

INTRODUCTION

In one of his essays James Baldwin describes an African writer rising to defend his insistence on the importance of an African culture. “What we are doing is holding on to what is ours. Little,” he added sardonically “but it belongs to us.” Because the blues is a mingled expression of the life of the Negro in another continent he might prefer to ignore it, but the blues does belong to the Negro, and in both range and depth it is a great body of folk poetry. The poetic achievement of the blues is in many ways unique, and if it is still little known this is another aspect of the same social discriminations that have forced it into being. Baldwin himself learned, in Europe, that it is the blues which were at the heart of his own identity as an American Negro, an identity which he tried unsuccessfully to reject. In his essay, “The Discovery Of What It Means To Be An American,” he wrote,

In Switzerland “. . . armed with two Bessie Smith records and a typewriter, I began to try to re-create the life that I had first known as a child and from which I had spent so many years in flight.

It was Bessie Smith, through her tone and her cadence, who helped me to dig back to the way I myself must have spoken when I was a pickaninny and to remember the things I had heard and seen and felt. I had buried them very deep. I had never listened to Bessie Smith in America (in the same way that for years I would not touch watermelon), but in Europe she helped to reconcile me to being a “nigger.”

For many Negroes in America, as it was for James Baldwin, it will be emotionally necessary to reject their background, but always in the blues they will find again the memory of the life they have left behind. As I wrote I thought more often of these men and women than I did of anyone else who might be interested in the poetic expression of the blues. If I seem, at times, to be insistent on emphasizing the ugly reality of American racial discrimination it is because I think of it as the dominant moral issue facing American society today, and if I sometimes seem to have a personal emotional involvement in the blues it is because the reality of the blues is not too different from the reality of the life of any of us living in the United States in these troubling years.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

The work songs from which much of the blues has been derived were like seeds scattered across the southern landscape. Wherever they strayed the blues sprang up after them and as a man sang the blues he scattered the material farther, until the blues became a nearly communal expression of the Negro in America. Most of the verses of the blues are used by every singer, and they have become the root language for the more personal singers like John Estes and Robert Johnson. I have not mentioned a particular singer as the source for these verses; since this would tend to imply that there is someone who could be thought of as having written them. The best singers, however, often developed a group of verses which became their personal material, and if the verse seemed to be related to one singer I have mentioned his name. Often the verses are used in two or three blues; since the blues is a pliant idiom, so I have not used a title with the verse. I have tried to suggest some of the casualness of blues composition by following the singers' own use of the verse. In those blues which have become a personal poetry I have generally mentioned both the singer and the title he has given to his song.

In the summer of 1962 I talked again with many of the blues singers that I've worked with in recent years, and their comments and suggestions on the nature of the blues were invaluable. If there is a difference between the verses on their recordings and the verses I have used in the text then the text version uses unreleased material from my collection. I would like to express my most sincere thanks to Mr. and Mrs. Henry Townsend and Mr. and Mrs. J. D. Short, of St. Louis; to John Estes and Philip Meux of Brownsville, Tennessee; to Gus Cannon and Furry Lewis of Memphis; and Mr. and Mrs. Pink Anderson and Mr. and Mrs. Henry Tate of Spartanburg, South Carolina, for their generous help. I would especially like to thank Mr. and Mrs. Willie Borum of Memphis for their friendship and hospitality during my trips to their city.

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New London,
New Hampshire.
November, 1962

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In some of the larger cities of the American South there are still signs reading "White Only" painted on the doorways or windows of restaurants and laundries. Dingy clapboard barrooms have painted arrows, usually part of the advertising on the building front, reading "Colored Entrance," the arrow pointing to a back door or to a service window in the side of the building. At hospital entrances there are ornate metal letters reading "Out Patient Dispensary - Colored" and "Out Patient Dispensary - White." The doors are separate. In the smaller towns there usually aren't so many signs; except for the benches under the shade of an overhanging store marquee or at a bus stop. Someone who didn't know the town well, someone perhaps in from a nearby farm for some shopping, might get the benches confused. Sometimes drinking fountains are marked, and gasoline station rest rooms, but there usually isn't much need for signs; since the townspeople, white and colored, know every street and every store front and every foot of pavement, and their own place on it. If someone stops in the town he's expected to look around and find where the color line has been drawn. In northern cities the line is less definite, and the emotional response is less intense if the line is crossed, but within every neighborhood some blocks are colored and others white. Even with an increased range of employment opening more and more to young colored men and women, with neighborhood restrictions being slowly pushed aside, and with educational opportunities steadily increasing, the line, despite its seeming vagueness and lack of official sanction, is still tightly drawn. The life of the Negro and the life of his white neighbor is still separate and apart, and despite recent social progress will remain separate for many years to come.

The life of the Negro in America has been so completely lived on the other side of the racial line that it is only with difficulty that white and colored can even understand each other's social attitudes. The Negro has been deprived of any large part in American life, despite the hundred years that have passed since the Civil War ended southern slavery. The inequality of opportunity, social and economic, is so extreme that a

sensitive young Negro is forced into an almost intolerable emotional position, and it is only a slowly and painfully acquired set of defenses and self-justifications that makes it possible for him to even force himself to confront the indignity and the anger that is part of being a Negro in the United States.

From this separateness of white and Negro there has come not only differences in social attitude, but also in social expression. The lives of the two groups are so insistently kept apart that there has grown up within the Negro society its own artistic self-expression. There has been another strong influence on the self-expression of the Negro, his African cultural background, but this has been such a disadvantage to his social development that if there had been an opportunity to become part of the main stream of American life it probably would have been as quickly forgotten as the backgrounds and traditions of other groups whose standards and whose expression have become mingled with the larger American attitudes. The Negro has been forced to remain apart. Already, from the separateness of expression which this has meant, have come the musical styles of jazz, which have strongly influenced the development of popular music everywhere in the world, and which may be the root force for a regeneration of the European classical tradition. Lesser known, but of perhaps as great significance, has been the development of a poetic expression of great strength and vividness, the blues.

With the blues the Negro subculture in the United States has its own popular music. As the two groups have adjusted uncomfortably to the separateness of their experience each of them has developed their own popular song, and the blues is to the colored musician what conventional popular music is to the white. Its preoccupations are the concerns and the emotions of ordinary life. Since the audience for the blues, and for popular song, is often a young audience its most persistent theme is their overwhelming concern with the torment of love and their sudden consciousness of sexuality. There are other themes, the insecurity and difficulty of much of Negro life, the discomfort and the loneliness of the enforced wandering of many of the singers, sometimes even a veiled protest at the social situation, but the most broadly woven strand in the texture of the blues is the despair of love. The blues is the song of men and women who have been hurt, who have been disappointed, who feel the confusion and the isolation of love. There are blues which are insistent

in their promise of seduction, and there are blues which are large sexual boasts, but the man who usually sings the blues is the man who has found in love only pain and disappointment. As the Mississippi singer J. D. Short expressed it,

*Well, the blues first came from people being low
in spirit and worried about their loved ones.*

It is not in its subject, however, that the blues has become poetic. Love is just as much the theme of the popular music of the larger society, but it is difficult to think of American popular song as having any of the freshness and the vigor of poetry. It is in the strength and vitality of its imagery and expression that the blues has become a poetic language. The language of American popular song has lost its freshness and its ability to convey even strong emotion. The English folk tradition which produced the broadside ballads and the rich profusion of love song and social commentary has dwindled to a repetitive and almost meaningless manipulation of phrases which no longer have even the artistic power of the sentimental Victorian love poetry from which they are derived. As the years pass the blues may become as moribund as popular song has become, and as the developing blues audience forces the singer into repetitions of his own attitudes there is an increasing tendency toward this, but the blues still have a fine, raw vigor.

The blues does not try to express an attitude toward the separateness of Negro life in America. Protest is only a small thread in the blues. But it is an expression of the separateness of the two racial groups. If the color line was not drawn through the streets and the neighborhoods of American cities the blues would not have been developed. There are religious people who strongly oppose the blues, but the attitudes that are expressed by the singers still mirror the attitudes of the Negro community. It is in some ways discomfoting to think of the blues as an expression of "differentness," since it is the difference between Negro and white in America which has been used as the justification for preventing the Negro from taking his place in American society, but there is a difference in tradition and in the social memory which gives to both colored and white their distinctiveness. The final measure of a democratic society, however, is not its conformity, but in its diversity, and there must be in America a merging of the two communities, not necessarily into a group

without differences, but into a single group that accepts these differences. It is then that the poetry of the blues will take its place as a force in the shaping of a new society, for in the blues will be found the expression of attitudes and beliefs that will become for the American Negro part of a racial memory, and part of a developing social history.

Since the blues is so much a reflection of the life in the segregated slums or the lonely farms where most of the Negro community still remains in the United States today is it possible for someone who is not a Negro to understand the language of the blues? In much of the blues there is a strong universality, and already American popular song has begun to take some of its material from it. There is no difficulty in understanding a verse like,

*Did you ever wake up in the morning,
find your man had gone?
Did you ever wake up in the morning,
find your man had gone?
You will wring your hands, you will
cry the whole day long.*

But the blues which are most closely involved with the reality of being a Negro in the United States will always have emotional overtones which will be almost impossible to sense. No one who has not lived as a Negro in the Mississippi Delta can understand fully what the singer Son House meant to express when he sang,

*My black woman's face shines like the sun.
My black woman's face shines like the sun.
Lipstick and powder sure can't help her none.*