

Week 1: The Blues

August 14, 2020

Check in regarding course

Goals, expectations, preparation, etc.

Any questions?

Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues*

Transatlantic slave trade

Slaves come from many different regions, embracing linguistic, cultural, and musical diversity.

Africa is enormous

- Senegambia
- Central Africa
- Sub-Saharan Africa



Some rough regional distinctions

1. Senegambia

- Influence of Arab culture – *griot*

2. “Slave Coast”, modern day Zambia/Angola

- Harmonic choral music

3. Congola-Angola, central Africa

- Exceptionally refined vocal polyphony

More on African aesthetics

- African music is “participatory”
 - Music exists *as part of life*
 - Informal, doesn’t happen in “concerts”
- Deals with humor and sex (griot)
- Music is related to speech
- Complex (rather than pure) timbre
- “Swing” – driving rhythmic force

Features of the Blues

1. “The Blue Note”
2. Man-woman relationships
3. Putting someone “on the banjo”

Structure of the Blues

- I-IV-V (1-4-5)
- A-A-B

Example: Victoria Spivey, Black Snake Blues
(1926)

Blue Note

Note quite in tune immediately, a characteristic “scoop,” an informality...

Best illustration:

- After You've Gone, Marion Harris (1918) (1:11)
- After You've Gone, Bessie Smith (1927) (1:10)

Victoria Spivey, Black Snake Blues

Look for AAB form, and
try to hear 1-4-5
progression

Victoria Spivey, Black Snake Blues
(1926) (lyrics approx)

(trombone)

Johnny, blow just like it aint never blowed before

Black snake been stuck in my <rock? Rattle?>

Hear me cry it, lord I mean it

Black snake been stuck in my (rattle stone)?

You can tell by that I ain't gonna stay here long

'Cause my left eye is jumping

And my flesh begins to crawl

I said my left eye is jumping

And my flesh begins to crawl

You can bet my last dollar

There's another mule/woman kickin' in my stall

Oh, I ain't gonna tell you no more

I said oh, I ain't gonna tell you no more

Stay away from my window

Don't you knock at my door

I'd rather be a catfish swimming in the deep blue

Lodged beneath a submarine, behind a floating boat

I'd rather be a catfish Swimming in the deep blue sea

Than to stay in Texas, let 'em try to mistreat me

Oh, I ain't gonna tell you no more

I said oh, I ain't gonna tell you no more

Stay away from my window

Don't you knock at my door

It's a mean black snake that's carried me this gate

Taught me my mistake, treated me hard to take

It's a mean black snake that's doing me this way

If I ever go back south, I'm going back there to stay

Blind Lemon Jefferson, Black Snake Moan (1926)

Same 3-part form

Aaaaah, I ain't got no mama now
Aaaaah, I ain't got no mama now
She told me late last night, "You don't need no mama no how"

Mmm, mmm, black snake crawling in my room
Mmm, mmm, black snake crawling in my room
Some pretty mama better come and get this black snake soon

Ohh-oh, that must have been a bed bug
Baby, a chinch can't bite that hard
Ohh-oh, that must have been a bed bug
Honey a chinch can't bite that hard
Ask my sugar for fifty cents, she said
"Lemon, ain't a child in the yard?"

Mama, that's all right, mama that's all right for you
Mama, that's all right, mama that's all right for you
Mama, that's all right, most seen all you do

Mmm, mmm, what's the matter now?
Mmm, mmm, honey what's the matter now?
Sugar, what's the matter, don't like no black snake no how

Mmm, mmm, wonder where my black snake gone?
Mmm, mmm, wonder where this black snake gone?
Black snake mama done run my darlin' home

Robert Johnson (1911-1938) and Huddie William “Leadbelly” Ledbetter (1888- 1949)

Robert Johnson, mythology

Leadbelly, freed from prison for being such a
wonderful singer

Robert Johnson and Leadbelly, examples

- Robert Johnson:
 - Terraplane Blues, 1936
 - Crossroad, 1936
- Leadbelly:
 - Governor OK Allen
 - Bourgeois Blues – lyrics

Blues throughout the century

The Beatles

The Rolling Stones

Notorious BIG

Justin Bieber

Writing assignment (200 words)

Find a contemporary example of pop music from the US that you think has some “bluesy” elements. Describe those elements, and explain how they are the same and different from the examples we’ve discussed today.

(email to me by Wednesday, August 19)