THE BLUES, THEY ARE NO ART

Do I sound provocative? What if I contend moreover that strictly speaking the blues were denatured the very minute their first notes were put on paper sometime around the turn of the first decade of the 19th century? If I claim furthermore that the epithet "the blues" has become less and less appropriate to denominate what has been recorded and played in the decades after the first commercial recording, I understand that at this point you are shocked and you start throwing insults at me to stop the blasphemy. No hard feelings if you dust your broom and stop reading. If you are intrepid enough to continue, I can promise you nothing more than some very personal reflections that have no other value than being an endeavor to organize a few chaotic thoughts that during the last couple of years have occupied my mind. I will probably appeal to ordering criteria that are different from yours. But let me indulge in my "intellectual" exercise. I apologize beforehand to those of you, familiar with my previous musings, for reflections that may sound familiar. For me, this grouping of loose thoughts is however a liberating catharsis. For you, I hope it is stimulating to throw your counterarguments.

My love for the blues started to blossom from the very first moment I made the effort to truly listen to them. I am a late bloomer: the blues only seduced me when I crossed the line of 50 – did melancholy push me to the blues? - and moreover, I entered the world of the blues by the gate opened by performers like Gary Moore, B.B. King and another King, called Eric Clapton, the latter often "Riding" on my HiFi with the former. This was sufficient though to ignite my inquisitiveness to dig further and ramble around back in time to the misty fields filled with haunting, scratchy sounds from 78rpm's carrying such (for me, then) obscure names on their label as Mississippi John Hurt, Son House and Charley Patton. Just imagine the culture shock that struck me when I acknowledged that the roots of most of our popular music lay in the output of those names which I had great difficulty, at the start, to even remember for more than a couple of hours. This was miles away from the Beatles- and other sixties sounds which had rocked me until then.

Today, when I reminisce about this period, I cannot help smiling and feeling a bit sorry for myself. But, I also feel mislead. Indeed, gradually the conviction grows that I entered the world of the blues through the wrong gate. Bit by bit, I perceive that, at the end of the day, it is not the music itself that primes in the blues. Identifying the blues only, or primarily, as music is a veil that hampers in hearing and comprehending what really goes

on underneath the surface. To persist in considering the blues as merely one of many musical styles, even if it is one of the main veins of the music history in the last century, stands in the way of my reaching their key significance.

In addition, the more my bookshelves fill with literature, the more I learn and understand, but also the more I feel imprisoned in a tunnel vision. Indeed, through all the pages which pass before my eyes, I can see the trees, but not any longer the forest. True, there are plenty of majestic trees in the forest of the blues lore. I see trees abundant with fruits dripping with juicy knowledge on bio- and disco-graphical data of well unknown and even, for me, obscure performers. I see trees with beautifully variegated foliage of stimulating thoughts on how the blues sprung from the slave sounds, and how the work songs and the field hollers left their legacy. I bump into trees which fruits gave me a taste of how the blues have been an integrated part of a segregated racial society. The leaves on this tree tell me how the blues were a way to survive in a cruel, white racist and violent environment. And yet … I keep feeling that I am missing something. I drink, but I remain thirsty.

Let me tell you straight away, to avoid disillusions, that in what follows I do not offer any answers. As said above, I only advance and arrange thoughts, ideas, suggestions, and speculations. But at least, I believe that I have found a path that possibly leads me out of the forest, hopefully to a hill from where I can admire the entirety of the forest. I am not sure that it is the right path, but I will give it a go.

AN AFRICAN OR A WESTERN FOREST?

How can I walk the path? Well, above all, I need to discern in my very own way of thinking each possible bias that insidiously invaded my frame of reference and which, for the sake of convenience, I will in a simplified way call “Western”. I am a long way from being able to account for all the possible cultural barriers that my education as well as the constant exposure to my social environment has set up and which hinder me from hearing more behind the haunted voice of Robert Johnson than what meets the ear. Can I truly listen to him, and grasp his message, without undoing myself from every prejudice and implicit cultural distortion that makes me also like the music of Neil Diamond? Can I perceive the meaning in the blues of Son House, without becoming conscious of the taste generators in me that seduce me to fall for the sweet and mellow sound of the Bee Gees? Can my brain waves evaluate in the same way Gene Pitney’s “It hurts to be in love” as Blind Lemon Jefferson’s “See that my grave is kept clean”? They are worlds apart, not only stylistically, but also with respect to their very nature. Are they even comparable? Does it even make sense to mention both in one sentence? Is it meaningful to keep one’s feet in one world and listen to songs echoing from another world? It is obvious that we need to cross a bridge to go from one world to another. In the same way that I cannot possibly understand the meaning in the Buddhists’ *Shōmyō* – even if I could translate the words – because I am not familiar with the background culture, I cannot get the drift of the blues without penetrating the blues

culture[1]. Understanding and appreciating music requires a priori comprehension of the culture from which it grows.

My complexion is not black, and I have the incredible luck of never having suffered from hunger, violence, oppression, discrimination or humiliation. Hence, I do not need to be convinced that I am predestined to never be able to truly feel the blues. Nevertheless, I can envisage a decent effort to step out of my preconditioned thinking and feelings, and unravel why it is wrong to expect to find the principles of harmony in Gene Pitney's love songs in the melodic structure of Son House's "John the Revelator". Why can I be so arrogant to assume that "Western" melodic standards would show up in Robert Johnson's songs? I would be no better than the colonist who believed that blacks were barbaric and were in desperate need of the one and only possible civilization, the "Western" civilization, erroneously considered as the omega of social evolution.

Hence, my first step on the path out of the forest will be a process of self-examination, i.e. of introspectively becoming conscious of every possible "Western" bias silently working in myself. I need to do away with the Western-centric mindedness that has, and still does, choke the slightest effort to verily comprehend the meaning of the blues. The best way for this purifying process is to open myself for African perspectives.

For instance, like me, you will no doubt have pondered about the notions of past, present and future. We take it as self-evident that time progresses in a linear way, and that the present is a result of the past, and that it is the basis of the future. Try for a second to imagine that this linearity is just an assumption, and that we may very well theorize the cosmos as "circular", and see the future as just a recycling of the past. Spring, summer, autumn and winter, and then spring again. The universe moves on in a perpetual rhythmical and cyclical way. To give another example: when we define "art", we try to describe it in terms of form and content. When we enquire into the "substance" of something, we implicitly say that, other than the form, the outside, there is also a substance. Why don't we define form and content as an indiscernible unity? Why do we dissect and "analyze", rather than "synthesize"? Why do we care so much for details, and do we forget the whole? Why do we put for instance so much value on expert medicine, and accept the fact that a specialist has only eyes for our ailment, but not for us, as unique human beings? As a final illustration: what is it that makes us believe that African collective ceremonies and rituals of rhythm and dance lead the dancers to be possessed in their trance by the spirits and gods? Alternatively, we might conceive that it is the dancers who possess the gods and spirits, and that through sustained rhythm and harmony they reach a transcendence that allows them to create their own environment. Rhythm and dance are then not a medium that invites the spirits to descend and to control the human, as we would expect from a Western philosophical point of view, they are – on the contrary – a device that permit humans as a collectivity to control the divine[2].

I hope to illustrate, in what follows, the relevance of this Afrocentric perspective in the comprehension of the blues[3].

LOOKING FOR OTHER VEGATATION IN THE FOREST

I expect, on my path out of the forest, to find an even greater variety of trees than the one I have been enjoying so far.

Though understandable, the very fact that the way to blues scholarship has hitherto mainly been steered by the love for the music has probably also its constraining consequences. It is quite natural that most of the influential blues students in the past and today are also (blues) musicians, or at least have a deep affection for the music. The nearness to the subject is at once stimulating, but at the same time this proximity can also be obscuring and confusing. We all know that it is very refreshing to put aside for a while the subject of our concern and take some distance, only to come back to it later with an accrued love and better understanding.

Do not despair: I do not plead to put your precious 78rpm gems aside, or punish yourself by tuning your radio to the Billboard Hot 100. I am no sadist. In broadening the perspective followed to date, we can walk a promising path to find new insights without silencing our favorite music.

For a start, unless I have been looking so far in the wrong libraries, I find very little attention for the blues in the relatively new field of the sociology of music. Although, the first theoretical mapping of the relationship between music and society goes back to the first decades of the previous century, it is no exaggeration to state that the field is still in its infancy. The role played by music in marking distinctions between social groups has been recognized. It has been amply described how music is an instrument by which younger generations claim their identity towards older generations. Music has been linked to the dynamics of urban marginalized groups that seek their rightful place in modern society. Yet, I notice a flagrant lack of attention on behalf of the larger population of researchers in this field to integrate the blues in their theories. The lack of detailed historical data is a comprehensible handicap, though invalid as an excuse. But then again: is it too far-fetched to suspect that this scientific discipline, born in the minds of European scientists like Max Weber and Theodor Adorno, has suffered too from an over concentration on European harmonies and musical expressions?

With respect to the (folk) blues, the sociology of music has so far been too much limited to ethnomusicology, focusing on the relation with ethnic background and “racial” aspects. Moreover - don’t tell you anything new – I note that it has been a field cultivated predominantly by white researchers.

Other scientific disciplines, as psychology and social-psychology and the like suffer from the same deficiency. Why do people listen to blues music? How are form and function of blues music linked? Is there a relation with particular personality characteristics? What are the mechanisms through which our musical taste impacts the perception of our environment? Is our love for the blues a way of social “protest”, of articulating ourselves in relation to others[4]? It would be fruitful to have a

more lively interaction between the general insights in music as a social and psychological behavior on the one hand, and the knowledge built up until now by blues scholars, on the other hand.

You are correct when you oppose me now and state that much effort has been deployed to position the blues and their evolution within the context of the African American history since the first slaves arrived in Virginia in 1619. Yet, the scope of this historical and social analysis is still too narrow and I find it often frustrating and annoying to stumble, time after time, on the same stereotypes. I would be delighted to find, for instance, some postulates that go further than linking the blues to the disastrous Reconstruction efforts, but would evaluate for instance also the impact of the economic crises of 1873, 1877 and the panic that struck in 1893. How did the wave of Reformism at the turn of the century relate to developments in music? If it is true that the year 1912 marked, according to Henry F. May, the end of the Victorian calm and "American Innocence", and the start of a period of cultural upheaval, is it then a coincidence that 1912 is also the year that blues music sheets gained popularity? Why do we call the 1920's commonly the Jazz Age, while it was precisely in this decade that the blues, as one of the "fathers" of jazz, gained unseen popularity?

In short, I see a need to widen the perspective on the blues, much larger than what presently dominates the scholarly material, and to involve more scientific disciplines, associating the experience and points of view of the musicians themselves. There is a strong need for bold theories that step out of the paved roads[5].

THERE ARE DIFFERENT TYPES OF FOREST

I show symptoms of blues-narcissism. The blues has overwhelmed me in such a way that I have been paying a quasi-exclusive attention to the scratchy sounds of Thomas Henry, Blind Lemon Jefferson and the like. Unconsciously reinforced by the above mentioned narrowed scope of the literature that landed on my desk, I have come to ignore that much can be learned from comparing the blues idiom to other similar cultural expressions, in other places and at other times.

It is odd to see that, while the comparative approach is largely disregarded by present blues students, early ethnomusicologists like father and son (Alan) Lomax were not restrictive in the definition of their field of interest. John Lomax, when he started collecting cow boy songs and ballads in the first decade of the 20th century, was also intrigued by African American folk. His 1933 tour, with his son Alan, along the state prisons to collect Negro songs from the convicts – songs supposedly untouched by mainstream influences – belongs to the classic narratives in the blues lore. In his turn, Alan Lomax directed his attention, next to African (American) folk also to folk songs from the United Kingdom, the West Indies, Italy and Spain. This broad scope inspired "Cantometrics", a method of music assessment, developed in the early 1970's coming in a joint effort by Lomax and a group of researchers. The taxonomy of expressive styles to which the Cantometrics'

study led, made it possible to develop theories on the relationship between musical styles from different traditional vocal music on the one hand, and characteristics of their social embedding at the other end. A basic assumption of the method is the relation between music and the social patterns of everyday life. Lomax advanced, for instance, the possibility of a link between the egalitarian versus hierarchical features of a society and the song style of its folk music.

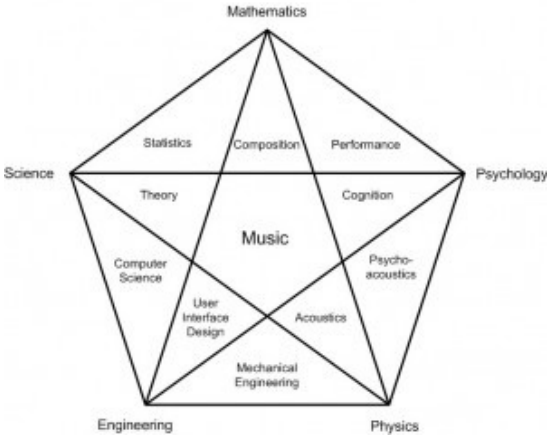
The relative lack[6] of thorough comparative research in the blues field is striking, all the more because similarities, though not directly in musical style, but clearly in mood and background between the blues and other musical expressions stare us in the face[7]. The styles that immediately come to mind are for instance tango, fado, rebetika, and flamenco. In his autobiography, W.C. Handy confessed that in his 1914 "St. Louis Blues", he "*tricked the dancers by arranging a tango introduction, breaking abruptly then into a low down blues*." Tango music was greatly in vogue at the same time the blues idiom became being formalized in music sheets. Fado is another folk musical genre often likened to the blues. It stands for the Portuguese emotion of "Saudade", referring to fate and to a yearning for the lost and the missed. A common theory says that fado is a mix from rural folk with song and dance imported by Africans and Brazilians.

Rebetika, the songs from the Greek "underworld", are frequently described as the "Greek blues" (Mc Nulty, 2000). Lodged in slum shacks in cities like Athens, Piraeus and Thessaloniki, tens of thousands of refugees from Asia Minor in the 1920's and 30's articulated in their lamenting songs the nostalgia for their homeland amidst appalling poverty. The rich vocal style of the haunting improvisations was a continuation of traditional styles with roots in the mid and late 19th century port cities of Smyrna, Constantinople and some Greek towns.

Brook Zern[8], a leading authority on flamenco music, has in the 1970's convincingly revealed the startling parallels between flamenco and blues/jazz. Just as the Africans were shipped to a totally strange country half a millennium ago and eventually developed their own culture, the blues being one of its cornerstones, so have the Spanish Gypsies, a dark-skinned race from a distant land, settled in Spain where they were the victim of oppression and cruelty on the part of the lighter-skinned

majority. Their "cante Jondo" , featuring a "hoarse, disconcerting, unsettling and even cutting" vocal style, incorporating vocal inflections, described their situation of abuse and expressed their sorrow. The similarity between blues and flamenco, Zern furthermore argues, does not stop in the resemblance of the dense and deep music both groups created, but extends even into their further evolution. Like the country blues, flamenco lost its authentic features when it spilled over to the urban environment, and when it was integrated in the mainstream culture. Is it a coincidence that both the blues and the flamenco were in the 1960's the subject of a wave of new interest that put the focus on the authentic forms?

Hence, if I want to better apprehend the significance of the blues, I am convinced that putting them in a broader (interdisciplinary) perspective and positioning them with respect to their nature and historical background to other folk music styles can be highly enriching and stimulating.



ARE THE BLUES (ONLY) MUSIC?

About a decade ago, Anne Blood and Robert Zatorre, researchers at the Neurological Institute from the McGill University in Montreal (Canada) demonstrated in an experiment how intensely pleasurable responses to music correlate with activity in brain regions that are also implicated in our reward and emotional system[9]. Furthermore, they found data suggesting that the brain activity generated by music can suppress negative emotions and feelings, in much the same way as biological stimuli like food, drugs and sex do. Hence, in an indirect way, through the development of the capability of deducting meaning from abstract, non-biological stimuli as music, the latter contributes to survival. It is a fascinating finding, no[10]?

It is very tempting to make the jump to the often repeated statement that the blues has been instrumental in the socio-cultural survival of the African American population. Blood and Zatorre's findings would support the common thesis that the blues are able to generate feelings that helped to overcome sorrow and the hardships of segregation and oppression. Only, this deduction would be no more than a gratuitous analogy that is not very promising with respect to creating new insights into the meaning of the blues. On the contrary, I expect to find a path to a better over-all view on the forest in which I have been strolling around until now by abstracting from the most obvious dimension of the blues, i.e. its perception and definition as a musical style. Why? Because, spontaneously, I associate music with sounds, harmonies and rhythms to

which I have been accustomed in the Western cultural pattern. The latter then risks working as a benchmark by which I appreciate the blues. To avoid the trap, I want to strip the blues from its musical connotation, and zoom in on the pure behavioral aspects and their functionality in a particular historical context. I want to define the blues as a *social ritual* with specific and historical functions.

This conceptual abstraction allows discovering a high degree of continuity in the African American cultural development ever since the first slaves were dropped in 1619 as a cargo on the coast of Virginia up until the booming popularity of the blues in the 20th century. In this line of thought, I am particularly seduced by the theory that describes the blues, the spirituals, field hollers and work songs as the descendants of the ring shout. Let me explain.

THE RING SHOUT: CONTROLLING THE ENVIRONMENT

Scholars[11] have demonstrated that the "ring shout" was a vital element in the growth of the black consciousness after the arrival of the slaves in the "New World". The ring shout, not to be confused with "shouting", can be described as "*a kind of holy dance in which the participants move counterclockwise in circle, hardly lifting their feet from the floor, knees bent, leaning slightly forward from the hips, and making movements expressive of the lyrics sung by a "leader" and "basers" or chorus in call-and-response fashion, propelled by cross-rhythms produced by foot stomping, hand clapping, and often a "sticker", a person who beats a broom handle or a stick on the wood floor. The shout usually begins slowly and gradually builds in intensity*"[12]. Because the slaves had different ethnic backgrounds, they also brought along different cultural backgrounds echoing divergent customs in their homeland. The ring shout was however a ritual that was a common denominator that affirmed a stock of shared cultural elements.

Indeed, the dance was a direct reference to some basic features of an African culture - however varied - in which, as mentioned above, the circle, the cyclical move of things, is a key concept. The circle is the symbol of balance, and the sign of unity between philosophical principles that at first sight seem irreconcilable. Inspired by the movement of the sun, the turn of the seasons, and by the life cycle the circle also stands for continuity. Naturally, ritual practices incorporated the circle as a central symbol of the African world view. The circle dance, by the vigor of the movements and the sounds established contact with the deities who rule over the forces of nature. One of the chief deities is reportedly Eshu (also Elegbara/Legba), worshipped in many related forms across Africa and in the

African Diaspora. He is the God of communication and spiritual language, the gatekeeper between man and the higher spirits, and as such he is the interface with the whole cosmos, and the doorway to the larger universe. This God is very much alive, and functions as the bridge between the larger universe and the everyday life. He also embodies all the forces, whether positive or negative, good or evil. But, most importantly perhaps, Eshu-Elegbara is the ultimate trickster who incorporates all the basic characteristics of such a persona: deceit, humor, lawlessness, and sexuality. He is the mischievous creative spirit who frequently leads man to temptation and possible tribulation in the hope that the experience will lead, at the end of the day, to maturation. His main sign is *the crossroad* of which he is the embodiment and the owner.

The circle served to define the space where Eshu met man. The sounds and the movements, the clapping of the hands and the stomping of the feet, accompanied by the strong beat of drums and gourds, the strong rhythmic accelerations eased the communication between the dancers and the higher spirits, and the spirits of their forefathers.

Like in Africa, the circle dance, transmuted to the ring shout in the New World, connected the living with the supernatural and the ancestors. It was the ultimate expression of a holistic world view in which primes the wholeness, the interconnection between the living and the dead in a universal cosmos that, unlike Western culture, makes no distinction between the sacred and the secular.

The ring shout helped to shape the sense of what it meant to be African American in an alien world. Its dominant functionality lay in the satisfaction of social needs, not in entertainment or in a wish to give shape to artistic aspirations. In the New World, it bestowed the slave community the ability to transcend the historical here and now, which was one of oppression, and to become one with their very own universe that they alone controlled. Through the power of their words, sounds and dances they entered the cockpit of their own communal life and cosmos. The ring shout articulated the African (American) consciousness. The plantation owner watched and did not comprehend that he was being locked out. He noticed only the weird and barbarian music and dance, which he interpreted as a confirmation of the happiness of his chattel property, "*just as later, when whites heard blacks laughing - those familiar minstrel sounds - they were also comforted that blacks were happy-go-lucky folks who accepted their racial stereotypes*"[13]. For the slaves, the ring shout was a mask behind which they could confirm their own view of life, enabling them to transcend the harsh social reality of an environment that tried to annihilate their humanity[14].

THE SPIRITUALS: YEARNING FOR FREEDOM IN AN OPPRESSIVE ENVIRONMENT

Akin to the ring shout, the spirituals[15], which emerged during the conversion process in the late 18th and early 19th century as a "signification" or re-interpretation of the Protestant hymns, functioned as a transcendental medium in a concrete historical context[16]. They too can be

conceived as a social and cultural ritual that derived their meaning from a particular social environment.

At first sight, the spirituals can be read as historical documents which contain a narrative of the slave's and freedman's history. In another interpretation, they can be seen as otherworldly projections toward a "heaven" after death, i.e. toward an abstract cosmos unrelated to the slave and African American experience. It was this interpretation that supporters of slavery thought to be functional and beneficial in the conversion process: the spirituals as the testimony of a belief of salvation in heaven as outlined in Christian terms. However hard the sufferings in the real live, eventually heaven would bring attenuation of all hardship. To the white community, the joyful appearance of the spirituals was, like the intense rhythm of the ring shout, a confirmation of the contentment of the African American, and of his acquiescence in his fate of a happy afterlife.

However, in an environment which is a constant assault on humanity, trickery and deception of the oppressor are the sole means of survival and freedom. From this point of view, the spirituals were a ritual that helped the slaves to retain a sense of dignity, and to define the "somebodiness" of their being, defying the slave-owner's definition of the "nothingness" of his property. With Christianity being only the outward layer of an essentially African spirituality, the spirituals helped to rebuild African inspired cultural structures in an alien world. They were the rhythms and the wordings, not of a Christian belief, but of an essentially African spirituality. It was, simply put, an Africanized Christianity. In the words of Zora Neale Hurston, despite the conversion efforts, "*the great masses were still standing before their pagan altars and calling old gods by a new name*"[17]. The spirituals helped the Africans to keep a measure of African identity in a foreign environment that refused them to grant humanity.

As James H. Cone convincingly argues, the holistic African world view with its absence of a distinction between the secular and the sacred, between the everyday life and the larger universe leaves no place for a denial of the historical freedom of the Africans, even after their transportation as mere cargo to an environment that defined them as only an economic factor, worth even less than a mule. In this cosmos, there is a natural contradiction between being a human, who through the mastery of the "word" (the nommos[18]) can bring life to all living and non-living things, and its reduction to a powerless object at the mercy of a white oppressor.

In this perspective, the spirituals are not songs of contentment and resignation, of acquiescence with a rewarding afterlife, but songs that emphasize liberation: yearnings for freedom, not in another world, but in the world here and now. They articulate a striving for historical liberation, not an abstract liberation, but a real one, an earthy freedom. Freedom is not a religious concept, as in the protestant ideology of the slaveholder, but a real, historical idea with transcendent implications. "*It was as if black slaves*," says Cone[19], "*were affirming their freedom through the rhythm, the passion, and the motion of their language. If the words did not sound right, feel right, and move smoothly form the lips, then how could they be an expression of the soul's yearning for freedom?*"

The "I" in the spirituals is a particular black person who affirms himself and his membership of a community which goal it was to stay alive *in dignity*. The spirituals are in this line of reasoning a ritual through which the African American community expressed its belief in its worth that transcended any measure opposed upon it by the white society. Transcendence through spirituals meant freedom, "*a live as if the future had already begun*". This fundamental chorus of belief in a future that can be different and better, and the constant affirmation of life are a reflection of a basic African optimism. It is what helped the African Americans lift them above their economic and juridical enslavement. Hence, the spirituals can be best read as a means, among others, by which African Americans defined themselves as "somebody", different from their oppressors.

This assumption is valid too for the blues which are also a ritualization of the African American existence that gives life a new meaning in a concrete historical context. Let me elaborate.

THE BLUES IS NOT SUNG FOR THE TUNE

Reverend Ruben Lacy, formerly a blues man, summarized the blues' spirit fittingly when he contended that the blues is not sung for the tune, but mostly for the words, adding that he "*told more truth in [his] blues than the average person tells in his church songs*." [20]

That is what the blues is all about: the truth. The truth consisted of the daily black experience that on the one hand had obtained the formal liberation of the chains of slavery, but on the other hand needed to cope with inescapable legal, social, cultural and economic constraints. The Emancipation had created the freedom to move around freely, to marry the woman one loved, to organize one's leisure time as one pleased. Yet, at the same time, this society robbed the freedmen of their fundamental rights, and made no effort to conceal that eventually they were *unwanted*. The gate to full participation in the white man's society remained firmly closed, and the regime of fear engendered by "Judge Lynch", accompanied often by literally burning the black man and reducing him to a mere carcass, was successful in conveying the message that passing this gate was no option.

The blues were a refusal of this horrific absurdity created by the white dominated

society. By the blues, the African American population affirmed its "*somebodiness*" in response to the attempts made to reduce it to "*nothingness*". While the blues lore can now be read as the repository of the black history, it was then foremost a means that made the crude and cruel reality comprehensible, gave it a name, embraced it, and by this very fact made it also possible to transcend it. "*When I have troubles*", declared Memphis Slim, "*the blues is the only thing that helps me – I mean that's the only way to kind of ease my situation*." The blues allowed to take a distance from the troubles, and offered a liberating catharsis. In more than a way, the blues were an instrument to overcome the attempts of the dominant group to subvert the segregated population, sometimes to the letter, i.e. by dragging its members through the streets as mutilated bodies, and hanging them on the trees as "strange fruit."[21]

In this perspective, the blues are a *ritual* that can be likened to the ring shout and the spirituals. The singing of the blues before an audience itself was an essential constituent of the ritual. They were not performed for entertainment, or showcased for aesthetic motives. In the words of Ruben Lacy, it is not the tune that primes, but rather the words the power of which transforms black life to a worthy life. Hence, the blues are at the very core of the black existence and historical experience of the African Americans. They are a manifestation of strength, and of the willpower to survive in the firm believe that one day the sun will shine. It is in the blues that African Americans acknowledged their existence, *and at the same time found a medium to transcend it*. They helped to define a world that was their own. In the words of Adam Gussow: "*blues is a way of bringing oneself and one's community back to life by getting loud, fierce, and down*."[22] Instead of suffering in silence, the blues are a testimony of the will to fight by a collective recognition and sharing of the crushing environment. The blues' singing was a "*signing into being of a getaway*" from the oppressive society. Again in the words of Adam Gussow: "*Blues (were) as an escape from the blues of poverty and share cropping economics.*"[23]

The *communal* aspect is an essential component of the definition of this ritual[24]. The audience is at least as important as the singer[25]. The blues were a collective unburdening of a trauma inflicted by the society in which the blues people were forced to live. Like the ring shout, the blues were a vehicle to an intra-communal connection aimed at creating a shared spirituality that transcended the daily experience. When the singer "preached", the "I" person in the blues lyrics merged with the "WE" experience. The individual blues symbolized the communal blues, and the two were inseparable. The preaching was

only successful if the singer, by his voice and rhythm, managed to create this communal spirit, i.e. to bring about a "one-ness" in which feelings and values could be shared. The song, the preaching, the tune, the rhythm, the singer, the audience all melted together in one creative unity that was different from the sum of its components. If the spark between singer and audience was absent, the fusion was not ignited, and there was no blues and no liberating catharsis. Without the mutual enrichment between singer and audience, the ritual healing could not take place, and there was no way to transform the collective nightmare of the black experience into a cosmos in which audience and performer could experience their humanity.

A WHITER SHADE OF BLUE

Hence, using the terminology of Charles Keil[26], the blues can be pictured as in the first place a ritualistic event, rather than a performance. If not always intentionally, they functioned as a means of spiritualistic liberation in relation to the metaphorical "bad luck" that was inflicted upon the singer and his audience. In this ritual, the performer and audience "*share the same intimate involvement and knowledge of black reality*."[27] This implies that during the "act" the performer is also more a "preacher" than an artist. The blues singer increases the feelings of solidarity, boosts the morale and strengthens the consensus[28], and in this role he expresses a belief, and cares less or very little about the artistic and creative dimensions. The latter are only relevant in as far as they contribute to successfully conveying his message. If the ritual is to be effective, his audience, in its turn, will be "*committed"* rather than *"appreciative"*. The audience does not judge the artistic qualities of the performance, but will find release in the lyrics and rhythms[29] through which the performer appeals to a shared cosmos of meanings in which both sides are reborn as "somebody".

This is the deep blues: preached and informal, spontaneous and emphasizing group solidarity.

It would be a stimulating exercise to describe the history of the blues in the twentieth century in terms of the three dimensions "ritualistic versus performance like style", "preaching versus creativity" and the "committed versus the appreciative attitude of the audience". Charles Keil and James H. Cone have offered a draft along this line. I agree with the latter that the history of the blues is in essence an evolution from a deep blue to a color near to "fafafa"."[30] A wide and complex array of

circumstances has fueled the development from the authentic folk and country blues to the urban, and to the white blues in which the performance primes over the ritual, the creative artistic act has suppressed the preaching, and the audience has become appreciative and less committed. The "good-timing" and fun-factor have, paired with an accrued attention to the aesthetic aspects and a growing sophistication of the music, gradually suffocated the spontaneity and improvisation which were characteristic of the "deep blues" preaching. Technique has largely killed the pure spirit.

However, the blues' turning into lighter shades of blue is not the topic of my discursion. In what preceded, I roughly sketched a few thoughts that can accompany me on my way towards a wider look over the forest in which I have been rambling around hitherto. I am convinced that a brighter overview can flow from a stronger interdisciplinary approach, creatively combining perspectives from musicians and scholars coming from a wider gamut of academic fields than so far has been the case. Moreover, I strongly believe that a comparative strategy in which the blues idiom and its social context are set out against that of "similar" types of folk music and their historic background holds strong promises to deepen our comprehension. Fundamental is, nevertheless, the recognition that the intent to grasp the meaning in the blues has the highest chance of success when, looking further than their musical layer, the blues are approached as a ritual behavior that requires explanation of its functions within a particular historical context. The terms of this explanation need to be those proper to the symbols of the social group for which the ritual is functional. Finally, the long term perspective that posits the blues within the development of the black consciousness and the survival strategy of the African American population in the context the New World is crucial. Only then can we see that the blues essentially are a means to transcend and cope with the terror embedded in a social structure that defined the African descendant as a mere "inhumane" economic factor, first as a slave, and after the Emancipation as a peon who was fundamentally unwanted.

The continuity in this long term cultural process is, to conclude, in fact nothing else than what Larry Neal, scholar of African-American theater, has called the "*Blues God*", on whom he declared in a 1978 interview[31]:

"(...) the blues god is an attempt to isolate the blues element as an ancestral force, as the major ancestral force of the Afro-American. What I always say about the blues god is that it was the god that survived the middle passage. It's like an Orisha figure. Because even though the blues may be about so-called hard times, people generally feel better after hearing them or seeing them. They tend to be ritually liberating in that sense."

FOOTNOTES

[1] See also, Adam Gussow, Seems like Murder here, 2002, who quotes S. Frith: “To grasp the meaning of a piece of music is to hear something not simply present to the ear. It is to understand a musical culture, to have 'a scheme of interpretation.' For sounds to be music we need to know how to hear them; we need 'knowledge not just of musical forms but also of rules of behaviour in musical settings”.

[2]See also, for instance, Eddie S. Meadows: *African World view in Blues : A Prefatory Analysis*, in Blues Unlimited - winter 1987 - n° 148/149. Meadows defines three basic features of African culture that penetrate into the blues : (a) the power of the word « nommos » (see also : Bosman, 2012 : « Toasting to the blues and Rap »), (b) the importance of the participation, and (c) the view of the universe as cyclical.

[3] To avoid all misunderstandings, I do not in any way want to take part in the debate about a dichotomous split between “black” and “white” music (see for instance Philip Tagg’s 1987 open letter on this matter: http://tagg.org/articles/opelet.html). My point is simply that, in order to understand music – or for that matter, whatever cultural expression – one needs to have a thorough background of its social and cultural environment from which it is an emanation. After all, just like language, music is a behavior that cannot be detached from the social dynamics of the group that uses the medium to communicate messages. Behind a simple word, behind a tune or rhythm hide connotations that are often only comprehensible to those who participate in the same social and symbolic environment. This has no ontological relation whatsoever with ethnic background, even if in practice the criteria for social formation frequently follow more or less clearly defined ethnic lines.
My plea for an Afrocentric approach to the blues conforms to this basic idea. It is based on the hypothesis that – despite their internal variety – the discerning and comprehension of a number of cultural values that survived the Middle Passage, and that were distinct from cultural meta-Anglo-Saxon values, likely contribute to a better understanding of the blues than relying primarily or only on the latter.

Following Max Weber’s assertion, formulated a century ago, it is in its musical landscape that a society or group shows its true nature. To truly understand and appreciate this landscape, it is inevitable to study its geology.

[4] For instance, a 2008 study exploiting data with regard to the co-occurrence of artists and genres in playlists shared by members of a popular web-based community, demonstrated that when one loves the blues, one generally also like jazz music. However, while rhythm-and-blues and rap music commonly share playlists, a high affinity for the blues seems to go hand in hand

with a low affinity for rap music (Baccigalupo, Plaza, Donaldson). (see: http://www.myblues.eu/blog/?p=2055)

[5] In this respect, Adam Gussow's theory on the relation between lynching and the blues is a perfect example of a daring theory that is utterly stimulating to extend our thoughts beyond the classic frontiers (Seems like Murder Here, 2002)

[6] One exception, among other authors, being Demeuldre, Michel. *Sentiments Doux-amers dans les Musiques du Monde: Délectations Moroses and le Blues, Fado, Tango, Flamenco, Rebetiko, P'ansori,Ghazal*, 2004.

[7] As J. Reis de Brito states : « The parallels in the evolution of some musics are, in some cases, so obvious, that were it not for the specificity of the musical structure and/or choreography, and the diversity of ethnic elements, one could not guess at their respective identity » (quoted in : The Gangster Reformed, a study in musical parallels, José Dos Santos, http://www.mustrad.org.uk/articles/gangster.htm)

[8] http://www.flamencoexperience.com/blog/?cat=31

[9] http://www.pnas.org/content/98/20/11818.short

[10] This finding recalls the 1973 article by Leonard Goines in "Black World": "The Blues as black therapy". Based on a random selection over a 30-year span of 270 blues songs, the author revealed that blues music could have a therapeutic effect on Blacks. They were a way to face their problems and release their anxieties: "once you name it, you can claim it, and then it's possible for you to tame it." It echoes Albert Murray's statement: "We invented the blues; Europeans invented psychoanalysis." (quoted in: Nancy Tolson: "Black children's literature got the blues", 2008).
It furthermore echoes one of Freud's hypothesis according to which repetition of distressing experience as a game is a way the subject may actively master, and derive pleasure from, an otherwise overpowering threat to the ego's integrity. (see: Irving B. Weiner,W. Edward The Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology, Volume 4, 2010, p. 1455).

[11] See, among others: Samuel Floyd, Ring Shout! Literary Studies, Historical Studies, and Black Music Inquiry, in: Black Music Research Journal 11(2), 1991, 265-287 / Samuel A. Floyd: The power of Black music, 1996 / Lawrence W. Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom, 2007 / Sterling Stuckey: Slave Culture, 1988.

[12] The "Encyclopaedia of African American History", 2006

[13] Jon Michael Spencer, Blues and Evil, 1993, p. 83. In this context, the author quotes Houston Baker's definition of the "mastery of form", i.e. the masterful manipulation of the minstrel mask. While the whites heard only the cheerful sounds of the stereotyped African American, the latter voiced his challenge to the hegemonic white paternalism, to the white power structure.

[14] See also Saidiya Hartman (1997), in: "Scenes of Subjection", where the author explores the healing effect of the antebellum African American.

[15] I refer here to the « folk » spirituals, and not to the spirituals popularized by a wide array of jubilee companies in the post bellum period.

[16] I owe much to the insights brought by James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (1991), and by Jon Michael Spencer, *Blues and Evil* (1993).

[17] Zora Neale Hurston, in The Sanctified Church, 1983, 103 – quoted in J.M. Spencer, Blues and Evil

[18] See: http://www.myblues.eu/blog/?p=2055

[19] James H. Cone, The Spirituals and the Blues, p. 44

[20] Blues Unlimited, n°43, May 1967, by David Evans, pag. 13

[21] Between 1890 and 1930 a few thousand cases of white-on-black lynching have been reported. It was not only the fear engendered by the lynching act itself that created the environment of terror, but also (and probably more) the spectacle that was built around it. A lynching, accompanied often by a total mutilation of the body, was regarded as a show, and body parts were spread as souvenirs. Here is an extract from an article in "The Springfield Weekly Republican" of April 28th 1899 on a Georgia lynching. (quoted from: Ralph Ginzburg, 100 years of Lynching, 1988 , p.19-20).

"Men and women cheer and express feelings of triumph and joy as the victim is hurried on to the stake to make a Sunday holiday in one of the most orthodox religious communities in the United States. They cut off his ears, his fingers and other members of the body, and strip him and pour oil upon him while the spectators crowd desperately for positions of advantage in the great work of torture and death. As the flames rise about the victim the people watch the quiverings of the flesh and the writhings of the frame, and shout back descriptions to the jostling, cheering hundreds on the outskirts of the ring. The negro raises a cry of agony that can be heard far away, and in a supreme effort loosens the upper part of his body from the chain which binds it to the tree. The fire is deadened while he is being chained back, and the awful agony prolonged to the evident relish of the spectators. Then more oil and fire, and death at last comes to the man's release.

Meantime the news has spread of what is going on and hundreds leave Atlanta and other places by special train to see the fun. There is a rush upon what is left of the body and spectators cut off bits of the flesh, the liver and the bones as precious souvenirs of the day. The mob is now only fairly started on the hunt for vengeance and amusement. The victim, in the midst of the torture, gives the name of one alleged to be implicated in his crime. It may have been the suggestion of truth, or it may have been the false prompting of a desperate desire to save himself. Quite likely the latter. But the mob sets off after the negro Strickland. He is seized in the dead of night. His white employer says he believes the man is innocent. No matter, the appetite for blood is up and has not been satisfied. The negro is "tried" by mob oratory and condemned. He is strung up and let down once or twice by way of extorting a confession, and through it all he protests his innocence. His ears and fingers are cut off and the body is finally left dangling from a tree limb. The mob next sets out for a negro who had been heard to say his race should be avenged, and at last accounts it was still spreading terror and death among the blacks, while a similar mob in South Carolina has inaugurated a like campaign".

[22] Adam Gussow, Seems like Murder Here, 2002, p. 16

[23] Adam Gussow, Feels like Murder here, 2002, p. 77

[24] This calls to mind Freud's three staged trauma recovery process : (a) remembering, (b) reconstruction, and (c) *the working through it with the help of a compassionate listener*.

[25] See also : Michael Haralambos, Right on : from blues to soul in Black America, 1974

[26] Charles Keil, Urban Blues, 1992

[27] Jon Michael Spencer, Blues and Evil, 1993, p. 40

[28] Idem

[29] In (socio-)psychological terms, the *repetitive* structure of the blues lyrics and tunes is an essential element in the blues' cathartic effect.

[30] Hexadecimal color codes are a way to describe hues (0000fa = deep blues; fafafa = white)

[31] Quoted in: Houston A. Baker, Afro-American Poetics: Revisions of Harlem and the Black Aesthetic, 1996, pp.157-158.