

Tennessee Blues and Gospel: From Jug Band to Jubilee

by David Evans and
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Sacred and secular Black music traditions have existed side-by-side in Tennessee since the arrival of large numbers of slaves to Mississippi River lowland plantations in the early 19th century. Although church-oriented music has remained separate from entertainment and work-related musics in performance, meaning and genre, it has influenced and, in turn, been influenced by them over time. Many well-known blues performers have "gone to God," and an equally large number of religious performers are attentive to the style, if not the ideology, of blues.

By far the most important Black secular folk music in Tennessee has been the blues. In the early years of this century, folk blues singers were probably active in every Black community in the state. Memphis was the largest of these and became the place where blues music first gained popularity. W. C. Handy, who led a Black orchestra that played the popular tunes of the day for Anglo- and Afro-American audiences, published his "Memphis Blues" in 1912, following it with many more blues "hits" in the next few years. Beale Street, the main Black business and entertainment street where Handy's publishing company was located, became renowned for its blues music; consequently, Memphis gained the reputation as the "Home of the Blues."

The blues of Handy and other songwriters were composed in the style of popular songs of the day and drew only some of their melodic and lyric material from folk blues. They were usually performed by popular vaudeville singers (mostly women) and accompanied by a pianist, a jazz combo, or a popular orchestra. A number of the more important vaudeville and cabaret singers came from Tennessee, including the great Bessie Smith from Chattanooga and Alberta Hunter and Viola McCoy from Memphis. Although they later settled in northern states, they frequently included Tennessee on their tours.

On Beale Street in the 1920s one could hear a great variety of blues styles. In the theaters were orchestras of musicians who read from scores, jazz bands who improvised, and vaudeville blues singers. In the smaller cafes there were usually blues pianists, small string combos and jug bands. Many of the string players, jug band musicians, and especially the solo blues guitarists had to play for tips on the street or in parks; they obtained paying jobs at private house parties and sometimes with traveling shows in the smaller towns.

Black field hands came to Memphis in large numbers from the

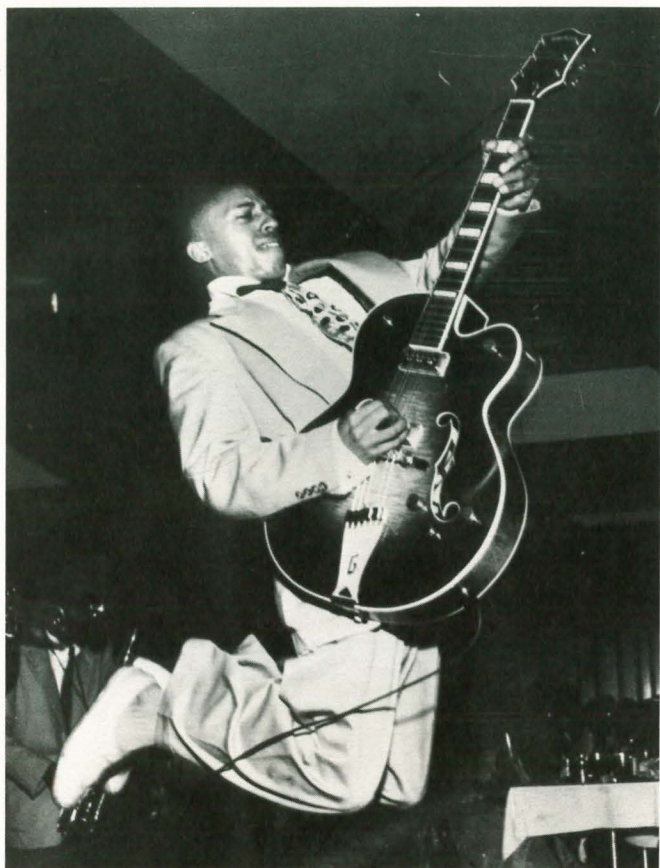
surrounding countryside, including nearby Arkansas and the Mississippi Delta region, for shopping, socializing, and entertainment. They made up the audience for those musicians who came there as well. A good many rural Blacks eventually settled in Memphis, contributing to the city's musical richness and variety by forming urban blues ensembles with strong country roots. Perhaps the most perfect expression of this convocation was the phenomenon of the jug band, which typically included one or two guitars, harmonica, kazoo and jug. Gus Cannon's Jug Stompers and the Memphis Jug Band were among the greatest exponents of this style.

Outside Memphis, Black fife-and-drum bands played at country picnics. Elsewhere in the state, much of the Black folk music repertoire and performance style of the time was shared with Anglo-American musicians and appealed to Black and non-Black audiences alike. For example, the repertoire of fiddler Howard Armstrong, originally from LaFollette, includes many folk and popular pieces from Anglo-American sources, while early Grand Ole Opry star DeFord Bailey entertained general audiences with his harmonica virtuosity.

During the late 1920s five major recording companies set up temporary studios in Memphis. They recorded an enormous variety of artists and styles, including rural self-accompanied blues singers, barrelhouse pianists, medicine show performers, jug bands, jazz combos and dance orchestras. These recordings, distributed nationally, remain extraordinary documents of the artistry of great figures in the blues, like "Furry" Lewis, the Beale Street Sheiks, Robert Wilkins, Memphis Minnie and Jim Jackson. Recording sessions in Nashville, Knoxville and Bristol turned up similar talent but on a lesser scale. Other blues artists, like pianist Leroy Carr from Nashville, left the state and achieved fame through recordings in the North. This pattern continued in the 1930s and 1940s, as artists like Sleepy John Estes from Brownsville and John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson from Jackson traveled north to record, others to seek wider fame, such as pianist "Memphis Slim" (Peter Chatman), Nashville pianist Cecil Gant, and Knoxville area guitarists Brownie and Stick McGhee.

In the years following World War II, as the guitar and harmonica became amplified, electric blues bands replaced the older jug bands in Memphis. Blues artists continued to migrate from the surrounding countryside into the city. B. B. King, originally from Mississippi, grafted an electric lead guitar sound to a large orchestra of professional musicians to create a blues style that remains popular today. Other smaller bands that played in neighborhood clubs were typically made up of one or two electric guitars, an electric bass (since the 1960s), piano or electric organ and drums, sometimes with saxophone added.

During the early 1950s, many great electric blues artists were recorded by Sam Phillips in Memphis for record companies in Chicago and the West Coast and later for Phillips's own Sun Record Company. Among these artists were Howlin' Wolf, Ike Turner, Bobby Bland, Little Junior Parker, Rosco Gordon and Rufus Thomas — still an active performer in Memphis. Blues artists were recorded by other companies based in Memphis during the 1950s and 1960s and by Bullet and Excello Records of Nashville. Blues also comprised an



Guitarist Calvin Newborn in a Memphis Club, ca. 1955. Photo courtesy Center for Southern Folklore



Fife player Ed Jones of Somerville, Fayette County. Photo by Robert Jeffrey, Tennessee State Parks Folklife Project

Memphis jug band including Will Batts (violin), Jab Jones (piano) and Dewey Corley (jug), ca. 1920. Photo courtesy Center for Southern Folklore





Memphis piano bluesman, Booker T. Laury.
Photo courtesy Center for Southern Folklore



Old-time jazz and blues fiddler, Howard Armstrong and his brothers L. C. (guitar), F. L. (mandolin) and Roland (bass), LaFollette, Campbell County, 1928. Photo courtesy Howard Armstrong



Gospel choir at Lambert Church of God in Christ, Memphis Photo by Ray Allen, Center For Southern Folklore

important part of the nationally successful soul music sound of Stax and Hi record companies of Memphis during the 1960s and early 1970s. Meanwhile, researchers and record collectors were rediscovering many of the great folk blues artists who had made recordings during the 1920s and 1930s. Among their "finds" were Furry Lewis, Robert Wilkins, Bukka White, and Gus Cannon of Memphis and Sleepy John Estes and Hammie Nixon of Brownsville, all of whom enjoyed successful second careers from this attention.

Integration in the 1950s and 1960s diminished the need for a separate Black business and entertainment district; consequently Beale Street experienced a period of decline. In the early 1980s, however, much of the street was rebuilt, and the city has hopes that it will once again become a major destination for tourists and others seeking entertainment. Today, as in the old days, the clubs on Beale Street tend to present the more popularized forms of music. But there is still an active street music scene that includes artists who are lured by the street's reputation and the opportunities it affords for wider exposure. Among the street musicians are such artists as Uncle Ben Perry, with his "rough-and-ready" small combo sound, and Jessie Mae Hemphill, with her Mississippi style of blues guitar.

In neighborhood clubs scattered throughout the city one can hear outstanding five- and six-piece electric bands, like the Fieldstones, Blues Busters, Hollywood All Stars, and Prince Gabe and the Millionaires. Large civic festivals, held since the 1960s, provide opportunities for these musicians to be heard by larger audiences, while giving exposure to such older musical styles as the barrelhouse piano of Booker T. Laury or Mose Vinson. Meanwhile, solo blues artists—Bud Garrett of Free Hill and Waynell Jones of Henderson for example—continue to perform in the smaller communities of Tennessee.

Equally rich as a source of gospel music, Tennessee has been well represented over the years by choirs, quartets, sanctified groups, street singers, and songwriters. After the ante-bellum era, the development of Afro-American sacred music in the state traces its beginnings to the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Their home, Fisk University, was founded in Nashville in 1866 through the efforts of the Freedman's Bureau. Having failed to attract attention with popular tunes, the Jubilee Singers successfully performed a program of spirituals. Beginning in October 1871, the group toured America and Europe, raising \$150,000 for the school. The importance of the Fisk Jubilee Singers rests with their preservation of spirituals, their influence on the ascendancy of the quartet as a performance tradition, and their general appeal to audiences outside the Black community.

During the first quarter of the 20th century, gospel quartets remained closely tied to community and church work. This relative isolation began to change in the 1920s with the commercial interest of the major record companies. During the 1930s and especially the 1940s, quartets began traveling outside their communities to perform at other churches, religious conventions, and gospel singing concerts. They were frequently given radio exposure—particularly in Nashville. The tendency, then, was away from localization to wider recognition and, for some, commercialization as full-time singers. A number of excellent quartets are still active in the state, many of them founded over 35 years ago: the Fairfield Four and

Fireside Singers from Nashville, and the Gospel Writers, Harps of Melody, Harmonizers, Pattersonaires, Spirit of Memphis, and Sunset Travelers from Memphis. In Nashville, Reverend Morgan Babb, formerly with the Radio Four, now performs as a soloist. Although no longer active in Knoxville, the Swan Silvertones and their superb lead singer, Claude Jeter, deserve special mention. These quartets run the gamut, from the older *a cappella* style, with its sharply defined four-part harmony, to performances accompanied by a full instrumental and rhythm section and exhibiting a greater use of vocal range and dynamics.

Sanctified gospel music, especially in the western part of the state, is represented by members of the Holiness or Pentecostal church, such as The Church of God in Christ founded by Charles Mason in 1897 near Memphis. One of its present ministers, Reverend Robert Wilkins, a practicing herbalist now 90, became active in church work after several years as a highly regarded blues singer. Sanctified singers perform in a "shouting" musical style, accompanied by hand-clapping, tambourines, guitars, and other instruments. A number of Holiness singers were recorded in Memphis during the 1920s, including Bessie Johnson and Lonnie McIntorsh. Of the many Pentecostal churches presently in Memphis, that of Reverend J. O. Patterson is prominent, where the exceptional soloist Mattie Wigley still performs with the choir.

Among its many songwriters Tennessee has had three who were prominent in Black sacred music: Lucie Campbell and Dr. William Brewster from Memphis, and Clevant Derricks from Nashville. Campbell (1885-1963) composed 45 gospel songs and was also music director of the National Baptist Convention, one of several annual convocations which, like that of the Church of God in Christ, are still important for the dissemination of songs as well as for individual singers to make their mark on gospel music.

Dr. Brewster, born in Somerville, Tennessee, composed scores of songs which reflect the belief that a gospel song should be a sermon set to music. Three of his best known compositions were "Move on Up a Little Higher," "Surely, God Is Able," and "Just Over the Hill." He also wrote plays in commemoration of the Black struggle for civil rights. In the late 1940s, Brewster's weekly "Camp Meeting of the Air" was broadcast live from his church on East Trigg and featured his great protege, Queen C. Anderson, who sang with his choir until her death in 1959. Not surprisingly, Elvis Presley is reputed to have been a fan of Reverend Brewster.

Tennessee blues and gospel performers in general have had an enormous impact on the Anglo stringband, country, and rockabilly music for which the state is often known. While it is tempting to view Nashville as the country music capital and Memphis as the blues and gospel city, the strong presence of gospel in Nashville and the blues-influenced Anglo-American rockabillys of Memphis show a more complex musical picture. Regardless, blues and gospel traditions of Tennessee continue with increasing development of folk-derived commercial styles on records, radio, and television. At the same time, Afro-American folk musics continue to play an important role in Tennessee churches, nightclubs, and entertainment districts.

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- The Blues in Memphis, 1927-1939* (Origin Jazz Library, 21).
- Happy in the Service of the Lord: Memphis Gospel Quartet Heritage—The 1980s*, Kip Lornell, ed. (High Water, LP-1002).
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- Rev. Robert Wilkins* (Piedmont, PLP-13162).
- Sun Records, The Blues Years, 1950-1956* (Sun Box, 105).
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