

Contrary to Popular Belief, the Blues Were Not Born on the Mississippi Delta

by George de Stefano

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Bessie Smith

Historians Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff debunk myths about the origins of blues music, locating them not in the Mississippi Delta but in southern black vaudeville.



The Original Blues: The Emergence of the Blues in African American Vaudeville

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The blues was born in the Mississippi Delta, fathered by black men who sang and played guitars, and these men took the music to Chicago, where they and their successors turned southern folk blues into electrified urban music that black people danced to in South Side clubs and white British rock bands later built careers (and fortunes) on.

For a long time, that origin story was the prevailing popular notion about the birth of the blues. But it's all wrong, as recent scholarship has shown. In their revelatory *The Original Blues: The Emergence of the Blues in African American Vaudeville*, Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff locate the music's origins in the early 20th century, southern black vaudeville circuit.

“By 1910,” they write, “there were racially insular black vaudeville theaters strong across the Southeast.” In these theaters, “the blues was incubated”. “Black vaudeville performers and songwriters of the era fitted up unpolished, fragmentary folk material for the professional platform. But the blues did not emerge onstage fully formed. The blues remained mutable and multiform long after it was institutionalized on the black professional stage.”

The Original Blues is the final entry in the authors' trilogy documenting the early decades of African American popular music. Abbott, a researcher at the Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane University in New Orleans, and Seroff, an independent scholar, previously published *Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular Music, 1889-1895*; and *Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, “Coon Songs,” and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz*. Their work, based on meticulous and far-ranging research, is invaluable for its documentation of the history of African American music of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as for the authors' astute and politically engaged interpretations of their research findings. Their latest book also is a major contribution to the blues revisionism of such writers as Elijah Wald and Peter C. Muir, both of whom have debunked received untruths about the music and its roots.



Robert Johnson

In *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (2004), Wald explored the mythology that has grown around Robert Johnson, the Mississippi guitarist, singer, and songwriter who, as legend had it, got his preternaturally formidable guitar technique in a deal with the devil, sealed at midnight at a Delta crossroads. Wald wrote about Johnson not only to

provide a factual account of his life and art but as a jumping-off point for a broader examination of the history of blues music. Wald argued that the blues, rather than a folk-based roots idiom was, from 1910 to 1960, African American popular music. He also observed that in the pre-World War II years, the biggest blues stars were women like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, who were popular with urban and rural audiences, black and white.

Peter C. Muir, in *Long Lost Blues* (2010), explored the history of what he called “popular blues”, the non-folk or country blues performed on vaudeville stages and issued as sheet music from 1912 to 1920. Muir noted that although Mamie Smith’s 1920 hit “Crazy Blues” is commonly regarded as the first commercial blues recording, several hundred other blues songs had already been recorded or published as sheet music.

Abbott and Seroff describe the pre-blues folk songs that African-American researcher Howard W. Odum collected in the South between 1905 and 1908 as “pregnant with the blues”. The authors claim that Odum’s collection, along with articles and reviews in black newspapers like the *Indianapolis Freeman* and the *Chicago Defender*, together “constitute sufficient evidence to tentatively proffer 1909 as the year ‘blues’ came up for public recognition as a musical term and, by extension, the year blues music achieved a distinct, recognizable identity.”

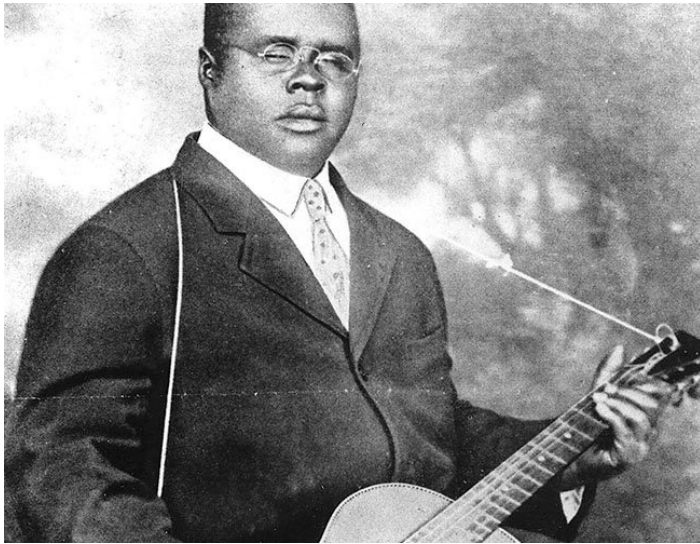
Although the ‘20s constituted the commercial high point of vaudeville blues, Abbott and Seroff maintain that the previous decade was even more creative. The ‘10s witnessed “the emergence, popularization, and early development of the original blues in southern playhouses.” Singers were usually backed by piano, and sometimes drums and horns, but the guitar, now so closely associated with the genre, was not yet established as part of the blues’ standard instrumentation. The relationship between country blues and the blues performed in black vaudeville theaters has been a controversial, chicken-or-the-egg question. Abbott and Seroff argue convincingly that the vaudeville singers made a strong impression on the first country blues stars, noting that country blues records of the ‘20s and ‘30s reveal the unmistakable influence of the early black vaudeville stage.

The authors provide a detailed account of the southern black vaudeville circuit, its theaters, stars, owners, successes, and challenges, in Texas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Louisiana. Racism was key to the development of a black theater circuit: “Segregation and degrading treatment in public places of entertainment necessitated the African American theater movement.” Heading north to Chicago, Abbott and Seroff chronicle the emergence of that city’s black entertainment, focusing on such venues as the Pekin, a beer garden owned by a black man, Robert T. Motts, that was frequented by black and white patrons. The Pekin became “a model platform for the exhibition of African American dramatic arts”; its influence “reverberated throughout the budding African American stage world.”

Motts, his producer and director J. Ed Green, and his stage manager Marion Brooks were enterprising, bold men who strove to build the black theater circuit in the face of segregation and racist violence. But “vested interests plotted to bring them down,” and by the end of 1910, “it had become clear that black vaudeville in Chicago would remain under the domination of white capitalists.”

The most fascinating chapter of *Original Blues* focuses on Butler “String Beans” May, a blackface comedian, pianist, singer, and dancer from Montgomery, Alabama. Performing solo and with a succession of female stage partners, the best-known being his wife “Sweetie” May, String Beans was to a large degree responsible for “the ascendance of the blues in black vaudeville”.

His legacy, elusive and too little acknowledged, is preserved in the repertoire of country blues singer-guitarists and pianists of the ‘20s. (May neither recorded nor copyrighted any of his songs.) May was best-known for his song, “I’ve Got Elgin Movements in My Hip and Twenty Years Guaranteed”, which later “became entrenched in blues tradition”. Robert Johnson fans know the “Elgin movements” phrase from his song “Walkin’ Blues”, but it appeared in songs by many other artists, including Blind Lemon Jefferson’s “Change My Luck Blues”, which actually preceded Johnson’s recording by eight years.



Blind Lemon Jefferson

“W.C. Handy [“St. Louis Blues”] has been immortalized as the ‘Father of the Blues’,” note Abbott and Seroff. “But in those days of nascent southern vaudeville,” tall, skinny May (hence the nickname) was “the stage performer most responsible for popularizing the ‘original blues.’ String Beans was the greatest attraction of pre-1920 African American vaudeville and the first blues star.”

May was driven by creative urges rather than a desire for money or fame: “Independent, unpredictable String Beans was the young lion of African American theater entertainment for an African American audience, the first national star whose fame and success depended not at all on approval from the white world.” His death in 1917, in a hazing accident as he was being initiated into a Masonic lodge, altered the course of the blues because it “cleared the stage” for the rise of the “blues queens”, well-known women like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Mamie Smith, but also lesser-known singers who enjoyed considerable popularity, such as Virginia Liston (“one of the very first blues stars on the African American stage”), Laura Smith, Ora Criswell and Trixie Smith. Their success marked a significant and welcome change in how black women singers

were labeled, from the degrading term “coon shouter” to “blues queen”. And as the blues became more accepted, “coon-shouting”, not only the term but also “what it implied about the commodification of African American culture—gradually descended into the dustbin of history.”

The authors describe a gender gap in early blues history: few of the pioneering male performers, like Kid Love and Baby Seals, made records, so “classic vaudeville blues” became known as “a female art form”. Female singers also “acquired a more dignified aura and identity in the emergent concept of the ‘blues queen,’ while male blue singers somehow remained tethered to the image of the blackface comedian.” The authors provide vivid portraits of some of these early male singers, most of whom, like String Beans, combined blues and comedy, including ventriloquism. John W.F. “Johnnie Woods, for example, “leapt into blues history when he brought a wooden-headed dummy named little Henry to life as a drunken-hearted, blues-singing vagabond.”

The last chapter of *Original Blues* chronicles the “commercialization of the blues”, from 1920 to 1926. The popularity of the blues and jazz provided a gateway for black performers to the “big-time white vaudeville circuit” and to Broadway, as well as to Tin Pan Alley and the recording industry. During the ‘20s, commercialization “shifted the center of blues activity north to New York City”, which had been an “alien environment” for the music. The type of blues popular in New York, however, was far removed from that heard on southern vaudeville stages. New Yorkers preferred their blues “toned down, polished up”, and “otherwise leavened by cosmopolitan sensibilities”. The women who made the first blues records were based in New York, which boasted recording studios and a substantial community of black performers, composers, and producers. Their blues smoothed over “the rough edges” of the southern style, reflecting the urbane tastes of northern theater audiences, as well as the cultural context of the Harlem Renaissance.



Mamie Smith

What changed all this was the advent of “race records, a powerful mass medium for the commodification of the blues”. Black Swan Records, founded by an African-American, Harry H. Pace, recorded such singers as Trixie Smith, Ethel Waters, and Alberta Hunter, but the label couldn’t survive “the fluctuations and exigencies of the record business”. It was Okeh, a white-

owned company, that became the most important force in the emerging blues market. Okeh artist Mamie Smith, from Harlem, not the South, scored a double-sided hit with “That Thing Called Love” and “You Can’t Keep a Good Man Down”. Columbia Records subsequently followed Okeh’s lead, signing Bessie Smith and Clara Smith to exclusive contracts and initiating a “race records” series with recordings by the two singers. Bessie Smith became the company’s best-selling “race” artist, with Clara not far behind.

As the blues became more popular and commercially viable, record companies, the vaudeville theaters of the Theater Owners Booking Association (TOBA), and the African American press all promoted the music to record-buyers. The chapter bogs down a bit in a lengthy discussion of TOBA and the conflicts among its entrepreneurs and impresarios, black and white. Abbott and Seroff end their history of the “original blues” with an account of how, by the late ‘20s, the recording industry turned its attention to country blues, performed by guitarists, jug bands, and barrelhouse piano players.

During the heyday of the blues queens, guitars were rare on black vaudeville stages; this remained true even after blues guitarists became successful recording artists. Blind Lemon Jefferson, who cut his first records for Paramount in 1926, represented the coming of age of country blues guitar. There had been other country blues singers and guitarists before him, some of whom made records, but he was the earliest star, the first to epitomize the iconic figure of the solo, guitar-playing male blues singer. Bringing their account back full circle to its early chapters, the authors note that Jefferson’s recordings were adaptations of what Butler “String Beans” May had created a decade earlier. The country blues of Jefferson, Robert Johnson, and many others “came of age in the shadow of popular vaudeville blues”.



Butler “String Beans” May and Sweetie Matthews

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