



# 筑紫女学園大学リポジト

## Honesty in the Blues

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# Honesty in the Blues

Andrew James

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 The Case of Otis Taylor

The year 2003 was officially recognized by the American government as the Year of the Blues. At the end of this yearlong celebration, a curious article on blues guitarist Otis Taylor appeared in the magazine Living Blues. Taylor is somewhat of a renegade in his willingness to tackle difficult topics such as Civil Rights and suicide in his brand of introspective blues. The article's title, "Otis Taylor: 'I Want to See the Blues Thrive and Become Hip Again!'" masks Taylor's pessimism. Throughout the article he expresses concern for racial issues (38) and artistic stagnation in the blues (44). While the writer's desire to give the story a positive spin through the title is perhaps understandable, one section of the article is particularly odd. Taylor recounts a trip he made to Petersburg, Russia, shortly after the 9/11 attacks on America. He visited a prison called the "House of the Crosses" and wrote a song with the same title.

It was just visual, 'cuz I could see it. You go to jail in Russia, you know it's gotta be bad. Because life is bad in Russia. People would roll up pieces of paper - they couldn't visit, tell their loved ones how they loved them - they made little megaphones, [the tour guide] called 'em trumpets. So I just had a visual thing, this woman and the kid, and the words just kept on coming to me. (43)

This song, "set in a Russian prison where a guard finds himself warding over the man who sired him years ago by raping his mother" (43), did not please the tour guide, when Taylor excitedly told him of its contents:

So the next thing, I'm going to the Hermitage Museum and I'm telling this song I wrote. I thought, "A Russian heart! This guy is gonna get it!" You know? I thought, him being Russian, that he could really feel this song! And he goes, "That's disgusting! Man, you're. [sic] Aww, man!" (43)

Taylor concludes the story on a humorous note: "I found out later he was a Frank Sinatra fan" (43).

This anecdote provides an intriguing window onto some of the problems facing contemporary blues in America. The blues has artistically stagnated due to economic pressures on blues musicians and critics alike. In order to boost sagging CD sales, the blues must be fun. Problems are dealt with from a comfortable historic or geographic distance. There are more blues festivals than ever before to go along with blues workshops, blues museums, and blues cruises on luxury liners. Furthermore, pressure placed on artists by both CD consumers and producers has turned a once-vibrant musical genre into a history lesson. Today the blues rarely serves as a gauge for social problems and concerns. It has been silenced.

Taylor's blindness in failing to understand the Russian tour guide's horror is a microcosm for America's

blind refusal to openly discuss its own as-yet unsolved racial and social problems. This is reflected in both the contents of the popular blues magazines, Living Blues and Blues Revue, and interviews the author conducted with two peripheral American blues musicians, boogie-woogie pianist Nat Dove and vocalist-guitarist Floyd Lee.

## **1.2 Signifying as Rebellion**

For blues scholars, one of the most intriguing aspects of the blues has always been its unique combination of street poetry and humor. To “signify” in the African-American world, according to Henry Louis Gates, “is to engage in certain rhetorical games” (48). Classic blues songs often amount to word games, as the singer uses humor and misdirection to express frustration, anger, joy, and various other emotions. Over sixty years ago, in conversation with Alan Lomax, Big Bill Broonzy and Memphis Slim offered explanations of both signifying and the importance of misdirection in the blues. Broonzy talked of the frustration experienced by blacks in the American South who were unable to confront their white bosses. A levee camp or chain gang worker

wanted to cuss out the boss and he was afraid to go up to his face and tell him what he wanted to tell him, and I've heard them sing those things - sing words, you know - back to the boss - just behind the wagon, hookin' up to the to the [sic] horses [ . . . ] or the mules or something, and then he'd go to work and go to singin' and say things to the horse, you know, horse, make like the mule stepped on his foot - say 'Get off my foot, goddamn it!' or something like that, you know, and he meant he was talkin' to the boss. 'You son of a bitch,' he say, 'You got no business on my-----, stay off my foot' and such things. (Lomax).

Broonzy calls this “signifying and getting [ . . . ] revenge thru songs” (Lomax). Memphis Slim saw the roots of the blues in the man who “was laying around sleeping, but still had to work, so it give him the blues, and he can't speak his mind. So he made a song of it” (Lomax). Both examples show how blacks used the blues to express feelings that could not be directly expressed. It has also been argued that the combination of bent or blue musical notes with signifying lyrics results in a form of music that “rebels against [ . . . ] formulization. For truly to play or sing the blues - to do it right and well - is not to play it as written, and it never can be; it is to follow a feeling, not a script, to give oneself over to something happening in the music, as a lived event” (Switzer, screens 29-30).

## **1.3 Blues Stagnation**

Nat Dove lamented in our interview that the blues has stagnated because the American vision of what constitutes blues has become formulized, just as “the most popular jazz in the world is Dixieland because it was allowed to be stagnated.” Dove claimed that perhaps the greatest living bluesman, B.B. King, is no longer a blues singer for he has been “redefined” as

A pop artist now. He is the blues singer in residence in the United States. As in many instances in African-American art, they don't need but one. When Richard Wright was writing, he was the one as though nobody else wrote a book. He was replaced by James Baldwin and when Baldwin came along he was the one. (Dove)

Contemporary American blues is certainly not the music of rebellious street poets anymore. Increasing efforts to make the blues marketable to (white) people who buy the most CD's and can afford to attend workshops or festivals, and join cruises, has made the blues safer than ever. Some critics view hip-hop and rap as emblems of America's cultural and musical decadence. Tom Bethell asks and answers: "What's happening now? Not much, I fear; a matter for concern if we regard the genius of American popular music as a proxy for the vitality of society as a whole" (Screen 6). Bethell argues that "If people are too comfortable, the creative juices are unlikely to flow. No doubt this is another reason why, so often, commercial success has been followed by artistic decline - for whites as well as blacks" (Screen 7). Currently, both musicians and CD reviewers must be careful not to offend the consumer as profit has become more important than ever. Efforts to historicize and protect the blues actually do it a disservice, for no creative growth can ever come from overprotective coddling. The best thing for both musicians and fans would be to pull the plug from the life-support system composed of Mississippi Delta tour buses and blue workshops to allow the blues a dignified death. Only then will it be able to rise again, growing into new and unexpected forms.

#### **1.4 Displacement**

An examination of the letters to the editor pages in two American blues magazines shows that the need to signify may not entirely have disappeared from the blues world. If Otis Taylor discussed the appalling conditions in an American prison in the pages of Living Blues, prison officials would no doubt have rushed to their word processors to write indignant rebuttals. "Life is bad in Russia," Taylor says, but it is also bad for the poor and convicted in America. Just as the Russian tour guide, whose job it was to show Taylor the beauty in his country, was shocked by the "disgusting" song, many American blues fans express similar sentiments in letters to Living Blues and Blues Revue when artists dare to criticize America. An article on the role of African-American blues musicians in Japan commissioned by Living Blues in the fall of 2002 which the author wrote and submitted never appeared for perhaps this very reason: the two profiled musicians claimed that they receive better treatment abroad than in America and made critical remarks about American society and the American blues scene.

Whining about the past is an accepted part of blues mythology. To put it more eloquently, "the blues are the plaintive songs of survivors" (McDonagh) - but not sufferers. Thus, while J.B. Lenoir's "Eisenhower Blues" was withdrawn in 1954 and re-issued as "Tax Payin' Blues" after "the White House itself complained about the song" (Meister) it is now, long after the passing of Eisenhower, part of the blues canon. In the 1960's Lenoir went even further, producing an album full of political content (Alabama Blues) which record

companies refused to handle (Dixon 156). The same atmosphere of denial and displacement that existed forty years ago flourishes today.

## 1.5 Contributing Factors

The second section of this paper comprises an examination of the role of economics in the blues. Although artists like Otis Taylor, who wrote a song called “Government Lied” for a 2005 CD, and the deceased J.B. Lenoir are anomalies in their fusion of politics and blues, the blues has always been billed as emotionally honest music that signifies more than it says. However, blues artists who attempt to use their music to make political points risk alienating white upwardly-mobile blues fans who have the most financial clout. CD reviewers for blues magazines find it difficult to be truthful about sub-par releases, as a negative review may hinder CD sales and anger the record companies, who are also magazine sponsors. The paper’s third section focuses on race and politics in contemporary blues, drawing on both reader mail to blues magazines and interviews with Nat Dove and Floyd Lee.

# BLUE ECONOMICS

## 2.1 Everything That Is Blue Is Good

In his regular column for Blues Revue in Aug/Sep 2004, guitarist Bob Margolin dealt with a problem raised by a reader in the April/May issue: “I received a sample copy of your magazine and was asked to subscribe. I have read your [album] reviews, and the problem is that your people love everything. So, as a discriminating buyer, your mag [sic] does me no good” (Perkins 6). Margolin’s position is clear and logical, if rather wishy-washy. Reviewers have a duty to write “informed” pieces based on “solid background knowledge”; though he confesses to liking witty reviewers, he “do[esn’t] respect writers who use their wit to make themselves feel cool at the expense of the music, the artists, and the readers. ‘Tough love’ - holding blues music *and* journalism to high standards - is very appropriate” (28). The editors of Blues Wax and Blue Revue who are quoted in Margolin’s article, however, do not seem to be fans of the tough love policy. Chip Eagle claims that CD reviews have no connection to advertising - “Enough advertisers have been upset with reviews to prove that!” - then qualifies: “In our reviews we certainly try to point out the positive and absolutely have no intention of dissing [sic] a particular artist or release” (28). In reality, if the magazine does not intend to publish negative reviews, then it is not really offering analysis but advertising space for blues artists. Blues Wax editor Steve Sloan calls reviewing a “double-edged sword,” with duties to both readers and artists to provide accurate, unbiased accounts of new releases. He concludes: “Not every CD produced has the necessary components to make it a classic, but every CD produced has the heart and soul of the artist in it” (28). Ultimately, nothing is clarified in Margolin’s article, though it becomes clear that the favored policy is to offend no one, which is precisely the point that Perkins was making.

## 2.2 Angry Readers

While Living Blues chooses not to publish reader mail in every issue, Blues Revue does. In spite of the blandness of the CD reviews, letters from disgruntled readers are common. By publishing rebuttals, the editor shows the impossible position in which reviewers are placed. No matter how positive or neutral reviewers try to be, they cannot please everyone. Two issues before Margolin's article appeared, an irate Rod Piazza fan asked: "Since when does Blues Revue condone using CD reviews to take cheap shots at legitimate artists?" The reader was irked by remarks about Piazza's sultan and his status as James Harman's "archrival" (Black 6). In the issue after Margolin's piece, a reader wrote in to inform the editor that "Occasionally a review gets the individual elements correct but draws the wrong conclusion." While the reviewer was right in praising the guitar work, arrangements, and songwriting on a Mark May CD, he exceeded his bounds in concluding that May "Doesn't cut the mojo" due to problems with range and expression. The reader remarks: "Huh? Where did that come from?" (Kolter 5). Reviews do not draw complaints from consumers alone. In the June/July 2003 issue the president of Doc Blues Records challenged a reviewer who had seen the eclecticism of Jeffrey P. Ross's new release as problematic. The president calls Ross a "full-spectrum bluesman who has made a uniformly entertaining album," and although that was not enough to please the reviewer, "it's more than enough for most blues fans" (Point 6). Cumulatively, the letters to the editor amount to an apology for the blandly positive reviews that fill the pages of each issue. Anything less than unequivocal praise is likely to incur the wrath of a devoted fan or record company executive.

## 2.3 Problems with the Truth in Jazz Circles

Blues is not the only musical genre in which economic factors complicate the relationships between artists, consumers, and record companies. In his book-length study of Japanese jazz, Blue Nippon, E. Taylor Atkins expressed dismay at the phoniness of CD reviews in Japanese magazines: "For months I had been struck by the fact that S[wing] J[ournal], which reviews hundreds of new and reissued recordings each month, practically never gives a bad review" (265). Atkins discovered that it was the magazine's policy to aim for a three-and-a-half star minimum rating due primarily to the "substantial advertising revenues" from record companies. He goes on to explain that critics who write glowing CD reviews are often asked by record companies to write the liner notes for future releases. Thus, it is in the reviewers' economic interests to write favorable reviews (265). This situation is probably not so different from that of the blues critics for American magazines, who have nothing to gain (besides the retention of personal pride) and much to lose by writing honest reviews.

## 2.4 A Jazz Restoration and the Year of the Blues

Atkins goes on to discuss attempts made by the Japanese company Paddle Wheel Records to proclaim a "jazz restoration" in 1994 which bears some similarity to the arbitrary creation of a blue year in 2003. Atkins interprets the "jazz restoration" as an attempt to lessen the influence of fusion and experimental jazz by boost-

ing interest in the classic jazz made popular by artists such as Miles Davis and re-popularized by Wynton Marsalis and others (274). Innovative jazz artists are faced with a dilemma, not unlike the one that post-modern bluesmen like Otis Taylor and Pops Staples (another controversial innovator) face. In jazz, the avant-garde commercial failure, says Atkins, is due largely to its desire to question the boundaries of jazz “at a historical moment when it is much more lucrative to defend them” (274). In other words, innovative jazz does not sell. Ironically, most of the jazz greats, including Ellington, Davis, Armstrong, and Coltrane, have become part of the jazz canon “precisely because of their disavowal of such boundaries” (275). The Year of the Blues, on the other hand, was a commercial opportunity created on a much grander scale than Paddle Wheel Records’ attempt to turn back the clock to the era of classic jazz. This declaration by Congress was intended as a centenary celebration of the self-proclaimed father of the blues W.C. Handy’s 1903 impromptu meeting with a bluesman in Tutweiler, Mississippi (Williams, pars. 3-4). This meeting, detailed in Handy’s autobiography The Father of the Blues, has long been mentioned as a possible birthdate for the blues. There were surely blue sounds before 1903 and W.C. Handy was not really the father (let alone discoverer) of the musical form known as the blues, even if he was one of the first African-Americans to understand, and profit from, the patent system. Year of the Blues highlights included a five-hour concert at New York City’s Radio Music Hall on February 7<sup>th</sup> (Shields 9) and the PBS’s series of seven documentaries, “Martin Scorsese Presents the Blues.” As Williams put it, “Congress’s boosterism addresses the fact that the imposing shadow the blues casts over world culture has done little to keep the public interested in the music in its original form” (par. 2).

## **2.5 The Future in the Past**

There has been a trend over the past decade to produce coffee table books of glossy blues photographs that promote the blues as art. In 1998 one such book, State of the Blues, appeared. The book is made up of photograph portraits of bluesmen and interviews with these musicians. In the afterword to the book, eight musicians are quoted on the future of the blues. All of them say essentially the same thing: the future of the blues is bright (163). Perhaps this is true, but the existence of such a book points to a serious problem within the blues music industry. Every musical genre has its share of legend-spinning and repackaging of old favorites in attractive CD box sets. However, there is a prevailing feeling that the blues needs to be protected and defended. It is difficult to understand why since there does not seem to be any real danger of blues going the way of the unicorn or the Rubix Cube. There have not been any large-scale movements to protect the polka or to defend the integrity of classical piano. The blues is not unlike a very publicly married couple that keeps making unbidden pronouncements on the health of their marriage. Such pronouncements only make the public suspicious. Perhaps the blues is fine and it will thrive, or perhaps not. But the public does not need to be constantly bombarded by slogans proclaiming that all is well. If anything, the received message is that all is not well, or that there is an ulterior (financial) motive behind the proclamation.

## 2.6 Marketing History and Myth

There is a tendency to romanticize the older generation of blues musicians as inspired geniuses who learned their craft through the school of hard knocks. This may have been true in Robert Johnson's time, before and during the Depression, when itinerant bluesmen wandered through the American South; it may even have retained grains of truth in the 1940's when Southern blacks were flooding north, to Chicago and St. Louis, and, via the blues, expressing discontent with the disparity between the vision of a better life and the reality of the ghetto.

Similar contradictions riddle the House of Blues, a series of music clubs dedicated to blues music and culture in America. Although the original concept of the House of Blues chain seems to have been to champion blues as an African-American art form, it appears more like a corporate machine catering to white audiences for financial gain. Three of the six clubs are located in areas not generally associated with African-America: Cambridge, Massachusetts; West Hollywood; Disney World in Orlando, Florida. While the clubs make a point of housing folk art, in 1996, the company had created a subsidiary branch called House of Blues Sports and signed corporate deals with Nike, Disney, and Vibe magazine (Aubrey, pars. 2, 5). By 1998, the six Houses of Blues owned more than six thousand works of art created by over sixty artists (Chase, par. 7). Most of the art was created by African-American artists and all of the artists were self-taught. "Many of them are visionary artists who receive direct impulses from God, and all of the artwork draws its inspiration from Southern traditions - traditions of piety, patriotism, poverty and (not infrequently) racist constraints on black self-expression" (par. 9). This is nothing more than myth-making. The curator Carole Crittenden is quoted by Chase as saying that many of the displayed artists "create for themselves, and unlike artists that go through the process of schooling and the regular gallery system they aren't seeking the same kind of appreciation. Many of these artists work obsessively to create what's burning inside them, and they really don't have the time to look for galleries and museums to celebrate their work" (Chase, par. 11). Crittenden's statement strains credulity. She implies that professionally trained creative artists do not create out of any intrinsic motivation and are more obsessed with finding galleries in which to hang their pieces than with the act of creation. Again, the true obsession, when one discusses the blues, is with authenticity, which is largely a mythological entity. It matters very little how one learned one's craft, though it does make for an alluring story with commercial possibilities.

## RACISM AND BLUES: THE STORY WITHOUT AN ENDING

### 3.1 The Unprintable Story

In the fall of 2002, a proposal by the author to write an article about African-American bluesmen active in Japan was accepted by the magazine Living Blues. In November 2002 the aforementioned boogie-woogie pianist Nat Dove and Delta bluesman Floyd Lee (also known as Ted Williams) were in the middle of Japanese



tours and I arranged to interview them both at Club 49 in Fukuoka. The story, which was never printed by Living Blues, contained comments about racial problems in America. While I recognized this was not the story that Living Blues, a magazine that bills itself as a celebration of the blues, would want to print on the eve of Year of the Blues festivities, this was the story the artists wanted to tell. In the spirit of honesty, I decided to write the story. Perhaps it was poorly written or came at an inconvenient time for Living Blues. The editor, when pressed, gave no reason for withholding publication. At first, the story's appearance would be delayed, I was told, due to a backlog of stories. Then I was told nothing, and the story died. Here is the story that Floyd Lee and Nat Dove told me in November 2002.

### **3.2 Escaping from Black and White**

The unpublished Living Blues story began with the following comment from Dove on why he enjoys playing for foreign audiences:

Blues in America, just like everything else, has a racial component. It's either black or it's white. Even to the detriment of all the other people who are neither black nor white. Because of this guilt factor, this creates the problem. And the Japanese don't have that problem. The French don't have that problem. The Dutch don't have that as a problem. (Dove)

When asked about why he had come back to Japan on musical tours over twenty times since his inaugural visit with Lowell Fulson in 1980, Dove spoke frankly about racism in America and the respectful treatment African-American musicians receive in foreign countries. He spent eleven years in Paris, during which time he co-authored a book with the famous blues expatriate, Memphis Slim, on piano technique (Dove). Dove's comments on the warm reception that African-Americans receive once they leave their home country came as no surprise. A generation of bluesmen made a career out of playing in Europe for the American Blues Festivals in the 1960's, and many, including Memphis Slim, chose not to return home. An anecdote related by photographer Valerie Wilmer about the experience of piano player Curtis Jones during a tour of England at the height of the blues craze shows how deeply racism in America affected African-American musicians. Jones wanted to use the bathroom at a hamburger restaurant after he had eaten.

He asked could he use the bathroom and they said no. What they meant was that they don't have one for the public, and you couldn't use theirs. He thought it was racial, and being a deeply sensitive person, he was deeply hurt. He was actually in tears. [ . . . ] I had to explain it to him. Things like that were difficult. (Murray 281).

#### **3.3.1 Floyd Lee**

The man known as Floyd Lee reportedly fled from his home of Lamarr, Mississippi at the age of nine or ten after a knife fight. He was sent to Chicago by train and, as an adult, played blues guitar and harmonica under the alias Ted Williams in the New York subway (Lee). At the time of our interview, he had toured Japan six

times since 1995. He did not specifically mention racism, nor was he critical of American society. Lee was the consummate good-time entertainer who, even at the age of seventy, would laugh and dance with the audience while hollering out old blues songs. After Lee had explained his introduction to blues music through the church and the circumstances of his sudden departure from Mississippi, he spoke mostly about how he enjoyed traveling overseas to play the blues. He had been in Moscow before arriving in Japan in November, 2002. Most of these details were included in a story in Living Blues on Lee that was printed about a year after the author's article was submitted.

### **3.3.2 Floyd Lee's View of the Blues**

Lee made two intriguing commentaries which point to the contradictions within the blues and America. Although Lee also talked about the financial rewards of touring Japan, he insisted that one of the reasons he enjoyed Japan so much was purely musical:

The blues scene in Japan is different. There's a lot of love and people are so serious. They don't care about the money. They want to play! [. . .] They just want to be close to you, and they want to learn. And I'm sure in the hell ready to teach 'em! (Lee)

While he was critical of Japanese blues singers, because of problems with diction and pronunciation, he acknowledged that Japanese blues musicians, in comparison with their American counterparts, are "more enthusiastic. They're more serious and they play better blues. I ain't just saying it 'cause I'm here. They play better blues and they're serious about it" (Lee).

### **3.4 The Blues Overseas**

Nat Dove and Floyd Lee both saw advantages for African-Americans in performing overseas. They play up-tempo, hard-driving blues and, while Dove bills himself as an educator, Lee is above all else a performer. About his tour of Moscow, he said: "I burned it upside down. They loved it. Everywhere I go, I'm an entertainer" (Lee). Dove, meanwhile, spoke of his blues workshops in Japan during which he explains the stories contained in blues lyrics, along with the history and culture behind the music (Dove). Both Dove and Lee said that they felt comfortable overseas because their skills as musicians are deemed more significant than the color of their skin. As Lee noted: "We are African-American, we are well-received [. . .] we don't have to pretend or do anything like that. 'Cause whatever we do is what we been doin' all our lives" (Lee). Dove thought the effects of racism lingered for both blacks and whites in America and in the blues:

I think that America has a phobia and a guilt complex. Truthfully, the only contribution that whites made to blues is that they brought the slaves over there in the first place and gave them the blues. And because this happened to black people they feel vulnerable about that. (Dove)

Like Lee, Dove praised Japanese music fans' accepting attitude towards the blues. "They are serious about it and they can accept the culture of blues. In the United States blues is looked at now as most things as pop cul-

ture. Which is a pity because they miss the whole point” (Dove). Both Dove and Lee are able to take advantage of their status as authentic bluesmen by coming to Japan, where there is plenty of blues being played in small clubs but very little by African-Americans. As Dove explained, in the United States “Blues is played by a guy who read a book about blues that was written by a guy who read a book about the blues” (Dove). Ironically, Dove learned to play the piano from his mother, a piano teacher, and he operates a music school, the Baldwin Hills Academy of Music in Los Angeles. Dove also offers frequent blues workshops. While he drew attention to the lack of folk in the art of the current generation of blues musicians, both in America and Japan, he learned music (as opposed to being self-taught) and continues to teach it today at his music school. Perhaps this would disqualify Dove from playing at the House of Blues, since he studied music as a child rather than simply waiting for divine inspiration.

### 3.5.1 Criticizing Critics

One of the reasons that Living Blues would not be interested in an article on expatriate bluesmen singing the praises of foreign shores is the implicit belief that racism existed in America years ago, but the situation has improved. Criticism of America is perceived as being bad for the blues industry. Blues performers who are too vocal in their criticism of contemporary society risk alienating their audience, which is predominantly Caucasian and upwardly mobile. Two young bluesmen, Anthony Gomes and Popa Chubby, were criticized because of the contents of profile articles in Blues Revue. The two letters to the editor quoted below show the deep conservatism of some blues fans. Gomes, a Canadian blues-rock guitarist and vocalist active in America, wrote a song called “Trouble in Our Land” about school shootings in the United States. Gomes explained: “Being Canadian, we have gun control and low crime rates. It was kind of a shock. There is nothing more precious than children and life. Just to have that happen is a painful reminder that something isn’t right” (Cote 20). This relatively innocuous comment provoked an angry letter in the following issue:

I can’t stand it when musicians perform songs about politics. It wouldn’t be a problem if people like Anthony Gomes did a little homework instead of working off of emotion. It’s a clear fact the U.S. has far less gun crime now than it did just a few years ago. Yes, Canada does have very extensive (and very expensive) gun control, but Canada does not have a Second Amendment like we do. Blues Revue has to remember that not all its subscribers are of liberal-left beliefs. The bottom line is that we musicians have to refrain from singing political songs, because we might either alienate our audience or show ignorance. (Lowell 5).

The key to this perverse line of reasoning is the idea that American gun crime has decreased and efforts to improve should not be criticized. The same argument is used to stifle negative CD reviews. Since every blues artist puts his or her heart and soul into each new CD, they deserve to be encouraged rather than discouraged. It is the critic’s job to find something positive in every CD. This is a deplorable, self-serving protectionist policy.

### **3.5.2 The Case of Popa Chubby**

Another irate blues fan took exception to the comments of Popa Chubby in the Feb/Mar 2003 issue: "I am one of those 'dentists, construction workers, accountants . . .' who occasionally gets up the nerve to attend a blues jam and live in 'delusions of grandeur for another week,'" the fan begins. He proceeds to threaten Chubby with economic reprisals: "Guess what? We are also the ones who buy blues CD's, attend shows, purchase blues memorabilia, and contribute as best we can to keep the blues alive. No apologies for not owning a '62 Strat or for sounding like the amateurs we are" (Gallagher 6). The fan concludes: "I suspect I will continue to spend using my 'corporate Visa. ' Shall I use it to purchase your latest CD, Chubby? Or would you prefer I not buy it?" (6).

It is sad and ironic that blues fans feel they have both the power and the right to threaten blues musicians. Although the two irate blues fans who threatened to boycott Anthony Gomes and Popa Chubby did not identify themselves as black or white, they made points of mentioning their right wing politics and economic power. To demand that the blues or any type of music stay out of politics is in itself a political threat. In order to protect the intellectual integrity of musicians, they must be allowed the freedom to express themselves on racial and political issues.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

### **4.1 Unexpected Honesty**

The issue of honesty in contemporary blues is a tangled one. Economic and racial factors make it both comfortable and profitable to keep one foot in the past, playing up the legendary aspect of blues music. Theatrically, rock and rap continue to be far more controversial in grappling with political, social, and racial problems. If Anthony Gomes is criticized for a song pleading for gun control, then it is hard to imagine the storm of protest that Neil Young's recent song, "Let's Impeach the President" would have created if it had been blues. Popular artists in rap and rock - musical genres that sell better than blues - are far less careful about angering potential consumers. It could be argued that their controversial subject matter actually helps to boost sales by speaking to rebellious youth. It is hard to know who blues musicians speak to or for when they are officially sanctioned by the Bush administration, as they were in 2003. Efforts to preserve or protect the blues are actually attempts to boost CD sales. Thus, blues artists are told to tread softly and endear themselves to potential customers, just as reviewers search for reasons to be optimistic. Efforts to preserve the blues only do a disservice to the genre in the long run, by contributing to its stagnation.

### **4.2 Saying the Unsaid**

Much of the attraction of the blues has been its ability to honestly convey emotion through words and sounds. Thus, blues scholars such as Jeff Todd Titon, Paul Oliver, and David Evans have spent years analyzing

the words to blues songs. During segregation, when African-Americans did not have freedom of speech, blues served as an outlet for self-expression on the most elementary level. While there were few blues artists writing the type of political songs that J.B. Lenoir did and Otis Taylor now does, there were scores of blues songs that appeared to be about mules stepping on angry men's feet that were actually about something more. While signifying may remain a part of blues music today, a survey of magazines such as Blues Revue and Living Blues suggests that in an era when American society is freer than ever before, the blues has run out of things to say. This seems to me a false conclusion. Artists performing in the blues genre still have plenty to say although, perhaps, they are discouraged from saying it. Floyd Lee and (even more so) Nat Dove wanted to talk about social and musical problems in America and, unprompted, they spoke of their concerns. Living Blues magazine's suppression of this story, in conjunction with the article on Otis Taylor, led to the beginnings of this paper. The real purpose of magazines like Living Blues and Blues Revue has become to reassure blues fans that their favorite music is going to be all right. Each month hundreds of wonderful new CD's appear and everyone within the blues industry is perfectly content. This is a beautiful myth that was created for a single profit-making purpose. Nat Dove's latest CD release, reviewed positively in Living Blues Nov/Dec 2006 issue, includes ecological and social engineering commentaries such as "Has the World Gone Crazy" and "Welfare System" (DeKoster 47). This is comforting for blues fans who are interested in the truth. When the day comes that blues magazines start publishing feature articles that are openly critical of not only Russia but America then the blues will truly have come back to life.

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