INTRODUCTION: YONDER COME THE BLUES

Paul Oliver

Collecting blues and jazz records in Britain before the 1950s was by no means easy, and some enterprising collectors who had picked up a rare Paramount or two would reissue them for like-minded enthusiasts on 78 rpm discs – Colin Pomeroy on Jazz Collector and James Asman on his Jazz label. I was desperate to buy Jimmy Asman’s first item, which was ‘Ma’ Rainey’s *Stack O’Lee Blues* on Jazz 5001. It delighted me, but I found myself increasingly attracted to the ‘B’ side – *Yonder Come the Blues*. As I tried to unravel the tangled skeins of myth, fiction, anecdotes and interviews which passed for blues history, I identified with her words:

I get disgusted and all confused,
Every time I look around, yonder come the blues.

‘Ma’ Rainey was doubtless singing of the blues as a feeling of despair, but for me her lines increasingly represented the first intimations of the blues as a new idiom, made all the more remarkable by her recollections of a tent show in a Missouri township in 1902. She told John W. Work and the poet Sterling Brown how ‘a girl from the town came to her tent one morning and began to sing about the “man” who had left her. The song was so strange and poignant that it attracted much attention.’ ‘Ma’ Rainey used it as an encore to her act and ‘many times she was asked what kind of song it was, and one day she replied, in a moment of inspiration, “It’s the *Blues*”’ (Work, 1940).
INTRODUCTION

Blues had come from way back, but no one knew then, or even knows now, quite where, when or how they sounded. To many blues enthusiasts Charley Patton represents the earliest phase of the blues, and his recordings their most archaic form. It wasn’t always so. His first record, made in June 1929, was *Mississippi Boweavil Blues*, issued by Paramount under the pseudonym of ‘The Masked Marvel’. When Harry Smith included it in his celebrated ‘Anthology of American Folk Music’ in 1952 it was still under this name. It was a long-forgotten collector, James McKune, who identified the singer and first drew attention to Patton’s powerful blues, and a noted guitarist of the ‘Blues Revival’ years, John Fahey, who, in 1958, made the first field trip to Mississippi to research his life and music. Fahey’s monograph, *Charley Patton*, was one of the innovatory studies in the Blues Paperbacks Series published by Studio Vista, in 1970 (Fahey, 1970).

Eventually, John Fahey’s book was superseded by two later studies: an extended paper on the singer by David Evans, included in the proceedings of an international conference organised in Liège, Belgium (Sacré, 1987), and a subsequent work on the ‘King of the Delta Blues Singers’ written by critic Stephen Calt and field researcher Gayle Wardlow (1988). The heat generated by the historical data, contentious claims and disputed lyric transcriptions in these works are illustration enough of the problems of blues historiography. David Evans was the author of another in the Blues Series, *Tommy Johnson*, about the influential Mississippi singer and guitarist who was a contemporary of Patton (1971). After further field research Johnson and his circle were examined later in Evans’s *Big Road Blues*, an exhaustive work on a regional tradition (Evans, 1982).

Seminal rural bluesmen like Patton and Johnson were not the earliest blues singers on record, however. For me, one of the initial four monographs in the Blues Series just had to be on Gertrude ‘Ma’ Rainey. After some persuasion the late Derrick Stewart-Baxter, arguably the first regular columnist on the blues in any country, agreed to write it. His book *Ma Rainey and the Classic Blues Singers* (1970) was devoted to the singing of the generation of women professional artists who, in the early 1920s, did make the earliest recordings. A decade after Derrick’s book a study of Gertrude ‘Ma’ Rainey was written by Sandra Lieb (Lieb, 1981). Surprisingly, in
view of their former popularity, a more extensive overview of the so-called ‘classic blues’ singers did not exist until 1988 when Daphne Duval Harrison’s *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* was published.

Among the earlier blues pianists was Eurreal ‘Little Brother’ Montgomery, who, in fact, both accompanied some of the women singers, and recorded before Patton and Johnson. He was befriended by a German researcher, Karl Gert zur Heide, whose book in the Series, *Deep South Piano* (1970), was the story of Montgomery and his associates in New Orleans and Chicago. Another regional tradition was examined in *Crying for the Carolines* by Bruce Bastin, who conducted research in the Carolinas and the East Coast states, eventually producing a comprehensive study of the southeastern blues tradition (Bastin, 1971, 1988). These were broadly historical works; William Ferris, Jr. concentrated on the blues that were currently played and sung in Mississippi in the 1970s, in *Blues From the Delta*, which was later expanded (Ferris, 1970). *The Devil’s Son-in-Law* was about pianist and guitarist William Bunch, known also as ‘Peetie Wheatstraw’. Written by Paul Garon, an advocate of surrealism, it discussed the singer’s personality and blues imagery (Garon, 1971). Bengt Olsson from Sweden contributed a study entitled *Memphis Blues and Jug Bands*, a pioneering work in this subject (1971). Subsequent articles in *Storyville* magazine by other authors on the history of the jug bands were promised in book form, but this never materialised.

By the 1970s blues appreciation had become truly international, as the authorship of a number of the books in the Blues Series demonstrates. This was in part due to the ‘Folk Blues Festivals’ which, under the direction of the late Horst Lippmann and Fritz Rau, toured Europe in the 1960s. Bob Groom, English editor of one of the first blues journals, described the phenomenon in *The Blues Revival* (1971). One European writer, however, anticipated the revival by many years. He was the youthful Dutch blues collector Frank Boom, who drafted his book on satirical blues, *Laughing to Keep From Crying*, as early as 1943. He died in Indonesia a decade later, and on hearing of the work, as Editor of the Blues Series, I hoped to include it in a subsequent batch, which would also include David Evans’s *Big Road Blues*. Frank Boom’s family, however, declined to give permission for its publication at that time. In the 1990s the Dutch
INTRODUCTION

blues lexicographer, Wim Verbei, traced three versions of Boom’s text which, at the time of this writing, are being prepared for publication.

So how did the Blues Series come about? Back in 1964 I had been invited to prepare a large exhibition at the American Embassy, London, which included some 500 photographs and large-scale reproductions of ephemera. For several years after, I worked on a book based on the material I had gathered, which was eventually published under the same title, as The Story of the Blues. Book designer and producer Ian Cameron of November Books was enthusiastic about it and asked me if I had anything else ‘on the stocks’? I told him about a short book which I had been planning, which stemmed from my experiences in West Africa in 1964. Discussing this, and other studies that I knew about, led to our devising a series of short paperback books which would reflect current research in the blues. Studio Vista were interested, agreeing to publish a series of books of 112 pages each, and to issue them also in hardback form, but under the same series title. It was clear that the books should comprise new and focussed studies in aspects of the blues, and in particular in those that had not received much attention in the previous decade of blues writing. They might include biographies, local traditions, historical and theoretical studies which could therefore appeal to a cross-section of the potential readership. Savannah Syncopators (1970), an examination of possible ‘African retentions in the blues’, was to be one of the first batch, as it would consider issues that were scarcely touched upon in Story of the Blues.

American music authority Tony Russell had been talking for some time about the similarity between recordings of the white country singers in whom he was interested and those of his first passion, the blues singers. Here, without doubt, was a subject which had been largely ignored in the literature to date, and one which would well represent the intentions of the Blues Series; Blacks, Whites and Blues was one of the first four books (1970). Robert M. W. Dixon had organised the Blues Recording Project to raise loans for me to do recordings in the United States while I was conducting field research in 1960. His discographical partnership with John Godrich produced their unrivalled listing Blues and Gospel Records, 1902–1942, and during the 1960s they worked on a revised
edition which was published in 1969. Apart from the discographical data it included summaries of the principal ‘Race labels’, but a fuller history was undoubtedly needed; Recording the Blues by the compilers was the outcome. In the week of its publication Dixon left for the antipodes, to take up a post in linguistics at the Australian National University, Canberra.

Another book was also included in the first group of four monographs, but, as already noted, Derrick Stewart-Baxter’s work on ‘Ma’ Rainey and her contemporaries was largely incorporated in, and superseded by, later studies. This has not been the case with the other three books that initiated the series, which are reprinted together in the present collection. The three were the first to go out of print, and though they have been the most frequently cited, they have not been generally available since the early 1980s. During that time blues has changed, becoming an international popular music genre which has been largely detached from the milieu of its progenitors.

This increasing distance may account for some of the mistakes that have appeared in blues and related histories which could have been avoided. For instance, ‘juke’ is an African retention, a word meaning “evil, disorderly, wicked” in Bambara, a language spoken in parts of the Congo. Absorbed into English via Gullah, the language of Blacks in the Georgia Islands’ (Davis, 1995, p. 7). Bambara, however, is not spoken in the Congo, but 2,000 miles away in the West African Savannah, so the implications of the origins of the word are profoundly different. Or again, Morgan and Barlow state that the origins of slave secular song ‘can be traced back to West African griots’ who ‘were also the “living libraries” of the region’s Bantu-language tribes’ (Morgan and Barlow, 1992, p. 8). The griots are not Bantu-speaking, the nearest living over 500 miles from the western limits of the Bantu region.

Such errors could have been avoided if Savannah Syncopators had been read, and their appearance, among a number of others in recent books, is seriously misleading – especially so at a time when, as the twentieth century has drawn to a close, there has been an increasing awareness of the most intractable problem in the history of the blues: how it began. Though a book which brought together these three studies might not
answer all the questions that arise concerning the beginnings of the blues, it seemed that such a work, augmented in the light of recent research, might further illumine some aspects of the problem. Less clear to the authors was how the three thirty-year-old studies should be presented. There was an argument for full revision of the books, though this might extend them considerably, while the new material would obscure the original texts. Another possibility was to reprint them in their entirety, but to amend errors and adjust the presentation where this may be viewed as 'politically incorrect'. Such a partial revision was thought to be undesirable, in that it was at best an uneasy compromise.

Considered by the authors to be the most honest solution, and the one which we have adopted, is the republication of the three books as they were originally written, with just a few inconsistencies and errors corrected; not without difficulties, nonetheless. For instance, there was the problem of nomenclature. At the time of writing the authors used the then acceptable term of ‘Negro’, with ‘black’ as an alternative. Subsequently, ‘Afro-American’ became the preferred term, later (in the 1990s) to be supplanted by ‘African American’. ‘Black’ and ‘Blacks’, though once regarded as being somewhat derogatory, have been reinstated. They are used here, with the ‘lower case’ form being employed as an adjective. After due consideration the authors have chosen to retain all terms in the original texts that were acceptable at the time of writing, and to employ current usage in the new supplementary chapters.

There were some problems with illustrations, especially where photographs or ephemera are now missing, or former owners untraced, so they have been somewhat reduced in number. Where the original texts cited LP recordings which have now been replaced by compact discs the LP issue numbers have been deleted and reference made to CDs on which the titles mentioned are currently available. The nature of the references being very different for each works, they have not been brought together in one bibliography, but are separately listed. Likewise, this applies to the references for the supplementary chapters.

In the case of the supplementary chapter to Savannah Syncopators I have found it necessary to exercise some control on the references cited,
for there has been a plethora of writing on the relationship between African American culture and its African antecedents or counterparts. Much of this has been on the sources of slaves. Linguistic studies have been numerous, while several papers on African music have also been published. In this chapter I discuss how these subjects may bear on African American music in slavery and after, and in particular how they may have been sustained in the blues. Though there has been a notable increase in writing on blackface minstrelsy, its origins, popularity, repertory and practice by both white and black troupes, this has not been paralleled by a similar volume of works on the commonality and exchange of the respective folk traditions. As researcher and writer in both blues and country music, as the compiler of a comprehensive discography of the latter, and as editor of the journal Old Time Music, Tony Russell has been uniquely placed to collect and collate such further material on their interaction as it has become available. His chapter supplementing Blacks, Whites and Blues considers this, especially where the formative years of the blues are concerned.

A major factor in the spread and popularisation of the blues was the development of the phonograph record, as R. M. W. Dixon and John Godrich documented in Recording the Blues. Since writing this book they saw the publication of a revised and expanded edition of their Blues and Gospel Records discography, its time span increased to 1890–1943. A fourth edition, having a broader perception of ‘blues and gospel’, was published in 1997, with Howard Rye being added as a third member of the team. A very experienced writer, researcher and discographer in jazz and blues, Howard Rye, on behalf of all three compilers, contributes the chapter which takes these changes, and further research on the activities of recording companies, into account.

It cannot be claimed that the questions concerning the origins of the blues have been answered in full. Nevertheless, the evidence offered herein is drawn from an extended period, 60 to 200 years ago, from whence, way back yonder, come the blues. These studies document the major, and largely consecutive, mediators in the emergence and evolution of this music.
REFERENCES


Boom, Frank (Verbei, Wim, editor). ‘Laughing to Keep From Crying’. Unpublished manuscript.


