Shaping Words to Fit the Soul

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Blues as, among other things, urbanized, secularized “‘spirituals’ of the city pavements” were very much what composer-arranger and reedist Oliver Nelson tapped for his classic 1961 album *The Blues and the Abstract Truth*, recorded barely four months after Richard Wright’s death (Wright, *Twelve* 128). The stately “Yearnin’” combines gutbucket blues with an ‘amen’ cadenza; it is escorted by the tongue-in-cheek hillbilly joviality of “Hoe-Down”; the bebop flag-waver “Butch and Butch”; the minor vamp of the famous “Stolen Moments”; the displaced intervals, magnified by the contrasting solo voices of studied Nelson and atonal Eric Dolphy, of “Teenie’s Blues”; and the harmonically advanced, cerebral “Cascades.”

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_Baby, how blue can you get?_  
—B. B. King singing Leonard Feather’s “How Blue Can You Get?” on *Live at the Regal*_

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**CHAPTER 4**

**Blues and the Abstract Truth**

The Southern Groove Continuum from W. C. Handy to the Allman Brothers Band
blues, which is a twelve-bar form[,] and the form and chord structure
I’ve Got Rhythm, being 32 measures in length, was my material for all of
the compositions on this album,” writes Nelson in the liner notes; “[t]he
augmentation of the forms themselves comes from thematic motifs and
melodic ideas” (2). Blues, then, together with the widely popular chord
progression of the George and Ira Gershwin standard, furnishes the con-
crete musical form of the concept album. Thus, Nelson’s album manages
to succeed in what “Long Black Song” struggles to accomplish, namely, to
borrow Myles Hurd’s terminology again, an organic fusion of ‘white forms’
and ‘black expression’ (48). The blues’ abstract truth is the modernist
eclecticism borne out of the blues itself, an eclecticism Wright would
surely have recognized. And so, The Blues and the Abstract Truth very
much occupies the crossroads where the blues meets the Great American
Songbook.

The Crossroads. Ground zero of the Delta blues—and, by extension,
of all of popular American music. Here, or so the story goes, is where the
legendary Robert Johnson traded his soul to the devil for virtuoso guitar
skills and went on to become the “King of the Delta Blues Singers.”¹ Not
too long ago, the city of Clarksdale, Mississippi, designated the intersec-
tion of Highways 161 and 49, State Street and Delta Avenue, respectively,
the mythical ritual ground where said transaction took place, and erected
a black metal marker adorned with two oversized blue guitars to mark
the spot. A fairly busy intersection—busy, that is, by Delta standards—it
is flanked by a DoubleQuick gas station, the Clarksdale Minimart, and
the H-Town Car Wash. The gleaming new green and white Church’s
Chicken fast-food drive-thru next to DoubleQuick seems to do much
busier business than the fading, ramshackle building of Abe’s Bar-B-Q,
proudly proclaiming its existence since 1924, right across State Street
behind Delta Donuts, with a prime view of the intersection. Yet none of
the automobiles traversing the crossroads will blast “Hellhound on My
Trail” from its stereo; instead, one is much more likely to hear the boom-
ing bass lines and sampled drum parts of Ludacris, Lil Jon—or, maybe,
Memphis Bleek.

Knowledgeable locals, however, will tell the inquisitive visitor that
back in the 1930s, Highways 61 and 49 intersected not here, but at what
today is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Drive and East Tallahatchie Street.²
Located right across the railway tracks from the center of Clarksdale, a
few blocks east of the cemetery on Sunflower Street, whose headstones on
Memorial Day are adorned with almost as many little flags brandishing the
Stars and Bars as the Stars and Stripes, this juncture’s forlorn aura belies
its proximity to downtown—or what passes for downtown—and appears
much more conducive to a demonic midnight rendezvous. Separated by the tracks and West Tallahatchie from an empty parking lot, an unmarked juke joint, Goon’s Furniture & Package Store, the aptly named Ricos [sic] Fisherman’s Shack, and the one-story brick building housing Southern Style Hot Wings and the Word of God Christian Ministry (presumably ministering to those leery of any chance encounters at this particular crossroads) that occupy the northeastern corner seem to do even less business than Abe’s down the road. But in the 1930s, King Drive was 4th Street and the main drag of black Clarksdale, the nearby train station a busy railway hub (Evans 40–41; White 5; Wilkins, Stackhouse, and Kenibrew 206, 228–29). One would think that businessmen intent on conducting a very tricky transaction would prefer a location other than the busiest intersection of south Clarksdale, teeming with life at all hours.

No wonder, then, that there is a third, much more plausible, location: Luther Brown, director of the Center for Culture and Learning at Delta State University in Cleveland, thirty-six miles south of Clarksdale, points to the intersection of two dirt roads just south of the famous Dockery Farms straddling the border between Bolivar and LeFlore counties.3 Marked merely by two rusty, slanted stop signs, the only signs of life are a small, fenced-in horse pasture, a dilapidated stable, and an ancient, rusted school bus on cinderblocks reincarnated as a tool shed. If one tarries there long enough, perhaps the eerie silence will be interrupted by a slow-moving pick-up truck—whose tinny radio is tuned to a country and western station playing Toby Keith’s latest single release. Even so, it is easy to imagine Robert Johnson striking a deal with the devil here, especially since one has to pass a tiny cemetery after turning onto the dirt road off of Highway 8. And yet, the suspicion lingers that the main reason for this intersection’s elevation to mythical status over sundry virtually identical ones all across the Delta had something to do with its convenient proximity to Dockery Farms, a must-stop for any blues tourist anyway, and to Delta State, Professor Brown’s employer, as well as its easy access from the highway.

So in the end, the mythical crossroads defies exact geographic designation, and it is therefore only fitting that, just as there are three crossroads, there are also three gravesites for Robert Johnson.4 Blues researcher Steve Cheeseborough explains the matter thus: “A few years ago, a guy working with some filmmakers asked me where they could find the ‘real’ crossroads for their film. I told him about various spots. But he kept asking where the ‘real’ one was. Finally, I explained that if they wanted to shoot pictures of Santa Claus, I could take them to the mall. But if they insisted on shooting the ‘real’ Santa Claus, I’d have to tell them that Santa Claus
is a mythical figure, not a real person. Well, that’s how it is with the crossroads, too” (qtd. in Stolle 47). Nevertheless, at least for the blues aficionado, the myth of the crossroads remains every bit as powerful as the myth of Santa Claus.

The legends raking around Robert Johnson in particular and blues in general as well as the landscape of the Mississippi Delta itself cloak the whole art form and its history in a titillating aura of backwoods mystery—an aura avidly maintained by record labels, agents, promoters, chambers of commerce, even academic researchers and some musicians themselves. It therefore seems like a paradox that blues is actually a thoroughly modernist art form, and always has been. For insight into the blues as modernism, we need look no further than the aptly titled autobiography of W. C. Handy, the Father of the Blues. In the tenth chapter, “Blue Diamonds in the Rough: Polished and Mounted,” Handy allows us to catch a glimpse of his compositional method: “The primitive tone or a correlated note of the blues was born in my brain when a boy. In the valley of the Tennessee River was McFarland’s Bottoms, which our school overlooked. In the spring, when doors and windows were thrown open, the song of a Negro plowman half a mile away fell on my ears” (137). After having carefully transcribed the plowman’s six-bar field holler, whose lyrics consisted solely of the singer’s refusal to live in Cairo, Handy continues,

All through the years this snatch of song had been ringing in my ears. Many times I wondered what was on the singer’s mind. What was wrong with Cairo? Was Cairo too far south in Illinois to be “up North,” or too far north to be considered “down South”? In any event, such bits of music or snatches of song generated the motif for my blues and with an imagination stimulated by such lines as “I wouldn’t live in Cairo,” I wrote my lyrics. If I had published at that time a composition called The Cairo Blues, and this simple four-bar theme had been developed into a four-page musical classic, every grown-up who had then heard that four-bar wail would now claim that Handy didn’t write this number. And you would hear them say, “I heard it when I was knee-high to a grasshopper.” Politely put, this would be a misstatement of fact; bluntly written, it would be a falsehood. That two-line snatch couldn’t form a four-page composition any more than the two letters i-n could spell the word information. (137–38)

Handy adduces more “snatches of song” he transformed into fully fledged blues compositions, “embellished by my harmonization and rhythm” (138). One need only recall the most famous blues of all time, Handy’s “St. Louis
Blues,” inspired, the composer tells us, by yet another “snatch” he first heard as a young homeless man from an inebriated woman wandering the levee of that midwestern city (118–21). Its embellishments included the middle section in what Handy calls a tango rhythm, for which he drew on a more recent sojourn to Cuba. Mapping what Paul Gilroy almost a century later would influentially dub “the Black Atlantic,” the classically trained Handy avers that “[a]ltogether, I aimed to use all that is characteristic of the Negro from Africa to Alabama” in “St. Louis Blues” (121). He later elaborated,

Another frequent question is why I used a tango rhythm in the familiar minor strain, beginning with the words “St. Louis woman wid her diamon rings.” The answer is that the tango was originally an African jungle dance called “Tangana” and may therefore legitimately be considered typical Negro music. It was brought into Spain by Moors and eventually reached the Argentine, where it was refined and freed from its primitive vulgarity. Simultaneously it reached Cuba by way of the Negro slaves and was given the name of “Habanera” because of its popularity in the city of Havana. This is the same rhythmic pattern that Bizet used in his “Carmen.” So the “St. Louis Blues” may be said to complete a cycle which began in the jungle and finally reached the operatic stages and the swank night clubs of the world. (“Handy” 16)

Therefore, Handy’s blues are a product of pastiche and collage and result from the collision of the snatches of folk songs, field hollers, and other vernacular musics on the one hand, with his classical training and inclinations on the other, and are thus thoroughly modernist. Their historical conscience lies in Handy’s awareness that they belong to a cycle—the same cycle of black New World culture Frederick Douglass heard in the slave songs, the same cycle the ring shout ritual enacts, the same cycle whose arcs Jean Toomer used to preface the three sections of Cane. Handy also insists that his music is not borne out of mere harmonic and rhythmic experimentation for experimentation’s sake, but that he sees his music, for all its eclecticism, standing firmly within a greater African American tradition. As he says it best in one of his lyrics, “May the world borrow gladness from sorrow, / Way down South where the blues began.” That the “St. Louis Blues” also apparently borrowed from the now obscure “I Got the Blues,” penned by Italian-American Antonio Maggio in 1908 and the first-ever sheet music to be published bearing the word “blues” in its title, and that Handy spent his formative years touring as musical director of the Irish Mahara brothers’ Mahara’s Minstrels, may posit an
insurmountable problem for the critic intent on unearthing the ‘authentic’ sources of black blues, but it is right in tune with the aesthetic of Afro-modernism (Wald 15–16). Perhaps somewhat unexpectedly then, and certainly unintentionally, the blues’ ‘official’ crossroads so designated by the Clarksdale Chamber of Commerce and flanked by the greasy venerability of Abe’s Bar-B-Q on one side, the cookie-cutter capitalism of Church’s Chicken on the other, is the one that comes closest to the spirit of the music with its idiosyncratic side-by-side of old and new, myth and commerce, tradition and fragmentation, history and progress, authenticity and ersatz.

Handy, as much as anyone else, codified not just the now quintessential AAB stanza form of the blues, but also recognized the so-called “blue notes” as the sine qua non of the genre. Handy’s own description of these blue notes is, for all its latent essentialism and class prejudice, as good as any: again apropos his most famous composition, Handy relates that

> [t]he primitive Southern Negro as he sang was sure to bear down on the third and seventh tones of the scale, slurring between major and minor. Whether in the cotton fields of the Delta or on the levee up St. Louis way, it was always the same. Till then, however, I had never heard this slur used by a more sophisticated Negro, or by any white man. I had tried to convey this effect in Memphis Blues by introducing flat thirds and sevenths (now called “blue notes”) into my song, although its prevailing key was the major; and I carried this device into my new melody as well. I also struck upon the idea of using the dominant seventh as the opening chord of the verse. This was a distinct departure, but as it turned out, it touched the spot. (Father 120)

What is crucial in Handy’s gloss is that this blue “slur” defies musical notation; all that Handy can do is approximate it in writing. What are commonly referred to as flatted thirds and sevenths—and later in bebop the notorious flatted fifth—are in fact notes that cannot be represented accurately on the staff. A blue note, explains Gunther Schuller, is “a microtonal variant” that produces an “harmonic ambiguity” vis-à-vis the European tempered scale (Swing 862; Early 46–47, 50–51). The catalyst for this harmonic ambiguity, the blue note in a way sounds the geographical location of Cairo, neither south nor north, in the plowman’s song young William Christopher heard in Alabama. The blue note, it may be said, is the musical equivalent of Robert Johnson’s crossroads: neither here nor there, defying the fixity of space and text, and yet a vital aspect of the story being told. The blue note is therefore the utterly modernist
axis on which the blues turn, and which gives voice to Afro-modernism’s historical conscience.\(^8\)

The inherent harmonic ambiguity produced by the blue notes and reverberating in the blues scale is also echoed in the politics of race that surround the blues. On the one hand, blues is indubitably a distinctly African American art form; at the same time, its modernist hybridity has often been repressed in critical discourse, subordinated to a mythology of undiluted origins and authentic ‘blackness.’ Despite—or, perhaps, because of—the fact that blues has influenced each and every genre of popular American music, this myth is still alive and well in the twenty-first century. As for example sociologist David Grazian’s important study of Chicago clubs shows, the country’s most vibrant blues scene still conceives of the music as the ultimate receptacle of authentic blackness, a blackness connoting “an extreme sense of authenticity, or what we might call the cultural construction of ‘soul’ as a dominant racial stereotype” (36). In this realm where blackness is at a premium, nonblack musicians often find themselves marginalized. According to one performer interviewed by Grazian, “The truth is, if you’re white you have to go out there and prove yourself even more. . . . I have to work twice as hard, play twice as good, because I’m white. In the world of blues, I am affirmative action” (qtd. in Grazian 139). Yet “[t]he blues,” the legendary Memphis Slim stated categorically, “started from slavery,” and Amiri Baraka seconded irrefutably that “blues could not exist if the African captives had not become American captives” (qtd. in Tracy 6; Baraka, Blues 17). And so it is that nonblack participation in and use of the blues is still raising provocative questions of cultural property and cultural propriety.

This problem is exacerbated by the recurrent exploitation of black music and black musicians by a music industry historically dominated by whites, amounting to what Baraka has accurately termed “the Great American Music Robbery” (Baraka, “Great” 328–30; Gennari 21–22, 47–49). It is a problem that has its roots in the minstrel show of the nineteenth century, as Eric Lott has shown: “These are the two narrative paradigms of minstrelsy’s origins: one in which mixing takes place by an elision of expropriation, through absorption (in both senses); the other in which it takes place by a transfer of ownership through theft.” The two paradigms “share an anxiety over the fact of cultural ‘borrowing,’” and both “have as their purpose the resolution of some intractable social contradiction or problem that the issue of expropriation represents. That of the first is miscegenation; that of the second slavery itself” (57). In blues, a dynamic of “love and theft” became particularly regnant in the 1950s and 1960s, when the burgeoning folk movement and the so-called British Invasion
prompted the ‘rediscovery’ of black blues musicians by white enthusiasts (Lott 4–7; O’Neal 346–53, 378–79). Eddie Boyd for instance, back in the 1950s a young Delta transplant witnessing firsthand the stirrings of the blues revival, still bristled years later at the way white producers and record labels sought to manage the music and the musicians: “You know, back in those days, man, those cats used to sit and talk about how they niggerized these blues singers, you understand?” (262). With the benefit of hindsight, a contrite Phil Spiro, radio disc jockey and blues fan, agrees with Boyd and muses:

And what did we give them [the blues musicians being ‘rediscovered’]? For the ones who had recorded before, like Son [House] and Skip [James] and Booker [“Bukka” White], we kept comparing them to their younger selves, and they knew it. How could they help knowing, when perhaps three-quarters of the people that they met were asking them questions about what color shirt they wore on that muggy delta day in 1931 when... Nobody seemed to give a flying fuck that they were still living on the wrong side of this poverty line, and that the income from their music was not enough to significantly improve their lot over welfare in most cases. We also consciously or unconsciously tried to shape the music that they played on stage. . . . Our motivation was a strange combination of ego, scholasticism, and power. I wonder now what would have happened if we had just left them alone instead of telling them what songs to sing and what instruments to play on. The rediscoverers fought over the artists. . . . Worst of all, aside from a couple of people like Chris Strachwitz and Dick Waterman, the rediscoverers all too often didn’t see the old guys as real, breathing, feeling, intelligent people. In general, we were collectors of people, who we tended to treat as if they were the rarest of records—only one copy known to exist. (qtd. in von Schmidt and Rooney 538)

The crossroads of power and property: in some ways, the cultural territory of the era echoed in disturbing ways antebellum America, the inherent modernism of blues notwithstanding. It was even more difficult for the newly ‘discovered’ musicians when the benchmark of authentic blackness was a handful of recordings by a man long dead—Robert Johnson. For young British rockers such as Keith Richards and Eric Clapton, Johnson was the ultimate blues musician, pure “soul” (Clapton 23; Richards 21–22).

The fabrication of authentic blackness and the accompanying myth of the crossroads are the products of a postromantic, antimodernist impulse.
The white romanticizing of black blues is not just problematic in terms of cultural appropriation: implicit in this process of romanticization is the once again deferred access of black musicians—and, thus, by extension, black people—to modernity. The popularized myth of the crossroads recasts the black blues musician in the European archetype of l’artiste maudit. It is a myth that requires the blues troubadour to still the artistic hunger by tarrying at the intersection outside of Cleveland until after midnight, but that would not want to grant him or her admission to, say, a Church’s Chicken—even if it is the one in Clarksdale—should the long wait for a certain gentleman suddenly cause a pang of physical hunger. Elijah Wald hints at the unsettling echoes of minstrelsy resounding at the intersection of the myth of Robert Johnson and the fabrication of authentic blackness:

The modern blues audience hears Robert Johnson’s music very differently from the way his peers heard it in 1935, and makes very different demands on those musicians who consider themselves his heirs. In a sense, the white audience turned blues into a sort of acting. At first, it demanded “real” blues singers, black men and women who had already established themselves as performers in their own communities. Since one of the measures of “realness” was that the music create the atmosphere of another world, that it carry the listener from Carnegie Hall or a Cambridge coffeehouse to a dilapidated porch in rural Mississippi or a barroom on the South Side of Chicago, this audience automatically gravitated toward the blues artist who made those connections most obviously. An audience of poor black Texans knew that T-Bone Walker was still one of them even though he was wearing a zoot suit and diamonds, dancing onstage and playing guitar behind his head. A white revivalist audience worried that someone that sharp and snappy was some kind of faker, adulterating the music’s pure country roots. (254)

To be sure, Robert Johnson’s crossroads are not entirely a fabrication of white myth-making. The crossroads in African American folk culture hark back to the West African deity Eshu-Elegbara, or Esu, guardian of the symbolic juncture of risk and opportunity, meaning and interpretation, of earthly life and the realm of the ancestors. But it is significant that in the Yoruba belief system, Esu is not a devilish, malevolent deity. It is also worth pointing out that there is not even a veiled reference to the devil on Johnson’s “Cross Road Blues.” Instead, it is the Lord to whom Johnson appeals for spiritual salvation, late one afternoon, at a well-traversed intersection:
I went to the crossroads, fell down on my knees.
I went to the crossroads, fell down on my knees.
Asked the Lord above, “Have mercy: save poor Bob if you please.”

Mmmm, standing at the crossroads, I tried to flag a ride.
Standing at the crossroads, I tried to flag a ride.
 Didn't nobody seem to know me, everybody pass me by.

Mmmm, the sun going down, boy, dark gon’ catch me here
Oooeee, oh dark gon’ catch me here.
I ain’t got no loving sweet woman that love and feel my care.¹¹

And so, Robert Johnson—during his lifetime a performer with limited appeal and influence—posthumously became a mythical, larger-than-life figure only through the intervention of mostly white aficionados, whose tastes and expectations were shaped not by New World retentions of Yoruban beliefs, but by the Euro-American, postromantic view of the artist as a tortured genius consumed by his art and misunderstood by a callous, hostile world around him.

In this racially charged realm of sound, commerce, and power, the Allman Brothers Band occupies a particularly salient place. Emerging on the heels of what historian C. Vann Woodward has called the Second Reconstruction, the Allman Brothers Band was not only the flagship of southern rock but was also the genre’s first, and for a long time the only, racially integrated combo (Woodward 107, 172–78).¹² The band was formed by Nashville-born guitarist Duane Allman, and its titular other half consisted of his younger brother Gregg on keyboards and vocals. Duane, a brilliant instrumentalist and charismatic personality, had made a name for himself as a session hand at the FAME Studios in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, just two or three miles south of Handy’s birthplace. There, his talent as both musician and arranger shaped classic recordings by soul acts Aretha Franklin, King Curtis, and Wilson Pickett, and caught the ear of Otis Redding’s former manager, Phil Walden. Walden urged him to put a new band together after Duane’s then current group, Hour Glass, split with their record label. And so, in early 1969 the Allman Brothers Band—ABB for short—formed in Daytona Beach, Florida, and subsequently relocated to Macon, Georgia, where they became the cornerstone of Walden’s newly founded independent label, Capricorn.

But even though they became so successful as to ride the crest of the ’70s wave of stadium rock, the myth of Robert Johnson at the crossroads has loomed large over the Allman Brothers Band. Fans, managers,
promoters, and assorted hangers-on have readily latched on to otherworldly theories in promoting the band's auratic mystique. They point to two earlier Duane Allman-led incubations of what would eventually become the ABB, which were called The Second Coming and Beelzebub, respectively. Then there was Macon's spooky Rose Hill Cemetery, where the band liked to congregate for nocturnal rehearsals and where cofounder Dickey Betts composed his classic “In Memory of Elizabeth Reed,” inspired by the inscription on a nineteenth-century gravestone of a little girl. There was Gregg Allman’s involvement with the criminal activities of the so-called Southern Mafia as well as his stormy and short-lived marriage to pop starlet Cher. There was the original members’ copious consumption of virtually every hard drug known to humankind. All of these affairs alone, amplifying and indeed partly cowriting the classic rock-star narrative of spectacular rise, damning fall, and wondrous redemption, read to many like Flannery O’Connor’s rock ‘n’ roll version of southern gothic, a tale of rhythm and bruise, and suggested that the band had hellhounds on their trails, too.

And then there were the crossroads. On October 29, 1971, Duane Allman lost his life after he swiped the back end of a flatbed truck (carrying a load of Georgia peaches, or so the rumors would later insist) and lost control of his modified Harley Davidson chopper. The accident occurred in Macon, at the intersection of Hillcrest and Bartlett. Duane had been the heart and soul of the band in many ways, a leader with an irresistible charisma. “He had this sort of glow about him,” affirms keyboardist Chuck Leavell (Leavell and Craig 88). Roadie and close friend Joseph “Red Dog” Campbell muses, “He was, and no disrespect intended, like our Jesus Christ. We followed him and his word. You might say the rest of the band went along and preached with him. How lucky we were to have six great preachers in one church” (102). Despite this irreplaceable loss, the band decided to soldier on and hired Leavell to complement the frontline. But many simply couldn’t get over the loss of Duane.

Bass player Berry Oakley took his leader's death the hardest. A year to the day before the accident, so the story goes, he had prayed over Duane, unconscious from a near-fatal heroin overdose, in a Nashville motel room, begging for just one more year of life for his idol. Now, Oakley began to listen obsessively to Robert Johnson’s records, especially “Hellhound on My Trail,” and was wont to hint darkly at otherworldly spirits seeking to do him harm. Riding his heavy Triumph motorcycle to a Macon jam session in the afternoon of November 11, 1972, the bassist collided with a bus; refusing medical attention on the scene, he died that night in the same hospital where Duane Allman had been pronounced dead little more
than a year before. The second fatal accident to haunt the band occurred at the intersection of Napier and Inverness—a mere three blocks away from the crossroads where Duane had lost his life. The elder Allman's body still hadn't been buried and was lying in cold storage, so he and Oakley were laid to rest together, under matching tombstones, in the Civil War section of Macon's Rose Hill Cemetery. “Duane was the Preacher and Berry was the Deacon,” says Campbell; “Like brother Duane told me the night before he departed this earthly dimension, 'This is a religion we are spreading. The music will always bring us back’” (28–29). Even so, tragedy continued to follow the ABB: Twiggs Lydon, the band's road manager for many years and a close friend of Duane’s, would fall to his death in a skydiving accident just outside of a town in upstate New York named Duanesburg, spawning rumors of suicide and even foul play. Lamar Williams, Oakley’s replacement and the second African American to join the band, would die exactly ten years after Duane from lung cancer that had been caused, the doctors speculated, by Williams’s prolonged exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam.13

In glaring contrast to the crossroads mythology surrounding the band, Robert Johnson is almost entirely absent from the ABB’s discography. As if to dissociate themselves from the rampant myth-mongering of white blues fans, they have covered the Mississippian only very rarely in concert, suggesting a conscious choice not to indulge in the romanticizing hagiography that has made “Cross Road Blues” a cornerstone of the legend.14 Unlike many who discovered the blues in the hippie era, Duane Allman and the rest of the band were interested less in milking myth than in making music. Although he didn’t sing, only made the announcements from the stage, Duane was the brain behind and the undisputed leader of the sextet. He and brother Gregg, like so many other white southerners of their generation aspiring to be musicians, had grown up listening to and admiring black music. As the guitarist summarized the musical foundation of the band, “When we first started, Gregg and me were playing rhythm and blues. ... We always had blues roots, and the only way we could break into the scene was to try to play black music in white clubs. The best thing that happened was that the British intervention on the scene made it possible to play what you wanted to play, and do what you wanted to do. ... We didn’t have to be restricted. Everyone began to dig the blues and everyone was getting into it” (qtd. in Freeman, Midnight 20). But from the very beginning, the Allman Brothers Band was interested in much more than simply streamlining and ‘updating’ the acoustic guitar of Robert Johnson’s songs by plugging in, cranking up, and pounding away, as so many of the Allmans’ contemporaries did after the invasion from across
the sea had been launched and they first heard Cream, the Yardbirds, or John Mayall’s Blues Breakers.\textsuperscript{15}

The ABB’s original, classic lineup already intimates that their music was designed to be something different from “love and theft”: the two Allmans were complemented by Floridian guitarist Dickey Betts, whose country and western roots were accompanied by a deep admiration for the jazz manouche of Django Reinhardt as well as for the free jazz of Ornette Coleman; by Chicagoan Oakley, bass player and the only Yankee in the group, who had been subbing in various Florida beach bands when his future boss met him; and by the most unusual drum tandem of Butch Trucks and Johnny Lee Johnson. The classically trained Floridian Trucks, who also likes to double on tympani occasionally, came out of the folk music scene. By contrast, Alabaman Johnson, who shortened his name to “Jaimoe” early on, had always wanted to be a jazz drummer. When he was recruited by Duane, he had just toured with Otis Redding but found himself out of work when the singer had to leave him behind for the European tour because Jaimoe had no passport. The contrast between Trucks and Jaimoe could hardly be greater. Over three decades later, Warren Haynes, who would fill Duane Allman’s spot in the band’s umpteenth reincarnation, still wonders, “The thing that Butch and Jaimoe have together is the unspoken chemistry that you could never expect. . . . Those guys wouldn’t even know each other were it not for music” (qtd. in Myers 58–59).

All members of the original group except Jaimoe were white—though Dickey Betts has some Native American background—and the addition of a black drummer to a white rock group was anything but ordinary. Butch Trucks remembers vividly his reaction when the elder Allman introduced him to his future percussion partner: “So he’s sitting there: giant muscles, and tank top on, that bear tooth thing around his neck—and I’m going, ‘damn, a militant n\[igg\]er, he’s gonna kill me!’” (qtd. in “Southern”). For Jaimoe’s part, his motivation for accepting what back in 1969 was a most unusual job proposition was rather pragmatic: “This friend of mine, he said, ‘If you want to make money,’ he said, ‘go play with them white boys.’ A little light bulb went off in my head—bing!—oh, make money, huh? So what the hell” (qtd. in “Southern”). Make money he did, eventually, but the reason he gives for staying is equally as telling as the economic disadvantage many black musicians experienced: “There was a lot of freedom in the stuff we were doing,” Jaimoe affirms simply (qtd. in “Southern”). Trucks soon recognized the decisive influence Jaimoe was beginning to exert over the development of the band’s unique sound: “[Jaimoe turned us on to Miles Davis and [John] Coltrane and that’s about all we listened to for a long time. . . . We didn’t listen to any rock ‘n’ roll at all. We started
getting a little more complex and experimenting with rhythms and melodies” (qtd. in Freeman, *Midnight* 63). Thus, progressive jazz combined with the blues’ Afro-modernism to provide, in sound, a space of freedom that allowed the individual to express himself according to his own desires, yet still remain within a supportive collective.

It is this creative freedom Jaimoe cites for which cultural diversity was a decisive catalyst, which in turn grew out of the high premium on improvisation marking all the musics contributing to the ABB’s stylistic mélange. The variety of the individual members’ musical backgrounds, a modernist pastiche of sound, was mirrored by wide-ranging influences, where Miles and Trane met Robert Johnson and Rahsaan Roland Kirk (Freeman, *Midnight* 63–64; Myers 55; Perlah). And when Derek Trucks, Butch’s nephew, eventually joined the band, he brought with him a pronounced interest in classical Indian and Middle Eastern musics, fusing them in what he calls “world-blues” (qtd. in Mattis 40; Hadley 33). Rather than romanticizing black music and black musicians—a path that, for example, Eric Clapton would follow devotedly, culminating in his 2002 album *Me and Mr. Johnson*—the ABB’s approach was as thoroughly modernist as Handy’s in that it sought to shore up in its music the fragments of its members’ various influences and interests. Not surprisingly, given this modernist eclecticism, the ABB has always rejected the label ‘southern rock.’ As Gregg Allman likes to point out, “Southern rock is a term some guy came up with so they’d have a place to put our records in shops. Anyway, rock ‘n’ roll was born in the South, so southern rock is like saying rock rock. The Allman Brothers are a contemporary blues and jazz band. That’s about what it is. That’s what we called ourselves before the term southern rock came along” (qtd. in Perlah).16 The adjectival clarification of the ABB playing contemporary music corroborates that the band is interested not in the faithful recreation of ‘authentic’ sounds, but rather in sounding out the possibilities offered by their two main sources, blues and jazz. Consequently, the ABB has always preferred the spontaneity and unpredictability of the stage to the constraints of the studio.

This sounding-out of possibilities arising from the spontaneity of performance has been a hallmark of the band irrespective of its various personnel reconfigurations. Neither their self-titled 1969 debut album nor the follow-up *Idlewild South* a year later made much of a splash, though they were well received by reviewers. The high point came with the sextet’s third offering: the taping of the live shows of March 12 and 13, 1971, at New York’s legendary Fillmore East almost single-handedly made Capricorn Records into the world’s largest independent record label (Suarez 91). Portions of those four shows total were released originally as two double
LPs, *The Allman Brothers Band at Fillmore East* and *Eat a Peach*, the latter also containing new studio material. At *Fillmore East* constitutes the early culmination of the ABB’s aesthetic, a benchmark of artistry recognized also by the Library of Congress: in 2004 it inducted the iconic album into the National Recording Registry (“National”). “This,” avers their agent Phil Walden, “was really an expression of their region, their environment, of their culture” (qtd. in “Southern”).

Accordingly, the album commences with the ABB’s nod to their musical roots: the blues. The first track is Blind Willie McTell’s “Statesboro Blues.” Initially, Duane had come across the song when he attended a Taj Mahal concert, and it was lead guitarist Ed Davis’s solo that prompted Duane to learn slide. But Duane soon sought out the original, too (Freeman, *Midnight* 31–32; Poe 56–57; Swenson 5). The mysterious Georgia native McTell recorded “Statesboro Blues” during his first session for Victor on October 17, 1928, in Atlanta, and it showcases his harplike, dexterous fingerpicking technique on his twelve-string acoustic guitar. As is often the case in early country blues, the original version does not adhere completely to the classic twelve-bar formula codified by Handy and others: rather than a regular division into bars, the duration of a segment is determined by the musical phrase being played and/or the verse being sung. Significantly, McTell’s filigree guitar here employs Handy’s blue notes only very sparingly, and almost exclusively their diminished seventh; there is but a smattering of flatted thirds across the performance. The ABB’s version, on the other hand, is more than a mere appropriation or ‘translation’ of McTell into the electrified idiom. Although they continued to credit McTell as sole composer, the band’s arrangement of “Statesboro Blues” is actually more a reinvention. Slowing down the original’s sprightly tempo some to a hurtling groove, they not only rearrange the lyrics—largely using Taj Mahal’s version—but completely recontextualize the music. The governing lick that opens the performance is actually the famous five-note riff from Muddy Waters’s “Hoochie Coochie Man” that has become the ensign of electric Chicago blues. Duane answers the band’s riffing in classic call-and-response fashion on bottleneck; he even slides around a boppish flatted fifth or two later on. What is more, the authoritative guitar combines with the churning beat to intimate that, perhaps, the song’s persona is now, several decades later, much more determined and willing to be “going to the country: baby, do you want to go? / But if you can’t make it, baby, / Your sister Lucille say she wanna go.” Bridging McTell’s fleet-fingered acoustic country blues with Waters’s meaty, electrified Chicago blues, the ABB’s reinvention of “Statesboro Blues” is deeply attuned to what Amiri Baraka calls “the blues continuum”: “as the developing strata
of the city emphasized, the blues could extend in a kind of continuum from rhythm & blues all the way back to country blues. In the cities all these forms sat side by side in whatever new confusion urban life offered, and the radio made them all equally of the moment” (Blues 173, 169–73). The dual drums’ hard-charging backbeat and especially Duane’s searing slide guitar, the thoroughly modernist reshuffling of various stylistic fragments, make this continuum explicit.

After all, it’s this same continuum that had famously given W. C. Handy’s career a new direction in the sleepy Mississippi Delta town of Tutwiler sometime in the first decade of the twentieth century:

[As I nodded in the railroad station while waiting for a train that had been delayed nine hours, life suddenly took me by the shoulder and awakened me with a start. A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside me while I slept. His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages. As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who used steel bars. The effect was unforgettable. His song, too, struck me instantly.

Goin’ where the Southern cross’ the Dog.

The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard. The tune stayed in my mind. (Father 74)\(^\text{19}\)

To be sure, the memoirist—always the savvy marketer of the Handy brand—contributes his own share of lucrative mythmaking here. Handy knew that most of his audience was composed of white urbanites who, then as now, proliferated what Berndt Ostendorf refers to as “the dangerous psychopathological implications of pastoral purism. For many of them [white fans] blues are not genuine if the singer does not qualify in most of the following points: He should be illiterate, of indeterminate age, preferably ugly, recently dragged from his plough and mule into a makeshift studio, unwilling to make any money off his music and, most importantly, unwilling to leave the South” (81). But there is no reason to doubt that it was indeed the Delta where Handy first heard the “weirdest” sounds emanating from a slide guitar—even if that sound had partly come, as Handy intimates and some blues scholars argue (as does none other than Son House, by the way), courtesy of the many hugely popular Hawaiian traveling shows that were crisscrossing the country in the early 1900s (Spottswood 5; Wald 281–82).
Whatever the amount of romantic audience-pandering Handy injected into his description, the fact remains that the material conditions in the Mississippi Delta around 1900 most certainly forced many of its black inhabitants to wear ragged clothing and shoes with holes in them. And just as Frederick Douglass’s frostbitten feet represented a historical conscience to which his pen gave voice, so does the anonymous musician at the Tutwiler train station (regardless of how ‘creative’ Handy’s nonfiction here is) personify historical conscience, and the blue notes emanating from his guitar its voice. There is, then, a direct line reaching from early, rural Mississippi Delta blues to Duane Allman and his bandmates. Riffing on and expanding Baraka’s blues continuum, “lean, loose-jointed,” pale Duane Allman and his cohorts may exemplify what can be called the southern groove continuum. Coming of age in the apartheid South, they, except for Jaimoe, were not directly privy to the experiential history of Americans of African descent. But their music and their understanding of its roots, an understanding expressing itself in a modernist aesthetic born of the blues continuum, suggested that petrified mappings of raciological taxonomy need not apply automatically when it comes to southern soundscapes.

It is therefore perhaps no coincidence that “Statesboro Blues” would become the Allman Brothers Band’s traditional concert opener. Slotted first on the Fillmore album, it is followed by Elmore James’s “Done Somebody Wrong,” the T. Bone Walker classic “Stormy Monday,” and Willie Cobbs’s “You Don’t Love Me.” Hence, the album’s first four tracks continue to limn the southern groove continuum as spawned by the blues. They traverse the genre’s entire spectrum, from McTell’s country blues to Cobbs’s rocking, electrified Chicago blues reincarnated as a funkified boogie. The instrumental “Hot ’Lanta,” the album’s first ABB original, begins to push the classic blues formula. It in turn is followed by another instrumental, Dickey Betts’s “In Memory of Elizabeth Reed.” Extending the blues sensibility considerably, it marks a stylistic shift: paralleling Carlos Santana’s emergence, “In Memory” is a Latin-flavored tune characterized by Jelly Roll Morton’s famous “Spanish tinge” (qtd. in Youngren 23). “In Memory” combines a complex, multilayered rhythmic groove with extended improvisations over a two-chord vamp. The album concludes with a tour de force of the Gregg Allman original “Whipping Post,” the song most indelibly associated with the ABB.

“Whipping Post” had been conceived shortly after Gregg’s return from the West Coast in late March of 1969. For the time being, the singer had moved into the upstairs room of Berry Oakley’s apartment house but was awakened one night by the cries of the Oakleys’ new baby. Without lights or electrical outlets in the tiny room, without pen or paper, Gregg
proceeded to write the song with a box of stick matches on an ironing board cover—to the great dismay of Linda Oakley. On the ABB’s debut album, “Whipping Post” clocked in at an easily digestible 5:18. On stage, it would undergo more and more alterations, though it retained the original’s structural modules, until it extended to over twenty-three minutes at the second show of the Fillmore concerts on March 13. By that time, it had also been wedded to another tune, “Mountain Jam,” that the band had been performing at first separately. “Mountain Jam,” never recorded in the studio, was based on “There Is a Mountain” by Scottish folkie Donovan, but the ABB defamiliarized the ditty so dramatically that Donovan granted the band co-composer credits when it was released commercially. Stripped of Donovan’s psychedelic hippie lyrics—“The caterpillar sheds his skin / To find the butterfly within”—the ABB’s version rumbled on for over half an hour. Since it wouldn’t fit on what was already a double LP (and a live double album at the time was considered to be career suicide in the industry), “Mountain Jam” was released only on the follow-up, Eat a Peach. But as originally performed, the two tunes resulted in almost an hour of uninterrupted music.

Two features of the extended medley are significant. First, there are Gregg Allman’s lyrics. Though not strictly a blues in terms of form, “Whipping Post” utilizes the standard blues narrative of love betrayed: “I been run down, / And I been lied to. / And I don’t know why / I let that mean woman make me out a fool.” Having absconded with Gregg’s persona’s cash and totaled his newly acquired car, she is now “with one of my good-time buddies / Drinking in some cross-town bar.” In the chorus, Gregg moans, “Sometimes I feel— / Oh baby, sometimes I feel / Like I been tied to the whipping post. // Good Lord, I feel like I’m dying.” The song thus traverses the same ritual ground as Wright’s “Long Black Song,” limning the intersection of love (or sex), violence, and ownership, and constructing the song’s persona as what Adam Gussow calls a “blues subject”: “the blues subject [is] a site on which a peculiarly southern dialectic of torture and sexuality is played out” (139). The chorus’s analogy expressing the agony of Allman’s persona references a symbol of chattel slavery in the American South. But Allman’s identity as a white southerner is only heightened by the oft-repeated assertion that “nobody sings the blues like Gregg does—at least not with blond hair” (qtd. in Myers 58). Moreover, following an archetypal narrative construction, Allman’s identity as a white male southerner is marked by a journey into the figurative blackness of American history from which the protagonist obviously would like to emerge again via what Ralph Ellison calls “a ritual of exorcism” (Shadow 103). The identity thus injected into the blues subject’s dialectic
precludes the application of Angela Davis’s contention of love as a metaphor for freedom in blues (9–10). This, after all, is a music invented by a people for whom any kind of love had been a very precarious proposition indeed for at least two centuries after arriving in the New World. As Toni Morrison’s Paul D muses, “to go to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well now, that was freedom” (Beloved 162). As circumscribed as the (artistic) freedom of the ABB may have been initially due to their regional provenance—Walden remembers that Atlantic, Capricorn’s distributor, urged him to drop the band after the sluggish sales of their debut album “because nothing was ever gonna emerge from the South” and, moreover, “that there was no way I could have any luck with a white musician”—it wasn’t nearly as compromised as the freedom, artistic and socioeconomic, of Paul D’s descendants, the African American blues artists ‘rediscovered’ by Phil Spiro and others (qtd. in “Southern”; qtd. in Leavell and Craig 66).

What is more, only the trivialization of the experiential consequences of slavery, experiences from which Allman’s ancestors were absolved solely by virtue of their skin color, allows the equation of the persona’s broken heart and the slave’s corporal punishment. This problematic kind of appropriation can be diagnosed as a manifestation of the so-called “black through white syndrome,” and, consequently, the lyrics of “Whipping Post” enact the reconfigured rites of the minstrel show (Black 229–31; Hewitt 33–54). However, the chorus’s simile is an expression of empathy, not of derision as in the minstrel show of the nineteenth century, nor, obviously, is it a romanticization of slavery as in the plantation tradition. Nevertheless, the declaration of emotional solidarity presupposes a trivialization of the physical terror exerted in the peculiar institution and its aftermath. In the evolution of the music, asserts Gussow, “[t]orture and dismemberment are pressing concerns of blues performers and blues song for reasons that trace directly back to the popular racial spectacle lynching suddenly became in the early 1890s, a kind of spectacle that had no real precedent in black memory,” and a kind of spectacle in which white southerners were the perpetrators, not the victims as in the sonic spectacle of “Whipping Post” (29). That the state of Georgia saw more lynchings of African Americans in the four decades or so after the end of Reconstruction than any other state makes the trivialization even more problematic (Gussow 167; Lincoln, Negro 81).

The rhetorical blackface Gregg Allman dons is reinforced when the guitars of Betts and Allman, playing in unison, build toward the climax of the song. They take a four-note pattern up the A dorian scale in a rousing crescendo, culminating with two As as quarter notes, a pause, and
one half note a full octave higher, thus mimicking the lash of the whip and the scream of the victim. This is particularly unsettling to hear in a 2003 performance by the revamped lineup in Raleigh, North Carolina. The twin guitars of Warren Haynes and Derek Trucks, augmented by Gregg’s organ and Oteil Burbridge’s six-string bass, build to the familiar crescendo. But then the guitars’ figurative cries of pain are accompanied by simultaneous cries of cognizant joy from the audience. And there is no reason to assume that this particular audience was significantly different in demographic makeup from what is the norm at ABB concerts, that is, almost exclusively white and predominantly male. In this regard, then, “Whipping Post,” having become a favorite audience sing-along, constitutes the contemporary version of the minstrel show. There, as Eric Lott explains, the performers’ “racial ventriloquism” met with an audience that “indulged in displaced blackface versions of themselves, ‘went black’”:

In terms of ego-ideology, the male spectator was alternately his “black” self and black people’s “manly” white superior, when, of course, “blackness” did not simply underscore a resistant sense of white “manliness” . . . It was in terms of his alter-ideology that he became a planter. The spectator may have intermittently identified with black characters [or, in this case, the whipping post so inextricably linked with slavery]—he had to if the minstrel show was to have its impact—but he always knew what he was not: a slave, whether of wages or of the plantation; he was no feminized (proletarian) subaltern. Here was a convenient fiction born in part of male panic, a gendered fantasy of renewed mastery over inferiors whose blandishments the mechanic enjoyed and whose pleasures he commanded. (197)

It is precisely this psychological dynamic that “Whipping Post” still conjures up in concert, early in the third millennium. The chorus and climax of “Whipping Post” constitute a form of neominstrelsy, rhetorical and sonic, that trivializes the historical conscience represented by the pen measuring the gashes in Douglass’s feet, or by the notes played by Handy’s Tutwiler muse.

But where the minstrel show of the nineteenth century was designed to assuage all kinds of fissures tearing at the psychosocial fabric of the country’s political economy—Ostendorf calls nineteenth-century minstrelsy a “symbolic substitute for material and economic bondage, a new contractual symbolism designed to take over from the whip and the lash” (70)—the ABB’s “Whipping Post” cannot be dismissed entirely as updated minstrelsy because its music in fact celebrates fissures, deliberately creates
them in the spontaneous flow of improvised performance. In other words, the discursive minstrelsy of the song’s lyrics, Gregg Allman’s racial ventriloquism, is counterweighted by the recognition of W. C. Handy’s modus operandi, tapping the sheer limitless potential of the blues as an inherently modernist aesthetic. It is again worth pointing out here that Handy, too, got his start crisscrossing the South as a purveyor of minstrelsy, touring as the musical director of the highly regarded Mahara’s Minstrels. As Lott also emphasizes, the minstrel show, “the first formal public acknowledgment by whites of black culture, was based on small but significant crimes against settled ideas of racial demarcation, which indeed appear to be inevitable when white Americans enter the haunted realm of racial fantasy” (4). The “significant crimes,” the subversion of socially sanctioned taxonomies of race and sound, occur in the sonic modernism of “Whipping Post,” furnishing a paradoxical juxtaposition to the rhetorical minstrelsy of the lyrics.

First of all, (instrumental) music is a much more abstract system than language. Its much more complex referential capabilities issue from “the instability with which music, because of its unique emotional qualities and sensory recall mechanisms, threatens all discourse, especially writing,” as Bruce Martin points out (21). Musicologist John Blackling has argued that in improvised musics in particular, sound is as meaningful as language in that it, too, constitutes (indeed, creates) systems of interdependent signs whose constantly changing processes must be understood in context (85–89). The one moment of sonic minstrelsy in “Whipping Post,” the twin guitars’ anguished cry of pain, is after all conditioned by the lyrics’ text, and is not spontaneous either. Furthermore, this kind of metaphorical displacement of violence from lyrics to music grows out of the black blues tradition, too, perhaps most famously voiced in John Lee Hooker’s “Boom Boom” (Gussow 228–32). As if to magnify the “significant crimes” and deemphasize the racial ventriloquism of discursive minstrelsy, the 2003 rendition of “Whipping Post” features tenor saxophonist Branford Marsalis as guest soloist. The Durham resident and Crescent City native reaches deeply into his Sonny Rollins bag of motivic improvisation for his solo and strategically deploys Trane-ish sheets of sound and altissimo screams as well, hence underscoring the ABB’s jazz influences. Moreover, Marsalis has always been an artist attuned to the political implications of music—one of his earlier albums, recorded by the quintet he co-led with brother Wynton, was entitled Black Codes (From the Underground)—and has also consistently refused to be pigeonholed as a performer. Finally, the edition of the ABB playing at the Alltel Pavilion that night fielded the most multicultural roster by far: joining the three remaining charter
members Trucks, Jaimoe, and Gregg Allman, plus newcomers Haynes and Derek Trucks, were bass player Oteil Burbridge, who claims a part-Egyptian heritage, and jazz-fusion percussionist Marc Quinones, who is of Latin American descent.

Second, the ABB once again foregoes stylistic mimicry in favor of a dynamic, fluid performance, tapping deeply into the southern groove continuum’s inherent modernism by improvisationally fragmenting the song into segments with different time signatures as well as weaving in musical “snatches” from a wide variety of source material. Like storytelling, music, especially when improvised, entails embellishing the passage of time, and the solos in “Whipping Post” tell a different story from the lyrics. On the 1971 Fillmore album, the song begins with Berry Oakley’s menacing bass introduction in a most unusual time signature, namely, 11/8, followed by the counterpoint of the dual guitars. With the rest of the band joining in, the song switches to 6/8 for the head—or a swift waltz time, not coincidentally a favorite time signature with John Coltrane’s classic quartet—and then Gregg Allman tears into his persona’s blues. Shifting gears to 2/4 for the chorus, a brief interlude again in 11/8 follows before Duane launches into his solo. Behind him, his brother’s organ and Betts’s guitar are comping a four-chord vamp of A minor seventh, B half-diminished, C major, and B half-diminished, but the solo section is already edging into the territory of modal improvisation, especially with Oakley’s bass moving nimbly up and down the A dorian scale, not the chords. Just as there is no set chorus length in modal jazz—which eschews the 32-bar AABA form of the standard or the 12- or 16-bar form of the blues—so do the solos here unfold not according to the underlying harmonic structure, but follow their own dramaturgy. In other words, the soloist, Duane in this case, is done with his solo when its own development of tension and release dictates. Bookending the first guitar solo is Gregg’s restatement of the head in 6/8, the chorus in 2/4, and a brief interlude in 11/8 before it’s Betts’s turn. Betts, who seems much surer here of his phrasing and his rhythm than on the previous night, shifts to a 2/4 beat halfway through, egged on by Trucks, whereas the rest of the band maintains the steady 6/8 groove, resulting in a polyrhythmic layering. Toward the end of his solo, he pulls the band first briefly into 4/4, then into a rubato section before suspending the beat altogether. It is here that Betts weaves in a lick borrowed from Ornette Coleman’s free jazz classic “Lonely Woman” before returning to 6/8 again. Another free rubato section precedes a 2/4 bridge, which in turn morphs into 6/8 again.

Then comes the menacing crescendo toward the song’s climax, the disturbing call and response of the whip’s lash and the victim’s cry. Into
the brief moment of silence that follows arrives Gregg's voice, unaccompanied for the first few words of the chorus before the whole band joins. Another free rubato segment propels Betts into resuming his solo, only this time he uses the A ionian scale. Again, it is he—possibly taking a page out of the playbook of beboppers such as Charlie Parker or Dexter Gordon—who weaves in another musical quote. What at first may sound like the lullaby “Frère Jacques” is actually a reference to one of Betts’s heroes, Django Reinhardt, and his recording of “Danse Norvégienne,” which in turn is derived from an Edvard Grieg composition based on Norwegian folk sources.

For the ensuing rubato that flirts with 4/4 time, Duane takes over from Betts, only in a minor scale again, and engages Trucks’s tympani in a game of call and response that glides into a massive crescendo on B minor. Gregg restates the chorus in free time, the call and response now between the two Allmans and the two drummers. The song ends in a grandiose finale, out of which peel Trucks's tympani, which blend seamlessly into the next tune, “Mountain Jam.”

The two guitarists first hint at the theme, taken in 4/4 time, in call-and-response fashion, tossing each other melodic phrases and fragments. After the theme, it is again Duane who takes the first solo. Now almost the entire performance is modal, with the musicians improvising over the E ionian scale. His brother follows with a rare organ solo of his own, in which he utilizes the blues scale almost exclusively, ending it with a sly quote from Led Zeppelin's “Dazed and Confused,” only one among many such interpolations throughout. Dickey Betts, in his solo, displays another affinity with the bebop of the 1940s: an improvised phrase he would later develop into a fully fledged composition of his own, namely, the chart-topper “Jessica” (the ABB's sole single to take the top spot). This, of course, is the same procedure that Charlie Parker and others were wont to follow (Dyer 186). The call-and-response interlude with Duane that ensues shifts to chordal improvisation over E major and D major and ends with Duane's signature bird calls, high up on the neck of his Les Paul.

Then follows another trademark of the ABB sound, a lengthy drum solo by Trucks and Jaimoe. There have been other bands featuring two drummers: 38 Special, for instance, or most famously The Grateful Dead, and many of the classic Motown hits were recorded with two drummers as well, but none let their sound be defined and explored the possibilities offered by double drum sets as thoroughly: Trucks and Jaimoe truly are the ABB’s engine room. Duane had originally gotten the idea at a James Brown concert: Brown—the Godfather of Soul or, as Ishmael Reed referred to him, “the Godfather of Everything” (Reed 30)—had been featuring two drummers in concert for a while, where matching the different
yet complementary sensibilities of John “Jabo” Starks and Clyde Stubblefield supercharged the funk beat (Brown and Tucker 178; Freeman, Midnight 37; Guralnick 221–22; Standing). The juxtaposition of the different approaches of Starks and Stubblefield in Brown’s band was accentuated even more by Jaimoe and Trucks in the ABB. Trucks, the former folkie, was usually responsible for anchoring the beat, while Jaimoe, the diehard jazzer, played over, under, and around his partner, but their truly telepathic interplay rendered this role assignment only a general trend. As Campbell, their drum technician, put it so memorably, “In those days, Butch and Jaimoe looked like two Cobras playing together and off of each other when they played the drums” (63). Here, on “Mountain Jam,” Trucks leads off, all the while accompanied by Jaimoe, whose big ears accentuate Trucks’s solo. When Jaimoe takes over, he dissects and deconstructs the beat—launching even into a few bars of hard rock—and especially his bass drum betrays the Gene Krupa influence, with a generous dose of Max Roach (Myers 58). Trucks then takes it back into the pocket, setting the stage for Berry Oakley’s bass solo.

Oakley’s function in the band also transcended the restrictive supporting role usually accorded to bassists. In the ABB, his instrument became less of a rhythmic anchor and more of a third voice in the frontline, a prominence he achieved in part because of his characteristic sound marked by an aggressive attack courtesy of a thumb plectrum. Harking back to the mélange of different time signatures comprising “Whipping Post,” Oakley’s solo guides the drummers from 4/4 to 6/8 and merges with the twin guitars (quoting Jimi Hendrix’s “Third Stone from the Sun”) in 4/4 again. The full band joins in a 2/4 shuffle beat, launching Duane into a slide guitar solo. Several different shifts, from shuffle to 6/8 and to 2/4 and from modal to chordal, end in Duane leading the band into “Will the Circle Be Unbroken” in a stately 4/4. The rubato ending leads back to the theme of the song, with Duane and Betts again engaging in call and response. Another rubato section featuring Betts leads to the finale and the two chords that are the bedrock of the blues, the dominant and the subdominant seventh.

Therefore, “Whipping Post” alone meanders in and out of five different time signatures. Significantly, these recurrent shifts are mostly not prearranged, but grow organically out of collective improvisation. As jazzer George Lewis points out, “In performances of improvised music, the possibility of internalizing alternative value systems is implicit from the start. The focus of musical discourse suddenly shifts from the individual, autonomous creator to the collective—the individual as a part of global humanity,” and concludes that “improvised music, seen in historical terms,
[is] a transcultural practice” (110, 113; emphasis added). “Without Improvisation,” seconds Joshua Redman, “Tradition and Innovation are reduced to imaginary and impotent adversaries, bickering fruitlessly over territory to which neither can lay rightful claim” (liner notes). In combination with “Mountain Jam,” then, the ABB shows how the southern groove continuum extends not only from Christian hymns to electric Chicago blues, but from Handy’s Mississippi River and Macon’s Ocmulgee River—muddy waters indeed—to the Parisian Seine, Scotland’s lochs, Hawaii’s beaches, and the fjords of Norway. And so, the ABB’s music, at its best, exemplifies in its modernism what Baraka in Blues People calls “the lateral (exchanging) form of synthesis, whereby difference is used to enrich and broaden, and the value of any form lies in its eventual use” (191). And it is the possibility of this kind of lateral transference that is sustained in the Afro-modernism of blues and jazz, the ABB’s twin inspirations. The lateral synthesis achieved in the band’s music therefore challenges received systems of taxonomy—musical, racial, regional, or other systems. Given this international, multiracial matrix, the Allman Brothers Band offers music—soundscapes—as a figurative ritual ground most conducive to decolonizing visually inscribed, petrified mappings of raciological categorization and thus swinging open, however fleetingly, doors to spaces that allow for the possibility of combining seemingly divergent and opposite forms of human experience and expression. For producer Tom Dowd, whose palmarès after all included such other classics as Coltrane’s A Love Supreme, the ABB’s At Fillmore East was simply “the greatest fusion album I’ve ever heard” (qtd. in Swenson 12).

To be sure, the ABB were not the first to hear in the ritual grounds of southern soundscapes a more democratic, egalitarian alternative—or, perhaps, utopia—highlighting the cultural transference of the blues aesthetic, of the southern groove continuum, across lines of color and genre where the South’s historical burdens and the social practices arising from them are at least temporarily suspended. Blues shouter Eddie Boyd, usually very outspoken about the racism he encountered as a traveling performer, relays just such a temporary suspension, occasioned by transracial sounds of music, of the racial exigencies of southern society. Of one memorable gig at the Night and Day Club, a white-owned establishment on the outskirts of Clarksdale, Mississippi, the Delta capital of the blues, he recounts:

So, they had a little dressing room out back of the club, and this white man, he put a strand of hay-baling wire across there and hung a whole string of potato sacks up there and put on one side “Niggers” and (on the
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other side) “White Folks” (laughs). Those white boys [fellow musicians who also performed at the Club] took a knife and cut that sack down from end to end and piled it up in front of that nightclub and poured kerosene on it and set it afire. That was the hillbilly boys. That's why I have never been able to be no racist, because I learned better than that early. 'Cause there's a lot of people doesn't understand that how good some people is, and how real. 'Cause these cats didn't have to do that, man. They were Mississippian that was in Mississippi. They really had a funny way of talking, 'cause they were uneducated cats, man, they played those fiddles and banjos. But they could play, man, and sing those hillbilly songs. He said, “What the hell this son of a bitch talkin' about? Putting a damn sheet up here between us and y'all. It ain't hardly step-pin' room in here. We play on the same stage. He [the owner] doesn't know music is natural international, don't give a damn what color he is.” I say, “Hello, brother, welcome to the club.” (237)

Boyd here limns a different crossroads of cultural exchange than does the Robert Johnson myth. In his account, the premises of the Night and Day Club have superimposed upon them the figurative club of musicianship, a “club” that is “natural international” and that transcends race.33 In this club echoes the “Long Black Song” of Sarah’s (utopian) vision, resounding with the harmonies of “men, black men and white men, land and houses, green cornfields and grey skies, gladness and dreams” that “were all part of that which made life good. Yes, somehow they were linked, like the spokes in a spinning wagon wheel” (154). For Ralph Ellison also knew, long before the Allmans did, that “[t]he master artisans of the South were slaves, and white Americans have been walking Negro walks, talking Negro-flavored talk (and printing it when spoken by Southern belles), dancing Negro dances and singing Negro melodies far too long to talk of a ‘mainstream’ of American culture to which they’re alien” (Shadow 286).

And conversely, the Father of the Blues himself initially made a living gigging in the Delta with music that was (or seems) decidedly unbluesy: “In the old days we had to play for dances the following: Mazurka, Polonaise, Berlin, Schottish, Quadrilles, lancers, yorkes, minuettes, etc. and Jim Turner and our bunch made up such dances impromptu that have never been set to music, which if done would compare very favorably with compositions by leading composers of that style,” catalogues W. C. Handy (Letter to Margaret Tubb).

Thus, music can transcend race. It did, for example, also in the famous Muscle Shoals Studios in 1960s Alabama, or at Stax in Memphis, where mostly white session musicians—Duane Allman among them—helped the
Queen of Soul, Aretha Franklin, and others record classic black music. It is difficult to argue with Les Black’s contention that what was created in Muscle Shoals, deep in the heart of apartheid America, was a music that “blurred the lines of racial segregation through coloring sound. This was black music practiced and innovated by both blacks and whites” staking out “utopian soundscapes” that “provided the means to communicate across the line of color and produce a music that was culturally composite and also embodied an identifiable black cultural legacy” (251). But this sonic utopia was confined almost entirely to the oasis of the recording studio and did not exist outside of history, either. As veteran songsmith and vocalist Dan Penn muses, “In a strange kinda way we were in the background and it was the black folks who were up front. Suddenly, after Dr. King’s death, it was over” (qtd. in Black 248). Seconds David Hood, bassist of the legendary Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section, “I learned so much about music from Otis Redding and all the other artists I worked with. They taught me how to play. But it was different after the assassination. That was the turning point” (qtd. in Kemp 6). And Stax pioneer Rufus Thomas confirms, “The death of Martin—the whole complexion of everything changed. It had to” (qtd. in Respect).

After the slaying of Martin Luther King, the rise of the ABB displayed perhaps the most visible continuance of interracial collaboration that had been so successful in the Stax and Muscle Shoals studios—certainly as far as the South was concerned (Guralnick 353–56). The ABB’s multiracial personnel was unusual enough to be noticed early on by other southern rockers: Richard Young, who would go on to co-lead the Kentucky Headhunters with his twin brother Fred, maintains that “[t]he thing about the Allman Brothers is that the word brother meant something. They had a black dude in that band, and you knew that they all had to wash in the same water spigot. Well, that was a big deal back then. It meant something. It stood for something” (qtd. in Kemp 219). The ABB’s modernism grew out of an understanding of the historical divisions within southern ritual grounds and a confrontation with them. The musical inclusiveness of the southern groove continuum in performance was matched by a heightened social and political awareness of the band—Betts’s engagement for Native American causes, or the band’s support of Jimmy Carter’s presidential campaign, for instance. There was also, in the early days, the ABB’s unusual booking policy: when touring in the South, the band insisted on racially integrated seating. For example, the contract Capricorn’s office negotiated with Albany Junior College (today Darton College) near the Georgia-Alabama state line in late 1970—more than a year before the release of At Fillmore East would propel the band to superstar-
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contained a “RIDER TO BE ATTACHED AND MADE PART OF AFM CONTRACT NO. 524 DATED December 10, 1970 BETWEEN ALLMAN BROTHERS BAND (HEREINAFTER REFERRED TO AS EMPLOYEE), AND ALBANY JR COLLEGE (HEREINAFTER REFERRED TO AS EMPLOYER.),” whose seventh paragraph read:

7. Employer agrees that admission to the engagement shall be open to all regardless of race, color or creed and that there shall be no segregated seating facilities based on race, color or creed. Artist shall be free to engage the services of supporting musicians of their choice without regard to race, color or creed. Non-compliance by the employer with the provisions of this paragraph shall give artist the right to cancel forthwith this agreement and in such event, any compensation paid or retained by artist and they shall be free of any obligations to employer for losses incurred and without prejudice to employees [sic] right to retain the full contract price. (American Federation)

This rider was part of all contracts the ABB made at that time, and the nature of the rider's other stipulations—all relating to general organizational technicalities such as catering, stage setup, power supply, and the like—as well as the convoluted syntax and mechanical error of paragraph 7 suggest the direct involvement of at least Duane Allman, the counter-signer on all contracts (ABB 1971). It is also the only paragraph detailing consequences in the event of the employer's noncompliance.34

At the same time, however, the high likelihood of the ABB performing the discursive neominstrelsy of “Whipping Post” in the gym of Albany Junior College, just as they would more than three decades later in Raleigh, paradoxically accompanies the band's social activism and celebration of the southern groove continuum. The band’s early home base, Macon, Georgia, exemplified yet another crossroads of the continuum. For Newton “Newt” Collier, Macon native and veteran of the bands of Otis Redding as well as Sam and Dave, his hometown was the last of “the three Ms in music” after Memphis and Muscle Shoals. Collier remembers a thriving music scene of about two dozen clubs and adds, “Otis Redding was the catalyst for everything.”35 Although “musicians [had] started to integrate themselves in different bands,” the clubs themselves remained thoroughly segregated, and the only white musician who could play in the city's black clubs was Redding's best friend, Wayne Cochran, often billed as “the white James Brown” (Freeman, Otis! 71–73). Even the socially progressive ABB, insists Collier, remained “basically outsiders” throughout their sojourn in Macon. At least part of the reason for the band's now
legendary free concerts in Atlanta’s Piedmont Park was the fact that they didn’t have any playing opportunities in Macon’s black clubs: even Duane admitted that “the only way we could break into the scene was to try to play black music in white clubs” (qtd. in Freeman, *Midnight* 20; emphasis added). The band arrived in Macon at the nadir of the town’s race relations: King’s murder—here as elsewhere—had led to violent racial unrest, which was accompanied by the growing controversies over the desegregation of Baconsfield Park and Bibb County Schools as well as by the slaying of a black man by a white police officer (Manis 236–68). Ironically though, the success of the ABB worsened relations between Macon’s black and white musicians. Collier is still bitter about Walden’s Capricorn label shifting its focus exclusively to white rock and in effect forcing many of Macon’s black musicians to relocate (Brent 47–55; Freeman, *Otis!* 113–45; Malone and Stricklin 111–16).

What both the story and the music of the ABB inadvertently amplify is the tension that marks southern ritual grounds as well as the southern groove continuum. “Whipping Post” is, then, a long black song, too, in a way, in that it foregrounds this tension: for all its democratic inclusiveness, ultimately music cannot transcend history, and “Whipping Post” fails to imagine a new rhetorical posture toward existence. Music, like narrative, entails the embellishing of time passing by. But just as the passage of time never occurs in a vacuum, so do storytelling and music-making, especially improvisation, never occur outside of the specific context in which they are performed. The historical whipping posts resound on the song’s deeper (Ellisonian) frequencies as a telling inarticulacy that ‘unmasks’ the minstrelsy of “Whipping Post.” Harking back to Oliver Nelson, then, the abstract truth is that music can transcend race. The concrete truth, however, is that music can never really transcend history. Not southern music, and not southern history, at any rate.

So—is the ABB’s music ‘black’ music? Does, in other words, the field of tension that constitutes Afro-modernism overlap with the southern groove continuum? Given the direct connection between W. C. Handy’s compositional techniques and the ABB’s improvised performances, it would appear so. Which, in turn, raises one final, and very old, question: can white folks sing the blues? If blues is understood as a repository for an essentialized, ‘authentic blackness’—a “blood ritual” as Baraka heard it—then the answer is clearly no (*Blues* 149). But if the blues aesthetic is understood as a product of an Afro-modernist sensibility, a sensibility that questions and challenges the socially and historically received binary pairs of the larger American culture—black and white, or blues and rock, for example—then, perhaps, what is ‘authentic’ in ‘authentic’ blackness
is that the blackness of blackness in fact thrives on hybridity, that it harnesses the possibilities of cultural production as well as simultaneously affirming the African American tradition. Perhaps, then, the southern groove continuum at its best manages to negotiate this field of tension successfully—perhaps, then, the southern groove continuum at its best is Afro-modernism straining to hear its historical conscience, sometimes succeeding (“Statesboro Blues”), and sometimes failing (the chorus and climax of “Whipping Post”). Trombonist George Lewis, for one, a long-standing member of the free jazz collective AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians), insists that “African-American music, like any music, can be performed by a person of any ‘race’ without losing its character as historically Afrological,” just as, say, a Schubert lied sung by Marian Anderson does not lose its character as what Lewis would call historically Eurological (93). And so the blues, to Steven Tracy’s ears, are “twelve sweet measures of humanity large enough to fit us all, but tight like that just the same” (7).

Thus, the crossroads of Robert Johnson are not just a locale where danger and opportunity, this world and the next, life and death, European romanticism and Yoruban gods meet. In the third millennium, the meetings between white and black continue at that same crossroads still, engaging in rituals at once reactionary and visionary, trying to forge a better future but unable to transcend completely the exigencies of the past. And this, then, is perhaps the real abstract truth of the blues.