Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics
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Published by Punctum Books

T.Johnson, Jeff.
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**Genre Trouble**

Blues is a music with trouble on its mind. The concerns and preoccupations of blues address — sing from, sing to — emotional and material conditions that may inform the Trouble Song. The question of who can sing the blues — which people, which culture has a right to the form, or even the mode — gets us into genre trouble, which is where we want to be if we are to locate the Trouble Song transmission in the present. Jones kills two blues with one stone when he writes of “the peculiar social, cultural, economic, and emotional experience of a black man in [1920s] America.” He continues:

The idea of a white blues singer seems an even more violent contradiction of terms than the idea of a middle-class blues singer. The materials of blues were not available to the white American, even though some strange circumstance might prompt him to look for them. It was as if these materials were secret and obscure, and blues a kind of ethno-historic rite as basic as blood. (148)

On one hand, this makes us wonder how to categorize the country blues (and the “Country Blues”) of (white) 1920s Virginia mountain balladeer Dock Boggs. On another hand, we wonder about later blues-inflected singers like Karen Dalton and Chan Marshall, who might be double-struck in Jones’s formulation (“black man”).

As Luc Sante will later do in “The Invention of the Blues,” Jones talks about the blues, in its classic form, having a “twelve-bar, three-line, AAB structure” (Jones 62; cf. Sante 177). Sante

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74 and/or casts genre in the light of cultural critique, if not ethnology
75 trouble, indeed
76 as Greil Marcus characterizes him in Invisible Republic (20)
77 As it is published in his 2007 collection Kill All Your Darlings, the essay carries the compositional date range of 1994–2002.
78 AAB refers to an end-rhyme scheme and verse structure as well as describing the whole-line, perfect-rhyme (repetition)-plus-punchline blues form.
goes on to say, “Although the term ‘blues’ came to be applied to any minor-key lament — in the 1920s and ’30s to almost any kind of song — the authentic blues songs are those that hew to this structure” (177, 178).  

79 No music is authentic for long, and authenticity is a historically acquired quality. And yet, music is made. Songs follow other songs, stealing from one another, appropriating and misappropriating terms (and lines) and forms. Surprise in song is a function of recognition: It is the strange or wayward element, this mismatched detail, the anachronism or stray, the wrongness that fits in a way that changes the blood (flow) of the listener.  

81 The recognizable is made strange, but the strange is also revealed to be recognizable, or rendered as such. As the strange is recognized, it is incorporated into experience. As the song travels, as it is re-encountered, the surprise is transformed into nuance, into style. This is what Sante calls innovation, which is based on deliberate decisions of individual artists, as distinguishable from “the inherited or instinctive moves of people following tradition without questioning or altering it” (196). However, here we also refer to the movement of the song as it finds us here, today. We recognize the way the song has come, to the extent that we know its (and our) history. It is

A classic example is “Downhearted Blues,” written by Lovie Austin and Alberto Hunter, and performed by Bessie Smith:

Trouble, trouble, I’ve had it all my days (A)
Trouble, trouble, I’ve had it all my days (A)
It seems like trouble going to follow me to my grave (B)

In this case, the AAB structure can be described as AAA, in terms of end rhyme (if the days/grave slant-rhyme is recognized). We might imagine an original (here: debut) performance in which the singer calls the A-line, the audience repeats it with her, and the singer answers with the B-line. In that case, we might imagine a floating-lyric composition, where the audience recognizes some or all of the parts — taken from “the great body of ambient tropes known collectively as the folk-lyric” (Sante 185) — but the whole is original.

79 Sante also identifies the structure with “line length of five stressed syllables” (177).

80 As singing changes the flow of blood, bulging the veins of the neck, pouring oxygenated blood on the brain, and as listening affects the heart’s behavior again, the singer is also a listener, the listener a singer.
an artifact covered with fingerprints which texture its surface, and contribute to the depth of its surface. The song sings to what we know, but it also sings the past away, in its insistence that it has come for us, that it came for us all along. That it encodes a past that acts on us is as important in the moment we encounter the song as our apprehension of any turn of phrase or musical gesture. As we sing along, as we carry the song to others, we aid its travel, and we add (our baggage) to its cargo, further burdening it with the marks of our touch.

Blues, whether classic or derivative, sing trouble. In blues, we find Trouble Songs. We also find them in country, in rock, in folk and rap and anywhere else we find songs, and language, and “trouble.” We also find trouble where we cannot locate “trouble.” The Trouble Song is an example, or a mode, more than a genre — just as a particular blues is also a song, one that is perceived within a necessarily limiting generic category, and may be heard outside those bounds. 82 We hear a song as blues until it gets hold of us, and then we don’t care what it’s called. We can only sing. If genre is a claim to contested terrain, the Trouble Song rolls through that terrain, gathering, mulching and fertilizing its grounds. The process does not tend toward purity, but rather admixture and cross-pollination. Borders are traversed, and territories are ultimately reconfigured. Maps, like songs, change.

82 We can also, if only for a moment, hear songs or parts of songs into the blues, even if they float on outside of it. And, of course, we might hear (or sing) the blues as a poem.