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Worrying the Line: Blues as Story, Song, and Prayer

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CHAPTER 13

WORRYING THE LINE

Blues as Story, Song, and Prayer



The Blues tell the story of life's difficulties, and if you think for a moment, you will realize that they take the hardest realities of life and put them into music, only to come out with some new hope or sense of triumph. This is triumphant music.

(Martin Luther King, Jr., Opening Address to the Berlin Jazz Festival, 1964)¹

Story

For Mother's Day this year my typically recalcitrant and cynical teenage son displayed a welcome moment of human engagement when he chose to give me a powerful collection of 'raw and rare and otherworldly' African-American gospel music (spanning the years 1944–2007). *Fire in My Bones* was issued by Tompkins Square, a small label dedicated to drawing attention to neglected treasures of American music and, in this case, raising funds for the New Orleans Musicians Relief Fund. Across eighty songs spanning six decades, the collection ranges from scratchy field recordings to intricate vocal harmonies to snappy adaptations of rock 'n' roll rhythms. This is gospel music as it has been sung and

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performed in tiny storefronts and large sanctuaries, from rural Georgia to urban Los Angeles. It is clearly among the most vibrant, playful, beautiful, and emotionally charged music in the world – and it sounds just like the blues. What is apparent from all the recordings is that the spirit of the Lord is rooted in the spirit of the blues.

You don't have to be twice born to feel the inspirational power of a Holy Ghost working its mojo through music. Communing with some greater force, regardless of its theological bent, is something music lovers seek every day. Whether from God or some other cosmic source – 'From on high he has sent fire into my bones, and it has overcome them' (Lamentations 1:13) – the painful reality of life is always with us. The great genius of the blues is to show us how to handle it and how to come out the other side with, as Martin Luther King, Jr. announced, 'some new hope or sense of triumph.'²

That a collection of gospel music would evoke the blues makes perfect sense, considering the mythic origins of the most legendary blues musician – Robert Johnson. Ever since somebody told somebody who told somebody about Robert Johnson making a deal with the devil at the crossroads, the blues and religion have been inextricably bound. Undisputed facts about Johnson's life are few and far between. All we know for certain is that Johnson lived in Mississippi from 1911 to 1938 and left us twenty-nine songs recorded over two sessions. But in between those years his proficiency and personality gave rise to rumor, mystery, and eventually a legend so compelling that it took on mythic proportions. The story about the birth of the blues became as important as the songs themselves to understanding the philosophical dimensions of African-American life.

As recounted in Johnson's composition, 'Crossroad Blues,' the musician 'Went down to the crossroad / Fell down on my knees,' deliberately choosing a place associated with power in African and diaspora religions. Whether met by St. Peter guarding the gates of Christian heaven or Legba, the trickster Vodun deity, the musician knew that at the crossroads he would meet a holy being that had Ashe or Amen: the power to make things happen. Although the song does not particularize a desire to perform the blues, it does articulate the conditions that would drive a man to want to play the blues – loneliness, despair, and helplessness.

Somewhere along the chain of narrators and performers, the protagonist of the song became Robert Johnson and the myth took on the potency of scripture. Johnson became, in Victor Turner's formulation, a lead actor in the social drama that is American life – a bluesman who so desperately longed for fame and fortune and who was so dissatisfied with his own



musical abilities that he made a momentous decision.³ At the stroke of midnight, he walked down to the windswept crossroads at the junction of highways in Mississippi and invoked a deity who in this case turned out to be Satan. In exchange for Johnson's immortal soul, the devil tuned his guitar, thereby giving him the abilities he so desired. From then on, the young bluesman played his instrument with an unearthly style, his fingers dancing over the strings. His voice moaned and wailed, expressing the deepest sorrows of a condemned sinner. Or so the story goes.

The relationship between religion and the blues is not a through line. Indeed, very little in African-American cultural production or philosophical thought follows a straight trajectory, but it is all connected at the source and by the existential effort to create meaning out of life. A more appropriate image would be a circle, which is foundational to African philosophical sensibilities that view life in terms of what Mircea Eliade called the myth of eternal return.⁴ In African cosmology as it came to America with people who would be enslaved, there is no distinction between sacred and profane. Secular problems have spiritual answers and spiritual remedies offer practical results.

This relationship was established early and was articulated by Frederick Douglass in his first narrative. Describing the spirituals he clearly identifies the paradoxical existential state that engenders such music that is both the 'prayer and complaint' of a people and expresses the 'highest joy and deepest sadness [...] the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone.'⁵ In creation and performance, the spirituals first established the terms of an African-American philosophical perspective that would later become the blues. This perspective promotes the story of paradox as the condition of life, endorses song as a means of recording life experience, and advocates prayer in improvisatory, fragmented, and signifying ways to negotiate the contingencies of life.

A secularized version of the spirituals, the blues establishes continuity between the emergence of an African American culture and the present times and provides a similar philosophical guide to life. The blues unifies people over time and space, offers functional advice for living, creates opportunities for and an analysis of society, engages political energies, and reinforces theological and spiritual values. The blues, however, does so in a unique way that brings an aesthetic dimension to the process of making meaning out of the harsh contingencies of life. What the blues depicts is not factual information as such but rather the life of human feeling, and therein the connection to a religious impulse also resides. For all the lure of the real there is also the blur of the real that shapes a



narrative to mythic proportions – as in the case of Robert Johnson at the crossroads – in order to make it meaningful and useful.

This process is neatly described by Richard Wright, who defended his fictionalization of his autobiography in the following way:

I've used what I lived and observed and felt, and I used my imagination to whip it into shape to appeal to the emotions and imaginations of other people, for I believe that only the writing that has to do with the basic issues of human living, moral, political, or whatever you call it, has any meaning. I think the importance of any writing lies in how much felt life is in it: It gets its value from that.⁶

As story, the blues is an inseparable and fluid balance of the sacred and the secular, of art and religion, of God and the Devil, set forth as myth, recalled in ritual, memorialized in symbol, generating a transcendent experience led by a chosen griot who conjures the incantatory magic of words and invokes the obligation to name things as he feels them. In the heroism of telling his tale, the bluesman prepares himself, and others, to live another day.

Song

A story doesn't do any good unless it is told, and singing is how the blues story is told. When sung, the blues offer a ritualistic way to affirm the essential worth of human existence. After facing the indignities of life, one can release the pain and frustration by stomping the blues, knowing full well that the expression is temporary and most likely ineffectual in terms of changing anything in a fundamental way. The stomp lasts Saturday night, and then you get up Sunday, go to church and repent, and start the cycle all over again. The blues, therefore, acknowledges that there is more to trouble and suffering than simply being in a bad mood or having a lousy string of luck; rather, these conditions are simply the structure of existence, for which the blues provides a kind of cathartic metaphysic, identifying what is real but in terms that are concrete, not abstract, and encompassing a full range of human expression.

According to Albert Murray – a preeminent practitioner, promoter, and priest of the blues – the music 'extends, elaborates, and refines'⁷ the philosophical impulse to make meaning out of experience and creates the opportunity



to develop and demonstrate the capacity to endure existence through transcendence as a strategy for survival and eventual – if temporary – triumph. The blues, like spirituals, is typically composed and sung not to answer the problem of evil – it is not a theodicy – but to describe the reality of a situation in which evil is present. It is functional in the most essential way because the blues converts experience and renews existence by embracing life in all its aspects: sorrow becomes joy, work becomes play.

Indeed, therapeutic and playful dimensions of the blues are often overlooked by two concerns that often dominate any discussion of the blues: a focus on the misery the blues describe and debates about the criteria for authenticity. Both issues, however, can lead to a corruption of the technique of ‘worrying the line.’ For blues musicians, ‘worrying the line’ is the technique of breaking up a phrase by changing pitch, adding a shout, or repeating words in order to emphasize, clarify, or subvert a moment in a song. In a broader sense worrying the line can describe the ongoing musical attempts that humans create to fashion a relevant philosophical response to a particular event or setting. If the nature and function of art are the means by which raw materials of experience are processed and stylized into statement, then the blues, Albert Murray argues, is the ultimate extension, elaboration, and refinement of rituals that represent the basic and definitive survival philosophy of a people in a given time and place.⁸

Linked to improvisation, the ability to worry the line is a powerful resource for living in an unpredictable world. The sampling, mixing, and mashups of contemporary hip-hop are the most recent extensions of the blues impulse to worry the line. Neither race, gender, class, ethnicity, nor age limit this power. The blues, Murray repeatedly insists, is an Omni-American response that influences the dominant culture in significant ways. The blues is not proprietary but imitative and contagious, shaped by procedure and custom but primarily by improvisations. The blues provides a context for transforming a miserable existence into a heroic life. Just as worrying the line is really a matter of innovation and improvisation, the blues isn’t about staying blue but about moving beyond the tragic and pathological dimensions of life through a brave confrontation and affirmation of what remains possible. The blues is art as celebration, an act of stylizing a particular existential condition into significance.

Like the paradoxical trajectory of human experience that it describes, the blues functions in a paradoxical way – as a highly pragmatic yet playful device for existential affirmation yet also as a strategy for acknowledging the fact that life is a low-down dirty shame, and also as a means for improvising or riffing on the exigencies of that predicament. As Albert Murray observes,



I don't know of a more valid, reliable, comprehensive or sophisticated frame of reference for defining and recounting heroic action than is provided by the blues idiom which enables the creator to deal with tragedy, comedy, melodrama, and farce simultaneously.⁹

Hence philosophy (and in this case its twin, theology) is a more adequate and sufficient tool than social science to capture the richness of the blues experience and to characterize what Murray describes as the 'incontestably mulatto'¹⁰ character of the Omni-American. There isn't a white blues or a black blues or a norm from which one contrasts deviations because the particulars of what causes the blues may be individual but the solution of stomping is shared. Taken to a higher level, the community becomes that of the Omni-Americans, a term that resolves, in some measure, the double consciousness that Du Bois describes in *The Souls of Black Folk*.¹¹ Black and white Americans are partners, willing or unwilling, in a single enterprise of living in the hyphen: the space between African and American, sorrow and joy, work and play, and heaven and hell. 'For all their traditional antagonisms and obvious differences, the so-called black and so-called white people of the United States resemble nobody else in the world so much as they resemble each other.'¹² Hope, therefore, is not an optimistic abstraction but a discipline to be practiced in a ritual way that makes community possible.

Prayer

One is seldom alone in stomping the blues. As described by Murray in his swinging prose, the Omni-American bluesman is, fundamentally, not a just a metaphysician but an ethicist:

Extemporizing in response to the exigencies of the situation in which he finds himself, he is confronting, acknowledging, and contending with the infernal absurdities and ever-impending frustrations inherent in the nature of all existence by playing with the possibilities that are also there.¹³

As a 'humanizer of chaos,'¹⁴ the blues reveals a sense of connection to a philosophy, a way of negotiating the world from which blues people are alienated that does not concede existential power to the dominant class. The blues humanizes the chaos of life by, among other things, retaining, in the midst of suffering, togetherness as a sense of cultural being and finding ways to use the blues idiom as prayer, as an agent of change.



The hope beneath the despair of the blues is what Martin Luther King, Jr. heard, and his success as a reformer is due, in part, to his appreciation of the blues. His strategy of direct action through non-violent resistance was an elegant example of the signifying – the practice in African American culture, involving a verbal strategy of indirection that exploited the gap between the denotative and figurative meanings of words – that goes on in the blues. He turned a passive act into an active one, emphasizing the discipline and skill required to remain pacifist in the midst of violence by rearranging the terms of the action and adding a negative prefix: ‘non.’ Choosing not to fight became, therefore, a new way of worrying the line and in the estimation of Henry Louis Gates Jr was ‘one of the most magnificent things anybody ever invented in the civil rights movement.’¹⁵

The blues is seldom associated with Martin Luther King, Jr. but its idiom was foundational to his life and career. In an opening address to the 1964 Berlin Jazz Festival, King offered remarks that give us insights that, in true blues fashion, circle back to where we began by considering the relationship between the blues and religious faith. Indeed, King began by identifying the blues as originating from a divine source:

God has wrought many things out of oppression. He has endowed his creatures with the capacity to create – and from this capacity has flowed the sweet songs of sorrow and joy that have allowed man to cope with his environment and many different situations [...] The Blues tell the story of life’s difficulties, and if you think for a moment, you will realize that they take the hardest realities of life and put them into music, only to come out with some new hope or sense of triumph. This is triumphant music.

He went on to worry the line, to suggest that jazz

has continued in this tradition, singing the songs of a more complicated urban existence. When life itself offers no order and meaning, the musician creates an order and meaning from the sounds of the earth which flow through his instrument.

He continued his brief comments by crediting musicians as the leaders in the American search for identity and the inspiration behind his movement:

Long before the modern essayists and scholars wrote of racial identity as a problem for a multiracial world, musicians were returning to their roots to



affirm that which was stirring within their souls. Much of the power of our Freedom Movement in the United States has come from this music. It has strengthened us with its sweet rhythms when courage began to fail. It has calmed us with its rich harmonies when spirits were down.

Certainly aware of the ironies of speaking in Berlin before the wall came down, King concluded by lifting his comments out of the particular and in to the universal:

For in the particular struggle of the Negro in America there is something akin to the universal struggle of modern man. Everybody has the Blues. Everybody longs for meaning. Everybody needs to love and be loved. Everybody needs to clap hands and be happy. Everybody longs for faith. In music, especially this broad category called Jazz, there is a stepping-stone toward all of these.¹⁶

King's comments are echoed by Cornel West, who cites the blues as the most effective strategy for dealing with the lingering and catastrophic effects of an 'empire in decline, a democracy in decay, and a civilization that is wobbling and wavering.' The problems society faces go beyond the mere 'problematic' and require 'fundamental transformation,' West pronounces, that can be found in the blues, 'an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically [...] with grace and dignity.'¹⁷

What makes the blues effective as an agent for social change is its ability to show us how to live with integrity while accepting the contingencies of radical disappointment and profound disenchantment. The blues gives one the context and method for organizing and mobilizing around common concerns while at the same time providing the opportunity for the individual, so often lost in the mass of human need, to have a moment of single recognition and identity as the author of her own song, her own struggles, her own blues. To stick to one's calling as a blues person, however, requires support and, according to West, 'a courageous few who are leavening a loaf'¹⁸ by bearing witness to the truth of our circumstances. Martin Luther King, Jr. was one such bluesman who offered a model for how to live a sanctified life.

That King was and West is Christian presents no existential conflict. Indeed, philosophy and theology are two sides of the same coin, a feature apparent in the ways one bluesman adopted King's cause as a subject for his music. 'Alabama Bus,' a blues song by Brother Will Hairston, illustrates the dualistic role of the blues: providing relief through its



religious sensibilities and signifying to criticize society. Like the civil rights movement itself, which advanced a secular cause of justice motivated by spiritual indignation, 'Alabama Bus' rides the road on which both the spirituals and the blues travel. The song tells the story of the Montgomery bus boycott, beginning with a chorus that is a repetitive protest against the system that discriminated against African-Americans: 'Stop that Alabama bus / I don't wanna ride.' The mythic narrative sung by the bluesman who tells of a 'bus that don't have no load' punctuates the collective chorus. The song continues with an account of a particular individual's experience of discrimination.

A black man boards an empty bus and pays his fare. However, he is not allowed to sit where he wants. The bus driver acknowledges the fact of payment but threatens to fine the man if he doesn't take his 'proper' place. The existential condition of the passenger, of course, transcends the circumstances of the bus and, as the song progresses, Brother Hairston redefines what 'proper' can be, transforming the dominant racist culture's depiction of an African-American's place at the back of the bus. In this brief account delivered as a blues composition, Brother Hairston illustrates the social challenges faced by African-Americans and gives voice to the indignities discrimination generates. But the blues lament is imbued with religious elements, particularly the invocation of Reverend Martin Luther King, 'the man God sent out in the world.' Drawing directly from the historical foundations of black spirituality, God is identified as one who intervenes in history, just as God sent Moses, also referenced by Brother Hairston and compared to King.

If we compare the present circumstances with the biblical past, the bluesman not only elevates the actions of the resisting passenger but gives him a role to play in a grand and sacred drama. Just as God delivered the Israelites in Egypt by anointing Moses to lead them out of slavery, African-Americans will find their collective deliverance by following their ordained leader, King, who will lead them from the back of the bus. King's lament in the song to 'treat us right' resonates with his response to the criticism of eight white clergymen as set forth in the 'Letter from Birmingham Jail.' The clergy had stated that King had no business in Alabama because he wasn't a resident there; they also urged the blacks in Alabama to withdraw their support of King and other civil rights leaders. King, however, affirmed his right to be in Alabama because 'injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.' Furthermore, he established the difference between just laws 'rooted in eternal law and natural law'



that uplift, and unjust laws, such as the black codes of segregation, that degrade. King declared that it was humanity's obligation to defy any laws that were not just.¹⁹

As the song continues, it reaffirms the fact that African-Americans were being denied privileges despite their contributions to the general welfare of the nation. Brother Hairston makes a classic blues maneuver and particularizes the cultural struggle by citing his own father, left blind by World War II but unable to reap the benefits of that war. Finally the song returns to King's story of imprisonment and pays tribute to him and his followers who substitute the pain of segregation for walking 'along the streets until their feet was sore.' Throughout the song there is a cry for recognition of humanity – 'Lord, there comes a bus don't have no load / You know, they tell me that a human being stepped on board' – that culminates in a classic blues statement Hairston attributes to King: 'a man ain't nothing but a man.'

There will always be a reason to sing the blues. But sometimes, when the song is sung, it tells a story that makes you want to pray along with Dr King that 'the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.'²⁰

NOTES

- 1 Martin Luther King Jr., 'On the importance of jazz: Opening address to the 1964 Berlin Jazz Festival,' (1964, <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/626.html>).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974).
- 4 Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1959).
- 5 Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), pp. 57–58.
- 6 Keneth Kinnamon and Michel Fabre (Eds.), *Conversations with Richard Wright* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1993), p. 4.
- 7 Albert Murray, *The Hero and the Blues* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1973), p. 33.
- 8 Murray, *The Omni-Americans* (New York: Outerbridge and Dienstfrey, 1970).
- 9 Albert Murray, *The Hero and the Blues*, p. 33.



- 10 Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, p. 58.
- 11 W. E. B. DuBois, 'The souls of black folk.' In *Writings* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1986), pp. 364–365.
- 12 Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, p. 22.
- 13 Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, p. 58.
- 14 Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, p. 63.
- 15 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 'The king of cats,' *The New Yorker* (April 8, 1996), p. 73.
- 16 This and the three preceding quotes are from David Kyuman Kim, 'Democracy, the catastrophic, and courage: An conversation with Cornel West and David Kyuman Kim,' *Theory and Event* 12:4 (2009).
- 17 Kim, 'Democracy, the catastrophic, and courage.'
- 18 Kim, 'Democracy, the catastrophic, and courage.'
- 19 Martin Luther King Jr., 'Letter from Birmingham Jail.' In James M. Washington (Ed.), *Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), p. 293.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 302.

