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ABSTRACT

When Delta blues are considered to be "folk music," the genre is inextricably tied to the neocolonial, sharecropping system of cotton production characteristic of the Mississippi Delta region between the Civil War and World War II. "Imperialist nostalgia," then, arises in accounts which pay primary and positive tribute to blues performances emanating from this same postcolonial cultural setting. But most blues performers did not remain in rural Mississippi and probably would not qualify as real authentic folk artists who lived on the land--most escaped the Delta as soon as they could. In William Ferris's ethnographic/folklorist book, "Blues from the Delta," his scholarly descriptions of the people, places, and events comprising his research inadvertently serve to paint an invidious portrait of his respondents as semi-literate, poverty-stricken folk musicians and communal associates. He places the Delta blues so deeply into cultural context that the impression is created that the music cannot exist without the culture. In this type of research the music is never actually heard, but lyrics are quoted, photographs of the musicians are seen, and letters they wrote are reproduced. How can imperialist nostalgia be avoided in studies of the Delta blues? Richard Wright, in a foreword to another scholarly study of the blues, called them "fantastically paradoxical," and this may have to serve until further notice. (Contains 12 references.) (NKA)

DELTA BLUES SCHOLARSHIP AND IMPERIALIST NOSTALGIA

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Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo coined the phrase "imperialist nostalgia" to describe the tendency of "agents of colonialism. . .[to] display nostalgia for the colonized culture as it was 'traditionally'. . .[or] for the very forms of life they intentionally altered or destroyed (Rosaldo, 1989, 1993:69)."

The present study examines a parallel phenomenon discerned in the scholarly literature on the Delta blues associated with the Mississippi Delta region of the United States.

This literature commonly regards its subject as special. In Deep Blues: A Musical and Cultural History of the Mississippi Delta, for example, Robert Palmer puts the matter plainly. When compared to the blues of the Carolinas, Virginia, Georgia, East Texas and Louisiana, Palmer writes that:

> The Mississippi Delta's blues musicians sang with unmatched intensity in a gritty, melodically circumscribed, highly ornamented style that was closer to field hollers than it was to other blues. (Palmer, 1981:44)

Few who are familiar with the various types of blues — which in addition to those mentioned by Palmer include varieties of urban blues, jazz blues and the classic blues of Bessie Smith and company — would argue with Palmer's position. There is something grittier, more "down home" to use Titon's (1977) label about the Delta blues when compared to the other blues. One could call the Delta blues more "primitive" in the dictionary sense of being "simple or crude, using unsophisticated techniques" (Oxford American Dictionary, 1980), but this would be ethnocentric, elitist and inaccurate, for Delta blues is far from simple from a musicological perspective. Instead, it has become conventional to treat Delta blues as "southern folk blues" in the manner described by British blues scholar, Paul Oliver:

> Called "country blues," "rural blues" or "down home blues," the blues sung and played by local community performers had the characteristics of a folk music: performed mostly by illiterate or only partially literate singers and developing traditions of phrase and stanza almost independent of professional entertainers. (Oliver, 1980, 1986:59)

However, when Delta blues are set off as "folk music" a subtle version of imperialist nostalgia creeps into the picture. Considering Delta blues "folk music" inextricably ties the genre to the neocolonial, share cropping system of cotton production characteristic of the Mississippi Delta region between the Civil War and World War II. Robert Blauner (1972) offers the widely accepted and supported thesis that America's minorities of color entered American history as colonized peoples. African Americans received "special" treatment in this regard for they were uniquely and directly exploited under plantation slavery and later exploited less directly under the tenant farming system, an economic arrangement aptly labled "coerced cash-crop production" by Immanuel Wallerstein (1979).

To put the matter simply, once Delta blues is treated as Southern folk music it gains its very intelligibility and authenticity in so far as and for so long as, it continues being produced by a "folk" whose communal existence remains enmeshed in the post colonial remnants of Delta plantation-based cotton production. "Imperialist nostalgia," then, arises in accounts which pay primary and positive tribute to blues performances emanating from this same post colonial, cultural setting. The result is a rather peculiar celebration of a strikingly brutal and exploitative economic regime.

The first step in demonstrating this requires an explication of what "folk music" is in general, and what "Southern folk music" is in particular. Works such as the Harvard Concise Dictionary of Music are of little use here for there is considerable debate about what folk music is and is not. Jeff Todd Titon's discussion of the matter, however, provides a useful summary of the issues at stake:

> An earlier generation of folklorists considered folk song to be a separate entity, distinct from popular music (associated with professional entertainers, the profit motive and mass media) and from classical music (associated with elite groups, written musical scores, and unvarying performances). Folk songs were defined as traditional music that passed by ear and imitation from one singer or instrumentalist to the next, changing tunes and words as they went and, overtime, giving the music the stamp of the community . . . Folk songs were understood to flourish in rural, preindustrial areas among an illiterate peasantry; literacy, industrialization, and urbanization were regarded as enemies of folk tradition. This definition, while useful, could not account for folk song's persistence among close-knit ethnic groups in modern cities; it also placed undue emphasis on the idea that a folk song was a text with a tune. Folklorists today conceive of a folk song as a performance, not as an item; its meaning and folk-quality arises from what it communicates in the performance situation. In other words, a song with the same text and tune may be folk in one context but not in another. When a concert singer includes "Barbara Allen" in a Carnegie Hall recital, the performance does not yield a folk song. (Titon, 1990:3)

Titon makes several points in the above but two stand out for present purposes. First, earlier conceptions of folk songs and folk music are readily criticized as elitist or inherently "modernist" in holding that folk music is found in rural, preindustrial communities where illiteracy is rampant and where the ambiguous "benefits" of modernist conceptions of progress have yet to take full hold. The definition of folk music offered above by Paul Oliver is perhaps a good example of this earlier tradition. The second point is that contemporary folklorists look

at folk songs as performances, not as items. This distinction does not appear particularly helpful, however, when considering the more prominent Delta blues men. Consider, for example, what would have happened if Delta blues legend, Robert Johnson, had lived to accept impresario John Hammond's invitation to perform in New York City for Hammond's "Spirituals to Swing Concert" in 1938. Would not Johnson's rendition of his "Rambling On My Mind" still be a Southern folk blues performance in Carnegie Hall? Titon suggests not, but it remains unclear as to why not. It is easy to accept the idea of folk song as performance in the case of, say, British rock star, Eric Clapton's performance of "Rambling On My Mind" in his 1966 recording of that composition ("Blues breakers with Eric Clapton," London, p2 - 00086). Clapton is surely not a folk performer, yet at the same time, he probably learned the Johnson song from a copy of the record the composer-performer cut in a hotel room in San Antonio Texas in 1936. That recording session was a long way to be sure from a Delta "jook joint" yet the performance strikes the listener as authentic Southern folk blues or pretty much the same as Johnson would have sung it in a "jook joint."

Thus, there remains a persistent problem in tying the Delta blues too closely to its cultural and geographic origins. Moreover, when one considers the biographies of the most prominent figures in the Delta blues tradition, they all seemed more than eager to leave their early folk music "performance contexts" behind at the earliest opportunity. Consider the following items in this regard: (1) In one four month period Robert Johnson left Helena, Arkansas and showed up in St. Louis, Memphis, Chicago, Decatur, Detroit, New Jersey, New York and Windsor, Ontario, Canada! Like other bluesmen, Johnson seemed to want nothing more than to separate himself from Delta life at every turn. He was surely repulsed by the whole

economic base of the Delta system for as his step-father reportedly commented Robert Johnson "was no good, because he wouldn't get behind that mule in the morning". . . (LaVere, 1990:5). (2) According to Palmer (1981:62) Johnson idolized Charlie Patton, another legendary Delta bluesman, whose entire life reflected a deep and troubled disdain for the set of life circumstances the Delta had handed him:

> Charlie Patton saw a world of changes during the fifty-odd years of his life, but the system was in effect in the upper Delta before he was born, and it outlasted him by several decades. He adapted to it well enough despite his lingering rage, which he tended to take out on his women, sometimes by beating them with a handy guitar. He suffered his dark moods and his occasional repentances and conversions, but he also had fun, or something like it. He rarely worked for whites except to furnish a night's entertainment, and he never tied to a menial job on a plot of land for very long. He went where he pleased, stayed as long as he pleased, stayed as intoxicated as he pleased, left when he wanted to, and had his pick of the women wherever he went. And he created an enduring body of American music, for he personally inspired just about every Delta bluesman of consequence; and some blues women as well. (Palmer, 1981:56-57)

(3) McKinley Morganfield (a.k.a. Muddy Waters) succeeded because he escaped the Delta and only in part because of the Delta blues style he took with him to Chicago. Waters incorporated Delta imagery and Delta vocal and guitar licks in his style but went on to develop a "new" style called the urban blues. (4) The same could be said for B. B. King, another Delta blues musician who utilized opportunities denied his predecessors like Johnson and Patton to develop his <u>own</u> blues style combining elements of "down home" inflection and tonality with the harmonic complexities of jazz and the urbane passion and polished musicianship of rhythm and blues.

Yet, regardless of the worldly successes of Delta bluesmen such as Waters and King, there remains a beguiled fascination among many blues scholars and blues fans alike with the

Southern folk blues of today's Delta region. Their common attitude is that the blues music that came from the Delta and is currently performed there has an essential purity or authencity that sets it off from blues performances found elsewhere. That this attitude exists, is difficult to prove, but suggestive evidence is not hard to come by. Moreover, such evidence smacks of imperialist nostalgia, or reflects a thinly veiled longing of the good old days of "jook joints," National steel guitars, Marine band harmonicas and of semi-literate, itinerant, black bluesmen seeking to outdo one another for the spare change of passersby, standing on opposing street corners in Delta towns on hot, sleepy Saturday afternoons.

Consider, for example, that the important blues periodical Living Blues devotes the bulk of its pages to what remains of the "pure" Delta blues tradition. Consider as well, that Clarksdale, Mississippi, remains a mecca for Delta blues fans from around the world, (Bird, 1991:53-74) and, having spent considerable time in the region, this author can attest to the Third World conditions endemic to the poorer (read black) sections of Clarksdale and towns like it. Automation killed King Cotton as a major source of livelihood for Delta Blacks and what remains is a depressed economy characterized by extreme (by American standards, anyway) income disparities involving historically given divisions of race and class.

But perhaps the best available evidence for imperialist nostalgia in the blues literature derives unintentionally from an excellent ethnographic/folklorist account called Blues From The Delta (Ferris, 1978). Ferris' scholarly descriptions of the people, places and events comprising his research inadvertently serve to paint an invidious portrait of his respondents as semi-literate, poverty-stricken, folk musicians and communal associates. In a word, Ferris places the Delta blues so deeply into cultural context that the impression is created that the music cannot exist

without the culture. Thus, if one wishes to preserve the music one cannot do so without retaining its cultural, folk music context, a situation which clearly smacks of imperialist nostalgia.

More explicitly an approach such as Ferris' links Delta blues with an imperialist past by stating that certain people, whom he describes at length, can produce this distinctive, powerful and beautiful music called Delta blues. Yet, we never actually hear this music. Instead, we read lyrics and read all sorts of things about where the musicians live, what they do and say and see photographs of them, their houses, where they hang out, and even of the letters they wrote to the author. Thus a strong link is established between a music we never actually hear and the music makers and listeners we read about at length. By the end of the book, the reader is left with the impression that the social context must somehow be central to the music and ipso facto, the result is an immediate and strong support for imperialist nostalgia.[1]

How can one avoid imperialist nostalgia in studies of the Delta blues? One answer was inadvertently supplied by Richard Wright in 1959. Writing from virtual exile in Paris , Wright supplied the Foreward to Oliver's, Blues Fell This Morning (1960, 1990). He said:

> The blues are fantastically paradoxical and, by all logical and historical odds, they ought not have come into being. I'm absolutely certain that no one predicted this advent.

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[1]This analysis is not meant as an attack on Ferris' scholarship. It is meant instead as a critique of mainstream Delta blues scholarship, ignored particularly of the ethnographic sort. Jacques Derrida's work lends general support to this critique, for he points out that although ethnography led the way in decenturing academic theories of structure, its own exposés of ethnocentrism revealed its own unavoidable ethnocentrism (Derrida. 1978 [1966]:278-82).

Wright went on to catalog the "historical odds" facing the African American creators of the blues: the toll of enslavement, the imposition of illiteracy, the systematic obliteration of their cultural and linguistic heritages, their reduction to the status of livestock, and the extreme brutalization characterizing their existence in the New World. Wright concludes with a question, one which remains as poignant today as when he asked it:

> How could such men, then, speak of what they underwent? Yet they did. In a vocabulary terser than Basic English, shorn of all hyperbole, purged of metaphysical implications, wedded to a frankly aetheistic vision of life, and excluding almost all references to nature and her various moods, they sang:
>
> Whistle keeps on blowin' an I got my debts to pay,
> I've got a mind to leave my baby an' I've got a mind to stay.

Until further notice, then, perhaps the Delta blues, and all blues should be treated as "fantastically paradoxical" — as a wonderous wail mixing joy and pain now heard around the world.

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