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From Coahoma County to Cook County: The Music of Muddy Waters

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From the Delta to Chicago: Muddy Waters’ Downhome Blues and the Shaping of African-American Urban Identity in Post World War II Chicago

ABSTRACT
African Americans developed the blues as a reaction to the harsh living conditions in the Mississippi Delta. The music found a new home during the first half of the twentieth century when thousands of African Americans migrated to Chicago. The purpose of this research is to understand how migration and the urban environment shaped the Black experience. Blues music, specifically the music of Muddy Waters, will be the focus of this study. His Downhome Blues, which grew in popularity following WW II, both shaped and reflected the emergence of an Urban African-American identity in Chicago.

It is not surprising that in 1903 the infamous “father of the blues,” W.C. Handy, a traveling musician, first heard the “primitive music” known today as the Blues while waiting for a train in Tutwiler, Mississippi. Robert Palmer, author of Deep Blues, notes that the first words Handy heard the ragged man sing were, “Goin’ where the Southern cross the Dog,” a reference to the intersection of two trains.1 In fact, Lawrence Levine, in Black Culture and Black Consciousness, describes the blues as “an ode to movement and mobility.”2 Having been bound to the land for centuries, African Americans viewed the ability to move as the greatest manifestation of their American right to self-determination.3 By the 1870s thousands of African-American migrant workers and wanderers—mostly male—traversed the South.4 The unknown bluesman that Handy described most likely moved from plantation to plantation across the Delta—guitar in tow—looking for work. This assertion of mobility broadened the American landscape and expanded the African-American experience; thus, “[setting] the stage for the evolution of the country blues.”5 This paper examines the role of Blues Music as part of the African-American experience and consciousness and argues that the blues played a vital role in the development of a Black urban identity.

Until the First World War, African Americans rarely traveled north of the Mason-Dixon line, but the growing number of vacant industrial positions in the North coupled with the intolerable cruelty of the South inspired thousands of African Americans to head to the Promised Land. Historians often gravitate towards this first wave of migration, referred to now as the Great Migration; however, following World

3 Ibid., 262.
5 Angela Y. Davis, Blues Legacies and Black Feminism. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998),
War II, 200,000 African Americans, the majority Mississippians, migrated to Chicago. Much can be understood about the relationship between migration and identity formation by examining the function of the blues, specifically Muddy Waters’ recordings, during this tumultuous period of transition in African-American history. As a bluesman, Waters conveyed the community, conjured up safe spaces amidst the unusual urban landscape, and assisted those who came with him from the Delta in renegotiating their past, their home, and their identity. His lyrics vividly addressed the issues that confronted both the pre-migrant and post-migrant psyche. Thus, by examining Waters’ lyrics, it is possible to understand the abstract processes of reshaping the collective identity of a generation of African-American migrants.

The blues, according to Houston A. Baker, author of Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature, “constitute an amalgam that seems always to have been in motion in America—always becoming, shaping, transforming, displacing the peculiar experiences of Africans in the New World.” Baker’s unique definition implies then, that the blues music that enveloped the Delta for the first half of the twentieth century reflected the African-American rural experience while the blues that enlivened Chicago’s South side following the migration reflected the African-American urban experience. Jones supports this idea, claiming, “the most expressive Negro music of any given period will be an exact reflection of what the Negro himself is. It will be a portrait of the Negro in America at that particular time.” Some historians question the validity of the blues that migrated to the urban North. However, blues music remained a reflection of the folk experience, despite its migration, because as Levine explains:

The personalized, solo elements of the blues may indicate a decisive move into the twentieth-century American consciousness, but the musical style of the blues indicates a holding on to the old roots at the very time when the dispersion of Negroes throughout the country and the rise of the radio and the phonograph could have spelled the demise of a distinctive Afro-American musical style. While it is undoubtedly true that work songs and field hollers were close to the West African musical archetype, so much of which had survived the centuries of slavery, blues with its emphasis upon improvisation, its retention to call and response pattern, its polyrhythmic effects, and its methods of vocal production which included slides, slurs, vocal leaps, and the use of falsetto, was a definite assertion of central elements of the traditional communal musical style.

The fact that the blues remained wholly traditional, yet forward looking at the same time is reflective of the collective African-American identity which Farah Jasmine, author of Who Set You Flowin?, describes as “at once modern and premodern.”

In 1941, thirty-eight years after W. C. Handy first heard the blues, two folksong collectors traveled to Coahoma County, Mississippi—not far from Tutwiler—to research and record the unique African-American folk music. Located in the heart of the Mississippi Delta and populated by a large majority of African-American cotton sharecroppers, Coahoma County, with its long tradition of African-American music, proved a near perfect destination for John Work, a member of the Fisk University Music Department, and Alan Lomax, a folklorist for the Library of Congress. That summer, they had hoped to record the legendary, but illusive, bluesman Robert Johnson, but another popular delta bluesman Son House informed them of Johnson’s untimely death and sent them in search of a young bluesman called Muddy Waters instead.

When Lomax and Work arrived at the Stovall Plantation, Muddy Waters, born McKinley Morganfield, was working as a tractor driver. On the weekends, Waters, then twenty-six, turned his modest cabin into a juke joint to supplement his meager income and make a name for himself as a bluesman. African Americans living in the Delta often gathered at juke joints or county picnics; whether in the deep woods or a cramped one-room shack, they found they could let loose in the absence of their oppressor’s gaze. Waters’ moonshine warmed the aching bones of men and women who spent their days in sun-drenched cotton fields, and his blues soothed the soul that undoubtedly ached for something more. The presence of the bluesman was vital to these gatherings; it was he who, from behind his guitar, orchestrated the eating, drinking, and dancing that eased the tension caused by the ruthless
humiliation and backbreaking work that characterized Delta life.

In the Delta, the overwhelming desire to be free from oppression connected the pre-migrant psyche to the bluesman who commonly invoked mobility as an assertion of freedom and an escape from mistreatment. Levine suggests that just the possibility of movement “operated as a safety valve for millions of Negroes who without the alternative of migration would have felt trapped and hopeless.”

This is exemplified in the first verse from “I Be’s Troubled,” recorded on the Stovall Plantation in 1941 when Waters sings:

Well, if I feel tomorrow
Like I feel today,
I’m gonna pack my suitcase
And make my getaway.
I be troubled, I’m all worried in mind,
And I never be satisfied,
And I just can’t keep from cryin.

In the verses that follow, Waters goes on to describe the mistreatment he endured at the hands of a no-good woman. In Downhome Blues Lyrics, Jeff Todd Titon suggests that blues singers often assumed the role of the victim so they could “express their desire for freedom more concretely.”

In “I Be’s Troubled” Waters told the common tale of a fickle woman in order to stress his overall dissatisfaction with the continuous cloud of oppression that hung over the Delta. In his 1941 version of the Delta standard “Country Blues,” recorded on the Stovall Plantation, he resolves to “ride the blinds”—hitch a train—rather than endure more misery; he sings:

Well, I’m leaving this morning,
if I have to ride the blinds

I feel mistreated, girl, you know
now, I don’t mind dyin.

By invoking the train, “long a symbol of freedom in the African-American oral tradition,” Waters provided an answer for those looking to escape the harsh Mississippi Delta. The train, with its magnificent strength and rhythmic splendor represented freedom from the Jim’ Crow South. Although African Americans left the station in segregated passenger cars, engulfed in the stench of inequality, perhaps as the train rolled further north, they felt the strangling grasp of Jim Crow weaken as Viethel Wills, in the documentary Goin’ to Chicago suggests:

I came to Chicago on the train, what I remember most about it was the conductor when we got to Cable, Illinois said, okay, you can through down that yassir’ and no sir’ and say yes and no.

Waters used the image of the train to call upon the desire for freedom shared by the Delta community. By doing so he tweaked the collective consciousness of African Americans whose identity had been shaped by years of Southern oppression and prepared them for the transition from rural sharecroppers, bound to the land, to migrants, ready to conquer the North. On a rainy day in 1943, two years after he heard his voice played back to him for the first time by the two song-collections, Waters joined the exodus. As the Delta faded in the distance, so too did his rural identity leaving the necessary space for a more urban identity to develop.

For African Americans who spent most of their lives in the Delta, the urban landscape was unnatural. Many of the new migrants traded the strenuous sharecropping system that sustained them in the Delta for the most grueling industrial jobs Chicago had to offer. The stench of the slaughterhouses or the choking fumes of the foundries filled their noses and replaced the scent of freshly plowed dirt or warm spring rain. Hard pavement rather than dirt roads greeted their feet, massive steel structures instead of tall trees blazoned the horizon, and bright lights rather than brilliant stars lit the way for the new urbanites. Amidst this strange industrial environment, a familiar character emerged carrying with him the sound of the Delta. The bluesman, the “wandering stranger” of the South, the embodiment of mobility, became the personification of home in the big city.

Historians often use the terms urban and country as well as downhome to describe the blues that Waters made popular in Chicago during the 40s and 50s. While the terms urban and country fit logically, the term downhome fits psychologically. More than just the fact that they originated in the country or that they were popularized in an urban environment, it is the power of the blues to evoke the South for the throngs of African Americans attempting to adjust to city life that is most significant. When examining the blues as a function of identity formation, it makes sense to utilize the term downhome because as Titon explains:

11 Levine, 265.
14 Lomax, 417.
15 Griffin, 19.
17 Griffin, 55.
The term *downhome* is evocative, calling up not so much an actual, physical place (the rural South), but the spirit of the place, the Southern root, that moved with the music and the culture as African Americans carried their downhome way of life into the twentieth-century cities.18

The supreme function of the blues in Chicago at this time was to guide the consciousness of newly arrived migrants out of the rural South safely into the urban North. The bluesman, by invoking the soul that sustained the Black community in the South, carved a path out of the Delta as powerful and as promising as the tracks of the Illinois Central Railway.

Conveniently traversing the intolerable Delta, the Illinois Central brought thousands of African Americans to the city’s South Side during the 1940s. Waters’ downhome blues grew in popularity among the freshest arrivals that gathered at after-hour joints and rent parties. Rich in southern tradition and lacking the sophistication that the rent parties. Rich in southern tradition and lacking the sophistication that the music scene.21 Pete Welding, Waters’ friend and the founder of Testament Records, described what Waters called “sweet jazz” as a “refined, polished, and institutionalized” version of the country-based blues that arrived in Chicago following the first wave of migration. Since the 1920s, Welding suggests, the music “had been progressively emasculated.”22 Perhaps initially the popular blues of the 1920s similarly functioned to soften the hard edges of the city and provide the new migrants a transitional space to renegotiate their collective identity. However, acclimatization and the development of an African-American middle class led African Americans who rode the first wave of migration to view the downhome blues that accompanied the second-generation migrants as old-fashioned.

The downhome blues may have appeared old-fashioned to the older generation, but the unfamiliar sense of homesickness drew the new arrivals to the bluesman because, as Titon suggests, the familiarity of the southern music steadied them.23 The sound of strings moaning under the pressure of a bottleneck and the locomotive rhythm of the harp invoked an image of the South “tinted with nostalgia.”24 A number of popular blues tunes during this period revolved around returning to the South. Waters, in “I Can’t Be Satisfied,” his 1948 version of “I Be’s Troubled,” resolves to return to the South, the oppressive setting that drove him and thousands of other African Americans to the North, he sings:

> Well, I’m going away to leave; won’t be back no more. Going back down South, child; don’t you want to go? Woman I’m troubled; I be all worried in mind. Well babe, I just can’t be satisfied, and I just can’t keep from crying.25

Waters’ resolve, although hypothetical, symbolized the new African-American Chicagoans vision of the South as home, but not just in its horror, terror, and exploitation, but a place that housed the values and memories that sustained black people. The South emerges as a home of the ancestor, the place where community and history are valued over the Northern individualism.19

Before African Americans could collectively move towards an urban identity, they first had to renegotiate their collective rural identity. Waters’ downhome blues facilitated this re-examination. Newcomers, comforted by the safe space that surrounded the blues and the nostalgic memories evoked in Water’ songs, renegotiated their Southern history, molded a collective memory, and passed through the first phase in the transition from rural to urban identity.

Newly transplanted bluesman were especially drawn to rent parties, described by Waters’ biographer Robert Gordon as “a get-together in someone’s home where the drinks were cheaper, the food more plentiful, and the audience nearer the band, and where musicians could establish their reputations.”20 There, bluesmen found an audience uninspired by the “bluebird beat,” a mixture of earlier classic blues and jazz that dominated the music scene.22 Pete Welding, Waters’ friend and the founder of Testament Records, described what Waters called “sweet jazz” as a “refined, polished, and institutionalized” version of the country-based blues that arrived in Chicago following the first wave of migration. Since the 1920s, Welding suggests, the music “had been progressively emasculated.”22 Perhaps initially the popular blues of the 1920s similarly

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18 Titon, 1.
19 Griffin, 9.
22 Gordon, 97.
23 Titon, 10.
24 Griffin, 53.
25 Titon, 148.
and as such, a place worthy of missing. As they did in the South, bluesmen continued to express the attitudes of African Americans in the North. Perhaps this traditional style, which combined themes of mistreatment and mobility, comforted the migrants not only because of its nostalgic pulse but because so many African Americans felt disillusioned by urban life. In 1949, when Chicago’s South and near West sides swelled with new arrivals, Waters’ “Train Fare Home” soothed the homesickness that spread like a cold in a cramped kitchenette. He sings:

Blues and trouble just keep on worrying me
Blues and trouble just keep on worrying me
They bother me so bad, I just can’t stay here, no peace
If I could get lucky and win my train fare home
If I could get lucky and win my train fare home
I believe I’ll go back down in Clarksdale, little girl that’s where I belong.26

Again Waters invokes the powerful symbol of the train. In the Delta, the sound of a train in the distance reminded African Americans that there was somewhere besides the heartbreaking plantations that stained the American South. However, Chicago did not prove to be the Promised Land it had been in the minds of those dreaming to escape the cotton fields. Waters, by claiming Clarksdale as his home, ameliorated some of the homesickness felt by the recent migrants.

Along with offering nostalgic images of the South for the newly arrived, bluesmen like Waters’ often incorporated symbols of Southern African-American traditions; one of the most popular being hoodoo. Naturally, in the midst of dramatic change, African Americans welcomed tradition with open arms. Waters explained to Robert Palmer why he sang about hoodoo so often, saying “you know, when you writin’ them songs that are coming from down that way, you can’t leave out somethin’ about that mojo thing. Because that is what people believed in at that time.”27 A perfect example of this is Waters’ 1950 hit “Louisiana Blues,” in which he sings:

I’m goin’ down to Louisiana
Baby, behind the sun
I’m goin’ down to Louisiana
Honey, behind the sun
Well, you know I just found out
My troubles just begun
I’m goin’ down to New Orleans
Get me a mojo hand
I’m goin’ down to New Orleans, umm-hmmm
Get me a mojo hand
I’m gonna show all you good-lookin’ women
Just how to treat your man28

In “Louisiana Blues,” Waters again begins with a hypothetical journey south, this time to New Orleans, whose forbidding and mysterious bayous are home to hoodoo. In much the same way that juke joints, and later rent parties, provided African Americans with a safe space that nurtured their identity, the well-insulated swamps of New Orleans offered African Americans refuge as well.29 Of these spiritual gatherings, Julio Finn, author of The Bluesman, suggests:

There, on the ground where their people had come together to be reunited with the gods of Africa, their spirits were able to free themselves from the slavers’ bondage and soar, and out of these stolen flights would come the music and words which became the blues, jazz, creole and cajun music.30

Finn quotes W. E. B. Dubois’ description of the Root Doctor, one of the most important figures in the hoodoo tradition, also called the Medicine Man or Hoochie Coochie man. Dubois describes him as,

the healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, the supernatural avenger of wrong, and the one who rudely but picturesquely expressed the longing, disappointment, and resentment of a stolen and oppressed people.31

Ironically, this is nothing other than a concise definition of a bluesman; perhaps the recent migrants viewed Waters as the modern Root Doctor of the city; Waters himself seems to. While this may appear to be a metaphorical analogy, Waters did comfort those transplanted from Delta soil in much the same way that the Root Doctor did those transplanted from African soil. In his 1954 hit “I’m Your Hoochie Coochie Man,” Waters illuminates this connection. He sings:

26 Gordon, 97.
27 Palmer, 97.
28 Palmer, 98.
30 Ibid., 111.
31 Ibid., 5.
I got a black cat bone
I got a mojo too
I got the John the Conqueror
I'm gonna mess with you
I'm gonna make you girls
Lead me by the hand
Then the world'll know
The Hoochie Coochie man

The hoodoo charms that Waters claims to have in this verse, the “black cat bone,” the “mojo,” and the “John the Conqueror” are described by Finn as the “material manifestations of power.” These amulets, composed of “any number of objects: cats' claws, hair, teeth, roots, herbs, etc… sealed in a small bag or cloth,” obtained their power from the Root Doctor. By claiming to possess such charms, Waters is in fact claiming to have the ability to empower his people. In hoodoo blues songs like “Louisiana Blues” and “Hoochie Coochie Man,” both the hoodoo tradition and blues music “come together to function as a source of strength, to set off a reaction and bring about a desired effect. They act as magic—perhaps the first function music ever had.”

Waters’ downhome blues not only soothed and strengthened the post-migrant psyche; it transformed it as well. Once steadied by the blues, the urban identity of the new arrivals began taking shape. One major distinction between the rural and urban identity of African-American males specifically is the mannish behavior that characterized their identity in the city. Bluesman, like Waters, radiated masculinity and exuded confidence. This combination excited the male migrants who had witnessed the perfection with which the Delta stifled African-American masculinity. When Alan Lomax recalled meeting Waters on the Stovall Plantation, he described the young bluesman as a “Delta wallflower.” This image sharply contrasts with Lomax’s later depiction of Waters as a “sharply dressed, supervirile dude, with money in his pocket, [and all] the women in town on his trail.” Waters projected this new overtly masculine image in lyrics like these taken from his 1955 hit “Mannish Boy.”

I'm a man, I spell mmm,
aaa child, nnn
That represents man.
No B, O child, Y
That mean mannish boy
I'm a man, I'm a full grown man
I'm a man, I'm a natural born lovers man
I'm a man, I'm a rollin' stone
I'm a man, I'm a hoochie coochie man

In “Mannish Boy,” Waters flaunts his masculinity, something the oppressive hierarchy of the Delta never would have allowed. He expresses his manliness in terms of his sexual prowess, his freedom of mobility, and his deep connection to African-American tradition. This powerful combination both liberated and elevated the collective African-American male identity.

Considering that prior to the Emancipation most African Americans lived and died bound to the land, the assertion of their natural American right to mobility undoubtedly expanded their collective consciousness. Angela Y. Davis, author of Blues Legacies and Black Feminism, suggests that the personal journeys that African Americans began post-emancipation “were occasioned by psychological repositionings.” Examining the impetus for, and the progression of, such “psychological repositionings” is necessary to understanding the effect of migration on African-American identity formation on Post World War II Chicago. The popularity of downhome blues among the newly relocated Mississippians reflects a period of transition for African Americans in which their rural identity evolved into a more urban identity.

However, the blues not only reflected the new urban identity of African Americans but also was an active ingredient in the alteration itself. It soothed the heartache heaped on the tired shoulders of sharecroppers in the Delta, inspired them to assert their right to search for a freer place, nurtured their post-migrant psyche, and strengthened their urban identity in Chicago.

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33 Ibid., 128.
34 Ibid., 128.
35 Lomax, 419
37 Davis, 68.
Bibliography


