

White Blues

Paul Garon

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Phil Rubio's article "Crossover Dreams..." (RACE TRAITOR No. 2, Summer 1993) provides an interesting perspective on the confrontation between white performers and black art forms. In many cases, he writes, white musicians are motivated by admiration and envy for the black performers they emulate. And he continues, we are seeing the "use of African-American culture by whites to find the spirit, and hence the humanity, they feel they've lost." But I would like to emphasize a totally different perspective. I will argue that for those interested in the support and study of African-American culture, blues as purveyed by whites appears unauthentic and deeply impoverished; further, it too often represents an appropriation of black culture of a type sadly familiar. Finally, it can be economically crippling to black artists through loss of jobs and critical attention.

Whites have been playing black music for decades, and the tail-end of a constant source of friction — and interchange — should not be seen as the beginning. But the phenomenon of whites taking up the blues in great numbers is a fairly modern spectacle, indeed, one that finds its beginnings in the late 1950s and the early 1960s. We make no attempt to locate the first white blues imitator, or performer, but one of the first objections to this phenomenon was raised by Charles Radcliffe (writing as Ben Covington) in the UK publication ANARCHY 5 in 1965. ("The Blues in Archway Road," ANARCHY 5, 1965. pp. 129-133.)

Many publications on the blues soon found themselves compelled to comment on what was an obviously growing artifact, and I found myself drawn into the ring in the early 1970s when LIVING BLUES, a magazine I helped found with Jim O'Neal, Amy van Singel, Bruce Iglauer, Diane Allmen, André Souffront, and Tim Zorn, was accused of racist policies for its ignoring of white performers. When jazz columnist Harriet Choice challenged our policies in the CHICAGO TRIBUNE, I was the one who hammered out our reply. Our position was articulated in her column and two LIVING BLUES editorials, as well as in the introduction to the special section "Surrealism & Blues" in LIVING BLUES No. 25 (Jan/Feb 1976).

When my own BLUES AND THE POETIC SPIRIT was published in 1975, I devoted a lengthy section of it to "the psychological relevance of the black man to the white man and what effect this has on the evolution of the blues." (p. 53.) I also analyzed the effects of white participants on black artists and suggested that this usually results in some form of dilution of the blues. I wrote little about the blues in the next fifteen years, but the controversy was bubbling along rapidly, hardly needing my attention, and soon it exploded on the pages of GUITAR PLAYER magazine

(August, 1990) in a guest editorial by Lawrence Hoffman, a white professor/composer and blues critic, who noted that it was “absurd to think that the lifeblood of blues could be extended by anyone who, in essence, could never be anything more than a convincing, expressive copyist.” (p. 18)

His position — that white players could bring little authenticity to their blues performances and that they took jobs that should go to blacks — brought mountains of vituperative abuse from GUITAR PLAYER readers, most of whom took one of four positions: 1) It’s racist to hold such positions as Hoffman’s; 2) Suffering is universal and whites suffer, too; as former GUITAR PLAYER editor Dan Forte wrote, mightn’t the white Eric Clapton have suffered more than the black Robert Cray? Others wrote that their grandparents died in concentration camps, or that they were Native Americans and had therefore fulfilled some sort of suffering quota; 3) Ability is beyond racial barriers; many whites, like Stevie Ray Vaughan, are great musicians; 4) History speaks in the form of white artists, i.e. blues was the expression of black cultural life, but now it is the expression of white as well as black feeling. This was expressed especially fervently by one defender of white rights who was apparently a specialist in reassessing whether blacks had a right to any heritage of their own, once whites decided to seize it. No doubt he was thrilled when the nearly all-white Grammy jury singled out white artists as recipients in both the traditional and modern blues categories.

Needless to say, Hoffman had his supporters (Paul Oliver, Jim O’Neal, and myself, among others), and several, like Karima Wicks and Michael Hill, published replies in GUITAR PLAYER, addressing among other notions, the dreadful lacunae in the background of several correspondents that led them to believe that the white role in the evolution of the blues was identical to that of blacks. As it turned out, some of the newer blues fans had no idea that blacks actually “started” the blues. Most interesting, however, is the fact that the tide was about 95% against Hoffman and 5% in favor.

Because it could no longer resist the current without comment, in 1993 LIVING BLUES asked me to re-articulate the magazine’s position in a Guest Editorial feature that they were inaugurating in the May/June, 1993, issue. There, I seized the opportunity to recall the magazine’s beginning. Twenty-three years earlier, when LIVING BLUES was first getting under way, most of the editors had a few things in common besides their love of blues. One of these common bonds was an involvement and belief in the civil rights movement and the broader issues associated with it. Among these concerns was a profound dismay at the depth of racism in the United States.

It was quite clear to us that the very specific forms of torture, beating, lynching, slavery, mistreatment and general discrimination that white Americans had visited upon the blacks had — combined with the highly innovative black response to this torment — produced the blues. Indeed, it was the very resistance to this genocidal tendency of white culture that had brought the blues into existence. That the blues was a “good time music” par excellence in no way invalidated this thesis: Only the very specific sociological, cultural, economic, psychological, and political forces faced by working-class black Americans — forces permeated with racism at their every turning — produced the blues. Nothing else did!

For me, and for the current editor of LIVING BLUES, none of this “material base” for the blues has changed. Racism and discrimination are still rampant in the U.S. A few things have changed, however. The audience for the blues began to shift from black to white when the “blues” revival began in the early 1960s. At the same time, many white members of this audience began to

take up the guitar, the harmonica, and, occasionally, the piano, and they began to play the blues themselves. Some even came from poor working-class families, and many had known suffering themselves.

Other things have not changed, however, and for those of us for whom an interest in documenting and fostering black culture is paramount, Living Blues' exclusive concern with black artists is consistent with our own position. Indeed, while anyone can play or sing the blues, it is the unique engendering nature of black culture that has always been our prime concern, regardless of the many types of suffering with which the blues deal in the manifest content of its songs. The fact that white musicians are now playing the blues is thus immaterial to a focus on black culture.

From such a perspective, I underscored for LIVING BLUES readers, the magazine's covering of R & B artists like Ruth Brown or LaVern Baker was more natural than its covering of "blues" artists like Stevie Ray Vaughan. While I thought this supremely clear and natural, a large part of the readership did not. Once again an avalanche of mail descended, most of it against the magazine's policy and my editorial. A few subscriptions were cancelled. "It's the music, stupid," wrote one long-time reader. We'll return to this phrase in a moment, but first let us try, once again, to analyze the issues that make up the controversy.

Perhaps we've come far enough to not raise the two false issues of suffering and ability. Plainly pain and suffering are not directly transmuted in the blues, and they are not essential to technical proficiency. Indeed, even non-technical, (metaphysical?) aspects of performance seem to ultimately resist being inserted into any equation involving suffering, although for some, it has always been axiomatic that one had to suffer to play or sing the blues. Our knowledge and experience of technique, however, suggests otherwise. Some apparently quite privileged whites have demonstrably played guitar as well as some less privileged ones, and from the vantage point of the 1990s, this hardly seems worth disagreement. Further — and suffering aside — it seems obvious that anyone of any race can, technically speaking, play the blues. Neither genes nor race-differentiated experience seems to affect one's ability to form certain chords or play certain melodies or passages. (Note that granting that whites can (physically) play the blues grants the "suffering" issue as part of its argument, or leaves it in a metaphysical realm.)

Whether or not one has to have suffered to sing the blues remains a metaphysical issue, although interestingly enough, it draws supporters from both sides of the white blues controversy. Many black blues artists think that suffering is an essential component of blues singing, and many backers of white blues feel that many whites have suffered sufficiently to qualify.

While these ideas seem clear, dismissers of white blues performance are often accused of holding the position that whites "do not have a right" to play the blues. The right to play and sing the blues is never at issue. An important factor that is at issue is that white performers have so much coverage and such high record sales (compared to blacks) that their notion of being victims of discrimination because LIVING BLUES doesn't cover them is quite laughable. As if Bonnie Raitt or Stevie Ray Vaughan were drowned in obscurity because of LIVING BLUES' "racist" policies! The real truth is that with white performers, the opinion of LIVING BLUES is a drop in the bucket compared to the critical establishment that does care about them, that does cover them, that does give out Grammy awards, and that does decide whether they make it or not (insofar as any critical establishment can do these things.)

And it is a matter of the critical establishment, after all. The fact that this particular critical establishment is white is very important. Black music critics have bigger fish to fry, preferring

to concentrate on rap and more popular artists. But their positions on these questions would be worth knowing. We cannot assume that black critics and black blues musicians feel the same in this matter. Indeed, why black blues performers don't object to white performers is far more than a question of tolerance. For black blues artists, the existence of white performers often leads them to greater financial success. As Rubio noted, Aretha Franklin credits her appearance in *The Blues Brothers* with revitalizing her career. Of course it recharged her career. We are protesting the racist conditions that made that possible, not its happening. Likewise, Bonnie Raitt made John Lee Hooker's LP such a fantastic seller, and not vice versa, (although by the time of their joint venture, Hooker was already incredibly popular for a blues artist.) But the argument over stars and "coverage" has an interesting dimension.

What many of the critics of magazine coverage are driving at is that they and their accomplices would like to receive coverage in *LIVING BLUES*, principally because it is the pioneering magazine that covers black artists, i.e. "real" blues artists. They know, however, that they can't raise this as an issue without revealing that they, too, believe that white blues are somehow inferior. In truth, the white artists receive considerable coverage in *BLUES ACCESS*, *BLUES REVUE QUARTERLY*, and other magazines, but these magazines don't carry the stamp of approval that *LIVING BLUES* does, for strictly racial reasons. It seems as if those white blues aficionados who profess to be "color-blind" are quite the opposite. But before discussing this color-blindness, let's approach the question from another perspective.

BLUES REVUE QUARTERLY has seized on the phrase, "It's the music, stupid." The editor has written that he's made it into a poster and has it on his wall, just to remind him of "what the blues is really about." I keep it in mind, too, along with "Hitler will never invade Europe," and "you'll fall off the edge of the earth." Because just "the music" is a much more-splendored thing than he acknowledges, something vastly more complex than mere "sounds." After all, if "sound" were all there were to it, no one would ever go to a live performance, concerts and clubs would be identical, rock fans wouldn't watch MTV (they'd just listen to it), performers wouldn't think about costume or stage acts or presence, etc. One just prefers to think that "the music is all that counts."

But it isn't. Race counts, as well, and if we did start talking about race and the way we hear the blues, we'd find out that many (white) people like to hear the blues played by whites more than they like to hear it played by blacks; many blacks vastly prefer to hear the blues played by blacks; many, many, people lie and say they don't care who plays it; and a very, very few people aren't lying when they say they don't care who plays it. (But don't worry. You and I aren't one of them.)

Who are these people for whom race doesn't matter? Not the average white blues artist. In fact, many white blues performers who, we are told, bring their own "authenticity" to their craft, display a mad craving for approval from black listeners and black artists, (not to mention black-oriented blues magazines like *Living Blues*). Whenever the battle is enjoined, in person or in the letters and editorial columns of *LIVING BLUES*, *GUITAR PLAYER*, or *BLUES REVUE QUARTERLY*, a white blues performer writes a pseudo-palliative "brotherhood" letter and just happens to mention all the black artists with whom he's performed, with the plain intention of proving that he must be acceptable or all of these obviously authentic artists wouldn't have welcomed his company. In itself this attitude embodies the entire contradiction of the existence of white blues. If white blues is autonomous and self-authenticating, why is black approval needed? If it is not autonomous and self-authenticating, and the craving for black approval seems to suggest

this, why is it not the weak and imitative form its detractors claim? This question remains with us.

One of my points in the book on Memphis Minnie, *WOMAN WITH GUITAR*, and in *BLUES AND THE POETIC SPIRIT*, was to offer new ways to hear the blues, so that the old songs and their embedded value systems would be meaningful to modern listeners. There is great resistance to this on the part of many listeners, however, and this relates to the race controversy among modern blues fans. Indeed, one reason so many white listeners prefer white performers of their own age is that their interest in the values embedded in the blues is nil, whereas they identify quite easily with other young whites. But are they hearing the same thing? Is it the same when a black man like Chuck Berry sings that he went “across Mississippi clean,” as when a white man like Elvis Presley sings the same lyrics in the same song? Hardly! Getting “across Mississippi clean” has a whole accumulation of meanings when sung by a black, meanings that just don’t exist for a white performer. And listeners of different races must hear it and identify with it differentially, based on their experience...and based on their interpretation of the experience of the singer.

It is often forgotten that a large proportion of the (white) blues’ current performers (and their following) was inspired by the popular white comedians Dan Ackroyd and John Belushi, doing their characterization of Jake and Elwood Blues, *The Blues Brothers*. The LP and the movie ignited a trend — based on a joke, mind you — that went beyond the wildest dreams of any of the participants. For many new white performers the notion of the blues’ “black heritage” is indeed a mystery; the only “heritage” they know is sunglasses, black suits and fedoras, which have become one of the classic new white blues uniforms. Combined, they form the logo of one of the new blues clubs. While the proliferation of white performers who play at these clubs may seem to be a harmless aberration to some, its ill effects can be quite insidious and go beyond the economic.

Defenders of white blues are often proponents of “color-blindness” as the ultimate weapon of anti-racism, but many of these color-blind whites are really resisting the importance of consciousness of race and race matters, with all the nagging reminders of racism contained therein. They believe that by refusing to use race as a criterion for anything, they are being the ultimate non-racists, but they are actually blinding themselves to the complexity of racial issues. If we may return to the event of the Grammy winners, isn’t it clear that what may seem like color-blindness is simply an event that allows racism to return to the podium? Whites didn’t win in the blues category because it was open to all and the best performers won; they won because whites are the vast majority in a country where racism distorts almost every move. The Grammy awards were simply more racism, not the exercise in color-blindness that so many pretend. Color-blindness, in too many cases, is simply the granting of control to white rule.

How ironic if the white blues performers, who so reputedly respect their black mentors, are only another instrument aiding and abetting white rule.

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