

(448), always spreading cheer (565), organizing fun activities (362, 556), and, above all, showing his generosity (208) in various ways. A joyful (230) man of energy and dreams (144), Cage loves to drink (339) and play games (340), the proverbial “cockeyed optimist” (235) who lightens everyone’s load (525) and is often a tender confidant (542–43, 581–82), interpreter of Merce’s moods (137–38), and sometimes willing scapegoat when things go awry (314). But he also has less appealing sides. Cage can be thin-skinned (429) about bad reviews (305, 424) or booing (168), testy (198), paranoid (557–58), disappointed (138), and sometimes given to depression, anger (104–5), even rage (585–86). Brown depicts a Cage less transcendent and more emotionally invested than he often wanted outsiders to think.

Cage was also, of course, an opinionated eccentric. Brown conveys his views on touring (164–65), Muzak (279), uncommitted (or unprepared) performers (440–41), her own dancing (139) and, of course, Merce Cunningham (118–119, 165). When it comes to *her* opinions about *his* music, though, Brown mostly holds her tongue, though conspicuously notes his “erratic” piano playing (380) and his insistence on ear-splitting volume for anything amplified (331, 364, 381, 492). Still, in two candid passages she lets us know that Cunningham’s dancers—herself included—essentially disliked Cage’s compositions (36, 172). Yet they also found any substitutes for them jarring (246). Whereas music and choreography were said to merely coexist in the troupe’s dances, it was a mutual obliviousness of a very distinct sort—and that was what Cage and Cunningham supplied.

One cannot escape in this book Brown’s constant undertone of regret for not having enough “fight or flight” response to Cunningham: how would things have been different had she stood up more to his difficult behavior or ignored more of his dark moods? The beautiful prose of *Chance and Circumstance* seems to grow like pearls from a certain irritation of her psyche by a mentor’s cruelty and caprice. Nevertheless, the book is a love story, however doomed. Early on, a deep affection for Cage spills out, as does profound admiration for (and fear of) Cunningham. But by the end, from the vista of old age, Brown has confessed her love for both men: John for what he gave her and Merce for what she gave him.

Michael Hicks



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Nobody Knows Where the Blues Come From: Lyrics and History. Edited by Robert Springer. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006.

Although it is certainly true that nobody does know where the blues come from, the origin of this book can be clearly traced to the groundbreaking work of Paul Oliver, in particular his *Blues Fell This Morning: The Meaning of the Blues*, which he later argued “disengaged blues from its customary acknowledgement as a late branch of black folk song, or as a tributary to jazz, and distinguished the idiom as

a phenomenon to be studied in its own right.”¹ Oliver’s *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records* expanded on his earlier study of blues lyrics and set the standard for others to follow, a challenge that has been ably met by the contributors to this book.²

In the first essay, “High Water Everywhere: Blues and Gospel Commentary on the 1927 Mississippi River Flood,” David Evans provides a comprehensive analysis of the flood songs of the Delta and the commercial flood songs of Lonnie Johnson and Bessie Smith, focusing on these songs as oral history. The theme of disaster and oral history is continued by Luigi Monge in “Death By Fire: African American Popular Music on the Natchez Rhythm Club Fire.”

In “Lookin’ for the Bully: An Enquiry into a Song and Its Story,” Paul Oliver analyzes the lyrics of the “pre-blues” songsters and the continuation of the “bully song” genre into the later blues repertoire. The repertoire of the songsters is interesting because it also seems to have contained vaudeville songs and popular songs of the day, alongside those of folk origin. Some tunes, such as “Make Me a Pallet on the Floor,” were also played by the jazz bands of New Orleans (109). Discovering how this exchange of repertoire took place could provide a useful insight into how the later blues form was communicated among songsters, vaudeville, and the repertoire of the jazz bands.

Tom Freeland and Chris Smith’s “That Dry Creek Eaton Clan: A North Mississippi Murder Ballad of the 1930s” continues the book’s focus on Mississippi, as does Guido van Rijn’s “Coolidge’s Blues: African American Blues Songs on Prohibition, Migration, Unemployment, and Jim Crow,” which argues that the roaring twenties largely bypassed the rural poor of the region.

In “On the Electronic Trail of Blues Formulas,” Robert Springer comments on the establishment of a database for the collection of blues lyrics (BLUR, or “Blues Lyrics at the University of Regensburg”). This is an exciting project, though it is unfortunate that “the sub-genre of the ‘classic blues,’ the BLUR corpus, is at the moment, in embryonic form” (169). If the same level of academic rigor can be applied in the future to the lyrics of vaudeville and jazz blues as has been applied to the country blues to date, then perhaps we can begin to construct a more comprehensive picture of the development of the blues form.

The last two essays extend the scope of the book. In “West Indies Blues: An Historical Overview, 1920s–1950s—Blues and Music from the English-speaking West Indies,” John Cowley explores a much neglected area of musical exchange. Randall Cherry’s “Ethel Waters: ‘Long, Lean, Lanky Mama,’” argues for a reappraisal of this vaudeville singer largely through her contribution to jazz rather than to the blues. The blues in vaudeville is an area that is underresearched; although fine work

¹ Paul Oliver, “Blues Research: Problems and Possibilities,” *Journal of Musicology* 2/4 (Autumn 1983): 377; and Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: The Meaning of the Blues* (London: Cassell, [1960] 1963).

² Paul Oliver, *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). The essays collected by Springer were initially presented at the conference “The Lyrics of African American Popular Music,” which he organized at the University of Metz, France, in 2002. As Springer notes in the preface, an earlier collection, *The Lyrics in African American Popular Music* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2001), resulted from a conference by the same name in 2000.

has been published by Daphne Duval Harrison and others, not nearly enough has been done to reflect the importance of vaudeville in the dissemination of the blues, either in the 1920s or before the recorded age.³

Nobody Knows Where the Blues Comes From provides much needed primary research and has developed methods of analysis that can be usefully applied more broadly in our understanding of the dissemination of the blues. Yet an assumption underpins this book that in many ways contradicts its title. Since “nobody knows where the blues comes from,” it is dangerous to assume that the Delta blues has primacy, or that it should be the paradigm by which other subgenres are assessed. Stephen Calt and Gayle Wardlow ably argue in *King of the Delta Blues: The Life and Music of Charlie Patton* that “it is improper to extol Patton as a blues pioneer in any circumstances, for no one knows when blues developed, or where they developed.”⁴ The blues as a musical form appeared almost simultaneously in published rags, in the repertoire of jazz bands, on the vaudeville stage, and also in the Mississippi Delta, and elsewhere in the South in the early years of the twentieth century.

It is clear that the development of the blues is not a simple narrative but rather the product of complex relationships. If this book can also act as the catalyst for debate about the future direction of blues research, and the extent to which the reengagement of the various genres of the blues would prove fruitful, then perhaps we shall be one step closer to finding out where the blues did come from.

Vic Hobson



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Public Worship, Private Faith: Sacred Harp and American Folksong. By John Bealle. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997.

Across the mainstream United States, there is a growing awareness of the genre of religious choral song known as “sacred harp” singing, a form not long ago sheltered in backwaters of the rural South. Over the past forty-five years the genre has gained attention and has recently entered the popular media, particularly in Hollywood films such as *Cold Mountain* and *Oh Brother Where Art Thou?* Further evidence of this trend includes the increasing interest in the tradition on college campuses, and there is a growing inclination to recognize its repertory as a subgenre of so-called American roots music. According to John Bealle, the tune book known as *The Sacred Harp*, first published in 1844, has become synonymous with the genre. It has, he writes, become an “over-determined” symbol (5). Of importance to his argument,

³ Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1988).

⁴ Stephen Calt and Gayle Wardlow, *King of the Delta Blues: The Life and Music of Charlie Patton* (Newton, N.J.: Rock Chapel Press, 1988), 47.