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Julia Simon. *Time in the Blues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, £47.99, pp. 272, ISBN 9780190666552)

Unlike many other academic subjects, new studies on the blues (and indeed other forms of popular music) face the scrutiny of very diverse and often opposing audiences. On the one side there are scholars keen on exploring the origins and significance of this music within the context of African American culture in the Jim Crow South. On the other, there are those less appreciative of academic approaches, enthusiasts, or even musicians, often more focused on the lives of mysterious singers and the stories behind important songs and recordings. As some new scholarship in this area has highlighted, appealing to both these audiences is far from straight-forward. However, in Julia Simon's case there is a deliberate attempt to bring together the academic (Simon is a Professor of French) with the musician (she is also an experienced blues performer) in order to explain the nature and enduring appeal of this music.

Time in the Blues is an interdisciplinary study that examines the diverse and often contradictory ways in which time is experienced and reproduced in blues music. Bringing together philosophical theorizations of temporality, together with a sensitivity towards the social, economic, and psychological context of what other blues scholars refer to as the blues' 'cultural milieu' (the post-Reconstruction South), and an analysis of the expressive, aesthetic, and sonic characteristics of the blues form and its performance, Simon centres on the multiple ways in which the blues genre 'endlessly explores, expands, and challenges our understanding of the present instant of experience' (p. 208).¹ The music's emphasis on what sometimes becomes the 'extreme present' (p. 84), Simon argues, is a direct outcome of the

¹ Paul Oliver, *Conversation with the Blues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997 [sic1965]), p. 4

material conditions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries in which the music was born: sharecropping and other restrictive labour practices under Jim Crow, as well as the consequences of powerlessness and discrimination, such as gambling, addiction, and prison time. This idea of the relationship between the music and its socio-historical context is not new. However, Simon remains focused on both the form and delivery of the blues. Exploring narrative construction, lyrics, and textual fragments in combination with the genre's musical characteristics in and outside of the performative context, the author suggests that the blues' distinctive and often contradictory modes of temporality are embedded in a tradition, meaning that 'the experience of a resonant present' (p. 211) can persist even when performers and audiences are far removed from its historical roots, thereby explaining the blues' enduring appeal.

In addition to its refreshing transdisciplinary approach, one of the monograph's other strengths is the use of a rich array of material from different time periods and across stylistic categories (classic, Delta, Chicago, folk, commercial, modern, etc.) to demonstrate the complex ways in which the present moment is explored throughout the blues tradition. Avoiding the limitations caused by adhering to constructed sub-genre categorizations, the book's central thesis on the experience of time is particularly persuasive. However, while Simon persuasively argues against adopting genre distinctions, the blues tradition is assumed to be relatively unchanging, and unaffected by some fundamental contextual changes. This points to some of the book's more problematic implications, particularly in terms of the connections between the blues and African American life in the post-Reconstruction South. Firstly, it is not as sensitive to the more dynamic elements of black life and culture under Jim Crow, the diverse background of blues musicians, or the changes

to creative practices and indeed traditions that came with the explosion of the commercial recording industry in the 1920s. Moreover, while the study enlightens on the inherent and unique characteristics of the blues – its main purpose – the music is considered in isolation from other genres. Many studies of recent years have tended to highlight that blues was one style among many in a much richer musical tapestry performed and consumed by African Americans, which, as Karl Hagstrom Miller has argued for instance, was not always racially exclusive. Finally, the emphasis on the more negative and oppressive aspects of black life in the post-Reconstruction South tends to equate the blues tradition with suffering, a music conditioned almost exclusively by the experiences of sharecropping and tenant farming. This relies on the ‘revivalist’ interpretation of the blues constructed during the 1950s and 1960s in which the tradition can be restrictive for African American agency. It regards blues singers as victims of an oppressive system, something which becomes reflected in their cultural activity. Despite some of the more debatable assumptions made about the music’s relationship to its context of origins, *Time in the Blues* does make a significant contribution to scholarship in explaining the peculiarities that make the blues so unique and compelling.

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