

THE BRITISH 'BLUESMAN'
PAUL OLIVER AND THE NATURE OF TRANSATLANTIC
BLUES SCHOLARSHIP

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Abstract

Recent revisionist studies have argued that much of what is known about music known as the blues' has been 'invented' by the writing of enthusiasts far removed from the African American culture that created the music. Elijah Wald and Marybeth Hamilton in particular have attempted to sift through the clouds of romanticism, and tried to unveil more empirical histories that were previously obscured by the fallacious genre distinctions conjured up during the 1960s blues revival. While this revisionist scholarship has shed light on some previously ignored historical facts, writers have tended to concentrate on the romanticism of blues writing strictly from an American perspective, failing to acknowledge the genesis and influence of transatlantic scholarship, and therefore ignoring the work of the most prolific and influential blues scholar of the twentieth century, British writer Paul Oliver. By examining the core of Oliver's research and writing during the 1950s and 1960s, this study aims to place Oliver in his rightful place at the centre of blues historiography. His scholarship allows a more detailed appreciation of the manner in which the blues was studied, through lyrics, recordings, oral histories, photography and African American literature. These historical sources were interpreted in accordance with the author's attitudes to the commercial popular music, which allowed the 'reconstruction' of an African American 'folk' culture in which the blues became the antithesis of pop. Importantly, this study seeks to transcend dominant discourses of national cultural ownership or ethnocentrism, and demonstrate that representations of African American music and culture were constructed within a transatlantic context. The blues is music with roots in the African American experience within the United States; however, as Paul Oliver's writing shows, its reception and representation were not limited by the same national, cultural or racial boundaries.

Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas. Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

Signed 

Date15/02/2013

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Contents

Introduction	6
Chapter 1: Distance Learning: Paul Oliver's Blues Writing in the 1950s	42
Chapter 2: <i>Blues Fell This Morning</i> : Record Collecting and the Analysis of Lyrics in the Reconstruction of the Blues	87
Chapter 3: 'You Asked Me So I'm Telling You:' The Use of Oral History and Photography in <i>Conversation with the Blues</i> (1965)	135
Chapter 4: History, Tradition and Invention: <i>Screening the Blues</i> (1968)	199
Chapter 5: The Rise and Fall: <i>The Story of the Blues</i> (1969)	235
Conclusion	289
Appendices: Interviews	301
Bibliography	437

Introduction

In the nineteen-fifties and sixties African American music emerged as one of the major influences in white popular music on both sides of the Atlantic. One of the most remarkable aspects of this movement was the place and significance of music known as the blues in providing inspiration for groups and individuals such as the Rolling Stones, Alexis Korner, The Animals, The Yardbirds, Eric Clapton, Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac and John Mayall. This musical 'revival' was accompanied, but also preceded by the development of a body of writing that also focussed on the blues. One of the most prominent and influential writers is the Englishman Paul Oliver, who over a period of sixty years has written some of the best-known and widely referenced books on the subject from *Blues Fell This Morning: the Meaning of the Blues* (1960), *Conversation with the Blues* (1965), and *The Story of the Blues* (1969). This study will examine Oliver's work in order to assess the nature and significance of transatlantic blues scholarship. In reconsidering the representations of the music in these works, this project will follow in the footsteps of a strand of revisionist scholarship on blues historiography. Writers such as Elijah Wald and Marybeth Hamilton have claimed that blues scholarship during the fifties, sixties and beyond, has been as much about 'invention' as it has been about discovery.¹ They argue that since the revival the blues has been repeatedly represented as an authentic African American folk culture at odds with popular music and the commercialism of the music industry. Blues singers such as Robert Johnson have

¹ Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (Amistad: New York, 2004); Marybeth Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues: black voices, white visions* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007)

been idolized as noble rebels that renounced the worldly benefits of commercial success in favour of their art. In essence, revisionist writers have emphasized that the blues was a form of popular music in its time, part of the music industry and therefore much more *modern* in character. Revivalist blues writers however, reframed the music and the musicians based on what they wanted to see: a ‘folk’ form which was opposed aesthetically and philosophically to commercialism and any notion of industry.

However, so far these writers have only told an American story, and focused on the role of notable American folklorists, collectors and scholars involved in defining representations of the blues such as Alan Lomax, Frederic Ramsey, Samuel Charters and James McKune. The blues is American music with origins firmly rooted within the African American experience of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but the story of its journey through the public consciousness and its reverberations within popular memory since World War II has not been limited by the same physical and cultural boundaries. Therefore, this study will attempt to move away from nationally or ethnocentrically based discourses of blues historiography by acknowledging the transatlantic character of blues appreciation and writing in the post-war era. Oliver’s seminal scholarship demonstrates that the music existed within a much more fluid context of cultural intermixture, permitted by the increasing availability of music through mass media and transatlantic interactions during the fifties and sixties. By undertaking a textual analysis influenced by deconstructionist approaches to historiography, an in-depth analysis of Oliver’s work will allow a more detailed understanding of how the blues was interpreted and reconstituted through a range of methods such as the analysis of lyrics, oral history, photography, and the process of constructing an historical narrative. This

introduction will begin by placing the topic within the context of the current revisionist emphasis on the invention of the blues, and demonstrate the need for a detailed consideration of the role of Paul Oliver.

The ‘Invention’ of the Blues: origins and debates

Traditionally, written interpretations of the blues and blues history have been pervaded by what George Lipsitz has defined as one of the main problems of popular culture studies: the subjective aesthetic criteria driving the analysis of cultural texts.² The music has been framed within the context of a binary opposition between white mainstream culture and black folk culture, which has led to an idealization of blues singers as folk heroes, outsiders and rebels against the consumerism of the fickle entertainment industry. The fact that the blues emerged amid the harsh realities of racial segregation and social deprivation augmented the sense that the music represented distinct human qualities of heroic dignity and resilience. This is best exemplified by the music journalist Robert Palmer in his famous history *Deep Blues* (1981): ‘[i]t’s the story of a small and deprived group of people who created, against tremendous odds, something that has enriched us all.’³ The tendency has been to envision the most deprived and those most distant from mainstream culture as the most representative of the blues idiom, giving rise to the popular conception of the “bluesman,”

² George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (London & Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990[sic]1994), p. 18

³ Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues: A Musical and Cultural History, from the Mississippi Delta to Chicago’s South Side to the World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 17

The men and women who played and sang the blues were mostly poor, propertyless, disreputable itinerants, many of them illiterate, many of them loners, many of them living on the edge. Rejecting the static lives of their parents, almost always on the move, they felt freer than most, and prided themselves on being masterless, on being able to enjoy a freedom of movement and expression denied many of their people, on being free from a labor system that tied others (including their families) to the land through violence, coercion, and the law.⁴

The disenfranchised rebels described here have most often been identified with the Mississippi Delta, creating an almost supernatural link between blues singers and their environment. The Delta, the heart of the Deep South and plantation slavery in the nineteenth century, has been frequently viewed as the heartland of the blues as it was also the home of singers such as Charley Patton, Robert Johnson, Skip James and Muddy Waters. Terms such as the ‘poorest’ and ‘blackest’ region of the South frequently characterize descriptions, and while these terms accurately describe the region, the emphasis blues scholars place on this region reveals the significance they placed on the relationship between the experience of ordinary African Americans and the Deep South.⁵ This is accompanied by a distinctive sense of awe and fascination for the music, built around the thematic narrative of beauty arising from tragedy, of humanity surviving, as Litwack put it, ‘against tremendous odds.’ Ted Gioia for instance, likened the Delta to ‘a Third World country [that] had been abandoned in the heart of the United States.’⁶ These visions have most frequently been personified by the legendary singer Robert Johnson, who was represented as the ‘King of the Delta’ blues during the revival, and for many blues scholars has since then has personified ‘the African American voice as it sounded

⁴ Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble In Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), p. 452

⁵ ‘poorest’ and ‘blackest’ in William Barlow, *Looking Up at Down: the Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), p. 26-7

⁶ Ted Gioia, *Delta Blues: the Life and Times of the Mississippi Masters* (London: W.W. Norton, 2008), p. 2

before the record companies got to it.’⁷ These interpretations of the blues still persist in the present day. An example can be seen in the question directed to the musician Seasick Steve (who was promoting his new album, ‘Man From Another Time,’) on BBC Breakfast on British television in 2009:

Presenter: It’s blues music that evokes a kind of hobo lifestyle, and people talk about your background in that way. Tell us a bit about where you were before you got to where you are...

Steve’s response was telling:

Seasick S.: Well, you know, that’s like another problem I have. People think they found me under a bridge a few years ago, but I raised 5 boys, you know, I had normal jobs, I had 35 years... But when I was a young fella’, I had to leave home when I was thirteen, and I did some pretty rough living and wandering around. We used to ride trains or hitchhike, and follow migrant work around the farm work. But, you know, that ended many years ago, and I just sort of had to be, tried to be a regular fella’.⁸

The interview on the morning show echoes the events of the sixties blues revival, when ageing and forgotten African American blues singers such as Son House, Skip James, and Bukka White were “rediscovered” and presented to mainstream white audiences. Indeed, Seasick Steve’s aptly titled album also supports the idea of a past in the process of being rediscovered. As the singer demonstrates in his answer to the stereotype that he was not discovered ‘under a bridge’ and was more of a family man, this imagined perception of blues musicians in the public consciousness needs to be constantly challenged with the reality.

⁷ Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, p. 9

⁸ Seasick Steve’s appearance on British TV in October 2009. Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/8310377.stm> on 5/4/2011 at 12:30pm

The problematic processes of discovery and rediscovery were addressed by the American ethnomusicologist Jeff Tilton who recalled the activities of blues enthusiasts during the revival:

The governing metaphor at the time for what we were doing was “discovery” and “rediscovery,” as if what we were doing was finding something that was unknown or had been lost. But the notion of discovery is complex, as anyone knows who has thought about the grade-school “fact” that Columbus discovered America. Our discoveries, like those of the European explorers, were mixtures of invention and interpretation, and in a way instead of finding our object, blues, we constituted it.

In recent years blues enthusiasts of the sixties blues revival have been able to - borrowing an expression from Tilton – ‘turn a reflexive eye’ on their own early engagement with the music.⁹ Tilton, Wald, Hamilton and Karl Hagstrom Miller have sought to deconstruct some of the major assumptions about the blues and blues singers, following the trend of revising popular music history such as in Scott DeVeaux’s analysis of jazz histories and Richard Peterson’s of country music.¹⁰ The reconsideration of blues scholarship seems to have been motivated in no small part by a personal sense of self-reflection. Wald recalls being captivated by the romantic vision of the music as an early blues fan, prior to a moment of clarity in which he began to realize that the music he had imagined bore little resemblance to the historical reality.¹¹ Similarly, the photographs Hamilton took of the landscape in her visit to the Mississippi Delta at first seemed to mark the entrance into ‘a mythic, primordial world,’ and it would take several months ‘for the spell to be broken,’

⁹ Jeff Todd Tilton. ‘Reconstructing the Blues: Reflections on the 1960s Blues Revival’ in N. V. Rosenberg, ed., *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 222-3

¹⁰ Scott DeVeaux, ‘Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography,’ *Black American Literature Forum*, Fall 1991, Vol. 25 Issue 3, pp. 525-60; Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010)

¹¹ Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, p. xxii

allowing a more considered interpretation of the images.¹² In these confrontations with prevalent attitudes, these writers have aimed to challenge depictions that saw the blues represented as an authentic folk music with roots firmly within working class African American culture, and of bluesmen as heroic figures of anti-conformism.

The revisionist emphasis has been on the social and cultural distance separating the music and the blues enthusiasts of the revival. Wald for instance, argues that blues writing has been dominated by white middle-class enthusiasts whose remoteness from the context of the music has created a tendency for blues research 'to be permeated with a romanticism that obscures at least as much as it illuminates.' For Wald, the neglect of empirical evidence in favour of romanticised interpretations resulted in figures such as Robert Johnson, who sold relatively little and was largely unknown even to African American audiences in his own time, becoming idolized and revered as a fundamental musician in the history of African American music. This was at the expense of singers who were more widely known among black audiences, more successful commercially, and therefore more culturally significant, such as Leroy Carr or the Mississippi Sheiks.¹³ Marybeth Hamilton on the other hand, focused her study on the manner in which folklorists, writers and enthusiasts from Alan Lomax and the enigmatic collector James McKune (spearhead of the 'blues mafia') 'felt imaginatively tied to the South,' and that in their quests for 'authentic black voices... remade the blues itself.'¹⁴

While the revision of blues scholarship would seem to be a recent phenomenon, the prevalent representations of the blues from the time of the revival have always been under scrutiny. Even amid the blues boom of the sixties, Charles Keil was highly critical

¹² Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, p. 3

¹³ Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, p. xxiii

¹⁴ Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, p. 18

of writing which marginalized more urban blues forms in favour of what those of the 'moldy fig mentality' saw as the *real* blues:

The criteria for a real blues singer, implicit or explicit, are the following. Old age: the performer should preferably be more than sixty years old, blind arthritic, and toothless (as Lonnie Johnson put it, when first approached for an interview, "Are you another one of those guys who wants to put crutches under my ass?"). Obscurity: the blues singer should not have performed in public or have made a recording in at least twenty years; among deceased bluesmen, the best seem to be those who appeared in a big city one day in the 1920's, made from four to six recordings, and then disappeared into the countryside forever. Correct tutelage: the singer should have played with or been taught by some legendary figure. Agrarian milieu: the bluesman should have lived the bulk of his life as a sharecropper, coaxing mules and picking cotton, uncontaminated by city influences.¹⁵

Keil drew attention to the divergence between blues writers and musicians, implying that certain representations were being imposed on musicians, rather than emanating from them. Albert Murray followed suit, and like Keil, criticized the widespread conceptions of the folk blues musicians as 'fallacious,' arguing that what was interpreted as traditional, self-taught and instinctive in blues from the Race Records era of the nineteen-twenties and thirties, was actually closer to being derivative and conventional in reality. Essentially, Murray was highlighting the constructed nature of the folk category upon which many of revivalist interpretations of the blues rested: '[t]here are those who assume that folk simplicity represents a deliberate, down-to-earth, self-confident rejection of over-refinement and decadence...It is no such thing.'¹⁶ Both Keil and Murray were unconvinced by the motives of the 'moldy figs' that associated the more authentic forms of blues with a folk ideal at odds with the commercialism of the mainstream. They therefore felt that the

¹⁵ Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 34-5; Keil explains the use of 'moldy figs' as a term that was used by more modern jazz musicians and critics to describe those who defined jazz strictly as a music from New Orleans and the pre-war era.

¹⁶ Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (London: Quartet Books, 1975), p. 203/208

folk and urban divide was not an accurate reflection of African American reality. The segregation of music into arbitrary folk and commercial categories failed to acknowledge that what was regarded as commercial, was also culturally significant for black audiences.

Probably the most important characteristic of music scholarship which has conditioned the written interpretations of the blues is what Karl Hagstrom Miller refers to as the 'folkloric paradigm.' This approach to the study of the blues developed out of the late-nineteenth century emergence of folklore studies, and Miller demonstrates that the paradigm has come to pervade most studies of music seen as rooted within rural cultures. In essence, the folkloric paradigm relied on an often exaggerated ideal of a pure folk culture and identity as a way of reacting to the oppressive forces of modernity. As a consequence, in the work of many major blues scholars such as Alan Lomax, Samuel Charters, and Robert Palmer, folk cultures are imagined as pure, unchanging, untouched by the modern ideals of progress or consumerism, and representative of real folk voices. It is in this approach that the classical divisions between folk and pop emerge in the interpretation of music, pervading music scholarship to the present day.¹⁷ During the blues revival, the folkloric paradigm found many adherents considering the frequency of counter-hegemonic social upheavals and movements. As Titon suggests, the post-war Beat movement and folk revival both played a large part in paving the way for the identification of white nonconformists with the music of a segregated minority such as the blues.¹⁸

¹⁷ Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound*, p. 6-10

¹⁸ Titon, 'Reconstructing the Blues,' p. 223

The trend of reconsidering blues scholarship seems to share an affinity with the deconstruction of the folk category in cultural studies. Robin Kelley began to question the very nature of the concept by arguing that terms such as ‘folk’ and ‘traditional’ can only really be understood if considered alongside the terms ‘modern’ and ‘commercial.’ Definitions are always developed in opposition, based on temporal attitudes towards issues such as race, gender, hierarchy and class.¹⁹ Kelley effectively made the case that what was considered folk could never quite be the stable and unchanging entity it was imagined to be. Benjamin Filene applied this to the history of American vernacular music by demonstrating that folk categorizations are constantly in flux and never stable, thus avoiding simple definitions. The notion of folk authenticity in music has repeatedly been redefined to cope with the changing nature of whatever has been considered ‘commercial.’ In one effective example, he demonstrates how the identification of the blues singer Muddy Waters firstly as a downhome blues singer, then a ‘downhome’ commercial blues singer, followed by commercial pop star, and finally as an old-time roots musician later in his career, exemplifies the unstable and constructed nature of folk authenticity.²⁰ It therefore seems that the idea of the folk rested on an arbitrary definition of something which was rooted in the past, but the instability of its conceptualization meant that the folk category was in a constant process of re-definition. Being rooted in the past also meant that the folk concept had what David Nicholls refers to as an ‘hallucinatory effect.’ He argued that its use as an ‘organizing trope’ for racial heritage and cultural pride in African American literature was as much the product of a reaction to

¹⁹ Robin D. G. Kelley, ‘Notes on “Deconstructing the Folk”’ in *American Historical Review*, Vol. 97, No. 5, December 1992, pp. 1400-1408

²⁰ Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. 77

a crisis of modernity, as it was an actual discovery of an African American past.²¹ Thus, interpretations and representations of folk cultures such as the blues have always been determined by a dialogue between an imagined past and the present.

In seeking to counter the biased and exaggerated depictions of the folk, revisionist writers have focused their efforts on the use of empirical evidence and historical facts. Miller's study aims to uncover a more realistic history that transcends the arbitrary musical categorizations that oppose white and black, and folk and commercial. He thus seeks a story more faithful to historical events than the whims of 'folkie' revivalists. The attempt to reveal a more objective past is the first of the two main approaches employed in revisionist blues writing. Wald's investigation into the white representations of Robert Johnson seeks to reveal events that have been blurred from view by relying on the available evidence of the singer's poor record sales and relative anonymity among African American audiences. These indicate that rather than being a 'folk hero,' Johnson operated within a commercial music industry, aimed for commercial success and developed his craft in order to try and achieve his ambitions. Similarly, Hamilton demonstrates how revivalists and historians have persistently adopted romanticized visions of history at the expense of more reliable historical sources. An example is provided by the recurrent use of W.C. Handy's first encounter with the blues as the marker for the genesis of the genre in blues histories. Blues scholars, she argues, have repeatedly fallen for the romantic image of Handy hearing a musician playing the guitar on a lonely Delta railway platform in 1903, neglecting the more reliable evidence

²¹ David G. Nicholls, *Conjuring the Folk: Forms of Modernity in African America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 5

provided in the research of Howard B. Odum that had pointed to the existence of the blues much earlier than Handy's autobiography.²²

The second method of addressing the invention of the blues has been influenced by a focus on the contemporary use of history in popular culture. Wald states that much of the writing on the blues during the revival was produced retrospectively. The irreconcilable gap between the context of the revival and pre-WWII blues favored a lack of considered appreciation for the historical specificities of the music, as well as the indulgence of personal fantasies on the part of revivalist writers.²³ For Wald therefore, invention is synonymous with bad historical practice and an over-personalized involvement of the blues writer with the music. Hamilton takes this approach further by examining the work of what she calls 'mediators and shapers of taste,' such as the Lomaxes, Frederic Ramsey Jr, and James McKune, arguing that their work is more revealing of their 'fears and obsessions' than it is of the music. Echoing the thoughts of Titon, she argued that the work of revivalists was indicative of the influence of the Beat movement's notion of a 'male flight from commitment,' manifested in the idealization of bluesmen.²⁴ This was an approach also adopted by Filene who concentrated on the role of 'middlemen,' those protagonists that rather than simply presenting the music to audiences, reconstituted and reconditioned it to conform to their own ideals of 'America's true musical traditions' and standards of authenticity.²⁵ He argues that folklorists, musicians and scholars such as Lomax, Charters and Willie Dixon actively

²² Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, p. 24; Hamilton uses the scholarship of Howard Odum (such as Howard B. Odum and Guy Johnson's *Negro Workaday Songs* (Chapel Hill; UNC, 1926)) in the first quarter of the twentieth century as a more reliable historical source than Handy's recollections in the autobiography, *Father of the Blues* which was published in 1941.

²³ Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, p. xv

²⁴ Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, p. 9-10/193

²⁵ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, p. 5

participated in the advancement of ‘visions of America’s musical past’ and acted as ‘memory workers.’²⁶ These protagonists, he argues, were constantly redefining and reconstructing this past by opposing it to an ever-changing modern musical landscape.

The Neglect of the ‘Transatlantic’ and the Role of Paul Oliver

Phrases such as ‘America’s musical traditions’ and ‘America’s musical past’ indicate that writers such as Wald, Hamilton and Filene have remained firmly within the borders of the United States when reconsidering the historiography of music scholarship. Consequently, the invention of the blues is overwhelmingly depicted as an American story. This means that the contribution of transatlantic blues scholarship in the invention process has been underplayed, making light of the fact that Europeans (as well as others around the world) have been listening to and writing about the blues since the Second World War, and that the British blues boom of the sixties had an enormous impact on Western popular music. This gap in current writing on the nature of blues scholarship outside the American narrative has begun to be addressed in recent years in Roberta Schwartz’s survey of the reception of the blues in Britain, and Ulrich Adelt’s consideration of representations of the blues and race in Germany.²⁷ It is clear that there exists an element of resentment towards non-American interpretations of American music, as represented by Michael Bane in the early eighties: ‘despite all the research, I

²⁶ Ibid., p. 131

²⁷ Roberta Freund Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues: the Transmission and Reception of American Style Blues in the United Kingdom* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); Ulrich Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties: A Story in Black and White* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010): in chapter 4 Adelt considers the conceptualization of race in Horst Lippman and Fritz Rau’s American Folk and Blues Festivals in Europe throughout the sixties and seventies.

think the English have a sort of very basic misunderstanding of what the music is all about... somewhere right at the beginning they missed a basic connection.’²⁸ These sentiments of cultural nationalism were echoed more recently by Wald when the author discussed the difference in quality between white British and white American blues musicians. The author argued that Chicago born harmonica player Paul Butterfield made ‘all the Brits sound like the foreigners they were.’ He also ascribes the misinterpretations of the blues to these ‘foreigners,’ by arguing that the blues as it exists today is ‘the image presented by Keith Richards and Mick Jagger.’²⁹ The present author has experienced these sentiments first hand. Following a paper on the subject of British blues scholarship at an international conference in Manchester, I was asked the following question in a somewhat cynical tone: ‘what makes the British the cultural custodians of this American music?’

Another strand of ethnocentrically-focused thought extends this division to include racial discourses. Hamilton’s subtitle, ‘black voices, white visions,’ is representative of this idea of not only a cultural disconnection, but one based on race. In many cases, however, it has been much more explicit. Voicing a deeply entrenched ambivalence towards cultural and critical miscegenation, Jon Michael Spencer makes the case that ‘white blues scholars do not fully understand the blues because they do not understand the threat and experience of getting their heads beaten.’ He, by contrast, knows ‘what it means to be black and currently living on the underside of history.’ He thus argues that the racial and cultural distance of white critics has been the primary reason behind a series of misinterpretations of African American culture and music, such

²⁸ Michael Bane, *White Boy Singin’ the Blues: the Black Roots of White Rock*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 156;

²⁹ Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, p. 245/221

as the ‘Anglo-Victorian’ fascination for the blues as an erotically charged idiom at the expense of its spiritual side.³⁰ Spencer’s vision of blues scholarship stems from a long line of ethnocentric writing that emanates from the Black Arts Movement of the mid and late sixties, keen to stress that the blues belongs firmly within a hermetic culture separate from and alien to the white world.³¹ For instance, in his definition of blues as ‘secular spirituals,’ James H. Cone applied the model of segregation from the Race Records era to blues scholarship. He argued that the music would only be decipherable from an African American perspective, as the black music communicated the ‘*feeling and thinking of African people, and the kinds of mental adjustments they had to make in order to survive in an alien land.*’ For Albert Murray, the misinterpretation of the function and meaning of black folk music would be elusive to ‘self-styled liberal jazz critics’ who were not ‘native to the idiom.’ Similarly, Samuel Floyd Jr argues that the ‘blues spoke a musical code decipherable by knowers of culture but inaccessible to those outside it.’³²

While these nationalistic and ethnocentric undercurrents seem counter-productive in the study of a music that has persistently crossed national and cultural borders, it must be said that popular portrayals of the British blues boom and the role of British musicians in getting the blues an audience in America, as portrayed in the BBC4 documentary *Blues Britannia*, tend to maintain rather than challenge an awkward sense of cultural

³⁰ ‘heads beaten’ in Jon Michael Spencer, ‘Blues and Evil: Theomusicology and Afrocentricity’ in Robert Sacre’ (ed), *Saints and Sinners: Religion, Blues and (D)evil in African-American Music and Literature*. (Liege: Belgium, 1996), p. 47; ‘what it means to be black’ in Jon Michael Spencer, *Blues and Evil* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), p. xxv

³¹ This is dealt with at length in Adam Gussow, ‘“If Bessie Smith Had Killed Some White People,” Racial Legacies, the Blues Revival, and the Black Arts Movement,’ in Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford (eds), *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), pp.227-52

³² James H. Cone. *The Spirituals and The Blues* (New York: Seabury, 1972); Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, p. 50; Samuel A. Floyd Jr. *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 78

nationalism.³³ It may be that too much has been made of popular narratives such as the arrival of British groups in the United States, exemplified in Peter Hall's *Cities in Civilization*: 'When The Beatles first came to America they told everyone they wanted to see Muddy Waters and Bo Diddley; one reporter asked: "Muddy Waters... where's that?" Paul McCartney laughed and said, "Don't you know who your own famous people are here?"'³⁴ Although there were inherent differences in the reception and appreciation of the blues between mainstream American and British audiences, scholarship on the subject was characterized by numerous transatlantic links that had existed since the early days of transatlantic jazz appreciation. The neglect of these links in the formation of blues scholarship means that there are still many more questions to be answered regarding revivalist interpretations of the blues. Indeed, blues records had been available in Britain since the nineteen-twenties, and blues musicians began to visit the UK from the early fifties. Also, the early days of blues writing in the music press were characterized by frequent transatlantic correspondence and exchange of information. Importantly however, to include the transatlantic element in the examination of blues historiography does not equate to asserting the importance of the 'British connection.' In the same way that Hagstrom Miller sees a much more intertwined black and white musical landscape in the American South, in the post-war years the blues proliferated at a time of increasing mass media, which permitted fluidity of exchange across physical and cultural borders. And it was in this post-war transatlantic context that ideas about the blues and African American culture were constructed. As the availability of blues music increased through mass media, critics, collectors and enthusiasts became fixated by origins and definitions at a

³³ *Blues Britannia: Can Blue Men Sing the Whites?* BBC4, 11pm, 9/12/2011, Chris Rodley (2009)

³⁴ Peter Hall, *Cities in Civilization* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998), p. 601

time when these were becoming ever more elusive. One of the ways to examine blues scholarship within this expanded Western context is through the work of the British blues writer, Paul Oliver.

For all the focus on ‘memory workers’ and the ‘shapers of taste’ that have influenced popular representations of the blues and blues musicians, it is remarkable that revisionist writers have so far neglected the British scholar’s role. This is even more surprising given Oliver’s vast influence in both Europe and the United States for more than half a century, as evidenced in the praise of other blues scholars for Oliver’s contribution to the field. The American ethnomusicologist David Evans states that ‘it would hardly be an exaggeration to state that most of our present understanding of the blues is based on the work of Paul Oliver;’ William Ferris argues that Oliver has ‘pioneered the study of blues;’ and Paul Garon believes that the British author ‘is surely the most important commentator on the blues in the world today.’ Titon highlights how Oliver’s first major book on the subject, *Blues Fell This Morning*, became the model for young academics who began to make the blues the subject of their research. So evident has his influence been in the field that Jon Michael Spencer referred to an ‘Oliverian’ tradition of blues scholarship.³⁵

Oliver’s contribution to the overall understanding of the blues over the last sixty years raises some interesting issues that this thesis will explore: to what extent did the scholarship of the most widely published and influential blues writer contribute to the invention of the blues? How did Oliver’s cultural distance from the context of the blues affect his representations of the music? How did Oliver negotiate the politics of race that

³⁵ Quoted in *The Paul Oliver 70th Birthday Tribute*, www.bluesworld.com/PAULOLIVER.HTML retrieved 22/8/2009; although the term was coined in a pejorative sense, this will be discussed in Chapter 2.

pervaded the reception of the music, and how did this shape the representations of the blues? What is interesting about Oliver's scholarship is that it provides a very different example from that of other notable blues writers who have been seen to "invent" the subject of their studies. For instance, Oliver's interpretation of the blues did not always privilege the Mississippi Delta as the unquestionable heartland of the music, unlike the protagonists in Wald and Hamilton's studies. His main point of interest was always centred on the relationship between the music and the social environment in which it emerged.³⁶ Oliver also acknowledged the artistry and contribution of female singers in the development of the blues far more than many of his contemporaries. He is also very different from individuals such as Alan Lomax, who may have regarded himself 'as spokesperson for the Other America, the common people, the forgotten and excluded [and] the ethnic.'³⁷ Consequently, many commentators regard Oliver's scholarship as more carefully considered and objective than typical revivalist visions. Evans, for instance, admires 'the fact that he is led to his conclusions by facts and evidence and not by preconceived notions, sweeping theories, or passing intellectual fads.'³⁸ Perhaps for this reason he has not been a straight-forward candidate for revisionist analysis. However, Oliver not only wrote some of the most well-known books on the subject, but he was also an avid record collector, conducted numerous interviews with blues singers in Britain and on his field trips to the US, became friends with a number of musicians, including Big Bill Broonzy and Brother John Sellers, and provided visual representations of the blues through his own illustrations and use of photographs. Thus, Oliver's vast scholarship in

³⁶ David Horn, 'Introduction,' *Popular Music*, 2006, Vol. 26 Issue 1, pp. 1-4, p. 6

³⁷ John Szwed, *The Man Who Recorded the World: a biography of Alan Lomax* (London: William Heinemann, 2010), p. 3

³⁸ *The Paul Oliver 70th Birthday Tribute*

the post-war era provides an invaluable opportunity to examine the manner in which the music and African American culture were represented during the revival.

Born in Nottingham, England, in 1927, Oliver's interest in African American music was sparked by an encounter with African American GIs when he was a teenager in the summer of 1942 in Stoke-by-Clare, Suffolk. Oliver was working along with his friend Stan in a harvest camp. Writing about this event years later he recalled,

...suddenly the air seemed split by the most eerie sounds. The two men were singing, swooping, undulating, unintelligible words, and the back of my neck tingled. "They're singing a *blues*," Stan hissed at me. It was the strangest, most compelling singing I'd ever heard ... I wanted to know from Stan how he knew what they were singing and what it was?³⁹

However much this recollection has been touched by the hands of nostalgia, it captures the impact of the music on Oliver as a teenager. Interestingly, it also calls to mind W. C. Handy's memory of encountering the blues for the first time in 1903, and coming across 'the weirdest music' he'd ever heard. But while Handy would go on to regard himself as the 'father of the blues' following his 'discovery,' the British writer would neither seek the same recognition nor become labeled as such.⁴⁰ That Oliver's first experience of the music occurred during World War II is an example of the influence of black troops in the widespread diffusion of African American music during the war. The encounter with the troops sparked an interest in record collecting that would fuel his scholarship on the subject.

Oliver also started attending Harrow Art School in 1942, where he eventually began to organize sessions where people with similar interests in African American

³⁹ Paul Oliver, *Blues Off The Record: Thirty Years of Blues Commentary* (Tunbridge Wells: Baton Press, 1984), p. 2-3

⁴⁰ W.C. Handy, *Father of the Blues: an autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1941)

music could come together to share and play records. He recalls how this got him to trouble,

...my developing interest in Afro-American music nearly got me expelled. The head blew his mind when he heard me playing it and told me to "get that filthy muck out of the place or otherwise I was." He was shouting down the staircase at me in this big building. He felt that the music was obscene and demanded that I stop running my sessions of alternative music.

This replicated the experiences of British jazz and blues singer George Melly, whose school headmaster described the music on the radio as 'filthy jazz.'⁴¹ Oliver left Harrow Art School to complete an Art Teacher's Diploma course at Goldsmith's College in London, and then took up the post of Art Teacher at his childhood school Harrow County in 1949, staying there until 1960. While there he undertook a part-time degree in the History of Art at the University of London, which would act as a prelude to a future career in architecture.⁴² Also while teaching at Harrow County School, Oliver set up the Harrow Jazz Purist Society with the help of his friend Bruce Stiles, based in the headquarters of the Fourth Harrow Rover Crew on Blaiwith Road. He also began to further his interests by reviewing for various jazz periodicals such as *Jazz Journal* and *Jazz Monthly*, which was also one of the main ways to supplement his part-time teaching salary. He was also able to apply the artistic ability he had been honing from a very early age to the design of record covers when the new ten-inch LP records arrived. He recalls this as a great source of extra income, paying around £15 per cover. In the early fifties Oliver was also a member a group called The Crawdads, in which he played mandolin. However, he did not have a high opinion of his playing and decided to quit. Another

⁴¹ Neil A. Wynn and Jill Terry, 'Introduction,' in *Cross the Water Blues: African American Music in Europe*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), p. 12

⁴² 'part-time degree' in John Baily, 'Paul Oliver's Contribution to Ethnomusicology,' *Popular Music*, 2006, Vol. 26 Issue 1, pp. 15-22, p. 16

reason was that he increasingly felt that the social and cultural differences separating him from the context of African American music were insurmountable: 'I had a strong feeling that it wasn't for me to try and play guitarist (or mandolin player) – I had no association with the world of blues singers nationally, racially, environmentally, even by class.' For Oliver, the only person who 'had managed to bridge the impossible gulf between the cultures' was the English harmonicist Cyril Davies.⁴³ This statement serves to differentiate Oliver from young disillusioned Brits who that felt a sense of 'affiliation' with the world and culture of the blues. Andrew Kellett borrows this idea from the literary theorist Edward Said to describe the manner in which the blues provided a gritty alternative to the blandness of popular consumer culture and conformism in the fifties and early sixties.⁴⁴ While Oliver obviously experienced the manner in which young Brits in the art school environment associated themselves with a distant culture as a form of middle-class rebellion, he was representative of another audience for African American music, one that based itself on developing knowledge of African American culture and understanding the social significance of the music.

In 1960 and following his field trip to the United States, Oliver was appointed Principal Lecturer in Art History at the Architectural Association School, beginning an academic career in vernacular architecture that eventually saw him become Associate Head of the Architecture School of Oxford Brookes University.⁴⁵ While the sixties marked the beginning of Oliver's professional career as an architect, the decade was also

⁴³ Oliver, *Blues Off the Record*, p. 58

⁴⁴ Andrew Kellett, 'Born in Chicago: the Impact of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band on the British Blues "Network," 1964-1970,' in Neil Wynn and Jill Terry (eds), *Transatlantic Roots Music: Folk, Blues, and National Identities* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 179-204, p. 182

⁴⁵ "A Conversation with Paul Oliver," Prof. Bob Garrat 2/6/2004, From Harrow County School Website http://www.jeffreymaynard.com/Harrow_County/POliver.htm Retrieved 16/06/2012 16:32

his most prolific as a blues writer. Following the field trip that was funded by the US Department of State and the BBC, Oliver conducted a large exhibition presenting his findings at the US Embassy in London entitled 'The Story of the Blues' in 1964. This was then accompanied by photographic oral history *Conversation of the Blues* (1965), which presented images from the field trip and excerpts from interviews. Oliver closed the decade by publishing a further three books on the subject, *Screening the Blues: Aspects of the Blues Tradition* (1968), *The Story of the Blues* (1969), and *Savannah Syncopators* (1970). The latter was the first in a line of *Blues Paperbacks* that Oliver edited, and saw some of the first publications of now established blues commentators such as Paul Garon, David Evans, John Fahey, Derrick Stewart-Baxter, Bengt Olsson, William Ferris Jr, Bob Groom, Bruce Bastin, Tony Russell.⁴⁶ The author recalls taking a break from blues writing during the seventies, and while no books were published in this decade, Oliver continued to write articles for magazines such as *Jazz & Blues* and *Living Blues*. In the last three decades Oliver has continued to publish on the subject of blues and related African American music with new editions of all his major books of the sixties, and new books such as *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records* (1984), *Broadcasting the Blues: Blues in the Segregation Era* (2005) and most recently, *Barrelhouse Blues: Location Recording and the Early Traditions of the Blues* (2008). In addition, he was one of the original members of the Editorial Board for the journal *Popular Music*, contributing as an editor until 1990.⁴⁷ He also acted as co-editor for a

⁴⁶ These *Blues Paperbacks* were published by Studio Vista between 1970 and 1971.

⁴⁷ Horn, 'Introduction,' p. 1

number of publications including *Popular Music Studies: A Select International Bibliography* and *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World*.⁴⁸

It is remarkable that Oliver has had such a prominent career as a blues scholar considering that it has been secondary to his main profession as an architectural academic. However, his background in the art schools of the immediate post-war years allows us to place his interest within the broader context of the British reception of African American music. Simon Frith and Howard Horne point to the manner in which the art schools created a home for disenchanted British youth lost between the rigid choices of the elitist academic world and the more likely daily grind of manual labor. The schools acted as cultural nurseries for these ‘misfits’ that would eventually go on to spearhead the British rhythm and blues boom of the sixties. Jazz in these art schools was

something understood as a folk form, live music for dancing and community entertainment, became a recording cult, music for collectors, for an elite of jazz students, critics, musicologists and discographers. Solemnity not excitement defined true jazz fans, who self-consciously distanced themselves from the general public and were suspicious when anyone like Louis Armstrong became popular.⁴⁹

Oliver belonged to a slightly older generation than the musicians of the eventual British rhythm and blues ‘boom’ of the sixties, and the divergence in these generations would become evident in the reactions of blues scholars to the white imitations of the blues revival. The British writer was closer to the generation of jazz musicians such as Humphrey Lyttleton, who had attended the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts following his discharge from the army after World War II.⁵⁰ Also, in contrast to many of

⁴⁸ ‘a break...’ in Oliver, *Blues Off the Record*, p. 5; For a more detailed bibliography of Oliver’s work see Robert Ford, ‘Paul Oliver: A Selective Bibliography,’ *Popular Music*, 2006, Vol. 26 Issue 1, pp. 157-86

⁴⁹ Simon Frith & Howard Horne, *Art Into Pop* (London & New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 75

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 71

the musicians which are the subject of Frith and Horne's study, Oliver was a teacher as opposed to a student. This educative function was to be reflected in his style of writing that would seek to inform readers on the meaning of blues lyrics and the social and historical background of the music.

The principal point here is that the art school environment of the post-war years fostered the formation of distinctive ideas about art and mass culture, and that the folk music of African Americans came to be represented as 'the soundtrack of disgust at the new "affluent admass" society.'⁵¹ This sentiment would run throughout the writing of blues critics of the fifties and sixties. The representations created within this context made the blues into a 'genre' as defined by Frith: 'popular music genres are constructed – and must be understood – *within* a commercial/cultural process.' While Frith was referring to the manufacture of genres into consumable commodities and *not* academic or musicological constructions, the representations of the blues in Oliver's scholarship were part of a larger cultural process which defined the blues as a distinctive genre. Consequently, Frith's argument that constructed genres 'set up expectations, and disappointment is likely when they are not met *and* when they are met all too predictably,' also applies to the academic and scholarly creations of the blues as a genre.⁵² Importantly, the British art school context also points to the relationship between the contextual circumstances of the interpreters of the blues, and the blues itself. The manner in which the blues was represented in Oliver's scholarship was thus as much a product of the author's social, cultural and historical context in the fifties and sixties as it was an analysis of African American blues from the interwar years.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 78

⁵² Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music* (Oxford University Press, 1996[sic]2002), p. 88/94

Methodology: Blues Scholarship as Historical Practice

Although many early blues scholars were conducting work which can be considered historical, very little was under the discipline heading of history. The work of what Schwartz refers to as 'blues evangelists' during the revival was in many ways historical in nature. Indeed, as Wald suggests, the very notion of history became blurred with nostalgia as they aimed to revive a music which had been, they thought, forgotten by history and consumed by modernity. Similarly, Hamilton is mystified by the ease with which prominent historians such as Leon Litwack fall back on romanticised descriptions when talking about the blues. Perhaps the malleable nature of the past in the eyes and ears of blues writers was most evident in Robert Palmer's famous quote: 'How much history can be transmitted by pressure on a guitar string? The thoughts of generations, the history of every human being who's ever felt the blues come down like showers of rain.'⁵³ In reviving the history of the music, however, these evangelists, enthusiasts and historians were reconstructing the blues' past into a series of narratives which became 'history.' While Oliver's scholarship was more focused on the relationship between the music and African American society, and provided an unrivalled amount of historical, biographical and analytical information, it also presents many examples of this reconstruction process through a re-interpretation of the past.

⁵³ Roberta Freund Schwartz, 'Preaching the Gospel of the Blues: Blues Evangelists in Britain' in Neil A. Wynn (ed), *Cross the Water Blues: African American Music in Europe* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), pp. 145-166; Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, p. 249; Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, p. 8; Palmer, *Deep Blues*, p. xvii

Given the constant negotiation between the past (the blues) and the contemporary present (Oliver's work), the approach in this project applies elements of deconstructionist thought in the practice of history. But rather than applying Derridean or Foucauldian notions of deconstructionism to their apocalyptic levels (based on the irreconcilable separation between signifier and signified), this project follows the challenge to the traditional reliance on empiricism and aims at 'the de-layering of... constructed meanings and interpretations.'⁵⁴ This questions the classical assumptions that there is a historical and objective truth which can be discovered and *known*. Correcting factual errors has been the focus of recent studies which have attempted to reveal that historically the blues was very different to how it was imagined by revivalists of the mid-twentieth century. This is not to say that it is futile or impossible to uncover historical truths, as in the recent studies by David Evans and Peter Muir, but that to understand the nature of the invention of the blues, it is necessary to focus on the use made of the blues as historical material at the level of interpretation and representation.⁵⁵ Blues scholars such as Oliver were working with and negotiating their understandings of the past: they were collecting records from the interwar years; they rediscovered singers and interviewed them, focusing on their memories of the past; and they repeatedly visited the American South on what Hamilton referred to as a 'cliché-ridden trail.'⁵⁶ Importantly, this accumulated knowledge of the past was shaped by the transatlantic cultural context of the fifties and sixties.

⁵⁴ Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 102

⁵⁵ David Evans (ed), *Ramblin' On My Mind: New Perspectives on the Blues* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Peter Muir, *Long Lost Blues: Popular Music in America, 1850-1920* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009)

⁵⁶ Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, p. 1

The focus of this study will therefore be to examine the manner in which the scholar interprets and organises his historical information to produce a series of historical narratives. This follows Hayden White's argument that all historical evidence is 'value neutral,' requiring the scholar to organise and impose significance upon these elements, thus 'emplotting' them into a narrative.⁵⁷ As the historian Alan Munslow argues, written history presents a plausible history rather than a definitive historical truth. This is not to say that historical events did not occur or that historical truths do not exist, but that *knowing* them fully and accurately is not possible in the ontological sense. Instead, knowledge of the past is more 'provisional, relative and constructed.' History is known through the negotiation of the historical narrative, produced by the author's 'emplotment' of documents which exist in a 'pre-jigsawed state.' In Oliver's case, the use of historical documents can be examined in the reliance on rare recordings from the interwar era. The data these records carried in terms of both sound and lyrics represented historical fragments, a few parts of the jigsaw which helped to produce representations of the music and of African American culture. Applied to blues scholarship, then, the practice of writing about the blues can be interpreted in the same way that Munslow regards the practice of history: 'an aesthetic appreciation of a past world rather than the recovery of its lost reality from the sources composed of individual statements about past reality.'⁵⁸

Adopting White's view of the historian-author also entails an appreciation of the writer's contemporary contextual circumstances, the social, political and cultural forces that characterise his 'here and now,' his existence in the present which shapes the narrative of the past. As Richard Middleton states, the post-war era was characterised by

⁵⁷ Hayden White, 'Historical Text as Literary Artifact' in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1978)

⁵⁸ Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, p. 102 / 149 / 148

the rise of 'pop culture' within a context of an increasingly globalised mass market culture.⁵⁹ It saw the increasing diffusion and reach of mass media, the rise of youth culture, the boom of genres such as skiffle, rock 'n' roll, and rhythm and blues. Importantly however, it was also the period of great social and political upheaval, with the growing momentum of the Civil Rights movement, the culture of the Beat generation and the folk revivals. It was in these arenas that the blues was defined and, as Kelley and Filene have demonstrated, that ideals over folk authenticity and modernist consumerism were contested. The increasingly globalised nature of popular culture in the post-war era also created numerous possibilities for links between past and present, and for people to 'acquire memories of a past to which they have no geographical or biological connection.'⁶⁰ This possibility for the cross-fertilization and diffusion of cultural forms means that it is possible to espouse an idea of cultural hybridity, explained by Paul Gilroy's concept of the 'doubleness' of black cultural forms within and outside definitions of modernity in the 'black Atlantic.' Gilroy explains the duality of late nineteenth century black musical forms as they re-appear through interpretations in the twentieth: 'The anti-modernity of these forms, like their anteriority, appears in the (dis)guise of a premodernity that is both actively reimagined in the present and transmitted intermittently in eloquent pulses from the past.'⁶¹ Borrowing this concept for the analysis of blues scholarship, the dialogue and interaction between past and present within a transatlantic context meant that the blues was at once divorced from its social and geographical roots by interpreters from afar, while being rooted back within an imagined African American world by the same writers.

⁵⁹ Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990), p. 14

⁶⁰ Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, p. 5

⁶¹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 73-4

In the post-war era of increased intermixture of cultural forms, the blues became a source of cultural capital for both white and African American observers. It is obvious that for many white European audiences, identifying with the music of a segregated minority was a means of anti-conformism, of defying convention, of supporting the lower classes and thus rebelling against the establishment. This can be seen from Oliver's experience of being condemned for playing jazz music at college, to the 'rebellious' behaviour of the Rolling Stones during the sixties. Frith and Horne conceptualized this more eloquently by arguing that in Britain the combined effect of the end of colonialism, rapid industrialization and the unstoppable rise of capitalist culture meant that native folk forms were always in decline, paving the way with identification with external sources.⁶² However, even for some African American audiences of the post-war era and the second half of the twentieth-century, the blues has been a source of racial pride, heritage, and artistic inspiration. While the 'New Negro' movement of the Harlem Renaissance may have regarded the music as lowbrow, for many African American authors the blues has been a huge resource. Adam Gussow has demonstrated that some writers of the sixties Black Arts Movement were vociferous in their disapproval of the blues as the primary form of black culture, and espousing a conception of the music as a symbol of the old accommodationist Jim Crow South (i.e. Frantz Fanon's description of the blues as a 'black slave lament' and Ron Karenga's assertion, 'the blues are invalid'). However, for many other African American writers, the blues were 'cherished ancestral root-stock, an inalienably black cultural inheritance that could be put to political as well as aesthetic

⁶² Frith & Horne, *Art Into Pop*, p. 74

good use.’⁶³ For black theorists of the post-Black Arts era such as Houston Baker Jr, the blues became conceptualized as ‘matrix,’ the ‘enabling *script* in which African American cultural discourse is inscribed.’ The ‘godfather of rap’ Gil Scott-Heron, also defined himself as a ‘bluesologist,’ referring to the importance of understanding the origins of the genre, of human expression in dire social and economic, and psychological circumstances.⁶⁴ Considering the blues as this source of cultural capital in an era that permitted the intermixture of imagined cultural categories, this study will move away from politically or racially motivated debates on the provenance of the blues scholar. It therefore becomes less important to focus on whether cultural outsiders can comment on the blues, as it does to focus on the fact cultural outsiders *do* and *have done*.

Thesis Outline

This thesis will examine Oliver’s work on the blues from the early fifties to the end of the sixties - his writing on the subject since then has been used only with reference to his work during the revival. The two main reasons for concentrating are: firstly, Oliver published the main bulk of his books by the end of the sixties, before the author decided to take a break from extensive blues research in the seventies; secondly, this period corresponds with Wald’s assertion that revivalist conceptions of the blues had become fully established by 1970, roughly coinciding with Oliver’s last major book of the period,

⁶³ Gussow, “‘If Bessie Smith Had Killed Some White People,’” p. 231-2: Gussow was referring to Frantz Fanon’s *Toward the African Revolution* (1967) and Ron Karenga’s article ‘Black Art: A Rhythmic Reality of Revolution,’ in the *Negro Digest*, January 1968, 17/3.

⁶⁴ Houston A. Baker Jr, *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: a Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 3; *Black Wax: Gil Scott-Heron*, Robert Mugge (1982), Sky Arts 1, 10pm, 9/7/2012

The Story of the Blues (1969).⁶⁵ However, it is important to remember that conceptualizations of the blues and race would continue to be shaped after 1970, with future publications such as the American magazine *Living Blues* (which began to be published the same year), as well as scores of other books on the subject.⁶⁶

In addition to the body of his written work during the fifties and sixties, several personal interviews have been conducted with Oliver in order to supplement the historical background of this period and to consider specific issues. These were particularly useful in obtaining additional information regarding more obscure aspects of his scholarship, such as his work during the fifties when writing for the specialist jazz press, and in the details of his 1960 field trip to the United States. These interviews have been used in the full knowledge that Oliver's recollections of these events are subject to the biases and omissions of memory, and often refer to the British writer's present thoughts on his past. As the oral historian Alessandro Portelli argues, '[o]ral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.'⁶⁷ The interviews therefore exhibited some of the typical problems of using oral history, particularly given that Oliver had the difficult task of recalling specific details of events from more than fifty years ago. In addition, as I am sure many who know and have worked with him will agree, Oliver's great generosity is outweighed only by his modesty. He regards himself as a minor figure in the history of the blues, meaning that it was often difficult to discuss some of the specifics about his personal life and scholarship.

⁶⁵ Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, p. 249; Oliver continued to publish on the subject throughout his career.

⁶⁶ Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties*, p. 114

⁶⁷ Alessandro Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different,' in R. Perks & A. Thompson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 67

The first two chapters of the thesis will focus on Oliver's blues writing prior to visiting the USA for the first time in 1960. Chapter 1 examines Oliver's writing in British jazz periodicals such as *Music Mirror*, *Jazz Journal* and *Jazz Monthly* during the fifties. This period was characterised by a reliance on records, which Oliver had been collecting since the Second World War. Blues music in Britain was the domain of a small group of British jazz enthusiasts who embraced blues as the foundations of jazz. However, it is also the period that saw the early formation of revivalist conceptions of the blues as a folk music that was separate from jazz, with roots in the lower class African American experience of the early twentieth century. Interestingly, while Oliver began to explore the background of African American life that produced the blues through the lyrics of songs, he made use of contemporary black literature, such as that of Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, to inform descriptions of black culture. This functioned to increasingly blur the boundaries between fact and fiction. In addition, Oliver decorated articles with his own illustrations based on the content of blues songs, adding a visual insight into his interpretations. Importantly, this decade saw the first visits to Britain by black American blues singers. Responses to their performances and interviews provided a means of confronting the real with the imagined. However, the impressions built around the visits of these singers were to be largely dependent upon the skill of musicians, such as Big Bill Broonzy, to negotiate the expectations of transatlantic audiences, and supply the demand for the imagined *real* bluesman.

Oliver's prolific work and record collecting in the fifties led to the publication of two books at the end of the decade, a short biography of *Bessie Smith* (1959), and the passionate exploration of themes in blues lyrics, *Blues Fell This Morning*, which is the

subject of Chapter 2. This book, like many of Oliver's publications, has not been considered in revisionist scholarship despite appearing shortly after Samuel Charters' *The Country Blues* (1959), considered one of the canons of revivalist scholarship. In contrast to Charters who focused on the lives of individual singers, Oliver's monograph examined the lyrics of over 350 songs and sought to relate them in thematic categories to the lower class African American experience of the early twentieth century. While it received a mixed reception, many hailed it as the first scholarly assessment of the music, and acknowledged the fact that the book presented the reality of the African American experience and the sociological context of the blues in candid terms. It also received support in the form of a foreword from Richard Wright, who praised Oliver for his objective insights into African American culture. The analysis of lyrics and the association of their meaning with notions of truth and reality reveal the processes by which ideas about the music were constructed by an audience reliant on recordings. The blues Oliver described was very different to that which young skiffers and rock 'n' rollers interpreted as blues, revealing that the music was also a contested space among British audiences. Importantly however, it was also divorced from the contemporary social and political struggles of African Americans in the late fifties, revealing the manner in which Oliver identified with a more distant and remote folk culture.

After the book was published, Oliver conducted a field trip to the USA that was partly funded by the American Department of State and the BBC. Along with his wife Valerie and founder of Arhoolie records Chris Strachwitz, he interviewed, recorded and photographed over seventy singers across the country. The trip was an opportunity for Oliver to confront the world he had been describing with the reality, and he concluded

that ‘the relation of blues to context that I had described [in *Blues Fell This Morning*] proved to be correct.’⁶⁸ The book which was published as a result, *Conversation with the Blues* (1965) and the subject of Chapter 3, is a fascinating attempt to give the singers back their voice in the telling of the music’s history. Importantly, while the interviews took place in 1960, the memories of the selected and cropped oral responses in the book serve to create a nostalgic attachment to the past, demonstrating both the way oral history could contribute to promoting a distinctive and constructed idea of the blues, but also demonstrate how blues musicians could be complicit in the construction. This is complemented by Oliver’s use of black and white photographs that in many instances evoke images of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographers of the nineteen-thirties New Deal era. The backward looking focus of the book helps to demarcate the blues from the new found popularity of the blues during the revival which Oliver regarded as posing a serious threat to the survival of the genre. This is even more interesting considering that the book was published in 1965, following the entry of the blues into the mainstream through the full explosion of the revival.

Oliver’s final two books of the sixties became more directly focused on historical analysis. The late sixties was a period in which blues scholarship was becoming much more specialized following the increased attention generated by the revival and the expanding areas of ethnomusicology. Oliver returned to the analysis of blues lyrics in *Screening the Blues: Aspects of the Blues Tradition* (1968). Here, the writer expanded on a number of previously written articles to trace the development of a tradition and an evolutionary link with the past. Chapter 4 examines the manner in which the attempt to trace the blues tradition reified the blues as a definable category with an idea of the past

⁶⁸ Paul Oliver, *Conversation with the Blues* (Cambridge University Press, 1965 [sic]1997), p. xiv

that regulated the present. The emphasis on the blues' roots within the past acted as a prelude to *The Story of the Blues* (1969). Chapter 5 discusses the problematic formation of this historical narrative, which tells the unique story of the music and the culture in which it emerged. It was a story that formed strong categorical boundaries by giving the music a history of its own, but also importantly, indirectly proclaimed the music's demise following changes in African American society and the white 'discovery' of the music. Adopting White's conception of the historian-author, it is possible to appreciate this book as a narrative organised from historical elements, and one that constructs a *story*, but at the same time erases from history many elements that revisionist writers have recently attempted to revive. Therefore, the chapter examines how the book contributed to the iconography of the blues which had been established by the end of the decade.

In the final chapter, the thesis will conclude by arguing that Oliver's scholarship demonstrates that the 'invention' of the blues was much more complex than simply a process of white middle-class enthusiasts describing a black music and culture that was very different to their own. While revisionist writing has pointed to the nostalgia and romanticism with which American blues collectors, enthusiasts and scholars enshrined the blues and the lives of blues singers, Oliver's focus on the relationship between the music and African American life through lyrics analysis, oral history, photography and history writing demonstrates that even the most rigorous research was susceptible to romanticism caused by the judgement of aesthetic criteria, something embedded in the study of popular music. Moreover, Oliver's writing also evidences the historical circumstances within which blues appreciation and scholarship developed, from the changing nature of popular music to social and political developments in the post-war

era, and allows a more detailed understanding of how perceptions of race influenced the representation of the blues. Finally, this study will argue that while there were undeniable differences in the approaches and representations between American and British scholars, popular conceptions of the blues were shaped within a transatlantic context, and that national and sometimes racial boundaries have more often been imposed on the categorization of blues research by the ideologies of individual writers.

A short version of Chapter 1 has been published under the title ‘Dreaming Up the Blues: Transatlantic Blues Scholarship, 1950s’ in Neil A. Wynn and Jill Terry (eds), *Transatlantic Roots Music: Folk, Blues and National Identities* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 37-56.

Chapter 1

Distance Learning

Paul Oliver's Blues Writing in the 1950s

Oliver's writing on blues for British music magazines throughout the fifties is indicative of the early formation of views about the music in the immediate post-war period. His writing and that of other commentators during this period also demonstrates that an active audience for blues existed in Britain prior to the much more widely-covered blues revival of the sixties, and that this early period was pivotal in the construction of concepts that would become prominent the following decade. This chapter will examine the emergence of the early blues commentary within the context of two different but nonetheless related revivals. On the one hand, the reception of the blues was facilitated by the established appreciation for jazz, particularly with the revivalist factions which saw the 'moldy figs' privileging the African American music of New Orleans as opposed to the music of modernist beboppers. On the other hand, the post-war era saw the emergence of a folk revival, with the interest in the culture of 'ordinary people' that was coupled with a fear of 'Americanization' following the growing role of American intervention in Europe in both political and cultural terms. Amid these revivals, it was possible for Oliver to promote the appreciation of blues as a distinctive musical form in its own right based on the fact that on the one hand it was represented as the foundation of jazz, and the other as a representation of African American folk music.

Importantly, Oliver's scholarship at this time highlights some of the main ways in which ideas about the blues were generated within a transatlantic context. Despite the fact that the British audience for blues was relatively small and middle-class during the fifties, writing on the subject was characterized by transatlantic connections which saw articles from a number of American writers appear in the pages of British magazines. Nonetheless, up until 1960 when Oliver visited the US for the first time, knowledge of the blues was characterized by reliance on commercial recordings from the twenties, thirties and forties, otherwise known as the Race Records era. While these discs provided basic factual information such as dates, location, and performers/composers, the interpretation of sound and lyrics would contribute to building an idealized representation of blues and African American culture that had its origins with the romanticism prevalent in the writing of the 'moldy figs' and the folk revivalists. To overcome the reliance on blues recordings, Oliver turned to the realism of writers of African American literature such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, which were used in order to gain an understanding of the sociological and cultural context within which the blues originated and functioned. His subsequent representations of African American life were also given a visual element in Oliver's own illustrations that accompanied many of his articles. These provide another window into the process of constructing an idea of the blues and its relation to black life. The images presented in Oliver's articles were also confronted, confirmed and sometimes challenged by the arrivals of the first blues musicians to visit the UK in the fifties. Oliver's responses to these early performances by musicians such as Big Bill Broonzy, Josh White, Lonnie Johnson, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee were fundamental in strengthening particular viewpoints that

privileged a type of black culture in which the blues represented an idiom which was pure and uncorrupted by the modern world.

Between the Jazz and Folk Revivals

Popular portrayals of blues history, perhaps unsurprisingly, tend to concentrate on the late fifties and early sixties as the period in which the music of black Americans became fashionable with young white middle-class English youth. In the 2011 BBC documentary *Blues Britannia* for instance, a dust covered, grey and austere nineteen-fifties Britain is depicted as ‘crying out’ for something as an alternative to the ‘gutless’ popular music of the time. Consequently, as rock and roll was on the wane in the late fifties (symbolized in the documentary by Elvis’s enrolment into the US military), these young British audiences ‘discovered the depth, power and authenticity they craved in a music they hadn’t heard before, the very basis of rock and roll, black folk music from the American South, the blues.’ The programme also hints at the emergence of interest in the blues among a ‘secret society’ of enthusiasts and record collectors, otherwise often referred to as ‘the purists.’⁶⁹ Representative of this group were prominent jazz critics such as Max Jones, Ernest Borneman, Albert McCarthy, and Rex Harris, and from this collective would emerge a group of writers that would begin to examine blues exclusively, among them Paul Oliver.

However, the origin of dedicated attention on the blues has its origins in the more established appreciation for jazz. Catherine Parsonage’s survey of the diffusion of jazz in

⁶⁹ *Blues Britannia: Can Blue Men Sing the Whites?* BBC4, 11pm, 9/12/2011, Chris Rodley (2009), “crying out” and “gutless” are the words of Chris Barber.

Britain describes the manner in which primitivism and exoticism meant that since the 1920s the reception of the music alternated between responses characterised by ‘fascination’ and ‘fear.’ This was especially manifest in the depiction of jazz as a black idiom in need of white refinement. It was not until the visits of Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington in the nineteen-thirties that a re-evaluation of these attitudes prompted ‘a deeper understanding of the artistic and cultural validity of jazz’ which forged the notion that only black Americans would be able to deliver the genuine article.⁷⁰ This critical reassessment became manifest in American books such as Frederic Ramsey and Charles Edwards’ *Jazzmen* (1939), Mezz Mezzrow’s autobiography *Really the Blues* (1946), and Rudi Blesh’s *Shining Trumpets* (1949). These books also began to place emphasis on the importance of the blues to jazz, which became synonymous with the African American experience that made jazz unique - as the musician Clarence Williams declared in *Jazzmen*: ‘Why I’d never have written blues if I had been white. You don’t study to write blues, you ‘feel’ them. It’s the mood you’re in.’⁷¹ The blues represented the almost indescribable emotive quality that was intricately connected to the African American way of life. For this reason Blesh likened the rhythm of blues to ‘the human pulse.’ Much of this early writing on jazz was characterised by the writers’ clear sense of affiliation with the musicians,

The chants and rhythmic calls always struck a gong in me. The tonal inflections and the story they told, always blending together like the colors in an artist’s picture, the way the syllables were always placed right, the changes in the words to fit the music – this all hit me like a millennium would hit a philosopher. Those few simple riffs opened my eyes to the Negro’s philosophy more than any fat

⁷⁰ Catherine Parsonage, ‘Fascination and Fear: Responses to Early Jazz in Britain,’ in Neil A. Wynn (ed), *Cross the Water Blues: African American Music in Europe* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), p. 97-98

⁷¹ E. Simms Campbell, ‘Blues,’ in Frederic Ramsey & Charles Edwards Smith (eds), *Jazzmen* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1939), p. 110

sociology textbook ever could. They cheered me up right away and made me feel wonderful towards those guys. Many a time I was laid out there with the blues heavy on my chest, when somebody would begin to sing 'em and the weight would be lifted. Those were a people who really knew what to do about the blues.⁷²

The blues was therefore the music of a race, bound to the lives of America's black population. As the battles between modernist be-boppers and New Orleans revivalists - that privileged the 'hot-jazz' of New Orleans - intensified in the immediate post-war period, the latter sought the idiom's roots in African American antecedents. In this context, the blues became not only a simple musical form based on the three line stanza and twelve bar progression, but also an emotive foundation that prioritised sincerity of expression over classical musical knowledge or technical dexterity.

In Britain, the revivalist faction was spearheaded by jazz bands such as George Webb's Dixielanders and musicians like Humphrey Lyttleton in the late forties.⁷³ However, the growing jazz press also provided a small but committed critical counterpart. The early British writing in *Melody Maker* and *Jazz Journal* duplicated the tradition of American revivalist critics. McCarthy, for instance, echoed the attitudes of *Jazzmen* by placing the authenticity of jazz in opposition to the large commercial swing bands of the time, and demanded the assistance of 'serious music critics' to 'save jazz from becoming a museum piece.'⁷⁴ British jazz critics also upheld the notion of African American music embodying the antithesis of the Western classical tradition of highbrow culture, by revelling in 'frankness' of black musical expression, of a music 'shaped by

⁷² Rudi Blesh, *Shining Trumpets: A History of Jazz* (London: Cassell, 1949), p. 101; Mezz Mezzrow with Bernard Wolfe, *Really the Blues* (London: Corgi, 1946 [sic]1961), p. 23

⁷³ Mike Dewe, *The Skiffle Craze* (Aberystwyth: Planet, 1998), p. 3

⁷⁴ Albert McCarthy (ed), *The PL Yearbook of Jazz* (London: Hutchison & Co., 1946), p. vii

emotion' rather than learned through dedicated study.⁷⁵ Importantly, British writers also began to emphasise that the blues was the 'essence' of jazz, providing the music with the emotive qualities born in the experiences of ordinary African Americans. Within this context, there was a growing appreciation that a firm understanding of blues, 'the parent idiom of jazz,' was fundamental to true jazz appreciation.⁷⁶ This was summarized by Iain Lang's *Jazz in Perspective: the background of the Blues* in 1947: 'the blues is not the whole of jazz, but the whole of blues is jazz.'⁷⁷ Clear distinctions began to be drawn between authentic blues and commercial offshoots of the music. Jones argued that 'the peak period of the blues (like jazz) on record was reached when the style had little attraction for any but coloured Americans.'⁷⁸ Herein began to take shape images of a black world, rooted in a folk culture and portrayed as a defiant opposition to white commercialism and popular taste. Offering an analysis for the European fascination folk cultures such as blues, Francis Newton (aka historian Eric Hobsbawm) argued that it could be explained by nostalgia for a self-made, participatory culture, a need arising from 'thin-blooded middle-class art...drained by systematic commercial debasement and over-exploitation.'⁷⁹

Newton's analysis draws in the romantic aesthetic of the post-war era folk revival, when A. L. Lloyd's *The Singing Englishman* (1944) became the symbol of a period which Georgina Boyes terms the 'second folk revival.' Following the Second

⁷⁵ Iain Lang, *Jazz in Perspective: the Background of the Blues* (London: Hutchison & Co., 1947), p. 104/122

⁷⁶ Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, p. 20-1

⁷⁷ Lang, *Jazz in Perspective*, p. 102

⁷⁸ Max Jones, 'On Blues,' in McCarthy, *The PL Yearbook of Jazz*, p. 73: Jones explicitly stated that the blues 'relate much of the Negro's social experiences in the Southern states,' p. 86; 'peak period' p. 104

⁷⁹ Francis Newton, *The Jazz Scene* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958 [sic]1961), p. 3/8; Newton could be seen as voicing similar concerns on mass popular culture as the cultural theorist Richard Hoggart in *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957)

World War and the USA's growing role on the global stage and particularly in the rebuilding of Europe, Boyes argues that a prevalent fear existed that England could become the forty-ninth state.⁸⁰ Michael Brocken develops this idea by stating that the sentiments of folk revivalists emanated from a convergence of a number of factors, among which were not only the spread of American institutions and culture, but also a nostalgia for the loss of Britain's former role as a global power. This arena fostered the development of a more politically leftist mood which favoured a 'rediscovery of working-class art.'⁸¹ This open attitude towards art from the lower echelons of society benefitted the American folklorist Alan Lomax, who spent much of the fifties in Britain due to his exodus from McCarthyism. During his British stay he produced radio programmes for the BBC such as 'Adventures in Folk Song' and 'The Art of the Negro' from the body of his Library of Congress recordings. He also collaborated with prominent British 'folkies' such as Ewan MacColl and A. L. Lloyd in promoting working-class music.⁸² The American folklorist's programmes on lower-class African American life and culture proved popular with audiences, demonstrating the manner in which black American culture was not viewed in the same light as its more mainstream and commercial white counterpart. In this context, given the emphasis on the music's African American roots, jazz was embraced as an uncommercial idiom not tied to the growing global political power that was the USA. Thus, jazz also presented a cultural symbol for the subordinated, which made it compatible with the aesthetics of the post-

⁸⁰ Georgina Boyes, *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology, and the English Folk Revival* (Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 198

⁸¹ Michael Brocken, *The British Folk Revival, 1944-2002* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 20

⁸² Szwed, *The Man Who Recorded the World*, p. 254-9

war folk revival. The blues appeared as the idiom's 'archaic' antecedent, providing a distant and obscure past from which jazz sprang into the modern era.⁸³

Blues in the British Jazz Press

Amid this context of the jazz and folk revivals, a handful of blues commentators emerged in Britain in the post-war era. Oliver had been collecting records from his first encounters with African American music since the early forties, and the impression he had been building about the blues at this time challenged the prevalent notion that saw blues simply as a foundational music for jazz.⁸⁴ The music was still relatively obscure at this point, and familiar to the few record collectors who had stumbled upon the rare records made available in Britain since the thirties.⁸⁵ Derrick Stewart-Baxter's 'Preaching the Blues' column in *Jazz Journal* became 'a haven for British blues fans' from 1949 onwards. This was accompanied by *Melody Maker's* 'Collector's Corner' which, following Sinclair Traill's take-over in 1949 began to devote more time to African American folk music.⁸⁶ A significant aspect of the jazz press during the post-war period is that correspondence from readers was vital to the direction which articles took. For instance, as early as 1946 Max Jones and Rex Harris were inviting readers to write in with any information on singer Peetie Wheatstraw, which contributed to a discussion and exchange of information regarding the singer over a number of issues of *Melody Maker*.⁸⁷

⁸³ 'archaic' is taken from Rex Harris' description of blues in his booklet *Jazz* (London: Penguin, 1952)

⁸⁴ Interview with the author, Appendix 1.1, p. 293

⁸⁵ Schwartz, 'Preaching the Gospel of the Blues,' p. 145

⁸⁶ Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, p. 25-6

⁸⁷ Max Jones and Rex Harris, 'Collector's Corner' in *Melody Maker*, 1/12/1946 p.4; 26/1/1946 p.4; 27/4/1946 p. 4

In a similar manner, Stewart-Baxter demonstrates the collaborative nature of the early days of blues appreciation,

So many readers have asked for a bigger coverage of blues records in the column to supplement that already contained in the review section of this magazine that I have approached the various companies. Most of them have agreed to co-operate.... In future all important blues issues will be reviewed in 'Preachin' the Blues.'⁸⁸

This active correspondence seems to have characterised much of the post-war period, as exemplified by Oliver who still sought assistance from readers in answering some fundamental research questions in 1960: 'Who then: recorded the first vocal with traditional twelve-bar blues verses employing the characteristic repeated lines a) with vocal introduction, and b) with no introduction?'⁸⁹ What seems evident from these examples is that much of the readership, at least that which tended to correspond with the writers, seemed to involve collectors of records rather than just the average listener. If they took the time and effort to write to the magazines, it can be inferred that they were fairly keen to obtain records and information on them. This means that the music magazines of this period were also forums for the exchange of information and knowledge on the subject of jazz, blues and related music. It also suggests that locating records still relied on chance as much as it did on re-issues from record companies. Therefore, rather than simply being antecedents of the present day music press, these magazines seem to have been platforms for the avid listener and record collector, able to devote time and most probably money to music appreciation.

⁸⁸ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, 'Preachin' the Blues,' *Jazz Journal*, January 1952, 5/1 p.6-7

⁸⁹ Paul Oliver, 'Screening the Blues,' *Jazz Monthly*, February 1960, 5/12, p.26-7

In the late forties and early fifties, Oliver began giving talks on the blues while teaching at Harrow County School, and he set up the Harrow Jazz Purist Society. In this period he began writing on the subject regularly for *Music Mirror*, *Jazz Journal* and *Jazz Monthly*. The circulation figures available indicate that these magazines had a very small but stable readership. The average monthly sales for *Jazz Monthly*, for instance, rose from 4601 in the second half of 1956 to 6631 in the first half of 1958. This number gradually decreased to 4997 in the second half of 1960. It is safe to assume that the figures for *Music Mirror* and *Jazz Journal* would have been similar, if not lower. These numbers seem to mirror the membership of the folk club known as the *Ballads and Blues Association* which had grown to around 4000 in 1959. This club aimed to present performances by American and British folk artists across the UK.⁹⁰ These were highly exclusive in comparison with publications such as the more popular weekly *Melody Maker*, which at its peak in early 1957 averaged 116,776, and the *New Musical Express* (*NME*) that in early 1958 had an average of 143,259.⁹¹ Given the dominance of jazz in the smaller periodicals, blues was very much a limited taste in the late forties and fifties. It is perhaps likely that the relative obscurity of the music at this point, coupled with the dominance of the jazz and folk revivals during the post-war years allowed Oliver a certain amount of freedom. The author recalls a friendly atmosphere between British collectors and commentators in this early period which made publishing articles on the blues relatively simple.⁹² Blues records had been available to collectors able to either devote the time to scouring junk shops, or have the financial means of ordering

⁹⁰ Jeff Smith, 'Folk Music Branches Out,' *Melody Maker*, November 21, 1959, p. 13; Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, p. 86

⁹¹ Audit Bureau of Circulations Ltd, 1949-1961 (London: England, 1961)

⁹² Oliver, *Blues Off the Record*, p. 4

expensive records from the US at a time of national austerity. Despite the sluggish post-war recovery, where for instance food rationing continued until 1954, the circumstances were not enough of a deterrent for Oliver, who recalls the logistical difficulties of collecting records during wartime,

I was desperate to get hold of them and in the war it was very difficult. I wanted very much to have a King Oliver record and I had to cross the whole of London to get to Southeast London to a shop which I knew had got one. And yet, travelling at that time was extremely difficult, to go across London – it was very hard indeed.⁹³

Therefore, having the resources to devote time to collecting and researching music was very much a niche and middle-class enterprise that fostered the creation of what has been sensationalized as a ‘secret society’ in popular narratives such as *Blues Britannia*. Schwartz has highlighted the manner in which groups of enthusiasts would meet, discuss and exchange knowledge on the music in specialist stores such Dobell’s Record Shop in Charing Cross Road, London.⁹⁴ She also points to the evangelical quality of blues proselytizing in the late forties and early fifties, as suggested by the title of Stewart-Baxter’s column in *Jazz Journal* and by Oliver’s own admission,

there was an evangelical element in my talking about the blues, I realize now, an urgent need to get the message across to as many people as I could in as many ways as I could. Like any enthusiast for a subject who feels passionately about it and about its neglect, I wanted the blues to be recognized and enjoyed.⁹⁵

While Oliver’s recollection exemplifies the evangelical quality of blues scholarship in this period, the writer’s emergence within the context of the art schools of the post-war

⁹³ Dewe, *The Skiffle Craze*, p. 53; Interview with the author 17/11/2009, Appendix 1.1, p. 293

⁹⁴ Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, p. 33

⁹⁵ Oliver, ‘Talking Blues’ in *Blues Off the Record*, p. 208 quoted in Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, p. 27

years, and the jazz and folk revivals, meant that blues proselytizing was also 'evangelical' in the preaching of stringent ideas about African American folk authenticity, and commercial music.

As will be discussed in the next chapter, the African American writer Richard Wright would praise Oliver's efforts in explaining the meaning of the blues within the context of the black experience in the United States. For Wright, the social and cultural distance that separated the author from America allowed Oliver the freedom to work without the pressures of the American social and political climate, thus favouring a more objective and unbiased analysis.⁹⁶ This would seem to complement Oliver's approach to his writing: 'I tend to keep myself out of the text, so that there's a focus on the subject of blues or blues singers, without any intrusion.'⁹⁷ However, while Oliver may have been removed from the turbulent racial and political struggles of America in the fifties, this does not mean that his British context was unobtrusive or simply favoured an objective analysis. If, as Hamilton states, 'every landscape is a work of the mind,' then Oliver connected with the world of the blues by imagining its landscapes and its people through the sounds and lyrics of blues songs, in combination with the depictions of African American literary works of the mid-twentieth century.⁹⁸ The consequence of the physical, historical and cultural distance separating Oliver from the music was that a large part of the experience was left to the imagination, and by imagining the blues there was also the possibility for exaggeration, marginalisation and to a large extent, invention.

⁹⁶ Interestingly, objectivity is a characteristic which Oliver has often been praised for (see Evans, *The Paul Oliver 70th Birthday Tribute*).

⁹⁷ Oliver, *Blues Off the Record*, p. 2

⁹⁸ Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, p. 3

Interestingly however, the pages of British jazz magazines in the fifties often included articles by American and European writers interested in jazz and blues records, which ultimately suggests that blues scholarship of the immediate post-war era was distinctly transatlantic in nature. *Jazz Journal* often included articles by the French jazz critic Hugues Panassie, but it was not uncommon, particularly in the late fifties to see articles by American writers such as Samuel Charters, Mack McCormick and co-author of *Jazzmen* Frederic Ramsey Jr. Often these articles would provide first-hand accounts of interviews with blues musicians, or report on their experiences in jazz clubs and field trips. Interestingly, there are also articles written by the likes of African American writer Ralph Ellison, who contributed biographical articles in tribute to singers such as Charlie Christian and Jimmy Rushing.⁹⁹ Apart from Ellison's eloquent treatment of these singers and the blues in general, the inclusion of such an article demonstrates the links between American and European writing on African American music, and the range of perspectives which were included in the music press. Despite the transatlantic distances, Americans and European collectors corresponded frequently. Oliver recalls corresponding with Charters in the late fifties, prior to American author's publication of *The Country Blues* in 1959. The fruits of this communication can be traced in the American journey of the French blues enthusiasts Jacques Demetre and Marcel Chauvard, whose tracing of blues singers in Chicago and Detroit in 1959 was facilitated by information provided by Oliver, before the British writer had ever visited the United States. Their experiences would be presented in a series of articles that appeared in *Jazz*

⁹⁹ Ralph Ellison, 'Remembering Jimmy,' *Jazz Journal*, November 1958, 11/11, p.10-11 and 'The Charlie Christian Story,' *Jazz Journal*, May 1959, 12/5, p. 7-8

Journal in 1960.¹⁰⁰ These transatlantic links begin to paint an image of blues scholarship less rigidly defined by national provenance. In Oliver's articles throughout the decade, it is therefore possible to examine the manner in which aspects of the blues and African American culture were interpreted within a more open transnational dialogue, and in turn how these interpretations began to define the music as a genre in itself.

Constructing the 'Negro World',¹⁰¹

In his very first article in 1952, dealing with the topic of religious music in African American churches, Oliver began to depict what he would often refer to as the 'Negro world.' This is a world which is difficult for the outsider to access. For Oliver, the further removed the African American was from the influences of the white world, where the places were of a 'darker hue,' the more it was possible for him to be 'unashamedly himself.' The distance between black and white, and the separation of the races were fundamental to an understanding of African American music. Ironically, Oliver was preaching a philosophy that would become the battle cry of Afro-centric African American cultural commentators in later years. He claimed the cultural and historical distance of the 'Negro world' from the surrounding world was difficult to cross for the 'outsider.' An example is given in an article on Blind Lemon Jefferson, where there is a specific reference to the singer's anonymity in white America. This was in

¹⁰⁰ Interview with the author 26/11/2009, Appendix 1.2, p. 304; Jacques Demetre and Marcel Chauvard, 'Land of Blues,' *Jazz Journal*, 1960, Vol. 13 Issues 3, 5, 7-10

¹⁰¹ The term 'Negro' was used at Oliver's time of writing as the term African American is used in the present day, and in revised editions of his works he would substitute it for the term 'black.' The use of the term 'Negro' here is only to represent Oliver's work accurately and consistently, and in order to avoid confusion.

contrast to the ‘Negro world’ where ‘the blues singer was valued and loved, for [Blind Lemon Jefferson] spoke to them who were members of his race.’¹⁰² Similarly, when discussing the significance of Peetie Wheatstraw’s music, it was clear for Oliver that the music spoke strictly through racial lines: ‘Peetie’s blues appealed to his coloured audience because they made no compromise. He sang in their language, he sang of his life which was their lives.’¹⁰³ The question that arises here is how the writer could draw such conclusions about music in the ‘Negro world.’ For Oliver, although accessing this world was difficult, it was not impossible. As he argued himself, ‘there are, of course, exceptions as [Wheatstraw’s] work tends to appeal only to the ‘hardened’ collector who has allowed himself to be absorbed by the idiom.’ There is no doubting that Oliver was completely ‘drenched in his subject.’ This can be corroborated by the evidence from his personal notebooks from this era, which reveal hours upon hours of laborious transcription from records, and the endless listing and referencing of record serial numbers.¹⁰⁴ While Oliver may have regarded the dedicated process of record collecting as an endeavour which served to narrow the ideological gap between the blues enthusiast and the music (which will be discussed in Chapter 2), the author’s ‘absorption’ into the ‘Negro world’ was also accomplished through the use of literature.

As well as analysing blues lyrics and scanning the available literature of African American life and culture in the US Embassy in London, Oliver relied heavily on the literature of black writers such as Claude McKay, Ralph Ellison, and in particular, Richard

¹⁰² Oliver, ‘Match Box Blues: Blind Lemon Jefferson’, *The Jazz Review*, July 1959, in *Blues Off The Record* p.69; Oliver, ‘Give Me That Old Time Religion’, *Jazz Journal*, February 1952, in *Blues Off The Record*, p. 14-5; Oliver, ‘Match Box Blues: Blind Lemon Jefferson,’ p.69

¹⁰³ Oliver, ‘Peetie Wheatstraw: Devil’s Son-In-Law’, *Jazz Monthly*, May 1959, in *Blues Off The Record*, p 193.

¹⁰⁴ Wright, ‘Foreword’ to *Blues Fell This Morning: The Meaning of the Blues*, p. 11; the personal notebooks were made available to the author by Paul Oliver.

Wright. In fact, Oliver had become relatively close to Wright while the author was living in Paris throughout the fifties. He, together with his wife Valerie, would meet Wright on yearly visits to Paris, where he also met Langston Hughes and the American jazz musician Mezz Mezzrow.¹⁰⁵ While it is difficult to measure the full influence of the relationship with Wright on Oliver's writing on the blues, especially since the American author had regarded jazz and blues as being only 'naïve' and 'mundane' forms of expression in his early career, Oliver described the Parisian 'subculture of talking, writing and music' as highly influential, particularly in the writing of *Blues Fell This Morning*.¹⁰⁶ He also believed that these literary works could allow the blues collector 'a clearer insight into the environment that produced [the blues singer's] music than he can find in any descriptive work of non-fiction.'¹⁰⁷ Although the realism and immediacy which characterises the writing of these authors make this claim more than plausible, it was by no means unproblematic. For instance, despite the naturalist shades of Wright's autobiography *Black Boy*, as John Lowe argues, the narrative 'is so consciously shaped and framed, editing out many aspects of Wright's actual life, and reshaping others, that it needs to be considered a fiction, despite the fact that most of the major incidents actually occurred.'¹⁰⁸ Wright's autobiography was a literary work crafted by the hands of memory that negotiated the past in the author's present. The consequence of this representation of the past is that the boundaries between fact and fiction are blurred in the eyes of the reader. The use of the realism in African American literature has the effect of

¹⁰⁵ Yearly visits to Paris, Interview with the author 1/6/2010, Appendix 1.4, p. 329;

¹⁰⁶ Richard Wright, *Native Son* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1940) p. 15; meeting Hughes & Mezzrow, and influence of Parisian experiences in Oliver, *Blues Off the Record*, p. 10

¹⁰⁷ Paul Oliver, 'Devil's Son-In-Law', *Music Mirror*, March 1956, 3/2, p. 8

¹⁰⁸ John Lowe, 'Palette of Fire: the Aesthetics of Propaganda in *Black Boy* and *In the Castle of My Skin*' in *Mississippi Quarterly*, Fall 2008, Vol. 61, Issue 4, p. 565

neutralizing the physical separation of the British writer from the context of the music. While Oliver's transatlantic context allowed him to bypass the racial politics of the American society, the distance separating him from the US favoured the construction of an imagined African American world shaped by the writing of black authors and the lyrics of blues songs.

Ellison's *Invisible Man* in particular seems to have had a particular effect on Oliver's interpretation of African American life. Apart from the direct mention of the novel in his two articles on Peetie Wheatstraw, there are other more indirect but nonetheless significant references. For instance, in the novel the protagonist encounters a man on the streets of New York, who later turns out to be Wheatstraw,

Close to the kerb ahead I saw a man pushing a cart piled high with rolls of blue paper and heard him singing in a clear ringing voice. It was a blues, and I walked behind him remembering the times I had heard such a singing at home. It seemed that there are memories slipped around my life at the campus and went far back to things I had long ago shut out of my mind. There was no escaping such reminders.¹⁰⁹

The song invokes memories of the past, home, and 'far back' in the protagonist. The blues plays the role of guiding the *Invisible Man* towards self-realisation, one of the points among many in the novel in which the protagonist is in 'movement toward identity.'¹¹⁰ The music touches an innate, natural, but hidden part of his identity. This sense of African American atavism seems to be of fundamental importance in Oliver's depiction of music in African American life at this time. In his first article for example, he mentioned that music 'is so essentially a part of the coloured man's nature;' dancing

¹⁰⁹ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1952), p. 141

¹¹⁰ Raymond M. Olderman, 'Ralph Ellison's Blues and "Invisible Man,"' *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, (Summer 1966), Vol. 6 No. 2, p. 11

was described as a ‘natural form of expression;’ and in talking about the Delta singer Muddy Waters, he argued how ‘it was as natural to him as the desire to eat... [to] want to learn to play and sing the blues.’¹¹¹ Herein is evident the similarity of Oliver’s language to the descriptions of jazz revivalists of the thirties and forties, which rested on subtle racial stereotypes of innate sense of rhythm and musicality, a propensity for feeling music naturally rather than learning from study, and the ability of the blues singer to ‘sing[] of things as he sees them.’¹¹² What emerges is a form of compensatory primitivism that valorises not only the music of African Americans, but also the philosophical approach to life which is interpreted from the music.

Oliver portrayed the blues as being both the symbol and practice of a folk heritage that went deep into the heart of the African American experience, depicting blues as something as natural as breathing for African Americans. The examples demonstrate the manner in which Oliver’s own imagination as a writer merged with the literary memory of the African American author in a layering process. The ‘Negro world’ is therefore imagined in isolation, the African American experience is divorced from the social, political and cultural context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of the major consequences of this divorce from context is that this world is idealized, and in Oliver’s writing the evidence of this can be seen in his depiction of the African American ‘folk.’ He often made reference to the blues as ‘the common folk song of the African American Negro,’ and those who sang ‘the music of their people’ were

¹¹¹ Oliver, ‘Give Me That Old Time Religion’, p. 15; Oliver, ‘Strut Yo’ Stuff’, *Music Mirror*, March 1955, 2/3, p.4; Oliver, ‘Muddy Waters: Hoochie Coochie Man’, *Jazz Monthly*, January 1959, in *Blues Off The Record*, p. 259

¹¹² Quote from Max Jones, ‘On Blues,’ p. 79

most often regarded as being more authentic and worthy of attention.¹¹³ The explanation for this reasoning lies in the fact that, for Oliver, the blues was inextricably linked to the African American's subordinate position with the American social hierarchy,

The Negro knows the blues. He can talk with the blues, walk with the blues. And for the coloured man confounded by his environment, puzzled and disappointed, the blues is not just an unwelcome associate: the blues give him consolation, enough to continue the fight.¹¹⁴

That the music functioned as a means of releasing tension and providing comfort amid the social problems affecting American life, would be echoed in countless future examinations of the music in future years. For instance, for James H. Cone the blues enabled a 'liberating catharsis' which helped both the singer and audience to deal with the pressures of African American life through the process of performance.¹¹⁵ For Oliver, however, the blues performance did not provide the means by which ordinary African Americans could to fight back against prejudice and racial discrimination. In one sense, Oliver was also divorcing himself from the overt 'negrophilie' of certain jazz revivalists, such as Mezzrow, that in jazz saw the ultimate cultural challenge to American social inequality.¹¹⁶ However, his descriptions oscillate between the identification with African Americans as a class group enduring social and economic hardship on the one hand, and the racialised interpretation of a symbiotic relationship between African Americans and the blues on the other (evident in phrases such as 'the Negro knows the blues.')

¹¹³ Oliver, 'Sources of Afro-American Folk Song 1: Down the Line', *Music Mirror*, May 1954, 1/1, p. 42; Oliver, 'In The Sticks', *Music Mirror*, April 1955, 2/4, p. 4. The references here are to the female singers such as Ma' Rainey who, although more involved with the world of entertainment, are praised by Oliver for retaining the quality of singing the "music of their people".

¹¹⁴ Oliver, 'Got the Blues', *Music Mirror*, May 1955, 2/5, p. 8

¹¹⁵ Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, p. 125

¹¹⁶ 'negrophilia' is a term that emanates from the French fascination with figures such as Josephine Baker that represented the craze for African American music in Paris during the 1920s, Iris Schmeisser, "'Un Saxophone en Mouvement'? Josephine Baker and the Primitivist Reception of Jazz in Paris in the 1920s," in Wynn (ed), *Cross the Water Blues*, pp. 106-24, p. 111

Simultaneously, the author reduced the possibility for the defiance of Jim Crow laws in public spaces as in Robin Kelley's 'theatres of resistance.'¹¹⁷ Music in Oliver's 'Negro world,' in contrast, was a coping strategy, a 'safety-valve' for the release of tension and hardship. It was when Blind Lemon Jefferson sang about the problems of 'his people' that he was a 'true folk artist,' displaying the folk heritage of African Americans.¹¹⁸ It has often been a criticism of those studying the nature of folklore that the ambiguity of the term 'folk' rests on the subjective definition of each individual observer, or as Richard Middleton argues, whatever the researcher says it means.¹¹⁹ What is less ambiguous from Oliver's interpretation of the black folk world, however, is that true 'Negro' folk music was in its purest form where white influence was lowest, and where music echoed the experiences of African Americans. Paradoxically, black folk culture was dependent upon the racial oppression of the white world maintaining its isolation from the mainstream.

While attempting to navigate away from the overt idealizations of black life and culture, Oliver's descriptions of the fifties sometimes fell prey to fetishized descriptions of his subjects. A clear example is presented by Oliver's first book, the biographical *Bessie Smith* (1958),

Bessie wore simple dresses that were boldly draped over her splendid figure, her hair was swept back and at her neck she wore a single strand of beads, sufficient to draw attention to the regular beauty of her oval features and her dark, moist eyes.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Robin Kelley, "'We Are Not What We Seem'": Rethinking Black Working-class Opposition in the Jim Crow South' in *The Journal of American History*, June 1993, Vol. 80, Number 1, pp. 75-112

¹¹⁸ Oliver, 'Sources of Afro-American Folk Song 1: Down The Line,' p. 42; 'Strut Yo' Stuff,' p. 4; Oliver, 'Match Box Blues,' p. 66

¹¹⁹ Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1990), p. 128

¹²⁰ Paul Oliver, *Bessie Smith* (London: Cassell, 1958), p. 6

The description is suggestive of an overt sexual voyeurism and exoticism for the female classic blues singer. Another example is provided by the imagined description of Peetie Wheatstraw,

One can imagine him as he sings through thick lips scarcely open; his eyes, not quite straight, glinting from beneath lowered lids; the dimples on his dark cheeks belied by the backward tilt of his head and the hat pushed far off the domed forehead¹²¹

The focus on the dark elements of the singers' physical appearance are suggestive of Oliver's exhibiting a moderate form of 'negrophilia,' but it also gives an indication of the author's level of personal fascination not only in the music, but in the people being studied. This also becomes manifest in Oliver's analysis of lyrics, as for instance, in the explanation of the railroad theme in many blues songs: 'And there was too, the fascination which a powerful, snoring engine always exerts on many men with its urgent rhythm, its fierce masculinity.'¹²²

Oliver's treatment of blues lyrics as the direct expression of the hardships of the African American experience, the primary method adopted in *Blues Fell This Morning* and widely used in subsequent research, helped to build the foundations of his 'Negro world.' He justifies this by stating that '[t]he blues singer is seldom inhibited by any thoughts of the more delicate sensibilities of his listeners and his statements are frank and forthright.'¹²³ The method's reduction of blues to a mere report or description of reality has been criticised for denying the lyrics their potential poetic value. Frith has also challenged the realist interpretation of song lyrics for the subjective and arbitrary

¹²¹ Oliver, 'Devil's Son-In-Law,' p. 9

¹²² Oliver, 'Rock Island Line,' *Music Mirror*, January 1957, 4/1, p. 6-8

¹²³ Oliver, 'Got the Blues', p. 8

distinction the cultural critic draws between the ‘real and unreal.’¹²⁴ For Oliver, however, the blues singer’s ‘subjective realism’ paints an accurate picture of African American life. The ‘forthright’ realism which Oliver imparts to the blues is reflected in many of the illustrations which he produced to accompany his articles. Figure 1 for instance, is an illustration of two African Americans working on the riverside. Their body language shows dejection, their facial expressions convey fatigue as well as melancholy, all in an environment which seems to resemble a bygone era. On the other hand, Figure 2 which accompanied an article on the living conditions of African Americans, is a representation of urban family life in a tightly cramped living space. As Oliver wrote, “‘Hot-bed” apartments are rented by three families at once, each using the bed and room for eight hours of the day.’¹²⁵ In the illustration a despondent elder member of the family sits on the bed with young children inside. The clean clothes hanging on the line over the bed seems futile considering the griminess of the walls. The image is reminiscent of a scene in Wright’s *Black Boy*,

Another change took place at home. We needed money badly and Granny and Aunt Addie decided that we could no longer share the entire house, and Uncle Tom and his family were invited to live upstairs at a nominal rental. The dining room and the living room were converted into bedrooms and for the first time we were squeezed for living space. We began to get on each other’s nerves... Rattling pots and pans in the kitchen would now awaken me in the mornings¹²⁶

The similarity to Wright’s autobiography is coincidental. However, Oliver’s illustrations show a distinct resemblance to social photo-documentary style of Wright’s *I2*

¹²⁴ Rod Gruver, ‘A Closer Look at the Blues,’ *Blues World*, (January 1970), No. 26/4, pp. 4-10; Oliver, ‘Got the Blues’, p. 10

¹²⁵ Oliver, ‘Chocolate to the Bone,’ *Music Mirror*, November 1954, 1/7, p. 41

¹²⁶ Richard Wright, *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (London: Longman, 1945) p. 136-7

Million Black Voices, which used a number of images from the Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographers produced under the auspices of the New

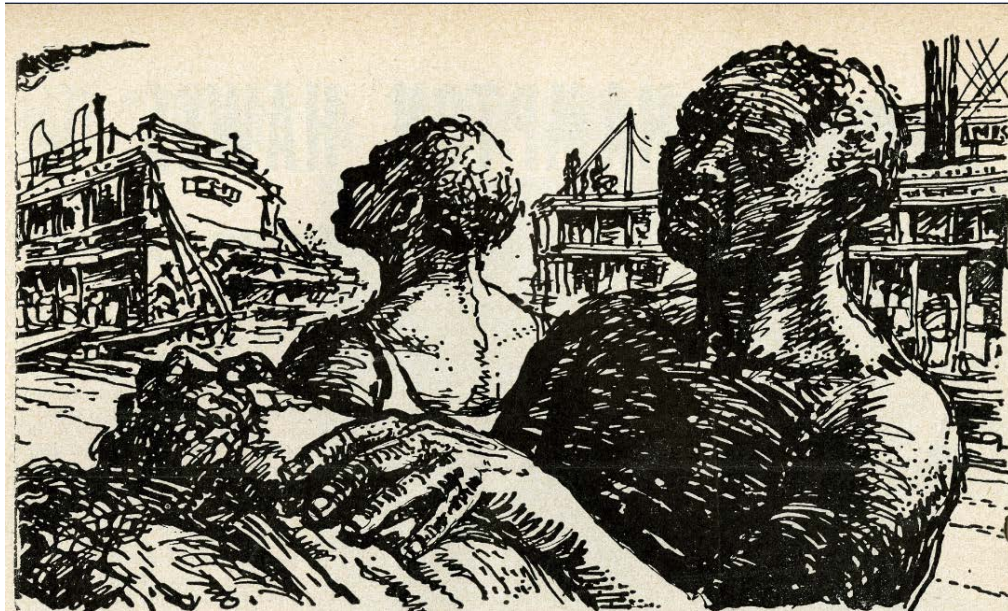


Figure 1 – ‘Sources of Afro-American Folk Song 1 - Down the Line’, *Music Mirror*, Vol. 1 No. 1, (May 1954)



Figure 2 – ‘Chocolate to the Bone’, *Music Mirror*, Vol. 1 No. 7, (November 1954)

Deal's Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the late thirties and early forties.¹²⁷

The author was providing a visual reference to his articles at a time when images of blues musicians and the African American life were difficult to obtain. He states that 'I just really wanted to communicate the content and where it took place and what it looked like, as far as I could tell, from the information I collected.' These illustrations proved popular, as Oliver contributed some of his drawings to *Big Bill Blues*, the autobiography of the singer edited by Yannick Bruynoghe. He also illustrated an article by Rex Harris on jazz that appeared in *Radio Times*, perhaps highlighting the difficulty of obtaining actual photographs even for a popular national magazine.¹²⁸ Actual images of blues musicians would begin to appear more frequently in British music magazines in the late fifties when Frederic Ramsey Jr. would make photographs from his field trips available.

Oliver's illustrations represent snapshots of his vision of the world in which the blues had emerged and had meaning, and in this sense they bear a stylistic resemblance to the rural paintings of the nineteenth century French artist Jean-François Millet, also drawing attention to Oliver's life as an art teacher. Millet's work came to focus on images of the French peasantry at a time of rapid urbanisation which gave rise to a popular emphasis on the common man and the fate of the French countryside. Perhaps Oliver's image of a cotton picker looking resigned (perhaps to the fact that a machine was beginning to take over his job) best represents the link to the rural art of post-1850 French painting or the nineteenth century Arts and Crafts Movement (Figure 9). However, some similarities in content can also be detected. In works such as *Man with a*

¹²⁷ Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (New York: Basic Books, 2008, [sic]1941)

¹²⁸ Interview with the author 26/11/2009, Appendix 1.2, p. 304; Big Bill Broonzy and Yannick Bruynoghe, *Big Bill Blues* (London: Cassell, 1955); Rex Harris, 'Jazz: New Music with Ancient Roots,' *Radio Times*, July 27, 1956

Hoe and *Going to Work*, Robert Herbert describes the ‘primeval innocence’ that characterises Millet’s rural subjects. In the former in particular he argues that,

Instead of confirming the middle-class view that life on the farm is a happy round of healthy tasks, Millet brought the labouring peasant directly into the observer’s presence, with a sense of the gruelling, wearing tasks he performs.¹²⁹

A number of Oliver’s illustrations portray subjects in similar circumstances. The despondency and fatalism in the expressions and body language displayed in Figure 1 are also evident in the faces of the family of Figure 3, and the ambiguous image of a black prisoner sitting in front of a white guitar player in Figure 5. The difficulties of the manual labour that characterised much of African American employment in the South is also manifested in illustrations of a horse and cart carrying tree logs through swampy terrain, and of bare-chested men working on the railroads (Figures 6 and 7).

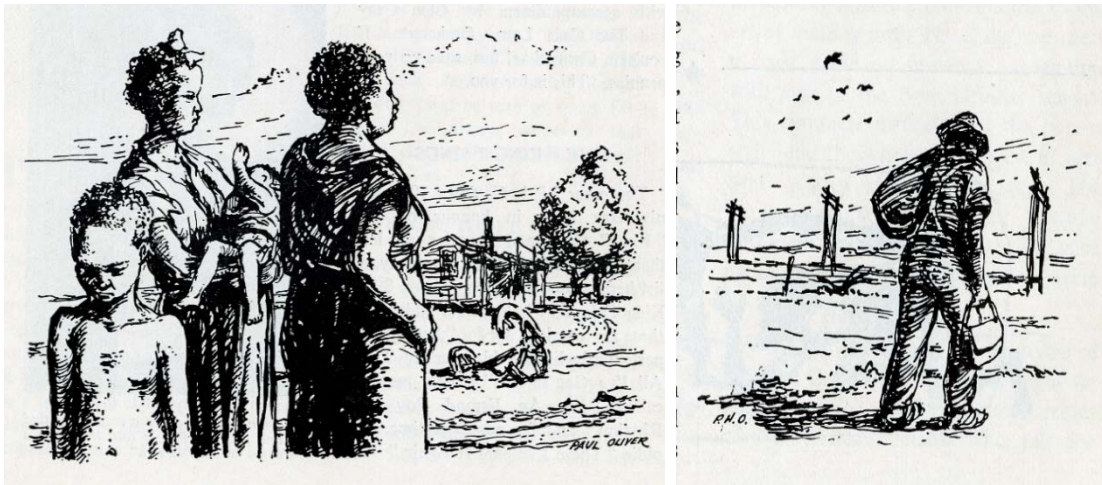


Figure 3 and 4 - *Another Man Done Gone*, *Music Mirror*, Vol. 1 No.4, (August 1954)

¹²⁹ Robert L. Herbert, *From Millet to Leger: Essays in Social Art History* (London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 32-3, ‘primeval innocence,’ p. 61

Portraits of singers also display similar dejected expressions (Figure 8), highlighting the manner in which Oliver opted to portray the subjects of his illustrations as largely unable to affect change in their daily lives, but through the images able to inspire sympathy on behalf of the observer. The similarities with Millet's painting are most likely coincidental (although given Oliver's art history background, it cannot be discounted that he had come across the French artist's work and may have been influenced by rural paintings in some form), but nonetheless Oliver's illustrations share an affinity with the plight of the subjugated, and in the attempt to represent the reality of the experience faced by the subjects.

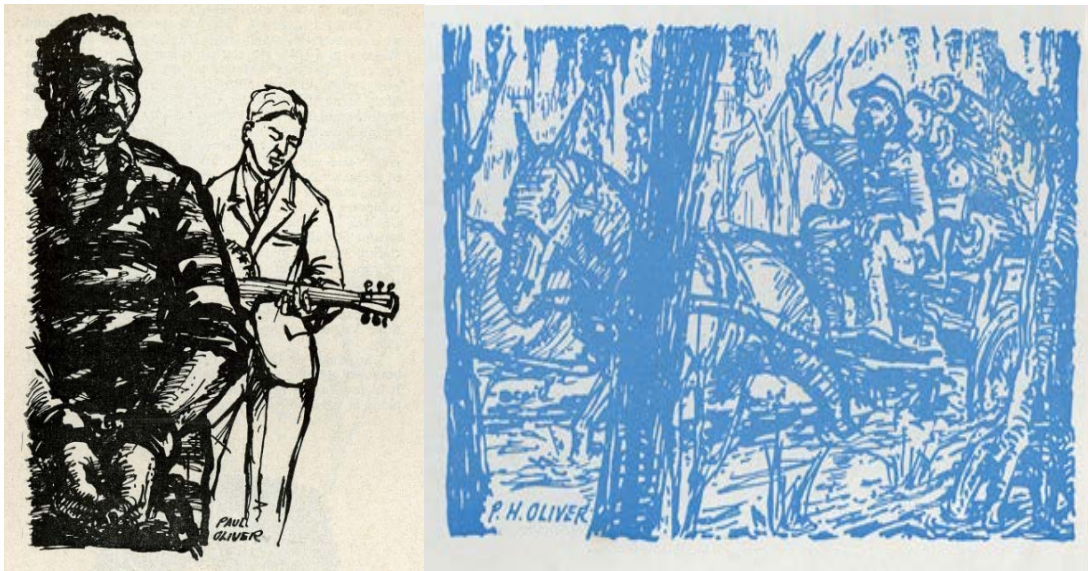


Figure 5 (left) - 'Hometown Skiffle,' *Music Mirror*, Vol. 3 No. 11 (February 1956); Figure 6 (right) - 'Sources of Afro-American 1 - Down the Line,' *Music Mirror*, Vol. 1 No. 1, (May 1954)



Figure 7 (left) - *Down the Line*, *Music Mirror*, Vol. 1 No. 2 , (June 1954); Figure 8 – ‘*Devil's Son-In-Law*,’ *Music Mirror*, Vol. 3 No. 2, (March 1956)

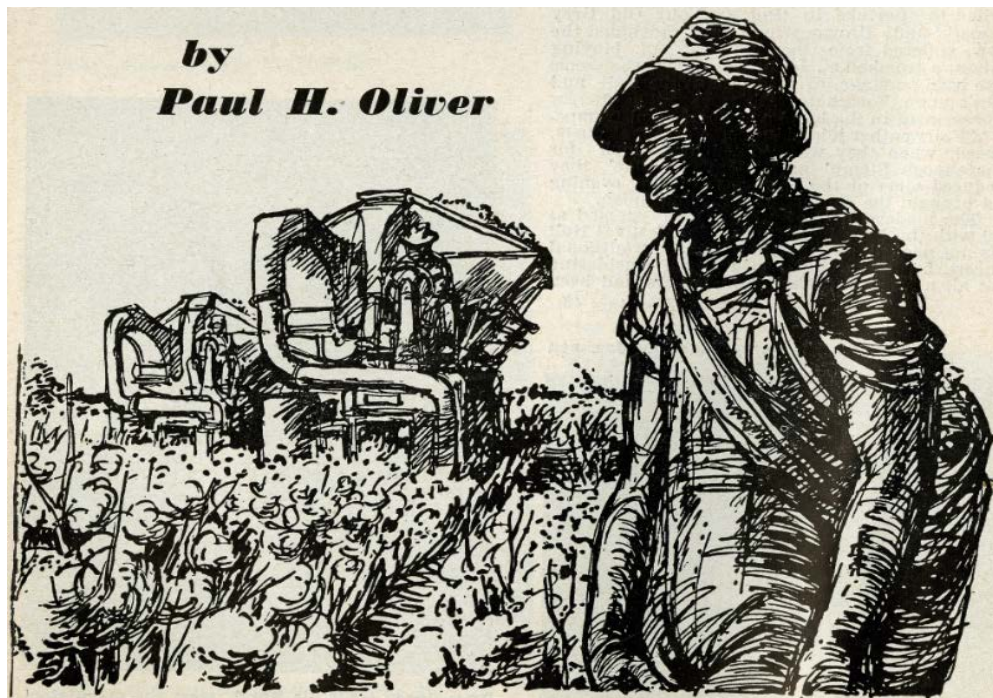


Figure 9 *Boll Weevil Blues*, *Music Mirror*, Vol. 1 No. 3, (July 1954)

Oliver's images thus bring together his own artistic impression of African American life with the subjective realism of blues lyrics, interpreted in combination with the literary representations of black life in the South narrated in the books of Wright and Ellison. In this intermixture of sources and influences it is possible to consider Oliver's role as a *listening* subject. As Steven Feld argues, 'the listener is implicated as a socially and historically situated being, not just as the bearer of organs that receive and respond to stimuli.'¹³⁰ Thus the listener brings himself and his social and ideological circumstances into his experience of the music. Oliver's empathy for the plight of African Americans, the dignity he sees in the sincere expression of things as they appear, and the admiration for the folk come to pervade his descriptions of the 'Negro world.'

The personal involvement in the process of constructing the imagery of African American life is evident in Oliver's writing style which takes the form of a series of short 'narratives.' An example can be seen in his exploration of the theme of departure in blues lyrics,

Coming home when the sun goes down, hand thrust deep in empty pockets,
gunny sacks tied about his feet, he pauses before his clapboard shack. The
holes in the walls are patched with packing cases and rats live unmolested
beneath the floor boards. His children greet him solemn-eyed. Their bellies are
swollen with pellagra. Now busy with the hominy grits in the skillet his
woman is waiting for him. Only partially does she appreciate why the pay
packet is small and why so much of that is spent in the gin-mill at the back of
town.¹³¹

The characters here are literal inventions, as they are not referring to any particular singer. Oliver's writing here is not socio-historical or academic but more akin to a fictional literary style. The subtleties of the man's pause, the children's greeting and the

¹³⁰ Steven Feld, 'Communication, Music, and Speech about Music,' in Charles Keil & Steven Feld (eds), *Music Grooves* (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 84

¹³¹ Paul Oliver, 'Another Man Done Gone,' *Music Mirror*, August 1954, 1/ 4, p. 27

woman's attitude are imagined and seek to create the situation in which a typical bluesman would feel the need to depart. This example is complemented by two further illustrations which depict a man leaving his family (Figures 3 and 4). It would be difficult to find a more stereotyped image of the wandering bluesman leaving his troubles behind and taking to the road. This style is highly representative of Oliver's articles in the fifties, and considering the writing is journalistic, the creative literary writing style could be understood as attempts to engage readers. Nonetheless, the illustrations are literary images, works of the imagination which aim to present the reality of African American life, but instead, like much realism in art, are closer to *re*-presentations of that reality.

The portrayal of the realism in blues lyrics and their relevance to African American life seems to be an attempt to validate the music as being worthy of more attention. Indeed, Oliver even bemoaned the way African American intellectuals snubbed the music for being 'backward, claiming 'they have yet to recognise the beauty of their own tradition.'¹³² Oliver was most probably referring to those black northern intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance who renounced blues and jazz as popular entertainment which did not conform to their standards of high civilized art.¹³³ Oliver had become familiar with an array of African American writing from this period by spending time at the US Embassy's library in London. A notable example would be Alain Locke's 'New Negro' movement to which 'Afro-American music had always been a source of embarrassment...[and their] feelings about urban spirituals – the blues – and about jazz sometimes verged on the unprintable.'¹³⁴ Oliver's sentiments seem to mirror those of

¹³² Oliver, 'The Folk Blues of Sonny Terry', *Music Mirror*, October 1955, 2/10, p. 6; Oliver, 'Introduction to Odetta,' p. 6

¹³³ Nathan I. Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (London: OUP, 1971), p. 64

¹³⁴ David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue* (Oxford: OUP, 1979), p. 173

Zora Neale Hurston and the poet Langston Hughes who were exceptions to the predominant view of the low art credentials of African American music. Hughes in particular ‘was noted as one of the first poets to celebrate the beauty of the blues as an American art form,’ and was often criticised for it.¹³⁵ It is a characteristic of those who study folk cultures to feel the need to rescue that culture from extinction, and feeling that the blues were being disregarded and forgotten Oliver defiantly declared that ‘it has not gone yet’ and ‘there is still time... Blind Willie McTell still walks the streets of Atlanta with his guitar and his tin cup.’ This was a cry not only for preservation, but for research which consisted of direct contact with the people involved, because, at the time it was still ‘living folk-lore.’¹³⁶

Confronting the ‘real’ with the ‘imagined’ and the ‘fake’

The reliance on recordings had undeniably fostered a desire for British blues enthusiasts and collectors to see the real thing, and the fifties saw many singers making the trip to Europe and the UK, despite a British Musicians Union ban on foreign musicians since 1935.¹³⁷ When African American singers such as Big Bill Broonzy, Lonnie Johnson, Josh White, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, Muddy Waters, Otis Spann, Little Brother Montgomery and Brother John Sellers did come to Britain, the anticipation in the press was great. This was apparent with Josh White’s imminent arrival

¹³⁵ Anita Patterson, ‘Jazz, Realism and the Modernist Lyric: The Poetry of Langston Hughes’ in *Modern Language Quarterly*, Dec 2000, 61/ 4, p. 667

¹³⁶ Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*, p. 127; Oliver, ‘The Folk Blues of Sonny Terry,’ p. 6; Oliver, ‘Forgotten Men’, *Music Mirror*, June 1956, 3/5, p. 9; Oliver, ‘Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry’, *Music Mirror*, June 1958, 5/11, p. 17

¹³⁷ Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, p. 8-9

to Britain, as *Melody Maker* included an advert for ‘Josh White at Foyle’s’ in Charing Cross Road in London to sign records prior to his 1951 tour. Similarly, *Jazz Journal*’s Albert McCarthy expressed excitement at the prospect of Lonnie Johnson’s first show, and Derrick Stewart-Baxter described the arrival Big Bill Broonzy in 1951 as ‘a date with the blues.’¹³⁸ The performances of these musicians, most often as ‘variety’ acts during performances by British jazz bands, was the time when British blues critics could compare the ‘real thing’ to the records they had been listening to for years. As was to be expected, the construction of a reified idea of the blues as a static genre derived from record collecting meant that the live performances were judged in accordance with a number of preconceptions, and some musicians fared much better than others. Oliver’s experience was typical of this, and as Jeff Tilton argues, the ‘fascination with the recorded artefact produced a distancing that the “real thing” (hearing the music live) couldn’t quite dislodge.’¹³⁹ Therefore, the responses to the appearances of blues musicians provide an insight into the prevalent attitudes of British critics formed in the early years of blues music appreciation.

The most notable ‘failures’ in the eyes of the British blues enthusiasts were undeniably Lonnie Johnson and Josh White. Sinclair Traill viewed Johnson’s performance with some scepticism for the inclusion of ‘too many of his own ballad compositions.’ Meanwhile as Elijah Wald highlights, despite becoming very popular in Britain during the fifties with numerous radio and television appearances, White could

¹³⁸ List of musicians who came to Britain from Dewe, *The Skiffle Craze*, p. 37; Anticipation for Josh White’s tour in *Melody Maker*, Jan 27, 1951, 27/906, p. 3; Albert McCarthy, ‘Lonnie Johnson,’ *Jazz Journal*, June 1952, 5/6, p. 1-2; Derrick Stewart-Baxter, ‘A Date with the Blues,’ *Melody Maker*, Sep 15, 1951, 27/939, p. 9

¹³⁹ Jeff Todd Tilton, ‘Reconstructing the Blues: reflections on the 1960s Blues Revival,’ in Neil V. Rosenberg (ed), *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993: 220-240), p. 223

not win over the core of jazz and blues critics. Max Jones' review in *Melody Maker* entitled 'Josh White pleases the mums and dads,' exemplifies the idea that the singer was pandering to popular taste by including songs such as 'Lord Randall,' 'Waltzing Matilda' and 'Foggy Foggy Dew.' Audiences were also less than pleased at the arrangements of the performances with a backing band, and such was the pressure applied by readers of *Melody Maker* that White's next performance on March 17th in 1951 was arranged as a solo concert in order to satisfy the need for the more authentic folk-blues sound based on White's recordings from the thirties.¹⁴⁰ Later in the decade Muddy Waters also experienced the demanding nature of British blues audiences that had developed stringent expectations about how the blues should sound. This is recalled by The Rolling Stones' Keith Richards,

So you had that traditionalist blues thing going. I once saw this fought out in the Manchester Free Trade Hall between an audience who watched Muddy Waters play acoustic guitar for an hour, applauding magnificently, only to boo him off when he came on with his Chicago band.¹⁴¹

Interestingly, the event would be echoed eight years later at the same venue by the now infamous cries of 'Judas!' at Bob Dylan's concert with a full backing band.¹⁴² In his 1958 performances across the country, Waters evoked similar responses from audiences that did not respond kindly to his electrified sound. Tony Standish attempted to compensate for this reaction by printing an interview with the singer, who explained that it was difficult for him to sing the same blues as he did years ago, given that his life had

¹⁴⁰ Elijah Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues* (University of Massachusetts Press: Amherst, 2000), p. 220; Max Jones, 'Josh White Pleases the Mums and Dads', *Melody Maker*, 27/908, 10th Feb 1951, p. 6/9; pressure on White to play solo in *Melody Maker*, March 10, 1951, 27/912, p. 6

¹⁴¹ Dora Lowenstein and Philip Dodd (eds), *According to the Rolling Stones* (Phoenix: London, 2003), p.

38

¹⁴² Michael Gray, *The Bob Dylan Encyclopaedia* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 365

virtually gone from rags to riches.¹⁴³ It therefore seems evident that the British blues cognoscenti had developed clear ideas as to what constituted authentic and inauthentic blues during the fifties, and were not shy in pronouncing their views.

Having devotedly collected records and reviewed them since the forties, Oliver was no exception. He described Lonnie Johnson singing 'Stardust' as 'a pathetic picture.' Although he was sympathetic to the singer's circumstances of having to operate within the music industry, Oliver also argued that Josh White had 'suffered from a... popularising process' and had 'drawn increasingly from a commercial repertoire... at the expense of a certain degree of authenticity and quality.' He would maintain this memory of the singers for many years,

Josh White had worked with Leadbelly, so he came to Europe and toured in Britain. The boy who had led a score of blind blues singers through the South and recorded as Pinewood Tom was a virtuoso guitarist and sang with a glottal catch. He sang *The House of the Rising Sun*, or *One Meat Ball*. Almost as disappointing was Lonnie Johnson, who had once accompanied Texas Alexander, as he smiled his way wistfully through *I Lost my Heart in San Francisco*. And then Big Bill Broonzy arrived.¹⁴⁴

As the closing sentence of the quotation indicates, no singer seems to have had the impact that Big Bill Broonzy had in helping to form these stringent conceptions of blues. The singer dominates blues writing in the British jazz press during the fifties and beyond. Les Pythian argued that '[Big Bill Broonzy] is the first authentic representative of the 'genre' ever to hit this neglected land of ours.... His is the art of the true folk artist.' This appreciation for Broonzy was effectively replicating the depiction of the singer by the French jazz critic Hugues Panassie,

¹⁴³ Tony Standish, 'Muddy Waters in London - Part II', *Jazz Journal*, Feb 1959, 12/2 p. 3-6

¹⁴⁴ Oliver, 'How Long Blues,' *Music Mirror*, July 56, 3/6, p.4-6; Oliver, 'Blue-Eyed Blues: The Impact of Blues on European Popular Culture' in C. W. E. Bigsby (ed.), *Approaches to Popular Culture* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Press, 1976), p. 230

He is a plain blues singer, always sticking to the pure idiom of the early blues; by this, I mean the blues as they were sung and played before jazz music really started, and as they are still sung and played today way down in the State of Mississippi and other states in the South of the USA.¹⁴⁵

It is apparent that Broonzy was much better at negotiating the demands of British audiences than some of his contemporaries, and the marker he set became the basis against which all subsequent live blues performances would be judged. It is very difficult to find a review of a blues performance or record without reference to Broonzy, and more often than not a major victim of this was Josh White: '[i]t's fortunate that in blues singing the voice is least important... for a good voice and polish, we'll listen to Josh! Here [Broonzy] is the real thing, the style and feeling which are all-important.' Oliver agreed, arguing that '[Broonzy's] hollering made Josh White seem slick and effete.'¹⁴⁶ In addition to his performances, Broonzy also seems to have been a highly personable and charming character,

He was quite different from the other singers because he talked to the audience almost as if they were his friend and it was the way in which everybody felt he was talking to them, so to speak. He just had an extraordinary stage manner and very relaxed and yet played so well. So I think his personality was one that was, you know, kind of engaged the audience.¹⁴⁷

Oliver recalls that the singer 'held audiences in the palm of his hand for hours,' and his magnetic character is corroborated by the fact he became very close friends with a number of British blues enthusiasts, particularly Alexis Korner with whom Broonzy actually lived for a short while. Korner described the singer as 'a very human person,' but

¹⁴⁵ Les Pythian in Derrick Stewart-Baxter, 'Preachin' the Blues' in *Jazz Journal*, 5/4 Apr 1952 p. 6-7; Hugues Panassie, 'A Date with the Blues', *Melody Maker*, 27/939, Sep 1951 p. 9

¹⁴⁶ 'it's fortunate' in Arthur Jackson, 'Review of Big Bill Bronzy in Cambridge,' *Jazz Journal*, 5/12 Dec 1952 p.3; 'his hollering' in Oliver, 'Blue-Eyed Blues,' p. 231

¹⁴⁷ Interview with the author 11/3/2010, Appendix 1.3, p. 317

also indicated a sense of awe at his otherworldliness: 'But Bill Broonzy is from another world than ours and it is with his own people that he will always be happiest.' Oliver also holds fond memories of his encounters with the musician, recalling the time when Broonzy visited for Valerie Oliver's birthday and insisting on cooking for the occasion.¹⁴⁸

As Wald suggests, Broonzy's style in this period did have a more folk based sound, and the singer had reverted to an older repertoire in order to satisfy the needs of his English audiences. Bob Riesman's recent biography highlights the singer's versatility and adaptability from the manner in which he managed to fill Robert Johnson's shoes for the Delta blues slot at John Hammond's 1938 'From Spirituals to Swing' concert at Carnegie Hall. This was after a period in which the musician had been developing a progressive urban blues sound by playing with groups in Chicago. What is more interesting, however, is that a sense of Broonzy's self-made persona emerges more explicitly in his transatlantic experiences. Riesman shows how the singer was able to portray himself skilfully to the British media as the archetypal bluesman with roots firmly within rural black life of the South. In this sense, Broonzy becomes an extremely interesting character due to the fact that he played an active part in creating a sense of the blues based on a more 'country' style that also depended on a lifestyle associated with black life in the rural South, highlighting how blues musicians could promote images of the music. He argued: 'you got to be born a Negro in Mississippi and you got to grow up

¹⁴⁸ 'held audiences' in Oliver, 'Blue-Eyed Blues,' p. 231; Alexis Korner, 'Big Bill Broonzy: some personal memories,' *Jazz Journal*, March 1958, 11/3, p. 1; Harry Shapiro, *Alexis Korner: The Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 61; Big Bill cooking at the Olivers, Interview with the author 11/3/2010, Appendix 1.3, p. 317

poor and on the land.’¹⁴⁹ Manfred Mann guitarist Tom McGuinness even recalls the singer dressing in the typical Southern sharecroppers’ dungarees in order to portray the correct image to his British audiences.¹⁵⁰ Consequently, most blues musicians who made the trip to Britain in the fifties were compared to Broonzy for their authenticity, and all too often they struggled to achieve the same level of recognition.

However, Broonzy had also managed to cultivate his image as an authority on blues history, and given his African American origins and proficiency with the music there were few to question him. In this context, in much the same way as Korner, Oliver came to accept the singer as ‘representing the living past.’ In his persona as a bluesman and a blues historian, Broonzy supplied a wealth of biographical, historical and discographical information to collectors. For instance, Oliver recalls the time when Broonzy mentioned Muddy Waters as an up-and-coming blues singer at a time when very few had heard of him. Oliver therefore advocated the use of the singer’s testimony for blues research by promoting the value of the autobiography, *Big Bill Blues*, compiled by Yannick Bruynoghe in 1955.¹⁵¹ The stories which Broonzy told would become gospel to many British blues commentators, helping to form the rigid ideas of what the blues was, where it came from, and who it belonged to.

Interviews and encounters with blues musicians were to become an important part of Oliver’s career as a blues scholar, and in the fifties he began the process of interviewing visiting blues singers in Britain,

¹⁴⁹ Wald, *Josh White*, p. 221; Bob Riesman, *I Feel So Good: The Life and Times of Big Bill Broonzy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 164-5

¹⁵⁰ Interview with the author 17/6/2011, Appendix 1.9, p. 395

¹⁵¹ Broonzy as a blues historian, Riesman, *I Feel So Good*, p. 164; Broonzy mentioning Waters, Interview with author, Appendix 1.3, p. 317; Oliver, ‘Blues Backstage,’ *Music Mirror*, May 1957, 4/4, p. 23; Oliver, ‘Forgotten Men,’ p. 9

Well, I mean, obviously I was very interested in interviewing them and they, I think, were genuinely surprised how much I'd known about them – I was trying to collect any bit of information I could from everywhere. And I generally had them come over to stay with me at least overnight and so forth.¹⁵²

These encounters allowed Oliver not only the chance to obtain as much information as possible, but also to get to know the blues musicians on a more personal level, as was the case with Brother John Sellers.¹⁵³ Although recordings formed the basis for most of Oliver's research in this period, he acknowledged at the time that the transcription of records could never fully account for all the subtle qualities the recordings contained. He also often stressed the fact that African American folk music was rooted in the oral tradition of the folk culture, in which improvisation was the 'golden rule.'¹⁵⁴ Therefore, analysis of records could only reveal so much, and oral history could have a large part to play, especially considering the relative obscurity of the music at this time, and only a handful of its exponents were known to be still alive. Indeed, it was Broonzy who perpetrated this myth: '[b]ut the real old time singers who worked in the fields, there's almost none of them left now.'¹⁵⁵ Consequently, the large amount of biographical information in articles which focused on singers, especially on those from the more distant past, such as Blind Lemon Jefferson and Ma' Rainey, were dependent on the recollections and reconstructions from interviews with visiting musicians.

Oliver often acknowledges that the interviewees could not always guarantee certainty in their recollections, and were often liable to exaggerate or exclude certain facts, and these are common consequences of using oral history. Perhaps more than any

¹⁵² Interview with the author 17/11/2009, Appendix 1.1, p. 293

¹⁵³ Interview with the author 11/3/2010, Appendix 1.3, p. 317

¹⁵⁴ Oliver, 'Special Agents: How the Blues Got on Record', *The Jazz Review*, February 1959, in *Blues Off The Record*, p. 48; 'golden rule,' Oliver, 'Big Bill Broonzy on Vogue', *Music Mirror*, August 1956, Vol. 3 No. 7, p.4

¹⁵⁵ Riesman, *I Feel So Good*, p. 165

other time, British blues scholarship in this period prior to the boom of the sixties, was dealing with a significant lack of physical evidence which favoured the reliance on record collecting and the use of secondary literature. However, the obscure past of the music fostered a mysteriousness which was undoubtedly compelling for collectors. In fact, Oliver was intrigued by the immeasurable possibilities that the enigmatic lives of singers presented and the unknown element in the music's history, 'for therein lies much of its fascination,'

But as the blues collector stares at the record label or listens whilst the needle summons again three lost minutes of a man's life some thirty years ago, he cannot help but speculate at times on the possible chain of circumstances that finally brought him from the city sidewalk and before the crude recording apparatus.... Where did he come from; who were his parents; when did he leave home? One wanders and falters, as the limitations of one's own personal experience make it almost impossible to imagine.¹⁵⁶

This passage not only provides an example of the stimulus given by the 'unknown' to the blues collector, but also highlights Oliver's acknowledgement of the imaginative qualities of listening as an activity. In a study on the role of radio in African American society, Tona Hangen argues that the role of listening through radio allowed African American listeners to 'renegotiate racial boundaries.' The reliance of the medium on the individual's imagination allowed entry into a sensory experience that could ignore racial barriers, something not as easily tangible in the reality of the South for example.¹⁵⁷ It can be argued that listening to records was a similar experience in the sense that it could allow Oliver to transcend the transatlantic gulf separating him from the South. Listening

¹⁵⁶ 'fascination,' Oliver, 'Problems of Collecting Race Records', p. 14; ¹⁵⁶ Oliver, 'We're Gonna Rock This Joint: Jimmy Rushing's Early Years', *Jazz Monthly*, December 1957, in *Blues Off The Record*, p. 146

¹⁵⁷ Tona Hangen. 'Man of the Hour: Walter A. Maier and Religion by Radio on the Lutheran Hour' in Hilmes, M. & Loviglio, J. (eds), *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio* (London: Routledge, 2002) p. 113-134

was also a key factor in the recording of oral history. Interviews with singers would often lead to the recollections of obscure singers from a lost era that were never recorded, leading Oliver to dwell on the identity of those on record label discographies labelled as “unknown.”¹⁵⁸ The lack of physical material to discover the unknown elements may have facilitated the quantity of guesswork. However, the fascination of enthusiasts with the more obscure elements of blues history could help to explain the enormous interest during the blues revival in singers who had recorded little and were not widely known in their time, such as Robert Johnson, but who died in mysterious circumstances.¹⁵⁹ During the fifties then, the blues was a puzzle in which a large proportion of the pieces were missing, pieces that scholars such as Oliver attempted to recover by analysing records and interviewing visiting musicians.

Importantly, as Broonzy helped to shape the interpretation of black folk music in the eyes of British blues enthusiasts, popular music was opening its doors to the emerging sounds of rock ‘n’ roll and rhythm and blues which provided the soundtrack to the rise of an increasingly youth-orientated era. In 1954 the vocal group The Chords were the first African American group to cross-over into the white bestseller charts with their hit ‘Sh-boom.’¹⁶⁰ At the same time, Bill Haley and the Comets had some success with ‘Shake, Rattle and Roll’ in December 1954, but with their next hit of October 1955, ‘Rock Around the Clock’ which featured in the 1956 movie *Blackboard Jungle*, the group really caused a stir. The film was banned in many British cinemas, but the success of Haley’s songs paved the way for Elvis Presley to take centre stage the following year. At the

¹⁵⁸ Oliver, ‘Forgotten Men,’ p. 8

¹⁵⁹ For more detail about Robert Johnson’s lack of commercial success see Wald, *Escaping the Delta*.

¹⁶⁰ Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm & Blues, black consciousness and race relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 1

same time, Mike Dewe notes how *Melody Maker*, formerly the magazine which carried the subtitle ‘for the best in jazz,’ began giving more column space to popular music following the increased competition offered by the *New Musical Express*’ pop charts.¹⁶¹ For many of the writers in the jazz and blues press, these developments were often either viewed with contempt or disregarded altogether,

...just as Elvis Presley and his ilk have borrowed from the Negro – with disastrous results – the Negro youth in his turn has been influenced by the various facets of cheap commercialism with which we cannot help but come into contact.

The effect was to further demarcate the boundaries between pop music for entertainment and for the mindless youth, from the authentic folk music of a people unconcerned for commercial success, and who sang for ‘the sheer joy of making music.’¹⁶² Interestingly, however, the music of the newer generations, Elvis, Buddy Holly, Chuck Berry and Fats Domino would be an entry point into the world of American music for many younger British listeners and musicians, as Tom McGuinness explains,

I came to blues from a completely different perspective; I came to it from rock and roll. I wasn’t into folk music particularly of any sort. I grew up with a bit of Irish folk music going on all round me, inevitably, but rock and roll just opened my eyes, opened my ears, suddenly it was all there and Big Bill Broonzy I didn’t discover until much later. Because I loved Chuck Berry, a fantastic song writer, fantastic guitar player and that led me into the whole Chicago thing. I liked Muddy, I liked Wolf, I liked John Lee Hooker, I know he’s not Chicago but same thing. I loved Buddy Guy, Magic Sam, Otis Rush. I love tough, hard rhythm and blues so Big Bill and that whole area really didn’t get to me but now I see.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Dewe, *The Skiffle Craze*, p. 58-9

¹⁶² Derrick Stewart-Baxter, ‘Blues in the Country’, *Jazz Journal*, April 1959, 12/4, p.3

¹⁶³ Interview with the author 17/6/2011, Appendix 1.9, p. 395-6

Nevertheless, the emerging genres of the fifties which seemed to borrow from the blues were seen as the corruption of tradition and the loss of sincerity of expression. The marginalisation of youth culture from the music press of this period further reinforces that the readership is more focused on the serious practice of collecting rather than consumption.

An interesting challenge to the purism in blues scholarship came in the form of skiffle, which had been brewing in the UK since the late forties up to the 'craze' period in 1956. A considerable proportion of skiffle was based on the songs of Woody Guthrie and predominantly Leadbelly. McGuinness remarks that 'a whole generation' picked up guitars because of Lonnie Donegan following the success of 'Rock Island Line' in January of 1956.¹⁶⁴ This seemingly home-made music based on American folk songs and ballads indicates the popularity of American music in Britain in the post-war era. However, while young 'skiffers' looked to genuine folk sources in the eyes of jazz and blues critics, their efforts could not reach the level of their American progenitors. Oliver had already aimed some criticisms at British jazz musicians by arguing that the 'whole British jazz movement is built wholly on imitation.' Skiffle musicians were to suffer the similar disapproval. Oliver held various criticisms for British musicians attempting versions of African American songs. British musician Ken Colyer was described as 'singing without feeling,' and Lonnie Donegan's failure to impress was given to the fact he was not 'born of a folk heritage.'¹⁶⁵ A description of Donegan's success years later exemplifies the writer's attitude towards skiffle,

¹⁶⁴ Dewe, *The Skiffle Craze*, p. 1/22; McGuinness, Interview with the author 17/6/2011, Appendix 1.9, p 395

¹⁶⁵ 'imitation' - Oliver, 'Blues Backstage,' p. 23; Oliver, 'Hometown Skiffle,' *Music Mirror*, February 1956, 3/11, p. 9

But no one expected the runaway success of Lonnie Donegan's Rock Island Line. The voice was Cockney/Deep South, the song was Leadbelly's, the singer's name was half Lonnie Johnson's. But the banjo player from Chris Barber's Jazz Band made a 'skiffle' record which stood at number five in the charts in the United States within weeks, and eventually received the accolade of mimicry of Stan Freeberg.¹⁶⁶

It is evident that Oliver, as well as other 'blues evangelists' and proselytisers of this period, had developed a clear notion of 'how it was imagined the music of rural African Americans ought to sound,' and clearly whites, especially British, were not able to replicate it.¹⁶⁷ In a later article Oliver would attempt to explain the popularity of American music at the time of skiffle by attributing it to the fact that whites had long since lost their own culture, and thus needed to 'borrow' from another.¹⁶⁸ Thus, much the same as the pop music of Elvis, the skiffle boom in Britain was mostly regarded as a symptom of the Western cultural crisis by blues purists. By borrowing, British musicians could not as sincere as someone such as the pianist Champion Jack Dupree, depicted here in album review by Max Jones,

Jack Dupree is a realist. Nothing in this album is remotely sentimental; indeed, as one American has written, nothing is romantic or even nostalgic... I like it and believe it to be an example of 'Come in and hear the truth.'¹⁶⁹

The contempt for popular music and approximation of black music by white musicians helps to contextualize the emphasis and fascination with African American folk culture which characterises much of Oliver's writing. In many instances Oliver's descriptions take on a distinctly ethnocentric hue, as they echo the sentiments expressed

¹⁶⁶ Oliver, 'Blue-Eyed Blues,' p. 231

¹⁶⁷ The term 'blues evangelists' is taken from Schwartz's article subtitle, 'Preaching the Gospel of the Blues'; Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, p. 40

¹⁶⁸ Oliver, 'Introduction to Odetta: An important new folk and blues singer', *Jazz Music Mirror*, April 1958, 5/7, p. 6

¹⁶⁹ Max Jones, 'Blues from the Gutter,' *Melody Maker*, December 19, 1959, p. 25

earlier on in the twentieth century by W. E. B. Du Bois, who argued that ‘the true Negro folk-song still live[d]... in the hearts of the Negro.’¹⁷⁰ The underlying implication is that music as a form of expression had become unnatural for white Western culture, with musical production being too intricately tied to commerce and capitalism. Therefore, African American folk culture in its purest form was considered ‘unpalatable’ for the white observer.¹⁷¹ The blues of Blind Lemon Jefferson, although appearing primitive, crude and unrefined to the white world, were ‘starkly dramatic, stripped of all superfluities’ and ‘uncompromising’ to the African American.¹⁷² Similarly, Peetie Wheatstraw ‘sings for the coloured people with no thought for discographers or a white world.’¹⁷³ The true folk blues singer then, for Oliver, consciously rejected the materialism of the white world. Oliver’s interpretation of the ‘Negro world’ and its folk culture was thus defined by its opposition to white Western culture. British skiffers like Donegan and Colyer could attempt African American songs, but in Oliver’s eyes they would never be able to match the real thing. It would seem that later in the decade Oliver’s writing was more orientated towards identifying cultural and class distinctions, moving away from the racialised tones of *negrophilie* which characterised some of his earliest description of the African American world.

Despite the physical, cultural and historical distance characterising Oliver’s scholarship during the fifties, the interpretive methods for the analysis of blues, from the sociological interpretation of African American literature, the subjective realism of blues

¹⁷⁰ W. E. B. Du Bois. *The Souls of Black Folk* (London: Penguin, 1903), p. 206; Alain Locke, *The Negro & His Music* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1936)

¹⁷¹ Oliver, ‘Problems of Collecting Race Records’, *Music Mirror*, September 1955, 2/9, p. 13

¹⁷² Oliver, ‘Match Box Blues’, p. 69

¹⁷³ Oliver, ‘Devil’s Son-In-Law’, p. 9

lyrics, the reception of the first blues visitors to Britain, to the activity of listening, allowed him and other blues enthusiasts to transcend 'the cultural separation' separating them from the land of the blues.¹⁷⁴ It was then possible to imagine a 'Negro world' within which the blues was one of the ways singers and audiences were able to cope with the strains imposed by the harsh realities of life in the American South. Music functioned as both a practice which allowed the African American to go on, and as a symbol of the undying folk heritage of the African American community defiant in the face of white capitalist oppression. Importantly, blues is seen as representative of an African American culture and approach to life which prioritises human relationships and sincerity, above any notions of commercial success or materialism. By contrast the music was reliant upon the white world pushing the 'Negro world' further into obscurity, strengthening the group solidarity of a black music and culture. Ironically, while the blues existed within a place which seemed dislocated from the modern world, modern methods of record transcription and listening to records allowed him to become absorbed by it.

The reader of Oliver's work in this period is presented with images of a world where the boundaries between historical fact and the fictive elements of the writer's imagination are often unclear. This lack of clarity is created by the romanticism for a music beset by the enigmatic lives of singers, combined with a sense of loss of folk heritage in the modern post-war world. It is also characterised by an idealised view of black musicians and singers that are often represented in a passionate language that sometimes borders on exoticism, and at other times identifies with African Americans more as a class rather than a racial group. Importantly however, the influence of romanticism in Oliver's blues writing is not to be understood as a trait which devalues

¹⁷⁴ B. A. Botkin, in *The New York Times Book Review*, quoted on reverse of *The Meaning of the Blues*.

the worth of his research, but instead should be interpreted as one of the underlying features of the nature of blues scholarship. The level of personal involvement in Oliver's writing in the fifties reflects the personalised experience of the listening process and demonstrates the difficulty the blues writer faces in disengaging with his tastes. Oliver's early career as a blues writer provides an insight into the transatlantic movements of the blues years before the revival of the sixties when the names of Robert Johnson and Charley Patton as beacons of authentic blues would become the norm, and the British invasion bands would begin paying homage to their idolized blues masters. Oliver's early scholarship was pivotal to British conceptions of blues in this period as it was undoubtedly the largest source of information and commentary on the music.

Chapter 2

‘Blues Fell This Morning’

Record Collecting and the Analysis of Lyrics in the Reconstruction of the Blues

This chapter will focus on the Oliver’s first major book on the blues, *Blues Fell This Morning: the Meaning of the Blues*, and examine the book’s representation of the blues and African American life. While Oliver’s writing for British jazz periodicals may have been the staple reading of a relatively restricted following, the book would attract considerably more attention. *Blues Fell This Morning* was first published in 1960, although it would have been released earlier were it not for a six month printer’s strike which meant it appeared shortly after American folklorist Samuel Charters’ *The Country Blues*. These two very different publications unofficially marked the beginning of blues being studied as a separate genre from jazz. Former editor of *Blues World* Bob Groom argues that these two publications ‘were the milestones’ of the blues research at the time.¹⁷⁵ Importantly, they also exemplify the simultaneous emergence of dedicated attention to blues scholarship on both sides of the Atlantic. While it may be difficult to quantify the actual impact of Oliver’s book, the fact that the guitarist of the The

¹⁷⁵ Paul Oliver in ‘A Conversation with Paul Oliver,’ Professor Bob Garratt, 2/6/2004, Harrow County Staff, http://www.jeffreymaynard.com/Harrow_County/POliver.htm Retrieved 16/06/2012 16:32; Interview with the author 18/11/2009, Appendix 1.10, p. 411

Groundhogs, Tony McPhee decided to hold a copy in his hand while dressed as a priest for the cover of the album *Blues Obituary* (1969), invites the conjectural suggestion that for some white blues musicians it was of ‘biblical’ importance.¹⁷⁶ Oliver’s book has acquired an almost legendary status among notable blues writers. As Paul Garon recalls, ‘*Blues Fell This Morning* was the single most important work for my blues education.’ At the time of its release the book was an insight into a culture and world of experience which offered an alternative to what Alan Balfour, a contributor for the magazine *Blues & Rhythm*, called ‘the sanitized version of American history I was taught at school.’¹⁷⁷ This was because Oliver’s book was remarkable in the fact that it presented one of the first instances of British writing on the socio-cultural life of African Americans. As Val Wilmer recalls, at the time there was little writing on the subject in Britain that had examined the cultural and political implications of African American music.¹⁷⁸

In many respects the book focused more on the context that produced the blues than the music itself. Oliver’s passionately written and highly accessible narrative presented the lyrics of 350 blues songs, mostly taken from his personal collection of records from the 1920s to the early 1950s, and described the meaning those lyrics held within the context of the African American world. Explored are the most prevalent themes in blues songs such as work, relationships, sex, gambling, health and disease, poverty, superstition, natural disasters, migration and rootlessness, but Oliver approaches each theme from the sociological condition that lyrics suggest, rather than analyse the lyrics directly. The book brought together the bulk of Oliver’s work throughout the fifties, which was aided by fellow record collectors and blues enthusiasts who helped to

¹⁷⁶ The Groundhogs, *Blues Obituary*, Arkama LP5271 (1969)

¹⁷⁷ Quoted in *The Paul Oliver 70th Birthday Tribute*

¹⁷⁸ Val Wilmer quoted in Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, p. 115

transcribe lyrics, find records and provide contextual information.¹⁷⁹ However, in the pursuit of the meaning of blues lyrics and establishing blues as a musical genre worthy of study in its own right, *Blues Fell This Morning* highlights the reification of the blues and African American world which produced it, a process of ‘blues construction’ that was gathering steam following almost a decade of blues scholarship, the tours of numerous blues musicians in Britain, and an increasingly diversified musical landscape.

Blues Fell This Morning makes it clear that rather than just representing a form of entertainment, the blues was intrinsically tied to social and economic circumstances of ordinary African Americans: it had a *meaning* for a specific people, and was thus worthy of scholarly attention. However, as this chapter will demonstrate, by relying on the lyrics of blues recordings, the book further reified the blues as a definable and identifiable category which set it apart from other music, be it jazz or the music of the new teenage generations beginning to take control of the charts in the late fifties. Oliver’s methodology also saw the evolution in the image of the bluesman as a spokesperson for African Americans, the strengthening of the idea that blues mirrored their experiences, and fostered the notion of a more sincere and honest relationship between African Americans and the natural world. These motifs were upheld by an ever-present but subtle undertone of disillusion with the modern world personified by the commercial music industry. The focus on the physical conditions of African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century also begins to trace a narrative of the African American experience. In *Blues Fell This Morning* this is constructed in the combination of a sociological, and at times anthropological, survey of Southern and urban black life in the United States, and the lyrics of blues songs. The result is a reality blurred with fiction that becomes manifest

¹⁷⁹ Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: the Meaning of the Blues* (London: Cassell, 1960), p. xviii

in poetic descriptions of nameless and imagined characters that are brought to life by Oliver.

The ‘outsider’ debate: Afrocentrism vs Paul Oliver

Importantly, *Blues Fell this Morning* is narrated by a British blues record collector and enthusiast yet to visit the United States. As his decision to stop playing music had demonstrated, Oliver was well aware of the possible misinterpretations this may have caused,

Though possibly no further removed from my subject in distance than the historian is removed from his in time, I am acutely aware of my remoteness from the environment that nurtured the blues. The help given me by visiting blues singers has therefore been invaluable and I would like to express to them my heartfelt thanks for their patient interest and kindly forbearance of my endless questions. In many hours of conversation Big Bill Broonzy drew from his inexhaustible fund of memories of half a century; Jimmy Rushing recalled at length the hey-day of the twenties; Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry reminisced on blues and blues singers of the thirties and forties, demonstrating many points, and Brother John Sellers gave me the benefit of his wide knowledge of the blues in the post-war years.¹⁸⁰

Despite his ‘remoteness,’ Oliver was confident that his experiences with visiting musicians to the UK, combined with a detailed survey of blues lyrics and the use of extant literature on African American society, would go some way to bridging the knowledge gap. As discussed in the previous chapter, the author also believed that dedicated record collecting was a means of infiltrating the world of the blues. While the accounts from blues singers like Broonzy and Sellers were invaluable, the intermixture of sociological description and memories from oral histories also created the possibility for

¹⁸⁰ Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, p. xvii

realities to become blurred with nostalgia, or romanticism, something which became much more evident in *Conversation with the Blues* (1965), following Oliver's field trip in the summer of 1960. However, the issue of the blues critic's race *and* national origin was raised by the passionate appraisal for Oliver's work in the book's foreword, written by the African American author Richard Wright,

As a Southern-born American Negro, I can testify that Paul Oliver is drenched in his subject; his frame of reference is as accurate and concrete as though he himself had been born in the environment of the blues. Can an alien, who has never visited the *milieu* from which a family of songs has sprung, write about them? In the instance of such a highly charged realm as the blues, I answer a categoric and emphatic Yes. Indeed, I see certain psychological advantages in an outsider examining these songs and their meaning: his passionate interest in these songs is proof that the songs spoke to him across racial and cultural distances; he is geographically far enough from the broiling scene of America's racial strife to seize upon that which he, conditioned by British culture, feels to be abiding in them; and, in turn, whatever he finds enduring those songs he can, and with easy conscience, relate to that in his culture which he feels to be humanly valid. In short, to the meaning of the blues, Paul Oliver brings, in the fullest human sense, what court of law term 'corroborative evidence.'¹⁸¹

This calls to mind the Carnegie Corporation Board's selection of the Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal for the sociological survey of the African American condition that resulted in the classic study, *An American Dilemma*. Myrdal recalled that,

..the whole question had been for nearly a hundred years so charged with emotion that it appeared wise to seek as the responsible head of the undertaking someone who could approach his task with a fresh mind, uninfluenced by traditional attitudes or by earlier conclusions, and it was therefore decided to 'import' a general director¹⁸²

Similarly according to Wright, Oliver's 'remoteness' was a distinct advantage allowing the British author the possibility to examine the blues in a more objective light, free of

¹⁸¹ Richard Wright, 'Foreword' in *Blues Fell This Morning*, p. x-xi

¹⁸² Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: the Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (London: Harper & Row, 1944[sic]1962), p. xlviii

any politically charged bias that may have clouded an American scholar. This was the self-confessed case of Charters who recalls being motivated by the need to highlight the creative qualities of African Americans in order to challenge the racial and social injustice of America.¹⁸³ Instead, Oliver could focus more on the aspects of the songs that made them unique, ‘humanly valid,’ and therefore universally appealing. Wright’s conception of the blues is framed in the context of beauty emerging from tragedy, of the tenacity of the human spirit against insurmountable odds. He emphasised the fact that the African American’s history of slavery and racial oppression meant that the blues ‘ought not to have come into being.’¹⁸⁴ In this sense, Wright espouses Oliver’s thesis that the music was borne of ‘a certain cultural separation,’

the blues has grown with the development of Negro society on American soil; that it has evolved from the peculiar dilemma in which a particular group, isolated by its skin pigmentation or that of its ancestors, finds itself when required to conform to a society which yet refuses its full integration within it.¹⁸⁵

For Wright, however, Oliver’s socio-cultural distance from the ‘milieu’ of the blues could be bridged by the fact that the content of the blues were of universal character, despite emanating from a distinct social group which was isolated as a result of its racial difference.

For many African American blues critics however, Oliver’s distance from African American culture has led to many misrepresentations and errors of judgement. More vociferous than any other has been Jon Michael Spencer, who has argued that ‘Oliver has done more than any other writer to impede the understanding of the blues and the race of

¹⁸³ Samuel B. Charters, *The Country Blues*, (New York: Da Capo, 1975 [sic]1959), p. x

¹⁸⁴ Richard Wright, ‘Foreword’ in *Blues Fell This Morning*, p. vii

¹⁸⁵ Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, p. 5

people who were its creators.’ Indeed, he passionately challenged and re-answered Wright’s question on whether an ‘alien’ could adequately write about the blues: ‘The answer ... is a categorical and emphatic No.’¹⁸⁶ For Spencer, as well as many other ethnocentric commentators, external commentary has led to misrepresentations of the music due to the fact that in order to understand the blues, it is necessary to be native to the idiom – African American and from the South. However, this stance serves to perpetuate rather than challenge stereotypical clichés such as ‘white people can’t sing the blues.’ While it is inevitable that the physical and cultural remoteness of white blues writers during the revival caused some mis-representations and romanticized ideas of the blues and black culture, to follow the ethnocentric argument presented by Spencer would nullify the validity of most kinds social, anthropological or historical research. The strict divisions drawn between white and black cultural categories as hermetic and separate from one another, also tends to minimize the fluidity of cultural forms, as suggested by Hagstrom Miller’s study. As Brian Ward suggests, the ‘Afrocentrism’ that emphasizes the hermeneutic nature of black culture and seeks to overturn centuries of racial subordination, can often work in favour of legitimizing the racial discourses of segregation.¹⁸⁷ Indeed, the ethnocentric debate also serves to minimize the impact of African American culture on white audiences, and the subsequent interaction of the two in the formation of ideas on the blues. The very existence of blues and jazz appreciation and scholarship in Europe from the twenties onwards demonstrates that African American music had travelled well beyond the borders of the United States, and was therefore open to interpretation and representation from outside its natural home.

¹⁸⁶ Spencer, ‘Blues and Evil: Theomusicology and Afrocentricity,’ p. 38; Spencer, *Blues and Evil*, p. xx

¹⁸⁷ Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, p. 4

Spencer's stance also places the responsibility of misrepresentation of white blues scholars, without acknowledging the role that blues singers themselves often took in creating the genre. As indicated in the previous chapter, blues singers such as Big Bill Broonzy were fundamental in transatlantic conceptions of the blues, and as Bob Riesman's biography demonstrates, the singer was a master of reinvention and of giving his audiences what they thought they wanted. Oliver's scholarship on the blues that was largely influenced by meetings and interviews with numerous singers, can help to bring to light the complicit role of singers in constructions of ideas about the blues during the revival.¹⁸⁸

Paradoxically, a significant proportion of 'white' writing shares many characteristics with the ethnocentrism of African American writers. Much in the same way that writers such as Spencer, Cone and Murray have attempted to defend the blues from white appropriation and dilution, many white blues scholars have emphasized the fact that the blues belongs firmly within African American folk culture in order to defend the music from white cultural colonialism. Charters, for instance, argued that to understand the blues was to empathize with the 'fabric of Negro life itself.'¹⁸⁹ So much was the blues vital to the existence of African Americans, that the music was seen as being synonymous and representative of the African American experience. Richard Middleton also emphasized the importance of the African American experience to understanding the blues by arguing the music represented 'the Negro's strategy for living' in an oppressive world.¹⁹⁰ William Barlow adopted a similar interpretation by

¹⁸⁸ See for instance Riesman, *I Feel So Good*.

¹⁸⁹ Charters, *The Country Blues*, p. 19

¹⁹⁰ Richard Middleton, *Pop Music and the Blues: A Study of the Relationship and its Significance* (London: Gollancz, 1972), p. 27

placing the emphasis on a history from below, and arguing that a distinctive and separate African American culture, such as the blues represented, was vital to the survival of African Americans during and after slavery. Black folk songs were seen as being made up of past experiences and acted as ‘cautionary folktales’ to solidify group cohesion. The lives of blues singers themselves were interpreted as representative of the separation from the mainstream: ‘[b]lues personas achieved mythical stature in the black community, constituting a black pantheon separate from – and in many ways antithetical to – the white heroes and heroines of middle-class America.’¹⁹¹ Even Oliver was effectively preempting the thesis of LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) when he argued that ‘the blues has grown with the development of Negro society on American soil.’ In *Blues People* (1963), one of the most well-known books on the blues, Jones equated the birth of the music (albeit with a looser definition that mixed blues with jazz) with the emergence of a distinctive African American identity in the post-Emancipation era. He argued that the blues ‘represented a clearly definable step by the Negro back into the mainstream of American society,’ and that ‘the term “blues” relates directly to the Negro, and his personal involvement in America.’¹⁹² As a consequence, most often white blues writers of the revival, as opposed to young white musicians, believed that white imitators and interpreters would never be fully capable of either replicating the music’s function for African American communities, or getting at the heart of the message the blues was believed to carry for its black audiences. The Afrocentric criticism of blues historiography therefore tends to divert attention from the more important questions on the nature of blues scholarship. What is of more interest is the fact that the music did

¹⁹¹ Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, p. 4/327

¹⁹² LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music that developed from it* (New York: Morrow, 1963), p. 86/93

become the object of study on both sides of the Atlantic, and Oliver's observations became highly influential in future representations of the music.

Mixed Reception

As discussed in Chapter 1, the early days of post-war blues writing were characterised by transatlantic correspondence and co-operation, which represented the fact that the blues was no longer limited to African American audiences. While disagreements in approach between American, European, and ethnocentric African American writers did emerge and persist into the second half of the twentieth century, the reactions to *Blues Fell This Morning* demonstrate that debates were as much internal (i.e. in the UK), as they were between nationalities and ethnicities. As Gussow has shown, writers of the Black Arts Movement were divided on the role of the blues within a modern African American social and cultural consciousness.¹⁹³ In another example, African American author Ralph Ellison had argued that LeRoi Jones' narrative was too strongly dictated by the militant attitudes developing among certain black factions during the sixties, and for this reason he suggested that *Blues People* was as indicative of Jones' attitudes towards white America and the Civil Rights issue, as it was of the blues. Interestingly, Ellison disagreed with Richard Wright regarding Oliver's approach to the blues. He defined *Blues Fell This Morning* as 'a sadly misguided effort,' arguing that the music had been better served by Stanley Edgar Hyman's essay 'The Folk Tradition.'¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ See Gussow, "If Bessie Smith Had Killed Some White People."

¹⁹⁴ Stanley Edgar Hyman, "The Folk Tradition" (1958), in Alan Dundes (ed) *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*. (New York & London: Garland, 1981 [sic]1973), p. 45-56

Hyman was reluctant to examine black culture as inherently oppositional to white, and instead promoted the analysis of folk traditions as part of a more inclusive model of modern western literature. He had argued that when African American culture seemed closest to its African folk roots and ancestry, it was also transcendent of national or racial traits, and thus more 'human.'¹⁹⁵

In Britain, the mixed reception that met the release of *Blues Fell This Morning* highlights the fact that the use of term 'blues scholarship' could be misleading for the reason that it suggests some consensus in approaches, or established guidelines for research. Many of Oliver's 'colleagues' were full of praise for the book. Fellow *Jazz Journal* critic Derrick Stewart-Baxter claimed it was a 'remarkable documentary' and that the author was 'a serious writer... for the serious student.' *Jazz Monthly's* G. E. Lambert agreed, claiming that Oliver's monograph was 'the best writing which has yet appeared on this subject.'¹⁹⁶ More numerable were the criticisms, demonstrating that the interpretation of the music was highly subjective. Oliver recalls that Alexis Korner was one of the first to comment on BBC radio by stating '[t]his was not the book we were expecting.' While it is unclear what Korner *had been* expecting, it seems likely that he shared the views of Bob Dawbarn whose review in *Melody Maker* was entitled 'This could have been THE book on the blues.' Dawbarn was sceptical of the book's strict focus on the literality of lyrics and the social deprivation of African Americans, and argued that 'all too often [Oliver's] text is a mere paraphrase of the verses he has quoted.' Poet and jazz critic Philip Larkin concurred and stated that Oliver often fell into no more than 'a mournful paraphrase of his material.' Charles Fox echoed these sentiments by

¹⁹⁵ Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Signet; 1966). p. 242;

¹⁹⁶ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, 'Blues Fell This Morning,' *Jazz Journal*, 13/4, April 1960, p. 18-9; G. E. Lambert, 'Blues Fell This Morning,' *Jazz Monthly*, 6/12, February 1961, p. 28-9

stating that the lyrics 'are mainly used to illustrate the author's conclusions,' and had expected more emphasis on the music and the singers than Oliver's sociological survey of African American life had allowed. Fox was also critical of the choice of songs selected for the book's accompanying record, arguing it was of 'academic rather than aesthetic interest.'¹⁹⁷ This prompted an article in response from Oliver, who justified his method of interpreting lyrics in relation to the lower-class black experience, and the selection of songs for the record: 'I hoped to illustrate as many different *forms* of folk blues expression as possible.'¹⁹⁸

These reactions demonstrate that by 1960 the blues was being interpreted in differing ways by various British blues collectors and enthusiasts, and there were very different views about the type of research which was required. Oliver's record was obviously not enough to appease readers that had expected more information on blues singers and on the musical element. However, as Oliver's response to criticisms indicates, the author was convinced that an understanding of the social conditions in which African Americans lived was vital if any insights were to be gained on the meaning of the blues,

For the majority of collectors, it may be fairly suggested, the appeal of listening to blues records lies mainly in the appeal of their musical qualities and often quite apart from the meaning of the verses themselves. But the music is the vehicle of expression; the true blues singer does not sing needlessly and his song is the medium by which he expresses what he intends to say. To appreciate the music without appreciating the content is to do an injustice to the blues singers

¹⁹⁷ Shapiro, *Alexis Korner*, p. 91; Bob Dawbarn, 'This could have been THE book on the Blues,' *Melody Maker*, April 2, 1960, p. 8; Philip Larkin, 'A Racial Art: *Blues Fell This Morning* by Paul Oliver', *Observer*, 27 March 1960, in Richard Palmer and John White (eds), *Larkin's Jazz: Essays and Reviews 1940-1984*. (London: Continuum, 1999[sic]2001) pp. 43-4; Charles Fox, 'Book & Disc Review: *Blues Fell This Morning*, Paul Oliver,' *Gramophone*, August 1960, p. 91

<http://www.gramophone.net/Issue/Page/August%201960/91/853199/> Retrieved 20/6/2012 at 17:15

¹⁹⁸ Paul Oliver, 'Apropos 'Blues Fell This Morning,' *Jazz Monthly*, 7/1, March 1961, p. 12/20 ; *Blues Fell This Morning: Rare Recordings of Southern Blues Singers*, Philips BBL 7369, 1960

and to fail to comprehend the full value of their work. In view of his peculiar social status and the complexities of the racial relations in the United States the world of the blues singer is circumscribed. His blues have meaning for him and he has ideas to express; it is impossible either to enjoy or to understand the blues to the full through the musical qualities alone.¹⁹⁹

Here, Oliver was essentially differentiating the music from other more popular genres. Blues singers did not sing ‘needlessly,’ and therefore there was more to the music than the rhythm which caused a foot to tap or a head to nod in time. There was meaning in the blues that needed to be communicated, and thus, discovered.

The Method of *Blues Fell This Morning*: the use of lyrics

Much of the early jazz literature in Britain which devoted space to the study of blues had laid the foundations for Oliver’s main line of inquiry in the book. The thematic study of lyrics was the most common method employed by jazz writers seeking to unlock the music’s African American roots. This was due to the fact that most jazz and blues critics were not musicologists, and also - given the British scholar’s forced reliance on records - partly because lyrics were one of the few sources of raw materials available for interpretation. The practice of associating the lyrics of songs with the lived experience of the singer’s themselves was in many ways an inevitable outcome of the association of blues with its African American origins, and a result of the superficial link formed between the music’s aural, or ‘blue’ characteristics and the African American position in American society. Many blues scholars have developed highly convincing arguments from the analysis of lyrics. Garon for instance, approaching his analysis from a surrealist

¹⁹⁹ Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, p. 12

perspective argued that the blues contains ‘an explosive essence of irreconcilable revolt against the shameful limits of an unlivable destiny,’ and that the music’s appeal was due to ‘the universal nature of the forbidden wishes it expresses.’ In another important study, Angela Davis used the lyrics of three blues women to reveal the existence of ‘a historical feminist consciousness that reflected the lives of working-class black communities.’ Guido Van Rijn also continues to examine blues expression in relation to historical realities, such as the American presidents.²⁰⁰ Most analyses of blues lyrics are pervaded by what Frith refers to as ‘reflection theory,’ that is, the faith in the lyrics of folk songs to convey the real world. However, as Frith’s critique of this theory argues, what has become ever more apparent in the realist interpretation of words in songs is that the method has suffered overwhelmingly from the arbitrary subjectivity of the interpreter. The extent to which certain songs convey reality more than others is largely determined by the person carrying out the analysis of meaning.²⁰¹

The problematic aspect of the subjective world of the interpreter must also be considered alongside the nature of blues on record. The enormous body of blues songs available for analysis, the three decades the recordings span, the range of styles this encompasses, the varying audiences to which blues have been directed and the idiosyncratic approaches of individual singers to composition are just some of the factors that contribute to the idiom’s accessibility from a range of standpoints. In essence, blues lyrics deal with such an overabundance of subjects and employ such wide-ranging

²⁰⁰ Paul Garon, *Blues and The Poetic Spirit* (London: Eddison Press Ltd, 1975), p. 8, 39; Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude ‘Ma’ Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holliday* (New York: Vintage, 1998), p. xv; see for instance Guido Van Rijn, *Roosevelt’s Blues: African-American Blues and Gospel Songs on FDR* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997) and *The Truman and Eisenhower Blues: African-American Blues and Gospel Songs, 1945-1960* (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006).

²⁰¹ Simon Frith, ‘Jazz and Suburbia,’ in Simon Frith (ed), *Music for Pleasure: Essays in the Sociology of Pop* (Routledge: New York, 1988), p. 112

techniques that the blues writer's selection of songs, combined with their organisation into a narrative, become emblematic of a constructed representation of the subject. This room for invention in the interpretation of blues lyrics is not dissimilar from the deconstructionist theories of historical practice. Questioning the classical notions of historical knowledge based on empiricism, Friedrich Nietzsche asserted that 'history is the work of the dramatist: to think one thing with another, and weave the elements into a single whole, with the presumption that the unity of plan must be put into objects if not already there.'²⁰² Much in the same way that post-structuralism refuted the subject's complete grasp of *the* historical truth, there is no absolute historical truth or meaning to blues that is not created at some level by the interpreter. This is not a denial of the existence of a truth to the blues or its meaning, but an acknowledgement of the blues scholar's inability to obtain its reality fully. From the selection of songs which exist, as much as historical artefacts or documents, in 'a pre-jigsawed state,' the blues writer weaves the various and sometimes disparate elements which constitute the lyric content of songs and brings them into a unified narrative. The author then actively controls and directs the blues singer's gaze to reveal a specific vision of the world, which ultimately is more indicative of the author's vision of the object they are seeking to describe. It must be said in later editions of *Blues Fell This Morning*, Oliver dropped the definite article from the subtitle to 'Meaning in the Blues,' perhaps in order to avoid drawing absolutist conclusions on the significance of blues songs.

Nonetheless, Oliver's analysis in the first edition of *Blues Fell This Morning* is an example of this subjectivism. Writing in the late fifties, Oliver was using material that

²⁰² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History* (1874) quoted in James Longenbach, *Modernist Poetics of History: Pound, Eliot, and the Sense of the Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 6

was predominantly from the interwar period and mostly from his personal collection, to offer a cross-section of the genre and to show that ‘the thematic content of the blues related to many aspects of black experience.’²⁰³ Oliver was careful to avoid over-generalizing and was fully aware of the selectiveness of his sample. While pointing out that omissions of certain singers were ‘in no way an indication of personal prejudice,’ the book still clearly identifies a particular kind of blues, predominantly what Charters’ referred to as ‘country’ blues and what Titon later called ‘downhome’ blues.²⁰⁴ Oliver was thus effectively demarcating the boundaries of the genre by making clear what was *not* blues. The discography in the book reveals that most of the songs are from the late twenties to the thirties, and the few numbers which date after that period are from singer’s that Oliver regarded as representative of the same tradition of country-style blues, such as John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters, Big Bill Broonzy, St. Louis Jimmy and J. B. Lenoir. This categorisation marginalises the newer, electrified and blues-derived styles which had emerged at Oliver’s time of writing. So the blues infused genres of rock ‘n’ roll and rhythm and blues of musicians such as of B.B. King, Chuck Berry, and Fats Domino have no place in the book. Interestingly however, the music of the latter was much closer to the music which young British musicians were listening to. Mick Jagger and Keith Richards both recall developing an interest in music in their late teens by listening to the hybrid styles of Elvis, Buddy Holly, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Chuck Berry.²⁰⁵ Oliver recalled that he had omitted this music because it had ‘reduced its content,’ in the sense that it no longer had a meaning to communicate to its audiences and had simply

²⁰³ Paul Oliver, ‘Preface to the Revised Edition’, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (Cambridge University Press, 1994) p. xxiv

²⁰⁴ Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, p 9

²⁰⁵ Lowenstein & Dodd (eds), *According to the Rolling Stones*, p. 6/8-9

become a form of thoughtless entertainment.²⁰⁶ Thus, *Blues Fell This Morning* begins to highlight the widening rift between the blues as interpreted by Oliver (and other blues scholars) and the world of popular music. This rift had a certain generational aspect. The end of the fifties and beginning of the sixties witnessed younger audiences engaging with music derived from the blues, and young musicians emulating the sounds of American rhythm and blues. As Alexis Korner had acknowledged, ‘America has “invented” The Teenager...The younger fans want new voices. They are on the whole, an audience that likes to know but does not want to learn.’²⁰⁷ The more purist elements of blues writings were highly territorial, as Keith Richards recalls fairly cynically,

The real blues purists were stuffy and conservative, full of disapproval, nerds with glasses deciding what’s really blues and what ain’t. I mean, these cats *know*? They’re sitting in the middle of Bexleyheath in London on a cold and rainy day, ‘Diggin’ My Potatoes’... Half of the songs they’re listening to, they have no idea of what they’re about, and if they did they’d shit themselves.²⁰⁸

Oliver would comment years after that ‘[i]t was no coincidence that the black audiences quit the blues like it had never been, when the Beatles and the Stones topped the charts.’²⁰⁹ Having lost its relation to the black community and become a form of entertainment for white audiences, the blues had lost its original *raison d’être*. These cultural conflicts help to understand the manner in which *Blues Fell This Morning* roots the music firmly within the context of the black experience, an attempt to establish the meaning of the music by relating it to African American reality.

²⁰⁶ Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (Cambridge University Press, 1994 [sic]1960), p. 281

²⁰⁷ Alexis Korner, ‘The Evolution of Muddy Waters’ in *Recorded Folk Music*, Sep-Oct 1959, Vol. 2, p. 5-8

²⁰⁸ Keith Richards, *Life: Keith Richards* (W&N, 2010), p. 82

²⁰⁹ Paul Oliver, ‘Blue-Eyed Blues: The Impact of Blues on European Popular Culture’ in C. W. E. Bigsby, (ed) *Approaches to Popular Culture* (Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1977), pp. 227-239, p. 239

The Blues as 'Mirror'

Oliver's book is centred on the premise that the blues are largely a reflection of the social and cultural context of the African American world: 'the folk singer is influenced by his environment, and his work is largely a reflection of it.'²¹⁰ This belief emanates from a long-standing view of the deterministic relationship envisioned between folk music and its environment that had been building in the work folklorists and revivalist jazz critics throughout the early twentieth century. However, in the instance of the blues and the African American experience, there existed a greater potential for this relationship to be emphasised given the backdrop of Jim Crow segregation and the social deprivation characterising black life in the US. In the introduction, Oliver makes this clear by stating that 'only the American Negro, whether purple-black or so light-skinned as to be indistinguishable from his sun-tanned White neighbour, can sing the blues.'²¹¹ Here Oliver maintains the imagined racial integrity of the music, but with some element of irony and as highlighted in Chapter 1, also upholds the view that it is possible for white observers to analyse the music, even though they may not be able to sing it. This motif is reinforced by Wright's *Foreword* that frames the story of the blues as one of beauty arising from misery. Thus, the music in *Blues Fell This Morning* is seen as giving voice to the African American experience,

In the blues were reflected the effects of the economic stress on the depleted plantations and the unexpected prosperity of the urban centres where conditions of living still could not improve. In the blues were to be found the major

²¹⁰ Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, p. 8

²¹¹ Ibid., p. 5

catastrophes both personal and national, the triumphs and the miseries that were shared by all, yet private to one. In the blues were reflected family disputes, the upheavals caused by poverty and migration, the violence and bitterness, the tears and the happiness of all. In the blues an unsettled, unwanted people during these periods of social unrest found the security, the unity and the strength that it so desperately desired.

Oliver's belief was that it was precisely the African American experience that forced meaning upon the music, meaning that 'the true blues singer does not sing needlessly,' thereby making the lyrics of blues songs 'socially significant.'²¹²

To exemplify this link, Oliver's approach begins with the process of detailing the physical and psychological conditions of a particular situation, such as the search for work in the aftermath of Reconstruction, and then follows the description with the lyrics of a song that gives the situation voice,

The last quarter of the nineteenth century saw an ever-increasing movement of Negro workers from state to state. By 1910 nearly one and three-quarter million Negroes had left their home states for others and of these some had moved West and half a million had gone North. As the pressure of hostile opinion and legislation became even greater, Negro workers sought new employment and travelled long distances in order to find it. In the ensuing years they were to be followed by thousands more.

REFRAIN

2. Poor boy, poor boy, poor boy, long ways from home.

I was down in Louisiana doin' as I please,
Now I'm in Texas I got to work or leave.
Poor Boy, *etc.*²¹³

Another example is presented in the context of the New Deal era, when schemes such as the Public Works Administration (PWA) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) provided some employment for African Americans during the Depression,

²¹² Ibid., p. 11-2

²¹³ Ibid., p. 15-6: lyrics from Ramblin' Thomas, 'Poor Boy,' 1929.

Though the men were not driven as many of them had been on the Southern plantations and the work was not by these standards hard, yet the road grading, the drilling and manual labour involved in many of the construction schemes was heavy enough, and the work paid only moderately well. Faced with the high rents that are charged in Negro sectors, and the debts incurred by having goods on credit in lean times, a labourer still had good reason for anxiety.

34. Working on the project with holes in all my clothes, (twice)
Trying to make me a dime, to keep the rent man from putting
me out doors.

I am working on the project, trying to make both ends meet, (twice)
But the pay-day is so long, oh well, well, until the grocery
man won't let me eat.²¹⁴

In these examples it is made apparent that Oliver did not base his focus on the actual lyrics themselves, but rather used the content of the songs as expressions of real situations. In this sense, Oliver's use of lyrics takes the shape of a 'semantic soundtrack,' much in the same way as the score of a film or documentary on the subject. This is made even clearer in Oliver's exploration of common health problems experienced by African Americans, such as the malady of pellagra which is followed by lyrics that do not explicitly mention the disease, but are suggestive of ill health: 'I'm in a bad condition, and I'm still going down slow.'²¹⁵ There are numerous examples of blues singers that experienced some of the realities described by Oliver, such as James 'Boodle-It' Wiggins who was brutally lynched after he failed to step off the pavement as a white woman walked past him. There are also numerous blues songs written in response to specific events experienced by singers as well as millions of African Americans, such as the numerous songs on the 1927 Mississippi floods, or 'Working on the Projects' as in the latter instance.²¹⁶ However, as the pellagra example indicates, many songs show only

²¹⁴ Ibid., p. 40: lyrics from Peetie Wheatstraw, 'Working on the Project,' 1937

²¹⁵ Ibid., p. 260: lyrics from St. Louis Jimmy, 'Bad Condition,' 1944

²¹⁶ Ibid., James 'Boodle-It' Wiggins p.207, Mississippi floods p. 234-8

tenuous links with the physical reality that Oliver describes. What this highlights is that while the relationship between blues lyrics and reality is in some cases self-evident, in many others it is somewhat forced by the author, thereby helping to construct the idea that the blues function as a mirror on contemporary black life.

One of the main reasons behind the suggested link between the music and reality comes from the interpretation of the language of the blues. For years, blues lyrics had been interpreted as equal to speech, sincere and direct. Max Jones argued that ‘the real blues sings out directly, unconcernedly, of life as it really is.’ Iain Lang and Rex Harris had also stressed the directness of blues lyrics and the comment they provided on the world as it appeared to the singer. This was perhaps best summarized by Francis Newton (Hobsbawm) who stated: ‘[n]obody beats about the bush in the blues.’²¹⁷ *Blues Fell This Morning* was no different, with Oliver declaring the blues to be ‘forthright and uncompromising’ in all subjects: ‘the blues singer sings in the language that he speaks,’ and thus ‘[blues] expression was a natural and uninhibited one.’²¹⁸ This pervasive view of blues expression was built upon the interpretation of the difference of African American language from that of Western popular music. Oliver often makes the effort to explain the difference, warning readers that to those who are unaccustomed with this form of expression, the lyrics could appear crude, coarse and sometimes offensive: ‘the forthright, uninhibited language of the blues must be accepted, and what is more, accepted without reserve or apology, for it is a natural transposition of the everyday language of both users and hearers.’²¹⁹ This sets up a dramatic binary opposition between the blues and popular

²¹⁷ Max Jones, ‘On Blues,’ p. 90; Lang, *Jazz in Perspective*, p. 122; Harris, *Jazz*; Newton, *The Jazz Scene*, p. 150

²¹⁸ Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, p. 111/116

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 117

music: 'in popular song and in particular the concoctions of 52nd Street euphemistic phrases are sung and winsome, sentimental, erotically evasive symbols are universally employed.'²²⁰ The blues is therefore natural, unadorned by masquerade and sometimes brutally honest, unlike its direct opposite which is 'concocted' and thus, false and dishonest.

Bluesman as Spokesman & the Blues as Catalyst

Oliver's representation of the blues as a reflection of the African American world, sung in a language that resembled everyday speech, places the blues singer at the heart of the story. The blues singer effectively takes on the role of the spokesperson for the race, giving voice to shared experiences,

... he is a realist, intimately concerned with his subjects but having no illusions about them...

In the sharply defined images of life that the blues reflects are mirrored the minutiae of experience of the ordinary Negro man. The words that the blues singer utters, the thoughts, passions, and reactions to which he has given voice are those that are shared by countless thousands of his fellows.²²¹

The realism which Oliver reads in lyrics stems from his the view that the blues singer 'sings from experience rather than sentiment.'²²² With this affirmation the image of the bluesman begins to take shape, as a figure who has experienced being black in a white country, and has the capacity to articulate those experiences through song. The literal interpretation of blues lyrics with the 'I' either embodying the autobiographical voice of the singer or representing the shared experience of the folk, works to form the image of

²²⁰ Ibid., p. 110

²²¹ Ibid., p. 298

²²² Ibid., p. 75

the blues singer as the voice of the African American lower class. The music was not simply a matter of pleasure, or entertainment, but spoke *to* and *of* a people, and it is in this sense that Oliver interprets blues as folk music, with the songs expressing the experiences and thoughts of the individual blues singer as well as the black community. For example, a historical situation is presented such as the migration northwards caused by the First World War,

The cessation of the influx of European immigrants coincided with Henry Ford's pronouncement, in 1914, that none of his workers would earn less than five dollars per day, and it was in that year that he commenced to employ Blacks on his assembly lines. As his huge plants in Detroit continued to expand and more coloured workers were taken on, the news reached the remotest corners of the South and attracted men who had been living in penury.

22 I'm going to Detroit, get myself a good job, (twice)
Tried to stay around here with the starvation mob.

I'm goin' to get me a job, up there in Mr. Ford's place (twice)
Stop these eatless days from starin' me in the face.²²³

The lyrics of the song are presented to express the experience of the situation, with the blues singer singing of his personal involvement experience which becomes also that of all African Americans who migrated. This example is complemented by another which describes the fact that not all those who migrated found the improved conditions they had hoped,

Negroes who had gone North to find better employment became disillusioned; the South that they had left in bitterness now seemed less cruel. Cotton prices had risen to nine cents in 1940, to fourteen cents in 1941 and were to rise to twenty cents in the following year. Many were attracted southwards. Sang Roosevelt Sykes:

38 (Spoken) Well I'm going back down South, where men are men, and
women are glad of it
Oooh – I've got those Southern blues, (twice)

²²³ Ibid., p. 32 lyrics from Blind Blake, 'Detroit Bound Blues,' 1928

Cotton prices going higher, an' I ain't got no time to lose.²²⁴

In these examples it can be seen that Oliver saw these songs as expressions of the reality of African American life. The blues singer was heard as a voice of 'real' experiences, giving the music value as a form of oral history, with the blues singer as the storyteller.

From the manner in which Oliver summarises the sentiments of 'Negroes who had gone North,' it could be argued that the author was narrating a rather simplistic form of history, which suited the fairly vague and sometimes general lyrics of songs. Indeed, to say that African Americans were generally 'disillusioned' with conditions in the North and regarded the South in a new light would be to simplify a number of historical factors and psychological responses to migration. In the case of the Roosevelt Sykes, for example, the singer was singing as much of women who were glad of men being men, as he was of cotton prices. This perhaps demonstrates the selective and subjective character of interpreting lyrics as the mirror of the real world. But in *Blues Fell This Morning*, the relationship between the blues and the African American world takes many forms. For instance, Oliver describes the relief from hard labour that people sought in barrelhouses and gin-mills, places that were often pervaded by violence, and uses the blues singer's experience of a similar event as an example, 'I took a gal to the beer tavern, things was lookin' hot/But my ole lady took her pocket knife and cut out my baby's heart.'²²⁵ In another instance, Oliver describes some of the conditions forcing African Americans to wander and drift on the road during the Depression,

the droves of coloured men, women and children who were to be seen
scuffling along the dirt roads were unwelcome to both White and coloured

²²⁴ Ibid., p. 42-3: lyrics from Roosevelt Sykes, 'Southern Blues,' 1948

²²⁵ Ibid., p. 170 lyrics from Peetie Wheatstraw, 'Beer Tavern,' 1939

communities. As the years wore on and money became scarce, when the poverty of those who wandered in the streets was almost equalled by that of the residents of homes for which they could not afford the rent, the begging cup of the hobo 'bumming his chuck' and seeking a 'handout' became more resented.

56 I have walked a lonesome road ill my feet is too sore to walk (twice)
I beg scraps from the people, oh well, till my tongue is too stiff to talk.²²⁶

The use of lyrics in this paraphrased style force the link between the social reality of the African American experience and the blues. The blues singer is regarded as having lived the life of which he or she sings, which in turn, gives the singer an incontrovertible authenticity not only as a musician, but as a storyteller, a historian and the voice of a people.

Interestingly, the 'direct' and 'uncompromising' language read in the lyrics is interpreted not only as a form of communication, but as a philosophical stance, the blues singer's approach to life. This is presented in the case of the Depression and the ensuing difficulties of finding work,

Negroes found that at first they were still George Schyler's 'mudsill of America' and in the struggle for employment they had lost ground even in the hated 'jobs.' Accustomed to the fight for survival, they accepted the situation philosophically.

30. I woke up this morning laughing, laid down last night a-crying, (twice)
Lost all my money, broke and didn't have a dime

When I had money, I had friends for miles around,
Hmmmmm-mmm I had friends for miles around,
Ain't got no money, my friends don't seem to know me now.²²⁷

Thus, the sincerity of the lyrics is read as an expression of the African American's acceptance and endurance of whatever life brings forth. This is repeated throughout the

²²⁶ Ibid., p. 58-9 lyrics from Peetie Wheatstraw, 'Road Tramp Blues,' 1938

²²⁷ Ibid., p. 36-7: lyrics from Walter Davis 'My Friends Don't Know Me,' 1945

book. Oliver describes the deprivation of black housing and the risks of disease and destruction that plagues the living conditions of African Americans, and in turn outlines that the endurance of these conditions justifies the 'Negro's despairing fatalism.' Additionally, blind blues singers, crippled by their disability, 'seldom seek sympathy' and instead produce songs that state facts and sing of things as they are without complaint. This is exaggerated in the stark image Oliver portrays of a man dying with his wife at his bedside: 'Fatalistically, the sick man faces death and, trying to spare the suffering of those that he leaves behind, asks only that he be remembered with love and not with tears when he is laid in the cold ground.'²²⁸ Thus the blues singer also assumes a heroic sense of stoicism, accepting the world as it is and enduring any hardship, including impending death, without self-pity or protest.

The heightened and idealized representation of blues singers as spokespersons which is constructed in Oliver's interpretation of lyrics helps to explain the important role they and the music play in black society: '[t]he blues acted as a catalyst for the blinding anger and frustration that sought to demolish the moral codes and spirit of a man, and the act of artistic creation brought satisfaction and comfort both to him and his companions.'²²⁹ From this comment it is clear that Oliver reiterates the value of blues as a 'folk' in terms of its function of allowing a release of anxiety for the black performers and audience as a whole. Oliver argued that blues was popular among African Americans precisely because the music 'had meaning not only for the singer but for every Negro who listened.'²³⁰ Despite the fact that Oliver had been careful to point out early on that pointed out that 'the blues does not reflect the whole of Negro life in the United States,'

²²⁸ Ibid., 'Negro's despairing fatalism' p. 246; 'seldom seek..' p. 267; 'Fatalistically..' p. 274

²²⁹ Ibid., p. 59

²³⁰ Ibid., p. 12

this is often contradicted by the representation of blues singers as central figures in African American communities: '[t]he death of a blues singer is a tragedy within the Negro race and its repercussions are little felt by other Americans.'²³¹ Not only is the image of the blues singer presented almost as a messiah, but the distance of black culture from the dominant white mainstream of American society is firmly established. Therefore, the blues – functioning as a coping strategy for those 'close to moral and mental disintegration' – is also distanced from the perceived function of popular music, whose sole purpose is imagined as resting in fickle and insignificant entertainment.²³² The framing of the blues as folk music in *Blues Fell This Morning* is therefore achieved as much in terms of its opposition to contemporary culture, as it is the music displaying certain musical or aesthetic traits which distinguish it as folk. Despite the inherent contradictions in defining the blues as folk, one of the principal ways in which Oliver attempts to do this is by describing the African American world as one different from the reader's, and therefore in need of deep description and explanation.

The Real and the Imagined: Social Anthropology and Fiction

As has been suggested, *Blues Fell This Morning* is perhaps more a description of lower-class African American life from the end of the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century, than it is an exploration of the blues idiom. This was in line with the author's objective of gaining an insight into the social, cultural and economic background which produced the music. Oliver made use of a range of sources in order to describe in

²³¹ Ibid., p. 281

²³² Ibid., p. 61

detail various facets of African American life, from the research of anthropologists such as B. A. Botkin and Melville Herskovitz, the sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, African American writing such as that by W. E. B DuBois, Richard Wright and Adam Clayton Powell Jnr, to the statistics on the African American population provided by the United States Information Service (USIS). As a result, each chapter gives a detailed account of the social, economic and physical conditions of African Americans. Oliver details the physical harshness of the various types of manual labour they faced both in rural and urban settings; he describes the disenfranchising systems of sharecropping and debt peonage locking black labourers; the experience and impact of large scale events such as the Depression and the two world wars; the social, economic and racial push and pull factors conditioning migratory movements; the experience of violence, whether through racial external prejudice or internal forces caused by desperation and anxiety; he examines the nature and composition of the African American family; the role of religion and superstition in black culture; he provides an account on the African American appropriation of popular stereotypes, such as the caste system, upheld by the black community as much as it is perpetrated by racism; and he provides a grim account of the social deprivation that causes the increased level of health problems among the black population. It is unsurprising that in his review the jazz critic Philip Larkin described the book as ‘a drab and depressing recital.’²³³

However, it was Oliver’s intention to demonstrate that the negative aspects associated with African American life, such as increased rates of crime and violence, promiscuity and disease, lack of hygiene, laziness and rootlessness, were products of the

²³³ Larkin, ‘A Racial Art,’ p. 44

social and economic circumstances that deprived them of adequate housing, employment opportunities, education and sanitation. He effectively wanted to argue that,

Psychologically, biologically, and anthropologically the belief that the Negro is inferior to the White man and incapable of the higher emotions is fallacious and insupportable. The capacity for love, for devotion, for courage, for selflessness is no less than that of any other group, even if conversely he is as prone to similar weaknesses of rapacity, avarice, or hatred as are others.²³⁴

The author attempts to nullify misrepresentations of African Americans by giving sociological and psychological explanations. A clear example is made in the case of the propensity for superstition among African Americans,

Victimized by circumstances over which he has no control, facing adverse conditions with no conception of the events that have brought them about, witnessing friends and relatives falling sick and dying with no cause that he can comprehend, the primitive and uneducated man falls readily into superstition. Observing a sequence of events or noting the coincidence of happenings strange or unexpected in themselves, he will satisfy his desire for understanding and seek to quieten his disturbed mind by drawing illogical but acceptable relationships between them. Frequently it is the lack of even a rudimentary education rather than inferior intelligence or intellectual capacity that causes a man to invent or accept such superstitions as a substitute for knowledge.²³⁵

Similarly, the inclination that many African Americans seemed to have for gambling can be explained by the underlying lack of social mobility and unstable economic status. With regards to the higher rate of health problems among the black population, Oliver argued that ‘the Negro is often more openly exposed to illnesses of many forms because he is insufficiently equipped to oppose them.’²³⁶ In this sense, Oliver adopts a descriptive style that oscillates between the sociological and anthropological as it aims to dispel racial stereotypes by arguing that the social and environmental conditions in which the

²³⁴ Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, p. 89

²³⁵ Ibid., p. 133

²³⁶ Ibid., ‘gambling’ p. 151, ‘health’ p. 268

African American is marginalised, are at fault. It might be argued that Oliver sought dispel some popular myths of the African American, at a time when in Britain racial stereotyping had been conditioned by a number of factors. The Second World War was not a distant memory, and the presence of African American GI's in the UK and the 'brown baby' legacy had caused substantial friction in different parts of the country.²³⁷ While Alan Lomax had gone a long way to producing educational programs on African American culture for the radio, the representation of black culture on television was somewhat different. *The Black and White Minstrel Show*, a program with whites dressed up in blackface performing song and dance routines, began to air on primetime television in 1958, and would continue to do so for two decades. The same year also saw the spilling of racial tensions on to the streets of Nottingham in August, and in London with the Notting Hill race riots of September.²³⁸ Therefore, in *Blues Fell This Morning's* educational tone became most evident the 'scholasticism' of British blues research, heavily focused on fact and empirical evidence.²³⁹ Oliver's descriptions attempted to humanize the African American population by suggesting that their condition is forced upon them, rather than being a manifestation of a different and inferior race. This is also suggestive of Oliver's focus on the African American population as a coherent and distinctive class group, shifting away from some of the more overt *negrophilie* of his articles in the fifties.

²³⁷ Graham Smith, *When Jim Crow Met John Bull: Black American Soldiers in World War II* (London: IB Taurus & Co. Ltd, 1987), p. 217

²³⁸ 'Black and White Minstrel Creator Dies,' www.guardian.co.uk, 29/8/2002, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2002/aug/29/broadcasting2> retrieved 23/07/2012 at 16:28; Michael Keith, *Race, Riots and Policing: Lore and Disorder in a Multi-racist Society* (London: UCL Press, 1993), p. 44-5

²³⁹ Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, p. 266

While Oliver aims for this inclusive approach in one sense, he also assumes a descriptive style which encourages the interpretation of the African American as 'other.' This appears in the detailed explanations that deal in particular with African American systems of behaviour. In the following extract, Oliver attempts to explain the motivation behind certain feelings which are described as if alien to the reader,

As the extremes of mental capacity, of madness and genius sometimes seem to converge, so too the extremes of emotion seem closely allied. Outbursts of anger may come when the heart is bursting with affection; pain and pleasure are inextricably interwoven; the deepest feelings of love may readily turn to the cruellest hate. Humiliation, frustration, bitterness and selfishness are bound up in the complex emotions that are experienced by the lover whose partner has been unfaithful.

118. If I was cold and hungry, I wouldn't even ask you for bread (twice)
I don't want you no more, if I'm on my dying bed.

At one time I loved you, but sure do hate you now, (twice)
Baby, you are the kind don't need no good man nohow.

Ev'ry man in town knows about your ornery ways (twice)
Cain't nobody change you now, 'cause you've been a devil all of your
days.²⁴⁰

Once again the lyrics function to convey the presence of these 'extreme' emotions among African Americans. Not only does the author attempt to explain these emotions, but also inherently promotes the idea that the intensity of these feelings is less prevalent in the world of the reader, as in the case of love,

The blues singer brought a basic simplicity of mind to the subject: he seldom attempted to unravel the problem but states his condition of heart in uncomplicated terms which in their sincerity lost little.

99 Don't leave me, baby, 'cause I'm so down and blue (twice)
Deep down in my heart, baby, my love is only for you.

²⁴⁰ Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, p. 101: lyrics from Leroy's Buddy, 'Triflin' Woman Blues,' 1939

You are the only woman ever got into my heart, (twice)
Lawsy, how would I live, baby, if we were to part?

I'm down and blue an' I'm as blues as I can be, (twice)
Because your love, baby, means all this world to me.²⁴¹

What begins to emerge in Oliver's description of the African American world is an almost supernatural relationship of the black community with the instinctive aspects of human emotion. Indeed, the author was unconvinced by the Victorian modes of thought evidenced in early writing on the blues (such as Lang) that had adopted stereotyped views of the 'depressed classes [as] incapable of spiritual love.'²⁴² As a consequence, however, Oliver takes this to extreme lengths by depicting the lower-class African American as possessing natural human qualities that have been erased by modern life in the West. This is replicated in the relationship that Oliver envisions between the African American and the natural world,

Since the Negro appeared in any appreciable numbers on the West Coast, there have been no earth tremors of any consequence and away from the Pacific volcanic perimeter ring such subterranean movements are not a serious problem in the United States. But though earthquakes do not bother him, the Negro still feels very much at the mercy of the earth; for so many of his fellows their entire lives have depended upon its fertility. The lives of a large proportion of Negroes are closely associated with the fundamental elements of the Ancients: with Earth, Air, Water and Fire.²⁴³

This presumed understanding between African Americans and the land aligns Oliver with the romanticism pervasive in the folk revival, which longed for a long lost connection to the natural world. It allows the possibility for some assumptions regarding the desires of ordinary African Americans, as in the case of black prisoners: 'they prefer to be in the

²⁴¹ Ibid., p. 89

²⁴² Ibid., p. 86

²⁴³ Ibid., p. 245

state farms than in the jails where the congestion, the inactivity, the boredom destroys the soul. They can smell the earth, see the sky, sing, and work with their companions.'²⁴⁴ Thus, Oliver's description and explanation of African American life has an inherently paradoxical quality. Historical and sociological facts which pertain to the realities of African American life are intertwined with the psychological assumptions made from the interpretation of lyrics, demonstrating the convergence of fact and fiction.

Perhaps the most evident examples of the manner in which reality and imagination become indistinguishable are in Oliver's semi-fictionalised descriptions of particular scenarios that attempt to explain the African American state of mind. Continuing this manner of narration from his articles throughout the fifties, in *Blues Fell This Morning* it occurs most vividly in the exploration of relationships between men and women, and infidelity in particular,

For the man who has struggled hard to try and secure for his wife a better home and standard of living, and in doing so has been forced to spend all his waking hours at work, 'doubling' his jobs to secure extra pay, her unfaithfulness is especially bitter. Fundamentally, his neglect of his wife and his inability to give her the tenderness and love that she as a woman demands with her whole being, has been because her interests were uppermost in his mind. Knowing that he loves her, she never shares his love and in her own-first in easy distractions, finally by giving herself to another man whose attentions are flattering and liberal because his responsibilities to her are negligible.

113. I work all day long for you, until the sun go down,
I work all day long for you, baby, from sun-up until the sun go down,
An' you take all my money and drink it up and come home and
want to fuss and clown.

I worked for you so many times, when I was really too sick to go,
I worked for you, baby, when your man was slipping in my back-door,
I can see for myself so tell your back-door man I won't be your fool no
more.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 216

²⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 97: lyrics from Lonnie Johnson, 'I Ain't Gonna Be Your Fool,' 1938

Oliver builds this mini-fiction from the lyrics of songs on similar themes, often using songs from different singers recorded at different times in a format which adopts the songs as a dialogue between the man and the woman concerned, as can be seen in the next stage of the story,

When next he sees her she is leaning back in a sleek Cadillac Eight, the arm of another man about her shoulders. Whilst she is enjoying the pleasure of luxuries that he has never been able to offer and her laughter still echoes in his mind, he tries to convince himself that she will soon return.

115. I saw you ridin' roun', you ridin' a bran' new automobile, (twice)
Yes, you was sittin' there with your hustler-driver at the wheel.²⁴⁶

It also incorporates the personalised writing style that includes the repeated use of 'he' and 'she,' reminiscent of, among many others, Melville Herskovitz's descriptions of the African American in *The American Negro*. For instance, some of Herskovitz's chapter titles were 'The Amalgam He Represents' and 'His Significance for the Study of Race.'²⁴⁷ The effect of this style is to build a narrative-like quality to Oliver's description of the African American world, which effectively blurs the boundaries between the real and the imagined. More than mere description, the people become characters that the reader can identify and sympathize with, as in the case of a nameless black convict who recorded a few songs in ambiguous circumstances in 1936:

His voice was rough, uncultured and intensely moving, as he sang his only testament. There is no blues more poignant, none that reproaches more directly the indifference of those who hear and do not attempt to comprehend, or see and do not recognize, than this simple and beautiful creation of a Negro convict. But it was the blues of a man with spirit but without hope, who has been so long severed from the outside world that Oklahoma was to him still the

²⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 99: lyrics from Lightnin' Hopkins, 'Automobile,' 1946

²⁴⁷ Melville Herskovitz, *The American Negro* (New York: Knopf, 1928)

‘Territory’ of the Indian nations; and who has been paying a debt to a society that had given him nothing. ‘You heah me talkin’ to ya, buddy, what made ya stop by heah?’ he demands of the listener as a certain man might well have done of those who passed by on the other side of the Jericho road.²⁴⁸

Here is an instance where the author is openly romanticizing ‘the simple and beautiful creation’ of the African American prisoner, indeed, no blues was more ‘poignant.’ While revealing Oliver’s identification of authentic blues as the music of those at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and that had had nothing from society, this passage also perfectly summarises the author’s preoccupation with the most obscure material from the interwar era, and evidences the manner in which the music is both imagined and contextualized. The singer is made to appear as beckoning from a long lost time, to sing not for commercial reward or the possibility of freedom (although either could have been true), but purely because the blues is the form of expression which is most natural to him, and in this case probably his only form of response. The obscurity of this singer’s recordings is mirrored by the songs present on the record which accompanied Oliver’s book. Although some of the names on the record, such as Bukka White, Skip James and Blind Boy Fuller would be familiar to many blues enthusiasts today, the recordings of the other singers such as Barefoot Bill, Tallahassee Tight and Kansas Joe would have been extremely rare to everyone other than dedicated collectors at the time of publication.²⁴⁹ The obscurity of these recordings, together with the example of the nameless black convict, demonstrate how the selection of blues for the book placed the genre far back enough historically to be detached from the corruption of contemporary culture, but was

²⁴⁸ Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, p. 230

²⁴⁹ *Blues Fell This Morning: Rare Recordings of Southern Blues Singers* (1960)

also real enough in its existence through recordings to be reconstructed as an idyllic folk genre in the present.

What also emerges from these fictionalised descriptions is the prevalent depiction of lower-class African Americans as downtrodden victims of an oppressive and disenfranchising world. The language varies little from ‘disappointed,’ ‘disillusioned,’ with the typical blues singer seen as ‘[v]ictimised by circumstances over which he had no control.’ Oliver thus reserves little space for reaction or activism in African American agency. He argued that direct protest of social iniquities was not prevalent in blues lyrics, and that indirect protest could be more easily read in the sense of protest against the situations and feelings which segregation gave rise to.²⁵⁰ Although Oliver’s analysis allows for the building of community cohesion, there is little beyond ‘having the blues’ that African Americans are able to do to ameliorate their condition. This means that the images of Oliver’s characters stand in stark contrast to the life of illiterate sharecropper Nate Shaw, who was able to experience some success as a farmer despite numerous setbacks, or even Robin Kelley’s examination of everyday responses of ordinary African Americans in the Jim Crow South.²⁵¹ It also in appears in opposition to the ‘modernist black aesthetic’ consciousness which Roger House, for instance, reads in the music of Big Bill Broonzy.²⁵²

The reduction of African American agency in *Blues Fell This Morning* may have been the reasoning for Ralph Ellison’s criticism of the book as a ‘sadly misdirected effort.’ The criticism may have been aimed at the resigned acceptance of fate which

²⁵⁰ Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, p. 292-3

²⁵¹ Theodore Rosengarten, *All God’s Dangers; The Life of Nate Shaw* (University of Chicago Press, 2000); Kelley, ‘We Are Not What We Seem.’

²⁵² Roger House, *Blue Smoke: The Recorded Journey of Big Bill Broonzy*. (Louisiana State University Press, 2010), p. 114

Oliver's interpretation imposes upon his subjects. Others writers keen to stress the strength of African American folk culture and the resistance it posed to oppression have embraced Ellison's vision of the blues as a transcending force by facing hardship head-on. Daphne Duval Harrison built on this by identifying the blues as 'a driving force' which allowed the resolution of the 'inner conflict' of identity.²⁵³ Although many blues writers have since shared Oliver's regard for the blues' cathartic quality, some regard the context of performance and dance as more expressive of communal resistance against the oppression of the white world.²⁵⁴ But whereas a proportion of writers has approached the subject of blues research from an evidently ethnocentric perspective, that is, seeking to emphasise African American agency and creativity, along with the contribution of black cultural forms to American society, the writing of British blues enthusiasts in the fifties and sixties is characterised by a certain detachment from the political discourses surrounding the study of black culture at the time. Years after the book was published, Oliver recalled that the period in which the book was written was a time of great social, political and cultural upheaval, but had only mentioned issues pertaining to Civil Rights in the revised edition published in 1990.²⁵⁵ The analysis and description of the African American experience in the first edition is almost a-historical in this regard. The events of the growing Civil Rights movement, the emergence of black grass-roots activism in the bus boycotts, civil disobedience receive scant acknowledgement, and thus appear as largely unconnected to blues culture. As W. G. Roy has recently demonstrated, the blues were of little relevance to the Civil Rights movement, it was instead the Freedom songs

²⁵³ Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), p. 7-8

²⁵⁴ Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, p. 124; Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, p. 29; Cone and Barlow are just two examples of writers sharing the vision of the blues' function as a form of release.

²⁵⁵ Oliver, 'Preface to the Revised Edition,' *Blues Fell This Morning* 1996, p. xiv

of the Old Left along with church music that played a much more central role in activism.²⁵⁶ Oliver is more concerned with the sociological, economic and psychological conditions that arise from the pre-Civil Rights era, such as the experiences of disenfranchising labour systems life of the South, the migrations as a result of agricultural decline and the two world wars, and the effects of the Depression. This disassociation with the political struggles of African Americans in *Blues Fell This Morning* is indicative of the scholarly interest in the blues at this time. The blues as it was imagined in the earlier part of twentieth century was closer to its folk origins, and more distant from the commerce that began with the Race Records industry, thus representing the longing for a culture that was more human, closer to nature, and untainted by modern aesthetics. The ‘discovery’ of the music from the past and the reconstruction of an African American world of meaning and experience in which the music emerged was therefore part of a response to the crisis of modernity.

The Absence and Presence of Sound: the record and record collecting

As mentioned earlier, some of the criticisms directed at *Blues Fell This Morning* seem to have been aimed at the book’s almost total lack of musical analysis, and for the most part the study of lyric content in the book is divorced from any element of sound. Musicologists have often been critical of musical studies which separate semantic content from musical techniques. For instance, Middleton has argued that lyric analyses often assume an oversimplified relationship between the words in lyrics and the reality to

²⁵⁶ W. G. Roy, *Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 192

which they refer. This assumption neglects the fact that lyrics can sometimes perform subordinated roles to sound where for instance, borrowing from Simon Frith, familiar, everyday words are ‘defamiliarized’ to ‘invest the banal with affective and kinetic grace.’²⁵⁷ Oliver, as was common in his considered approach, had pointed out that ‘[a]bove all other forms of music, folk song is to be heard rather than read.’²⁵⁸ Nonetheless, his approach in *Blues Fell This Morning* places the focus entirely on *what* is heard in terms of lyrics, rather than *how* it is heard. Middleton reminds the reader that it is contradictory to omit a sonic consideration of the manner in which lyrics in songs are communicated, and that their significance can often be subservient to the music which envelopes them. It is undoubtedly true that blues lyrics were often a reflection of the world in which they emerged, and that singers would sometimes comment on the world as they saw it, as many of Oliver’s transcriptions demonstrate. However, the simplification to which Middleton draws attention exemplifies the nature of blues criticism which in Oliver’s case – as in many others – was subservient to subjectivity. The blues’ sonic characteristics are stripped from the lyric core without an acknowledgement of the complex and varied relationship lyrics have with music, or how the totality of both elements combine in the receptive experience.

The presentation of lyrics as the mirror of the African American experience masks the fact that words of songs were not as easily accessible to the average listener. On a superficial level, the laborious and costly tasks of record collecting and transcription which the book entailed is somewhat hidden from view, and the book thus indirectly champions the content and meaning of blues lyrics as the primary form of expression.

²⁵⁷ Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*, p. 36/378

²⁵⁸ Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, p. 10

The selection of blues songs for the record which accompanied the book seems to have also been dictated by the accessibility of the lyrics. The fourteen songs chosen are accompanied by detailed notes on the sleeve, which give each song a real life context, strengthening the music's relationship to African American experience. For instance, Bukka White's 'Strange Place Blues' (1940) is described as an example of how the content of the song is '[c]lose to the bitter facts of life and death.' The eloquent notes on the sleeve re-iterate the interpretation of blues in the book:

Inextricably bound in the drama of their own environment the composers of the blues sang of their immediate world: of their work, their personal relationships and private predicaments and in doing so gave expressions to their loves, hopes, repressions, superstitions and fears.²⁵⁹

The lyrics on the record are fairly accessible to the untrained ear allowing the listener to engage with Oliver's subject matter relatively easily, a characteristic which is not always shared by records from the early Race Records era. However, the accessibility of the song lyrics marginalizes the primary form of reception characterizing the experience of the music.

As with all music, the initial response is characterized by the listener's reception of the music *first*, with the lyrics in many cases digested at a secondary stage. This almost certainly would have been the case with the records Oliver used for his book, as words were often undecipherable. More importantly, however, Oliver's analysis of the records is indicative of a form of listening which was only for the select and dedicated few, representative of the small and largely middle-class community of blues aficionados which Keith Richards recalls so critically. As opposed to the 'hardened' collectors, for a

²⁵⁹ *Blues Fell This Morning: Rare Recordings of Southern Blues Singers* (1960)

normal, white and uninitiated audience on the other hand, the music would be ‘frightening’ and provide ‘grim listening.’²⁶⁰ This perspective seems to erect a barrier that prevents those who fail to take the music seriously from really understanding the music. This explains the book’s attempt to render African American expression, which ‘[t]o the European ear... is as difficult to understand as the “Geordie” of the Tynesider is to the Londoner,’ accessible.²⁶¹ In this sense, the book attempts to translate the music for a wider audience, while at the same time demarcating the boundaries of authentic blues and serious blues appreciation from any notion of commercialism. Therefore, outside the world of the blues singer and its typical audience, the music only had meaning for those willing and able to delve deep enough.

The primary method to achieve this level of knowledge for people interested in the blues was to collect records. As described in the first chapter, Oliver had spent many years collecting records by mail order from the US, and visiting second-hand shops across a blitz-torn London. As Middleton has argued, the work of folklorists has often been characterised by a sense of mission, to rescue folk music from vanishing forever, and by collecting blues records from the interwar period, and pressuring record labels to reissue the recordings of forgotten singers, blues enthusiasts on both sides of the Atlantic were not only salvaging the music, but as Oliver’s work demonstrates, constructing meanings from their findings.²⁶² Collecting is to all intents and purposes a participatory process in which the collector assumes a sense of ownership over both the object and the subject. It is also a means by which categorisations are made, and lines are drawn between what is deemed of value and importance, and what is not:

²⁶⁰ Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, p. 277

²⁶¹ Ibid., p. 265

²⁶² Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*, p. 127 – ‘sense of mission’

[b]lues record collectors occupy a cultural insider/outsider status, their collections simultaneously representing a public display of power and knowledge and a private refuge from the corrupting influences of contemporary popular culture...

...the participants often combine gendered insularity with wilful obscurantism and a scathing repudiation of contemporary mainstream popular culture as an authenticating strategy that reifies collecting as inherently oppositional.²⁶³

The 'insider status' which collecting allows was particularly significant in British blues writing as knowledge of the African American South would have been more obscure. More importantly, however, collecting itself became a substitute for the lack of participation in the culture that was being observed. Newton argued that white interest in jazz was originally attributable to the music's affinity with a historically self-made, participatory form of culture, and the jazz fan's desire to recapture those elements.²⁶⁴ Thus, collecting could provide that element that was missing from modern life, as stated by Marshall McLuhan: 'the Western world is visually lopsided and sorely in need of audible-tactile stimulation.'²⁶⁵ By contrast, then, music in the contemporary world was regarded as one in which participants were merely observants, passive recipients and consumers of cultural forms produced for consumption, as conceptualized by the French literary theorist Roland Barthes,

...passive, receptive music, sound music, is become the music (that of concert, festival, record, radio); playing is no longer manual, muscular, kneading physical, but merely liquid, effusive, 'lubrificating'...

In short, there was first the actor of music, then the interpreter (the grand Romantic voice), then finally the technician, who relieves the listener of all activity, even by procuration, and abolishes in the sphere of music the very notion of *doing*.²⁶⁶

²⁶³ John Dougan, 'Objects of Desire: Canon Formation and Blues Record Collecting,' *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, April 2006, Vol. 18, pp. 40-65, p. 55

²⁶⁴ Newton, *The Jazz Scene*, p. 8

²⁶⁵ Quoted in Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 49

²⁶⁶ Roland Barthes, 'Musica Practica' (1970) in *Image, Music, Text: Essays Selected and Translated by Stephen Heath* (Oxford University Press, 1977[sic]1984; pp. 149-154), p. 149-150.

This vision of contemporary musical culture echoes the thoughts of German philosopher Theodor Adorno who argued that the mass distribution of music ‘seems to complement the reduction of people to silence, the dying out of speech as expression, the inability to communicate at all.’²⁶⁷ Blues record collectors aimed to invert the state of music consumption which Adorno claimed had gone from a ‘bottom-up’ (participatory) to a ‘top-down’ (handed down) form. This process, as also suggested by Hamilton, was inherently paradoxical.²⁶⁸ Blues scholars relied on commercial recordings to reconstruct an idiom which was regarded as untainted by commercialism or the industry of the music market. Nonetheless, collecting records from another era would thus allow serious blues enthusiasts, or ‘hardened collectors,’ a way of increasing their distance from the corruption of modern world, but at the same time narrow their distance to their object of desire. Blues collecting meant not only participation by preserving the idiom and communicating that they were reacting to contemporary norms, but also importantly was the means by which fragments of blues from the past could be organised into an image of the blues in the present.

The systems of thought associated with collecting were complemented by the interpretation of lyrics, which allowed the framing of the blues as a folk music. From the outset of the book, Oliver emphatically declared that ‘if blues had never been recorded in any form, it would have thrived as a folk music.’²⁶⁹ It is on the basis that blues was the music of its people that writers began to carve out arbitrary categorisations that separated

²⁶⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, ‘On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening’ in Andrew Amato & Eike Gebhardt, *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978; 270-299), p. 271

²⁶⁸ Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, p. 10

²⁶⁹ Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, p. 2

it not only from newer forms of jazz, but more importantly from the commercial and market driven world of popular music. The music could be therefore be saved from becoming extinct, preserved as an idiom which was regarded as having cultural and historical value rather than being a commercial commodity for consumption. In defining the music as folk, however, the music has to be imagined as it was in the past, when the blues was solely the music of African Americans. Collecting records that were predominantly from the interwar period facilitated this imaginary process. This is perfectly summarized in Dougan's conception of the constructive nature of creating the folk category: '[d]espite folk's emergence from within contemporary practices, the contemporary 'real' did not suit. So the real, the continuity, was substituted, arranged and engineered until an ideal disengaged past was itself 'real.''²⁷⁰ In other words, by authenticating and reifying an idea of the blues from the past, blues writers could justify the preservation of the blues as a folk music that had meaning in relation to the experience of African Americans, and thus be separated from the music of the masses in the present day.

In a wider sense, the separation of folk blues from popular entertainment, and the distancing of lower-class African American culture from mainstream Western culture, suggests that the work of blues scholars around the end of the fifties and into the sixties was fiercely driven by a certain disillusionment with modernity. This means that it may be possible to think of blues scholarship in this period in a similar manner to Gertrude Stein's 'lost generation.'²⁷¹ The sense of aversion for the commodification of cultural forms manifested in Oliver's analysis of the blues and its opposition to modern mass

²⁷⁰ Brocken, *The Folk Revival*, p. 23

²⁷¹ Stephen C. Tracy (ed), *Write Me a Few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), p. xiii

forms of culture is not too distant in its ideology from the work of writers such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, poets canonised as part of American modernism. According to Seth Moglen, these writers were disheartened by ‘the logic of the market [which had] come to permeate virtually all aspects of life,’ and that such forces were irresistible.²⁷² Blues critics shared this experience of disenchantment with manifestations of modernity such as the entertainment industry and the world of popular music. Having no link to a *real* or extreme experience as that of African Americans, the content of popular music was reduced to embellishment and sentimental notions of love and romance which appealed to youngsters, and were thus aimed at profitability. Oliver places a gulf between the sentimentalism of popular music and the expression of the blues which is ‘natural and uninhibited.’ As the examples of the expressions of love in the blues have shown, African American culture possessed the ‘erotic and affective connection’ of real human relationships, of which modernist poets had mourned the loss.²⁷³ Importantly however, much in the same way that the lost generation ‘felt that a healthy relationship with the past is essential for the highest quality of life... in the present,’ it also reveals the method in which blues appreciation was a manifestation of the disillusionment with modernity through its attempt to reclaim an idealized past.²⁷⁴

²⁷² Seth Moglen, *Mourning Modernity: Literary Modernism and the Injuries of American Capitalism*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 5

²⁷³ ‘natural and uninhibited,’ Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, p.102; Moglen, *Mourning Modernity*, p. 35

²⁷⁴ Longenbach, *Modernist Poetics of History*, p. 11

Blues Scholarship as Archaeology

According to Stephen C. Tracy, ‘that shred of hope in the face of tremendous weight of accumulated moral, ethical, social, and political outrages and indignities,’ which characterises the spirit and essence of the blues, is similar to the desire of modernist poets to piece back together a world from the wounds of consumer capitalism. He also describes Ezra Pound as ‘essentially an archaeologist bent on reconstructing our perception of past history so as to radically alter our present.’²⁷⁵ However, it is possible to argue that Oliver’s work on the blues could be interpreted in this way. *Blues Fell This Morning* is as indicative of what has been *done* to the blues, as it is informative on lower-class African American life in the first half of the twentieth century. By collecting and interpreting records from a bygone era Oliver was conducting a form of ‘musical archaeology.’ Records were unearthed in junk shops and second-hand stores, traded in specialist magazines, and were used as foundations for a reconstruction of the past from which they emanated. The records were used as historical documents, with lyrics used as a ‘mirror’ to form an image of a world which echoed its past reality. The power of blues singers to sing of the world as it appeared, allows Oliver to frame the African American world in *Blues Fell This Morning* as a folk community, one that appears to have maintained humane characteristics that the modern world of mass culture has lost. The idealization of this imagined world is communicated through a series of narrative descriptions in which the author creates empathy for nameless characters that are representative of the folk ideal. But in studying the discovered object, the blues, the object was also reconstituted. Thus, while the records he collected and the lyrics they

²⁷⁵ Tracy, *Write Me A Few of Your Lines*, p. xiii

contained evoked the black world of the early twentieth century, this world could never be grasped fully. As Wald argues, the work of enthusiasts created 'a rich mythology that often bears little resemblance to the reality of the musicians they admired.'²⁷⁶ Oliver's writing in the book did not work towards creating the same mythology that the 'blues mafia,' the New York based group of collectors that would promote the canonisation of Delta musicians, would promote in the early sixties.²⁷⁷ However, the combination of a sociological survey of the African American experience and the lyrics of blues songs helped to create another version of the 'Negro world' which was dependent on the author's attitudes to modernity and commercialism.

In a similar way that English folk song collector Cecil Sharp discovered a British past in America which he thought had been lost, Oliver was representative of a nucleus of British scholarship that had found an idiom across the Atlantic which retained qualities that the modern world was rapidly losing.²⁷⁸ Unlike Sharp, Oliver had yet to visit the US, but would be able to confront the world he had described in the book with the physical reality in his field trip in the summer of 1960, which is the focus of the next chapter. *Blues Fell This Morning* is representative of Oliver's generation of blues scholars, separated from the object of their studies not only historically, but also socially and culturally. However, this physical separation was not simply the cause of misinterpretations, as more ethnocentric commentators have argued. After all, to most blues enthusiasts, collectors and critics of the sixties, the world of the blues was as alien

²⁷⁶ Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, p. 3

²⁷⁷ Hamilton describes the world of a group of American blues enthusiasts and collectors in the fifties, spearheaded by the enigmatic James McKune, which eventually started the Origins Jazz Library label and canonized what they believed to be the 'real' blues over commercial offshoots, Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, Chapter 6

²⁷⁸ Roy, *Red, White and Blues*, p. 64

for Europeans as it was for most white Americans. *Blues Fell This Morning* represents the manner in which Oliver negotiated and reconstructed his subject. Importantly, this negotiation is characterised by Oliver's existence in the present, what White terms the author's 'here and now,' meaning the image of the music presented in the book was as much a product of the contemporary forces driving the author as it was the sum of the blues records used.²⁷⁹ Oliver's dialogue between his contemporary present and the blues 'as it was,' helps to create the image of a world from the past, an echo of the past reality. Thus, the image in *Blues Fell This Morning* is of a world in which the blues is the expression of an African American folk community which is made to appear closer to nature, more in tune with authentic human emotions, anti-modern, uncorrupted by forces of consumer capitalism, and of embodying a philosophical approach to life which accepts the world as it is. Unfortunately, this means that African Americans in Oliver's narrative are largely unable to affect changes in the world which oppresses them. This is not to suggest that Oliver's representation of the world within which the blues existed is incorrect, or that the boundaries between fact and fiction are blurred. *Blues Fell This Morning* remains a remarkable work which brought to light not only some of the grim truths of African American life in the United States, but also brought attention to hundreds of blues songs and singers that would have been lost to the silence of history.

²⁷⁹ Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, p. 162

Chapter 3

‘You asked me about it, so I’m tellin’ you’²⁸⁰

The use of Oral History and Photography in *Conversation with the Blues* (1965)

Blues Fell This Morning had helped to establish Oliver’s reputation as one of the leading writers on the blues, and by the time *Conversation with the Blues* was published in 1965, the author was being described in the British magazine *Jazz Beat* as ‘one of the foremost authorities on the blues scene.’²⁸¹ The book presented excerpts from interviews with over sixty-five singers, accompanied by eighty-four photographs from his field trip to the United States in the summer of 1960. Unlike any other writing on the blues up to that point, the book appeared to give the creators of the blues the chance to tell their side of the story. Critics hailed the fact that in *Conversation* Oliver took a step back and let ‘the true experts’ have their say.²⁸² At the time, British photographer and jazz critic Val Wilmer praised this methodology, arguing that Oliver was ‘highly successful in his conversations with the people who make and live the blues, surprisingly so in an area where the enthusiastic aficionado is so often a victim of the “put-on.”’ Wilmer also

²⁸⁰ Quote taken from the blues musician Will Shade in Oliver, *Conversation with the Blues*, p. xiii

²⁸¹ Paul Oliver, ‘Crossroads Blues,’ *Jazz Beat*, February 1965, 1/6, p. 20-1: the quotation is taken from the subtitle of Oliver’s article.

²⁸² David M. Breeden, Review of ‘*Conversation with the Blues* by Paul Oliver,’ *Music Educators Journal*, Vol. 53, No. 6 (Feb. 1967), pp. 97-98

argued that Oliver's book was for blues what Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff's *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya* (1955) had been to jazz. Interestingly, these jazz writers had pointed out that blues was deserving of more attention in its own right, paving the way for Oliver's scholarship that was to follow.²⁸³ *Conversation* therefore seemed to offer a more authentic history, one narrated by the protagonists in their own environment, rather than by alien observers from afar. The appreciation for the book's engagement with direct sources was still championed more than thirty years later when the second edition of *Conversation* was published in 1996. Mervyn Cooke argued that the book represented 'a classic in the reportage of oral history.'²⁸⁴ The photographs of the singers, where they lived and worked, served to increase the authentic quality of the story by offering a window into the geographical realities of the blues.

In essence, *Conversation* presented the home of the blues as a world ridden with poverty, hardship and social deprivation. For this reason, many readers were forced to confront imagined and romanticised perceptions of the blues and the African American world with the physical realities. In her recent survey of the reception of blues in Britain, Schwartz argues that the desire of sixties' blues aficionados 'to be in the bluesman's shoes' was virtually eradicated by Oliver's book.²⁸⁵ However, the trip itself was an opportunity for the author to verify his descriptions of African American life in *Blues Fell This Morning*. In this sense it provides a unique opportunity to examine the role of fieldwork, particularly in terms of interviews and photography, in the reconstruction of

²⁸³ Quoted in Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, p. 177; Val Wilmer described *Conversation with the Blues* as the 'Hear Me Talkin' To Ya' of the blues, *Jazz Beat* 1965, Vol. 2 No. 7; Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya: The Story of Jazz as Told by the Men Who Made it* (New York: Dover Publications, 1966 c1955), p. xii

²⁸⁴ Mervyn Cooke, Review - 'Conversation with the Blues by Paul Oliver' in *Music & Letters*, Vol. 79 No. 4, (Nov. 1998), pp. 638-639

²⁸⁵ Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, p. 177

ideas about the blues. While the function of oral history in blues scholarship has received some scholarly analysis, such as in the work of Barry Lee Pearson, the power of images to shape stereotyped representations of blues musicians and African American culture has been neglected.²⁸⁶

This chapter will examine Oliver's highly selective and edited presentation of oral accounts from the singers interviewed on the trip, and discuss the manner in which the memories and reminiscences in the responses contributed to the creation of a specific idea of the blues, an idea rooted firmly in the past whilst being shaped by the contextual circumstances at the time of the trip. It will also concentrate on the pivotal role of the book's photographs, which function to heighten the sense of nostalgia for the past and disconnection with the present. Many of the images deceptively recall the documentary-style of the New Deal-era photographers, particularly in their presentation of the harsh realities of African Americans to the development of the blues. However, as in all documentary photography, what can appear as a direct representation of an objective reality can often be the result of manipulation and transformation. This chapter will therefore examine the outcomes of the problematic confrontation between the real and the imagined through the use of oral history and photography.

Firstly however, given that Oliver's trip and the publication of *Conversation* are separated by a five year period, it is necessary to place Oliver's field trip within the contemporary context of blues scholarship in 1960, and consider how it related to other fieldwork. Also, as the book was published in 1965, it is important to acknowledge how the rapidly changing social, cultural and political context of the first half of the sixties,

²⁸⁶ Barry Lee Pearson, *'Sounds Good To Me' – The Bluesman's Story* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984)

which involved the intensification of both the Civil Rights movement and the blues revival, influenced the editing of the book and its reception.

Origins of the 1960 Field Trip

Oliver was by no means the first to visit the American South or the northern cities to record and interview blues singers. Alan Lomax had been conducting trips since the thirties, and in 1959 had completed a five month folk song collecting tour of the South accompanied by the English folk singer Shirley Collins. Samuel Charters had also visited the South throughout the fifties, and co-author of *Jazzmen* Frederic Ramsey Jr had made several trips across the South in the same decade which was later represented in the photo-documentary essay *Been Here and Gone* (1960).²⁸⁷ Although Ramsey's book is similar to *Conversation* in its use of photography, Ramsey narrates a description of African American life in the South rather than relying on oral accounts from interviewees. Europeans had also been visiting the United States in pursuit of singers, biographical details and recording information. A year before Oliver's trip, French jazz critic Jacques Demetre and discographer Marcel Chauvard visited New York, Detroit and Chicago and wrote of their experiences with singers and in blues clubs for *Jazz Journal*. Oliver also recalls that Yannick Bruynoghe and George Adins from Belgium had undertaken self-financed trips to the United States in the hope of gaining biographical and discographical information on singers. Some of the findings from these expeditions

²⁸⁷ Alan Lomax's trips to the South were the subject of his book, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (Pantheon Books, 1993); Lomax and Collins' trip in 1959 from Shirley Collins, *America Over the Water* (London: SAF Publishing, 2005); Frederic Ramsey Jr, *Been Here and Gone* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1960)

had begun to generate substantial interest among British blues writers. Stewart-Baxter called for the gathering of funds to support another field trip in the hope of locating forgotten singers and authentic blues: ‘the work will be hard and the monetary reward small, but I am certain the adventure would pay dividends in pure folk singing... Is anyone interested?’²⁸⁸

Oliver seems to have been the one to answer the call. His expedition was made possible with the financial support of a Foreign Specialist Grant provided by the bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the US Department of State. Having worked in the American Embassy in London for extended periods and making use of the United States Information Service (USIS), Oliver was made aware of the funding and recalls receiving around \$1000.²⁸⁹ Schwartz argues that at this time American foreign embassies had a desire to promote ‘cultural goodwill’ due to the contemporary social and political strains, due to the growing pressures of the increasingly visible Civil Rights movement and the Cold War. It is also possible to consider the Foreign Specialist Grant as an extension of the State Department’s sponsoring of jazz as a cultural export during the Cold War era. As Penny Marie Von Eschen’s study shows, jazz had become a useful tool in the promotion of American modernism where traditional propaganda had proven ineffective, although the sponsorship of tours by African American musicians such as Dizzie Gillespie and Louis Armstrong at a time of deeply entrenched racial inequality was not without major contradiction. Nonetheless, government officials were attracted by the power of jazz as a culture transcending high-art form, but also sought to distance the

²⁸⁸ Jacques Demetre & Marcel Chauvard, ‘Land of Blues’ in *Jazz Journal*, 1960, Vol. 13, No’s 3, 5, 7-10; Oliver, *Conversation*, p. xiii; Stewart-Baxter, ‘Blues in the Country,’ p. 4

²⁸⁹ ‘Obtaining grant,’ Oliver, *Conversation*, p. ix; ‘use of USIS at American Embassy,’ Interview with author 1/6/2010, Appendix 1.4, p. 329

music from its African American roots, something which the musicians themselves often contested.²⁹⁰ By contrast however, blues was certainly not considered a vehicle for displaying modernistic ideals of high art, and had not yet gained the respectability of jazz in popular culture by 1960. Oliver's objective was also to examine the strictly African American roots of the music, so while there exists a link with the State Department sponsorship of the jazz tours on the one hand, the sponsorship of Oliver's field trip cannot be considered a similar exercise in Cold War era propaganda.

The BBC was also keen to obtain material which could be used for the production of radio programmes on the music. Lomax had already helped to produce a series of broadcasts on American folk music during his time in Britain, and Oliver had managed to establish a working relationship with the BBC as he had presented a few radio shows in the late fifties. They provided a Midget Tape recorder, and would eventually use some of the material in a series entitled 'Conversation with the Blues' on the Third programme.²⁹¹ In addition, the BBC provided funds equivalent to \$25 for each interviewee. Oliver, however, refrained from mentioning any payment before the interview in the fear that the proposed transaction would colour the outcome. After recording the interviews he provided interviewees with a form with which they could apply for the funds directly to the BBC.²⁹² Following Stewart-Baxter's encouragement, fellow blues enthusiasts and writers also set-up the 'Blues Recording Fund' with the aim of recompensing singers that had been 'ruthlessly exploited in the past.'²⁹³

²⁹⁰ Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, p. 117; Penny Marie Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 20-1

²⁹¹ Oliver, *Conversation*, p. ix

²⁹² Interview with the author July 2011, Appendix 1.8, p. 383

²⁹³ Albert McCarthy, 'Blues Recording Fund,' *Jazz Monthly*, 6/1, March 1960, p. 3

This attitude towards blues singers of an older generation serves to explain the mood among the purist strain of British blues scholars in the late fifties and early sixties. The feeling that the actual creators of the blues, the black singers of the South and the Northern ghettos, had been marginalised at the expense of young white pretenders who had appropriated the music, be it through skiffle, rhythm and blues or rock 'n' roll, was dominant among British writers. Popular music periodicals such as *Melody Maker* were extremely disparaging towards these newer genres in the late fifties.²⁹⁴ In a sentiment prevalent among critics (as in the example of Alexis Korner in Chapter 2), Stewart-Baxter sensed the threat to the blues caused by a new generation of young, white rock 'n' rollers,

There is more to it than a few talentless youngsters earning sums entirely out of proportion to their ability. As I have tried to point out, it is because these highly publicised young men are allowed to yell themselves hoarse that the real singers suffer hardship, and many of the great bluesman of yesterday have virtually disappeared. Some have drifted into employment, while others...?²⁹⁵

There was also a growing sense that the blues was in rapid decline, and that what remained had to be recorded and preserved. This fatalistic view of the blues' decline increased following his trip to America, and a few months prior to the publication of *Conversation*, he argued that '[s]ome forms of the blues have moved away from the Negro world to that of the white folk world.'²⁹⁶ He felt that the popularity of music regarded as blues among young white musicians was 'derivative,' it was merely a 'blood transfusion,' and thus would only serve to postpone its demise. In a more personal attack

²⁹⁴ John Street, 'Shock Waves: the Authoritative Response to Popular Music' in Dominic Strinati and Stephen Wagg (eds), *Come On Down? Popular Media Culture in Post-war Britain* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 306

²⁹⁵ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, 'Curtis Jones,' *Jazz Journal*, March 1960, 13/ 3, p. 3

²⁹⁶ Oliver, 'Crossroad Blues,' p. 21

on white imitators, the headlines they grabbed and their music – he argued - made for ‘gruesome reading, not to say, listening.’²⁹⁷ It was not only white appropriation that was feared, but as *Blues Fell This Morning* had indicated, modernity itself, represented by the developments in technology and mass popular culture which had taken their toll on the music,

For the folk collector the changes in the nature of the blues, the increasing use of amplification and stereotypes of sound mark the deterioration of the music whilst the lessening of social themes to the common denominator of sexual prowess and unrequited love mark a diminution of the blues as a vehicle for social comment.²⁹⁸

The feeling in 1960 was that time was running out to find out about the history and nature of the music ‘from the lips of those who made it,’ and importantly in those places where the music retained the power of ‘social comment.’²⁹⁹ In addition, after more than a decade of collecting and interpreting blues records Oliver was motivated by a desire to explore the physical world of the blues for himself. He acknowledged that in the attempt to separate blues from jazz ‘[he] may have distorted the picture,’ and therefore wanted the opportunity to confront the world he had imagined and described in *Blues Fell This Morning* with the reality of African American life. The author was also keen to visit and survey places of the American South that had received less attention, such as Texas, forced by the growing concentration on Mississippi as the blues’ centre of gravity.³⁰⁰

Part of the need to communicate with blues singers had developed from the practice of interviewing blues singers in the UK in the previous decade. Oliver was among a small group of blues writers that was able to meet and interview singers on their

²⁹⁷ Oliver, *Conversation*, p. xiv, 12; Paul Oliver, ‘Blues ’65,’ *Jazz*, July 1965, Vol. 4 No. 7, pp. 26-9

²⁹⁸ Oliver, *Conversation*, p. 10

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xiv; ‘desire to visit Texas,’ Interview with the author 20/6/2010, Appendix, 1.5, p. 349

visits to Britain, taking the opportunity to enquire about recordings, lyrics, and blues history. As explained in Chapter 1, for Oliver and many other British blues purists, Broonzy came to represent the antithesis of what was regarded as popular or commercial. The romantic image that Broonzy had nurtured for his own economic survival as a musician became the image which governed a considerable part of Oliver's searches. The author actively sought out the 'natural context' where the blues singer was 'at one with his environment.'³⁰¹ From this view point, it was firmly believed that true story of the blues was in the rural and African American South, far removed from the world of popular music where young white audiences began to embrace rhythm and blues, skiffle and rock' n' roll in the post-war era. This became evident in Oliver's desire to lesser known figures: 'I was anxious to meet singers who were unknown to me or to the recording studio, but who were significant in their own milieux.' For Oliver this 'milieux' meant the most obscure and lower-class aspects of African American society: '[i]n total the story of the blues is one of minor singers rather than major ones, of men with small acquaintances, limited aspirations and humble talents.'³⁰² It was these African Americans in the remotest and obscure parts of America that the meaning of the blues would be discovered.

The trip therefore served to place the music within a specific time-place context, and at the same time create a clear division between that context and contemporary popular culture of 1960. Much in the same vein that historian Paul Thompson regards the practice of oral history as one that 'enriches and enlarges' history by 'break[ing] barriers between chroniclers and their audience,' Oliver believed that by speaking to older singers

³⁰¹ Oliver, *Conversation*, p. 4

³⁰² *Ibid.*, p. xv and p. 3

he would uncover a more realistic history of the blues.³⁰³ By interviewing, he also believed he would be able to engage with the oral tradition which characterised lower-class African American culture: '[b]lues is a folk-music – a music of the people, and much of its history is folk-lore, the mixture of truth and belief which must pass for history in an oral, unlettered tradition.'³⁰⁴ In this sense, *Conversation*'s content and methodology was in line with the academic currents of the decade which saw a shift from traditional studies of the centres of power to the margins, as exemplified by the Italo-French school of micro-history, and influential socio-historical works such as E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). Importantly, the sixties saw the relatively small but highly significant emergence of oral history as an academic discipline with the establishment of the Oral History Association in 1966, and the increase in funding available for oral history projects.³⁰⁵ One of the most celebrated oral history works of the era, Studs Terkel's *Hard Times* (1970), which contained reminiscences and memories from people in some form that experienced the Great Depression, seemed to follow the resurgent interest in the social documentary works of the thirties. Alan Trachtenberg suggests that leftist youth movements of the sixties went in search of 'a radical heritage,' and many found this in the experiences of ordinary Americans presented in the visual works of New Deal era photographers from the thirties. Originally produced under the auspices of the Farm Security Administration (FSA), works such as James Agee and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941),

³⁰³ Paul Thompson, 'The Voice of the Past: Oral History' in R. Perks & A. Thompson, (eds) *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 26

³⁰⁴ Oliver, *Conversation*, p. 12

³⁰⁵ Rebecca Sharpless, 'The History of Oral History' in Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers, Rebecca Sharpless, Leslie Roy Ballard (eds) *The History of Oral History: Foundations and Methodology* (Altamira, 2007), pp. 9-32

and Evans' *American Photographs* (1938) were re-released in 1960 and 1962 respectively.³⁰⁶

In its use of oral accounts from largely unknown and ordinary African American musicians, and visual representations of their often squalid circumstances, *Conversation with the Blues* was remarkable for the manner in which it represented the convergence of the histories from below and the revival of Depression era photography. As reviews of the book demonstrate, blues scholars regarded the book as a 'document,' a resource that allowed access to the social and cultural circumstances which gave rise to the music. John Szwed regarded the book as 'a complete immersion into the context of the blues' which provided the contextual reference from which to understand the 'meaning' of the music.³⁰⁷ As Schwartz has also highlighted, the book became a key text of blues scholarship as it challenged some of the naïve stereotypes held by enthusiasts. However, while the book has often been praised for its revelation of the physical realities of African American life, the use of oral history and photography and their relationship to these realities require closer examination. Both mediums are often presumed to represent a more direct and unmediated line of communication to historical realities, but as this chapter will demonstrate, interviews and photographs often represent a tampered and subjective version of the real. In this sense, the memories of blues singers and images of their surroundings in *Conversation* play a prominent role in the reconstruction of ideas about the blues and lower-class African American culture.

³⁰⁶ Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History – Matthew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1989), p. 245-6

³⁰⁷ John F. Szwed, 'Review of *Conversation with the Blues* by Paul Oliver' in *Western Folklore*, Vol. 25, No. 3, (Jul. 1966) pp. 202-203; In his review Breeden argued that the images 'prove that poverty breeds a need for creative outlet, and that it is in such conditions that blues music frequently, if not always, comes to play an essential role in people's lives,' pp. 97-98

However, this reconstruction was produced on either side of some major social and cultural changes. When Oliver began his trip in 1960, the blues revival was yet to peak. Singers such as Mississippi John Hurt, Sleepy John Estes, Peg Leg Howell and Ishmon Bracey had not yet been ‘re-discovered.’³⁰⁸ The group of blues collectors known as the ‘blues mafia’ had not yet established the Origins Jazz Library that would catapult Robert Johnson and Charley Patton into blues legend.³⁰⁹ In Britain, it would be another couple of years before the Rolling Stones would lead the British rhythm and blues boom, and before German promoters Horst Lippmann and Fritz Rau would launch the American Folk Blues Festivals across Europe.³¹⁰ At the time of the trip, the blues of the interwar period that Oliver had examined in *Blues Fell This Morning* was still the domain of a relatively small niche of collectors. These regarded this historic music as a bastion of authenticity based on its apparent anti-commercialism and existence in a world that they believed the industry had never been able to colonize (not without irony, it was the Race Records industry that produced the recordings British enthusiasts would collect).

However, by the time *Conversation* was published in 1965, the musical landscape had been almost turned on its head. The British invasion bands had raced up the charts with their adaptations of American rhythm and blues. Blues musicians had visited the UK frequently, toured with British backing bands, blues songs had even featured on popular television shows such as *Hullaballo* and *Jazz 625*, and the Rolling Stones had had a number one hit with a cover of Howlin’ Wolf’s ‘Little Red Rooster’ in 1964.³¹¹ As Schwartz has observed, the rapid surge in the popularity of blues in the early sixties

³⁰⁸ Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, p.175

³⁰⁹ Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, p. 184-5

³¹⁰ Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, p. 145

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 182-3; Rolling Stones ‘Little Red Rooster’ mentioned in BBC4 documentary *Blues Britannia: Can Blue Men Sing the Whites?* Chris Rodley (2009), BBC4, 11pm, 9/12/2011

meant that this was on the wane by 1965. The American Folk Blues Festivals failed to attract the large audiences of the preceding years, and singers such as John Lee Hooker had begun to lose their novelty factor. At the time, Oliver was disappointed at the low turnout for the Blues Festival shows in Croydon in 1965. Notwithstanding, the number of dedicated blues enthusiasts and record collectors had risen, and within a year of its first edition, Oliver's *Conversation's* was reprinted for release. This followed the emergence of dedicated publications such as Simon Napier and Mike Leadbitter's *Blues Unlimited* in 1963, and Bob Groom's *Blues World* in 1965. Large record outlets also began to stock recordings that had previously only been available in specialist shops such as Doug Dobell's shop on Charing Cross Road. Schwartz notes how Dobell even opened a specialty store called the Folk and Blues Record Shop containing both domestic and foreign material on the subject.³¹² Taken alongside the positive praise for the book, the re-issue of *Conversation* indicates that Oliver had hit a nerve for this expanding blues intelligentsia. The immersion into the physical, social and geographical reality of the music through the oral accounts of the people interviewed, combined with their images permitted readers to engage with a representation of the context of the blues that could not have been more distant from the commercial successes of the blues revival.

³¹² Paul Oliver, 'Blues Festival '65,' *Jazz Monthly*, December 1965, 11/10, pp. 18-20; Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, p. 182-5

Oral History in *Conversation with the Blues*

Interviews in Blues and Jazz Scholarship

'What you want – history?' he muttered. 'Well, I know it.'³¹³

The process of interviewing singers and musicians among jazz and blues critics was not uncommon by the time Oliver went to the US in 1960. As already mentioned, in Britain writers rarely missed the chance to interview visiting singers throughout the fifties. It presented an opportunity to not only meet highly esteemed musicians, but the possibility to learn about the origins of the blues, the lives of blues singers, recording information and the meaning of lyrics. Interestingly, following his transatlantic success as an exponent of the 'real' blues that European audiences desired, Broonzy had been interviewed at length by Yannick Bruynoghe in order to compile his autobiography *Big Bill Blues* (1955). In the US interviewing had become extremely important in jazz scholarship during the thirties. Alan Lomax had discovered the potential for discovering an alternative history of jazz by interviewing New Orleans pianist Jelly Roll Morton in Washington between May and June in 1938. As his impassioned description of the pianist suggests, it allowed the story to be told by one of the makers of history,

With not a moment's pause – as if all his life had been waiting for this and treasuring up the sentences – Jelly Roll began to think out loud in a Biblical, slow-drag beat....

These sessions were important to him. He was renewing his self-confidence as he relived his rich and creative past for a sympathetic audience that didn't

³¹³ Alan Lomax interviewing the New Orleans clarinet player Louis deLisle Nelson in Alan Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll: The Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton – New Orleans Creole and 'Inventor of Jazz'* (London: Pan Books Ltd, 1959 [sic1952]), p. 88

interrupt; he was putting his world in order; but, much more to the point. New Orleans and her boy, Jelly, were getting their hearing at the bar of history itself.³¹⁴

The potential of first-hand accounts was the motivation which led jazz aficionados Charles Edward Smith and Frederic Ramsey Jr. to use interviews with New Orleans musicians to create *Jazzmen* (1939). As Hamilton notes, this endeavour was marked by the philosophy of the Federal Writers Project of the New Deal era, and so the authors sought to compile a 'folk history' made up of the stories and reminiscences of the musicians who had created the music.³¹⁵ This was followed by Shapiro and Hentoff's *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya: the Story of Jazz as Told by the Men Who Made it* (1955). The authors believed that the stories of jazz musicians would cut through unrealistic depictions of the music in popular culture,

This portrait, happily, is not anything like the caricatures of jazzmen too often found in the movies, daily press and even in many otherwise accurate magazines and books. As you will hear in the voices to come, the musicians of jazz are citizens of a strong original creativity, with deeply felt traditions of expression and a richly experienced way of life.³¹⁶

Studs Terkel also used first-hand accounts of jazz musicians in order to compile his *Giants of Jazz* (1957).

Given the greater popularity of jazz among white scholars, interviews with blues singers were less frequent prior to the fifties. Again, it was Alan Lomax that pioneered the method. As John Szwed has observed, Lomax became more interested in blues in the post-war period as he began to see it as another form of folk music.³¹⁷ Following his

³¹⁴ Ibid., p. 218-9

³¹⁵ Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, p. 140-2

³¹⁶ Shapiro & Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya*, p. x

³¹⁷ Szwed, *The Man Who Recorded the World*, p. 185

experiences with Morton, Lomax used interviews to learn about the lives of singers and the origins of the blues, as for instance in his now legendary discussions with Memphis Slim, Sonny Boy Williamson and Big Bill Broonzy in New York in 1947.³¹⁸ For Lomax and his endless search for America's folk past, oral history was the medium that would allow the submerged folk voices of America to be heard. Thus, interviews with the participants of history allowed the documentation and recording of events from previously unheard voices, a philosophy of the oral history method shared by Thompson,

Oral history is a history built around people. It thrusts life into history itself and it widens its scope. It allows heroes not just from the leaders, but from the unknown majority of the people... [it] offers a challenge to the accepted myths of history, to the authoritarian judgement inherent in its tradition.³¹⁹

In this sense, oral history provided the means of democratizing history, of telling the story from the bottom up, and allowing a more direct connection to historical sources through oral communication. Lomax's scholarship and methodology would have a significant impact upon British jazz and blues music scholarship during the fifties, given his work with the BBC on American folk music. This was summarized by British folk singer and playwright Ewan MacColl in his reference to *Mister Jelly Roll* as 'the first great work of Socialist Realism' in 1950.³²⁰

³¹⁸ The 1947 interviews are available on the Cultural Equity Research Center website, <http://research.culturalequity.org/get-audio-detailed-recording.do?recordingId=11941>, retrieved 27/6/2011 at 15:45

³¹⁹ Thompson, 'The Voice of the Past,' p. 28

³²⁰ Szwed, *The Man Who Recorded the World*, p. 244

Problems of Oral History

It seems evident that Oliver's research on the field trip of 1960 was highly influenced by the work of the Lomaxes. A clear example is Oliver's visit to the Mississippi State Penitentiary in Parchman, where he may have been hoping to replicate John Lomax's discovery of now legendary figures such as Huddie Ledbetter, or 'Leadbelly.' With regards to interviewing, Oliver was driven by a similar desire to allow those at the foot of the historical ladder to have their say. He argued that 'the blues reveals much of the patterns of behaviour and thought of an underprivileged minority group in a modern state,' and that the real story of the music was that of the 'minor singers' who were for the most part 'still unknown.'³²¹ It was through oral history that this story could be obtained,

If blues musicians explain their music best in their performance, their recollections do much to add to our knowledge of the blues. The reminiscences of the individual and his relationship to his community are still the raw material of social research and remain so when this embraces folk-music, explaining the importance of the music in that society, its function, its *raison d'être*.³²²

It is important to stress that this ideology was motivated by the pervasive folkloristic approach to popular music studies, prevalent among jazz and blues scholarship at the time. Oliver clearly regarded the popularisation and mass production of the blues in hybrid forms such as rhythm and blues, skiffle and rock 'n' roll, as deteriorating its function as a 'vehicle for social commentary.'³²³ It was therefore necessary, he believed, to engage with those who had seen little or no commercial success, and that had been

³²¹ Oliver, *Conversation*, p. 1-3

³²² *Ibid.*, p. 7

³²³ *Ibid.*, p. 10

untouched by the fickle demands or rewards of the entertainment industry. To seek out their stories and histories would give a clearer picture of the blues' origins and significance among the African American folk. This interpretation itself points to an element of construction, or what revisionist writers now call 'invention,' as Oliver favoured the unknown and commercially unsuccessful to build an interpretation of a music which had become, as Simon Frith claims, available to transatlantic audiences precisely because it had penetrated the mainstream.³²⁴

Recalling his trip at the end of the last century, Oliver noted that in his interviews he was 'determined to let the singers give their accounts and make their observations with the minimum of direct questioning.' As his treatment of the BBC funds available for interviewees indicates, Oliver attempted to minimize the risk of influencing the responses, and he therefore 'wanted to keep in the background as much as possible.'³²⁵ However much he may have desired anonymity, the very collaborative nature of oral history makes the historian an active participant in the production of the oral accounts. According to Ronald Grele, oral history is a 'conversational narrative,' where the interviewer's research goals drive the process. Alessandro Portelli expands on this by arguing that oral history is 'the result of a relationship, of a shared project in which both the interviewer and the interviewee are involved together.'³²⁶ In the process of interviewing Oliver helped to produce the oral accounts given by singers. Essentially, however, it is important to consider that Oliver's oral history was conditioned by a

³²⁴ Frith, 'Playing With Real Feeling – Jazz and Suburbia,' p. 61

³²⁵ Oliver, *Conversation*, p. xv

³²⁶ Ronald J. Grele, 'Movement Without Aim: Methodological and Theoretical Problems in Oral History' in R. Perks & A. Thompson. (eds) *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998) pp. 38-52; Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different,' pp. 63-74

multitude of factors in two stages: firstly in the interview process, and secondly in the editing and presentation of the oral accounts in the book.

In terms of the actual interviews, a myriad of elements that are impossible to detect could have influenced the outcome. For instance, each interviewee would have differed in their attitudes to being interviewed and recorded, depending on their experience of interviews, or their expectations of potential outcomes. As was customary for the British author, Oliver carefully acknowledged these possibilities by arguing that the ‘limited horizons of many of the singers produced their own perspective distortions. Time and pride may [have] cause[d] them to embroider some narratives and leave others as sketches.’³²⁷ These varying attitudes would have affected their willingness to disclose sensitive information. It is impossible to quantify the accuracy of recollections, and the imaginative additions or revisions of those memories, shaped by personal experiences and attitudes to the past. The time and place of interview may have also dictated the outcome of an interview, or the presence of others during the recording process may have also conditioned the responses.

Some factors, however, can be examined and appreciated. For instance, Oliver argues that his European origins, combined with the presence of his wife proved to be an advantage rather than a hindrance, lending weight to Richard Wright’s view that a cultural outsider would be best equipped to study the music, due to his or her distance from the racial strife that troubled American society. Oliver stated that his European provenance managed to form the basis for a bond with African Americans that had been stationed abroad in wartime.³²⁸ While this is more than feasible, it is also true that many

³²⁷ Oliver, *Conversation*, p. 11

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11

may have regarded a European as more open towards African Americans, especially following the rumours of cultural acceptance across the Atlantic and the exodus to Europe following McCarthyism. Shirley Collins also experienced positive reactions to her nationality in her field trips with Alan Lomax.³²⁹ On the other hand, coming from the UK seemed to give Oliver a naiveté that meant he was less daunted than other white Americans to visit black areas, such as in the case of Harlem in New York,

having got to New York, Val, my wife, decided we'd go up to Harlem and we were quite taken by the number of people who warned us and said it was very dangerous and so forth. Neither of us felt that was really true, yet we didn't quite know why, we thought well we'll risk it and get across and see what it's like. So we did and in fact it was really quite okay, people were a bit surprised to see a young couple, white, especially when they spoke to us and discovering we weren't even American.

The presence of Oliver's wife was most probably a huge help building relationships. Oliver has commented that she would sometimes spend time with singers' wives while he interviewed or recorded singers, or visited barrelhouses as for instance, in his experience with Wade Walton.³³⁰ Conversely, it could also be argued that some of Oliver's assistants on the field trip exerted some form of influence on the interviews. Aside from his wife Valerie, Oliver was aided by many 'enthusiasts,' such as the founder of Delmark Records Bob Koester and John Steiner in Chicago, Charley O'Brien in St Louis, he was joined by the blues historian Mack McCormick when in Texas, Dick Allen and Bill Russell in New Orleans, and the founder of Arhoolie Records Chris Strachwitz whom he met in Memphis.³³¹ The latter went on to record and launch the careers of many singers that

³²⁹ Collins, *America Over the Water*, p. 114

³³⁰ Interviews with the author 20/6/2010, 'Harlem' in Appendix 1.5, p. 349; 'Oliver's wife', July 201, Appendix 1.8, p. 383; Oliver comments on this visit to a barrelhouse, without mentioning that his wife spent time with Mrs Walton in *Conversation*, p. xiii

³³¹ Oliver, *Blues Off the Record*, p. 11

Oliver interviewed in the South, such as Mance Lipscomb and Lightnin' Hopkins, and it is therefore not unlikely some may have been affected by the lure of a recording contract.³³²

In his analysis of interviews with blues singers, Barry Lee Pearson argued that the content of the oral accounts could oscillate between the 'businessman's side of the story,' that is the self-promotion as an authentic exponent of the genre, and the 'artistic narrative,' in other words, the respondent's 'performance' of his life and memories through speech.³³³ Pearson brings to light the various forces that could have shaped the responses of his interviewees, and acknowledges the fact in the same way the interviewer brings their own set of assumptions to the process, the blues singer does the same by evaluating his or reasons for speaking and their expectations. He argues, therefore, that the interview response can result in a song-like 'performance,' where 'the bluesman creates an artistic version of his past.'³³⁴ It could be argued that Broonzy was one of the major 'performers' in this regard. As highlighted in Chapter 1, and borrowing the words of Colin Harper, 'Broonzy had been canny enough to corner the nascent British blues market while he could, allowing willing recipients of his wisdom to believe in the romance that here was, indeed, the last of the Mississippi blues singers.'³³⁵ Thus, through the blues interviews it is important to remember that, while the representation of the interview was in the hands of the interviewer, blues singers were active participants in the production of oral histories: they alone decided on the nature of the accounts they gave.

³³² Other blues researchers on Oliver's trip in Paul Oliver, *The Story of the Blues* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972 c1969), p. 164; Chris Strachwitz's recordings in Lee Hildebrand, 'Chris Strachwitz: The Life of a Sound Catcher,' *Living Blues*, February 2011, Issue #211, Vol. 42 No. 1, pp.28-33

³³³ Pearson, 'Sounds Good To Me,' p. 30

³³⁴ Ibid., p. 39

³³⁵ Colin Harper, *Dazzling Stranger: Bert Jansch and the British Folk and Blues Revival* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), p. 17

Conversely, this does not mean that they communicated transparent truths or fabricated a life story for themselves in order to gain something from the interview. Broonzy provides an example where the amount of fabrication and complicity in 'invention' could be measured at least to some extent. However, for many of Oliver's less well known interviewees, it is fair to assume that the oral accounts may have varied greatly on the mixture of fact and fiction. It is therefore more useful to adopt Titon's notion of the interview as the production of a 'life story' which is a more of 'a self-contained fiction' produced in the interaction of the interview, and determined by social psychological and cultural contexts, rather than a simple biographical report.³³⁶

The second main way in which Oliver's oral history was conditioned was in the editing process for the publication of *Conversation*. In the first instance, Oliver's desire to reduce his influence on the oral accounts by presenting them without comment is contrasted by the presentation of the interviews in carefully selected excerpts. The lack of authorial comment lends a stream-of-consciousness quality to the book, but despite the fact there are no chapter headings, a faint thematic organization resembling the layout of *Blues Fell This Morning* is detectable. The oral accounts are grouped in a rough order beginning with ideas on the nature and meaning of the blues, descriptions of the 'old days' (childhood, family, learning music), work experiences, leisure time activities (Saturday nights and role of music), violence and tragedy experienced in their lifetimes, the experiences and memories of female singers, and the singers' experiences of recording. This organisation reveals Oliver's editorial hand at work, contrasting the attempt to let the singers have their say. In addition, the absence of contextual

³³⁶ Jeff Todd Titon, 'The Life Story,' *Journal of American Folklore*, July- September 1980, Vol. 93 No. 369, pp. 276- 92

commentary means there is no clear indication as to the questions asked, or whether the excerpt represents the full extent of the singer's response. Given that many singers appear throughout the book more than once, it seems that each excerpt was carefully selected and extracted from the entirety of the interview. This means that each excerpt selected for the final copy of *Conversation* was deemed to be of greater value and as having a greater effect. In this sense, the author aims to direct the reader towards a reconstructed and manipulated interpretation of the blues. What is selected for publication and what is excluded, say as much about the author's attitudes towards his subject, as it says about the subject.

Finally, the inevitable reproduction of the interview in the written word marks one of the problems of representing oral history. As highlighted by Portelli, the transcription of oral accounts represents more of a translation in which many of the oral elements are morphed into 'segmentary traits.'³³⁷ Important aspects of the oral responses, such as emphasis, tone, pauses, become essentially lost in translation. The excerpts therefore contain a certain fragmentary quality, never able to faithfully reproduce the original oral accounts, and thus morph into spectral echoes of African American voices from 1960. Importantly, while elements of physical speech are lost in translation, the transcriptions add other elements to the oral responses. Oliver's reproduction of the dialect and parlance of his interviewees by adopting unconventional spelling and the dropping of 'g's, as will be highlighted below, is demonstrative of his attempt to faithfully convey 'authentic' African American voices. As Jeffrey Hadler's essay on the representation of black voices highlights, this process of reproduction based on unorthodox language, which he terms the 'Remus orthography,' sees the combination of fact and fiction. Historically, similar

³³⁷ Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different,' p. 65

transcriptions of African American speech have been overshadowed by an inherently racist ideology.³³⁸ While it is safe to say that Oliver's representation of the black voice was in no way related to notions of racial prejudice, the oral transcriptions of *Conversation* are nonetheless characterised by the paradoxical blend of reality and imagination. In other words, they at once approximate the reality of the oral responses by focusing on how they are spoken, but at the same time 'construct' identities based on the reader's perception of stereotypes. Therefore, the voices of the respondents are as much real as they are dependent on reader's reconstruction of an *imagined* real. Overall, the ambiguous nature of Oliver's fragmentary excerpts favours the distortion of the physical reality of field trip into an imagined and constructed interpretation of the blues and African American life.

Oral History in 'Conversation'

. It is in the opening paragraph that it is possible to truly understand the romanticism underlying Oliver's appreciation of the blues,

It was a burning July morning and the relentless sun drained the colour from the sidewalk signs, and shop fronts and drawn shades on 4th Street. Inside the Big Six barber shop it was close and the electric fan, the size of a cartwheel, could not dispel the perspiration that glistened on fore-arms and ran down foreheads and chests. Immaculate in putty trousers and tan shirt the barber, Wade Walton, seemed least affected by the oppressive heat. He fingered a slow blues on the guitar for it was Sunday and Clarksdale was quiet.

³³⁸ Jeffrey Hadler, 'Remus Orthography: the History of the Representation of the African-American Voice,' *Journal of Folklore Research*, Vol. 35 No. 2, (May-Aug, 1998: 99-126), p. 100-1

Described in the style of narrative fiction so typical of Oliver's writing throughout the fifties, the image of Walton playing a blues sets the scene. Here, the blues appear as part of daily life for an ordinary African American with some spare time on what seems to be a lazy Sunday morning. The blues is presented as a means of expression and pastime that is turned to whenever time permits. The story progresses as another two African Americans come into the shop and one of them also begins to play a blues. Without knowing if Oliver asked any questions, the author begins to report back the conversation between the two singers, Walton and Robert Curtis Smith.³³⁹ From this passage, it seems that Oliver has managed to stumble upon both a performance and a discussion, precisely what he had been searching for, the blues appearing spontaneously in its natural environment. For the most part, this situation reflects Oliver's approach to finding singers by word of mouth, and following leads generated by other blues enthusiasts and collectors. He had also used place names in blues songs to try and find singers:

Yes, well if by any chance there was a blues record that they made which had the name of a place in it I would often go to the place to see if it was associated with it and so forth because there was only a hunch that there might be but in fact that worked out quite well and I found quite a lot of people that way actually.³⁴⁰

However, the representation of the discussion between Walton and Smith sets the tone of *Conversation* by making the music appear as the both a natural and spontaneous expression, and furthers the attempt to root the blues firmly within the lived experience of ordinary African Americans.

In line with this attempt, the selected excerpts focus on elements which are seen to characterise the blues and differentiate it from other more popular forms of music. One

³³⁹ Oliver, *Conversation*, p. xi

³⁴⁰ Interview with the author 1/6/2010, Appendix 1.4, p. 329

of these is honesty and the expression of truth. Although the responses of the singers gave varying interpretations of the feelings that gave rise to the blues, most regarded the music as a means of communicating those feelings directly. For instance, Robert Curtis Smith led with the ideas of honesty and sincerity, that the blues is unadorned with dramatic effect or sentimentality, but instead is a vehicle for truthfulness. Smith stated that he sang his blues ‘straight from the heart,’ and that therefore those listening would understand that ‘[it]’s me as I is.’ Similarly, Boogie Woogie Red claimed that ‘[t]he blues is something that you have to play coming from your heart,’ and John Lee Hooker declared, ‘when I sing the blues ... I really means it.’³⁴¹ Again, it is conjectural to attempt a measurement of the actual sincerity of these responses. The singers could just as easily have been telling Oliver what they thought he wanted to hear, as they could have been giving their honest opinions. What is significant however, is that Oliver chose to emphasise the theme by selecting excerpts in which truthfulness and sincerity were mentioned.

The emphasis on the honesty and directness of the blues stems from the association of blues scholarship with ideas prevalent in folk music studies. Alan Lomax’s work, for instance, had regarded the music produced by ordinary people as a reflection of folk cultures, therefore expressing the reality of those cultures. As demonstrated throughout the fifties and in *Blues Fell This Morning*, Oliver regarded the lyrics of the blues as an expression of African American life, a window through which that culture could be observed. A clear marker of this ideology was the belief that folk music was more of a natural ability than a learned craft, and many singers’ responses included in the book exemplify this belief. Sam Chatman argued that most people of his generation had

³⁴¹ Oliver, *Conversation*, p. 19/21-22

learned ‘just by ear,’ and Willie Thomas made the case that the African American didn’t learn the blues, but instead ‘God give it to him.’ In a caption to a photograph of a recording studio, Oliver also argued the case stating ‘[b]lues singers have no use for sheet music and music stands.’³⁴² It is also important to note that at the time of his trip, most of the people interviewed were unknown, or had recorded very little as musicians. Mance Lipscomb for instance, had never recorded prior to his encounter with Chris Strachwitz on Oliver’s trip.³⁴³

The interpretation of blues as a form of folk music explains the means by which the realities of African American life come to play such a prominent role in the book. Some of the most common responses in *Conversation* focus precisely on lived experience, particularly on the harsh realities of poverty, the toil of manual labour and experiences of violence. There are numerous examples of singers emphasizing the state of poverty which characterised most of their lives. For instance, Blind Arvella Gray told of his never having worn shoes as a child; Willie Thomas recalled the Depression era ‘when there were eight of us eatin’ out of one pan at the white folk’s house;’ and James Butch Cage described the poverty of living with his widowed mother and twelve siblings, which meant he was required to work instead of going to school as a child.³⁴⁴

Significant emphasis is given to accounts that focus on the singers’ experiences of manual labour. For example, Robert Curtis Smith’s described working from ‘sun-up until sundown,’ J.B Lenoir told of doing ‘just about everything a person could name for to make that money for a livin’,’ and Jewell Long told of his working wherever there was

³⁴² Ibid., p. 46/22/125-6

³⁴³ Interview with the author July 2011, Appendix 1.8, p. 383; Oliver states that McCormick and Strachwitz had discovered the singer a few days earlier.

³⁴⁴ Oliver, *Conversation*, p. 23/53/36

work to do.³⁴⁵ However, the majority of accounts that discuss work experiences concentrate on the nature of the sharecropping system,

We sharecropped out on a farm and more or less that's the onliest way we had of makin' a livin'. I mean my father follered that kind of labor; I mean that's the onliest labor he ever knew. And which and why that was the hard side of life, because in sharecroppin' you work all the year and when the year ends and everything supposed to be divided up, why then you supposed to get half and he's supposed to get the other half. And you don't have but one thing to do and that's go along with him take whatever the figures showin' whatever you have. You can't argue. You can't prove nothin' so you just go along with him. So you make it whatever way you can – make it go further.³⁴⁶

Interestingly, this oral excerpt is slightly different from the sound recording present on the accompanying record to *Conversation*, but also clearly demonstrates Oliver's attempt to faithfully represent Jackson's speech through unconventional language. Oliver had also chosen to crop the small parts of the responses in order to make them more readable better in the transcriptions.³⁴⁷ While even here it is evident that Oliver's editorial hand had modified the oral accounts, the numerous responses testifying to the experiences of sharecropping demonstrate that many African Americans of the South who played the blues experienced disenfranchisement, hard labour and exploitation. However, in *Conversation* the concentration of these accounts lends weight to the idea that in order to play the music, it is essential to have lived a certain life, particularly one related to the lower-class African American experience, which is also represented by Jackson's peculiar speech. In the book's closing excerpt, Edwin Buster Pickens states that '[the] nach'al blues come directly from a person's heart: what he's experienced in life, what

³⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 40/26/39

³⁴⁶ Lil' Son Jackson, Ibid., p. 31

³⁴⁷ Track 4 by Lil' Son Jackson, 'The Onliest Way' on the *Conversation with the Blues* record, contains a sentence that has been removed from the transcription quoted here.

he's been through.'³⁴⁸ But while Pickens may have been referring to personal experiences in a more general sense, the thematic organisation and cropping of the responses focuses the reader's attention on the specific experiences of harsh manual labour and disenfranchisement.

The oral responses in *Conversation* therefore appear to match an image of the blues singer which took shape in the fifties with the testimony of Big Bill Broonzy – that the blues was music not only of sharecroppers, but of lower-class African Americans of the Jim Crow South. Effectively, they helped to demarcate the boundaries between blues as interpreted here in the folkloristic sense, and the other genres deemed more popular, whether pop, rhythm and blues or rock 'n' roll. Oliver's representation of the blues in *Conversation*, which prioritizes the memories of ageing and lesser known musicians, has the effect creating a temporal, as well as musical, cultural aesthetic boundary. The blues has not only been separated from jazz as a distinct musical category worthy of attention, and become divorced from newer versions and evolutions of the genre, but it was effectively placed firmly within the realm of the past. The temporal separation of the blues from more contemporary genres is to a large extent steered by the backward looking focus of the oral responses of the singers. A large proportion of the excerpts in the book are reminiscences of the past, whether they are about learning to play an instrument, childhood, work, sharecropping, recording, or about songs. For instance, Muddy Waters recalled a fairly enigmatic and 'restless' Robert Johnson in one excerpt, and in another talked of his early experiences around Clarksdale prior to trying his luck in Chicago; Will Shade described Beale Street in Memphis back in 'them days;' Bo Carter, Speckled Red and Gus Cannon all reminisced of their experiences in the travelling

³⁴⁸ Oliver, *Conversation*, p. 31

medicine shows of the twenties; and Sam Price, Jesse Crump and Norman Mason recalled the heyday of the female classic blues singers, the list goes on. It is extremely rare to find a response that describes what any of the musicians were doing at the time of interview, what their opinions were about newer music, or how they were living.

In his review essay of Terkel's *Hard Times*, Michael Frisch argues that 'memory...moves to centre stage as the object, not merely the method of oral history.'³⁴⁹ In considering *Conversation* a similar enterprise, it is important to acknowledge the problematic notion of accepting memory as historical fact. Oliver was careful to acknowledge in his introduction that there 'were stories not without contradictions, not perhaps without errors of fact,' whether caused by age, limited horizons or pride.³⁵⁰ However aware he was of the possibility for sketchy histories or fictive tales of past times, Oliver could not prevent the interpretation of the excerpts as a form of history. Indeed, as Portelli rightly makes the case, with memory as (unofficial) object, whether the oral account is based on historical fact or is mere fiction becomes irrelevant. Instead, it is what the informants choose to tell and what they believe that becomes history.³⁵¹ The oral recollections may not therefore refer to historical reality which Oliver may have sought, but are equally indicative of what the respondents thought of that history, which also draws attention once again to the participation of the respondents in the reconstruction of the blues in *Conversation*.

Portelli's reference to the 'now' - the present - becomes crucially important in the analysis of the oral responses. As Frisch argues, '[c]ontemporary pressures and sensitivities encourage people to screen their memories in a selective, protective, and

³⁴⁹ Michael Frisch, 'Oral History and *Hard Times*: A review essay,' in *The Oral History Reader*, p. 33

³⁵⁰ Oliver, *Conversation*, p. 11

³⁵¹ Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different,' p. 67

above all didactic fashion.’³⁵² In other words, the respondents’ reminiscences of their experiences in the past have been shaped, filtered, and manipulated by their life since then, and therefore come to indicate as much about the present as they do of the past. This means that the collection of memories and recollections in *Conversation* is paradoxical, since the selection of excerpts prioritizes the past by marginalising the present. But while invisible, it is in the social, cultural and political context of 1960 that the memories in *Conversation* were immortalised on record. It is also not impossible to imagine that, given the evident circumstances of many of the interviewees at the time, some may have been motivated by the possibility of reaping some financial reward of recording music again, and therefore built their responses in order to gain credibility. While this is difficult to quantify, what is certain is that in seeking to separate blues from contemporary popular cultures, and promoting the appreciation of blues as a form of folk music, Oliver’s book is an attempt to effectively travel back in time through the memories of the respondents, to an era when the music was known only to the African American folk, when it carried more weight as a ‘vehicle for social comment,’ and was therefore at its most ‘authentic.’

Consequently, through *Conversation* it is possible to regard Oliver as another of Filene’s ‘memory workers,’ which includes Alan Lomax, Willie Dixon and Samuel Charters. However, while Filene’s group helped to establish the idea of the blues, particularly that of the interwar period as ‘roots’ music, that is, as part of America’s musical heritage, Oliver was less interested in nurturing the historical foundations of American folk music. Nor was he focused on promoting the role of British interest in the preservation of the blues. The oral recollections of the past promote the idea that blues

³⁵² Frisch, ‘Oral History and *Hard Times*,’ p. 36

was a creation of the early twentieth century, and that it was intricately tied to the daily struggles of ordinary African Americans. At the same time, the memories of the past indirectly suggest that the music is in decline and on the verge of vanishing in the present day. Therefore, the consequence of Oliver's emphasis on the past in *Conversation* is that it puts distance between the 'then' and 'now.' This temporal dislocation could be interpreted as a deliberate attempt to create categorical distinctions between the intricately tied music and lived experienced of African Americans of the interwar years, and the contemporary world of popular music in the mid-sixties. Simultaneously, the reliance on memories and reminiscences of the past are suggestive of the nostalgia for an idealized past which hangs over the scholarly analysis of the blues.

Another feature of the emphasis on the blues from the past, is that it is indicative of the belief that the blues was in decline, and dying out with the ageing singers that remained. The blues in *Conversation* is in a world which is rapidly vanishing. This means that Oliver's scholarship also disconnected the music from contemporary African American life and culture. Unlike Lomax, Oliver's writing lacked the leftist political ideology which emanated from the thirties Popular Front, and was much more timid on the racial struggles of African Americans. Lomax, for instance, was much more outspoken on issues of social injustice, and had been openly critical of Ben Botkin's *A Treasury of Southern Folklore* (1949) for its failure to acknowledge the culture of lynching that pervaded the South.³⁵³ Oliver, on the other hand, had interpreted the blues as lacking a political voice primarily from the absence of direct protest against Jim Crow or discrimination in blues lyrics, arguing that political issues were only ever present as an

³⁵³ Szwed, *The Man Who Recorded the World*, p. 250

‘aside.’³⁵⁴ Consequently, Oliver’s point of departure in *Conversation* is the separation of blues from the contemporary social and political struggles of African Americans in 1960.³⁵⁵ Indeed, in his introduction he argued that

Blues is not the music of the black leaders, of the black intelligentsia. The active militant members of CORE or the NAACP seldom show interest in blues; the music does not feature in the black periodicals except as an occasional success story.³⁵⁶

As W.G. Roy has recently observed, it is clearly the case that blues songs did not feature prominently in Civil Rights protests, as black activists from the groups mentioned above favoured the Freedom songs of the thirties in order to build group cohesion.³⁵⁷ It was also true the black audiences for the blues, particularly the music of the interwar years which was deemed as more ‘country’ or ‘downhome,’ were on the wane in this period. But there is an inherent paradoxical quality in the separation of blues from the social and political of the time. In the introduction Oliver begins by presenting his experience of witnessing a black protest against the job discrimination of a store. The person he interviews, who he had originally believed to be the singer Alice Moore, was in fact a member of the NAACP who reacted strongly to being stereotyped as a blues singer only because she was a black woman from the South. Another protestor, Marion Oldham, argued that the blues represented a step backwards for African Americans, and that she was unaware of anyone who actually liked them.³⁵⁸ While Oliver regarded this as a clear indication that

³⁵⁴ Oliver, *Conversation*, p. xiv

³⁵⁵ Lomax was critical of Ben Botkin’s *A Treasury of Southern Folklore* (1949); quoted in Szwed, *The Man Who Recorded the World*, p. 250

³⁵⁶ Oliver, *Conversation*, p. 1

³⁵⁷ Roy, *Reds, Whites, and Blues*, p. 192

³⁵⁸ ‘Alice Moore,’ Interview with the author 1/6/2010, Appendix 1.4, p. 329; ‘Marion Oldham’ in Oliver, *Conversation*, p. 1

blues belonged to a different generation, the situation also demonstrates that the people he would interview during his trip were experiencing very turbulent times.

It is important to stress that in the few years prior to Oliver's visit to the US, there was a large increase in grass-roots black activism, as exemplified by the Montgomery Bus Boycotts of 1955 in Alabama, in which local black residents boycotted the use of segregated public transport for over a year. In the months preceding Oliver's trip, students had begun the sit-ins and protests of civil disobedience in public spaces which would spread across the Southern states. These protests, which had begun in Greensboro, North Carolina in February 1960, would eventually see over seventy thousand people involved, leading to over 3,600 arrests. The fact that these demonstrations are often portrayed as a student based phenomenon may have influenced Oliver's generational divide between older blues people and young Civil Rights activists. According to Adam Fairclough however, older generations of African Americans, although slow to react initially, eventually rallied behind the protest and took part in boycotts and sit-ins.³⁵⁹ While this does not mean blues singers may have actually been personally involved in demonstrations, they nonetheless existed in a society and in communities where demonstrations were becoming common and attracting significant media attention.

Nonetheless, this was not the society the British author believed had produced the blues, but had rather turned its back on it, hence his decision to omit some of his experiences of the racial struggles from *Conversation*. For instance, due to the fact that it was illegal for a black man and a white woman to be in the same vehicle, when driving around with Wade Walton in Clarksdale, Oliver's wife Valerie was forced to hide in the

³⁵⁹ Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 241-243

back of the car to avoid being seen and possibly arrested. He also recalls being ‘run out of town’ by the police in Texas, and also being escorted out of Mississippi from Clarksdale. In another episode, Oliver recalls entering a club looking for Alex Moore. Upon hearing that a white man was looking for him, the singer proceeded to hide outside under a large pile of dirty clothes, where Oliver eventually found him.³⁶⁰ This experience or others similar to it are not present in *Conversation*, suggestive of the book’s intentional disconnection from some of realities of life in the segregated South. The omission of these events from the book is partly explained by Oliver’s deliberate downplaying of their importance. As his experience in Harlem shows, Oliver believed that racial tensions did not affect his field trip in a major way,

I thought there would be far more [issues of racial tension]. I mean, really it was not a serious problem; the only thing was that there often were signs of discrimination and you had to be aware of them. For example, I was in Dallas, Texas, in a saloon and was looking for a particular pianist and guitarist who played both, Joey Long, and eventually I’d seen a photograph of him and I spotted him. So I said, ‘I’m just going to go over,’ and they said, ‘Oh no, no, don’t,’ but I didn’t know why and it was because there was just a little piece of string which was suspended across the room and that was dividing the white area from the black area... It was absolutely bizarre really. I think they were afraid that if I was deliberately undoing the rope and going through and so on it may cause a real problem.³⁶¹

Thus, while Oliver saw protests, was run out of town by police and experienced the tensions of segregation, he did not believe that he had experienced the overt racism that Shirley Collins had witnessed just a year earlier with Alan Lomax. Collins recalls seeing

³⁶⁰ ‘Wife hiding in car,’ Michael Roach interview with Paul Oliver, <http://www.euroblues.org/members/podcast>, retrieved 1/7/2011 at 13:50 and Paul Oliver and Michael Roach on Paul Jones, BBC Radio 2, 7pm 30/5/2011; Interviews with the author 1/6/2010, ‘run out of town in Texas’ Appendix 1.4, p. 330, ‘escorted from Mississippi,’ and ‘Alex Moore’ 20/6/2010 Appendix 1.5, p. 349

³⁶¹ Interview with the author 1/3/2011, Appendix 1.7, p. 373

vivid signs of the Klu Klux Klan in Southern towns and hearing comments such as ‘we don’t like niggers here and won’t allow ‘em.’³⁶²

Conversation has numerous examples where interviewees make reference to the social conditions which gave rise to the protests of the Civil Rights movement, but importantly, there are no traces of a sense of protest, activism, or even anger in their responses. For instance, Sam Price talked of a man being lynched near his home town in Texas when he was a boy, but after acknowledging what things were like, he moved on to talk about the typical work patterns of picking cotton in the fall and fruit in the summer; Sam Chatman sang a song which referred to the negative associations of being ‘kin to that Ethiopian race,’ but aside from stating that ‘it was real hard for colored folks,’ his excerpt continues by describing his upbringing as a yard boy.³⁶³ Instead, as Lil’ Son Jackson’s example given earlier suggests, there is often a resigned acceptance of the harsh realities affecting the lives of the interviewees. In describing the exploitation of white plantation owners, the singer simply states that ‘you can’t argue.’³⁶⁴ Oliver claims that he edited out some references to the demonstrations or Civil Rights as he didn’t want to anger anyone, and this probably referred to the US State Department that had funded his trip. Oliver’s reproduction of lower-class African American speech in the oral responses are also another way in which Oliver separates the ‘black intelligentsia’ from the folk culture of the South. However, the apparent lack of anger or desire to react in the responses could be explained by reasons other than Oliver’s editing. For instance, the respondents may have had little interest or not known about black grassroots activism (although unlikely). Alternatively, the singers may have refrained from talking about this

³⁶² Collins, *America Over the Water*, p. 114

³⁶³ Oliver, *Conversation*, p. 35/50

³⁶⁴ Lil’ Son Jackson in *Ibid.*, p. 31

subject with white people. Whatever the reasons, the absence of protest or reference to the social upheavals of the late fifties and early sixties in the excerpts furthers the cause of distancing the blues from the present socio-political circumstances of ordinary African Americans.³⁶⁵

What makes *Conversation* even more problematic in this regard is the fact that by the time it was published in 1965, the African American struggle for Civil Rights had become far more visible internationally through the television exposure of high-profile events such as James Meredith's enrolment at the University of Mississippi in 1962 and the resulting riots, the scenes of Civil Rights activists being hosed down by police in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, the March on Washington and the 'I have a dream speech' given by Martin Luther King Jr in the same year, the signing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the assassination of Malcolm X in February 1965. To produce a book following these events, which included African American memories of hardship, exploitation, and poverty, points to the nature of transatlantic scholarship on the subject. Oliver seems to have felt unequipped to challenge large political issues such as Civil Rights from such a social and cultural distance. He may have even felt uncomfortable challenging America's racial issues given the Department of State's backing for his project. These had exhibited some ambiguous conceptions towards African American culture. For instance, while in Detroit Oliver recalled that their direct involvement in trying to arrange his visit was 'embarrassing.' Oliver was determined to make his own arrangements,

We compromised, with my agreeing to attend a performance by a black performance by a black dancer of Wayne University, which [the State Dept.

³⁶⁵ 'Oliver editing out,' Interview with the author 1/3/2011, Appendix, 1.7, p. 373

Representative] had put on especially for me. The dancer was named LaRogue Wright and when the curtains parted he came prancing on stage in leopard skin, and brandishing a spear. I found it excruciating and asked if he could stop³⁶⁶

The State Department had probably misunderstood the objectives of Oliver's trip, and combined this with dated perceptions of African American folk culture, as opposed to a more modern conception of jazz. Subsequently, Oliver refused all future State Department invitations, preferring to make his own arrangements.

His primary objective was to understand and learn about the social and cultural contexts which produced the blues, rather than to investigate the circumstances which made Civil Rights an urgent necessity. While he may have consciously opted to avoid discussing these issues with his respondents, or the interviewees may have decided not to comment, directly or indirectly, Civil Rights issues did affect the lives of the people he recorded and photographed. As Oliver's language indicates, unearthing the story of the blues 'from the lips of those who made it' was a quest to discover the origins and nature of a folk music that had survived in 'semi-isolation' from the mainstream.³⁶⁷ For the music be considered 'folk' in the sense that folkloristic scholarship of the post-war era believed, the blues had to exist at the margins of society. The disconnection of the blues from contemporary and more importantly mainstream social struggles of ordinary African Americans, was thus also a necessity if the blues was be appreciated as folk music. In addition to recording blues singers' memories of the past, which helped to distance the blues from the present day, the other means of capturing this world was by

³⁶⁶ Oliver, *Blues Off the Record*, p. 11

³⁶⁷ Oliver, *Conversation*, p. 9

using photography. Images of the musicians and where they lived would provide a visual reference of the blues existing on the fringes of modern society.

Photography and *Conversation with the Blues*

The eighty-seven images that accompany the oral responses were also the basis for Oliver's exhibition at the American Embassy in London in 1964 entitled 'The Story of the Blues,' an event which was attended by blues musicians such as Lightnin' Hopkins and Little Walter, as well as African American author Langston Hughes.³⁶⁸ Some of his photographs also became record covers for some of the singers who went on to record in the sixties.³⁶⁹ Despite this appreciation for the images from the trip, *Conversation* has been critiqued primarily as an oral history rather than a visual work. It is remarkable that the role of images and photography has received no attention from revisionist scholarship which has considered how blues music has been 'invented' over the last fifty years. This omission is surprising not only due to powerful role that images can play in the process of constructing visual symbols for cultures and cultural objects, but also because images of singers were prevalent in music magazines from the late fifties. The trips across the South that produced *Been Here and Gone* (1960), Frederic Ramsey Jr's photographic essay on lower-class African American life in the South, also produced numerous photographs of African American musicians and their surroundings in British periodicals such as *Jazz*

³⁶⁸ Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, p. 116-117

³⁶⁹ Notable examples are Whistlin' Alex Moore's photograph for *Alex Moore Piano Blues*, Arhoolie #LP1008, Lil' Son Jackson's *Blues Come to Texas*, Arhoolie #LP1004, and Mance Lipscomb's *Texas Songster*, Arhoolie #306

Journal.³⁷⁰ Again, despite the fact that during the fifties blues appreciation was the pastime of a small nucleus of collectors and folklorists, the presence of Ramsey's photographs in British periodicals demonstrates the transatlantic links in early blues scholarship, and also how images of real blues musicians in their milieu were highly valued. Nonetheless, criticism has tended to concentrate on the written element, failing to acknowledge the range of representative mediums which characterised the reception of the blues. The photographs and the oral accounts in *Conversation* are intricately interwoven and thus both instrumental in creating an idea of the blues rooted in the ideology of folkloristic scholasticism and romanticism.

What differentiates the images from the oral responses, however, is their overwhelming ambiguity created by the author's failure to outline their purpose, thereby giving priority to the interviews. The photographs, all taken by the author, can be divided into three main categories: portraits; singers in the act of performing; and environmental images of landscapes and architecture. The high level of variation in their content, from smiling portraits, shots of squalid wooden shacks, decaying urban buildings to images of singers performing in urban clubs, further confuses the purpose of their inclusion. From the book's positive reviews, which welcomed its exposure of the harsh realities that singers had experienced and that helped to produce the music, it seems to have been taken for granted that the photographs conveyed the world as it really was for lower-class African Americans. This is supported by one of the rare references to Oliver's photographs in which David Breeden argued that they 'prove that poverty breeds a need for creative outlet, and that it is in such conditions that blues music frequently, if not

³⁷⁰ An example of the lack of consideration for photography is *In Search of the Blues*, where Hamilton concentrates on the author's suggestion that the poverty-ridden, rural black South retains human qualities which the modern world has lost, p. 157-160

always, comes to play an essential role in people's lives.'³⁷¹ It seems likely that Oliver shared this view, and believed the photographs required no explanation. He argues that 'I didn't want to just be focusing only on the singer or musician or the record company but more of the environment in which they worked or what they reflected.' In other words, in a very similar way to the oral responses in the book, for Oliver the images *spoke* for themselves. They represented the physical reality of the African American experience in which the blues had emerged.³⁷²

In many ways, this is unsurprising, as photography has always possessed a great seductive power as a medium that reproduces the *real*, as Alan Trachtenberg explains:

The camera offered what seemed a new relation to the physical world, especially to its transitory nature and the illusory character of its surfaces. The photograph's mirror-like ability to capture the moment and preserve its uniqueness made the camera seem (as it still does) a near-magical device for defeating time, for endowing the past with a presence it had previously had only in memory.³⁷³

The act of 'defeating time' seems perfectly congruous with the folkloristic aims of capturing the social and geographical conditions of the blues before it was too late, and the last exponents of the real blues vanished forever. Photographic images could provide a visual reference for the memories given by the respondents. However, as Lawrence Levine points out, '[p]hotographic images, like statistics, do not lie, but like statistics the truths they communicate are elusive and incomplete.'³⁷⁴ Thus images that appear to freeze time, and capture a transparent moment of reality 'as it was,' are much more

³⁷¹ Breeden, 'Review of *Conversation with the Blues*,' p. 98

³⁷² Interview with the author July 2011, Appendix 1.8, p. 383

³⁷³ Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, p. 288

³⁷⁴ Lawrence Levine, 'The Historian and the Icon: Photography and the History of the American People in the 1930s,' in Carl Fleishhauer and Beverly W. Brannan (eds), *Documentary America, 1935-1943* (Berkeley, London & L.A.: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 15-42, p. 17

relative and constructed. As the deconstructionist approach to history argues, the meaning derived from the object from the past is dependent on a negotiation between the historical object and the interpreter in the 'here and now.' In other words, while photographs offer the illusion of faithfully representing a real moment in time, what is captured in the image is a combination of two main processes: firstly, the aestheticizing process of the photographer taking the picture and then selecting and/or editing it; and in the second instance, the processes involved in the viewer looking at the image and interpreting the object in the present.

With regards to the former, Susan Sontag's seminal work on the nature of photography suggests that there is an inevitable sense of appropriation in taking photographs (as exemplified by the verb used to describe the action, 'take'), which ultimately leads to a transformation, rather than a representation of reality,

To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed... photographic images now provide most of the knowledge people have about the look of the past and the reach of the present...[p]hotographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire.³⁷⁵

Transformation implies that in capturing the photographic image, the photographer's choice of when to take the photo, what to include or exclude, the angle, the lighting, all contribute to manipulating and creating a version of reality, heightening a mood or attempting to elicit a certain response. Sontag also observes that despite the photographs' apparently objective presentation of a real moment in time, the production of the photographic image is 'still haunted by the tacit imperatives of taste and conscience.'³⁷⁶

³⁷⁵ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 4

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6

This also occurs in the process of editing photographs for effect. Nicholas Natanson provides a useful example by describing Edwin Rosskam's editing of the 'Interior of "kitchenette"' photograph for Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* (1941).³⁷⁷ In the original photograph taken by Russell Lee under the auspices of the Farm Security Administration (FSA), one of the young girls was shown with her tongue out, as a child would normally behave. This was edited for publication in Wright's book by removing the tongue, having the effect of creating another subject altogether.³⁷⁸ Oliver recalls that his photographs were mostly taken 'spontaneously,' but this however, does not eliminate the fact that each shot represented a choice, and every photograph was selected, organised into a sequence, and may have been enlarged or cropped for publication.³⁷⁹

The meaning of photographs, however, is also created at the interpretive stage. As Trachtenberg makes the case, meanings constantly change depending on 'how and where and when, and by whom' the photograph is seen.³⁸⁰ The consequence of the 'transitory' meanings conveyed by images is that the photos of the singers, their homes and landscapes are both the representation of a fragmentary reality, and are the basis for the construction of multiple realities dependent on the interpretation of the audience. A means of conceptualizing this process is given by Roland Barthes' thesis that meanings in photographs are always constructed by a 'connoted message,' that is, by culture which has a pre-existing set of codes and stereotypes that are superimposed on the image.³⁸¹

Derrick Price took this further by adopting a Foucauldian conception of power systems to

³⁷⁷ Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, p. 110

³⁷⁸ Nicholas Natanson, *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography* (University of Tennessee Press, 1992), p. 251

³⁷⁹ Interview with the author July 2011, Appendix 1.8, p. 383 – Oliver was referring in particular to a photo of Mance Lipscomb which will be discussed later in the chapter (figure 10).

³⁸⁰ Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, p. 19

³⁸¹ Roland Barthes, 'The Photographic Message' in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 17-18

argue that rather than mirroring the real, photographs construct a form of reality shaped within discourses of the dominant social system.³⁸² Applying this to the theme of blues scholarship would be to equate the ‘dominant social system’ with the pervading folkloristic approach towards the study of popular music that tended to romanticise the ‘folk’ in opposition to commercial and more popular cultures.

What is interesting however, is that Oliver’s black and white photographs of mainly economically deprived African Americans, combined with the author’s unstated faith in the photograph’s ability to mirror reality, and the era’s interest in social history (particularly that of the Depression), invites a comparison with the FSA documentary photography of the late thirties and early forties. As already mentioned, *Conversation* followed the reissue of some of the major photographic works that had been originally produced with the sponsorship of the New Deal. Also, Oliver had come across many of the images from this era through the USIS at the American Embassy in London. Notable FSA photographers such as Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Jack Delano and Ben Shahn, had focused on representing the poor and creating stories of real Americans struggling with the effects of the Depression. Recalling his experiences of meeting African Americans in his trips to the South, Ben Shahn recalled that ‘I came to know well so many people of all kinds of belief and temperament, which they maintained with a transcendent indifference to their lot in life.’³⁸³ This experience seems to resemble Oliver’s in 1960, particularly in his descriptions of the overwhelming generosity of the people he met, and the ‘innate dignity’ which characterised their oral responses despite

³⁸² Derrick Price, ‘Surveyors and Surveyed: Photography out and about’ in Liz Wells (ed) *Photography: A Critical Introduction*. 4th Edition (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 107

³⁸³ Natanson, *The Black Image in the New Deal*, p. 89

their bitter experiences of segregation.³⁸⁴ A distinctive similarity between Oliver's photographs and those of the FSA photographers can also be seen in Oliver's images of rural and urban landscapes, particularly in the images of homes, towns, and buildings. For instance, the image of the railway tracks running through Richmond in East Texas, and the photo of Nelson Street in Greenville are highly reminiscent of photos by Walker Evans in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. William Stott's analysis of photo-documentary expression highlights the manner in which a considerable proportion of the photographic works of the FSA photographs equated to a populist form of propaganda.³⁸⁵ This was also the focus of Lili Corbus Bezner who demonstrated that the FSA photographers often sought out 'truth' and 'honesty' in their images in order to arouse a sympathetic response in their viewers. The spirit of many of the photographic works of the time was to incite social change through the provocation of feelings of sympathy for the dispossessed, an emotion which was carefully 'guided into the safe waters of human tragedy and national populism.'³⁸⁶ The key to evoking feelings of sympathy according to Roy Stryker, the Head of the FSA's Historical Section, was to faithfully reproduce the realities of ordinary Americans at the bottom of the social order. This was exemplified by James Agee, author of *Let us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) who firmly believed that the photograph could capture the 'absolute, dry truth.'³⁸⁷ The emphasis on truth and honesty that seemed to motivate the FSA photographers are reflected in many

³⁸⁴ Oliver, *Conversation*, p. xvi and p. 5

³⁸⁵ William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 20

³⁸⁶ Lili Corbus Bezner, *Photography and Politics in America: from the New Deal into the Cold War* (Baltimore & London: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 5/10; John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the everyday* (Manchester & New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), p. 81

³⁸⁷ Joseph Millichap, 'James Agee, Walker Evans, and the Dialectic of Documentary: Representation in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*' in *Southern Quarterly*, Fall 2010, 48/1, p. 88

instances in *Conversation*, particularly in Oliver's desire to capture the direct voices of singers and in the emphasis on the blues as sincere expression.

However, as already discussed, photography, as oral history, cannot portray the real in unproblematic terms. Stott argues that most often FSA photographers would purposely present their subjects as 'never vicious, never depraved, never responsible for their own misery.' He provides the fascinating example of how Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell actively sought out facial expressions *they* desired for *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937). They would often time their shots to capture facial expressions that expressed 'the *look*: mournful, plaintive, nakedly near tears,' an image perfectly epitomized in the Dorothea Lange's famous 'Migrant Mother.'³⁸⁸ While Oliver concentrates on lower-class African Americans and some photographs capture people with the 'look', the purpose of *Conversation* was not to inspire social change, or to evoke feelings of sympathy, despite the fact that the latter may have well occurred in viewer responses. While Oliver focused on images of African Americans, the photographs were not aimed at inspiring change, such as in Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices*. Wright's photo-documentary portrayal of black life used more powerful and overtly challenging images, such as that of a lynching in Georgia to promote the anti-segregationist message.³⁸⁹

The ambiguous nature of Oliver's photographs, and the lack of a political motivation complicate the whole-hearted comparison with FSA photography. In breaking down the nature of the term 'documentary,' Stott defines the photographic works of the FSA era as 'social' documents, which strive to evoke emotional responses to incite

³⁸⁸ Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, p. 58-59

³⁸⁹ The image used was an AP photograph, Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, p. 45

participation in social change. It is doubtful whether the entirety of Oliver's photographs could be grouped in this category. Some of the images in *Conversation* could be categorized in what Stott terms 'historical' and even 'human' documents, which require intellectual and emotional responses respectively.³⁹⁰ While the images may not have the stated purpose of promoting social change, they do manage to represent the manner in which Oliver attempted to represent the culture of the blues.

The Photographs in Conversation with the Blues

In the same way the oral history represented a means of connecting the blues to the source of its creators, the photographs in *Conversation* function largely as a means of rooting the music in a specific geographic location. One of the main ways in which the book achieves this is in the arrangement of images as a visual progression from the rural South to the urban North of Chicago and Detroit. This could be interpreted as an attempt to mimic the Great Migrations of the early and mid-twentieth century, or perhaps the journey northwards undertaken by many blues singers such as Muddy Waters (such as the example given by Robert Palmer in *Deep Blues*³⁹¹). Interestingly, this progression is the opposite of the route Oliver took in 1960 which began in New York, went on to Chicago and Detroit, followed by the rendezvous with Strachwitz in Memphis and across the South, and ending in Washington.³⁹² In addition, the photographs gradually become more populated, beginning with portraits of individuals in rural areas, to group photos of blues singers living together in Chicago, from photos of single farms or sharecropper

³⁹⁰ Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, p. 8 and 18-20

³⁹¹ Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues*, p.6

³⁹² Oliver, *Blues Off the Record*, p. 11

homes, to aerial shots of large cities, from desolate country barrelhouses, to crowded city blues clubs. The arrangement therefore appears as a representation of the African American journey of the twentieth century, from rurality to urbanity, from South to North. While this seems a fairly accurate reference to the prevailing migratory patterns of African Americans, it was also an attempt on Oliver's part to make *Conversation* 'a bit more readable,' demonstrating the way in which the author made his findings conform to a narrative style, or in other words, working towards 'the story of the blues.'³⁹³ The general arrangement of the photographs also indicates the presence of Barthes' 'connoted meaning,' that is, meaning imposed by a pre-existing set of assumptions. The photographic sequence is made to conform to a prevailing notion of the African American experience.

The book therefore begins in the rural areas, opening with a picture of a wooden and seemingly vacated sharecropper's home (Fig. 10). The image is accompanied with the caption 'Blues Standing in My Door,' which instantly establishes a link between the small home and the blues, or in other words, this is where the blues 'lives.' The intentions of the photograph can be automatically detected by the desire to physically place the music in specific geographical space – the home of a sharecropper, the black manual labourer or the rural South – or even, the image cultivated by Big Bill Broonzy in his European tours. The angle of the photograph, taken from higher position to the side of the shack, is also suggestive of a disconnection between photographer and object. A full frontal view of the home was not given, as if to suggest that it was not accessible to an outsider. A similar effect is achieved in an urban context, with the image of black housing in Chicago's South Side (fig. 11). This image, highly reminiscent of Russell

³⁹³ Interview with the author 1/6/2010, Appendix 1.4, p. 329

Lee's photographs of housing used in *12 Million Black Voices*, reinforces the connection between the subordinate social standing of African Americans and the blues.³⁹⁴ The picture of rubble piled up in front of seemingly unstable buildings, pictured in a wide-angled frame creates a similar sense of isolation and distance from the object, as seen in the wooden sharecropper's home. Importantly, these images need to be considered in the context of their publication in 1965, which sets-up a contrast with the commercial success of white groups playing African American music during the blues revival, or even the burgeoning African American sounds of soul. The 'real' home of the blues which Oliver presents, on the other hand, is anything but glamorous or commercial. It is harsh and, as the photographs indicate, it is real, isolated and perhaps impenetrable. Importantly, the image conforms to the folkloristic approach to blues scholarship which exalted anti-commercialism as the purest element of the folk. Nothing seemed more anti-commercial than a sharecropper's small wooden shack, or the squalid housing of African Americans living in Chicago's South Side.



**Figure 40 – Oliver's caption read:
'Blues Standing in My Door -
Clarksdale, Mississippi:
sharecropper's home.' Photo by Paul
Oliver, 1960.**

³⁹⁴ Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, p. 114-115 - Russell Lee's photographs were entitled 'Empty Lot and Houses, Chicago, IL' and 'Negro Housing, Chicago, IL.'

A number of photographs serve to illustrate the seemingly anti-commercial nature of the blues. For instance, the image of a smiling Blind Arvella Gray playing with a tin cup pinned to his jacket on the streets of Chicago, also used as the front cover for the 1997 edition, is suggestive of the commercial decline of the blues, with singers reduced to street performances for pennies (Fig. 12). What is significant, however, is that the singer does not inspire sympathy, and is not made to seem overly downtrodden or defeated. In the quaint grin toward the camera, he appears with a certain dignified acceptance of his circumstances. Many other portraits in *Conversation* share this quality, by presenting singers smiling at the camera, whether posing for the shot or while playing a song.³⁹⁵ Similarly, the image of Butch Cage and Willie Thomas playing outdoors under a tree, with no sign of an audience, and with the musicians not looking at the camera, is captioned as ‘What We Played Is Just All We Know’ (fig. 13).³⁹⁶ This image seems to reaffirm that the music has its roots in this rural setting, while the captioning of a quote



Figure 11 – The caption read: ‘Very Poor on the South Side - Black housing behind South State Street, Chicago.’ Photo by Paul Oliver, 1960

³⁹⁵ These portraits include J. B. Lenoir, Otis Spann, Whistlin’ Alex Moore, Black Ace, Ernest Roy, and a famous group image of Roosevelt Sykes, Little Walter, Sunnyland Slim, Armund Jump Jackson and Little Brother Montgomery.

³⁹⁶ Photo of Arvella Gray in Figure 7; image of Butch Cage and Willie Thomas in *Conversation*, p. viii

from the musicians as a title plays on the directness and honesty of the music, again an important criteria of folk and anti-commercial music.



Figure 12 - Oliver's caption read: 'What we Played Is Just All We Know: Butch Cage (fiddle) and Willie Thomas (guitar) playing on the Old Slaughter Road, Zachary, Louisiana.' Photo by Paul Oliver, 1960

The image of Cage and Thomas highlights one of the more striking features of a large proportion of the photographs. At first glance, the camera seems to subtract itself from the process, giving the impression that Oliver is almost 'not there' taking the photograph. This impression is created by a number of images in which the people photographed are not looking into the camera, but instead either focused on something else or gazing into the distance. This characteristic immediately reminds of well-known FSA images such as Dorothea Lange's 'Migrant Mother,' or even Russell Lee's church service photograph used in Wright's *12 Million Black Voices*, that show their main subject looking away and past the camera. In Oliver's photos, this characteristic helps to

create a fly-on-the-wall mood that adds a certain sense of naturalness, as if the images were not the product of Oliver's presence.³⁹⁷

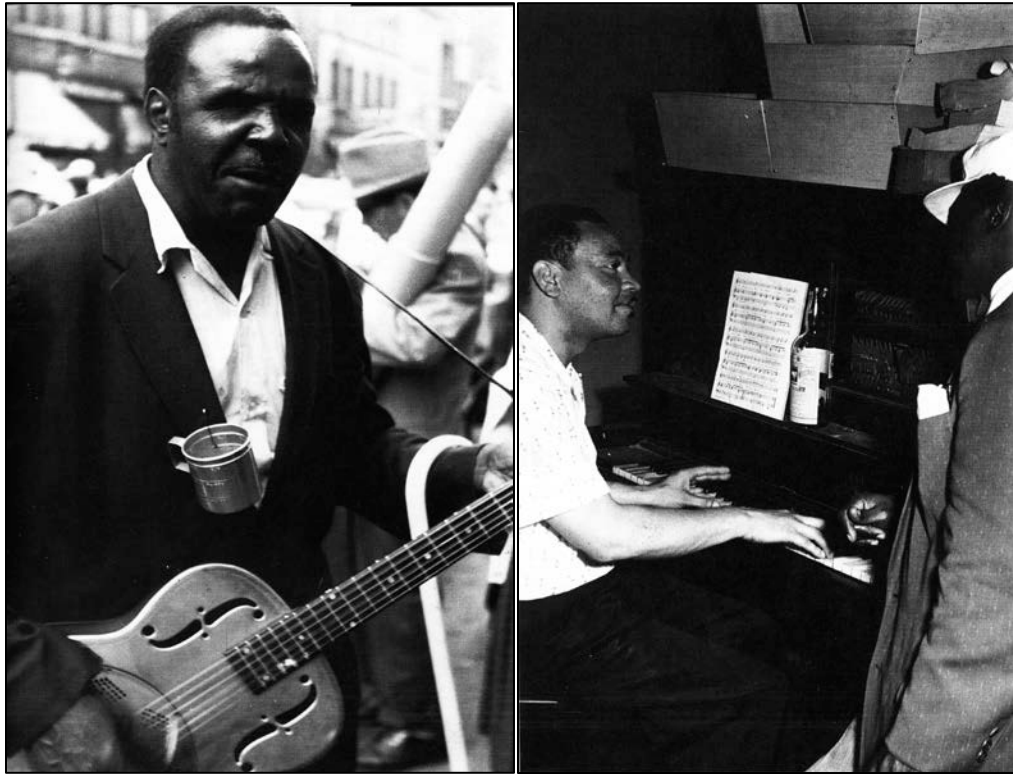


Figure 13 (left) – Oliver's caption read: 'A Quarter in a Tin Cup - Blind Arvella Gray on the corner of Halsted and Maxwell in Chicago.' Figure 14 (right) - Oliver's caption read: 'Boogie and Blues - Boogie Woogie Red and Little Eddie Kirkland.' Photos by Paul Oliver 1960.

This is particularly the case in the photographs taken of musicians performing. One photo of Maxwell Street Jimmy shows the guitarist playing on a busy street in Chicago, and no-one gazes at the camera or seems to acknowledge its presence. A similar impression is created by the photos of Daddy Stovepipe playing on Nelson Street, of Eddie Hines and Tom Stewart, and of Boogie Woogie Red and Little Eddie Kirkland around a piano (fig. 14). In the latter image especially, the angle from which the shot was

³⁹⁷ Lee's photograph was used as the front cover for the 2008 edition of Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices*; this photograph also clearly shown in the camera's positioning to capture a corridor running through the church with two people in the background, while the young girl in the foreground looks across the camera.

taken, behind the two musicians, creates the feeling that the photographers has stumbled upon a performance, giving the impression that the image is merely capturing what is happening, rather than the situation being organised for the photograph. Consequently, these images suggest a certain photographic anonymity, with Oliver almost becoming absent in the process of production. This anonymity complements and reinforces the ideology behind the use of oral history, that is, to let the people concerned have their say. These images provide an illusion of the real, suggesting that what is occurring in the image is a natural occurrence, rather than having been arranged for the interviews and the photographs.

As the criticism of realism in photography has suggested, it is not quite possible to shake off the intrusion of the observer with what he or she is observing. While the photos discussed would appear to have a spontaneous and natural quality, the inclusion of these images in *Conversation* serve to reinforce an idea of the blues being shaped by the contemporary cultural norms of the time. Oliver, as acknowledged earlier, was determined to seek out the music's 'natural context.'³⁹⁸ The pictures of the singers playing on the streets force a strong bond in the reader between the music and a specific geographical time and place. The street corners represent one of these 'natural contexts.' They suggest marginality rather than success or a central position within society, with people walking by and the absence of a dedicated audience, which would conform to the folkloristic view that true folk music was anti-commercial.

The fact that an outsider is looking into the world of the blues, which has been highly influenced by a pre-existing body of knowledge, is demonstrated by the emphasis on images that produce a sense of nostalgia for the past. For the most part, the effect of

³⁹⁸ Oliver, *Conversation*, p. 4

the photographs is directed by Oliver's captions which seem to impose meaning on the images. For example, a picture of a Beale Street signpost on a street corner is accompanied by the caption which states 'Where Highway 51 meets Beale Street was a goal for migrants from Mississippi;' and a picture of Hastings Street in Chicago is entitled 'Hastings near Brown's Club where Big Maceo worked has been destroyed to make room for an expressway.'³⁹⁹ A notable example is the image of a disused warehouse in Terrell, Texas (fig. 15). The caption imposes nostalgic responses on the interpretation of the image, by forcing the viewer to acknowledge that the music which used to fill the warehouse, is no longer present. In this sense, Oliver's photography contains an element of tourism. The photographs captured historically significant locations that the natives had taken for granted. Oliver's captioning narrows the process of interpreting the images, by directing the viewer towards a nostalgic attachment to the past, which is also generated by the backward looking focus of the oral excerpts. Importantly, Oliver's captions have a similar imposing function to Bourke-White and Caldwell's *You Have Seen Their Faces*. Their use of captions for the images revealed their own views of the photographs, rather being more faithful to the perceptions of their subjects, as Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor were in *An American Exodus* (1939).⁴⁰⁰

Portraits of the singers also manage to convey the idea that the blues Oliver went looking for had been lost to history. The photograph of Bo Carter (fig.16), captioned as '*I Used To Play for Doctors*,' is followed by Oliver's comment, 'Once a 'medicine show' guitarist, Bo Carter became sick and blind, scarcely able to play his old 'National' steel

³⁹⁹ Ibid., Beale Street image p. 97; Hastings Street p. 143

⁴⁰⁰ Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, p. 218-220

guitar.’⁴⁰¹ A tired looking Carter faces away from his instrument, looks down toward the floor, and holds up his guitar as if not to play no more. The combination of these factors

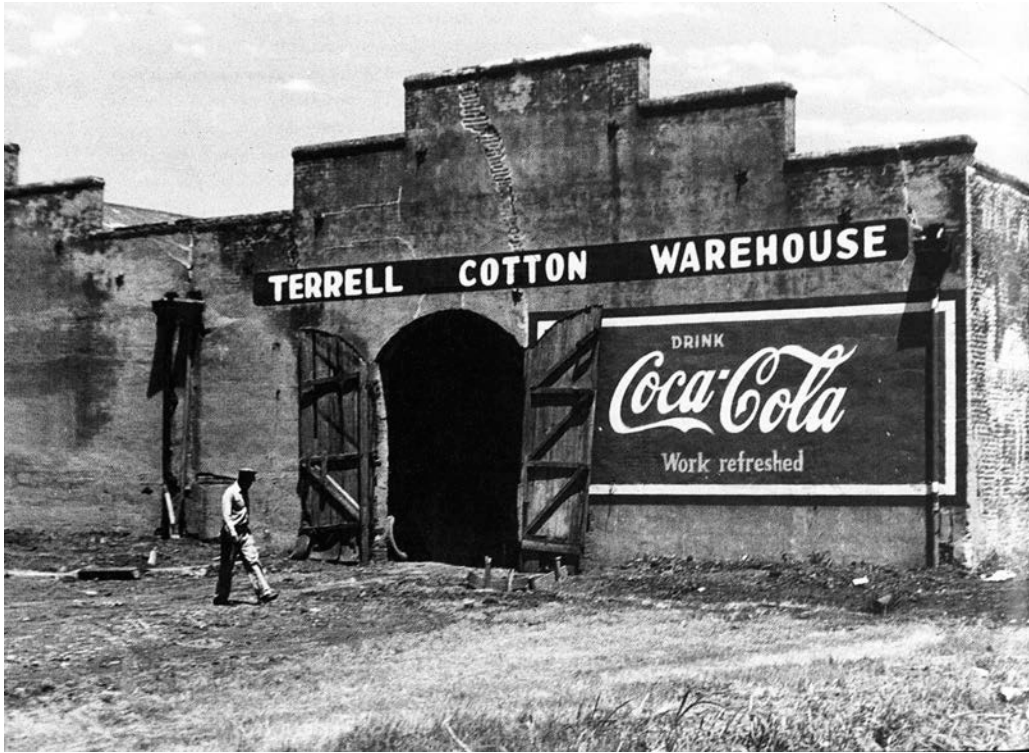


Figure 15 - Oliver's caption read: 'To Catch the Cotton Crop: In such barns and warehouses travelling shows played. Outside, Cola sells on work incentive. Terrell, Texas.' Photo by Paul Oliver, 1960.

creates a sense of loss, the feeling that Carter could once play the blues, but now time and illness converge to prevent that from happening. Two images of Mance Lipscomb evoke similar responses, but also highlight a sense of disconnection between photographer and subject (fig. 17 and 19). In the first, Lipscomb is shown playing inside his two room cabin, backed by his young children on beds, looking at Oliver's camera and apparently indifferent to the performance. The presence of the microphone also signals the artifice

⁴⁰¹ Oliver, *Conversation*, p. 90-91



Figure 16 – Original caption read: '*I Used To Play for Doctors*' – Once a 'medicine show' guitarist, Bo Carter became sick and blind, scarcely able to play his old 'National' guitar.' Photo by Paul Oliver, 1960.



Figure 17 – Original caption: 'Farmed Mostly All My Life: Mance Lipscomb sings in his two-room cabin while his grandchildren listen.' Photo by Paul Oliver, 1960.

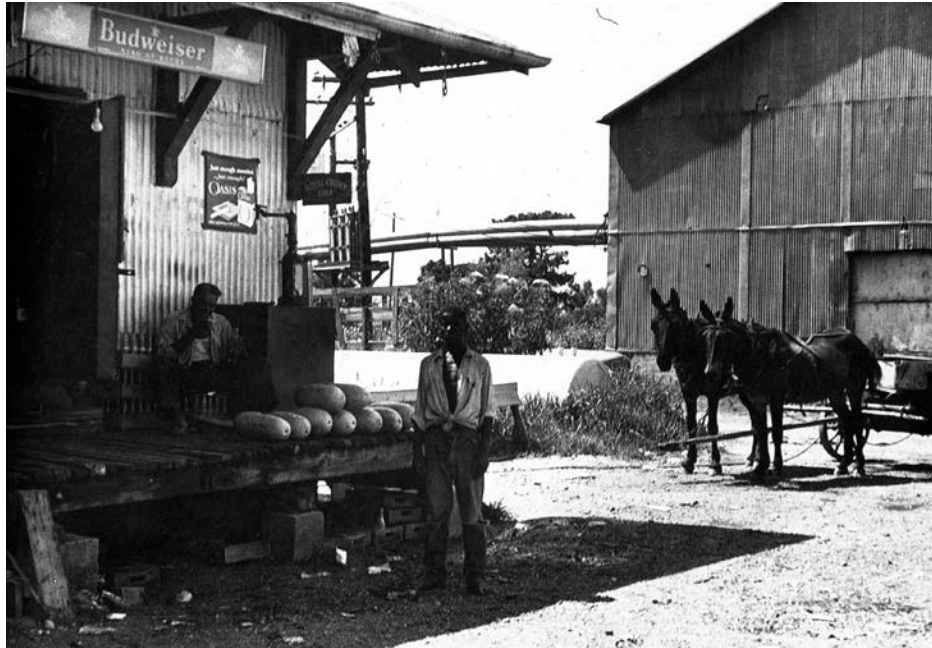


Figure 18 - Original caption: 'When Final Settlement Comes: pause for refreshment at the corrugated iron grocery at Luisa, Mississippi. The mules wait by the cotton gin.' Photo by Paul Oliver, 1960.

and arrangement of this situation for the purpose of recording. The situation is repeated in slightly different circumstances in the second photograph. Lipscomb is now seen playing on his outer doorstep, while looking into the distance across and away from the camera, as if he were gazing into the past. Behind the singer, a young grinning child peeks through the door to look at the camera. In both images, there is a generational disconnection in the fact the young seem uninterested in the music, and are more interested in Oliver's presence. In turn, Oliver's focus is on the singer, while the singer gazes out into the distance. While Lipscomb's lack of eye contact with the camera reinforces the feeling that Oliver has instead stumbled upon a natural occurrence of an ageing man singing a blues for his own purposes, the children's gaze at the lens reveals the artifice of the situation. Again, the overall mood of the two pictures is that the blues

belongs to an older generation, and that the only other people who are interested in this music are the photographer and those looking at the images.



Figure 19 – Original caption: 'An Open Player: Mance Lipscomb is proud that he has 'got it in the fingers'.' Photo by Paul Oliver, 1960.



Figure 20 – Oliver's caption read: 'We Played for Shuckin –Bees: Percy Thomas on guitar, and Bill Johnson on fiddle, with the bandaged man behind them.' Photo by Paul Oliver, 1960.



Figure 21 - Oliver's caption read: 'Colored Folk's Juke:' Across the road from the juke at Rome, Mississippi, in Sunflower County, is the cafe for white patrons.' Photo by Paul Oliver 1960.

Interestingly, these images and many others in *Conversation* are also representative of the social and economic circumstances of many African Americans in

1960. It is in these images that Oliver's photography is most reminiscent of the FSA photographs. For instance, the cramped and squalid condition of Lipscomb's home is accompanied by that of an adolescent barefoot boy outside a corrugate iron store, looking directly at the camera with dejected body language (fig. 18).⁴⁰² While this photograph may have proved useful in the promotion of social and economic improvement for African Americans in 1960, the caption of the image, combined with the lack of protest in the oral excerpts serves to marginalise the racial and political battles of the period. Two additional photographs create a similar effect. The first example shows Percy Thomas and Bill Johnson playing together (fig. 20). In the background, a younger black man with a bandage around his swollen face, looks intently at the camera. The viewer is left to assume the reasons for his injuries based on his intense and unsettling stare at the lens and on the fact that the injuries have affected his face. Considering the visibility of the Civil Rights protests and the violent reactions of white authorities in Southern states by the mid-sixties, it would have been easy for observers at the time to conclude that the individual suffered the injuries at the hands of white racism or prejudice.

The second image pictures a black café which stands alone alongside a road (fig. 21). What makes this photograph significant is that it is the only image in the book which displays an overt sign of segregation, here present in the 'Colored Café' sign above the doorway. In addition, the caption highlights the fact that the white café is on the other side of the road and out of shot. At first, this photograph reminds of the work of photographers such as Marion Palfi and Dan Weiner, who were more explicit in their attempts to portray the injustices of racial segregation by focusing on similar symbols of

⁴⁰² Ibid., p. 29/43-44

Jim Crow.⁴⁰³ However, the effect here is contradictory. While segregation is evident in the photograph, the viewer is forced to interpret black life in isolation from the outside world of the South. Oliver may have evaded the comparison of the two buildings to avoid confronting the visibility of segregation head-on. This seems to represent the author's timidity on wider racial and political issues which affected the lives of African Americans during his field trip. Overall, the combined effect of these images serves to aestheticize the harsh social and economic realities of lower-class African Americans, and to relate these realities to conditions which produced the blues, rather than to reveal the injustices that continued to pervade African American life in 1960. Therefore, the subjectivity of these images, combined with Oliver's captioning, indicates that the photographs in *Conversation* are as revealing of a world that Oliver imagined, than they are of the African American experience.

In *American Photographs* Walker Evans had opened up the possibilities of his photographs by omitting names, dates and places. According to Trachtenberg, '[t]he book invites its readers to discover meanings for themselves, to puzzle over the arrangement of pictures and figure out how and why they appear as they do.'⁴⁰⁴ By complete contrast, the visual aspect of *Conversation* reduces the possibility for open interpretations. The photos place the blues within the poverty of the rural South and the urban ghettos of the North, which means that the music is portrayed as belonging firmly within these deterministic social and geographical categories. Consequently, what is excluded is the affluent side of African American music, the commercially successful or popular. The people are presented in their disadvantaged socio-economic circumstances, but importantly, as in

⁴⁰³ Bezner, *Photography and Politics in America*, p. 204 – Bezner highlights how images such as Palfi's 'Somewhere in the South' were aimed at challenging Jim Crow segregation.

⁴⁰⁴ Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, p. 258

many FSA photographs, the subjects are rarely made to look pitiable. In the context of revivalist blues scholarship, this representation acts more as an identification of the music as a folk form, rather than a documentary report on the conditions in which African Americans were living in 1960. *Conversation* indicates that there is an innate dignity in African American culture which transcends social, economic and racial strife.

For the author, the 1960 trip confirmed that the world and society he had been describing during the fifties and in *Blues Fell This Morning* 'were all too painfully accurate.'⁴⁰⁵ *Conversation with the Blues* was thus a representation of what Oliver regarded as the reality of the African American experience which had produced the music. While the approach of using oral responses and photographs was employed in the hope of the world of the blues speaking for itself, the effect was to create a reality that forced to conform to an idea, constructed by 'connoted meanings' which had been developed in the previous decade of scholarship on lower-class African American culture. Oliver aimed to let the creators of the blues have their say, and the voices that echoed through the excerpts were regarded as beckoning directly from the source. However, the scattering of his interviews into small segments, framed within a distinctive pronunciation, and which focused on the past, helped to create an idea of the blues as a cultural expression that belonged to history, was the voice of people who had struggled through harsh manual labour, violence and poverty. It also emphasised that the music's true origins remained within the memories of old and relatively unknown blues singers, and was thus in the process of dying out. Importantly, these fragmentary memories presented in excerpt format were not transparent historical facts, but rather signified what

⁴⁰⁵ Oliver, *Conversation*, p. xiii

the singers thought of themselves, their history, and the interviews. In turn, Oliver's selection of the responses combines with their content to separate the blues from the present, the world of the 1960.

The images add a visual dimension to the separation of the past and the present. While they capture moments of Oliver's experiences, and put faces and places to names, they are also indicative of a choice, of a selective vision that carves out a version of reality. The meanings imposed on the photographs by Oliver's captions direct the gaze of the viewer towards a visual construction. This world is, as can be expected, poor and black, but most importantly, it is vanishing, its people are dying and its places are disappearing. Moreover, these people and places are isolated from the mainstream, whether the mainstream is the popular culture of 1960, the blues revival, or the Civil Rights movement. Combined with reminiscences of days gone by, the photographs testify to *Conversation's* ability to physically root the blues within a distant historical past created by selected African American memories.

The idea of the blues as belonging to a bygone era was largely shaped by the author's attitudes towards growing popularity of African American music among young white audiences and musicians in the sixties. White British bands had popularised the music with their commercial success, and this derivative enterprise had made Oliver 'shudder' with revulsion.⁴⁰⁶ Black singers had visited Europeans shores and toured extensively, appeared on television and entertained large audiences. In a sense, these large uninitiated audiences had to be 'educated' as to what the blues was and where it came from. In this context, the book was extremely important in blues scholarship, for it

⁴⁰⁶ Prior to the publication of *Conversation* Oliver commented that British groups playing African American derived rhythm 'n' blues often made him 'shudder.' Paul Oliver, 'Review of R&B,' *Jazz Monthly*, November 1964, 10/7, p.24

played a fundamental part in constructing the idea that the blues was the music of the unknown, ageing, black singers of the South, and that it emerged from their toil and exploitation in the rural South and Northern ghettos. It helped to strengthen the boundaries of the genre which isolated it from any notion of popularity or commercial success. Most importantly, it claimed to communicate this message from the voices of its creators and the expressions in their faces. However, the oral responses and the images were the product of a mixture of memories and history, facts and fiction, the real and the imagined. In the disconnection with the contemporary experiences of lower-class African Americans in 1960 in particular, *Conversation* is revealing of the way the African American world was nostalgically imagined by the author and by readers that championed his efforts. The emphasis on the rapidly vanishing past would drive his next enterprise in blues scholarship, *Screening the Blues: Aspects of the Blues Tradition* (1968), which reified the blues presented in *Conversation* by tracing the continuities and discontinuities of the music as a tradition.

Chapter 4

History, Tradition and Invention:

***Screening the Blues* (1968)**

In *Screening the Blues: Aspects of the Blues Tradition* (1968), Oliver returned to the methods of *Blues Fell This Morning* by analysing the lyrics of blues songs. However, this time the focus was on the use and adaptation of themes by singers over different generations, and how continuities revealed the existence of a blues tradition. The book examined some of the previously unexplored and more obscure aspects of the music, such as blues about sex, to further emphasise that the music belonged to a culture far removed from the contemporary scene of the pop industry. It would act as a lengthy introduction to the seminal book published the following year, *The Story of the Blues*, which was one of the first major attempts to narrate a comprehensive history of the music (Chapter 5). The late sixties were therefore characterised by the historical exploration into the origins of the blues and its evolution up to the end of the revival.

While Oliver maintains his typical conscientious approach by acknowledging the limits of his scholarship in *Screening the Blues*, the process of historicizing and effectively canonizing the music through the identification of a ‘tradition’ reveals a highly subjective process of categorization based on an often romanticised, but also restrictive interpretation of lower-class African American culture. This chapter will consider the problems involved in the tracing the blues tradition, and will demonstrate the

manner in which this canonisation served to strengthen the categorical boundaries which made the blues a distinctive and authentic culture in the eyes of the blues writer. In examining certain aspects of black culture that are traditional, the author was also susceptible to romanticise their nature, and sometimes rely on stereotypical assumptions of the differences between lower-class African American culture and the white mainstream. What arises is an increased sense of nostalgia for a vibrant culture of unmediated expression, deeply rooted in the traditions of an imagined African American past. The language used to describe this culture serves to highlight the attitudes of the writer as much as it illuminates the subject matter. As Oliver traced and defined the characteristics of the tradition, he was also able to discern when that tradition was no longer being respected, a trend which was becoming much more commonplace in post-revival world of the sixties. *Screening* is permeated with categorical boundaries imposed by the binary vision of authentic folk and commercial pop culture. While he argues in many instances that the difference between blues and pop is purely cultural, the writing contains a timid but nonetheless significant racialised tone, which is part of the response to the white discovery and appropriation of African American music in the sixties. Oliver had now to contend with the fact that music labelled blues had reached much larger audiences on both sides of the Atlantic through the interpretations of white groups, and the rediscovery of older bluesmen which had generated increased interest among enthusiasts and collectors to discover more about the origins and nature of the blues. The act of 'screening' the blues was therefore representative of the bolder steps Oliver took towards the end of the sixties to fix definitions and conceptions of the blues as the music of an imagined African American lower-class in the pre-WWII era.

Blues Scholarship in the Mid and Late Sixties

It was evident that there had been a marked increase in the number of people interested in the background and history of the blues after 1965. This was in clear contrast to the changes occurring in the world of popular music. Schwartz notes how British musicians and audiences had begun to tire of repertoires heavily dependent on fifties rhythm and blues, with many turning to the more contemporary sounds of soul. British audiences at the American Folk Blues Festivals had also begun to drop as a growing sense of ‘discovery fatigue’ emerged following the repeated appearance of the same visiting blues musicians.⁴⁰⁷ However, a number of factors helped to create a new generation of enthusiasts for the blues by the mid-sixties, particularly the music of the interwar years. The ‘re-discoveries’ of musicians long thought to have been lost such as Son House, Mississippi John Hurt, Skip James and Sleepy John Estes, as well as previously unrecorded singers such as Mance Lipscomb and Mississippi Fred McDowell must have been like great archaeological discoveries, promoting the idea that the creators of the music could still be found, that the music was still alive, still significant, and that much of the music’s history could be learned from them.⁴⁰⁸ McDowell had been ‘discovered’ by Alan Lomax on his journey across the South in 1959, and was subsequently involved in the American Folk Blues Festival in London in 1965. In Oliver’s description of the singer which anticipated his imminent arrival and

⁴⁰⁷ Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, p. 185-6; ‘discovery fatigue’ quoted by Simon Napier in Schwartz, p. 190

⁴⁰⁸ ‘re-discoveries’ in Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties*, p. 43

performance, it is possible to discern the ideal which these re-discovered musicians represented:

Fred McDowell represents the purest form of Mississippi blues; influenced, of course, by the work of other blues singers including the great names of the Delta, and by the records that he heard, but playing today, as he has all his life, the music of the country and the cotton patch.⁴⁰⁹

The appreciation for these rediscoveries was accompanied by a sense of caution on the treatment and exploitation of ageing singers. Oliver argued: 'Let those of the Anglo-Saxon intelligentsia who take such an interest in the Negro people of America never forget the responsibility they have for the changes they have wrought in those lives.' While such a comment may appear to echo some remnant shred of paternalism, Oliver was concerned by the fact that ageing blues singers may have been ill-prepared to face the demanding nature of transatlantic tours, and were thus easily exploitable. This mixed attitude of anticipation and caution reveals some of the inherent tensions Oliver felt towards the popularization of the blues in the sixties, fearing the effect of white audiences on the music, but also that 'the Negro musician may be playing his old role of entertaining the white folks.'⁴¹⁰

In this period the pages of *Blues Unlimited* became filled with notices by readers seeking other individuals with which to share record collections and information. The contributors of these new blues magazines were also representative of the transatlantic scope of blues writing and criticism by the mid-sixties, with numerous articles by American writers such as Pete Welding, David Evans, Bob Koester, Paul Garon and

⁴⁰⁹ Paul Oliver, 'Slidin' Delta – Fred McDowell,' *Jazz Beat*, August 1965, 2/9, pp. 12-3,23

⁴¹⁰ Oliver, 'Blues '65,' p. 26

Gayle Dean Wardlow.⁴¹¹ As a result, blues clubs and societies began to form all over England and Scotland in the mid- and late sixties.⁴¹² Oliver was also in the business of advising budding record collectors on forming a reputable discography of blues recordings, which included pointing readers of *Jazz Beat* to the discography of *Blues Fell This Morning*.⁴¹³ This expanding group of blues acolytes across Britain sought detailed knowledge on the history of the music, the lives of the singers, the significance of the blues vernacular and, more fervently than ever, sought to differentiate authentic blues from the inauthentic. This growth in interest also saw the formation of the National Blues Federation which held two conventions, the first of which was held in September of 1968 in London. Over the two day conference there were talks, recitals, performances, workshops and films. An advertisement clearly displays Oliver's name at the top of the bill, demonstrating the writer's reputation in the field. In a review of the Convention, Oliver was described at the 'doyen of blues writers,' and was applauded for the fact that he 'gave the most professional lecture seen throughout the whole convention.'⁴¹⁴

The musical landscape had changed dramatically over the preceding decade. While in the fifties blues enthusiasts desired the recognition of the blues as a musical culture separate from jazz, in the sixties the picture had been complicated by the mass exposure given to the music by blues revival. The efforts of British bands to turn young audiences onto the blues 'masters' seemed to have worked very well. Bands such as The Rolling Stones, The Yardbirds and the Animals, people such as John Mayall and Eric

⁴¹¹ For instance see *Blues Unlimited*, October 1965, No. 26

⁴¹² Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, p. 199-200

⁴¹³ Paul Oliver, 'Blues in the Bran-Tub,' *Jazz Beat*, April 1965, 2/4, p. 12-3

⁴¹⁴ Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, p. 202; Advertisement for 1st National Blues Convention, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square London, 7-8 September 1968 in *Blues Unlimited*, June 1968, no. 54, p. 19; 'Review of National Blues Convention,' *Blues Unlimited*, November 1968, No. 57, p. 16

Clapton had all been hugely successful playing blues covers and blues inspired material and it was evident that this popularity had caused some major shifts. In popular music in general, the likes of Cream, Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix had also made use of the blues to experiment and fuse a number of styles. Adelt has commented that many of these musicians had produced highly innovative music by using the blues as a basis.⁴¹⁵ By contrast Oliver was arguing that by the mid-sixties '[s]ome forms of blues ha[d] moved away from the Negro world to that of the white folk world; many successful white singers are successfully imitating the blues.' For Bob Dawbarn the idea that whites were trying to commercialise the blues was 'ridiculous.'⁴¹⁶ Evidently, the blues intelligentsia were highly cynical of the musical miscegenation that the sixties blues revival had produced. The appropriation of the music by young, white, and often British musicians strengthened the resolve to distinguish what was authentic from imitation, which required a reliance upon the now firmly established folkloristic interpretation of music. This helps to explain the growing interest of blues within the folk world, as exemplified by Oliver's presentations at the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS) at Cecil Sharp House in 1965. The author was surprised by this shift, arguing that ten years earlier the performance of a singer such as Blind Gary Davis at Cecil Sharp House would have been 'unthinkable.' Oliver described Davis as being 'part of the authentic tradition,' in contrast to 'professional' folk singers like Harry Belafonte that had 'little or no connection to the tradition.'⁴¹⁷ The entrance into the folk world was also in contrast to other European

⁴¹⁵ Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties*, p. 2

⁴¹⁶ Oliver, 'Crossroad Blues,' p. 21; Bob Dawbarn, 'Are British Acts just imitating the Negro Sound?', *Melody Maker*, 26 June 1965, p. 8

⁴¹⁷ Oliver's talk at the EFDSS in Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, p. 189; Blind Gary Davis at EFDSS in Paul Oliver, 'Blind Gary Davis,' *Jazz Beat*, July 1965, 2/8, p. 12-3; Harry Belafonte in Paul Oliver, 'Sellers Market,' *Jazz Beat*, May 1965, 2/5, p. 12-3

conceptualizations of the blues. Adelt has noted how the German organisers of the American Folk Blues Festivals, Horst Lippman and Fritz Rau had always espoused a more primitivist idea of the blues, based on a nostalgic attachment to an idea of the blues from the past, in a very similar way to Oliver's scholarship. However, by the late sixties and with the changes in popular music, the Festival organisers had become much more willing to incorporate the links between the blues and the modern phenomenon that was rock.⁴¹⁸ By contrast, Oliver's emphasis on the 'tradition' in this period demonstrates how his efforts became focused on the music's historical and cultural roots in the late sixties, which would help to differentiate the real from the ersatz, effectively 'screen' the real thing from the imitation by giving the musical an historical legitimacy. His method was to establish the traits of the blues tradition, and to demonstrate ways in which this tradition had been maintained and developed by subsequent generations of musicians. His approach in *Screening* were appreciated by Derek Jewell of the *The Guardian* who stated that Oliver was 'an invaluable guide, especially in a decade when the blues [had been] massively intermixed with the mainstream of Western popular music.'⁴¹⁹ The appropriation of the blues in the popular music of the sixties served to strengthen the conviction of blues enthusiasts that 'authentic' blues lay firmly within the African American experience of the early twentieth-century, and was separate from the mainstream of white popular music.

⁴¹⁸ Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties*, p. 79/97

⁴¹⁹ Derek Jewell, Advertisement for *Screening the Blues, Blues Unlimited*, November 1968, No. 57, p. 27

Identifying and Constructing the Blues Tradition

In *Blues Fell This Morning* and *Conversation with the Blues*, Oliver had examined the blues in contexts which had suggested and pointed to the past through the analysis of lyrics, the oral accounts of singers and nineteen-thirties evoking imagery. However, in *Screening the Blues* and *The Story of the Blues*, the author's writing became distinctly historical in nature. The fact that the blues is referred to as a 'tradition' in *Screening* is demonstrative of the historical emphasis in Oliver's writing in this period. This book saw Oliver returning to the analysis of blues on records primarily from the interwar years, and focused on the themes of traditional verses and their relevance to the African American culture of the South in the first half of the twentieth century. The main themes which Oliver examined were blues on the subject of Christmas, religion and the Church, gambling, heroic figures and sex. The book concentrated on the manner in which subsequent generations of blues musicians made use of these themes to continue in the tradition. By finding continuities in the music and the lyric content, the blues could be linked to the past, or more specifically, the African American past he had been describing for two decades. Interestingly, a considerable proportion of the writing was taken from previously published material. A large part of the book is based on articles which Oliver had written for the English periodical *Jazz Monthly* between 1960 and 1961 under the title 'Screening the Blues;' the chapters entitled 'The Santy Claus Crave' and 'The Forty-Fours' are both expanded versions of articles that appeared in *Music Mirror* even earlier in 1955; and the chapter on sexual blues themes, 'The Blue Blues,' was also developed from an article that appeared in a 1963 edition of the periodical named *Jazz*. While the

older material offered Oliver a chance to further explore the themes of the originally shorter articles, their use indicates that rather than challenging assumptions on the nature of the blues or of popular culture itself, his field-work experiences and the blues revival of that decade strengthened the binarism which saw folk blues in opposition to commercial popular music.

Given this viewpoint, the traditional aspects of the blues, that is, material and practice rooted in the cultural past are of paramount importance to the folkloric interpretation:

For blues has a tradition. Perhaps the music is now in decline but it has enjoyed a life-span long enough to establish a tradition of its own, comparable with that of say, the Dutch school of painting, whose artists, from the generation of the 1590s to the generation of the 1620s anticipated those of the blues by exactly three hundred years. In a period of unprecedented acceleration of social, technological, economic and cultural changes, the blues has changed too. But though it has been altered by the differing environments which gave it birth and modified by the social climates in which it has flourished, those constants, the elements of tradition within the music, relate it to the folk forms that preceded it and establish links between the various categories that have been discerned in its development.⁴²⁰

Demonstrating once again his artistic background in the likening of the blues to Dutch art of the Renaissance, Oliver identifies the ‘constants’ which make up the blues tradition: the three-line stanza, common stock verses and themes, and the influence of pre-blues styles such as minstrel songs, work songs, spirituals and the ballad tradition. The repetition of these ‘constants’ forms the basis of a tradition which links the practice of blues musicians with a shared cultural past. Oliver’s focus on the tradition can therefore be interpreted as attempt to confront the changes wrought on the music by the

⁴²⁰ Paul Oliver, *Screening the Blues: Aspects of the Blues Tradition* (Cassell: London, 1968), p. 13

‘unprecedented acceleration of social, technological, economic and cultural changes.’ As the blues was ‘in decline’ at the time of the book, by establishing the tradition the author would use the past to form the canon that would define the qualities making the music unique and distinctive, thereby rescuing it from the demise which the revival of the sixties had caused. However, Oliver’s declaration that the blues’ was in its final days is suggestive of the subjective adherence to an ideal of the blues, which was not shared by all other blues writers. Keil, for instance, had already challenged the ‘moldy fig’ mentality that was particularly strong among English blues writers. He maintained that the African American tradition of expressing the condition of the lower-class was alive and well in the newer urban and more ‘soul’ influenced sounds of musicians such as B.B. King, Bobby Bland and Ray Charles, but had been marginalised by writers such as Oliver due to their aversion for the contemporary decadence of the entertainment industry.⁴²¹

Thus, Oliver’s search for the tradition became as much an exercise in highlighting continuities among generations of musicians, as it was about defining and maintaining an idealized conception of the music. As was common in his work, Oliver demonstrates an incomparably detailed knowledge of blues recordings that allows him to discuss the continuities and adaptations made to traditional themes in lyrics and in musical terms. Examples are numerous in the book, and one such instance is the discussion on songs that use the Santa Claus theme. Oliver suggests that Jack Dupree’s version of *The Santy Claus Crave* borrowed aspects from Peetie Wheatstraw’s *Santa Claus Blues* and Elzadie Robinson’s *The Santy Claus Crave*, but rather than being derivative, ‘he creates a new blues from the raw material of two rich seams within the idiom.’⁴²² Another method

⁴²¹ Keil, *Urban Blues*, p. 34, 38

⁴²² Oliver, *Screening the Blues*, p. 38

employed by Oliver analyses the general treatment of a subject in songs, such as the Church or religion. Oliver argues that a survey of recorded songs over a number of decades indicates a cautious approach to religion or the authority of the Church in the blues, and appreciates that this may have been caused by some form of censorship by record companies, or even that many singers may have felt inhibited by their own connections with religious life.⁴²³

In a musical sense, the author also traces the evolution of a melodic theme, such as the *The Forty-Fours*. In this chapter, Oliver becomes much more technical in his analysis of continuities by including musical notation. This is perhaps a sign of the more specialised language which blues scholarship had begun to develop in the late sixties, a period when ethnomusicology was turning its relatively young eye upon the blues with people such as Keil, David Evans and Jeff Titon. Oliver presents the notation for Little Brother Montgomery's version, to then show the variance among other blues musicians that recorded the song. He argues,

The Forty-Fours... demonstrate the complex family-tree of the blues. Its basic instrumental theme provides the groundwork for two major vocal tunes and a number of subsidiary ones; the instrumental theme itself is also subject to many variations. The blues shows the degree to which a singer's individual style may influence the way in which a tune is interpreted by others; it exemplifies the passing on of traditional verses and lines, the dropping of some and the grafting of others in the process of evolution.⁴²⁴

In this manner Oliver traces the genealogy of some of the main themes of the blues tradition, and how they have been modified and adapted to the requirements of each

⁴²³ Ibid., p. 75, 85: Oliver demonstrates how many blues singers grew up directly involved with the Church, and many often included religious material in their repertoires.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., p. 126

singer. Importantly, what is particularly significant is that the ‘process of evolution’ gives a sense of coherence to the blues as a clear and identifiable category, an organism with a story of its own. However, the interpretation and description of the blues as a tradition in *Screening* raises a number of analytical problems.

Firstly, as is the case with most music styles, there had been no official definition or general agreement by writers as to what the blues actually was by the end of the sixties. A broad number of familiar categories such as Classic, country, ‘downhome,’ Chicago, East coast (Piedmont) and urban blues had been used by various blues writers in different ways. For American revivalists that produced the Origins Jazz Library, singers that sailed closest to the gritty aesthetic of the Delta such as Charley Patton and Son House were held in the highest esteem.⁴²⁵ By contrast, Samuel Charters had paid more attention to audiences by placing emphasis where African Americans had spent their money, and thus revealed a wide-range of styles in *The Country Blues*, from Leroy Carr to Big Bill Broonzy. As previously acknowledged, Keil challenged the privileging of the oldest and most obscure rural singers as more emblematic of the blues genre, by highlighting the importance of newer forms of electrified urban blues to African American popular culture.⁴²⁶ Consequently, what the blues *is* depends almost entirely on each writer’s subjective interpretation. The identification of the tradition’s characteristics, traits and continuities would therefore conform to a highly personal reading of the blues.

This opens up the possibilities for invention, which is the second problem with defining a cultural performance as a tradition. As Hobsbawm argues, “[t]raditions” which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented.’

⁴²⁵ Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*

⁴²⁶ Charters, *The Country Blues*, and Keil, *Urban Blues*.

The basis for Hobsbawm's idea of invention is in the sense of crisis which arises from rapid changes in the social, economic and cultural climate,

Inventing traditions, it is assumed here, is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition. ...we should expect it to occur more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which 'old' traditions had been designed, producing new ones to which they were not applicable⁴²⁷

Hobsbawm's suggestion that traditions become invented in times of significant social crisis would seem to concur with Oliver's description of 'unprecedented' social and cultural change mentioned earlier. This is combined with the sense of disillusionment with the world of contemporary pop music, and the nostalgic sense of loss for an African American way of life prior to the post-war era that was so prominent in his writing. Fuelling this nostalgia was a growing sense that the blues was close to its demise, primarily due to the white 'discovery' of the music,

Facile but skilful imitation by young white singers has further obscured the individuality of the blues and it seems likely that the future of the blues as 'the song of the folk,' as a 'spontaneous utterance, filled with characteristics of rhythm, form and melody' is likely to be a brief one. No longer 'without the influence of conscious art' the blues may become a self-conscious art music and as such survive in a new form, but its days as a folk music may be numbered.⁴²⁸

If the blues as 'the song of the folk' had little chance of survival, then the presence of a tradition would help to solidify the music's place in the past. Importantly, however, the tradition would also act as a process of boundary formation, helping to establish the blues

⁴²⁷ Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 1, 4

⁴²⁸ Oliver, *Screening the Blues*, p. 9

as Oliver represented it, as a definable category, and traceable to a definite set of characteristics that conform to the tradition which set it apart from other forms of music.

The examination of the process involved in the construction of a tradition has a precedent in musical historiography, as in Scott DeVeaux's analysis of jazz scholarship,

The "jazz tradition" reifies the music, insisting that there is an overarching category called jazz, encompassing musics of divergent styles and sensibilities... Jazz is what it is because it is a culmination of all that has come before. Without the sense of depth that only a narrative can provide, jazz would be literally rootless, indistinguishable from a variety of other 'popular' genres that combine virtuosity and craftsmanship with dance rhythms. Its claim to being not only distinct, but elevated above other indigenous forms ('America's classical music'), is in large part dependent on the idea of an evolutionary progression reaching back to the beginning of the century.⁴²⁹

The function of the tradition, therefore, is to establish roots which legitimate its place apart from other music styles. As highlighted previously, Oliver sought to 'relate [the blues] to the folk forms that preceded it.' By tracing themes, imagery, expressions and tunes back to the earliest available records, the blues could be linked to that place in the past which was echoed in the lyrics examined in *Blues Fell This Morning* and the memories of *Conversation*. It was in the latter that Oliver interviewed Boogie Woogie Red who stated that the 'blues have been goin' on for centuries and centuries, and the blues was written years and centuries ago.'⁴³⁰ Oliver re-employs this quote in *Screening* in order to create a sense of the history and continuity justifying his analysis of the music's genealogy, but what it also highlights is that more importance is placed on the music's past than on its present. The categorical boundaries drawn up by a tradition

⁴²⁹ Scott DeVeaux, 'Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography' in *Black American Literature Forum*, Fall91, Vol. 25 Issue 3, pp.525-60, p. 530

⁴³⁰ Oliver, *Screening the Blues*, p. 13

allowed the author to expose how traditional elements were lacking in the more commercial and white interpretations of the blues in the sixties. DeVeaux's describes scholars who prioritized New Orleans and 'trad' jazz above the newer styles of bebop and free jazz as 'neo-classicists.' These, he argues, attempted to 'regulate the music of the present through an idealized representation of the past.'⁴³¹ Similarly, through the concentrated analysis of records from the interwar years, and the backward looking focus of *Conversation with the Blues*, it is to the blues of the past which Oliver looks in his writing. In *Screening* Oliver reiterates that the blues is 'one of the last great bodies of folk-song,' which simultaneously hints at a glorious past and a pessimistic present. Importantly, defining the tradition and the link to historical origins would pave the way for discovering and narrating the history of the music in *The Story of the Blues* (Chapter 5), which became Oliver's next publication following *Screening*, and would complement the process of reifying the blues as a definable and identifiable category worthy of its own unique story.

Folk Origins & the Role of the Recording Industry

Inherent in this nostalgic notion of the past is the appeal of the mysterious nature of the music's genesis (as Chapter 1 demonstrates for Oliver's work in the fifties). This is exemplified by Oliver's questioning of the origin of some of the traditional images and phrases employed by blues singers:

And who was the source of:

⁴³¹ DeVeaux, 'Constructing the Jazz Tradition,' p. 527

I'm goin' to the river, take my rocker chair, (2)

If the blues overtake me, gonna rock away from here,

which has had a life of more than fifty years?⁴³²

The murky origins of these expressions and common blues phrases evoke the image of the anonymous songwriters of traditional folk songs, indicating that the blues has developed from deep within a now practically impenetrable African American oral culture. In the chapter relating to the *The Forty-Fours*, he stated '[t]hese words come from no special blues, but from a hundred, or a thousand.'⁴³³ The mysterious origins of the expressions therefore appear to go far back enough to establish the roots of the blues far back within the African American past, with the blues phrases emanating from the collective experience of the African American community. Making these verses traditional is their re-use and adaptation by subsequent generations of singers. Oliver refers to stock expressions that transfer from one theme to another as 'maverick lines,' which singers adapt to different themes based on individual preference and style.⁴³⁴ The use, development or modification of these lines by newer generations establishes what Oliver interprets as the blues tradition.

It is the strength of the blues that as an art it regenerates itself; the singers continually draw from traditional resources to create anew and they invest in old and familiar themes fragments of their own experience which impart to them a refreshing individuality.⁴³⁵

⁴³² Oliver, *Screening the Blues*, p. 18

⁴³³ Ibid., p. 90

⁴³⁴ Ibid., p. 18

⁴³⁵ Ibid., p. 41

Fundamental to Oliver's idea of the blues tradition and its origins is the early twentieth-century conception of folk music, which in *Screening* becomes much more explicitly pronounced through the adoption of the early twentieth century definition of the American musicologist, Henry Edward Krehbiel:

Folksong is not popular song in the sense in which the word is most frequently used, but the song of the folk; not only the song of the people but, in a strict sense, the song created by the people. It is a body of poetry and music which has come into existence without the influence of conscious art, or a spontaneous utterance, filled with characteristics of rhythm, form and melody which are traceable, more or less clearly, to racial (or national) temperament, modes of life, climatic and political conditions, geographical environment and language. Some of these elements, the spiritual, are elusive, but others can be determined and classified.⁴³⁶

As was demonstrated in previous chapters, Oliver was a close adherent of the folkloric paradigm in the binary interpretation of folk and popular music. In *Screening*, Krehbiel's definition of folk-song represents the ideal to which the blues must conform, and to regard the blues as such meant that 'the influence of conscious art' was absent, but also that it was, as Oliver had indicated in his view of the white appropriation of the blues, a folk-song on the verge of extinction. Interestingly, Oliver also adheres to Krehbiel's notion of identifiable 'racial temperament,' a problematic idea which shapes a racialised representation of the blues and will be discussed below. However, Oliver's polarized view of the blues tradition existing as a distinct category from any forms of commercialism and 'conscious art' deserves attention.

In his typical considered manner, Oliver was appreciative of the blues' exceptional circumstances as a folk genre, demonstrating that he was perhaps more open

⁴³⁶ Ibid., p. 1; quote from Henry Edward Krehbiel, *Afro-American Folksongs: A Study in Racial and National Music* (G. Shirmer: New York, 1914) p. 2 quoted in *Screening the Blues*, p. 1

to the contradictions inherent in the folk label than other purists. He describes how the music occupied a foot within the marginalised circumstances of the African American experience of Jim Crow, and the other within the Race Records industry of the interwar years. Interestingly however, the music was never dependent on the recording industry. Instead, it was a pure 'accident of history' that saw the blues' 'simultaneous evolution with the perfection of recording techniques.' This is despite the fact that by the mid-twenties between five and six million Race Records were sold per year. And yet for Oliver the blues remained a folk music. So rather than simply considering technological progress as a poisonous influence, he acknowledged how mass media, radio, recordings and juke-boxes played an important but vitally, not an essential role in the development of the tradition,

If, as a result of recording, there was an inevitable 'influence of conscious art,' there was also within the various types of Race music, a cross-fertilization of traditions and ideas, of lyrics and music which have been continually enriched by the creative inventiveness of individual singers and musicians.⁴³⁷

Here, the negative influence of mass media on the blues' as a folk idiom is balanced with the positive effects on the music. In the chapter which considers sexual themes in blues songs, Oliver argues that the censorship which recording may have imposed (either by record companies or the singers themselves), 'may have enriched Race music rather than impoverished it,' inspiring singers to come up with new ways of communicating familiar themes.⁴³⁸ It is not until the advent of post-war era and the sixties in particular that Oliver forecasts the negative effects of modern technology,

⁴³⁷ Ibid., p. 2

⁴³⁸ Ibid., p. 252

...it must be conceded that in the long run blues suffered from the levelling –out of character of which recording and radio were the primary causes. Whatever the outcome of the present confused state of the music, it is clear that mass media and the commercial interests that have inspired their exploitation of the blues, will have played a large part in determining its fate.⁴³⁹

The impact of recording on the music is therefore interpreted as having had different effects in different time periods. Given the condescension with which white blues musicians are often described, the main reasoning behind this interpretation lies in the fact that in the sixties, mass media diffusion permitted white listeners to appropriate and ultimately corrupt the music. The major consequence was that Oliver regarded the white discovery of the blues as the cause of the ‘diminution in importance of the lyrics.’⁴⁴⁰ In other words, the texts of blues songs no longer performed the function for African American society that *Blues Fell This Morning* had described. In the twenties, by contrast, the Race Records industry that was primarily produced by and for African Americans, worked to keep the music within the black community despite its standardising effects. This meant that the music was able to retain its functionality as a folk idiom within African American society, which, as established in previous chapters, was to foster racial solidarity, and act as a ‘safety-valve,’ a method by which to sidestep real-life issues and anxiety built up from the experience of marginalisation in American society.

There are numerous examples of this in *Screening*. For instance, Oliver argues that while the policy blues (on the subject of illegal gambling, or ‘playing the numbers’) may have baffled white listeners in the thirties and forties, ‘their very obscurantism had

⁴³⁹ Ibid., p. 10

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 128

its value for the Negro who bought the blues records. They helped to give him the security of being part of a tightly knit community and afforded him a sense of racial solidarity.’⁴⁴¹ Here, the popularity of the blues on the subject of playing the numbers is equated directly with the sense of community and the fostering of group cohesion, with little possibility for the fact that the songs make light of a serious problem in lower-class black society, or that listeners simply enjoyed the tunes. Another example is provided by Oliver’s interpretation of the act of consumption for African Americans during the interwar years. In this case, Oliver loosens his tight grip on the Adorno-esque vision of the industry to acknowledge that ‘[t]hough listening to records is not as active a form of participation as singing songs with a group, it does demand participation of a kind.’ The acts of selecting, purchasing and listening to records are seen as an extension of the processes which sustain the folk tradition, rather than a threat to the traditional processes of active participation.⁴⁴² What appears here is an uneven perception of the effects of consumerism in interwar African American culture, and in post-war transatlantic culture. The record industry and purchase of records was a means of maintaining and strengthening the status quo for American Americans who could hear themselves and their issues on record, and furthermore, musicians could resist the temptations of the recording industry and the lure of financial reward. As Oliver exemplifies, ‘[b]lues is not the music of recorded singers only. It originated without the benefit of the phonograph and would probably have continued to evolve without it.’⁴⁴³ In the post-war era, by contrast, commercialism had taken over, and the culture which the Race industry had helped to maintain had vanished. The representation of blues musicians indifferent to

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., p. 138/144

⁴⁴² Ibid., p. 251

⁴⁴³ Ibid., p. 2

material wealth possible through a successful recording career would become particularly complicated in *The Story of the Blues*, which is the subject of the next chapter. The ideal of musicians unconcerned with commercial success would find conflict in the numerous photographs of musicians in sharp suits which are much more suggestive of mainstream aspirations of respectability than the adherence to an ‘unconscious art.’

Tracing Continuities and Restricting the African American world

The manner in which Oliver traces the continuities of traditional traits in *Screening* is demonstrative of the imagined vision of blues musicians as keepers of the tradition. When indicating where singers have borrowed from others, the author relies on the ideal that this was a means of staying within the boundaries of the tradition, rather than an attempting to replicate a previous commercial success and obtain recognition through a popular motif. This can be seen in Oliver’s analysis of the use of the automobile image in songs,

It is superfluous to examine in detail the innumerable blues and blues songs which extend the automobile theme further, from the many variants of Sonny Boy Williamson’s *My Little Machine*, which has become a traditional blues, to the versions of *Auto-Mechanic blues*; their existence, their frequency of use, are evidence of the appeal of a powerful sexual symbol in the blues.⁴⁴⁴

The repetition of the automobile theme is taken as a signifier of its presence within the tradition, albeit only by virtue of being a popular ‘sexual symbol.’ It does not allow for the song’s commercial success to influence the recording of subsequent numbers on

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 216

similar themes. Interestingly, the use of automobiles as sexual metaphors in the blues provides a vivid example of the manner in which Oliver imposes restricted aspirational levels on African Americans. Initially, Oliver suggests that the car is more attractive as a metaphor than other objects such as the train, as it lent itself more easily to use by the individual. Also, as ‘the images are most affective when they come within the immediate world of the Negro,’ it is assumed that objects outside the immediate reach and the manual operation of ordinary African Americans would fail to strike a chord among listeners. For this reason, Oliver argues that the automobile became a powerful and recurrent theme due to the mass availability of second-hand Model-T Ford’s,

When Ford changed his policy in 1927 and commenced making more luxurious models, second-hand Model-Ts came on the market at sensationally low prices and the vehicle was widely popular among Negroes. Its near-indestructibility, its dependability, its lack of glamour, reflected virtues that the Negro liked to see in himself.⁴⁴⁵

What is notable here is that, rather than attempting to assert some form of citizenship, economic self-assertion, or make his life easier by owning a vehicle, the African American is assumed to revel in his ‘lack of glamour’ by equating himself with a used car that is now only available because wealthier whites can buy more luxurious ones.

The automobile theme demonstrates the manner in which the investigation into the blues tradition permits Oliver to make assumptions about the condition of the African American psyche in the early twentieth century. This is not to say that there was not a historical case for Oliver’s suggestions, but that the author tended to generalize on specific instances to produce an image of the African American world which conformed to the vision of the blues singer. A case in point is the chapter which examines blues

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 214

singers' treatment of heroic and successful figures in the thirties, such as the athlete Jesse Owens and the boxer Joe Louis. Oliver argued that while this decade witnessed events such as the brutal invasion of Ethiopia by Mussolini's armed forces, the blues singer's realm of experience was too marginal to consider such issues for his songs. This is in contrast to the general African American population and press that shared a 'strong feeling of association with Emperor Haile Selassie and his tribesmen,' and were 'overjoyed' by the achievements of African American athletes at the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. The exception to these shared sentiments was the blues singer: '[t]he events [of the Ethiopian invasion] were too far away for a clear conception of them to be in the experience of blues singers.' Not even the triumphs of Jesse Owens could inspire them to song: '[p]erhaps these events were also too remote for most Negroes for whom the events on American soil before the eyes of watching white Americans would have been more immediate.'⁴⁴⁶ Oliver equated the absence of recorded blues songs on these topics as directly indicative of the blues singer's lack of interest in them, and as a result of the interpretation that song themes reflect reality, he also assumed that blues singers were unconcerned with that which lay beyond their daily experiences. This analysis serves to promote the idea of the bluesman espoused by the Beat-inspired 'male flight from commitment,' as suggested by Hamilton.⁴⁴⁷ Oliver promotes the myth of the blues singer as a figure who is both marginalised by American society and his own community for leading an immoral lifestyle, but importantly also withdraws himself from issues which have wider influences in society. For this reason, the separation of the blues from the social and political of African Americans in the post-war era is cemented in

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 149

⁴⁴⁷ Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, p. 193

Screening: 'Of the Civil Rights movement, of Freedom marches, of anti-segregation demonstrations and lunch-counter sit-ins, Black Muslims and Black Power, the blues says nothing.'⁴⁴⁸ As previously acknowledged, while blues songs on these subjects were lacking it is not to say that blues singers themselves withdrew themselves from such debates. Such a statement is demonstrative of Oliver's reification of the blues as not only a form of music, but also an aesthetic philosophy that sought its withdrawal from the mainstream of popular culture.

What is evident here is that while Oliver attempted to describe a form of lower-class African American collective consciousness, he also imposed its limits and restrictions:

For all his extraordinary successes Jesse Owens was a member of a team, a team which was an American one which fought for America first. This was as it should be, but the state of mind of the Negro in America at the time was not one to moralize on such issues; the pains of the Depression, the injustices of job discrimination were too close.'⁴⁴⁹

There is an inherent disconnection between the successes of black athletes at the 1936 Olympics with the daily struggles of ordinary African Americans, exemplified by the blues singer's refusal to comment on them. Therefore, while adherents of the blues tradition are unconcerned with a 'conscious art,' they are at same time largely unmoved by the significance of racial discourses during the thirties. Importantly, Oliver seems to have been keen to emphasise that the African American 'state of mind' was represented by the 'dispirited blues' at a time when 'the Depression hit the Negro hardest and civil

⁴⁴⁸ Oliver, *Screening the Blues*, p. 12

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 149

rights was a meaningless phrase.⁴⁵⁰ The lack of a significant number of recorded blues on issues of segregation, politics, or Jim Crow is associated with a sense of apathy towards social change in the consciousness of ordinary African Americans in the pre-WWII years. This view sustains an accommodative vision of the blues. While the music may have 'bolstered a sense of racial solidarity... [the blues] also diverted repressed hostilities which may otherwise have found more immediate expression.'⁴⁵¹

The lack of protest in the blues or association with the post-war Civil Rights movement is convenient for the folkloric stance on the blues as it associated the music with earlier African American forms of cultural expression, such as the spirituals and folk-tales such as Br'er Rabbit and Uncle Remus. Oliver equates the sense of protest in the creative story-telling found in the latter by Kardiner and Ovesey's *The Mark of Oppression* (1962) to the emotional release which the blues permitted.⁴⁵² A poetic description of sacred and secular black culture co-existing on West Lake Street in Chicago highlights the similarities seen in the role of both musical forms,

At night the paint-starved woodwork, the bug-infested cracks, the thick layers of smuts and dust, are less evident; the lights from the joints glow and the neon crucifixes shine pink in the shop-front windows of the store-front churches. A door swings open and one may hear the shouts of laughter of a jostling crowd packed solid to the far end of the smoke-filled interior, where a dimly perceived blues band thunders with amplifiers turned up to maximum volume and the lead singer roars hoarsely into a hand-held microphone, mere inches from his closest listeners. Another door may open on a scene no less intense, as a gospel quartet, with frenzied gestures and heads thrown back, stir a small but exultant congregation into irrational ecstasy. Sacred and secular are found side by side on West Lake and however different the avowed purposes of the church and the blues joint, to the observer the heady mixture of music and

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 259

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., p. 257

⁴⁵² Ibid., p. 260-1; Abraham Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey, *The Mark of Oppression: Explorations in the Personality of the American Negro* (World Publishing Co.;1962) pp. 340-1

emotion to be found in each has much in common. Exhilarating and elemental, the music transports the gathering from the meanness and poverty beyond the doors.⁴⁵³

This passionate vision of a street scene in Chicago, ambiguous in its origins (whether from observation, or invented), offers a concentrated view of the interpretation and representation of lower class African American culture. A distance is created between the observer (a white, blues enthusiast perhaps) and the blues joint and church interiors, adding to the sense that the blues belongs to a distant other world, one of which white observers can only occasionally have glimpse through an open door. In addition, both gospel and blues are seen to perform similar functions in black society, allowing participants of this culture to transcend the physical reality of 'paint starved woodwork and bug-infested cracks,' rather than directing protest against the causes of those conditions.

Instead, Oliver argued that direct protest was most often substituted by a release of sexual repression through music. Even in the largely female attended churches, the ecstatic and feverish reactions of the congregation are seen as 'sublimated expressions of sexual ecstasy' created from the 'inhibitions that the strictures of the church demand in their private lives.'⁴⁵⁴ Similarly the blues 'provide the same catalyst; they sublimate hostility and canalize aggressive instincts against a mythical common enemy, the 'cheater.'⁴⁵⁵ The creative manner in which sex and relationships are treated in the blues allow 'the realities of racial oppression [to be] site-stepped.'⁴⁵⁶ For Oliver, the channelling of bottled up energy through sexual metaphor points to one of the

⁴⁵³ Oliver, *Screening the Blues*, p. 44

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 53

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 258

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 255

psychological consequences of segregation. An example is provided in the analysis of sexual violence expressed in Uncle Skipper's *Cutting My ABCs* and Lightnin' Hopkins' *The Dirty Dozens*,

Cutting My ABCs casts a thin veil of humour over a brutal theme; *The Dozens* obscures in the recordings a fathomless well of bitterness, humiliation and anger, which the uncensored version by Lightnin' Hopkins openly reveals. The anal-eroticism of the song may be exemplary of arrested adolescence, but it is the stunted development of a racial minority which has not been permitted its full maturity.⁴⁵⁷

Whatever one may make of the psychological significance of these more sexually violent blues lyrics, Oliver's interpretation is used here to demonstrate the manner in which his scholarship represented African Americans through the language of the blues. It could be argued that the emphasis on the release of sexual tension in church and through blues themes relies somewhat on the stereotype of promiscuity among African Americans. Indeed, Spencer argued that it was the white blues scholars' obsession with the sexual content of the music, which 'teased [their] Victorian sensibilities,' that helped to lay the foundations for the 'Oliverian tradition' of blues scholarship.⁴⁵⁸ More significant however, is that the stigma of the racial minority dominates every aspect of the analysis of black consciousness and culture, forcing African Americans to be confined in psychological, physical and expressive terms, within the prison of segregation. Blues songs about cars are not indicative of the tendency towards modernisation and economic self-determination, but instead are mainly a metaphor mechanics of sexual interaction; sexual imagery, metaphor and violence are repressed feelings of frustration, and in no way representative of attempts at creating controversy or generating commercial interest.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 255

⁴⁵⁸ Spencer, 'Blues and Evil,' p. 39

Importantly however, in linking blues to earlier forms of cultural expression which emanated from slavery, Oliver was solidifying the music's position as the cultural expression of a people sharing a particular experience in the past. It is in this sense that the blues was more emblematic of historical folk expression, and thus more distant from the more contemporary African American militancy of the sixties.

The manner in which the lives of ordinary African Americans and blues singers are represented in a fairly confined cultural and political context is part of the 'screening' process which filters the blues from other genres. The idea that the music functioned to foster sentiments of belonging to a tightly-knit community, a people which shared a disadvantaged position in American society and therefore shared cultural expression, reinforced the folk function status of the blues. However, what is significant in Oliver's writing is that while the emphasis is on the seeming accommodationism towards racial segregation, through the lyrics of the blues the singer is to some extent seen as having made the choice to remain marginal,

He accepts his position in the social sub-stratum on, as George Schyler termed it, 'the mud-sill of America' in numerous self-abasing metaphors and then rejoices in them: 'I'm ragged but right'; 'it's dirty but it's good', 'I'm blue, black and evil and I did not make myself.'⁴⁵⁹

This quote is similar to the interpretation of the automobile image, where the blues singer is depicted as embracing his lower social status, and it is this sense of pride in poverty which seems most admirable to Oliver. In this sense, he is akin to Cecil Sharp who, as Filene argues, made the poverty of Appalachian songsters appear as an 'ascetic

⁴⁵⁹ Oliver, *Screening the Blues*, p. 254

philosophy.’⁴⁶⁰ The subtle manner in which poverty is aestheticized in blues scholarship demonstrates the imposition of anti-modern ideals on blues singers, despite the fact that in reality blues singers it was often the opposite. An example was Brownie McGhee who was astounded at the success of Josh White in the white folk circles of New York in the early forties: ‘when I saw how much money he was making, I said, ‘Hey, show me how to go white, too.’’⁴⁶¹ Instead, Oliver borrowed from Kardiner and Ovesey’s study on spirituals and folk-tales which argued that it was African Americans at the bottom of the social order that carried ‘the greatest amount of self-preservation anxiety.’⁴⁶² Therefore, while there may not have been a sense of ‘conscious art’ for the blues singer, there nonetheless existed a sense of conscious cultural agency to preserve the tradition.

The Language of *Screening the Blues*

Oliver conveys this sense of racial solidarity by employing a highly personalised language to describe their sentiments and choices of blues singers and audiences,

As a member of a victimized minority rather than as an individual victim of prejudice, [the blues singer] shares with other Negroes the common frustration that a repressive social system has provoked. Through the blues songs and traditional songs, through the ebullient reiterations of time-worn themes, he bolsters his ego with sexual fantasies and shares them with the listeners for whom he sings and whose repressions are his own. Through them he asserts his masculinity, and achieves the power that the system denies him; through them he, or she, brags of his prowess, asserts his superiority and challenges all comers. Listening to the records and purchasing more, the Negro joins the singer in a shared experience, feels with him a sense of racial solidarity.⁴⁶³

⁴⁶⁰ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, p. 24

⁴⁶¹ Elijah Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues* (University of Massachusetts: Amherst, 2000), p. 99

⁴⁶² Oliver, *Screening the Blues*, p. 260

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 257

The personalised language that Oliver uses here in ‘his masculinity,’ ‘his own,’ ‘he bolsters his ego,’ and ‘he joins and feels’ creates an intimate connection between singer and audience, but also between writer and subject matter. The writing goes beyond mere description and evokes a sense of admiration. By personalising his narrative, Oliver gives a human face to the connections and relationships which maintain the folk community. However, another example of Oliver’s personalised language demonstrates how susceptible the categorisation as a folk music is to contradiction. Here, the blues singer is depicted as predominantly individualistic and egocentric, a trait momentarily abandoned when taking on the role of balladeer in telling the story of the boxer Joe Louis, ‘[f]orgetting for a moment his preoccupation with himself, the blues singer spoke briefly for his racial group as a whole, giving voice to its exultation over the hero’s winning bouts.’⁴⁶⁴ This contrasts the previous example in which Oliver represented the blues singer as singing for his listeners with whom he also shares repressions. The individualism of the blues singer is difficult to reconcile with the idea of the African American’s sense of shared cultural self-preservation. What this demonstrates is that Oliver’s representation of the blues as folk music serves to highlight the unstable nature of the folk concept in blues scholarship overall. That the blues, despite being recorded commercially en masse and with traditional active participation in cultural production being replaced by consumption, is persistently represented as being a product of African American culture and functioning as a cohesive agent in maintaining that culture says much more about the attitudes of the analyst than of the culture itself.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 163

The manner in which the author describes musicians is typical of the folkloric paradigm that dominates the concept of the blues tradition. For instance, Oliver presented his view on the recurrent debate between the natural folk as opposed to the schooled Western approach to music,

It is one of the strengths, but also one of the weaknesses of the blues that it offers to the singer or the instrumentalist of very little accomplishment a means whereby he can give some expression to his ideas. Many blues guitarists never learn to form a chord – John Lee Hooker is one who has achieved wide fame in the blues without even this degree of musical knowledge. Often it is better so; unorthodox fingering and the trial-and-error process of finding his way along the fingerboard of his guitar has given to many a blues musician a sound quality which is his own.⁴⁶⁵

The improvised and instinctive is repeatedly placed above the dedication to technical skill and artistry. Again, the view that the blues is characterised by more intuitive didacticism and that ‘often it is better so,’ supports the vision of the blues as an unconscious art. It also separates the music of musicians such as Hooker from the young white generation of guitarists claiming to be playing the blues such as Eric Clapton (i.e. ‘Clapton is God’), which by the late sixties were very much, according to Oliver, ‘applauded and lauded.’⁴⁶⁶ To be sincere, the instrument needed to be played instinctively and roughly, such as Ernest Johnson’s piano in the recording of *Louisiana Bound*,

The bass figures growl and climb, the treble notes are hammered throughout the record with alternating runs. It is not *The Forty-Fours*, but listening to the accompaniment to *Louisiana Bound* is like hearing a pianist who is exploring the piano, feeling his way to the creation of the theme. It is an impressive performance, less polished and formalized than recordings of *The Forty-Fours* and *Vicksburg Blues*, more wild and in many ways more exciting.⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 90

⁴⁶⁶ Oliver, *Conversation with the Blues*, p. xiii

⁴⁶⁷ Oliver, *Screening the Blues*, p. 101

The way Oliver perceives Johnson to ‘feel’ his way through the recording prioritizes improvisation, and thus the instinctive aspects of performance. In other words, the pianist is playing naturally and therefore, honestly. The passage gives as much away about the author as it does of the singer. Stating that he found it ‘wild’ and ‘exciting’ suggests a sense of primitivism and affinity for the exotic.

This perception of the sincere approach to musicianship finds its counterpart in the analysis and judgement of singing, such as in the example of Hi-Henry Brown’s *Preacher Blues*: ‘[t]hough the words were humorous there was little humour in Hi-Henry Brown’s delivery which deep, rough-textured and with an intonation that suggests there was some truth in the narration of the misdemeanours of the preacher.’⁴⁶⁸ This description associates the less polished qualities of Brown’s voice with the singer’s sincerity, invoking the repeatedly used assertion that was presented in the oral accounts of *Conversation*, the blues conveys the truth. There needed to be conviction in the unpolished delivery of the lyrics, as if to communicate innate truths that were direct and unadulterated, such as Jesse James’ *Sweet Patuni*, ‘[w]ith his guttural voice, his stomping piano breaking sometimes into boogie woogie bass figures and the rough humour of his verses with their terminal puns, Jesse James pours out a stiff draught of unadulterated, undiluted barrelhouse entertainment.’⁴⁶⁹ Oliver also repeatedly uses the terms ‘unbowdlerized’ and ‘bowdlerization’ to discern the level of censorship in sexual themes, and therefore make judgements on the extent to which those themes are indicative of the

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 50

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 225

tradition.⁴⁷⁰ Bessie Smith's *Empty Bed Blues*, for instance, 'is honest in that it does not attempt to hide its theme, the metaphors following direct statements.'⁴⁷¹ Honesty, as the directness and frankness which early jazz critics championed in African American music, was a fundamental criterion for Oliver's tradition. What is significant, however, is that these examples demonstrate the unstable method of description which is used to define authentic blues. It is almost entirely dependent on the author's perception of sincerity as it is conveyed in the performance. Once again, one is reminded of the vitally important role of the sonic characteristics of the blues in determining written interpretations of the music.

The weakness in this method of judgement is made more evident in Oliver's criticism of singers that fail to match the standards required of the tradition. For instance, the pianist Roosevelt Sykes' (singing under the pseudonym of Willie Kelly) recording of *Kelly's 44 Blues* lacked 'the organic unity of the traditional theme' of *The Forty-Fours*, and resulted in 'a surprisingly poorly resolved musical composition.'⁴⁷² Memphis Slim's attempt to record this traditional theme was described 'mechanical and lifeless,' despite including many of the musical characteristics that shaped the tune.⁴⁷³ In another example, Oliver describes Virginia Liston's delivery of *Rolls-Royce Papa* as '[s]ung with an insipid voice and with little conviction.'⁴⁷⁴ Perhaps the most significant of these instances relates to the career of Bessie Smith,

Rudi Blesh observes ... that 'in her later years Bessie Smith was the victim of mismanagement and, faced with diminishing returns, succumbed

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 230/239

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., p. 180

⁴⁷² Ibid., p. 111

⁴⁷³ Ibid., p. 113

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 215

at times to the temptations of commercialization and pornography and even belittled herself and her race singing *coon* songs.’ The recordings careers of [Sara Martin and Bessie Smith] and other classic blues singers were liberally sprinkled with coon songs. Imitative of Negro song in a genre which owed more to ‘Nigger Minstrels’ than to a part of the tradition, they were prominent not only at the conclusion but also at the commencement of their careers. The increased proportion of suggestive and pornographic material in their late sessions does lend support to the view that the record companies, confronted with the Depression, attempted to revive flagging sales with records of this character.⁴⁷⁵

What seems significant here is that Oliver not only shared Blesh’s interpretation, he emphasises the view to the extent that Smith ‘belittled herself and her race.’ The categorisation of music which fails to respect the anti-commercial nature of the tradition is now made into a racial discourse. In other words, to seek commercial rewards through the music is to betray the race, and therefore the tradition. The African American blues tradition is thus seen as a form based on anti-modern stance, centred on human relationships of direct and frank expression, the antithesis of the commercial and materialistic principles of Western Anglo-Saxon culture.

In *Screening* Oliver clearly shared the aversion for the influence of white mainstream popular culture and its post-war incursion into the black vernacular music that had been expressed by LeRoi Jones earlier in the decade. Jones had suggested that the effects of the Depression on the recording industry forced some musicians to try and satisfy white audiences, and when that happened, ‘many times no more real blues ever left their lips.’ He went on to argue that in the post-war years continuity was traceable from the pre-war blues into the newly labelled rhythm and blues category, which ‘though largely commercialized, was still exclusive enough to escape the bloodless

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 180

commercialism of the white entertainment world.’ Jones’ termed this ‘the blues continuum,’ which was largely orientated towards fostering a sense of pride in African American cultural heritage which would serve as a consolidator for ‘black pride’ at a time of increased militancy and revolt at social injustice.⁴⁷⁶ Keil also saw Jones’ ‘continuum’ in the urban blues sounds of the sixties. However, this was not a tradition in the sense that a specific historically identifiable practice was held as the standard for contemporary interpretations. Instead, Keil’s concept of lower-class African American expression through the ‘unspeakable essence’ of expressing ‘soul’ allowed musical expression to draw on older forms while reforming them for deployment in the present day.⁴⁷⁷ Thus, while there was continuity there was also change and modernisation in the new age.

By contrast, Oliver’s analysis of the blues tradition, while establishing continuities in thematic and melodic characteristics, functioned as a means of demarcating and creating categorical boundaries and imposing limits where Jones and Keil saw evolution. It distinguished authentic African American blues from the imitations and interpretations of the sixties, and the commercial blues that were becoming ever more prominent. In the process of ‘screening’ the blues, of filtering the authentic from the inauthentic, Oliver placed a gulf between pre-war African American cultural expression and the post-war era. In privileging of the past over the present, Oliver fell into the trap of romanticising a vibrant, human, and honest folk culture, but also into making sometimes fairly limiting assumptions of African American character and consciousness in order to defend his blues culture from the white invasions of the sixties. The tradition therefore functioned as a means of creating links to the past, and paving the way for Oliver’s next

⁴⁷⁶ Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People*, p. 167/169

⁴⁷⁷ Keil, *Urban Blues*, p. 185

book which narrated the story of the music. The focus on upkeep of the tradition, and on the dominance of the past over the scholarship of the blues in the late sixties, highlights the Oliver's aesthetic allegiance to the standards set by the blues of the interwar years. In addition, the romantic tone of Oliver's personalized passages suggest that the blues used to be at the heart of a racial defiance of social injustice through cultural practice rather than political protest, creates the narrative of human tenacity and survival against all odds, of beauty being borne of tragedy, a motif that would become central in *The Story of the Blues*. It also further removes the world of the blues from the contemporary social and cultural context of African Americans. While Jones' 'blues continuum' represented a part of the formation of a strong African American cultural and historical identity being constructed around the time of the Black Arts Movement and Black Power, as the next chapter will explore in *The Story of the Blues*, the allegiance to the glory of days gone by would inevitably result in the end of the tradition and the death of the blues.

Chapter 5

The Rise and Fall:

The Story of the Blues (1969)

The Story of the Blues was Oliver's last major book of the sixties, and was probably the most influential in future scholarship on the subject of the blues as it represented one of the first formal attempts to narrate a history. At the time of the book's publication, British jazz writer Max Harrison argued that *The Story of the Blues* was 'the only complete history of the music we have.'⁴⁷⁸ Although by this time there had been a number of other books on the subject, none had dedicated their efforts to trace the emergence and development of the music in any great length. For this reason the editor of *Blues Unlimited* described Oliver's monograph as 'the most lavish book on the subject to date.'⁴⁷⁹ The closest to a blues history before then was undoubtedly LeRoi Jones' (Amiri Baraka) *Blues People* (1963). However, this was a history that sought to emphasise the value and vitality of lower-class black music and simultaneously, as William Harris highlighted, to critique white America and the black middle classes.⁴⁸⁰ Consequently, Jones was not as determined to erect or maintain the categorical definitions between blues and other genres, as he was to distinguish 'free' African Americans from slaves and white Americans. Many blues writers still maintain today that *The Story of the Blues*

⁴⁷⁸ Max Harrison, 'The Blues: review of *The Story of the Blues* by Paul Oliver', in *The Musical Times*, Vol. 111, No. 1523, (Jan. 1970), pp. 48-9

⁴⁷⁹ Simon Napier, 'Review of 'The Story of the Blues,' *Blues Unlimited*, September 1969, No. 65, p. 20

⁴⁸⁰ William Harris, 'Manuals for Black Militants,' *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 27 No. 3 (Autumn, 1967), p. 408-16

‘represents the best synthesis/reportage of the ‘real thing’ and that it ‘was the best popular introduction to the music in its day.’ The book provides a comprehensive survey of the differing range of musicians, styles and geographical areas involved in the music’s development, as well as acknowledging the various social and economic circumstances which conditioned the emergence of the blues across the African American landscape. Oliver’s sensitivity to these diverse elements has been appreciated by blues musicologists such as Evans, who argues that the author ‘has learned that the history of blues is complex and cannot be neatly packaged or reviewed as a unilinear development and that the blues has many meanings for many different people.’⁴⁸¹

As the previous chapters have demonstrated, in his writing during the fifties and sixties Oliver had elected to demonstrate that the blues was a distinct musical category worthy of attention in its own right. His exploration of meaning in lyrics saw the blues as a reflection of the African American experience of the lower-classes, and, as discussed in Chapter 4, the identification of the blues as a tradition by ‘screening’ the real blues from the inauthentic functioned to separate it from other forms of music, and root its origins within a distant folk culture from the past. In this context, an historical narrative would complete the process of isolating the blues as a distinct and identifiable form with its own particular story. *The Story of the Blues* is interesting precisely for this reason, as representing the blues through the historical narrative suggests that the music exists not only as a stable and definable idiom, but also as a music that had a unique history that legitimized its consideration apart from other forms. Oliver’s history examines the origins and development of the blues in sixteen chapters that span a century. It begins in the

⁴⁸¹ ‘represents..’ Amy Van Singel; ‘best popular introduction..’ Jeff Titon; ‘has learned..’ David Evans quoted in *The Paul Oliver 70th Birthday Tribute*, www.bluesworld.com/PAULOLIVER.HTML retrieved 22/8/2009

music's obscure origins from the ashes of slavery and Emancipation, through to its development from folk idiom to popular culture at the turn of the twentieth century, the start of the recording industry in the twenties, the Depression years into interwar period, to its decline as a folk music in the post-war blues revival of the sixties. While accounting for the genesis of the music from the often tragic circumstances of the African American experience, the author was indirectly proclaiming the 'death' of the blues at a time when the blues revival itself was in the process of petering out. Incidentally, Oliver's emphasis on the demise of the blues as a genre coincides with Wald's assertion that by the end of the sixties, the revivalist and romanticised interpretations of the blues had become fully established.⁴⁸²

Despite Oliver's sensitive appreciation of the complexity of blues history, however, an examination of *The Story of the Blues* reveals the manner in which his blues narrative contributed to the production of a constructed representation of the music at the end of the blues revival. When Oliver described the book as 'a brief outline,' he modestly underestimated both its impact on future blues historians and its power to reify an idea of the blues.⁴⁸³ The 'blues narrative' would be frequently re-written in years to come by notable writers such as Giles Oakley, Robert Palmer William Barlow, Francis Davis, and former Rolling Stones bassist Bill Wyman.⁴⁸⁴ Notable historians such as Lawrence Levine and Leon Litwack have also given space to the blues in their African American histories. The romantic slant of these narratives that represents the blues as the voice of a lower-class African American consciousness, opposed to the soulless commercialism of

⁴⁸² Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, p. 249

⁴⁸³ Oliver, *Conversation with the Blues*, p. 7

⁴⁸⁴ See Giles Oakley, *The Devil's Music: a History of the Blues* (Da Capo, 1976); Palmer, *Deep Blues*; Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*; Francis Davis, *The History of the Blues: the Roots, the Music, the People* (Da Capo, 2003); Bill Wyman & Richard Havers, *Bill Wyman's Blues Odyssey* (DK Publishing, 2001)

the capitalist world, has been the focus of criticism in recent revisionist scholarship. Perhaps Palmer's now iconic quotation (also used by Litwack), has come to symbolize the lure of blues history: 'How much history can be transmitted by pressure on a guitar string? The thought of generations, the history of every human being who's ever felt the blues come down like showers of rain.'⁴⁸⁵ This pushes Hamilton to comment that 'it is curious... to find an historian as sophisticated as Litwack framing the blues in this populist way as the voice of the folk, the pure and unmediated cry of the masses.'⁴⁸⁶ Revisionists have concentrated on the manner in which romanticism has obscured more factual histories, in the sense of actual events that occurred in the past. While this criticism allows for the use of more empirical data in discerning fact from fiction, it does not fully take account of the manner in which the actual process of *writing* history can contribute to misrepresentations and reifications of an imagined blues.

This chapter will examine the construction of the historical narrative in *The Story of the Blues*, as it is the process of writing a history, characterised by the inevitable clash of historical evidence and literary artifice that destabilizes the tangible appearance of that same story. Importantly, what is omitted from the story is also telling of the manner in which the history is shaped by the author. The production of the narrative undermined the notion that a coherent, linear and identifiable history of the blues could be known and accurately told. This will entail a discussion of the very nature of historical writing and the ambiguities that characterise the writer's negotiation of historical information in the contemporary social, cultural and political context of the late sixties. In addition, the chapter will explore Oliver's use of a range of different images from his own

⁴⁸⁵ Palmer, *Deep Blues*; used by Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, p. xvii

⁴⁸⁶ Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, p. 8

photographs, the portraits of singers, advertisements from the Race Records era, to the photographs from the Farm Security Administration of the New Deal, which help to establish the iconography of the blues while complicating the representation of blues history.

Writing History and the ‘Blues Narrative’

As the previous chapters have demonstrated, Oliver’s work on the blues was characterised by an emphasis on the past, while not being formally in the discipline of history. In collecting records from the interwar years, examining lyrics within the context of interwar African American life, collecting singers’ memories of those experiences, and tracing a blues tradition, the representation of the music was dictated by an idealized version of the past with which the contemporary post-war world was repeatedly confronted. *The Story of the Blues* represents a more formal attempt to narrate a history, and as such requires analysis precisely as a historical work. However, it is not the purpose here to debate the accuracy of historical events presented in the book, as these discussions have taken place elsewhere.⁴⁸⁷ Also this would contradict the historical deconstructionist approach which has characterised the preceding chapters. Instead, it is the actual process of writing a blues history which is of interest, as the putting together of information gathered from records, oral history and literature on the subject of the blues

⁴⁸⁷ See for instance Wald’s discussion on Robert Johnson’s minor role in the history of African American music, which contradicts revivalist interpretations of the singer, in *Escaping the Delta*; also see Hamilton’s discussion on the inaccurate use of WC Handy’s first encounter with the blues as a point of origin in blues histories in *In Search of the Blues*, p. 22-3

and African American culture provides a window into the process of constructing the blues.

This analysis takes as its basis a deconstructionist historical analysis as explained by Alun Munslow,

History is first and foremost a literary enterprise. Its cognitive function derives from the complex interpretive structure of narrative defined as a set of proposals or suggestions about past events...

Constituting a narrative explanation requires the ordering, selection and omission of events and occurrences, and by our study of how the historian does this ought to be possible to reveal something of his/her rationale or motive for producing this or that choice of narrative.⁴⁸⁸

As acknowledged in the Introduction, it would be unproductive to take the linguistic discourses of deconstructionist thought to their ends. What becomes the focus of deconstructive analysis in this case is what the 'literary enterprise' of the historian highlights. The emphasis is placed on the construction of the historical text, the way history is *done*, rather than the past on which the text is based. Historians are therefore regarded as much 'authors' as they are historians, acknowledging the literary activity which characterises the process of selecting and piecing together historical elements into a written narrative. Much of the emphasis on the literary practice of historical work emanates from the writings of Hayden White, who argues that all historical evidence is 'value neutral' and lacking in meaning prior to its organisation into a narrative form. An order is achieved through a process of 'emplotment' in which the author's 'literary imagination' adds 'fictive elements' in order to adequately organise and give meaning to historical events.⁴⁸⁹ For White, it is in this capacity to mould historical information that

⁴⁸⁸ Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, p. 118

⁴⁸⁹ White, 'Historical Text as Literary Artefact,' p. 84/99

the authorial characteristics of the process emerge. A *story* is created from the information of historical events that have a beginning, a purpose, an ending, and its protagonists must be able to attract some form of response from the reader through their struggles. All of these characteristics can be traced in Oliver's book, which is aptly titled the *story* the blues, and will be discussed in this chapter. Importantly, this is not to say that Oliver's historical narrative was fictional, that it was deliberately misleading, or overtly romanticized, as this was far from the case. It is to say, rather, that due to the problematic nature of adequately representing and knowing the past, the process of piecing together an historical narrative carries inevitable elements of literary craft that shape the ultimate representation of the subject at hand.

In the emphasis on the disconnection between signifier and signified, deconstructionist theories have tended to point to the existence of a world without meaning, and that all history is therefore 'invented.' However, as suggested above, the implication of applying these theoretical principles would make any form of analysis redundant, and, as Georg Iggers reminds us, the production of the historical text 'does not occur in a vacuum.'⁴⁹⁰ What must be remembered, therefore, is that history can never be fully divorced from the reasons motivating the author-historian to write,

We are all imprisoned in the present as we narrate the past. This is the historian's perennial double-bind...
...the historical imagination itself exists intertextually within our own social and political environment, the past is never discovered in a world set aside from everyday life. History is designed and composed in the here and now.⁴⁹¹

⁴⁹⁰ Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: from Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), p. 11/145

⁴⁹¹ Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, p. 129/148

In other words, the construction of the narrative must also take account of the contemporary ideological, political and social that shape and motivate the production of the historical text. As examined in the previous chapters, the context of the blues revival and the white discovery of African American music played a considerable role in Oliver's framing of the past. Herein lies the 'intertextuality' of blues scholarship, with scholars examining records and memories of the past on the one hand, but on the other carrying out the research in their own contemporary social, political and cultural context. As the previous chapter indicated, while actual blues songs had lost their popular appeal in the charts, the number of blues enthusiasts had grown towards the end of the sixties. These were ever more hungry for information, records and history, which can be detected in growth in number of articles that looked at the historical and sociological background of the music, such as Lawrence Skoog's series in *Blues Unlimited* entitled 'The Negro in America: His Life and Times.'⁴⁹² Following the publication of *The Story of the Blues*, Oliver kicked off the second National Blues Convention in September of 1969. A reviewer argued that Oliver 'really put the stamp of authority on proceedings with a relaxed, but splendidly succinct lecture.'⁴⁹³ While the fact that blues was no directly longer topping the music charts at this point supports Wald's view that the histories blues scholars were writing reflected 'an elite, extremely minority taste,' it was nonetheless within this context of a minority of connoisseurs that Oliver's history of the blues was shaped.⁴⁹⁴

⁴⁹² Lawrence Skoog, 'The Negro in America: His Life and Times,' *Blues Unlimited*, June 1969, No. 63, pp. 4-7

⁴⁹³ 'Review of 'The 2nd National Blues Convention, 1969, Conway Hall, 21st/22nd September,' *Blues Unlimited*, November 1969, No. 67, p. 16

⁴⁹⁴ Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, p. 188

The analysis of the literary construction of a blues history has many parallels with Scott DeVeaux's criticism of jazz historiography and official jazz histories,

...jazz is presented as a coherent whole, and its history as a skilfully contrived and easily comprehended narrative. After an obligatory nod to African origins and ragtime antecedents, the music is shown to move through a succession of styles and periods, each with a conveniently distinctive label and time period: New Orleans jazz up through the 1920s, swing in the 1930s, bebop in the 1940s, cool jazz and hard bop in the 1950s, free jazz and fusion in the 1960s. Details of emphasis vary. But from textbook to textbook, there is substantive agreement on the defining features of each style, the pantheon of great innovators, and the canon of recorded masterpieces.⁴⁹⁵

For DeVeaux, the narrative reifies jazz as a stable and identifiable category, with histories presenting a continuum traceable throughout the twentieth century. He also adopts White's concept of literary emplotment, arguing that the mode in which jazz histories are told vary from the Tragic to the Romantic. In essence, the evolution and establishment of the blues narrative from Oliver's history to the writings of Oakley, Palmer, Davis and even Bill Wyman display a remarkable similarity to DeVeaux's critique of the jazz narrative. It may well be that modern music histories, even of rock, punk, new wave, metal or grunge are all characterised by a process of literary construction. This is in combination with the retrospective character of writing histories which often constitutes a divorce of the historian from the historical context they are narrating.⁴⁹⁶ In the specifics, however, what differentiates jazz from blues in the historiographical sense, is that jazz, or 'America's classical music,' retains a strong presence in the twenty-first century both musically and economically, and still retains

⁴⁹⁵ DeVeaux, 'Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography,' p. 525

⁴⁹⁶ 'retrospective' nature of writing histories highlighted by Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, p. xv

numerous figureheads seen to be keeping the tradition alive.⁴⁹⁷ The ‘blues narrative,’ on the other hand, has often rested on the assumption that the music has either been on the verge of demise, or depending on the time in which the history was written, extinct in its ‘truest’ and most ‘authentic’ forms. This has meant its transition from a form of folk music to popular music and ending with a ‘roots’ music label.⁴⁹⁸ Indeed, in the introduction to *The Story of the Blues*, Oliver wraps his narrative in the context of a fading musical form that in its time of dying has inspired the burgeoning success of many others,

Roll over, Beethoven! When the Beatles recorded the iconoclastic title it wasn’t only Beethoven who had to move aside but the composer of the song, the rhythm-and-blues singer, Chuck Berry, as well. When the Rolling Stones were *Confessing the Blues* they were confessing, too, to the influence of Walter Brown and B.B. King; when the Animals acclaimed the *Big Boss Man* the real boss man was Jimmy Reed. It was Lightning’ Hopkins who was preserved when The Lovin’ Spoonful put the *Blues In the Bottle*; it was a Mississippi Negro, Bukka White, on parole from Parchman Farm, who was Bob Dylan’s muse for *Fixin’ to Die Blues*. Using the words and music of a Memphis ‘gum-ball raker,’ Gus Cannon, the Rooftop Singers offered the invitation to *Walk Right In*. Popular music has been walking in on the blues ever since.

The boundaries are clearly drawn here, the blues and white popular music of the sixties are two different things, and the end of the story is set with the invasion of latter on the former. However, Oliver again makes clear the purpose of his narrative: ‘this is not a book about the current trends in popular music, but about the blues.’⁴⁹⁹

⁴⁹⁷ DeVaux argues that Wynton Marsalis has been depicted as having ‘rescued jazz from extinction,’ and also that ‘jazz has, in many ways, never been better supported or appreciated,’ in ‘Constructing the Jazz Tradition,’ p. 527

⁴⁹⁸ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, p. 123; Filene argues that places such as Chicago and the Chess Records label became pilgrimage sites for European blues enthusiasts in search of the music’s roots

⁴⁹⁹ Paul Oliver, *The Story of the Blues* (Penguin: London, 1972 [sic]1969), p. 6

Beginnings: Framing the Story

From the outset, in his acknowledgements Oliver directly sets the backdrop for the story: ‘my greatest debt of gratitude, of course, is to the blues singers and musicians themselves whose creative abilities, born in painful experience have immeasurably enriched our musical experience.’⁵⁰⁰ Similar sentiments would be endlessly repeated in blues narratives that followed, as exemplified by Stephen C. Tracy: ‘It is a story as old as the American genesis...and it is, to a great degree, a myth of inferiority that is forcefully dispelled musically, poetically, and spiritually by this century’s humbly towering art form, the blues.’⁵⁰¹ While this is a perfectly understandable ode to the creators of the music, it also sets the context for the blues narrative. Given the absence of concrete historical evidence of the origins of the music, Oliver elects to focus on the wider historical context of the African American experience. It is their ‘painful experience’ of the latter part of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries which frame the history of the blues. The story therefore begins from the legacies of slavery. The inclusion of a full page poster from 1853 in which a slave buyer offered ‘\$1200 to \$1250 for Negroes,’ a period when the slave trade was supposed to have been over for near half a century, looms large over Oliver’s introduction, indicating the burden which the protagonists of Oliver’s story must carry. Thus in the opening chapters the story emphasises the quiet resistance and tenacity of African Americans that, despite the continued presence of the slave trade in the nineteenth century, the failed promises of

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 4

⁵⁰¹ Tracy (ed), *Write Me a Few of Your Lines*, p. xi

Reconstruction, and the disenfranchisement of Jim Crow, retained the ability to express themselves creatively. This has its origins within the Atlantic crossings of African slaves,

There had been sustained contact with Africa for more than two centuries, and in spite of the barbarities of the slave-ships, the inhumanity of the auction block and the brutalities of the slave-drivers which were all designed to break the spirit, the African displayed a remarkable capacity for survival under deplorable conditions.⁵⁰²

Accompanying this description is a large image of a 'Guinea-man' slave ship loading plan, displaying the shocking harshness of the crossings. The effect of the image is to stress the tragedy characterising the beginning of the African experience that would eventually become African American. Here, the British seems to lean towards LeRoi Jones' analysis of the blues born in the African slave's path to becoming African American. Jones argued that slavery dictated to a large degree the emergence of the music, and would go on to argue militantly that 'the only so-called popular music in this country of any real value is of African derivation.'⁵⁰³ Oliver, however, is not declaring that the blues was the music of slaves, but rather is attempting to demonstrate the manner in which African Americans were able to survive despite the suppression of their African culture with the use of spirituals and work songs. The effect of this framing is to create a distinctly powerful image of beauty emerging from tragedy, of a spiritual triumph over physical and material despair, or in White's words, 'the triumph of good over bad, of virtue over vice, of light over darkness.'⁵⁰⁴ Oliver uses an example from the diary of the young black freewoman Charlotte Forten from 1862, where a slave woman is quoted

⁵⁰² Oliver, *The Story of the Blues*, p. 9

⁵⁰³ Jones, *Blues People*, p. 28

⁵⁰⁴ Hayden White, *Metahistory: the Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1973), p. 9

commenting on the spiritual 'Poor Rosy,' stating that 'it can't be sung without a *full heart and a troubled spirit*.' Despite focusing here on early traces of African American songs, Oliver regards the sentiment evoked by the slave woman as a link to the emergence of the blues around half a century later: 'A full heart and a troubled spirit has been the inspiration and the reason for countless blues.'⁵⁰⁵ This helps to establish the 'emplotment' of Oliver's narrative of a battle between the human spirit and oppression, which is depicted as being played out throughout African American history.

While Oliver is not directly linking the blues with slavery, he does attempt to trace a continuity of consciousness based on human endurance. African identity and cultural practices may have been forcibly eroded in the lives of the transplanted slaves, but, as in the case of those spirituals that were supposedly white in origin, their 'African means of expression and [their] ability to extemporise soon moulded them as something apart from the European tradition.' Equally, the call-and-response patterns of the work songs allowed them to impose their own rhythms to the toil of the field gangs.⁵⁰⁶ This ability to mould music to suit their demands is represented as the constant which transcends historical events,

...it may be seen that Negro traditions of music, song and dance had a long history extending far back in slavery and to an African heritage. Vestiges of Africa remained in their arts where they were permitted to do so, and in the dialect of the Georgia Sea Islands, of the Gullah Negroes and in scattered fragments throughout the South, may be heard African words and phrases. The ability of the Negro to adapt his music, to create anew, to improvise words and themes is evident in innumerable reminiscences and reports. All this has relevance to the blues and has had, in some way, an influence on the shaping of the music, its content or its function.⁵⁰⁷

⁵⁰⁵ Oliver, *The Story of the Blues*, p. 8

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 10-1

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 13

Indeed, the imagery used in the book supports the idea of African retentions, by presenting an image of inmates at the Angola Penitentiary in Louisiana, singing a ‘cutting song as they wield their axes, in a manner which recalls that of African work gangs’ (Fig. 22). Oliver makes use of some his own photographs from his experiences in Ghana in 1964, where he spent some months as a visiting lecturer at the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, and at the University of Ghana in Legon, where he gave a number of talks on African American vernacular music, including blues and jazz. These experiences allowed him to conduct fieldwork which would eventually be published in *Savannah Syncopators: African Retentions in the Blues* (1970), the first in a series of ‘Blues Paperbacks’ that Oliver edited.⁵⁰⁸ The images show African American banjo players next to similar stringed instruments from the savannah regions of West Africa, which Oliver stated were ‘related to the banjo.’ Similarly, a photograph of an Ashanti dance to a drum orchestra appears on the same page that Oliver discusses the Saturday night ‘frolics’ and ‘jigs’ that characterised the plantation lives of slaves.⁵⁰⁹ Once again, this creates a sense of continuity. While Oliver notes that African and European cultures met and formed hybridized versions in the antebellum South, there remains the suggestion that the African elements were better positioned to resist total suppression. In the battle of good over evil, then, African heritage takes on the part of the good, whereas the imperial white oppressor takes the bad. The use of African photographs demonstrates the author’s emphasis on the past and more specifically with the origins of the blues from the black experience of slavery.

⁵⁰⁸ Paul Oliver, ‘Savannah Syncopators: African Retentions in the Blues,’ in P. Oliver, T. Russell, R. M. W. Dixon, J. Godrich & H. Rye (eds), *Yonder Come The Blues* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 15

⁵⁰⁹ Oliver, *The Story of the Blues*, p. 12-3



Figure 22: Oliver's caption reads 'convicts in Angola Penitentiary, Louisiana, sing a 'cutting song' as they wield their axes, in a manner which recalls that of African work gangs. Bottom left: banjo player and dancer about 1890. Centre: Negro songs were sentimentalised in the 'Plantation Melodies' of Stephen Foster, and here a banjo-playing slave sits at Foster's feet on the Pittsburgh Memorial. Right: Hausa and Fulani stringed instruments from the savannah regions of West Africa are related to the banjo.' It is interesting that the raised arms of the convicts almost remind of the postures of the dancer and banjo player. (Top image from Harry Oster, bottom centre from United States Information Service (USIS), remaining images from Paul Oliver.)

The manner in which free African Americans coped with the social and economic conditions of the late nineteenth century inspires similar imagery of human survival against the odds. According to the author, the combined effect of the catastrophic failure of Emancipation, the eventual institutionalization of the 'separate but equal' laws through the Supreme Court in 1896, and the entrapment into exploitative employment practices, 'was to impress upon [the African American] a sense of his own identity.' For Oliver, these events gave rise to Booker T. Washington and W.E.B Dubois' two different approaches to tackling the underprivileged position of the African American, but most importantly for the story, also triggered an internal revolution within black culture which would give rise to not only blues but jazz, ragtime, gospel, and the ballad folk heroes such as John Henry and Ella Speed.⁵¹⁰ That it was possible to forge such distinctive cultural forms amid dire social and economic circumstances impresses on the reader a sense that the African American story was an extraordinary one, and thus worthy of its own history. Again, this emphasis on the experience and survival of cultural practices amid tragic events lends an historical legitimacy to the story.

However, what seems to emerge is an internalized and inward looking African American world, a recurrence of the 'Negro world' Oliver describes in his writing of the fifties. The opening chapters of *The Story of the Blues* create a middle ground occupied by this African American space. Oliver states that the book is an attempt to show 'the evolution of a modern folk music,' which places the blues in a category between the modern world and the old. Labelling the blues in this way is demonstrative of the cultural constructs that categories such as 'folk' point to, but Oliver's purpose is once again one of demarcation. In this way, the blues belongs neither to the world of the slaves, or the

⁵¹⁰ Ibid., p. 15

modern world of popular entertainment and mass culture, instead it is in-between, in a place and culture of its own. In addition to the cultural 'in-betweenness' of the African American world, Oliver provides rich imagery to describe the geographical separation of the black world from the white,

When the blues began, the countryside was quiet. Loudest of the sounds to break the stillness was the roar of the steam train as it traced its way through the lowlands, leaving a smudge of smoke against the blue sky. A brief moment of excitement as it passed, a shrill whistle, dipping and wailing like a blues and it would be gone...

There was little to listen to. No airplanes overhead, no automobiles lifting clouds of dust from the dirt roads, no television aerials on the cabin roofs, no tractors and mechanical cotton-pickers, no transistor radios to place on them...In the early years of the blues, their counterparts were the creaking of wagon axles, the groaning of gang planks, the cries of occasional street vendors – the tamale man, the charcoal man and the blackberry woman. Or perhaps the blind guitarist on the community steps.

Perhaps there is no better example of literary craft in Oliver's history than in this passage, where the sound of a passing train in this quiet country is likened to the sound of a blues. The scenes described here are of an isolated world cut-off from modernity, although the passing train that passes by acts as a reminder of the modern world's existence. From Oliver's description this is a primitive, rural world where modern life and technology have yet to make their presence felt. Oliver's summary of African American life in the South of early twentieth century portrays a simple way of life,

At the height of the cotton-picking season, there was little time for anything else but hard work during the day and the rest of aching limbs for a brief night, but during the rest of the year, when the sun went down, there was time for relaxation. At the end of the week the hands would go into town to bring produce to the market, to spend a little change, have a haircut and swap lies. Saturday night has always been the big night in southern rural communities; there were fish-fries and country suppers to the music of a string band or of a guitarist and fiddler by the river's edge

when the weather was warm, and wilder pursuits in the hot, ill-ventured juke joints. On the Sunday, for the godly there was church, with services lasting on and off all day, the hoarse exhortations of the preachers leading to the lining-out of old spirituals or to the joyous sounds of the gospel song which was to become the successor of the shout. But that was Sunday. Saturday night was for good times, with the liquor flowing, the shouts and laughter of dancers rising above the noise of juke band or gin-mill piano, and sometimes the staccato report of a revolver fired in jest – or in earnest.⁵¹¹

Here Oliver strengthens his interpretation of the African Americans as the ‘humble, obscure, unassuming men and women’ that make up the story of the blues.⁵¹² Life in the black world of the rural South appears to oscillate simply between labour and leisure, with little concern for anything outside this realm of experience.

The images that accompany these passage both support and challenge this depiction (fig. 23). At first glance, the pictures of cotton pickers and a close-up of a cotton boll illustrate the rural character of African American labour. This is contrasted by the two images of a riverboat and a freight train transporting industrial quantities loads of 500lb cotton bales, highlighting that the production of cotton was part of a larger economic system. Images of a country juke joint and of dancing present a similar paradox. While the image of the smiling dancers inspires a sense of joy and ecstasy, the sign reading ‘colored juke’ on the building reminds of the racial segregation that characterised the South. Interestingly, the description of black life demonstrates that the isolation from the outside world is not wholly negative. In Oliver’s portrayals the exceptionalism of the middle ground acquires a romantic beauty, once again recalling Big Bill Broonzy’s description of the blues and the relation to its place in the rural South,

⁵¹¹ Ibid., p. 21

⁵¹² Ibid., p. 6

narrated to his British audiences in the early fifties: ‘..in Mississippi and Arkansas. That’s where you hear the blues hollerin’ across the fields at sundown.’⁵¹³

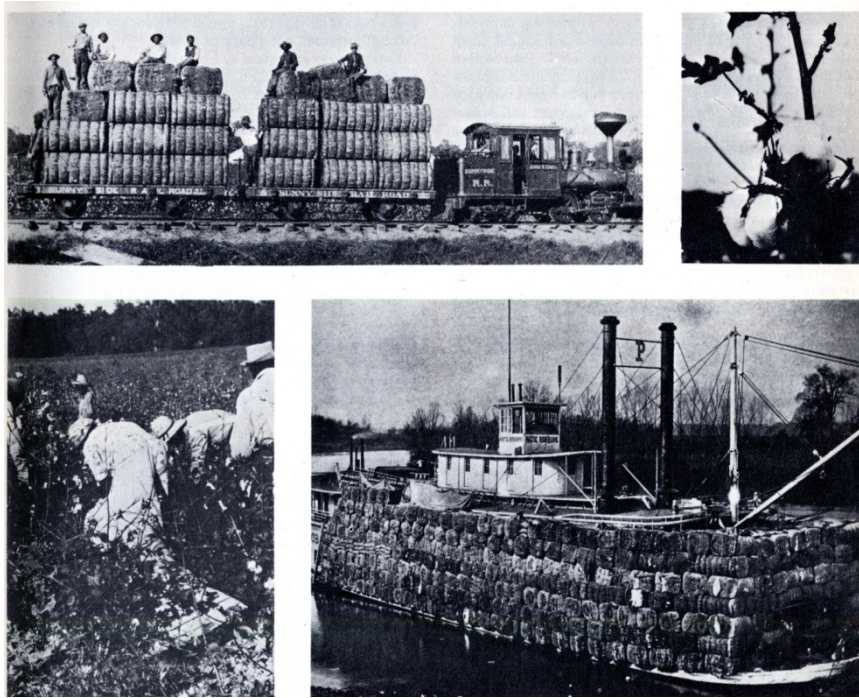


Figure 53: Images of the cotton bolls, pickers, railroad cars and riverboats transporting large loads of 500lb cotton bales (top left and bottom right Paul Oliver; top right and bottom left USIS).

The Plot, the Protagonists and the Setting

Having framed the context of story in the African American experience of the postbellum era, Oliver’s history moves in chronological order from the turn of the

⁵¹³ Riesman, *I Feel So Good*, p. 165

twentieth century up to the sixties. As an instance of the early state of the music, Oliver draws upon a now legendary resource,

‘One night at Tutwiler, as I nodded in the railroad station while waiting for a train that had been delayed nine hours, life suddenly took me by the shoulder and wakened me with a start.’ The event which, quite literally, altered the life of William Christopher Handy and also, to a considerable degree, the course of the blues, was the playing and singing of a ragged, lean Negro guitarist. ‘As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who used steel bars. The effect was unforgettable. His song, too, struck me instantly.

Goin’ where the Southern Cross the Dog.

The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard.’ It’s one of the earliest dateable references to a specific blues and is important because of the evident folk character of the singer, the location, the idiom – which W. C. Handy later used in his *Yellow Dog Blues* – and the technique of playing the guitar.⁵¹⁴

So much has this encounter from 1903, narrated by the African American composer Handy in his autobiography of 1941, become a staple of blues histories that the US Congress marked the centenary by naming 2003 as ‘The Year of the Blues.’ This year also saw director Martin Scorsese commission a series of blues documentaries by the likes of Mike Figgis and Clint Eastwood.⁵¹⁵ Hamilton’s study has drawn attention to the reliance on this retrospective encounter that has been repeatedly used in blues histories as a symbol of the genesis of the genre. She argues convincingly that Handy’s account matched the blues scholars’ ideal of the music ‘as it sounded before the record companies got to it,’ in its original and uncorrupted state. Thus, ‘[i]n their hands Handy’s Delta vagrant has been transformed into the archetypal bluesman... the story became a

⁵¹⁴ Oliver, *The Story of the Blues*, p. 26

⁵¹⁵ <http://www.yearoftheblues.org/about.asp> Retrieved 19/04/2012 at 14:09; Scorsese films in Dave Allen, ‘Feelin’ Bad this Morning: Why the *British Blues*?’ *Popular Music*, 2007, Vol. 26 No. 1, pp. 141-56

foundation myth, seeming to convey something essential and incontrovertible about the origins of the blues tradition.’⁵¹⁶ To a great extent, Hamilton’s observations apply to Oliver’s use of the story, as it is clear that the image painted here resonated with the author’s interpretation of the blues in its pre-recording days. This is demonstrated by his focus on the ‘folk character’ of the situation in terms of sound (slide guitar), appearance (‘ragged, lean Negro’), and place (railway platform in a small Delta town). However, Oliver’s ‘scholasticism’ ensures that Handy’s experience does not become simply a ‘foundation’ story, and instead serves as a rare example of the condition and function of the blues at the turn of the century. Oliver was appreciative of the fact that examples of the music had been recorded as early as 1911 in the work of the folklorist Howard B. Odum, and as discussed above, was keen to place the music within the context of the development of African American vernacular music.⁵¹⁷ Nonetheless, Oliver’s use of the Tutwiler narrative is still indicative of the attachment to a romantic image, a real historical event repackaged through Handy’s memory. Oliver may not have regarded this as the beginning of the story of the blues, but it conformed to a pre-existing notion of the music’s function before recording, who played it and where it was played. Interestingly, it also seemed to echo the author’s own experience of hearing African American music for the first time in the summer of 1942, when the sound of black GI’s singing as they worked left a lasting impression on the young Oliver.

Throughout his writing of the fifties and sixties, Oliver had rarely privileged Mississippi or the Delta as the unquestionable home of the music. During the blues

⁵¹⁶ Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, p. 21

⁵¹⁷ Interestingly, Odum is the subject of Hamilton’s second chapter. She argues that his account of African American music at the turn of the century has been largely overlooked by blues scholars, although Oliver was appreciative of his writings in works such as Howard B. Odum & Guy Johnson, *Negro Workaday Songs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1926)

revival, this idea had taken shape in the early sixties with the founders of the Origins Jazz Library (OJL) and the American collector James McKune, and it went on to seduce the growing world of blues scholars, enthusiasts and musicians. Hamilton demonstrates that by 1965 even writers such as Charters, who had originally proposed a blues canon more appreciative of audience behaviour, believed that '[n]owhere else in the South... could have bred a music so raw, so primal, for nowhere else was so cut off from the currents of modern life.'⁵¹⁸ And in *The Story of the Blues* Oliver also began to fall for the lure of the Mississippi story,

The sheer crudity of segregation in Mississippi, the barbarity of the measures to enforce it, the rich and yet despairing landscape with its low, red clay hills and the monotony of the flat bottomlands combine to give the state a perverse fascination. It is occasionally beautiful, but mostly it is elemental, cruel even, stifling in its feudalism. That a folk music of such stature and dignity took root and thrived in this soil continues to thrill and astonish, and for this reason perhaps, the view of the Mississippi as the birthplace of blues and the epitome of the whole music is seldom questioned. And perhaps, when all is told in the story of the blues, this may be true. But blues is not a music of a state and county lines or river boundaries, but of a people. While the blues was taking shape in Mississippi other traditions were emerging elsewhere.

Once again, Oliver's appreciation for Mississippi is more considered and appreciative of the fact that the story of the blues was not only from this part of the South. The example above, however, demonstrates again the focus on the motif of triumph over tragedy. The Mississippi Delta has a special place not only because of the singers and the music which came from the region, but also because the harsh conditions that characterized African American life seemed more extreme. Two images accompany this description: the first shows a cotton picker with a white man in a suit, and the second an aerial shot of the river

⁵¹⁸ Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, p. 186-7

running through the Delta. These images are captioned as: ‘many Mississippi blues singers... were underprivileged members of the community in their home districts, subject to exploitation...and the rigours of a hard life growing cotton in the fertile, black Delta lands.’ These pictures reference the subordinate social standing of the African American of the Delta to his white ‘boss,’ while showing the enormous scale and wild character of the land they work (fig. 24). What is significant here is that an almost supernatural link is established between the musicians and the Delta. The music of Delta singers such as Charley Patton, who ‘sang with such fierce conviction and with such growling earthiness,’ was the fruit of a land described as ‘rich and yet despairing,’ ‘elemental’ and ‘cruel.’⁵¹⁹

This link is explored further in a chapter that examines the ‘back home’ music of the thirties, when the older generations of singers that had stayed in the rural South, instead of venturing northwards or westwards, recorded for local talent scouts such as H. C. Speir. Undoubtedly, the intimate connections that existed between Delta singers such as Patton, Son House, Tommy Johnson, Willie Brown and Ishmon Bracey in a relatively small space adds to the appeal of the Delta tradition narrative. It seems clear that a motivating force behind the emphasis on the Delta region was the fact that often

⁵¹⁹ Oliver, *The Story of the Blues*, ‘dark intensity’ p. 31; quote and photo caption p. 34



Figure 24: Images of the fertile but hostile Delta region of Northern Mississippi, accompanied by picture of a cotton-picker and the white landowner referred to as ‘The Man.’ Also included is the advertisement for Crying Sam Collins’ Jail House Blues.’ (top right from FSA; bottom from USIS; top left from Nick Perls (Yazoo Records))

conditions there were harshest, and therefore the blues here was at its most powerful,

Three years earlier the terrible disaster of the Mississippi floods had occurred; the ravages of the boll weevil were still being felt; after the inundations had come an equally devastating drought, and the full effect of the Wall Street crash was beginning to hit the South. It must have seemed that there was no end to the troubles that a Mississippi field hand had to bear.

Oliver describes Son House's singing as 'hypnotic,' and his voice as 'full' and 'raw.' Similarly, the singer Bukka White 'had a tough life' and thus his singing held 'a primitive force.' The focus on the blues of this region allows Oliver to briefly highlight the presence of Robert Johnson. Here, Oliver relies on the testimony of Johnson's friend David 'Honeyboy' Edwards to the OJL founder Pete Whelan. While Oliver describes Johnson as 'the most important musician' to work with the likes of House and Brown, his importance is only justified in terms of his influence on the post-war Chicago blues scene. As Wald has recently reminded blues scholars, Johnson sold very few records in his time and was practically unknown to interwar African American audiences. It is unlikely that Oliver was unaware of Johnson's poor commercial success, but his brief description indicates that the lure of this obscure singer's life and death was compelling. Oliver argues that the lyrics of songs such as *Hellhound on my Trail* and *If I had Possession Over Judgement Day* reveal 'a tormented spirit' that was 'undoubtedly... rocking to his end.'⁵²⁰

It is not surprising that Oliver decided to give space to the Mississippi in his narrative. After all, many of the re-discoveries of the early sixties were from the region, and many collectors and folklorists had devoted attention to uncovering the recordings and lives of Delta musicians, peaking with the crowning of Robert Johnson as the king of

⁵²⁰ Ibid., p. 118-20

blues singers. The popularity of Johnson's recordings among white audiences of the sixties had made it so that his story could not be ignored. However, while Oliver gives ample space to the Mississippi bluesmen in his story, as he stated above, 'other traditions were emerging elsewhere.' He takes on a comprehensive survey of the various geographically based styles that characterized the origins and development of the music, espousing a view of the music's polygenetic nature. In addition to the Mississippi Delta bluesmen, also examined are the Texas styles of Blind Lemon Jefferson, the popularity of string and jug bands among black audiences such as the Mississippi Sheiks and the Memphis Jug Band, the piano blues that emanated from the saw mills and lumber camps, the piano and guitar duos such as Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell, the success of the classic blues women from the minstrel and travelling shows to the vaudeville era, the East coast style of Blind Blake and Blind Willie McTell, the jazz influenced sounds of the 'shouters' such as Jimmie Rushing and Jimmie Witherspoon, the music of the younger generations that amplified their juke joint sounds in cities, to the emergence of rhythm and blues in the postwar era. These are considered in unison with social changes such as the First World War and the migrations from the rural South to urban areas across the country (predominantly north), the decline of agriculture and mechanization of farming practices, the emergence of the Race Records Industry, the Great Depression, the emergence of mass media in the postwar era, to the white discovery of African American music in the revival.

One of the main characteristics of Oliver's narrative is its focus on movement, and journeys that African Americans made throughout the first half of the twentieth century. The back inside cover of the book includes a large map of the East, South and

Mid-West showing ‘migratory routes’ via railroads and highways (fig. 25). Whether spurred on by the labor shortages in the northern factories during the First World War, pushed by the intolerance of Jim Crow segregation, or urged to seek fortunes elsewhere due to the Depression, the protagonists of Oliver’s story are continually on the move. While the predominant direction of this movement in blues histories was from rural South to urban North, exemplified by Palmer’s use of Muddy Waters’ journey from the plantation to Chicago, Oliver’s use of a map and the focus on migrations northwards, westwards, as well as to urban centres of the South demonstrate the author’s consideration for more accurate historical realities.⁵²¹ However, what makes the focus on movement significant in *The Story of the Blues* is its presentation. On the one hand, numerous pictures show freight trains, railway tracks, some with people walking alongside them, road side signposts, and bird’s eye view images of cities, and of urban ghetto housing highlight the destinations of the migrations (figs. 26-27). On the other, the factual description of the scale of African American migration (i.e. ‘by 1900 the colored population in [Chicago] was ten times that of fifty years before’⁵²²) is under umbrella chapter headings such as ‘Travelin’ Men’ and ‘Back to Mississippi,’ and passages that state historical facts blended with a sense of stoicism: ‘The struggle to gain work, to eat and to raise a family was sometimes too much to cope with, and many blues singers, like other jobless rootless men, took to the highways.’⁵²³ It is here possible to relate the sense of affinity with the idea of movement with what Hamilton describes as the post-war Beat inspired ‘male flight from commitment.’ Migration and travel are not simple consequences of historical events, but made into conscious acts of empowerment.

⁵²¹ Palmer, *Deep Blues*, p. 6

⁵²² Oliver, *The Story of the Blues*, p. 74

⁵²³ Ibid., p. 106



Figure 27: Images of 'movement' (top FSA; bottom USIS).

The common thread linking the development of the music amidst the movements of African Americans through various historical events is that the blues is considered ‘a

state of mind: the blues singer didn't reason himself into a different frame of mind, he sang himself into it,' and the blues is therefore 'a means by which a man may give expression to his feelings.'⁵²⁴ Thus, the blues becomes much more than just music or entertainment; it is given symbolic significance as an attitude, a means of approaching life, and a collective consciousness required to deal with the difficulties presented by the racial segregation. This is made clear in the descriptions of the singers' styles. In a style remarkably similar to Oliver's writing during the fifties, Blind Lemon Jefferson is described as singing 'with a deep pathos, a feeling that stemmed from the being of a man forever in darkness.'⁵²⁵ Considered in conjunction with the descriptions of singing with language such as 'raw', 'guttural,' 'instinctive,' it is clear that blues has an almost spiritual force. This intangible, abstract power endows the music with the ability to create a strong connection between singer and audience, and for Oliver, the audience is never white or European, but African American. He states that Ida Cox's songs 'were aimed... at her Southern audiences.' Similarly, Big Bill Broonzy 'sang for the South in Chicago,' and 'was neither motherless nor sisterless, but he sang for those who were.'⁵²⁶ Effectively, the lyrics of songs therefore carry the duty of communicating this 'state of mind' and solidifying the collective consciousness: 'the blues records conveyed the feelings and experiences of ordinary men... and the content of blues lyrics spoke for the black masses.'⁵²⁷

Oliver had been defining the blues as 'a state of mind' for almost two decades, but in the context of the historical narrative, the underlying motif of the blues as a

⁵²⁴ Ibid., p. 30/46

⁵²⁵ Ibid., p. 37

⁵²⁶ Ibid., 'Ida Cox' p. 61; 'Broonzy' p. 101-2

⁵²⁷ Ibid., p. 99

psychological standpoint serves to unify and link together diverse historical events and music in various regions of the South by creating a sense of continuity. From the early records of black songs in Charlotte Forten's diary to the Depression of the thirties, the collective consciousness fostered by the practice and performance of music permits the transcendence of tragedy,

In the post-Depression years, Negroes seemed to need to be given the assurance that their economic and social stresses were shared and understood, and if no-one else could give it without appearing condescending, the blues singer could. The blues in this period was sometimes less rich musically than it had been hitherto, but the content of the verses, which mattered greatly to those who bought the discs, was of more immediate social relevance than at any other previous time.

Here the blues is seen as a unifying medium, bringing together the experiences of millions of African Americans across the country and providing reassurance. It is for this reason that Oliver regarded black life of the interwar years as 'mirrored' in lyrics.⁵²⁸ Whether through the experience of debt peonage and sharecropping, the suffering of the Mississippi floods, the economic effects of the Depression, the displacement of the Great Migrations, or life in urban ghettos, Oliver believed that '[b]lues singers... offered an indication of the hopes and fears of black people, sometimes their anger and sometimes their apathy.'⁵²⁹ Importantly, what is created here is something which the outside world cannot destroy or appropriate, thus remaining distinctly African American. As Oliver bases much of his scholarship on the lyrics of recordings, and as exemplified in the identification of the blues tradition in *Screening the Blues*, he endows blues musicians and audiences with the ability to utilize the recording industry as a means of creating and

⁵²⁸ Ibid., p. 103-4

⁵²⁹ Ibid., p. 106

harbouring a collective 'folk' African American consciousness, and therefore establishing a continuity with the past, the survival through slavery and Emancipation. Importantly however, Oliver was not trying to allude to the fact that blues reflected the experience of all African Americans,

blues singers sang for the 'Race' audience exclusively in the 'twenties and 'thirties and not even the Negro political organisations chose to listen. In the 'thirties the Negro was a forgotten man, and he required of the blues singer and his records the confirmation that he was not alone.⁵³⁰

As highlighted in all of his previous publications, the music did not resonate with black organisations such as the NAACP or CORE that sought social change, and thus in terms of protest, the music was predominantly 'accommodative.'⁵³¹ Therefore, the world of the blues was not only one which had been 'forgotten,' but one which seemingly accepted the world as it was and perhaps 'forgot' about the outside world. This strengthens the idea of a separate black world far removed from contemporary life and social struggles.

Fundamental to this separate world is an intimate connection between the blues and the spaces it occupies. In Oliver's narrative the story of the blues becomes not just a story about 'a people,' but importantly of specific places. In a double page map of the east, mid-west and South of the US on the inside cover of the book, Oliver pin-pointed his 'blues centres and recording locations' (fig. 28). With the telling of the story a clearer picture of these 'blues centres' emerges. The aforementioned descriptions of Southern fields where sounds of modern life are absent, and memories of lonely figures playing blues to themselves on train platforms of sleepy Delta towns, combine to root the earlier

⁵³⁰ Ibid., p. 106

⁵³¹ Oliver stated that in the blues 'Negro self-assertiveness found expression instead in sexual themes,' Ibid., p. 104

forms of the blues in a rural and pre-modern South. As the story progresses with the Great Migrations of agricultural hands to the industries of urban areas, and the development of African American music in the ghettos, places such as Chicago's South Side also become 'blues centres,'

...there was little chance for the majority of blues singers to escape the lives they described; by 1925 literally half the Negro families in the North were living on relief, but still the cities attracted Negroes from the South although the disillusioned trickled back. Ghettos burst at the seams, 'hot-bed' apartments operated on a shift basis... Under such conditions crime was rife, prostitution was a commonplace, the courts filled on Friday nights and weekends with delinquents pulled almost at random off the streets...

Everyday conditions in the ghetto, which constantly recur in the blues, were shared by countless singers. But even the more extreme and dramatic circumstances were to be found in the lives of some of them...⁵³²

Therefore, as the 'back home' blues was at its most powerful in areas where conditions were harshest, so did the urban side of the music flourish in parts of St Louis, Chicago and Detroit where African Americans were the most socially and economically deprived, but importantly, where the old 'folkways' could be maintained.⁵³³ The ghetto described above, as well as recalling Oliver's earliest descriptions of urban life (Chapter 1), is akin to the 'barbarity' imagined in the Delta. While violence, crime and poor living conditions were consequences of the mass concentration of African Americans into urban ghettos, the growth of these black areas also fostered of what Oliver terms 'urban folk communities,' that is, the transplanted culture of lower-class African Americans from the South. From these were drawn the 'star' singers of the thirties, among them Big Bill Broonzy, Tampa Red, Bumble Bee Slim, Lonnie Johnson and Walter Davis, that record

⁵³² Ibid., p.105-6

⁵³³ Ibid., p. 42

companies relied on for record sales at the expense of the ‘effete and stage-directed ‘classic singers’ of minor calibre whose work ended with the Depression.’⁵³⁴ Oliver commented that the lives of African Americans, whether in the South or the city ghettos were often too real and harsh to be subject to romanticism. While the author avoids romanticising, he emphasizes the narrative of beauty born from tragedy. He describes singers that had been stabbed, shot, blinded, served in prison for homicide, and bore the scars of shackles, but ‘however complex the circumstances or repressing the conditions of living, so many had the creative ability and the artistic stature to develop a folk music of such richness from such experience.’⁵³⁵

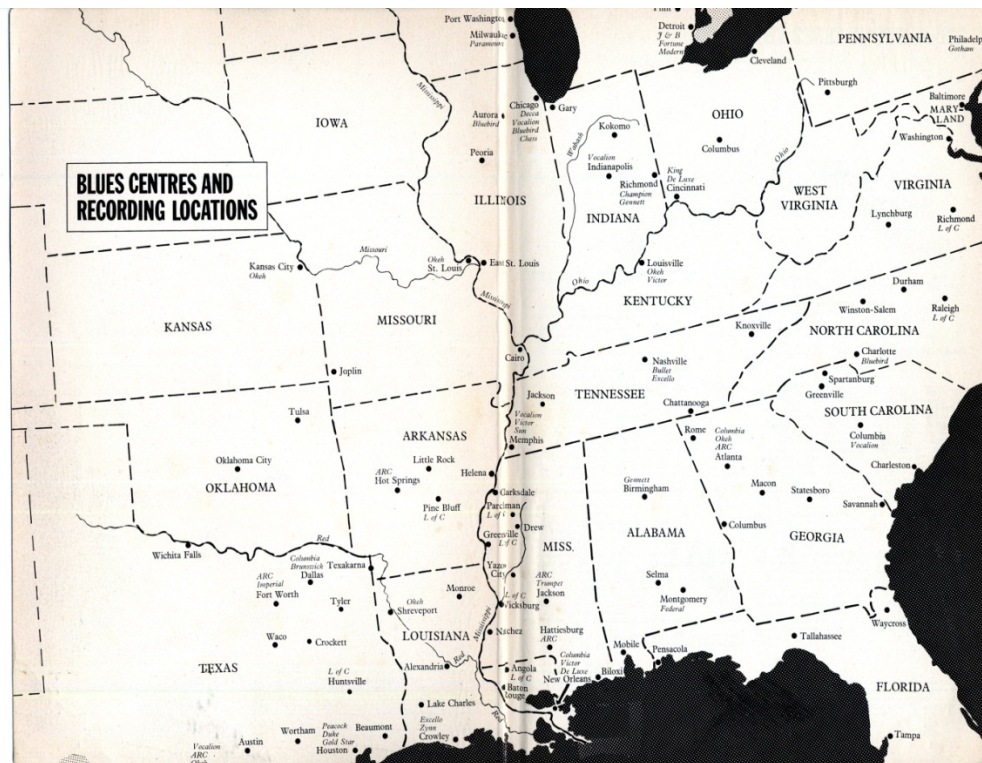


Figure 28: Blues Centres and Recording Locations on front inside cover.

⁵³⁴ Ibid., p. 107

⁵³⁵ Ibid., p. 106

The Imagery of the Story

As in *Conversation with the Blues* the range of photographs, and the additional posters, advertisements and illustrations used in *The Story of Blues* function to fix Oliver's blues centres in distinct geographical realities. Descriptions of agricultural life in the South are accompanied by images of cotton fields, sharecropper homes, railroad workers, ditch-diggers, mule-skinners, country juke-joints and singers playing on their front porches or for dances. Conversely, as African American life became more urbanised in Oliver's narrative, pictures begin to show the deprived housing of the black ghettos, the smokestacks of city industries, an image of young black man being treated at the emergency ward of a Chicago hospital, as well as blues musicians playing inside the city night clubs (fig. 29-30). In this manner, Oliver helps to establish some of photographic iconography of the blues. What distinguishes the use of images from *Conversation*, however, is that Oliver uses a wide range of sources. As well as re-using photographs from his 1960 field trip, Oliver borrows images from a number of other folklorists and blues scholars such as Frederic Ramsey, Harry Oster, Jacques Demetre, George Adins, Mike Leadbitter, Mack McCormick, Val Wilmer, Pete Welding, and William Russell. In addition, Oliver made use of material from governmental organisations such as the United States Information Service (USIS) and the Farm Security Administration (FSA) photography from the thirties and forties obtained through the Library of Congress.

One of the most significant aspects of the images used in the book is that the range of sources and types of image used appears as a pastiche that complicates and

destabilizes the narrative. The majority of the photographs are not dated, with the effect of blurring the historical specificity of the story. Thus, images from a range of historical periods spanning almost a century, from the immediate postbellum period, the thirties, to the author's own photographs from 1960 are shown alongside one another (fig. 31-32). The effect is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, the pictures are real and specific enough to link the written narrative with specific geographical spaces, such as the landscapes of the South. On the other hand, the scant dating of the images or lack of specific explanation colour the visual element of the book with a sense of timelessness. The absence of details about the photographs often means that the only element indicating an historical difference between the images is the quality of the photograph itself. The effect is to blur the various historical events of the African American past into a more simplistic whole. Despite the fact the images portray very different circumstances and provide visual references to events that are either very distant from one another temporally, or not directly related, their presentation in *The Story of the Blues* helps them to blend into a unified narrative: the African American experience that produced the blues.



Figure 29: a man being treated in an emergency ward (FSA).



Figure 30: Downtown Atlanta (USIS).



Figure 31: Richmond Virginia in April 1865 (USIS).



Figure 32 (left): The image is captioned by Oliver as ‘the slaves freed at the end of the Civil War looked uncertainly to the future (bottom left New York Public Library); **Figure 33 (right):** the picture is of workers in the fifties lining the rail tracks in Alabama under the watchful eye of the Section Boss in the background (Frederic Ramsey).

The images therefore reinforce the narrative by strengthening the triumph over tragedy motif. This is made much clearer in pictures which attempt to highlight the subordinate and disenfranchised social standing of African Americans, and the physical reality that have given birth to the blues. The photographs Oliver selected from the Library of Congress collection of interwar photography in particular, attempt to show the more vividly disturbing scenarios: the squalid living conditions of ordinary black labourers and families; a picture of hundreds standing in line in relief camps following the 1927 Mississippi flood; families watching their buildings burning down; inmates kept in cramped quarters under armed guard; a man grieving at the grave of a loved one (fig. 34-36). What is presented, therefore, is a much more explicitly graphic representation not only of the history of the blues, but the places in which this history occurred. Many of the images taken from the FSA photographers, from USIS and the Library of Congress most

probably had very little to do with blues when they were taken. But presented alongside the written narrative they become representative of the story. For instance, an image of a sharecropper and his family give an indication of the living conditions of agricultural labourers. However, it is not clear if the sharecropper was a blues singer, or whether he was a musician at all. But in the context of the story, the family stood almost in a horizontal line and facing the camera become representative of the blues life. Similarly the picture of African Americans inside a liquor store has no direct relevance to the music, but the solemn expressions on their faces comes to symbolize the sentiment of ‘a full heart and a troubled spirit’ (fig. 37). Max Harrison described the images in the book as ‘acutely depressing,’ and for this reason he believed the story of the blues was a testament to the ‘tenacity of the human spirit.’⁵³⁶ The pictures Oliver selected therefore functioned to intensify the tragic element of the narrative, thus also heightening the achievement of creating music such as the blues out of the experience.



Figure 34: Picture of the Red Cross maintained relief camps following the 1927 Mississippi flood (Library of Congress).

⁵³⁶ Harrison, *Review of the Story of the Blues*, p. 48-9



Figure 35: Families look on as a building is burning (FSA).



Figure 36: A man grieving at a grave site (FSA). Both figures 14 and 15 are captioned by Oliver as follows: 'The blues mirrored Negro life in the 'twenties and 'thirties.'

While a considerable proportion of the pictures support Oliver's description of African American life in the first half of the twentieth century, many other images contradict the seemingly separate and isolated 'Negro world.' The advertisements for blues records from the Race Records industry, press releases, record covers, and the professional portraits of musicians often smartly dressed in suits, and smiling for the camera indicate a society in which music functioned not so differently from the present day, supporting Wald's view of the blues as the pop music of its time (figs. 38-39). These images complicate the story of the 'humble and unassuming men and women' that had 'limited aspirations.' Many of the styled portraits indicate that a professional look was important to the success in an industry which sold millions of records and advertised and marketed profusely across the African American market. Considered alongside images of a more 'folk' in nature, country dances, men singing the blues on the porches of their shacks, of decaying juke joints and railroads, it is evident that the story of blues is made of a multitude of histories, multiple stories that in their similarities are unified into a single narrative.



Figure 37: a black liquor store (FSA).



Figure 38: 'professional' portraits of (from left to right) Big Bill Broonzy, Georgia Tom and Roosevelt Sykes. (left and right Paul Oliver; centre Philips Phonographische Industrie).



Figure 39: Race Records advertising (Nick Perls, Yazoo Records).

The Death of the Blues?

As the story progresses from the Depression through the Second World War and post-war eras, the narrative describes the musicians and styles that became prominent in the late thirties and forties in other parts of the country, moving away from the predominant 'South to North' motif. While the chapter entitled 'Travelin' Men' considers the music and movements of musicians of the East Coast and Piedmont style, such as Blind Blake, Blind Willie McTell, Sonny Terry, Blind Boy Fuller, Brownie McGhee, Josh White, and Sleepy John Estes, the following chapter examines the music that developed in the westward part of the country, from Texas and Kansas to California in the late thirties and early forties. Among other musical developments, this period saw the emergence of hybridized forms of electrified music with the likes of T-Bone Walker, the fusion of Kansas City jazz bands, group ensembles and blues 'shouting'. Concurrently, the early forties were also characterised by the increase in the influence of radio and the boom in the juke-box industry. As discussed in Chapter 4 in terms of the relationship between the blues and the recording industry, while there were positive effects that could be detected from technological developments, such as in the potential for audiences to hear more than was possible from their immediate experience, and the mixture of musical styles that radio permitted, on the whole mass media diffusion through radio and juke-boxes 'was damaging to music making.'⁵³⁷ The author's language thus begins to take on a more pessimistic tone than in *Screening the Blues*. While phonographs could substitute live performance, juke-boxes could offer more choice than the repertoire of a single musician. Similarly, while radio could open up markets for certain musicians, it also

⁵³⁷ Oliver, *The Story of the Blues*, p. 139

made the ‘exploitation’ of the market through the commodification of blues records more straight-forward.⁵³⁸

Simultaneously, Oliver believed that in this period some singers had begun to ‘move further away from blues and into commercial popular music with blues colouration,’ and learned to blend different sounds into popular styles, such as Ray Charles, whose music is described as a ‘studied exploitation of blues idioms.’⁵³⁹ However, the predominant migration northwards to Chicago and Detroit during the late forties and fifties was accompanied by a great concentration of a newer generation blues singers, seen as continuing the ‘back home’ blues tradition in its most authentic forms. Musicians such as Elmore James, Muddy Waters, Little Walter and Howlin’ Wolf began to be heard over the airwaves with the growth of black radio stations, and they could be seen performing regularly in a small nucleus of Chicago venues such as Sylvio’s, Smitty’s Corner, and the Big Squeeze Club. That the tradition was alive in the mid-fifties was evident as lesser known blues singers such as Jimmy Davis and Little David could be heard on Maxwell Street, depicted as the ‘training ground.’ Playing on streets for change or for pure enjoyment presents the link back to the Southern tradition of music making, as represented by the espoused depiction of the singer on the train platform in Tutwiler. It also transposed the iconographic landscapes of the South to the contemporary streets of the Northern cities. But importantly, it was the signalling of the beginning of the end in the story of the blues,

Through the heavy amplification, the smoke, the urban haze, could be discerned still a line of descent which was sired in the music of Charley Patton, Son House and Robert Johnson. It was a thrilling, dramatic

⁵³⁸ Ibid., p. 140

⁵³⁹ Ibid., p. 145

culmination of a remarkable tradition exemplified in numerous lesser bands led by Snooky Prior or J. B. Hutto, Walter Horton or J. B. Lenoir all over the South and West Sides. But it was not to last much longer.⁵⁴⁰

From the very beginning of Oliver's narrative, the story is set to the end with the post-war discovery of the blues. The sense of decline had been building in Oliver's writing prior to *The Story of the Blues*, as there was always an underlying premonition that the music's days were numbered, whether that was manifested in the concentration on the blues from the interwar years in *Blues Fell This Morning*, the memories and images in *Conversation*, or the focus on the tradition in *Screening the Blues*. However, in *The Story of the Blues* it is made clear in several instances that while the blues developed and evolved through the African American experience of the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, the demise of the music would come with the onset of the sixties: the huge influence of black music on white groups in this decade is framed as an invasion of popular music ('walking right in on the blues'); at the time of writing it was 'still possible, but only just, to hear the history of the blues from the mouths of many of them who shaped it;' the blues on record reflected the life of African Americans during the twenties and thirties, and began to lose relevance to the changing nature of black society in the post-war era; little more than memories remained of the classic blues singers; and the story is told in progressive stages, (i.e. 'down in Memphis, the last act in the city's important part in the story of the blues was being played out'⁵⁴¹), with each inching closer to the end. Overall the 'death of the blues' results as a combination of three primary occurrences: the industrialization and commercialization of music; changes in African American culture and society; and the white discovery of black music.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 154-6

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., 'walking in' and 'still possible' p. 6; memories p. 72; 'down in Memphis' p. 134

The first of these concentrates on the Adornian interpretation of music as a commercialized industry. The folkloric view of the blues as a music born in an oral tradition and morally opposed to any aspects of profit making, success, or fame is dependent on an adverse view of the recording industry. As this project has shown, Oliver became always more considerate of the double-edged nature of the recording process, as a tool for preserving folk culture and allowing the mass dissemination of African American culture on the one hand, but also standardizing the genre and diluting the nature of the music through the influence of commercialism. Additionally, Oliver had appreciated the fact that what was available on record was only an approximation of the culture to which the music pointed. Thus, the Race Records market was not a simple and definable thing, but was complex, diverse and 'illusive.' Power often rested within the record companies, and blues musicians were sometimes equipped with the necessary skills of playing the market to their advantage, while others succumbed to their demands of control and censorship.⁵⁴² But ultimately the recording industry, the growth of radio and juke-boxes replacing the traditional role of live musicians, changed the function of music making from predominantly active participation to passive consumption. Once the blues became more popular on record and on the airwaves, the traditional function of singer and audience, releasing tensions and collectively facing their troubles through the cathartic performance of the music, described in the first half the book and in *Blues Fell This Morning*, was waning. The author could therefore conclude that for over a decade there had been very few blues songs that were 'lyrically significant,' as the blues lost the power for social commentary it possessed prior to the Second World War.⁵⁴³

⁵⁴² Ibid., p. 99

⁵⁴³ Ibid., p. 168

While the music industry represented an external development which exerted its influence upon the blues, there was an ‘internal’ shift among African American culture which favoured its decline. This change was twofold. Firstly, the post-war period saw the burgeoning of younger generations of African American musicians and performers that gave rise to rhythm and blues, which also meant the transformation of the ‘race’ label. For Oliver, these new performers varied in their allegiance to the blues tradition. While the likes of Jimmy Reed maintained ‘roots [that] were still deep in the blues’ and held an appeal to younger generations, others such as Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley ‘played on the current fads, fears and fantasies of the young Negroes.’⁵⁴⁴ B. B. King is described as ‘impassioned, if somewhat uninvolved,’ and Buddy Guy’s popularity is given to his showmanship on stage, rather than to his skill as a blues musician.⁵⁴⁵ As in *Screening the Blues*, this form of subjective categorisation rests upon deeply personal interpretations of authenticity, with certain lyrics and sounds being identified as traditional, and other mannerisms as the flight from the tradition. Inherent in this portrayal of the new rhythm and blues musicians was the belief that younger audiences identified with a more confident and assertive stage presence which the seemingly accommodationist blues of the interwar years could provide, and thus turned to soul music as the sixties wore on,

That the Soul trend – the blend of gospel techniques of exaggerated mannerisms and screaming, passionate entreaties with blues instrumental techniques and commercial ‘pop’ words – has been immensely popular with young Negroes and whites alike is undeniable. It has meant vastly increased sales for the record companies and, combined with the sleek and successful Detroit Tamla-Motown ‘sound’, has dominated the record catalogues which are directed at a Negro market, and so in turn, the juke-box and disc-jockey promotional devices. This has been damaging to the blues as a form in its own right and blues singers who have been unwilling

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 158-9

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 160-1

or unable to adapt their music demands of 'soul' have found themselves without engagements. The more geared to the record and radio industries music has become, the greater has been the pressure on blues singers to accede to popular taste. As Buddy Guy explained to Peter Guralnick, 'you got to keep up with the latest songs. You got to have it down, man, what James Brown or Wilson Pickett may put out. You forget your own... Unless you make a hit.'⁵⁴⁶ Soul, it seems, has replaced the blues as the music that speaks for the younger generation of Negroes, while it draws from the blues as part of its expression.⁵⁴⁶

While this represents a change in the music of the period, it also points to the second aspect of the internal shift. Guy's reference to James Brown was probably a response to the singer's 1968 hit 'Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud,' which 'became virtually the anthem of the Black Power Movement.' It was one of the most prominent songs in a body of music from the mid-sixties onwards, including figures such as Marvin Gaye and Berry Gordy, which became representative of an African American culture which both 'celebrated blackness and challenged white dominance in equal measure.' As Stephen Tuck argues, in this scenario music was not simply an abstraction of the racial struggle, it was the actual 'battleground.'⁵⁴⁷ As much of Oliver's writing had indicated, none more so than *Conversation with the Blues*, the blues represented a realm of experience that was not akin to that of the generations involved in the Civil Rights or Black Power movements. Oliver's focus on the past was therefore confirming what many African American writers of the Black Arts Movement thought, that the 'blues was how

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 161

⁵⁴⁷ Brown's song got to number 10 in the R&B singles chart following its release in September 1968, *The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time*, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/the-500-greatest-songs-of-all-time-20110407/james-brown-say-it-loud-im-black-and-im-proud-19691231> Retrieved 30/04/2012 at 10:51; Stephen Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be: The Black Freedom Struggle from Emancipation to Obama* (Belknap Harvard; London, 2010), p. 340-1

we felt yesterday.’⁵⁴⁸ In *The Story of the Blues*, the blues had been described as the music of ‘humble, obscure, unassuming men and women,’ seemingly accommodative, whilst simultaneously fostering a sense of group solidarity. He stated ‘[t]he blues singer has yet to declare ‘I’m black and I’m beautiful and I’m Afro-American,’’ thus leading to a decline in relevance of the blues to a generation which required loud political voices. Oliver hoped that in a post-Civil rights world ‘black Americans may be able to look back with pride upon the creation of one of the richest and most rewarding of popular arts and perhaps the last great folk music that the western world may produce.’ If the political objectives of the more assertive post-war African Americans had coloured the interpretation of the blues as a negative symbol of the past, in his closing remarks the author remarked that the achievement of these political objectives would hopefully open the doors to a renewed appreciation for the music as a form of African American cultural heritage. As Adam Gussow’s essay argues, while for many black cultural critics and writers of the late sixties the blues *was* significant, for younger African American audiences the blues were not particularly popular or interesting.⁵⁴⁹ Nonetheless, what is significant here is that in the description of the blues’ decline, Oliver strengthens the racial categorisation of the music by hoping in a future reconciliation of African Americans with their past. This is reinforced by separating African American discourses of history from the white discovery of the blues.

That this discovery represented a threat to the authenticity of the blues was nothing new. However, in *The Story of the Blues* it is made clearer by the fact that little more than a few paragraphs are dedicated to the blues revival in the sense of the music

⁵⁴⁸ The quote is from black DJ Reggie Lavong speaking to Michael Haralambos at New York’s WWRL in 1968, in Gussow, “‘If Bessie Smith Had Killed Some White People,’” p. 232

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 237

played by white rhythm and blues bands of the sixties. Instead, the revival which Oliver discusses is the research and field work of American and European folklorists, musicians and enthusiasts of the post-war era that led to a growth in knowledge about the blues, but also to the rediscovery of a number of elderly bluesmen. In this way, the author focuses more on the fact that the veterans of the music, and those who have supplied more information than anyone else, were dying out. This establishes the sense of nostalgia that accompanies the narrative, visually reinforced by images that appear like distant memories of the past, when the blues was part of a living folk culture. From the very beginning of the book, the white discovery of the blues is framed in terms of an invasion and appropriation, a process of popular music 'walking in on the blues' that will bring about its decline. While Oliver described the popularity of the blues among European audiences as a 'phenomenon that deserves more attention,' he also attempted a brief analysis,

In the [European] clubs, many of the young dancers hardly knew who they were dancing to; they like the music, it was great for the twist or the frug, and a whole generation seemed to find an affinity with the men who made the blues. A generation in revolt found that the music of a segregated minority was the symbol of a gulf between themselves and the values and attitudes of their parents.⁵⁵⁰

He therefore suggests that the popularity of the music was perhaps more indicative of a social and generational crisis within European society, than it was about a genuine interest in the culture of African Americans. Accompanying this cultural disconnection between black music and white audiences is the fact that Oliver also made clear that the blues played by European musicians was markedly different to the real thing: '[w]hite

⁵⁵⁰ 'soul', in Oliver, *The Story of the Blues*, p. 167; Cyril Davies, in Oliver, *Blues Off the Record*, p. 58

singers could play the blues too well and, up to a point, could sing them, but they hadn't got the magical quality of "soul." The only exception seems to have been English harmonicist Cyril Davies.⁵⁵¹ While skilful, white imitators could only approximate as they lacked something that was intangible, something that came from deep within the experience of the African American. From this viewpoint, Oliver's historical narrative framed in terms of a triumph over tragedy serves as a legitimizing factor, giving the blues a firm link within the experiences of segregation and disenfranchisement in the United States. In the fifties, Oliver criticised Lonnie Donegan and Ken Colyer for attempting to sing black music while they themselves were not of the same folk heritage. In the late sixties, Oliver's language adapts to the new developments within African American culture to adopt the term 'soul,' distinctive for its relation to African American cultural expression and identity. Importantly, lacking this fundamental characteristic meant that the 'black youth turned away' from the blues.

The 'death' of the blues highlights some of the major contradictions in *The Story of the Blues*. The very genesis of the music explained through the coming together of the work songs, field hollers and spirituals of the nineteenth century, combined with the Anglo-European influence of instrumentation and melody, allows for a certain amount of hybridity. The blues was born of the African American experience, but also as a product of many cultural and musical interchanges that resulted amid the events of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Inherent in Oliver's description of the blues in the pre-WWII era was a sense that the African American progenitors of the music retained a certain autonomy over their own music and their own culture. However, in the

⁵⁵¹ Ibid., p. 168

post-war era, when the culture is more exposed to growing forms of mass media and thus open to invasion of the white world, the cross-cultural possibility for a multi-racial hybrid of the blues is deplored, it is seen as a form of cultural colonialism, a barbaric violation of something pure and meaningful. Therefore, while Jones and Keil saw the evolution of older forms in the soul of the sixties, Oliver and many of the readers that valued his book saw the last days of the genre. In the analysis of the blues' decline in the sixties a clearer picture emerges of the representation of the blues as an organic whole, made of sound and a cultural and often racial consciousness that has a beginning, a story, and an end.

The construction and piecing together of the 'blues narrative' demonstrates the manner in which the music was imagined by the leading writer on the subject at the end of the sixties. After having established that the blues constituted a tradition, Oliver attempted to fix categorical boundaries by narrating the music's history which legitimized its existence as a distinct musical form, with a story and history of its own. While his history is highly informative in the manner that Oliver appreciates historical events in terms of the experiences of lower-class African Americans, the framing of the narrative through the 'triumph over tragedy' motif maintains the portrayal of African Americans largely as accommodative and as the predecessors of those that made up the Civil Rights groups of the fifties and sixties. The narrative thus locks the protagonists of the story firmly within the past, as the people that make up the story in Oliver's book seem closer to the disappointments of Emancipation, the endurance Jim Crow segregation and the experiences of the Depression years than the young activist African Americans of the post-war years. The pastiche of imagery present in large quantities throughout the book also adds geographical specificity by attempting to reveal the places in which the

story evolved. While many of the pictures are often starkly real in their presentation of the physical realities of African American life, as in *Conversation with the Blues*, they are also distinctly elusive in the way they appear timeless, in the mixture of their sources and styles, thus complicating the fluidity of Oliver's narrative of the blues as folk music. Nonetheless, the images in Oliver's book help to establish some of the visual iconography that were associated with the music by blues scholars during the revival: the rural landscapes of the South and the Mississippi Delta, the urban ghettos of the North, the railways that transported millions out of the South, the economic poverty and despair on the faces of African Americans. In conjunction with the author's increased emphasis on more 'revivalist' aspects of the music, such as the role of the Mississippi Delta, Robert Johnson and Handy's encounter with the music for the first time, *The Story of the Blues* reveals the blending of fact and imagination in the formation of the 'blues narrative,' and how the interpretation of the music always rested on the aesthetic criteria imposed by the scholar's idealized view of the music. In this way, *The Story of the Blues* functioned not only as a means of legitimizing the blues through the telling of its history, but also as a means of reifying the imagined world of the blues, of trying to fix categorical meanings and aesthetic criteria by narrating *the* story, which brought together the experiences of blues singers into a generalized experience that made up the blues life. The book would therefore both inform readers on the experiences of many African Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and conform to visions of a folk world constructed in opposition to the commercialism, cultural capitalism and musical miscegenation of the fifties and sixties. These visions simplified the many different tales and events that made up the history of the blues into a single and more compelling *story*.

Conclusion

Paul Oliver has had an enormous impact on blues scholarship in the last sixty years, and while this study has focused on his writing during the nineteen-fifties and sixties, he has continued to work and publish on the subject of African American music throughout his life. Indeed, the year after *The Story of the Blues* was published, Oliver edited a series of 'Blues Paperbacks' that included books by a number of now established blues scholars (see Introduction). The series began with Oliver's *Savannah Syncopators: African Retentions in Blues*, a work which John Baily praised for its innovative ethnomusicological approaches, which widened the narrow scope of existing research on the subject of African retentions.⁵⁵² While the book emphasized Oliver's concentration on the origins of the blues at the end of the sixties, it is worth noting that in later years, as in *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records* (1984), he acknowledged that his focus on the blues, as well as the writing of other blues scholars from the revival, had resulted in the marginalization of a range of musical styles that were enjoyed and performed by African Americans. He therefore examines the music of Southern dances, the medicine shows, the spirituals and gospel songs of the church congregations, and attempts to go some way to deconstructing the iconic figure of the 'bluesman' by making the case that many 'songsters and musicianers' had much more stylistically varied repertoires.⁵⁵³ Despite Oliver's acknowledgement of the biases that had pervaded blues scholarship, including his own, the re-publication of *Blues Fell This Morning* (1990),

⁵⁵² John Baily, 'Paul Oliver's Contribution to Ethnomusicology,' *Popular Music*, 2007, Volume 26/1, pp. 15-22, p. 21

⁵⁵³ Paul Oliver, *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records* (Cambridge University Press, 1984)

Conversation with the Blues (1997) and *The Story of the Blues* (1997) indicates that the conceptualizations of the blues constructed during the revival were still prevalent and prominent more three decades later. The development and evolution of blues scholarship in the years after the revival are still deserving of further scholarly attention. Nonetheless, the focus of this study on Oliver's scholarship during the post-war revival was intended to contribute to the understanding of the 'invention' of the blues. By examining the work of the leading authority on the subject of the blues, I have aimed to locate Oliver in his rightful place - at the centre of blues historiography - and in the process, attempt to transcend discourses dominated by ideas of cultural ownership, whether based on notions of race or cultural nationalism, by highlighting the transatlantic nature of blues scholarship during the revival.

Paul Oliver and the 'Invention' of the Blues

The lack of consideration for Oliver's scholarship in revisionist studies is surprising when one considers the ideological characteristics he shared with the people like Alan Lomax, Samuel Charters, Frederic Ramsey and even Hamilton's 'blues mafia' all displayed a sense of distrust towards the music industry, they harbored a nostalgic attachment to an imagined and idealized past, and exhibited a general discomfort with modernity. What differentiates Oliver is the wealth of his material available for scrutiny, and it is in his processes of interpreting and representing the music that it is possible to identify the manner in which the blues was invented. However, in Oliver's case, it is perhaps more accurate to say the blues was 'reconstructed,' rather than 'invented.' The

author's conception of the blues was created in the small details rather than blatant fabrications or flights of fancy. It was built with the subtle uncertainties that lie between fact and fiction, between empirical evidence and nostalgia. In the fifties, when the blues was the interest of a small number of jazz enthusiasts that only heard the origins of jazz in the blues, the author examined the lyrics of records collected in Britain in the attempt to separate the genre from jazz. Pervaded by a dearth of available documentation on the music, Oliver supplemented the information that lyrics provided with the imagery and descriptions drawn from African American literature. His representations of the blues in *Music Mirror* and *Jazz Journal* became intertwined with the memories of Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, leading to the construction of ideas about the musical atavism of lower-class African Americans. This was also represented in a series of illustrations in which Oliver depicts his downtrodden subjects as emanating from another time. Throughout his articles, and more especially in *Blues Fell This Morning*, Oliver used the candid and 'direct' nature of lyrics to build images of an African American world that was devoid of the pretension of either modern or white middle-class culture. His semi-fictionalized passages, describing a particular situation pertaining to a song, continue to illustrate the manner in which the author imagined the world in which the blues had emerged.

The 'imagined' became confronted with the 'real' during his 1960 field trip to the United States. While Oliver declared that the land he visited and people he met had confirmed many of the hunches in *Blues Fell This Morning*, in *Conversation with the Blues* the reader is presented with a paradoxical world that combines memory and nostalgia with history and reality. In the oral responses of singers, memories of the past

that included life experiences of toil, poverty and deprivation are at once selected and prioritized, indicating that the world Oliver was searching for was that of the interwar era, rather than 1960. The photographs in *Conversation* strengthen the book's nostalgic attachment to the past by calling to mind the socio-documentary style black and white photography of the thirties. Importantly, they also begin to aestheticize distinct geographic locations, such as the cotton fields, sharecropper homes, levees, railroad lines, and urban ghettos as being emblematic of blues culture, thus reifying the folkloric interpretation of the blues with specific 'blues places.' In his final two publications of the sixties, the author clarified that the blues was a music that belonged to an African American culture that was in the process of disappearing. By tracing a 'tradition,' Oliver at once categorized certain aesthetic qualities that separated the music from other genres and determined that authentic blues belonged to the past. In *The Story of the Blues*, the process of constructing a narrative for the blues along the lines of a triumph over tragedy, a human story of survival against the odds, contributed to its categorization as a unique musical genre, identifiable not only in its sonic and aesthetic characteristics but in its relationship to development of an African American society and culture that pre-dated the Civil Rights era.

Oliver's scholarship in the fifties and sixties reveals the process by which events from the past are reconstructed into 'histories.' The retrospective character of blues writing, which entailed historical analysis into the meaning of lyrics, the exploration of memories in oral histories, the search for the reality of the black experience through historically significant places, and the formalization of a narrative that gave the blues a 'story,' contributed to the intermixture of historical fact and imagination that produced a

blues. The sources Oliver used were similar to archaeological finds, fragments that pointed to a past culture, and what was missing was imagined to 'reconstruct' Oliver's conception of the blues. By appreciating Oliver's role as an 'author-historian,' it has been possible to uncover the 'reconstruction' of the blues through its representation in a number of texts: articles, illustrations, photographs, oral histories and historical narratives. This reconstruction was determined by the social, cultural and ideological context of his experiences in the post-war era. Having developed his early ideas about the blues while working within the British art school environment, and being influenced by traditionalist jazz writing and the work of folklorists, he espoused and evidenced the prevalent folkloric ideology that characterized the blues revival of the fifties and sixties. The blues is persistently championed as an expression of African American folk culture, and thus framed as antithetical to the entertainment business and music industry. Separating Oliver from many other blues writers in this regard was his considered appreciation of the blues' dual presence within the commercial music industry, and within the 'folk' culture of African American society. Despite his acknowledgement of the biases that occur from the analysis of commercial records, Oliver's scholarship represented the efforts of blues scholars to continually define as 'anti-modern' a music that was inherently 'modern:' the music proliferated when record companies realized the economic opportunity of capitalizing on the African American appetite for music, and musicians developed individualized forms of expression and performance that operated within a range of shared musical styles. As Paul Gilroy argues in his chapter on black music and authenticity in *The Black Atlantic*, critics became ever more obsessed with origins and past meanings when those became ever more ungraspable.⁵⁵⁴ Therefore,

⁵⁵⁴ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p. 73-80

Oliver's scholarship indicates that ideas about the blues were 'reconstructed' by recreating an identifiable and suitable past that would be the antithesis of the commercial music industry, of entertainment, and mainstream Western culture. At its heart, this past was distinctly racialised.

The Interpretation and Function of Race

As this study has shown, Oliver's research was centered on the relationship between the blues and African American life and culture. From his articles in the British jazz press to his major publications of the sixties, the story and meaning of the blues are intrinsically linked to the lower-class African American experience, particularly in the first half of the twentieth century: the music developed and 'moved' along with the ebbs and flows of agricultural life of the South, the experiences of sharecropping and debt peonage, the Mississippi floods, Jim Crow segregation, the Depression of the thirties and the migrations out of the South. There are two fundamental aspects to Oliver's conceptualizations of African American culture in his writing. Firstly, the British author clearly evidences a fascination for lower-class black culture, particularly in the fifties, when his descriptions of black life and of blues singers take on shades of romanticism, exoticism and at times, remnants of primitivism or nineteen-twenties' negrophilia. It is here that it becomes more complicated to place Oliver within the broader context of white European enthusiasm for black culture in the post-war era. According to Ulrich Adelt, 'attempts by young white audiences to reject white middle-class culture, racism, colonialism, and fascism sometimes took form in a nostalgic re-creation of a safe

blackness that predated the civil rights movement.⁵⁵⁵ This identification of young white musicians with an idealized blackness that seemed to shun conventions, such as commercial success and pretension, can be identified in the fascination with gritty realism of the blues. In the BBC4's documentary *Blues Britannia*, the English musician John Mayall describes the British fascination for the blues in the sixties: 'The main charm about the blues is that it has such an authenticity about it, the fact that when you listen to it, you hear the stories and you can visualize that these are real stories.'⁵⁵⁶ While musicians would feel some form of kinship with blues singers through the act of replicating the music, in Oliver's scholarship this is not possible. The author did not believe that whites could adequately reproduce the music they revered, and in this conviction effectively segregated the music based on the racial and cultural aspects of African American culture. He summarized this in *The Story of the Blues* by stating that whites did not have the quality of 'soul,' the innate and unspeakable characteristic that separates the imitation from the real. The memories of singers in *Conversation with the Blues* testify to their lived experience which is depicted as a fundamental aspect of the music. The language that is used to reinforce this motif oscillates between racial and class based distinctions. When the blues is under attack from within the African American domain, from music that is considered more commercial, or not of the tradition, Oliver relies on descriptions that frame its working-class and folk character, as the music of the 'ordinary Negro,' in order to establish its place within the totality of black culture. On the other hand, as the world of mainstream and white popular music begin to appropriate the blues in the post-war era, Oliver's language shifts towards more racialised tones,

⁵⁵⁵ Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties*, p. 2

⁵⁵⁶ John Mayall, *Blues Britannia: Can Blue Men Sing the Whites?* Chris Rodley (2009), BBC4, 11pm, 9/12/2011

sometimes relying on stereotypical assumptions of innate and atavistic musicality, and in others justifying the black experience of segregation and discrimination as the factor determining cultural differences with the white world. Essentially, Oliver's language in explaining African American life, while evidencing a more moralistic tone in *Blues Fell This Morning* (particularly in the explanation that segregation and racism were the causes of major incomprehensions of black culture), is never too involved politically to challenge the condition of blacks in America, or to support Civil Rights. Instead, it tends to focus on what Adelt terms a 'safe blackness' that was idealized by European blues aficionados. They envisioned a culture that was distant from the mainstream, more obscure from the perspective of white observers, but therefore also more easily available for misinterpretation.

Importantly, the process of describing the intricate relationship between the blues and the African American experience of the pre-Civil Rights generation highlights the second aspect of Oliver's ideas on race. By drawing a line between blues culture and post-war African American social and political activism, he tended to focus on a more accommodationist and sometimes fatalist black consciousness. And reading Oliver's descriptions of black life in the South, one can understand why some African American critics of the late sixties saw in the blues an expression that was akin to a 'black slave lament' that had little relevance to Black Power or any sense of social and political empowerment. Paradoxically however, Oliver's writing also preceded the thoughts of many African American writers of the Black Arts Movement that saw a vibrant form of expression and an active cultural consciousness in the blues of the interwar years. While many black theorists and writers would challenge the notion that any white or European

observers could fully understand and represent this distinctly African American music, and take exception to the fact the blues was a means of safely displacing repressed white fantasies, their objectives in arguing that the blues was socially and culturally significant for the African American were the same as Oliver's. Thus, Oliver does not display an affinity for 'safe blackness' to displace his own desires, as much as he was interested in the vitality, beauty, and social significance of a lower-class culture.

The Transatlantic

If Oliver shares so many ideological characteristics with figures such as Alan Lomax, Samuel Charters, Frederic Ramsey, and a large proportion of writers of the Black Arts Movement, then the question arises: what is the significance of transatlantic blues scholarship? As this study has argued from the very beginning, blues historiography has been plagued with notions of cultural nationalism and perhaps more understandably (given the social and racial cauldron that is American society) ethnocentrism, leading to clichéd questions such as, can white people sing the blues? And can white people understand the blues? It is hoped that this study has gone some way to demonstrating that, contrary to popular belief blues scholarship did not emerge and develop along nationally divided lines. While the predominance of writing on the blues was carried out by whites, Oliver's scholarship demonstrates (along with the emerging scholarship on the transatlantic diffusion of African American culture⁵⁵⁷) that ideas and conceptualizations

⁵⁵⁷ See for instance Heike Raphael Fernandez (ed) *Blackening Europe: the African American Presence* (Routledge, 2003); Neil A. Wynn (ed), *Cross the Water Blues: African American Music in Europe* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi); Neil Wynn & Jill Terry (eds), *Transatlantic Roots Music: Folk, Blues, and National Identities* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012)

were actively constructed in a transnational context. There was widespread co-operation among folklorists and collectors during the fifties and sixties, and the major differences characterizing their work were on the basis of diverging aesthetic categorizations of authenticity. In addition, Oliver's use of commercial recordings prior to his first visit to the US was not an indicator of the special predicament of non-American blues appreciation. After all, despite the increased opportunities of actually visiting the South and seeking out musicians, American blues researchers also were forced to rely on recordings. Separation into national (i.e. British or American) or racial categories (black versus white) has been imposed on the historiographical examination of blues scholarship by writers keen to defend American music from foreign invaders, or ensure African American music is not diluted by white cultural colonialism. More importantly, these debates do little to aid our understanding of the means by which music described as blues came to play such an important role in the development of Western popular music in the twentieth century. Perhaps the grasping of racial and nationalistic categories supports the articulations of writers such as Eric Hobsbawm and Paul Gilroy who in different terms suggest that the search for the past in terms of origins, significance, and traditions, is symptomatic of a contemporary sense of cultural crisis.

It may never be fully possible to explain the British or European fascination for the blues, although it must be always be remembered that interest in the music is at some level always dictated by the aural experience of sound, and that no scholar would have ever written about the blues if they did not like it. Despite the fact considerable scholarship concentrates on the meaning of lyrics and the social function of the blues

within African American communities, as Albert Murray argued, ‘the chances are that most of their [(scholars’)] goose pimples and all of their finger snapping and foot tapping are produced by the sound far more than by the meanings of the words.’⁵⁵⁸ It is therefore important to recognize that white interest in the blues during the revival was initially spurred by this sensory experience, and all subsequent interpretations of race and politics were developed at a secondary stage. Nonetheless, Oliver’s blues scholarship demonstrates that ‘invention,’ or the romantic interpretation of early twentieth century African American culture as anti-modern, unpretentious and uncomplicated by the whims of the Western world were inherently part of the process of blues writing during the revival. In other words, the ‘revival’ of the blues constituted the ‘invention’ of the blues. Misrepresentations of the blues - in the exaggeration of folkloric myths, or the privileging of certain blues forms over others that were closer to an imagined ‘tradition’ - occurred even in the most carefully considered studies. Indeed, while some readers may regard this study as a criticism of Oliver’s scholarship, I argue clearly that his work remains among the most important and influential in the field. However, an alternative reading of his writing on the blues gives us a window from which to understand the nature of the blues revival, and gain insights into the processes of ‘discovery’ and ‘rediscovery.’ In this light it is possible to consider blues scholarship of the nineteen-fifties and sixties, as an example of the way in which representations of the past, like the popular representations of Native Americans or the Tudors, can be exaggerated, manipulated or ‘invented’ by the processes of looking backwards and *doing* history.

⁵⁵⁸ Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, p. 76

Appendix 1.1

Interview with Paul Oliver at his home on November 17th, 2009

Key:

I: Interviewer

R: Respondent

I: So what I thought I could start, is as I've said I've been reading some of the... because I've read and in your books you often quote some of these early publications as things which you valued very highly, like Iain Lang's *Jazz in Perspective: The Background of the Blues*.

R: Well, yes, I mean there's very little else. That's the very first one that I bought actually. I remember buying it in the company's bookshop, yes.

I: Okay. And what was your impression of it when you read it?

R: Well, I hadn't read anything else really, so obviously it was opening the whole field that I just really didn't know about, you see. I mean, subsequently I realised that there was only about thirty-five quoted blues in it and very, very short extracts at that, so it really wasn't actually really getting to the heart of the matter, so to speak. But in terms of a, sort of, accessible history, very much simulating blues for jazz, which always was the case at the time, I think it was really quite useful. And it was interesting because Rex Harris's book came out and so forth and we were beginning to just be able to compare approaches really. And what could just seem like a really simple narrative then, (unclear 0:01:28), could then, you know, had depth and that she was related to it. I found that very challenging and very interesting.

I: I mean, Rex Harris's book, which I've also looked at, came out a few years after that book.

R: Yes it did, yes.

I: And he seems to treat blues more as a... I don't know. I got the impression that Iain Lang gave it a bit more time and a bit more analysis rather than Rex Harris did.

R: Yes, I think that's quite true. It's a little difficult, I think, really, to say how much either of them devoted to it in particular because the popularity of jazz at the time is such that you had to obviously concede that and at the same time they were wanting to expand a bit it. So it was going to be difficult but I think they tackled it in different ways in terms of readability and so on. I mean, *The Background of the Blues*, it's funny because when it came out in hardback form it was then kind of history of jazz with *The Background of the Blues* - I didn't find it as satisfactory really.

I: No, no, no. I got that impression as well. In both of them, looking at it, I mean, I'm looking at it from now after I've read all the other materials but it seems like they were speaking to people who knew what they were talking about.

R: Well, I think that's certainly true. There wasn't a readership that was totally unaware of the blues. I think the point was that it was always, in those days, if it came into any text it was always essentially blues as a part of jazz and, you see, some of them really turned to that idea and thought that the blues couldn't exist without jazz and jazz couldn't exist without, kind of blues, so to speak, because they didn't see it as a separate idiom. And in my collecting, kind of a very short

span of time, it came very strongly to me that it was a separate idiom – it had been influential but it didn't depend on jazz. So that's really what got me going actually.

I: Uh-huh. Do you think the basis for what they were saying, you know, as blues is a precursor of jazz and just a small branch of it was mainly because of the records that were available? Because you said you were collecting so you found other blues records.

R: Well, it so happened that in the 1930s there was a surprising number of blues records coming out related to boogie-woogie and therefore to blues piano, you see. For a start there was a kind of trio of boogie pianists, and in a way, Pete Johnson and so forth, they influenced, I think, the record companies because the records sold very well. Sometimes two of them would play together and so forth, or three. Then Joe Turner from Kansas City would sing with them and he had a very powerful voice – he was a big man. And at that time, a couple of the boogie pianists came from Kansas City and the general feeling was that blues had probably emulated from Kansas rather than, you know, but of course, those things change, obviously, but on the evidence that there seemed to be around, you see.

Then very shortly after... that was in the late 30s, shortly after... no, it must have been a bit later than that, yeah, not much though, '39, '40, so the beginning of the war, yeah, so it would be round about then, there was a series of 78s were being issued by Brunswick and they had been selected by a person who has never been identified - Bill Elliott, I think it was. My own feeling was it was Max Jones using maybe his brother's surname or something. I just had the feeling that it was Max more than anybody else, mainly because he was the person that seemed to know most about it at the time. Anyway, Pinetop's Boogie Woogie and Pinetop's, er, his... oh, I've forgotten what the title was, the backing group, for a moment, but anyway, those plus Sleepy John Estes (p.h 0.06.16) *Single Tide* accompanying them, those other things were being issued, you see. I mean, they really opened the whole... I was desperate to get hold of them and in the war it was very difficult. I wanted very much to have a King Oliver record and I had to cross the whole of London to get to Southeast London to a shop which I knew had got one. And yet, travelling at that time was extremely difficult, to go across London – it was very hard indeed.

I: So you had to be quite a passionate listener to be able to do that?

R: That's right, yes. You had to be sure of what you wanted when you got there sort of thing. So it wasn't easy in those days.

But the other thing that I discovered and that more luck than judgment, was that quite a few blues records had been issued in Britain in the 1920s, so the very first one I found was one by Lizzie Miles and then a couple of Bessie Smith's – In the House Blues and so on. And they were on black label Parlophone. Lizzie Miles, actually, was on the HMV label, I think. But anyway these were 78s, of course, and in those days all the ones we're talking about were 78s but I found these in junk piles in street markets because street markets were very common at that time and there was a street known as Student's Arch in Harrow and just nearby was St Anne's Road and it was really market stalls all the time, all the way down the road, you see, so every day there would be more 78s and I was always going through them in the hope that I'd find something.

I: So you found at the time records that were more than twenty years old?

R: Yes, yes, oh yes, that's right. Those were the ones I was really looking for in a way but I did pick up... well, Memphis Jug Band, Dixon and John (unclear 0:08:16) and so forth.

I: And those were some of the first articles you wrote were about those bands?

R: Yes that's right because I'd got the records. At the time, well obviously there were no people to listen to so the only source you had of the music was the records so I wrote about them because

well, I really wanted to express my ideas and thoughts about them and also the content of those good lyrics and that kind of thing really.

I: Okay. That's the kind of next thing I was going to go into because when you started writing... actually, can you just remind me how you actually got into it, how you started writing about and getting articles published?

R: Yes, I really don't quite know. What really happened was that Jazz Journal was coming out - Jazz Monthly hadn't started at that time - and I got very interested in gospel. It's not easy to follow but it just also was the result of a couple of 78s that I found and that got me just aware of it. Then I just read the odd book and so forth and that was really when I started my book collecting, and anything that seemed related to the subject from whatever position, I bought if I could. So I wrote an article for Jazz Journal thinking that they'd probably turn it down and instead of which they gave it priority in the issue, which took me by surprise to say the least. But what I was doing, I was trying to show that gospel had a very important role and was not being really examined. And I said we were concerned about the failure or lack of writing on jazz but endeavouring to remedy that and so forth we may ignore other music. So I really made that point and that seemed to have gone down well with Sinclair Traill, who was the editor.

I: Yes. He was the editor at the time.

R: So that's really how it happened and so it was the first one. Then I started reading books by black writers and fairly shortly after, of course, I met up with Richard Wright.

I: And that was in Paris?

R: That was in Paris, yes. But I wouldn't have been aware of him if I hadn't found the odd book and particularly his book 12 Million Black Voices which was the one that really sparked me off, of course.

I: Was it? Was that the first one you'd read by him?

R: Well it was the first by him because it was first published here. Eventually, well, not too long after, I was quite fortunate in finding Black Boy and Native Son, the first one.

I: Yeah, I read that recently, Native Son.

R: Oh did you?

I: Yeah, yeah.

R: So I did an article on the jazz and blues in black writing. As far as I knew, I had written...had read everything but I had collected in a surprisingly short while quite a number of books. I mean, I look at them these days and see '51 written on something and I think, God, did I get it then? It's really quite surprising.

I: Yeah, yeah. So do you ever remember reading Jazzmen by Frederic Ramsey and Charles Edward Smith?

R: Yes, yes, I've got that.

I: When did you first come across that, was that after you'd started writing?

R: Yes, yes. I don't know how long after.

- I:** Because what I noticed in Iain Lang's book, a lot of his judgment about what jazz was, seemed to be based on Jazzmen.
- R:** Yes. Well I think that was really quite influential, certainly, but there wasn't much else written by several authors, so to speak, so there were different perceptions of it and I think that was very positive really. I quite remember when I just read a copy before I finally found one and bought it. I think that somebody loaned it to me for a while. I wanted to get it, yes, that is the case – I was wanting to get a copy and so on and was going in the store. I did certainly find it, yes.
- I:** So when you were writing your first articles, were you just using the records and just writing or were you using other sources of some kind?
- R:** Well, the articles, the first articles I wrote, as I say, were really not on the music as such but rather about black authors who had written or included it in their writing and so on because that was the kind of thing I was finding, that a number of jazz books for people like, well, ones we've been talking like Rex and so forth, they didn't really go into examining the literature so I was trying to, well, broaden the canvas a bit, really, I suppose.
- I:** Yes.
- R:** It was luck to a large extent because I just found these things but after a while I kind of got a sense of where I ought to be looking.
- I:** So you said, because eventually you started using the American Embassy, didn't you?
- R:** Oh yes, that was quite a bit later.
- I:** That was quite a bit later.
- R:** Oh yes, yes, I did but I started using the American Embassy library as soon as I could get access to it but that was in the mid to late 50s, the second half of the 50s anyway.
- I:** But that was a good resource, wasn't it?
- R:** Oh yes, extraordinarily good yes. And it really did expand the area enormously from my point of view, but they were very pleased because really not very many people used it, the library, at all and they'd got a lot of stuff coming from the Library of Congress and so on which was something I really pounced on.
- I:** [Laughter].
- R:** These things came. They were very pleased. They were very supportive of me as much as anything because I really was using the resource. If I did get anything posted, I'd give them copies and so forth.
- I:** Yeah. So they kind of enjoyed that?
- R:** Well they also knew that I was doing it for a purpose.
- I:** Hmm. Because primarily, in the 50s, you were writing for Music Mirror, weren't you?
- R:** Well yes, yes, mainly for the theatre. I've got them here, there, you see. The very first copy is rather battered... yeah the first one here is fairly okay but this first one... I think more so from trying to put it in so it maybe...
- I:** Oh right, okay, I see, from the....

R: Yeah.

I: Wow. And this was a general music magazine, was it?

R: Well that was the idea. That's why they called it Music Mirror - reflecting on music as a whole, rather than particular aspects of it. But Charles, er, oh my dear, what was the name? It certainly began with a C. Anyway, Jack Higgins who was a sponsor of some of the very earliest kind of jazz concerts and so forth and Charles, I can't remember his surname now, anyway, they both, well, Charles in particular had been writing and I think was definitely the editor for Jazz Journal. When they decided to start this they invited me to write.

I: Okay. I remember reading somewhere in an introduction somewhere that you said that it was quite easy to get stuff published. They rarely tried to say that's not the kind of thing that...?

R: Well they weren't in a position to do so, in a way, because there wasn't much on the subject, I mean, that was the point of... You could only get it published by a publisher who might be interested, you know, in other words it wasn't persuasive in that sense but I found that a magazine like that and so on, well they were interested in my doing it though anyway, you see.

I: Oh, there's Dobell's, the advert.

R: Oh yes. Is that the advert within the sound of Dobell's, did they use it that early?

I: Charing Cross Road?

R: Yeah it was, yes.

I: 'We stock everything for the jazz collector.'

R: Yes, well, you know that they used to say about something happening, the sound of bow bells, you know?

I: Oh right.

R: Well then, eventually it dawned on him and he started sort of saying get your jazz, or all the jazz is in the sound of Dobell's.

I: Hmm. I bet these are worth quite a bit, aren't they?

R: Well, I've never seen any more around because that's the earliest ones, the yellow ones, then they reduced the size but they still went on yellow and then they started using various colours on the covers.

I: Hmm. Were they expensive at the time?

R: Not particularly. It had the price on it. I think it was about two shillings.

I: Two shillings and six.

R: Yes, two and six, well it was obviously fairly pricey in those days in monetary terms. Yeah, it would be like probably asking for about ten shillings now, so to speak.

I: Hmm. Wow. Yeah, because I recently saw... what was his name, Robert Ford?

R: Yes, Robert Ford.

I: **He did the bibliography of all the stuff...**

R: Oh yes, yes, that's right, yes of course. Yes he was at the Exeter University in the library.

I: **Yes. He's had that published, this huge book...**

R: Yes, that's right. It's a bibliography.

I: **And it included a lot of this reference to a lot of this stuff.**

Okay, so I remember last time I came we talked a bit about the actual personality between some of these people. You said Rex Harris was quite difficult to get on with?

R: Well I found him so. I mean, that maybe very unfair but I always felt a sense of jealousy. I suppose his attitude left me with that sensation. I mean, I haven't necessarily come up with that feeling before, I just felt very conscious of it.

I: **Well he seemed to be very like... I don't know. I get the impression that he was kind of very elitist.**

R: Well, I think he was certainly that.

I: **And so maybe seeing other people beginning to write about the subject he was maybe a bit wary of them. He seems to have gone off the radar as time has gone on.**

R: Oh yes, he wasn't kind of exposed for terribly long, only just a few years. I think he actually couldn't develop his ideas very much, while it was fairly simple writing but when people started writing with original research and so on I think that he felt a bit lost.

I: **Hmm. Then there was Max Jones.**

R: Max was quite remarkable. I think he was the most influential writer, original writer, so to speak. He wrote the first article I ever saw, On Blues.

I: **That one in The PL Yearbook of Jazz?**

R: Yes that's right, yes. The PL Yearbook did come out for about four or five years I suppose, and I can't remember whether it was '46 or something.

I: **I think it's '46, I've seen the contents page on Max. It's On Blues, isn't it?**

R: Yeah that's right, On Blues. It was certainly the first article that I read that was really about blues singers and actually citing particular people, like Petey Wheatstraw and so forth, that nobody else had even referred to. He was editing at that time or soon after a journal called Jazz Music. I've only got about two or three copies of it but it's very rare and it was very difficult to get hold of but he was editing it with Albert McCarthy. Eventually they kind of split a bit, partly because Albert wanted to start Jazz Monthly but I don't think that Max Jones particularly wanted to do that, you know, commit himself to a monthly issue, so to speak.

I: **Did you know Albert very well?**

R: Oh yes, yes, yes. [Laughter] He was quite a character. He's quite a burly man and fairly tough – he got a bit of a rasping voice when he got angry and so forth. But somebody tried to rob him on a staircase in Piccadilly just above the... they'd already introduced the moving staircase and he went

in and somebody tried to pickpocket him and he hit this guy and hit him so hard that he fell all the way down the moving staircase and so forth, so Max was very pleased, very proud of it actually. [Laughter]

I: Wow.

R: I would have thought he'd have been terrified of being arrested or something but he was... What we used to do with Jazz Monthly, every second or third month and always (unclear 0:22:49), we met with the other writers at a wine bar. It was the first time I'd ever gone to a wine bar, I didn't even know there were any in London at that time. When you go down Oxford Street and it meets the top of Tottenham Court Road there's a tiny little road that links the two and it was about two or three points from Oxford Circus, a second or third shop, and I went round it recently, just round that little road just to see what the shop was now and to my surprise it was all closed down and the windows had been painted white or something; it was completely written off. But in those days we used to go to the wine bar and have long discussions about the content of... getting the balance of the various issues right and we were meeting other writers and so on.

I: Hmm.

R: It was good fun; I used to enjoy that, even if I had to get all the way up to London in order to go to it.

I: Where were you living at the time?

R: Near Harrow.

I: Oh right, okay. But back then it must have taken a while...

R: Well it took a while, yes, but from my point of view it was worth doing and anyway I would go to the National Gallery or the art gallery and so forth, one or another.

I: Take advantage, yeah. So did these guys like Max and Albert, were they full-time devoted to editing and publishing?

R: Very difficult to know really. In a way I think they devoted their main activity to it. I don't know of them doing anything else but they may have done or they may just have made enough money in other things just to keep them going – I'm really not sure. Sinclair Traill, now he lived in Richmond and he had a house right on the waterfront of the town, it was a lovely situation.

I: Hmm it sounds nice.

R: Max lived up in Highgate, so did... or another part of it. Yes, let me see... well certainly anyway he did, yes.

I: Okay. And there was Derrick Stewart-Baxter as well.

R: Oh Derrick, yes, well he was selling records in a shop in Brighton and the only thing was, as I mentioned, it was terribly difficult to be with Derrick because he smoked. It was absolutely horrendous, I mean, he never stopped – he was smoking a pipe and so forth all the time. Every time it went out he was just stoking it up again; he never put it down. He never seemed to open the windows and let the smoke out so it was really very difficult to go and see him because it always upset me, you know, I was coughing. I was fairly asthmatic. He was a cricket enthusiast, which I wasn't, but I was quite prepared to meet up with him at the cricket ground in Brighton so that he could watch the game and we could talk, talk particularly when they were between sets or whatever they call it.

I: Yes.

R: And curiously enough, Albert McCarthy was a cricket enthusiast. I was so surprised when I discovered he was, so he occasionally had a chat with Derrick as well.

I: Hmm. They sound like an interesting bunch of people.

R: Oh they were all characters, there's no question about that.

I: Hmm. How did they react to the work you were doing as you were writing?

R: Oh very positively, partly I think because I wasn't really encroaching on their ground, so to speak. None of them were writing about blues very much and Max wrote about all sorts of aspects of jazz, interviewing singers and so forth so he wasn't worried at all. Well in fact he was really quite encouraging really.

I: Okay.

R: No I didn't feel any problems of that kind.

I: When you published Blues Fell This Morning, was it all positive again?

R: Oh, what, the reactions?

I: Yes.

R: Oh yes, very much so. I've got them upstairs but I can show you the reviews because at that time I kept them.

I: Yeah I've seen some of them, yeah. And even Roberta talks about some of them as well.

R: Oh does she, yes. No, it was very positively received. Max then, at that time, I couldn't think of it, you see, he was... well he wasn't an editor but sub-editor or down the hierarchy anyway, oh, of Melody Maker.

I: Right.

R: So he tended to be the jazz writer of Melody Maker and so was Stanley Dance, the two of them. Stanley eventually went to the States but his wife wrote a biography of T-Bone Walker.

I: Oh right.

R: Eventually. But in these earlier days it was Stanley Dance and Max, well, they were just writing quite a lot but they were also getting things going themselves, in smaller journals.

I: Hmm.

R: Particularly with Melody Maker, they were the, kind of, income base.

I: Okay. So about that time when you... because I remember last time you also mentioned Alexis Korner's reaction to the book.

R: Oh, that was... yes, I mean, it wasn't until it was published.

I: Yes, once it was published but from what I've read so far, and I might be wrong about this, do you think that there was kind of a gap developing between younger generations who were

getting interested in the music who would eventually... many of them would become musicians and just, kind of, of older generation who had already been looking at blues and jazz in the 50s?

R: Well, I think that's certainly true. I don't think there's anything to feel... no, I wouldn't be surprised if that doesn't apply fairly frequently anyway, not many people write. We're all so practicing musicians with a view to becoming professionals, so to speak. No, I think the positions were different really. People, if they were writing, were often quite interested in the history and into the musicians when they could and so forth.

I: **Yes.**

R: No, I think it's a fair enough comment really.

I: **Hmm. It just seems there's that kind of irony that many of you were trying to get people to listen to the music and then it kind of did get a bit popular, but from what I've read, Derrick seemed to have been quite protective over the music he thought he knew and these younger kids didn't really know what it was about.**

R: Well, probably that's true up to a point but I mean Derrick actually was a fairly popular writer so I didn't feel that he had a reason to be kind of protecting his own writing type of thing. He wrote in a more pop style in a way. When you say younger generations I mean, all young generations just are suddenly younger.

I: **[Laughter] Yeah. Okay, another more banal question I'm going to ask now is, okay, I've read the story of when you first heard the blues many times but this... well, I've also read that you've written somewhere "I would like to see more people trying to do some work on the blues aesthetic and why we get into the music. What is it about the blues that attracts people to it?" And I'm interested, what other types of music were there around when you started listening to...?**

R: Yes.

I: **For example, what was it about the blues that wasn't in British music at the time?**

R: Well, I suppose it was part of the black community, I think therefore it reflected that and I was interested in general research on that. I think that was probably the first thing. I suppose there were certain things like the structure of blues, you know the blues stanzas and verses and twelve bars and so forth. There wasn't the kind of sixteen bars or ballad songs and so forth but fairly well known as a kind of standard frame. I think the fact that it was an identifiable separate music I found very attractive. I think it was that really. I wasn't disagreeing that it had an influence on jazz; I just wasn't very happy with the people who felt that blues broke off from jazz, it was rather...

I: **Kind of marginalised it?**

R: Yes.

I: **Because I think the factor that it was a black music and you could identify it with these people it was kind of a discovery, wasn't it?**

R: Well it was I think, yes, certainly. Well, I was, I suppose, fairly lucky really because making contact with people was difficult but if there was an opportunity with any concert or jazz concert, for that matter, I would try and get people talking – sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't.

I: **Yeah, musicians can be funny in that sense.**

- R: Yes, especially if you're asking about other people when they really want you to be asking about them.
- I: **Yes. Do you remember what kind of British music, what the general public in Britain were listening to at the time?**
- R: Well, you see, it's quite difficult in a way because much of this period was during the war so they were wartime songs but there wasn't very much access to music really. It would mainly be popular song on popular song 78s. I mean, one can look at these now... It's hard; they were just popular songs, some of them narrative, some of them just expressive of a point of view and so forth. There was no kind of idiom, I think, really at the time.
- I: **A lot of it was on the radio as well, they would listen to it on the radio as well.**
- R: Yes it was on the radio, yes. Swing obviously, as the swing period came in then there were songs sung by swing singers but obviously they didn't have very much substance - some people were a bit annoyed by them.
- I: **Yeah. [Laughter] Okay. Do you know what the time is?**
- R: It's just gone 5; we can go on for a while.
- I: **Okay, alright. Another that I think is a really interesting thing about the 50s is when the first, kind of, musicians started coming over like Josh White, like Big Bill Broonzy, and Lonnie Johnson, Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee. I suppose there must have been a lot of anticipation. I think Josh White was probably the first blues...**
- R: Yes, 51 yes.
- I: **And there was a lot of anticipation about that, wasn't there?**
- R: Well there was, yes. I found him rather disappointing because it was Max Jones that introduced me to him and he was just at the end of the concert and I was not really looking forward to meeting him because I really hadn't enjoyed it very much. He immediately showed me that he'd got broken fingernails and that was hurting him greatly while he was playing. I since heard that he suffered from some kind of fracture of the nail anyway. I just thought it was just at the time; I didn't realise that it was a problem that he always had to cope with to a degree. But he picked up one or two popular songs in Britain, not really of a folk kind but... I'm finding it difficult to think of an example at the minute, but the kind of thing that school kids might sing or something and he picked up one or two of these and played them also and I just felt he got it wrong. People really wanted to hear him playing blues and hear (over-speaking).
- I: **Hmm, stuff that he had been playing in the 30s.**
- R: Yes, and a bit of the same problem with Lonnie. Lonnie Johnson played more blues but he wasn't at his best really because he was such an outstanding guitarist and I think he was a bit nervous or something had gone wrong. Of course amplification was often very difficult as well and they would have a microphone and that was about it. If they weren't constantly singing into the mic the sound would go off.
- I: **Right. What do you think...? For example, you know, like Josh White, a lot has been written about Josh White in the way a lot of people think he sold out and he kind of pandered to the masses a bit.**

R: Well, it was more really to the folk clubs in New York really. I wouldn't say that he... It was, well, my wife and I, whenever we went to New York we always went to the folk clubs in Greenwich Village and that certainly wasn't the masses, it was still a very selective few when you really got down to it. But nevertheless it was an audience and they had a particular kind of idea of what they wanted and I think when he came over and when Lonnie came over, at first, I think they expected the same audience over here, you see. I think they were disappointed that people weren't more enthusiastic. They thought that just what they were doing they didn't like and that it was too advanced, whereas really it was the opposite way round – they were a bit fed up because they weren't getting down to the nitty-gritty, so to speak.

I: **Right.**

R: So Josh hardly ever came again but Lonnie did a few times but the person that really changed it, the singer, Big Bill, he was quite extraordinary.

I: **Big Bill played the kind of blues that you like, that you guys wrote about.**

R: Yeah, exactly, yeah. I mean he just was a remarkable man really and a very nice personality as well. He was very upset about the offer, of the fee, which was referred to as a biography, Big Bill Blues, because he wrote it to a large extent but then Brian Hogg really kind of probably edited it all and stuck it together but Big Bill felt he was really stealing all the credit, so to speak, so he wasn't happy about that. And he also stayed with Alexis at the time. Alexis tried to grab every musician to stay at their house if he could. He was living in the outskirts, well, in London, you see, and therefore, of course, he had interest in promoting as well so it was in his interest to some degree but at times I feel that he was just, sort of, almost sealing off the singer or performers to prevent other people (unclear 0:39:27) and so forth.

I: **Right. So you met most of these musicians and you spoke to them, didn't you?**

R: Yeah.

I: **Do you think that they kind of changed the way you wrote, changed the way you approached writing on the music?**

R: Well, I mean, obviously I was very interested in interviewing them and they, I think, were genuinely surprised how much I'd known about them – I was trying to collect any bit of information I could from everywhere. And I generally had them come over to stay with me at least overnight and so forth.

I: **Yes.**

R: And that was quite welcome actually, that gave them a break and a bit of a rest of the London area. It was actually one of my favourite parts of the country.

I: **Hmm. Of course in this period Alan Lomax was also in the UK, wasn't he?**

R: Yes he was, yes. He had been... He did a number of programmes for the BBC which were really quite good but he was... well I didn't find him a likeable man at all.

I: **He seemed to be a person that... from other people I know that, kind of, I think met him as well, he knew what he wanted and he was very uncompromising in many ways.**

R: Yes, that's right. Not very... Well, he never acknowledged people. People would help him and he would never give them any acknowledgement. He took all the credit for himself. I showed him the articles for Music Mirror and his response to that was, "Well it's good that you're shooting for us," and I said... well, shooting for him, but he just spoke about it as if the only reason why I was

doing it was to advance the Lomax's and even though I was mentioning them very little, somehow it was the way he interpreted it.

I: [Laughter] Yeah. 'Cause, I mean, Lomax was in Britain because during the McCarthy period he was...

R: Yes, yes, that's right. That time when they were seeking out companies and so forth.

I: Did any of that seep out while he was in Britain, do you think?

R: I don't think many people really considered he was a communist anyway. And also probably in the States they will have exaggerated a lot of it.

I: Yes, of course. I recently saw a film about it actually, about a radio programme in the 50s which the catchphrase was 'Good night and good luck.' It was about the first radio programme to challenge McCarthy openly. It was quite good actually. Okay, I think that will probably be okay for now. You've given me a lot of stuff there.

(End of recording)

Appendix 1.2

Interview with Paul Oliver at his home on November 26th, 2009

Key:

I: Interviewer

R: Respondent

I: I can see where the sleeve in the back of the book is but it's not there, so... But none of that is really...

R: I mean, pointless up to there, of course, anyway.

I: Yes, definitely. Oh, Bob showed me as well, he had some of the original records that when you published *The Story of the Blues* and the record to go with it, he had the originals as well, which was quite good as well because I haven't seen them before and so...

R: You want some light there, don't you?

- I:** No, no, no, I'm fine, I'm fine. Okay, so to carry on from what we were talking about last week, we were talking about your period in the 50s when you were writing for *Music Mirror* and *Jazz Journal*, and I was looking through some of the articles that you wrote – you published almost every month, I think?
- R:** Yes.
- I:** What I was interested was that a lot of the articles, most of them seemed to be based on records you had in your own personal collection.
- R:** Yes, yes.
- I:** How did you go about choosing which records to write about?
- R:** Well, you see, I suppose one was more familiar with records, of 78s, in those days, because there's only just two tracks on a CD now but around that time every pair of titles registered in your mind far more. So I think it was partly that I would just sort of scan in my mind the items that I'd got and also I was seeking to purchase those that seemed to be likely titles. That was always a problem but I had true friends who were collecting as well and the one I have put out, if you wanted to borrow them... I'll just go and get it because I wanted to ask you a question.
- I:** Oh, okay.
- R:** The corollary of that question is really telling me that I know what to get, you see, and even how to get hold of them if I did. What happened was that the chap who lived in London in... oh, I've forgotten what it's called, it's only just on the outskirts of London anyway, on the Middlesex side, he started this magazine called *Vintage Jazzmaster* and I took it for so many years and it was three shillings for a copy like that which was quite a lot actually in those days. But I'm just trying to remember Brent Wyatt, I don't think he wrote... actually John Godridge even wrote in this one. Anyway, Trevor Bentwell, that's right, yes, and Phil (p.h 0.03.30) *Crossgun* and Doris Hill. I don't know how he initiated it but anyway he did and it was, well, he'd find or sell these records and... I mean, classical and so forth hardly enters into it; it's mostly jazz or blues but people were advertising what they'd got for sale.
- I:** And this was a national network?
- R:** Well yeah, it was very international – American contributions to it and so forth, you see. And it gives an idea of what actually was already available in a sense and who had them. Like, for example, this chap here, Bernard Chapman, he lived in Dawlish in Devon, not terribly far from where I'd go down. So he had got all these for sale, an extraordinary number, and they would list the record label of them, obviously abbreviated, but some of them were... You see, I mean, there's ones which are just (over-speaking).
- I:** Something like that would be like a Paramount?
- R:** That's likely to be a Paramount yes, the condition was E. I don't know whether he was probably asking for, oh, offers accepted, yes. And then occasionally anything that he wanted sold he would put a 1 by it which is what he called ridiculous offers accepted.
- [Laughter]
- R:** But it says 'Buy it for 19'.
- I:** Okay, so this was one of the ways in which you found...

- R: Oh we all did, yes. And one or two of the people that I used to associate with, just to discuss the records and so on, actually got very involved in this business of selling them because it helped to improve their finances and they would buy in more records and so forth. It was, sort of, competitive in a way at times but it was a tremendous way of finding items really. So that's the whole lot that I've got actually of them. (Unclear 0:05:49) for a long time.
- I: **So when did this first emerge?**
- R: Well that one is April but it doesn't say which year. April 1970, that one, so it's fairly late I think. It was still going in the 70s but I would associate that about '74, '71 that one. That's slightly later than I thought. Certainly, obviously, it was the 70s but you see by that time people had built up quite good collections and they either felt, kind of, committed to them and wanted to expand them or they were starting to disburse them or just specialise, you see.
- I: **Yeah.**
- R: But almost, yes. Yes, these are '70 to about '75 I think, these. Before that it was very difficult to know what was going to be available except by people contacting you and saying, "Well I've got these to sell."
- I: **So was it a case of when you found something which sounded quite intriguing you would...?**
- R: Well yes. They would always say who had recorded it so that was always helpful and I could always go to a chap named Jack Parsons who died unfortunately in his early 30s, but I used to keep in touch with Jack and he was very good for being able to say, oh, that's a very good one on such a label, and he'd heard it. He made notes on everything he heard. Because I did that in a way too, though in a different way, but I've got some notebooks which you're quite welcome to borrow, if you wish, which I was making in the 1950s.
- I: **Those would be great, actually. It was interesting because I was looking through those magazines and you have an article as sometimes continued from a previous issue and it was the only one about the blues, in this magazine specifically, anyway, and it was just like... I was thinking you'd probably built up quite a collection by that time already probably so how were you deciding what to do write about?**
- R: Well I suppose in those days one listened to the records probably rather more so I was always making notes or transcriptions of them so sometimes it was just the fact that the ideas that were expressed in it were original, unusual, or it was a well-known name or a name who I thought ought to be well-known. And it might be a well-known one like Lead Belly but it might be someone like Petey Wheatstraw and in those days a small number of people would have heard obviously. So in the 70s I started that series of blues paperbacks, well Petey Wheatstraw was one of them, Paul Garon, and so forth because I really wanted, not only to find a vehicle for the obvious lines but also for the less well-known ones.
- I: **Hmm. So when you found something that you thought was worthy of more interest you...**
- R: Yes that's right, yes. I mean, obviously, one can make mistakes and I did – I tended to go for the people with rather peculiar names because they often reflected a bit more of the kind of culture, so Lightnin' or Petey Wheatstraw were not the names you'd normally come across, so to speak, where a name like Tommy Johnson or Robert Johnson would just sound like the guy next door so I often didn't buy me any valuable ones as they became, because they just sounded too commonplace. But I mean it took a while to discover these things obviously.
- I: **Yeah obviously. Getting the materials to kind of look into stuff even more might have been more difficult.**

R: It certainly was difficult. I've got these notebooks. You can see how I was making notes of them anyway. Shall I bring them in?

I: **Yeah, okey-dokey. We can get it afterwards.**

R: Okay.

I: **Okay, so most of these articles have your illustrations with them as well?**

R: Yes in those days, yes that's right, yes that's quite true.

I: **And I find this part really, really interesting, the way that you drew pictures or illustrated these articles. I was wondering, were you using anything in particular or was it just kind of like something inspired out of what you were listening to?**

R: No, it's not really collecting books for references. I was copying the drawings but I had been an art student and I was originally going to be a painter and then I took up sculpture but then I found that the dust and so forth affected my chest so I had to give that up. So I decided I would work in graphics so I did a graphics course. Any opportunities for doing illustrations, even if I was just illustrating my own work, it meant that I could show them to a publisher. Well I did a few illustrations for people, for instance, Francis and Barbara (unclear 0.11.31) and things like that so it was really quite nice to do that. I just really wanted to communicate the content and where it took place and what it looked like, as far as I could tell, from the information I collected.

I: **So it was kind of almost like a mental picture of what you thought?**

R: Yes.

I: **I find looking at those really, really interesting as well because none of the other articles were doing things like that.**

R: Of course, the other thing was I was designing record sleeves, did you know that?

I: **Yes. I've seen some of them. Now were you doing that before...?**

R: Well, I'd been trying to do it. I don't think they were roughly contemporary with each other, one sleeve, twenty-two LPs came in and I can't remember quite when that was, I think it was about '74 or something like that. I had ten-inch LPs. I was designing for those and Paul Gammon, oh Peter Gammon rather - he's still actually around, he's pretty elderly but lives in South London somewhere - and he was really in charge of the commissioning of them. He had a boss who was a real pain in the neck because he obviously insisted that no names were... no signatures were (over-speaking).

I: **Oh yeah that's the one you showed me.**

R: Oh was it?

I: **You were sneaking in your initials. [Laughter]**

R: That's right, yes. Fortunately, Peter Gammon knew about it and was really quite amused the way they snuck them in. I fortunately got past the censors.

I: **But the magazines, you put your name on?**

R: Oh yes of course, no problem there at all.

I: I've been looking at those and, as I say, I really like looking at them; I think they're really interesting. Because it's one where you can see how people are kind of imagining what people are singing about as well.

R: Yes, sure.

I: Okay. The other thing I wanted to ask about is you mentioned Big Bill Broonzy, that you illustrated something for his autobiography, was it?

R: Yes.

I: Now when, for example, him and Josh White and Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee and these musicians started arriving in the 50s, you met a lot of them, didn't you?

R: Oh yeah, yeah.

I: What impact did they have on you, do you think? Do you think that they had any effect on the way you were writing about their music?

R: Up to a point. That's an interesting question and a fair question but a difficult one to answer because it depended how much I was familiar with their recordings as to whether they were up to their recordings or beyond it, which was one aspect, and the other is you had expectations of people.

So Josh White, I was quite disappointed really when he came. I thought he was far better on the record but I'd got some of the earlier records – I still listen to them, I still think they're extremely good – but he'd been working in New York clubs, night clubs and so forth, and I think he just assumed it would be the same kind of audience in Britain. It was just a little bit kind of obvious and he just didn't have any kind of real weight behind him at all. I found that disappointing. But also I'd always been very interested in the way he had a kind of catch in his voice and also in his guitar playing and I wondered how this had developed. But it was Max Jones who introduced me to him and he was therefore, kind of, I said I wasn't quite sure if he was playing comfortably sort of thing... I'm trying to find the phrase but... and it turned out that he'd got broken fingernails from something or other and he was finding it very difficult to play.

Lonnie Johnson came and Lonnie was confident but, again, not really at the level of his recordings. I just felt therefore when Big Bill came it was just way ahead of his recording. He was an extraordinary good singer and player - very, very good relationship with the audiences. He just had an amazing personality.

I: Yeah. I mean, the fact about Josh White which is interesting, today actually I've just come... I was in the Bodleian library today because I was looking at Max Jones' article in the Yearbook of Jazz.

R: Oh yes, yes.

I: And he writes about Josh White, saying he's a fantastic blues singer, he's one of the authentic real ones but that was before he came.

R: That's right, yes.

I: So I assumed that was probably one of the reasons, not just the records but also people had very high expectations.

R: Yes, yes exactly, yes, of course. If they wrote enthusiastically in the way that Max would sometimes, they also tended to jack up the expectations of it, you know, specialists, so to speak.

- I:** Yeah. There seems to have been a bit of... because I read a lot about when Big Bill was in England he used to talk... saying his audiences used to, kind of, I don't know, say things about Josh White – "He's not a real blues singer, I'm a real blues singer." He seems to have played on that a bit.
- R:** Well I think he probably did a bit really. I didn't think that he was in any way particularly vindictive about anybody; I think it was partly joking in a way. I think probably the manager or something might also have prompted him.
- I:** Yeah. And then who else came in the 50s? Sonny, Terry & Brownie McGhee came.
- R:** But maybe after Big Bill died then Chris Barber booked them in as intermission artists and they came over. At that time there was a legal situation where musicians could not come over from the States as a group and so forth and train in Britain – Michael was a British Union Musician and that was the American Federation of Musicians. They had a kind of continual dispute with the Musicians' Union here for a long time so they really inhibited groups coming over but they came to an agreement that they could come over as intermission artists and play in the... pause between two stages in a play or whatever, that kind of thing, so Chris Barber booked them as intermission artists for his concerts with his own jazz band, you see. It was a very crafty move actually. There was no regulation at the time. They wanted to introduce it afterwards and how long an intermission could be, you see, Peter (p.h 0.18.57) *Sugden* featured in that one.
- I:** Well Chris Barber seems to have played a big part in...
- R:** Oh yeah, there's no question of that. It was just very efficient the way that he managed these things.
- I:** Another thing I'm interested in, Paul, is the fact that going back to when you first heard the music, when you heard the American soldiers and then later you met these musicians first hand, I'm interested in what kind of feeling or sentiment you had towards, I don't know, the situation of African Americans.
- R:** Well, of course, it was hard to get fairly much information on that really, the kind of stereotypes of slavery, kind of thing. We don't really know what that implied and there is surprisingly little written on the subject - at least that was successful in Britain. But we obviously realised that there were restrictions on them coming – most of them would have told us if they had been in a group then come over and it had been difficult, but generally speaking, there wasn't too much difficulty but how much precisely in the booking, I don't really know because I wasn't involved in that.
- I:** Yeah.
- R:** As to how I felt about it, well, I suppose that's the reason why I did the articles in music, really, because I was trying to communicate the fact that there were the attractions of moving from the South to the North and away from any kind of discrimination in the South, that kind of thing.
- I:** Yeah. Because I mean, obviously there was a bit of a... there seems to have been, correct me if I'm wrong, a bit of a wow factor when you first heard the music and it was the first time you'd seen black people, wasn't it, as well?
- R:** Pretty well. Yes, Americans were certainly the first, yes.
- I:** And then afterwards... because later in the 50s as well, you were in Paris when you wrote *Blues Fell This Morning*.

R: Well I was in Paris in stages for it. What happened was every year I would take parties of pupils of the school I was teaching at – I was teaching art – but the Head of French and Languages, we were good friends and he invited me to take the students to a place in Vincennes and with my wife, we did this together. I mean, she spoke better French than me so it was a help anyway. Then we had to see them again but not too frequently so they could settle in with the family they were with. If we got complaints or they were really unhappy or whatever they could tell us so we normally saw them about once a week for four weeks.

So I was over there for four weeks doing this. It was just a stroke of luck really that another friend of mine who was a French teacher who also happened to be over doing the same thing, at a party he met the guy and I told him... he was a black American, so to speak, who said he wrote and so forth and he wanted to know what I thought about the singer. I said, "Did he say who he was?" He said, "Well he called himself Richard Wright," and I couldn't believe it.

[Laughter]

So every year we spent a lot of time with Richard when he was here. We became very close friends, we still are, with Julia, his daughter – she was only twelve years old at that time. Then Ellen, his wife, died, unfortunately, at a very similar time actually.

I: Yeah because he died quite young, Richard Wright.

R: Yes Richard did, but Ellen as well, so we maintained the contact with Julia. Julia is by herself these days. Yes and I still don't know why but I think it was just his heart. I'm not really quite certain what Richard died from, it was so unexpected and it was while I was away. When I went to the States to do the field recording I did it with a letter of support from Richard Wright, I knew it would carry more weight, so to speak. Val was trying to find an apartment for him in London because he was quite keen to live in Hampstead. He just thought he'd like to do that. She had almost found somewhere and was debating it but then we had to leave and when we came back we discovered he'd died while we were away.

I: But you formed quite a strong friendship with him?

R: Yes.

I: And I read also...

R: He was twice my age.

I: Was he?

R: Well not really twice but he was in his forties and I was in my twenties.

I: Right. But he seemed to really... I mean, I've read in an introduction of one of your books that when you met Richard Wright, eventually he was trying to persuade you to write or to, kind of, promote the cause of African Americans, kind of...

R: Well, up to a point. Well he just felt there were virtually few people that were doing solo in Europe at the time and I think they were people writing about Africans and so forth but I don't think the... There were only a few African Americans really coming over and often they came over and were entertaining us more than anything else, certainly not trying to live here, so it was partly that, yes.

I: Do you think he had a kind of impact on you to the extent that...?

- R: Well I'd say the impact was really just his show. I had his book, 12 Million Black Voices, and was amazed at that. It was a very, very influential book in those days so when this friend referred to Richard it was 12 Million Black Voices I was thinking of particularly, but then when I started getting to know him he was talking also about the books which were sold as novels but they were kind of Native Son and were really part of his autobiography actually.
- I: **Yeah?**
- R: Oh yeah.
- I: **But Native Son was also...**
- R: Well Native Son... to a lesser extent, the first one was called Black Boy, I think it was. Well that one was really his autobiography as a child but then Native Son had this kind of criminal element in it but he was always rather interested in that actually. I think he was just generally interested in stressful situations so there were things that we had in common although I was much younger so we had a very good relationship.
- I: **How did he feel about the music you were writing about? Because he wrote the foreword to your...**
- R: Yeah that's right. Well very positive but he had already written the notes for albums, collections, 78 albums and so forth in the States so he was quite familiar with the music.
- I: **Because I think this aspect, and then you met the musicians as well, did they often talk, when you met them obviously, because some of them stayed with you in those days, didn't they?**
- R: Later, yes. As soon I knew when they were coming... I wouldn't know which hotel they were staying in and they always told me if I asked for it so I interviewed them in their hotels and genuinely I was the first person to do the interviews so they hadn't got into the kind of routine answers.
- I: **Did they often like talking about that aspect of their life?**
- R: Generally whenever I asked them about it they generally responded surprisingly freely. I think the fact that I knew about the conditions in which they lived and so forth and I was familiar and I could mention names of people and so on, UCP or whatever it is, depending on the nature of the dialogue, I think kind of reassured them so they were often more open with me than they were with others, I discovered - I didn't know straightaway but it became apparent eventually.
- I: **Yeah. I suppose it must have been quite liberating for them coming to (over-speaking).**
- R: Oh yes. I think they were suddenly surprised too actually, which was a help.
- I: **Okay. Now in the 50s you also began to get involved with the BBC. How did that come about?**
- R: It came about, I think his name was Jack Dobbs or something very like that who was a BBC producer and he'd read a couple of my articles, I think it was before I had the book but after I wrote for Jazz Journal occasionally and Jazz Monthly more regularly and he'd obviously read them... No it wasn't, no maybe it was Charles Cook? No, no it wasn't Charles Cook because he was doing things on white folk music about the same time. No I think it must be Jack Dobbs, but anyway... I can't remember him. I'm not sure I've got this name quite right but anyway he invited me, just literally asked me if I would be willing to talk on the BBC. So first of all it was more an interview than anything but they seemed to think that I spoke quite freely and obviously knew my subject and asked me if I'd do a programme or two. It just started like that really.

- I:** Okay. Because there had been other programmes on the blues previously, hadn't there?
- R:** Yes, Lomax and so on. There hadn't been much in the way of British... Have you heard of any?
- I:** No. I mean I know that Lomax did some programmes and he also used Josh White I think for a few of them.
- R:** Oh yes, yes, but they were of a different kind. I mean, those were... There was a jazz programme every week and Max was one of the organisers and writers of that but there wasn't really anything on blues to speak of except, as you say, Josh, but then there certainly wasn't any real searching into the subject or anything like that. And I think that they'd obviously been interested because my approach was different and they just asked me to do it really.
- I:** Right, yeah, because I've been trying to... I mean, you've given me your transcripts from some of them and I found two from that period – there's one you did on the Memphis Jug Band.
- R:** Yes.
- I:** And I've been trying to get hold of some of these other programmes that were done in the 50s as well on the radio to see if I can... with the BBC archives but they're not easy to...
- R:** No they certainly are not, I agree. I was really tape recording for popular use but not many came in, to any extent.
- I:** No.
- R:** They did by 1959/60 but hadn't really in the early 50s. No that is a bit difficult; I've no easy answer to that one.
- I:** No. And obviously all the programmes then, I'm also interested in when... because you published two books – there was Bessie Smith which was... that's a collection of articles you were writing, wasn't it, more or less?
- R:** Well it was intended as a... it was in this series called Kings and the Blues, there basically was a king.
- [Laughter]
- R:** So I was writing when I could find information but ultimately it really was possible and it went into a surprising number of editions in the States, in Germany, in Melbourne I think it was and Italy – I was really kind of surprised.
- I:** And then Blues Fell This Morning. Now because of your writing seems to have built up, you started writing more and more and then you finally decided, right, this would be good as a book or...?
- R:** Yeah. Well I think Music Mirror largely did that because although I did it in a different way, they were quite influential on what I was writing about, so to speak, but of course take a different form. But the research that I'd done for the articles played quite an important part for me in terms of doing the book.
- Yes, you see, what was good was Desmond Flower who was really the director of Cassell Books in those days, was a jazz enthusiast himself and in fact he did a book with Sidney Bechet, interviewed him and so forth. I mean, hardly anybody in the business was that interested that they

- would do it themselves, so to speak. So he asked me if I would do the Bessie Smith book and it had good reviews and so forth and I said well I was working on this other book. He said, well let me know when it's finished, so I did, and the only thing is that it was the blessed printers' strike that held it up for me, well, over a year. I mean it was all finished but just not getting published.
- I: Not getting published, yeah. Because around the same time Sam Charters also published his book.**
- R: Yes that's right, yes.
- I: But I would imagine that that probably arrived in England a bit later, didn't it, after your book?**
- R: Well no it came out almost about the same time actually, as far as I remember. I had been in touch with Charters for a short while but I think he felt I was treading on his territory when in fact I wasn't going to do the kind of book he was doing but it was almost as if he didn't believe me in a way. I never actually spoke to him.
- I: But you had been in touch with him before?**
- R: Yes, yes, we were corresponding and so forth.
- I: How did you become aware of what he was doing? Was it through...?**
- R: I think it was through Jacques Demetre, a Frenchman. I met him while he was in the States. It was really through him, as far as I can remember.
- I: Right. Had you been in contact with many other Americans who were interested in writing about the music at all, any other like jazz critics or writers?**
- R: Well, with one or two but I don't think they played a very significant role really. One or two were discographers, so to speak, but obviously one tried whatever one could get, and this chap, I can't remember his name at the moment, eventually became a manager for one of the singers. I'm just trying to think - the name is stuck in my mind. Anyway, but they were just occasional people; there wasn't anything very regular about it. I don't think I've probably got any letters from that far back.
- I: No but I was just interested because also when I looked at the PR Yearbook today I noticed there was an article in there by Frederic Ramsey which I thought was quite interesting because you have a British and then... it obviously means that people were corresponding quite early on about the music as well.**
- R: Yes, Fred Ramsey did loan me a few photographs as well for The Story of the Blues but I liked his work very much but he was fairly introverted - one would not necessarily know that - but he was as a person. He wasn't terrible easy to get on with, it was just rather repressed somehow.
- I: Well I've recently looked at his Been Here and Gone which is... I mean, it's mainly a collection of photographs.**
- R: Yes, when you read it.
- I: And it's just quite interesting, the way he's decided to do that as well, because that also came out about the same time.**
- R: The same time, yes. It was a good title I think for... this was contacts of other (unclear 0.36.58) really. Yes, I mean, one or two people, Rudy Blesh and so forth came from New Orleans. Jazz

- writers I did correspond with, not very frequently, but I did correspond with them, so when I went to New Orleans I obviously saw them as soon as I was there.
- I: And they were obviously good people to know?**
- R: Oh yes of course.
- I: So the field trip you did in 1960, was that the first time you'd been to the States or had you been...?**
- R: Yeah, that was the first time.
- I: That was the first time.**
- R: The book had been published before I went there.
- I: Okay. And when you read Charters's book what was your reaction to it? Can you remember at the time? Obviously it's a long time ago now.**
- R: Yes. I thought it was a useful book. There were some interesting biographical pieces in it. It was a kind of approach to writing which wasn't one that I shared. I didn't particularly like the way it was written but I can't say I was critical of it really because at least he'd achieved it and done it. Obviously there were people that weren't included but he had done quite a bit of field work to get information on people (unclear 0.38.24) or whatever so I could hardly be very critical of that. It's not a book I get any real pleasure out of reading. There's nothing about the way of writing and so forth. Part of the stimulus of reading is also the way people put things over, so I found that a little bit article-like somehow.
- I: Yeah. It seems like if you just look at bibliographies of people that have written books on the blues, in the 60s it seems to be dominated by yourself and by Sam Charters.**
- R: Well there weren't many others; it's true.
- I: There are a few other books that you published... I think you did three books in the 60s?**
- R: Yes originally.
- I: And you had quite a few come out. That seems to have been your prolific blues writing book period, anyway.**
- R: Yes.
- I: And often, I mean, the timing of the book, when your book came out and his book came out, kind of, invites some kind of comparison of how...**
- R: Well it does and it did then although it was purely accidental because of the printers' strike.
- I: Yeah, otherwise yours would have come out...**
- R: It had actually been completed quite a while before. It was a pain, that. And it was Winston Churchill who actually saved us.
- I: Yeah?**
- R: Yeah, a very curious thing. Desmond Flower, who was the senior director of Cassell hated paperback books but the printers' strike made them near broke, you see, and they apparently didn't

know what to do. Churchill had been publishing his autobiography and his historical works and so forth with Cassell and he had a bright idea of putting them all into paperback. He didn't want paperback but as you can see it was going to work and it did and they sold that by them. They made enough money to support the publication of my books. Churchill was thanked for that.

I: Was that his own book?

R: Which one?

I: The Winston Churchill?

R: Well, yes, he did a ton of books and all of them were published by Cassell who were the publisher then. He was a historian as well. He's really a remarkable man really - his sheer range and motive and so forth. So I don't know if it was any specific.... it was the collection of his works in paperbacks. It was a pretty smart idea really, it meant that Desmond Flower had really to go and entirely get his own (unclear 0.41.33) for it, but it was a really good thing he did, yeah.

I: Also another reason why this period invites some kind of comparison is also the fact that you were British and he was American. Now over the course of the years this seems to have been developed into a kind of rift between... some Americans didn't appreciate the fact that some British people were writing about an American type of music.

R: Where have you found that?

I: Well Bob Groom kind of gave me the impression that some people didn't appreciate the fact or kind of ignored what was being written across the Atlantic.

R: Oh, I don't think I was quite so aware of that. Bob probably was because of publishing, I don't know.

I: Right, maybe. But also maybe because Bob was more involved in, especially kind of like the more journalistic side, whereas in the period you were in, well, you were writing, well if you read it, everybody considers it more scholarly. And I think he was referring to people like Stephen Calt.

R: Gosh, yes, I'd forgotten him.

I: But I'm not sure, but it wasn't that apparent at the time.

R: He was a bit odd though, Calt. He wrote reviews or at least the notes for records but I never quite knew exactly where he stood.

I: But you don't remember there being any kind of rift?

R: No, no. If there was I wasn't probably particularly aware of it.

I: No. I mean it's not something that has been apparent to me anyway.

R: No. It was one thing you had information on that. No, I must say, I didn't really feel that at all. I felt cautious or I just wondered whether there would be problems, maybe rifts from writing but I'd got many people supporting me.

I: That must have been a huge kind of boost to have this.

R: Well it was. Rudy Aggrey. Have you ever heard of Aggrey?

I: No.

R: Well it was curious, when I was in West Africa I came across a book called Aggrey of Africa which I bought and Aggrey came from Achimota on the coast of Ghana and was a black African. He was a very interesting writer and educationalist. He was at the... they don't call it university but a high level of education anyway at Achimota and he was there. I remembered him and that was that. Then when I met up with Richard, well the first people he introduced me to were Rudy Aggrey and it was Aggrey's son. He was regarded as the Black American ambassador in Europe and he also wrote in support of my getting a grant to do the field trip. Both of them did. I was a bit worried about Richard because he had been a communist in the McCarthy period but I think everybody recognised that he was a very good writer. I thought it might go against him but it didn't.

I: It seemed that period with the McCarthy era that they all came in exile.

R: Yes.

[Laughter]

I: It's amazing really. I was just going to... then another question to me about this which has just vanished from my mind.

R: Association with anything?

I: Well, just what we've been talking about Richard Wright and...

R: Was it people in France or in Great Britain?

I: Oh, no, it was about how he'd written the foreword and he was encouraging what you were doing.

R: Yeah, well that's certainly true. He actually offered... What was interesting is that I didn't ask him to write the foreword, he offered to do it.

I: Because also a few years after your book was published, LeRoi Jones, Amiri Baraka, published Blues People.

R: Yes that's right.

I: And he kind of takes the line that if you're not from here, if you're not black you can't get this.

R: Yes, oh.

[Laughter]

R: It must attract a popular audience but, of course, in a kind of way that would realise overall that it's all, well, anthropology. It makes sense if you stop to think about it.

I: Yeah but it's kind of the way, maybe, I don't know if... because, to be honest, beyond that I haven't really looked at much of what other things he's written and I'm going to because it maybe seems to be a reaction against either white people in America trying to look at the music and then maybe against non-Americans looking at the music.

R: Yes, that's a good point.

I: And it seems to be more for like, kind of, not about the blues or the African American music itself, but more about African Americans.

R: Yes. But in the notebooks, of course, there was listed... I was always listing the books that I'd worked from or got information from and so forth so it would be interesting to see what I was reading at that time. Of course I look at them now and wonder how I managed to find so many but anyway.

I: [Laughter]

R: So you'd have to be a bit... At that time I was living in Kenton, only about fifty yards from the library and I was in there every day.

I: In Kensington?

R: No Kenton, near Harrow.

I: Right, okay.

R: That's when I started buying books as soon as I'd seen them.

I: Yeah, I mean it's not so easy... To be honest, where I am in Cheltenham, it's not that easy. I mean now I can come to the Bodleian because I've got the membership and I think they're much better furnished than the University of Gloucestershire.

When I did my Masters in London, we had the Senate House Library there which is the University of London library and that... I'm wondering whether some of the books from the American Embassy ended up...

R: In the Senate House?

I: Yeah.

R: I think they probably did.

I: Because the US collection is there.

R: Yeah, I think it was very likely that they did.

I: I used to enjoy going there actually; it was always very good. That's kind of most of the questions I have for today, Paul. Thanks very much for that.

(End of recording)

Appendix 1.3

Interview with Paul Oliver at his home March 11th 2010

Key:

I: Interviewer
R: Respondent

I: There was also – some I'm not sure about – Muddy Waters, you also... did you interview him in England?

R: Not in England, well, not really an interview, I mean, I did get to know him in England when he visited us. He didn't stay with us, he visited us but he invited us to stay with him in Chicago.

I: Not a bad invite, going to stay with Muddy Waters in Chicago. Was there anyone else?

R: That came over, you mean?

I: Yeah. Rosetta Tharpe as well, Sister Rosetta?

R: She came over, yes, yes, that's right; she did too. I have to start thinking about it. Yes, Little Brother Montgomery because Champion Jack Dupree was over here and even living over here for quite a while. Curtis Jones came over, he died in Morocco I think it was. Eddie Boyd, the pianist. He then moved to Sweden, because quite a few of them came over to Europe. They had to go to France then come to England then go back to Europe and even settled there for quite a while.

I: Yeah. Champion Jack Dupree lived here for many years.

R: Oh he did, yes, yes.

I: He lived up in the north somewhere.

R: He lived in York or Yorkshire anyway, yes, and lived down in Sussex too for a short while.

I: But you met already during the 50s, did you?

R: Oh yes, yes.

I: But I think, from what I gathered, the first one you met was Josh White?

R: Yes, that's right. As I say, I'd just better stop and think, I wasn't quite sure that it was but, yes, it was. I'm just trying to think who was more or less contemporary with Josh. Lonnie came after. Oh perhaps it just was Josh White.

I: That was in the late 40s, he first came over, wasn't it?

R: '51 I think it was. Certainly I didn't see him before '51. He may have come over and I hadn't seen him but '51 I did.

I: But from what I've gathered, you were introduced to Josh but you didn't interview him as such, but...

R: Well, not really, he wasn't in a state of mind to do so. He was actually in rather bad shape. This was in 1951, as I say. What happened was that he had damage to his hand and also broken fingernails so when he was playing the break kept on catching on the strings and producing a sound which wasn't what he wanted obviously so that upset him quite a bit but he wasn't feeling very healthy. So Max Jones introduced me to him but he just wasn't up to being interviewed then properly. I mean, we did chat briefly but not really an interview; it was more really about his hand and that sort of thing.

I: Was there anything you remember about meeting him, anything that sticks out?

R: Well, I think the thing that struck me the most was that... it was probably the circumstances. He seemed to be a very different person from the one who was singing but I think it was obviously because he was quite determined to sing his way and with this extraordinary kind of breaks in the voice and matched with those and the guitar, it was a very individual way of playing and singing. But I think actually off the stage, so to speak, and under these circumstances when he feeling far from well, he was clearly a different person but it wasn't a way of measuring what he would be like if I met him when he was in good shape, but that wasn't the case as it happened. I remember the incident very well and I remember him on the stage very well, I remember being introduced to him by Max. I mean, all that is quite clear in my... but it doesn't add up to anything, really, because the circumstances were kind of distorted.

I: And was this in London?

R: Yes, it was. It was at the Royal Festival Hall that we heard him. Certainly it was in a very large auditorium. There were about three or four auditoriums that they did have the visiting musicians and so on in. Another one was, oh, I can't remember the names of them now but...

I: But that was at the time during the Musicians' Union's ban, wasn't it?

R: Yes, that's right, yes it was.

I: But he had a whole evening just for him somehow, or...?

R: Yes, well that was... the Musicians' Union's business, actually, I don't think that it was exactly at that time because I think it was when Sidney Bechet came over that the Musicians' Union really clamped down, because I knew Bechet quite well.

I: Yeah, you've mentioned him quite a lot.

R: But what happened anyway was that he was in the audience and I think Chris Barber or one of the band leaders anyway, it might have been George Wade but I can't remember, but said, well, they hadn't got a saxophone player in their band and was there one in the audience? Of course, Bechet presented himself and got up and so on and they sort of welcomed him on stage and he played but this was absolutely against the Musicians' Union. It all looked as if it was pretty accidental but obviously it had been set up, so it caused a lot of problems really and also it broke the back of the... I can't remember if it was Warner or Walker, something, brothers who put on many of these concerts at that time but they were fined very heavily and they were very distressed by that. They had to settle that with... I think it was Chris Barber but it might have been George Wade. There was just a very brief period when one took over from the other, so to speak, and one or two people played in the same, in both bands. I'm just a little hazy as to whom it was, but anyway, the effect was that they made this ban that bands could not come over to Britain or go to the States, you see, because, of course, almost immediately in the States they made the same restriction. Now I never quite knew how The Beatles got round that, whether they'd heard enough of The Beatles on record or something.

I: Was it still active in the early 60s?

R: Well it was very late, anyway, certainly I think it was still active, yes, I'm pretty sure it was, really. It was pretty sensitive because they were really the first group to go over after the limits had been imposed so I think it might have been. But, anyway, the effect was quite good from the blues point of view because they wouldn't allow musicians to come over. They were called intermissions and the idea was that they only played in the break when something else was going on, of course, inevitably they came over. Also, variety artists were still acceptable so they came over as variety, that was the other thing.

I: **As long as they weren't bands.**

R: Yes, that's right.

I: **But obviously that time Josh played, obviously he didn't kind of play the music that many people were expecting? It was a bit of a disappointment then?**

R: It was a disappointment, certainly, and quite a lot of the people were disappointed. I mean, he did his best, I'm sure.

I: **Yeah, I've read that you've written that it wasn't his fault, it was the people around him that, kind of... and you were quite critical of what was happening in Britain at the time.**

R: Yes. Where was I writing that?

I: **In Music Mirror. It was how... trying to pander to popular taste.**

R: Well, that was certainly... oh well, yeah, that's quite true. Yeah, I was right about that because what happened was that prior to his coming over he'd been working in New York and they had what they call folk clubs which was a pretty elastic term, actually, and one or two of them were really quite good but others were... well that's the point, you see, it was just a name and it didn't really define either the music or the people who really went, so to speak. You had to know where some of them were working and if you were interested, go there.

Anyway, he had worked these clubs and some of them were pretty ropey really. I think he anticipated an audience very similar to the ones he'd been playing for when he came over to Britain because he hadn't really any idea what the audience, how much it knew and so on. I think it was, well it was a shame really; it was disappointing.

I: **Was it a similar case with Lonnie Johnson?**

R: Well, to quite an extent it was. I mean, certainly, Lonnie was a very good guitarist and also he was more wrapped up in blues. In a way, Josh, it's quite difficult to explain really with Josh. I suppose he worked with a lot of other singers and so on but then Lonnie did as well but their approaches were very different really. But Lonnie wasn't at his best. When he sang blues, well, he did only about a couple in the actual performance, they were good but I think he felt that they were looking for more pop kind of things, you see. And I remember him, what particularly stayed in my mind because it really turned my stomach, was, I Left My Heart in San Francisco, not that I'd ever associated him with that kind of pop. He was good though and I arranged to meet up with Lonnie in the States. I didn't manage to with Josh. In fact, Josh was not well and of course he died quite young.

I: **Yeah, but he stayed in Europe for many years.**

R: I think he did for a while.

I: **I think he had a French girlfriend or wife.**

R: I'm not really quite sure.

I: Elijah Wald would know. But then you met Lonnie Johnson and you spoke to him, didn't you?

R: Yes. Lonnie was an interesting person to talk to. I think that like many of the singers, they didn't quite know how much people would know about them or about their music or anything in Europe and I think they got quite surprised when they found that many Europeans knew far more than the Americans they'd been playing for. I talked to him about some of the people he'd accompanied on record and I think that actually was quite a good thing really, got him a bit more focused.

I: Right. Did he ever seem to be a bit, I don't know, like he was a bit reluctant at times?

R: Well I didn't find that. I think one or two other people did but I didn't at all. I found him very relaxed and easy to... I told him that I was planning to come to the States and he gave me an address and a couple of other addresses too, so he was really very positive actually.

I: Hmm. So there weren't really many subjects that they were... or Lonnie was reluctant to talk about, or anything?

R: No, but, of course, in those days it was fairly sensitive anyway so you had to be fairly careful with what you were asking of them and so on, because I mean, it was still segregation in the south and it was in the north, in effect, but they didn't say there was. I mean, the south side of Chicago or the black Harlem and so forth, they were really segregated areas.

I: St Lewis as well, yeah. But obviously the fact that you knew a lot about his records and who he played with, it, kind of...

R: Well, I think it helped to obviously break the ice, as you might say.

I: Yeah, obviously. I suppose for many of these guys it must have been kind of a bit of a shock to come somewhere so far away and realise...

R: Well, I think it must have been but I think one of the things that... well, the person who has not been given the credit that I think he deserved really was Panassier, you see, Panassier really made the first arrangements for blues singers to come over to Europe but he was a bit of a pain in some ways and also some people didn't like his books very much and so forth. So he wasn't very popular in Britain but, nevertheless, he had the nous and the motivation to do that. And he also went to the States and he stayed there quite a while finding people and trying to arrange for them to come over. So if it hadn't been for Panassier starting off by doing that I don't think we'd have had anything like the blues festivals we had later.

I: France in this period, and Paris, in particular, seems to have been a hub of activity for Americans especially, doesn't it?

R: Well it was and, of course, there was quite a large percentage actually living there and obviously, well, Val, my wife, and I made very good friends with Richard Wright and what we were doing was taking boys across for learning French by being there so that gave us time to either just go to concerts or whatever but fortunately meeting up with Richard and we saw him every year. He would take me to places and I'd take him to meet singers and so forth.

I: That's amazing, yeah. Did you ever meet any of the other famous writers who were there? They were a lot younger than Richard but...

R: Yes.

I: James Baldwin was there.

R: Who?

I: James Baldwin.

R: James Baldwin I didn't meet. Well, actually I was introduced to him so I suppose I met him in a sense but we never made any kind of contact really. That was partly I think because it was Richard that introduced me to him and I think Baldwin was a real pain as far as...

I: They'd had a bit of a falling out, hadn't they?

R: Yes, exactly, so I think I was written off promptly by him as well but...

I: There was also Jacques Demetre in Paris.

R: Oh Jacques Demetre, yes. Oh yes, we were very good friends. In fact, it was very curious because I was in Paris only the year before last and I tried to make contact with him but he was definitely there but he wouldn't meet up and I don't know why, because our relationship was so good in earlier years. Whether he's aged a lot or embarrassed about something, I just don't know and I couldn't find out.

I: No, because there was a series of articles in Jazz Journal, I've seen. He wrote Land of Blues.

R: Yeah.

I: And even in British magazines.

R: Yes, that's right. I helped him with the translations here and there but the other thing was that he often produced the photographs and I would write a text to illustrate the photograph, that's another thing we did.

I: So you worked together. We've talked about... well, you've briefly met Josh, you got on well with Lonnie. What about... Now Big Bill, obviously you had a... This is probably the guy you got to know the most.

R: Oh yes, well pretty well. Actually I preferred John Sellers in a way because I knew him because he stayed with us, I mean, kind of, officially stayed, so to speak, but Big Bill, certainly, as far as a major singer and so on and guitarist, he definitely was prominent. We got on very well.

I: Do you remember when you first met John?

R: Curiously, that's exactly what I was trying to do – I was trying to remember the first circumstances. It was really I think that I did the illustrations for his autobiography.

I: Hmm, I've recently read it.

R: And I did more than they finally printed; that was (unclear 0.17.47). I mean, they commissioned half a dozen plus a cover but in fact reduced one or two. But I think he wrote in my copy.

I: Oh wow. I bet that would be worth quite a bit.

R: [Laughter] I don't intend to part with it.

- I: No, no, I wouldn't imagine so. No, I recently read this. What involvement did you have, apart from the illustrations with this book? Did you have any other involvement?**
- R: Well he came over to... we were living in a place called Greenford, do you know Greenford?
- I: Yeah.**
- R: Anyway we were renting an apartment there at that time and we used to put on parties. Many of the singers, we tried to put on at least one party for them and so forth but with Big Bill we did so every time he came over and he came over quite frequently but I think he really looked forward to it. And when one of them was my wife's birthday, he came over and he insisted that he did all the cooking for her and so forth - it was great having a meal cooked by Big Bill.
- I: Not many people can say that.**
- R: And he got on very well, very easily, very relaxed with other people and so on. People used to come over like Alexis, up to a point. Our relationship was friendly but Alexis had a slightly strange personality. I didn't always feel very confident with him actually.
- I: Well, he seems quite enigmatic to me because I don't know much about him and I'm trying to find information on him.**
- R: Well, there is a book on him.
- I: Yeah, I know.**
- R: I've got it, but I don't think it really gets to his personality at all. I think really he was actually conceited, that really was the problem but it was in the way in which he was critical of others more than what he actually said. But you always felt that he was placing himself above whomever he was criticising and he kept on doing this. It got some people very, very annoyed. But it was a, sort of, strange relationship. We got on okay. But Charles Fox, have you come across his name at all?
- I: Yes, I have.**
- R: Well he was a very good critic, jazz critic and so forth and he rented an apartment in Alexis's house and I never could understand how they could get on but I think he actually... Charles had a rather... he was a very interesting person, very nice fellow too, but I think he actually felt that he benefited by the fact that they weren't too close, that he'd got his own independence and was probably quite shrewd really. I liked Charles very much but he died suddenly, still quite young.
- I mean, Val and I used to go to Alexis's house and he occasionally came over to me but I lived in Harrow at that time so it was a bit too far.
- I: Was it from one of the parties that the... I mean, Yannick, the person who wrote the book, I can never get the name right.**
- R: Yannick Bruynoghe.
- I: Yeah. How did the book come about?**
- R: Well what happened was actually Big Bill was very annoyed about it really but he'd been in Belgium and he'd been writing notes on his stay and so forth, you see, and Yannick Bruynoghe had spoke with him a lot and so forth and Bill showed him this and Yannick then said, well that's interesting, kind of thing, have you got anything else? So Big Bill in the subsequent year also brought these notes and so on. And he was very upset about it really because what he thought he was doing was getting Yannick to check the writing and see that it was okay and he was writing

his own autobiography but Yannick in fact was actually translating it first of all, then translating again back. There was something funny about the translation and I can't remember quite exactly how it happened.

I: So Yannick edited a lot of it.

R: But he edited it in the process, you see, and I think Big Bill felt that a lot of things that he wanted had been edited out of it. When Cassell produced it at least they did a decent job. It had a very, very good reception at the time for the publication. I think that eased his mind for a little bit but he was very upset about it all the same.

I: Oh well, you never would have thought that. So Big Bill was obviously quite prominent in Britain in this time as well for a blues...

R: Oh yeah, from the blues point of view, blues and jazz, oh yes, certainly.

I: So I suppose you had many opportunities, well, you got to know him quite well. You had many opportunities to speak to him.

R: Yeah.

I: Was Big Bill ever wary of talking about any topics? I mean, obviously with regard to his life he's been quite open in the book.

R: Yes, what kind of topic are you thinking of?

I: I mean, just about, for example, when talking about, I don't know, the social conditions in America, for example. Did you ever think he was...? Well, basically what I'm trying to get to is that if any of the people you speak to, if you ever think they gave you answers that weren't necessarily what you were looking for but they were just the answers they would give to avoid causing any...?

R: I didn't have much of that kind of problem but I was fairly careful myself not to...

I: Not to probe too much?

R: Well, particularly on the race situation at the time, because this always put them in a rather difficult position and they either had to lie about it or talk about something they didn't want to talk about. Fortunately, I think I came to that conclusion really early on so I didn't do so. If they made any comment I might make a small remark or even a joke or something together but I didn't really investigate their...

I: Okay. You tried to focus on their music?

R: Yeah, their music and the places where they were working and see which were... if it's on the south side or if it would be just on State Street, Two Corners and so on. We'd just talk about those places.

I: Hmm. How did Big Bill feel about his popularity over here?

R: Well, I think he was... I mean, I think he was quite content about that because his relationship with the audience was so good. He was quite different from the other singers because he talked to the audience almost as if they were his friend and it was the way in which everybody felt he was talking to them, so to speak. He just had an extraordinary stage manner and very relaxed and yet played so well. So I think his personality was one that was, you know, kind of engaged the audience. But many people were even rather nervous therefore, about going out to talk with him;

- well that often was the case. But, you see, I had one interview with him when we were down... well it was by the Thames but I can't remember the name of the... But anyway, it was one particular hall where a concert was being held and we were there and I took him along to a room I'd found where we could just talk and it had got a fiddle or violin, obviously it had been left by an orchestra player there and he picked it up and started playing but playing so fantastically well and I said, "Oh, why don't you play it on this stage, Bill?" because I just couldn't believe that... but he said, "No, no, they won't like it." But I thought he was absolutely extraordinary. But he had started off really as a fiddle player and that was interesting, before he became a guitarist.
- I: He was quite able then to... he had a lot of ability to kind of perform and engage an audience then?**
- R: Yes, so much more so than...
- I: Because it's often something you hear about the 50s and 60s, especially when a lot of people were rediscovered, a lot of the older musicians didn't have the ability to kind of do that because they hadn't really ever done it.**
- R: Yes, it's quite true but I think it just came naturally with Big Bill in a way, that's maybe why he was so popular as a whole.
- I: One thing I never... Big Bill recorded extensively, didn't he, in the States?**
- R: Yes.
- I: Was he still quite popular in America at that time as well?**
- R: Well, I suppose he probably was, it just depends on with whom.
- I: Obviously it wasn't a widespread...**
- R: Yes, it's difficult to say really but at one stage we were saying, "Bill, you must be the last of the blues singers," and he said, "No, I'm not," and I said, "Well, who is coming up then?" and he said, "Well, you wouldn't know him but he's a lad called... well they call him Muddy Waters," so we all laughed and thought it was a joke but then he said, "No, no, that really actually isn't his name. I can't remember his name now," but that's something that... I mean, that really kind of stuck in our minds and eventually Chess Records came out with Muddy playing on it, so we really did know that it was a real person. But he really was the person that let us know that there were other singers coming up and so on.
- I: Still around, yeah, because there was, kind of, the... you get the sense that there was the feeling that a lot of the musicians had either disappeared or they'd maybe died.**
- R: That's true. And of course Lead Belly came over. I didn't see that many because I wanted to do so but I was teaching at the time and they wouldn't give me freedom and time to...
- I: And he only came to Paris, didn't he?**
- R: Yeah, we just went to Paris, fairly briefly, and he was ill at the time. He went back to the States and went to, I think it was St Austin and was very ill there and died there, of course, immediately after. I did meet Martha, his widow, but she was pushing on a bit really.
- I: I was just thinking of something, when you mentioned Muddy Waters and the Chess... a film was made recently about Chess Records and Muddy Waters. It starts with the scene with Muddy sitting outside his shack on a plantation and two people approach him and say, "McKinley Morganfield?" and they say, "I'm Alan Lomax and this is John Work. We'd like**

you to do some recordings for the Library of Congress.” And that’s how the film starts. It’s basically how Chess Records got started. It would be interesting to see what you think about it.

R: Well...

I: It’s a recent film; it must have come out last year.

R: Yes, I didn’t know about it.

I: It’s called Cadillac Records. Is it Leonard Chess used to buy Cadillacs for Muddy and Little Walter?

R: Yes, Cadillacs. It didn’t cross my mind really that that might be about that.

I: Yes, I was surprised. I mean it’s not a great film by any means but it’s interesting to see how they interpret that. So what about Brother John Sellers then?

R: Well, he was gay really and that put a lot of people off or they got very angry with him and so forth, which I loathed. He was a very nice man, I liked him greatly.

I: Did people know that he was...?

R: No, I don’t think that many but he was quite honest to me and my wife, Val. That was the way he was and we weren’t making a fuss about it but I think Alexis had realised that and he just wouldn’t speak to him.

I: God.

R: I found that he was taking the same position as some people did racially. I found that very offensive really. In a way, I mean, we did have a bit of a row over it at one stage.

I: Really?

R: Yeah.

I: It seems kind of silly really, you know.

R: He made his contribution, there’s no question about that. He started the club in Central London and so forth. I don’t want to minimise his.... And also his playing was extremely good but personality wise, I couldn’t say I liked him really.

I: He was quite abrasive, he sounds.

R: Yeah. But Brother John was just... well, for one thing, I mean, I don’t know but I don’t think that that involved him in any active engagements with anyone in Europe and I’ve never heard anybody say so, it’s just that he was a very honest man. Because he said to me one day, “You know, Paul, I love men and not women, don’t you?” and I said, “Well, I heard that.” I was trying to find a way of actually... [Laughter] but he just started laughing and that was that really.

I: That was the end of it, yeah.

R: But we were very good friends. He had worked with, oh gosh, Mahalia Jackson, a gospel singer, and he was a gospel singer as well as a blues singer, more gospel in a way because... he did play guitar and piano but very, very rarely on stage. I mean, he played a lot better than I expected because I’d never seen him play there but when he did I got him to give a talk to some of my

students at one time and he then played the piano then and I was really surprised how good he was.

I: Why was he reluctant then?

R: I think he wanted... I think he was nervous really in case people thought he was being intrusive, it was something like that. I can never quite understand really but he was a shade surprised, I suppose, that he was working with some of the blues singers and so on that he was, you see. He was more used to working with gospel singers really. He then became a singer with a dance company. I'm just trying to remember what they were called. Because they came over to England and when I put my Story of the Blues exhibition on at the American Embassy, the whole company came to it. Brother John came over. Big Bill did too. Because they did come over together; they got on quite well actually but they never played together. But I just liked him as a person, just his personality. He was, I think, well one of the things was he was much easier to talk with about ordinary everyday things, for example, a lot of the blues singers didn't like the hotels they were in but they didn't know what to do about it or they thought they were paying too much on their behalf or whatever it was or it was too far to walk and they didn't really like walking. He wasn't like that at all. He went for a long walk every day and got his exercise and so on. He was the only blues singer I ever met that did that.

[Laughter]

I: Were there ever any problems when you were interviewing, when you were trying to find information? Did you ever encounter any difficulties?

R: I did but they were not ones in resistance, more ones of reluctance, I think, really, or they didn't really know what to say in answer to a question because they didn't know what I knew or didn't know and so forth, and I found that even with somebody like Roosevelt Sykes it was quite hard. We eventually got over that but I found when I first interviewed him he just didn't want to almost say anything. Well, Little Brother Montgomery even more was subject to that really.

I: Do you think that had anything to do with the fact that you were white?

R: Well, I think they weren't normally ever subject to interviews; I think that was partly it. I mean, they obviously had to be adjusted to white men in Britain but one or two eventually became much more open. But what I found worked well was if they weren't responding, then I would just wind up the interview rather early and rapidly and say, "Well, I have to go but perhaps we can meet again?" And I gave them the opportunity to say whether we should meet and in most cases that was exactly what we did do.

I: Okay, so maybe it was just an initial...

R: Yeah, that's right, I think they were uncertain who they were talking to or why or why they asked these questions.

I: Why are these people interested?

R: Yes. Because they didn't get that kind of interest in the States very much, at least not from persons in a white community and so on. So I think it was all uncertainty really.

The other thing was that the various organisations didn't really... well I say various as in one or two but they didn't always, I think, look after them quite enough. They took it for granted that because they were kind of important and well known and so forth that they would be fine but in fact they were often rather nervous.

I: Kind of left to their own devices?

- R: Yes, yeah. I mean, one or two were quite different. I mean Jack Dupree was quite the opposite; he was a very kind of outward kind of person.
- I: Yeah he seems that kind of character. Then there were Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee. They obviously came a bit later, didn't they, in the late 50s?**
- R: Late 50s, yeah. Well, really, because when Big Bill died it looked as if there was nobody going to take his place but Brownie had... one or two of his records were actually issued as Big Bill number two I think or something. I don't know whether he resented that (over-speaking)
- I: Obviously quite a clever marketing ploy.**
- R: Yes. But he was, oh Brownie was good, and I found him very easy to talk with and so on.
- I: He's a great guitarist, I think, Brownie McGhee.**
- R: Yes, I liked him. Sonny was, well, he had a hard life really because he obviously couldn't see and when Brownie and Sonny came over to stay with Val and myself in Harrow it was quite a long way but Sonny didn't know where he was. He was in the back of a car, just didn't know what was happening, it just seemed to go on and on and on and I think he felt he was going all around the world. Brownie was interested and he chatted quite a bit and asked questions about things and so forth. So it was clear that Sonny was... I mean, his blindness was quite serious and he found it very hard to know where the toilet was. We didn't have a downstairs one, it was only upstairs but even coping with a staircase and so on he found really quite difficult. I mean, he eventually felt his way and got the plan in his mind but at first I think he found that difficult.
- I: Before they played together, Sonny Terry played with...**
- R: Blind Boy Fuller.
- I: Who was also blind.**
- R: Yes, he was, yes. That's very strange because both of them were blind. Quite how that worked out, I have no idea really. But J.B. Long was Blind Boy Fuller's kind of manager and I think he probably just arranged for them to have somebody to walk with them or whatever, I think.
- I: Hmm. How was...? So you did more talking with Brownie, maybe?**
- R: Yes.
- I: What do you remember about the speaking with him and the chatting with him? Obviously you got to know them quite well as well.**
- R: Yes, well, Sonny, it must have been difficult because he wouldn't know who he was talking to or where he was talking and so forth. I was very aware of the problem that he had because he was sort of in a totally different location but he didn't know where that was, whereas Brownie obviously did, so Brownie somehow, I suppose, kept him informed as much as he could. Brownie was really just very, very friendly and relaxed. He had a kind of slightly muffled voice when he was just talking; it was rather different from some of the other singers. It wasn't when he was singing.
- I: No.**
- R: But he got on well with us and he did with Val, my wife. I don't know, they really were household friends in a way, it was very nice. The other thing is he had a sense of humour and I wanted to take

photographs of him and Sonny when he was in the house, you see. So he said, "Well leave it for me for a minute," and what he did is we had a party and I'd got wine glasses and so forth and he arranged the bottles all round Sonny before I took the photograph of Sonny so it looked as if he was fast asleep having drunk so much. And that was Brownie's joke, you know, but I could see that he could be very embarrassing and Sonny wouldn't know what was happening I imagine. I suppose he had more of a sense of humour than most of the singers that I met really.

I: So you were quite privileged in the way that... because they stayed with you, you had a chance to talk to them on and off and repeatedly. And what were the things that you were most interested in, do you remember, that you wanted to find out from them?

R: Well, I've always been interested in the beginning of things, I mean, in particular... that's why I write on the early origins of blues. I keep on doing so in one way or another.

I: Keep going backwards.

R: Yes that's right. But I do in architecture and so forth. It's just how things happen, is the aspect that I'm particularly fascinated by and also why, of course. So I generally tried to find out whether they learned from their parents or who had taught them or did they just feel their own way and eventually perform and so forth. As much as anything I think it was that. It was also who they knew and where they were playing currently and what they think they would do but the focus for most of my interviews was really on their background – how they came to be where they were.

I: You were also working on the glossary, you were trying to...

R: Well, yes, I had this glossary with Roy Ansell. He still lives in California, actually, Roy, but we're rather out of touch now. We kept in touch for about thirty years or so. No I think we just exchange Christmas cards.

I: [Laughter].

R: That was our intention to do this but, of course, eventually we were overtaken by... somebody did a, I think, it might have been Panassier did a blues bibliography, no it wasn't a bibliography, it was a dictionary, oh yeah a dictionary of jazz perhaps it was. Yes, because I designed the cover for it, I now remember. I had actually forgotten. Panassier, Dictionary of Jazz, yes, that's right. Yes, well that was, I suppose, the emphasis particularly of what I was interviewing them about.

I: Yeah, how they...

R: How they really got to where they were and what the relationship with the past... I was really trying to find out if they were the generation that created it or was it the generation before, did it go further back and so on.

(End of recording)

Appendix 1.4

Interview with Paul Oliver at his home on June 1st 2010

Key:

I: Interviewer
R: Respondent

I: So I think that was one of the things that I wanted to talk about but also, yeah, she kind of catalogued them as all archivists do and we've got copies...

R: What did she have catalogued exactly then?

I: Well, for example, what she did here she listed the ones in order that we have and obviously there's...

R: Is that the Music Mirror?

I: Yeah. That eventually turned into Jazz Music Mirror, didn't it, I think, towards the end?

R: I don't know. I thought it just closed down actually.

I: Yeah, it became Jazz Music Mirror.

R: Oh yes, Jazz Music Mirror, yes, but it was only a few...

I: A few editions, yes, but, yeah it's good that we have this because we've been able to look at some of your illustrations close up.

R: [Laughter].

I: It's probably been a while since you looked at some of those.

R: Well, I'm afraid so, yeah.

I: There was one actually that I found really, really... if I can just find it. Is it this one?

R: Well, let's see the illustration first.

I: This is, yeah, works on Rock Island Line, because this was about the time when Lonnie Donegan released Rock Island Line.

R: Oh, he did too, that's right, yes.

I: And you wrote about his...

R: Appropriate youth, did I, yes. [Laughter].

I: Yes. And what the Rock Island Line means, about the time the skiffle craze began.

R: Actually tracing Rock Island was quite difficult because it had a most strange route – across the Lakeland regions before it went south. I think people just thought it was one that went to a place called Rock Island; it was that sort of thing.

I: I must admit, the first time I heard the title I thought it meant they were referring to Alcatraz.

R: I see. [Laughter]

I: Taking them to prison.

R: Yes, yes. Yes they could have done, that's quite true. I showed some of the articles to Alan Lomax and he didn't like the illustrations, he said "They don't look like the negroes I know." And that seemed to be very revealing, in a sense, because I'd really gone to the trouble of trying to do actual portraits of particular black people so that in fact it wasn't just a stereotype and what he was obviously looking for was the stereotype and obviously he was carrying it in his head.

I: Well, he had a clear agenda of what he wanted to portray as well.

R: Exactly yes. I think he was just expecting thick lips and wide nostrils, kind of thing, and I was trying not to have that kind of... I felt actually, if you take those two, that they did actually communicate a...

I: Well, I think this is really interesting where you have the family and then you have the working man.

R: Yeah, it was good doing those in those days; I used to like it but it all took more time of course.

I: Of course, yeah.

R: I don't have time to do it these days.

I: No, but it's good to have those. I think we've got most of them. The ones that are missing, I'm hoping to go and see them in London.

R: There are some missing, are there?

I: Yeah there are a few missing.

R: The ones you've had are the only ones I've got; I didn't have any others.

I: Yeah. By looking at this list we were able to identify ones that we've got missing. There are not many that are missing. We have a gap there from February to May so there's March and April '57.

R: Yeah. There's 4 and 2, so it would have been one issue though, I think. That's number 4, that's number 2, so it's apparently number 3 that's missing.

I: Yeah. Number three there and then we have the gap between number 7 and number 10.

R: Oh there's quite a lot then, yeah.

I: But I don't know if you remember Robert Ford, he did, a few years ago...?

R: Oh, Bob Ford?

I: Yeah, he was doing a blues bibliography.

- R: That's right. I've got it over here. There it is, the extreme right there, you see? Robert Ford, the Blues Bibliography. You've not seen it?
- I: **Yeah, I have seen it. I got it on Inter-Library Loan.**
- R: Yes, yes.
- I: **A second edition has come out -**
- R: Has it?
- I: **- which is even bigger -**
- R: Wow.
- I: **- which includes recorded material as well. I got it on Inter-Library Loan and it was huge.**
- R: What an extraordinary thing to have. [Laughter] I'd forgotten, for a moment you said Robert Ford, I remember Bob Ford but I couldn't think where I, you know.
- I: **Yeah. I think he's at Exeter, I can't remember. I don't know if he's still there.**
- R: I think he probably was. In fact, I think... yes I did, I did know of him. I even remember now having dinner with him [laughter] as it comes back and that was in Exeter, yes, but that was many years ago when American... You see, I was lecturing in American Studies, only part-time because at that time I was living down in Devon.
- I: **I was just trying to find... Because I had a look and he's got actually the list of all the articles you did in that period so what we don't have there, I'm going to go and see, in either the British Library in the next month or so, or there's a place in London that, they deal in vintage magazines.**
- R: Oh gosh. Oh really?
- I: **Yeah. They have an archive where you can go and actually look at them and work in them and it's in East London somewhere.**
- R: Oh, what a marvellous thing to do, especially these days. Everything is on the net, kind of thing, so you really should find it.
- I: **Although it's good to have things like that, when I'm reading I much prefer to look at... I don't like to view it on the screen at all.**
- R: No. Well I'm exactly the same. In fact, as you know, I don't even have email and so on. I suppose I've had a very material life, just handling things my whole life, I get so much pleasure out of it. I don't want to lose that.
- I: **In fact, Neil recently bought some old copies of the Melody Makers from around the war period.**
- R: Oh yes, he asked me about that. I was going to put a box out for you of Melody Maker clippings. I've got mine upstairs. I'd forgotten that he mentioned it on the phone actually, he did and I told him about the clippings but yeah, I've just got to hunt and find them – it's not difficult.
- I: **Because he's been working around the war period, about the interest in music during the war.**

R: Oh that's good, I'm pleased to hear that because he was asking about things on slavery early on but there is a pretty big literature on slavery and I was wondering what have I got that he's hasn't got access to. I don't know if you know the American Slave, that series of books – they're terribly expensive. Mine cost nearly £500, actually. I bought them one at a time, obviously, [laughter] but only because I knew they were extremely rare. The only other person that I knew was in fact Michael Roach; he also bought some.

I: **Oh, did he?**

R: Yeah. He'd managed to make some contacts in the States so he bought them on my behalf as well as himself.

I: **Okay. I mentioned to you on the phone that I've been working on a paper which looks at the 1950s in the UK and based around the material you wrote about the interest in Britain and, you know, how scholarship began to arise in Britain in this period. And Neil and Jill from Worcester are considering it for this collection of articles for the book that's...**

R: Are you doing another book?

I: **The one that you're also contributing a paper to.**

R: Oh, am I? [Laughter] Oh, God, what was that on?

I: **The Worcester Conference.**

R: Oh the Worcester Conference, yes, yes, that's right, yes. In fact they were going to send me - but it hasn't arrived yet - an edited copy, or so I understood that they were sending anyway. They sent me a series of comments but I can't find the original text.

I: **Okay. Well I'll give Neil a ring.**

R: Yeah okay. I'm sure I spoke to him or somebody about it a couple of days ago.

I: **Yeah, well, it's amazing. This paper I've written, they want to put it in this book as well. Brian Ward and other people who wrote the conference are putting articles in. The next time, because it's about a lot of your work, I'd like to run it by you to see what you think.**

R: [Laughter] Okay.

I: **Yeah, I'll bring a copy next time to see what you think. Okay, yeah, so that quote I showed you about the Invisible Man, I'm just interested how you got into African American literature because I can't imagine it must have been very easy to get hold of in the post-war period here?**

R: Well I suppose, really, there's one fundamental thing but obviously there had to be precedents to it and fundamental was the fact of knowing Richard Wright. Richard Wright was the first I knew.

I: **But you met him in Paris, didn't you?**

R: In Paris, yes.

I: **That was later on in the 50s?**

R: Well I suppose it was later, I'm not quite sure exactly when the first meetings were, because we met every year.

- I: But you never met him in England, did you?**
- R: No, but he was going to come and live in England and my wife was looking for a premises and she found one, but we were in the States and by the time we got back he'd died.
- I: Yeah he died quite tragically, didn't he?**
- R: Yes. So there was Richard. We knew Sterling Brown but that was later - I first met him in Washington in 1960. So I think Richard was the key person. I'm just struggling in my mind trying to remember if there was somebody that I'd met before but I think it was more... as you know, I was a passionate book collector so if I found things that were of interest to me or stimulated something new that I didn't know... so I expect I acquired a book or two that way, gathered a few names and began to start looking for them really.
- I: So that kind of started after you got interested in the music?**
- R: Oh yes, definitely. The interest in the music didn't arise... but they may have been more or less together in a way, but it didn't arise, I mean, the music was really just the music. In fact, I think I told you about Field Hollers that I'd heard. That was really the beginning of it. Then Stan Hyam who was the chap who died and was killed in the war, he had a collection of 78s, a small collection these days, but if you'd never seen a hit at that time on blues and so forth....He used to have orange boxes; these orange boxes were a box which had oranges in both halves of it, it was divided, you see, but for some convenience they were 25cm across and that just allowed for a 78 record to go in. It was very odd. Most of us were looking for orange boxes to keep our records in. So, let me see, I probably just had a couple of boxes at that time.
- I: So it was purely by chance really because you obviously were... you liked to read, you liked to collect books as well as records.**
- R: Yes.
- I: So you stumbled upon primarily some African American literature of that time?**
- R: Yeah, basically it was, because one or two were really quite remarkable and some were not. You had to acquire enough information to regard how well they were written or how well you could rely on them.
- I: Because they tend to have... you used obviously Ellison and Richard Wright and Claude McKay and they all have this current of realism, don't they?**
- R: Yes, yes.
- I: They kind of give you a very vivid picture of what life was like.**
- R: Well it was very helpful. They did actually because otherwise it would be quite difficult to dream it up, especially in the segregated...
- I: And possibly also because... I mean, the material available on African American society probably wasn't abundant, was it?**
- R: Well no, because for one thing it was a period of segregation and that was never in the favour for a black community and they were oppressing it, in a sense, so you could hardly... I mean, what I did get fascinated by was the writings of people who got out of the South and went to Chicago or Detroit and so on but were writing about the South that they knew and I got very interested in that.

- I: I suppose the only other work that had been done before that would have been the Odum and Johnson and Dorothy Scarborough...**
- R: Well, they were collecting, yes, yes, so their collecting was very good and Dorothy Scarborough amazes me still what she managed to find, really. I mean Odum and Johnson were better known but on the other hand they acknowledged Dorothy Scarborough as the influence. How she arrived at it always amazes me really.
- I: Yeah.**
- R: Yes. Odum and Johnson, well, they did a couple of books, both will be to hand, as you probably saw.
- I: I've seen them there, yeah.**
- R: Well actually one of those I found for ten shillings I remember in Charing Cross Road actually, one of the two of them, sorry, I can't remember which one it was now. Of course, in those days it was a much bigger sum of money, several pounds, so to speak, but it still really was, considering its rarity, an extraordinary thing to find. It was just lucky but I always have been a book hunter...
- I: They're kind of characterised though. I've looked at some of Odum and Johnson's work when I did some work on the blues era, the 20s and 30s and the research they did, it tends to, kind of, look at blues and that kind of music in a, kind of, bad way, doesn't it?**
- R: Yes, yes, so looking down on it in a way.
- I: Yes.**
- R: But I wasn't too worried about that because I'm more about the culture but actually it was meeting up with Richard Wright which was the key thing for me really. I think I've told you about it.
- I: Yeah, yeah, you have. I've been reading a lot of Richard Wright's work and I think Native Son is one of the best books I've ever read, one of the best novels I've ever read and I've also read Black Boy.**
- R: Yeah. Which is virtually an autobiography.
- I: Yeah. There is that. It doesn't just give you a picture of racism but it also gives you what actually African American life is – the torture within the community as well. But one thing that struck me though is that music never seems that present in his novels really.**
- R: No, I think that's quite true. Well that's why he was largely encouraging I think. I had done quite a lot of research but I wanted to piece things together and the meaning of words is often elusive and so on but he was interested in the fact that I was interested in those issues, that's why he was helpful to me. So as I say, we met him every year, my wife and I. And also I was able to introduce him to one or two jazz musicians who were in France, Sidney Bechet and so on, and he was introducing me to one or two of the people coming over so it was mutually helpful in a way.
- I: Hmm. Did you ever meet Ralph Ellison?**
- R: No, I didn't. I don't think I met Ralph Ellison; at least I've got no mental picture of him anyway. Sometimes I say no to something and then eventually I remember that I did but I don't think I did.
- I: Because after I read Invisible Man it was no surprise to me that you actually wrote about it in that article about Petey Wheatstraw because Petey Wheatstraw appears in the book, and blues plays a big role in that book. It's easy to see why you... it, kind of, appears, the blues**

- appears, the invisible man because you never know his name, he's walking through Harlem and he hears this guy playing this music and it takes him back to the South, it takes him back to something that's deep inside him, so.
- R: But did Ellison come over to here?
- I: **That I'm not sure of.**
- R: I don't think so.
- I: **He was a musician as well, wasn't he, I think?**
- R: Yes, I mean, how much of one, I'm not sure but it was the fact that Richard was very accessible and that he was pleased to have somebody to talk with.
- I: **Yeah. But one thing that emerges from your writing in that period, I realised this a long time ago now, but it's also that you... there's one comment you make, kind of, the black intellectuals of around that era and possibly before the 30s and 40s, kind of you said something like 'they haven't recognised the beauty of their own culture yet' because I think from the Harlem renaissance many black intellectuals like Alan Lock, they didn't really look at blues as one of the... they saw it as entertainment and jazz as well; they kind of brushed it aside.**
- R: Yes, curiously, but on the other hand jazz was better known really.
- I: **You had bigger names.**
- R: Yes, that's right, but you're quite right.
- I: **No, because one of the things that strikes me, one of the people who wasn't like this or few people like Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, they were the opposite, they said, "No, no, we need to..." And did you use much of Langston Hughes's work at all? Because he seems to have a kind of very similar depiction of the music to what you did in the early period and I don't know if that's just coincidence or...**
- R: I don't remember doing so but...
- I: **You met him later in the 60s, didn't you?**
- R: Yes, yes I did but I'm just trying to remember the circumstances of it really.
- I: **Wasn't it for the exhibition of the Story of the Blues?**
- R: Oh it was for that. Yes that's right; that was it. It was for the exhibition but that was really quite late.
- I: **Yes, that was the mid 60s, was it?**
- R: '64 it was, actually. I started work on it in '60 but then I went to the States.
- I: **On a trip.**
- R: Yes. And I came back, by which time the new American Embassy was set up. And we discussed that and considered that we'd get a larger exhibition if we used the new embassy so the embassy building was the whole side of Grosvenor Square, the whole of one side of it, the new building which was done by... actually by a Scandinavian architect. I put on the first exhibition and also

gave the first lecture, funnily enough, at the new embassy and the exhibition was the Story of the Blues and covered the whole floor.

I: You had a lot of the photographs, didn't you?

R: Oh a tremendous amount; there was over 500 items on show, yes. Well it was very exciting at the time, doing it.

I: So was it completely based on your trip?

R: Well no, no, it wasn't based on... I mean, it was based on all sorts of things.

I: All the work you'd done?

R: Yes, that's right, yes, but also, kind of, the print of film, early ads for blues records and that kind of thing. I collected quite a lot in the States at the time. So it just really built up from all that material really. I've still got quite a pile of them.

I: I've been in communication with Chris Strachwitz.

R: Oh have you?

I: Yes. He's near San Francisco.

R: Yes. He actually does pronounce the 'ch' as well, Strachwitz, he calls himself.

I: Strachwitz?

R: Yeah.

I: I was never sure how to pronounce it. Because I was in the States for a while, I was hoping I'd be able to go and see him because I actually spent a few days in San Francisco on the way back but he was away at that time so we've been communicating by email and I've sent him over some questions about the trip that you did together. I think he's obviously taking his time to write back because he has to write the answers rather than say so but yeah he's been quite helpful in that way.

R: I wanted him... and I did suggest it to him when I last saw him, which was last year, that we marked the period because it was exactly fifty years ago that we did the trip and I thought that he'd be more responsive but wasn't really, so I couldn't see how I was going to do it by myself.

I: He's still working at... he's the owner of Arhoolie records, isn't he?

R: Yes he is. Well, Down Home Music I think it was he... and Arhoolie is a part of Down Home Music, so to speak. Because I think Arhoolie has its own management as well but basically they were both initiated by him.

I: That 1960 field trip I think is something that I'd like to talk about more but maybe not just yet because I'm not looking at that yet. Maybe when I get some answers from Chris as well we can discuss this.

R: Yes, yes, sure.

I: Another thing that I've noticed, I've been reading around as well, is that the post-war period in England, there was also a big folk revival here as well.

R: Yes, there was, yes.

I: **And I've noticed you've got a few of... you've got Cecil Sharp's English Folk Song.**

R: Well I would have that, yes, yes that's right. I've got the... I think that's the original edition.

I: **Well did you ever get into English folk music?**

R: Oh yes, yes, quite a lot actually.

I: **Yeah?**

R: Well, yeah, because in Devon and Dorset... my family lived in Dorset and music was still very active in those days. It was relatively recently. I mean, I say relatively, a couple of decades ago maybe but at least still a lot of people... And in the villages in which we lived it was very active because we lived in a village called Symondsburry which is five miles from Bridport and there were local singers and musicians and so forth and it was a little bit like living in the past in a way, but they were very active and it was marvellous. In fact, Peter Kennedy, you know Peter? He wrote a huge book, it's over here somewhere, that one there, Folk Songs of Britain. Peter was really the most informed of British writers on folk songs. It's a huge book, marvellous work.

I: **Wow.**

R: We were very good friends. He died about two years ago now.

I: **Wow. That's a big collection.**

R: Well yes but it was all his own field... in fact, I've got copies of an enormous number of items that he recorded. I've got them on cassette though; these days they're not easily playable.

I: **No.**

R: They're not impossible.

I: **Yeah. Because even in some of your notebooks you've looked at... there's notes on what Cecil Sharp did as well.**

R: Yes.

I: **So did you use the kind of work they were doing as well, that obviously Peter did in England, to help what you were kind of doing?**

R: Well it was helping me in actually what to think about, quite often. He would just be aware, in a sense, of possible relationship between British song at that stage and...

I: **Hmm. But haven't I read somewhere that your mother used to collect records?**

R: Yes, well she didn't collect records; she just sang ballads. She came from Herefordshire and although I never see any writing about it but actually there was quite a strong ballad and song tradition in the Herefordshire region and she was very much involved in that, so that's really what the connection was. She didn't collect records but she always knew the songs. If I wanted the melody she generally knew or she could tell me if I'd find one that I couldn't find the melody for it and so forth, she would just look at it for a moment and then sing a melody which may or may not have been that one but certainly fitted it, you see, because the structures of the ballads were obviously similar but...

I: So that's kind of when you started transcribing as well?

R: Yes, yes that's right. And she helped with the transcriptions. When we heard Lomax broadcasting then we'd take alternative lines as to write them down.

I: Hmm. What did you think of Cecil Sharp's work, do you remember?

R: Well, Cecil Sharp was very early really; I think he's quite remarkable.

I: 10th Century, wasn't it?

R: Well, yes. No I think what Sharp did is quite extraordinary especially in the Appalachians.

I: Yeah, when he went to the States.

R: Yes. And I knew... I'm just beginning to... There's a woman that worked with him who was a young assistant when he was working in the States but I knew her when she was an elderly lady and I'm just trying to think what her name was. It probably may be on the Cecil Sharp book; I'll have a look and see. Cameron Sharp, yes, that's it. Yeah, it was Olive Campbell, that's right, I'm sure it was her. Because in those days it was only polite to be in alphabetical order so she was actually the assistant but she comes over as being... [Laughter] She was very elderly when I met her but I met her actually in Dartington. But this is very nice this early edition, I'm very fond of it, but it's extraordinary the number of songs in the collection, yes - something about 120 or something like that.

I: It's kind of interesting that... well, this is a bit earlier than that book. Around the time that you began to work on the blues and black music in the States there was also this folk revival and an interest in English folk music as well. They're, kind of, two currents that run at the same time.

R: Yes this is earlier actually. This was 1917. It was published in '17 so he did his work round about 1905.

I: Hmm. There's the music notation.

R: Yes, that must have taken ages doing all that really.

I: Wow. Have you ever been to Cecil Sharp House?

R: Well I have but, God, that was...

I: A while ago?

R: Oh, a long while ago, yes. If you mean the one that's on the north of Regent's Park...

I: I'm not sure; I thought there was only one.

R: Well as far as I know... well, you see, that's the one we call Cecil Sharp as but I know there may have been others as well, I was thinking. But, no, that was the one that I understood to be the Cecil Sharp House and it's still there but it's funny really because English Folk Song Society kind of managed it or probably still does, I don't know.

I: Yeah, yeah I think they do.

R: But Peter Kennedy was a bit... well, actually, curious enough, Peter Kennedy's father was president of the English Folk Song Society but he felt they were interfering too much and that in a

way they were already kind of editing Cecil Sharp's collections and so forth and he felt that things should be left alone but a few years later they maybe went in a different way. He rather put me off actually. I did obviously go because I wanted to see it and so on but I could see what he was getting at. But their view about it was rather different to me because Cecil Sharp House was both folk song and dance and I think that that was the point that they were trying to get across, that they didn't want people just to be hunting for the songs and ignoring dance side – it was part of the tradition. So there was an argument for both sides really.

I: Yeah I've been reading about the folk revivals as well and there seems to be, well, especially in the last few years when people start to revise and look again at the way things have been written that what Cecil Sharp was doing, it was kind of like a top down approach. The masses don't know what they have so they need intelligent people to collect it and to make it into something.

R: That's quite true. It was that, sort of, slightly patronising in a way but probably experience made it necessary. It was an odd situation, this facing Regent's Park from the North, where it was.

I: Is it not where the zoo is as well?

R: Sorry?

I: That's where the zoo is as well I think.

R: Well the zoo is on the way actually, it's not quite... yes, it's near where the zoo is but you didn't have the view of it and so on. There was another... oh well, one is getting deflected (over-speaking) there was another route off. There was something else on, some other occasion but I can't remember what it was now. So we'll carry on.

I: No, it's okay. I read an article recently by Jeff Titon.

R: Yes.

I: The ethnomusicologist, who wrote an article called... it's actually quite an old article now, I think about twenty years old or so, fifteen, twenty years old and it's called Reconstructing the Blues. And he says, with the benefit of hindsight, when he began he got interested in the music and he just wanted to write about it. He said, 'With the benefit of hindsight now I can realise now that my enthusiasm and my love for the music kind of conditioned the way I... I didn't really portray the music exactly as it was, I rather constructed it in a certain way,' because he's kind of acknowledging his own bias.

R: Where's that now? I must have read it.

I: It's in a journal somewhere.

R: Yes, I'd just forgotten his name until you mentioned it but then it's come back, of course, but not clearly yet.

I: Yes, he's at Brown, he is, in Providence in Rhode Island.

R: Oh that's what it was, was it? Yes.

I: And I was in touch with him a few years ago because I applied to do my PhD there with him as my supervisor but unfortunately I didn't get in. I mean, it is an Ivy League school but they said no.

[Laughter]

- I:** But it's worked out for the best. But I was in touch with him and he gave me some comments on the work I was doing which was quite helpful. But do you ever think that, that when you look back and you look at the way you were writing about things, do you think sometimes that maybe you were...? I mean, obviously people's opinions change over time.
- R:** Well, yes. I don't know. I don't look back at myself as a different person, so to speak, but obviously one's knowledge extends and you hope the more experience you've got, the more criteria you inevitably develop. And that does apply to what you've written in parts sometimes but I don't spend any time ruminating on that.
- I:** No, no, no I'm just wondering because the recent literature on blues has been about, you know, how much invention there has been. You know Elijah Wald, do you remember, from the conference, the guy with the purple shirt?
- R:** Yes, yes.
- I:** He wrote the book *Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues*. He gave a talk on Josh White at the -
- R:** Yes, at the conference.
- I:** - conference. But his book basically says that revivalists were so, you know, they loved the music so much that they kind of idealised certain aspects over others and kind of didn't... they weren't looking at things like record sales or... for example, Robert Johnson, the King of the Delta Blues, but in reality he says he never sold many records, had he never recorded probably things wouldn't have been very different for black music anyway.
- R:** Well, yeah, that's fair enough but, of course, you can't go by the number of records sold because it depends on how many they were distributing, even how good their advertising was.
- I:** But that's in his own time. Obviously Robert Johnson wasn't very well known but the fact is when people listened to him in the late 50s and early 60s, they heard something that stuck a chord.
- R:** Oh yes.
- I:** No, but I was just wondering whether you ever looked back at the work you did around the 50s when you were writing for *Music Mirror* and you ever think that maybe your enthusiasm... because you loved the music, didn't you, so you wanted people to know about it. Do you think it was ever a negative influence at all?
- R:** Well, I don't know. I haven't really thought about it that way. I think of it much more about the effort, because what I wanted to do was to... and *Blues Fell This Morning* was certainly in the first... You see, I'd been asked to do the Bessie Smith book so that got me writing on the subject from a book point of view but *Blues Fell This Morning*, I still hadn't got a name for it at that time but I was really just wanting to focus on the content of blues really, what blues was about, in a sense, and the fact that people could improvise because of its structure you see and that enabled them to manipulate it or...
- I:** Yeah, use different verse blocks.
- R:** Yeah. So it was that sort of thing and I don't feel particularly critical of that, no. I think it was a reasonable focus and certainly one that occupied my mind but the point about it was, you see, that it wasn't as if it was without any support because there were a lot of collectors at the time who weren't writing about the music but were interested in collecting the records and some were, of

course, more passionate about some record labels, Paramount and whatever it was, that dominated but when I was deciding upon certain subjects and I still felt certain things were missing, I'd circulate them – people like Jacques Demetre in Paris and so forth. I just asked them if they had any items and could they let me know and they generally did. In those days of course it was difficult sending the music.

I: Of course, was it Jacques Demetre who went to the States?

R: Yes, that's right. He actually preceded me; he went in '59 but only to Chicago.

I: He only went to Chicago?

R: Yes, that's right.

I: Because wasn't it the Land of the Blues, that series that he wrote, it came in Jazz Journal? I'm sure I've seen it.

R: Yes. Well it came as a book, yes eventually. It was a series of articles, basically different people that they'd been talking to.

I: What did you think of what they did though in Chicago?

R: Well, I suppose I was impressed by the fact that they managed to do it. It was difficult on the Chicago south side but I hadn't been there, not then. We were going to go together the following year but I don't know what it was that interfered with that but anyway he had to stay back in Paris. Val and I just went. We met up with Chris in Memphis but we went first to Washington, then to Harlem and New York, then to Detroit and then to Chicago so it wasn't a case of going straight to Chicago, in fact, these other places on the way, and I'm very glad we did because Detroit was already being wrecked. I managed to at least be on Hasting Street. If I'd gone even only a month later I probably wouldn't have been able to do so because they were destroying it. They were putting a great motorway, express way right through it.

I: Because also the time you went to the States was the time of big social upheaval as well, wasn't it?

R: Well it was, yes. It was a difficult period.

I: Did that affect where you went at all?

R: Well not really. It didn't affect it adversely. In a kind of way the upheaval gave me some kind of impetus because I felt that a lot is going to go if I don't document it now, kind of thing - that was the way I was thinking about it. But then we went to... It was a good thing starting off in Washington because I was then driven around by somebody and I could see that we were missing out on things and this was helping me quite a bit. Then Harlem. Of course we went to New York first and I wanted to go up to Harlem. The Americans were...

I: Shocked?

R: Yes. They were prepared to take me up to 125th Street but not any further. Val and I went on. We got on alright. We didn't have any problems at all actually.

I: Did it help being English?

R: I think it may have done, I think it may have done. I know if I'd thought about it at the time I think I would have thought of that as a hindrance but it may well have actually been a help, yes. Well it was quite an experience and then, as I say, I went on to Detroit and that was really quite different

there. There was an American academic there who was, kind of, wanting to see me but he was just opposing all my work that I was doing.

I: Wasn't Leroy Jones, was it?

R: No it wasn't Leroy Jones. It wasn't him. I'm struggling for who the name was.

I: Samuel Floyd, maybe.

R: It was a longish name, two or three syllables in each... anyway, it will pop back. It's just at the moment I can't remember. But it was odd anyway but often these things gave me further impetus really to do it while I still could. We went down, as I say, we went on...

I: So you did the cities first – Washington, New York, Detroit –

R: Yes, in that sequence, yes.

I: - Chicago.

R: Yes. And then from Chicago down to Memphis. We went directly down. We met up with Chris, you see, and fortunately we'd just been corresponding a bit just before and then I heard that he was going to be working there so we decided we'd try and meet and we actually pulled it off quite easily as it turned out.

I: So what was Chris doing in Memphis?

R: Well, he was planning on starting a record company and he wanted to make some recordings - that's what he was doing.

I: But was he looking for blues in particular?

R: Well, at that time I think he was looking more for blues. It's sort of difficult to say because I don't know; he was issuing other material quite early on so he may have had a look. But, I mean, my focus for me was quite clear and I'm afraid that dominated my thinking in a way at the time.

I: So after you went to Memphis you then went into Mississippi and...

R: Yes we went down to Mississippi first of all and the first person I viewed in Mississippi was Sam Chapman, a member of The Mississippi Sheiks.

I: Hmm.

R: We found Bo Carter, well, things just added up. And Chris had briefly met Mac McCormick in Texas so we worked our way down through Mississippi and then went to... I'm just trying to think if we went to Texas before going to... now I think we went to Louisiana, didn't find as much in Louisiana as we expected, and then went to Texas, yes, that's right.

I: Okay. I mean, you went to Clarksdale as well, didn't you?

R: Yeah, Clarksdale is in the city, of course, yes, Clarksdale. Yes it was an odd period. Still, Clarksdale, there were some very interesting people there.

I: And the meetings you had with singers, were they random or were they organised beforehand?

R: Well, they were names that we...

I: You obviously had a lot of names before...

R: Well yes. I've got a whole card index. I've still got it upstairs – a box which I put all the information I knew about each blues singer. I'd written it in note form and took the whole card index with me. So some were quite informed and others it was only just the name and there was hardly any information at all.

I: So did you go to places hoping to stumble upon different people?

R: Yes, well if by any chance there was a blues record that they made which had the name of a place in it I would often go to the place to see if it was associated with it and so forth because there was only a hunch that there might be but in fact that worked out quite well and I found quite a lot of people that way actually.

I: Okay.

R: Well in certain places like Clarksdale there was a lot happening or had happened and, of course, Bessie Smith had died there and so forth so there were quite a lot of historic elements in it as well. So we spent more time in some of them but Jackson in Mississippi too we spent quite a bit of time in. We gradually worked our way down. In fact, you see, Chris didn't really know so very much about it actually. I found that I was actually knowing more but, on the other hand, he was an American and he knew the kind of places we could go into or those we couldn't.

I: And how were you recording the interviews?

R: Well, what happened was, obviously I wanted to record the interviews and I didn't know how I was going to manage it because that year the first portable recording equipment was made, a single little unit, but it was far too expensive and I couldn't afford it so I didn't really know what we were going to do but I made it known to the BBC, and it was very odd that it was a past pupil of mine that I had been teaching at a grammar school in Harrow and suddenly he popped up with recording equipment on behalf of the BBC. He was actually working for the BBC and it was pure coincidence but, anyway, when he heard that I was looking for it he found... and this was a pretty heavy blocking machine but it was okay and was remarkably good really considering the circumstances at the time – I was very pleased with it – and you could recharge it, that was the good thing about it. I could plug it in in an evening and charge it up again for the next day's recording.

I: And it would be fine?

R: That's right.

I: So you recorded interviews as well as performances?

R: Oh a lot of interviews, yes. Unfortunately I haven't got them here at the minute because they're actually on CD as well but, oh.

I: There must have been quite a lot of material that didn't make it into Conversation with the Blues or...?

R: Oh yes, there was a lot. I mean those were extracts really and I was extracting them partly to make a kind of relatively cohesive line because you didn't want people every time just to tell you their personal history or it got pretty boring. I thought it was far better to move from the rural to the urban kind of thing and make it a bit more readable that way.

I: Hmm.

R: So they're extracts. Well they're all extracts of the interviews but it would only be a tiny part sort of thing.

I: Do you still have the...?

R: Originals?

I: Yes.

R: At the moment we've got them at the EBA.

I: Oh really?

R: Yes, I sent them off because I felt that... that, in fact, is where they've got the CDs. I'm hoping they're going to bring them back but they were made from it but at the moment I don't actually have them with me so I can't say anything to you.

I: No, because it would be interesting to go through some of those because there's a lot more there than there is in Conversation.

R: Oh yes, much more, yes. But sometimes it's fairly ephemeral in a way because they're chatting about all sorts of things, about home life or whatever it might be. If you discuss home life more than once people get bored by it. But, yes, there's some interesting material there. It is a long list, I must admit.

I: Yeah it must be, must be. Did you encounter any problems like when you were interviewing or when you were...?

R: Well a few really. The odd thing was when Chris and I met, we thought we'd go to... we corresponded and in some of the discographies they would say where the place had been used for recording and we'd read about Memphis Tennessee. I can't remember the name of the hotel at the moment but anyway it was clear that some of the recordings had been made in a hotel so we thought well okay, let's meet at the hotel. So we went to the hotel, he did and I did, and we met there. The only thing was that it happened to be a festival, well there was an enormous chicken about twelve feet high had been constructed in the main foyer of the hotel which was a multi-story thing like this, this chicken, and it was a conference of chicken breeders and so forth in the South so it wasn't exactly a good place to start. We had to start again. The funny thing was we left it and promptly walked into two young women who owned... they stopped us and started accusing us of racism.

I: Really?

R: Yes. And there's more. I said, "What's your name?" She asked my name and I told her and I said, "What's yours?" She said, "Alice Moore." I said, "You're not the Alice Moore, the blues singer?" She said, "Everybody thinks we're blue singers," and got so angry. It was just coincidence but it was a funny coincidence that the very first... the woman's name that I heard was that of a blues singer but it wasn't her actually.

I: It wasn't her. She was quite upset that everybody thinks she's a blues singer.

R: Yes that's right, yes.

I: It was probably, like, a reaction to... because obviously you weren't the first guy to go there but then many people have been going there looking for blues singers, haven't they?

R: Yes. I don't think they did very much when they actually went there, as far as I could tell. Well, you see, talent scouts would normally go and some blues singer like, well, Roosevelt Sykes and so forth worked as talent scouts as well. They were much quicker at finding people.

I: But during the actual work were any singers ever reluctant to speak about certain things?

R: No, we didn't have much problem of that kind. Knowing what they'd done and knowing their recordings and so forth was the tremendous asset and I was so glad that I had... of course the people I was looking for were largely the names that I knew, I might meet somebody else, but in Memphis I was looking for the Memphis Jug Band and Cannon's Jug Stompers but, of course, the bands didn't exist but, of course, Gus Cannon was still around and Will Shade who was in the Memphis Jug Band was still around and so forth and we gradually found these people. The fact that we knew their names and where they might be and so forth was an enormous help because they realised that we weren't just going around seeing if there were any blues singers here but were informed of them. It was good that I'd done some radio programmes and so forth for some years before that because it got me a fair amount of information really.

I: Yeah.

R: So there were no really serious problems. We were only run out of town once really and that was in Texas by the police. We did get followed by the police in Northern Mississippi for quite a while which was a bit of a pain. What we actually did was then stop. It was a jokey thing really but we were fairly near the Mississippi river and there's a long drop down to the river so I said to Chris, "Well let's go on down there." He couldn't think why. So I said, "We've got to get rid of these police," because they followed us but they couldn't do anything else but turn round and go back because there was nowhere else to go, so we just stayed by the river admiring the water kind of thing.

I: So you were never worried by that, because obviously there was a lot of things going at that time?

R: Yeah, we were worried about it in a way but we were determined to do what we got there for. I was also in a fairly strong position that I'd got documents with me for the grants that I had received from the American Embassy as support.

I: Yeah, that's the thing that I've been meaning to ask about, so it was the US Department of State that gave you a grant to do the work?

R: Yes that's right. But it was the American Embassy that told me about the grant. Because, you see, what had happened was I had written Blues Fell This Morning. It had been published, it had good reviews. The American Embassy were very pleased because I had used their library and what they used to call USIS (United States Information Service), I'd made a lot of use of that and they eventually told me that I had used it more than anybody they'd heard of. But I didn't know that but anyway they did and therefore they were always looking for stuff that I might be interested in and all that helped enormously. So afterwards they said, "Well, you haven't been to the United States and you've published this book and so on, you must go and you should go to the South and so on." I said, "Well, yes, but how am I going to do it?" They said, "Well there is a grant that is for leaders and specialists from the Department of State. Do you want to apply for it?" I said, "Well, I would be interested to do so but I don't know how I'd go about it." So they helped me with that and Richard Wright and... I've forgotten his name at the moment, it's something like Alan Ward but that's not quite right. But anyway, he was often known as the black ambassador from the States but performed this kind of role in Europe. He too supported it. So with their backing and with the American Embassy's backing as well it put me in a very strong position. So I got the grant. I think it was a thousand dollars and return fares to Chicago and the other routes. The rest of it we just had to find. I say we because I wanted Val to come with me, my wife. It worked out okay. We were able to do many things really quite economically.

- I: And when you told the BBC about this, they were interested?**
- R: Yes. Well it was helped by this past pupil of mine actually being linked with the BBC then. I didn't even know he was and that was very helpful anyway. But I'd already done a number of programmes for a number of years for the BBC.
- I: Yes, a lot of radio programmes.**
- R: Yes. So it wasn't difficult to get their interest.
- I: No. There was quite a big distance between the trip and the actual publishing of Conversation; I think it was five years.**
- R: Oh Conversation, yes there was. I did Blues Fell This Morning but when I got back I realised that there were a number of things that I really hadn't covered so I did a book, Screening the Blues, to take some thematic aspects.
- I: Yes, develop some of the more risqué lyrics?**
- R: Yes that's right, exactly. All sorts of aspects, but the 'blue blues' as I called it... But a lot of this I'd been exposed to with some really quite... I couldn't really find an easy way of writing about it but anyway. So the next stage really was getting the exhibition and so forth done. Then when I did the exhibition it was called Story of the Blues and that I wanted to make into a book by which time, of course, I'd got my transcripts and so forth and was thinking well really Conversation of the Blues ought to be written.
- I: Yeah.**
- R: But the title was actually one of a Big Bill Broonzy title (unclear 0.59.27) Conversations. And I always knew that a person didn't know of Broonzy if they put an S on the end.
- I: Yeah. Because I've looked at his Big Bill Blues' book where he talks to Yannick?**
- R: Yannick Bruynoghe, yes, he was Belgium.
- I: Did you find that the meetings you had with the people in the States there in that time, kind of, altered your, I don't know, perception of blues and its function or...?**
- R: Well, no, I didn't really find that; I found rather it reinforced it.
- I: It complimented it?**
- R: Yes. No I was a little anxious that I got it wrong but in fact, you know, I was glad to see but I was quite apprehensive about it in a way.
- I: Yeah, I think I read in the introduction of it that you found that a lot of your hunches were actually... you were proved right, a lot of them.**
- R: That's right, yes.
- I: That must have been... because I've been doing obviously a lot of black history in the last few months and that period, the late 50s, 1960, you've got a lot of things happening in the South, a lot of protests, a lot of riots in the cities.**
- R: Oh, it was a dodgy period.

I: And then, obviously, you had the police following you in places.

R: Yeah.

I: I always think that being English... Richard Wright thought that you being English was helpful, didn't he?

R: Well he did, yes, he regarded it as an advantage, yes, whether others did or not, I don't know.

I: Well, there are some others that... there's kind of people that think... I've also recently discovered this guy, I don't know if you know, John Michael Spencer? He wrote a book called *Blues and Evil* a few years ago.

R: I don't think I've got that.

I: And he's... I've just ordered it on Inter-Library Loan actually. And he's kind of very, very critical of non-black researchers of black music.

R: Is he black himself?

I: Yes.

R: Oh yes. John Michael Spencer, yes, I can't think of him.

I: Yes. He's one of those who is very critical of the non-black perspective, saying how can you know a culture, how can you understand it if you're not from it, basically, which isn't very...

R: It's also, in a way, means that you can't be detached from it though. I mean, that's the whole point of anthropology, isn't it, you have to learn the knowledge and the skills to be able to study a culture and not be a part of it.

I: Yeah, hmm. At the moment I've been concentrating, obviously for a while I've been banging on... I must bore you to death now talking about the 50s but one of the next things I'm aiming to look at is the 1960 trip you did and the role of oral history in blues scholarship. Because, obviously, *Conversation with the Blues* is one of those, it's probably the first book I think, apart from *Big Bill Blues* where you look at... kind of, singers have an opportunity to have a say in what's...

R: Big Bill, of course, actually was very annoyed with Yannick Bruynoghe. He complained to me a lot about him.

I: Did he?

R: Yeah. Because he stayed with us at our house, a lot of singers did but Big Bill more frequently than most and he was very annoyed with Yannick. I'm not sure that he was right, in a sense, but he felt that Yannick was appropriating or stealing his... because he insisted to me that he'd actually written his autobiography and Yannick was just putting his name to it. I don't think it was as simple as that but on the other hand he clearly had written a great deal of it and I think much more than he probably got credit for so I think his irritation was, up to a point, justified.

I: Looking at *Conversation*, you do... I mean, you've only really written the introduction, really, because the rest of it you were presenting...

R: [Laughter].

I: No what I mean is obviously...

R: Really just an edited version, yes.

I: You're presenting what the singers and the musicians said, so it's kind of giving them an opportunity to... you're attempting to give them a say in...

R: Oh yeah, that's very definitely the case, yes; that's the whole point about it.

I: Yeah.

R: It's just that they would not have been talking about these things if I hadn't raised the issues and got them talking and so on.

I: Yeah. That's going to be the next part of my focus, the role of oral history, when I'm done with this first part. But anyway, the next time I come, as well as bring you back some stuff, I'll give you a copy of this paper just to see what you think about it. It sounds like I might be talking about a lot of things that were a long time ago that you might not remember as well but...

R: Well, I don't know.

I: I mean I'm just looking at that period of interest because it seems that even, like I mentioned, Elijah Wald, Marybeth Hamilton, they concentrate on the blues revival and the blues mafia. In America you know the... you must have heard of James McKewn and...?

R: Yeah, McKewn. But what do you mean by blues mafia?

I: Well, kind of, when Charters published *The Country Blues*, this group of collectors in New York who called themselves the blues mafia who regarded themselves as the real blues experts, they felt that Charters was looking at an element of blues which wasn't the best example so they eventually published the *Origin Jazz Library CD*, Really! *The Country Blues*.

R: Oh I've forgotten about that.

I: And it was that where they included Charlie Patton. Basically the Delta blues is the home of...

R: Yes, well, of course, I think it's questionable.

I: Yes, of course, but anyway all the emphasis is on the blues revival and how blues scholarship has kind of invented this image of the blues where the Delta is the heartland but none of them mention Britain or European interest before the 60s, really, so that's what I'm kind of looking at. Obviously, there was jazz appreciation before that but there was also blues appreciation and we've got music magazines from the 50s to prove it.

R: [Laughter].

I: So that's what I'm finishing up on now. I think that's about all my curiosity satisfied for today.

R: Okay. Did you want to say anything else though in the way of the...?

I: Oh the clippings? Shall we?

R: Well the clippings are one thing and I think the box is upstairs. Oh and the other thing was I've got the drafts of...

(End of recording)

Appendix 1.5

Interview with Paul Oliver at his home on June 20th 2010

Key:

I: Interviewer
R: Respondent

I: Yeah. I mean, I'd like to know what you think, basically. I mean, a lot of it is about the scholarship in the 50s and about the work you did as well. And I'm talking a lot about your articles for Music Mirror in the 50s, it's probably stuff you haven't looked at for a long time so...

R: [Laughter] Yeah but let's hope that my answer...

I: But anyway, that's for you to keep anyway.

R: I see, okay. Right, thanks.

I: We can talk about that next time.

R: Yes, give me a bit of time to look at it.

I: Yeah, sure, I know you're busy.

R: I was thinking you were passing it for me to do...

I: No, no, that's okay. I've bought my own copy; I found a copy of your book.

R: Oh Conversation, oh, have you?

I: Yeah, well, I've had this for years now, but I thought I'd bring it over because maybe we can just begin talking about ... I mean, we started talking about the trip you did in the 60s last time and...

R: That is really what I will be talking about tomorrow because I spoke to John Anderson, because, yes, Michael Roach is, I can't remember where he said he was, it's quite a long way away. Anyway, his role, he won't be around, you see, so John...

I: Oh, he's not around tomorrow?

R: No, so John Anderson is going to manage the whole event really, which is fine, I think, because he's an efficient person. Yeah, so I was talking briefly with him about the talk to see what kind of emphasis that he particularly thought would be appropriate, but he didn't seem to have any particular preferences - he seemed to think it would work either way.

I: But it's good to do something for the 50th anniversary, isn't it?

R: Well yes, very much so from my point of view, but it's also the opening for the new centre.

I: Yeah, yeah, I've seen the new website as well.

R: Oh have you, because I never see these things?

- I:** [Laughter]. I've seen it. I've been meaning to become a member for some time actually, of the EBA. It looks like they've got quite a few events in the pipeline as well.
- R:** Yes, that's right. I have been pushing quite hard in the meetings to get the events going. Yes, the plan is to have more activity, but we're struggling with getting the base at the other place, which was very nice but it was on the fourth floor in a Georgian house. People were a bit put off by that; felt they were invading us or something. People have already been coming to the new premises and we've hardly made it known. So it should work much better, I think.
- I:** Yeah, yeah, now it's across into the main library building, isn't it?
- R:** Yes, it's very close; it's in the public library, yes. Exactly, it's down a little side lane beside the old one, very near.
- I:** That's good.
- R:** I am pleased about that. The room is nothing quite as spacious, but it's much more accessible, you've got to put more things in the balance. Anyway...
- I:** I mean, in the last conversation we had a few weeks ago, I remember you told me about how you obtained the recording equipment and -
- R:** Oh yeah.
- I:** - how you organised your trip. I just thought we'd maybe, by looking at some of the, you know, just skipping through the book, what you remember about some of the photographs or some of the people that have contributed in the book, or some of the people that you included. I know that this is only a small collection compared to the recordings you made.
- R:** Actually, you see the interviews are transcribed there, although they're sections from the interviews rather than the whole...
- I:** They would have been too long otherwise.
- R:** Yes, exactly, people don't find these things so readable so I wanted to make a collage of it, kind of, new voices.
- I:** Yeah. So when you think back to the trip you did, because obviously it was your first time in America as well -
- R:** Yes, it was.
- I:** - what were some of the instances or moments from the trip that spring to mind? What do you always think about when you think about the trip? Is there anything in particular that stands out?
- R:** I think ... probably not what you'd expect, necessarily, but one was getting Sterling Brown to interview. Sterling Brown is a major writer and he was quite willing. I did an interview with him, which I still have. He was with ... I can't remember his name now, but he was a historian, who was also doing work. So, they were the very first recordings that I made, so that stays in my mind particularly. Also, I think, even though they were knowledgeable learned people, still, it made me realise that you still have to have a relationship to the person you're interviewing that doesn't either put them off or make them feel they've got to answer in a particular way. So I learned quite a bit from that, so I think that was one of the first...

The second, well another thing was having got to New York, Val, my wife, decided we'd go up to Harlem and we were quite taken by the number of people who warned us and said it was very dangerous and so forth. Neither of us felt that was really true, yet we didn't quite know why, we thought well we'll risk it and get across and see what it's like. So we did and in fact it was really quite okay, people were a bit surprised to see a young couple, white, especially when they spoke to us and discovering we weren't even American.

I: That probably helped a bit, didn't it?

R: It probably did but, like I say, it's not an incident that we could look back and think, 'My God,' it wasn't like that, it was so agreeable. In fact, we were also asking people in certain places that we wanted to see in Harlem and so on, and they were giving us clear directions, they weren't trying to obscure it at all. So I felt that one thing which we didn't know is that Harlem has a very, well, sophisticated and high class Jewish sector, on a high ridge, which overlooks the city and very large. We were very surprised at that, because that's the kinds of things you just don't...

I: You don't really know about.

R: Nobody ever mentions, but in fact, that was the original Harlem, which was also quite interesting, of course, probably of Dutch origin.

I: Yeah, probably. So you interviewed Sterling Brown, was one of the first interviews you did?

R: Yes, that's right, yes.

I: I had no idea about that because it's not in this...

R: Well, no, because it's a conversation with the blues, that was partly about it.

I: So what was that interview like?

R: Well it was really more... I was interested in his writing about black Americans and also I was really wanting to get some information on where to go and what was desirable and what wasn't, so to speak.

I: And what did he think about the work that you were doing?

R: Well, he was pretty positive about it actually, but I think one or two others... He is a rather... it's difficult to explain really. He's not aloof, but very kind of controlled so he's not the kind of person that would ever get excited about anything, or at least if he did he certainly wouldn't reveal it. I found that interesting and a bit surprising because I expected something rather different.

I: He was quite different to some of the other people you interviewed obviously, because he was a professor, wasn't he, a poet, a professor?

R: Oh yes, a professor, exactly.

I: Wasn't he at a big university as well?

R: He was at... the two universities are more or less parallel to each other in Washington, it was one of the two, it begins with an S I think, I can't remember it offhand.

I: No, because I mean the interesting thing about this, you've obviously got some great photographs as well, and you took a lot of these photographs, didn't you, Paul?

R: Yeah, I think... can you show me any that I didn't take?

I: We'll just have a look at it; we'll just have a look. I mean, one of the first ones...

R: That's Will Shade, of course.

I: Yeah. That's where the book begins.

R: I took that, I think all the photographs are mine as far as I know. That was Wade Walter outside his barbershop.

I: In Memphis?

R: Actually in Clarksdale.

I: Oh, it's in Clarksdale, right.

R: This is Butch Cage and Willie Thomas, I think that was in (unclear 0.09.47) it was, oh Zachary, yes.

I: So, for example, when you went to Clarksdale, obviously that's in the heart of the Delta really, isn't it, Clarksdale? And that period was a heated moment in...

R: In terms of segregation it certainly was, but it was more that we were tending to... We weren't under pressure so much in the places that we were at but we were very cautious about where we stayed overnight, or we planned to be cautious at least. What was difficult was a way we said to him, "Oh, we need somewhere to stay," and he said, "Well, do you want one that the police are not going to expect you to be in?" and we thought that was probably a good idea. It was actually a black... what do they call them now, overnight stay places?

I: Motel.

R: Motel, that's right, a black motel, but he was right, they didn't bother us at all. It wasn't until they saw us in the car that the police escorted us out of Clarksdale and were keen to escort us out of Mississippi, I think.

I: So then, in contrast to the south and the countryside, we have here in Chicago, this is... Some post there.

R: It sounds like it.

I: Yeah, I'll get it for you. I suppose your letterbox is quite high. I'll put it on your desk.

R: Oh, I see, that made a noise, didn't it?

I: Yeah, it looks like you've got a publication there. Were any of the people ever a bit wary of being photographed or recorded or...?

R: Not really. You see, what we did, almost always, was get their agreement to being photographed and of course, that generally related to them being recorded. I think one of the curious things was having the BBC recorder. It was a pretty (unclear 0.12.19 – 0.12.21), but the curious thing about it was that our having that attracted a lot of attention. They were quite interested and wanted to hear themselves on it and so forth. That was unexpected.

I: I suppose because a lot of them were musicians though and most of them had recorded in the past, hadn't they?

R: Well yes, they probably...

I: **Did many of them see it as another opportunity to begin recording again or maybe to...?**

R: Not really much, I'm just trying to think. In Chicago, that was more the case, but I was interested really in being in the south and I wanted to get to Texas because everybody was talking about Mississippi at the time. I felt I wanted to be there to see it, but I was really more interested in Texas because I knew though... I had been for quite a long time. I had been collecting 78s of Texas blues singers and I wanted to try and find them. I did find Black Ace and Fats Waller.

I: **Of course at the time when you went to the states it was the time everyone began to concentrate on Mississippi and Delta in particular, didn't they?**

R: Absolutely, yes, so...

I: **But it was perhaps that final trip too far, Texas, wasn't it, maybe?**

R: No, actually we were very glad we went there really.

I: **Oh, you did go to Texas?**

R: Oh yes, in fact this is Richmond, Texas, here.

I: **Oh yeah.**

R: The black side is this, you see, and these two guys obviously went over there to buy something, so the railway line divided the town, you see. I was amused because there were more cars on the black side than there were on the white. This was Tynan, that's also in Texas.

I: **Santa Fe tracks.**

R: On the Santa Fe line, which is interesting in itself for me, but this is Mississippi. They had this town, people have often said, but...

I: **Oh, Greenville?**

R: Greenville. It was poor, but somehow there always seemed to be a cliché that if a place was poor it was going to be dangerous - we didn't necessarily find that at all. This was in New Orleans, that's on Rampart Street. That smartened up eventually. Nowadays, you don't see ... I mean, you'd see these windows and so forth, and all of this is very smart, lost its sense of ... You know, *(ph. 0:15:15 – 0:15:17) Pete's still here in a funny little place so I (unclear 0.15.19)* him, but you don't see that now.

I: **But there's quite an eclectic mix of the musicians that are quoted as well. You have people who at the time had been around a long time, or maybe were being rediscovered. I mean, Bo Carter was in The Mississippi Sheiks, wasn't he?**

R: That's right, yes, he was.

I: **And then you have people like Muddy Waters who were a lot younger at the time.**

R: Yeah, yeah, that's true.

I: **John Lee Hooker as well, he was kind of part of the newer generation, wasn't he?**

R: Yes, yes they both were really. (Unclear 0.15.57) he was very helpful, very friendly, he was very nice. Henry Townsend too, he was useful, he died a few years ago but he did keep in touch with me for a long time. But I think he was almost a key man in St. Louis because so many people were seeking out a career or something and they were going to Henry to try and help them with what they should do. He advised us on finding a number of people.

I: **Oh right, okay. So that was one of the ways, by speaking to people, that led to other links as well?**

R: Yeah, exactly yes. This was Henry Brown, both of them are Henry. And I did recordings with Henry Brown - I actually had a record session that's just been issued in New Orleans -

I: **Oh, really?**

R: - as a CD.

I: **Oh right. Henry Townsend, yeah. That was Sam Jackson?**

R: Sam Jackson, yes, playing. I've got a shot of him, I think, in his joint as well.

I: **So he was in...?**

R: This one, he was actually, really in Louisiana, but it's the Texan part of Louisiana so there were people there... it's related to (p.h 0.17.44) *sheep* or something. And there's a kind of blurred connection between the two states there for some reason.

I: **There's a guy who I find quite interesting, J.B. Lenoir.**

R: Well yes, he was good, he died very young unfortunately.

I: **Yes, they were very unfortunate circumstances, weren't they?**

R: I can't remember exactly what happened.

I: **I saw there was, a few years ago when they made the seven films on the blues, which Martin Scorsese was one of the... he edited the collection and there was a film by the German director, Wim Wenders, which had three sections.**

R: I didn't know any of that.

I: **No, his film was called The Soul of a Man and it shows footage of J.B. Lenoir when he was filmed by a Swedish couple in the late 50s and they took that to Europe and he used to go to their house and play for them, and they recorded him on video. Then it says, they're interviewing this Swedish couple and they said, "We went back to Sweden. We came back to America to record him again and we found out he'd died a couple of weeks before from a car crash, and he'd died because they took him to hospital but they wouldn't treat him."**

R: I didn't know that.

I: **That's what they said, it was very unfortunate. But the other part of the film based on Blind Willy Johnson and Skip James, so they kind of have three different life stories in a film.**

R: I hadn't seen those at all. That's Brother John Sellers there.

I: **He came over to Britain as well, didn't he?**

R: Oh yes, he did, yes. I knew him very well actually.

I: **I would imagine that some of the links you made here, when the musicians came here were helpful.**

R: Tremendously helpful. He was actually a great character. He was a very nice chap. I mean, he was a bit... well, what was interesting to me, actually, in London, he was one of the few that would walk about in London. Many of the blues singers who came over to Britain were absolutely terrified about leaving the hotel.

I: **Really?**

R: They just wouldn't go anywhere, only if I came and walked with them and so forth.

I: **I suppose it must have been quite a... I mean, to travel so far from where they were living because you wouldn't have imagined that they would have travelled much.**

R: And from a black community into a lousy white one and so forth.

I: **Yeah, I mean, they would have had no idea how they would have been received really, I would imagine.**

R: Yes, absolutely right. I think I was just struck at the time by the fact that he was about the first of the visitors to actually be quite relaxed. It was quite a surprise. There, (ph.0:21:00) *topless housekeeper* in Chicago.

I: **Mmm-hmm. Yes, so you do cover the countryside and the city.**

R: That's right.

I: **To get a spectrum of then... then you will have got when the, kind of, rhythm and blues start kicking off.**

R: Yes, that's a good group. Johnson apparently is still active in the States.

I: **Really?**

R: Yes, I had somebody asking if I had any other photographs that I'd taken at the same time. I wasn't so interested then.

I: **In the emerging rhythm and blues?**

R: Yeah, that's right.

I: **It wasn't really...**

R: No. I was aware that it was changing and aware that there was this threat to it in a way and I really wanted to document while I still could. That's the boogie-woogie (unclear 0.22.11) as I used to call him. I'm just trying to remember what...

I: **Did you often find that though, that people you wanted to speak to wanted to focus more on maybe the newly amplified music or ...?**

R: Curiously enough, amongst the singers themselves I didn't find that, I think they were more concerned about what they were losing, or what was being taken from them. You see, they were

- quite resistant about the closing down of Hasting Street in Detroit and so forth. Those things were very upsetting to them.
- I: I suppose this is also the time after Elvis has been out a few years, there's this appropriation of black music.**
- R: Absolutely.
- I: So, yeah, that reminds me of a film I've seen recently where it talks about the Chess brothers and how Chuck Berry felt that white people were making more money ripping off his songs than he was.**
- R: This is Blind James Brewer now, this was on Maxwell Street, you see, but that was actually a gospel group, you wouldn't think so necessarily, but that's the actual cable there. What they did, several had electric equipment and so forth and they just took it from the houses. People in their house would put a wire through the windows, so amplification and so on was quite surprising really. He actually sang on the street here, I just noticed the... yes, that's right. It's only just (over-speaking).
- I: Did anyone ever refuse to be interviewed or photographed at all, did anyone; do you remember that at all?**
- R: I can't remember anybody doing so really. I was surprised how pleasing they were. I didn't really have any real problems in that respect at all. The bigger problems were of the wealthier people I think. They were a little bit more... or if they were booked, but they weren't obstructing it, it's just that they often had an engagement and we had to make our time fit into theirs, in a way. In the south, of course, we were, with Chris Strachwitz, that was a help. Chris has been doing a recording and so on.
- I: So you obviously knew a lot of singers as well, didn't he?**
- R: Not many, fewer than I'd expected really because I thought we'd be following a plan of places he'd been to and I was surprised how many I just discovered really when I first (unclear 0.25.23) so...
- I: Many of the singers had actually been interviewed previously before so it wasn't the first time they were being interviewed either, was it?**
- R: Well it depends who they were. Some of them of them it was the first time, some of them had been interviewed, of course, yes.
- I: Because I mean, is it Frederic Ramsey, who'd been visiting, himself?**
- R: Yes, Fred Ramsey yes. The only thing is I think the people that did do the recording before had particular kind of emphasis. Fred Ramsey was very much looking for the folk idioms and he was quite shocked by the electric guitar or anything like that. So he took a very purist approach, not realist. Sam Charters did a lot - I never got on with him at all; it was very difficult.
- I: He based his book on the singers that were primarily more successful.**
- R: That's quite true. We did come to a kind of agreement because he knew I was doing a book, you see, and I think he thought he should be the author. So I emphasised the fact that I was doing mine on the meaning of blues and things, and not on the biographies, whereas he was definitely working on the biographies. Certainly what he did was useful and I admit there wasn't the clash that I

think he anticipated with me, but he wasn't an easy person - you couldn't just sit and discuss it with him.

I: No, did you ever meet him?

R: Yes, I worked with him twice actually, once in New York, I can't remember where the other place was. I have a feeling it was in an academic media, I seem to remember, but I can't remember which it was. Anyway, I never could say we really knew each other. There were not too many people, of course, writing on the subject at the time.

I: No, no, just looking at the press, I mean, you could tell that it wasn't ... there were very few of you and occasionally... So people collecting records on blues, I imagine it being a very small but dedicated community in England.

R: In a way, yes. But, you see, actually books were being published in Britain really quite early on, but Conversation with the Blues, that was a late edition done by Cambridge.

I: In '65 was it, it came out?

R: It came out in '65, that's right.

I: Do any pictures of the singers, for example, you said Henry Townsend was particularly helpful, do you remember the actual meetings and interviews with some of the singers more than others? Do any of them stand out for any reason at all? For example, were there any that you were particularly eager to meet because you were particularly fond of their music or...?

R: Well, I mean what I suppose was most interesting in that respect were people like Black Ace and Alex Moore, who hadn't been interviewed who we were trying to trace you see.

I: There's Black Ace there.

R: Exactly, but it didn't turn out to be so difficult because in the short time before we actually interviewed him he'd got a radio programme. I think he did it once a week, so it wasn't a pure chance that we happened to hear him and decided to... so on and so forth, and got in touch with the radio company. They told us where he was and...

I: How to get in touch.

R: Yeah. That worked out very well. With Alex Moore, I guess we wanted to find him and he only ever sang about Dallas. He was from something to the north side, I can't quite remember what it was, but anyway, it was just about crossing Dallas, so we were keen to get to that area to find him. Somebody had said that he was in a place, similar name to this; it was called The Blue Parrott. We asked about it and we couldn't find it. Suddenly we heard where it was, it was a joint, and it was in open country just outside the city. I went there and I could hardly see inside, it was so dark. I went over to the bar and they said, "Are you looking for someone?" I said, "Yes, I'm looking for a man named Alexander Moore." He said, "What does he do?" I said, "Well he's a singer." They said, "Well he's not here." He said, "If I were you I'd look outside." That was all he said. So I thought, oh well, went outside and when we'd gone in I'd thought the place looked pretty rough because there was a great pile of old clothes and stuff, then as I went out the old clothes started moving, and it was actually Alex who was asleep underneath the pile. So when he said, "If I were you, I'd look outside", he actually was giving me quite wise advice really, without making a big thing of it. That was quite extraordinary.

I: That's Victoria Spivey. You interviewed a few women as well?

R: Mary Johnson and Edith Johnson, they're not related, they both have the same... Victoria Spivey, she was very nice.

I: **Yes?**

R: She really was. Val, my wife and she got on excellently together. They just met and struck it off. I think it was just a different situation, but we met them, well, I met her on a couple of later trips to the States.

I: **I noticed a picture of...**

R: She started her own record company.

I: **Oh, did she?**

R: Yeah, with Len Kunstadt.

I: **I noticed a picture of Lightnin' Hopkins as well, he was kind of a bit younger than some of the...**

R: That's while he was playing I think there. I took it at this joint.

I: **Billy Pearce.**

R: Yes, Billy Pearce is actually with the wife on the right hand side, Billy was in a very bad state.

I: **Was he, and that's a folk artist?**

R: This chap working in the street collecting pennies and doing (over-speaking).

I: **I imagine Beale Street used to be very different to what it is now, I would imagine.**

R: Very different, yes.

I: **It's very commercial now, it's very... I went there about ten years ago.**

R: Did you?

I: **Yeah.**

R: Well done.

I: **It was nice to go there, but it was, kind of, I don't know, a bit theatrical in a way.**

R: Well the reason I ask you that is they were going to destroy it, you see, and then there was a bit of a protest so they ringed a part which they would conserve but then they overdid it. I mean, rather than just keeping it as it was and letting it go on, it was a great pity.

I: **But it's good that it's there, I suppose.**

R: Exactly, it's just a pity they couldn't leave it to be itself, but nevertheless they didn't destroy it, which otherwise was the original plan.

I: **So before the actual book was finished, did you ever go back to the States after that, immediately afterwards?**

- R: Yes, we went every year, pretty well, for several years, undoubtedly for architectural reasons, (unclear 0.34.22) Native American. But we went to practically every state. I think the only ones we didn't go to was one was Iowa, one was Florida, I think those were the only two states that we didn't go to. I was doing a lot of (unclear 0.34.50) but also elected tours, you see.
- I: **Yeah, so I suppose it was also the first time you went, it was like you'd been listening to the music for ten years, you'd met some singers as well, but this time you were, kind of, perhaps confronting some preconceptions you'd built up as well?**
- R: It's true, inevitably it's different in some respects, but, actually, I was surprised that that wasn't more the case. In the main, I was prepared for most places that we visited.
- I: **I think it... the photography, so what would you...?**
- R: (Over-speaking) filming of Lightnin', it is in, the shot of Lightnin', I think.
- I: **Yeah, yeah. I saw it earlier, it's, kind of, in a bar or...**
- R: That's right. It was actually called... now what's the name of that, it began with an s, Sputnik Bar it was, yes that's right. You knew about the Sputnik, did you?
- I: **No.**
- R: Oh I see. Well it was a fairly early stage in the development of technologies for penetrating into the great heights, the Sputnik, there's a projectile.
- I: **Oh yeah, the Sputnik bar in Houston.**
- R: That's it. That was typical because it was Lightnin', I probably would imagine that he would be more (unclear 0.36.44 – 0.36.46).
- I: **Was your... were you aiming to find out more about the singers' lives themselves or were you just ...?**
- R: I just was doing more of that, obviously I wanted to know, but I didn't go into a lot of it. At the end of the book, as you know, there are some of these...
- I: **Some biographical details. But you were more interested... I mean, how did they work, did you have a set list of questions ready or was it just spontaneous?**
- R: More spontaneous really. Well, spontaneous in the sense that I didn't necessarily frame up the question, partly because I wanted to see the people and how they related to it, also if they were asking me questions. But in the main, there were questions in my mind about various people. Sometimes I had a lot of information on them, some I had very little at all and, of course, in those days you had to write all that information down. So I had with me a long cardboard box with cards in it and I had the information.
- I: **Oh yeah you told me about that last time, yeah. I suppose there were kind of also... because a lot of the singers knew each other, didn't they?**
- R: Oh yeah.
- I: **They were a good source of information to find out about people who had passed on as well, who there wasn't much information about, because there weren't many records of these people either, apart from maybe the recordings they'd done, but you wouldn't find anything else really, would you, really?**

R: No, not really.

I: **There's Muddy Waters.**

R: Yes, we stayed with him.

I: **James Cotton. I saw James Cotton.**

R: He came over here too.

I: **Yeah? I saw him a few years ago, about three years ago I saw him in Italy with the James Cotton band. He'd had some operation on his throat so he couldn't talk very well, he had a very disrupted voice, but he was still playing harmonica with his band and he's still touring.**

R: That's surprising, you saying that, yes.

I: **Yeah. That was in Italy. Shakey Jake, Eddie Boyd, he also came over to Britain, didn't he, Eddie Boyd. J.B. Lenoir, for some reason I find him an intriguing character, also because he has a very distinctive voice and distinctive sound.**

R: Yes, he was tremendously helpful. I mean, he took us to a lot of places, or told us where they were and so forth. He really was interested in what we were doing. In the main, I couldn't say people were ... they weren't instructive, I can't say they were really very interested, but he definitely was.

I: **Yeah, I mean, obviously some people were a bit more interested than others, weren't they, in ...?**

R: It's actually Muddy Waters's house, on his front doorstep.

I: **Sunnyland Slim and Little Walter, he was a bit of a loose cannon, wasn't he?**

R: Well yes, yes, he was covered in scars. He got himself into, really, some terrible situations.

I: **Yeah. Roosevelt Sykes,**

R: Little Brother, Jump Jackson who was always trying to dominate. Of course, he would be on the top of the steps; he had very high esteem of himself.

I: **It's always a bit like that with musicians, you find though, there's a lot of competition between them and egos often...**

R: Yeah, that's true.

I: **Teddy (p.h 0.40.49) *Stovepoint*. Right, okay. Well that's about it, really, Paul, that I wanted to talk about. I just wanted to... I mean, there wasn't anything in particular, I just wanted to reminisce with you a bit about it because...**

R: You'll get me thinking.

I: **Yeah. What will you be talking about tomorrow then?**

R: Well I think I'll talk about the trip. Obviously, there will be people... but roughly in the sequence in which they were recorded and so forth you see. I mean, I was talking to John Anderson about that this morning because... but he didn't seem to have any particular advice on what would be

more appropriate for people because I have a very clear idea on how much people would be familiar with the subject - some will be and some won't, sort of thing. So, I thought, well, seeing as it is the anniversary of the trip for me, probably the best thing would be to talk about the trip.

I: I mean, because when people think of 1960 they think of the south and United States, they think of all the social upheaval at the time as well.

R: Yeah. Well that was, it was then but you could hardly say there was any competition with us because... I mean, I think people were just surprised to see us.

I: Yeah, well, I hope it goes okay for you.

R: Thanks.

I: You've got your copy of it there, the Cambridge edition.

R: Oh, yes.

I: There was another thing, Paul, that I spoke about with Neil and Lorna at the...

(End of recording)

Appendix 1.6

Interview with Paul Oliver at his home in November 2010

Key:

I: Interviewer
R: Respondent

R: I hoped it was a no smoking area.

I: Yeah.

R: He's a nice guy.

I: Yeah, he seems to have been, kind of, the main guy for a lot of them a lot of the time.

R: Yeah, writing On Blues and so on.

I: I mean, occasionally you found that the other guys who were spending a lot of their time writing and reviewing jazz concerts or records occasionally delved into the odd blues.

R: Well, it was passed to them to review often.

I: Hmm. But it seems to have been a very small... I actually managed to obtain some of the sales figures for those magazines for the circulation....

R: That's interesting, how did you get that?

I: There was this, kind of, press association. They have a website and I was interested in finding out the figures. For example, Melody Maker was sold on a weekly basis and both that and Jazz Journal in the 50s was steadily on the increase. So I think Melody Maker was selling around 100,000 a week, Jazz Journal was a bit less, well quite a lot less, about 12,000 to 13,000 but also it was on the increase until we get to about 1958 and then they both start going down.

R: That's intriguing.

I: I'm just wondering if that coincides as well with the explosion of newer musical forms – you have rock and roll and R & B.

R: Yeah, those were coming up and I think probably there was maybe more competition in terms of other publications, I'm not sure. There were things like Jazz Report and two or three others.

I: The New Musical Express as well, the NME.

R: Oh, the NME, yes, that's right. Oh, quite a lot of other things came out and I think that that, kind of, dispersed some of the enthusiasm. People bought one of the new magazines, kind of thing, instead of staying with the old ones. It's difficult of course, I guess they probably really worked at the figures there to probably get a fair picture of it but I don't know what you do with it when you've done it.

I: Yeah. I mean, obviously, there are probably many reasons for it all as well but it just seems strange that '58 seems to be the, kind of, slight turning point. When I contacted this agency I

- asked them if they had the sales figures and they said... they replied in a very, very strange way. They said, "On this one occasion, as a gesture of goodwill, we'll give you some of the figures," so they only gave me from '50 to '59, but since then I found out that the Newspaper Library have that same information which is open to access so I just need to go to Colindale in North London and have a look at those.
- R: Yes, John Colley, I think, has gone to Colindale on odd occasions so he can probably give you some information.
- I: **Hmm. Are you still in touch with John?**
- R: Oh yes, I was talking to him yesterday, or the day before, maybe it was. Yesterday I think I was probably preparing this lecture, but anyway the day before [laughter] yes.
- I: **I was looking at also, Paul, at the, erm... when the book came out obviously it was reviewed by many of your colleagues, Blues Fell This Morning, and there was some mixed reactions to it at first, like, Alexis Korner reviewed it on the BBC.**
- R: Oh, yeah that was a bit of a pain, yes.
- I: **He said, "This is not the book we were expecting."**
- R: Yes, exactly.
- I: **What do you think he meant by that? What book was he expecting, do you think?**
- R: Well, certainly I wouldn't, nor would any professional writer write a book that everybody else is expecting. So God knows what he had in mind. I think he might have thought that I was doing an imitation of Sam Charters, just one of those biographies or straight history or something but I wasn't interested in doing that, not at that time. It wasn't easy to do research on any of these things at the time.
- I: **Well, especially from Britain as well, you couldn't really do much on the singers themselves.**
- R: No exactly, especially on that side of it but on the content you could. I had to work at it, it wasn't easy but I was helped a lot by the United States Information Service – they were very generous really in their time and so on. I think they were pleased to have somebody who was actually seriously interested in their library and so forth, you know.
- I: **Do you think that that comment, I mean, to be honest, it depends on the way you read it although it sounds like it's quite disparaging. However, it sounds like... I mean, because he was a musician and he was involved a lot in playing the music as well. Maybe it was because the music was more about, kind of, the cultural aspect of blues rather than the musical.**
- R: Yes, well it could. I never really understood what he was getting at. He wasn't a very easy person to get on with. I mean, he appeared it but, you know, a lot of people found him quite difficult to be with.
- I: **I recently read his biography.**
- R: Yes. Who wrote that now?
- I: **Harry Shapiro.**
- R: Oh yes, that's right. Yes, I have got it somewhere.

I: There's quite a lot on the close relationship he developed with Big Bill as well, which is kind of similar to you as well because you got quite close to him, didn't you?

R: Well, yes, I did, yes. Well, I mean, obviously, he was able to make use of the fact that he was a guitar player and so on. Big Bill wasn't the kind of person to make any comment on somebody else. I wouldn't have been trying to get him... I wouldn't have said, "What do you think of so and so?" He wasn't that kind of person really. He was a very nice guy.

Alexis was sort of odd really.

I: Because in the late 50s he was also writing some articles as well on records and...

R: Oh yes. The person that lived in his house, as the tenant, so to speak, was Charles Fox. Have you come across him?

I: Yes I have, yes.

R: He was very good actually. I liked Charles Fox very much. I wondered how he put up with Alexis actually but he obviously did, but he died quite young and quite suddenly. I don't know what the circumstances were.

I: There was also Bob Dawbarn, do you remember Bob Dawbarn?

R: Only the name. Did he ever...?

I: He wrote a review of Blues Fell This Morning in Melody Maker and his title was also 'This could have been the book on the blues'. But the interesting thing, Paul, I don't know if you remember this, is that you wrote an article in response to all these...

R: I didn't know I did that.

I: Yeah, you did in -

R: Oh, I can't remember that.

I: - in Jazz Monthly I think.

R: Yes.

I: Yeah, Jazz Monthly, I think I've got a copy of it actually. I don't have it with me but I've got my notes on it, is that... because Charles Fox also reviewed it in Gramophone, the book. Basically, it's kind of a response because some of the criticisms aimed at the book from the people who were... because you got a lot of good reviews as well from Derrick Stewart-Baxter and also Wilfred Mellers wrote a very good review of it but some of them said that, you know, you were focusing so much on lyrical analysis, on the analysis of lyrics, and interpreting them literally, and you were responding that you acknowledged this in your book. And I just thought it was quite interesting that there's this dialogue between you guys.

You make reference as well to another review that I could never find, Phillip Larkin. He used to write about jazz, I think for The Observer.

R: Oh that's where he was, was it, yes.

I: But I've never been able to find that article.

- R: I may have it somewhere. I'll have a look. Because I do have quite a lot of the early reviews, I must say I haven't looked at them in years so I hope they haven't deteriorated completely.
- I: **But I suppose because these are... you were all guys who were deeply interested in this music so you were going to have differences of opinion anyway and some people obviously loved the book, others were a bit more critical, but what do you make of the fact that some of them were criticising that you were interpreting song lyrics literally?**
- R: Well, although I think that they're being too subtle in a way, in thinking that the singers are actually going to record but they're hiding what they really mean in a series of metaphors and still make it fit the pattern. I think it's actually being altogether too much of an (p.h 0.10.08) *archivist* really. I think obviously some people were using a simple metaphor but to suggest that there was a whole underlying other set of meanings I think is a construct and that's probably one of the worst aspects of being this far away. Because you can make it be whatever kind of metaphoric association you care to make it.
- I: **Yes, that's true. If you read a lot of different books on music over the years they all interpret it their own way, don't they?**
- R: Yeah. But did they actually say whether they disagreed or just making a statement?
- I: **Well, they were very short reviews obviously. For example, it was Charles Fox that said that sometimes many song lyrics are interpreted literally but that you responded saying, 'I actually acknowledged in chapter two that a lot of the singers assume masks when they sing,' which they obviously didn't read.**
- R: [Laughter]. They'd forgotten I said that.
- I: **Let me see if I can find that other review. Yeah, Bob Dawbarn in Melody Maker...**
- R: I don't think I ever met him. I'm just wondering if he really existed or whether it was the name of somebody else.
- I: **This was his comment. He said, 'The book sometimes achieves the task of highlighting the poverty, deprivation of context that spawned the blues but all too often his text is a mere paraphrase of the verse that he has quoted.' That's quite scathing.**
- R: Well, yeah, but what would you expect?
- I: **I think his was that you maybe... there wasn't enough acknowledgement of the humour in blues lyrics.**
- R: True.
- I: **I was always interested in what Alexis Korner meant in his comment.**
- R: Yes.
- I: **You know, "This wasn't the book we were expecting."**
- R: It always struck me as odd really; it irritated me at the time.
- I: **Was it on the BBC?**
- R: Yes, it was on BBC, yes.

I: On the radio?

R: Yes.

I: So he actually said that?

R: He actually said it, yes.

I: Right.

R: And it was also the very first review of the book – it was only a couple of days after it was published, as far as I remember.

The other thing was, Charles Fox, he died a number of years after but he was ill for quite a while and I went to see him because we had a good relationship for a long time and I was concerned about him being so ill. Unexpectedly he said to me, “I’ve just been reading Blues Fell This Morning again.” He said, “It was a wonderful book you did,” and then he said, “I wondered why it got so much criticism.” I said, “Well, by and large, I don’t know very much, it’s only a small group of people that were critical,” and I left it at that.

I: I found as many positive reviews. I was trying to find Eric Hobsbawm’s review but I could never find it. No, Derrick Stuart Baxter says that it was the best book by far that had been written on the subject and I found just as many. But the method you were using of looking at lyrics and looking at the link between African American life and culture and what the singers were singing about... Actually, I mean Max Jones did that and Iain Lang did that when they talked about blues in... Max Jones wrote On Blues in the PL Yearbook of Jazz in 1946. Rex Harris also, in his book on jazz in 1952 he uses the same principle, so it was something that was actually...

R: In circulation.

I: Yeah, so it was kind of like a, we could say a standard method of analysis.

R: Well, yes, except that I don’t think we ever discussed it really as a method. I mean, in a way it seemed the logical thing to do. If it was all really hiding meaning then in a sense how do you criticise that because you don’t know you’ve got it right? Also, you see, I was more concerned about blues as self-expression; that was the aspect that interested me most. I did a book on the relationship of improvised music to improvise painting for Jazz Monthly, and I can’t remember what I called it now. What I was really trying to emphasise was that in a way blues related best – jazz really as well – in musical terms to painting, especially of the modern movement at that stage because so much of it was spontaneous.

I: Yes.

R: I was personally interested in that, so.

I: The natural context was that they played on, you know, in their leisure time, didn’t they, and much of it was improvised?

R: Yes.

I: Also, another really interesting fact about the book - I don’t know if you’ve ever thought about this actually - is that I think it’s one of the first, if not the first, British examination of African American, or we could say at the time it was contemporary African American life and culture, especially lower class African American culture.

R: Well, it depends what I cited in the... is there a bibliography with it?

I: **Yeah. I mean, you look at a lot of the work that folklorists did in the 20s and 30s and at the turn of the century, Odum and Johnson, obviously, and Dorothy Scarborough, the work that they did, but they were Americans.**

R: Oh I see yes, yes, but not European.

I: **Yes.**

R: I see.

I: **So it's kind of like the first non-American examination of African American culture really, apart from the jazz literature.**

R: Oh I see, apart from the jazz literature I think that would be probably true. Rex Harris was a jazz writer who was interested in the social context and so forth but not particularly informed on blues. There was one... a chap with a German name.

I: **Oh, um...**

R: Broadhurst? No I don't think it was quite that.

I: **No, is it Bornemann?**

R: Bornemann.

I: **Ernest Bornemann?**

R: Yes, that's right. I think probably he was closest to that but...

I: **But these were all guys who were interested in music, weren't they?**

R: Oh yes, sure.

I: **But I don't think... even I was checking with Neil as well and I don't think there's anything that came out of England or Europe, or maybe Europe but England surely, that looked at lower class African American culture before that.**

R: Oh, that's interesting.

I: **So you might have been the first to do that, I think.**

R: Oh that's weird.

I: **And it also coincides with, obviously, a period in history when African American culture was going... there was a lot of social and political upheaval at the time.**

R: Well, that is true. I think that there was. On the other hand, it was identifiable which is sometimes difficult really but I suppose the relationship of jazz and blues to it, in a way, in a period of quite considerable excitement but moving and so forth as well, did seem to imply a different culture generating it. Obviously one wanted to find out what the context of that was but...

I: **But also when the book came out there was student sittings and bus boycotts in the south, as you experienced yourself when you went there in 1960. There were protests and...**

R: Oh yes, it was a difficult period.

I: **But your book coincides with this but obviously because you're looking at blues from a certain period it doesn't really, I mean, it doesn't really feature, does it? They're not really connected.**

R: Well, I don't think that it was tremendously strong in my actual personal encounters, so to speak, especially as I hadn't been to the States before the book was published.

I: **So at the time you were working, in this period of the late 50s, you also went to Paris to write a bit of it?**

R: Yes.

I: **How much were you aware of what was going on for black people in America at the time?**

R: Well as much as I could from people, you know, some people were more articulate than others, so getting to know, well, just about everybody who came over – Little Montgomery or Muddy Waters and so forth, Little Walter, they were all interesting people. I think probably about more than half of the singers and so forth who came over to Britain and often travelling Europe and so on stayed with my wife and myself for at least a couple of nights. So the advantage of that was we could talk without looking at the watch and saying, well, the interview is nearly over kind of thing - it wasn't that at all.

I: **A luxury really.**

R: Yeah. When they heard that I was teaching at that time, yeah, one or two of them just volunteered and said, "Well I don't mind playing a few numbers for them."

I: **Did any of the guys that you met in that period that came over ever talk about what was going on in the States in regards to the race issue?**

R: Very little as specific as that. I mean, they were talking about their experiences more than the texture of it. I think probably Muddy was a bit more advanced in that respect.

I: **He was slightly younger, though, than a lot of the other guys.**

R: Well, that's quite true, yes, but I mean John Lee Hooker was... he didn't have a very clear image of much at all really. It was strange. He could sing very well but he couldn't talk, it was quite extraordinary.

I: **He had a bit of a speech impediment, didn't he?**

R: Yes, yes.

I: **Were you ever worried about what you were writing and how these guys would interpret it?**

R: Well, no, because whenever I had an opportunity to read a bit to them, I did.

I: **And you got feedback from them as well?**

R: Yes, that's right. But most of the time, I could tell, they were not really listening critically; they were so surprised and pleased that anybody was writing about them.

I: **Right, yeah, of course. Many ethnocentric writers that I've looked at in recent years, there's guys who have kind of looked at blues music from the black perspective to try and empower**

- African American culture, looking historically, and there's a guy, I think I've mentioned him to you before but I don't think you've read what he's written. There's a guy called Jon Michael Spencer...?**
- R: No, I don't think I have.
- I: He wrote a book called Blues and Evil. He's kind of critical of all non-black and especially non-American writers who have analysed the blues because his basic argument is that they've kind of missed the point because they're not from that culture. One of the basis of what he writes is that in much white writing of black music, for example, singers and African Americans come across as kind of passive victims. They're not empowered enough. They're depicted as existing in a world which constantly castrates them and constrains them. And he uses, kind of, your book and Charters's as kind of his...**
- R: I've never read that. Nobody has even mentioned it to me before this.
- I: It's not that old but David Evans told me about it.**
- R: Oh really? Yeah.
- I: David Evans told me about it and I've found it and he accuses all British like scholars of being Victorian and applying Victorian models of interpretation to the blues.**
- R: Does anybody question his image of Europeans or of white people?
- I: Well, I will, because the ethnocentric view is kind of looking at the world through a pair of sunglasses, giving everything a...**
- R: He's doing the same thing.
- I: Exactly.**
- R: Practising what he's preaching.
- I: But I remember in your introduction to the 1990 copy of the book, you said that the period that you were writing at wasn't as liberal as ten years after, when you wrote The Story of the Blues, so you kind of felt a bit... did that kind of condition you a bit, not to be as explicit, maybe, about the subject?**
- R: I don't really know actually. I think The Story of the Blues, well, it certainly, for me, was performing a different function. What I was trying to show was a self expression of people who, to a large degree, had a measure of repression. Blues Fell This Morning was largely of benefit but when I was writing Story of the Blues it was, well, that was part of the story maybe but right from the start I was just talking about the experience.
- I: But I suppose there were... I mean, the period that you were writing at, do you remember The Black and White Minstrel show on television?**
- R: Yes.
- I: That started in '58, didn't it, and it had huge audiences and you've got this weird interpretation of black culture, white guys dressing up in black face and...**
- R: Well, I think, retrospectively, people probably got a rather warped or distorted view of that because most people were aware that it was just a repetition or an imitation of an idiom that

- existed before. I don't think it was really racist in its content; it was a more a kind of caricature of an earlier idiom.
- I: But when I think about that and then your book coming out, your book kind of justifies, you know, African Americans have their own culture, their own... this is an example of it, it's kind of humanising it against that backdrop of a caricature, isn't it?**
- R: Yes, I think probably, yes, you could say but I just meant that I don't think it was a major influence on people. Most people just took it as...
- I: Entertainment really.**
- R: Yes, that's right, exactly.
- I: A few years after the book came out, Paul, Charles Keil wrote Urban Blues -**
- R: Yes, yes.
- I: - which concentrates on the newer forms of blues music, of Otis Rush and B.B. King and the electric blues. And he's, kind of, saying that the work of yourself and Charters has kind of marginalised the newer forms in favour of a more authentic older blues.**
- R: Maybe, but I can't really remember it now.
- I: Because he was talking, well, this newer music is just as relevant to black people now, whereas the music that blues purists were looking at was, kind of, from a time which was past, if you see what I mean.**
- R: When did he write that?
- I: '66.**
- R: Yes, that was quite a long...
- I: It's about five or six years after, six years after...**
- R: Well, the publication is a good ten years after writing about it.
- I: Hmm.**
- R: I don't know really. I had the book, I just wasn't particularly attracted to it so I suppose maybe what I wasn't attracted to was the position he was taking.
- I: I think he was just looking at a more contemporary aspect of the music, whereas, kind of, the music that yourself and some of the other guys were looking at in the 50s and late 50s, early 60s was kind of, like, the folk blues of the Race Records era.**
- R: Yes.
- I: Whereas he was saying well there's a lot of blues derived music which is still relevant and still has a social function.**
- R: Yes. I mean, that's a fair enough argument but you work with what is available.
- I: Do you remember Jeff Titon, Paul?**

- R: I'm just amazed that a number of these names who I once knew but I can't... [Laughter] Jeff Titon, where was he based?
- I: **He's at Brown, in Providence in Rhode Island. He wrote Early Downhome Blues.**
- R: Early Downhome Blues. I guess I must have it. It's probably upstairs.
- I: **I remember seeing a copy of it.**
- R: Over here, do you?
- I: **Yeah, I think I remember. Anyway, he's an ethnomusicologist and he's done a lot of work on the blues as well. He wrote an article a few years ago called Reconstructing the Blues. And he talks about his own work as well during the revival on researching the music and he says that many blues scholars, including himself, in the act of discovering their object, the blues, they actually constituted rather than discovered it.**
- R: [Laughter]. Oh, funny.
- I: **Because their involvement was so great with the music that they were looking at and it was against the backdrop of, you know, the explosion of popular commercial music. Their motivations forced them to kind of construct an idea of the blues. Do you think that's fair?**
- R: Well, whether it's fair or not... I mean, it's a thing to do if you're committed to it. What amused me, when you were saying it, was that in a kind of way, I suppose, it could have been said about what I was talking about today but it wasn't about blues obviously. You could say that... But what I was doing was more of his line, is trying to draw attention to the constructions that we use in discussing settlement patterns or aspects of architectural that builds the environment and so forth. So what we're really discussing is the environs, in a sense, rather than the environment as such, because there's no definition of precisely what the environment is – circumstances change according to who is at the centre part of it. And we were then discussing our relationship of ourselves with the environment, but also if we're talking about the physical environments of varying kinds, then much of our support of it or examination of it is conditioned by the resources it produces, which we use for the purposes of building. And I was trying to show that, in a way, these were constructions in a sense. I mean, there's no actual such thing, so to speak. So I can see that he might have been making a similar kind of parallel but you might do that for almost any art really.
- I: **Yeah. Well I suppose it's part of the process of doing history as well, is that from fragments that we have we kind of construct an idea that might or might not be similar to the reality of it.**
- R: Well yes, well you see, or there's an imposed structure. Again, in the talk today, I was, sort of, saying, "Has anybody any idea where this is?" Someone said, "Turkey?" I said, "What do you mean by Turkey?" He said, "Oh well, you know..." and then started describing (unclear 0.32.13). So I said, "Really, you're talking about the political boundaries that may have been artificially constructed." I said, "But have you heard of cappadocia?" And well, yes, they had. And I said, "What's that?" Of course what I was really talking about were particular rock formations that occur in one part of Turkey, as we call it. I said, "So I will be, you know, in subsequent talks, using the names of countries, as we call them, so as you know roughly where the (unclear 0.32.44) is. But I want you to realise that it doesn't exist and essentially are constructions." So it occurred, in a way, and I could see that he might be arguing the same kind of thing but it doesn't get you very far.

I: No, I suppose not. Now, obviously, we've talked a lot about when in the 50s you met a lot of singers you hosted quite a number of them, you got to know a few of them. You were also corresponding with a lot of writers in America, weren't you, at the time?

R: Well, endeavouring too, yes. Who were you thinking of?

I: Sam Charters you were corresponding with.

R: Well yes, I mean we did actually correspond before, really deciding what our kind of respective areas would be – he wanted to concentrate on the autobiographies and I was concentrating more on what people sang about, you see. We had a friend, I can't remember his name now, it wasn't Bill Elliott, something a bit like it, but he was quite a clever imitator of voices. And one day a person rang up and my wife answered the phone and she said, "Well, who is speaking?" He said, "It's Sam Charters." She said, "Oh, come on, Bill," and, of course, it turned out it was Sam Charters and he was a bit fed up about that. He didn't obviously realise... [Laughter]

I: Were you ever in contact with Frederic Ramsey?

R: With Frederic Ramsey, a bit, yes. I really admired his work, I did, but we corresponded, actually, it was round about the time when he was finishing his trips. I think it was in Florida that he finally (over-speaking).

I: He was doing Been Here and Gone, you know that.

R: Yes, that's right, yes.

I: It's got some great photographs in it.

R: Oh yes there are. Yes, he also let me have a copy of the... well one of the books, I think Story of the Blues, particularly of his tiny little, almost a joint come saloon, so to speak. No, he was very helpful.

I: Did you ever correspond with any singers who were over there, any musicians, apart from the ones that came to Britain?

R: Apart from the ones that came to Britain, it was very difficult. I did get the addresses of quite a few. Well a little bit, I did, the odd letter was...

I: Because when Jacques Demetre and Marcel Chauvard went to America, they even say that you provided a lot of the leads they used. You gave them a lot of the...

R: Well, I got them addresses but I'd really got those from other singers and so forth, of recommendations. It wasn't easy to do; it was quite a difficult time. I probably did with one or two. I don't suppose I have the letters now because it was a long while ago.

I: Yes. It's so long, further back.

R: I'm struggling a bit to try and remember.

I: Would you remember about Alan Lomax being in Britain at the time?

R: Yes, yes.

I: Do you think he was any influence at all?

R: Well, I found Alan Lomax a bit of a pain really.

I: I've heard many people say that before.

R: About him you mean?

I: Yeah.

R: Well, he was really. He wasn't exactly conceited but he... well, he might have been but he kind of dominated or always wanted to. The worst thing as far as I was concerned in a way about that is I showed him some of the articles I had written for Music Mirror. He said, "Well it's great to have you guys writing for us," or, "shooting for us," some phrase like that. I can't quite remember it now.

I: Rooting for us or something like that.

R: Something, yes, but whatever it was we were doing it really for them to develop their reputations rather than write about the subjects.

I: You meant that in the leftist movement, you know, because you ran away from the McCarthy era. He was part of that new left, wasn't he?

R: Well, sort of, yes, but whether he was any more so than his father, I'm not sure. But I only met Alan; I didn't meet the elder one. But I did interview, I think, a chap who sent him to the south but it was more to get him out of his hair than anything I think.

I: [Laughter] Yeah I've heard people say before that he was quite a difficult character – he was very convinced about what he was doing and was difficult to work with.

R: Well, that's very true. The one person who didn't agree with that was Peter Kennedy. He was a white folklorist here, you see. He only died a few years ago, 1980, I think it was, '90, maybe, yeah it was '90, yes. But anyway, Peter was a very good folklorist but he was quite a good friend of Lomax and, as far as I know, he was the only person that's ever said to me that they, you know, and had I got any message for him and so forth. He was very decent about it. I had to be as diplomatic as I could [laughter] and so, "Not just at the moment. I'll let you know if there is something I want." [Laughter]

I: He worked a lot with the BBC as well, didn't he, Mr Lomax?

R: Yes. Oh, the programmes were good; he was good on that really. It was his personal relationships I think were... he was always... by the way in which he responded, it was always kind of subordinating you – "you're following me", you know.

I: But the programmes they were doing, they were just radio or was it television as well?

R: Oh radio really, yes, at that time.

I: Oh which Josh White worked with him a few times I think as well.

R: Probably did. I can't remember them too clearly, to be honest. I remember the fact that I did listen to them and note them but I can't really remember their themes. I'm sure they're all accessible through the BBC, yes, certainly the information anyway. Again, it might be worthwhile talking to John Kennedy, just for possible advice on finding information.

I: Hmm.

- R: But he's quite a bit younger than me so I don't think he would remember it very clearly but he might, I'm not sure.
- I: **Yeah, I might get in touch. I think I've got his email address. Yeah, I've also been trying to find out some information about some of the other guys who were writing about blues in England. The only thing I've managed to find on Albert McCarthy, Stewart Baxter, Rex Harris is that I found an obituary about Max Jones, an obituary to Max Jones.**
- R: Who did that?
- I: **Oh, I can't remember but it was in the... what newspaper was it? The Times, I think.**
- R: Oh it would be because he did occasionally... he certainly wrote for one or two of the newspapers as well as for the magazines. He edited one or two of them. He was a nice guy.
- I: **Albert McCarthy?**
- R: Oh, Mac I knew quite well. He was telling me about somebody trying to push him down the stairs and hitting the guy and the guy was sort of tumbling all the way down and cracking his skull. He was a pretty tough guy actually. One wouldn't guess it but he was. But we got on well. We used to have a meeting, well every month we'd meet contributors for Jazz Monthly so we would discuss the contents not for the next month but the month after that – we'd be two months ahead. And we all met in a wine bar in Oxford Street, well, just off Oxford Street, and I've always had a life long passion... but it wasn't really life long, it suited then, in wine, you know. [Laughter]
- I: **But these guys, they were working full-time. They were making a living from this.**
- R: Well yes, that's right. Mostly they were. Well, then we'd just have writers on the Jazz Monthly team, so to speak, one or two I didn't know very well. There was a husband and wife team, I can't remember their names now. John and Mary something, I don't know, Allcott? I don't know, something like that. But we weren't all there every time but we tried to get together, it was useful. Jazz Journal people always met at Sinclair Traill's house which was very nicely situated overlooking the Thames in Richmond. He did very well. But Mac wasn't as well off as they were so we just had these meetings at the wine bar. It was good though.
- I: **It sounds good, it sounds good.**
- R: We don't do that kind of thing these days but...
- I: **Well, not... The kind of press devoted to jazz and blues is, kind of, very small now and it's very select, for example...**

Appendix 1.7

Interview with Paul Oliver at his home March 1st 2011

Key:

I: Interviewer
R: Respondent

R: ...I was just inventing it, I'd just been doing it only a couple of days ago but I think it just got smothered with the things I've been trying to handle.

I: Yeah, well that's fine.

R: Well, I'll find it for you. It was just the photographs of the panels. It's not really... oh the text that was written on, I think we'll probably need a microscope to read those but I had these photographs and I thought they hadn't done it and then I guess they had but where would they be, and I was hunting around and eventually found them, so I'm quite pleased about that.

I: Yeah because there's talk of putting up a similar exhibition this year, isn't there?

R: Well, yes, I don't think they could do it on the scale of that one because it had over twenty panels and each panel was about ten feet long.

I: And that had the American embassy involved as well, didn't it?

R: Yes, that's right, and they financed it.

I: Well, I heard... because the EBA and Neil and Lorna at the university we have been in contact recently with because... and John mentioned the fact that, would the university be interested in helping out in organising such an event with staging, obviously, and commemorating because it's fifty years, well, no, it's fifty-one now.

R: It's John who's said this?

I: John Anderson.

R: Oh, I see.

I: He sent an email to Neil about it. But also we've been in contact as well because the university has just come up with some money for research and Neil has put together a research proposal which would help to catalogue and create a database and an archive for the materials held at the EBA.

R: Yes, well some of it is anyway.

I: Yes for some of it but particularly because the EBA said they have a lot of materials that are just sitting in boxes and not being used at all and they're not even fully sure exactly what's there. Also because I get the impression from John that it's just him and Michael there so they don't really have the facilities or the resources to maybe do all of that. And also John mentioned that they're putting together a research bid to do a similar thing through National Heritage or something.

R: Yes, I think they are. I don't know if they've sent it in but they have mentioned it, yes.

- I:** So this is why I think Neil wanted to organise a meeting because it's been a year since the last one, where we've been discussing things and things haven't really moved forward. Anyway, this is all above my station so I'm not too sure – I have my own work to focus on.
- There's a few things I wanted to talk about, Paul. I came across an interview you did with Michael for the EBA podcasts.
- R:** Oh, really?
- I:** Yeah. Which I think you recorded a couple of years ago and Michael talks a lot about... he asks you a lot about your trip to America in 1960 and he actually asked you about some things that I didn't know about, which I found extremely interesting, and they were about your experiences with a protest of some kind in a hotel, where you...
- R:** Oh, yes that's right. They were picketing the hotel. Well, it was Memphis, or at least one, because it actually happened twice but the one that was really...
- I:** It happened twice, so you encountered two protests?
- R:** Yes, that's right. But the one in Memphis was the one that was most, kind of, emphatic, really just because we were booked into that hotel. We weren't causing the problem particularly because they didn't know why we were there. The only thing is... I'm just trying to remember now. I think her name was Anne Cook.
- I:** Yeah, because you found a singer among the protestors, didn't you?
- R:** Well, yes, I thought I did; in fact, it was just that they shared the same name. She wasn't actually the singer at all. It was amusing. She was a bit annoyed. Another woman who was also on the picket line was as well, but in a way I think they thought I was exploiting her name and, of course, it was just sheer coincidence really. I mean, they were alright; it calmed off a bit. I think they probably had been treated pretty badly.
- I:** So what were they protesting about?
- R:** Well, they were protesting about the hotels, themselves, as being essentially white hotels. In other words if you were black you couldn't book in there and so forth, rather than interpreting our going there as being an element in that way. We chose... I mean, it was rather odd because it was the Peabody Hotel. I now remember what happened. One was outside the Peabody and the other was at the one that we moved to. And the Peabody, I'd suggested it only because it happened to be the hotel which was the location that was used in the field recording in earlier years. So I thought, well that would be a place that won't have any problems so we'll book in there. So I did, I booked from here. But, of course, we did have problems, it turned out, but we weren't to know that but the biggest problem of it, and I mean, literally, was an immense stuffed chicken which was almost as high as this house. It was just an enormous chicken that they'd made and covered it with immense artificial feathers and so forth, absolutely bizarre. And it was a conference of chicken farmers from all through the state, adjacent states and so forth and they were having this big conference. Of course, we choose it just at that time that was on.
- I:** So it must have been really busy.
- R:** Yes, absolutely but funnily enough, because I got there quite early we had actually got our rooms but they were pleased that we were leaving and I suppose the women who were running the picketing, because they were complaining that no black workers were represented in it, it comes back a bit more what it was all about. And that's why the place was being picketed, not because we were there but we were just assumed to be part of the same group.

- I:** Okay. So obviously that's in a period where there was widespread activism and local people protesting about incidences such as that – employment in white hotels. But then you say there was another protest in the hotel you went to?
- R:** Yes. Well that one was, I think, just a misunderstanding. I think they thought we were picking on them, so to speak, you see, only because we were surprised to find another place being picketed. We'd only just left one. They didn't know that, of course, and I think it was a race situation again. That was a period that was not common but it did occur, so to speak, and it wasn't illegal or anything like that. And in fact their behaviour was really quite reasonable.
- I:** Yeah.
- R:** If anybody got angry about it... I didn't see or hear anybody that did but, of course, there might have been.
- I:** So you never actually felt threatened by any of the...?
- R:** No, not at all. I just felt they didn't understand why we were there and why should they? Nobody told them. But the funny thing was... yes, I remember what her name was now, it was Alice Moore – this was at the second one. Her name was Alice Moore and that was the name of a blues singer.
- I:** Yeah.
- R:** And I thought she might be the daughter or something with her mother's name but, of course, she said, "Why does everybody want to know what we think of blues and gospel?" And she said, "I don't like them at all and nobody I know does." Words to that effect anyway; I can't quite remember what they were.
- I:** Yeah. Because there were a lot of people during the 50s and late 50s going back down to the south and looking for singers, weren't there?
- R:** Yes.
- I:** Alan Lomax went there with Shirley Collins the year before you.
- R:** Oh yes.
- I:** And that's what he wrote *The Land Where the Blues Began* from, from those travels.
- R:** Yes.
- I:** So, I mean, a lot of the older musicians and singers must have been quite used to meeting white researchers, looking for stories and interviewing them. But I heard on this interview with Michael how you got round... because it was illegal for a white woman to be in a car with a black man.
- R:** Oh yes, yeah, definitely.
- I:** So you had to get round that by... and your wife, Val, was lying on the floor in the car.
- R:** Yeah, on the floor of the car which was pretty difficult because it had the bulge in the centre. I had to drive. But we had to come to some conclusion or some way, and there's no way in which she could exchange with anybody because it was this combination of white and black, you see.

- I: And that was just as common in Memphis as it was in smaller towns like Clarkesdale?**
- R: Yes. I think it was a kind of state position, really, rather than just individual cities, so to speak. We were either based in a city or just moving from it and it was a bit hypersensitive then.
- I: Right. So were there any other incidences of things you had to work around because of the sensitivity of the, kind of, racial issues?**
- R: Well surprisingly little, actually, I thought there would be far more. I mean, really it was not a serious problem; the only thing was that there often were signs of discrimination and you had to be aware of them. For example, I was in Dallas, Texas, in a saloon and was looking for a particular pianist and guitarist who played both, Joey Long, and eventually I'd seen a photograph of him and I spotted him. So I said, "I'm just going to go over," and they said, "Oh no, no, don't," but I didn't know why and it was because there was just a little piece of string which was suspended across the room and that was dividing the white area from the black area.
- I: Wow.**
- R: It was absolutely bizarre really. I think they were afraid that if I was deliberately undoing the rope and going through and so on it may cause a real problem. That's the only time that anything I'd done... short of just being not really run out of town.
- I: But you were followed, weren't you?**
- R: We were followed, yes, pretty closely. The police were just behind and just really driving us out, so to speak.
- I: Yes, they were kind of keeping a close eye on you.**
- R: Yes, absolutely, yes.
- I: Wow. Oh, the thing is that struck me about when I heard these in the interview with Michael, Paul, was that you don't really... for example, when Conversation came out, you don't really get a sense of that, because obviously you're quoting excerpts from interviews with the individual people you met, but it's not really a feature of the fact that you experienced some of these instances while you were in America. Was it a conscious decision to leave those out?**
- R: Well, I didn't really want to make too much of it really, quite honestly, because it was a sensitive period but at the same time the kind of discrimination was breaking down considerably and I didn't want to really write anything that somehow just angered people, so really it was a self edit in a way.
- I: Hmm. So you didn't want to seem too politicised, in that sense?**
- R: That's right, or too critical, in a sense. Because I was trying to travel so much and in so many countries and so on, you've just got to be aware that their standards and values and so on are different and there's no reason why we should just anticipate they're going to be exactly the same in the States as here.
- I: Yeah. Also the issue is that the people you met, themselves, because you met... I think in the book I counted about seventy-five names, more or less, something around that figure anyway.**
- R: Yes, I think I interviewed seventy.

- I:** I'm just wondering, because I mentioned earlier that a lot of them had been interviewed before and they'd met people looking for information or wanting to hear their stories, or wanting to record them, certainly from the post war period onwards, from people who were interested in the history of the music, their own stories.
- R:** Who are you thinking of though?
- I:** Well, no, because of the amount of people that travelled to the south, like Frederic Ramsey and Alan Lomax, among others, that travelled to the south.
- R:** That's the major list.
- I:** Yes. But a lot of the people you met had been interviewed before previously, hadn't they?
- R:** Yes, but sometimes very sketchily, it seemed to me.
- I:** Were they ever ambiguous about your... or a bit, not ambiguous, sorry, a bit apprehensive towards you? Was there a...?
- R:** Well, I never really... I can't really recollect anything of that nature but I think it was partly because Chris was with me. Actually, Chris speaks with quite a German accent but the other thing was that my English accent and Chris's accent, they seemed to think was the same.
- I:** Well you were both not American, so.
- R:** Yes, that's right but it was rather funny. But he, on the other hand, has been doing fieldwork and so forth. Mind you, he hadn't started his record company but he was trying to get material and do some recording and so forth. So obviously if the dust could be cleared then it would be all better. In a way I suppose he did that more because, for me, each encounter was something new, really.
- I:** Right, so this period as well was when you travelled to the States just before you had the skiffle era as well, while you were writing Blues Fell This Morning.
- R:** Yes.
- I:** I was wondering what you thought about the... because the mid 50s is when you, kind of, see an explosion of youth audiences and interesting music and you have skiffle with a lot of young amateur musicians taking homemade instruments and playing tunes that they hear from Lead Belly. I wonder how that affected what you were doing at first, how you reacted, because you get the feeling that popular music is a, kind of, mass produced thing and kind of emerges in this period, doesn't it?
- R:** Well, yes, it comes a little later, well just only a bit. There was popular music of other kinds before but just that rock and roll and so forth were just emerging really.
- I:** And R & B as well.
- R:** Yes exactly.
- I:** I'm just wondering how this affected, because obviously the music you were interested in was going back a bit further than that, wasn't it?
- R:** Well, I think it was because of the way in which it was just being treated. It was just something that influenced what really mattered which was rhythm and blues, or rock, and I really wanted to be more informed on what was surviving but I'd been collecting records even during the war. They were mainly ones that black American servicemen had left in Britain so there weren't very

many of those but there were enough to give me the incentive to find out more about them and find out more about the people. The very first one I found that way was Kokomo Arnold.

I: I read the... also the guys who went to America in the 50s, the two French guys.

R: Oh yes. Jacques Demetre and...

I: Yeah. And how they went looking for Kokomo Arnold and they found him in Chicago.

R: Yeah, that's right, yes they did. I was very curious because I haven't seen Jacques Demetre for a good few years. And I was in Paris a couple of years ago and I spoke to somebody, didn't they know where he was now, and so on, and I told them where he stayed before and they looked a bit surprised - I think really because it was quite an expensive area in Paris. So I said, "Well, perhaps it's best if you contact him," so they did but they said, "Well, he won't be able to see you," and I said, "Oh really, why not?" and he said, "Well, he says he's too busy." That's not the kind of thing I'd associate with him at all. I'm sure there was some other reason; either that or he just was feeling his age, I don't just know, it was very difficult to tell. But certainly it was a very kind of short reply and it didn't somehow seem the person I know. So whether he's still with us or not, I just don't know.

I: I haven't heard. Because I came across a couple of the collection of papers that Robert Springer edited from a couple of conferences in France that were on the lyrics in African American music.

R: Oh, yeah.

I: And I often thought I would have imagined that Jacques Demetre maybe would have contributed somehow to that because it was in France, I don't know. I just made that simple connection.

R: It still would make sense.

I: Hmm.

R: I really don't know.

I: But it's interesting because recently, I don't know if you've seen that Keith Richards of The Rolling Stones has published an autobiography, and he talks a lot about the early years of when he was getting into music and he met Mick Jagger and he was playing in different bands across London. And he draws this sharp divide between what he calls the people who were purists, who were interested in a specific kind of blues and were very quick to point out if something was the real thing or not, and musicians who just, you know, lapped up everything they heard whether it was blues, whether it was a hybrid like rock and roll or anything else. And he draws this really sharp divide.

R: But the curious thing is, you see... I hadn't heard that in his case, but that always has been the case, really, because there was a criticism of purism and when we set up a society, friends of mine and myself, we called ourselves The Jazz Purists because that was absolutely considered a thing you wouldn't do. So we did because it did at least state, well, that is what we're adhering to and that's what we're interested in investigating.

I: Okay. And when was it you did the Jazz Purist thing?

R: I would have thought that was, well I suppose early 50s, it may have even been late 40s - it was very early on.

I: And it was you and some friends or...?

R: Yes. Well, most of them have passed on or I've lost any contact with them.

I: Were they music critics like yourself?

R: Well, they were collectors. They weren't normally writing about subjects; they mostly were collecting. One or two were from overseas but perhaps they really hadn't given any thought to that for a long time.

I: [Laughter]. I think I read about that in Roberta Schwartz's book on How Britain Got the Blues.

R: Oh, I don't think I've ever read that.

I: Yeah, she writes, kind of, the history of how people started listening to blues and blues derived music in Britain from the jazz age onwards.

R: Yes, well it was The Jazz Purists that we called ourselves at that time but it was really because that was the subject of criticism. It helped one define what we were seriously interested in.

I: What I get from Keith Richards is that you've got that, kind of... I get the sense that the general public, when they think of blues in Britain, they think of the 1960s, the British invasion bands – British bands like John Mayall, The Stones, then going to the States and selling it back to the Americans, kind of thing, but people were listening to the music ten years before that in England, weren't they?

R: Oh yes. Not many writing about the blues, as such, but certainly about jazz. At that time... Well, there was only Iain Lang, who was the only one who wrote a very thin book.

I: Yeah, he did a chapter on blues.

R: Yes, the book that he did [laughter] is virtually a chapter but he called it the Background of the Blues or something like that.

I: But it was one of the first instances of someone in Britain writing about that.

R: And getting a cover round it, that's right.

I: Yes.

R: Rex Harris was...

I: Yeah, he wrote another...

R: Yes, he wrote a book.

I: And then Max Jones wrote an article.

R: Yes, and Max was so much better than they were – very, very much more informed. He was a very bright person indeed.

I: But when you came back from your trip in the States and you had the exhibition which I think was, what, '63, '64?

R: '64 it was, yes.

- I: At that period you have the blues boom in Britain, don't you?**
- R: Well, I suppose so. Certainly a boom of awareness anyway, and it helped it, of course.
- I: Yes. I was wondering how that affected your work on the subject because you've got a lot of youth interest in music that they regard to be blues or African American and you're studying in a very, you know... From the people you met you were looking for people from a certain period, primarily, so I'm just wondering how that affected your work at all.**
- R: Well I'd been writing anyway, of course. I'm just trying to think of the precise dates really. I can't exactly remember. Anyway, Blues Fell This Morning was published in 1960.
- I: Hmm. And then I think Conversation was 1965.**
- R: Yes. I did one, Screening the Blues, which was really... things had been left out or not dealt with adequately between those. There wasn't much to go back to before that. I mean, the books often either used blues in the title and hardly discussed it or just considered that this was the most common thing as being a part of jazz. So actually trying to get the message across that jazz had been influenced by the blues and could certainly accommodate it, but nevertheless it was music that in a sense was independent of it, that was quite hard to get across. Fortunately I did quite a lot of broadcasting in those days so it was not...
- I: Yeah, the radio.**
- R: Yeah, Radio 3. Well, it went BBC Third programme, Radio 3 and there were two or three other names for it but they all had 3 in it.
- I: Yeah. Because I'm just wondering whether... I mean, you obviously had a... because of your interest in the subject, even like if you look at Blues Fell This Morning, you talk a lot even about African American life. It's kind of anthropological in some ways, it's historical in others because you look at some of the... I mean, it incorporates new deal policies and its effect on African Americans. But in the mid 60s, when you've got all this youth interest in black American music, I'm just wondering whether you felt that that was kind of tarnishing the reality of what blues actually was at all or if you ever felt that kind of threatened, what you were trying to do.**
- R: Well I think I didn't look at it quite the way of my work being threatened. I think mine arose because I think they got it wrong; it was more that really. In using terms like, well, being purist, so to speak, was actually adopting a term which was in a sense a put down and actually making a virtue out of it, if you like. As a policy, what I was really trying to do was to find ways in which I could, if there was this kind of criticism, turn that to get effect, in other words what was the reason for criticism, was it basically social, was it racist or whatever? But there wasn't a serious problem because Cassell, who published my books for quite a while was a very good publisher indeed. They were based in Rose Square in London, higher Oxford Street, and they were very good. Desmond Flower who was the chief editor, was a kind of jazz collector himself and that meant that I didn't have to work terribly hard to convince him that it was worthwhile publishing. So, on the whole I just found it fairly positive.
- I: There was a general greater appreciation of the subject really.**
- R: Well, people were open minded to it. I mean, it was, I think, a period of post war. The war had only finished technically five years before but for many people it was almost existing because it so discoloured views and so on. I think really it was a period where they were open to new thoughts or interpretations of the past and so forth and seeing it again with a bit of a different eyesight. No,

- I think it was a rather interesting period. I often felt that there hadn't been enough writing about it but I think probably one had to have been, you know, a part of it, in a way.
- I:** Yeah. Going back to that Keith Richards, that delineation of, he calls them anoraks, and then there was, you know, cool people. But, obviously, when it comes to music there are those divisions, aren't there, people who devote themselves to something and people who have more passing interest perhaps. I just thought that that was quite interesting. Now we mentioned as well, on the telephone, you mentioned your book *Songsters and Saints*.
- R:** Oh yes.
- I:** Because that book was kind of an attempt as well, wasn't it, correct me if I'm wrong, to kind of look at other aspects of African American music which *Blues Fell This Morning* concentrated on blues, and *Songsters and Saints* was looking at other genres related.
- R:** Well, yes, really I just felt that it was important even to study blues to see it in its context but also it just seemed to me that there were whole areas like the influence of balladry, for example, and in fact that people were still singing ballads and so forth. And the development of gospel out of spiritual, so to speak, these things had really not received enough attention, let alone... if they did it was often in the abstract, it was, well, the nature of the music rather than the people who created it, in other words the fact that it was, in a sense, the creation of numbers of people thinking on similar lines, so to speak. It just didn't seem to have been examined in the States so it was an incentive from my point of view.
- I:** Yes. Because I've been coming across a few recent publications that, kind of, look at the period before 1920, because 1920 is normally taken as, you know, when Mamie Smith's *Crazy Blues*, you know, that heralds the race records era. I've come across a few books, a couple of photocopies of this one which I found a really, really interesting book. This is the front page.
- R:** Oh right. Oh, it's very recent, 2010.
- I:** Yeah.
- R:** Oh, I hadn't come across that, nobody has mentioned it.
- I:** No. It's not the only one on the subject, it's basically... he talks about obviously music before 1920 but he kind of looks at the way... you know, genres as rigidly divided as they were before, racially or categorically. He talks about the interchange, well, the kind of intermixing of musical styles between white and black. They weren't so rigidly divided as they were until the recording industry...
- R:** Yes, I suppose that's true but on the other hand the recording industry was almost taking on the roles that books had done in the past, there was relatively little writing. But I've just noticed names like Odum and Johnson coming up.
- I:** Yeah.
- R:** So that in a way he's drawing from... well, in other words, there were writers on the subject.
- I:** Yes. No, but I found that was quite an interesting... it's just because there seem to be a few books that look at, or maybe look at things that have been marginalised by scholarship or read in a different way, looking at things in a different way. There's another book as well which came out, also in 2010, called *Long Lost Blues* which looks at the song sheet market between 1910 and 1920.

R: Oh John Anderson would be interested in that.

I: **Yes. Peter Muir, I think, wrote it.**

R: Yes. Well I don't know. I'm not quite sure. I've certainly not come across that before. Was that published over here or was it in the States?

I: **Let me have a look. This one was published... well, this one has been published over here, Durham and London, it says. The other one was... No, Chicago, University of Illinois.**

R: A-huh.

I: **Actually, Paul, I recently... did you see one of the books on Big Bill Broonzy which came out?**

R: Yes, I've got those, yes.

I: **There is the one which is called The Recorded Journey of Big Bill Broonzy by Roger House.**

R: It's over there, actually, I think. I think that's the title, it might have been the subtitle, I'm not sure.

I: **Because I was asked to review it for the African American review.**

R: Oh yes?

I: **Yeah.**

R: That's good.

I: **I was just wondering what you thought of it?**

R: Well... We've been referring to them. I've obviously put them somewhere but I can't think where.

I: **I've got a copy of it anyway so I've seen it. I was just interested to know what you thought about it.**

R: Well, it's just the fact that there were two of them, you see.

I: **Yeah because one has not actually been released yet, I don't believe. Is it Robert Riesman's book?**

R: Yes, that's certainly... I'm very puzzled by that. It wasn't that one, I don't think. Oh maybe I've got it up... oh yes, perhaps I've got it upstairs in what I call the blues room. I've probably taken it up there already. [Laughter]

I: **I wrote a review of the book and I'm hoping that I will have the opportunity to review Rob Riesman's one which is called I Feel So Good.**

R: Yes, that's right, yes. I Feel So Good.

I: **Have you seen that one?**

R: Yes, I've got it, yes.

I: **Have you looked at it? Do you know what it's...?**

R: Well, I haven't got very far with either; I really haven't had the time, actually. I thought I would but all sorts of things have happened.

I: Okay, well I think I've asked you about all my curiosities for today.

R: [Laughter] Well did you want to see any material or anything?

I: Well if you had that stuff on The Story of the Blues I'd be...

R: Well, I'll show you. I've got some upstairs; you can go and have a look at it. I don't know that there's as much as...

(End of recording)

Appendix 1.8

Interview with Paul Oliver at his home in July 2011

Key:

I: Interviewer
R: Respondent

I: Okay.

R: ...in fact, it's nice to have some company because feeling unwell and also not seeing anybody is pretty depressing really.

I: Yeah, I had the same thing a couple of years ago when me and my girlfriend, we moved to Italy when I was teaching English, but for the first six months I was there on my own and it was fine and I've always been okay when I've been on my own but for about ten days I was very, very ill with some kind of stomach virus or something. I couldn't keep any food down and for about the first three or four days I had a really, really high fever.

R: Oh gosh.

I: And I was completely alone.

R: Oh, miserable, yes.

I: Yes, the first few days I could hardly stand up so it was really, really horrible to be on my own so I can imagine what that's like.

At the moment I'm looking at Conversation with the Blues and I've been looking at the use of oral history and photography together and the period that you went to America and the book came out, you've got oral history as kind of taking off as a kind of academic discipline in the 60s with Studs Terkel and Hard Times, that kind of thing. Then you've got the republishing of the photography from the Farm Security Administration, books like Walker Evans: American Photographs and...

R: Yes, I collected mostly just from them. I think probably I chose items that were similar but Farm Security Administration and the Library of Congress were very closely linked, really, and they had the photographs. In the Library of Congress, in those days, in Washington, they had a separate section where you could see the photographs and so forth, and also they had box files of them and when I said that I wanted to use some for some of my writing and so on, they said, "Well, just choose." And I was amazed. I had extraordinary freedom. There was a limit to the number I could take but they were surprisingly generous. I even got the impression that they were not the people that had taken them but were the next generation or something because they didn't sort of suggest particularly boxes of anything; they just left me to find what I wanted.

I: Hmm. So you used some of those photographs in the Story of the Blues, didn't you?

R: Yes, that's right.

I: But the ones you used in conversation were all the ones...

R: Yes, those are the ones that I took, yes.

- I:** Did the Farm Security photography influence you for the trip or did you have that in mind when you were taking the photographs?
- R:** Well can you give me an example of what you mean? I'm not quite... I've never been asked that question.
- I:** No it's just the, erm... I mean a lot of... Actually, let me go back and rephrase the question. Because up until that point all writing on the blues had been mainly done writing and obviously you'd done some illustrations but this was the first time, well one of the first times that there was photography. Why did you want to use photography as well? What did you think it would...?
- R:** Well, I think what I was... I think it had a slight reflection of my architectural interest as well. It wasn't that I was photographing the architecture but one of the areas of the macro-architecture studies which were just really generating in my mind at the time, was relation to the environment and the environment in itself and the degree to which that is creatively used by particular people. And I thought that, therefore, in talking about blues I didn't want to just be focusing only on the singer or musician or the record company but more of the environment in which they worked or what they reflected.
- I:** Okay.
- R:** It was an important aspect for me.
- I:** I mean, because before that, in *Blues Fell This Morning*, you talk about the relation of the music to African American life so the environment is essential to that, isn't it?
- R:** Yes. Yes, but it also contributed to it. When I say environment there, it's partly the natural environment, partly the environment that's created by communities or villages or whatever it is, you see. Yes, so African American environment certainly is...
- I:** Okay. So because you took photographs on the trip, before you took the photographs, was there any element of, for example, had you seen some of the photographs? For example, in *12 Million Black Voices*, Richard Wright's... that photo documentary style, did that kind of...?
- R:** Well, that certainly was influential partly because I knew Richard, as you know, so obviously the book was important. I mean, curiously enough the selection of the photographs wasn't done by Richard. I was very surprised actually.
- I:** No it wasn't.
- R:** I think it was done by discretion but at that time they weren't so readily available. I think it was more complicated getting them. The other problem was that Richard was very much out of favour with the United States at the time which was the reason why he was in France, you see. So that was a bit odd. Anyway, that's really how that happened.
- I:** Okay. When you were taking the photographs themselves, how did people react? Were there different reactions to being photographed?
- R:** Well, yes, I think you could say there were different reactions. I've brought down... yes, the largest format were... one has got a blue spine and the other one has got a red one. Are they there or not?
- I:** Right, okay. On the desk?

R: Well, I thought they were on the desk, maybe they're over here, perhaps they're in the other room, I don't know.

I: **Don't worry, Paul.**

R: Well, it's important I think because you'll... Oh, there they are, those two there.

I: **These two folders?**

R: Yes.

I: **Okay.**

R: That has a lot of the photographs in.

I: **Oh, from the...?**

R: That I had taken, the originals, in other words.

I: **Okay.**

R: Well, I always feel that they give a better idea because they haven't been edited to fit the space.

I: **And they're all catalogued.**

R: Well they were. I mean, funny they're not kept in that catalogue but Amanda - I can't remember her surname at the minute - who lives not terribly far away, she did the cataloguing with a view to getting them in sequence but the only thing is that I don't think she really enquired enough as to quite whether that was the sequence that was most practical for me.

I: **Yeah. Yeah, because I've noticed that photograph of Little Walter.**

R: Oh yes, well, versions of it of course because the one that's best known is the one where Little Walter is sitting at the bottom.

I: **With Roosevelt Sykes and Sunnyland Slim and...**

R: Yes.

I: **Yeah. I've been looking very closely because there is that element of the kind of Farm Security Administration style photography in some of them.**

R: Really?

I: **Yeah. But obviously I think... that one wasn't in there.**

R: Which one is that?

I: **That street one.**

R: Oh yes, well that was in Maxwell Street. The next shot is also.

I: **Yes, that one is in the book.**

R: Maxwell and I think it's Henman or something, the road that came into it anyway.

I: So it was just literally to give a, kind of, visual reference of the world that you're referring to, isn't it, of the world you're describing and talking about?

R: Well yes. And some things are a surprise, you see, for example, that place here, (unclear 0.08.51 – 0.08.52) doesn't look very much and that's actually Jimmy Cotton walking across the road, and that's where Muddy Walters was playing. Well I'd expected something far more glamorous.

I: And grand, yeah.

R: Exactly.

I: I always remember this one photograph, Paul, actually of Mance Lipscomb, is it?

R: Yes.

I: I'll see if I can find it.

R: I don't know which one you're remembering but the name is right.

I: Where he's playing... That's J.B. Lenoir; he's one of my favourites.

R: Oh yes, J.B. Well J.B. really, he was very generous. He acted a lot of his time in Chicago just taking me to places, assuring people that I was doing it because I was interested in what they were doing and not because I was... because, you see, it was a dodgy time. Some people were very afraid that I was doing it for political reasons or exploitation so J.B. came around and reassured them. We were very good friends. He died very young.

I: Yeah, it was a not very nice way to go as well. I think he bled to death because they wouldn't treat him after a car accident.

R: Oh was it, that bad? I knew that he...

I: Yeah.

R: Oh awful.

I: Yeah, such a nice guy too. That's Alex Moore.

R: Alex Moore.

I: And...

R: Let me see, the other one.

I: The other one, I can't remember his name but I love the fact that he's in his socks.

R: Yes. I just can't remember, but anyway, I've generally written in pencil on the back.

I: Yes, that's a new photo there. There's a white piano player as well.

R: Which one is that?

I: That one.

R: Yeah, this one I think at a concert actually, which the others aren't but I seem to remember... Oh, Robert Pete Williams and Lockie Parker, yes. Yes that's right; it was an event at Montreal of all places.

I: **Okay. Oh so that's from 1970? Right, so it's a bit later.**

R: That's right, yes. Yes that was Lockie Parker, yes. I don't know what happened to him. Robert Pete Williams, of course, was very successful and he came over here.

I: **I love that photograph.**

R: Well that's funny, really. I don't know what happened to it because I took one of Lightnin' as well at the same time.

I: **That's outside his house, isn't it?**

R: Yes, that's his house. We were all discussing him really.

I: **That's the logging.**

R: Yes, the logging camps. It was a good example really, that one, because I did go to others but...

I: **Yeah.**

R: That's Daisy in Beale Street. That's where John Lee Hooker started as... he guided people to their seats. Not the kind of occupation you think of.

I: **There's Lightnin'.**

R: Yes, that's Lightnin' there, yes. That was him... that's a real indication of the date because that was the Sputnik bar and they're trying to show how modern and up to date they were. [Laughter]

I: **Yeah.**

R: Willie Dixon.

I: **He's a big guy.**

R: Yes.

I: **You see, this is another interesting photo, I found. This is in the book as well.**

R: That's Mary Johnson and that's her mother.

I: **They don't look very happy that you're taking the photo. [Laughter]**

R: Well, they've never been photographed at all, well just for publication. No I think that's quite true but they weren't resistant at all; they were just a little uncomfortable, that's all.

I: **Were any of them, for example, the fact here, I mean, they've obviously let you into their house to take the photo. Was there anything about coming into the house that they were...?**

R: No, not really. I think what made a tremendous difference in that kind of respect was my wife being with me.

I: **Okay.**

R: But I think probably they're just not used to sitting and being photographed in-house kind of thing. This was Edith Johnson.

I: **Yes.**

R: She was more relaxed. I interviewed her but...

I: **Lonnie Johnson.**

R: Lonnie, yeah. I'm just trying to think... Is that, oh, wait a minute, is that Edith Johnson's son? Yes, James John Johnson.

I: **James John Johnson.**

R: Yes that's right, yes. He was actually the son. You would think that he looks much older. I was really surprised.

I: **Exactly, that's true. Lonnie Johnson, I remember these one.**

R: Yes, that's De De Pierce. He was very ill and I didn't think he was going to survive but in fact he did and they recorded... I saw somebody who had actually got a CD of him recently.

I: **Wow. That's (unclear 0.14.35) Jimmy, isn't it?**

R: Yes that's right, yes. He was a nice guy actually too, good fun. He lived underneath, well, these were the steps, Muddy Waters's house. Muddy Waters had a basement so he made it available for people who couldn't afford...

I: **Kind of like a community?**

R: Yes, that's right.

I: **Henry Townsend.**

R: Yes, that's it.

I: **That's Maxwell Street, isn't it, again?**

R: Yes.

I: **Ah, now this photo I wanted to ask you about. I've always wondered about that guy at the back.**

R: Ah, no idea who it was.

I: **Because it looks like as if he's been beaten up; his face is swollen.**

R: Oh yes, that's a good point. That was actually Chris.

I: **That was Chris next to him.**

R: Yes. I suppose he did rather but there's nothing really about the occasion that suggested that. I suppose he could have fallen on his face or something.

I: **Yeah he could have done. So these are the originals, Paul, that you...**

R: Well mostly, yeah. And the blue file as well.

I: Now this picture I wanted to show you of Mance Lipscomb. There's two of him: there's that one and then there's this one. Okay, now this picture here that you took, was this a spontaneous photo or did you arrange it?

R: No, it was spontaneous. He's just sitting on his front step and I was interviewing him and he, actually, had no family himself so strictly speaking she wasn't a granddaughter, she was granddaughter-in-law, so to speak, and this I think is her brother or something and his granddaughter.

I: Okay. Like a great niece or...

R: Yes, sort of thing, whatever. Yes, and she was just peeping, wondering what was going on.

I: Because a lot of the photography, like, of Dorothea Lange and people like that, you know, the Migrant Mother, that famous photograph?

R: Oh.

I: A lot of effort... so photography, they've got the people in the photographs, they'd never quite look at the camera but they're always looking up into the distance somewhere, so that's why it looked like that.

R: Oh I see, yes.

I: But most of the photos were... you just took them as you were interviewing?

R: Well, yes, I just wanted to take a shot of Mance, you see, playing, and he was prepared to do so but he just wanted to sit down. In fact, I've got somewhere another shot that I took which was looking down, not exactly a lane but you see the front of the house and he was sitting more or less, not quite in shadow but shortly after it.

I: There's another... Will Shade, isn't it?

R: Yes.

I: Curtis.

R: A-huh.

I: I'm just trying to find... This one, this was inside the house, wasn't it?

R: Yes, that's in Mance's house. Well the thing was, we went inside and I did take the photograph, that's one of the kiddies, you see, but I was and still am very sensitive to insects and so forth. And it's not evident in the photograph but there were bugs on the wall and it was pretty... the whole interior seemed to be fully of these little creatures, you see, so I didn't waste any time there – I took one shot and then got out again. So that was it really.

I: Was that the time when... He was discovered not long before that, wasn't he? He'd never recorded.

R: No. It was Mac McCormick and Chris who found him really on the way coming up to meet me in Memphis. They had only found him a few days before. He was, well, a very nice guy really but I think was overstrained by some of the recordings that he made later.

I: Hmm. Right, because the year you went to America as well was when Frederic Ramsey released *Been Here and Gone*.

R: Yes. He'd just released it so it was very helpful to me actually.

I: Yeah? Because he did a similar kind of thing, didn't he, but without interviewing people as much?

R: No, no he didn't interview... no, no, he just, I think, went to different places down the... he didn't want to be just in the delta, he wanted to be in other parts of Mississippi and so on, you know, and Louisiana.

I: But the photograph as well is kind of similar as well, isn't it?

R: Yes, I think, in a sense it is. Yes I think it was quite, sort of, influential, less formal anyway that was usual at the time.

I: Hmm. What route did you take when you got there because you were in America for three months or so, weren't you?

R: Yes.

I: So July to September, wasn't it?

R: Well it was.

I: And did you start in the South and work your way North or was it the other way round?

R: I think... I'm just trying to think... You see, I managed to get some funding.

I: Yeah, from the American Embassy.

R: Well the American Embassy supported it. They recommended a... it was for leaders and specialists.

I: Yeah. It's in here. It's the Foreign Specialist Grant made under the Foreign Specialist Programme at the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs.

R: Yes, that's it. Well they called it, I mean, at the American Embassy, Leaders and Specialists, but it was in fact you could apply for the leaders' one or for the specialist, well mine was obviously the specialist but hardly anybody applied for these things but on the whole I don't think people knew about them. So anyway, I'm just trying to think.

I: Because in the book it, kind of, starts off in the south and then you gradually get to Chicago and Detroit towards the end.

R: Yes, but I think we were in New York first of all. I'm just trying to think how we got to the south.

I: Because Chris met you in... He was there for the south, wasn't he?

R: Yeah, we met in Memphis, you see, and then travelled south from there. Oh it's all coming back now. Yeah, first of all, I was actually in, I think, Philadelphia, and then we met up with one or two of the writers at the time. Oh, I can't remember their names at the moment, but anyway, oh it's crazy. I haven't put my mind to this for so long. But anyway...

I: You met a couple of other American writers though?

R: Yes, yes. I probably mentioned them.

I: Wasn't it Sterling Brown?

R: Oh yes, Sterling Brown.

I: Leon Virgil?

R: Yes, I can't remember him very well now but certainly...

I: Larry Cohen?

R: Yes.

I: Bob Koester, John Steiner, Harry Oster?

R: Yes. I mean, most of them actually did very little really. Just show me the list of names and I can tell you which ones were influential. Anyway, Sterling Brown particularly, Len Kunstadt, Bob Kester and John Steiner, yes. But then of course, as you can see, names go further south. In fact, Joe Von Battle I'd also been in touch with. Joe Von Battle had Gold Star, I think it was, the record label. So many different people but, anyway, initially the talks were more official, the ones with... they didn't take an official stance but it was to check why I got the grant and what I was planning on doing and where I intended to go. But really they worked on that, so I then went up to Washington, Library of Congress and so forth, then to Detroit, and really the first place that we spent any time - I say we because my wife was with me, you see - was Detroit and then we went from Detroit to Chicago.

I: And then worked your way south from there?

R: Yes. Well actually, quite rapidly from Chicago to Memphis. The visit to St Louis. I did on the way back. After we had done the southern trip in detail we then went to California and Chris stayed there. He got a... it wasn't 1,760 but very like fifty and a half, and I wondered what the half was and the half was what he lived in which was a little cabin, log cabin, at the back of a house.

I: God.

R: But 1,700, just not another house in sight. They used these numbers to indicate if the standard scale of sites were eventually developed and that would be the number of the house but nothing else was numbered - it was most strange to me. That was in California.

Then we went back via New York. It was terrific really but all very new. But Memphis, it was funny because we'd agreed to meet Chris at the Peabody Hotel because we knew that the Peabody had been used by the record companies when they were recording in Memphis so they'd hire a couple of rooms. So we thought well that's bound to be the best known name so we duly met there. But it was quite extraordinary, there was no room for us at all because the entrance lobby, which was quite large, was full by an enormous chicken which was about sixteen feet high and it was stuffed with chicken feathers and so forth all over it, you see, and it was a conference of chicken dealers and farmers. They had one a year in those days. So all of them had taken all the rooms, so we went off in search of another hotel, eventually found one, got a room, that was okay and then the following morning discovered that it was picketed by blacks who were against this... well, higher segregation of their position.

I: So that was in Memphis?

- R: That was in Memphis, yes. But it was funny and in a way, a very useful start really.
- I: **Yes, yes.**
- R: And then in Memphis I got one or two names including the name of the chap who, well, Harry Oster, who did a lot of the managing of the recording that took place in Memphis and he gave me quite a lot of clues on people to contact and so on. So that worked out very well really.
- I: **I'm going to the States in October. I managed to get a grant from the American Studies Association.**
- R: Oh I'm very pleased to hear that.
- I: **Yes, it was quite a nice surprise. I'm going to the Blues Archive at the University of Mississippi, in Oxford, Mississippi, because they have a huge collection of photographs, recordings and periodicals.**
- R: When did they draw that up?
- I: **Oh, I think Charles Keel was in charge of it. No, not Charles Keel, William Ferris was looking after it for a few years but I think he's now in North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I think, perhaps. So I'm going to go there and then I'm hoping to spend the weekend in Clarksdale and around there and I've never been to Clarksdale before so I was hoping to...**
- R: Well, have you been to other parts of Mississippi?
- I: **I've been through it before but I haven't seen much of it. I've been to Memphis and New Orleans before but I'm going on my own this time. I was going to go to the Riverside Hotel where Bessie Smith died.**
- R: That's right. Of course, I haven't been there for many years now but certainly at that time, and I think they would still be making that evident.
- I: **Yeah, yeah. I've seen clips of it on the internet. So that will be interesting and there's a huge blues festival in Helena, that weekend, so I might try and sneak off to that and see a few shows as well.**
- What else was I going to ask you? Oh yes, the fact that you were interviewing people and getting them to give their side of the story was one of the reasons why the book, when it came out, was really well received - I've been reading some of the reviews. When you were interviewing, did the fact that... for example, Alan Lomax had been interviewing blues singers a lot and he obviously did Mister Jelly Roll where he did all those recordings with Jelly Roll Morton, telling stories, and Yannick Bruynoghe had done it with Big Bill Broonzy as well. Did that have any bearing on what you did?**
- R: Only in the sense that I didn't really want to do what they were doing. I really wanted... I suppose underlying it all was why does one become a blues singer? Do you have kind of ambition for that and so forth? I didn't want to ask the questions in that way precisely because it might even be really confusing for them but underlying it was that really. Most of all I think it was blues in its context that was really interesting me but the position is going to be taken differently in different places and different regions.
- I: **Yeah. Studs Terkel called his book Hard Times where people were interviewed about the depression in the 60s. He called it a memory book. Would that apply to yours as well, to Conversation? Because a lot of them talk about their early life experiences working and when they first started playing music and...**

- R: Well obviously they were partly responding to questions that I'd asked. I didn't exactly have a set of questions but, kind of, subject areas, approximately. I just wanted to know a bit about their family, what their background was when they'd heard blues when they were young, so those were the sort of things I wanted to find out, but I wasn't too rigid.
- I: **So you were just letting them, kind of...?**
- R: Yes. Some were, well I suppose it's the same wherever you do interviews – some people are talkative and some people have to be continually prompted.
- I: **Yes.**
- R: There's no easy way of arriving at it. What I did find is I was just so thankful that Val came with me because she seemed to be sure, the very fact that she was there seemed to assure a lot of people who would otherwise have been either a bit nervous or a bit suspicious of a white British person asking questions. What Val did, where it was possible, she went to church with the wife of the interviewees like Wade Walton so on the Sunday I'd be with Wade and she would go to church with Wade's wife. And as much as anything, it was just that we found that made an enormous difference - people seemed to be far more confident about us if she did that.
- I: **Yes, I can see why. You mentioned Wade Walton but he took you to, like a metal shed, like a barrel house, didn't he?**
- R: Oh yes, yeah.
- I: **And you said that some people were kind of openly hostile?**
- R: Well that was very extraordinary really. It really was in (unclear 0.33.42) and obviously Val couldn't go to that. It was very, very rough, very small really but absolutely packed - you could hardly breathe in it. I couldn't believe it could be so solid of people, so difficult to get from just one bit of it to another and there was a table and they invited me to sit at it but nobody was going to move and let me do so. The whole thing was strange really.
- I: **So why were they hostile?**
- R: I think as much as anything with Wade for taking me there. Well I think really it's just that it far exceeded numbers for anybody there.
- I: **And the fact that you were white most probably.**
- R: Yeah exactly. In a way it's understandable because it was a kind of interference with something they'd established.
- I: **It was their own thing, yeah.**
- R: Yes.
- I: **Hmm. So in many ways the trip was a way of kind of verifying some of the things you'd written about in Blues Fell This Morning?**
- R: Well certainly yes, I'm not quite sure I went with that in mind, expressed that way. I was really wanting to do the research. On the other hand, I wanted the research that I'd like to have been able to have done before if I had the money or the opportunity to do it. So in a way I suppose I was looking at confirmation. My intention was to find out more about the lives of the singers and what they sang - was that a reflection of their lives or just the way they saw other people?

I: Hmm. You paid some of the singers, didn't you?

R: Yes. I actually paid them all but it was a very small sum, although it was quite generous at the time, it was 25 dollars.

I: So each person you interviewed or photographed you gave...?

R: Well, interviewed, yes.

I: Interviewed, 25 dollars?

R: Afterwards. I didn't tell them before; I just wanted to be sure that I wasn't buying the interview.

I: Ah okay, so they didn't know that you would pay them?

R: No, that's right. And they did have to apply for it but I gave them a little form and they sent that direct to the BBC. The BBC were very good; they paid everybody.

I: So did most people apply for it, yeah?

R: Yes, a surprising number did. They often got somebody else to write it, one could clearly see, but yes, basically. Because obviously not knowing how many people I may be interviewing I couldn't really carry a great sum of money and expect to get the...

I: Yeah, obviously, so in that way they weren't... you know, you didn't tell them, okay, if I interview you, I'll pay you. They had no idea?

R: No.

I: So it was kind of like a little welcome surprise for them, I'd imagine.

R: Yeah, exactly. No it was a way of saying thank you. Some of them didn't follow it up but most did. One or two did on behalf of one or two of the others, like Little Brother Montgomery did for his group of friends, actually. Well like Sunnyland Slim and so on, who I would have thought was equally capable of arranging it himself because he's fairly bright really, but anyway, Little Brother did it really for the group. So it depended a bit.

I: Hmm, yeah, yeah. Oh, see, I never knew that as well. I think that's a really interesting thing, the fact that they didn't, so they weren't conditioned by that transaction to give certain information or... oh right, I've exhausted my list of questions.

R: Oh, if there's any more general things...

(End of recording)

Appendix 1.9

Interview with Tom McGuinness on June 17th, 2011

Key:

I: Interviewer

R: Respondent

R:as good as they used to be in a club, being bigoted and narrow-minded. And then Bo Diddley came on, which was the main reason I was there, and I then I left before the Everly Brothers. I wouldn't stay for the Everly Brothers.

I: Really?

R: And yet a year before that I thought the Everly Brothers were pretty good at that sort of pop rock teen angst. And a year after that I did Ready Steady Go with the Everly Brothers and I saw one of the greatest gigs I've ever seen because... I'll keep it short but after the sound check and everything for the show, the Everly Brothers stayed in the room playing acoustically, singing. They did about half an hour.

I: What was that on then?

R: On Ready Steady Go, on the recording of the programme. So when I say I saw the greatest gig, it wasn't a gig - they were sitting looking at each other and singing folk songs and things like that. But at that particular period I was very narrow minded and wouldn't stay to listen to them.

I: I've been reading a lot of... There's a lot of new books that have come out that are, kind of, rewriting history.

R: Revisionist.

I: Yes. A guy, in particular who I met last year, Elijah Wald.

R: No, I don't know him. I haven't read much of blues -

I: He wrote the book...

R: - literature recently.

I: Well, he wrote a book about six or seven years ago now about Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues.

R: Right.

I: And saying how Robert Johnson became, kind of, this thing that was romanticised and mythologized. In reality, in the 20s and 30s people like Leroy Carr were much more successful and nobody really had ever heard of Robert Johnson, so he was kind of taking that kind of opinion.

R: Funnily enough, I've just started doing, with a blues band, as an acoustic number, (In the Evening) When the Sun Goes Down.

I: Oh really?

R: Because I love Leroy Carr's version but in fact the first version I heard was Lonnie Donegan, like a whole generation.

I: **He was the first way in for a lot of people I suppose.**

R: Oh huge, huge, you could say a whole generation, this is the simplification but a whole generation picked up guitars because of Lonnie Donegan.

I: **The Lead Belly songs he was doing.**

R: Yeah, but I mean we didn't really know where the music came from or anything.

I: **It wasn't that much of an issue, was it, for some people?**

R: He did country stuff and everything; he mixed it all up. I didn't really see things, I still don't, I'm, sort of, colour blind about music.

I: **That's probably the best way to be.**

R: I like George Jones and I like Duke Ellington. I like Christy Moore and I like Ali Farka Touré. [Laughter] And I don't know where...

I: **Yeah.**

R: So even when I started out... Listen, do you want to begin where you want to begin?

I: **No, that's fine. I've kind of got it loosely structured anyway so I'm kind of happy to ramble on.**

R: For me, it's only in retrospect that I can see that almost everything I liked was either black music or was influenced by black music but I didn't think about that at the time. Since I got your notes I've been thinking about, well, what were the first things I heard? I grew up in Wimbledon, not in the middle class picture of Wimbledon, I grew up in a place where everyone was called McGuinness, Brennan, O'Brien or, you know.

I: **Very Irish.**

R: Yeah, or O'Connell. And no-one had any money. The first music I remember impinging on me, apart from hearing the top music that was on the BBC, which was pretty boring most of them, but the first thing... it was the two boys downstairs. We were in a house divided into two flats, the Connelly brothers, in about 1950, '51 they started buying Hank Williams records and Earl Bostic records. Do you know of Earl Bostic?

I: **Yeah.**

R: A honking sax player.

I: **Recently, yeah.**

R: So I was hearing black R & B which was Earl Bostic and I was hearing white country, Hank Williams, then I read about Hank Williams years later and it's funny how things stick in your mind. He learned a lot about guitar playing from a black street musician called Tee Tot, who lived in the town where Hank Williams grew up – I couldn't tell you. And then you could say that when Hank Williams and Earl Bostic got fused together, that became Elvis and Carl Perkins and

all of that. So although at the time I didn't see things in terms of black music, almost everything that I've loved since then have been out of black music whether it's jazz, soul, rock and roll.

Even before rock and roll, I remember being quite impressed by Johnnie Ray when I was really young and then you read a bit about Johnnie Ray and he got a bit of his act from black performers, he used to pretend to cry and fall on his knees and everything like that. That was before James Brown but I'm sure James Brown got it...

[Child cries]

R: There were gospel singers who would do that when they got emotional, when you read about it. Anyway, you read about Johnnie Ray, and Johnnie Ray, like Dinah Washington, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, so even the white people that I liked... that I never saw in terms of black music really.

I: **But even in that documentary that I saw you in, that Blues Britannia that they did, you get the impression that even though people realised it was black music, the race issue wasn't that much of a factor generally, I don't think, unless it was for certain people like Paul who were writing about it.**

R: Well, yeah, and I think all of the race issues, I mean, I'm talking now when I get into my late teens, early twenties, by then one had some knowledge of how bad the condition was for black people in America and we were also aware of anti-apartheid in South Africa. If you had any interest in politics by then you had learnt the conditions that people were living in then. But I didn't watch... if I saw Louis Armstrong in a film like High Society, I wouldn't look at him and think of him as a representative of the downtrodden people. I just didn't have any concept like that at the time in my early teens or anything; that came a bit later. And certainly by the time, I mean, a successful band like Manfred Mann were very aware of the politics of the south.

But you know the other thing is, I remember having a Swedish au pair back in the late 60s and I said, "Sweden seems to have a very open attitude when it comes to terms of race," and she said, "Yes, we don't have any black people living there." Well I guess that was what it was like for us in the 50s; there weren't any black people so race didn't impinge on our daily life. Does that make sense to you?

I: **Yeah.**

R: Because it was very true. I can remember when I first met a black person. I can remember being really surprised. I can remember exactly where I was and it would be 1967 and I was outside a pub in Suffolk. We were filming what would be called a pop video now and these three young girls came along and they were, "Oh, it's the man from down the road." One of them was black and she had a cockney accent and I remember thinking, wow, that's weird, you know. You just didn't see black people. So the fact that it was black, you know. I mean, until rock and roll came along what was I listening to? I was listening to The Light Programme which would play very little black music of any sort, the occasional bit of jazz.

I: **There was a bigger following for jazz in the beginning, wasn't there?**

R: Oh jazz was the thing and it was modern jazz or trad jazz and it was divided along those lines and if you liked one you didn't like the other.

I: **Because I've been reading through a lot of the jazz press of the post war period and it does get very dreary but it's also quite interesting because you've got magazines like Jazz Journal.**

R: I used to get Jazz Journal. That was one magazine I used to get, probably before rock and roll came along, '55, and even when rock and roll had come along, because I remember reading some

really important articles in there, to me, important, to what happened with my life. I think there were a couple of Belgians who went off to Chicago.

I: Oh the two French guys?

R: Were they French?

I: Yeah, Jacque Demetres and Marcel Chauvard.

R: And I think they published a book about it eventually in French which I've never seen and it was illustrated with photographs. I remember thinking, you know, bear in mind that reading about black music in Chicago, it's like reading about something really exotic, really out of my experience.

I: Really far away, yeah.

R: So seeing photographs of Silvio's and places like that, the clubs, and people playing in these smoky clubs, it just sort of added to the whole romance of the thing.

I: Yeah, it must have done.

R: So reading about that but, you know, I was getting the magazines too. Why do you get magazines? You get magazines because they're interesting but you also want to walk round holding them so that you look hip. [Laughter]

I: But they had quite a select readership though, didn't they, Jazz Journal?

R: Jazz Journal was a very small readership. It's still going, more power to its elbow, but at least I think it is.

I: Yeah. There's a few others, because Paul wrote for it in the late 50s. He also wrote for Music Mirror.

R: Music Mirror I don't know at all. Record Mirror I know. So Record Mirror was a pop magazine but had a bit of jazz in it and ultimately really got into the whole R & B thing with a journalist called Norman Joplin who wrote in Record Mirror. And he would write about Slim Harpo and Chuck Berry when it wasn't the thing to write about, but I don't remember Music Mirror at all.

I: Okay. Well that's what I think he kind of began with but there are others, and I've seen, from the photographs, I always got the impression that, in the 50s anyway, it was a bit elitist, or not, I don't know...

R: What, Jazz Journal?

I: Yes. Do you think?

R: Well, no, I think it was. And also it was cliques. No-one liked... If I remember Jazz Journal rightly, they didn't really like English jazz at all.

I: No, no, they didn't.

R: It only liked... and it didn't... I don't think it was very big on too much of like... it wasn't into John Coltrane or Nick Colman or anything like that.

I: Oh no, into the...

R: It was into Buck Clayton and mainstream, Duke Ellington stuff and Louis Armstrong but not after 1927 or something.

I: **Yes, they were like traditionalists... yeah.**

R: I don't know. It opened my eyes to certain bits.

I: **But then there was Melody Maker as well.**

R: Melody Maker.

I: **Which you guys used a lot for the ads.**

R: But that was later. If we're talking about the '50s, I used to buy the Record Mirror because it always had the American 100 chart in it and also with a friend who was more into the country side of music – I was at school with him – we used to go and buy Billboard, we used to go up from Soho and buy Billboard and we'd just read it from cover to cover. Again, it seemed exotic, you'd see that... I don't know, The Dominoes that had a breakout hit in Houston, and we could enjoy that fact for ten minutes.

I: **[Laughter]**

R: For me, Melody Maker became more important when I started being a working musician but prior to that I'd say Record Mirror was the one I got. It had a guy called Tony Hall who wrote for it who was a record plugger for Decca and a DJ on Radio Luxembourg and Decca put out an awful lot of black music on the London American label. They used to cover things in the Record Mirror but Melody Maker was much more still interested in that jazz area - they did like some English jazz like Humphrey Lyttelton and John Dankworth.

I: **Well they published every week, didn't they?**

R: Yes. And Record Mirror did.

I: **Oh, they did as well, right.**

R: It was a weekly... There was Record Mirror, Melody Maker, New Musical Express, Disc and Sounds which were all...

I: **NME came out in '58 though, didn't it?**

R: No, no much earlier than that.

I: **Was it?**

R: Much earlier. Melody Maker goes back even earlier. NME was out in the early '50s. In fact, NME, I think, published the first chart.

I: **Yeah I remember reading about that but I always thought it came later for some reason.**

R: No, no. It was definitely the dance band of the Sinatra and the Dean Martin era when New Musical Express began.

I: **Because I know Melody Maker were publishing during the war as well.**

R: Yeah. I think they were writing in the 30s first.

I: Yeah you can go quite far back with those.

R: And Max Jones who used to write on it was very much that same generation of left leaning music lovers but he was fairly bigoted.

I: Yeah?

R: Well I don't mean racially, sorry, I mean musically but in that sense, narrow focus.

I: There were quite a few though. I've read a lot of Max Jones, I've read a lot of Derrick Stewart Baxter - he was also very anti rock and roll.

R: Oh yeah, Melody Maker hated rock and roll. I mean it's touching in retrospect; they were trying to cling onto a life that was rapidly ending because of beach groups and things like that. But Ronnie Scott and Tubby Hayes recorded... they were part of the sax section on... Do these names mean anything to you?

I: Yeah, yeah.

R: They were part of the sax section on Lady Madonna by The Beatles. That was the front page of the Melody Maker – Tubby and Ronnie on Beatles records.

I: But there was a point at which that kind of... you know, when rock and roll first emerged they kind of really, really hated it but then it got to a point when you guys started working that they started to at least acknowledge it.

R: Yeah.

I: Like by the mid, early/mid 60s, mid 60s.

R: Oh earlier, I think. Well no, it's probably more mid for the Melody Maker but papers like the Record Mirror and NME started picking up on it before the Melody Maker, partly because they were both concerned with pop music from the beginning and jazz was like peripheral to them, whereas Melody Maker, jazz and dance music was their be-all and end-all. Rock and roll seemed peripheral to it.

I: Yeah.

R: So pop music just naturally morphed into... you know, from Frank Sinatra it was a relatively easy step to Elvis. I mean, there were still people writing on the NME who hated what Elvis was doing and you can't understand the words. But, for me, rock and roll changed the world.

I: Well it did.

R: Yes, it did, it did because up until then your parents liked Doris Day and Frankie Laine and stuff like that. It did change everything. For me, if I look - and this may be wrong but I lived through it - '55 to '65, I literally think that everything that's been done since is just a reworking of what happened between '55 and '65. I can't really see much that's changed. I mean, it's quite possible for me to hear... forgive me, I don't take much notice of what's currently happening.

I: Well neither do I, to be honest.

R: Is he called Cee Lo or something? Black, plump...

I: Oh that's Cee Lo Green.

- R: Yeah. Well he just seems to follow on from Solomon Burke and everything like that, to me. I hear him peripherally and think, that's quite nice but it's hard to me. It's not like I hear something and I think, that is astounding. I might not, because of my age, think that's astounding and new, whereas when I heard, in no particular order, Fats Domino, Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Buddy Holly, The Everly Brothers, I heard all of that music in the space of two years ('55 – '57) and it just was nothing like what people have been listening to on The Light Programme.
- I: **You see, one of the things I'm trying to get at is that often what you've just described there, people try and explain it by saying it's middle class rebellion or that kind of thing but it is literally, at times, just a matter of fact that the sound of that music was so radically different and exciting compared to what was on the BBC.**
- R: Yeah. I was lucky in another sense perhaps because when I eventually got a radio - one of my aunts gave me a radio - I used to channel hop all the time because if you just listen to The Light Programme, The Light Programme would have organ recitals from cinemas and every now and then you'd hear a great record at the beginning of rock and roll but I used to listen to AFN, American Forces Network, I used to listen to Voice of America which in spite of being a cold war propaganda thing, played a lot of jazz and I used to listen to French radio because the French have always loved American black music.
- I: **Yeah, they did, didn't they?**
- R: Going right back to Josephine Baker in the 20s and all of that, so I used to channel hop. I was lucky in the sense that I had discovered these things. I still take a radio with me on the road and wherever I am and rather than listen to an iPod, walkman or whatever, I turn the radio up and just see what I find.
- I: **So the American Forces Network, that was just a radio station for the American soldiers who were stationed over...?**
- R: Yeah. I think it was basically... I'm not sure it broadcast from England. I used to pick it up on the medium wave from Germany, I think, and I'd hear black vocal groups that you wouldn't hear in 1954, '55, records, you just didn't hear any. But the same in France – I'd hear Ray Charles really early in his career on French radio.
- I: **Yeah, the French, from what I've seen, when Lead Belly came over to Europe he made it to France in '49, just before he died.**
- R: Did he?
- I: **Yeah, but he died a month or two after that trip. He had to go back to the States because otherwise he was due to come to the UK as well.**
- R: I just read a lovely story. I don't know if you know Dave Lang who writes a bit on rock and roll and pop and stuff.
- I: **Yeah, I have seen his...**
- R: He's just revised his Buddy Holly book and Buddy Holly was one of those huge influences on me. The Crickets, it's the prototype band, The Chirping Crickets album cover, two guitars, bass and drums, it's The Beatles. We all thought that's what you had to do to be a band – two guitars, bass and drums. And Buddy Holly was touring England and I've forgotten who took him. Someone took him to see Big Bill Broonzy with Chris Barber at the Conway Hall in London. I just love the idea, Buddy Holly. [Laughter]

I: I'm reviewing a biography of Big Bill Broonzy right now that's just come out.

R: The new one?

I: Yeah. Because there's two that have come out in the last year; I reviewed the last one.

R: Because years ago I had Big Bill's Blues, was that what it was called?

I: That came out in '55, yeah. I read that as well because... I worked out actually how important Big Bill was to blues in Britain.

R: Oh very much so, very much...

I: Did you...?

R: I never saw him.

I: You never saw him.

R: I came to blues from a completely different perspective; I came to it from rock and roll. I wasn't into folk music particularly of any sort. I grew up with a bit of Irish folk music going on all round me, inevitably, but rock and roll just opened my eyes, opened my ears, suddenly it was all there and Big Bill Broonzy I didn't discover until much later.

Because I loved Chuck Berry, a fantastic song writer, fantastic guitar player and that led me into the whole Chicago thing. I liked Muddy, I liked Wolf, I liked John Lee Hooker, I know he's not Chicago but same thing. I loved Buddy Guy, Magic Sam, Otis Rush. I love tough, hard rhythm and blues so Big Bill and that whole area really didn't get to me but now I see... but even there, you know, have you seen that clip of him in dungarees? Now he's doing that for the European audience.

I: Yeah, he got changed, didn't he?

R: Yeah. Because you see him in... well you see Robert Johnson, these are smart, sharp guys.

I: They're trying to be professional.

R: Yeah. And Big Bill Broonzy, he was like the King of Chicago. He introduced Muddy Waters to everyone. And he looked the business with his suit and his sharp guitar and someone said to Big Bill Broonzy, you know, you've got to be a sharecropper if you come to Europe. Weird things went on. Again, it's that... I don't know, I'm talking about what I don't know but what I've read about. But, again, it's that left perspective on things. You've got to look downtrodden if you come over.

I: But that's what I find fascinating is those expectations that people had before he arrived and they wanted something specific and he adapted to that. And this new biography that I've just received seems to be focusing on how he was a master of reinvention because he started off as a sharecropper playing country blues, then he went to Chicago and became...

R: A massive... he was a wonderful guitar player.

I: He was playing in bands. Then when he came to Britain...

R: He had to go back to being a sharecropper.

I: Yeah, and he did it successfully, which other singers didn't do as well like Josh White because they didn't fit that image that people wanted.

R: Josh White, in retrospect, was a tremendous guitar player.

I: Oh yeah, and a great singer as well.

R: And a good singer, yeah, but I just saw him as a bit of a, sort of, variety entertainer in the UK. I'd see him and he'd be singing, [sings Josh White song] and all that, and I thought, I want to hear Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley and Howlin' Wolf.

I: When Paul writes now, he still writes and he thinks back to the first blues musicians who came over in the early 50s and he always says that Big Bill Broonzy was the marker.

R: And Sonny & Brownie came over a lot.

I: But Josh White and Lonnie Johnson were disappointments because they played more popular tunes.

R: But Lonnie Johnson is, in retrospect, a phenomenal guitarist.

I: Oh yeah.

R: And the duets he did with Eddie Lang, have you heard them?

I: Yes, yes.

R: They are just...

I: Yeah, I love Lonnie Johnson's guitar playing.

R: And then I saw him on one of the National Blues things they did, Lippmann and Rau brought over the blues, what were they called? Came over in '62, '63, '64 and there would be a package of like...

I: Oh right, like...

R: They brought out some DVDs a few years back.

I: So like the festivals thing that they did.

R: Yeah, the American Blues Festival, that's what they were called, yeah, and they were two journalists bringing it over to Europe. Sorry, pleasant memories. But I saw Lonnie Johnson in Croydon.

I: I'm very envious.

R: Listen, as I said, '55 to '65 everything happened - Motown, Otis Redding, Phil Spector, apart from all the things I mentioned earlier, The Beatles, a fantastic period to grow up with music.

I: I'd be interested to see what you thought of that guy I mentioned earlier, Elijah Wald. Last year he brought out a book called How the Beatles Destroyed Rock and Roll. I don't know if you've heard of it?

R: No, I haven't.

I: Although that title is very provocative and it got a lot of The Beatles' fans angry, it's not actually saying that The Beatles destroyed rock and roll but it's kind of looking at a more realistic view of what happened in music history and what The Beatles did for popular music by elevating it to kind of art with the concept albums.

R: Yeah, no, no I can see that.

I: It's a very interesting book though.

R: Because, to me, two and a half minutes of a rock and roll record or a blues is still my benchmark. There are very few artists still whose albums I think I can sit... especially since the invention of the CD. When you had an album and it was six songs one side, six songs, you'd take a breather perhaps before you'd play the other side. Now, there are very few people that I think I really want to listen to 48 minutes of your music in one go, even to people I really liked back then.

I: And now people are downloading everything en masse so that's even gone as well, the CDs.

R: Yeah.

I: Do you ever remember in 1960 Paul wrote the first book on the blues, Blues Fell This Morning?

R: I didn't buy it then. This is what I can safely say to you, because I read it afterwards. I started... I didn't have any money initially. I went to work in 1960, I was earning £6 a week or something and I wanted to get a guitar and an amp. I didn't even have a record player.

I: So you used to listen to records with other people?

R: I used to go round to friends who had bought records. I didn't start buying records until the early 60s, partly because - it sounds like Monty Python - we were that poor but we had no money for luxuries at all, we didn't have a television, we didn't have a record player and that was it. I never asked for one because the money went on buying food and buying clothes, paying the rent. But when I started working and I got a girlfriend, she had a record player, I started buying singles, not albums, singles and I used to work in the city for my sins. I used to work in Norwich Union in Fenchurch Street, right in the city, and I used to go to Petticoat Lane where they would have DJ promo copies of singles which obviously the DJs had unloaded onto the stalls and I used to buy all the London American stuff. It was all slightly left field rock and roll, R & B, proto soul and stuff like that. I've lost track of the question.

I: I think I have as well but it's okay, it's fine. The book that Paul...

R: Oh yeah, I bought Paul Oliver's books much later, like in maybe '63, '64, '65 because what I was interested in when Paul's book came out was rock and roll and when I say rock and roll, all the Little Richard... and as it became tamed and the industry owned it rather than...

I: You had to search for something...?

R: I had to look for something else and I started hearing things like... I can remember literally hearing a Howlin' Wolf record on a weird TV programme. I heard Smoke Stack Lightning by Howlin' Wolf on a programme called Cool for Cats which was the weirdest programme. It was like puppets - Pinky and Perky started on Cool for Cats and I can remember them... but what was good about it, I can remember Pinky and Perky miming to Buzz, Buzz, Buzz by The Hollywood Flames. This is not a record that you would have heard anywhere particularly but it turned up on Cool for Cats and one night I'm watching it, it's fifteen minutes on ITV and I'm sure the guy said at the time, "Now here's a record by a rhythm and blues accordion player," - I'm sure he said accordion player which was totally incorrect - "called Howling Wolf," and it was Smoke Stack

Lightning, and it was one of those... oh what is that? What is that? So around 1960 when he's writing about really archaic folk blues, I'm desperately looking for some electricity, literally things plugged into the wall sounding loud, crude, giving me what I got from Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee Lewis and all that stuff.

I: But this is a thing that I find really interesting about when the book came out because a record came out with it as well, which was all these songs from the 20s and 30s and there's a couple from the early 40s but it was primarily a very old race records era blues at the time when you've got young British kids getting into rock and roll and Chicago R & B. And it's...

R: But bear in mind that he's slightly younger than me but we did glide off each other like that. Eric Clapton, he was really into Big Bill Broonzy, he loved that folk picking theme. He liked the other stuff as well, he liked Buddy Guy and all that but he had all that down even then and... I wasn't even interested in it. I could see that what I loved came through it and from it but it didn't...

I: It didn't grab you immediately?

R: So when Paul Oliver started writing about the classic blues singers and whatever I read it as a way of sort of researching the roots of what I was now interested in which was that Chicago, mid 50s, Sonny Boy Williamson.

I: This is what I think he was very orientated towards, was establishing the roots of everything and kind of placing them in a specific time and place.

R: But even then when you're not there... it's like Robert Johnson wasn't a great innovator because he borrowed from everyone around him including Lonnie Johnson, but he was just an astounding musician and the interplay between his voice and the guitar, it's like any giant in any area of art. It's like watching someone building a great dry stone wall or painting the Sistine Chapel. When somebody has got an ultimate gift... even then when you read about him he would sort of do what the audience wanted. He would do white hits of the day.

I: And then, again, you've got the picture of the suit, haven't you?

R: Yeah.

I: He wanted to be an entertainer; he wanted to be successful.

R: Yeah, yeah. Well it's like Howlin' Wolf who would climb on the table and before him Son House was supposed to be doing things like that as well.

I: Yeah, Charlie Patton as well was supposed to put a guitar between his legs.

R: Yeah, Charlie Patton. Yeah, Jimmy Hendrix, nothing is new but I do think there's a certain preciousness to writing about it which suggests that, and I'm not talking about Paul Oliver, I'm talking generally... I don't want to say anything derogatory about Paul Oliver because we owe him a huge debt, even if I don't necessarily agree with all his opinions, without him... and other people, like Max Jones, popularising black artists, and the whole Blues Unlimited magazine thing which started in, I think, '63. The Neil Slaven, the Mike Leben, these people who brought it alive...

I: That's another interesting thing is that you've got, in the mid 60s you've got Blues Unlimited and Blues World.

R: Yeah. But Blues Unlimited was even earlier. I think Blues Unlimited started in '63, maybe '62.

- I: And I think Blues World is '65. Because I've spoken to Bob Groom who, I think he set up Blues World.**
- R: I'm not sure. Neil Slaven is still around, who did Blues Unlimited.
- I: Is he?**
- R: Oh yeah. I think someone told me he's living in New York now. I made a couple of documentaries – this is a digression but I made a couple of documentaries: one was about a busking festival in Clonakilty, County Cork, and it was shown on RTE and BBC Northern Ireland. And out of that, because my relatives still all live around there, in County Court, Noel Redding from the Jimmy Hendrix band lived there so we... I've lost track of what I was saying here, forgive me. How did I get onto this? What were we talking about before I...?
- I: Blues World, Neil Slaven.**
- R: Neil Slaven, that's it. And then we made... through knowing Noel I made a South Bank Show on Jimmy Hendrix and then we wanted to make another documentary. We were trying to sell an idea to BBC television and we wanted to make a documentary on... now is it Neil Slaven? There were two books, South to Louisiana, which is about, sort of, Cajuns and everything and... is it Neil Slaven? I get all these people mixed up now, forgive me. I'm 70 this year.
- I: Really?**
- R: That's why I get them mixed up. Anyway, let's say it's Neil Slaven - I may have the name wrong - we wanted a documentary about him and we tried to pitch it to him because he's got two books which are used by the state of Louisiana in their education system, and he's a bank manager from Ashford in Kent. And there are all these photographs of him and he's wearing sort of cavalry twill trousers and a short sleeved white shirt with all these mad Cajuns. He spends all his time down there in Lafayette and Baton Rouge and he is terribly well spoken, home counties Englishman. And we had this wonderful opening sequence that we wanted to film where he's at the bank in Ashford and they're all saying, "Goodnight Mr Slaven, see you on Monday," and he's like, "Goodnight, everyone," and he's got his briefcase and he opens the door, steps out and we wanted him to be in the main street of Lafayette with all this thing going on around him. Anyway, those people, in terms of (unclear 0:38:22) information, Blues Unlimited was a wonderful thing for me because it was writing about Muddy Waters and James Cotton.
- I: You mentioned in an email that that was a haven of purists as well. I've never kind of understood...**
- R: What, Blues Unlimited was?
- I: Yes.**
- R: Yes. They didn't like The Rolling Stones, they didn't like Manfred Mann, they didn't like any of us white guys who were polluting... and, of course, we were, in a sense. Do you know, I loved the records of Sonny Boy Williamson and Muddy Waters and I can see that we were one twentieth, one hundredth of what they were doing but they inspired us to make... You know, the other thing is, they inspired us to tell the Americans about the treasure they'd got because we'd go to America with Manfred Mann, and The Stones did the same thing, I know. We all did the same. We'd go over there and say, "You've got Muddy Waters, you've got Howlin' Wolf, you've got Jimmy Reed, you've got..." and they'd go, "Oh yeah, do you like The Crystals?"

Getting to New York and turning on the radio. We were over there because we were having a big hit record with Do Wah Diddy. We were number one. Well we'd just been number one. We'd got

another record climbing the charts and going over there and turning on the radio in the car, we had this stretch limousine in the airport.

I: Living the life.

R: Well it's something we saw in films. Suddenly we're in Manhattan skyline, it is fantastic, we turned the radio on and find the black station and they're playing Lowell Fulson followed by The Miracles followed by Jimmy Reed, followed by Dinah Washington. We'd got nothing in the whole of Europe like this that we could listen to.

I: If you had to say though who, back home in Britain, who the purists were, who would you say they were?

R: I think Paul Oliver was a purist and Max Jones was a purist and the people at Blues Unlimited were purists – they only liked the black originals. But fair enough, we were imitators; we were drawing on what we were hearing. I mean, it never bothered us; you've got the confidence of youth. If you hear Chuck Berry you think, that's pretty good, how do I learn to do that? You don't think I'm ripping someone off.

I: I always got the impression it was always musicians who weren't as bothered by labels and frustrated musicians who were purists.

R: I'm not sure that any of the journalists who wrote about it were frustrated musicians actually, not that I'm aware. I'm not aware that any of them were players or had any...

I: Okay, but they weren't musicians.

R: And, of course, there were musicians like Humphrey Littleton and Chris Barber who had tremendously open ears and would... and Chris Barber, we owe a huge debt to because he brought people over at his own expense. He brought Muddy Waters over, Louis Jordan, people like that.

I: He took them on tour, didn't he?

R: He took them on tour. He'd say, "We've got Muddy Waters as a guest," and the promoter said, "Everyone is coming to see you, Chris, I'm not going to pay any more," so he'd pay for them himself.

I was a subscriber to Blues Unlimited from... I probably bought the first copy and I read it through until the last copy. I kept them eventually but I threw away the early ones because I wasn't in collecting mode. Again, big debt. They wrote about the people we loved and I didn't...

I: I've got another question. Paul, in 1960, went to America. Do you know this?

R: Yes, but not in that copy, or maybe I do, maybe I've lost the dust jacket.

I: Okay.

R: I don't know, but I remember this.

I: He went on a trip in 1960.

R: Blind Arvella Gray?

I: Yes.

R: [Laughter].

I: Very good.

R: That's through reading Blues Unlimited.

I: He went to America...

R: You see, this is what I want... I wanted to see those pictures back then. That's why the Jacques Demetre and everything, because there were pictures like that, Magic Sam. Sorry. James Cotton, Pat Hare?

I: Smitty's Corner, I think that is.

R: It's Pat Hare. Great, my memory isn't that bad. I can remember everything back then; I just can't remember yesterday.

I: But, you see, this came out in 1965, but the trip where he went and he took the photos and he interviewed all these people was in 1960.

R: Right.

I: So when this came out it's primarily, I mean, although you see pictures of Muddy Waters and a bit of Chicago at the end, there's pictures of the countryside. Like if you look at this photo, look at this guy in the background, he looks like he's been beaten up and looking at the camera not very... he's not smiling.

R: No.

I: And it just seems to me this image of the blues contrasts a lot with what was happening in 1965.

R: Well, of course, what was happening in 1965 is there's a lot of really sharp, black soul singers out there but he's writing about what he loves. He's not saying this is the definitive view of black culture and black America in 1960. This is what I saw because this is what I went looking for. I mean, he wouldn't have liked it if some sharp young... I mustn't say he wouldn't have liked it. He was looking for what he loved.

I: Yes, I suppose. But it shows how many different types of audiences there were, I suppose, for black music in Britain, I suppose. But it's just because he went there in 1960, and in 1960 in the south you've got students sitting in protesting against...

R: Absolutely.

I: And that kind of thing.

R: And the integration of schools and registering for the vote and all that going on.

I: But none of that is present in here which I also find, kind of...

R: Well, my suspicion is that he had absolutely no politics at all.

I: Well, this is the thing - you asked me at the beginning if he was like left leaning, I don't think he was.

R: No, because there's a whole thing there of seeing blues and jazz as negro, folk music, and an expression of their culture and a lot of people who wrote about music from that point of view in

- the 40s and 50s came from a... I won't beat about the bush, a communist left perspective on things, all sorts of... the Workers' Educational... WEA, something over here that people used to go around lecturing about, the plight of the negro in America, playing blues and jazz records to thirty people above a pub in Tonypandy.
- I: Wow.**
- R: [Laughter]. The Workers'... I've forgotten what it was called but it was like a grassroots educational system for the working man.
- I: I suppose, I mean, you've got the folk revival going on at the same time here as well, haven't you, early 60s?**
- R: You see, folk wasn't, it just wasn't impinging... it didn't do it for me. Yes, of course, having said that, I was only reminded yesterday of The Ballad of John Axon. There were some great radio ballads they were called on The Light Programme which were done by Peggy Seeger, Ewan MacColl and Charles... I've forgotten the producer's name.
- I: I remember a Charles Chilton.**
- R: No it's not Charles... he did Journey into Space.
- I: Right.**
- R: I don't think it was Charles Chilton. To say folk didn't impinge on me was wrong. It comes back to the same thing all the time – rock and roll swept everything away for me. I was listening to jazz and then rock and roll came along, then Lonnie Donegan came along and rock and roll seemed very exotic and American. It's a bit like English movie stars were much more the boy or girl next door looking, a bit glamorous but American movie stars were like big screen, glamorous. And rock and roll came along, that did, then Lonnie Donegan came along and we all thought we could do those three chords and then, very quickly for me, having learnt the three chords, I thought, with those three chords I can play Carl Perkins tunes and I can play Buddy Holly tunes. And then I thought it would sound really good if I had it plugged in. I'm just a template for everyone else. That's what John Lennon did, I imagine. It's what Brian Jones did.
- I: Skiffle.**
- R: It's what we all did, skiffle, and then we plugged our guitars in and the same three chords could do... and then, for me, as rock and roll got tame I was totally into the wilder side of R & B. I didn't get into Robert Johnson and Lonnie Johnson and Leroy Carr until I started listening to things like that in the mid 60s.
- I: The mid 60s.**
- R: For me. Other people it was earlier. Eric Clapton had heard Big Bill. In fact, it was Eric who first played the first Robert Johnson album to me, which would be, what, '64 or something like that.
- I: Yeah. I remember the Americans who pushed the Robert Johnson thing, although funnily enough, I've found reviews of Robert Johnson records from the early '50s in England but it never caught on.**
- R: Of singles?
- I: Yes. I think a lot of the time Paul would write from his own personal collections because he was a record collector as well. And I've seen in Jazz Journal and Music Mirror, when they review records, I've found the odd Robert Johnson review.**

R: What labels were they on?

I: **Oh, that I couldn't remember, I couldn't tell you.**

R: That's fascinating, because all sorts of strange records were released for no apparent reason.

I: **And sometimes they were... I mean, when I've asked Paul about this he said during the war and immediately after the war he would go round junk shops looking for left over...**

R: And pick them up, yeah.

I: **Just pick them up for a few quid, well, not a few quid.**

R: A few pennies.

I: **Yeah. So yeah there were people that were aware of some Robert Johnson but obviously it wasn't until the 60s until it really caught on.**

R: Well it was that first album, what was it called? King of the Delta Blues.

I: **Yeah, King of the Delta, something like that.**

R: And, for me, it was very eye opening, ear opening.

I: **Yes.**

R: But, be honest, still to do this day I'd rather hear Freddie King or B.B. King or Albert King or Otis... it's what I love.

I: **But then we go down to taste. I mean, I love Freddie King.**

R: Yeah, outstanding player.

I: **Amazing.**

R: I've got to show you something.

I: **What? You haven't got a picture of him, have you?**

R: No, I haven't got a picture of him. This is what I like, this is what I like - it's all going on still. Let me find this.

[Music plays]

R: He's 11 years old. He lives near me in Cambridgeshire. He's got a Facebook site and the two people that feature on it are Freddie King and Stevie Ray Vaughan, he's 11 years old. He comes round and plays.

I: **Wow.**

R: I couldn't play like that until I was, I don't know what.

I: **I can't play like that, well, like that now.**

R: But he loves Freddie King. Isn't that tremendous?

I: Yeah it is, it is.

R: Another whole generation.

I: I can remember hearing... I drive often... because I'm originally from Northampton and I sometimes drive back there to see my dad. I drive through Chipping Norton and I heard that he used to record there. A lot of people recorded in Chipping Norton and you could see Freddie King in the '70s walking around Chipping Norton.

R: Well, you know what is even...? Sorry, this is a complete digression. Walthamstow Town Hall, have you ever seen Walthamstow Town Hall? It's a bit of sort of brutal Stalinist 50s architecture, I love it. It's one of my favourite London... it's big, it's complex, it's not just one building and it's got a concert dance hall within it which is equipped for recording and a lot of recordings have been made there, particularly orchestral recordings – it's got very good acoustics. Aaron Copland, the great American Jewish gay composer who wrote Fanfare for the Common Man, Appalachian Spring and Billy the Kid, Sweet, and stuff like that, he used to record there in the 50s and 60s. He used to come over from America and record there. Now the really weird thing is that Chet Baker, one of the most beautiful men in the world and a junkie, lived in Walthamstow in the late 50s because if you got registered as a heroin addict you could legally obtain the drug so he came over and lived there for about nine months, and I just love the idea that Aaron Copland is walking down... and he sees this incredibly good-looking man and they meet up in Walthamstow but the idea of Aaron Copland's in Walthamstow and Chet Baker is in Walthamstow is a bit like you with Chipping Norton.

I: [Laughter].

R: But Freddie King, a huge influence on Eric. And I was at school with a guy called Terry Brennan. I passed the 11 plus and I went on to grammar school and he went on to secondary modern but we stayed in touch and when I was trying to get a band together in '62, '63 which eventually became The Roosters and Eric became the... We were two guitarists, never had a base player.

I: Oh yeah, I was reading about that today in Bob Brennan's book.

R: Oh right. And Terry had B.B. King singing Love the Woman, and on the other side was Hideaway. He had a single in HMV, English HMV, and he was the first person to play Freddie King to Eric. That was Eric's introduction to hearing Freddie King and from then on... he even bought the guitar, the Les Paul, because Freddie King played one at that point on the early...

I: And then he went on to the Gibson, didn't he?

R: Well the Gibson is a Les Paul but he went on to a 335.

I: That's the one I mean, yeah.

R: Yeah, but he put on the King album of Freddie King sings or whatever it's called, he's playing, I think, a gold top Les Paul, I think, I can't remember. I haven't looked at that album for years.

I: I've only ever seen him with the 335.

R: Oh no, the very early stuff...

I: But it's like you always see Hendrix with the Stratocaster but he played the Flying V as well sometimes.

R: He did, yeah. I did see Hendrix, luckily.

I: Lucky you.

R: Yeah. When I made the documentary on him...

I: I was born in the wrong era, I think.

R: Never mind. You can hear it all and it's all on DVD and YouTube.

I: Well, I've seen a few people but they're all, I mean, I've seen Johnny Winter a few times but obviously a lot of guys are... although Chuck Berry is still touring, amazingly.

R: He's not, well I mean maybe he is but he was due to go over about two years ago and we were going to open for him with a blues band.

I: And he didn't...?

R: Which we really wanted... and then it was all cancelled about... A friend of mine, John Collis, wrote an autobiography of Chuck Berry but never got to meet Chuck Berry so a lot of it's a cut and paste job, but he did go to St Lewis and he spoke to Johnnie Johnson, the piano player of Chuck Berry's stuff or some of Chuck Berry's stuff. And he went to Chuck Berry's club and this would be maybe five, six, eight - I lose track of the years - years ago, anyway, some years ago, this century, and he saw Chuck Berry in his club and he said he was fantastic, he was great. He was playing to a black audience and he wasn't messing... because he could mess the audience around, not do his best, just play everything too fast and too loud.

I: [Laughter]

R: A friend of mine gigged with him. Would you like another drink?

I: No, no it's okay; I've got to drive back.

R: Have you got enough?

I: Yeah.

R: I'm happy to go on. I'll have another drink because I'm going to lie down for an hour before...

I: An hour before the gig.

R: So if you want to do some more, but if you've got enough and I've covered it all...

(End of recording)

Appendix 1.10

Interview with Bob Groom November 18th 2009

Key:

I: Interviewer
R: Respondent

R: ...I recently got from a guy called Bob West. He ran a label I'd never even heard of before. I don't know if they had distribution. It was called Arcola Records and there's a load of good stuff, mostly his recordings, very nice Henry Townsend, Henry, Furry and Bukka and Babe Stovall, as you probably know, a load of stuff. But in addition, he sent me which isn't issued but which I suspect I know why it's not been issued – Dick Waterman probably – a Son House, well, two Son House interviews on CD, one that he did and one by a lady at a radio station which is a bit marginal, basically they wouldn't allow him to play live. I presume it was Dave's decision, I don't know. So it's padded out a lot of the Crombie session stuff, quite amusing, but nothing new. Bob's interview is quite valuable to me because I interviewed Son in '67 and again in 1970. The '67 one was recorded. That's the days at the De Montfort Hall in Leicester but the...

I: That's where you interviewed Son House?

R: Yeah.

I: Wow, in Leicester. That's the last place I would have imagined.

R: Well it was a '67 blues festival and there were just too many people to talk to. There was Skip James on that.

I: He wasn't very well at the time, was he?

R: No. And Little Walter wasn't very well either. I mean, I'm glad to have seen him but he was not at his best. Well, just a whole host of people. I was determined and I didn't know some would come over again in '70 and in fact Dave didn't let me go and interview with him anyway. I did an interview with him but I wasn't allowed to record it.

But '67, a mate of mine had a little reel-to-reel. The problem, well, there were two problems, 1) there was so much noise because all the artists were in one big room and people were talking to them, there was all that drowning out, so many asking questions and then with the passage of years it's deteriorated, so it's just unlistenable. So at last I've got a similar, well, it's not the same, obviously, but it's a similar interview in crystal clear sound and I think that must have been a radio station. So it's very, very nice to hear. You know, there's nothing drastic for you and there's a few songs, apocryphal stories like cleaning Louis Armstrong's shoes. I don't believe a word of it but it's a nice story because he was born in the Delta but the family lived in Louisiana for a while, close to New Orleans. And that's where this Armstrong story comes from and Son is talking about... because he's much older than me, but of course, he wasn't, he was actually only about two years older than Son. By some reckoning, Son was older but I don't believe that, Dick Waterman. seems to have believed it. But somebody put in Blues and Rhythm recently, an explanation of that and it's confusion, I think between Son and his father in terms of certificates and things.

I: So what I'm, kind of, interested in...

R: Sorry, yeah, you ask me. [Laughter]

I: It's all really interesting for me. You started... when did you start Blues World, was it in...?

R: '65.

I: '65. So before that, before that period, I mean, you've probably been asked this a million times before, but when did you start getting into the music?

R: Yeah. I always say, I mean, so many times on Radio 2 programmes and elsewhere and on the box you'll get one of the Stones or... and they all talk about how everything started to happen down there, you know. Just a passing reference... well, yes, there was Eric Burdon and those guys up in the north-east but really it was all happening down here. There were only a handful of blues fans in those days. That's tosh, absolute tosh.

I went to a grammar school in Altrincham, a few miles away, and there were a number of guys from this area who already had blues records. They knew about Big Bill Broonzy, they had the Howlin' Wolf EP, the Muddy EP, all which I got subsequently myself, the London EPs, and there's an interesting thing actually, with Paul, you made already be aware of it, the drawings he did for...

I: Yes.

R: Yeah, right. So I was being told about this stuff as I was already into Fats Domino, Little Richard, Chuck, Bill, the rest of them, Elvis obviously, I've written quite a bit about Elvis, so quite quickly I began to see that Sonny & Brownie were touring and I began to see the backwards tunnel of blues that had led up to rock and what was happening so it all happened quite quickly with me really.

I: Was that in like the mid 50, late 50s?

R: '55, '56, I was in the black rock and that stuff, Elvis and all the rest of it. By '57 I was beginning to learn about Big Bill and all the rest, so I would say it was really sort of around... difficult to pin it down but around '58, '59 I had really got into blues and, clearly, as for others, The Country Blues and Blues Fell This Morning were the milestones, so I read The Country Blues, Robert Johnson, Son House, it was just amazing. So it was a huge learning curve about all this stuff, as it was for even people like Charters, discovering things and doing field recordings, finding out stuff. And, okay, he did get some things wrong and maybe his critical judgment wasn't always sound but that's easy to say in retrospect.

At the time, I mean, it was just an incredible boom, the country was... as was Paul's, with more of the accent on lyrics and which has always been a big speciality of mine. What's a song about? I did a big piece on Red Nelson recently, not a particularly, you know, well-known figure but when you go into all his songs they're quite fascinating, some of them. But because suddenly you put them on and you think, oh that sounds a bit like the last one, take it off, you know, he's not playing credible silent guitar or brilliant harmonica [laughter] but his songs are really interesting.

So all that got me going and then quite rapidly, Simon and Mike had just started Blues Unlimited. I corresponded a lot with Simon. I got reel to reel tapes of stuff like Bukka occasionally, celebrating all this wonderful stuff. And that was around, well, I got the Robert Johnson album in '61 it would be, or early '62, and a mate of mine, in the days of going down to the pub and all the rest of it, we used to come back around midnight and then we sort of worshipped King of the Delta Blues Singers until the knock came on the ceiling and we had to stop playing.

I: Had you come across any of Paul's journal articles, like, for Music Mirror and Jazz Monthly before the book came out, before Blues Fell This Morning?

- R: I used to get Jazz Journal off the bookstall. Pretty well every station used to have a bookstall – there was one on Oxford Station, there was one in Hale where I got the train to go to grammar school. So I started getting Jazz Journal and also Jazz Monthly on a regular basis around '59 and then I got some back copies of '57 and '58 stuff. Then I got into a lot of more specialised things like blues research and R & B Panorama and all of these kinds of things. There was a lot of stuff taking off just about that time.
- I: **Yeah because when Blues Unlimited started there were quite a few other magazines that kicked off as well, weren't there, just after that?**
- R: That's right. I think they started in '63 as far as I remember. But just to go back to the point about The Stones and so on, I can think of a half dozen of my near contemporaries, mostly older than me, who were very well aware of blues, as I say, even before Paul's Blue... There was actually Sonny & Brownie, Chris Barber was promoting people.
- I: **Yeah, Alexis Korner was doing a lot.**
- R: Alexis Korner, yeah. So all these people, there was all stuff already happening so there was a bit of a myth, you know, that everything starts with The Rolling Stones, it isn't true. I mean, a lot of The Beatles weren't really in the blue as such but they were into quite a lot of black music, but as my mate, Dave Carter, said, Liverpool at that time, a huge amount of records were coming in the country from merchant navy seaman, bringing them in from New York and places.
- I: **Yeah, Roberta, she talks about that quite a lot.**
- R: Yeah, I think I gave her a bit of a lead on that one, yeah. She interviewed a couple, I think. You know she lives near the Rock Island?
- I: **No, I didn't know that.**
- R: Because (over-speaking).
- I: **(Over-speaking).**
- R: Well, we weren't allowed to put any in but... Well, somebody got some in, the German guy. Yeah, fire away. [Laughter]
- I: **I was going to say because that... So when you decided to start off Blues World, were you hoping to fill a gap that the others weren't, something that the other magazines weren't doing?**
- R: Yeah. It was a bit unfortunate in a way. I was getting more and more into country blues but still loving lots of other black music and it seemed, because BU had a fairly wide orientation – it covered Cajun, Vadico, as well as blues, R & B, all a bit of black soul stuff, quite a wide brief, so me and another guy called John Hancock, we both worked in the centre of Manchester and we met for lunch and there was already a magazine coming out then called R & B Scene. There was R & B Monthly down South, the Vernon brothers, but there was one there with a guy called Roger Eagle. Ever heard of him?
- I: **No.**
- R: He was as a significant guy in Manchester, quite a strange guy at the time, and he was a DJ at the club called The Twisted Wheel and he started this magazine. It was better than Blues World in the early days because it was a glossy job, yeah, and it was quite idiosyncratic. So he'd have Sonny Moore as number two in there, he'd have Screaming Jay Hawkins, anything that really, you know, took their fancy but mostly on the blues R & B style. But he did black R & B a bit later, black soul

and then he got into stuff that left me cold, like Captain Beefheart and so on – I didn't go with in that way. And he opened another place called the Magic Village. I used to take my magazine there in the era when there were mattresses on the floor and very subdued lighting and all sorts of stuff going on. And it was moving away from me; I stuck with music. But he was quite a singer. And somebody is working on a book about him now. He died a few years ago from aids.

But my mate, Brian, you pick up a book about blues, rock, you'll find a Brian Smith photograph. He's been doing it since the '60s. Some of the stuff he's photographed has turned out to be quite important and lucrative because he's got stuff that nobody else... somebody else might have taken photographs at this concert but he's the only one who has still got them or he was the only one who got them. So Brian is, you know... Mostly we go to festivals and concerts these days. Brian knows all the promoters. So I do the review and he does the photo reviews, the difference being doing a review gets me into see people, doing the photographs it could be a little gold mine in ten year's time, sort of thing.

I: It's interesting what you're saying, about The Stones and everyone thinks it kicked off down south.

R: Yeah, it strikes me, from what I know, that, well, you know, there wasn't a huge local interest. There was obviously more than the stereotype thing that you hear on the radio and see on the box, but it was perhaps slightly different in the sense that the people I was talking about, appreciating the music, when they go and see an act like Sonny & Brownie, but they weren't particularly into research or history or...

I: Yeah, that seems to have been, what, the passionate few?

R: Yes that's right, that was much more...

I: Do you reckon there was like a difference in class as well between the guys who were looking at the music down south, like your Albert McCarthy, Max Jones?

R: Oh yeah.

I: Because they seem to have been fairly... even Paul himself.

R: That's right, they came from cultured families, often well off families. I was born on a farm, when I was five we moved into a council house, and that's my start in life. So we were, I guess... I don't particularly go for all this stuff, but we were working class kids, I guess, and Altrincham Grammar School was a funny place really because there were all the Knutsford lads who were basically a bit beyond the pale and then there was the stockbroker belt in Hale, a very, very prosperous area, so all the offspring of these people had a different life altogether than us who came in on the train. What brought it home to me was when we were doing our GCEs and there was a guy, we called him Ticker T, and he was always fooling around in class, everybody thought he's never going to get anything. He got eight or ten subjects, didn't he, and we were all amazed. But then someone said, "He fooled around in school but his father had a home tutor for him and he had to get through," so that was how it worked. We couldn't afford home tutors, so there you go. And you're right, even The Stones, even though they dressed (unclear 0.19.53) it's all art school and it's an easier sort of life when you get out there and start earning a living.

I: Yeah, Paul was telling me that during the war when he was collecting records he was travelling big distances and buying records. I mean, only someone who was financially able to do it...

R: Yeah, who was mobile, who had the means and it fitted into a culture, yeah. I was a little bit always on the outside looking in. But what was so good was, you know, like, when I started the magazine, you could then get into it with like-minded people and that's how, quite quickly, we

overtook people like Sam Charters because his approach was... He'd found out as much as you'd want him to know but he wasn't too worried about detail, so he'd write something and I was very critical of his Robert Johnson book because basically he just ignored all the research that we lesser mortals had done.

I: But do you think that was because you guys were based over in England, maybe?

R: Well he came over and lived in Scandinavia.

I: Oh he did, didn't he? Yeah.

R: Yeah. I'd just done a review of a new book on Bill Haley and he spent several years when he was with Sonic Records trying to get a good album out. Bill had got a reasonable country album, a lot of remakes which didn't go very... and I think the last album was quite reasonable, a rock album, but he was over in Sweden then. I haven't even read it yet but I've just got a new book of his which is... there's a blues chapter but there's also Caribbean stuff.

I: Is Charters still alive then?

R: Oh yeah, yeah.

I: Is he still based in...?

R: What a good question. I'd have to look in the book. It's based on decades of studying music all over the world but he seems to be still around. This only came out earlier this year so yeah he must be still... All the good people are gone – Pete Welding, people I had lots of dealings with, it probably says stuff in a magazine, testament records. Yeah, and the 60s was great in the sense that you'd get John Lee Hooker in the charts with Dimples, Wolf, with Smoke Stack Lightning, B.B. King eventually becoming a, you know, number fifteen in the top hundred and all that sort of stuff, so I mean it was a big time. Then I withdrew a little bit. I stopped listening to the music.

The magazine came to an end. All going back to how it started, yeah. So, as I say, there was this Rodrigo magazine which was fairly short lived but good while it lasted, maybe two or three years. We had, John and I, had the idea that we needed a northern counterbalance to this south coast London scene and we dabbled a bit in guitar. So Eagle had this blues club at the pub a couple of years, at least, ago there. As I said, we met at lunchtimes for a meal and slowly the idea revolved of launching our own magazine. John was on board for about the first three or four issues and his fiancé told him, as so often happened, you either give up this magazine nonsense or I give you up and so he dropped out.

I: So it wasn't a full-time thing?

R: Oh, my Lord, no. The only time I did it full-time was when I was writing the Blues Revival and that was much later, that was... I'll get you a few of the mags from that time. It started off (unclear 0:25:02) Photo Life and then later (ph. 0:25:10) *Letterpress*. And that was the time when I was doing it full-time along with writing the book but the postal strike killed that, there was a seven week postal strike and in that time I didn't get a bean coming in. I was newly married; we were looking for a house. Clearly a man without an income couldn't get a mortgage so with reluctance I had to crawl back into local government and missed the great opportunity that was offered to me and I couldn't take, which was a big festival in Montreal that Mac McCormick was in charge of (ph. 0:26:05) *for the Swiss army*. Those were the days that Mac was still amongst us in terms of, how can I put it, part of the circuit rather than now where he is somewhat out there beyond Mars.

I: Yeah?

R: Yeah.

I: The last I saw of him, well, the only real thing I've ever seen of his was when he appeared in that film by, documentary by John Hammond, about Robert Johnson.

R: Right. There's lots of strange stories connected with Mac. The first one was he and Paul were writing this book on the Texas Blues.

I: The one that never got published.

R: The one that never came out. Because Mac would never draw a line and say, we're never going to know it all and we'll keep on learning more, but at the point, as Paul thought, where it was publishable. As he said, "You've got to stop somewhere." Mac wouldn't agree to it - psychological stuff. I used to be in touch with Mac. We had certain things in common, like both being asthmatics and both revering Blind Lemon and all this sort of stuff. And he did the Henry Thomas but, as I say, Paul gave up in despair and being too much of a gentleman to give Mac an ultimatum and because, of course, a lot of the on the spot research was Mac's living down there in Texas, and that book has never come out and there's all sorts of stuff in there that is still not known other than to Mac and, to some extent, Paul. So that's never happened.

Then there was the bad review of Phantom. Now at the time I was doing my book for... you'll remember the book (unclear 0.28.17 – 0.28.18).

I: Hmm.

R: This book by Mac McCormick was advertised (unclear 0.28.25) Phantom about Robert Johnson, er, with research, but strange to say that never came to fruition either but bits still keep popping up – Peter Grummich who was another of my friends and contacts.

I: Yeah, because he's written some stuff about Robert Johnson.

R: Yeah, he got some stuff from Mac and put it in his research on Robert Johnson but Mac is still very much an unknown quantity.

I: Because he tracked down the person who allegedly killed Robert Johnson.

R: Well there's all sorts of interesting aspects to that too. I don't know whether you've got Tony Russell on your list to interview or try...

I: Well, I saw Tony...

R: I see Tony.

I: I haven't spoken to him in person but he gave a speech at the conference in September.

R: Sorry, what conference was that?

I: They did another one in Worcester.

R: Oh, right.

I: The Transatlantic Routes of Roots Music.

R: Oh right. Hold on a sec. And he did a beast.

I: He did, but it was about the recordings of country music.

R: Yeah, yeah.

I: **But I might speak to him as well. So when you started the magazine...**

R: He was the [clears throat], for that blues paper, he was the house editor.

I: **Right. When did you first become... when did you first meet Paul?**

R: Right, erm...

I: **Because obviously you'd read his stuff before you met him, I would imagine.**

R: That's right. That's a good question. There was a guy called John Holt who I've not heard of in donkey's years but he ran something called a Lightnin' Hopkins Appreciation Society and he put out a little booklet. People were putting out little booklets on all sorts of things then - John Lee Hooker and whatever. I was in touch with him. And subsequently he did something for me for the magazine. It was just after I started the magazine or maybe just before. I went down to stay with him in the East End of London. I've got this vivid memory, up in a tower block and his father went out to work very early, possibly a manual job, anyway, something that got him out quite early. It was a very warm night in the summer, John and I had been out, probably around some of the record collectors and what have you. We didn't get in until about 1am. Suddenly his father was there with a cup of tea, oh my God, the water down there, how could they make tea from that?

I: **[Laughter]**

R: It was obviously straight out the River Lea and it was incredibly vile but I had to be grateful for it. It was around at that time... I was going to get the 7.30 train into town but I was on holiday. So this week, John fixed up for us to go and see Paul and at that time I think he was living in Harrow on the Hill. So we went up there and spent time with Paul and Valerie and it was a very nice visit. Actually, I think I must have just started the magazine. I think he said he wanted to write something, which took some time actually - he was just so busy doing so many things. What was it that actually came out in the end? I think it was reprinted in... it's not Blues Off the Record. Oh it might be... It came out about three or four years ago.

I: **Is it about the...?**

R: Blues as an art form.

I: **Oh right, okay.**

R: I never went to his home again but would meet up with him and Val. One year he came up for the Burnley Blues Festival and he used to have this photographic display in a basement, the first few festivals then it stopped and at the same time I think he had this one at the American Embassy.

I: **Yeah, is that the one that became eventually Story of the Blues?**

R: Hmm, that's right. So it was all sorts of occasions where I'd meet Paul, the Warwick conference, sometime in the 80s, oh, and a Manchester one, Manchester University. I don't remember whether I spoke at them or not but Paul certainly did.

I: **What was your impression at the time about the kind of work that Paul was doing on the blues?**

R: Well one of the things that was a big influence on me was his particular interest in lyric content, so you'd meet some blues fans who are really only interested in the sound. I mean, I loved the sound of the slide guitar or Chicago harmonica or whatever it might be, but I also have an interest in the

songs and how they connect, and there's all sorts of fascinating connections. So that's one of my things, you know, and I'm sure that part of my interest was Paul's interest stimulating my interest, also, sort of opening up that vision back to the blues appreciation and the jazz context and all of that.

I was running the magazine and I used to trade my magazine for all the other magazines, like Jazz and Blues which is what Jazz Monthly became, Jazz Journal. (Unclear 0.36.05) find somebody to take it off my hands now, all sorts of magazines, I've got cupboards full of them - Jazz Research, Blues Research, Jazz Report, loads and loads of them. And obviously Paul was part of that continue... going back to the 40s and there was all those radio programmes which I'm sure you have access to.

I: Yeah. I mean, he's given me some of his transcripts from the ones he did. A lot of them seem to have been based on biographical data and musicians and groups.

R: That's right, but there was also a lot about lyrics and I've got quite a few of them on cassette, once cassette came in, I haven't got the early ones.

I: What do you think was the main difference between what he was doing and what Charters were doing because they were kind of the big guys who were writing in the 60s about...?

R: Hmm, you must know a little of the people, like Francis Smith, I mean, he did a lot of Radio 3 programmes as well. I would say... I'll choose my words carefully here. In a way I think Sam was a little bit more of a generalist, perhaps a little bit in the way of Lomaxes, so like John perhaps more than Alan, but he was interested in songs rather less in performance and obviously he was an unusual performer and he had an interest but often the documentation is lacking because he wasn't so bothered... It was all about music in culture and folk song, whilst to me a lot of my contemporaries, the artist was very significant, very important, so all the rediscoveries, we were feeding on them like some people feed on pop stars, so like Son House was my huge hero. Whereas Lomax, both Lomaxes and particular John, they would be seeing not so much what the guy was as an artist, but what songs could he deliver. So he got the famous Blind Willie McTell thing, where John Lomax is, you know, the story is pressing in the same...

I: Yeah.

R: "Well, don't you know any songs about (unclear 0.39.20)," and Blind Willie, very sensitive, very...

I: Yes, I know, I don't know any songs.

R: He's thinking, this is horribly uncomfortable. "That's not in our time," he says. I mean, it sadly was, but I knew what he meant, what he meant was I'm a singer of songs, I don't think of myself as a nigger, you know, and so I don't want to go back to slavery time and start telling this guy about, you know. Some of the less sensitive singers, they would just perform the song, they didn't think of themselves particularly as artists. Willie did because he'd done a lot of recordings. He had a very distinctive approach to guitar playing, to singing, to song composition and so on. Have you seen my King Edward piece?

I: No.

R: You'll have a copy of that. Because that will tell you how he remoulded songs, Willie.

I: I'm reading his biography at the minute.

R: Take some of it with a pinch of salt.

I: Yeah?

R: My friend David Evans would say. David and David's late father really got the goods on Willie.

I: In the 1970s.

R: Partly because his parents lived in Georgia at the time and he got them onto it. Great stuff came out of it. Then our friend went across to see David and pumped him and took a lot of stuff off him but when you read the bloody book, David is dismissed, he's perfunctorily put in, not even the proper acknowledgements, just as an after, you know, and also ran with several dozen other people. He was appalled. Also, David says he got a lot of his facts wrong. I don't know, I'm not sufficiently versed in that. So I've got it on the shelf, it's a bit tainted because it could have been a much better book than it was, but it is the only book on Blind Willie McTell. But as I say, David was hopping mad and I told him by email what was in it. [Laughter]

I: A few years ago I did a project on... I mean, it was my Masters dissertation and I just wanted to do something on blues and because I was quite limited I didn't know what to do so I thought of getting three artists - I got Son House, McTell and Lead Belly and what I did was I compared some of their commercial recordings to some of the field recordings they'd done through Lomax and, er, mainly through Lomax, to see if there was any specific differences that could tell us about the effect of commercial recording on singers and what it did to their repertoires and the music that came out. And that's when I heard John Lomax pressuring McTell, saying... I remember that bit because I wrote about it. I was saying that obviously even though it's a field recording it wasn't for commercial purposes. At the time, Lomax put so much pressure on McTell that he affected what came out.

R: That's right.

I: And I remember sending it to David Evans because I wanted him to... I'd been in contact with him and I was asking him for advice and he was very thorough, actually, David.

R: He's always very thorough. [Laughter] I've still got a tape of an interview I did with David. The idea being that I'd publish it but, of course, Seller wasn't too keen because, well, white guys are sort of useful in their place but should not be the main feature. So in '85 when David took me down south and we made the great discovery of Tom Rushing – mentioned in Charlie Patton's blues of course, mistitled My Paramount, typical, Tom Rushen instead of Tom Rushing - the day where I designed this is a place called The Rushing Winery. So we went down there and the guy running it said, "Oh yeah, that's my Granddad, big Tom." I mean, he wasn't particularly big but he was broad. "Yeah, he often comes in here." Moments later the door opens and in walks Tom Rushing.

I: Wow.

R: Fantastic. So we talked to him, he agrees to be interviewed, we went back to his nice house in the nearby town and had a nice session there and I wrote it all up, not only that but also other stuff on Memphis and about the Rouge Blues Festival, etc, etc., and I offered it to... At that time, Blues & Rhythm had just started up. Paul Vernon was editing it with a lady, Maureen Quinn. I never really knew too much about her. So I wrote and said, "Did they want it?" and I never heard a thing, but time went by. So I offered it to Cilla who literally, it was about the second or third issue of Due Blues. So she accepted the text. I sent her photographs and she said, "Yeah, unfortunately I'll have to cut you and David and Robert Sacre and his mates - who were all with us - out because I don't publish pictures of white people, unless of course they have some significance," so she would keep Tom Rushing in the photograph because he was the subject of the black blues, but we had to go. Strange, strange.

I: What did you think of...?

- R: Don't repeat that, of course.
- I: **No, don't worry. Because I presume you know a lot of the people who have written about the blues over the years.**
- R: Yeah, I mean, particularly in magazine days I was in touch with a lot of people around the world.
- I: **What do you think the general consensus about Paul's work was? How was he regarded, do you think?**
- R: He was very highly regarded in Britain, in Europe and by some in the States, like David, for instance.
- I: **Yeah. Because I've read David... when Paul turned 70 he wrote Most of What We Know About the Blues for a lot of his work and we're all indebted to him for that.**
- R: Hugely. But there was a school of resistance in the States. A lot of people came round, or at least newer recruits came round, but I need to go back to the 60s, and we had people like Steve Calt.
- I: **Yeah.**
- R: And to some extent, Geraldine Walther and one or two other people who were content just with people like Paul, they were huge egotists. [Laughter] I once wrote a scathing piece for 78 Quarterly, about a piece that Calt had published and David did a piece for me for my magazine called The King Solomon Hill Fiasco which really ripped apart Calt. But I found their attitude to Paul was basically, this lyric nonsense is... it's the sound of the record, we know these old guys, we're Americans, we understand the lyrics and the rest of it, even Nick (p.h 0.49.07) *Pearls* who I got on really well with. I used to do the booklets on Charlie Patton and Robert Johnson. He still calls me a bit. He said, "There's people talking about Robert Johnson." And when the first stuff came out, I mentioned Charles but then Charles was, "What about me, I'd put the first publication on Robert Johnson out in 1965?" Oh well, who am I? I come from this little country called Britain. Like Paul, I've suffered a bit from that sort of attitude. Even *Pearls* the same and has, sort of, said he couldn't understand, "We native Americans," sort of thing..." - native in the sense of, you know - "we surely know more about the music and the lyrics and everything."
- But patently it wasn't true because we were putting out much more accurate lyric transcripts and things like that. I used to get tapes of Nick. He'd play guitar for a bit, then he take a few drags on a reefer. He'd tell me a story like when we went down to find some house, and his description of the delta was the anus of the earth which clearly meant that he was even more uncomfortable down there than I was when I went down there because he was so removed. He came from a rich Jewish family. His father owned an art gallery. He was rolling in money. He had the most expensive guitar, produced the most marvellous LPs, (unclear 0.51.04) and all the rest of it. Great stuff, wonderful Nick, but you had to have the money to start with to do all that. Now, you know, who's closer to a dirty, poor farmer down in Mississippi? I rest my case but there you go.
- I: **In this thing that David Evans said on the 70th birthday tribute to Paul, he said, "Recently..."**
- R: Was that in Blues Access?
- I: **It was on the website, it was on blues...**
- R: Ah yeah, but it was all tied into a special edition in the magazine and I think it's Blues Access.

I: And David says, 'Recently a blues writer labelled Paul and me and other people 'the (p.h 0.51.55) *Oliverans*'.

R: Yeah, the reactionary school that...

I: But I don't know who he's referring to who said that.

R: If you just give me a moment I'll just have a look to see if I can find that special issue. A lot of the stuff that's on the net was related to that. I was quite surprised and pleased that they would do a Paul Oliver tribute issue considering what it had been like in the past, you know. I mean, his book sold quite well, more of *The Meaning of the Blues* than *Blues Fell Morning*, I guess, the later edition. Yeah, I'll have a quick look. At the same time I'll dig out a few blues... well, particularly the one with blues as an art form. I hope I can find that one for you. I'm going to make some more tea when I come down. While I've gone for five minutes, give me something else to play for you.

I: Er, I'll let you surprise me.

R: Well I've not surprised you very much so far.

(End of recording)

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