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Student's name: **Saul Meyerson-Knox**

This work and its defense approved by:

Committee chair: Stefan Fiol, Ph.D.

Committee member: Thabiti Asukile, Ph.D.

Committee member: bruce mcclung, Ph.D.

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"African Blues": The Sound and History of a Transatlantic Discourse

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by

Saul Meyerson-Knox

BA, Guilford College, 2007

Committee Chair: Stefan Fiol, PhD

Abstract

This thesis explores the musical style known as "African Blues" in terms of its historical and social implications. Contemporary West African music sold as "African Blues" has become commercially successful in the West in part because of popular notions of the connection between American blues and African music. Significant scholarship has attempted to cite the "home of the blues" in Africa and prove the retention of African music traits in the blues; however much of this is based on problematic assumptions and preconceived notions of "the blues." Since the earliest studies, "the blues" has been grounded in discourse of racial difference, authenticity, and origin-seeking, which have characterized the blues narrative and the conceptualization of the music. This study shows how the bi-directional movement of music has been used by scholars, record companies, and performing artist for different reasons without full consideration of its historical implications.

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Introduction

The term “African Blues” signifies on several levels: on the surface, it is a catchphrase used to market contemporary West African music; yet on a deeper level, “African Blues” is a statement about the journey of traditional African music to the United States and back to Africa. Since the 1940s, numerous studies in ethnomusicology and anthropology have attempted to prove the retention of traditional African musical styles in American blues.[1] More recently, scholars and artists have begun exploring the diffusion of contemporary American blues styles back to Africa, where they have blended with indigenous styles and have seemingly provided justification for a historical link. The marketing genre “African Blues,” popularized by such artists as Ali Farka Touré, his son Vieux Farka Touré, Boubacar Traoré, and Afel Bocoum, was born out of a desire to capitalize on these popular claims of the blues’ African roots.

The recording industry created the term “African Blues,” and it only came about after scholarship had created a space to imagine the connection between African music and the blues. Because much of the scholarship includes problematic understandings of history, the resulting commercial recordings that are presented as musical evidence of the African origins of the blues perpetuate the same historical inaccuracies. Once the connection between African music and the blues was drawn together in the mainstream

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[1] Melville J. Herskovits, “Problem, Method and Theory in Afroamerican Studies,” *Phylon* 7, no. 4 (1946): 337–54; Paul Oliver, *Savannah Syncopators: African Retentions in the Blues* (New York: Stein and Day Publishers,1970); Michael Theodore Coolen, “The Fodet: A Senegambian Origin for the Blues?”, *The Black Perspective in Music* 10 (Spring 1982): 69–84; Gerhard Kubik, *Africa and the Blues* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999).

conscious in the 1990s it became possible to create "African Blues" music that would live up to these expectations of what a more "African" kind of blues would sound like,[2] and since then, "African Blues" has become a major force within the world music market. Artists associated with African blues have continuously topped the Billboard "World Music" charts and have received many Grammy Awards and nominations. "African Blues," therefore, can be seen as a space to re-imagine the very nature of the blues as a distinctly "African" cultural expression, where contemporary West African recordings become the sonic proof—sound as evidence—that the blues was African all along.

The earliest commercial source to make use of the term "African Blues" is an album of the same title by multi-Grammy award winning West African guitarist, vocalist, and composer Ali Farka Touré (1939–2006). Released specifically in the West in 1990, this album set the stage for the rise of "African Blues" as a marketable style, of which Touré would go on to become the most prominent and prolific recording artist. His recordings have become extremely popular in the West and have led to collaborations with famous American and African musicians, to much acclaim. Touré's music is generally labeled "African Blues" or "Desert Blues," and Touré himself is often marketed as the "Malian Bluesman" or "King of the desert blues singers." While Touré's music blends different cultural styles from Africa and the West, it presents itself as proof that the roots of American blues are to be discovered in African music. "American blues, to me, just means a mix of various African sounds," Touré explains in *The History of the Blues*. "It's not American music, it's African music directly imported from Africa."[3]

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[2] Kubik, 190.

[3] Ali Farka Touré, quoted in Francis Davis *The History of the Blues* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 33–34.

With album titles such as “African Blues” or “The Source,” Touré’s music appears to present itself as proof that there are elements of African music which can be found in the blues. However, the musical style demonstrates a blues influence from contemporary American blues music. This point is clearly stated in *The History of the Blues*, where Francis Davis writes: “To make matters more confusing, African music is beginning to betray the influence of the blues…. Though the echo of [John Lee] Hooker’s music in Touré’s is often pointed to as evidence of Africa’s influence on the blues, it’s really the other way around.”[4] When Ali Farka Touré sounds like Hooker it is not actually because Hooker’s music retained Sudanic elements, but because Touré intentionally incorporated elements of Hooker’s music into his playing.

Touré’s music has inspired a wealth of recordings by other musicians labeled “African Bluesmen” or “Desert Bluesmen.” These projects have been motivated by an understanding that African music directly influenced the blues and focus on the “return” of blues music to West Africa. This includes the countless compilations of “African” and “Desert Blues” that have emerged over the past decade such as *The Rough Guides to African Blues*, *Desert Blues*, *From Mali to Memphis* and *Beginners Guide to African Blues*.[5] These recordings relentlessly oversimplify the complexity of the diffusion of African musical traits in the new world and conceptualize African music as if its only purpose was to someday become the blues.

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[4] Francis Davis, *The History of the Blues* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 33–34.

[5] *The Rough Guide to African Blues*, Various Artists, World Music Network CD, 2007; *The Rough Guide to Desert Blues*, Various Artists, World Music Network CD, 2010; *From Mali to Memphis,* Various Artists, Putumayo World Music CD, 1999; *Beginners Guide to African Blues,* Various Artists, Nascente CD, 2011.

There have also been an increasing number of collaborations between Western blues musicians and African musicians, including the 1994 Grammy winning album *Talking Timbuktu* by Ry Cooder and Ali Farka Touré, and *Kulanjan* by Taj Mahal and Toumani Diabate. Other Western blues players who have recorded with African musicians include Markus James, *Calabash Blues*, Corey Harris, *Mississippi to Mali*, and Bonnie Raitt, *Silver Lining*.[6]

1. Objectives and Questions

This thesis will offer a critical study of the discourse surrounding the bi-directional transatlantic movement of music between West Africa and the United States. I attempt to deconstruct "African Blues" as both a historical concept and marketing genre to find out exactly where it came from and what it means in different contexts. As the concept "African Blues" contains a statement about the connected history of African music and the blues, my first objective is to examine the literature that originally presented this theory in order to understand how this concept was created. My aim is not to take a stand on whether or not the blues has African roots, but to evaluate how and why different sources have approached the question. I will investigate the different methods that researchers have used to show this connection and ask if they are historically valid and ethically sensitive. Beyond an analysis of their methods, I want to try to understand why it is that so many scholars are invested in proving the "African roots" of the blues. Is seeing the blues as "African" part of a longer trend of racializing the blues? Is there something unique about the blues that lends itself to mythologizing

[6] *Talking Timbuktu,* Ry Cooder and Ali Farka Touré, Hannibal CD, 1994; *Kulanjan,* Taj Mahal and Toumani Diabaté, Rykodisc CD, 1999; *Calabash Blues,* Markus James, Firenze CD 2005; Corey Harris, *Mississippi to Mali*, Rounder CD, 2003; Bonnie Raitt, *Silver Lining*, Capital CD, 2002.

and origin seeking? Is the blues more “African” than any other African American musical tradition? Why has the blues received this attention?

I will also explore the different ways that this discourse is represented outside academe. Many different media outlets make the case for “African Blues,” and I will look at the ways they draw on existing scholarship and how this scholarship is used. Do they offer reliable information to the public, and are the histories of these traditions represented accurately? I propose that record companies and commercial media outlets adopt the discourse of “African Blues” for different reasons than academics; ultimately, however, these claims substantiate one another. As the commercial sphere has become the main way that theories about “African Blues” are disseminated, I will investigate ways that sound is used as evidence of this connection.

I also seek to understand the position of the musicians, both African and American, within the marketing of “African blues.” I will find out how African artists such as Ali Farka Touré and Toumani Diabate came to be associated with the blues, and whether this connection was and is desirable to them. Do they agree with theories about the connection between the two traditions, and how do they see the path of influence? How have their voices been represented, and how have their statements used? Additionally, I seek to understand how American musicians such as Taj Mahal have come to collaborate with West African musicians. Why are they drawn to this music, and what is their motivation? How do American musicians view theories about the African roots of the blues, and how to they portray this history?

Finally, as collaborative recording projects have become central to “African Blues,” I will ask how the nature of collaboration has contributed to this discourse.

American musicians actively use African musicians to "Africanize" their style and to validate themselves and their place in history, while African musicians collaborate with American artists and Westernize their style in order to reach a wider audience and lay a claim to a shared African-American heritage. What are the power dynamics and ethical implications of these collaborations? What is at stake for both African and American musicians to make a claim about the history of the blues and what do they stand to gain?

2. Methodology and Chapter Synopses

This thesis is built on a two-part analysis of secondary sources. The first is an investigation of the scholarly literature that created the notion of "African Blues." I examine some of the earliest books on the American blues of the 1950s and 1960s in order to understand how the blues was first imagined. I also analyze the writings that theorize a connection between the blues and Africa. This body of literature is made up of books and journal articles that present different theories based on fieldwork carried out in various parts of Africa. I search for shared themes and contradictions within this literature in order to show the genealogy of the "African Blues" concept.

In Chapter One I demonstrate how the earliest literature on the blues in America created a narrative that firmly grounded the blues in a discourse of racial difference and authenticity, and the search for origins. I contend that these tropes for imagining the blues in America were the first steps in a later process that would lead to searches for the roots of the blues in Africa. In Chapter Two, I raise historiographical problems with the body of literature on African retentions in the blues. I critique five major publications for certain methodological oversights and assumptions, and ultimately I make the argument

that this body of writing has contributed to a romanticized and presumptuous understanding of the relationship between African music and the blues.

The second part of the analysis is a study of the ways that "African Blues" has been represented through commercial sources. I include a review of diverse media, including magazine articles, newspapers, books, commercially produced recordings, recording reviews, and published interviews with musicians. I will also examine one "African Blues" recording in detail in order to show how the themes brought up earlier in this discourse are furthered.

In Chapter Three, I compile a history of "African Blues" in commercial media by noting major events and recordings, and I uncover the key tropes of presenting African blues through non-academic sources. Finally, in Chapter Four I offer a case study on the music and discourse surrounding one especially provocative "African Blues" recording, *Kulanjan*, which was a collaboration between the American blues musician Taj Mahal and Malian *kora* virtuoso Toumani Diabate.[7] I demonstrate the specific ways that this discourse has sonically manifested in an "African Blues" recording.

[7] *Kulanjan*, Taj Mahal and Toumani Diabaté, Hannibal CD, 1999.

Chapter One

Creating the Blues Narrative

> The African presence in the blues can only be distantly glimpsed, like the sun as it drifts through the clouds on a hazy morning. [1]
>
> —Samuel Charters

To better understand the literature that created the "African Blues" theory, we must first understand how the blues was constructed in both the scholarly and aficionado communities, and how this culminated in the blues narrative. Before researchers traveled to Africa to find the "roots" of the blues, there were already established ways of imagining and appreciating the blues (culturally and socially), which had been established by the first blues writers who searched the South for the best surviving blues performers. In this chapter I will explore the intellectual climate of the late 1950s and 1960s in blues scholarship that created certain ways of understanding the blues and led to the more specific searches for African "roots" of the blues.

In the blues there is a long history of outside involvement in the processes of documentation, preservation, and promotion of the music. These people are considered outsiders from blues tradition not only because they are not African American, but also because they are mainly from the North and other areas without a history of blues performance, and are from middle-class, urban backgrounds; most importantly they are not professional blues performers themselves.[2] This includes John Lomax, the first major

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[1] Samuel Charters, *The Bluesmen: The Story and the Music of the Men Who Made the Blues* (New York: Oak Publications, 1967), 16.

[2] Marybeth Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues: Black Voices, White Visions* (London:

folklorist to travel and search the south for African American songs in the 1930s and 1940s, and the later blues writers and enthusiasts of the 1960s Such as Samuel Charters and Paul Oliver who would codify the popular understandings of the blues by writing about the music and continuing the process of searching for the best living blues performers. The result of such heavy outside involvement in the creation of the blues narrative is that notions of difference, particularly in terms of social identity, define how the blues came to be portrayed.

The most significant element of the blues narrative is a created (imposed) definition of authenticity in the blues, and by extension, a belief that this authenticity can be found. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the first books about the blues were published, there were already many different ways of classifying the blues. There was the "country" or "primitive blues," later deemed "delta" blues associated with Mississippi and artists like Robert Johnson and Charlie Patton, but there was also the "classic blues" of Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, and the newer "urban blues" of B.B. King. However, through these books on the blues, it became established that the "country blues" was the most authentic. Writers such as Paul Oliver and Samuel Charters focused on a seemingly simpler, stripped-down, and raw form of the blues, which they took to be signs of true authenticity. They also saw this as music of an earlier and thus more authentic era; music that was connected to an older time was perceived to be more valuable. The notion that an authentic form of the blues could be found led to the "blues revival" of the '60s and

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Jonathan Cape, 2007), 9–10.

active searches in the South for "real, authentic bluesmen," living cultural artifacts who embodied the blues tradition.[3]

Additionally, this writing on the blues established the Mississippi Delta blues as the "birthplace" of the music and depicted it as a mystical land where the last real, authentic African-American expression, uncorrupted by modernity, could be found. In her deconstruction of the ways that white authors created the concept of Delta blues, Marybeth Hamilton explains that in this scholarship on the blues, there is "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."[4] This notion of some sort of "pure, authentic, and real" black voice that existed in the blues shaped the way that the blues would be perceived and imagined. The Delta blues became the most authentic since it was among the oldest and least commercial sounding of blues recordings. Early Delta blues records exclusively featured acoustic instruments performed with unpolished musicianship often recorded with poor quality, giving the impression of a historic and uncorrupted sound. Over time these early recordings became the basis for thinking that a "more real" form of blues had once existed, and perhaps, could still be found. In the hands of early blues writers such as Oliver and Charters the blues became exotic and mysterious; they treated the music with much reverence, but also like a cultural anomaly that needed explanation. They were enchanted by romantic notions of Southern poverty and created an archetypical bluesman who was permanently

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[3] Stephen A. King, *I'm Feeling the Blues Right Now: Blues Tourism and the Mississippi Delta* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2011), 38–39.

[4] Hamilton, 9.

alone, tough, crude, down on his luck, womanizing, drinking, and also incredibly emotional and poetic.

To Oliver, Charters, and a number of other writers,[5] the blues was inseparably attached to African American history; they saw the blues as a true expression of suffering caused by slavery and the racial history of the South. These writers were all very much products of their time; the struggle for civil rights and racial justice in America was clearly in the air and on their minds, and they saw their work as progressive and an important part of the struggle by showing how to appreciate African American culture. In essence, through this work, the blues came to be associated with some kind of "pure" African American cultural expression to these, writers, who were fascinated by this raw and "primitive" song. They believed that African American song was most valuable when it remained primitive and uncorrupted; they saw any modernizing influences, radio, jazz, and popular song of the day, as threatening the pure nature of the blues and sought to "discover" blues singers who had remained untainted. While always working to extol the musical and cultural qualities of the blues, this writing is continuously in the process of difference-making; any unique and distinctive elements are emphasized and used to point out the difference between white and black culture. As Hamilton makes clear, "At the core of the idea of a Delta blues, or an undiluted and primal black music, is an emotional attachment to racial difference."[6] To many of these writers, the blues was

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[5] Other blues writers of the day included: Tony Russell, *Blacks, Whites and Blues* (1970), Bob Groom, *The Blues Revival* (1971), Mike Leadbitter, *Nothing but the Blues* (1971), Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music* (1975), along with members of the New York "blues mafia" such as James McKune and Don Kent, blues enthusiasts and record collectors who wrote album liner notes and publishes articles in early issues of *Blues Unlimited* magazine.

[6] Ibid., 18.

inherently different from all other music, because African American culture itself, as a result of racial history in the United States, was so different. This perpetuating idea that the quality of African American music could be found in its purity and primitiveness would eventually lead some of these scholars to search for the same qualities in Africa.

1. John Lomax: Archiving African American Song

One of the earliest and most prolific researchers to travel through the South in search of "authentic" African American songs was John Lomax.[7] In 1928 Lomax established the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress and in 1933 he set out on the road with his son Alan and a newly devised portable recording machine to record and document African American folksongs of the South.[8] Lomax was distinctly interested in a kind of "primitive purity" of uncorrupted African American song, and he saw his work as part of the preservation of a unique American cultural artifact. Lomax believed that after contact with white music through the radio and records, African American music would lose its unique and valuable qualities, and he sought to find living relics of an earlier era who were still truly "authentic." Lomax's objective was, as Hamilton writes, "to find archaic Negros who inhabited a world where time had stopped."[9] He contended that by finding singers who had been isolated from the outside world and had retained an earlier musical style, he could access that earlier time period. This marks the beginnings

[7] Earlier folklorists who traveled the South to document African American song included: Dorothy Scarborough who published *On the Trail of Negro Folk Songs* in 1925, and Zora Neale Hurston who collected and transcribed songs in the late 1920s. See, Hamilton, 40–70 and 11–12.

[8] Ibid., 74–76.

[9] Ibid., 81.

of a trend in this scholarship to look at the subjects of the work as if they lived in a different time. This denial of coevalness would permeate later searches for "authentic" song and led to the idea that by documenting these songs one could access an earlier period of history. For Lomax, the logical places to find just such isolated singers were the prisons of the South where he assumed African Americans would have been isolated from the modern world and contact with white culture. In a report for the Library of Congress in 1933, Lomax wrote, "Negro songs in the primitive purity can be obtained probably as nowhere else from Negro prisoners in state or Federal penitentiaries…. Here the Negros are completely segregated and have no familiar contact with whites…especially the long-term prisoners who have been confined for years and who have not yet been influenced by jazz and the radio."[10] Lomax's agenda was clear: to find instances of archaic, authentic African American song that had yet to be diluted by modernity and white culture of the day. Essentially Lomax was after some kind of hidden and pure black authenticity, which he alone was to "discover" and show to the world. Through his work in the prisons of the South, Lomax would "discover," promote, and arguably exploit the career of previously unknown singer and guitarist Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter who would go on to be one of the most well-know and established figures of the early American folk and blues scene.

As the pioneer of American-American folksong collecting, John Lomax left a legacy that would influence all later researchers; those who searched the South for traces of authentic African American song and those would travel to Africa to search for an even heightened form of authenticity. One aspect of Lomax's legacy was the creation of

[10] John Lomax, "Report of the Honorary Consultant and Curator," from Report of the Librarian of Congress for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1933, quoted in ibid., 82.

a romantic view of African American musicians and of himself as collector. Lomax helped established many of the long-held tropes of a solitary, isolated, hard, and profoundly melancholy blues singer that would dominate later blues writing. Hamilton writes:

> He transformed the search for authentic black song by spinning around it a new kind of romance. The black renegade, the outlaw, the convict in chains: they were carriers of the folk spirit, and they gave up their treasures to the brave and intrepid who dared to venture off the beaten path. Not for nothing did Lomax title his 1946 autobiography *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*: for him song-collecting was a kind of safari, rough-hewn, vigorous and consummately male.[11]

This view of the blues singer himself as well as the process of song collecting would define the later blues "revival" of the '60s and even permeate the later searches in Africa. Additionally, through his work Lomax helped established the notion of a solitary bluesman, who could be discovered living in a previous time.

2. Writing the Blues Narrative: Mythology, Tropes, and Trends

In the decades following Lomax's innovative work, there were many important people writing about the blues in the '50s and '60s whose work would shape the nature of blues scholarship. For the scope of this project, however, I will limit my focus to just Paul Oliver and Samuel Charters. They were two of the earliest and most influential scholars, and they both would later travel to Africa to research early blues source material. Although these two scholars cannot be said to speak for all of the blues writing of the '60s, they helped to conceptualize the distinct origin and discoverable roots of the blues, crystallizing the mythology and stereotypes about the blues. Their writings created a climate of appreciation for the blues that exoticized and romanticized the music, and

[11] Ibid., 79.

saw it as something with roots that could be discovered. In doing so, they created mythical bluesman trope with an emphasis on authenticity that would come to be equated with "blackness" and racial difference. This notion of the blues authenticity with roots that not only could be but also needed to be "discovered" would eventually lead to searches for the roots in West Africa.

2.1 Samuel Charters

Samuel Charters's landmark book *The Country Blues* (1959)[12] was one of the first major texts on the blues. In it, Charters sets forth much of the mythology and romanticized notions of the blues that would influence later generations of blues scholars and enthusiasts. The majority of Charters's work, *The Country Blues* included, is written in a semi-scholarly tone, which would have been widely accessible and available to the non-academic reader. This text establishes the romanticized notions of an idyllic bluesman singing away his sorrows in the impossibly poor and rundown American South. Charters also establishes a view of the blues as descending directly from Africa: slaves brought the music of West Africa across the Atlantic where it fused with hymns to become spirituals, it later developed into work songs of the plantations and prisons, and eventually resurfaced as the blues. Charters writes:

> With servitude and brutality still harsh realities, the Negroes preserved the field cries and chants of the years of slavery. The work songs still expressed their frightened despair and self-pity or their strong pleasures. The *clearly African* [my emphasis] singing of the fields and prison yards was still a part of the life of the South…. The great spirituals reached a more or less finished form in the years between 1870 and 1890, and the work songs became almost crude blues.[13]

[12] Samuel Charters, *The Country Blues* (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1959).

[13] Ibid., 28–29.

Thus, Charters emphasizes that the essence of African music was preserved in slave songs, which, combined with pain and suffering of the African American experience, created the blues.[14] The unspoken conjecture is that all previous African American music was destined to one day become the blues, and the African qualities make this music distinctive.

In 1967 Charters published *The Bluesmen*, an account of the lives of various blues performers throughout Mississippi, Alabama, and Texas, which was the first blues text to strongly make a case for an African background. The book is predominantly a discussion of American blues, but the first chapter, "The African Background," makes it clear where blues comes from and what makes the music unique. In this chapter Charters lays out some of the main parallels between the blues and African music that would be continued in many following studies on the subject. He first explains the same diffusionist narrative again, "The pattern of development was clearly from the African communal song to the slave work song, and from the work song to the blues."[15] Thus, the path from Africa to the blues is shown as completely intact and easily traced, though the hundreds of years are not accounted for. More glaringly, perhaps, is Charters generic concept of a homogenous Africa, with some kind of undefined "communal singing."

Next Charters makes a connection between West African *griots* and American blues singers. Charters cites a simplistic definition of these "praise singers," who travel

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[14] This echoes a point made in by W.E.B. DuBois in the final chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) titled "Sorrow Songs." DuBois argues that African American folk-songs and spirituals are "the articulate message of the slave to the world," and thus descend directly from the slave experience. However, Charters extends this notion to conclude that the blues is a further incarnation of slave songs.

[15] Charters, *The Bluesmen*, 16.

across the country-side singing and performing on stringed instruments, which he takes to be kind of pre-bluesman. He goes on to note that Africa has "a strong tradition of guitar-like instruments" and that early blues finger picking accompaniment styles must have developed out of West Africa.[16] This line of reasoning, that *griots* (usually poorly defined and misunderstood) are related to American blues singers reappears consistently throughout the later discourse, and the notion that there are something like "indigenous bluesmen" who can be found in African is almost too attractive for many writers to resist.

In *The Bluesmen*, Charters firmly establishes that the blues was born in the Mississippi Delta and spread to the rest of the South from there. There is much debate and speculation on exactly where and when the blues was first sung, and the general consensus is that there is no single area that gave birth to the blues; rather, the music developed roughly around the same time (1890s) throughout the South, and possibly the Midwest.[17] Charters, however, seems invested in notion that there was a single birthplace of the blues, and this, according to his account, was the Mississippi Delta. Blues-writing has long been preoccupied with the Delta, as there was an undeniably strong blues tradition there. Yet that does not mean that the blues was "born" in the Delta, or even that it has a single, specific birthplace. Charters, however, relentlessly promotes the myth that the Delta is the source of the blues, not only because of the mass of talent that came from here, but because of the Delta's history of slavery and relative isolation from the rest of the country. He writes, "The music that developed in the counties of the delta [i.e., the blues] was so little influenced by American popular music

[16] Ibid., 19.

[17] King, 25.

that it was still closely related to the distant African background, and in many ways seems to be an intense distillation of the slave music that had emerged from the diffuse tribal and cultural influences of the slave society."[18] The blues then, according to Charters, developed out of the music and experiences of slavery, and because it had little contact with other traditions, was able to retain elements of African music, and slave work songs. Thus, Charters creates a past of the blues that is irrevocably tied to African American history and defined by its African roots. He argues that the Delta blues is unique and valuable because of its African past and lack of outside influences, and therefore is seen as an example of a kind of pure and authentic black tradition. By labeling the Delta as the "home" of the blues Charters set a precedent for roots-seeking and origin-discovering of the blues.

2.2 Paul Oliver

While significantly more nuanced and scholarly, Paul Oliver's work emphasizes many of the same aspects of the blues as Charters; there is a marked interest in racial difference and authenticity, and the blues is treated as a mystery that needs to be solved. As one of the few British writers on the blues, Oliver's voice is unique in this body of literature. Perhaps as a result of his cultural distance from the blues tradition, he was also more acutely aware of race relations in the United States. Following in the footsteps of John Lomax and previous blues writers, Oliver places an emphasis on authenticity, and in the blues he is looking for some kind of pure and uncorrupted African American voice. Just as Lomax searched the prisons of the South for African American singers who would

[18] Charters, *The Bluesmen*, 67.

not have been influenced by "jazz and the radio,"[19] Oliver sees the authentic, "country" blues as a distinct and intact folk tradition in danger of being lost. In *Aspects of the Blues Tradition* (1968), he laments, "The blues was, and is today, one of the last great bodies of folk-song; perhaps the last that will ever emerge before the folk communities are finally absorbed."[20] With this understanding, the blues becomes a highly important cultural output, as the potential last authentic folk music that humankind may ever produce. There is in Oliver's writing (like Lomax's before him) a distinct anxiety over modernism; fear of a time in which radio and television will corrupt the "authentic black voice" that can still be heard in the blues. This writing is fairly patronizing; Oliver writes as if he is more able to tell which is the most valuable kind of blues than the people making it. He continues, "Today the blues is threatened by pressures of mass media and commercial exploitation which may obliterate its character as a music form."[21] Rather than the product of a long history of absorption and blending of different styles, Oliver sees the blues as if the music itself was totally free from any outside influences. This view of the blues as "pure," "authentic," and in danger of being lost would eventually lead Oliver to West Africa to locate an even more authentic black voice, which he assumed, would be further removed from modernity and white culture.

[19] John Lomax, 82.

[20] Paul Oliver, *Aspects of The Blues Tradition* (New York: Oak Street Publications, 1970), 1.

[21] Ibid., 9.

3. The "Blues Revival" and the Search for "Authentic Bluesmen"

The 1960s "blues revival," as it was later labeled, grew out of this climate of blues appreciation inspired by the writing of Charters and Oliver. Prompted by this new body of literature on the blues, especially Charters's *The Country Blues* (1959), many generally young and white blues fans and folklorists traveled the South searching for living bluesmen who had recorded in the 1920s and 1930s as well as other "undiscovered" blues singers that could be seen as authentic. The writings of blues scholars established certain performers as the best and most authentic, and the revival of the 1960s sought to find these once-forgotten masters, along with any others singers who possess the same qualities. Despite the contentious nature of this movement, the revival had positive and lasting effects: many old recordings were preserved, including those of Charlie Patton and Son House, which might have been lost, and early blues recording artists, such as Son House, Skip James, and Mississippi John Hurt, were given the chance to perform and record again, this time to much wider audiences and more acclaim. The movement also helped spur the careers of previously unknown blues singers including Fred McDowell.[22]

Throughout this revival period, the concept of an "authentic bluesman" was further crystallized. As Steven A. King explains, the blues preservationists who searched the South were not looking for white performers; they specifically sought out elderly African American men who embodied their idea of what an original master of the country blues would be like, and accordingly, "'blues authenticity' became associated with the

[22] King, 38–39

racial marker of blackness."[23] Along with race, the blues revival also gave preference to other characteristics that were believed to be the signs of the most authentic bluesmen such as old age, physical disability (especially blindness), addiction to alcohol, and a low social standing. The preference was also overwhelmingly towards male blues singers, so much so that only men were seen as authentic. Women were totally excluded from this movement, mostly because nearly all country blues recordings were of men and also because female blues singers, such as Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, were associated with the "classic" or "vaudeville" blues style, with its more pronounced jazz and urban elements.[24]

4. Conclusion

Through the song-collecting and archival work of Alan Lomax and later the blues scholars Samuel Charters and Paul Oliver, the blues narrative as we know it today was finalized.[25] The blues became inseparably attached to the Mississippi Delta and was seen the music of pain and suffering caused by years of slavery and its ramifications in the United States. Highly romanticized definitions of authenticity were firmly emplaced so that only old, working-class, African American men could sing the blues. The Delta blues was seen as the most authentic and was valued because it had resisted modernity and could transport listeners back to an earlier era when African American music was still "pure" and "undiluted." Because the blues was so undeniably different from all

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[23] Ibid., 46.

[24] Ibid., 46.

[25] Additional scholars who have written about the Delta blues include: Tony Russell, Bob Groom, Mike Leadbitter, Greil Marcus, James McKune and Don Kent.

other musics of the day, there was interest in discerning exactly it was that made it unique; scholars and enthusiasts were preoccupied with discovering where the blues came from and finding ways to see the blues as a product of African American history. This emphasis on origins and discovery led to searches throughout the South for surviving bluesmen and their recordings, and accordingly a precedent for origin-seeking was established in the blues. These are hallmarks of the blues narrative: a preference for authenticity (related to social identity), along with notions that the origins of the music could be discovered.

By the end of the 1960s, the main searches for authentic blues roots in the South were complete and researchers would have to turn elsewhere. Africa became the next frontier to look since the blues was already seen as inseparably tied to African American history and culture. In the 1970s and 1980s researchers would travel to West Africa to search for the roots of the blues. With them they would carry the same concepts of blues authenticity in their search for an even more pure and undiluted form of the blues.

Chapter Two

Roots of the Blues: Literature on African Retentions

> First, we know that West Africans, who are the people most modern scholarship has cited as contributing almost 85 per cent of the slaves finally brought to the United States, did not sing the blues. Undoubtedly, none of the African prisoners broke out into *St. James Infirmary* the minute the first of them was herded off the ship.[1]
>
> —Amiri Baraka

From the 1970s through the late 1990s, a body of literature developed that explored the potential of African retentions in the blues. Initiated by some of the same blues scholars of the previous blues literature, Western scholars traveled to Africa to research a number of different ways that the blues could be traced to a "home" in Africa. Their methods used include different ways of tracing the patterns of the slave trade as a way to identify this "home," along with analysis of West African music to uncover parallels with the blues in terms of harmony and melody, structural elements of the music such as AAB form and call-and-response, and linguistics. There were also attempts to make connections between the social standing of North American blues singers and West African *griots* and hereditary musicians. Additionally many of these authors studied American blues first and traveled to Africa with the specific intent of finding music that related to their conception of the blues. They tended to overlook the significance of African music on its own terms, only viewing its potential as "pre-blues."

In general, these researchers found what they were looking for: "bluesy" sounding "roots" music that must certainly be the "original blues." The blues is undoubtedly

[1] Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), *Blues People* (New York: Morrow Quill, 1963), xi.

related in some ways to West African music, yet there is not a clear or completely traceable path. What this body of work lacks is an understanding of how the music found in contemporary Africa has evolved from the days of the slave trade. This oversight is part of a long tradition of viewing Africa as if it were an unchanging and pure artifact, resistant to time and any outside influences. Referred to as the "denial of coevalness" by anthropologist Johannes Fabian,[2] it is a problematic trend in anthropological and ethnomusicological work to look at the subjects of fieldwork as if they lived in a different time period with the assumption that things have stayed the same in that culture. The authors who wrote about African retentions in the blues do not fully acknowledge that over time music and cultures change and migrate and that contemporary fieldwork cannot tell for certain what African music sounded like three hundred years ago. This work also overlooks the question of how African musical traits survived and transformed in America by privileging musical "survivals" over and above elements of change.

Scholarship that attempts to prove the African "roots" of the blues is based on some problematic foundations, which have led to an ahistorical notion that there is something inherently "African" to be found in the blues despite hundreds of years of musical development in the United States. Scholarship that does not fully explain the complexities of the process of retention and also oversimplifies notions of African music has led to an incomplete understanding of the blues and Africa. In this chapter I will address the main historiographical problems perpetuated in the literature surrounding the Africa-blues discourse. I will first introduce each of the five main texts that have explored this issue followed by an analysis of the main themes and methodologies found

[2] Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Work of Anthropology: Critical Essays 1971–1991* (Philadelphia: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1991), 198.

throughout: origin-seeking, the blues scale and blues tonality, AAB form, harmony, language, call and response, connections to *griots*, and issues of social history.

Before discussing the each of the works that explores the connection between Africa and the blues, I will mention the work of Melville Herskovits, who was the first major scholar to attempt to prove that elements of African culture could be found in the New World. In his widely cited study, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941),[3] Herskovits countered the notion that there was no "negro past" and set out to prove that elements of African culture could be found in the New World. Herskovits's main target was the previously accepted theories (mainly espoused by E. Franklin Frazier) that African Americans had lost their African heritage during slavery; that the harsh realities of slavery had essentially destroyed all traces of African elements and African American culture was created completely in the New World. After completing fieldwork in West Africa, Herskovits published *The Myth of the Negro Past,* which demonstrated that the majority of slaves were taken from West Africa and thus elements of this culture could still be found in the New World. He looked to language, religion, and customs along with music to document these connections. Herskovits focused most of his attention on South America and the Caribbean for evidence but also applied these findings to North America. One of the most obvious problems with his model was that it was based on the assumption that West African culture was homogenous, thus oversimplifying any found connections. In many ways Herskovits's work is outdated, but it was extremely important and progressive at the time, and has influenced all later studies in this field. Joseph E. Holloway writes, "Herskovits established a baseline theory of African

[3] Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941).

retentions from which other researchers could assess African survivals in the New World and expand into areas he did not take into account."[4] This is precisely what has happened in blues research: Herskovits' "baseline theory" with all its strengths and flaws has been used to examine potential Africansims in the blues.

Later studies have subsequently taken this question of African retentions in America a step further in attempt to understand how a single African American identity was formed during slavery. Moving beyond Herskovits's assertion that African culture merely survived in the America, Sterling Stuckey's *Slave Culture* (1987) analyzes and interprets slave rituals to contend that slaves originating in different locations in Africa, with differing ethnicities, created a Pan-African cultural identity to resist and survive the cruel oppression of slavery. Stuckey shows that through a common African American cultural expression such as the ring shout, "the ancestral past was revered through the most important African ritual in antebellum America."[5] In *Exchanging Our Country Marks* (1998),[6] Michael A. Gomez explores further ways that slaves of different African backgrounds came together to see themselves as part of a common race over ethnic differences. Through analysis of sources including documentations of the slave trade, anthropological studies of African cultural retentions, and primary sources such as advertisements for runaway slaves, Gomez argues that while creating a common culture

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[4] Joseph E. Holloway, *Africanisms in American Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), x.

[5] Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), viii.

[6] Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

and African American identity, slaves retained much more of African culture that was previously acknowledged.

1. Overview of Literature on "African Blues"

Of the many authors who have researched the notion of Africanims in American music, there are five major scholars who make up the core of this literature and have defined the discourse and the way that many people now understand "African blues." These authors have produced a body of literature that attempts trace the blues back to certain areas of Africa with different methods and degrees of specificity.

Paul Oliver was one of the earliest scholars to write about the blues and African American music and publications such as *Blues Fell this Morning* (1960) and *The Blues Tradition* (1968) established his place as a preeminent blues scholar. Oliver's *Savannah Syncopators: African Retentions in the Blues* (1970) was the first major text to point to Africa as the source of the blues. Oliver conducted research in West Africa while teaching in Ghana in the mid-1960s, gathering data that would support the theory that the American blues descended directly from Africa. In *Savannah Syncopators*, Oliver establishes the Savannah region, Senegal, The Gambia, Mali, Guinea and Nigeria, as the areas most likely to be "the home" of the blues. To make this point, Oliver traces the historical patterns of the slave trade to show that the majority of slaves taken to the American South were from the Savannah, thus making this a logical place to search for "the roots" of the blues.[7] Oliver identifies more evidence for his theory by pointing out

[7] Oliver arrives at this conclusion through analysis of sources of the slaves as published in Herskovits's *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), along with J.C. Furnas' analysis in *The Road to Harper's Ferry* (1961), and Henry C. Carey's figures published in Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944).

that music of the West African interior based on stringed instruments and singing has more similarities with the blues than the coastal, polyrhythmic, percussion-driven music.[8] He includes brief descriptions of the sound and instrumental techniques of Savannah music to further his comparison and shows parallels between West African poet-musicians known as *griots* and American blues singers.[9]

Oliver's text is the first of many to posit a "birthplace" hypothesis; he approaches West Africa with the intent of finding parallels with his understanding of American blues. While stating that his book is meant to "lay out some aspects of the questions arising for reexamination, and perhaps serve as a prelude to the study of African retentions in jazz and the blues,"[10] he establishes origin seeking in as a major focus in literature specific to the connection between Africa and the blues. This search for the exact "birthplace" was already an important component of his and others' work on American blues, and this text is an extension of that same impulse across the Atlantic. *Savannah Syncopators* lays out a method for research in Africa on the blues that would influence subsequent works on this issue.

Along with Oliver, Samuel Charters was one of the earliest and most influential blues-writers; *The Country Blues* (1959) established the tradition of searching the South for the last surviving "bluesmen" and has become one of the premier "classics" of blues literature. In late 1970s, Charters traveled to West Africa to test Oliver's findings and to further explore the theory that there are distinct "African" elements in the blues. The

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[8] Paul Oliver, *Savannah Syncopators: African Retentions in the Blues*. (New York: Stein and Day Publishers,1970), 42–43.

[9] Ibid., 98–100.

[10] Ibid., 9.

resulting *The Roots of the Blues: An African Search* (1981) is one of the less scholarly and least factually informative of this body of literature. While engaging, the book is mostly a travelogue recounting the trials and tribulations of a Westerner traveling in Africa. Charters reiterates Oliver's theory that the string heavy and less percussion based music of the West African interior is the most closely related to the blues. He also focuses most of his attention on *griot* musicians with the intention of finding parallels to blues singers. Charters is interested in learning more about slavery from an African perspective—both the legacy of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in modern Africa, and he gives significantly more thought to this important issue than other writers.[11] *The Roots of the Blues* is significant because of its more accessible and less scholarly tone, which may have allowed these theories of the "African nature" of the blues to reach a wider audience.

Michael Theodore Coolen is an ethnomusicologist and composer at Oregon State University. He has conducted fieldwork throughout Senegal focusing on the *xalam*, a stringed lute often seen as a precursor to the banjo. Coolen's article "The Fodet: A Senegambian Origin for the Blues?" (1982) supports Charters's and Oliver's earlier theories of an African origin of the blues with specific musical analysis. Coolen based his work on the understanding of the blues as an extension of West African, Savanna based string-playing traditions. Coolen first explains that the majority of slaves, particularly in the early days of the trade, were taken from Senegambia, and that there was a preference for Wolof by slavers. He also points out that the Wolof were highly influenced by their neighboring people including the Mandinka, Fula, and Tukolor,

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[11] Samuel Charters, *The Roots of the Blues: An African Search* (Boston: Marion Boyars, 1981), 78–95.

meaning that the Wolof lute tradition represents "the main elements" of the lute tradition of all of Senegambia.[12] In the article Coolen compares the Senegambian music of the *fodet* with the American twelve-bar blues. The *fodet* is a song form played on the *xalam* with different sections in different key areas, and Coolen posits that the structural elements of the *fodet* have many similarities with the blues form. As opposed to earlier work, this article focuses almost exclusively on musical analysis and includes extensive transcriptions. Coolen shows significantly more sensitivity to the greater historical and cultural context and makes insightful and persuasive arguments for a connection between the formal structure of Wolof music and the blues. This article is an extension of Oliver's theories with more specific evidence used to point to an African "birthplace" of the blues.

Harriet Ottenheimer is Emerita Professor of Anthropology & American Ethnic Studies Kansas State University. Her work mainly focuses on African and African American cultures, particularly on issues of language, and she has also written extensively on the blues and blues history. Ottenheimer's article "Comoro Crossroads: African Bardic Traditions and the Blues" (1992)[13] advances a new and strikingly different "birthplace" theory: the blues may have more similarities with East African "bardic" traditions, particularly of the Comoro Islands. Ottenheimer counters the previous work that alleged that the blues would have more in common with West African music. She posits that the last slaves were brought to the United States illegally as late as

[12] Michael Theodore Coolen, "The Fodet: A Senegambian Origin for the Blues?", *The Black Perspective in Music*. 10 (Spring 1982): 72.

[13] Harriet Ottenheimer, "Comoro Crossroads: African Bardic Traditions and the Origin of the Blues", *Human Mosaic* 26, no. 2 (1992): 32–38.

the mid-eighteenth century from East Africa; as the most recent group to arrive, their culture would be more likely to survive and become the blues. This is directly opposed to Herskovits's previously recognized and generally accepted theories that the earliest arrivals from West African would have the more established and lasting traditions. As a linguistic anthropologist, Ottenheimer draws most of her evidence from linguistic parallels between Comoroian traditional song and the blues. She points to songs with an AAB scheme which, when translated, look a lot like a blues stanza. She also gives an example of a term in the ShisNzwan language that she contends translates directly as "the blues" as in "to have the blues." As a linguist, Ottenheimer is able to provide a different perspective to the discourse, and since she is not a trained musicologist her conclusions rely less on musical evidence. This article, too, is another example of an attempt to locate the "birthplace" of the blues, though the conclusions are vastly different from pervious theories.

Gerhard Kubik (b. 1934) is an Austrian ethnomusicologist who has worked extensively in Africa since the 1960s. Kubik has compiled the largest collection of recorded African music and has become one of the most well-respected and prolific scholars of the music of Africa and the African diaspora. Kubik's *Africa and the Blues* (1999) is the most nuanced, multidimensional, and thorough addition to this discourse, and it is a product of significantly more time spent living and working in African than any of the other writers I discussed above.

Africa and the Blues is built on the original theory set forth by Oliver but Kubik adds much more to the discourse. He agrees that blues is closely related to music of the West African Sudanic, Savannah lands; but in contrast to other authors, he contends that

the blues is inherently *American* music that shows significant retentions of a "west central Sudanic style cluster."[14] He supports this theory with musical analyses and transcriptions that demonstrate African characteristics shared with the blues in terms of scalar tendencies, harmony, and language. The text also includes more of the social history that is necessary to understand why, where, and when the blues developed in the United States. As a more recent work, *Africa and the Blues* is the only text to examine the current trend of "African blues" commercial recordings, which I explore in the following chapter. I now move to a discussion of the specific themes and tendencies in "African blues" literature, beginning with the issue of origin seeking.

2. Birthplace Theories/Origin Seeking

Since the earliest writing on the blues in America, there has been significant interest in locating where the blues was "born." Much debate has surrounded the question of this exact location. Samuel Charters contends that the blues came from the Mississippi Delta and Ottenheimer argued that the earliest blues was sung in Midwestern cities of Missouri and Indiana, but the general consensus is that there is no simple answer. The blues probably emerged somewhere in the South, and very possibly it developed in different areas simultaneously as opposed to a single specific location.[15] Origin seeking has long been a major theme in blues-scholarship because the emphasis placed on authenticity and discovery, and now the notion of a "birthplace" of the blues is

[14] Gerhard Kubik, *Africa and the Blues* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 203.

[15] Stephen A. King, *I'm Feeling the Blues Right Now: Blues Tourism and the Mississippi Delta* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2011), 25.

an important part of contemporary blues culture. In fact, the potential sites of origin of the blues have become a major source of tourism in Mississippi since the 1990s.

In "Comoro Crossroads" Ottenheimer specifically links her theory the East African "birthplace" to the American blues narrative through the cross-roads myth. Much blues writing, especially in popular sources, tells the story of a "bluesman" who sold his soul to the devil at a Mississippi delta crossroads in exchange for unmatched guitar abilities.[16] Versions of this myth cite both Robert Johnson and Tommy Johnson (no relation) as the "bluesman" and apparently only Tommy spread the story during his lifetime.[17] As many of Robert Johnson's songs include demonic imagery and references to "the Devil" and "hell," images of Johnson selling his soul to the Devil at the crossroads have become extremely common in contemporary American blues mythology. While original accounts of this mythical deal with the devil were only meant to explain Johnson's guitar playing abilities, the story has acquired different meanings over time. Though blues music had already been in existence when Johnson was said to have sold his soul, popular notions of this myth equate (and confuse) this deal with the Devil at the crossroads to the birth of the blues.

After providing evidence for an East African birthplace of the blues, Ottenheimer describes the Comoro Islands as "a unique musical and cultural crossroads" because of their location on the Indian Ocean, and she asks: "Could it be at this very crossroads that the blues began? The personalized bardic style which developed there certainly seems

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[16] This is a common trope about virtuosic instrumentalists. A similar story is often told about Paganini.

[17] King, 92.

closer to the blues than anything else that has been found so far."[18] This statement raises a number of issues, one of which is why Ottenheimer invokes the crossroads myth? What does Robert (or Tommy) Johnson have to do with the Comoro Islands? By calling the Comoro Islands a "crossroads," Ottenheimer intentionally connects blues mythology to East Africa in a memorable, but factually unrealistic, way. But why assume that the blues "began" anywhere? Music is a constantly evolving entity with no beginning or ending point. Furthermore, should the music of the Comoro Islands, which may have influenced American music, really be considered blues? This music is significant in its own right and does not need to be seen only as a precursor to American blues.

Through email correspondence, Ottenheimer made it very clear to me that she did not approach the Comoro Islands with the intent of finding blues origins; rather it was a "chance" transcription of a song that led her to consider the possibility of a connection between East Africa and the blues. She explained that her article is meant to raise questions and make contributions to the larger search by proposing a different location and approaching music as a grammatical language.[19] However, the notion that the blues descended from a single location, and that music we know of today as "the blues" has specific origins is difficult for scholars like Kubik to accept. As part of his rebuttal, Kubik writes that Ottenheimer's theories that the blues may have originated in East Africa, "neglect—like any other African 'birthplace' hypothesis—the complex interplay of retention, reinterpretation, adaptation, modification, and innovation of single traits,

[18] Ottenheimer, 35.

[19] Harriet Ottenheimer, e-mail message to author, June 27, 2012.

operating diachronically in cultural transplants and cultural contact."[20] This is an important criticism. The blues itself includes a number of different influences that came together in a complex and largely indefinable way. The blues did not simply "exist" first in Africa and was not "born" anywhere; the music evolved over many years, through many different cultural interactions, combined with the history of racial oppression in America.

When scholars insist that they have "found" the African "birthplace" of the blues, they make a number of errors that can lead to widespread misunderstandings about the history of the music, and the process of how music is retained, passed down, and adapted. Origin seeking is problematic because it is built on the assumption that the blues descended directly from a specific African source that has continued to exist in the same place for hundreds of years. It also oversimplifies, or even ignores, questions of what exactly happened to the African music in the New World as it became the blues: how was the music "remembered" and passed down, how did traditions impact the music, why would some elements of the music survive and not others, and how did the situation of African descendants during and after slavery impact the development of the music? In *African and the Blues*, Kubik actively separates his theories from previous work based on origin seeking and provides a different way of approaching this question:

> We proceed from the notion that there is no such thing as "roots" of the blues, but that the American blues were a logical development that resulted from specific processes of cultural interaction among eighteenth- to nineteenth-century African descendants in the United States, under certain economic and social conditions.[21]

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[20] Kubik, 49.

[21] Ibid., 4.

It is important to remember that the blues is the culmination of different African and Western traditions coming together under that shadow of racial inequalities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this light, the blues cannot be seen as a continuation of a single African musical practice that somehow survived in its original form.

3. Blues Scale, Blues Tonality

The first quality of the blues that is generally assumed to be of African origin is the overall sound and aesthetic of the blues, the intangible quality that makes the music feel "blue." This is the juxtaposition of major and minor, the use of flat 3rds and 7ths harmonically and melodically, and the notion of a so-called "blues scale." Scholars have struggled to make sense of these characteristics of the blues and often conclude that they must be African retentions. In *Africa and the Blues*, Kubik lays out a "rule of thumb" for this research: "Whenever Western music theoreticians find a harmonic pattern in jazz or blues to be strange or unusual, it might indicate retention of one or another African concept."[22]

One of the most prominent features of the blues that is generally assumed to have African roots is the blues scale. Attempts to understand the blues scale have a long and convoluted history dating back to jazz historians interested in Africansims in jazz, but, as Eddie S. Meadows writes in his review of literature on Africa and the blues scale, "Jazz historians fail to review the literature dealing with African musical practices, and jazz

[22] Ibid., 117.

historians tend to force rather than prove relationships."[23] Even the very elements of the blues scale are not always agreed on by musicologists; it is sometimes seen as a minor pentatonic scale with a sharp 4th, or a major scale with altered or lowered 3rd and 7th degrees, or sometimes a combination of both. Kubic writes: "Almost any note that is off-pitch from the viewpoint of the Western scale is qualified by some authors as a blue note. That stretches the concept too far, and we may end up at some point where the principle of deviation becomes paramount, and any audible 'deviation' from notes of the diatonic scale being called 'blue.'"[24] The *New Grove Dictionary or American Music* defines the "blue note" as, "A microtonal lowering or 'bending'" of the 3rd, 7th, or 5th scale degrees, but concedes, "The pitch or intonation of blue notes is not fixed precisely but varies according to the performers' instinct and expression. Together with other, non-inflected pitches they make up the blues scale."[25] The lack of a precise universal definition of "blues notes" makes attempts at finding them to be African retentions less convincing since it allows for any non-diatonic pitch to be considered "African."

In *Savannah Syncopators* Oliver notes that "the 'blue notes' themselves are found in Africa"[26] without going into specifics of where in Africa, describing how they are used, or providing an example. What Western musicologists would refer to as non-diatonic tones, or lowered 3rds, 5ths and 7ths, can certainly be found in African music

[23] Eddie S. Meadows, "Africa and the Blues Scale: A Select Review of the Literature," African Musicology 2 (1992): 263.

[24] Kubik, 125.

[25] J. Bradford Robinson, "Blue note," *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music* vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan Press, 1986) 241.

[26] Oliver, 95.

but that does not mean that these tones are used that same way in the blues or that they are actually “lowered” since the music is not based on the Western theory of a fixed diatonic scale. These “blue notes” may very well relate to certain musical concepts in Africa, but the “blues scale” as Western theory defines it, is not an actual African music practice.

In *Africa and the Blues* Kubik devotes significant space to the concept of the blues scale and blues harmony.[27] He explains that the lowered 3rd and 7th are blue tones and that the flatted fifth is a separate scalar tendency. To make sense of the blues notes, Kubik poses a lengthy and extremely complicated theory based on an idealized concept rather than empirically tested data on patterns of speech. Essentially, Kubik hypothesizes that Western Sudanic languages are built on fourths, where the “female range” would be from C down to G with a Bb in the middle and the “male range” is from F to down to C by way of Eb. By combining the scales of the “male and female range,” we reach a minor pentatonic scale. Kubik continues his analysis with an in-depth and convoluted explanation that when this “African” pentatonic scale is compared against the Western tempered twelve-note scale, the Bb and Eb blues notes fall somewhere between A and B, and E and F, respectively. These intervals are then plotted on multiple charts mapping the intervals in terms of cents to locate the blue notes. This hypothesis that African speech and scale patterns developed into our modern conception of the blues scale is theoretically intriguing but impossible to validate empirically. Kubik admits, “How and why this process occurred is open to speculation,” and also that “it is very difficult to

[27] Kubik, 129–143.

prove anything that is probably unconscious."[28] His understanding of how African descendants fused traditional African sounds to Western instruments and practices is based on a concept of "pitch memory": somehow between the time that slaves were taken to the United States from Africa and the late nineteenth century when the blues developed, a "pitch memory" was kept intact and evolved into music with blue notes.[29] There is little doubt that the off-pitch notes that are considered "blue" by Western standards descend from an African tradition (probably many different ones), but this kind of analysis does little to further our understanding of the music because it is based on two dissimilar musical systems.

In a 1989 "Open Letter" printed in *Popular Music*, Philip Tagg accurately assesses the problems with the binary terms of "white" and "black" music.[30] Tagg explains that certain musical tendencies such as the blues scale have come to be understood as a "black" musical component because they descend directly from Africa, whereas singing non-diatonic or lowered pitches can also be found in Appalachian and early British folk music. "Such traits can be found in the music of some West Sudanic peoples today but also occurred on a regular basis in folk music from Scandinavia and, more importantly, from Britain at the time of the main colonization of the New World. Such traits are commonly heard in old recordings of "'thoroughly White'—as opposed to the equally silly notion of 'thoroughly Black'—music from the Appalachians."[31] Thus,

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[28] Ibid., 144.

[29] Ibid., 140.

[30] Philip Tagg, "Open Letter: 'Black Music', 'Afro-American Music' and 'European Music,'" *Popular Music* 8, no. 3 (October 1989): 285–89.

[31] Ibid., 288.

the "blues notes" themselves are not evidence alone of a direct African retention if the practice of lowering pitches can also be found in European music. The fact that "blues notes" were used in early Appalachian folk music shows that this practice was common in many different folk traditions throughout the South in the early twentieth century. It is not the exclusive domain of the blues, and potentially, the earliest blues singers were incorporating aspects of Appalachian songs as much as Savannah music.

4. Formal Structure of the Blues: AAB Form, Harmony, Language, and Call-and-Response

The unique formal and harmonic structure of the blues is an additional characteristic that many scholars have attempted to trace back to Africa. The vast majority of the blues repertory is built on an AAB form and is of interest to musicologists because it has unique tonal and linguistic implications. In Michael Theodore Coolen's article "The Fodet: A Senegambian Origin for the Blues?", he shows that the Wolof lute or *xalam* tradition of *fodet* has striking similarities with the blues, and he explains how the structure of the blues alternating tonal centers, V, IV, I, mirrors the tonal transitions in *xalam* music. Much of *xalam* music is based on a cyclical form known as *fodet*, which along with implied rhythmic and melodic characteristics, also denotes a reoccurring harmonic structure. Most *fodets* have at least one, if not more, additional (secondary) tonal centers that mark off different phrases, much in the way that the first half of the second phrase of the blues form (AAB) is in the subdominant key. *Fodets* are also cyclical, and like the blues, contain a fixed number of repeated chords and beats.[32] While

[32] Coolen, 77.

there are many obvious differences between the blues and the *fodet* tradition, Coolen does show some remarkable similarities in structural organization and also in harmonic similarities.

Missing from Coolen's analysis is a discussion of the functionality of these practices from the point of view from the musicians who actually play them. Do blues musicians think about the different "tonal centers" in similar ways as *xalamkats* do? Do they use the alternating "tonal centers" in the same way? Simply alternating between a few harmonic spaces is not unique to only these two traditions. Practically speaking, I'm not sure that alternating "tonal centers" is the best way to describe the chord changes of a twelve-bar blues, as the music is not really modulating to a different key for each verse. In a C blues, even during the move to the IV chord, the musicians are still thinking and playing in a C blues scale. The notes of the IV7 chord will probably be emphasized, but it is not the same as a brief (and complete) modulation to F. That said, is this what happens in a *fodet*? Are musicians actually thinking and working in different keys? How do *xalamkats* deal with this move, and how do they conceptualize it?

Coolen also overreaches when he emphasizes the importance of the perfect fifth in both the blues changes and in *fodet* music. He writes: "In the blues, the perfect fifth is part of the basic triad in the chord. In the *fodet* the perfect fifth appears both in alternation with the tonal center and simultaneously with it. The perfect fifth is an essential element of the harmonic and melodic language of *xalam* music, and it is present in both of the major *xalam* tunings . . ."[33] While the fifth is used in similar ways in both the blues and *xalam* music, that does not necessarily prove a connection. The perfect fifth is extremely

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[33] Ibid., 78.

important in many musical traditions, as it is the most stable interval after the octave, and it is not surprising that it is an important part harmony, melody, and tuning of *fodet* music. Simply employing the fifth in a similar way does not show a definite retention in the blues and seems more like an instance of reaching for a connection.

4.1 Call-and-Response

Call-and-response is an additional potential African retention that has fascinated blues scholars.[34] Referred to by Kofi Agawu as a "catch-all term,"[35] call-and-response is widely associated with generic concepts of African musical style and form, and can be used to describe the conversational nature of music from nearly all parts of Africa. Many different types of musical dialogues can be described by this metaphor, from purely vocal exchanges to the interchange between a master drummer and a solo vocalist in West Africa, two xylophone performers in South East Africa, and pairs of mbira players in Zimbabwe.[36] Once call-and-response is accepted as a quintessentially African technique it becomes easy to find examples of it in African American music. In blues-specific literature this is no exception.[37] In *Savannah Syncopators*, Oliver uses the concept of call

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[34] Call-and-response is defined by *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* as: "The performance of musical phrases or longer passages in alternation by different voices or distinct groups, used in opposition in such a way as to suggest that they answer one another; it may involve spatial separation of the groups, and contrasts of volume, pitch, timbre, etc." See, Barry Kernfeld, "Call and response." *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, 2nd ed. Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press, accessed July 13, 2013, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.

[35] Kofi Agawu, *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 110.

[36] Ruth M. Stone, "African Music in a Constellation of Arts," *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*. vol.1 ed. Ruth M. Stone (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998), 10.

[37] Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 29.

and response to show a link between the blues and "African" vocal techniques. Referring to it as "antiphonal 'leader-and-chorus' patterns," Oliver explains that this is a common practice in Savannah singing as well as African American folk and religious songs. Since blues is generally a solo vocal tradition, Oliver posits that the improvised guitar (or other instrumental) "answer" to each vocal line is a retention of an African practice.[38] Oliver explains that in Africa the "praise singers" use string instruments "imitatively to augment the content of their song."[39] Oliver does not provide a more specific example of this tradition, but relies on his somewhat abstract understanding of Savannah music and "praise singers." These musicians are usually referred to as *griots* or *Jali*, and it is not clear if blues singers actually "augment the content" of their songs in the same way, or if this should be considered an example of call-and-response.

In his discussion of the blues form, Kubik notes that "the more or less universal African call-and-response scheme is an integral part of the blues,"[40] and "vocal and instrumental lines alternate in call-and-response form."[41] However, it is not the B line of an AAB blues that is the response; rather, as Oliver also contends, the response is the instrumental (generally guitar) line that answers the vocal line at the end of each of the three four-measure phrases of the blues form.

Philip Tagg notes that call-and-response is seen as uniquely "black" or African musical practice when it is actually very common in many different traditions, particularly European church music. He writes: "Call-and-response techniques can be

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[38] Oliver, 63.

[39] Ibid., 64.

[40] Kubik, 41.

[41] Ibid., 86.

antiphonal or responsorial. They are as African as they are European as they are Indian or Jewish. Antiphonal psalm-singing and *responsoria* between priest and choir or congregation have been common over the past two thousand years in the Middle East and Europe."[42] While this may drastically oversimplify the point that call-and-response is not a uniquely West African practice, different cultures throughout the world create music with this technique. Thus, the earliest blues singers may have simply been taking advantage of a prominent musical device (especially in the church)[43] when they used "call-and-response" in their songs.

Furthermore, call-and-response may not even be the most accurate way to explain what goes on in the blues, and Ottenheimer takes particular issue with efforts to see this as an African retention:

> Attempts to connect the blues with these styles have not been very convincing. Blues singers, for example, do not typically make use of the call and response form as an organizing structure, either in their music or in their performances. Rather they engage in dialogues, both with their instruments and their audiences. Connecting these dialogues with call-and-response patterns takes some of a stretch of the imagination: the argument that they might be seen as reinterpretation of iterative call-and-response structures is probably more informed by a desire to discover West African blues roots than a clear understanding of musical form.[44]

Using the term "musical dialogues" rather than strict call-and-response to understand the formal structure of the blues is valuable, since "dialogues" suggests a less formulaic

[42] Tagg, 289.

[43] Call-and response has been an important component of music in the African American church since at least the late eighteenth-century. Furthermore, the blues and Spirituals often share many similar musical characteristics, so much so that some songs are classified by scholars as "blues-spirituals," and by the 1920s African American church music was so intertwined with the blues that often the religious nature of the text was the only difference. See, Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*. (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 80, 333, 457.

[44] Ottenheimer, 33.

approach to the blues, and takes into account the changing and improvisational, even conversational, aspects of vocal and instrumental exchanges. Regardless of the terminology used to understand the blues form, it does not make it more or less of an African practice until one can show how these traits were remembered and retained over time and across the Atlantic.

Perhaps even more to the point is the question Ottenheimer raises of why scholars are motivated by "a desire to discover West African blues roots"? This desire is so strong that at times it can lead researchers to overlook important issues. While Ottenheimer is just as susceptible to this criticism as others, it is significant that she is the first to label this as a motivating force in the discourse.

4.2 AAB Form Beyond Music: Language and Poetry

In her article "Comoro Crossroads" Ottenheimer writes that the blues may have descended from East Africa after studying grammatical and linguistic parallels, and explores "the possibility that the Comoros were indeed the African birthplace of the blues."[45] Ottenheimer contends that AAB structure of the blues can be found in East African bardic songs, particularly those of the Comoro Islands. Ottenheimer points to a song transcribed from the Comoro Islands with a three-line AAB poetic format that when translated looks a lot like a blues stanza. She explains that on the recording, the song "contains all the elements of the blues" including a solo vocalist accompanied by an unidentified string instrument, sung in a "slightly melismatic, slightly bluesy, vocal

[45] Ibid., 35.

style."[46] While this rough description does appear to match many of the same qualities of the blues, it is difficult to tell if what she found in the Comoro Islands is actually a pre-blues is it original form. There are undoubtedly more "elements" that make up the blues, and this rough description of the sound does not alone show a direct ancestor.

It is also difficult to see how this form would have survived in the New World and would have been diffused all over the South by the turn of the century.[47] AAB poetic form was not a new innovation at the time, and there are other traditions of AAB throughout music history. This theory does not take into account the possibility that other AAB traditions could have influenced the blues and also does not account for the change of language and the question of meaning in the songs.

Ottenheimer continues her analysis of East African bardic songs with an example of a word in the ShiNzwani language that "translates smoothly into English as 'to have the blues.'"[48] Given this revelation, Ottenheimer concludes that "the home" of the blues may very well be in East Africa, and scholars may have been mistaken in following the path laid out by Herskovits and searching for roots in West Africa. If African American culture is actually more related to East Africa, as she suggests, then scholars would need to "rethink our theories of cultural persistence and change, retention and acculturation."[49] Since previously accepted theories asserted that the earliest arrivals to the New World would have had the strongest cultural impact, this theory would suggest that the culture

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[46] Ibid.

[47] Stephen A. King, *I'm Feeling the Blues Right Now: Blues Tourism and the Mississippi Delta* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2011), 25.

[48] Ottenheimer, 35.

[49] Ibid.

brought by the latest arrivals (from the Comoro Islands) had a more lasting legacy if it, in fact, did influence the blues. Needless to say, Ottenheimer's assertion that years of research pointing to a West African "home of the blues" is wrong has rubbed some scholars the wrong way. Kubik considers her whole theory of East African retention in blues as "far-fetched" and specifically disagrees with Ottenheimer's translation of the Bantu phrase "to have the blues." He continues by questioning Ottenheimer's loosely defined "East African bardic style" and notes that her song transcriptions show very little in common with the blues.[50] "Comoro Crossroads" is significant, however, because Otttenehimer raises some valuable points about the nature of this discourse and supplies compelling evidence, based on a vastly different methodology from previous researchers. The fact that one a can make an argument for the roots of the blues being in both East and West Africa says something about this discourse; since there are many different ways to interpret the history of the blues it is most likely impossible to pinpoint exactly where it came from.

5. *Griots*: Musical and Societal Connections with the Blues

Parallels between American blues singers and the West African hereditary poet-musician bards known as *griots* or *Jali* is one of the oldest and most commonly used strategies used to make a case for the African "roots" of the blues. Since the earliest writing on the blues (Charters's *The Bluesmen* and others), there has been significant interest in the connection with these potential "African bluesmen." Before most blues scholars had studied West African music, there was a vague notion that African

[50] Kubik, 49.

musicians called *griots* performed alone while accompanying themselves with indigenous stringed instruments.[51] These musicians were thought to live on the outskirts of their societies, thus creating endless potential to find parallels between *griots* and blues singers. This discourse is twofold: one area focuses on the music of *griots*, and by extension the string playing tradition in Africa—both the instruments themselves and the performance techniques;[52] the other is based around the perceived social position of *griots* in West African societies. I would argue that both lines of inquiry suffer from an incomplete understanding of *griots*, but the second is the most misleading.

Both Oliver and Charters based much of their theories on a potential connection to *griots* and their instrumental techniques. In the opening of *The Roots of the Blues*, Charters writes that the purpose for his trip to Africa and the reasoning behind it: "In the beginning I planned simply to record the West African tribal singers known as *griots*, since it was these musicians who seemed to come closest to that we know as a blues singer" since, "they usually sing alone, accompanying themselves for the most part on plucked string instruments."[53] Oliver also dwells on these apparent parallels, noting *griots* use of solo song with string accompaniment, reliance on improvisation, patron relations, and frequent use of double-entendre in lyrics, along with playing techniques that are similar to blues guitar.[54] Missing from this argument is a more thorough

[51] West African *Griots* are not exclusively musicians. While many do sing and play instruments, *griots* can also be historians, genealogists, and storytellers, and serve varying and complex social functions throughout the different West African communities. See, Barbara, G. Hoffman, "Power Structure, and Mande Jeliw," *Status and Identity in West Africa*, ed. David C. Conrad and Barbara E. Frank (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) 36–45.

[52] Charters, *The Bluesmen*, 20.

[53] Charters, *The Roots of the Blues*, 1.

[54] Oliver, 98–100.

understanding of the music and sound of *griot* songs, along with the meaning and context of the music that would be necessary to make a convincing connection to American blues singers.

Griots sing epic tales of Manding history, such as Sunjata epic, which takes hours to tell. They also tell the genealogies of noble families and are known to praise a patron by extolling their ancestry and lineage. Blues songs are nothing like this. Hypothetically a blues song could be written on anything, but the overwhelmingly vast majority of the blues canon consists of songs about issues of relationships and infidelity along with the hardships of poverty and alcoholism. Many blues songs are about personal struggles; blues songs may comment on society, but they never tell the history of a people or aim at praising a patron.

Over-romanticized notions of *griots* portray them as lonely, wandering "African bluesman," earlier incarnations of Delta bluesmen; but this image ignores the prevalence of female *griots*. Just as scholarship on the Delta blues focused only on male blues singers and created an archetypical "bluesman," attempts to find this type of figure in Africa miss the importance of female *griots*. Women are just as prevalent as male *griots* and often they perform together, with women singing and men playing the stringed accompaniment.[55]

The presumed connections between the social standing of *griots* and blues singers are also problematic. Oliver contends that both can be seen as marginal members of society and are stereotyped as "lazy and lacking in industry." He writes, "Blues singers are not necessarily socially acceptable in the black community, but they are certainly

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[55] Eric S. Charry, *Mande Music: Traditional and Modern Music of the Maninka and Mandinka of Western Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 276–79.

known to most members of it."[56] The problem with this comparison is that Oliver does not show an understanding of the complex position *griots* hold in West African society; while *griots* are lower caste and generally looked down on, they are vital members of society. *Griots* are responsible for maintaining their community's genealogies, as well as memorizing long epic poems; they are necessary for major events such as weddings and funerals, and are in a unique position that allows them to praise and criticize members of society.[57]

There would appear to be many parallels between the two traditions if we see them both as string-playing wandering musicians, telling stories and living outside of the community. As Oliver explains: "They [*griots*], too, are the source of humour and entertainment, of gossip and comment, and a singer like Lightnin' Hopkins is very much a *griot* in personality, with a similar flair for spontaneous and devastating comment on the passing scene."[58] But what is a "*griot* personality"? How can personality be measured, for one, and be passed down through multiple generations across the Atlantic? In a series of articles in *Living Blues* magazine, David Evans accurately questions some of Oliver's findings, particularly the similarities between *griots* and blues singers. Evans points out three main flaws with this argument. First, "not all bluesmen by any means fit this description"[59]; clearly there are many different blues singers, they are not all like

[56] Oliver, 98.

[57] Barbara, G. Hoffman, "Power Structure, and Mande Jeliw," *Status and Identity in West Africa*, ed. David C. Conrad and Barbara E. Frank (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 36–45.

[58] Oliver, 98.

[59] David Evans, "Africa and the Blues," *Living Blues* 10 (Autumn 1972): 27–29, reprinted in *Write Me a Few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader*, ed. Steven C. Tracy (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 65.

Lightnin' Hopkins, and do not all enact the "bluesman" trope. Second, there are comparable musicians in other parts of Africa who do play stringed instruments and may also be socially marginal, but are not strictly members of a caste as *griots* must be. Finally, blues singers themselves are not part of a caste in the way that *griots* are. Blues musicians may be relegated to parts of society and they may be marginalized, but they are certainly not a caste as such. Blues singers can and do leave the profession, and their children are not expected to be blues singers. Additionally, as Evans points out, *griots* are expected to marry within their caste, but blues singers certainly do not have to marry other blues singers.[60]

To further his hypothesis that *griots* influenced the development of the blues, Oliver theorized that as a lower caste, *griots* would have been expendable by the upper classes and would have been more likely to be sold into slavery, thereby resulting in higher numbers of *griots* among slaves (and therefore more potential for *griot* traditions to have influenced the blues). The problem is that the opposite is just as likely to have been true; Evans writes, "As skilled performers and entertainers, *griots* may have been deliberately kept back from the Europeans by powerful African leaders."[61] Regardless of how *griots* were valued in West African society, the problem with this line of reasoning is that it is based on speculation because there are no records of exactly how the slave trade worked among all African tribes, and it is difficult to tell *griot* songs and traditions could have survived in the United States.

[60] Ibid., 65–66.

[61] Oliver, 67.

In his article on the potential similarities between the blues the *fodet* tradition, Coolen also posits that there are societal connections between *xalam* players (called *xalamkats*) and blues singers. "Parallels can also be drawn between the lifestyles of professional *xalamkats* and the 'songsters' and 'bluesmen' of Texas and the Mississippi delta. Musicians from both continents pride themselves on being complete entertainers."[62] This trait is not a unique of the *xalamkats*, since arguably musicians from many different cultures aspire to be "complete entertainers," and therefore this alone cannot qualify as an African retention. Coolen explains that *xalamkats* boast of their ability to sing history, tell proverbs and fables, and provide entertainment for important events such as weddings, christenings, and funerals. While this does match many descriptions of a *griot*, it does not sound like a blues singer at all. Blues singers may provide entertainment, but they are certainly not necessary in the way that *xalamkats* and *griots* are, and also do not figure in different life cycle events of a community. One would not require a bluesman to perform at a funeral. Blues singers also do not recite histories, and his description of the work of an *xalamkat* differs significantly from that of a blues singer.

6. Issues of Identity and Social History

The debate on African retentions in the blues is, at its core, about the people of Africa and their descendants in the New World, yet this human component of the discourse is often ignored. When searching for elements of the blues in Africa and finding ways to draw these connections, these scholars tend to leave out any notion of the

[62] Coolen, 75.

history of the people being discussed. It is important to point out the power dynamics inherent in this work, and be aware that the legacy of slavery and colonialism played a major part in the creation of the blues in the United States.

In an argument that resembles eugenics-style logic, Oliver contends that there are physical resemblances between many blues singers and the African people of the Savannah. Oliver notes, "The predominance of certain physical characteristics among a number of blues singers which relate closely to those of savannah people." He claims, "The high cheek-bones, long features, narrow jaw-lines and, frequently, straight noses, of a surprisingly large number of blues singers" is evidence of descent from the Savannah region. He follows this with a list of male blues singers that match this description.[63] There are even pictures of blues musicians John Henry Barbee and "T-Bone" Walker with the following caption, "The facial features would not appear out of place in the Savannah regions of West Africa."[64] In a critique of *Savannah Syncopators*, blues scholar David Evans referrers to Oliver's assertion of physiological and genetic similarities as the "weakest" argument in the book.[65] While Oliver did spend many years in different areas of West Africa and may be able note the physical characteristics of people from different regions, he is in no position to assume a direct genetic link between people that are at least one-hundred-and-fifty years and multiple generations removed. It is unlikely that Oliver can tell by physical appearance alone which specific region of Africa from which a person's ancestors came. Moreover, were he correct in his assertion,

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[63] Oliver, 91.

[64] Ibid., 92.

[65] Evans, 66.

he has further assumed that the musicians he named were somehow genetically predisposed to become blues singers. Oliver also does not account for the numerous blues singers who do not have these specific physical resemblances and, as Evans points out, the percentage of blues singers that bear these features is probably comparable to the percentage of the total African-American population with similar features.[66]

Evans continues his critique of Oliver's theory that the physical features such as "high cheekbones and straight noses" of some blues singers could mean they are descendants of the Savannah people by explaining that this could also be the result of "intermixture with whites and Indians, which was considerable during slavery."[67] In *Living Blues*, Oliver responded to this criticism:

> However, if the genetic flow were Indian to produce these physiological characteristics one would expect to find straight hair or circular section. But these singers [Fred McDowell, Wade Walton, Scott Dunbar] have all Negro "woolly" hair (or elliptical sections) as do Savannah people. In fact they display strong features of the Fulani specifically, and my first encounter with the Fulani tribesmen so reminded me of Wade Walton that I was encouraged to explore this area of genetic flow, which I had been entirely skeptical about until that date.[68]

Perhaps Oliver should have remained skeptical. Simply noting that a blues singer in the United States has the same "wooly" hair and other physical features as the Fulani people that Oliver observed does not in any way prove that the blues has Fulani "roots." What about all the people in America with those same characteristics who are not blues singers? Or those who are musicians but perform in other styles? Even if it could be

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[66] Ibid., 66–67.

[67] Ibid., 67

[68] Paul Oliver, "Echoes of the Jungle," *Living Blues* 10 (Autumn 1972): 29–32, reprinted in *Write Me a Few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader*, ed. Steven C. Tracy (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 73.

proven that a blues singer such as Wade Walton descended from Fulani ancestors, it does not necessarily mean that his music retains Fulani traits since we cannot say that music is stored and passed down through the genes. Reasoning of this sort looks at blues singers and Africans less as humans and more as research subjects. Beyond simply being offensive, it is not scientifically provable and serves only to weaken the argument.

7. Conclusion

To uncover exactly which African traditions influenced the blues is a massive, if not impossible, undertaking. Scholars have taken different approaches to this question and have often had to rely on speculation and oversimplifications to reach answers. Philip Tagg accurately summarizes the problems inherent in any attempt to distinguish African retentions in American music:

> First, we would have to find out what the slaves brought with them to the New World and how this interacted with what the Europeans had brought with them. In order to know this we would have to know which African peoples were actually brought to the New World, in what numbers, where they ended up and which Europeans they had to have dealings with. Then we would need to know whether the music used in Africa today by those peoples supplying the New World with slaves in the eighteenth century is the same now as it was then or whether it has undergone any changes. We would then have to know the social conditions of newly arrived slaves, the processes of assimilation and acculturation in various parts of the South and on that basis isolate strictly African musical elements in the fast acculturating genres of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[69]

Tragg accurately spells out the main questions that must be answered in this literature. We cannot portray an accurate picture of how and which African music was retained in the blues until all the historical specifics are accounted for.

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[69] Tagg, 291.

Since this body of literature contains so many divergent but genuine attempts to prove that the blues is “African” in some way, one has to notice that this “desire” to uncover the origins of the blues is behind all of this research. What is it about the blues that leads to such a desire, and why are scholars so desperate to find the origin of the music? There seems to be something mysterious and exotic about this uniquely American musical phenomenon that lends itself to such exhaustive and creative searching and speculation. Do we listen to the blues differently if it is understood to be of African origin? Can we appreciate the blues more once its “African roots” have been uncovered? Or is this discourse motivated by scholarly debate? In an email I asked Harriet Ottenheimer why so many scholars were intent on finding the “home” of the blues. While explaining the value and significance of origin seeking for different personal and historical perspectives, she made another astute observation: “I would add another question and that is why people seem to care so much about being the one and only finders of blues origins.”[70] There is an unmistakable tendency in this literature to discredit earlier theories and present ones’ own research as valid. Perhaps this discourse has become the grounds for scholarly competition, where open-ended concepts of “the blues” (with its history of mythology and speculation) and “Africa” (often misunderstood in the West) become the ultimate prize.

I contend that scholarship on this discourse should move away from concepts of “finding” and “discovery” not only because they are empirically unverifiable, but because they reinforce the inherent power imbalance between Africa and the West. When a Western scholar (established and employed by a university or foundation) asserts that a

[70] Harriet Ottenheimer, e-mail message to author, June 27, 2012.

music in Africa has been "found" to be the "root" of the blues, the scholar is in essence taking a kind of power or possession over it. This ignores (or even strips away) the cultural or spiritual significance this music may have held for the people that created it and for the people who continue to perform it. We should move away from engaging in this kind of scholarship as an act of discovery, since the music was never lost and is not in need of finding. Rather, we should work towards understanding and appreciating African and American musics for their sake, along with understanding their shared history.

Chapter Three:

Commercial "African Blues"

As scholarly theories and debates about the African legacy of the blues began to gain acceptance, the recording industry developed a strategy to market African music that specifically stressed a connection to the blues. African music was already an established cornerstone of the world music market that developed in the 1980s with prominent artists such as Senegalese Youssou N'Dour, Malian Salif Keita, Nigerian King Sunny Adé, and collaborative recordings such as Paul Simon's *Graceland* (1986)[1] with South African musicians. However, the apparent "blues connection" was not used as a serious marketing strategy until the early 1990s. Regardless of the fact that many West African musical styles already contained a heavy influence of Western popular styles, the marketing of African blues was meant to show that the roots of African American music were, indeed, in Africa. The resulting music, which was actually a blend of styles, is portrayed as musical evidence. The reasoning here is somewhat convoluted; African musicians mixing Western and traditional instruments and sounds are seen as proof of the African influence in the blues, and the resulting recordings of African musicians intentionally playing in a "bluesy" style is perceived as evidence that the blues existed in Africa all along.

"African Blues" is often conflated with "Desert blues," a somewhat more specific and evocative term, reserved generally for musicians from the interior parts of West Africa, in the Sahel region and the Sahara. No clear delineation exists between the two,

[1] Paul Simon, *Graceland*, Warner Brothers, 1986.

and the terms can be used interchangeably. “African Blues” is meant to highlight connections between African musicians and African American culture, and “Desert blues” is sometimes reserved for musicians of Berber or Tuareg background. There are many packaged compilation albums of “African Blues” and “Desert Blues,” and often some the same artists can be found on both. For example, Moroccan singer Mariem Hassan’s music can be found on both *The Rough Guide to Desert Blues* and also *The Rough Guide to African Blues*, and Ali Farka Touré’s music is often described using both terms.

“African Blues” has become a major seller in the world music market. Since the creation of the “World Music” category in 1992, artists associated with “African Blues” recordings have received four Grammy Awards and numerous nominations as of 2012. “African Blues” has clearly made its mark in the West and is becoming one of the main frames within which Westerners apprehend the music of Africa.

This chapter will explore the different ways that the “African Blues” discourse has been represented outside of the academic world. Ali Farka Touré was the first performer to use the label “African Blues” and has since become the most well known and pivotal of all “African Blues” performers. I will first provide a timeline of major events in “African Blues” by presenting an overview of Touré’s career to show how all this unfolded and where other artists and recordings sit in relation. The discussion will then move to an analysis of specific examples of this discourse in media sources such as magazine articles and commercially produced recordings. I will look at the ways this discourse has become focused on Mali and the city of Timbuktu, and finally I will present

examples of scholars and musicians who have voiced criticism of the "African Blues" label.

1. Ali Farka Touré and the Rise of "African Blues"

The history of "African Blues" is inseparable from the legacy of its premier star, Ali Farka Touré. On Touré's earliest recordings from the 1970s for Malian radio, he blended traditional Songia and Sahel folk songs with elements of American rock and blues. On these recordings Touré performed all of the vocals and played acoustic guitar along with *n'jarka* (single-string, bowed instrument), often with calabash percussion accompaniment. Through his early recordings Touré developed an idiosyncratic guitar style that featured pentatonic scales, inflected with ornamented semi-tones, played over an open drone on the lowest string. In the 1980s, Touré released three albums: *Ali Farka Touré Red* (1984), *Ali Farka Touré Green* (1988), later released as *African Blues* (1990), and a self-titled album, *Ali Farka Touré* (1988). These albums, and particularly *Ali Farka Touré*, caught the attention of Western producers and became the foundation of Touré's international career.

The following decade of Touré's career marks a notable change toward a more Western and accessible sound. Touré began to play more electric guitar and added accompanists, generally creating what can be perceived as a richer and more "bluesy" style. Both *The River* (1990) and *The Source* (1992) were among the highest sell World Music albums at the time and introduced Touré to a much wider audience. *The Source*

became the third longest running number one “World” album, speeding eighteen weeks at the top of the Billboard chart in 1993.[2]

Touré’s major breakthrough came in 1994 with the release of *Talking Timbuktu*. This album was a collaboration with American guitar legend Ry Cooder and also featured blues guitarist Clarence “Gatemouth” Brown. The album received widespread critical acclaim and won the 1995 Grammy Award for the Best World Music Album. *Talking Timbuktu* became an international sensation, introducing many to the potential for similarities between African music and the blues. It established “African Blues” as a marketing style and set the precedent for future collaborations involving African and Western musicians.

The next major collaboration to gain widespread attention was *Kulanjan* (1999), which paired American guitarist Taj Mahal with Toumani Diabate along with other Malian musicians. *Kulanjan* aimed to create a sound that highlighted similarities between Malian music and American blues by reworking a variety of traditional Mande *griots* songs, and classic American blues, as well as original compositions. *Kulanjan* was well received and created buzz in music magazines, particularly those that focused on blues and guitar playing.[3] Together, *Kulanjan* and *Talking Timbuktu* were two of the main catalysts sparking interest in “African Blues” in the 1990s. Both albums featured extremely influential and popular American blues musicians performing with Malian musicians who at that time were significantly less well known in the West. Beyond

[2] Fred Bronson, "‘Talking’ about a World Record” Billboard 106, no. 42 (October 15, 1994): 110.

[3] Banning Eyre, “Taj Mahal and Toumani Diabate,” Rhythm: Global Sounds and Ideas 8 (1999): 22–23; Banning Eyre, “Blues For Mali” Folk Roots, 21(1999): 29–33; Banning Eyre, “Homeward Bound,” Guitar Player 33, no. 12 (December 1999), 74–79; Jan Cornwell, “Taj Mahal Meets Central Park”, The Independent, (November 1999).

creating interesting musical fusions, these albums made a strong case for the African origins of the blues and were portrayed as musical evidence of the same shared roots. The liner notes to *Kulanjan* highlight the potential historical connection between traditional *griot* instruments and American blues guitar technique, and the music is presented as an example of what the original, pre-diaspora "blues" sounded like.

The United States Congress declared 2003 "The Year of the Blues,"[4] and in conjunction PBS aired the Martin Scorsese documentary entitled *The Blues*. This seven-part series featured a different director for each episode and aimed to present a somewhat comprehensive history of the blues, highlighting certain musicians, events, and regions important to blues history. Scorsese directed the first installment, "Feel Like Going Home," and it focused on the Delta blues as the origins of the music. The film accompanies contemporary American blues musician Corey Harris as he travels through Mississippi to uncover the roots of the blues and pays homage to its early masters. The documentary then presents theories that trace the blues back to Africa by following Harris to Mali where he meets and performs with Ali Farka Touré. In a particularly provocative scene, Touré explains to Harris his theory that African culture is still intact in America, and music is its clearest incarnation. "Feel Like Going Home" makes a strong case for the African origins of the blues; Harris and Touré's performance is meant to show the shared history of two traditions, and the intended conclusion for the viewer is that the core of the blues still contains something "African." With this documentary, PBS viewers were exposed to the music of Ali Farka Touré, and theories about the African roots of the blues became more widely known. This concept, in its more simplified form,

[4] Stephen A. King, *I'm Feeling the Blues Right Now: Blues Tourism and the Mississippi Delta* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2011), 3.

fully entered the American public consciousness with *The Blues* and opened the door for more recordings that would capitalize on it.

In 2005 Ali Farka Touré and Toumani Diabate, now two of the best-known African musicians through their previous collaborations with American blues players, released the collaborative album *In the Heart of the Moon*.[5] The album was very well received, winning multiple awards including the Grammy for "Best Traditional World" album in 2006. Unlike some of their earlier recordings, the album focused much less on any apparent blues connections with Africa; nonetheless, it still captured the imagination of many Western listeners and marked another major commercial success for Touré, often given the title "King of the African blues." Touré died in March of 2006 and his final solo album *Savane* was released posthumously in July of that year.[6] The follow-up recording to *In the Heart of the Moon* titled, *Ali and Toumani*[7] was recorded in 2006 but not released until 2010, and won the Grammy for Best World Music album in 2011.

Touré had a complicated relationship with the music industry and with his image as an "African bluesman." To Touré, the blues, and all African American music, was really just an extension of African music. Touré's music often invites parallels to American blues singer John Lee Hooker, as many of Touré's songs are built around pentatonic ostinatos and his guitar playing is grounded in different minor and blues scales that are reminiscent of Hooker's style. Touré, however, maintained that Hooker's music was inherently African: "He [Hooker] plays tunes whose roots he does not understand. It

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[5] Ali Farka Touré and Toumani Diabate, *In the Heart of the Moon* Nonesuch CD, 2005.

[6] Ali Farka Touré, *Savane*, Nonesuch CD, 2006.

[7] Ali Farka Touré and Toumani Diabate, *Ali & Toumani*, Nonesuch CD, 2010.

comes from Africa and particularly from Mali. It comes from history, from the land, nature, animals. It doesn't come from beer and whiskey. . . . He [Hooker] understands the spirit, but it is never Western. *Never*. It comes from Africa and particularly from Mali."[8] This polemical claim allows Touré to claim that his music is "one-hundred percent traditional"[9] since any apparent Western influence is still African at its core.

In 2007 Touré's son, Vieux Farka Touré, released his first recording. This self-titled album featured previously recorded tracks with Vieux's late father along with Diabate and established Vieux as the family's musical heir. Vieux's music tends to evoke the same aesthetic as his fathers', and his repertoire includes versions of his father's songs. In particular, Vieux's guitar style has developed directly out of Ali Farka's tradition and uses many similar sounding guitar riffs and ostinatos, especially in his early recordings. Later recordings feature Vieux in a more rock-oriented setting; his guitar playing is more amplified and explosive, and he tends to feature Western drum-set over the more traditional calabash and djembe percussion that his father favored. Vieux has been described as "the Hendrix of the Sahara,"[10] and he has collaborated with popular American musicians including Dave Matthews, Derek Trucks, and John Scofield.[11] In 2010 Vieux was invited to perform at the Opening Celebration of the FIFA World Cup. This high-profile performance showed Vieux, and the legacy of his father by

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[8] Banning Eyre, "Ali Farka Touré 1939-2006," *The Village Voice* (March 22, 2006): 77.

[9] Ibid.

[10] "Bio," http://www.vieuxfarkatoure.com/?page_id=4 (Accessed May 27, 2013).

[11] Vieux Farka Touré, *The Secret*, Six Degrees CD, 2011.

extension, as one of the most important African musicians, and "African Blues" had become one of Africa's chief musical exports.

Throughout the 2000s, other musicians from northern Mali were also capitalizing on the growing interest in the "Desert Blues." Bands such as Tinariwen, Terakaft, and Etran Finatawa have toured the United States and Europe, blending an amplified, rock aesthetic with *Tuareg* and *Songahi* melodies and rhythms. Their music also featured elements that could be seen as "bluesy" such as pentatonic and blues scales improvised over repeating ostinatos, and the subsequent marketing of the music tended to emphasize the apparent connection to American music by using the term "Desert Blues." In 2012 Tinariwen won the Grammy for their album *Tassili* that featured tracks with American guitarist Nels Cline and The Dirty Dozen Brass Band.[12]

2. "African Blues" Discourse in Popular Sources

As "African Blues" recordings began to account for significant sales in the West, much ink has been spilled in attempt to make sense of this intriguing music. Articles on this trend have appeared in most major news sources including the *New York Times*, NPR, BBC, *The Guardian*, along with music-specific magazines such as *Guitar Player* and *Folk Roots*. The general tone of these publications is one of admiration for the music, seeing it both as a new phenomenon and also as a kind of connection to something much older. There is always an attempt to understand the history behind this music; most articles acknowledge the theory of the African roots of American blues as if it were an

[12] Tinariwen, *Tassili*, Anti Records CD, 2011.

already accepted conclusion by musicologists, brushing over the details and citing the music as evidence.

The discourse on African retentions in the blues in commercial publications is grounded in the scholarly theories discussed earlier in Chapter Two. The generic notion of "the African roots of the blues" as theorized by writers such as Oliver and Charters is taken as fact and with that comes some of the same problematic assumptions. As commercial publications are not held to the same standards as scholarly ones, they are able to communicate a looser understanding of history. The result is that a body of literature has developed that further oversimplifies understandings of West African music and the history of the blues. Often overlooked is the question of which music is influencing which. "African music" itself is undervalued, being seen only as important for is apparent connections with the blues, and it is still seen as an example of an older and intact tradition.

In this literature the relationship between Africa and the blues is often portrayed as fact. One example is an article by Banning Eyre[13] titled "Homeward Bound" in *Guitar Player* (1999). Eyre oversimplifies the discourse and distils it down to the main points. The article references the fact that there has been significant commercial scholarship on the issue, and that some of it is contentious, but the forgone conclusion has already been made. "Homeward Bound" is a review of the Taj Mahal and Toumani Diabate collaboration *Kulanjan* and opens with the sentence, "It's old news that many

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[13] Banning Eyre is possibly the foremost authority on commercial African music in America and occupies a unique position as a scholarly and commercial writer. He was one of the coauthors of book *Afropop: An Illustrated Guide to Contemporary African Music* (1995), one of the producers of Afropop Radio and the author of *In Griot Time*. He has become the go-to source when any major news source needs an article or interview on African music, particularly from Mali.

musicologists believe rock and roll, jazz, blues, rap, and even bluegrass banjo originated in Africa."[14] Eyre acknowledges that there are many different sides to this issue; however, "It's difficult to enter the debate if you have little familiarity with African music. But one listen to *Kulanjan* . . . cuts through a lot of the rhetoric and reveals tangible links between musical styles on both sides of the Atlantic."[15] These provocative statements give an accurate impression of the way that the "African Blues" discourse is portrayed outside academia. Eyre first presents himself as someone who will accurately guide the readers of *Guitar Player* through this discourse in an easy and accessible way. There is a lot of complex work on this issue, but it's "old news," and as a result, the public can safely assume that nearly *all* American musical innovations have roots in Africa. Specificity is not important here, and any debate would be "difficult" for the readers of *Guitar Player* to enter as they presumably have "little familiarity" with the music of Africa. Thus, Eyre is able to invite his readers into a semi-factual space that he as the expert can moderate, where all American music, especially the blues, is connected to African music and *Kulanjan* is all the evidence that is needed. One no longer needs to understand the different and complex theories that link African and American music, simply listening to the recording is enough. While Eyre's statements oversimplify the issue, there certainly are "links between musical styles on both sides of the Atlantic"; however, the specifics of this connection are less obvious. The reality that American blues and West African musicians can easily collaborate does not necessarily mean that the blues stems directly from this specific style of Malian music, and what contemporary

[14] Eyre, "Homeward Bound," 74.

[15] Ibid.

Malians are playing is not necessarily indicative of the African music from before the slave trade.

3. Corey Harris and *Mississippi to Mali*

American blues musician Cory Harris has generated much interest in the "African Blues" discourse stemming from his work in Mali. Harris was already celebrated in blues circles for his Delta-inspired recordings, but he became even more prominent after he was featured in the Martin Scorsese series *The Blues* performing with Ali Farka Touré. This experience inspired Harris to make a second trip to Mali to record with Touré for his 2003 release, *Mississippi to Mali*.[16] The album includes Harris performing in multiple different styles in order to show the common elements of the different musical aspects of the African diaspora. Half of the tracks on the album feature Harris performing in Mali with Touré and his band. Harris sings and plays acoustic guitar on blues standards such as "Special Rider Blues," "Cypress Grove," and "Catfish Blues" with supporting calabash percussion, while Touré adds accompanying ostinatos on *n'jarka* and occasional guitar fills. Touré takes the lead on three tracks where he sings and plays guitar while Harris provides minimal backing guitar. The album also includes recordings made in the United States where Harris performs traditional American blues, both solo, and with a supporting band, and even two tracks with fife and drum from Mississippi. In the liner notes, Harris explains that the recording was inspired by his work for the Scorsese film, and the goal for the album was "to demonstrate the living links between African music

[16] Corey Harris, *Mississippi to Mali*, Rounder CD, 2003.

and African-American music, specifically the blues and its offspring."[17] The album and is noteworthy because of the multidimensional ways that the "African Blues" discourse is approached.

One pervasive problem with this album and the surrounding press is that the concept of "Africa" is seen in generic terms, as if there was a single, unified "African" sound that could be heard anywhere on the continent. Harris regularly invokes the "roots" metaphor, where all kinds of African American music, blues included, are the branches of a common tree, whose roots are a general concept of "Africa."[18] Harris often explains that all African American music can be traced back to Africa but neglects to show any sensitivity to the vast differences between many kinds of African music. In a 2004 interview with *Acoustic Guitar*, Harris explains why he specifically chose to record songs of the early, influential delta blues singer Skip James, with Ali Farka Touré: "In my mind, Skip James was very much between African styles and blues styles, although he never heard African music, as far as I know."[19] How then, does Skip James's music retain elements from Africa? Harris's statement echoes the work of earlier scholars such as Charters who speculated that early Delta blues was somehow closer to original African music. Unmentioned here are the "African styles" to which Skip James's music was similar. The concept of a generic, homogenous "African music" underscores this reasoning, and by avoiding specificity Harris is able to make an easy claim about one of the most beloved early blues singers without detailing or offering any evidence. This

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[17] Ibid., liner notes, 2003.

[18] Ian Zack, "Journey to the Source: Corey Harris Tracks Down the Roots of the Blues, from 'Mississippi to Mali,'" *Acoustic Guitar* 137 (May 2004): 57.

[19] Ibid., 56

logic follows a pattern of ignoring the diversity of African music and also seeing it only for its potential influence in the West.

Harris's work in Mali tends to promote the notion that decontextualized sound can be used as evidence of a historic connection. When Harris performs in a convincing style with African musicians, blending elements of both traditions, the result is seen as proof of their relationship. In the liner notes to *Mississippi to Mali*, Harris explains that the recording is meant to provide audible proof of a shared history, but he is aware that this connection is debatable. "The listener must decide on his or her own, rather than be told and led down the path by a narrator [as is the case in the Scorsese documentary]. To make the connection between our ancestors' music and today's Black music, we must listen."[20] While Harris wants the listener to draw his or her own conclusions, it is very obvious what he thinks those ought to be. Harris goes on to explain that the various musicians, African and African American, are all different, but are "bound by common roots." He concludes, "Our different histories, ages, cultures are all part of the same tree. Listen closely and you will hear the roots."[21] Thus, by blending different aspects of the music of the African diaspora, Harris can oversimplify the history of different traditions and make a general claim about the music's past. If "the roots" are a kind of shared sonic history, then listening to contemporary music of both sides of the Atlantic can certainly give an impression of a shared history, but this is not the same as actual evidence.

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[20] Corey Harris, *Mississippi to Mali*, Rounder LC319, liner notes, 2003.

[21] Ibid.

Harris' understanding of the role of contemporary African musicians is complicated. He views the music of Ali Farka Touré and others as a link to the past, as examples of pre-diaspora music, but he is also aware that the music they are playing is entirely contemporary. In a 2004 interview with *Global Rhythm*, Harris explains: "One thing I have to say is that these musics are all modern. They're really not that old. Even Ali Farka's music—even though it's rooted in the ancient—he wrote those songs. They're not traditional songs; they're all songs he wrote or arranged. Also, the guitar is not a traditional African instrument."[22] This is a valuable comment; it is important to remember that Touré and other contemporary Malian musicians have all been exposed to Western music and that they are not attempting to play in a purely "traditional" sense, though the music is often portrayed as such.

Another important issue that Harris calls attention to in his work is the history of slavery and its impact on creating this music. Much of the "African Blues" discourse focuses on the musical parallels between African American music and West African music but it tends to overlook the historical and social circumstances that had to happen first in order for this music to have been created. In the liner notes to *Mississippi to Mali*, Harris takes pains to remind his audience that the history of slavery is important to this discourse:

> Music and culture can never be taken away. When our ancestors were stolen from Africa, stripped of their names, their families and possessions, music was always there, in our hearts and souls, untouchable…. Slavery killed millions of Africans, bled the continent of its riches, and left many damaged survivors in its wake, but it could not kill the spirit that makes the music. It is out of love and

[22] Mark Keating, "Common Roots: Bluesman Corey Harris Makes the Malian Connection," *Global Rhythm* 13, no. 5 (May 2004): 29.

> respect for this spirit that I traveled to Mali and Mississippi to record the sounds on this CD.[23]

It is important to remind listeners of the history of oppression inherent in any discussion of the creation of the blues in America, and Harris should be commended for bringing this issue to the forefront. It is also significant that he sees music as a positive surviving outcome of this history. There is clearly a spiritual connection that Harris feels between his music and that of Mali. The specifics of how this spirit survived, was passed down, and changed over time are left unanswered, but viewing this musical legacy in this light, as a spirit, may make more sense than as a tangible entity.

Harris's contributions to the "African Blues" discourse are valuable because he reminds listeners that the music is still contemporary, and his words can give a sense of why it is personally important for him to make these recordings. As a performer, Harris can elide historical connections and produce music to which he is spiritually and emotionally drawn, since he is not held to the same standards as scholars.

4. Focus on Mali and Timbuktu and Parallels with the American South

As more "African Blues" recordings flood the market, Mali, more so than any other nation, has become seen as the de-facto "home of the blues." Samuel Charters's original theories of an African origin of the blues focused mainly on Senegambia as the "home," Paul Oliver's theories pointed to the interior Savannah, Michael Coolen highlighted Sengebal, Harriet Ottenheimer pointed to East Africa, and Kubik has identified parts of Mali, northern Ghana, northern Nigera, and northern and central

[23] Corey Harris, *Mississippi to Mali*, Rounder LC319, liner notes, 2003.

Cameroon as the most likely sources.[24] However, since Ali Farka Touré and nearly every subsequent "African Blues" artist has come from Mali, this nation has become center of this phenomenon.

There are a few reasons that Mali is well-suited for this role. As Mali is extremely large and is geographically and ethnically diverse, it encapsulates many of the different musical traditions of West Africa. According to Kubik, music from parts of north-central Mali contain many of the traits, such as pentatonicism, that have been identified as key African retentions in the blues. Northern Mali, which accounts for the majority of the land, is made up of Sahel and the Sahara desert and borders Mauritania, Algeria, and Niger. There are strong connections to Africa's Muslim history here, including Timbuktu, the historic Islamic center of trade and learning. The music of Northern Mali often shows Islamic influence in ornamentation and melismas, traits that Kubik labels as an important blues retention.[25] Furthermore, northern Mali is home to the Sonhai, Tuareg, and Berber peoples, whose music is rooted in pentatonic scales. Southern Mali, where the capital Bamako and other population centers lay, is culturally more in line with neighboring costal nations such as Senegal, Guinea, and Cote d'Ivoire. Southern Mali has a long and still intact history of *griot* musicians who perform songs that date back to the height of the Malian Empire of the fourteenth century[26], and as I noted earlier, *griots* and their music are often invoked in the "African Blues" discourse. Thus when focusing on Mali as the home of the blues, one can be referring to a number

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[24] Kubik, 69–70.

[25] Ibid., 63.

[26] Banning Eyre, *In Griot Time: An American Guitarist in Mali* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 2–3.

of different traditions, all of which can be seen as relating to the blues. Furthermore, during the height of the "African Blues" fad of the 1990s through the early 2000s, Mali was a fairly stable nation, and though extremely poor, it was a somewhat accessible destination for Western travelers and researchers.

The ancient city of Timbuktu has also played a role in the creation of Mali as the center of "African blues." Timbuktu is the largest city in Mali's north; it lies in the Sahel region on the edge of the Sahara desert. Because of its historic Mosques and libraries, Timbuktu has become a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Ali Farka Touré and Afel Bocoum were both born and lived near Timbuktu, and thus the city has become known for their music. The name Timbuktu also holds significance in the West as synonym for any impossibly distant or unimaginable place, as in the expression "from here to Timbuktu." For centuries Timbuktu has symbolized the end of the world, or at least the end of the Western understanding of the world, because of its distant location and mythical status as remote and unreachable. Fascination with Timbuktu reached a highpoint in the 1820s when the French *Societe de Geographie* offered 10,000 francs to the first non-Muslim to make it to Timbuktu and back, and in a recent article on this phenomenon, Scott Neuman explains, Timbuktu has come to "symbolize the blank spaces of our imagination."[27]

Because of the mystique and legend surrounding this mysterious location, the name "Timbuktu" is often invoked in the growing discourse on African blues to highlight the foreign and exotic nature of this music. Touré's 1994 Grammy winning recording

[27] Scott Neuman, "From Here To Timbuktu: Myth And Reality At The World's Edge," http://www.npr.org/2013/01/29/170562921/from-here-to-timbuktu-myth-and-reality-at-the-world-s-edge (accessed January 29, 2012).

with Ry Cooder was titled *Talking Timbuktu*; American guitarist and singer Bruce Cockburn who has traveled to Mali, titled his 1999 blues-tinged album *Breakfast in New Orleans, Dinner in Timbuktu*.[28] American blues musician Markus James has worked extensively with Malian musicians, and he titled his 2005 album, which was recorded in Mali, *Timbuktoubab*; the word "Toubab" means foreigner or white person.[29]

The concept of Timbuktu has become so important to the "African Blues" discourse that some sources have taken it to be actual "home of the blues." The notion that the blues must have a specific birthplace is central to the dialogue on American blues and significant research has been devoted to uncovering exactly this location. Accordingly, in blues mythology the Mississippi Delta has become the popularly accepted place where the blues began, and certain stories hold powerful currency in the blues community, such as Robert Johnson meeting the Devil at the crossroads, or Charlie Patton at Dockery Farms, and even W. C. Handy, the self-proclaimed "father of the blues" first hearing the blues at a railroad depot in Tutwiler, Mississippi.[30]

A provocative 2010 article in the *Christian Science Monitor* by correspondent Scott Baldauf offers vague reasons for why Africa, and specifically Timbuktu, is regarded the "home" of the blues.[31] Titled "Timbuktu, the Birthplace of the Blues," his article even includes the blunt subheading: "Don't argue with an African about the birthplace of blues. It's Timbuktu. Hear why." Baldauf writes that most Americans

[28] Bruce Cockburn, *Breakfast in New Orleans, Dinner in Timbuktu*, True North CD, 1999.

[29] Markus James, *Timbuktoubab*, Firenze CD, 2005.

[30] King, 23-53.

[31] Scott Baldauf, "Timbuktu, The Birthplace of Blues," *The Christian Science Monitor* (March 2005), http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Global-News/2010/0305/Timbuktu-the-birthplace-of-blues (accessed February 20, 2013).

would consider places such as the Mississippi Delta, or Memphis, Tennessee to be the home, but he writes: "Ask an African, and he'll look at you as if you're stupid. The blues came from Timbuktu." What exactly is meant by "the blues" and how it came from Timbuktu are questions left unanswered; equally problematic is the notion of "an African." Baldauf writes as if one could simply ask any African living on any part of the continent about the blues and he would immediately understand that the music came from Timbuktu. The notion of a generic, homogenous African people and culture, defined only by their by difference is rampant in Western conceptions of Africa and is one of the key factors in creating historical inaccuracies about the connection between Africa and the blues.

Baldauf's article continues with passages from an interview with Ali's son, Vieux Farka Touré, who explains that the blues should be considered "African music" since Africans brought it to America. Baldauf explains that when Touré plays "traditional Malian" melodies on the guitar it sounds much like the blues because "the five-note or pentatonic scale he uses for solos and riffs, far outweigh and differences."[32] Baldauf is aware that there are various competing theories on the origins of the blues, and he concedes that some musicologists believe that it is impossible to trace the music to a specific place because contemporary African musicians are influenced by American popular styles and cannot accurately represent music that existed prior to the slave trade. This would appear to be a sensible, logical warning about the dangers of making assumptions. "But," Baldauf writes, "that's the problem with academics. They think too much." With this swift and conclusive dismissal of academics, Baldauf is able to

[32] Ibid.

overlook scholarship in order to make easy and attractive connections and assumptions. The romantic images of desert nomads playing the blues before it was brought to America are hard to resist:

> Close your eyes, and listen to Wanty Ag Mohamed al Mouloud, a Tuareg griot (a musical historian and storyteller) play a few bars of a song, about the difficulties of a caravan crossing the Sahara, of the heroic battles of Tuareg fighters against French colonials, and you'll wonder if Robert Johnson may have sold his soul to the devil in vain.[33]

Suddenly the temporal and geographic distances between pre-slave trade West African music and the music of the Delta from the 1930s is conflated; the music on both sides of the Atlantic becomes the blues, a single entity, rich with mythology. Robert Johnson and the crossroads myth are somehow related to Tuareg songs, and the blues becomes a metaphor for a vague African musical experience that one can better understand and fantasize about with closed eyes. Indeed, "close your eyes" to scholarship and academics may be an accurate direction for how to see the unequivocal connection between the blues and the music of Timbuktu. Ignoring the complications and intangibles of history is the best way to see this as a clear connection. Thus Mali has become the "home of the blues" and Timbuktu its mythical capital.

4.1 Connections Between Mali and the American South

As many popular publications consider the South as the American home of the blues and Mali as the African home, it is natural to attempt to forge some kind of link between the two as though there is something inherently similar about the two places. In a 2006 obituary for Ali Farka Touré, Banning Eyre writes: "The distance between the

[33] Ibid.

Mississippi Delta and the banks of the Niger gets shorter every day. We have Ali Farka Touré to thank for that."[34] Touré's music is seen as bridging a gap between these two very distant locations, both of which have come to be symbolically associated with music.

Many of the transatlantic collaborations and "African Blues" compilation albums make use of this memorable rhetorical connection, especially drawing on the potential for alliteration. Cory Harris's album title *Mississippi to Mali* immediately draws attention to this connection and establishes some kind of commonality between the two. On the album *Kulanjan* by Toumani Diabate and Taj Mahal (see Chapter 4), the track "Mississippi-Mali Blues" exemplifies this memorable sounding name, and the music, as expected, features Mahal and Malian musicians playing the blues. The 1999 Putumayo release *Memphis to Mali* establishes this connection by pairing American blues and Malian pop songs back-to-back. [35] Bruce Cockburn's *Breakfast in New Orleans, Dinner in Timbuktu* (1999)[36] too, makes a connection between Mali and the American South, drawing parallels to Louisiana instead of Mississippi.

American jazz singer Dee Dee Bridgewater has also explored the possibility of a connection between Mali and the American South on a 2007 collaborative recording with Malian musicians. Her album *Red Earth: A Malian Journey* emphasizes connections between the red-tinted soil found around her native Memphis (and throughout the South)

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[34] Banning Eyre, "Ali Farka Touré 1939-2006," The Village Voice (March 22, 2006): 77.

[35] Various Artists, *Memphis to Mali*, Putumayo World Music CD, 1999.

[36] Bruce Cockburn, *Breakfast in New Orleans, Dinner in Timbuktu*, True North CD, 1999.

and what she encountered in Mali.[37] Bridgewater writes that the album is the culmination of discovering her "roots" in Mali, and creating a blend of jazz and traditional Malian music that Bridgewater considers her "journey home."[38] In the liner notes Bridgewater explains that she came to believe that she is a descendant of people from Mali after the realization that she has an "instinctual connection to Malian 'blues,'" an apparent physical resemblance to the *Peul* people of Mali, and "an inexplicable draw to the red earth." The similarities between the look of the soil in Mali and Tennessee are a central focal point to the album. The title track "Red Earth" opens with virtuosic *kora* melodies, over talking drum, piano, and trap set. The musicians then come together to form a slow, formulaic, twelve-bar blues grove. Bridgewater sings the lyrics: "I've been findin' clues around the world./ Clues of red earth everywhere said "Listen girl."/ And when I stepped off the plane in Bamako./ I saw the red earth and knew the blues had touched my soul."[39] In essence, the "red earth" common to the South and Mali is a metaphor of cultural similarity; the African nature of the blues becomes apparent to Bridgewater through her connection to the soil of both continents.

5. Critical Voices

As the connection between the blues and African music is commonly made and accepted in the commercial world there are some who have questioned the veracity of

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[37] Dee Dee Bridgewater, *Red Earth: A Malian Journey*, Emarcy CD, 2007.

[38] Ibid., liner notes.

[39] Ibid.

these claims. The following is an investigation of ways that both scholars and African musicians have raised issues with this discourse.

The word "blues" is commonly used to describe other "world" traditions beyond West African music, which can lead to problematic assumptions. In his article "The Blues Metaphor," Jeffrey Callen explains some of the problems with the overuse of this term, especially for Moroccan Gnawa music. Callen notes that the term "blues" is used for many different kinds of music because it gives Western audiences a frame of reference and offers of an air of authenticity. He writes, "Whether it's Portuguese *fado*, Greek *rembetika* or even the songs of Edith Piaf, the blues metaphor has been used for decades as a way to bring in new audiences by shifting expectations to make the music seem familiar, authentic and alluring."[40] Since the "blues" label is already so ambiguous and undefined it is open for different interpretations and can be used, however misleading, for many different styles. (For example, Billie Holiday mainly sang popular song, but her music has come to be associated with the blues.[41]) Callen continues, "But slapping the blues label onto any music that seems sad, mournful or soulful (not in the sense of soul music, God help us!) or shares some West African musical elements not only simplifies and flattens things, it also covers up real connections and interchanges that make music in the modern world so fascinating."[42] Invoking "the blues metaphor" is indeed dangerous because, as Callen writes, it oversimplifies history along with musical connections across continents and leads to incomplete assumptions. When we label any

[40] Jeffrey Callen, "The Blues Metaphor," *The Beat* 27, no. 4 (December 2008): 40–41.

[41] "Holiday, Billie 2." Encyclopedia of Popular Music, 4th edition, Oxford Music Online, Oxford University Press, accessed July 2, 2013, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/epm/66452.

[42] Ibid., 41.

contemporary West African music as a kind of "blues," it brushes over long and complex history of influences that has produced distinctive traditions.

While Callen is mostly opposed to using "the blues metaphor" in reference to Moroccan and Middle Eastern music, he accepts it as term for West African and Sudanic music because of the shared history and aesthetic similarities. He writes, "One example of when the blues metaphor works is its use to describe the emergence of 'Malian blues' or 'desert blues'" to describe the music of Ali Farka Touré and other similar Malian musicians. Callen acknowledges the difficulties in finding specific links between the two traditions, but in this case, the similar sound is evidence enough. He writes:

> Direct historical connections between Malian music and the blues may be a subject of some dispute in academic circles but the shared aural characteristics are unmistakable. They are also clearly both branches of the great African musical river that crossed the Atlantic but don't forget that river always flowed both ways and the interchanges sped up considerably with the dawning of the 20th century.[43]

Callen is right to point out that musical influences between Africa and the Americas is bidirectional and that advances in transportation and communications of the twentieth century have greatly aided this process. However, "shared aural characteristics" between Malian music and the blues alone are not enough to prove a shared past, and we need to be aware that the music is still a contemporary creation, and that "African blues' recordings are not indicative of what centuries-old, traditional African music sounded like.

[43] Ibid., 40.

5.1 Contesting "African Blues": Lobi Traoré and Ali Farka Touré

Often absent from the discourse on "African Blues" is the perspective of the performers themselves. They tend to be voiceless, with record companies using their names and apparent "bluesy" sound to sell albums. African performers are rarely given the opportunity in published texts to explain how they see the connection between their music and the blues. Lobi Traoré (1961–2010) is one Malian musician whose skepticism with the blues connection has been noted in the press. While less prominent in the West than stars like Ali Farka Touré or Toumani Diabate, Traoré was known for his distinctive, heavily rock-influenced, electric guitar playing that blended Barbara music with a rock aesthetic. Traoré admits he was influenced by American blues recording artists such as John Lee Hooker, but he was always hesitant to label his music "blues." As Banning Eyre explains in Traoré's obituary for *Guitar Player* Magazine, "In the late '80s and early '90s, his producers encouraged him to embrace the 'Bambara blues' tag," because artists like Ali Farka Touré been so successful with the "African bluesman" label.[44] Traoré's first recording was titled *Bambara Blues* (1992), and the blues metaphor has since been applied to all his music by the music industry. In an interview with Eyre, Traoré states: "It wasn't me who came up with the idea of Bambara blues. People kept saying, 'Bambara blues, Bambara blues.' In the end, I accepted it. But I don't think that the blues is our music."[45] As a market savvy musician, Traoré came to terms with the use of the term "blues" by his producers to market his music despite the problems he had

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[44] Banning Eyre, "Lobi Traoré," *Guitar Player* 44, no.10 (2010): 46.

[45] Eyre, *In Griot Time*, 86.

with it. Traoré understood the potential to reach Western audiences with the inclusion of the word “blues,” and was successful with it.

Traoré is aware that American blues has influenced his sound, but he still considers the blues a distinctly American tradition. In the interview with Eyre he explains: “When I was young, before I even knew I would become a musician, I listened to a lot of blues—John Lee Hooker and all that. Maybe I was inspired by it. Maybe the blues was inspired by Africa. Maybe the resemblance is just a coincidence. What I know is this: The music I play comes from my place. To me, blues is American, nothing but American.”[46] As opposed to Ali Farka Toure’s view that the blues is strictly African music, Traoré would rather see the blues as a tradition that developed separately rather than as an extension of West African traits.

Despite the reservations Traoré once had, much of work is labeled “blues,” and it is astounding how often his music is packaged with the term. After *Bambara Blues*, his other albums included *Mali Blue* (2004) and *Rainy Season Blues* (2010). His album *Bwati Kono* (2010), meaning “In the Club,” is a collection of live recordings made in Bamako; the cover features the text “Raw Electric Blues from Bamako.”[47] The music on this album features *balaphone* along with trap set and *djembe* accompaniment to Traoré vocals and searing, heavily distorted, guitar solos. The vocals and guitar riffs are built around pentatonic scales and blues notes, but no standard blues idioms such as twelve-bar form. Presumably, however, record producers understood that Traoré’s music would

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[46] Ibid.

[47] Lobi Traoré, *Bwati Kono*, Kanaga System Krush CD, 2010.

have more appeal in the West if audiences could use the blues as a frame of reference, and it is difficult to tell if Traoré himself had any say in the marketing of his work.

Ali Farka Touré is also famously ambivalent about the blues connection to his music. With so much marketing and emphasis on his music as "the roots of the blues," it is often impossible to step away from the transnational influences inherent in the music. Eyre writes, "With Farka, the music itself persuades listeners that they are actually *hearing* the roots of John Lee Hooker and his peers."[48] Reading theories about African retentions in the blues is one thing, but hearing sonic proof of this history is quite another. Eyre accurately questions the concept that Touré's music can be seen as a pre-blues: "Behind this romantic notion lie paradoxes. For one thing, Farka had heard John Lee Hooker before he became a sensation in Europe during the 1970s, leading some to question who influenced whom . . . . But for whatever reasons, the "roots of the blues" excitement has mostly focused on Farka."[49] However much Touré may have consciously incorporated Western blues into his style, he always maintained that his music was purely African. In a 1993 interview with Eyre, Touré explained that the blues was still African at its core: "The music comes from history. How did it get here? It was stolen from Africans." For Touré the history of the African diaspora and slavery is still relevant and an important part of understanding the history of this music. It is clearly an overstatement to say that there are no Western aspects of the blues—instrumentation, language, tonality, would suggest differently—but for Touré the blues is more than just

[48] Banning Eyre, *In Griot Time*, 202.

[49] Ibid.

an extension of West African musical traits, and he is staking claim on the music as a surviving African style.

Despite Touré's instance that the blues was an intact African traditions, he consciously emphasized connections to American blues with his image. Touré was often photographed with a fedora, similar to that of John Lee Hooker, playing guitar and smoking a cigarette looking much like one would expect an "African bluesman" to look. Sometimes the hat and sunglasses are juxtaposed with the colorful *boubou*, a traditional Malian robe, creating an image that accurately projects his "Africa-meets-the-United States" sound. Eyre writes, "With four wives and eleven children to support, Farka had to like the money he earned on the road, and when touring he dutifully played the African bluesman, donning a porkpie hat, nursing a flask of whiskey, and hypnotizing audiences with his elliptical songs from the edge of the Sahara."[50] This would suggest that his persona was different off the stage, and that Touré, like most successful entertainers, understood and fulfilled a carefully cultivated image. Kubik, too, has noted that Touré's stage presence confirmed audience expectations. "Once the 'Malian bluesman' label was established, it became clear that Touré, while on tour in the United States, had to live up to the associated expectations."[51]

Ali Farka Touré made an international career of exploring the potential connections between American blues and traditional Northern Malian music. His final release *Savane* (2006) features Touré on the cover lounging in a chair with hat, sunglasses, cigarette and electric guitar. The subtitle reads "The king of the desert blues

[50] Ibid.

[51] Kubik, 194.

singers," which is probably an implicit reference to the Robert Johnson recordings famously reissued in 1961 under the title *King of the Delta Blues Singers*. The word "King" is also regularly invoked in blues discourse with the most famous being the "Three Kings": B.B. King, Albert King, and Freddie King. The word "king" additionally references the highly masculine gendering of blues and jazz performance, with other prominent examples including King Oliver, and Duke Ellington. Therefore, by labeling Touré the "king of the delta blues singers," the record company is drawing upon previous notions of jazz and blues and showing that Touré conforms to these expectations.

In *African and the Blues* (1999), Kubik questions the reasoning behind Toure's success in the West, and exposes some critical flaws in the marketing "African Blues." He points out that although there may be similarities between Toure's music and American blues, particularly the music John Lee Hooker, it is not proof of the shared history, and his music is not the actual "roots of the blues." He writes: "Ali Farka Toure's original interest in the blues is legitimate and perhaps an indication of personally felt cultural affinities. But the manner in which his predilections have been reinterpreted, and even exploited, is a long way from their original integrity and historical truth."[52] Kubik's main concern is that the term "African Blues" is inaccurate because "blues" refers to a certain kind of music with implied musical components (form, harmony, etc.),[53] and he is uncomfortable with the increasing use of the term "blues" to package music from the west-central Sudanic belt. Kubik identifies what he calls "imaginative catchwords," such as "African Blues," "Source," and "Roots," as examples of marketing

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid., 82–95.

strategies used to effectively sell Touré's music.[54] Without a transnational music industry, it is uncertain if any West African musicians would use these terms to describe their music themselves.

Kubik goes astray, however, in his speculation about Touré's success in the West. In one passage, Kubik theorizes that Touré's music has become successful with white America because of unconscious feelings of white guilt. He explains that Touré's music has grown very popular in America, but not with all Americans:

> Ninety-nine percent of rap fans probably have not heard of Touré. And characteristically, Touré's popularity is almost entirely among European-Americans. This was predictable, because some of these audiences are motivated by an almost religious yearning for spiritual participation in the 'roots of black music,' a reaction that is to be understood psychologically as compensating for a feeling of "collective guilt" (e.g., the history of slavery). In other words, the same psychological situation that made it possible for the Kunta Kinte *Roots* TV series to strike a chord in the mainstream American unconscious also fuels the reaction to Toure *as a symbol*. [55]

This assessment is troubling on multiple levels and raises many questions. First, how can Kubik really speculate on what "ninety-nine percent of rap fans" have or have not heard? By positioning his concept of "rap fans" against "European-Americans," Kubik posits discomforting racial assertions while intentionally avoiding those terms. He also fails to provide any data that would support his descriptions of the ethnic backgrounds of Touré fans (being either European-American, or rap fans). Second, Kubik's understanding of race relations and the psyche of European-Americans is concerning. How exactly does he come to the understanding that Americans have "religious yearning for spiritual participation in the 'roots of black music'?" And exactly how does this

[54] Ibid., 195.

[55] Ibid.

compensate for the "collective guilt" of slavery? For an Austrian who teaches in Germany and has spent much of his life working in Africa, Kubik may not be in the best position to make assumptions about the American subconscious. Taken to its logical extreme, Kubik seems to be asserting that every time a white person buys an Ali Farka Touré album, he or she is doing it to symbolically absolve himself or herself of the guilt for the mistreatment of African-Americans of the past three hundred years. He is right that Americans have very complicated feelings about race, but to assume that this is the only motivation for listening to Touré is both far-fetched and impossible to prove.

6. Conclusion

The phenomenon of "African Blues" is a remarkable example of a commercial product whose existence is grounded in a historical theory. "African Blues" would not have the same marketability were it not for the decades of scholarship that has lent credibility to the theory that African music and the blues are irrevocably linked. The marketing of West African music as blues only works because of the acceptance of theories that link the two traditions. With the success of "African Blues" recordings came the development of a body of popular literature that commented on these theories. Different commercial sources have approached this discourse in different ways. Articles printed in magazines and newspapers have drastically oversimplified theories about African retentions in the blues to make easy and memorable points about the music. Record labels have increasingly used terms like "blues" or "roots" to market West African music, and the musicians themselves both elucidate and further complicate this discourse. American Corey Harris tends to make generalizations about African music,

but he also makes it very clear why he is personally invested in "African Blues" and why the discourse is historically relevant. Malian musician Lobi Traoré believed that the blues is strictly an American tradition that should be seen as separate from the African music that he plays, while Ali Farka Touré contended that the American blues is in essence still "African music." Though both musicians incorporated elements of American blues and rock into their playing, they were both interested in viewing their music as African and found different ways to maintain this distinction.

The fact that "African Blues" can be defined and used in so many different ways shows

Chapter Four:

Case Study: *Kulanjan*

Kulanjan is a collaborative recording made in 1999 by American blues musician Taj Mahal and Malian *kora* virtuoso Toumani Diabate. The album draws on the established scholarship that posits a connection between the American blues and the music of West Africa in order to tap into the growing market for "African Blues" recordings. *Kulanjan* received highly favorable reviews in the press including being named album of the year in *Folk Roots* magazine and was even recommended by President Barack Obama in 2008 for Borders bookstores.[1]

Kulanjan is notable for the variety of different ways that the connection between African music and the blues is made. The album relentlessly instructs the audience that the blues has African roots, but the specifics of how the blues is related to Africa are less clear. There is no simple definition of "the blues," and furthermore the concept "African music" is intentionally left undefined. The album notes make a case for this connection by highlighting apparent parallels between *griots* and American blues musicians, and similarities between traditional Malian stringed instruments and blues guitar technique. First, I will briefly introduce the main performers on *Kulanjan* to provide context for the album and explain their different music backgrounds and contributions. Second, I consider the different ways that history is constructed on *Kulanjan*; the album draws on theories that *griot* songs and instrumental techniques could be related to the blues and

[1] Nigel Williamson, "Grammy-nominated Mali Musician gets Obama Boost" Reuters/Billboard, Feb 5, 2009, http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/02/06/us-grammys-mali-idUSTRE5150KV20090206 (accessed June 5, 2011).

even hypothesizes that the music may be an indicator of what historic West African music once sounded like. I follow this with a discussion of the representations of Afrocentricism found on *Kulanjan* and the ways that the album has come to be part of Taj Mahal's personal narrative. Finally, I explore the different perspectives and motivations of the main performers.

Born Henry Saint Clair Fredericks, Taj Mahal is a Multi-Grammy Award-winning and nominated artist, and has been an active and prolific performer and since the mid-1960s. Mahal's primary musical interest is the blues, but his music has branched into many different territories, including Caribbean music and even collaborations with Hindustani musicians, and has been known throughout his career to show a keen interest in the background and social history of his music. Mahal states that he has been interested in Mande music since first hearing a recording of *kora* music in made by Toumani's father, Sidike Diabate, in 1970 titled *Ancient Strings*.[2]

Kora virtuoso Toumani Diabate traces his lineage though seventy-one generations of *griot* musicians, a genealogy in which he takes great pride. Diabate is known not only for his command of the ancient *griot* repertory but also for extending the techniques and repertory of the *kora*, incorporating many aspects of Western music such as jazz improvisation. He has been involved with numerous cross-cultural collaborations including recordings with Spanish flamenco performers, American jazz trombonist Roswell Rudd, and Afro-Cuban musicians.

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[2] Banning Eyre, "Taj Mahal and Toumani Diabate," *Rhythm: Global Sounds and Ideas* 8 (1999): 23.

Kulanjan features six other African performers, both vocalists and instrumentalists, many of which are among the most renowned in Mali, yet are not famous and established in the United States as Diabate. The music on *Kulanjan* comes together well because both Mahal and Diabate perform on stringed instruments and rely heavily on riffs and formulaic improvisation. The album is evenly divided between traditional Mande and *griot* songs along with selections in the standard blues idiom. On the "African" tracks Mahal takes a diminished role, rarely singing and only playing subtle guitar accompaniment. The American, blues-based tracks highlight Mahal's singing and more "bluesy" guitar playing. Diabate's contributions in this context are perhaps the most intriguing. In the blues-oriented tracks, including Mahal's trademark "Queen Bee" and the aptly titled "Mississippi-Mali Blues," Diabate drifts in and out of a traditional "blues" style. At some points he plays purely pentatonic melodies that seem designed to mimic the pentatonic nature of American blues guitar playing, and at other times he explores the more modal and extended scalar potentials of the *kora*. Diabate comes across as equally comfortable in a standard blues context or in pushing the boundaries of what we know as the blues and exploring a space usually designated as jazz or fusion. While Diabate is meant to represent the "older" tradition, the pre-diasporatic African sound, his playing on *Kulanjan* maybe the most innovative and forward-sounding.

1. Representations of History

In the accompanying liner notes, the historical and cultural gaps between West African music and the blues are routinely minimized; it is assumed that the "roots" of the blues are in Africa, and that the African musicians on *Kulanjan* accurately represent this

"pre-blues" music from before the slave trade. In actuality, the African musicians on the recording represent at least three different, historically separate Malian traditions: *griot* music, Wassoulu, and hunters' music. The album effectively constructs a new kind of idealized West African music by speculating that all of these different traditions combined to form the blues. The fact that musicians of separate traditions can all effectively "jam" together with Taj Mahal in a blues-oriented context is presented as evidence that the three all have common "roots." In the liner notes, Malian music scholar Lucy Duran acknowledges the differences but explains that they all relate to the blues. She writes, in Mali "the hunters' harp is never played together with the kora or ngoni. Kulanjan brings together these two traditions–both at the roots of the blues–and re-unites them with their long-lost brother, the finger-picking blues."[3] Since the use of stringed instruments plucked with fingers is common to these West African traditions and also the blues, the link is made despite the countless differences that are not accounted for. For example, Kubik cites the *kora* specifically as an instrumental tradition that did not influence the blues, namely because the *kora* operates in very different harmonic and melodic tonal schemes.[4]

The notion that the *kora* and *ngoni* are both "at the roots of the blues" is equally problematic because it ignores their vast repertoire and cultural context as *griot* instruments and also values them only for their potential to have influenced blues guitar technique. American blues compositions are very different from *griot* songs as they are more often commentary on current situations and predicaments; blues performances are

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[3] Lucy Duran, album notes to *Kulanjan*, Hannibal CD, 1999.

[4] Gerhard Kubik, *Africa and the Blues* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 70.

not required for ceremonies in the way that *griot* songs are, and also the system of patronage is vastly different. This is a well-established line of reasoning; since the earliest theories on African and the blues scholars have used oversimplified notions of *griots* to find potential connections with these "pre-bluesmen."[5] While the *griot* argument is one of the weakest links between African music and the blues, it has become one of the most pervasive, reinforced in films, articles, and other sources.

The music on *Kulanjan* offers many opportunities to see how Malian music and the blues can interact, thereby reinforcing the notion that the two traditions are historically related. On the track "Catfish Blues," Mahal and Diabate combine their respective styles to create a sound that references American blues and Mande music. The track opens with Taj Mahl playing a formulaic blues guitar riff that brings out the chromatic possibilities of the blues scale. Mahal connects this riff to a pentatonic ostinato with bent pitches that provides the framework for the rest of the track as a foundation for the other instrumentalists to improvise. Diabate then enters with pentatonic riffs on the *kora* with chromatic inflections that sound much like blues guitar, which he soon extends into longer scales runs that highlight the range of the instrument. Once this groundwork is established, Mahal sings the lyrics to this classic blues; the first stanza includes the refrain "Swimmin' after me" and on the second stanza he changes the refrain to "Timbuktu to Bamako," thus distinguishing the song from the way it is traditionally performed and highlighting the Malian musicians. In the liner notes, Duran writes: "Toumani demonstrated his improvisatory genius on this the truest American blues on the album. To the wonder of all, he set up an unorthodox tuning of his kora and

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[5] Paul Oliver, *Savannah Syncopators*: African Retentions in the Blues (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1970), 98–100.

lifted the hidden African essence of this tune out from deep within."[6] Thus Duran creates a notion of the blues with an inherent African nature that can be heard only with Diabate's contributions. Furthermore, on "Catfish Blues" Diabate is not only playing intentionally in a "bluesy" style, but he even had to change to tuning of his *kora* away from the traditional *griot* system in order to comply fully with the blues aesthetic of the track.

The liner notes for *Kulanjan* presents the notion that the African musicians represent a previous style; that by hearing ancient instruments intentionally played in a "bluesy" style we might be able to access an early, undocumented, chapter in blues history. In the liner notes, Duran writes, "This may be as close as one gets to how the blues once sounded." This statement raises a number of issues. First, clearly this recording was made with modern instruments in recording studio; it is difficult to see how it could really portray the sound of West African music from before the slave trade. Second, in this context, the blues becomes an inherently African music that already that existed in Africa before it was brought to the United States, and *Kulanjan* is seen to recreate this sound. But what exactly is meant by "the blues," and how did it survive? Kubik writes that the blues is a uniquely American phenomenon that came into existence at the turn of the twentieth-century because of certain cultural and socioeconomic circumstances.[7] In this sense the blues may still show aspects African music, but is not an actual surviving *African* tradition. However, Kubik has a strict definition of what characterizes the blues. If, as in the case of *Kulanjan*, the blues is taken to be a more

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[6] Lucy Duran, album notes to *Kulanjan*, Hannibal CD, 1999.

[7] Kubik, 4.

loosely defined marketing entity, or perhaps even undefined, it becomes much easier to make the connection.

The liner notes include a quote from Diabate, part of which reads: "They say that blues and jazz came from Africa. The kora and ngoni, they're very old, many centuries old. So maybe the blues was once being played on these instruments . . . . What I've learned about the blues is the melancholy that we have in common, that I feel inside when I play my music."[8] Perhaps this is a better way to view the connection. Diabate is specifically not claiming that the blues directly descends from Mande music or even that the blues existed in Africa before the slave trade, rather he is explaining that he finds certain emotional characteristics to be similar. If we look closely for parallels between two distant traditions, we inevitably have to make assumptions and historical oversimplifications, since the musical systems have devolved so differently on both continents. It is unproductive to speculate on how "the blues once sounded" by trying to recreate it, but perhaps the emotional, less tangible, connections are more revealing because they can tell us more about *why* these artists of different traditions feel it is so important to make the connection.

2. Images of Afrocentricism

As much as *Kulanjan* is a statement about the connection between the blues and Africa, it is also about Taj Mahal's personal search for his African roots and by extension, a symbol of unity of the African diaspora. Through this work and his travels in Mali, Mahal has come to believe that he is a descendant of Mande *griots*, specifically

[8] Toumani Diabate, album notes to *Kulanjan*, Hannibal CD, 1999.

the Kouyates. In an interview with *The Independent*, Mahal explains that after his first trip to Mali in 1979 he was struck by the physical resemblances he saw between himself and some Malian people: "The Kouyates looked like my father, my grandfather, my uncles . . . . Same, same kind of hands, same fingers, nails, ears, noses, cheekbones, eye colour. They looked at me with their jaws open, just like I looked at them."[9] The combination of physical features and an unexplainable draw to the music of Malian *griots* has led Mahal to take on the pseudonym "Dadi Kouyate" when performing and recording with Malian musicians. In doing so, *Kulanjan* becomes more than just a musical experiment; it is a way for Mahal to show his personal involvement with the music and to create a new identity based on discovering his past.

Much of the press generated by *Kulanjan*[10] specifically mentions that Mahal's parents were involved with Marcus Garvey's pan-Africanism movement.[11] In essence, the discourse of African blues on *Kulanjan* has become part of a larger discussion about Afrocenticism,[12] with *Kulanjan* being seen as the musical fulfillment of these ideas by

[9] Jane Cornwell, "Taj Mahal Meets Central Park," *The Independent* (November 1999) http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/taj-mahal-meets-central-park-743732.html (accessed February 1, 2013).

[10] Banning Eyre, "Taj Mahal and Toumani Diabate," *Rhythm: Global Sounds and Ideas* 8 (1999): 22-23. Banning Eyre, "Blues For Mali" *Folk Roots*, 21(1999): 29–33; Banning Eyre, "Homeward Bound," *Guitar Player* 33, no. 12 (December 1999), 74–79; Cornwell, "Taj Mahal Meets Central Park."

[11] Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) was a Jamaican-born political leader and activist. He founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association and went on to become one of the earliest and most influential figures of the Black nationalism movement. Garvey was a strong proponent for pan-Africanism, a movement dedicated to the solidarity of all people of African descent and advocated for the return of members of the African diaspora to Africa. See, Tony Martin, *Marcus Garvey, Hero: A First Biography*. (Dover: The Majority Press, 1983).

[12] Afrocentricity is an ideology devoted to the cultural and historical importance of the African people that is distinct from the Eurocentric worldview. According to scholar Molefi Kete Asante, "Afrocentricity is a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives predominate." It is also a deeply ethical philosophy devoted to combating, "all forms of

bringing the blues back to Africa. In an interview with Banning Eyre published in the journal *Rhythm: Global Sounds and Ideas*, Mahal explains that he was raised by his parents to have a heightened awareness of African culture and as a child and young adult he "always had a positive image of Africa."[13] Mahal makes it clear that *Kulanjan* is part of his lifelong interest in African culture and that it is a way to musically enact the ideas of pan-Africanism. In the liner notes Mahal writes:

> To complete a cycle, to return to the intact original, to have been visited by very powerful visions of ancestors and their music, to realize the dream my Father and Mother had along with many other generations of Africans who now live outside the Continent of Africa. This is a cause for great celebration![14]

By declaring that he is returning the blues to Africa, Mahal is able to stake claim on the blues as a living connection between many African Americans and their African ancestors, and *Kulanjan* becomes a place to celebrate the artistic achievements of the African diaspora.

As *Kulanjan* becomes more about Mahal's personal narrative than tangible musical connections between two continents, he is able to take artistic license and bridge the historical gaps in order to comment on this shared history in a meaningful way. The liner notes tell us that at one point in the recording studio Mahal said, "That's five centuries there, the music just went around in a big ring." Duran concludes, "And so closes the circle."[15] While this is undoubtedly an oversimplified version of the musical history of the African diaspora, the sentiment cannot be ignored. Mahal is not actually

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oppression." See, Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (Chicago: African American Images, 2003), 2.

[13] Eyre, "Taj Mahal and Toumani Diabate."

[14] Taj Mahal, album notes to *Kulanjan*, Hannibal CD, 1999.

[15] Duran, album notes to *Kulanjan*, Hannibal CD, 1999.

bringing African music back to Africa through this project, because Western music and the blues are already prevalent in Africa. All of the Malian musicians on the recording would have been familiar with it and some even intentionally incorporate parts of it into their playing. However, the notion that the blues, or any African American music, can be a place for identity formation and also a way to find solidarity throughout the whole African diaspora is still important and cannot be overlooked.

Kulanjan is not alone in its representations of Afrocentricism and is part of a much larger trend of African American musicians looking to Africa for differing reasons. As Ingrid Monson demonstrates in *Freedom Sounds* (2007), African American jazz musicians have been in interested in African liberation and black unity since the 1950s, and through the struggle for civil rights of the 1960s (and changes in black identity) many would "view the link between Africa and jazz as a crucial cultural connection."[16] American jazz musicians of this time period also saw Africa as a way to modernize their sound, and they looked to African music and culture as a way to access new ways of music-making with different elements of rhythm, harmony, and timbre, but grounded in traditional values. As Robin D. G. Kelly explains in *Africa Speaks, America Answers* (2012), African American jazz musicians saw Africa as a way to engage with an older and more spiritually awake alternative to Western culture. She writes, "The continent represented a beacon of modernity blazing a new path for the rest of the world, but one tempered by deeply spiritual, antimaterialist values."[17]

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[16] Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 151.

[17] Robin D. G. Kelly, *Africa Speaks, America Answers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 2012), 6–7.

As Frank A. Salamone argues in his article "Africa as a Metaphor of Authenticity in Jazz" (1991), notions of Africa and Africanness have taken on important symbolic value within the jazz community. Jazz has long been caught in the dichotomy of "Africa/Europe" musical subtext, and over time jazz musicians have actively sought to bring out what is taken for the "African" elements, and ostensibly Africanize their sound mainly by adding rhythmic complexities and exploring harmonic possibilities.[18] On *Kulanjan*, Taj Mahal engages in a more explicit kind of "Africanization" of his music by collaborating with West African musicians and constructing an idealized West African music with which he can interact. Rather than attempt to play in a more "African" way as jazz musicians have done before him, Mahal actively uses the blues as a space to engage with African musicians and find common ground.

In his article "Music and the Global Order," Martin Stokes questions the ways that American-and-African collaborations, such as that of *Kulanjan*, have been used to show proof of a shared musical past. The fact that American blues players and African musicians can easily collaborate is evidence of only a much larger global flow. Explaining that "reverse flows are as much a feature of the globalized landscape,"[19] Stokes notes that at the end of the twentieth century, musical styles associated with African diaspora are being "returned" to Africa through the proliferation of Western popular musical styles: "As Martin Scorsese's (2003) documentary about the blues demonstrates, American blues musicians and Malian *griot* singers have little difficulty getting together and producing a musical experience that is palpably coherent in contexts

[18] Frank A. Salamone, "Africa as a Metaphor of Authenticity in Jazz," *Studies in Third World Societies* no. 46 (December 1991): 2–6.

[19] Martin Stokes, "Music and the Global Order," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 66.

in which very little else (for example, spoken language) is shared."[20] This comment is specific to the Scorsese documentary *The Blues*, but the sentiment could be extended to the many other blues-based trans-Atlantic collaborations. Stokes goes on to note, "The great ease with which African Diaspora sounds and practices travel is often taken for granted even by ethnomusicologists…careful consideration of the musical practices as music could do much to help understand the extraordinary energy with which such important musical devices as the riff circulate."[21] Since much African American music and Malian music is built on riffs that function as ostinatos as the grounds for improvisation, these common practices can allow for easy and convincing collaboration. Rather than direct proof of a shared musical history, that fact that both traditions are riff-based is one explanation for why American blues musicians and West Africans can collaborate easily.

3. Perspectives of Performers

For the musicians on *Kulanjan* and similar projects, the music becomes an important way to find emotional and spiritual connections throughout the African diaspora. For Mahal this project is a way to authenticate his sound and also to create a personal narrative. As Taj Mahal is already a well-respected and highly successful performer, it can be assumed that his motivations for making *Kulanjan* are more artistic than monetary. In an interview with *The Independent* Mahal states: "My feeling was that the general recording industry is only interested in you if you're selling hits for them….

[20] Ibid., 67.

[21] Ibid., 66.

They're not interested in you culturally. So since they're not interested and I am, I'll just go ahead and do it…this [*Kulanjan*] is a total spiritual connection that is priceless."[22] Mahal, then, acknowledges that *Kulanjan* was not intended to be a best-selling album, rather he is interested in spiritual and emotional gains.

For Diabate this project was a way to bring Mande music to a larger demographic, and in turn, to show how it could operate in different traditions. It was also a way for him to gain access to the American market and to further his own career through exposure to larger audiences. Furthermore, *Kulanjan* may have also been a place to explore emotional similarities he identified between American and Mande music such as "the melancholy" that he felt in both traditions. Noting connections between string-playing techniques and the dance-feel of the blues,[23] Diabate may also have been interested in finding parallels with other traditions, rather using this project as a way to make historical connections.

4. Conclusion

On one hand, *Kulanajan* can be seen as only part of a common late twentieth-century phenomenon of collaboration between African and American musicians using riff-based music to find common ground. On the other hand, however, *Kulanjan* is unique in the degree that the blues and Malian music are perceived to have a shared past. In the case of *Kulanjan*, the music industry (supported by scholarship) has promoted the African history of the blues, which at times is somewhat at odds with the musicians who

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[22] Cornwell.

[23] Diabate, album notes to *Kulanjan*, Hannibal CD, 1999.

may be more interested in creating an enriching musical experience to which they feel emotionally and spiritually drawn. *Kulanjan* brings together American blues and Mande music, two separate, but musically compatible systems. They both work well together because of the preponderance of stringed instruments and an emphasis on riff-based improvisation. However, these shared musical components are not necessarily proof of a shared past and do not necessarily mean that the blues has "a hidden African essence," as the liner notes purport.

If we place too much emphasis on the apparent music similarities we risk overshadowing the significant differences between these musical traditions. Toumani Diabate is a brilliant musician and imaginative improviser. Despite the emphasis on his linage as a traditional hereditary *griot*, he plays the *kora* in a completely new and innovative way. *Kulanjan* is important not only for the creative ways that musicians of different backgrounds and traditions are able to come together, but also for the ways that musicians, critics, and the producers all find meaning in the album in different ways.

Conclusion

> It seems that the Africanization of world pop music and the Afro-Americanization of African pop are complexly intertwined, particularly since the Second World War.[1]
>
> —Steven Feld

In this thesis I have traced the development of discourse on the "African Blues" from its beginnings in the scholarly discourse on musical retentions to its flourishing as a commercial product in the world music market. I have sought to demonstrate how issues of authenticity, race, and origin have characterized the blues narrative and the conceptualization of the music. In Chapters One and Two, I explored the ways that the blues has been imagined in the earliest blues scholarship. Literature on the blues has always been preoccupied with the search for authentic examples of African American blues; the idea that the most "authentic" blues was the creation of marginal African American men in the Mississippi Delta had been prevalent since the first writings about the blues in the 1950s. This search for origins within the United States would develop into and influence the search for the African "roots" of the blues. I critically examined five key works that make up a body of literature on African retentions in the blues with an eye for historical inconsistencies and assumptions. By analyzing the trends in this literature, such as the presumed parallels between the two musical traditions (e.g., the blues scale and AAB form), and the theories about the social position of American blues musicians and West African *griots*, I have found that much of this literature cannot

[1] Steven Feld, "Notes On World Beat," *Public Culture* 1, no.1 (Fall 1988) 36.

accurately locate a precise "home" of the blues because it conflates notions of historical and contemporary Africa and does not explain how African musical elements survived in the blues. I contend that this literature proposes many fascinating and useful *theories* about Africa and the blues, but it is misguided to assume a direct connection.

In Chapter Three I explored the ways in which theories positing the connection between Africa and the blues became accepted in the popular sphere. The music industry created the label "African Blues," a catchphrase that could be used to market music from West African to American and European audiences by drawing on popular, but vague, understandings of the connected history of African music and American blues. As the scholarly theories about this connection were built on problematic assumptions and oversimplifications about Africa, the subsequent commercial product, "African Blues," also portrays a version of history that presumes that African music traditions have remained intact over hundreds of years. I looked at few of the main performers in the "African Blues" genre with an attempt to see how their sounds were used to sell this product in the world music marketplace and to question if their words and views were represented accurately. I have found that the music industry tends to overemphasize any potential connections between West African music and American blues in order to make an easy and definitive claim without fully taking the performers' views into account. By analyzing popular media sources such as magazine articles and interviews, I have shown how this discourse on "African Blues" has become widely accepted and how Mali has come to be known as the "home of the blues."

Finally, in Chapter Four I presented the album *Kulanjan* as a specific example to further critique this discourse. In *Kulanjan* we can see all of the themes explored in

earlier chapters that culminated in the marketing of "African blues." The scholarship that links the blues to Africa is drastically oversimplified, with notions of West African traditions of stringed instruments and *griots* used to support this theory. West African musicians are portrayed as representatives of earlier, pre-diasporic music, and ideas about Afrocentricim, particularly with respect to the statements from Taj Mahal, were explored to show how *Kulanjan* has become part of a process of finding unity throughout the African diaspora. I have offered a critique of *Kulanjan* as a way to view the different perspectives and driving forces at work within "African Blues." Scholars make a case for the connection between two traditions, the music industry distills and emphasizes these theories to sell records, and musicians come together to explore different traditions and create a fulfilling musical experience.

Situating "African Blues" in World Music

There are a few major reasons why the commercial product of "African Blues" has been successful in the world music market. First, there has been a long and well-document history of Western pop star collaborations with "world" musicians dating back to the Beatles involvement with Ravi Shankar, and since the 1980s, pop star collaborations have become a pillar in world music, with Paul Simon's *Graceland* (1986) with South African musicians and David Byrne's *Rei Momo* (1989) with Latin musicians as two prominent examples.[2] As I have noted, collaborations between American blues musicians and West Africans are central to "African Blues"; the music sales did not really take off until after Ry Cooder's collaboration with Ali Farka Touré *Talking*

[2] Steven Feld, "A Sweet Lullaby for World Music," *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 149.

Timbuktu (1994), and arguably the success of "African Blues" was only possible because of that breakthrough album.

Second, "African Blues" is a prime example of the creation of a distinct field within the larger market, which is one of the main goals of the music industry. As Steven Feld notes, "The existence and success of world music returns to one of globalization's basic economic clichés: the drive for more and more markets and market niches."[3] Once "African Blues" became a recognized marketing strategy, more West African music (and practically any and all Malian music) was packaged with that label so that it could be sold to the newly created niche market.

Furthermore, as Martin Stokes notes in "Music and the Global Order" (2004), throughout the commercial history of world music, analogies to African American musics have been used as a sign of authenticity. Stokes explains: "Algerian rai is described as Islamic rock and roll and as Thursday night fever. South African kwela as township jive, Greek amanes as Greek blues, and so forth."[4] Therefore, when the music industry embraced "African Blues" as a way to package West African pop music, it was drawing on the established tradition of referencing African American musical styles to appeal to American audiences and extend a notion of authenticity to the music.

Finally, in his "Notes on World Beat" (1988), Steven Feld offers another reason for African music's success in the world music market: "At the same time that world music is homogenizing and human musical diversity is shrinking, clearly the mark of the new, the exciting, the revitalized, the 'long-distance call' is still *the mark of otherness*

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[3] Ibid., 167.

[4] Martin Stokes, "Music and the Global Order," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 59.

[my emphasis], no more strongly epitomized on the world musical map than by Africa."[5] This is the final component of world music that resonates so strongly with "African Blues"; for American audiences, Africa represents an incredible otherness. As world music's existence is essentially based on finding ways to sell difference, African music is a prime example of music that can be molded into ways that reflect Western pop aesthetic but still retains some "mark of otherness." Therefore "African Blues" is the ideal world music genre. On one hand the word "blues" is a sign of authenticity that can be applied to any outside tradition, and on the other, the word "African" is a signifier of difference and otherness.

There is a somewhat clichéd expression that is often used to state one of the main goals of anthropology: "to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange." I believe that this statement relates directly to the "African Blues" phenomenon and can help us understand its appeal. To the American audience, the strange—African music—becomes familiar through its presumed connection to the blues, and the familiar—the blues—becomes strange by associating it with Africa.

As I noted above, the blues has been conceived of in a racialized context since the earliest writings on the subject. The first blues texts concluded that only African Americans could create authentic blues, as the blues itself was a product of the African American experience. In "Blues People" (1963), Amiri Baraka explains that terms such as ragtime, dixieland, and jazz are American terms and relate to an American experience, "But the term *blues* relates directly to the Negro, and his *personal* involvement in

[5] Feld, "Notes on World Beat," 36.

America."[6] Thus, the word "blues" has profound associations with African American culture and the racial history in the United States. Given this, I believe that "African Blues" may well be part of a larger desire to see the blues as even "blacker" or "more African" on the parts of scholars, consumers, and musicians.

In *Urban Blues* (1966) Charles Keil writes: "The blues, the Negro, and related concepts serve naturally as projective tests; white liberals, black militants, and others of varying pigmentation and persuasion hear in the blues essentially what they want to hear, find in the blues ethos what they expect to find."[7] This notion of the blues as a "projective test" is a useful way to understand how and why the phenomenon of "African Blues" has come to be. Scholars, musicians, and consumers often want to see the blues as inherently African, even if there is no direct evidence of the connection, and the ways in which different groups approach and conceptualize the blues often reveals much about what they were already looking for.

As I have demonstrated, the fact that so many scholars have attempted to find elements of the blues in Africa shows a strong desire to find the origins of the blues. The fact that this presumed connection was so easily accepted and rearticulated in the popular and commercial spheres shows that there was a desire to see the blues as African there as well. When American musicians such as Taj Mahal and Dee Dee Bridgewater find a connection to their pasts by collaborating with Malian musicians (even going so far as to decide that they are direct descendants of Malian people) and use "African Blues" as a way to make connections through the diaspora, it shows that they found in the blues what they were looking for, too. Perhaps then, "African Blues" can be used as Keil proposed,

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[6] Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), *Blues People* (New York: Morrow Quill, 1963), 94.

[7] Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), vii.

as a "projective test" to reveal what different parties wanted to find in the blues all along. Lacking proof of exactly how the blues was formed and exactly how African musical tradition evolved over three hundred years, scholars, musicians, media sources, and music consumers have collectively forged the myth of "African Blues."

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