

GENRES IN NEGRO ORAL POETRY AND SONG

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*Muddy Waters.
Photo: Richard Waterman.*

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It is perhaps ironic that the immigrant group least well served by the American educational system should be the only such group to maintain viable traditions of both oral poetry and improvisational song. Although the purists may bemoan the fate of the country blues—which have almost succumbed to the exigencies of the recording industry—one should realize that the complex of musical streams that falls under that generic title has been influenced by commercial outlets for at least forty years, and that condemning the sort of blues Muddy Waters plays today in favor of the “purer” blues he played several decades ago is really indulging oneself in a ro-

matic fallacy. The electrified, stylized blues heard on so many soul stations are in fact a linear descendant of the traditions developed in the deep South. Those traditions have simply been influenced by changing social needs (which altered the texts) and changing technologies (which altered the styles of presentation). Some of the older forms exist simultaneously, and it is not uncommon to find other performers who will switch styles to suit different audiences (Muddy Waters and Lightnin’ Hopkins are examples).

Something of the same has happened with religious music: the rather free-form of spiritual singing has been partially taken over by the stylized concepts of

gospel singing; the focus on spirituals as a participant activity has been partially replaced by gospel as an audience-performer situation. In those areas where modern conditions have not intruded enough to restructure the life styles (such as the southern prison farms, which in some cases mirror the old plantations), genres such as the worksong—elsewhere archaic—still survive. Finally, new needs create new demands. The urban streetcorner world has led to an adaption of the hobo recitation called the Toast, long narrative poems that serve a variety of functions ranging from expressing simple homilies to partially releasing bitterness and frustration lacking other outlets.