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# THE BLUES, THE FOLK, AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY

By Marybeth Hamilton

READ 21 JANUARY 2000 AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

ON a stifling Saturday in Texas in June 1937 a twenty-six-year-old African-American musician, Robert Johnson, stepped to the microphone in a makeshift recording studio in a disused warehouse atop a Buick showroom. Johnson had grabbed a ride west from his native Mississippi to make it to the recording session in Dallas, one more journey in a life that had been spent by and large on the road. In contemporary parlance, he was a songster: an itinerant guitarist and maker of songs who scraped together a living wherever he found it, performing on street corners and in juke joints in the Deep South, sometimes drifting north, even reaching New York City, but always heading south again. That he recorded at all came down largely to luck; luck, and the exigencies of the Great Depression, which cut deeply into record company profits and forced the so-called 'race record' companies, which sold to an almost entirely black market, to look for cheap talent, Southern performers with local reputations who might appeal to regional markets. Johnson was one of many who caught a talent scout's ear in the Mississippi Delta in the late 1930s. On that Saturday in Dallas he recorded fifteen songs, among them a haunted blues called 'Hellhound on my Trail'.

I got to keep movin', I've got to keep movin'  
Blues fallin' down like hail, blues fallin' down like hail  
Blues fallin' down like hail, blues fallin' down like hail  
And the days keeps on worryin' me  
There's a hellhound on my trail, hellhound on my trail  
Hellhound on my trail<sup>1</sup>

Today, Robert Johnson has become a major pop music phenomenon. The first stirrings of this were felt in the 1960s, when Johnson's recordings were reissued on a two-volume LP, but it crested in 1990 with the release of *Robert Johnson: the Complete Recordings*, a CD anthology that brought together all of Johnson's songs and two recently discovered

<sup>1</sup>Robert Johnson, 'Hellhound on my Trail', *Robert Johnson: the Complete Recordings* (Columbia C2K 46222/467246-2[UK]).

photographs of the man himself, the only photos of Johnson known to exist. Alongside the CD came extensive publicity chronicling Johnson's brief, violent, mysterious life: his death by poisoning at age twenty-seven, and the legend that he had sold his soul to the Devil at a Delta crossroads in return for prowess on the guitar. The anthology sold one million units, with the first 400,000 bought up in only six months. Johnson's face can now be found on postcards, t-shirts, posters, and guitar polishing cloths; it also stares out from the covers of recent works of popular musical history: Greil Marcus's *The Dustbin of History* and Francis Davis's *The History of the Blues*. As for 'Hellhound on my Trail', it is broadly acclaimed as the apex of the blues tradition: 'Johnson's crowning achievement', writes critic Peter Guralnick, a stark, terrifying cry of despair. The dark intensity of his music has made Johnson the most celebrated of all blues singers. 'To my generation', writes Guralnick, 'Johnson became the embodiment of the existential wandering bluesman, burdened by a despair that spoke of not just black suffering but the anguish at the heart of the human condition.'<sup>2</sup>

Johnson's importance lies not on the popular level alone. He has resonated just as strongly for scholars of African-American history – most recently, for the historian Leon Litwack in his sweeping study of the turn of the century American South, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*. Johnson's dark vision looms over the text: two of the book's eight chapters take their titles from Johnson's songs, and the lyrics of Johnson's 'Hellhound on my Trail' provide the closing words of the book. For Litwack, 'Hellhound on my Trail' is both prototypical blues and an archetypal tale of the Jim Crow experience, and Johnson himself a black Everyman adrift in the Mississippi Delta, a haunted soul who articulated black Southerners' profound alienation, their experience as 'a new generation of interior exiles . . . exiles in their own land'.<sup>3</sup>

Litwack's book is by no means singular. For the last two decades, the blues of the Mississippi Delta have provided a luminous focus for a revitalised African-American history, one engaged with the experience of the forgotten and faceless black masses. Beginning with Lawrence Levine's monumental *Black Culture, Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, published in 1977, historians have turned to blues as a key form of folk culture, echoing with the voices of the inarticulate, with experiences that historians had for too long ignored. As historical evidence, its value lies in its sheer directness. As Litwack puts it, to listen to Robert Johnson 'is to feel – more vividly and more intensely than any mere poet, novelist, or historian could convey – the despair, the

<sup>2</sup> Peter Guralnick, *Searching for Robert Johnson* (London, 1990), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York, 1998), 478.

thoughts, the passions, the aspirations, the anxieties, the deferred dreams, the frightening honesty of a new generation of black Southerners and their efforts to grapple with day-to-day life, to make it somehow more bearable, perhaps even to transcend it'.<sup>4</sup> What Johnson's blues provides, in other words, is a kind of audio snapshot of the innermost truths of the past. As Litwack writes, quoting the Delta blues chronicler Robert Palmer: 'How much history can be transmitted by pressure on a guitar string? The thoughts of generations, the history of every human being who's ever felt the blues come down like showers of rain.'<sup>5</sup>

In what follows I want to reflect upon this idea of the blues as history transmitted by a guitar string. More precisely, I want to interrogate historians' use of the blues and raise questions about what I can only describe as their romance with this particular form of historical evidence. It is, I think, curious to hear an historian as sophisticated as Litwack frame the blues in this straightforwardly populist way: as the voice of the folk, the pure and unmediated cry of the masses. That reverence for the music's evidentiary powers recalls nothing so much as the claims made, decades ago, for oral history: that it allows us to bypass the dangers of historical interpretation by removing the need for an historian, that it enables us to communicate with the past directly by presenting pure images of past experience.<sup>6</sup>

At the root of the problem lies historians' conceptualisation of the blues as folk culture. In using that label, both Litwack and, in particular, Levine take care to distinguish their approach to folk music from what might be called a traditionalist view: the folk as isolated preindustrial peasantry; folk culture their spontaneous, unschooled creation, a creation endangered as the cheap, tawdry products of commercial mass culture eat away at the foundations of traditional life. Instead, and drawing on revisionist folklorists of the 1960s, they emphasise folk music as process: the interaction between marginal peoples and the songs they sing, whatever their origin, whether absorbed at the cradle, sung in the fields, or learned from the Victrola or juke box. Folk music is any song through which a people expresses its own needs and values. And the folk itself is 'any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor ... a group [that] for whatever reason has some traditions that it calls its own'.<sup>7</sup>

Yet despite this disclaimer, there is an unspoken process of selection at work in these histories. If in theory any song can be a folk song, in practice some always seem to be more folkish than others. In using the blues as a

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 457.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Frisch, 'Oral History and *Hard Times*: A Review Essay', in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London and New York, 1998), 29–37.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Dundes, 'The American Concept of Folklore', *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 3 (1966), quoted in *The Dictionary of Anthropology*, ed. Thomas Barfield (Oxford, 1997), 195.

window on folk consciousness, historians draw their evidence from the same clutch of singers, with the voices of Charley Patton, Son House, above all Robert Johnson heard over and over and over again. Embedded in historians' use of the blues as folk culture are unexplored assumptions about authenticity in African-American art and experience, about what is peripheral and what stands at the core. At the core is the blues of the Mississippi Delta, a music whose 'folkness' lies in its raw emotion, in Robert Johnson's unvarnished terror and pain.

That the Delta was the original home to the blues has been an article of faith for recent historians – and here I refer not just to music journalists, but to scholars of African-American history. Nowhere else in the South, writes Samuel Charters, could have bred a music so raw, so primal: nowhere else was so cut off from the currents of modern life.<sup>8</sup> And nowhere else did racial oppression rule with such ferocity. In the Delta time had effectively stopped – it remained a quasi-feudal region still stuck in the dynamics of slavery. Those circumstances shaped the blues in its natural state, a music of peculiar power and purity, an intensely emotive, deeply personal music permeated by alienation and anguish.

This paper maps the historical roots of this vision of folk authenticity. Historians have been so eager to hear the Delta blues as the direct voice of black folk experience that they have neglected the process of cultural recycling that has given listeners in our era readier access to some visions of blues than to others. More specifically, they have neglected the blues revival of the late 1950s and 1960s, when white Americans and Europeans rediscovered a music that African-Americans were leaving behind. Those years saw a flood of aficionados, record collectors and folk music enthusiasts, head south from Memphis and north from Vicksburg armed with tape recorder, camera, and notepad, determined to cut through the dross churned out by the commercial record companies and capture the sound of the real thing. The real thing was the Delta blues, the name they devised for the rough, impassioned voices they had encountered on scratchy 78s and heard reissued on new LP compilations: singers like Skip James, Charley Patton, and Robert Johnson. In those recordings these new listeners heard what historian Miles Orvell has called the 'incandescence' of the authentic: impassioned voices echoing with pain and privation, emanating from a flat, water-logged, primitive landscape seemingly untouched by the modern world.<sup>9</sup>

Yet the aficionados of the blues revival were not the first song hunters to scour the Delta. That path was forged two decades earlier, when an interracial team, the black sociologists Lewis Jones and Charles Johnson

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Charters, *The Bluesmen* (New York, 1967), 27–32.

<sup>9</sup> Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880–1940* (Chapel Hill, 1989), xvi.

of Fisk University and the white folklorist Alan Lomax of the Library of Congress, surveyed black music in Coahoma County, Mississippi, the first attempt by the Library of Congress's Archive of Folk Song to join forces with an historically black university and document forms of African-American music inaccessible to whites working alone. In 1941 Lomax, Jones and Johnson assembled a team of black fieldworkers based in Coahoma County's capital, Clarksdale, who interviewed residents about musical taste, musical activity, and their use of sheet music, radio, jukeboxes, and records. Those sessions smoothed the way for Lomax, who arrived in the summer of 1942 and made over 200 hours of field recordings: from children's game songs, spirituals, field hollers and work songs to party songs, brothel tunes, and blues.<sup>10</sup>

Owing in large part to Lomax's reminiscence of the project, his award-winning 1993 memoir *The Land Where the Blues Began*, the Coahoma County study has been celebrated largely for the local musicians it captured on record: a tractor driver on a cotton plantation, Son House; and a shy, sleepy-eyed sharecropper named McKinley Morganfield, who would soon move to Chicago and, under the stage name of Muddy Waters, help change the face of popular music.<sup>11</sup> My focus, however, is not on the findings but on the tale that its architects shaped to make sense of them. In their reports and memos written during and after the project, Lomax and Jones identified the blues as the Delta's key form of black music. Yet this was not the Delta blues as we now perceive it, bred by isolation and anguish. This was a music of sex and modernity, rooted in national currents of industrialising black life.

Modernity and urbanisation are the keynotes of the tale Jones and Lomax set out. The Delta it depicts was fast-paced and worldly, particularly in contrast to 'the Hills', the counties east of the Delta, where families had deep roots in the soil and traditional mores seemed fully in force. In the Delta no one stayed in one place for long, and its young people were scorning the church, experimenting with sex, immersing themselves in a mass-marketed world of jukeboxes, automobiles and motion pictures.<sup>12</sup> More jarringly, the Delta blues we would recognise was nowhere in evidence. Surveying the black bars of Clarksdale, Lewis Jones

<sup>10</sup> Alan Lomax, 'The folk-song survey in collaboration with Fisk University', undated memo c. September 1941 in Alan Lomax Archive, Hunter College, New York City (hereafter ALA-HC); Alan Lomax, 'A memorandum about the July trip to Coahoma County: Functional approach to the study of folklore', undated memo in ALA-HC; Alan Lomax, 'Folk Culture Study: suggested field procedures', undated memo c. September 1941 in ALA-HC. Some of this material can also be found in Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection, Archive of Folk Culture, Library of Congress, Washington, DC (hereafter AFC-LC).

<sup>11</sup> Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> Lewis Jones, 'The Mississippi Delta', undated ms. (probably late 1940s), 61–2, in ALA-HC.

found not a single local musician on the jukeboxes: not Charley Patton, not Skip James, not Robert Johnson. Top sellers in 1942 were the same as they were in black districts across the US: Louis Jordan, Lil Green, Count Basie, Fats Waller.<sup>13</sup> This was not the case in Clarksdale alone. Late one night Alan Lomax stumbled on a juke joint on the edge of a cotton field and opened the door to find a blaring jukebox and a roomful of people jitterbugging to Duke Ellington.<sup>14</sup>

The Coahoma County study presents an interpretive problem: a legendary moment when the Delta blues was discovered – but not in the form that has passed into legend, not in the form that we expect to find. In what follows I want to explore this tale, focusing on its guiding assumptions and the sense of mission that drove its creators. The Coahoma County investigators, like the Delta blues fans who followed, shaped their vision of the blues of the Delta in part out of political and cultural commitments, their sense of what was real in black secular music in an urban, industrial, mass-market world where African-Americans looked less like a ‘folk’ than ever before. Eventually, one tale of the Delta blues triumphed. But as historians of popular memory have argued, dominant accounts of the past take shape in part through their struggles with others, a process by which certain tales ‘achieve centrality and luxuriate grandly; others are marginalised or excluded.’<sup>15</sup> The Coahoma County study presents one such excluded story. Through it we can begin to explore what was pushed to the margins when the Mississippi Delta was reimagined as the locus of African-American folk authenticity, or, as Alan Lomax would eventually phrase it, the land where the blues began.

What is perhaps most unsettling about the Coahoma County study to anyone who has ever picked up a blues book or CD is that it was not premised on a conviction that the blues had its roots in the Mississippi Delta. As I have already noted, for today’s blues chroniclers that origin seems incontrovertible, though a few will admit that in point of fact they have precious little direct evidence to go by. As a music of a denigrated, impoverished class, the early blues left few traces behind it – no reliable accounts of performances, no thorough transcriptions of lyrics. While historians agree that the AAB verse form first appeared in the early twentieth century, even that is less fact than inference: nothing resembling that form appears in nineteenth-century ballad hunters’ reports. Otherwise, all comes down to guesswork. No one knows who sang the first blues, or where they sang it, or when.

<sup>13</sup> ‘List of records on machines in Clarksdale amusement places’, Folder 7 (Lists), Fisk University Mississippi Delta collection, AFC-LC.

<sup>14</sup> Alan Lomax field notes, July 1942, ALA-HC.

<sup>15</sup> Popular Memory Group, ‘Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method’ in *Oral History Reader*, ed. Perks and Thomson, 75–86.



With all certainties absent, scholars rely on tales told retrospectively by well-placed observers about encountering the blues for the first time. Far and away the most frequently told of those tales is one that first appeared in 1941, the year that saw the launch of the Coahoma County study, in *Father of the Blues*, the autobiography of the African-American composer W. C. Handy. Handy describes how he first heard the blues around 1903, late one night in the Mississippi Delta, as he dozed on a railway platform waiting for a train that had been delayed nine hours. A dream-like figure appeared before him: a 'lean, loose-jointed Negro', his clothes in rags, his shoes in tatters, his face etched with the sadness of ages. On his guitar he strummed a haunting refrain, 'the weirdest music I ever heard. The tune stayed on my mind.'<sup>16</sup>

In the past forty years Handy's story has been told over and over again, in liner notes, journal articles, and books written by chroniclers eager to assert the primacy of the Delta in blues history with little hard evidence to back that claim up. One might label it, now, a foundation myth, a tale used to convey something true and essential about the origins of the blues tradition. To its enthusiasts, the blues expresses fundamental emotions, timeless echoes of black – indeed, human – suffering. It makes sense that it would enter history not through its invention but through its discovery, encountered as Handy encountered it, in the form of a sorrowful wanderer adrift in the Delta, appearing before him as if from a dream.

Yet powerful and ubiquitous as that tale is now, in the early 1940s it had nothing like that sort of resonance. Certainly not for Alan Lomax or Lewis Jones, though both had read *Father of the Blues*. Underpinning and guiding their study was a very different blues origins tale: one that rooted the blues in the city, in the urban sexual underground. The 'Delta blues', by these lights, was an urban import, originally part of the red-light district that had sprung up in Clarksdale in the early twentieth century, when railroad construction tied the Delta into the national economy and opened it up to the currents of black city life.

The first thing to say about this genealogy is how common it was in the interwar period. Discussions of blues in the national press routinely rooted the blues in the 'southern underworld' of cities like New Orleans, where it expressed and stimulated 'outlaw emotions'.<sup>17</sup> Such a tale, heavily laden with stereotypes, clearly played on white notions of black immorality; yet, even to racial progressives, it did seem to make a kind of empirical sense. Since the earliest years of its recorded history, the blues *had* celebrated 'outlaw emotions': overtly sexual hits like 'Black Snake Moan', 'Meat Cutter Blues', 'Tight Like That', and 'I Got the Best Jelly Roll in Town',

<sup>16</sup> W. C. Handy, *Father of the Blues* (New York, 1941), 78.

<sup>17</sup> 'Enigmatic Folk-Songs of the Southern Underworld', *Current Opinion* (September 1919), 165–6.

laden with culinary and animal double entendres that brought the feeling, sensing, tasting body vividly to mind.<sup>18</sup>

For intellectuals in the interwar era, coming to terms with the blues meant engaging with this sexual music. More than a few regarded it with a mix of dismay and distaste. The sociologist Forrester Washington, writing in 1928, spoke for many when he lamented the salaciousness of the recordings issued by race record companies, recordings he claimed were spreading urban disorder into the farthest flung corners of the black rural landscape.<sup>19</sup> Buried within such comments were early stirrings of a social science critique decrying the 'pathology' of black urban life, a critique that would reach its peak of intensity after World War Two. But what is striking about the Delta study of 1942 is the absence of such moralistic laments. Alan Lomax, Lewis Jones and Charles S. Johnson found a vibrant authenticity in black sexual song, a sense of the music's 'incandescence' that had its roots in the politics of the Popular Front.

Born in Texas in 1916, Alan Lomax was raised on the study of folk music: his father, John Lomax, collected cowboy ballads and African-American song in the early twentieth-century American south. The elder Lomax was a conservative southerner for whom collecting folklore was a nostalgic attempt to salvage pristine rural traditions.<sup>20</sup> That preoccupation was not, however, shared by his son. By the late 1930s, when he joined the Library of Congress, Alan Lomax was active in left-wing cultural circles and committed to revitalising folkloric practice along progressive lines.

Integral to that revitalisation was the documentation of sexual song. In the folk song hunts in the late 1930s and 1940s, Lomax sought out and recorded obscene material, depositing the disks in the Library of Congress. He had inaugurated this practice in 1938 in an extraordinary three-day interview with the jazz pioneer Jelly Roll Morton, who sat at his piano and recreated the sound of the blues of the Storyville brothel, songs so explicit in their sexual content that they remained buried in the archives for a full fifty years. (See the appendix at the end of this article, for lyrics.) Three years later, on the Coahoma County study, Lomax's directives to the Fisk fieldworkers targeted sexual and scatological material: party songs, dirty jokes, and 'toasts', the ritualised abusive humour that he saw as a vital form of African-American culture.<sup>21</sup> He even restaged his Jelly

<sup>18</sup> On sexuality in blues recordings, see Paul Oliver, 'The Blue Blues', in Oliver, *Screening the Blues: Aspects of the Blues Tradition* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 164–261.

<sup>19</sup> Forrester Washington, 'Recreational Facilities for the Negro', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 130 (November 1928), 279.

<sup>20</sup> Jerrold Hirsch, 'Modernity, Nostalgia, and Southern Folklore Studies: the Case of John Lomax', *Journal of American Folklore* 150 (Spring 1992), 183–207.

<sup>21</sup> See Alan Lomax, 'Folk Culture Study: Suggested Field Procedures', 2, in ALA-HC, where Lomax specifies 'sexual or skatological [sic] songs' as one of the song types to be collected and researched on the study. For examples of obscene material collected on

Roll Morton session by interviewing ex-brothel pianist Jaybird Jones, sitting him at his piano, pumping him for anecdotes of Clarksdale's red-light district.<sup>22</sup> The result was disks full of obscene songs, rhymes and tales that the Library of Congress catalogued with the Greek symbol 'delta' to denote its erotic content and render it off limits to all but specialist scholars.

In recording sexually explicit material, Lomax broke with a generation of American song collectors whose works lamented the obscenity of black secular song while refusing to provide any evidence of it. Accounts of Negro folk music published in the early twentieth century by Howard Odum, Guy Johnson, Gates Thomas and Newman White were suffused with distaste for the salaciousness of what they encountered. 'The real problem of the Negro work-songs is not to find them, but to get them selected, classified and expurgated for publication so that the point and quality of the songs are not impaired', wrote Gates Thomas in 1926. 'Pornography is such an organic part of their structure that it cannot be excised without destroying the point of the songs.'<sup>23</sup> Yet in the song collections they published, obscene material was excoriated and excised, for, as Odum explained, 'these songs come ill-harmonised to the soft, stirring melodies of a folklife'.<sup>24</sup>

As Odum suggests, more than simply obscenity laws led folklorists to expurgate sexual song. Early twentieth-century song collectors had a sense of the authentic folk voice rooted in Victorian ideas of uplift. The beauty of 'soft, stirring melodies of a folklife' lay in their purity of spirit, their echoes of a divine presence, which enabled listeners to transcend gross physicality and experience something of the sublime.<sup>25</sup> Rooted in pristine peasant communities, folk song moved the listener to spiritual catharsis. While African-American spirituals seemed to serve this function, sexual song did not. Its relentless double entendres mired listeners in the physical, in a world of black snakes, boiled cabbage, and jelly rolls.

That Alan Lomax recorded this material owed to a political vision that attempted to disentangle the concept of folk music from its Victorian moorings. He shared that vision with other left folklorists involved in WPA lore-gathering programs: Benjamin Botkin, Herbert Halpert and

the study, see Lomax's interview with David Edwards, on AFS 6615a, Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection, AFC-LC, and *Land Where the Blues Began*, 375-9.

<sup>22</sup> Alan Lomax interview with Jaybird Jones, AFS 6662A and 6663A, Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection, AFC-LC.

<sup>23</sup> Gates Thomas, 'South Texas Negro Work Songs', *Publications of the Texas Folklore Society* 5 (1926), 155, quoted in Paul Oliver, *Screening the Blues*, 164.

<sup>24</sup> Howard Odum, 'Social and Mental Traits of the Negro: Research into the Conditions of the Negro Race in Southern Towns', *Studies in History, Economics, and Public Law*, 37 (1910), 165-7; see also Howard W. Odum and Guy Johnson, *The Negro and His Songs* (Chapel Hill, 1925), 166.

<sup>25</sup> Ronald Radano, 'Denoting Difference: the Writing of Slave Spirituals', *Critical Inquiry* 22 (Spring, 1996), 506-54.

Mary Elizabeth Barnicle. Sexual song – even commercial ‘race records’, which Lomax studied appreciatively in the late 1930s – formed part of what Botkin termed ‘living lore’.<sup>26</sup> Unlike its Victorian predecessor, ‘living lore’ was not confined to rural communities. As ‘folklore in the making’, it proliferated in the metropolis: in the songs and tales of city labourers and the ‘symphony’ of urban night-life.<sup>27</sup> Rooted in a Popular Front ethic of interethnic solidarity and industrial unionism, the concept of ‘living lore’ affirmed a radically inclusive American culture, celebrating the vitality and creativity of the diverse communities industrialisation had spawned. Its authenticity lay in its audible social dynamics. As Botkin explained, living lore – like ‘the blues and reels and the work songs and “hollers” of the Black South’ – was an ‘expression of social change and culture conflict’.<sup>28</sup>

That search for expressions ‘of social change and culture conflict’ drove Lomax throughout the Delta study. He particularly noted conflicts around sex. Percolating through the obscene songs and toasts he recorded were sexual hostilities that he, along with the Fisk team, attributed to the region’s high rates of mobility, involving black women at least as much as black men. In the old days, said one informant, ‘a woman couldn’t just get up and go once she done left home and been married to a man ... But nowadays they is practically all free. They can do most they wants to do. Leave when-so-ever they get ready, run round with white men, and most everything.’<sup>29</sup> Adding to the tension was a sexual system that allowed sex between white men and black women but forbade it between white women and black men. ‘To tell you the truth’, said share-cropper Joe Cal, it’s only ‘the white man and the nigger woman’ ‘that ain’t slaves in this here man’s land’.<sup>30</sup>

From the perspective of folklore studies, Lomax’s project marked a sharp break with the past. Previous hunts for black song in Mississippi

<sup>26</sup> B. A. Botkin, ‘Folklore as a Neglected Source of Social History’, in *The Cultural Approach to History* ed. Caroline F. Ware (New York, 1940), 311–12.

<sup>27</sup> B. A. Botkin, ‘WPA and Folklore Research: “Bread and Song”’, in *The Conservation of Culture: Folklorists and the Public Sector* ed. Burt Feintuch (Lexington, 1988), 259.

<sup>28</sup> Botkin, ‘Folklore as a Neglected Source of Social History’, 312. Insightful discussions of Botkin can be found in Hirsch, ‘Modernity, Nostalgia, and Southern Folklore Studies’, 199–203; and in Jerrold Hirsch, ‘Folklore in the Making: B. A. Botkin’, *Journal of American Folklore* 100 (1987), 3–38. For a sweeping analysis of Popular Front cultural politics, see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: the Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York, 1997).

<sup>29</sup> Quoted on p. 104 of Samuel Adams, ‘Social Change in the Delta’, undated ms. in ALA-HC. Though the Lomax Archive’s copy of this manuscript is attributed to John Work (a Fisk University musicologist who helped set up the study of Coahoma County), it is clearly authored by Adams, a fieldworker on the study: much of the text can also be found in Samuel Adams, ‘The Acculturation of the Delta Negro’, *Social Forces* 26 (1947), 202–5.

<sup>30</sup> Adams, ‘Social Change in the Delta’, 104.

had focused on spirituals, and virtually none had explored the Delta, a region deemed too new, too unstable, to merit serious folkloric investigation. As the head of the state's folklore programme cautioned Lomax, 'there are no folk songs and folklore typical of the Miss. Delta, since the region has been opened up and settled comparatively recently, and then largely by people from other parts of the state, including the hills where most of the folk material is to be found'.<sup>31</sup> Yet it was precisely the Delta's modernity that appealed to Lomax. 'It is a folklorists' illusion that folklore communities are pure, that the pure old tradition is the one most worth studying', he observed.<sup>32</sup> To hunt for songs in the Delta was to strike a blow against folkloric nostalgia, to show how a modernising region was creating new forms in the face of relentless conflict and change.

The Fisk sociologists, for their part, sought evidence of conflict too. Yet the agenda of Lewis Jones and Charles Johnson looked not to folkloristics but to social science, its prescriptions for African-American life. Indeed, their concerns, not those of Lomax, had targeted the Mississippi Delta to begin with.<sup>33</sup> Jones and Johnson were out to challenge the 'caste and class' model of race relations forged by anthropologists who in the mid-1930s had transformed the region into a pilgrimage site for students of American racial dynamics.

Paramount among such studies was John Dollard's 1937 *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, researched fifty miles south of Clarksdale in Indianola in neighbouring Sunflower county.<sup>34</sup> Dollard's book probed the psychological mechanisms underpinning the South's racial order, arguing that its social relations were structured by the interaction of caste and class. Class, within the black community, was a new development – new since the late nineteenth century, when economic and educational changes had seen the emergence of a small black elite. Yet the privileges that ordinarily accompanied middle- and upper-class status were continually thwarted by an iron-clad caste system that held all African-Americans to be contaminating, a brutal, degrading system that felt little different from slavery.

By the 1940s the caste model dominated the social science understanding of race, exerting a hold so tenacious as to leave a few social scientists – particularly black ones – uneasy. What had begun as a useful

<sup>31</sup> Memo from Eri Douglass to Jerome Sage ('Subject: Data for Mr. Alan Lomax'), 29 October 1942, Folder 10 (Correspondence October 1942–January 1947), Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection, AFC-LC.

<sup>32</sup> Lomax field notes, July 1942, ALA-HC.

<sup>33</sup> As late as July 1941, Lomax was suggesting southwestern Tennessee as the focus for the study, as it 'is slightly more stable than the Delta area'. Lomax to Charles S. Johnson, 30 July 1941, Folder 8 (Correspondence 1939–41), Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection, AFC-LC.

<sup>34</sup> John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (New York, 1937).

framework for untangling the South's complex social dynamics had turned into a model for race relations across the US that framed African-Americans as helpless victims and ruled out any prospect of change.<sup>35</sup> The caste model dictated that the fundamental change was impossible: black Americans acquiesced in their own subjugation, channelling their hostilities into aggression towards their own group.

Among the dissenters from the caste paradigm, none were better placed to challenge it than Charles Johnson and Lewis Jones. Since the 1930s, Fisk's Institute of Social Science had carried out regional studies showing the dynamism of social and economic patterns across the black South. The moving force behind those studies was Charles Johnson. He had come to Fisk in 1928 after seven years in New York, where as editor of the journal *Opportunity* he championed the writers of the New Negro movement. At Fisk he returned to the scholarly agenda he had absorbed at the University of Chicago, where he trained in sociology as the protégé of Robert Park. The regional studies he launched at Fisk echoed Park's 'human document' tradition, using ethnographic fieldwork methods, intensive interviews and participant observation, to probe subjects' interior worlds. The South they depicted was rife with changes in farming, welfare provision, and education. Above all it was teeming with migrants, black men and women seeking new opportunities who, as Park argued in the late 1930s, 'had gradually ceased to exhibit the characteristics of a caste'.<sup>36</sup>

With their emphasis on migration and the reshaping of the plantation economy, those regional studies had always challenged the caste model, but in turning to the Delta's musical culture the Fisk team confronted them head on. In *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, John Dollard had pointed to the region's sexually expressive leisure as a lynchpin in the caste system, a gain that whites allowed to lower-class blacks that reconciled them to subjugation. Race records and juke joints, music and dancing encouraged uninhibited physical indulgence, a sensual experience denied to whites. As Dollard put it,

[The poor Negro] has accessible pleasure possibilities which are abandoned in large degree by . . . middle-class white people. His impulse expression is less burdened by guilt and less threatened by his immediate social group; the essence of the gain lies in the fact that he is more free to enjoy, not merely free to act in an external physical sense, but

<sup>35</sup> See James B. McKee, *Sociology and the Race Problem: the Failure of a Perspective* (Urbana and Chicago, 1993).

<sup>36</sup> Robert Park, introduction to Bertram Wilbur Doyle, *The Etiquette of Race Relations in the South* (1937), xxii. On Johnson and Fisk, see Richard Robbins, *Sidelines Activist: Charles S. Johnson and the struggle for Civil Rights* (Jackson, Mississippi, 1996).

actually freer to embrace important gratifying experiences.<sup>37</sup>

That illusion of freedom stabilised the caste system, allowing even the most denigrated to benefit from the status quo.

The Fisk team disagreed. As they saw it, the rise of the blues within the Delta had in fact *unsettled* the caste system by tying African-Americans into a mass-market black culture that celebrated mobility, pleasure and individual licence. The enthusiasm it inspired had weakened the church (the one force, they believed, that had the power to reconcile blacks to their own subjugation).<sup>38</sup> Above all, it had fed racial pride. 'Negroes making music are of the same nature as my own and to me they are the best in the world', one informant told fieldworker Samuel Adams. 'When a nigger sings, he sing with more emotion. Ain't nothing no white man do sincere.'<sup>39</sup>

Echoing through this Delta blues the Fisk team heard a new voice of black self-assertion. Fuelling that voice was economic and social change. As New Deal agricultural subsidies spurred planters to mechanise and rationalise cotton production, the quasi-feudal tenancy system declined, and planters who once voiced a sense of paternalist responsibility for tenants now hired them in the picking season and paid them off at the end of the day. Farm labourers, for their part, picked up stakes if better wages were offered elsewhere. 'Substitution of the wage relationship for the traditional sentimentalities has been accompanied by much mutual suspicion and fear', Jones and Johnson noted. The result, as they saw it, was intense animosity and a new sense of identity among black workers. Blacks in the Delta, wrote fieldworker Adams, 'are ceasing to be a folk people'.<sup>40</sup> Jones and Johnson concluded: 'Over the past ten years the changes may be summed up in the suggestion that a rural proletariat has developed.'<sup>41</sup>

In the blues of the Delta, the Fisk team heard the voice not of the folk, but of the black proletariat – secular, urban, flouting tradition. Their stress on the music's modernity echoed Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes and other African-American intellectuals who like Charles Johnson had come of age in the New Negro movement. And in describing it as a proletarian music they evoked a rallying point for some of the American left: a vision of African-Americans as a revolutionary vanguard. Like Richard Wright, like Langston Hughes, they sought the radical potential of African-American culture. It was not surprising that they heard the

<sup>37</sup> Dollard, *Caste and Class*, 391.

<sup>38</sup> See Lewis Jones, 'The Mississippi Delta', undated ms. in ALA-HC.

<sup>39</sup> Adams, 'Social Change in the Delta', 63.

<sup>40</sup> Adams, 'Acculturation of the Delta Negro', 202.

<sup>41</sup> Charles S. Johnson and associates, *To Stem This Tide: a Survey of Racial Tension Areas in the US* (Boston, 1943), 27–30.

Delta blues as, in essence, politicised, rife with the tensions bred by wage labour and by the sexual volatility that migration brought in its wake.

In the years that followed World War Two, the Lomax/Fisk tale of the Delta blues vanished from the historical annals. It disappeared partly because it never received a proper airing. The book that Jones and Lomax intended to write became an impossibility by late 1942, as their collaboration degenerated into a morass of professional jealousy. In truth, it had been tense from the beginning. Privately, Lomax had railed against the laziness and incompetence of the Fisk field workers. Lewis Jones, in turn, resented Lomax: a white boy from Washington radiating authority, given to peremptory memos upbraiding the Fisk team for their insufficiently musicological focus. Within weeks of completing the fieldwork, the investigators began jockeying for position as the study's primary spokesman, creating such a level of acrimony that the Library of Congress temporarily removed Lomax from the project. In 1947, when Lomax began preparing a book on the Delta, Fisk refused to loan him the field recordings. Lomax responded with a furious letter, and all contact between the two parties ceased.<sup>42</sup>

But in the end their narrative did not collapse so much as it was obliterated by a new generation of folk-song enthusiasts who rejected the vision of blues that had shaped it. The 1950s saw a growing enchantment with the power and purity of rural American cultures. In coffee houses, on university campuses, and at music festivals across the US, that enchantment gave birth to a folk revival. Yet this folk-song movement had a different tone from its predecessor in the interwar era, when songs of marginal peoples were taken up for their illumination of social struggle. 'For those of us whose revival began around 1958', writes Robert Cantwell, such political associations 'would have been, in our naive and compliant youth, a barrier to any enthusiasm for folksongs'.<sup>43</sup> Instead, revivalists embraced folk music for its 'real and human values', its heartfelt poetry.

In a Cold War culture that marginalised radicalism, song hunters recoiled from the politicised vision that had guided the folk-song hunts of the Popular Front. The folklorist Frederic Ramsey, who travelled South making recordings in the mid-1950s, wrote, 'I ... looked vainly [in previous studies] for accurate and convincing accounts of the persons who

<sup>42</sup> On tensions among the investigators during the fieldwork, see Alan Lomax field notes, July 1942, ALA-HC. On the disintegration of the collaboration, see B. A. Botkin to Harold Spivacke, 27 October 1942; Alan Lomax to Charles Johnson, 2 January, 1947; Alan Lomax to John Work, 2 January 1947; all in Folder 10 (Correspondence October 1942–January 1947), Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection, AFC-LC.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: the Folk Revival* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), 22.



were making [black] music.<sup>44</sup> Revivalists sought a new kind of accuracy that distanced itself from what Samuel Charters called the 'sociological' thrust of interwar writing on black song.<sup>45</sup> Imprisoning artistry in an ideological straitjacket, those accounts could not illuminate the blues. 'If the blues simply mirrored the protest of the moment they would finally have little more than an historical interest, like the songs of the suffragettes or the Grange movement', wrote Charters. Instead, the African-American poured into the blues 'his personal and immediate experience', creating 'a poetic language' that spoke of 'a larger human reality', timeless truths of alienation and loss.<sup>46</sup>

In that sense, the blues revival formed part of a depoliticisation of cultural inquiry in the Cold War US, a movement of intellectuals away from radicalism and towards a new role as 'guardians of the self', champions of the personal against the forces of political conformity.<sup>47</sup> Yet while the revival's architects sought to erase all political distortions, their own vision was informed by politics – in particular, by intensifying postwar attacks on the 'tangle of pathology' overtaking black life.<sup>48</sup> Mounting fear of black urban disorganisation lent added force to revivalists' conception of blues as a fundamentally rural music, suffused with the anguish of slavery, born in an isolated, primitive landscape cut off from the modern world.

It took a few years for that vision of blues to root itself in the Mississippi Delta. In his pioneering 1959 book *The Country Blues*, Samuel Charters barely mentioned Mississippi; his raw, archaic black music grew out of the rural South as a whole. And while his friend Frederic Ramsey included the Delta on his Southern song hunt, he did not seem to think that the blues had its roots there. 'Don't know what the Delta along the way will hold', he wrote to Moses Asch of Folkways Records as he embarked on his journey in 1954. 'Probably at least one good blues singer.'<sup>49</sup>

The idea of something called the 'Delta blues', the deepest, purest form of the music, began circulating in the early 1960s, boosted by three seminal LPs: the first Robert Johnson anthology, entitled *King of the Delta Blues*

<sup>44</sup> Frederic Ramsey, Jr., *Been Here and Gone* (New Brunswick, 1961), xi.

<sup>45</sup> Samuel Charters, *The Country Blues* (New York, 1959), xii.

<sup>46</sup> Samuel Charters, *The Poetry of the Blues* (New York, 1963), 17, 173.

<sup>47</sup> The phrase 'guardians of the self' is from Wilfred McClay, *The Masterless: Self and Society in Modern America* (Chapel Hill, 1994), 226, quoted in Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880–1996* (Chapel Hill, 1997), 73. For a discussion of postwar intellectuals and cultural inquiry, see Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York and London, 1989), 42–64.

<sup>48</sup> See Scott, *Contempt and Pity*, pp. 71–91. The phrase 'tangle of pathology' was coined by Daniel Patrick Moynihan in US Department of Labor, *The Negro Family: the Case for National Action*, Washington, DC, 1965, 29.

<sup>49</sup> Frederic Ramsey to Moses Asch, 28 June 1954, Frederic Ramsey personal correspondence folder, Folkways Collection, Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

*Singers*, and two albums put together by record collector Pete Whelan for his Origins Jazz Library label: *The Mississippi Blues* and *Really! The Country Blues*, a compilation of tracks by Delta-born artists. The title of the latter – *really* the country blues – was a slap at Samuel Charters, whose book *The Country Blues* had neglected the Delta and thus failed to capture what Whelan saw as the music's most authentic form. 'Wasn't Charters' country blues real?', an interviewer asked Whelan thirty years later. 'It was real', he replied, 'but not real enough.'<sup>50</sup>

The 'realness' of the Delta blues lay in its rough-hewn sound, its heated, primal emotion, and the primitive character of the song form. As one of its early champions explained: 'The voice is dark and heavy, often thick and congested, with a peculiar crying quality . . . and suffused throughout with an emotional intensity that is all but overpowering (the words seem almost torn from the singer's throat).'<sup>51</sup> These were barely songs at all – more a rhythmic wail of anguish, in which 'monosyllabic cries' expressing 'strong, uncontrollable feelings' often 'carr[ied] far greater meaning than do the song's words'.<sup>52</sup> They were raw, unvarnished, in the most profound sense, an intense distillation of the music of slavery, 'only a step from the wordless field cries and hollers of an older generation'.<sup>53</sup> Such a music could only have been born in the Delta: nowhere else had perpetuated the dynamics of slavery in such a pure form, and nowhere else had been so completely cut off from commercial culture. Yet raw as they were, they voiced sentiments that were startlingly contemporary. As Pete Welding wrote of the greatest of the Delta bluesmen, Robert Johnson, 'His songs are the lonely, impassioned, unanswered cries of disaffected, disoriented, rootless modern man, purposeless, without direction or power, adrift at the mercies of the fates.'<sup>54</sup>

That the Delta seemed a natural landscape for this music of existential loneliness had much to do with social changes that transformed the look and feel of the region itself. Pilgrims who went there in the early 1960s absorbed in the romance that they had woven around the music found a very different landscape than had greeted the Fisk investigators twenty years earlier. With railroad lines overgrown or pulled up and two-thirds of its black population having fled to the north, the Delta of the mid-1960s did look more isolated, more remote than ever before. Add to that all that had happened in the previous decade to push the region to the forefront of white liberal consciousness: the horrific lynching of 14-year-old Emmett

<sup>50</sup> Joel Slotnikoff, 'Pete Whelan Interview', <http://www.bluesworld.com/PeteWhelanInterview.html>.

<sup>51</sup> Pete Welding, 'Stringin' the Blues', *Down Beat* (1 July 1965), 22.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Pete Welding, 'Robert Johnson: Hellhound on His Trail', *Blues Unlimited* 82 (June 1971), 16.

Till for the crime of whistling at a white woman: the reissue of John Dollard's *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, given a new life on university reading lists: and, above all, the Mississippi Freedom Summer campaigns for civil and political rights – all painted a grim portrait of the Delta as a region still stuck in the mid-nineteenth century, the most benighted place on earth.

For blues revivalists, only that setting could have bred a music so permeated by alienation and anguish. It proved to be a powerful vision – powerful enough, indeed, to sway Alan Lomax. In the years following the Second World War, Lomax moved away from the focus on social conflict that had guided him in the era of the Popular Front. By the time he wrote his account of the Coahoma County study, his magnum opus *The Land Where the Blues Began*, in 1993, he had largely discarded the vision that had once led him to Jelly Roll Morton. If in 1938 Morton's sexual blues provided 'a rich evocation of underground America', in 1993 they were commercial, superficial, and inauthentic: 'the blues of the professional jazzman are never quite the real thing'.<sup>55</sup> The real thing was the blues of the Delta, a music of 'anomie and alienation' that had its roots in a region where slavery had never ended, that was cut off from the forces of the modern world.

It had taken Lomax fifty years to publish an account of the Mississippi Delta. 'He agonised over that book', says his daughter. 'He lived with that material for a long time.'<sup>56</sup> That he so substantially rewrote his field notes speaks volumes for the shift in his once radical vision. But perhaps it also tells us something about the limits of that vision itself. As the Fisk sociologists may well have sensed, Lomax was not documenting black music as part of a fight against racism. Fundamentally, he was fighting what he called 'cultural grey-out', the dominance of world music by the faceless, sentimental tunes churned out by the corporate song hacks of Tin Pan Alley. Capturing the blues at the grass roots formed part of the battle for a full-blooded music – a battle that for Lomax was charged with democratic romance. He wrote of making field recordings, 'Every time I took one of those big, black, glass-based platters out of its box, I felt that a magical moment was opening up in time. Never before had the black people, kept almost incommunicado in the Deep South, had the chance to tell their story in their own way.'<sup>57</sup>

It's hard to tell what Lomax's informants made of this process, but evidence suggests that some of them had a take on the sessions that was rather more straightforward. 'Dear sir', wrote Muddy Waters two months after Lomax recorded him in his cabin on the outskirts of Clarksdale.

<sup>55</sup> Lomax, *Land Where the Blues Began*, 440.

<sup>56</sup> Anna Lomax Chairetakis, telephone conversation with the author, February 1999.

<sup>57</sup> Lomax, *Land Where the Blues Began*, xi.

‘This is the boy that put out Bur Clover Blues and First Highway Blues and several more blues. Want to know did they take. Please sir if they did please send some to Clarksdale Miss please sir answer soon to M G Morganfield.’<sup>58</sup>

That the twenty-six-year-old Morganfield felt obliged to call himself a boy in writing to the twenty-five-year-old Lomax suggests that, despite all hopes of inspiring trust, the South’s racial etiquette still impinged on the study. Moreover the letter suggests something more, something that Lomax never seems to have recognised: Morganfield assumed that he was a talent scout for a commercial record company. Clearly, there were some elements of the Delta’s modernity that even Alan Lomax did not want to hear.

### **Appendix**

‘Winning Boy Blues’ (Jelly Roll Morton), recorded by Alan Lomax at the Library of Congress, June 1938. Found on Jelly Roll Morton, *Winin’ Boy Blues* (Rounder CD 1094)

<sup>58</sup> McKinley Morganfield to Alan Lomax, 21 September 1941, Folder 11 (Correspondence: individual informants), Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection, AFC-LC.

(speaks): This happen to be one of my first tunes in the blues line down in New Orleans in the very early days when people first thought of playing piano in that section. Of course, when a man played piano, the stamp was on him for life, the femininity stamp, and I didn't want that on so of course when I did start to playing the songs were kinda smutty a bit, not so smutty but something like this.

(sings): I'm the winin' boy, don't deny my name (× 3)  
I can pick it up and shake it like Stavin' Chain,  
I'm the winin' boy, don't deny my name

I had a gal, I had her in the grass  
I had that bitch, had her in the grass (× 2)  
One days she got scared and a snake ran up her big ass,  
I'm the winin' boy, don't deny my name

I had that bitch, had her on the stump (× 3)  
I fucked her till her pussy stunk  
I'm the winin' boy, don't deny my name

Nickel's worth of beefsteak and a dime's worth of lard (× 3)  
I'm gonna salivate your pussy till my penis gets hard,  
I'm the winin' boy, don't deny my name.

Every time the changin' of the moon (× 3)  
The blood comes rushin' from the bitch's womb,  
I'm the winin' boy, don't deny my fuckin' name

I want about ten sweet bitches to myself (× 3)  
The one I like I'm gonna keep her to myself  
I'm the winin' boy, don't deny my fuckin' name