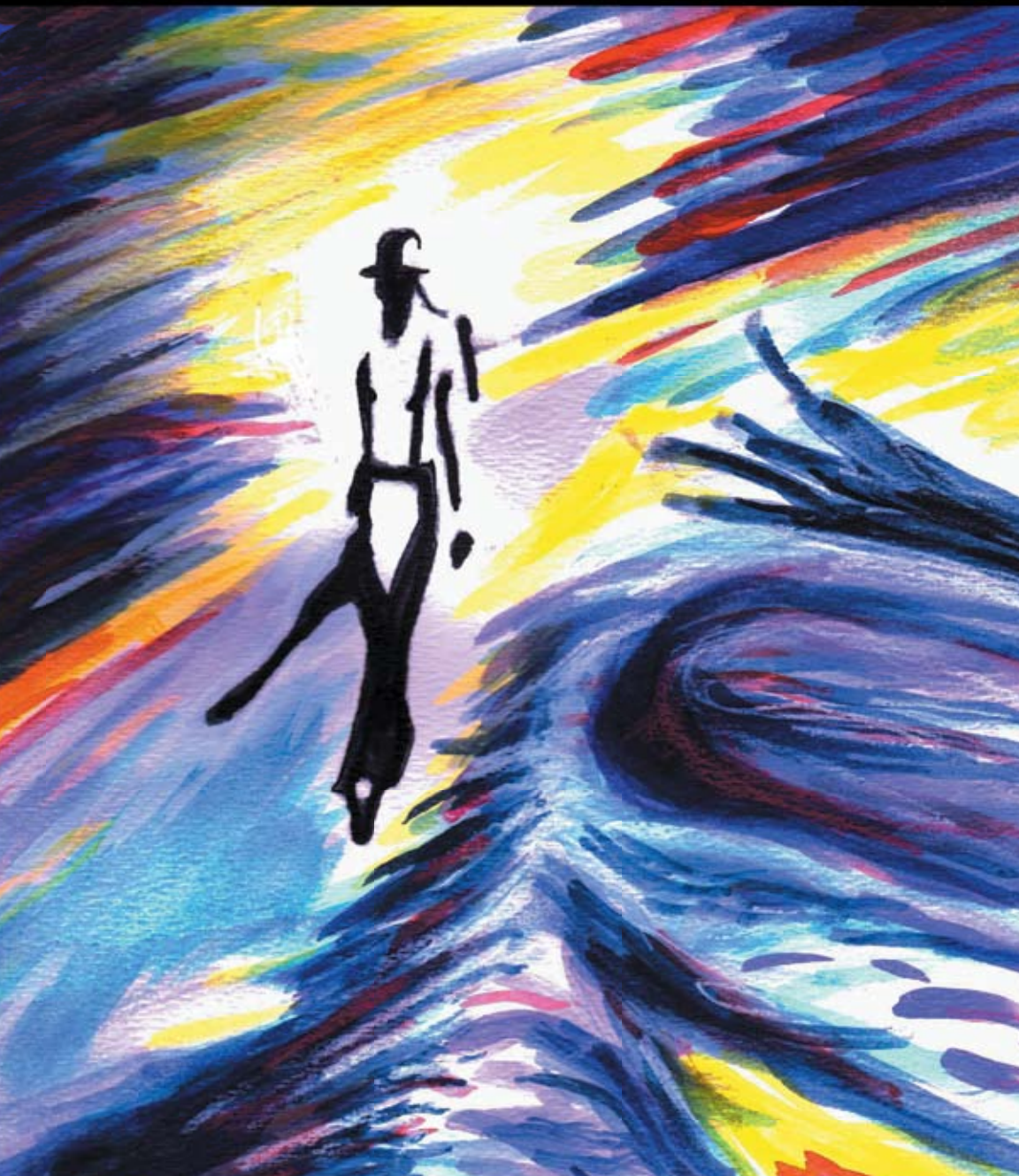
Deep Blues

Human Soundscapes for the Archetypal Journey

Mark Winborn



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Prelude

"Is There Harm in Singing the Blues?"

—Sermon by the Reverend Emmett Dickinson:
Paramount Records, 1930

(Spoken)
I'm speaking to you from this subject
It's no harm to sing the blues
There's so-called preachers all over this land
Are talking about the man or woman who sings the blues
You don't know the meaning of the blues
The blues is only an outward voice to that inward feeling
And way back yonder
When Adam and Eve was put out of the Garden of Eden
To till the earth
He began to sing a song
I don't know what he sang
But I imagine he sang

(Sung)
I didn't know my burden was so hard
Oh I didn't know my burden was so hard
Oh I done made up my mind
Oh how I had some preachin' kind
I didn't know my burden was so hard

(Chanted)
Way back yonder
Uh when Israel crossed the Red Sea
On dry land
And landed on the other side
I'm told that they sang a new song

I don't know what they sang
But I call that the Israelite blues
I imagine they sang
"I just made my escape
And got over yonder"
And way back down -
When Paul and Silas
Was in the Philippian jail
Paul said, "Silas
Uh do you feel like singing"
Silas says "I never felt as much like singing before
In all my life"
I call that the jailhouse blues
They tell me that Silas sing
Or prayed
The old jail reeled and rocked like a drunken man
The chains fell from their hands
The shackles fell from their feet
The old jail doors sprang open
Uh but they done kept on singing those
Jailhouse blues
Way early in the morning
The jailer came
And saw the jail was standing ajar
And he just drew back his sword
To take his own life
Uh but Paul said "Just stay your hand
For we are all here"
I imagine they continued to sing
The jailhouse blues
Way down yonder
Uh when our foreparents was in slavery
They sang George Washington offer his song
The sang Abraham Lincoln on his song
I call that the slave time blues

1

Introduction

"In the beginning was noise. And noise begat rhythm. And rhythm begat everything else."

—Mickey Hart

I started listening to blues music when I was about 13 or 14 years old. I didn't know why I was attracted to the blues but I knew it resonated with something in me as soon as I heard it. The gritty, visceral, deep feel of the blues expressed something for me that I couldn't express for myself. The blues has allowed me to experience these emotions long enough to "get it" on the inside. Bill Willeford calls this influence of the blues the "education of the heart" and sometimes I think of it as deepening or expanding my emotional vocabulary.[1] The blues is a way of maintaining an ongoing dialogue with myself because it allows access to some fundamental aspects of myself which might otherwise remain hidden. The history and tradition of the blues is also appealing; allowing the experience of continuity in felt relationship to, and participation with, the blues tradition.

However, writing about the blues is a difficult task because I am trying to express in words what can only ultimately be experienced aurally. On some level I am uncomfortable with, or resist, the idea of reducing or conceptualizing the blues because the blues is not a thing, an object to be examined; it is an experience. Words cannot fully convey what the blues is about because the blues is about hearing and resonating with the pain, suffering, joy, or sadness in the blues singer's voice. In the final sense, words cannot fully express an understanding of the blues or capture the experience of the blues. This situation is similar to C.G. Jung's statement about images: "Image and meaning are identical; and as the first takes shape, so the latter becomes clear. Actually, the pattern

1 "Abandonment, Wish, and Hope in the Blues." In N. Schwartz-Salant and M. Stein (Ed.) *Chiron: Abandonment,* pp.173ff.

needs no interpretation: it portrays its own meaning."[2] Words and concepts cannot avoid being a reduction of the blues. Author Charles Keil characterized writing about the blues in this way: "There are really no blues critics - the very title seems either self-contradictory or altogether empty of meaning."[3] Paul Garon echoes these sentiments by asserting that we are unable to describe in secondary process terms the nature of our primary process response to the blues.[4] However, while acknowledging these limitations, I will highlight certain aspects of the music which are salient and relevant to my own experience of the blues.

Jungian analyst Paul Kugler hypothesizes that there exist "acoustic images" as well as visual images. If his hypothesis is correct, one could say that the blues operates within a particular set of archetypally based acoustic images.[5] Archetypes are inherent universal potentials to experience aspects of life in a particular manner. Therefore, the archetypally based acoustic images that make up the blues need no interpretation, only an experience of them to potentially constellate a response in the listener. The blues is like a Talmudic statement about dreams: "The dream needs no interpretation, it is its own interpretation." The blues, like the dream, only need a vessel to resonate in. The blues speaks for itself.

Throughout this book I'll be drawing on ideas from the field of Analytical Psychology, the school of psychoanalytic theory and practice created by C.G. Jung, to facilitate the exploration of the blues. Very little has been written about the blues from the perspective of Analytical Psychology: only two works written from a Jungian perspective have been published to date. An essay by Bill Willeford gives a general introduction to the blues and then explores the intimate relationship between the blues and feeling or emotion, both as experience and process.[6] He illustrates this relationship through the examination of archetypally based emotional themes such as abandonment, wish, and hope. Willeford utilizes the attachment and separation processes of the mother-infant relationship to interpret some of the emotional activity portrayed in blues performances.

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2 C.G. Jung, "On the Nature of the Psyche," *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, CW8, par. 402. NOTE: CW refers throughout to *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*.

3 *Urban Blues,* p. 163.

4 *Blues and the Poetic Spirit.*

5 *The Alchemy of Discourse.*

6 *Abandonment, Wish, and Hope in the Blues*.

Another article, by Stephen Diggs, approaches the subject from a significantly different perspective.[7] Diggs frames his observations within the conceptual framework of Archetypal Psychology[8] and he explores the phenomenon of the blues primarily from a collective or cultural perspective. He envisions an "alchemy of race" existing in contemporary America in which the dominant conscious attitude is the "white mind" which is still largely entrenched in the European tradition. Diggs argues that the blues, emerging out of the experience of black African-Americans, is "doing therapy on the soul of Western consciousness" by bringing it into relationship with depression, passion, and Dionysian energies. Unfortunately, Diggs does not explore how Western consciousness has influenced African consciousness; missing an opportunity to examine the possible reciprocal nature of this influence.

There are a few books within Analytical Psychology that deal with more general aspects of music. Books of particular interest are *Music and the Mind*, by Anthony Storr, *Sounding the Soul*, by Mary Lynn Kittelson, and more recently *Music and Psyche* by Paul Ashton and Stephen Bloch (Eds.). Storr's work, the most general of the three, examines the origins and functions of music, the patterns of music, the effect of music on the brain and soma, and the inner experience of the composer and listener. Storr focuses most of his attention on classical music, hence deeply rooted in the Western tradition which, while illuminating, limits the applicability of some of his observations to the topic at hand in our discussion.

Kittelson's work focuses on the broad experience of sound, hearing, listening, and silence, especially as it takes place within the frame of the analytic encounter. She uses the image of "the acoustic vessel" to draw attention to the unique form of *temenos*[9] created by listening at deeper levels to the acoustic patterns transpiring within a therapy hour. Kittelson also explores the role of sound in music, poetry, and other healing arts. Her understanding of the general aspects of sound sheds light on various aspects of musical experience.

Music and Psyche by Ashton and Bloch is an exploration of the interface between music and psyche as mediated through analytic understanding. It is a collection of essays covering a range of topics related

7 "Alchemy of the Blues." *Spring*, vol. 61, pp. 16ff.

8 Archetypal Psychology, developed originally by James Hillman, is a subset of Analytical Psychology.

9 *Temenos* – "A Greek word meaning a sacred, protected space; psychologically, descriptive of both a personal container and the sense of privacy that surrounds an analytical relationship." – (Sharp, *Jung Lexicon)*

to the interaction of music and psyche, from individual psychological transformation to recent findings from neuroscience and the healing powers of music's spiritual dimensions. *Music and Psyche* explores the nature of music's impact and resonance in the psyche, and with psyche's self-expression through music.

While I am sure that there are other works that I have overlooked, the limited number of books and articles discussed illustrates how little work has been done from a Jungian perspective on the interpretation of music, especially the blues. Naturally, there are a number of authors from other disciplines that have written on the psychological, historical, sociological, and anthropological aspects of music as well as works specific to the blues.

Blues and the Poetic Spirit, by Paul Garon is one of my favorite books. Garon examines the blues from the perspective that the blues is poetry and then likens the bluesman to poets such as Robert Frost, T.S. Eliot, and Allan Ginsberg. He also utilizes surrealist philosophy and psychoanalytic theory to explore the various themes present in the blues, such as Eros, aggression, humor, work, or male supremacy. Garon is one of the few authors who make an attempt to understand the blues from a psychological perspective, even though some of his arguments sound dated and rather fixed in the cultural revolution of the 1960's.

The first book on the blues by an African-American author was *Blues People*, by LeRoi Jones. Working sociologically, Jones traces the development of the blues from its origins in slavery through to its influence on the contemporary jazz idiom. Jones pays particular attention to the values within African-American culture which gave birth to the blues and the shift in those values which caused an eventual decline of the blues within the African-American culture. He also traces the influence of the blues on white America.

Charles Keil, in *Urban Blues*, makes an important contribution to blues scholarship by identifying the close parallels between the role of the bluesman in the African-American community and the role of the African-American preacher. He provides insight into the importance of psychological "commitment" on the part of the audience and how that relates to the capacity of the music to affect an emotional shift in the audience. Building on this insight, Keil proposes that the role of the bluesman is more of a "belief role" rather than a "creative role" and more "priestly" than "artistic."

Blues and Evil, by John Michael Spencer, is a rather intriguing book written from a more Afro-centric perspective. Spencer's position is that

other blues scholars have all accepted the stereotype of the blues being seen as inherently secular music, both in terms of form and function. He disagrees with this perspective and presents arguments for the existence, within the blues, of underlying mythologies, theologies, and theodicies (i.e., explanations for the existence of evil in the world created by God). Spencer is the only author I came across, outside of Analytical Psychology, who utilizes some of Jung's theories, especially Jung's perspectives on evil, in laying out his positions.

Nothing but the Blues, edited by Lawrence Cohn, is primarily a historical and biographical account of the blues. It is an enjoyable and scholarly introduction to the personalities and styles associated with the blues. The book traces the developments in the blues from its most primitive origins, through country blues, classic blues, vaudeville, gospel, urban blues, white country blues, East Coast Piedmont blues, and jump blues, as well as the blues revivals of the 1960's and later. Most of the chapters are written by ethnomusicologists and are primarily descriptive rather than interpretive. One of the added pleasures of the book is an excellent discography covering a wide variety of blues styles.

Jeff Titon explores the blues from the perspective of a musicologist in his book, *Early Downhome Blues*. His work provides an extensive examination of the musical structure, form, and content of early country blues. He also explores the cultural context in which country blues developed. Titon provides an extensive catalogue of song lyrics to support his analysis of the music.

Finally, I will mention *Blues Fell This Morning*, by Paul Oliver. The subtitle of the book, "Meaning in the Blues," is somewhat misleading because Oliver never explores this topic from a depth perspective. Instead, Oliver's work, originally published in 1960, focuses primarily on identifying and categorizing the various content themes found in blues recordings. Each chapter brings together a large number of blues songs with a common theme such as travel, love, or work. After reading the book one is left with a greater awareness of the vast area covered by the blues, but without a greater appreciation of the depth and vitality of the music. Oliver has difficulty moving from the position of an outsider in his observations on the blues and African-American culture, lending a somewhat stereotypic tone to his comments.

An underlying theme which will emerge in the chapters that follow is similar to a premise presented by Maud Bodkin, namely that it is possible to identify themes in poetry (or the blues) which, "have a particular form or pattern which persists amid variation from age to age, and which corresponds to a pattern or configuration of emotional tendencies in the minds of those who are stirred by the theme."[10] Bodkin uses the term "archetypal pattern" to refer to that, "within us which . . . leaps in response to the effective presentation in poetry of an ancient theme." Her premise is especially relevant since poetry itself was originally presented in the form of a song. Our discussion will initially explore the archetypal foundations of blues music and the development and history of blues music as a specific musical form. As our musical journey unfolds, I will use the concept of "unitary reality" proposed by Erich Neumann to organize various themes observed in the blues.[11] We'll examine the idea that the blues reflects a state of "unitary reality," a state which articulates an essential characteristic of the blues experience and accounts for the depth and richness of blues music. Neumann defines unitary reality as, "A reciprocal co-ordination between world and psyche . . . a co-ordination which is based on the archetypal structure which embraces both, or of which both are partial aspects . . ."

10 *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry,* p. 4.
11 *The Place of Creation.*

and which "leads to an emotionally toned unitary experience."[12] As such, the blues is a manifestation and containment of the archetypal field that constitutes unitary reality. It is the development of these ideas around unitary reality and the blues that contribute to the unique perspective of this book. These ideas are further developed through an examination of the role of the bluesman and the blues performance. Ultimately, the blues has an innate healing potential: it is a form of therapy which incorporates elements of humor, alchemical imagination, personification, and the narrative impulse.

12 *The Place of Creation*, p. 27.

2

The Genesis of the Blues

"Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind,
flight to the imagination, and life to everything."

—Plato

Origins

The blues has been around a long time. The blues existed before there was ever something called the blues. Perhaps the blues began when mankind first developed sufficient consciousness to be aware of subjective feelings. It was certainly present in the time of the ancient Greeks; after all, they developed the dramatic form commonly referred to as Greek tragedy. According to Joseph Campbell, "The sufferings revealed through the episodes of a [Greek] tragedy are not accidental or occasional, but 'grave and constant,' archetypal of human life."[13] Campbell's description of the Greek tragedy could well be used to describe the typical content of the blues.

Perhaps Orpheus was the first bluesman. In ancient Greece, Orpheus was the greatest musician among the mortals. He was married to Eurydice but immediately after the wedding she was killed by a viper. Orpheus' grief and love was so great that he vowed to go to the underworld and try to bring Eurydice back. His grief, expressed through his songs, was so great that even the dreaded goddesses, the Furies, were wet with tears. He sang the following song to Hades, lord of the underworld, and his queen, Persephone:

O Gods who rule the dark and silent world,
To you all born of a woman needs must come.
All lovely things at least go down to you.
You are the debtor who is always paid.
A little while we tarry on earth.
Then we are yours forever and forever.

13 *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space*, p. 135.

But I seek one who came to you too soon.
The bud was plucked before the flower bloomed.
I tried to bear my loss. I could not bear it.
Love was too strong a god. O King, you know
If that old tale men tell is true, how once
The flowers saw the rape of Persephone.
Then weave again for sweet Eurydice
Life's pattern that was taken from the loom
Too quickly. See, I ask a little thing,
Only that you will lend, not give, her to me.
She shall be yours when her years' span is full.

Others who heard the song of Orpheus were profoundly moved by it. The song of Orpheus "drew iron tears down Hades' cheek, and made Hell grant what love did seek."

Of course, being a blues song, the situation didn't turn out happily ever after for Orpheus and Eurydice. Hades agreed to release Eurydice to Orpheus under one condition: that he wouldn't look back on her as they made the journey to the upperworld, much like the bargain Yahweh made with Lot and his wife.[14] Unfortunately, Orpheus looked back to reassure himself of her presence just before they reached the upperworld. Immediately she slipped away into the darkness and the only word he heard her speak was "farewell." Forsaken, he wandered the countryside alone, until he came upon a band of Maenads who tore him limb from limb and flung his severed head into the Hebrus River.[15] The link between Orpheus and the blues is so strong that Peter Guralnick, in his book *Searching for Robert Johnson*, describes Robert Johnson as a modern-day Orpheus.[16]

However, the link between ancient Greece and the blues does not end with Orpheus. The blues is also present in the journeys of Odysseus and in his fights with his wife's suitors upon his return to Ithaca. The blues also exist in Demeter's grief for her lost daughter Persephone and the blues is present in those driven mad by music of Dionysus or Pan. So it would seem that we have always had the blues.

14 *Holy Bible*, Genesis Chap. 19.

15 This mythic summary of Orpheus was adapted from Hamilton, *Mythology,* pp. 104ff.

16 Robert Johnson is widely considered to be the greatest bluesman to ever be recorded. He reportedly made a pact with the Devil to obtain his prodigious skills on the guitar. Johnson was just 27 years old when he died in 1938 at the hands of a jealous husband.

The blues sound is generally raw and primitive. It has some basic but fluid forms. It is culled up out of the *prima materia*[17] and has never lost touch with the base elements of life. The origins of the blues reflect its humble beginnings with early blues performers relying only on guitar, harmonica, and vocals to communicate their message. The overarching themes are emotional and spiritual, not rational. The word "blues" originally had nothing to do with sadness, but seems to have meant a state of mind more akin to boredom. By the early 1800's, however, the term "blue devils" came to signify contrary spirits that hung around and caused sadness.[18]

The early influences of the blues originate in West Africa, transported to America by African slaves. African-American blues historian John Reese eloquently states the deep connection between the music and the history of the people:

> Blues was such a strong part of our history and how we got here. There is an urgency to this music. When black people were brought here, they didn't have time to pack their bags. It was chaos, but out of that chaos came all this beautiful music. We had to find some way to get a handle on this. The field hollers, the chants, if not for that music, nobody would have survived. That's the closest one will have to the presence of God, when blues and jazz are performed. A lot of people don't want to stare that power in the eyes. But that power goes from the source to the performer to the audience. To express ourselves in a strange land in strange conditions, we had to take whatever ability we had and make the best of it. Or there wouldn't be any blues or jazz.[19]

In West Africa there is a term, *griot*, which is used to refer to a tribal singer but also refers to a tribe's archive of musical stories which preserve the tribe's history and culture. The blues carries on this tradition of musical lore with timeless songs that are continuously remade because of the emotional depth and wisdom that they possess. The *griot* singer commonly accompanied himself on an instrument referred to as a *halam* or, in other African dialects, the *banjo*. It is made of an elongated dried gourd with five strings. Musicians were still using banjos

17 *prima materia* – "An alchemical term meaning 'original matter,' used psychologically to denote both the instinctual foundation of life and the raw material one works with in analysis - dreams, emotions, conflicts, etc." - (Sharp, *Jung Lexicon)*

18 Brian Robertson, *Little Blues Book*.

19 Quoted in J. Gentry "The Subway Lounge." *Living Blues*, Issue 132, p. 55.

made of gourd as late as the 1840's. This instrument was brought to the Americas and as it evolved it became the most common instrument of the plantation South as well as providing the first instrumental accompaniment for the blues singer.[20]

The first generation of African slaves sang African songs and chants. By the second generation those songs were replaced by work songs with the conditions of their American environment as the focus. White slave owners repressed traditional African drumming and worship of African deities for fear that those influences could incite revolts. Westerners also considered African music primitive because it emphasized rhythm rather than harmony and melody.[21] Perhaps this reaction occurred because rhythmically based music appeals more directly to the body and encourages movement. Thus the blues might be considered the shadow[22] or anti-thesis of Western musical forms.

West African music typically has a layering of rhythm, a complex weave of beats, and an avoidance of a single stressed rhythm; it is polyrhythmic as opposed to the typical mono-rhythm of Western music. In the blues this is maintained with a, "floating accent, associated with the vocal line despite the regularity of the accompanying rhythm, often anticipating the chord change rather than accenting on the chord change."[23,24] This polyrhythm may also take the form of the vocal rhythm falling into a two-beat (double) rhythm while the accompaniment is being played in a triplet rhythm, or it may take the form of an alternation between double and triple rhythms throughout the song.

West African music also has an antiphonal emphasis, a call and response - theme and comment pattern, which is a characteristic that has also carried over into African-American blues and gospel. The call and response pattern and the repetition of certain phrases, as found in African music, can also be heard instrumentally in the repetition of certain patterns of notes that form a riff in jazz and blues.[25]

A particularly good example of these African influences can be heard in the sacred blues of Blind Willie Johnson who is considered the fore-

20 Charters, "Workin' on the Building." In L. Cohn (Ed.). *Nothing but the Blues*.
21 Jones, *Blues People*.
22 Shadow – "Hidden or unconscious aspects of oneself, both good and bad, which the ego has either repressed or never recognized." - (Sharp, *Jung Lexicon)*
23 Charters, "Workin' on the Building."
24 This characteristic can be heard in the Muddy Waters song - *Still A Fool*.
25 Jones, *Blues People*.

most example of the mixing of the blues style of music with a sacred theme.[26] His performances were emotional onslaughts that were powered by howls, growls, cries, and vibrato that were intended to constellate the religious fervor of the listener, to excite the believer and convert the non-believer. Johnson typically sang in a gravelly, false bass voice. These features suggest a lineage with certain African sacred rituals. In these African rituals, the masked singer adopts a shift in voice tone that accompanies the change in appearance associated with the donning of the mask. Deep chest growls, false bass tones, and strangulated shrieks were all part of the masked singer's repertoire of vocal effects.[27]

Despite the similarities between West African music and the blues, there also exist some significant differences. In West African music the concept of the solo performer, i.e., playing and singing by oneself, is relatively nonexistent. Also, the themes of West African music are largely about the tribe itself: their gods, work, nature, and the conditions of man's life.[28] Hence, West African music is largely about the collective and collective themes. In the blues, the emphasis is predominantly placed on individual experience even though the themes may be universal. Diggs asserts that the emergence of the solo performer of the blues and his focus on individual experiences was a result of the introjection of the "I," or ego of the West by the rural, unskilled African-American.[29] Hence, the blues reflected a movement from collective community to individual consciousness. The importance of individual experience and expression in the blues is further emphasized by Diggs:

> Blues was a music that arose from the needs of a group, although it was assumed that each man had his own blues and that he would sing them . . . As such, the music was private and personal . . . it was assumed that *anybody* could sing the blues. If someone had lived in this world into manhood, it was taken for granted that he had been given the content of his verses . . . Given the deeply personal quality of blues-singing, there could be no particular method for learning the blues.[30]

26 An example of this is Blind Willie Johnson's performance of *Motherless Children*.

27 M. Humphrey "Holy blues: The Gospel Tradition." In L. Cohn (Ed.). *Nothing but the Blues*.

28 Jones, *Blues People*.

29 Diggs, *Alchemy and the Blues*.

30 Diggs, *Alchemy and the Blues*, p. 82.

Blues went back for its impetus and emotional meaning to the individual, to his completely, personal life and death. Because of this, blues could remain for a long time a very fresh and singular form of expression. Though certain techniques and verses came to be standardized among blues singers, the singing itself remained as arbitrary and personal as the shout. Each man sang a different blues . . . The music remained that personal because it began with the performers themselves, and not with formalized notions of how it was to be performed.[31]

The Birth of the Blues

It is impossible to identify when the unique pattern of musical form, now labeled the blues, first emerged. However, most evidence suggests that it originated in the Delta cotton country of northwest Mississippi. The blues, as a particular musical form, may have emerged, during the late 1800's, out of a broader class of music called "reels" which was a catch-all term for social music, especially dance music.[32] However, it's clear that the blues also developed out of the work songs of slaves, sharecroppers, and chain gang prisoners. These work songs and field hollers were also known as "arwhoolies." Arwhoolies are short rhymed verses of one or two phrases which were used to communicate between patches of sharecropping farms and allowed prison gangs to work together in a coordinated manner. This is consistent with bluesman Son House's 1965 account of how the blues began: "People keep asking me where the blues started and all I can say is that when I was a boy we always was singing in the fields. Not real singing, you know, just hollerin', but we made up our songs about things that was happening to us at that time, and I think that's where the blues started."[33]

These arwhoolies were associated with the, "African-influenced five-note pentatonic scale, as opposed to the European eight-note diatonic scale."[34] The pentatonic scale is most often used when the blues are sung unaccompanied but when performed with accompaniment, utilizing Western instrumentation, the utilization of the diatonic scale is required. Blue notes (usually the flattened third, fifth, and seventh scale degrees) are created using tones of the European diatonic scale, either by raising or lowering the pitch of the note which allows the

31 Diggs, *Alchemy and the Blues*, p. 67.
32 Humphrey, *Holy Blues*.
33 Quoted in Charters, *Workin' on the Building*, p. 13.
34 Robertson, *Little Blues Book*, p. 4.

sound of the pentatonic scale to be recreated and a minor key tonality to be evoked.[35] Blues songs with twelve bars of 4/4 meter was the most commonly utilized form as early country blues emerged as a distinct musical genre. The song lyrics usually fell directly into three-line, AAB, stanzas where the second line repeats, sometimes with slight variation, the words in the first, and the third line completes the thought, with a rhyme at the end.[36]

Harmonically, in primitive country blues there may be a one or two-chord "drone" found throughout the entire song which results in rather hypnotic inductive effect. However, most blues are based on the tritone interval (tonic, subdominant, dominant chords) which is considered to be the most dissonant of all intervals, carrying tremendous tension.[37] Thomas Moore addresses the tritone interval in more depth:

> Musical therapy, therefore, does not imply any harmonizing of life as avoidance of dissonance. Stability, evenness, calm, order, control, happiness and peace - these are not the goals of musical therapy. Dissonance has a place and even an energizing function. In music, sound dissonance creates climax and provides expressiveness, it gives bite and spice to an otherwise unsavory mixture of tones. For centuries one of the most dissonant intervals was the tritone or diminished fifth, sometimes called *diabolus in musica*, the devil in music.[38]

Moore's comments have implications for the healing properties of the blues which will be explored in greater detail later.

There is also a clear link between the blues and spirituals, with many performers of the blues crossing over to perform spirituals as part of their repertoire. Jones says, "The blues is formed out of the same social and musical fabric that the spiritual issued from, but with blues the social emphasis becomes more personal, the 'Jordan' of the song much more intensely a human accomplishment."[39]

Because of the link with slavery, sharecropping, and prison life, the blues is closely associated with the experience of oppression. In fact, according to Spencer, without oppression and racism there would be

35 Cohn, *Nothing but the Blues*.
36 Jeff Titon, *Early Downhome Blues,* p. XVIII.
37 Diggs, *Alchemy and the Blues*.
38 *Musical Therapy,* p. 133.
39 Jones, *Blues People*, p. 63.

no form of music identified as the blues.[40] Paul Garon expressed similar sentiments:

> Only the very specific sociological, cultural, economic, psychological, and political forces faced by working class African Americans - forces permeated with racism - produced the blues. Nothing else did! . . . Only the complex web of racist oppression suffered by blacks at the hands of whites produced the blues, regardless of the many types of suffering with which the blues deals in the manifest content of songs.[41]

In the process of analytic therapy, we frequently observe how the repressive and suppressive influences of the psyche operate similarly to the oppressive forces within a collective and can create the conditions necessary for the development of the blues and its manifestation in the form of grief, depression, worry, and loneliness. The psychic cost of the blues, both individual and collective, exists side by side with the psychic renewal imparted by the blues, as pointed out by blues singer Noble Sissle: "The music did not just happen. There is a history to the birth form of our music. There is an element of life in it - religion, romance, tragedy, faith, hope, and primitive abandon - brought together and paid for at a tremendous price."[42] Sissle's comments can be seen as an implicit acknowledgement that the emergence out of collectivity into individuality is an inherently suffering experience in itself. It seems that Sissle is describing a process of individuation,[43] initiated through the institution of slavery. In fact, Sissle also seems to be redeeming the unrecognized shadow aspect of slavery; an institution which destroyed so much, also served as a catalyst for a movement from a collective consciousness into an individual consciousness. This paradox is one of the wellsprings of the blues.[44]

The blues might be seen as a means of transcending the immediate experience of oppression through expression. For example, love is the

40 Spencer, *Blues and Evil*.

41 Quoted in Titon, *Early Downhome Blues*, p. 275.

42 Quoted in Spencer, *Blues and Evil*, p. XXVI.

43 Individuation – "A process of psychological differentiation, having for its goal the development of the individual personality." - (Sharp, *Jung Lexicon)*

44 Of course, one must be careful to consider that the possibility that the interpretation of slavery as an individuation process is merely the imposition of a Western conceptual framework onto African culture, i.e., valuing individual consciousness over the collective. As Kawai (1988) points out, concepts such as ego, Self, and individuation take on a different connotation when examined in the context of the Japanese culture.

vehicle of potential transcendence in Robert Nighthawk's *Sweet Black Angel*:[45]

> *I've got a sweet black angel, I likes the way she spread her wing*
> *When she spread her wings over me, I gets joy and ev'rything*
>
> *If my black angel should quit me, I believe that I would die*
> *If you don't love me black angel, please tell me the reason why*

The oppression that served as the gestation for the blues remained even as the blues evolved. Until recently few blues singers were given copyrights to their songs and they typically only received travel expenses to the recording sessions and a one-time payment for recording the songs that day. It was extremely rare for an early blues singer to receive royalty payments for the records which were sold.

As Keil points out, the blues has always been a migratory music.[46] At first it was carried by men moving from town to town in search of work and then later it became associated with traveling medicine shows, circuses, and later touring troupes or musical revues. In this way, it parallels some of the migratory patterns north of the Mason-Dixon Line by emancipated slaves and later of African-Americans leaving the agricultural economy and Jim Crow laws of the South. In fact, over one million blacks moved northward from Southern states between 1915 and 1930.[47] During this massive migration the blues evolved. The role of the solo bluesman diminished and blues bands became prominent as the blues moved into louder urban settings, eventually leading to the electronic amplification of the instruments and a greater emphasis on dance oriented rhythms. However, Richard Wright does not feel that the blues lost its importance or vitality as the blues moved off of the plantation and into the cities: "On the plantation our songs carried a strain of otherworldly yearning which people called 'spiritual'; but now our blues . . . are our 'spirituals' of the city pavements, our longing for freedom and opportunity, an expression of our bewilderment and despair in a world whose meaning eludes us."[48]

45 Often throughout this book only selected stanzas or lines of songs will be presented, rather than the complete lyrics.
46 Keil, *Urban Blues*.
47 Spencer, *Blues and Evil*.
48 Quoted in Spencer, *Blues and Evil*, p. 122.

Defining the Blues

But what is the blues? The blues is a form of music with a particular sound and feel but the blues also describes an emotional state usually characterized by sadness, grief, or depression. The blues is a more evocative way of describing an internal state; an internal state that seems much richer when communicated through the blues than through psychological language which can seem rather sterile in comparison. Listen to the depiction of a fragmenting inner world described in Stevie Ray Vaughan's lyrics to *Tightrope*, "*Caught up in a whirlwind, can't catch my breath, knee deep in hot water, broke out in cold sweat, can't catch a turtle in this rat race, feels like I'm losin time at a breakneck pace*." The blues also describes specific experiences such as the loss of a lover, a friendship betrayed, or a bad drunk. Finally, the blues may refer to an entire lifestyle or philosophy of life. When used in this manner it is sometimes talked about as "living the blues." Paul Oliver summarizes these threads as follows: "Though the blues may frequently be associated with a state of depression, of lethargy, or despair, it was not solely a physical, nor a mental state. It was not solely the endurance of suffering or a declaration of hopelessness; nor was it solely a means of ridding oneself of a

mood. It was all of these, and more: it was an essential part of the black experience of living."[49]

When a blues musician refers to himself as a "bluesman" he is not only referring to the type of music he plays but also the type of life he has led and the attitude he has about life. It is in this last sense that the blues begins to comment upon or amplify the *anima mundi*, or world soul. An awareness of the *anima mundi* can be detected in many blues songs, e.g., T-Bone Walker's - *Mean Old World*, "*This is a mean old world to live in by yourself*," or Elmore James' - *The Sky is Crying:*

The sky is crying, look at the tears roll down the street
I'm waiting in tears for my baby, and I wonder where can she be?
I saw my baby one morning, and she was walking down the street
Make me feel so good until my poor heart would skip a beat

I got a bad feeling, my baby, my baby don't love me no more
Now the sky been crying, the tears rolling down my door

The blues philosophy implicit in the blues includes the idea that the blues is something to be accepted; not something to be gotten rid of or fixed:

Going Down Slow - Mance Lipscomb

Don't send no doctor, he can't do me no good.
It's all my fault, mama, I didn't do the things I should.

Willeford describes the blues philosophy in this way, "In the imaginative world-view of the blues, joy is born of pain; pain is not to be denied. Joy is not simply the denial of pain but represents an order of value of its own right. Irony [in the blues] assures that pain is not denied, is taken into account, as the value of joy is affirmed . . . One must remain open to the reality of human misery."[50] This stance of acceptance is reflected in Junior Kimbrough's lyrics "*most things haven't worked out"* and "*I done got old."* In listening to Kimbrough's music one has the sense that Kimbrough is making an observation, not a complaint. Within this philosophy of acceptance the blues is seen as something ubiquitous and pervasive, penetrating into all areas of life:

49 *Blues Fell This Morning*, p. 283ff.
50 *Abandonment, Wish, and Hope in the Blues*, p. 181ff.

Appendix: Recommended Listening

The blues has its origins in rural settings but evolved as bluesmen migrated to the cities and their instruments became electrified. The blues has become more diverse: country blues, Piedmont blues, jump blues, soul blues, Chicago blues, jazz blues, West Coast blues, North Mississippi Hill Country blues, and Delta blues – each possessing its unique characteristics – but still grounded in the same *prima materia* of everyday emotional life that forms the foundation of the blues.

In my opinion, there is no substitute for listening to live music of any genre. Only by being in the room can we pick up on nuances of the singer's voice, feel the movement of the sound waves through our bodies, sense the impact of the music on the other audience members, and fully participate in the ritual of the performance. However, when opportunities to listen to live blues are limited, listening to the recordings from this list will enhance and deepen the experience of the book and hopefully encourage you to begin your own blues journey.

R.L. Burnside – *Too Bad Jim,* Fat Possum

Rev. Gary Davis – *Harlem Street Singer*, Prestige/Bluesville

Buddy Guy – *Damn Right I've Got the Blues,* Silvertone

Son House – *The Original Delta Blues*, Columbia Legacy

Skip James – *Complete Recorded Works: 1931*, Document

Robert Johnson – *The Complete Recordings*, Sony

Blind Willie Johnson – *The Complete Blind Willie Johnson,* Sony

Junior Kimbrough – *You Better Run: The Essential Junior Kimbrough,* Fat Possum

B.B. King – *Greatest Hits,* MCA

Prison Songs: Historical Recordings from Parchman Farm 1947-,48, *Vol 1 & 2*, Rounder

Johnny Shines - *Johnny Shines with Big Walter Horton*, Testament

Koko Taylor – *Deluxe Edition,* Alligator

Sonny Terry – *Whoopin' the Blues: The Capitol Recordings, 1947-1950,* Capitol

Big Mama Thornton – *Ball N' Chain*, Arhoolie

Stevie Ray Vaughan – *The Essential Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble*, Sony

T-Bone Walker – *Stormy Monday Blues: The Essential Collection,* Half Moon UK

Little Walter – *His Best: The Chess 50th Anniversary Collection*, Chess

Muddy Waters - *The Definitive Collection*, Geffen

Junior Wells – *Hoodoo Man Blues*, Delmark

Big Joe Williams – *Shake Your Boogie,* Arhoolie

John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson – *The Original Sonny Boy Williamson: Vol 1*, JSP

Sonny Boy Williamson II – *His Best,* Chess

Smokey Wilson – *88th Street Blues*, Blind Pig

Howlin' Wolf – *His Best: The Chess 50th Anniversary Collection*, Chess

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Mark Winborn, PhD, NCPsyA is a Jungian Psychoanalyst and Clinical Psychologist. He is a training and supervising analyst of the Inter-Regional Society of Jungian Analysts. Dr. Winborn maintains a private practice in Memphis, Tennessee where he is also currently the Training Coordinator for the Memphis Jungian Seminar.

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