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## ON BLUES

*"The blues jumped a rabbit, ran him a solid mile  
When the blues overtook him, he cried jes' like a natch'l chil'."*

OLD NEGRO BLUES.

"Blues" signifies one thing to one person, something else to another. The word suggests mood music and depressed spirits; it evokes apparitions of that languorous ballroom dance of twenty-odd years ago or worse, the mock plantation scenes beloved of musical-comedy writers with their score or so of black-faced minstrels whooping and strumming in unlikely abandon.

It is, in brief, a word so misused as to have been stripped of the greater part of its meaning. From Elizabethan times, the word has denoted a state of despondency, both here and in America, and the Negro named his "dissatisfaction" songs after the mood that begot them. Sometimes the blues is personified by Negro singers

*"Good mornin', Blues, Blues, how do you do?  
I'm doin' alright, good mornin', how are you?"*

*"When I woke up dis mornin', Blues walkin' round mah bed  
Went to eat mah breakfast, Blues was all in mah bread."*

Even among musicians confusion exists. For the word "blues" is akin to 'jazz' or "ragtime," in that it betokens a kind of music and, more properly, a way of playing. Like them, it has been for long at the mercy of fashions in public taste.

To-day, nine out of ten laymen have but the sketchiest notion of what the term stands for, and if this note clears up a few of the more widespread misapprehensions its purpose will have been served.

To musicians, "blues" has "shop" qualities. Even so, its connotations vary and are often indiscriminately stressed. To them it denotes, first and foremost, a music form and a harmonic 'formula, and this pattern is recognised as a foundation form of jazz. Indeed, by virtue of its rhythmic, modal, harmonic and melodic characteristics, blues may justly be considered the essence of jazz.

But the word's meaning is not restricted to that. Most jazz musicians imply more than a semi-traditional music pattern in their use of the term. A definite, usually plaintive mood is implicit in the name which also carries overtones of the original blues. At first, blues was singing music, only to be played incidentally on whatever instruments happened to be handy, and, although many years have passed since the music enjoyed its classic era, it has retained much of its vocal identity. To-day, when blues is introduced as a topic of conversation, "singing the blues" is still the phrase that comes uppermost in the jazzman's mind.

Another significant use of the word, one which prevails among Negro jazzmen, is exemplified in the common phrase: "A good jazzman always plays blues!" The statement does not imply that the good jazz man limits himself to set themes of, say, twelve measures in length, but rather that he applies blues treatment to all his material no matter what its form. In that sense, formal design is subordinate to an emotional attitude—the *blues*, which manifests itself musically in a number of ways.

First, then, an attempt must be made to delineate the blues pattern and consider a

few of the musical devices commonly employed by singers and players in order to impart "blueness" to their performance.

The blues is a traditional American Negro song in four-four time--the beats being evenly stressed--which has taken definite shape in eight- twelve- and sixteen-bar verses.

Among the thousands of them recorded by collectors and record companies are a small percentage having a fluid form (no doubt the unaccompanied singer was not in the 'habit of adhering to any set formula), while, of the rest, the twelve-bar variety predominates. This is the pattern preferred by the jazz-man for instrumental purposes, but there are many noteworthy blues like "Careless Love" and "How Long Blues" having the eight- or sixteen-bar structure, which were much in favour with pioneer jazzmen and are old tunes as blues tunes go.

Harmonically, the blues is founded upon the tonic, dominant and sub-dominant chords of the major scale, other chords being rarely employed by "authentic" blues musicians. In the modern jazz band version, however, a diversity of chord progressions can be heard, these having been built-up over the general harmonic framework.

The characteristic blueness of the songs is gained largely by the use of a slightly flattened third against a major chord in the accompaniment, this providing an unexpected "minor" effect which has been termed a blue note. Much use is also made of the dominant seventh chord in blues harmonies.

There is, among Negro singers, a tendency to avoid correct pitch when encountering the third and seventh of the major scale, and this "wavering" pitch imparts a sour quality to their singing. W. C. Handy, who tried to capture the effect on paper, has thus described it "The primitive Southern Negro as he sang was sure to bear down on the third and seventh tone of the scale, slurring between major and minor . . . I had tried to convey this effect in "Memphis Blues" by introducing flat thirds and sevenths (flow called blue notes) into my song, although its prevailing key was major; and I carried this device into my melody as well."<sup>1</sup>

Sung, or played solo by wind or string instruments, the blue note sounds like a note deliberately played off pitch. On the piano, intervals are fixed and unvariable so that blue notes can only be approximated, and for that reason the instrument is not an ideal medium for blues playing.

The incidence of the "wavering" third and seventh in American Negro music has been satisfactorily explained by Ernest Borneman, in one of his papers on the subject: "When faced with music in the diatonic major, the African will tend to become uncertain wherever the third or seventh or any of their chords are approached. He will tend to skid around them by violent vibrato effects until they reach scalar value and become effective as sharps and flats." Pointing out how such tendencies finally crystallise into new scalar patterns, Borneman concludes: "Out of one of these scales emerged the whole tradition of American jazz."<sup>2</sup>

This expressive intonation, then, like the rhythmic attributes of the blues and its peculiarities of *timbre*, may be regarded as an African survival. All three are qualities that can be found in a

(1) *Father of the Blues*, by W. C. Handy, The Macmillan Co., New York.

(2) *Anthropologist Looks at Jazz*, by Ernest Borneman; *Record Changer*, April, 1944. (In booklet, *A Critic Looks at Jazz*, Jazz Music Books, London, 1946.)

great deal of the Afro-American music which preceded jazz- folk blues, spirituals and other gospel songs, and in plantation shouts and work songs. It is only in these

existing outside America or among white U.S. communities, it has been aptly styled "Afro-American".

#### BLUES AS NEGRO FOLK-SONG

Besides the significance the word holds for jazz musicians 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 forefathers' secular music.

To the student and collector of folk-song, blues is a handy designation for the greater part of the music sung by an authentic blues singer, whether his material takes the twelve-bar shape, any of the variants, or whether it wanders on in the way of those undeveloped blues shouts which appear to have neither beginning nor end. The important qualification is that blues must be an individual's comment on feelings and events connected with earthly existence.

As a convenience, American Negro folk-song can be separated into two compartments - religious and secular. These lend to sub-division into two more groups: songs that are sung in concert, and those sung solo. Like the plantation holler and folk-ballad, blues fall each time within the latter group.

In rudimentary state it must have resembled certain of the slave seculars and a line of descent could, no doubt, be traced from modern blues straight back to these chants. A comparison of the lyrics of each points a relationship in the matter of temperament.

Many slave songs carried a note of protest, most often covert since the *slavocracy's* temper bordered upon constant hysteria. Among innumerable meaningless stanzas would often be found one voicing the singer's discontent and even his awareness of better conditions existing elsewhere. A nonsense verse might have been repeated *ad libitum*:

*"Jaw bone eat and jaw bone talk  
Jaw bone eat with knife and fork."*

And then be followed by:

*"Corn bread rough and corn bread tough  
Ain't got no money got corn bread tough."*

*"Way down yonder by Jaybird town  
People don't work till the sun goes down."*

Other songs commented more openly

*"De ol' bee makes de honeycomb  
Deyoung bee makes de honey  
De niggers make de cotton and corn  
En de white folks gets de money."*

After Emancipation, such sentiments were more freely expressed in work-blues by folk Negroes who had exchanged absolute bondage for a similarly ineluctable system of economic slavery.

*"Slabbery an' freedom is mos' de same  
Lord, no difference hahdly cep' in de name."*

*"Well, it makes no difference how you make out yo' time  
White man sho' to bring a nigger out behin'."*

*"If you work all de week an' work all de time  
White man sho' to bring nigger out behin'."*

*"White folks use whip an' white folks use trigger  
But 'twere Bible an' Jesus made slave of de nigger."*

And to-day, the plight of the Negro peasant is emphasised in one of Joshua White's poverty blues

*"Well, I work all the week in the blazin' sun Lord,  
I work all the week in the blazin' sun  
Can't buy my shoes, Lord, when my pay day comes."*

*"I ain't treated no better than a mountain goat  
I ain't treated no better than a mountain goat  
Boss takes my crop, and a poll tax takes my vote."<sup>2</sup>*

Considered historically, blues songs are just outside the classic folk era which may be said to have closed around 1850.

(1) Text from the Asch recording of 'Corn Bread Rough.' by Huddie Ledbetter.

(2) Text from the Keynote recording of "Southern Exposure," by Josh White.

Emancipation, with its new-found freedom of movement for Southern Negroes, stimulated the growth of worldly songs, and the period the late 1870's to the close of that century was the age in folk-blues was in its ascendancy.

Now, it is often claimed that blues is purely urban music. But in old folk-blues much of the metaphor suggests a rural derivation. Despite the constant reshaping of lyrics through the years, it is sometimes possible to track down early versions of popular blues. And it is illuminating to discover that the couplet:

*"You never miss the water till the well runs dry  
You never miss your baby till she says good-bye."*

started life on a more rustic plane as

*"Ain't miss my salt water till my well went dry  
Ain't miss my goat till she said good-bye."*

The blues idiom abounds with illustrations drawn from country life. "A good-looking woman make a cow forget her calf," or the variant: "Good-looking woman make a rabbit chase a hound," are just two of the scores of examples which spring readily to mind. Among numbers of blues founded on folk-ballads are several that had their origins in country life. One of the best known-"Bo' Weevil Blues"-comes from the Texas cotton fields and has been sung everywhere that the bug settled.

From the ballads, and especially the wealth of "bad man ballads," the blues singer

borrowed much of his material. He created a compound song which told of the exploits of his folk heroes and memorable events in local history. This song type could aptly be dubbed "the epic blues," for it bemoans natural and man-made disasters-floods, cyclones, slumps in farming, the depression, the boll-weevil plague, the war, race riots, lynchings, even notorious miscarriages of justice like the Scottsboro trial. And songs of the same kind have been composed about Joe Turner, John Henry, Railroad Bill, Steel-Drivin' Sam, Casey Jones, Stackalee, and many another mighty figure of Southern history or mythology. Again, in more recent times, these documentary blues have commemorated popular Negro figures like Joe Louis, blues-singers Bessie Smith and Leroy Carr, and band leader, Walter Barnes.

(1) "Stars Fell on Alabama," by Carl Carmer.

A clue to the style is given by the titles of some of these songs "John Henry Blues," "Southern Casey Jones," "The Death Leroy Carr," "Joe Louis Blues," "Joe Turner Blues," "Blues," "Southbound Water," "Homeless Blues," "St. Louis Cyclone Blues," "Mississippi Blues," "Pearl Harbour Blues," "W.P.A. Blues," "Charity Blues," and "Pink Slip Blues."

One personal song, "East Chicago Blues," carries a passing reference to that tragic race disturbance which swept across East St. Louis in 1919.

*"East Chicago's on fire, East St. Louis is burnin' down."*

And the Scottsboro case, the trial, and subsequent conviction, of provenly innocent Negroes on a false charge of rape in 1931, was grimly exposed in the "Death House Blues," which pictures the hapless victims of Alabama State Law confined in Birmingham jail:

*"Seben nappy heads wid big shinin' eye  
All boun' in jail and framed to die."*

There, "framed" is the operative word. Sometimes the piece was sung as: "All boun' in jail and boun' to die," but substitution of the word "framed" immeasurably strengthens the dramatic force of the song. When one of the accused was asked: "Were you tried at Scottsboro?" he at once rejoined "I was *framed* in Scottsboro."<sup>1</sup>

Almost the entire American Negro community saw the trial as a repressive measure carried out to ensure maintenance of the South's deplorable *status quo*. The blues echoed this feeling

*"Worse ol' crime in dis damn lan'  
Black skin a-coverin' po' workin' man."*

*"White folks a-settin' in great Court House  
Lak cat down cellar wit no-hole mouse."*

And the pretentious workings of the State murder machinery were recognised for what they were-organised legal lynching:

*"Jerge an' jury all in de stan'  
Lawd, biggity name fo' same lynchin' ban'."*

(1) *Scottsboro-and Other Scottsboro*, by Nancy Cunard, Negro. Wishart & Co.. London, 1934.

(2) "Death House Blues" *Proletarian Literature in the United States an Anthology*

The Negro has had his fill of Southern justice. Everywhere in his songs are unexpected references to the law, bearing witness to his realisation that it is, in one sense, an instrument of the white man's determination to "keep the nigger in his place." And, as Lawrence Gellert wrote, there is always road repairing to be done by convict gangs. "Work on the roads, of course, is in proportion to the number of convicts available. Hence no crime goes long unpunished. Not if there can be found a stray Negro within a hundred-mile radius." Thus, the protest blues

*"Standin' on de corner, wan' c/cm' no harm  
Up come a p'liceman grab me by de arm  
Blow a li'l whistle, ring a li'l bell  
Here come de p'trol waggon runnin' la/c hell.*

*"Jedge he call me up an axe mah name  
Ah tel' him fo' she' ah wan't to blame  
He wink at de 'liceman, 'liceman wink too  
Jedge say a/i got some work to do.*

*Working on de road gang shackle boun'  
Long long time Jo' six mont' roll roun'  
Miserin' fo' mah honey, she mis'rin' Jo' me  
But, Lawd, white folks won't let go o' me."<sup>1</sup>*

#### **WORK-BLUES**

Blues has been considered here as a jazz foundation form, as a way of playing, as folk-song and as protest song. Now, its unfolding from the elemental holler to the shape recognised to-day as standard must be traced; its verse patterns examined, and its quality as folk-poetry hinted at.

The "lonely" temper of the blues song has already been stressed. Blues is naturally the refrain of a solitary labourer or loungeur who sees the world in a personal light and sings of things as *he* sees them. (From this generalisation must be excepted the more objective blues-ballads which partake of English and Irish origins to a greater extent than the rest.) 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.

(1) Quotation and song text from *Negro Songs of Protest*, by Lawrence Gellert, 'New Masses' (quoted in *Negro*).

Until recent years, these work-songs were to be heard still remote areas of the South and they may yet be sung on Negro prison farms, where Alan Lomax heard them and recorded some choice examples. "The songs," writes Lomax, "are addressed to the sun and the choking dust, to the stubborn mules, to the faithless woman of the night before, to the hard-driving captain and they concern the essential loneliness of man on the earth ... (In them) the listener will notice the same use of falsetto stops, the same drop of the voice at the end of lines, that characterise the blues. The singers generally do not refer to these work-songs as sung at all."<sup>1</sup>

The holler was linked with a job of work, just as the choral field-songs had been. Not in its content, which was presumably related to affairs close to the heart of the singer but by virtue of its power to release him temporarily from the boredom

induced by a monotonous task. The labourer's attitude to his singing was expressed by one of them, who declared "Law, Cap'n, I's not a-singin', I's jes' a-hollerin' to he'p me wid my wu'k. You mus' be stringin' me to call that singin.'" <sup>2</sup>

Although that remark could have been an instance of the Southern Negro's tendency to belittle his own ability in conversation with white men (a tendency in direct opposition to the boastful front shown to members of his own community) it was probably a just portrayal of the singer's state of mind. Among field workers, the urge to sing was largely involuntary and it was perhaps exceptional if the singer fully understood the words he used. His attitude, towards these song creations has been further summarised

"My blues ain't got no time, ain't got no place, don't mean nothin' to me an' nobody else. But, good Lawd, I got de blues, can't be satisfied, got to sing . . . When I gets 'bout half high as Georgia pine, 'bout forty wid de cleaver, an' 'bout half 'sleep, I sings slow blues, don't know what I'm singin', don't know what they mean. Still they has singin' feelin' an' I puts all sorts an' kinds together . . .

And they had singing feeling indeed, as anyone familiar with *The Library of Congress Folk Music Albums* (edited by Alan Lomax)

(1) Notes to Album IV, *Folk Music of the U.S.* (Afro-American Blues and Game Songs), Library of Congress, Music Divs., Washington, D.C., 1942.

(2) *The Negro and His Songs*, by Li. W. Odum and G. B. Johnson, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, N.C., 1925

(3) Text from *Negro Workaday Songs*, Odum and Johnson, quoted in *A men can Ballads and Folk Songs*, John A. and Alan Lomax, Macmillan.

will readily admit. The holler had in it everything that was in early blues except coherent lyrics and the instrumental accompaniment. And a comparison of, say, Huddie Ledbetter's rougher songs like "The Black Snake Moan" and "'Fore Day Worry (Melotone and Perfect recordings) with Jim Henry's unaccompanied "I Don't Mind the Weather" (*Folk Music of the South.*, Congress library, Album IV) shows that the gap them is a very small one.

At first the work-blues simply eased the singer's mind, there being little indication of conscious desire to produce verse or even intelligible lyrics. As the prison-farm warden or plantation boss might put it "Them niggers is always hollerin' like that down in the fields"; some perhaps asserting that "a singin' nigger's a good nigger," for that belief has outlived the episode of slavery.

#### THE STANZA

The blues at its embryonic stage comprised one line repeated as often as the singer wanted. For variety the pause between sentences was sometimes filled out with extravagant vocal effects or shouts of encouragement from the listeners. In time, the songs took on a definite meaning and a loosely standardised shape.

By the close of last century the verse-form had more or less crystallised. That most commonly used was a line of verse fitted to a musical phrase two or four bars in length which would be repeated three times to make a four-line stanza. Despite its elementary structure, this blues sounded far from unadorned. The untrained singer embellished his performance with a seemingly endless variety of accents and tonal inflections. And the reiterations were never identical with the initial statement. For example, where the singer first declared "Ef trouble was money I'd be a millionaire"; his second line would probably begin "Well, ef trouble . . ." and a subsequent line might consist of a series of exclamations followed by part of his theme, as, for

Other variants would be *"Now, ef trouble . . . Ef trouble was money, Lawd, I'd be . . . Oh, ef trouble . . . Yes, ef trouble."* Or simply, "Trouble was money

A favourite device is the inclusion in the repeat line of the word "Said" or "Says."  
A typical stanza begins:

*"Brooks runnin' into the ocean, chit', ocean runnin' into the sea Said brooks  
runnin' into the ocean, ocean runnin' into the sea."*

These examples only point a direction in which blues singers depart from the basic lyrics. By means of shades of pronunciation too fine to indicate with words, by shifting stresses, by singing loudly here and more softly there, by resorting to a hundred and one tricks that seem to come naturally to Negro folk-singers, they are able to make each song-line different, and each performance a new experience. About the melodic content of primitive blues, nothing need be said here except that it is hardly more rigid than the lyrics. Every singer has his own version of a tune and a personal style of improvising, so that no two singers sing one tune alike. Blues is part-created *in the performance* from scraps of verse and melody known to the community as a whole. For that reason the music has special appeal for the community. But it is usually respected by them as the momentary invention of the song-maker whose job it is (at that particular time, anyway) to give back to the people their own songs in acceptable form and with new, and often topical, flavouring. The development of the blues stanza can best be shown with the help of sample lyrics. First, was one line sung four times. Then, the same line twice repeated but rounded off by a rhyming fourth-line which, in the song last quoted, would probably have been "Well, if I don't find my baby now, well, gal, you gon' have to bury me."  
Or the stanza may have been made up in either of these ways:

*"Another man done gone  
Another man done gone  
Oh . . . from the country farm  
Another man done gone.*

*"Some folks say de worried blues ain't bad  
That's the miseriest feelin', babe, I most ever had  
Well, now some folks say de worried ol' blues ain't bad  
That's the miseriest ol' fee/in', child, now, well . . . I ever had."*

Until, finally, there emerged the mature form of stanza and chorus:

*"If I feel to-morrow lak I feel to-day  
Gonna pack my suitcase an' make my gitaway*

(Chorus)

*Lord, I'm troubled, well, I'm all worried in mind  
An' I'll never be satisfied an' I jes' can't keep from cryin'."*

All the blues were not composed of four-line stanzas. That was the pattern of most early blues and a common folk-song form before 1900. But from the time when rural Negro communities began to break up, and their members made tracks for town, the agricultural songs had started to lose purity in the formal sense.

With the disintegration of the closely-knit community came relaxed standards of conduct; the authority of the Church was partially undermined; the taboo on secular music became ever less effective, and with a new way of life there occurred general "debasement" of Negro folk-song.

The blues gained popularity as dance music: sung, and played on fiddle, banjo, mandolin, harmonica, guitar, piano or whatever instruments were accessible. Probably the stylised twelve-bar blues took shape in the dance hall rather than in the fields, on the levees, or among street-corner musicians. Certainly it made its appearance a little later than the folk-blues already discussed. There is not enough reliable evidence to justify an attempt at pinning down its beginnings to a precise date, but the period between 1890 and 1900 seems to have seen its advent. For some years before 1910 the twelve-bar blues must have flourished because W. C. Handy had it down on paper by that time. Of his "Mr. Crump" election song, afterwards entitled "Memphis Blues," Handy said: "...The twelve-bar, three-line form, with its three-chord basic harmonic structure (tonic, sub-dominant, dominant seventh) was that already used by Negro roustabouts, honky-tonk piano players, wanderers and others of the under-privileged but undaunted class from Missouri to the Gulf, and had become a common medium through which any such individual might express his personal feelings in a sort of musical soliloquy."<sup>1</sup>

That is typical modern blues ; a twelve-bar chorus divided into three equal parts, to each of which goes a line of verse. Whereas the musical duration of each part is four measures, the singer customarily concludes his sentence on the first beat of bar three-leaving a pause of seven beats to be exploited instrumentally. The freedom of this break, which allowed the accompanist to give rein to his imagination, is with reason considered to have been a vital factor in the birth of the Negro's own instrumental music-jazz. It has been vouched for by song collectors that in primitive blues the break (occurring between lines one and two) was

(1) *Father of the Blues*, Ibid.

often sustained for undetermined periods, presumably while the singer searched for suitable words with which to round off his stanza, and that the singer, or a companion, would hum, shout, whistle, or play extempore to fill this gap. When accompanied by a stringed instrument, by foot-beating or by hand-clapping the vocal blues was more effective, for the rhythm would be suspended during the break. This had the result of encouraging whoever "took" the break to indulge in extravagant turns of phrase and modifications of tempo.

Out of this practice came the jazz break, with its trick effects of tone and violent rubato. In a sense, the blues singer (or his accompanist) played to the gallery when he took his break just as the New Orleans cornetist, trombone or clarinet player did in the early jazz band and sometimes does to-day. By the musicians themselves, the stimulating influence of a "hot" break upon the listener has long been recognised. Speaking of Chris Kelly-old-time New Orleans trumpeter-Henry Allen declared: "When Chris got to the fourth bar," of a blues, that is, "and fell back to the regular rhythm on the fifth bar, everybody would holler and stamp, just the way they do to-day when you play breaks on the blues."

As to lyrics: the three-line stanza offers a singer several possibilities. He can state his theme thus

*"I wanna see do my baby know right from wrong."*

and repeat it for the second and third lines of his stanza. Or, as he does in the vast majority of cases repeat the statement for his second line and supply a third, and final, line, which is complementary to the opening statement

*"I'm a po' ol' boy, long, long ways from home  
Said I'm a po' ol' boy, long, long ways from home  
Well, babe, I'm out in dis wide oi' worl' alone."*

The third line is, in most cases, a rhyming line, but the question of rhymes is not one which exercises the Negro's imagination to any great extent. Among the lyrics cited in this note will be found some that appear to rhyme indifferently when seen on paper. But hear them sung in the soft Southern dialects and the effect

(1) Henry Allen, quoted in *The Duke Ellington Piano Method for Blues*, Robbins Music Corp., New York.

is altogether satisfactory. "Alone" will always rhyme with "home" or "roam" and "blind" with "climb, or "time," in genuine blues. Nor is the matter one of first importance.

Poetic qualities inhere in dozens of blues stanzas which in no way measure up to the standards of rhymed verse, for instance:

*What you gwine to do when Death comes tippin' in yo' room?  
Lord, what you gwine to do when Death comes in yo' room?  
I'm gwine to hang my head, I'm gwine to hang my head and cry."*

And, finally, to dispose of the matter of stanza building, the song-maker can develop his narrative over all three lines. This 'has been done in the renowned "St. Louis Blues," where a woman exults:

*"I loves dat man lak a schoolboy loves his pie  
Lak a Kentuck' Colonel loves his mint an' rye  
Lord, I'll love mah baby right till de day ah die."*

#### TOWN AND COUNTRY

A great many writers on American Negro folklore have objected to the designation of blues as folk-song, saying it is urban music, quasi-folk at best, which is shot through with jazz influences.

The answer is that those who have most closely studied the blues - Professors Newman White, Howard Odum, Guy Johnson, and Alan Lomax, to name a few-have considered blues to be Negro folk-song in essence, although it has its commercial offshoot in the slick offerings of some night club entertainers and recording artists. Alan Lomax terms blues "the Negro folk lyric type *par excellence*. Next to the Negro spiritual it is the most original, and to-day it the most influential of all American folk-song styles. among the folk Negroes of the South they are used mainly for dancing."<sup>1</sup>

And W. C. Handy, who collected the songs from all over the South, codified them, and kept them alive in written form, states emphatically that they are folk-songs which are "essentially racial, the ones that are genuine . . . and they have a basis in older folk-song."

Their roots have already been suggested here. For musical substance they

whatever the Negro has

(1) Notes to Album IV, Lomax, Ibid.

taken he has digested, re-interpreted, and put out as something new-something distinctly his own. His blues also relied Western songs for much of its material, and there is significance in the fact that early investigators found a great many Texas Negroes who knew "social songs" which fell into the blues category. But wherever two versions of a song can be found- one Negro and the other white-they are always as different from one another as could well be imagined, considering their common source.

The blues is a Negro song style; whether applied to material of white or coloured origin it yields a product unmistakably Negro. Blues is rarely sung by white singers and, when attempted, is, in nearly every instance, devoid of those' very peculiarities of timing and *timbre* which are all-important elements.

Blues, then, is essentially folk-music possessing pronounced racial characteristics. The argument that it is exclusively urban music, dependent upon jazz for its vitality, is one that can hardly be maintained in face of the volume of evidence now amassed. The admission that it was one of the basic substances of jazz presupposes its separate, and prior, existence. The fact that whites, who can play hybrid jazz (of the march type) well enough, are out of their depth with traditional blues surely, confirm this musical independence? Modern blues singers have absorbed certain jazz mannerisms since the bulk of modern blues are city-conditioned songs. But that in no way rebuts the music's pastoral origin.

Blues go far back in time, drawing on country *and* urban sources for musical dialect. They relate much of the Negro's social experiences in the Southern states; and, just as the spirituals reveal his religious yearnings, so the blues mirror his temporal desires and day-to-day encounters. Rightly, they' are called Negro workaday songs.

#### **MIGRATION**

The temper of city blues grew out of the Negro peasant's reaction to metropolitan life. Into his old blues was introduced a new note, half cynical, half despairing, called forth by loneliness and disillusionment. Country Negroes took their songs with them when they left the plantations for the cities. Their experiences away from home, away from their traditional background, in a new and unsympathetic environment, caused them to think in nostalgic terms of the old, secure folk ways. Their balladists echoed this disillusionment and nostalgia, and adopted a more satirical mode of expression than hitherto.

Under serfdom, the Negro's knowledge of town life had been limited, for most times a chit was needed before plantation hands dared venture upon the roads at night, and they frequently toiled in the fields from sun-up to sundown or, as their expression had it, "from can to can't"-from the time you can see to the time when you can't! This gave their folk-art the breath of isolation. Whereas slave songs arose from a people in physical bondage, blues matured in conditions (for the coloured American) of comparative freedom.

After Emancipation, liberty of movement and limited opportunity were theirs, and they took advantage of the novel situation to indulge a thwarted travel-ache which brought about a stream of itinerants from middle-South towards Kansas and the West during the late 1870's. One, indeed, so distasteful to the authorities that they took steps to regulate it and peg down labour on the farms where it was most needed

The migration trend continued from farm to city and, in the main, to cities in the South although many thousands of Negroes got away and headed North-towards areas that promised equal opportunity for the black worker. The main stream made West, where lumber and turpentine camps offered large-scale employment. No doubt this accounts in part for the volume of Negro blues, and blues piano styles, that emerged from those regions.

But besides the exodus to the West, and concurrent with it, was a considerable internal movement of population in the deep South. In particular was a re-shuffle of coloured population affecting racial distribution over town and country that had for long been pretty well constant. Something like a half-million Southern Negroes became city dwellers during the decade following the migrations of 1879. And this was the decade that witnessed the amalgamation of folk and city music into a compact and highly-stylised whole known later as jazz. The new music was manifestly urban music, expressive of fast living and distorted values, the like- of which the world had not previously heard. Blues was a component of the jazz amalgam. But it also retained its identity as a separate and flourishing music form.

The effect of the displacement of thousands of rural coloured folk upon the blues has already been remarked. A number of migrants found work in the towns, but many more wandered from place to place in search of employment, and sometimes food and shelter. It was these homeless people who first made blues songs that deal with the vicissitudes of life on the road with exposure to the weather and, in the case of Negro men, with the importuning of women:

*"Oh, oh, please hear my lonesome moan  
I'm a po' boy; long, long ways from home."  
"I'm broke an' I'm hungry, ragged an' dirty too  
All I want to know, honey, is can I go home wid you?"*

For the newcomer to city life, there was the need to adjust himself to the more rapid *tempo* and comparative sophistication of urban existence. His efforts in this direction have been recorded in countless of his blues. Professor Frazier, of Howard University, wrote of them:

"These secular folk-songs of the black troubadours in our industrial society record the reactions of the uprooted folk to the world of the city. In fact, there is hardly any phase of their wanderings and contacts with the urban environments that one cannot find touched upon in their songs."

Among even quite modern blues are to be found many suggestive titles: "P.W.A. Blues," "Fire Department Blues," "Going Back to My Plow," "District Attorney Blues," "Hangman Blues," "Workin' on the Project," "Bus Rider Blues," "Terraplane Blues," "Whiskey Blues," "Hard Up Blues," "On the Killin' Floor," "War Time Blues," "Country Blues," "Milk Cow Blues," "Young Heifer Blues," "Back Home," "Welfare Blues," "Hobo Blues," "Dollar Down Blues," "Chinch Bug Blues," "Brown Skin Woman," "The Santa Claus Crave," "New Way of Livin' Blues," "Arkansas Mill Blues," "Poor Millionaire Blues," "Hard Dallas Blues" and a hundred or two more as homely or as inauspicious.

To the God-fearing Negro-and there can be few more. God-fearing people than the Negro peasantry-all this blues and secular music was sinful stuff. The ordinary, relatively harmless social song was a "devil song," even jubilee singing being considered by some the work of Satan. Dance music naturally fell into whatever category was held to be most sinful. and Negroes from country villages addicted to dancing. or

even the mildest fling, found it necessary to go into neighbouring towns to indulge  
(1) *The Negro Family in the U.S.*, by E. Franklin Frazier.

their fancy. This puritanism on the part of rural Negroes amply accounts for the disrepute in which blues was held away from the towns. In rural communities conduct was closely regulated by custom and, at bottom, by the Church, which looked after the morals of young and old alike.

Mild relaxations were looked upon as major transgressions by the orthodox; ministers were tireless in their efforts to dissuade sinners from singing the folk-songs even to themselves, and when once a Negro found religion he "laid down all sinful ways and put devil songs behind him"-often forgetting that he ever knew any. Baptists in particular were sensible of the need for saving souls, and seemed to direct towards worldly songs that hostility which the newly converted reserve for objects of a former faith. For that reason, no doubt, much good folk-song was stifled almost out of existence. For that reason, too, later generations of investigators experienced the greatest difficulty in getting elderly folk to divulge the old songs they knew.

This Church control naturally influenced the direction which Negro song was to take. It meant that country people went to town for their diversions and there picked up something of the popular music idiom. Such an influence is typified in the case of Huddie Ledbetter, the folk-singer, who tells how he learned his guitar style from the honky-tonk pianists down on Fannin' Street, in Shreveport. Huddie always wanted to go into town when he was young, where they had "pianos and guitars in the barrelhouses." Huddie talks of one of the barrelhouse pianists "He played that boogie woogie. That's where I got that bass- on Fannin' Street. I wanted to play that on my guitar-that piano bass. I always liked to play piano tunes."

And so there were two major reasons for an influx of rural folk-tunes and ideas into the cities of the deep South-the migrations, and the rigid Church discipline which forced music to find an outlet away from home. The wandering communities, or the solitary wanderer, freed from the restraint of village life threw off many of the folk ways and developed a more rational outlook. This outlook has been referred to as providing the emotional temper of many an old blues.

The scale of the migrations, which continued unabated through the first decade of the present century, can be realised from the figures given by Professor Frazier: by 1910, nearly one-and-two thirds million Negroes had migrated from the state of their birth.

(1) Notes to *Asch Album of Leadbelly Songs*, by C. E. Smith, Ascb Co., N.Y.

And between 1900 and 1940, over a million migrated from country to town.<sup>1</sup>

In the lower South, towns most affected by the influx Atlanta, Georgia; Birmingham and Montgomery, Alabama; Jackson, Mississippi; Memphis, Tennessee; and, to a smaller degree, New Orleans, Louisiana. Further North, migrants were attracted to St. Louis and Chicago, in the East to New York, Baltimore, Pittsburg and Philadelphia, and in the West to Dallas, Beaumont, Galveston, Austin and Houston. It was in Southern towns, especially those in the deep South, that the blues flourished.

#### CITY BLUES

*"I got de blues, can't be satisfied . . . got to sing."*

Through the years, "blues" has consistently denoted the frame of mind known as "being down in the dumps" and this finds an echo in the pseudo-blues creations of



*"I was not sick, I was jes' dissatisfied."*

That there are unqualified sorrow blues none would deny. Since the inauguration of recording catalogues designed to suit the taste of the big coloured public the number of them has increased disproportionately, for singers are thus encouraged to bemoan the loss of a good woman with greater frequency than would naturally have been the case. But the bulk of the pre-recording-day blues songs reflected an attitude too tough to permit of wholesale indulgence in misery. For every blues theme after the style of "When my heart struck sorrow de tears came rollin' down," there would be two or three declaring: "Lord, I got de blues real bad, but too *damn mean* to cry!" Somewhere between the two, for feeling, comes the well-loved stanza

*"I had de blues before sunrise with tears standin' in my eyes  
It gave me such a miser'ble feelin', Lord, a feelin' I do despise."*

The over-frequent occurrence of the "my baby left me" theme has been properly attributed to commercial recording influences, but there is good enough reason for the song-maker's allusion to broken homes on many occasions. Largely because of the economic and social set-up in the South, Negro men and women tend to change partners more often than is the custom among their white countrymen. This finds reflection in the blues, seen from both the man and woman's viewpoint. But the subject is treated in realistic fashion with the minimum of romance, often with rough humour. Here is a typical example:

*"Last night I lay down dreamin', you know what I was dreamin'  
all to myself?  
If my baby ain't lovin' me, well now I hope she am' lovin' someone else."*

Blues may not measure up to the spirituals as folk verse but it has a poetry of its own. Its lyric style is mordant. Blues stanzas, couched in the Negro's expressive dialect, are eminently descriptive. For his everyday speech is strikingly picturesque and evocative. Obviously he sees a clear picture of scenes or persons and has the faculty for reproducing it in well-chosen word images. In the same way he expresses concisely and effortlessly his personal emotions, in one line or stanza conveying a mood of wistfulness, melancholy, gaiety or sardonic humour. Brief sentences proclaim his homespun philosophy:

*"When you see two womens always runnin' han' in han'  
Said if you see two womens always runnin' han' in han'  
Thu c'n bet yo' last dollar one's got the other one's man."*

*"If I mistreat you, gal, I sho' don' mean no harm  
Lord, if I mistreat you, honey, sho' don' mean no harm  
I'm a motherless chile an' I don't know right f'om wrong."*

*"Well, all these womens sho' do make me tired  
res, all these here womens sho' do make me tired  
Gotta handful of gimme-mouthful of muck obliged."*

*"Don't vou never get one woman onvo' mm'*

*Lawd, Lawd, one woman on yo' mm'  
She'll keep you in trouble, Oh . . . worried all yo' time."*

The rhyming element in Negro folk-song has already been commented upon and it will be appreciated that the Negro's habit of softening all harsh consonants (and omitting final consonants), and mispronouncing about half of what he says, makes it easy for him to rhyme such unlikely words as "behind" and "going." This is exemplified in the song, "Long Gone Lost John"

*"Lost John built a pair of shoes all his own  
Jes' as good a pair as was ever worn  
They had heels in front and heels behin'  
So you couldn't tell which-a-way Lost John's gwine."*

Since slavery days, Lost John personified the runaway Negro. No doubt the idea of special shoes of the kind described appealed to the Negro's imagination as a smart move, to outwit pursuers. There is this childlike quality in a great many of his songs, simplicity and unpolished humour being perhaps the keynote of his social songs. And some of the simplicity, and most of the humour, has remained a feature of blues right up until the present time.

There is about many blues lyrics an air of unsophisticated wisdom and a good humour which half conceals the underlying significance of the words. Random examples of blues that carry social criticism cloaked in bluff humour are these

*"Well, there's nineteen men livin' in mah neighbourhood (repeat)  
Eighteen o' them is fools an' de other am' no doggone good."*

*"I asked dat pawnshop man what dem three balls doin' hangin' on dat wall  
(repeat)  
Said it's two to one, buddy, you don' gityo' things back outa here at all."*

Writing of Louisiana folk-song in the early nineteen-twenties R. Emmet Kennedy gave this summing up: "In our own the untutored Negro of the South possesses this charm of inherent creative ability to an astonishing degree. He is wonderfully gifted musically, and fairly tingles with poetic tendencies; unconsciously expressing his most commonplace thought in the direct, rhythmic language of true poetry. Crude, semi-barbarous poetry, if you will, but savouring of the real, original essence."<sup>1</sup>

It is not possible to capture the whole charm of these folk lyrics in print. Unless the reader already has a fair acquaintance with the complex style of singing, the irregularities of phrasing, and general metric licence characteristic of blues, he will fail to comprehend the enjoyment which the songs afford to hundreds of zealous collectors. But by exercising his imagination he should surely get something of the unique blues feeling embodied in these typical stanzas (in each case the leading line would be repeated).

*"Yeah, I know somebody sho' been talking to you  
I don' need no tellin', gal, Ijes' watch the way you do."*

*"Say, mah gal's got teeth like a lighthouse on de sea  
Yes. evrv time she smiles. Lord. now she throws a light on me."*

*"Now, I got a good woman an' she ain't long a-tall  
But to tell you the truth, man, she's soft as a butter ball."*

*"She's long an' she's tall, sweet mama jelly bean  
An' she know jes' how to get me out of New Orleans."*

*"Now, I had to go so far, gal, to get my hambone boiled  
'Cos all those Birmingham women let my hambone spoil."*

*"I done more for you, gal, than yo' daddy ever done  
I gives you my jelly, Lord, he ain't give you none."*

*"Sweet babe, I'm gonna leave you, an' de time ain't long  
If you don't b'lieve I'm leavin', jes' count de days I'm gone."*

*"Oh mah honey-baby, says yo' papa am' mad widyou  
'Cos you done fo' me what no other woman kin do."*

*"I'm a-goin' down yonder to de white folks tellyphone  
An' axe 'em fo' to tell you, chil', dat I'm start in' on mah journey  
home."*

(1) *Black Cameos*, by R. E. Kennedy, A. and C. Boni, New York, 1924.

*"Said I thought I heard dat K.C. whistle blow  
Blowin' jes' lak it am' gonna blow no*

*"If I'd a listened to what my dear mama said  
I would'n be here thinkin' 'bout the life I led."*

*"reah, de sun goin' to shine in mah back do' some day  
Says de win' goin' to rise, Lord, an' blow my blues away."*

*"Think I'm goin' down de road where I get more better care I will sho' go, chile, I  
don't frel welcome here."*

*"Went down to de depot, babe, I looked up on de board  
Said dere's good times here-dey's better up de road."*

*"Lord, Igot de blues, got de blues so bad  
Well, I ain't got de gal, man, well, that I thought I had."*

The Negro singer puts "all sorts an' kinds together," mixing stanzas from this blues and that, with here and there an original verse or a new twist to an old one. More often than not a logical relationship between the stanzas is not attempted, for blues songs are rarely narrations. Some tie may exist in the singer's mind which would be discerned by listeners familiar with his subject, but it is probably correct to consider the majority of the songs simply as haphazard collections of verses governed, perhaps, by the prevailing mood of the singer.

There is the local significance to a lot of blues which gives them an intimate quality that cannot be appreciated by outsiders. A singer takes for granted his audience's knowledge of local background. He may make an unheralded reference to "the rhythm club" being "jes' three blocks away," or introduce the name of a famous judge, detective, bandit or prostitute which would be known to his listeners but not to "foreigners." In many cases, happily for the collector, a blues is prefaced by some remark pinning down the location; a leading line will state that "it was down in Memphis, the corner of Beale and Main," or it happened "in Jackson, Mississippi," 'or even in the courthouse or prison where the scene of scores of blues has been laid.

But this distinctly regional flavour of blues goes further than a casual mention of one place or another in the lyrics. At one time each State had its own songs, and each big town too. And the home town of both song and singer might be learned from hearing a performance.' Such distinctions can no longer be but something of an aura still surrounds the New Orleans blues separating them from the products of Memphis, say, or of West. It may be primarily a melodic distinguishing mark, but there it is.

As for the lyrics: they allude most often to those cities that have attracted Negro labour: "Down in New Orleans" "I think I go back to sweet Birmingham" . . . "Rather be in Atlanta" . . . "Hard in Dallas, worse in Memphis, Tennessee" . . . and so on. Sometimes counties are named or the State its elf. The great majority of old blues seemed localised to a few States-namely, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Arkansas and Tennessee. Texas, Louisiana, Florida, Missouri and the Carolinas set the background to a few, and Illinois has inspired scores of blues since Negroes migrated in ever-increasing numbers to Chicago and industrial centres nearby.

*"Nothin' in Chicago, nothin' but a worried mind."*

*"I say Chicago's tight, an' I know I'm right, 'cos there am' no money  
'round  
Tight in Chicago, am' like it used to be,  
Tight Chicago is really worryin' me,  
An' if it gets muck tighter, I'm gonna have to cross the sea."*

#### **BLACK, BROWN AND BEIGE**

It has been remarked how blues singers strung odd stanzas together to make up their songs. This gave the refrains an inconsistency that has proved a barrier to the casual listener's understanding and appreciation of the style. Further incongruities arose from the imperfect transmission of the songs from singer to singer. Until the days of large-scale recording, blues were handed down orally, and this resulted in constant, though gradual modification of the original material. Even in modern times blues lyrics are partly spontaneous, partly traditional, and the traditional lines (or stanzas) are repeated from memory whether they have been borrowed from a recorded or live performance. And this practice naturally admits a margin of error which varies in proportion to the literacy of the singers.

(1) Text from Brunswick recording of "Tight in Chicago," by Mozelle Alderson

The ability of semi-literate folk to compose songs with such ease is no doubt something to wonder at. But it must be realised that the enterprising singer can, and does, make a blues out of odds and ends of song from the store, adding, changing, taking away as he thinks fit according to the impulse of the moment and the needs of

the song. In this he is helped by the numerous well-worn phrases in contemporary use which so aptly and succinctly describe something or someone, or sum-up a situation.

The folk Negro is inordinately fond of these pithy phrases which, indeed, constitute a kind of floating repertory of song lines and ideas. There are hundreds of them which find their way into untold blues, and the experienced listener learns to recognise them and anticipate their arrival. Five common examples of the ready-made blues phrase are: "*Handful of gimme, mouthful of much obliged*"; "*Site's like to make a rabbit hug a hound*"; "*A brown-skinned woman, chocolate to de bone*"; "*Gonna buy me a bulldog to watch me while I sleep*"; and "*Had de nerve to ask me would a matchbox hol' my clo's?*"

When pressed into service by the blues singer, they may be used word for word or with slight variations. Here they will form part of the leading line, there a rhyming response. Often, just the idea is taken and worked into a new *bon mot*. It is interesting to compare these lyrics culled from recorded blues

*"Had the nerve to ask would a matchbox hol' mah clo's?  
I didn't have so many but I had a long long ways to go."*

*"She cooked mah breakfas', well, she throwed it outdo's  
Had de nerve to ask me would a matchbox hol' mah clo's?"*

*"I was sittin' here wond'rin' would a matchbox hol' mah clo's?"  
"Don' want no suitcase, pretty mama, on mah lonesome ol' road."*

On the hound and rabbit theme can be found these, and as many more:

*"Oh, Corrine, she sho' does bring me down  
Takes a red-headed mama make a jack-rabbit hug a hound."*

*"rou's a brown-skinned woman, you's a brown-skinned woman  
You'd make a preacher lay his Bible down  
An' a jet-black woman makes a jack-rabbit hug a hound."*

In similar vein, but with different illustrations, are these:

*"A black-headed gal makes a freight train jump de track  
But a long tall gal makes a preacher 'Ball de Jack.'*

*"Lawd, a blond-headed woman makes a good man leave de town  
But a red-headed woman makes a boy slap his papa down."*

*"A brown-skinned woman sho' smells lak toilet soap  
But a black-skinned woman smells lak a billy-goat."*

The blues singer is very inclined to employ word images that place two persons or scenes in direct contrast. Thus, in the well-known "Frankie and Albert" saga, there is the telling line:

*"Carried him down to the graveyard but they sho' didn' bring him back!"*

It appears that in innumerable blues the contrast is made between persons of varying degrees of colour. On this subject of skin pigmentation there is a wealth of song, much of it frankly humorous, some rather malicious, but all firmly rooted in the colour-based caste system which obtains in America to this day. From Dorothy

Scarborough's book on Negro folk-song comes corroboration of the colour antagonism finding expression in jibes and sometimes song. "There is almost as little social corn-'mingling between the mulattoes and the blacks," she wrote, "as between the whites and the mulattoes."

Besides mulattoes, there are the octeroons, quadroons - known as "quarteroons"- and people of various shades of colour. To the Negro they fall into general classifications such as black, brown and yellow, and it is a widespread failing of the coloured people as a whole that they should look down on blackness, perhaps as a result of the "white supremacy" doctrine. That this has for long been their habit is shown by early observers, of whom one, the actress Fanny Kemble, commented on "this tendency to despise and undervalue their own race and colour, which is one of the very worst results of their (the slaves) abject conditions." She continued: "One of their songs, which displeased

(1) *On the Trail of Negro Folk-songs*, by Dorothy Scarborough, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1925.

me not a little, embodied the opinion that 'twenty-six black girls not make mulatto yellow girl!'"<sup>1</sup>

This has its modern parallel in Barbecue Bob's bragging song

*"So glad I'm brown-skinned-chocolate to de bone  
So glad I'm brown-skinned, I'm chocolate to de bone  
And I got what it takes to make a monkey man leave his home.*

*Black man is evil, yellow man's so low-down  
Black man is evil, yellow man so low-down  
"I walk into their houses jes' to see those black men frown*

*"Y'ellow man won't quit an' a black man jes' won't 'have  
Yellow man won't quit an' a black man won't behave  
But a pigmeat mama's crazy 'bout brown-skin baby ways."<sup>2</sup>*

There are, of course, numbers of songs wherein the opposite viewpoint finds expression:

*"Blackest man in de whole St. Louis  
Blacker de berry sweeter is de juice."*

*"A yeller gal I do despise  
"But a jet-black gal I can't denies."*

It seems likely that slavery conditioned the Negro to accept the white man's analogy between blackness and inferiority to some extent, for his songs often show a tendency to couple black with evil. Critics have explained Alice Moore's "Black and Evil Blues" away by suggesting that she uses the word in the sense of *ill-fated* when she sings: "I'm black an' I'm *evil* an' I didn't make myself."

While this is no doubt a correct interpretation, it could hardly be applied to "Black man is evil, yellow man's so low-down." But there are certainly instances of the word "black" having been used in the sense of evil or unlucky. Sonny Boy Williamson has

a song called "Black Name Blues" in which he declares with transparent bitterness: "I hear my black name a-ringin' up an' down the line." And the opening of one of Blind Lemon Jefferson's

(1) *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation in 1838-39*, by Frances Annie Kemble.

(2) Text from Columbia recording of "Chocolate to the Bone," by Barbecue Bob.

recordings announces that things are "Too bad, mama, to *black* bad!" These are two simple illustrations of the way in which Negro singers alter the meaning of words or, as sometimes happens, return to their original meaning.

#### IDIOM

It must be borne in mind that innumerable slang expressions enjoy wide usage among Negroes. Some are manufactured words, others have legitimate meanings which must be ignored if the listener is to get the sense of the lyrics. Thus "frigidaire" has come to signify a prison (i.e. "cooler") in sundry blues songs. And an innocuous term like "jelly" can have pretty dubious connotations, as in the line "I give you my jelly, he don't give you none." It is similarly used in another blues which goes:

*"I got a gal, she sho' do treat me right (repeat)*

*What I mean when I say right, man, 's three meal a day and jelly at night."*

As in a good deal of English slang, the same word may be used to describe a person embodying that quality, as in the traditional lines

*"If yo house ketch fire an' dey am' no water roun'*

*T'row yo' jelly out de winder an' let de shack buhn on down."*

A typical, often-met example of an adjective which has in the U.S.A. a customary meaning distinct from that which obtains here is the word "mean." To most Americans (certainly to Negroes) the term is synonymous with "unjust," "evil," or "wicked-tempered" and in no way implies stinginess.

A Negro woman boasts that her lover is "a mean mean man, but he's so good to me!" And a railway labourer says of the ganger man: "Lord, mah Cap'n so doggone mean, well he must a come from New Orleans," this being a reference to the general belief that natives of that city are invariably endowed with vicious qualities. As one old New Orleans jazzman told the writer: "Anybody from down there's mean. I come from there myself so I know. Friend of theirs, you alright, but get in their way-man, you better watch out I"

What with the slang, the misuse of words, faulty pronunciations, and the often esoteric nature of their subject matter, blues can be obscure enough to defy understanding by the foreigner. Without some familiarity with American railroads and geography, little could be made of the leading line: "De Southern cross de Dog at Moorhead, mama, Lawd, an' she keep on throo." "Yellow Dog" is the name given to the Yazoo Delta Railroad by coloured people because (it is said) a Negro once asked what the "Y.D." stood for—replied that he never did know "less'n it's for Yeller Dog."

In that way, railway blues (of which there seem to be hundreds) can be more baffling than the rest. The volume of songs built around train themes can be accounted for by the fact that Negroes habitually live "across the tracks" in the coloured section of town, think of the train as a romantic symbol of free movement and escape, and find employment on the railroads in astonishingly large numbers. The songs themselves

"Alabama Bound," "Number 29," "Big Four Blues," "Cow Cow Blues," "Cows See that Train coming," "Passenger Train Blues," "Streamline Train," and "Forty-Four Whistle Blues."

About the time of the depression an abundance of poverty blues came into being, although there had always been songs protesting against hardship of one kind or another. Bessie Smith's "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out," contrasts eloquently enough the opulent and the penniless life, and there are a good many more to be found on records-"Hard Up Blues," "Last Dime," "Hard Times," "Poor Man's Blues" and "Arkansas Mill Blues" being examples that spring to mind. In the last named, Elzadie Robinson sings with impressive depth of feeling:

*"I was lyin' in my bed this mornin' and heard a mill whistle blow lak it was cryin'  
(repeat)  
O1' sawmill has cut all that timber, am' no mo' work for that man of mine.*

And in her "St. Louis Cyclone Blues," she gets over on record the same almost terrifying intensity:

*"De wind was howlin', de buildin's dey began to fall (repeat)  
I seen dat mean ol' twister comin' jes' lak a cannon ball."*

This narrative finishes, in true folk-Negro fashion, on a note of weary resignation

*"De shack where we lived reeled an' rocked but never fell (repeat)  
How de cyclone started, nobody but de Lawd can tell."*

#### **ON RECORD**

During the middle and late 'twenties these fine blues were recorded by Negro-owned concerns, and by the big recording companies for issue on their race catalogues which sold almost exclusively to the coloured public. There was a ready market for blues then, and for good blues about every interest of the Negro, bar his religion. Since the Okeh company made a start around 1920 with Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" (which is said to have sold over seven thousand copies weekly) the different concerns maintained a fairly steady output. A popular blues, "Trouble in Mind," sold in all 700,000 copies of various recorded versions, while the total sale of all Bessie Smith's recordings reached several millions while she was living.

The majority of Bessie Smith's songs were put out on the race lists but she was sufficient of a celebrity, like Leroy Carr, to have occasional releases on the popular label. Her renown can be judged by Columbia's action in continuing to record her through 1930 and 1931 despite the depression that had destroyed, race markets and spelled unemployment to countless blues singers.

Race recordings reappeared as soon as things began to pick up, and Negro Americans once again had something to spend over and above subsistence money. But there were more concessions being made by this time to the taste of the big public-a taste which tended to be prurient with inclinations towards *double entendre*. Instead of a variety of blues speaking in simple and unashamed language of the different phases of existence, the record companies now contrived to issue a succession of blues and near-blues notable for their innuendo rather than poetic imagery.

It is a trend which has robbed the blues idiom of much of its former charm,

although it must be admitted that a good few worthwhile efforts still find their way into the race catalogues

(i) Text from Paramount recordings of "Arkansas Mill Blues" and "St. Louis Cyclone Blues," by Elzadie Robinson.

to-day. Artists like Big Bill Broonzy, Champion Jack Dupree, Baby Doo, Tommy McClennan, Memphis Minnie, Kokomo Arnold, Sonny Boy Williamson, The Honey Dripper, Walter Davis, Jazz Gillum, and Lonnie Johnson are still singing and have recorded more or less recently. And some of the work of retired, or dead, singers remains available. Leroy Carr and Peetie Wheatstraw (the Devil's Son-in-Law) are singers of merit, now dead, whose records can be bought in the States quite easily.

The names of Lemon Jefferson, Blind Blake, Robert Johnson, Sleepy John Estes, Little Brother Montgomery, Tampa Red, Walter Rowland, Bumble Bee Slim, Barbecue Bob, Lee Green, Bessie Jackson, Chippie Hill, Charlie Jordan (and many more) are respected to-day by blues collectors although few of them have recorded during the last decade. Tampa Red has frequented the studios regularly since the days of pre-electric recording, his guitar gracing any number of old sides by good and indifferent singers. Himself a talented vocalist, he has repeatedly descended to petty vulgarities on his more modern recordings so that they are not wholly representative of Red's work.

Of late years there has been a considerable revival of interest in the Negro folk idiom. This has encouraged the record firms, both large and small, to inaugurate a policy of releasing albums from time to time featuring the music of men like Huddie Ledbetter and Josh White—both great singers of blues, work-songs and Negro dance tunes. Along with these have been valuable re-issues of recordings by Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey.

There is little doubt that they are selling primarily to white collectors and enthusiasts to-day; an indication that authentic blues, like true jazz, has almost passed out of currency among the folk who originated the style. In Harlem, and many other vast Negro centres, the evidence points to a growing dislike of the earthy 'folk-style' of, say, a Ledbetter. Perhaps the modern Negro frowns upon any reminder of his former low estate. Certainly his popular acclaim goes to singers like Johnny Temple and Frankie Jaxon, and the blander-toned women such as Rosetta Howard, Georgia White and Blue Lu Barker. This type of singer, consequently, has enjoyed a recording boom. While many of their performances are trivial a small percentage have lasting appeal.

These blues-come-popular songsters are the ones most likely to achieve best-selling status in the race market to-day. But it must be remembered that the peak period of blues (like jazz) on record was reached when the style had little attraction for any but coloured Americans.

The decline in quality of recorded blues no doubt follows a deteriorated public taste caused by the standardisation that is taking place on every cultural level in the U.S.A., Inevitably, radio and cinema chains and syndicated publications tend to impose uniform ideas throughout the land, stifling originality and dissension. But the blanket of culture spread by these mediums need not be one of phoney culture; and in the last few years America has shown signs of waking to the fact of its possession of a healthy folk-art maintained, to a great extent, by the Southern Negro.

#### **BLUES AND THE PUBLIC**

Blues singing is not a forgotten art by any means. It is alive to-day and can be

made to flourish, and the radio networks are beginning to play their part in familiarising millions with songs that despite their American origins are foreign to hosts of U.S. inhabitants. True, the early blues were a kind of regional phenomenon drawing on local custom and events for their flavour, and critics have asserted that the social fabric which nurtured them no longer exists. Like New Orleans jazz, they expect blues to wither and die now that the shifting social background has rendered it "obsolete."

Whether it can survive away from its roots is yet a matter for conjecture, but it seems at least possible that a music so vigorous will withstand transplantation and continue to thrive if given a fair hearing. There is no reason why blues shouldn't tell the story of a large section of the American people (especially the Negro people) in present times, for the singer automatically brings his topics up to date, employing an idiom familiar to his audience.

Contemporary blues reflect a pretty wide range of human emotions and experience. It has been objected that such songs rarely express noble (sic) sentiments like patriotism, and that is partly true. Blues give us realistic glimpses of the Negro who, in all justice, has little upon which to feed his latent love of country. When America goes to war, calling upon its erstwhile "inferior race" to take up arms in defence of freedom and equality, the coloured tenth of the nation is naturally confused. A last war song gave intimation of Negro viewpoint in these words

*"Joined the Army for to get some do's  
Lawdy, turn yo' face on me  
What we're fightin' for nobody knows  
Lawdy, turn yo' face on me."*

And the more recent America at war has been justly satirised. by Negro singers for its defects on the home and fighting fronts

*"In the land of the free, called the home of the brave All I want is liberty-that is  
what I crave."*

*"Went to the Defence factory, tried to find some work to do  
Had the nerve to tell me, black boy, nothin' here for you."*

*"Home of the brave-land of the free  
Don't wanna be mistreated by no bourgeoisie."*

*"Now I want you to gather round, boys, we all gotta go  
There's no use you a worryin', we won't see yo' face no mo'.  
Now you gotta wear a unjform, man, so you can be in style  
You gotta learn to walk straight and tote a rifle, Uncle Sam wants to use you  
a while."*

*"Same thing in the Navy, when ships go to sea  
All they got's a mess boy's job for me,  
Uncle Sam says 'Keep on yo' apron, son,  
You know I ain't gonna let you shoot my big Naval gun.'"*

Songs as vigorous as those do not give the impression of a diving style. The

publishing houses may not have much use for anything but dope in the way of popular music, but the ordinary people should have, and they should take steps to see that a still robust art is not allowed to decay. Fortunately, blues has not had to rely much upon music publishers. Songs have been orally preserved, folk fashion, and in the last two decades made semi permanent on wax. This cuts to a minimum the interference of commercial interests since sheet music is not involved in either process. And, needless to say, the intervention of the orchestrator's art in the simple process of learning a song by ear would not have been beneficial. Recordings afford the collector his main chance to study the style in all its phases. They form a handy reference work to coloured America, for the easiest way to know the people is by listening to their folk-song, and they enlarge immeasurably the singer's audience.

But music cannot be kept alive solely by recording activity; it needs performance to people who are dancing, working or just listening for information or amusement. There are still in the Southern States large numbers of coloured folk in comparative isolation (in regions where cinema and radio are yet something of an innovation) for whom blues fulfils a natural musical function. It is music to dance to and hear and sing. At parties, they sing in turn their favourite blues verses, so that one tune will continue for hours going from mouth to mouth until no one has anything to add. (Here is a case where blues is carefree rather than sorrowful music.) That is real folk-song, the kind which is undeniably dying out. For as these communities become exposed to civilising influences they put the old traditional ways behind them.

What seems to be needed, then, is an extension of the present range of radio programmes and record albums devoted to folksong, coupled with some new measures that will help bring living folk-music before the mass of townspeople. There are already a small number of regional and national folk festivals; the American Music Festival broadcast over a New York Station (part of which was re-broadcast in 1944 from London) and sundry concerts devoted wholly or partly to folk-singing. Apart from these, there have been increasing numbers of union meetings and social gatherings, and political rallies, which have given a platform to the finest living blues singers in the past few years. In a different field, similarly useful work has been done by a handful of night-club owners who have filled their cabaret spots with folk artists like Big Bill Broonzy, Huddie Ledbetter, Josh White, Lonnie Johnson and some of the women singers. And in a smaller way the "hot" clubs and jazz societies help popularise blues singers by presenting them at informal sessions and sometimes at ambitious concerts.

All this plays an important part in building an audience for the folk musician of talent. If more is done in the same direction and an effort made in the proper branches of the entertainment business and especially in the musician's unions, there can be every hope that blues (and, of course, a great many other music styles) will continue to make headway among people who are slowly recovering from the blast of debased jazz to which America has recently been subjected.

If blues retains its vitality, succeeds in breaking the bounds of region and race, overcomes class and colour prejudice, and withal keeps its characteristic simplicity and directness; it will become the pre-eminent American ballad-type of the future. If not, it should go down in history as the ultimate phase of informal song-making in twentieth century U.S.A.

**Some of the facts quoted in the foregoing article were culled from *The Jazz Record Book*, edited by C. E. Smith, Smith and Durrell, NY., 1942; and the section devoted to blues in *The Negro Caravan*, edited by Brown, Davis and Lee. The Dryden Press, N.Y., 1941.**