Introduction

A full-featured, curly haired colored woman from Cincinnati, Ohio, in her thirtieth year stood before the horn of the recording machine in the New York Studios of the Okeh Record Company. At the signal of the recording engineer, the group of five musicians beside her, with their instruments pointed down the bells of similar horns, commenced to play an introduction, and then, in a clear voice, pitched a shade too high for comfort, she began to sing:

1 I'm worried in my mind, I'm worried all the time,
My friend he told me to-day, that he was going away to stay,
Now I love him deep down in my heart,
But the best of friends must part . . .

Perry Bradford, the composer of her song, stood near. It was he who had secured this recording date for February 14, 1920, when Sophie Tucker had been unable to record. Neither the occasion nor the recording seemed unduly auspicious, but the sale of the first disc to be made by a colored singer, *That Thing Called Love*, backed by *You Can't Keep A Good Man Down*, sung by Mamie Smith, "contralto, with Rega Orchestra" on Okeh 4113 was sufficiently great to secure for the singer a second date on August 10 the same year. This time she cut Bradford's *Crazy Blues* with its choruses based on a twelve-bar structure, the first vocal recording to employ a blues form. For months the disc sold some 7,500 copies a week, revealing the existence of a market that the record companies were not slow to exploit. In Alberta Hunter's words, Mamie Smith had "made it possible for all of us."

If Mamie Smith had never entered a recording studio, if the blues had never been recorded in any form, it would have thrived as a folk music. Mamie's songs were on the very fringe of the blues, half-Vaudeville performances which marked a late stage in the development of the blues from a simple folk music to a form of sophisticated entertainment. When the first "Race records" – those made specifically for black consumption –

were issued, the blues had a history of some thirty years and attempts to commit the music to musical notation had been made a decade before. But though the advent of recording was not necessary to the life of the blues, it did mark an important stage in its history for two reasons. In the first place Blacks throughout the United States were now able to hear the voices of blues singers who were not in their immediate field of acquaintance, and in the second place the blues as largely improvised folk music, that often depended on the inspiration of the moment, could now be preserved in permanent form.

Undoubtedly the issue of the records in itself moulded taste, stimulated attempts to sing in similar vein, and in turn increased the demand. But the remarkable sale of the first blues recordings indicated that the demand already existed and that the black populace was anxious to obtain its own music on wax. Examining the situation in the middle twenties, when the recording of black artists was still young, the sociologists Odum and Johnson assessed the combined annual sale of records made by and for Blacks at a figure between five and six million copies. At this time examples of folk blues musicians had scarcely appeared for, contrary to the process of development of the blues, it was the more sophisticated and more easily accessible forms that were first put on disc. As the record companies broadened their activities they found a similar demand in southern country districts and commenced to record rural singers, first bringing them north to the studios, then taking mobile vans to record them nearer home.

By the end of the twenties Vaudeville and tent-show singers, circus artists and barnstormers, medicine-show entertainers and wandering troubadours, street beggars and field hands, folk minstrels with guitars and gin-mill musicians at upright pianos, singers with boogie-woogie pianists, vocalists with washboard, jug and jazz bands were to be heard on record all singing and playing some form of the blues, and outside the phonograph stores Blacks would form in line, anxious to obtain the latest blues discs fresh from the presses. Saloon bars, barber shop parlours, drug stores, cigar stands, and black business establishments of every description sold the records and the companies were advertising for more representatives. Discs could be bought from vendors who sold them from the trunks of automobiles, or through mail-order catalogs of big shipping firms, and Blacks throughout the northern and southern states ground them to grey inaudibility on old Victrolas, heavy-armed table machines and hand-cranked portables. This was their music, the blues of their own race, and families that could ill afford to do so, bought their phonographs and surrendered their seventy-five cents

a time for the records. Country "dog-trot" cabins and "shot-gun" houses, edge-of-town taverns and waterfront barrelhouses, red light honky-tonks and hole-in-the-wall cribs, music shops and street corner intersections, crowded tenements and apartment houses alike echoed to the rocking, moaning, hollering, singing of the blues throughout the black world of the United States.

Wider acceptance of the blues came much later and such recognition as it enjoyed was, and for the most part still is, limited to the synthetic "blue" compositions of the Broadway show and the commercial confections of 52nd Street that purported to be blues by the inclusion of the word in the titles. But apart from the blues specialist and the occasional folklorist, interest in authentic blues was confined for many years to the enthusiasts of jazz. In the public mind the imprecise use of the term, not only in the field of popular music but also in dictionary definition, sowed seeds of perplexity as to the nature of the blues. But within the music itself there is room for confusion, for it does not conform to a simple definition. Were the blues a simple folk music local to one area, native to a small social group and tied to a firm tradition of standardized form and instrumentation, as is the case with many forms of folk music in various parts of the world, the identification and appreciation of its peculiar properties would present no undue difficulty. But the blues was sung and played in districts that are literally thousands of miles apart where widely differing social, economic, physical, and climatic conditions prevailed: its distribution might be compared with a purely hypothetical folk music that flourished at once in Copenhagen and in Rome, in London and in Cairo though bonded by language and national unity. It was a music that was common to persons living under the most primitive rural circumstances and in the high pressure of modern city life. It was not the creation of a distinct troubadour group but was as common to the farmer as to the factory worker, to the hobo as to the union entertainer, to the lover as to the murderer. It had an ancestry that extended back into the nineteenth century and, some would contend, into the slavery period (though there is no evidence to support the contention). It continued to thrive during the migratory movements and social advancement of millions of people.

In form the blues eventually determined its unique twelve-bar, three-line pattern, but innumerable variants exist in stanzas of eight, ten, fourteen, sixteen bars amongst many others, while the instrumental and vocal improvisation which is a feature of the blues has proved an effective barrier against standardization. Blues vocals have been sung to the accompaniment

of axes and hammers, home-made instruments, guitars and harmonicas, mandolins and banjos, pianos and organs, trumpets, clarinets and saxophones; to the small folk bands and improvising 'traditional'-styled jazz bands, large jazz orchestras, rhythm and blues combinations – and to no accompaniment at all.

Blues singers ranged in style and delivery from those whose voices were coarsely incomprehensible to those who sang in soft, burred, if not dulcet tones; unlike the flamenco singers with whom they are so often loosely compared they varied from the taut to the supremely relaxed, the negligent to the precise. Some murmured, some moaned, some hollered, some declaimed. Some there were who half-spoke their words; others would shout and cry. There were blues singers with deep, rich voices, with guttural, throaty voices; and others whose voices were high-pitched and shrill. And in the field of jazz there have been the purely non-vocal forms of the blues where the means of vocal expression have been transmuted into instrumental terms; where the jazz musician plays the blues. If there is one simple common denominator in all these aspects of the music it is that the blues is a folk form of expression that is by superficial appearances the product of a racial group: the African American in the United States. However, African origins have been so reduced through intermarriage and miscegenation during the centuries that it is doubtful if pure African blood can be found to any great extent in the United States. Cultural features inherited from Africa have been so modified and altered during that passage of time, ousted by compulsory, and later voluntary, absorption of a new culture, that their retentions are conjectural. Yet the apparent fact remains that only the American Black whether purple-black or so light-skinned as to be indistinguishable from his sun-tanned white neighbor, can sing the blues. If there is a conclusion to be drawn from this it is that the blues has grown with the development of black society on American soil; that it has evolved from the peculiar dilemma of a particular group, isolated by skin pigmentation or that of its ancestors, which was required to conform to a society and yet refused its full integration within it. This enforced partial isolation produced, in spite of black desires to be accepted on wholly equal terms within the social pattern of American life, a certain cultural separation which bore fruit in, amongst other things, the blues.

With some speculation on the origins of the blues, which are admittedly obscure, it has been possible to trace its process of evolution and change in a sequence which becomes progressively more clear after the turn of the century. Buried deep in the fertile ground of Revival hymns, spirituals,

minstrel songs, banjo and guitar rags, mountain "ballits", folk ballads, work songs and field hollers lie the roots of the blues which began to take form at some indeterminate time in the late nineteenth century. Above all the meandering, interminable hollers, improvised by the field hands of a thousand southern plantations influenced the growth of this extempore song. They were sung by men at work but the blues evolved as a song primarily created by men at leisure, with the time and opportunity to play an instrumental accompaniment to their verses. With fiddle, banjo and most of all, guitar, they were able to add a second, answering voice which amplified the meaning of their own song. In accepting certain restrictions that an instrument imposed they fell back on the simple three-chord harmony – tonic, subdominant, and dominant of the hymnals and ballads. But the shadings, the bendings and the flattenings of notes which had so delighted the field-hand were preserved in the vocal delivery and found instrumental expression in the employment of flatted thirds, dominant seventh chords, and whining notes achieved by sliding the strings, and the use of other unorthodox guitar and piano techniques.

From such beginnings evolved the folk blues, which originally had eight- and sixteen-bar forms related to the spirituals and ballads, but ever more frequently took shape in a pattern of twelve-bar stanzas of three lines each, wherein the first line was repeated, giving the singer an opportunity to extemporize if he so wished, a third, rhyming line. With vocal lines of approximately two bars each the singer was able to play instrumental "breaks" between them that added greatly to the meaning and beauty of his creations. These folk blues of the rural South, strong, untutored but rich in textural variety, moving in expression and frequently accomplished, if unorthodox in their instrumental accompaniments, are often termed the "Country Blues," or the "Southern Blues," though in the different styles recognizable in the work of singers from the Carolinas, from Mississippi, from Georgia, or from Texas they merit more detailed identification.

Sometimes, the early rural blues singers were supported by other instrumentalists, playing stringed instruments in "juke bands" or the home-made instruments of the "jug band" and the "washboard band." These were popular in rural districts of the South but found ready support in the streets of Memphis or New Orleans in which latter city the similar "spasm bands" had more than a little influence on the development of jazz. In the cities and towns – Dallas, Birmingham, Atlanta – folk blues guitarists also worked, begging in the streets or playing in the saloons where "barrelhouse" pianists copied their rhythms and pounded out their versions of the blues. Some

singers worked in the medicine shows and the touring carnivals, finding an audience for their blues in the "tank towns" and villages that they visited. In these shows the Vaudeville singers and tent-show burlesque entertainers met the blues singers and absorbed the elements of their folk music. Bringing to it the professional qualities of deliberate artistry they laid the foundations of the "Classic Blues" which bridged the gap between the folk blues and the world of entertainment. Whilst the classic blues singers, of whom the majority were women, brought the blues to the minstrel shows and the black theaters, the "City Blues" singers of the urban centers developed their harder, tougher forms which reflected the different character of their environment. Some were a shade slicker, yet a trifle less relaxed than the country singers and their somewhat more facile playing and singing was "dressed up" through their contact with a more sophisticated world.

From the honky-tonks of New Orleans came the "black butt" pianists who played powerful, aggressive blues in the tough dives of the "wide open" city and the oil towns. The lumber-camps and levee-camps of Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas yielded the so-called "Fast Western" pianists who sang as they played, in imitation of the southern guitarists, rolling eight-to-the-bar rhythms in the bass, and improvised endless blues variations in the treble. As "boogie woogie," their music found a home in the Chicago of the twenties. During the years of the great black migration they and the country singers who risked the unknown life of the urban North, brought their blues styles to Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and New York where the classic blues singers joined forces with those of the New Orleans and mid-western jazz musicians who had also migrated. While the clubs, theaters, and dance halls rang to the blues of the classic singers, the tenements and speakeasies gave a home to the city blues and the rapidly urbanized country blues of the southern-born Blacks.

The years of the Depression did not kill the blues; rather, they gave good reason for singing them. In the South, where conditions scarcely could have been worse, the blues did not change greatly in character; the guitarists still made the strings cry with knife blades and bottle-necks on their fingers as they moaned the blues. But in the North, blues guitarists and pianists combined during the thirties to produce, as conditions improved, the brash, exciting "Urban Blues" of Harlem and Chicago's South Side. Boogie piano, guitar, bass and drums in support of the singer made a frequent combination, often augmented by harmonica and on occasion by saxophone or clarinet. By now the Classic Blues had virtually died: linked with the traditions of Vaudeville and New Orleans-style jazz, it passed with

them. Those elements that survived did so in the sophisticated forms of the blues which reached the night clubs and cabarets of Harlem or which were sung by the blues-jazz singers who worked in front of the large orchestras of the late thirties. But the strongly manned, blues-based bands that emanated from Kansas City with their riffing brass and "powerhouse" rhythm sections produced full-throated, deep-lunged "blues shouters" who declaimed their blues above the compelling music. Though World War II put a temporary stop to recording, it did not stop the blues, and when peace came the jumping, small group music of the urban blues groups and the driving, swinging jazz of the big combinations were wedded in the development of "Rhythm and Blues." In the "R. & B. bands," as they were soon to be known, the guitars, basses, even the harmonicas were electrified or amplified, and the post-war spirit was reflected in the optimistic and aggressive music which supported the strong-voiced blues shouters. Boogie pianos and guitars, honking tenors and heavily accented off-beat drumming characterized the post-war music of the city blues, and even in the southern towns and the newly rapidly growing black communities on the West Coast the same music could be heard. But with the popularity of R. & B. on the radio networks came a demand for the southern country blues – now played on electric guitars.

Such might be a summary of the development of the blues to 1960, with all the faults and inaccuracies that so brief a history must inevitably include. Blues, it must be emphasized, is a very individualistic form of music and the arbitary classification of so personal an art must necessarily force singers into categories which do not adequately represent their particular merits, but rather tend to minimize them in the process of fitting them into a general pattern of conformity. But, just as the folk singer is influenced by his environment, and his work is very largely a reflection of it, so too is he a part of his own tradition, and in being so, bears certain elements of similarity with others working in the same idiom. Loose classifications can therefore be made which can justifiably distinguish the country blues singer from Texas or Georgia from the Chicago R. & B. singer or the Kansas City blues shouter. Through the work of them all ran certain qualities of expression that characterized the blues as no other music, though the degree of blues quality tended to diminish as the music inclined to more sophisticated artistry on the one hand, or to the narrative ballad, rag, or other form of black folk song on the other. For this reason the examples quoted in the present work are drawn primarily from the country and urban folk blues. Likewise, as this is not intended to be an historical analysis, few examples

have been taken from the work of big band or rhythm and blues singers and jazz-blues vocalists. The omission of many great names is therefore in no way an indication of personal prejudice, nor the inclusion of others an indication of preference. The examples that are quoted are taken from gramophone recordings, for these are the only means whereby most of us can obtain any impression of the work of all but a few blues singers. Without the phonograph record the singing of scores of blues artists of the twenties and thirties would be unknown to us today and it is fortunate that the recording of the blues, if it did commence somewhat late, at least came within the lifetime of what may well have been the first generation of true blues singers.

To what extent the blues examples that are to be heard on record give a truly accurate picture of the whole field of the music is a matter of conjecture. In the almost total absence of any contemporary research in written or noted form let alone on record, the extent to which records illustrate the forms of the music that were prevalent in the first decades of the century cannot be ascertained. That there have been forms of the blues scarcely represented on record or entirely absent, and that some may still exist, seems likely enough, and the dangers of dependence on phonograph recordings are readily apparent. It seems almost indisputable that the field hollers had a major formative influence on the blues, but no examples were to be heard on record during the twenties, and until the late thirties none was committed to wax for public release, and then by the Library of Congress. Certain forms of primitive unaccompanied blues have been recorded only in the post-war years for specialist collections and even these may have undergone a process of change, for the work of singers who have been consistently recorded over a period of perhaps thirty years often shows changes that reflect the altering circumstances of their environment. Similarly, the considerations that determined if a singer ever appeared on disc are innumerable: whether he was in the vicinity when the recording engineers arrived; whether he was interested in being recorded, or like Sonny Boy Williamson No. 2 (Alec Miller), jealous of his material; whether his work appealed to the session supervisors; whether his name reached the talent scouts; whether he had sufficient personal drive to present himself; whether he kept the recording date; and so on. Again, the material that appears on wax, though in the case of the blues remarkably broad in scope and more uncompromising than in almost any other branch of song, still depended to a certain extent upon its possible appeal, and on its acceptability to the recording company.

It is evident that any examination of the blues on record must be made

with the foregoing considerations borne in mind. Nevertheless, the gramophone record still remains the basis for any discussion upon the subject, for it is the only means whereby all who are interested can consider the merits of an identical example of the blues. Above all other forms of music, folk song is to be heard rather than read. It scarcely exists in a true sense in written musical notation though folk songs have been noted and adapted by musicians and collectors frequently enough. There are no fundamental standards in the manner of delivery, for this is essentially personal to the folk singer himself who is in no way striving after technical perfection and purity of tone. And of all folk song forms the blues may well be said to be the one which most requires to be heard.

Fortunately, its representation on phonograph recordings is truly remarkable and exceeds that of any other type of folk music. Though some singers are known by a single 78 r.p.m. recording – some in fact by reputation only – the examples of blues by Big Bill Broonzy, Lonnie Johnson, Bumble Bee Slim, and Leroy Carr, to take but four great and admittedly well-featured singers, exceed a thousand titles. The factors that decide why a great singer should only appear for a single recording session may well be bound up in the circumstances of his private affairs and his personality, but there are literally thousands of blues by other singers which merit examination. In view of the abundance of recordings, the paucity of published works on the subject of the blues before the late 1950s is surprising. It is probably true to say that in proportion to the numbers of examples available to the public no folk music has been so neglected and so little documented. If it is true that the blues is to be heard and not written, it is also equally true that the blues eminently deserves to be written about. Though it was fashionable in jazz circles in the 1950s to decry any suggestion that the blues had "significance" under the curious pretext that such a suggestion destroys the spirit of the music, the fact remains that the blues *is* socially significant. Failure to appreciate what the blues is about, failure to comprehend the implications of its content, is failure to appreciate the blues as a whole.

Not that the blues has been entirely neglected: it is customary to include in any anthology of American folk song a selection of blues verses. But the blues has not the traditional sequences of stanzas of the narrative ballad, and seldom chronicles an historical event exterior to the experience of the singer. Consequently, blues verses plucked out of context and entered unexplained in such an anthology have a certain appeal as emotive fragments, but as a whole seem strangely bleak. Only in the histories of jazz does the blues receive closer examination. It is an undeniable fact that, complex though the

beginnings of jazz undoubtedly were, in the assimilation of the influences of the marching parade music, of ragtime, the spasm bands, and the popular music of the turn of the century, in its final emergence as a coherent art form the blues played a major part.

Because of the dependence of jazz upon blues – the acceptance of the fact that the blues has proved to be a basic element in every aspect of the music, traditional, mainstream, and modern (to use the current nomenclature) as no other single feature has proved to be – instrumental blues has been studied in some detail. Through the blues have been traced the links of jazz music with earlier black musical traditions of the spirituals, the work songs, and the hollers, and the history of the music itself has received diverse and at times contradictory attention. Nevertheless these studies were clearly made from the standpoint of the jazz enthusiast, historian, and critic. The influence of the blues on jazz was a musical one, eventually to be developed in a purely musical non-vocal form of expression. Though a jazz band sometimes accompanied the blues singer it could just as well play the blues without the singer's presence and in the course of time the importance of the singer became less as the jazz musicians used the blues form instrumentally. Perhaps naturally, if not wholly justifiably, such analyses, though making some incursions into the content of the blues, are primarily concerned with its musical elements and the relationship of the vocal blues to instrumental jazz.

For the majority of collectors the appeal of listening to blues records lay mainly in the appeal of their musical qualities, often quite apart from the meaning of the blues verses themselves. But the music is the vehicle of expression; blues singers did not sing needlessly and song is the medium by which they expressed what they intended to say. To appreciate the music without appreciating the content is to do an injustice to the blues singers and to fail to comprehend the full value of their work. In view of their peculiar social status and the complexities of the racial relations in the United States the world of the blues singers was circumscribed. Their blues had meaning for them and they had ideas to express; it is impossible either to enjoy or to understand the blues to the full through its musical qualities alone.

One may wonder why there was such a market for the blues when the records of Mamie Smith first appeared on the stands. Why did the blues recordings sell in such numbers for so many years? What was it that attracted the purchasers of the blues discs and caused them to spend hard-earned money on the blues as they would on no other art form? It was not for the music alone. It was because the music had meaning not only for the singer but for every African American who listened. In the blues were reflected the