

## *MyBlues*

### The way I feel about blues

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#### - Yodeling blues

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It is not unrealistic to say that in the early period of blues and country music there existed a fair deal of cross pollination between these musical styles. Hillbilly and blues originate from the same region and time period and there is evidence that the racial segregation in the global social context was less striking in the musical field, at least outside the recording studios. Record companies, by their policy of ethnic marketing, have to a large extent obscured the interaction between white and black music because their marketing strategists believed that more money could be made when the ethnic segments of their customers were presented with the music that was supposedly 'theirs'. Polish music for Polish immigrants; Italian music for Italian immigrants....Race records for the African American population. It was expected from an African American that he would sing the blues, just as it was expected from a white man that he would record only white country music. The blues artist was expected to play the guitar and give up the fiddle and the banjo.

In our historical view, this clouds the fact that African American artists often performed live for a white public, and brought more than just blues music on those occasions. In his book 'The Land where the Blues Began', A. Lomax quotes Big Bill Broonzy : "*Me and them boys played around dances for white people all over the country*". Broonzy continues : "*We had different tunes we'd play – for waltzes (), old ragtime () and fast dances like one-steps and two-steps and the square dances ()*". He explained the exclusivity of his performances for the white audience referring to the white "folk's" policy that whenever a Negro was

good in something, he wanted to keep it all for himself (p. 432). Gayle Dean Wardlow reproduces an interview with Ishmon Bracey where he states : *“Men, white, colored...we got on with them. White folks would give hayrides, dances. Then they’d get through. They’d dance at some kinda place, like a barn or something and we played.”* (Chasin’ That Devil Music, p. 51). After all, when it brought in cash, why would they not do so? The white audience was thus well aware of the kind of music that was played by African Americans.

There have been different examples of mutual white and African American musical influences (Frank Hutchison, Uncle Dave Macon and Henry Thomas, The Baxter Brothers and the Georgia Yellow Hammers to cite only a few names). A particular striking case of cross-pollination is the one of Jimmie Rodgers (James Charles Rodgers), born in 1897, who is considered to be the first hillbilly, country star, popularly considered as a typical white musical genre. His (record) career started with the Bristol sessions headed by the Victor talent scout Ralph Peer in July 1927. He became known as a.o. the “Blue Yodeler” and the “Father of the Country Music”. Ironically, he had been turned down at an audition for H.C. Speir who launched many blues careers (see my post here).



The Baxters



Rodgers was not unfamiliar with the work of the local blues musicians. As a rail road worker and a traveling musician he had certainly met blues performers. It is also said that he listened intensively to race records. In his 1981 publication in Blues Unlimited (n° 148) (reproduced in Chasin’ That Devil Music), Wardlow tells us about the interview that he conducted with Jesse Thomas in 1972 (Jesse Thomas was the

Jimmie Rodgers brother of Ramblin' Thomas – see my previous post on King Solomon Hill). Jesse Thomas who acted as guitarist in the background for recordings by Bessie Tucker in 1929 also “recalls that America’s Blue Yodeler, Jimmie Rodgers’ recorded at the session”, adding that both Ishmon Bracey and Tommy Johnson played for Jimmie Rodgers in Jackson, Mississippi on at least one occasion. Rodgers, who was appearing at the King Edward Hotel, heard them (Bracey & Johnson) performing on the street in front of the hotel and invited them on the roof, where he allowed them to perform for his audience. Bracey said, “*He was struck by that ‘yodel’ of Tommy’s (Tommy Johnson) and asked if we (Bracey & Johnson) had recorded.*” (p. 65). “On another occasion, Bracey and One Leg Sam (Norwood) were invited by Rodgers to perform on the roof at the King Edward’ (p. 65).

Jesse Thomas goes further and asserts that on another record session, Jimmie Rodgers listened to one of his brother’s song and that Rodgers afterwards reworked it and recorded the song with a slightly different approach.

The Mississippi Blues Commission contends that in 1929 Jimmie Rodgers toured with a vaudeville which included a blues singer. According to the same source, Robert Nighthawk has also accompanied him in a performance at the Edwards Hotel in Jackson. I have found no other source to confirm this though.

It stands however that Rodgers’ Blue Yodel songs were based on the 12-bar blues format and that he got a great deal of his inspiration from the blues folk music. Some don’t hesitate even to call him in the first place a blues man. His ‘yodeling’ was very much a translation of the falsetto-blues riffs he heard all over the place from his black friends. In their article ‘America’s Blue Yodel’, Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff (1993) explore further the relation between African-American tradition and the origin of the ‘blue yodel’ : “*Rodgers probably owes his refrain less to black music than he does the occasional falsetto which he employs on words in*

*his blues stanzas. This is a common technique among black folksingers and one that is undoubtedly indigenous to their music, since it can also be heard in some recordings of African tribal music. Rodgers probably picked up the technique from black musicians when learning the blues and somehow associated it with Swiss yodeling, with which he also must have been familiar. Thus was born the 'blue yodel' in white folkmusic"*



One can state at the same time that Jimmie Rodgers has also influenced the black musical world. Since his career formed the meeting point, as Tom Piazza wrote, "*for images and folk material from the American South and West, from black and white traditions*", it is equally worth to investigate further the many ways that Rodgers on his turn influenced blues artists. I won't go into this detail though because this would lead us too far off our road. Let me simply refer to what Howlin' Wolf said about the way that he developed his famous 'howl' by listening to the music of Jimmie Rodgers: "*I took the idea and adapted it to my own abilities*". "*I couldn't do no yodelin' so I turned it into howlin'. And it's done me just fine*" (Segrest and Hoffman, *Moanin' at Midnight*, 2004, p. 22).

Howlin' in the wake of Yodelin' : how blue and black blues shook hands as relatives of the same family.



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