Women in the Blues pre 1960; a Cry of Agony from an Oppressed Minority, or an Early Triumph in the Fight Against Patriarchy.



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**Contents**

Acknowledgements....................................................................................................................... 2

Abstract......................................................................................................................................... 3

Chapter One, An Introduction to the Blues................................................................................... 4

Chapter Two, Slavery and Emancipation....................................................................................... 5

How slavery shaped the blues............................................................................. 5

How emancipation shaped the blues.................................................................. 8

Chapter Three, Intersectionality and the blues............................................................................. 10

Women in the blues............................................................................................ 10

Women in slavery................................................................................................ 11

Emancipation and women’s blues....................................................................... 12

Sexual Liberation.................................................................................................. 13

Chapter Four, Women in the blues and feminism......................................................................... 14

Chapter Five, Structure ‘Vs’ Agency?............................................................................................. 15

Final thoughts................................................................................................................................ 26

Bibliography................................................................................................................................... 27

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*To the women in the blues, thank you, this is for you!*

**Introduction**

There are myriads of stories, theories, songs, versions and arguments about the blues; my aim is to bring to the reader a new or an enlightened stand point on this sacrosanct genre of music. I endeavour to highlight what the blues is as a sound, what may have influenced the sounds and lyrics historically and sociologically, and then explore the entire subject from a female perspective. I intend to highlight the differences in lived experiences for women and how that in turn shaped their music, creating not only a dichotomy within the ideologies of authenticity, theories and sounds of the blues; but also, how this lived experience and strength in expression gave women a voice, and so began an early triumph against patriarchy from the deep south of the United States. My paper celebrates the women who began singing the blues and how they broke through societal structures that bound them, achieving a form of gender equality and liberation within a specific music form.

**Chapter One**

**An Introduction to the blues**

“*Seen from any point of view, the blues is both a state of mind and a music which gives voice to it*” (Oliver.P, 1997p3).

There are many books and papers written on the subject of the blues; to try and sum up the entire story in this short essay would be impossible as the length of time, culture, and experiences that created the sound is so vast, and so varied, that even the greatest scholars of the blues have needed more than one book to re-tell the tale. Paul Oliver, a blues scholar and historian reveals in his work what he can from investigating the earliest writings and from musicians about the beginnings of this expressive and particular form of music. In Oliver’s ‘The Story Of The Blues’ he opens with a vast introduction to what might be described as the blues, “*the wail of the forsaken, the cry of independence, the passion of the lusty, the anger of the frustrated and the laughter of the fatalist’... played by a lonesome guitarist on his back-door stoop or a barrelhouse piano player in a rocking juke joint”*, these all equate to the expression of the self through the blues vehicle. (Oliver. P,1997p3). In this section of my essay will be a short description of the subject as a *music genre*, for the reader to understand the following chapters.

In Marybeth Hamilton’s ‘Authenticity and the Making of the Blues Tradition’ (2000) she allows the reader to understand that the origins of the blues will always be ‘shrouded in mystery’, nothing was recorded or written of before late 19th century, so no one knows who sang the first blues, where or when. Most likely because this music was a shared tradition passed down, shaped and moulded through generations and across countries, becoming a vehicle of expression and worship by a people that were unable to read or write and repressed from being otherwise.

It is common knowledge within blues history scholars that the first recorded history of the blues was written by W.C.Handy in 1895. Handy describes hearing the weirdest music he had ever heard, the singer repeating the same line 3 times whilst playing guitar with a knife pressing the strings. He described the man as a ragged wanderer with his feet peeping out of his shoes and the look of sadness of the ages on his face (Handy,W.C.1944). From this depiction of the blues we see three major distinctions; 1, the singer is male; 2, they are poor and in anguish; 3, the singer repeated the same line 3 times, this carries a narrative of authenticity throughout the institution of the blues, I will begin to unpick and question these distinctions of authenticity in latter chapters.

The blues is a form of music that has been shaped through a long line of African and African-American culture. The holler of the field workers in call and return work songs, African vocal lines and phrases, and the spiritual songs all shaped what would become blues music, helped along with some European chord structure to become what we know now as traditional blues. These traditional blues are made of a twelve-bar structure, a cycle of progressions that roll over for the full length of the song. This form has three sections, three sung statements and three instrumental responses, the Holy Trinity, the blues, as described by Marsalis & Ward (2008).

As well as this use of the 12-bar formation, the singer must not only tell a story, but they must incorporate a melody that will see the singer hold on to notes for long periods of time and to a note that might seem off key to an untrained ear, this is what would also distinguish the song to being specifically blues. This is a practice that has remained from the singing of work songs and hollers where James Weldon Johnson described the voice as having “*curious twists and turns and quavers and the intentional striking of certain notes just a shade off key*” or as Reverend A.M. Jones describes …”*a distinct feeling in these tunes of hovering over and around a central note or notes, round which the melody seems to be built or towards which it works*” (cited in Oliver.P,1997p18,19). Indeed, these keys and extended notes are those which add the emotion and agency to the structure in which the song is built within.

In Memphis Minnie’s ‘Down in New Orleans’, we can hear the tones and keys being sang as described by Johnson and Jones. Minnie strikes and quavers her way through the 12-bar sections of the song, repeating two lines and ending with a third throughout. I look not into the lyrics of the song in this section of my essay, only to allow the reader to see the structure of the blues format to which the blues are classically written and to hear the sounds described as above.

**Down in New Orleans[[1]](#footnote-1)**

I’m going back down in New Orleans. (2x) Well, I’m going where I can get my rice and beans.

We are the cookingest Creoles in the world you ever seen. (2x) And if you don’t believe me, follow me back to New Orleans.

Well, my man is a doctor and he lives off those rice and beans. (2x) That’s why he done gone and left me back down in New Orleans.

I’ve got the cookingest sister in the world you ever seen. (2x) But she can’t cook nothing but them rice and beans.

And you can’t tell me nothing, baby, that I never seen. (2x) And if you don’t believe me, follow me back to New Orleans

**Chapter Two**

**Slavery and Emancipation**

‘*The blues is a vaccine: It’s the controlled dose of something bad that prepares someone to deal with the approaching uncontrollable bad. It’s the way some parents acted in slavery times, treating their kids harshly to arm them for what was comin*g’ (Marsalis.W, 2008p48)

**How Slavery shaped the blues**

In this chapter I explore how the structure of society in the American South, the lives of the victims of slavery, and the experience of the emancipation period helped to shape the blues, in their structure, in their form, and in their lyrics.

Before slavery, the Africans taken had homes, lives, norms, values, tribes, music, culture, religions and traditions. How much can be left of a person’s sense of self who has this stripped away from him? LeRoy Jones writes in his book ‘Blues People’ (1963) that this complete antithesis of a man’s life on earth is the cruellest aspect of slavery. When you go to prison you have committed a crime and you are punished for it, the punishment is to strip you of your self; these people have done nothing criminal, but their punishment is worse than anyone could imagine, and one that that would last for centuries and for the whole of their individual lives.

A birth date is something that seems so ordinary, yet in ‘The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass’ (1999) Douglas writes that a slave would not know of his birth date and never know how old they are, slave owners keeping their slaves ignorant, and yet the slaves could see that the white people knew theirs. From being taken from your mother as a baby so as to not be allowed to have attachments, to being put into the life of a slave; seeing women beaten so bad their backs are covered in blood and they are screaming while children scream for them to stop; after working in the field from the moment the sun rises until it falls and then working at home to fix the only three items of clothing you have for a year; having to sleep on the cold and damp ground with only a blanket; living with the constant fear of the overseer who would shout, scream, cut and whip the slaves into action in the field. This is how Douglass describes some aspects of his life as a slave.

Not only not knowing the days of their birth, slaves were usually stripped of their names and given that of their owner, nothing left to be kept sacred of their previous lives. In another slave account of Mary Prince, her harrowing story sees her, and her siblings being sold away from their mother. She recalls in the book ‘Am I Not a Woman and a Sister’ of her family sitting together and crying as they were being ‘shrouded’ for sale in their new osnaburgs.[[2]](#footnote-2) They were walked into town and stood against a wall where the children were lined up in order of age, Mary describes that her heart “*throbbed with grief and terror so violently*” she thought it might jump out of her body (Salih, 1831p11). An unimaginable experience, to be handled as Mary describes it herself, as like being a calf or a lamb being spun around and described in size to the willing buyers at the auction.

In the book ‘The Souls of Black Folks’ W.E.B.Du Bois writes of sorrow songs, “*that these songs articulate the message of the slave to the world*” (Du Bois, 1989p199). Du Bois describes the sorrow songs and those who sang them, saying they are a music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment. Du Bois also explains that the music is more ancient than the words, describing developments in the slave music as being African, Afro American and then a further blend with Caucasian, creating new minstrel and hymn songs all developing from the slave song. Blues historian Paul Oliver retells a story from Minister David Macrae who was said to be greatly troubled by the mixture of grief and gladness in the negro hymn, “representing a life full of sorrow, and death as a joyful release”, (Oliver, 1997p8), Oliver himself describes the spiritual negro folk song as being sung slowly and infinitely sad and poignant.

In consonance with Du Bois’ script, Le Roi Jones (1963) argues that it is impossible to say that slavery created the blues but does argue that it started there and gathered it’s form there, that which is the call and return that has the singer’s vocal line returned to them in the chorus of a work song and the repetition of vocal lines especially. Singing together in the field working not only gave the slaves a rhythm to work to, but a solidarity to help to get through the day, to sing is to lift one’s spirits and to sing together is to sing and stand in unity. Paul Oliver also agrees that blues did not exist at this time, yet he helps us make sense of the coming together of the various forms that created them in saying that yes, the lives of those on the plantation are mirrored with the barbarities of the lives of those in Auschwitz, but some plantation owners did give some time off to the slaves to enjoy themselves, for an evening of pleasure if it can be called as such. Here, especially in the famous Congo square in New Orleans, slaves would come together and dance and make music. People from France, Ireland and Scotland would be in the congregation, and so the musical amalgamation would commence, over lapping the spirituals[[3]](#footnote-3) and the work song and finding new influence from outside the African cultures (Oliver, 1997).

DuBois also wrote about these songs being naturally ‘veiled’ when the slaves spoke to the world, he describes Negro people as being born with a veil, a peculiar sensation of having to act the way that the people looking in expect you to act but being someone completely different underneath, living as “*two souls, two thoughts... In one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder*” (Du Bois, 1989p5). The real story in the lyrics of the blues is often there for you to guess as they have layers of meanings in their complexities and can be hard to unpick (Davies. 1999). We see in many a blues song a hidden meaning, particularly double entendres which I will come to later, but in my song example for this part of the paper the double meaning was significant in its use.

Harriet Tubman used a song to help slaves escape, in using the song ‘Wade in the Water’ a negro spiritual, Tubman informed the slaves to wade through the water and therefore not leave a scent or trail for the dogs to find. This is a prime example of using a song to join the people together not only in solidarity, but under the veil of knowing what is being said without explanation. After escaping Tubman would use other songs to convey messages, singing once or twice to warn of slave catchers. Wade in the water is a spiritual song, a call and return song and is also written in the twelve-bar blues formation.

**Wade in the Water[[4]](#footnote-4)**

Chorus: Wade in the Water, wade in the water children.   
Wade in the Water. God's gonna trouble the water.   
  
Who are those children all dressed in Red?   
Wade in the water.   
Must be the ones that Moses led.   
God's gonna trouble the water.  
  
 Chorus.   
  
Who are those children all dressed in White?   
Wade in the water.   
Must be the ones of the Israelites.   
God's gonna trouble the water.  
  
 Chorus.   
  
Who are those children all dressed in Blue?   
Wade in the water.   
Must be the ones that made it through.   
God's gonna trouble the water.  
 Chorus.

**How Emancipation shaped the Blues**

To focus on blues music leading up to the 1960s from a sociological perspective, is to look on what is called the ‘Jim Crow’ era. The new found freedom for the emancipated slaves was to have what W.E.B Du Bois describes as a deep disappointment for the Negro people, where once they could cry for freedom, now they were lost to the terrors of the Ku-Klux Klan (KKK), the holocaust of war, the disorganization of industry and the contradicting advice of friends and foes (Du Bois, 1989).For Le Roi Jones, (1999) what was happening in society for slaves shaped the music, then emancipation and the troubles that came with it would carry on shaping, arguably bringing with it a whole new selection of sound and troubles.

The era of ‘Jim Crow’ followed the emancipation, an era that would see black people being characterized as minstrel cartoon characters, popularized by a white minstrel ‘Thomas Daddy Rice’. The show would see him as a beggar wearing ill-fitting clothes, laughing, grinning and dancing around with a painted black face and singing a rhyme named ‘jump Jim Crow’, he was intended to imitate the Negro (Litwack. L F, 1999). Litwack describes how Jump Jim Crow became popular with the nation and gave strength to supporting their distorted images of black life, the term even working its way into the American dictionary. And yet, it is not known how a dance created by a white man for a white audience became synonymous, designed by whites to segregate the races says Litwack (1999) but soon newspapers used the term to separate railroad cars in the North of the United States. By 1890 ‘Jim Crow’ took on additional force and hence for 60 years after 1890, Negros were denied basic rights of citizenship. They were stamped as inferior; and due to their race, the patterns of discrimination, segregation, unequal justice and violence toward them persisted (Litwack.L F,1999).

In working life, for those who had been slaves on plantations, freedom meant having to work for your debt of rents and furnishings therefore life was stagnant, not much changed other than the white man not having control over every aspect of their lives. But the black man would continue for a long time doing the work that the white man wouldn’t, the white man owned the fields and the black man worked them. From then the people began to disperse, first of all to Mississippi to other farms, and then in 1879 thousands of black southerners fled the rural Southern states in what has come to be known as the ‘Exodus’ trying to leave behind the drudgery of working to make a white man rich and for ever being in debt (Litwack, L F. 1999). Alas, many of the black people who tried to better themselves would be lynched, violence toward the black population was much worse some would say after emancipation as now any member of the public could and would beat on a black person or kill them, “*thus keep the race terrorized and ‘keep the nigger down*” (Ida B Wells cited in Litwack, L F. 1999;156). In an interview with Candi Staton, she told the Record Collector magazine of a time in the early 50s, where racial segregation was enforced by the Jim Crow laws and the threat of violence by the KKK. Candi was 10 or 12 years old and remembers travelling in a caravan unable to use hotels they slept under a tree one evening and were approached by police officers who shouted for them to sing and shot their guns in the air, and then to dance and shot their guns into the ground, angered but unable to do anything (Record Collector, 2018, Issue 485:61).

Faced with the harshest racism and inequality in working life after emancipation, and escaping the horrors of the deep South, brought about many songs of travel in blues music particularly in men’s blues; singing of trains, conflict and troubles they experienced through marginalization; while women in general stayed home living the patriarchal life sang of heartache and missing men. The lure of travel after being stuck to a spot for such a long time in slavery being too hard to resist, even if it meant having no money, it meant having freedom (Davies.1999).

Huddie William Ledbetter also known as Lead belly (1848-1949) wrote a song in 1937 which really expels the emotions society has forced upon him through the enforcement of Jim Crow laws when visiting Washington DC. Again, the song follows the twelve-bar blues format and the melody hangs around centralized notes and stretched notes that emphasize the song as in Oliver’s description in chapter one. Reading the lyrics alone conveys the anguish that Lead belly felt with this kind of treatment. I include an audible version on CD, but in the footnoted video you can hear the tale Leadbelly speaks around the lyrics of the time he went to meet Alan Lomax, a white author and journalist, and his wife in Washington and here is where the song arose.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**The Bourgeois Blues**[[6]](#footnote-6)

Me and my wife went all over town

And everywhere we go, people turned us down

Lord, in a bourgeois town

It's a bourgeois town

I got the bourgeois blues

Gonna spread the news all around

Well, me and Martha, we were standing upstairs

We heard the white man sayin' I don't want no niggers up there

Lord, in a bourgeois town

Ooh, bourgeois town

I got the bourgeois blues

Gonna spread the news all around

Home of the brave, land of the free

I don't wanna be mistreated by no bourgeoisie

Lord, in a bourgeois town

Ooh, the bourgeois town

I got the bourgeois blues

Gonna spread the news all around

Me and my wife went all over town

And everywhere we go, people turned us down

Lord, in a bourgeois town

It's a bourgeois town

I got the bourgeois blues

I'm gonna spread the news all around

**Chapter 3**

**Intersectionality and the blues**

Investigating women in the blues, involves looking at intersections of sociological factors of oppression. Intersectionality is a way of understanding the complexities in society by looking at varying factors that would change one person’s experience compared to the next. Social divisions such as race, gender and class prove that inequalities are not shaped by a single axis but rather intersections of them (Collins & Blige, 2016). Given the history of African Americans, of their vibrant beginnings, and the long story of slavery it is natural that race is the narrative that underpins black consciousness. Bell Hooks wrote in ‘Ain’t I a Woman’ 1982 that “*No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women*” (Hooks,B. 1982p7) describing that when people talk of blacks they talk of black men, and when people talk of women, they talk of white women. To be active toward their oppression would mean choosing to focus on civil rights against racism or to focus on feminism and class in worker’s rights, “*because African-American women were simultaneously black and female and workers, these single focus lenses on social inequality left little space to address the complex problems that they face*” (Collins & Blige, 2016p3).

In the previous chapters I have looked onto the creation of blues as a whole and what has given shape to them, only touching on the subject of women’s blues, I will use this section of my paper to explore the intersectionality of oppression for women that created such a wealth of explicit and emotive blues material. Therefore, I would like to now re touch the previous subjects in my paper through a feminist lens; women and the blues; women in slavery; and explore the experiences of women through emancipation, what it meant for women and their sexuality and how it shaped women’s blues.

**Women in the Blues**

Paul Oliver and many other scholars will begin their story of the documented blues with the story of W.C Handy and his depiction of the *‘Ragged wanderer*’ as in my first chapter, and yet, continuously overlooked is the story of Gertrude (Ma) Rainey (1886-1939). Leon Litwack writes that a year before the infamous W.C Handy’s tale, Gertrude, often named ‘The Mother of the blues’ was playing in a travelling show, she came into the tent and sang a song that was “*strange and poignant” ...* and when asked to describe the song she replied, “*it’s the blues*” (Lieb. S,Cited in Litwack.F, 1999p448). This isn’t the only female blues singer story to be over looked as the first documented. In contrast to the weird sounds of Handy’s wanderer or Gurtrude Raineys’ strange and poignant blues, is a story of the blues brought to life in the Storyville district in New Orleans. In an interview with Ferdinand Lemothe (“Jelly Roll” Morton), Alan Lomax heard a story which describes Morton’s first introduction to real blues, that in the story of Mamie Desdoumes[[7]](#footnote-7) (1879-1911). Morton describes Mamie of living next door to his Godmother and singing this same song every day, she only had three fingers from an accident so was restricted in her piano ability, but her songs had such an effect on Morton (Lomax, A. & Martin, D.S. 1973). Morton introduces his 1939 ‘Mamies blues’ recording saying that the song is no doubt the first blues he heard in his life (Hanley,P.2002). Mamie, unlike other stories from origins of the blues was to use her blues music in the district like the other women to attract ‘business’. New Orleans had and still has a sex workers trade and the music sold the sex for the ladies in what Morton calls ‘The Tenderloin’ of the city where women would chant in the doorways happy and sad blues.

My point here is not to argue as to whether Lieb, Handy or Morton’s stories of the first blues recorded is true or not, but rather to highlight, as Marybeth Hamilton does in her paper (2000) about the Making of the Blues Tradition, that the ‘ragged wanderer’ turns up in so many books and papers on the subject and very little light shone on women’s blues. Often one chapter in a whole book, and usually Ma Rainey or Bessie Smith that are mentioned, never have I read this name Mamie Desdoumes until I came across it in my research for this paper. Hamilton would like to argue that it is because it would ruin the authenticity of the blues to do so, that it was not a lonely wanderer making a great story but rather a female, situated in the centre of urbanism, commercialism and sex (Hamilton,M.2000).

Too add, and value to the argument of authenticity as above, Mamie Desdoumes was living in New Orleans where at that time there was no segregation with the Creole[[8]](#footnote-8) people. Her father was a mulatto,[[9]](#footnote-9) a French speaking activist and descendant of Haitian immigrants with a black partner. This may provoke the idea that you do not have to come from a black slave family to sing the blues and could separate what is thought of as authentic blues.

It could be that the blues hangs in the air around New Orleans from the vast number of plantations, or from the occasions in Congo Square; in either case the blues speaks differently in Desdoumes’ experience. In Lomax’s book of Jelly Roll he adds a section from an interview with Bunk Johnson, a New Orleans trumpet player regarding Mamie Desdoumes that says: “*when Hattie rogers or Lulu White would put it out that Mamie was going to be singing at their place, the white men would turn out in bunches and them whores would clean up”* (Lomax, A. & Martin, D.S. 1973:21).

**Women in Slavery**

To understand women’s lyrical content in the blues it is essential to revisit slavery and see what life was like through a woman’s eyes. Bell Hooks (1982) writes that patriarchy formed a base of American social structure along with racial imperialism, she writes that in the beginning it was men who were bought and sold as slaves, they were the workers and had the muscle for the hard labour they were being bought to do. Slave owners soon realised that women who gave birth while in their ownership would produce free slaves, and the children would legally become property of the slave owner so then, like the men the women were then shipped, branded with hot irons, stripped naked and shipped to a land unknown.

Records show that slave ship Pongas carried 250 women, many of them pregnant, squeezed into a compartment of 16 by 18 feet, exposed to extreme heat and freezing cold it was difficult for children to survive birth (Hooks.B, 1982). The women who dared to be un co-operative to the slavers were raped as a means of torture and control, and a lot of women became impregnated on the ships. The accounts in Hooks’ ‘Ain’t I a Woman’ are difficult to comprehend, one from a family named Weldon describes how women were mocked and beaten, and often children were beaten just to torment the mother. In one instance the Weldon’s describe a child of nine months who wouldn’t eat on a ship being flogged continuously, the child still wouldn’t eat and so they put him into a pot of boiling water feet first, he still wouldn’t eat and so the captain dropped him and caused his death, then forcing his mother with brutal force to throw him overboard (Hooks,B.1982). This all before one even leaves the ship that stole them from their lives.

Once at their destination the women were treated the same as the men, having their identities stripped from them along with their dignity, perhaps the only sense of equality they experienced. The main difference between the male and female slaves in the work area is was “*the black male slave was primarily exploited as a labourer in the fields; the black female was exploited as a labourer in the fields, a worker in the domestic household, a breeder and as an object of white male assault*” (Hooks,B.1982p22). Cited from an autobiographical account in ‘Ain’t I a Woman’ a female slave declared *“The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear. The lash and the foul talk of her masters and his sons are her teachers. When she is fourteen or fifteen, her owner or his sons. Or the overseer, or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents. If these failed to accomplish their purpose, she is whipped or starved into submission to their will” (*Hooks,B.1982p24).

An account from ‘*Once a Slave*’ cited in ‘Ain’t I a Woman’ tells of an incident where a white mistress had returned home to find her husband raping a thirteen year old slave girl, the girl went on to be punished by being beaten and locked in a smoke house and whipped daily for weeks afterward (Hooks,B.1982p37). The girls were seen by the whites as temptresses, that they deserved the rape. Accounts say that white women even bought female slaves in order to keep their sons at home, it seems unbelievable that these are real life situations for humans to endure. For men, being stripped of their responsibilities for their families was seen as emasculating them, however, as harrowing as the story of slavery for men is, it could never be measured to the idea that “*African women were imagined to be more animal than human, positing that their uncontrollable sexual appetites meant that they could not be raped*” (Collins,P. 2004p101).

As in my previous section on slavery, women’s blues had not been formed as such at this point, or at least there is not documentation of it, but it *is* a vital ingredient to the following section and the emancipation of women in blues music.

**Emancipation and Women’s blues**

Moving out of the rural south and into the cities, women were mostly to become employed in houses where they would be the ‘help’/house servant, working from the crack of dawn until the sun went down. They would use a separate entrance, a separate bucket to drink from, separate toilets and suffered every whim and demand of their employers; thus giving the women who instead hit the road to play the blues at this time a certain sense of agency and liberty in not being governed. For Memphis Minnie and others like her, a certain amount of glamour was attached to the role of blues songstress and given that they would receive a considerable wage over that of an agricultural or home worker, it is clear why she would choose singing the blues over picking cotton (Garon. P, 1992).

Born in 1896 Memphis Minnie lived all of her younger life in the Jim Crow era, in her song ‘In My Girlish Days’ Minnie tells us that ‘*nineteen and seventeen, twenty-one was tough’* the song describes the year of the race riots in St Louis 1917. Those were three days of torture for the African-Americans being beaten, beheaded, lynched and hung from lampposts; the bridge out of the city closed to keep the trouble contained meant people drowning in the Mississippi trying to escape (Keyes.A,2017). Lorna Dee Cervantes, an expert of Memphis Minnie, found interviews from Minnie saying

“*there were these Nazis and they came into East Saint Louis and tore apart every black person they could find. Man, woman, and child. The women went out, too, with their children, armed with spoons. And it wasn't done in anger, and it wasn't a fight, and it wasn't revenge. It was done with calm, as if they were at a holiday fair. Smiling, laughing, not in a hurry. Systematically, every single black person in East Saint Louis was massacred*” (Stein.A, 2003).

Memphis Minnie then described that during this bloodshed, the love of her life was torn apart in front of her eyes and left in a pool of blood, she escaped by hiding under the chassis of a car. It is then no wonder that she is described by her peers as a woman who would not stand for any mischief and not afraid to use a guitar, gun or pocketknife on anyone who might need it (Garon.P, 1992).

To have experiences like this is surely to shape your music lyrically and emotionally, albeit within the structure of a blues format. In Memphis Minnie’s song ‘Ain’t Nothing in Rambling’ we can hear her joy in being free to ramble, but the torment of wanting to settle down at the same time; Paul and Beth Garon write in their analyses of the song that in the end of the song she “*replaces her youthful sense of adventure with an adult fondness for security*” (1992:266). It could be assumed in the lyric that she has stopped rambling, and that she is going to stay right here; or it could be that she’s happy rambling and would prefer to be on the road eating beans than working for somebody else having been her own manager since that young age, either way she describes the troubles along the way you might face in rambling. With most blues songs there are double meanings to each line as argued by Du Bois, but it is especially in prevalent in women’s blues which I will expand upon in the next section of this chapter.

Nothing in Rambling.[[10]](#footnote-10)

I was born Louisiana, I was raised in Algiers,

And everywhere I been, the peoples all say, Ain’t nothing in rambling, Either running around. Well, I believe I’ll marry, ooooo woooo, Lord and settle down.

I first left home, I stopped in Tennessee, The peoples all begging, “Come and stay with me.” ‘Cause ain’t nothing in rambling, etc,

I was walking through the alley with my hand in m my coat.

The police start to shoot me thought it was something I stole. You know it ain’t nothing in rambling, etc,

The peoples on the highway is walking and crying, some is starving, some is dying. You know it ain’t nothing in rambling, etc,

You may go to Hollywood and try to get on the screen, But I’m gonna stay right here and eat these old charity beans.

‘Cause there ain’t nothing in rambling, etc,

**Sexual Liberation**

For women, much like for everyone else, the change in the structure of the labour market immediately after emancipation left not a lot of change in that part of their lives, however, for the first time in the history of African women being present in America they had the autonomy to choose their sexual partners (Davies, 1998). Suddenly, women were not being continuously raped and forced to conceive, they could take control of their sexuality and the blues women could shout about it. From the 1920s women sang on masse about their feelings and expressed themselves through powerful vocal lines, engaging delivery, and strong, bold presentation commanding respect and a stop to the mistreatment to them as women (Johnson, 2003).

What this did for their music was shocking for a lot of people, as the blues began to take over religious in secular (African-American) music, so did the devil over God and so the secular became sexual across the new black consciousness. God’s music was sung at work and in church and the devil’s music in Juke joints, travelling shows and circuses (Davies, 1998), as well as outside the brothels in The Tenderloin of New Orleans. One could not sing the music that these ladies wrote in church by any means, as Davies describes them, they are vividly articulated sexual desires, albeit behind the veil of the double entendre[[11]](#footnote-11) and a far cry from the romanticized love song sang about in other music genres. There would be no prince whisking our blues ladies off into the sunset, they had been stamped on but are crying out for more attention, singing of who did them wrong and what they’d do for their man sexually if he came home; they sang for other women to stay off their man and left double entendres as instructions endlessly. Songs like ‘Empty Bed Blues’ by Bessie Smith and ‘Shave Em Dry’ by Ma Rainey were two of the hundreds of raunchy blues songs released on record from this time, filled with sexual innuendo and frivolity. Like with the Desdoumes case though, these songs, because either the singers were backed by multiple musicians, or because the songs were commercialized; they are an embarrassment to the blues scholars who would claim that the music created at his time for these women was pornographic party music (Hamilton.M,2000).

Memphis Minnie recorded a few different versions of her famous track ‘Bumble Bee’ in this song she is explicit and obvious in her ‘veiled’ lyrics. Her man/ bumble bee has the best stinger she has ever seen, and she wants some more of it is the main theme of the song. This was the song that made her famous and has been covered many times, and the term bumble bee and/or stinger have been used in countless songs since. A perfect example of the double entendre, sang once again in the typical A B lyric format and 12- bar progression of the blues, she uses long notes to enhance the song in areas she wants to force the listener to engage with.

**Bumble Bee**[[12]](#footnote-12)

Bumble bee, bumble bee, won’t you please come home to me (2x)

He got the best ol’ stinger and bumble bee I ever seen.

He stung me this morning, I’ve been looking for him all day long (2x)

He had me to the place once, I hate to see my bumble bee leave home.

I can’t stand to hear him, buzz, buzz, buzz,

Come in bumble bee I want you to stop you fuss.

You’re my bumble bee and you know your stuff.

Oh sting me bumble bee, until I can’t get enough.

Hmmmmmm, stinger as long as my right arm (2x)

He stung me this morning, I’ve been looking for him all day long.

Sometimes he makes me happy, then sometimes he makes me cry (2x)

He had me to the place once, I wish to God that I could die.

**Chapter 4**

**Women in the blues and Feminism**

“*There is a core meaning in the texts of the classic blues women that, although pre feminist in a historical sense, reveals that black women of that era were acknowledging and addressing issues central to contemporary feminist discourse*” (Davies. 1999;24).

History writes that western white women led the way for feminism but as William F. Danaher argues in his paper ‘Gender Power, The Influence of Blues Queens’, “*In many ways, the lives and songs of these women prefigured the eventual rise toward gender equity of women in general*” (2005;1453) with blues singers performing sooner than the political movement of The Suffragettes in 1903. In presenting themselves to the world as a sexual power, as non-domestic, expressing their feelings freely and going against the grain with societal norms for women, blues queens vigorously exercised their power and challenged the stereo types given to women. These women began the movement for all women not just black women to move from the domestic sphere and into the public one (Danaher 2005). Women in this era were expected to find satisfaction in the home and in family life, and within the confines of marriage, so the sparsity of these elements within the lyrics of women’s blues become highly significant (Davies, 1999) in pushing these boundaries and an early triumph for women in asserting their agency within this imposed social structure.

The very nature of the call and return element in the blues holds a large significance in the reaching out to other women too. A call and response is carried from the plantations and the cotton fields but if no structured call and response is written into the song then as Angela Davies (1999) argues, in women’s blues, the female singer tells a story that is going to resonate with her audience, and the return will be hollers of agreement and a solidarity, restructuring the idea of call and return yet having the same connotation. Likewise, if this be the case then songs of equality and sexuality played on the radio and in juke joints will ergo empower the women who hear it.

Imani Kai Johnson argues that “*Out of the margins of society, blues women performed a badass femininity in counter-distinction to dominant notions of bourgeois femininity of the 1920s*” (2014:21), a brave and un noticed act within the field and history of feminism. Johnson writes that the rhetoric that surrounded the respectability of women, be that the repressive Victorian era or the Madonna/whore dichotomy, the middle-class aspirations of African Americans amongst many, have neglected and excluded poor women, immigrants and women of colour. Yet rather than be oppressed by their Southern working class roots any longer, blues women embraced them and opted for the road over the kitchen, breaking moulds, singing of relationships with men *and* women and addressed violent relationships where they weren’t only the victim but also the perpetrator (Johnson. 2014).

I include here another song from Memphis Minnie, Keep On Goin’. In the song her man has done wrong, they’ve been fighting, he’s cheated and he’s ‘stayed off her at night’, Minnie tells her him to keep on goin’, she’s found another man and he had better stay away from her from now on. She is applying her strength and owning the situation rather than be trampled down by it. She again celebrates her sexuality and presents her needs, desires and rules in her way with her condemning verse reminding us repeatedly the steps that blues women took for women (Garon. 2014). Once again, the lyrics and progressions fall into the traditional blues format.

**Keep on Going – Memphis Minnie[[13]](#footnote-13)**

I’m beg you baby, to treat me right,

you don’t show nothing but fuss and fight

So now you keep on goin’ ah keep on a goin’

Now you can keep on goin’, honey till I change my mind

You get away from my window, quit hangin’ round my door

I got another man, I don’t want you no more

So now can keep on goin’ ah keep on a goin’

So now you can keep on goin’ honey till I change my mind.

(spoken)Ah keep on a goin’, don’t stop

Now you need to come a runnin’ holdin’ up your hands

You go to your woman, I got me another man

So now can keep on goin’ ah keep on a goin’

Now you can keep on goin’ honey till I change my mind.

I’m gonna tell you little something so aimed to make you mad,

But it’s good to have something that you never had.

So now can keep on goin’ ah keep on a goin’

Now you can keep on goin’ honey till I change my mind.

When I had you baby you know you wouldn’t treat me right.

You take my money, stay off a me at night.

So now can keep on goin’ ah keep on a goin’

So you can keep on goin’ honey till I change my mind.

**Chapter 5**

**Structure/Agency?**

“*That the music was explaining the history as the history was explaining the music. And that both were expressions of and reflections of the people*”. (Jones.L.R, 2002:x)

All though the blues is a reflective and highly expressive art form, in which, arguably, broke the mould for feminism; I would also suggest that the blues can be firmly seated into the sociological antinomy of the structure verses agency theory. The idea that an agent can only act within the iron cage of the constraints within society was famously suggested by Max Weber (1864-1920), the iron cage determining the actions and characteristics of individuals, I would argue that this theory can be applied to every chapter in this paper and the story of the blues.

For blues in its musical form, the structure its self is strict, all though rhythms and speeds may change, or the lyric formation may change, it is the classic blues structure that remains intact for it to *be* the blues. Scholar, Albert Murray writes, that when a musician announces that they are about to play the blues, they mean that the following song will be a twelve-bar blues-chorus format, that they do not mean they are going to start crying or moaning, they mean they are about to begin playing a very specific “technology of stylization” (1976;87). Murray goes on to say that musicians can improvise and elaborate within the structure, using imagination and talent, but playing the blues is like a ritual, a tradition which a community might do together and you can kid around and have fun with it, but it remains the same. All though, Murray also argues that a blues performance is that which sends out a direct outpouring of emotion of personal anxiety and anguish (1976;87), defending the contradiction by separating the music from the actual performance of a song. The lyrics from the blues performers cannot be cast aside into the idea that they mean nothing because they all sound the same, for it is the lyric which communicates the discourse of the musician’s identity to the listener (Machin, 2010).

Sociologically, as LeRoi, Oliver and Du Bois agree, that slavery shaped the blues, then we must agree that it was in the confines and a direct result of the structure of oppression that the blues was born. An economic system that used a people in a division of labour for capital gain, these people could not escape these structures and even once the law released them from their slavery the chains that bound them to a life of inequality would remain. While in slavery and the music was being formed, more structures were created within the micro communities, to create music to pass the day, and to create call and return songs to keep time and lift each other's spirits, thus creating more structures within that which is oppressing them and indeed the one that would set some of them free as in the Tubman instance. Functionalists like Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) might suggest that the blues were created through functional action between all of these structures which helped the music of generations evolve into what it is today; not excluding the white people who bought slaves in the first place, nor the fact that the continuation of a music that was to express and console a people facilitates a continuation of oppression, exploitation and anguish.

In emancipation the people were set free from the structures that bound them to one place, but the social structure of the law that came with the Jim Crow era would see, as Leon F Litwack proclaims, these people were “*denied access to the political process, limited in what they could acquire in schools, and dehumanized in popular culture, black southerners were compelled to find other ways to express their deepest feelings and to demonstrate their individual and collective integrity*” (1999:xvi). Litwack speaks of the constraints of the social structures and the free will/agency of the individual but almost describes the veil of Du Bois, no matter of the location, together, the freed slaves have something that ties them together spiritually and musically.

For women, they are held together in structures *as* women as well as being the racially oppressed, as fleeing, and as wearing the veil. Together women seemed to write the same kinds of songs that were not only based on a collective historical memory to cope with slavery but worked to affirm “*subjectivity and community for women of the black working class*” (Davies, 1999:46). They rejoiced together in song about their sexual freedom, albeit with the wrong men. Yes, it has been argued by many blues scholars that women’s blues were created for the market, attaching the women firmly in a capitalist trap; where the more authentic songs of prison and poverty were seen as authentic, the songs of a sexual nature are thought of to be a product of commercialization (Hamilton, 2000). The songs that sang of sex were made famous and sold in vast amounts by the Vauderville[[14]](#footnote-14) blues ladies like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, their records paying them $125 per side where their male counterparts may only have made $15 per side in comparison, but a lot of the Vauderville songs were written by men, the ladies were managed by men, and as soon as the depression hit, so the music was hit too (Garon, 2014). Furthermore, Madame Desdoumes was managing herself, she also used her song for commercial purposes to win over her potential customers for the day, concurring with Adorno’s theory in the culture industry that in a modern capitalist society *all* production is for market, produced for nothing more than profit and acquiring capital ( Adorno,2009). For commercialization or not, this cannot take away from the ferocious images these women forged of themselves in history, redefining the ‘woman’s place’, challenging the age-old traditions in gender politics, to be so openly sexual and even homosexual in these times (Davies,1999).

**Final Thoughts**

For actors to create something so powerful in the blues, and to take the notion to make music, there must be some form of agency/free will, even if trapped inside the structure of the blues themselves. Colin Campbell’s paper on the ‘Black box of Personal Agency’ (2009) refers to there being two types of agency, the first being able to perform an action within the confines of a structure, and the second, ‘Agentic power’, as being one that allows an actor to act independently regardless of the structure that bounds them, and instead push through and overcome those boundaries to create something new. While it is thought that in music, as in the arts, that each are nothing more than joint products of all the people who interact in that kind of world who bring new art to existence (Becker,1982). Even with the most powerful agency, Adorno writes of music as being that which is shaped by “*responding to modernity in its present state*” (Adorno, 2002:86), a reflection and expression of the society lived by the musician.

I would argue that blues music on the whole, has been shaped by social structures of class, race and gender; and survived as a genre of music in a highly structured form. In women’s blues however, I argue that all though bound by the same structures, these blues women surged forward with agentic power to make a change not only in their community, or society, but across the world, and prefiguring the eventual rise toward recognising the gender equality of women in general. This is not to say that the idea of all women, especially black women, are of equal status to their counterparts, but it is to say that these women indirectly took a stand and would become role models for thousands of women, thus opening an ideology to defy male dominance, step out of the domestic sphere and fight the social structures that bind them.

Word Count 8973

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1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6Ou-BPxgsY> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *A course linen fabric* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Spiritual negro folk song* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vg_8L96E3eU> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Note, Leadbelly did not know the word Bourgeois at the time but liked the sound of it so much he wrote a song with it in.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://youtu.be/Dk6Y9uIwiMI?list=RDDk6Y9uIwiMI> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The real spelling of her name is Dedunes, but Alan Lomax spells it this way in his book [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. a term used to describe people born in New Orleans and those who were born during the colonial era, usually French, Spanish, Native American or African or a mixture of these heritages. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Born of mixed race parents. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ujPyfdS2YUo [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. a word or phrase with two meanings, one of which usually risqué [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\_qLUxdbkv1Y [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wq46VLZdSco [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. women who mixed folk blues and theatre performance, performed with live bands. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)