

## Reconstructing the Blues: Reflections on the 1960s Blues Revival

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The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grants money to artists and to organizations supporting artists. The NEA Folk Arts Program funds folk artists. One wintry March day in 1981 I was sitting in an office room in Washington, D.C., with a dozen anthropologists, arts administrators, museum workers, folklorists, and ethnomusicologists, and we were voting on grant proposals. I was beginning a three-year term on the Folk Arts Panel, an appointed group that recommends to the NEA which proposals should and should not be funded.

We had just had a lively discussion about a certain proposal. Everyone thought the idea was a good one, that the project was feasible, and that the proposing organization was sound. The problem was that the artists were a mixture of traditionalists and "revivalists." Folk arts did not fund revivalists. Some panel members felt that the presence of revivalists tainted the project and therefore we must not fund it. Others felt that because some of the presentations involved traditional artists exclusively, and because a respected professional folklorist was a consultant on the project, we should fund only that portion that presented traditional artists. The latter position carried the day and the project was recommended for funding at a lower figure with instructions to the presenting organization that Folk Arts money was to be used for traditional artists only.

At this point I remembered when I had first heard the term "revivalists." It was in the late 1950s when I was a teenager. Among the upscale suburban crowd and the bohemian college students and city dwellers, folk music was in vogue; it offered a meaningful musical alternative to rock and roll's rapid insistency. In the late 1950s most folksingers entertained their audiences with a mocking, ironic, "hip" or "beat" stance, a version of ex-

istentialism, the popular intellectual philosophy of the day, which viewed the world as populated with antiheroes. Singing folk songs—meaningful lyrics set to simple melodies with simple accompaniment on acoustic instruments—was one way of asserting humanity in an absurd universe. Feeling confined by the small world of our high school and the getting-and-giving of our parents, a few of us worked out our adolescent rebellion in terms of jazz, folk music, beat poetry, James Agee, Albert Camus, foreign films, and coffeehouses. My father was an amateur jazz guitarist and so I learned to make chords and accompany myself singing folk songs. In 1960 I bought my own guitar and began singing and playing in coffeehouses in my home city, Atlanta.

In the early 1960s many of us thought that this urban folk revival was dividing in two. In one camp were those who considered folksongs common property. Entertainers like Pete Seeger, the Weavers, Peter, Paul, and Mary, the Limelighters, and the Kingston Trio sang a mixture of traditional and newly composed material in "folk" style (using simple melodies, harmonies, and accompaniments) and encouraged audiences to sing along. In the second camp were singers like Joan Baez, the New Lost City Ramblers, Dave Ray, and John Koerner who tried to sing and play what they regarded as a traditional body of material (Child ballads, for example, or the music of Leadbelly) in a traditional way. These folksingers took on a burden of repertoire and technique that led to self-conscious artistry. My allegiance quickly passed from the first camp into the second, and as a college freshman in 1962 I spent several hours a day practicing guitar in the fingerpicking style of Etta Baker and Elizabeth Cotten. Among enthusiasts in the folk revival, debates were held about "authenticity" and "selling out." Who was "more ethnic" (as the saying went) than whom?

Folk music was democratic, acoustic, open to everyone; yet people tried to excel, to be recognized for skill and taste. Connoisseurship entered in: who was the best guitarist, who had the better record collection, who would make the next "discovery" of an obscure song or singer? Yet ego was held in check: one did not show off. Folksingers like Oscar Brand and Theodore Bikel were suspect: chatty and sophisticated actors on stage, they tried to entertain, sometimes at the expense of their material. But Joan Baez was praised for her self-effacing stage manner, which let the songs "speak for themselves." Among those who favored authenticity and tradition it was a short step to "reviving" traditions themselves, as by performing old-time string band music or blues or bluegrass, or by entering tradition, as Bob Dylan did when he became a singer-songwriter like Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. The folk revival was identified strongly with acoustic music, and when Dylan emerged at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965 playing electric guitar and backed by a rock band, many purists

felt that Dylan had sold out and that the folk revival had been seriously weakened. This was the kind of analysis I remember going on in New England among college-student "folkies" in the first half of the 1960s.

I was reminded of these things while we were discussing the grant proposal. The NEA panel could identify revivalists easily enough: they had not grown up inside the family or community whose tradition they came later to practice; rather, to pick it up they had to cross ethnic, geographic, and class boundaries, or they learned it in some kind of institutional setting, and as often from other revivalists as from those with a birthright to the traditions they carried. Traditional folk artists carried tradition as inseparably as their native tongue.<sup>1</sup> But as I glanced around the panel an overwhelming irony struck me. I saw mostly lapsed revivalists. To be sure, still-performing Pete Seeger was on the panel, but many of the rest of us had once enjoyed professional if not spectacular careers in the folk arts. And we were voting to give money only to nonrevivalists. No conflict of interest here! (Or was a deep conflict being repressed?)

My epiphany was what Barbara Babcock and others would call a "reflexive" moment, a moment when one steps outside of oneself to look at oneself as someone acting in the world.<sup>2</sup> It is a moment of objectivity, a moment that philosopher Thomas Nagel would characterize as one in which our consciousness allows us to be aware of ourselves as subjects and objects simultaneously. And there lies a serious philosophical dilemma: "how to combine the perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of that same world, the person and his viewpoint included."<sup>3</sup>

In this essay I turn a reflexive eye on the blues revival of the 1960s, a movement in which I participated as collector, performer, promoter, record producer, guitar teacher and music school cofounder, biographer, fieldworker, historian, and interpreter. Although I will review some of my own activity, I will concentrate on an exemplary early work by Samuel Charters that ushered in and set the tone for the revival that followed. I will look also at Charters's second thoughts in his preface to a 1975 reprint of his pioneering book. The larger question is the relationship of revivalist activity to blues itself. The governing metaphor at the time for what we were doing was "discovery" and "rediscovery," as if what we were doing was finding something that was unknown or had been lost. But the notion of discovery is complex, as anyone knows who has thought about the grade-school "fact" that Columbus discovered America. Our discoveries, like those of the European explorers, were mixtures of invention and interpretation, and in a way instead of finding our object, blues, we constituted it.

Hindsight, a climate encouraging reflexivity, and my reading of recent work in literary and anthropological theory lead me to conclude that those

of us who participated in the revival thought we had discovered an object called blues, which we then set out to think about, document, analyze, and, in some cases, perform. Instead, by our interpretive acts, we constructed the very thing we thought we had found. This is not to say there was nothing "out there" called blues. I am not defending a position of philosophical idealism here. Rather, I am saying that the various activities of the blues revivalists constituted a commodity called "blues" that came to be consumed as a popular music and a symbol of stylized revolt against conservative politics and middle-class propriety.

Prior to this revival blues had been a music by and chiefly for black Americans; the revival turned it into a music by black and white Americans primarily for white Americans and Europeans. To be sure, some black folksingers had been a part of the folk music revival that was centered in New York City since the 1930s and directed largely at whites; in fact the revival began with the black songster Leadbelly, and during the 1940s and 1950s other black folksingers (Josh White, Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry, and Big Bill Broonzy) became part of a nightclub and concert folk music circuit extending to Europe. With the exception of Leadbelly, each of these performers had a prior commercial career singing blues to black audiences. Yet when presented as folksingers for urban white audiences, they performed ballads like "John Henry," folksongs, and spirituals as well as some blues.<sup>4</sup>

The blues revival was fueled by the folk revival, especially at first, but it might not have touched so many city and suburban whites had they not already been weaned on rock and roll, a music heavily rooted in blues and rhythm and blues. Folkies rejected rock; blues fans disliking rock preferred prewar, acoustic blues, but rockers embraced the postwar blues with its electric guitars, electric basses, and drum sets—the rock instrumentation. Jazz also helped bring about the blues revival.<sup>5</sup> The Beat movement in literature, with its interest in the black American jazz artist as existential role model, prepared an intellectual path for people like me who, in looking for something that would mark them as nonconformist, came upon the blues.

The blues revival brought commercially recorded blues music and black musicians before the white public. White, middle-class, city and suburban men (and a far smaller proportion of women) initiated the revival. In the United States, the revival was launched in 1959 with the publication of Samuel Charters's *The Country Blues*, along with an accompanying record album of the same name, as well as a Charters-recorded album of Lightnin' Hopkins, the singer with whom he framed his book.<sup>6</sup> The revival did not end suddenly, but the scale of activity declined dramatically after the 1970 Ann Arbor Blues Festival, where most major blues artists performed before

an audience of ten thousand. I date the major phase of the revival from 1959 to 1970, and note that, as I write, in the late 1980s, a new one is in full swing.

The blues revival documented, presented, and interpreted. Charters's work was preceded by that of record collectors who explored country blues and also the "classic blues" of the women blues "queens" like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey.<sup>7</sup> Collectors canvassed the United States for 78 rpm records in factory warehouses, goodwill stores, junk shops, and the homes of people who might have bought them. They pored over these records, puzzling about singers with nicknames—"Blind Lemon Jefferson," "King Solomon Hill," "Bo-Weavil Jackson"—what romance in these names! Hobbyists, their pastime was buying, selling, listening, and imagining. Record magazines published early blues discographies and tantalized their readers with life-sized photos of rare labels. Jazz magazines such as the English *Jazz Monthly* ran notes-and-queries columns. In the early 1960s *Blues Unlimited* and other magazines devoted entirely to blues arose; they printed record reviews, discographical notes and queries, interviews with blues singers, news and itineraries, obituaries, and an occasional interpretive article. Eventually blues fans moved from thinking about blues as a kind of folk music (the "folk-blues") to blues as a music unto itself.

It was a short step from collecting 78s to reissuing them on long-playing albums. When Folkways published the companion album for Charters's book, *The Country Blues*, a group of record collectors in the New York area issued a counter-album, *Really! The Country Blues*.<sup>8</sup> This was the beginning of Origin Jazz Library (OJL). The New York "mafia," as it later came to be known, felt Charters had underrated the Mississippi Delta, where the most outstanding blues had originated; their first album was devoted entirely to the "father" of Delta blues, Charley Patton, and *Really!* included several Mississippi recordings and sought to upstage Charters's efforts. I am sure my love for Delta blues dates from my listening to the early OJL reissues and reading about the collectors' quests to locate singers who might still be alive. Many other reissue albums followed in the early and mid-1960s, particularly from OJL and Folkways in the United States, and from several English companies. As the decade progressed and the revival received increasing public attention, collectors worried about copyright infringements, but the flow of reissues increased, and by 1970 most of the material of interest to collectors could be found in long-playing record albums issued by companies such as Yazoo (approximately fifty albums), Roots (forty albums; an Austrian company), Blues Classics (twenty-five albums), and OJL (twenty-three albums).

In 1963 and 1964 the blues revival gained strength from the "rediscovery" of Mississippi John Hurt, Skip James, Son House, and Bukka White (to

name the four most prominent), once only exotic names on record labels. Collectors turned promoters and encouraged the rediscoveries to record anew; the singers practiced (although usually they were recorded soon after the first meeting, lest the treasure slip away), made albums, and began playing their acoustic music, often sounding uncannily like their recordings decades earlier, at clubs, coffeehouses, and festivals. Some went on tour to Europe and Japan. Their appearances at the Newport Folk Festival in 1963 and 1964 turned them into a media event, and they were written up in the weekly news magazines while they secured record contracts with major labels: Son House and Booker White on Columbia, and Skip James and John Hurt on Vanguard. Folk music still was big business; singers like Joan Baez and groups like Peter, Paul, and Mary continued to inspire young imaginations throughout the United States, and when folk festivals featured the rediscovered singers along with the revivalists, they were making a statement about roots that the media, reporting about the civil rights movement and looking for heroes, could not ignore. More field research resulted and new favorites like Mance Lipscomb and Fred McDowell emerged. Traditional artists were documented; many more albums were released featuring field recordings. Post-World War II blues with electric guitar, particularly the Chicago-styled version, moved into the revival in the middle of the decade when people realized that the British Invasion (particularly the music of the Rolling Stones) was blues-based. The Stones, after all, had taken their name from one of Muddy Waters's blues songs. And a white blues harmonica player from Chicago put together the Paul Butterfield Blues Band and had a blues single high on the pop charts: "Born in Chicago." Soon other blues band leaders had major record contracts: James Cotton, James Montgomery, and Charlie Musselwhite, to name a few. Some were revivalists, and some were traditional artists enjoying second careers in the revival, but in a sense all were revivalists because they were reviving a music that had fallen in popularity.

The 1960s blues revival grew out of the earlier urban folk revival and it had two strains, two sides. First, it was a romantic movement among idealists of all ages, involving a love for blues as a stylized revolt against bourgeois values. So it appealed to people who came out of the intellectual wasteland of the Eisenhower era, the age of the "organization man," the other-directed conformists who made up the "lonely crowd."<sup>9</sup> Rejecting conformity to middle-class values, blues revivalists embraced the music of people who seemed unbound by conventions of work, family, sexual propriety, worship, and so forth. The blues revival was a white, middle-class love affair with the music and lifestyle of marginal blacks. The romantic strain projected a kind of primitivism on the blues singer and located him in a culture of natural license. On the other hand, the blues revival was

remarkably oriented to records and the record-listening experience. It was begun by collectors for whom 78s were exotic mysteries engendering endless theorizing. The collector strain in the revival was scientific in method if not spirit: blues music was objectified on recorded artifacts that seemed real (after all, they could break) and, unlike most living beings, held still when one tried to analyze them. A dialectical energy involving acquisitiveness and fantasy fueled the revival.

First and most important were the collectors' efforts at gaining discographical control over the vast number of recordings. Listing blues records by artist, sidemen, title, date, record company name, release number, and matrix number culminated in the massive Dixon-Godrich prewar blues discography.<sup>10</sup> Most collectors used discographies innocently enough. If you liked Blind Blake, for example, Dixon-Godrich would tell you which records you needed for a complete collection. Discographers aimed at scientific objectivity; their compilers strove to print accurate information about records while refraining from evaluation. No discography would tell you which Blind Blake records were best.

But the discographers' work embodied a paradox. Choosing which records to include and which to exclude was not always easy. The discographers used collectors' criteria rather than the criteria of the general public (who probably would have included white artists) or the criteria of the general African-American public (who did not make rigid distinctions between blues, rhythm and blues, and jazz, for example). The paradox is that while the collectors assumed they were merely providing information about something that already existed in the world, their discographies came to define the blues canon. If a record was listed, it was blues; if not, it wasn't.<sup>11</sup>

Collecting is an act of appropriation. As James Clifford reminds us, collections are efforts "to make the world one's own, to gather things around oneself tastefully, appropriately. . . . The self that must possess but cannot have it all learns to select, order, classify in hierarchies—to make 'good' collections."<sup>12</sup> As museums appropriate objects for preservation and display, these objects come to be authentic and authenticating cultural representations, to "stand for" a "school" of painting, say, or an extinct species, or a human group's former way of life. And just as museums order their artifacts into an authoritative reconstruction, so record collectors arrange their discs into something that represents "blues."

In that representation, process becomes artifact and engenders new cultural activities: collectors listening and talking about "blues" on the record. Paul Oliver, the most highly regarded English blues writer of the past thirty-five years, recognized that for most Europeans, the experience of blues is an experience of recordings: "Though there's nothing quite like listening to a blues singer in person, in a club or on his house porch

especially, for me as for most enthusiasts, those records have been the raw material of our experience."<sup>13</sup> This fascination with the recorded artifact produced a distancing that the "real thing" (hearing the music live) couldn't quite dislodge. So, for example, when Muddy Waters toured England in the 1950s, Oliver noted that "his rocking blues and electric guitar were meat that proved too strong for many stomachs" that had been expecting something closer to "folk music" than rock and roll.<sup>14</sup> Waters, unlike Big Bill Broonzy, did not know or did not care that the European audience had a preconception of blues that fixed it in an earlier, acoustic era.

Nor is it clear that Waters would have drawn a sharp distinction between blues, rhythm and blues, and rock and roll, or classified himself then as a blues singer only. When he toured England he was at a stage in his career when he was aiming at the teenage record market. "I'm a Man," "Mannish Boy," and other such songs penned for Waters by Willie Dixon sought to capitalize on the newly discovered record buying power of teenagers, the market that Waters's Chess stablemate, Chuck Berry, had exploited. Only when his career faltered in this arena in the early 1960s and he found a second career in the blues revival did he return primarily to blues. The fascination with the recorded artifact and the desire to have singers recreate those artifacts and conform to *a priori* images is a collector's fixation. As Charles Keil points out, many of those images were racist stereotypes: "The worst white ideas about blacks are accepted a second time and worked through with a vengeance in the personae of Muddy Waters, a natural force like the Mississippi, a rolling stone with mojo powers; Howlin' Wolf, a raging beast, the tail dragger humping around on all fours; Sonny Boy Williamson, pushing 60 when he first records for Chess but still just a 'boy' whose smiling face can sell King Biscuit Flour."<sup>15</sup> And Oliver's phrase, "on his house porch especially," reveals the collector's desire to put the singer in his place: the country porch was a more "natural" (i.e., close-to-nature) context, but in 1984 it was terribly anachronistic.

"Natural" context suggests something of the underlying romantic imagination that reconstructed "blues" in the act of interpretation, and this brings me to second aspect of the revival, romanticism, and to Oliver's counterpart in the United States, Samuel B. Charters, whose popular 1959 book and reissue album both introduced and delimited the field of commercially recorded "country blues." In most of his writing Oliver shows the collector's fascination with facts: names, dates, places, and so on. Charters cared less for fact and wrote evocatively, using the resources of fiction as he wrought his subject into being. Later writers took Charters to task for conceptual sloppiness and bad history. For example, Charters had devoted a chapter in *The Country Blues* to Leroy Carr, whom later writers regarded as the most important early city blues singer.

Charters's definitive book reveals romantic enthusiasm born of existential commitment, and a conflict between his personal taste and the aesthetic criteria he inferred from the black record audience. In his preface, he wrote that he would devote space to the blues singers in proportion to their popularity (as shown by record sales in the black communities) rather than impose his personal preferences. This, he felt, would guarantee objectivity. Immediately contradicting himself, he offered a justification for a chapter on Robert Johnson, whose records did not sell very well:

It has seemed to me artificial to discuss the music on any other level than that of its relationship with its own audience. This has resulted in an extensive study of the marketing and sales of blues records in order to achieve as high a degree of objectivity as possible. It would be relatively simple to select groups of recordings and develop a thesis on either a musical or a sociological basis, but the truth has been that the blues audience is capricious and not in the least concerned with musical or sociological concepts. Two singers, Rabbit Brown and Robert Johnson, have been discussed at length, despite their minor roles in the story of the blues. Brown was discussed in a contemporary review and some further comment seemed important, and the music of Robert Johnson was of considerable interest to the study of blues styles. (pp. xvii-xviii)

Johnson, most writers now believe, played a major role in blues history because his innovations and repertory passed orally to so many other artists in the Mississippi-Memphis-Chicago blues tradition; sales of his records are beside the point. But Charters could not avoid selecting a group of recordings and then developing a thesis. He railed against the Bluebird recordings of the 1930s that featured Bill Broonzy, Washboard Sam, and Sonny Boy Williamson:

In the years before the second World War, Bluebird exploited the blues with a persistence and thoroughness that made its blues releases almost as popular as the standard vocal releases on Victor. The country blues were a commercial success. In the 1930s, they became as repetitious as the city blues had been in the 1920s. The personal vocal styles and the intense, personal styles were almost eliminated. Instead of individual accompaniments, there were small groups. . . . To make individuality even less noticeable, Bluebird used a group of house musicians who accompanied everybody. The singers were not even singing their own blues most of the time. (p. 183)

Charters had a simple thesis: blues was a traditional art form whose chief value lay in its "intensely personal expression." Intensely personal expressions sounded defiance in an age of conformity. Robert Johnson is

important in *The Country Blues* because he epitomized the kind of romantic, even existential, artist-hero that Charters envisioned as "bluesman." Johnson is mysterious: "Almost nothing is known of his life" (p. 207) except that he was murdered and died young. Charters reports a rumor that would make any record collector shudder: "There is a story that his first recordings were done in a billiard parlor and a drunken fight broke out after he recorded. Someone threw a billiard ball at one of the engineers and smashed several of the masters" (p. 208). But above all Charters views Johnson as a tortured, driven poet. He is "superbly creative" (p. 207); his lyrics have a "superb imagery" (p. 209); and "the finest of Robert Johnson's blues have a brooding sense of torment and despair" (p. 209). Fair enough; evaluate Johnson's blues as poetry. But Charters goes on to say that "his singing becomes so disturbed it is almost impossible to understand the words" (p. 210). Here, he confuses the singer with the person and fails to realize that Johnson's intensity is calculated art. Different "takes" of the same song from these sessions, perhaps unavailable to Charters, show little change and indicate that Johnson was not incoherent or "disturbed," but an artist and a perfectionist.

Charters's portrait of Lightnin' Hopkins frames the book and, not surprisingly, yields more information about revivalist romanticism than about Hopkins. Supposedly a description of the way Hopkins turns a work song into a blues, it reveals instead Charters's construction of Hopkins and the moment. "In a poor, shabby room in the colored section of Houston, a thin, worn man sat holding a guitar, playing a little on the strings, looking out of the window. It was a dull winter day, a heavy wind swirling the dust across the yard. There was a railroad behind the houses, and a few children were playing on the rails, shivering in their thin coats. . . ." (p. 15). Hopkins sings a few verses of what Charters thinks is a work song, "Ain't No More Cane on this Brazos," and then Charters divines Hopkins's thoughts: "He sat a moment, thinking of the hot, dusty summers on the flat cotton lands along the Brazos River, thinking of the convict gangs singing as they worked, the guards circling them slowly, a shotgun across the saddle" (p. 16). Hopkins sings a couple of lines more, and then "He stopped to drink some gin out of a bottle under the chair. He drank nearly a half pint of raw gin, using the metal cap of the bottle for a glass" (p. 16). After the long drink he sings what seems a complete performance. Charters concludes: "The man was named 'Lightnin' Hopkins, from outside of Centerville, Texas. 'Ain't No More Cane on this Brazos' was a song he had heard when he was a young man, working in the fields. His own song ['Penitentiary Blues'] was a reshaping and reworking of the old work song into something intensely personal and expressive. He had changed it into a blues" (p. 17).

Charters's depiction sends up warning signals. The clichéd phrases ("poor, shabby room," "thin, worn man," "dull winter day," "hot, dusty summers") suggest an observer who sees in predetermined categories. The stereotyping continues when Hopkins downs the most "raw" drink imaginable (straight gin) as if to provide a metaphor for the transformation of the "raw" verses of the worksong into the finished blues. I do not doubt that he drank the gin; what concerns me is why this detail is selected and others omitted. But the most telling aspect of Charters's portrait of the artist is that by constructing in accordance with his already formed expectations, he misunderstood what he heard. I think that instead of changing a worksong into an "intensely personal" blues song, as Charters would have it, Hopkins was merely hesitating as he recalled and refashioned a blues song he had recorded a dozen years earlier as "Grosebeck Blues."<sup>16</sup> I came to this conclusion after listening to the versions of "Penitentiary Blues" ["Grosebeck Blues"] that Hopkins recorded commercially prior to his meeting Charters, and after considering the lyrics of these versions with the lyrics Charters prints. The earlier "Grosebeck Blues" is in quatrain-refrain form; the resulting "Penitentiary Blues" attaches Hopkins's earlier quatrains to a new improvisatory refrain.<sup>17</sup> He makes a new blues song from an old one, not from a worksong.

Because Charters "knew" that blues songs developed from worksongs, he was predisposed to interpret what he heard as Hopkins turning a worksong into a blues, an instance of blues ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny. But in the light of information he did not consider, the account seems wrong and, because he was careful enough to record Hopkins's music and generous enough to make it available, we can read through his construction to what probably took place. And, of course, this incident reveals strikingly how the blues revival, thinking it was performing acts of interpretation on something "out there" called blues, constituted blues through its interpretive acts. I don't mean that Charters was making blues in the sense that he was singing them, of course; but he was making them in the sense that he was constituting a domain he called blues, and he was arbitrating and divining meaning within that domain, just as I did when I suggested a different interpretation.

In this light it is interesting to follow Lightnin' Hopkins's and John Lee Hooker's careers through the revival decade as they progressed from blues singers to folksingers to blues singers once again. Hopkins and Hooker were discovered and recorded in the late 1950s for folk and blues revival audiences. Both were presented as folksingers who made up their own lyrics and accompanied themselves on acoustic guitar. Both Hopkins and Hooker made many 78 rpm records in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and prior to their discovery in the late 1950s they were singing before

audiences in the black communities, fronting small bands and playing electric guitar. The producers of folk music concerts and albums must have asked them to change to acoustic guitars and sing without a band backup. Their current music must have sounded too much like rock and roll. Acoustic music—folk music—was thought unadulterated. Ironically, then, Charters and other folk music promoters unplugged the electric guitars, assuming the authority to alter Hopkins's and Hooker's music to sell it to the folk revival audience. In so doing, they probably felt they were removing the "electric" taint. But a few years later, after the Stones, the Butterfield Band, and Bob Dylan's appearance with an electric guitar at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, Hopkins and Hooker were promoted as blues singers and when they recorded for the blues revival, they were plugged in once again.

To complete the interpreter's hegemony over the artist, he must deny "authority" to the artist, leaving the interpretive field to himself. Charters moves in this direction when writing [above] that "the blues audience is capricious and not in the least concerned with musical or sociological concepts." Harold Courlander, whose *Negro Folk Music U.S.A.* was the period's standard treatment of its subject, goes the rest of the distance. I quote from the beginning of his chapter on blues: "Too often, in recent times, folk song performers, innocent bystanders, and casual rustic acquaintances have been called upon to provide definitions, the history, and the philosophy of folk songs. . . . The value of this 'personal interview' approach to problems of analysis and definition is limited if not altogether precarious. Nevertheless, we might take a look at what some folk and blues singers have had to say about blues."<sup>18</sup>

Here Courlander sets the stage with his tone. "Casual rustic acquaintances," for example, and several other condescending phrases not only deny interpretive authority to folksingers but tell the reader that he and the writer belong to a more highly educated class. Courlander's tone may have been an extension of the sophisticated patter one could hear on the urban folk stage. And so he reviews some native theories:

Huddie Ledbetter, Sonny Terry, and Bill Broonzy, among others, have tended to identify blues with melancholy or miserable feelings of one kind or another. As Ledbetter put it—in a pat, theatrical way: "When you lay down at night, turning from one side of the bed all night to the other and can't sleep, what's the matter? Blues got you. . . . When you get up in the morning and sit on the side of your bed, may have father and mother, sister and brother, boyfriend or girlfriend or husband or wife around you, you don't want no talk out of 'em. They ain't done you nothing, you ain't done them nothing, but what's the matter? Blues got you."

Bronzy may have come a bit closer to talking about the blues song rather than "the blues" when he said: "Blues is a natural fact, something that a fellow lives. If you don't live it, you don't have it." What he meant, I think, is that a real blues song grows out of real life, unlike many other kinds of popular songs. However, blues singers are not likely to be able to tell us much more than this about the blues form or its development. Their role is to sing, not explain how it all came to be, or why it is as it is. (pp. 123-24)

Leadbelly was not trying to define blues songs but to connect the emotion to universal experience. Courlander dismisses Leadbelly's view, not by refuting it, but by attacking its sincerity: if it is "theatrical," then it must be false, an act. Bronzy is allowed to speak for himself, but Courlander must translate his meaning: "What he meant, I think, is . . ." If the blues singers do not know what they are talking about, or if they are insincere and apt to be lying, we should not trust their interpretations. Instead, here is Courlander's educated, "objective" voice telling us what the blues "are":

As a form of expression, blues are certainly much more than a statement of personal misery. At its base, the blues song is a sort of exalted or transmuted expression of criticism or complaint, the very creation or singing of which serves as a balm or antidote. The finer the singing or the creative effort, the more effective is the song as a catharsis. A singer in a Louisiana prison declared, "Whenever you sing the blues just right, why you feel like a million, when you may not have a dime. . . . That's the best part of my life, is blues." (p. 124)

Courlander's interpretation turns on the notion of catharsis, but I think he has Aristotelian tragedy in mind, not blues. "Exalted" is a strange word to describe the lowdown imagery of blues lyrics. "Creation or singing" is a willful evasion; I want to ask him whether the catharsis comes with the creation or the performance (why not both?), and I am sure he has no clue; he has not thought it through. "Balm or antidote" cleverly takes the weight from the comparison to tragedy; blues is a lesser thing. And his conclusion is rampant with irony; having denied interpretive authority to blues singers, he quotes one to "prove" his point about catharsis. His interpretation does not hold; ideas war against each other, they spin and cancel each other out. Yet his strategy is clear: quote the native point of view if you must, but discount it and substitute your own, reporting occasional native viewpoints when they support your views. In that way he constructs the domain he calls "blues."

I continue with other writing from this period, including my own Ph.D. thesis. Most of us were satisfied to seek out blues singers' ideas and present

them in their own words as "folk evaluation."<sup>19</sup> In my thesis, later published and honored as the outstanding book on "nonclassical" music of its year, I took pains to represent many blues singers speaking what they actually had said in conversations and interviews, but always organized in categories that I learned from ethnomusicologists or took from my interest in history, music, and poetry: what was the social status of the blues singer; how were blues songs composed and transmitted; was blues a protest music; were blues songs autobiographical; and so on.<sup>20</sup> In other words, my portrait proceeded by my analytical categories; I sought their information but not their way of thinking about it. I was impatient with questions such as "What is the blues?" and in my own fieldwork seldom asked it. Thinking I was presenting their view, I was presenting my construction of it. Again, that is not to say I made it up; but I did fashion the raw material of interviews into a chapter on "The Singers' Perspective" that cohered on the basis of my experience, not theirs.

My reaction to Lazy Bill Lucas's repertoire and record collection reveals how different were our views. Bill was the first blues singer I got to know as a friend. We lived in the same city; we played music together; I spent time at his apartment; and in 1969 I joined his blues band as a guitarist. I knew him for a few years before I heard the word *ethnomusicology* or understood what fieldwork was. Bill's performing repertoire seemed to me to be a mix of blues and lesser material. I liked his blues songs but did not care as much for his rhythm and blues pieces. His record collection reflected his repertoire and included what I thought of as rare Chicago blues alongside common rock and roll (e.g., Fats Domino). One of his favorite songs was Domino's version of "Blueberry Hill," a big rock hit from the mid-1950s. Bill, of course, did not sort the music out in the same categories I did. My difficulty, as I view it with hindsight, stemmed from a "pure" conception of blues deriving from collectors' criteria. A rare record on the Blue Lake label in Bill's collection got me excited. Finding a home recording of Bill and Snooky Pryor and Homesick James in Bill's basement was a monumental discovery. To Bill, the Blue Lake record was just another of Sunnyland Slim's performances; he had heard him so often. And for Bill the home recording was just a performance that had not resulted in a record contract, not a unique document of a historical moment.

Nor was I fully aware how much of what they told me was a product of previous interactions between folklorists, record producers, fans, and historians on the one hand, and blues singers on the other. To be sure, I knew that some singers' views had been influenced by their dealings with well-meaning promoters; who could think that Leadbelly had composed "Bourgeois Blues" without exposure to leftist ideas, or that Big Bill Broonzy's autobiography, written at the end of his life for a European blues fan,

was not partly the result of his second career on the revivalist circuit?<sup>21</sup> Anecdotes (later proven untrue) circulated about Alan Lomax and Son House, or more recently about John Fahey and Booker White. But somehow, I thought, my purposes were pure—after all, research, not exploitation, was my aim—and I felt the singers would recognize that and respond thoughtfully and honestly to my questions, giving me the answers in the 1960s that they would have given in the 1920s and 1930s, before all the revival hoopla. Barry Pearson has shown how naive that notion was, and how, confronted with revivalists, blues singers fashioned stories to satisfy their new audience.<sup>22</sup> By the late 1970s I had come around to the position that what we take to be oral history is often better understood as fiction.<sup>23</sup>

My notion of what anthropologists call “native point of view” or “folk evaluation” rested on two incorrect assumptions: that there existed a dominant or definitive viewpoint that could be reified into “what blues singers (in general) believe,” and that there existed a more or less unswayed viewpoint that could be extracted from what the singers said in conversation with me and other researchers. The concept of “folk evaluation” turned too much on the wishful thought of a pristine “folk” and a separation between them and us. While on the one hand I tried to bridge that gap, playing guitar in Bill’s band, I also played my role as researcher, and when I wrote my book I thought of myself fully in the latter role.

As Berger and Luckmann have shown, all of us are socialized into an ongoing construction of reality.<sup>24</sup> After childhood we do not come wholly innocent to any situation. All revivalists acquired preconceived notions of blues. Charters went looking for blues as folk music, and of course he discovered what he was looking for. Charters got his expectations about blues from his activities in the interpretive community of jazz buffs and folk music aficionados. When in the mid-1960s I began doing blues research in earnest I scrutinized every blues fan magazine, read every blues book and article (there weren’t many) and every record jacket liner note I could get my hands on, and was thus brought into the blues research interpretive community. As a result I began to see and hear the things that were commonly discussed: the differences between “Delta blues” and “East Coast blues,” for example. I acquired an attitude, developed prejudices, became something of a connoisseur. I knew, or thought I knew, what was authentic. In short, I became part of the blues revivalist interpretive community, and I can best understand my activities then within this matrix. Blues singers were socialized into the world of the blues revival as well. They learned that certain kinds of performances were better received than others, and they adjusted their shows accordingly. They learned that they would have to deal with a myriad of questions from interviewers. They, too, acquired attitudes. Some did research of their own; John Jackson, for example, a

Virginia blues singer, has built an outstanding collection of reissued blues recordings and has incorporated some of these songs into his repertoire while incorporating the liner notes into his reflections on the history of blues. But if our social theories were naive, it would be hard to find a word to describe our political ideas. What was at stake for those who participated in the blues revival?

Revivalism is peculiar politics; is it reactionary or revolutionary? Charters, reviewing *The Country Blues* in the retrospective preface he wrote for the 1975 reprint, claimed, “We were trying to turn what we did with our lives into a political act, and what I did, in part, was write this book” (p. ix). And it is his retrospective on the blues revival and his part in it that I want to take up here, if only to suggest that readers be cautious about anyone’s hindsight, mine included. Charters saw himself to be anticipating the 1960s counterculture in conjuring an alternative to mainstream America. He wrote:

I could have shouted, and I could have criticized—but instead I tried to present an alternative. If my books from this time seem romantic it’s because I tried to make them romantic. . . . *The Country Blues* was two things. It was a romanticization of certain aspects of black life in an effort to force the white society to reconsider some of its racial attitudes, and on the other hand it was a cry for help. I wanted hundreds of people to go out and interview the surviving blues artists. I wanted people to record them and document their lives, their environment, and their music—not only so that their story would be preserved but also so they’d get a little money and a little recognition in their last years. So there was another kind of romanticism in the book. I was trying to make the journey to find the artists as glamorous as possible, by describing the roadsides, the farms, and the shacks, and the musicians themselves. What I was doing wasn’t academic, and it wasn’t scholarly, but it was effective. (p. xii)

Was Charters really aware of political choices (shouting, criticizing, presenting an alternative, or working for change) or was he, rather, swept up for a time in the very romanticism he says he chose to employ? A good test would seem to be his portrait of the black culture he said he felt was direct, open, and honest. “I found that the awareness of the real sources of power in the society, the consciousness of social inequalities, and the direct expression of sexuality in the black culture was so much closer to the American reality that I felt I somehow had to make people conscious of what these other voices were saying” (p. x), he wrote, but his phrase “the American reality” is odd in this context. What can it mean? In the sentence just quoted it suggests “reality” in contrast to “appearance.” But



for Charters both the appearance and reality of 1950s bourgeois American culture was stifling. "At the same time I believed that if I could make people hear the voices of black Americans they might begin to see them as human beings, and not as stereotypes" (*ibid.*). And yet his portraits are romantic stereotypes. We've seen how he conjured up Lightnin' Hopkins at the book's beginning. We predict the book will end with Hopkins walking slowly down the street into the gathering darkness while Charters laments the impending death of the blues. Not quite, but almost: "Lightnin', in his way, is a magnificent figure. He is one of the last of his kind, a lonely, bitter man who brings to the blues the intensity and pain of the hours in the hot sun, scraping at the earth, singing to make the hours pass. The blues will go on, but the country blues, and the great singers who created from the raw singing of the work songs and the field cries the richness and variety of the country blues, will pass with men like this thin, intense singer from Centerville, Texas" (p. 266).

The blues will go on, diminished. This is Charters's romantic lament, leavened by a false existential toughness. Hopkins lonely and bitter? How can Charters presume to know? The blues has continued for almost a century, despite sixty years of predictions of its impending demise. Cultures and music-cultures ebb and flow, diminish and strengthen. Some die, but the blues continues dynamic and emergent; the current interest in blues has resulted in a surge of new reissues, new blues artists such as Robert Cray, and surely will result in new writing about it. Already the new revival is under way, attempting another interpretation.

As a gloss on this theme, I quote a few lines from Wallace Stevens's poem, "The Man with the Blue Guitar":

The man bent over his guitar,  
A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.

They said, "You have a blue guitar,  
You do not play things as they are."

The man replied, "Things as they are  
Are changed upon the blue guitar."

And they said then, "But play, you must,  
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar  
Of things exactly as they are."

## II

I cannot bring a world quite round,  
Although I patch it as I can.

•••

Here I inhale profounder strength

And as I am, I speak and move

And things are as I think they are

And say they are on the blue guitar.<sup>25</sup>

Stevens was not known as a connoisseur of blues music. These lines might be taken as a brief for Courlander's view that blues singing is cathartic: that is, by changing "things as they are," the singer or artist purges sorrow. Instead, the poem turns on its relation to Picasso's painting *Man with a Guitar*, in which everything *but* the guitar is blue. The poem suggests that the guitar, a figure for the imagination, turns the green day blue. My point has been the same: the blues revival, like all revivals, including the folklore and folklife movement itself, is an imaginative act owing its ongoing activity to a paradox. That paradox is this: for activity to take place, people must think there is something stable "out there" called blues (or called folklore, for that matter), which the revival then does things to; it celebrates artists and songs, reissues records, rediscovers artists and makes new records, promotes concerts, writes discographies and histories, and in general interprets the activity called blues music. Rather than telling what blues is, the revival makes it what it is, just as in Stevens's poem the guitar makes the day blue. But for the revival to proceed, the revivalists must believe otherwise, that they are merely finding (discovering) something rather than constructing (constituting) it.

The period of the blues revival, after all, was also the era of civil rights and black power, when interpretive voices from the black community spoke loudly on racism and exploitation in music as in all aspects of American life. One black history revue I performed in then had Lazy Bill Lucas singing blues in a slave hut.<sup>26</sup> For the revue's purposes, blues was a music of complaint, and therefore the slave setting was appropriate. I told the show's director that scholars thought blues began no earlier than the 1890s; the show, I thought, was committing an anachronism. I had my say but the show went on as planned. Four years later as I was listening to thousands of blues lyrics in preparation for an anthology of transcriptions, I decided that complaint wasn't the "real" theme of the blues; freedom from mistreatment was.<sup>27</sup> The blues, I felt, was an important and positive part of the black heritage. Meanwhile, though, some voices in the black community concerned with developing a distinct black "aesthetic" devalued the blues as a music of resignation and the past.<sup>28</sup> Nowadays, on the contrary, black writers such as Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates see blues as proof of a historically rooted, distinctly black attitude toward life,

an attitude that is alive to the complexities of living and thinking and feeling, and an attitude that turns life into art.<sup>29</sup>

To the musicians, the blues revival of the 1960s was a way to earn money, prolong their careers, achieve prestige from recognition, and remain artists. The promoters enjoyed bringing this music to a popular audience but they were not entirely altruistic: they exercised power and made money for themselves. Collectors satisfied desires for acquisition and control. Academics found intellectual and other pleasures and wound up furthering their careers.<sup>30</sup> The interpreters viewed blues within the matrix of their ideas of black music and culture. For many fans, blues represented a lifestyle and a stylized, artistic revolt against confining bourgeois values. Writers concerned with the black experience constructed blues as a historical expression and fit it into a contemporary agenda. The folklorists on the NEA panel viewed blues as a cultural treasure, threatened and in need of support. No one, then, is free from constituting domains through interpretive acts. Instead, various interpretive communities—whether blues scholars, musicians, black historians, or folk arts programs—engage each other in a negotiation over meaning that finally is political and implicates us all.

#### NOTES

This is a revised version of a paper read at a panel on Revivalism at the 1987 annual meeting of the American Folklore Society, in Albuquerque. The panel was co-chaired by this writer and Burt Feintuch, and it included Neil Rosenberg and Edward D. Ives. I am grateful to Steve Feld, Barry O'Connell, Burt Feintuch, and Neil Rosenberg for their comments and suggestions on an earlier draft. Excerpts from "The Man with the Blue Guitar" are taken from *Collected Poems* by Wallace Stevens. Copyright 1936 by Wallace Stevens and renewed 1964 by Holly Stevens. Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

1. See Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*.
2. Babcock, "Reflexivity: Definitions and Discriminations." See also Ruby, *A Crack in the Mirror*.
3. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, p. 3.
4. Mention must be made of Kenneth Goldstein, Alan Lomax, Harry Oster, and Chris Strachwitz who located and recorded several black folk and blues singers at the height of the folk revival during the latter 1950s and early 1960s; the recordings appeared mainly on Atlantic, Prestige, and Arhoolie. Prestige had one album series called Prestige/Folklore and another called Prestige/Bluesville. Most of these albums appealed to the folk revival audience rather than to hard-core blues fans, however.
5. In the 1950s jazz was popular on college campuses, particularly when played by small combos like Dave Brubeck's and big bands like Stan Kenton's. Record

companies capitalized on this craze with albums such as Brubeck's *Jazz Goes to College*. Many colleges began their own jazz bands at this time.

6. Charters, *The Country Blues*. All page references that follow in the text are to the 1975 edition. The albums are *The Country Blues* and *Lighnin' Hopkins*.

7. David Evans and I preferred the term "vaudeville blues" because most of these women had backgrounds in stage shows before recording blues songs. I also objected to the judgment implied by "classic" attached to a genre that I didn't value as highly as country (or as I came to prefer, "downhome") blues.

8. See the data for *Really! The Country Blues* in the discography for this volume.

9. Whyte, *The Organization Man*, and Riesman, Denny, and Glazer, *The Lonely Crowd* were two best-selling interpretations of middle-class American behavior in the 1950s.

10. Dixon and Godrich, *Blues and Gospel Records*. (London: Storyville Publications, 1964). A second edition was published in 1969 and a third, revised, edition in 1982.

11. This became a serious issue with the post-World War II discography, *Blues Records* by Leadbiter and Slaven, because they overlooked many blues records. Their discography was not, therefore, regarded as "authoritative." An "authoritative" second edition is awaiting full publication; the first volume (A-K) appeared and is already being amended in the blues magazines.

12. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, p. 218.

13. Oliver, *Blues Off The Record*, p. 274.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 266.

15. Keil, "People's Music Comparatively," p. 121.

16. Hopkins recorded four takes of "Grosebeck Blues" in 1947 for Gold Star in Houston. Takes 2 and 3 were reissued on *Early Recordings Vol. 2*; take 4 may be found on *Fart Life Woman*. The correct spelling of the place is Groesbeck.

17. That is, a quatrain followed by a refrain comprises each verse.

18. Courlander, *Negro Folk Music U.S.A.*, p. 123. Other citations from this work are given parenthetically in the text.

19. The term "folk evaluation" is anthropologist Paul Bohannon's; it means the informant's own ideas. See Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music*, p. 31.

20. Titon, *Early Downhome Blues*.

21. Ledbetter, "Bourgeois Blues"; Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*.

22. Pearson, "Sounds So Good To Me."

23. Titon, "The Life Story."

24. Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*.

25. Wallace Stevens, "The Man with the Blue Guitar," from *Collected Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964).

26. *Dat Frelin!*, presented at the Tyrone Guthrie Theatre, Minneapolis, in the fall of 1970.

27. I completed the anthology in 1974 but for several years could not find a publisher. The trade houses told me that most of the books they had published in black studies in the past five years had not met sales expectations. (Their implication was that black people did not read.) The first edition of Titon, *Downhome Blues Lyrics*, appeared in 1981; the second in 1990.

28. Gayle, *The Black Aesthetic*.

29. Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*; Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*.

30. Between 1965 and 1971 I was a graduate student in American studies. When I said to my adviser that I wanted to write my Ph.D. thesis on blues, I was told that I should think carefully about the academic consequences of scholarly research into a music that had never been given such serious treatment. I was told that it would hurt my chances of getting a job by being in a university. I was advised to obtain an additional degree in order to improve my chances on the market. For that reason I got the M.A. in English in addition to the Ph.D. in American studies. I got a job in an English department. Many of my classmates did not get jobs; the market was tight and grew tighter. Having my dissertation published did not merely further my career; it probably kept me in the profession.

## *Living Blues* Journal: The Paradoxical Aesthetics of the Blues Revival

Peter Narváez

Although it was typically "tasteless" and imbued with painful caricature, one of the recorded satirical sketches created and performed by Cheech and Chong (Cheech Marin, Tommy Chong) in the early 1970s embodied a fundamental paradox of the blues revival that will be one of the foci of this analysis of *Living Blues* journal, namely, that of a group of European-Americans appreciating and abetting African-American folk performers and their music, while simultaneously attempting to influence the aesthetics of those performers and their audiences and thus possessively determine the course of their art.<sup>1</sup> Entitled "Blind Melon Chittlin'," the recording lampoons the major personae of the blues revival—blues artists, producers of blues consumer goods, and finally their target markets—blues audiences. The setting for the piece is a blues recording session in which an aggressive, mercenary, and exploitive producer, appropriately named "J. R.," from the infamous TV character on "Dallas," records an "old" blues artist that he "signed the other day," "Blind Melon Chittlin'."<sup>2</sup> The old blues singer, whose name is obviously a pun on Blind Lemon Jefferson, receives payment for the session in the alleged form of his namesake—"ten dollars," "a bottle of booze," and "a hooker." Ironically, J. R.'s plans for going "gold" with a young white audience entail directives to Chittlin' that are not unlike John Lomax's insistent demands on Blind Willie McTell while recording for the Library of Congress in 1940,<sup>3</sup> that is, J. R. wants the singer to sing a protest blues that chronicles past social injustices perpetrated by whites against blacks. Thus, J. R. appeals to "Blind Baby" to sing "not just [another] blues . . . but . . . an epic document depicting the struggle of the black people against the white devil slavemasters." Far from achieving this objective, however, J. R. is forced to record many