

### Feels Like Going Home: Mythologising the Story of the Blues

This essay addresses the necessity of original and emerging fan communities to re-invent and mythologise the narrative and context of the blues in order to fit their own political, fiscal and cultural purposes in the present. By considering the work of song-collector Lawrence Gellert in cataloguing the seemingly explicit protest content in blues songs of the 1930s, I examine both how a creative and revisionist stance may affect contemporary performers and create and mediate the perception of blues artists within the fan communities to whom they most regularly perform. In short – why do different people tell different stories about the blues, and what are the real-world effects of these tales?

My discussion begins by firstly looking at some of the myths promoted by the self-styled *Father of the Blues*, W.C. Handy. Secondly, I will consider the case of Texas musician Blind Lemon Jefferson. Thirdly, I will examine folklorists John Lomax and Leadbelly and then fourthly my focus will shift to song-collector Lawrence Gellert. Fifthly, I will consider The Blues Mafia and in conclusion, I will explain how this essay fits into my current research. At each turn I will consider who is telling which story, why they are choosing to tell it, and what perceived effect that story may have had in the past and present.

A myth is defined as a traditional or legendary story, usually concerning some being or hero or event, with or without a determinable basis of fact or a natural explanation ("Myth", 2012). Semiologists including Roland Barthes help us to see that myths are essentially re-tellings of a current or historical situation, removed from any sense of actual meaning but enshrined in the false reality of language. In short, stories do not need to be real in order to have real effects. So, what are the myths that surround the blues? What do they tell us about the people who make and perpetuate them and the reality of their times?

Pervasive blues myths that have existed since the 1910s have gone beyond mere marketing to become the way that the music-listening audience regards performers of blues music. These myths are drawn from sources that include (without being restricted to) the marketing of record companies, the scholarly work of blues authors and ethnographers, and interviews given by numerous performing artists over the course of the first 70 years of the 20th century. More specifically, popular myths construct the blues as the music of the rural poor, as heavily derived from sorrow songs, and that the material is unmediated and 'authentic'. Further to this, there are persistent popular myths that the blues are spontaneous, non-technological and essentially non-commercial.

It is fair to say that the commercial blues were born at a time of rising class-consciousness amongst the African-American population of the United States at the turn of the 20th century and that this and other socialist ideas would prove critical to the dissemination of blues music and culture. With this in mind it is important to consider the part played by race, technology, commercial interests, religion and the political orientation of those collecting and presenting the music in defining what would come to be known as 'Blues Music'.<sup>1</sup>

My exploration starts at the beginning of the 20th century, with one of the earliest and most pervasive myths concerning the blues. William Christopher Handy (1873-1958) was an African-American trumpet-player, composer and arranger whose encounters with itinerant Black musicians lead to the writing down of elements of folk-blues in order that other trained musicians could begin to reproduce the sounds and stylistic characteristics. For this reason, he styled himself as the "Father of the Blues". Writing in 1941 about an encounter that had taken place some 39 years previously in 1902, W.C. Handy says:

*...a lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plucking a guitar beside me while I slept. As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of a guitar in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who use steel bars. The effect was unforgettable. His song, too, struck me instantly.*

1 (from 'Father of the Blues' Handy, 1941, p. 99) 'The primitive southern Negro, as he sang, was sure to bear down on the third and seventh tone of the scale, slurring between major and minor. Whether in the cotton field of the Delta or on the Levee up St. Louis way, it was always the same. Till then, however, I had never heard this slur used by a more sophisticated Negro, or by any white man.'

2 (from 'Father of the Blues' Handy, 1941, p. 99)

3 An impassioned outcry, as of entreaty or protest [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cr%20de%20coeur](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cr%20de%20coeur)

4 This contentious term is used to indicate that John Lomax was familiar with the vernacular music of the rural Negro community of North America at the beginning of the 20th century. Excepting minstrel-show parodies, this was a style not broadcast or transmitted far beyond the circumstances of its creation and performance. For a clearer illustration of the problematic discussion about 'Black' or 'White' classification in music, see *Open Letter about 'Black Music', 'Afro-American Music' and 'European Music'* (Tagg, 1987).

5 It is interesting to note that Billie Holiday's recording company, Columbia, refused to record the anti-lynching song "Strange Fruit." Its powerful lyrics ("the bulging eyes and twisted mouth," the "black bodies swaying in the Southern breeze") were considered too controversial. A deal was made with Columbia, who loaned her to Commodore, and "Strange Fruit" was cut on April 20, 1939 at Brunswick's World Broadcasting Studios with Frankie Newton's Café Society band. See Nicholson (1996, p. 113).

6 Few histories of the blues in the 20th century omit mention of the alleged Faustian pact in which Robert Johnson received supernatural musical gifts in return for the sale of his soul. The musician is examined as a site of contemporary iconography in *Robert Johnson: Mythmaking and Contemporary American Culture* (Schroeder, 2004). The '...romanticism implicit in the circulation and reception of the story about Robert Johnson', and 'uninterrogated assumptions about artistic expression...in our own time,' are investigated throughout *The Crossroads and the Myth of the Mississippi Delta Bluesman* (Richard, 2006) and *Remembering Robert Johnson* (Lipsitz, 1997). A concise historiographical overview of the creation and initial influence of the myth is presented in *The Search for Robert Johnson* (Guralnick, 1990).

7 These scholars and enthusiasts include (without being limited to) Steven Calt, John Fahey, Stefan Grossman, Bernie Klatzko, Robert Palmer, Nick Perls, Phil Spiro, Gayle Dean Wardlow, Dick Waterman, and Pete Whelan.

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