

Universidad Sin Fronteras Class, March 27, 2013 Notes

Class #2: Culture and Liberation in the U. S. South

History of the Blues

INTRODUCTION TO CULTURE AND LIBERATION IN THE U. S. SOUTH

Words representing participants' reactions to the March 20 class on the history of slavery and the cultural roots of the Americas: resisting erasure; the overwhelming numbers of slaves from Africa; phenomenal; thought-provoking; restoring heritage; energizing; economic deprivation; resistance; cultural expression; setting a new path

LOCAL BLUES ARTISTS ON THE SPREAD OF THE BLUES ACROSS THE SOUTH

Tom Davis

- Known as Doctor Love, the Doctor of the Blues
- He has been regenerating this sub-culture by building radio stations across the South, including WRFG, as described in an article on him in *The Sentinel*
- He did the sound stage for the first Social Forum in Atlanta
- His Love Radio was involved in the People's Hundred Days, starting in Lowndes County.

Theodis Easley

- A blues guitarist from Mississippi with about nine albums
- His family always had a guitar at home. His father was too busy working as a sharecropper, but two brothers, ten and twenty years older, played the guitar. The middle one started a band with another brother on drums. They played in juke joints and Theodis joined them as a bassist when he was thirteen. Their number one hit was "Stand Up."
- His definition of the blues is that it is any feeling in any format.
- Chick Willis wrote a song about why black folks don't need the blues no more, but he was wrong. His biggest song was about a personal worry, "Stoop Down, Baby."
- A toothache can be the blues.
- Hip hop rappers are really blues singers. Young people want to be different from their parents, but they'll grow up and be as stupid as their parents were. You think somebody is trying to spoon feed you something that is bad.

Tommy Brown

- Introduction by Emery Wright: He knows the history of everything;
- Blues was our doctor and our psychiatrist, especially when it was not acceptable to see a shrink.
- The blues started with the beat. When problems started, we told our stories with the beat.
- Field workers couldn't read music, but they could pick guitars.
- Only the story makes the blues. Sheet music bars have nothing to do with it. In the mid-forties, radio stations picked it up and complained that the songs were too long. Record companies turned blues songs into bars so they would fit in a restricted time space.

- I started performing [dancing, at six or seven years old] in 1937 on Auburn Avenue in a theater up the street with the help of Cab Calloway's brother, earning seven dollars a night.
- Atlanta was the nucleus of music around here, particularly the Royal Peacock. It was the first step before going to New York.
- I was lucky to have worked with almost all the greats, up to the Jackson Five.
- When I was engaged, my fiancée came to the Peacock with someone else. I fell on the floor crying and singing and was told to keep that in my act. One time there was a problem putting in the right key the song "Blues at Midnight," a song about a man waking up and discovering that his woman was gone. Instead, I made up "Weeping and Crying," a song that was on the charts for about nine months. Since it was 1951, I received no money for it, even though it became the number one blues record of the year.
- Most blues is about a feeling, as is all of our music, including in church. White people clap but don't shout in church. We feel something and only play or dance when we feel like it.
- Blues music is the soul. It is a story about love, hard times, bankruptcy (that song will be a hit).
- The blues went to church, where we took our troubles to the Lord, but the blues did not come from church.
- A lot of us need psychiatrists to ask us what's happening. That's what we say in the blues.
- Pastors sometimes made it bad for us with our wives. Some songs were banned because of the words.
- The young don't know what R and B means (rhythm and blues), a term Sonny Til came up with on the Ed Sullivan show.
- I performed on the Chitlin Circuit, meaning in black restaurants that served chitlins. Since nearby white clubs closed at twelve, white customers, after midnight, went to the black clubs that stayed open longer. Some whites told New York producers about the good performers, enabling them to play for whites in the Pop (popular) Circuit, what is now called Crossover Music.
- I worked at Jewish places in the Cascades and learned that although they weren't all rich, they took care of their people.
- I worked in the same places as Pearl Bailey; at theaters across the country and the world; in Europe, Australia, and all states but Alaska. I'll play in the Virgin Islands soon (they won't stay virgin once I'm there) and next week in Finland.
- When I performed recently with an African group, they played different instruments but still had a beat like the blues.
- Jazz is part of blues; Norman Grant tried to pull it out, but he was wrong. Jazz is just expressing yourself, as when sax soloists jazz up a piece. It's not really a different kind of music;
- Learning music with technical points at college can lead to a loss of the feeling. Who cares how fast the fingers are? The melody needs to be clear to keep customers' attention; music is music.
- This music is our heritage; it is us. When you sing or dance, you express yourself. Blues has been our salvation. Music puts things together, changes things.

Harvey Scales

- His song, "Disco Lady" was the first platinum black record in the world. ("Shake it up, shake it down, disco lady.") Johnny Taylor, who made this song popular, was first a gospel singer. The song was not a disco song but R&B funk and blues.

- I worked with Albert King and Rufus Thomas and others like that. I did a song with M. C. Hammer, "The Thrill is Gone."
- As a young man, me and my friends were into the blues while listening to the Temptations and Four Tops; we figured out only later that it all came from the blues.
- "Billy Jean" has a blues bass line, but Michael Jackson's voice makes it pop; B. B. King's voice would make it the blues.
- Once you characterize something, you can control it, as in the trade magazines.
- The blues is a feeling that allows all the music to be played different ways.
- I go to colleges with an organization to educate the young about the blues.
- Blues and country western are the only true American music, the basic music of Americans.
- Hip hop came from the blues; the young would never go see B. B. King, the Godfather of the blues; he's earnest with it; he means all he sings and plays; it doesn't come from paper; the twelve-bar blues doesn't come from paper.
- The blues is your heritage, whether you know it or not
- Us as a people must hold onto our heritage. No matter what music you listen to, you can hear the blues changes. Jazz and blues were intermingled, both played at the same clubs

Sandra "SaNa" Foster

- Female bassist and Professor of Social Work at Clark Atlanta University
- With my Blues Problem Solving Method, I use blues as a way for people to tell their stories.
- We are rolling under the carpet difficulties from the past that are still going on today. Many suffer from post-traumatic slavery syndrome, which makes you try to forget what happened. Your parents didn't tell you about the problems they were facing, so you thought everything was all right.
- My workshop on the blues traces it from Africa to America. Ledgers from slave ships described the prisoners moaning together. They were in pain, with people dead next to them. Since they spoke so many different languages, they would moan instead of talking.
- The first stage of problem solving is Moaning. Moaning can begin to sound like the blues. You can moan about student loans, about the boot on your car, about the messed-up street hurting black businesses. Moaning feels good to me.
- Social workers have to ask questions to find out what their problems are. Telling them to moan leads to answers.
- The second stage is Mourning. Pay attention to the blues and hear when they say they have to get over.
- The final stage is the Morning stage, looking forward to a brighter day.
- Social workers are supposed to help people go through each of these three stages. We help our clients come up with their own solutions.
- In "Red House," by Jimi Hendrix, the guitar is moaning: "There's a Red House over yonder / That's where my baby stays../..Well, I ain't been home to see my baby, / in ninety nine and one half days."
- We ask small groups in workshops to create blues songs that cover the three stages.

After listening to this song, what are your thoughts about the connections between the blues and liberation?

- The feeling of the blues
- School taking away the soul of performing music

- The impact of hearing blues as a child
- The power of story-telling in organizing
- The blues creating a space for vulnerability where people can open up
- Reminder of when Dr. King was killed when it's in the music
- Powerful
- A way to express freedom and to be free-spirited against oppression
- Giving people a voice in difficult conditions
- That song made the blues seem more relevant than others have; hip hop and rap are less deliberate about struggle.
- Young people haven't felt these things, but the blues introduces them to the struggles.
- You'll know if you have the blues.
- Both blues and liberation inspire feelings of freedom.
- There's a lot of energy from this, which is liberating.
- Remembering the oppressive system trying to shut us down.
- Something beyond words connecting us
- Rhythm is also central in Guiana.
- Music is storytelling. Words hold a lot of power and weight to pass traditions.
- That song was their truth at that time. Our truth is different at this time, but we're still fighting for liberation. The song's truth was that people didn't want to think about the bad times connected to the blues. Today's youth have our own oppression to face: the invisible chains of slavery in schools, the economy, etc.
- Then or now, there is a message in blues song that some or all of us can relate to.
- Clarification from Tom: The song was written only a couple of years ago, making a point that too often African Americans give away our culture.

Sung directions from Emery about the free writing to do at the end of the class: I'm not going to sing the blues but maybe I am; I was going to say in the last ten minutes of the class, we got a free write question to ask. I think the last question will be, "What do the blues mean to you?" Thanks to everyone for being here.

This summation of the main points made at the second class of the Course on Culture and Liberation in the U. S. South on March 27, 2013 is selective, to some extent organized by topic rather than in the order in which they were stated, and often paraphrased. I encourage anyone who was present to suggest additions or corrections.