


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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In Search of the Blues  
Marybeth Hamilton

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## About the Book

Everyone knows the story of the Delta blues, with its fierce, raw voices and tormented drifters and deals with the devil at the crossroads at midnight. In this compelling book, Marybeth Hamilton radically rewrites that story.

Archaic and primeval though the music may sound, the idea of the 'Delta blues' emerged in the late twentieth century, the culmination of a longstanding white fascination with 'uncorrupted' black singers, untainted by the city, by commerce, by the sights and sounds of modernity. Written with exquisite grace and sensitivity, at once historically acute and hauntingly poetic, the book is an extraordinary excavation of the blues mystique and provides a deeper understanding of the place of the blues within wider American culture.

## About the Author

Marybeth Hamilton was born in California and teaches American history at Birkbeck College, University of London. She is the author of *When I'm Bad, I'm Better: Mae West, Sex and American Entertainment*.

ALSO BY MARYBETH HAMILTON

*When I'm Bad, I'm Better: Mae West, Sex and American  
Entertainment*

*For Jackson and Lukas*

MARYBETH HAMILTON

# In Search of the Blues

Black Voices, White Visions

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London



The ruins of a bridge, Mississippi Delta



## Chapter One

### The Delta Revisited

ON OLD HIGHWAY 61 in Mississippi, between Lula and Robinsonville in the heart of the Delta, stand the remains of a wooden railroad bridge partially submerged in a murky swamp. The air enveloping the bridge is sticky and fetid, thick with the smell of decayed vegetation, and the dark, stagnant water stretches far into the distance, flooding the banks, engulfing the trees. To look at the scene is to peer at an eerie, apparently timeless landscape, primordial and untouched by history, the world Noah might have glimpsed after the flood.

I photographed this bridge in May 1999 while driving south through the Mississippi Delta, aware all the while of following a well worn and cliché-ridden trail. The trek through the Delta in search of the roots of the blues has been a trope of music writing since the early 1960s, the opening years of the blues revival,<sup>1</sup> when white Americans and Europeans rediscovered a music that African Americans had long left behind. My aim in coming to the Delta was, I thought, more sophisticated: to get a handle on the pilgrim experience, to reconstruct the breathless hunt for the blues's authentic origins. And yet here I was, slamming to a halt on a desolate highway, bewitched by the sight of that decaying bridge, transported into what felt like a mystical landscape, a world frozen outside the passage of time.

The tale of the Delta as a land outside history was told by the area's earliest boosters: turn-of-the-century railroad entrepreneurs, who seized upon a region that had only just been opened for agriculture - as late as 1860, ninety per cent of the Delta was covered in swamps<sup>2</sup> - and wrapped it in the romantic imagery of the Old South. 'Nowhere in Mississippi have antebellum conditions of landholding<sup>3</sup> been so nearly preserved as in the Delta,' rhapsodised the Illinois Central Railroad in 1910. 'The Negro is naturally gregarious in instinct, and is never so happy as when massed together in large numbers, as on the Delta plantations.' That tale - framing the Delta as 'the Old South reincarnate', with its unspoken assurances of subservient darkies - was given a more sinister cast by the anthropologists who flocked to the region in the mid-1930s.<sup>4</sup> Those observers - John Dollard, Hortense Powdermaker, Allison Davis, all of them Northern and, in Davis's case, black - painted a stark, vivid portrait of a land of unparalleled brutality, marked by naked extremes of wealth and destitution and by caste domination in its most blatant forms.

Yet none of those descriptions of the Delta landscape was as luminous as that set out in the blues revival. The 1960s saw a flood of record collectors and folk-music enthusiasts head south from Memphis and north from Vicksburg armed with tape recorder, camera and notepad, determined to cut through the dross churned out by the commercial record companies and capture the sound of the real thing. The real thing was the Delta blues, the name they devised for the intense voices they found on scratchy 78s and newly issued LP compilations: singers like Son House, Skip James, Charley Patton and Robert Johnson. What distinguished the music, above all, was the arresting character of the singing. 'Rough, spontaneous, crude and unfinished',<sup>5</sup> dominated by 'stark, unrelieved emotion', this was an intense distillation of the music of slavery, 'only a

step from the wordless field cries and hollers of an older generation'. In those recordings these new listeners heard the birth of the blues: impassioned voices echoing with pain and privation, emanating from a flat, waterlogged, primitive landscape seemingly untouched by the modern world.

As I made my way south - past the bridge to Clarksdale, Tutwiler, Itta Bena, Parchman, all the places whose names resonate in accounts of blues history - I found myself wholly caught up in that story. Everywhere seemed to demand to be photographed, as my trek was punctuated by enchanted moments when the Delta looked as it was supposed to: trees submerged in water, crumbling sharecroppers' cabins, arid fields under a moonlit sky. At some level I knew that these photos were hackneyed, that they had been taken by every blues pilgrim before me. But the power of the tale was too strong to resist, that sense of stepping out of history, and entering a mythic, primordial world.

It took several months for the spell to be broken. Over time, once I'd returned to a frenetically urban, post-industrial London, that railway bridge began to tell a new tale and I came to see the hand of modernity in my photograph. In the swamp's stagnant water, I saw commercial land clearance:<sup>6</sup> the process, which had absorbed the efforts of thousands of black workers in the late nineteenth century, of draining some areas and engulfing others to open the Delta for cotton crops. And in the submerged bridge I saw remnants of the rail network that had connected the Delta to Chicago in the early twentieth century. If every landscape is a work of the mind, shaped by the memories, the obsessions, of its observers, these were memories that had been pushed to the margins: a Delta determinedly touched by history, manipulated by commerce and machines.

I first heard of the Delta blues sometime around 1977, when I was going to high school in San Diego, about as far south-west as you can get in America without crossing the Mexican border. The school was dominated, in ways more and less tangible, by the presence of the Pacific Ocean. If you sat high enough in the football bleachers you could see the breaking waves. I did not surf or spend much time on the beach or go on dates or to parties or dances. As a child I had thrown myself into fleeting, solitary obsessions (Scout Finch, Eleanor Roosevelt, Anne Frank, Pauline Kael), and in my early teens I discovered music. My initial passion was for the New York Dolls, whose songs sounded rough and unfinished, partly because they could just about manage their instruments, and who appeared on the cover of their first album in drag, their faces slathered in pancake make-up, the band's name scrawled across the top in lipstick.

At first this obsession was solitary too, but eventually I found friends who shared it, some my age and some a bit older, who had dropped out of college or never bothered to go. On Saturday nights five or six of us would cram into a Volkswagen Beetle and drive to Los Angeles to the Whiskey a Go Go to see and hear whoever was playing: Patti Smith, Talking Heads, the Ramones, Blondie, the Germs, the Screamers, the Dickies, X. We were a cohort who considered ourselves an avant-garde. Our bible was *Creem*, an iconoclastic compendium of salacious party gossip and flamboyantly articulate record reviews published monthly out of a commune in Detroit. Like most of the *Creem* writers, we took pride in the fact that the stuff we listened to was too edgy and raw for the radio to handle (though once, en route to LA, we heard a local AM radio station play 'Pretty Vacant' by the Sex Pistols, and in the shock and exhilaration that followed we almost careened off the road).

One day at the library I saw that a writer whose name I knew from *Creem*, Greil Marcus, had published a book called *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music*. I took it home and spent a week reading it. Though his subjects were, by and large, musicians I didn't particularly care about, the book made surprising connections - between Randy Newman and Herman Melville, or Elvis Presley and the Puritan Jonathan Edwards, who left his mark on American history with a fire-and-brimstone sermon called 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God'. Marcus explored the ways in which the greatest rock artists, like the greatest writers, reworked enduring American stories. At their best and most risky, they contested 'the very idea of America',<sup>7</sup> teasing out its dark undercurrents and exposing something 'complicated, dangerous, and alive'.

Most dangerous of all was a musician Marcus profiled early on, a Mississippi blues singer named Robert Johnson. I had never heard his name before, and even Marcus knew only the barest facts of his life: that he was born in 1911 and died violently and mysteriously in 1938. But it was his music that mattered: the twenty-nine songs he recorded in 1936 and 1937, songs that loomed over every blues singer and every rock and roller that followed, because they went further than any artist had dared into the underside of the American dream. Johnson sang of 'a world without salvation, redemption, or rest',<sup>8</sup> of anguished, incessant wandering, of being pursued by baying hellhounds, of Satan knocking at his door. While blues in general 'made the terrors of the world ... more real',<sup>9</sup> Johnson's made them more real than anyone else's. His greatest recording, 'Stones In My Passway', was 'a two-minute image of doom'<sup>10</sup> that has the power to make doom a fact'.

This was serious, weighty stuff. Whatever unvarnished truth I was hearing in punk, it seemed Robert Johnson had got there first, and in his shadow everything else became

play-acting, flimsy, trifling, inconsequential and fake. Reading about him left me feeling challenged and, in some obscure way, affronted. Marcus's rhapsodic praise of the tormented drifter seemed somehow to exclude me, as a woman if nothing else. Perhaps that was why it took me fifteen years to get around to listening to Johnson's recordings, and why, when I did, I heard very little, just a guitar, a keening vocal and a lot of surface noise. I certainly did not hear the tale of existential anguish that Marcus and others discerned within them. I wondered if this revealed some defect in me, or if there might be another blues story to tell.



As it is ordinarily told, the story of the Delta blues has a prelude of sorts in August 1920, with the release of 'Crazy Blues' by Mamie Smith<sup>11</sup> and her Hot Jazz Titans, the first blues recording by an African American singer. Though sold almost exclusively in black areas and steeply priced at one dollar (by contrast, admission to the motion pictures cost ten cents), 'Crazy Blues' stunned virtually everyone by selling hundreds of thousands of copies, 75,000 in its first month of release. Its success revealed the scale of a musical market that the recording industry had long refused to believe could exist. That African Americans would buy phonograph records in disproportionate numbers became startlingly audible in those last weeks of summer: people said that you could hear Mamie Smith's recording playing in every black neighbourhood in the US.

# MAMIE SMITH

## The Records Most in Demand

**Mamie Smith,  
Your Best Seller**

The sales value of a MAMIE SMITH record is emphasized daily by the fact that there is a noticeable steady demand, and that this demand grows with each new release of a MAMIE SMITH record.

Because she has developed an individual manner of singing Blues, she stands apart and above other Blues interpreters.

MAMIE SMITH has an ability for vocal characterization that has won her the title of "Queen of Impassioned Harmonies."

Are you hearing MAMIE SMITH?  
Are you keeping your stock supplied so that you may take care of every request?  
Hear her on all MAMIE SMITH records.  
Then enter a MAMIE SMITH campaign.



**Mamie Smith  
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Enter the studios of the Blackbird Amusement Co. Mamie Smith, advised by her old Blue Bird, a large company of professional artists, is giving everyone in all the large cities throughout the country. One by one, her carefully selected songs are recorded, and the production process, in fact, has in each instance stimulated the sale of the records.

She has recently made engagements in Chicago, St. Louis, St. Paul, Detroit, Memphis, Little Rock, Tulsa, Oklahoma City, Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, New Orleans, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Atlanta, Newark, Richmond, Norfolk, Washington, Philadelphia and numerous other cities.

A complete list of Okeh's catalogue of this year's records follows on adjacent page.

We hope the music and you the demand. Please see your dealer and local lists.

**Complete List of Mamie Smith Records**

POPULAR BLUES—VOCALS

4113	THAT THING CALLED LOVE.....	Mamie Smith
10 in.	YOU CAN'T KEEP A GOOD MAN DOWN .....	Mamie Smith
\$1.00		
4169	CRAZY BLUES .....	Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds
10 in.	IT'S RIGHT HERE FOR YOU.....	Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds
\$1.00		
4194	THE ROAD IS ROCKY.....	Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds
10 in.	FARE THEE HONEY BLUES.....	Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds
\$1.00		
4228	MEMORIES OF YOU, MAMMY.....	Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds
10 in.	IF YOU DON'T WANT ME BLUES.....	Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds
\$1.00		
4253	LOVIN' SAM FROM ALABAMA.....	Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds
10 in.	DON'T CARE BLUES.....	Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds
\$1.00		
4295	JAZZBO BALL.....	Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds
10 in.	"U" NEED SOME LOVING BLUES.....	Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds
\$1.00		

# Okeh Records

GENERAL PHONOGRAPH CORPORATION  
OTTO HEINEMAN, President  
 25 West 45th Street New York City, N. Y.

Okeh's advertisement for Mamie Smith

What followed were recordings by Ma Rainey, Ida Cox, Victoria Spivey, Alberta Hunter and a host of performers with the surname Smith, an outpouring that is described in identical terms in nearly every work of blues history. These women, so we are told, were popularisers, not folk singers: trained on the black vaudeville and tent-show circuits, their gift was for glitz and titillation, not the raw truth-telling that was the blues at its most intense. That kind of music would not be recorded until the end of the decade - and this is when the story really heats up, when the phonograph records acquire integrity, when (to quote a chapter title in Giles Oakley's *The Devil's Music*) 'The Men Start Recording'. Suddenly, unaccountably, record companies began sending mobile recording units across

the South, auditioning singers and musicians with local reputations who might appeal to regional markets. The talent scouts had dubious credentials: technicians and salesmen, nearly all of them white, with scant familiarity with African American music. So it was largely by a stroke of luck that they happened into the Mississippi Delta and captured the searing voices of a few wandering minstrels who expressed blues anguish in its purest form: Charley Patton, Son House, Skip James and Robert Johnson, itinerant loners bred in the land where racial oppression hit hardest, the land where the blues began.

From that point on, those voices take over the story. The mournful drifter roaming the Delta, pouring his desolation into his music: for chroniclers of black song since the 1960s this is African American song-making stripped down to its essence, exuding the despair bred by Jim Crow and slavery, the alienation from which the authentic blues sprang. The tale has proven especially bewitching to scholars of black American experience, for whom blues recordings have become a form of historical documentation, compelling, even mystical in their power. From Lawrence Levine's monumental *Black Culture, Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, published in 1977, to Leon Litwack's *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*, published in 1998, the Delta blues has provided a luminous focus for a rewriting of African American history, attentive to the experience of the faceless black masses, to voices that mainstream historians had too long ignored. As historical evidence, its value appears to lie in its sheer directness. To listen to Robert Johnson, Litwack argues, 'is to feel - more vividly and more intensely than any mere poet,<sup>12</sup> novelist, or historian could convey - the despair, the thoughts, the passions, the aspirations, the anxieties, the deferred dreams, the frightening honesty of a new generation of black Southerners and their efforts to grapple with day-to-day



life, to make it somehow more bearable, perhaps even to transcend it.' What Johnson's blues provides, in other words, is a kind of audio snapshot of the innermost truths of the past. As Litwack writes, quoting the Delta blues chronicler Robert Palmer: 'How much history can be transmitted by pressure on a guitar string?<sup>13</sup> The thought of generations, the history of every human being who's ever felt the blues come down like showers of rain.'

It is enormously seductive, this idea of the Delta blues as history transmitted by a guitar string. In a virtual-reality world of replicas, pastiches and hybrids, one cannot but crave that direct connection, the opportunity, as the critic Hillel Schwartz puts it, 'to touch what the Folk naively touched, to feel what they felt'.<sup>14</sup> Yet there is something unsettling about it too. Historians ordinarily pride themselves on their methodological rigour, the unsparing eye with which they scrutinise evidence. Why is it, then, that when they turn to the blues that pose of critical distance evaporates and their writing takes on the hues of romance? It is, I think, curious to find an historian as sophisticated as Litwack framing the blues in this populist way as the voice of the folk, the pure and unmediated cry of the masses. That reverence for the music's evidentiary powers recalls nothing so much as the claims made, decades ago, for oral history: that it allows us to bypass the dangers of historical interpretation by removing the need for an historian, that it enables us to communicate with the past directly by presenting past experience in its purest form.

Enraptured with the purity of the Delta blues, the resonant truth of the voices within it, historians have neglected some basic questions, foremost among them the question of audience. The awkward fact is that as newly minted 78s, Charley Patton's recordings sold only moderately<sup>15</sup> in the 1920s and 1930s; those of Son House, Skip James and Robert Johnson sold barely at all. Even in

the heart of the Mississippi Delta, the so-called Delta bluesman had limited appeal. A Fisk University sociologist<sup>16</sup> who surveyed the black bars of Clarksdale late in the Depression found not a single local performer upon the jukeboxes. Top sellers were the same as they were in black areas across the United States: Louis Jordan, Lil Green, Count Basie, Fats Waller, all patently urban and unabashedly sexual, their songs laden with double (and sometimes single) entendres, backed by a jazz-inflected sound that pulsed with the rhythms of city life.

The voices of Johnson, House, Patton and James were pushed to the foreground not by black record buyers, but by more elusive mediators and shapers of taste. Underpinning the rapturous acclaim for the music's 'almost archaeological purity',<sup>17</sup> its 'rough, spontaneous, crude and unfinished'<sup>18</sup> voices, is the legacy of those mediations, an unspoken conviction that what we are hearing is uncorrupted black singing, the African American voice as it sounded before the record companies got to it. At the core of the idea of the Delta blues is a sense that some forms of black music are more real than others, an investment in purity with a tangled history that blues chroniclers, in the main, have neither perceived nor explored.

The realness of the Delta blues, its much-heralded purity, lies in those raw, archaic, supposedly uncompromised voices. Yet those voices were originally disseminated via the commercial race records industry and, decades later, recycled, recontextualised and given new meanings on LP anthologies and compact discs. Blues enthusiasts, in the main, have ignored those technological trappings, the phonograph, the disc, the electrical current; only the voices remain, fierce and immediate, communicating 'so directly', writes Greil Marcus, 'any distance between the singer and the listener is smashed'.<sup>19</sup> What makes the Delta blues singular, and paradoxical, is its magical capacity to transcend that technology, to be

conveyed mechanically and yet be perceived as pristinely untouched by the modern world.

This book aims to unravel that paradox by offering a different sort of Delta blues history. It argues that the Delta blues was 'discovered' - or, if you like, invented - as the culmination of a quest that began in the early twentieth century, as white men and women unsettled by the phenomenal success of race records set out in search of black voices that they heard as uncorrupted and pure. In an age of mechanical reproduction, they set themselves up as cultural arbiters, connoisseurs whose authority rested on their powers of discernment, their ability to distinguish the ersatz from the real.

Some of these enthusiasts are well known in the annals of blues history. I explore, for example, the renowned journeys of the father-and-son folklorists John and Alan Lomax, who combed the Depression-era South in search of black song and found authenticity in a Louisiana convict named Leadbelly, whose rough, ragged, melancholy vocals evoked the anguish of the chain gang. But I also examine more obscure searches by individuals who may seem unlikely characters in a blues context: the Southern sociologist Howard Odum; the Texas novelist Dorothy Scarborough; the jazz historians Frederic Ramsey, Charles Edward Smith and William Russell; and a reclusive record collector named James McKune. In tracking their involvement with African American music, I am interested less in their 'discoveries' than in their fears and obsessions. All were captivated by the idea of (in John Lomax's term) 'uncontaminated' black singing, all embarked on quests to unearth it, and all, in different ways, addressed the same question: how do you capture and preserve the real black voice in the age of mechanical reproduction? Answering that question meant engaging with the very technology whose impact they feared, ferreting out singers with portable phonographs and, eventually, rifling through bins

in used-record stores, searching for voices that sounded archaic, willing themselves to hear past the machine.



For the first generation of American intellectuals to encounter race records, hearing past the machine rarely came easily. Even in a business that cut every corner, the so-called 'race record' manufacturers of the 1920s and 1930s were notorious for their shoddy materials, with the biggest race label, Paramount, determined to drive its production costs below the \$1.50 per hundred that the industry considered the bottom line. Skimping on shellac, the most expensive ingredient, it packed out the 'dough' with low-quality filler. The result was a 'tin-pan tone', as one retailer put it, a disc that sounded worn and scratchy before it was ever put on a turntable. 'You couldn't get anything on Paramount,'<sup>20</sup> talent scout Harry Charles lamented years later. 'I put some good songs on there; you'd never know it.'

All the more startling, then, was the sheer zeal with which America's black population embraced them. It made a sharp contrast to what the Edison Corporation had found a few years before,<sup>21</sup> when it marketed its state-of-the-art Diamond Disc phonograph to white middle-class consumers and had to hide the machinery inside decorative cabinets and unveil demonstration models in concert halls to dispel a persistent scepticism of recorded music, a widespread unwillingness to accept it as 'real'. None of those techniques of persuasion were needed when it came to African Americans. All they required was for someone to put their music on phonograph records, and even men like songwriter Perry Bradford, who had spent years promoting black singers, were unprepared for the sheer volume of discs they purchased, the vast sums of money they were

ready to spend. The African American folklorist Zora Neale Hurston was astonished at the end of the 1920s by the extent to which 'the mechanical, nickel phonograph'<sup>22</sup> had come to dominate the turpentine, logging and phosphate camps of rural Florida where home-made songs had once reigned supreme. 'No, ma'am, they don't make up many songs,'<sup>23</sup> one foreman told her. 'The boys used to be pretty bad about making up songs but they don't do that now.' Instead, such 'made-up songs' with their roots in the region gave way to 'Pinetop's Boogie-Woogie' and other songs learned from recordings. Seemingly overnight, an oral culture was inundated with mechanical reproductions, as a people long celebrated for spontaneous singing immersed themselves in the sound of recorded discs.

Hurston, for her part, viewed this development with undisguised dismay. On the road in the South in the late 1920s she searched for a black voice that she was convinced was disappearing, a vocal majesty and creativity that were in the process of being drowned out. 'Enclosed find all of the material that I have transcribed into ink,'<sup>24</sup> she wrote to the anthropologist Franz Boas in 1927. 'It is fortunate that it is being collected now, for a great many people say, "I used to know some of that old stuff, but I done forgot it all." You see, the Negro is not living his lore to the extent of the Indian. He is not on a reservation, being kept pure. His Negroness is being rubbed off by close contact with white culture.' Her report concluded: 'The bulk of the population spends its leisure<sup>25</sup> in motion picture theatres, or with the phonograph and its blues.'

Preserving 'Negroness' was Hurston's concern, and endangering that purity was the race record. That fear was echoed by other African American intellectuals who, like Hurston, were entranced with the power of black folk song and speech. The writer Jean Toomer, a native of Washington, DC, moved to a 'crude... but strangely rich and beautiful' part of rural Georgia in 1921 and was distressed

by what he encountered, only one year after 'Crazy Blues' had burst in upon the African American soundscape:

There was a valley... with smoke-wreaths during the day and mist at night.<sup>26</sup> A family of back-country Negroes had only recently moved into a shack not too far away. They sang. And this was the first time I'd ever heard the folk-songs and spirituals. They were very rich and sad and joyous and beautiful. But I learned that the Negroes of the town objected to them. They called them 'shouting'. They had Victrolas and player-pianos. So, I realised with deep regret, that the spirituals, meeting ridicule, would be certain to die out. With Negroes also the trend was towards the small town and then towards the city - and industry and commerce and machines.

Machines were the problem: like the city, like industry, like commerce, they corrupted whatever fell in their path. 'The supreme fact of mechanical civilisation<sup>27</sup> is that you become part of it, or get sloughed off,' Toomer wrote to his friend Waldo Frank in 1922. 'Negroes have no culture to resist it with (and if they had, their position would be identical to the Indians), hence industrialism the more readily transforms them.' Even Hurston, more sanguine than Toomer about the persistence of folk song in some black rural areas, felt that this survival could only be temporary, that the 'lush glades of primitive imagination'<sup>28</sup> would inevitably be 'drained by mechanical invention'.

In part, this suspicion of the machine and mass-produced culture echoed a longstanding lament among intellectuals across the industrial West at the loss of what Walter Benjamin described in 1936 as the 'aura' of the work of art.<sup>29</sup> By 'aura', Benjamin meant its authenticity, its uniqueness as a hand-made object, or, in the words of historian Miles Orvell, the 'quality of intensity'<sup>30</sup> [that makes

it stand] out against the featureless background that constitutes the main hum of experience'. Central to that featureless background were the standardised products of commercial amusement. Even before the recording industry developed, many feared that authentic folk songs were being drowned out by assembly-line replicas. That no piece of sheet music could be an authentic folk song was accepted virtually without debate. Folk music was composed anonymously, transmitted orally, and suffused with the spirit of the peasantry, and since that unspoiled people was fast disappearing, genuine folk song was fading fast. Its gentle tones could not compete with the strident strains of commercial popular music. 'There is an enemy at the doors of folk-music<sup>31</sup> which is driving it out, namely the common popular songs of the day, and this enemy is one of the most repulsive and most insidious,' noted the British composer Hubert Parry in 1899. 'In true folk songs there is no sham, no got-up glitter, and no vulgarity. [T]hese treasures of humanity are getting rare, for they are written in characters the most evanescent you can imagine, upon the sensitive brain fibres of those who learn them, and have but little idea of their value.'

Yet if Hurston and Toomer's distaste for commercial recordings in some ways simply extended a longstanding elegy, it also had meanings that were specifically racial. Since the mid-nineteenth century African American intellectuals had stressed the importance of song as communication, a critical source of expression for a people otherwise forced into silence. The slave-turned-abolitionist Frederick Douglass wrote in 1845 of the significance to be found in music that genteel whites dismissed as childlike gaiety or primitive noise. 'Rude and apparently incoherent'<sup>32</sup> though the slave songs might be, beneath the surface they contained unfathomable depths of suffering: 'They were tones loud, long, and deep, they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the

bitterest anguish. Every tone was testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.'

In the wake of emancipation, African American writers and activists built on Douglass's reflections. The black sociologist W. E. B. DuBois, writing in *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, stressed the spirituals' importance as testimony, a powerful refutation of historians' claims 'that life was joyous to the black slave, careless and happy'.<sup>33</sup> However guarded their language, the sorrow songs confronted the listener with 'death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world',<sup>34</sup> a yearning for deliverance to a place and time where 'men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins'.<sup>35</sup> And in an era of rampaging commerce and industry, they offered a simplicity and purity of spirit unparalleled in a nation effectively born in modernity, a nation that lacked a peasant past. 'There is no true American music<sup>36</sup> but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave,' he concluded. 'All in all, we black men seem the sole oasis of simple faith<sup>37</sup> and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness.'

But what if 'we black men' abandoned that role? That was what Hurston and Toomer perceived in the pell-mell embrace of race records: a mechanisation of the song-making process, a standardisation of that transcendent voice. With World War One had come an intensification of urbanisation, of black people's movement from field to factory, and the explosive growth of urban enclaves like Harlem. Even black intellectuals like the writers Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown, who saw the blues as a modern folk music, shared something of Hurston's apprehension about what this embrace of the modern world meant. Though devoted consumers of race records, they kept that enthusiasm to their private letters; their published writings celebrating the blues as an expression of black memory and community (like Hughes's 1929 novel *Not Without Laughter* and Brown's 1930 poem 'Ma



Rainey') effaced the recorded disc and depicted the music in live performance. It would not be until 1952, when the nameless protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* burrows into his hidden basement in Harlem, lights up a joint, drops a 1929 Louis Armstrong disc upon the turntable, and finds 'a new analytical way of listening to music',<sup>38</sup> that an African American novelist reflected on the possibilities opened up by the phonograph record. In those three decades of silence, it would seem, lay unspoken tensions about the impact of mechanical reproduction and of this strange process of hearing music by putting a platter on a recording machine.



If even black intellectuals found the emergence of race records unsettling, it was all the more jarring for white men and women enchanted by African American singing, whose numbers were greater than one might suppose. That enchantment stretched back at least to the mid-nineteenth century with the development of minstrel shows, whose racism thinly disguised a fascination with the vitality of black music, yet it reached a new peak during and after the Civil War when the South was flooded with white Northerners, veterans of anti-slavery efforts, who travelled among the emancipated slaves and were riveted by the music they heard. The spirituals, the work songs, the 'long, lonely sing-song of the fields':<sup>39</sup> such music was beautiful, haunting, somehow unearthly - it strained the white listener's capacity to describe it, to fix it on paper in musical notes. Those who tried became obsessed by the impossibility of the task before them. 'It is difficult to express the entire character<sup>40</sup> of these negro ballads by mere musical notes and signs,' wrote the abolitionist campaigner Lucy McKim in 1862. 'The odd turns made in

the throat; and that curious rhythmic effect produced by single voices chiming in at different irregular intervals seem almost as impossible to place on score as the singing of birds, or the tones of an Aeolian Harp'. The anti-slavery activist William Allen felt the same sense of awe at the sheer *difference* of the black voice. 'The best we can do... with paper and types, or even with voices,<sup>41</sup> will convey but a faint shadow of the original. The voices of the colored people have a peculiar quality that nothing can imitate; and the intonations and delicate variations of even one singer cannot be reproduced on paper.'

In the years that followed, the elusiveness of the black voice, its resistance to reproduction, became an indispensable axiom, the eye of the needle through which any discussion of African American song had to pass. As the cult of the spirituals grew in the 1870s and 1880s with the international success of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, white intellectuals in America and Europe lauded what they saw as a wholly untutored artistry that owed its power to racial difference, to the 'remarkable musical capacity' of a 'half-barbarous' race that remained tied to the natural world. In that indescribable, unreproducible voice, enthusiasts heard a purity of spirit and a wild, untamed longing, a mournfulness that spoke not just of slavery but of something universal in the human soul. As one-time Union commander Thomas Wentworth Higginson put it, 'Never, it seems to me, since man first lived and suffered,<sup>42</sup> was his infinite longing and suffering uttered more plaintively.' Deepened by suffering, honed by anguish, the black voice could reach peaks of emotion that white voices could not; through rapt attention, white listeners could absorb it and experience something of the sublime.<sup>43</sup>

All the more unsettling, then, to hear that fierce, untutored, primitive voice captured by this most modern of technologies and to see America's black population shelling out millions to buy up those discs. The titles of the records

were bad enough – hit releases like ‘Black Snake Moan’, ‘Meat Cutter Blues’, ‘I Got The Best Jelly Roll In Town’ – but more fundamentally, the very act of fusing the black voice and modern technology made for a kind of mongrel amalgamation that left connoisseurs of the spirituals distinctly uneasy. Few were as blunt as the song collector Robert Gordon, who stated that in preserving black folk song he aimed to help ‘the whites of the South to keep *one* bunch of Negroes<sup>44</sup> from becoming utterly worthless and *modern* in the city coon sense’. Yet many shared the feeling underlying Gordon’s pronouncement: that the cultural value of African Americans lay in their remaining rural and primitive, and that as they abandoned that role something essential was being lost. ‘When black takes on the prowlings and pratings of the white race<sup>45</sup> and becomes a strutting chrysalis in silk shirts and Ford cars, the mystery is gone forever,’ wrote one journalist. That lament went hand in hand with a yearning for ‘real’ black music charged with the mystery of racial difference, emanating from African American singers who resisted the pull of the modern world.

What follows are the stories of a few white men and women who went in search of those magical voices, who set out to stem the tide of mass-produced replicas by uncovering the sound of the real thing. In writing this history of exploration and connoisseurship, inevitably, I have been selective. For many enthusiasts of African American singing, the recording machine posed grave dangers even as it opened up new possibilities: at once the prime destroyer of authenticity and an unparalleled tool of authentication. I have looked for people whose experience seemed to shed light on that contradiction, whose passions and vulnerabilities I felt for, and whose struggles I thought I could bring alive.

Out of those struggles, over time, emerged the idea of the Delta blues. By now it should be obvious that mine is

not a conventional Delta blues history. I make no attempt to cover the ground mapped in Robert Palmer's canonical *Deep Blues*, with its focus on the development of a musical style and lines of artistic transmission (Charley Patton begets Son House begets Robert Johnson begets Muddy Waters). In such a history, the protagonists are black, quite rightly. My central characters are white. At the core of the idea of a Delta blues, of an undiluted and primal black music, is an emotional attachment to racial difference that extends back at least to the mid-nineteenth century, to abolitionists' enchantment with the peculiar power of black singers, their uncanny ability to allow their white listeners to experience an unimagined transcendence, a level of emotional intensity otherwise out of their reach.

The folklorists, critics and collectors I've written about were all searching for that vicarious ecstasy. All were born in the era of segregation; in different ways, all felt imaginatively tied to the South. Throughout their lives, they made racial assumptions that were hackneyed, condescending and often offensive. Yet as I read their words, tracked their obsessions, and revisited their journeys, I came to appreciate what they have left us, the reservoir of recovered music, the chain of knowledge and expertise. In time, I learned to admire the sheer fortitude it took to engage with an art form that few whites of their generation respected. Even as they feared black modernity, they struggled to cope with it, and sometimes to transcend their racist beginnings. We are their debtors, even if we cannot avoid being their critics.

In the end, theirs is not a straightforward history with a discernible chronology. To excavate the idea of the Delta blues is to describe something more amorphous and intangible: a history of voices and responses to voices, of the memories and emotions they generate, of how those associations change over time. What emerges from their stories is a genealogy of feeling and sensibility. The idea of