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Conventional Wisdom

The Content of Musical Form

Susan McClary

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CHAPTER 2

Thinking Blues

One of the anxieties often voiced in accounts of twentieth-century music involves a construct called "the main stream." Donald Tovey's classic essay introduced the term to naturalize what we now refer to as "the canon," and many a composer and critic has attempted to trace the continuation of that main stream in the aftermath of World War I.[1] But as early as 1967, Leonard B. Meyer announced the futility of this venture, arguing instead that our time is characterized most by its stylistic pluralism.[2] Still, in narrative histories of twentieth-century music (by which is meant the continuation of Tovey's classical canon), musicologists continue to grope for the main stream, to grasp hopefully at various trickles, to lament the loss of orientation its disappearance has effected.

But if twentieth-century music has no single main stream, it does at least have something more coherent to bequeath the future than the various trickles we grasp at with a mixture of hope and despair. If I hesitate to label it *the* main stream, I have no qualms comparing it to a mighty river. It follows a channel cut by a force known as the blues.

We can trace something called blues back as far as the beginning of the twentieth century, and it has remained an active generator of new musical movements up until the present moment. When LeRoi Jones

published his powerful book *Blues People* in 1963, his title referred to the African American musicians who fashioned the blues out of their particular historical conditions and experiences.[3] Yet a music scholar of a future time might well look back on the musical landscape of the 1900s and label us all "blues people": those who inhabited a period dominated by blues and its countless progeny.

That musical landscape would include such diverse items as the spiritual songs of Blind Willie Johnson, his proto-heavy-metal disciples Led Zeppelin, the stride piano of James P. Johnson, the earthy frankness of Ma Rainey and her heiress Janis Joplin, the electrified Chicago sound of Muddy Waters, the mournful country whine of Hank Williams, the exuberant Cajun stomp of Queen Ida and her Bontemps Zydeco Band, the elegant jazz arrangements of Duke Ellington, the gospel-tinged shouts of Little Richard as he ignited rock and roll, the adolescent surfer songs of the Beach Boys, James Brown's godfathering of soul, echoes from Nigerian and Zulu pop, the modernist irony of Thelonious Monk, the tormented quest for mystical union in albums by P. J. Harvey, the postmodern collages of John Zorn, not to mention contemporary resonances in rap. As much as these musics may differ from each other, they unite in engaging with the conventions of the blues.

Contrary to a popular belief that regards blues as some kind of unmediated expression of woe, the conventions underlying the blues secure it firmly within the realm of culture; a musician must have internalized its procedures in order to participate creatively within its ongoing conversation. Albert Murray writes:

> It is not a matter of having the blues and giving direct personal release to the raw emotion brought on by suffering. It is a matter of mastering the elements of craft required by the idiom. It is a matter of idiomatic orientation and the refinement of auditory sensibility in terms of idiomatic nuance. It is a far greater matter of convention, and hence tradition, than of impulse. . . . It is not so much what blues musicians bring out of themselves on the spur of the moment as what they do with existing conventions.[4]

And yet reliance on convention is rarely held to be incompatible with creativity in blues-based music. How does this musical universe operate, and what can we learn from it?

Before proceeding further, let me say a few words about my purpose in this chapter. I am not presuming to add anything substantial to available knowledge about blues: few genres of twentieth-century music have generated a more extended bibliography.[5] Likewise, I am not attempting to legitimate blues—this music and its practitioners do not need my help or the acknowledgment of academic musicology. Nor—let me hasten to assure you—am I setting up a comparison between African American and European-based musics in order to trash the latter. I promise to be just as affirmative in the next chapter on eighteenth-century tonal procedures.

I have two principal reasons for spending a chapter on this genre. First, I think that blues can help academic music study out of a long-standing methodological impasse: I am drawing on blues as a clear example of a genre that succeeds magnificently in balancing convention and expression, and I will make use of this model as I reexamine the European eighteenth century in chapter 3. Second, I firmly believe that any account of twentieth-century Western music must dwell extensively on the blues in its various manifestations because this is the music that has most shaped our era. Finally, the blues-based repertory deserves our careful attention simply because it contains so much superb music, and I take this to be among the principal reasons we bother to study any repertory.

The blues is largely the product of a diasporic people, though the genre did not originate in Africa. When procedures recognizable as blues first entered the historical record around 1900, they already testified to centuries of fusions with North American genres. I have occasionally heard the claim that no trace of Africa remains in the blues, that African practices were thoroughly eradicated from the music of black people under slavery, and that we must admit this, even while we

may mourn the loss involved.[6] And without question, blues harmonies bear witness to European influence—the result of exposure to hymns, dances, popular ballads, fiddle tunes, and marches that circulated widely in the United States during the nineteenth century. Most of the instruments played by blues musicians originated in Europe; lyrics are sung in English; and, as Jones and Lawrence Levine have pointed out, even the emphasis on individual subjectivity in blues poetry and music resembles European practices more than those of Africa.[7]

But most specialists—including not only Jones and Levine but also (among many others) Gunther Schuller, Olly Wilson, Christopher Small, Henry Louis Gates, Peter van der Merwe, Paul Gilroy, and Samuel Floyd—identify in the blues a great many typically African elements.[8] They argue persuasively that African Americans—long after having been uprooted from their homelands and against enormous odds—managed to maintain and transmit a core of collective memory while in exile, especially through their music. For example, blues musicians privilege a vast palette of sounds that European-trained ears tend to hear as distorted or out of tune. As Ernest Borneman explained in a classic essay from the 1940s:

> While the whole European tradition strives for regularity—of pitch, of time, of timbre and of vibrato—the African tradition strives precisely for the negation of these elements. In language, the African tradition aims at circumlocution rather than at exact definition. The direct statement is considered crude and unimaginative; the veiling of all contents in ever-changing paraphrases is considered the criterion of intelligence and personality. In music, the same tendency towards obliquity and ellipsis is noticeable: no note is attacked straight; the voice or instrument always approaches it from above or below, plays around the implied pitch without ever remaining any length of time, and departs from it without ever having committed itself to a single meaning. The timbre is veiled and paraphrased by constantly changing vibrato, tremolo and overtone

effects. The timing and accentuation, finally, are not *stated*, but *implied* or *suggested*. The musician challenges himself to find and hold his orientation while denying or withholding all signposts.[9]

The rhythmic patterns that animate any given realization of blues likewise are related to African attitudes and tied to a vocabulary of physical gestures, kinesthetic motions, and dance steps quite unlike anything European. Music in many African cultures is inseparable from dance on the one hand and spirituality on the other. Historian Sterling Stuckey writes: "For the African, dance was primarily devotional, like a prayer. . . . The whole body moving to complex rhythms . . . was often linked to the continuing cycle of life, to the divine."[10] Thus the groove that sustains the blues serves as a conduit linking the body, words, musicians, listeners, and a realm often experienced as sacred. As we saw in the gospel music of the Swan Silvertones in chapter 1, no transcendence without the body, no individual redemption without the community.

Most important is the way the blues operates according to certain models of social interaction characteristic of African cultures. The practice nineteenth-century blacks called signifying—long before Henry Louis Gates revived the word as "signifyin(g)" for fashionable critical jargon—strives to maintain a socially shared framework within which participants exhibit prowess and virtuosity through highly individualized elaborations. Signifyin(g) thus ensures the continuity of community, at the same time that it celebrates the imagination and skill of each particular practitioner. Gates developed his theory of signifyin(g) in order to account for why African American writers often prefer to reinhabit conventional structures rather than treat formal innovation as the be-all-and-end-all of literary value, as it is for many European-based artists and critics. And he drew heavily on the example of blues in explaining this alternative worldview that pervades so many African American cultural activities.

We cannot trace the precise history of the blues, for those who had the means of preserving music before the twentieth century did not often write down the music produced by African Americans. Occasionally a style ascribed to the black population sparked a response among European or Euro-American musicians, but we cannot tell much about the original music itself from these appropriations—except that its relation to the body and its affective qualities appealed to those with access to notation.[11]

The blues seems to have emerged from many different kinds of musics, including shouts, spirituals, gospel hymns, field hollers, ritual laments, dances, and virtually every musical genre that African Americans had encountered. Whatever its history as a strictly oral practice, we can trace the genre with confidence only after it entered into writing. The first "recording" of blues per se came from the pen of W. C. Handy in 1912, who was promptly granted the title "Father of the Blues."[12] But even as Handy was composing his blues, a far more powerful form of writing—sound recording—was making its first appearances, and it is to this technology that we owe most of what we know about blues history.

It is important to keep in mind that recording and its commercial distributing networks did not merely preserve this music; it also actively shaped the blues as we know it. We cannot, in any case, recover whatever it was that existed before notation and recording crystallized it into something like its standard format. Among the first commercial successes of the new medium were the recordings of the blues queens, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ida Cox—women who blended modes of performance borrowed from church, rural entertainments, vaudeville, and urban popular idioms when they sang songs such as Handy's "St. Louis Blues" and their own compositions. The Mississippi Delta bluesmen of the late 1920s and the 1930s, many of whom were discovered by recording agents scouring the South for material to supply the burgeoning market of black consumers, had been heavily influenced by early commercial recordings.[13] Even so "authentic" a musician as Robert Johnson learned in part from listening to Bessie Smith on 78s, and he tailored his own songs to accommodate the three-minute limit of sound-recording technology.

In other words, no matter how deeply we excavate the blues in search of a bedrock of pure folk music, we always find the mediating presence of the culture industry.[14] Yet, as George Lipsitz has argued with respect to popular culture and ethnic identity over the course of this century, uncovering commercial interventions in such a genealogy does not discredit it.[15] For it has not been despite but rather *by means of* the power of mass mediation that the explosive energies of the blues managed to spread and develop in as many directions as it did; even so influential an artist as Ma Rainey was unknown outside the South until Paramount Records signed her in 1923.[16] And while the threat of cooptation always accompanies the commercial media, so do the possibilities of worldwide distribution, dialogue across the barriers of class and race, and the unpredictable responses and tangents of development that can proceed from such heightened visibility and audibility.

We often underestimate the impact of the technology of writing on medieval music or of commercial printing on culture since the Renaissance, but it is much more difficult to ignore the cultural explosion made possible by twentieth-century innovations. With sound recording, a previously silenced group, which had been represented to the broader public (when at all) only through European notation, descriptions, and imitations, could begin to explore and literally to broadcast their own various approaches to self-representation. To be sure, these new voices had to negotiate with those who regulated the industry, and the abuses that resulted have sometimes seemed to outweigh the triumphs. Yet this chain of negotiations has had the effect of altering in an African direction the worldwide history of music, the body, sensibilities, and much else.

TWELVE-BAR BLUES

Viewed from a European vantage point and with European criteria, the blues might seem impoverished. Indeed, a more rigid convention is difficult to imagine, as a three-phrase harmonic pattern with a two-line

poetic scheme is repeated in verse after verse, blues number after blues number. And yet it is the formulaic status of that pattern that has enabled it to give rise to so many rich and varied repertoires, that allowed it to function so effectively as what literary critic Houston Baker calls a matrix of African American memory, to sustain personalized improvisation, to maximize communication and the immediate appreciation by listeners of even the most minute inflections.[17]

I have chosen one of the best-known blues—the opening verse of W. C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues," as performed by Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong—to serve as a schematic model for the blues procedure.[18] For each line of lyrics, I have indicated the underlying harmony for each successive bar, along with common alternatives. Even when performed by a single musician (as in the example below by Robert Johnson), each four-bar section operates on the basis of a call/response mechanism, with two bars of call followed by two of instrumental "response."

Line 1:	I hate to see	the ev'ning sun go	down	
(1–4 mm.)	I	IV (or I)	I	I^7 (V of IV)
Line 2:	I hate to see	the ev'ning sun go	down	
(5–8)	IV	IV	I	I
Line 3:	It makes me think I'm	on my last go	round.	
(9–12)	V	IV (or V)	I	(V^7)

Unlike the harmonic practices of European classical music (which is where individualistic expression is most often registered), the changes in the standard twelve-bar blues serve as a dependable, little-changing background that articulates the formal divisions within the lyrics and heightens the rhetorical distinctions among the lines of text. Typically, the first phrase is harmonically static, beginning and ending as it does on the tonic, though it may be inflected to IV in bar 2. Following the two-bar "call" (the verbal statement), the "response" stays

grounded on the tonic, though a seventh often enters in preparation for the move to IV.

The second phrase repeats the first line of text, but this time it begins on IV. The "call" takes place in this other harmonic region, then returns to I for a cadence at the beginning of bar 7; the "response" maintains this area of repose. To be sure, the alternation between these two closely related chords—I and IV—creates only a slight degree of tension. Yet it allows for two quite different interpretations of a single line of text: the stable "call" of the first line gets unsettled by its response, leading to a reconsideration of the "call" in the second line, cast now in the new light of a changed harmonic context. A blues singer will usually convey subtle but distinctly different implications of that line when she or he presents it a second time with the harmony tilted slightly askew. Moreover, the second "response" stabilizes by returning to the tonic rather than pushing toward reorientation as in the first line. Thus, even if these fundamental harmonies ensure maximal security, such minimal alterations permit a significant shift in tone. The result is something like the harmonic equivalent of a cross-rhythm, with textual sameness and harmonic sameness held in tension against one another.

The most dramatic contrast comes with the beginning of the third line, which delivers the consequent—the anticipated punchline—to the twice-stated first line of the lyrics. This moment is highlighted by a move to V, which usually relaxes after a bar to IV, and then returns back to I. Note that the harmonic rhythm gradually accelerates through the three segments of the blues: the first line sustains a single area for four bars, and the second spends two bars each on IV and I. Now the harmonies begin to shift every bar, producing greater animation, and placing a strong accent halfway through the "call." In fact, the "call" this time may move through three harmonies, V-IV-I, underscoring the sentiment expressed there; if the first line throws out a proposition, the second mulls over it, and the third draws emphatic conclusions.

Harmonic closure arrives punctually at the beginning of bar 11, yet musicians typically undermine that sense of an ending by stepping

away from I to V^7, then building momentum through a "turnaround" that pushes forward into the next cycle. These junctures between verses count as among the most important musical challenges for performers, as they work to arouse a desire for continuation. A good blues band can keep going indefinitely—all night long, as they often boast—by converting what is technically an additive structure into an ever-changing process in which every detail "signifies." Like Scheherazade, blues performers learn how to imply certainty, then suspend it long enough to hook the listener into anticipating another round. And still another. If (unlike Scheherazade) their lives don't depend on the success of their strategies, their livelihoods do.[19]

This simple procedure turns out to be exceptionally resilient, capable of undergirding the most varied of subjects, affects, and styles. If individual blues chords do not operate on the basis of deviation for purposes of expression (as, for instance, an unexpected Neapolitan or a move to ♭VI might in a Schubert song), they do underwrite a powerful rhetorical structure, and the dynamic they chart has been refined by many generations of performers interacting with audiences. While our attention focuses on the imaginative nuances displayed by each new instantiation of the blues, the facilitating pattern itself counts as the most important signifier in the lot: it acknowledges a social history, a lineage descending from a host of tributaries. And with each verse, each performance, it reinscribes a particular model of social interaction.

Within the context of each particular manifestation, however, few people listening to the blues pay much attention to the pattern itself. If the pattern guarantees coherence and the survival of collective memory, it also hovers in the background, accommodating and articulating (as though "naturally") the project at hand. Thus in order to appreciate how the blues operates as a cultural force, we need to examine closely some specific moments and tunes.

It would be absurd to try to treat a genre as pervasive as blues comprehensively in such a short space. My purpose here is to try to demonstrate a critical approach that takes into account the conventions of

blues and historical context, as well as the particularities of the music itself. Accordingly, I will confine myself in this chapter to addressing three tunes only, representing women's Classic Blues, Delta blues, and the blues-based rock of the late 1960s. I will return to the blues in the final chapter when I deal with contemporary compositions by John Zorn, Prince, and Public Enemy that engage once again with blues patterns—no longer as the conventional space they inhabit but as the locus of shared cultural memory, available for citation in the production of new meanings.

BESSIE SMITH: "THINKING BLUES"

Bessie Smith was known during her illustrious career as the Empress of the Blues. Like many of the black women who became stars during the first decade of mass-mediated recording, Smith regarded blues as only one of several marketable genres. For although born and raised in Tennessee, she learned about blues not from oral tradition but from her mentor and rival Ma Rainey; Rainey in turn had learned this mode of expression—at least according to her testimony—from a young girl whom she overheard singing to herself after one of Rainey's tent shows, sometime during the first decade of the century. Rainey incorporated blues into her act (Ma and Pa Rainey, "Assassinators of the Blues," with the Rabbit Foot Minstrels) and found that her audiences responded enthusiastically when she offered them what they perceived as their own music. Smith absorbed both style and format, then, from a context devoted to public entertainment, and when she moved into more urban environments, she continued fusing blues with the popular songs of vaudeville and with a newly emerging idiom known as jazz.

As I have already mentioned, by the time blues started showing up in written or recorded form, it already had merged with commercial enterprises. Yet there exists a cultural mythology (stemming largely from the 1960s and for reasons we will explore later) that wants to trace a pure lineage of blues from a cluster of rural, male blues singers

recorded in the 1930s. And that mythology tends either to erase the women who first brought the blues to broad public attention or else to condemn them for having compromised that pure lineage with commercial popular culture.

But Simon Frith and Howard Horne have suggested that the reason for this marginalization might involve even more complex cultural tensions. If the blues came to represent an unassailably virile form of masculinity to British rockers (the musicians largely responsible for the mythologizing of Delta blues), then women could not be acknowledged at all in the canon—let alone as its progenitors. Frith and Horne go on to explain that this association in England of blues/rock with manliness may help account for why so few women art-school students in the 1960s turned to music for self-expression; they became, instead, the vanguard of feminist visual and performance artists.[20] Although these are the concerns of a later and very different group of listeners/practitioners, they have, in effect, shaped the ways we now usually understand the historical role and contributions of women blues singers.

Purity and authenticity were rarely urgent matters for working black musicians who had to negotiate with real conditions—the securing of gigs, audiences, recording deals—or else face destitution. And prevailing conditions differed considerably according to gender. Male bluesmen often took the option of roaming through the region, playing on the streets, in juke joints, or at festivities as opportunities arose. As a result, many of them remained closely tied to and sustained by the traditional community. Women did not have access to the same kind of mobility, and few became itinerant musicians. Yet with the increasing instability of the southern black population at the turn of the century—the massive migrations to northern cities motivated by poverty, Jim Crow laws, and lynchings—women, too, often were compelled to leave home. By and large, however, they sought the security of steady employment. As Daphne Harrison has shown, many of the performers who came to be celebrated as the blues queens were displaced young

women who found they could patch together a living performing in traveling minstrel shows, vaudeville, urban clubs, and (after the industry reluctantly agreed to try black women singers) the new medium of recording.[21]

What resulted was an explosion of female creativity that animated the 1920s—one of the few such moments in Western music history. These women and the market they helped produce exerted significant cultural and economic power for about a decade. As *The Metronome* reported in January 1922 (a scant two years after Mamie Smith recorded the first blues number), "One of the phonograph companies made over four million dollars on the Blues. Now every phonograph company has a colored girl recording. Blues are here to stay."[22]

If the blues produced under these conditions bear traces of its social contexts, that makes it no different from any other kind of music. Rather than hearing women's jazz-and-pop-flavored blues as corrupt, writers such as Hazel Carby, Daphne Harrison, and Toni Morrison have treated it as a genre that registered with keen accuracy the shocks and jolts of early black urban life, including the first direct encounters of the black population with the pressures of capitalist economies.[23] If some of us prefer to turn to the rural bluesmen in an imagined pastoral setting, it is partly because we can thereby pretend to retreat from the harsh realities of industrialized modernity.

One of the extraordinary contributions of so-called Classic Blues is its articulation of desire and pleasure from the woman's point of view. Throughout the span of Western culture, women have been spoken for more than they have been permitted to speak. And given the tendency for women to be reduced to sexuality and the body, many female artists have tried to avoid this terrain altogether.[24] As a result, vocabularies of the body and of erotic feelings have been constructed principally by men, even when they are projected onto women, as in opera and much popular music. Thus the blues queens offer an unparalleled moment in the history of cultural representation. As Carby puts it:

> What has been called the "Classic Blues" . . . is a discourse that articulates a cultural and political struggle over sexual relations: a struggle that is directed against the objectification of female sexuality within a patriarchal order but which also tries to reclaim women's bodies as the sexual and sensuous subjects of women's song. . . . The women blues singers occupied a privileged space; they had broken out of the boundaries of the home and taken their sensuality and sexuality out of the private into the public sphere. [25]

Accounting for how and why this happened is very complex. On the one hand, African-based cultures tend to treat the body and eroticism as crucial elements of human life: the shame or prurience that attends sexuality in so many European cultures is often absent. But on the other hand, the bodily components of African American culture have repeatedly been misconstrued within the dominant society.[26] Because black women were often defined as oversexed by whites,[27] it was risky for them to sing explicitly about desire: entrepreneurs in the culture industry cheerfully exploited the stereotype of the libidinal black female in posters, sheet music, and staging (recall, for instance, the salacious marketing of so brilliant a performer as Josephine Baker); and singers who lacked clout sometimes were pressured into prostitution, which resided just next door to entertainment, as Billie Holiday's painful memoirs make clear. They also encountered severe castigation from the black middle class, which often adopted the mores and attitudes of white bourgeois culture.

This was yet another set of issues that had to be negotiated with great care by each female performer, within each song. Despite the personal dangers and social controversies, however, these women left us an invaluable legacy revealing how female pleasure, sexual independence, and woman-to-woman address could sound—a legacy Angela Davis does not hesitate to identify as feminist.[28] Several of them, including Rainey and Smith, even celebrated their bisexuality in their lyrics.

I want to focus now on "Thinking Blues," one of Bessie Smith's own blues numbers, which was recorded in New York in 1928.[29] Smith's lyrics in "Thinking Blues" deal with some of the central themes of

women's blues: broken relationships, remorse, and pleading. Yet in contrast to some of the male-composed lyrics she also performed superbly, "Thinking Blues" articulates a vision of female subjectivity that balances self-possessed dignity with flashes of humor and a powerfully embodied sense of the erotic; simply the stress on the verb "to think" in the opening and final lines presents a different kind of experience from the passive suffering often ascribed to women in general and Smith in particular.[30]

BESSIE SMITH: "THINKING BLUES"

Did you ever sit thinking with a thousand things on your mind?
Did you ever sit thinking with a thousand things on your mind?
Thinkin' about someone who has treated you so nice and kind.

Then you get an old letter and you begin to read,
You get an old letter and you begin to read,
Got the blues so bad, 'til that man of mine I wanna see.

Don't you hear me, baby, knockin' on your door?
Don't you hear me, baby, knockin' on your door?
Have you got the nerve to drive me from your door?

Have you got the nerve to say that you don't want me no more?
Have you got the nerve to say that you don't want me no more?
The Good Book says you got to reap what you sow.

Take me back, baby, try me one more time.
Take me back, baby, try me one more time.
That's the only way I can get these thinking blues off my mind.

Bessie Smith, "Thinking Blues." Used by permission of Hal Leonard Corporation.

As is the case in many blues numbers, "Thinking Blues" suggests a possible narrative framework but moves freely among many forms of implied address from verse to verse. Sometimes she hails the listener as though in conversation ("Did you ever sit thinking?"); at other times, she seems to retreat into soliloquy ("Then you get an old letter"); and finally, she speaks as though directly to the man whom she has evidently left and whom she wants back. As she approaches him, she moves from tentative questioning ("Don't you hear me knocking?"), to audacity ("Do you have the nerve to say?"), to demands ("Take me back, baby").

Thus while there is a clear rhetorical shape to the sequence of five choruses—a move from public address to internalized reflection to simulated encounter, a steady increase in intensity—the blues convention that underlies the piece minimizes the narrative component of the music itself. What we get instead is a series of meditations on a single situation, as Smith returns to the problem nagging her with a new approach in each verse. The repetitions suggest personal obsession, but at the same time, her use of the blues invites the listener to identify with her predicament. What she sings sounds utterly familiar: we can relate. As John Coltrane once said, the audience heard "we" even if the singer said "I."[31] She invokes and brings into being a temporary community that bears witness to and empathizes with her subjective expression, made intersubjective by her use of shared codes.

Yet as transparent as it may seem, her performance refuses to offer a single easily identified affect—even within any particular verse. The structure of the blues, in which the first line of each chorus occurs twice, permits her to shift her implications radically from moment to moment. She couches each statement within an apparently limitless range of ambiguities and ambivalences—she lives a gray area, never truly giving anything away even while suggesting a whole range of possibilities.

At times her moans seem to spell grief, but in the next moment a similar glissando will suddenly turn into a sly, insinuating grind. On "Have you got the nerve to say that you don't want me no more?" is she seducing? Groveling? Taunting? And taunting her lover or herself? This sentence is a central event in the song, and she turns it every which way but loose. Yet what is she saying underneath all those layers of irony? The final line, "Take me back, try me one more time," clarifies a great deal—this is what she wants; no more indirection. But while her words may plead, the power of her delivery and her nuances

destabilize the potential abjection of her appeal. This lady is in charge, even if she "ain't too proud to beg."

In "Thinking Blues," the musicians elect the option of remaining on V for bars 9 and 10 rather than moving down through IV. We may never know who chose to do it this way, but the rhetorical effect is to maintain a single, steady affect through the last line until the moment of cadence in bar 11. Smith's delivery of each verse's final line takes advantage of this detail by driving all the way through rather than releasing the energy in stages, and it becomes especially insistent in verses 3 ("have you got the nerve to drive me from your door?") and 4 ("the Good Book says you got to reap what you sow").

In this recording, Smith is accompanied by some of her favorite sidemen: Demas Dean on cornet, Fred Longshaw on piano, the incomparable Charlie Green on trombone. All three were jazz musicians—Green played regularly with Fletcher Henderson—and the performance presents a fusion between the demands of jazz ensemble-playing and the more intimate qualities of the blues. One of the most obvious jazz elements is standardization: in order to facilitate group improvisation, the blues pattern here (and elsewhere in Classic Blues) has been regularized, so that each chorus follows the twelve-bar progression.

Consistent with the blues, however, is their style of bending pitches, rhythms, timbres, and rhetorical conventions to signify on the standard pattern. The song is structured according to call and response, with Dean and Green answering Smith in turn on alternate lines, thus playing up the asymmetries already inherent in the pattern. Each instrumentalist carefully links his contributions with Smith's words and expressive decisions: in other words, all elements of the song—whether sung or played—are vocal in conception and execution. Green and Dean never tire of intensifying or ironicizing Smith's inflections. Green tends to get down with her growls and innuendoes, while Dean contributes astringent, strutting countermotives that keep Smith and her trombonist from spiraling too deeply into the funky zone. Even

Langshaw—whose principal task it is to maintain the harmonies and the groove at the piano—throws in subtle melodic comments and echoes here and there.

Not only do Smith's three instrumentalists amplify the various shadings of her delivery (they act as extensions of her utterances), but they also serve as an exemplary cluster of listeners who react audibly to her calls, thus granting her the social legitimation of community. If technology had permitted a live performance, we would also hear actual listeners lending their support (as in the Swan Silvertones tune discussed in chapter 1) through sympathetic moans, appreciative hoots for the double entendres, and responses such as "Sing it, Bessie!" or (as we would put it today) "You go, girl!"

ROBERT JOHNSON, "CROSS ROAD BLUES"

When the blues queens proved to be commercially viable, recording companies sent agents out in search of other talent that would appeal to the African American market now being aggressively cultivated. At the same time (the late 1920s and 1930s), folklorists such as Alan Lomax also began traveling through the South in hopes of recording and preserving musics that were in danger of disappearing with the massive migrations north and the onslaught of the mass media. What both commercial scouts and ethnomusicologists found were large numbers of itinerant musicians who performed for various occasions within black rural communities.

Unfortunately, the Great Depression brought to an end the boom that had carried Bessie Smith to fame, and recording companies grew reluctant to gamble on unknown genres or talents. Thus much of what was collected from rural bluesmen circulated only as "race" records designated exclusively for the African American market or as field recordings harvested for purposes of ethnographic study. In the late 1930s, John Hammond—an executive at Columbia Records and a

blues aficionado—began to mount prestigious concerts of such musicians, along with jazz figures. Around that same time, musicians who had migrated to northern cities were developing urban versions of downhome music that would become extremely influential. Many later blues stars (e.g., Muddy Waters, B. B. King) learned their trade from those earlier musicians—often through recordings. But the bids for commercial success by the Delta bluesmen had occurred at precisely the wrong time.[32]

Robert Johnson figures foremost among this group. Held up as a legend by Waters and made into a virtual god by the British rockers who rediscovered him in the 1960s, he spent his short career playing gigs throughout the South, with side trips to Chicago and New York. In the mid-1930s, Johnson sought out a recording agent, who undertook two sessions with him: three days in November 1936, two in June 1937. In all, he cut eleven 78s, one of which ("Terraplane Blues") sold reasonably well within the southern race-record circuit. But by the time John Hammond tried to recruit him for his 1939 Carnegie Hall concert, Johnson was dead—apparently poisoned by a jealous husband.

Johnson's posthumous reputation rests on an LP released by Columbia in the 1960s. Executives at Columbia speculated that rock'n'roll had generated a market that might be receptive to rock's forerunners, and they turned to their archives for possible materials. Later in this chapter I will discuss some reasons why Johnson became an idol for musicians in England. But for now I want to examine one of his most celebrated cuts, "Cross Road Blues."[33]

ROBERT JOHNSON: "CROSS ROAD BLUES"

I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees,
I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees,
Asked the Lord above "Have mercy, save poor Bob if you please."
Standin' at the crossroad, I tried to flag a ride,
Standin' at the crossroad, I tried to flag a ride,
Didn't nobody seem to know me, everybody pass me by.

The sun goin' down, boy, dark gon' catch me here,
Oooo, boy, dark gon' catch me here,
I haven't got no lovin' sweet woman that love and feel my care.
You can run, you can run, tell my friend boy Willie Brown,
You can run, tell my friend boy Willie Brown,
Lord, that I'm standin' at the crossroad, babe, I believe I'm sinkin'
down.

One of the first things that strikes the ear in "Cross Road" is the peculiar, almost throttled intensity of both guitar and vocal sounds. Although Johnson recorded several very erotic, seductive, slow-hand blues, his posthumous fame rests with these rather more tortured numbers. An affect of dread and entrapment pervades this tune—partly the result of his strangulated, falsetto vocals and his uncanny replication of that timbre on the guitar. Moreover, Johnson's percussive guitar pulse, which locks in at the eighth-note level, allows almost no sensual movement: even though Johnson's singing constantly strains against that beat, the listener's body is regulated by those short, aggressively articulated units. The guitar thus seems to represent simultaneously both oppressive outside forces and a desperate subjectivity fighting vainly for escape.

Another factor contributing to the effectiveness of "Cross Road Blues" is its elastic sense of phrasing. Because he performs by himself, Johnson has no need to follow the standardized organization of ensemble blues, whereby each line receives four bars. Instead, phrase-length becomes one more element he can manipulate rhetorically. Typically, in "Cross Road" Johnson lingers after the first line, as his call is met with a varying number of guitar riffs that seem to obstruct his progress. The presentation of the second line operates similarly, with erratic extensions. But the final phrase often sounds truncated, with some bars of three rather than four beats. And no sooner does he achieve the conventional closure of the culminating line than he plunges on, as though dissatisfied, back into the maelstrom. He grants little relief here—as

though hesitation at the cadence would mean that the devil (to whom Johnson's peers believed he had sold his soul in exchange for his guitar technique) would claim him. This phrase irregularity, then, is not a sign of primitivism (he had listened to Classic Blues on the phonograph as much as anyone, and many of his other numbers adhere to the twelve-bar paradigm), but rather a parameter he bends as willfully as pitches, rhythms, and timbres: even the meter expands and contracts to accommodate his rhetorical impulse.

As idiosyncratic as "Cross Road" may be, it relies on the blues format both for its affective quality of obsession and for its public intelligibility. Indeed, Johnson takes for granted that his audience knows the harmonic framework within which he operates: the changes themselves are often only suggested as he concentrates instead on the pungent guitar riff that haunts the song.[34] No longer just a glorified accompaniment pattern or the expected response to fill in the time between vocal lines, the riff comes to dominate "Cross Road," serving double duty both as the amplification of the vocalist's affect and as the object of dread against which he strains. The cross-rhythms set up within the guitar seem to allow no airspaces, no means of escape. Unlike "Hellhound Blues," another of Johnson's songs of metaphysical entrapment, there are no moments of relief—no ribald references to making love while awaiting doom. Instead we are locked into two-and-a-half minutes of concentrated horror—intense social alienation, images handed down from African *vodun* (which holds the cross road to be the terrain of Legba), and the entirely justified fear of what might well befall a black man in Mississippi in the 1930s caught outside after sundown.

Since the 1960s, blues musicians such as Johnson have been elevated as the authentic wellspring from which parasitic, commercially contaminated genres drew their strength. Yet, as George Lipsitz has argued so eloquently, this dichotomy accomplishes little more than ideological mystification.[35] To be sure, Johnson's audience was predominantly composed of southern rural African Americans whose vernacular was blues. He never garnered the prestige to negotiate seriously with a broader, mixed public. Yet it seems quite certain that he happily would have done so, given the opportunity. He was very much a product of his moment in history: his music was influenced by what he had access to by means of recording and radio; he performed Tin Pan Alley songs at his gigs; he drew on the latest technologies (automobile engines, the phonograph) to create some of his most memorable tropes; he sought out recording agents himself. Had he lived, he would probably have moved north and participated in the transformation of traditional blues into R & B. To hold him as the authentic measure against which to condemn both his successors and female predecessors is to cling to a shredded mythology of Romanticism that ought to be laid to rest.

CREAM, "CROSSROADS"

> White folks got money,
> Colored folks got all the signs.
> Signs won't buy nothin'. (1845)[36]

My third example requires that we jump from the rural South to the English art schools of the 1950s and early 1960s. For one of the most unlikely events in recent cultural history involves a group of disaffected art students (including Keith Richards, Pete Townsend, Freddy Mercury, Jimmy Page, Charlie Watts, Cat Stevens, and Eric Clapton; Mick Jagger was from the more upscale London School of Economics)[37] who embraced traditional blues as their own musical language and turned it into what became known in North America as "the British Invasion." Their motivation had at least as much to do with their own context as with the particular music they embraced to form their identities. Yet there are reasons why they chose blues rather than any of the other culturally distant musics available.

The bohemian subculture flourishing around art schools in the 1940s had adopted Dixieland jazz as a sign of proletarian sympathies and resistance to commercialism.[38] When bebop broke on the scene, English jazz aficionados split between those who advocated the "progressive" sounds of modern jazz and those who sought authenticity in "trad" (i.e., Dixieland). In the 1950s, the debate shifted ground somewhat, as John Mayall started to push the blues as an even more authentic source than jazz. Many younger students, who wanted to mark their distinction from the earlier generation, followed Mayall and recreated much the same debate, but now with blues representing authenticity against the commercialism of jazz *tout court*. (This may be difficult for us to grasp now that bebop has come to represent high modernist intellectual rigor in contrast to the simplicity of the now-overexposed blues. But such are the ironies offered up by history.)

It now became fashionable for art students to denounce jazz; John Lennon said of jazz, for instance, "I think it is shit music, even more stupid than rock and roll. . . . Jazz never gets anywhere, never does anything, it's always the same and all they do is drink pints of beer."[39] In place of jazz, they began to exalt the new blues-based rock'n'roll of Chuck Berry, the first model for the Beatles, Rolling Stones, and Clapton. Then they began to look back to acquaint themselves with Berry's musical ancestors. Concerning this conversion, Clapton said:

> At first, I played exactly like Chuck Berry for six or seven months. You couldn't have told the difference when I was with the Yardbirds. Then I got into older bluesmen. Because he was so readily available, I dug Big Bill Broonzy; then I heard a lot of cats I had never heard before: Robert Johnson and Skip James and Blind Boy Fuller. I just finally got completely overwhelmed in this brand-new world. I studied it and listened to it and went right down in it and came back up in it.[40]

Although few of the British art-school students had previous experience with music, many of them acquired guitars and began learning to play—virtually in front of the indulgent coffee-house audiences who shared their enthusiasms and political associations.

In these various debates among English fans, neither side had a particularly clear sense of black culture in America; they used their musical allegiances to meet their own needs.[41] Yet it was significant that it was the music of black males they idolized, for African Americans were thought to have access to real (i.e., preindustrialized) feelings and community—qualities hard to find in a society that had so long stressed individuality and the mind/body split. Moreover, in contrast to what politicized art students regarded as the feminized sentimentality of pop music, blues seemed to offer an experience of sexuality that was unambiguously masculine. This was no mean consideration, for the English had regarded music-making as effeminizing for nearly 500 years.[42] Suddenly it was possible for British males to participate in music without the homophobic stigma of what Philip Brett has theorized as "musicality" attaching to them.[43] But the brand of masculinity that resulted from this identification with black music differed considerably from its model. As Ian Chambers has observed, the rebelliousness of the British bluesmen "tended to take the form of reducing the ironic cast of the blues to a blatant obsession with male sexuality."[44]

Meanwhile Mayall continued to mine the archives for earlier manifestations of blues and to recover obscure race records of the previous thirty years. Some of the old bluesmen were found to be still active as performers, mostly in urban clubs. Overnight Muddy Waters, Howling Wolf, B. B. King, Buddy Guy, and others became celebrities in England—an unanticipated turn of fate they were happy to exploit. For instance, Big Bill Broonzy, who had long played electric blues, converted back to acoustic and developed a "raw" style of delivery in order to satisfy this new audience's demand for ever-greater purity: "authenticity" became his ticket to commercial success.[45]

It was within this highly charged context that Keith Richards and Eric Clapton discovered the newly released Columbia LP of Robert

Johnson. As Richards said later, "To me Robert Johnson's influence—he was like a comet or a meteor that came along and, BOOM, suddenly he raised the ante, suddenly you just had to aim that much higher."[46] Clapton described his experience with Johnson's music this way: "It was as if I had been prepared to receive Robert Johnson, almost like a religious experience that started out with hearing Chuck Berry, then at each stage went further and deeper until I was ready for him."[47] To both, it was not only Johnson's extraordinary musicianship that drew them but also what they took to be his freedom from commercialism. As Clapton says,

> I played it, and it really shook me up because it didn't seem to me that he was particularly interested in being at all palatable, he didn't seem concerned with appeal at all. All the music I'd heard up till that time seemed to be structured in some way for recording. What struck me about the Robert Johnson album was that it seemed like he wasn't playing for an audience at all; it didn't obey the rules of time or harmony or anything—he was just playing for himself. It was almost as though he felt things so acutely he found it almost unbearable.[48]

What a place to encounter the "Who Cares If You Listen?" line![49]

Clapton passed through a number of British blues bands, working on his guitar skills and listening carefully to Johnson. Eventually he created the always already legendary band Cream with drummer Ginger Baker and bass player Jack Bruce. Cream was noted for its live performances, in which members of the band would improvise in response to audience feed-back—feed-back heightened for purposes of the Dionysian fervor cultivated in the late 1960s by hallucinogens. It was around this time that Clapton began to eclipse his idols, as the motto "Clapton is God" appeared scrawled on walls throughout Europe and North America. Although they created much of their own material, they also covered some traditional blues numbers, including Johnson's "Cross Road Blues."

Cream's version, titled "Crossroads," retains Johnson's lyrics, with a substitute verse (about taking his "rider" or lover to Rosedale) taken from another of Johnson's blues, "Traveling Riverside Blues":

> I'm goin' down to Rosedale, take my rider by my side,
> Goin' down to Rosedale, take my rider by my side,
> We can still barrelhouse, baby, on the river side.[50]

And the model of Johnson's organizing riffs became indispensable to Cream's modus operandi. But the band replaces Johnson's eerie, strangulated riff in "Cross Road" with one that boasts a driving, propulsive beat and an insistent aeolian seventh-degree that announces their refusal of pop-oriented tonality. This riff returns throughout the song, pounding out the tonic whenever it appears.

Several aspects of Cream's performance depart more significantly from Johnson. First, their presentation of the blues pattern is absolutely regular, like the Chicago blues bands rather than Johnson. This is in part because of the presence of an ensemble and also because of the way blues practices had solidified by that time. One can't really imagine a rock band attempting to duplicate Johnson's erratic performance—at least not before the progressive rock bands of the 1970s and thrash metal groups of the 1980s.

Second, the structure of Cream's version articulates a brand of individuality in which self is pitted against society (even as it contributed to and drew from the sensibilities of the counterculture society of the 1960s). In Johnson's version, imagination is manifested in the particularities of his expression; he affirms the convention of proceeding through a series of identically shaped verses, but he signifies constantly throughout the entire number, forcing us to dwell on each moment, each detail as it comes. By contrast, the Cream recording minimizes expression within the verses in order to showcase the virtuosic solos for which Clapton became idolized, thereby reshaping the additive process

of the blues to create an overarching formal trajectory. Clapton's solos operate like those in a concerto or bebop combo, as he strains forward in increasingly more extravagant figuration before yielding to the communal ritornello.[51]

Two solo choruses occur after the verse about Rosedale; then after repeating that verse, Clapton pulls out the stops and plays three choruses that threaten to derail the song with his rebellious individualism. During the solos, Jack Bruce's walking bass contributes to the sense of instability and urgency. The return to the final verse about Willie Brown, which served as the chilling culmination in Johnson, here becomes an aftermath during which listeners can begin to wind down after the ferocious display of improvised pyrotechnics they have just witnessed. Cream pushes the envelope of Johnson's strophic organization, imposing on it the dynamic, climax-oriented shape typical of European-based narratives.[52]

Accordingly, the prominence of the vocal quality of Johnson's performance—even in his guitar playing—and his emphasis on the imagery of the lyrics have been inverted in Cream. Virtually everything in the Cream version revolves around the primacy of the instrumentals, especially in the riff and Clapton's individualistic solos. His singing is fairly perfunctory, even a shade self-conscious ("Crossroads" is the only song in which he contributed lead vocals on *Wheels of Fire*). And the staggering range of timbres employed throughout by Johnson—sonic evidence of his body's intimate engagement with the music—disappears except during the solos. Not too surprisingly, Cream has "hardened" the blues; those elements that signified the body in its vulnerability (whether in vocals, cross-rhythms, or timbral shadings) are exchanged for a driving beat, a narrative trajectory in the music, and the display of alienated Romantic virtuosity.[53]

Thus the priorities of the genre changed when it was adopted by British rockers—as they had, for that matter, when the blues passed

from Bessie Smith to Robert Johnson. That the principal interests of the British differed from those of the African American musicians they initially idolized became clear when musicians and critics alike announced that they were ready to leave their black mentors behind and move forward into art rock. As Motown historian Dave Morse complained in 1971: "Black musicians are now implicitly regarded as precursors who, having taught the white men all they know, must gradually recede into the distance, as white progressive music, the simple lessons mastered, advances irresistibly into the future."[54] The mind/body split—temporarily suspended—returned, motivating the critical dismissal of black dance-oriented music: the British had received access to their bodies by means of their alignment with African American music; but after a point, they felt they had to rescue that music from the body.

When middle-class kids and British art students "universalized" blues by making it the vehicle for their own alienation, many black musicians chose to develop other modes of expression. For some of them, in any case, the blues had come to recall times of rural poverty and victimization—the genealogy sedimented into the blues had moved to the foreground for them, drowning out other registers of meaning. Thus it is no coincidence that rap musicians have worked to construct a different heritage, tracing their roots through sampling and quotation back not to the blues per se but to James Brown and soul—a genre of black music that emerged during the decade when white rockers arrogated the blues unto themselves. For African Americans the blues was always just one particular manifestation of a number of deeper elements that live on in other genres. It was never a fetish, but simply a vehicle for expression. When historical conditions changed, when it became reified, it could be left behind.

To be sure, the blues as a genre still exists intact. Many of the old bluesmen lionized in the 1960s—B. B. King, Buddy Guy—continue to play concerts.[55] Some of the 1920s blues queens, such as Alberta

Hunter, were rediscovered by feminist historians in the 1970s, and women's blues has enjoyed a rebirth with artists such as Etta James and Bonnie Raitt. Moreover, a neo-blues trend may have started with the emergence of younger musicians such as Robert Cray. Even those not identified with the blues continue to find it an invaluable point of reference, a repository from which they may draw gestures, moods, evocations of a variety of times past.

But the way we tell the history of the blues is often shaped by that period of British enthusiasm. Although the enterprise of British rock was certainly not untouched by the desire for commercial success, an ideology of noncommercial authenticity that first led Clapton and others to champion the blues permeated their self-images as rebels against capitalism. It continues to inform many of the rock critics who emerged at that same time as the historians, theorists, and arbiters of popular taste who justified this particular enterprise.

Yet whatever reservations one might harbor concerning that moment in blues history, it is now part of the permanent record. And some of its results were, in retrospect, quite startling. For instance, this fusion between African American models and British aesthetic priorities permitted the first truly international wave of English musical creativity since perhaps Elizabethan times. Moreover, it was in the wake of this fusion that the blues became inescapably a necessary chapter in the history of Western music: one could no longer even explain how white, European males came to compose the music they contributed without a detour through the Mississippi Delta.

This is not to suggest that black music deserves legitimacy only insofar it is found to be of use to Europeans or white Americans. Indeed, I would claim that the musical innovations that have most shaped people in the course of this century have principally come from African Americans, who have given the world a legacy that richly demands (and is finally receiving) attention in its own right. But it is hard to draw the line any longer between various strands of music in North

America and Europe, for they have shared the same geographical and temporal spaces, responded to the same historical conditions. And in the second half of the twentieth century, many prominent Western musicians—white as well as black—have come to identify themselves as descendants of African American traditions in addition to or rather than the classical canon. Thus the odd designation of black music as "non-Western," which might have seemed reasonable at one time, was no longer even remotely defensible after the 1960s.

There is no Hegelian reason why this should have happened. This merger occurred as a result of a number of unlikely circumstances—the technology of recording, which made possible (though not necessarily probable) the transmission of African American voices beyond their own times and places; the increasing obscurantism of the European tradition, which created a cultural vacuum; a political faction among British art school students who chose the blues as their symbol of defiance; the explosion of a global counterculture that depended on the demographics of the baby boom and the looming presence of an unpopular war. None of these or their impacts could have been predicted, nor was blues the necessary vehicle, even though the specific qualities of the blues drawn upon—its ability to galvanize community, engage emotions, and animate the body—indicate that the choice was not arbitrary either. Yet music history has always lurched along (I won't say advances) by just such circumstances: we impose the illusion of a smooth narrative unfolding only long after the fact.

In the next chapter, I want to examine one of those sequences in Western music history that seems to flow smoothest—the music of the Enlightenment—in terms that parallel those I have just brought to the blues. For it is not just the procedures of popular music that develop ad hoc according to unforeseen contingencies but also the most "purely musical" elements in the canon. Yet I hope to have established that this process of grabbing established conventions and arranging them according to the needs of the moment can be artistically powerful and

culturally consequential—especially if we pay close attention to the signifying devices engaged in each tune as well as the historical contexts that make them meaningful. If we musicologists often have difficulty grasping how music and social conditions interact, if we still sometimes believe that adhering to conventions means the surrender of individuality and expression, we can learn a great deal by thinking blues.

CHAPTER 3

What Was Tonality?

At first glance (and maybe second and third as well), eighteenth-century European art music would seem to have little in common with the blues. Not only do the musical practices themselves bear scant resemblance to one another, but the temporal, geographical, and social locations of the personnel involved—disenfranchised African Americans versus composers working under the patronage of Italian courts and German churches—demand radically different modes of historical analysis. Yet just as many artists during our own era have found the blues a compelling template for musical and cultural expression, so eighteenth-century musicians embraced with great enthusiasm the particular cluster of conventions we call tonality.

We know these conventions so well that we scarcely notice them except as technical devices, which is one reason I have chosen to put them up next to the blues. By juxtaposing these highly conventionalized discourses from two very distant cultural contexts, I propose to defamiliarize temporarily the musical premises we in musicology most often accept as "purely musical." As with the blues in the last chapter, I will ask how eighteenth-century procedures intersected with and helped to structure the social world in which they played active roles. My other reason is less arbitrary. Among the musical cultures to which we in