

The Delta Blues, Foreshadow of the Civil Rights Movement

Over 50 years after emancipation, Robert Johnson describing what life was like for black people in the Mississippi Delta area in the early twentieth century sung “Blues fallin’ down like hail...the days keep worryin’ me...a hellhound on my trail” (Johnson, 1937). The Delta, on both sides of the Mississippi River, was an area where the large black population was relegated to low-income jobs. Many were sharecroppers barely scratching out a living, entirely segregated from the rest of society and under the heavy weight of oppression. This fertile ground, where abundant crops enriched the white owners of the farms, also became fertile ground for a new and pioneering music genre, the Delta Blues. The Delta Blues began as an extension of work/field songs used by people to deal with the difficult, lonesome, and hot conditions of their work, but quickly became something much more (Barlow, 1989). It was a ground-breaking genre, guitar-dominated music with a unique lyrical style, and it led to Chicago blues, electric blues, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, soul music and more (Dierking, 2017). Most importantly, the Delta Blues is a music genre of protest, and was the way for the black community to fight against racism and oppression even before the beginning of the civil rights movement. To demonstrate and analyze the Delta Blues as protest music, this paper will focus on five songs from four artists - Big Bill Bronzy, Charley Patton, Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters. By analyzing the circumstances of the time, the artists themselves, and their songs this paper will demonstrate that the Delta Blues was a unique form of protest music, drawing attention to the lives of an oppressed people, but not explicitly focusing on either their oppressors or offering solutions, as future protest songs would. This is due to the restrictions in the society of the time, and is another example of the need for these protest songs. It is more subtle than a protest song such as Bob Dylan’s *Masters of War*, a song that explicitly blames and attacks those engaged in the Vietnam war, and was the voted the #1 protest song in a *Rolling Stone* magazine survey (Greene, 2014). Finally, the paper will show that the songs and their artists are the

rightful forebears of the civil rights movement that would soon follow, which will use many of the ideas pioneered by the Delta Blues. And, as the civil rights movement developed, so did the songs they sang - transitioning from its origin as soulful laments to proper calls to action, worthy of the cultural revolution they sought after.

The areas around the Mississippi Delta had deeply entrenched histories of racism despite its majority black population, from slavery to Jim Crow laws to segregation to numerous lynchings to the brutal sharecropping system, and thus it is no surprise that a music genre such as the Delta Blues came from a place like this (Adams, 2006). The Delta Blues sprung from work songs, sung by black workers to pass the grueling labor of their everyday lives. As blues singer Sunnyland Slim put it, “they were singing the blues in Mississippi and Louisiana ever since there were colored peoples...they sang in cotton fields and in prison camps and in the levee camps” (Barlow, 1989). As the music transitioned from the fields to the stage, from workers to professional musicians, the genre we know today as the Delta Blues was born. Known, locally, as simply “the blues” for its melancholy tunes, its central themes were often about hard physical labor, difficult economic situations, racism, fear of police, segregation, prison experiences, and the difficult transition from slavery to freedom (Slovenia, 2022). They were a clear reflection of what reality was for most black people around the Delta. Every song carries with it a deep despair that permeates every last part of it - the melody, the lyrics, and the stories the songs told.

The Delta Blues was a form of protest for those who lived there, and it drew attention to their plights. In fact, the singers of these songs often sang not just about the general experience of being black in such a hostile place, but about their own lives and experiences as well, and this made the songs and their lamentations that much more impactful. Big Bill Bronzy, born before 1900, was an early blues musician, a father figure to many, who went on to influence famous rock musicians such as Eric Clapton and Pete Townsend (Barnett, 2011). He was born to a family of former slaves... and born into the sharecropping system that his parents were still a part of, a system that was nearly the same to slavery

in all but its name (Barlow, 1989). Big Bill would begin working on the plantation at the young age of seven. Charley Patton was born in 1891 also to sharecropper parents and seven of his twelve siblings would die before they were 20 years old (Barlow, 1989). Although Patton was determined to, and eventually did, escape the brutal conditions of a sharecropper's life, the damage it left on his mind and body in the form of mental health issues and alcoholism caused by this life continued to follow him even as played in Chicago (Boyd, n.d.). Robert Johnson, a greatly influential blues musician who only lived to 27, was born after his mother had an affair with a field hand, and although he never personally worked the fields, he had a very deep connection with those who did (Ugwu, 2019). Little is known about Johnson's early life, but his stepsister has wrote that he saw music as a way to escape the oppression of South and became a travelling musician (James, 2022). Also, Tom Graves, Robert Johnson's biographer, proposed that Johnson "chose the life of a walking blues musician because it was preferable to the backbreaking and monotonous work that sharecropping entailed" (Graves, 2008). Muddy Waters, born in 1913, is likely the most well-known of the Delta Blues musicians, due to a long career and commercial success. In interviews, Waters described his early life – his mother died in childbirth, he grew up on a plantation with his sharecropper grandmother, by the age of seven he was expected to pick a full sack of cotton every day, but his love of music helped him (Leatham, 2022). In a 1979 interview, he drew the most direct connections between music and his life. When asked about it, he responded that, "Blues really is... based on hard times I had.. I came up as a poor kid, my family was poor, and I had a lot of trouble" (Waters, 1979). Overall, the Delta Blues music described the many hardships these people had to go through to continue surviving, and formed the basis for the first defined genre of protest songs about civil rights.

Recorded in 1924, the song "Goin' Down the Road Feelin' Bad" by Big Bill Bronzy is a song about hardship, struggle, and unfairness. It describes the life of a black sharecropper, "tired o' eatin cornbread and beans...two dollar shoes killin' my feet...feelin so miserable and bad" (Bronzy, 1924). The closest

thing this song has to a chorus is the single line, “I ain’t gonna be treated this-a way”, and the song tells a black sharecropper’s story in a way it had not been told before. The lack of a chorus of or a small chorus is an important element of Delta Blues songs, because they tell a story. They do not need to repeat things, but rather tell a story from beginning to end. The somber tone, melancholic melody, and powerful guitar strums underscore the lyrics, and all combine to form a lamentation that sounds as if it were being wailed into the sky by someone simply desperate for any relief from their miserable life. Interestingly, this song, as well as most of the other Delta Blues songs, differ significantly from more “modern” protest songs that come after. The classic “protest song” does three things - it defines the problem, identifies the oppressor responsible for creating the situation, and comes with a call to action to change these things. Delta Blues songs, however, typically have only one of these three - defining the problem. While “Goin’ Down the Road Feelin’ Bad” carries with it a small glimmer of action in the line “I ain’t gonna be treated this’a way”, it is primarily a simple lament about the woes of life, and the only solution the song ever presents is to simply leave, in a sort of resignation or admission of defeat. There are no identified oppressors for Big Bill to charge towards, nor much of a solution to his woes. All he can do is sing this song to ease his pain, and to voice a tiny wish for something, *anything*, to change.

“Down the Dirt Road Blues” by Charley Patton in 1929 is another great example of a melancholic, lamenting Delta Blues song, but instead of describing each problem, Patton simply sings “every day seem like murder here” (Patton, 1929). The song is sung as if the singer is currently in the process of leaving the troubles they have faced behind, but the road itself offers little comfort to him. He sings of leaving the Mississippi Delta and traveling to Illinois, and of his worries of being lonely as he travels. However, despite him hearing that “them oversea blues ain’t bad”, he isn’t convinced that his travels will actually allow him to escape his troubles - “It must not a-been them oversea blues I had” (Patton, 1929). The beat, while faster than “Goin’ Down the Road Feelin’ Bad”, still plods along like a horse’s hoofbeats, and lines such as “My rides got somethin’, she’s tryin’a keep it hid” suggest that he

feels almost as if he himself is the horse (Patton, 1929). He “can’t go down any dirt road by (him)self”, and “I don’t carry mine, gonna carry me someone else”- He has nothing of his own to carry with him and feels almost as if he cannot travel at all without some sort of burden - the burden of his skin color and ancestry that weighs heavy upon him like saddlebags packed with bricks (Patton, 1929). Even as he leaves his troubles behind, he feels no lighter, and expects nothing but more of the same even at his destination.

“Crossroad Blues” by Robert Johnson is more than just a lament, it is a cry for help. The song begins with Johnson falling to his knees at a crossroads and begging the Lord for mercy, even as “everybody pass me by” and nobody offers to lift even a finger for him (Johnson, 1936). With guitar riffs that sound like plaintive wails along with the crowing vocals, the song feels as if it is actually being shouted at the side of a road to uncaring passers-by. As Johnson sings of the sun going down, his direct cries for help become almost defeated, alluding to the so-called “sundown towns”- white neighborhoods where, once the sun dipped below the horizon, any black people still in the area would likely be mobbed and lynched. Johnson almost accepts his fate, crying to the listener to “Run, tell my friend boy Willie Brown” of his untimely demise. The choice of the name “Willie Brown” is an interesting one. Brown, like the last name Freeman, often came from freed slaves who had no real last name before they gained their freedom, and “Willie” originates from the Germanic “Wilhelm”, which roughly means “protector”. Johnson is calling out to his friend, his protector, but not to ask for protection or help, rather, he is just asking for his words to be passed along, because he feels that his fate is already sealed- “I believe I’m sinkin’ down” (Johnson, 1936). Additionally, it is not just him at the crossroads, but all of society. Will the oppression ever stop? Johnson believes that we have already made our choice, as “everybody pass me by” as he cries for help, dooming him to a grisly fate.

“Hellhound on my Trail”, also by Robert Johnson, is a more direct allusion to lynching. As a child, Johnson saw his father barely escape a lynching, and this is reflected in the agonizing lyrics and

high-pitched guitars that sound almost like a child's screams. The allusions begin with the "hellhound", which clearly represents the bloodhounds that were used to find and chase down runaway slaves (Hill, 2015). The song describes fantastical and unrealistic wishing for better times - "If today was Christmas Eve and tomorrow was Christmas Day"- as if wishing for anything better was as far-fetched as it suddenly becoming Christmas (Johnson, 1936). The next verses speak about him getting help to throw the bloodhounds off his scent, perhaps from his child - "You sprinkled hot foot powder... all around your daddy's door"- as if the singer is in fact Johnson's father running from the lynching mob, as "hot foot powder" was a method to throw bloodhounds off the scent (Hill, 2015). And yet, despite the help, the hellhound still chases him, and he cannot do anything but keep on worrying and keep on running, wishes of better times getting ever further away. And, again, like in "Goin' Down the Road Feelin' Bad", the lyrics talk about a "rider", as if the singer feels like they are nothing but a horse, a beast of burden, running away in fear like an animal. Beyond the clear lynching references the lyrics, guitar and vocals, convey a sense of foreboding and fear, there is no happy ending. This is a protest song referring to the most heinous symbols of oppression, lynching, but unlike *Strange Fruit*, sung a few years later far away in New York, Johnson chose not to directly reference lynching, likely fearing reprisals. Also noteworthy, *Strange Fruit*, which is about lynching and *Hangman's Blues*, about "legal" hangings are songs watching from the outside, while *Hellhound on My Trail* is the terrifying point of view of the person being chased.

"Mannish Boy (I'm a Man)" by Muddy Waters, in 1955, while still carrying much of the protest aspects of a Delta Blues song, is strikingly different from the others. Where the earlier songs could not be too overt in their nature as protests in fear of retribution, "Mannish Boy" is overt in its statements, and acts as the call to action that all the other songs were missing. The song was made right on the cusp of the civil rights movement, and is no longer a cry for help or a wailing lament. Instead, it carries a powerful sound and a staccato rhythm that sounds like someone stomping his foot with the lyrics, demanding to be respected, considered a man and to have his words heard. "You will listen to me, you

will see me, you will respect me” is what the music, instruments and lyrics are saying. The use of the term “boy” to refer to an adult black man a deeply racist way to diminish black men and has a long racist tradition in the South (Bosmajian, 1969). Waters is yelling that he is a “full grown man” that go anywhere we wants to (“rollin stone”), and not a boy (Waters, 1955). No longer are they content with simply running away to another place that may be no better than the place that they fled from - now they are standing their ground and demanding the rights they are entitled to. This song, unlike the others, has a repeated chorus. It is a demand, a demand to be heard, and it is repeated assertively, and will be repeated for as many times as it takes.

All these songs represent a protest against the oppression of the time. They document problems faced by black people in the Delta and finally with Mannish Boy, demand that society sees them and treats them with respect. Most of the songs do not use choruses nor much repetition, but rather tell a story from beginning to end. The ground-breaking use of guitar, typically the only instrument, causes the listener to pay attention. Although the songs were used in dancing situations the melodies are a clear break from typical country dances. They are meant to be listened to and, if danced to, done as a slow dance or swaying. These are not raucous dance songs where the meaning disappears, but rather songs to listen to and contemplate.

Protest songs are statements to and demands of society, pointing out things that must be changed. Complete protest songs have three “parts” to them - they identify the problems, then they identify the oppressor causing the problems, and finally they call the listeners to rise up against their oppressors. Delta Blues, however, are a unique protest song focusing almost entirely on just the first part of the three, as such they are lamentations on the difficulty of the life if black people in the Delta. The choice to focus only on the problems, is due to the times and places the songs were made. The writers and singers of these songs could not identify their oppressors or make any calls to action, or they could incite violence upon themselves. So, instead, the songs, using lyrics, instrumentation, scale and

rhythm, become plaintive wails to the heavens, pleading for respite from the hardships of life, and the only solutions offered at all are simply to leave, even though the place they are running to might not even be better than the place they left. For most of the Delta Blues genre, the only one that the songs seem to call to for help is God, as if only divine intervention could save them now. Each of these songs references God and asks God for help. As such, the songs have important religious connections, connected to Gospel music and (again) foreshadowing the civil right movement. Most civil rights leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., were from the clergy, and churches were important places to proliferate the ideas (Taylor, 2014). The songs are pessimistic and resigned, hoping wistfully for better times even if they seem to believe that such times will never come to be. The primary call to action is to simply leave (going down the road), which foreshadows the great migration, where six million black people move from the South to Northern cities from 1915 to the 1970s (National Archives, 2021). Most importantly, this genre leads directly into many other popular music genres, and is the precursor to the great civil rights anthems written decades later, such as A Change is Gonna Come, People Get Ready, We Shall not be Moved, and Times They are a Changin, which are all songs that call for action and demand change.

References

- Johnson, Robert. "Hellhound on My Trail". 1937. <https://genius.com/Robert-johnson-hellhound-on-my-trail-lyrics>.
- Barlow, William. *Looking Up at Down: The Emergence of Blues Culture*. Temple University Press, 1989. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1bw1krv>.
- Dierking, Phil. "Delta Blues: The Birth of American Music." Voice of America, September 22, 2017. <https://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/delta-blues-the-birth-of-american-music/4030512.html>.
- Greene, Andy. "Readers' Poll: The 10 Best Protest Songs of All Time". Rolling Stone. December 4, 2014.
- Adams, Jane, and D. Gorton. "Confederate Lane: Class, Race, and Ethnicity in the Mississippi Delta." *American Ethnologist* 33, no. 2 (2006): 288–309. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3805416>.
- Slovenia, Gordan Stosevic. "Music as an Expression of Protest against Class and Racial Segregation- Part 3 of 4." The International Magz, December 9, 2022. <https://www.internationalmagz.com/articles/music-part-3>.
- Barnett, David C. "Big Bill Broonzy: History's Musical Chameleon." NPR, June 24, 2011. <https://www.npr.org/2011/06/25/137398692/big-bill-broonzy-historys-musical-chameleon>.
- Boyd, Amanda. "Charley Patton." Mississippi Writers and Musicians. No date. <https://www.mswritersandmusicians.com/mississippi-musicians/charley-patton>.
- Ugwu, Reggie. "Overlooked No More: Robert Johnson, Bluesman Whose Life Was a Riddle." The New York Times, September 25, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/25/obituaries/robert-johnson-overlooked.html>.
- Tom Graves, *Crossroads: The Life and Afterlife of Blues Legend Robert Johnson* (Spokane, WA: Demers Books, 2008), 23.
- James, Ben. "Robert Johnson's Stepsister Tells His Story, and Her Own, in 'Brother Robert.'" New England Public Media, April 6, 2022. <https://www.nepm.org/regional-news/2020-12-01/robert-johnsons-stepsister-tells-his-story-and-her-own-in-brother-robert>.
- Leatham, Thomas. "The Fascinating Details Surrounding Muddy Waters' Childhood." Far Out Magazine, November 9, 2022. <https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/fascinating-details-muddy-waters-childhood/>.
- Muddy Waters- Interview 1979. YouTube. Reelin' In the Years Productions, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTDfhWTA29I>.

Bronzy, Big Bill. "Goin' Down The Road Feelin' Bad". 1924. <https://genius.com/Big-bill-broonzy-goin-down-the-road-feelin-bad-lyrics>.

Patton, Charley. "Down the Dirt Road Blues ". 1929. <https://genius.com/Charley-patton-down-the-dirt-road-blues-lyrics>.

Johnson, Robert. "Cross road Blues". 1936. <https://genius.com/Robert-johnson-cross-road-blues-take-2-lyrics>.

Hill, Karlos. "The Lynching Blues." The Lynching Blues: Robert Johnson's "Hellhound on My Trail" as a Lynching Ballad, May 11, 2015. <https://southernstudies.olemiss.edu/study-the-south/the-lynching-blues/>.

Waters, Muddy. "Mannish Boy (I'm a Man)". 1955. <https://genius.com/Muddy-waters-mannish-boy-im-a-man-lyrics>.

Bosmajian, Haig A. "The Language of White Racism." *College English* 31, no. 3 (1969): 263–72. <https://doi.org/10.2307/374523>.

Taylor, Clarence. "African American Religious Leadership and the Civil Rights Movement." Mr. Tomecko, January 24, 2014. <http://mrtomecko.weebly.com/uploads/1/3/2/9/13292665/religiousleadership.pdf>.

"The Great Migration (1910-1970)." National Archives and Records Administration, June 21, 2021. <https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/migrations/great-migration>.