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## The Blues: Religious or Anti-Religious?

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## **The Blues: Religious or Anti-Religious?**

**Brian Darrith**

Bluesman Cedric Burnside can be heard in the smoky juke joints of Memphis and North Mississippi singing out from behind his drum set, “Some people dislike me/because I sing the blues/a guy put his hands on me/and I knocked him out his shoes/I know we not suppose to fight/but if I had to, I’d do it every day/God, I know it’s wrong/please forgive me for living this way/and I just want to make it in this world” (Burnside, 2007 [in press]). This song, entitled “I Just Want to Make It,” acknowledges violent behavior as wrong yet accepts the reality that fighting is sometimes a necessity; thus, one can only ask God’s forgiveness. Some might consider this acceptance of sin as evil and, worse yet, his sought after forgiveness a mockery to the practice of repentance. Does this text ridicule Christian practices? Is this text anti-religious? On the other hand, does this text genuinely seek atonement for sinful fighting? Is this text religious? To understand the answer to these questions, one must look at the history of blues music to give Burnside’s text a background and setting.

Many scholars have noted that music has been an essential part of black survival and is inseparable from black existence (Cone, 1972, p.1-7). This is because African-American music is founded upon “expressions of the human heart of love, pain, and longing” (Stax Museum, 2007), and this music “moves the people toward the direction of liberation” (Cone, 1972, p. 5). Although many secular and spiritual slave-songs emphasized liberation from slavery, the theme of freedom in Black Music did not end at the Emancipation Proclamation. Wealthy, white landowners still oppressed black people and poor whites via the unfair sharecropping system. Black tenant farmers often did not

produce enough to pay off the white landowner and provide for their families. African-Americans were also subjected to political oppression through Jim Crow laws, which prevented them from taking part in the political process and furthered the idea that African-Americans were inferior citizens. African-American music created after slavery was used as a form of mental liberation and escape from these hardships. James Cone has noted two main forms of African-American music: spirituals and blues (Cone, 1972, pp. 1-4). Spirituals began during slavery and remained a part of later black life. The blues came into existence in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and is based, at least in part, upon the secular work songs of the slaves (Cone 1972, p.109-110). Scholars have noted that blues developed out of a spirit of resistance and were a means of raising social consciousness (Garon, 1975, pp.198-199; Davis, 1998, p. 120). In the oppression of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early twentieth centuries, there were not many avenues to success for African-Americans. Music could provide at least limited social and economic success within the black community. The bluesman thus often became a spokesman for the community (Ferris, 1978, p. 9). Alternatively, preaching in the church could also bring another form of limited success, and the preacher was also a spokesman for the community. As such, the bluesman and the preacher often developed a sort of rivalry, the former being the secular spokesman and the latter being the spiritual spokesman. This rivalry is clearly seen in the fact that the bluesman was often referred to as the “Devil’s Preacher” (Ferris, 1978, p. 81). Many churches forbade any singing or dancing outside of church—although these were an integral part of every Sunday service—and so the blues singers were considered sinful by default (Ferris, 1978, p. 84).<sup>1</sup> These prohibitions, coupled with the sexual and

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that although Ferris refers to dancing in both blues and religious settings, he distinguishes one as religious dance—implying it is quite a different form of dance than that

violent themes often contained in blues texts, readily led to the church community denouncing bluesmen and their music as immoral (Davis, 1998, p. 124). As such, it was often assumed bluesmen had made pacts with the Devil and that these agreements allowed them to play blues (Davis, 1998, pp.123-124; Garon, 1975, pp. 200-201). Many blues musicians even acknowledged their alleged pacts with the devil capitalizing on them for increased notoriety. Among others, Tommy Johnson told the story of meeting the devil at the crossroads about midnight. Supposedly, the devil took his guitar, tuned it, and gave it back to him. From that point on, Johnson could play anything he wanted, but the Devil got his soul in return (Titon, 1994, 31). These stories furthered the image of the bluesman as the “Devil’s Preacher.”

The “sinful” content of the blues is well exemplified by Mississippi John Hurt’s version of “Got the Blues, Can’t Be Satisfied.” Hurt sang of turning to alcohol to cure his blues (“Whiskey straight will drive the blues away”). According to the song, he caught his baby “shakin’ that thing”, and he took his gun and put his baby “six-feet under the ground.” Then he took the man she was cheating with and “cut that joker so long, deep, and wide” (Titon, 1994, 77). In this song can be found the prominent blues motifs of drinkin’, cheatin’, and killin’; these were precisely the sort of texts that made church members declare blues and blues singers sinful, immoral, and hellbound. Because of this sinful nature, many musicians often said that one could not sing both blues and church-music (Ferris, 1978, p. 82). According to bluesman Lee Kizart, the difference between blues and spirituals is that singing the blues is sinning and that singing spirituals is automatically serving the Lord. Arthur Vinson noted that there is “not much difference

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which is associated with the blues. This religious dance or “shouting” is distinct from secular dancing—e.g. there is no crossing of the legs in religious dance or “shouting.”

[in style] between the types of music [blues and spirituals]. It's just where you are and who you're playin' for" (Ferris, 1978, pp. 82-83). Most musicians and scholars seem to be in agreement that blues and spiritual music are very similar in musical style. However, as Vinson noted, the social contexts of the two musics are different. The secular setting of the blues juke joints differed drastically from the religious setting of church music. The differentiation in secular versus religious settings helped maintain Kizart's notion that the blues is automatically sinful and church music is automatically serving the Lord. These sentiments were also expressed by the Reverend Robert Wilkins—a former blues singer—who said that spirituals were of the good spirit and blues of the bad spirit; only one spirit can dwell in the body so one can not sing both. Furthermore, Wilkins suggests that the blues only relieves the natural soul whereas praising God relieves the spiritual soul (Titon, 1994, 33). However, not everyone who thought that the blues was evil avoided the blues. Bluesman Blind Lemon Jefferson refused to sing the blues on Sunday due to its evil nature but had nothing against singing the blues on any other day (Titon, 1994, 33). Although Kizart acknowledged the blues as sinful, he stuck to singing the blues and avoided religious music so as to not take the Lord's name in vain (Ferris, 1978, 82).

The sinful content of the blues and the frequent opposition between the blues and religion has led many scholars to consider blues music and musicians atheistic in nature. According to Garon, "The blues is uncompromisingly atheistic. It has no interest in the systems of divine reward and punishment: it holds out for "paradise now" (1975, p. 148). Garon posits that this antireligious nature of blues stems from the oppressive nature of the church. He argues that the black church not only repressed the sinful behaviors

mentioned above, but also the black people's desire to revolt, accommodating the white powers-that-be (1975, p. 144). The blues, however, is rife with radical themes and so is in immediate tension with the church (Garon, 1975, pp.146-148). Blues is "emphatically materialist," Garon argues, and is against the "earthly representatives" of "heavenly abstractions"—i.e. preachers who represent God (Garon, 1975, 148). The blues is "wholeheartedly *on the side of evil*."<sup>2</sup> The 'devil's music' is the denunciation of everything religion stands for and the glorification of everything religion condemns" (Garon, 1975, p. 148). Garon also explicitly states that the blues should not be considered any sort of secular religion.

In his "My Black Mama—Part I", Son House sang "Hey, tain't no heaven/ Tain't no burnin hell;" Humphrey interprets this as an atheistic proclamation (1993, p. 131). Humphrey then notes the seemingly contradictory nature of the next stanza which asks "Lord Have Mercy." House's "Preachin the Blues" continues the apparent contradictions. He sings, "I'd had religion/ Lord this very day/ But the womens and whisky/ Well, they would not let me pray." Later in the song, House sings "I've got to preach these gospel blues" (Humphrey, 1993, p.131). There certainly seems to be some confusion as to whether this text advocates a belief in a god, is atheist, is antireligious or is religious. This confusion might be better resolved with the help of subsequent scholars' interpretations.

James Cone suggests that the blues does not necessarily reject God, but rather ignore him in order to embrace the current physical existence; according to him, the blues is for the African-Americans who could not embrace a God-centered perspective (1972, pp.108-110). Cone, however, believes that a blues song can be a "secular spiritual." He

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<sup>2</sup> Garon's emphasis.

argues that they are secular in their focus on the immediate and physical, whereas they are “spiritual” in their search for truth in black experience (1972, 112). Cone agrees with Garon that the blues were a sort of rebellion against white domination; they affirmed the worthiness of black people through the use of song, despite the fact that whites treated blacks as subhumans. As Big Bill Broonzy put it, “You never seen a mule sing, have you?” (Bronzy, in Cone, 1972, 117). Cone, as well as Garon, believes that the blues focuses on concrete existence and are not abstract. However, this earthly focus did not lead Cone to declare the blues to be evil. Rather, it is just part of a sad reality (Cone, 1972, p. 122). Blues songs tell of black suffering and are thus not “art for art’s sake” but a “way of life.” And, they do so by rejecting spiritual<sup>3</sup> transcendence and instead support a real, physical transcendence (Cone, 1972, pp. 124-127). The blues questioned the white proclamation that black people were the Lord’s children while these same white people treated them as inferiors. The bluesman was searching for hope and meaning in this subhuman existence (Cone, 1972, pp. 136-138). This hope and meaning did not come from God or any sort of abstract, non-physical existence, but rather from black existence and history (1972, pp.141-142). Cone and Garon agree that bluesmen did not base their hope on God. However, he argues for a spiritual nature of blues, asserting that blues is a “secular spiritual.” This reasoning supports “My Black Mama’s” self-proclamation that it is gospel blues and helps to explain why House’s song rejects heaven and hell but still prays to the Lord.

Ferris sides with Cone, saying that playing the blues could take on the form of a “secular service.” “Consecrated with wine and dance, their performance is a secular

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<sup>3</sup> The adjective “spiritual” will be used to mean “pertaining to the non-physical” and is a distinct term from the “spirituals” as a musical genre. “Spiritual” is also distinct from “religious” in this discussion; “religious” refers to “pertaining to the beliefs or values one lives by.”

service which embraces not only the Sabbath but the complete week.” In these “secular services” blues musicians often “preached the blues” and called upon the Lord for help. According to Ferris, blues is spiritual in nature but depicts black life in a more honest and frank manner than religious music (Ferris, 1978, p. 28).

Angela Davis emphasizes the interrelatedness of blues and church music. She discusses several musicians—such as Ma Rainey—who switched from blues to church music. As a blues singer—before Rainey’s transition to church music—she utilized spiritual themes in her music. Her “Countin’ the Blues” is explicitly spiritual due to its opening phrase, “Lord, I got the blues this morning and I want everyone to go down in prayer, Lord, Lord.” It also utilizes the West African spiritual practice of *nommo* that gives humans a magical potency via ritual naming (Davis, 1998, p.128). Jahn recalls the words of a Yoruba priest which emphasize the importance of naming an entity, “‘Whatever we have a name for, that is;’ . . . Naming is an incantation, a creative act” (Jahn, 1961, p.133). Thus, Rainey’s naming the blues identifies the blues as a potent spiritual entity.<sup>4</sup> However, it is not correct to say that blues served the same spiritual function as church music, as Ma Rainey eventually left the blues for the church. Even a blues singer such as Ma Rainey, who clearly utilized spiritual themes in her blues music, had unfulfilled spiritual needs in her life as a blues singer.

In his *Blues and Evil*, Spencer argues that the blues is essentially religious in nature. As evidence of this, Spencer discusses the frequent “Oh, Lord” (“dear Lawd”, “great God”, “Lord have mercy”, etc.) interpolations that are found throughout the blues. Spencer notes that many scholars have interpreted these as “‘apostrophes’ for the sake of

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<sup>4</sup> In this context, the term “blues” does not refer to the musical genre but the emotional and/or spiritual force which affects people’s demeanors.

emphasis.” Spencer, however attempts to discredit these interpretations by recounting Sonny Boy Williamson’s stabbing. As Williamson lay dying of an icepick wound, he looked to his wife and said, “Lord have mercy” (Spencer, 1993, p. 38). Spencer also notes bluesman James Son Thomas’ assertion that a blues text such as “Lord, I ain’t seen my baby since she been gone,” can easily be changed to “Lord, come and see about me” and that this second text can be sung to the same music as the first text. However, Thomas does this to note the similarities in the musical styles of blues and church music (Ferris, 1978, p. 79). The use of similar musical styles does not necessitate that the use of “Lord” maintain the same meaning. On the other hand, the story of Sony Boy Williamson does give some legitimacy to Spencer’s argument. Spencer suggests that the “Oh, Lord” exclamation is a petition to God by the bluesman in times of trouble, just as a preacher might call on God during hard times (Spencer, 1993, p. 28). It may be objected that since Williamson’s “Oh, Lord” was not part of a blues song but was just a spoken statement there is no grounds to assume that this shows a spiritual side to the blues. However, the sincerity of this “Oh, Lord” would provide some legitimacy to the “Oh, Lord” exclamations found in his blues songs such as “Skinny Woman” and “Until my Love Come Down” (Williamson, 1991 & 1999). Furthermore, Spencer argues that the bluesman “preached” the blues in order to instruct his listeners. In her version of “Preachin’ the Blues,” Bessie Smith, tells her listeners how to save their men—as opposed to their souls—and warns them against taking another woman’s man. Spencer acknowledges Oliver’s interpretation that Smith is singing in a joking manner, making fun of religion, but Spencer asserts that Smith is “preaching” in a serious nature from a “cultural Bible” (Spencer, 1993, pp. 40-41). This “cultural Bible” from which Smith

preaches is exemplified in her “Preachin’ the Blues” text which uses explicitly Biblical language. “Read on down to chapter ten,” Smith sings, “taking other women’s men you are doing a sin” (in Spencer, 1993, 41). Assuming that either Oliver or Spencer is right and the other wrong would be a false dichotomy. Smith may well have been making fun of the church and its preaching regarding saving souls—supporting Oliver’s notion—and simultaneously preaching from a “cultural” bible—supporting Spencer’s interpretation. Smith may have been making light of the church’s emphasis upon heavenly salvation and preaching the means to glorified, earthly living. Spencer even notes that blues singers emphasize the present reality as opposed to the church’s and gospel music’s emphasis upon heavenly glory; he echoes Cone by writing, “preaching the blues’ was coming to grips with the religious meaning of living ‘down here’” (Spencer, 1993, p. 43). Utilizing the example of Bessie Smith, Spencer suggests that preaching the blues was advocating a secular and cultural way of life or “religion” for good living, while disregarding religions which were concerned with good or bad afterlives.

It is important to realize that none of these arguments are conclusive nor are they always mutually exclusive. David Evans noted that many of the arguments concerning the blues and religion seem to be of a “rhetorical nature” (interview with author, 06/29/2007). Additionally, Mark Humphrey suggests that there is not enough known about these bluesmen—some of whom sang both blues and church music—to determine their intentions in these songs. He proposes that religious references could be of genuine religious sentiment or attempts to make profitable recordings—i.e. by cashing in on the success of blues musicians such as Gary Davis who dealt nearly exclusively with religious subjects in their blues’ texts (Humphrey, 1993, 130). It seems certain that blues

fulfilled a religious need for some bluesmen. In commenting upon the blues, Muddy Waters said, "It's from the heart. That's my religion" (Humphrey, 1993, p. 132). Most blues musicians, however, did not state so explicitly that the blues fulfills a religious need. Considering the personal nature of religion, and any sort of spirituality, it would be a gross generalization to assert that all blues musicians had sentiments similar to those of Muddy Waters. It is this sort of generalization that Evans and Humphrey warn against. It is important to note that statements such as Waters' demonstrate that the blues can lend itself to religious sentiments.

It seems that arguments concerning the religious sentiments of individual bluesmen and the religious nature of their songs are better suited than arguments concerning the entirety of the blues genre. General themes may be noted, but it is important to avoid applying these themes universally to all blues music. So the questions "The blues: religious or anti-religious?" or "Can the blues express religious or anti-religious sentiments?" are not going to be directly addressed as there are no definitive answers to these questions which apply to the genre "the blues." Rather, the questions of whether or not individual blues songs are religious or anti-religious will be addressed.

Richard Johnston's "Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning" differs drastically from the spiritual of the same name. The spiritual is found in various versions, but all are based on Matthew 25:1-15. In this parable, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to bridesmaids waiting on their bridegrooms. The foolish maids fell asleep and, as they trimmed their lamps for the arrival of the groom, realized that they did not have enough oil to keep their lamps burning. They left to buy more oil and missed the groom, and the Lord (the groom) rejected them upon their arrival. Except for Johnston's version, songs

by the name “Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning” elaborate on the theme of this parable. Gary Davis’ version consists of a series of commands, each ending with the promise “This old world is almost done” (Davis & Grossman, 2001). Davis instructs, “Keep your lamp trimmed and burning,” “Brother, don’t you keep worryin,” “Father, don’t stop prayin,” “Preacher, don’t stop preachin” (Davis & Grossman, 2001). Davis’ entire song focuses on the hopes of a heavenly future. His commands for the present—i.e. “Keep your lamp...”, etc.—are based upon his promise that “This old world is almost done.” For Davis, the present is defined with respect to an otherworldly future.

Johnston’s song opens with the same line as Davis’, but, from there goes in a radically different direction. “Keep your lamps trimmed and burnin’/ see what my Lord has done,” Johnston sings, “I don’t go to church girl, it don’t mean that much to me/ Well now I don’t go to church and I don’t care if you do/I can treat a stranger every bit as good as you/I’m so happy/ I got me good religion” (Official Bootleg, 2003). This text apparently acknowledges a belief in God but also presents the idea that “good religion” does not necessarily involve the church. Johnston continues the questioning of the church’s importance by proposing that he can treat a stranger as good as a churchgoer can. However, it is important to note that this line is somewhat ambiguous. One interpretation could be: I can treat a stranger every bit as good as you<sup>5</sup> (a churchgoer) can treat a stranger. This interpretation would imply that going to church is not a prerequisite for ethical treatment of one’s fellow man. A second interpretation could be: I can treat a stranger every bit as good as I can treat you (the churchgoer). This would mean that all people—whether churchgoers or not—deserve fair treatment. When asked what this ambiguous line means, Johnston said that either interpretation works. He added that the

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<sup>5</sup> “You” being the girl that goes to church.

first interpretation was his initial implication; it is meant to highlight his belief that Christians don't treat strangers that well. He thinks Christians are scared by things that are different. However, Johnston continued, "When I listened to it a little deeper, it was like 'I have tolerance for these people.'" (Johnston, interview with author, 07/23/07). This statement supports the second interpretation, as Johnston posits his willingness to tolerate all types of people, even those with differing religious beliefs. Johnston continues questioning the church by rejecting the notion of absolute Biblical truth; he sings, "Jonah met the whale and then he's spit right on the shore/I don't believe in fish stories, I don't wanna hear no more" (Johnston, 2003). Johnston proposes a religion which denies the authority of the church and Bible. Such things are unimportant for his proposed religion. It seems Johnston perceives his Lord in that which is around him, and that is why one should keep one's lamp trimmed and burning: to see and enjoy the world around one's self. One's trimmed and burning lamp does not represent his waiting for Christ's return and hope in a heavenly existence, as other versions emphasize. The different moods of the two songs clearly distinguish their differing overall moods. Davis' song is somber and grim, filled with commands, telling the listener what to do. Johnston's song is a personal, first person reflection upon a personal religion. With the exception of the title line "Keep your lamps trimmed and burning, see what my Lord has done", it neither promises nor commands anything. The use of this title line throughout the song emphasizes that Johnston is responding to the older version of "Keep Your Lamps." Indeed, Johnston's focus on his present surrounding is in direct contradiction with Davis' focus on a heavenly future. Davis' song expresses eschatological hope whereas Johnston's expresses present contentment. Johnston uses call and response between the

vocal melody and the slide guitar. Opening with a slide-guitar riff based on the major triad, his voice responds by mimicking this melody. Occasionally, Johnston plays a guitar melody while singing a slightly different vocal melody, creating a heterophonic texture. The percussion accompaniment—mostly high-hat symbols and snare drum—rises and falls with the melody, adding tension and relief as the guitar melody resolves from the dominant seventh to the tonic. The heavy use of the major triad contributes to the feeling of contentment which pervades the song via lyrics and these major tonal qualities. The melodic structure of Davis’s song leans heavily toward the minor side of a typical blues scale, communicating a much more grim perspective. Davis’s rendition opens with a monophonic guitar part followed by a slow, mournful vocal melody, accompanied homophonically by bass-notes on the guitar, lending a feeling of loneliness which pervades the song. Davis’s version occasionally uses heterophony between the guitar and vocal melody. The majority of the song is homophonic, however, with the exception of the frequent monophonic guitar interludes between verses. When the vocal or guitar melody is accompanied by bass-notes on the guitar, the accompaniment is much lower in amplitude so the melody is more apparent, creating a lonely feeling. The stylistic qualities of Davis’ song reflect the meaning of the text—i.e one will transcend sorrow and obtain happiness at the end of this world. The more consonant, major sonority of Johnston’s song reflects his happiness in the present. Johnston’s song exemplifies what many blues scholars argue—the blues ignores eschatological fates and focuses on being happy in the present. However, this does not necessarily mean that Johnston’s song is atheistic or without an ethic as Garon would argue. Johnston refers to “my Lord”—an important distinction from “the Lord”—and this may imply a potent

entity that Johnston acknowledges while denying the traditional God of the Christian church. “My Lord is logic; see what my Lord has done,” Johnston says (Johnston, interview with author, 07/23/07). He believes that his classical education in such disciplines as logic has given him the ability to analyze others’ arguments and beliefs critically and that religion thrives on masses of people who are not fortunate enough to have this education or critical ability. “Religion has just completely fucked up this world,” he says, and educating people so they can think for themselves in a logical manner is the path to improving the world (Johnston, interview with author, 07/23/07). Johnston refers to himself as an “agnostic, atheistic blues player” and he does not believe in any forces which are not reducible to physical laws<sup>6</sup>. So Johnston does not adhere to any traditional religion, yet he has his own religion of logic. This religion has its own ethical system which is portrayed in his song. “I can treat a stranger every bit as good as you;” if one considers both interpretations of this line, Johnston proposes a humanist ethic—i.e. one not based on a non-physical, divine entity—in which all people should be treated fairly without concern for religion.

“Lord Have Mercy,” written by Junior Kimbrough and recorded by the North Mississippi Allstars on their album *Phantom 51*, requests forgiveness for wrongdoings and is a plea to the Lord for assistance (North Mississippi Allstars, 2001). “Oh, Lord have mercy on me,” Luther Dickinson sings, “If I done anybody wrong, I cry, ‘Oh Lord, have mercy on me.’” The text also reflects the theme of redemption, “Used to be a bad boy, troubles always chasin’ me, it really got me down. . . I fell down on my knees and I cry, ‘Oh Lord, Have Mercy on me.’” This text presents the story of the prodigal son,

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<sup>6</sup> Johnston is quick to point out that although we can not now understand all forces acting in this world, if we begin pursuing these questions in a logical as opposed to faith-based manner we will be able to account for all forces in this world with physical laws.

which pervades both many blues texts and the lives of many bluesmen. Reverend Robert Wilkins was a blues singer before becoming a minister in the Church of God in Christ. “That’s No Way to Get Along”, one of his most famous songs, was recorded in Memphis in 1929. In this song, he tells of how the “low down women” treated him so wrong that he wished he’s “dead and gone” and “that’s no way for me to get along” (Wilkins, 1989). In this secular song, Wilkins uses a prevalent blues motif of how bad women will make a man’s life miserable and how one must overcome these women by separating from them. Once Wilkins became a Church of God in Christ pastor in 1950, he refused to sing his old blues songs (Spencer, 1993, p. 65). When asked to record such songs as “That’s No Way to Get Along,” Wilkins would rewrite them as religious songs. “That’s No Way to Get Along” became “The Prodigal Son;” in this version Wilkins tells the parable of the Prodigal Son as found in Luke 15:11-32 (Wilkins, 1965). This parable tells of a son who leaves his father to “make it” on his own, and then, after squandering all his wealth, returns to his father broke and hungry. The father then rejoices at his sons return and prepares a feast to celebrate. Wilkins’ recording of the “The Prodigal Son” reflects the story of his own life—his departure from religion into the world of blues juke joints and his return to the church. Wilkins’ song sticks close to the original parable presented in Luke, and the only textual remnant of his original song “That’s No Way to Get Along” is the last line of verses 1-4 and 7. This line moves from the son leaving his home in verse 1 while stating, “That’ll be the way to get along” to the son being broke and hungry in verse 4 and saying, “That ain’t no way to get along.” In the final verse of the song, the father orders the preparation of the feast saying, “Kill that calf and call the family round/My son was lost but now is found/Cause that’s the way for us to get along”

(Wilkins, 1965). In both “Lord Have Mercy” and “The Prodigal Son,” the protagonist reflects upon his bad behavior and changes his ways. Spencer argues that bluesmen maintained a consciousness of sin and that this consciousness drove many bluesmen to give up the blues for the church or give up the church for the blues (Spencer, 1993, pp.53-56). Wilkins certainly exemplifies Spencer’s notion in both his life and his song “The Prodigal Son.” However, the North Mississippi Allstars did not give up singing secular blues songs even though their “Lord Have Mercy” certainly displays a consciousness of sin. “Lord Have Mercy” also focuses on the secular theme of sensual pleasure. Dickinson sings, “Write to my mama, ‘Mama, please deliver me home. Way I feel, Doctor can’t do me no good’” (2001). Dickinson’s text not only calls upon the Lord for deliverance and mercy but also seeks relief in the sensual pleasure that can only be provided by the lover of the song’s narrator. The North Mississippi Allstars also sing several secular blues songs such as “Shake ‘Em on Down” and “Po Black Mattie” in addition to the more religious songs such as “Lord Have Mercy”, “Ship”, and “Circle in the Sky.” The texts of both “Ship” and “Circle in the Sky” place hope in the otherworldly future on which Davis’ song “Keep Your Lamps” focuses. “Waitin’ for my ship, waitin’ for my ship, waitin’ for my ship to come in,” Dickinson sings, “They’ll be no trials and tribulations, they’ll be no trials and tribulations, they’ll be no trials and tribulations when my ship comes in” (North Mississippi Allstars, 2001). Dickinson echoes this sentiment in “Circle in the Sky”, “Circle in the sky, take me home on high” (North Mississippi Allstars, 2001). This hope in an abstract, eschatological future seems at odds with Cone’s argument for the blues as a “secular spiritual “ which focuses on one’s current physical existence while ignoring any otherworldly future. The text of “Lord Have

Mercy,” in addition to North Mississippi Allstars’ other secular and religious songs, is concerned with otherworldly futures as well as current physical realities.

One of Robert Wilkins’ young church musicians, Memphis Gold (Chet Chandler), recorded a significantly different version of “Prodigal Son.” Memphis Gold introduces the song, half speaking and half singing, “People, Let me tell you about what a man have to do sometimes/He might have to leave, he always ends up back home/You know sometimes he’ll leave with something, but he might come back with nothing/And People let me tell you today, I had to come back that way/And here’s my story” (Chandler, 2004). Chandler’s introduction sets an entirely different tone than that of Wilkins’ “The Prodigal Son.” It presents the idea that a man has to leave home sometimes, implying that it would be abnormal for a man to fight this urge. Wilkins’ song and the parable in Luke, however, suggest that the son leaves home in his youthful ignorance. Then Gold begins singing the verses to “The Prodigal Son”:

I am the prodigal son on my way back home. (2x)

Well I lived a thousand lifetimes, a new one every day.

People be oohh, so mean, say play the blues all over the world. (2x)

I am that prodigal son, on my way back home.

I’m at that fork in the road, Lord I don’t know which way to go. (2x)

Well I got these six women, I’m looking for a long happy home.

I got this voodoo woman, way down in yazoo city, usa. (2x)

Well she try to put voodoo on me, I put the curse on her.

I'm at that fork in the road, Lord I don't know which way to go. (2x)

Well I got these six women, I'm lookin for a long happy home.

I am that prodigal son on my way back home. (2x)

I am that prodigal son, on my way. (Chandler, 1994)

The statement “a thousand lifetimes, a new one every day” is reminiscent of Wilkins’ story of the returned and redeemed son or the North Mississippi Allstars’ story of leaving one’s bad ways to cry for the Lord’s mercy. However, Gold’s life-changing experience does not seem to be as clear-cut as those depicted by Wilkins or the North Mississippi Allstars; in Gold’s song a new lifetime is lived everyday, suggesting that any repentance from any evil ways is not entirely definite. Gold continues the uncertainty by saying he is at a “fork in the road, Lord, I don’t know which way to go.” The fork seemingly splits the paths to sensual pleasure and to holy living as Gold says in the next line “I got these six women, I’m looking for a long happy home.” Similar lines are found in other blues songs such as Son House’s “Preaching Blues,” “I wish I had me a heaven of my own. . . .” The song suggests that a “long happy home” would be found by taking the path of sensual pleasure with his six women. This would certainly exemplify Cone’s idea of the blues rejecting abstract spiritual transcendence in favor of immediate, physical pleasures. On the other hand, Gold acknowledges that he does not know whether he wants this life

of physical pleasures or one of a more holy existence—the sort of existence pursued by the prodigal son of Wilkins and Luke.

Gold openly criticizes the church and preachers in his “Preacher Blues” (Chandler, 2004). In it Gold sings that his baby is leaving him for a preacher and that he hopes the preacher treats her right—that the preacher is not a “heartbreak in disguise.” Chandler suggests that the preacher is not only fallacious in his romantic intentions but also a thief; he sings, “You wanna watch your pocketbook if he say anything about payin’ your tithes” (Chandler, 2004). The song ends with a spoken passage:

First thing Sunday morning here she go runnin out the door, you see Reverend Elmo, he got a two member church, just him and her, some kind of convocation, huh. But you know what y’all, I’m going right down to that church house, and I’m gonna stick a shotgun in that door and I’m gonna tell Reverend Elmo to send that ho’ fo’ on out that door. Yeah, Yeah, Yeah. She been stayin’ out all night, you know she ain’t right. Forgive me this thing, cause I might trespass against her, and lead me not into temptation. cause I got evil, evil, evil, on my mind evil, evil, evil, evil, evil on my mind. I got evil yall, evil, evil, evil, evil, evil. You need to leave that preacher alone and come on back home (Chandler, 2004).

Gold readily discusses the “sinful” behavior of church members and pastors, however, he says that this was going on mostly in the Baptist church, and Reverend Elmo is a Baptist preacher (Chandler, interview with author, 07/16/07). Having been raised in the Church of God in Christ, Gold says he was raised to believe that smoking, drinking, cursing, and blues-playing is evil. According to Gold, this was not taught in the Baptist church.<sup>7</sup> As Gold said, “Go to one of those ole Baptist churches and you might see some of them old

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<sup>7</sup> Of course this comment is controversial and the opinion of Memphis Gold, not the author.

guys there chewing tobacco or they might be, some lady might be dippin' snuff.

Somebody may be takin' a little nip of whiskey on the side; but, you probably never find that in the Church of God in Christ" (Chandler, interview with author, 07/16/07). Despite this conservative upbringing which forbade the young Chester Chandler to play blues music, he secretly played in blues bars around Memphis by the age of 15.<sup>8</sup> He was also playing in the New Prospect Church of God in Christ at this time with his father and the Reverend Robert Wilkins. Even at such a young age, Gold was a living example of the blues musician who plays the juke joint on Saturday and playing in church on Sunday. Throughout Gold's life there has been conflict between blues and church music. Gold acknowledges that his Pentecostal family still does not approve of his blues playing, but he says "Being influenced by growing up in the Church of God in Christ, it just won't let me do everything I want to do, you know, it's like a veil that's over me that prevents me from doing the wrong stuff" (Chandler, interview with author, 07/16/07). "I know the right way but I think I've come a long way to not let the music take me into a perspective of being hellbound" (Chandler, interview with author, 07/16/07). Gold still considers otherworldly futures in his music and he finds a way to make his music coexist with his religious beliefs. Yet Gold's text does not present certainty in religious beliefs. "In the back of my mind there is this little guilt trip that, I'm wondering, am I really playing the right music?" Gold says, "Should I be playing church music? I live with this almost everyday" (Chandler, interview with author, 07/16/07). When asked if Gold has had any drastic conversion experiences, he said, "Yeah, I have them all the time" (Chandler, interview with author, 07/16/07); hence Gold has lived a thousand lifetimes with a

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<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note that this is at odds with what Gold says is taught in the Church of God in Christ but not taught in the Baptist church—namely, that blues-playing is evil.

thousand different conversion experiences. Gold's inner controversy surrounding his religious beliefs is fueled by his strict Church of God in Christ upbringing and familial influences. "I can't talk with them [my family] without them saying, are you saved yet?" Gold says, "Yeah I'm saved, cause I do believe in Jesus Christ" (Chandler, interview with author, 07/16/07). Considering Gold's response to his family, one would be hard-pressed to take his addresses to the Lord in verses 3 and 5 of "Prodigal Son" to be meaningless interjections. It seems clear that Gold must be calling on the Lord for assistance with the decision-making that takes place at such forks. This helps to support Spencer's argument that the "Oh Lord" phrases are a significant indicator of the spiritual nature to the blues. On the other hand, it is important to avoid generalizing from the one example of Memphis Gold to all blues music.

Corey Harris has recorded several older spiritual songs such as "Didn't my Lord Deliver Daniel" and "Keep Your Lamps Trim and Burning." He has also recorded a version of the blues song "Preaching Blues." The first two songs have themes similar in their hope of divine and heavenly deliverance. The text of "Keep Your Lamps Trim and Burning" has some important differences from the Gary Davis version discussed above:

Keep your lamps trim and burning. (3x) See what my lord has done.

Brother, don't get worried. (3x) See what my lord has done

Well here I stand, waitin for the lord. (3x) See what my lord has done.

Deacon, don't get worried. Brother, don't get worried. Elder, don't get worried.  
See what my lord has done

Well heaven's journey almost over. (3x) See what my lord has done.

Hey, hey, hey don't get worried. Brother, don't get worried. Brother, don't get  
worried. (Harris, 1995)

The first two verses are similar to those of Gary Davis. However the third and fifth verses do not resemble any verses found in the Gary Davis' version. Both emphasize eschatological hope—hope in the Lord's deliverance from the misery of current existence into the promise land of future. Verse 3 expresses a time of passive waiting for divine action, which fits in with the song's overall theme of preparation for the Lord's arrival. Harris also sings, "Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel/ Didn't my Lord/ Why not every man?/He delivered Daniel from the Lion's Den/ Jonah from the belly of the whale/ And the Hebrew children from the fiery furnace/ Why not every man?" (Harris, 2000). Why would the Lord not deliver every man? This must be the question that plagues all people that are suffering. Why would the Lord not deliver every man? If the Lord delivered Jonah after only three days, why has the Lord not delivered the suffering people of today? "Didn't My Lord" expresses a hope in the Lord that does not ring with as much confidence as "Keep Your Lamps." It is important to note that the fact that Harris sings these songs does not mean that his personal interpretation of the text is the same as the traditional Christian interpretation. Harris' personal emphasis is not upon a heavenly

salvation, but deliverance from earthly troubles. For Harris, there is enough “positive and negative energy” on earth so he sees no need to believe in the “myths of heaven and hell.” “It’s gotta be something we can use. People use so-called religion to hold others down” (Harris, interview with author, 07/25/07). Harris views the “Devil” as the “embodiment of all negativity,” and, for Harris, this removes the “Devil” from the realm of the abstract into a concrete, earthly existence. His concept of the “Devil” does not emphasize an entity to be feared—or an entity which should “hold you down” in fear of damnation—but one to be avoided due to its inherent negativity.

Harris applies this concept of the “Devil” in his version of “Preaching Blues.” His song is based upon Son House’s “Preachin Blues” and “Preaching the Blues (part II).” Harris sings:

Well I get my religion, join the Baptist church. (2x)

I’m gonna be a Baptist preacher, so I don’t have to work.

Oh Lord, I wish I had me a heaven of my own. (2x)

Well I would give all of my women a long happy home.

Well I met the blues one morning, (what he was doin now), you know he  
was walking like a man.

Well I met the blues walkin like man. (yeah, what ya tell him)

Well I said, “Good morning, blues (what), why not give me your right  
hand.”

Yeah I saw the devil one morning, walkin like a natural man.(2x)

He had a badge on his chest and a pistol in his hand.

I went in my room, you know I bow down to pray.

Oh I went in my room, I bow down to pray.

But the women and the whiskey, good god, well they blowed their spirit  
away.

I'm gonna preach these blues, chose my seat and sit down.

Ohhh, preach these blues, choose my seat and sit down.

But when the spirit comes, want you to jump straight up and down. (Harris,  
1997)

Every verse but the fourth is based upon Son House texts. Verse 4 tells the listener that the badge-wearing representatives of the law, with their abundance of negative energy, can be the devil incarnate. Harris' religion focuses on present, practical uses of religious entities and the devils on earth which should be avoided. The fifth verse tells of the struggle between piety and immediate pleasure. This verse is representative of the struggles of many bluesmen to incorporate the religion of the church with their love for blues music and the lifestyle that often went with it. Harris interprets this Son House text as "presenting the fullness of what's going" and acknowledging that some people are not only partying at juke joints but also going to church (Harris, interview with author, 07/25/07). In Harris' music, we hear traditionals—sung in a blues style—advocating

traditional Christian messages such as heavenly salvation. Harris, however, does not interpret these texts in a traditional manner, but this does not imply Harris or his music is atheistic. Rather, Harris uses traditional, religious themes in his music while advocating his personal form of religion which seeks to avoid holding others down. Harris' relation to his music is a great example of why one must avoid taking a musician's text at face-value and interpreting it as the musician's personal point of view. Some might use this to discredit the bluesman's "Oh Lord" interjection saying it is not the "Lord" he is calling on but some other, anti-religious entity. It is unreasonable, however, to assume that all people—bluesmen and otherwise—would have the same exact conception of the "Lord." The bluesmen's maintaining their own personal notions of divine powers<sup>9</sup> does not imply any sort of atheistic or evil beliefs.

The verse of "I just want to make it" transcribed in the first paragraph of this essay was written by Cedric Burnside after meeting a Christian at a Burger King restaurant. "This guy, he was suppose to be a Christian, goin' to church and everything," Burnside says, "I told him I play blues, then he told me, 'awww no man.' He wasn't cool with me no more. He was like, 'You got to cross over to the other side, brother. That's not right, you playing the devil's music'" (Interview with author, 7/26/07). The notion that blues is the "devil's music" is still found in the southern black church and still confronts blues musicians today. However, Cedric Burnside has not given up his blues for gospel music like some earlier musicians such as Robert Wilkins. Burnside says, "I love playin the blues, and I know that I'm going to play the blues for the rest of my life. . . I just hate that people feel that way [that blues is the devil's music]" (Interview with

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<sup>9</sup> I.e. Notions distinct from the traditional interpretations of divine power found throughout religion.

author, 7/26/07). Although Burnside is dedicated to blues music and never plans to give it up, this does not mean he has compromised his religious values.

“I love God and I love Jesus Christ. I don’t go to church as often as I should. Matter of fact, it’s been a while since I went to church. But I still believe in God. I wake up every morning and I pray. We all children of God. I have been baptized, and I love God, Jesus Christ. I think he gave me my talent to play blues because that’s what he wanted me to do with it. If he didn’t want me to play the blues, he wouldn’t of gave me the talent to do it” (Burnside, interview with author).

Burnside addresses the accusation of sin made by the Christian at Burger King. Burnside believes his talent for playing the blues is God-given and thus he uses this talent, as God would want him to. It is interesting to note how the supposed devilish inspiration of many bluesmen has fueled the belief that blues is the “devil’s music.”<sup>10</sup> Since Burnside claims a divine inspiration for his music, it is reasonable to expect his music to have some religious content. Some might argue that if Burnside were genuine in these Christian sentiments, he would not so readily accept his sinful behavior, as the text of “I Just Want to Make It” expresses. This acceptance, however, can be understood as the acceptance of life’s reality. “Ain’t nobody perfect,” Burnside says. “I know a lot of the things that I do, they might not be the right things to do. But, sometimes we find ourselves in that situation” (Interview with author, 07/26/07). Sometimes the realities of one’s existence allow no feasible alternative to behaviors deemed sinful by the Christian church. Burnside’s text reflects this, “When I write my music I try to write it to the way I live” (Interview with author, 07/26/07). So, is Burnside’s music anti-religious or

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<sup>10</sup> See the Tommy Johnson story on p. 3.

religious? Is blues anti-religious or religious? To declare his music either anti-religious or religious would be much too clear-cut. His text certainly expresses genuine religious sentiment when he asks for God's forgiveness. On the other hand, his religious opinions don't necessarily fit into the religion advocated by the Christian church, certainly not the church of the man at Burger King. Burnside's music certainly does not conform to Garon's interpretation of the blues as "atheistic" and "wholeheartedly on the side of evil" (Garon, 1996, p.148). On the other hand, the title line "I'm just trying to make it in this world" seems to support the arguments of Garon, Cone, Ferris, and Spencer. Burnside and his text are very much concerned with his current, physical existence in this world, and Burnside often sings about physical pleasure—e.g. the text of his song "My Girl" says, "I get a little before I doze off" (2007, In press).

In a similar manner, the music of Memphis Gold and North Mississippi Allstars is certainly not atheistic or evil, yet is concerned with both earthly existences and heavenly futures—as expressed in the secular and redemptive themes of "Prodigal Son" and "Lord Have Mercy." Gold, the North Mississippi Allstars, and Burnside all exemplify Ferris's assertion that the blues depicts black life more honestly than religious music. This idea is echoed by Corey Harris in his aforementioned interpretation of Son House's "Preaching Blues"—blues music presents people's lives in a fuller and more frank manner than church music. Johnston's music is the most anti-religious of the songs discussed. He proudly claims his atheistic, anti-Christian beliefs and is certainly against heavenly abstractions; so, his music provides some support for Garon's argument. However, Johnston and his music are certainly not on the side of evil. His song proposes an ethic

and value system that reflects his personal beliefs. So, his song proposes a personal religion.

It was previously stated that the blues—as a genre—could not be determined religious or anti-religious due to the unique nature of musicians and their songs. This does not mean, however, that individual songs could in fact be established as religious or anti-religious. The majority of the texts discussed do have components that go against the grain of established religion. However, these songs also are religious in the sense that they relate to the musician's personal belief systems and values.

Like any art form, the blues has the capacity to express the full range of human experiences, beliefs, emotions, and values. To assert that the blues is either religious or anti-religious would be to arrest the blues in one area of the human experience. As any person, a blues musician may waiver from devout religious beliefs to sentiments which question and oppose religion in a hostile manner. This wide range of emotions can be expressed through the bluesman's music. Blues songs may articulate a belief in a conventional religious system or question and even reject a conventional religious system in favor of a unique system of personal values. While blues songs certainly can be used to express hostility to Christianity and religion in general, questioning of conventional religious values and assertions of doubt are not necessarily expressions of evil or of atheism.

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