

# ***The Development of Jazz from Bebop: Its Functions and Purposes in American Society***

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## ***Abstract***

*Black traditions of music, song and dance have a long history which goes far back to the times of slavery and African heritage. The ability of African Americans to adapt their music, to create, to improvise words and to enact themes is evident in innumerable reminiscences and reports. All of this is relevant and has had an influence on the shaping of the music.*

*This essay will be trace the development of Blues, discussing its functions and purposes in American society and assessing value as a means of expressing black American concerns, referring specifically to a range of examples. I have chosen a chronological order of the materials, tracing the history of Blues from its origin in Africa through its manifestations in colonial America and then in the United States, up to present time.*

***Keywords:*** *Jazz, Blues, Society and Culture*

## ***Özet***

Afrikalı Amerikan yerlilerinin geleneksel müzik, şarkı ve danslarının geçmişteki kölelik zamanlarına ve Afrikadaki kökenlerine kadar uzanan uzun bir geçmişi vardır. Afrikalı Amerikalıların kendi müziklerine adaptasyon yetenekleri, geçmişlerindeki zorlu yaşantılarını şarkı sözlerini doğaçlama yaratmalarından gelmektedir. Bu bağlamda, Afrikalı Amerikalıların geçmişteki kölelik zamanlarında yaşadıkları yaptıkları müziğin şekillenmesinde etkili olmuştur.

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Bu makale Blues müziğinin gelişimini, işlevini, amacını ve Afrikalı Amerikan yerli toplumu için ifade ettiği anlam ve değerini belli başlı müzik yapıtlarından örneklerle ele almayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaçla, Blues müziğinin Afrikadan Amerikan Kolonilerine ve sonrasında Amerika kıtasına ve günümüze kadar uzanan tarihsel gelişimi kronolojik olarak ele alınmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Jazz, Blues, Toplum and Kültür*

### **MAIN PART**

The Blues are much more difficult to write about than regular music, because it is essentially “*non-note music*”. Blues singer, T-Bone Walker, said: “*The blues? Man, I didn’t start playing the blues ever. That was in me before I was born and I’ve been playing and living the blues ever since. That’s the way you’ve gotta play them. You’ve got to live the blues, and with us that’s natural, it’s born in us to live the blues*” (Middleton, 1972).

In 1901, for example, an archaeologist Charles Peabody, engaged in field work in Mississippi. He noted that the texts of songs he heard sung of black labourers dealt with “*hart luck tales*” and “*love themes*” the subject matter of Blues although that term was not used. (Southern, 1997). But old timers who sang and played the Blues in tenderloin districts across the nation scoffed when asked about its origins. In New Orleans an old fiddler said, “*The blues? Ann’s no first blues! The blues always been*” (Southern, 1997).

The Blues tend to be very closely connected in some way with the Negro’s horrific experiences in America. Indeed, the music is considered to be the most important expression of Negro bitterness, melancholy and resilience. The music especially appeals to community needs as it tends to be more generalized, more figurative, as opposed to direct in its language. It also represents the view felt by the consensus as opposed to that of the individual person. The predecessors of the Blues were the mournful songs of the roustabouts, the field hollers of the slaves, and the sorrow songs

among the spirituals and the long nights of the depression era. So the story of the Blues is the story of humble, isolated, unassuming and subordinate men and women.

The mood varies widely, from desperate, lonesome songs to witty and overbearing. The music style owes both something to Europe and something to Africa. In addition to its lyrics, “*The blues is instinctive for its three-line stanza, which perhaps is a throwback to African origins, for the three-line stanza is uncommon in European folk song repertoires*” (Southern, 1997). The melody representing the ongoing drudgery of life many years in the running and the harmony demonstrating the possibility of revolution, change and progression. “*In 1619, the first of Africans black men arrived in the English colonies on the America*” (Southern, 1997). After recovering from the being ejected from their homes and forcibly integrated into a foreign society, they found it difficult to learn to adjust. Black men and women had to learn the master groups language, culture and way of life without help. Slaves documented their daily lives by recourse to music in the same way that many people record their day to day lives in a diary or personal biography; music being the main way of communication.

Music was primary form of communication for the slaves, just as it had been for their African ancestors. Singing accompanied all kinds of work, whether it consisted of picking cotton, threshing rice, stripping tobacco, harvesting sugar cane (Pasteur and Toldson, 1982). The music reflected their moods of those moments. For example, a work song which shows the plight of the black Americans.<sup>2</sup>

Ain't hard, ain't it hard,  
Ain't it hard to be a nigger, nigger, nigger?  
Ain't it hard, ain't it hard?  
For you can't get yo' money when it's due.

Tony Russell asserts that the song is usually directed against a section of the white public. Here, for instance, is a common-stock American folk song couplet at least as old as its appearance in the

<sup>2</sup> quoted in course worksheet, p. 4

1867 collection Slave Songs of the United States:

Some folks say a Nigger won't steal  
I caught one in my cornfield.

In his 1931 recording of "*Preachers Blues*", Kansas Joe McCoy used the line:

Some folks say a preacher won't steal  
Some folks say Mister Charlie won't steal.

In addition, this song as performed to black audiences, confirms suspicious that the white boss was not to be trusted (Titon, 1977).

By the Civil War, the black folk music in the United States had developed its own characteristic style. Ex-slaves sang about their experiences of their newly acquired freedom. "*The original African names of their forbears had long ago been forgotten, the land of Africa no longer beckoned after almost two hundred and fifty years of exile*" (Southern, 1997).

In those times, it was frequently the case that black men were put in prison using the slightest pretext. So therefore, the prison song became a particular type of music in that time. For example, such a gang recorded in 1939 by John A. Lomax on the Clemes Prison farm in Texas;

Captain I'm due to be in Seminole-Oooklahooma  
Captain, I'm due to be in Seminole- Oooklahooma  
Oh in them long- hot sommer days  
Black gal, if I never more- seee- youuu  
Black gal, if I never more- seee- you  
Oh in them long- hot summer days.

A decade after the Civil War it was clear that reconstruction had failed and it spelled disaster for the Blacks. In 1896 the Supreme

Court approved the segregation laws provided that separate but equal facilities were available (Oliver, 1997). It seemed deliberate cynicism, for in every accommodation Black were provided with poor and unclean facilities. At the same time the nation as a whole was suffering repeatedly from economic problems. Massive labour strikes and outbreaks of violence threatened the national security and jobless men moved away in a vain attempt to find a job.

The effects of this period of economic and social stress were upon the African American, the ultimate result was to impress upon black men a sense of their own identity. Isolated by restrictive legislation, cut off from white society, they began to rejuvenate their own culture. It was this period of social unrest, which seems to have caused a revolution in African American culture and also the period which was inspired the beginnings of the blues. *“The post-war spirituals, like the social songs, employed the old forms and musical idioms of the slave songs. For example, the most musical black folk of the ante-bellum period may well have been the men working on the wharfs, on the levees and on the railway”* (Sothorn, 1997).

The railway train was a representative symbol of both civilization and the prospect of hope. As such the train represented the industrial revolution’s mechanized rape of the virgin American countryside, and with it the country, the Negro and his basic but stable culture. It was, however, also the means of carrying the urban Negro back to the country and recreating the eroticism and tribalism of the country community in the city. *“It was the combination of primitive physical wholeness, mechanical dehumanization and individual, civilized consciousness”* (Middleton, 1972).

For example, the following song was collected from a visiting singer in Northern Mississippi (Oliver, 1997).

I’m a po’ boy’ long way from home,  
 Oh, I’m a po’ boy’ long way from home.  
 I wish a’ scushion train would run,  
 Carry me back where I cum frum.

I ain't got a frien' in dis town.  
I'm out in de wide worl' alone.  
I wish that ole enineer wus dead,  
Brouht me' way from my home.

Negro culture is associated with a clash between implication and actuality and hope and reality. The difference between slavery and emancipation lies in the addition to reality of a brighter future, and that is why emancipation created the Blues. The pointless travel in which many Negroes indulged in order to test their freedom symbolized the new isolation. The wandering country Blues singer was one such traveller and it was this new loneliness and tension which created the country blues.

The principal theme of country Blues is about their sexual relationship and other sub-themes such as leaving town and work trouble. Love is the focus of the Blues man's experience of country life. "*Perhaps this ambivalent subject of togetherness and loneliness, communion and isolation, physical pleasure and emotional anguish, effectively summarizes this experience*" (Middleton, 1972). So his music reflects the sensuality of country life, but it also deals with the chaos and pain, which any breakdown of the precarious conventions of the family structure reveals.

*"At the beginning of the 19th century, about 10 percent of black population of the Unites States lived in urban communities"* (Middleton, 1972). As well as new hope in urban life this brought increased sophistication and it introduced new complexities and tensions. The Blues music of this period has been labelled "*urban blues*" (Southern, 1997). The Negro's urban experience has been a fluctuating relationship between the force of Americanisation and that of the ghetto spirit. Also the singers had sung about their failed sexual relationship; many urban migrants left their women behind in the country, therefore the sexual confusion, and the breakdown of morals were resulted from this.

In the 1940s barely discernible changes began to take place with regard to integration. The Blues, which had been created by African Americans, was gradually coming to represent the American music. It had entered the fields of mainstream dance and entertainment music. Beginning in 1950s, political, civic, social, and religious organizations began to work towards full equality for the black population.

Urban life quickly became even more hopeless than the country. Then blacks moved to the city with new hopes; to be American and to be a Negro was felt to be possible in the city. There was a new creation of the merits of Americanisation and individualism, or a new emphasis on the supportive function of the black community. City Blues were basically constituted by these elements. For example, "*Hoochie Coochie Man*", recorded in 1952 in Chicago (tape ex. 26). City life was so different from country life that the Blues had to change in new urban generation. Performers adopted electric instruments. They began to use this new electric sounds. Then music became harder and more in keeping with a new environment.

In the post-depression years, Blues were about unemployment, the Public Works Administration and the Works Projects Administration, high rents and low wages, shootings and on chain gangs and penitentiaries. There were also Blues about gambling and prostitution, Blues about broken homes, infidelity, leaving men and forsaken women. There were Blues about superstition and folk beliefs; these were Blues which persisted in the cities. In addition they sung about their experiences of suffering under the force of the state. For example Poll taxes made universal suffrage a joke "*Taxes on my Pole*" became an ironic sexual pun in the Blues (Oliver, 1997).

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, the Blues were the most powerful way in the Negro's to express their difficult life. Negro's sings out their troubles out their experience. By doing so they define their identity and to a degree, the Negro identity. This is important because the Negro identity is

so little elaborated in America. Finally, from the beginning of the arrival of the first Africans in America, their musical activities have not only played a crucial role in black lives but they have also deeply influenced the performance of music in America and many parts of the World. The Blues remains today to be one of the most influential forms of black music currently in being.

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