

**How Britain Got the Blues:
The Transmission and Reception
of American Blues Style
in the United Kingdom**

Roberta Freund Schwartz

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AMERICAN BLUES STYLE
IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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ASHGATE

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General Editor's Preface

The upheaval that occurred in musicology during the last two decades of the twentieth century has created a new urgency for the study of popular music alongside the development of new critical and theoretical models. A relativistic outlook has replaced the universal perspective of modernism (the international ambitions of the 12-note style); the grand narrative of the evolution and dissolution of tonality has been challenged, and emphasis has shifted to cultural context, reception and subject position. Together, these have conspired to eat away at the status of canonical composers and categories of high and low in music. A need has arisen, also, to recognize and address the emergence of crossovers, mixed and new genres, to engage in debates concerning the vexed problem of what constitutes authenticity in music and to offer a critique of musical practice as the product of free, individual expression.

Popular musicology is now a vital and exciting area of scholarship, and the *Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series* aims to present the best research in the field. Authors will be concerned with locating musical practices, values and meanings in cultural context, and may draw upon methodologies and theories developed in cultural studies, semiotics, poststructuralism, psychology and sociology. The series will focus on popular musics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is designed to embrace the world's popular musics from Acid Jazz to Zydeco, whether high tech or low tech, commercial or non-commercial, contemporary or traditional.

Derek B. Scott
Chair of Music
University of Leeds

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Preface

It's sometimes a little embarrassing to admit, especially to my professional colleagues, but my love affair with the blues began with Led Zeppelin. I read everything I could find on the band and their influences and was particularly intrigued by blues artists they referenced: Bukka White, Howlin' Wolf, Robert Johnson, and Elmore James. I was a devoted enough fan to seek out information about these unknown musicians and purchase their records. I was drawn first to the Chicago blues, and through explorations of its foundations, to the rest of the genre.

I am not the only person to have discovered the blues through British bands of the 1960s and 1970s. Bruce Springsteen found Muddy Waters through the music of the Yardbirds and the Animals. Robert Cray first learned the blues from the records of Eric Clapton, Cream and Jimi Hendrix. Rock journalist Peter Guralnick found himself drawn to the music of the Rolling Stones, at first because they seemed to have same musical tastes that he did, and they also introduced him to music he had previously ignored. "Whatever else they have been," he has said, "The Stones have always proved the best advertisement for American black music outside of the music itself the Stones, from the first, have paid their respects."¹ Like many of their countrymen, the band had a deep love for the blues, which generated a market and fan base for the music that that was wider and more diversified than ever before.

It has always seemed to me ironic that the blues found new audiences in the United States, and recharged rock and roll, after young singers and guitar players from across the Atlantic focused attention on the genre. Though the American folk revival of the early 1960s also embraced the blues, the British invasion bands, through their advocacy, had a far greater impact. The Beatles berated reporters for not knowing who Muddy Waters was. The Rolling Stones refused to appear on the American pop program *Shindig!* unless Howlin' Wolf was invited as well, and the image of Britain's second most popular import sitting at the feet of an obscure black musician had a powerful affect on both African American and white viewers. Other groups recorded with Chicago blues icons and asked personal favorites to appear with them in concert, thus forcing public acknowledgement and recognition of their contributions to the American musical landscape.

¹ Ray Varner, "Robert Cray, Part Two," *Living Blues* 74 (1987): 19–20; Peter Guralnick, *Feel Like Going Home* (London, 1978), p. 14.

The championing of the blues by young British musicians is all the more remarkable when one considers that only a small number of Americans outside of the African American community knew much about the blues. How, then, did young Britons discover the genre? During the late 1950s rhythm and blues artists enjoyed wider access to the mainstream media; though ultimately short lived, it was enough to ensure that their records reached Europe, and a handful of expatriates could explain the transcontinental transmission of the Chicago blues. But what about the recordings of an artist like Robert Johnson? How did the records of Blind Boy Fuller, Lonnie Johnson, and Memphis Minnie, sold primarily in the American South or in “race” centers like Chicago, Gary, St. Louis, and Memphis, find their way to teenagers across the Atlantic?

The seminal importance of Britain in the blues revival of the 1960s, when the blues was embraced by “a large and appreciative white audience,” has been acknowledged since the publication of Bob Groom’s 1971 monograph *The Blues Revival*.² Most discussions of British rock and roll in the 1960s recognize the enormous impact of American blues artists, the widespread popularity of “rhythm and blues” bands and the influence these groups had on American rock and roll during the British invasion. Often missing from these discussions is how and when the blues arrived in Britain, how the music was received, and how, by 1963, it had filtered down to a small but significant segment of the 16–25 age group. Those sources that do engage in some discussion of transmission disagree on how it took place and lack supporting details, such as where records were bought and sold and how blues knowledge diffused through the country without radio play, mainstream media attention or BBC sanction.

The British blues revival raises a number of other issues that have never been fully explored. Why did the blues appeal to British audiences and at a time when interest in the genre was declining in the African American community? What was the reception of the blues by various musical constituencies? Issues hotly debated today, such as assimilation, appropriation, and authenticity, were discussed in Britain’s mainstream musical publications as a music known only by the jazz elite was embraced by a fringe of the Trad jazz and skiffle movements, and ultimately by the rock and roll underground. Lastly, how did these factions “get” the blues, and what impact did the genre have on native musical styles? I have attempted to address all of these issues to present a detailed portrait of the “blues diaspora” in Britain.

Earlier studies have made this task much easier. Bob Groom’s seminal study explores aspects of the 1960s revival in the United States and Britain and broadly outlines the parameters of white interest in the genre. *Blues: The British Connection* by Bob Brunning, an original member of Fleetwood Mac, provides an insider’s description of the British blues scene of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Martin Celmins’s outstanding introduction to the more recent *Blues-Rock Explosion* is

² Bob Groom, *The Blues Revival* (London, 1971), p. 6.

perhaps the best encapsulated study of the interplay between the blues and British rock; it touches on virtually all of its major aspects in a mere nineteen pages. Another fine overview is the essay "Blue-Eyed Blues: The Impact of Blues on European Popular Culture" by Paul Oliver. Each has been instrumental in shaping the current study, and these authors have my greatest thanks.

All of the aforementioned writers are British, and all but Celmins were direct participants in the blues revival. I, on the other hand, am an American born in 1968, after most of the events in this book transpired. Why, then, should I engage this material? As a beneficiary of the revival, I believe that a fresh look at the ways in which African American popular music was transmitted and received outside of the United States might help to explain the incredible impact of the blues on the popular musical language after 1963. Moreover, new methodologies, which place new importance on social meaning, economics, and reception theory, permit a more culturally rooted evaluation of blues-influenced music.

Modern scholarship has also highlighted the crucial role of recordings within the study of popular music. Nearly all Britons first encountered the blues on records, and musicians who took up the music learned both techniques and repertoire from discs. Diaspora studies have determined that the conditions of the dissemination of musical knowledge largely determine which elements of music migrate to a new cultural milieu; certainly, reliance on recordings had an impact on British ideas about the meaning and value of the blues, as well as their artistic interpretations of African American music.

Which artists and songs were available to the average listener at any given time has had an enormous effect on British tastes and perspectives. Jed Rasula has noted that determining the impact of recordings can be difficult, as "recordings circulate non-sequentially, privately, and defy reliable documentation of their consumption."³ However, until the mid-1960s a relatively limited number of blues recordings were widely available in Britain; by tracking the dates of blues releases and determining the availability of foreign records through specialist dealers it is possible to roughly map which artists and styles were accessible within a given time frame, and to analyze their influence on British musicians. Additionally, a number of British blues fans have, in the course of their recollections in interviews, writings, or web postings, discussed when and how they encountered certain significant artists and even specific recordings.

Though chronological narratives are currently passé, after much deliberation I decided it was best format for this study. The reception of the blues by British audiences was largely developmental in nature; certain artists, events and recordings created a wider audience for the music, which stimulated more blues releases and tours by American musicians. This process might be regarded as

³ Jed Rasula, "The media of memory: the seductive menace of records in jazz history," in Krin Gabbard (ed.), *Jazz Among the Discourses*, ed. Krin Gabbard (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 143.

evolutionary, but I hope that the reader will not extend this implication to the music or any artists discussed herein.

Likewise, I have chosen to employ a great many direct quotes, as I feel they best convey the tenor and tone of period debates and scholarship. In the early days of blues scholarship passions ran high, and commentary was often quite contentious and polarized. I ask the reader to consider all quotations in context. While some strongly held positions ultimately turned out to be incorrect, it is surprising how much of the historiography has been validated by further research, particularly given the scant resources available. Many of the quotations employ terminology that was commonly accepted in its day; thus, African American artists are described as “Negro” and “colored,” and “black,” or “Negro music” is invoked as a monolithic concept. The last is now widely acknowledged as a fictional construct; Philip Tagg, Portia Maultsby, and others have clearly articulated the fallacies involved in viewing “European” and “black” music as diametrically opposed systems.⁴ However, the dichotomy was embraced by most writers on African American musical styles until quite recently, and it served as a convenient frame for articulating concepts of difference and musical fusion that were accepted by both white and black audiences.

As many British writers viewed the blues as a sub-segment of jazz—unlike the American binarism that places jazz and blues at opposite ends of a spectrum of artistic legitimacy—it is necessary to include a brief survey of the country’s jazz culture prior to World War II and Britain’s early encounters with African American music. The perception of jazz as an essentially white, dance-based idiom established a series of enduring expectations about black music. Additionally, the British jazz scene provided the climate in which the blues revival would germinate and later emerge.

Roberta Freund Schwartz
July, 2006

⁴ Philip Tagg, “Open Letter: ‘Black Music,’ ‘Afro-American Music,’ and ‘European music,’” *Popular Music* 8/3 (1989): 28–98, provides an excellent critique.

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I am especially indebted to the many “veterans” of the British blues revival who were willing to share their memories and offer suggestions. I would like to specifically thank Jen Wilson, director of the Women’s Jazz Archive in Swansea, who offered not only the use of her collection but also her hospitality, and emphasized the importance of the blues to British women, a nuance I nearly overlooked. The participants in the seminar “Overseas Blues: European Perspectives on Black Music,” held at the University of Gloucestershire in July 2004, provided some much needed encouragement at a crucial juncture in this study. I feel very fortunate to have had the assistance of John Cowley, Bob Groom, and Paul Oliver, who corresponded with me and answered queries about British record labels, payroll taxes, and other issues that were unclear. Thank you all so much!

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Chapter One

Jazz Reception in Britain: Misunderstandings and Recordings in Exile

Until the late nineteenth century the British regarded American music as more or less the poorer cousin of its own esteemed traditions. This began to change in 1873, when the touring Fisk Jubilee Singers brought spirituals to the country. Such was the impact of this wholly new and fresh music that the ensemble was soon celebrated throughout Britain. They regularly performed to full houses, and a souvenir book about the Singers and their repertoire sold out printing after printing. Their impact was particularly profound in Wales and Northern England; these marginalized and industrial populations felt the spirituals performed by the Fisk troupe were relevant to their lives as well. Black minstrel troupes touring in Europe in the latter part of the decade also found receptive and eager audiences in these areas, as well as in the larger urban areas of the south.¹

The British taste for black music spread in the 1880s when American minstrel shows became a staple of London's theatre district, supplementing the standard music hall offerings of Picadilly Circus. For some time blackface minstrelsy enjoyed great popularity. Audiences from all parts of Britain seemed to find the range of emotional expression exhibited by "coon singers" refreshing in comparison to typical Victorian restraint, and the portrayals of "darky" buffoons and swindlers who were nonetheless content with their lot were probably reassuring validations of the benevolent paternalism of the empire.² A number of African American minstrel troupes, escaping the turbulent collapse of Reconstruction and the subsequent imposition of "Jim Crow" legislation in the south, toured extensively in Europe; their programs made "genuine nigger song and dance"—coon songs, sand dancing, and the cakewalk with instrumental ragtime accompaniment—popular attractions in the towns and villages of England, Scotland and Wales.

¹ Jeff Green, "Spirituals to (Nearly) Swing" and Jen Wilson, "Black Soul, Welsh Hwyl" (papers presented at the conference "Overseas Blues: European Perspectives on African American Music," University of Gloucestershire, 23–26 July 2004).

² Edward S. Walker "The Spread of Ragtime in England," *Storyville* 88 (April–May 1980): 124–5.

British dance bands recorded ragtime numbers as early as 1898, the first year phonographs and cylinders were commercially available in the country, and each of the three major record labels—Columbia, Edison, and Gramophone Ltd—released “coon songs” in limited numbers. The mainly working class audiences who had encountered African American entertainers in the music halls or whites in blackface performing similar material had developed an affinity for syncopated music, and the records sold fairly well. However, it was not until 1912, when a convergence between popular Tin Pan Alley “ragtime” songs from the States and a hit review called “Hullo, Rag-time” created a surge of publicity, that ragtime songs achieved broad national popularity. Small bands playing instrumental ragtime—syncopated music for dancing—were common, particularly in the years immediately following World War I. In the first known British study of jazz R. W. S. Mendl theorized that ragtime provided demobilized soldiers an escape from the horrors of the trenches; “they needed a powerful stimulant, and the strong rhythms and the bright colors of the syncopated dance orchestra gave it to them...”³ By this time earlier associations of ragtime with African American traditions, whether real or fictitious, had evaporated, and the term was applied to any syncopated music.

By 1918 Britons were beginning to hear about “jass,” a new type of music gaining popularity in the United States. Notices in the musical press provided a fairly accurate description of a jazz band as a clarinet, a cornet, a trombone, a “snappy” drummer, and a ragtime piano player with an added banjo and string bass, but they didn’t explain what this “jazz” was. Several dance instructors in London began offering classes in the “the jazz,” the latest novelty dance craze from New York City. Irene Castle, the arbiter of popular dance in the United States, happened to be visiting London at the time and quickly set the record straight for the readers of *Dance Monthly*. She explained that there was no such dance; rather, jazz was what “nigger bands at home” did to a tune, “that is to say, they slur the notes, they syncopate, and each instrument puts in a lot of little fancy bits of its own...I have not come across a ‘jazz’ band in England, and I doubt there is one.”

Even though no jazz recordings were available in Britain a number of syncopated dance bands felt fully capable of slurring notes, putting in fancy bits, and adding novelty gags, and they began billing themselves as jazz bands. While following Mrs. Castle’s instructions to the letter and capitalizing successfully on the buzz surrounding the new American craze it probably didn’t sound much like jazz. “There was about as much Negro colouring in their music,” David Boulton recalls, “as there is Turkish colouring in Mozart’s *Seraglio* choruses”⁴

The first jazz band to tour in Britain, and thus the first heard by most Britons, was the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. The novel appearance of an “authentic” American jazz band in the country generated a good deal of attention in the press,

³ R. W. S. Mendl, *The Appeal of Jazz* (London, 1927), p. 89.

⁴ David Boulton, *Jazz in Britain* (London, 1958), pp. 34–5.

particularly as the merits and flaws of the genre had already been extensively debated among musical authorities; all seemed to have an opinion, even though none had actually heard any jazz. The Original Dixieland Jazz Band did not win most of them over. A typical reaction appeared in *The Performer*: “the best qualification for a jazzist is to have no knowledge of music and no musical ability beyond that of making noises either on piano, or clarinet, or cornet or trap drum, which, I believe, are the proper constituents of a jazz orchestra.”⁵

What is more, according to David Boulton the reaction of Britain’s musical intelligentsia to what they *thought* to be jazz was at its height when the Original Dixieland Jazz Band arrived, and many critics used the concert to verify their previously entrenched positions on the subject. Though initially met with mixed reactions—they were fired after their first show at the London Hippodrome—the band enjoyed a successful and extended residence at the luxurious Palais de Danse in Hammersmith. They soon garnered a steady following of musicians and fans who realized that this music was somehow different than the music that native organizations were calling “jazz.”

Other American bands, attentive to the commercial success of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, soon began arriving in Britain. Most appeared only in London, playing extended engagements of a month or two in well-appointed clubs or dance halls, though occasionally a band would perform in Birmingham, Liverpool, or Manchester. Some were unknowns, like the Southern Rag-A-Jazz Band and the Original Capitol Orchestra; others, like the Mound City Blues Blowers, might have been familiar to a handful of jazz record collectors. Many of the American imports were syncopated dance bands, such as Will Marion Cook’s Southern Syncopated Orchestra, which included a very young Sidney Bechet. British dance organizations, forever attentive to new trends, began to emulate the style of their foreign counterparts and re-christened themselves with Americanized names, such as the Manhattan Jazz Band and the Wild West Jazz Band.⁶

However, resistance to jazz remained in some quarters. The musical establishment objected on purely musical grounds. A critique in *The Times* that labeled jazz “one of the many American peculiarities that threaten to make life a nightmare” continued, “the object of a jazz band, apparently, is to provide as much noise as possible; the method of doing so is immaterial and if music happens to be the result occasionally so much the better”⁷ Similar items appeared in the mainstream press, condemning both the noisiness of the genre and the lack of traditional musicianship among the performers. However, some detractors may

⁵ Jim Godbolt, *A History of Jazz in Britain, 1919–1950* (London, 1984), p. 8.

⁶ Phil Bennett, “Jazz in Great Britain, part I: 1919–1929,” *Jazz Times* (April 1969), n.p.; Catherine Parsonage, “Responses to Early Jazz in Britain” (paper presented at the conference Overseas Blues: European Perspectives on African American Music, University of Gloucestershire, 23–26 July 2004).

⁷ Godbolt, *Jazz in Britain*, p. 3.

have had other reasons to object; despite assertions to the contrary by members of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, it was widely acknowledged that jazz had been created by black musicians in the American south.

In *The Appeal of Jazz* Mendl suggested that there were a number of people “whose hostile reaction to syncopated dance music is attributed by them to their antipathy towards everything connected with the nigger.” Andrew Blake has also advanced the theory that resistance to American forms was racially motivated, “that these were black or black-derived forms and that black music was dangerous; they would infect the white ‘race’ with its open eroticism and its association with illegal narcotic drugs.”⁸ A letter in the *Daily Mail*, for example, complained of the “jungle music” of “Negro orgies” at the “jazz dances” at the Palais de Danse, and lurid editorial cartoons highlighted the dangers of jazz dancing to the young and naïve.⁹ Such prejudicial reactions to jazz appeared in the British press with surprising frequency. African American musicians were regularly “described as ‘savages’ and ‘Sambos,’ and their music as having a ‘debasing effect’ on ‘the prestige of the white races.’”¹⁰ Mendl himself described the origin of jazz in “primitive, artless stock” with “little nigger bands” who played “weird syncopations” and had “picked up the elements of instrumentation more or less instinctively through contact with western civilization.”¹¹ Jazz was, nonetheless, accepted by a certain segment of the British population, who perhaps received the genre with a mixture of fear, fascination, and envy.

The most reputable and objective British source of information about jazz in the 1920s was *Melody Maker* magazine, which subscribed to the idea that jazz was a white refinement of primitive music played by black musicians in the south. The publication’s first editor, Edgar Jackson, felt that only symphonic jazz like Paul Whiteman’s was worthy of the name. After analyzing some recordings of smaller, front line organizations he declared that these ensembles—particularly those made up of black musicians — were crude, outdated, and inferior. He was one of the numerous critics in both Britain and the United States who believed that while the rhythmic components contributed by “primitive, Negro musicians” were valuable, the true art of jazz was realized only when white composers added more advanced harmonies and orchestration. Speaking for jazz musicians everywhere he vociferously demanded that “the habit of associating *our* music with the primitive

⁸ Andrew Blake, *Land Without Music: Music, Culture, and Society in Twentieth-century Britain* (Manchester, 1997), p. 85.

⁹ Iain Chambers, *Popular Culture: The Metropolitan Experience* (London, 1986), p. 33.

¹⁰ Richard Middleton, “The ‘Problem’ of Popular Music,” in *The Blackwell History of Music in Britain*, vol. 6 (Oxford, 1995), 30, 73.

¹¹ Mendl, *The Appeal of Jazz*, 82.

and barbarous Negro *derivation* shall cease forthwith, in justice to the fact that we have outgrown such comparisons....”¹²

Jackson’s reviews of recordings by African American artists were frequently laced with racial epithets, even when he believed the music to be of some merit. He judged the Fletcher Henderson orchestra “far better than ... the average nigger band” and “Massa” Duke Ellington’s outfit as “a colored unit in which the expected faults of coon bands—a noticeable crudeness and somewhat poor tone—are by no means so apparent as usual.” However, by the early 1930s Jackson had a change of heart. His reviews stopped invoking “childish humor” and “nigger atmosphere” and recognized the merits of many African American jazz artists; ultimately he became one of Ellington’s staunchest champions in the British press. By this time, however, he had firmly established the convention that “Negro bands were either crude or funny, or both, but never of real value”¹³

For the most part British jazz fans had to take his word for it, as most had never heard hot jazz by African American artists—at least not live. After World War I the Gramophone Company began to supplement its popular instructional records by British dance orchestras with imported masters by American bands. Several of the most popular were by the Ambassador Orchestra, under the leadership of a young Paul Whiteman. Visiting artists playing in the syncopated style were also asked to record for HMV; a five-piece contingent from American bandleader Art Hickman’s Orchestra made a number of records for British release. The idea of “jazz orchestras” playing “symphonic syncopation” soon caught on with popular dance bands. As most fledgling fans came to know and enjoy the music in dance halls and ballrooms the jazz orchestras soon dominated live performances in Britain.¹⁴ However, other kinds of jazz were available, albeit sporadically, on record.

Jazz on record, 1917–1933

By the end of World War I there were nearly two hundred British record labels ready to exploit the surging popularity of the gramophone. While most concentrated on native talent a significant number also had leasing arrangements with American companies, and were thus in a position to release jazz records from the United States. Yet foreign jazz issues were not particularly common, and in most cases those discs that were released were not widely advertised. This was not because the British record industry had anything against jazz; it just didn’t know much about the subject.

¹² Godbolt, *Jazz in Britain*, p. 28.

¹³ Boulton, *Jazz in Britain*, pp. 52–6. Interestingly, Jackson also used “blue” and “blueness” as synonyms for “blackness.”

¹⁴ Chambers, *Popular Culture*, p. 136.

Most record executives had no idea which discs were good and which were bad, which might be expected to sell, or which artists were important or popular. Unlike their American counterparts, which either employed black executives to head their “race” divisions or relied upon a network of insiders to suggest artists and material, British administrators were provided with a list of available titles and more or less randomly chose some for release. As a result some relatively minor lights like Tony Parenti are as well represented in early British record catalogues as are Red Nichols, Miff Mole, and Frankie Trumbauer. However, even if one were up on current trends in the United States, the extensive mislabeling of recordings made determining exactly who was playing on any given disc rather difficult.

The Guardsman label had a “race series” that included jazz by groups like the Old Southern Dance Orchestra and the Original Black Band, even though the recordings were often by better known ensembles like the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra and the Mound City Blues Blowers. His Master’s Voice issued the first British records by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band from American masters on the Victor label in November of 1919, during the group’s successful engagement at the Hammersmith Palais; not to be outdone, their rival Columbia recorded the band in London and quickly issued competing discs. Columbia’s subsidiary labels Regal and Parlophone also occasionally issued American jazz records, including selections by the Georgians, the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra with Louis Armstrong, and the Original Memphis Five.¹⁵

Only a handful of jazz records, save for those in the syncopated dance vein, were discussed in the pages of *Melody Maker*, but after a 1927 change in ownership the paper began to review the “hot jazz” issues that were increasingly available in Britain. The white New York-based Red Nicholls-Miff Mole school was most enthusiastically received, but more cosmopolitan African American acts like McKinney’s Cotton Pickers, Fletcher Henderson and his Orchestra, and Clarence Williams also garnered favorable reviews. These records sold well enough to stimulate the release of other styles of jazz, at least on a limited scale. In 1927 Columbia included a selection of “Hot Jazz Records” in its catalogue; among the represented artists were Duke Ellington and his Washingtonians and King Oliver’s Savannah Syncopators. In 1928 their Parlophone label introduced a series called “rhythm–style records,” which were culled from the recently acquired Okeh catalogue. These included sides by Louis Armstrong’s Hot Five (under its own name) and Bennie Moten as well as by the Dorsey Brothers and other white bands, but their advertisements employed an African American caricature that symbolically associated all “rhythm–style” records with Jackson’s “nigger style.” Perhaps for this reason the discs did not sell as well as dance-oriented recordings. Nonetheless, a group of jazz fans devoted to hot jazz began to emerge, and its size

¹⁵ Godbolt, *Jazz in Britain*, pp. 60–3; Peter Martland, *Since Records Began*. EMI: *The First 100 Years* (Portland, 1997), pp. 124–5.

was sufficient to suggest that tours by African American jazz artists might be commercially viable.

Jazz heats up

During the 1920s jazz artists touring in Europe continued to draw large crowds, though New Orleans style jazz and early swing were rarely heard. In fact, proportionately few black American orchestras played in Britain during that decade.¹⁶ Will Marion Cook's Southern Syncopated Orchestra and Will Vodery's Plantation Orchestra enjoyed a certain success in Britain, but their performances were in a semi-symphonic style quite similar to Whiteman's and their repertoire consisted of Tin Pan Alley standards, spirituals, and light classical works. A few musical reviews featuring African American artists, like "Blackbirds of 1926," toured the country, and a band led by Noble Sissle played in London in 1929–30, but these were exceptions. Even though many of these groups included highly proficient musicians who were intimately familiar with New Orleans jazz, their performances seem to have contained few of the qualities British audiences and critics associated with "real" jazz.¹⁷

By the late 1920s a sea change was in the works. The popularity of "symphonic syncopation" was on the wane, as it was increasingly recognized that the music was neither good art music nor particularly good jazz.¹⁸ Though syncopated dance music continued to be popular, more Britons were developing a taste for the more energetic and exciting "hot" jazz. A few native organizations based on the Miff Mole-Red Nichols formula of frenetic tempos, jerky syncopations, and anticipation of the beat emerged; those of Fred Elizade, an American student at Cambridge, and Spike Hughes, an Anglo-Irish musician and critic, produced fairly credible hot dance music. Their popularity with the public lent new prestige to touring American bands that featured hot soloists; for example, while Ted Lewis's posturing and overly-emotional singing were considered positively "corn-fed" by the reviewer for *Rhythm* magazine he showered praise upon soloists George Brunies, Muggsy Spanier, and Jimmy Dorsey, as did many fans throughout the country.

The enthusiasm for hot acts was such that David Boulton considered 1932 the real beginning of the revivalist jazz impulse in Britain. Hot jazz based on the front

¹⁶ In their article "Black Musical Internationalism in England in the 1920s" Howard Rye and Jeffrey Green emphasize that many black musicians of British or African ancestry performed in the country during the 1920s and much of their repertoire was African American music. However, most critics either didn't hear these performances as jazz, or they did not valorize them in the same way as they did African American jazz.

¹⁷ Godbolt, *Jazz in Britain*, pp. 15, 59.

¹⁸ Parsonage, "Responses to Early Jazz."

line-rhythm section model of the small New Orleans and Chicago ensembles but adding a swinging, four-to-the-bar feel “had an ever-increasing number of adherents, and although the vast majority of these never dreamed that any revival in the fortunes of their music could ever come about, there was the occasional odd man out ...who lived for the day when old-time jazz would once again come into its own.”¹⁹ Derrick Turner’s New Dixieland Band, touring Britain in that year, created a sensation. Shortly thereafter *Melody Maker* reported that a miracle had occurred: Louis Armstrong had been granted a visa, and would be appearing at the Palladium in London for an extended run in July.

The Armstrong concerts quickly took on the status of an “event” that received national mainstream press coverage; even the most fervent jazz-haters flocked to his concerts, as did several members of the royal family and fans from as far away as Scotland. Though these appearances may have done little to change anyone’s opinions about the merits of the music as a whole, they did establish quite positively that there was a market for jazz featuring outstanding soloists and bandleaders. Within a year Fats Waller, Coleman Hawkins, Cab Calloway, and Duke Ellington had visited Britain. Promoters slowly began scheduling appearances outside of London; Cab Calloway played a few concerts in Manchester, Leeds, and Glasgow, and Hawkins toured in Manchester, Birmingham, Leicester, Nottingham, and York. By the time of Duke Ellington’s celebrated 1933 tour visiting jazz artists regularly performed in most of the major cities in Britain.

Ellington played to sold-out houses at the London Palladium despite the rather expensive tickets, and throughout Britain he drew crowds that far exceeded the previously estimated number of jazz fans in the country. The tour soon drew not only attention, but also positive reviews from the many in the mainstream musical establishment.

Fans of the hot idiom prophesied a new dawn for British jazz, where regular visits by the American masters of the genre would enrich not only club life, but also stimulate native bands to produce more authentic music. However, this golden age was not to be. In 1935, in order to protect the jobs of dance band members, the British Musicians’ Union banned tours by American jazz musicians.

The dance band section of the Musicians’ Union had been established in 1930 to protect the rights of professional musicians who played for dancing. While largely occupied with the standard matters applying to working musicians—fair compensation for recording sessions, reasonable payment for overtime, safe working conditions, and the like—the Union was also increasingly concerned by the overwhelming popularity of touring American jazz bands. As early as 1926 discussion began about the need to safeguard the jobs of British musicians; since none of the country’s prominent dance bands were offered tours in the United States, each visiting American act was, in essence, depriving a British musician of

¹⁹ Boulton, *Jazz in Britain*, p. 60.

his livelihood. In the early 1930s, when visits by American jazz musicians became more frequent, the debate became more strident, and the pages of *Melody Maker* were filled with letters from “members of the profession” expressing their growing concerns that popular music would surely become the exclusive domain of foreign musicians were something not done. Strictures were soon put into place to bar American artists from recording in the country unless they were regularly employed with a British band. Moreover, the Union also negotiated a series of ‘needle-time’ agreements with the BBC, the country’s only licensed radio station. These agreements limited the amount of recorded material the BBC could play in a week; the theory was that much of the available recorded material was American, and live performances by native artists would protect jobs and preserve British musical traditions. By 1935 the Union had prevailed upon the Ministry of Labor, which ultimately controlled visas for visiting musicians, to require one-for-one reciprocity with American and British jazz bands. Until such time as this occurred, special licenses were required for any visiting American artist, and these “were not given casually.”²⁰ Unfortunately, there was simply no demand for British jazz artists in the United States; even if there had been, the American Federation of Musicians was equally protectionist. The practical effect of the action was a virtual ban on live American jazz.

The ban was enforced for a staggering 22 years, so long that, according to arranger/trombonist John Keating, it seemed a lifetime, and to some it was. The ban was occasionally violated or circumvented, but not very often. Fats Waller appeared briefly as a variety artist, and Coleman Hawkins, Louis Armstrong, and others figured out ways to play a few concerts—Hawkins, for example, was purportedly demonstrating the advantages of Selmer saxophones on his 1939 tour—but until the mid 1950s British aficionados could experience hot jazz by American artists only through recordings.

Rhythm clubs and collective listening

The average British jazz aficionado was only rarely able to hear the American recordings they read about in *Melody Maker*, given the comparatively small number of hot jazz releases every year and the high cost of recordings—the equivalent of several hours’ wages at a time when most working class families were barely able to make ends meet.²¹ However, market forces coincided with public demand for jazz in a serendipitous way. In order to increase their sales City Sale and Exchange, a record shop in Fleet Street, invited all customers who had purchased a record in the previous four weeks to a listening party of the latest jazz

²⁰ Blake, *Land Without Music*, p. 85.

²¹ Eric Hobsbawm has also pointed out that few members of the working class were able to afford consumer durables like gramophones, let alone the discs to play on them.

releases on the first Monday of each month. These were perhaps modeled on the informal record recitals that Dave Toff, the manager of bandleader Billy Cotton, occasionally presented at the Majestic Theatre. At one such listening session Eric Ballard met Bill Elliot, a fellow jazz fan and record collector. "Not unnaturally they got talking about the music they both loved, and one day they realized that all over the country there were others just like them meeting in record shops to talk about the latest hot record." The pair decided to set up similar weekly meetings that might feature older, as well as current, releases and facilitate discussions and exchanges of information about jazz.²²

Their first meeting was advertised through *Melody Maker*: "Hot Rhythm Club. Members wanted. First class hall in Regent Street taken. Accommodation 100." Though only forty-five turned out for the inaugural session on 24 June 1933 the magazine's editors saw the potential for increasing the number of jazz fans and, hence, subscription sales, and quickly threw its support behind the club—soon to be christened the No. 1 Rhythm Club. *Melody Maker* advocated the formation of similar groups throughout the country, publicized meeting times and places free of charge, and devoted a regular column to minutes and special happenings. Within six months the No. 1 club was joined by affiliates in Middlesex, Manchester, York, Birmingham, Bradford, Northampton, Liverpool and the greater London area. *Melody Maker* publicized solicitations for those looking to form rhythm clubs in their area, and in short order there were groups in Salisbury, Ipswich, Glasgow, Coventry, Newcastle, Gloucester, Bridlington (which filled its membership roster in three days), Cardiff, Dundee, Plymouth, Edinburgh, and the Isle of Wight. By the end of 1934 there were over 100 rhythm clubs meeting throughout Britain.

The clubs were local and completely autonomous, and their activities varied widely depending on the resources and interests of its members, who joined for a small monthly fee. In larger areas a club might host jam sessions, as did the No. 1 Club, which concluded every meeting with forty minutes of "informal busking," or it might sponsor a live band for the evening. In rare cases a jazz artist touring in France or Belgium was induced to attend as a "guest speaker;" both Benny Carter and Louis Armstrong occasionally used this method to play small gigs without running afoul of the Musicians' Union. A few clubs, like Manchester No. 3, had "record libraries" or "record services" from which members could borrow discs for a week or a month. Most, however, based their meetings on the recital format. A topic for the day was selected, such as King Oliver, records from Chicago, or the merits of swing vs. New Orleans jazz, and members would bring applicable discs to share with the group; discussion then followed. Serious collectors sometimes offered lecture/recitals on special topics featuring rare or unissued discs from their holdings; meetings like these showcasing "race records" or "blues" might have

²² Bill Elliot, "Rhythm Clubs," *Swing Music* 3 (May 1935): 70; and Godbolt, *Jazz in Britain*, p. 139.

been the first public expositions of African American music other than ragtime and jazz.²³

The rhythm clubs had an enormous impact on the musical landscape in Britain; not only was a broader segment of the population exposed to more varied styles of jazz, but they also created a larger community of fans. Social events like “Rhythm Club cruises,” which were jam sessions held on a “pleasure steamer” that cruised from Richmond to Chertsey in an attempt to capture some of the spirit of riverboat jazz on the Mississippi, gave the members opportunities to interact and discuss music in an informal atmosphere. It also established the “club”—a group of like-minded persons who paid a nominal fee to become part of the collective—as a standard and enduring paradigm for listening to popular music. At least once a week, for a small fee, you could meet others in your area who shared your interest in what was essentially a niche genre. Even if you lived in an isolated area with no club nearby a glance through the “Clubs” column in *Melody Maker* or *Swing Music* could affirm that you were not alone in your musical tastes; what’s more, the explosion of the rhythm club movement must have created the impression that the number of jazz fans was growing daily.

It did not take long to realize that such numbers could be mobilized as a commercial force. In an editorial in *Swing Music*, a journal founded in 1935 as the “Monthly Magazine for Rhythm Clubs,” Bill Elliot suggested that the combined membership of all rhythm clubs demonstrated that there was a significant audience for jazz in Britain. He advocated the formation of a national federation to facilitate program and member exchanges and to establish jazz fans as a collective constituency. Surely such “strength in numbers” could be used to convince the major record companies to increase the number of records by American artists released in Britain, and perhaps secure the re-release of some of the seminal jazz recordings of the previous decade. This was, he related, an achievable goal; the No. 1 Club had already successfully persuaded British Decca, which held licensing rights to the ARC catalogue, to reissue some Red Nichols records, “as well as one or two other discs” on its Brunswick label.²⁴

At that point in time the British recording industry was willing to listen to anyone who claimed to represent a buying public. The combined effects of the Depression and the advent of broadcast radio led to the collapse of the market for records; EMI’s sales plummeted, eventually bottoming out in 1937 at five million units per year, just fifteen percent of their 1929 sales.²⁵ New releases were

²³ Godbolt, *Jazz in Britain*, pp. 139–141. Spike Hughes recalled being so moved by spirituals after the actor Paul Robeson had introduced him to the genre that he took a record to his next rhythm club meeting and insisted on playing both sides of the disc (*Swing Music* 3 (May 1935): 63).

²⁴ Bill Elliot, “Editorial,” *Swing Music* 1 (March 1935): 2.

²⁵ Martland, *Since Records Began*, p. 137. This was analogous to the situation in the United States.

drastically scaled back to curtail costs. Re-releasing material the company already owned to an identified market segment committed to purchasing their product must have seemed a quite agreeable proposition.

As it turned out, these reissues sold well enough to convince Decca of the existence of an untapped market niche; the foundation of the British Rhythm Club Federation in 1935 merely served as additional incentive.²⁶ In 1936, the company released "Classic Swing," a compilation of twenty-eight sides re-issued from the old Gennett catalogue, which it acquired through its purchase of the Edison-Bell label in 1933. The significance to British aficionados of hot jazz is clear from the announcement of the project in *Melody Maker*:

This historic decision means that, at last, the ordinary fan will be able to buy records which are discussed with bated breath at Rhythm club meetings; and which, although only the merest handful of so-called authorities have ever heard them, are rightly regarded as the foundation stones of modern jazz.²⁷

Among these "foundation stones" were recordings by King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band, Bix Beiderbecke and the Wolverines, and the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, bands whose works had not previously been released in Britain. Jim Godbolt credits this series with "planting the seed of interest in New Orleans Jazz, to be the models for many hundreds of young British and European musicians a decade later."

British Decca had also secured the rights to the American Vocalion catalogue when it purchased the Crystalate label in 1936. Later that year some of the material from the Vocalion S series was released in Britain; this included the first recordings of classic blues singers Rosa Henderson and Trixie Smith.²⁸ Occasionally records by female blues singers appeared in Hot Jazz or Rhythm-Style series; the earliest was perhaps Bessie Smith's "Gimme a Pigfoot," which was recorded especially for British release in 1933 and issued on the Parlophone label.

Prior to 1935 jazz on the radio was quite rare and was largely confined to broadcasts of significant jazz "events" like the Armstrong and Ellington concerts; both were broadcast on the London Regional, rather than National, program. During its brief existence the Rhythm Club Federation resolved to pressure the BBC to program more jazz. It might be said that they won their battle, but not quite the war; the BBC did, in short order, import Benny Carter to serve as the arranger for its resident dance orchestra, but it banned "hot music" from the airwaves in

²⁶ The British Rhythm Club Federation was dissolved in January of 1937 after having failed to achieve much of anything save for a head count of its membership. The clubs themselves endured until the early 1950s.

²⁷ "Sensational Record Project," *Melody Maker*, 18 January 1936, 1.

²⁸ Godbolt, *Jazz in Britain*, pp. 129, 145.

1935, perhaps to limit the number of American recordings played. More headway was made by individual members within the BBC. Charles Chilton and his mentor, Leslie Perowne, managed to secure permission to establish transatlantic hookups from jazz clubs in New York for late-night broadcasts, and a series called "Swingtime" aired from 1937–39. The BBC rescinded their "hot" ban in 1940 and introduced "Radio Rhythm Club," a half-hour weekly program of live jazz that would air, with varying titles and bandleaders, well into the 1960s.

The rhythm clubs also created an extremely well educated audience for jazz that took its music quite seriously. In part this was a natural result of the composition of their membership. Rhythm club meetings brought record collectors, critics, musicians, and fans into regular contact in a way that did not happen in the United States. This direct interaction of the *cognoscenti* and the interested neophyte created a situation that could scarcely be anything but educational; collectors were furnished with an audience for their treasured recordings, and critics, for once, had direct access to their reading public.

At the weekly meetings ... one such critic after another would make his stand before the public by putting his favorite records on a big phonograph and expecting their entranced members to nod their heads in unison to the succession of adverbs and adjectives that formed the basis of the commentary.²⁹

The educational aspect of the rhythm clubs was encouraged from the beginning. Bill Elliot devoted space in the first issue of his journal *Hot News and Rhythm Review* to highlight the activities of the Northampton Club, which had devoted a meeting to the program "What is Wrong with English Jazz?" After a comparative record recital, the membership decided that the English musicians played weaker solos. "This," Elliot opined, "is the sort of thing I like to see clubs doing; after all, jazz is a serious thing, and should be studied in the right manner."³⁰

The British did take their jazz quite seriously, and critical listening was considered the only proper way to approach the music. Andrew Loog Oldham, manager of the Rolling Stones, remembers being taught to listen analytically by a jazz-loving neighbor, and skiffle icon Chas McDevitt also recalled that "what one might describe as a jazz fan was more a student of jazz, essentially an enthusiastic listener."³¹ It would be another decade before jazz would be considered mere fun.

²⁹ Ernest Borneman, "The Jazz Cult: Intimate Memoirs of an Acolyte," *Harper's Magazine* (February 1947): 145–6.

³⁰ Bill Elliot, "Rhythm Club News," *Hot News and Rhythm Review* 1/1 (April 1935): 22.

³¹ Andrew Loog Oldham, *Stoned: A Memoir of London in the 1960s*, interviews and research by Simon Dudfield, ed. Ron Ross (NY, 2000), 14; Chas McDevitt, *Skiffle: The Inside Story* (London, 1997), p. 4.

This serious and studious approach to jazz, one that would ultimately be transferred to the blues, may have also been related to the way in which the music was received. Evan Eisenberg points out that serious jazz appreciation was almost impossible without reliance on recordings. Before jazz records were available one had to go to some unsavory locations to hear jazz, and the music was usually heard in a party atmosphere—hardly conducive to serious consideration. “The phonograph and radio allowed us to listen to jazz analytically, and in this ... convinced us that jazz was not just entertainment.”

The ability to play and replay a frozen live performance permitted scrupulously detailed aural analyses of jazz, as well as a sense of deep engagement with the inner coherence and structure that critics like Theodore Adorno and Heinrich Schenker advocated for art music. With recorded jazz the listener could respond with clinical detachment rather than the emotional reaction that might be generated in a live setting. Moreover, the very fact that the music had been committed to acetate seemed to convey a sense of respectability. In the opinion of critic B.H. Haggin, records “makes it possible to hear and discuss’ improvised jazz performances as one does a piece by Haydn or Berlioz.”³²

Visiting jazz artists from the United States quickly noted that the average British fan was far more knowledgeable than his American counterpart. In *Music is My Mistress* Duke Ellington recalled his 1933 visit to Britain. “We were absolutely amazed at how well informed people were in Britain about us and our records. They had magazines and reviews far ahead of what he had here.”³³ Valaida Snow, the “Queen of the Hot Trumpet,” on tour with the Blackbirds Review in 1935, concurred in an interview with *Hot News and Rhythm Review*.

What amazes me most about England is your knowledge and appreciation of our American music. There is a public in the States that understands and appreciates swing music and musicians, but it is a very small public. Over here everybody seems to like it, and I have met dozens of English boys who know more about jazz than the people who play it. And it is all because of gramophone records, they tell me. Now that is another strange thing. Hardly anybody buys records in America, and I expected to find the same thing in England. You can guess how surprised I was to find a great public that knows more about American records and recording artists than we do ourselves. A public that knows all the best musicians by name and that can recognize their styles of playing just from records. I hear you have clubs over here, too, where the fans meet to listen to the latest hot records. If we had something like that in the States it would help jazz tremendously, for the boys are greatly encouraged if they know that anybody is sufficiently interested in their playing to take it as seriously as you do.³⁴

³² Evan Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel: Explorations in Phonography* (NY, 1987), pp. 73, 144.

³³ Edward [Duke] Ellington, *Music is My Mistress* (NY, 1973), p. 84.

³⁴ “Valaida,” *Hot News and Rhythm Review* 1/1 (April 1935): 10.

As recordings were the only way British jazz fans could hear American innovators of the genre, records themselves took on a fundamental importance. In 1947 Ernest Borneman, explained the rhythm club movement to *Harper's Magazine*.

To understand the function of this sort of organization in the life of the average European jazz fan, his utter dependence on the phonograph records will have to be remembered. Cut off from the living music by time as well as space he submits to a peculiar shift of values. The record becomes more important than the music.

Under these conditions someone "who knows his way through a maze of records becomes more important than the musician himself."³⁵ This may explain the laudatory status that collectors and discographers assumed in the jazz (and blues) world of Britain.

In the United States "hot collecting" seems to have started among the college jazz buffs at Princeton and Yale in the very early 1930s and was enjoyed as either a cheap hobby or a hedge against the day that jazz might fall from fashion.³⁶ British collectors, on the other hand, were in many respects the custodians of jazz history. Before the advent of the long-playing record and the market for re-releases created by the New Orleans revival only a small sampling of American jazz was available for general purchase. The devoted few who ordered Vocalions, Okeh's, and Paramounts directly from the U.S. at great cost or combed junk shops looking for recordings cast off by American servicemen and sailors on tramp-steamers were sources of unique knowledge; their prized recordings of early New Orleans outfits, proto-swing and Territory bands, "race" blues, and African American spirituals were often the only copies in the country. Not only did this make the collector a valued asset to any rhythm club, but it also granted him a certain degree of authority in the jazz community. Certainly, critics and discographers depended on their goodwill and generosity, as were those involved in the record business; many jazz re-releases on independent labels were dubbed directly from collector's copies.

Discographers and collectors were often one and the same. As 78 record labels typically provided little or no information about personnel, session dates, or locations, information that was necessary to understand stylistic development and influences, this data had to be established either by ear or through diligent research. The pervasive employment of pseudonyms by British record companies, as well as the nearly exclusive reliance on recordings for the reception of jazz, made their role even more crucial. This perhaps is why discography was initially a European art, even though American researchers had far greater access to the artists or record company files. The importance of records to overseas fans may have contributed to

³⁵ Borneman, "Jazz Cult," p. 145.

³⁶ Stephen W. Smith, "Hot Collecting," in Frederick Ramsey, Jr. and Charles Edward Smith (eds), *Jazzmen*, (NY, 1939), p. 289.

the desire to learn everything possible about the disc and its contents. In fact, the devotion to the minutiae pertaining to recordings might be read as a devotion to the discs themselves, which took on the status of fetish objects in the high church of the jazz diaspora.³⁷

The British dependence on recordings did have negative repercussions as well. Jed Rasula has argued that the limitations of early recording technology present a false picture of jazz in its live context, particularly of the temporal parameters exercised on the music.³⁸ Moreover, the commercial recording industry exerts tremendous influence over which artists and styles are available for public consumption, a fact acknowledged by contemporary commentators.

We, in England, are handicapped in our appreciation of jazz by the fact that we only know records. Often I have an uneasy feeling that our horizons are limited, a feeling that in the sea of talent there must be many fish as good as these that have swum our way but of which we have no knowledge. This of course, is speculation, but it is a certain fact that even on records there are many, many musicians of the first water who are by no means well-known. ...³⁹

Another major problem with reception via recordings was that they detached jazz from its historical position in African American culture. It is perhaps no surprise that several prominent critics and collectors, including Edgar Jackson, Brian Rust, and Ralph Venables, were passionate (and somewhat obstinate) propagandists for the “white origin” theory of jazz; except for a handful of recordings and a few visits in the early 1930s, African American music, musicians, and culture were largely absent from British ideas about the development of jazz after its first decade. However, this was about to change.

³⁷ The concept of the “fetish object” providing identity to minority subcultures is discussed extensively in Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London, 1979).

³⁸ Jed Rasula, “The Media of Memory: The Seductive Menace of Records in Jazz History,” in Krin Gabbard (ed.), *Jazz Among the Discourses* (Durham, 1995): 135.

³⁹ Eric Ballard, “Editorial,” *Hot News and Rhythm Review* 1/6 (September 1935): 20.

Chapter Two

The First Time I Met the Blues: The Blues Arrive in Britain

From 1935 to 1945 live jazz in Britain was dominated by dance bands modeled after successful white American “big bands.” These “sweet” orchestras usually included at least one “hot” soloist—though not always a very proficient one—and were mostly fronted by attractive, white female singers. After 1938 a domestic tradition of big band swing developed, based largely on the Glenn Miller formula of call and response choruses and riff-based arrangements.

The most esteemed outfit was that of Ken “Snakehips” Johnson and his West Indian Dance Band, an all black ensemble composed largely of immigrants from Britain’s African and Caribbean territories. Though Johnson, a dynamic dancer who modeled himself after Cab Calloway, was the titular bandleader, the group was anchored by Leslie Thompson, a British trumpeter with an established reputation as a session player and pit musician. Thompson regularly backed visiting African American artists, as did the Jamaican woodwind specialist Bertie King and guitarist Joe Deniz, a native of Cardiff. Contact with the African American idiom gave the band a “hot” sound, and the flamboyant Johnson kept things swinging for the jivers who flocked to whatever dance venue the group called home. The Johnson outfit was featured on the BBC after successful tours of theatres and clubs throughout Britain and took up residency at the Café de Paris in London. The band was building a reputation as the hottest in the land when tragedy struck; in 1941 a German bomb hit the club, killing Johnson and severely wounding several other musicians.

Surviving members joined other dance bands and arguably improved the overall sound of native jazz.¹ However, outfits like Johnson’s were outnumbered by big bands that played syncopated dance music and “variety ... a blend of light classical, music-hall/musical comedy and American or American-influenced light music, dance music, and the more orchestral (whiter) version of jazz, including by the 1940s rather tame versions of swing.”² This scene coexisted, though not always peacefully, with the “hot” jazz fans of the rhythm club movement. They typically felt that only their music was the “real” jazz, separate from what seemed to them

¹ Andrew Simons, notes to *Black British Swing: The African Diaspora’s Contribution to England’s Own Jazz of the 1930s and 1940s* [Topic TSCD781], 2004.

² Blake, *Land Without Music*, p. 86.

vapid and commercially tainted imitations. Rex Harris's categorization of the entire "big band" era as "American Commercial Exploitation" [sic] and "the meretricious blaze of artificially exploited swing" is typical.³ Many of these fans turned their backs on modern developments altogether and developed an intense interest in the early years of the genre, "a golden age before big bands and riffs and saxophones and commercialism had driven the jazzmen out of the garden."⁴ This launched two separate but related movements in the both the Britain and the United States: attempts to recreate traditional New Orleans jazz and investigation into its origins and history.

In Britain the first began in 1943 with the formation of George Webb's Dixielanders. The group took shape at the jam sessions that traditionally closed meetings of the Bexleyheath and District Rhythm Club at the Red Barn in Barnehurst, Kent; the musicians experimentally injected breaks and collective improvisation into loose arrangements of jazz standards, perhaps inspired by Lu Watter's Yerba Buena Jazz Band in the United States. Within several years the Dixielanders had developed a reasonable facsimile of the classic New Orleans ensemble style, and they were embraced by the hot jazz fans in the greater London area.

Some championed the group for reasons other than their music. To those who objected to the commercial orientation of popular British swing the Dixielanders "represented the clear shining light of purity and conviction ... these Quixotes from Subtopia were tilting their lances against the evils of commercialism."⁵ Left wing ideologues viewed the band as principled, working class musicians trying to revive a dying folk art. The Young Communist League sponsored several Dixielanders's concerts under the auspices of the Challenge Jazz Club and discussed the sociopolitical overtones of their music in the newsletter "The Challenge." The proletarian ideal of "jazz for the masses" attracted still more fans from the political left. It is easy to overstate the political element in revivalist jazz, but in Britain, as in the United States, a certain percentage of adherents supported the movement partially for its rejection of bourgeois convention. Revivalism also promoted the music of an oppressed minority with little access to the mechanisms of capitalism. Some, like Albert McCarthy, Graham Boatfield, and Iain Lang, embraced the blues for the same reasons.

However, many fans of the Dixielanders simply enjoyed hearing live hot jazz. The novelty of their style and the freshness of their sound drew an audience that superseded the membership of a sponsoring rhythm club, and the band began to generate a following throughout Britain. George Melly heard about the band while serving on a British Naval carrier during World War II. "I didn't really believe it was possible to play this music anymore. I imagined the secret had been lost, like

³ Rex Harris, *Jazz*, 5th edn (Harmondsworth, 1957), p. 11.

⁴ George Melly, *Owning Up* (London, 1965), p. 3.

⁵ Godbolt, *Jazz in Britain*, pp. 202–3.

early cubism.”⁶ Eventually, though, other young musicians began to form revivalist bands of their own.

The biggest difference between the Dixielanders and the mainstream of British jazz was that the former looked to the African American originators of jazz for inspiration and guidance rather than the British musicians, both white and black, whose recordings were more readily accessible. The rediscovery and reissue of recordings by New Orleans based groups was largely brought about by the deeply committed and ever expanding circle of collectors. According to Albert McCarthy:

Until this time there had been only a few isolated individuals who took jazz seriously enough to form representative record collections, but now they had reached such a number that they were able to make the companies reissue important sides and even occasionally record a few sessions featuring some of the earlier musicians.⁷

These activities were an expansion of the rhythm club affiliated push for new releases in the 1930s. The difference was not only a larger body of interested collectors but also the more elevated status they enjoyed in the late 1940s. Young and enthusiastic rhythm club participants had, in the intervening years, become critics, publishers and discographers, and thus had more influence with the heads of Britain’s major record labels.

The traditionalist movement inherited the rhythm club’s ethos of regarding jazz as serious music that demanded intense contemplation. Humphrey Lyttelton recalled that the Dixielanders’s gigs at the Red Barn were such studious affairs that “people who jogged about in their chairs too vigorously were discouraged by petulant frowns from their neighbors.”⁸ This changed when Graeme Bell and His Australian Jazz Band visited Britain in 1948. Their repertoire was not substantially different from that of the Dixielanders but dancing was encouraged. The result was a broadening of the revivalist base to include a younger and more diverse audience. By the late 1940s this type of jazz was becoming popular with British youth, particularly those of the lower middle classes and by the 1950s it was the favored music of middle class left wing intellectuals. When interest in the black American music that had given birth to jazz developed, many would also embrace the blues.

⁶ Melly, *Owning Up*, p. 3.

⁷ Albert McCarthy, “The Re-Emergence of Traditional Jazz,” in Nat Hentoff and Albert J. McCarthy (eds), *Jazz: New Perspectives on the History of Jazz by Twelve of the World’s Foremost Jazz Critics and Scholars* (NY, 1961), p. 307.

⁸ Humphrey Lyttelton, *I Play as I Please: The Memoirs of an Old Etonian Trumpeter* (London, 1954), p. 73.

The roots of jazz

Although a handful of recordings were available in the 1930s it wasn't until after the war that serious interest in the blues started to spread. There had been some interest in the genre before, but after it was a different war, the one between the revivalists and the modernists, heated up that the blues began to attract a wider audience.

The factional conflict between the "mouldy fyggies" who believed that New Orleans jazz was the only true jazz and fans of the new bebop style was similar to the one raging in the United States, but in Britain:

the struggle was conducted at an altogether higher pressure. There were few and far between who protested an equal validity for both schools of thought, running the risk of being labeled appeasers, sitters on the fence. And the pages of the jazz magazines were filled with facile "proofs" that one or the other was the only style worth worrying about.⁹

Writers and critics in the traditionalist camp viewed their assault on the legitimacy of bop as an extension of their crusade against swing and dance bands; they considered it emotionally barren and removed from the authentic jazz style.

In January 1948 *Melody Maker* ran a highly critical review of the London jazz scene by Ernest Borneman, a German critic and scholar who had waited out the war in the United States. At the time Borneman resided in England and the publication asked him to provide an outsider's view of native swing. He found little worthy of praise, save for a record recital that preceded one of the concerts. In an article entitled "Where does that smell come from?" he speculated that the Musician's Union policy that banned performances by "American bands in general and the great Negro musicians in particular" was dooming British dance music to sterility. He felt that the only hope for her musicians was a healthy dose of the blues:

If any single factor was responsible for the decline of all those other factors which had once made a powerful force out of the jazz idiom, then that factor was the gradual alienation of the idiom from the one and only source that can ever revitalize it—the flux of native Afro-American folk music.¹⁰

By this date Borneman had completed two unpublished monographs on African American music¹¹ and perhaps knew more about the blues than anyone in Europe.

⁹ Boulton, *Jazz in Britain*, pp. 86–9.

¹⁰ Ernest Borneman, "Where does that smell come from?" *Melody Maker*, 14 February 1948, 4.

¹¹ "A Bibliography of American Negro Music with a short introduction on African Native Music" (1938–40) and "American Negro Music: A Preliminary Inquiry into the

Like most other writers of the time he held an expansive view of the genre. The blues were what Bessie Smith sang but:

there is a wider meaning which embraces several kinds of American Negro song, without regard to their precise musical construction. In this sense, blues must be deemed a song category into which falls the bulk of the popular song of contemporary southern Negroes, and some of their forefather's secular music.¹²

"Blues" was a generic term for any African American music that wasn't a spiritual or jazz and could describe "the whole store of Negro folk musics, from spirituals and folk songs, to hollers, street cries, play party songs, and nursery rhymes."¹³ This inclusive definition was employed in the book *Jazzmen*, the bible of the revivalist movement in both the U.S. and Britain. The chapter on the blues by E. Simms Campbell discussed Tin Pan Alley compositions, classic blues and black folk song; in other parts of the book "blues" was used to describe boogie-woogie, swing and jazz based on the 12-bar form.

The next month the American clarinetist Mezz Mezzrow, whose autobiography *Really the Blues* was making the rounds of the revivalist crowd, asserted that the blues was nothing less than the blueprint for authentic jazz: "Blues are the simplest form of jazz. The blues leave so much room for improvisation and creation that any time you play them you invent a melodic line and new counterpoint. This is the goal of the jazz musician: that kind of playing is the pattern of real jazz."¹⁴

It was generally accepted that the blues was the parent idiom of jazz, whose vestigial remains were the 12-bar chorus, blue notes and classic blues records. An enormously influential pamphlet published during World War II, *The Background of the Blues*, asserted: "the blues is not the whole of jazz, but the whole of the blues is jazz, having no existence apart from this idiom. It forms a bridge between southern folk music—work songs and gospel songs—and the organized harmonic and rhythmic complexities of the improvising band."¹⁵

Origin of Ring Shouts, Spirituals, Work Songs, Blues, Minstrelsy, Ragtime, Jazz, and Swing Music" (1945–46).

¹² Max Jones, "On Blues," in *The PL Yearbook of Jazz*, ed. Albert McCarthy (Bournemouth, 1946), p. 75.

¹³ Borneman, "The Anthropologist Looks at Jazz," *Record Changer* (May 1944): 38–39; Krin Gabbard, "The Jazz Canon and its Consequences," in *Jazz Among the Discourses*, p. 15.

¹⁴ Mezz Mezzrow, "Blues are the pattern for authentic jazz," *Melody Maker*, 27 March 1948, 2.

¹⁵ Iain Lang, *Jazz in Perspective: The Background of the Blues* (London, 1947), p. 102. This volume includes Lang's original essay but focuses on the economic and cultural environment that produced jazz. The original pamphlet was published during or shortly after World War II.

This posited relationship encouraged the consideration of early jazz as a sort of instrumental folk music, one that was “expressively honest and culturally rebellious” and removed from the pressures of the marketplace.¹⁶ Thus, to really understand jazz one had to know something of its roots; anyone calling himself a connoisseur was expected to be familiar with the entire body of African American folk music. In Britain this perspective was not merely endorsed by the jazz press, it was emphatically and enthusiastically promoted.

Spreading the gospel of the blues

While the blues received only minimal attention from the average jazz fan before 1947, examples of the genre had been available for some time. During the 1930s the odd blues record was swept into Britain with the rising tide of jazz releases; most were scooped up by the small group of collectors who actively sought out American “race” recordings. When “Mike”—aka Spike Hughes—reviewed one of Bessie Smith’s earliest British releases for *Melody Maker* he mentioned that the singer was already “known to a few of us in this country from expeditions we sometimes make to Whitechapel to buy Okeh race records.” Though he believed that “most of Bessie’s discs have been a little too strong meat for the somewhat squeamish British public” he proclaimed her “the Queen of the Blues if ever there was one.”¹⁷ Smith’s records were perhaps initially issued (and subsequently purchased) in Britain because she was accompanied by noted jazz musicians, but her rich contralto voice and expressive delivery attracted many devoted followers. Years later George Melly recalled, “At their best the ‘classic’ blues represent that fragile but precious moment in a developing art form when feeling and technique are in perfect accord, and in Bessie Smith the times provided the necessary genius to give this moment concrete expression.” James Asman more emphatically stated, “Learn to enjoy Bessie Smith’s kind of jazz, for it is the only kind there is!”¹⁸ Other classic blues singers inspired less devotion but they nonetheless introduced a number of jazz fans to the blues.

Boogie-woogie records, lingering in an uncertain categorical domain between jazz and the blues—though usually lumped together with Fats Waller and Jelly Roll Morton as “jazz piano”—were favored by younger members of the rhythm

¹⁶ Bernard Gendron, “‘Moldy figs’ and Modernists,” in *Jazz Among the Discourses*, p. 39.

¹⁷ “Mike” [Spike Hughes], review of “I’m Down in the Dumps” b/w “Do Your Duty” by Bessie Smith, *Melody Maker*, 14 April 1934, 7. Levy’s in Whitechapel was a major outlet for imported records.

¹⁸ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, *Ma Rainey and the classic blues singers* (NY, 1971), p. 7; Ron Staley, “Empress of the Blues,” *Jazz Journal* 5/9 (September 1952): 12.

club set.¹⁹ By the postwar period these discs were more readily available than the classic blues and arguably far more potent, based on the number of blues devotees who claim Jimmy Yancy and Little Brother Montgomery were once their favorite artists. There were also a few guitar duets by Eddie Lang and Lonnie Johnson that were wholly anchored in the jazz idiom but strongly influenced by the blues.²⁰

Lastly, there was British Brunswick 3562, a recording so far removed from jazz that no one knew quite what to make of it. According to Paul Oliver, “Drop Down Mama” b/w “Married Woman Blues” by Sleepy John Estes was the subject of intense speculation:

None seemed rarer nor more strange ... the broken voice, the wailing accompaniment ... and the compulsive rhythm which produced vague references to Africa all confounded criticism. The twelve-bar blues had been accepted as a traditional pattern, and the three-line standard verse accepted as the traditional blues stanza. But at the time when Bunk Johnson was talking of playing the “twenty-four bar blues,” here was issued a blues from a decade before which was on a loose twenty-four measure structure and sung in verse and refrain of a quite atypical form.²¹

Female blues singers—especially Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith—had a relatively strong following among jazz collectors but this other kind of blues was “the subject of an esoteric cult, a backwater of interest in ‘pure’ jazz” that was “valued for its ethnicity, its authenticity and its historic importance rather than for its merits as a music.”²² It might have remained the isolated passion of a few interested souls had it not been for a small but growing number of critics, collectors, and discographers who promoted greater knowledge of the blues. All were devoted and vocal champions of African American music whose educational activities initiated the British blues revival.

“Race” music was first disseminated through record recitals, which were still presented by many of the rhythm and hot jazz clubs that met throughout Britain during and after the war. By 1948 Albert McCarthy had established a reputation as a recitalist; it was his presentation of a “fine selection of blues records” to the Hot Club of London that Borneman thought the high point of the New Year’s Swing Scene in 1947. At roughly the same time Paul Oliver began giving lectures on the blues to rhythm clubs, schools, and youth organizations, toting an orange crate

¹⁹ Oliver, “Blue-Eyed Blues: The Impact of Blues on European Popular Culture,” in C. W. E. Bigsby (ed.), *Approaches to Popular Culture* (Bowling Green, 1976), p. 231.

²⁰ Lonnie Johnson and Eddie Lang: *Two Tone Stomp* [R1195] and *Handful of Riffs/Bull Frog Moan* [R1496] were included in the Parlophone “Rhythm Style” catalogue. The flip side of R1195 is a classic blues by Ma Rainey. Its British release date is unknown, though the catalogue numbers suggest 1930 or 1931.

²¹ Paul Oliver, “Crazy Crying Blues: Sleepy John Estes,” in *Blues Off the Record*, p. 224.

²² Oliver, “Blue-Eyed Blues,” p. 230.

filled with rare Paramounts, Okeh's and Victor's. Rex Harris and Max Jones were also popular and respected recitalists.

In 1942 Jones and Albert McCarthy founded *Jazz Music*, one of the first British publications devoted to the promotion of African American music, including but not limited to jazz. The editorials and content focused on the superiority of black musicians and their role in the creation of jazz, black folk styles and the influence of racism and poverty on African American music. The last, an essentially Marxist viewpoint, was common in contemporary folk song scholarship in the United States but represented a radical shift in British jazz writing. This outlook was shaped by the political orientation of its founders; Jones founded the Young Communist League's Challenge Jazz Club and McCarthy was well known as a fellow-traveler. Though inconsistently applied and not always politically motivated, the influence of commercial and social forces framed a great many of their stories on the blues.

Jazz Music was published only irregularly during the war due to paper rationing but it issued a number of pamphlets on jazz-related subjects. Of particular note were *Record Information* by John Rowe—editor of the rival magazine *Jazz Tempo*—and two by Jones and McCarthy: *Piano Jazz* and *A Tribute to Huddie Ledbetter*, their first proselytizing on behalf of an artist who would shortly have an enormous impact on music in Britain.²³

Iain Lang's *The Background of the Blues*, a similar booklet publication, was the first study of the blues as an autonomous genre. He focused primarily on lyrical content and the communal use of folk materials but also analyzed regional approaches to diction and attempted to isolate the genre's defining musical characteristics. Lang made no distinction between different styles of blues and cited hokum vaudeville stars, classic blues singers, big band shouters, country blues players and contemporary bluesmen interchangeably; the potpourri of cited artists—Hamfoot Ham (Joe McCoy), the Red Devil, the Yas Yas Girl, Springback James, Andy Boy, Bumblebee Slim, Honey Dripper [sic] (Roosevelt Sykes), Black Ivory King, Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, Joe Turner, Sleepy John Estes, Jimmy Rogers, Big Bill Broonzy [sic], Clara Smith, and Trixie Smith—reflects the haphazard nature of blues acquisitions in the immediate postwar years.

Another journal that promoted the blues was *Jazz Records*, an organ of the Jazz Appreciation Society founded by James Asman and Bill Kinnell. The anti-authoritarian publication, edited by Graham Boatfield, Kennedy Brown, and Stanley Dance, featured articles on noncommercial jazz and African American folk music and editorialized about the indifference of British record executives. "The amazing attitude of Parlophone and HMV towards their jazz public persists, despite numerous tests. Whoever is responsible for jazz issues owes an explanation to jazz enthusiasts" They also endorsed collective advocacy. "By uniting our

²³ Godbolt, *Jazz in Britain*, p. 162. *Tribute to Huddie Ledbetter* and *The Background of the Blues* were written for the Jazz Appreciation Society.

interests with all sincere jazz groups, we can persuade the BBC, the *Melody Maker*, and the recording companies to the patent fact that a very large number of lovers of good jazz know what they want and intend to get it.”²⁴

In 1946 Sinclair Traill, one of the most outspoken champions of the revivalist movement, launched *Pick-Up*—shortly thereafter renamed *Jazz Journal*—as a locus for serious jazz criticism in Britain. It featured a monthly column called “Preachin’ the Blues” by Derrick Stewart-Baxter, a well-known collector who had served as secretary of the Leamington Spa Rhythm Club in the 1930s. Therein he dispensed information on blues artists and styles, discussed his latest record acquisitions and reviewed any record that could justifiably be categorized as blues. He had an enormous impact on fledgling fans. “For years,” Paul Oliver recalls:

his was the only column on the subject ... and his enthusiasm was projected to a lot of young readers He used to hold court in an upstairs room of a Hove record shop, a gathering place for blues enthusiasts who were prepared to brave the smoke of his pipe to share in the sounds and discussion on jazz and blues.²⁵

In a column from early 1949 Stewart-Baxter wondered why there were not more collectors interested in the blues as “blues shouting goes straight to the basic root of jazz.” For those who regarded the blues as “unmusical” and full of “sentiments that are always the same” he recommended an educational listening program of recordings by Bessie Smith, Leroy Carr, Tommy McClennon, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Big Bill Broonzy, Leadbelly and “the more sophisticated but equally wonderful” Josh White.²⁶

“Preachin’ the Blues” became a haven for British blues fans, where one could find featured profiles of both prominent artists and relatively obscure blues men like Bumblebee Slim and Barbecue Bob and Stewart-Baxter’s “casual ramblings on the blues and its various byways and footpaths.”²⁷ *Jazz Journal* became a major advocate of African American folk music, and throughout the 1960s it devoted substantial coverage to the blues.

Jazz Music, ostensibly a competitor of *Jazz Journal*, endured until 1953 and established high standards of content that separated the specialist publications from the mainstream musical press. Shortly after *Jazz Music* folded McCarthy founded *Jazz Monthly*, “The Magazine of Intelligent Jazz Appreciation.” It consistently made space for articles on blues artists, the meaning and social context of blues lyrics and discussions of style and technique. In fact, so much of the journal was being devoted to blues articles that by 1960 the editor was receiving letters of

²⁴ “Editorial,” *Jazz Records* 3/1 (1950): 4.

²⁵ Paul Oliver, “Moaners and Shouters,” in *Jazz Off the Record*, p. 124.

²⁶ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, “Talkin’ from the Heart,” *Jazz Journal* 2/1 (January 1949): 3.

²⁷ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, “Blues on Record (and other matters),” *Jazz Journal* 7/9 (September 1954): 8.

protest; one groused about the frequency of “ten page day by day life histories of Blind Sammy Peasticks who died of TB in 1897.”²⁸

Though the specialist publications developed a small but loyal following in the late 1940s and early 1950s it was *Melody Maker*, as one of only two national music weeklies, that spread the gospel of the blues beyond the congregation of the faithful. While the paper maintained its devotion to native swing, critics reached out to traditionalists through “Collector’s Corner,” a column launched by Bill Elliot to facilitate the exchange of discographical information among devotees of early jazz. After editorship of the column passed to Max Jones and Rex Harris in 1946 the “Corner” was occasionally devoted to American “race” records, and discographies of blues artists like Barbecue Bob, Charlie Jackson, and Blind Blake were published alongside those of Bunk Johnson, George Lewis and Jelly Roll Morton. These appeared more frequently when Sinclair Traill took over from Harris in 1949.²⁹

From an early date the pair held that any true understanding of jazz entailed accepting other kinds of music as well.

Swing music, Harlem ‘jive,’ ragtime, piano blues, and sundry types of Negro singing find ready acceptance by some among collectors. And often the Negro singing comes near in emotional content to the true jazz that is the collector’s first consideration.³⁰

The authors reviewed blues, folk and gospel records alongside those of revivalist jazz, and they often combined their commentary with biography, stylistic history, and social context; in short, the column served as a tutorial on African American music.

The “Corner” frequently emphasized the idea that the blues, as the foundation for all “real” jazz, was of the utmost relevance to collectors and fans. Max Jones wrote:

To understand the blues is to hold the key to jazz appreciation. Blues is the essence of jazz, and few enthusiasts who listen long and seriously fail to end up blues lovers. Most often jazz interest begins with an instrumental style, then, as taste matures, the vocal and piano blues idioms occupy more and more of the listener’s attention.

He also felt that an interest in the blues was the hallmark of the truly sophisticated listener as it was “the most difficult branch of jazz.”³¹

²⁸ “Letter to the editor,” *Jazz Monthly* 6/7 (September 1960): 2.

²⁹ It is possible to trace the increasing popularity of New Orleans style jazz and blues through the space devoted to the column. In 1946–47 “Collector’s Corner” was a fairly short feature, averaging approximately four column inches. By 1949 the space devoted to the column had nearly doubled, and by 1950 it occupied nearly a full page.

³⁰ Rex Harris and Max Jones, “Collectors’ Corner,” *Melody Maker*, 11 January 1947, 5.

Though not associated with the “Corner” after 1949, Rex Harris continued to promote jazz and blues appreciation through his writings and radio broadcasts. In 1952 he authored a paperback volume for Penguin Books simply entitled *Jazz*. Its stated purpose was to trace the genre’s origins, as “after the long and wearisome years of ‘swing’ which overlaid the traditions of jazz there has arisen a new generation which is anxious to learn of the roots and growth of this fascinating folk music.” *Jazz* was a succinct and articulate statement of the revivalist viewpoint; as such, it devoted significant attention to the musical precursors of jazz, including the blues. The author approached the subject carefully:

There are many hazy ideas about what constitutes a blues number; many people imagine that it is any attendant lyric full of lachrymose bleatings. The public can hardly be blamed for its lack of discrimination, for it has had so many ersatz versions foisted upon it during the past thirty years that it is in the position of a man who, having been condemned to a diet of tinned salmon for many years, views the real thing with suspicion and a certain conservative alarm.

Harris focused primarily on the lyrical content of the blues, though he discussed the harmonic foundations of the 12-bar form and the importance of improvisation. He included no information on the classic blues singers, as “they were influenced by jazz, but they did not influence the course of jazz. Blues singing ran (and runs) a parallel course.”³² The simplicity of this statement belies its significance, for it was an early articulation of an idea that would not take root for several years: the blues was an autonomous musical genre that, despite its relationship to jazz, was not subsumed by it.

The promotion of the blues by traditionalist critics was not entirely dispassionate. Paul Oliver has commented:

there was an evangelical element in my talking about blues, I realize now, an urgent need to get the message across to as many people as I could in as many ways as I could. Like any enthusiast for a subject who feels passionately about it and about its neglect, I wanted the blues to be recognized and enjoyed.³³

There was also hope that as appreciation for the music grew record buyers would demand more blues releases. Immediately after the war it was difficult for most jazz fans to find blues discs even in the record shops that specialized in American imports. “When I first became interested in blues records,” recalled Albert McCarthy, “I used to order them from the U.S.A. without much idea of what I was

³¹ Jones, “Collectors’ Corner,” *Melody Maker*, 13 January 1951, 7; “I am not a Roberts fan,” *Melody Maker*, 16 July 1949, 5.

³² Harris, *Jazz*, introduction, p. 42.

³³ Oliver, “Talking Blues,” in *Blues Off the Record*, p. 208.

likely to get ... the exotic array of names in the current lists meant nothing to me, but I tried to get an example of most of the artists.”³⁴

Importing records from the United States was prohibitively expensive for most aficionados and from 1949–1960 it was technically illegal. Britain amassed significant debt during and immediately after the war; in order to stimulate revenue the value of the pound sterling was devalued to encourage trade. Not surprisingly the countries of the British Empire rushed to convert their currency to American dollars, further depressing the value of the pound and creating a “sterling crisis.” In an attempt to resurrect its value, strengthen domestic industry and protect British governmental reserves of U.S. currency the importation of certain items was strictly limited and most foreign purchases, especially of luxury goods, had to be made in pounds sterling. Given the right contacts and sufficient access to American dollars records could be purchased from the United States, but the additional expense made imports cost prohibitive for all but the very wealthy or very determined. Moreover, infractions were prosecuted, albeit rarely; personal imports were generally overlooked but specialist dealers were occasionally raided and fined.³⁵

The truly devoted prowled junk shops and thrift emporia, looking for the odd blues record that had made its way to Britain. Sometimes V-Discs or AFRS Jubilee records would surface; these were issued by the U.S. Military for the exclusive use of American service personnel, but after the war a fair number made their way into the hands of collectors.³⁶ The series included a sampling, albeit a small one, of black folk music and country blues, including several recordings by Big Bill Broonzy.

Others secured discs from American military personnel; black servicemen, in particular, were often willing to sell blues records to interested collectors or trade them for recordings of local jazz bands. British seamen who regularly visited the States, called “Cunard Yanks” after their Liverpoolian brethren who worked for the Cunard shipping line, were generally quite knowledgeable about black American music and were a reputedly reliable source of blues and R&B records. However, few revivalist fans had the resources, connections or time to devote to serious record collecting. Thus, while they were learning more about the genre and its significant performers, they only heard the music when blues records became commercially available in Britain.

³⁴ Albert McCarthy, review *Leroy Carr* (EP) by Leroy Carr, *Jazz Monthly* 4/12 (February 1959): 22.

³⁵ Paul Oliver and John Cowley, personal correspondence with author, 3 May 2005.

³⁶ The American Federation of Musicians allowed its members to donate their services under the condition that the records never be commercially traded.

Blues on the Record

Collective attempts to pressure the major record companies into releasing or re-releasing significant recordings date back to the Federation of Rhythm Clubs in the 1930s; it did not take long for the revivalists and blues aficionados to mobilize in the same way. The earliest of these organizations seems to have been James Asman and Bill Kinnell's Jazz Appreciation Society, which cultivated a relationship with British Brunswick artist and repertoire man Harry Sarton. The JAS soon joined forces with the British Hot Jazz Society, founded in 1945 by Max Jones, Albert McCarthy, Stanley Dance, Eric Tonks and Jeff Aldam. Both organizations were dissatisfied by the releases suggested by similar groups, and they encouraged Brunswick to release boogie-woogie and barrelhouse piano discs, as well as contemporary blues by Bea Booze, Peetie Wheatstraw and the Harlem Hamfats, available through their American subsidiary. Many of these sides were issued in the late 1940s and early 1950s; they included the first British recordings by Trixie Smith, Coot Grant, Socks Wilson, Frankie Half-Pint Jaxon and Sleepy John Estes.

The most successful postwar campaign was led by the National Federation of Jazz Organizations (NFJO), formed under the sponsorship of *Melody Maker* in June 1948 "to protect and further jazz interests in Britain." In truth the NFJO did not represent any actual organizations, but its officers, including Rex Harris, Max Jones and Sinclair Traill, collectively served as the "spokesman of organized jazz opinion (read Trad jazz) in this country."³⁷ In March 1949 they secured a promise from the major record labels in Britain to make every effort to reissue items for which there was a demand; Jones and Traill made sure that some of the requested records were by blues artists. These discs were advertised as "recommended by the National Federation of Jazz Organizations," which naturally insured significant coverage of their release in those publications edited by its officers. For example, the release of Bessie Smith's "Empty Bed Blues" by Columbia Records in January 1951 received nearly a page of related coverage in *Melody Maker*, including a testimonial establishing its importance: "To listen to a good record—and this is a very good one—by Bessie Smith is the finest training I know to help you really hear those things that are the important things to hear in jazz and the blues."³⁸

The two major British record companies to have survived the 1930s, EMI—a conglomeration of English Columbia, HMV, and Parlophone—and Decca, were accommodating, perhaps sensing the emerging niche market for blues records. They also had sufficient repertoire at their disposal. Columbia had sold its American division, along with its control of the Okeh label, in 1931 but retained licensing rights to the material. EMI maintained a longstanding agreement with

³⁷ "NFJO Clinches Big Record Release Tie Up," *Melody Maker*, 5 March 1949, 1.

³⁸ Max Jones, review of "Bessie Smith: Empty Bed Blues," *Melody Maker*, 20 January 1951, 9.

RCA Victor and acquired the British rights to catalogues of small and moderately sized American companies, including MGM, ABC Paramount, Capitol and Mercury. Despite lobbying efforts EMI released only a handful of blues recordings prior to 1955, mostly on their Columbia, Parlophone and Mercury imprints.

Decca issued far more blues material, which appeared primarily on its London Jazz label. The imprint was established in 1947 for its releases in the United States, as the company had sold its shares in American Decca some years earlier. However, the company also used the London label for reissued material from its acquired American catalogues. These included Cameo, Romeo, Banner, Oriole and Perfect, all active players in the “race” and “hillbilly” markets during the 1930s. After 1951 London was also used for records originally released by independent American labels. The company had retained its license to the pre-1932 recordings of Brunswick and Vocalion after the divestiture of its American properties, as well as the exclusive right to release American Decca masters in Britain. In 1954 it acquired the rights to the catalogue of American Riverside, which reissued vintage material; Derrick Stewart-Baxter deemed the news “perhaps the most exciting ... that *Jazz Journal* readers have had for some time.” London immediately began releasing Riverside’s “Origins of Jazz Series” in the novel LP format. One of the first discs was *The Folk Blues of Blind Lemon Jefferson* [AL 3508]. By 1956 the series also included *Penitentiary Blues—Jefferson* [sic, AL 3546] and *Backwoods Blues*, featuring Bobby Grant, Buddy Boy Hawkins, King Solomon Hill and Big Bill Johnson [AL 3535].

However, the record buying public no longer had to rely on the major labels. After the war independent record companies began to spring up across Britain; by 1950 there were so many that *Melody Maker* felt compelled to print a guide describing their standard repertoire and distribution centers. These new labels mostly catered to niche markets that were not being served by Decca and EMI; many specialized in jazz and blues.

Tempo was one of the earliest independents to hit the market. The label, established in 1946 by Ron Davies, Stephen Appelby and Colin Pomroy, catered almost exclusively to the revivalist market. While its “A” series was devoted to contemporary or nearly contemporary recordings of traditional jazz, the “R” series was reserved for reissues of “classic” jazz and blues from the Gray Gull, Paramount and Gennett catalogues. Tempo quickly established a reputation as a significant blues label, issuing the first British records by Leadbelly, Blind Blake, Papa Charlie Jackson and Blind Lemon Jefferson. Nonetheless, by October 1952 Tempo stopped issuing new titles and was taken over by Vogue in 1953.

Tempo may have enjoyed a relationship with Jazz Collector, a private concern established in 1949 by the Jazz Art Society in West Kensington. The label licensed material from Paramount, Gennett, Autograph and other small American labels, as

did Tempo, and while the majority of their releases were traditional jazz they also issued a number of blues. As a private label Jazz Collector had a very limited distribution network. The records were sold only at a few specialty jazz shops and the prices were steep: 7s 6d (approximately £7.88 in today's currency) for a 78 rpm disc, nearly double the cost of a popular record on a major label.⁴⁰

Like most other independents, Jazz Collector pressed only 99 copies of each release in order to circumvent the Purchase Tax of 33.3 percent applied to larger batches of records intended for commercial sale. Though limited runs did keep costs down, this meant that popular reissues sold out. Norman Field has noted that some selections initially released on Tempo later appeared on Jazz Collector and vice versa. One example is Leadbelly's "Becky Deem, She Was a Gamblin' Gal" b/w "Pig Meat Papa," issued as Tempo R11 in September 1949 and as Jazz Collector L124 in 1952; both were dubbed from the same Perfect master, 6-04-55. This was almost certainly done to avoid the Purchase Tax, which would have been applied to not only the second pressing but also retroactively to the original lot. The scarcity of Jazz Collector records, as well as the importance of the items issued—discs by Blind Blake, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Leroy Carr, Little Brother Montgomery and others—made them prized finds for collectors despite their often "lo-fi" sound quality.⁴¹

Melodisc, founded in 1949 by the Serbo-Croatian entrepreneur Emile Shalit, was part of a multinational concern; it was affiliated with Productions France-Amerique in Paris and enjoyed licensing agreements with American Savoy and Moe Asch's Disc label. Though the Savoy deal gave Shalit access to recordings by Charlie Parker, Bunk Johnson and Norman Granz's Jazz at the Philharmonic the connection with Disc was in many ways more lucrative. Asch had extensive contacts with New York City's burgeoning folk music movement and recorded substantial quantities of material by Leadbelly, Josh White, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee for his Asch and Disc imprints. When these artists toured Britain in the early 1950s Melodisc was poised to capitalize on their popularity. The label's chief producer, Denis Preston, also took great pains to record visiting jazz and blues artists after their public concerts, thus acquiring new material for future release.⁴²

⁴⁰ This price was comparable to those of Tempo, Ristic, and other independent labels.

⁴¹ Jazz Collector L92—Leroy Carr's "I Believe I'll Make A Change" b/w "Barrel House Woman #2"—was in such demand that in 1958 Jazz Collector began pressing additional copies.

⁴² "U. S. Jazz and bop stars on new British labels," *Melody Maker*, 27 August 1949, 4; Max Jones, "The *Melody Maker* Guide to those who seek their jazz and swing on Private Labels," *Melody Maker*, 28 January 1950, 2; John Cowley and Bob Groom, interview by the author, Gloucester, England, 25 July 2004.

Esquire, whose inaugural issue was in February of 1948, was established the year before by jazz drummer Carlo Krahmer and his associate Peter Newbrook. Esquire catered primarily to fans of bebop and modern British jazz, but it also issued prewar and postwar American blues; it acquired material by exchanging masters of British groups recorded in their studios with small labels in the United States. By 1950 Esquire was the British licensee for Prestige, U.S. Circle and Dial and Atlantic; these proved to be valuable assets when rhythm and blues became popular later in the decade.

Vogue, another major player in the revivalist market, launched a British subsidiary the following year in order to issue "the cream of U.S. catalogues such as Blue Note, Apollo, King, Discovery, Deluxe, Mercer and Modern." Their sales generated enough capital for Vogue to purchase the failing Tempo label in late 1952 or early 1953; it served as their blues imprint well into the 1960s.

A few other independent labels occasionally issued blues titles. Topic Records, founded in 1939 by the Workers' Music Association, enjoyed a stable financial position due to funding received from the British Ministry of Education.⁴³ This enabled the label to produce small runs of populist recordings, such as early folk blues performances by the duo of Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, without regard for their commercial appeal. Discographer and recording engineer John R. T. Davies started his Ristic label in 1950. His main focus was early jazz re-releases, but these included a relatively high proportion of classic blues by Ma Rainey, Trixie Smith and Edith Johnson and an LP of material by Blind Blake. Most were dubbed from Paramount and Gennett masters, probably from Davies's own collection.

Although the trickle of blues releases by independent labels was a positive sign, it did not make the records much more accessible to the average listener, as they were sold only in the handful of specialty jazz shops that were springing up throughout Britain. Most, like the independents themselves, were run by jazz fans and collectors. Perhaps the most famous was Dobell's Record Shop in London, which is still remembered fondly by blues collectors and ageing rock stars who spent many happy hours sifting through the bins. Dobell's enjoyed such a reputation that by the late 1950s the saying was, "Every jazz fan was born within the sound of Do Bells."

The shop's owner, Doug Dobell, became interested in jazz during his term of military service after meeting a number of record collectors. After his demobilization in 1946 he worked at his father's bookshop at 77 Charing Cross Road; it wasn't long before his fellow collectors began stopping by the shop. Since the traffic was already there the younger Dobell was able to convince his reluctant father that jazz records and books would sell well. Along with major label

⁴³ Georgina Boyes, "Topic," NG <www.groves.com> [10 October 2004]. The WMA received government funds through the influence of prominent members like Benjamin Britten and Sir Granville Bantock.

offerings Dobell's carried the new Tempo and Jazz Collector discs, "thereby breaking the monopoly held by Decca and EMI, which at that time had most record retailers sewn up."⁴⁴

Word soon spread that other discs were also available at Dobell's; the shop stocked a number of American jazz and blues releases and reissues, both legitimate and pirated, as well as a smattering of 78s obtained by junk shopping or trading with other collectors. The International Book Store, just down the street from Dobell's at 52 Charing Cross, also had a well-appointed jazz department, which carried a "large selection" of independent import labels like Commodore, American Music and Black and White, as well as Tempo, Jazz Collector and Esquire. Foyle's, a large department store at the end of the street, claimed to have in stock every record reviewed in *Melody Maker*. Dobell's main competitors, though, were shops run by his fellow collectors: Dave Carey's Swing Shop in the southern suburbs of London and James Asman's London Jazz Club (82 St. John's Wood High Street), which served as an outlet for all of the British independent labels as well as American imports and rarities.

Though London was the most reliable source for rare jazz and blues records there were outposts in other major British cities. Hessey's in Liverpool was one of the largest music stores in the north; in addition to musical instruments and sheet music, its ads claimed it was the source for "everything in jazz. Bop-Blues-swing-Dixieland-Traditional—on all makes of records."⁴⁵ The venerable Messrs. Hime and Addison dealership in Manchester carried jazz and blues records, as did Collet's, a radical bookshop at 36 Deansgate. Moore and Stanworth's in Leicester specialized in imports, and several Birmingham dealers stocked jazz and blues discs. In Bristol Stan Strickland operated Stan's Record Store, which carried used 78s; he also offered copies of "deleted records from his collection onto your own customized acetates." This complemented the offbeat Corvinus Records, a shop of sorts run by collector T. K. Daniel; admittance was by invitation only and most of the records were available for discussion but not for sale.⁴⁶

Specialist dealers absorbed some of the functions of the rhythm clubs. Fans of the still largely underground blues scene met while searching for the odd rare Charlie Patton or Robert Johnson disc that had made its way to Britain. Records were shared, traded and discussed, styles were analyzed, and fans with similar listening preferences formed alliances and friendships.

The number of British jazz fans who appreciated the blues, as well as the availability of blues records in Britain, had increased steadily since the beginning

⁴⁴ Frank Owen, "The Sound of Dobells," *Storyville* 4 (April 1966): 20.

⁴⁵ Hessey's is still in business, in part because of tourist traffic; the Beatles bought their first instruments there.

⁴⁶ Dave Hibberd, *Recollections of Jazz in Bristol: My Kind of Town* (Bristol, 2000), p. 36.

of the New Orleans revival in the late 1930s. However, appreciation of the blues really took off when African American artists connected to the folk music scene in the United States began touring in Europe, bringing a taste of the “living blues” to the British Isles.

‘Blues Come Walkin’ Like a Man’

Given his eventual influence on British popular music it is somewhat ironic that Huddie Ledbetter—better known as Leadbelly, his *nom de disque*—never performed there. A popular figure of the burgeoning New York folk scene, Leadbelly was in many respects the perfect artist to introduce the blues to Europe; his biography fulfilled the most extravagantly romanticized expectations about southern black life and his extensive repertoire circumscribed the entire body of African American folk music. He was born near Shreveport, Louisiana in 1885 and though he farmed for a living music was his vocation; he spent weekends—and occasionally longer periods—playing guitar and singing on street corners and at country dances. He was known as a songster, a general entertainer who prided himself on the number of items in his repertoire. This made him a veritable repository of folk ballads, cowboy songs, sentimental parlor tunes, Tin Pan Alley hits and early blues, some learned, he claimed, at the knee of Blind Lemon Jefferson.

He was incarcerated for assault and murder in 1917 and was still serving his sentence at Angola penitentiary when he was discovered by John and Alan Lomax, who were recording folk material for the Library of Congress. The pair was so dazzled by breadth of his repertoire, his clear, strong tenor voice, fluid guitar technique and substantial charisma that after his release the elder Lomax took him on a speaking tour to demonstrate African American folk songs for groups like the Modern Library Association. Until the 1930s much of this music was inaccessible outside of the African American community. The Lomaxes’s attention to this older repertoire of traditional material, which previously had no particular commercial value, started to bring blues and African American ballads to a new audience: white scholars and folk song collectors.

Leadbelly’s first and only European visit was a 1949 concert at City University Theater on the outskirts of Paris. The event was sponsored by the French writer Hugues Panassié, who timed the concert to coincide with the Hot Club of Paris Jazz Festival; he hoped that some of the attendees would avail themselves of the opportunity to hear some authentic pre-jazz. The occasion generated substantial interest in Britain through the efforts of Sinclair Traill and Max Jones, who “had been propagating the Lead Belly doctrine for some years.” The pair—along with a contingent from the London Jazz Club—attended the recital and upon their return devoted columns to the singer and wrote lengthy reviews of the records released in Britain after the event.

Tempo issued two Leadbelly sides several weeks after the Paris concert: "Defense Blues" b/w "Diggin' my Potatoes" [A16], originally recorded in 1940 for the Disc label. Jones and Traill praised Ledbetter's authenticity, commenting that his style was "less mannered than ... most of the best recording blues artists." They also stressed the relevance of the records to the average jazz fan. "True, he is not singing jazz, but his material is related to it, and his style has been much influenced by it ... I hope everyone who has any interest in blues singing will get one at least."⁴⁷

The disc sold well enough for a more typical country blues to be issued on Jazz Collector in July of the same year: "Packing Trunk Blues" b/w "All Out and Down" [L2], reissued from a 1935 Paramount session. These were followed by four Tempo sides in October and November: "Four Day Worry Blues" b/w "New Black Snake Moan" [R13] and "Becky Deem, She was a Gambler Gal" b/w "Pig Meat Papa" [R11]. Jones praised the recordings with the highest accolades of "honest, unpretentious, unselfconscious, and uncommercial [sic]," and again emphasized their broad appeal: "Even if you know nothing of American folk-blues, this is the kind of music that can easily grow on you...anyone can enjoy them."⁴⁸

The following year, after significant prompting by Jones, Traill and the NJFO, Capitol Records issued the first major label release of Leadbelly's songs, "Backwater Blues," b/w "Eagle Rock Rag," as part of their "Capitol History of Jazz" series. Even though somewhat critical of the recording on its merits—the vocal and guitar work not being up to Leadbelly's usual standards—Jones nonetheless encouraged all *Melody Maker* readers to "show willing" and buy it in order to stimulate more blues issues. The disc must have sold fairly well, as Leadbelly's recordings were thereafter released and re-released continuously by both major and independent record labels until the late 1960s. The quasi-anthology of his songs compiled by the Lomaxes, *Negro Songs as sung by Lead Belly*, also sold well in Britain, especially during the skiffle craze of the mid 1950s.

By early 1950 it was evident that a hoped-for Leadbelly tour of Britain would not happen. The singer had fallen ill during his concert in Paris and was unable to extend his stay; he died six months later. It would be his New York colleague, Josh White, who would bring the living blues to Britain.

Josh White

In September of 1969, a small item appeared in the periodical *Jazz Times*. "We mark with sadness the passing of Josh White ... whose records acted as an introduction for so many of us to the blues at a time when records by Bessie Smith

⁴⁷ Max Jones, review of "Defense Blues" b/w "Diggin' my Potatoes" by Leadbelly, *Melody Maker*, 3 December 1949, 7.

⁴⁸ Max Jones, "A perfect vintage Ledbetter," *Melody Maker*, 30 July 1949, 3.

and Leadbelly were rare, their circa 1948 releases on 78s being the pride of many young collectors then."⁴⁹ Though White's credibility as a blues singer was challenged in the 1960s he was perhaps the first to make Britain "fully recognize the blues."⁵⁰ He the first artist to tour the country, his recordings were the first commercially available blues, and his personal charisma made him a nationally recognized entertainer.

White was born in Greenville, South Carolina in 1908 and, by his account, "learned many of his songs from the blind colored street-singers of the South from whom he obtained his pocket money by acting as their guide when he was only seven years old." Like Leadbelly, he claimed to have been a "lead boy" for Blind Lemon Jefferson, as well as Blind Blake and the lesser known Blind Joe Taggart. In 1932 White traveled to New York to record gospel songs for the ARC label as "The Singing Christian;" he also recorded a number of blues sides as "Pinewood Tom." He found the city to his liking and remained, finding work as a session guitarist, manual laborer and actor. The latter proved to be his ticket to fame. In 1940 he received favorable notices for the key role of "Blind Lemon," a character loosely based on the blues singer, in the musical *John Henry*. Though the show closed after only a short run White found himself in great demand as a folk performer and recording artist.

In the fall of 1946 British Brunswick issued two sides by White: "Strange Fruit" b/w "House of the Rising Sun" [03749]. Rex Harris and Max Jones devoted an entire "Collector's Corner" to the recording, which included their now familiar argument about of the relevance of blues singing, a detailed review of the performances and an introduction to White's smooth performing style.

Josh White is often accused of smart and commercial tendencies, and it has been said that his interpretations lack sincerity.... No one will class his silky executions with the rough hit-and-miss performances of the many excellent but untrained singers whose records can be found among a welter of good, bad, and indifferent "Race Music," but they have the directness, fine musicianship, and the almost universal appeal of the folk-song.⁵¹

Despite their unquestionably favorable review of the record—whose release Jones had facilitated—it sold poorly, and no further selections by White were issued until after his concert appearances in 1950.

By then Josh White was relatively well known in Britain. The singer was featured on several V-Discs and most jazz collectors knew his dramatic and sly

⁴⁹ Les Page, "Column," *Jazz Times* (September 1969): n.p.

⁵⁰ Alexis Korner, "Ragtime, Ringshouts, and Hollers," in Albert McCarthy (ed.), *Jazzbook '55* (London, 1955), pp. 80–81.

⁵¹ Rex Harris and Max Jones, "Collector's Corner," *Melody Maker*, 11 January 1947, 4.

performance of “One Meat Ball” [383A].⁵² He had participated in a number of morale boosting radio programs during World War II; several of these were also heard on the BBC, as were his weekly broadcasts for the U.S. Office of War Information. His high profile, along with a great deal of preparatory publicity, made his concert appearance in July 1950 a greatly anticipated event. Perhaps the occasion wasn’t as monumental as Louis Armstrong’s visit nearly two decades earlier but for Britain’s blues fans here at long last was the chance to hear a live performance of the real thing.

Some, like Paul Oliver, were disappointed by White’s smooth delivery and professional concert demeanor. Others were thrilled by his intensity, sincerity and dramatic guitar work, which was more fluid and developed than at any point in his career. Nearly all, though, agreed that White was far more impressive in person than on record and better still in the impromptu sessions that took place in dressing rooms and private flats after most of his concerts.

Many critics recognized that while White performed blues songs his style of delivery was quite sophisticated. Denis Preston interviewed the singer after his first concert and asked him to comment on the differences between a folk and “a blues or jazz singer”:

When folk singers leave the countryside and move into town, like so many of the Chicago blues men, they right away start imitating the kind of jazz they hear all around and that way soon lose the folk touch ... you hear that in Leadbelly’s later work, and in such men as Big Bill Broonzy and Tampa Red. Blind Blake is about the best example of a borderline blues and folk man. Blind Lemon Jefferson, another blind man I used to lead around when I was a kid, is a straight folk singer.⁵³

Both the question and response illuminate contemporary perceptions about the hierarchy of African American music. Unschooled interpreters of traditional material were equated with folk music and more urbane and polished performances were considered jazz or blues, depending on whether one was discussing instrumental or vocal music.

The Gramophone declared White:

very much more than a blues vocalist. He sings just about every kind of Negro folk music ... and he is probably the greatest living interpreter of them. He is unique not only for his versatility, but also for a technique which has given to the music of his race a new artistry while retaining to the full the Negro idiom and character.

⁵² “One Meat Ball” was coupled with “Cotton-Eyed Joe.” The other discs were V-Disc 550: “The Riddle Song”/“The House I Live In” and V-disc 264: “Waltzing Matilda”/“Blues in Berlin”/“Lass with the Delicate Air”.

⁵³ Elijah Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues* (Amherst, 2000), pp. 173–4.

Their reviewer also thought his recording of “Mean Mistreatin’ Woman” was “probably the most authentic and finest instance of blues singing ever heard on a record.” The disc is one of White’s most vocally relaxed performances, which features warm conversational delivery, dramatic stop time, nicely bent guitar lines—including a rather rare example of White’s slide playing—and well-executed call and response exchanges between the vocals and guitar. However, the singer’s silky tone and the vocal mordents that would increasingly color his voice in later years sometimes work against the pathos of the lyrics. Pat Harper of *Jazz Record* nonetheless defended the disc:

This is not the race music of a Sleepy John Estes with an appeal only to the initiated but the performance of a trained and tasteful singer.... However, we must not think it unlikely that a Negro whose diction is excellent and whose voice is musical ranks equally with the primitive. For Josh White has lost none of the emotion and sensuality that characterize the true singing of the blues.⁵⁴

White’s tour and rave reviews catapulted the singer to near stardom in Britain. Notice of his impending return in February 1951 garnered front page coverage in *Melody Maker*. Melodisc rushed to market a pair of sides dubbed from Disc masters [8008]; London simultaneously issued eight tracks White had recorded in London [L739, 810, 828, and 907]. Not to be outdone, Jazz Parade, a new (and ultimately short-lived) independent, released six sides of White playing with a Parisian combo for French Vogue. The BBC even ran a program of songs by White during the Christmas season.

During his 1951 tour the singer played most of his 28 dates to sellout crowds and recorded extensively. He was featured in the BBC Easter special “Walk Together Chillun,” a program of black religious music that proved so popular with listeners that the following year producer Charles Chilton arranged for White to record six more programs for a *Negro Anthology* series. Eventually retitled *The Glory Road*, the series focused on spirituals and folk songs but White performed a few blues as well. *The Glory Road* was an unqualified success; the station received a flood of positive mail and Josh White became a British radio star. He contributed to a number of series and programs during the 1950s and became the first foreign musician to appear on all three BBC programs: Light, Home, and Third.⁵⁵

For many Britons White served as their first introduction to African American folk music, and for a brief time he was their only source of information about blues and blues singers. It is surely no coincidence that recordings by the “blind,

⁵⁴ Pat Harper, “Reviews,” *Jazz Records* 3/1 (1950): 17.

⁵⁵ Dorthy Schainman Siegel, *The Glory Road: The Story of Josh White* (White Hall, 1982), p. 131.

coloured street-singers” he cited as his earliest influences—Blind Lemon Jefferson and Blind Blake—were issued a month or two later on the Tempo label.⁵⁶

White continued to tour and record in Britain until his health deteriorated in the early 1960s, though he was increasingly regarded as a general entertainer and personality rather than a bluesman. He lost some of his audience, particularly the jazz cognoscenti devoted to the “authentic” and “non-commercial” blues, to Big Bill Broonzy, who altered the landscape of British popular music as surely as the Beatles did a decade later.

Big Bill Broonzy

Josh White’s success in Britain encouraged a number of other prewar blues musicians to try their luck in Europe. Most, like Lonnie Johnson, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, were affiliated with the folk music scene in the United States. Big Bill Broonzy was the exception. By 1950 he had quit the music profession; black audiences in the United States increasingly found his style old-fashioned in comparison to the raucous jump blues of Louis Jordan and the aggressive, rhythmic sounds coming out of Chicago and Memphis. Yet it was Broonzy who served as Britain’s ambassador of the blues, in equal parts sage, songster, teacher and touchstone to what was believed to be a fading tradition.

Broonzy first appeared in Britain in late September of 1951 as an extension of a Parisian visit arranged by Hugues Panassié. His concerts, and those of other visiting bluesmen, were made possible by a loophole in the guidelines of the Musicians’ Union: folk singers were considered “variety artists” rather than musicians and thus did not threaten the jobs of British performers. They were not allowed to bring backing bands so they appeared as soloists or were accompanied by native musicians. The latter resulted in a number of interesting, if not always satisfactory, collaborations that nonetheless provided valuable learning experiences to British performers.

Blues fans anxiously awaited the two concerts that Bill Broonzy played at Kingsway Hall, Holborn. George Melly was one of them; he later recalled, “the idea of hearing an American Negro singing the blues was almost unbearably exciting.”⁵⁷ During August and September the jazz press featured articles about the blues in general and Broonzy in particular, with special correspondents reporting on his activities in France. His London appearance was emceed by Alan Lomax, who not only introduced the singer but also drew him into discussions about the

⁵⁶ The Jefferson releases were “Weary Dog Blues” b/w “Change My Luck Blues” [R38] and “Hangman’s Blues” b/w “Lockstep Blues” [R39]. The four sides by Blind Blake were “Southern Rag” b/w “C.C. Pill Blues” [R40] and “Hey Hey Daddy Blues” b/w “Brownskin Mama Blues” [R23]. Most were reviewed in Max Jones, “When Blind Men Stood on the Corner,” *Melody Maker*, 7 April 1951, 5.

⁵⁷ Melly, *Owning Up*, p. 105.

songs and their social import, making the audience feel “as if they had wandered more or less by accident into one of those fabulous jazz parties of which the books are full.”⁵⁸ The concert was not terribly well attended—Paul Oliver reports that the hall was only a third of the way full—but the critical response was overwhelmingly positive. Reviewers commented on the beauty of Broonzy’s guitar playing, the emotionalism of his vocals and his remarkable artistry, but all regarded him, above all else, as an “authentic” blues singer.

The notion of authenticity occupies a central position in British debates about the worth, appropriation and commodification of African American music. In his *Philosophy of Music* Theodore Adorno coined the term “authenticity” to describe musical works that “forged their own internal consistency while acknowledging the historical nature and social function of the material.” However, in critical discourse in Britain the idea of authenticity mostly evaluated extramusical relationships to an idealized notion of reality: how it was imagined the music of rural African Americans ought to sound. In the early 1950s authenticity was an aesthetic whose parameters were in constant flux, updated and refined by each new experience with the blues and its performers. Sincerity, emotional connection to the material and disregard for commercial appeal—whether real or perceived—were its most important characteristics, though personality was also significant. The musical qualities of authenticity were not yet established but a rawer, more untutored approach was valued over polish and technique.

“Big Bill is the real thing,” *Jazz Journal* proclaimed, “rugged and authentic, his artistry remarkable yet wholly unpretentious.” His performance style, Paul Oliver recalled, “made Josh White seem slick and effete,” and Hugues Panassié believed Broonzy was a window to the “pure idiom of the early blues ... Big Bill is giving us a down-to-the-heart feeling that we are now, for the first time, getting the real thing as far as blues are concerned.”⁵⁹ Broonzy’s reception as a representative of the early, primitive blues required some selective memory on the part of critics, collectors and the cognoscenti: he had been a pioneer of the “city” or “hokum” blues style, which fused the solid four-to-the bar feel of jazz with light, swinging propulsion, guitar fills and relaxed, sophisticated vocals. He was also one of the first male blues players to regularly work with a pianist and drummer. By the late 1930s Broonzy’s guitar style already included not only walking boogie figures but also repeated notes and short motivic ideas that presaged his interest in the electric guitar, which he is reputed to have picked up in the early 1940s.

Though regarded by the British press as “one of the great Mississippi Delta Men” (granted, one who combined “low down earthy blues with that of the city”),

⁵⁸ Ernest Borneman, “Big Bill Talkin’,” *Melody Maker*, 29 September 1951, 2. Other critics, particularly Max Harrison and George Melly, found Lomax’s comments embarrassingly paternalistic.

⁵⁹ Oliver, “Blue-Eyed Blues,” p. 230; Hugues Panassié, “Big Bill doesn’t sell his music—he gives it away,” *Melody Maker*, 15 December 1951, 9.

Broonzy's fundamental style was closer to that Texas bluesmen—particularly Blind Lemon Jefferson—and Piedmont singers like Blind Blake: light, open-textured accompaniments that combined single string work with strummed chords on the lower strings, an easy, lilting feel and high, clear vocals. His singing, in particular, had an urbane and polished manner that was reminiscent of Leroy Carr, an extremely popular figure in Chicago when Broonzy was first starting to make records.

However, Broonzy had always been something of a stylist, and he was capable of altering his vocal tone and approach when the material demanded it. For slow, mournful songs like "Worrying You Off My Mind" he adopted a darker, more supported tone and looser phrasing—though still with little grain in his voice—and concentrated on sparse accompaniments with single string work in the breaks. He was aware that white audiences interested in "blues folk songs and ballads" would want to hear an older repertoire performed in a less polished style; as a professional though titularly retired musician, he was prepared to give the audience what it wanted.

Though no particular repertoire was solicited by the promoters, for his European performances Broonzy compiled a program of early blues and African American songs he either recalled from his youth or learned from books and records; he arrived in Europe with a large trunk full of "his blues manuscripts." He also returned to the style he employed on his earliest discs. He generally took songs at slower tempos, adopted an edgier, more extreme vocal tone—either his high, slightly nasal head voice or lower, gruffer chest tones—and he allowed his accent to emerge more frequently. British critics familiar with his Chicago style certainly recognized the change but didn't call attention to it; they seemed to accept that it was appropriate to the material and celebrated his performances as examples of the "authentic" tradition.

Broonzy never disabused that notion. He sold himself as the sound of the real blues: "these fellows singing folk music in the night clubs, and with dance bands, they're all right, but it's not blues." He claimed to have searched for musicians who still really understood the blues to serve as accompanists but found none; "I guess they've all been shot."⁶⁰ Nobody knew how many country blues players were still alive; Broonzy encouraged the belief that he was the last.

The singer was gratified by his reception in Europe and pleased with the respect the British had for the blues; he thought audiences in the United States had forsaken the genre. Despite his protestations that he was no longer a professional—he claimed to have been visiting Europe as a tourist and playing a few concerts on side—word arrived in late December that he would return to Britain in February. In anticipation of his tour British record labels, both major and minor, rushed recordings into the marketplace. Vogue released six sides recorded in Paris that

⁶⁰ Harry Shapiro, *Alexis Korner: The Biography* (London, 1996), p. 67; Yannick Bruynoghe, "Meet Bill Broonzy," *Melody Maker*, 11 August 1951, 9.

August [V2068, 2073–2075 and 2078], and Melodisc issued several tracks laid down in London [1191, 1203]. *Melody Maker* and *Jazz Journal* critics not only reviewed all of the discs but they also discussed their cultural context and musical antecedents at some length. The commentary indicates that critics specializing in the blues were beginning to view it as something other than primitive jazz, as they contain none of justifications and projected relationships to jazz styles that marked earlier blues writing.

Broonzy's February 1952 tour took the artist to Manchester, Liverpool, Edinburgh, Brighton, and London. These concerts were far better attended, probably because the ensuing publicity and record releases had significantly raised his profile. They were also lucrative enough for Broonzy to pledge to return again before the end of the year; he did so in November in the company of pianist Blind John Davis. This established a nearly annual series of visits by Broonzy, who toured Britain in 1953, 1955, and 1957 to increasingly greater acclaim and influence.

By his third tour Broonzy had revealed that he was also a skillful performer; in his review of a Liverpool concert Les Pythian noted, "at first hearing his art seems unconscious—but this is not strictly true—Bill has been singing his blues, work songs and spirituals so long that he has developed a form of presentation (call it showmanship if you will) that really sells his stuff." Broonzy introduced songs with anecdotes that referenced his childhood experiences in the rural south, thus reinforcing his identity as a rare connection to the pure blues tradition that predated jazz. He also explained lyrics, expounded on the variety of blues styles and the primacy of the Mississippi variety and reinforced the distance between modern blues and the genuine article. A transcription of Broonzy on stage at Hove Town Hall in 1953 conveys something of the flavor of these pronouncements and the near patois he adopted while onstage.

That [John Henry] was one of them folksongs—Negro folksongs they call it—we call 'em worksongs where I come from, but they named it folksongs...this is one of the songs my uncle use to play when he used to ride mules ... Goin' to town, take him two three days, you know ... he sing this song to us, you know. He called this "Goin' Down the road Feelin' Bad," and I said to him one day, I said, 'Why do you keep callin' this song "Goin' Down the Road Feelin' Bad?"' He said, 'Well, brother-son [sic] we ain' getting' nothin' for the cotton we raised this year, so I'm feelin' bad ... so this is the way we sung those things.⁶¹

Broonzy was not the only blues singer to tour the country in the early 1950s. The NFJO, which was severely criticized for not promoting earlier visits by American

⁶¹ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, "Preachin' the Blues," *Jazz Journal* 6/2 (February 1953): 4. It is interesting to compare this transcription to Broonzy's first European interviews, which contain few grammatical errors and are laced with contemporary urban slang.

jazz and blues musicians,⁶² arranged a tour by Lonnie Johnson in July 1952. While most jazz aficionados hadn't known much about Big Bill Broonzy prior to his arrival, Johnson was a familiar figure. A few of his guitar duets with Eddie Lang were still available and both Melodisc and Vogue had blues by the singer [1138 and V2105, respectively] in their catalogues, but he was best known for his performances with the Chocolate Dandies, Louis Armstrong's Hot Five and the Duke Ellington Orchestra.

He was an odd choice to present to audiences interested in hearing early blues, as nearly all of his recorded output was in a sophisticated, urbane style closer to the vaudeville circuit than the medicine show. However, the 63-year-old New Orleans native was of sufficient age to recall the earliest days of jazz, and it was hoped he might be able to provide insights into the music's genesis. Moreover, during his long career he had accompanied a number of country blues singers, so he was known to be conversant in the "folk" style. Ultimately, though, Johnson was probably chosen for his "crossover" appeal in the hopes that both jazz and blues lovers would attend his concerts. Besides, Max Jones was a big fan.

Despite the allure of African American musicians during this period the critical reaction was tepid. Peter Tanner introduced the artist to the British public in *Melody Maker* and reminded potential concertgoers to expect something quite different from Big Bill Broonzy, who was the standard to which all future blues visitors were inevitably compared:

His vocal work does not measure up to such singers as Big Bill Broonzy, Muddy Waters, or Leroy Carr, as I am sure he would be the first to admit. Lonnie shows only a trace of the traditional blues-shouting style, singing instead in a soft, persuasive and mellow manner that is not without its attraction.

Max Jones, the self-proclaimed Johnson "addict," concurred, adding that his voice "lacks the roughness and power of many recorded blues voices, yet it is not ruinously polished. And Lonnie seldom fails to impart the essential shade of melancholy to even his happier songs." Albert McCarthy classed him as a blues singer of the "second rank" and felt that his recent recordings had little genuine blues feeling, but he was hopeful that, like Broonzy, Johnson would prove to be a much different artist on stage.⁶³

This was not the case. At his first appearance at Royal Festival Hall in London Johnson disappointed many listeners with his choice of material. The blues he sang were considered excellent but "despite backstage instructions" from persons

⁶² Broonzy's concerts in 1951 and 1952 were arranged by the Wilcox agency after the NFJO failed to act on initial offers by his representation.

⁶³ Peter Tanner, "Lonnie Johnson," *Melody Maker*, 21 June 1952, 9; Max Jones, review of "Jelly Roll Baker" b/w "Drunk Again," *Melody Maker*, 8 September 1951, 9; Albert McCarthy "Lonnie Johnson," *Jazz Journal* 5/6 (June 1952): 8.

unknown he programed mostly ballads, including the standards “Stardust” and “Careless Love” and the sentimental “Just Another Day.” “While no doubt excellent as a one-man Ink-Spots impression, it was not the type of blues guitar[ing] [sic] we expected at the Royal Festival Hall traditional jazz concert.” Stanley Dance believed the entire concert was ruined by “Lonnie Johnson’s ambitions as a ballad singer ... it is odd if no one advised him on the planning of his programme ...”⁶⁴

Despite his shaky debut Johnson went on to play scheduled concerts in Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, and Edinburgh before returning to London for a final concert.

Five days later, then, London had the opportunity of hearing Lonnie a second time. What a different Lonnie it was! Here was something of the old, and much loved, blues singer; the artist who made all those fine Okeh and Bluebird sides ... Lonnie gave us the blues, beautifully sung and beautifully played. This time he performed with real feeling and enjoyment

Derrick Stewart-Baxter credited the “improvement” to members of the Lyttelton organization, who had booked the latter part of the tour. “Humph, Jim Godbolt and Lyn Dutton were on hand to advise Lonnie (in a tactful manner) just what the crowd would expect of him,” which was blues, sung in a simple and expressive manner.⁶⁵ No one was interested in his sophisticated way with a ballad.

The failure of visiting American artists to anticipate the expectations of British audiences had been an issue since Louis Armstrong’s first visit to the country in 1933, when some critics expressed displeasure over the great trumpeter’s constant mugging. As professional entertainers accustomed to performing for either African American audiences or progressive white ones, blues and jazz musicians often added popular songs, sentimental crowd pleasers and performative flourishes to their acts to increase their appeal. Many British critics and fans interpreted these gestures as “inauthentic” and “commercial”; they wanted earthy, “genuine” blues like those they heard on race records. Such expectations would continue to affect the reception of the blues for more than a decade; artists who most closely matched preconceived notions about the music and its performers found the most favor in Britain.

Johnson played to near capacity crowds during his tour but did not develop the kind of following that Broonzy did; he was not invited back to Britain for more than a decade. Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee fared somewhat better, perhaps because their long affiliation with folk audiences had focused their repertoire on

⁶⁴ Sinclair Traill, review of Lonnie Johnson at the Royal Festival Hall, *Jazz Journal* 5/7 (July 1952): 11; Dance, “Lightly and Politely,” *Jazz Journal* 5/9 (September 1952): 6.

⁶⁵ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, “Preaching the Blues,” *Jazz Journal* 5/9 (September 1952): 19.

older material. Derrick Stewart-Baxter gave them his highest accolades, calling both “true country blues singers” who had not been “spoiled by the commercial boys of Tin Pan Alley. Buy any of these discs and get with the blues. This is real and true and can be guaranteed to take away the smell of the Top Twenty.”⁶⁶ Again this required some selective memory, since the duo had recorded a number of successful R&B hits only a few years earlier, but Terry and McGhee were consummate professionals who had no trouble presenting a folk blues act if that was what customers wanted. Like Broonzy, the pair became frequent visitors to Britain, and their raw and untutored style remained popular until the mid-1960s.

The blues and Aunt Beeb

It is rather remarkable that the blues, like jazz before it, managed to generate a following in Britain without significant airplay. Given the BBC’s ambivalent attitude toward jazz it is not surprising that the blues did not become a priority for programmers. The occasional disc turned up on *Radio Rhythm Club* or a request program, but otherwise the blues fared no better than hot jazz had in its day. However, the emerging perception of the blues as African American folk music gave it a scholarly credibility that its instrumental sibling lacked. The music of foreign cultures was, after all, educational.

The *Negro Anthology* series that Josh White recorded for the BBC was popular enough that the network was amenable to other programs of this type. As it so happened, one of the world’s experts on folk music was resident in London at the time. Alan Lomax had arrived in Britain in late 1950, ostensibly on a collecting trip, but the increasingly aggressive stance of the House Un-American Activities Committee and its apparent animosity toward the New York folk music movement must have made Lomax, who—unlike most of his colleagues—really was a Communist, feel that the time was right for an extended visit abroad.

Lomax made contact with the BBC upon his arrival, hoping they might sponsor some of his recording activities, and producer Denis Mitchell expressed interest in a series on various types of folk music. The resulting *Adventures in Folk Song*, a survey of American folk music interspersed with anecdotes about song collecting, was broadcast in February 1951 and received overwhelmingly favorable reviews. To mollify the Musicians’ Union and adhere to the BBC’s needle-time arrangements all of the songs were performed by Lomax or Robin Roberts. Only a few of the items were blues but the program’s success guaranteed a follow-up. In December of that year Lomax compiled *The Art of the Negro* for broadcast on the Third Programme. The three-part series featured jazz, blues and gospel from

⁶⁶ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, “Blues on Record, Part VI,” *Jazz Journal* 12/1 (January 1959): 33.

Lomax's field recordings, along with an oral history of African Americans in the United States.

The final program, "Blues in the Mississippi Night," was enormously influential. The broadcast featured recordings of Sleepy John Estes, Robert Johnson, John Lee Hooker and Muddy Waters, as well as pseudonymous commentary about southern black life by John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson, Memphis Slim and Big Bill Broonzy.⁶⁷ Not only was the British public exposed to some superb recordings, but they were also provided an unflinching look at the hard realities of racism that were the crucible of the genre; many remember the broadcast as their first glimmer of a deeper understanding of the blues. Letters poured into *Melody Maker* requesting a list of the records that were used for the series. While only one—Lonnie Johnson's "Rocks in My Bed"—was available on a British label, the broadcast introduced contemporary artists like Hooker and Waters and presented a wider variety of blues styles than had previously been available to the general public.

The following year Max Jones was a guest host on the weekly program *Jazz Club*, and he presented a recital of "Town and Country Blues." His selections introduced the music of Waters, Williamson, Tommy McClennan, Bumble Bee Slim and Bukka White, along with generous helpings of Leadbelly and Big Bill Broonzy, to thousands of listeners across Britain. However, the program met with some criticism because it presented only recordings. In order to avoid further skirmishes over the place of records on the BBC most future series on folk music, like Lomax's *Ballads and Blues*, used material performed specifically for the program by visiting artists like Big Bill Broonzy and Josh White, or by jazz artists specializing in "blues singing," like Neva Raphaello and Beryl Bryden. The latter, though soundly denounced by serious critics as ineffectual and inauthentic, were at least British, and thus invited no complaints from the Union.

Due to both the BBC's ambivalence about broadcasting American music and the Musicians' Union's protectionist stance, blues on the radio remained a rare occurrence until the 1960s. Blues and rhythm and blues were heard with more frequency on Radio Luxembourg or the Armed Forces Network in Germany, stations that could reliably be picked up in Britain. However, even sporadic exposure perhaps introduced new listeners to the genre or retained the interest of collectors.

It is reasonable to ask whether these early efforts to popularize the blues through radio broadcasts, articles, columns and record reviews yielded significant

⁶⁷ "Blues in the Mississippi Night" is an example of the well-intentioned but sometimes deceptive means by which the blues were contextualized. Lomax stated that the conversation had taken place at a dance hall after a white policeman tried to dissuade him from hearing the men's stories in the street. He neglected to mention that the session took place in New York City and that it was recorded seven years after the field recordings that made up the rest of the series.

results. The letters in *Melody Maker*'s "Corner Forum" indicate that at least a portion of the paper's readership was beginning to think about and listen to the blues. One wrote, "I want to thank Max Jones and colleagues for the weekly 'Corner.' Each week I learn something new ... I am grateful to the record companies for the Broonzy discs." Another commented, "I was very interested in Max Jones's article on the blues. I like this kind of music very much, and have bought all the Blind Lemon, Leadbelly, and Josh White releases, and also some Lonnie Johnson and Big Bill records." Still another remarked, "my non-jazz friends and relations all pan 'noisy jazz' but have all become blues addicts via Josh White and Big Bill. Yessir, there are thousands of potential blues collectors"⁶⁸

Various polls taken by Jones and Traill—the best records of the 1940s, NFJO polls, and the like—indicate that only a small minority of their readers enjoyed the music in anything except small doses and "folk blues" discs in particular sold at a slow, yet steady, pace. It is difficult to identify why certain jazz fans were more attracted to the blues than others, though Leighton Grist suggests that middle class listeners with politically liberal views, those most likely to reject commercially oriented music, embraced the blues sooner than their conservative, working class counterparts.⁶⁹ Likewise, musical authenticity, honesty and exposure to genuine experience seem to have been important to those who were drawn to the genre.

Whatever the reasons, by 1953, knowledge of the blues was beginning to disseminate through the country and a core audience for the music was beginning to coalesce.

⁶⁸ "Corner Forum," *Melody Maker*, 17 May 1952, 3; 24 May 1952, 9; and 14 June 1952, 9.

⁶⁹ Leighton Grist, "The Blues is The Truth" (paper presented at Overseas Blues: The Reception of African American Music in Europe, "Overseas Blues: European Perspectives on African American Music, University of Gloucestershire, 23–26 July 2004).

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Chapter Three

1953–1957: The Problem of the New

The belief that blues was the wellspring of jazz motivated many aficionados to take an interest in the genre, sample available recordings and patronize visiting American artists. A small but devoted subset was even beginning to appreciate the music on its own merits. However, their exposure was limited to a handful of early blues styles. Between 1952 and 1956 contemporary genres, which demonstrated the variety of possible approaches to the blues, arrived in Britain and challenged the perceptual dichotomy of folk authenticity or commercial compromise. They also called into question established ideas about what constituted the “real” blues and strained the dominant paradigm of blues as the archaic roots of jazz nearly to the breaking point.

Arguably, rhythm and blues arrived in Britain with the first records of vibraphonist Lionel Hampton and Erskine Hawkins in the late 1930s. However, the jump blues of Louis Jordan and Earl Bostic, which became available in the early 1950s, made a bigger impression. Record buyers soon embraced the music, which combined the driving, four-to-the-bar feel of swing with solo work that emphasized excitement and fervor. Jump records sold well; despite lukewarm (or worse) reviews by critics, some of the jazz cognoscenti received them as a refreshing alternative to dance bands, bop and the New Orleans revival. The music was loud, powerfully rhythmic and energetic; it might be argued the same “strong rhythms and bright colors” that R. W. S. Mendl invoked as proscriptive for soldiers returning from France in 1917 was equally appealing to military personnel demobilized after World War II.¹

Record companies that had licensing agreements with American independent labels began to tentatively issue similar material by small ensembles fronted by powerful vocalists. Discs featuring jazz-oriented vocalists like Julia Lee, Big Joe Turner and Jimmy Rushing found an audience among fans of Count Basie and other Kansas City bands; their affiliation with prewar swing and the classic blues was evident though the style of the singers was markedly different.

Blues shouters—powerful vocalists whose style and tone were more allied to popular music—were not similarly embraced. The first R&B record released in Britain, “Lovin’ Machine” b/w “Bloodshot Eyes” by Wynonie Harris [Vogue

¹ In a 1961 article Christopher Whent proposed that strongly rhythmic music was the “musical safety valve” for a society pushed to the brink of psychosis by modern industrial society (“The Phenomenon of Jazz, part 3,” *Jazz Monthly* 7/3 (May 1961): 13–14).

2111], sold only 150 copies in its first eight months. Then, at the end of 1952, the disc began to move. The reason is not entirely clear, though an October 1952 feature in *Jazz Journal*, which described rhythm and blues as the latest music popular with African American audiences, may have played a part. The article did not critically endorse rhythm and blues but it characterized the music as more modern and sophisticated than the race records of the 1920s and 1930s, which were “often primitive, and [their] musical worth often very doubtful.” The author made frequent use of adjectives like “snappy” and “jumping” and claimed that this new blues had the “rocking, rolling beat which only a coloured band can generate.”²

There is no evidence that rhythm and blues achieved instant popularity but the music gradually found an audience. In 1953 *Vogue*, which had just begun to establish its British subsidiary, declared itself:

Britain's only label specialising in Rhythm and Blues. This category of record was almost unknown over here two years ago, but now the popularity of r. & b. [sic] discs is increasing daily ... at first we must admit that YOU did not buy but now, thanks to our faith in Bostic, Wynonie Harris, Dominoes, Helen Humes, and Jimmy Witherspoon, YOU cannot get enough³

By mid 1954 younger jazz fans enamored of the socked beat and jumping rhythms drove “Flamingo” by Earl Bostic to the top of the British charts. Christopher Small states, “I still remember from my teens the impact made by ‘Caldonia’ and ‘Is You Is or Is You Ain’t My Baby.’ Neither I nor my contemporaries had the slightest idea of the provenance of all that vigour, excitement, and sheer fun, but we loved it”⁴

The critics were less impressed. Many, like Edgar Jackson, found rhythm and blues too loud, overly aggressive and lacking in emotional intensity. Though he enjoyed the records of Nellie Lutcher and Little Nell he found Jordan and Lionel Hampton abrasive and had no use for Earl Bostic. Reviewing a new batch of his releases in early 1954, Jackson commented:

[Bostic] still screams with the phoney fervour of a soap-box orator (almost completely obliterating the aforementioned vibes melodies); the noise he makes still sounds like a cross between a beehive and a buzz-saw.... These sides are what they describe in American as R&B. R is supposed to stand for rhythm; B for blues. Rasp and ballyhoo would be more apt descriptions.⁵

² Doug Whitton, “Inside ‘Rhythm and Blues,’” *Jazz Journal* 5/10 (October 1952): 1–2.

³ Advertisement in *Jazz Journal* 6/2 (February 1953). Most of the releases were from Chess masters.

⁴ Small, *Music of the Common Tongue: Survival and Celebration in Afro-American Music* (London, 1987), p. 209.

⁵ Edgar Jackson, “Swing reviews,” *Melody Maker*, 9 January 1954, 9.

Derrick Stewart-Baxter also condemned the music as “blasting,” “blaring,” “banal,” and “uninspired riffing.” He decided that rhythm and blues meant:

smart lyrics ... funny enough to get by at one of those bottle parties where the wine is in and the wit is out. The accompanying band is about as subtle as a pile driver, and just about as attractive. A good time is had by all members of this group who are knocking themselves out. I should mention there are hand claps for the kiddies. All very groovy!⁶

This was moderate compared to Peter Tanner’s response to rhythm and blues sides by Eddie Chamblee and Sonny Thompson:

For sheer musical vulgarity both of these performances would be hard to beat. Both the tunes and the playing are banal in the extreme and in the worst possible musical taste ... crude, self-conscious jazz.... Did I say jazz back there? Any resemblance to what I hope You [sic] and I term jazz is purely coincidental⁷

Albert McCarthy characterized rhythm and blues as “the music of gimmick and cheap excitement—it is as perfect a music for the ‘50s as the Charleston was for the ‘20s. It expresses perfectly the basic emptiness of modern America.” The “eccentricity of sound” created by squealing trumpets and honking saxes produced a “music lacking in any subtlety and has as its object the purveyance of excitement. From beginning to end the performers attempt to play with the maximum drive against a steady and almost thunderous beat from the rhythm section.”⁸

Their reactions are nearly analogous in their language and tone with early reports of jazz in the teens and twenties; complaints about heavy beat, strident tone colors and volume seem oddly anachronistic, especially since both Stewart-Baxter and McCarthy recognized they resulted from the growing urbanization of the African American population. Larger performance venues required increased volume if musicians were to be heard; in rhythm and blues this was accomplished by enlarging the standard “city” blues ensemble of electric guitar, upright bass, piano and trumpet or saxophone to a nine- or ten-piece ensemble.

A different aspect of urbanization may have been responsible for the new sound of the blues: big cities provided a radically different sonic environment to the rural American south. In *The Art of Noises* (1911) the futurist composer Luigi Russolo theorized that industrialization and the noises of machinery would render pure musical sounds obsolete and generate a demand for new variety of instrumental

⁶ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, “Wynonie Harris and Blind Boy Fuller,” *Jazz Journal* 6/9 (September 1953): 13.

⁷ Peter Tanner, review of Eddie Chamblee and his Blues and Rhythm Band, “Back Street” b/w “Cradle Rock” [Esquire 10-340] and Sonny Thompson and his Blues and Rhythm Band, “The Fish” b/w “Screamin’ Boogie” [Esquire 10-339], *Jazz Journal* 7/2 (February 1954): 8–9.

⁸ Albert McCarthy, “Rhythm and Blues,” in *Jazzbook ’55*, pp. 84, 88.

textures and colors.⁹ The honking, rasping saxophones and ferocious rhythmic drive of rhythm and blues were perhaps not merely affectations to generate excitement, but the sound of the blues adapting to its new environment.

British critics noted, and respected, that rhythm and blues discs were “the type of record which the present-day Negro population of the U.S. likes and buys ... with increased postwar prosperity, the Negro’s taste has broadened far beyond the interminable, repetitive twelve-bars which filed the pre-war Race lists.”¹⁰ The excitement it generated drove its appeal; given the popularity of revivalist jazz, bebop and crooners in the postwar period, many felt that rhythm and blues was “the only reliable place where the more adventurous youngster could find swing and beat.” Ernest Borneman celebrated this “sudden rediscovery of the beat,” speculating that it might “have something to do with the Negro community at long last reasserting its own taste”¹¹

Nonetheless, most critics were concerned by the emotional sterility they perceived in rhythm and blues. Derrick Stewart-Baxter’s comments about Wynonie Harris are illustrative:

He does have a good virile voice in the best tradition of the blues, but I find his material brash and very superficial.... While I am prepared to endure croaking tenors and high-powered machine gun drummers if what is being sung has merit, I draw the line when Harris shouts his trivial and rather contrived blues songs.¹²

Moreover, “everything is sacrificed for noise and power-house drive. That, I think, is one of the main faults of these Rhythm and Blues recordings ... everything is at one level of synthetic excitement.” To many the abandonment of folk themes and “deeply felt” sentiments represented a weakening of the “authentic” tradition, and increased sophistication and musicianship were not satisfactory compensation. “Sadly it is that we listen to most contemporary blues—for they are now just words ... they add heavy rhythm, sing fast, sing excessively slow. They create tricks, but never tell the story. There is nothing there.”¹³

This perceived vacuity was blamed on the music’s explicitly popular orientation. It was generally accepted that the most “authentic” blues were folk creations developed for local communities and thus isolated from the pressures of the marketplace. Rhythm and blues, on the other hand, was a commodity, and thus compromised in sentiment and style. Brian Ward has pointed out that “there was a

⁹ Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (Durham, 1996), pp. 114–16.

¹⁰ Doug Whitton, “Will the ’53 Bubble become the ’54 Boiler? *MM* puts the spotlight on R and B,” *Melody Maker*, 2 January 1954, 3.

¹¹ Ernest Borneman, “A Break in the Racial Barriers,” *Melody Maker*, 4 April 1953, 4.

¹² Derrick Stewart-Baxter, “Blues on Record part III,” *Jazz Journal* 11/10 (October 1958): 29.

¹³ Jasper Wood, “Reflections on the Nature of Jazz,” in *Jazzbook* ’55, p. 119.

sense that other, earlier black styles were somehow purer, more authentic, less haunted by the specter of an all-powerful commercial apparatus controlling the production and consumption of the music.”¹⁴ Albert McCarthy declared rhythm and blues a “rather reprehensible bastardization of a fine folk form” that if left unchecked might become a market driven monster like swing. Even Stanley Dance, who mostly championed the idiom, was concerned about the growing homogenization of rhythm and blues, created by artists imitating the style of recent hit records. Few believed the music was of lasting value.

Some critics tried to negotiate the difference between this new music and older blues by conceptualizing rhythm and blues as a “blues-inflected” or “blues-affiliated” style that stood apart from the “authentic” tradition. “Although [Turner, Rushing, Harris, et al.] are very good,” commented Hugues Panassié, “they do not represent—as I found out later—the type of blues singing which was one of the main foundations of jazz music.” These artists were not, to his thinking, “real blues singers.”¹⁵ Max Jones similarly considered Wynonie Harris:

a jazz singer who specializes in blues. Not country blues or blues-ballads of the type that Lead Belly sang, but rocking, roaring songs which are more likely to express anger or high spirits than the melancholy dissatisfaction of so many traditional blues. Such artists ... are called “made singers” by Big Bill Broonzy (who has the greatest admirations for Wynonie) to distinguish them from “natural” blues singers.¹⁶

In both cases it was Broonzy—who in the long view of history might be regarded as a progenitor of rhythm and blues—who provided the basis for reclassifying blues that did not conform to prevailing notions of the genre, perhaps to protect his monopoly as a purveyor of authenticity. During his British visits he frequently informed the press that other artists, even those he respected, were not singing “real” blues. Either their style was too “dressed up” (Josh White), too primitive (Sleepy John Estes) or too much like jazz (Lonnie Johnson). British jazz writers employed similar exclusionary rhetoric to isolate a pure root stock of the blues that influenced, to greater or lesser degrees, other styles of African American popular music.

This mechanism allowed those with reservations about rhythm and blues to nonetheless recognize its affiliation to the larger tradition. Albert McCarthy acknowledged that singers like Wynonie Harris, Willie Mae Thornton, Ruth Brown and B. B. King were “modernized city versions of the great blues singers of the past.” He felt that if these artists rejected the style’s superficial trappings “the solid core of really worthwhile music will emerge unscathed if rhythm and blues

¹⁴ Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley, 1998), p. 10.

¹⁵ Hugues Panassié, “Hugues Panassié on blues singers,” *Melody Maker*, 10 May 1952, 9.

¹⁶ Max Jones, “Jazz Reviews,” *Melody Maker*, 21 February 1953, 9.

retains some of the greatness of his past musical achievements, then it can be welcomed as a step in the right direction.”¹⁷

The West Coast electric blues were, in their way, as aggressive and strident as rhythm and blues but from the first were accepted as legitimate expositions of modernization. The first recordings in this style to reach Britain were tracks by T-Bone Walker from the Capitol *History of Jazz* volume 3 [10033]. At that time Irving Jacobs rated Walker as:

a blues singer of rare talent. Phenomenally enough, there is a direct link in his singing from the blues and folk artist of the past to the highly urbanized negro night-club entertainer of the present ... Whether T-Bone plays on a single string or whether he plays chords, he creates a solo that is steeped in old-time blues tradition and yet is strikingly, yes, startlingly fresh and new.¹⁸

Stanley Dance, who considered Walker “one of the greatest artists in the blues field,” agreed. “These are really the blues, but don’t expect blues sung in the same way as on records made thirty years ago ... these are city blues, alert, up-to-date, and heavily influenced by jazz ... but it is full of the brave and gay defiance that animates the enduring blues” even though the music had a “terrific beat” and “swings madly.”¹⁹ Sinclair Traill also noted that although Walker’s music was “somewhat modernized by the use of an amplified guitar and modern recording technique, he nevertheless retains much of the true feeling for the blues idiom which he assimilated during his youth.”²⁰ Lowell Fulson was also considered “a fine modern blues singer” who is neither “tasteless” nor “brash,” and delivers his songs, “which have a good bluesy ‘tang’ to them ... with obvious relish.”²¹

It is interesting to note that both were evaluated primarily as singers rather than instrumentalists, given Walker’s eventual influence on blues guitarists. The tracks on Capitol’s *Classics in Jazz: T-Bone Walker* [LC6681], a collection of eight of the superlative sides he recorded for Black and White in the late 1940, do highlight his vocal abilities, but they also reveal his staggering and novel command of the electric guitar. Critics did notice his technique; Stanley Dance praised him for the

¹⁷ McCarthy, “Rhythm and Blues,” in *Jazzbook* ’55, pp. 89–92. Most of the artists listed were products of the Atlantic label, which consciously wrote, arranged, and produced music to sound “something like the authentic blues, but cleaner, less rough, and more sophisticated.”

¹⁸ Irving Jacobs, review of “T-Bone Blues b/w ‘Mean Old World,’” by T-Bone Walker and *The Capitol History of Jazz* 3, *Jazz Records* 3/1 (1950): 6.

¹⁹ Stanley Dance, “Lightly and Politely,” *Jazz Journal* 8/11 (November 1954): 25.

²⁰ Sinclair Traill, review of *Capitol Classics in Jazz: T-Bone Walker, Melody Maker*, 30 October 1954, 11.

²¹ Sinclair Traill, review of “I Love My Baby” b/w “The Blues come Rollin’ In” [London L1199] by Lowell Fulson, *Melody Maker*, 12 November 1953, 12; Derrick Stewart-Baxter, reviewing same, *Jazz Journal* 7/1 (January 1954): 22.

way he wailed on “the most electric electric guitar in the racket” and Stewart-Baxter noted he “plays some fine single string guitar,” but neither attached any particular importance to Walker’s predominantly melodic style. Given the swing era expansion of the guitar’s role in ensemble jazz—pioneered by Walker’s mentor, Charlie Christian—it is likely that the intelligentsia received him primarily as a jazz technician who also sang blues. Certainly the Capitol album frames him in this manner; his band was composed of respected West Coast jazz players who provided tasteful and meritorious backing that reviewers found worthy of mention. It would only be recognized in retrospect that the most significant element of the fresh, urban blues that T-Bone Walker introduced to Britain was not his swinging vocals. Rather, it was his guitar playing, which combined the dexterous picking he had learned from Blind Lemon Jefferson and the jazz leads of Christian and Lonnie Johnson into a virtuoso style that would have been impossible on an acoustic instrument. Walker, the first blues player to fully exploit the melodic and sonic possibilities of the electric guitar, spearheaded a new urban style that would eventually be viewed by most British blues writers with as much ambivalence as rhythm and blues.

While jazz critics recognized rhythm and blues and the new urban sound as modern dialects of the blues they were still regarded as something other than the genuine article. Stanley Dance assured those who were devoted to only the most authentic black music that “the real blues tradition persists, and is faithfully supported by the colored communities, particularly in the south ... there is always this public for music that combines sincerity, honest artistry and a beat.”²² In fact, music of this nature was reasserting itself in the American marketplace and hitting the rhythm and blues charts, blues in the “old style ... by such artists as Country Paul, Muddy Waters, Smokey Hogg, and the ubiquitous John Lee Hooker...such recordings are referred to as ‘country’ or southern’ blues.”²³ However, British writers recognized these were not the familiar folk blues of Josh White and Leadbelly:

For just as jazz (in the purer sense) has been changing ... so has race music The majority, by far, are vocal items, often strongly reflecting modern life and all having original words, with such titles as “I’m A Natural Born Lover,” “Appetite Blues,” and “Shake, Holler, and Run.”...The number of artists involved in making these recordings is, of course, very considerable and amongst them are such well known and prolific artists as John Lee Hooker, Lightning Hopkins, Sonny Boy Williamson, and Smokey Hogg. Amongst a host of others, perhaps not so well-known, are Country Slim, Little Sam Davis, Big Boy Grooves [sic], Elmer [sic] James, and Lula Reed.²⁴

²² Stanley Dance, “Rhythm and blues,” *Melody Maker*, 18 June 1955, 3.

²³ Whitton, “Spotlight on R and B,” 3.

²⁴ Dixie, Ronald E. “Undercurrent,” *Jazz Monthly* 2/8 (August 1956): 10.

Given his subsequent importance, it is fitting that Muddy Waters was the first down home artist whose records were available in Britain. Many blues enthusiasts knew of Waters and had even heard some of his music; several London collectors had secured copies of the Library of Congress collection that included Waters's first recorded output and Alan Lomax programed a few of these songs on "Blues in the Mississippi Night." Moreover, Big Bill Broonzy cited the younger man as perhaps the only other active purveyor of real, authentic blues. Thus, it is not surprising that Waters's first domestic releases in 1952 received a great deal of attention.

In his review of "Rollin' Stone Blues" b/w "Walkin' Blues" [Vogue V2101] Max Jones declared, "Muddy is a must for people who like unspoiled blues as opposed to the watered-down commercial variety." He did not elaborate on which characteristics he heard as authentic, for he also considered Waters a contemporary stylist. "His way of singing and playing is one outcome of 50-odd years of developments in the American Negro blues field. He is part of a live tradition, and his music is as modern as bop if not as modernistic."²⁵ Trad trumpeter Humphrey Lyttelton concurred, categorizing Waters as "a genuine contemporary blues singer—by which I mean that he is neither a sophisticated cabaret 'blues singer' nor a relic from some archaic period."²⁶ The drum and bass accompaniment and stinging, amplified electric guitar solos were new qualities superimposed upon the older style of the folk blues, but Waters exemplified other traits that Jones praised in "real" blues singers: a rough untrained voice, earthy and direct lyrics and an expressivity borne of honesty and connection with the material.

John Lee Hooker was also categorized as a down home stylist, but one who employed modern techniques and "accompanies himself with terrific beat, generated both by his guitar and the stomping of his feet." While such a heavy beat was considered anathema in rhythm and blues, it was accepted as a natural element of Hooker's style since "he generally displays a free attitude toward the 12-bar blues formula and sings in a rough, dramatic style" like older traditional blues players.²⁷ Moreover, "as a performer with deep feeling, John Lee is right back there with such timeless artists as Blind Willie Johnson, Barbecue Bob and Lewis Black ... 'Whistlin' and Moanin' Blues' goes right back to West Africa in its primitive, almost chanting, ultra-rhythmic accompaniment."²⁸

²⁵ Max Jones, review of "Rollin' Stone Blues" b/w "Walkin' Blues" by Muddy Waters, *Melody Maker*, 10 May 1952, 9.

²⁶ Humphrey Lyttelton, review of "Long Distance Call" b/w "Hello Little Girl" by Muddy Waters [Vogue V2273], *New Musical Express*, 1 April 1955, 4.

²⁷ Hugues Panassié, "The Blues Singers," *Melody Maker*, 31 May 1952, 9.

²⁸ Claude Lipscombe, "John Lee Hooker," and Max Jones, review of "Hoogie Boogie" b/w "Whistlin' and Moanin' Blues" by John Lee Hooker, *Melody Maker*, 24 May 1952, 9.

McCarthy accepted these records as “genuine blues similar to the great performances of the past, and the artists would be of the type of Big Bill Broonzy, Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, Howling Wolf, and Lightning Hopkins.”²⁹ He thought that Waters was “not quite such a great blues singer as some critics would have us believe” but was “very much closer to the original source than the monstrous crop of rhythm and blues singers.” Derrick Stewart-Baxter also embraced Wolf, Waters, and Bo Diddley as “true negro folk singers” but drew an additional distinction between two acceptably genuine styles of blues: “firstly the rural blues of men like the late Blind Blake, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Robert Johnson and that of the living Big Bill Broonzy; and secondly the city style, the blues of the industrial North, an infinitely more sophisticated but exciting and beautiful music.” He regarded both as separate from “the various gimmick singers pushed up by commercial interests” and the “equally dangerous influences” of the “commercial exploitation of R and B or Rock an’ Roll.”³⁰

The tendency to categorize contemporary blues as either “authentic” modernizations of the folk style or “commercial” and “corrupt” rhythm and blues seems to dominate discourse from this period; however, this was more than just compartmentalization for its own sake. Assigning artists or songs a degree of consanguinity with the unassailably authentic folk tradition established at least one standard by which blues could be evaluated, albeit one that was still largely subjective. The system was not without its problems, for these categories were far from absolute and the definitions of critical discourse were not universally established. Albert McCarthy defended an early Howlin’ Wolf release [London RE-U 1072] by informing blues collectors that they “should certainly get this and need not be deterred by the fact that the sleeve calls the performances ‘rhythm and blues.’” He likewise felt that Fats Domino,

although working under the rhythm and blues banner ... is a genuine blues artist While not comparable to [Jimmy] Rushing or [Big Joe] Turner as a blues singer, let alone the country style men, Domino is a consistently fine performer and does not deserve to be overlooked because of the r & b tag

However, he lamented that these artists couldn’t be recorded with “good jazz backing.”³¹

Despite the ambivalence of the critics, by 1955 rhythm and blues was popular enough with the British public that popular dance orchestras like the Squadronaires and the Tony Crombie Orchestra were bringing their rhythm sections out front and

²⁹ McCarthy, “Rhythm and Blues,” pp. 90–91.

³⁰ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, “Joe Williams,” *Jazz Journal* 9/9 (September 1956): 7.

³¹ Albert McCarthy, review of *Rhythm and Blues by Howlin’ Wolf*, by Howlin’ Wolf, *Jazz Monthly* 3/5 (July 1957): 21; review of *Here Stands Fats Domino* by Fats Domino, *Jazz Monthly* 3/8 (October 1957): 13.

adding R&B numbers to their play lists. Mostly they featured novelty or comic songs with suggestive lyrics that had enjoyed modest success in the United States. Rhythm and blues releases, mostly from doo-wop groups or the Caucasian imitators who covered their songs, were more prevalent than they had been a few years earlier, though the fad soon began to fade as record buyers turned to new novelties from the States: calypso and country and western music.

The popularity of rhythm and blues did not significantly expand the British audience for other blues styles, which was still largely comprised of serious jazz fans and record collectors. This changed in late 1954 when two related musical crazes hit Britain almost simultaneously: rock 'n' roll and skiffle.

'The Blues Had a Baby'

Identifying the first rock 'n' roll record in the United States has become a popular pastime of scholars and critics, but after nearly fifty years of debate no consensus has emerged. In Britain the issue is much simpler. There is almost universal agreement that "Rock Around the Clock" by Bill Haley and the Comets, released on the Brunswick label in October of 1954, launched its love affair with rock 'n' roll.

Ironically, the term arrived before the music did; British writers were already using it to describe certain rhythm and blues songs. Stanley Dance called the "worst of R&B" rock 'n' roll but did not explain what might push a song into that category. Leonard Feather and Max Jones used it to encompass "all the wildest elements of rhythm and blues music": aggressive honking tenor saxophones, animated vocal backing, a strong beat and shouted lyrics.³² The music of Bill Haley and Elvis Presley wasn't called "rock 'n' roll" in Britain until 1956, long after the term entered the popular vocabulary of the United States.

Laurie Henshaw's appraisal of Bill Haley's first British offering—"presumably aimed at the R. & B. [sic] field. It will probably fall well wide of its target"³³—was well off the mark. The song began slowly climbing the pop charts but didn't start to seriously move until after Brunswick released "Shake, Rattle and Roll" b/w "A. B. C. Boogie" [05338] on 10 December. A week later "Shake, Rattle, and Roll" was at number thirteen; by the beginning of 1955 it was a Top Ten hit, and it dragged "Rock around the Clock" to number seventeen. "Shake, Rattle and Roll" reached number four by late January but its companion disc dropped off of the charts. *New Musical Express* critic and Radio Luxembourg disc jockey Geoffrey Everitt warmly praised both singles—"I marvel at the wonderful beat, which is

³² Dance, "Rhythm and Blues"; Leonard Feather, "Hamp's Circus," *Melody Maker*, 11 June 1955, 5.

³³ Laurie Henshaw, review of "Thirteen Women" b/w "We're Gonna Rock Around the Clock" by Bill Haley and his Comets, *Melody Maker*, 9 October 1954, 2.

something we never seem to get in this country”—and actively promoted new releases by Bill Haley and the Comets.³⁴ However, none performed as well as “Shake, Rattle, and Roll” until October 1955, when *The Blackboard Jungle*, an American film about juvenile delinquency, opened in Britain. “Rock around the Clock” was featured prominently in the soundtrack; almost immediately Haley’s record leaped back onto the charts and hit number one a few weeks later. It remained in the Top Twenty for seventeen weeks and established Bill Haley as the popularizer of a new type of rhythm and blues.

The British public at large only heard about rock ‘n’ roll after reports of rioting by real life juvenile delinquents at screenings of *Rock Around the Clock*, another film that featured Haley’s songs. The situation was vastly overstated by the national press—most of the rioters just wanted to dance in the aisles of the theatre—but more than a dozen cities banned the film, fearing “hooliganism” and “public disorder.” This public unrest did nothing to limit the appeal of the new music; in fact, many teenagers were drawn to the excitement and its rebellious image.³⁵

Charlie Gillett has stated that, “lacking any regular access to the sound of Hank Ballard, Amos Milburn, Wynonie Harris and Muddy Waters during the early fifties, most people [in Britain] were taken by surprise when ... ‘Shake, Rattle, and Roll’ and ‘Rock Around the Clock’ were issued in late 1954.”³⁶ It is true that little rhythm and blues had appeared on the British charts but jazz writers, critics, and fans had no trouble recognizing rock ‘n’ roll’s pedigree. All of its elements—the style of the beat, the 12-bar form, the instrumental resources, the shouting delivery style and the prioritization of rhythm over melody—were known to connoisseurs as elements of the blues. Some commentators pointed out more direct relationships. Tony Standish explained that both rhythm and blues and rock ‘n’ roll featured guitar playing from blues tradition, the wailing saxophones of the jump blues and rhythm and blues percussion. “The drummers either ride along with the eight-to-the-bar piano rhythms or employ the hypnotic ‘drop-beat’ that the rhythm-and-blues men long ago appropriated from the gospel singers.” The singing, to his ears, was “country blues gone urban, with a strong gospel influence becoming apparent.” Charles Edward Smith further noted, “The blues have supplied the

³⁴ Geoffrey Everitt, review of “Dim Dim the Lights” b/w “Happy Baby” by Bill Haley and his Comets, *New Musical Express*, 28 January 1955, 4.

³⁵ According to Christopher Smalls, teens who wanted to dance were prevented from doing so by theatre officials; in response Teddy Boys occasionally ripped up seats or loitered outside the cinema after being ejected (Smalls, *Common Tongue*, p. 376). Graham Nash recalls this happening when the film was shown in Manchester. John Lennon, hoping for some excitement in sleepy Liverpool, was disappointed when no riot materialized at his local theatre.

³⁶ Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll*, 2nd edn (NY, 1996), p. 254.

melodies for countless tunes, probably hundreds if not thousands, in the rock and roll field alone (which also borrows from spirituals)."³⁷

The musicians themselves freely discussed their influences. Rex Morton reported that Bill Haley and his Comets "admit that they model themselves closely on such 'authentic' r. and b. [sic] attractions as Earl Bostic, the Wynonie Harris group, and blues-shouter Joe Turner." Haley championed rock 'n' roll as respectable entertainment, wondering "how could it be anything else, when it comes directly from the blues, the gospel [sic] songs, and other aspects of Negro folk music in America?"³⁸ Vocal harmony groups like the Crew Cuts and the Four Aces also acknowledged their debt to rhythm and blues, as did Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins and other white rock 'n' rollers interviewed by the British musical press.

Haley was widely considered the creator of a novelty combination of rhythm and blues and country music with a swinging beat; stories in the popular music press painted him as a hard-working musician who had spent years finding an audience for his new style. When Elvis Presley arrived in early 1956 critics began to see the music in a different light. Presley was aggressively promoted by Brunswick and Decca as the "new American sensation," and his first British disc, "I Was the One" b/w "Heartbreak Hotel," was advertised through planted features in the musical press. When the song reached number one in the United States *New Musical Express* put Elvis on the cover even though the record was not selling well in Britain. After several more weeks of hype the record climbed into the Top Twenty; by then it was abundantly clear to jazz critics that rock 'n' roll was music crafted for popular consumption and marketed with all the zeal the industry could muster. And by August the stuff was flooding the country.

Some reviewers who found fault with the new music did so for the same reasons they panned rhythm and blues: they thought it was too loud, crude, vacuous and monotonous. Albert McCarthy opined, "The reason that rock and roll, despite obvious affinities with the blues, is so inferior to the real article is that the emotions expressed are almost entirely spurious."³⁹ The head of the Musicians' Union thought it rubbish of no musical worth and *Melody Maker* suggested that even those who produced it thought it tasteless. The paper called on the music industry and the public to "rebel against the handful of men who are responsible

³⁷ Tony Standish, "The Big Beat Generation," *Jazz Journal*, 12/10 (October 1959): 11; Charles Edward Smith, "Big Bill and the Country Blues," *Jazz Monthly* 3/11 (January 1958): 7-8.

³⁸ Rex Morton, "The Meteoric Rise of the Comets," *New Musical Express*, 4 November 1955, 10; Bill Haley, "There's Plenty of Room for All Tastes—So Please Don't 'Knock the Rock,'" *New Musical Express*, 4 January 1957, 9.

³⁹ Albert McCarthy, review of *Live at Newport* by Ray Charles, *Jazz Monthly* 6/5 (July 1960): 15.

for this lowering of musical standards.”⁴⁰ One of the most famous condemnations was by jazz critic Steve Race, whose objections were based as much on the invasiveness of American culture as the musical qualities of the genre.

Comes the Day of Judgment, there are a number of things for which the American music industry, followed (as always) panting and starry-eyed by our own, will find itself answerable to St. Peter. It wouldn't surprise me if near the top of the list is 'rock-and-roll.'...Viewed as a social phenomenon, the current craze for rock and roll material is one of the most terrifying things to have had happened to popular music [sic]...the rock and roll technique, instrumentally and vocally, is the antithesis of all that jazz has been striving for over the years—in other words, good taste and musical integrity.⁴¹

A surprising number of reactions were racially based, though these attacks were usually couched in “tribal” metaphors. A columnist for the *Monthly Musical Record* compared rock ‘n’ roll to “certain forms of music [which] induce mass-hysteria in certain ‘primitive’ peoples,” and Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave have noted that “horrified reactions to ‘jungle’ drums, ‘primitive’ rhythms and sax and guitar-playing, ‘African’ dance styles, etc., were in good supply ... even if not quite so strong as in parts of the USA” Sir Malcolm Sargent, conductor of the BBC orchestra, condemned the music as “nothing more than an exhibition of primitive tom-tom thumping,” adding that it “had been played in the jungle for centuries.”⁴² The critic for the *Daily Mail* offered what was easily the most offensive comment; he found rock ‘n’ roll “deplorable. It is tribal. And it is from America. It follows ragtime, blues, jazz, hot cha-cha and the boogie-woogie, which surely originated in the jungle. We sometimes wonder whether this is the Negro’s revenge.”⁴³

Jazz and blues critics who reacted negatively to rock ‘n’ roll were mostly concerned that it was a further dilution of the blues, which had already been compromised by commercialism. Tony Standish believed that:

[Rock ‘n’ roll and rhythm and blues] have come about largely as a result of the conflict between the unique vitality and functionalism of urban and rural Negro folk music and (a) the attempted rejection of the basic folk qualities by many young Negroes hell-bent for Culture [sic], (b) changing social conditions, and (c) the demands of a predominantly

⁴⁰ “Pop Rot!” *Melody Maker*, 8 November 1958, 3.

⁴¹ Steve Race, “Searchlight,” *Melody Maker*, 5 May 1956,

⁴² Middleton, “Problem,” p. 30; Dick Bradley, *Understanding Rock ‘n’ Roll: Popular Music in Britain 1955–1964* (Buckingham, 1992), p. 89; “Sir M. Sargent on ‘tom-tom thumping,’” *London Times*, 18 September 1956, cited in Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave, *Anti-Rock: The Opposition to Rock ‘n’ Roll* (NY, 1993), p. 47.

⁴³ *Daily Mail*, 5 September 1956, cited in Martin Cloonan, “Exclusive! The British Press and Popular Music,” *Pop Music and the Press*, ed. Steve Jones (Philadelphia, 2002), pp. 114–15.

white society whose musical wholesalers wish to inflict their own crass tastes upon the products they market, and who promise rich cash rewards to those who comply.

He felt that Tin Pan Alley had:

corrupted and stamped out New Orleans jazz in the thirties; it exploited and killed off the New Orleans revival (in America) in the forties; it recorded Tony Bennett with the Basie Band in the fifties, and it adds insult to all these injuries by attempting to recreate the blues in its own lying, imbecile image.

Iain Chambers claims that the musical press avoided the link between rock 'n' roll and the blues, but most jazz columnists discoursed openly on the subject. Standish noted that Chuck Berry:

fills a place in popular Negro music once occupied by Bessie Smith, Leroy Carr, Kokomo Arnold, and Tampa Red. His is the sort of music the Negro listens to today ... and like it or not it is music that undeniably retains much of the vitality of the blues from which it evolved.⁴⁴

Stanley Dance regarded rock 'n' roll's fusion of blues and hillbilly music as a "commercial prostitution" yet acknowledged it as a legitimate, though fundamentally barren, blues style "which occupies much the same position as the 'race' music of thirty years ago."⁴⁵ He may have been paraphrasing Sinclair Traill, whose introduction to *Just Jazz* dubbed rock 'n' roll a "musical oddity which bears such a close resemblance to the race and blues music of thirty years ago ... the pallid version of a jazz sound, exploited three decades ago for the prime benefit of the coloured people in America."

Some tried to assuage jazz and blues fans that feared the commercial pressures exerted by rock 'n' roll would destroy black music. Humphrey Lyttelton thought the fad would pass but "the names of the men who laid the foundation on which today's card-houses are built—Joe Turner, Jimmy Rushing, Big Bill Broonzy, Huddie Ledbetter, Muddy Waters and many others—will remain," and Stanley Dance reassured his readers that "contrary to some widely expressed opinions, the unadulterated blues and its singers are neither dead nor even licked." Only Sinclair Traill dared hope that "the noxious element in this debased music will not have harmed the minds of those who are on the fringe of jazz, but that it will ultimately

⁴⁴ Tony Standish, "The Big Beat Generation," *Jazz Journal* 12/10 (October 1959): 11; Standish, review of "Beautiful Delilah" b/w "Vacation Time" by Chuck Berry, *Jazz Journal* 11/10 (October 1958): 12.

⁴⁵ Stanley Dance, "Lightly and Politely," *Jazz Journal* 11/5 (May 1958): 41; Sinclair Traill, "Introduction," in Sinclair Traill and Gerald Lascelles (eds), *Just Jazz* (London, 1957), pp. xvi–xvii; Humphrey Lyttelton, "Am I A Square?" *Melody Maker*, 25 January 1958, 6.

have provided the stepping-stone to something deeper and far more serious from such humorous beginnings.”⁴⁶

Rock ‘n’ roll ultimately drew far more British young people to the blues than Traill could have imagined, though it did so through another derivative style. As “Rock around the Clock” was hitting the top of the charts another record was launching the country’s next big craze. And it came from a rather unlikely place: revivalist jazz.

‘The Rock Island Line’: Skiffle

In January of 1956 ‘The Rock Island Line’ by Lonnie Donegan entered the British Top Twenty. It was different from anything that had hit the pop charts before. It sounded like a song by Leadbelly or Big Bill Broonzy with the inflections of American country and folk music and it was performed by a well-known jazz band. Nonetheless, consumers—and particularly teenagers—were buying it in droves. It was the beginning of a wild, eighteen month ride that would leave a permanent impression on popular music in Britain.

Skiffle was introduced several years earlier by the popular Crane River Jazz Band as intermission filler. The Cranes were led by Ken Colyer, who many consider the “Godfather of British New-Orleans-style jazz.” He became interested in the revivalist movement when his brother Bill started collecting Bix Beiderbecke records, and in 1950 the siblings decided to start a band and “re-create the archaic jazz of the Storyville period” to the degree they believed was possible by white European musicians. The Crane River Jazz Band received mixed but generally favorable reviews, then broke up in 1952 after Ken Colyer quit and joined the Merchant Marines.

The band’s few recordings continued to sell well, especially after the Cranes received a postmortem infusion of credibility. Word reached London that Colyer had jumped ship in New Orleans and was playing with some of the legendary prime movers of jazz like George Lewis, Alcide Pavageua, and Percy Humphries. During his stay he sent regular dispatches back to *Melody Maker* for publication and was establishing a significant reputation in both countries when his visa expired and he was forcibly deported.

When he arrived back in London he found a band waiting for him. Chris Barber, whose own revivalist outfit had lost several members, was looking for a new direction. Barber was a classically trained trombonist who had studied at the prestigious Guildhall School of Music while simultaneously playing in some of England’s finest dance bands. His own outfit, Chris Barber’s New Orleans Jazz Band, played better than most of their contemporaries but was rough around the edges, despite their leader’s obvious talent. He thought that adding Ken Colyer

⁴⁶ Traill, “Introduction,” p. xvii.

to the mix would improve their general musicianship and raise their public profile.

Barber may have liked New Orleans jazz but he claimed to be a blues fan at heart. He recalls buying his first blues record in 1945, but is unsure whether it was by Sleepy John Estes or Cow Cow Davenport. "I think I got my first Robert Johnson in 1947," he remembers, "which I got in Dobell's shop for seven shillings and sixpence." There he met Alexis Korner, a guitarist and fellow collector, who was also searching for country blues records. Barber brought Korner into the band and started to add blues songs to their repertoire. Korner recalled:

We used to do a half-hour set of R&B, 'race blues,' it was called then—a piano, guitar, bass, drums set-up like the Tampa Red and Bill Broonzy Chicago sessions on Bluebird in the late 1930s and early 1940s ... people would say, 'What's that funny stuff you played in the middle?'"⁴⁷

This interval set was much like the one the Crane River Jazz Band featured except the Barber outfit performed more blues, mostly Leadbelly and Big Bill Broonzy songs they learned from records. In order to strengthen their sound Colyer recruited a young banjoist named Tony Donegan, who rechristened himself "Lonnie" after his name was entangled with Lonnie Johnson's by the compère of a London concert.⁴⁸

By this time they were calling the blues interlude the skiffle set, though no one was sure what the word meant. In *Story of the Blues* Paul Oliver defines skiffle as another name for a rent party—perhaps a distortion of the word "scuffle"—with a secondary, broader meaning of a jam session or free-for-all. "Home-Town Skiffle" was the title of a 1929 Paramount 'all-star' blues disc featuring Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Blake, Will Ezell, Charlie Spand, Papa Charlie Jackson and the Hokum Boys (Georgia Tom and Tampa Red), and in 1948 Brownie McGhee, Pops Foster, Sidney Bechet and Kid Ory recorded a few sides with newspaperman Dan Burley as the Skiffle Boys. The term was also associated with "blue blowing" or spasm bands that played jazz on found or home-made instruments. None of the above particularly applied to the Barber/Colyer skiffle ensemble but Bill Colyer, who named the outfit, didn't attach much meaning to the word. However, it may have evoked a feeling associated with old blues records.⁴⁹

Ken Colyer and Chris Barber proved to be temperamentally incompatible and after a few months both Colyers left the group. They took Alexis Korner with them and formed Ken Colyer's Jazzmen. Advertisements of their first concert promised "skiffle music played by a group led by Ken on guitar, and including Bill Colyer, Alex Korner and guest pianist Johnny Parker." The same group, plus bassist Micky

⁴⁷ Shapiro, *Korner*, p. 40.

⁴⁸ McDevitt, *Skiffle*, p. 61.

⁴⁹ Paul Oliver, *The Story of the Blues*, 2nd edn (Radnor, 1982), p. 164.

Ashman, recorded the first British skiffle in November of 1954. The eponymous album [Decca LP1196] included three skiffle numbers: Leadbelly's version of "Midnight Special;" "Casey Jones," probably learned from the Jesse James 78 rpm [Vocalion 10337]; and "K.C. Moan" [source unknown]. By this time Chris Barber had recruited new members and headed into the studio as well. His LP *New Orleans Joys* also offered Leadbelly songs performed by their skiffle group: "John Henry" and "Rock Island Line." Neither group viewed the tracks as particularly special but BBC disc jockey Chris Stone liked "Rock Island Line" and played it frequently. Once it started to generate requests Decca decided to release the song as a single. It appeared on the charts immediately after its December release and by the last week of January 1956 it had overtaken both Bill Haley's "Rock Around the Clock" and "Rock a' Beatin' Boogie."

No one was quite sure why the disc was selling, let alone in the Top Ten. It has been speculated that the record was successful because it was the first to introduce black music to Britain; this is obviously not true, though it was perhaps the vehicle through which many younger Britons discovered African American folk music.⁵⁰ "Rock Island Line" does not sound particularly like Leadbelly's version—though both Chas McDevitt and Bob Groom swear that if one plays Donegan's 45 rpm single at 33 1/3 rpm they are almost identical—nor did it resemble much of the American folk music of its day. Charles Govey observed, "the disc has quite accidentally cashed in on two very strong trends in the pop record business. One is the narrative gimmick ... the other is the 'rock an' roll' [sic] craze as exemplified by 'Rock Around the Clock' and 'Sixteen Tons.'" He speculated that perhaps the word "rock" in the title was seducing buyers who thought it another rock 'n' roll disc.⁵¹ While this seems unlikely, "Rock Island Line" did share some of its traits. Both skiffle and rock 'n' roll foreground propulsive rhythms created by rhythmic layering: the drum or bass lays down the basic pulse, the guitar subdivides each beat into even eighth notes and the singer contributes a syncopated melody line. Furthermore, the second and fourth beats of every bar are accented, a trait common in rock 'n' roll and R&B. All three styles are driven by variations of melody, rhythm, dynamics and timbre rather than goal-directed harmonic motion. The similarities were clearly recognized by critics, as much of the British music press used the terms "rock 'n' roll" and "skiffle" interchangeably.

Skiffle, however, was initially aggressively anti-commercial. John Postgate commented that although "as far 90 percent of their audience is concerned they might as well be the same thing" skiffle was "folksy and authentic, while 'rock 'n' roll' is unashamedly commercial."⁵² Most skiffle audiences rejected the slick fare

⁵⁰ Gary Atkinson, "Lonnie Donegan & Lead Belly," *Lead Belly Letter* 5/3 (Summer 1995): 5.

⁵¹ Charles Govey, "The Trad Man in the Top Twenty," *New Musical Express*, 27 January 1956, 5.

⁵² John Postgate, "Skiffle," *Jazz Monthly* 3/7 (August 1957): 7.

produced by Archer Street, Britain's analogue to Tin Pan Alley. Charlie Gillett recalled that he liked skiffle because the songs "seemed to have no romantic content, which spared us the phony passion of 'your eyes are the eyes of a woman in love.'"⁵³

In skiffle authenticity and dedication were more important than precision, and participation was valued more than passive consumption. This is not to say that skiffle records didn't sell well; Lonnie Donegan placed 25 more skiffle songs in the Top Twenty, and Chas McDevitt, the Vipers and Johnny Duncan and the Bluegrass Boys also had records on the charts. The music also generated an explosion of amateur skiffle groups, a do-it-yourself music movement the likes of which Britain had never seen.

In its populist guise skiffle was a syncopated mixture of jazz, folk and blues played on inexpensive or home-made instruments, which included acoustic guitar and/or banjo, snare drum or washboard and an upright bass constructed from an empty tea chest, a broom handle, and some wire. The music was influenced primarily by black folk artists like Leadbelly and Josh White, and African American folk songs comprised the central repertoire; American folk tunes recorded by Burl Ives, Ramblin' Jack Elliot and Woody Guthrie were also popular. An Anglican vicar who wrote a popular "how-to" manual on skiffle suggested that vocalists "should have a fair knowledge of Blues [sic] style singing, as many of the old Negro spirituals, work-songs, ballads and Blues are some of the best material for a skiffle group."⁵⁴ What was important was that the music was not complicated. Once a prospective skiffler had mastered three or four chords, a few basic rhythmic patterns and some lyrics he was on his way.

Skiffle was soon *the* activity for young Britons. Chas McDevitt estimated there were between 30,000 and 50,000 groups in the British Isles by 1957, and every town of decent size was represented by a dozen or more. Adam Faith recalled, "Skiffle hit Britain with all the fury of Asian flu. Everyone went down with it. Anyone who could afford to buy a guitar and learn three chords was in business...." Music shops hawked washboards and cheap guitars that could be paid off in weekly installments and skiffle songs were used in advertisements. Youth organizations promoted skiffle as a positive and constructive activity, and churches and civic groups sponsored contests and booked bands for socials and mixers. Coffee bars, newly popular hangouts for teenagers, generally offered their patrons live entertainment; within months skiffle became their music of choice. In London there was such demand that coffee bars proliferated only slightly less quickly than skiffle groups.

The music was equally popular, if not more so, in the rest of Britain. For weeks *The Lonnie Donegan Showcase* topped the regional jazz record charts in

⁵³ Charlie Gillett, "Getting to know Snooks Eaglin," in Simon Napier (ed.), *Back Woods Blues* (Bexhill-on-Sea, 1968), p. 35.

⁵⁴ Brian Bird, *Skiffle: The Story of Folk Song with a Jazz Beat* (London, 1958), p. 62.

Birmingham, Manchester and Edinburgh, and jazz clubs, ballrooms and restaurants regularly provided performance opportunities for local bands; in Glasgow the British Legion Hall and the Community House offered skiffle sessions.⁵⁵ Regional competitions were regular occurrences and national skiffle contests attracted groups from all over Britain. One such event was launched at the Empire Theatre in Glasgow, with competitions in Leicester, Derby, Nottingham, Sheffield, London, and Leeds; the latter also hosted the world skiffle competition in 1957. The winner of the “First National Skiffle Contest” in Bury St. Edmonds in June 1957 was the 2.19 Skiffle Group from Rochester, Kent; the runners-up, the Delta Skiffle Group, had traveled from Glasgow to participate.⁵⁶

Similar groups existed in virtually every city in Britain. One of the most popular, the Avon Cities Skiffle Group, was from Bristol. The Railroaders Skiffle Group, a Newcastle ensemble comprising winners of the South Shields Jazz Club skiffle contest, later became the successful pop group the Shadows. Liverpool was home to a veritable host of skiffle groups, among them the Quarrymen, who may not have won any of the regional contests at the Liverpool Empire but did all right for themselves once they got rid of their banjo player and changed their name to the Beatles.

Skiffle was so popular that even the BBC took notice. Skiffle records were played on request shows like *Housewife's Choice* and *Mid-day Music Hall*, and in July 1957 BBC radio introduced the *Saturday Skiffle Club*. By some accounts the movement was already in decline but the show nonetheless garnered acceptable ratings. The new Independent Television Network (ITV) reacted more quickly; its *Cool for Cats* debuted in December 1956. BBC-TV retaliated several months later with *Six-Five Special*. The show covered youth trends of all kinds but regularly featured performances by Trad jazz and skiffle bands.

The general public amiably tolerated skiffle but jazz critics and members of the British musical establishment had mixed feelings. While most accepted that in the hands of professional musicians like Lonnie Donegan and Chris Barber skiffle was a “genuine development of folk music” and “a legitimate part of a jazz band’s scope,” the style became controversial as acts of marginal ability flooded the market.⁵⁷ *Melody Maker* devoted significant space to debating whether skiffle was “a creative music, a menace, or just a form of rock-and-roll?” in articles entitled “Skiffle on Trial” and “Skiffle or Piffle?” Bob Dawbarn voted for piffle, calling the music a “bastardized, commercialized form of the real thing, watered down to suit the sickly, orange-juice tastes of musical illiterates.”⁵⁸ Likewise, Benny Green thought skiffle “the despair of the genuine jazz lover, the salvation of the Music

⁵⁵ Mike Dewe, *The Skiffle Craze* (Aberystwyth, 1998), p. 144.

⁵⁶ McDevitt, *Skiffle*, pp. 188–9, 193.

⁵⁷ Tony Brown, “Amazing success story of Chris Barber,” *Melody Maker*, 9 Jan. 1957, 3.

⁵⁸ “Skiffle on Trial”, *Melody Maker*, 9 March 1957, 2.

Hall, and a windfall for countless artists with no voice, no experience, no talent and no humility,” but noted that its ancestry made it hard to dismiss out of hand:

What of these credentials that the skiffers have presented as their excuse for literally scraping such a comfortable living? They are credentials which have an intimate connection with that fickle jade, Folk Music. Now Folk Music is one of the irresistible weapons in the musical fight. It is a device which shatters all adverse criticism in an instant, a kind of dialectic atomic bomb ... there is no reason why the claim of “Folk Music” should be accepted as a passport for entry into the principality of jazz The fraudulent conversion of the jazz currency into rock-and-roll coinage was bad enough, but the claims of the skiffers to a place in the jazz world are even less justified, more outrageous and completely incomprehensible by even the crudest canons of musical judgment.... It is fobbing off a generation of future citizens with a ghastly ersatz version of the real thing.⁵⁹

A few critics believed that, no matter their personal opinion of the music, skiffle would ultimately prove beneficial. Ernest Borneman hoped that the emphatic beat of rock ‘n’ roll and skiffle would revitalize the country’s jazz and popular music. John Postgate, who admitted that when he saw skiffle players “a series of reflexes is triggered off whereby I end up in the nearest bar out of earshot,” seconded the notion. “Hasn’t it been obvious for at least two years that the thing that sold rock ‘n’ roll and skiffle was beat and then more beat?” He thought skiffle might start a revival of jazz singing, as “the past decade’s fashion in popular singing has involved about as much beat and jazz inflection as a school choir, and the ostensibly jazz and cool singers have been little better.”⁶⁰

Most jazz traditionalists and blues evangelists were benignly tolerant, recognizing that young skiffle players were learning basic musicianship and broadening their musical horizons. Humphrey Lyttelton granted that skiffle might be a positive thing “if people are really learning to play those guitars, not just carry [sic] them naked around Soho for effect;” even Steve Race felt there was “something intrinsically good about even a bad group of amateur players.”⁶¹ Max Jones and Sinclair Traill admitted that much of the music was of poor quality but noted that “a proportion do [sic] take keenly to the music, and they swell the existing audience for artists of Bill Broonzy’s class.”

African American folk musicians visiting Britain not only accepted skiffle musicians but also encouraged them. Broonzy declared, “If Lonnie or any of them [skiffle players] like to take my best songs and record them, and maybe sell a

⁵⁹ Benny Green, “The Usurpers,” in Sinclair Traill and Gerald Lascelles (eds), *Just Jazz 2* (London, 1958), pp. 82, 90.

⁶⁰ John Postgate, “Skiffle,” 7.

⁶¹ Humphrey Lyttelton, “Skiffle purists are worried,” *Melody Maker*, 29 June 1957, 5; “Skiffle on Trial.”

million of 'em, I'll be proud."⁶² Chas McDevitt recalls visiting performers were supportive, as they regarded skiffle as "an extension of their field of work." Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee played skiffle clubs during their 1957 tour and added McDevitt's hit "Freight Train" to their repertoire. The following year Muddy Waters and Otis Spann gave him some pointers—or at least a photo op—backstage at the Leeds Jazz Festival.⁶³

Alan Lomax was not surprised by skiffle's popularity, as black folk songs "had already succeeded in pleasing the racially prejudiced people of British descent in the south." He was somewhat troubled by the disparity between the preferred skiffle repertoire—"Negro prison songs"—and its performers, "young men who had suffered, comparatively speaking, so little. But I soon realized that these young people felt themselves to be in a prison composed of the class-and-caste lines of the shrinking British Empire." However, he hoped that skiffles would develop an interest in English folk songs. Graham Boatfield likewise believed that if the country's youth wanted to sing folk music they should stick to the native repertoire:

Folk music is intensely national, even parochial.... Even to the casual listener this become apparent when a singer attempts to cross not only national but racial barriers ... we can all hear the false note when Josh White sings a "white" song or Burl Ives sings anything Negroid. Our skiffle groups however seem unaware that they are doing the impossible when it comes to copying music which is the very personal property of Negro convicts and Alabama sharecroppers⁶⁴

Chris Barber, in contrast, thought the "vocal and guitar music of Big Bill Broonzy and Leadbelly" was the only real skiffle music; inserting British folk songs into the mix would corrupt the idiom. Lomax, though, believed that such an expansion was inevitable; eventually skiffles would tire of "two-beat imitations of Negro rhythm and ... produce something a bit more home-grown"⁶⁵ As it turned out, Lomax was half right; the British folk revival did attract some skiffle players and fans, but the movement as a whole was not transformed.

In fact, the skiffle craze had already peaked, and it was over by the end of 1958. Professional skiffles continued to perform and a few had Top Twenty hits but the amateur movement slowly dissipated. Though its widespread popularity was brief, skiffle made a number of important contributions to British popular music. Its most immediate effect was the popularization of the guitar. Before 1955 the instrument was occasionally heard as a solo instrument or in the rhythm section of dance bands, but few musicians played regularly. Bryan Silver of the Vipers Skiffle Group recalled:

⁶² Max Jones and Sinclair Traill, "Collector's Corner," *Melody Maker*, 6 April 1957, 6.

⁶³ Chas McDevitt, letter to the author, 11 February 2005.

⁶⁴ Graham Boatfield, "Skiffle Artificial," *Jazz Journal* 9/5 (April 1956): 2.

⁶⁵ Alan Lomax, "Skiffle: Where is it going?" *Melody Maker*, 7 September 1957, 5.

Guitars were very rare in those days. I was going home one night when two policemen asked "what's that?" They asked, "where did you take that from?" I said "nowhere," they said "prove it," so in the middle of Charing Cross Road I had to play "On Top of Old Smokey."⁶⁶

During the skiffle craze guitar sales increased tenfold and music shops couldn't keep instruments in stock. John Lennon famously stated that Elvis Presley made hundreds of British youngsters want to play guitar but it was Lonnie Donegan who made it seem possible. Fellow Quarryman George Harrison agreed. "I have a lot to thank skiffle for. Without it being so simple I may not have put in so much time with the guitar, enabling me to learn more of the instrument as I progressed."⁶⁷

The do-it-yourself aesthetic of skiffle shaped the next three decades of British popular music. Brian Bird observed, "Music which during the gloomy decades of the past century had come to be looked upon as an occupation for hack performers only, or as a 'cissy' [sic] extra to be learned at school by a few abnormal individuals, has now become again a national pastime"⁶⁸ Amateurism no longer prohibited participation.

Most importantly, skiffle introduced the youth of Britain to a broad spectrum of American roots music that was largely inaccessible to the general public before 1955. George Harrison was grateful that the movement made him aware of "folk, country, blues and traditional songs, and people like Leadbelly who, to this day, is still one of my favorite singer/songwriter/guitar players." Mick Jagger also recalls that he became interested in the blues during the skiffle craze, "when I found out that it so much as existed."⁶⁹

While many fledgling musicians abandoned their guitars and washboards, others turned back to rock 'n' roll which, much to the chagrin of the musical establishment, was still very much alive. Some groups metamorphosed into rock 'n' roll acts overnight; the Alan Caldwell Skiffle Group became Rory Storm and the Hurricanes and Liverpool's Gerry Marsden Skiffle Group became Gerry and the Pacemakers.

At this juncture the British music industry was trying to cultivate a native tradition of rock 'n' roll. Tommy Steele, who was launched in 1956 as the British Elvis, was doing well but still not outselling the genuine article. Nonetheless, he introduced a "pattern of hack-handed mimicry" that was copied by most of the talent recruited and managed by the legendary impresario Larry Parnes. As most of these teen idols were largely unfamiliar with the blues roots of rock their efforts

⁶⁶ Keith Hunt, *Shakin' All Over: The Birth of British R&B. The Life and Times of Johnny Kidd* (Buckinghamshire, 1996), pp. 17–18.

⁶⁷ Philip Norman, *Shout! The Beatles in their Generation* (NY, 1981), p. 19.

⁶⁸ Bird, *Skiffle*, p. 56.

⁶⁹ George Harrison, foreword to Mc Devitt, *Skiffle*, p. viii; Carey Schofield, *Jagger* (NY, 1985), p. 15.

were not particularly convincing, and they “quickly reverted to being up-tempo teenage pop singers.”⁷⁰

David Hatch and Stephen Millward have declared that “in a country where the techniques of blues-boogie guitar playing were as much a mystery as were the principles underlying Indian and Japanese folk musics” the production of even marginally credible rock ‘n’ roll was “something of an achievement.”⁷¹ Neil Nehring, however, dubbed the music of these new British teen idols “castrato rock, signifying [its] close commercial control as well as musical and vocal vacuity which killed rock stone dead.... No rage, no farce, no ugliness left. We have mass-produced faces with mass-produced voices on mass-produced songs”⁷²

Many former skiffles and rock ‘n’ roll fans agreed, and they sought out less commercialized musical options. Some embraced folk music. Others returned to the Trad jazz scene, which enjoyed renewed popularity once “the skiffle threat” had passed. A third group, somewhat smaller than the others, went looking for the blues.

⁷⁰ Norman, *Shout*, p. 50; Chambers, *Urban Rhythms*, p. 38.

⁷¹ David Hatch and Stephen Millward, *From Blues to Rock: An Analytical History of Rock Music* (Manchester, 1987), p. 78; Neil Nehring, *Flowers in the Dustbin: Culture, Anarchy, and Postwar England* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1993), pp. 207–9.

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Chapter Four

1957–1962: The Blues Revival, Part I

The critics who had optimistically guessed that the blues-based musical fads of the mid 1950s might stimulate a taste for the real thing turned out to be right. Trad jazz led many young hipsters to valorize African American music, as did skiffle and rock 'n' roll. These movements stimulated "a growing appetite for authentic blues. Hearing the blues, in however crude or debased a form, seems to have conditioned many teenagers to the pattern and mood of the idiom, so that they can listen to singers like Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee without any sense of strangeness."¹ The blues scene that began to develop in Britain between 1958 and 1962 was spearheaded by the blues faction of the jazz cognoscenti, but it was driven by this new, young, and largely unexpected constituency.

Many of these new fans discovered the blues through Big Bill Broonzy. Art Wood, a popular figure of London's blues scene in the 1960s, was playing in a swing combo when he was seduced by Broonzy's sound. Eric Clapton may have initially fallen for the music of Chuck Berry, but then he discovered other bluesmen; "because he was so readily available I dug Big Bill Broonzy; then I heard a lot of cats I had never heard of before...."² Keith Richards recalls hearing some fellow students trying to play Big Bill Broonzy songs:

Suddenly I realized it goes back a lot further that just the two years that I'd been listenin'...then I started to get into where it had come from. Broonzy first. He and Josh White were considered to be the only living black bluesmen still playing ... I thought, that can't be right. Then I started to discover Robert Johnson and those cats.³

Others discovered the blues via artists like Bo Diddley, Chuck Berry and Fats Domino, whose records occasionally crossed over to the British rock and roll charts.

Many of these new young blues fans were art school students, a mixture of Bohemian intellectuals, working class youth with artistic talent, and disaffected youth whose exam scores did not qualify them for attendance at other institutions of higher learning. Chris Dreja of the Yardbirds recalled, "In those days you could

¹ Charles Fox, "The Raising of the Standard," in *Just Jazz* 2, p. 137.

² Jann Werner, "Eric Clapton," in Pete Herbst (ed.), *The Rolling Stone Interviews: Talking with the Legends of Rock and Roll, 1967–1980* (NY, 1981), p. 28.

³ Robert Greenfield, "Keith Richards," *Rolling Stone Interviews*, p. 159; David Dalton, *The Rolling Stones: The First Twenty Years* (London, 1981), p.13.

get into a pre-art school setup called the ‘art stream.’ If you took certain aptitude tests or your hair was too long and you didn’t fit in anywhere else, you could get in.”⁴ Art schools were important centers of musical distribution in the 1950s and 1960s, as the students were perfect constituents of niche music: they were trained to accept new ideas yet suspicious of authority and its promises of a transformed society.

By the mid 1950s the austerity and rationing of the postwar period had ended and politicians claimed the country was moving toward an affluent, classless society. Many young people recognized that they would likely not benefit from this arrangement, but rather, would be “condemned, in all probability, to a lifetime of unskilled work,” a generation “ground between the millstones of technocracy and democracy.” Not surprisingly, many were deeply unsatisfied by the distance between promises about their future and the drab realities of their existence.⁵

Their sense of frustration created a powerful empathy with marginalized populations, a sentiment shared by others outside of the mainstream. They appropriated the blues as a signifier to define and reflect their sense of otherness. John Steel, drummer of the Animals, claimed that the hard industrial landscape of Newcastle and its isolation from rest of England provided “an instinctive emotional identification with black American blues.”⁶ Many northern and Welsh blues fans also heard reflections of their lives in the lyrics of African American singers from thousands of miles away. Eric Clapton, an illegitimate child raised by his grandparents, felt in his youth that:

my back was against the wall and that the only way to survive was with dignity, pride, and courage. I heard that in certain forms of music and I heard it most of all in the blues.... It was one man and his guitar versus the world ... when it came down to it, it was one guy who was completely alone and had no options, no alternatives other than just to sing and play to ease his pains. And that echoed what I felt.⁷

For many British women the blues—particularly the classic blues—carried an even deeper meaning. Marginalized because of their gender, they empathized strongly with African American music; in the songs of Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey they found perspectives with which they could identify. Jen Wilson was struck by how directly and honestly women’s views were expressed when she first encountered

⁴ John Platt, Chris Dreja and Jim McCarty, *Yardbirds* (London, 1983), p. 8.

⁵ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Harmondsworth, 1958), pp. 248–50, quoted in Bradley, *Understanding Rock*, p. 85; and Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London, 1979), p. 50.

⁶ Sean Egan, *Animal Tracks: The Story of Newcastle’s Rising Sons* (London, 2001), p. 11. John Lee Hooker claimed Newcastle was “a gritty, working-class city he always said could have been situated right in the deep American South (Eric Burdon with J. Marshall Craig, *Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood* (NY, 2001), p. 53).

⁷ Martin Celmins, introduction to *Blues-Rock Explosion*, Summer McStravick and John Roos (eds), (Mission Viejo, 2001), p. xxii.

the classic blues on Armed Forces Radio in the 1950s. Beryl Bryden, who Ella Fitzgerald dubbed the “queen of the British blues,” spent much of the 1950s in Paris, where she made friends with Billie Holiday, Mary Lou Williams and Lil Hardin Armstrong. “The three black American women did not think it strange that I, white from Norwich, should sing the blues. I shared performances with them, the music itself becoming the common denominator.” In her understanding of the genre, the singers felt their shared identity as female musicians was more significant than differences in skin color.⁸ Women also found the classic blues empowered them; if Sippie Wallace and Lovie Austin could sing and play in public on equal footing with men they could as well.

Others embraced the blues because of its limited commercial appeal. After 1945 popular culture was aggressively promoted in Britain to stimulate mass consumerism. Thus, some emphatically rejected anything that smacked of commercialism, instead favoring more esoteric fare.⁹ For them niche music was a symbolic resistance to “embourgeoisement,” in which all were supposed to aspire to middle class status. The blues was also American music, which held its own appeal. America was synonymous with excitement and freedom; it was also transgressive, in that the guardians of British culture had deemed it a corrupting influence on native cultural institutions. Thus, the music was a rejection, though perhaps a stylized one, of conservative ideals and social conformity.

In short, young Britons found the blues appealing for much the same reason that their parents or older siblings had embraced jazz. However, by 1958 jazz was almost respectable, which naturally made it unacceptable to disaffected youth. The blues, though, sounded like a music of rebellion. John Platt recalls, “to a generation brought up on increasingly dull pop music and generally gutless Trad jazz ... the discovery of the blues had an incredible impact. Acoustic or amplified, the blues has always been raw, exciting, and genuine.”¹⁰ And by the time the skiffle craze had faded interest in the blues was more widespread in Britain than ever before.

‘Blues All Around My Door’

In 1957 the Musicians’ Union ban against American jazz artists was finally rescinded. While the system was still technically based on reciprocity the Union was more generous with work permits, especially if British musicians were

⁸ Jen Wilson, interview by the author, Swansea, 5 August 2005; Wilson, “Syncopated Ladies: British Jazzwomen 1880–1995 and their Influence on Popular Culture” (M. Sc.(Econ) thesis, University of Wales, 1996), pp. 85–9; Beryl Bryden, interview by Jen Wilson, oral history, transcript, Women in Jazz Archive, Swansea.

⁹ Stan Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: the Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (London, 1972), p. 179.

¹⁰ Platt et al., *Yardbirds*, p. 12.

employed as accompanists or opening acts. The first bands to tour Britain were occasionally fronted by blues singers, and audiences finally had a chance to hear shouters like Joe Williams and Jimmy Witherspoon in person.

Count Basie's long-time vocalist Jimmy Rushing toured Britain in 1957, at the invitation of Humphrey Lyttelton. Rushing was mentioned by the cognoscenti in the same breath as Waters, Broonzy and Leadbelly, and though his style was very different his appearances generated the same kind of interest and devotion. The singer played eighteen dates in England and Scotland to "large and cordial" crowds of jazz and blues fans, who chose his album *Jimmy Rushing Showcase* [Vanguard PPT 12016] as the best jazz LP of the year in *Melody Maker's* annual poll; he was also selected as best male vocalist. Rushing returned for a second tour in August 1958 and regularly appeared in Britain over the next decade. While in a few short years Rushing would be considered a jazz singer rather than a blues artist, Bob Groom recalls that he played an important role in popularizing the blues among jazz fans. The majority still preferred their blues accompanied by a jazz band and favored swinging, trained vocalists over rough-voiced primitives. They prized the artistry of Rushing, Big Joe Turner and Jimmy Witherspoon and championed their music "to the near exclusion of all other blues singers."¹¹

Many visits by American blues singers in the late 1950s were initiated by Chris Barber, who not only enjoyed live performances of the blues but was also eager to improve his band's sound by working with American artists. This was especially the case after 1955, when Ottilie Patterson, an Irish schoolteacher with a powerful blues voice, was added to the band's lineup. Barber's own popularity facilitated the tours, as their visitors were often unknown to the general public. "Club promoters would take the acts because Chris Barber was a saleable commodity. So Chris' love of the blues was able to bring in those people and the promoters never argued."¹² Through his agent he arranged for Big Bill Broonzy to return to Britain in October of 1955; the singer made a number of concert appearances with the Barber band and went into the studio to record thirteen sides for Pye.¹³ He returned for what would be his final British tour in 1957.

Broonzy, in the company of gospel blues singer Brother John Sellers, played sixteen well-attended concerts with Barber's band. His appearance at London's Royal Festival Hall was standing room only, and he played to "substantial and enthusiastic crowds in many towns."¹⁴ Broonzy also performed in smaller, intimate venues, like the 125 seat Blues and Barrelhouse Club at the Roundhouse pub and the Ballad and Blues Club, a folk venue above the Princess Louise Pub in Holborn.

¹¹ Groom, *Blues Revival*, p.16.

¹² Bill Wyman and Richard Havers, *Bill Wyman's Blues Odyssey: A Journey to Music's Heart and Soul* (London, 2001), p. 315.

¹³ The tracks were recorded in London 26–7 October 1955, and appeared on Pye/Nixa NJL16, NJE1015, NJE1005, and NJE1047.

¹⁴ Max Jones, "The last of a Line," *Melody Maker*, 23 August 1958, 12.

At both locations he held after-hours master classes for young guitarists. He also dispensed philosophical ruminations on the blues that belied his down home, folksy stage persona. Referring to an empty glass, he told Otilie Patterson, “I could fill that with whisky and make a man drunk. I could fill it with water and save a man’s life. Or I could break that glass and kill a man. It’s not just a glass. And when you’re writing the blues, it’s not just an ordinary thing.”

The tour was not only Broonzy’s longest but also perhaps his most influential, as it gave the younger generation of blues fans their first exposure to the music as a living entity:

It is difficult to imagine the impact that Broonzy had on those who had scratched around since the mid ’40s buying up the music of those they never thought they would see on stage. The slightly younger generations of music fans who idolized Ken Colyer and Chris Barber and were forming their own bands to play Broonzy songs were equally in awe.¹⁵

Chas McDevitt characterizes these last appearances as a bridge between “the sophisticated offerings of Lonnie Johnson and Josh White, and the earlier performances of Muddy Waters and Bo Diddley in the later years of the decade.”¹⁶ Later that month *Melody Maker* announced that Chris Barber had arranged for two more blues singers—“Sonny Terry and Howard [sic] McGhee”—to tour in Britain. Terry and his partner, Brownie McGhee, were active in the New York City folk scene. Both had recorded a number of blues sides in the late 1930s for Vocalion Records, the latter as “Blind Boy Fuller #2.” Broonzy, who was undergoing chemotherapy for throat cancer, may well have recommended the pair to Barber; he certainly gave them a rousing endorsement. In an open letter to his British fans he wrote, “I do hope you like Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry, they is [sic] two good boys and can really play and sing the blues.”¹⁷

They were afforded the same anticipatory publicity as the older blues singer. *Melody Maker* ran an article the week of their arrival for the benefit of those unfamiliar with their music. Alexis Korner provided a brief biography of each artist which emphasized their authenticity—McGhee’s mentor was Blind Boy Fuller and Terry had played with Leadbelly—and originality. “At the mention of the blues, many will think of Bill Broonzy. This is not what will be heard from Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, for there are many different ways of playing and singing the blues—but their ways are equally genuine and sincere.”¹⁸

The bluesmen started their six week tour at Birmingham Town Hall on 24 April to a nearly full house. Tony Standish found this cause for celebration and a bit of self-congratulation:

¹⁵ Shapiro, *Korner*, pp. 62–3.

¹⁶ McDevitt, *Skiffle*, p. 20.

¹⁷ Max Jones, “This World of Jazz,” *Melody Maker*, 5 April 1958, 10.

¹⁸ Alexis Korner, “The Terry-McGhee blues team,” *Melody Maker*, 19 April 1958, 6.

It is a flattering indication of the European's appreciation of jazz that Sonny and Brownie, two honest-to-goodness blues singers, are able to undertake a nationwide tour and be assured of packed, enthusiastic houses. This sort of reception must be both unexpected and gratifying to men such as these, whose contributions to their own country's culture is [sic] largely overlooked at home¹⁹

Such speculations were almost stock phrases in blues concert reviews, but in this case it was true. Brownie McGhee commented, "Everybody has been just so nice to us. If we'd known we were going to be received like this we'd have been here seven years earlier."

Terry and McGhee were quite liberal with both their services and their time. They were happy to sit and talk about blues with fans and also did a great deal of playing and singing after hours. They performed for the annual "Floating Festival of Jazz" on the Thames, the venerable descendant of the No. 1 Jazz Club's Riverboat Shuffles; in dressing rooms after their shows; and at private parties, including one given by *Melody Maker* critic Bob Dawbarn. The duo was also featured on radio and television. In what would become a familiar ritual for visiting blues artists they performed on *Bandbox*, Chris Barber's BBC radio show for the Light Programme, each week of their residency, and they also appeared on BBC-TV's *Jazz Session*.

The pair was well received and lavishly praised by the music press. Stanley Dance regarded their performances as:

unadulterated sunshine. [Their music] is mellow rather than sour. It is high- rather than low-spirited. It is warm and friendly rather than bleak and forbidding. It is unassuming rather than pretentious. The music was monumental ... no frills needed to cover structural weakness. It was, if you like, simple and primitive and if you like it or not it was quite magnificent.

Likewise, Tony Standish found their music "sufficiently fundamental, sufficiently devoid of affectation, to be beyond reproach."²⁰

Their appearances created a fierce demand for Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee records. During their visit Topic leased one of their Folkways albums [FA2327] for British release [12T29]; the entire limited edition run sold out and another hundred copies were hurriedly delivered. Topic secured another Folkways master [FA3035] for September release [10T30] and other labels rushed albums into production. Melodisc got *Whoopin' the Blues with Sonny Terry* [MLP516] and *Me and Sonny* [EPM7-83] into stores before the duo had departed the British Isles; in August

¹⁹ Tony Standish, "Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee," *Jazz Journal* 11/6 (June 1958): 1, 3.

²⁰ Stanley Dance, "Lightly and Politely," *Jazz Journal* 11/8 (August 1958): 8; and Standish, "Terry and McGhee," 3.

Nixa released *Sonny, Brownie, and Chris* [NJT515], an album recorded with the Chris Barber Band and another, featuring Terry and McGhee [NJL18], in September.

By presenting a largely folk blues repertoire to British audiences Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee promulgated the idea of the “real” blues and became the new touchstones of authentic black music when Big Bill Broonzy died in October of that year. However, their reinforcement of the folk tradition colored the British reception of newer blues styles.

Though Broonzy had frequently endorsed Muddy Waters, Chris Barber invited him to Britain in October 1958 on the advice of Modern Jazz Quartet keyboardist John Lewis. “[He] told me, ‘If you don’t get Muddy Waters then you’re doing it all wrong.’ And he offered to find him for us.”²¹ Barber arranged for Waters to be classified as a solo entertainer to avoid any problems with the Musicians’ Union, though he later admitted that he hadn’t known that Waters had a band; on most of his British releases he was backed only by an upright bass. Waters was allowed an accompanist; he brought pianist Otis Spann, who was so unfamiliar to British promoters that he was billed as “Otis Stann” in the early tour publicity.

Critics and fans looked forward to the appearances, as Waters had excellent credentials. “On the principle of ‘The King is Dead [sic], long live the King,’” wrote Stanley Dance:

we are fortunate in being able to welcome so soon the most deserving successor to the crown—Muddy Waters, McKinley Morganfield, always enthusiastically endorsed by Bill as the finest living Mississippi blues singer.... The store of goodwill that Bill himself created should ensure this great singer the warmest of welcomes.²²

Waters and Spann made their British debut on 17 October at the Leeds Triennial Music Festival, a rather formal affair that programed primarily chamber music and jazz. In retrospect it may not have been the best choice for his inaugural appearance, though at the time foreign visitors were included in local music festivals whenever possible. Waters’s set was not universally appreciated; some concertgoers walked out and a few critics from the mainstream press described the set as “coarse and repetitive,” “full of fantastic slide and tremolo” and too loud. One reviewer walked out. “Muddy fiddled with the knobs ... the next time he struck a fierce chord, it was louder, and I realized that this was the established order of things. As he reached for the volume knobs again, I fled from the hall.”²³

However, the overall reaction has become greatly exaggerated. The audience was not, as some have suggested, “shocked into paroxysms of fear and loathing by

²¹ Robert Gordon, *Can’t Be Satisfied: The Life and Times of Muddy Waters* (Boston, 2002), p. 157.

²² Stanley Dance, “Lightly and Politely,” *Jazz Journal* 11/10 (October 1958): 25.

²³ Gordon, *Can’t Be Satisfied*, 161. Gordon cites only “a well-known critic” as the source; I have been unable to locate the review in question.

his slicing electric guitar.” Also too simple is Jeff Todd Titon’s view that romanticized notions and “fascination with the recorded artifact” prevented British listeners from accepting live performances of the blues.²⁴ The reaction was not a universal rejection of the urban blues. It was more a case of mistaken expectations.

Paul Oliver recalled, “anyone who had heard Muddy Waters would have heard him playing acoustic. When he played electric, it was a surprise ... a lot of people still thought of blues as part of jazz, so it didn’t quite match their expectations.” Sinclair Traill interpreted the problem as one of presentation. “No one troubled to present Muddy Waters—surely a little explanation about his songs and methods of singing would not have come amiss—and so about 90 per cent of the audience sat in stupefied silence wondering what it was all about.”²⁵ In their irreverent *14 miles on a Clear Night* Peter Clayton and Peter Gammond proposed another possibility; while most jazz fans knew who Muddy was they hadn’t necessarily heard any of his music. “It was somehow a point in your favor if you knew that [his] real name was McKinley Morganfield. Muddy was so obscure in those days ... that there wasn’t much else you could know about him ... Muddy is to blues what King Oliver is to jazz—somebody you have to know about without actually liking.”²⁶

Chris Barber has continually asserted that Muddy wasn’t particularly loud at Leeds or at any of his other 1958 concerts. “We had toured with Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and she played quite loud. We’d toured with Sonny and Brownie, and Brownie played amplified acoustic guitar.” However, there is a difference between the amplification of an acoustic instrument and the range of colors and feedback produced by a Fender Telecaster. Waters used the instrument to give his blues a penetrating edge and harsher sound, and in Britain “electric guitar had not really been heard, not loud. The chords yes, but not that kind of wild playing,” which some described as “screaming guitar.”²⁷ The year before Bob Dawbarn hadn’t cared for Tharpe’s solo numbers even though he was an admirer “due to the strange sounds which issued from her guitar amplifier. It was a pity to hear that long-admired guitar playing transformed through a jangle-box into a shambles of slurring sound.”²⁸

After the Leeds festival Waters and Spann embarked on a ten-date tour of Britain. In every city there were a few detractors; Max Jones noted that most were critics “who could not hear his voice properly over the powerfully amplified guitar, and others who simply do not care for the electric instrument at all.” The

²⁴ Charles Shaar Murray, *Boogie Man: The Adventures of John Lee Hooker in the American Twentieth Century* (NY, 2000), p. 210; Jeff Todd Titon, “Reconstructing the Blues: Reflections on the 1960s Blues Revival,” in *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined*, Neil V. Rosenberg (ed.) (Urbana, 1993), p. 227.

²⁵ Gordon, *Can’t Be Satisfied*, p. 335; Sinclair Traill, “Music and Musicians,” *Jazz Journal* 11/11 (November 1958): 1.

²⁶ Peter Clayton and Peter Gammond, *14 Miles on a Clear Night: An irreverent, skeptical, and affectionate book about jazz records* (London, 1966), p. 68.

²⁷ Gordon, *Can’t Be Satisfied*, p. 335.

²⁸ Bob Dawbarn, review of Sister Rosetta Tharpe, *Melody Maker*, 30 November 1957, 5.

comments of Jack Florin, reviewer for the *Manchester Evening News*, are fairly representative:

Although his singing is authentic and he uses his voice as an instrument for conveying melancholy and dissatisfaction, I cannot class him as a true blues artist. Apart from the beautiful “Blues Before Sunrise,” most of his songs seemed to me to owe too much to the rhythm and blues style.²⁹

Derrick Stewart-Baxter was “saddened” by such comments and felt there was “little excuse for such ill-informed and inaccurate statements.” He reminded *Jazz Journal* readers that the blues was still a living music that reflected the changes in African American society. “Muddy Waters is a genuine product of his sociological background and represents all that is best in modern blues which, let it be quite understood, is a very real and vital force in the lives of the coloured population of the North American cities.” Max Jones concurred:

The blues tradition expands and changes. This was the country tradition which earlier produced men like Big Bill Broonzy, but it was a far cry from Big Bill’s softer, more reflective and wryly humorous mood. It would be wrong to expect a man of Muddy’s age to sing the blues like Broonzy did ... the younger man has a different way with the language, a different way of breaking the phrases up, of accenting and swinging.

He regarded the concert at St. Pancras Hall in London “remarkable ... it was tough, unpolite [sic], strongly rhythmic music, often very loud but with some light and shade in each number ... the repertoire was pure blues, and the style was vital, uninhibited, and decidedly ‘Down-South.’” Tony Standish reported that Waters and Spann:

began slowly, feeling their way before a quiet, listening audience. Gradually the music increased in depth and intensity, through “19 Years Old,” “Key to the Highway” and “I Can’t Be Satisfied,” and Big Bill’s plaint from Parchman farm, “Baby, Please Don’t Go.” By the time the spellbinding “Blues Before Sunrise” came up, Muddy had the audience hooked on the end of those curling blue notes that shot, shimmering, from the big amplifier box.³⁰

Despite the ambivalent reactions of a few critics the turnout at most venues was near capacity. As Jimmy Rushing was simultaneously touring Britain this was considered an encouraging indication that the blues were more popular than ever. Critics noted with some surprise that many of the concertgoers were young people;

²⁹ Jack Florin, “Muddy Water Blues,” *Manchester Evening News*, 27 October 1958, 2, cited in Sandra B. Tooze, *Muddy Waters: The Mojo Man* (Toronto, 1997), p. 165.

³⁰ Max Jones, “This World of Jazz,” *Melody Maker*, 25 October 1958, 11; Tony Standish, “Muddy Waters in London,” *Jazz Journal* 12/2 (February 1959): 5.

they had expected older, serious jazz fans, not a bunch of art school students. Demand was such that an additional date was added so that Waters might play the inaugural session at the Mardi Gras, a new jazz club in Liverpool.³¹

Waters and Spann also played an unofficial gig at the Roundhouse. They had come to check out Broonzy's local protégés but Alexis Korner offered them the stage. Few who were present forgot the experience, which was quite different than the Barber-accompanied concert at St. Pancras:

At the concert [Spann] had suffered from poor amplification, but at the Roundhouse there was no trouble. The left hand rolled them, huge and blue, and the right hand hovered, making it sing, and then swooped and soared, showering us with piano blues such as we had never heard in the flesh ... Muddy mopped his perspiring brow ... and suddenly there was another Muddy, a Muddy who sang as he must for his own people, in another world than ours ... preaching the blues chorus upon hypnotic chorus³²

Waters left Britain with far more fans than detractors. *The Best of Muddy Waters* [London LTZ-M15152] placed third in the *Jazz Journal* record poll of 1958, and *Melody Maker* readers chose it as the best vocal record of the year. Plans were underway for a second British tour in late 1959 but for reasons unknown it never materialized and Waters did not return to the country until 1962, when his music would be received in a completely different context.

Jazzshows

After the successful tours by Waters and Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee promoters became interested in bringing other blues artists to Britain. Jazzshows, a concern run by bandleaders Ted Morton and George Webb and the Harold Davidson Agency (which, not coincidentally, represented Chris Barber), launched a campaign to bring blues musicians to London for an extended club appearance each month. After seeing Waters perform at the Roundhouse they decided that small, intimate venues were better places to hear blues than cavernous concert halls. To ensure that an adequate establishment would be available, Jazzshows took over the lease of the Humphrey Lyttelton Club at 100 Oxford Street in September 1959.

The Davidson Agency secured a deal with Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, who were touring Britain with the Weavers, and on 10–12 October they played the first blues sessions at the new club. Considering that there had been little time to advertise the attendance was quite good, and this was interpreted as an auspicious omen. The jazz press encouraged the venture and produced an enticing list of

³¹ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, "Blues Up North—Some Observations," *Jazz Journal* 12/6 (June 1959): 31; Jones, "World of Jazz," *Melody Maker*, 25 October 1958, 11.

³² Standish, "Waters in London," 6; Oliver, "Hoochie-Coochie Man," in *Blues off the Record*, p. 266.

future guests—Lightnin’ Hopkins, Howlin’ Wolf, Big Maybelle, Muddy Waters, Helen Humes and John Lee Hooker—but the next to appear at Jazzshows was the lesser known Champion Jack Dupree.

None of Dupree’s recordings were available in Britain prior to his arrival in November 1959; London rushed his Atlantic LP *Blues from the Gutter* [LTZ-K15171] into stores to coincide with his appearance and *Melody Maker* ran stories on the artist for several weeks before his arrival. The pianist played seven dates at the club, accompanied by either jazz guitarist Diz Disley or Alexis Korner, and a like number of concert dates with Chris Barber in the greater London area.

Champion Jack Dupree presented a varied and dynamic program that included barrelhouse and boogie numbers, blues standards, anecdotes, and playful banter. The blues cognoscenti were thrilled:

“How Long” and “I Been Gone a Long Time” were remarkable examples of how the old-time feeling and phrasing survive in vocal blues ... Everything Dupree sang told a story, and some of the tales were raw and racy. He is a strange mixture of untutored entertainer, careless at times about which note he hits, and relaxed, strictly traditional Southern blues artist³³

However, the unorthodox nature of his performance did not match what some had come to accept as the blues. Jack Cooke, reviewing one of the Jazzshows dates for *Jazz Monthly*, approved of the intimate dynamics of the venue but though the singer was “closer to his audience in a physical sense, they remained as far as ever from actual understanding of his music,” especially the “average New Orleans [jazz] devotee with little or no knowledge of the blues as a whole. Dupree’s rough, barrelhouse piano playing and extroverted singing sits oddly with that of many revivalist blues singers whose attitude often seem to be one of martyrdom.” Paul Oliver also recognized the complexities in Dupree’s performance but interpreted them quite differently:

Such moving, exhilarating, disturbing music and singing is a gauntlet thrown in the face of all petty argument and academic theory. Champion Jack Dupree’s music stems from the barrelhouse of a New Orleans that now scarcely exists, but his blues at one and the same time is immediate, captivating, and thoroughly of the present day.³⁴

In March 1960 Jesse Fuller, “The Lone Cat,” kicked off a sequence of monthly residencies at Jazzshows. Fuller, a one man band who played 12 string guitar, harmonica, kazoo and a foot-operated bass called a fotdella, may not have been the kind of artist Jazzshows had originally envisioned, but by 1960 the management had discovered that prominent bluesmen like Muddy Waters and John Lee Hooker

³³ Max Jones, “This World of Jazz,” *Melody Maker*, 7 November 1959, 11.

³⁴ Jack Cooke, “Champion Jack Dupree in London,” and Paul Oliver, “A Rollin’ Mind,” *Jazz Monthly* vol. 5/11 (January 1960): 13, 25.

were out of their price range. Thus, for the duration of the endeavor they presented artists from alternative blues traditions. It became standard practice to arrange television and radio exposure for their guests and to secure whatever additional bookings were possible. The Ballads and Blues Association, a folk club with 4400 members, became a valued ally that could be counted on to produce at least one large concert in a greater London venue. *Melody Maker* was also a dependable supporter; the paper ran large feature articles about visiting artists prior to their arrival and published reviews in a timely fashion.

Fuller benefited tremendously from this publicity; even though British Vogue had released several of his albums—*Take this Hammer* [LAG12159] and *The Lone Cat* [LAE12279]—he was almost entirely unknown in Europe. Max Jones found his first concert, at the White Hart in Bromley, exceptionally well attended, and he too noted that the vocal and admiring crowd was comprised primarily of teenagers. Fuller presented a broad repertoire of African American folk music that included country blues, instrumentals, jump-ups, folk songs and standards like “Bill Bailey” and “Creole Love Call.” Fuller had some idea of the repertoire that would please British audiences as he had been corresponding with Val Wilmer, a young jazz fan who aspired to becoming a writer. Fuller became the subject of Wilmer’s first article, which was published in *Jazz Journal* in 1959, and she in turn tried to find him work in Europe. Albert McCarthy, one of the staunchest champions of the Jazzshows endeavor, encouraged fans to attend concerts to experience live blues so that “other artists can come, because so many of the older blues artists are living in conditions of extreme poverty ... and it would be helpful if some of them could get two months work a year locally.”³⁵

Jazzshows scheduled a trio of blues pianists—Speckled Red, Memphis Slim, and Little Brother Montgomery—to appear during the summer months. Max Jones commented:

Ted Morton and George Webb should be applauded for their enterprise in booking such barrelhouse characters. Although there is more of an audience for genuine blues music now than there was when Big Bill first came here in 1951, I am afraid it remains quite small. So there must be a substantial risk involved in the bringing over of these somewhat obscure blues men.

Webb admitted that the market for blues singers was still slight, even in London, but reiterated his commitment to presenting “people who really sing and play the blues ... it’s surprising how many people in the clubs look forward to hearing a blues or gospel singer.”³⁶

³⁵ Val Wilmer, *Mama Said There’d Be Days Like This: My Life in the Jazz World* (London, 1989), pp. 30–31; Albert McCarthy, “Opinion,” *Jazz Monthly* 6/1 (March 1960): 3.

³⁶ Max Jones, “Blues are Brewing,” *Melody Maker*, 30 April 1960, 13.

It is tempting to interpret the preponderance of blues pianists at Jazzshows as a British rejection of the urban blues aesthetic, but it is equally likely that they responded in greater numbers because they were underemployed in the United States. Barrelhouse pianists also had a natural constituency in Britain; many of the mature cognoscenti came to the blues through boogie-woogie. Paul Oliver recalls being surprised when a classmate asked if he liked that style of music; “it had never occurred to me that anyone would *not* like it.” Blues pianists, whether or not they broke out the “Chimes” and “Forty-fours,” presented a rare opportunity for these fans to hear the artists who had awakened their love for the genre.

Speckled Red [Rufus Perryman] was an exciting example of a “rediscovered” artist, living proof of the enduring nature of the blues. He had been retired from music for at least a decade when a St. Louis policeman and jazz fan convinced him to start making records again. Though he received less publicity than some other Jazzshows acts he attracted a decent crowd, perhaps because several of his recordings were already available in Britain.³⁷ His childhood friend Memphis Slim took over the Jazzshows slot in July. Slim was recommended by Alan Lomax, who told Max Jones that the pianist had a great live act; reviews suggest this was so.

The arrival of Little Brother Montgomery in August was greatly anticipated by many jazz critics. Max Jones became a devoted collector of his records after Albert McCarthy, a fellow enthusiast, loaned him a few discs. “I didn’t really expect to be seeing such a gin mill performer as Montgomery in person. But with Jazzshows importing a stream of blues talent this summer, the unexpected becomes almost commonplace.” Montgomery was thrilled to be playing in Europe; he had Val Wilmer take his picture in front of Buckingham Palace so that he could prove to folks back home that he’d made it big.

While in residence Slim and Montgomery performed at the Beaulieu Jazz Festival, which was held on the grounds of Edward Lord Montagu’s private estate in Hampshire. The festival was filmed for the BBC; fortunately both bluesmen had played before a booze-fueled scuffle broke out between Trad and modernist jazz fans and the BBC ceased transmission. The two pianists also recorded albums for later British release. Champion Jack Dupree returned in September to play eight dates at Jazzshows and a short tour with the Barber band. He saw no reason to return to the discrimination and poor employment of the United States and emigrated to Switzerland. Slim, likewise, elected to remain in Europe, settling in Paris.

Roosevelt Sykes played at Jazzshows in January and February 1961 and Memphis Slim returned in April, but blues residencies at Jazzshows did not continue beyond 1962. While Morton and Webb managed to break even on most of the deals their margin was not sufficient to continue, despite their commitment to the endeavor. However, lackluster ticket sales were not necessarily a reflection of audience interest, as the publicity for the shows was often slight. George

³⁷

Jazz Collector JGN1001 and Vogue-Coral LVA9069.

Harrison commented that he would have enjoyed hearing more American blues artists but “you never heard about them coming over.”³⁸

Nonetheless, American blues musicians appeared in Britain with greater frequency. Some were invited by the Ballads and Blues Association, which aspired to present large monthly concerts of American and native folk talent in London, Glasgow and Birmingham, and smaller club dates in Edinburgh, Newcastle, Bradford, Liverpool, Oxford, Bristol, Cardiff and Brighton. In April 1960 Josh White was featured in Association concerts at Islington Town Hall, Glasgow, the Birmingham Midland Institute and the Cavern in Liverpool. He also appeared on radio programs and wrote a guest column for *Melody Maker* on the relationship between blues and rock ‘n’ roll, in which he speculated that Leadbelly would have been a top rocker because “he had that sukey-jump beat that has been copied by so many youngsters.”³⁹ Bookers extended these limited engagements by pairing visiting bluesmen with Trad jazz bands touring outside of London. Not only did this provide the blues artists with more work, but it also spread the music to new areas of Britain; when Memphis Slim appeared with the Monty Sunshine band in early April of 1961 he became the first American blues musician to appear in northern Scotland.

Chris Barber continued to invite American artists to Britain. Sister Rosetta Tharpe returned in April 1960; the gospel blues guitarist had become friendly with Barber and Otilie Patterson and enjoyed their working reunions. After numerous requests James Cotton played a short tour with the Barber band in the summer of 1961. Barber also sponsored a fall tour by Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, though they only played together for a few London concerts. For most of their stay they appeared throughout Britain with the Terry Lightfoot and Bob Wallis bands; they also participated in a “Journey into Jazz” event at the Coventry Theatre, demonstrating the folk roots of the idiom.

Responses to some of the visitors were mixed, as British jazz audiences and critics, many with limited knowledge of the blues, didn’t always know what to expect. The same was true for many of the artists. Memphis Slim explained:

Back in America one has to play so many styles to get by—one has to blend with the trend, and do what is the current happening. Here you like blues, but when Big Bill, Muddy Waters, Lonnie or myself came over here, we didn’t know that ... we think maybe you like the same music as they do back in the States, so we sing ballads and sing it pretty and we are a complete flop. But had we known, we would have stuck to the blues.⁴⁰

³⁸ Ian Pickstock, “Ian Pickstock discusses R&B with the Beatles in an informal Crosstalk,” *Jazzbeat* 1/2 (February 1964): 23.

³⁹ Josh White, “Sex-song sacrilege,” *Melody Maker*, 9 April 1960, 9.

⁴⁰ Memphis Slim, “In My Opinion,” *Jazz Journal* 13/9 (September 1961): 4.

Even Muddy Waters was willing to alter his performance style to match expectations. He told Max Jones, “Now I know that people in England like soft guitar and the old blues. Back home they want to hear the guitar ring out ... next time I come I’ll learn some old songs first.”⁴¹ Failure to anticipate British tastes could have serious repercussions. Lonnie Johnson did not realize that “he was remembered as a folk artist for his work on the Armstrong Hot Sevens ... gave us a cabaret act, singing songs that probably go down fine in a flossy New York niterie!” He was not invited back to Britain for a decade, and Waters would wait five years for a return tour.⁴²

Performers also had to accustom themselves to the high degree of personal contact their British hosts desired. Many fans were anxious to get to know the artists on a personal level and they knew nothing of the social taboos that regulated such interactions in the United States. Most wanted nothing more than to buy their idol a drink and perhaps get an autograph; many Britons fondly recall the time he or she bought a pint for a visiting bluesman. More serious devotees hungered for knowledge. The hotels where visiting acts stayed—in London, usually the Avenue Mansions off Haymarket Street—were plagued by a “constant stream of well-wishers who arrived bearing bottles of spirits eager to learn more of the blues.”⁴³ This made some of the visitors a little uncomfortable. Val Wilmer recalls, “Blues musicians who played in London in the early 1960s had to develop their own way of dealing with white people who were in many ways different to those they were more used to at home.”⁴⁴

However, many enduring relationships were forged between musicians and their British hosts. Val Wilmer frequently took visitors to meet her mother and enjoy a home-cooked meal. Big Bill Broonzy stayed with Alexis Korner when he played in London, and Korner’s wife Bobbie furnished many a bluesman with a late breakfast. Paul Oliver conducted interviews with singers in their hotels, but also invited them to his home:

Most blues singers welcomed the release from the claustrophobic surroundings of the concert tour ... I recall Sonny Terry fast asleep among a pile of beer bottles, placed there as a joke by Brownie McGhee; Lightnin’ Hopkins picking up an African hunter’s two-string fiddle that I had collected in Nigeria and playing a blues on it; Jack Dupree attempting to ride Francis Smith’s penny-farthing bicycle of course, there was an ulterior motive. I genuinely wanted the blues singers to visit an English home and feel welcome; but I also wanted to be talking blues with them some of the time.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Jones, “This World of Jazz,” *Melody Maker*, 25 October 1958, 11.

⁴² David R. G. Griffiths, “Jazz and Racial Discrimination,” *Jazz Monthly* 2/3 (April 1956): 30.

⁴³ Oliver, “Sittin’ Here Thinkin’,” in *Blues Off the Record*, p. 274.

⁴⁴ Wilmer, *Mama Said*, p. 68.

⁴⁵ Oliver, “Talking Blues,” in *Blues Off the Record*, p. 210.

Willie Dixon recalled that when he and Memphis Slim played in London, “youngsters used to come backstage telling us how they were going to have a group and liked this song and that song. They wouldn’t let them come in the front door but they’d come around the back and me and Slim would talk with them.”⁴⁶ By all reports, most visiting blues musicians did the same, and so long as the conversation wasn’t dominated by questions about their recordings they were happy to spend time with people who showed a genuine interest in their music.

‘Blues Fallin’ Down Like Hail’: blues releases 1958–1962

In August of 1958 Derrick Stewart-Baxter noted:

ever since I have been working in the jazz department of a large record shop I have become very much aware of the considerable interest that has recently arisen in the blues in vocal form. This is due no doubt in part to the visits to this country of such great artists as Big Bill Broonzy, Lonnie Johnson, Brother John Sellers, Jimmy Rushing, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee. Furthermore, the popularity of watered down forms (ie: Rock ‘an’ Roll and the various efforts of local Skifflers) has led some youngsters turning to the more genuine article.⁴⁷

In order to help these new adherents Stewart-Baxter devoted his next 12 *Jazz Journal* columns to an annotated discography of blues records available in Britain. When he began it seemed like a substantial task; a year later the pace of releases had accelerated to such a degree that a comprehensive listing was all but impossible.

“It is easy,” commented G. E. Lambert:

to pass off this increasing popularity of the real blues by observing that the most popular blues singers in this country are those who have the fortune to travel with Chris Barber’s band, or to comment that, after all, Lonnie Donegan still outsells Leadbelly by quite a fantastic margin ... but the fact remains that we are faced with what is, in part at least, a genuine movement of understanding of, and love for, the blues.... Already the stage has arrived when one can recommend a blues LP to a British record company without thinking that they are going to be happy to lose money in providing for a minority interest, because a good blues LP can sell today.⁴⁸

Once that state had been reached the major record labels took an interest in making blues available to the public.

⁴⁶ Willie Dixon with Don Snowden, *I Am the Blues: The Willie Dixon Story* (NY, 1989), p. 125.

⁴⁷ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, “Blues On Record,” *Jazz Journal* (August 1958): 28–9.

⁴⁸ G. E. Lambert, “Bad Luck Blues,” *Jazz Monthly* 6/4 (June 1960): 22–3.

Britain's leading blues label was Pye/Nixa. In 1953 Pye, a manufacturer of radios and televisions, acquired the small, independent Nixa label. It launched Pye Records in 1955, but continued to employ the Nixa imprint for several years. Most of its early blues releases were recorded in Europe by visiting artists. The exceptions were compilations prepared by Alan Lomax: a transcription of "Blues in the Mississippi Night" [Nixa NJL 8] and *Murderer's Home* [NJL 11], a selection of field recordings from the infamous Parchman Farm.⁴⁹ Though many thought the title was a bit tasteless the disc received universally favorable reviews, as it was the first collection of "primitive" African American folk material like field hollers and worksongs available to the general public.

In 1958 the company began leasing masters from the Chess and King labels in the United States. This valuable concession, wrested from British Decca by dint of sheer determination, gave them access to material by Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, Sonny Boy Williamson, Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf, which was issued through their "R&B" series. This franchise was aggressively marketed through advertising in jazz periodicals and music weeklies, and was available not only in record stores but also at the Boots chain of chemists. Pye also held the British license to manufacture and distribute Mercury, Vanguard and EmArcy records, which included recordings by Big Bill Broonzy, Josh White and Sister Rosetta Tharpe.

At the time Decca issuing was blues on its London imprint, which held exclusive rights to the Imperial and Atlantic catalogues; this gave the company a British monopoly of the music of Fats Domino and Ray Charles as well as Alan Lomax's seven volume *Southern Folk Heritage* series. A good percentage of their releases from this period were stamped from Chess masters, but London also released an album recorded by Champion Jack Dupree during his 1959 tour; the sales of *Natural and Soulful Blues* [LTZ-K15217] were impressive enough for the company to create the Ace of Clubs label in 1962 for locally recorded blues.

British Columbia relied almost exclusively on visiting artists to provide them with new blues material. Between 1957 and 1962 Roosevelt Sykes, Little Brother Montgomery, Jimmy Cotton, Brother John Sellers, Big Bill Broonzy, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee recorded at their London studios, often in the company of local musicians. This yielded uneven results but for lesser known artists they provided valuable exposure; they also preserved for posterity an approximation of how American bluesmen tailored their style and repertoire to British audiences. Columbia's labelmate, Parlophone, also released a handful of blues discs in the late 1950s. The majority were by Lonnie Johnson and featured material from his Cincinnati sessions at the end of the 1940s. Vogue drastically reduced its blues offerings after 1956 and focused on jazz. In 1962 it licensed material from

⁴⁹ *Murderer's Home* was also issued on three 45 rpm Extended Play discs, NJE 1061–3.

Duke/Peacock, which provided them blues by Jimmy Witherspoon, Lightnin' Hopkins, Jesse Fuller, Big Mama Thornton and Bo Weavil Jackson.

When the major labels entered the blues market the independents lost a significant share of their market niche. Some folded, but most adapted by leasing masters from smaller independent labels in the United States or recording new material themselves. In 1958 Topic separated from the Workers' Music Association and focused on "traditional" material, licensing masters from Folkways and World Song. Most of their albums were not blues, but Topic did release Sonny Terry's *Harmonica Blues* [10T30] and *Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry Sing!* [12T29]; these were in such demand that they were reissued several times over the next decade. Melodisc also licensed material from Folkways and issued blues albums by Leadbelly and Big Bill Broonzy from the Disc and Asch labels. Esquire remained in business but from 1955 to 1964 it served primarily as the British manufacturer and distributor of Bluesville, the subsidiary label American Prestige created for blues issues in 1959.⁵⁰ The catalogue, which was discontinued in the mid 1960s, was a mixture of new material by established artists working outside the modern idiom and field recordings of unknown singers.

Several new independent labels were started by blues lovers who wished to extend the scope of African American music available to the public. Doug Dobell's 77 label—named for his shop at 77 Charing Cross—was launched in 1959 as an outlet for field recordings. Its first release, Lightnin' Hopkins's *The Rooster Crowed in England* [LA 12/1, 1959], established 77 as a significant concern. Hopkins was one of the great discoveries of the postwar era, a down home stylist who fused modern single string playing with the arpeggiated accompaniments of Blind Lemon Jefferson. He was also a gifted improviser who could create original, topical blues with facility; as a tribute to his new audience Hopkins created a "Blues for Queen Elizabeth." The record sold briskly and was heralded as one of the finest blues discs of the year. Dobell followed his inaugural issue with several collections of field recordings and the first new album by Leroy Carr's partner Scrapper Blackwell.

That same year *Jazz Journal* critic Tony Standish started his Heritage label, which released discs by Lightnin' Hopkins, Lowell Fulson and Snooks Eaglin, along with field recordings from Maxwell Street in Chicago. Like many such labels it issued only a few titles; the time and effort involved was considerable and the financial rewards slight.

Re-releases

Prior to 1960 the majority of blues records released in Britain were of relatively new material; discs from the prewar years were still hard to find. Robert M. W. Dixon recalled that in 1959:

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Esquire also issued LPs from the Prestige catalogue.

Whilst some British collectors were familiar with Peetie Wheatstraw, Washboard Sam and Blind Lemon Jefferson, fewer had heard the more obscure records by artists like Skip James, Sam Collins, Son House, or Charley Patton. There was, however, a general feeling that the blues of Paramount, Gennett, and the other famous labels of the '20s and '30s were a thing of the past.⁵¹

Most critics agreed that the great blues of the past would never be reissued, but some collectors were committed to making this repertoire accessible.

Jazz Collector may have continued to reissue discs throughout the 1950s, but information about the label is as scarce as copies of their records. It apparently stopped issuing blues singles in 1952; when the label resurfaced in 1959 it offered twelve-inch Long Play and seven-inch Extended Play records, formats introduced in the United States in 1948–9 as potential replacements for 78s. The Long Play 33 1/3 rpm discs were ideal for compilations, anthologies and classical works; the smaller, cheaper discs were perfect for popular music releases. Though companies often put only one song per side of a seven inch disc, narrower groove spacing made it possible to accommodate two or three, though with some reduction in sound quality. This “Extended Play” format provided an economical middle ground for record buyers unwilling to invest in an album by an unfamiliar artist. Jazz Collector’s first releases on the new format were a “*Male Blues* series, which features genuine blues singers of the '20s and '30s, singing in both city and country blues styles.” Though the EPs were intended for blues aficionados, Jazz Collector suggested that outlets could also market the discs to “the youngsters who play guitar in your area.”⁵²

Many important blues were reissued on EPs. Fontana, a Philips subsidiary, entered the British market with releases by Blind Willie Johnson [TFE17052] and Leroy Carr [TFE1501]. It took a few years for Decca’s RCA imprint to recognize the format’s advantages, but in 1962 it too introduced a successful blues series. It featured a wider variety of artists than did *The Male Blues*; there were tracks by Canon’s Jug Stompers, Arthur Crudup and Big Maceo Merriweather as well as Sleepy John Estes, Furry Lewis and Sonny Boy Williamson. RCA took advantage of an endorsement by Alexis Korner, by that time a known quantity on the London blues scene, and marketed the series as *Alexis Korner Presents the Kings of the Blues*; the popular artist also supplied educational liner notes.

Labels aimed at the older collector’s market favored the Long Play format. Jazz Collector issued an album of Blind Blake tracks from the Paramount catalogue [JFL2001] and field recordings from Angola Prison in Louisiana that featured Robert Pete Williams, a down home stylist praised for his authenticity.⁵³ Heritage,

⁵¹ Robert M. W. Dixon, review of *Conversation with the Blues* by Paul Oliver, *Jazz Monthly* 11/9 (November 1965): 25–6; Paul Oliver, “Editorial,” *Jazz Monthly* 5/6 (June 1959): 2.

⁵² Selection Records release sheet (1959), National Sound Archives, London.

⁵³ *Angola Prisoner’s Blues* [JGN1003] and *Angola Prison Work Songs from the Louisiana State Penitentiary* [JGN1006].

which was committed to reissuing “unique and previously unobtainable blues,” released anthologies of Blind Blake and Blind Lemon Jefferson sides [HLP1011 and 1005] as well as a Charlie Patton EP, the first accessible collection by the “father of the Delta blues.”

Many of these reissues were bootlegs, illegally dubbed from rare 78s owned by British collectors. The vast majority of European revivalists believed that bootlegging was necessary to keep important works in circulation. They were not particularly sympathetic to the complaints of major record labels, as most jazz and blues musicians were paid flat fees for their original sessions and did not receive residuals. Moreover, they believed that record companies had a duty to keep recordings of “special aesthetic, intellectual, or cultural importance” in print, and if they abrogated this responsibility then their rights should be forfeit. Tony Standish, who had tried without success to legally obtain masters for his reissues, agreed; while he recognized that opponents of bootlegging presented valid arguments, “the only certainty that emerges is that somehow these early and valuable examples of American Negro music must be made available”⁵⁴

Standish noted that the current demand was leading some of the major labels to enter the reissue market, as these ventures required a low capital overhead. “A change of heart is currently taking place, and what began as a trickle a year or so ago now threatens to become a deluge.”⁵⁵ Philips, a small startup label purchased by the Dutch arm of Decca Records in 1946, was one of the major reissue labels in the early 1960s. The company released a number of Jimmy Rushing and Big Bill Broonzy albums in the late 1950s but did not issue older material until 1960, when it produced the anthology that accompanied Paul Oliver’s groundbreaking *Blues Fell This Morning* [BBL7369]. This album—along with RBF1, the analogous disc for Samuel Charters’s *The Country Blues*—seems to have stimulated the British market for the country blues by introducing Memphis Minnie, Bukka White, Texas Alexander and Barbecue Bob to a wider audience. Shortly thereafter Philips began its *Classic Jazz Masters* series, which devoted several discs to important blues singers. The first, featuring Blind Boy Fuller, [BBL 7512] provided some much-deserved representation to an important architect of the city blues style. The second had a profound and enduring impact on popular music in Britain.

After the publication of *The Country Blues* cognoscenti in the United States began clamoring for a Robert Johnson anthology. Columbia, which held the rights to the catalogue, initially refused and relented only after Origin Jazz Library threatened to produce a bootlegged version. *Robert Johnson, King of the Delta Blues Singers* (1962) was released by Philips, Columbia’s British licensee, as *Classic Jazz Masters*, *Robert Johnson 1936–37* [BBL7539]. The album was almost

⁵⁴ Max Jones and Sinclair Traill, “Jazz Bootlegging,” *Melody Maker*, 17 February 1957, 9; Tony Standish, letter to the editor, *Jazz Monthly* 6/5 (July 1960): 31.

⁵⁵ Standish, review of *Alexis Korner Presents Kings of the Blues* [RCA RCX202, 203, 204], *Jazz Journal* 15/2 (February 1962): 30.

immediately deleted from British catalogues due to contractual disagreements, but a significant number had already been sold. Serious collectors purchased the disc as soon as it appeared, and enough members of the art school blues crowd had copies that it seemed everyone had either heard the record or heard about it. By the time the album was re-released in 1964 Johnson was the patron saint of young, white guitarists all over the country.

Domestic reissues were complemented by similar offerings from Europe and the United States. Sterling restrictions were relaxed in 1960 and it became possible for retailers to regularly stock foreign titles. Folkways discs were available in most well-appointed stores, as were selections from Origin Jazz Library and Prestige/Bluesville. These imports made an even wider range of blues artists available to the jazz public—if they knew where to shop.

Specialist record shops and the blues scene

Despite the dramatic surge in blues releases it was still hard to find specific recordings. Blues discs were still pressed in small lots, even by the major labels, and local dealers only kept a few copies in stock; this was particularly true of imports. Brian Jones nearly came to blows with writer Roy Carr over the last copy of a John Lee Hooker record in London, and Tom McGuinness of Manfred Mann recalls walking three miles just to look at the cover of a Hooker disc from the States; he didn't even get a chance to hear it!⁵⁶ Finding a record by a particular artist required diligence and frequent visits to local jazz shops; in short order those picking through the latest blues offerings began to recognize their fellow enthusiasts. Keith Richards remembers, "it was the fact that we were searching out these records that brought us together."⁵⁷

By the early 1960s specialist record dealers were the nuclei of subterranean blues communities that were forming in towns across Britain, centers where new releases and unfamiliar artists were discussed and musical partnerships were formed. Charing Cross Road in London was the center of the British blues universe, and its core was the venerable Dobell's, "The Record Shop with the Club Atmosphere." As soon as it was legal to do so Dobell's began carrying a wide range of imports; their advertisements claimed the store had the world's largest selection of jazz, folk, and blues recordings. It may have been true. Central Record Distributors, the British distributor for Riverside, Storyville, Blue Note, Folkways, Candid and Jazz Line, was run out of back of their shop. Dobell's also carried Origin Jazz Library, RBF, and other specialist imports, as well as jazz periodicals and books about blues and jazz. Younger collectors favored the large secondhand department, which claimed to have the largest stock of used records in the country.

⁵⁶ Murray, *Boogie Man*, p. 266.

⁵⁷ Anthony DeCurtis, "Keith Richards," *Rolling Stone*, 28 May 1998, 5.

One of Dobell's biggest competitors was Dave Carey's Swing Shop in Streatham, where the attentive clerks sometimes gave young collectors chipped or damaged records to help get them started. Val Wilmer, who got her first jazz and blues records there, was a beneficiary of this largesse. Peter Guralnick recalls it as a place "where you could not only pick up rare transcriptions by singers like Kokomo Arnold, Peg Leg Howell and Barbecue Bob, but also actually engage in conversations with someone who knew and loved the music."⁵⁸

Those who regarded the blues as pure folk expression frequented 70 New Oxford Street, one of the many leftist bookstores owned by Eva Collet Reckitt. The shop carried a good supply of blues discs, specializing in folk blues anthologies. Patrons could also purchase reel-to-reel tapes of field recordings by Alan Lomax. Levy's in Whitechapel had been a source of rare imports since the 1930s; in the 1960s it was part of Levy's Sound Studios, one of few independent recording studios in London. Many visiting blues singers made records there, and those in the know crowded into the studio to watch the sessions and socialize with the musicians

London may have been the place where blues pilgrims had the best chance of finding a wide selection of titles and imports—enthusiasts from across Britain made purchasing trips to the city—but with perseverance specialist records stores carrying rare jazz and blues imports could be found in nearly every major British city. Stan Strickland opened The House of Sound in Bristol in the early 1960s. It was a gathering place for local jazz and blues fans and the proprietor was especially kind to younger enthusiasts. "Stan was a source of great encouragement to the likes of us who spent most of our waking hours in his shop," one recalled. "We had no money, so we didn't buy much, just hung around, but felt we were part of the scene."⁵⁹ In Manchester Barry's Record Rendezvous carried a sampling of both domestic issues and imports; Bob Groom recalls that the owners had connections with local promoters and occasionally visiting blues artists would drop by to sign autographs and talk with fans.

City Radio in Cardiff, which opened in 1961, advertised itself as the jazz and blues specialty store for Wales and the west. While it carried an impressive number of new and secondhand discs, the majority of its business came from its mail order service. The same was true of Peter Russel's Hot Record Store (110 Tavistock Road) in Plymouth. These dealers maintained catalogues of their regular stock, which could be purchased at list price plus a modest shipping charge.

Of course, it was also possible—though quite costly—to order blues records directly from the United States. Mick Jagger discovered this "secret" when he started collecting:

⁵⁸ Peter Guralnick, *Feel Like Going Home*, p. 13.

⁵⁹ Hibberd, *Jazz in Bristol*, p. 109.

I get on this train one morning and there's Jagger and under his arm he has four or five albums He's got Chuck Berry and Little Walter, Muddy Waters. "You're into Chuck Berry, man, really? That's a coincidence." He said, "Yeah, I got few more albums. Been writin' away to this, uh, Chess Records in Chicago" ... So I invited him up to my place for a cup of tea.⁶⁰

Mail order was far too expensive for most blues enthusiasts, even if they had access to American dollars and mastered the intricacies of international shipping and import duties. Bob Groom recalls that the import tariff on records from the United States was often greater than the purchase price of the disc itself.⁶¹

For those who couldn't afford records, their only opportunity to hear blues was on the radio. There were still no regular blues shows but the music was heard more regularly on the BBC than it had been in the early 1950s. Alexis Korner ran a blues program for the BBC's World Service which could be heard in most parts of the country. Alan Lomax created a series called *Folk Songs of the Southern States* which aired on the Third Programme in October 1960, and occasionally Paul Oliver presented talks on the blues and shared anecdotes and field recordings from his 1960 trip to the United States.

The blues even appeared on television. Pop music shows like *Off the Record* (ITV), *Dig This!* (BBC), *Oh, Boy!* (ITV) and *Six-Five Special* featured popular rhythm and blues songs from the United States. Jazzshows artists regularly appeared on the televised version of *Jazz Club* (BBC) or ITV programs *Jazz Session* and *Tin Pan Alley*. Jazz festivals in Britain were regularly televised and American visitors were usually included in final edit. Eric Clapton remembers seeing Big Bill Broonzy on television in 1957. "It was so spellbinding. I think anyone who was leaning in that direction got it from there."⁶²

'The Blues Are the Truth': folk authenticity and the rise of the puritans

When blues was in short supply in the late 1940s critics and the cognoscenti accepted most, if not all, kinds of blues as equally legitimate. In the late 1950s and early 1960s they became more discriminating, especially after members of the general public and the popular music press began classifying rock 'n' roll and commercial R&B as "blues." While some critics employed the term to describe a broad category of popular music that retained fundamental characteristics of African American music, others were profoundly disturbed by the implications:

⁶⁰ Robert Greenfield, "Keith Richard: 'Got to Keep It Growing,'" in Ben Fong-Torres (ed.), *The Rolling Stone Interviews*, vol. 2 (NY, 1973), p. 222.

⁶¹ Bob Groom, interview by the author, Gloucester, England, 24 July 2004.

⁶² *Martin Scorsese Presents The Blues: A Musical Journey*, Robert Santelli, Holly George-Warren, Christopher John Farley (eds) (NY, 2004), p. 239.

It is almost unbelievable that the record buying public can be fooled week after week by the musical Frankensteins who howl their way through a twelve-bar “pinch” of the real thing. That the majority of pop buyers are teenagers is no real excuse, their taste has been distorted by the many “interested parties” out to earn a quick buck. What all these tripe-mongers are doing amounts to musical murder, but unfortunately it is legalized murder.⁶³

Critics like Stewart-Baxter believed that more critical evaluation was necessary, and authenticity was still the basis by which legitimate blues were separated from lesser, popular derivatives. Sincerity, emotional connection to the material and disregard for commercial appeal were still widely accepted criteria, but the standards by which these were judged became more nuanced as the blues became entangled in the British folk movement.

The blues revival is often framed as a component of the folk scene that emerged in the United States in the late 1930s, a movement born in the Great Depression and promoted by the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, which valorized the music as a unifying cultural legacy of the American people. During the same period socialist and other liberal organizations employed folk songs as tools for protest and change. In the 1940s folk music became popular with American middle class intellectuals and a vibrant scene developed in New York City. A number of blues musicians found work as folk performers, even though they had been professional recording artists since the late 1920s, and acoustic blues remained a subset of the American folk movement throughout the 1960s. Leadbelly, Josh White, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee were associated with the folk scene in the United States, but they did not initiate the jazz-based British blues revival, which was already in its formative stages. It is more accurate to see the blues and folk revivals as parallel movements that had similar philosophical underpinnings and occasionally shared common goals.

The British folk revival was also markedly different to its American counterpart. The movement was started by Cecil Sharpe (1859–1924), who desired to protect the remnants of rural folk culture. He founded the English Folk Dance and Song Society, motivated song collectors to do field work, mobilized wealthy patrons and published song collections for use by schools and cultural groups. While he did succeed in exposing many Britons to aspects of folk culture, by the late 1930s the revival had ossified and was associated primarily with upper class erudition and genteel versions of traditional songs and dances. After World War II the movement was revitalized by Ewan MacColl and A. L. (Bert) Lloyd, who independently came to view folk music as the unadulterated expression of the underclass. As this conflicted with the utopian pastoral views of the EFDSS, they

⁶³ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, “Blues on Record XV,” *Jazz Journal* 13/1 (January 1960): 15.

enlisted the support of the Workers' Music Association, which was interested in promoting noncommercial music of the proletariat.

In 1952 Lloyd and MacColl teamed up with WMA vice-president Humphrey Lyttelton and fellow traveler Alan Lomax to produce the six part *Ballads and Blues* series for the BBC. They hoped the New Orleans jazz revival, and especially the burgeoning interest in the blues, would stimulate greater interest in other kinds of folk expression; MacColl believed that folk music enjoyed broad popularity in the United States because "the American folk form is the blues, and the blues not only formed the basis of jazz but has influenced all American popular music."

Folk music aficionados in Britain had previously shown little interest in the blues. "The collector of English ballads and the like looks down on Negro songs as either comic or beneath contempt," explained Derrick Stewart-Baxter. "Robert Gretton has complained bitterly of the reception he has had at various folk-song gatherings when he has tried to play his tape-recorded blues" However, the music's appeal to jazz fans presented a means by which Britons might be enticed into listening to other kinds of folk music:

"The Blues ain't nothin' but a good man feelin' bad," "the blues ain't nothin' but the poor man's heart disease" ... this is true of all the harsh and bitter melodies that came out of the slums and sweatshops of early nineteenth century London. Loneliness, hunger, frustration, despair ... these are the common factors which link the ballads of the old world to the blues of the new.⁶⁴

Britons, though, were actively discouraged from performing the blues, which were not a part of the anglicized movement MacColl had in mind; he feared the music would erode British traditions. "If we subject ourselves consciously or unconsciously to too much cultural acculturation, as the anthropologists call it, we'll finish with ... a kind of cosmopolitan, half-baked music which doesn't satisfy the emotion of anybody."⁶⁵ By 1962 tensions between opposing factions rent the British folk community in two. Contemporary or populist clubs welcomed native performers who wished to sing blues, but the MacColl-affiliated traditionalists continued to reject white interpreters in no uncertain terms:

Folk music is supposed to be sincere and non-commercial. Yet the performers sing songs which are British adaptations of songs sung in the Southern States of the USA and also adopt phoney stage names which are taken from American Blues singers To all the folk singers who wish they had been born black and sing pseudo-American ballads

⁶⁴ E. David Gregory, "Lomax in London: Alan Lomax, the BBC, and the Folk Song Revival in England, 1950–1958," *Folk Music Journal* 8/2 (2002): 145; Derrick Stewart-Baxter, "Ballads and Blues," *Jazz Journal* 6/7 (July 1953): 17.

⁶⁵ Sydney Carter, "Going American?" *English Dance and Song* (special issue 1961): 19–20.

about the boll weevil, the chain gang and other things they have never seen I say: "Come off it." Let's keep folk where it belongs⁶⁶

A similar ideological divide was emerging in the blues community. G. E. Lambert observed, "those who love the blues will not need to be told that there is trouble in the camp, a battle between the country blues folklorists and those who would electrify the kitchen sink because that's how it's played today." Alan Lomax was the primary exponent of the purist stance. Like F. R. Leavis and Theodore Adorno, he considered any product of mass popular culture anathema to tradition, and felt that any blues recorded for commercial purposes had probably been corrupted by agents of the recording industry:

men who largely looked down upon the blues and its Negro composers, [who] grew and prospered by teaching its mild-mannered country protagonists to cheapen themselves with gimmicks, insincere effects, poor arrangements and silly subject matter. Since to the recording directors the blues were both cheap and meaningless, they encouraged the singers to compose blues by the yard, cut ten to twenty sides a session, to pour out bits of rhyme about any and every subject ... the blues might have flowered so much more fully and richly if these men had not been forced to market themselves.

Lomax thought the blues of Blind Lemon Jefferson were fairly authentic though "most of the songs have been cheapened by the callous attitude of the recording directors, who partially succeeded in teaching the Southern Blues players that it was more important to make money than to make music" In his opinion Ma Rainey was not a real blues singer because she tried to put her songs across to an audience rather than letting them come "from her heart, from where the blues must come." The vaudeville and city blues of the 1930s were to his ears "coon songs," lacking any merit and standing completely outside of the tradition.⁶⁷

Few critics adopted Lomax's rigidly Marxist stance, but most believed amateur performers were more authentic than recording artists like Big Bill Broonzy or Josh White. Stanley Dance, for example, considered Mama Yancey the "genuine article" because her style was "raw, unpolished, unprofessional, not made for the public. A shrill voice, old-time, it sounds more like someone singing for her own pleasure, at home."⁶⁸

Truth—or the perception of truth—was also an important characteristic of authenticity:

⁶⁶ John Kirkham, letter to the editor, *Melody Maker*, 12 January 1963, 20.

⁶⁷ G. E. Lambert, review of *Willie's Blues* [Prestige/Bluesville BVL 1003] by Willie Dixon and Memphis Slim, *Jazz Monthly* 7/7 (September 1961): 24; Alan Lomax, liner notes to *Roots of the Blues* [London LTZ-K 15211]; "Alan Lomax reviews the 'Archives'," *Melody Maker*, 20 February 1954, 13.

⁶⁸ Stanley Dance, "Lightly and Politely," *Jazz Journal* 11/2 (February 1958): 10.

The impact of a good blues singer is partly that he or she gives the feeling of involvement with his or her material. An outstanding present day performer like Lighnin' Hopkins convinces one by virtue of the fact that he never falls into the error of false attitudinizing. If Bessie Smith had screamed "Backwater Blues" at the top of her voice, throwing in a few sobs for effect, the impact of the lyric would have been lost. It is the very casualness of the comment on so many blues records that gives it the ring of truth. The blues singer offers us his or her story on events witnessed or lived⁶⁹

However, many felt this truth was rooted in something more elemental. Derrick Stewart-Baxter believed that the blues could not be learned. "The essence has to be absorbed through experience, and above all one has to think the right way. The blues is more than just a musical form—one has to think and live the blues." He was not alone in suspecting that authentic blues was intrinsically rooted in the black experience. Paul Oliver felt this explained why the blues had not achieved mainstream popularity. "Its allusions are to the Negro world or to the world as seen through the eyes of the American Negro and it is a world that is hard to penetrate. Race music has its own peculiarities ... qualities have remained apart and these remain the least tangible if the most vital"⁷⁰

Nonetheless, these unknowns gave the music a certain exotic allure:

As one thumbs through the pages of discographies of blues singers one is constantly aware that the amount of biographical information on them is lamentably small. Therein perhaps lies some of the peculiar fascination: the strange names, the colorful pseudonyms, the titles of blues that are couched in idiomatic phrases that have real meaning only for the members of a remote minority group, have an aura of romanticism⁷¹

The musicians who were considered authentic representatives of the blues tradition in the 1950s and early 1960s were those who confirmed listener's ideas about what constituted blackness, which often included stereotyped notions of southern black culture. Stanley Dance praised Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee for the real blues atmosphere they created at their London concert:

Into the Festival Hall came swirling the mist from the bayou and the Spanish moss was eerie on the trees in the morning sun. The nights were warm and you sat on the porch drinking corn and listening to the hounds hard after fox or possum and an old man said, "Where's 'at old Stumpy at now son"... and always, accenting loneliness, came the low, far-off cry of the freight train, plaintive, stirring.

⁶⁹ Albert McCarthy, review of *What'd I Say* [London HA-E2226] by Ray Charles, *Jazz Monthly* 5/4 (July 1960): 10.

⁷⁰ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, "Blues on Record," *Jazz Journal* 14/9 (September 1961): 17; Paul Oliver, "Screening the Blues, part 1," *Jazz Monthly* 5/5 (August 1959): 27.

⁷¹ Paul Oliver, "We're Gonna Rock the Joint: Jimmy Rushing's Early Years," in *Blues Off the Record*, p. 146.

Val Wilmer found Jesse Fuller equally evocative. "As he swings along you can hear the roar and whistle of the freight train; you can smell the scent of dried grass and cotton field; you can see the black bodies sweating as they line the tracks—you know you are listening to the real thing." Likewise, Blind Willie Johnson was "a chiller, a dark-night, fire-and-brimstone Christian singer of voodoo propensities. In a dim room you listen to a down bound train carving a relentless way through a black mist-drenched Louisiana night"⁷²

It is no coincidence that such feelings were evoked by country blues musicians, whom purists considered the last representatives of the authentic tradition. Robert M. W. Dixon noted that a "snobbism" had emerged among some collectors. "The first axiom seems to be that only country blues singers can be 'great; city singers are somehow tainted, they have lost the true spark of the blues." Alexis Korner certainly believed this, as to his ears the "amazing effect which was so often achieved in the country lore" was absent from the recordings of classic blues singers.

These notions were reinforced by visiting blues musicians. In his first interview with the British press Big Bill Broonzy stated that to play the real blues one had to "be born a Negro in Mississippi, and you got to grow up poor and on the land ... the blues, they're field hollers way down in Mississippi and Arkansas. Go to the city and you get jazz, not blues." The very urban Muddy Waters agreed. "There's no way in the world I can feel the same blues the way I used to. When I play in Chicago I'm playing up-to-date, not the blues I was born with. People should hear the pure blues."⁷³

The authenticity of country blues artists was predicated on the assumption that they had rejected the influence of newer styles of black music. Humphrey Lyttelton considered Broonzy a genuine bluesman because he "earned the respect and esteem of thousands, not by compromising with commercial trends, but by standing firm, an oasis of restraint and quiet persuasiveness in a desert of clamour and din." Sonny Terry was also thought to have "paid no attention to fashions or popular styles, in spite of years in the big cities playing concerts He has remained an authentic singer, his voice rich with the accents of the South. There is no trace of outside influences in his work."⁷⁴

Authenticity was sometimes prioritized over originality and talent. Kansas Joe McCoy was "not an exceptional blues artist" in Max Jones's opinion, but "he has a pleasantly down-to-earth voice and absolute authenticity of style ... this is good,

⁷² Stanley Dance, "Lightly and Politely," *Jazz Journal* 11/8 (August 1958): 5; Valerie Wilmer, "Jesse Fuller," *Jazz Journal* 12/5 (May 1959): 6; Tony Standish, review of *Blind Willie Johnson* [Fontana TFE 17052], *Jazz Journal* 11/11 (November 1958): 19.

⁷³ Borneman, "Big Bill Talkin'"; Max Jones, "This World of Jazz," *Melody Maker*, 25 October 1958, 11.

⁷⁴ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, "Blues in the Country," *Jazz Journal* 12/4 (April 1959): 3; Albert McCarthy, "Sonny Terry," *Jazz Monthly* 2/4 (April 1956): 20.

straightforward Southern blues—without artifice or much invention—of a type hard to find today.” Similarly, Albert McCarthy felt that Sonny Terry’s unassailable authenticity compensated for “a certain monotony in his songs.”⁷⁵

There is some indication that the desire for truly authentic blues was creating its own kind of commercial distortion. “In the case of a danger arising for blues singers,” said Albert McCarthy:

it is the collectors who are responsible.... It should be no secret to readers of this magazine that most of the outstanding contemporary blues singers prefer using an electric guitar and featuring a backing that is sometimes classified as rock and roll. I am now hearing of instances where singers are being asked to record for a specialist white collector market on condition that they use an acoustic guitar and cut down the backing to one considered more “genuine”.... I am sure that if these blues followers were to hear Howlin’ Wolf or Muddy Waters playing to their own audiences in Chicago night clubs they would consider them renegades.⁷⁶

Objections to “false authenticity” came to a head when *The Country Blues of John Lee Hooker* was released in Britain. The original idea had been for Hooker to record an album of Leadbelly songs but the producers soon discovered that he didn’t know any. “Not to be thwarted, the supervisors made certain that the record should be as ‘old-timey’ as possible, banishing such devilish intentions as amplified guitars,” and Hooker was asked to play his favorite country and folk blues. Most critics did not approve:

The fact is that only John Lee’s earliest roots are in Mississippi—his life, for more than twenty years, has been a city life, his music a city music. To foist upon him an acoustic instrument in place of his usual electric one and to cast him in the role of a recent arrival from some little country town ... is not only aesthetically dishonest but ... pallid, unconvincing, and essentially phoney.⁷⁷

Such paeans to commercialism were often blamed on producers or record company executives, but Paul Oliver advised caution. “Our view is very conditioned by preconceptions of what they ought to have played, and we may be tempted, as many writers have, to consider that somehow such singers have been persuaded almost against their will to learn pieces that fall outside the admissible repertoire.”

⁷⁵ Max Jones, review of “One More Greasing” b/w “One in a Hundred” [Jazz Collector JDL 81] by Kansas Joe McCoy, *Melody Maker*, 23 May 1959, 8.

⁷⁶ Albert McCarthy, “Comment,” *Jazz Monthly* 6/11 (January 1961): 30.

⁷⁷ Tony Standish, review of *The Country Blues of John Lee Hooker*, *Jazz Journal* 14/3 (March 1961): 32; Albert McCarthy, review of *The Folk Blues of John Lee Hooker*, *Jazz Monthly* 7/4 (May 1961): 22. Riverside RLP12-838 was originally released as *The Country Blues of John Lee Hooker*; however, a number of copies with the same matrix number appeared in Britain as *The Folk Blues of John Lee Hooker*.

The Country Blues... had not been Hooker's idea—the head of Riverside Records had proposed it—but the bluesman did not object. He took pride his ability to play convincingly in a number of different styles and to adjust to the changing demands of the marketplace, as did many of his contemporaries.⁷⁸

While stylistic honesty was universally recognized as important, many felt that as long as a style was “genuinely within the artist's experience” it could be revisited with integrity:

This was demonstrated so well when Big Bill Broonzy delighted us with songs which went back beyond the city environment in which he spent the greater part of his life. Many of Bill's later recordings are genuine and moving works of art and if we prefer the better of his Chicago city blues recordings to these then we are making an aesthetic rather than a historical or moral judgment.⁷⁹

Others believed that modern performances of folk blues could never be authentic because they were meaningless to contemporary black society. “Whatever the purist may think, the blues must move on and continue to keep their direct connection with the people”⁸⁰ Tony Standish was convinced that recreations of this nature soon became vacuous and stale. “This is what has happened to Sonny and Brownie. The result: spiritless, empty performances—the same old songs rehashed and retitled, the lyrics recited dully, mechanically, joylessly, with patently false *bonhomie*.”⁸¹

New ideas about authenticity, commercialism, and relevance led the congnoscenti to reassess artists they had formerly embraced as authentic:

Readers must have noticed the extraordinary change of heart by our critics whenever a celebrated blues singer returns to this country for a second visit. Having previously praised the artist for his great ability and fine style, these intellectual pygmies proceed to go into their well known “about face” routine: the subtle attack (about as subtle as a charging rhino) of faint praise is launched, with perhaps a few rather tentative criticisms—his style is not quite authentic (how do they know?), and his singing is tinged with commercialism. Presumably if one is a blues singer one must not be an entertainer!⁸²

The first to be affected by critical reevaluation was Josh White, whose mannered, sweet style and unflinching professionalism made him seem less than authentic. By

⁷⁸ Oliver, “Mining the ‘True Folk Vein’: Some Directions for Research in Black Music,” *Black Music Research Journal* 5 (1985): 23; Murray, *Boogie Man*, p. 213.

⁷⁹ Lambert, review of *Willie's Blues*.

⁸⁰ Stewart-Baxter, “Blues Up North.”

⁸¹ Tony Standish, review of *Down Home Blues* [Prestige/Bluesville 1002] by Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, *Jazz Journal* 14/7 (July 1961): 31.

⁸² Derrick Stewart-Baxter, “Blues on Record,” *Jazz Journal* 15/3 (March 1962): 36.

1958 White was no longer recognized as a blues singer “if he ever was one. His voice has taken on greater range, technique, and control in the same way as his guitar work has become more refined and at the same time more tricky.” Rather, he was classified as an entertainer who occasionally played some blues. “Today Josh exists in a near-vacuum: his songs, as sung, have little or no connection with reality, and he is sustained by an audience whose interest in folk music is as phoney as it is condescending.”⁸³ Even Big Bill Broonzy denounced him. Humphrey Lyttelton recalled a concert the two played at his London club:

Josh had to endure persistent ribbing from Bill Broonzy, who ... kept haranguing the audience with “he cain’t sing the blues! He’s from the North, ain’t never heard no one from the North sing the blues!”... critics in the audience nodded sagely ... this is what we had always said—Josh White was not an “authentic” blues singer, and here is was being confirmed, as it were, from the horse’s mouth!⁸⁴

Broonzy’s own authenticity was also under scrutiny. “Most of us had the feeling, which we did not care to express perhaps, that his work declined perceptively each time he came to our attention in this country, and was becoming more and more shallow.” Tony Standish suggested that taking a blues singer out of his community was tantamount to taking the blues out of the singer:

Once away from his natural environment—and with well-meaning people asking him to sing “country” blues—he inevitably became a “performer,” conscious of his duty to a new and far from understanding public. When this occurs (and it has since happened to Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, Sam Hopkins, and, it seems, Memphis Slim) the singer’s economic situation may be improved, but his art is invariably the poorer.⁸⁵

It may be that discourse about authenticity and emotional relevance intensified because the blues was beginning to emerge as a genre independent from jazz, one with its own developmental history, musical vocabulary and social significance. In the 1959 *Decca Book of Jazz* Paul Oliver declared its emancipation:

It is undeniable that the roots of the music are buried deep in Afro-American tradition. The story of jazz is not purely an evolutionary one however, for many of the folk forms

⁸³ Graham Boatfield, review of *Josh White Stories vol. 1* [HMV CLP1159], *Jazz Journal* 11/6 (June 1958): 24; Tony Standish, review of *Chain gang songs, spirituals, and blues* [Elektra EKL-158] and *Josh at Midnight* [ELK-102] by Josh White, *Jazz Journal* 14/9 (September 1961): 37.

⁸⁴ Humphrey Lyttelton, *Best of Jazz: Basin Street to Harlem: Jazz Masters and Masterpieces, 1917–30* (Harmondsworth, 1980), p. 73.

⁸⁵ Graham Boatfield, letter to the editor, *Jazz Journal* 14/11 (November 1961): 36; Tony Standish, review of *Hollerin’ Blues* [Mercury ZEP10093] and *The Blues Roll On* [Pye PEP605] by Big Bill Broonzy, *Jazz Journal* 14/1 (January 1961): 30.

of Negro music, from which it has in part derived, have continued to develop to the present day on a course parallel to that of jazz, and are thriving in an industrialized society.⁸⁶

Blues scholarship

Before World War II relatively little was known about the blues. The few scholarly articles on the subject focused on the classic blues singers and their relationship to jazz. American folklorists and ethnographers had engaged the blues, but mostly as a popular music that threatened to displace folk ballads and spirituals. Few inquired about the origins of the genre, though some noted its importance to the community, and since they were focused on the collective repertoire they paid little attention to individual musicians, performance context, or musical style.

Two substantive essays on the blues were written in Britain during and immediately after the war: *The Background of the Blues* by Iain Lang and Max Jones's contribution to the 1946 *PL Yearbook of Jazz*. Both relied on the few sources that were available: the African American folk song collections of Harold Odum and Guy B. Johnson, Dorothy Scarborough and Newman White, Ernest Borneman's essays on African American music and W. C. Handy's *Blues: An Anthology*. While some new synthesis of information did occur, the focus remained on the relationship of the blues to African American folk music. Both Lang and Jones commented on the origin of the blues scale and other possible African retentions, described the performance techniques of blues singers and speculated about why people sang and played the blues and how jazz came to be. However, specific details about musicians, musical style, change and causality were largely absent. Before 1950 this information hadn't seemed important:

Because of the dependence of jazz upon blues—the acceptance of the fact that the blues has proven to be a basic element in every aspect of the music ... through the blues have been traced the links of jazz music with earlier Negro musical traditions of the spiritual, the work songs and the hollers, [but] the history of the music itself has received diverse and at times contradictory attention.⁸⁷

British researchers tried to learn more about the genre by interviewing visiting blues musicians, and artists like Josh White and Big Bill Broonzy provided a great deal of new information. Not all of it was accurate; Broonzy, in particular “was a great raconteur for whom fact and fantasy were sometimes a little confused”⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Paul Oliver, “Deep River,” in Peter Gammond (ed.), *The Decca Book of Jazz* (London, 1960): 15.

⁸⁷ Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (London: Cassell, 1960), p. 11.

⁸⁸ Oliver, “Just a Dream,” in *Blues off the Record*, pp. 111–12.

Nonetheless, a more nuanced picture began to emerge, one that was later supplemented by interviews, field work and research and eventually developed into an historical narrative.

It might seem odd that much of the early commentary on the blues was by European, rather than American, writers. However, it was a logical byproduct of a climate in which knowledge served as a substitute for direct experience:

How does one explain the interest in blues music in Europe? In Europe the picture's not the same as it is in the United States. You can't go to hear a blues singer or jazz musician just when you feel like it.... If you really are an enthusiast, you try to find out as much about the music that fascinates you as you can, people who sing the music and so on. You also have to depend heavily on records and once you start collecting the records, you start finding out who's on the records; once you do that you get curious about who else they worked with, so you build up a kind of framework of knowledge and information which compensates for the lack of live music down the road.⁸⁹

Given the British tradition of analytical, “deep” listening to jazz it not surprising that the first stage of blues scholarship was rooted in comparative aural evaluation.

Definitions of Style and Periodicization of Blues History

Until the beginning of 1950s blues were blues; some were perhaps more sophisticated than others, but as far as writers and critics were concerned the blues played by Jimmy Noone were not markedly different from those sung by Bessie Smith or Josh White. However, as more recordings reached Britain it became evident that there were many different blues styles, each with its own defining characteristics. The sonic disparity between contemporary blues and those of the 1920s and 1930s had already elicited a division of the blues into “urban” and “rural.” Now critics proposed more specific subcategories.

Jeff Todd Titon has suggested that the British compulsion to order and classify blues styles is related to the privileging of recordings. Every blues fan was, out of necessity, a collector, and to provide some sense of order they began to divide the blues into genus and species in the same way that a museum would arrange its artifacts to demonstrate evolution and progress; collectors created a taxonomy that made their collections seem representative of the blues as a whole. While this idea is intriguing, it does not acknowledge that the elucidation of stylistic difference is one of the critical tasks of historical writing. Such categories facilitate comparisons, indicate “affinities of expression, and reveal the existence of schools of thought and creation,” creating a framework of chronological periods upon which a historical narrative might be based. Paul Oliver felt the classification of various traditions was needed to understand the blues. Though Derrick Stewart-

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Oliver, “Sittin’ Here Thinkin’,” in *Blues Off the Record*, p. 274.

Baxter was ambivalent about compartmentalizing the blues, he acknowledged that "classification does sometimes aid the newcomer to appreciate what he is listening to more fully."⁹⁰

In "On Blues" Max Jones recognized that discussions of the blues as an homogenous repertoire tended toward oversimplification. He described how the "pseudo-blues creations of Tin Pan Alley" differed from the blues derived from work songs and field hollers and how the genre changed in the 1930s as singers made more concession to public taste. Finally, he demonstrated how modern blues singers incorporated jazz into their styles and the ways in which urban environments shaped the contemporary idiom. He even intimated that blues originating in different parts of the United States might have their own defining characteristics, but he did not advance any specific criteria or terminology.

The first to do so was the American jazz critic Rudi Blesh. His book *Shining Trumpets* posited an evolutionary chronology of the blues based on musical style: archaic (Blind Lemon Jefferson), classic (Bessie Smith), contemporary (Tommy McClennan), decadent (Jazz Gillum) and eclectic (Billie Holiday). Most British blues writers knew the book well—the Jazz Book Club of London offered it as a selection—but neither the system nor its terminology was adopted. However, it may have supplied the impetus for parsing the blues into stylistic schools.

In many branches of history stylistic categories are defined as part of a complete system. In Britain these categories emerged as aficionados encountered artists or schools that contradicted prevailing notions of the genre. The first seems to have been "folk blues," a term Max Jones used to describe Leadbelly's style. "Really it is not jazz, but neither is it the straight, jazzless music of the folk-singer without jazz experience"⁹¹ It is not analogous to Blesh's "archaic" period, as it proposes a finer differentiation of the early blues than was previously acknowledged.

The phrase "country" blues started creeping into the columns of Derrick Stewart-Baxter and Max Jones in 1952–3. The inspiration almost certainly came from Big Bill Broonzy, who frequently contrasted his "real blues" style with "Chicago music" and the "modern blues" that were "all jazzed up." Both critics acknowledged that the artistry of musicians like Blind Lemon Jefferson and Blind Blake separated them from contemporaries like Leadbelly, but it is not clear that British writers regarded it as a completely differentiated style, as even Jones and Stewart-Baxter used "country" and "folk blues" interchangeably to describe "early" blues, the kind "from which all other types have evolved."⁹²

⁹⁰ Jeff Todd Tilton, "Reconstructing the Blues," p. 226; Oliver, "Lonesome Bedroom," in *Blues Off the Record*, p. 241; Derrick Stewart-Baxter, "Blues on Record," *Jazz Journal* 16/9 (September 1963): 9.

⁹¹ Jones, review of "All Out and Down" b/w "Packing Trunk Blues" [Jazz Collector L2], by Leadbelly, *Melody Maker*, 30 July 1949, 3.

⁹² Stewart-Baxter, "Blues on record, Part IV," *Jazz Journal* 11/11 (November 1958): 31.

To further confuse the issue, “country” blues was also used to describe the postwar “southern” or “down South” idiom that would eventually be named the “down home” blues. Muddy Waters called his style “country blues” and considered Big Bill Broonzy the “daddy of country style blues singers” like Robert Johnson, John Lee Hooker, B. B. King, Bobby Blue Bland, Chuck Berry, Ray Charles and Elmore James. In fact, by 1958 the term was so broadly applied that it encompassed all blues that were not explicitly jazz affiliated or rhythm and blues.

Charles Edward Smith attempted to isolate the characteristics of “country” blues through an analysis of Broonzy’s work. He cited fluid guitar accompaniment, singing based on instrumental lines, “tonal-rhythmic excitement” created by irregular line lengths set against regular chord changes and variant text pronunciation in the service of an overall aesthetic based on tone color and rhythm.⁹³ Others adopted Smith’s narrowed definition and after 1960 “folk blues” was generally reserved for artists like Blind Gary Davis, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee whose repertoires contained spirituals, folk songs, ballads and blues.

Anyone who had heard the recordings of Leroy Carr recognized that his music was markedly different from the rural idiom; in 1947 Max Jones labeled him a “city” singer. He was often mentioned in the same breath as sophisticated musicians like Lonnie Johnson and Blind Boy Fuller. Paul Oliver attributed the stylistic difference to the transformative pace of city life and the commingling of jazz, vaudeville, country blues, barrelhouse piano and African American country dance music in a new environment. The resulting blues, which he regarded as a “kind of urban folk music,” combined driving four-to-the-bar rhythms, walking bass lines and good natured melodies sung, often as not, in an approximation of Carr’s smooth, cool style. It was also ensemble music; most artists recorded with a partner or a drummer, if not a small acoustic combo.

Oliver noted that in time the city blues hardened into a rougher, louder, and more “extroverted” music he dubbed “urban” blues. “It was a driving music, punched by the rhythms of a Washboard Sam or, on bass, Ransom Knowling, and swung at times by the saxophone of Buster Bennett. But the key figure in the group was the brilliant blues singer and guitarist Big Bill Broonzy.”⁹⁴ “City,” “urban, and “modern” were also used interchangeably for most of the 1950s; by the end of the decade “city” blues referred to prewar artists and “urban” singers were from the postwar period.

⁹³ Tony Standish, “Muddy Waters in London, part 2,” *Jazz Journal* 12/2 (February 1959): 3. Charles Edward Smith, “Big Bill and the Country Blues,” *Jazz Monthly* 3/11 (January 1958): 32.

⁹⁴ Oliver, “Deep River,” in *The Decca Book of Jazz*, p. 27; “Blues to Drive the Blues Away,” in Nat Hentoff and Albert J. McCarthy (eds), *Jazz: New Perspectives on the History of Jazz by Twelve of the World’s Foremost Jazz Critics and Scholars* (NY, 1961), p. 95; “Just a Dream,” in *Blues off the Record*, pp. 114–15.

“Urban” music was one of a number of styles placed under the umbrella of rhythm and blues, which initially described Jimmy Witherspoon, Wynonie Harris and other vocalists whose style was derived from “shouters” like Jimmy Rushing and Joe Turner. Some categorized these men as “jazz singers” who sang blues or “jazz-blues” artists and reserved the term “rhythm and blues” for bluesy material that hewed too closely to pop music for their comfort.

By 1960 these categories were stable enough to be employed in *Jazz on Record: a Critical Guide* to subdivide the entry on “blues and folksong.” Recordings were classified as work songs, prison blues, and prison spirituals; country blues and folksong; city blues; classic and jazz blues; gospel and spirituals; and rhythm and blues, the latter a catch-all for nearly every secular item released after World War II. These broad groupings provided a chronological survey of blues for jazz initiates: pre-blues, primitive blues, blues vocalists in the context of jazz, gospel and—if you went for that sort of thing—the modern idiom.

Intriguingly, the critics who defined these categories often felt uncomfortable using them. Max Jones declared that “the dividing line between folk singer and professional entertainer is hard to place when you are dealing with the early days of blues recording. As hard and risky as the job of fitting these singers into ‘country’ and ‘city’ categories.”⁹⁵ Piano blues presented a similar challenge. Very little was known about its early history; “barrelhouse” pianists were rarely recorded before the 1930s and many performers employed pseudonyms so vague that it was impossible to establish their identities. Moreover, its sub-styles were hard to define; even the musicians disagreed about what set boogie-woogie piano apart from barrelhouse and how these related to ragtime or stride. Lastly, as the instruments were generally located in public spaces the piano blues was perceived as music for entertainment, not a deeply personal vehicle for self expression. The piano blues became a self contained category that, depending on the writer, might or might not encompass jazz pianists as well.⁹⁶

The female blues singers of the 1920s–30s were almost entirely omitted from blues writing of this period, as they were also hard to classify. Rudi Blesh proposed the label of “classic” blues; like many revivalist jazz fans, he considered them the pinnacle of blues artistry, and other critics employed similar adjectives to describe the fruitful collaborations between these singers and jazz bands before the war. As a result of these partnerships female blues singers were considered part of the jazz field.

In his review of “The Bessie Smith Story” Humphrey Lyttelton admitted that it was difficult to categorize the Empress of the Blues. Frank Walker at Columbia records thought she was “gosh-darned country—real southern,” but Lyttelton noted that most of her songs were not “drawn from the common pool of traditional

⁹⁵ Max Jones, review of *The Country Blues* by Samuel Charters, *Melody Maker*, 25 June 1960, 11.

⁹⁶ Oliver, “Piano Blues and Barrelhouse,” in *Blues Off the Record*, p. 177–8.

southern blues” so she couldn’t be considered a “country blues singer in the accepted sense.” He concluded that she was not a folk singer either, as she performed a great deal of formally composed music, so she would be most accurately described as a jazz singer. There were dissenters on this point—Francis Newton believed Bessie Smith couldn’t sing anything except the blues—but even he conceded that lesser lights with trained voices were jazz or pop performers who occasionally sang professionally arranged blues numbers.⁹⁷

The death of W. C. Handy created a similar dilemma. How should the “father of the blues” be treated, now that more was known about the genuine article? In his obituary Lyttelton emphasized that the man had not created the blues and had in fact acknowledged that his famous compositions were based on black folk songs but were not authentic blues. The critic argued that Handy’s songs were only called blues because it was convenient, and he declared that “St. Louis Blues” was “as far as anything could be from the Mississippi blues.”⁹⁸

Revisionist assessments reflect the differences between the stock history of the blues familiar to most Britons and the new narrative that was starting to emerge. Until the mid-1960s most British jazz writers described the blues in a fairly standard way. The usual starting point was to define the blues as the cries of an oppressed people who expressed their troubles in musical form. Most asserted that the blues were born during slavery, though cautious writers admitted there was no evidence of the genre before 1890. They described the field hollers, slave songs and ballads from which the blues emerged and often discussed the brutal conditions of the antebellum South. Nearly all discoursed on blue notes and theorized about how they were connected to African musical practices. The blues were often treated as folk songs, as “in character, genuine blues harks back to the plaint of the individual field worker whose song style was probably the most primitive, the most purely Negro, of any to be found in the United States.” If a distinction was made between African American folk song and the blues it was located in the expression of personal, rather than communal, sentiment. The blues spread beyond the isolated communities of the rural south via “professional Negro beggar-minstrels, often blind, who roamed the road.” These were portrayed as wandering minstrels by writers with an historical bent; those with more romantic tastes opted for scorned pariahs driven to a peripatetic existence by their marginal status in the community.⁹⁹

Most argued that when the blues left the fields and instrumental accompaniment was added it became music for entertainment, and once musicians

⁹⁷ Humphrey Lyttelton, review of *The Bessie Smith Story* [Columbia CL856] by Bessie Smith, *New Musical Express*, 11 March 1955, 9.

⁹⁸ Humphrey Lyttelton, “The Paradox of W. C. Handy,” *Melody Maker*, 19 April 1958, 4; and “The Father of the Blues,” *Melody Maker*, 12 April 1958, 4.

⁹⁹ Jones, “On Blues,” p. 81; Francis Newton, *The Jazz Scene* (Harmondsworth, 1959), p. 34.

discovered an affinity between voices and instruments some began to play, rather than sing, the blues. The 12-bar form was attributed to the necessity of a common framework for group improvisation, which led directly to jazz. An essentialist alternative presented the creation of jazz as a “lucky accident” brought about when African American musicians, “knowing nothing of the strict rules of playing which had evolved over preceding centuries ... put some strange instrument to his lips and tried to express himself as he instinctively would with his voice and in the musical language of Africa.”¹⁰⁰

Early writers devoted some attention to the classic blues, which was viewed as a more advanced version of the blues familiar to all “country Negroes.” When W. C. Handy is mentioned it is as a purveyor of “the pseudo-blues creations of Tin Pan Alley” that nonetheless supplied many jazz standards. Most did note that blues songs were still recorded, though they were not regarded with much esteem. This standard sketch, which was presented with remarkable consistency in British books on jazz written between 1945 and 1963, was adequate so long as the blues were viewed as a catalyst for more evolved musical expression. However, it would not do as an independent historical narrative. In his study of jazz historiography Scott DeVeaux acknowledges the symbolic value of genre history, particularly its role in generating the “cultural capital” necessary to stimulate research and patronage. A historical narrative is a “pedigree” that demonstrates that a genre is “not a fad or a mere popular music, subject to the whims of fashion, but an autonomous art of some substance”¹⁰¹ Framing the blues as a folk tradition of profound significance that adapted to the changing circumstances of the African American populace was a significant milestone in blues research.

Paul Oliver presented the first sketch for an autonomous history in “Blues to Drive the Blues Away,” his contribution to *Jazz: New Perspectives on the History of Jazz by Twelve of the World's Foremost Jazz Critics and Scholars*; it was repeated with only slight variation in his first monograph, *Blues Fell This Morning*. Oliver drew upon earlier narratives, identifying the antecedents of the blues in Baptist hymns, spirituals, folk ballads and hollers. The last were eventually expanded into a three-line structure and instrumental accompaniment was added. Here he located the country blues, “untutored but rich in textual variety, moving in expression and frequently accomplished, if unorthodox, in their instrumental accompaniments, though in the different styles recognizable in the work of singers from the Carolinas, from Mississippi, from Georgia or from Texas....” He did not ignore enduring African American folk practices and added jug bands, string orchestras and cane fife and drum music to the stylistic brethren of the blues.

The classic and “city” blues, he argued, were adaptations of the blues by vaudeville singers in response to urban conditions, not evolutionary improvements

¹⁰⁰ Peter Clayton and Peter Gammond, *Knowing About Jazz* (London, 1963), pp. 30–31.

¹⁰¹ Scott DeVeaux, “Constructing the jazz tradition: Jazz Historiography,” *Black American Literature Forum* 25/3 (1991): 526.

of “primitive” country forms. “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.” The piano blues were treated in a more comprehensive fashion than ever before. Oliver described “black butt” pianists who played in a rough, aggressive style, fast Western pianists who copied guitar patterns and the boogie-woogie players of the 1930s. He noted that urban pianists and blues guitarists forged a newer, harder idiom, and as vaudeville faded and the Depression lingered the classic blues was replaced by blues shouters and jump bands. After the war the urban idiom and swing jazz came together to create rhythm and blues—which he viewed as sophisticated music for the emerging black middle class—but recent arrivals and rural audiences favored “down home” blues, a modernized and electrified retrofit of the country idiom.¹⁰² Oliver qualified his narrative and apologized for “the faults and inaccuracies that so brief a history must inevitably include,” but for a first attempt it was stunningly adept. Its chronological but non-evolutionary framework and a remarkable number of its particulars were not significantly altered by the intensive scholarship of the 1960s; many endure in modern histories of the blues.

The most significant departure from earlier narratives was the differentiation of three distinct country blues styles. The formulation of regional divisions began to take shape in the early 1950s as researchers questioned musicians about their backgrounds, their mentors, and their fellow bluesmen. As the blues was considered a folk music, many suspected that such variants existed; Big Bill Broonzy reinforced the idea by emphasizing the merits of his performance tradition.

In his earliest British interviews Broonzy proudly and repeatedly championed the superiority of the “Mississippi” blues in comparison to those in other parts of the southern United States. Hugues Panassié explored the idea of regional styles in a four part series in *Melody Maker* in 1952:

It may seem strange, but the blues singers coming from Mississippi and nearby, not only sing the blues in the same style: [sic] they even have the same kind of voice. Big Bill, Kokomo Arnold, Johnny Temple, Muddy Waters, Jazz Gillum, Tommy McClennan, who all come from Mississippi are easy to recognize one from another, of course ... but they all have something in common. The pronunciation adds something to the resemblance ... they do not pronounce the words according to the academic rules, but their delivery exactly fits the music and the lyrics of the blues.

Panassié accepted Broonzy’s notion of a unified regional style but seemed unable to isolate its characteristics. The singers he cites share a tendency to employ a high pitched, forcefully projected nasal tone at the beginning of a song and to inject

¹⁰² Oliver, *Blues Fell this Morning*, pp. 4–8.

short falsetto hollers into instrumental breaks. However, all employ these tone colors sparingly and they are not typical of older Delta musicians like Charlie Patton and Son House. Most approximate Broonzy's urbane style, which Panassié employed as his baseline. "Big Bill is typical of the kind of blues that comes from Mississippi and Arkansas, and which seems all in all the purest and most impressive kind."¹⁰³

British blues writers focused their attention on country blues singers, assuming that regional styles would be most clearly expressed by musicians with limited access to recordings. Comparing Muddy Waters's version of "Walkin' Blues" to the Robert Johnson original, Max Jones noted a high degree of interplay between the vocals and the guitar, which he attributed to regional difference rather than a mentor and student relationship. Tony Standish further observed that Mississippi blues accompaniments were based on rhythmically propulsive ostinati and that the most proficient bottleneck guitarists came from the Delta. By the late 1950s British blues critics confidently referenced the "typical Mississippi style," though a fair portion of the time the musician under discussion was, in fact, from somewhere else.

Max Jones was the first to propose that Blind Lemon Jefferson's "tuneful and swinging" style and intricate guitar accompaniments constituted a regional inflection; he heard similar elements in many of the recordings of Leadbelly, who spent a good portion of his early life in the borderlands between Louisiana and Texas. Panassié later noted that the vocal style exemplified by Jefferson, Texas Alexander and Lonnie Johnson (who was from Louisiana) was lighter and less strained than that of Mississippi singers and "nice to listen to."¹⁰⁴

There was some sense of another strong, regional tradition on the south-eastern coast of the United States, but critics had trouble identifying its origin. Panassié proposed Florida; he noticed that Bumble Bee Slim and Bill Gaither seemed to imitate the style of Leroy Carr, who he imagined might be from that state. Like most blues musicians of the 1930s Slim and Gaither did closely imitate Carr and his partner, Scrapper Blackwell, but neither was from Florida; they hailed from Georgia and Kentucky, respectively, and Carr was born in Tennessee but raised in Indianapolis. Others proposed Georgia or the Carolinas as the hub of a style that was heavily influenced by ragtime and white "hillbilly" music. In 1962 Paul Oliver proposed that the style might not be localized in a single state but perhaps ranged all over the Piedmont, the low plateau that runs from New Jersey to Alabama at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

¹⁰³ Borneman, "Big Bill Talkin';" Hugues Panassié, "The Blues Singers, part 2," *Melody Maker*, 31 May 1952, 9.

¹⁰⁴ Jones, review of "John Henry" b/w "On a Monday" [Melodisc 1187] by Leadbelly and "Rabbit Foot Blues" b/w "Sugar Shucking Blues" [Tempo R46] by Blind Lemon Jefferson, *Melody Maker*, 20 December 1951, 9; Panassié, "The Blues Singers," *Melody Maker*, 10 May 1952, 9.

Most British blues writers believed that regional styles grossly oversimplified more complex modes of transmission but they were nonetheless frequently invoked, as they provided a convenient framework for discussion. They also suggested that the blues organically emerged from African American folk music in a number of different locations in the late 19th century.

Paul Oliver

Though critics and columnists had been writing on the blues for a decade, the beginning of serious scholarship on the genre is often associated with Paul Oliver, the “dean of British blues writers.” Oliver was fascinated with folk music from an early age and became interested in the blues when a friend took him to hear black American soldiers on a nearby military base who sang while they worked. “The back of my neck tingled,” he recalls; “it was the strangest, most compelling singing I’d ever heard.” Inspired by the clutch of 78s his friend had amassed, he began collecting blues records. After devouring the few available articles and pamphlets on the blues he was “prompted by exasperation” to begin investigating on his own. He expanded his collecting activities to include books on African American history, sociology, culture and folklore and started writing about the blues; his first article was published in *Jazz Journal* in 1952. A few years later he penned an expansive series on “Sources of Afro-American folk song” for *Music Mirror*. Though an architectural researcher by trade he was soon in great demand as a blues writer, and his articles regularly appeared in *Music Mirror*, *Jazz Journal*, and *Jazz Monthly*.

As he had been collecting song lyrics since childhood—starting with his mother’s extensive repertoire of Welsh folk songs—it is not surprising that he took a particular interest in this aspect of the blues. When he heard American songs on the radio he would transcribe the words, initially with help from his mother, who took down every other line. Later he carried on this activity with fellow blues enthusiasts:

Recalling the days when a few friends would cluster with me around a wind-up gramophone, furiously sharpening thorn needles on an Imhof sandpaper strip meanwhile, seems like summoning up another life. We enjoyed arguing about the transcription of lyrics, or the straining after the fragmented syllables on a damaged record that was part of the experience.

Though he was well practiced in transcription, deciphering unfamiliar dialects and slang terms was a formidable challenge; he has described the activity as “a form of gestalt process, of fitting hypotheses about what is sung against the evidence of recorded sounds.” He and his team—which included his wife Val—began compiling an annotated lexicon of blues terms and concepts, which became the nucleus of *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues*, the first substantive

monograph on the genre.¹⁰⁵ Though completed in 1958, publishing conflicts stalled the volume's release. In the meantime Oliver produced a short biography of Bessie Smith, an outgrowth of essays he had published on classic blues singers. Even though the book is a relatively straightforward biography it contains all the hallmarks of Oliver's style: sociological, geographic and historical details that establish a context for the music at hand in an effective yet concise manner, the citation of lyric couplets to illustrate the narrative and carefully documented research.

Oliver's original intention was to write a single volume that treated blues lyrics and "the historical development of the blues forms with summaries of the lives and work of principal singers." He sought the assistance of visiting blues singers, record collectors and enthusiasts, and accumulated so much material that he had to limit his treatment to meaning and context. On a trip to Paris he met the American author Richard Wright, whom he asked to critique the manuscript; Wright was so impressed that he contributed a foreword:

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.¹⁰⁶

Oliver limited his engagement of "meaning in the blues" to a handful of themes that were frequently found on records, which he admitted might not constitute a representative sample. "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 gramophone recordings are readily apparent." However, at the time there were few alternatives:

In view of the abundance of recordings, the paucity of published works on the subject of the blues is truly surprising ... though it is fashionable at the moment to decry any suggestion that the blues has "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 ... 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.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Oliver, "An Introduction" and "Sittin' Here Thinkin'," in *Blues Off the Record*, pp. 1–7, 274; Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, p. xxiii.

¹⁰⁶ Richard Wright, foreword to *Blues Fell this Morning*, pp. x–xi.

¹⁰⁷ Oliver, *Blues Fell this Morning*, pp. 9, 12–13.

When *Blues Fell this Morning* was published in April 1960 it was the most concentrated discussion available of the environment that had produced the blues, expanding the impressions British blues fans had received from Alan Lomax's "Blues in the Mississippi Night." "In the 1950s," Val Wilmer recalls, "there was little writing that analyzed black music [as intellectual creativity] or discussed its political implications. Most histories were a combination of sentimentalism and sociology" *Blues Fell this Morning* was widely praised as a means by which serious students of the genre could better understand the blues but it had its detractors. Graham Boatfield declared it dull and dry and others, including Bob Dawbarn, were bothered by its strict focus on textual analysis. He recognized Oliver's encyclopedic knowledge of subject and granted that he "produces sometimes startling facts of the grinding poverty and brutality which spawned the blues" but still considered the volume a failure. "Does the book increase the reader's appreciation of the blues? I am afraid the answer is No."¹⁰⁸

As useful as lyric transcriptions, discographies, press reports and sociological studies were, the most valuable information came from discussions with visiting artists. In the late 1950s the French blues writer Jacques Demetre visited the United States and located a number of blues singers that were known only from their Paramount and Vocalion records of the 1920s; this caused some commentators to wonder why no one had bothered to interview them:

At the risk of incurring the wrath of some of my American friends I cannot refrain from commenting that many of them show a curious disinclination to seek out musicians and singers who might well have very worthwhile stories to tell. While Paul Oliver has done valuable work in chronicling the changes that have taken place in the blues field during the past two decades, he would be the first to agree that a tremendous amount of work still needs to be undertaken. Many of the earlier blues singers are reaching an age when they will not be with us much longer and it is vital to get their stories now.¹⁰⁹

Oliver had already planned a research trip to the United States in the summer of 1960. The journey was partly subsidized by a Foreign Specialist Grant from the state department of the American government; a cultural affairs officer at the United States Embassy in London suggested he apply after she read *Blues Fell this Morning*. Oliver made arrangements with the BBC to make field recordings for later broadcast; they supplied him with a tape recorder and some tips on conducting interviews. Though he had done extensive preparatory research the trip was facilitated by Dr. Harry Oster and Chris Strachwitz, the founder of Arhoolie

¹⁰⁸ Wilmer, *Mama Said*, p. 27; Bob Dawbarn, review of *Blues Fell this Morning: Meaning in the Blues* by Paul Oliver, *Melody Maker*, 2 April 1960, 8.

¹⁰⁹ Albert McCarthy, "Comment," *Jazz Monthly* 5/9 (November 1959): 3. A number of American scholars, including Alan Lomax, Samuel Charters and Frederic Ramsey Jr., were conducting field research and recording unknown and forgotten blues musicians in the late 1950s.

Records; the latter, who had been planning a field trip of his own, invited the Olivers to come along, and he guided them through the complicated social mores of the segregated south.

In conjunction with the trip, discographer and critic Robert M. W. Dixon, Trevor Benwell—the owner and founder of *Vintage Jazz Mart*—Derek Collier, Tony Standish and Derrick Stewart-Baxter created the “Blues Recording Fund”:

It is to be hoped that both individuals and organizations will give their support. Paul Oliver and Jacques Demetre will be spending several weeks in the States during the summer and if they can get support from collectors should be able to do a fair amount of recording ... they, like us, are appalled that many singers have been so ruthlessly exploited in the past and so we have agreed upon a minimum fee to be paid to each singer recorded.

Compensation for musicians was part of the package Oliver received from the BBC; the fund provided the monies necessary to prepare the recordings for commercial release. It was hoped that record labels would purchase the master tapes and any money gained in the transaction would be reinvested in the fund after the subscribers were paid.¹¹⁰

Jazz Monthly never again mentioned the Blues Recording Fund, but even if the contributors were not recompensed they were probably nonetheless satisfied with the return on their investment. The expedition collected a mountain of data and the field collecting was extremely fruitful. Oliver and Strachwitz “found” the Black Ace (B. K. Turner), Whistling Alex Moore, Lil’ Son Jackson, Sam Chatmon, Henry “Gatemouth” Brown, Jasper Love and Sunnyland Slim. Only a few still played regularly but all agreed to an interview and a demonstration of their style. Oliver also recorded a number of unknown musicians, like Blind Arvella Gray and Smokey Babe. The sessions with Moore, Babe and Brown were released on Doug Dobell’s 77 label; other field recordings were featured on the BBC Third Programme and *Conversation with the Blues* [Philips BBL 7369], a companion to the 1965 book of the same name.

In 1961 Paul Oliver gave the inaugural lecture at a new recital hall in the American Embassy in London. The talk was so well received that it was expanded into a monthly series entitled “The Blues—An American Negro Folk Music,” which reflected the new historical view of the blues:

- January 17 The Origin of the Blues
- February 14 Blues in the Rural South
- March 14 Development of the Blues
- April 11 Blues in the Urban North

¹¹⁰ Albert McCarthy, *Jazz Monthly* 6/1 (March 1960), 3; Paul Oliver, correspondence with the author.

- May 9 Blues and Entertainers
- June 6 Great Blues Singers
- July 3 The Blues Today

By this time Oliver had become the embassy's resident expert on American music. Francis Mason, the Deputy Cultural Affairs Officer, asked him to prepare a multimedia installation on the blues, which was exhibited with great fanfare in September 1964. Some British blues scholars wondered in print how Oliver "persuaded the Americans to begin officially to accept this side of their own culture" In fact, the exhibition and the lecture series were part of a postwar strategy of the United States government to use its cultural products as tools of diplomacy; foreign embassies were encouraged to promote exhibits and events that generated cultural goodwill. All were tacitly assumed to enhance the image of the United States as a forum for free cultural exchange vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. In the mid 1960s, with news of the American civil rights movement reaching the foreign press, events that highlighted black contributions to American culture were particularly important.

Reviews of the exhibition were overwhelmingly positive. The editor of *Blues Unlimited* proclaimed that it "should not be missed on any account for it is something unique and compiled with Paul Oliver's usual standard—perfection."¹¹¹ Lightnin' Hopkins and Little Walter made a point of attending while they were in London, as did Langston Hughes. Though the exhibition did not become a permanent installation, it formed the basis for Oliver's 1969 book *The Story of the Blues*.

The Country Blues

The first extended study of the blues available to American readers was Samuel Charters's *The Country Blues*; in Britain it appeared several months after Oliver's stalled monograph was finally published. The proximity of their releases invites comparison, though the two books approach the blues in very different ways.

The Country Blues focused on early blues singers and their commercial recordings. As Charters wanted to "keep the emphasis where the black audience would have placed it" he focused on artists that were popular with African American listeners. Therefore, figures like Charlie Patton and Skip James were omitted in favor of extensive treatments of Lonnie Johnson, Leroy Carr, Big Bill Broonzy and even Elvis Presley. Even though they played "minor roles in the story of the blues" he included chapters on Robert Johnson and Rabbit Brown because they were of interest for stylistic reasons.

¹¹¹ Simon Napier, review of the exhibition "The Story of the Blues" by Paul Oliver, *Blues Unlimited* 16 (October 1964): 19; Jack Cooke, review of exhibition, *Jazz Monthly* 10/10 (December 1964): 3.

The Country Blues was received in Britain with a great deal of excitement as the first biographical study of significant blues singers but it was panned by a number of critics. A few objected to its highly romanticized tone, which used evocative language to emphasize the poverty and loss the author thought his subjects must feel. Charters acknowledged this in the preface of the 1975 paperback edition but defended the hyperbole as a means to encourage research. "I wanted hundreds of people to go out and interview the surviving blues artists ... I wanted people to record them and document their lives, their environment, and their music." In this respect the book was a smashing success; many American blues researchers—Gayle Dean Wardlow, Pete Whelan, and others—have cited Charters's text as a motivating force.

It wasn't the romantic sheen that disturbed most British critics, but rather, its fallacies. They felt errors were understandable in a work of this scope, but *The Country Blues* contained episodes they knew to be entirely spurious. In his chapter on Big Bill Broonzy Charters cited "the ignorance of Big Bill's [British] audience in the 1950s":

For the notes on an English record, Bill was questioned about his early life. There was an almost complete ignorance of Bill's many years of great popularity, so with a perfectly straight face he told the earnest young woman who was questioning him that he'd been an Arkansas sharecropper until 1946 ... this rather startling information was duly printed on the back of the record jacket.

This might have been an example of Charters romanticizing for effect—his distaste for the "folk blues" market is evident throughout the text—or he might have accidentally conflated Broonzy's first British appearances with the 1938 "Spirituals to Swing" concert, where the singer was introduced (to his great surprise) as a sharecropper. However, British jazz and blues critics knew the anecdote was untrue and did not appreciate its implied condescension. Derek Collier shot back:

I have been unable to trace this record and would appreciate details. It is also stated that Big Bill recorded "dozens" (!?) of albums, with sleeve notes "usually written by someone who hadn't heard his old records." Who could this refer to? Charles Edward Smith perhaps? Or Studs Terkel? Charles Fox? Alexis Korner? James Asman? ... even the unknown writer of the first EmArcy LP sleeve note is not unaware of the early Big Bill records¹¹²

¹¹² Derek Collier, review of *The Country Blues* by Samuel Charters, *Jazz Monthly* 6/3 (May 1960): 26. The 1958 British Vanguard release of *Spirituals to Swing* reproduced John Hammond's program notes, which state that Broonzy was a sharecropper.

Moreover, the biographical summary that Max Jones included in the program notes for Broonzy's first London appearance detailed the singer's years as a recording star in Chicago.

Charters also erroneously described Muddy Waters's first British tour of 1958, reporting that Waters had brought his entire band with him and, as they had come straight from a tour of the south, they hadn't had time to change from black to white standards of performing. He also claimed that all of the instruments (guitar, bass, harmonica, and piano) were miked and the music was so loud that one critic retreated to the bathroom to listen. This was a harmless enough distortion, but many wondered how a book that contained such deliberate fabrications could be of any real value. However, *The Country Blues* was not without champions. Graham Boatfield endorsed the volume because it was the only one of its kind and therefore valuable despite its flaws. "It is a book which can do some good to the study of the blues ... because it is readable and because it is vital." Max Jones concurred, finding it informative and entertaining even though Charters was "not the most brilliant writer to tackle jazz" and "a bit snooty about European appreciation of blues"¹¹³ He also felt that the admixture of styles in a book that was presumably devoted to the country idiom presented "more than a possibility that thirsting blues students will be confused."

Though each was more or less well received in Britain, *The Country Blues* and *Blues Fell This Morning* revealed a fundamental difference between British and American approaches to blues research. This divergent methodology continued to widen during the 1960s, ultimately leading to a rift between American and European writers.

The club scene – the British blues in formation

By 1960 it was evident that blues adherents comprised a small but distinct faction of Britain's jazz community. The impresario Giorgio Gomelsky estimated that there were perhaps forty people in London who were "seriously interested in authentic blues;" others estimated there were perhaps 100 or more. Whatever their numbers, a small subset was beginning to do more than listen to blues; they wanted to play them as well. Charles Keil has commented, "with Afro-American music, the compulsion to be participating rather than observing is particularly strong; it is simply that kind of music."¹¹⁴

Trad jazz was just reaching the height of its popularity, and while most groups were strictly instrumental concerns a number of bands added "blues singers" to

¹¹³ Max Jones, review of *The Country Blues*.

¹¹⁴ T. Gracyk, *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity* (Philadelphia, 2001), p. 17; Charles Keil, *Urban Blues*, with a new afterword (Chicago, 1991), p. 39.

their lineups, as many revivalists groups had done in the late 1940s. These were the first British blues singers. None was more famous than George Melly, still revered in England as a singer, author, radio host and all around character. Melly discovered jazz in school, as did many young Britons, but unlike many of his counterparts he was not won over by the instrumental prowess of Louis Armstrong or the swinging charts of Duke Ellington; he was seduced by Bessie Smith singing "Gimme a Pig-Foot." He began hanging around the revivalist scene in London in the late 1940s and started his professional career by haranguing band leader Cy Laurie until he was allowed to sing Smith's version of "Careless Love." He spent more than a decade on the road with Mick Mulligan's Magnolia Jazz Band, honing a repertoire of classic and hokum blues numbers.

Melly was well received by critics of the period and one can still hear the qualities they admired; his phrasing and style are obviously those of his idol, Bessie Smith, and his tone is comparable to other jazz vocalists of the 1940s. However, his appeal was based as much on his flamboyant style of presentation, charisma and vaudevillian theatricality as his musicianship. He would often perform classic blues songs in "female persona" by sticking beer mugs under his sweater and singing in a pinched falsetto range. "Although rather passionate about the blues, which he sang with the utmost sincerity," said Jim Godbolt, his former manager, "I don't think George managed to assimilate the blues feeling."¹¹⁵

Melly was the first, but "Britain's foremost blues shouter" was Beryl Bryden. She started performing at the busking sessions that followed each meeting of the Norwich Rhythm Club, which she helped establish, and after moving to London in the late 1940s she sang her "own brand of blues" with George Webb's Dixielanders, the Cy Laurie Four, Alex Welch, Monty Sunshine and the Chris Barber band. Bryden had a pleasing if somewhat slight voice; she employed little vibrato—one can tell she was influenced by Billie Holiday—but her phrasing and delivery were borrowed from Bessie Smith. Though well loved by legions of devoted followers her renditions of the blues were not particularly heartfelt, even when she wasn't accompanying herself on her signature washboard.

A number of other singers of the late 1940s favored the classic blues and thus were dubbed "blues singers;" these included Neva Raphello, vocalist with the Dutch College Swing Band, and Joan Roberts, a popular singer in the Midlands. Both were regarded as acceptable jazz singers but ineffectual blues stylists. Bryden and Melly performed with revival and skiffle bands throughout the 1950s but neither convinced audiences that the blues were anything more than jazz songs with folk ancestry. The singer who did was Otilie Patterson, who introduced the new generation of blues fans to the classic repertoire.

Patterson, a vocalist with the Chris Barber band from 1955–1973, possessed an amazingly deep, rich voice. While the use of "black" as a stylistic designation is

¹¹⁵ Jim Godbolt, *All This and Many a Dog: Memoirs of a Loser/Pessimist* (London, 1986), p. 53.

now passé, George Melly's description of her vocal tone conveys something of her effect on audiences: "She doesn't sound like a black imitation, or someone paying homage, however sincerely, to the black soul. She sounds black."¹¹⁶ Hearing Otilie Patterson for the first time, one is unlikely to visualize a petite Irish school teacher, and the disparity between her appearance and enormous voice left an indelible impression. However, her reputation was not based on the surprising quality of her voice, but rather, on her emotional and nuanced delivery and dedication to the blues idiom.

On several occasions Patterson described her first encounter with the blues. "I heard Bessie Smith singing 'Reckless Blues;' I was transfixed. I thought I was melting. It was almost orgasmic. All those sad sounds" After this discovery she, like other Northern Irish youth who were interested in the blues, made a pilgrimage to the Belfast home of collector Gerry McQueen. "When you went to his house," she recalled, "he would just put on a record and look at you but he never gave you titles and you didn't dare interrupt him and say, 'What was that?' You just had to pick it up as you went along." McQueen introduced her to blues outside the classic style. "I thought Bessie was marvelous, but when I first heard the 'race' thing, I thought, this goes further and deeper. It turned out to be Robert Johnson's 'Dust my Broom.'"¹¹⁷

Patterson began singing with a local jazz band but quit when asked to sing popular songs and light jazz fare. "I maybe didn't sound like a blues singer, but I felt like one! I was just freaked out on blues." A holiday trip to London in 1954 gave her another chance to perform the music she loved. Patterson went to a jazz club to see the Chris Barber Band; she asked several times if she could sing but was not invited to the stage. At the end of the night she approached the group's pianist, who was still at the keyboard. "I said, 'Play Careless Love for me,' so John played and I started to sing. The guys in the band were all packing up their instruments when I started to sing and they immediately unpacked and all joined in. It was like Hollywood!" She was invited to join the band and began rehearsing with them at a rented space in Soho:

The room was bare and cobwebby, with a grimy window and a big hole in it and I'm singing "Make Me a Pallet on the Floor" and outside the streetwalkers were out in force, and I thought, "This is like Storyville in New Orleans. I'm living the blues!" I was a wee Comber girl with imagination!

Though she, like other early blues singers, was influenced by Bessie Smith, her repertoire contained numbers by Memphis Minnie, Tommy McClennan, Muddy

¹¹⁶ George Melly, liner notes to *Madame Blues & Doctor Jazz!* by Otilie Patterson with the Chris Barber Band, Black Lion BLM51101, 1984.

¹¹⁷ Trevor Hodgett, "Otilie Patterson," in Hodgett and Colin Harper (eds), *Irish Folk, Trad & Blues: A Secret History* (Cork, 2004), p. 159; Shapiro, *Korner*, p. 57.

Waters, St. Louis Jimmy and Leroy Carr. She also fought to get the blues out to a wider audience:

I broadcast regularly on a Saturday night from the Trad Tavern in the Aeolion Hall during the 1950s and 1960s and insisted that blues music should be part of the revival music for which our band was renowned. The producer at the BBC felt it was “too esoteric” but I insisted.¹¹⁸

Patterson initially received favorable notices in the jazz press but the authenticity debate led many to re-evaluate her work. Bob Dawbarn commented, “I am afraid British blues singers still sound utterly unconvincing to me. For that reason I prefer to hear Otilie Patterson sing ‘Darling Nellie Gray’ than a blues like ‘Million Dollar Secret.’” Others thought her a “carbon-copy stylist” who would “never make a blues singer even if she lived to be as old as Methuselah.” She also had champions who cited her as proof that British musicians could assimilate the blues as they had done with jazz. One was Muddy Waters, who invited her on stage with him at club in Chicago; she brought the house down and a host of local musicians declared hers a “real blues voice.”¹¹⁹

Alexis Korner

In 1958 Charles Fox reported:

visiting blues singers ... have even had a stimulating effect upon some British instrumentalists—the group of young men who play sessions of folk-blues at the Roundhouse, a public house in Wardour Street, for instance, which includes in Cyril Davies and Alexis Korner two local guitarists who have mastered the art of blues playing.¹²⁰

Korner is widely, if not universally, acknowledged as the patron saint of the British blues. He was not only an active performer, but over the course of his career he also mentored dozens, if not hundreds, of young British musicians.

The son of successful import/export dealer, Korner discovered the blues through boogie-woogie. “On Saturday afternoons,” he recalled, “we used to go down to the Shepherd’s Bush Market and nick 78s from the stalls ... one of the first records to vanish into my saddle bag was Jimmy Yancy’s ‘Slow and Easy Blues.’”¹²¹ He took up the guitar in his teens, primarily to annoy his father, but got

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 159–60; Jen Wilson, “Syncopated Ladies,” p. 87.

¹¹⁹ Bob Dawbarn, “Sister Rosetta,” *Melody Maker*, 9 April 1960, 5; “The Trend in Trad: Otilie and Barber make blues mood,” *Melody Maker*, 11 June 1961, 3; Hodgett, “Patterson,” 160.

¹²⁰ Charles Fox, “Raising of the Standard,” 137.

¹²¹ Shapiro, *Korner*, p. 14.

a great deal of practice while completing his requisite national service. As he spoke fluent German he was assigned to the British Forces Network in Hamburg, where he was placed in charge of the record library; he also worked on a series of shows with Gerald Lascelles, a fanatic jazz collector and cousin to Queen Elizabeth II. Lascelles was not satisfied with the station's recordings so he had his own collection shipped to Hamburg. Korner spent a great deal of time absorbing the rare discs at his disposal, though he also moonlighted as a disc jockey on Nord-West Deutsche Rundfunk. By the time he was demobilized he was a good enough guitarist to find work with revivalist bands in London. He also parlayed his service experience into a job at the BBC, where he was placed in charge of the General Overseas Service.

As a member of the Ken Colyer Skiffle Group he was poised on the brink of stardom but quit the band because he felt the music was too commercial. He wanted to play the blues. He teamed up with Cyril Davies, a hard core country blues fan who was “fixated” with Leadbelly and played both 12 string guitar and harmonica. Cyril ran the London Skiffle Club, which met first at Good Earth, then at the Roundhouse pub in Soho every Thursday night. Paul Oliver heard them play at Good Earth in 1955. “Alex was playing endless choruses of Leadbelly’s ‘Yellow Girl.’ Later he sang some blues that were good and effective and a bit of a surprise because I hadn’t heard any English people play blues up to then.”¹²²

When skiffle was at the height of its popularity Korner and Davies shut down the club and reopened as the Barrelhouse and Blues Club. Their audience initially evaporated but within a few weeks the Roundhouse was attracting others who were experimenting with the folk blues. The pub became a gathering point for blues players in London after the ideological schism within the folk movement. Korner was quick to criticize what he viewed as a hypocritical stance:

The Anti-Establishment group has already established its own set of rules; in a short time these will have crystallized into a set of clichés just as ponderous as those of The Establishment. Often one tends to resign from one group in order to join the other, but so far as this concerns the world of Folk Music, I have simply resigned from groups with hard and fast rules.¹²³

The folk blues soon spread to new “contemporary” folk venues, which welcomed anyone who wanted to play blues, folk songs, calypso or any other type of acoustic music. “We used to go to the one or two London clubs,” recalls Paul Oliver,

the Good Earth ... or Alexis Korner and Cyril Davies’ Barrelhouse and Blues Club ... There [the famous Scottish watercolorist] Rory McEwan played astonishingly adept

¹²² Ibid., p. 61.

¹²³ Shapiro, *Korner*, p. 93.

imitations of Blind Gary Davis and various aspiring blues singers ... tried their hand, or rather, their voices.¹²⁴

There were many clubs in the London metro area and similar establishments were springing up all over Britain. In Edinburgh the Howff club on High Street was the largest and most prestigious venue. The Spinners club in Liverpool offered every kind of music, including folk, Trad and American country and western. There was the Hideout coffee bar in Brighton, the Rambler's folk club in Birmingham, the Wagon and Horse in Manchester, the Liberal Club in Newcastle, and other clubs in Chelsea, Edgware and Southampton. There was even a Manx Ballads and Blues Club.

Some of the guitarists that frequented the clubs played a mixture of blues, jazz and folk music. Steve Benbow, often cited as the first English folk guitarist, had spent time in Egypt; he combined blues and American folk music with Arabic songs and the Cuban melodies he remembered from his childhood. The enormously influential Davy Graham based his style on the blues of Big Bill Broonzy and Leadbelly but fused their harmonic and rhythmic bass lines with contrapuntal melodies drawn from the Piedmont country blues, jazz and Eastern folk music. He was soon followed by John Renbourn and Bert Jansch, who revolutionized contemporary ideas about acoustic guitar with a similar amalgam of styles.

As their repertoires contained a number of 12-bar blues folk guitarists were called "blues musicians" by the mainstream press, much to the consternation of the cognoscenti. However, there were a number of instrumentalists who focused almost exclusively on the genre. Perhaps the most respected was Geoff Bradford, who was devoted to the acoustic blues of Big Bill Broonzy, Blind Blake and Blind Boy Fuller. He was one of the few guitarists in London playing "finger style"—single string melodic lines—and thus leaned toward the Piedmont repertoire but he also enjoyed the city blues; he and pianist Keith Scott occasionally teamed up to play as a duo modeled on Scrapper Blackwell and Leroy Carr. "I remember a saying that used to be around in the early days of the British Blues scene," said Davy Graham. "Anyone can have the blues but can you *play* the blues? Geoff Bradford could play the blues."¹²⁵

So could Long John Baldry. Though he would ultimately be remembered as a singer in the mid-1950s he was a precocious youth playing folk, jazz and blues in skiffle clubs, and he developed a formidable reputation as a 12-string guitarist. It was only a matter of time before he ended up at the Roundhouse, where he met Alexis Korner and Cyril Davies. Baldry became a regular at the club and the folk

¹²⁴ Oliver, "Picking the Box," in *Blues off the Record*, p. 58.

¹²⁵ Davy Graham, "Testimonials," <<http://www.geoff-bradford.co.uk/>> (10 October 2005).

and jazz in his repertoire began to fall away; he had been a fan of the blues since his early teens but it hadn't occurred to him that there was an audience for it in London, let alone elsewhere in Britain.

The number of venues in which live blues could be heard was on the rise but events were already in motion that would electrify the British blues and bring them into the mainstream of popular culture.

Blues Incorporated

Once again Chris Barber and Otilie Patterson were the catalysts. Their work with Muddy Waters and their visit to Chicago made them fans of the urban blues style. The Barber band had always tried to incorporate new ideas they learned from American artists; their work with Bill Broonzy, Brother John Sellers, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee changed the band's approach to rhythm from a rigid New Orleans two-beat to a more fluid, four-to-the-bar-feel, and Sister Rosetta Tharpe had made them aware of the triplet subdivisions at the heart of many styles of African American music. Thus, it was not surprising that the band was eager to experiment with the urban blues sound.

Barber recalled, "I felt the need for electric guitar and harmonica, and I invited Alex Korner and Cyril Davies, who knew what it was all about, to guest with the band." The resulting album, *Chris Barber's Blues Book*, received mixed reviews but the band was convinced that rhythm and blues—the term many British critics used to describe the Chicago style—was the wave of the future. Korner and Davies also played with the band on several Trad Tavern programs in 1961 and at their usual Wednesday evening and Friday night sets at the Marquee, a jazz club Barber and Harold Pendleton founded in 1958.

A year later the Marquee's newsletter, *Jazz Today*, reflected on the event:

We come to a New Sound. At least, it is new on the British scene, and with the same hard work and occasional lucky breaks as Traditional Jazz, it could build to the same proportions. It is Rhythm and Blues, the type of R and B that you may know from the exciting Muddy Waters records. Since the late summer of last year, Alexis Korner has been sitting in with Chris, Otilie and the Band at the Wednesday or Friday sessions. So, for three or four numbers an evening, a real R&B sound has been produced and, with the recent addition of Cyril Davies (harmonica), the sound has created an enormous response.¹²⁶

No doubt Korner and Davies appreciated the exposure—the Chris Barber Band was one of the most popular outfits in Britain—but they weren't interested in accompanying Patterson for one set each evening. They wanted to focus on the blues, and the Marquee experiments demonstrated that there was an audience for

¹²⁶ *Jazz Today: The Marquee Club Newsletter* 10/5 (May 1962): n.p.

this new and energetic variant. They decided to form their own rhythm and blues group. Barber blessed the enterprise by offering them the intermission slot on Wednesday nights.

Korner found a rhythm section; Davies recruited vocalists Art Wood—whose nine piece combo was also experimenting with rhythm and blues—and Long John Baldry. They named the band Blues Incorporated, a moniker Korner used for pickup groups that played at the Roundhouse. While the Marquee intermission slots were high profile they needed other performance opportunities. They soon discovered that the Roundhouse and most of the folk clubs in London wouldn't allow amplified blues, so Korner and Davies founded a new club in a small pub in Ealing that featured Trad several nights a week and hoped for the best.

A short announcement in *Melody Maker* about the formation of a rhythm and blues band turned out to be all the publicity they needed; the Ealing Club was "patronized immediately by zealots from Middlesex and beyond, as earnestly devoted to blues as other cliques were to yachting and donkey's false teeth." To the hundreds of young musicians across the country that had fallen for the music of Chuck Berry and Muddy Waters Blues Incorporated was a beacon in the wilderness. Mick Jagger recalled, "Suddenly in '62 just when we were getting together we read this little thing about a rhythm and blues club starting in Ealing. Everybody must have been trying to get one together. 'Let's go up to this place and find out what's happening'." Eric Burdon came all the way from Newcastle to check it out. So did blues loving youth from hundreds of miles around. "The club held only 200 when you packed them in," Korner recalled, "and there were only about 100 people in all of London who were into the blues, and all of them showed up at the club that first night."¹²⁷

Blues Incorporated played their first intermission set at the Marquee on 11 April 1962. Though originally allotted twenty minutes the crowd reaction was so positive that Barber let their sets run longer and longer. Within a month the group had developed such drawing power that the management decided to give them the Thursday night slot. Thursdays were traditionally a slow night for live music in London and Harold Pendleton was willing to take a chance on this new outfit if they could lure even a modest number of patrons to the club. The Marquee Club Newsletter did its part, advertising Blues Incorporated as "Britain's only Rhythm and Blues group and if you want an evening of gutty, swinging music that's different come along"

Korner soon noted that the crowds were more extroverted than typical folk or jazz audiences; "they used to stand on tables and rock and dance and shout." Their numbers were also growing: "By the eighth week or so we were doing 350 on Thursday nights and feeling pretty good." On 12 July Blues Incorporated made its debut on the BBC's *Jazz Club* and the band began drawing more than 1000 people

¹²⁷ Dalton, *Stones*, p. 19.

a night. Some came from as far away as Scotland and Wales, eager to get some idea of how British musicians could approach the blues.

Brian Jones, the founder of the Rolling Stones, is representative of the young musicians drawn to the nascent London blues scene. Jones was “an ex-Cheltenham Grammar School lad” interested in jazz and the blues. One of his formative experiences was hearing the Chris Barber Band featuring Otilie Patterson. He was so taken by the music he went backstage to ask the vocalist where she got her music, and who was this Bessie Smith? According to his friend and original Rolling Stones member Richard Hattrell, after that night Jones spent an inordinate amount of time “learning guitar, reading Sam Charters’ *Country Blues* and raving about Muddy Waters ...” Hattrell was the local blues buff in Gloucestershire and he and Jones quickly bonded. When visiting blues artists like Muddy Waters and Terry/McGhee performed in Bristol or Newport they tried to persuade the Americans to come by their flat for drinks.¹²⁸

When Chris Barber and Otilie Patterson next appeared in Cheltenham Alexis Korner played the interval. He and Jones became friendly and Korner invited the young man to come to London and check out the clubs. Jones wasted little time; he was soon sleeping on Korner’s floor and devouring blues records from his extensive collection.

Jones’s world changed after hearing a copy of “Dust My Broom.” “I discovered Elmore James,” he later said, “and the Earth seemed to shudder on its axis.” He was determined to learn how James produced such a sound and became one of the first British guitarists to learn the bottleneck style. This was enough of a novelty that Blues Incorporated frequently invited him to sit in. Another guest performer was Paul Pond (né Paul Jones), later a member of Manfred Mann and Free. When Paul met Brian Jones he was surprised to find a fellow blues fan. “I was amazed ... that anybody else was into it. I thought I was the only one.”¹²⁹

As word spread an ever greater number of young musicians wanted to perform with Blues Incorporated; this meant intense jockeying for position, especially among singers. Hundreds of aspirants sent tapes and letters. One was a London School of Economics student named Mick Jagger who was a regular at the Ealing Club and the Marquee. Once Korner was satisfied with the depth of the young man’s knowledge he was invited to sing with the band. He was not the only one. Jagger recalls standing in line waiting for his chance. “We’d all sing the same bloody songs; we’d all have a turn singing ‘Got My Mojo Working’ or whatever it was. It was the Muddy Waters that went down best.”¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Richard Hattrell, “Jazz in Gloucestershire,” *Jazz Times* 3/1 (January 1966): n.p.; Shapiro, *Korner*, p. 101.

¹²⁹ Wyman, *Blues Odyssey*, p. 336; Shapiro, *Korner*, p. 102.

¹³⁰ Shapiro, *Korner*, p. 111.

Blues Incorporated was a nursery for the first generation of British blues and R&B artists. They were also important role models. "We'd never seen a full American blues band in action," noted Ian Whitcomb:

We had been visited only by the odd solo blues entertainers like Champion Jack Dupree or Speckled Red. Fine old varmints, true, and full of colorful tall tales and folksy music ... but nevertheless, these charming black men always remained several degrees removed from our own experience ... Blues Incorporated was showing us that even we white chaps could make reasonable R&B."¹³¹

The London blues scene quickly became a community and Korner—who was always interested in cultivating new talent—was its sage, coach and patron. His house was a drop-in center for young musicians; he fed the starving artists and provided them a place to sleep and access to his record collection. "It was Alexis' movement," recalls Mick Farren, a musician and writer who would later make his mark with the Deviants. "He was a great proselytizer ... he was everybody's godfather, rabbi, whatever." Giorgio Gomelsky also remembered the era with fondness. "You had that feeling of being in a clan of people who were sharing information and musical abilities, who were into the blues, they were into the same thing. And that made the whole thing gel."¹³²

Although the earliest flush of the revival was centered in London, major cities like Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, and Edinburgh also had their share of young blues fans, and by October 1962 they were beginning to find each other. The rhythm and blues boom was underway.

¹³¹ Ian Whitcomb, *Rock Odyssey: A Musician's Chronicle of the Sixties* (NY, 1983), pp. 28–9.

¹³² Steve Appleford, *The Rolling Stones: It's Only Rock and Roll: Song by Song* (NY, 1997), p. 9; Dalton, *Stones*, p. 25.

Chapter Five

“London: The New Chicago!”: The R&B Boom of 1963–1965

By 1962 the Trad fad was beginning to fade; the market was flooded with homogenous “traddy-pop” bands and club attendance was down. *Melody Maker* solicited advice from music industry moguls about what might revitalize the British jazz scene. Most proposed an exploration of Caribbean music or a return to large dance orchestras, but producer Denis Preston suggested the same course of action he had in the late 1940s: a good, strong dose of the blues. He was seconded by Jack Good, the creator of popular music programs like *Six-Five Special* (BBC) and *Oh, Boy!* (ITV), who was convinced that British rock and pop had become staid and uninspired. He advocated a return to “real, low-down, raunchy, scraunchy rhythm and blues that’ll knock the guts and beat the hide.”¹

It is not clear that Preston and Good knew about the recent surge of attendance at the Ealing Club. Several months later *Melody Maker* columnist the Raver mentioned the successful R&B sessions at the Marquee and wondered if they “could be a pointer to something!” Blues Incorporated was inundated with offers and within a few months had a residency at Jim Godbolt’s Six Bells Club in Chelsea on Wednesdays; on Fridays they could be heard at Woodstock Hotel in North Cheam; and on Saturdays they held forth at Maton Hall, Edmonton. In November *Melody Maker* announced:

Blues are Bustin’ Out All Over! ... The music which is currently drawing the biggest crowds in the London clubs these days is plain, unadulterated rhythm-n-blues. And the rhythm-n-blues purveyed by Alexis Korner’s Blues Incorporated unit ... is not music just to listen to—it’s music to twist to, jive to, jump to, swing with, and get with.²

By this time Blues Incorporated was no longer the only rhythm and blues band in London. The Ealing Club still met on Thursday nights but with a new group in residence, an R&B outfit headed by Bob Watson, Cyril Davies’s original partner in the London Skiffle Centre. By June the Esquire Club in Leeds also had a Thursday rhythm and blues night. Mick Jagger recalls, “Clubs which had specialized in straight Trad jazz were feeling the pinch—lots of them were closing down, but

¹ Whitcomb, *Rock Odyssey*, pp. 19, 28.

² “Blues are Bustin’ Out All Over!” *Melody Maker*, 17 November 1962, 11.

fast. Or changing over to the sort of music that Alexis Korner was pioneering. We knew, quite definitely, by going round the different clubs that the audiences were looking for something as an alternative.”³

Many jazz bands were attentive to the emerging trend and reorganized to meet the demand. Dave Hunt’s Confederates, a popular Trad group, became Dave Hunt’s R&B Band by adding a set of jump blues to its repertoire. Shortly thereafter banjo player Pete Deuchar announced that henceforth his Professors of Ragtime would focus on R&B and be called the Country Blues of Big Pete Deuchar. The Wes Minster Five, a band that had been playing jump swing at American air bases since the late 1950s, also adopted an R&B format, as did the Don Rendall Four/Five, a modern jazz band that included saxophonist Graham Bond. On occasion they joined with the Blues Incorporated rhythm section to form the Johnny Burch Octet, which played around London and Wales in the summer of 1962.

Before joining Rendall’s group Bond had played a few gigs with jazz keyboardist Manfred Mann and percussionist Mike Hugg. The duo thought they might get more work as a rhythm and blues combo so they placed an ad in *Melody Maker* seeking “other musicians to play Elmore James and Howlin’ Wolf material.” Paul Jones left his Oxford-based band, Thunder Odin’s Big Secret, to front the Mann-Hugg Blues Brothers, which eventually changed its name to Manfred Mann. Jones was not the only Korner protégé to form his own ensemble. Geoff Bradford assembled Blues by Six in July 1962 after rejecting an offer to join Brian Jones’s new band, the Rollin’ Stones.

Blues Incorporated made its broadcast debut on a Thursday and Korner had needed a band to fill his slot at the Marquee; he offered it to the fledgling Stones. The band—which at that time included Pretty Things founder Dick Taylor and future Kinks drummer Mick Avory—soon generated a loyal following, as did Cyril Davies, who left Blues Incorporated over creative differences and formed his own group, the R&B All-Stars.

British rhythm and blues was initially confined to a small number of establishments in the London area: the Birdhouse, the Ken Colyer Club, the Flamingo, the Star and Garter Hotel in Richmond, the Marquee and the Eel Pie Hotel, a decaying luxury retreat on an island in the Thames. Most fans hoped it would remain a local phenomenon and thus avoid the commercial hype that surrounded skiffle and Trad. However, it was not to be. *Melody Maker* devoted much of its inaugural issue of 1963 to R&B. “Are the signs pointing to a boom or a bandwagon existence?” one article asked. “Boom means true recognition for genuine R&B—bandwagon spells ... Trad all over again, with purist vs. popster battles and all the other controversies.” The article closed with a “thought-provoking suggestion” from “one of the newer faces on the R&B scene, Mick

³ The Rolling Stones, *Our Own Story, as we told it to Pete Goodman* (Toronto, 1965), p. 65.

Jagger, singer with the Rolling Stones ... ‘[R&B] has got to move out of London ... it has to spread live.’”⁴

‘Boom-Boom’: the R&B scene

In the early months of 1963 many of London’s jazz clubs took steps to increase their sagging attendance. “As the Trad scene gradually subsides, promoters of all kinds of teen-beat entertainments heave a sign of relief that they have found something to take its place,” reported *Melody Maker*. “It’s rhythm ‘n’ blues, of course—the number of R and B clubs that have suddenly sprung up is nothing short of fantastic.” The twin pillars of London’s R&B scene were the Marquee and the Flamingo. The Marquee, which moved to 90 Wardour Street in early 1963, was a respected venue that accepted Chicago style blues as part of a holistic, jazz oriented program; it was also the chosen hangout of London’s blues purists. Cyril Davies and his R&B All-Stars featuring Long John Baldry were in residence for the all-important Thursday night sessions. Monday nights were given over to “Britain’s Leading R&B groups” and soon Fridays were as well. In the early years these sessions featured acts like the Rolling Stones, the Bluesbreakers, the Yardbirds and Manfred Mann. By 1964 the Marquee had its own newsletter, *Jazz Today*, a weekly radio show and Sunday afternoon recitals of gospel and blues records.

The Flamingo, just down the road at 33 Wardour Street, was devoted to modern jazz in the 1950s and early 1960s but offered a Sunday night residency to Blues Incorporated in early 1963. They were soon replaced by Georgie Fame, a failed teen pop star who had discovered a fondness for jazz and blues. He and his Blue Flames created an R&B hybrid more devoted to Motown, hard bop and soul than to Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf. Led Zeppelin bassist John Paul Jones recalls, “The Flamingo was extremely seedy, hot and sweaty, but a brilliant vibe ... [the musicians] were all jazzers who played R&B.” The club was popular with American GIs and local black residents; some estimates put black attendance on R&B nights at nearly fifty percent. The Stones and the Yardbirds rarely played the club because regulars considered them “white R ‘n’ B, which nobody was into at all.”⁵

Perhaps the Flamingo’s regulars were not, but plenty of other Londoners were. One was Giorgio Gomelsky, a self-described “sucker for rhythm and blues,” which he hoped would “inject some authenticity into the rather pale and exploitative music scene.”⁶ In 1962 he started the Crawdaddy Rhythm and Blues Club in the back room of a pub in the Station Hotel, Richmond. He heard the Rolling Stones at

⁴ Chris Roberts, “Trend or Tripe?” *Melody Maker*, 5 January 1963, 5.

⁵ Andrew Loog Oldham, *Stoned: A Memoir of London in the 1960s* (NY, 2000), p. 79.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

the Red Lion in Sutton and offered them a Sunday residency; within six months his club had 2000 members and Gomelsky was looking for new accommodations. The Crawdaddy ended up at the Richmond Athletic Association.

Other important early R&B clubs in London were the Scene Club, owned by Rohan O'Rahilly, Studio 51 (formerly the Ken Colyer Club), Klooks Kleek, the Railway Hotel and the L'Auberge coffee house in Richmond, the 100 Club and Club Noreik, an all-night establishment on Tottenham Court Road.

Too Many Blues

In 1963 Blues Incorporated dominated the nascent British blues scene but it was not long before challengers arose. The first was Cyril Davies and his R&B All-Stars. Davies was the most respected of Britain's fledgling blues musicians; Paul Oliver wrote, "I never met one [British blues player] who seemed to be remotely like a blues singer in background, approach, or personality, apart from Cyril Davies ... it seemed to me that he bridged the impossible gulf between the cultures in a way no other blues singing Britisher did."⁷ The All-Stars were a disciplined and respected outfit composed of jazz veterans and studio players, augmented in early 1963 by Long John Baldry and Geoff Bradford. The band was devoted to recreating the sound of south side Chicago blues and they dominated the Marquee until Davies's sudden death from leukemia in early 1964. Baldry took over the unit and asserted that he and the renamed Hoochie Coochie Men were going to play the blues—a "blues orchestra" sound like that of Ray Charles—rather than "what is currently thought of as R&B, though our repertoire includes everything from Muddy Waters songs to Jimmy Rushing."⁸

Graham Bond replaced Cyril Davies in Blues Incorporated but few months later he, Jack Bruce and Ginger Baker split to form a new outfit. Bond had recently acquired a Hammond organ—one of the first in Britain—and he wanted to explore its possibilities; he even named their new group the Graham Bond *Organization*. Though their sound was closer to modern jazz than blues Bond considered himself a "blues-rooted player":

It doesn't have to be a 12-bar. Blues can be 9 ½ bars, or 14 bars, and in any time. You can play so many different sequences or no sequences at all. Talk about "free form"—there is a tremendous parallel with the blues, because it's so free. We are playing the blues of today, and I can get away with playing practically anything.⁹

⁷ Paul Oliver, "Picking the Box," p. 58.

⁸ "After Cy Davies—Long John and the Hoochie Coochies," *Melody Maker*, 25 January 1964, 12.

⁹ "Graham Bond," *Blues-Rock Explosion*, p. 36.

The jazz feel of the group became even more pronounced after John McLaughlin was replaced by Dick Heckstall-Smith.

The founding members of the Rolling Stones broke away from Blues Incorporated because they wanted to focus on the Chicago blues repertoire; their early sets included "Dust My Broom," "Honey What's Wrong" (by Jimmy Reed), "The Crawdaddy Song" (Bo Diddley), "Confessin' the Blues" (Chuck Berry) and "I Got My Mojo Workin'," a tune so ubiquitous George Melly dubbed it the "Saints" of the R&B movement. The raucous and admittedly rough style of the Stones quickly attracted younger blues adherents. Promoter Vic Johnson recalls:

The kids watching had never sampled this sort of thing and they didn't know what to make of it at first, but by the end of the evening they knew all right ... they were playing the blues, but they weren't an academic blues band. The Rolling Stones were more like a rebellion.¹⁰

The Yardbirds, like the Rolling Stones, weren't blues scholars. The band arose from the remnants of Paul Samwell-Smith's Metropolis Blues Quartet, which specialized in acoustic country blues. The band lasted long enough to draw the attention of three Chicago blues enthusiasts from Surbiton: Jim McCarty, Chris Dreja and Top Topham. Topham's father collected blues records and exposure to his Jimmy Reed singles changed Samwell-Smith's mind about the urban blues; Keith Relf, a folk aficionado who had discovered blues in the clubs, fell for Furry Lewis and Tommy McClennan. The Yardbirds distinguished themselves from the Rolling Stones by extending songs through individual and collective improvisation. "We went straight into open-ended instrumental passages," Chris Dreja recalls; "some nights it just didn't work, but when it did work it was great."¹¹ By October Topham had been replaced by Eric Clapton, a friend of Relf's from art school.

As the popularity of R&B soared more jazz bands reinvented themselves. The Mike Cotton Jazz Band became the Mike Cotton Sound and Chris Barber made a quick switch to R&B by replacing the banjo with an electric guitar and his upright bass with an electric model. Warwick's Tony and the Talons renamed themselves the Original Roadrunners; Atlantix from Burton-on-Trent broke up and reformed the next week as Rhythm and Blues Incorporated; and the Liverpoolian Brooks Brothers became the Rhythm and Blues Quartet overnight. Even Beryl Bryden jumped back into the fray, fronting Dave Davani & the D Men.

In late 1963 clubs were appearing in London at such a pace that *Melody Maker* declared the city "the new Chicago!" Coronation Hall in Kingston became an R&B club, as did the Ricky Tick Club at the Olympia Ballroom, Reading. The Refectory in Golders Green had sessions on Mondays. On Tuesdays the Nurses R&B Club

¹⁰ Victor Bockris, *Keith Richards: The Biography* (NY, 2003), p. 58.

¹¹ Platt et al., *Yardbirds*, p. 19.

met at the Jolly Gardener's in Isleworth and there were blues at the Harringey Club at Manor House. There was rhythm and blues at the George & Dragon in Acton; the Bluesliners Mojo Club at the Greyhound, Chadwell Heath; the Blues Opera Club at Royal Bell in Bromley; the Double D Club in Hackney and the Red Lion Club in Walthamstow. The Baldry Blues Club met at the Railway Hotel; the Black Prince R&B Club in Bexley; the Hopbine R&B Club at North Wembley Station; and the Mercury Theatre in Notting Hill ran a "Thursday Night Prayer Meeting preached by Alexis Korner's Blues Incorporated." Farther to the south R&B clubs operated at the Concorde Club in Southampton; the Toby Jug Hotel in Tolworth, Surrey; the Wooden Bridge Hotel in Guildford; Uncle Bonnie's Chinese Jazz Club in Brighton and above the Copper Kettle restaurant in Andover. By this time there were 140 R&B groups working in the greater London area and an additional 20–25 on the southern coast; Bill Carey reported that in the 40 mile radius around central London about 300,000 people attended at least one live R&B show every week.

In early 1964 the popular press identified R&B as the "sound of London" but Newcastle, Manchester, Birmingham and Sheffield were also centers for blues-based music.

Eric Burdon and John Steel, students at Newcastle College of Art, started the Pagans, that city's first rhythm and blues outfit, after attending a Muddy Waters concert in 1958. Most of the band's repertoire was learned from Big Joe Turner's *Boss of the Blues* [Columbia LTZ-K15053], but there is little evidence they played more than a few gigs. Meanwhile Burdon, who specialized in the blues shouting style of Jimmy Witherspoon and Joe Williams, begged bands that played at the Corner House pub and the University Jazz Club above the Gardener's Arms to let him sing "See See Rider" or "Beale Street Blues." The Alan Price Rhythm and Blues Combo usually allowed him to perform a few numbers; Burdon became a permanent member in 1962. The group changed its name to the Animals and started playing slow nights at the Downbeat, a dodgy pub ran by Mike Jeffery. Once they built up a local following Jeffery booked them into his other venue, the larger and more prestigious Club A-Go-Go. By the fall of 1963 the club filled to capacity whenever the band performed.

The home of R&B in Manchester was the Twisted Wheel, a coffee house converted into a rhythm and blues club in 1963. Most nights a local disc jockey named Roger Eagle spun American blues and soul records but the club also had a house band, Blues Syndicate. Its front man, John Mayall, had been appearing at the Bodega, Manchester's largest jazz club, since the late 1950s; he often played a nine string guitar in emulation of Big Joe Williams but he was also a skilled boogie-woogie pianist. Mayall moved to London in 1962 on the advice of Alexis Korner and assembled a band dedicated to re-creating contemporary Chicago blues. The Bluesbreakers found work at the Ealing Club, Studio 51 and the Flamingo and finally gained a following after opening for Manfred Mann at the Marquee in November 1963.

British rock and roll dominated the Midlands and the North until R&B bands from London expanded their touring circuit. After the Pretty Things appeared at St. Andrew's Hall in Norwich the *Midland Beat* declared, "R and B ousts Rock in East Anglia!" The jazz club Rhythm Unlimited soon introduced a rhythm and blues night; the club filled to capacity shortly after the doors opened, as it did on subsequent evenings. Local musician Spencer Davis told the *Midland Beat* that he had "been wanting to experiment with this type of music for some time. This club has provided me with the opportunity. I think it is a shot in the arm for the music scene in Birmingham."¹² Davis later teamed with jazz drummer Pete York and the Muffy Winwood Jazz band to form the Spencer Davis Group. In Sheffield local R&B groups lacking a venue started their own club in the back room of Forester's on Division Street. They soon attracted enough business that within a month clubs opened at Leeds Arms and the Minerva.

Though Scottish rock and jazz bands played material by Muddy Waters and Jimmy Reed there was no Scottish version of the London R&B scene in the early 1960s. The leading club in Edinburgh, the Place, favored jazz and beat groups, but it booked any blues tours came through Scotland. La Cave in Glasgow ran an R&B session on Wednesdays, as did the Crown Bar on Tuesdays, but attendance and participation were limited to a select group of devotees. Scotland could claim a few "R&B" bands from the early 1950s, like the George Barne All-Stars and Five Smith Brothers, which played songs by Louis Jordan and Lionel Hampton, but the closest analogue to London area groups was Alex Harvey and his Soul Band, which packed its set list with songs by Muddy Waters, Ray Charles and Bo Diddley after adopting an R&B format in 1963. Glasgow bands Blues Council and the Poets of Glasgow walked the line between beat and R&B, including Lightnin' Hopkins and Howlin' Wolf songs in their Motown-influenced sets. In Wales, too, R&B hewed closely to jazz and soul; groups that appeared at the R&B Cellar and Glanmore Jazz Club in Swansea were as likely to perform songs by Ronnie Scott and Ray Charles as those by Mose Allison and Big Joe Williams.

In 1964 R&B Bands proliferated as quickly as clubs did. It is estimated that there were 300 R&B groups in England at the beginning of that year; at its end there were upwards of 2000. The Groundhogs—named after John Lee Hooker's "Groundhog Blues"—were based in London, as were the Pretty Things, the Mark Leeman Five, the Authentics, the Sheffields, the Cheynes, Gary and the T-Bones and the Pink Floyd Sound, which took its name from country bluesmen Pink Anderson and Floyd Jones. The Sounds of Blue, with Christine Perfect and Chris Wood, was a popular act in the Kidderminster-Dudley-Wolverhampton triangle that eventually produced Robert Plant, Traffic and Chicken Shack. There was the Nightshift (Jeff Beck's first group), Shakedown Sound from Hereford (which in time became Mott the Hoople), the Beaconsfield Rhythm and Blues Group, Leeds's Blue Sounds, the Rhythm and Blues Group from Grantham and the

¹² *The Midland Beat*, 1 October 1963, quoted in Clayson, *Beat Merchants*, p. 152.

Bluesvampers from Hohner. Southampton had the Howlin' Wolves, the Boll Weevils, two groups called the King Bees (one led by David Bowie), the Primitives, Sam Spade's Gravediggers from Coventry and Vance Arnold and the Avengers-cum-Joe Cocker's Big Blues. There were so many new groups that one wonders, as John Lennon did, where they all came from.

Richard Middleton has posited that British R&B was an attempt by young blues fans to "back up" and understand the "harsh and primitive" aspects of the down home elements they heard in urban blues, soul and early rock and roll.¹³ Giorgio Gomelsky felt that Trad had become too formulaic:

We had to go back to something authentic ... I've a feeling that to a certain extent the blues message, the way it's presented, seemed more close [sic] to people's consciousness here than the white rock 'n' roll which was stolen from it. Maybe it was more direct and down to earth.¹⁴

Bill Wyman agrees that R&B seemed more honest than popular music. "Those smarmy pop songs about lipstick on your collar and that kind of stuff, it was just laughable ... but when someone sang about working on the railroad at a dollar a day ... you could appreciate it, because he probably did ... it was true to life." Likewise, Eric Burdon recalls that the first time he heard Eddie Boyd's "Five Long Years" he thought, "That was happening to people ... grown men on my block."¹⁵

There was also a sense that the vague discontent of the late 1950s was becoming something more aggressive and that blues and R&B provided an outlet for anger and resistance. "Rhythm and blues," Ian Birchall has noted, "combines an awareness of frustration and oppression with a vigorous rejection of it. With only minor modifications, [it] ... could be transferred to reflect the attitude and preoccupations of British working-class youth." George Melly believes the postwar blues were about "hatred, really, but there was no overt protest in them. They were about racial aggression expressed in sexual terms ... and the British drop-outs heard this and wanted to join in."¹⁶

It is tempting to dismiss claims that the appeal of R&B was rooted in aggression and sexuality as overly facile but many former fans think these elements were significant. Ian Whitcomb recalls, "There was a crowd collecting to see and hear R&B, not purely for the Afro-American blues sound, but also for a highly charged mixture of sex and violence and blues" Robert Plant remembers

¹³ Middleton, *Pop Music*, p. 187.

¹⁴ Dalton, *Rolling Stones*, pp. 17–18.

¹⁵ Wyman, "Stone Freed," in Dan Ackroyd and Ben Manilla (eds), *Elwood's Blues: Interviews with the Blues Legends and Stars* (San Francisco, 2004), pp. 158–9; and Murray, *Boogie Man*, p. 270.

¹⁶ Ian Birchall, "The decline and fall of British rhythm and blues," in Jonathan Eisen (ed.), *The Age of Rock* (NY: 1969), p. 96; George Melly, *Revolt into Style: The Pop Arts in Britain* (London, 1970), p. 84.

the appeal of “Help Me” by Sonny Boy Williamson: “He’s talking about everything, you know. About the sexuality, the reliance, the need, and I was a young man, I had pain in the loins.”¹⁷

Whatever their reason, young musicians continued to jump on the blues bandwagon. Bookstores had trouble keeping anthologies like *The Book of the Blues*—which provided chord changes, lyrics, and short textual analyses of blues classics—and method books like *The Blues and How To Play ‘Em* in stock.¹⁸ Guitar sales soared again after a post-skiffle slump and eager musicians queried the “Expert Advice” columnists of *Melody Maker* about the relative merits of various acoustic guitars and where one might purchase a “bottleneck.”

In the early years of the boom most of the musicians were serious blues fans. That changed as the music became more popular. Nascent rock bands like the Who and the Kinks adopted the R&B tag and learned a few Jimmy Reed and Howlin’ Wolf tunes to increase their potential for employment, and many jazz groups did the same. Varying degrees of familiarity with the root idiom yielded widely divergent musical styles that were all called “rhythm and blues.” This created confusion for young fans just discovering the idiom.

The British musical press did not help clarify the issue, as there was great deal of contention over what should be classified as R&B. British jazz critics, like their American counterparts, had initially embraced a flexible definition that encompassed most black popular music of the postwar period. This was sufficient until British R&B became popular.

Bob Dawbarn explained the dilemma:

The connection between R&B and British jazz is a confusing one, the edges tend to become blurred and merge with the pop-beat groups, many of whom give themselves the R&B tag. Even those who claim the authentic R&B sound can represent utterly different types of music, from the earthy Cyril Davies All-Stars to the modern Alexis Korner Blues Incorporated.¹⁹

There were many different views on what constituted R&B:

On one side there are the so-called “purists” and their contention is that r&b [sic] is the music played in those now almost familiar places on the Chicago South-Side like “Smitty’s Corner”. ... This is followed by the affirmations of people in the jazz world “proper” who claim that r & b—in this country at least—is the music played by a select group of blues-minded jazz musicians who range from Graham Bond to Manfred Mann

¹⁷ Whitcomb, *Rock Odyssey*, p. 29; Robert Plant, “The Song Remains the Same,” in Ackroyd, *Elwood’s Blues*, p. 139.

¹⁸ *The Book of the Blues* (London, 1963); Frank Paparelli, *The Blues, and How to Play ‘Em: A Piano Method Book* (NY, 1941).

¹⁹ Bob Dawbarn, “What’s what with Jazz Singers, the big bands, and R&B,” *Melody Maker*, 19 October 1963, 6.

to Chris Barber. A third category states that r & b is the music played at the Flamingo by Georgie Fame ... yet another is that it is "the American Negro's pop music," and finally, some people hold the view that it is a rich mixture of Liverpool, Manchester, beat, and pop, Chuck Berry, the Cavern, Ray Charles, skiffle groups off-beat accents [sic]—in short, all of which sells at the moment.²⁰

This last category was employed solely in the popular music press, which for a time called any British pop that was audibly influenced by American black music "R&B." The Beatles, for example, were often called a "British R&B-style act" because their sound was "straight out of Nashville, or anywhere you like in America's Southern music belt." While explicable, this did not adequately indicate what separated R&B from rock 'n' roll. In fact, many believed that "R&B" was nothing but a "pacemaker for that horrific beat music." Bill Carey of the National Jazz Federation believed that "R&B is what jazzmen call rock and roll, and the rockers call jazz" and offered the following definitions: "In beat, the audience screams at the group ... in R&B the group screams at the audience."²¹

While Carey might have made light of the issue, young fans did not. They fought with the zeal and passion of the newly converted:

Today you are likely to listen to a record of the Rolling Stones, or the Mojos, or Manfred Mann with teeth-gritting fury, and with white-hot pen scorch a letter to the *Melody Maker* sprinkled with "I am fed up ..." "It's a load of rubbish ..." and finishing with your definitive argument on rhythm and blues ... they put forth all kinds of theories that make simple old blues music sound like a controversial Fourth Stream movement.²²

So pervasive were debates of this nature that they were spoofed—and quite accurately characterized—by Paul McCartney and John Lennon in an early 1964 interview:

PAUL: It gets a bit stupid when you get letters in to the big musical papers when people really pick these boundaries apart. You sort of get these letters like "Bo Diddley, Chuck Berry, Little Richard—huh that's not rhythm and blues listen to ..."

JOHN: Like ... "I've got Big Screaming Arthur and Fat..."

PAUL: "...you know like Broken Leg Williams. And Broken Leg Williams has done some great releases but why don't the British public know about it ...?"²³

²⁰ Giorgio Gomelsky, "Is There a Rhythm and Blues Boom?" *Jazzbeat* 1 (January 1964): 6.

²¹ Sinclair Traill, "Editorial," *Jazz Journal* 7/11 (July 1964): 5; Bob Dawbarn, "Well—what is R&B?" *Melody Maker*, 30 March 1963, 6; Dawbarn, "Swinging to R&B," *Melody Maker*, 18 April 1964, 8–9.

²² Chris Roberts, "To Be—or not to R&B?" *Melody Maker*, 29 August 1964, 7.

²³ Pickstock, "R&B with the Beatles."

Virtually no one considered British R&B—a phrase that rarely appeared in the jazz or blues press without being sheathed in quotation marks lest the author be considered a rock 'n' roll sympathizer—to be "real" blues. Even most of its target audience recognized that British R&B was a "commercial local accent" of the blues or "really a new thing ... a British thing."²⁴ Nonetheless, this new upstart led critics back to the same questions they'd had in the 1950s: where did R&B end and rock 'n' roll begin? Pat Richards, the editor of *Jazzbeat*, noted:

All over London clubs are springing up with claim to feature R&B and many new groups are being formed who will make R&B noises ... that does not mean the sound they make IS R&B. The difference is something slight and difficult to detect; it is a question of detecting the original from the fake, from the poor copy. Groups like Alexis Korner and Cyril Davies have for years studied the idiom and created a British R&B scene. What they and other groups play and do is legitimate and honest, it is worthy of attention. What the copyists who play the "pigeon holes" do is often dishonest, shallow, and worthless.²⁵

However, there were no established criteria for discerning one from the other. There was general agreement that "authentic R&B" should sound like Muddy Waters or Jimmy Reed but—as Charles Shaar Murray has noted—this demonstrated only "an adherence to the letter of the blues rather than its spirit" and "sedulous mimicry of vocal and instrumental mannerisms"²⁶

In the early 1960s most British R&B bands were highly imitative. In fact, the most sincere tried to replicate as precisely as possible what they heard on records because they revered the original artists. Learning songs "was almost a religious experience for the pious Stones, copying the old blues standards as if they were scripture ... anything else would have been sacrilege."²⁷ Phil May likewise observed, "All the people like Korner, to them [playing the blues] was like a church. You couldn't be disrespectful. The harmonica was learned note-for-note."²⁸

Modeling and imitation are employed by all young musicians; the most creative later forge these learned influences into a personal style. Many of those trying to play the blues were doing well to turn out credible renditions of their favorite R&B songs; as a whole they lacked sufficient musicianship to create blues in their own distinct style. Before the skiffle boom such limited skills might have kept a young band rehearsing in private until their talents were more fully formed, but by 1962

²⁴ Dawbarn, "What is R&B?"

²⁵ Pat Richards, "Editorial," *Jazzbeat* 2 (February 1964): 3.

²⁶ Charles Shaar Murray, *Crosstown Traffic: Jimi Hendrix and the Post-War Rock 'n' Roll Revolution* (NY, 1989), p. 137.

²⁷ Appleford, *Stones*, p. 9.

²⁸ Richie Unterberger, *Urban Spacemen and Wayfaring Strangers: Overlooked Innovators and Eccentric Visionaries of '60s Rock* (San Francisco, 2000), p. 15.

the do-it-yourself ethos had triumphed and many started playing for audiences as relative beginners.

Only a few critics attacked British R&B because some of the musicians did not play well; there were plenty of other reasons. One thing that seemed to irritate both sides of the purist divide was the vocal tone employed by many British R&B singers. On several occasions Bob Dawbarn complained about the "painful imitations of Chicago Negro singers ... to me it is still farcical to hear the accents, sentiments, and experience of an American Negro coming out of a white-faced London Lad." Alum Morgan too felt "the sight and sound of four or five white Englishmen ... singing Negro blues in a phoney American accent is really too ludicrous to take seriously."²⁹ For ears long accustomed to blues-inflected rock voices it is hard to tell what critics found so irksome. It is true that "Negroid vocalizing" like Eric Burdon's powerful blues shouting was largely without precedent but writers like Max Jones repeatedly stressed that the "Negro dialect" and sense of timing were important element of the blues; young singers did their best to copy both.

The results were admittedly mixed. A handful of singers, including Burdon, Steve Winwood and Long John Baldry, discovered they could sing comfortably and naturally in this style. For Adam Clayton, such vocalists "showed that you didn't have to come from the chain gang or the ghettos of southside [sic] Chicago to sound world-weary, cynical, and knowing beyond your years If you half-closed your eyes, with delicate suspension of logic, these stripling lived-in, aged rasps would seem believable"³⁰ The majority, however, produced idiosyncratic tone colors that betrayed their country of origin. Chris Barber recalls, "The British blues were very British in sound really. We were trying our darndest, Mick tries his darndest to sing like Muddy Waters and Bo Diddley, but he still sounds like Mick Jagger. I mean we are, after all, English"³¹

Many critics felt this mimicry was dishonest, as stylistically disingenuous as recasting John Lee Hooker as a folk artist. Simon Frith has noted that in much British popular music, rooted as it is in the character song of the music hall:

the singer is playing a part, and what is involved is neither self-expression (the equation of role and performer, as in chanson or the blues), nor critical commentary (as in the German theatre song) but, rather, an exercise in style ... the art of this sort of singing becomes a matter of acting, and there is always a question concerning the singer's relationship to his own words.³²

²⁹ Bob Dawbarn, "Stones Stoned!" *Melody Maker*, 23 May 1964, 8; Alum Morgan, review of *Alexis Korner's Blues Incorporated*, *Jazz Monthly* 10/6 (August 1964): 20.

³⁰ Clayton, *Beat Merchants*, p. 153.

³¹ Dalton, *Rolling Stones*, p. 18.

³² Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 171.

British R&B was just such an "exercise in style," which nullified the raw emotional impact of the genre, a mere hearsay of genuine experience. Critics noted that even professional musicians who had long cultivated the blues did not measure up to American standards. Peter Russell noted:

Messrs Davies and Korner, particularly the latter, have made a convincing job of their new studies and can now turn out an extremely entertaining product which sounds almost too authentic on first acquaintance. By about the third hearing one is all too well aware that the performances lack inner vitality, and the impression gained in that this is the blues seen from without rather than experienced from within.

Ray Coleman believed the same was true of Long John Baldry and the Hoochie Coochie Men. "Baldry has absorbed the blues idiom well ... yet the listener is often left with the feeling that his singing is too mannered and theatrical for the sheer earthiness of blues."³³

The press had a difficult time understanding why this emotionally barren music was so popular. Gina Wright observed, "the material is rather trite, lacking in depth and of little musical consequence. It may hold a brash appeal to the pop-buying market providing background or dancing music, but it can lay no claim to authenticity, being only a parody of the blues."³⁴ She was wrong, though. Anyone could claim to be authentic—it didn't have to be true.

Authenticity was a desirable commodity; as the cognoscenti had framed the blues as folk music, artists that offered the "genuine" article could reach a larger audience. Big Bill Broonzy had realized this and tailored his image accordingly; some agents, managers and promoters in the early 1960s also knew that authenticity—real or imagined—could elevate the reputations of their artists. Charlesworth Presentations of London promoted its clients—the Graham Bond Organization and The Bluebottles with Mike Patto—as "authenticity in R&B." The Rolling Stones's representation urged Londoners: "Don't be misled! Hear the real, authentic rhythm and blues sound!" Ben Covington claimed that there were so many posters in London advertising "authentic rhythm 'n' blues" bands that "one might be forgiven for assuming that the Blues was created by a post-Aldermaston generation of art students rather than by the afflicted negro population of the American south."³⁵

³³ Peter Russell, review of *Blues at the Roundhouse, volume 2* [Tempo EXA102] by Blues Incorporated, *Jazz Monthly* 6/2 (April 1960): 21; Ray Coleman, review of *Long John's Blues* [Ascot ALM 13022] by Long John Baldry and the Hoochie Coochie Men, *Melody Maker*, 13 February 1965, 15.

³⁴ Gina Wright, review of R&B [Decca LK 4616] by various artists, *Jazz Journal* 17/11 (November 1964): 36.

³⁵ Advertisement in *Melody Maker*, 21 March 1964, 17; Massimo Bonanno, *The Rolling Stones Chronicle: the First Thirty Years* (NY, c. 1990), p. 14; Ben Covington [Charles Radcliffe], "Blues in the Archway Road," *Anarchy* 51 (May 1965): 129.

These claims were assiduously refuted by critics, who expressed concern that British audiences might think native R&B actually was authentic. Guy Stevens worried about:

beat groups who played cover versions of rhythm and blues songs, thinly disguising their music as the 'Merseybeat' sound, and in some cases going so far as to call it rhythm and blues. Thus the mass pop record-buying public have been milked into thinking that the songs their idols are singing are original

Even worse, "groups such as the Rolling Stones are taken seriously and there must be several thousand teen-aged fans who believe they have heard some authentic rhythm-and-blues."³⁶

Fears of misdirection were converted into presumptions about the musicians themselves. Most jazz and popular music writers believed that if a band played R&B they considered themselves to be purveyors of the real thing. However, the vast majority of the groups never claimed to be "authentic." Most happily acknowledged they were taking a bash at playing rhythm and blues songs and if that led a few more teenagers to discover the blues, so much the better. Mick Jagger told *Melody Maker*, "To those who listen to groups like ours, and think we are originators, we say—don't listen to us. Listen to the men who inspire us. Buy their records. Why get your information second hand when it's fairly easy to buy it new?"³⁷

In fact, many bands tried to distance themselves from the "authentic" label. Alexis Korner asserted that Blues Incorporated was a blues band; they didn't play R&B, as that was American Negro pop music. Graham Bond and Manfred Mann also denied being R&B bands. Bond stated, "I am a blues-rooted player. This is really a new thing. An affiliation of modern jazz with a beat—although nothing like soul jazz. It is really a British thing."³⁸ Pete Godwin of Wes Minster 5 claimed to play modern blues with a heavier emphasis on the beat; Manfred Mann said they played basic jazz with a heavier emphasis on the beat.

Some musicians felt that their fellow "R&B" groups shouldn't even play the blues. Eric Clapton recalled, "I was very pompous in my attitude toward white blues groups ... my ego made me regard it as being all right in my case, but not in anybody else's ... so that I didn't like any other white guy's playing." Long John Baldry agreed that white R&B bands were unacceptable because they created false notions about black music. "I consider it very sick the way people now talk about

³⁶ Guy Stevens, "Barrett Strong," *Jazzbeat* 3 (March 1964): 19; Morgan, review of *Blues Incorporated*.

³⁷ "The Rolling Stones Write for *Melody Maker*," *Melody Maker*, 2 May 1964, 3.

³⁸ Dawbarn, "What is R&B?"

blues and don't really know a thing about it. In fact there's an awful lot of rubbish talked and an awful lot of rubbish around."³⁹

It may be that part of the furor over "authenticity" was caused by conflicting terminology. In the early part of the boom "authentic" was used by various factions to specify what type of R&B a given band looked to for inspiration. In 1963 Brian Jones tried to secure an audition with the BBC; his letter of inquiry explained that the Rolling Stones tried to produce "an authentic Chicago Rhythm and Blues sound, using the material of such R&B 'greats' as Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Bo Diddley, Jimmy Reed, and many others." Giorgio Gomelsky also used the word in this manner. "It may well be that in the present confusion as to what R&B really is, [British R&B bands] are not always following the 'authentic,' i.e. the Chicago South Side, type"⁴⁰

Most critics writing for mainstream jazz publications considered only jazz-based expositions of R&B—jump blues and small swing organizations featuring organ or keyboard and fronted by a shouter—to be "authentic." Harold Pendleton told *Melody Maker* that he was interested in booking rhythm and blues bands, but only "R&B-type R&B, not rock by any other name." These groups comprised established jazz players who had studied the blues idiom and therefore were given serious consideration in the mainstream musical press. Ian Stewart recalls feeling that the jazz cognoscenti wished to "keep the r'n'b thing very much jazz oriented ... though we got tacit encouragement, because we didn't have horns, they used to play games, you know, they'd offer us gigs then take them away and offer them to Charlie Watts' Blues by Six or the Mann-Hugg Blues Brothers."⁴¹

Periodicals like *Jazz Journal* and *Jazz Monthly* paid little attention to British R&B until the magnitude of the phenomenon made it impossible to ignore. By mid-1964 they waded into the fray and presented a quarterly survey of "the scene." Most cognoscenti recognized that native R&B bands played "a kind of bastardized blues with more spirit than actual know-how" and viewed them with the same bemused tolerance as skiffle. Paul Oliver observed:

The growth of Rhythm-and-Blues playing in Britain during the past couple of years is a remarkable phenomenon in itself, whatever one might think of the individual performances. Though many of the groups make me shudder I must admit that they have bridged the cultural gap with more success than the earlier skiffle craze ever did.

³⁹ Buddy Guy and Donald E. Wilcock, *Damn Right I've Got the Blues: Buddy Guy and the Blues Roots of Rock and Roll* (San Francisco, 1993), p. 65; Val Wilmer, "Long John Baldry: Every Inch a Bluesman," *Jazzbeat* 1/9 (September 1964): 6.

⁴⁰ Bonanno, *Rolling Stones*, p. 14; Gomelsky, "Opinion," *Jazzbeat* 2 (February 1964): 29.

⁴¹ Bob Dawbarn, "Is rhythm and blues killing Trad jazz?" *Melody Maker*, 26 October 1963, 8; Dawbarn, "Swinging to R&B," Bob Bruning, *Blues – The British Connection* (Poole, 1986), p. 20.

He also noted, approvingly, that the rhythm and blues clubs “have no pretensions to blues purism or folksiness.”⁴²

Many were glad the craze was drawing attention to the blues. In a *Jazz Monthly* editorial Albert McCarthy declared:

I welcome the current trend in pop music which has resulted in such groups as the Rolling Stones and Georgie Fame’s gaining prominence. On a strictly critical level I find their records totally unimpressive but the music seems much more direct and honest than a great deal of the pop output of the past, though essentially derivative in content. From the viewpoint of *Jazz Monthly* readers the real importance of current pop taste is that it is resulting in an unprecedented interest in the blues.⁴³

Others did not view the movement with such favor. Eric Thacker replied:

I wish I could wholeheartedly share the editor’s feeling that the current pseudo-rhythm ‘n’ blues craze is, on balance, no bad thing ... my own fear is that the public image of the blues might be so debased as to need many years to recover even the blurred focus it has now. The debasement is plain enough in the vulgarisms of the Rolling Stones, Manfred Mann, the Animals, and Georgie Fame, etc., but there is also some indication that the hit parade stereotyping of rhythm ‘n’ blues tempts visiting Negro artists to emphasize the kind of repetitive sub-blues to which their teenage audiences obviously respond most favorably.

Derrick Stewart-Baxter agreed:

One has only to remember the Trad boom or the Skiffle craze, the latter founded on a genuine American Negro music of considerable historical value, to realize just how a musical style can be distorted and finally ruined. At the moment the blues are being given the ‘treatment,’ and it is anybody’s guess what may happen!⁴⁴

Even worse, Trad strongholds like the Ken Colyer Club were giving more nights over to rhythm and blues and by July 1964 the Marquee and the Flamingo had virtually abandoned jazz. There was a general outcry that beat, pop and R&B had “nibbled away at the roots of the Blues, diluting the jazz message, and young people have been accepting the substitutes instead of reaching for the real thing.”⁴⁵

In fact, they were doing both. *Melody Maker* noted that British R&B was stimulating a widespread interest in American blues records:

⁴² Sinclair Traill, “Editorial,” *Jazz Journal* 17/7 (July 1964), 5; Paul Oliver, review of *R&B* [Decca LK 4616] by various artists, *Jazz Monthly* 10/7 (November 1964): 24; Oliver, “The Original Sonny Boy,” in *Blues Off the Record*, p. 258.

⁴³ Albert McCarthy, “In Person,” *Jazz Monthly* 10/6 (October 1964): 3–4.

⁴⁴ Eric Thacker, “Incidentals,” *Jazz Monthly* 10/11 (January 1965): 9; Derrick Stewart-Baxter, “The Blues on Record,” *Jazz Journal* 17/10 (October 1964): 24.

⁴⁵ Danny Halperin, “When the Saints go Marching Out,” *Jazzbeat* 7 (July 1964): 6.

The hit paraders of the moment are largely responsible for making the popular music public aware of what used to be obscure names. They are the new pop heroes: singer-guitarists like Berry and Diddley, bluesmen like John Lee Hooker and Muddy Waters, and US R&B legends like Little Walter and Elmore James.

Ian Whitcomb recalled the excitement of discovering this new music:

Inspired by the intellectual respectability of Alexis Korner and the animal magnetism of Mick Jagger, I buried myself in R&B. I poured over liner notes. I combed specialty record stores. I consulted an Old Etonian who had a very decent collection of R&B imports ... I was now reading anything I could find on the subject of blacks and black music

Whitcomb, a founding member the Dublin-based R&B group Bluesville, was typical of the new generation of blues aficionados:

Whether participants or spectators, blues enthusiasts—like the skiffers of old—frequented Dobell's, Carey's Swing Shop in Streatham and rare provincial stores like Violet May's in Sheffield that also dealt in a wide spectrum of vinyl goods from black America ... before they knew it, fans were rolling out of bed at 5 AM to catch a half-hour blues show on the American Forces Network, and making expensive expeditions to Manchester, Birmingham, and London for blues [tour] packages.⁴⁶

Albert McCarthy noticed that the R&B boom was creating a "genuine concern with the more authentic performers to a degree that was never true of the average follower of the Bilk or Barber bands."⁴⁷ The number of new adherents provided an audience for American blues musicians, who were once again invited to appear in Britain.

Folk blues festivals

In 1962 promoters Horst Lippmann and Fritz Rau launched the American Negro Folk Blues Festival package tour, hoping to capitalize on the rising European interest in American folk music. As their familiarity with the blues scene in the United States was limited they enlisted Willie Dixon to serve as associate producer, recruit talent and deal directly with the artists. Concerts were originally scheduled in France, Germany, Switzerland, Denmark and Holland; surprisingly, Britain was not included. Dixon and Lippmann claimed "there was not much

⁴⁶ Ray Coleman, "The Pop Heroes," *Melody Maker*, 2 May 1964, 3; Whitcomb, *Rock Odyssey*, p. 34; Clayson, *Beat Merchants*, p. 151.

⁴⁷ McCarthy, "Editorial," *Jazz Monthly* 10/5 (July 1964): 3.

enthusiasm in Europe when we came up with the idea ... only Paris right away liked it.”⁴⁸

British blues writers reacted with disbelief. Paddy McKiernan, owner of the Bodega club, leapt into action, and at the last minute managed to book two shows into the Manchester Free Trade Hall on 21 October. Tickets sold briskly. The discrepancy between the stated “lack of enthusiasm” and the obvious appetite for tickets suggests that whoever Lippmann and Rau initially approached had rejected their terms. G. E. Lambert guessed that “those who claim to have their hands on the pulse of the jazz public felt a full concert by blues artists would be too strong a brew.” He did not name names but the National Jazz Federation was suspected; it had previously rejected tour offers by blues artists.

Melody Maker reported that Alexis Korner and his band were canceling their appearances on the 21st in order to attend the Festival. This elicited similar declarations from other groups, effectively instituting a London blues blackout the day of the concert. The paper also ran a large article introducing the acts. Some, like Memphis Slim, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee and John Lee Hooker, were well known to British audiences; others, like Willie Dixon and T-Bone Walker, were familiar only to the cognoscenti. Those who attended—according to Paul Oliver, the majority were blues diehards from London—gave the artists an “enthusiastic reception.” John Lee Hooker recalled, “Bo-o-o-oy, it was just like the President or Jesus comin’ in” T-Bone Walker was also surprised by the response and the enthusiasm of the crowd. Lambert felt each performer had “presented his songs in a natural manner and one was pleased to note the absence of deliberately ‘folky’ episodes ... we were thus able to hear the blues in conditions as natural as one could hope for considering the basic incompatibility of this music with the concert platform.”

While all of the acts were well received, Walker was a revelation:

He performed in his usual, flamboyant style, which was unprecedented facial expressions, varied dances around the stage and weird cavortings [sic] in front of the cameras were no more than a prelude to playing the guitar with the left hand while lying prone and finally with both hands with the instrument slung round the back of the neck.

Lambert noted the similarity of the blues man’s amplified guitar style to the “current r & b manner” of playing which, he speculated, “must have dismayed both the respectability seekers and the folkniks.” However, he praised Walker as a creative player whose technique was beyond reproach.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Jim O’Neal, “I Once was Lost but Now I’m Found: The Blues Revival of the 1960s,” in Lawrence Cohn (ed.), *Nothin’ But the Blues* (NY, 1993), p. 349.

⁴⁹ G. E. Lambert, “Blues Festival in Manchester,” *Jazz Monthly* 8/10 (December 1962): 13; Murray, *Boogie Man*, p. 245.

Though neither concert was a sellout—estimates vary, but their average suggests the 5000 seat auditorium was at two-thirds capacity—the first American Folk Blues Festival was an unqualified success. The next year Lippmann and Rau increased the number of dates from 17 to 29 but once again did not book any dates in Britain. They changed their minds after a chance meeting with Giorgio Gomelsky, who told the promoters of Britain's rhythm and blues boom and insisted, "[The Festival] has to go to England." He personally called Harold Pendleton, who pledged the support of the National Jazz Federation, and five English dates were arranged: three at Fairfield Hall in Croydon, one at the Manchester Free Trade Hall and one in Birmingham.

The 1963 American Folk Blues Festival lineup included John Lee Hooker, Otis Spann, Sonny Boy Williamson, Victoria Spivey, Big Joe Williams, Lonnie Johnson, Willie Dixon and Matt Guitar Murphy. There was a palpable sense of anticipation, particularly among young blues connoisseurs. British R&B had been enlarging the music's fan base since late 1962 yet the only American act that had toured the country was Bo Diddley. All of the Festival's British dates quickly sold out. *Blues Unlimited* editor Simon Napier enthused:

The fantastic reception and success accorded the show leads me to believe that the boom in blues' popularity is no passing fancy BUT IS VERY MUCH [sic] here to stay. Lately the tremendous popularity of so-called rhythm and blues along with the pseudo-folk market must have some effect on the sale of the real thing, as more and more people are given the chance to hear a larger number of good blues singers.

The mostly young audience gave the visiting bluesmen a terrific reception, so much so that artists had trouble getting off the stage, as the crowds demanded encore after encore. "Never has Britain seen such a tremendous display," declared Napier. "All the singers were delighted by their welcome and very surprised by the great interest taken in themselves and in their music. This is very encouraging for the future of blues in Europe"⁵⁰

Paul Oliver concurred and offered grand praise for the quality of the artists and their performances, particularly given that the musicians—some of whom were over 60 years old—were near the end of a grueling tour and unaccustomed to playing in large auditoria. He ranked Williams' performance one of the finest of the night, "far more interesting than he seems on record—and his recent records are very good—Big Joe was worth traveling a long way to hear." He was also impressed by the completely unknown Matt "Guitar" Murphy and was captivated by the sexagenarian harmonica player Sonny Boy Williamson, who dazzled the audience with a virtuosic display. He was somewhat ambivalent about Lonnie Johnson, who once again inserted a few sweetly sentimental pop tunes into his set.

⁵⁰ Simon Napier, "American Folk Blues Festival," *Blues Unlimited* 6 (November 1963): 16.

"The audience applauded wildly, I have to report. At last the mums and dads who had been dragged along by enthusiastic young fans, and the jazz critics who admit the importance of the blues but don't like it or recognize it—at last they heard something they knew." The audience did not know how to respond to Victoria Spivey, the sole representative of the classic blues tradition, whose vaudevillian performance set off a firestorm of critical discourse.

The most controversial artist of the evening was Muddy Waters, who had once again misjudged English audiences. "Muddy made a typical error when he sang at the Leeds festival, in playing his electric guitar to an audience that couldn't take one from a blues singer. He made another one this time—in playing a bright new Spanish box when he ought to have played electric guitar."⁵¹ The younger audience shared none of the older generation's problems with loud guitars and they wondered why the king of the Chicago blues was playing acoustic. Some audiences responded nonetheless but others remained aloof. "Back at his London hotel after the concert," Val Wilmer reported, "he sat shaking his head in disbelief ... Just what did they want, these [British] white folks?"⁵²

After the Festival performances a few of the artists ventured into London to hear some British R&B. Naturally the visitors were asked to take the stage, which gave critics and diehard fans an opportunity to hear blues performed in a more intimate venue. The informal nature of these sessions and the enthusiastic response convinced several promoters to mount tours by individual American artists. For the next 18 months the country played host to a constant stream of American bluesmen, often two or three at a time. Cliff White recalls this period as one "when American blues, rock, and soul originators were coming at us so thick and fast that we had to be slick to know which way to jump and they had to be bloody marvelous to even so much as justify their reputation, let alone create a lasting impression."⁵³ Many acts were booked by Frank Weston of the Malcolm Nixon Agency, who also arranged media appearances and recording sessions. Willie Dixon often served as the middle man; he negotiated on behalf of the artists in exchange for a cut of their profits.

The first to arrive was Sonny Boy Williamson. Giorgio Gomelsky claims that he convinced Horst Lippmann to let the harp wizard remain in Britain so that "we could organize a tour of the budding R&B club circuit and strengthen the blues scene." It appears that Williamson returned to the United States with the rest of the cast but he was back in London by early December for a series of concerts at the Marquee Club, including a Christmas Eve gig with the Cyril Davies All-Stars and

⁵¹ Paul Oliver, "American Folk Blues Festival 1963," *Jazz Monthly* 9/10 (December 1963): 8–11.

⁵² Val Wilmer, "First Time."

⁵³ Cliff White, notes to *Upside Your Head* by Jimmy Reed [Charly CRB 1003], quoted in Murray, *Boogie Man*, p. 291.

Long John Baldry that made him an "honorary member of the British pop elite."⁵⁴ Williamson ushered in 1964 at the Marquee with the Chris Barber Band and Otilie Patterson and in January he played the club at least once a week, alternately backed by the Hoochie Coochie Men and the Yardbirds. His reception—and the club's attendance—was so overwhelming that Williamson applied for an extension to his work permit so that he could play a short tour of the provinces with the Yardbirds and additional dates in Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham.

Previously, blues artists had been backed by the Chris Barber Band, Alexis Korner or another experienced unit; the idea was to introduce American artists to the British public by having them appear with respected jazz bands. The pairing of visiting blues musicians and young British R&B bands was done for different, but related, reasons. Promoters were still not convinced the British public would come out in significant numbers to hear elderly blues performers; pairing them with local bands that were already packing clubs ensured they would turn a profit. The American artists were assigned accompanying acts and they did not necessarily play with the same band for the entire tour.

The degree to which these pairings worked varied considerably. Some artists, like Howlin' Wolf, rehearsed with backing bands and took time to put the young musicians—who were often scared to death—at ease. Ian McLagan of the Muleskinners recalled, "We're all anticipating this scary, big man, and the doors open ... 'My boys!' he yelled. I mean, five little white kids—we were anything but his boys, but we were so happy to be called that ... he just made us feel so special." In such cases the accompaniment was usually satisfactory. However, many visitors didn't bother; either they didn't realize how little experience their young charges had or they didn't feel that a few hours of practice would make any difference. Little Walter and Sonny Boy Williamson were considered difficult by their peers, and neither was much inclined to change a lifetime's worth of habits to accommodate a group of white "blues" boys. Williamson was known for his idiosyncratic style; he habitually extended or shortened phrases as the mood took him and changed keys to amplify certain lyrics. This made him difficult to accompany under the best of circumstances; it virtually unmanned most British groups.

He and other visiting artists also disregarded prepared set lists and changed the order of songs or added new ones based on audience reaction, as they had always done. Jim McCarty of the Yardbirds remembers, "You didn't know what number he was going to play until he started. It was OK in rehearsal, but at a gig he would do them in a completely different order and play numbers we'd never even rehearsed." Sometimes things fell apart; Ian McLagan recalls that when the

⁵⁴ Giorgio Gomelsky, notes to *The Yardbirds Story*, 4 CD set, Charly SNAB 905 CD, 2002.

Muleskinners backed Little Walter in Guildford, Surrey, none of the songs lasted more than thirty seconds.⁵⁵

Audiences generally forgave such incidents, as they were thrilled to see the American blues players they knew from records. Critics were less tolerant. John Broven reported on the backing Little Walter received in Brighton:

The session opened with the backing group—in this case the Soul Agents—and they were awful ... I trembled at the very thought of them backing Walter, and when I saw Walter before the show he was visibly unnerved by them; “I’m not gonna sound like I do on my records tonight” he said sadly When will British promoters realize that a group of unmusical juveniles will just NOT do to back artists of this caliber

Derrick Stewart-Baxter was also critical of the manner in which visiting artists were “lumbered with some British pop-blues groups as accompanists. These youngsters,” he asserted, “have no idea of what the blues are all about, and I suspect that some of them care even less ... I know my criticism is harsh, but I love the blues too much to condone such musical murder.”⁵⁶ Promoters were probably unaware that most British R&B musicians were sorely unprepared to accompany seasoned blues players. They seemed to believe that any band that could play a 12-bar progression could accompany a singer. Their knowledge of the blues was at this point too superficial to recognize the subtleties of timing, pitch variance, modulation, phrasing and accentuation that are necessary elements of a good performance.

The same could be said of the groups themselves. They could turn out more-or-less credible facsimiles that were acceptable to themselves and to their peer group, but their scant experience with live performance gave them false notions about what playing the blues actually entailed. Eric Clapton has stated:

At that point in time hadn’t occurred to me that to know a song was different to [sic] being familiar with it. I thought it would be in a key, and it would have a tempo; I didn’t realize that the detail was important. It didn’t occur to me that there would be a strict adherence to a guitar line, to an intro, to a solo. And that’s what I learned very quickly.

Other members of the Yardbirds recalled, “Playing with Sonny Boy helped the band a great deal. If nothing else, simply working with a genuine blues musician taught us a lot about feel and emotion, and also, not surprisingly, improvisation.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ James Segrest and Mark Hoffman, *Moanin’ at Midnight: The Life and Times of Howlin’ Wolf* (NY, 2004), p. 219; Guy, *Damn Right*, p. 58.

⁵⁶ Charles Radcliffe, review of Little Walter at the Chinese Jazz Club, Brighton, 18 September 1964, *Blues Unlimited* 16 (October 1964): 7; Derrick Stewart-Baxter, review of *Blues Now* [Decca 4681] by various artists, *Jazz Journal* 18/8 (August 1965): 30.

⁵⁷ Peter Guralnick, “Eric Clapton at the Passion Threshold.” *Musician* 136 (1990): 48; Platt et al., *Yardbirds*, p. 33.

The frequency with which critics accused British R&B bands of "not bothering to learn" the most famous songs of visiting artists suggests that many similarly failed to grasp the hidden complexities of the blues.

By 1964 it was common practice for visiting American bluesmen to record with local musicians. The tradition was inaugurated by Chris Barber, who went into studio with Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee and James Cotton in 1961, and the blues pianists who appeared at Jazzshows, who recorded with Alexis Korner, Jack Fallon and Eddie Taylor. The first British R&B/American blues pairing was the Yardbirds and Sonny Boy Williamson, who recorded seven numbers at the Crawdaddy Club. When Fontana released the album in 1966 critics found the results better than expected. David Illingsworth admitted that the Yardbirds produced a "reasonable and surprisingly restrained (if uninspiring) performance. Eric Clapton's guitar is quite good in a couple of the numbers, showing a slight Matt Murphy influence." The performance is indeed restrained; the band is virtually cowering behind the visiting American and on some tracks only drummer Jim McCarty and bass player Paul Samuel-Smith are audible. The overall impression is that the Yardbirds are gamely hanging on, trying to reach the top of the form at the same time as their soloist.

For their part, the young musicians viewed these interactions with pride but also with some ambivalence. Eric Clapton expressed the feeling most eloquently: "I suppose somewhere in the back of my mind I was going to be ready perhaps when I was forty to make a record," he said, "and that up until then I was going to be a student and trying to get it right ... and yet here I was twenty years old and shoved into the studio—although I'm sure I was very happy to be there—with Muddy Waters and Otis Spann" to record tracks for the Decca album *Blues Now* [LK4681]. "I was a kid with a guitar and I felt terrified and I had no idea how to conduct myself ... it just didn't seem right to me"⁵⁸

It is hard to determine what American blues artists actually thought of British R&B bands. Most blues rock musicians remember their visitors were supportive and generous, and legends like B. B. King and John Lee Hooker have frequently claimed these interactions enhanced and extended their careers. At the time, though, many expressed contradictory opinions. As Barry Pearson has noted, when blues artists are interviewed both parties have preconceived notions about what is expected and appropriate, and the comments made by visiting blues musicians seem to have been colored by what he believed the interviewer wanted to hear or what seemed efficacious.

The most frequently cited comment about British R&B is Sonny Boy Williamson's quip, "those cats in England want to play the blues so bad. And that's how they play 'em—so bad."⁵⁹ However, a few months earlier he told Max

⁵⁸ David Illingsworth, review of *Sonny Boy Williamson and the Yardbirds* [Fontana TL 5277], *Jazz Journal* 19/1 (January 1966): 35; Celmins, *Blues-Rock Explosion*, p. xiv. Clapton is heard on the tracks "Pretty Girls Everywhere" and "Stirs Me Up."

⁵⁹ Murray, *Crosstown Traffic*, 81. This comment has been referenced many times;

Jones that the British blues was “going to be the greatest thing that ever hit you. They understand it better now, and the younger people make the older people listen. It’s the youngsters who understand it today.” While on tour with the Yardbirds in 1964 he apparently had a different opinion. Tom McGuinness recalls, “[Sonny Boy] would turn round to the band, and say ‘this one’s in E’ and he would deliberately start playing in C, or anything but E. Then he’d stop the band and say to the audience, ‘you see, these white boys can’t play the blues!’”⁶⁰

Little Walter emphatically declared to Max Jones that the groups he had played with in Britain were good: “I was expecting to hear the same thing as I hear from the hillbillies back home ... I thought that white boys couldn’t play the blues but ... them boys was as pure in the blues as many a Negro group back home.” To Paul Oliver he made the more neutral comment, “These boys are workin’ their hearts out; they ain’t had the experience like we got so they’re good I’m tellin’ you,” and he told Mike Leadbitter that he “hated the fucking English blues groups”⁶¹ It is possible that Walter was bitter after a long tour that yielded little financial reward but he might also have sensed that Leadbitter, who intensely disliked British R&B, was receptive to more critical statements.

It is not surprising that most visiting bluesmen said positive things about British rhythm and blues, as they were hoping to connect with local audiences. Many were also flattered by the attention they received from their new fans. Memphis Slim told Max Jones, “when I came back last year the blues was ringing like on Chicago’s South Side They’re so eager to play [the blues] here. I find them so eager to sit in with me, and of course it makes me feel good.” T-Bone Walker made similar comments. “They had quite a few blues bands ... and they were doing a good job of it. They had a group over there called the T-Bones.... They were some admirers of mine, crazy about T-Bone Walker and had never saw me.”⁶²

Muddy Waters, who appeared frequently in Britain, also made contradictory statements. In 1963 he declared:

So far as the groups are concerned, it’s beginning to sound like it does in Chicago ... I must tell you I have to feel good about what is happening with the blues in Britain, because there’s some of my versions in it.... If you remember, I got a little criticism last time for playing electric guitar ... now, when I come back, I find everybody is using electric, and playing as loud as they can get it.

the wording varies, though the sentiment and basic syntax remain the same.

⁶⁰ Max Jones, “This World of Jazz,” *Melody Maker*, 11 January 1964, 15; Brunning, *Blues in Britain*, p. 176.

⁶¹ Tony Glover, Scott Dirks, & Ward Gaines, *Blues with a Feeling: The Little Walter Story* (NY, 2002), pp. 231, 239; Paul Oliver, review of *R&B*.

⁶² Max Jones, “Cooler Man – Play Cooler,” *Melody Maker*, 6 June 1964, 12; Jim O’Neil and Amy Van Singel, “T-Bone Walker,” in *The Voice of the Blues: Classic Interviews from Living Blues Magazine* (NY, 2002), p. 152.

He also expressed admiration for the Rolling Stones, who Waters called "his boys." "They said who did it first and how they came by knowin' it. I tip my hat to 'em. It took the people from England to hip my people—[American] white people—that a black man's music is not a crime to bring in the house." Six months later he added, "Of course, I ought to get some money, but ... I'll tell them to send me a bottle of whiskey." However, this response may be the most genuine:

Just one thing makes me a little mad. These young white kids get up and sing my stuff ... and the next thing is they're one of the biggest groups around and making that real big money. Sometimes that makes me mad because we've been struggling so long, fighting for a little recognition.⁶³

The success of the American Folk Blues Festival motivated George Wein—the impresario behind the Newport Folk Festival—to launch the American Folk Blues and Gospel Caravan. In late April 1964 the package—which included Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Blind Gary Davis, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, Muddy Waters and Otis Spann and Cousin Joe Pleasants—arrived in Britain for a 17-date tour. The venture was financially successful—the original 11 dates sold out so quickly that six more were added—and the reviews were overwhelmingly favorable. Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee were received warmly—by this time most British blues aficionados regarded them as old friends—despite a stock set geared toward folk fans. Much of the critical attention once again focused on Waters who, despite iconic status among young R&B players, seemed to have difficulty connecting to British audiences. Simon Napier noted that Waters "seemed resolved to give 'em the straight text-book stuff they seemed to want," and that was to hear him play electric guitar. Napier rated his set quite highly and G.E. Lambert tempered criticism of Waters's "slick and commercial" performance by reminding readers, "[Muddy] never seems to have hesitated to adapt his music to a formula for success, and while his current output does not match the caliber of the blues he recorded when he first arrived in Chicago in the late 'forties, it is swinging and entertaining stuff." Blind Gary Davis was somewhat inconsistent and at one show had such stage fright that he could only manage a few numbers. However, Napier felt this was expected. "Anyone who saw that show probably thought they had a bad deal, but to expect a genuine street singer to turn out any sort of professional performance is to destroy all the things that are good in the blues and gospel idioms. If you were lucky ... you saw Gary at his very fine best."⁶⁴

⁶³ Max Jones, "This World of Jazz," *Melody Maker*, 2 November 1963, 6; Charles Shaar Murray, *Shots from the Hip*, ed. Neil Spenser (Harmondsworth, 1991), p. 188; Jones, "Bluesarama!" *Melody Maker*, 9 May 1964, 12.

⁶⁴ Simon Napier, "The Folk Blues and Gospel Caravan," *Jazz Monthly* 10/5 (July 1964): 6–7.

At the beginning of May Champion Jack Dupree returned to Britain at the behest of Keith Smith's Climax Jazz Band, with whom he made a six-week tour of jazz clubs throughout the country. A few days later Memphis Slim arrived to headline a British R&B package that included Long John Baldry and the Hoochie Coochie Men, the Graham Bond Quartet, Jimmy Powell and the Dimensions, the Downliners Sect and the Alex Harvey Soul Band. Though critics agreed that the backing provided by the Hoochie Coochie Men wasn't terribly proficient this seems not to have diminished attendance; so many people were packed into the Chinese Jazz Club in Brighton to hear Slim that the owners sold reduced price tickets to those willing to sit on the radiator.

In May Chuck Berry arrived in Britain. In 1959 this would have been the most exciting thing a young guitar player could imagine but in 1964 it was overshadowed by the most anticipated event of the year: a five-week tour by John Lee Hooker. *Melody Maker* headlines proclaimed "John Lee Hooker—tour all set" in the weeks proceeding his arrival and unleashed a barrage of publicity. He arrived a few days early to appear on the pop television showcase *Ready, Steady, Go* and to perform on "Saturday Club" before beginning his tour at the Flamingo on 1 June. Blues fans came from all over Britain; according to John Mayall the queue for tickets stretched all the way down Wardour Street. Max Jones proclaimed, "What I heard confirmed that John Lee Hooker can create the right kind of lowdown blues atmosphere within 20 seconds of hitting his first note. His opening shout 'Are you ready?' needed no answer, but got one. Then into the blues—unquestionably the real potent article"

John Broven emphatically disagreed. "[Hooker] was content to strum his way through meaningless things like 'Dimples,' 'Boom Boom,' 'Hi Heel Sneakers' and others.... What went wrong? Why was one of the greatest living bluesmen transformed into an unexceptional R&B artist?" He felt John Mayall's accompaniment was largely to blame but also noted, "[Hooker] appeared to be under the misconception that he was playing to a 'pop' audience ... blues enthusiasts were definitely to the fore at the Flamingo ... wasn't this the perfect opportunity to educate the uninitiated?" Pete Townshend remembers being similarly disappointed and accused the Bluesbreakers of "treating [Hooker] as if he was another Chuck Berry or Bo Diddley and not—as is the real case—the true 'boss' of '60s electric R&B" Mayall has since admitted that the band thought they were "shit-hot players and knew what it was all about. Then you get Hooker on stage and what you know flies out the window. You feel like rank amateurs."⁶⁵ Critics preferred the Groundhogs, the band that supported Hooker for the last week of his tour. Hooker also enjoyed playing with the group, which served as his British band until the group split in 1966.

⁶⁵ John Broven, review of John Lee Hooker at the Flamingo, *Blues Unlimited* 14 (August 1964): 9; Murray, *Boogie Man*, pp. 272–6.

Broven's charge that Hooker was playing to a pop audience was undeniably true. Stateside released a single of "Dimples" [SS297]—a song that Hooker had originally recorded for Vee Jay in 1956—prior to his arrival; it started climbing the pop charts in May and peaked at number 23. Derrick Stewart-Baxter dubbed it:

the outstanding happening blueswise this year ... without a single concert appearance, and with only very few TV appearances, [Hooker] has, during a few weeks, put the blues right into the commercial bracket without watering down or otherwise debasing his style Perhaps it's because Hooker is a greater artist, but with "Dimples" breaking into the top twenty, one is inclined to ask, where do we go from here?

Purists were undoubtedly pleased that Hooker outsold the Spencer Davis Group, which released at cover version at approximately the same time.

Hooker drew standing room only crowds at virtually every venue and the demand for tickets was so great that nine additional dates were added to the tour. Hooker had to return to the States in mid-July but he proudly told Val Wilmer, "I'll be back again after that and they say I can stay as long as I want to. Don Arden says he could book me for another year or more because the people here love me so much."⁶⁶

Memphis Slim returned in August to headline the National Jazz and Blues Fest in Richmond, play The Place during Edinburgh's annual festival and tour clubs in greater London and the Midlands. He too adopted one group—the Sheffields—to serve as his backing band. His final date was "An Evening with the Blues" at the Marquee Club with Chris Barber, Long John Baldry and the Hoochie Coochie Men and Little Walter, who had just arrived in London.

Walter's first British tour was well publicized by *Blues Unlimited* and the ever solicitous Max Jones, and Paul Oliver endorsed the harpist as an exciting act. His debut at the Marquee before a capacity crowd of 400 was advertised as "An Evening with the Blues," but Charles Radcliffe declared it "An Evening of British Rubbish":

Walter, encouraged by an avuncular Memphis Slim, blew a few fine phrases between the rough patches ... on this showing it was justifiable to think of him as a bluesman past his peak, slumping, if not into downright mediocrity, at least into the "betwixt and between" world inhabited by so many former "greats."

The critic was far more impressed by Jimmy Witherspoon, who joined the Barber band for a few songs; he was about to depart for the States after a tour with the Ronnie Scott Quartet and an appearance at the National Jazz and Blues Festival.

Walter received far better notices a week later at the Broadside Folk Club, where he was accompanied by Davy Graham and Bert Jansch. Radcliffe opined, "I

⁶⁶ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, "The Blues on Record," *Jazz Journal* 17/8 (October 1964): 22; Val Wilmer, "Just Talkin' About the Blues," *Jazzbeat* 7 (July 1964): 15.

have never before heard such beautiful or moving work on harp ... gentle, but with real tension, echoing and continuing the vocal lines, emphasizing, underlining, extending the melody, riffing beautifully" Walter, however, spent much of his first set yelling to Jansch, "easy on the fingers, baby!"⁶⁷ Over the next several weeks he appeared at small clubs in Guildford, Portsmouth, Bristol, Manchester, Hanley, and Sheffield, backed by whatever local band was available. Little Walter didn't put much emphasis on rehearsal; according to his booker he just got up and blew his harp and hoped for the best. Some biographers speculate that he was disillusioned by his "amateurish backing" and lost interest in the tour. Bob Hall, the pianist for the Groundhogs, recalled that this did not always endear him to audiences. When he played the Club Noriek in London:

There was a good crowd, but they were underwhelmed by Little Walter. He didn't connect with them, made perfunctory sort of dispirited announcements and played a lot of instrumentals. He just didn't seem to know how to play to British audiences. He seemed in a bad mood, acted as though he had a chip on his shoulder, and blamed the reaction of the crowd on the band.

Eric Clapton, who was at several of Little Walter's gigs, wasn't particularly bothered:

Every number he would start and stop and tell them it was all wrong, and he'd start it again. It was sheer chaos ... to me it was pure magic, just the sound that came out—I mean, he could not *not* play. You know what I mean? He was very reticent to get into anything for very long, but whenever it happened, even if it was just for 30 seconds that he'd blow, it was heaven for me.⁶⁸

While audiences were sparse at some of the clubs outside of London, media exposure generated enough interest that the tour was extended by three weeks. This put Walter in direct competition with John Lee Hooker, who had returned as promised.

Hooker's second British tour of the year began with the now standard rituals: television and radio appearances and an interview with Max Jones. He told the critic:

more bluesmen have been over here from the States and gone over real good ... more kids are playing the blues and understanding it than even three months ago. They appreciate blues far more than American kids ... I find that your younger people know the different songs and dig so deep into them ... and some of your groups are so good at

⁶⁷ Max Jones, "Little Walter: The Man who Sparked a Revolution," *Melody Maker*, 12 September 1964, 9; Radcliffe, "Little Walter on Tour," *Blues Unlimited* 16 (October 1964): 8; Glover, *Blues with a Feeling*, pp. 232–6.

⁶⁸ Glover, *Blues with a Feeling*, pp. 232–4; Guralnick, "Clapton," 46.

it. Gosh, I really dig it. The John Mayall group and the Groundhogs are definitely my favorites. They're tremendously nice fellows and very good to work with. They try hard to do everything I want.⁶⁹

At the artist's request he was backed by the Groundhogs for the entire month-long tour, and he chose to travel with the group in their van rather than in a separate, chauffeured car. He also convinced his record label that his young accompanists were sure to be the next hot British pop group and he remained in London for several weeks after the tour to cut an album with them. Despite Hooker's enthusiastic endorsement the disc didn't do much for the Groundhogs and it was not released in Britain until 1971.⁷⁰ The group provides eminently competent backing but they exhibit the idiosyncratic stiffness that typified many of the "British R&B" groups, perhaps the result of limited technique, unfamiliar rhythmic structures, or tempos that were too fast for the material. Hooker conforms to the accompaniment admirably and Tony McPhee's guitar work is quite good; much of the time it is impossible to tell whether he or Hooker is playing a given fill. Keyboardist Tom Parker, supposedly new to the blues, is either a natural or enjoying a streak of beginner's luck, as on most tracks he sounds more confident than his band mates.

The third American Folk Blues Festival landed in Britain on 19 October with its most ambitious cast yet: Sleepy John Estes and his recording partner Hammie Nixon, Howlin' Wolf and Hubert Sumlin, Willie Dixon, John Henry Barbee, Sunnyland Slim, singer Sugar Pie Desanto, Sonny Boy Williamson and the long-awaited Lightnin' Hopkins. There were two concerts at Fairfield Hall, Croydon, and the tour also stopped in Birmingham, Manchester and Bradford; an estimated 50,000 people attended. The concerts were well received by fans and critics alike, though neither group was entirely uncritical. Derrick Stewart-Baxter proclaimed, "Paradoxically, this was both the best and the most disappointing of the Folk Blues packages so far. The high spots were as good, and in the case of Hopkins and Estes better, than anything we have heard previously." Simon Napier agreed, especially in regard to Lightnin' Hopkins. "Superlatives cannot justify this man, whose inventiveness is such that he will change the same song in three following concerts ... Derrick Stewart-Baxter said it all a few minutes later, 'What the hell can you write about this?'"

Napier also praised Sleepy John Estes and Hammie Nixon. "There is something so perfect about these two that one can hardly believe it's true ... their obvious keenness restores one's faith in the Blues: especially after the disastrous and super-commercial handling of Hooker and Little Walter" He was less enthusiastic about Sugar Pie Desanto but reminded readers that even though "her particular sort

⁶⁹ Murray, *Boogie Man*, pp. 291–2.

⁷⁰ The disc was issued in the United States as *Seven Days and Seven Nights* on the Verve/Folkways label in 1965; it is now available as *Hooker and the Hogs*.

of blues is often despised by the blues lovers ... blues is a living form and Sugar Pie is very much alive” His harshest criticism was of Willie Dixon, who used much of his set to discourse on what the blues was all about and then performed a modern folk song of his own composition “to the most complete silence a blues singer can ever have commanded. This is a pity for the song is very poor and Willie’s guitar very dull ... the effect on the folk fraternity was spellbinding; the remarks cast by the hardcore of blues lovers cannot be repeated.”⁷¹

The closing act, save for the universally scorned ensemble finale, was Howlin’ Wolf. Given their usual disapproval of “slickness” and showmanship—T-Bone Walker was booed when he did the splits at the first American Folk Blues Festival—he was a risky choice to put before a British audience. The 6’6” Wolf was the most energetic showman in Chicago and was known to lunge about the stage, climb curtains, do back flips and anything else he could think of to get an audience on its feet. Both *R&B Monthly* and *R ‘n’ B Scene* thought it prudent to forewarn their readers. “From reports, his act is essentially visual, and it will be another hallmark in British blues appreciation to see this massive bluesman roar his blues.”⁷² Willie Dixon was so concerned about possible reactions that he ordered Howlin’ Wolf to “act right” on stage. From published reviews and remembrances it seems that he toned down his usual antics, but his size and menacing stage presence were enough to make an indelible impression. Alan Stevens of *Melody Maker* reported, “He pads around the stage like a caged animal, fixes his baleful stare, makes a violent movement of his hands, then belts out the blues with such power and effect that the whole of his massive frame shakes”

According to Simon Napier, Wolf’s Festival performances “varied from day to day somewhat as to content quality and power ... some days he got over very well, at others he was less effective.” At Croydon and Manchester he “brought down the house” with “Shake for Me” and was “absolutely great.” Long John Baldry recalled, “It was just magic watching him.”⁷³

Once again artists from the Festival remained in Europe to tour, Howlin’ Wolf among them. The Chicago bluesman was at that moment very much in demand. Not only had his powerful Festival performances earned him new fans, he also had a record on the charts. “Smokestack Lightnin,’” [Pye 7N52244] a song that had been in Wolf’s repertoire since the early 1930s, broke the British Top 50 shortly after its release in June; it peaked at #42 on the national charts but in Manchester and Newcastle it was in the Top Twenty. This granted him almost mainstream stardom and during his stay he appeared on nearly every pop television and radio

⁷¹ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, Review of the American Negro Blues Festival 1964, *Jazz Journal* 17/12 (December 1964): 28; Simon Napier, “The Third American Folk Blues Festival—1964,” *Blues Unlimited* 17 (November 1964): 3–4.

⁷² Neil Slaven, “Howlin’ Wolf,” *R&B Monthly* (August 1964): 3.

⁷³ Alan Stevens, “R&B? No, I’m a Folk Singer—Howlin’ Wolf,” *Melody Maker*, 7 November 1964, 12; Napier, “Folk Blues Festival,” Seagrest, *Moanin’ at Midnight*, p. 217.

program in the country, including the iconic *Juke Box Jury*. The panel decided his next single, "Love Me Darlin'," would be a "miss" rather than a "hit" but the bluesman reaped the benefits of prime time television exposure across the whole of Britain.

Howlin' Wolf opened his tour at the Marquee on 26 November. The date was covered by nearly all of London's blues and jazz critics and he received a rave review from *Blues Unlimited's* John Broven, a fervent purist who was perhaps the toughest critic in Britain. He felt that Wolf provided:

the kind of blues never seen in a European club. If only Muddy, Hooker, and the rest would realize that Europeans can take the blues the hard way.... Wolf did a whole string of unbelievably brilliant numbers, many of which were new to me—a refreshing change from the "hits only" policy of some.... Here was the modern blues at its very, very best.

The club performance evidently won Broven over, as he harshly critiqued the artist's appearance at the Festival, rating Wolf's harmonica playing "little more than adequate" and chastising Hubert Sumlin for "making the annoyingly frequent mistake of 'playing down' to a white, European audience." Critics throughout the country, as well as the local R&B musicians who played with him, commented extensively on his charisma and geniality; collectively they suggested that Howlin' Wolf, more than any visiting artist, made them feel they were part of the blues experience rather than observers.

November also marked the first British appearance of Jimmy Reed, one of the first urban bluesmen to cross over to the pop and rock charts and to have his songs covered by Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, and other rockabilly artists. The Rolling Stones, too, played Jimmy Reed numbers, as did the Yardbirds, the Animals and nearly every other blues-based band in the country. The secret to Reed's success was lazy, engaging vocals accompanied by rocking boogie bass lines, a pattern from which he rarely deviated. He was also an epileptic with a drinking problem who was usually fine on stage so long as he adhered to a routine. Thus, his pairings with British R&B groups generally went well. Like most visitors, he played a series of clubs in the greater London area before embarking on a provincial tour.

Sonny Boy Williamson also remained after the Festival, touring throughout November and December and ringing in 1965 at the Marquee with the Chris Barber Band. Despite his contradictory feelings about the British blues Williamson decided that his long-term career prospects were better in Britain than they were in the United States and he made plans to emigrate; his contribution to the 1964 American Folk Blues Festival album was "I'm Trying to Make London My Home."⁷⁴ He returned to the U.S. when his visa expired in January but he never made it back to Britain; he died in Arkansas on 25 May.

⁷⁴ Many sources claim this was Williamson's last recorded song and that Jimmy Page and Brian Auger played on the session. Williamson did go into the studio with Auger,

When Horst Lippmann and Fritz Rau announced their first American Spiritual and Gospel Festival in January 1965 Max Jones wrote, "Blues festivals we have in plenty and personally I feel: Let them all come, so long as the supply of good performers holds out. But there is a risk of satiation setting in, I suppose"⁷⁵ It was apparently reached in February, when the festival arrived in Britain. The impresarios were hoping to emulate the successful Wein package but the tickets didn't sell. Perhaps the lack of a gospel blues artist like Sister Rosetta Tharpe or a "name" star like Mahalia Jackson failed to draw crowds. The Manchester concert had to be cancelled to avoid catastrophic losses and the first London show was sparsely attended; in other cities audiences were better but none of the concerts sold out. It seems that the younger generation of fans, who came to the blues through rock and R&B, did not feel obligated to embrace all forms of African American music, as the older cognoscenti had.

It is also possible that the festival lost out to competing acts. So many American blues artists were playing in Britain in early 1965 that there were constant fears of saturating the market but there seemed to be an ever-expanding demand for live blues. John Lee Hooker played another month-long tour in May, as did Memphis Slim and Big Joe Turner.

The London City Agency invited Jesse Fuller, who had fans among both the folk and blues constituencies, to tour in late February and early March. While they expected Fuller would be a draw they were completely unprepared for the run on tickets. The entire four-week tour of folk clubs, colleges, and town halls sold out before Fuller arrived in Britain, as did the additional dates that were hastily added to accommodate the demand.

In February Buddy Guy, an artist who profoundly influenced the next phase of the British blues, arrived for his first solo tour. He came with an endorsement from Muddy Waters, who told Max Jones he was "one of the best younger blues men." Guy made the now standard appearance on ITV's *Ready, Steady, Go!* to generate publicity but Cathy McGowan, the show's perky host, introduced him as Chuck Berry. After he played "Let Me Love You Baby" McGowan apologized for her error and stated that, of course, their guest was Chubby Checker! While this was not an auspicious introduction to the British Isles, things soon improved.

The inner circle of British blues guitarists had already discovered Guy through the 1964 album *Folk Festival of the Blues* [Pye NPL 28033]; according to Jimmy Page, "everybody got tuned into ... in the early days. [Guy] just astounded everybody." His long, developed solos and exploitation of new technologies and tone colors were revelations to young guitarists who were just beginning to grasp their inherent possibilities. Seeing him in person was equally inspirational.

Page, and other British musicians on 29 January 1965 but this song was not on the play list. In 1968 Marmalade Records released *Don't Send Me No Flowers* [LP 607004], which included the 1965 London session.

⁷⁵ Max Jones, "From Church to Concert Hall," *Melody Maker*, 2 January 1965, 6.

Reports of Guy's club appearances suggest that the young bluesman held nothing back. "Holding the guitar like a machine gun, he recoiled and shot a blitz of repeating notes which crackled, spit, soared, and twisted through the hall. He ran his Stratocaster through his legs, threw it on the floor and swept it up, the feedback careening in mega-decibel agony." Neil Slaven recalled the impression made by Guy's use of a long guitar lead. "For us to see somebody who just got off the stage and went out into the audience was just totally startling. Totally startling. What we hadn't seen up until then in the correct context was a young Chicago bluesman doing it the way he did at home."⁷⁶

Guy was the first modern blues player that most Britons had ever heard live. "At last," wrote Simon Napier, "Buddy Guy has brought us the real modern blues to Europe. After failures by both Muddy and Hooker to show us Guy has won acclaim from dozens of our readers. Thank you Buddy!" To younger musicians he represented a new kind of authenticity. Eric Clapton recalled, "We were used to seeing bluesmen come on like Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee or Josh White. They were all dressed up to be folk-blues musicians, and Buddy came through the way he was." Somehow this made Guy's flamboyant showmanship not only acceptable but also honest and genuine. Neil Patterson noted, "he is not afraid of making a noise, and playing his guitar turned up to full volume, he illustrated to advantage his mean, biting style."⁷⁷ J. B. McCoy of Redcar, Yorkshire, wrote a letter to *Melody Maker* that perhaps represented a sizeable portion of the younger blues audience: "Please let us have more artists of his caliber and age group, instead of the living legends and old age pensioners we've had for the past two years."⁷⁸

T-Bone Walker, the godfather of the modern guitar blues, arrived shortly thereafter. For his pre-tour publicity he was accompanied by Chris Barber but on tour he was backed by the Bluesbreakers. Walker said, "the fellows knew my records well, so we hardly needed to rehearse," and he grew accustomed to their "English ways They give me the idea of Jimmy Reed, people like that. My way's a little different, but they're good for what they do." He recalled, "We ended up at the Flamingo in London, and because the blues were all the rage, the reviews were great!"⁷⁹ The bluesman returned to Britain for another month-long club tour in October; as with John Lee Hooker, his initial tour "didn't by any means satisfy the demands of people who wanted his services." The same was true of Buddy Guy, who was also asked to return as soon as possible. "I've been astonished by

⁷⁶ Guy, *Damn Right*, pp. 67–8.

⁷⁷ Simon Napier, "Editorial," *Blues Unlimited* 21 (April 1965): 2; Neil Patterson, "George 'Buddy' Guy, *Blues Unlimited* 19 (February 1965): 4.

⁷⁸ Guy, *Damn Right*, pp. 66–7; J. B. McCoy, letter to the editor, *Melody Maker*, 20 March 1965, 20.

⁷⁹ Max Jones, "Conversation with a Blues Great," *Melody Maker*, 20 March 1965, 6; Dance, *T-Bone*, p. 141.

the blues interest here,” he told Max Jones. “The kids have the idea of the beat and they know the blues, even though they don’t get the blues records like we do.” Guy was particularly surprised by the enthusiastic response, as he was still working to establish his reputation in Chicago. In his 1993 autobiography he recalled, “I felt like somebody there ... How in the world did they know me? People at home didn’t know me. How did they know me there?”⁸⁰

While Guy and Walker were popularizing the modern urban blues Champion Jack Dupree was returning to his roots. The previous autumn Colin Kingwell and Steve Lane founded the Blues and Jazz Appreciation Society to promote apprenticeships between New Orleans jazz and blues musicians and Trad jazz groups. Dupree, who had married and settled in Halifax, probably seemed a logical guest artist. His six-week tour re-established his popularity with English audiences and the pianist soon became a fixture of the Midlands and Northern blues scenes. Jimmy Witherspoon returned to Britain in 1965, as did Josh White and the Reverend Gary Davis, who arrived with the American Folk Music Tour.

As American blues musicians had participated in jazz festivals since the 1950s it is not surprising that the three-day festival organized by the National Jazz Federation in 1961 was dubbed the first National Jazz and Blues Festival. The first concerts presented British modernist, Trad and big bands; the “blues” was represented only by the Chris Barber Band. The following year the word “blues” was omitted but it returned in 1963 when the Cyril Davies All-Stars and the Rolling Stones were invited to perform; both warmed up the crowd for the headliners. Their appearance was viewed with ambivalence by some members of the jazz community but there was not enough of an outcry to keep festival organizers from booking R&B acts the following year.

In 1964 the lineup included the Rolling Stones, Manfred Mann, Long John Baldry and the Hoochie Coochie Men, Georgie Fame, the Graham Bond Organization, the Authentics, the Yardbirds and the T-Bones, as well as American visitors Mose Allison, Jimmy Witherspoon and Memphis Slim. Most played during the day. A few evening sessions featured R&B bands but once again they opted for jazz stalwarts like Chris Barber and Kenny Ball.

That summer jazz festivals all over Britain added R&B groups to their lineups. The opening session of the Northern Jazz Festival at Redcar Racecourse featured Manfred Mann, the Hoochie Coochie Men and the Yardbirds. The last two also played at the Scottish Jazz and Blues Festival at Ayr and the West London Jazz Fest. The R&B portion of the Bath Jazz Festival featured the Who; the Norwich Jazz Fest made do with the Continentals. Many similar acts played at newly renamed British “blues jazz and blues” festivals between 1964 and 1970; after 1965 they outnumbered jazz bands by a considerable margin and American musicians were rarely asked to participate.

80Guy, *Damn Right*, p. 68.

By that time most British jazz fans had reached the limits of their tolerance for domestic blues bands but festival organizers continued to book them. Val Wilmer defended the practice, noting that young rhythm and blues musicians often enlivened otherwise staid jazz audiences. She also pointed out that these more mainstream bands drew larger crowds and helped subsidize smaller festivals. Derrick Stewart-Baxter admitted that he liked seeing bigger and younger audiences at jazz events but had mixed feelings about the long-term effects of British R&B:

It is a sad thing but the moment any art form becomes popular, more often than not artistry dies.... With the growing interest in what is now called R&B there has appeared a watered down form ... a type of music which, unfortunately, seeped through to some of the real bluesmen who, to make a living, have had to sing a considerable amount of rubbish.

He hoped that he was being overly pessimistic but opined, "once the commercial boys get their hands on anything it is usually the end."⁸¹

He was not alone. The music's new acceptance raised significant questions about its essential character. Was the blues folk music or had it always been popular fare? Could it be both? Was its purpose entertainment, social commentary or expression? The debate over the how the blues should be defined became more intense during the turbulent years of the R&B boom, hardening the ideological factions that emerged in the late 1950s. To many, this was more than just a debate about how to frame the blues: it was a struggle for the music's very soul.

Blues ain't nothin' else but

By the early 1960s the folkloristic viewpoint endorsed by Alan Lomax had become the dominant perspective of the serious musical press. This purist faction steadfastly maintained that the blues was folk music, a manifestation of American black culture defined by emotionality and sincerity:

The blues is essentially expressionist. Technique is totally subordinated to content, and indeed determined by it. One merely has to listen to the wonderful flexibility of the blues line ... to appreciate the way in which every slight variation in intonation, rhythm, or melody serves to express emotion with the utmost accuracy and power, like a great dancer. I do not think any form of art has ever been developed which can transform ordinary emotion, as felt by all of us, into artistically valid statements more directly and with less loss of intensity.⁸²

⁸¹ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, "Blues on Record," *Jazz Journal* 16/7 (July 1963): 23; and 18/11 (November 1965): 25.

⁸² Newton, *Jazz Scene*, p. 86.

Moreover, the “authentic” blues could only be corrupted by the new demands of the marketplace, as seemed evident from the newly “slick” and professionalized style of artists like John Lee Hooker and Muddy Waters. Brian Ward hypothesizes that the widespread popularity of the blues in the early 1960s:

devalued the music’s currency as a measure of generational, class, or peer independence ... to compensate, some whites began to cultivate an intense purism about precisely which sorts of black popular music were “authentic” ... which had always offered a way for far gone devotees to distinguish themselves from more casual fans⁸³

The opposing viewpoint had no moniker, though “pragmatists” might be apt. Its advocates were mostly older critics who recognized that the blues was a living tradition and its relevance and meaning fluctuated in response to social and economic changes in the African American community. They frequently agreed with the purists, particularly about the detrimental effects of commercialism, but were generally more tolerant of new trends. The reactions of these two groups to the 1963 American Folk Blues Festival demonstrate how sharply their camps were divided.

Derrick Stewart-Baxter greatly enjoyed the concert. His complimentary review emphasized his satisfaction with the turnout and the high quality of most of the performances. He was also pleased to see two of his favorite artists, Lonnie Johnson and Victoria Spivey, on the same bill. John Barrie and Roynon Cillings, two younger blues aficionados, registered their disagreement through a scathing letter to *Jazz Journal*’s editor.

Most of the singers in the Blues Package represented the debasement of the blues through the pressure of commercial interests ... One has only to compare the simple intensity of the early Muddy Waters with the suave night club performance ... Any sincerity and depth of personal experience (which is surely essential to the blues) was lacking in this second-rate exhibition by a blues artist turned pop-singer for material gain. Perhaps the worst example of Mr. Stewart-Baxter’s lack of discrimination was his praise of Victoria Spivey ... to say “she is the real blues” is surely a complete contradiction in terms. Her whole manner of “T.B. Blues” was that of a commercial entertainer fawning for popularity—smiling and winking ingratiatingly into the camera ... With her raucous screams and vaudeville antics all depth of emotion was completely lost ... the only real moments of satisfaction in the program were provided by Lonnie Johnson and Big Joe Williams, to whom it was left to reveal the true depth and intensity of personal expression which is the essence of the blues.

Jazz Monthly received similar letters after Granada TV broadcast portions of the Festival, expressing dismay at the “professionalism” of the performers. John

⁸³ Ward, *Just My Soul*, p. 239.

Postgate compared the reaction to that of jazz fans disappointed by Louis Armstrong's first London concert:

when he dealt a blow to jazz romanticism by putting on a peg-legged tap dancer and generally producing a show. Yet I am surprised at blues lovers reacting in this manner, because they are so ready to cry "phoney" if a city blues singer puts down his electric guitar and plays acoustic for the folknik market The answer, of course, is that it was too authentic for most of us. Blues is still a living entertainment in the U.S.A., and a highly unsophisticated form of entertainment.⁸⁴

From the purist point of view, this merely proved how degraded the blues had become.

Authenticity and commercialism had long been at odds in British writing on black music, but both were now interpreted with increasingly stringent criteria. Many purists viewed conscious artistry as the antitheses of sincere emotional expression, which they felt was the sole characteristic by which the music should be judged. Ironically, Stewart-Baxter himself thought that "real and pure" blues "has no place in the inartistic world of commercial music;" he and his critics differed only in what they considered authentic. Charles Radcliffe judged Muddy Waters "an exciting stage act rather than interesting blues" and criticized John Lee Hooker, whose tendency to play "folk-tinged blues" for white audiences and "highly rhythmic boogie numbers" for black ones demonstrated his capitulation to market forces. Others feared that Junior Wells, Buddy Guy, and most of the young Chicago musicians had become showmen rather than blues men.⁸⁵

"No concession to commercialism" became the highest praise that could be bestowed upon a blues singer. Recently discovered artists like Son House, Fred McDowell and Mississippi John Hurt, who had been safely out of circulation since the 1930s, were heartily endorsed as true bluesmen. Robert Pete Williams was even better, as his term of incarceration during the mid-1950s:

has obviously made him a very much better blues singer, unsullied as he is by the demands of the arty folkworld and the demoniacal commercialism of the rock and rollers, playing down to large white audiences. Williams is a real blues singer, conveying with his earthy voice a fervour and urgency which most contemporary singers seem to have lost, probably for the above reasons.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ John Postgate, "Random Reflections," *Jazz Monthly* 10/2 (April 1964): 2.

⁸⁵ Charles Radcliffe, "Blues Walking Like a Man," *Anarchy* 51 (May 1965): 151; Simon Napier, "Fifth American Folk Blues Festival, 1966," *Blues Unlimited* 38 (November 1966): 4.

⁸⁶ Mike Leadbitter, review of *Those Prison Blues* by Robert Pete Williams [77LA12/17], *Blues Unlimited* 1/3 (July 1963): 16.

Many felt that singers separated from “their roots”—either by leaving the rural south or rising out of poverty—lost their “need” to sing the blues; therefore, their music was merely a reproduction of a once authentic style. “The blues singer of modern times, although for the most part singing genuine blues, is a very different person to the old timer,” Stewart-Baxter opined. “His is a fully conscious art—he is in every sense of the word a performer The feeling that he is putting into his songs may be genuine, but to achieve the mood required, the singer is consciously using effects which in earlier times were entirely natural.”⁸⁷

Such mimicry diminished musicians in the eyes of the many purists. Artists like McDowell, who did not record until 1959, served as the benchmark for “honest and genuine” blues. “To them the blues are a music that comes from the depths of their very soul—completely unsullied by commercialism in any form.”⁸⁸ Many British critics perceived natural musicianship and expression as positive traits demonstrating artistic integrity, but Albert Murray points out that viewing the blues as:

a species of direct emotional expression in the raw, the natural outpouring of personal anxiety and anguish ... ignores what a blues performance so obviously is an artful contrivance, designed for entertainment and aesthetic gratification; and its effectiveness depends on the mastery by one means or another of the fundamentals of the craft of music in general and a special sensitivity to the nuances of the idiom in particular.⁸⁹

Essentialism led critics to value “natural” and “primitive” country blues singers at the expense of their “professional” urban counterparts. Paul Oliver warned, “A myth has developed of a scale of authenticity which relates to a singer’s proximity to the country; a fallacious and unworthy argument which can do great harm to the recognition that many city artists rightly deserve. Of the younger Chicago blues singers little is heard today.” He noted that the country blues were authentic but “the music of the blues bands of Chicago is no less so, for it is as much a mirror to the Negro world of today as the former is to the farming community.” Jimmy Witherspoon said much the same thing to Max Jones: “They keep bringin’ these country singers and players over here, and the kids think this is the real thing, the typical Negro blues. That’s where they’re wrong—it isn’t.”⁹⁰

Concerns about authenticity were rooted in fears that the “‘pop’ blues, with their banal lyrics and sloppy sentiment” would weaken and eventually supplant genuine African American expression, which was “not easy to assimilate.” Most

⁸⁷ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, “Blues on Record,” *Jazz Journal* 17/7 (July 1964): 8.

⁸⁸ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, “Blues and News from *Blues Unlimited*,” *Jazz Journal* 18/10 (October 1965): 10; “Blues,” *Jazz Journal* 19/7 (July 1966): 9.

⁸⁹ Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 2nd edn (Da Capo, 2000), p. 87.

⁹⁰ Oliver, “Country Blues,” *Jazzbeat* 2/10 (October 1965): 12; Oliver, “Muddy Waters,” *Blues Unlimited* 10 (March 1964), reprinted in *Nothing But the Blues*, p. 52; Max Jones, “I’ve Been Lucky with my Tenors,” *Melody Maker*, 27 June 1964, 6.

blamed the "slick salesmanship of the record companies, who play safe by recording, for the most part, rubbish." John Broven assigned responsibility for John Lee Hooker's song "Boom Boom," which he detested, to "those A&R men! When John sings 'boom boom' the guns should be pointed at them!" Likewise, Charles Radcliffe and Mike Rowe believed many new blues releases were "disfigured by a-and-r nightmares."⁹¹ These perspectives were reinforced by visiting blues artists, who told interviewers that executives and producers determined who they would work with, what songs they would record and the style in which they should perform. Some, like Memphis Slim, admitted they had recorded mediocre material to satisfy the demands of label owners who wanted new "product."

African American consumers were also perceived as pawns of the media. Blues had declined in popularity among black record buyers since the mid-1950s; this was seen as proof that black youth had been "brainwashed" by pop records and "white beat groups (who stole from the American Negro in the first place!) ... plugged day and night on the air, on TV and through the medium of the juke box." Radcliffe felt that "white pop-influenced Negro record buyers" demanded "noisier, more aggressive blues ... partially in sub-conscious self-defense and partly in emulation of white youth."⁹²

Some critics did blame African Americans, and particularly "city Negroes," for accepting "glossy commercialism" in place of "what originally had been earthy and honest," but these were minority opinions. The idea of passive black consumers manipulated and victimized by commercial forces may have been easier to accept than the truth: the "folk" community of the blues no longer believed the music spoke to them. Ian Whitcomb recalls trying to find musical fellow travelers among the black students at Trinity College but discovered that most thought the blues old-fashioned and preferred soul music. Muddy Waters frequently commented in interviews that the blues would probably die out with his generation because "the Negro kids, they don't like it at all."⁹³

The rejection of the blues by younger African Americans was partly generational—young people rarely embrace music of their elders—but the blues were also associated with social conditions that many African Americans wished to put behind them. While most British critics felt that the creation of jazz and the

⁹¹ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, review of *The Blues Project: A Compendium of the Very Best in Urban Blues* [Elekra EKL264], *Jazz Journal* 18/5 (May 1965): 29; John Broven, review of "Boom Boom" by John Lee Hooker [Stateside SS203], *Blues Unlimited* 13 (July 1964): 11; Charles Radcliffe and Mike Rowe, "Chicago Blues: The Post-War Scene, Part Two," *Jazz Monthly* 11/9 (November 1965): 23.

⁹² Derrick Stewart-Baxter, "Blues," *Jazz Journal* 20/5 (May 1967): 14 and 19/8 (August 1966): 4; Radcliffe, "Walking," 150.

⁹³ Philip Larkin, *All What Jazz: A Record Diary 1961–68* (London, 1970), p. 134; Radcliffe, "Walking," 154.

blues was a cultural achievement that should properly be celebrated by black intellectuals, Paul Oliver noted, “for many the cap-touching, lick-spittle servility of the plantation worker and the crude, gauche, superstition-ridden speech of the uneducated Southern ‘boy’ is inextricably linked with the arts which arose as a form of escape from them.” Nonetheless, some commentators maintained that blues musicians should resist the demands of the current marketplace; not to do so was not only unseemly but a betrayal of their culture. John Broven felt that John Lee Hooker had “failed” the blues and George Melly believed that artists who yielded to the temptation of commercialism were allowing the blues to be “castrated” by the white establishment that was exploiting their cultural heritage.⁹⁴

To be fair, no one regarded this a tenable position when confronted with its implications: that in order to remain “authentic” black musicians “had a bounden duty to maintain themselves in a state of poverty and primitivism so as not to jeopardize their status as art objects; a duty to stay poor, stay oppressed, to stay funky, to stay ignorant, to remain as sufferers in perpetuity.” Val Wilmer retrospectively explained, “We thought it was safe to listen to the blues as an art form removed from commercial consideration—never stopping to think that our idols earned their living this way. We had no idea of the reality of the lives of the people who played the music.” Even George Melly admitted that “artistic integrity is an easy thing for plump record collectors to go on about.”⁹⁵

Some theorized that the blues were becoming less “authentic” because the Civil Rights movement was eliminating both racism and its consequential economic disadvantages. Norman Jopling, *Record Mirror* reviewer and R&B partisan, questioned whether African Americans even retained the right to sing the blues:

For those fanatics who say that R&B can only be played by long-suffering, overworked, under-fed negro musicians, what do they think the more authentic British R&B groups were doing for the years before they became famous? They played ridiculously long hours in sweaty clubs for fees that school kids would sneer at as pocket money.

These “long-suffering” groups, he explained, “traveled themselves sick in decrepit vans not having enough time to eat properly, and altogether had more cause to wail the blues than many of the spoon-fed wealthy negro R&B musicians in the States today.”⁹⁶ It seems utterly ludicrous that anyone would suggest that riding in a van and missing an occasional meal was comparable to a lifetime of institutionalized discrimination or that African American musicians had become a pampered elite, but Jopling was not the only commentator to suggest this was so. Val Wilmer

⁹⁴ Paul Oliver, “Fox Chase,” in *Blues Off the Record*, p. 99; Melly, *Revolt*, p. 39.

⁹⁵ Murray, *Crosstown Traffic*, p. 52; Wilmer, “The First Time I Met the Blues,” in Robert Santelli, Holly George-Warren, Christopher John Farley (eds), *Martin Scorsese Presents The Blues: A Musical Journey* (NY, 2004), p. 243; George Melly, review of *I Want to Shout the Blues* [Stateside SL10074] by John Lee Hooker, *Jazz Journal* 17/7 (July 1964): 35–6.

⁹⁶ Norman Jopling, “British R&B? Of course it exists,” *Jazzbeat* 5 (May 1964): 16–17.

proffered a plausible explanation: most of the blues artists who toured Britain didn't look or act like the poor, oppressed musicians that were frequently described as the source of "real" blues. Despite their knowledge of the Chicago blues idiom, few seemed to realize that most of their visitors were professional musicians who lived in a large cosmopolitan city. They spoke with Midwestern accents and used contemporary slang. They were genial and patient with interviewers and fans. They wore their best suits and presented an image of success. In other words, they confounded many preconceived notions about blues singers.

Unfortunately, stereotypes were unintended byproducts of sociologically based writing about the blues. Samuel Charters's romanticized portrayals of the rural south highlighted the region's abject poverty and appalling racism in order to stimulate demands for social change. Similar narratives that emphasized the harsh conditions in which the blues were born were occasionally oversimplified or misinterpreted and their immediacy obscured more holistic perspectives. There was also a widespread belief that blues lyrics offered an accurate portrayal of African American life rather than lower or lower-middle class views, many from earlier generations, on a limited number of topics. As a result some blues fans and critics developed misperceptions about blues musicians, race relations and contemporary conditions in the American south. Some of these were amended by new information gathered and published by the increasingly large number of blues fans devoting themselves to investigating the music and its history.

'Let's Talk It Over': blues scholarship

In April 1963 *Blues Unlimited: Journal of the Blues Appreciation Society*, a handful of mimeographed sheets produced by blues fans in the southern coastal town of Bexhill-on-Sea, appeared in specialist jazz shops in Britain. Mike Leadbitter and John Broven had been interested in obscure American R&B since 1957; after they met fellow traveler Simon Napier they gathered for weekly listening sessions and "things got blusier and blusier."⁹⁷ They created the Blues Appreciation Society, the express purpose of which—according to their manifesto—was to launch a blues magazine, "as one seemed badly needed in this now increasingly popular field." Membership dues entitled one to not only a subscription but also access to the Society's library of books and discographies and responses to blues related queries "on receipt of a 3d stamp."

The founders hoped *Blues Unlimited* would serve as an open forum to publicize blues research, which they noted was "very widespread and disorganized Anyone working on anything please tell us and we'll publish it. We hope to have a list of 'work in progress' soon." Napier and Leadbitter identified two crucial

⁹⁷ Broven, "Mike Leadbitter, 1942–1974," *Blues Unlimited* 111 (December 1974/January 1975): 3.

avenues of investigation: “musicological & historical research” and discography. All “details, queries, etc.” in the former area were directed to Paul Oliver, who was working to compile biographies of all early blues recording artists. Napier and Leadbitter were hoping to expand the number of people researching the blues but their expectations for the journal were modest. “Both the ‘BAS’ and ‘BU’ are completely non-profitmaking [sic]—all the principles are unpaid in any respect. All cash received is spent on more research and towards a bigger and better organization.”⁹⁸ *Blues Unlimited* was largely produced by researchers with strong ideological views; most were unapologetic purists. However, the publication embraced African American folk, gospel and other blues related styles, including Cajun music. It also sought to “bring attention to bear on blues issues overlooked and ignored by the other specialist magazines of the day,” particularly the postwar blues, largely dismissed by earlier generations as noisy, shallow and overly commercial.

The initial run of 250 copies of *Blues Unlimited* disappeared almost immediately to the great surprise of the founders, who had grossly underestimated their potential readership. They exponentially increased the number of copies printed with each issue and by July 1964 there were so many subscribers that duplicating had to be abandoned in favor of lithography and profits allowed for the publication of “Collectors Classics” booklets on select artists and regional styles.

The success of *Blues Unlimited* encouraged a number of other startups. *Jazzbeat: the Lively Jazz Magazine* appeared in January 1964. Intended as a spirited publication for younger fans, the magazine embraced the widest possible conception of jazz and addressed Trad, swing, bebop, British R&B and the blues with equanimity. Its ample blues coverage included interviews with visiting artists, semi-regular features by Val Wilmer, Paul Oliver and Guy Stevens, and reviews of blues albums and tours. Mike Vernon and Neil Slaven launched the similarly catholic *R&B Monthly* in 1964, which covered an even broader array of blues-related music; articles on American soul stars like James Brown and Otis Redding appeared alongside reviews of British R&B bands and biographies of American postwar blues musicians. *R&B Monthly* was well respected but the endeavor proved too much for the editors, who packed it in after twenty issues. *R&B Scene*, produced by Roger Eagle, likewise folded after its July 1965 issue. In March 1965 *Blues Unlimited*’s Country Blues Correspondence Club launched its own bimonthly magazine. Editor Bob Groom described *Blues World* as a publication covering “the whole blues field and particular emphasis on detailed studies of blues singers.” However, the majority of its content focused on traditional and country fare and it quickly became essential reading for those with an interest in early blues styles. Like its parent journal *Blues World* issued booklets and discographies at irregular intervals and embraced the same serious, empirical approach to scholarship.

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“The Blues Appreciation Society,” *Blues Unlimited* 3 (July 1963): 3.

In their desire to enhance the standard of musical commentary the new blues cognoscenti demonstrated little tolerance for the "so-called blues writers and critics" from mainstream publications and did not hesitate to lambaste these "unknowledgeable scribblers" for factual errors:

The delicate situation of the vital form of Negro folk music is not enhanced by its continued ignorance in magazines such as yours. When space is permitted the result is usually one of great confusion.... Surely, as a blues critic, this information should have been known.

The *Blues Unlimited* staff also heaped abuse on *Jazz Journal* and *Jazz Monthly* for reviewing records—often favorably—by Bo Diddley, Chuck Berry and Ray Charles, and they accused mainstream critics of granting "unbridled adulation on any performer who shows the slightest sign of perpetuating the blues tradition" Derrick Stewart-Baxter agreed that a growing number of critics, in their efforts "not to appear square have gone out of their way to praise the mediocre."

Sinclair Traill objected to the:

calm effrontery with which *Blues Unlimited* attempts to dictate what we shall like and what we shall not ... in my opinion what is wrong is for these purists to try to discipline the rest of us.... Perhaps they had better send us a list of those whom they consider worthy of blues criticism so that in future we don't overstep that party line and hurt their tender sensibilities.

The acrimonious exchanges between—and among—jazz and blues reviewers at times seemed little more than outbursts of factional name calling and many grew tired of "hysterical articles that sound like fan magazines."⁹⁹ However, they underscored an increasingly evident point: there were no common standards for evaluating and discussing the blues, and some were sorely needed.

Standards of blues criticism

"The blues are for everyone. Everyone, unfortunately, does not understand them."
Alexis Korner¹⁰⁰

As more blues records entered the market critics felt increasingly obliged to differentiate between authentic folk artistry and "second-rate commercial pastiche." George Melly opined:

⁹⁹ John Broven, letter to the editor, *Jazz Journal* 16/5 (May 1963): 38; Barrie and Cillings, letter; Derrick Stewart-Baxter, "Blues on Record," *Jazz Journal* 16/7 (July 1963): 23; Sinclair Traill, "Editorial," *Jazz Journal* 18/1 (January 1965): 5; Derek Kells, "Editorial," *Jazzbeat* 2/2 (February 1965): 2.

¹⁰⁰ Alexis Korner, "Broonzy—the Great Blues Man," *Jazz Scene* 1/3 (July 1962): 13.

It's not enough to trace a direct line between primitive blues and R&B, the time has come to decide which stretches of that line are of value, and that just because there is a line ... this doesn't give equal validity to every recording, every development, the whole career of every artist.¹⁰¹

For music criticism to move beyond subjective evaluation there must be some general agreement about what characteristics are important to the genre. This is by no means a dispassionate thing. Folk and popular criticism is all the more difficult because the music is "technically limited" and the relative merits of sincerity, tradition and technical skill must be considered. Paul Oliver notes that similar contentions surrounded New Orleans jazz, and critics had to "grapple with a very fundamental problem in the assessment of the more elemental aspects of the total music." He asked, "What are the qualities that make a Blind Willie Johnson, a Charlie Patton, a Blind Lemon Jefferson, or a Laura Henton pre-eminent in their particular fields? And once one has had an inkling of their respective merits what standards has one to apply to the work of lesser men?"¹⁰²

Derrick Stewart-Baxter interrogated the issue in an essay entitled, "What makes a blues singer great?"

With the early primitives it was a natural and completely unselfconscious feeling—they were singing to themselves and for themselves, and were not until later singing for the enjoyment of others. But from the moment these singers came out of the fields, a very gradual awareness or consciousness took place, but even so the music they made was very personal.... The more he felt his songs the better he became—always providing, of course, he had talent in the first place. It is lucky for us that so many of these singers had the ability to project their songs and their feelings so beautifully

Stewart-Baxter assumed that any singer approaching "greatness" had talent and technical facility. What made some better than others was their emotional engagement with the material and the ability to communicate those feelings to listeners.

His evaluation of Bukka White as a "great mid-period blues singer" enumerated the qualities he felt were significant:

- White was a powerful singer with "a wealth of sadness in his voice"
- He varied the subject matter of his songs but also touched on traditional themes
- There was a "poetical quality" to the lyrics
- He was original
- His music retained audible ties to the country blues

¹⁰¹ George Melly, review of *House of the Blues* [Pye NLP 28042] and *How Long Blues* [Fontana 688 799] by John Lee Hooker, *Jazz Journal* 17/11 (November 1964): 32.

¹⁰² Paul Oliver, review of *Virginia Country Spirituals* by various artists [Storyville SLP135], *Jazz Monthly* 9/10 (February 1965): 23.

- His style had not changed greatly over the course of his career
- He took "great trouble" with his songs but they were not overly sophisticated

John Barrie likewise challenged "the value of certain aspects of current blues criticism, together with the assumptions and attitudes that underline them." He particularly disagreed with the "historical approach ... the attempt to see the history of the blues as a distinct development leading from the primitive country origins through the city blues of the 'forties to the R&B of today" and the implication that this conveyed authenticity to the modern idiom. He argued that great artists had an emotional intensity drawn from their "deeply felt personal and racial experience."

By 1964 emotional engagement had been accepted as the most important evaluative quality of the blues. Robert Johnson and Blind Willie Johnson were universally recognized as major talents because of their highly affective interpretations of their material. When Son House was rediscovered in 1964 critics recognized that his technical skills had deteriorated but they praised his new "passionate" delivery and "intense personal involvement. Every word is hurled forth in an anguished, frustrated voice" Similarly, Elijah Brown, an elderly guitarist with a weak voice, was praised because his singing nonetheless "carried the rich, intense strain of the Delta blues in all its purity and emotional potency."¹⁰³ As sincerity was often equated with simplicity high standards of musicianship could be a liability. David Illingsworth noted,

the poor old blues singer who spends his whole life developing his art gets a raw deal from his fans and critics. Okay if he disappears for a couple of decades or more and returns a shadow of his former self, the cracked voice and limited technique being then interpreted as emotion and economy of style.¹⁰⁴

Simon Frith has observed that critics value originality, perhaps because it is easy to identify. Most of the intelligentsia recognized that the reuse of melodic and textual material was a central aspect of the blues tradition but reliance on stock materials was often considered a weakness, employed "whenever he or she can't think of anything else, or wants to return to familiar ground." Paul Oliver recalls that at the time more prestige was attached to "improvisation and the novelty of poetic invention in blues stanzas, than to the exchange and transfer of images and lyric fragments between singers," even though the latter was in fact more

¹⁰³ Neil Slaven, "Son House, Pts. 1&2 [sic]," *Jazzbeat* 3/3 (March 1966): 13; John W. Peters, "A Weekend with the Blues," *Jazz Journal* 18/12 (December 1965): 12.

¹⁰⁴ David Illingsworth, review of *Paul Butterfield Blues Band* [Elektra EKL294], *Jazz Journal* 19/1 (January 1966): 29.

“authentic.” It is also likely that the prestige granted to invention was a reaction against the perceived “sameness” of the modern blues and R&B.¹⁰⁵

Bob Groom believes Snooks Eaglin, a younger singer from New Orleans, was a victim of the “myth of the totally original blues singer.” Max Jones considered him “a pleasantly personal artist in spite of the fact that his songs come from other, older singers or from the traditional store” but added, “Does this affect the value of his music? In one way, of course, it does ... it is even possible that part of the emotional content of his singing is bogus.” The “originality myth” even affected older bluesmen; one reviewer felt “Washington D. C. Hospital Center Blues,” a new composition by Skip James, was problematic because it used the same tune as Blind Boy Fuller’s “Mistreater.”¹⁰⁶

Even though British blues writers agreed on a number of evaluative characteristics criticism was still dominated by personal taste. Graham Ackers noted that every listener invariably considered a different set of variables significant. “We might go for a ‘sound’ rather than lyrics, or excitement rather than ability ... very few records will please ALL blues lovers, however good the particular record might be.” A *Blues Unlimited* experiment proved that subjectivity was inevitable: two critics reviewed the album *Cotton in Your Ears* [Verve-Forecast FTS-3060] by James Cotton and came to opposite conclusions about the record’s quality and value. Simon Napier commented that the evaluations “appear to underline the problem of blues reviews by blues collectors—it just depends on what you and the reviewer likes.”¹⁰⁷

It was expected, however, that taste was informed by considerable knowledge of the blues, including how new artists and recordings related to the historical idiom. By the mid-1960s this required a certain amount of study, as an explosion of field work and research were challenging standard assumptions about the blues.

Lookin’ for the Blues: Interviews, Rediscoveries, and Conversations

Before 1962 much of what was known about the early blues was gleaned from interviews with a handful of artists that had visited Britain: Josh White, Big Bill Broonzy, Jimmy Rushing, Muddy Waters, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee. Documentary research, correspondence, and essays fleshed out the biographies of

¹⁰⁵ Newton, *Jazz Scene*, p. 148; Oliver, *Blues Fell this Morning*, p. xxii.

¹⁰⁶ Max Jones, review of *Portraits in Blues, Volume 1: Snooks Eaglin* [Storyville SLP146], *Melody Maker*, 26 December 1964, 10; Richard A. Noblett, review of *Skip James, the Greatest of the Delta Blues Singers* [Melodeon MLP7321], *Blues Unlimited* 32 (April 1966): 22. Both “Mistreater” and “Washington D. C. Hospital Blues” use the melody of “Sittin’ On Top of the World,” recorded by the Mississippi Sheiks in 1929.

¹⁰⁷ Graham Ackers, review of *Louisiana Blues* [Storyville DG177] by various artists, *Blues Unlimited* 26 (October 1965): 20; Simon Napier, editorial comment, *Blues Unlimited* 65 (September 1969): 28.

many singers but large questions remained. What was the place of the blues—and blues musicians—in African American society? What was the music like when it separated from the general body of African American folk song in the 1890s? And how important was the blues to those who played and sang it?

Concert packages and tours brought musicians from different stylistic traditions to Britain, providing researchers unprecedented access to direct testimony about the music's history and significance. Neil Slaven recalls the backstage area at the American Folk Blues Festival concerts was teeming with investigators and critics:

All the usual faces would be there: Simon Napier inevitably telling you not to interview so-and-so, "I've got it all—every question you could possibly ask. Read about it in the next *B. U.*"; Mike Leadbitter already well oiled against the cold but nevertheless able to regurgitate the most devious facts from the stupor; Mike Rowe bristling with cameras like a bemedalled South American general ... and John Mayall with full harmonica kit, eager for a few impromptu sessions. And so you'd all set off to your various destinations. At mid-day heads went together to compare notes amidst gasps of astonishment and snorts of disbelief, and you'd promptly go off to see if you could get even more information than your friend/enemy had Facts were learned—but most important, you got to know these people as something more than names in a book or voices on records. When you first start to interview blues singers there is a feeling of "Fancy me talking to...!" But cut a few more notches in the ballpen [sic] and the relationship changes from "idol to fan" to "person and person." Quite often both of you are overwhelmed at the easy-going atmosphere created, and the gratitude of people like Eddie Boyd at being able to talk about what *they* want comes to mean a lot more than matrix numbers and personnels [sic].¹⁰⁸

As visiting blues artists became more comfortable with their admirers they were more willing to answer questions and volunteer information. They were also freer with their casual conversations, which occasionally yielded valuable insights; Paul Oliver recalls that he learned a great deal about the diversity of blues styles by hearing performers discuss the relative merits of other singers.

The most exciting and informative were "rediscovered" artists who had recorded in the 1920s and 1930s but then given up their professional careers until they were located by young white enthusiasts. The "age of discovery" began with Samuel Charters's discovery of Furry Lewis, a modestly successful artist who recorded for Vocalion in the late 1920s, and by 1965 more than a dozen prominent country blues singers had emerged from obscurity. British enthusiasts were particularly surprised by the discoveries of Sleepy John Estes and Bukka White, as Big Bill Broonzy had insisted they were dead. American researchers found Mississippi John Hurt (1962), Peg Leg Howell (1963) and Ishmon Bracey (1963), as well as the previously unrecorded Robert Pete Williams and Mississippi Fred McDowell; Mike Rowe unearthed Robert Johnson's young protégé Johnny Shines

¹⁰⁸ Neil Slaven, "Silver Threads Among the Blues," *Jazzbeat* 3/11 (November 1966): 16.

in 1965. The most exciting discoveries were Son House and Skip James, early luminaries of the Delta blues.

Nearly all of the rediscovered artists returned to performing though they were baffled by their new fans. "I just didn't think that anyone was interested in that old-time stuff any more," said Son House. "Couldn't understand why some white boys were so interested but I agreed to try again."¹⁰⁹ A few could scarcely still play; others, like White and Hurt, retained much of their technical facility. Most were erratic but capable of good—and sometimes thrilling—performances. All provided a taste of the original, "authentic" blues and valuable information about the genre's history.

Another source of direct testimony was *Conversation with the Blues*, a compilation of interviews conducted during Paul Oliver's 1960 research trip to the United States. At that time the first person narrative was rarely encountered in blues writing, as many believed musicians and their "rustic acquaintances" were unreliable, prone to exaggeration and unfamiliar with larger musical and sociological perspectives. When the comments of blues singers were cited their comments were often rephrased or "interpreted" by experts who mediated between these primitive creators and more sophisticated connoisseurs.¹¹⁰ Oliver let the artists speak for themselves. His objective was to get answers to a broad range of questions "straight from the source." The most significant was:

the importance of the blues to the singers themselves. It was evident from many blues that the singer speaks as an individual and that the lyrics depict personal involvement ... blues rarely comments on contemporary political or historical events except as an aside, with the singer as observer or participant. To what extent the singer drew on personal experience, or poetically projected themselves into the situations and emotions they sang about, remained a major question.¹¹¹

He also hoped to uncover the relationship between jazz and blues in order to determine, once and for all, if long standing presumptions were accurate.

Conversation with the Blues was almost unanimously embraced by critics. Charles Fox praised it as "one of the finest books ever produced on a jazz subject" and Steve Lane marveled at its "deep insight into the state of mind of Blues [sic] singers and performers, and to me at least, the descriptions of living and working conditions are a revelation." Its immediate impact upon blues scholarship was to negate romanticized views of the American south. It was one thing to have Samuel Charters explain that many "work in small fields, struggling to raise a scanty living out of the poor soil;" it was quite another to read a string of first person narratives about sharecroppers making nothing off an entire season's work. Within a year

¹⁰⁹ Groom, *Blues Revival*, p. 59.

¹¹⁰ This tone in blues writing of the 1960s, and the dangers of bringing preconceived notions into field work, is masterfully demonstrated in Tilton, "Reconstructing the Blues."

¹¹¹ Oliver, *Conversation*, pp. xiv–xv.

stories that expressed a desire to "to be in [the bluesman's] shoes and see what it's really like" all but vanished from the critical press.¹¹²

Valerie Wilmer hailed Oliver's approach, which "dispenses with damaging, cheap nostalgia. He is a serious individual, yet highly successful in his conversations with the people who make and live the blues, surprisingly so in an area where the enthusiastic aficionado is so often the victim of the 'put on.'" Oliver noted that by dint of his nationality and approach most informants believed he was credible and tried to be accurate, though he admitted:

there were stories that were not without contradictions, not perhaps without errors of fact. The limited horizons of many of the singers produced their own perspective distortions. Time and pride may cause them to embroider some narratives and leave others as sketches. Blues is a folk-music ... and much of its history is folk-lore, the mixture of truth and belief which must pass for history in an oral, unlettered tradition.¹¹³

Conversation confirmed a great many assumptions about the blues and provided some new insights, but most importantly it established that "in widely differing cultural, social, and inter-racial climates in which black groups are to be found many shades of opinion exist" For all the equivocation about what should and should not qualify as authentic blues, the raw data indicated:

Blues is the wail of the forsaken, the cry of independence, the passion of the lusty, the anger of the frustrated and the laughter of the fatalist ... as such the blues is the personal emotion of the individual finding through the music a vehicle for self-expression. But it is also a social music; the blues can be entertainment, it can be the music for dancing and drinking ... blues is the song of the casual guitarists on the back stoop, the music of the piano-player in the barrelhouse, the juke-box rhythm-and-blues hit. It's the ribald 'dozens' of the medicine show, the floor-show of the edge-of-town club, the show-biz of the traveling troupe and the latest number of a recording star. Blues is all these things and all these people¹¹⁴

New information occasionally reshaped the history of the genre. Researchers solicited information from jazz and blues musicians in New Orleans and discovered that some regarded early jazz as instrumental blues while others insisted the two were distinct genres at the turn of the century and dismissed the blues as "low class" music. Given such divergent perspectives, Oliver proposed a

¹¹² Charles Fox, review of *Conversation with the Blues* by Paul Oliver, *Sunday Telegraph*, quoted in *Conversation*, back matter; Steve Lane, review of *Conversation with the Blues* by Paul Oliver, *Jazz Times* 2/8 (August 1965): 6; Charters, *Country Blues*, p. 30; Jim Delehant, "Willie, Furry, and Gus," *Jazz Journal* 18/5 (May 1965): 10.

¹¹³ Oliver, *Conversation*, pp. 11–12.

¹¹⁴ Oliver, *Story*, p. 3.

reexamination of the theory that the blues were primitive jazz; under close interrogation the assumption weakened and was largely abandoned.

The tradition of piano blues also started to come into focus. Field research turned up an unexpectedly large number of pianists, including musicians better known as singers and guitarists. They provided information about the slow, lowdown “barrelhouse” style of rural “chock-houses” and turpentine camps, the faster “walking basses” and the proliferation of piano blues themes like *Cow-Cow Blues*, *Forty-four Blues* and “The Fives” that provided the bass figures of boogie-woogie.

Though Mississippi was accepted as the birthplace of the blues there was little specific information about music’s formative stage and nearly all of that had been provided by Big Bill Broonzy. Muddy Waters identified Charlie Patton and his teacher, Son House, as important predecessors but very little was known about them or their place in the folk tradition. Kokomo Arnold, Ishmon Bracey, Son House and Skip James fleshed out the picture of the early Delta blues, as did interviews with their friends and relatives. These informants disclosed how, and what, singers learned from older performers, how songs were created and transmitted and how singers got on record.

One of the goals of the Blues Appreciation Society was to document all postwar blues and gospel labels. Aficionados had long worked at cataloguing all known recordings of particular artists or labels but as research topics expanded the need for a comprehensive discography became clear. The seminal *Blues and Gospel Records 1902–42* was something of a collective effort but the volume, published in July 1964, was spearheaded, compiled and edited by Robert M. W. Dixon and John Godrich. Max Jones and others praised its breadth and utility but the authors considered the volume a work in progress. They offered amendments in the pages of *Blues Unlimited* and subscribers were encouraged to contact authors with corrections. Eight months later the discography was already in its third printing, a clear indication of the number of devoted blues aficionados. It also reflected how quickly older blues material was becoming available to the average Briton.

‘Everybody’s Blues’: the blues on record

In 1964 *Melody Maker* columnists used questionnaires and interviews to devise “profiles” of contemporary music fans. They discovered that 41 out of 100 beat and R&B record buyers occasionally purchased blues records and two out of 100 regularly did so.¹¹⁵ The majority of those bought contemporary urban blues. Big Bill Broonzy, Bo Diddley and Jimmy Reed albums were the most popular but compilations and reissued singles were also selling in huge numbers.

¹¹⁵ “Fanmanship – read all about yourself,” *Melody Maker*, 15 August 1964, 8–9; Bob Dawbarn, “What Makes you Buy Records and Why?” *Melody Maker*, 6 March 1965, 11.

Pye International had an enormous competitive advantage in the booming blues market because of its licensing agreement with Chess. As soon as R&B became popular they began releasing back catalogue material by Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf. The company issued records in all formats but began to favor EPs and singles on Pye and Chess's proprietary British imprint after Wolf, Berry and John Lee Hooker placed records on the pop charts.

Though it later became a leading folk and blues label, Transatlantic Records began as an importer and distributorship for RBF, Storyville and Prestige/Bluesville. RBF, a Folkways subsidiary, was dedicated to reissuing older material; the other labels specialized in newly recorded blues.¹¹⁶ Though some of the Prestige/Bluesville discs from the mid-1960s are collector's classics the label is primarily known for releasing an avalanche of records in 1962–63 in an effort to dominate the market. The strategy was the result of imperfect market knowledge; as no one was able to predict which albums would sell it was hoped that sufficient volume would yield a substantial number of hits. Transatlantic maintained this "flooding" strategy in Britain and poured money into advertising and promotion. However, critics noted that many of the records were of questionable quality and poor sales drove Prestige/Bluesville into receivership by late 1964. Some of its stronger releases were later reissued on Xtra, the budget label Transatlantic launched in December of that year.

Material from the Prestige catalogue was issued on the Fontana 688200 (mono)/888200 (stereo) and Stateside SL10000 series. EMI-affiliated Stateside, launched in 1962, was well positioned for the R&B Boom. The label had access to portions of the Vee-Jay catalogue as well as leasing arrangements with Imperial, Sue and Tamla/Motown. The label released a torrent of LPs by John Lee Hooker, Jimmy Reed and Lightnin' Hopkins from the Excello and Vee-Jay catalogues, challenging Transatlantic's effort to dominate the British market. It, too, was charged with favoring volume over quality but EMI's strong market position helped offset its unsuccessful releases. Philips released comparatively few blues during this period, though the company did hold the lucrative license for the commemorative American Folk Blues Festival albums. Mercury reissued some of its older recordings by Josh White and Big Bill Broonzy, and *King of the Delta Blues* continued to sell at a brisk pace.

Decca managed to profit from all blues constituencies. Early in the boom Decca hired Mike Vernon to serve as its "blues producer;" he oversaw all of the label's British R&B issues and produced new albums by a stable of visiting American artists. In fact, Decca enjoyed a virtual monopoly on blues material recorded in London. The company also licensed nearly contemporary blues for British release. While its agreement with Chess was undoubtedly missed the company had arrangements with Imperial and Atlantic. The latter also granted

¹¹⁶ Storyville, run by Danish collector Karl Knudson, also re-released albums from the Folkways, USA, Speed, Gold Star and Formal catalogues.

access to the catalogues of Motown competitors Stax and Fame, which proved lucrative in the newly competitive singles market.

Decca, British Columbia and Pye International began issuing blues on 45 rpm discs in the late 1950s. The majority were by R&B artists like Fats Domino and Chuck Berry, who appealed to the rock and roll crowd. After 1960 collector labels like Top Rank, Vogue and Collector released a handful of Chicago blues and R&B singles, but the format did not have a significant market presence until 1963. Singles by Jimmy Reed, Howlin' Wolf, Tommy Tucker and Sonny Boy Williamson were mostly purchased by young people exploring the roots of their favorite folk and beat artists. Decca and Pye/Chess quickly dominated this market segment—Pye even had a special red and yellow label for urban blues discs—as few other major labels had adequate licensing agreements in place.

When R&B was at the height of its popularity in the United States a small fraction of British jazz critics thought the music worthy of serious consideration; only Vogue had pursued the genre with any vigor. The majority of postwar blues records were issued by small, independent labels; even if British record executives had wished to expand into this market they would have had difficulty identifying valuable licensees. Younger blues collectors were far more knowledgeable, and the nearly mainstream popularity of blues convinced many to become import distributors. Initially they specialized in 45 rpm records, presumably because the financial risks were minimal. The discs were cheap in the United States—especially if one had contacts—and could be resold in Britain for a reasonable profit.

Bootleg was a limited edition operation formed in 1964 by an unnamed “group of philanthropic and knowledgeable collectors” that apparently included Simon Napier and Mike Rowe. Its “sole purpose” was to offer British blues aficionados “some of the finest and rarest in great down-home blues.”¹¹⁷ The label’s promised collection of “previously unissued material from the border states” never materialized but Bootleg did release several singles that were, in fact, licensed reissues of postwar blues from the Parrot, Bluestown and Modern labels. Bootleg apparently reorganized as pwb (postwar blues) in 1965; its sole EP release, *Hobos and Drifters*, contained records by three unknown bluesmen and bears the catalogue number BRL 100. The label also issued compilations of rare postwar material. Mike Rowe personally imported singles from the Detroit-based Fortune label and its subsidiaries Strate 8, D.I.R., and Hi-Q. The catalogue included some of John Lee Hooker’s earliest discs as well as material by Dr. Ross, Big Maceo and Eddie Kirkland. His sales must have been adequate, as Rowe—along with Mike and Richard Vernon—started Blue Horizon records in 1965.

The most competitive independent supplier of 45 rpm blues discs was Sue, a subsidiary of Chris Johnson’s Island label. In 1963 Johnson was the British

¹¹⁷ Advertisement in *Blues Unlimited* 12 (June 1964): 2.

distributor of American Sue records,¹¹⁸ but a later licensing arrangement gave him access to blues from the USA, Flair, Kent, Ace, Federal, Modern, Duke and Peacock catalogues by Elmore James, Willie Mabon, J. B. Lenoir, Big Mama Thornton and B. B. King. In 1964 he turned over operations to Guy Stevens, a popular music critic deejayed for a Monday night R&B session at The Scene Club. This gave Stevens a forum to introduce new records to his target demographic and receive their input on future releases.

Other British independent labels continued to focus on albums. 77 was still releasing material from the 1960 Blues Recording and Research Project, but most of its new records were reissues from the American Folk Lyric and Delmark labels. Carlo Kramer's struggling Esquire label held the foreign rights for the Delmark imprint¹¹⁹ but was unable to fund new releases after 1963.

Few British labels re-released prewar material; only Decca pursued even a modest reissue program. Its most notable album was *Out Came the Blues* [DL4434], which included country, classic and down home blues from the Decca 7000 series. The label also instituted the RCA Victor Race Series, which dipped into the American Decca, Brunswick and Vocalion catalogues for records by Leroy Carr, Walter Davis, Tampa Red, Julius Daniels, Jazz Gillum, Elder Charles Beck, Doctor Clayton, Jim Jackson, and Ishmon Bracey. A few other major labels re-released early material from licensing partners; most reissued blues albums from the 1950s that had been deleted from American catalogues. Capitol reintroduced the T-Bone Walker album from its 1954 *Classics of Jazz* series and Leadbelly, Big Bill Broonzy, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee were similarly presented to a new generation of blues fans.

Given the burgeoning popularity of the country blues it is surprising that independent British concerns did not rush into the reissue market. However, so many rediscovered artists were recording new material that early styles seemed fairly well represented in the marketplace. Reissue programs also require personnel with extensive knowledge of blues discography and access to early country blues recordings; Britain had more than its share of the former, but few had extensive collections of rare prewar blues discs. In the United States conditions were more favorable. Field researchers began canvassing in northern cities and the south in the late 1950s and uncovered a significant number of rare country blues discs. Thus, it is no surprise that American independent labels monopolized the field. Concerns like Origin Jazz Library, Testament and Arhoolie catered to the specialist blues audience, and their albums were eagerly embraced by younger British collectors. These reissue collections often had a pedagogical focus and provided a cross-section of significant works to new blues fans. Many also included superb

¹¹⁸ WI300-317 were identical to Sue's American releases.

¹¹⁹ Delmark, run by the American blues collector Bob Koester, was called Delmar until 1963, when the Delmar instrument company requested a spelling change to clarify the separation of the two endeavors.

and informative liner notes. Origin Jazz Library, run by *Blues Unlimited* contributor Pete Whelan and his partner Bill Givens, was particularly influential in Britain. *Really! The Country Blues* [OJL-2], a response to the Sam Charters compilation that contained classic and city blues as well as country items, introduced Britons to the music of Tommy Johnson, Son House, Skip James and Ishmon Bracey and seems to have stimulated widespread interest in the Delta blues style.

The popularity of American imports partially reflected the dissatisfaction of serious blues fans with the poor quality of “budget blues” collections that were flooding the market. British labels retaliated by creating their own budget outlets. Pye’s Golden Guinea label, introduced in 1962, assembled several volumes of R&B hits in 1964, and Decca created Ace of Hearts for reissues of older material from its American subsidiaries. Ember, EMI’s budget imprint, began as an independent label launched by Flamingo club founder Jeff Kruger. His attempt to break the monopoly of the major labels foundered after several years, partly because of the fierce competition for the new market niche.

All of the above sold albums for 21s, well below the national average price of 32s, 6d. Crown, a subsidiary of Modern/RPM, drove prices still lower. Crown is remembered by collectors for the poor quality of its records and its mercenary marketing strategies. In the late 1940s and early 1950s RPM and Modern artists included B. B. King, John Lee Hooker, Elmore James and Lightnin’ Hopkins; their records were repackaged in various permutations for the next decade. Crown records were sold at most specialty stores in Britain for the all but impossible price of 15s. This was apparently a last-ditch effort to remain solvent, as its American operations were on the verge of collapse.

Most of the budget blues labels did not survive. Riverside went bankrupt in 1964; Prestige discontinued Bluesville at approximately the same time and fringe labels like Allegro, Fidelio, Pickwick and Society managed only one or two releases, even with discs priced at 10–12s. The budget collapse leveled the playing field for independent British concerns and enabled smaller American labels, like Delmark, to compete without intermediary licensing agreements.

Blues Everywhere

By 1964 finding blues records no longer required a trip to Soho. Major record outlets stocked Pye and Decca releases and specialist jazz shops carried British independent issues and popular American labels like Folkways, Arhoolie, and OJL. For those outside major population centers mail order houses specializing in blues records, like Chris Wellard Records, advertised in *Blues Unlimited* and *Jazz Journal*. Peter Russell’s Hot Record Store in Plymouth put out a “periodical” called *the good noise* for its thousands of regular customers, which boasted, “We were stocking and selling blues LPs and EPs as soon as there WERE blues LPs and EPs Man, we do such much blues, we even sell records to Paul Oliver. And to

Derrick Stewart-Baxter, (even to Simon Napier)!"¹²⁰ Despite the competition Dobell's remained Britain's premiere destination for serious collectors. In 1965 Doug Dobell purchased the antique bookshop adjacent to his jazz record store on Charing Cross Road and created the Folk and Blues Record Shop, a specialty destination that carried domestic and imported blues records, books, discographies and periodicals.

However, it was no longer necessary to leave the house to hear the blues. Popular television shows like *Gadzooks!*, *It's All Happening*, *The Beat Room*, *Thank Your Lucky Stars*, *Top Gear* and *Ready, Steady, Go!* featured visiting American performers. In the fall of 1963 ITV launched *Hullabaloo*, a five show "spectacular folk and blues package;" Cyril Davies and the R&B All Stars "represented the blues" on each program and Sonny Boy Williamson made a guest appearance.

Granada TV—ITV's contractor for the "north of England" franchise—covered most blues festivals. The network taped the 1962 American Folk Blues Festival and during 1963 aired sets by Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, T-Bone Walker, Memphis Slim and Willie Dixon. The following year they broadcast *I Hear the Blues*, an edited version of the 1963 festival emceed by Memphis Slim, and the 1964 festival was televised as *Tempo: the Blues Came Walkin'*. Instead of showing excerpts of the first Blues and Gospel Festival Granada filmed the headliners at a Manchester train station. The intimate, made for TV performances, highlighted by an atmospheric drizzle, gave *Blues and Gospel Train* an artistic appeal that many found captivating; the program received critical praise from the mainstream press and was aired by ITV outlets throughout Britain.

Big Joe Turner, Muddy Waters, Memphis Slim, and other blues singers were interviewed on BBC's *Tonight*, Britain's highest rated television program, and performed on *Jazz 625*, hosted by Humphrey Lyttelton and Steve Race. Perhaps the oddest forum for the blues was the ITV children's show *Five o' Clock Club*. Alexis Korner led the house band and occasionally performed gritty versions of blues standards, which were dutifully introduced by the show's puppet host, Pussy Cat Willum.¹²¹

Blues were also increasingly heard on radio. Visiting artists were still featured on BBC jazz programs and there were also specialty blues programs. In 1964 the World Service introduced *Rhythm & Blues with Alexis Korner*, which aired three times a week; though intended for audiences abroad the show had a wide domestic following. Korner invited British R&B bands into the studio but mostly programmed American blues records, carefully providing relevant information for the edification of new fans. Steve Race introduced *Jazz Scene '65* on Wednesday nights, which regularly presented interviews and performances with visiting artists.

¹²⁰ Peter Russell, *the good noise*, supplement included in *Blues Unlimited* 26 (October 1965): 26.

¹²¹ Clayson, *Beat Merchants*, p. 172.

Jazz at Night, which aired from 11:15–11:45 on Fridays, featured classic and city blues with some regularity, as did *Jazz Club* (Monday 10:30–midnight) and *Late Jazz*.

In 1964 unsanctioned commercial stations emerged to fill the vacuum created by the BBC's notoriously narrow play lists, which included very little pop, beat music or R&B. As these stations transmitted from international waters—either on ships or conning towers at least 12 miles off the coast—they were not subject to British broadcast regulations and could play a wide variety of music without interference from the major record labels. The blues came in on the ground floor. In April Ronan O'Rahilly, the proprietor of the Scene Club, launched Radio Caroline, one of the first pirate stations; by the end of the summer it had over 7,000,000 regular listeners. Shortly thereafter a host of competing stations emerged. All carried pop programming but the larger station was also a stronghold of British R&B that helped launch the Animals, the Spencer Davis Group and Cream. The popular Saturday evening show *Down Beat* featured American blues and soul records, as did *It's All Happening* (Sundays 12:30–1:45) and *The R&B Show* (Sunday 7–8 pm); *All Systems Go* (Saturdays 11:15 AM–1:00 PM) played the American and British Top Fifty “in company with the best rhythm and blues.”

Other stations occasionally played blues records and Mike Raven, a deejay on the small Radio 390, ran Britain's first all blues show. On weeknights and Saturdays from 7:30–8:30 he played a broad spectrum of black popular music but Sundays were devoted to the blues. “I play examples of almost every type of 12-bar blues, from the earliest recorded examples up to the present day,” he stated, “though I must admit that there is an emphasis on a ‘down-home’ sound.”¹²² The show was so successful that when BBC1 launched in 1967 it hired Raven to continue the program, and Xtra released *The Mike Raven Show* album [1047], a sampler “meant primarily for people first coming to the blues who are still rather wondering just what it is all about.”¹²³

In the opinion of the blues cognoscenti such broad media coverage could “only ultimately be of great benefit to the music and can help bring more and more people to love the blues. With a few more good blues releases, and tours by yet other good artists [1964] could be the year of the big breakthrough.”¹²⁴ It was. Sixteen months later the blues vanished.

¹²² Derrick Stewart-Baxter, “Blues and News from *Blues Unlimited*,” *Jazz Journal* 19/1 (January 1966): 23.

¹²³ David Illingworth, review of *The Mike Raven Show* by various artists, *Jazz Journal* 20/2 (February 1967): 34.

¹²⁴ Simon Napier, “Television and the Blues,” *Blues Unlimited* 8 (January 1964): 19.

Chapter Six

Blues at the Crossroads: The British Blues Revival Part III, 1965–1970

It is hard to pinpoint when the R&B boom began to wane. January 1965 looked like it would be as big a year for the blues as ever. Fans rang in the New Year at the Marquee with Sonny Boy Williamson, Chris Barber, and Long John Baldry and the Hoochie Coochie Men; records by British R&B bands were at the top of the pop charts and American blues artists on tour were still drawing large audiences.

Yet, those closest to the R&B scene sensed that something was changing. In December 1964 Alexis Korner told Max Jones that audiences were beginning to tire of “rave-ups” and were favoring slower, more jazz-influenced tunes. “As for the club scene,” he reported, “generally, we find it okay in the Midlands in North Midlands ... but less encouraging in the south.” Long John Baldry disbanded the Hoochie Coochie Men a month later, as bookings were falling off and he was losing £400 a week. Kit Lambert, manager of the Who, told *Melody Maker* the band was having “serious doubts about the state of R&B” and were refocusing themselves as a “hard pop” group. Paul Samuel Smith of Yardbirds admitted that he thought the sound was “a bit dated.” The Artwoods started to move away from blues to more soulful numbers; they told an interviewer, “Six months ago we sat down and thought what we would do when R&B went out Now we realize we have changed the trends. We’ve dropped the slow blues, the Jimmy Reed stuff, quite unconsciously.” Chris Farlowe and Thunderbirds noted “We don’t play any Chuck Berry or Bo Diddley. That has really been played out.”¹

By then few bands were claiming to play rhythm and blues. Spencer Davis told Chris Welsh, “We prefer to call it younger generation American negro pop ... we wouldn’t label our group as pure R&B.” Many bands associated themselves with soul, the new black popular music of the United States: up-tempo, dance oriented music that seemed more “sophisticated” and polished than down home blues. Tony McPhee noted that almost overnight, “people in the market didn’t want blues bands

¹ Max Jones, “Could this be the Korner Breakthrough?” *Melody Maker*, 5 December 1964, 6; Andy Neill and Matt Kent, *Anytime, Anyhow, Anywhere: The Complete Chronicle of the Who 1958–1978* (NY, 2002), p. 58; “Will the Yardbirds Make It with This?” *Melody Maker*, 27 February 1965, 17; Celmins, *Blues Rock Explosion*, p. 9; Chris Welsh, “Sounds of 65,” *Melody Maker*, 2 January 1965, 9.

anymore, they wanted soul bands.” British R&B didn’t just vanish—groups like the Bo Street Runners, the Artwoods, John Lee’s Groundhogs and the T-Bones were still appearing in clubs—but they no longer dominated the London scene as they had only months before. In August the 100 Club began programing jazz five nights a week (including Fridays and Saturdays) and discovered that business was “satisfactory and likely to get better” Even the Marquee and Flamingo were backing away from R&B, steadily reducing the number of sessions per week throughout 1965.²

One of the reasons for this pop paradigm shift was that the efforts of R&B groups like the Rolling Stones and Yardbirds to introduce their audiences to the blues acts that inspired them had succeeded beyond their expectations. Paul Samuel-Smith noted, “The groups started to dig up all the original records and I think switched the public on to them, so that the record buyers ended up buying the original records, like Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed. The public listened to groups imitating the originals, and shunned the groups” John Cooper agreed. “R&B is the blues as the Post-War city Negro interprets them and we have only to listen to artists like Jimmy Reed, Fats Domino and Ray Charles who are part of this urban folk tradition to realize how ridiculous are the efforts of those who seek to commercialise it ... as Beat or R&B.”³ The result should have delighted the blues intelligentsia—young people were reaching for the real thing—but the R&B bust had unexpected consequences. Tony McPhee recalls that when the scene collapsed “for a lot of people, blues was a bad name.” Alexis Korner expressed regret about starting the whole scene. Even American blues artists, especially those performing in the “down home” or early Chess style—now the currency of British popular music—were caught in the backlash.

When John Lee Hooker returned to Britain in May 1965 he discovered that the Groundhogs had disbanded and his first tour date was not at the Marquee but in Newport, South Wales with Cops ‘n’ Robbers, a local band that even reviewer Tony Lennane didn’t know. It was a sign. His new British management, Rick and John Gunnel, prioritized appearances (with the Bluesbreakers) at smaller clubs under their control over larger and more prestigious venues. Moreover, increasingly informed audiences were beginning to realize that his “down home” style was some twenty years out of date. Pete Townsend remembers, “they all seemed so pathetic, John Lee Hooker in his checkered jacket, doing his cabaret” The nearly mainstream pop success Hooker enjoyed a year prior had dissipated. John Broven heard Hooker at the Ricky-Tick Club in Surrey and expressed his dissatisfaction in a scathing review:

² Chris Welsh, “Last of the R&B Groups?” *Melody Maker*, 12 June 1965, 8; Tony McPhee, quoted in Brunning, *Blues in Britain*, pp. 99–100; “100 Club Brings Back Jazz,” *Melody Maker*, 7 August 1965, 5.

³ Bob Dawbarn, “Are British Acts just imitating the Negro Sound?” *Melody Maker*, 26 June 1965, 8; John Cooper, “Pops from Jazz,” *Jazzbeat* 1/5 (May 1964): 7.

There is an abundance of ammunition for those defeatists who claim the blues is losing its glamour ... there can be no disputing that it has been highly, too highly, romanticized, but a visit to one of Hooker's performances will reveal the real reason for this apparent negligence.... Hooker has had his chance, three times, and each time he has churned out the same, same rubbish ... he has failed the blues.

Neil Slaven expressed similar feelings, noting that "the aura of mystery surrounding previous visitors is almost gone" as the same artists returned to Britain again and again. "Something's got to be done to bring back that enthusiasm we had three or four years ago."⁴ However, the most evident sign that the blues boom was over was that after two years of sellout crowds the American Folk Blues Festival failed to draw a large audience.

"It was a shock ... to see the first house on the Monday concerts only a third full," Paul Oliver remarked; "one comes to expect the fans clamouring [sic] at the doors. The second house was substantially fuller but there were many empty seats." In retrospect, what looked like diminished attendance was probably the result of overzealous booking; four concerts were scheduled for London and there were additional dates in Manchester, Newcastle, Glasgow, Belfast, Bradford, Birmingham and Bristol. The dates had anticipated further growth of the blues audience, but interest in the genre had obviously leveled off. Derrick Stewart-Baxter opined, "Obviously the saturation point has been reached in the blues boom and it looks like only the best artists and records will be good enough for the years ahead."⁵

Oliver felt the blues had reached a crossroads.

Some forms of the blues have moved away from the Negro world to that of the white folk world; many white singers are successfully imitating the blues; the discovery of the veterans has led to a wider appreciation of some singers and a diminution of respect for others; the blues boom has enabled Europe's enthusiasts to hear men they thought were buried and has made a reality the phenomenon of the "blues package" deal. What happens next?⁶

⁴ Murray, *Boogie Man*, p. 299; John Broven, review of John Lee Hooker at the Ricky-Tick Club, Surrey, 15 May 1965, *Blues Unlimited* 23 (June 1965): 15; Neil Slaven, "Lippmann + Rau Present: The Fifth American Folk Blues Festival: 1966: A Preview," *Blues Unlimited* 36 (September 1966): 13; Slaven, "Silver Threads," 17.

⁵ Paul Oliver, "Blues Festival '65," *Jazz Monthly* 11/10 (December 1965): 18-19; Derrick Stewart-Baxter, "Blues and News from *Blues Unlimited*," *Jazz Journal* 18/7 (July 1965): 19.

⁶ Paul Oliver, "Crossroad Blues," *Jazzbeat* 3/2 (February 1965): 21.

'Dry Spell Blues': 1965–1966

At the height of the blues boom it was feared that British R&B had eradicated hot jazz; between 1961 and 1965 the number of professional Trad bands in London diminished from 50 to less than a dozen. However, R&B had merely overshadowed its parent movement. By early 1965 the "Traddypop" years were a distant memory and a "new" New Orleans revival emerged, one that was more affiliated with the blues than before.

Some advocates of "authentic" blues had long held that the most genuine examples were to be found in jazz:

Those who have a taste for the real thing should not accept rockers with jarring amplified guitars ... listen instead to yesterday's traddies. There you will hear as near to authentic R&B as the British can be—Sandy Brown playing "Roll 'Em Pete"... Bob Wallis singing "See Mama Every Night" ... and Keith Smith's interpretation of Muddy Waters' items.

Jazzbeat editor Pat Richards noted that at the Fourth National Jazz and Blues Fest in 1964 both Manfred Mann and Chris Barber received enthusiastic audience response. "Traditional jazz, even if with the additional of an electric guitar played by a band which shows itself to be versatile and as able to play R&B as Trad, is now completely acceptable to a majority of fans."⁷

By 1965 traditional jazz did seem to be once again on the rise. Some R&B groups, like Graham Bond and Georgie Fame, moved closer to jazz territory by re-engaging horn players and ejecting pop material from their play lists. Older acts, like the Back o'Town Syncopators and Colin Kingwell's Jazz Bandits, found work easier to come by. Clubs outside London that had adhered to a "jazz only" policy during the R&B boom were noticing an uptick in attendance by midyear and solid crowds by 1966.

Many bands were returning to the kind of variety found in the early years of the Trad jazz movement. Steve Lane's Famous Southern Stompers, for example, advertised their devotion to music in the "classic New Orleans Style—stomps, rags, blues, ballads, spirituals, and boogie" featuring "ragtime pianist" Ray Smith, the "VJM Washboard Band" and "blues and jazz vocals by Corinne."⁸ The Indiana Jazz Band, newly formed in February 1965, featured singer Jane Griffiths, who was "agreeably addicted to Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey & Co., and successfully recreates a big Bluesy [sic] sound without forcing or faking."⁹ Washboard bands, jug bands, and "boogie woogie blues" pianists were finding audiences among not only

⁷ Cooper, "Pops from Jazz;" Pat Richards, "Editorial," *Jazzbeat* 1/9 (September 1964): 2.

⁸ Advertisement in *Jazz Times* 1/3 (November 1964): n.p.

⁹ Brian Towers, "Jazz in Sussex," *Jazz Times* 2/2 (February 1965): 15.

jazz and blues fans but also folk adherents, who were now open to a broader range of musical styles.

While the British R&B scene boomed other blues-influenced artists had continued to perform at folk clubs throughout the country, which were proliferating at a fantastic rate. Some were affiliated with the Ballads and Blues Association, which had continued to grow, slowly but consistently, but others were started by local aficionados. One of the largest folk clubs in London—at the Starting Gate, Wood Green—was run by the New Old-Timers, a country, blues, and bluegrass trio. There were also folk sessions on Friday and Saturday nights at the Atlas; at the Black Horse in Fitzrovia; and the Loft Blues Club on Southampton Way; on Sunday nights Jo-Ann Kelly held forth at Bunjie's in Leicester Square. Guitarists Gerry Lochran, Cliff Aungier and Royd Rivers opened a folk and blues club called "Folksville" in the Half Moon Pub, Putney, so they would have a place to perform; Kim Simmonds of Savoy Brown did the same in an upper room of the Nag's Head Tavern in Battersea. The Wang Dang Doodle Club, which met Tuesdays at the Railway Hotel, Harrow, Wealdstone, boasted both live music and a disc jockey playing deleted blues and jug band records.

Folk music was perhaps even more popular in the rest of Britain. The Midlands were full of small clubs; Robert Plant got his start singing at the Seven Stars Blues Club in Stourbridge and other folk blues sessions in Birmingham in 1963. A number of clubs functioned in York; there were three in West Riding alone. Edinburgh supported four folk venues and there were purportedly ten in Glasgow, all generating packed houses. There were University of Wales affiliated folk clubs in Cardiff and Swansea. Southampton also had several clubs, one of which had a resident jug band. Ian A. Anderson claimed there was a small but thriving folk blues community in tiny Weston-Super-Mare and there was a "purist folk blues" club at the Old Duke in Bristol.

During the boom the British folk establishment largely abandoned geographically rooted notions of authenticity and became more tolerant of non-native repertoire. Scots House, Cambridge Circus permitted blues singing and there was a Folk/Blues Happening at the Cecil Sharpe House in January 1965 featuring Shirley Collins and Davy Graham. That same year the English Folk Dance and Song Society Festival included a workshop on blues by Paul Oliver. The EFDSS even sponsored an American Folk and Blues tour featuring Blind Gary Davis and Josh White. Oliver noted:

Times have changed as the "folk song" craze has developed: a few years ago the very appearance in this country of Blind Gary Davis would have been the subject of fanatical enthusiasm by a small handful of dedicated blues and gospel music collectors, and it would have been virtually overlooked by Cecil Sharpe House. Now it is the EFDSS that toured Blind Gary and the blues enthusiasts were in the minority¹⁰

¹⁰ Paul Oliver, "Blind Gary Davis," *Jazzbeat* 2/8 (August 1965): 12–13.

Provincial jazz and “folk blues” clubs booked American blues artists with greater frequency. Some were already in Britain as part of larger package tours or passing through the country. About half the dates of Fuller’s enormously successful 1965 tour were in small folk blues clubs; Rev. Gary Davis also made a number of appearances at folk venues. Other musicians were sponsored directly. The city council of Cambridge hired Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry to headline the inaugural Cambridge Folk Festival on 31 July 1965. Small clubs and municipalities may have been able to afford such endeavors because of the reduced demand for prewar artists at London venues; it also helped that a number of American blues musicians had emigrated to Europe.

Champion Jack Dupree had always been most appreciated in smaller clubs outside London, and by 1965 the resident of Halifax was a fixture of the jazz and folk blues scenes in Yorkshire and the Midlands. The “genuine embodiment of many decades of blues which came from the Deep South and New Orleans” made frequent appearances at pubs and clubs, sometimes with traditional jazz bands and sometimes as a soloist, where he sang, told stories and played rollicking blues piano. Curtis Jones, who resided in Paris, was also a small club favorite, as was Mississippi Fred McDowell, the sensation of the 1965 American Folk Blues Festival.

Though the Festival was underattended, audience and critics responded favorably, particularly to those artists from the folk blues tradition. McDowell, a recent discovery of American blues researchers, had never been a professional musician and he made no records until the late 1950s; most of the audience had no idea who he was. Nonetheless, his simple songs and bottleneck slide electrified all present, “...assuring the promoters, if any such assurance is needed, that there is a huge audience for the authentic, totally unsophisticated forms of rural blues.” Dr. Isaac Ross, the eccentric one-man band, was also well received, as were Shakey Jake Horton and Roosevelt Sykes, who provided “first-class barrelhouse entertainment.”¹¹ Some critics were disappointed by Eddie Boyd and Buddy Guy, the representatives of the modern blues, but all and sundry were stunned by Big Mama Thorton, the featured “girl singer.” Her powerful blues shouting and superlative harp playing may have helped launch the re-evaluation of classic blues singers that soon followed.

The lackluster attendance of the Festival seems to have influenced promoters, as there was a precipitous decline in tours by American blues artists in the early part of 1966. Simon Napier speculated that “discovery fatigue” was setting in and that the torrent of new tours and recordings had overloaded both the press and audiences. Derrick Stewart-Baxter admitted that even he was getting a bit blasé. It did not help matters that the few blues musicians that did tour—Hooker, Jimmy Witherspoon, Chuck Berry, Rev. Gary Davis, and T-Bone Walker—had appeared

¹¹ Oliver, “Blues Festival ’65.”

in Britain on numerous prior occasions. Walker, touring with the Jazz at the Philharmonic package, encountered some objection from critics and audiences.

People were saying they didn't want R and B ... so when the reporters talked to me about mixing R and B and jazz, I told them, "Better come and hear for yourself." Ask the guys. I want no R and B. I like nothing better than playing with Dizzy, Clark Terry, Teddy Wilson, Zoot, Flip, and the rest.¹²

He said nothing about the blues.

'When the Levee Breaks': The second stage of the blues revival

By mid-1966 even some of its most devoted adherents were giving up on rhythm and blues. Georgie Fame disbanded the Blue Flames and turned to playing jazz and pop music; the Animals called it quits and the Bo Street Runners, Zoot Money's Big Roll Band, and the Graham Bond Organization split up. Alexis Korner even dissolved Blues Incorporated, and Eric Clapton quipped that trying to start a blues band in Britain was "like banging your head against a wall."¹³ There were few concerts by visiting American artists, and though blues could still be heard in jazz and folk clubs the genre had fallen from public view. Derrick Stewart-Baxter and others worried that the "pitifully small" attendance at the 1965 Festival indicated that the "fringe faction" of eager young aficionados had "deserted the blues for some fresh fad."¹⁴

However, there were indications that despite the collapse of the R&B boom the core constituency for the blues had gotten bigger—a lot bigger. Specialist bookshops couldn't keep blues books in stock. *Conversation with the Blues* went into a second printing less than a year after its initial release. Specialist booklets published by *Blues Unlimited* and *Blues World* sold out in single day and the readership of both journals continued to surge. Moreover, blues records were still selling well.

These encouraging signs, however, were mostly overlooked by the British musical establishment. Planning for the 1966 American Folk Blues Festival was based on the assumption that the country's appetite for blues had peaked and only two dates were scheduled. However, worries about poor attendance were for naught; the Festival, which featured Sleepy John Estes, Roosevelt Sykes, Yank Rachell, Otis Rush, Fred Below, Little Brother Montgomery, Sippie Wallace, Junior Wells, Robert Pete Williams, Big Joe Turner and Roosevelt Sykes was

¹² Dance, *T-Bone*, p. 146.

¹³ Chris Welch, "Clapton—Lonely Man with Power in his Guitar," *Melody Maker*, 26 March 1966, 11.

¹⁴ DSB, "Blues," *Jazz Journal* 19/9 (September 1966): 27.

extremely well attended, and while Neil Slaven was unimpressed, Simon Napier reported that the “congregation” of the blues faithful was “large and enthusiastic” even though the London concert—the first of the tour—was plagued by tentative performances and technical problems. Tony Russell and Bob Yates observed that since both concerts were packed and the seats were not inexpensive, “we can only suppose that the ‘R&B boom’ is outlasting expectations and—perhaps—spawning genuine blues enthusiasts.”¹⁵

In the late 1950s and early 1960s the blues intelligentsia encountered new young fans at concerts, in clubs and in specialized record outlets, providing them some notion of the size of the music’s core audience. The mainstreaming of commercial access to blues materials and the sudden dearth of concerts by American artists greatly reduced such communal interactions; thus, Russell and Yates might have been surprised to learn how many blues aficionados there were in Britain and how seriously they took the music.

‘Blues with a Feeling’: the formation of the British blues

“The thing is, you either LISTEN to a blues singer or you want to emulate him.”

Neil Slaven¹⁶

The R&B boom may have died out in 1965 but it was not long before the native blues returned with a vengeance. Bands that had persevered were beginning to find their own voices within the language of the blues. Some of the earliest R&B bands that had moved on to rock and roll were returning to their blues roots, and a more country-oriented approach was emerging from the folk clubs that had multiplied throughout the decade.

After the R&B boom ended most of its bands and fans moved on to soul, pop, or cabaret, leaving a purist hardcore centered around Alexis Korner and John Mayall. Though he disbanded the group that sparked the blues revival Korner remained committed to fostering appreciation of the genre; “I am still trying to prove that the blues is not a mysterious musical form appreciated by a dedicated few, but something which everybody can enjoy.” After the failure of his new trio Free at Last, which played a combination of R&B, jazz and soul, he made some rather negative comments about “what passes for blues in the UK ... a deliberately bastardized form of the country blues.” He insisted that blues had been in a steady state of decline since Robert Johnson’s death in 1937 and claimed that modern jazz was the only logical new outlet for the genre. He then retreated into the folk scene,

¹⁵ Tony Russell and Bob Yates, “American Folk Blues Festival 1966,” *Jazz Monthly* 12/9 (November 1966): 12.

¹⁶ Neil Slaven, review of *Blues Like Showers of Rain* [Saydisc-Matchbox SDM 142] by various artists, *Blues Unlimited* 57 (October 1968): 28.

to emerge a short while later as a figurehead of the British “country” blues movement.¹⁷

Mayall, Korner’s one time disciple, held his Bluesbreakers together as the R&B scene collapsed and continued to play the blues. Though he was frequently criticized by the blues intelligentsia most recognized his extensive knowledge and growing familiarity within the idiom. His refusal to make commercial compromises cemented his reputation for integrity with purist fans, who considered him the most serious and dedicated blues player in Britain. As his own tastes matured through exposure to the modern blues Mayall—through his mentorship of young new talent—was “instrumental in changing the emphasis of the blues sound in Britain away from rhythmic chord playing and horn lines to one closely identified with the style of B. B. King, Freddie King, and Buddy Guy among others, utilizing finger vibrato, string bending, distortion, clipped phrases and fluid soloing.”¹⁸ The vehicle for this transition from the Chicago to the modern style was Eric Clapton, “the catalyst who introduced blues to a much broader audience on both sides of the Atlantic.”

And the catalyst behind Clapton, at least after 1965, was Buddy Guy. “When Buddy played the Marquee Club in London in 1965,” he said, “I saw an amplified bluesman for the first time. He was the epitome of it all ... he gave us something to strive for—the way he dressed, the way he moved, the way he expressed himself.” Clapton’s memory for influences is somewhat faulty—he’d previously seen (and played with) a number of “electrified” American artists—but contemporary reports verify that Guy had a particularly profound effect on him. Neil Slaven, who was seated next to Clapton at the concert, watched the young guitarist “collapse into frustrated tears.”¹⁹ Guy similarly influenced other young guitarists, in much the same way that Muddy Waters and Bill Broonzy had inspired Korner and Davies.

By 1964 Clapton was already considered the finest young blues-influenced guitarist in Britain. As his devotion to the genre grew he became more estranged from the Yardbirds, whose other members aspired to commercial success. After Guy’s visit Clapton quit the Yardbirds because, in Keith Relf’s words, “he loves the blues so much. I suppose he did not like it being played badly by a white shower like us!” A few weeks later, after reading an interview where the young guitarist claimed that “for me to face myself I have to play what I believe is pure and sincere and uncorrupted music,” John Mayall invited Clapton to join the Bluesbreakers, as he too was “very dedicated and wanted to put the blues on the map and play it right.”²⁰

¹⁷ “News,” *Jazzbeat* 3/6 (June 1966): 5; Alexis Korner, “Don’t Judge a Book by its Cover,” *Melody Maker*, 21 October 1967, 9.

¹⁸ Celmins, *Blues Rock Explosion*, p. 178; Shapiro, *Korner*, p. 55

¹⁹ Eric Clapton, foreword to Guy, *Damn Right*, pp. 1, 73.

²⁰ “Clapton Quits Yardbirds, too commercial,” *Melody Maker*, 13 March 1965, 5; Christopher Sanford, *Clapton, Edge of Darkness*, updated ed. (NY, 1999), p. 48; John

Mayall and Clapton recorded several singles for the Immediate and Purdah labels, including “I’m Your Witchdoctor [IM 012],” which contained the first truly significant blues rock guitar solo. It also hinted at a new British take on the blues, one that would reach a more articulate fulfillment on *Blues Breakers: John Mayall with Eric Clapton*. The album—widely considered the seminal testament of blues rock—had an enormous impact on the British blues scene, as it was the first music by a native group to truly explore the modern idiom. Clapton’s extended solos on Johnny Otis’s “Double Crossing Time” and the Freddie King’s “Hideaway” may have been familiar to blues aficionados, many of whom commented upon his facility within the idiom, but to the uninitiated they were unprecedented. Even the sound of his guitar was revolutionary. Clapton was the first British player to adopt the heavy Gibson Les Paul with humbucker pickups, the preferred model of Freddie King and Hubert Sumlin. When run through the reverb-inducing Marshall amplifiers preferred by English R&B bands the Les Paul created a loud, aggressive sound with a substantial bottom end. Attempting to replicate the sound achieved by modern Chicago blues players, he insisted on turning his amplifier up all the way to create maximum distortion and sustain and allowing the sound to bleed into the microphones. The resulting color and presence led virtually all other blues-influenced guitarists in the country to adopt a similar setup.

Blues Breakers: John Mayall with Eric Clapton entered a pop marketplace dominated by soul music and the initial stirrings of psychedelia and unexpectedly climbed to number six on the British charts. The album proved that the blues was not an esoteric music “dying from the stale smell of yesterday” but a still vital and evolving idiom.²¹ It launched a multitude of guitar-oriented bands that looked to Clapton and his influences for inspiration and ignited a new stage of the revival.

A number of other factors drove the re-emergence of what was believed to be a moribund blues scene. Britain’s popular music, dominated by second-hand soul and underground psychedelic rock, was perceived as drowning in its own complexity. Many also speculated that the gritty realism of the blues was a reaction against the “hippy, drop-out scene” and offered more emotion and variety than contemporary pop. One writer observed, “half the attraction of the blues is that it is a minority music. I wouldn’t go so far as to say that many people pretend to like the blues merely to be unconventional, but certainly if it became nationally accepted it would lose much of its appeal”²²

This new blues revival was driven by a more serious and knowledgeable constituency. Pete Frame recalls,

Mayall, liner notes to *As It All Began: The Best of John Mayall and the Bluesbreakers 1964–69* [Decca D121768], 1997.

²¹ Chris Wolfe, letter to the editor, *Melody Maker*, 22 July 1967, 16.

²² Eddie Faulks, letter to the editor, *Melody Maker*, 8 June 1968, 20.

The movement was a sort of elitist spin-off from R&B ... and was populated by anti-gimmick purists, who went for albums and an underground following. A working knowledge of Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley was no longer enough; you had to be able to speak authoritatively about Albert Collins, Albert King, Gatemouth Brown and all the other U.S. cult figures.

Al Smith, the American producer of the 1968 American Folk Blues Festival, commented, "I think the reason [the blues] has spread is because people in England read so much about the music ... I meet people often who know more about the blues world than Americans who live in that world."²³

The British blues scene gained momentum throughout the last half of 1967 and by early 1968 the blues were officially "happening." Blues-influenced artists were putting records on the album charts and they dominated reader's polls in the popular music press. Letters to *Melody Maker* putting down blues drew record numbers of responses. Al Smith was "astonished to see such big houses come out everywhere we played ... standing in many places." Eddie Boyd commented, "I always knew there were people over here who liked it but I didn't know there was such an active scene. The pie crust has been broken and now we're really getting with [sic] the meat and gravy." Dick Heckstall Smith noted, "Today the scene is equally strong all over the country. In the large cities and towns, new blues groups seem to be continually starting up."²⁴

As in 1962, the primary catalyst was popular appreciation of native music based on the blues. Many books provide detailed information about British blues rock and its most enduring contributors; extensive discussion here would be superfluous, but a brief survey of the most significant bands and how they viewed their approach to the genre is necessary to frame the major issues of the new revival.

Eric Clapton left the Bluesbreakers shortly after completing the album that made him a guitar god and formed a new band with Graham Bond Organization drummer Ginger Baker and bassist Jack Bruce, a veteran of the Bluesbreakers and Manfred Mann. Cream was originally conceived as a blues trio informed by modern Chicago blues and Jimi Hendrix, who was familiar with the cutting-edge experimentation of Earl Hooker and Robert Nighthawk. Jack Bruce recalls "sitting in a London coffee bar with Eric Clapton, when we first formed Cream, and telling

²³ Pete Frame, *Rock Family Trees, Vol. 2* (1983), quoted in Christer Fridhammar, "Knights in Blue Denim: The British Blues Scene from the 1960s Onward," *Knights in Blue Denim* (9 November 2005) <<http://www.fridhammar.com/london.html>> (11 June 2006); Max Jones, "Britain Digs Real Blues More Than the USA," *Melody Maker*, 22 November 1968, 8.

²⁴ Chris Welch, "British Blues—the big Blues Build-up," *Melody Maker*, 3 March 1968, 13; Welch, "Faithful;" Max Jones, "Eddie Boyd names Europe's Best Blues Guitar," *Melody Maker*, 24 February 1968, 10.

him, 'I want us to take the language of the blues and develop it a step further.'²⁵ However, after the band's debut at the National Jazz and Blues Festival in Windsor, where a lack of sufficient material necessitated the extension of every song in their short set list, Cream focused on improvisation, employing the riff-based blues as a flexible structure that could accommodate a fusion of stylistic elements. Though the band soon drifted into psychedelic pop their virtuosic blues-based jams pointed toward new directions in British rock.

Alexis Korner was also exploring the possibilities of blues-based improvisation. In 1967 he became involved with the Spontaneous Music Ensemble created by jazz drummer John Stevens to provide a forum for exploring free improvisation, the avant-garde movement that advocated the expressive possibilities of creating music in the moment. The SME was inspired by Ornette Coleman's 1960 album *Free Jazz* and the collective exploration of Charles Mingus, as well as the London-based collective AMM. Stevens and Korner ran a series of weekly workshops at Les Cousins that included both jazz and blues musicians. Korner's electric trio, which included Victor Brox and Ray Smith, convinced Max Jones that "there is room for another approach to freedom than the dominant idiom of the SME—a blues approach. Their earthy, free sets were a reminder that music started with sounds, not forms, and that freedom is even closer to the roots than ethnic color."²⁶

The same year the Bluesbreakers released *A Hard Road*, featuring guitarist Peter Green. The album was hailed on both sides of the Atlantic as a superlative example of white blues. *New Music Express* imagined the band to be anti-commercial and of interest only to blues specialists but their follow-up, *Crusade*, was an effort by Mayall to "campaign for some of my blues heroes by recording one number each from their own recorded repertoires." Much of its success was attributable to Green, a surprisingly mature guitarist who was heavily influenced by B. B. King and had mastered—perhaps better than any of his British contemporaries—the American guitarist's expressive vibrato and economic style. He quickly became disillusioned by Mayall's new devotion to jazz-blues fusion and teamed with Elmore James imitator Jeremy Spencer, Mick Fleetwood and fellow Bluesbreaker John McVie to form Fleetwood Mac, which was considered the finest of Britain's blues bands until the end of the decade. The group followed their well-received debut at the National Jazz and Blues Festival with an eponymous album recorded by Mike Vernon. The disc of blues standards and blues-influenced originals leaped up the charts to number four, the highest position a blues-oriented album had attained to date. After its release "the band became the

²⁵ Chris Jisi, "Cream Rises: After 36 years, Jack Bruce & Co. whip up a heavy reunion," *Bass Player* 16 (December 2005): 34.

²⁶ Max Jones, "Caught in the Act," *Melody Maker*, 12 August 1967, 5.

biggest draw around; the queues went round the block, people were fighting to get in."²⁷

Pop critics hailed *Fleetwood Mac* as one of best albums of 1968 but blues critics were more reserved. David Illingworth praised the band as "the most natural sounding British blues group I have ever heard" but he, and many others, were disturbed by the band's lack of originality. "A pity that this record had to follow so closely versions of 'Dust my Broom' and 'Rollin' and Tumblin' ... but if they can bring more young people to the real thing then good luck."²⁸ The album's mainstream success signaled that the British blues had become an accepted alternative to pop, and record companies began signing new acts at steady clip.

Savoy Brown began playing British R&B at the tail end of the boom. Finding gigs hard to come by they started their own club and gradually built a following on the nascent club and college circuit. The group was devoted to rhythmically charged Chicago blues and boogies, and their first few albums were dominated by up-tempo blues standards. Gradually guitarist Kim Simmonds's affection for the music of Earl Hooker, Otis Rush, and Freddy King and a string of personnel changes engendered a more modern sound and a shift to blues-influenced originals. Savoy Brown failed to connect in a meaningful way with British blues fans and critics after 1968, perhaps because the band's aggressive style made them sound too commercial for comfort; they also suffered by comparison to groups with a more diverse approach.

Another club favorite, the Aynsley Dunbar Retaliation, was named for its founder, a prolific drummer who began his career with the Merseysippi Jazz Band. The Retaliation was widely hailed as an original band that was not afraid to experiment; John Mayall felt they were "one of the few groups playing contemporary blues music reflecting the world today, and not just reproducing blues from years ago that the audience have on record at home."²⁹ The John Dummer Band had a number of incarnations and fluid membership until late 1967, when it included country blues devotees Dave Kelly, Steve Rye and Tony McPhee. Dummer stated that the group was "trying to get back to the real early country things. We want to take the early vocal stuff and retain the rhythmic feel and full melody of it while doing it in a band. Canned Heat has done this to a certain extent, but nobody else seems to try." However, the contradiction between the band's philosophy and their recorded output, which was dominated by Chicago blues standards, may have cost them fans. Critics recognized the group's mastery of the blues idiom and "specialist's blues work" but others felt they hewed too closely to their models. Ten Years After took a different approach. Like Cream, their music

²⁷ Brunning, *Blues in Britain*, p. 117.

²⁸ David Illingworth, review of "I Believe My Time Ain't Long" b/w "Rambling Pony" [CBS 3051] by Fleetwood Mac, *Jazz Journal* 20/12 (December 1967): 32.

²⁹ "Aynsley Dunbar Retaliation," and "John Dummer Band," in *Blues-Rock Explosion*, pp. 112, 106.

was heavily influenced by jazz and employed “feedback and distortion freak-outs usually associated with the hipper pop groups.” Guitarist Alvin Lee, a second generation blues fan, stated, “We don’t want to do a pure blues scene. We are aiming at a wider range of music. We have already had a few knocks from the purists ... rumors have reached us that we are not playing pure blues and we are only pretending. But we do play blues.”³⁰

After scaling the heights of pop stardom and trying—with little success—to compete with the Beatles in the psychedelic arena, the Rolling Stones returned to their roots on the 1968 album *Beggars’ Banquet* [Decca LK 4955]. Keith Richards had listened to many of the newly accessible country blues anthologies and his absorption of the idiom is evident in the disc’s overall coloring. Though it included an arrangement of “Prodigal Son” by Reverend Robert Wilkins, most of the songs on the album were originals inspired by the Delta blues; many featured Brian Jones on slide guitar. The blues also influenced *Let It Bleed* [LK 5025], anchored by the group’s cover of Robert Johnson’s “Love in Vain.” Even Eric Clapton, tiring of the improvisatory explorations of Cream, expressed a desire to return to the blues. “I was not being true to myself. I am and always will be a blues guitarist ... I’ve returned to what I like doing as an individual, and that is playing exploratory blues.”³¹

There was also a British “country blues” movement, an offshoot of the folk blues scene that eschewed stylistic fusion in favor of a purist approach. Their primary inspirations were Alexis Korner and Geoff Bradford, widely recognized as the finest “finger style” player in the country. Bradford quit the music business after the Hoochie Coochie Men disbanded in 1965 but his reputation and body of work motivated a new generation of performers determined to adhere to vintage blues styles. The acoustic scene first took shape in Bristol but soon spread to London, where its growth was stimulated by the popularity of folk music. By April 1967 the movement had enough adherents to be called a “London blues-contemporary scene.” Alexis Korner noted that the R&B boom had been exclusively group oriented but that “the much deeper interest in all forms of the blues has led to a situation where solo blues artists can work successfully outside the purely folk scene.”³²

Though he spent most of his career playing Chicago-influenced electric blues, Tony McPhee was an enthusiastic promoter of the country blues movement. Initially drawn to the genre by Cyril Davies and the early Blues Incorporated, he began to perform as an acoustic soloist after the Groundhogs disbanded in 1965. Though he shortly thereafter returned to the group scene with Herbal Mixture

³⁰ Welch, “Blues Buildup”; Jerry Dawson, “Out of the Midlands Comes Alvin,” *Melody Maker*, 2 December 1967, 7.

³¹ Chris Welch, “Clapton—Back to the Blues,” *Melody Maker*, 4 May 1968, 11.

³² Karl Dallas, “Focus on Folk” *Melody Maker*, 22 April 1967, 4; Alexis Korner, “It’s booming—and there is a British Style,” *Melody Maker*, 23 March 1968, 13.

(1967–8), the John Dummer Band (1968) and the reformed Groundhogs (1968–2004) he continued to appear in folk and blues clubs. McPhee frequently duetted with Jo-Ann Kelly, “the mother of the British blues revival.” Kelly was one of the most respected British country blues guitarists, admired for her prodigious talent and serious approach to the genre. She and her brother Dave began playing guitar during the skiffle craze and made regular forays to the Swing Shop in Bristol in search of material. This led to a chance meeting with McPhee, who introduced the pair to the music of Snooks Eaglin, Fred McDowell, Memphis Minnie, and Robert Johnson; the latter inspired both to take up the slide guitar. Jo-Ann began performing at folk clubs and universities in 1964 and quickly developed a following. Both she and McPhee were praised for their “remarkable degree of accomplishment in vintage blues styles,” and “greater concern with vocal expression than many other white blues singers.” Kelly contributed a number of tracks to folk blues anthologies like *New Sounds in Folk* [Halcyon HAL 1], *Blues Like Showers of Rain* [Saydisc Matchbox SDM 142], and *Me and the Devil* [Liberty UK LBS 83190], which sustained her growing reputation.

Kelly frequently appeared at events promoting the new country style with Mike Cooper, who “virtually dominated the bottleneck guitar scene during this period, paving the way for a whole resurgence in slide playing in the seventies.” His devotion to the National guitar started a trend and drove a nationwide run on the brand. Mike Raven said, “I should imagine his hero is Blind Blake, but what I like is the way he combines material from several sources to make it into new material of his own.”³³ His 1968 EP with Ian A. Anderson, *Almost the Country Blues* [Saydisc SD-134], brought the country blues movement into the national spotlight.

Anderson had played with an R&B band in Bristol, but after discovering the Delta blues he threw himself with equal measure into mastering the Mississippi bottleneck style and evangelizing on its behalf. In 1966 he co-founded Bristol Folk Blues and the West, the first major blues club in Britain.

‘Members Only’: blues societies and clubs

After the R&B boom collapsed personal ads began to appear in the pages of *Blues Unlimited*: “Blues lovers wanted in Birmingham and Bradford ... with a view to exchanging ideas, data, etc.” “Looking for other blues fans in Bengeworths, Evesham, Worcestershire.” “Anyone interested in playing, listening, drinking blues [sic] contact Ian McPherson, Glasgow.” “Young enthusiast requires blues records, magazines, cuttings, etc. ... Whitewell House, Frome, Somerset.” “Anyone interested in forming a blues appreciation club on Merseyside for records &

³³ Jerry Gilbert, “Mike Cooper—reviews etc.,” *Mike Cooper—sliding around the world*, n.d. <<http://hometown.aol.co.uk/cooparia/cooparia.html>> (9 August 2006); Bob Dawbarn, “Blues British Style, Part Two,” *Melody Maker*, 12 October 1968, 21.

singing, please write for details..." "Robin & Ivor Johnson of Kirk 'o the Muir, Kinclave, by Stanley in Perthshire (Scotland) would dearly like to hear from others interested in blues with a view to meetings."³⁴

As isolated individuals made contact with their fellow enthusiasts a wave of blues societies began cropping up throughout Britain. The first was the London Blues Society, founded by Chris Trimming in September 1967. Their weekly meetings at the Royal Albert, Blackheath, took the form of record recitals on topics like "the Real Boogie Woogie?," "Jay Miller Artists" and "Elmore James," and the latest blues releases were also played and discussed. Similar recital-oriented clubs soon surfaced in Kingston, Dublin, and Gloucester. Like the rhythm clubs of the 1930s these societies were autonomous and driven by the interests of their members. The Scottish Blues Society, which met in Airdrie, Lanarkshire, presented lectures, talks, films and concerts; they also maintained a lending library of records, books, and magazines. Blues Junction, created by Robin and Ivor Johnson in 1967, promoted blues in central Scotland by offering food and lodging—in addition to performance fees—to musicians willing to tour north of Edinburgh. Within a year they had established regular Sunday night blues sessions in Perth and fostered similar clubs in St. Andrews, Dundee, and Dunfermline.

Many clubs were performance oriented; they regularly featured "serious" British blues artists and offered "the real thing whenever possible," though not necessarily to the exclusion of other activities. Folk Blues Bristol & the West, founded by Ian A. Anderson, Elliot Jackson and Saydisc founder Pete Moody, was typical; the club presented "the finest of the British blues interpreters" fortnightly, published a monthly newsletter, and held regular evening meetings for blues record collectors.³⁵ Most clubs were devoted to either the "city" or "country" blues, depending on the interests of their members and their meeting place; small venues, like the student union that hosted the Southampton Art College Blues Club, could only accommodate acoustic soloists or duos.

Initially blues clubs lacked the endorsement and coordination of a major periodical, but in April 1968 *Blues Unlimited* began devoting space in each issue to club news, meeting times, and special events. In short order new groups appeared in Dover, Lancaster, Peterborough, and Bournemouth, and both the London and Bristol groups had to relocate to accommodate the sudden increase in membership. By September there was enough related news for the journal to devote a regular column to "Blues in Britain."

The largest performance club in London was the weekly country blues session at Bridge House, Borough Road. There were also folk blues every Saturday at the Anglers Hotel in Teddington; Don Crane of the defunct Dowliners Sect had a club

³⁴ Letters and personal advertisements from *Blues Unlimited* 32 (April 1966): 19; 34 (July 1966): 17; 37 (October 1966): 15; and 39 (December 1966): 27.

³⁵ Ian A. Anderson, "Blues in Britain," *Blues Unlimited* 49 (January 1968): 17; and 57 (November 1968): 13.

at the White Bear in Hounslow, Middlesex; another, administered by Mike Cooper, met at the Crown in Reading every other Tuesday. The Bottleneck Blues Club met at the Railway Tavern on Sundays and promoter Ron Watts ran a "Country Blues Loft" at the White Hart on Wednesdays, along with other blues sessions in Aylesbury and Oxford.

The Blues Loft, White Hart, High Wycombe was London's first "city" club and expatriate blues artists like Curtis Jones and Champion Jack Dupree appeared there on a semi-regular basis. Mike Vernon assumed management of Kilroy's at the Nag's Head Tavern after Savoy Brown hit it big and renamed it the Blue Horizon; the club hosted visiting American artists as well as British blues groups. There was a popular Sunday afternoon session at Studio 51 on Great Newport Street that attracted visitors like Howlin' Wolf and Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup. Many of the largest R&B clubs, like the Marquee, Klooks Kleek, Bluesville, and the Flamingo, continued to book blues acts; the latter also sponsored a Thursday record session run by Mike Raven. There were a number of smaller clubs as well, like the Fickle Pickle Chicago blues club that met on Wednesdays at the Hornsey Wood Tavern and Blues at the Roebuck on Tottenham Court Road. The Blues Scene took place at the Windsor Thames Hotel on Wednesday evenings but the Blues Thing happened at 21 Winchester Road on Saturday and Sunday nights. By 1969 there were also clubs on Saturdays at the Crown, Twickenham ("a real jook!") and Mondays at the Black Bull; on Tuesdays "the new London blues scene" congregated at the 100 Club; there were blues on Wednesdays at the Toby Jug in Tolworth; Thursdays at the Red Lion, Leytonstone; and Fridays at the Tiger's Head and New Links (Borehamwood).

Though there were many clubs in the greater London area the new blues movement enjoyed its greatest initial growth elsewhere. Paul Oliver was surprised by the movement's geographical diffusion, from "the somewhat unlikely Farnham Country Blues Club, or the Swansea Folk and Blues Club, the Leicester Blues Society [and] the Bristol Folk Blues Club" to the university groups in Norwich, Leeds, Manchester, Bath, Essex, Lancaster, and Sussex; the latter maintained separate "city" and "country" clubs.³⁶ Birmingham had perhaps the most active scene in Britain. Besides the country blues club at the University of Aston there were also sessions at the Midland Jazz Club on Mondays; at the Blues Club on Tuesdays; Artesian Hall and Salutation Tavern on Thursdays; the Capri Jazz Club on Fridays; and at the Piccadilly Jazz Club on Fridays and Saturdays. City blues aficionados could choose from the Slaughterhouse Blues Club at the Birmingham Arms; Henry's Blueshouse, which had seating for 300 but routinely had to turn away patrons on Tuesday nights; and the popular Friday Blues Nights at Mother's.

Manchester had a surprisingly small concentration of blues clubs, perhaps because it was the hub of the new "northern soul" scene. There was a Sunday night

³⁶ Paul Oliver, "In Person: Fred McDowell/Freddie King," *Jazz Monthly* 15/3 (May 1969): 10.

blues session at the Sports Guild, the Manchester University Institute of Science and Technology had a lecture/recital club and larger venues like the Magic Village and the Twisted Wheel booked blues acts on occasion. Farther north the South Tyne Folk & Blues club grew so quickly that it had to move to a larger venue after only three meetings. In the southwest Bristol and Gloucester were centers of activity; the latter had several well-populated clubs that favored the country blues.

Leeds was the blues capital of Yorkshire and the Humber. In addition to the University-affiliated society, “Bluesville” operated a country blues club Mondays at the Meanwood Hotel that sponsored visiting American blues artists, resident blues players, and record recitals. There was a city club in nearby Bradford on Sundays at the Farmer’s Inn, Thornbury, and one on Friday nights at the Whip Hotel, Lower Briggate, as well as the Blues Bottleneck Club at The Redcar Jazz Club in Halifax. In the southeast there was the country blues club at Farnham (Surrey), Albion Hotel, which met fortnightly and consistently drew greater than capacity crowds; the Blues Attic in Banbury, Swan Inn; and another at the Star & Garter, Dorking. There were also active groups in Dover, Bath, Nottingham, Stockton-on-Tees, Tredegar (Wales), Glasgow, and Derby.

The rapid proliferation of clubs demonstrated that there was a far more substantive British audience for the blues than ever before, and it was not long before the new scene recognized its collective potential. Ron Watts, proprietor of the Blues Loft, opined:

The best way to exploit (in the best sense) the current interest in blues is for the clubs to get in touch with each other and try to organize visits from U.S. artists. Maybe a ‘Federation’ could be formed (Chris Trimming suggested this too) to promote tours by such artists. Obviously if twenty or so clubs were prepared to book an artist it would make bringing him over a viable proposition.³⁷

Blues Unlimited endorsed the idea, as “the need for such an organization to consolidate the efforts of the various people/organizations currently working in the blues field has been felt for some time,” and a National Blues Federation was formalized in late 1968. Its aims were:

- To bring interested clubs, organizations and individuals into a united effort ...
- To maintain and improve on the current healthy scene, minimize the dangers from “band wagon jumping” by inferior artists and clubs alike—signs that this happens are evident even now.
- To arrange tours by American bluesmen and to increase an awareness and knowledge of Blues in this Country [sic].

³⁷ Simon Napier, “Blues Around Britain,” *Blues Unlimited* 55 (July 1968): 19.

In accordance with the last the Federation created a booking agency to set up tours by American artists and “all the British artists that the Federation can recommend.”

Membership was available for individuals and for clubs; the latter benefited from collective booking, publicity and—after several blues clubs failed and/or were raided by police—managerial advice. “We want to see all clubs succeed as badly run failures only give the music a bad name.”³⁸ Such concerns—that missteps and bad publicity would jeopardize not only the new blues revival but also the health of the entire genre—were widespread; no one had forgotten the heated critical discourse that marred the “British R&B” boom. The Federation was run by a committee of influential figures from all constituencies of the British blues: Watts, Trimming, Napier, Ian Anderson, Alexis Korner, Mike Raven and Richard Vernon.

Simon Napier proposed a national meeting for blues aficionados to “consolidate the strengthening position of the music here, and foster understanding between the different camps and schools-of-thought.”³⁹ The London Blues Society took on the project and on 7–8 September 1968 the First National Blues Convention—“the Blues Event of 1968!”—took place at Conway Hall in London. The advertised “20 hours of blues!” included workshops, auctions, films, concerts and record recitals by members of the blues intelligentsia. All tickets for the event were sold and the convention was declared “an unqualified success” that “gave people an opportunity to discover other points of view. It was all for the good of the blues, and some of the friendships which developed can only do good for the music we all love.”⁴⁰

A second national convention was held in September 1969. The format was similar but, save for the West Indian singer Errol Dixon, all the performers were British; Bukka White, initially advertised as the featured American artist, did not materialize. Attendance was down slightly from the previous year but the organizers were nonetheless pleased, as “the bigger the movement, so much better its chance of survival when, as is inevitable, the blues ‘thing’ starts to decline”⁴¹

³⁸ Ian Anderson, “Blues in Britain,” *Blues Unlimited* 58 (November/December 1968): 14.

³⁹ Simon Napier, “Editorial,” *Blues Unlimited* 52 (April 1968): 2.

⁴⁰ Sinclair Traill, “Editorial,” *Jazz Journal* 21/10 (October 1968): 40; David Illingworth, “London Blues,” *Jazz Journal* 21/10 (October 1968): 5; “1st National Blues Convention Conway Hall 1968,” *Blues Unlimited* 57 (October/November 1968): 17.

⁴¹ “The 2nd National Blues Convention 1969 Conway Hall,” *Blues Unlimited* 68 (December 1969): 16.

'Reconversion Blues': new blues evangelism

The mainstream popularity of blues-based rock presented new opportunities to blues evangelists, who hoped to stimulate greater interest in the genre's American artists and history.

The push seems to have begun with the Bluesbreakers album *Crusade*, which John Mayall hoped would "get people interested in voicing their views on blues. It's like the days when jazz fans used to petition the BBC for more airtime. We want the BBC and newspapers to realize there is a market for programmes and articles on people you don't normally hear about."⁴² Chris Welch's review essay "O, Come All Ye Faithful and Join the Blues Crusade" signaled *Melody Maker*'s return to proselytization. The "Magnificent Seven," a weekly feature that invited experts to profile seven important musicians in a given style, was increasingly devoted to blues artists, and stories about the genre appeared with greater frequency. Max Jones even created an "ABC of the Blues" so the "uninitiated" might develop "a genuine appreciation" of the genre; the column introduced historical styles ("B" for barrelhouse, "C" for country blues, "D" for down home, "W" for work song, etc.), canonical artists ("E stands for Sleepy John Estes," "Y" for Jimmy Yancy, "K" for Kokomo Arnold, and so on), and important blues locations ("A for Alabama, "M" for Mississippi), as well as specific performing techniques (under "I" for instrumental blues, "B" for bottleneck and "F" for frailing) and an explanation of the 12-bar form.⁴³

The 23 March 1968 edition included a special four page "blues supplement," that featured an essay by Paul Oliver on background of the blues, the important characteristics of the genre, and its major stylistic currents; suggestions from Max Jones about building a representative collection of recordings; a description of the British blues style by Alexis Korner; a "magnificent seven" of great blues pianists, and a bibliography of books and periodicals for those interested in learning more about the "real thing." Later that year *Melody Maker* added a weekly blues page that contained coverage of the British scene, reviews of the latest books and albums, tour reports, and a feature story on an important American artist.

The paper took a more active role in promoting the blues by sponsoring "Blues Scene '68," a showcase of American and British artists headlined by Muddy Waters with Champion Jack Dupree, John Mayall, and the Aynsley Dunbar Retaliation. The response far exceeded expectations; *Melody Maker* reported that thousands were turned away from the sold-out event. The following year the magazine, in conjunction with the Harold Davidson agency, sponsored "Blues Scene 1969," a tour headlined by John Lee Hooker and featuring Champion Jack Dupree, the Aynsley Dunbar Retaliation, Jo-Ann Kelly and the Groundhogs.

⁴² Chris Welch, "O, Come All Ye Faithful and Join the Blues Crusade," *Melody Maker*, 28 October 1967, 11.

⁴³ Max Jones, "ABC of the Blues," *Melody Maker*, 14 September 1968, 7.

There was less coverage of the blues in British jazz periodicals, presumably because the new revival was rooted in popular music rather than jazz. Commentators allied with the blues intelligentsia still wrote columns on the subject; their essays often lacked an evangelical orientation but retained the assumption that some blues styles were relevant for serious connoisseurs of jazz. Paul Munnery asserted that jazz “still needs to breathe the blues like air” but noted that “the original proximity is gone: we can no longer say that the blues and jazz audiences are the same, or that their demands are answered by the same artists.” *Jazzbeat* remained committed to more extensive coverage than *Jazz Journal* or *Jazz Monthly*, despite pleas by some readers to eliminate non-jazz articles. The publications continued to cover major blues events and reviews of albums by both American and British artists often contained insightful commentary on the continuing relevance—or lack thereof—of particular artists and styles. Even Alexis Korner returned to proselytizing, giving a series of lectures on the blues at universities “up and down the country. The interest is absolutely tremendous. The purpose of the lectures is not so much to give specific information, but to create a basic understanding of the feeling of the blues.”⁴⁴

The promotional zeal of *Blues Unlimited* and its cadre of young enthusiasts recalled the evangelizing of the intelligentsia two decades earlier but their concerns and goals were somewhat different. There was a sense—albeit an inaccurate one—that American researchers were interested only in “living legends” and marginalized other important artists. Paul Oliver cautioned:

As the history of the blues is now being belatedly documented in all its styles, its regional characteristics, its themes, its flow and circulation, its creation and development and change must, by the very magnitude of the subject, subordinate the work of countless blues singers...to the major patterns and the principal, most influential artists. When the assessment of the major figures is made, the minor blues singer is forgotten.

In response Simon Napier established an editorial policy that prioritized research on unknown early artists and young musicians who still played community-based blues:

The ‘rediscovery’ scene has, I believe, been handled very well, but it is out of context and relies almost entirely on the presence of a number of aged singers in 1976 there’ll be very few of the first recorded generation left, which stresses the urgency of finding, interviewing and recording any we can as soon as we can.

In March 1966 *Blues Unlimited* began a series on “The Unknowns” and “The Unheralded,” which featured artists like Guitar Slim, Sonny Freeman, J. R. Fulbright, Elmon Mickle and Guitar Nubbit. The journal also promoted

⁴⁴ Paul Munnery, “The Blues Form and its Influence on Early Jazz,” *Jazz Journal* 20/9 (September 1967), 40; Korner, “British style.”

independent record labels that were committed to promoting regionally significant artists. Napier argued that “writers and collectors will need to review the whole blues situation at regular intervals, contemplating all the while on [sic] just how much is there?” Mike Leadbitter issued his own call to action, asking readers to “help with the task of documenting the blues from those parts of the States that produced—and still are producing—the Blues.”⁴⁵

The latter resulted in a flood of interviews and field recordings from all parts of the United States. Some of the research was done by American subscribers, who from time to time found requests for information embedded in the journal’s articles. However, British blues fans were also visiting the States in significant numbers. In the 1950s a handful of European critics ventured to major American cities but until Paul Oliver’s productive 1960 trip few believed they could go to remote areas of the United States and interview blues singers. Neil Paterson, a Cambridge University student, took a field trip to Chicago in the summer of 1963 and returned with a wealth of information distilled from interviews with record label owners Mel London and Cadillac Baby, artists Willie Mabon, Magic Sam, Junior Wells, and unknown bluesmen playing on Maxwell Street. Others followed his lead and in short order a tour of Chicago blues clubs were like the *hajj* for young European blues devotees: a requisite pilgrimage that should be made at least once by the truly faithful. Those with specific musical passions also visited blues enclaves like Houston, New Orleans, Memphis, and Detroit.

Musicians were usually happy to talk with fans from abroad and discussed not only their pasts but also their recent projects or lack thereof, information that frequently found its way into print. Many investigators also published artists’ addresses and encouraged anyone who enjoyed their records to write, “even if only a card.” By the end of the decade *Blues Unlimited* published contact information for as many artists as possible as a “service to collectors and would-be royalty-payers.” Special pains were taken to contact overlooked artists from the 1930s and 1940s. Some, like Ruben Lacy, had long since given up music as a profession and were not interested in a second career; others were incapacitated by health problems or old age and no longer capable of performing. Readers were often encouraged to send letters and good wishes. Bob Groom explained:

even though it has not been possible for all living blues singers to take part in the revival ... it is still true to say that very many of them have benefited to some degree They have given us the music; we have been able to repay them, in some small way, by buying their new recordings, going to see them perform and, perhaps equally important, showing how much we respect them as performers and care for them as individuals.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Oliver, *Conversation*, p. 3; Simon Napier, “Editorial,” *Blues Unlimited* 39 (December 1966): 2; Napier, review of *The Sound of the Delta* by various artists [Testament 2209], *Blues Unlimited* 33 (May–June 1966): 23; Broven, “Mike Leadbitter.”

⁴⁶ Simon Napier, “News,” *Blues Unlimited* 75 (September 1970): 28; Groom, *Blues Revival*, p. 65.

In a few instances blues aficionados were moved to do more. The British blues community rallied around the cause of blueswoman Memphis Minnie, purportedly the first of the Chicago artists to play electric guitar and one of its finest instrumentalists. By the time researchers found her she was living in a nursing home in Memphis, paralyzed by a debilitating stroke. Jo-Ann and Dave Kelly began playing benefits on her behalf and soon other musicians and clubs arranged charity concerts to help the impoverished singer cover her medical expenses. Jo-Ann Kelly also sold pictures of Minnie, which provided the blueswoman with some badly needed income, and letters and cards from her British fans gave her some comfort and satisfaction in her last years. *Blues Unlimited* publicized similar campaigns for Bukka White and Pete Johnson.

There were also efforts to help blues players start—or restart—their careers playing non-commercial blues. Mike Rowe urged readers to ask Horst Lippmann to invite “minor lights” like Johnny Shines, Eddie Taylor, J. B. Hutto to participate in the Folk Blues Festivals. “All would be overjoyed to come and while it won’t mean the commercial success that they need it would show them that they are still appreciated ... all deserve to make the trip, which should be as satisfying commercially as it would be musically....” Mike Leadbitter was particularly involved in championing artists who pursued their own artistic agendas. He asked blues fans to purchase the Gold Star album by Big Walter Price and write a note “giving him some encouragement now that he’s going it on his own and doing what he wants to do”⁴⁷ He did the same for Poppa Hop (Harp Wilson) and other artists who refused to conform to the demands of the marketplace and urged independent label owners to provide more opportunities to unknown musicians.

For Juke Boy Bonner, an artist that Leadbitter particularly admired, he devised a more proactive plan. He asked 200 readers to send Bonner money to pay for a recording session and 1000 copies of the resulting record, which would hopefully help the bluesman relaunch his career. “Anyone who sends \$1 will get a copy, and Bonner will still have 800 copies to sell/distribute to DJs and such after paying his costs. If successful other similar schemes may be inaugurated.” The resulting single “Yakin’ in my plans” b/w “Runnin’ Shoes”—“a ‘must’ record and worth every cent of the 200 bucks that went to make it”—was released as *Blues Unlimited* 101 in 1968; it not only sold several hundred copies beyond those given to donors but Chris Strachwitz also heard about the effort and recorded Bonner for Arhoolie records. The bluesman wrote to thank Leadbitter and *Blues Unlimited* readers. “Boy this is what I really needed, a break with a company State side based ... man it has been a pretty good Xmas thanks to you”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Mike Leadbitter, “Big Walter Price,” *Blues Unlimited* 19 (January 1965): 8

⁴⁸ Mike Leadbitter, “Juke Boy Bonner,” *Blues Unlimited* 44 (June–July 1967), 3; Leadbitter, liner notes to *Louisiana Blues with the Fabulous Weldon “Juke Boy” Bonner* [Storyville SLP 841] (1965); “Letter from Juke Boy Bonner,” *Blues Unlimited* 51 (March 1968): 19.

'Big Ten Inch': blues records in Britain 1966–1970

Between 1966 and 1970 the number of independent record labels in Britain exploded. Most were small, limited release concerns run by passionate collectors out of their homes, who hoped only to find a wider audience for music they loved. There was certainly a sufficient market. "Judging by the activity of present record concerns and the fast formation of new ones," Simon Napier noted in early 1966, "it would seem that the demand for blues discs has still to reach its peak."

Most of the major record labels and the established independents like Chess, Fontana and Prestige were by this time distributing discs directly in Britain rather than licensing their masters to British companies. Though this made blues records more widely available, there was a sense that these outlets favored quantity over quality and issued material with "reckless abandon."⁴⁹ Decca was occasionally lambasted for using British musicians to back artists like Eddie Boyd and Champion Jack Dupree in the studio but was recognized for its commitment to the blues and willingness to record artists with little mass-market appeal. The company also commissioned special projects like *Blues—Southside Chicago*, a compilation recorded by Willie Dixon for English release, which featured Maxwell Street artists like Poor Bob, Johnny Young, and Homesick James. Polydor, CBS and Chess occasionally delivered albums of merit but primarily released modern "soul" blues that sold well in the United States but were unpopular with British critics. Little effort went into publicizing even these discs, let alone more esoteric fare. Few had faith that the major labels would invest time and energy in promoting minor artists so committed blues lovers took matters into their own hands.

Blue Horizon played a substantial role in the promotion and dissemination of products of the new revival. Mike Vernon and his brother Richard launched their concern in early 1965 with a limited edition single that Howlin' Wolf guitarist Hubert Sumlin recorded at their London flat. The hundred copies of the disc, offered exclusively through an ad in *R&B Monthly*, sold out in ten days, motivating the Vernon brothers and their partner Neil Slaven to expand their offerings. Blue Horizon released recordings by visiting blues artists like Lowell Fulson, Houston Boines and J.B. Lenoir and reissued material by B. B. King, Lightnin' Sam, Otis Rush and other Chicago artists licensed—or bootlegged—from Cobra and Excello. Blue Horizon also issued a ten-volume Blues Masters series comprising mostly new material from Elmore James, Otis Rush, Magic Sam, Bukka White, Furry Lewis, Johnny Shines, Mississippi Joe Callicott, and Champion Jack Dupree.

Its Purdah and Outasite subsidiaries specialized in British blues and R&B. Mike Vernon was lambasted in the purist press for claiming his goal in recording British artists was "to make sure that the music that is issued on record is genuine and not some phony copy," but he believed that British blues would establish a larger market for a wide spectrum of issues, "starting with Mississippi or Texas

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Simon Napier, "Editorial," *Blues Unlimited* 31 (March 1966): 2.

blues and any country style that come our way, then taking in early Chicago and Detroit and also things from the West Coast made in the late '40s and early '50s." Blue Horizon was also committed to promoting minor American blues artists. Vernon stated, "I feel that it's my duty to record and preserve these people for posterity. I know that if I don't, no one else will and the music will die, undocumented and unrecorded."⁵⁰

Mike Cooper and Ian A. Anderson used the success of *Almost the Country Blues* to persuade Gloucestershire based Saydisc Specialty Records to create Matchbox, a subsidiary committed to "presenting the best from all aspects of the Country Blues." The first Saydisc Matchbox issue, a compilation of British country blues entitled *Blues like Showers of Rain* [SDM 142], was aggressively promoted by BBC 1 disc jockey John Peel and was largely responsible for mainstreaming contemporary acoustic blues. Cooper and Anderson continued to record for Matchbox but the label's focus quickly shifted to reissues of American country blues. *Blind Boy Fuller On Down* [SDM143], a compilation based on a series of articles by Simon Napier, sold more than 1000 copies upon its release in 1969; it also cemented the label's reputation for high-quality transfers and informative liner notes. Saydisc Matchbox soon established a distribution arrangement with the Austrian Roots label, which produced a number of excellent geographically-based anthologies in the last years of the decade. In 1968 Peter Shertser launched Red Lightnin', "purveyors [sic] of contemporary blues." Its first releases were Buddy Guy, *In the Beginning* [RL 001] and Little Walter, *Quarter to Twelve* [RL 002], double albums of unissued and alternate tracks from the Chess vaults. The compilations were extremely costly—51 shillings, or nearly £2.5—and clearly intended for the specialist collector market.

Transatlantic was perhaps the most prolific blues label in Britain. The concern was particularly committed to folk blues and released albums by British artists like Ralph McTell and John Renbourn as well as new material by Mississippi Fred McDowell. It also reissued discs from the now defunct Bluesville catalogue on its Xtra budget label. Xtra also produced *The Mike Raven Show* [1047], a pedagogical collection that introduced new blues fans to important artists and styles, and *The Mike Raven Sampler*, a similar outreach album for fans of British blues rock. Raven's liner notes read:

In blues clubs up and down the country it is possible to hear very creditable performances of the music by young British artists. If you have heard and enjoyed such performances, and are wondering about the origins of the music, then perhaps this album will help you to find your way back to the grass roots. If, on the other hand, you have never heard of the blues ... then you are in luck. This album could be the key that

⁵⁰ Max Jones, "Beyond the Blue Horizon," *Melody Maker*, 13 January 1968, 6; Alan Walsh, "Chicago blues are dying," *Melody Maker*, 6 July 1968, 9.

will open a door to a whole new world of music ... you may very well find that it is one in which you will want to spend a lot of your time.⁵¹

The flood of rediscovered artists and new blues fans interested in the history of the blues stimulated a new demand for reissued material. The major labels were eager to service this lucrative market niche but had limited access to rare material; after 1966 most of their reissue anthologies were new combinations of previously released tracks or verbatim reprinting of earlier compilations. English RCA's Victor Race Series and Victor Vintage Series, particularly the 1966 *Bluebird Blues* [RD7786], were exceptions. Neil Slaven declared that it was "left to the small independent companies to provide the serious collector with carefully planned, balanced albums."⁵²

The focus of many independent reissue labels was the immediate postwar period, by that time heralded as the "golden age" of the Chicago blues. Singles and albums from this period, particularly those recorded for small local concerns, were becoming hard to find; Paul Oliver noted that some were "as scarce and obscure as ever were the Vocalions of the '20s."⁵³ Many reissue concerns were run by collectors and were labors of love rather than serious commercial enterprises. Their limited edition discs were marketed directly to their target audience through ads in *Blues Unlimited* and despite their high cost, averaging between 45 and 51 shillings, label owners rarely did more than recoup their expenditures.

Neshoba Records was started in 1966 by John Allison, an import distributor of American specialist labels who wished to make "the finest, rarest postwar blues from below the Mason-Dixon line" available to the public. However, the label issued only one album: *Let's Go Down South: Postwar Blues as sung from Memphis Down to Dallas*. The Manchester-based Kokomo and Highway 51 labels, run by Trev Huyton, Ted Griffiths and Bob Groom, fared better. The labels and their predecessor, Blue Highway, released several compilations of items from the JOB, Chance, Parrot, and RPM catalogues that were well received despite poor transfer quality. Its sister label, Kokomo, specialized in collections by prewar blues artists like Buddy Moss and Barbecue Bob, as did several anonymous dealers who sold reel-to-reel tapes of unissued blues. A collector in Birmingham even advertised made-to-order tapes "any size, speed ... I am especially pleased to help and advise new collectors."⁵⁴

A number of aficionados used independent labels to distribute recordings by favorite artists. Pete Moody established his Sunflower label for the express purpose of issuing compilations by Memphis Minnie to accompany his privately published

⁵¹ Mike Raven, liner notes to *The Mike Raven Blues Sampler* by various artists [Transatlantic TRA SAM 5], 1969.

⁵² Neil Slaven, "Classic Blues on Blues Classics," *Jazzbeat* 3/5 (May 1966): 12.

⁵³ Paul Oliver, "Chicago Breakdown, part two," *Jazzbeat* 3/6 (June 1966): 8.

⁵⁴ Jim Vyse, advertisement in *Blues Unlimited* 49 (January 1968): 27.

biography of the singer. Blue Circle emerged in 1967, offering a 40-track reel-to-reel tape of country blues by Sam and Bo Chatmon. Advent Records eschewed anthologies in favor of entire EPs or LPs devoted to a single artist. Frank Scott and John Holt began issuing 45s of material by Luke and Long Gone Miles on the Two Kings label before expanding into larger projects. *John Lee Hooker and His Guitar* [Advent LP 2801], a compilation of alternate takes and tracks recorded for the Sensation label between 1948–51, sold well enough to ensure the solvency of Two Kings, which operated until the early 1970s. The Python label was started by Keith Tillman, a former member of the Bluesbreakers and the Aynsley Dunbar Retaliation. Many of the releases were repressings of Candid and Cobra albums and some of the initial issues were badly dubbed, but Python was one of the few reissue labels to offer cutting-edge modern blues to the collector market.

In 1966 John Broven jumped into the reissue business with partner Robin Godsen to “present the best and rarest items they can find.” Jan & Dil released a handful of items prior to 1968, when they changed the name of the label to Flyright. Its first releases were a repressing of Blues Unlimited 1 by Juke Boy Bonner and *Juke Boy Bonner: The One Man Trio* [LP 3501], an album the artist recorded on his personal tape machine at various clubs in Houston. Several anthologies and collections by postwar artist followed.

The most esteemed reissue label was Pete Brown’s Down with the Game, which showcased overlooked talent from the prewar and immediate postwar years. His critically acclaimed collections of vintage blues, all entitled *Down with the Game* and differentiated only by volume number, were praised for their superb mastering and track selection. The anthologies restored the reputation of more than one artist whose few previously available recordings did not reflect their best work.

Compilations, which provided an economical means by which “not only young enthusiasts but also from well-intentioned teachers, librarians, leaders of boys’ clubs and others who realize that there is a great interest currently in the blues” could familiarize themselves with the genre, became even more popular in the final years of the decade. Unlike earlier anthologies, which focused on themes (like *Murderer’s Home*) or artists, newer collections aimed to provide an introduction to particular stylistic traditions. Often these took on a regional focus, intended to enhance comparative listening, “underlining rather than refuting the idea of related but divergent ‘schools’ of blues.”⁵⁵

In 1966 Elektra launched their discount Bounty label, which quickly became one of the most prolific reissue concerns. Much of their output was drawn from Pete Welding’s Testament label, which released new material by popular artists like Fred McDowell and Big Joe Williams, but its most significant discs were Welding’s knowledgeable and adventurous collections. The most revered was

⁵⁵ Paul Oliver, “Blues in the Bran Tub,” *Jazzbeat* 2/4 (April 1965): 12; Bruce Bastin, review of *Southeastern and Gulf Coast States* by various artists [pwb 3], *Blues Unlimited* 44 (June–July 1967): 27.

Can't Keep from Cryin' [Testament S-01; Bounty BY6035], an album of blues about the assassination of President Kennedy. Mike Leadbitter, Simon Napier, Paul Oliver and other members of the British blues intelligentsia similarly lent their expertise to reissue labels, assembling anthologies and providing notes and commentary. This lent credibility to labels like Storyville and Liberty UK, whose "awareness of senior blues buffs ... can only be for the general good."⁵⁶

Most anthologies and blues releases were carried by mainstream outlets, but many new specialty stores opened to serve serious collectors. The Record Center of Wolverhampton Ltd. was devoted to blues imports; The Diskery in Birmingham aimed at collectors seeking 78 and 45 rpm discs of R&B, blues and early rock 'n' roll. Discland was a blues and country & western dealer with branches in Oldham and Walkden, Manchester. The proprietor of the Groove Record Shop in Stourbridge, Worcestershire, claimed "Nobody likes Chicago the way I do!" His only challenge was from Soul City, "Britain's only 100% American R&B and Soul record shop," run by a cooperative of blues and R&B fans.

The blues were also heard regularly on radio, partly due to the restructuring of BBC radio in 1967. Responding to the competition from pirate stations, the BBC introduced Radio One, a pop station that played rock and related vernacular styles. Management hired a number of popular disc jockeys from the now defunct pirates. Among them was Mike Raven, whose R&B Show continued to run on Sunday nights without interruption; in March 1968 the show was expanded to a full hour. Alexis Korner had a Sunday night radio show that featured African American music of all kinds, in addition to his World Service program "The Blues is Where you Hear It." He and also created a three-part series for BBC 3 on the British blues entitled "The Blues Roll On," which included live performances by native country blues artists, and a special series, "The Submerged 7/8 of the Blues." "Top of the Pops" disc jockey John Peel hosted a popular Wednesday evening program called "Night Ride" which frequently featured British blues musicians. Paul Oliver continued to produce blues-themed programming for the BBC, including the series "The Negro Sings," "the Blues as an Art Form," and "The Blues and Black Society." Of course, visiting American blues artists also made appearances on Radio 1, 2 (the renamed Light service) and 3 (Third).

'Long Way from Home': blues tours

Though well attended, the 1966 American Folk Blues Festival was not necessarily an artistic success. For the first time the festival package debuted in England; many of the performances were tentative and the show did not run smoothly. These problems were exacerbated by the exceedingly formal setting of the Royal Albert

⁵⁶ John Broven, review of *King of Dowling Street* by Lightnin' Hopkins [Liberty LBL 83254], *Blues Unlimited* 65 (September 1969): 25.

Hall, which is acoustically difficult under the best of circumstances. The country blues performers, normally the favorites of devoted blues fans, were particularly badly served. Sleepy John Estes and Yank Rachell were poorly miked, rendering Estes nearly inaudible, and Robert Pete Williams, unsure of his own amplification, delivered a hesitant, mediocre performance. The opener, Roosevelt Sykes, was criticized for an overly predictable set but Little Brother Montgomery delivered some fine, solid boogie-woogie piano that greatly pleased older members of the blues intelligentsia.

Responses to Otis Rush and Junior Wells, the two modern blues performers, were more positive than one might expect. Rush's crowd-pleasing set was judged "as good as we've heard in this idiom but without the calculated showmanship of Buddy Guy, which seems to make it better." Tony Russell and Bob Yates observed, "his playing is rather closer to the blues of a decade ago [than Buddy Guy] just as his stage act is less attuned to the demands of hipper audiences. It is an unfortunate state of affairs, since Rush is a finer artist than Guy" His rapturous rendition of "I Can't Quit You Baby" "walked the tightrope between passion and disintegration ... by the quality of which every future Chicago visitor will surely be judged."

Simon Napier opined Wells, "along with Buddy Guy, it seems, and the long gone Junior Parker, has departed from his blues background into more popular fields," but Paul Oliver was more complimentary. He felt the Chicago bluesman was a bit "histrionic" but "his ability to move an audience is undeniable Whatever one's specialist quibbles, he certainly provided an accomplished and exciting act, to which he had devoted much thought and energy; his success will do a great deal of good for the cause of modern blues appreciation."⁵⁷

The surprise hit of the festival was the classic blues singer and pianist Sippie Wallace, who "managed to evoke a nostalgia [sic] for the twenties, but her simple dignity and calm self-assurance prevented it from decomposing into sloppy sentiment." Oliver observed:

Classic blues have always been dear to jazz—and older generation blues collectors, but younger blues fan, too often preoccupied with the almost exclusively male province of country blues, have tended to ignore the extensive (and less fascinatingly rare) work of the early female singers ... but [Wallace's] sheer authenticity and regal delivery made a mass conversion likely.

This was certainly the case; Simon Napier, who was at best lukewarm about the classic blues, admitted, "I'd still like to hear more of Sippie playing sometime!"⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Napier, "Folk-Blues Festival, 1966;" Tony Russell and Bob Yates, "American Folk Blues Festival 1966," *Jazz Monthly* 12/9 (November 1966): 13; Napier, "Folk-Blues Festival 1966," 4; Oliver, "Folk Blues Festival 1966," *Jazzbeat* 3/11 (November 1966): 10.

⁵⁸ Slaven, "Silver Threads," 16; Oliver, "Blues Festival;" Simon Napier, review of *American Folk Blues Festival 1966* by various artists [Fontana 885 431], *Blues Unlimited* 40

Paul Oliver concluded his review with an indirect request to the festival's organizers.

Now that it has been proved that the British audiences will turn out—in the thousands—for a blues concert, perhaps those who have eagerly awaited and till now have been disappointed not to hear Son House or Skip James will at least be able to hear them? These are the absolutely outstanding blues singers who have yet to appear in Europe—Son House, Skip James, Bukka White of the older generation, and the songsters of Mississippi, John Hurt and Mance Lipscomb, if it is not already too late.

Promoters apparently failed to attribute the surge of attendance at the festival to a wider appreciation for the blues, as few American artists toured Britain in 1967. John Lee Hooker played a series of problematic dates with Ten Years After and Savoy Brown in June; the distortion and volume created by the Marshall stacks of the British bands rendered Hooker nearly unintelligible and his effort to tailor performances to the “youngsters” was ineffectual. The result was unenthusiastic audiences and further damage to Hooker's reputation. Bo Diddley, who appeared at a number of London clubs in late April, was received more positively, as was Champion Jack Dupree, who primarily played smaller clubs in the Midlands but also appeared at larger venues in the greater London area. Jesse Fuller headlined a mediocre folk package in May and remained in Britain to play a few dates for appreciative audiences. His June 4 appearance at the 100 Club with the Bill Niles Delta Jazzband drew nearly double the capacity of the venue, but he also performed at a number of small clubs in the provinces.

The year's most significant concert was the underpublicized 17-date tour by Freddy King, “one of the few singer/guitarists who were using the B. B. King manner as a basis for personal blues interpretation.” King's tour of the blues club circuit, including two critically acclaimed dates at the Blue Horizon, drew thousands of fans even though he had received little attention in the blues press. Adherents of the British blues knew him by reputation; many bands covered his songs and their guitarists acknowledged him as an important influence on their single string work and style of improvisation. David Illingworth stated, “it was stimulating to see that Freddy was often building solos which varied considerably from the original recordings....” Martin Newman, who reviewed the performance for *Blues Unlimited*, was less enthusiastic, noting that most of King's solos were similar in their form and composition, but he still rated the event as an “exciting technical display of the Chicago blues.” Illingworth added, “The audience was beautiful, responding like they were Chicagoans born and bred, visibly and audibly moved Make no mistake, Freddy King is one of the best of the younger blues artists, and certainly the most exciting to visit Britain for some time.”⁵⁹

(January 1967): 24.

⁵⁹ David Illingworth, review of Freddy King with Chicken Shack at the Blue Horizon, Nag's Head, Battersea, *Jazz Journal* 20/11 (November 1967): 17; Martin Newman,

The 1967 American Folk Blues Festival should have compensated for any dissatisfaction blues aficionados had about the spate of recent tours, as Paul Oliver's request had apparently been received. Son House, Skip James, and Bukka White, the most esteemed of the "rediscovered" early blues artists, topped the bill, which also included Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, Hound Dog Taylor, Little Walter, and Koko Taylor. The greatly anticipated festival, though, failed to live up to admittedly high expectations. House, who got most of the press coverage, won over audiences throughout Europe. Bob Groom wrote:

It is difficult to describe the transformation that took place as this smiling, friendly man hunched over his guitar and launched himself, bodily it seemed, into his music. The blues possessed him like a "lowdown shaking chill" and the spellbound audience saw the very incarnation of the blues as, head thrown back, he hollered and groaned the disturbing lyrics and flailed the guitar, snapping the strings back against the fingerboard to accentuate the agonized rhythm. Son's music is the centre of the blues experience and when he performs it is a corporate thing, audience and singer become as one.⁶⁰

Many purists were disappointed by the rest of the bill. Mike Leadbitter considered the package an "all time low":

It is almost a relief to know it couldn't possibly get any worse These shows have become a "sacred cow" that no-one dares to criticize for they are either uncertain of what is bad, or just don't want to offend anyone. What did the money-mad Dixon rake up for us this time? A fumbling burlesque of Elmore James, an unenthusiastic Little Walter, no pianist at all, a useless and unknown bass man, half a drummer and a girl whose looks were better than her voice.⁶¹

Part of the problem was that most of the headliners were in their sixties and were used to singing in clubs rather than auditoria. Neither Skip James nor Bukka White could project sufficiently and the subtleties of their performances were lost; Little Walter was miked poorly and drowned out by Taylor, his accompanist. However, these incidents negatively impacted all of the performers. Simon Napier opined, "It might be a dangerous thing to say, but there seemed to be an unfortunate element of backstage hostility which might have accounted for some of the apathetic playing." He, and other critics, worried that the lackluster performances would harm perceptions of the genre. As the festival provided many with their first exposure to live blues:

review of Freddy King at Southend, Essex, *Blues Unlimited* 48 (December 1967): 9. King spelled his name "Freddy" until 1969.

⁶⁰ Bob Groom, "An Interview with Son House," *Blues World* 18 (1968): 5.

⁶¹ Mike Leadbitter, "All Time Low!" *Blues Unlimited* 48 (December 1967): 20.

real thinking has got to be put into its future. If the music, and interest in it, is to expand and grow, only good shows with artists playing as well as they can (we know they can do it—it must be ensured that they DO!) will be good enough.⁶²

Mike Leadbitter believed the solution was for all potential attendees to write to Horst Lippmann and demand better acts. He asked *Blues Unlimited* readers to send in a list of the ten blues artists they would most like to see; the results demonstrated that there was a considerable disconnect between promoters and the public. Aficionados were interested in artists like Clifton Chenier and Juke Boy Bonner, who were championed by blues writers; “down home” guitarists Lightnin’ Hopkins, Fred McDowell and Big Joe Williams, as well as the venerable Son House; Chicago rivals Howlin’ Wolf and Muddy Waters; and B. B. King. Though they did not make the top ten Albert King, Otis Rush, Magic Sam, Johnny Shines and other modern artists also scored highly. Only a few requested “the big names of yesteryear like Reed, Hooker, Junior Wells [and] Buddy Guy”⁶³

If the *Blues Unlimited* readership did contact Horst and Lippmann it did not affect the lineup of the 1968 festival, which featured Hooker, Reed, T-Bone Walker, Curtis Jones, Shakey Horton, Hound Dog Taylor and Big Joe Williams. So many of the artists were frequent visitors to Britain that Mike Rowe quipped, “you get the feeling that you could review [the festival] without the luxury of attending any concerts!” However, there were some surprises. John Lee Hooker delivered an exciting opening set and Eddie Taylor redeemed his failures of the previous year to emerge as the clear favorite of audiences and critics alike. Big Joe Williams performed well but his medley of blues standards displeased some attendees; the same was true of Walker’s flamboyant showmanship. The entire show was plagued by now-familiar problems with amplification, tuning and organization and a few performances were indifferent or utterly inept. The anonymous columnist Grapevine sniffed that the audience nonetheless “cheered the rubbish ... the blues seems to be about as deeply appreciated as Hot Jazz was in the ‘Trad Dad’ days.” Simon Napier defended the crowd, noting that “objectivity inevitably conflicts with one’s sympathy and involvement,” but he was alarmed by the shoddy production. *Blues Unlimited* ran a full page of reviews by readers and Napier addressed the issue at length:

In recent years there has been increasing concern over the declining quality of these affairs—or is it a more critical audience? The writers in *B.U.* [sic], likeliest of all to go out of their way to make excuses, to forgive the boobs, have mainly expressed grave misgivings over this most recent 1968 tour. What is to be done? Whilst whatever is presented draws a capacity crowd, there is little incentive to change but the extensive coverage we have given to the general mood ought to be heeded ... before it is too late!

⁶² Simon Napier, “Editorial,” *Blues Unlimited* 48 (December 1967): 2.

⁶³ Mike Leadbitter, “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” *Blues Unlimited* 53 (May 1968): 3.

Many of the amateur reviewers enjoyed Taylor and Williams but were critical of the other acts. There was a common perception that “nobody cared a f... [sic] about the blues. Everybody played second rate soul sounds and it all meant nothing”⁶⁴ There was also palpable disappointment that no new artists were included in the lineup; many were “irritated” by the cast of “usual suspects.”

That year’s festival had competition from one of its alumni. Muddy Waters and his band performed at Jazz Expo ’68 at the Hammersmith Odeon and headlined Blues Scene ’68; they also played a series of club dates where, at long last, the architect of the Chicago blues finally connected with British audiences. Ian A. Anderson recalled that Waters was “that kind of so good that you rocked in your seat and chuckled with pleasure.” David Illingworth, who saw the band at the Marquee, was also won over. He noted that Waters left most of the soloing to guitarist Pee Wee Madison, who also played a solo set, as did Otis Spann. “It is of course this variety within a group that can make Muddy’s band such a success on the club circuit. Other bands may not have such a sophisticated approach to programming, but it is hoped that endeavors may be made for the visit of bands such as Howlin’ Wolf, Otis Rush, and James Cotton.” John Broven also attended the Marquee session, and was so impressed by the collective interplay within the group and its interaction with the audience that he stated, “Beauty is an abstraction which almost defies definition, but this particular performance merits exclusive rights to the word.” He was also pleased to find that Waters’s organization measured up to its reputation:

Year after year the FBF has promised so much and achieved so little. It has not been for want of trying ... but something has been missing or wrong—that irritating, abstruse “something” ... the only way to appreciate the “real thing” is to see blues artists in their natural environment, in a Club with THEIR OWN BAND [sic].⁶⁵

In response to the disastrous reviews Lippmann and Rau invited Chris Strachwitz to replace Willie Dixon as co-producer and band manager. Strachwitz, who read and occasionally contributed to *Blues Unlimited*, assembled an eclectic and diverse roster of artists who were, save one, new to European audiences: zydeco master Clifton Chenier; John Jackson, an amateur country blues artists; pianist Whistlin’ Alex Moore; Juke Boy Bonner; and modern guitarists Magic Sam and Earl Hooker. There were still technical and logistical problems but the inaugural concert at the Royal Albert Hall was, in the estimation of many

⁶⁴ Mike Rowe, “Where it’s at! A. F. B. F.,” *Blues Unlimited* 58 (December 1968): 4; n.a., “Grapevine,” *Jazz Times* 5/12 (December 1968), 16; Simon Napier, editorial comment, *Blues Unlimited* 77 (November 1970): 21; Napier, “American Folk Blues Festival 1968” and Nick Kimberly, review of the American Folk Blues Festival at the Hammersmith Odeon, *Blues Unlimited* 59 (January 1969): 18.

⁶⁵ Anderson, “Blues in Britain,” *Blues Unlimited* 59 (January 1969): 15; Illingworth, “London Blues;” John Broven, review of the Muddy Waters band at the Marquee, *Blues Unlimited* 59 (January 1969): 12–13.

reviewers, the best yet. The critical favorites were Clifton Chenier, Magic Sam and—surprisingly—Earl Hooker, whose flamboyant antics topped those of T-Bone Walker. The maverick guitarist convinced British audiences that sincere blues and showmanship were not mutually exclusive; even Simon Napier was won over by his “unique, remarkable music” that “only at times ... strays away from the point, becoming an exercise rather than blues music”⁶⁶

British promoters failed to capitalize on the new enthusiasm for the blues. Paul Oliver noted there were “more visiting blues singers in 1959–60 than there are likely to be now, a decade later. At least, that would certainly have been the case if arrangements were left to the promoters.”⁶⁷ The Tempest and Davidson agencies acknowledged the commercial prospect of the blues yet seemed unable to deliver artists; visits by Slim Harpo, Lightnin’ Hopkins and Albert King were announced and then cancelled without explanation months later. The National Blues Federation intervened on behalf of Curtis Jones, whose tour was jeopardized when the original promoter failed to secure enough dates; members arranged a series of club appearances and provided logistics and support for a brief but successful tour. The positive outcome convinced the Federation that they were capable of promoting artists on their own and in February of 1969 they organized a three week tour for Mississippi Fred McDowell, who also headlined the “Evolution of the Blues” Concert at the Town Hall, High Wycombe on 1 March. The guitarist was “seen by over 5000 people in England, Scotland, and Ireland, he never played badly and often was absolutely brilliant.” The sentiment was echoed by virtually all who saw him, and at each concert McDowell took requests and played numerous encores to sellout or near-capacity crowds. “If the NBF can put on shows of this quality,” *Blues Unlimited* stated, “the future looks very bright.”⁶⁸ The London Blues Society also sponsored a series of successful concerts in conjunction with Blue Horizon records.

Blues artists flocked to Britain in 1969, again sparking worries of too much of a good thing. Many still relied on British blues bands for backing but the results were far better than they had been several years earlier; the British musicians were more experienced and the modern bluesmen they supported had none of the idiosyncrasies of down home artists like Little Walter and Sonny Boy Williamson. There were still occasionally problems but these were mostly due to the extreme volume at which the British bands normally played.

Freddie King toured with Killing Floor in late February and early March and drew large, enthusiastic audiences. Paul Oliver caught him at Klooks Kleek on 25 February and commented on the band’s aggressive and forceful

⁶⁶ Simon Napier, “1969 Lippmann—Rau American Folk Blues Festival,” *Blues Unlimited* 68 (December 1969): 5.

⁶⁷ Oliver, “Fred McDowell/Freddie King.”

⁶⁸ N.a., “Fred McDowell tour,” *Blues Unlimited* 62 (May 1969) and review of Fred McDowell at the Mayfair Theatre, London, *Blues Unlimited* 62 (May 1969): 15–16.

accompaniment, which “King obviously liked and their lack of subtlety helped to enhance his intricate fingering.” Though admittedly not his favorite kind of blues, Oliver found the American an exciting performer who “had the crowd, and me, with him.” King returned in May and November for more extensive tours and Mike Leadbitter advised fans of electric blues:

walk, swim, run, or fly to catch Freddy King in action He is without doubt the best guitarist, with the best act, around today.... This man seems to combine the best of today’s top guitar Kings with his own bag and comes on harder and heavier than anyone else I’ve seen.⁶⁹

In May Howlin’ Wolf arrived in Britain for a club tour with the John Dummer Blues Band. Dummer recalled vividly their show at London Polytechnic:

The hall was heaving with about a thousand people packed in like sardines. Wolf connected immediately and grabbed the gig by the scruff of the neck ... he used every inch of his body to get his songs across, howled at the moon, got on all fours, rolled on his back, rolled his eyes, worked and worked, and the audience knew they’d been worked over by the Tail Dragger.

Wolf played primarily in small clubs, but, according to Dummer, worked equally hard at every show, sometimes to the point of transcendence. At one gig he went into the audience:

and his voice suddenly took on an extra presence, as if some terrifying power had taken over ... we got quieter and quieter and he gave us a master class in blues feeling: less is more. I was shaking at the end of that song, and many girls in the audience had tears in their eyes ... I never heard a performance like that before or since.⁷⁰

When Freddie King returned the two bluesmen played a combined date at the Manchester Free Trade Hall that was, by all accounts, an exciting night of blues. King also crossed paths with Otis Spann; they joined forces for concerts in Sheffield, Newcastle, and Middlesbrough. In Newcastle Spann prodded the Killing Floor’s pianist into a cutting contest:

Not that Lou [Martin] was trying to outshine a man who he considered one of his heroes, but he made damn’d good account of himself anyway! Spann was just pure class ... I remember him running his fingers up the keyboard and lifting his leg up to hit the top note with his foot!⁷¹

⁶⁹ Oliver, “Fred McDowell/Freddie King,” Mike Leadbitter, review of Freddie King at Tolworth’s Toby Jug, *Blues Unlimited* 69 (January 1970): 5.

⁷⁰ Segrest and Hoffman, *Moanin’ at Midnight*, pp. 253–6.

⁷¹ Mick Clarke, “Freddie King,” *Killing Floor*

<<http://www.marshalamp.com/killingfloorcom.htm>> (4 August 2006).

John Lee Hooker was also in Britain for an extensive tour with the newly reconstituted Groundhogs. This did not necessarily please hardcore blues fans, who were hoping the 1968 Folk Blues Festival had convinced him to return to the down home style. Chris Mosey thought the concert sad; "the great Hooker of yesteryear was forced to relive his blues to the crash and thump of a trio of young men aptly called the Groundhogs ... they murdered some pretty fine blues!"⁷²

In April B. B. King at long last arrived in Britain, and was given a hero's welcome. "We came through customs," he recalls, "and there were about 2300 people there waving American flags. And as we walked through customs, everybody started hollering 'B.B.! B.B.! By God, I was frightened ... I'd never seen anything like that before! Never ever! I was actually like a superstar to them' Critics and fans were enthralled by his appearances, which were praised even by those who were ambivalent about his style and its effect on modern blues. Paul Oliver described the effect he had on audiences: "King has scarcely to open his mouth to have his audience roaring with him; the impression of unity and of mass hysteria barely held in check is very real...."⁷³ Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, who were also on the bill, were scarcely noticed.

While audiences for major artists were consistently good, Mike Leadbitter claimed to be one of about "eight interested and a dozen disinterested parties" who saw Lowell Fulson perform at the Flamingo in May. The bluesman had already registered a number of well-attended and impressive showings, including the inaugural session at the Barrelhouse Club in Bristol; Pete Moody thought it "a great session of modern blues."⁷⁴ His memorable appearance at the 100 Club included a surprise visitor; B. B. King, who had just concluded his European tour, stopped in to pay his regards. He and Fulson played a blistering set, much to the delight of the assembled blues crowd. There were so many blues tours in Britain that summer and fall that the American musicians often ran into friends and acquaintances; in addition to the Folk Blues package and the separate American Folk Blues and Gospel Festival, Howlin' Wolf, Juke Boy Bonner, Freddie King, Jimmy Reed, and Otis Spann were playing the club circuit. All drew substantial if not capacity crowds.

'Talkin' Some Sense': blues scholarship

British blues fans were generally conversant with the genre's major artists and styles but the totality of blues expression, its symbolism and its communicative

⁷² Chris Mosey, review of John Lee Hooker and the Groundhogs, *Brighton Evening Argus* 3 May 1969, quoted in *Blues Unlimited* 62 (May 1969): 10.

⁷³ Chris Trimming, review of B. B. King and Lowell Fulson, 100 Club, London, *Blues Unlimited* 64 (July 1969), 21; Paul Oliver, *Broadcasting the Blues: Black Blues in the Segregation Era* (New York and London, 2006), p. 73.

⁷⁴ Pete Moody, review of Lowell Fulson at the Barrelhouse Club, Bristol, *Blues Unlimited* 64 (July 1969), 21.

function in African American society were still understood in only a superficial way. As the blues receded from its folk roots scholars and critics tried to enumerate and analyze its background and traditions in order to better understand the genre.

In *Screening the Blues: Aspects of the Blues Tradition* (1968), Paul Oliver returned to themes addressed in *Blues Fell this Morning*: the poetic language of the blues and its modes of expression; the balance of tradition and variation in the construction of new material; characteristics that transcended regional and stylistic boundaries; and the reliability of the blues as a reflection of the African American experience. The monograph revealed the underlying complexities of the “simple” blues idiom and was hailed as an indispensable guide to the music’s social context, “especially in a decade when the blues has been massively mixed with the mainstream of Western popular music.”⁷⁵ *Screening the Blues* also applied the folk studies concept of song families—songs with common elements that can ultimately be traced to a single ancestor—to the blues, and the methodology Oliver employed to trace variants of the popular “Forty-fours” offered a new way of looking at patterns of influence within an enduring tradition.

Equal praise was lavished on *The Bluesmen*, the first of Samuel Charters’s planned three volume history of the blues. The first, which focused on country blues artists from Mississippi, Alabama and Texas, dovetailed with the new popularity of the rural idiom.⁷⁶ It contained new information about figureheads like Charlie Patton, Robert Johnson, and Texas Alexander that had been uncovered by American researchers, as well as maps, photos, and facsimiles that vividly contextualized the early years of the blues. British reviewers criticized the volume for its factual errors, faulty transcriptions and sketchy citations but the public response was energetic. Full print runs sold out twice in less than a month and dealers had trouble keeping the book in stock.

The Bluesmen was the first of a number of new books that shed new light on the history of the blues. Mike Leadbitter’s *Delta Country Blues* provided the first authoritative information on the early postwar blues scene in Mississippi and Arkansas, analyzing the output of both major artists like Sonny Boy Williamson II and Howlin’ Wolf and their lesser known contemporaries. The following year *Blues Unlimited* issued *Crowley Louisiana Blues* and *From the Bayou*, the fruits of Leadbitter’s field research on zydeco and the unique accent of the blues in the cradle of jazz. In 1969 November books initiated The Blues Series, brief essays on “important blues singers and musicians, local styles and traditions, subjects and themes” in the tradition of the pamphlet publications of 1940s.⁷⁷ Paul Oliver wrote the inaugural volume, *Savannah Syncopators: African Retentions in the Blues*, in which he used observations from a recent trip to Ghana to interrogate theories

⁷⁵ Derek Jewell, review of *The Story of the Blues* by Paul Oliver, Oliver, *Story*, back matter.

⁷⁶ The second and third volumes were published in the mid-1970s.

⁷⁷ Paul Oliver, *Savannah Syncopators: African Retentions in the Blues* (NY, 1970), back cover.

about the origin of blues scales and instrumental technique. Tony Russell's book *Blacks, Whites and Blues* was the first serious attempt to understand the complex relationship between American folk traditions and the blues; Derrick Stewart-Baxter contributed *Ma Rainey and the Classic Blues Singers*; and Robert M. W. Dixon and John Godrich released the invaluable *Recording the Blues*, the culmination of their research on early blues labels.

However, arguably the most significant monograph to appear was *The Story of the Blues*, the first complete history that traced the genre "from their birth pangs born out of slavery and oppression, right up to the present day." Its parsing of history was informed by Oliver's interviews and approached all aspects of the blues, as understood by its practitioners, in an equal and unbiased manner. The book also contained more than 500 drawings and photos from his 1964 exhibit at the U.S. Embassy. Its comprehensive nature necessitated covering only the essentials, but "such is the professionalism of the man, this book never becomes a digest, and certainly no charge of superficiality can be brought against the author. Everything is there and no important singer fails to receive recognition"⁷⁸

The Story of the Blues retained the now standard division of the country blues into separated Delta, Texas, and Piedmont styles but resisted "the present vogue of putting singers into tight little regional pigeon holes." Researchers hoped that new information and recordings would reveal local blues traditions that demonstrated folk-like patterns of influence and development. The rediscoveries of Son House and Bukka White led some to suggest the existence of a "Clarksdale" style that would reinforce anecdotal evidence of a continuum of area guitarists stretching from Charlie Patton to Muddy Waters. The fact that most known artists from the area were skilled bottleneck players who used open tuning and similar accompaniment patterns made the idea quite plausible and suggested the same might be true elsewhere. There was a concerted effort to make Tommy Johnson the originator of a Drew subgroup of the Delta style, as many of the songs recorded by Mississippi singers seemed to be derived from his repertoire, but further research revealed that Johnson—as well as other singers of the "Drew group"—had inherited the collective repertoire of older singers like Patton and Willie Brown.

Most of the blues intelligentsia agreed there was a distinct country and ragtime influenced East Coast style but Simon Napier and others noticed that most of the artists cited as definitive Piedmont stylists—Julius Daniels, Blind Willie McTell, and Blind Blake—"were capable of traditional blues and mostly their recordings might be misleading; after all, McTell's 'commercial' recordings give little hint of his general repertoire as it would seem from the Library of Congress/Prestige recordings." His attempts to isolate Blind Boy Fuller as the originator of a "Carolina" school were ultimately hampered by a lack of comparative evidence and testimony from contemporaries. "What are the facts? The answer—there are

⁷⁸ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, review of *The Story of the Blues* by Paul Oliver, *Jazz Journal* 22/9 (September 1969): 11.

hardly any! The music is fact. How we interpret it, and co-relate it to other records by different artists without, in most cases, other first- or even second-hand evidence, is mostly surmise.”⁷⁹ Francis Smith, John Godrich, and Max Vreede independently reached the same conclusion: blues singers seemed to vary their style according to demands of song, or for any other number of reasons.

It is not surprising that this more localized theory emerged in Britain, as researchers were accustomed to deducing evidence from aural criteria. However, Paul Oliver devoted much of the introductory essay of *Screening the Blues* to the effect of recordings on development and dissemination of the blues and contemporary notions of blues scholarship. He noted that, along with a sense of kinship and shared experience, recordings created “a cross-fertilization of traditions and ideas, of lyrics and music which have been continuously enriched by the creative inventiveness of singers and musicians ... recording is a fact of blues history and its influence has been immense.” He also emphasized the importance of “seeking common elements of the blues tradition, to trace them where applicable across the boundaries of style, local or regional.”⁸⁰

Increased contact with country blues players revealed that while young musicians did learn from local favorites they also studied records by national stars. Comparative listening revealed that Robert Johnson, the “King of the Delta Blues,” was more heavily influenced by city blues singers than by Son House; more than a third of tracks on the Philips compilation were adaptations of songs by Leroy Carr and Black Ace. Don Kent noted that House’s own repertoire contained material learned from records by Frank Stokes and Blind Lemon Jefferson. This created enough uncertainty that “localized regional” schools were ultimately rejected in favor of a more general model that attributed similarities of instrumental technique, vocal style, and delivery to the emulation of canonic figures like Charlie Patton, Leroy Carr, T-Bone Walker, and B. B. King.

The theory also demonstrated the need for reliable discographies. Dixon and Godrich’s *Blues and Gospel Records 1902–42* became an essential reference for studying the country blues; by 1966 it had sold out two printings and a third was in preparation. However, nothing similar existed for the postwar era until Mike Leadbitter and Neil Slaven published *Blues Records 1943–66*. They felt a volume that updated Brian Rust’s *Blues and Gospel Records* was sorely needed but soon realized that the sheer volume of recordings made a comprehensive listing untenable. Ultimately they chose to “include every artist who is of interest to blues collectors. Several artists who made good blues recordings had to be excluded due to space, while only the initial recordings of others are included for the same reason.” Most other excisions were based on a restrictive definition of the genre.

⁷⁹ Simon Napier, “The Carolina Blues: Blind Boy Fuller—On Down,” *Blues Unlimited* 38 (November 1966): 17; and 40 (January 1967): 19.

⁸⁰ Paul Oliver, *Screening the Blues: Aspects of the Blues Tradition* (London, 1968), pp. 2–3, 14–15.

Artists like Josh White, who most critics viewed as folk artists, were omitted; some of Leadbelly's post-1942 recordings were included, but not those "in the true folk vein" (189). The early recordings of rhythm and blues singers like Amos Milborn, Rufus Thomas and Jimmy McCracklin were included but their later efforts were not, as they were "not of any interest" or "too commercial for inclusion ..." (39). Shouters like Jimmy Rushing and Big Joe Turner were also rejected, as were the few classic blues artists who recorded after the war.

Such selectivity became increasingly necessary as the number of blues recordings and known artists skyrocketed. Discography, critical evaluation and newly discovered information slowly began to shape a blues canon that elevated some musicians to the status of "greats" and relegated others to lesser consideration or exclusion from the history of the blues.

Is you is or is you ain't a Bluesman?

As the definition of what constituted the blues became more restrictive so did the number of artists who fitted these criteria. Those most affected were musicians whose repertoires contained ballads, dance numbers, folk songs and pop numbers. Huddie Ledbetter was particularly problematic. The catholicity of his repertoire and his recordings for white folk devotees caused purists to dismiss him entirely. Graham Boatfield asserted that, "Leadbelly was no blues singer. He was that rather curious phenomenon to us, a Negro folk singer and an entertainer ... bluesmen I have spoken to sometimes dismiss him as an Uncle Tom" Francis Newton reduced him to "minstrel guitarist," and most critics, if they mentioned him at all, considered him a folk artists.⁸¹ Piedmont stylists were also marginalized. George McKay questioned whether Mississippi John Hurt "should be identified as a rural blues singer. His rather small baritone voice contains only slight traces of traditional negro blues inflections and his light, nimble thumb-and-finger guitar technique reflects almost none of the slurred notes and pronounced beat characteristic of most blues guitarists. John Hurt might be classified more properly as a folk minstrel."⁸² Blind Willie McTell and Blind Blake were similarly classified as folk musicians. By late 1960s a clearer idea of the continuum of African American folk song and blues began to emerge and new research challenged assumptions about early 20th century black music of the rural south. "Songster"—a term that many blues singers used to describe professional musicians of the preblues period—gained currency as a way to categorize blues musicians who performed popular songs and folk tunes and entertained audiences with jokes and stories. The fact that so many songsters—a group that included Fred McDowell, Jessie Fuller, Mance Lipscomb and Champion

⁸¹ Graham Boatfield, review of *Keep Your Hands Off Her* by Leadbelly [Verve VLP5011], *Jazz Journal* 19/8 (August 1966): 33; Paul Oliver, "The Demonic Leadbelly," *Jazzbeat* 3/7 (July 1966): 10.

⁸² George W. Kay, "Mississippi John Hurt," *Jazz Journal* 17/2 (February 1964): 24.

Jack Dupree—were still active suggested that the blues retained elements of older traditions as it evolved.

As notions of the blues were reinforced or rejected based on mounting evidence, an increasingly uniform notion emerged of which styles were worthy of study. Pete Lowry discoursed on “a rather sizeable omission in the various bits of scribble” in *Blues Unlimited*, which devoted most of its coverage to the “‘down home thing.’ That’s not to say the stress is bad, just that it is not as UNLIMITED as it might be, and has resulted in many artists being ignored or passed off as a bit unpalatable at best” Elsewhere he commented, “there seems to be a bit of prejudice towards those in the blues field who have their attachment via jazz, and their import in the blues world has been played down tremendously.” Paul Oliver also felt that musicians with jazz ties were unfairly marginalized. “Once again, the arguments over authenticity have produced artificial barriers, have classified, often meaninglessly, the categories into which musicians and singers conveniently fall and have imposed a highly artificial form of arbitrary evaluation.” Simon Napier admitted that he sometimes dismissed artists based on his own aesthetic preferences. “I do not as a rule like jazz band vocalists, and this includes Witherspoon, Joe Williams, the lot. Nor, with the exception of Ma Rainey and a few others, do I like those ladies most often dubbed the ‘classic’ blues singers.” Clara Smith, he stated, “sold many millions of records—but, as I have often maintained, not what I call blues records”⁸³

The performances of Big Mama Thornton and Sippie Wallace at the 1956 and 1966 American Folk Blues Festivals led to a reevaluation of classic blues singers. Critics came to view Ma Rainey, long considered inferior to her protégé Bessie Smith, as a more significant artist. “The fact that Bessie ‘soaked up’ all that Ma knew is obviously self evident when one compares their respective recordings. Bessie went on to become a Top Urban singer with much of the city slickness inherent in the style, while Ma remained grooved [sic] in the earlier earthy moaning Folk Blues” Lucille Bogan was also granted critical esteem because her style “in all respects comes closer to the men than almost any other successful female artist.”⁸⁴

The city blues of the 1930s and 1940s were commonly viewed as an “unfortunate homogenization of the diversity of the blues, from which the development of the harder-edged postwar styles marked a point of release and revitalization.” Leroy Carr was considered a major figure but the style he pioneered was removed from serious consideration. However, prominent city performers like Bill Broonzy, Memphis Minnie, and Washboard Sam were still

⁸³ Pete Lowry, “Oddenda and Such,” *Blues Unlimited* 59 (January 1969): 11; Lowry, review of *Every Day I Have the Blues* [Bluesway 6005] by Jimmy Rushing, *Blues Unlimited* 52 (May 1968), 25; Paul Oliver, “Mighty Tight Woman,” in *Blues Off the Record*, p. 143; Simon Napier, review of *Clara Smith Volume 1* [VJM VLP15], *Blues Unlimited* 52 (May 1968): 26.

⁸⁴ Norman Turner-Rowles, “My Lady of the Golden Eagles,” *Jazz Times* 2/7 (July 1965): 19; Simon Napier, review of *Alabama Blues 1930–1935* [Roots 317], by Lucille Bogan and Walter Roland, *Blues Unlimited* 59 (January 1969): 28.

valued.⁸⁵ Blues shouters were omitted from most contemporary blues narratives, though Paul Oliver continually defended their legitimacy. Some, like Big Joe Turner and Jimmy Rushing, were re-evaluated when the Kansas City tradition was better understood; others, like Joe Williams and Jimmy Witherspoon, were framed as jazz vocalists. R&B artists were similarly marginalized.

‘Stranger Blues’: the British and American divide

The “score of researchers” Oliver estimated were active in the United States in the early 1960s ballooned by the end of the decade. Extensive fieldwork and searches of local bureaucracies led to the recovery of significant biographical information about early blues artists and collectors discovered previously unknown recordings. Graduate students in academic fields like folklore and ethnomusicology began focused research on blues topics and their biographically and musically focused essays filled European blues publications by the end of the decade.

By this time a rift had developed between British and American investigators, who generally employed divergent methodologies. This escalated into an often confrontational dialogue that still occasionally surfaces in blues writing. American scholars dubbed the British approach—which was heavily fact based and focused on recordings—“scholasticism.” The earliest European blues researchers employed the same techniques they had used to study jazz: they carried out painstaking and detailed research to identify artists, establish discographies, and understand the music’s sociological context. This information was then used to extrapolate relationships among musicians and stylistic currents based on careful listening. Most of the British intelligentsia did not prioritize “life stories;” Paul Oliver noted that enthusiasts were interested in lives of the musicians they admired but biographical details rarely enhanced appreciation or enjoyment of their music.⁸⁶

Many American researchers, who approached the blues from an ethnographic standpoint, felt the British approach was fundamentally flawed, as it ignored connections between the blues and its culture of origin. One writer declared:

Half of the problem in sorting out heads from tails these days is the goddamn British.... They’ve sifted through American pop music with a fine-toothed comb, and their research is meticulous But despite all the research, I think the English have a sort of basic misunderstanding of what this music is all about. They know every detail of our musical history, and they publish reams of material about it, but somewhere right at the very beginning they missed a basic connection.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Charles Radcliffe and Mike Rowe, “Chicago Blues: the Post-War Scene: Part 1,” *Jazz Monthly* 11/7 (September 1965): 20.

⁸⁶ Paul Oliver, “Gum-Beating,” *Jazzbeat* 3/1 (January 1966): 3.

⁸⁷ Michael Bane, *White Boy Singing the Blues* (NY, 1982), p. 156. My thanks to Mr. Bane for responding to my e-mail query about this quote.

Samuel Charters tried to frame the blues sociologically by focusing on the priorities of African American consumers and was discouraged that white intellectuals did not view the blues within a cultural context but rather “tended to select certain artists out of it—artists who, generally, came closest to a white concept of what a blues artist should be.” The British cognoscenti, however, rejected market-oriented considerations because they believed commercialism was a corrupting influence on community-based folk music.

For their part, British researchers thought much American blues writing was careless, unconcerned with accuracy, dominated by technical details, and overly reliant on anecdotes. Charles Keil’s *Urban Blues*, the first full-length consideration of the modern blues scene and its implications, received rather poor reviews in the British press. “Mr. Keil approaches blues with the longwinded and too technical attitude usually associated with modern jazz scholars. The whole thing seems to have been inspired by a few shows in Chicago – hardly the basis for a book!”⁸⁸ Keil, like Charters, alienated British readers by arguing that their understanding of the blues was limited to “moldy fig” fetishizing of authenticity:

An affair I witnessed in London featured an array of elderly bluesmen, a few of them quite decrepit; one scheduled performer had just been shipped back to the States with an advanced case of tuberculosis, another’s appearance was little more than an exhibition of incipient senility, and some “stars” had all they could do to stave off the effects of acute alcoholism ... the concert might be best described as a third-rate minstrel show. The same show presented to a Negro audience in Chicago ... would be received with hoots of derision, catcalls, and laughter. The thousands of Englishmen assembled for the event listen to each song in awed silence; the more ludicrous the performance, the more thunderous the applause at its conclusion.⁸⁹

In rebuttal, Mike Leadbitter offered that perhaps Sleepy John Estes would be laughed off the stage in a Chicago nightclub but Keil would certainly be laughed out of an English lecture hall.

Naturally, everything was not so cut and dried. Books and articles from the United States were eagerly devoured by English blues fans and a number of American researchers employed British-style methodology. There were also a number of enduring international partnerships—for example, Paul Oliver’s long collaborations with Mack McCormack and Chris Strachwitz. Save for book reviews, the British/American divide was only rarely evident in British blues journals. Occasionally Simon Napier goaded Pete Lowry, *Blues Unlimited*’s most prolific American contributor, with editorial asides when he raised points of known contention, such as “careful!” “Wanna fight, Pete?” These barbs seem mostly good

⁸⁸ Mike Leadbitter, review of *Urban Blues* by Charles Keil, *Blues Unlimited* 38 (November 1966): 20.

⁸⁹ Keil, *Urban Blues*, p. 37. Keil issued an apology in the afterword to the 1991 reprint, noting that he, too, had “constructed the blues to suit my own fancy (p. 234).”

natured and Lowry rarely responded; when he did it was with a plea to “avoid the backbiting that has grabbed too many critics. Togetherness baby, it won’t kill you!”⁹⁰

‘Honey, Where You Goin’?: the modern blues

One of the central arguments of Keil’s monograph was that European blues researchers were so preoccupied with identifying the “real” or “authentic” blues that they either neglected the contemporary idiom or decried it as a diluted version of a previously vital, earthy music. “It is so much easier to reminisce with old bluesmen, collect rare records and write histories than it is to properly assess a career-conscious singer, analyze an on-going blues scene, and attempt to understand the blues as a Chicago Negro in 1966 understands them.”⁹¹

Keil’s assertions were exaggerated—Paul Oliver and Chris Barber had been interviewing and befriending modern bluesmen since the late 1950s and many Chicago artists were profiled in popular and jazz music periodicals—but they contained some measure of truth. John Broven editorialized on the subject several years earlier:

May I express my dismay at the continued lack of knowledge concerning the blues of today. Already much of the wonderful material recorded in the fifties has fallen into oblivion and with it the artists and record labels who practiced it. Where today are such artists as Jimmy Rogers, J. B. Lenoir, Cousin Leroy, Baby Boy Warren, Walter Horton and Sunnyland Slim, and labels such as J. O. B., Trumpet, Parrot, Cobra, Modern, and States?⁹²

Mike Vernon agreed:

Our energies must be turned to writing about those artists who have helped mould the many different traits in the modern blues idiom, instead of pontificating in senseless disorder about John Lee Hooker, Lightnin’ Hopkins et al. Room must be made for comment on such artists of the stature of Smiley Lewis, Nappy Brown, Amos Milburn, Little Willie Littlefield, and even poor old B. B. King.⁹³

⁹⁰ Pete Lowry, review of *The Blues, Music from the Film* by Samuel Charters [Asch 101], *Blues Unlimited* 58 (December 1968): 26.

⁹¹ Keil, *Urban Blues*, p. 38.

⁹² John Broven, letter to the editor, *Jazz Journal* 16/5 (May 1963): 38.

⁹³ Mike Vernon, “Workin’ with Annies [sic] Aunt Fannie’s Baby,” *Jazzbeat* 3/12 (December 1966): 16.

Many aficionados equated the modern blues with Chicago. While the Windy City was still a primary recording hub, Charles Radcliffe and Mike Rowe emphasized that the “Chicago blues” was not a single, well-defined idiom.

A style emerged in the early 'fifties at the height of recording activity that we shall describe as the “classic” Chicago style ... but, from the mid-'fifties, the aggressively modern blues of the BB King school— Otis Rush, Magic Sam, and Buddy Guy—has been developed into what is now the distinctive Chicago style.⁹⁴

It is evident that they regarded the “classic” style—the urbanization of the great down home blues players—to be superior. Derrick Stewart-Baxter also thought this period was the pinnacle of Chicago blues, “before commercialism and gimmicks spoiled so much of the present day offerings.”⁹⁵ Radcliffe and Rowe even suggested the modernization of the blues paralleled the corruption of the country blues by commercial interests in the 1930s. “This is logical when we consider that the major singers have had to adapt their styles to suit current trends ... but whether they have been successful ‘blues-wise’ in adapting is another question.”

Some of the blues cognoscenti endorsed the legitimacy of modern bluesmen but with reservations. Derrick Stewart-Baxter thought that Junior Wells could “at times be over-dramatic, but what he is singing (when he can be heard above the chatter and general noise) *is* valid.” This echoed Max Jones’s declaration that Buddy Guy was unquestionably a “shrewd entertainer,” but his “undoubted vocal ability” and “guitar work, spectacular and even exhibitionistic as it is, is based on swinging ideas which keep the music driving along.”⁹⁶ Paul Oliver felt that the modern blues was a valid and unique product but its quality was uneven and the songs rather banal; this “certain decline in subject interest,” he charged, was “sometimes matched by a similar decline in the strength of the music itself.”⁹⁷

Many thought that even the best representatives of the modern style, like Guy and Otis Rush, represented the music’s decline:

They simply do not have the poetic and melodic imagination that stamped the recordings of, say, the young Muddy Waters. In their work the blues has once again become a thoroughly urbanized art ... the blues they play, club blues, is noisy, relatively uncomplicated and lacking the subtlety of the classic post-war singers.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Radcliffe and Rowe, “Chicago Blues part 1,” 20.

⁹⁵ Paul Oliver, “Chicago Breakdown part two,” 8; Derrick Stewart-Baxter, review of *Post-War Blues-Chicago* [PWB1], *Jazz Journal* 18/7 (July 1965): 28.

⁹⁶ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, “Blues,” *Jazz Journal* 20/5 (May 1967): 14; Max Jones, review of Buddy Guy at Kenton’s Fender Club, *Melody Maker*, 27 February 1965, 4.

⁹⁷ Paul Oliver, “Chicago Breakdown, part two.”

⁹⁸ Radcliffe and Rowe, “Chicago Blues, part two.”

There was general agreement that true blues feeling was being subverted by artists favoring instrumental prowess over effective vocals. The blame for this problematic shift from emotional engagement to pyrotechnic virtuosity—otherwise perceived as the triumph of the urban aesthetic over the folk—was often assigned to B. B. King, who has since become the universal standard bearer of the blues.

King was by far the most popular blues singer in the United States, one of the few who was still able to make a living performing primarily for African American audiences, and was thus often imitated. His style was a sophisticated fusion of blues, R&B and jazz that employed the “vocal” qualities of the guitar—a characteristic of the Delta style—in a manner that was harmonically sophisticated and soulful but at the same time retained the sting and power of postwar blues. As he never mastered the bottleneck style he bent the strings of his guitar to create a similar effect and used tremolo to infuse sustained notes with great presence. His solos were composed of long, lyrical lines influenced by jazz players like Django Reinhardt, Lester Young and Cootie Williams. Critics noted that many young guitarists copied his style, “contrasting long and whining notes with rapid runs falling in a cascade of clear sounds, making explosions and flurries, scintillating embellishments and repeated riffs with the vibrato amplified in pulsating sound and the volume turned to maximum.”

Though King had British advocates—Simon Napier, for one, felt he was “one of the few blues artists genuinely interested in blues as a valid means of expression, and not just another way to get some bread”—many were disturbed by his apparent emotional reserve.

The B. B. stands for ‘Blues Boy’... but just as the meaning has been dropped from the initials much of the meaning has gone from the performance too There is no denying B. B. King’s popularity among Negro audiences, and the time is long overdue for an examination of the reasons for this high esteem. I for one am baffled by it....⁹⁹

King’s problematic reception was rooted in the persistent privileging of the folk and country blues over urban traditions. Though a native of the Delta, King had eclectic musical tastes. His primary influences were Lonnie Johnson, Blind Lemon Jefferson, jazz great Charlie Christian, Doctor Clayton and Leroy Carr, not Son House, Charlie Patton, and Robert Johnson. His stint as a disc jockey on Memphis station WDIA in the early 1950s exposed him to a broad spectrum of rhythm and blues and he developed an affection for the west coast style of T-Bone Walker and Lowell Fulson, the smooth crooning of Charles Brown and Johnny Moore and shouters like Wynonie Harris and Big Joe Turner. All were regarded by British

⁹⁹ Oliver, *Story*, p. 161; Simon Napier, review of Lucille by B. B. King, *Blues Unlimited* 63 (January 1969): 29; Paul Oliver, review of *Let Me Tell You About the Blues* [Blue Horizon LP2] by various artists, *Jazz Monthly* 12/7 (September 1966): 28.

critics as marginally authentic R&B players who lacked the kind of emotional engagement with the material they regarded as crucial to good blues.

Many critiques of modern bluesmen were similarly based on the reviewer's preference for the down home style. Mike Leadbitter, for example, was excited to hear B. B. King cut loose in the studio with "some fantastic pure blues" but disappointed when he rejected the results. "The setup for 'Folks Get Wise' sounded good and modern, but I sure wish he had taken it 'way back home.'" Likewise, he wished technology wizard Earl Hooker would lay off the wah-wah pedal and "cut some really down home blues" because effects and other devices were "novelties, not a way of life..."¹⁰⁰

Others were bothered by the "sameness of rhythms employed, instrumental phrases, and vocal expression which is often identified as 'style'—'the Memphis style' or 'the Chicago style'—but which is merely derivative playing, in much of the modern blues which alienates many potential enthusiasts." The critic's greatest concern, however, was that stylistically narrow and technically focused playing signaled that the blues was separating from its folk roots and falling into decadence:

[The blues] shows every sign of cultural decline; the ascendancy of formal mannerism over content, the rococo flourishes and extravagant posturings, both physically and instrumentally, are signs of an art form in its final stages. From direct and forthright origins as a functional art created of necessity, it has passed through the successive phases of development and maturity, the means evolving to meet the demands of meaning. As so often happens in an art form which has continued beyond its period of greatest value as expression and communication, it has reached a late stage of flamboyant embellishment.¹⁰¹

"Can a white man sing the blues?"

As the number of "serious" British blues musicians grew, discussions about appropriation, exploitation and commercialism once again filled the musical press. The vast majority felt that only black musicians could produce authentic blues, but when ever greater numbers of white artists were embraced by the popular music press a new debate arose: could whites sing the blues at all?

Though questions about the validity of white blues performers arose as early as the 1940s, they re-emerged with a vengeance when contributors to *Blues Unlimited* began to cover American blues outfits. After Simon Napier penned a favorable review of Canned Heat's debut album the publication received 25 letters, 21 of which were "very down on the white guys." This conformed to the dominant

¹⁰⁰ Mike Leadbitter, "In the Studio," and review of *Sweet Black Angel* [Blue Thumb BTS-12] by Earl Hooker, *Blues Unlimited* 65 (September 1969): 10, 25.

¹⁰¹ Oliver, review of *Let Me Tell You About the Blues*; Oliver, *Blues Fell*, p. 168.

opinion of the intelligentsia that the blues was “essentially folk music possessing pronounced racial characteristics.”¹⁰² No matter how sincere the singer or sympathetic the rendition, whites could not replicate crucial and indescribable elements of the blues.

Paul Oliver held 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” and Derrick Stewart-Baxter argued, “Blues are the music of the American Negro, belonging to him and him alone. Many white musicians have mastered the art of instrumental blues playing, but when it comes to singing the white race has not produced a major artist.” Even some British blues musicians agreed. Danny Kirwan stated, “The blues is a black man’s language ... something that stems from the black nature of man.” Long John Baldry similarly argued that the blues were “music that is peculiar to American Negroes. The Negro is the one person in the world who can sing it.... There are quite a few of us who can interpret it but we can’t get inside it. It is an alien art form, whereas the blues are a natural way of life to the American Negro.”¹⁰³

The undeniable technical mastery of some of Britain’s “bluesmen” complicated the issue. Paul Oliver went so far as to state, “If Neil Slaven’s description of Eric Clapton’s playing as ‘breathtakingly beautiful’ is over-lavish, it is certainly true that there are few guitarists playing in the modern blues idiom to touch him,” and he felt that Cream “probably played better blues, technically, than did most of the working blues bands in Chicago” Even Son House, who had worked extensively with Al Wilson of Canned Heat, said, “I used to think that white men couldn’t play the blues, but now I don’t think that way.” Honeyboy Edwards, though, nuanced his approval. “A lot of these white boys play the blues real good. Ain’t but one thing about most of them though: most can’t sing a thing.”¹⁰⁴

More than a decade earlier Big Bill Broonzy had advanced the same idea: talented white musicians could, with practice, master the instrumental blues but not the vocal idiom.

There is [sic] even a few white men who can sing the blues, like Frank Melrose, for instance. They always run around with Negroes and play with them ... but they couldn’t sing the blues. They could say the blues words and some of the blues they could sing

¹⁰² Jones, “On Blues,” 86.

¹⁰³ Oliver, *Blues Fell*, p. 4; Derrick Stewart-Baxter, review of *R&B From the Marquee* by Alexis Korner’s Blues Incorporated, *Jazz Journal* 16/1 (January 1963): 40; Celmins, “Blues Rock Explosion,” xxx; Tony Wilson, “Can White Men Sing the Blues?” *Melody Maker*, 20 April 1968, 15.

¹⁰⁴ Paul Oliver, review of *Blues Breakers: John Mayall with Eric Clapton* by the Bluesbreakers, *Jazz Monthly* 12/8 (October 1966): 16–17; Tony Wilson, “Son House wins over Europe fans,” *Melody Maker*, 4 November 1967, 13; David “Honeyboy” Edwards, Janis Martinson and Michael Robert Frank, *The World Don’t Owe Me Nothing: The Life and Times of Delta Bluesman Honeyboy Edwards* (Chicago, 1997), p. 196.

was of the kind that we call big-city blues and dressed-up blues, but not the real Mississippi Blues.”¹⁰⁵

Privileging singing permitted African American artists to inhabit a middle ground, recognizing the talent of young white musicians—some of whom were friends and protégés—and the positive influence on their own careers while also retaining primacy over the music. This stance suggested that British artists, who played in accepted blues styles but sang in a different manner, were creating their own kind of blues. Mississippi Fred McDowell stated,

I’ve been asked many times could a white person sing the blues as well as a Negro. Well, sure he can. People are only in these last few days coming into the knowledge of knowin’ what the blues is. The blues is anybody in trouble.... If you lose your money or somebody takes your wife or your girlfriend, you’re in a mess and you got the blues ... white people sing their kind of blues like they feel ‘em.¹⁰⁶

Paul Oliver accepted the British blues as a popular music inspired by, but not identical, to the original genre. “Blues today, as played in the teenage clubs in dusty suburbs, is ... a borrowed music with its principal source of inspiration lying in the modern ‘rhythm and blues’ of the Negro clubs of Chicago.” And while he didn’t always look kindly on white interpreters he recognized that the blues was “part of the complex symbolism of a generation in revolt from a sociological point of view” and that young Britons had “taken its assertive, unsentimental, vigorous music as their own”¹⁰⁷

Other members of the blues intelligentsia slowly begin to view white and black blues as different entities. *Blues Unlimited* started covering British blues, though in a column headed “Cross the Separation Line”; this was soon replaced by labeling all pertinent reviews “WHITE.” *Blues World* similarly had a separate page for “White Blues” recordings. As these designations signaled that the works in question were not authentic, critics were able to evaluate native blues on its own merits. In fact, some felt “it would be unfair to both sides to compare these performances with any by Rush, Buddy Guy, B. B. King or any other genuine article.” Derrick Stewart-Baxter, long an opponent of white blues, expressed trepidation when he learned that Champion Jack Dupree recorded an album with the Bluesbreakers but found the results surprising, “for they do a very fine job indeed. ‘Third Degree’ in particular rates for very high praise. This Eddie Boyd number is beautifully played. Mayall’s harmonica is extremely ‘blue’ and fits perfectly—but the outstanding contribution comes from the guitarist; this is good blues guitar” David Illingworth discovered he liked the music of Fleetwood

¹⁰⁵ Big Bill Broonzy, “Big Bill Blues.”

¹⁰⁶ Valerie Wilmer, “Blues People: Fred & Roosevelt,” *Jazz Journal* 19/8 (August 1966): 23.

¹⁰⁷ Paul Oliver, “Roots of the Blues,” *Melody Maker*, 23 March 1968, 12.

Mac. "There is nothing worse than a *bad* white blues band, but if I can occasionally enjoy a pint while listening to a group like this I shall be happy ... these boys *are* beginning to talk the blues."¹⁰⁸

However, the "doctrine of separation" was not universally embraced. Peter Checkland wondered:

Should we be ... polite about "blues singers" from Essex and Lancaster who present, with narcissistic aplomb, a grotesque parody of the blues? if they offer themselves as public performers in the blues idiom, then we are being foolish if we avoid applying to them the standards which the best performers of the idiom have defined.

He personally felt the British blues were an insult; "unsteady rhythm, unfelt emotion, adolescent dramatics unrelated to the song structure, and irrelevant lyrics, combined in a sad parody of the real thing."¹⁰⁹ Nick Jones wondered, "If the blues crusaders revel as much as they obviously and understandingly do in the music of the blues greats and originators why do they insist on having to play it as well?"

Bob Dawbarn, who frequently covered British blues bands, acknowledged that they did a credible job of "transplanting the sounds, and often the lyrics, of an oppressed poor minority into young, white English mouths" but he failed to see the point, as the real thing was readily accessible. Paul Garon, at the time residing in England, was similarly perplexed:

The most baffling aspect of the entire phenomenon of "white blues" is the legitimacy and relevance with which its perpetrators would like to see it endowed Removed from the unique historical configurations that once produced the blues, that is, the socio-economic and cultural conditions through which blues came into being, the melodic similarities produced by the white imitators appear weak, trivial, spineless and without substance The question then, is not, "Can whites play (or sing) the blues?" but simply, "Why do they bother, and who cares?"¹¹⁰

The commercial success of British blues artists raised accusations that white musicians were appropriating traditional black material to the detriment of its original creators. This perspective is still widely accepted but it should be considered in context. The nature of communal composition, by which lyric couplets, melodies and accompaniment patterns are freely co-opted to create new songs, was well understood, and some British artists believed such uncredited

¹⁰⁸ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, review of *From New Orleans to Chicago* by Champion Jack Dupree [Decca LK 4747], *Jazz Journal* 19/5 (May 1966): 30; Illingworth, review of *Fleetwood Mac*.

¹⁰⁹ Peter Checkland, "Substance and Shadows: McDowell and the Rest," *Jazz Journal* 22/7 (July 1969): 23; Jones, review of "I Believe My Time Ain't Long."

¹¹⁰ Bob Dawbarn, "An Introduction to the blues, revivalist style," *Melody Maker*, 28 January 1969, 10; Paul Garon, *Blues and the Poetic Spirit*, 2nd edn (San Francisco, 1996), p. 61.

borrowing was the “traditional” manner of writing songs. Robert Plant, and probably many others, believed anyone who played the blues became a member of this “great big group of beggars and thieves.”¹¹¹ Moreover, determining authorial credit for many blues songs was—and still is—difficult. Cream, which took great pains to make sure that Skip James received proper credit and royalties for their rendition of “I’m So Glad,” failed to attribute “Cat’s Squirrel” and “Train Time” to their creators—Dr. Isiah Ross and Forest City Joe (John Pugh), respectively—because they believed the songs were traditional folk material; this commonly occurred with older blues that had been recorded by a number of different artists. There were also instances in which managers and agents, unable to locate a copyright holder through the usual channels, simply gave authorial credit to their artists; the Rolling Stones were genuinely surprised to discover that they, not Robert Wilkins, were listed as the composers of “Prodigal Son” on *Beggar’s Banquet*.

However, Cream, Fleetwood Mac, and Led Zeppelin—to say nothing of the Yardbirds and the Rolling Stones—unquestionably derived far more benefit from the new popularity of the blues than the Americans who created the idiom. Honeyboy Edwards has stated, “because they’re white, white musicians, when they play blues, they get the benefit of our music. They get more recognition for our music than we do. But then it makes blues more popular, too. I think a few different ways about it.” Joseph Conforti, a sociologist who interviewed B. B. King, asked how he felt about the adulation of white blues artists. He responded, “I used to feel a little hurt, but not any more, because these guys, they are for real seemingly and they have opened a lot of doors for me” Conforti suggested that King’s benign acceptance indicated that blues musicians were unlikely to achieve mainstream success without white endorsements but he offered it might also be “an appreciation of the young whites who are carrying on the blues tradition.”¹¹²

Chris Welch also thought that British musicians were “keeping the tradition alive” Max Jones believed this was the motivation behind the entire revival, as did many of the artists. Bill Wyman recalls that during the recording of Howlin’ Wolf’s album *The London Sessions* [Chess 9297]:

we were trying to do “Red Rooster” ... the way Wolf did it. Wolf’s trying to teach Eric Clapton to play the slide and he’s not quite getting in there properly, so Eric says, “Well, Wolf, it’s your song ... why don’t you do it and then we’ll cut the track and it will be perfect.” And Wolf says, “No, man, no, no. You’ve got to do it, because when I’m gone somebody’s got to carry it on.” That’s the essence of it ... it’s not stealing. It’s just continuing a tradition.

¹¹¹ Celmins, *Blues Rock Explosion*, p. xxix.

¹¹² Edwards, *Don’t Owe Me Nothin’*, p. 196 Joseph M. Conforti, “A Sociologist Talks to B. B. King,” *Blues Unlimited* 64 (July 1969): 5.

The country blues artists disagreed, believing they were the ones committed to preserving the real blues. "I guess it was obvious on [sic] that you can't really play country blues in a band without regularising the rhythm a la Stones and so it remains with the soloist to carry the tradition"¹¹³

Most critics doubted that any British musicians could credibly do so. Derrick Stewart-Baxter's comments are representative:

It is the contention ... that in a few years blues as sung by Negroes will be dead, and that it is already a dying art form. It must be admitted that much of the present day urban blues is far from good, due to commercialism, but I am far from convinced that there are no young singers about.... The Elektra company and sleeve writer Paul Nelson are convinced that it will be the young white singers who will lead us back to true blues. If this LP is a sample of what is to come, I must be counted out. All the artists are white folk singers, all profess to love the blues, but it would appear that few of them have much idea of what it is all about.¹¹⁴

It was true that only a few British musicians grasped what Amiri Baraka has termed the "blues aesthetic": an understanding of the blues as a function of black life. Most had romantic notions that were far removed from the realities of 1960s America and only a tenuous grasp on the social conditions that spawned the music. John Mayall believed his marginalization by the pop mainstream and feelings of inadequacy as a white blues player were emotionally equivalent to the "frustration" of black artists facing discrimination in the United States. Geoff Bradford admitted that he knew nothing of the social context of the songs he copied from records, as did Jon Spenser, who recalls that he didn't much care. However, he was drawn to the idea of the "lonely life of the bluesman shunned by own people." Eric Clapton recalls trying to get into the spirit of the blues and understanding the life of an authentic blues artist by imagining "what kind of car he drove, what it would smell like inside ... I had no idea there was a racial thing involved."¹¹⁵

Alexis Korner claimed that concerns were no longer relevant:

People interested in pop, soul and those areas of music have now realized that the blues is basically just as much their music as anyone else's. And a British style of blues playing and singing has begun to develop that owes no allegiance to the Negro social conditions that gave birth to the blues roughly 100 years ago ... It's no longer a matter of race or color; it's a matter of attitudes.

¹¹³ Wyman, "Stone Freed;" Ralph McTell, "Testimonials," *Geoff Bradford*, n.d. <<http://www.geoff-bradford.co.uk>> (10 October 2005).

¹¹⁴ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, review of *The Blues Project*.

¹¹⁵ John Mayall, "Keeping the British Flag Flying," *Melody Maker*, 26 October 1968, 8; *Living with the Blues* (BBC, 1989), television special; Harry Shapiro, "Wall of Sound," *Mojo* 53 (April 1998): 91.

John Mayall similarly felt the blues had “nothing to do with race. It just happened that the blues came from the Negro race. If you haven’t absorbed the idiom then you can’t sing the blues.”¹¹⁶

The prevailing notion among British musicians was that the emotion behind blues constituted its entire substance, and that once grasped it could be applied to a number of related genres. Stan Webb complained, “So many guitarists think blues guitar is a style rather than a feeling ... if you don’t feel the blues yourself then it’s pointless to try and play that way.” Alexis Korner concurred.

The blues is definitely not simply playing 12-bar themes with a specific series of chord changes ... I discussed it with B. B. King and he said it’s not a matter of form anymore, it’s a feeling. Blues can be played in so many different ways it just isn’t definable anymore. But you hear someone and you know at once if he is a blues player or not.¹¹⁷

‘It’s Still Called the Blues’: the British idiom

Some critics—even those who accepted black and white blues as different entities—felt the British blues could not be viewed as a new stylistic approach until it abandoned wholesale copying of American artists. Derrick Stewart-Baxter believed British musicians would “eventually arrive at an important musical synthesis, but their insistence on devoting half their time to poor Blind Lemon Jefferson imitations will not win over the doubting Thomases, and may even spell death to their own interesting music.” One contributor to *Melody Maker* argued, “The derivative British bluesmen come close to parody of a unique musical idiom. They have achieved nothing which has not been done with less contrivance and self-consciousness by countless authentic bluesmen.” Even Peter Green felt that “most of [the other British blues bands] are lifting straight from the Americans ... If I was playing what the Cream or Jimi Hendrix is playing, I wouldn’t call it blues.”¹¹⁸

There was a purist faction of fans that demanded rigid adherence to American models. David Illingworth reported that young audiences reminded him of “Trad audiences of 15 years ago, when everything was taken so seriously, and the closer to the original the better.” Long John Baldry said, “The trouble is the hard core of

¹¹⁶ Korner, “British Style;” Wilson, “White Men Sing the Blues.”

¹¹⁷ Bob Dawbarn, “The Blues British Style, part 1,” *Melody Maker*, 5 October 1968, 14; Bob Dawbarn, “You Don’t Have to be in Chains to Play Blues,” *Melody Maker*, 13 July 1968, 6.

¹¹⁸ David Illingworth, review of *John Renbourn* [Transatlantic TRA135], *Jazz Journal* 19/7 (July 1966): 35; S. B. Terry, letter to the editor, *Melody Maker*, 2 November 1968, 32; Tony Wilson, “Emotion! That’s the Blues Secret,” *Melody Maker*, 20 June 1968, 10; Alan Walsh, “True Blues.”

blues fans who won't allow their idols to deviate from the narrow path of what they consider real blues. Because of that attitude, the British blues scene has become standardized and clichéd. I hear groups like the Ten Years After [sic] or Eric Clapton or Peter Green, and they all seem to be playing exactly the same tunes. It's all so serious now." Aynsley Dunbar likewise complained there was little opportunity for groups to develop, as "in England the blues fans expect you to just bang away, or it's not blues."¹¹⁹

By 1968 a uniquely British approach was beginning to emerge. Bands still played mostly American blues but they chose material by a stylistically diverse range of artists—songs by Otis Rush, Bukka White, Fenton Robinson, B. B. King, Robert Johnson, Blind Joe Reynolds, the Mississippi Sheiks and Little Brother Montgomery were part of the common repertoire—and developed arrangements that altered or recontextualized their models. Ian Anderson commented, "What we are all doing is taking traditional material and rewriting it in our own way—which is exactly what the old country blues men did themselves. We have got inside the idiom and are now coming out of the British end."¹²⁰

While writing *Beggar's Banquet* Mick Jagger and Keith Richards played old blues numbers until a core idea emerged. Richards would "monotonously strum a refrain over and over again, sometimes wailing incomprehensible sounds that only Jagger could translate, until—often after many hours or days—they were singing 'Stray Cat Blues' or 'Salt of the Earth.'"¹²¹

Eric Clapton's approach was to "take the most obvious things and simplify them. Like my way of doing 'Crossroads' was to take that one musical figure"—the fill that Robert Johnson used to conclude each phrase—"and make that the point, the focal point. Just trying to focus on what the essence of the song was—keeping it simple."¹²² Cream reduced the intricate figure of the original into a propulsive riff that gave their version a relentless drive, a technique they also employed with Skip James's "I'm So Glad."

Fleetwood Mac turned Mississippi Fred McDowell's masterpiece "You Got to Move"—a reworking of "It Hurts Me Too," which was itself derived from the Mississippi Sheik's "Sittin' On Top of the World"—into a sly shuffle by changing its rhythmic emphasis and introducing melodic variations that allowed Peter Green to shadow, and then expand, McDowell's bottleneck statements of the original tune. Led Zeppelin's version of "How Many More Times" barely qualifies as an arrangement. The group borrowed the melodic outline of "How Many More Years" by Howlin' Wolf but none of the words or the accompaniment. The lyrics are comprised of phrases and couplets from half a dozen blues, including the

¹¹⁹ Illingworth, "London Blues;" n.a., "British Blues a Bore says Long John," *Melody Maker*, 1 June 1968, 11; "Aynsley Dunbar Retaliation," *Blues Rock Explosion*, p. 113

¹²⁰ Dawbarn, "Two Ians."

¹²¹ Bockris, *Richards*, p. 143.

¹²² Guralnick, "Clapton," 54.

African American folk songs “O Rosie” and “Steal Away;” Albert King’s “The Hunter;” “It Ain’t Right” by Little Walter and “Your Own Fault Baby, To Treat Me the Way You Do” by Lightnin’ Hopkins. The accompaniment is a standard blues riff that calls to mind Cream’s rendition of “Smokestack Lightning.”

The haphazard nature in which recordings of different blues styles reached the country—and the inconsistency of their availability—meant they were often encountered non-chronologically, and thus were conceptualized and combined in new ways. Charles Shaar Murray has argued that:

the spiritual and geographical distance which [sic] separated the Brit bands from their sources ultimately proved to be their greatest asset. Lacking firsthand knowledge of and access to their role models, they were forced to reinvent the music, to juxtapose styles and idioms which rarely mixed on their native soil, to join up the dots with their own ideas. “If I’m building a solo,” Eric Clapton explained... “I’ll start with a line that is definitely Freddie King...and then I’ll go onto a B. B. King line. I’ll do something to join them up, so that’ll be me” Out of their creative misunderstandings of the distant worlds of the South Side and the Delta, Clapton and his kind accidentally-on-purpose invented something uniquely their own....¹²³

Cream’s “Strange Brew” is an Albert King inspired arrangement of the traditional blues “Lawdy Mama” fitted with new lyrics, Eric Clapton’s solo is lifted, nearly in its entirety, from King’s “Cross Cut Saw;” and the underlying riff was taken from the Buddy Guy and Junior Wells recording “Everything’s Gonna Be Alright.” A number of the band’s original compositions—for example, “Sunshine of Your Love” and “NSU”—are based on single chord riffs or riffs wedded to a standard blues progression, ideas inspired by models like Howlin’ Wolf’s “Spoonful.” Dave Headlam notes that these derivative techniques represent the “culmination of the British adaptation of blues into rock and also the direct precursor of Led Zeppelin and heavy metal, where this type of blues-based motivic riff and harmonic motions like A-C-G or E-G-A ... serve as the basis for a seemingly endless number of songs.”¹²⁴

A number of factors convinced British blues musicians to write their own material. Some were ambivalent about basing their entire repertoire on other artist’s songs. Eric Clapton recalled, “I felt like I was stealing music and got caught at it. It’s one of the reasons Cream broke up, because I thought we were getting away with murder, and people were lapping it up.”¹²⁵ Others started to doubt their ability to convincingly deliver material that was deeply rooted in the African American experience. Jon Spencer felt “none of the blues were relevant” and it “didn’t make much sense for someone in my situation to be singing about chain

¹²³ Murray, *Boogie Man*, p. 270.

¹²⁴ Dave Headlam, “Blues Transformations in the Music of Cream,” in John Covach and Graeme M. Boone (eds), *Understanding Rock: Essays in Musical Analysis*, (NY, 1997), p. 85.

¹²⁵ Guy, *Damn Right*, p. 87.

gangs.” Andrew Oldham urged the Rolling Stones to compose because “the entire teenage population of the British Isles could not be expected to relate to the needs and wants of middle-aged blacks.”¹²⁶

As feeling overtook style as the primary element of the British blues, singers chose material more closely related to their own lives. John Mayall stated, “blues of social condition or anything like that—I’m not too much interested in that. Things about chicks and things like that ... it’s just personal experience, and that’s really all it’s about. I mean, how can you sing with conviction about a subject you’ve had no experience of or never known?” Ian Anderson concurred. “I don’t sing blues I can’t identify with. If you do a song about going to Chicago it immediately establishes that you copied it off a record.”

Eventually many British blues artists adopted:

[a] new, original and personal approach to the blues with relevance to our time and generation ... Mike [Cooper] has come to the same conclusion as me about the futility of sticking in the ethnic mumbling country blues idiom of 40 years past and is venturing nicely into fields which are blues feel rather than blues form ... so many people on the British scene, after years of copying records and styles, are at last beginning to move their music on¹²⁷

Alexis Korner continued to pursue jazz-based explorations of the blues, having long asserted that “the way blues should be played today is the way Ornette Coleman is playing them.” He drew inspiration and ideas from a variety of blues-based styles, feeling there was no need to be “tied down to playing one part of the thing. Blind Lemon and Big Bill are no more, and no less, valid than ... any of the really good, pushing avant-garde players.” Country blues players, like their folk forebears, regularly combined the blues with various types of world music. Ian A. Anderson has said of Davy Graham, “When you heard the first guitar bars of ‘Leavin’ Blues’ it hinted at out there in Asia or North Africa; when he started singing Leadbelly’s words you were here and now in England.”

Ironically, critics found groups exploring new ground within the auspices of the blues more, rather than less, authentic. Chris Welch praised John Mayall’s decidedly jazz-influenced suite *Bare Wires* as “a great leap forward. Within the blues framework ... creates absorbing music, richer in content than any previous British group album ... that has set John above his imitators and contemporaries and prevented the fall into a well of stagnation predicted by critics.” Jethro Tull, whose status as a blues band was always tenuous, received nearly unanimous acclaim for their bold fusions of jazz improvisation and blues feeling. The Aynsley Dunbar Retaliation, which Welch initially thought “unmoving” and “derivative,”

¹²⁶ *Living with the Blues*; Oldham, *Stoned*, p. 256.

¹²⁷ Frank Kofsky, “John Mayall,” *Jazz & Pop* 7/10 (October 1968): 15; Dawbarn, “Two Ians.”

was praised for *To Mum from Aynsley and the Boys*, “a great improvement” involving “more original ideas.” Even Led Zeppelin, whose emotionally intense, heavy approach to the blues was shortly thereafter labeled “hard rock,” was hailed for its originality. John Mayall noted that for many British musicians, the blues “was a starting point They had to find their own way of expression. That kind of led them into other areas that just happened to make them very popular on the rock and roll pop scene. In all cases, everyone ended up finding their own identity.”¹²⁸

Despite the divergence of British and African American blues styles, concerns remained about the impact of the former on the “authentic” blues. Many noted similarities between British blues and Trad jazz and hoped that the movement would not become derivative, “with endless new groups copying the leading British names.” Stylistic variety seemed to promise continued growth and diversity but the commercial success of leading bands generated inferior imitations. In late 1968 Richard Vernon observed, “People are already bringing out so-called blues records to cash in ...” and Ian Anderson noted that “a great many of the completely unknown and very sub-standard British blues groups are flooding the American market with what is really just repetitive rubbish.”

Christopher Small has noted that such “bandwagon” effects bring about significant alterations to the root style, “generally diluting [it] to make it more acceptable to those for whom Afro-American values are too subversive, too disturbing.”¹²⁹ Paul Oliver had long feared such an outcome. In *Screening the Blues* he wrote:

Today the blues is threatened by pressures of mass media and commercial exploitation which may obliterate its character as a musical form. On one hand the blues has been absorbed by popular music throughout the world with consequent damage to its identity.... Facile but skilful imitations by young white singers has further obscured the individuality of the blues and it seems likely that the future of the blues as ‘the song of the folk’ and as ‘spontaneous utterance, filled with characteristics of rhythm, form, and melody’ is likely to be a brief one. No longer “without the influence of conscious art” the blues may become a self-conscious art music and as such survive in a new form, but its days as a folk music may be numbered.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ “Back to Square 1 with ‘R&B’ Korner,” *Melody Maker*, 19 March 1966, 15; Ian Anderson, review of Folk, *Blues, and Beyond* by Davy Graham, *fRoots Recommends* <<http://www.cdroots.com/fled-3050.html>> (June 5, 2006); Chris Welch, “Mayall’s ‘Bare Wires’—a Progression in Attitude,” *Melody Maker*, 13 July 1968, 7; Appleford, *Stones*, p. 35.

¹²⁹ Dawbarn, “Don’t Have to be in Chains;” Keith Althman, “Jethro Tull: The Rave Interview,” *Rave* November 1969, [28 May 2006] Jethro Tull Press <<http://www.tullpress.com/ravenov69.htm>> (August 8, 2006); Small, *Common Tongue*, p. 470.

¹³⁰ Oliver, *Screening the Blues*, p. 9.

‘All Out and Down’: the end of the blues revival

While the genre itself proved resilient, by mid 1969 the British blues revival was coming to an end. The National Blues Federation continued to bring American musicians to Britain but was driven to the brink of ruin when audiences failed to turn out for its sponsored tour by Son House; British blues bands had to stage a benefit to clear its debts. Attendance at blues clubs declined precipitously and many began booking mainstream rock and pop acts.

Top British groups began turning away from the blues. Ian Anderson of Jethro Tull opined, “The whole Blues scene, with a capital B, is a bit dated now. Eighteen months ago people went to see a blues group and thought of themselves as being very different from those going to see Arthur Brown or the Nice. Now it’s all the same scene.” Fleetwood Mac, Ten Years After, the Aynsley Dunbar Retaliation and the Taste extended the improvisatory approach to blues into sprawling, open-ended structures that stood well outside the idiom and ultimately declared the blues “too confining,” Anderson explained:

See, the common ground you have in a jam is usually a blues ... a 12-bar sequence. You just play on one chord. I mean, what can you say with those kinds of limitations which haven’t been said a thousand times before. I don’t want to repeat the overworn blues clichés; the B.B. King sequences or what Eric Clapton does. They’ve already done them, far better than I could do them or anybody else can do them now.

Stan Webb of Chicken Shack told Chris Welch, “There have been a few alterations in the last six months and we are not doing blues anymore. So many better people than us are entitled to do it, like B. B. King, that we are going to leave them to get on with it.” Even album titles suggested a break with the blues. Webb named his group’s next album *Accept*, Jethro Tull came out with *Move On*, and the Groundhogs announced their adoption of a more “progressive” style with the release of *Blues Obituary*; the album’s cover pictured the band removing a coffin from a hearse.¹³¹

Even *Blues Unlimited* seemed to feel the revival was nearly played out. Simon Napier declared—rather prematurely—that the task of blues scholarship was nearly complete.

Since *BU* began we have seen “Godrich-Dixon” published—before too long we’ll see “Leadbitter.” That will wind up discography more or less. There are less than a handful of young blues artists around likely to be recording much in the way of good modern blues as we know it. There can be very few “old masters” still hidden away; a few handfuls of still unlocated recordings. The groundwork has been done with amazing

¹³¹ Bob Dawbarn, “The Two Ians;” Ian Anderson, “Zig Zag Interview;” “Chicken Shack,” *Blues-Rock Explosion*, p. 71.

thoroughness. Now we must all strive to polish up the remaining blind spots, the relatively few gaps in the story ... the “boom” is still going strong, but its fire is fast running out of fuel.¹³²

The end of the boom was by no means the end of the blues. Bob Groom commented in 1971 that the revival “has served to illuminate blues history, publicize the music and make available—on record and on-stage—the work of the long neglected blues singers of postwar America. With international awareness of the blues, the revival as such is at an end and the work of consolidation has begun.”¹³³ Indeed, new adherents of the blues, brought to the music by British R&B and blues bands, formed a fan base that endures to the present day. Despite his pessimism about the endurance of the authentic idiom, Paul Oliver remained optimistic:

Views on such forms of popular music in which the blues is powerfully evident range from despair at the degeneration of musical values to the scorn of the specialized blues magazines at the imitation of the authentic article. Both have some basis in fact but the inescapable truth is that a vigorous folk music has broken out of racial confines to have an all-pervading, world-wide significance; profoundly and irrevocably changing popular culture.¹³⁴

Postlude: How Britain “got” the blues

While the blues did not retain its popular orientation in the 1970s, its stylistic elements radically and permanently influenced the language of both rock and pop music in a number of ways.

The guitar

The blues provided a new identity for rock guitarists. Prior to the blues revival guitarists were considered backing musicians (unless they also sang) and featured solos were rare, especially after the “guitar band” fad was eclipsed by the Brill Building and Motown. British R&B and blues rock elevated guitarists to a role that was equal to that of singers and artists like Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, and Jimmy Page became the new superstars of rock.

Blues guitarists also provided popular music with a new coloristic vocabulary. Elijah Wald has noted that British country blues musicians took “Josh [White]’s idea of using blues techniques to play English traditional songs” and used it to create “a European finger-picking style that overflowed into rock, pop, and jazz

¹³² Simon Napier, “Back in Time Blues!” *Blues Unlimited* 50 (February 1968): 2.

¹³³ Groom, *Blues Revival*, p. 109.

¹³⁴ Oliver, “The Future of the Blues,” *Blues Off the Record*, p. 286.

and continues to dominate the European folk scene.” The blues inspired the extended guitar solo, which soon became a standard element of blues-influenced genres and “a musical laboratory for counter-culture experiments in spontaneity, free expression and self-development.”¹³⁵ Emulating the technically advanced fretwork of bluesmen like Freddy King and Buddy Guy, British guitarists amplified their virtuosic tendencies. As there was general agreement that white musicians could “learn to play” the blues but not sing them with conviction, instrumentalists became the standardbearers of the British blues movement; consequently, guitarists also served as it “inspired solo voices.”

British R&B, in particular, introduced the characteristic overdriven guitar timbre of psychedelic rock, hard rock, heavy metal and punk. Initially the sound was created by under-funded bands running several guitars and an electric bass through a single amplifier, often one that used cheap transformers that distorted the output by as much as 50 per cent. Jeff Beck recalls, “All the amps were underpowered and screwed up full volume and always whistling It would feed back, so I decided to use it rather than fight it.” The “heavy” blues sound that dominates hard rock and heavy metal can also be attributed to technological differences, specifically, the EL84 tubes employed in British amplifiers, in contrast to the 6V6 or 6L6 tubes in their American counterparts. Randall Smith states, “The EL84’s dynamic character seems less resilient and when driven into distortion, higher order harmonics prevail, and an aggressive, snarling bite ensues” in the midrange. “It is easy to see how ‘bad attitude’ rock and roll styles ... developed from blues-based music being played on amps fitted with European tubes and cranked up into heavy distortion.”¹³⁶

Vocals

During the revival vocalists were often criticized for their attempts to copy African American singers. While their efforts may have been less than convincing they ultimately expanded the range of vocal styles employed in popular music. Singers of blues-related material perceived the “grain” of the voice, as well as glissandos, slurs, and shadings of tone and color to be integral components of the idiom, which demanded using “the whole voice rather than a refined part of it, all of the effects of which it is capable.” Singers adopted other techniques of blues and R&B singers: accenting syllables through alterations of tone color, the hard ascending breaks of the “gospel shout” and the arhoolie, glottal stops, groans, cries and moans. Of the latter Robert Plant stated, “I moan because you can’t say everything

¹³⁵ Wald, *Society Blues*, p. 246; Chambers, *Urban Rhythms*, p. 101.

¹³⁶ Steve Rosen, “Jeff Beck,” *Rock Guitarists* (Saratoga, CA, 1978), p. 11; Randall Smith, “The Birth of Bad Attitude: The Tale of the Tube,” *Mesa/Boogie* <http://www.mesa-boogie.com/US/Smith/bad_attitude.html> (4 August 2006).

with lyrics; the whole thing about the blues is that it transmits emotion even if it's secondhand and even if it's repetitious ... it's not just words. It's delivery."¹³⁷

The influence of the blues is particularly prominent in what Michael Hicks dubs the "blues rock" voice, which he divides into the "roar" and the "buzz." The roar, often used for selective expression by urban blues singers, is "the guttural belt style of singing in which the singer opposes laryngeal and pharyngeal forces to create a gravelly, gurgling sonority." The buzz—often produced in singers attempting to mimic African American vocalists—"comes from the upper part of the throat and the nasal cavity, producing a grinding, raspy sound."¹³⁸

These colors also had a practical application: such vocal "impurities" carry better than "purer" tones. A surprisingly large number of African American singers made cylinders in the earliest days of the recording industry; the trade publication *The Phonogram* explained that "Negro [voices] 'take' better than white singers, because their voices have a certain harshness or sharpness about them that a white man's has not."¹³⁹ British vocalists found this "cutting" quality useful in projecting over distorted and amplified instrumental backing. The style remains part of the vocal arsenal of British vocalists like David Bowie, Elton John and David Gilmore, who sang with blues bands in their early years.

Improvisation

The greatest legacy of the blues was probably introducing improvisation into rock music. The "elastic process of invention, exchange, and improvisation" was an important element of song creation and live blues performance. Pete Townshend recalled, "Playing pop before, you just copied a record, and that was it ... blues was a completely different thing altogether." Roger Daltry added, "Because so many of the songs sounded exactly the same, we had to use our imagination to build them up. Blues taught us to use musical freedom ... we'd play one verse for twenty minutes and make up half the lyrics." Like most singers in the blues tradition, British musicians adopted the basic formulae of themes, verses, motives, and harmonies "to form a unique comment on the body of tradition and a unique presentation of the personal and communal identity."¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Ian Hoare, "Mighty, mighty spade and whitey: black lyrics and soul's interaction with white culture," *The Soul Book*, ed. Ian Hoare (London, 1975), p. 153; Plant, "Songs Remain the Same," p. 138.

¹³⁸ Michael Hicks, *Sixties Rock: Garage, Psychedelic, and Other Satisfactions* (Urbana, 1999), pp. 2–3.

¹³⁹ Tim Brooks, "George W. Johnson: The First African-American Recording Star," *ARSC Journal* 35/1 (Spring 2004): 44.

¹⁴⁰ Frederic Ramsey, Jr., "Lines Buckner's Alley," *Jazz Monthly* 3/9 (November 1957): 2; Neill and Kent, *Anyway*, p. 18; Murray, *Boogie Man*, p. 271; Middleton, *Pop Music*, p. 51.

Showmanship

Many of the earliest British blues performers paid little attention to showmanship, as anything else would have suggested that they were not serious about the idiom. Later singers and guitarists adopted the performative elements of musicians like Buddy Guy and Junior Wells and amplified the theatricality that had long been a part of rock and roll. Bands like Led Zeppelin, Chicken Shack, the Rolling Stones and Jethro Tull made stage antics and flamboyant behavior a component of their overall image. The blues has also been cited as the source of male rebelliousness and “narcissistic egocentrism” that emerged in British bands of the 1960s, and the “socially provocative stage and public persona” of these acts “marked an important breaking away from the traditions that ruled pop and popular music in general.”¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ Chambers, *Urban Rhythms*, 67–8.

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