# 1 Surveying the field: our knowledge of blues and gospel music

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Blues and gospel are widely familiar as generic labels, and have extensive histories both in their own right and as genres influential on other forms of music. They emerged within oral traditions of African American culture, embodying interpretation of, and responses to, experience in two differing realms (broadly, the secular and the sacred). They were then both taken up by the music industry and disseminated particularly from the 1920s. We know them through recordings, particularly, but their surrounding circumstances we know through writings. In this introduction, I want to lay out some of that knowledge, raising a few of the key questions as to how these genres function.

Although many books devoted to them treat them as separate, if related, genres, in this book we acknowledge their deep linkage. Indeed, Samuel Floyd (1995: 6) goes so far as to insist that they originated in exactly the same impulses, and that they are therefore alternative expressions of the same need. This is such a crucial issue that it is worth focusing on it straight away. Take the music of the Rev. Gary Davis. Was he a blues singer? Was he a gospel singer? In listening to him sing "Twelve gates to the city," to which genre are we responding? His guitar playing provides both the solid sort of underpinning we might expect from a street musician, together with flashes of virtuosic brilliance and moments of call-and-response patterning (that wonderful bass scale), and extensive bent thirds. The structure and content of the lyric, however, are far from this – the "city" is celestial, not earthy. Or take an avowedly blues singer. What are we responding to when Bessie Smith sings "Moan, you moaners?" Accompanied as she is by a piano and gospel quartet, she brings with her all the technique and expression she has acquired in singing of her own troubles to a determinedly gospel lyric. And what about those gospel quartets? When the Heavenly Gospel Singers let rip on "Lead me to the rock," they demonstrate their total ease with blue notes, with the blues' driving rhythm and vocal expression given by "dirty" timbres (growls, hollers etc.) These may be relatively extreme examples, but they demonstrate audibly that there was no clear dividing line between the blues and gospel in the lives of (some of) their exponents. Add to this such frequent crossing of the sacred/secular dividing line as that made by

Thomas A. Dorsey, Sam Cooke, Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, Little Richard Penniman and others, and we begin to observe the artificiality of any such division. Christopher Small puts it trenchantly:

> It has been said that if gospel is the present-day paradigm of Afro-American religious musicking, so blues is of secular. It would be more true to say that blues and gospel are twin modern aspects of that ritual of survival which is the musical act . . . there is a good deal of quite secular enjoyment of both spirituals and gospel music, so in blues . . . there is a strong element of what can only be called the religious.
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> (Small 1987: 191)

It is impossible to date the origin of the blues with any precision, although its roots in the music which West African slaves would have brought with them to the Americas have always been assumed. There are accounts of calls and field hollers back into the nineteenth century. Working individually in the fields in comparative quiet, such calls had practical use (to ease the drudgery of repetitive actions, or to call instructions to animals) but they would also sometimes become communal expressions, as when one field hand picked up the call from another, and so on. These workers were politically segregated. The hopes which had arisen in the wake of the 1875 Civil Rights Act, which gave blacks equal treatment in terms of access to accommodation, places of entertainment, and public transport, were dashed on its repeal in 1883. Segregation became more rigidly enforced to the extent that in 1896 the U.S. Supreme Court validated new segregationist laws (the "Jim Crow" system) enacted in southern legislatures (and which received national government sanction in 1913). These were extreme. The economic depression of the 1880s and 1890s hit African Americans hardest, as they were increasingly barred from any form of economic competition with whites. And, as the blues became identified as a recognizable genre (singers like the stylistically eclectic Henry Thomas and Charley Patton, born in the 1870s and 1880s, are usually cited as among the first "blues" singers), someone like Patton was treated as racially "black" even though he had long, wavy hair and a comparatively light skin. The repertoire of most of these singers extended far wider than just the blues – folksongs, dances, worksongs, even minstrel songs on occasion. The term "blues," however, has attained such currency that it has come to symbolize the entire repertoire.[1]

Many of these early singers were travelers. A disproportionate number were blind or otherwise disabled (music being one of the few sources of income for such individuals), carrying their songs from community to community by railroad, by steamboats, by wagon and even by foot. As travelers, it was vital that their means of earning were portable – hence the widespread adoption of the guitar as an accompanying instrument.

(The guitar had played a role in both nascent jazz bands, for example that of Buddy Bolden in the late 1890s, and the early string bands.) Blues thus settled down in the years prior to their first recordings as an acoustic form, in which the singer accompanies him- (or less often her-) self on the guitar, particularly for various social events (dances, picnics etc.). This form has been identified by various names: country blues or rural blues (recognizing its original location) or downhome blues (a term more favored by players themselves). Geographical location is also important: there are recognizable stylistic differences between singers emanating from Texas, from Mississippi, from Alabama or from Georgia.

These differences became first consolidated, then subsequently abandoned in the steady pattern of northward migration which began in the failure of the post-war Reconstruction. It gradually increased in speed during the latter part of the nineteenth century, reaching a first peak in the years immediately before the First World War. Migrants from Mississippi, for example, tended to gravitate towards Chicago, at least in part (it must be assumed) in response to calls from militant black organizations in the North, some of whom even offered free transport. There were mixed motives at work here. Southern states clearly did not value black labor, so they were encouraged to demonstrate a responsibility to their families and their community to move northwards; the Depression made lives as southern land-workers even more difficult; the resentment felt by southerners at this desertion merely compounded matters. Leaving the South, however, created two new sets of problems and at least one opportunity. By the early part of the twentieth century, the migration had gathered such pace as to create ghettoes in northern cities, generally in the most run-down districts which were already inhabited by European immigrants, and from which new rounds of racial disharmony arose. In the North, however, a black middle class had developed into professions such as teaching and into small business ownership. Conflicts then arose between northerners' aspirations into white culture, and the more overtly distinct, black culture, being brought in from the South. In spite of these difficulties, the launch in 1910 of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples, an interracial organization, began to make strides in pushing for equality of treatment, even if that was not to have any real impact in the field of music for some time.[2]

The northward migration, however, did. In centers like Chicago and Kansas, both jazz bands and the (now-primitive) technology of the electric guitar could be found. Steel guitar strings had replaced the more traditional nylon at the turn of the century, in the desire for a louder sound, and early electric guitars were experimented with in the 1920s, but it was not until the late 1930s that an amplified open-body model was commercially

viable (the solid-body instrument we all know arrived in 1952). Among the earliest blues exponents were Bill Broonzy, who did so much to popularize the blues in Europe in the 1950s, and Muddy Waters. Not only did these instruments provide a louder sound, to enable the instrument to compete on equal terms with trumpets and saxophones, but they were able to produce a harmonically richer sound, whose "dirty" timbres were seized on by players like Waters, in expressing a continuity with the rural inheritance but in updated form. Thus the "urban" blues which was to form the backbone of "rhythm'n'blues" (r&b) and subsequently "rock'n'roll," and which depended not only on the electric guitar and the (microphonically) amplified voice, but particularly the saxophone prominent in the midwestern jazz and jump bands. And indeed, the reality the urban blues dealt with also demonstrated a continuity: a new wave of migration began with the Second World War and the need for workers in the armament factories of the industrialized North, while overcrowding within the ghettoes (Harlem in particular) grew exponentially. It was only after 1950 that middle-class black aspirations began to be achieved, and as the Civil Rights movement gained momentum through the 1950s, and as accommodation to the status quo became more widely replaced by a discourse of struggle, the blues faded from black awareness, as embodying a message which was out of tune with the times.

Although this line of development of the blues appears to have some historical priority, the first recorded presence of the blues was as a very different genre. In a society as deeply divided as that of the U.S.A. at the turn of the century, to be a black woman was to suffer a double oppression, from which the world of entertainment offered one of the few avenues of escape. This opportunity may seem paradoxical until we recall, as Charles Keil (1966) observed, that while black men were seen to pose a threat to white women, black women presented a sexual appeal to white men. This presence also received support from the suffragette movement – both women's enfranchisement and the first classic blues recording date from 1920. As a genre, the sound was also very different. Rather than the itinerant soloist, we have polished performers (for whom dress was quite clearly a matter of some import) accompanied by small jazz bands, with a far more subtle individualization of expression than found among country bluesmen. Crucial to the development here was the blues which pianists played; and which developed from ragtime into barrelhouse and boogie-woogie. The piano was a far more respectable instrument than the guitar. It had already figured in the growth of ragtime, the first black style to acquire some sort of legitimacy (identified as it was by means of its composers), and featured in the first published blues, which dates to 1908. Whereas the guitar was suited to performance outdoors, in the street, the piano was both a less public

instrument (indoor performance enabled control over those who would hear it) and a more public instrument (the large numbers of people invited to rent parties, for example, were there partly because of the presence of the piano player). With the Depression and the rise of talking films, live performance was hit, and the classic blues effectively died, although the combination of jazz instruments and blues vocal returned, as we have seen, in aspects of the urban blues.

Compared to the blues, gospel has both a longer and a shorter history. Longer, in that its roots can be more easily observed, because committed to paper, in the music used by the earliest European settlers. Shorter, because the term itself is of recent origin. The earliest sacred songs were a form of security, a basis for trust among those carving out a new existence in a foreign land. The continuity involved here was less with the culture they had left behind, than with the faith they had taken with them. Thus the earliest publications (such as the *Bay Psalm Book*) demonstrated subtle, but nonetheless real, differences from the development such music had undergone particularly in England. Evangelization among blacks was slow – an ideology of equality sat uneasily alongside a culture which could not operate without slave labor. Nonetheless, by the early nineteenth century, black congregations could be found, some of whom expressed their faith musically in an amalgam of both European and African practices. These were most visible in the revival movement in the South, in which spirituals as we know them arose. The communality inherent in these is, on the surface, distinct from the individuality that would subsequently come to be a feature of blues performance – rather than express the response of an individual to his or her circumstances as we find in a solo guitar blues, spirituals express a communal response, frequently using biblical texts which would have been common currency. It is better, however, to regard the same as being true of the blues – although the manner of performance may be more individual, the texts are again frequently common currency, as they migrate from performance to performance. What is notably missing from both these genres, is the striving for an originality of expression, identifying the singer as an individual distinct from the community.

Spirituals remained the means of sacred expression right into the twentieth century, even if the label sometimes changed ("gospel hymns" and "holy roller hymns" are perhaps the most notable). Authors, too, had greater visibility – maybe the clearest secular equivalent to revivalist songwriter and singer Ira Sankey would have been ragtime composer Scott Joplin, rather than any particular blues singer of a similar period. Black churches also grew, in which spirituals would form the musical fare. And, the split which existed in secular culture – between middle-class and working blacks, between North and South, between white and black – was to a certain extent

played out in the sacred realm too. Prior to the Civil War, blacks and whites would often worship in the same congregation, albeit segregated within the building. Subsequently, however, the increasing racial separation forced many black congregations solely into their own communities. The Baptist and Holiness churches were only perhaps the most visible groupings. This music was, however, made available and acceptable to white audiences (as had minstrel songs before them), through traveling groups such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers. This process of making acceptable, however, entailed a simplification and standardization (and notation) of the rich (and not notatable) performance practices associated with the repertoire. Such standardization and other forms of crossover were to continue throughout the following century.

The key issue which both these genres faced as we enter the era of recordings is that of commodification. As early as 1909, it became possible to assert ownership of songs through copyright legislation, and immediately the hitherto dominant position whereby it had been the performer, and the performance, which carried identity, was challenged. Ownership in this way is a very Europeanized practice – in order to create something to be copyrighted, there is an assumption that it carries originality, that it marks out the autonomy of its creator. Assertion of ownership is necessary in order to sell the song, in order to make financial gain (or at least recompense) out of the processes needed to record it and which, until very recently, were beyond the means and the techniques of most working musicians. However, within African American culture, that is (or, at least, was) a markedly unsympathetic approach. I shall refer below to the practice which has become known as "signifyin(g)" – suffice it to say here that, singing as they have done of acknowledged shared experience, by means of shared texts, the identification of ownership of such a text is a deeply problematic concept.

So, although the term "gospel" may only have come into common usage since the 1940s, gospel scholarship has a much longer history. Before the end of the nineteenth century, gospel biographies could be found, while noted hymn-writer Ira Sankey's *My Life and the Story of the Gospel Hymns* appeared in 1906. Anthony Heilbut's *The Gospel Sound*, an early history (written as gospel was becoming subsumed within popular culture and dedicated to "all the gospel singers who didn't sell out"), finds the origins of gospel songs in the eighteenth-century hymns of writers like John Wesley and Isaac Watts, as we have seen, indeed finding in one of the latter the mood which makes it an ancestor of the blues too (Heilbut 1971: 21). It is only recently, however, that a commonsense history (of which Broughton's is only one of the more recent, if more widely read, examples) has begun to be questioned. For example, Michael Harris' recent study of Thomas A. Dorsey reconceptualized the origin of what we now know as gospel, seeing it

as the interaction of old-line, protestant religion, and blues practices. Prior to Dorsey's work, gospel had been sung from notation. He inserted into such performing manners of, essentially, improvisation, which led to the rise of Mahalia Jackson, Sallie Martin and others as song-leaders. His crucial song "Take my hand, precious Lord," served to unify what were becoming disparate traditions within different sects. The continuity between the old spirituals and the new gospel is defined by Harris in terms of their both being strategies of coping within oppressive societies, a strategy which equally underpins the blues.

The first thoroughgoing histories of the blues were written by British authors. This concentration on a marginalized U.S. form by Britons is a feature not only of commentators but of players too, as this book's final chapter will observe. For many, the dominant figure in blues scholarship has been Paul Oliver. His *Story of the Blues* (1969), while historical in outlook, emphasized the importance of both lyrics and geography to an understanding of the genre, wherein different regions had their own traditions, while blues musicians were apt to wander. As I have suggested, these routes of migration remain important. The other early history, that of Giles Oakley, began life as a series of B.B.C. documentaries broadcast in 1976. Like Oliver, the approach is chronological and lyric-based, but pays less attention to geography and, in a sense, adds little new. This strand of writing remains important: Francis Davis' *History of the Blues* develops from a series of U.S.T.V. documentaries much as Oakley's had and, while new sources are used and the history is brought up to date, the format does not permit much penetration of problematic issues. Lyrics were also an early focus of study: for example, Harry Oster printed lyrics to 221 songs collected between 1959 and 1961 (with little concern for how they were sung) and arranged them according to eighteen distinct themes (cotton farming, gambling, drinking, traveling etc.). He suggested they have significance "as a reflection of folk attitudes and their functions as self-expression, catharsis of emotional disturbance, social protest, identification with society, and accompaniment to sensuous dancing . . ." (1969: 61), but his preference for this form (collected largely from prisoners in gaol) over what he calls "city blues" is very clear.

Oster also claimed that respondents distinguished clearly between singing blues and spirituals (1969: 4). Although he claimed they felt that one couldn't live in both worlds, this does not diminish the observation that both blues and spirituals represented strategies of coping. This claim also runs against the contemporary observation of John Storm Roberts (1972: 173–4) that the division was never clear cut. Even some of the earliest singers (Charley Patton, Son House, Skip James) provide sufficient examples of this, although singers did sometimes adopt pseudonyms, possibly to acknowledge audience unease with singers crossing such a boundary of taste. Indeed,

it is with a difference of taste, rather than a difference of function, that the boundary lies.

It was with two 1960s studies, those of Charles Keil and Amiri Baraka, that our understanding of how the blues functioned socially came of age. Keil's *Urban Blues*, which originally came out in 1966, demonstrates concern not just with the forms he observed, but with the people he was writing about. A key feature of Keil's critique was his elucidation of the "moldy fig" mentality of the majority of those writing at the time (1991: 34–5).[3] Although he acknowledges that their documentation was invaluable, he laments the lack of concern they showed with current (commercialized) music. The difficulty he highlights is a perennial problem. For example, in Samuel Charters' early study of the country blues, he explores a music which fascinates him, from the position of an outsider looking in.[4] This position is always in tension with the insider's account, in the problems of potential misrepresentation it raises, but these are ultimately the same problems encountered in any reductive account. In a telling phrase, Keil downplays the importance of "originality":

> The blues artist, in telling his story, crystallizes and synthesizes not only his own experience but the experiences of his listeners. It is the intensity and conviction with which the story is spelled out, the fragments of experience pieced together, rather than the story itself which makes one bluesman better than another. (1991: 161)

We might rephrase this, in saying that it is not the "what" that counts, but the "how," noting that this represents a clear difference from most of what passes for the study of music. Keil's work was crucial for the thinking of Christopher Small, whose *Music of the Common Tongue* developed a legitimatization of black U.S. forms at the expense of the European classical tradition – the two are contrasted both musically and socially and the latter found wanting. Michael Haralambos' earlier sociological study (*Right On!*) was not guilty of the focus on "old music" which so angered Keil, but was focused on moving forward historically. Haralambos argued that, from the late 1960s onward, the acceptance by black Americans of the "accommodatory" message of the blues had been replaced by an acceptance of the message proclaimed by soul: that society should and must be changed for the better, and that they could actually be agents for such change. Albert Murray's *Stomping the Blues* also had a forward-looking focus: it was unusual at the time in that, while it made reference to country blues artists, Murray was concerned with the transformation of classic blues through aspects of jazz and the r&b represented by Joe Turner and Louis Jordan, into the basis of popular music, which explains why he is more interested in matters of performance than in, for example, lyrics. None of this, of course, is to say that

the blues hasn't remained popular both in the U.S.A. and elsewhere. One of the most recent large annual European blues festivals took place in Utrecht in 1999, still drawing large crowds keen to see rare U.S. visitors – on that occasion including Johnny Jones, Tomcat Courtney, Wolfman Washington etc. Indeed, there are dozens of annual festivals worldwide, celebrating a style which has remained static for some time. Whether the recent stylistic experiments of someone like R. L. Burnside will result in a new lease of stylistic life remains to be seen.

Amiri Baraka's *Blues People* (originally published in 1963) was the first unambiguous attempt to place the blues within the cultural experience of blacks in the U.S.A. That it should have taken so long is a clear comment on its "low" status as music, on the minimal value placed on understanding the culture, and indeed on the lack of interest in understanding how music functions socially in general. Baraka saw the emergence of the blues as marking the transition from the African as transient to the African as American. He emphasizes the necessary separation of the genre while it nonetheless operates within a larger culture: "Rhythm & blues . . . was performed almost exclusively for, and had to satisfy, a [1940s] Negro audience" (1995: 169) when measured against the co-option of swing. His general thesis is clearly stated at the end of the book: he sees the

> continuous re-emergence of strong Negro influences to revitalize American popular music . . . [but] what usually happened . . . [was that] finally too much exposure to the debilitating qualities of popular expression tended to lessen the emotional validity of the Afro-American forms; then more or less violent reactions to this overexposure altered their overall shape. (1995: 220)

Nelson George's more recent epitaph is in this tradition. Defining r&b both musically and sociologically (and, for the former, seeing it as identical to rock'n'roll and as the progenitor of "soul, funk, disco, rap, and other offspring . . ." [1988: xii]), he argues that the drive for racial integration and cultural assimilation, effected largely through the intentional search for crossovers, has resulted in atrophy for the form (an atrophy partially reversed by the rise of rap and the recovery of a rootedness of the music in everyday experience in the 1980s). Blame is largely laid at the door of the major labels who moved in on the music from the late 1960s on.

This range of writings testifies to the recognition of the crucial role of the music's originators. What, though, of the music they originated? Jeff Todd Titon's *Early Downhome Blues* was the first influential study of the musical facets of the genre, although, as an ethnomusicologist, Titon treats them firmly within the context of the culture from which they arise. He notably attacked the simple concept of the "blue third" as a harmonic

construct, arguing that the scale degrees are far more fluid than in other Western musics. This study also makes use of lyric analysis, finding a range of formulae (there because the blues are frequently invented on the spot) which parallel the formulaic nature of the melodies. The crucial concept here is that of "song families" whereby bits of material (lines of lyric, melodic shapes) migrate from one song to another, within family lines.[5] This forms an important point of difference between gospel and blues, for Anne Dhu Shapiro (1992) has argued that this aspect is far less important in spirituals than are particular performance practices: call and response, minimal lyrics and the free variation of short melodic phrases. Formally, gospel seems to be less regulated than the apparently ubiquitous "twelve-bar blues."

Histories of music in the U.S.A. have been around for years, but Eileen Southern's attempt to write a history of the music of African Americans was a vital move. Her history is concerned to trace all forms of music-making and, although her focus is clearly on the legitimation of the music (blues is treated as a precursor of jazz, for instance, while r&b and gospel are passed over very swiftly), an argument now clearly dated, the willingness to be comprehensive is notable. This is also the case with two other studies appearing at around the same time. Harold Courlander's *Negro Folk Music U.S.A.* places both blues, and what he declares singers term "Anthems," in the wider, explicit, context of worksongs, singing games, dances and the like. With primary concentration on texts, there is again a lack of interest in commercialized forms. The context for John Storm Roberts' *Black Music of Two Worlds* is what are now known as "African retentions" throughout the Americas, an aspect that has become of increasing importance. For Roberts, it is the general qualities of performance practice which he finds clearly originating in the West African Savannah. For Samuel Floyd, it is specific techniques of call and response.

In adopting this focus, Floyd's *The Power of Black Music* utilizes a specific theoretical model, that of "Signifyin(g),"[6] and the way it is manifested in music, through historicized adaptations of the "ring shout" realized as call-response textures:

> A twelve-bar blues in which a two-measure instrumental "response" answers a two-measure vocal "call" is a classic example of Signifyin(g). Here, the instrument performs a kind of sonic mimicry that creates the illusion of speech or narrative conversation. When performers of gospel music, for example, begin a new phrase while the other musicians are only completing the first, they may be Signifyin(g) on what is occurring and on what is to come, through implication and anticipation . . . it is sheer, wilful play – a dynamic interplay of music and aesthetic power, the power to control and manipulate the musical circumstance.
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> (Floyd 1995: 96)