A Dark Night, a Cold Night: the Phraseology of Blues

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In the summer of 1952, anthropology student Charles McNutt recorded twenty items near Memphis with a black singer Will Slayden [between 60 and 70 years old] who accompanied himself on a five string banjo.[1] As an anthropologist, McNutt was interested in American prehistory, and his interest in a sixty-five-year old Slayden was not a professional one; he was just curious about how to play the banjo.

Just as with the guitar player Libby Cotten (1895-1987),[2] whose qualities were re-discovered by coincidence in the home of musicologist Charles Seeger in the 1950s and whose repertoire preserved the music of her youth till 1915, in Slayden's repertoire we can also discover the rudimentary type of blues; "Joe Turner" is nothing exceptional within other songs. There was no evidence that in the early decades of the 20th century similar songs would become core items of the most important popular music genres and that they would repeatedly influence the main stream of pop music.

Slayden's archetypal blues can help us to understand the origin of the blues form; however, it is still rather difficult to understand why this happened exactly in the beginning of the 20th century, why this happened in the American South and why – within the many existing musical cultures – it was exactly the blues, which dramatically extended its natural frame.

In the American South, African and European music had been meeting for at least over two hundred and fifty years, and the blues represented a really sophisticated product of this process.[3] Naturally,

1) Will Slayden (2001). *African-American Banjo Songs from West Tennessee.* [CD]. Tennessee Folklore Society.
2) Elizabeth Cotten (1958). *Folk Songs & Spirituals.* [LP]. Folkways.
3) It is really peculiar that in an extremely complex work byDan Epstein *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals* (1977, Urbana), which surveys accessible literary notes related to African American music on the American continent, the term blues can be found only in the very end, as a very brief note.

similar productive contacts had happened also at different places and different times, but the blues appeared not only when technologies of sound recording and the industry that followed were available, but also in the most accessible geographic area for such a music industry. In the 1920s and 30s, US recording companies managed to promote the African American blues more assertively than did for example French labels Odéon, Aérophone, Le Soleil, and Perfectaphone, or than Idéal managed to do with their recordings of Parisian bagpipe players.[4]

In its home environment the blues was first considered more of a fresh novelty (Wald, 2004), so then it could leave the scene easily, the same way as it appeared. The reason why this did not happen was apparently profound. There is evidence that the roots of the blues go back to the period after the American Civil War, with the abolition of slavery, which meant the loss of a problematic protection, a breakdown of traditional values, and replacing one familiar danger by a number of unknown ones. There is a similar example in the Czech lands: "During the times of drudgery we had just one master, and now there's as many of them as manors in the village", says priest and writer Václav Beneš Třebízský (1849-1884) when describing the development of the Czech lands (1969, 14).

It is not a coincidence that older levels of African American singing have often brighter colours; abolished slaves entered quite a modern world and they reflected it in appropriate music: using familiar notes to express the true anxiety from unexpected menaces, general uncertainties and the so far unknown loneliness of individuals who were torn out from traditional communities by the changed system. (Tourgée, 1999, [13–22]).

The basis of the blues was a simple, universally acceptable form that allowed immediate self-expression to almost anybody, though using taken-over elements. A formal frame was flexible enough: John Lee Hooker explains that, if needed, he is able to play the twelve-bar blues

4) *Cabrette.* (1993). Auvidis/Silex Memoire.

perfectly, but because this is not the thing he is famous for, he does not care. Another reason against it is the fact that an exactly set form deprives him of the right feeling (Obrecht, 1993, 113).

When compared to older layers of folk music, the blues included an apparent tendency to a certain simplification. It is not a coincidence that many of the best bluesmen started to perform relatively late and they were not handicapped in their music anyhow. Sometimes a musician even played one song over and over; sometimes one blues was enough for a longer entertainment; sometimes the lyrics were extended on the spot by the performer or even by the audience. Many blues masters used a couple of motives consciously, and polishing them was the basis of their musical life.

This was the way how in a rural background of the blues a hard core emerged, which represented a personal way to express oneself, using suitable musical tools and a personal system of values. If a musician didn't manage his blues enough, or if he complicated his music too much, his colleagues simply said that it was not "the right blues" or they claimed that he simply "didn't play the blues anymore". Even respected performers were able to say openly: "This man plays a deeper blues than I do, that one doesn't go deep enough..." (Obrecht,1993, 93).

In June 1942 "Mississippi Blues" [5] by Willie Brown was recorded, a free adaptation of a three-year-old hit, and the next day "County Farm Blues" [6] was recorded by Eddie Son House. A comparison of both recordings shows the direction and the length of the road the blues has travelled. Evidently, there was no problem to master current trends and to create a formally mature, technically perfect form, basically corresponding to the needs of European 'light' music.

However, there was also another possibility: to leave the original piece its strength, to unite the traditional natural field hollering and rough instrumental technique of playing the diddley bow; to apply it to a completely new instrument (guitar), and to fully use this newly found

5) *Mississippi. The Blues Lineage* (1999). [CD]. Rounder, track 2.
6) Ibid, track 3.

potential.

The recordings show clearly continuous improvement and deepening of the blues. While in the youth of Cotten and Slayden the blues was only a part of folklore repertoire, it is more important with the next generation of songsters; later on – after 1910 (Evans, 2005,18) – we meet someone, who consciously and willingly becomes someone more and at the same time someone less than a musician: an expert mainly on the blues, who does not only perform familiar songs, but ideally he is able to improvise with music and lyrics on the spot. In a way, this is the moment, which should be considered the key one.

There is an old anecdote about an obstinate musician, who, when being asked why he has been playing just one tone, answers: "Everybody else is looking for a tone on the whole fingerboard, but I have already found it ...". *It* corresponds remarkably with an opinion of Budy Guy: "George Benson[7] is one of the greatest I've seen, he can do that from top to bottom. I have a tendency to stay there and wear a hole in the neck of my guitar, and just play one sound. Oh, that sounds so good!" (Obrecht, 1993, 203–204).

Not to be confused, Guy actually works with almost endless line of pitches, because he follows the motto "I´ll make the little E kiss the big E", when he pulls the strings across a fingerboard some tones above their tuning. However, the feeling of immediately controlled expression is crucial, because it is what matters most. The result then seems to be something more and at the same time something less than music.

The needs of music created this way were followed by the development of the instruments: Slayden's rattling banjo was 'thrown far away' and replaced by a guitar with its longer, more pliant and darker tone, but the possibility of tuning instruments was kept, mainly to minor or major chords. The pliant tone of a mouth-organ was used perfectly, while the mechanical system of an accordion was not suitable anymore, as is evident by the number of recordings. From the beginning the

7) George Benson (b. 1943), a jazz guitarist.

instruments were used in a way that must have driven their constructors crazy. The oldest report concerning the blues, quoted thousand times, describes a performer sliding the strings with a knife. This technique enabled the performer to move along the guitar strings, tuned probably like a banjo to a chord, with a knife, bone of an animal, glass bottle or a chipped bottleneck fully independently on a European tone system, somewhere between minor and major chords, with oriental accuracy. Muddy Waters has been called "Mr. Microtone" and *Guitar Player* magazine points out "Slip that baby on your finger, and suddenly pitch isn't just a matter of hitting the right fret – it's a matter of hitting the right molecule." (Wheeler, 1993, 37).

However, the blues is not only about tone pitch, but mainly about the possibilities of expressions. The same can be reached by guitarists when pulling the strings; some of them start the tone on a lower fret to open the space for both directions. For the same reason, mouth organ players even use instruments of different keys than the tune played, and choking or blowing strokes together with shaping the necessary tone by hand enables them to control immediately the expression, which is not possible with any wha-whas, boosters or other similar effects.

Such freedom indeed faced some limits from time to time, as it is evident from four recordings where the blues exceeds itself. First it is so called 'holly' blues by Blind Willie Johnson "Dark was the night, cold was the ground, where my Lord was laid down", where actually the whole song is sung by a guitar, and a voice just follows it without words and creates a unique mood [8]. In the second example, "*Pearline*" [9] by Son House, the singer just repeats the girl's name urgently and the whole message is left upon the guitar. Also John Lee Hooker fully uses the space given by the blues, which has spread more widely as the genre reached new audiences. If we want to hear the laughter of the blues, we can listen to black humour, which John Lee Hooker uses in the song "[I'm

8 *The Complete Blind Willie Johnson.* (1993). [CD]. Columbia, track 1/5.
9) *Martin Scorsese Presents Son House.* (2003). [CD]. Columbia, track 9.
10) *John Lee Hooker Alone.* (1989). [CD]. Tomato, track 1/2.

Bad like] Jesse James"; there he describes how a fellow is strangled under water, and accompanied by extremely austere guitar music he doesn't even omit to include the sound of the last bubbles coming up from the victim's lungs. [10] And when we want to hear the crying of the blues, we can listen to the same singer describing his loneliness in the "Dark Room". [11] However, these recordings represent the extreme borders of the genre. Both Blind Willie Johnson and Son House sound somehow helpless. Hooker already supports himself with certain stylization and dramatic behaviour, which can be hardly present in the original setting of the blues; in contact with a university audience the singer reaches an enviable freedom, but he also lacks the power of the supreme blues.

The period of the formation of blues as a unique music language is coincident to a certain degree with the development of a distant music style, which also closely reacts to the radically changing world: musical expressionism. It is a peculiar paradox that the only place, where expressionists and bluesmen could meet face to face, was the terrible world of trenches in the World War I.

Expressionism requested directness and a power of musical expression, expansion of instrumental and vocal techniques and the most direct self-expression as possible, independent on education, intellectual background and skills. The blues, of course, fulfilled the requirements, in some points even better than expressionism itself.

Since the very beginning, the blues has left the ideal of a beautiful voice or tone; it continuously works with a number of purposeful impurities, music processes the sound stimuli of the new period, the lyrics balance on the edge of pornography and at the same time they enter into the darkness of human mind. The sound of instruments has been strongly vocalized, or reduced on percussion sound, while singing moves close to the act of speech or, on the contrary, uses bizarre shades: as is evident in Robert Johnson in his "Last Fair Deal Gone Down". [12]

11) Ibid, track 1/3.
12) *Robert Johnson: Complete Recordings.* (1996). [CD]. Columbia, track 1/20.

If we want to describe the blues in its innermost form, logically there is available the characteristic of expressionism presented by philosopher Theodore Adorno, "loneliness as a style" (Adorno, 1966, 49–50). To understand the consensus and differences we can compare at least two quotations. The first one, by American bluesman Eddie Son House, comes from a processed experience, the second one, by Hungarian composer Béla Bartók, focuses more on general worries:

"The blues is just by yourself. That's the blues – when you done got lonesome and worry, don't know what to do. Thinking 'bout your loved ones... people that you wanna be nice to you, you been nice to them, but they ain't... you're deceived... Now you got the blues, you don't know what to do ... You want to see 'em, wonder where they're at, wonder where they're gone, wonder why they deceived me... I trusted them with everything I had, I done everything ... had a hard time, with faith, and believe them, and then they get up and deceive me... Now you don't know ... And you cry again. That's the blues, B.L.U.S.E. [sic]"[13]

"I am a lonely man! I may be looked after ... and I may have friends ... yet there are times when I suddenly become aware of the fact that I am absolutely alone! And I prophesy, I have a foreknowledge, that this spiritual loneliness is to be my destiny. I look about me in search of the ideal companion, and yet I am fully aware that it is a vain quest. Even if I should ever succeed in finding someone, I am sure that I would soon be disappointed." (Bartók in Crawford: Crawford, 1993, 7).

It is not always that the blues reaches a really convincing straight expression that is able to express the above quoted feelings; it often stays in the position of a trivial popular hit. However, the verse by Sleepy John Estes, "And the people stood on the bridge – crying and mourning '..." which expresses the anxiety invoked by a natural disaster, an urgent speech of the performer – and even the Estes' face at the moment - touches the audiences with its similarity to a screaming figure leaning on

13) Edward Son House in the film *Festival*, directed by Murray Lerner.

the fence on one of the most famous paintings by Edvard Munch, The Scream (*Skrik in Norwegian*, also known as German *Der Schrei der Natur*).

The blues was probably in the right place at the right time, not only as to the geographical area and technological conditions, but also because it answered most successfully the urgent call of the period. To this aim the blues created generally acceptable music language and it was able not only to use traditional instruments, but to find new ones in order to reach the goals needed as well. When two people are doing the same thing it is of course not always the same. The causes and effects of the blues and expressionism could have been and also were in many ways different. But the harmony of sound fragments, booming and howling glissandos, croaky, colourless pizzicatos or knockout chords shows the way, which the blues used to travel: from the remorseless rattle of the Slayedn's banjo to the very end of its possibilities.

Resources:

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