, but it is clear: it is only by establishing connections between the repertoire of rural songsters, jazzmen, vaudeville performers, commercial ragtime composers and the folklore record that we can begin to address the question.

⁷³¹ Papa Charlie Jackson, “I’m Alabama Bound,” recorded Chicago Illinois May 1925 (Paramount 12289-A).

Reengaging Blues Narratives

In this thesis I have argued that to develop a clearer understanding of the development of the blues it is necessary to reengage the blues narratives of the commercial blues with jazz and country blues. I have framed this argument within the context of a number of tangential questions. Was W. C. Handy the “father of the blues?” Was the Mississippi Delta the “Land Where the Blues Began?” Were Jelly Roll Morton’s blues original, and did the “birth of the blues” take place in New Orleans?

Superficially these appear to be competing claims, but once the extent of the interrelationships between these claims is established we can begin to see that they are complementary claims, each of which contributes to our knowledge about the development of the blues.

W. C. Handy was not the father of the blues, if by this we mean that he was he personally responsible for the creation of the blues, but then he never claimed that he did create the blues. He always said that he took existing folk music and adapted it in his compositions. He was arguably less candid about his borrowings from the commercial blues. He consistently claimed that he wrote “Mr. Crump,” the tune that would become “The Memphis Blues,” in 1909 and from a time before there is any evidence of the “blues” by name being performed in Memphis. In the knowledge that “Mr. Crump” was written for the 1911 re-election campaign of Edward Crump, when the “blues” by name was well established in Memphis and throughout Southern vaudeville, we can begin to see why Handy had such a problem explaining the origins of his first published blues, “The Memphis Blues” (1912).

At face value Handy asks us to believe that he converted a simple one verse song with the repeated lyric “Goin’ Where the Southern ‘cross the Dog” performed on guitar using a knife, and this became the “Mama Don’t Allow” theme, orchestrated for a minstrel brass band. The connection is far from obvious. In the knowledge that the Two Sweets had threatened to sue anyone publishing their song “Mama Don’t Allow” it is understandable that Handy chose to publish “The Memphis Blues” without lyrics. It is also explains why he was keen to associate his later compositions “Joe Turner Blues,” “Careless Love,” etc., with folk-songs rather than the commercial “blues” of vaudeville, of which he cannot possibly have been ignorant.

But in a different sense perhaps W. C. Handy was the father of the blues, in that it was his 1914 composition “The St. Louis Blues” that brought together all of the features that today we associate with the blues in a single composition. In “The St. Louis Blues,” W. C. Handy brought together the twelve-bar form of the blues, a blue-note melody and lyrics using the AAB stanza form. “The St. Louis Blues” was perhaps not the first composition to do this (arguably this distinction belongs to “The Negro Blues” by Lasses White) but the enormous popularity of the “St. Louis Blues” has ensured that this is the standard blues form. In this sense that W. C. Handy can rightly claim to be the father of the “formal blues.”

I have also asked whether the Mississippi Delta was the land where the blues began. In terms of the “formal blues” the answer appears to be no. There is nothing to suggest that the “formal blues” was known or performed in the Mississippi Delta before it began to appear in sheet music and vaudeville circa 1908-1910. In the Mississippi Delta and throughout the rural South the blues was first recalled from a time around 1910, and consistently those who sang the country blues say that they were the first generation to do so. On the other hand the proximity and transport connection that the Delta enjoyed could well go some way to explain why the Mississippi Delta has been seen as the land where the “country blues” began.

Were Jelly Roll Morton’s Blues original? They were original compositions, but he never claimed that his use of the blues form was original. What Jelly Roll Morton said was that the blues was sung in New Orleans from the early years of the twentieth century and that he and other New Orleans musicians played a role in disseminating the blues throughout the South while touring in vaudeville.

Was New Orleans the birthplace of the blues? It is here that much more research is needed. On the surface of things both New Orleans and Memphis appear to have a good claim to the birth place of the blues, but I would be very cautious about subscribing to any belief about any one place having given birth to, invented, or otherwise originated the blues.

Alongside the pervasive myth that the blues originated in the Mississippi Delta, pioneered by Charlie Patton, we have the equally pervasive myth that jazz originated in New Orleans pioneered by Charles “Buddy” Bolden. It has been popularly believed that jazz developed because of the coming together of ragtime and the blues and that New Orleans was the place that this fusion of musical influences took place. Superficially this sounds a reasonable argument given New Orleans’ unique position as a geographical and cultural crossroads; a place that connects mainland America to the Gulf of Mexico via the Mississippi River, fusing Latin and French culture with Anglo-American influences. Although we know that jazz did develop in New Orleans, we do not know if it developed in New Orleans *alone*, or what role Buddy Bolden and his repertoire played in that development.

One way to investigate this may be afforded by the recent acquisition of the *Fredrick Ramsey Papers* by the Historic New Orleans Collection. Ramsey was one of the *Jazzmen* authors who made a significant study of Buddy Bolden, but never published his findings. Perhaps the Ramsey papers could act a starting point for a reassessment of the role of Buddy Bolden and the blues in the emergence of jazz.

What this thesis confirms is that the “formal blues” did not begin to emerge until around 1908-1910 at a time when “blues” titles began to be associated with twelve-bar form. This development seems to have taken place in the repertoire of rural songsters, the emerging jazz bands, and in the repertoire of vaudeville performers and in sheet music at much the same time, with none of these genres having any obvious primacy.

The twelve-bar form can be found in sheet music from 1896 with the publication of “The Bully Song,” and by 1900 the twelve-bar form was beginning to be combined with simple I-IV- V harmony by the composer Hughie Cannon in “Just Because She Made Dem Goo-Goo

Eyes.” The popularity of this song can be attested to by its appearance in the repertoire of trench diggers in Coahoma County, Mississippi in 1901-2, and also by its inclusion in the music that John Robichaux played with his band in New Orleans. It is clear that in the case of “Just Because She Made Dem Goo-Goo Eyes,” the repertoires of rural songsters, jazz musicians and minstrel show performers were one and the same. This would argue for a re-engagement of blues narratives rather than the study of the country blues as “a phenomenon to be studied in its own right.”⁷³²

As Howard Odum commented:

It is doubtful whether the history of song affords a parallel to the American situation with regard to the blues. Here we have the phenomenon of a type of folk song becoming a great fad and being exploited in every conceivable form; of hundreds of blues, some of which are based directly upon folk productions, being distributed literally by the million among the American people; and the Negro’s assimilation of these blues into his everyday song life. What the effect of these processes are going to be, one can only surmise. One thing is certain, however, and that is that the student of Negro song tomorrow will have to know what was on the phonograph records of today before he may dare to speak of origins.⁷³³

This observation was made in 1926 when phonograph recordings spread the blues throughout the South. Long before this it was the tent shows, vaudeville, minstrel shows, sheet music and the emerging jazz bands that provided a similar function.

I would argue that Odum’s advice should be extended, and that before we “dare speak of origins” we need to know what was being sung in the tent shows and on the vaudeville stage, what was being distributed as sheet music and what was being played by the emerging jazz bands of New Orleans and elsewhere.

⁷³² Oliver, “Blues Research: Problems and Possibilities.”

⁷³³ Odum and Johnson, *Negro Workday Songs*, 33-4.

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