

*JIM CROW'S COUNTERCULTURE: THE BLUES
AND BLACK SOUTHERNERS, 1890-1945*

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Given its centrality in African American culture throughout the twentieth century and its fundamental role in the development of contemporary popular music, the study of the blues has attracted scholars from different areas and perspectives. In this process, blues has become both a specialized object of study and a complex source to address a network of issues including, among others, cultural production, “race” relations and politics. *Jim Crow's Counterculture*, an inspiring cultural history tracing the evolution and implications of the genre between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, focuses on blues as a countercultural expressive form combining acceptance and rejection to white supremacy statutes of the segregated era in the United States. Blues musicians, Lawson argues, were countercultural in several ways: they preached an anti-work ethic, communicated through coded language and used music as a means of hedonism and escapism (or social advancement) from their subordinated social and economic positions. Living an itinerant lifestyle mainly within segregated environments where violence, sex and drugs were common, early blues musicians developed an evolving concept of political self that gradually shifted from a singular “me” centered mentality to a more plural “we” centered one, reflecting the growing integration of black Americans in American society.

As the author makes clear in the introductory chapter, his particular approach stems out of his desire to interrogate the middle ground between two distinct camps in blues scholarship that have established a limiting dichotomy between “blues as accommodation” and “blues as resistance.” According to his classification, scholars in the first camp “considered the blues to be an essentially conservative musical tradition, helping the long-oppressed African American population sublimate its anguish and anger in song [...] as individual cries of desperation and resignation” (12). Interested in the blues as an example of threatened folk culture in the wake of urbanism and mass production, this perspective is exemplified by the classic works of John Lomax and Newman White, and by the 1960s folk-blues revival works of Paul Oliver, Samuel Charters and Frederic Ramsey. On the other hand, the second

general perspective saw blues culture as a tradition of “protest, pride, and hope” (14). This is exemplified by the folklore works of Alan Lomax and John Greenway; the blues lyrics analysis by Paul Garon; and the Black Power-related works of Amiri Baraka and James Cone.

The author points out two problems about this polarized interpretation: the heterogeneous nature of the blues and its musicians; and the variation of contents, functions and effects of blues over time. By stating that blues musicians necessarily accepted social norms imposed by Jim Crow while attempting to evade or subvert them, the author brings a subtly revised understanding of blues values and modes of operation. He encounters a point of balance by bringing attention to the overlapping processes of conflict, struggle and liberation that are continuously negotiated in everyday life through discourse and behavior. While Lawson’s theoretical approach may not seem particularly complex or revealing at first, his identification and questioning of binary oppositions within blues scholarship offers a more accurate account of the lives of blues people, while bridging confronted visions. By avoiding a model structural control and determination, he acknowledges the importance of individual and collective agency, without falling into a naïve conception of unrestricted personal freedom.

The book starts with a discussion about the blues profession and the negotiation of “Black Place” during Jim Crow, which serves to introduce the origins of the genre from its African roots to its early commercialization through sheet music and recording companies. It advances by following some of the major historical developments in the first half of the last century and tracing the ways in which blues culture responded: the Great Migration and the transformation of blues in the urban, growingly industrial environment; the experience and effects of World War I in the changing perceptions of black identity within American society; the transformations that came with the unprecedented disasters of the Great Flood and the Great Depression; and the social and cultural changes that accompanied World War II, where the blues counterculture evolved from exclusion to inclusion. In this historical journey, conveniently divided in six differentiated periods, Lawson examines the blues and its linkage to black people in the U.S. in order to obtain evidence of changing lifestyles, identities and cultural forms in relation to the political agenda and the state of “race” relations. He manages to combine informative accounts about the experiences of a wide range of musicians (including Leadbelly, Big Bill Broonzy, Peetie Wheatstraw and Muddy Waters), with an engaging narrative of the wider sociopolitical conditions. The detailed examination of blues lyrics as indicators of the African American experience, sensibility and opinion towards their immediate environment and their place in the national and international sphere, serves as a powerful connector between the macro and micro levels. In this regard, blues music –a flexible, entertaining and empowering cultural force, integrates a

revealing network of voices and themes that combined both frustration and self-affirmation.

The author argues that, while blues continued to represent a counterculture, it gradually evolved towards an increasing engagement with the values of mainstream America. As blues musicians simultaneously negotiated their artistic status and their identity as African Americans through these transformative events, their messages announced “a more positive imagined future in which work, consumption, and stability were valued over vagrancy and avoidance of pain” (167). Until the mid-thirties, “racial” uplift remained a slow yet constant development, and black consciousness gained a certain sense of individual hope and community aspirations. By the forties, World War II promoted a culture of pluralism and, for the first time, many bluesmen incorporated messages of patriotism, self-sacrifice and collective action. Others like Leadbelly or Josh White acquired a more militant stance against Jim Crow and, due to their acoustic style and use of explicitly political verses, became closely associated with the (predominantly white) folk scene, and the civil right movement driven by black leaders and associations.

Overall, *Jim Crow's Counterculture* offers valuable insights about blues history and politics, and about the ways in which the discourses within the genre developed in relation to the contextual experiences. The main idea that cultural production can be seen as a negotiated interplay between accommodation and resistance should certainly be considered and applied to different case studies both in blues history and in other expressions of popular culture. Not only does it fit with W.E.B. Du Bois' influential conception of “double consciousness” in black American life, but it provides a starting point for analyzing the specific ways in which past and present professional musicians and cultural producers often operate within hierarchic organizations and systems and, at the same time, encounter successful and/or creative ways of overcoming barriers and limitations. On the other hand, the book may be criticized for not discussing in greater detail some of the artists or interactions it mentions like the experiences of female blues singers, or the relationship between black musicians and the generally white-owned recording companies. More worrying than this potential absence is the somehow celebratory tone with which the book concludes.

Lawson introduces blues' counterculture of inclusion, as well as the genre's transformation by the “birth” of rock 'n' roll and its overseas expansion, as an unproblematic process in which a goal was reached, but does not suggest any conflicts or tensions in those processes. Since the civil rights movement and the appropriation of blues had not reached its peak and would ultimately prove ambiguous and contradictory, this relaxed, concluding attitude seems premature and is not in synch with his more nuanced development throughout the book. Despite these observations, *Jim Crow's Counterculture* stands as a carefully researched, rigorous and ambitious study. Focused on blues and black southerners, it offers a

complex and polyphonic history about the genre within North American culture, and shows how it was dialectically shaped in relation to some of the major national and international processes until 1945. The rich combination of a clear and exemplified statement with historical description and interpretative analysis will be of interest for researchers in different areas, including blues, folklore and popular music studies, cultural studies, and contemporary history.