

TRANSCRIPTION 4.9
(continued)

I go free, Lor - dy, I go free, Chorus

weren't gon - na mar - ry till a I go free. Chorus

Well Ro - sie O Lord, gal. Chorus

ah Ro - sie O Lord, gal. Chorus etc.

Collected by Alan Lomax; transcribed by Mieczyslaw Koliński. From Courlander 1963.
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Music of Play

As we have seen, the performance of religious songs and work songs in the black tradition includes elements of play. For example, churchgoers admire the beautiful performance of a verbally adept preacher as he plays with the resources of language and gesture, and they clap their approval as a solo singer sustains a climactic pitch or goes through intricately improvised melodic variations with great feeling. Work songs introduce a playful, distancing attitude toward the labor at hand. Like call-and-response, this sort of play with pitch, timbre, and rhythm characterizes both African and African American music.

Although African American religious songs and work songs contain elements of play, their main purpose is to aid in worship and work. In contrast, music of play serves primarily as entertainment, performed mainly for pleasure even when its effect is also educational, cathartic, or ecstatic.

Imagine that we are walking through the black neighborhood outside the church after the service we “attended” earlier in the chapter. We find ourselves surrounded by the music of play. Children skip rope on the side streets, chanting jump rope rhymes and taunts at one another. Teens walk down the street listening to CD players. Deep bass tones boom out through powerful car stereos that throb with the latest hip-hop hits. Jukeboxes can be heard in the bars and barbecue joints that line both sides of the main street. When night falls, some of the bars have live entertainment—a local band that plays the blues, or a nationally known jazz combo in a fancy nightclub. Downtown in the city auditorium a nationally known artist is scheduled, while in the public gardens a concert of classical music offers the premiere performance of an electronic composition by a black composer who teaches at the city university.

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Blues

Clearly, the music of play in black America offers a dizzying array of genres. The rest of this chapter focuses on just one African American music of play: blues. The blues is a music familiar to many, but its very familiarity presents problems. Chief among them is the current emphasis on blues as a roots music. If blues is the root, then rock is the fruit—or so the story goes in the films and radio programs produced in 2003 (see “Further Listening” and “Further Viewing” at the end of the chapter), which the U.S. Congress declared the “year of the blues.” (We will see more about blues and roots music near the end of this chapter.) But blues is a music in and of itself. It is wrapped tightly around the history and experiences of African Americans in the United States and deserves to be understood in this light. Blues is tied intimately to African American experience and cannot be understood without reference to its historical development within African American culture.

A second area of confusion about blues arises over the relationship between blues and jazz. Is blues a part of jazz? Did the stream of blues flow into the river of jazz? That common metaphor is not accurate. Historically, blues and jazz are more like parallel highways with crossroads between them. Blues can be understood as a feeling—“the blues”—as well as a specific musical form. Jazz, which engenders complex and varied feelings, is best thought of as a technique, as a way of forming. Jazz musicians applied their technique to the blues form, as to other musical forms.

Muddy Waters (Figure 4.7), Howlin’ Wolf (Figure 4.17), B. B. King, Albert Collins, John Lee Hooker (Figure 4.22), and Buddy Guy (Figure 4.21), who rose to national prominence as blues singers, came from a vital tradition. For decades, the blues music-culture—with its singers, country juke joints, barrelhouses, city rent parties, street singing, bar scenes, nightclubs, lounges, recordings, and record industry—was a significant part of the black music-culture in the United States. In the 1960s, when desegregation and the Civil Rights Movement changed African American social and economic conditions, blues faded in popularity among African Americans while it gained a large and appreciative white audience. Nowadays the blues music-culture incorporates white as well as black musicians and includes a worldwide audience.

BLUES AND THE TRUTH

The best entry into the blues is through the words of the songs. It is hard to talk at length about words in songs, and harder still to talk about music. As Charles Seeger, one of the founders of the Society of Ethnomusicology, reminds us, it would be more logical to “music” about music than to talk about it (Seeger 1977:16). And in the blues music-culture, when the setting is informal, that is just what happens when one singer responds to another by singing verses of his or her own. Another common response to blues is dancing. Dancers and listeners as a rule have no interest in an articulate body of blues criticism.

FIGURE 4.7

Muddy Waters (McKinley Morganfield) relaxes between songs at the Ann Arbor Blues Festival, 1969.



Jeff Todd Titon



Jeff Todd Titon

FIGURE 4.8

Lazy Bill Lucas. Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1968.

In the world of music the recognition of blues as art is well established. But waiving their value as musical art, we may assert that they represent a body of poetic art unique and powerful. . . . No body of folk poetry in America—except, perhaps, the black spirituals—can touch it, and much of the poetry recognized as “literature,” white or black, seems tepid beside it. (Brooks, Lewis, and Warren 1973:II, 2759)

We begin by taking an extended look at a single blues performance, “Poor Boy Blues,” by the Lazy Bill Lucas Blues Band (Figure 4.8). Bill Lucas is the vocalist; he accompanies himself on electric guitar. He is joined by two other musicians, one on acoustic guitar and the other on drums. Listen to the recording now (CD 1, Track 26), and look at the Close Listening guide, paying particular attention to the lyrics.

RESPONSE TO THE LYRICS OF “POOR BOY BLUES”

I did not choose “Poor Boy Blues” because the words were outstanding; they are typical. For me, some of it is good, some not; some of it works, some does not. “I’m

Speaking of **oral literature** (literature spoken or sung and passed along without writing or musical notation) as a whole, Dennis Tedlock points up the paradox with gentle irony:

Members of primary oral cultures generally limit themselves to brief remarks about performances when they say anything at all, and such remarks are quickly forgotten. There is no such thing as an oral performance of the great critical discourse of the past. (Tedlock 1977:516)

The most common response to blues music is a feeling in the gut, dancing to the beat, nodding assent, a vocalized “that’s right, you got it, that’s the truth”—not unlike the black Christian’s response to a sermon or a gospel song. A good, “deep” blues song leaves you feeling that you have heard the truth in a way that leaves little more to be said.

Yet much *can* be said about the words to blues songs. Because the words pass from one singer to another as a coin goes from hand to hand, they become finely honed and proverbial in their expression: economical, truthful. Response to the words of the songs can be talked about in words. Moreover, blues lyrics have a legitimate claim to be considered as serious literature. As the literary critics Cleanth Brooks, R. W. B. Lewis, and Robert Penn Warren have written,

CD 1:26

“Poor Boy Blues” (3:16). Performed by Lazy Bill Lucas Trio. Field recording by Jeff Todd Titon. Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1970.

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