

Black and White Blues:
The Othering of Blues Music through Romantic Racialism

Blues, jazz, and other black musical genres have arguably received more critical attention than other black art forms. Critic bell hooks claims that while postmodern theorists focus on black music and its expression of the Other, it hardly makes up for those same theorists largely neglecting the censorship the white majority placed on “other forms of cultural production by black folks—literary, critical writing, etc” (2515). While it is true that much attention has been paid to black musical forms, it is wrong to assume that simply considering black music in its Otherness makes it unaffected by white censorship, much the same as the other cultural productions she mentions.

Indeed, we might better look at the Othered narrative in terms of what is not told rather than what is told—the story of blues music as something that goes beyond the white romantic racial viewpoint blues has been painted through. The narrative that has been truly Othered in blues music is musicians’ careers in regard to their engagement with different ethnic communities. The lack of discussion outside of a racial dichotomy created from historically romanticized racialism in blues music has disabled broader conversation about blues music, its musicians of many races, its history, and its evolution. Through my research and discussion, I hope to demonstrate that blues scholarship needs a closer, ethnically oriented discussion of the blues and its culture and a less racially romanticized look for theorists to truly claim due diligence in dealing with the subject.

The stereotypes established in the early years of blues scholarship about both blues music and blues musicians exist to this day. Until quite recently, they have rarely been challenged in blues scholarship, even by black scholars, who are also stuck in the racially dichotomized scholarship. Black music, particularly blues, has been Othered again by the pressing of white musical standards upon music with African roots, and even arguably been Othered from its roots by insisting that blues is a racial music instead of an ethnic one. While the difference between the words *racial* and *ethnic* are subtle ones, the term *ethnic* allows for a broader definition of community than the term *racial* does, which I will explore throughout this paper.

In order to deal with this deeply ingrained racial history, we must first understand what that racial history is and how it came about. As the conversation stands, the majority of blues scholarship comes from white men, many who were historically music collectors or ran the music business in the early and later 1900s. By contrast, black musicians were cast in the role of wandering musician to fill the stereotypical and expected role of the black musician in the white public mind.

Since the discussion of the Othered in blues music in terms of romantic racialism and its history could encompass a much larger work, I will focus my paper on the image of two blues musicians, Eric Clapton and B.B. King, under the white racially romanticized gaze. To give a basis for this racially romanticized history of blues as folk art, I will introduce Jacques Rancière's theory of art, community, and the *police* that determine artistic value. Then, I will describe how the precursor figures to modern blues scholarship, particularly John A. Lomax and Howard Odum, perpetuated racially romanticized blues scholarship through what Rancière describes as policing. Finally, I will discuss how the policing of blues under a white romantic racial paradigm has made it difficult for postmodern theorists to ever talk about the blues as an

Othered art form or entity. Until the blues is considered under its own artistic paradigm, one of an ethnic instead of racial African American heritage, it cannot be truly dealt with as Other; neither can it be dealt with as a valid art form on its own separate of the white, romanticized, historical view of blues as folk art.

JACQUES RANCIÈRE AND THE ARTISTIC PARADIGM

While scholars such as Michel Foucault have written about how communities decide what constitutes values in an artistic community, Jacques Rancière has a concise and useful outline of how community determines aesthetics in his work *The Politics of Aesthetics*. His determination of aesthetics in various communities makes it easier to determine how a Western artistic paradigm became the tool used to assess and label blues music as folk art.

Blues music, as an African American art form, has been grouped together with many other American arts from many different ethnic groups. Each of these ethnically different art forms follows artistic rules for that ethnic community. However, those artworks, like the blues, have been generally been aesthetically assessed under the Western, white majority community's racial definition of art. This Western assessment and restriction for what can be determined art is what Jacques Rancière would describe as a community choosing what aesthetical values to place on art, because those aesthetical values will in turn have an effect, for better or worse, on the community that decides upon those values.

Rancière asserts that art falls into the category of aesthetics in the Kantian sense, which determines that "aesthetics can be understood . . . as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience" (13). In other words, our senses limit what we see, do not see, hear or do not hear, and this determines how we interact with the world around us,

particularly in regard to art and politics, as both art and politics depend on what we see and how well we can iterate descriptions of what we see to those around us.

Rancière's definition, however, is not all-inclusive. As the sensory experience of each community may differ slightly, sometimes drastically, from another community, the definition of art under Rancière's theory changes, because his artistic philosophy is based within the distribution of the sensible. The real emphasis, then, should be placed not on the art itself but on the values, laws, and choices of the community, for it is the community, or *police*, that determine the laws, which determine who gets to participate in the community and therefore have a chance to create what that community would call art based off of the laws, expectations, and politics of that community.

The problem that blues encounters with this definition is, then, that its creators and their communities were unable to determine the rules that came to define blues as folk art. White folk music collectors—among them the precursors to blues scholarship, Lomax and Odum—recorded the songs for future generations, and with those songs, made commentary on the art form using the white, Western artistic paradigm. While the information we have because of these blues and folk music collectors is invaluable, the values of the blues community were determined by whites who did not have access to the knowledge of the blues community's values, laws, and choices. Therefore, the community that determined the value and aesthetics of the blues was not the community that created and largely participated in the musical genre.

The community determines laws and therefore aesthetics through the distribution of the sensible. This type of community—one which determines its own laws (and therefore government) and specifies who can participate within society based on those laws—gives a considerable amount of power to the individuals allowed to participate in such a society. For if

an individual, say an artist, within that society decides a law needs changing, he or she can demonstrate that need for change through an artistic medium. Yet, for the blues, the people who determined the aesthetics in the first place were not part of the ethnic community that had the right to determine those aesthetics, meaning that instead of a way to institute change for the ethnic minority and their art, art becomes an instrument for maintaining the status quo.

Before the Western aesthetic paradigm was applied to the blues, and even after, the blues was set on the trajectory to create change for the better through an artistic medium; many blues songs speak of injustice, and if they do not call it out as injustice, at least call them hard times, and have at the heart of the songs a spirit of endurance to deal with that inequality—in love, in politics, in everyday social situations. The themes of injustice and endurance were not unique to blues: work songs and field hollers, as precursors to the blues, often contained similar themes.

Yet these themes of injustice with no hope of resolution or betterment conflicted with American community ideals: the pursuit of happiness, rags to riches, lift where you stand, etc. Those American community values along with continued Western artistic ideals came to define how the white American community looked at art, and it was a vision that could not include the messages portrayed by these work songs, field hollers, and especially the blues, at least not on an equal playing field. The blues and its proponents were doomed to inherit a racialized value system that diminished the art form in the name of furthering a racial status quo. Blues scholarship reflects the racial romanticism instilled through the collections of early blues and folk documentation.

PRECURSORS TO BLUES SCHOLARSHIP: FOLK MUSIC COLLECTORS LOMAX AND ODUM

The two main men considered precursors to blues scholarship that are credited with the documentation of Negro folk music are John A. Lomax and Howard Odum. Their collections

and compilations of blues and Negro folk music came to define how we view the blues today: as a pure, authentically American musical format of an oppressed (or even possibly submissive) culture that offers a way toward redemption available to its practitioners in no other way. Upon a close examination of the themes of redemption and American authenticity, the real problem with viewing the blues in this light is that it entrenches blues scholarship in a romantic racialism that disenfranchises the Other from their musical art form, instead giving it over to white musical and political ideals that reaffirm the majority.

Collectors like Lomax and Odum had the power to determine the portrayal of black music, and their work established the social functions black music had for both the minority and majority, because the aesthetic paradigm they prescribed to the music led to the racial definition of the music scholars, listeners, and practitioners hold today. Several examples from the works of Lomax and Odum help to illuminate the aesthetic standard set for the blues during this crucial value establishment period: the chosen musical examples for both Lomax's and Odum's work, their commentary on the works they chose, and for Odum, commentary on the social traits of the Negro. For the sake of ease in showing the influence of Odum's work in particular, I will start with examples and analysis of Odum's work, and then follow with the influence Odum's work had on Lomax and his portrayal of blues music.

Howard Odum

Professor Howard Odum devoted much of his time to studying blacks and their culture and society in what he saw as an effort to bring more scientific knowledge "to interpret the Negro Problem and to some extent to suggest means by which the heart of the problem may be reached" (Odum 5). While he readily admits that there are difficulties in working toward the completion of such a study, among them getting blacks to speak honestly and openly to him and

to get any reliable information out of whites, Odum's work paints a detailed portrait of black cultural life, a life that always contains music.

His book portrays many bleak, commonplace situations in black society, such as the high, informal divorce rate and the poor state of black education, but stops to highlight both Church attendance and song, and secular enjoyment through music. According to Odum:

The Negro has a song for every occasion; yet the song is adapted to all groups. It may well be said that the Negro sings on all occasions, and that he should sing it in as many ways and on as many occasions as there are different scenes in his life. Wherever the negro is seen he may be heard singing, chanting, humming, or whistling a tune at some stage of his activity. . . . The laborers sing and whistle The children sometimes sing continuously for hours Loafers and vagrants sing as they wander Women sing while working "Music physicians", "musicianers" and "songsters" add much to the total of negro gayety and satisfaction. (231-3)

This passage and later commentary indicates that despite all of the less than satisfactory conditions Odum describes, the black community seems overall satisfied with their situation, or if not satisfied, at least willing to accept the hardships through singing about them.

Odum would go on to build collections of negro folk music with Guy B. Johnson, providing further commentary on this prevalent musical culture as he strove to document it for future generations. In the book *The Negro and His Songs*, he described the various songs he documented as "poetry of unusual charm and simplicity" and "parts of the story of the race" that held great importance to folk history (8). And yet, in the same book, the social songs Odum comments on all portray two main features: the lone, wandering black man with no friends who

is consistently thwarted in love and adventure. The wanderer, in his songs, is always in search of sympathy, pity, and help from listeners, especially women.

The songs Odum and Johnson chose to record have a decent range from sad to sexual, with themes that reaffirm the problems and contentment of blacks' social situation outlined in Odum's earlier work, *Social and Mental Traits of the Negro*. Songs such as "Po' Boy Long Way From Home" with its lyrics of "You brought me here an' let 'em throw me down. / I ain't got a frien' in dis town. / I'm out in de wide worl' alone" (170) highlight the call for sympathy for the vagrant wanderers; songs of sexual infidelity such as "I Couldn't Git In," with its lyrics of "Lawd, I went to my woman's do', / Jus' lak I bin goin' befo'; / 'I got my all-night trick, baby, / An' you can't get in" (189) reaffirm the stereotype of hyper sexuality of blacks that would be considered inappropriate listening content for more sophisticated, white audiences. Instead of portraying a black social atmosphere of great variety in its musical creations, the collection of social songs seems particularly crafted to reaffirm racial stereotypes. Indeed, Odum even goes so far as to leave out many of the verses of "Honey, Take A One On Me" because the Negro variations on the song "are not suitable for publication" (193). By the end of their chapter on social songs of the Negro, Odum and Johnson have allowed enough vagrancy to show through in social songs to solidify Odum's earlier portrayals and discussion of the Negro Problem.

However, a year later, Odum and Johnson would publish another collection of songs titled *Negro Workaday Songs*, which would continue to strive for what they defined as "authentic pictures of the Negro's folk background" (1). Here, they denote blues music as an underappreciated and poorly documented art form, one that, given its "distinctive contribution to American art" (17), needs to be more closely looked at. Odum and Johnson note that their

chapter on the blues is not a complete history, but they do mean to make a significant statement with it.

They qualify the blues as sorrow song, a musical form going back as far as the Negro Spiritual, even if the blues at that point was uncultured and naïve. They determine that “the original blues were so fragmentary and elusive—they were really little more than states of mind expressed in song” (19), and then go on to define the blues more modernly. The main points they determine are as follows: the blues is melancholy in both words and music, which give the blues its name; blues’ main topic is male–female relations and love, with some variation for tough times and homesickness, but the dominate topic is lovers’ complaints; the blues will generally express self-pity, which is often “the outstanding feature of the song” (20); the blues singer wants to draw sympathy from his or her listeners by bringing tough times to the forefront of the listeners’ attention; and the blues songs are unconventional—naively expressed.

The songs Odum and Johnson go on to highlight in their 1926 collection reaffirm the criteria they set out for blues music, with titles such as “I’m Tired of Begging You to Treat Me Right,” “Poor Man Blues,” and “Bleedin’ Hearted Blues.” At the end of this presentation of these workaday songs, Odum and Johnson discuss the problems of notating the music, stating that “there are slurs and minute gradations in pitch in Negro songs which it is impossible to represent in ordinary musical notation. . . . they cannot be shown on a musical scale which is only divided into half-step changes of pitch. . . . It is what the Negro sings between the lines and spaces that makes his music so difficult to record” (242). What’s more, they note the struggle to get the singers to ever sing something the same way twice. Catching the harmonies between multiple singers and the proper caesura cannot be accurately notated, and neither can the variation between the words against the consistent down-strokes.

Odum and Johnson's commentary on the problems of blues notation builds on their musical format prescription in *The Negro and His Songs*, which provides the lyrical format of these social songs: "the song not only begins and ends with the regular chorus, but each stanza is followed by the same chorus, thus doubling the length of the song" (168). Between this lyrical description and the outline of the makeup of blues music, Odum and Johnson provided the base upon which even their contemporaries would come to build.

John A. Lomax

When it came to the blues, John A. Lomax readily admitted his indebtedness to Howard Odum's work on the subject and its people (Lomax 189). In his work *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, the blues section's introductory text is particularly telling: it documents the blues as something that negroes just sing for something to pass the time, something to keep their blank minds occupied:

My blues ain't got no time, ain't got no place, don't mean nothin' to me an nobody else. But good Lawd, I got de blues, can't be satisfied, got to sing. . . . When I gits 'bout half hifh as Georgia pine . . . I sings slow blues, don't know what I'm singin', don't know what they mean. Still they has singin' feelin' an' I puts all sorts an' kinds together. (189)

The words above belong to Left Wing Gordon, and Lomax reprinted them from Odum's work *Rainbow Round My Shoulder*. The quote, which is only an excerpt that omits what may have given Gordon's words more meaning, portrays the blues as something that certainly is not well thought out. If the singer has taken time to compose the blues, he or she cannot know why they are putting the words in the order they are.

From the quote, Lomax has set up the hollers and blues songs in his collection to tell the tale of a drifting people with only sorrow songs to sing. What follows are a series of eleven songs all with a similar theme—the negro man and his appeal for sympathy as he works, is imprisoned, and searches for a good woman to no avail. For example, when introducing the “Cornfield Holler,” Lomax says that if you ask a white person from the South about the song, “any white person who is acquainted with the singing of untrained country Negroes . . . will tell you that ‘niggers are always hollerin’ like that out in the fields’” (191). The songs are interpreted through white eyes despite the direct access to the black blues community’s commentary, if not their values. Through all his travelling and documentation, Lomax continues to choose to portray blacks through a white, romanticized racial ideal that keeps blacks outside of the Western artistic paradigm, instead relegating them to what could be perceived as the lower art of folk music.

Similar commentary on other songs in the blues section follows, documenting the history of the songs, even if much of it is folklore: “Dink’s Blues,” a song from one of the women forced into a levee-camp to take care of the men there; “Woman Blue,” a song of a teenage black girl in prison for murder; “Shorty George,” sung by the women who go out on Sundays to see their men in the prison yard; and “Cholly Blues,” the song of a drifting black laborer looking for a good woman and soft place to sleep. All of these chosen songs and their commentary reinforce the racial stereotypes that delineate blues as folk art and sorrow songs of a lesser race. Not all songs are put to music, but where the music is notated, it is put down very simply and utilizing a diatonic scale.

THE LASTING EFFECTS OF LOMAX AND ODUM

These collectors, precursors to blues scholars, acted as Ranciére’s police; they used their knowledge of what constitutes art in their white, Western community and tried to transfer the

same artistic paradigm upon a music that did not come from that same heritage. Hence, the music is often deemed folk or savage in many accounts, for it was difficult, if not impossible, to subscribe the Western musical scales and themes upon a musical form that was not created with those scales or themes in mind.

Instead of using a diatonic scale, they may have looked at the blues as LeRoi Jones would come to define it musically: as non-diatonic. Jones¹ says that blues scholars have put “the cart before the horse. There are definite chords which have been evolved to support the blues, but these do not define the blues, and the blues can exist as a melody perfectly recognizable as the blues without them” (25). When collectors like Lomax and Odum documented these songs in Western musical terminology instead of looking at the blues as part of a different artistic community with different ideals, they inherently racialized the music, because it could never reach the classical Western ideals, and could therefore be used to create a narrative that never let the Othered group be anything but oppressed.

The collectors who created a basis for blues scholarship held that black music was important to document the American story, but instead of using the blues to recognize the Othered group as equal participants and inventors in their own right, they simply cared that “the blues was a window on the strange inner mind of ‘the Negro,’” and as Steve Garabedian later states, this “blues image in the white mind shared a basic consistency rooted in the tradition of white racialism” (477). These collectors and observers never got past viewing blacks and their

¹ I quote Leroi Jones from his *Blues People* full well understanding that his assessment of the blues at one point in his career goes so far as to suggest that whites have no business playing the blues or participating in the creation of the music or culture from an African American heritage. While I believe that view makes him a participant in the dichotomy I am denouncing, I find his musical definitions of the blues useful for my discussion of rule and ideal creation according to Ranci re’s definition of community.

music as anything but an object or tool to use to reach further objectives that satisfied the white majority. Blues people were made exotic, primitive, and erotic; their music was used to tout expressionism from lesser, oppressed classes in the United States; and their music was used to show the way for redemption. All of these viewpoints would emerge and thrive in blues scholarship, particularly evident in how many blues scholarly pieces end up categorizing blues in the 60s and forward.

The irony of solidifying the white romantic racial view of blues is that it has created a seemingly inescapable dichotomy in blues scholarship: that blues can transcend racial boundaries to become the people's music, and that the blues, in order to be authentic, must be racially defined as sounding "black" in order for it to be authentic. In other words, while anyone may listen to the blues, one can only sing it or participate in the culture if he or she has inherited the tradition through black roots.

ROMANTIC RACIALISM AND BLUES MUSICIANS: ERIC CLAPTON AND B.B. KING

Eric Clapton and B. B. King are two musicians who epitomize the racial dichotomy blues scholarship has created. Clapton throughout the history of his career evidently struggled with identifying himself as an "authentic" blues musician, not only because he is white, but also because he sees himself as inauthentic as he strays from his perceived notion of black music. King, on the other hand, struggles to maintain that same "authenticity" with the black community as he moves toward playing blues for white audiences, thus calling into question his authenticity as a black blues musician.

Neither of these musicians, despite their great contributions to the blues musical canon, can escape the romantic racial dichotomy that blues scholarship created for them. Both musicians struggle to stay within the lines of the acceptable, structured "black sounds" that have come to

define blues music, and it has definitively diminished their legacies as innovative musicians because the dichotomy disallows innovation outside of the expected, romantic racial status quo. Under the status quo, anything that strays from the requirements the white, Western musical tradition has defined for the blues cannot be considered innovative, but instead only inauthentic.

As such, the paradigm created for the blues leaves it a stagnant music without room for the innovation that should be rightfully given to it were the music less dedicated to the romantic racial paradigm of black sounding authenticity. Freed from the burden of authenticity, both musicians' music can be looked at as an evolution of the music, one that accepts both Clapton's and King's versions of the blues as valid constructions of the genre.

Clapton's Blues

Eric Clapton, a white, British man, struggles to fit into the currently defined blues music community because he is not American, does not have any black roots, and has not been exposed to oppression in any form that the community might recognize as valid to give him reason to sing the blues. Consequently, throughout his career he has tried to validate himself as a blues musician by claiming that his childhood abandonment, addictions, and bad relationships give him authority to sing the blues. Ulrich Adelt asserts that this self-marginalizing technique, the creation of the white negro, was a way for Clapton and other white blues musicians to gain a black identity to play the blues by taking "everything but the burden from black culture" (435). For Clapton, it is the black sound that matters, and to play the blues one need not recognize or in any way help bear or take responsibility for the burden of oppression and Othering that African Americans bear.

This is particularly evident in his endorsement of Enoch Powell, whose anti-immigration politics were notoriously harsh toward colored people. With his public support of Powell,

Clapton showed that while he was okay with appropriating black music in the form of the blues, he was not willing to use his position to bring awareness of the need for understanding and equality. Even though his reasoning for supporting Powell was that he cared about the British and the need to make sure that immigrants did not take the country's jobs, the hinge point is on immigrants of color taking jobs from white British men. Racial purity was the name of the game, and as Clapton could never be black, so those immigrants of color could never be white, and therefore could not hold an equal place in British society. If Clapton were to truly interact with the blacks he took his musical inspiration from, perhaps he would have shown more sympathy and understanding to the colored immigrants he spoke out against as he supported Powell, particularly because Clapton's idea of blues largely included the importance of struggle, sorrow, and loss.

The irony in this idea of black sounds as sounds of burden and sorrow is that there is much more to the blues than sadness and pain and burden; the music is a way to lighten those burdens, and so there were many types of blues songs. Similarly, there is no way to break away from the blues, its cultural heritage, or its community that can provide understanding of unforgiving circumstances: its structure is built off of call-and-response format, and, as Adelt says, "blues singers relied economically and psychologically on community support . . . expressed musically" by that format (437–38). While Clapton's view of the blues may be enhanced by his life experience, by choosing to discard the heart of the blues community, he has disabled himself from ever becoming fully a part of that community.

In his search of black-sounding, authentic music, without fully recognizing the blues community heritage and culture, Clapton would be constantly dissatisfied with the music he would produce. For example, when playing with the Yardbirds, Clapton met Sonny Boy

Williamson, and after hearing him play, “Williamson made Clapton realize that the Yardbirds were not being ‘true to the music,’ because ‘this man was real and we weren’t’” (Adelt 438). Later, he would be unable to accept himself in his most innovative periods because while he could never fully identify as black, he also refused to accept his white heritage, therefore alienating himself from race, and also from the blues community, for he could not accept the possibility of mixing cultures, styles, and experience to evolve the musical form. Even upon meeting Jimi Hendrix in 1966, Clapton recalled “‘When I saw him I knew immediately that he was the real thing. . . . I thought, ‘If I was black, I would be this guy’”” (Adelt 441). By jamming with a black innovator, Clapton felt his music could not be as authentic simply because of his race.

Everything about the conception of the blues community in the sense that Clapton understands it revolves around race and what Adelt calls the “conceptualization of racial purity” (446). For Clapton, this means that as long as the music itself came off as racially pure—or had that authentic, black sound—it was okay for him and other whites to appropriate blues music and form, even if it meant demeaning or suppressing that same form of black expressionism; whites could legitimize the genre even though blacks were who whites considered more natural players of the music, and Clapton would even self-proclaim himself a blues ambassador.

The white concept of racial purity in blues music that is so clearly expressed through Clapton’s vision of the blues might be concisely stated thus: the blues can only be truly “authentic” if it comes from blacks with natural talent for it, and that blacks should have a talent to play the blues because of their race; whites can play the blues, but they will never be as truly “authentic” as blacks because of their racial differences. His viewpoint makes it particularly difficult for himself, or in his eyes any white blues musician, to ever be innovative or evolve

their sound, because as they evolve and innovate, they may not stray from the format of the blues, but will stray from that authentic black sound, therefore disabling them from ever fully contributing to the blues community traditions. As Clapton would later come to say in 1966, “I’m no longer trying to play anything but like a white man. The time is overdue when people should play like they are and what colour they are” (Adelt 440). And yet, in later years Clapton would state that while he felt he was a qualified blues singer, “I still don’t think I’ll ever do it as good as a black man” and that while it took Clapton many years to learn the blues, “for a black guy from Mississippi, it seems to be what they do when they open their mouth—without even thinking” (Adelt 448). Even as Clapton tries to break away and be his own blues artist as a white man, he is unable to break free of the racial dichotomy set up in blues musical history, particularly the concept that the blues can only be authentic if it comes from blacks with a natural talent to sing the blues. Furthermore, the racially romanticized musical history determines for Clapton that if a person is black, he or she should have the natural talent to play the blues because of his or her race.

By defining the blues community as an art bound by race, both blacks and whites would come to limit the art form we know as the blues. It may seem, after a brief look into Clapton’s career, that the racially romanticized blues history would mainly affect whites vying for authenticity, and yet it would also cause blacks to struggle with the need to create an authentically “black” sound. We can see how this racially romanticized view of the blues as a purely black art form would hurt black blues musicians as well in the career of the late B. B. King.

King’s Blues

B. B. King, one of the most influential musicians of the twentieth century, would upon quick glance have every right to be considered an “authentic” blues musician by a person of any race. And yet, when B. B. King evolved his sound to play to a more urban, white audience, his authenticity as a blues musician in his own mind was undoubtedly thrown into question. He says of his reaction to the Fillmore show, where he played to a largely white audience, “It’s almost like going to another country where people don’t understand what you are trying to say. . . . Well, I felt lost. It is kind of like looking at a baby that’s crying, and you want to help it but you don’t know how to” (Adelt 199). For King, this would come to signify some sort of loss that he arguably never felt he was able to regain, and that loss came from the blues community as defined racially. As King gained more success with white audiences, he seemed to feel he had lost one of his connections to the blues: his black audience.

The move from black audience to white audience was a necessary financial decision for King, as the blues was becoming more and more unpopular with black audiences who were tired of the misery the blues supposedly represented. With the changing times, the musicians had to change with them in order to stay relevant, and King’s manager, Sidney Seidenberg, felt that the move toward a white audience was the correct move. Seidenberg’s stated goal was to make King “a big recording star,” and with some modest success in that field, Seidenberg moved him on to popular clubs that had become “the main attractions for the burgeoning hippie culture” (Adelt 198). Yet the move was an inherently racial change, not a musical one.

Adelt states that when viewing King’s move toward a white audience it can be looked at as a statement about the prosperity of the races: “An ‘all-black’ audience represents obscurity and failure, whereas a crossover to ‘mainstream’ or ‘white’ audiences equals the ultimate success in America” (201), and therefore King’s decision to cater to white audiences paint the picture of

a progressive “move from ‘black’ past to the ‘white’ future” (202). And yet this change in audiences from black to white also affected how blues scholars and critics, particularly Charles Keil, saw King. He became, in effect, too commercial and no longer “authentic” enough to be considered a true blues musician. In switching racial audiences, he in effect leaves the blues community as it is defined racially. Those who still saw King as a blues musician, such as Charles Sawyer, one of King’s biographers, generally find him more respectable when he makes the switch from a black to a white audience, reaffirming white values as he leaves the black ghettos behind (Adelt 202).

The romantic racial definition of the blues alienated King from the community in a similar way that it would forever exclude Clapton. In his autobiography, King says of playing for white audiences, “I wasn’t comfortable. It was another new situation that had me worried about fitting in. I felt like I was being forced on the fans, like I was going to someone’s house without being invited” (260). Yet despite his discomfort with playing to white audiences, King’s music did not radically change with the audience shift. He was still playing the blues as he had always played it, but it was not the music that defined his place as blues musician in the community; it was his race and the race of his audience that mattered and came to somewhat exclude him from the blues community.

This categorization of the blues as bounded racially is something Adelt calls “a problematic but powerful fabrication” (205), for King catered his music, both performances and albums, to both blacks and whites. King evolved his sound as a blues and rock musician while still hearkening back to the old blues tunes. As King’s career progressed he would become more and more an ambassador for the blues across the races, leading me to believe that it is a possible and necessary step to try to redefine the blues community as something that transcends romantic

racial boundaries while at the same time respecting the African American heritage the blues evolved from.

REDEFINING THE BLUES COMMUNITY

Changing the community from one that is racially based to one that is ethnically based may seem a small change, or indeed like no change at all. Ethnocentrism has in the past been as harmful as racialism in regard to communities of people. Yet, I stand with Joel Rudinow in believing “that different ethnic groups use music in different ways and that members of different ethnic groups tend to make and respond to music in ways that are characteristic of their respective communities” (135). This definition of music in regard to the blues community in particular opens up the blues to multiple ethnicities, for it implies that if a person will take the time to learn the musical idiom of the community, then they can perform an authentic form of the blues. The community then becomes defined by a set of cultural customs, techniques, and histories that can be mastered by those who would take the time to respect them and learn from the blues community—therefore superseding the romantic racial boundary that affected authenticity from the early precursors of blues scholarship to how we view the blues today.

In conclusion to this deconstruction of a racially romanticized view of the blues, I would like to briefly reiterate several points which I find could aid in the construction of a more inclusive, uplifting narrative to the racially exclusive narrative that tends to exclude even the community who the blues belongs to. These points are some that Rudinow brings forward in his article “Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White People Sing the Blues?” which I find beneficial in starting to redefine the blues in a way that allows for it to evolve and thrive as a community without the currently defined racial boundaries.

The three main points are the need for the flexibility of the definition of authenticity; the need to redefine the necessity of credentials; and the need for initiation into the blues community in order to appreciate and validate the blues community and its culture. Using these three points as a skeleton structuring, the blues can constructively redefine its community in a way that values the preservation of the old blues tradition and the evolution of that tradition as new experiences and ideas are brought to it through people of different races.

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