Blues Fell This Morning
PERFECT RACE RECORDS

"SLOPPY DRUNK"
0236 | I'm So Loney Drunk
| Home Of My Own
0238 | New Blue Heaven
| Stripped Clock Blues
0239 | In A Shanty In Old Shanty Town
| Sweet Evening Blues
0237 | How You Want It Done?
| M & O Blues
0237 | Worrying You Off My Mind No. 1
| Worrying You Off My Mind No. 2
0238 | How Long How Long Blues
| Mama Don't Allow No Long Riders Here
0239 | How Long How Long Blues No. 1
| How Long How Long Blues No. 2
181 | New Meetville Jull
| Joe Henry Blues
100 | I'm Sitting On Top Of The World
| Take A Look At That Baby

"GRAVEYARD DIGGER"
0235 | Graveyard Diggers Blues
| Consonant Road Blues
0236 | Deserted Man Blues
| Motherless Boy
0235 | New Stranger Blues
| Georgia Hand Blues
0236 | You're Goin' To Leave The Old
| Home Jim
| Cowardly Lion Blues
190 | How Mean How
| New Sally Dog
190 | Slop Off Blues
| Alley Brought
0236 | Red Depression Blues
| Howling Wolf Blues
0215 | You Raised You No. 1
| You Raised You No. 2
0215 | You Raised You No. 1
| You Raised You No. 2
0214 | You Talkin' Bout You No. 1
| You Talkin' Bout You No. 2
0215 | Summertime Blues No. 1
| Summertime Blues No. 2

25¢ FOR SALE BY
25¢
Blues Fell This Morning

Meaning in the Blues

Paul Oliver

with a foreword by Richard Wright

Cambridge University Press

© Cambridge University Press
To Valerie
Contents

List of illustrations
Author's note and acknowledgments to the first edition
Foreword by Richard Wright
Preface to the revised edition
Introduction
1 Got to work or leave
2 Railroad for my pillow
3 Pains in my heart
4 I'm a rooster, baby
5 The jinx is on me
6 Let the deal go down
7 Evil and mean and funny
8 Goin' to take a rap
9 World black as midnight
10 Going down slow
11 Blues like showers of rain
Bibliographical references
Discography of quoted blues
Acknowledgments to discography
Index of quoted blues singers
General index
Illustrations

Contemporary advertisements for blues records are listed by year of the advertisement, and not that of the record issue.

Perfect Race Records, dealer’s sheet, 1933
Oriole Records, dealer’s sheet, 1933
Bo-Weavil Blues, Kokomo Arnold, 1936
Arkansas Mill Blues, Elzadie Robinson, 1928
W.P.A. Blues, “Casey Bill” Weldon, 1936
Florida Bound Blues, Leroy Carr, 1936
Freight Train Blues, Trixie Smith, 1924
Black Widow Spider, Leroy Carter, 1936
What’s The Matter With My Milk Cow?, Bill Weldon, 1936
Hey Mama, It’s Nice Like That, Jim Jackson, 1936
Pigmeat Blues, Ardell Bragg, 1926
Advertisement for oils and good luck potions, 1936
“Sister Lola,” advertisement, 1959
Page from Policy Players’ Dream Book, 1950
New Big “80” Blues, Bumble Bee Slim, 1936
Good Whiskey Blues, Peetie Wheatstraw, 1936
Kidnappers Blues, Peetie Wheatstraw, 1936
No Job Blues, Ramblin’ Thomas, 1928
Back In Jail Again, Bumble Bee Slim, 1936
First Degree Murder Blues, Lil Johnson, 1933
High Water Everywhere, Charley Patton, 1930
T.B. Blues, Victoria Spivey, 1927
Death of LeRoy Carr, Bumble Bee Slim, 1936
Joe Louis Is The Man, Joe Pullum, 1936
Blues Ain’t Nothin’ Else But, Ida Cox, 1924
Author’s note and acknowledgments to the first edition (1960)

When the present work was originally undertaken it had been my intention to write not only on the meaning of vocal blues, but also on the historical development of the blues forms with summaries of the lives and work of principal singers. With this end in view I circulated a number of blues enthusiasts with a draft scheme requesting the assistance of those interested. Though many were fully occupied with their own researches the response from collectors was very generous, with the result that the information gathered from many sources far exceeded my expectations. To attempt to do some justice both to the subject and to the work of contributors I found that it was necessary drastically to reduce the original plan. Accordingly, I have devoted the present book solely to the meaning and content of blues, but a study of its form and history is now in preparation.

Though possibly no further removed from my subject in distance than the historian is removed from his in time, I am acutely aware of my remoteness from the environment that nurtured the blues. The help given me by visiting blues singers has therefore been invaluable and I would like to express to them my heartfelt thanks for their patient interest and kindly forbearance of my endless questions. In many hours of conversation Big Bill Broonzy drew from his inexhaustible fund of memories of half a century; Jimmy Rushing recalled at length the hey-day of the twenties; Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry reminisced on blues and blues singers of the thirties and forties, demonstrating many points, and Brother John Sellers gave me the benefit of his wide knowledge of the blues in the post-war years.

The preliminary work for this book involved the written transcription of several thousand blues recordings from my own collection and from the record libraries of many collectors who generously put them at my disposal. A number of collectors also undertook the laborious task of transcribing records on my behalf and, though only a small proportion of these texts could be used in the final work, they all helped me to obtain a picture of the blues on record. For their help in transcribing records and for the
Author's note and acknowledgements to the first edition

Information that they supplied my very sincere gratitude to Brian Davis; M. Jacques Demetre, blues columnist of Jazz-Hot, Paris; D. J. Parsons, who also checked numerous items; Max Vreede of Holland, Race Research columnist to Matrix, and J. R. T. Davies who assisted him.

For the loan of records and the resources of their files my warmest thanks to Sam Benjamin, U.K. representative of the International Jazz Club; jazz and blues singer Beryl Bryden; Derek Coller, editor of the Discophile from 1948–1958, who also kindly solicited help through his magazine; J. R. Davis who taped innumerable items; Brian Rust of the B.B.C. Gramophone Department; Derrick Stewart-Baxter, blues columnist of Jazz Journal; and Michael Wyler of Jazz Publications and Paramount specialist of Jazz Monthly.

Sincere thanks for many enjoyable record playing and transcribing sessions and for the loan of valuable items from their collections to Roy Crawford Ansell who also joined me in research on Negro terminology; Graham Boatfield, Jazz Journal columnist; Peter Gammond of Decca Record Company; Gerry Grounsell and John Jack, Columbia Race catalogue specialists; Norman Jenkinson; John Langmead; Vic Schuler; and Eric Townley, Jazz Journal columnist.

Though the major proportion of the blues quoted in this book is of traditional and folk blues items, every attempt has been made to trace possible holders of copyright. In making this search I have been given every possible assistance by the Mechanical-Copyright Protection Society and in particular Miss M. D. Jarvis and members of her department who have been unstinting in their efforts and time. To them and to the publishing companies who have so kindly given permission for the quotation of items under their control, my warmest appreciation of their generosity. In this connection I would like to express my thanks to the Directors of Cromwell Music, Ltd.; Empress Music, Inc.; Essex Music, Ltd.; Leeds Music, Ltd.; Milton ‘Mezz’ Mezzrow; Pickwick Music, Ltd., and Southern Music Publishing Company, Ltd. Full details of the items held in copyright by these companies are given under the appropriate titles in the appendix, Acknowledgments in Discography. As far as is known, all holders of copyright have been traced, but the author requests the indulgence of any publishing companies whose copyright of a quoted blues and permission so to quote have been inadvertently overlooked.

I am greatly indebted to the distinguished authority on American folk song, Alan Lomax, and to the eminent Negro writer Richard Wright for their advice and encouragement. Likewise I am deeply appreciative of the
Author's note and acknowledgements to the first edition

interest and help of John Ball, Professor of English at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, and Director of the Archive of Ohio Folklore, and of his wife, Mrs. Helen C. Ball, Special Services Librarian at Miami University; and of the valuable information on Negro affairs given me by Ralph H. Turner, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of California, and Philip H. Wiklund, Associate Professor of English, Indiana University.

To Richard C. Wootton, Cultural Affairs Officer of the United States Embassy, my grateful thanks for his help and advice, and to the Staff of the American Library for the loan of innumerable books and recordings from the Archives of the Library of Congress. Sincere thanks also to B. Bennett, Librarian of the Greenford Branch, Ealing Libraries, and his staff, for their trouble in obtaining many rare books for my use. Doug Dobell, Brian Harvey, and Bill Colyer of Dobell’s Record Shops have also loaned me books and recordings for which I am most grateful, and I have been greatly encouraged by the continued interest of Doug Dobell in the progress of this work.

Many other persons have helped me in divers ways. I would especially like to thank Sam Charters for information on singers; Tom Cundall, Editorial Director, and Jack Higgins, past editor of Music Mirror, in which magazine appeared the series of articles on which the idea of this book was based; Nat Hentoff, co-editor of The Jazz Review and late of Downbeat, who kindly solicited help through his column; Max Jones of Melody Maker for much advice and aid; Donald Kincaid and Alexis Korner for technical information; Robert Koester, editor of the St. Louis Jazz Report, for his interest and generous notice in his magazine; Albert McCarthy, editor of Jazz Monthly and compiler of Jazz Directory, for his great help in enabling me to trace obscure discographical data; Anthony Rotante, columnist of Record Research, for discographical information, and Bert Whyatt, assistant editor of the Discophile, for the loan of Race Record publicity sheets. My warm thanks to all the other persons who have helped in different ways and who, by letter or in person, have expressed their interest in the project. In expressing my appreciation of the great help that I have received from all these persons, I would add that the selection of relevant material, the opinions stated and the conclusions drawn in the content of the book are entirely my own and do not necessarily represent those that might be made by any persons who have assisted me.

To no one do I owe a greater debt of gratitude, however, than to my wife Valerie, who has endured for many months the constant upheaval caused by sheaves of notes, stacks of books and piles of discs; who has nobly transcribed
Author's note and acknowledgements to the first edition

recordings, typed and filed transcriptions; who has checked discographies and typed the final manuscript; who has heard blues records incessantly and repeatedly; who has given me the right encouragement when enthusiasm has flagged, and who has somehow developed a passion for blues herself.
Foreword by Richard Wright

Millions in this our twentieth century have danced with abandonment and sensuous joy to jigs that had their birth in suffering: I’m alluding to those tunes and lyrics known under the rubric of the blues, those starkly brutal, haunting folk songs created by millions of nameless and illiterate American Negroes in their confused wanderings over the American southland and in their intrusion into the northern American industrial cities.

The blues are fantastically paradoxical and, by all logical and historical odds, they ought not have come into being. I’m absolutely certain that no one predicted their advent. If I may indulge in an imaginative flight, I can hear a white Christian Virginia planter, say, in 1623, debating thus with his conscience while examining a batch of the first slaves brought from Africa:

“Now, these black animals have human form, but they are not really human, for God would not have made men to look like that. So, I’m free to buy them and work them on my tobacco plantation without incurring the wrath of God. Moreover, these odd black creatures will die early in our harsh climate and will leave no record behind of any possible sufferings that they might undergo. Yes, I’ll buy five of these to be used as slaves . . .”

But that mythical Virginia planter would have been tragically deluded. Not only did those Blacks, torn from their tribal moorings in Africa, transported across the Atlantic, survive under hostile conditions of life, but they left a vivid record of their sufferings and longings in those astounding religious songs known as the spirituals, and their descendants, freed and cast upon their own in an alien culture, created the blues, a form of exuberantly melancholy folk song that has circled the globe. In Buenos Aires, Stockholm, Copenhagen, London, Berlin, Paris, Rome, in fact, in every large city of the earth where lonely, dispossessed man congregate for pleasure or amusement, the orgiastic wail of the blues, and their strident offspring, jazz, can be heard.

How was that possible? I stated above that the possibility of those shackled, transplanted Blacks ever leaving behind a record of their feelings about their experiences in the New World ran smack against historical odds. What were some of those odds?
Foreword by Richard Wright

First, those Blacks were illiterate and it was not until some three centuries later that their illiteracy diminished to any appreciable degree.

Second, how could tribal men, whose values differed drastically from those of the Puritan Christian environment into which they were injected as slaves, ever arrive at an estimate or judgment of their experiences? How could they determine whether their lives were better or worse in America than in Africa?

Third, upon being sold into slavery, many tribes were deliberately separated one from another, so that the possibility of tribal inter-communication would be nullified, and, thus, the likelihood of revolt eliminated.

Fourth, not only were slaves bought and sold, employed as commodity-mediums of exchange, but they were intentionally bred as livestock, thereby augmenting the wealth of the planters.

Fifth, the spur to obtain the slaves' labor was brutality; the effort of the slave to learn merited punishment; self-assertion on the slaves' part met with rebuff; the penalty of escape, death.

How could such men, then, speak of what they underwent? Yet they did. In a vocabulary terser than Basic English, shorn of all hyperbole, purged of metaphysical implications, wedded to a frankly atheistic vision of life, and excluding almost all references to nature and her various moods, they sang:

Whistle keeps on blowin' an' I got my debts to pay,
I've got a mind to leave my baby an' I've got a mind to stay.

This volume contains three hundred and fifty fragments (a fraction of the material extant) of the blues, and I believe that this is the first time that so many blues, differing in mood, range, theme, and approach, have been gathered together. We thus have here a chance to cast a bird's-eye view upon the meaning and implication of the blues. Certain salient characteristics of the blues present themselves at once.

The most striking feature of these songs is that a submerged theme of guilt, psychological in nature, seems to run through them. Could this guilt have stemmed from the burden of renounced rebellious impulses?

There is a certain degree of passivity, almost masochistic in quality and seemingly allied to sex in origin, that appears as part of the meaning of the blues. Could this emotional stance have been derived from a protracted inability to act, of a fear of acting?

The theme of spirituality, of other-worldliness is banned. Was this
consciously done? Did it imply reflection upon the reigning American religious values?

Though constant reference is made to loved ones, little or no mention is made of the family as such. Was this because family life was impossible under slavery? (Family life among American Negroes has remained relatively weak until the present day!)

The locale of these songs shifts continuously and very seldom is a home site hymned or celebrated. Instead, the environmental items extolled are saw-mills, cotton-gins, lumber-camps, levee-banks, floods, swamps, jails, highways, trains, buses, tools, depressed states of mind, voyages, accidents, and various forms of violence.

Yet the most astonishing aspect of the blues is that, though replete with a sense of defeat and down-heartedness, they are not intrinsically pessimistic; their burden of woe and melancholy is dialectically redeemed through sheer force of sensuality, into an almost exultant affirmation of life, of love, of sex, of movement, of hope. No matter how repressive was the American environment, the Negro never lost faith in or doubted his deeply endemic capacity to live. All blues are a lusty, lyrical realism charged with taut sensibility. (Was this hope that sprang always phoenix-like from the ashes of frustration something that the Negro absorbed from the oppressive yet optimistic American environment in which he lived and had his being?)

All American Negroes do not sing the blues. These songs are not the expression of the Negro people in America as a whole. I’d surmise that the spirituals, so dearly beloved of the southern American Whites, came from those slaves who were closest to the Big Houses of the plantations where they caught vestiges of Christianity whiffed to them from the southern Whites’ cruder forms of Baptist or Methodist religions. If the plantations’ house slaves were somewhat remote from Christianity, the field slaves were almost completely beyond the pale. And it was from them and their descendants that the devil songs called the blues came – that confounding triptych of the convict, the migrant, the rambler, the steel driver, the ditch digger, the roustabout, the pimp, the prostitute, the urban or rural illiterate outsider.

This volume is the first history of those devil songs; it tells how fortuitously they came to be preserved, how their influence spread magically among America’s black population, and what their probable emotional and psychological meaning is. It would be very appropriate to recount that an American Negro was the first person to attempt a history of
the blues and their meaning. But, like the blues themselves, this volume is paradoxical in its origin. It was written neither by a Negro nor an American nor by a man who had ever seen America and her teeming Black Belts.

Paul Oliver, the author of this interpretation of the blues, an interpretation that cuts across such categories as anthropology, economics, and sociology, first heard the Negro’s devil songs on phonograph records when he was a child living in London. Those songs haunted that English boy. They spoke to him and he was resolved to understand them. For twenty years, as a student, a teacher, a lecturer, Paul Oliver studied the blues, collected records, pored over the literature relating to the Negro and created by the Negro, interviewed blues singers and jazz players, and has finally presented us with this interesting and challenging documentary volume.

As a southern-born American Negro, I can testify that Paul Oliver is drenched in his subject; his frame of reference is as accurate and concrete as though he himself had been born in the environment of the blues. Can an alien, who has never visited the milieu from which a family of songs has sprung, write about them? In the instance of such a highly charged realm as the blues, I answer a categoric and emphatic Yes. Indeed, I see certain psychological advantages in an outsider examining these songs and their meaning: his passionate interest in these songs is proof that the songs spoke to him across racial and cultural distances; he is geographically far enough from the broiling scene of America’s racial strife to seize upon that which he, conditioned by British culture, feels to be abiding in them; and, in turn, whatever he finds enduring in those songs he can, and with easy conscience, relate to that in his culture which he feels to be humanly valid. In short, to the meaning of the blues, Paul Oliver brings, in the fullest human sense, what courts of law term “corroborative evidence.”

I’m aware of certain possible difficulties. The Cold War climate in which this non-political book will appear might well militate in some quarters against its being received in the same warm, impartial, and generous spirit in which the author conceived and wrote it. Much of the material, factual and authenticated, and drawn from official sources, upon which Paul Oliver floats his interpretations of the blues, no longer “officially” exists: that is, American Negro middle-class writers as well as some American Whites with psychological vested interests might not only decry the material, but may seek to cast doubt upon its validity. If such were the case, it would be tragic indeed that material relating to aesthetics should come under the racial or political hammer.

Yet the contents of the 1954 Supreme Court decision regarding the
Foreword by Richard Wright

integration of black and white children in American schools ought, at least, to open our minds a bit on this subject, and Paul Oliver's book, directly and indirectly, deals with that psychological area of tension and depression consequent upon social exclusion, documenting it, illustrating it.

Recently, when commenting upon the death of Big Bill Broonzy, a well-known Negro blues singer, a powerful and popular American Negro magazine announced the "death of the blues." But can anyone or anything hand down an edict stating when the blues will or should be dead? Ought not the contraction or enlargement of the environment in which the blues were cradled be the calendar by which the death of the blues can be predicted?

The American environment which produced the blues is still with us, though we all labor to render it progressively smaller. The total elimination of that area might take longer than we now suspect, hence it is well that we examine the meaning of the blues while they are still falling upon us.

Paris 1959

Richard Wright
Preface to the revised edition

Within a few months of the publication of *Blues Fell This Morning* my wife Valerie and I made our first trip to the United States, specifically to do research and field recording in the blues. It took us to cities like Washington, New York, Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis, Memphis, Dallas, and New Orleans, to small towns and rural communities in Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, and California. We went with considerable trepidation, not for our safety – though it was a difficult time in the South – but fearing that the world described in the book would prove to be misleading. As it turned out though, we found that it was often too painfully accurate, as we encountered the humiliation of racial discrimination, the poverty and deprivation of Blacks in the urban ghettos and the country, the conditions in which many blues singers lived.

Of course we learned much more: that was the purpose of the trip. We heard, interviewed, and recorded blues singers and musicians, record promoters, veterans of the shows; black writers, historians, and Civil Rights leaders too. The details of that trip, the substance of many of the interviews, and the field recordings I made were incorporated in a later book, *Conversation with the Blues*, and in a number of long-play record releases. Thirty years have passed since then; thirty years of change in the United States, in black culture, in the blues; thirty years of further research and writing about the blues, including my own. In that time I have spent several weeks, sometimes months, in the United States every year, on average, and my visits have taken me to every region in the South and to some two-thirds of the states in the country as a whole. These visits have enabled me to note the persistence of many aspects of American life, as well as to witness the many changes as they have occurred. Together, they have led me to make a number of amendments to the text of *Blues Fell This Morning* which require some words of explanation.

At the time of publication the lunch-counter sit-ins were just commencing, and Martin Luther King led the meeting in Raleigh, North Carolina which resulted in the forming of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, whose Freedom Rides commenced the following year. The
Preface to the revised edition

formation of the Black Panther Party was still half a dozen years away. For many rural Blacks they were stressful years but eventually the effects of the non-violent demonstrations, the Washington March of August 1963, the Civil Rights Law, 1964, the 1965 Watts riots, the trials of the militant black activists, the martyrdom of Martin Luther King, the passing of the Civil Rights Bill of 1967 and its implementation, the ebb and flow of prejudice and justice, repression and freedom ultimately led to remarkable social change.

It seemed inconceivable when I made that first field trip that I would one day see a black leader be a serious contender for party nomination in a presidential campaign. I would not have anticipated that numerous cities, in the South as well as in the North and West, would have black mayors, that schools and public facilities would be desegregated throughout the country – or that the problems and squalor of the black ghettos of New York, Washington, and Chicago would be as intractable after three decades as ever they were.

Change in the world of black people was not only the outcome of shifts in political power and Civil Rights legislation, nor the eventual end of discriminatory practice throughout the country, fundamentally important though these were. It was also brought about by the conjunction of many other factors – the decline in the cotton economy as synthetic fabrics became universal, the industrialization of the South which brought field labor to an end, reductions in relief payments for the poor, and much else. Yet the complex effects of political, industrial, commercial, and social decisions taken at levels far removed from them have left millions of Blacks without a share in the benefits of overall economic prosperity.

Blues in this period of upheaval has had a curious history. To a large extent it failed the campaigns of the non-violent demonstrators, the Civil Rights activists and the black militants: in the marches in Alabama and Mississippi, gospel song found a new role, but blues did not. Through the aggressive amplification of the Chicago blues bands of the late 1950s the sounds of protest could be heard, but the social commitment of the vocal blues of the 1930s was passed to James Brown and a few soul singers. By the early 1960s I had already seen indications that blues as an active force within the black community was showing signs of decline; the graph fell steeply soon after.

This was not the perception of listeners in general, for blues in the 1960s gained an international audience. Record labels and specialist magazines started up to cater for an expanding market for blues, field research
uncovered a remarkable succession of veteran blues singers, among them many celebrated names. But now their audiences were white and largely middle-class; many singers followed the path staked out by Big Bill Broonzy in the 1950s. “Folk Blues Festivals” toured Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, blues singers went on State Department tours, star performers from Muddy Waters to B. B. King played for concerts and festivals. Rock musicians from both sides of the Atlantic paid homage to blues singers, exploited their techniques, recorded hit versions of their songs and made a lot of money of which little, and in many cases nothing at all, filtered back to the surviving blues singers in royalties. Small wonder that Blacks largely gave up the blues as Whites took over.

Throughout these eventful decades blues scholarship has grown, though regrettably, not often among black writers and researchers. The bulk of the work, whether historical or discographical, empirical or theoretical, has been done by white writers from outside the culture, European as much as American. Much of it is based on interviews with singers and musicians so that today we know far more about the lives of the singers, their sources and their influences, the work they did and the places where they performed. The history of regional styles has been pieced together, the role of the recording of the music is now better understood. Record collecting has become the obsession of many enthusiasts and some have made rare recordings available on their own long-play (LP) reissues. The LP revolution had begun in the 1950s, when I was writing this book, but it gained momentum after its publication.

An important aspect of all this activity has been recording in the field. The routes across the South had been way-marked by the early field units of the commercial companies, and the folklorists employed by the Archives of Folk Music of the Library of Congress. In the 1950s one or two field studies of folk forms of black music were done, especially in Alabama. But in the 1960s the emphasis was almost wholly on blues. Surprising numbers of singers were traced and recorded, adding to the now vast documentation of the subject. So much so that the relationship of blues to earlier forms of black music was in danger of being forgotten or ignored.

In the 1970s valuable contributions to the study of blues were made by many writers, even if theoretical and thematic books were rather fewer than the historical and biographical works. From such writings and further studies of my own I have come to modify my views about some aspects of the blues: its function as entertainment, the personalizing of the lyrics, the interaction between vocal expression and instrumental techniques. In the
Preface to the revised edition

past I attached more importance to improvisation and the novelty of poetic invention in blues stanzas, than to the exchange and transfer of images and lyric fragments between singers. Yet the significance of the subjects about which blues artists sang, and which their audiences clearly wished to hear in person or through the purchase of their records, still remains of great importance to the understanding of the role of blues in black society.

Little, however, has been developed on the lyric content of blues since Screening the Blues (1968) where I sought to examine in depth some of the themes opened up in Blues Fell This Morning. The more liberal climate of the late 1960s enabled me to discuss freely the sexual emphasis of a large number of blues and black songs. Changes in social attitudes are evident when the discussion of the “blue blues” is compared with its treatment in the earlier book. In Blues Fell This Morning I had felt obliged to justify the consideration of certain themes – homosexuality and lesbianism for instance, sensitive subjects in those pre-Wolfenden days. Writing of the breakdown of the family, common-law liaisons, desertion, or of alcoholism and drug addiction in a period which was less frank and less tolerant than the present, it was necessary to explain them in terms of social pressures. But a certain moralistic tone crept in, which I now regret. Some passages no longer require the kind of explanation that they did thirty years ago; others were over-written and have been simplified.

In revising the book, a number of other decisions had to be made. One was a matter of nomenclature: at the time of writing, “Negro” was a preferred term, but in the late 1960s “Black” generally replaced it. “Afro-American” was occasionally used, and in the late 1980s “African American,” as an equivalent to, say, “Italian American,” has gained some support. I have settled for “Black” and “White” when employed as nouns, and “black” and “white” when used as adjectives, though for relief, or to avoid anachronisms, other terms have been used a few times.

Further decisions were not about style. An important one was related to the period of time to which the book referred, now that so many more years of singing and recording the blues have passed. In theory, the large body of commercially recorded blues, the extensive field work and recording undertaken by researchers, and the greater accessibility of recordings drawn from a total span of seventy years, makes this a rich mine of material. Indeed it does, but the popularization of the blues in the 1960s, and its considerable popularity today, has been principally a reflection of the growing taste for the music among white enthusiasts. This has meant that blues has been
Preface to the revised edition

shaped by their preferences, and singers have frequently responded to them as new, appreciative, but different audiences.

Commercial recording of blues that was addressed and sold to black audiences spans some forty years – roughly 1920–60. From the advent of rural blues singers on record in the mid-1920s to the decline of the 78 rpm disc in the Rhythm and Blues epoch was a period of thirty or so years. During this time the blues on record was essentially by and for Blacks, apart from Library of Congress recordings and a few minority collector labels of the post-war years. Often the men who were responsible for the recording of blues singers were Whites who frequently had local knowledge. But many talent scouts were black and quite a few were blues singers themselves. They responded to black preferences, identified most of the major singers and gave many minor ones a chance to record. To some extent they undoubtedly shaped taste, emphasizing “originals,” or new compositions which could be copyrighted, and probably influenced the development of blues with a story-line. They also overlooked some aspects of black music, most regrettable the string bands that were still popular in the 1930s.

With all these factors borne in mind it is still my opinion that commercially recorded 78s, made between the mid-1920s and the mid-1950s, give us the most accurate picture we are likely to have of the blues when it was solely the music of the black community. Consequently, I have deleted from the book some blues which were recorded on the relatively new LPs and others that were issued on 78s which were marketed primarily for white collectors; where possible, I have made appropriate substitutions. In some other instances I have replaced the blues quoted with an example which better illustrates the point that I wished to make.

Transcribing blues, which involves coping with surface noise, comprehending the parochialisms of local accents, a knowledge of black idioms of the past, and a working understanding of the themes about which blues performers sing, can never be an exact science. It is a form of gestalt process, of fitting hypotheses about what is sung against the evidence of recorded sounds. Numerous readers have commented over the years on the blues quoted, suggesting alternative transcriptions of the words or interpretations of their meaning. They are too numerous to list, but I wish to express my gratitude to blues collectors and writers Alan Balfour and Chris Smith for the immense amount of trouble they have taken in checking transcriptions and debating others. Whatever improvements there are in the accuracy of the transcriptions is in very large measure due to them. I am also greatly
indebted to Johnny Parth for his help with records and to John Cowley for many items of relevance.

Finally, there is the matter of interpretation. Blues Fell This Morning was subtitled (and published in the United States) as The Meaning of the Blues, though my preference had been for Meaning in the Blues, which more accurately described its purpose. Clearly, there are levels of meaning which are symbolic and abstract, and some of these I endeavored to unravel in Screening the Blues. There are also qualities of meaning which emanate from the instrumental accompaniments to the lyrics, which defy notation and which are best experienced through hearing the records. My intention in writing this book was more direct: I wished to show that the thematic content of the blues related to many aspects of black experience during the period in question. Always I started from the lyrics of the blues, rather from sociology or history, but in order to do so I had to consult many references. Apart from my conversations with the author Richard Wright, and with a number of blues singers, I was largely dependent on the work of black historians, sociologists and authors. Details of my principal sources and substantiating texts are given in the notes to the chapters.

In 1960 there were still young blues singers in their sixties. There were some that were younger, who had been playing since childhood, and they are still featured in the European blues clubs and festivals. Very few came after them, for the black blues clubs had dwindled in the cities. Rock and soul, and later, hip-hop and rap, filled the space that the blues had left. In the country districts, blues remained as the old folks’ music, regarded by some young Blacks somewhat condescendingly, and by the more militant with impatience. Blues represented the values of another era, values which they did not share. This I rather expected. What I did not expect was the growing interest among some young Blacks today in the culture of what is now their grandparents’ (or great-grandparents’) generation. How widespread and how lasting this may be we can only wait and see, but perhaps this revised edition of a book written at the end of an era, will provide one means of access to the socio-historical background of that generation’s blues songs.