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BLUES AS A MUSICAL PIDGIN TOWARDS A COMPREHENSION DEFINITION AND THEORY OF BLUES*

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Abstract

Theoretical works on blues as a style in its own right are scarce. Within the rather compact corpus of theoretical works on blues, only very few authors have attempted the establishment of a comprehensive theory, i.e., a theory that would account for the majority of phenomena exhibited by the vast array of musical styles that have come to be called blues at a certain point in time. A comprehensive definition of blues in the sense of a common theory applicable to the majority of its musical exponents has therefore hitherto not been satisfactorily established. Considering the totality of its sub-styles, blues is a highly diverse style and thus defies definition through a theory based on the analysis of physical musical constituents. In the article, I attempt to formulate a comprehensive definition and theory of blues; the definition and theory is based on the fact that blues shares common traits with Pidgin languages, which can be uncovered by an understanding of how blues uses the harmonic and melodic language of Western tonal music. The article analyzes the decontextualized use of Western tonal elements in blues through Schenkerian and tonal analysis and compares the findings to three traits of Pidgin languages, namely limited embedding and avoidance of deeper structure, the use of infinitive forms and metonymy, and grammaticalization, thus arriving at a metaphysical theory and definition of blues. The

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definition and theory is metaphysical in that it describes principles by which the blues is guided and through which actual musical constituents are brought into existence.

Keywords: Blues, musical pidgins, blues theory, definition of blues, blues metaphysics

Müziksel bir Pidgin Dili olarak Blues: Kapsamlı bir Blues Teorisi ve Tanımına Doğru

Blues'u kendi başına bir stil olarak ele alan teorik çalışmalar oldukça azdır. Blues üzerine yapılan kuramsal çalışmaların sayısının oldukça az olmasının yanı sıra, çok az sayıda yazar kapsamlı bir blues teorisi oluşturmayı hedeflemiştir. Kendi döneminde veya sonraki dönemlerde blues olarak adlandırılan çeşitli müzikal stillerin sergilediği fenomenlerin çoğunluğunu açıklayacak bir teori henüz oluşturulmamıştır, dolayısıyla blues stillerinin çoğunluğu için geçerli olacak ortak bir teori ve kapsamlı bir tanım tatmin edici şekilde geliştirilmemiştir. Blues'un tüm alt stilleri göz önünde bulundurulduğunda, blues son derece çeşitli bir stildir. Bu çeşitlilik, blues'u fiziksel müzikal bileşenler üzerinden tanımlamayı zorlaştırmaktadır. Bu makalede, blues'a kapsamlı bir tanım kazandırmaya ve bir blues teorisi formüle etmeye çalışıyorum; bu tanım ve teori, blues'un tonal müziğin armonik ve melodik dilini nasıl kullandığını analiz ederek, blues'un Pidgin dillerine benzer ortaközelliklerini ortaya koymaktadır. Makale, blues'daki tonal öğelerin öz bağlamından bağımsız kullanımını Schenkerci ve tonal analiz yöntemleriyle inceler ve bulguları, Pidgin dillerinin üç özelliğiyle karşılaştırır. Bu özellikler: sınırlı gömme ve derin yapıdan kaçınılması, mastar ve metonimi kullanımı ve gramerleşme kavramlarıdır. Pidgin dillerinin dilbilimsel özellikleri ile blues müziğinin tonal unsurlarının karşılaştırılması, metafizik ve dolayısıyla kapsamlı bir blues teorisi kurmayı mümkün kılar. Sunulan teori ve tanım, bluesmüziğinin arkasında yatan ve fiziksel müzikal temsillerin ortaya çıkmasına sebep olan prensipleri açıkladığı için metafizik bir teori ve tanımdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Blues, müzikal piginler, blues teori, Blues tanımı, Blues metafiziği

Introduction

What is blues? The question seems to be easily answered, given the fact that blues is a musical style[1] with professional global and regional production, international and national sales listings and musicians who openly define themselves as professional proponents of the style. Closer inspection of the style *in its totality* yet shows that the struggle for a definition is met with hardships arising from the style's highly diverse nature; the diversity of blues is not a product of historical development; over the style's roughly 150 year history, blues has developed in a variety of different settings and locations, bringing forth a great number of musically distinct sub-styles Even in the earliest stages of blues, the style was highly diverse in terms of musical material, orchestral types and geographic origins. Blues has originated in the southern United

States, over an area roughly the size of Western Europe, among a population of highly diverse cultural origins, and has since spread all over the globe to form a great number of productive and highly improvisation driven styles. Blues elements have also been incorporated into a great number of African American popular musical styles and their derivates, just as it itself has incorporated several musical traits of the before mentioned.
A comprehensive definition of blues would have to be valid for the vast amount of individual sub-styles the term came to comprise. Given the great musical diversity among sub-styles, the question arises if singular blues sub-styles or style conglomerates should only be treated as styles in their own right in scholarly discussion. There are two strong arguments against this notion: First of all, blues *is* considered to be a musical style among musicians and listeners of its sub-styles, and therefore its sub-styles *are* perceived as pertaining to a single specified style. Secondly, blues musicians are not necessarily bound to perform a single sub-style, as many examples of musicians that have been active in more than one blues sub-style, or musicians who have incorporated sub-styles different from their original ones into their repertoire, give proof of. A definition of blues comprising the style in its totality has–as the following literary discussion will show–hitherto not been satisfactorily established. The article is an attempt at a definition of the style from a new perspective, i.e., the definition of blues as a musical Pidgin language and the establishment of a meta-theory to support this claim. The article shall first discuss previous scholarly definitions of blues and their downfalls, concentrating on definitions based on melodic material and non-Western Pitch Content, form and rhythmic analysis, and then continue to establish a theory and definition of blues as a musical Pidgin, comparing three major traits of Pidgin languages to musical constituents of the blues repertoire, namely limited embedding and avoidance of deeper structure, the use of infinitive forms and metonymy, and grammaticalization.

Scholarly Definitions of Blues and Their Downfalls

Scholarly literature has traditionally focused on three methods of definition of the blues style, namely definition through social aspects of its origin and production, literary analysis of textual components and musical analysis. The first two have obvious downfalls: Social theories will only account for blues development among certain social groups, and thus defy universality. Literary analysis will only provide a theory for blues that has a

literary component and will only peripherally touch upon instrumental exponents of the style. Musical analysis is therefore the most promising method for a comprehensive definition of blues.

The corpus of scholarly musical theoretical writing on blues is comparatively small. A possible reason for this is its rather simple harmonic structure. Blues, in nearly all of its exponents, is a style based on a simple and repetitive harmonic structure with little to no room for harmonic augmentation, making it a rather uninteresting field for tonal analysis. Existing musical theories of blues generally focus on three areas of study: The melodic structure and use of scales and non-Western pitch content, harmonic form or chord structure, and rhythmic traits. It shall be seen over the following paragraphs that the existing theoretical approaches are not sufficient in providing a definition of blues in its totality, since their focus on foreground musical phenomena rather than governing principles do not lead to a universal understanding of this musically highly diverse style.

Definitions based on melodic material and non-Western Pitch Content

Non-Western pitch content–as maybe the most striking feature of the style to the European trained musicologist–has most likely been the most discussed feature of blues among theorists. The exonym *blue note* is often used to describe non-Western pitch content (see Kubik, 1999: 118-145). In his book *Downhome Blues*, Titon (1977) present a statistical evaluation of the early Delta blues repertoire and derives a *blues scale* from it:

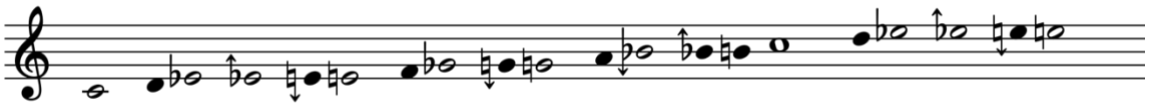

Figure 1. Titon's *Blues Scale*

Judging from the notes with the highest occurrence, a pentatonic scale can be derived from the scale presented in Figure 1, with some steps of the scale housing pitch "complexes" (Titon, 1977: 154), i.e., steps prone to microtonal inflection.

Many definitions and theories of blues have been based on explanations and supposed reasons for non-Western pitch content in blues. I shall in the following discuss the two most influential theories, namely the theory of a "ladder of thirds" introduced by Van der Merwe (1989) and the theory based on an overlapping of harmonic series, as presented by Kubik (1999: 118-145), since the overwhelming majority of later theoretical writing on the blues is based on these two seminal works[2].

In his highly influential work *Origins of the Popular Style*, Van der Merwe (1989) presents a system of three *matrices*[3] that come together to form and define the blues, namely the matrices of *blues mode*, *rhythmic syncopation* and *blues form* (Van der Merwe, 1989: 93-100 and 113-145). Elaborating on the blues mode, Van der Merwe (1989: 120) conceives a system of a *ladder of thirds* based on the "mysteriously satisfying quality of the minor third". Van der Merwe uses a method of stacking minor and/or neutral thirds–the problematic dichotomy of which shall be discussed at a later point–to create a *blues mode*, the foundation of which–hanging and dropping thirds–he assumes in chorale and folk musical styles of Europe, Africa and the Americas (Van der Merwe, 1989: 120).

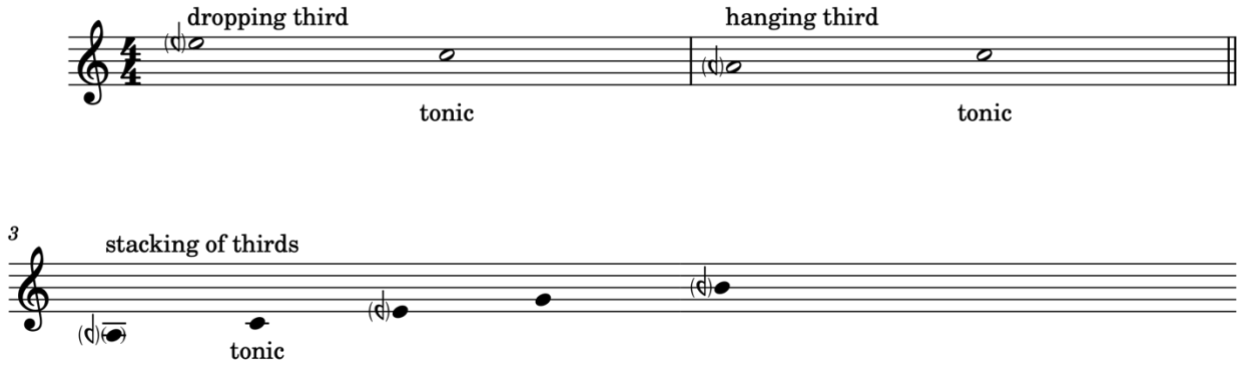

Figure 2. Basic constituents of Van der Merwe's *Ladder of Thirds*

In Figure 2, we see the basic constituents of the *Ladder of Thirds*, as proposed by Van der Merwe (1989). Van der Merwe accepts the concepts of dropping or hanging thirds as the basis of a concept that creates triads and a more or less pentatonic mode from stacked thirds. In Figure 2, the C is accepted as the tonic. Van der Merwe yet puts forward that the *hanging* third, in this case the A, can also serve as a tonic from a melodic standpoint.

The first row of Figure 2 shows what Van der Merwe (1989: 122) calls "two-note modes". The two note modes can be combined to form a triadic mode (Van der Merwe, 1989: 123). Another method of creating triadic modes is through *stacking* of thirds above the tonic, leading to a triad above it (Van der Merwe, 1989: 122-123). It is to be noted, that while Van der Merwe acknowledges the thirds in question to be *neutral thirds* in his basic example of two note modes, he does not notate neutral thirds in examples he gives for the triadic modes. Writing on the similar nature of both methods of triadic mode creation, he clarifies:

> The two forms of this triadic mode, one with the tonic in the middle and the other with it at the bottom, may look very different, but we must not let the appearance of the notes on the page deceive us. Instead of the major and minor thirds of the printed page, most of the thirds will be neutral in actual performance. In such cases the fifth formed by the outer notes will be a perfect fifth, and the two forms of the mode will be identical except for the position of the tonic (Van der Merwe, 1989: 123).

Van der Merwe yet uses minor thirds and neutral thirds interchangeably in a way that is not always clear to the reader. Curry (2016) has addressed the problem:

> In outlining the ladder of thirds, van der Merwe first emphasises [sic!] the importance of the minor third in forming the basis of the blues system. However, he goes on to point out that this third can vary between a minor and a neutral third […] One way to map this out is to assume that a note a fifth above the tonic note will be very close to that found in equally tempered systems […]. if the G in the model were approximately a perfect fifth (equally tempered or justly intoned) above the tonic (C in this instance), then both the interval between C and E and the interval between E and G would need to be around 350 cents. Neither interval could drop below this (towards the interval of a minor third) in the manner van der Merwe [sic!] suggests without the other interval becoming greater than a neutral third (Curry, 2016: 253-254).

Curry's (2016) critique points out a downfall of Van der Merwe's theory. To match the high diversity of the repertoire and the rather *ad libitum* use of different pitch contents on different scale degrees, Van der Merwe states the minor third as a constituent of a supposed *blues mode* (or even the aesthetic foundation of the system), whereas his theory, i.e., the ladder of thirds, can only be established–without sacrificing the perfect fifth, clearly a constituent of a blues scale, if one is to exist–if the ladder is based on the neutral third. Microtonal inflection is–as can be seen from Titon's (1977) statistical evaluation–a crucial part of blues production. Yet, the theory of the ladder of thirds does not account for why minor and neutral thirds can be used interchangeably. Furthermore, the major third must also be regarded as an important melodic constituent of blues, if one is not to

disregard a greater part of the blues repertoire; in Van der Merwe's theory, major thirds are unaccounted for.

An inflected interval Van der Merwe's ladder of thirds cannot explain in itself is the *blue* or flattened fifth. Van der Merwe evades the problem by regarding the interval as having arisen from a "relative minor" (Van der Merwe, 1989: 125-126) of the minor melodic triad, i.e., the addition of a minor third below a *stacked* minor triad of the tonic. The blue fifth results from a transposition of this relative minor mode to the first scale degree. In doing so, Van der Merwe leaves the realm of purely melodic considerations, adding a harmonic dimension to his theory, since the minor triad would gain double meaning as either a minor or diminished chord based on an imagined harmonic background. Van der Merwe (1989: 213-220) regards melodic development of blues as independent from the underlying chord structure–a point to which I highly agree. It would yet be at least questionable why a melodic component with an intrinsic harmonic understanding would use an independent harmonic concept for its accompaniment.

Another inconsistency in Van der Merwe's theory is his treatment of an interval he calls the *blue sixth* (an interval, that is–at least as an interval independent from the minor seventh–absent from Titon's (1977) statistical evaluation). Van der Merwe argues–with some support from the repertoire–that the sixth may also be microtonally inflected in blues (Van der Merwe, 1989: 127-128). He treats the microtonally inflected sixth as a variant of the *blue* or microtonally inflected/flattened seventh, in place of which it may be used. There is a clear discrepancy between the notion of a blue sixth and Van der Merwe's original assumption that a hanging third will in practice be neutral. If this were so, the blue sixth would not be blue, but rather the standard sixth of the repertoire, or worse even, the tonic.

Van der Merwe's theory and its downfalls point to a major problem of blues theory, i.e., how hard it is to define the whole of the repertoire with a single theory. Van der Merwe's theory may be fit for a small portion of the repertoire; to be able to define the whole of the repertoire the theory has yet to be augmented to the point that the augmentations are in conflict with its original assumptions. The choice of third, be it neutral or minor, is also

not accounted for by the theory; the application is left to the individual choice of the musician.

The theory of overlapping harmonic series presented by Kubik (1999) seems at least at first glimpse to be more promising. Kubik bases his theory and definition of blues on a supposed ancestry of blues in the music of the Western Sudan belt. Kubik finds an example of paired double bell playing and singing among the *Kutin* people. The double bells of the *Kutin* are tuned to the intervals of a perfect fourth, and are used in pairs, which are tuned a perfect fifth apart (Kubik, 1999: 132-134). According to Kubik (1999: 137), the bells are tuned according to the [idealized] harmonic series of the human voice rather than the probably highly inharmonic overtone series of the bells themselves. The bells are used to accompany singing, which is based on a three-note diminution of the perfect fourth the bells are tuned to, based on the 6th, 7th and 8th partial of the harmonic series. The lower bells represent male, the higher bells female singing; female and male singing overlap and imitate each other on a different *level* [Figure 3] (Kubik, 1999: 132-145).

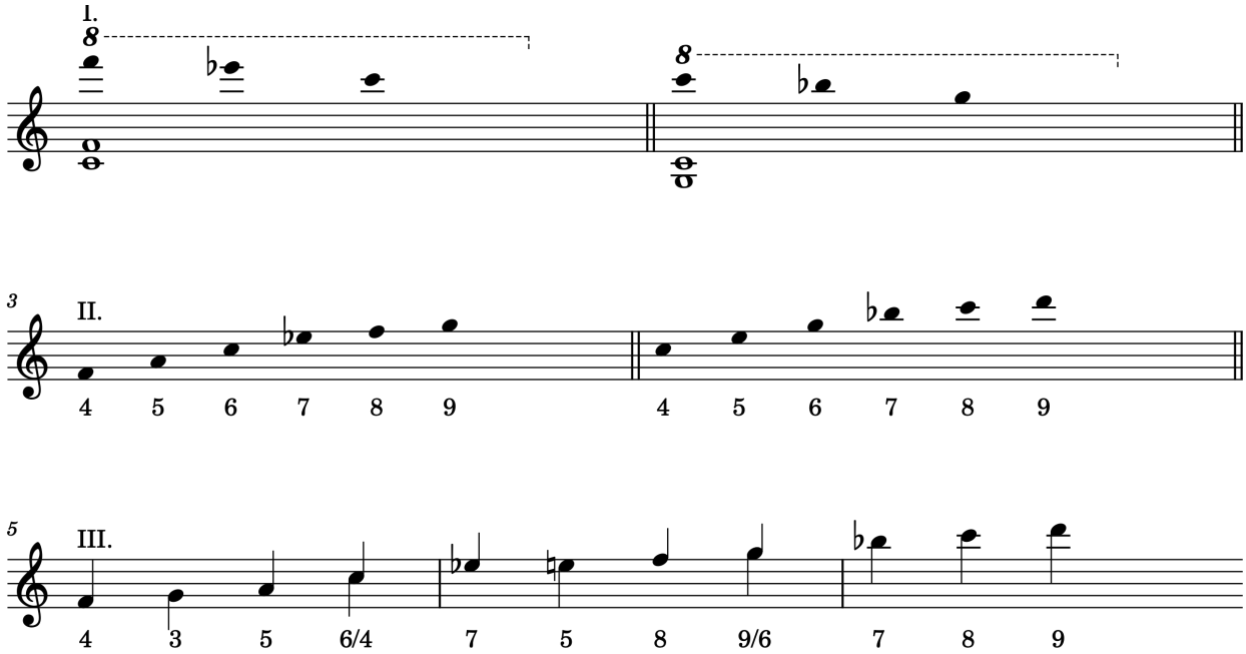

Figure 3. Summary of Kubik's theory of overlapping harmonic series

Kubik (1999: 136-145) argues that if one were to extend the harmonic series downwards, overlapping–as in the case of the *Kutin* bell players/singers–would lead to the creation of a scale that may be regarded as the foundation of the melodic content of blues [Figure 3].

The creation of a scale that would meet Titon's statistical observations would have to be based on an octave transposition of the second bell. For the sake of simplicity, I have not used special notation to mark septimal and syntonic commas in Figure 3, and instead included the number of the partial below the note.

Even at first glimpse, we see that the scale above is in conflict with the pitch content Titon's statistical evaluation outlines. Prominently, the flattened fifth (in Kubik's (1999: 146-151) terms "flatted"), major seventh as well as the microtonal inflections of the third and the seventh are absent. Kubik (1999: 138-140) explains the microtonal inflections of the third to arise from the conflict between the minor and major thirds that forms when the harmonic series overlap. Kubik gives two explanations for the flattened fifth in blues. The first explanation is based on a notion of secondary tonal centers, which may be separated by a whole tone from the original tonal center. This would by accident also account for the existence of the major seventh. The second explanation is based on a higher part of the harmonic series, i.e., accepting the flattened fifth as the 11th partial. According to Kubik (1999: 146-151), moving tonal centers are to be assumed in cases, where only the ascending form of the scale makes use of a flattened fifth (or–to be exact–a raised fourth). The use of the 11th partial is again according to Kubik (1999: 146-151) bound to situations in which the melody obstinately uses a scale of the 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th partial over all chords of the underlying 12-bar blues form. The above observations are problematic in that moving tonal centers–if applied rigorously–would necessarily lead to near chromatic pitch material, thus making the theory and the original scale derived from it obsolete. The use of the flattened fifth in the enclosed situations above also does not reflect the reality in the blues repertoire. Consider Muddy Waters' field recording of the song *Ramblin' Kid Blues* (Morganfield, 1993), in which the violin player uses the flattened fifth (or again–to be exact–the raised fourth) throughout the song with the exception of the V7 chord of the 12-bar blues form (which shall be discussed in detail at a later point), on which he plays the minor seventh of the chord, i.e, the natural fourth. Another argument against this treatment of the interval is that the flattened fifth is a prominent independent melodic means in Chicago blues, which especially in harmonica playing is often used as an ornament; in some cases, as in Little Walter's *That's It* (Jacobs, 1997), a

whole section of the solo uses only the flattened fiftth, since he switches to chromatic harmonica in first position, which in the second octave with *slide in* only produces a diminished chord on the I (which obviously does not interfere with the I(7) chord of the 12-bar blues form).

Curry (2016) develops a more complex system to account for obvious chromaticism in blues, within the theoretical framework of Kubik's theory of overlapping harmonic series. He first defines Kubik's scales as a series of narrowing thirds, which is of course true, since intervals of the overtone series are created by adding the exact same difference of frequency to each interval, thus intervals will be narrower the further up they are to be found in the harmonic series. To account for chromaticism, he conceives a theory based on "equal temperament" (Curry, 2016: 260). In this obscure definition of temperament, Curry equates all intervals but the first to minor thirds of 300 cents, thus adding a minor 9th to the scale. Organized in the form of a *tonnetz* (Curry, 2016: 261-262), this approach explains harmonic and melodic chromaticism, without sacrificing Kubik's original theory. It is yet highly questionable, why the septimal second between the 7th and 8th partial should be equated to a minor third; keeping in mind that Kubik's system is not based on temperament but on the harmonic series sung to instruments tuned to fifth and octave over a fundamental, i.e., either the 3rd and 4th, or 6th and 8th partial, octave equivalence is clearly a vital part of the system. The sharpening of octaves to form chromaticism is–in accordance with the theories of Kubik and Curry himself–therefore highly unlikely.

Definitions and Theories of Blues based on Formal Analysis

If there is on thing that can be said about the blues without reservation, it is that all of its exponents are based on an obstinately repetitive form, over which the melody is constructed in a rather independent manner. In some cases like the orchestral blues of W.C. Handy–interestingly the self-proclaimed father of the blues (Handy, 1941)–a canonized repetitive form of blues (i.e. the 12-bar blues form) may be used as the foundation of a single period of a work.

The repetitive form may take on the form of a single riff (i.e. a repeated short melodic or rhythmic/chordal structure), alternating riffs or a *progression* of more or less tonal

chords, in most cases basic triads or *dominant* seventh chords. One peculiar tonal progression has gained so much popularity in the blues style, that it has become synonymous with the style, namely the above mentioned 12-bar *blues form* [Figure 4]

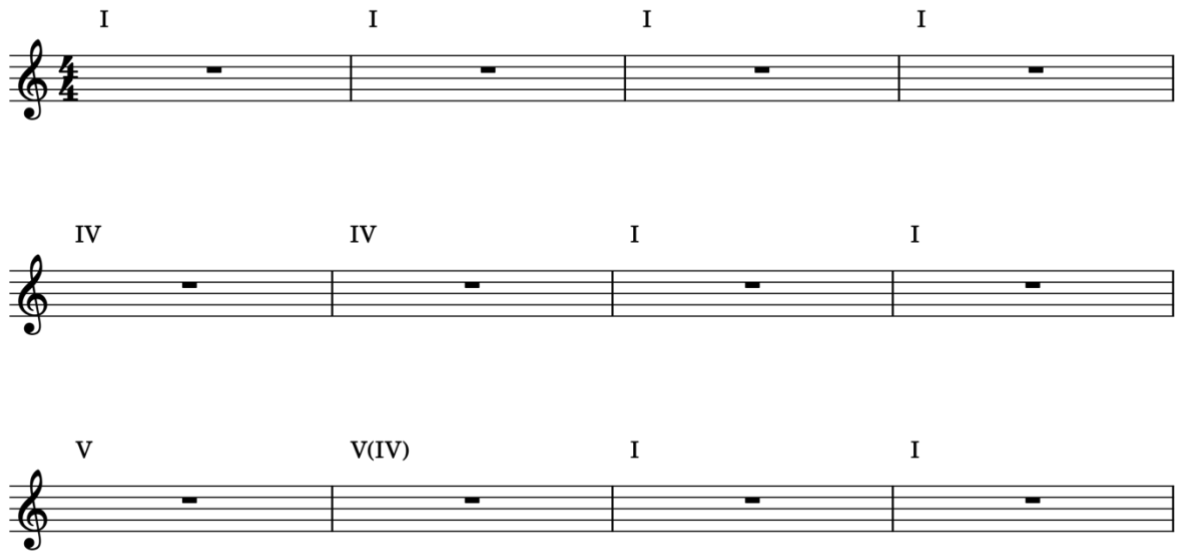

Figure 4. Basic outline of the 12-bar blues form

The 12-bar blues form is interesting, since it is not clear how and where the form has originated. Kubik (1999: 41-43) states an African origin, based on the most common method of setting lyrics to the form and their rhyme scheme (i.e., AAB, each line corresponding to a capitalized letter being set to 4 bars of the form). He yet acknowledges that "[n]o systematic survey of African music regarding this question has been undertaken. But the presence of an AAB form in west Africa is testified, if only (so far) by a single case […]" (Kubik, 1999:42). A single occurrence of a certain rhyme scheme does not necessarily make an African origin of the form credible. In the Western tonal tradition, a prolongation of the first degree over two thirds of the whole of the form is a technique that if at all would not be found in song form.

Van der Merwe views the 12-bar blues form to be one of the essential distinguishing marks of the style. Van der Merwe states that the blues form is not bound to a certain chord

progression, or even a number of bars; he instead holds that the three-part structure of the 12-bar blues form is an essential distinguishing mark of the blues style[4].

"The essential features […] are the blues mode and the three part form, evolving separately in Africa and Britain, and finally coming together in the United States of the nineteenth century." (Van der Merwe, 1989: 130)

Van der Merwe is yet wrong in assuming that blues is necessarily based on three-part forms. There are several works in the repertoire with a clear two-part form, ranging from short single-period forms like Leadbelly's *Grey Goose* [Figure 8], which is based on a single chord change, to more complex single-period two-part forms like Robert Johnson's *They're Red Hot* (Johnson, 1990) [Figure 7]. Van der Merwe is one of only very few writer who have theorized the 12-bar blues form, therefore his theories and their downfalls may count as representative for the whole of the academic discussion. Thus–as has been seen in the case of definitions based on melodic analysis of blues–definitions and theories based on the formal analysis of the style also encounters the problem that blues seems to be a style that defies definition through a singular musical principle.

Definitions and Theories of Blues based on Rhythmic Analysis

Van der Merwe (1989) holds that one of the *blues matrices* is a highly syncopated rhythm. Upon closer inspection, rhythmic syncopation in blues yet does not necessarily exceed Western tonal musical styles; it is yet to note that the majority of blues exhibits *inégal* beats one step below the main beat of the work, making syncopation appear more complex than it might actually be.

Kubik (1999: 51-62) has dedicated a whole chapter to the prominent absence of complex time-line patterns in blues, especially in comparison to other African American musical styles. Maybe, on the contrary, syncopation in blues is to be understood not as rhythmic complexity but–on the contrary–as a means of embellishment within a style of rhythmic simplicity. It is for this reason that I do not take rhythmic considerations into account in my own definition and theory.

Towards a comprehensive theory and definition

The above discussion on musical theoretical literature on the blues reveals a serious obstacle to the theorist: Blues, as a highly diverse style, is incredibly hard to define through musical traits, since mostly only a part of the repertoire will adhere to a certain musical concept. Blues seems to defy clear-cut musical rules and definitions; every theory put forth is contradicted by at least one exponent of the style that does not neatly fit into its constraints.

In his article *Blues and our Mind-Body Problem*, Smith (1992: 43) states that "The exceptional trick it [i.e., blues] pulls off is precisely to turn anti-music fully into music, to be the form of form's refusal, the eloquence of inarticulateness, the sublime inevitability of vacillation […]". Van der Merwe (1989: 219)–after elaborating separately on modal, rhythmic and formal traits of the blues, the downfalls of which have been discussed earlier–comes to the conclusion, that there is a certain "at-oddness" behind the concepts of the blues scale, blues syncopation and blues form, at least from the standpoint of Western tonal music, and goes on to state that it is the combination of the at-oddness of these concepts that lead to a sense of completeness in the style, or in Van der Merwe's (1989: 219) words "it is the reconciliation of […] at-oddness that makes for completeness [in blues].".

Weisethaunet (2001: 105) yet states that "[…] blues is to be experienced as tonal music; there is in blues always a tonal centre; it is a play within a tonal framework. Blues is hardly ever 'a-tonal', as may be the case with Western non-functional musics." Indeed, at least judging from the accompaniment, blues nearly exclusively makes use of Western tonal elements, be it the progression of triadic chords or an *ostinato* bass movement in accompanying riffs. These elements are yet applied in ways often highly different from their standard application in Western tonal music.

At first glimpse, it is hard to understand what to make of this. Blues is obviously not a simple mixture of European and African styles, since a simple stylistic mixture would have arguably led to a much more consolidated style. Maybe blues could be defined as a mixture of a multitude of styles with Western tonal music in varying composition; but this would not account for the blues to have been perceived as a single style throughout its history,

since it is hard to imagine that differing stylistic mixtures would lead to an outcome similar enough to be perceived as such.

I believe that the greater part of authors attempting to propose a definition or theory of the blues have erred in trying to find a definition or theory in the musical material itself. It is rather the *use* of the material in question that will provide answers to the question of *how blues works* in its totality. Musical material may differ, but it is an analysis of the principles that guide their use that has the power to reveal the rules at work behind the totality of the style, and as such will lead to a theory and definition.

I believe that if one is to find guiding principles behind the blues style, one must look at the elements of blues that are well known and studied concerning origin and application. As the downfalls of Kubik's theory suggest, African traits will not satisfy this need, since the exact origin and original guiding principles of supposed African musical traits in blues remain to a greater part obscure. I therefore suggest that it is the use and application of Western tonal structures in blues the researcher will have to focus on when trying to understand the guiding principles behind the style, since their original application is well documented and diverging use of them will lead to an understanding of how blues *really works*. It will in fact be shown in the following that blues itself may well be based on principles that have originated from a use of Western tonal principles divergent from their standard application, or even a defiance of principles intrinsic to them; it will be seen that perceivedly non-Western elements of the melody such as microtonal inflections may also well be explained simply as outcomes of this process.

Blues as a Musical Pidgin

An analysis of the application of Western tonal material in blues uncovers principles that strikingly resemble the principals involved in the formation of a phenomenon in linguistics, namely the formation of Pidgin languages. Considering the early history of the blues, this is not at all surprising. According to Bakker (2002: 5) "[…] a Pidgin is [...] not a native language, and not the language of one specific community or ethnic group. Pidgins are used between people who have no other, full-fledged language in common [...]." Pidgin languages are languages that evolve out of necessity in situations where speakers have no

common tongue to communicate; they have mostly evolved in situations that arose from European imperialism, and as such are generally lexified by a dominant language, i.e., the language of the European imperialists (Motanya, Toro & Nasir, 2016). Blues as a musical style has developed in a setting that fits the definition. The southern United States of the 19th century were home to people of highly diverse ancestries, ranging from western to central and even southeastern Africa to a variety of European countries. The African American population of the rural south of the United States alone originated among highly diverse linguistic, cultural and social groups (for a discussion see Kubik, 1999 and Oliver, 1997). Meaningful music making and transmission will arguably not be possible between people of different cultural backgrounds. It is likely that–in parallel to language development in similar situations–the African American population of the rural southern United States has developed similar strategies to make meaningful music transmission and music making possible. It is to be noted that the term *meaningful* is not used in the semantic sense–musical *meaning* in the sense of semantic representation in blues is rather to be found in the realm of its textual component. I apply the term *meaning* in the strictly syntactic sense, quite similar to the way Van der Merwe (1989: 219) uses the term *completeness*. In this sense, a work of music is *meaningful* if its musical elements are perceived by musicians as well as listeners to coherently follow an intrinsic string of logic.

Western tonal music has been documented as a dominant musical language in the 19th century southern United States. European style religious music and gospels were an important influence on the development of African American music in general; the use of and education on Western musical instruments was also an important factor in the dissemination of the Western tonal style (see Oliver, 1997). Unlike the African Americans of the big cities, the rural population consisting of farm workers and wage slaves, is most likely to have had only limited access to a thorough education in Western tonal music; the role of limited access to a superstratum language in the creation of Pidgins has been stressed by Lefebvre (1998: 35)[5].

I shall in the following elaborate on how blues resembles Pidgin languages on the level of metaphysical categories; these can–in theory–have unlimited physical manifestations; yet, in practice, the blues style will stay near to its lexifier, i.e., Western tonal music; thus,

completely non-tonal representations in blues are not accounted for by the repertoire. To do so, I shall compare three major aspects of pidgin languages to tonal and Schenkerian[6] analysis of selected works from the blues repertoire.

Limited Embedding and Avoidance of Deeper Structure

Limited embedding has been shown to be a major trait of Pidgin languages. In her work on relative clauses in child language and Pidgins, Romaine (1985) shows that pidgin languages have a strong preference for structures that avoid embedding. Romaine (1985) cites an example from the Papua New Guinean language Tok Pisin (which – according to Bakker (2002) is not a true Pidgin language but rather a Pidgincreole, yet Tok Pisin exhibits many traits of *true* Pidgin languages), that reveals the syntactic differences to the embedding strategies of the English language. The example presented is: "Mi lukim dok […] em i ranim pik bilong mi [...] [.]" (Romaine, 1985: 13), which translates to English as "I saw the dog that chased my pig" (Romaine, 1985: 13). The Tok Pisin example exhibits a structure with less structural depth than the English example. This is achieved by adding the redundant pronoun *em* [he, she, it], thus creating a new sentence instead of further implying a deeper structure in the verb phrase, as is the case in the English example. The subordinate verb phrase "chased my pig" is no longer part of the original verb phrase "saw the dog"; but a verb phrase of its own. Thus, morphologically speaking, "chased the pig" is no longer embedded in the sentence "I saw the dog that chased my pig". Motanya et. al. (2016) give the following example from Nigerian Pidgin English: "Wi tel awa draivas mek dem no come", which translates to "We told our drivers not to come.". Here the highly complex verb phrase, including an infinitive construction of the indirect speech, is simplified by adding a redundant *mek dem* to the structure, thus creating a second verb phrase, since *mek* is obviously in the subject and not the object position (it is obviously the subject speaker's action that *mek dem no come*).

As we see from the above examples, coreferencing in pidgin languages is often avoided by the introduction of redundant pronouns. Thus, the stringing together of independent sentences is preferred over deep structure. In blues, we see a rather similar phenomenon. In fact, the obstinate form of blues may well be explained as adherent to a metaphysical principle of an avoidance of deep structure. Pidgin languages prefer the stringing together

of independent sentences over deep structures within the verb phrase. Blues also seems to avoid the deepening of structure by repeating structure instead of deepening it.

Blues forms that exceed the simple riff in length and complexity, like the 12-bar blues form, often defy deeper structure through means of its avoidance within the technical framework of Western tonal music. This becomes particularly evident if the 12-bar blues form is compared to even simple works of tonal music, as the German children's song in Figure 5:

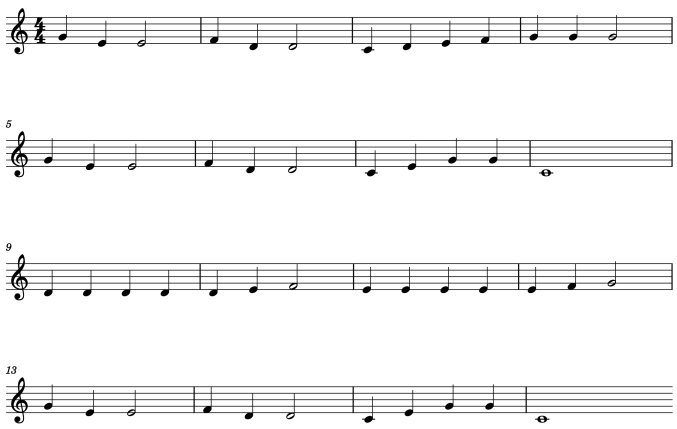

Figure 5. German Children's song *Hänschen Klein*

The German song *Hänschen Klein*, a song most German native speakers will be familiar with, is a good example of how tonal music implies deep structure and embedding even in its most simple forms. This becomes especially evident through Schenkerian analysis.

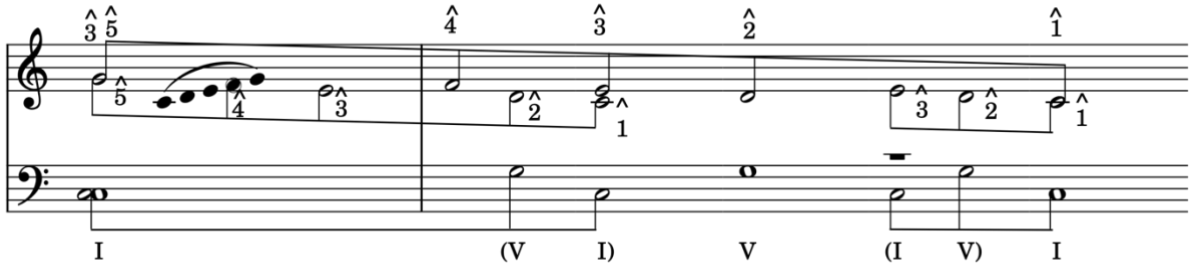

Figure 6. Schenkerian Analysis of the German Children's song *Hänschen Klein*

Upon closer investigation, the simple children's song *Hänschen Klein* exhibits a highly complex interplay of *hintergrund*[7], *mittelgrund* and *vordergrund* structures. At least two

different *mittelgrund* levels can be extracted from the song, one being a *quintzug* spanning over the whole length of the song, the second (higher) *mittlegrund* level exhibiting a *quintzug* and a *terzzug*, of which the first *quintzug* may theoretically (though not shown in Figure 6) be divided into two *terzzug-s.* The *vordergrund* also exhibits interesting traits, such as ascents of a fifths (thus describing the *tonraum* of the work in ascending order).

A short look at the 12-bar blues form reveals that the form itself inhibits multi-layered structure in that it exhibits only a single cadential bass movement towards the end of the form. Since the chord structure is in most cases obstinately followed, there is no room for cadential movements that would hint at a higher structure than the lowest *mittelgrund* level, thus limiting deeper structure to the basic *quint-* or *oktavzug* (though–for reasons that are not accounted for by purely formal observations–the *oktavzug* will seldomly be encountered in blues) of the *mittelgrund*. This notion is probably what Van der Merwe (1989: 219) has felt when he found the 12-bar blues form to carry "at-oddness".

As I have mentioned earlier, the 12-bar blues form or any other asymmetrical three-part form that Van der Merwe would associate with it, is not the only form used even in early blues. I have mentioned earlier that symmetrical two-part forms exist in blues, i.e., forms with a half cadence near the middle of the song, which is resolved at the end of the song, a perfect prerequisite for deeper structure, since a half cadence will allow for the *hintergrund* and different *mittelgrund* levels to move at a different pace, thus creating a multi-layered deep structure It is yet exactly in these forms, that we come to understand how blues does not only lack deeper structure, but how it actively avoids it.

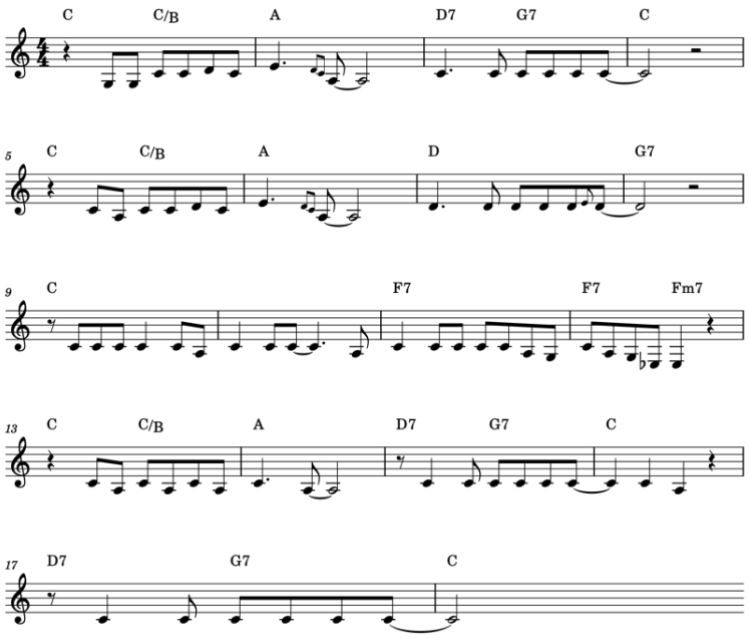

Figure 7. Transcription of chords and melody of Robert Johnson's *They're Red Hot*

The example in Figure 7, a transcription of Robert Johnson's song *They're Red Hot* (Johnson, 1990), shows that blues evades deeper structure even in forms that would–in terms of a Western tonal understanding–most definitely call for it. The above form is–as has been stated above–clearly a single-period two-part form, divided by a half cadence. What is interesting is how the melody creates an environment that evades cadential feel. The only true cadential movement in a Schenkerian sense can be seen in the transition from the half cadence back to the chord of the first degree, i.e., C in the 9th measure. Due to the fact that the melody evades the 4th degree altogether, a *quintzug* is impossible to establish. In fact, it is impossible to truly establish a cadence after the 9th measure. In this case, even though there are cadential movements in the accompaniment, the melody works against it, thus simplifying the form. The chordal progression of the song is basically a *ragtime* progression (see Curry, 2016), the foundation of another popular African American style. Robert Johnson *transforms* a ragtime tune to blues through his characteristic implementation of the melody.

Another good example for the phenomenon at hand is Leadbelly's (Ledbetter, 2007) rendition of the folk song *Grey Goose*. Again, we see how the treatment of the melody transforms a simple symmetric two-part form into a work of blues:

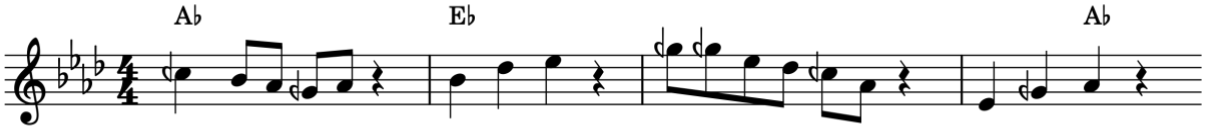

Figure 8. Transcription of melody and chords of Leadbelly's rendition of the song *Grey Goose*

Leadbelly obscures deeper structure by returning to a pitch content in the 3rd bar that in the Western tonal tradition would rather be associated with the Ab chord of the first degree. He also evades the second degree towards the end of the work, introducing the melodic cadential degree only in the second bar. One is tempted to argue that Leadbelly *destroys* a feeling of spanning not only by evading the second degree towards the end of the song, but even more so by introducing pitch content not corresponding to the pitch content hinted at by the Eb chord in the third measure. Another means to obscure cadential feeling is the use of microtonal inflection on the third and seventh degree, thus further blurring the harmonic affiliation of the melody.

The avoidance of the second scale degree in the melody is most probably what has lead many scholars to believe in the existence of a *blues mode* or the application of a more or less *pentatonic scale* in blues. To my understanding, the pentatonic scale or blues scale is yet not a constituent of blues in itself. It is not the pentatonic or blues scale that shapes blues; it is the notion of avoidance of deep structure that will lead to the avoidance of the second degree under cadential circumstances, or in more extreme cases, altogether.

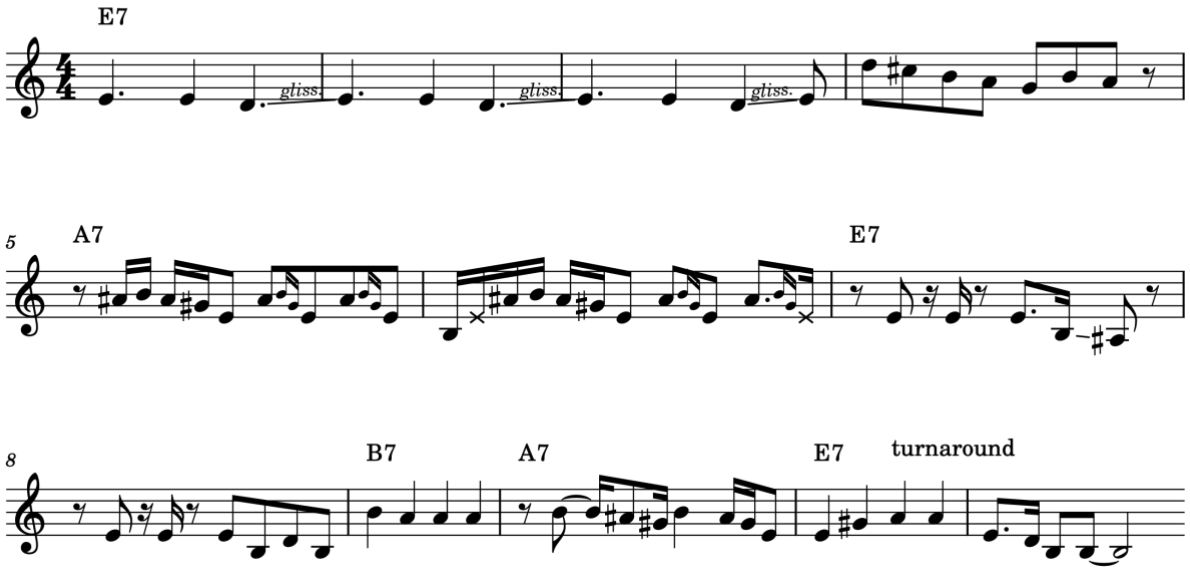

Figure 9. Transcription of the second part of James Cotton's harmonica solo on Muddy Waters' *Got My Mojo Workin'*

James Cotton's solo over Muddy Waters' (Morganfield, 2007) *Got My Mojo Workin'* [Figure 9] is an example of the extreme case in which the second degree is avoided altogether[8]. What is highly interesting is that the melody of the song only reacts to the B7; other chords are utterly ignored by the melody (with the exception of the turnaround). In some cases, the melody even creates strong dissonances from the standpoint of a Western tonal understanding (A# against A). This notion will be of importance later on in the article.

A direct comparison of recordings of the same song by a blues musician and a musician of another popular American musical style will arguably provide striking evidence for the above phenomenon. Consider the transcriptions of blues singer Leadbelly's (Ledbetter, 1996) and country singer Bill Monroe's (2013) versions of the song *In the pines*, in Figure 10 and Figure 11 respectively.

Bill Monroe's version of the song [Figure 11] is quite adherent to the rules of tonal harmony, with the exception of the extreme prolongation of the initial I of the *hintergrund.* The staff notation represents the choral singing of Bill Monroe and two other singers, whereas the chord symbols represent the chords played by the accompanying guitar. Even though the form would seem to be hindering it, at least three levels of *mittelgrund* can be

assumed; a *quintzug* from the beginning to the end, two independent *terzzug*-s in bars 1-2 and 3-4 (in 1-2 through octave transposition of the third in the guitar chord) and an *oktavzug* moving at a higher pace than the *quintzug* from the beginning to the end of the song.

Leadbelly's rendition of the song in Figure 10 paints quite a different picture. The upper staff represents the melody sung by Leadbelly, the lower staff the bass notes played by the guitar; the chords represent the rhythmically strummed chords of the guitar, that are played alternatingly with the bass notes. Here the bass evades cadential properties by playing unison with the melody.

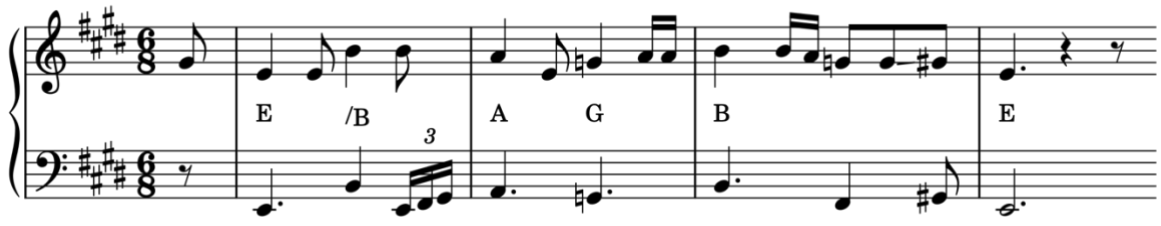

Figure 10. Transcription of Leadbelly's rendition of the song *In the Pines*

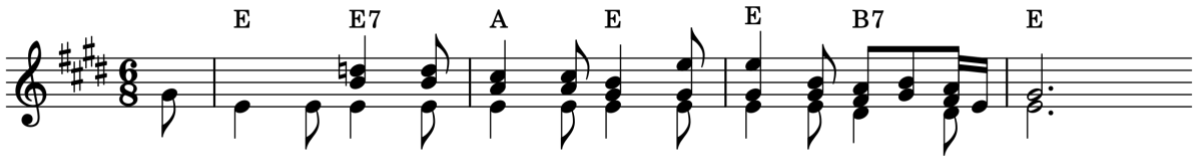

Figure 11. Transcription of Bill Monroe's rendition of the song *In the Pines*

The F# in the bass line of the penultimate measure might be an octave transposition of a cadential melodic note, which would at least make a Schenkerian *hintergrund* plausible; yet even this notion is destroyed by the penultimate G# in the bass line, obscuring the cadential movement and thus destroying even the clear notion of a *hintergrund*, leaving the musical material *meaningless* in Western tonal terms.

The evasion of clear cadence by a movement to the third is a technique that can be encountered quite often in blues. Even in composed works of blues that exhibit a well

defined *quintzug* in the *mittelgrund*, the movement is used to blur the clear-cut two- or three-layeredness of the structure. This is the case Big Mama Thornton's rendition of the Leiber & Stoller's (2023) song *Hound Dog* [Figure 12]*:*

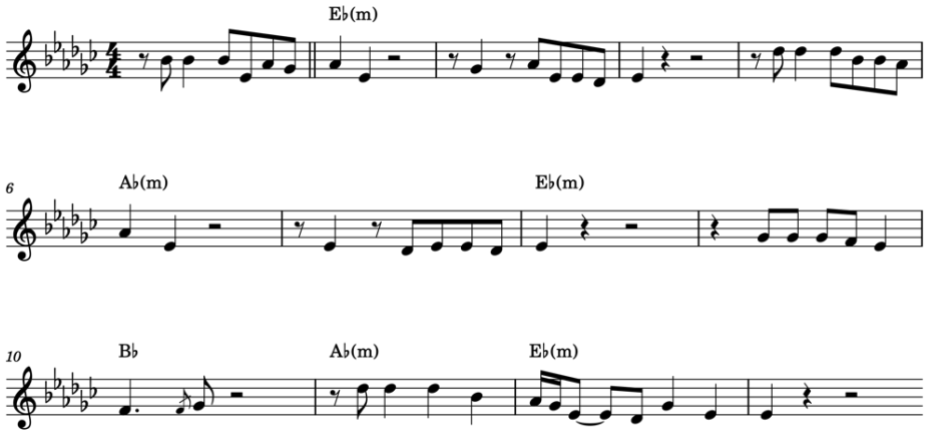

Figure 12. Big Mama Thornton's rendition of Leiber & Stoller song *Hound Dog*

As can be seen from above, blues applies a great number of methods to evade deeper structure. The methods presented here are most likely just a small portion of the techniques used to achieve this means. As stated above, blues could theoretically apply infinite techniques to achieve this goal. The number of techniques to be applied is yet limited by the fact that blues is lexified by Western tonal music, and thus the music will at least superficially adhere to its rules. There are rules that are nearly thoroughly abided to; even though the melody evades cadential meaning, in all of the above examples, the melody begins with a chordal tone of the first degree chord of the tonality of the tune. All of the above examples end on the first degree of the respective tonality. Though this is not a rule of thumb, and blues can evade even this notion (which–as will be seen–is also founded in the theory of blues as a Pidgin), this notion hints at a major trait of the style. Blues uses Western tonal material, but evades the traits of it that would complicate intercultural musical communication. To do so, blues uses a multitude of means, among them the partial or complete evasion of the second scale degree in the melody, microtonal inflection, and the doubling of the melody in the bass.

Use of Infinitive Forms and Metonymy

According to Todd, the use of infinitive over finite verb forms is a major trait of Pidgin languages (Todd, 1990: 1-2). Todd gives the examples of Tok Pisin and the Cameroonian Pidgin language Kamtok, in which forms of agency, including the first person dual of Tok Pisin, all use the same basic verb form (Todd, 1990: 2). To understand how infinitive forms work in music, it must first be established what the notion of infinitive forms conveys in linguistics. Infinitive forms are verb forms that show no inflection, meaning that the person or function of the verb cannot be understood from the verb form alone.

A similar phenomenon is at hand in blues. Looking back at Figure 9, it can be seen that the melody only reacts on certain chords in the way one would expect it to in Western tonal music. The melody does not seem to react to the chord on the fourth degree at all. The chord, therefore, is quite similar to the infinite verb form in Pidgin languages, in that it alone cannot account for the meaning that is assigned to it by the melody. Chords can be understood in different ways, depending on context; but it is not the context of the chord within a progression or form that defines the function of the infinitive chord, but the melody construed over it.

Finite and infinitive forms are functions of the chord (though they are not defined through it, as has been stated above), since it is chords and their positions within a progression that arguably carry function in Western tonal music. In fact, the notion of function is quite crucial in the teaching and understanding of tonal harmony. It is yet also possible to view the phenomenon from the perspective of the melody; in this case, a melodic structure that is to be expected on a certain chord is left out *in lieu* of another, unexpected melodic structure. In this case, the process is to be understood as an outcome of a metonymic process.

The terms metonymy is–again–not to be understood in the semantic sense, but as a functional term. Concerning music and especially the case of the blues, it must yet not be confused with grammaticalization, which constitutes the use of a chord or chord progression in a way opposed to its original function in the Western tonal tradition.

Metonymy is a function of the melody, by which the *meaning* of a chord as a generator of melodic structures is manipulated or defied.

In his seminal work *Bastard Tongues*, Bickerton explains the role metonymy has played in the evolution of Creoles, and thus, its importance in Pidgin languages:
"Words in Creoles change their meaning for a variety of reasons. Perhaps the most common is the fact that a lot of words were simply lost in the extraordinary circumstances that gave birth to Creoles. Take the typical Guyanese query: *What time we go reach?* Reach what? Well, wherever you're headed for. *Reach* simply means "arrive" […]" (Bickerton, 2008: 34)

It is quite plausible that music too–given that most probably only limited access to the sources of Western tonal music was available to the African American population of the rural southern United States–began to make use of the limited melodic material that was at hand in contexts that were not accounted for by the limited amount of chord progressions that were available to the musicians within this population. The process yet led to the exact opposite of limitedness. In fact, it is probably exactly the metonymic processes that account for the stylistic diversity of blues. Theoretically, chords can be reinterpreted by the melody in an infinite number of ways, again only constrained by the notions of Western tonal music as a lexifier language.

Sonny Boy Williamson II's song *Help Me* (Miller, 1991) [Figure 14] is a radical example of this notion. In the opening solo to the song, Sony Boy Williamson II plays a solo in major tonality on a minor tonality chord progression [Figure 13].

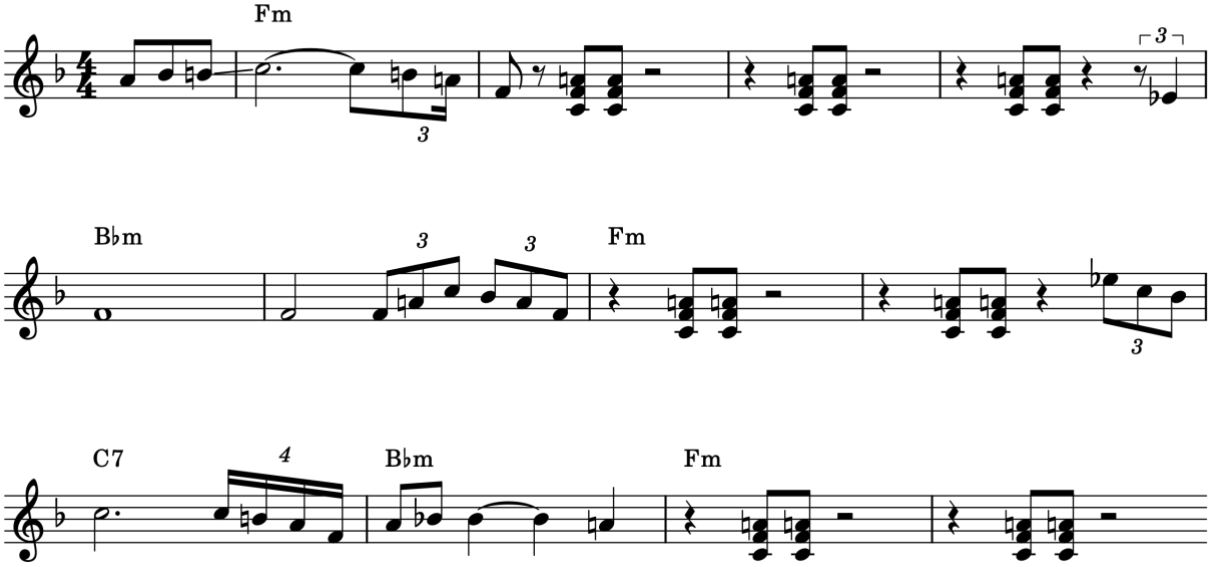

Figure 13. Opening harmonica solo of Sonny Boy Williamson II's song *Help Me*

What is quite interesting here is the fact that the melody Sony Boy Williamson II *sings* is in minor tonality, though the harmonica solos and the harmonica vamping (i.e., chord accompaniment) are in a major tonality throughout the piece. Since no minor chords can be played on the diatonic harmonica in second position–the predominant position in blues harmonica playing and the position Sonny Boy Williamson choses to play in the recording–this may be attributed to the tonal layout of the harmonica itself. It is interesting, though, that even an unchangeable outside influence like the layout of the harmonica can be metonymously used as melodic material over an unrelated chord. This opens up room for discussion, whether or not the metonymous processes are metonymous in a strict sense of the word, or if these processes rather constitute processes of relexification. This would open up space for non-Western melodic structures to enter blues and would account for how African musical traits may be encountered in blues, even though African melodic traits do not seem to account for the melodic development of the whole of the repertoire.

Differences in melodic material between parts sung and played by instruments are often encountered in blues; in Muddy Waters' *Got my mojo working*, the harmonica solo of which we have encountered in Figure 9, Muddy Waters' singing adheres strictly to a minor pentatonic, with occasional microtonal inflections to the third. Metonymy or– to go even

further–relexification opens up an area of creativity for the blues musician, in which even in a single tune different musicians can use different melodic material without sacrificing the musical meaning of the tune in its totality. It is this process that shows that blues is not only a musical Pidgin language, but also a means of pidginization, in the sense that–if applied in the sense of its musical principles–blues can readily incorporate a great number of unrelated melodic concepts without losing musical meaning; thus, musicians can use blues to *ad libitum* create an unlimited amount of musical Pidgin languages.

Grammaticalization

In her chapter in *The handbook of Pidgin and Creole studies* (Kouwenberg & Singler, 2008), Bruyn (2008: 385) states that "[...][p]rocesses of grammaticalization may be considered central to the development of pidgins and creoles […]". She cites Hopper & Traugott (2003: 15) who define gramamticalization as "the change whereby lexical items or phrasal constructions can come in certain contexts to serve grammatical functions […]".

As I have discussed above, it is the chords and progressions of chords that are the carriers of function in Western tonal harmony. Grammaticalization in blues may be regarded as the use of chords in functions they would not normally be applied in. Sonny Boy Williamson II's song *Bye Bye Bird* (Miller, 2013) may serve as a first example [Figures 14 and 15].

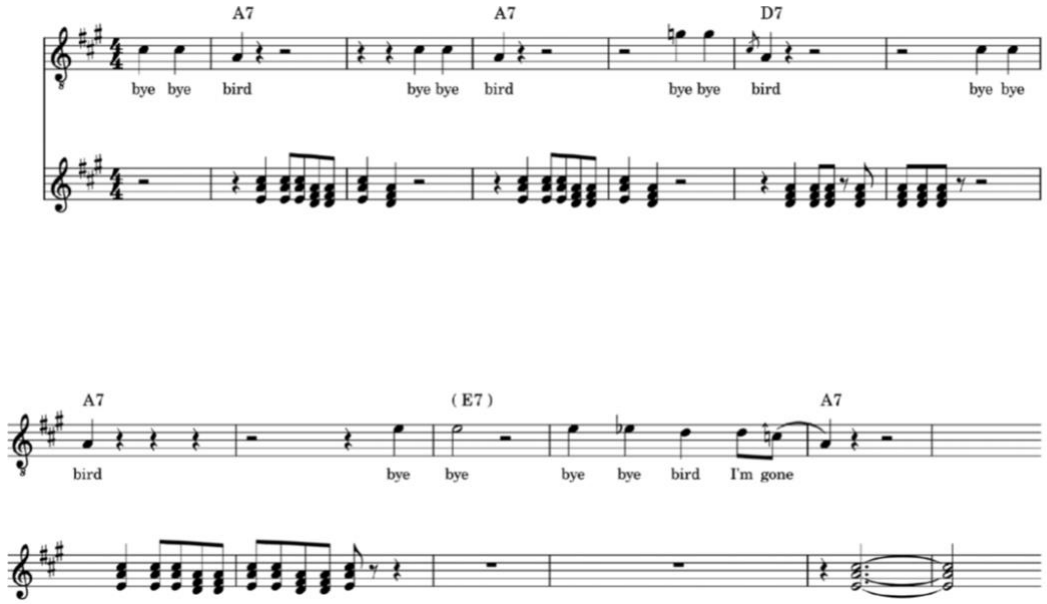

Figure 14. First stanza of Sonny Boy Williamson II's song *Bye Bye Bird*

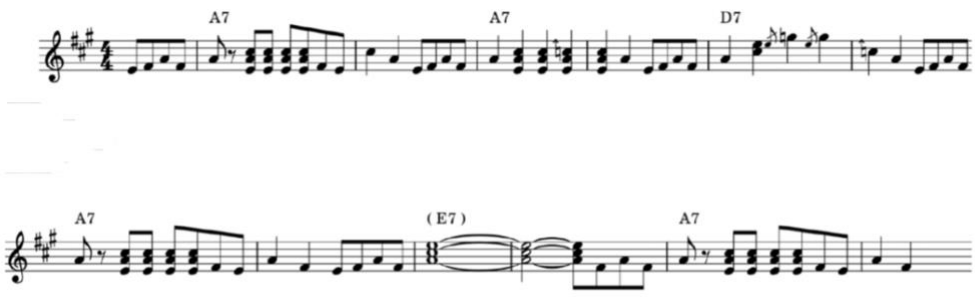

Figure 15. Harmonica solo of Sonny Boy Williamson II's song *Bye Bye Bird*

In the song, Sonny Boy Williamson II accompanies himself on the harmonica; since this is the case, there is no chordal accompaniment to the sung melody, since Sonny Boy Williamson II could not possible play and sing at the same time. The instrument used is a diatonic harmonica in Low D, played in second position (i.e., *finalis* on A). In the first stanza, Sonny Boy Williamson II sings an E in the position the V7 (in this case E7) chord would normally occupy in a 12-bar blues progression. In the solo, it yet becomes clear that a chord that in Western tonal harmony does not carry a function beyond being the starting and ending point of a tonal work, the I chord, has actually taken over the function of the V7 chord. I have written the chords of a normal 12-bar blues progression over the melody and accompaniment played by Sonny Boy Williamson II in Figures 14 and 15 to point out this discrepancy. Of course, there is no such thing as a *normal* 12-bar blues form. What we see here is that blues can radically reinterpret chords; even though the song technically has no V chord, there still is clearly a feeling of cadence in the work; the work does not seem to stand still.

Even more radical approaches can be seen in blues forms that are based on a riff on a single chord or two alternating chord concepts. Concepts like this often use a variety of chordal interjections in lieu of a dominant chord, in the sense that they serve as a point of tension that is resolved by a return to the original chord of the riff. Consider the example of John Lee Hooker's (2020) song *Boogie Chillen* [Figure 16].

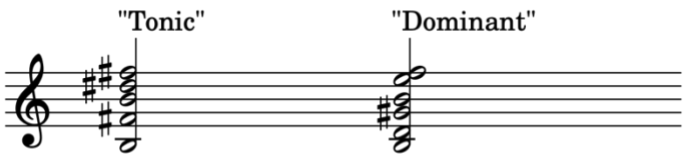

Figure 16. Chords used in John Lee Hooker's song *Boogie Chillen*

John Lee Hooker's *Boogie Chillen* is quite different from the examples presented above in that it does not adhere to a strict form. The song is based on a rather free interchange of riffs on two different chords, as seen in Figure 16. Since there are only two chords in the song, the E9/B chord takes over the function of a dominant in the sense of Western tonal music, i.e., the functional degree carrying tension. John Lee Hooker *grammaticalizes* the chord of he fourth degree to take over the function of a chord of the fifth degree.

Grammaticalization can be as radical as to replace the I chord at the beginning of a work. Charley Patton's (2004) song *A Spoonful Blues* [Figure 17], follows a progression, namely VI/II/V/I, which in itself would not seem strange, were it not for the fact that the progression constituted the whole harmonic structure of the song. In this case, the chord or the first degree is only encountered at the very end of the form, as the form of the song opens on a chord on the sixth degree. Charley Patton, though, adjusts the melody accordingly; here we see the difference between grammaticalization and metonymous or relexification processes first hand; in metonymous proceses, the content of the melody would not cohere to the chord, whereas a grammaticalized progression is prone to use a melodic structure that fits the harmonic structure. Even in the first stanza of *Bye bye bird*, the E sung to the grammaticalized chord of the first degree is the fifth degree of the chord in question.

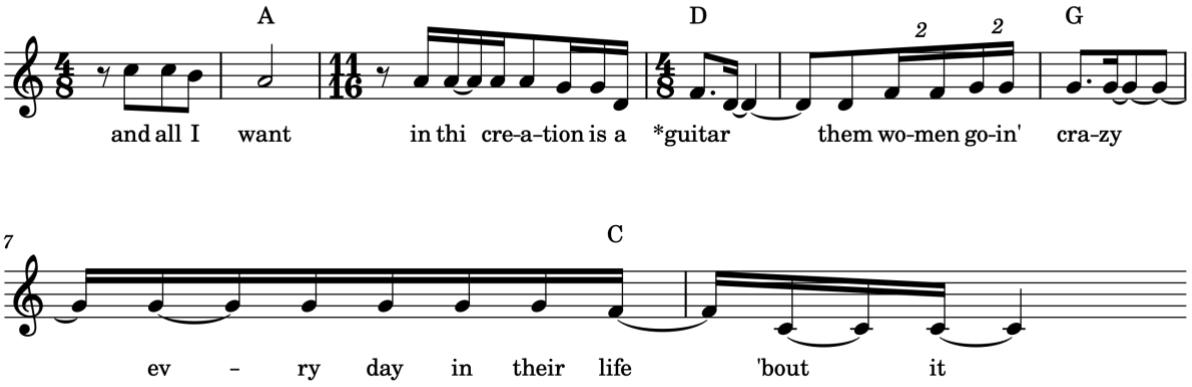

Figure 17. Transcription of the first stanza of Chaley Patton's *A Spoonful Blues*

It is important not to confuse grammaticalization with reharmonization. Whereas reharmonization follows certain guiding principles derived from Western tonal principles and replaces chords according to them, grammaticalization makes use of arbitrary chords in places reserved for chords of a certain function, and is thus in itself not bound to the restraints of Western tonal practice.

Conclusion

Blues as a highly diverse style defies the constraints of purely musical theories and definitions. The above considerations have yet shown that blues follows certain metaphysical principles that can substantiate in a great variety of musical manifestations. Blues, as a style that has developed in a highly diverse cultural setting in the rural southern United States, seems to follow the same metaphysical principles Pidgin languages adhere to. The article has analyzed blues among the lines of three major metaphysical properties of Pidgin languages, i.e., limited embedding and the avoidance of deeper structure, the use of limited forms and the metonymous reinterpretation of formal structures, and grammaticalization.

A definition of blues may be derived from a style's combined adherence to these metaphysical principles, whatever their musical manifestations may be. Maybe it is possible to speak of metaphysical *matrices* in the sense Van der Merwe (1989) has opted for. Blues could then be defined by its adherence to the principles of Pidgin languages translated to the realm of music, as has been proposed by this article. Theories of blues that shall account for the blues style as a whole must therefore also be based on the above

metaphysical principles. More metaphysical traits of the blues style may be discovered in future works on the subject, thus expanding the theory. Having a definition at hand will hopefully prove to be a valuable tool for the ethnomusicologist working in blues related fields.

Notes

[1]I choose the term *style* over the term *genre*, since the article attempts a definition of blues based on musical and meta-musical rather than on functional consideration. I thus follow Moore's (2001: 441) first definition of style and genre: "[…] [The] distinction may be characterized in terms of 'what' an art work is set out to do (genre) and 'how' it is actualized (style)."

[2]Van der Merwe (1989) and Kubik (1999) present theories that differ from the majority of authors in that they postulate independent theories of the melodic material of blues. The works of authors like Sargeant (1964), Borneman (1959) and Schuller (1968) shall be mentioned here, yet they only provide theories of melodic material in blues that are based in deviations from the existing diatonic concept, and are therefore not influential as theories in their own right.

[3]Matrices in the sense of Van der Merwe (1989) are to be seen as general notions of a style that when combined become its defining element. Though in general a metaphysical concept, Van der Merwe bases his matrices on physical traits of the musical repertoire.

[4]The terms *two-part* and *three-part* are not used in the sense of classical musical analysis, but in the sense of *distinguishable parts* of a musical form, in coherence with Van der Merwe (1989).

[5]Lefebvre's work is based on Haitian Creole, therefore not strictly speaking a Pidgin. According to Bakker (2002) Creoles are Pidgins that have reached a point in their historical development at which they produce native speakers. Creoles are therefore a further development of Pidgins, and arguments concerning the origins of Creoles are equally valid for Pidgin languages.

[6]I am well aware that using Schenkerian theory in an attempt on a theory and definition of blues seems–especially considering the recent discussions on the ideological positions of Heinrich Schenker–to be rather out of place. In his criticism of the white racial frame of the SMT and Western music theory in general, Ewell (2001) uses Schenkerian theory as the main example in his deliberations on how the white racial frame of Western music theory was established. According to Ewell, Heinrich Schenker was "[…] an ardent racist and German nationalist." (Ewell, 2020, section 4.1.2.). The whitewashing of music theories like the one of Heinrich Schenker, and the focus on solely musical aspects of such theories by neglecting their ideological framework, was and is–according to Ewell–an important means in upholding the white racial frame of Western music theory. In Ewell's words:

"There can be no question that our white racial frame has [..] shoved aside, ignored, or treated as incidental [...] Schenker's racism. It has done so in order to keep in place racialized systems that benefit whites and whiteness." (Ewell, 2020, section 4.3.8.)

According to Ewell, the theory of Heinrich Schenker is tainted with racism, and therefore its teaching without harsh criticism of its very nature furthers the white racial frame of Western music theory. Racist theories reverberate–again according to Ewell–in the very essence of Heinrich Schenker's idea of organic structure that is born from the concept of the interconnected *hintergrund*, *mittelgrund* and *vordergrund*:

"Schenker often relates music to the human body and living organisms: […] [I]nsofar as […] musical coherence can be achieved only through the fundamental structure in the background and its transformations in the middleground and foreground [...], Schenker implies that blacks are inferior because only the white German genius, with superior *Menschenhumus*, is capable of producing the background that Schenker speaks of. In other words, to Schenker, blacks are not capable of producing the same level of artistry and beauty that whites are capable of. And among whites, Germans were the best at producing such beauty." (Ewell, 2020, section 4.5.3.)

Schenker also openly attacks African American music:

"Schenker disparages the music of blacks, namely, "negro music" and jazz [...], as well as negro spirituals, claiming that they were "completely falsified, dishonest expropriation of European music" […]. It seems that Schenker liked these negro spirituals inasmuch as he compared them to European music. But instead of according blacks and blackness a measure of integrity or artistic beauty, he reduces this particular black genre—the negro spiritual—to thievery, stripping it of its humanity and implying that blacks were incapable of producing good music on their own, which, in turn, bespeaks his hatred of blackness." (Ewell, 2020, section 4.2.3.)

In the present article, I choose a Schenkerian approach not *despite* but *because of* its problematic connotations; it is the opposition of blues to this *organic* structure of Western tonal music, as supposed by Heinrich Schenker, that will be shown to be the driving force behind blues. Heinrich Schenker states in *Der freie Satz*:

"The origin of every life, whether of nation, clan, or individual, becomes its destiny. Hegel defines destiny as 'the manifestation of the inborn, original predisposition of each individual'. The inner law of origin accompanies all development, and is ultimately part of the present. Origin, development and present I call background, middleground, and foreground: their union expresses the oneness of an individual, selfcontained life." (Cook, 2007: 311, for the German original, see: Schenker, 1956: 25)

Blues, as shall be shown in this article, defies this unity, and therefore disconnects the individual from the general, or in Schenkerian terms the *individual* from the *clan* or *nation*, or the *present* from *origin* and *development*. The Schenkerian viewpoint hints at an internal binary opposition within the Western tonal music conception of the late 19th and early 20th century, i.e., an ideal of formal and tonal unity versus an opposing concept of incompleteness and disruption. In this sense, the theory presented in the article will lead to a deconstruction of Schenkerian concepts, by silently acknowledging the binary opposition at hand. One is of course tempted to ask the question whether early or even later blues musicians were and are aware of this discourse in Western tonal music; even though an ideological discourse on music in the sense of Schenker and his contemporaries will most probably not have been part of the early blues musicians' reality, one must not forget that blues has developed as a contemporary of Schenker and the "political and racial discourses of fin-de-siècle Vienna" (Cook, 2007: 308), of which Schenker was a part of. Western tonal music of the early 20th century itself was not immune to the theoretical discourse of its time. Even though Heinrich Schenker propagated his ideas with near religious fanaticism, it would still fall short to speak of Schenker's theory as purely prescriptive, since it is in principle based on analysis; the question whether theory influenced music or music influenced theory is a question of hen and egg. One must therefore assume that the view of the *organic* work was not only a prescriptive fantasy, but a trait of the repertoire itself, against which blues and blues musicians constituted an opposition.

The main reason why I have chosen not to touch upon the racial aspects of the theory in the above article is that I am attempting to establish a meta-theory for the whole of the blues style. Blues has been actively created in a multitude of different racial settings; the theory presented here may and in fact must–from a standpoint of race–be judged differently according to the specific setting. While the opposition in early blues and the creation of individuality independent from *nation* and

clan may well be regarded at least partially as an opposition based on aspects of racial inequality, the quest for individuality in post Second World War European blues as a reaction to the devastating collectivity of the era of National Socialism will need to be read in a completely different context.

The concept of binary oppositions is not to be understood as a reconciling approach to Schenkerian theory. On the contrary, the concept makes use of the problematic theory to uncover the driving principles behind a style that can only be uncovered through an understanding of how blues defies tonal thought and logic. I am aware of the fact that my own theory will not be free of such problematic traits; it is this yet another reason why I present my theory as plain theory without touching upon aspects of race. I believe that my theory not only shall but *must* be criticized in the harshest way possible from a perspective of race, gender, etc.; as a white middle-aged male scholar in the European academic tradition, I yet believe that I myself am not in the position to credibly present an analysis or critique based on the before mentioned.

[7]To avoid confusion, I have used the main terms of Schenkerian analysis in their original German form, set in *italics*.

[8]Though the case is extreme from a theoretical perspective, the complete avoidance of the second scale degree is common in the blues repertoire.

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Figures

Figure 1: Titon's *Blues Scale.* Adapted by the author from Titon J. T. (1977). *Early downhomw blues: A musical and cultural analysis.* University of Illinois Press, s.154.

Figure 2: Figure 2: Basic constituents of Van der Merwe's *Ladder of Thirds.* Adapted by the author from Van der Merwe, P. (1989). *Origins of the popular style.* Clarendon.

Figure 3: Summary of Kubik's theory of overlapping harmonic series. Adapted by the author from Kubik, G. (1999). *Africa and the blues.* University Press of Mississippi.