

Cheer Up, Emo Kid!
Contemporary Rock, the Blues Legacy, and “Streetlamp Blues”
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Beginning this project, I had little to no knowledge about the blues. While I already loved music, most of my expertise lay in indie rock, contemporary piano music, hip-hop, and other young genres. My current blues knowledge was acquired almost entirely through actively seeking out blues music and doing research. The result has been interesting. My composition is both conscious of the strengths of contemporary rock music and able to speak the language of classic blues to remedy rock’s limitations.

I. Genealogy

In most discussions of the contemporary music scene and jazz’s future, rock is framed as jazz’s nefarious, puerile competitor in the battle for the ears of America’s youth. Ron David portrays the advent of rock music not as an extension of the blues, but rather with a picture of a guitar-toting hippie sitting victoriously on jazz’s gravestone (David 69). While several of the authors pay lip service to rock, they nevertheless belittle the music. Rock beats are “ham-fisted” and lacking in jazz rhythms’ “natural eloquence,” rendering jazz-rock attempts “inherently graceless” (Jim Macnie, qtd. in Taylor 58). “Rock ‘n’ roll killed the jazz singer” by belittling the art of singing vernacular, which “took a whole lot of steam out of folks who were committed to wedding sophisticated chord changes to ingenuous turns of phrase” (K. Leander Williams, qtd. in Taylor 143-4). With dropping sales in jazz records, many jazz academics have tried to convince themselves that jazz will eventually come out the champion in the popular music “war.” Throughout the book, authors drop the names of jazzman after contemporary jazzman as

proof that jazz is still alive and kicking. By way of making a point about developing personality in contemporary jazz, Peter Watrous rattles off a host of musicians:

I propose that Arthur Blythe work with Reid Anderson. That Matt Wilson hire Johnny Griffin. That Kurt Rosenwinkle record duets with Mulgrew Miller. That Sonny Rollins share some of the juice that fuels the rhythm section of Nasheet Waits and Taurus Mateen. That Mark Turner and Lee Konitz form a band... [W]ell, the list goes on and on. (Taylor 6)

I trust that these are probably all qualified musicians. However, speaking as a fairly typical American youth, I've never even heard of any of these people! The jazz academics writing in *The Future of Jazz* come off as even more cloistered after this statement by Will Friedwald:

So why so much attention to jazz's relationship with rock? Admittedly, I'm the wrong person to ask--I don't think I've listened to a rock record since roughly the last time I went to a basketball game, which would be around the time of the 1969 Knicks. (Taylor 62)

Such statements reveal such jazz academics to be both out of touch with contemporary music and elitist in their construction of what it means to be "jazz." Jazz writers' apparent ignorance of the music that a majority of young people actually listens to undermines their credibility in saying that jazz is not dead. Among elite jazz clubs frequented by forty-year-old academics, jazz may still be played. Once these writers' generation is gone, however, their causes for optimism will probably have disappeared as well. Many such authors claim to be above such "petty" disputes as the conflicts between swing, bebop, and free jazz, by magnanimously putting all the branches of jazz under one tent.

The jazz mainstream today is a very broad church. It's not like the 1950s, when the term was coined...to accommodate the music of a group of displaced big-band musicians...who continued to ply their craft within the conventions of the Swing Era, even though the musical climate around them had long since changed. (Stuart Nicholson, qtd. in Taylor 12)

Jazz academics' critique of the original "jazz mainstream" sectionalists-- "accommodat[ing]" old music "even though the musical climate" had progressed past it-- could apply to their treatment of rock music. In order to privilege their favorite jazz incarnations as the "jazz mainstream," they dismiss any other music--including rock, a far more popular genre--as "not jazz", without considering the things the two musical forms share in common. The jazz academics' assumptions ignore historical fact, for rock music evolved directly from the blues. Many early rock and roll songs, such as Elvis Presley's "That's All Right," are essentially sped-up, amplified versions of old blues tunes (Guralnick 38). Indeed, from the call-and-response that accompanied AC/DC's performances of "TNT" ("Oi! Oi! Oi!"), to the syncopation of the Pixies' "Bone Machine," to the twelve-bar blues progression found in the Decemberists' "I Was Meant For the Stage," rock music of any era possesses many of the same characteristics that define blues and jazz--when you let yourself listen for them.

It is true, however, that during the transition from blues to rock some important aspects of the blues were lost. The blues represented a musical attempt by African-Americans to create an independent identity that could bridge the gap of what W. E. B. DuBois called "double consciousness". Post-Civil War blacks saw themselves from two perspectives: that of the black community and that of white American society. These two viewpoints were apt to disagree, resulting in a "dwarfing, warping, distorting influence" on the subject's psyche (James Weldon Johnson, qtd. in Bromell 196). The tensions between European and West African influences, the dialogues between instruments and voice or performers and audience, and the conflicts of tradition and improvisation gave voice to these inner conflicts of blues audience members.

Taken as a whole this sound makes perfect sense, sounds “right,” because it so powerfully expresses what an audience was *feeling*: what one historian has called the “explosive combination of promise and disappointment that constituted freedom for African Americans.” It was a condition of being free yet unfree, of being released into new possibilities of individuality yet more deeply tied to community identity than ever before, of feeling happy and feeling unspeakably low, ...of possessing a dynamic and powerful sense of self while at the same time experiencing that self as, in part, a construction of others... (Bromell 200-1)

Young white baby boomers also experienced bifurcated and confused identities, though for very different reasons. In post-war America, modernization and the mass media broke down remaining traditional social norms in favor of impersonal, all-encompassing forces. Furthermore, with an economic upswing filling the baby boomers’ pockets, marketers were urging young people to buy all sorts of goods, including cars. At the same time, however, familial norms forbade teenagers to smoke, drink, or be sexually active. Essentially, teenagers were supposed to spend like adults but behave like children. These mixed messages, and the absence of tight-knit cultural expectations, made it difficult for young people to consolidate their identities (Bromell 211). According to Nick Bromell, the prevalence of suburban “double consciousness” suggests that the reason why blues-based rock music became so popular--the blues were adept at expressing the contradictions of young white suburban life as well as their more violent, racially-defined incarnations. Rock-and-roll was not just white kids imitating black resistance strategies just to be counter-hegemonic. The music functioned as “a medium in which the inner and outer changed places, in which private misery became public ritual, in which their loneliness seemed to go beyond itself by so intensely being itself” (Bromell 216). Young suburbanites appropriated it because it worked for them.

While rock and roll fed off of blues themes and structures, most of the blues' context was lost in the shuffle. The original classic rockers studied blues music avidly; indeed, the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, the Who, and many others started out as blues groups (Headlam 60). However, rock and roll was not being marketed for its African-American history; there was little incentive to make it clear to audiences that the songs being performed were based on thorough study of Robert Johnson or Muddy Waters. Producers only wanted to import just enough of the "black sound" into white musicians' playing to make it seem "edgy" and sell records. The separation of African-American blues and Anglo rock was driven further with the idea of the "British Invasion." New Orleans jazz had long been popular in Britain, creating a British hybrid style called "skiffle" that was played by many proto-rock stars including the Beatles (Headlam 60). However, American youth thought of the popular new rock sound as a Liverpool creation--unaware that it was really "their own music in an altered form" (Headlam 61). Thus, while rock fans "listened to rock collectively, often ritualistically" and "affirmed...that they were all experiencing what felt like a form of 'oppression'", most of them were completely unaware that what they were listening to was blues music and had the blues' African-American history (Bromell 215-16).

This loss of context has stunted the overall emotional maturity of contemporary rock music. Recordings of emotionally-charged blues and classic rock songs still exist, but recordings fail to capture the sense of community and ritual attached to those emotions. As a result, as rock music has moved away from its roots and grown increasingly self-absorbed; to have "the blues" is to have them alone. The culmination of this tendency, a branch of alternative rock dubbed "emo," consists of white suburban

teenagers whining about their parents or ex-girlfriends. Emo music is “communal” in the sense that teenage audience members identify with it, but it provides no solutions to the problems discussed nor develops much of a positive support network among listeners. It cries a river, but it fails to build a bridge over it. The emo trend, instead of following the blues’ tradition of personal growth and communal coping, provides young people with a soundtrack with which to wallow in their mood swings. At the same time most other contemporary rock, in trying to distance itself from the “emo” label, cut loose almost all emotional commentary. Vapid, ironic, or nonsensical lyrics, once rare, are now practically standard in the indie music scene. Such music usually fails to even cry the river.

This is where I believe “Streetlamp Blues” comes into the picture. With influences from rock, new age, hip-hop, and other genres, my composition is evidently not classical blues. It fits squarely at the end of the timeline. Yet its revival of both the structure and (more importantly) the spirit of the blues functions anachronistically as a response to emo music. The suburban “double consciousness” of post-war youth still exists. Gibberish indie rock ignored the problem with sarcasm and distraction. Emo music resolved the conflict largely on the side of the juvenile with passive complaining. Both approaches slow the emotional maturation of their listeners. It is time for my generation to grow up.

II. Creative decisions

To some extent, my choices in creating “Streetlamp Blues” followed the progression of blues to rock through history. My first attempt, creatively titled “Blues #1”, discovered a reason why most popular music has moved beyond a rigid 12-bar blues

structure. There have been, and continue to be, some musicians who can bring “pure” blues songs to life. However, my attempt sounded limp and derivative. I was trying to cram my playing into an unfamiliar style, and it simply didn’t work. Hence for my second try, while remaining true to the spirit of the blues, I began mixing blues structure with my musical background: namely new age piano, indie rock, and hip-hop.

I noticed that in most blues and early rock songs, the bassline meandered about with its own mood-setting tune. This style clashed with my new age and post-rock piano training, however; I was accustomed to using the left hand for percussive chords. I pragmatically decided, after my “Blues #1” experience, to not force myself to adopt walking basslines. However, such lines are hinted at in the chorus--since the right hand part is relatively empty, I could consciously throw in some different left hand notes.

In the early weeks of the project, I came up with a variety of song fragments. Some went into the failed “Blues #1”. Some made their way into the finished “Streetlamp Blues.” My Latin-sounding riff, however, was orphaned by both compositions. Most of my musical output was very Anglo-American, so the Latin sound never fit in anywhere. I also have very little experience with Spanish music, so I couldn’t come up with any more material to surround the misfit riff. Perhaps in the future I will find a use for that song snippet, but for now it sits in a notebook.

Still looking for song material, I began listening to my music collection for songs to “jazz up.” In Eve 6’s song “Not Gonna Be Alone Tonight” I found a chord progression that appealed to me (C G Ddim). I thought about taking those chords out of the punk context and swinging it in 6/8. However, when I subsequently listened to Tryad’s song “The Rising,” I realized they had already done what I had intended to do to Eve 6’s song!

Eventually, I decided to keep the chord progression, moved down to the key of A. The early jazz musicians were “ragpickers”--using bits and pieces of surrounding sounds in their improvisations, performing songs with little regard for clearing the copyrights--and my composition was entirely noncommercial. Borrowing some themes from other songs was justified, in my mind.

Thus began my life of sonic piracy. Probably the most blatantly borrowed element of “Streetlamp Blues” is the spoken-word quotation of Sage Francis’ song “Threewrite.” As the song that went a long way in consolidating my feelings after a breakup (the very breakup that inspired that old poem!), “Threewrite”’s lyrics were the best words I could find to describe the message I was trying to communicate. “Threewrite” describes the speaker’s trials in recovering from a failed marriage, itself quoting the movies “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” and “High Fidelity”, among other sources. It stands as one of the pieces of artistic expression most loyal to the meaning of the blues that I have ever heard. I was also encouraged to include part of “Threewrite” in my composition after reading an off-hand comment by Stuart Nicholson’s in *The Future of Jazz*: “Of course, there have been...experiments combining jazz with rap and hip hop, but the results were generally indigestible and lacked any kind of subtlety...” (Taylor 50). I found his statement surprising and rather ludicrous, considering bebop and beat poetry’s historical relationship (Feinstein 67). When I started my jazz project, I did not intend to prove Nicholson wrong on this point; however, given the opportunity to do so, I seized it with both hands.

I raided several other works as well, including my own, for “Streetlamp Blues.” I chose the theme from The Dandy Warhols’ “My Slow Descent Into Alcoholism” over the

folk drinking song “The Bean Song” for the main piano solo because it was a more interesting tune, even though it belonged to someone else. The chorus lyrics were extremely adapted from the words to Semisonic’s song “She’s Got My Number.” I even raided my own work--most of the verses’ words came from a half-finished poem I wrote a year or so ago. (Ironically enough, I had previously worked on the poem twice, making its adaptation into “Streetlamp Blues” a true “threewrite”!)

III. Textual Analysis

The rhythms of “Streetlamp Blues” create tensions that reflect the singer’s own inner conflicts. The pace of the song (excepting the solo, which accelerates) is relatively slow and thoughtful, yet this pace permits quick-fingered ornamentations and improvisations that add color and energy to the piece. The 6/8 beat incorporates both a cyclic, meandering waltz and a steady 2/2 that keeps the piece moving. This conflict is appropriate to the content of the song. “Streetlamp Blues” ought be slow and pensive; as a song about a failed love, it really isn’t very happy, even at the end. The circular element of the 6/8 beat reflects the singer’s difficulty in breaking out of the cycle of memories of and feelings for her former lover. Despite these cycles, however, the song and the singer manage to move forward, riding the 2/2 beat toward acceptance.

The two solos bend the rules of standard songwriting to enhance the song’s message. The first solo comes unusually early in the song and runs for more than a minute (and even longer in the live version). The solo’s placement is excusable in that it illustrates the singer’s flight from the sources of the memories of her former lover. Its length denotes the energy with which the singer undertakes this breaking of ties; it is a whole-hearted effort to forget her past. The solo’s energy is spent in vain, however, as it

is eventually coopted by the song's same old theme; "[she] can run, but [she] can't hide." The second, more successful solo, on the other hand, directly applies that same improvisational energy to the song's main theme, denoting the singer's acceptance of her past. While in most songs each solo surpasses previous solos, the second solo is only sixteen bars long. This reversal denotes that the singer's coming to terms with her former love is nothing especially spectacular. She may have found a successful coping strategy, but there is still work to be done.

The spoken-word section's reference to a "threewrite" refers not simply to the singer's literal process of acceptance, but to the structure of the song itself. The song has three verses, three choruses, and three iterations of the final line of the chorus during the song's conclusion. Furthermore, these repetitions themselves display the singer's progress. The verses go from a statement of the problem to a realization that the singer's early, less mature attempts at coping have failed. The last line of each chorus morphs from "Time to run and hide" to "Time to let it lie" to "I'll be fine, I'll be alright." Finally, the final line's repetitions bring the song to its conclusion.

IV. Conclusions

While I did learn a great deal about the blues during this project, I still wish I could have learned more for the sake of my composition. Had I had more time, I could have taught myself to play walking basslines naturally and better integrate that blues element into my composition. Several questions remain about things I could have added to "Streetlamp Blues" remain unanswered. What other instruments could I have used? Would a cornet or saxophone line have sounded good over parts of the piece? Are there

classic blues songs with vocal duet parts? If so, what do typical blues harmonies sound like? I have finished my project, but there is still a lot left to investigate.

Of course, considering my jazz background before taking the course, I have certainly made a lot of progress. The only blues musicians I was at all familiar with at the beginning of the semester were Janis Joplin and Susan Tedeschi--and those only because my father is a fan of their work. Through the course and my project research, I have since become much more blues literate. I can only become more knowledgeable in the future.

My major uncertainty regarding my composition was (and is) the choice to include the “Threewrite” segment in the piece. While I like it, and for the purposes of this project was eager to contradict Stuart Nicholson’s statements about rap and jazz, I am instinctively wary of mashing together rock and rap. Too often the synthesis only serves to ruin two previously-passable songs (cf. most songs by Linkin Park). So far, however, feedback on this point has been positive and has bolstered my decision to include it.

I am still unsatisfied with the quality of the song recording, and may try to improve it later on. I borrowed a friend’s eight-track and a Jam Society microphone for the recording session, only to discover a persistent hiss in the piano track. I filtered out some of the hiss, but any more noise reduction would have corrupted the piano tone too much. Thus, I would like to try re-recording the song with better equipment in the future. Future recordings would also allow me to experiment with brass descants, harmony, and so forth, until I find a mix that I am completely satisfied with.

Overall, however, I feel that “Streetlamp Blues” is one of the best songs that I have composed. The experience of this project has been encouraging, my new knowledge of the blues has expanded my songwriting vocabulary, and I certainly expect to write

more music in the future. More importantly, however, I hope my rediscovery of the spirit of the blues as a source for creating emotionally mature music will be repeated by other musicians. Contemporary music has high levels of technical skills and an extraordinary number of styles available for it to employ and mix. Wider adaptation of the blues' lyrical maturity could complete the picture in amazing ways.

“Streetlamp Blues” lyrics

The night knows what you meant to me
The night knows what you said in your sleep
The night’ll never set you free
The night is filled with eyes

I’ve got your number, you’ve got mine
I’ve got your number for all time
Time to run and hide

My eyes glance to you
Your eyes are looking too
We know too much to tell the truth
... I’ve gotta go

Watching brushfires burn mountainside
You can run but you can’t hide
The streetlamp shines into the night
The darkness just gets deeper

I’ve got your number, you’ve got mine
I’ve got your number for all time
Time to let it lie

So my air-mail lips blew him a farewell kiss
Slinking over the sink, where all the hair gel drips
Stairwells dipped deep into his mouth where I found a cycle
And ever since then, I’ve been on a downward spiral
This round is over, and it’s time to recover
‘Cause it’s a porch that some dogs choose to die under
The first round was the breakdown, I apologize in round two
This version of certain, this shit ain’t even about you!
It’s the threewrite

I’ve got your number, you’ve got mine
I’ve got your number, I might for all time
But I’ll be fine
I’ll be fine, it’ll all be alright

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