

# Blues in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Myth, Self-Expression  
and Trans-Culturalism

Edited by

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and

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Series in Music



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# Preface

Since its beginnings in the late nineteenth century, the Blues has been more than a music style with a seminal impact on twenty-first-century popular music. As a medium of social expression, it articulated the tribulations of an entire black culture, male and female. Discourses about race were as much an integral part of the evolution of the Blues as were those of class, when young white kids—in America and Europe, especially the UK—adopted the music for their political and social ends. Idealising black models of culture, white interpretations verged on myths on the one hand, but on the other brought out transcultural features of the Blues in their performative acts. Other realms of performing arts, such as literature, films and photography speak of the flexibility of the Blues. Its commercialisation by white and black record companies, or annual festivals around the world, is another proof of its durability. Bearing this in mind, any doubts about the survival of the Blues in the twenty-first century are rendered obsolete.

The flexibility and changeability of the music and the culture it is embedded in are paralleled by the versatility of academic discourses about the Blues. Early studies of the Blues, chiefly by US-American authors (with the exception of *Blues Fell this Morning: The Meaning of the Blues* 1960 or *The Story of the Blues* 1969 by the British scholar Paul Oliver), emphasise the evolution of the genre against the background of structural racism in the US, and further illuminate the counter-cultural features the producers of the music incorporated. They made an important contribution to the documentation and survival of this feature of black Blues culture. Of outstanding importance is Samuel Charters' *The Bluesmen* (1967), *The Roots of the Blues; An African Search* (1981) or his *The Blues Makers* (1991), which come to mind here.<sup>1</sup>

The chapters in this volume are representative of the papers presented at the conference “Blues in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Myth, Self-Expression and Trans-Culturalism”, held at the University of Catania, Sicily, in November 2018. The conference focused on, among other topics, specific features of corpora of classic Blues lyrics, Blues tourism (not represented in the book, though it was

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<sup>1</sup> The tradition has continued, as recent studies have shown: Lynn Abbott. 2017. *The original Blues: the Emergence of the Blues in African American Vaudeville*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. Alan Harper. 2016. *Waiting for Buddy Guy: Chicago Blues at the Crossroads*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

included in the conference)<sup>2</sup> and national, regional and other varieties of (European) Blues.<sup>3</sup>

There are three sections of the book: the first, *Blues impressions: responding to the music*, is informed by a variety of analytical perspectives including Cultural/Film Studies, Literary Criticism and Musicology, and presents studies that focus either on the works of individual artists, including Jimi Hendrix, Lightnin' Hopkins, Ali Farka Touré ; or on specific features of the Blues as a genre. The second group of studies, *Blues on the page: perspectives from literary criticism*, focuses on the Blues in contemporary literature, especially in the work of the prominent poet and activist Langston Hughes, who found in the Blues a language and a body of cultural practices, appropriate for his needs as an African American intellectual seeking social freedom, in the period before the Civil Rights movement. A third section, *Scientific perspectives: Authenticity and identity in contemporary Blues studies*, presents studies that use analytical techniques, from musicology and corpus linguistics, to explore a variety of issues that include authenticity, vocal technique, emotions in Blues lyrics and the themes of Robert Johnson.

One of the themes that will be seen to run through the diverse contributions to this book, whatever their methodological approach, is *authenticity*. This is only natural, since it is an issue for the Blues itself. Legend has it that the Blues began on Dockery's cotton plantation in Mississippi, in a far-off time of black slaves, of cultural and religious syncretism, of moonshine whiskey; when Charlie Patton's inspirited exhibitions were the evening release for a burdened people. Its first, most truly authentic performers, before the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, came from this problematic social setting, and many took to music, it is said, as a way of escaping from their lives of drudgery. The early Blues singers, whose names have mostly disappeared, drew on such experiences to provide material for their songs, and sang them to a mainly black audience, who would gather on street corners or at informal dances in farmhouses, to hear them play. From the musical point of view, the rhythms of the songs had to respond to the needs of dancers. The lyrics consisted, initially, of stock references to shared experiences; they used in-jokes, jargon, veiled social criticism and so on, in a recipe that gave rebelliousness a compelling voice, that has echoed down the years.

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<sup>2</sup> An example from the States: Steve Cheseborough. 2018. *Blues Traveling: The Holy Sites of Delta Blues*. 4<sup>th</sup> edition. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

<sup>3</sup> For Germany: Winfried Siebers, Uwe Zagratzki, eds. 2010. *Das Blaue Wunder. Blues aus deutschen Landen*. Eutin: Lumpeter und Lasel. Michael Rauhut. 2016. *Ein Klang – zwei Welten. Blues im geteilten Deutschland*. Bielefeld: Transcript.

The names who first emerged as significant artists in the field—Patton himself, Bessie Smith, Robert Johnson, Son House, Sonny Boy Williamson and the rest—all knew the tropes of the Blues backwards, both from a musical and a textual point of view. With these names, we are already approaching a later period, when advances in technology such as the radio and the phonograph had begun to bring their music to a wider audience. With the mass exodus to Chicago in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, we find a new form of Blues, one that took the name of the city, a pulsating electric music that already feels worlds away from its antique country cousin. Is that music still the Blues, still authentic? Muddy Waters, one of the great names whose life and work straddles both periods, talked about the *mojo*, an amulet or talisman that features in one of his classics ‘Got my *mojo* working’:

“When you’re writin’ them songs that are coming from down that way, you can’t leave out somethin’ about that *mojo* thing...I didn’t believe in it, no way. But even today, when you play the old Blues like me, you can’t get around from that.”<sup>4</sup> (Palmer 1982, 98-99)

In other words, Muddy himself was engaged in a kind of cultural sleight of hand, using outdated symbols because the genre demanded it. His dilemma concerns authenticity, too; how far such country superstitions, which the singer himself had grown away from, could be relevant to listeners on the streets of the windy city. If even one of the undisputed masters of both Delta and Chicago schools could have issues with authenticity, it is understandable that the music’s adoption by white stars like Eric Clapton and Mick Jagger, in the 1960s, provoked such a storm. Though many black artists have expressed their approval for white performers, some would still agree with critic Paul Garon’s complaint that “Blues as purveyed by whites appears unauthentic and deeply impoverished.”<sup>5</sup>

As a white Blues enthusiast, whose interest was kindled long ago and grew up revering these great figures, I have often pondered these issues. For the South of England, white and middle class, what possible relevance could this powerful magic have held, what message could pass from the Delta of the Mississippi to our own less mighty rivers? In Randolph Lewis’s chapter, he quotes film-maker Les Blank’s phrase, saying that the Blues would “calm somewhat the inner terror of my chaotic soul.” Perhaps this comes close to an explanation, or an answer. Sadly, we will never know what it was like to be a young black teenager in the audience while Lightnin’ Hopkins was telling the

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Palmer. 1982. *Deep Blues*. New York and London: Penguin.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Garon. White Blues. <https://ourBlues.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/microsoft-word-white-Blues.pdf>. Last access 18/9/2019.

story of Mister Charlie. We will never be in the same room as Howling' Wolf, laying down his powerful, irresistible sounds. The popularity of the Blues among white audiences is testimony that its message, whatever it is, speaks not just to the skin but to the soul. To the extent that we share that immediate feeling, the paradoxes and doubts melt away, and the music is still able to offer us an authentic experience. Uwe Zagratzki, co-editor of this volume, writes: "I had to clear the language hurdle, as English is not my native tongue. Yet my first encounter with the Blues, in a 1970s North-western town in Germany, via a then-popular radio programme, caught me unawares and captured me for good. Not by words but by 'magic' chords, that struck a chord with me. When words became comprehensible in the course of time, and with them came increasing knowledge and—much later—professional ambition, still the original feelings have prevailed."

Some of the above themes are picked up directly by our contributors; other chapters explore different facets of the story of the music, to comprise a work divided into three thematic sections. The first section is entitled *Blues impressions: responding to the music*:

**Randolph Lewis** argues that authenticity was found, by film-maker Les Blank, in the life and music of Texas Bluesman Lightnin' Hopkins. Centring on Blank's documentary "Trouble in Mind: The Blues According to Lightnin' Hopkins", he explores the affinity between the representation (film) and the represented (Lightnin' Hopkins), in a "film that moves and feels like the music it represents." He discusses how Blank was drawn to the gritty realities of Hopkins' life as they contrasted with his own milieu, the superficial, materialistic world of white American culture.

**Iain Halliday's** chapter discusses the transcultural transformations of the Blues in time and space, and reflects on its paradoxical capacity for speaking to listeners from social contexts that are worlds away from its starting points. He considers the metaphorical and emotional dimensions of the colour "Blue", which stands for an art form that has endured, and still has the potential to be associated with authentic human experience and music of significant quality.

In her study of Ali Farka Touré, **Diana Sfetlana Stoica** poses the authenticity question from another angle. Touré is an African musician, and his colour credentials are therefore impeccable; however, it is questioned how far his music, in which African sounds and rhythms are perceptible, can be heard as Blues, and how far it is representative of a kindred, though distinct, tradition. The Malian musician's work, she suggests, represents an African counter-discourse to the African American definition of the roots of the Blues.

**Daniel Lieberfeld** focuses on an artist not generally thought of as a Bluesman—Jimi Hendrix—and convincingly presents him as a true pioneer of the genre, whose work may be seen as a departure from older Blues patterns, but nevertheless reproduces the real sounds and feelings of the form. Hendrix's whole sound, he suggests, was deeply rooted in the Delta sounds of Hooker and Waters, and their influences are felt in the song "Machine Gun", analysed here.

**Uwe Zagratzki** raises the issue that the authenticity of the Blues consists in its alternative cultural features (see Raymond Williams), which have survived post-modernist mainstreaming. Modern listeners adapt the Blues to their personal experience and thus manage to "reproduce" a plethora of individual alternatives, which negate the original "aura" (Walter Benjamin's term), that is the unique specificity of a work of art. He argues that the Blues, owing to its de-constructiveness and flexibility, empowers the recipient to retain the music's alternative gestures, also under the conditions of technical reproduction.

In the second part of the book, *Blues on the page: perspectives from literary criticism*;

**Chiara Patrizi** underlines the political potential in Langston Hughes' last Blues poem "The Backlash Blues" (1967), and explores the interplay between the written text and the sung version by Nina Simone. Recapturing and intensifying the denunciatory spirit of the original, Simone's version expressed the poem's latent militancy for a global audience of black and white, and Patrizi shows how its message still resonates in contemporary America.

**Valerio Massimo De Angelis** reflects upon Langston Hughes' long writing career and the poet's purposeful return to political engagement, which especially emerged in his work "the Backlash Blues". He explores the roots of the poem in a lifetime of experience dating from the poet's days at the centre of the Harlem Renaissance, and argues that it represents his most complete attempt to infuse an authentic poetic discourse with the slave language and "signifying" common in the plantation context.

**Irene Polimante's** starting point is Hughes' work on such poems as "The Weary Blues", which left a legacy for poetic strategies in contemporary African American poetry. The performativity of experimental poets such as Willie Perdomo, she argues, explores analogous terrain, in terms of authenticity and identity, to that mapped out by Langston Hughes. Thus, the Blues is seen as a continual influence, changing form in response to circumstances, linking past and present, abolishing distinctions between high and low cultural forms.

Authenticity was an issue for Langston Hughes, as he sought for a bridge between the élite cultural form of poetry and the popular symbols and patterns of speech and action of his community. As early as 1925, as **Adriano**

**Elia** says in his chapter, Hughes produced the first poem that incorporated actual Blues lyrics. In his study of “The Weary Blues”, he explores Hughes’ conception of music and poetry as possessing a cathartic potential and healing power. He also shows the extent to which Hughes’ poetical techniques drew on the forms and features of the field experiences of the American South.

The final part of the book, *Authenticity and identity in contemporary Blues studies*, presents some scientific perspectives:

Authenticity in the Blues is the topic of **Thomas Claviez**’s contribution. He recognises the increasing importance of the concept in today’s corporate business context. He asks, not only whether white boys—and girls—can play the Blues, but whether “electrified, popular, successful” Blues can be considered authentic, whether played by black or white. Claviez even questions the authenticity of one of the foundation myths of the Blues, the legend of Robert Johnson selling his soul to the Devil in return for musical knowledge.

**Jean Charles Khalifa** also uses corpus techniques to compare black and white Blues singers, but focuses on features of the texts. A quantitative analysis of word frequencies and a qualitative grouping of speech patterns lead to a deeper understanding of the “unconscious” layers of the black Blues. Their emotional patterns oscillate between feelings of fear, loathing and curiosity, which depend on complex responses to factors in their immediate social situations.

**Giulia Magazzù** applies critical discourse analysis to the lyrics of one of the best-known traditional Bluesmen, Robert Johnson. As the quintessential representative of the authentic, “Delta” Blues, Johnson’s texts were both collections of standard verses that circulated at the time, as well as personal lyrics reflecting his own preoccupations. The chapter therefore sheds light on the whole genre, distinguishing between types of lexical units and semantic structures, and attempting to identify the source of the subversive potential of the texts.

From a musicological perspective, **Emiliano Bonanomi** and **Jack Dandy** explore the question of authenticity in the digital age, asking how far the presence of digital recording techniques and new patterns of instrumentation impact these questions. Communication through social media with a virtual fan base shows how far the Blues has moved from the earliest periods in its evolution. A comparison is made between the way a modern artist such as Joe Bonamassa establishes a sense of community with his public, and more traditional patterns of old-style Delta relations.

**Douglas Mark Ponton** traces the differences in vocal techniques and other aspects of performance between black and white singers, exploring Garon's claim that whites are incapable of achieving authenticity. It is by now acknowledged that certain white guitarists (Clapton, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Ry Cooder, etc.) are capable of playing the Blues in an authentic way, but what about white vocal performers? In a corpus study, the author outlines the features of authentic Delta Blues singing, and suggests that there are some white performers able to reproduce them to a degree.

This brief outline highlights the variety of approaches, methodologies and points of view in this volume. Such diversity is natural in a multi-disciplinary scientific endeavour. However, the reader will also find many points of contact between the different chapters, and a common fascination with this extraordinary musical and cultural phenomenon. It is indeed our hope, with this volume, to make a contribution to the continuation of scholarly interest in the Blues.

The two-day conference left many vivid memories. The stimulating talks from our speakers, performances by Catania-based Blues band "Hot Shanks", and the viewing of a film by John Baily on British Blues drummer Hughie Flint, "Beyond the Blues", an intense and personal document that shared Flint's love of the Blues, as well as his developing interest in Irish music. Perhaps it is appropriate to end this preface—and begin our book—with Flint, moving on from the Blues, seeking trans-cultural connections, the emotional sensibility that underlies all folk music. Not forgetting to include some lines from Robert Johnson:

From Memphis to Norfolk is a thirty-six-hour ride  
A man is like a prisoner, and he's never satisfied



## **Acknowledgements**

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## Author biographies

**Emiliano Bonanomi** is a professional guitarist and tutor with a genuine interest in music technology and social media. During his Master's Degree in Popular Music Performance at ICMP he further investigated the relationship between contemporary musicians and modern technology. This facilitated his efforts in analysing Blues in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, focusing on the two aforementioned aspects. Currently collaborating with the University of Derby on the G.A.S.P. project, he aims to further develop the scholar elements of being a practitioner in popular music, in accordance with the Practice As Research methodology.

**Thomas Claviez** is Professor for Literary Theory at the University of Bern. He is the author of *Grenzfälle: Mythos – Ideologie – American Studies* (1998) and *Aesthetics & Ethics: Moral Imagination from Aristotle to Levinas and from 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' to 'House Made of Dawn'* (2008). He has co-edited numerous volumes, most recently, with Kornelia Imesch and Britta Sweers, the collection *Critique of Authenticity*, published 2019 with Vernon Press. He is the single editor of the collections *The Conditions of Hospitality: Ethics, Aesthetics and Politics at the Threshold of the Possible* and *The Common Grawl: Towards a Poetics of Precarious Community*, both published with Fordham UP in 2014 and 2017. He is currently working on a monograph with the title *A Metonymic Community? Towards a New Poetics of Contingency*, and a collection of essays with the title *Throwing the Moral Dice: Ethics as/of Contingency*, both forthcoming in 2020.

**Jack Dandy** has been a keen blues guitarist and enthusiast since the age of 14. He channelled this passion into his BA (Hons) Degree in music at the University of Chichester (2012-15). Ready for the next step, Jack undertook a Master's Degree in Popular Music Performance at The Institute of Contemporary Music Performance (ICMP) (2016-17). This enabled him to hone his electric guitar skills and further explore blues in both a practical and an academic sense. Now a working musician and guitar tutor, this is Jack's first publication and he hopes it will not be the last.

**Valerio Massimo De Angelis** teaches American Literature at the University of Macerata. He is the author of two books (*La prima lettera: Miti dell'origine in The Scarlet Letter di Nathaniel Hawthorne*, 2001; and *Nathaniel Hawthorne: Il romanzo e la storia*, 2004), co-editor of two collections of bio-critical essays on contemporary American authors, of the proceedings of an international conference on Philip K. Dick, and of the proceedings of the 19<sup>th</sup> International Conference of the Italian Association for North-American Studies (AISNA), as well as a number of articles and essays on historical fiction, romance, abolitionism, feminism, modernism, postmodernism, comics, transatlantic Italian-American

relationships, and on authors like Edgar A. Poe, Walt Whitman, Ambrose Bierce, Stephen Crane, Henry James, Langston Hughes, Thomas Wolfe, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Henry Roth, Leslie Fiedler, Doctorow, Stephen King, Leslie Marmon Silko, Margaret Atwood, and Rudy Wiebe. He is Director of *RSA Journal*, the review of AISNA, and Coordinator of the Centre for Italian American Studies at the University of Macerata.

**Adriano Elia** is Senior Lecturer in English Language and Translation at the Department of Political Science, University of Rome “Roma Tre”. He has held teaching and research positions at the universities of Catania, Naples “L’Orientale” and Rome “Roma Tre”. His publications include essays on contemporary British fiction, Afrofuturism, Langston Hughes’s poetry, W.E.B. Du Bois’s short fiction and poetry, Octavia E. Butler’s fiction and four books – *La Cometa di W.E.B. Du Bois* (2015), *Hanif Kureishi* (2012), *The UK: Learning the Language, Studying the Culture* (co-author, 2005) and *Ut Pictura Poesis: Word-Image Interrelationships and the Word-Painting Technique* (2002).

**Iain Halliday** is Associate Professor of English Language and Translation in the Department of Humanities, University of Catania. His research interests include literary translation and, more recently, relations between language and music. His most recent monograph is *Huck Finn in Italian, Pinocchio in English: Theory and Praxis of Literary Translation* (2009), while recent articles include “David Bowie, songwriter, musician and singer” (2017) and “From ‘La canzone del sole’ (1971) to ‘The Sun Song’ (1977): more than textual problems in the translation of Battisti’s Pop Anthem” (2015).

**Jean-Charles Khalifa** is Associate Professor of English linguistics and translation at the Department of English Studies, University of Poitiers, France. His research interests include formal syntax, corpus linguistics, the syntax-semantics interface, and professional translation. He has also published papers and given lectures on the folk tradition in the British Isles and in America, and on the Blues. Among his books on linguistics are, *Syntaxe de l’anglais* (2004), *L’Épreuve de grammaire à l’agrégation* (2006), *Perception et structures linguistiques : huit études sur l’anglais* (2010). He is also a musician and a published translator of U.S. novels, including recently: Earl Thompson, *A Garden of Sand* (French title: *Un jardin de sable*, 2018), *Tattoo* (2019), Emil Ferris, *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* (French title: *Moi, ce que j’aime, c’est les monstres*, 2018), Frederick Exley, *Last Notes from Home* (French title: *À la merci du désir*, 2020).

**Randolph Lewis** is a Professor of American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. A former contributing writer for *The Brooklyn Rail*, he is the author of four books including *Under Surveillance: Being Watched in Modern America*, *Emile de Antonio: Radical Filmmaker in Cold War America*, *Alanis Obomsawin:*

*The Vision of a Native Artist*, and *Navajo Talking Picture: Cinema on Native Ground*.

**Daniel Lieberfeld** started hearing and playing blues as a teenager. He has taught history and international politics at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Colgate University, and Bowdoin College. His articles on music and cultural history have appeared in *Rock Music Studies*, *The Sixties*, *African-American Review*, *The Drama Review*, *The American Scholar*, *Film Quarterly*, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, *Logos*, and the *Journal of Popular Film and Television*.

**Giulia Magazzù** obtained a BA in Modern Languages from the University of Messina, Italy and an MA in Translation Studies from the University of Bologna, Italy. She is completing a PhD in English Studies at the University of Rome Tor Vergata. Her dissertation deals with audiovisual translation and the fansubbing of multilingual TV series. She also works as adjunct lecturer at “Gabriele D’Annunzio” University of Chieti-Pescara, Italy, where she teaches English linguistics and translation at undergraduate level.

Her areas of research are translation studies, audiovisual translation, ESP, and critical discourse analysis. Among her publications are *The Representation of Immigrants in the Italian Press: Exploring visual Discrimination* (in *InVerbis*, 2018); “Dottore, dottore!” Subtitling dialects and regionalisms: the case of “Inspector Montalbano”. In Corrius M., Espasa E., Zabalbeascoa P. (eds), *Multilingualism and Audiovisual Translation*. Peter Lang 2019. She is currently working on a book about the language of Donald Trump to be published in 2020 by Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

**Chiara Patrizi** holds a PhD in American Literature at Roma Tre University and is *cultrice della materia* at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice. Her PhD research examines the concept of “wilderness of time” in contemporary American literature, focusing on Kurt Vonnegut Jr. and Don DeLillo. She holds an M.A. from Ca’ Foscari University of Venice—her thesis received a special mention at the Lombardo-Gulli Award 2015. She is a member of the American Studies Association of Italy (AISNA). She was Visiting Scholar at Duke University, and has participated in conferences in Italy and abroad, collaborating with the Don DeLillo Society, the Centro Studi Americani (CSA), and the AISNA. Her main publications are “Body and Time in Don DeLillo’s *The Body Artist*” and “‘A Moth-eaten Shirt’: Memory and Identity in Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.” Her research interests include contemporary American literature, African-American literature, literature and the arts, and trauma studies.

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