

A Blues Aesthetic: Performance Practice, Politics, and History

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Abstract: Blues has been used as a term to designate a broad musical category, in addition to an aesthetic that includes the visual arts and literature. Reasserting the significance of the blues as a form of Black vernacular music grounds the idea of a blues aesthetic in both a specific history and a performance practice. The genre was shaped by racialized socio-economic conditions that influenced its formal and stylistic components. As a key feature of the blues, repetition delimits a field of creative activity. Despite formal and stylistic constraints, the blues models resistance to domination aesthetically, as the genre challenges the idea of the work of art as a fixed product. Valorizing process, the blues models a practice of resistance to domination using repetition with a difference as a form of agency.

Keywords: blues, performance practice, Black vernacular music, Charley Patton, B. B. King

The blues understood as a Black vernacular musical genre is a capacious category. The word designates a wide range of musical performance styles and practices extending from rural non-professionalized forms, often with geographical descriptors, such as Delta, Piedmont, and Texas, to urban incarnations with their own geographical designations, such as Chicago, Memphis, Kansas City, or West Coast. “Blues” also sometimes references formal or stylistic characteristics of tone, rhythm, scale or mode, and lyric structure. This broader usage invokes a category of music that extends to other genres: rag, popular song in Black vaudeville, jazz, soul, blues rock, et cetera, raising questions about genre boundaries. Indeed, the setting of genre boundaries for the blues has spurred numerous debates focused on formal attributes, composition practices, performance techniques, as well as the music’s social function, prompting polemics about “authenticity” and “inauthenticity” among scholars and critics. Beyond music, “blues” has been used to designate a particular Black aesthetic that encompasses the visual arts and literature. As Richard Powell (1989) argues, when applied to visual art and literature, the “blues aesthetic” conjures artistic “work that identifies with grassroots, popular, and/or mass black American culture” (23).

If a specific African American vernacular musical form lends its name to a broader aesthetic, it is for particular reasons. Clyde Woods (2017) posits a “blues epistemology” grounded in a specific racialized, historical, geographical, socio-economic context: “working-class African Americans in the Delta and in the Black Belt South have constructed a system of explanation that informs their daily life, organizational activity, culture, religion, and social movements. They have created their own ethno-regional epistemology” (16). For Woods, “The blues became the channel through which the Reconstruction generation grasped reality in the midst of disbelief, critiqued the plantation regime, and organized against it. The Mississippi Delta is the home of the blues tradition in music, popular culture, and explanation . . .” (25).¹ For Woods, the “blues epistemology” refers to a critical interpretive stance that generates a sometimes aestheticized counter-discourse informed by specific racialized economic conditions.

In keeping with the general theme of this volume, I want to shift the conversation about a “blues aesthetic” away from broad categories to focus on musical practices. I will argue that the blues as a

performance practice is grounded in the specific historical context out of which the genre emerged. In this respect, I agree with Woods's linking of an aesthetic with an epistemology or even ontology arising from specific historical conditions.² For the purposes of a blues aesthetic as opposed to an epistemology, I draw the historical boundary at the moment of the emergence of "blues" music, in the post-Reconstruction landscape of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at the nadir of race relations in the United States. Developing an aesthetic out of performance practice for the blues entails acknowledging the historically-rooted critical interpretive perspective to which it gives voice lyrically and instrumentally. It also requires teasing out the underlying principles embedded in formal and stylistic attributes of the music. In other words, working from performance practice toward a musical aesthetic entails extrapolating from a historicized understanding of the genre, including its stylistic, formal, and technical features.

Such an approach is consistent with the way in which many blues performers understand their craft. As the guitarist John Cephas, half of the acoustic duo Cephas & Wiggins, explains, "Musicians seldom speak of an aesthetic as such; that is, they don't often use that word. But they do talk about what they do, what it's about, and how they do it. They see the blues as a system connected to the oral black tradition, sharing qualities with other types of vocal and instrumental music and dealing with subjects common to the black community" (Powell 1989, 15).

Ultimately, the focus on performance practice signals an understanding of the aesthetic object as sound. This is especially true for the blues and other vernacular musical traditions where there is no written score to privilege above any particular performance of a song. The work of art is the music; which is to say, that performances—live or recorded—are the object of study. Any aesthetic grounded in performance practice must account for music as sounding process: an inherently unstable and ephemeral series of sonic articulations that unfolds in time. As I will argue, this aesthetic process has political implications.

1. Historical Context

Determining a historical time and place of origin for the blues poses significant problems related back to the capacious nature of the genre designation. Ideological stakes exert pressure on the conception of a Black vernacular form. Much early criticism—and commercial recording, as Miller (2010, 187–240) has argued—was informed by folkloric assumptions about "purity" and "authenticity" linked to Romanticism. This conception of "folk" music rejected "professionalized" forms, including Black vaudeville, tented shows, and sheet music, in favor of "spontaneous" composition, traditional verses, and particular lyrical themes performed in rural locales, as indications of the "authenticity" of the music.³ Collection by folklorists tended to privilege sites with majority African American populations in specific socio-economic conditions, such as plantations and prisons.⁴ Motivated by left-leaning politics, this initial work aimed to recognize an aesthetic form rendered largely invisible to the white dominant culture. Paradoxically, the focus on hyper-segregated contexts and concern with mediation by white culture also reified fluid boundaries in terms of artistic repertoire. Many Black artists were discouraged from recording popular and religious songs.⁵ Instead, the folkloricist focus on "purity" and "authenticity," understood as distance from "professionalized" forms mediated by capitalism, policed the boundaries of the genre. Ironically, the conception of "folk" music and its attendant collection practices de-historicized and thereby fixed an inherently unstable form of music with porous boundaries. The focus on a certain conception of "purity" edited out evidence of contact with "modernity" in one part of the blues archive.⁶

More recent criticism has acknowledged the emergence of music in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the formal and stylistic attributes associated with the "blues" in a multitude of Southern settings: urban, semi-urban, rural, under tents, in Black vaudeville, as well as on porches, at picnics, and in rural jukes. This work highlights the "segregating of sound" (Miller 2010) that occurred in early commercial recordings, as well as the gender bias operated by the exclusion of the

“professional” venues and their performers (McGinley 2014, 7–9).⁷ Across these contexts, it is the formal and stylistic features of the music that determine its designation as “blues.” Peter C. Muir’s (2010) study of songs published from 1912 to 1920 with “blues” in the title or subtitle establishes axes of classification to indicate a spectrum of features ranging from “folk blues” to Tin Pan Alley songs, setting up the contours of a broad field (38–48). Antiphonal structure, pentatonic scale, blue notes, 3-line verse form, and lyrical themes of “having the blues” create a web of family resemblance that roughly designates the emerging genre of music across “folk” and “professional” contexts. However, the features themselves are not anodyne; they should be read as signs of Woods’ blues epistemology. Historical conditions shape aesthetic forms.

Aesthetic modes do not emerge *ex nihilo*. Music genres and subgenres develop over time, shaped by material circumstances (such as the availability of instruments, technological capabilities, and the socio-economic conditions of the musicians and their listening publics), as well as types of musical knowledge (such as the ability to read music, play certain instruments, and manipulate technology) and, eventually, modes of dissemination. They also emerge in relation to prior musical traditions. In the case of the blues, the folklorists were not wrong in privileging certain spaces. Work songs and spirituals dating back to slavery, as well as seculars, ballads, and hollers, provided a sound palette from which to create the “blues” (Barlow 1989, 8–20). These earlier musical practices were better preserved in situations of hyper-segregation, oppression, and exploitation that closely recreated conditions of gang labor under slavery. Focusing on plantations and prisons highlighted the musical continuity between earlier Black vernacular musical forms and the blues and also the continuity between racialized labor regimes under slavery and in the New South. In this respect, blues music as a manifestation of the “blues epistemology” critiques the lack of progress made by African Americans across the rural Jim Crow South, in part through its retention of features reminiscent of music under slavery.

The formal and stylistic resemblances between the blues and earlier hollers, spirituals, work songs, and seculars—antiphonal structure, a tonal system with “pitch areas” (Evans 2005, 84), and a repeating chord pattern—resonate with sounding practices under slavery, but in a specific post-Reconstruction context. Beyond the musical continuity, the blues also reflect the racialized, socio-economic conditions of the rural Jim Crow South in other ways. As I argue in *Time in the Blues* (2017), the sense of temporality in the blues bears the traces of experiences of time under the exploitative racialized labor regimes of sharecropping, tenancy, and convict lease, where the yearly cycle of debt immobilized a workforce (35–46). Lyrics deploy romantic and sexual relations to signify socio-economic conditions, often narrating the discovery of betrayal. The realization often leads to the desire for a break with the past as a result of the new awareness of victimization. However, a limited ability to project into the future forecloses the possibility of enacting meaningful change and restricts the sense of agency. Narrators often imagine “going away to leave” or that “someday, things will be different”—as in the traditional blues line “the sun’s gonna shine in my backdoor someday”—without articulating a path forward.⁸ With only tenuous links to the past and a vague imagining of the near-future, the temporal features of the blues expressed in the formal structure, lyrics, and instrumental performances focus attention on dwelling in the present (Simon 2017, 18–20, 22). The prevalence of repetition in the blues—in lyrical structure, chord progression, recycling of lyrics and riffs, et cetera—reinforces the emphasis on the present moment, evoking a feeling of being trapped. Repetition resonates with the lack of change in both material and socio-economic conditions, dampening any feeling of progress. In this respect, the “immediacy” and “spontaneity” that characterize the instrumental and vocal performance practices of the blues represent responses to forces that bore down on a population in semi-bondage. The privileging of the present moment is part of the sublimation into a powerful aesthetic form of these circumstances that both limit and enable agency. The formal characteristics of the blues not only echo a musical past of slavery, but also critically reflect on a contemporary situation of on-going bondage.

2.1. Performance Practice

The emphasis on the present moment in blues performance practice highlights one of the underlying paradoxes of the aesthetic. Despite the fixed form of the AA'B verse structure, repeating chord progression, and the use and re-use of commonly-held lyrics and riffs, the genre stresses musical art as inherently unstable process. The folklorist critical insistence on composition practices among "folk" blues artists highlights instability, even at the level of the "song." David Evans (1982) writes,

Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to speak of folk blues as "songs" in the usual sense. Instead of repertoires of blues songs, we must often deal with *outputs of blues performances*. Many blues singers do not learn or compose blues at some particular point in time and then repeat them the same way in all subsequent performances. Instead, each blues performance often produces a new song, one that may never again be performed by the singer. In such cases, composition and performance are identical and inseparable. (111)

While this composition-performance practice does not accurately describe the work of non-"folk" artists like T-Bone Walker and B. B. King, who employed horn sections with pre-arranged parts, or artists with consistent performances across takes, like Robert Johnson and Memphis Minnie,⁹ it nonetheless captures an essential aspect of blues performance. Any particular performance of a song stands not as a copy of a canonized studio version that functions as a norm (like performance in relation to the written score in other genres), but rather represents one instantiation as part of a living process. The principle of repetition with a difference grounds an aesthetic enacted in and through performance. As Albert Murray (1976) emphasizes, this constant variety is not a result of sloppiness or lack of technique, but rather should be understood as a form of "musical nuance" that requires "verbal" and "musical precision" (79).¹⁰ In discussing musical practice in the blues, Murray develops the notions of play:

Blues musicians play music not only in the theatrical sense that actors play or stage a performance, but also in the general sense of playing for recreation, as when participating in games of skill. They also play in the sense of gamboling, in the sense that is to say, of fooling around or kidding around with, toying with, or otherwise having fun with. Sometimes they also improvise and in the process they elaborate, extend, and refine. But what they do in all instances involves the technical skill, imagination, talent, and eventually the taste that adds up to artifice. (87)

Repetition with a difference in the immediacy of the present moment finds a performance aesthetic in which the work of art is understood as ephemeral process rather than fixed product. The degree of spontaneity in the blues may differ among sub-genres, but "play" in Murray's sense is crucial to the aesthetic.

2.2. Performances: Charley Patton and B. B. King

While nearly all blues performances entail some degree of spontaneity, the Delta blues exhibit a high degree of the composition-performance practice described by Evans (1989), even when recorded. As John Fahey (1970) in his study of Charley Patton notes, "the folk-artist in a recording studio, isolated from the audience to which he is accustomed, is in an 'artificial' situation. The artist is told to make as few mistakes as possible, to watch for the red light on the wall since his performance can last no more than four (*sic*) minutes. He is told that he will be paid, but that he will be paid 'per accepted selections' only" (8).¹¹ The constraints of the recording process exert pressures on performers that tend to inhibit spontaneity. The emphasis on the finished product introduces commercial concerns that distance the music captured on disc from live performance practice. In this respect, the capitalist interests of the white dominant culture mediate access to the "folk" form. But while the "artificiality" of the studio setting likely altered Patton's performance practice, his 1929 and 1930 sides with Paramount manage to capture and freeze a feeling of process. Listeners hear features of Patton's guitar and vocal style and composition practice fixed in recording and interpret them as signs of "spontaneity."

What is heard as “spontaneity” or “unfinished process” is partially conditioned by expectations about what a finished piece of music sounds like. Evans (1993) catalogs the features of Patton’s recorded output that he interprets as exhibiting this unfinished quality:

His voice was tough and raw, suggesting a rough-and-tumble life and a barely suppressed rage. *Though he had a superb touch on the guitar and mastery of the subtleties of tone and timing, he often liked to snap and bend the strings and slide a knife over them to produce percussive and whining effects.* . . . He often accented normally weak syllables and words of secondary importance for the song’s meaning in order to give full weight to every part of his performance. He delivered a spoken commentary on many of his songs, seeming to create his own audience and context even in the recording studio. Although he drew heavily on the storehouse of traditional blues verses, many of his lyrics had a startling originality and contained highly personal references. His recordings had an extremely spontaneous quality, always seeming to be songs still in the making, never finished products delivered by the artist for the final embalming in shellac. One seems to be hearing Charley Patton at that very moment working on his musical repertoire, engaged in a high-energy process of reshaping and reworking. (43, emphasis added)

In the highlighted sentence, Evans implies, with his concessive “though,” that guitar techniques specific to the Delta blues, for example, string snapping and playing with a slide, are signs of a lack of subtlety with respect to tone and timing. For Evans, these techniques, in opposition to an imagined performance of subtle “mastery,” signal spontaneity. In truth, string snapping and slide work require the musical nuance and precision that Murray (1976) highlights. However, in other musical aesthetics, the sounds these techniques produce—often described as “dirty tones”—are deemed undesirable and are even deliberately avoided.¹² Likewise, the spoken commentary, syllabic emphasis, and vocal “noise” (Malawey 2020, 105–106) in Patton’s recordings are also part of a blues aesthetic (Jungr 2002, 147), although they may be heard by listeners unfamiliar with the tradition as lacking in terms of technique, particularly in relation to other recorded music of the late 1920s. In this respect, specific features of this subgenre of music are read as signs of “folk” spontaneity.

Patton’s “Down the Dirt Road Blues” (1929) exhibits many of the techniques that Evans highlights. The idiosyncratic guitar part includes strumming, picking, percussive string-dampening, and a syncopated recurring figure, all within an accelerating tempo. Patton’s “career” as a performer with well-documented stage antics, such as “playing the guitar behind his head or between his legs” (Evans, 1993, 43), provides evidence that he was a well-rehearsed “professional,” putting into question the “spontaneity” of the guitar techniques. The vocal delivery demonstrates Patton’s signature ability to create different voices. His diction in the spoken asides is fairly clear, while the melismatic holds on certain words create diphthong vowels that hinder comprehension. For example, the elongation technique emphasizes the words “away,” “unknown,” and “worried” in the opening verse: “I’m goin’ away to a world unknown [2x] / I’m worried now, but I won’t be worried long.” Like the guitar technique, the variety on display in Patton’s vocal performances indicates control that is likely practiced for maximum effect. Here, the phonetic emphasis generates a semantic field around travel to an unknown destination and the attendant emotional response. Feelings of fear and anxiety are enhanced by aspects of the vocal delivery, including its semi-incomprehensibility.

In the case of “Down the Dirt Road Blues,” the “startling originality” in the lyrics that Evans notes arises from the violence that the lyrics, along with the vocal performance, evoke. While the sequence of lyric verses appears at first glance to be haphazard, contributing to the perception of spontaneous composition, the song more or less coheres around the narrator’s flight “down the dirt road” of the title, perhaps because of betrayal or cheating by his sexual partner (“My rider got somethin’, she’s tryin’ a keep it hid”). The most violent imagery occurs in the third and fifth verses. In the third verse, Patton sings, “I feel like choppin’, chips flyin’ everywhere [2x] / I been to the Nation, Lord, but I couldn’t stay there.” The B line of the verse suggests that the narrator sought asylum with an Indigenous American tribe, perhaps as a result of the violent act symbolized by the “choppin’” in the A lines, but now flees. In the fifth verse, he sings, “Every day seem like murder here / Spoken: My God,

I'm no sheriff / Every day seem like murder here / I'm gonna leave tomorrow; I know you don't bid my care." Overtones of racialized violence haunt the lines. As Adam Gussow (2002) argues,

When Charley Patton sang "Every day seems like murder here," he was singing about the early modern South he knew. The murderers were certainly white: during Patton's teenage years in Sunflower, Mississippi, at least nine blacks were lynched. But the murderers were also black: in two separate stabbings, jealous members of his jook audience almost ended his life. (16)

I would argue that aspects of both the instrumental and vocal performance characteristic of the Delta blues were shaped by and evoke the intensity and anxiety of life under conditions of racialized domination and threatening violence that permeated the Jim Crow South during Patton's lifetime. The aesthetic of "spontaneity" entails sublimating a variety of pressures into a performance practice that calls attention to the present moment through particular sounds and lyrical invocations.

As Evans has documented (1982), Patton's "Down the Dirt Road Blues" contains lines that appear in the songs of others artists who, like Patton, lived in the Drew, Mississippi area. Although Evans sets up an opposition between Patton's use of "traditional verses" and his "startling originality" and "highly personal references" (1993, 43), any particular artist's articulations may become part of the general stock of lyrics available. Thus, lines from "Down the Dirt Road Blues" occur in songs by Tommy Johnson and Mager Johnson (Evans 1982, 273). Like Ferdinand de Saussure's model of the relationship between *langue* and *parole* (Saussure 1972, 62), each song represents an utterance that feeds the virtual storehouse of signifiers available with respect to both lyrical and instrumental articulations.¹³ Paradoxically, this recycling contributes to the perception of spontaneous composition. Listeners recognize utterances across performances and interpret them as evidence that the singer reaches in the moment and seizes on the familiar, although always delivered with a new twist.¹⁴ While this practice exhibits a degree of spontaneity, it also demonstrates a thorough mastery of a common tradition constantly fed by new articulations.

At the opposite end of the blues stylistic spectrum to Charley Patton lies the urban blues of B. B. King. In an interview with Tom Wheeler, King remarked, "In my room, you'd be surprised at all the things I try, but I never go out on a limb, not onstage, no, no, no. I make enough mistakes without it" (Wheeler 2000, 322). King's use of the word "mistakes" is telling about his attitude with respect to "spontaneity." It is difficult to know how many passages of his "improvised" solos were worked out in advance, but it is safe to assume that he worked from a standard vocabulary and grammar to construct solos in the moment that were more "rehearsed" than "spontaneous." The constraints of pre-arranged charts for his backing ensemble shaped this approach. Influenced by commercial interests and recording studio practices, King leans heavily toward the "professional" end of the blues spectrum.

King's attitude nonetheless reveals an understanding of performance as process: "I learned through these many years of being out there and hoping to get everybody working with me that if you make a mistake, *please* work something into it, so that it's *not* a mistake" (Wheeler 2000, 322). "Mistakes," as King makes clear, can motivate spontaneity. Any articulation, even an inadvertent one, may be developed in the process of playing. But beyond "mistakes," spontaneity is a feature of all live performance. Whether it entails adjustments of tempo, groove, rhythm, attack, dynamics, or melodic and/or harmonic voicing, performers respond in the moment to the play of others—both fellow musicians and audience members.

Even a risk-averse player like King understood the value of spontaneity. His recorded output includes a studio version of a song with a "mistake" that he tellingly chose to release. In response to a question about "a very unusual melody line" (Wheeler 2000, 322) in "Chains and Things" (1970), King revealed his privileging of feeling over accuracy in studio recording:

I made a mistake. Now you're getting all the secrets. My bandleader and I have laughed about it many times, but I made a mistake and hit the wrong note and worked my way out of it. We liked the way it sounded, so we got the arranger to have the strings follow it. They repeat the phrase the way I played it. If you've got a good take going and hit one wrong note, you don't want to stop, so I was in the key

of *A flat*, and when I hit [*hums E, D flat, E flat, E flat*], which is #5, 4, 5, 5, we just got the rest of the band to follow right along. (Wheeler 2000, 322–33)

For most genres of music, the take would have been discarded. King's reference to the arranger writing parts for the strings to give the feeling that the "mistake" was deliberate indicates that the cut employed overdubbing: the strings were recorded after and added to King's track. In other words, the recording was not "live" in the studio. The desire to keep the unusual sequence of notes and work through it represents a key element of a blues aesthetic. Despite the studio technique of layering recorded sound, the song's final version contains an indication of its origin in a kind of "spontaneity."¹⁵ In the end, as in jazz, the conception of the aesthetic object is rooted in performance. What King chose to retain in the recording of "Chains and Things" evidences what Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. (1995) identifies as an essential aspect of Black music: "With the *musical* experience, the expectation is that something musical will *happen* in the playing of the music" (97). What "happens" on stage and, here, in the studio is valued above a "polished" (i.e., altered and perfected) finished product.

3. Performance Process and Politics

Whether live on stage or in the studio, the blues privileges music as process rather than finished product: the aesthetic object exists in the moment of performance. This has broad implications. Unlike in other genres, in which the written score is understood as the work of art, the blues is first and foremost sound. This conception blurs the boundaries between composition and performance. Moreover, there is no one "composer"—a lone individual responsible for creating the work—nor a unique site or time of origin. A vernacular form, the blues depends on a commonly-held stock of couplets, guitar (and other instrumental) parts, and riffs that are recycled and recreated through the process of performance.

The emphasis on sound troubles questions around the "origin" but also foregrounds the context of reception. If the importance of performers is highlighted with respect to composition, so is the role of listeners. With regard to audience, the blues is part of the broader Black oral tradition that Cephas references (Powell 1989, 15). For critic Charles Keil (1966), the "blues" forms part of African American "entertainment-ritual" culture:

[C]ertain Negro performances, called 'entertaining' by Negroes and whites alike, have an added but usually unconscious ritual significance for Negroes. The ritualists I have in mind are singers, musicians, preachers, comedians, disc jockeys, some athletes, and perhaps a few Negro novelists as well. These entertainers are the ablest representatives of a long cultural tradition—what might be called the soul tradition—and they are all identity experts, so to speak, specialists in changing the joke and slipping the yoke. (15)

The broadness of Keil's conceptual category of the "soul tradition" is evident here, which encompasses a variety of social and artistic spheres. The foundational resemblance lies in the performers' modeling of a strategy of resistance to domination: "changing the joke and slipping the yoke." For Keil, "the word 'ritual' seems more appropriate than 'performance' when the audience is committed rather than appreciative" (164).¹⁶ The repeated act of coming together requires performers and audience members to play a part in an active process. For listeners, a performance is an event that "elevates the expectation and places the hearer in a critical mode" (Floyd 1995, 97). Recalling Woods's (2017) insistence on the critical interpretive stance of the "blues epistemology" (25), music as process requires active engagement from the audience.

Audience response is not only active, engaged, and critical, it is also physical. Listeners move in response to the music. In the case of blues and other forms of Black vernacular music, the word "groove" "describe[s] a band's or a performance's rhythmic feel or character. The term is usually reserved for music that exemplifies a solid, infectious rhythmic feel, that demonstrates what Charlie Keil would call "vital drive" (Berish 2012, 63).¹⁷ The musicians use tempo, rhythm, and beat to shape the movement of music in time and, therewith, audience response. Listeners tap their feet, clap

their hands, and move their bodies along with the music. In a dialectical dynamic, musicians respond in turn. The common beat or pulse unites musicians and listeners.

The common experience of movement in time has political implications. In the specific case of the blues, the genre's historical context of origin in the New South shapes its resistance to fixity, as well as its privileging of spontaneity. The "working-class African Americans in the Delta and in the Black Belt South" (Woods 2017, 16) who created the form were bound in a variety of labor regimes aimed at immobilizing Black labor. As part of its articulation of a critical stance, the blues aesthetic resists confinement and fixity in favor of an on-going collective process. Music-making is "participatory" in the sense that it functions as a "fulcrum of identity, allowing people to intimately feel themselves part of the community through the realization of shared cultural knowledge and style and through the very act of participating together in performance" (Turino 2008, 2). Listing features that occur in blues performance practice, Thomas Turino argues that in participatory music,

since what happens musically depends on individual contributions and interactions in the moment, many of the sonic details of a performance are not, and cannot be, pre-planned. *Open form* refers to music that is open ended and can be repeated for as long as the participants and situation requires. The forms used in participatory music are typically short (i.e., a single rendition of the entire piece may last a minute or less), but the entire form is repeated over and over. Cyclical (*ostinato*) forms, in which the same short repeated melodic-harmonic-rhythmic unit constitutes the basic piece, are common in participatory music, as are short sectional forms. . . . One of the most common stylistic features of participatory music is the emphasis on the heightened repetition of musical material—at the levels of motives, phrases, sections, and the entire form—which is then repeated over and over again for a relatively long time. (37–38)

While not as participatory as some forms documented by Turino, as we have seen, the blues aesthetic privileges spontaneity as well as repetition as part of performance practice. The blues engages musicians and listeners on multiple levels as part of a collective process of identity formation.

The resistance to fixity, confinement, and immobility performs an important dialectic of agency at the heart of the blues aesthetic. Responding to the history of racialized domination from slavery through the Jim Crow regime and beyond, the blues models a form of agency within the bounds of a fixed aesthetic form. The formal constraints that shape artistic production function as aesthetic correlates to the restrictions, inhibitions, and limitations that shape power relations under domination. Most significantly, repetition restricts the field of play. Lines of verse, riffs, and chord progressions repeat and are recycled, setting limits to the modes of action. The emphasis on the present moment serves to further check agency. In this way, formal constraints in the blues resonate with historical modes of domination, as artistic agency is circumscribed by formal and stylistic conventions. But domination invariably meets resistance. Whether organized and large-scale or, more often, ad hoc and local, resistance responds with the tools at hand in a pragmatics of the possible. Everyday modes of resistance under extreme forms of domination enable the exercise of agency without risking violent reprisal (Scott 1985, 33–34). The blues as a genre represents this type of resistance to domination aesthetically. Working within constraints, the blues enacts and models a pragmatic and effective form of resistance by privileging repetition with a difference and spontaneity in the present moment. The A' line deviates from the A line, responses to calls create dialogic tension, every new sequence of chord changes creates a sense of forward movement, and so on. Each new iteration (repetition) creates new possibilities for creative action (difference). Within the confines of the fixed form, creativity and, therefore, agency is possible, both individually and collectively. A blues aesthetic rooted in performance practice demonstrates the possibility for action in the moment that preserves tradition, while simultaneously advancing a politics of incremental and meaningful change over time.

Notes

- ¹ Woods (2007) wrote about the blues as not only a musical tradition, but also “a knowledge system indigenous to the United States that is expressed through an ever-expanding variety of cultural, economic, political and social traditions. Embedded within the blues tradition are highly developed and institutionalized forms of philosophy, political economy, social theory and practice, and geographic knowledge that are dedicated to the realization of global social justice” (49).
- ² Gilmore (2017) explains in the “Introduction” to the reissue of Woods’s *Development Arrested* (originally published in 1989) that his adviser Edward Soja talked him out of the term “ontology” (xii).
- ³ As a counter to this critical tradition, the work of Abbott and Seroff (2007, 2017) has called attention to the significance of Black Vaudeville and tented shows for the development of the “blues.”
- ⁴ The scholarship of Paul Oliver, Samuel Charters, Alan Lomax, and David Evans is most influential in this regard.
- ⁵ Wald (2004) cites an interview with blues pianist Little Brother Montgomery about being restricted to blues in recording, including not being allowed to bring sheet music to sessions (65). Ward and Huber (2018) assert that A&R man Ralph Peer required Black artists to “conform to a much narrower set of stylistic expectations than he demanded of the white roots artists he recorded for hillbilly records series” (170).
- ⁶ The distancing from modernity goes hand-in-hand with a disdain for “commercialism” among folklorists who subscribed to the Romanticist belief “that folk music was the supreme artistic expression of Man, the higher embodiment of a pure, spontaneous creativity uncorrupted by the trappings of civilization” (Muir 2010, 29). Ward and Huber (2018) also interpret the focus on “authenticity” as a response to the “social and cultural dislocation” associated with the modern world (4).
- ⁷ Miller (2010) traces the cross-pollination of commercial and folkloric recording (9, 240). See also Hamilton (2008) on the folk versus popular divide and the “inauthenticity” of recorded blues (16–17).
- ⁸ “Going away to leave” appears in the opening verse of Muddy Waters, “I Can’t Be Satisfied,” Aristocrat 1305, Chess 1514, 1948. See Oliver’s (1968) open-ended, speculative reading of the meaning of the traditional couplet “The sun’s gonna shine in my backdoor someday / And the wind’s gonna change, gonn’ blow my blues away” (19–20).
- ⁹ Robert Johnson’s performances of songs were remarkably consistent—including spoken asides—as evidenced especially in takes from the Dallas sessions from June 1937. As Gioia (2008) notes, many later fans influenced by folklorist conceptions were disappointed with this evidence of craftsmanship, preferring to believe in a romanticized notion of spontaneous, improvised performance (170). Citing remarks from St. Louis bluesman Henry Townsend, Conforth and Wardlow (2019) argue that Johnson had a more stable and consistent conception of a song than other contemporary artists (162). Memphis Minnie also demonstrates consistency, including nearly identical solos in the two takes of “Keep It to Yourself” (1934).
- ¹⁰ Signifying in jazz and blues refers to reinterpreting or altering phrases, figures, structures, rhythms and/or grooves in music. It requires being able to play the music “straight” in order to create deviation and play.
- ¹¹ 78 rpm records could record approximately three (not four) minutes of sound.
- ¹² Chion (2016) discusses the process of editing out the “noises,” “squeaky glides that are produced by the movement of the fingers over the strings along the neck of the guitar, percussive sounds, and so forth,” (62–63) as part of the process of listening to classical guitar music.
- ¹³ See my discussion of composition practice in the blues in relation to Saussure (Simon 2017, 178–79).
- ¹⁴ Oliver (1969) dubs these verses that appear in various songs “maverick lines,” noting they “are given new rhymes and meaning by their juxtaposition with other ideas” (18).
- ¹⁵ With digital studio effects available today that were not available at the time, such as editing, splicing, auto-tuning, and pitch correction, the “mistake” could be “fixed.” Even today, these studio techniques are not commonly used for recording blues.
- ¹⁶ Writing during the civil rights era, Keil reads Black “soul” music, including the blues, as providing a strategy to respond to the need for African American community identity post-*Brown v. Board of Education* (165–66).
- ¹⁷ On “vital drive,” see Keil and Feld (2005, 59–62).

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