HOLLOW ROCK & *The Lost Blues Connection*

BY MARTHA BAYLES

It still makes millions of dollars, but rock has lost its soul. While the blame is often placed on crude commerce, Martha Bayles finds that American music went astray when it misunderstood, and then lost touch with, the rich blues tradition.

People used to tap their feet and smile when they listened to American popular music. Now they sit open-mouthed and stare: at "speed metal" rockers with roadkill hair who, despite a certain virtuosity on guitar, treat music as a form of warfare; at "grunge" bands in thrift-shop flannels who throw tantrums and smash their instruments; at "gangsta" rappers in baggy gear who posture as rapists, pushers, prostitutes, murderers, or terrorists. Tune into MTV, and you will occasionally come across something wonderful. But more likely the sonic abuse and verbal-visual ugliness will appall and repel you.

Appall and repel, that is, if you belong to one of two groups of listeners: either to those who have always disliked popular music and regard what they see on MTV as the inevitable outcome of commercialization, or to those who once liked popular music but cannot stomach the current fare. For the latter, among whom I count myself, the main problem is finding a way to articulate objections without echoing earlier gripes about music we relish, whether jazz, swing, blues, rhythm and blues, or rock 'n' roll. "Turn that racket down," we yell, realizing we sound just like our parents.

So we chalk the problem up to age, telling ourselves that people prefer the music of their youth, and that's all there is to it. But this explanation conjures up a most unlikely prospect: today's teenagers 60 years from now attending Saturday-night dances in their retirement communities, their eyes misting over to the sounds of Megadeth, Sonic Youth, and Niggaz With Attitude. Such a future seems unlikely for the obvious but under-appreciated reason that much of today's popular music evokes only the more intense, unsettling emotions of youth: anxiety, lust, anger, aggression. In the narrow gauge of its effects, such music could not be more different from the best of American popular music, which balances such unsettling emotions with tenderness, grace, and wit. Indeed, the great vigor of our music has always been its ability to blend opposites.

What happened to this vigor? The answer, or at least part of it, is found in the undisputed heart of American popular music, the blues. The story of our music's decline, as I shall show, is strongly bound up with the history of what happened to the blues starting in the mid-1960s: how it got bludgeoned into "rock," "hard rock," "heavy metal," and even more grotesque offshoots—developments that you need not be a philistine, prude, or old fogy to deplore.

Defining the blues is itself a vexed question, given the historic conundrum of race and sex that has long distorted white reactions to Afro-American music in general and to the blues in particular. The task is further complicated by the fact that generations of folklorists

ROMARE BEARDEN'S *AUTUMN LAMP* (1983)

have evaluated different blues forms in ideological, as opposed to musical, terms. Many of these earnest souls have engaged in a prolonged but fruitless debate over whether certain changes in blues practice (lyric content, instrumentation, electric amplification) have destroyed blues artistry and reduced the blues to commercialized entertainment. The debate is fruitless because it ignores the fact that the blues has always been commercialized entertainment.

While scholars disagree over many particulars of blues history, most agree in tracing the music to two sources: to Afro-American religion and ritual, including spirituals, ring shouts, field hollers, work chants, sermons, and toasts; and to early forms of American popular culture, including plantation music, minstrel "coon songs," and popular ballads performed by itinerant street singers for the loose change of passersby.

From its beginning, then, the blues was both noncommercial and commercial. The form as we know it—one performer, usually male, singing and playing a guitar—dates back to the years immediately after the Civil War, when emancipation sent former slave musicians on the road to earn a living. This image of the solo, itinerant bluesman appeals to aficionados steeped in the romantic ideal of the lonely artist pitted against a hostile society. But for two reasons, the blues rarely fits the ideal. First, the blues has always been played by groups as well as by individuals. And second, it has never ceased to sell itself. For over a century, the blues performer's motto has been not "art for art's sake" but "make way for the paying customers." The latter have included everyone from travelers waiting at a railroad depot to sharecroppers crowded onto segregated benches for a country "medicine show," from families gathered for a barbecue on a Mississippi cotton plantation to lowlife rowdies raising hell in a Memphis juke joint, from citydwellers strolling in a public park to transplanted southern factory workers in a hole-in-the-wall Chicago club.

In recent years, the blues performer most frequently forced into the art-for-art's-sake mold has been the renowned Mississippi Delta bluesman, Robert Johnson (1911–38). Because Johnson was a lone wolf who wrote many of his own lyrics, some of them strikingly original, reissues of his 1930s recordings have been greeted with glowing tributes, many of which depict him as the true romantic hero who lived only for the purity of his art. The deflating truth, however, is that Johnson spent most of his career working as a human jukebox. Journalist Peter Guralnick cites one of Johnson's contemporaries, who recalled that the bluesman "was as likely to perform 'Tumbling Tumbleweeds' or the latest Bing Crosby hit as one of his own compositions. 'You didn't play what *you* liked, you played what the people liked. That's what you had to do.' " Had Johnson lived past 1938, he might have been one of the first delta bluesmen to perform on radio. The price of appearing on tiny KFFA in Helena, Arkansas, was singing jingles for the King Biscuit Flour Company and allowing your face to adorn a cornmeal label. But Johnson would have paid it, just as his stepson and protégé, Robert "Jr." Lockwood, did.

To stress this commercial aspect is not to disparage blues artistry. It is only to point out that the leading practitioners of Afro-American music have never drawn a sharp, uncrossable line between commerce and art. The great figures of blues and jazz have understood all too well that commercial

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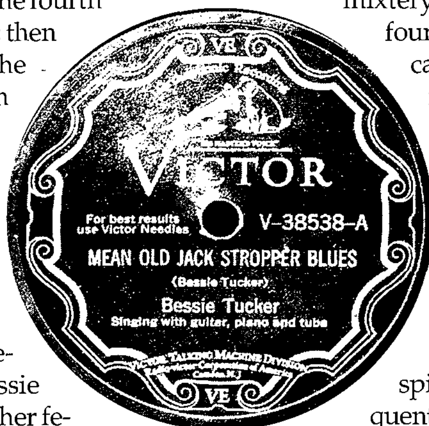
priorities often conflict with artistic ones, and that those who profit from the music are rarely those who create it. But they have nonetheless striven to make commerce and art dovetail. As Duke Ellington remarked about his famous predecessor: "I loved and respected Louis Armstrong. He was born poor, died rich, and never hurt anyone on the way."

Unlike folklore purists, musicians have always defined the blues as a structure, as a way of playing and singing, and (equally important) as a ritualized way of coping with the harshness of life. As crystallized in the early 20th century, the traditional blues is a three-line, 12-bar stanza with lyrics following a variety of rhyme schemes, usually *a a b*. Typically in the key of E or A, the blues stanza starts with four bars on the tonic, with the fourth shifting to the dominant 7th; then it proceeds to two bars on the subdominant, two more on the tonic, two on the dominant 7th, and two final bars back on the tonic. Not all blues have this structure; far from it. The oldest known blues are almost free-form, and many "classic" blues, such as those recorded in the 1920s by Bessie Smith, Mamie Smith, and other female performers, have the familiar structure of the 32-bar popular song.



But blues artistry consists of more than strumming a simple sequence of chords and singing the somewhat constrained melodies that arise from them. First and foremost, the blues is polyrhythmic, meaning it possesses that elusive but essential quality known as "swing." At some point, every critic tries to explain Ellington's famous title, "It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing." The task is not easy, but the French musicologist André Hodeir comes close when he explains that swing depends on five things: "infrastructure" (meaning a regular structural beat, often implied rather than played), "superstructure" (meaning the numerous other pulses surrounding the structural beat, usually given equal, if not greater, accentuation), "getting the notes and accents in the right place", "relaxation", and "vital drive." As Hodeir admits, "The first three are technical in nature and can be understood rationally; the last two are psycho-physical, and must be grasped intuitively."

Blues artists further define their music in terms of distinctive vocal and instrumental techniques, such as "moaning" and "string bending," which produce a rich variety of timbres and microtonal shadings. Like polyrhythm, these techniques are indisputably the heritage of Africa. As a slave musician remarked to a white visitor in the 1830s, "Notes is good enough for you people, but us likes a mixtery." The same "mixtery" is found in all forms of Afro-American music. In blues, as well as in jazz and gospel, the best performers range across the whole spectrum, from tones pure enough to pass muster in a European concert hall to "impure" textures evocative of every imaginable emotional state.

Emotion brings us to the spirit of the blues, a subject frequently misunderstood, even by its admirers. The music gets its name from the Elizabethan phrase, "the blue devils," meaning a fit of bad temper or melancholy. But bad temper and melancholy are merely the starting point of the blues, not its destination. Of course, some people view the blues as depressing, as would befit "the devil's music." This view prevails in the gospel field, where many agree with Mahalia Jackson that "blues are the songs of despair, gospel songs are songs of hope." It is more sympathetically expressed by blues historian Paul Oliver: "The blues is primarily the song of those who turned their backs on religion." But both evaluations miss the point. If the blues teaches us anything, it is that despair is not the only alternative to faith. For all the emotionalism found in

blues performance, the music's basic philosophy is stoic.

To put the matter another way, "having the blues" is not the same thing as "playing the blues." The former refers to a negative state of mind, such as loneliness or grief, anger or fear, disappointment or jealousy; the latter, to the art of leavening, tempering, or (possibly) transforming such a state. Because it does not expect to achieve heavenly bliss, the blues aims lower than gospel, at what can be achieved in this world—usually enough irony or humor to give a modicum of freedom in even the grimmest circumstances. Novelist and jazz critic Albert Murray explains:

> The church is not concerned with the affirmation of life as such. . . . The church is committed to the eternal salvation of the soul after death. . . . But the Saturday Night Function [the blues performance] is a ritual of purification and affirmation nonetheless. Not all ceremonial occasions are solemn. Nor are defiance and contestation less fundamental to human well-being than are worship and propitiation. Indeed they seem to be precisely what such indispensably human attributes as courage, dignity, honor, nobility and heroism are all about. . . . The most immediate problem of the blues-bedeviled person concerns his ability to cope with even the commonplace. What is at stake is a sense of well-being that is at least strong enough to enable him to meet the basic requirements of the workaday world.

Robert Johnson's blues never suggest any hope that coping with trouble in this world will lead to rewards in the next. One of his best-known lyrics goes, "You may bury my body down by the highway side/So my old evil spirit can catch a Greyhound bus and ride" ("Me and the Devil Blues"). Yet Johnson makes it just as clear that if despair is allowed to rule in small things, it will rule in large: "If you cry about a nickel/You'll die 'bout a dime" ("Last Fair Deal Gone Down"). Like gospel, the blues involves both performer and audience in a communal, ritualized re-enactment of extreme emotional states. The purpose of the blues ritual is, like that of gospel, to *return* from those states—to *survive* trouble, not succumb to it. The difference is that, unlike the preacher, the bluesman tempers every extreme. His stoic stance toward life eschews pain, but his focus on bitter realities also distrusts joy.

Historically, the topics addressed by the blues make for a very long list. Here are just a few, taken from Paul Oliver's landmark study of traditional blues lyrics, *Blues Fell This Morning*: employment and the lack thereof; the need to migrate, usually by railroad, and the personal costs of doing so; color prejudice among blacks as well as whites; standards of beauty and dress; flirtation, romance, courtship, and marriage; fidelity and infidelity; sex in all its permutations, including sexual boasting and insult; folk beliefs, magic, and "hoodoo"; gambling; carnivals, juke joints, and vaudeville; liquor, Prohibition, and drugs; conditions in various regions and cities; prostitution and vice; weapons and fighting; gangsters and crime; the Ku Klux Klan; prison and convict labor; the abuses of the criminal justice system; prison escape and family breakup; capital punishment; the Mississippi River; floods, tornadoes, dust storms, and hurricanes; housing, insurance policies, and fires; military service, wars, and veterans; diet, working conditions, injury, and disease; death, funerals, and cemeteries; heaven and hell; bereavement and hero-worship.

Because the blues has long been embraced as an authentic "folk art" by the political Left, its stoicism tends to get overlooked. Old leftists, from Anatoli Lunacharsky (Stalin's commissar of public enlightenment) to the poet-activist Amiri Baraka, have interpreted the blues as a form of coded political protest, thereby foisting upon the music a programmatic optimism about human affairs that is simply not present. And new leftists, from

rock critic Greil Marcus to black nationalist Ron Karenga, have dismissed the blues as passive acceptance of injustice, thereby missing the hard gleam of resistance at its core.

When the rural southern blues moved to the urban North in the 1940s, both its sound and its lyric content changed. In Chicago, practitioners of Johnson's Mississippi Delta style such as Muddy Waters (McKinley Morganfield) and Howlin' Wolf (Chester Burnett) began using electric amplifiers to make themselves heard over the conversational din of clubs and saloons. At the same time, one theme came to dominate the lyrics: relations between the sexes. There were commercial reasons for this change. As sociologist Charles Keil explains, "Radio stations and other commercial interests have been most energetic in reshaping blues styles." But Keil also sees other factors at work, including the fact that "male roles in the [northern] Negro community are confused, anxiety-laden, and in need of redefinition." In other words, sex became the focus of the urban blues not just because sex sells but also because sex is freighted with meanings about the stability, and instability, of life in the urban North.

Lynda Barry, Blues Style *(1986)*

Yet too often these larger social and psychological concerns are lost on listeners who are put off by the blues' sexual frankness. Oliver puts it well: "As with all other subjects the blues, when dealing with matters of love and sex, is forthright and uncompromising." Oliver suggests that "polite society" takes "offence" at salty blues language. And so, in its way, does the Old Left. Ever since Maxim Gorky's 1928 essay, "On the Music of the Gross," socialists of all stripes have considered the element of eroticism in Afro-American music proof of "decadent commercialism." To such listeners, there is nothing but a crude leer in the famous Johnson lyric: "You can squeeze my lemon 'til the juice run down my leg."

But they, too, miss the point. Like all blues lyrics, "squeeze my lemon" has to be interpreted in context. The line appears in Johnson's "Traveling Riverside Blues," a song of wry complaint. The singer has a woman in every Mississippi port, but the one in Friar's Point, he laments, has "got a mortgage on my body, now, a lien on my soul." "Squeeze my lemon" expresses lust, of course, but in a deliberately banal way suggestive of what casual sex has become for this heartsick traveling man. The next (and last) line is crucial: "But I'm goin' back to Friar's Point, if I be rockin' to my head."

Unfortunately, this larger context is also neglected by a goodly portion of the 1960s generation, many of whom embraced the counterculture's project of total sexual liberation. Such listeners, who tend to be heavily represented in the ranks of rock critics, seize upon such lyrics as proof that the essence of the blues—the real *truth* of the form—is prurience. And it is this primitivist celebration of prurience, not the puritanical head-wagging of matrons and Marxists, that has fostered the systematic debasement

of the blues in rock.* This primitivism is in turn related to some of the oldest misunderstandings that complicate relations between black and white Americans.

The phrase "blood knot" comes from the South African playwright, Athol Fugard, but it is an apt metaphor for the complex racial-sexual dynamic that has for more than three centuries shaped American culture. To describe this dynamic properly, one must go back to the beginning—to the original clash of world views between black Africans and white Europeans in the New World.

Historian Eugene Genovese suggests that throughout the Americas the puritanical outlook of Anglo-Saxon slaveowners made them more restrained than their Spanish and Portuguese counterparts when it came to the sexual exploitation of slave women. But restraint had a cost, especially in cases where such exploitation might have led to sympathy. Interracial love was thwarted in the English colonies, Genovese argues, not only by the injustice of slavery but also by the white culture's powerful association of sex with sin:

> Miscegenation poisoned southern race relations much less through those acts of violence which lower-class women—and their men—have always had to suffer in hierarchical social systems, than through the psychological devastation it wrought. . . . What the white men might have viewed, even if perversely, as joyous and lusty, they generally had to view as a self-degradation.

As for the enslaved Africans, most historians agree that the coherence of their original religions was shattered by slavery. But as Albert J. Raboteau notes, it is significant that most North American slaves were not converted to Christianity until the Great Awakening of the 1740s: "In the face of this religious indifference," he writes, "some forms of African religious behavior seem to have continued." Genovese concurs, adding that even after conversion, most slaves had difficulty assimilating the puritanical view of sex.

This difficulty did not stem from the Africans' savage, concupiscent nature, as was commonly believed by white Americans in the 18th century. Instead, it derived from the fact that the religions of Africa (like most pre-Christian religions, including those of Europe) placed sex and fertility at the center of the cosmos. However shocking to 17th- and 18th-century European explorers, the graphic artifacts, dances, and rituals of West Africa symbolized a life force neither wholly material nor wholly spiritual. A recent interfaith study of Christian marriage in Africa captures this delicately balanced view:

> In the African world view sex was not biological only; it was also sacred. It was to be "used" with care; it was mysterious and like all mysterious things it belonged to the gods. The pleasure of sex was, of course, legitimate, but its outcome, whenever possible, was to be children. Childbearing was a religious and social duty. It follows, therefore, that in almost all parts and cultures of Africa, rape, homosexuality, bestiality—all sexual acts which did not fulfill both of these conditions—were condemned and severely punished. They could bring nothing but disaster not only to the people concerned but to the whole community.

According to Genovese, this African world view persisted among the slaves, who saw sexual misconduct as "primarily a moral offense to the community rather than to God," and who rejected "the denigration of sex as sinful, dirty or anything other than delightfully human and pleasurable." The slaves were not puritans, but neither did they condone sexual

*By "rock" I mean the white-dominated styles of music discussed herein, from the Rolling Stones to such contemporary forms as "speed metal" and "grunge." I do *not* mean the diverse strains of Afro-American music lumped together as "rock 'n' roll" in the 1950s and early 1960s., and I do *not* mean the various black-dominated styles, from Motown and soul to funk and non-"gangsta" rap, now misleadingly classified as "pop."

excess. Premarital intercourse was tolerated, even encouraged, and there was no stigma attached to its issue. But tolerance did not extend to marital infidelity, by husband or wife; the cure for a bad marriage was dissolution, initiated by either partner. Genovese reports that many slaveowners were well aware of this sexual code among blacks. The more intelligent whites even acknowledged it—some with a trace of self-deprecating humor. Mary B. Chestnut, wife of a prominent Virginia planter and politician, wrote in her diary that "Negro women are married, and after marriage behave as well as other people."

Not only did the slaves have their own sexual code. They also held definite opinions about the somewhat different code of whites. Above all, they bitterly condemned white male adventurism among their own women, and many black men were willing even to die in defense of black women. In addition, the slaves took a dim view of certain aspects of the white sexual code, notably its insistence upon the permanence of marriage and its preoccupation with female purity. The slaves were starkly aware of the gap between word and deed in white sexual morality. The majority of North American slaves lived too intimately with whites to believe that the latter always abided by the stern morality they professed. Blacks understood all too well that most whites had two moral standards: a rigid one for themselves, which they frequently fell short of, and a lax one for their slaves, with whom they frequently did their falling short.

The blood knot acquired another twist after the Civil War, when, as Genovese explains, white attitudes shifted from guilt about sex between white men and black women to terror of sex between black men and white women:

> The titillating and violence-provoking theory of the superpotency of that black superpenis, while whispered about for several centuries, did not become an obsession until after emancipation, when it served the purposes of racial segregationists.

Sociologist Calvin C. Hernton describes the ensuing dynamic: the ambivalence warping the white man's perennial exploitation of the black woman, the isolation of the white woman atop a pedestal of sexless virtue, the forbidden-fruit syndrome distorting all contact between the mythically potent black man and the mythically pure white woman, the resentments and hypocrisies afflicting relations between the sexes within each group, and, finally, the foul mist of irrational violence enveloping the whole.

Especially astute is Hernton's account of how blacks themselves have strengthened the blood knot. He cites the old southern tale about a group of white men walking through a cornfield, discovering a black couple making love, and joking, "That is another good reason for being a nigger!" Toni Morrison embroiders on this tale in her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, where instead of merely joking, the white men gather around the couple (who are very young) and goad the boy to "get on wid it." Naturally, the boy is too terrified to do anything of the kind. But to keep his tormentors at bay, he fakes it. The effect, of course, is to humiliate him before his girl and add another trauma to his life. Yet Hernton's point is that white voyeurism has caused many black people to believe in their own fakery—or, worse, to put on a genuine performance when the white folks jeer, "Make it good, nigger."

The sad truth is that sexual prowess is one of the few traits for which blacks have received tribute from whites—albeit one of spiteful envy. For a people as systematically vilified as black Americans have been, any advantage over the vilifier is bound to exert a certain attraction. Combine that with a clear-eyed view of white sexual hypocrisy, and it seems inevitable that a certain segment of the black community would come to believe that black sexual "immorality" was superior to white "morality." Hence the strain in Afro-American folklore that regards any restraint as a sham and any license as honest, natural, and

authentic. From this strain comes the folk hero Stagolee (the original "bad nigger"), whose sexual swagger is all too frequently imitated by men (and some women) lacking any other source of pride.

Does this mean that every black performer who pleases a white audience is the same as the boy in the cornfield? Even posing the question is an insult. Yet it needs to be posed, because the blood knot has a way of entangling everyone, white and black, who studies the interaction of black performers and white audiences. Consider this passage from James Lincoln Collier's biography of Louis Armstrong:

> Precisely why white Americans have been drawn to black entertainment is not easy to explain, but two factors are evident. First, the black subculture as it existed in the slave cabins and then in big-city ghettos has always seemed exotic to whites. . . . Second, blacks were also seen as more erotic than whites. They were not expected to abide by the sexual proscriptions of white society.

Why should Collier, a white admirer of jazz, find it "not easy to explain" the appeal of black entertainment? No doubt this disclaimer arises from the context, a discussion of the voyeuristic undercurrent of white interest in Afro-American music. Naturally, Collier wishes to distance himself from that undercurrent, with its unflattering image of the white jazz fan as a cold, uptight puritan secretly thrilled by the warm, relaxed sensuality of black performers.

Unfortunately, this undercurrent is real. To be sure, innumerable whites have straightforwardly embraced Afro-American music as an antidote to excessive inhibition—not just in relation to sex but also to emotion, bodily movement, even religious enthusiasm. To appreciate the complex beauties of the music in this way, however, one must sense the difference between the erotic, which preserves the connections between sex and the rest of life, and the obscene, which severs them. Afro-American music is sometimes erotic, but it is never obscene, because there is always a larger whole—whether spiritual ecstasy, physical exuberance, or emotional catharsis—to which its erotic qualities are joined.

During the 1950s, a great many whites embraced rock 'n' roll precisely because of its erotic component. The rock 'n' roll craze began in the South, when young whites began tuning into black-oriented radio stations to hear the various 1940s hybrids of blues, swing and gospel known as "rhythm and blues." Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, and others added country music to the mix. The rhythm and blues influence remained strong through the mid-1960s, where it can be discerned in Motown, southern soul, and the early music of the Beatles.

Of course, rock 'n' roll elicited many of the same critical reactions that the blues did. To contemporary pundits, many of them influenced by the heavy-handed Freudianism of the day, rock 'n' roll was nothing but decadent trash mass-marketed to teens. To Jack Gould of the *New York Times*, for example, Presley had "no discernible singing ability," and his stardom rested wholly on "an accented movement of the body that heretofore has been primarily identified with the repertoire of the blonde bombshells of the burlesque runway."

Predictably, this prudish response was followed by a primitivist one. Like the prude, the primitivist focused exclusively on the sexual component of Afro-American music. But while the prude would censure, the primitivist would celebrate. Rock critic Greil Marcus, for instance, praised Presley's music purely in terms of sexual liberation, portraying this complex, troubled figure as the first open advocate of a centuries-long "secret revolt against the Puritans."

Reading Marcus, you would never know that most rock 'n' roll lyrics were as sugary as they were salty. Nor would you know that rock 'n' roll was, first and foremost, a *dance* craze. The fans who screamed and fainted for

Berry and Presley were feeling their libidinous oats, to be sure. But that is not all they were feeling. The famous rock 'n' roll deejay Alan Freed once remarked that "rock 'n' roll was merely swing with a modern name." And he was right. By the 1950s, Americans had been driven from the dance floors—first by modern jazz ("bebop"), with its exploration of rhythms too subtle for human feet, and then by postwar "pop," with its preference for midtempo ballads.

Given this dearth of danceable music, it is hardly surprising that young people would seek out whatever dance music was available. Rock 'n' roll was different from swing because it was played by smaller groups in a bluesier, rhythmically heavier style. But it was similar in ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous. Bad rock 'n' roll, like bad swing, reduces the basic elements of a steady beat and repeated melodic "riffs" to a formula. Good rock 'n' roll, like good swing, enlivens these elements with rhythmic counterpoint, rich instrumental color, and adventurous solos.

Blues playing and blues feeling persisted right through the rock 'n' roll era. Some critics, patrons, and fans celebrated rock 'n' roll in primitivist terms, but not the musicians themselves. It was not until the mid-1960s, when primitivism became the province of musicians (and would-be musicians), that the loss of vigor really began.

The change took place in Britain, largely because the British admired Afro-American music but found it difficult to accept its commercial dimension. The Beatles' appealing early style drew upon such authentic sources as Chuck Berry and Buddy Holly, gospel quartets, and rhythm and blues. But because the Beatles did not stress the blues, purist British fans scorned their sound as commercialized "pop." This scorn was reinforced by class bias: The Beatles were working-class pubgoers from Liverpool, while most blues fans were middle-class clubgoers from suburban London. In their anxiety to avoid the taint of commerce, the latter gravitated toward a form of Afro-American music that had never really "crossed over" to whites: the Chicago blues.

In fact, the Chicago blues had never been all that popular with blacks. It sold well among the uprooted Mississippians of the Windy City, but most black listeners preferred other styles, such as the spare Texas blues of Sam

Elvis Presley, photographed here in the 1950s, brought some of the best features of Afro-American music into the white American mainstream.

"Lightnin' " Hopkins, the sprightly boogie-woogie of Jimmy Reed, or the lyrically swinging Memphis sound of T-Bone Walker, B. B. King, and Little Johnnie Taylor. Most of these strains negotiated the musical spectrum from sweet to salty, smooth to rough, pure to gritty, soft to loud, and slow to fast. Chicago blues, by contrast, emphasized the qualities at the cruder end of the spectrum—almost to a fault. Or so thought its leading exponent, Muddy Waters, who grew tired of the Chicago approach in the early 1960s and returned to a broader, mellower style closer to that of his native delta.

Yet while Muddy Waters was broadening the Chicago blues, his British admirers were narrowing it to the point of caricature. The change shows up most starkly in the human voice. Most rock pundits dutifully report that Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones learned to sing from the blues masters. Yet, as Rolling Stones biographer Philip Norman admits, the only black singer Jagger ever came close to imitating was Chuck Berry:

> Berry's voice, light and sharp and strangely white-sounding, had a pitch not dissimilar to [Jagger's] own. Singing along to "Sweet Little Sixteen" or "Reelin' and Rockin'," he suddenly felt like something more than a mumbling impersonator.

And Jagger surpassed most of his contemporaries, whose range is aptly summarized by critic Charles S. Murray: "British blues bands ran the emotional gamut from A (I'm feeling sorry for myself) through B (I'm well 'ard, me) to C (I'm not tough really but I'm going to pretend that I am) to D (I'm pissed off)." Or, as Muddy Waters himself said of the "white kids" who had taken up the blues, "They play so much, run a ring around you playin' guitar, but they cannot vocal like the black man."

Back in America, blues vocalism fared no better. Janis Joplin, the 1960s rock heroine crowned "the greatest white, female blues singer of all time," claimed to have learned her art from Bessie Smith. But vocally Joplin could

Two lost souls: Both Janis Joplin (above) and Jimi Hendrix (left) began as musicians in the blues tradition, but both pandered to the lowest audience expectations and ended up destroying their music and their lives.

1969, music critic Henry Pleasants compared King's "consummate musicianship" with Joplin's reliance upon "a sound that little boys of four or five produce when trying to determine just what degree of aural torture will finally drive Mommy or Daddy into giving them a smack in the teeth."

The debasement of vocal artistry was intimately related to a debasement of instrumental artistry. Urban blues bands typically included several instruments—two or three guitars, acoustic bass, drums, harmonica, and piano—all involved in a constantly shifting interplay. Early rock bands, by contrast, stripped down to lead guitar, bass guitar, and drums. To be sure, the Beatles used the same stripped-down lineup, and a few early rock groups, notably the Rolling Stones, often included other instruments. But the rock bands that considered themselves "progressive" used the "power trio" lineup. Unfortunately, their notion of power was one that sacrificed musical interplay to self-indulgent soloing—what Charles S. Murray calls "the fetishization of lead guitar playing as an athletic event."

not have named a less appropriate model. Smith, whose range barely exceeded one octave, was a stunning practitioner of blues "mixtery," shading every note and beat with elaborate nuance. Joplin had a strong, three-octave voice, but rather than develop its potential, she began her career imitating Smith—only without nuance, in a painfully high register. Yet even this effort sounds better than Joplin in her heyday, when she cauterized her vocal equipment with a style consisting almost entirely of screaming. Reviewing a double bill featuring B. B. King and Joplin in

"Guitar heroes" such as Jeff Beck of the Yardbirds and Pete Townshend of the Who also manipulated the enormous amplification systems developed for stadium concerts in the late 1960s. In such systems, the electromagnetic pickups on instruments (especially guitars) receive two different kinds of signals: those manually produced by the musician and those produced when the pickups recycle the

sound issuing from the huge loudspeakers. The result, familiar to anyone who has ever hooked up an amplifier, is "feedback," a sustained, distorted tone shrieking with high harmonic overtones.

The only person to turn feedback and other electronic effects, such as reverb, into blues was the black American guitarist, Jimi Hendrix. As white Chicago bluesman Mike Bloomfield explains, Hendrix used "an immense vocabulary of controlled sounds, not just hoping to get those sounds, but actually controlling them as soon as he produc[ed] them. I have never heard such controlled frenzy." As Townshend admits, "Jimi took some of our stuff, but he was doing a whole different thing with it. He took what I was doing and turned it into music."

Hendrix's closest rival was Eric Clapton, who, together with Jack Bruce (bass) and Ginger Baker (drums) started the archetypal power trio, Cream, in 1966. Blues devotees though its members were, Cream excelled at sheer virtuosity and volume—"a wall of noise," writes one critic, "that was physically palpable, and . . . almost literally bowled audiences over." But volume was not the only reason Clapton did not achieve Hendrix's "controlled frenzy." As one Hendrix biographer recalls, Clapton was also deficient in rhythm:

> Clapton could never seem to understand what Hendrix was getting at when he stressed rhythm accompaniment. Hendrix felt that Clapton was too intellectual about it, . . . insisting the guitar was now an instrument of the virtuoso, just like in classical music. Jimi tried to get across the message that the funk, the feel, and the boogie of the blues came from a subtle rhythmic combination . . . where the guitar put the electric fire crackling over the bass and drums, creating the dynamic that made folks want to dance and shout and get it all out.

Clapton himself agrees. Commenting on his early days, he admits he "forgot" about "time—when you hit the note and when you stop. How you place it exactly."

The glory days of guitar heroism were brief. Hendrix succumbed to drugs in 1970, leaving his "gauntlet," in Charles S. Murray's phrase, "still lying where he left it." And Cream broke up in 1969, despite its commercial success (its first three albums sold 15 million copies in the United States). To his disappointed fans, Clapton explained that Cream had taken "hard rock" as far as it could go. And he meant it. For all his diverse musical activity since then, Clapton has never returned to the sound that culminated in Cream. I say "culminated" because, although various offshoots of hard rock dominated the 1970s, they did so without progressing musically. To be sure, hard rock has produced a line of guitar virtuosos: from Beck and Townshend to Jimmy Page and Eddie Van Halen, to Steve Vai and Vernon Reid. But for all their virtuosity, the only musical values displayed by these idols are speed, dexterity, and athleticism. Guitar heroes scorn the high-tech music now made by computer, but their own playing sounds almost as mechanical.

Early rock also bludgeoned the spirit of the blues in two crucial areas: in its treatment of the erotic and in the relationship between performer and audience. In the first, the Rolling Stones led the way, understanding all too well that many rock fans were transfixed by the myth of black "hyperpotency." A few black performers were already trading on that myth in the mid-1960s, but the Rolling Stones had the advantage, and convenience, of not actually being black. They could cater to white primitivism without worrying about white self-consciousness. And it worked. One British reviewer exclaimed, "Never before has there been a sound to rival this—Except, perhaps, in the jungles of darkest Africa!" Another critic extolled Jagger as England's best "imitation black blues" singer—not just because he exuded "more aggression, more obvious sexuality," but also because he had "big flappy lips." Yet another admirer called gui-

tarist Keith Richards "the world's only bluegum white man, as poisonous as a rattlesnake," and extolled the Rolling Stones for "inciting the crowd to orgasm."

Hendrix catered to the same fantasies, but for him primitivism was both a ploy and a trap. As Clapton explains:

> The English people have a very big thing about a spade. They really love that magic thing, the sexual thing. . . . And Jimi came over and exploited that to the limit. . . . He'd do a lot of things, like fool around with his tongue or play his guitar behind his back and run it up and down his crotch. And he'd look out at the audience, and if they were digging it, he wouldn't like the audience. He'd keep doing it, putting them on, playing less music.

The Rolling Stones also led the way in transforming the relationship between performer and audience. Unlike the Beatles' manager, Brian Epstein, who got his start selling records in music-obsessed Liverpool, the Stones' manager, Andrew Loog Oldham, entered the record business from the tangential fields of fashion and public relations. Thus, Oldham's ideas about performance came less from Afro-American music than from the visual arts—particularly from the stale avant-garde attitudes that he (along with many other early rock figures, including three members of the Stones) picked up in art college. For Oldham, it was only logical to market the Rolling Stones as the "artistic" alternative to the "commercial" Beatles. Here is the strategy, laid out in the group's first "official biography," published in 1964:

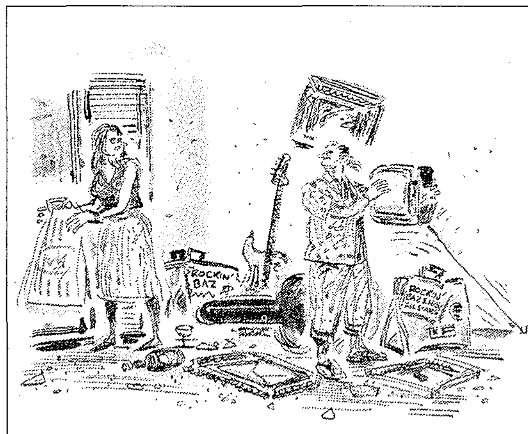
> Many top pop groups achieve their fame and stardom and then go out, quite deliberately, to encourage adults and parents to like them. This doesn't appeal to the forthright Stones. They will not make any conscious effort to be liked by anybody at all—not even their present fans if it also meant changing their own way of life.

To prove themselves true artists, the Rolling Stones cultivated a posture of contempt for the audience: Instead of smiling at the camera, they scowled; instead of signing autographs, they spat; instead of ending a show at the London Palladium by greeting the fans, they turned and stalked off.

The irony, of course, is that this posture departed not only from the Beatles but also from the blues. Granted, the crowd-pleasing manner that is part of every bluesman's stock in trade takes a different form when removed from its original all-black setting. But it always reflects a basically positive disposition toward whatever audience happens to be out there. Even the notoriously moody Howlin' Wolf never failed to behave courteously when performing for his newly acquired white fans. Like most Afro-American musicians, he lived by the adage, "The people can make you, and the same people can break you."

It was not long before rock's "artistic" posture became the whole show, with music taking second place to the spectacle of the superstar slowly destroying himself in an increasingly trite orgy of rampant promiscuity, alcoholism, and drug abuse. Hendrix's life—and music—sank into chaos while his fans cheered. Joplin dropped all pretense of blues artistry in favor of what *Rolling Stone* writer David Dalton calls "a myth of freedom and a disdain for boundaries." The "deadpan formality" of the blues may have been good enough for black folks, Dalton writes, but protean beings like Joplin needed to "experience not just the blues but the original impulse that created it: the violence, eroticism, craziness, and sputtering of rage." And the singer agreed:

> Young white kids have taken the groove and the soul from black people and added intensity. Black music is understated. I like to fill it full of feeling—to grab somebody by the collar and say "Can't you understand me?". . . I was brought up in a white middle-class family—I could have anything, but you need something in your gut, man.


"You don't have to wreck your hotel room this trip— we're on holiday!"

Unfortunately, all Joplin had in her gut at the time of her death in 1970 was hard liquor, hard drugs, and hard feelings toward the world for not loving her enough. And all she left behind was the widespread impression that singing the blues is the same as throwing a public tantrum.

By the end of the 1960s, a great many people, musicians as well as businessmen, were taking careful note of hard rock's commercial success and proceeding to turn the form into fool's gold. Celebrated guitar solos became codified so that less-gifted players could repeat them fast and loud; hard rock's heavy beat became fixed in a deadly pounding that fits the worst stereotypes of both foes and friends. Focusing on this monotonous pounding, political philosopher Allan Bloom observed that "rock has the beat of sexual intercourse." Steve Tyler of the hard-rock band Aerosmith makes a similar observation, though with pride rather than disdain: "It's rhythm and blues, it's twos and fours, it's fucking." No one seems to notice that this "dinosaur beat" is a travesty of the rich, tireless, complicated rhythms of the blues.

By the early 1970s, dozens of groups, from Steppenwolf and Grand Funk in America to Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath in Britain, had adopted the formula. A few, such as Vanilla Fudge, Iron Butterfly, and Deep Purple, added arty organ noodling. But as the 1970s became the 1980s, a seemingly endless parade of groups—Aerosmith, Judas Priest, Def Leppard, Iron Maiden, Twisted Sister, Poison, Motley Crüe, Guns N' Roses—prospered with a no-frills style described by the critic Jon Pareles as "stylized and formulaic, a succession of reverberating guitar chords, macho boasts, speed-demon solos and fusillades of drums." To the first MTV generation, this stuff is "rock 'n' roll," even though it sounds nothing like the music of the 1950s. But sound is no longer the point. To these fans, "rock 'n' roll" isn't music; it's *attitude.*

And where did this attitude come from? Not, it turns out, from Afro-American music. Instead, it grew out of the decadent, pseudoliterary sensibilities of Steppenwolf and certain other rock groups of the late 1960s and early '70s. The music of these groups acquired the name "heavy metal," a phrase borrowed from William S. Burroughs's fictional celebrations of sadomasochism, drug addiction, and ritual murder—subjects that have over the years come to dominate rock lyrics. The champions of heavy metal may claim that there is no significant aesthetic or moral difference between Presley singing "That's All Right Mama" and a group like Slayer regaling 12-year-olds with simulations of human sacrifice, blood communion, mutilation, and necrophilia. But they are wrong.

To begin with eroticism, heavy metal's main accomplishment has been to polarize the sexes. Instead of the heartsore male-female dialogue found in the blues, heavy metal substitutes a male monologue. Musically and emotionally, it succumbs to an adolescent preoccupation with "hardness"—meaning not "hard singing" in the blues or gospel sense but the compulsion to prove one's masculinity by avoiding sounds and feelings that might be construed as "soft." The change is aptly summarized in Charles S. Murray's comparison of Muddy Waters's and Led Zeppelin's treatments of the same song:

> The former is a seduction, . . . warm and solicitous: [Muddy Waters] suggests that the woman to whom he is singing is both sexually inexperienced and starved of affection, and volunteers to remedy both conditions. . . . Led Zeppelin, by contrast, come on like thermonuclear gang rape. . . . The woman is strictly an abstract, faceless presence; she is an essential part of the intercourse kit, but not as an individual. 'Love,' in this context, is a euphemism for something measurable with a ruler.

And that was back in 1970. By the 1980s, heavy metal had quit bothering with euphemisms—or with intercourse, for that matter. Good old promiscuity went the way of the dodo bird, as "speed metal" and "death metal" groups beefed up their acts with bloody sadism. The mid-1980s were the heyday of rock videos depicting female victims chained, caged, beaten, and bound with barbed wire, all to whet the appetites of 12- and 13-year-olds for onstage performances such as the famous one in which the group W.A.S.P. sang their hit song, "Fuck Like A Beast," while pretending to batter a woman's skull and rape her with a chain saw.

Offstage, performers regaled fan magazines with tales of strange sex acts with groupies involving wine and beer bottles. Metal stars bragged about having intercourse during performances, recording sessions, or video tapings. Heterosexual dancing disappeared, and metal concerts became all-male workouts consisting of "head-banging" (snapping the head up and down to the beat), "slam-dancing" (violently jostling one another), and "moshing" (pushing and shoving in the "pit" below the stage).

Then there was the semiofficial religion of heavy metal: Satanism and the occult. Every rock fan knows about Altamont, the 1969 rock concert during which a spectator was brutally murdered by members of the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang, hired to provide "security." Altamont is commonly viewed as the last gasp of the 1960s, the turning point after which the counterculture slipped from "peace and love" into a darker, more pessimistic phase. This view is accurate enough; Altamont certainly took the investment bloom off massive outdoor rock festivals. But the change did not happen in a day. The Rolling Stones had already darkened rock's mood with songs like "Sympathy for the Devil"—which in fact they had performed at Altamont just before the murder occurred.

A mere flirtation for the Rolling Stones, Satanism became a passion with Led Zeppelin's lead guitarist, Jimmy Page. So fond did Page grow of Aleister Crowley, Britain's most famous modern Satanist, that he purchased a former Crowley estate, the reputedly haunted Boleskine House on Scotland's Loch Ness. Next in line was Black Sabbath, a British group derided by critics for their "anguished screeching about war pigs, rat salads, iron men and similar gloomy topics set to an endlessly repeated two-chord riff," but capable of filling football stadiums with crowds eager to see lead singer Ozzy Osbourne do something vile—as when, later in his career, he bit off the head of a bat.

As every rock fan knows, Old Nick is also present in the blues—witness the many legends about blues performers (Robert Johnson, for one) gaining their talent through Faustian pacts. But the very extremes to which heavy metal carries Satanism suggests a radical break. For the fact is that Afro-American culture takes a very different attitude toward the devil than did a turn-of-the-century English decadent such as Crowley, who courted the London press with self-advertised sex orgies, drug marathons, and black masses. Reflecting its folk origins, the blues depicts Satan as a conjurer or trickster—wicked but also vain, mercurial, and susceptible to human wiles. Historian Lawrence Levine reminds us that, during slavery, "songs of the Devil pictured a harsh but almost semicomic figure (often, one suspects, a surrogate for the white man), over whom [the blacks] triumphed with reassuring regularity." Hence the strain of wry humor toward

the devil and his works that pervades the blues, including Johnson's.

The other part of heavy metal's semi-official religion is pre-Christian mythology, especially Celtic and Norse. When first touted by Led Zeppelin, this interest fostered a moody, quiet phase in hard rock's otherwise deafening sound. But overall, the main impact has not been musical. Led Zeppelin reverted to its "wall of noise," and its half-digested mythology set what biographer Stephen Davis calls "the tone of overwrought Dark Ages fantasy . . . that would be the standard psychic backdrop for all the heavy metal bands to come."

It is difficult, now that heavy metal is the theme music of Europe's neo-Nazi youth movement, to ignore the chillingly fascist flavor of this blood-and-soil backdrop. Equally troubling is metal's longstanding posture as an aggressively "white" music, in hostile opposition to whatever "black" music it happens to be competing with. To be sure, heavy metal started out paying homage to the blues. But in a way, that was exactly the problem. Nothing breeds resentment like homage. Rolling Stones biographer Stanley Booth remarked to Mick Jagger in the late 1960s that "we all want to be black, what we think black is." Jagger replied, with characteristic coolness, "*I* don't. I'm not black and I'm proud of it."

This reply speaks volumes about the transition from early rock to heavy metal. Jagger himself was never smitten with "blackness" so much as skilled at manipulating others who were. But those others were legion, and by the end of the 1960s it is likely that they were tired of the whole musical, folkloric, and (especially) sexual mystique of "what we think black is." What a relief, then, to recast primitivism as an affair of wild white savages lurching through the primeval mists of Europe!

Unlike heavy metal and its grotesque progeny, the blues comes by its supernaturalism naturally. Songs like Robert Johnson's "Hell Hound on My Trail" and "Me and the Devil Blues" emerged from a living tradition; they were not dug out of a source book for the self-conscious purpose of shocking the public, as when Motley Crüe adopted the Satanic pentagram in the hope that, as one band member allowed, "it would be able to get a rise out of normal citizens." Nor does the supernaturalism in the blues lead to a cult of obscenity and brutality, as in heavy metal and such unspeakable offshoots as "death metal," "grindcore," and (arguably) "gangsta" rap.

To some apologists, this cult of obscenity and brutality is justifiable as ritual, if not as art. To sociologist Deena Weinstein, heavy-metal concerts offer nothing less than "epiphany"—Dionysian ecstasy, brilliant theatrics, organizational genius, and idealized community, all in a perfect balance. Rock critics agree. To Mikal Gilmore of *Rolling Stone*, heavy metal is "a vital and reliable rite of passage." To Jon Pareles of the *New York Times*, "heavy metal concerts are theatrical events, community rituals." Of like mind, unsurprisingly, is heavy-metal producer Tom Werman, who reminds us that young people "need to be angry, they need to have music they can clench their fists by, to pump themselves up by. They're not always happy. They're confused and alienated. . . . They need an outlet."

Given my own account of the blues as a ritualized way of coping with harsh realities, I have a certain sympathy for this line of argument. But only up to a point. Werman says that heavy metal helps young people "feel angry." Yet he also implies that they are already angry, that society has made them angry. Does heavy metal offer a release for anger that is already there? Or does it whip up even more anger? Does whipping up more anger offer greater release? And what happens afterward? Does the head-banger go home after the concert with his troubled emotions under control, having experienced what Albert Murray calls "a ritual of purification and affirmation"?

Somehow I doubt it. As Albert Murray explains, the blues ritual is intended to help

people "meet the basic requirements of the workaday world." The same cannot be said of heavy metal. To the contrary, the young people most deeply involved with metal, such as the dropouts, runaways, and "throw-aways" who congregated in places like Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles during the 1980s, seem incapable of coping with anything. As a number of observers have noted, these young people display a bizarre combination of vaulting ambition and drooping despair, based on the conviction that the only alternative to stardom is death in the gutter. Nor do the stars provide guidance. They are just as nihilistic as their followers. But instead of being punished for self-destructive behavior, they are rewarded.

At some point, even apologists for metal quit praising its cathartic powers and say that most head-bangers grow out of their obsession anyway. This is the apologists' final argument, and it may very well be true. But it fails to explain how those same young people are supposed to make up for the months and years they wasted in the grip of something so ugly and useless.

I have no doubt that the youthful (and not-so-youthful) champions of rock and metal will ignore the substance of these arguments and dismiss them as the complaint of an aging flower child longing for the music of her youth. My reply is simple: The blues is not the music of my youth. It was not created by my generation or by any single age cohort. Quite the opposite: It is an American perennial, whose flowering and withering does not fit easily into the tidy decades so beloved of some pundits, critics, and historians. That is why serious attention to the blues is not a sign of regression but rather of renewal—that is, of hope for an imminent improvement in the quality of the music we hear. At the moment,

Willie Nelson, the "outlaw" country musician, is only one of many contemporary songwriter-performers who are helping to return blues to its central place in American popular music.

such signs are appearing all over.

Take jazz, long considered defunct but recently revitalized by the so-called "neoclassical" movement, which seeks to identify with both the greater jazz past and the greater jazz audience. The name topping the charts is Wynton Marsalis, the New Orleans trumpeter who dazzles listeners with his facility in both the European classics and bebop. But there are many other names, and, as Marsalis would be the first to point out, neoclassicism is nothing new. Indeed, his heroes are those figures who over the past 40 years have exerted a steady counterpressure against such tendencies as free jazz and rock fusion. When Charlie Parker died in 1955, many of his fellow beboppers decided that the best way to move jazz forward was to reach back—into the blues. Thelonious Monk, Charles Mingus, John Coltrane, and Sonny Rollins did just that, and they were only following in the footsteps of Ellington.

Or take country music, currently the best-selling form of popular music behind the amorphous category "rock." In the mid-1960s, when rock first appeared on the scene, its fans considered country music a lily-white bastion, altogether hostile to the blues. And, indeed, country was dominated by the unbluesy "Nashville Sound," aptly summarized by Robert K. Oermann: "The procedure was to smooth over the roughness of the country style of a singer with violin sections, soft background voices, sophisticated arrangements, and studio technology. A typical Nashville Sound record features a high jangling guitar strum, country instruments overlaid with a soaring violin section, vocal background 'oooohs' . . . and a slight echo effect on the lead singer's voice."

Yet this image of country music blots out the memory of those legendary performers, from Jimmie Rodgers to Bob Wills to Bill Monroe, who learned their craft partly from bluesmen. It also obscures the importance of honky-tonk, the Texas strain of country heavily influenced by rhythm and blues during the 1940s. During the 1950s, the most respected names in country—Ernest Tubb, Lefty Frizzell, Hank Williams, George Jones—retained those rhythm and blues influences, even when besieged by violins. And by 1959, honky-tonk was poised to make a comeback, as the commercial success of Buck Owens's swinging, bluesy sound enabled him to build a recording empire in Bakersfield, California, and foster the 1960s careers of such honky-tonk stalwarts as Merle Haggard.

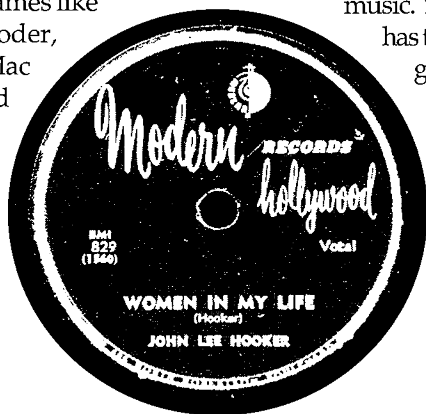
The abiding weaknesses of country music are two: love of sentimental cliché, rooted in its turn-of-the-century link with Tin Pan Alley, and an aversion to the rhythmic counterpoint of Afro-American music. The blues influence provides a welcome tonic for both ills, as proven most forcefully by "outlaw" country musician Willie Nelson. A successful songwriter who left Nashville for his native Texas in 1971, Nelson is an iron-willed character who proceeded to use country as a base from which to explore everything from jazz to gospel, blues to boogie-woogie, spirituals to swing. If the term "outlaw" means musical freedom, then Nelson is responsible for the happy fact that country music today contains more outlaws than law-abiders.

As for the lily-whiteness of country, I cannot assert that any part of the record industry, including the Nashville establishment, operates without white racism. But there is more than one kind of racism in popular music. After all, what is more degrading to blacks: country music's apparent exclusiveness or metal's (and "gangsta" rap's) increasingly sick primitivism? Moreover, it is not evident that the country audience rejects black performers out of hand. Beginning in 1965, black country star Charley Pride sold more records than anyone on the RCA label, except Elvis Presley. It is also true that, despite the fondness for country music expressed by such legendary black artists as Ray Charles and Charlie Parker, the genre's pale complexion is partly the artifact of black attitudes. In 1992, rising black country singer Cleve Francis made an astute observation: "Maybe Nashville

did discriminate against black singers, but in the black community, nobody encouraged you to sing country music—it's a two-way street."

Of course, both Pride and Francis avoid injecting blues into their country music. In this one respect, at least, country audiences resemble rock audiences: They are more tolerant of musical freedom in white performers than in black. But here again, the charge of racism is too easy because the best country musicians use their eminence to reaffirm their blues roots. And these reaffirmations—whether Nelson doing a TV special with Ray Charles or Randy Travis recording a duet with B. B. King—contain none of the leering condescension found in many rock tributes. It may seem odd to discuss country music in the same breath as neoclassical jazz, since their aims and accomplishments are so different. But they belong to the same family, and in their own ways they both provided a safe haven for the blues when the blues was under attack.

Finally, there are the musicians I call root doctors, those members of the 1960s generation who fell in love with the blues and, despite many changes, have remained stubbornly loyal ever since. Now in their forties or older, these people are as seasoned, in their way, as the blues performers they first admired. Their careers have been swamped, sometimes capsized, by the upheavals of their times. But the familiarity in the 1990s of names like Mike Bloomfield, Ry Cooder, John Mayall, Bonnie Raitt, Mac "Dr. John" Rebenneck, and Jimmie Vaughan suggests that maybe these people have been doing something right all along. The salient fact about these root doctors is that, unlike such 1960s rock icons as Mick Jagger, they are not perceived as "old." They are not getting any younger, to be sure. But their music is not "old," at least not in the sense of being stale, repetitious, or anachronistic. Instead, it occupies a special niche only slightly below that of the masters. Most listeners, young and old, understand that these root doctors have paid their dues.



Back in the 1960s, Muddy Waters tactfully passed judgment on his young British acolytes:

> I think they're great people, but they're not blues players. Really, what separates them from people like Wolf and myself, we're doing the stuff like we did way years ago down in Mississippi. These kids are just getting up, getting stuff and going with it, you know, so we're expressing our lives, the hard times and the different things we been through. It's not real. They don't feel it. I don't think you can feel the blues until you've been through some hard times.

Note well that Muddy Waters does not find the source of blues feeling in skin color, geography, social class, or relationship to the means of production. Rather, he sees it as the product of long, hard experience with life as well as with music. Yet once achieved, blues feeling has the power to transcend race, sex, generation, and most other human divisions. That is the source of its vigor, and that is why, if the blues does not return to our music, our music will remain in trouble.

AFRO-AMERICAN MUSIC AND THE MAINSTREAM

The story of how Afro-American music conquered the world lies behind so much of our culture that most everyone accepts its basic outline. West African ideas of pitch and rhythm enter the New World, encounter both repression and appreciation from white society, and emerge transformed in a family of sounds—blues, jazz, and rock—capable of expressing the essence of modern life with moving force. But the tale is so intertwined with America's ever-festering racial problems that the authors who have tried to write it down disagree, sometimes vehemently, on the details. Is it a history of exploitation—of black creators repeatedly ripped off by pale imitators and their record companies—or artistic triumph, as African-American musicians permanently reshaped the mainstream culture that tried to exclude them? For that matter, is Afro-American music fundamentally African or the hybrid its name suggests?

Simply describing the music or its history can mean taking sides. In **The Music of Black Americans: A History** (Norton, 1971), Eileen Southern, a professor emerita of music and Afro-American studies at Harvard, shows little interest in questions of artistic ownership, probably because she is too busy documenting an immense musical tradition. She meticulously traces lines of descent from West African music to slave songs and field hollers and on to ragtime, jazz, and rock 'n' roll, assembling a staggering catalogue of movements and ideas. But while the scope of Southern's work may leave little room for political questions, she cannot avoid them entirely. Her assertion that jazz sprang from the union of African music and European instrumentation and ensemble playing is a highly disputed point, not a matter of record.

Certainly others would agree about the music's mixed heritage. For jazz critic Albert Murray—**Stomping the Blues** (McGraw-Hill, 1976)—the blues is a distinctly American creation, "a synthesis of African and European elements, the product of an Afro-American sensibility in an American mainland situation." European and African cultures met elsewhere in the world, Murray notes, and produced "calypso, rhumba, the tango, the conga, the mambo, and so on, but not the blues." The blues idiom, therefore, "is not West African, nor is it European . . . it is Afro-U.S." Murray's sentiments echo those expressed by French musician and critic André Hodeir in **Jazz: Its Evolution and Essence** (Grove Press, 1953). Writing from the perspective of a musician who loves jazz and European classical music and can discuss both with passion and precision, Hodeir defines jazz as the product of blues and military marches. He even insists that "a comparison between the Negro-American music of the oldest recordings in the New Orleans style and the different varieties of African music shows immediately that they have fewer points in common than differences."

These are not, however, universally held beliefs. They would likely draw fire from historian Lawrence Levine and author/musician Ortiz M. Walton. In **Black Culture and Black Consciousness** (Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), Levine admits that black and white Americans living around the turn of the century sang many of the same songs, but he describes the blues themselves as thoroughly African, showing white cultural influence mainly in their emphasis on the solo performer—a rarity in African music. Walton, in **Music: Black, White, and Blue** (Morrow, 1972), goes one step farther, insisting that the blues and jazz have been tempered by "the American experience" but draw little from white American culture. Walton sees the relationship between black musicians and the mainstream as a steady pattern of exploitation and artistic theft. If his analysis unfairly brands white jazz musicians as, at best, record company tools and, at worst, shameless plagiarists, it is hard to deny his contention that the music industry has always preferred to promote fresh white faces, no matter who played the music first.

In fact, it may be more surprising that any chronicler of African-American music could go

on paper supporting the record industry, but sociologist Charles Keil manages to. In **Urban Blues** (Univ. of Chicago, 1966), he states that for all their faults, the record companies have introduced mainstream America to a vital piece of black culture and given a select few bluesmen an audience beyond the dreams of their musical ancestors. "Is the opportunity to tell your story to hundreds of thousands of people an exploitation?," he asks. Considering the impoverished, nomadic lives of such blues pioneers as Robert Johnson, detailed by journalist Peter Guralnick in **Searching for Robert Johnson** (Obelisk, 1989), Keil's answer that "many bluesmen would pay for the privilege" sounds like the poignant truth.

Questions of exploitation have dogged rock 'n' roll to a far greater extent than blues or jazz, in part because of the belief that rock 'n' roll was merely black music played by whites (or, as Walton would put it, the blues played badly). But in **The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll** (rev. ed., Pantheon, 1984), writer and independent record label executive Charlie Gillett argues that while rock 'n' roll may have begun life as repackaged rhythm and blues, it soon blended with country, swing, and other musical styles to create something truly new.

Others, such as rock critic Greil Marcus in **Mystery Train** (Dutton, 1975), have made the same case by focusing on Elvis Presley and his country roots. Although Gillett acknowledges Presley's role, he is far more interested in the career of Bill Haley, whose popular cover versions of such rhythm and blues tunes as "Shake, Rattle and Roll" left him open to charges of stealing riffs from lesser-known black musicians. Gillett shows how Haley carefully assembled his sound from elements of dixieland, rhythm and blues, and western swing, tinkering for years before finding the right mix. Haley didn't create rock 'n' roll, of course, but Gillett suggests that his willingness to experiment—shared by countless black and white contemporaries—did.

If the rock 'n' roll of Haley's day was interracial, performed by blacks and whites for a mixed audience, its offspring, rock, was not. So it is no surprise that one of the few black musicians to gain entrance to rock's mostly white pantheon, Jimi Hendrix, should have had such a complicated relationship with the mainstream. Poet and biographer David Henderson, in **'Scuse Me While I Kiss the Sky: The Life of Jimi Hendrix** (Bantam, 1981), pays close attention to the role race played in shaping Hendrix's career—from his manager's decision to launch him first in Britain, where the locals were in love with Afro-American music and desperate for an "authentic" source, to the racial conflicts within Hendrix's band. But rather than view Hendrix as an isolated figure, a lone black musician surrounded by whites imitating blacks, Henderson sees him as part of a larger music, as "essentially" a blues man. While it was necessary for the publicists to put the rock banner on Jimi's music," Henderson writes, "the funky syncopated foundation and wide choices of phrasings and colorings rested in the blues tradition." Nor does Henderson present his subject as the sole modern disciple of that tradition. He describes the affinity Hendrix felt for such diverse but closely related artists as jazzman Roland Kirk and soul/funk groups War and Sly and the Family Stone. To Henderson, Hendrix was one black artistic hero out of many, all able to win acceptance through the sheer strength of their music.

If few authors can agree on how to interpret the relationship between Afro-American music and the mainstream, neither can many of the musicians. Witness the recent debates over white rappers such as Vanilla Ice, Marky Mark, and Snow. But that disagreement, within the musical community and among the authors who write about it, should be recognized for what it is—a sign of life. After all, the only artistic traditions that provoke no debate are static and dead.

—David Baker

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