that they were turning green with envy. Thus the chances were that blues-oriented Afro-Americans acquired both the word and its special connotation from their Euro-American ancestors. English usage of the term blue devils to designate baleful demons has been traced back as far as 1616. Its figurative use as a metaphor for depression of spirits has been traced as far back as 1787, and its plural use as a name for apparitions seen or experienced during delirium tremens has been in use since 1822.

American usage of the blues as a term for depressed spirits, despondency, and melancholy dates, according to *The Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles*, at least as far back as 1807, when Washington Irving used the following sentence in *Salamagundi XI*: "He concluded his harangue with a sigh, and I saw that he was still under the influence of a whole legion of the blues." And no less of a national figure than Thomas Jefferson is on record as having written in 1810: "We have something of the blue devils at times."

Other instances have been documented by the *Dictionary of American English* as follows: 1820, *Western Carolinean*, 18 July, "The fact is he was but recently convalescent from a severe spell of the blues"; 1837, *Southern Literary Messenger III*, 387, "I shall have a fit of the blues if I stay here"; 1850, N. Kingsley *Diary*, 143, "Some are beginning to get the blues on most horribly"; 1866, Gregg, *Life in the Army*, "It was well for me that day that I was able to look on the brightest side of the case and avoid a severe attack of the blues"; 1871, *Scribner's Monthly* I, 489, "The Silence alone is enough to give a well man the blues"; 1883, *Harper's Magazine*, Dec., 55, "Come to me when you have the blues."

All of which suggests that blues music bears a vernacular relationship to the blues that is much if not very nearly the same as that which the spirituals bear to the Christianity of frontier America. Musicologists have indeed traced numerous rhythmic, structural, and sonic elements of the spirituals to African sources, but the fact remains that the spirituals as a specific musical idiom are both indigenous and peculiar to the religious experience of Africans transplanted to the United States. They are a product of the interaction of certain elements derived from African religious and musical sensibilities with European-derived music and religion. But this interaction only took place in the United States. Not in Africa, for all the Africans converted by European missionaries; and not in Europe, and not even in the Caribbean and Latin American countries.

Likewise, the actual historical as well as geographic circumstances, and consequently the conceptual framework in terms of which the blues as such are first perceived, defined, and then responded to by musicians and dancers is not West African, nor is it European. Nor Euro-African. It is Afro-U.S. However many demons there might have been in ancestral West Africa and however many of them may have been some ominous shade of blue, the specific rituals—if any—they gave rise to were likely to be far more closely related to voodoo ceremonies than to the Saturday Night Function. The underlying dance-beat disposition involved is obviously West African in origin, and so are the definitive stylistic elements that give the incantation and percussion—which is to say, blues music—its special idiomatic character. But even so the blues seem to have been imported to the United States from Europe, along with the Christian conception of God and the angels of Heaven and the Devil and the imps of Hell.

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Hugues Panassié's description of blues music as "bearing very definitely the stigma of the yoke of slavery—as may be gathered from the note of pathos . . ." is highly questionable to say the least. To most musicologists the so-called note of pathos is largely a matter of African-derived quarter-tone or blue notes, which is to say, a matter of convention and tradition predating the importation of black slaves to the United States. Moreover, the subject matter and imagery of blues lyrics are usually nothing if not concrete and specific, and not unlike the subject matter and imagery of lyric poetry in general, they are much more preoccupied with love affairs than with such political issues as liberty, equality, and justice.

What with all the references in the spirituals to The House of Bondage, The Walls of Jericho, The Lion's Den, The Fiery Furnace, Deliverance from Old King Pharaoh, The Wilderness, The Valley of the Shadow, The Rainbow Sign, and The Promised Land, it is easy enough to associate their deeply moving sonorities with slavery and political oppression. Indeed, even the most

metaphysical concerns of the spirituals often readily lend themselves to immediate political interpretation and application. Also such is the intrinsically moral orientation of the imagery of the spirituals that no great violence is done to the essential poetic statement when references to the spiritual predicament of man are seen as reflecting his earthly plight.

But even when blues lyrics address themselves directly to negative economic, political, and judiciary circumstances, far more often than not, the main emphasis is likely to be placed on the victim's love life. The pseudo-folk lyrics currently so dear to the hearts of avant-garde night-club patrons and self-styled revolutionary revelers blame the crooked judge, but traditional folk lyrics are about the damage to a love affair. The source of the trouble that brings on the blue tormentors being addressed by Bessie Smith in *Jailhouse Blues, Workhouse Blues, House Rent Blues, Money Blues, Hard Times Blues,* and *Backwater Blues* is not perceived as the political system as such but rather almost always as some unfaithful lover. In fact in the 160 available recordings of Bessie Smith (Columbia five-album set, GP33, G30126, G30450, G30818, G31093), a few notable exceptions such as *Washwoman's Blues* and *Poor Man's Blues* notwithstanding, the preoccupation is clearly not at all with hard workmasters, cruel sheriffs, biased prosecutors, juries, and judges, but with the careless love of aggravating papas, sweet mistreaters, dirty nogooders, and spider men. Old Pharaoh in the spirituals may often stand for Ole Marster as well as the ruler of a sinful and oppressive nation; and Egyptland is often the U.S. South as well as the mundane world. But the man who imprisons the woman body-and-soul in Bessie Smith's lyrics is neither sheriff nor warden. He is the slow and easy but sometimes heartless lover.

In any case, Panassié's political emphasis is not borne out by any outstanding internal evidence of political consciousness. Therefore his characterization of blues music as "a protest against the sad lot that was inflicted on him [i.e., U.S. Negroes]" is gratuitous for all its unquestionably good intentions.

As a matter of fact, much goes to show that in the world as represented by most traditional blues lyrics, it is usually as if the political system were simply another elemental phenomenon, as much a part of the nature of things as were the inscrutable forces

Bessie Smith in 1923, the year she made her first recordings, including *Gulf Coast Blues, Aggravatin Papa, Baby Won't You Please Come Home,* with Clarence Williams on piano; *Jail House Blues,* with Jasper Johns on piano; and *Any Woman's Blues,* with Fletcher Henderson on piano. Between 1912 and 1922 she worked in theaters such as Bailey's 81 in Atlanta, toured the South with such groups as the Florida Blossoms and Silas Green, and was already a vaudeville prima donna with a considerable following before her first records were released. By the end of 1923 her popularity was that of a superstar.

personified by the Gods of Mount Olympus, which also suggests the possibility that the source of any overtone of pathos that may be heard is likely to be more existential or even metaphysical than political. Nor is such an eventuality in the least inconsistent with charges made by church elders against blues music when they accuse it of being good-time music. The overtones they hear are mostly of frivolity.

Not that blues music is without fundamental as well as immediate political significance and applicability. But the nature of its political dimension is not always as obvious as some promoters of folk-music-as-social-commentary seem to believe. The political implication is inherent in the attitude toward experience that generates the blues-music counterstatement in the first place. It is the disposition to persevere (based on a tragic, or, better still, an epic sense of life) that blues music at its best not only embodies but stylizes, extends, elaborates, and refines into art. And, incidentally, such is the ambiguity of artistic statement that there is no need to choose between the personal implication and the social, except as the occasion requires.

As for the note of pathos that Panassié finds to be as moving as that of any other music in the world, the element of downright sadness, forlornness, bitter deprivation, and raw anguish is by all odds a far greater characteristic of the folk music of white southerners than of the downhome honky-tonk Saturday Night Function and ballroom. When a hillbilly musician or country-and-western musician plays or sings a lament, the music is likely to reinforce the mood of melancholy and longing, but in the performance of a blues ballad the chances are that even the most solemn words of a dirge will not only be counterstated by the mood of earthy well-being stimulated by the beat but may even be mocked by the jazziness of the instrumentation.

As imprecisely as the words of so many blues lyrics are treated in actual performance, even by the most celebrated vocalists, beginning with Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, and including Louis Armstrong, Jimmy Rushing, and Big Joe Turner, they provide the most specific clues to the historical source of the blues predicament to which they address themselves. What blues instrumentation in fact does, often in direct contrast to the words, is define the nature of the response to the blues situation at hand, whatever the source.

Accordingly, more often than not, even as the words of the lyrics recount a tale of woe, the instrumentation may mock, shout defiance, or voice resolution and determination.

Panassié, however, as the entry in Grove's *Dictionary* also goes on to show, is by no means unaware of the affirmative thrust of blues music. Having overstated the historical implications of what he calls the note of pathos, he states in the very next sentence that when Negroes play their blues it is not to give way to sadness, but rather to find relief from it, which he says is "why the blues are never sentimental in the pejorative sense." In his book *The Real Jazz* he puts it somewhat differently:

> It has been stated that the blues were a cry of the black man's soul under the oppression of the whites. Hence the plaintive quality, the often hopeless accent. But let us make no mistake; when a Negro sings the blues it is not to give way to sadness, it is rather to free himself of it. He has far too much optimism and too vivid a sense of life to permit himself to do otherwise. That is why the blues, in spite of their nostalgic mood, have nothing to do with whining—but rather express a confidence, a tonic sense of vitality. The Negro has no time for that sentimental, languorous tone which is the scourge of so much music . . . . Furthermore when the blues are sung in rapid rather than slow time they can assume an even joyful note.[!]

Perhaps it is overemphasis based on assumptions that are too specifically political that prevent some commentators from realizing that it may be much more to the point to speak rather of a difference of conventions between blues and hillbilly music than to characterize the latter, if only by implication, as bearing no stigma of the yoke of slavery—or as bearing a greater stigma of something else. The correlation of plaintive musical overtones with political status is not likely to be very clearcut in either case.

But then the term *stigma* can hardly do justice to the complex heritage of the experience of slavery in the United States anyway. Much is forever being made of the deleterious effects of slavery on the generations of black Americans that followed. But for some curious reason, nothing at all is ever made of the possibility that the legacy left by the enslaved ancestors of blues-oriented contemporary U.S. Negroes includes a disposition to confront the most unpromising circumstances and make the most of what little there is to go on, regardless of the odds—and not without finding

delight in the process or forgetting mortality at the height of ecstasy. Still there is a lot of admittedly infectious exuberance, elegance and nonsense to be accounted for.

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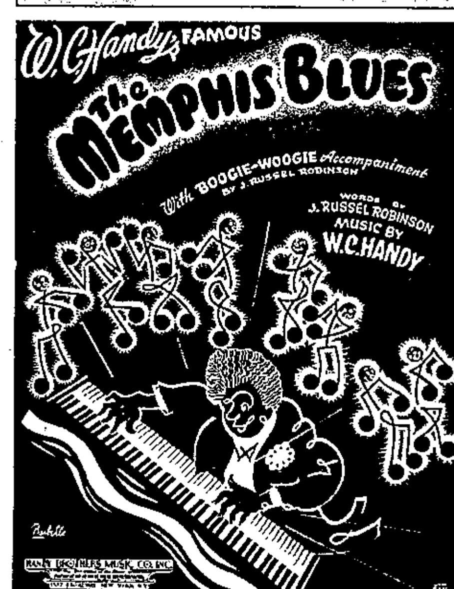
The entry in *A Dictionary of Americanisms on Historical Principles*, which defines blues music as "a type of mournful, haunting Negro folk song adapted and often burlesqued for use in music halls, vaudeville shows, etc.," includes two fundamental clues omitted by other standard references, only to misinterpret them and end up with the same old confusion and exclusions. But once the mood has been limited to haunting mournfulness and the level of execution to that of folk (which is to say nonprofessional or semiprofessional if not amateur) expression, it is no doubt easy enough to preclude burlesque or ridicule as perfectly normal elements of blues-idiom statement, and to imply that the music hall and the vaudeville stage are not its natural setting. Eliminated by doing so, however, are Ma Rainey, Bessie, Clara, Mamie, and Trixie Smith, Ida Cox, Jelly Roll Morton, Louis Armstrong to name a few, the best of whose work often contained elements of burlesque, mockery, and derision, and was nothing if not music hall and vaudeville along with whatever else it was.

The vaudeville circuit was as natural to Ma Rainey, the Smith queens, and Louis Armstrong as the street corner and the cheap honky-tonk were to Blind Lemon Jefferson and Robert Johnson. Nor was their music a special adaptation of folk expression. It was rather a perfectly natural historical development. It was an extension, elaboration, and refinement that was no mere embellishment but an evolution altogether consistent with the relative sophistication of the musicians involved.

That blues music began as folk expression goes without saying. Nor have the original folk-type blues musicians ever gone out of existence. But in point of historical fact, once W. C. Handy had arranged, scored and published *The Memphis Blues* (1912), *The St. Louis Blues* and *Yellow Dog Blues* (1914) and *Beale Street Blues* (1916), it was no longer possible to restrict blues music to the category of folk expression. Certainly there was nothing provincial about the musicians who were providing the instrumentation for Bessie Smith by the early 1920s when her now classic repertory was being established as a nationwide phenomenon (via phono-



(Top) Street-corner and honky-tonk folk music. (Bottom) Dance-hall compositions for professional musicians.

graph records to a great extent). Clarence Williams, Fletcher Henderson, James P. Johnson, Louis Armstrong, Joe Smith, Buster Bailey, Coleman Hawkins, Charlie Green, and the rest were anything but folk performers. They were professionals with no less talent and authenticity for all the technical facility, range, and control at their command.

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The entry on blues music in the *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend* describes the poetry of the blues as the "tender, ironic, bitter, humorous, or typical expression of a deprived people"; and then goes on to catalogue the subject matter of the blues as careless love, the woman who has lost her man, the no-good woman a man can't forget, the longing to go north with train whistles in the night, floods, cyclones, jails, chain gangs, levee camps, lonesome roads, back alleys, and barrelhouses. It is a source of some wonder to find the barrelhouse, a place of merriment if there ever was one, included in a catalogue of examples of deprivation. Elsewhere the *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend* describes it with casual condescension as cheap: "A cheap saloon of the period of about 1900 during which jazz developed, in which customers could fill their own glasses from a cask, the drip from the spigot falling into a 'gutbucket' on the floor." Not all barrelhouses were cheap, though none were very swanky. Not all permitted customers to serve themselves: but the barrel and the gutbucket are touchstones of nostalgia, not regret. The term, the entry also goes on to say, "is applied to the kind of music played in such places and especially to the rough 'dirty' timbre of instrumental tone characteristic of this early jazz." But barrelhousing has more to do with dance rhythm than with timbre, and is associated mostly with the piano. A dirty tone on a trumpet or clarinet, for instance, is not referred to as barrel-house.

Overemphasis on the sociopolitical is evident again in such remarks as, "Singing the blues is one way to say what would not be tolerated in speech. Chain gang bosses, for instance, will ignore comment in song about the work, the food, the misery, of the prisoners, that would bring swift reprisal if spoken, so long as the picks and hammers keep swinging to the music, the words don't matter, except to those who sing them."

Of much more practical use are such observations as follow:

> Musically, the blues are distinguished by an 8 or 12 bar structure (16 and 20 bars in later stages), by a strongly antiphonal quality, by syncopation and by polyrhythm characteristic of Negro music, by simple harmonic progressions, and by a slight flatting of the third and seventh intervals of the scale, these latter are known as "blue notes". Singers make use of subtle variations in pitch and rhythm, portamento, and a wide range of tone coloration. Certain passages may be hummed or rendered in nonsense syllables called "scat." Instrumental accompaniment (by guitar, piano, or various combinations) improvises melodic and rhythmic patterns to the singer's lead or around a solo instrument, and achieves enormous tonal variety by the use of vibrato, mutes, and ordinarily non-musical instruments such as washboards, jugs, etc.

Also to the point are the following observations on the blues lyric:

> The stanza consists typically of a statement repeated one or more times, sometimes with slight variations and a gnomic comment or response. This construction, both in the words and in the music that is molded to them, relates to earlier Negro styles of religious and work singing, with their narrative call lines and responses, and back to African singing. The "punch" lines in their frequently proverbial form, hark back to widespread African use of proverbs in song and story, and the whole song may be of a double-meaning, allusive character close to the African songs of allusion and derision.

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The Random House Dictionary of the English Language defines blues music as "a song of American Negro origin, that is marked by the frequent occurrence of blue notes, and that takes the basic form, customarily improvised upon in performance, of a 12-bar chorus consisting of a 3-line stanza with the second line repeating the first. . . . the genre consisting of such songs." Thus it does not make the usual mistake of confusing blues music with blues as such. But it is misleading nevertheless. Blues music is always an artful combination of incantation and percussion. It is not always song in the conventional sense of the word. Sometimes if not most times the incantation is instrumental, and while it is true that blues instrumentation is derived from voice extension, it is equally true that much vocalization is now derived from instrumentation.

In all events, defining blues music as song not only gives the lyrics more emphasis than is warranted by the way they are used