

# WHAT ARE ITS FUNCTIONS?

The vast spreading popularity of blues and blues byproducts among White listeners in the 50s and 60s is no surprise to the student of folk music. Although late in coming, it was only one of many steps in the blending of West African music idioms with Western and European music begun in the 17th century.

In earlier years, the "blues" qualities of spirituals and recorded African-American blues had been strongly attractive to popular song writers, but the pop song of 1920-40 was still shackled by the weight of ballad-like "messages." It was still to be realized that in the airy spaces of the blues, a singer could be free to concentrate on rhythmic and melodic elaboration.

The spreading of blues in southern Black communities occurred with traveling carnivals, medicine and vaudeville shows, Black minstrelsy, and later, the phonograph record. With the gradual disappearance of a Black rural-based society in the southern United States, many feared that the blues would slip into obscurity. But through the perseverance of a few singers, record companies and collectors, and most notably through the cultural systems of Black people, the blues was transformed into a city-oriented music in Chicago and across the world as rock 'n' roll.

Although some economic conditions changed with the urban move of Black people from the South, other social and political conditions were similar enough to maintain the original blues function. City bars and amplified guitars replaced their rural counterparts, but the lyrics of Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Sonny Boy Williamson, and others fulfilled the same esthetic. Otis Spann told Nat Hentoff: "Most of the people who come to hear us work hard during the day . . . the blues for them is something like a book. They want to hear stories out of their own experiences, and that's the kind we tell."

The outlook of Western art is such that individual esthetic products, even folk products, tend to be treated as *objects* of art, items existing out of social context. The use to which musical expression is put—its function—is ignored or soon forgotten. And yet there, after all, is where the meaning lies. Somehow we must find a way to save this functional side of things too; we have to find a way to pull folk music off the stage long enough to understand its use in the human setting in which it was born.

Most definitions of the blues represent the form as characteristically introverted, self-centered verse that is said to be the outpourings of a personal condition of sorrow: i.e. "having the blues." But it's possible to distinguish a number of functions served by the blues in Black communities that contradict the opinions of some scholars. Blues are used for dancing, party listening (as in the famous *double entendre* songs of Tampa Red and Blind Boy Fuller), and as topical accounts.

What did blues mean? Why were they sung? Song is always a means for saying something that in everyday speech would be awkward, if not forbidden. Numerous singers in Paul Oliver's *Conversation with the Blues* testify to the "therapeutic" values of blues singing.

The blues singer, often a traveler, a professional, sang of symbols and conditions that were shared by most Black people, emerging as they did out of a common past and having a strong sense of the uniqueness of Black history. Far removed from the timeless abstract narrative of the White ballad, the blues is not a song form for the heroic and the epic. The emphasis is upon truth, though elaboration is often a favored technique. Fantasy is minimal. No wonder that as blues spread to a White audience, many older singers decried songs by people "who don't even feel them."

An even wider perspective can be

gained if the audience's viewpoint is taken. Why did they listen to the blues? The singer's function was similar to that of the psychoanalyst; while the analyst helps the patient relive difficult problems for himself, the blues singer relives the problems of the group, as a participant, and explores them in song. It's easy to see why the blues were (and are) so offensive to many of the strongly religious Black communities: not only do the problems discussed in the blues and in the music of the church differ, but the manner in which they are handled is different. The church *collectively* poses its problems to God through song and prayer (the two are narrowly separated in the Black church), while the blues audience's problems are posed *individually* to the group.

When a significant portion of the White population became aware of rhythm and blues, particularly under the influence of Elvis Presley's recordings of Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup's songs, an identifiable product emerged from the mass media with enough distinctiveness to be called rock 'n' roll. But the problems posed in traditional and urban blues were not those with strong appeal for teenagers. Consequently, a rapid shift occurred toward adolescent concerns (Chuck Berry became a key figure in the transition with songs like *Oh Baby Doll* and *School Day*).

Despite the valiant efforts of a few singers of "blues-protest" and folk-rock, the revival blues are not folk music in the truest sense. Yet, with their poetic form and melodic influence, the blues have deeply enriched American music and music forms. And they also have given us a fleeting insight into the means by which Black people continue to live creative lives within an oppressive environment.

—John Szwed  
Director of the Center  
for Urban Ethnography,  
University of Pennsylvania