

“These hard times gon’ kill you”: Black masculinity, racial and intimate violence, and the blues in the Mississippi Delta, 1918-1945

by
Alexa Dagan

Supervised by
Dr. Jason Colby

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Introduction

In the state of Mississippi between the years of 1882 and 1968, the NAACP estimates that 581 African-

share this enthusiasm. Therefore, during the 1870s when home rule was violently and effectively

excitement provided by the event.⁶ The second spike in lynchings occurred just after World War I, when young black men were returning from military service in Europe, where race relations were more relaxed.

Upon their return, white Mississippians were keen to reinforce the status quo, and remind black soldiers of their place in the social hierarchy, regardless of their service to the nation. Additionally, encountering better circumstances abroad made returning black soldiers more intolerant of the physical, emotional and economic assaults of southern whites and more likely to speak or act out against abuse. Willie Walker, biological father of preacher C. L. Franklin, abandoned his family and headed north after returning from the war, now finding the “southern farm situation” intolerable.⁷ Not all black veterans left Mississippi, however, and the lynching increase during this period correlated

social expectations dominated interactions between the races, with blacks defensively adopting a docile, subservient demeanor in their speech and body language. Adopting a grinning, cheerful deference in the presence of whites was a survival strategy. By manipulating whites with a display of willful, chipper, “incomprehension,” blacks reassured them of their perceived racial superiority and caused whites to be more inclined to dismiss those who were successful at this deception.⁹

When questioned in later years, many black men revealed the suffocating effect that white supremacy had on their emotional and mental states. During the years of Jim Crow, however, outlets for expressions of discontent of this kind were limited. While some found legal ways to fight back against white oppression, and rebelled against white supremacy through education, the courts, or the press, many more found this nearly impossible. Others found solace in the church, and hymns, prayers and spirituality provided comfort, community, and a mode of expression. Where these methods fell short, the less reputable institutions of juke joints, bars, and blues music offered an outlet for the kind of expression that was unacceptable elsewhere.

The first chapter of this thesis focuses on the racial and economic climate of the Delta and discusses black men’s encounters with racism and violence in both boyhood and adulthood and how bluesmen articulated these events in their music. It argues that bluesmen used metaphorical language and coded expressions of their feelings surrounding these conditions and experiences within their music.

The second chapter explores black men’s commentary on masculinity and

“bad man” mythos and other masculine themes as bluesmen present them in their music; this chapter connects the significance of manhood in the lives and presentations of blues musicians to themes and reports of violence. The last chapter analyzes black “intimate violence” as defined by Adam Gussow as expressed in black social spaces such as juke joints, barrelhouses and bars.

The blues is much more than a timeless and powerful musical genre that speaks to the strength of the musicians that produced it; it presents a microcosm of the complexity of human emotion and struggle that characterized the lives of black men between reconstruction and the Civil Rights movement. By studying it, we have a chance to understand the nature of violence in black communities and in its later manifestations in rap music and “gangsta” culture, and for the ways in which we understand black masculinity today.

and I did not want to die. News of lynchings were frequent.”¹³ The looming spectre of lynching lingered in the cultural imaginations of blacks, discouraging rebellion, and ensuring the continued endurance of the everyday indignities of life in the American South.

Open rebellion against segregation or white social rules often resulted in violent attempts by whites to “keep the nigger down” by any means necessary.¹⁴ While many blacks chose to display outward acceptance of white supremacy for the sake of their safety, in many cases this was little more than an intentional ploy concealing deep discontent and feelings of rebellion, both of which bluesmen expressed in their music. While historians debate the extent to which lynching was discussed in blues music, Gussow maintains that fear of lynching and white violence are one of the prime topics of blues, often unintentionally coded within lyrics, yet recognizable and relatable to other blacks living under the same conditions. Furthermore, he argues that “lynching blues” often dealt with the theme of white violence unconsciously, and that the terror lynching produced, and the daily stress of living under white supremacy manifested itself into the blues as a form of creative expression.¹⁵

The blues, a condition directly related to living under Southern white supremacy, was such a part of the black experience, that bluesman Brownie McGhee, in his recording session with Big Bill Broonzy and Sonny Terry, states that, “I never had the blues, the blues always had me.... The blues was in the cradle with me, rocking.”

¹³ Richard Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger): A Record of Childhood and Youth*, 1st Perennial Classics Ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 252.

¹⁴ Ida B. Wells and Alfreda M. Duster, eds., *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida. B. Wells* (University of Chicago: Chicago Press, 1970), 64

¹⁵ Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here*, 22-23.

Broonzy adds that the blues is not a simple emotion that results from the lack of money or food, but a result of existing when every day is suffering, concluding that if you don't live the blues, "you don't have it."¹⁶ The comments of these musicians establish that the blues exceeded hardship, poverty, and sadness, it is a fact that results from the knowledge that even money and status symbols such as a new Cadillac, will not erase the fundamental state of being unequal.

After escaping the south and relocating to Chicago, Richard Wright worked alongside white women for the first time, and he states that he considered them to lack a certain depth of feeling in comparison to blacks. He states that they lacked the "emotional equipment" to empathize with blacks because their experience of America had been so different; in short, they lacked the blues. Yet, when discussing the shallow emotions of white women, Wright compares his own experience in which he felt as though the strength of his emotions defined his life because of the suffering he endured as a black man.¹⁷ Wright's commentary displays the strength of emotion and range of feeling that black men were capable of, and the determination of southern whites to prevent that emotion from ever being shown.

Blues historian Elijah Wald is quick to dismiss the image of the miserable, poor, oppressed blues singer, and calls into question blues' image as the "heart-cry of a suffering people."¹⁸ Wald argues that instead, intelligent, professional, moneyed, well-dressed men wrote blues music, an

audiences to the music, rather than the personal melancholy of the lyrics. Wald refers specifically to the famous photograph of Robert Johnson, in his pressed suit, tie pins, and pocket handkerchief, stating that this image runs counter to that of the impoverished musician strumming a guitar on “ramshackle” porches.¹⁹ Yet, Wald’s assessment is somewhat simplistic, and dismisses the idea that Bill Broonzy discusses,

interactions with whites, whether in general terms, or for example, the anxiety associated with the whims of a cruel overseer, or the actions of a hostile stranger. The second codes the effects of white violence within the world of “women troubles,” substituting loneliness and the unfaithful lover as a more easily addressed source of pain, and the pleasure of taking a lover as a way of healing the pain of white oppression. The final form manifests in the theme of rambling, most often via railroad or Greyhound Bus, and represents a core, fundamental desire to escape the South and

Memphis Slim and Bill Broonzy, where the two men explain that prison guards used dogs to track down runaways.²³

“Cross Road Blues” reinforces this fear, narrating the unease of being a black man caught in a county where he is unknown after dark. Alan Lomax, the foremost recorder of country blues in the 1930s and 1940s comments on this phenomenon in his book

While Robert Johnson's lyrics clearly and hauntingly encapsulate the fear of living under threat of white violence, Lead Belly is more concerned with the injustice of it. In addition to speaking on white violence, he boldly addresses segregation in "Jim Crow Blues."

I been traveling, I been traveling from toe to toe
Everywhere I have been I find some old Jim Crow

One thing, people, I want everybody to know
You're gonna find some Jim Crow, every place you go.²⁷

Where Johnson's songs on oppression are sorrowful, Lead Belly's lyrics burn with anger, and nowhere is this more apparent than in "Duncan and Brady," which describes a violent confrontation between a white police officer and a black bartender. "Mr. Brady," the white cop walks into the bar and arrests Duncan, keen to start a fight and "shoot somebody jus' to see them die." Yet, Duncan responds to the threat of arrest by shooting Brady in the chest. Lead Belly's lyrics appear to take a certain amount of

Charley Patton's "Some of These Days" describes a man who leaves his lover, who takes him for granted, telling her "you'll be sorry."³³ Son House, a man who in his life was a preacher, a musician

So my old evil spirit
can catch a Greyhound bus and ride⁴⁰

Some bluesmen even titled songs about certain train lines, like Son House's

he is stating his desire to move somewhere where the blues will no longer afflict him, despite the obvious ill reception of these words.⁴⁵ Many Southern whites would have reacted to Patton's words with extreme displeasure, and in fact, Southerners sometimes resorted to drastic measures to prevent the loss of their workforce. Police arrested blacks in train stations and hauled them off trains, and suppressed black, northern newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* to prevent the spread of dangerous ideas.⁴⁶

For bluesmen, their songs were more than sorrowful ballads of love, suffering and hardship, they were a form of social expression that both resisted, and attempted to

Chapter 2

I Can't Be Satisfied

While bluesmen were performers, poets and fighters, they were primarily black men. The ways in which bluesmen expressed their maleness in both performance and lyrics was fundamentally linked to how black men constructed their own sense of manhood. Although in the early twentieth century, newspaper articles, law courts, and the public often considered black men as inherently violent, the ways in which black men constructed and expressed their own sense of manhood were infinitely more complex. Violence was not an instinctual reflex to confrontation, but rather a last resort in preserving one's sense of self-respect or agency and ability to self-determine.

This chapter will focus partially on the ways in which scholars have discussed black masculinity, and its performance, and secondly, how bluesmen presented masculine behaviours in blues shows and lyrics. The relationship between black masculinity and violence holds a unique position in much academic literature because while some of the earlier literature implies that black men are somehow predisposed to violence, some contemporary literature ties black violence to a complete internalization of white expressions and values of Southern honour. This perspective, while preferable to the previous attitude, denies black men their agency in defining their own sense of

disintegrative, rather than internally coherent, resistant, and/or constitutive.⁴⁷

While black men both internalized and adopted some aspects of traditional, white

breadwinner and head earner of the household, than they were being the patriarch and leader of the family.⁵³

in addition to his repertoire of songs about personal tragedy also wrote a fair number of songs about sexual fulfillment.

Carefully constructed stereotypes regarding the sexual appetites of black men and women were perhaps the main tool used by whites to justify the lynching and brutal treatment of blacks. Black men were branded as bestial rapists who would not hesitate to violate white women hence one of the most common reasons given for a lynching was that the victim (most often a black male) had assaulted a white woman.

Conversely, whites stereotyped black women as lustful and immoral to continue the allowance of the sexual advances and predations of white men. These stereotypes were instrumental to upholding the racial hierarchy of the South because they allowed

this was in part because Patton seemed to have little respect for his female companions. In *Pony Blues*, Patton begins with the lines:

Baby, saddle my pony, saddle up my black mare
 Baby, saddle my pony, saddle up my black mare
 I'm gonna find a rider, baby, in the world somewhere

Riding is common slang in blues lyrics for intercourse, and blues artists often referred to their female partners as “riders.” In these lines, Patton is clearly expressing his desire for a female companion. However, the song also makes clear the temporary nature of the relationship he seeks through the concluding lines,

I got somethin' to tell you when I get the chance
 Somethin' to tell you when I get a chance
 I don't wanna marry, just wanna be your man⁶²

Additionally, the testimonies of Patton’s contemporaries indicate that not only was Patton promiscuous, but also that he actively presented his wives to his peers. His nephew reported that “heap of time you’d mostly meet him he’d have a different wife,” suggesting that Patton took a certain measure of pride in his ability to collect companions.⁶³

As we demonstrated in the first chapter, black men often used physical pleasure as a method of healing emotional pain, and the example of Charley Patton demonstrates that promiscuity was both a metaphorical painkiller, and a manifestation of “cool pose.” Majors

his relationships with black women were largely outside of the realm of white concern and control.⁶⁷ By exercising control in their relationships, and publicly attesting to this fact through blues, bluesmen not only boosted their own reputations, but also enhanced their own confidence through self-determination.

Although bluesmen used sexuality and cool pose in establishing their image, black men sometimes grew tired of resisting white supremacy through more subtle methods, and embraced the “badman mythos,” for its violent rejection of white oppression. The badman archetype was that of a man who was something of an outlaw, and defined himself by his lack of fear of white supremacy and its various forms of violent punishment.⁶⁸ When faced with the humiliations or threats of white supremacy, the badman would respond with his gun and fearlessly fig4(re)9(a5(26.e,2 Tck,-3(ld o)-3(u)-3(ld)-3(res

Broonzy, tells a story about his “crazy” uncle, who refused to allow his pregnant wife to work in the fields; when the white man pushed the issue, the uncle retaliated by beating the other man. Later, when a lynch gang came for him, he allegedly shot four or five of them before he was finally taken. Although Broonzy states that others called his uncle “crazy,” both him and Slim regard the man with respect, stating that he was only called crazy because he stood up for his rights.⁷¹

While the badman trope mainly concerned black men who fought white violence with violence, Broonzy and Slim seem to consider a “bad negro” any man who resisted white oppression in a way that brought severe risk onto himself. Memphis Slim describes a scene he encountered in Marigold, Mississippi, where, in a carefully guarded room in the back of a restaurant black men were reading the banned, and inflammatory, black operated newspaper the

their lives that were tightly controlled by whites. Asserting one's right to self-determine and make their own decisions was paramount, and it was frequently when others violated this right that black men reacted in violent, defensive ways. As demonstrated by Broonzy's anecdote about his uncle, a man would be accorded a measure of respect for violently defending his right to govern himself, his family, his finances, and his own sexuality, even if the cost was his own life. In the lives of black men, violence was not random; it was a carefully employed tool used when other strategies were exhausted, and when words failed; senseless violence was reserved for white men, and lynch mobs.

Chapter 3

House of the Rising Sun

Blues lyrics just as often describe violence committed by blacks, or bluesmen themselves, against other African Americans as they do the pain of white supremacy.

the murder or assault of an African American, committing violence against blacks had few consequences. In the strongly honour-based society of the South, men had to defend against any insult to one's honour and self-worth, but for African Americans, reacting against white oppression was often impossible. Instead, they had to claim respectability in whatever situation they could. Responding violently to extreme insult or disrespect could preserve one's own self-worth by projecting an image of strength, confidence and roughness.⁷⁵ Additionally, black men sometimes reacted in a violent manner to having their agency, and personal boundaries infringed by other black men, from whom this treatment did not have to be tolerated the way it did from whites. Blues lyrics express this phenomenon, but this struggle for respect and status played out most strikingly within juke joints, barrelhouses, and other drinking establishments catering to blacks. In these establishments, according to Katrina Hazzard-Gordon "Blues was a mode of resistance: a way of bearing coded and overt witness to terror, easing troubled minds, making a living outside the sharecroppers exploited condition, clearing a space for pleasure, fantasizing revenge –3(n)-3(g)6(e)-3()JTJET E emost

roadhouses, and rural black bars fulfilled the same function. These joints also had a reputation for being a hotbed for seedier activities such as prostitution, gambling, and as is the focus of this paper, violence.⁷⁷

providing an atmosphere in which blacks, repressed by Jim Crow and white oppression, could find an outlet for the frustrations that result from everyday oppression.

The function of the juke joints themselves were also a major contributing factor to the outbursts of violence that occurred. First, these juke joints were one of the few places where African Americans could find alcohol. xadm()1-3(lco)8aC5(e)-3(se)6()JTJET5T1 0 0 1 263.57 t

popular past time in these places, and gamblers commonly quarreled over debts and loses.⁸⁴ The known fact that nearly everyone occupying the joint was armed only served to further aggravate tensions in the juke. After the Civil War, guns became much more affordable, and possession of firearms skyrocketed among the working class.⁸⁵ In fact,

While much of the violence that occurred in juke joints were quarrels over romantic and sexual disputes, many outbursts of violence were between the lovers themselves, rather than rivals. The relationships of bluesmen and their lovers were often volatile, passionate, and violent, and while much of the violence was one-sided abuse, there were many instances of the violence being mutual, with women being the perpetrators almost as frequently as their men. John Lee Hooker's relationship was one of these hostile relationships, and the couple's frequent fights sometimes occurred within the venues Hooker played. His wife, Maude Hooker, attacked him in a club in Toledo once, and broke a guitar over his head, and during an especially bitter fight, cut his hand so deeply that she sliced a tendon, with the result that Hooker could no longer flex that finger. In addition to these acts of physical violence, Maude Hooker frequently verbally abused her husband, criticizing him for his devotion to music that brought him little income.⁹⁴

Tommy Johnson, another Delta bluesman who was particularly known for his addiction to alcohol and willingness to drink substances such as Canned Heat and shoeshine, had many women, but his relationship with Maggie Campbell was the most incendiary. According to his brother Ledell, they fought often, and one night he observed Maggie chasing Tommy out of the house barefoot into the snow, striking him with pots and pans, and even biting him on the ear, yet later both returned to the house, hand in hand, apparently made up.⁹⁵

Bluesmen often express the turbulent and often violent nature of their relationships

a particularly interesting example, as it describes his regret and confusion at mistreating his lover.

When you got a good friend
that will stay right by your side

remove her belongings from his residenc

Conclusion

The early twentieth century was a period in which the threat of brutality was a daily reality in the Mississippi Delta, and the blues was one of the many ways in which African American men interacted with this reality while simultaneously expressing pain, agency and identity. In the context of violence, humiliation, and injustice, the birth of the blues allowed black men to communicate their lived experience and provided an outlet for their emotions. While direct and obvious rebellion against white supremacy could invite danger, the covert acknowledgement of the pain, anger and injustice incited by white supremacy in blues lyrics allowed for not only expression, but also the chance for an exchange of understood grief between blues musicians, and their audience. The “lynching blues” were an eme M

musician's sexual ability and promiscuity, yet also displayed fragility in the emotional comfort found in a lover's company, and the sincere and devastating pain of their abandonment or unfaithfulness.

Yet, the anguish of a lover finding comfort in another man could easily transition into violence, especially in the context of the juke joint where intoxication and suggestive dance styles exacerbated tensions between men. Moreover, juke joints served an inherent function as a black social space in which men could reclaim the respect, identity and agency often denied to them by white overseers, employers and, social etiquettes. Although, it is significant that these interactions were not inherently violent, and were often resolved through conversation and courtesy. It was only in the case of aggressive and persistent disrespect that violence was resorted to resolve the insult. Largely, these scenes resulted from the understood right of all men to set their own boundaries regarding insult and mistreatment. While many would tolerate abuse and disrespect from whites to survive and continue earning a paycheck, insult from another black demanded an answer. Yet, an excess of violence, especially towards women was often met with disapproval, and it was only in the context of defending one's own reputation from extreme insult that it was acceptable for a man, or even woman, to resort to a performance of violence when they deemed it necessary. Therefore, violence did not define black manhood rather, it was defined by a man's right to determine when violence was an acceptable answer to

expression that maintained a careful balance between defeat and optimism, tenderness and violence, defiance and acceptance, and, pleasure and pain. In this way, bluesmen both epitomized what it meant to be a black man in the Jim Crow South, and defied all expectations of what black men should be, while simultaneously and irrevocably influencing the direction of American popular music for the foreseeable future.

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