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The Social Significance of Blues Music

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Abstract

Blues music was created from the living conditions and emotional experiences of African Americans in the southern United States. The social significance of Blues music resides in the revolutionary element of African Americans creating their own aesthetics.

Blues music represented the opposing voice that refused to be silenced by oppression and segregation. The Blues expressed this with unprecedented clarity, honesty and simplicity. As a raw, authentic expression of intimate feelings it was not meant to be political but became an expression of community and solidarity which fueled social movements of African American and inspired youth and cultural minorities globally, and has entered mainstream popular music.

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1. Introduction

The emergence of Blues can be considered the biggest music event in history as it crystalized emotions and creativity in a period of rapid development and economic growth. It is rooted in deep inequity and has powered liberation and emancipation efforts globally.

This thesis analyzes the historical socio-economic and cultural conditions that led to the emergence and development of Blues music. Such factors include centuries of institutionalized slavery of African Americans, the economic rationale for slavery as a working force, in particular to produce cotton, the "Great Migration" and the creation of cultural space for the performance of Blues music, and the technological development in music recording. It also considers the features of Blues music, including rhythms and tones, lyrics and art of performance and its capacity to build identity and a sense of community, and the capacity of these features to inspire social movements.

Blues music was born out of an oral tradition, building on African spiritual and musical traditions and European folk music, emphasizing improvisation and spontaneous expression, and artist-audience interaction. It gave rise to a range of musical development and has been the basis for modern popular music. Further, this thesis outlines the socio-economic and cultural consequences of Blues music, as an inspiration for political movements and emancipation of minorities and underprivileged groups worldwide.

This thesis investigates the essence of Blues as being born out of oppression and cultural and personal annihilation. It postulates that Blues is neither assimilation, nor escape but it expresses basic human feelings within a context of suffering and injustice. Blues helped to form a cultural identity, suddenly possible through the end of slavery. It met with elements of strong economic and cultural development, and massive advances in infrastructure development and communication, in the form of railways, music recording and radio. Receptiveness on the side of the dominant white majority grew, giving rise to new, more mainstream, music genres, many of which are associated with civil rights and social movements. These include Jazz, credited with freeing whites from emotional and sexual repression, and Rock and Roll that played a

role in the anti-war movement of the 1960s. Blues is also seen as a precursor of women's emancipation as it provided a conduit for articulating the voice of women in challenging male hegemony.

Social and musical analysis are combined in this thesis in order to explain the particular expressive, affirming and uniting power of Blues music. It does not aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of all social and musical facets of Blues but highlights the most important factors, features and implications.

2. Conditions That Led to the Emergence and Rise of Blues Music

Among the many factors that contributed to the emergence of Blues music and more generally, to the development of a distinctly Afro-American culture, the experience of slavery is, due to its traumatic and socially as well as emotionally devastating consequences, without a doubt one of the most relevant aspects that influenced the birth of a new form of expression. This chapter briefly covers the history of slavery and the economic rationale behind cotton production in the era of the Industrial Revolution, as well as the changes consequent to the end of slavery. It also analyzes certain aspects of African American culture, language and religion that have been fundamental in the creation of a musical revolution.

Slavery. Between 1600 and 1820, eight million slaves were brought from Africa to the Americas through ships crossing the Atlantic Ocean. Slaves made up almost two thirds of all immigrants arriving to the new continent from 1500 to 1760 (before 1580 they comprised a fifth of all migrants, then increasing up to three quarters in the time period between 1700 and 1760) (Engerman and Sokoloff 2008). However, the first slave import to the future United States occurred in 1619, with 250 slaves arriving in Jamestown (Thornton and Heywood 2007). However, only 9 percent of slaves ended up in British North America or the United States.

Southern tobacco plantations very soon became reliant on African slaves, as it was clear that importing them would be cheaper even considering the proportion of slaves dying during transit, estimated at 15 to 20 percent (Ferguson 2011) and they could be forced to perform harder than indentured European laborers. British slave-

buyers recruited slaves from African sellers at the West and Central African Coast. Slave trade across the desert of the Sahara had existed since at least 200 AD (Ferguson 2011).

Imports of slaves into the United States were banned in 1808 but smuggling continued for decades afterwards. Due to the expansion of cotton plantations in the "Deep South" (those state that originally formed the Confederate States of America, i.e. South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas), domestic slave trading continued and rapidly expanded as a response to growing labor demand. More than one million slaves were sold from the Upper South, which had a surplus of labor, and taken to the Deep South in a forced migration, splitting up many families. New communities of African-American culture were developed in the Deep South, and the total slave population in the South eventually reached 4 million before liberation (Behrendt 1999).

In North America, the concept of private property dominated political life. Accordingly, slave owners felt they could treat their possessions, whether humans or land, as they desired. This did not change much with time: As the number of slaves in British America grew to one third of the white population in 1760, laws were increasingly designed in order to create even more separation between black slaves, who were forced to work for lifetime and indentured workers, who served their masters for a period of five or six years (Ferguson 2011). This 1663 Maryland law speaks very clearly: "All Negroes or other slaves in the province... shall serve *durante vitae*; and all children born of any Negro or other slave shall be slaves as their fathers were" (Elkins 1968. p. 40). Over time, legislation concerning slavery became increasingly stricter: A 1669 Virginia law stated that killing one's own slave was no crime; a 1726 South Carolina law defined slaves as "chattels"; in addition, physical punishment was codified (Elkins 1968, p. 50).

These laws highlight the contradiction of European institutions as slavery as an integral part of the economy had died out in England while it was perfectly capable of existing on another land still controlled by the same institutions (Ferguson 2011). A magistrate in Virginia depicted this tension inherent of the "peculiar institution" of slavery in this declaration: "Slaves are not only property, but they are rational beings, and entitles to the humanity of the Court, when it can be exercised without invading

the rights of property." (Davis 1980, p. 125). Attacks of abolitionists on slave-traders were only successful when severe atrocities were committed, such as when the captain of a ship from Liverpool ordered to throw 133 slaves overboard while these were alive and chained, due to insufficient supply of water (Ferguson 2011).

Contrary to South America, where interracial interbreeding was very soon accepted as a reality, in North America interracial unions were a taboo. "Miscegenation" as it was called, the interbreeding of individuals that are considered to be part of two different "races", was prohibited, and when it happened anyways, it was denied and considered illegitimate. This was a direct consequence of the fact that British migrants more often than not took their wives with them when traveling to America (Ferguson 2011). Nevertheless, despite the elaborate efforts to prevent these unions, interbreeding, often in the form of sexual violence from slave-owners to slaves, was an everyday reality. The children of such unions, even if they were predominantly white (such as in Virginia, where one black grandparent was enough) were considered black independently of their physiognomy and therefore slaves (Ferguson 2011). Interracial marriage was punishable in Virginia from 1630; interestingly, slaves were also denied the right to marry among themselves in British colonies. As in 1915, in 28 states interracial marriage was still prohibited and in 1912 there was an attempt at amending the US constitution in order to ban it permanently (Ferguson 2011). African slaves who entered the Unites States were thrown into a system where differences between ethnicity were extremely strict and freedom was impossible to obtain.

When John Locke wrote the "Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina", he made of private property the basis of politics (Ferguson 2011); laws were shaped accordingly. It was not only land that was under these laws. In article 110 Locke declared: "Every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves, of what opinion or religion soever" (Ferguson 2011, p.135). Ownership of humans was considered just like ownership of land. Later laws were meant to keep this status quo. For example, the South Carolina Slave Code of 1740 gave white men the permission to examine a slave who was found outside landed property unaccompanied by whites, as well as prohibiting slaves to leave their plantation, violations being punished with "moderate whipping" (Ferguson 2011, p.

135) and prohibiting white people to teach slaves how to read and write. From the very beginning, the newly created United States took pride in defining itself the Land of the Free, however, considering that one in five people had no chance of ever gaining freedom, this statement was rather ironic. (Ferguson 2011). Slavery was legal in all US at time of the declaration of independence in 1776.

    <u>Cotton and the Industrial Revolution</u>. The demand for slave labor in the Southern States was itself a product of the industrial revolution which started with textile manufacturing in England. In fact, textiles were the first economic sector to industrialize, contributing more than half of economic output growth in England in the initial period of industrialization (Clark 2007)

    The uniqueness of the Industrial Revolution lies in the fact that in a relatively short period of time, the economy witnessed an advance in the rate of efficiency as there had never been in the past. During the period of transition from a static Malthusian economy to a modern economy (1760 - 1800) the sector that saw the greatest advance in productivity was that of textiles, which contributed more than half of the entire national efficiency growth rate in England (Clark 2007).

    Textiles were therefore the carrying industry during this period: the process of transforming raw cotton into cloth grew 14 times in the century from 1760 to 1860 due to a number of technological innovations in the textile, which transformed the industry (Clark 2007). This development greatly increased the demand for cotton. The South of the United States, with its favorable climate, became a valuable exporter of cotton, providing capital to the North and becoming a crucial trade partner for Europe. Of course, as the demand for cotton grew, the demand for field slaves did as well. One could argue that slavery in the United States was in fact not motivated by ideological justification, but merely by economic considerations and profit.

    Demand for cotton increased greatly and was further facilitated by the invention of the cotton gin, which allowed the mechanical separation of the cotton lint (fiber) from the seed.

    The Southern States have long, hot summers, and rich alluvial soils and ample water supplies, providing ideal growing conditions for cotton. By 1860, Southern plantations supplied 75% of the world's cotton, with shipments mainly from Houston,

New Orleans, Charleston, Mobile and Savannah. This fact gave the confederate states the confidence that they would prevail in a conflict with the abolitionist North, summarized in the slogan "King Cotton" (Hammond 1858).

The first widespread applications of steam powered engines at the very beginning of the industrial revolution were in textile manufacturing, i.e. spinning machines and looms which relied on a continuous source of energy for repetitive mechanical movements. With new machinery, it was possible to process raw cotton into clothing that was better and cheaper than hand-made product. European and New England purchases expanded fourfold from 720,000 bales in 1830, to 2.85 million bales in 1850, to nearly 5 million in 1860. Cotton production revived the slave market. By 1860, cotton accounted for almost 60% of American exports, representing a total value of nearly $200 million a year (Hammond 1858).

In 1860, one year before the outbreak of the American Civil War, 35 to 40 percent of the U.S. South's population consisted of slaves. Nevertheless, it is important to notice that these slaves were only held by a quarter of free households and that only 15 to 20 percent among these households held at least 20 slaves, which was considered to be the low threshold of slaves for a farm to be considered a plantation. This means that about 3.5-5 percent of Southern free households were plantations and that the overwhelming majority of slaves worked in them (Coclanis and Engerman 2013).

In order to understand the fall of slavery, it is crucial to know who profited from this business. Although some economic aspects of slavery, namely the question about its cost efficiency, are still open to debate, one can without a doubt state that individual slave holders derived profit out of slave ownership; in fact, even though in some areas of the South slaves could have been considered unprofitable due to overspecialization or poor health (such as in the rice region), generally slave prices were not only high but also rising before the Civil War. The values, norms and behaviors of slave owners was not, as is often said, driven by ideology but by more market logic and plain concerns about profit and loss (Coclanis and Engerman 2013). In some ways, even non-slaveholders in the South profited from slavery, since slaveholders payed a great deal of the taxes and since slaveholder and non-slaveholders engaged in economic exchange through provisions, contracts, discounts

and services that involved slaves (Coclanis and Engerman 2013). Two other groups that profited from slavery were the population of Northern states and Europeans: both made use of goods and commodities that had been produced by slaves, as part of the surplus from unpaid labor was transferred in the form of cheaper food, clothes etc. In addition, Northerners paid lower taxes due the income from tariffs on imported goods; these tariffs were financed by exports of cotton, rice and tobacco which were worked on by slaves (Coclanis 2007).

Economically, by 1860 the North was unambiguously more developed than the South. This was due to the fact that the South's economy rested on a strong demand for few staples, all of which coming from agriculture; only for one of these products, namely for cotton, the South had a comparative advantage; the production of sugar solely relied on political protection. In short, the Southern economy was not stable as it depended so heavily on slavery and agriculture (Coclanis and Engerman 2013). As stated by Hirschman, the South had a "noncumulative development" meaning that it did not undergo consistent sophistication or tangible qualitative change over the 19th century (Hirschman 1977). In addition, an overwhelming majority of investments and saving were being spent on purchasing slaves instead of technological innovation, capital, or the improvement of land (Coclanis and Engerman 2013). Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to state that the Southern economy was insufficiently flexible; in the 19th century, important economic adjustments were made, including railroad infrastructure, which would prove crucial in the migration of free blacks to the North, and the introduction of the cotton gin (Coclanis and Engerman 2013), which increased the demand for slaves and contributed to a sustained economic growth, therefore ending predictions about the end of slavery due to economic reasons.

The end of slavery and the Great Migration. The contradiction within the United Stated between human rights and liberty on the one side, and the institutionalization of slavery on the other could only be dissolved by a war and that is what happened in the American Civil War (1861 – 1865). However, even though slavery ended with the defeat of the secessionist, pro-slavery States of the South by the anti-slavery Northern States, it was a widespread opinion, especially among the Southern regions, that the prosperity of the United States was largely due to the

differentiation between blacks and white and that, for this reason, the dividing line between races had to remain (Ferguson 2011).

In 1863, President Lincoln issued an executive order known as the Emancipation Proclamation, changing the legal status of all slaves in the Confederacy "free". As a result, slaves who could escape the control of the Confederate government, often through advances of Union troops, became free. By June 1865, the Union Army controlled all of the Confederacy and had liberated all of the designated slaves (Litwack 1979).

When analyzing slave societies, it becomes clear that no economy seems to have developed after the fall of slavery. Rather, slavery has always left deep, unsettling consequences for its succeeding generations, creating disastrous material conditions, social issues and an overall cultural despair (Coclanis and Engerman 2013). Even abolitionists thought a transition into a complete end of slavery was necessary in order to educate slaves to be free, to give them time to emancipate themselves and avoid social upheaval (Coclanis and Engerman 2013).

As a consequence of the outcome of the Civil War that left a defeated South, and after a congressional amendment, legal slavery terminated immediately and without apprenticeship for the freed slaves. Furthermore slaves and slave owners were not compensated in any way. Compensations would have had an unsustainable costs, and the possibility of apprenticeships to integrate slaves into society would have never been accepted to former slaveholders; a gradual ending of slavery would have caused political struggles and was therefore unfeasible (Coclanis and Engerman 2013)

The period from 1870 to 1900 saw a transition from slavery to sharecropping, small-scale agricultural production. At the same time, the expansion of railroads in the southern United States made African Americans more mobile in search of work and economic opportunities to move. Mobility, and the right to assemble, led to the establishment of juke joints as places where blacks went to listen to music, dance, or gamble after a hard day's work.

Blues is a musical form originated by African Americans in the Southern United States towards the turn of the 19th-20th century, as a genre developed from the roots in African-American work songs and European-American folk music. Blues was not formally written down. Music Sheets appeared around 1910. In line with

technological advances in music recording and broadcasting, recorded Blues and country music can be found as far back as the 1920s, when the record industry created the marketing categories "race music" and "hillbilly music" to sell music by blacks for blacks and by whites for whites, respectively (Floyd 1995).

During the 1920s, mass immigration from Europe had stopped as a result of the 1st World War and labour was in short supply in the north. As a result, millions of African-Americans from rural Southern United States moved to the urban Northeast, Midwest, and West, called the "Great Migration" (Lemann1991). By 1930, 1.3 million former southerners had moved to other regions in the US (Gregory 2009). With such mass migration, the opportunities for Blues music were greatly enhanced, with the ability to perform in music clubs, new audiences and access to urban spaces, infrastructure and technology. In fact, the notion of Blues as a separate genre arose during the black migration from the countryside to urban areas in the 1920s and the simultaneous development of the recording industry. Blues became a code word for a record designed to sell to black listeners.

Decades later, in the African American Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968) African Americans fought for the recognition and protection of their civil rights. There were still supremacists that believed that segregation was the key to prosperity, such as Alabama Governor George Wallace whose motto "Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!" described white supremacists' vision of the United States' success due to segregation and the plan to keep the status quo (Ferguson 2011). Even though African Americans managed to achieve many of their goals, including voting rights and the ban of racial barriers, it is clear even today that slavery was not only unnecessary to the United States' economic and political success; slavery and segregation, in addition to the trauma due to the atrocities inflicted to a whole population in the course of centuries, left traces that are visible today through a number of developmental and social issues, such as lacking education, drug use, high crime rates and rates of incarceration, that lie at the heart of many communities of African Americans (Ferguson 2011).

Language: Unlike other immigrants, African Americans were denied the use of their own native languages. (Salaam 1995) Over the years, and without having the

opportunity of receiving formal instruction, the slaves developed a transaction language, the "pidgin", to communicate with their masters and between themselves. For a time, slaves were bilingual, being able to speak both the pidgin and their native languages; but, as the new generations of slaves were born, the opportunities of practicing their native languages became less, and eventually their linguistic heritage became forgotten. (Smitherman 1977)

Slaves were thus not only physically and emotionally, but also linguistically oppressed by dominating Western culture. They were left communicating in a language which could not communicate their experiences effectively, in part because it belonged to those who were ensuring the continuation of their oppression (Salaam 1995). The English language, or the various derivatives spoken by African American slaves, did not have the means do adequately represent the emotional and social struggles of the slave's reality, rather it ignored and negated this reality. Not having access to instruction, or to other means of verbal expression, music was used as a channel of non –verbal expression of their human experience. In the end, even when instruments where prohibited, music could be created anywhere and in any moment, it just required voices and bodies (Salaam 1995).

Blues music thus originated as a non-verbal language, as a necessity to express feelings of pain and grief, and in this way as a tool of (passive) resistance. It became an instrument of cultural affirmation among African- Americans, and more importantly, specifically made for African-Americans (Salaam 1995).

3. Features of the Blues

The origins of Blues music. During the time of slavery, the music and dancing of African Americans kept some of their cultural memory of their land of provenance and their traditions, maintaining the qualities of various African rituals. According to a report from Philadelphia in the 18th century, "more than one thousand of both sexes, divided into numerous little squads", would come together to dance and sing "each in their own tongue", each following the traditions of their African nations of

provenance (Watson 1881, 265 quoted in Floyd 1995). During the times of legal slave trade, from 1619 to 1808, African rituals and their myths evolved into ceremonies where bands of African Americans would sing, dance and pray after the regular church services were over. Many musical traditions from this West Africa remained intact: Tremolos, ululations, shouts, hums, grunts polyrhythms and melismas as well as the emotional and spiritual attachment to the ritual (Floyd 1995).

In the late 19th century, in New Orleans, there is evidence of usual Sunday recreational events where African Americans were performing music and dances. They were dancing around in a "ring", a cultural element of African provenance, now continued by slaves and playing a crucial role in their forms of entertainment and rituals (Floyd 1995). During these ceremonies, the tempo of the music was initially slow, then it increased, accompanied by chanting, clapping and stomping of the feet, with increasingly upbeat and ecstatic patterns of call-and-response and polyphonies, until the music finally reached a climax.

The ring practice was seen by whites and, with time by black Christians too, as savage, impure and idolatrous and was heavily criticized and even forbidden. But most African Americans, both free and slave, saw this ritual as a metaphysic necessity, as their connection with the spirits and the dead as well as an expression of their values, including sexual impulses and fertility. Most of all, the act of forming a ring and celebrating reaffirmed their identity and created a community that carried a cultural memory (Floyd 1995).

From the early 18th century onwards, white and black music styles and characteristics started influencing each other, giving birth to new styles that became widespread (Floyd 1995). During the second half of the 18th century, black religious music evolved into hymns and religious songs. "Negro spirituals", written and performed by black musicians who had studied white music, such as Jubilee Songs which were adaptations of slave songs in order to fit into European vocal requirements. At the turn of the century, spiritual music culminated into the creation of Gospel singing.

At the same time, African American secular music world also included "carry-me-backs", sentimental songs and pseudo-rituals, which encouraged the pro-slavery idea that free blacks were wished to return to the status of slavery to feel safe and

secure; another denigrating, even derisive trend was that of the "coon song" from the 1880s onwards (Floyd 1995). In these songs, African American males were depicted as criminals, drunks, fun-loving gamblers, while the stereotype of the fat and very black woman was perpetuated through illustrations, or alternatively, the image of beautiful light – skinned women was imposed as more acceptable and desirable by white culture standards of beauty (Floyd 1995).

Spirituals had many of the distinctive characteristics of traditional African songs: Their lyrics tended to be repeated often, voices were non-tense, melodies were simple and relaxed while rhythms were multileveled. Furthermore, they included many patterns of interaction of African musical culture, such as improvisation and call-response. These cultural traits remained intact and included metaphors, personifications and legends of African origin culture but they also carried a deeply rebellious spirit of slaves, who at their heart refused to accept their status (Harding 1981). In fact, according to Lovell (1972) freedom and the hope for freedom were the main concepts of these rituals.

Spirituals were kept alive by the birth of black churches as African Americans, even those who were free, were systematically excluded or mistreated in white religious communities. By creating their own religious gatherings, blacks were able to perpetuate the spirit of the ring. Only through the ring they let go of their emotions through a dramatic, cathartic practice (Floyd 1995).

African Americans used calls, cries and hollers to make announcements, organize meetings, communicate about work and to convey greetings, sometimes using words, other times solely with sounds and moans and yells; each of these sounds had a specific function. Hollers were employed to communicate across vast spaces, while cries and calls for more personal and closer messages (Floyd 1995). Since the use of their native language was forbidden by slave owners and slaves speaking different native languages were deliberately mixed in order for them to be less cohesive as groups, these sounds were effective means of communication for newly transplanted slaves who did not know how to communicate; but most of all, from the necessity to convey practical messages, a new form of musical expression was gaining importance (Floyd 1995).

Just like it was tradition in Africa, African American slaves sang while

working (Floyd 1995). Soon slave masters noticed that the singing practice gave working men and women more strength and endurance on the fields, and that "there was usually a lead singer who set the pace for the group. In fact, when slaves were auctioned, singers with the strongest voices brought top prices" (Kebede 1982, 130). As discussed by Wilson (1983), the African American work song therefore has not only an artistic side to it, but also a utilitarian principle, as for instance its function for performing workers is to "facilitate the task of chopping wood" through which a process is initiated in "the work becomes the music, and the music becomes the work" (Wilson 1983. pp. 11, 12). Not only had songs the power to help slaves in keeping a steady and upbeat working rhythm, they also had a role in keeping a cultural heritage which, amidst all the dehumanizing work, would otherwise have been lost. In fact, on the plantations, slaves often engaged in satirical or derisive songs, or nostalgic children's lullabies (Floyd 1995).

Spirituals and secular songs, as well as hollers, cries and calls all had some features in common. In all these types of music, "natural pauses in the melody were filled in with clapping, stomping, pattin', vocal outbursts, and, in the case of dance music, strumming or slapping string instruments, shaking rattles, and beating sticks, bones, and other percussive instruments" (Southern 1983, p. 201). Likewise, the instruments used had in part African origins, such as the banjo, the drums where they were not prohibited, the flute, sticks and bones and rattles (Floyd 1995). These instruments and methods came to be used in an attempt to recreate African style music in another system and under new circumstances, and arose as new practices due to adaptation (Floyd 1995). Not only the instrumental aspect of African American songs maintained the distinctive qualities of its predecessor: Voices made particular sounds at the end of each verse, in a way mirroring the bending pitch and modulation of their speech in their native languages (Ekwueme 1974).

Religion. The moral and artistic perspectives of Western and Central African spirituality were crucial to the development of African and subsequently African-American music (Floyd 1995). The huge variety of African cultures all have their distinct features. However, many African cultures do have a common ground, and some fundamental concepts are expressed in their religious and spiritual rituals.

According to Mbiti, in African societies, "without a single exception, people have a notion of God... a minimal and fundamental idea about God" (Mbiti [1969] 1990, 29). God is the creator of heaven and earth, with the two being joined or closely linked. In fact, in African traditions there was no real difference between the material, or the profane, and the spiritual, or sacred; spirituality or religion influenced and set the basis for virtually all practical realms of life (Mbiti [1969] 1990). Although God was recognized as the sole creator, other, lesser divinities, existed, which has been described as "archetypes of the collective unconscious" (Gonzàles-Wippler 1985, p.13) and were seen as the bridge between the creator and the people, each dealing with different realms of daily life. These gods were in a sense semi - spiritual and semi - physical and permeated the world as anthropomorphized, real beings (Mbiti 1990). The most prominent of these gods, *Esu*, was depicted as a trickster, a prankster who often caused disorder for no apparent reason (Gonzàles-Wippler, 1985, p.117).

In addition to the divinities, the dead were also part of the spiritual world; in African cultures, the physically dead remained alive and part of the community through the act of remembering by those who were still alive. Africans relied on these spirits as means for communicating with the divinities and for seeking catharsis, or for relief (Floyd 1995). It is remarkable when observing African societies and cultures that, unlike Christian cultures, the boundaries between life and death, between the material and the spiritual, seem rather blurred and flexible.

It is through drum, song and dance that Africans manifested their rituals, connected with spirits and divinities and offered their sacrifices. The connection between Africans, their ancestors and God happened within ceremonies that were led by music (Floyd 1995): Many African cultures believed that "ritualistic dancing can increase and generate *ache* [ashé] or life force in the individual" (Gonzàles – Wippler 1985, 12), *ache* being a moving, dynamic life force (Floyd 1995). During the ceremonies, dancing individuals fell into a trance through dance and drumming, feeling possessed by the different divinities, who were each evoked by different drumming patterns (Mbiti [1969] 1990). This ceremonial possession was stimulated by concentrated group dancing, chanting, drumming, extreme mental focus as well as storytelling and particular costumes (Floyd 1995).

African religious systems included both monotheistic and polytheistic aspects,

acknowledged one single power that was both negative and positive and able to produce both evil and good, instead of juxtaposing them, as is done in Western cultures.

African religious systems, including their symbols, myths, narrations and tales, were kept alive through ritual and artistic expression, and formed the very basis of the structure of their society, their moral standards, their laws and politics. African mythology was a way to explain reality and was kept alive and nourished through ritual, which was dominated by dance and drums (Floyd 1995). Myths and legends of spirits, gods and their interactions became the fundamental part of African cultural heritage, of their folk narratives. African tales came in different types and had different purposes, some having a moral intention, some to inspire fear or discipline, others being mere entertainment; mostly they involved animal characters, with animal trickster stories (the trickster representing the divinity of Esu) being very prominent among folk tales (Floyd 1995). These tales were deeply interconnected with African musical traditions, as they both contained opposition and had a sort of dialectic quality, in music represented through "overlap, apart-playing, and interlock" (Abrahams 1983, p.20). Legends thus were the inspiration for music and the rituals that were dominated by it (Floyd 1995).

In the ambition of maintaining an identity, which slave owners sought to erase, the African God was substituted by the Christian God, with Christ taking the place of spirits; this was not a traumatic transformation as the idea of a supreme power was not a new one in African spirituality. Christianity quickly permeated African American music and spirituals became the most popular musical genre among African Americans. Spirituals were essential during the times of slavery as they not only represented the sole means of expressing frustration and hope, therefore being the only outlet against dehumanization, but they also maintained slaves' cultural and spiritual heritage alive (Floyd 1995). Through the act of remembering the past, slaves were able to cope with the present.

Music was an urgency, an expression of a profound need to keep contact with their spirits and ancestors so that they could "retain their power of self-definition or [they would] perish (Small 1987, p. 123).

Traditions of Blues Music. The instruments used in African traditional music were mostly voice and drums, which were intermingled and harmonized in heterogeneous ways, but also bells, claps and rattles. Also, music was not only the accompaniment to rituals and religious practices, but, as African culture is solely oral, it was the main vehicle for self-expression and the expression of the whole community. Music thus expressed love, pain, mortality, celebration, it contained the realities and narratives of African societies and the interactions between individuals; it was a translation of life experiences, a reflection, a version of history through its many varieties (Floyd 1995).

Blues music can be described as contradictory and ambiguous in its content, in the performance and in the emotions it carries. In its execution it is democratic, with every member of the band and the audience being actively part of the creative process as a whole, yet it gives attention to the individual who has the space to give their unique contribution. It is adaptive and it celebrates the present, thus leaving space to improvisation in both the composition as well as in the interpretation and the articulation of sound. Salaam (Salaam 1995) uses three attributes to describe the dichotomy that seems to lie at heart of Blues music: Loud, raw and bluesy.

The term "loud", more than "dynamic", which is also a correct definition of the Blues sound, implies a disruption of the status quo. From the drums to the bass line to the voice, all seem to be setting in motion expansive vibrations which encourage a response. This "desire to create overtones and feedback" (Salaam 1995) encourages a feedback, a "call and response", both from the audience and from the instruments. The music becomes inclusive as it does not fully become itself until both the audience and the environment become part of the music making process (Salaam 1995). The "rawness" quality refers to the approach of both the music makers and the audience, and emphasizes honest, spontaneous involvement in the music. It is achieves through a sincere response that is not filtered by "civilized" behavior or social conventions. In a way, the "raw" quality of Blues music can be interpreted as an urge to freedom, an anger outlet by those who have been repressed and exploited (Salaam 1995).

"Bluesy" refers to an attitude of acceptance without submission. Blues songs are sung to transcend reality in order to accept it. The lyrics usually state a desire to

transcend a situation of oppression and a longing for improvement in the future. It is in a way a spiritual escape to a given social situation which cannot be physically overcome. This feeling is also conveyed through the inexactness of the Blues sound, the sliding between notes from minor and major scales, and the use of noise elements.

As described by Alan Lomax (1975): "When most Africans sing they are non-tense, vocally; quite repetitious, textually; rather slurred in enunciation; lacking in embellishment and free rhythm; low on exclusive leadership; high in antiphony, chorally; especially high on overlapped antiphony; high on one-phrase melodies, on litany form; very cohesive, tonally and rhythmically in chorus; high on choral integration or part-singing; high on relaxed vocalizing; and highest on polyrhythmic (or hot) accompaniments." (Lomax 1975, p. 46).

According to Lomax (1975), these qualities of African musical traditions were not only kept under slavery, but were central for slaves as it provided support and a sense of group. "The non – complex structure of text and tune and the multi-leveled structure of the original African performance style added incentives for group participation, opening the door for anyone to make a contrastive or complementary personal contribution to the whole sound. Where the whole society is needed to accomplish heavy, monotonous hand labor in intense heat, we find a communication style maximally inviting, encouraging and eroticizing participation by all present. This style was continued under slavery and now forms the baseline for the entire Afro-American tradition." (Lomax 1975, p. 50)

From the early 18th century onwards, white and black music styles and characteristics started influencing each other, giving birth to new styles that became widespread (Floyd 1995). During the second half of the 18th century, black religious music evolved into hymns and religious songs, "Negro spirituals", written and performed by black musicians who had studied white music, such as Jubilee Songs (which were adaptations of slave songs in order to fit into European vocal requirements) and then culminated into the creation of Gospel singing at the turn of the century. At the same time, African American secular music world also included "carry-me-backs", sentimental songs and pseudo-rituals, which encouraged the pro-slavery idea that free blacks were wished to return to the status of slavery to feel safe and secure (Floyd 1995).

Since the abolition of slavery, the process of emancipation brought extreme changes to Afro-American social life and therefore to black music. The gatherings of African Americans had no longer be justified by the act of praising and worshipping: This triggered a turn towards the secular (Floyd 1995). As a consequence, jook houses emerged and changed dance, drum and song (Hazzard-Gordon 1990); although the jooks' direction was undoubtedly secular, it maintained its African traditions, in which such separations were not present. It was in these environments that early forms of the Blues began to be played.

From the late nineteenth century, medleys of spirituals and folk music, the so-called "rags", began to be danced in and out of the ring, in the performance of "ragging": This new style that emerged, like all Afro-American music, from African musical traditions, employed their polyrhythms, cross-rhythms and multi-metric configurations which are so central in the quality of Afro-American music and its aesthetic power (Floyd 1995). The contrast between the Christian division between sacred and secular and the jook's promiscuous, amoral environment led to a rupture within black culture, with some desiring to be assimilated and accepted into white culture. In fact, black bands and orchestras performed quadrille and cotillon music at white dances for free black people, often improvising on these tunes and employing patterns of both musical heritages, initiating the syncretization of African American music (Floyd 1995).

Johnson (1912) describes a live ragtime improvisation as follows:
"The barbaric harmonies, the audacious resolutions, often consisting of an abrupt jump from one key to another, the intricate rhythms in which the accents fell in the most unexpected places, but in which the beat was never lost, produces a curious effect. And, too, the player – the dexterity of his left hand in making rapid octave runs and jumps was little short of marvelous; and with his right hand he frequently swept half the keyboard with clean-cut chromatics." (Johnson 1912, quoted in Floyd 1995, p. 70)

Language and lyrics. Just by existing and expressing its true self, and without consciously striving for it, Blues music represented a challenge to the tyranny of dominant culture. The society in which it came to life was based on the notion of

supremacy of "White" ideals, and was upheld by the judgment that these ideals were good and desirable. The Eurocentric culture was dominant in every single social construct, in every symbol and in every icon. Blues music, as the voice of an oppressed and exploited people, created an antithesis to dominant social structures: it did so in an unexpected way, by breaking the musical status quo (Salaam 1995). Blues music did not intend to be political, nor did it aim at deconstructing a dominant system. That is where the true force of this form of expression lies: Not in its intention, but in its actual, unrefined and simple existence.

Blues music thus originates as a non-verbal language, as a necessity to express feelings of pain and grief, and in this way as a tool of (passive) resistance. It became an instrument of cultural affirmation among African- Americans, and more importantly, specifically made for African-Americans (Salaam 1995).

Blues artists – songwriters and performers – often dealt with the leading idea of mortality in an ambivalent way. Emotional trauma forcibly confronts one with the vulnerability of human existence which is dominated by suffering, death, loss and unpredictability. Conflicting emotions about mortality are conveyed through the lyrics of a song by an unknown writer:

> *I'm goin' to lay my head on some*
> *Lonesome railroad track*
> *I'm goin' to lay my head on some*
> *Lonesome railroad track*
> *And when the train come along, I'll snatch my damn head back.*

This song expresses, both tragically and ironically, the absurdity in dealing with mortality: Life is depicted as too painful to be dealt with, but too valuable for it to end at the same time.

Through the lyrics, the Blues conveys the collective experience of emotional trauma. One, perhaps the most important of these musical elements is the use of "tension and release". Melodically, this is done through "pitch-bending". "Pitch-bending" gives rise to tension as it creates ambiguity between minor and major keys. Blues singers and musicians sing or play sliding up and down around the pitch of a

key, therefore somehow being "out of tune" and then resolve the tension created by reaching up or down to the "target" note in the "correct" key. "Pitch-bending" creates ambiguity as the resulting melody can neither be assigned to a major nor a minor key. Typically, melodies in a minor key are associated with grief and pain, while tunes in a major key convey joy and happiness. As Blues music ambiguously slides between keys, it perfectly conveys the tragic irony of human existence (Stolorow and Stolorow 2011).

The traumatic and absurd dimensions of human existence are also captured by rhythm. Blues is always carried by a distinctive groove, a sort of "rhythmic looseness" that is created as the band keeps a steady beat, while the lead singer or musician allows himself or herself to be "out of time", in a way playing with the beat and creating tension which is then released as he or she returns to following the beat held by the band. Just like the ambiguity created between minor and major keys, this rhythmic component conveys a feeling of tragic irony which is parallel to that of human existence. (Stolorow and Stolorow 2011)

The Signifying Trickster. Just like in African tales, the characters of animal tricksters became the protagonists in African American narratives, the most prominent of these was the Signifying Monkey. Animal tricksters became heroes in African American culture because through their wit they could overcome richer, stronger and more powerful enemies (Floyd 1995), as Barlow (1989) stated, "by cunningly inverting the status quo of normal power relations" (p. 22). Tricksters were a "sneak attack on the values of the dominant white culture" as they lessened their power by outsmarting and making fun of it. Esu, the God of tricksters, also found a place in African American culture, as the guardian of crossroads, or sometimes as the Devil, who was to be found at crossroads trading souls (Floyd 1995).

Animal trickster tales found their place in secular music of the South and soon became part of African American folk tradition; these songs were written and performed by "songsters" for entertainment and satire (Floyd 1995).

One very prominent figure in early Blues songs' lyrics is that of the trickster, who is elevated and almost portrayed as a folk hero. In African American folk tradition the trickster is a character who employs humor and various deceiving

techniques to escape societal norms and to derive personal gain. The trickster is a rebel, an outsider who does not fit into any social role or pattern. He thus embodies a contrast to the oppressed and restricted life of the slave (Smith 2005).

It is precisely in the context of slavery that the figure of the trickster has its roots. The myth of the anti-hero who could escape norms of society through wit offers an alternative, a way of coping with the brutal submission and impossibility to determine one's identity that the slaves were forced to deal with daily (Smith 2005). The narrative of the trickster embodies a duplicity: In a system that involved living in extremely submissive power-based relations, the trickster embodied not only a part of African Americans' cultural identity, but also the necessity to deal with contradictory depictions of reality. The trickster represented the acceptance of the dehumanized character attributed to slaves, while at the same time a resistance to it, through escaping societal norms and finding a way to express one's identity on another level (Smith 1997).

During the times of slavery, the character of the trickster, usually present as some sort of animal during ring games and storytelling, had assumed a more benign personality that its African alter ego, being more malicious, annoying and even helpful rather than mean, aggressive and destructive (Abrahams 1983). The trickster figure was now solely relying on his wit when his opponents threatened or oppressed him. Through the process of translocation of slaves from Africa to America, the divinity of Esu was incarnated as the Devil, who, according to Afro-American myths from the late nineteenth century, appeared at crossroads and gave black musicians exceptional artistic and performative skills and was therefore the first source of inspiration in Blues music (Floyd 1995). By the turn of the century, the violin and the banjo were superseded by the guitar as the first instrument for Blues musicians. The guitar became a protagonist of the Blues legend, which was set at a crossroads and involved the figure of the Devil meeting musicians and exchanging their souls for musical talent (Floyd 1995). However, the importance lies not with Esu as the Devil; it lies with the trickster as the inspiration, the guardian of art, the "ultimate master of potentiality" who had "the force to make all things happen and multiply" (Thompson 1983, 19, 18). The power of Esu, and the reason why he became so important in Afro-American culture, is that, in spite of the oppression, he was able to give bluesman

inspiration: He gave them a voice through music.

The Blues is originally nothing else than a solo variation of the ring ritual, not only in its powers, but also in its values; it is an affirmation, a return to the origins, a catharsis. In fact, for blacks, the birth of the Blues through the divinity of Esu was a reminder of their cultural and spiritual heritage, a gift that permitted spiritual survival into the twentieth century (Floyd 1995).

As African American music evolved into the Blues, the figure of the trickster was adopted as an alter-ego of the Blues musician. Through an authorial voice, the Blues musician self-identifies her- / himself with the trickster, admitting to crimes, violence, sexually promiscuous behavior and alcohol abuse. The trickster, with his destructive behavior and resistance to societal norms and codes of moral conduct, becomes the Blues musician (Smith 2005).

An example of the trickster figure is Railroad Bill ("Railroad Bill ought to be killed/Never worked and never will") whose life is portrayed in many folk tales and ballads and lastly in the Blues in Will Bennett's 1930's song "Railroad Bill" (Smith 2005).

The figure of "Railroad Bill" is often used as it combines two important leitmotifs of Blues lyrics, that of the trickster and that of the railroad. The railroad is the vehicle that provides escape to the trickster figure. But most importantly, railroads are crucial as they enable migration and the crossing of borders, which are two themes in African - American culture. Crossing borders symbolizes the post- Civil war dilemma of self-determination, of choosing one's path in a newly obtained freedom after a history of slavery (Smith 2005); the freedom of movement, embodied in the act of migrating and traveling, is a newly acquired tool of self-expression.

In summary, the particular traits of Blues music can be seen in its rhythm and notes, its themes and messages, and its social features of performing. Rhythms provide a deep drive and dynamics, with notes expressing emotional states. The themes and messages of the Blues cover the entire range of human sufferings and aspirations, always expressed in authentic ways. For what concerns the art of performing, interaction among performers and with the audience is a key feature.

4. Further Evolution of Blues Music

<u>World War II, the Postwar Period and Rhythm and Blues.</u> In general, the history of popular music of the 20th century in the United States can be described as a repeating exchange between innovation by blacks and popularization by whites; the creativity of black artists alone was not enough to reach the peak of commercial and economic success as they were systematically excluded from positions of power in the music industry. This, in addition to an audience that was still deeply influenced by racism, created a separate and unbalanced market structure in which black music had difficulties in "crossing over" into mass market without compromises. Nonetheless, black music continued to evolve and innovate, its influence being disproportionate considering the hostile political and economic climate (Chapple, Garofalo 1977).

Until 1939 in fact, most black artists were systematically denied the right to enter the American Society of Authors, Composers, and Publishers (ASCAP) an organization that provided royalty payments for for copyrighted music that was performed by others. Black musicians could not access the benefits of copyright protection that gave life to the Rhythm and Blues (Garofalo 2002, p. 113).

While Jazz can be seen as a "crossover" genre that managed to make elements of African-American musical culture accessible to white mainstream culture, the musicians who started the Rhythm and Blues in the 1940's were much more similar to their Blues origins, employing sounds close to the ones of the old big bands, and generally representing what was popular within the black community (Garofalo 2002, p. 114).

From the outbreak of World War II, the black music scene was divided between two different evolutions, one of major interaction with white musicians as its increasing popularity had enabled black music to enter mainstream culture, while the other was characterized by the creation of a black underground, a reaction to blacks' increasing cultural, and mainly musical integration (Eyerman, Jamison 1998). Black music and the ghetto culture became a racially distinct matter, something that was sought after as truly "black" although, at the same time, it was also imposed by a society that was still refusing to integrate them. Some black musicians, after a period

of being popular among whites, went back to the support of their community, and had their "authenticity" judged by it (Eyerman, Jamison 1998).

Musicians in the ghettos gathered in clubs where bebop and Rhythm and Blues evolved as distinct music styles; Parallel to the increasing distinction among black music types, also the black public sphere was becoming more differentiated while also socially fragmented. These different developments of inclusion and exclusion led to subdivisions in music, including the evolution of Jazz and Rhythm-and-Blues as a new genre, as well as within communities and cities (Eyerman, Jamison 1998). Due to the increasing popularity and the increasing mass-mediation of Blues music, expectations of young blacks, especially musicians, rose. The music of the new black southerner was the Blues in a more commercial form, the Rhythm and Blues, which, in addition to the electrified Blues guitar, incorporated piano, saxophone, a drum-beat and a heavy bass line (Eyerman, Jamison 1998). During World War II, regional music spread significantly and reached audiences nationally, due to northern soldiers living in Southern military bases, as well as one million Southern blacks moving north in order to find a job. The new Southern African-American immigrants had gained enough money to become a distinct consumer group and, as a response, some radio stations began to introduce black-oriented programs (George 2003).

However, by the end of the 1940's, the rise of the popularity of solo artists and the lack of resources to finance expensive big bands in a fragile post-war economy led to a decline of big bands; it was the black artists which suffered more from this change and by 1950, there was not a single black artist on year-end charts of pop music. As major labels were ignoring black music, African-American culture was evolving and black artists were reconnecting to the sound of the Blues with a new music style of the working-class blacks, the Rhythm and Blues (Garofalo 2002, p. 116).

In addition, some technological advances enabled Rhythm and Blues to enter mainstream market and then finally to dominate it in the form of Rock and Roll. For one, the magnetic tape did not only provide for better editing and sound, but it made recording accessible to anyone. Also, the invention of high fidelity made the expansion of new music faster and cheaper. These two innovations, as well as the expansion of record programming of local radios, led to the emergence of independent

labels and the increasing popularity of Rhythm and Blues. This new genre was popular among whites as much as among blacks; in fact, in 1952, a retail outlet of black music, the Dolphin's Hollywood Record Shop, reported having an audience of forty percent whites (Garofalo 2002, p. 118-120).

The emergence of Rock and Roll. The Rhythm and Blues, which entered the national musical market through the radio, brought influences of Jazz, Gospel and Blues and those of country music which eventually developed into Rock and Roll. When Rock and roll became a distinctive style, the horns were let go, while the boogie structure of the rhythmic base became even more predominant. Most of the artists who influenced the formation of Rock and Roll were black, including Muddy Waters, who initiated the "electrification" of Blues, the Jazz and Gospel fusions of Ray Charles, and vocalists like Sam Cooke, who made the traditions of Gospel more secular and pop-oriented (Garofalo 2002, p. 122).

A practice that may have seemed to facilitate the process of crossing over but in reality limited it were the very popular "covers" of famous rand Blues songs. A cover version is "a copy of an original recording performed by another artist in a style thought to be more appropriate for the mainstream market" (Garofalo 2002, p.124). Typically, white artists who were signed by major labels covered black artists; dozens of tunes were covered as early Rock and Roll began spreading. However, most of the covers had lost the initial intention and the emotional "rawness" of the original songs. The fact that small companies often sold records to big labels which would then produce cover versions was very much suffered by the original performers, who only gained from the sales of their own records; most performers of the original songs were black (Garofalo 2002, p. 116).

By the mid 1950s, this process of black creativity and white popularization, or appropriation, was somehow countered as Rhythm and Blues evolved into Rock and Roll, which would then become the dominant musical style. Rhythm and Blues overcame the obstacle of suppression of black music by the market and was accepted into mainstream culture: The popular market saw a dramatic increase in black artists. Billboard Magazine even wrote in a headline: "1955 - The Year R&B Took over Pop Field."

Chuck Berry, whose records had been turned down by two major labels, would perhaps have been known as the king of Rock and Roll had it not been for the racist dynamics that dominated the music industry. His simpler, more "teeny" music made black music, especially Rhythm and Blues sounds more relatable to a young, white audience, without selling away his authenticity as a black artist (George 2003).Consequently, many white Rock and Roll artists began dominating the charts, such as Elvis Presley, Gene Vincent, Jerry Lee Lewis and Johnny Cash, all of which mixed elements of Rhythm and Blues into the country and western tradition upheld by whites (Garofalo 2002, p. 130).

Musically, the most important influence of black music in Rock and Roll was its polyrhythmic base, which was absent in white country derivatives. Also, elements typical of the African-American musical tradition, such as the "blue notes" and a Rock and Roll variation of the call-and-response pattern, were present in this new, revolutionary music (Garofalo 2002, p. 131).

It was the crossover of European folk music traditions and black music that paved the way for such a style to develop. However, it is not possible to distinguish the success of what is seen as a "white" musical style, which was in reality initiated by black artists, from the racist pattern of popularization, appropriation and cultural domination of white society. This happened with Jazz, Swing and Rock and Roll alike (Garofalo 2002, p. 135-136).

From the Civil Rights Movement to Rap. During the Civil Rights movement, Gospel music was the main musical inspiration, as it was the segregated church that provided the basis for social networks to form and for solidarity to be reproduced; freedom songs and spirituals mobilized the Civil Rights movement by bringing oral and religious traditions of the black community into the discourse and the formation of a new identity (Eyerman, Jamison 1998). With the development of the movement, music gained importance, continuing to be a source of identification and communication as boycotts started and patience started to vanish. The music of the Civil Rights movement was the glue between the various classes of blacks, as well as with white supporters and between rural and urban Afro-Americans; it was both serious and playful as it contained the characteristics of black humor and the tradition

of signifying (Eyerman, Jamison 1998). The music of the Civil Rights movement was central to the formation of a collective identity that could gather and react not much because it was commercial or innovative, but rather because, through its simple melodies and evocative power, it was able to recall the past; the songs dealt with broad themes such as integration, discrimination and brotherhood, as well as visions of societies in which different cultures could coexist and be honored, without being political or ideological, reflecting the inclusiveness of the movement itself, the same hopeful, utopian vision that Martin Luther King conveyed in his iconic speech, "I Have a Dream" (Eyerman, Jamison 1998).

The need for blacks to free themselves from the dominant white "dictatorship of definition, interpretation, and consciousness (Van Deburg, 1992) was first put into the slogan of "Black Power" by Stokely Charmichael, who shouted these words in 1966 during a protest in Greenwood, Mississippi. The generational change and the Black Power movement gave rise to a more aggressive, tougher symbolism and musical style, from the Black Panthers, who were closely linked to ghettos and employed a secular, more urban language, to the harder music of James Brown. The Black Power movement, through music and sometimes even violent forms of exemplary action and resistance, had the aim of giving more value to the African-American experience: Black Americans had to be proud of their origins, their bodies, their appearance, and not feel the need to imitate whites. With the emergence of the Black Power movement, the old tensions between segregation and integration reappeared, with African Americans increasingly searching for authenticity through street talk and urban life. Of course, music was fundamental in this process of identity formation. Soul music and consequently, Hip Hop and Rap have developed exactly as differentiated expressions of Afro-American consciousness (Eyerman, Jamison 1998).

Rap music developed from the late 1970s onwards in the context of the streets. Essentially, it is folk poetry that has been electrified, thus representing a great technological innovation. Rap emerged in an urban background and is an affirmation of young blacks of their pride and dignity, and expression of Afro-Americans' continuing struggle for equality put into music. It contains a wide range of themes and subtexts, as well as being open and prone to improvisation, as, rather than singing, it is more of a spoken-out, melodic stream of consciousness accompanied by rhythm.

These characteristics have enabled Rap music to reach a wide range of markets; in fact, as Rap has an impressive commercial success, the old split between highbrow and lowbrow, between integration and authenticity, reappeared (Eyerman, Jamison 1998). Nonetheless, Rap music keeps the message of the Blues alive by offering a contemporary narrative of a collective memory and by inspiring new feelings of opposition.

5. Social Implications of Blues Music

Blues music and identity. Just by existing and expressing its true self, and without consciously striving for it, Blues music represented a challenge to the tyranny of dominant culture. The society in which it came to life was based on the notion of supremacy of white ideals, and was upheld by the judgment that these ideals were good and desirable. The Eurocentric culture was dominant in every single social construct, in every symbol and in every icon. Blues music, as the voice of an oppressed and exploited people, created an antithesis to dominant social structures: it did so in an unexpected way, by breaking the musical status quo (Salaam 1995). Blues music did not intend to be political, nor did it aim at deconstructing a dominant system; rather its true expressional power lies in its mere existence.

African American music developed from the urge of the slaves to express their culture, their heritage, but most importantly their emotions. Being denied the opportunity to learn to read or write, and being deprived of virtually any means of expression, as even drums and other instruments were banned from plantations out of fear that they could serve for communicating between slave assemblies, chants such as field hollers and work songs represented the slaves' only channel of creative expression.

The Blues thus emerged as what can be described as a creative explosion that collected all the impulses that would have resulted in different forms of art. It is precisely this creative impulse, born in an extremely oppressive context that gives the Blues its intensity and its poetic efficacy (Rosemont 1973).

The Blues developed as a response to African Americans' deeply traumatizing experience of slavery and the dehumanization that persisted after its end. The origins of this distinctively African American music lie in the slaves' attempt of dealing with an unescapable situation of suffering. But independently of whether people can relate to the history that lies beneath this expression, the Blues seems to be universally appealing: There is something about the Blues which allows people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds to get confronted with the most deeply traumatic aspects of human existence. (Stolorow and Stolorow 2011).

In his book "Trauma and Human Existence" Robert Stolorow (2007) wrote that pain can become intolerable if there is no "relational home", as in a "context of human understanding" which allows emotions to be held and shared collectively. The aspect of sharing one's pain through musical expression becomes crucial as it gradually makes trauma more bearable.

The elaboration of pain in the Blues starts with a process of putting the bodily, visceral dimension of emotions into language. Unifying language and emotion creates a dialogue within the "context of human understanding" which allows for traumatic experiences to be given a name and thus endured, if not accepted. The Blues becomes an experience that unifies the artist and the audience in a "visceral-linguistic conversation" in which universally painful emotional states are held and shared as a collective. (Stolorow and Stolorow 2011).

Black music, and African-American culture more generally, was influenced by the modernist discourse, which called for a rejection of many traditions, patterns and values of the past, including the African spirituality and culture of the myth, in favor of embracing rationalism and the consumption of various forms of entertainment and art (Floyd 1995). This shift towards demystification, together with a gradual urbanization of blacks, marked the beginning of a process of social differentiation, since only few African Americans could meet the "white" criteria for material, artistic, and social success; consequently, a social cleavage was created and the frustration and alienation arising from it was expressed and coped with the discourse of the Blues (Floyd 1995).

After 1900, a new black elite consisting of professionals arose. Although most African Americans were unskilled workers, an emerging new middle class tried to

differentiate itself from the working class as it was embarrassed by its behaviors and values, which were so different from white culture, which they were striving to embrace (Floyd 1995).

In this way, the emancipation and Afro-American modernism marked a change from African values of community and mythology to a strongly individualistic society in which the ideal of community was no longer determining; only few African Americans were able to find their place and determine their own future in society and the rest of the black population was left alienated by this detachment from the original culture and by segregation from white culture. These cultural changes, together with the social differentiation and the disappearance of African spiritual customs left many African Americans without a sense of belonging and feeling rootless in a hostile environment (Floyd 1995). The period from 1917 to 1919, in which the Great Migration peaked, sparked white resentment towards the many black workers migrating from the South to the North. In addition, the fact that black men participating in World War 1 had not changed their social status or white's willingness to accept blacks into their society was a source of disappointment and disillusion.

The cynical attitude of African Americans therefore intensified and was met with even more mistrust by the white population. Blacks were deeply resentful towards white society which refused to grant them the rights they had given them on paper and disillusioned by the perpetuated violence, segregation and passive resistance they were subject to (Floyd 1995). Blacks' cynical attitude was backed with other strategies of self-defense, such as the act of signifying, symbolized by the character of the Signifying Monkey (Floyd 1995), present in many legends and Blues songs.

For blacks living in the cities, the tale of the Signifying Monkey, that managed to fool the lion and flee from him by tricking him, soon became a symbol, a means to cope with white society's oppression and, more generally, with their alienating social conditions, through trickery. This re-interpreted version of the trickster became a language (Gates 1988) to help in dealing with continuing exploitation, as well as representing black people's battle for equality dignity through wit, using the same instruments as the tricksters of the past (Floyd 1995).

According to Murray (1973), musical signifying has a "telling effect", which

"asserts, alleges, quests, requests, and implies... mocks, groans, concurs, and signifies misgivings and suspicions" (p. 86), and it does so by including the various musical techniques of call and response, such as cries, whoops, hollers, cross-rhythms, vocal imitations and parlando (Floyd 1995). Furthermore, signifying was a way of criticizing society through satire, irony, manipulation and imitation through musical dialogue, or alternatively through the critical evaluation of a new form of music (Floyd 1995).

Music and Social Movements. Social movements are crucial in reconstituting culture. In this process, cultural actions reshape collective identities and behaviors, norms and values are reflected and debated. These movements combine and therefore reconstitute both culture and politics by broadening the space for cultural expression. This of course includes music as an expression of a mobilization and political action. (Eyerman and Jamison 1998).

Social movements have a profound impact on cultural transformations, especially musical changes. First and foremost, they challenge dominant views and judgements, not only through the action of making them conscious and problematizing them, but also by creating new collective practices and aesthetic standards. At the same time, social movements use artistic expression, particularly music, as a means of communication with the larger society; in so doing, entertainment becomes politicized. Social movements therefore create a good ground for artistic renewal and the creation of social interactions and collective identities (Eyerman and Jamison 1998). Referring to African-American movements, Houston Baker uses the term "sounding": social movements have given life to new musical traditions, while at the same time music has given social movements the opportunity to communicate their meanings and creating coherence (Baker 1987).

Eyerman and Jamison (1991) have developed a cognitive approach in relation to social movements and culture. The cognitive approach focuses on social movements as providing new spaces for the creation of knowledge and therefore new collective identities. While being tied to specific times and places, and being rooted in specific historical and cultural contexts, social movements are able to momentarily transcend these contexts and create new ones, even though they are still under their

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influence. Through these newly created spaces, new "cognitive identities", new visions and projects are articulated (Eyerman and Jamison 1998). Cognitive praxis therefore refers to the "active creation of knowledge or consciousness in encountering the world" (Eyerman and Jamison 1998), a process of individual and collective identity formation. Music plays a crucial role in this process of cognitive praxis in social movements. It becomes knowledge and action, and, as part of the representation of social movements, plays a great role in influencing society. As social movements transcend its functional and commercial use, music becomes cognitive praxis as in a symbol of what the movement stands for, an opposition to dominating ideas and values, an "exemplary action" (Eyerman and Jamison 1998).

In many instances, music has been fundamental in forming and connecting the values and lifestyles that constitute the tradition of rebellion (Eyerman and Jamison 1998). As stated by Cantwell (1992) tradition is the foundation, a kind of basic grammar upon which popular music holds. Musicians collect the musical procedures around them, and offer their own reinterpretations and variations of the inputs of traditions. At the same time, musical innovation consists in breaking these traditions, in adapting them to new contexts and breaking established rules (Eyerman and Jamison 1998).

Traditional identities create a space in which people can be part of what Anderson (1991) has called an "imagined community". In the case of music, this is expressed through performances, as rituals and concerts, which almost physically shape traditions. Musical traditions are a part of cultural creativity and innovation and the identification with such is crucial in providing meaning to the "imagined community". We can see how traditions are both real and imagined, how they are formed by being imagined by the community and yet end up being a constitutive part the community because they are conceived as real and authentic (Eyerman and Jamison 1998).

Rituals can be described as "an action which dramatizes and re-enacts the shared mythology of a social group" (Small 1987, p. 75); they create a connection which is emotional and rational at the same time and are therefore critical to the "construction of meaning" (Eyerman and Jamison 1998). In his study, Christopher Small (1987) did a research on how American slaves created and enacted rituals and

were able to preserve their dignity through them: These rituals, in which musical expression was the focal point, affirmed a collective identity by creating a feeling of community. "It was musicking and dancing, those twin rituals of affirmation, of exploration and celebration of relationships, with their unique power to weld together into a higher unity the contradictory experiences of pain, hope, and despair" (Small 1987, p. 87). Turner (1969) used the term "liminality" referring to moments of transition from one order to the other, in which agents "lose themselves" through rituals. The social movement opens up a new space in which new ideals are expressed, thus creating new practices and rituals; rather than an invention, it is a selection and re-elaboration of cultural inputs. Through this, traditions acquire new meanings (Eyerman and Jamison 1998).

Social movements initiate transformations by opening up spaces in which traditions can be deconstructed and recombined and then spreading into greater society. In this sense, the process of changing traditions in social movements can be seen as both a "pre-political" as well as an "overtly political activity" (Eyerman and Jamison 1998, p. 42). They are pre-political as they forge everyday experiences and provide resources for the construction of reality and of latent social solidarity and identification. As stated by Edelman, "contrary to the usual assumption – which sees art as ancillary to the social scene, divorced from it, or, at best, reflective of it – art should be recognized as a major and integral part of the transaction that engenders political behavior" (1995, p. 2).

Music, especially African American music, contains many different traditions and therefore evokes symbols that are open rather than determined. As a bearer of images, the music of social movements can be compared to ideology, which also carries symbols that trigger emotions and give a framework for explaining reality (Eyerman 1981). Nonetheless, the difference between music and ideology is that while both provoke action by representing images and symbols, the interpretation of reality given by an ideology is already set and defined and more commanding of what one should think and do, music is more ambiguous in its interpretation, more utopian as it opens up for new experiences and possibilities by suggesting interpretations without imposing them (Eyerman and Jamison 1998).

Ever since W. E. B. DuBois wrote about black folk tradition in the beginning

of the 20th century, musical expression and African American social movements have been closely linked. Analyzing slave songs, DuBois found that they were not simply songs as in they expressed a common past and heritage, an experience and culture common to all African Americans. As an expression of collective memory, they were a means of telling history and connecting African Americans to their past, thus being a central component in the creation of a tradition (Eyerman and Jamison 1998).

The creation of this tradition had a strongly political meaning and, as part of African American cultural baggage, was crucial in creating a nationalism which turned out to be the primary source of African American social movements (Eyerman and Jamison 1998). In 1905, two years after publishing his influential book "The Souls of Black Folk", DuBois, together with other African American intellectuals, joined the Niagara Movement and in 1909 he amongst others founded the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). Before the First World War, music was more of a background to openly political activities; after, a new generation of urban blacks, the New Negros, started challenging black musical traditions and what was commonly perceived as the proper, authentic African American music, defending new forms of secular music, including Blues (Eyerman and Jamison 1998).

The Blues started developing at the end of the nineteenth century, when blacks, especially in the South, were still confronted with daily violence and oppression, and laws were aimed at creating segregation and separation between blacks and whites, including different rules and institutions. It was in this context that DuBois developed the concept of "double consciousness": African Americans were free on paper, but oppressed by a social order, and the slave songs of the past were no longer apt to express this ambiguous social position. New forms of musical expression, especially the country Blues in the South, helped blacks in coming to terms with their social reality and this new, double identity. One the one hand, there was a celebration of pleasure and sexual desire as an outlet in an otherwise extremely repressive situation. On the other hand, there was the ambition to create a musical form for middle-class African Americans that connected European and African elements (Eyerman and Jamison 1998).

As it spread from the Mississippi Delta up to St. Louis, Kansas City and then

traveled to Chicago and New York, the Blues gained in popularity because it was able to grasp to essence of contemporary African American consciousness. In the 1920s and 1930s, influential musicians as well as intellectual helped define African American musical tradition and gave a shape to their historical experience. These activities gave life to the so-called Renaissance which took mainly place in New York and Chicago. The Renaissance can be interpreted as a kind of social movement which overcame the diversity of different forms of black artistic expression and helped to create a common African American aesthetic (Eyerman and Jamison 1998).

Although this social movement stems directly from musical expression, it has also helped new forms of musical experimentation by creating spaces in which it could thrive. The Negro Renaissance provided African Americans with their own public sphere, allowing blacks their own context for developing new, innovative material. (Eyerman and Jamison 1998). At the same time, the social movement gave music its own reading and political significance. It is therefore not surprising that black music seems to have been especially inventive in the 1920's and 1930's; more than that, it was loaded with a new kind of social and political responsibility. This mutual influence between music and the public sphere gave music not only a vast audience, but also a greater cultural relevance.

This connection between culture and politics is what Eyerman and Jamison call a "cognitive process of remembering" (Eyerman and Jamison 1998, p. 78). This cognitive praxis created unity between actors by bringing back up already existing forms of mobilization, mostly oral traditions, which carried African Americans' claim for acceptance and recognition. Music, as a truth-bearer, as a guide to raising consciousness and as an empowerment became an example of social solidarity (Eyerman and Jamison 1998).

After the American Civil War, as the defeated Southern States faced a political and economic collapse, the acquired freedom of blacks led to a new, unskilled workforce. It was in this context that allowed old African traditions and slavery experiences to be re elaborated through music (Lomax 1993). For unskilled workers, who found their "collective voice" through the Blues, music was a source of communication and a way to make their conditions livable by defining a collective identity (Eyerman and Jamison 1998).

Blues music was born from the necessity of mostly illiterate black people to express their life experience. Growing out of field hollers and work songs and dances that had African roots, for which it distinguished itself from white country music, which also had rural origins, the Blues reflected the experience of black migrant workers spread across Southern and Eastern U.S.A. (Eyerman and Jamison 1998). For these scattered workers, Blues music represented a community, an informal "network" they could feel part of as they changed location (Cruz 1986), or, as Anderson called it, an "imagined community" (1991). In fact, the Blues was played at the margins of cities, in clubs visited by newly translocated migrant workers and often avoided by wealthier and more educated people (Eyerman and Jamison 1998).

The first transcriptions of Blues music were written down by the musician W. C. Handy at the beginning of the 20th century, with the music of "Memphis Blues" (1912) counting as the first documented Blues song. According to LeRoy Jones (1963) it was Handy who to some extent "invented" the Blues by making it accessible to a wider audience and by showing that this new genre could be appealing and commercialized. W.C. Handy was a black man who came across the Blues growing up in Mississippi and Alabama (Eyerman and Jamison 1998). He said: "Each one of my Blues is based on some old Negro song of the South... Something that sticks in my mind, that I hum to myself when I'm not thinking about it. Some old song that is part of the memories of my childhood and of my race. I can tell you the exact song I used as a basis for any one of my Blues" (quoted in Morgan and Barlow 1992, p. 117).

Handy's songs sparked the Blues enthusiasm in New York in the 1920's and other cities, although when Handy came to New York in 1918, earlier experimental forms of Blues were already popular among circles of southern immigrant workers, with female singers and vaudeville shows being the main elements of entertainment (Floyd 1995). Before the diffusion of the radio, Handy's music sheets and texts were already allowing the Blues to spread across the United States and to become popular and commercialized.

It is not surprising, considering the environments where the Blues grew, that most of Blues music addressed the issues of the social classes whose experience it gave a voice to: migration, work or lack thereof, relationships, drugs and alcohol (Oliver 1960). Other songs also dealt with the nascent African-American

stratification. An example can be found in these lyrics documented by Lomax in 1917:

> *Niggers getting' mo' like white fo'ks,*
> *Mo' like white fo'ks eve'y day.*
> *Niggers learnin' Greek an' Latin,*
> *Niggers wearin' silk an' satin,*
> *Niggers getting' mo' like white fo'ks eve'y day*. (quoted in Levine 1977, p. 245).

By reflecting an array of different, yet relatable, common experiences, the Blues was the central part of a process of identification which is different than that which DuBois described analyzing sorrow songs: it was not a reflection, but more an immediate necessity of expression (Eyerman/Jamison 1998). The Blues also created a contrast, a differentiation from the new conformist, socially aspiring black middle class who did not want to be associated with this "lowbrow" musical genre. In the song cited above, the term "nigger" expresses exactly this contrast as it carries both a negative and a positive connotation: On the one hand, the assimilation of a racist, white dominated judgement, and on the other hand, the employment of those terms from which this new, ambitious class of blacks wanted to separate itself (Eyerman and Jamison 1998).

In fact, higher class, religious African American who wanted to distinguish themselves from the working class judged Blues music as "nigger music", giving it that same negative connotation (Eyerman/Jameson 1998). Willie Smith, a great Blues musician and piano player, talked about the times when "the average Negro family did not allow the Blues, or raggedy music to be played in their homes" (quoted in Lewis 1994, p. 59). However, Lewis (1994) writes that the very same people who did not allow Blues music to be played in their homes were the ones who frequented clubs and places where Blues was played at nighttime. The desire to separate oneself from this world was linked to strategies of assimilation and integration (Eyerman and Jamison 1998). This rose a sort of duplicity: The aspiration to "emancipate" oneself from the low-class, uneducated image of the "nigger", but also the fascination for an expression that reflected one's own cultural heritage and experiences. Blues music,

with its primitive, emotional quality, both attracted and repelled the African American middle class. It was therefore not only subject to discrimination by whites, but also within blacks.

DuBois stated: "I do not doubt that the ultimate art coming from black folk is going to be just as beautiful, and beautiful in largely the same ways, as the art that comes from white folk... but the point today is that until the art of black folk compels recognition they will not be rated as human (DuBois 1986 p. 1002).

Referring to Locke, J. A. Rogers stated that slave songs, Blues and Jazz alike were rooted in the necessity of evading oppression and domination. It was exactly this feeling that came to be an essential part of the African American experience and that helped define a "black" culture. With Jazz in particular, musicians tried to leave Blues behind and be happy without any reminder of previous sorrows. This is why Jazz had such an appeal to modern industrial and mainstream society. By Locke, it was described as a "revolt of the emotions against repression". Unlike Blues, Jazz was a joyful departure from convention, authority and boredom. In that sense, Jazz continued the musical traditions of Blues but left behind its ethnical and social boundaries (Rogers in Locke [1925] 1968). Blues music, like all folk traditions, was seen as reflecting of an imagined community of the past, and a significant resource for an elaboration in the future, rather than a valuable artistic experience in itself (Eyerman and Jamison 1998).

From the 1920's, the popularity of the radio and the evolution of recording technologies became crucial in the mass-mediation of music and its role in shaping and reproducing culture. As Blues music became available to a much wider audience, it was subject to a creative process of reworking and recombining with other genres, including Jazz, and other forms of artistic expression such as poetry. Blues thus became accessible as it underwent a process of innovation in which class, race, and geographical distinctions were mixed and re elaborated (Eyerman and Jamison 1998).

Thus, in this time, Blues music received a number of different impulses, social, through the mixing of highbrow and lowbrow culture, but also aesthetic, through the evolution of Jazz and the influence of other forms of art. This enabled black music to enter U.S. mainstream culture. However, the conditions of this assimilation were somehow set by the white hegemony: As the cultural transformation

of the "New Negro" movement in the 1920's shows, black music had to be adapted, "cleaned up" in order to be appealing to mainstream culture . It had to revise its aesthetic standards and limit its social ambitions in order to be accepted (Eyerman/Jamison 1998).

Impact on whites and women. Benzon (1993) observes that African American culture exhibits a pattern of improvisation whereas European culture exhibits a pattern of composition. In addition, Clyne (1977) investigated music for its emotional expressiveness and described basic temporal patterns (rhythms) through which feelings are expressed. Benzon (1993) considers European classical music to reflect a "pervasive rejection of the body" that translates into a musical technique that relegates rhythmic complexity to a secondary role; Benzon even speculates that "relative rhythmic simplicity may well have been a precondition of the harmonic development which has been so important in classical music". Another critical difference is seen in the fact that in classical music, creative responsibility is shared between composers and the performers, whereas in Blues or Jazz, the musician starts with a framework upon which the music is constructed immanently.

Benzon thinks of Western culture as "one of emotional restraint and repression", which is "at the core of the psychodynamics of racism". Similarly, Jordan (1974) argued that Europeans projected an image of emotionality and sensuality into blacks that they were rejecting in themselves. In that sense, European American started to like African-American music because of its expressive characteristics that were lacking in European music, and began to imitate it. Over time, such crossing of African and European cultures created, out of the Blues, new musical styles such as ragtime, traditional and Swing Jazz, Rock and Roll, and Rap. The adoption of music styles by whites allowed them to express emotional aspects of themselves that were not easily expressed by European music. Such music was generally more commercially successful, and therefore created a source of resentment, thus driving more adventurous African Americans to abandon their style and propose new ones.

Among the different music styles that developed out of Blues music and that were emulated by whites, Jazz has reached a level of sophistication similar to

European classical music. Spellman (1970) argues that Jazz, and in particular bebop, helped African American to express themselves with self-assurance. Benzon (1993) maintains that Jazz supported and galvanized the black protest civil rights movement. Similarly, Rock and Roll became a central expressive medium for white anti-war protests, and other forms of social, cultural and political protests and experimentation.

It was out of oppression that one of the most innovative and influential, perhaps the most influential turn in musical history was created. Oppression aims at silencing its victims, to take away their voices; yet the Blues had nothing to do with silence. Its greatest social impact lay within the communication it created between the artist, the music and the audience, the power that was created through this dialogue that transmitted a vast range of emotions (Winsby 2012).

According to Young (1990), there are "five faces" of oppression, five states that make a social group oppressed: violence, exploitation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and marginalization (40). Oppression is here considered as a situation of imbalanced power relations (Young 1990). Slavery is of course the most oppressive condition one can be forced to live in as it fully impersonates all of these states. But oppression did not end with slavery; the Blues is a tangible expression of a means of liberation and catharsis of a group that was still oppressed, though legally free.

Oppression does not only happen across race or class lines. Women to this day are being oppressed in the form of various forms of discrimination, gender norms, objectification and even violence and abuse; it is interesting to notice how the Blues created a platform for women to address their independence, even their sexuality (Winsby 2012) in an unprecedented way and with surprising openness and honesty.

It was the entrance of Blues music into the mainstream that created for women the space to become musicians. Before the turn of the century, chances for women to enter the music scene were almost non-existent, but by 1900, the profession of the musician became a more common choice among women; this change sparked controversy and was seen as a degeneration of the art, female Blues musicians being at first denigrated and laughed about (Winsby 2012). But Blues women quickly gained popularity: Women were among the first Blues artists to record, with Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" becoming the first vocal Blues song recorded by an Afro-American (Winsby 2012). From then, Blues women became popular among blacks

and whites alike. This is peculiar considering the general view of women at the time, and especially since female Blues artists gave women a political and public voice through their strong, independent, even sexually free personas (Winsby 2012).

> *I'm as good as any woman in your town*
> *I ain't no high yella, I'm a deep killer brown*
> *I ain't gonna marry, I ain't gonna settle down*
> *I'm gonna drink good moonshine and run these browns down*
> (Bessie Smith, Young Woman's Blues) (quoted in Winsby, 8)

The lyrics of women's Blues expressed women's independence, often through role reversals with men, and they often address abuse and violence against women. By speaking up they fought against conventions and challenged a social order that was not only dominated by whites but also patriarchal: Female Blues artists showed mainstream culture that women had a message too, that they had emotions that needed to be heard (Winsby 2012).

But the great innovation of Blues women is not just that of independence. It is that of a deeper, visceral liberation. Female Blues artists sang sexually explicit, sometimes almost aggressive lyrics, they depicted men, the ones who objectified them, as objectified beings, therefore stepping out of what was viewed as "appropriate" or "ladylike" female behavior (Winsby 2012). It was through the assertion of their sexuality that they challenged the existing social order and gave not only blacks a voice, but women as well, becoming, without being aware of it, precursors of women's emancipation.

As can be seen, the impact of Blues music went beyond creating an identity and social affirmation of African Americans. It helped to inspire other movements, such as within the white majority, and women. This was not limited to the United States, but also in Europe where the initial acceptance of Blues and Jazz music was easier because the political connotations were less obvious. Today, most popular music played in the Western World contains elements of the Blues, even though the many adaptations often carry very little of the original expression of state and message. Elements of Blues music can be found in today's popular music genres in

Latin American and sub-Saharan Africa, where they can build on common cultural roots. Blues rhythms and notes, self-expression in lyrics and ways of performance have influenced music styles worldwide, and continue to power musical and social development.

5. Summary and Conclusions

This study argues that the Blues was created from the living conditions and emotional experiences of African Americans in the southern United States. Blues music was a new creation, mixing African and European folk styles, originally based on rhythm, guitar and voice.

The social significance of Blues music resides in the revolutionary element of African Americans creating their own aesthetics. Through slavery, African Americans were deeply deprived of material and cultural means. This is why Blues can be played with the simple instruments. It represents the part of the oppressed that the oppressor could not touch, and therefore it is a deep expression of human nature.

African Americans' identity was shaped in an environment whose language, society and political structure were created by the same people that had denied them any right or dignity. Although the aesthetic and moral standards were dictated by dominant white culture, blacks were able to create their own, which diverged from the existing social order. Blues music represented the opposing voice that refused to be silenced by oppression and segregation. But what made the Blues such a powerful and inspiring event was that it was not meant to be political. It was a raw, authentic expression of intimate feelings of pain, love, pleasure and anger. Blues music carried the very essence of humanity. This is where the social significance of the Blues lies: In the recognition that some basic aspects of human experience are universal. The Blues expressed this with unprecedented clarity, honesty and simplicity.

Until now, the Blues has carried the heritage and told the stories of an oppressed, annihilated people. It is through this deeply emotional and unfiltered music that African Americans elaborated their past, and it is also through music that the socio-economic issues that still affect African Americans have gained visibility and significance.

Blues music was the principal medium of communication, an expression of community and solidarity. It was able to continue to live through the musical developments of Jazz, Soul, Rock and Roll, and Rap. Its influence on other music

genres made it possible for Blues to continue to inspire not only African Americans but youth and cultural minorities globally, as well as mainstream popular music in different forms.

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Riassunto: L'importanza sociale della musica Blues

La nascita del Blues può essere considerato il più grande evento musicale nella storia perché definì le emozioni e la creatività in un periodo di rapido sviluppo e di crescita economica. Il Blues trovò radici nella profonda ingiustizia e alimentò sforzi di liberazione e di emancipazione a livello globale. Questa tesi analizza le condizioni socio-economiche e storico-culturali che portarono alla nascita e allo sviluppo della musica Blues, come la schiavitù istituzionalizzata degli afroamericani, la motivazione economica alla schiavitù come una forza lavoro, in particolare per la produzione di cotone, la "Grande Migrazione", la creazione di uno spazio culturale per l'esecuzione di musica Blues e lo sviluppo tecnologico nella registrazione di musica. Essa considera anche le caratteristiche della musica Blues, tra cui ritmi e toni, testi e arte della performance e la sua capacità di costruire una identità e un senso di comunità, oltre alla capacità di queste di ispirare movimenti sociali.

Le condizioni che condussero alla nascita e alla crescita della musica Blues

L'esperienza della schiavitù ebbe conseguenze emotive e sociali devastanti sulla popolazione afroamericana. Tra il 1600 e il 1820, circa 750.000 mila schiavi furono deportati dall'Africa al Nord America e costretti a lavorare nelle piantagioni di tabacco. Nonostante le importazioni di schiavi verso gli Stati Uniti furono vietate nel 1808, il traffico continuò per decenni. La crescente domanda di lavoro dovuta all' espansione di piantagioni di cotone nel "Deep South" portò alla crescita domestica del commercio di schiavi: la popolazione totale degli schiavi nel Sud alla fine raggiunse i 4 milioni prima della liberazione (Behrendt 1999).

In Nord America il concetto di proprietà privata dominava la vita politica. Di conseguenza i proprietari di schiavi gestivano i loro beni (sia gli esseri umani che i terreni) come desideravano. Contrariamente al Sud America, dove l'incrocio interrazziale fu ben presto accettato, in Nord America le unioni interrazziali erano tabù e considerate illegittime. Tuttavia gli incroci, risultati di forme di violenza sessuale da parte dei proprietari verso gli schiavi, era una realtà

quotidiana. I figli di tali unioni, anche se prevalentemente bianchi, venivano considerati neri e quindi schiavi (Ferguson 2011).

La domanda di lavoro degli schiavi negli Stati del Sud fu un prodotto della rivoluzione industriale, che iniziò con la produzione tessile in Inghilterra. Il Sud degli Stati Uniti, con il suo clima favorevole, diventò un importantissimo esportatore di cotone. In seguito alla crescita della domanda di cotone crebbe altresì la domanda di schiavi. Nel 1860 le piantagioni del Sud fornivano il 75% del cotone mondiale.

Nel 1863, il presidente Lincoln emise un ordine esecutivo conosciuto come il "Proclama di Emancipazione", che cambiò lo status giuridico di tutti gli schiavi della Confederazione in "libero". Con la fine della guerra civile, ogni schiavo divenne libero.

Il periodo 1870-1900 vide il passaggio dalla schiavitù alla mezzadria, una produzione agricola su piccola scala. Allo stesso tempo l'espansione delle ferrovie nel sud degli Stati Uniti diedero agli afroamericani più mobili e in cerca di lavoro, opportunità economiche. La mobilità e il diritto di riunione portarono alla creazione dei "juke joints" luoghi dove i neri ascoltavano musica, danzavano e giocavano d'azzardo dopo una dura giornata di lavoro.

Il Blues è una forma musicale originata dagli afroamericani nel sud degli Stati Uniti tra la fine del 19° e l'inizio del 20° secolo. Fonda le sue radici nei canti di lavoro afro-americani e nella musica popolare europeo-americana. L'espansione del Blues fu aiutata dalla "grande migrazione" di 1,3 milioni di afro-americani dalle aree rurali del sud degli Stati Uniti al nord-est urbano, Midwest e West (Lemann 1991). La possibilità di eseguire la musica Blues in club e spazi urbani e i progressi nella tecnologia contribuirono ulteriormente a far crescere la popolarità di questo genere tra gli ascoltatori neri.

A differenza di altri immigrati, agli Afroamericani venne negato ogni diritto di istruzione, compreso l'uso della propria lingua nativa. (Salaam 1995). Nel corso degli anni gli schiavi svilupparono un proprio linguaggio di compromesso detto "pidgin", per comunicare tra di loro. Ne deriva che la musica Blues nacque come un linguaggio non verbale, la necessità di esprimere sentimenti di sofferenza e dolore, dunque come uno strumento di resistenza passiva.

Caratteristiche del Blues

Durante il periodo della schiavitù, la musica e la danza afroamericane mantennero alcune parti della memoria culturale della loro terra di provenienza. Durante i tempi del commercio legale di schiavi dal 1619 al 1808, i rituali e i miti africani si evolvettero in cerimonie in cui bande di afroamericani potessero cantare, ballare e pregare al termine delle funzioni religiose regolari. Molte tradizioni musicali dell' Africa occidentale rimasero intatte: tremoli, ululati, grida, ronzii, grugniti, poliritmi e melismi, nonché l'attaccamento emotivo e spirituale al il rituale (Floyd 1995).

Dal 18° secolo, gli stili e le caratteristiche della musica bianca e di quella nera iniziarono ad influenzarsi a vicenda dando alla luce nuovi stili (Floyd 1995). Durante la seconda metà del 18° secolo la musica religiosa nera si evolvette in inni e canti religiosi. I loro testi tendevano ad essere ripetuti spesso, le voci erano non tese, le melodie erano semplici e rilassate, mentre i ritmi erano su più livelli, conservando modelli culturali e musicali africani. Gli afroamericani usavano chiamarsi, gridare e urlare per fare annunci, cantare e comunicare sul lavoro. A volte usavano le parole ed altre volte solo suoni, gemiti e grida (Floyd 1995). Ben presto gli schiavisti notarono che la pratica del canto donava agli schiavi più forza e resistenza sui campi.

Gli strumenti musicali utilizzati dagli afroamericani avevano in parte origini africane, come il banjo, i tamburi (nelle piantagioni in cui non erano vietati), il flauto, bastoni, ossi e i sonagli (Floyd 1995). Questi metodi e strumenti facevano parte di un tentativo di ricreare lo stile della musica africana in un altro sistema e in diverse circostanze (Floyd 1995).

Molte culture africane hanno in comune alcuni concetti fondamentali espressi nei loro rituali religiosi e spirituali. Gli Africani hanno una nozione di Dio come creatore del cielo e della terra: i due elementi sono uniti e strettamente collegati. Infatti nelle tradizioni africane non vi era alcuna differenza tra materiale, profano, spirituale e sacro. Il più importante degli dei, Esu, veniva rappresentato come un imbroglione, un burlone che spesso causava disturbo senza alcun motivo apparente (Gonzales-Wippler 1985, p.117). Anche i morti facevano parte del mondo spirituale. La connessione tra gli Africani, i loro antenati e Dio si verificava all'interno di

cerimonie guidate da musica (Floyd, 1995).

Il Dio africano venne ben presto sostituito dal Dio cristiano, con Cristo che prese il posto degli spiriti. La cristianità permeò rapidamente la musica afroamericana e gli "spirituals" divennero il genere musicale più popolare tra gli afroamericani.

Il processo di emancipazione portò estreme modifiche alla vita sociale afroamericana e alla musica nera. Questo segnò una svolta verso il secolare (Floyd 1995). Di conseguenza, i "juke joints" emersero, cambiando la danza, le percussioni e il canto (Hazzard-Gordon 1990). Dalla fine del XIX secolo, medley di spirituals e musica popolare, i cosiddetti "Rags" ("stracci") cominciarono ad essere ballati,, con i loro poliritmi, ritmi incrociati e configurazioni multimetriche (Floyd 1995).

La musica Blues, che emerse dai juke joints, rappresentava una sfida alla tirannia della cultura dominante e alla supremazia degli ideali dei bianchi. Diventò la voce dei popoli oppressi e sfruttati in antitesi alle strutture sociali dominanti: lo fece in modo inaspettato, rompendo lo status quo musicale (Salaam 1995).

Attraverso i propri testi, il Blues trasmise l'esperienza collettiva del trauma emotivo degli afroamericani. Il Blues raccontava esperienze di vita quotidiana come l'amore, il dolore, la mortalità, la celebrazione, l'interazione tra individui e conteneva realtà e narrazioni di società africane. Il termine "bluesy" si riferisce ad un atteggiamento di accettazione senza sottomissione. I testi di solito affermavano il desiderio di superare una situazione di oppressione e un desiderio di miglioramento nel futuro. In sostanza si trattava di una fuga spirituale da una data situazione sociale che non poteva essere superata fisicamente.Uno degli elementi musicali con cui veniva espresso questo atteggiamento fu l'uso di "tensione e rilascio". In genere le melodie in chiave minore erano associate al dolore e alla sofferenza mentre quelle in chiave maggiore trasmettevano gioia e felicità. Così la musica Blues scivolava ambiguamente tra le chiavi interpretando perfettamente la tragica ironia dell'esistenza umana (Stolorow e Stolorow 2011). Il Blues si distingueva dal suo "groove", una sorta di "scioltezza ritmica" creato dalla band che suonava mantenendo un ritmo costante.

Proprio come nei racconti africani, i personaggi di animali imbroglioni diventarono i protagonisti dei racconti afroamericani. Il più importante di questi fu il"Signifying Monkey". Animali imbroglioni diventarono eroi nella cultura

afroamericana e personaggi fondamentali delle canzoni Blues perché attraverso il loro ingegno potevano superare i nemici, i più ricchi, i più forti e i più potenti (Floyd 1995).

Un'altra caratteristica fondamentale riguarda l'interazione tra artisti e pubblico: il Blues fu in grado, attraverso il coinvolgimento emotivo del pubblico e la pratica della chiamata-e-risposta, di creare un senso di comunità fra gli afroamericani, oltre a rappresentare un momento di catarsi per un popolo oppresso che non aveva altri strumenti per esprimersi.

Ulteriore evoluzione della Musica Blues

La storia della musica popolare del 20 ° secolo negli Stati Uniti può essere descritta come uno scambio ripetuto tra innovazione da parte dei neri e divulgazione da parte dei dei bianchi; la creatività degli artisti neri da sola non fu sufficiente per raggiungere la vetta del successo commerciale, data a loro esclusione sistematica dalle posizioni di potere nel settore della musica.

Dallo scoppio della seconda guerra mondiale, la scena musicale nera si evolvette in direzioni diverse. Una fu l'importante interazione con musicisti bianchi, che permise alla musica nera, che stava acquisendo popolarità, di entrare nella cultura dominante, mentre l'altra fu caratterizzata dalla creazione di un filone "underground" (Eyerman, Jamison 1998).

I progressi tecnologici, come il nastro magnetico, consentirono al Rhythm and Blues di entrare nel mercato mainstream e poi finalmente di dominare sotto forma di Rock and Roll. L'invenzione dell'alta fedeltà portò all'espansione della nuova musica in maniera rapida e a buon mercato. Da queste due innovazioni, così come dall'espansione della programmazione record di radio locali, nacquero etichette indipendenti e la crescente popolarità del Rhythm and Blues fra i bianchi. Il Rhythm and Blues superò l'ostacolo della soppressione della musica nera dal mercato e fu accettato nella cultura mainstream: Il mercato popolare vide un drammatico aumento di artisti neri

Il Rhythm and Blues, che entrò nel mercato musicale nazionale attraverso la radio, portò con se influenze di Jazz, Gospel e Blues e quelle della musica country che alla fine sfociò nel Rock and Roll. La maggior parte degli artisti che aiutarono la

formazione del Rock and Roll furono neri, tra i quali Muddy Waters, Ray Charles e Sam Cooke (Garofalo 2002).

Una pratica che avrebbe potuto sembrare facilitare il processo di "crossing-over" (incrocio di culture) ma in realtà lo limitò, furono le "covers" di famose canzoni Rhythm and Blues. Una cover è "una copia di una registrazione originale eseguita da un altro artista in uno stile pensato per essere più appropriato per il mercato mainstream" (Garofalo 2002).

A metà degli anni 1950, questo processo di creatività bianca e divulgazione nera, o appropriazione, portò al Rock and Roll, che sarebbe poi diventato lo stile musicale dominante. Musicalmente, l'influenza più importante della musica nera nel Rock and Roll fu la sua base poliritmica, che in precedenza era assente nelle derivate della musica country dei bianchi. Inoltre, elementi tipici della tradizione musicale afroamericana come le "note blu" e una variante del Rock and Roll del modello di chiamata-e-risposta, erano presenti in questa nuova musica rivoluzionaria (Garofalo 2002).

Durante il movimento per i diritti civili, la musica Gospel provvide alle basi per le reti sociali e alla solidarietà; canti di libertà e spirituals, le tradizioni orali e religiose afroamericane, mobilitarono il movimento dei diritti civili (Eyerman, Jamison 1998). Il ricambio generazionale e il movimento Black Power, che nacque dalla necessità di liberarsi dal dominio della cultura bianca, diede luogo ad una ascesa aggressiva, a un simbolismo più duro, a un nuovo stile musicale ed un linguaggio urbano. Il Soul e di conseguenza la musica Hip Hop e Rap si sono sviluppate le espressioni esattamente come espressioni differenziate della coscienza afroamericana (Eyerman, Jamison 1998).

Implicazioni sociali della musica Blues

Semplicemente esistendo ed esprimendo il suo vero sé, la musica Blues rappresentò e rappresenta una sfida alla tirannia della cultura dominante. La società in cui venne a crearsi era basata sulla nozione della supremazia degli ideali bianchi, considerati buoni e desiderabili. La cultura eurocentrica era dominante in ogni singolo costrutto sociale, in ogni simbolo e in ogni icona. La musica Blues, come voce di un

popolo oppresso e sfruttato, si creò in antitesi alle strutture sociali dominanti: lo fece in modo inaspettato, rompendo lo status quo musicale (Salaam 1995). La musica Blues non aveva intenzione di essere politica, né aveva mire a destabilizzare un sistema dominante; piuttosto il suo vero potere di espressione risiede nella sua stessa esistenza.

Il Blues emerse così come quello che può essere descritto un impulso creativo, nato in un contesto estremamente oppressivo, con un' intensità emotiva e l'efficacia poetica uniche(Rosemont 1973). Le origini di questa peculiare musica afroamericana sono da ricercare nel tentativo di affrontare una situazione imprescindibile di sofferenza da parte degli schiavi. Emancipazione e modernità afroamericana segnarono un cambiamento dalla società dei valori africani di comunità ad un modello di una società fortemente individualistica. Questi cambiamenti culturali, insieme alla differenziazione sociale e la scomparsa dei costumi spirituali africani ha lasciò molti afroamericani senza un senso di appartenenza, senza radici, in un ambiente ostile (Floyd 1995).

Per i neri, la storia del "Signifying Monkey" che riuscì ad ingannare il leone a fuggire da lui, divenne ben presto un simbolo, un mezzo con il quale combattere l'oppressione della società bianca e, più in generale, le alienanti condizioni sociali. Questa versione re-interpretata dell'imbroglione divenne una lingua (Gates 1988) per sopportare il continuo sfruttamento oltre a rappresentare la battaglia del popolo nero per l'uguaglianza e la dignità attraverso l'uso del proprio ingegno (Floyd 1995) .

In questo modo la musica Blues ebbe un ruolo cruciale nel processo di prassi cognitiva dei movimenti sociali. In questo processo, le azioni culturali rimodellano le identità e i comportamenti collettivi; norme e valori vengono vagliati e discussi. Questi movimenti combinano e ricostruiscono sia la cultura che la politica ampliando lo spazio per l'espressione culturale nel quale la musica diventa fondamentale nella mobilitazione e l'azione politica. (Eyerman e Jamison 1998).

Durante la Grande Migrazione, il Blues guadagnò in popolarità perché rappresentava l'essenza della coscienza contemporanea afroamericana. Negli anni 1920 e 1930, musicisti influenti così come gli intellettuali contribuirono a definire la tradizione musicale afroamericana dando forma alla loro esperienza storica. Queste attività diedero vita alla cosiddetta "Negro Reinaissance" che trovò sede

principalmente a New York e Chicago. Questo movimento fornì gli afroamericani della propria sfera pubblica e dello spazio per la sperimentazione artistica (Eyerman e Jamison 1998). Allo stesso tempo, il movimento sociale diede alla musica una sua propria lettura e un suo proprio significato politico. Non è quindi sorprendente che la musica nera sembri essere stata particolarmente inventiva nel 1920 e 1930; per di più fu caricata di un nuovo tipo di responsabilità sociale e politica.

Originariamente la maggior parte della musica Blues raccontava I problemi dei neri: il lavoro o la sua mancanza, le relazioni, la droga e l'alcool (Oliver 1960). Riflettendo su una serie di diverse ma significative esperienze comuni, il Blues era la parte centrale di un processo di identificazione. Il Blues creò un contrasto, una differenziazione dala nuova aspirante classe media nera conformista, che non voleva essere associata questo genere musicale.

Secondo Rogers, le canzoni degli schiavi ed il Blues e Jazz allo stesso modo, erano radicate nella necessità di eludere l'oppressione e il dominio. Fu proprio questo sentimento che divenne una parte essenziale dell'esperienza afroamericana e che contribuì a definire una cultura "nera". Con il Jazz in particolare, i musicisti cercarono di lasciare il Blues alle spalle e di essere felici senza alcun ricordo dei dolori precedenti. Questo è il motivo per cui il Jazz fu una tale attrazione per la società industriale e la principale corrente moderna.

Dal 1920, la popolarità della radio e l'evoluzione delle tecnologie di registrazione divennero cruciali nella mediazione di massa della musica e nel suo ruolo nel plasmare e riprodurre cultura. La musica Blues divenne oggetto di un processo creativo di rielaborazione mischiandosi con altri generi, tra cui il Jazz. A questa musica nera fu dato di entrare a far parte della cultura americana mainstream. Tuttavia, le condizioni di questa assimilazione furono in qualche modo stabilite dalla egemonia bianca: come la trasformazione culturale del movimento "New Negro" mostrava negli spettacoli del 1920, nei quali la musica nera doveva essere riadattata e "ripulita" in modo da essere attraente per la cultura dominante.

Una differenza fu elaborata tra la cultura musicale afroamericana, che si basava sull'improvvisazione, e quella classica europea, che si basava sulla composizione. Benzon (1993) considerava la musica classica europea come un "rifiuto pervasivo del corpo" che si traduceva in una tecnica musicale che relegava la

complessità ritmica ad un ruolo secondario.

L'oppressione non avveniva solo secondo razze o classi. Le donne oggi giorno vengono oppresse da varie forme di discriminazione di genere, oggettivazione e persino di violenza e di abusi. Il Blues ha creato una piattaforma per le donne per affrontare la loro indipendenza, anche la loro sessualità (Winsby 2012) con sorprendente apertura e onestà, come non era mai stato fatto prima.

Prima della fine del secolo le probabilità per le donne di entrare nella scena musicale erano quasi inesistenti. Mentre le musiciste Blues, prima denigrate e derise, rapidamente guadagnarono popolarità: le donne furono tra i primi artisti Blues a registrare, con Mamie Smith, che in "Crazy Blues" cantò il primo brano vocale registrato da un afroamericano (Winsby 2012). Le artiste Blues cantavano testi sessualmente espliciti, a volte quasi aggressivi, raffiguranti uomini come oggetti. Fu attraverso l'affermazione della loro sessualità che le artiste Blues sfidarono l'ordine sociale esistente dando non solo una voce ai neri, ma anche alle donne e divennero, senza esserne a conoscenza, precorritrici di emancipazione femminile.

Come si può vedere, l'impatto della musica Blues, è andato oltre la creazione di una identità e di affermazione sociale degli afroamericani. Ha contribuito a ispirare altri movimenti, all'interno della maggioranza bianca e fra le donne. Oggi la musica più popolare suonata nel mondo occidentale contiene elementi del Blues anche se molti adattamenti spesso riportano molto poco dell'espressione o del messaggio originali. I ritmi e le note Blues, i testi, i modi, le performances hanno influenzato stili musicali in tutto il mondo, e continuano a rappresentare una forza di cambiamento sociale.