Deep Blues
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PENGUIN BOOKS
CHAPTER 1

Beginnings

Charles Peabody of Harvard's Peabody Museum arrived in Coahoma County in June 1901 to begin archaeological excavations at some Indian mounds in the vicinity of the Stovall and Carson plantations. His first stop was Clarksdale, then a typical Delta town with a flat, dusty, treeless business district and oak- and maple-lined residential streets that ended in cotton fields. He stocked up on provisions, hired some wagons, and recruited a gang of black workmen, and one sunny morning his party set off for the first dig, fifteen miles outside town. To Peabody's surprise, his workmen immediately burst into rhythmic song, and they kept it up all the way to the campsite. One strong-voiced man would take the lead, improvising short lines that touched on scenes along the road, women everyone seemed to know or know about, Biblical themes, and the romantic involvements and recreational habits of certain men on the crew. The others would answer with a refrain—"the time ain't long," or "goin' down the river"—sung in rough unison.

The mounds Peabody was interested in were imposing structures up to fifty feet in height. A few were burial mounds, but most had served the practical purpose of keeping Indian homes and community buildings dry during the periodic rampages of the Mississippi, their "father of waters." Many of the planters who first cleared the land for farming built their homes on the tops of
Indian mounds, the only high ground around. But Peabody's sites had remained untouched, and he suspected that once he penetrated down to the earliest strata in the mounds, he would find cast-off bits of pottery, arrowheads, and other artifacts indicative of how some of the earliest Mound Builders had lived.

Peabody put his crew to work scooping deep trenches out of the moist soil, and they kept right on singing, timing their call and response to the rhythm of the digging. Before long, he found he was being worked into the songs. On a Saturday that had been declared a half-holiday, he was startled to hear Ike Antoine, the group's robust song leader, singing "mighty long half-day Captain" from deep down in the trench. On another occasion, when quitting time was at hand and Peabody and a white compatriot were sitting in front of their tent idly flipping a knife into the ground, he heard the men sing, "I'm so tired I'm most dead / Sittin' up there playin' mumble-peg."

Peabody wasn't a folklorist, but he'd had some musical training and he thought enough of what he was hearing to jot down lyrics and impressions and even attempt musical transcriptions. The transcriptions weren't very successful—much of the music, he admitted, was "singularly hard to copy in notes"—but his descriptions, published in the 1903 Journal of American Folk-Lore, are the first we have of black music in the Delta. He seems to have been particularly struck by the differences he perceived between the music of the countryside and the music of his workmen from Clarksdale. The "autochthonous music," as he called it, puzzled him. He referred to the unaccompanied hollers of a man working in a nearby field as "strains of apparently genuine African music"; a lullaby he overheard coming from a cabin near his tent was "quite impossible to copy, weird in interval and strange in rhythm; peculiarly beautiful." An elderly ex-slave who lived on the Stovall plantation and was called in to entertain Peabody one night displayed a remarkable singing voice, with "a timbre resembling a bagpipe played pianissimo or a Jew's-harp played legato, and to some indistinguishable words he hummed a rhythm of no regularity and notes apparently not more than three or more in number at intervals within a semi-tone."

The singing of the men from Clarksdale seemed less alien, especially when they accompanied themselves on guitars. Their repertoires included ragtime and minstrel songs they had picked up from visiting tent shows, tunes that were popular throughout the South. In style these songs were close cousins to white country music. For the most part they were black in origin, but from the 1840s on they had been picked up by white minstrel entertainers and imitated by professional songwriters. After the Civil War, black minstrel and medicine show performers sang both the originals and the Tin Pan Alley facsimiles, and these songs were absorbed back into the black folk tradition. "Some folks say preachers won't steal," went one of the ditties Peabody heard, "But I found two in my cornfield / One with a shovel and 't other with a hoe / A-diggin' up my taters row by row." The song's original culprits had been "niggers," not preachers, and the field had been full of watermelons.

But along with these songs, which Peabody's men loosely called "ragtime," there were other songs, closer in character to the chants of the country blacks. These were sung unaccompanied as work songs or hollers, or accompanied by guitars for dancing and partying. To Peabody they tended to blur into "hours-long ululation of little variety," but he was struck by some of the words. The most common subjects were hard luck, women, and "favorite occupations and amusements," and among the lines Peabody wrote down were "They had me arrested for murder / And I never harmed a man" and "The reason I loves my baby so / 'Cause when she gets five dollars she give me fo.'" These are, or were in the process of becoming, blues lines. Peabody visited the Delta just when blues was beginning to emerge as a distinct musical genre out of the loose, partially improvised music country blacks sang to make their work go faster or to entertain themselves in moments of leisure. The music probably wasn't referred to as "the blues" yet, although "having the blues," a slang expression descriptive of melancholia that can be traced back to the "blue devils" of Elizabethan England, was a phrase and a state of mind with which both blacks and whites were familiar.

THE AFRICAN MUSIC from which the blues ultimately derives came to what is now the southern United States with the first
African slaves. These Africans had belonged to a number of different tribal and linguistic groups, each of which had its own musical traditions. Most of the earliest arrivals were from a stretch of the West African coast the slave traders called Senegambia. It extended from present-day Senegal and the Gambia down to the northern coastline of Guinea, an area which was forested toward the south but whose northern extremities edged into the Sahara. For centuries Senegambia had been dominated by powerful empires, but during the sixteenth century the Wolof empire splintered into warring city states and in the decades of turmoil that followed many prisoners were taken and sold into slavery. Islam was already making headway in the region, and its coming contributed to the general unrest that made Senegambia particularly attractive to European slave traders. The slavers were not above kidnapping, but it was more-efficient and less risky to deal with Senegambian kings and princes who had prospered in war and owned more slaves than they could profitably use.

As the slave trade gathered momentum, it tended to shift farther south, to the immense stretch of coastline Europeans loosely referred to as the slave coast—present day Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, Dahomey, Nigeria, and Cameroon. A third area south of the Congo River's mouth, along the coast of what is now Angola, also became an important slaving center. By 1807, when Great Britain and the United States officially outlawed the trade, slaving in Senegambia had dropped off dramatically and most of the activity was centered along the slave coast and the Angolan coastline.

Between 1807 and the outbreak of the American Civil War slaving continued clandestinely. The Congo-Angola region became more and more important because the many channels and small islands at the Congo River's broad mouth made it easier for the slavers to skulk out of sight of patrolling English and American warships. Other slave traders managed to operate in the vicinity of what is now Nigeria, especially in the Bight of Benin where there was considerable political turmoil during the first half of the nineteenth century. And some ventured around Cape Horn to trade for slaves in Mozambique and at the Arab slave markets on the island of Madagascar.

Senegambia, the slave coast, and Congo-Angola differed markedly in terms of topography, political organization, and material culture; musically each area had—and to a considerable extent still has—a distinct personality of its own. There are no great forests in the relatively dry Senegambia, so there aren't as many large wooden drums as in the more southerly areas. But one encounters a wealth of stringed instruments, from the humblest one-stringed gourd fiddles to guitarlike lutes with two, three, or four strings to elaborate harp-lutes with more than twenty strings. Because of Senegambia's many centuries of contact with the Berber and Arab cultures north of the desert, the vocal music tends to reflect the Middle East's predilection for long, tortuous melodic lines. And there's a fondness for formal solo singing, which is relatively unusual in most African music.

In many Senegambian societies, singers and musicians belong to a particular social caste, the griots. They sing the praises of wealthy and powerful men and memorize long epic genealogies that constitute a kind of oral history of their people. Some of them are attached to royal courts, while others sing in the streets, or play in groups that encourage farmers and other workers by setting rhythms for their tasks. One would expect the griots to be valued members of their societies, but in fact they are both admired, for they often attain considerable reputations and amass wealth, and despised, for they are thought to consort with evil spirits, and their praise songs, when not properly rewarded, can become venomous songs of insult. Some of the earliest European visitors to Senegambia remarked that when griots died they were not buried with the respectable people of their communities; instead, their bodies were left to rot in hollow trees.

Village music making in Senegambia involves drumming, hand clapping, and group singing in call and response form; usually an improvising vocal soloist is answered by a chorus singing a repeating refrain in unison. This kind of communal music making, which was much more prevalent in Senegambia in the days of the slave trade than it is now, is also characteristic of much of the slave coast, but there the drumming and percussion tend to be more elaborate. Often villages mount orchestras of drums, rattles, bells, and other percussion instruments that play polyrhythmic music of dazzling complexity. In group singing the parts of the lead vocalist and chorus often overlap, or even blend in a kind of
polyphony—music that consists of several different but simultaneous melodies. There is harmony in slave-coast vocal music, too—not the periodic resolving harmony of European music but the parallel melodies sung a third, fourth, or fifth away from each other.

The people of Bantu stock who are the dominant population group in much of the Congo-Angola region also play drums and percussion instruments, but for the most part their rhythms aren’t as complex as, say, Ewe or Akan or Yoruba drumming from Ghana and Nigeria. Bantu choral music, however, is the most highly developed in Africa. Even in call and response singing the leader and chorus tend to overlap, and there are local traditions of exceptionally refined vocal polyphony; sometimes solos, duets, and trios emerge from a dense choral backdrop that pits two sections of singers against each other. Some Bantu vocal music includes whooping, or sudden jumping into the falsetto range, which seems to derive from the pygmies who were the area’s original inhabitants.

Despite their differences, the musics of these three areas also have certain broad, basic features in common, features that are characteristic of African and African-derived music wherever it’s found. For one thing, African music is usually participative. Shepherds do serenade their flocks with lonely flutes, and the musically inclined sometimes play small instruments like the sanza or hand piano to entertain themselves, but most music making is group music making, and in group situations the distinction between performers and audience that is so basic in Western music tends to blur or disappear entirely. Whole villages take part, with musical specialists handling the more demanding roles and everyone else chiming in with choral responses or simple hand-clapping patterns. There are plenty of opportunities to practice, for almost every group activity—religious rituals, planting, hoeing, pounding grain, building dwellings, partying—has its own body of music. The structure of the music actively encourages participation, whether it’s call and response, in which anyone can join the response, or a method of organization called hocketing, especially prevalent among the Bantu and the pygmies, which involves the building of a multitude of individual one- or two-note parts into a dense polyphony.

Both call and response and hocketing are forms of musical conversation. Even professional instrumental ensembles that organize their music in a more complex manner play conversationally; the master drummer “talks” to his accompanying drummers, one xylophone player addresses another, two flutes entwine in a sputtering, partially vocalized dialogue, and so on. Sometimes these musical conversations involve the exchange of actual verbal information. The Yoruba, the Akan, and many other African peoples speak pitch-tone languages in which a single syllable or word has several meanings, and one indicates the desired meaning by speaking at an appropriate pitch level, usually high, middle, or low. Among these people, speech has melodic properties, and the melodies found in music suggest words and sentences. By using generally understood correspondences between pitch configurations in speech and in music, musicians can make their instruments talk. This is the secret of the celebrated West African talking drums, which literally drum up trade for merchants by announcing wares and prices and can also send messages, announce visitors, and flatter or revile public figures. Horns, flutes, xylophones, and other instruments are also capable of talking. When they are played in groups, the music consists of layers of melodies and rhythms, some of which may have verbal meaning while others do not.

Speech and music are closely related even where pitch-tone languages are not spoken. The use of musical instruments for signaling is found everywhere, and drummers learn rhythms by imitating either meaningful verbal phrases or onomatopoetic nonsense syllables. Instrumentalists, especially flutists, sing or hum while blowing in order to produce grainy, vocelike textures. One fascinating group of instruments, singing horns and singing gourds, can be played as horns, with the lips vibrating, or simply used as megaphones to amplify the voice. The Luba of Zaire lip their singing gourds as if they were playing trumpets, and the instruments contribute propulsive bass parts to ensemble music. The playing technique, and the instrument’s musical function, were preserved by the jug blowers in black American jug bands.

Gunther Schuller has defined the rhythmic quality familiarly called swing as “forward-propelling directionality.” That’s a mouthful, but until a description comes along that is equally accu-
rate and rolls off the tongue more readily, it will have to do. African rhythms don’t always swing in a jazz sense; sometimes the polyrhythm is too dense and complex. But they always have that quality of forward-propelling directionality—they’re driving, “hot.” And it doesn’t take a battery of drummers to drive the music along; a single musician playing a stringed instrument or even a flute or horn can generate plenty of heat. As one would expect, the African instruments with the most highly developed solo traditions tend to be instruments like the widely distributed hand piano or the harp-lutes of Senegambia that can simultaneously produce driving ostinatos (repeating patterns) and chording or melody lines that answer or comment on the player’s singing. The persistence of this principle in America helps explain the alacrity with which black musicians in the rural South took up the guitar once white musicians and mail order catalogues introduced it to them.

European and American visitors to Africa have often been puzzled by what they perceived as an African fondness for muddying perfectly clean sounds. African musicians will attach pieces of tin sheeting to the heads of drums or the necks of stringed instruments in order to get a noisy, rattling buzz. When confronted with a wooden flute, which naturally produces a relatively pure tone, they will sing or hum while they play. And their solo singing makes use of an extraneous variety of tonal effects, from grainy falsetto shrieks to affected hoarseness, throaty growls, and guttural grunting. This preference for what western musicology tells us are impure sounds has always been evident in black American music, from the rasp in so much folk, blues, and popular singing—think of Mahalia Jackson, or James Brown—to the gutbucket sounds of early New Orleans jazz trumpeters, who sometimes played into brass spoons or crammed homemade mutes made out of kazoo’s into the bells of their horns.

South. At first, Africans from different cultures were thrown together by slave traders and planters without regard for their disparate origins, but as time went on the planters developed definite preferences for slaves from certain areas. In seventeenth and eighteenth century Virginia and the Carolinas the favorites were Senegambians, who were thought to be more civilized and thus more adaptable than pastoralists and hunter-gatherers from farther south. Some of these Senegambian slaves had been city dwellers and were converts to Islam—there are cases of trusted slaves keeping plantation records in Arabic—but most of them were from backcountry tribal cultures. There were Bambara, Malinke or Mandingo, Hausa, and many others, but the Wolof seem to have played a particularly important and perhaps a culturally dominant role in the early slave culture of the southern United States.

“The Wolof are famous for their good looks,” writes the anthropologist David Ames. “They are a tall, slender, black-skinned people, who stand straight and are proud and dignified in their posture.” The earliest English slavers to visit Senegambia found that the Wolof language (which is not a pitch-tone language) was widely spoken, probably because so many tribes had been vassals of the medieval Wolof empire. So Wolof speakers were sought out as interpreters and guides, and it was during this period that Wolof terms for several foodstuffs—banana, yam—passed into English usage. The linguist David Dalby has suggested that several American slang terms with strong musical association also derive from Wolof. In his article “Americanisms That May Once Have Been Africanisms,” Dalby compares the American slang verb “dig” to the Wolof dega, pronounced something like “digger” and meaning to understand. He relates “jive” to the Wolof jëw, to talk disparagingly, and “hip cup” to the Wolof verb kipì, “to open one’s eyes,” and agentive suffix -kat; in Wolof, a kipì-kat is “a person who has opened his eyes.”

The Wolof are also a likely source of the most popular American musical instrument to have originated among the slaves—the banjo. The word, which was variously reported in accounts from the colonial period as banjer, banshaw, banza, and handore, seems to be a corruption of bania, a generic name for a similar type of instrument found in Senegal, but there are particularly
close connections between black American banjo music and music played on the Wolof halam. Like the banjo, the halam has five strings, one of which vibrates openly as a drone string, and it is played in what American folk musicians call frailing or claw hammer style—which the minstrel banjo instruction books of the nineteenth century referred to as brushless, drop-thumb frailing. In frailing, the fingernail (or nails) picks various strings in a rhythmic, fast-moving pattern while the thumb repeatedly strikes down at the drone string, providing an insistent ostinato. It's a purely rhythmic-melodic style; the adjective "brushless" means that the fingers don't brush several strings at once to produce a chord.

Most Senegambian lutes have fewer strings than the halam, but the frailing technique is widespread. One hears it today in Morocco and Tunisia among the descendants of Senegambian blacks who were brought there centuries ago as slaves. It survives in only a handful of recordings of black American music; it was passed if not positively archaic by the 1920s, when black folk music first found its way onto discs. But it was still popular among white musicians in Kentucky, Tennessee, and other Southern states, especially in the mountains. A number of white mountaineers have reported learning to play the banjo from blacks who lived in or visited their localities, and the instrument and the frailing style were also spread by traveling minstrel shows whose performers, whites in blackface, copied slave musicians they'd heard on Deep South plantations.

Long after the Senegambian slave trade had declined, blacks from that area continued to enjoy special status on many plantations. New Senegambian arrivals were given relatively light work to do around the house, while blacks from the slave coast and especially Bantu from the Congo-Angola region were sent to the fields. Senegambians who had played bowed stringed instruments would not have had too much trouble adapting to the European violin, their homemade banjos would not have sounded too harsh to European ears, and small percussion instruments like bone clappers and triangles would also have been acceptable. Slave orchestras consisting of various combinations of these instruments, sometimes with flutes or fifes, became a fixture of plantation life almost from the first. These plantation house musicians, many of whom learned some European music and probably combined it with African playing habits, inspired the blackface minstrel troupes that dominated the American entertainment scene from the 1840s until some years after the Civil War.

Musically inclined blacks from the slave coast and Congo-Angola, where complex drumming was indispensable to much music making, found themselves at a distinct disadvantage. Drums were banned everywhere in North America except French Louisiana by the middle of the eighteenth century, and so were horns, which are made from wood or animal horns and played in hocketing ensembles in the slave coast and Congo-Angola regions. Plantation owners had learned, sometimes the hard way, that such loud instruments could be used to signal slave insurrections. The range of musical expression that was left to Africans from south of Senegambia was cruelly circumscribed. Their lives were filled with backbreaking labor, with little time left for making instruments or practicing. Since they were forbidden drums and horns, and since more elaborate instruments such as harps or xylophones required too many special materials and took too much time to construct, all these instruments eventually died out after making early appearances on a few Southern plantations. The music that was left utilized mankind's most basic musical resources, the voice and the body.

The slaves who toiled in Southern fields came from every part of Africa that was touched by the slave trade. Through singing to themselves, hollering at each other across the fields, and singing together while working and worshipping, they developed a hybridized musical language that distilled the very essence of innumerable African vocal traditions. In parts of Senegal, Upper Volta, Ghana, and the Cameroons, and undoubtedly in other areas where few field recordings have been made, African singing has many of the characteristics of this American hybrid. Such singing tends to sound vaguely familiar to the European ear, as if the melodies were based on the major scale but with flattening or wavering in pitch around the third and sometimes the fifth and seventh notes. On closer examination, it becomes evident that the singers' intonation—their manner of singing "in tune"—is determined by natural harmonic resonances and not by the more arbitrary tempered scale of European music. The solo singers indulge in con-
siderable sliding, gliding, and quivering between pitches, and in a
group all the singers evidence an acute sense of timing and rhyth-
mic drive. The group answers the lead vocalist’s musical and
verbal improvisations with a fixed refrain, sung in unison with
perhaps some relatively simple harmonizing or polyphonic elabo-
ration.

This description may seem detailed, but it’s general enough to
apply equally well to field recordings from many parts of West
Africa or to recordings of black works songs made on Southern
prison farms in the 1930s. One feature demands additional com-
ment: the flattened third, which is referred to as a “blue note” in
most jazz literature but is really a melodic tendency and not a note
with a fixed pitch relationship to its neighbors. This is the expres-
sive core of the hollers, work songs, spirituals that have not been
substantially influenced by white church music, and later the
blues, especially Delta blues. You can hear it, or suggestions of it,
in African vocal music from Senegambia to the Congo, and it has
special significance among the Akan-speaking people of Ghana,
who suffered the depredations of English and American slavers
through most of the period of the slave trade. Akan is a pitch-tone
language in which rising emotion is expressed by falling pitch, and
in Akan song rising emotion is often expressed by flattening the
third. There seems to be a direct continuity between this ten-
dency and blues singing, for blues singers habitually use falling
pitches to raise the emotional temperature of a performance.
Usually these falling pitches are thirds, but Muddy Waters and
other vocalists and guitarists from the Delta tradition also employ
falling fifths, often with shattering emotional effect.

Whooping, a kind of yodeling that’s traditional among the pyg-
mies and their neighbors in the Congo-Angola region, is an exam-
ple of a specific African vocal technique that survived in the rural
South well into the twentieth century, especially in field hollers
and blues. Originally, hollers and blues were almost exclusively
the province of field workers; house servants had no need to
holler. Blues, as almost any Mississippian will tell you, came “from
the cotton patch,” and Bantu slaves were almost invariably put to
work in the field and not in the house. Bantu were being brought
into the South in large numbers long after the Senegambian and
slave coast trade had dwindled. All these factors help explain the

whooping tradition’s long life. Texas Henry Thomas, whose 1874
birthdate makes him one of the oldest black singers captured on
recordings, played a set of panpipes whooping style, alternately
vocalizing and blowing into his pipes so as to produce a con-
tinuous melody line. Panpipes and whooping have also been recorded
in other Southern states, including Alabama and Mississippi, and
the instrument as well as the technique can be traced directly to
African prototypes. But as a purely vocal technique, whooping or
octave-jumping seems to have survived mostly in the hollers and blues of Mississippi. One hears it in the work of early
bluesmen like Tommy Johnson and in the later Chicago record-
ings of Delta-bred singers like Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf.

Voice masking is another African vocal technique with some
bearing on blues singing. The finest African masks are now valued
as precious art objects, but in village rituals these masks were simply
the visual aspect of a masking procedure that also involved
modifying the voice. The masker was often believed to be pos-
sessed by a god or spirit, so his voice had to change along with his
appearance. Some masks had mirliton membranes mounted in
their mouthpieces and the maskers sang through them, producing
a buzzing timbre not unlike that of a kazoo. Other masked
singers, especially in the slave coast region, mastered deep chest
growls, false bass tones produced in the back of the throat, stran-
gulated shrieks, and other deliberately bizarre effects.

Since such extreme voice modification had primarily religious or
ritual associations in West Africa, it’s interesting to note that it
figured more prominently in black American sacred singing than
in secular music. One encounters it with particular frequency in
the early recordings of guitar-playing evangelists such as the
Texan Blind Willie Johnson. The recordings of Charley Patton,
Son House, and Rubin Lacy, three seminal figures in the first de-
decades of Mississippi Delta blues, also contain frequent examples of
techniques that are possibly related to voice masking, and all
three men were preachers and religious singers at one time or an-
other. Lacy was permanently converted not long after he made his
only blues recording. Son House wavered back and forth between
preaching and the blues life, and Patton made commercial record-
ings of religious material (as Elder J. J. Hadley) and reserved
some of his most spectacular vocal displays for these occasions.
An African-American continuity can be discerned in the subject matter of song lyrics too. In Africa, and in the South both during and after slavery, song leaders who were quick-witted improvisers were highly valued. The improvisations Charles Peabody heard from his Clarksdale work crew were typical in their ironic humor, their overriding concern with relations between the sexes, and their unselfconscious mixing of imagery from the church and the bedroom. Several European explorers in precolonial Africa documented the trading of insults in song; often such insults constituted a kind of socially sanctioned censure directed at specific members of the community. This practice survived in a slave custom known as putting someone “on the banjo” and its spirit was often present in pre-blues and blues singing. Charley Patton’s recordings, for example, include frequent jabs at real individuals, including several wives and girl friends and the “high sheriff” who often arrested him.

Man-woman relationships, probably the most persistent concern of blues lyrics, are also important in traditional African villages, where social harmony is often considered synonymous with or dependent on harmony in the home. And the mixing of the sacred and the profane in black American song lyrics is more easily understood once one realizes that in precolonial Africa these two fields of human activity were not generally thought of as polar opposites. There’s a telling photograph from a Nigerian Tiv village in Charles Keil’s book *Tiv Song*. A man is squatting on the ground holding a ritual object, a very large clay penis, while a group of male children look on. It’s tale-telling night, a serious occasion when stories having to do with important spiritual concepts and behavioral norms are repeated for the benefit of the young. But the penis is awfully big and awfully stiff, and the man is smirking.

The study of rhythm and percussion in slave music and in the black music of the post-Civil War period has been severely hampered until recently by a lack of documentation and by some unwarranted assumptions. For many years conventional wisdom had it that the Black Codes which banned slave drumming effectively eliminated African polyrhythm from black music in the United States; phenomena such as the very rapid development of jazz drumming after 1900 could be explained by “natural rhythm.” But such explanations will no longer wash. The consensus among anthropologists is that cultural intangibles such as a feel for complicated rhythms are learned, not innate.

During the last decade, scholarly detective work on several fronts has finally begun to give us a more complete picture of the fate of African polyrhythms in North America. To begin with, the passage of the Black Codes, which in most states actually predated the Revolutionary War, did not automatically stamp out all slave drumming. An exhaustive analysis of diaries, letters, and travelers’ journals from colonial times up to the Civil War, undertaken by Dena J. Epstein and detailed in her book *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals*, yielded a surprising number of references to slave music that was primarily percussive. Usually such music was associated with annual festivals, when the year’s crop was harvested and several days were set aside for celebration. As late as 1861, a traveler in North Carolina saw dancers dressed in costumes that included horned headdresses and cows’ tails and heard music provided by a sheepskin-covered “gumbo box,” apparently a frame drum; triangles and jawbones furnished the auxiliary percussion. Such late accounts are not plentiful, but there are quite a few from the southeastern states and Louisiana dating from the period 1820-1850. Most of the Delta was still Indian territory and wilderness at the time, but it was settled by planters and cleared by slaves who came from these states. Some of the earliest Delta settlers came from the vicinity of New Orleans, where drumming was never actively discouraged for very long and handmade drums were used to accompany public dancing until the outbreak of the Civil War.

Where slaves could not make or play drums they could at least pat jubil. “The patting,” an ex-slave reported in 1853, “is performed by striking the right shoulder with one hand, the left with the other—all the while keeping time with the feet, and singing.” Undoubtedly there were any number of personal variations on this formula. And anyone who has heard the work of a master jazz drummer like Max Roach or Elvin Jones will be well aware that a
single gifted musician can muster enough coordination to execute elaborate rhythm patterns in several different meters simultaneously.

The ring shout, a black "holy dance" in which worshipers shuffled rhythmically in a circle, clapping and stamping, seems to have developed with the widespread conversion of slaves to Christianity during the revival fervors of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The earliest accounts date from the 1840s; more vivid descriptions from the twentieth century leave little doubt that the dancing and stamping constituted a kind of drumming, especially when the worshipers had a wooden church floor to stamp on. "It always rooses my imagination," wrote Lydia Parrish of the Georgia Sea Islands in 1942, "to see the way in which the McIntosh County 'shouters' tap their heels on the resonant board floor to imitate the beat of the drum their forebears were not allowed to have." A recording of a ring shout, made by John Work and Alan Lomax for the Library of Congress in 1934, shows a percussion ensemble, with hand clapping furnishing a crisp syncopated cross-rhythm to the thudding beat of feet on the floor. This tradition is surely older than the earliest white accounts of it.

In 1942, when Alan Lomax was in Coahoma County recording Muddy Waters and other musicians, he heard about a black band from the Mississippi hill country that had recently visited Clarksdale. This group, led by a multi-instrumentalist named Sid Hemphill, could perform as either a country string band, a brass band, or a fife and drum band. Lomax went looking for Hemphill and his musicians and found them near the little hamlet of Sledge, where the northern Delta country meets the central hills. They were professionals who traveled around Mississippi performing for both whites and blacks, and they had a repertoire for just about any occasion. With Hemphill blowing a homemade fife and the other three musicians on two snare drums and a bass drum, they gave an admirable approximation of a white fife and drum band, playing period pop tunes like "After the Ball Is Over" and "The Sidewalks of New York" in straight march tempo with very little syncopation. But Hemphill, who was born in 1876 and probably played most comfortably in styles that were current around 1900, also played panpipes in the African whooping style, as well as both white country music and blueslike music on fiddle, guitar, mandolin, banjo, and harmonica.

After Emancipation, drumming was no longer forbidden, and many black brass bands and fife and drum bands that included store-bought snare and bass drums were formed. Some of these bands must have approximated white music, but some clearly did not. In 1959 Lomax returned to northern Mississippi, and in the hills east of the Delta he found and recorded some elderly fife and drum musicians who performed in a much more African or at least a much blacker style. Ed Young played repeating, hollerlike melodies with flattened thirds and sevenths on his fife, fluttering one of his fingers rapidly back and forth across a finger hole to produce a voice-like quavering and affecting a hoarse, grainy sound. He also sang out snatches of hollers, spirituals, and popular blues. The snare and bass drummers played syncopated cross-rhythms that rarely fell directly on the downbeats and were designed to stimulate uninhibited, improvisational group and solo dancing. This tradition must have dated back to the latter half of the nineteenth century, and it could not have developed in the first place if there hadn't been a reservoir of polyrhythmic sophistication in the culture that nurtured it. David Evans, an anthropologist who has done extensive fieldwork in the hill country of northern Mississippi, recorded black families there who play polyrhythmic music in their homes on chairs, tin cans, and empty bottles. He reports that among the area's older black fife and drum musicians, making the drums "talk it"—that is, playing rhythm patterns that conform to proverbial phrases or the words of popular fife and drum tunes—"is considered the sign of a good drummer." This enduring tradition of folk polyrhythm played an important part in the development of Mississippi blues.

BLACK AMERICAN MUSIC as it was sung and played in the rural South was both a continuation of deep and tenacious African traditions and a creative response to a brutal, desperate situation. But while some of the earliest slave musicians were making purely African music, others were learning European dance music in an
attempt to better their positions in the slave hierarchy, and some became adept performers of European classical music. Dena Epstein has unearthed accounts of gatherings at which some slaves danced to music played on African instruments and sung in African languages while others danced approximations of the minuet to European-style music.

Over the nearly three centuries between the first accounts of slave music in North America and the earliest recordings of black folk music in the South, blendings of innumerable kinds and degrees took place. By the period of the Civil War, almost every conceivable hue of the musical spectrum must have been present to some degree in black folk culture, from the almost purely African to the almost purely white American. And while one would expect to find field workers whose parents were born in Africa playing more African music and blacks whose forebears had been house servants for generations playing in a more acculturated style, this was not always the case. Black musicians, especially professionals whose music is also their livelihood, have always been pragmatic.

There must have been a number of musicians who, like Sid Hemphill, could play anything from African whooping music to folk ballads to fiddle and banjo breakdowns to the latest Tin Pan Alley hits, as required.

Long before the Civil War, black professional musicians in the North were playing white classical and dance music and, probably, some early forms of syncopated dance music as well. In the rural South even the musicians who played in plantation orchestras were less than fully professional; they had other duties around the house. Emancipation gave the plantation musician mobility, making true professionalism possible. At the same time, most of the plantation orchestras disappeared due to the harsh economic exigencies of the Reconstruction period. So countless black musicians—fiddlers, banjo players, mandolinists, fife and panpipe players—took to the roads. The great majority of Southern blacks stayed on the land, often on the very plantations where they had been slaves or on other plantations in the neighborhood, but musicians found that they could walk or ride horses, mules, wagons, and trains from plantation to plantation and hamlet to hamlet, playing on town street corners for tips on Saturday afternoons, when the plantation hands crowded in to shop and socialize, and out in the country later, at all-night frolics.

These traveling musicians of the Reconstruction period were called songsters, musicians, or musical physicians by their people. (The songsters were wandering balladeers, while musicians and physicians were particularly adept as instrumentalists.) Some of them may have played a kind of blues, but the evidence, incomplete though it is, strongly suggests otherwise. If they performed blueslike material, it was almost certainly either narrative ballads with a melodic flavor that approximated what later became known as blues, or songs called jump-ups that strung together more or less unrelated lines, most of them of a proverbial nature, over a simple chorded accompaniment. "See, they had these little old jump-up songs," LeDell Johnson, a Mississippi bluesman-turned-preacher born in 1892 told David Evans when he was asked about the music of his parents' generation. "The little old blues they had to my idea wasn't worth fifteen cents."

For the most part, the songsters' repertoires consisted of country dance tunes, songs from the minstrel stage (some black in origin, some white, some of impossibly tangled pedigree), spirituals, and narrative ballads, all of which reflected considerable affinities with the white country music of the period. But one should think twice about calling this material white-influenced; after all, early white music had drawn heavily on black fiddle and banjo styles and on plantation songs composed by blacks. It would be fairer to say that from the time of the Civil War until the early twentieth century, the music of the songsters and musicians shared a number of traits with white country music, with musicians of each race borrowing freely from the other.

But even though many white and black songs were similar or the same, black performing style, with its grainy vocal textures and emphasis on rhythmic momentum, remained distinctive. And gradually the songsters developed a body of music that diverged more and more radically from the interracial common stock. They made up their own ballads about events in black life, ballads like "Frankie and Albert," which was probably composed in St. Louis in the 1890s when so many Southern blacks were pouring in to
look for work that at night the sidewalks and the levee were littered with their sleeping forms. There were songs that celebrated black badmen, like “Looking for the Bully of the Town” and “Stackolee,” who was so bad that in some versions he died, went to hell, fought with the Devil and came out on top. There were songs about black heroes like “John Henry,” the steel-driving man who challenged a steam drill and won a Pyrrhic victory. And there were more localized ballads, like “The Carrier Line,” a song recorded by Sid Hemphill in 1942 but only recently issued that dissected the follies of various whites with cool, pitiless accuracy. Most black ballads were of their time and place and did not outlast it, but a few proved remarkably resilient. “Stack-a-Lee” was a rhythm and blues hit in 1950 for the New Orleans pianist Archibald, and as “Stagger Lee” it became a 1958 rock and roll hit for Lloyd Price.

Jump-ups like the ones Charles Peabody heard his workers from Clarksdale singing in 1901 were much closer to the blues than these ballads. They were already popular in the early 1890s. In 1892, W. C. Handy, who was to achieve fame as a songwriter and popularizer of blues but was then an out-of-work cornet player with experience in black minstrel shows and brass bands, heard “shabby guitarists” in St. Louis playing a tune that began, “I walked all the way from old East St. Louis / And I didn’t have but one po’ measly dime.” “It had numerous one-line verses,” Handy recalled in his autobiography, “and they would sing it all night.”

Was this a jump-up or a true blues? The question is of some academic interest, but in the context of black folk culture it’s meaningless. Handy called the song he heard in St. Louis “East St. Louis Blues.” He didn’t indicate whether the people who sang it called it that in 1892, but we know that the term “blues” came into currency as a description of a particular kind of music sometime around 1900 and that it was applied very loosely from the very beginning. One can try to be as specific as possible and insist that only songs with recognizable blues melodies and three-line verses in an AAA or AAB format are true blues. These songs, at least the ones with AAB formats, in which each line or thought is stated, repeated, and then answered, developed later than “East St. Louis Blues” and the other early jump-ups, or “one-verse songs” as they were sometimes called. But the black songsters of the early twentieth century weren’t particularly discriminating in their terminology; they called several kinds of songs blues. In “Hesitation Blues,” which was popular as early as the first decade of the century and was widely recorded beginning in the 1920s, each verse consists of two lines and a refrain, and the melody is ragtime or minstrel influenced. Delta bluesman Charley Patton recorded dozens of blues in an AAB, roughly twelve-bar format, but he also called ballads with eight-bar verses blues—“Elder Green Blues,” for example.

One can’t even say with certainty that blues was simply a more evolved version of the earlier jump-ups or one-verse songs. Blues is a musical idiom that has drawn on numerous sources, including jump-ups, field hollers (which it most closely resembles melodically), songster ballads (from which it borrowed some imagery and some guitar patterns), church music (which influenced the singing of many blues musicians), and African-derived percussive music (which furnished some rhythmic ideas). Each blues performer draws on a mix of these sources and on the influence of other blues performers and comes up with something that is distinctively his or her own; the only way to define blues with any real precision would be to take the repertoire of every blues performer into account.

**THIS IS WHERE REGIONAL DISTINCTIONS come in handy.** We can’t successfully define blues in a very specific way; we have to be content to talk about a tendency toward twelve-bar, AAA or AAB verse forms, or a tendency toward pentatonic melodies with a flattened third. But we can define Delta blues, or the blues of the Carolinas, Virginia, and Georgia, or the blues of East Texas in an acceptably concrete manner, taking as our raw data the work of all the blues singers who learned their music from oral tradition in these regions. And once we take this approach, we can begin to appreciate what made Delta blues unique. Early southeastern blues was lilting and melodic and included more songs of a ballad or ragtime nature than straight twelve-bar, AAB blues. In East Texas, where blues probably developed around the same time as in Mississippi, guitar-accompanied blues tended to be rhythm-
cally diffuse, with guitarists like Blind Lemon Jefferson playing elaborate melodic flourishes to answer their vocal lines. At the same time, the lumber and turpentine camps of Texas and Louisiana spawned a black piano tradition that emphasized driving dance rhythms. Boogie-woogie probably developed out of this kind of playing, which was sometimes called fast western.

The Mississippi Delta's blues musicians sang with unmatched intensity in a gritty, melodically circumscribed, highly ornamented style that was closer to field hollers than it was to other blues. Guitar and piano accompaniments were percussive and hypnotic, and many Delta guitarists mastered the art of fretting the instrument with a slider or bottleneck; they made the instrument "talk" in strikingly speechlike inflections. Eventually Delta blues became firmly established in Chicago and had a profound and direct impact on American popular music. Texas blues migrated to California and became closely associated with the bluester styles of big-band jazz; the influence of Texas on the Delta, and of the Delta on Texas and California, constitutes a continuing subplot.

Since blues was so firmly rooted in earlier black folk music that it's difficult to say with any certainty at what point it became blues, one would expect the professional black musicians of the period to have found it somewhat familiar. But two of the earliest accounts we have come from the professional entertainers Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and W. C. Handy, and they did not find the new music called blues at all familiar; they found it "strange" and "weird." Rainey was a vaudeville entertainer who sang minstrel and popular songs with a black tent show, the Rabbit Foot Minstrels. In a small Missouri town around 1902 she heard a girl who was hanging around the tent sing a "strange and poignant" song about how her man had left her. The entertainers in the troupe had never heard anything quite like it before and Rainey decided to work it into her act. The response she got from rural black audiences was overwhelming, so she began looking for similar songs as she traveled. When John Work interviewed her in the early thirties, she recalled that she frequently heard such songs after this initial incident but that they were not then called blues.

Handy's reaction to his first encounter with blues in the Delta seems even more curious. He had grown up near Florence, Alabama, not far from the Mississippi line, and his experience as a traveling band musician, playing for tent shows that roamed the length and breadth of the Deep South, had been extensive. He had heard the "East St. Louis Blues" and other jump-ups and one-verse songs as early as 1892, and by the early 1900s he was leading the most successful and progressive black dance orchestra in the Delta; operating out of Clarksdale, his group played ragtime, cakewalks, and other popular and light-classical music from written scores. But when he happened on the blues while waiting for a train in Tutwiler in 1903, it struck him as "the weirdest music I had ever heard."

Tutwiler, which is fifteen miles southeast of Clarksdale on Highway 49, had only a few hundred citizens in the early 1900s, and in the middle of the night the train depot, with closed-up stores in forbidding lines on either side of it, must have been a lonely place. Looking down the tracks, which ran straight off into the flat Delta countryside, Handy could probably hear the ghostly rustle of cypress and willow trees that were watered by nearby Hobson Bayou. The darkened stores, the trees bending and swaying over the track, a stray dog or two—it wasn't much to see, and Handy had seen it all innumerable times. He stretched, contorted his body to try to make it fit the hard contour of the bench, relaxed, and fell asleep.

The train was nine hours late, and sometime during the night a black man in ragged clothes sat down beside him and began playing a guitar, pressing a knife against the strings to get a slurred, moaning, voicelike sound that closely followed his singing. Handy woke up to this music, and the first words he heard the man sing were "Goin' where the Southern cross the Dog." The line was repeated three times, answered in each case by the slide guitar. Politely, Handy asked what it meant, and the guitarist rolled his eyes mirthfully. In Moorehead, farther south near the Sunflower River in the heart of the Delta, the tracks of the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad, known to the locals as the Yellow Dog, crossed the tracks of the Southern at right angles. The man was on his way to Moorehead, and he was singing about it.

Handy had heard jump-ups with train lyrics in the cotton fields and around the levee camps, where black day laborers shored up the earthworks that protected the Delta's rich farmland from the
Mississippi. But as a schooled musician who could swing a ragtime tune and follow it with a crisp “Poet and Peasant Overture,” Handy had paid “primitive music,” as he called it, scant attention. Now, suddenly, he was intrigued. This music was different. The singing was freely ornamented and the melodic range was narrow—it sounded like a field holler. The guitar part wasn't the sort of strummed accompaniment he'd heard so many black guitarists using since the 1890s, when Sears Roebuck and other mail order concerns had first begun offering guitars at prices even poor people could afford. Nor was it steady, regular picking, as in the fancier ragtime guitar and banjo styles. Instead, the guitar set up an intricate pattern of rhythmic accents and talked back to the singer. It was both a drum orchestra in miniature and another voice.

The voicelike sound of the slider was particularly novel. The slide technique was originally associated with an African instrument that has been reported from time to time in the American South, the single-stringed musical bow. One-stringed instruments played with sliders seem to have survived principally among black children, who would nail a length of broom wire to a wall and play it with a rock or pill bottle slider. The appearance of black slide guitarists in the early 1900s has often been linked to the popularization of a similar technique by Hawaiian guitarists, but slide guitar wasn't native to Hawaii; it was introduced there between 1893 and 1895, reputedly by a schoolboy, Joseph Kekuku. It did not spread from Hawaii to the mainland until 1900, when it was popularized by Frank Ferera, and by that time black guitarists in Mississippi were already fretting their instruments with knives or the broken-off necks of bottles.

Gus Cannon, who was born in northern Mississippi in 1883 and settled in the Delta near Clarksdale in 1895, first heard slide guitar “around 1900, maybe a little before.” The guitarist was Alec or Alex Lee, who had been born around 1870 and spent most of his life in the vicinity of Coahoma County. The songs he played with a knife included “John Henry,” probably one of the earliest slide guitar pieces, and “Poor Boy Long Ways from Home,” a melodic one-verse song in which each line was repeated three times (AAA) and answered by the slider. In Coahoma County in 1900 this was unusual music. Cannon played country dance tunes, jigs, reels, minstrel songs, and a few light-classical pieces on his banjo and fiddle, and the black music he remembers hearing around Clarksdale at the time was made by banjo and fiddle groups, or by guitarists who played ballads, minstrel and medicine show songs, and an occasional jump-up, or by workers and worshipers who sang without instrumental accompaniment. Handy's band, which was all the rage among local blacks who considered themselves sophisticates, featured a fiddler named Jim Turner who did hilarious imitations of barnyard animals on his violin and knew plenty of reels in addition to more sedate dance and concert music. Only Alec or Alex Lee was playing music that could be said to resemble blues.

Cannon's memories of turn-of-the-century music making in Coahoma County confirm the reports of Charles Peabody and W. C. Handy. There was a rich and astonishingly varied music scene—hollers, work songs, spirituals, country string bands, fife and drum and brass bands, homemade percussion, guitar-accompanied ballads and jump-up songs, and upwardly mobile dance bands like Handy’s. But with the possible exception of a few songs like “Poor Boy Long Ways from Home” in the repertoires of a few singer-guitarists, there wasn't blues, not before the early 1900s. The earliest Delta blues seems to have originated a little farther south, in the vicinity of the Will Dockery plantation—five thousand acres of bottomland on the Sunflower River about halfway between Tutwiler and the junction where the Southern crosses the Dog.