Bending the birth of the blues

Researchers may just have found what they wished

By Glenn C. Altschuler | March 23, 2008

In Search of the Blues
By Marybeth Hamilton
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Alongside a railroad track in the Mississippi Delta, two signs commemorate the birth of the blues in the town of Tutwiler. While touring the Delta in 1903, a wooden panel indicates, W. C. Handy heard a musician sing as he pressed a knife along the strings of his guitar. Handy was mesmerized. The brass plaque on the other side of the track tells much the same story, but declares 1895 the birth date of this "native Negro ballad form."

"In point of fact," according to Marybeth Hamilton, who teaches American history at Birkbeck College at the University of London, "there is little hard evidence" to sustain any claims about the primacy of the Delta in blues history. White blues researchers, she argues, found the foundation myth of Handy handy because it emphasized discovery rather than invention. For them, the blues was "eternal, primeval." It should - and must - enter history through the sad, suffering, sentimental, spontaneous songs of an anonymous African-American itinerant.

Accounts of musical origin, Hamilton believes, "are always social and political fables." As "In Search of the Blues" deconstructs them, it illuminates black images in white minds. In elegant and poignant prose, Hamilton follows white amateur ethnomusicologists - Howard Odum, Dorothy Scarborough, John Lomax, Charles Edward Smith, William Russell, Frederic Ramsey, and James McKune - on their obsessive quests to find "the lush glades of primitive imagination" before they were ditched and drained by industrial capitalism. Condescending toward the "darkies" they discovered, these critics and collectors nonetheless located and labeled "a music of archaic, uncompromised voices" - on phonographs that were at once the instruments of authentication and the enemies of authenticity.

In the early decades of the 20th century, Hamilton points out, the terms "blues" and "jazz" were often used interchangeably. And blues researchers oscillated between the Delta and New Orleans as the place where it all began. Their choices, Hamilton demonstrates, reflected their views of Negro "aboriginals." Romantic racialists, the aficionados of the Delta thought that the plantation South was the natural habitat of backward blacks, whose songs of suffering and quiet resignation stemmed from isolation and restlessness. By and large, they turned a blind eye to oppression by whites.

"Leadbelly" (Huddie Ledbetter) was the linchpin of the legend of the Delta blues. When Lomax, a consultant for the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress, met him in July 1933, Leadbelly was an inmate at Angola State Penitentiary in Louisiana. Lomax was taken with the sometime farm laborer, itinerant guitarist, and double murderer with a rich, booming voice and an encyclopedic knowledge of spirituals, shouts, and sinful songs. He helped Leadbelly get a pardon, hired him as chauffeur and manservant, brought him to New York, and launched his recording career. With Leadbelly, Hamilton suggests, Lomax created "a new kind of celebrity: a flesh-and-blood embodiment of life on the margins."

But he knew it couldn't last. When Negro folk singers were transported to the North, Lomax insisted, they became tainted by white musical conventions. We can only wonder what he was thinking when he coached Leadbelly to clean up his diction so that audiences could comprehend his lyrics and then despaired at the studied artifice that crept into his stage performances. With the singer increasingly sullen and soused, the odd couple quarreled. In 1935, Leadbelly returned to Shreveport. His "corruption," Hamilton emphasizes, "was a worldliness that was there from the outset." Lomax didn't see it that way. "With a high-handedness so monumental it is almost disarming," Hamilton writes, he remained wedded to a "convict pastorale, a song of melancholy yearning, with the black man in prison stripes," fierce, ignorant, and insensible, "laying roads, splitting rails, moaning in anguish, serving as a minor gateway to the sublime."

Jazz men, Hamilton demonstrates, had an entirely different agenda for the forgotten voices they found. Popular Front left-wingers, they were fascinated by the promise they saw in the urban lives of African-Americans, "where outcasts and the disreputable expressed resistance, found training and fellowship, and created a new art form." Their Leadbelly spoke for blacks who saw hired hands drop dead in the cotton fields from heatstroke and fled from white mobs. Convinced that environmental influences shaped behavior, they rejected African attributes as sources of jazz. At the turn of the century in Storyville, New Orleans, "a ribald, pieblenan Garden of Eden," they declared, black musicians forged an underground communion. By the 1920s, however, commercial record companies were policing paradise. Preferring shallow emotion to authentic low-down, gut-bucket blues, the moguls of mass appeal cheapened and adulterated jazz, cast aside the brilliant black innovators, and anointed, among others, the aptly named Paul Whiteman.
When the Popular Front gave way to the Cold War Red Scare, the romance of Storyville faded. In the soulless, superficial, consensus-driven 1950s, critics and collectors uncovered the country roots of New Orleans musicians. They celebrated blacks as male sexual existentialists, at once unconventional, defiant, sensitive, and vulnerable. Jazz and the blues went their separate ways. The "country blues" became "the Delta blues," even though "the region felt modern to those who lived in it, fast-paced and worldly." The myth has endured, at least for now, Hamilton concludes, because it is suffused with ambiguity, retaining the capacity to enrich and, alas, to feed "on a faintly colonialist romance with black suffering."

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