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Talkin’ Delta Blues

Who Can Sing the Blues? A Deeper Examination of the

Authenticity of Blues Performances and Blues Works

It is no secret that the blues have had a profound effect on the development of popular music. Artists like the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, Stevie Ray Vaughan, and the White Stripes all owe a great deal to the blues tradition from which they descended. While many thematic and technical aspects of these artists can be traced back to the blues with relative ease, one hesitates to say that mere imitation makes for “authentic blues.” In “Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White People Sing the Blues?” Toel Rudinow offers the position that authentic blues performances are performances which are backed by the credibility of “having the appropriate relationship to the source,” a relationship at once sociocultural and dependent upon the maintenance of certain proper attitudes about the blues (Rudinow 129). While Rudinow eventually reaches the reasonable conclusion that the “stance” of the artist towards the blues is the determining factor in their right to claim authenticity, a deeper examination of the ontology of authenticity, using the work of Stephen Davies in “The Ontology of Musical Works and the Authenticity of their Performances” as a jumping-off point, suggests a very different conclusion.

First and foremost, the intrinsic nature of the blues work, or indeed any work of art as viewed from an abstracted perspective, must be clarified. For the sake of simplicity, this paper will henceforth embrace the view expressed in Nelson Goodman’s *Languages of Art* that a work represents a class and that the performances of that work represent members of that class. By way of illustration, Son House’s “Death Letter” is an abstract object that exists in a state apart from its performances, as they rely upon it for their existence. It is almost certain that all human beings are incapable of seeing into the metaphorical land where works dwell in their true form, therefore seeing as how the only way one might be exposed to a work is through the medium of performance, the only way to get at the nature of a work is through a process of removing the irrelevant aspects of the performances that indicate its existence. This presents a significant hurdle, as without some kind of rubric for determining which components are relevant and which are not, it is not possible to access the work itself, rendering the aforementioned equation quite impossible to solve.

Davies offers a way of surmounting this roadblock, namely that by examining the variations present in a set of performances it is possible to determine those attributes of the work upon which it supervenes. By way of example, many artists have covered “Death Letter.” Taking as a small subset the Son House original (*S*), the Lead Belly version (*L*), and the White Stripes cover (*W*), a reasonable set of attributes necessary to “Death Letter” can be derived. First, it is clear that the lyrics and length of the performance are not among these attributes, as Son House himself often varied these over the course of his performing career, as did the other two artists. Due to the fact that the work did not adhere to a consistent set of notes, owing to its existence within a highly improvisational genre, the ordering and nature of the notes present in the song can also be left out. Second, structure can be discarded, as the ABAB chorus in *S* is not present in *L*, which opts for an AAB structure. The story told in the song is consistent across *S, L,* and *W* (though expressed with different lyrics), so it can be deemed essential. Another commonality is the presence of aggressive clipped downstrokes on the guitar that set the rhythm of the song. The presence of a guitar as the main instrument in the performance can also be included, but can be concluded that is not essential that it be the only instrument present, as a drumkit is present in *W*, or that the type of guitar used matters to the performance, as *W* features an electric guitar whereas *S* and *W* do not. Finally, the manner in which the thread of the song is recovered following these downstrokes by way of a much gentler ascending stream of notes which rise above the note on which the downstroke occurred is similar in *S, L,* and *W*.   
 Davies defines an authentic performance as “[delivery of] that which constitutes the work as the individual which it is,” (Davies 25), which is to say that the authenticity of a performance can be expressed as the ratio P:R, where P is the performance and G is the work, in this case a blues work. Using the above analysis, it is clear that a performance led by a guitar with the same narrative and mood (as expressed by the aggressiveness of the downstrokes and tone of the speaker) would probably qualify as an authentic performance of “Death Letter,” as its P:R ratio would be higher than that of a performance which lacked one or more of these elements. This proposition can be tested in a qualitative manner through a thought-experiment wherein each property is drastically changed (i.e. playing the song on a kazoo, changing the narrative to one about a journey on the railroad, or setting the he mood by a bright upstroke instead of a dark downstroke), with the result that each property is confirmed as being necessary to the work. The relative weights of each component might be determined by another thought-experiment where each component is removed entirely and the impact considered. This process seems to suggest that the instrumentation is less important than the narrative, which is in turn less important than the mood. Unfortunately, as this is a subjective aesthetic judgment, its findings are not particularly useful. Further investigation into the mechanics behind this shortcoming might prove fruitful.

Noting that performances are members of works, it seems that works are similarly members of types. Types, unlike classes, do not derive their identity from their members, though they do have a set of identifiable attributes. An example of this distinction is “The NFL,” which is a type with many members (teams), who all share certain attributes (i.e. 11-having men on defense and offense, adhering to a set of official rules, maintaining a field 100 yards long and 53 yards wide). The individual teams that make up the league do not define the type “The NFL;” these teams have changed multiple times while “The NFL” has remained intact. Likewise, “The Blues,” as well as most genres of art and music, share this structure, albeit in a less quantifiable manner. With this in mind, one can take one step back from “Death Letter,” taking it as a member of the type represented by the overarching work of “The Blues” and examining its relationship with other songs that are also members of the type “The Blues” (**B**). It is not unreasonable to claim that, barring a few outlying cases, the necessary attributes of blues works tend to include the same attributes. While instrumentation (*I*) varies between members of **B**, the vast majority of songs of type **B** rely on instruments pulled from a very small list of instruments: the guitar, harmonica, and piano are by far the most usual, though drums, horns, and bass are also fairly well represented. The mood (*M*) is harder to pin down, as there are many upbeat songs of type **B** that go hand in hand with the sad ones. The narratives (*N*) featured in songs of type **B** are mostly sourced from the trials and tribulations of African Americans living in the South and as time went on, those that they faced in urban centers such as Chicago, though other narratives, such as those of common folk-heroes like Stagolee, do exist. The only unifying characteristic within the diverse moods and narratives at play within **B** seems to be that they are all grounded in the shared cultural experience of the disenfranchised African-American lower class. This suggests the presence of a fourth attribute (*E*) required for the authenticity of the blues located at the type level (i.e. where **B** exists), which might be described as a “blues pedigree,” or as Rudinow puts it, “a proper relationship to the source [of **B**].”

While Rudinow claims that the stance of the performer towards the act of performance determines the authenticity of the performance, the relationship between **B**, its members (songs), and their children (performances) is such that while the songs must have attribute *e* to belong to the genre of the blues, the performances of those songs do not have to have attribute *e* to be authentic performances of the songs to whom they belong. In other words, whereas members of type **B** *must* have *e*, members of class W (blues performances of works) do not share this restriction. Expressed symbolically,

W= {∀x ∈ (*I*x & *M*x & *N*x)}

**B** = { ∀x ∈ (x ∋ W) & *E*x }

This distinction leads to two important discoveries. First, that any performance with properties *I, M,* and *N* is a “blues performance,” and second, that all “blues performances” are not “Blues.” This means that while it is quite impossible to develop a new work in **B** without a proper relationship to the cultural experience that is the wellspring of **B**, it is possible to perform works of type **B** without any such relationship. In other words, Rudinow’s claim that “the authenticity of a blues performance turns…on the degree of mastery of the idiom and the integrity of the performer's use of the idiom in performance” (Rudinow 137), but rather on the authenticity of the work being performed. Any cover of a song in **B** which does not entirely ignore the expression of *I, M,* and *N* central to the work being performed, yet occurs without an understanding of the meaning or cultural heritage behind the work is as much a blues performance as one which occurs with full knowledge and understanding of these attributes.

The conclusion that results from this, then, is that the works which arose from artists such as Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones trying to create new works of type **B** through emulation are not, properly speaking “authentic blues” works. However, their performances of works like “Nobody’s Fault But Mine” and “Rolling Stone” *are* authentic blues performances. Anyone can sing the blues, regardless of race or understanding of the genre, but only people who have Rudinow’s “proper relationship” to the blues can write it afresh in an authentic manner. This is not to say that songs with characteristic similarities to the blues, and songs of typ**e** **B** don’t exist under a further parent kind of “Bluesy Songs,” which might carry with it its own requirements for “authentic bluesiness,” merely that adding to the canon of **B** proper is impossible without true knowledge and experience of the conditions from whence it developed.

Works Cited

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