“I Believe I’ll Go Back Home”: Blindness in Blues and Gospel Race Records

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This dissertation analyzes the contributions and reception of blind African American musicians who produced phonograph recordings between 1926 and 1938. Their records were central in transforming Black popular music. The "downhome" aesthetic they popularized was a significant stylistic departure from previous Race records. The prevalent notion that downhome expression was an always already foundational Black expression complicates its association with blindness and the moment of its popularity in 1926. The downhome became a liminal space on records featuring performances by blind musicians for audiences affected by institutional racism as well as increased acts of racial terror. Relegating blindness to the downhome was extremely popular, and was also a disabling and inaccurate representation. While the musicians presented an aesthetic that suggested an authentic downhomeness, they were participating in a Black modernity as recording artists and performers in cosmopolitan urban centers during their era, far from downhome. The musicians were associated with a past during a period vital to the construction of African American collective memory. Their records functioned as auditory mnemonics through the downhome and the effect of phonographic reproduction. By 1938, at least fifty "Blind" monikers were credited to musicians on recordings marketed to African American consumers. Sight as a marker of modernity contributed to the industry's promotion of a "Blind" downhome expression. The musicians could not "see" the modernity their audiences were navigating, they also could not "see" themselves as a result of their social invisibility. Their recorded expression imposed a break from a present state of modernity, validating a post-agrarian position. Blindness functioned as an authenticating marker of this break. Drawing on public health documents related to African American communities from the mid-nineteenth to early-twentieth centuries, recordings, lyrics, interviews, films, and the Black Press, this dissertation shows how blind musicians became the most popular producers of Black popular music during the late 1920s.

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PREFACE

In writing this dissertation, my objective is to provide a candid speculative discussion relating to the significance of blindness in African American communities and the construction of cultural memories from a position outside of the collectivities of these musicians and their audiences. I am also answering an appeal for scholarship that locates "auditory manifestations as building blocks in the construction of historical collective identity" as a primary aspect of this study.[1]

I would like to acknowledge my position and the incredible responsibility of speaking about and for a group of musicians whose expressions, ideologies, and experiences are documented almost exclusively by their recordings. I also discuss a generation that bought their records but is no longer alive to offer their engagement with them. I intend to provide the reader insight into their world and experiences through this sometimes imaginative study. Additionally, I use this preface as an opportunity to answer a general call by Guthrie Ramsey, by self-reflexively opening with the disclosure of my white currently non-disabled position in approaching the subject of blind African American musicians, nearly a century removed from their production on Race records.[2]

I emphasize that blindness does not determine a musician's manner of expression but does affect the sighted listeners' reception of the blind performance. This reception relates to my reading here of the recordings by the musicians. Not only does my sightedness, whiteness, and era bias my

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[1] Karin Bijsterveld and José van Dijck, *Sound Souvenirs : Audio Technologies, Memory and Cultural Practices*, Transformations in Art and Culture (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 15.

[2] G. P. Ramsey, "Who Hears Here? Black Music, Critical Bias, and the Musicological Skin Trade," *MUSICAL QUARTERLY* 85 (2001).

study, but I am equally biased by my position as an academic. These are also factors that brought me to this project. I recognize I discuss the meanings of the music and recordings by the musicians and their audiences from this outside position.

The musicians I discuss in this dissertation were part of a collective of musicians that produced Race records in the 1920s and 30s. They were African American, from across the Southern United States—Jacksonville to Dallas. They shared similar habitus as itinerant musicians, and most significantly their "Blind" title which suggests they experienced some degree of visual impairment. Their blindness was mostly undocumented and remains unverifiable, reflecting their shared position as disabled members of disadvantaged African American communities. While the musicians' impairment, experiences, and musical expression was varied, the psychological significance of their "Blind" moniker and a unique sonic aesthetic on their recordings contributes to the idea of their collectivity.

Audiences' engagement with the musicians' downhome records during the 1920s and 30s are central to this study because only through their popularity was the vast archive of their phonograph records produced. Without phonograph technology and the audiences who popularized their records, these musicians might only be remembered in oral histories. Instead, they are recognized as actors in the early Black popular music industry of the United States.

You are you even before you
grow into understanding you
are not anyone, worthless,
not worth you.
Even as your weight insists
you are here, fighting off
the weight of nonexistence
and still this life parts your lids, you see
you seeing your extending hand
as a falling wave—

Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*

INTRODUCTION

Blind Willie Davis sang "I Believe I'll Go Back Home" at his first recording session in Paramount's waterwheel powered Wisconsin studio sometime in the fall of 1929. It was the last of the six songs that he recorded during his life. When the stylus dropped onto the spinning wax disc and began cutting, it captured the sound of Davis's capoed vestapol tuned guitar. [3] He begins thumbing a pulse on the bass strings, then with his slide, he presents the melody of the hook on the high string, the title of the song, with a chorus of phantom notes underneath. Using the slide on the guitar can create nuances of the human voice, with the addition of sympathetic overtones from strings that vibrate un/intentionally. This chorus of harmonics is apparent even through the veiled quality of the recording as it is heard on remasters from surviving prints. The master print was lost, possibly scrapped for the metal content that was deemed more valuable than the music printed on it.

Davis sings the melody line back to his guitar, "I believe I'll go back home?" The "m" of home with an upward bend to end the phrase turns it into a question. Both Davis's voice and his guitar sound as if they are debating whether they are indeed going to go. They could be asking

[3] A capo clamps the guitar's strings to the fretboard. Vestapol is the name of an open D chord tuning (DADF#AD). The tuning is believed to derive its name from a popular nineteenth-century parlor guitar arrangement of "The Siege of Savastopol." The slide is a glass bottleneck, metal cylinder, or knife used to glide in between pitches often to play melodies on the higher strings of an acoustic guitar. Paul Oliver writes that "I Believe I'll Go Back Home" is "apparently based on the white song, 'Where is my Wandering Boy Tonight?'" Paul Oliver, *Songsters and Saints : Vocal Traditions on Race Records* (Cambridge Cambridgeshire ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 212.

each other because they know they might find what they left there and what that has become. When they repeat the phrase, they resolve to the root. They agree to leave where they are and to return. Davis and his companion guitar have gone long enough to know they need to go back.

No one knows where Davis made his earthly home or the places he lived, performed, and left throughout his life. Gayle Wardlow, a blues scholar, thinks he may have lived for a time in Bude, Mississippi. No birth or death certificates, nor other paper government documents about Davis are known. The story in the sound of his voice and guitar on his six recordings are his testimony, like an ancient mystery from the modern period. His absence reveals his invisibility in a disabling and racist society. The six recordings he made are his legacy that would have otherwise been unwritten and lost.

Davis sings (something like), "A poor mother, a sitting at the window, with a heart full of troubles, her eyes full of mourning too, rolling down her cheek, wondering, where is my boy tonight? Lord, I wonder where he's gone." Her boy could have gone away to look for work like so many other African American young men during the period of the Great Migration. They left their families, unsure if they would ever see each other again. Her boy could just be out for the night playing the blues, or just out playing, guilt-free and easy, working off the stress of work and life under Jim Crow. Her boy could be a blind street performer, a guitar evangelist traveling the roads in search of audiences, opportunities, a chance to record, and places to play that would pay, so he might survive the Great Depression that began as he sang this song.

Audio 1. Blind Willie Davis "I Believe I'll Go Back Home" clip

Like many of the recorded songs from the blind guitar evangelists during the late 1920s, its lyrics borrow from the Bible. “I Believe” is traced to the story of the prodigal son, but here there is no father, no spent wealth, only a lonely, troubled mother and an absent son. Davis sings, “When I had plenty money, I had a place to sleep, I had something to eat, now I’m broke and hungry, and out of doors, all my friends have turned their backs on me.” He sings abjection, now alone, friendless, motherless, and searching. God’s children had a hard time, blind and broke a long, long way from home.

Davis’s voice and guitar perform gospel through the blues as tangled up as they always have been. As inseparable as this earthly house and a cabin in the sky, no matter whether they are dancing or fighting, jumping or dusting their broom, no matter how hard they try. The root in the bass that Davis keeps with a pulse on the low strings does not alter. The harmony does not shift, the rhythm does not change, and this grounds his music. Even as he shifts the dynamic of his voice letting melodies fly, the root is grounded.

Davis sends a message to others out on the road as the stylus made its last cuts of wax. He offers advice, singing “When you get a long, long ways, far from your poor mother,…take time; it’s only a pencil and a few lines, so she can rest at night, get up in the morning and have an appetite.” He immediately follows with the chorus, sung in unison with the slide now, but he leaves “home” off for the listeners’ imagination, singing only, “I believe I’ll go back.” The guitar melody finishes his phrase. He does not need to sing it because the listener already knows.

The guitar slides the note, bending up to the blue third (a textbook ingredient of blues) on “home.” Home is unspoken, imagined, somewhere in between minor and major, bent, cut into, and cut short. The guitar repeats the phrase four times, pushing the issue for Davis. They are going

back home or going back somewhere as the last grooves of the record were cut. Where he went after that session is unknown.

Maybe Davis returned back home to the South to perform the good word on the street, or maybe he went to nearby Milwaukee or Chicago to perform home for other recently relocated communities of African Americans. His disappearance is a testament to his disadvantaged position, his social invisibility as poor, African American, and disabled. He shares this invisibility with other blind blues and gospel musicians. Those who did not produce recordings are forgotten, those who did are legends. “Uncle Art” Satherley left his position in 1929 as the studio supervisor at Paramount records, the label most closely associated with blind musicians. Whether he or the company documented details of sessions is uncertain—Davis’s payment, the number of records printed and sold, and any other information that Paramount may have had about Davis is lost.

This study refers to Davis and other musicians who share his identity markers—African American, blind, Southern, producers of records for the segregated Race record industry but otherwise socially invisible, collectively known as “the musicians.” This reduction recognizes their importance as contributors to the popular music industry and resolves defining them by their markers of exclusion. However, these markers of exclusion are central to their subjectivity and this study. The musicians’ phonograph recordings between 1926 and 1938 were central in transforming Black popular music. The years frame the introduction, popularity, and decline of both the blind epithet and the descriptor, “downhome.” Nearly all of the musicians shared the “Blind” appellation and produced music of a “downhome” aesthetic, a significant stylistic departure from previous recordings at the height of the segregated Race record era. Their recordings had a range of lyrical themes from gospel to hokum, the sacred and profane, with

acoustic guitar accompaniment. They mostly recorded in solo and duo formats which allowed for variation and spontaneity.

The reception of the musicians' recordings involved the limiting marker of the "Blind" epithet. This objectification of disability was part of their marketing, yet interpolated the musicians' identities, regardless of the musicians' self-identity without the stigma of the marker of their blindness. They were characterized, and they became agents of their own characterization.[4] In performing the downhome under the "Blind" title, they assumed the identity of the musicians. The recordings of their performances and their record companies' Black Press advertisements are the technologies through which this title was constructed. The audiences' imagined subjectivity of the musicians established them as a unique objective class within African American society during their era. While their experiences varied, their epithet conveyed the idea of their shared habitus, street mendicancy, musical expression, and provinciality.[5] However, because the musicians owned the apparatuses of their musical production (prerecording) and determined their own business decisions, they shared a rare and liberated but complicated position. The potential of this agency is demonstrated by their recordings produced despite the disabling societal structures the musicians navigated. The downhome became a liminal space on records featuring performances by blind musicians, bringing "home" to millions of African Americans that left their own as part of the Migration. The belief that downhome blues and gospel were an always already foundational Black expression suggests that blindness further authenticated its unfiltered realness. Following Blind Lemon Jefferson's extremely popular debut in 1926, at least fifty "Blind" titles appeared on

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[4] Chris Weedon, *Identity and Culture* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2004), 4.

[5] Anne Waldschmidt, Hanjo Berressem, and Moritz Ingwersen, *Culture - Theory - Disability : Encounters between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies* (Transcript, 2015), 261.

recordings marketed to African American audiences. Relegating blindness to the downhome through the title was popular, but also a disabling and inaccurate representation. While the musicians presented an aesthetic that suggested an authentic downhomeness, nearly all of them participated in a Black modernity as recording artists and performers in multiple cosmopolitan centers far from the provincial isolation their recordings often suggested.

The industry reduced musicians to the "Blind" epithet on recordings marked "old-time" in advertisements in the Black press. Companies promoted the musicians' records as auditory mnemonics of "real" and "downhome." The combined effect of phonographic reproduction, in the performance of the disembodied voice and in which sight is a marker of modernity, as enlightened, interrelated and contributed to the industry's promotion of a "Blind" downhome expression.

The musicians were associated with a past during a productive period in the construction of African American collective memory because communities were leaving the past. The musicians conceivably could not "see" the modernity their audiences were navigating, they also could not "see" themselves as a result of their social invisibility. They were often unseen by dominant society, and when they were, it could be dangerous. While the musicians were navigating a society that committed acts of violence and terror against individuals based on race and disability, phonographs performed veiled reproductions of their expressions. The musicians were invisible as their music was reperformed and consumed.

Their recorded expression imposed a break from a present state of modernity, validating a post-agrarian position of their audiences. Blindness functioned as an authenticating marker of this break, and it was related to a new sound of oldness in Black popular music. This notion is supported by identifying the trope in the social context of the demographic fluidity and mobility of the Great Migration, relevant to both consumers and musicians. The distinction that is proposed in previous

studies about a “break” in blues often relates to a physical relocation of the music and its practitioners from rural to urban spaces, “country” to “city.” While this was an aspect of African American subjectivities during the period, a reconsideration warrants further research.

The blues was an urban, popular music across the South before the Race record era. Urban environments may have transformed its rural "residues," but the music and musicians’ adaptations to twentieth-century technological innovations, as aspects of modernity, are also significant factors.[6] The Great Migration involved a “country to city” culture shock described in scholarship by Amiri Baraka and Jon Spencer, with an additional dimension of disillusionment described by Richard Wright.[7] The conditions of spaces that were to offer opportunities portrayed in the Black press often provided little relief from Jim Crow in the Northern South. The experience resulted in the liminal space in which the Blind archetype and their recordings existed, a nostalgia for the idea of a Black past. This occurred at a time when the antebellum era was reimagined in dominant popular culture through a whitewashing of slavery and the plantocracy. The musicians were a counter to this and were associated with what is described as “country,” “rural,” “folk.” “Downhome” blues were the highest selling recordings of the segregated Race industry *following* the classic city blues. Because of the juxtaposition of these tropes—the Migration, as a rural to urban movement, and a reverse trend of Race records from urban to rural significance, retrospection, and nostalgia present themselves as overlooked but central aspects of the musicians’ production.

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[6] Jon Michael Spencer, "The Diminishing Rural Residue of Folklore in City and Urban Blues, Chicago 1915-1950," *Black Music Research Journal* 12, no. 1 (1992). Amiri Baraka, *Blues People : Negro Music in White America* (New York, N.Y.: W. Morrow, 1963).

[7] Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam, *12 Million Black Voices; a Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (New York,: Viking Press, 1941).

Terry Rowden, in his *The Songs of Blind Folk*, the only full-length work on blind African American musicians attributes Willie Johnson's reception as outside the realm of blues and gospel, and as something Other, to his blindness "functioning as a marker of premodernity."[8] While blindness in the reception of the musicians may have served as a marker of premodernity and signified a metaphoric boundary, it also signified the veil which preserved the authenticity of downhome expression, and therefore a less corrupted Black expression of the past. The position of blindness would seemingly liberate a subject from the visual experience of the oppressiveness of modern society, one that not only disparaged Black expression but transformed it through its imposition and its gaze.

Rowden's correlation of the "Blind" epithet with premodernity relates to Paul Gilroy's description of Black musical forms. Gilroy writes, "The anti-modernity of these (Black musical) forms, like their anteriority, appears in the (dis)guise of a premodernity that is both actively reimagined in the present and transmitted intermittently in eloquent pulses from the past."[9] This point suggests that the projection of an atavism on the musicians by audiences was relevant in the construction of cultural memory.

Rowden confronts the problem of addressing "the blind" as a collective, citing Richard French, who wrote in 1932 "To speak of blind people (as a collective) is to miss at the start one of the most fundamental characteristics of the group—their outstanding and sometimes overweening individualism."[10] While grouping the entire history of African American blind musicians as

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[8] Terry Rowden, *The Songs of Blind Folk : African American Musicians and the Cultures of Blindness* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 76.

[9] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993), 74.

[10] Rowden, *The Songs of Blind Folk : African American Musicians and the Cultures of Blindness*, 8.

Rowden does in his book seems problematic for similar reasons, he addresses their blindness from the broad range of their social significances across genre, and his study serves as a call for further scholarship.

The first chapter presented here discusses the social context of the musicians. As there is limited information available specific to the musicians, public health documents from the first decades of the twentieth century related to blindness and race are discussed, as well as narratives of the experience of Jim Crow, the Great Migration, the Red Summer riots, and the first years of the Race record era. The year before Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" launched the Race record era was marked by riots across the United States. Six years later, Blind Lemon Jefferson similarly proved a viable artist for a record buying audience and the number of artists produced on his and other labels with the "Blind" epithet in the decade following his success is remarkable. Little is known about the nature and degree of the musicians' visual impairment, other than Blind Boy Fuller, Gary Davis, and Willie McTell. The prevalence, etiology, and implications of clinical blindness in turn of the century rural Southern African American communities are also discussed in the first chapter.

The second chapter discusses the historical trope of blind musicians with and without the "Blind" epithet. Two prominent nineteenth-century African American concert pianists known popularly as Blind Tom and Blind Boone offer a counter to the musicians with the same epithet that produced Race records between 1926 and 1938, the first decade of popular downhome production. Their mass-mediated representations are contrasted with the musicians of Race records. The epithet itself is discussed, followed by perceptions of the lives and professional careers of the musicians. Musicians faced challenges as street performers with disabilities because

it jeopardized their access to public assistance. Two cases related to this scenario are included in the chapter.

The third chapter involves a discussion of the racially segregated record industry, a thematic discussion of recordings, and concepts of the musicians. Representations of the musicians in the Black press are presented along with audio clips for reference. The musicians' varied styles and their descriptions from imprisonment to recent Pentecostal movements serve as a basis for the discussion of their recordings. Only a selection of the recordings by musicians and pseudonyms marked with the blind epithet are discussed. However, the selection demonstrates the broad range of their production even within the production decisions of recording companies.

The relevance of the musicians to collective memory processes and their role as actors in the production of music that involved the experience of retrospection and nostalgia is addressed in the fourth chapter. The promotion of the blues as fundamental and "old-time" in discourse throughout the history of the music is an aspect of this chapter. Exploring how the notion of old-time related to audiences engagement with technological innovations and the experience of the Great Migration during the interwar era by the audiences of the musicians is also included. The work of Pierre Nora, Ron Eyerman, Allison Landsberg, and others are referenced in relation to the idea of blindness, the past, and a mass-mediated cultural expression related to the musicians.

The fifth chapter aligns the popularity of downhome production with the period's discourse related to African American cultural expression. The notions of invisibility, veils, and double consciousness are discussed regarding the musicians. In 1925 and 1926, the years that the musicians became popular, essays related to African American art and expression appeared in collections and journals. The essays in the 1925 *Survey Graphic* volume later included in Locke's *Enter the New Negro* and *Fire!!* from 1926 serve as the focus.

The historic significance of the musicians and their recordings produced as expressions of disabled African American musicians provides insight into their era and experiences, but their continued relevance is evident in the early twenty-first century. The prevalence of blindness in the communities of the musicians was the result of exclusionary racist practices directly imposed by figures symbolized in these objects provoking national debate. This project addresses the musicians' intersectional relevance to current studies of race, disability, popular music, and collective memory, and their significance as performers of the "past" during their period of production, a consideration unaddressed in previous research.

1.0 BLINDNESS IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN NADIR

The nadir of African American history is roughly the period from the end of Reconstruction in the last decades of the nineteenth century to the Race record era of the 1920s.[11] The period witnessed increased acts of racial terror by white communities and de jure marginalizing practices as well as the production of a range of African American discourse that influenced the formation of an empowered collectivity. Caroll LaVallee and Scott Waring recognize a group of historians who perceived frequently worse conditions for African American communities during the nadir than those of the era of slavery. While experiences were broad and varied, these perceptions are worth noting.[12] Practices of discrimination within the public health system during the nadir relevant to the musicians' blindness is conspicuous in formal documents. They reveal racist sentiment within power structures that contributed to the prevalence of visual impairment within African American communities through the lack of access to medical treatment. Racist physicians, politicians, and people of influence perpetuated misinformation that influenced racist sentiment that is presented in this chapter.

Blind recording artists during the Race record era are representative of the presence of visual impairment in African American communities. There were fewer documented incidents of blindness within white communities, but this is complicated by uncertain parameters used to define

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[11] The terminology "nadir" in this context has been used to describe race relations in the period, and attributed to the work, Rayford Whittingham Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901* (New York Dial Press, 1954). This application was subsequently challenged based on the idea that the term reduced the period to one of African American victimhood and failed to recognize the agency and accomplishments of the period. The same period is now refered to as

[12] Carol LaVallee and Scott M. Waring, "Using Sources to Examine the Nadir of Race Relations (1890-1920)," *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas* 88, no. 4 (2015).

blindness. The available data related to blindness in underserved communities during the period was documented in the census, and methods used by data collectors to determine whether a person was blind is uncertain. The 1920 report states, “There is, in popular usage, no accepted line of demarcation between the totally and the partially blind.” The 1920 census only documented individuals who had no light perception, considered “totally” blind. The report recognizes a large number of people with visual impairment excluded by this definition.[13]

1.1 RACIAL TERROR IN THE MUSICIANS’ COMMUNITIES

Lomax’s description of a discussion with Turner Junior Johnson, a blind musician in Clarksdale, offers a rare viewpoint from a musician who may have had similar experiences as the musicians who recorded. They sat outside of the Church of God and Christ and the Saints in Holiness Church where Johnson described his fall from a wagon that resulted in his blindness, his year and a half at a school for the blind in Nashville where he began music studies. He also describes a group of “three or four hundred” African Americans that were lynched by a mob in Tupelo, “hung um unmerciful.” Johnson told Lomax, “Now I don’t know what them colored boys had been doin.(sic) Maybe had touched something they should have left alone. Maybe they should have been punished. Maybe it was somebody else and the wrong ones was caught. Maybe so and maybe not.

[13] Department of Commerce. Bureau of the Census, *The Blind Population of the United States, 1920* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1928), 7.

But we don't know."[14] He told Lomax that one of the victims said the town of Tupelo would be cursed because of the atrocities, "Tupelo wouldn never do no good no more." In 1936 "four or five" years after the murders, twelve tornadoes hit Tupelo killing roughly 450 and injuring thousands. Johnson said, "(T)hose people had forgot there was a God," and thus he believed Tupelo's people became victims themselves to the wrath of God's anger.

Four years before Blind Lemon Jefferson traveled to Chicago to make his first recordings for Paramount records, there was an event in the next town in East Texas where he was raised that caught national attention. In 1922, five African American men were brutally tortured and murdered for being accused of the murder of a white woman. The incident was followed by an epidemic of other lynchings in the region. James Weldon Johnson wrote a letter to President Warren Harding pleading for the intervention of federal troops in East Texas in response to the violence related to the torture and killing of these men and the immunity from judicial recourse of those who inflicted it.[15] The former NAACP president previously wrote an open letter to all senators in support of one of the two hundred anti-lynching bills, none of which passed in the Senate.

The acts of terror continuously inflicted upon African Americans in East Texas since the Juneteenth Emancipation and throughout the United States is well documented (although incomplete) during the period in lynching statistics.[16] By the end of the 1920s, Arizona Dranes

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[14] Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 35-36.

[15] Terry Anne Scott, "'Don't Fail to See This': Race, Leisure, and the Transformation of Lynching in Texas" (PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2015), 99-100.

[16] During the four years between 1919 and 1922 following the First World War, the lynching of over 250 African Americans were reported. See Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings in the United States, 1892-1893-1894* (Chicago: Donohue & Henneberry, 1895); James H. Chadbourn, Lynching Southern Commission

and Willie Johnson also emerged from East Texas as prominent blind Race record producers. A Washington Post front-page headline declared "Fear Texas Race War Result of Lynchings" the week of the murders. The entire nation, both Black and white, was aware of the situation in East Texas.[17] Today Jefferson's East Texas hometown of Coutchman is no longer on the map, literally abandoned and remembered because of its association with him. According to Texas State Historical Association, the town only briefly existed, beginning at the turn of the century and "had only a few scattered dwellings" by the end of the Depression.[18]

The proximity and presence of racial terror was a reality for the musicians. They and their audiences were likely aware of this, if they were in contact with the Black press, white press, or word of mouth during the period of migration, that the period of uncertainty and violence could escalate to a racial revolution. Race riots in twenty-five cities across the country marked the summer after the First World War. The history is well-documented by Blind Willie McTell's biographer, and the incidents of violence in Georgia were second only to Mississippi during the African American nadir.[19] The NAACP reported the violence which occurred across the state in their journal *The Crisis,* which was edited by W.E. B. Du Bois.

James Weldon Johnson is credited with naming the racial violence of the long summer of 1919 the "Red Summer." The violence discouraged hopes in the potential for racial acceptance in the United States following the First World War after African Americans fought and died for

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on the Study of, and Law University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. School of, *Lynching and the Law* (Chapel Hill The University of North Carolina Press, 1933).

[17] As cited in Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, The End of American Lynching, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2012). 185.

[18]"Texas State Historical Association, Coutchman," https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hrcdk. Accessed June 18, 2017.

[19] Gray, *Hand Me My Travelin' Shoes : In Search of Blind Willie Mctell*.

nationalistic ideals of freedom, liberty, and justice for all. None of which applied to African American communities in the Jim Crow South and the North was not necessarily better. After the War, African American and white soldiers, and European immigrants vied for jobs, and unionized labor was racially divided. African Americans who participated in the Great Migration found employment opportunities in vacancies created during the War and were met with animosity and violence by returning soldiers.

James Weldon Johnson was a native of Jacksonville, where Blind Arthur Blake was living in 1926 when he first recorded for Paramount. Blake accompanied Leola B. Wilson, a classic blues singer but within months he returned to record as a solo artist in the Chicago studios. Like those from East Texas, other prominent blind musicians were from the East Coast and Piedmont regions. The experiences documented by James Weldon Johnson in Jacksonville provide insight into the world of Blake and other musicians with similar experiences. A mob nearly lynched Johnson for being in public with a woman who appeared white, which could have resulted in his murder but for his behavior.[20]

Racist acts of terror and violence went unpunished in the communities of these musicians, but so did censorship of Black thought. Blind Blake's Jacksonville banned Langston Hughes's *Weary Blues* in 1926 from its public libraries. According to the report in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a white librarian considered it "below standard," and the book was discarded.[21] If the written word was below standard, one might imagine the contempt the records of the blind musicians might

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[20] James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (New York: The Viking press, 1933), 165-70.

[21] "Southern Public Library Bans Langston Hughes' Book of Poetry '*the Weary Blues*'," *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950).* March 20, 1926.

generate. This was not unique; local governments attempted to and succeeded in censoring and blocking the sale and distribution of the Black Press during the period of the musicians. This included the Chicago Defender, the Atlanta Independent, and other newspapers that featured advertisements for the musicians.[22]

The manner the musicians' may have experienced reports of terror and perceived their vulnerability to it is limited. Gary Davis recalled "I was so scared,…I felt like I had come close to getting' killed" after accidentally bumping into a white woman.[23] Josh White, who accompanied and assisted blind itinerant performers was deeply traumatized by an incident he witnessed. While he was travelling with John Henry Arnold, an unrecorded blind performer, they came upon a double lynching. He recalled the horrors of his experience in an interview.[24] Often the sadistic torture of African Americans was a form of mass entertainment described with indifference in news reports. This treatment of lynching in the general press was compounded by the fact that African Americans were otherwise absent from the news. Indeed, the writers for the Black Presses were much concerned with the terrorism in the South and throughout the country. The Race Riots which occurred across the country and peaked in 1919 were a contrast to the terrorism and torture that affected African Americans. The riots involved large groups of people targeted solely based on race, meaning every African American could have been targeted and involved without the guise

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[22] Erick Johnson, "The Great Migration Was a Triumph of the Black Press," *The New Pittsburgh Courier* 2016; William G. Jordan, *Black Newspapers and America's War for Democracy, 1914-1920*, 1 ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2001), 106, 24, 41.

[23] Interview with Lyttleton quoted in Ian Zack and ProQuest, *Say No to the Devil: The Life and Musical Genius of Rev. Gary Davis* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 27.

[24] Elijah Wald, *Josh White : Society Blues* (New York ; London: Routledge, 2002), 12-13.

of suspicion. Individuals were targeted to lynch and torture in order to terrorize the entire community, and entire communities were targeted during riots.

Kleege writes, "The assumption seems to be that because the blind are immune to images they must also be immune to the significance of the events, and therefore must be somehow detached from or indifferent to the nation's collective horror and grief."[25] These types of perceptions could have influenced audiences belief that musicians experienced the renewed racism differently than sighted because of the absence of visual terror.

1.2 IMAGINING THE DOWNHOME

African American discourse and expression and popular culture in the early twentieth century prompted a reconsideration of previous scholarship on the Black aesthetic. The musicians introduced a counter-narrative to descriptions of the suffering of sorrow songs that Du Bois describes "as the most beautiful expression of human experience this side of the seas."[26] This expression has been read as derived from similar experiences as the blues, and as a precursor of the blues. However, for Du Bois "there breathes a hope" in the sorrow songs while the downhome resolved to leave one's problems or wait for the apocalypse. These are hardly hopeful, but they are

[25] Georgina Kleege, "Blindness and Visual Culture, and Eyewitness Account" in Lennard J. Davis, *The Disability Studies Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 393.

[26] W. E. B. Du Bois, Henry Louis Gates, and Terri Hume Oliver, *The Souls of Black Folk : Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, Norton Critical Edition. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 251.

resolute. The sorrow songs and the downhome represented survivals down from the Black past, but the downhome blues often involved navigating the problems of modernity.

Blindness signified the preservation, survival, and stigma of a Black past. It served as a veil during the nadir of racial terror which pervaded America in the 1920s. Traces of the traumatic memory of slavery surfaced in texts and practices across society during this period, a half-century after Emancipation. Timothy Taylor writes, "In a consumer culture saturated by media messages, music can insinuate itself into one's memory and come to signify memories and experiences that one never actually had."[27] The musicians were mostly mendicant street performers, but the experience of their performances as mass-mediated popular phonograph records is critical. In this context, their influence as popular culture producers rooted in the past (as downhome) affected processes of collective memory formation among their audiences. The music suggested a period before its production, before the technologies which produced, distributed, and reproduced it.

The popularity of the blind title and the downhome with African American audiences, aside from representing a past, can also be read as resistance because both of these markers were /are abject to dominant cultural norms and values. While other modes of Black cultural production were engaging with dominant convention, either as cultural influence or some perceived form of validation, the musicians were on a separate course affirming an African American expression that was non-conformist. Blindness was a subtext of downhome non-conformity. Classic blues and jazz indeed portrayed an irreverence, but the expression was already modern, hybridized, and perceived as relevant in dominant culture. The primary national media outlets were interested in

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[27] Timothy D Taylor, "Performance and Nostalgia on the Oldies Circuit," in *Sound Souvenirs: Audio Technologies, Memory and Cultural Practices*, ed. Karin; Dijck Bijsterveld, José van (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009).

the celebrities of these styles. In contrast, the downhome musicians were popular, but invisible to the dominant culture. They are absent from the period's dominant mass media and present in the Black Press almost exclusively through advertising.

Downhome records served to establish a modernity, and a positioning in the present by providing a tangible object representing a Black sonic past—one that was funky, grooving, creative and cutting. The musicians as a collective produced hundreds of records all featuring the "Blind" epithet and this aesthetic of the past. David Scott writes that the archive is "…the dense network of allusions, events, concepts, images, stories, figures, personalities, that inhabit the sub-terrain of statements, animating them, giving them sense, as well as force."[28] The records, epithet, representations, sonic aesthetic, and subsequent discourse related to the past and the musicians are textual documents that represent an archive.

The downhome music of Blind Lemon Jefferson was marketed as old-time, but its popularity was new on Race records. Blindness can be interpreted as authenticating the internal experience of the past. The act of memory is always internal, while it is inseparable from its social context in the present. Because ocularcentric perceptions of blindness often involve an internal experience, aural expressions from this interiority that relate to a collective experience, whether imagined or lived, become intersubjective sonic artifacts. These mass mediated recordings united dislocated communities in which they were popular. The phonograph provided a new technology for communal ritual and subject formation. This is to say that every experience of the musicians expressed in their records defined the listener's unique relationship to a sonic past and an African American collectivity. Their music represented both a cultural relic and a popular commodified

[28] David Scott, "Introduction: On the Archaeologies of Black Memory," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, no. 26 (2008).

product. The recordings of the musicians, alongside recorded sermons, became the most popular varieties of Race records jazz, and blues during the mid to late 1920s.

During the period of production, other historical archives were constructing narratives that glorified the American past during the era of slavery. African Americans were written out of this history or discussed as having dispositions that were suited to and thrived under the conditions of captivity. Institutions like the American Medical Association and departments of government produced documents conspicuously detailing these sentiments in the early twentieth century.

Racist narratives of United States history, including those that erase African American experiences of trauma, emerged during the era of the musicians. These processes are described in studies in the early twenty-first century throughout cultural and collective memory scholarship. While there are variations in terminology, generally Ron Eyerman refers to "traumatic cultural memory," Marianne Hirsch to "postmemory," and Allison Landsberg to "prosthetic memory" in relation to the phenomena of cross-generational trauma.[29] The sonic past represented by the downhome was distanced by the phonographic performance but had the marker of the traumatic experience. This could have created a safe experience of a traumatic past, offering a vantage of that past that was distant and shared, and affirmed a collective dislocation from it.

Records located the listener in modernity, while the musicians' performances were reproduced from their distant space of blindness and downhomeness, regardless of where the listener was experiencing the recordings. A listener could identify with the sonic and the sentiment

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[29] Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008); Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

of the expression while the listener and performer occupied separate spaces. The listener was relating to a space created by themselves, the industry, the phonograph, and the musicians. Traumatic memory in media is recognized as "signifying cultural participation and belonging."[30] Listeners were aware that the same music was being similarly consumed throughout the country in African American communities, in a shared experience of a postmemory, or a prosthetic memory that was simultaneously familiar and distant.

Landsberg discusses the differentiation of the Proustian concepts of *mémoire voluntaire* and *mémoire involuntaire.* The blind epithet relates to the voluntary, "…conscious, willed, artificial archive, …" in that it was a deliberate engagement with an expression that was marked as the past.[31] The musicians' recorded production relates to the work of Landsberg on prosthetic memory, which she describes as "privately felt public memories which emerge at the interface of individual and collective experience derived from an encounter with a mass cultural representation of the past, when new images and ideas come into contact with a person's own archive of experience."[32] The relationship of the musicians to cultural memory was not singular but involved a range of associations related to listeners' subjectivities. This means that the representation of an imagined past had unique meanings to each consumer on an individual level, across socioeconomic strata in African American communities.

The audiences of the musicians were arguably mainly African American but determining the specific demographics of these audiences is impossible. With certainty, their audiences had

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[30] Allen Meek, "Cultural Trauma and the Media," in *Interdisciplinary Handbook of Culture and Trauma*, ed. Yochai Ataria, et al. (Switzerland: Springer, 2016), 31-37.

[31] Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*.

[32] Ibid., 19.

access and means to purchase records and a phonograph. Therefore, this included the more affluent and educated classes, but importantly also the working class for whom the technologies recently became accessible. As socioeconomic disparities broadened within African American communities during this period of Migration opportunities, hierarchies formed. However, the collective experience of life as African Americans in the United States was unifying. Du Bois presented a report at the Universal Races Congress in London in 1911. He described the African American experience and practices of discrimination as "disabilities under which Negroes suffer regardless of education, wealth, or degree of white blood." He lists thirteen of these present in the "Southern South" which he states contain 75 percent of the African American population of the United States. The disabilities Du Bois identifies are:

> 1.Cannot vote, or their votes are neutralised by fraud.
> 2. Must usually live in the least desirable districts.
> 3. Receive very low wages.
> 4. Are, in the main, restricted to menial occupations or the lower grades of skilled labour and cannot expect preferment or promotion.
> 5. Cannot by law intermarry with whites.
> 6. Cannot join white churches or Attend white colleges or join white cultural organisations.
> 7. Cannot be accommodated at hotels and restaurants or in any place of public entertainment.
> 8. Receive a distinct standard of justice in the courts and are especially liable to mob violence.
> 9. Are segregated so far as possible in every walk of life-in railway stations, railway trains, street-cars, lifts, etc., and usually made to pay equal prices for inferior accommodations.
> 10. Are often unable to protect their homes from invasion, their women from insult, and their savings from exploitation.
> 11. Are taxed for public facilities like parks and libraries, which they may not enter.
> 12. Are given meagre educational facilities and sometimes none at all.
> 13. Are liable to personal insult unless they appear as servants or menials or show deference to white folks by yielding the road, etc.[33]

[33] W.E.B Du Bois, "The Negro Race in the United States of America," in Universal Races Congress, Papers on Inter-Racial Problems, Communicated to the First Universal Races Congress, Held at the University of London, July 26-29, 1911, (London: P.S. King & Son, 1911). 361.

He follows this list by writing, "(A)s a rule, all Negroes, no matter what their training, possessions, or desert, are subjected to the (aforementioned) disabilities." [34] This means that socioeconomic status, education, and Migration did not protect African Americans from disability as described by Du Bois during the era of the musicians and their production. Considering audiences' perceptions of their own social disability and how it was reflected in the musicians' blindness is relevant to understanding the popularity of the musicians.

Downhome is used to describe the expression recorded by the musicians and is used here because it is a more appropriate designation than others commonly used. These include "folk," "country," and even "primitive," and are usually followed by the style they describe, the blues. Blues in this context includes a broad range of expression, secular and sacred. A number of the musicians are considered guitar evangelists and produced only gospel recordings. However, this is also considered "downhome" expression. The compound (downhome), hyphenated (down-home), and unhyphenated (down home) forms of this term have been used in print to describe a range of cultural production. The compound form is documented in texts only between 1925 and 1931, albeit minimally, and is otherwise absent during the first half of the twentieth century.[35] The downhome merely is defined as descriptive of the qualities of an unpretentious way of life, often

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[34] Ibid.

[35] Jean-Baptiste Michel et al., "Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books," *Science* 331, no. 6014 (2011). https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=downhome&year_start=1900&year_end=1950&corpus=5&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cdownhome%3B%2Cc0. Accessed June 18, 2017.

associated with the rural Southern United States.[36] This relates to African American[37] consumers of the musicians' records who were active in the demographic fluidity of the Great Migration.

Ethel Waters recorded "Down Home Blues" for Black Swan in 1921, demonstrating the terminology was present in Black popular culture since the first years of Race records. The term was active in larger popular culture before Waters' recording. Hollywood produced the silent film "Down Home" in 1920 based on the novel *Dabney Todd,* a drama about a woman who inherits a farm from her mother, the tragic events surrounding her inheritance, and ultimately a happily-ever-after ending. A 2016 feature film by the same "Down Home" is a comedy about a man that returns to Kentucky with his husband to take care of an ailing conservative father. In the context of both of these films, "Down Home" signifies a return to a prior familiar environment. Though the expression may have origins in African American communities, both of these films feature white actors, suggesting that the downhome has a long history and significance across race despite its close association with the blues and Black popular music. The downhome aesthetic on Race records was often solo performances by male vocalists accompanying themselves on acoustic guitar with the effect of spontaneous, inspired performances.

Blues scholar Jeff Titon recalls Big Bill Broonzy not "using very many labels at all" to describe the blues. This is consistent with practitioners and producers of other categorized artistic expressions because the classifications are often limiting, subsequent to their practice, and originate from outside of their communities. However, Titon recounts Broonzy and bassist Jojo

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[36] "Down-Home." Merriam-Webster.com, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/down-home. Accessed June 18, 2017.

[37] I use the terminology African American, as opposed to African-American here based on arguments that the formation of African American collectivity is distinct from other hyphenated Americanisms, as an identity imposed through the institution of slavery. This non-hyphenated terminology also reflects interpretations of Du Bois's double consciousness in that one's identity is not a modified Americanity, but a complex binary within a racist system.

Williams used the term "downhome" to refer to the music while listening to Charley Patton records. When asked about the downhome, Broonzy first responded that it meant "down south, on the farm." Apparently he was thinking more of a location than Williams, who elaborated that it meant "…back to the root, which means back to where it all start at, the blues and the church music, and so far as I can understand it came from the country, the fields and the shacks and towns that weren't but wide spaces in the highway."[38] This also points to a physical location, but more importantly to the idea of going "back" in both secular and sacred contexts. This is an expression that signified a retrospection, and in some minds a retrogression.[39]

In his book *Early Downhome Blues*, Titon writes "Downhome blues *is* folk music, but its earliest reliable documents are mass culture artifacts: commercial phonograph records from the 1920s." [40] His equation may have been written with the best intentions, but reads as problematic because it perpetuates constructions, observed by John Storey, of "folk culture" as products of "primitive rural isolation" that preserve earlier practices.[41] The centrality of blindness in mass-mediated downhome production is relevant to this idea of folklore, as it relates to cultural memory.

Musicologist Eileen Southern was unimpressed with Titon's definition of downhome. She criticizes his focus on "the same tired, old, worn stereotypes and myths as appear in earlier books

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[38] Jeff Todd Titon, "Labels: Identifying Categories of Blues and Gospel," in *The Cambridge Companion to Blues and Gospel Music*, ed. Allan F. Moore (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 18.

[39] See Levine's citation of the New York Times article from 1922 detailing the criticism of Black musical expression in a sermon by a Reverend in the city in Lawrence W. Levine, "Jazz and American Culture," *The Journal of American Folklore* 102, no. 403 (1989).

[40] Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Downhome Blues : A Musical and Cultural Analysis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977).

[41] John Storey, *Inventing Popular Culture : From Folklore to Globalization*, Blackwell Manifestos (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2003).

about black folks."[42] Yet, she writes in her *own* book, "The early anonymous singers of the blues were often wandering, sometimes blind, who carried their sorrowful songs from one black community to another, some of them sauntering down the railroad tracks or dropping from freight cars."[43] Downhome musicians, both blind and temporarily sighted, may have played sorrowful songs, but their blues were often wrought with irony across a range of emotion verse to verse. Langston Hughes described this complexity in 1927, "The mood of the *Blues* is almost always despondency, but when they are sung people laugh."[44] From Lemon Jefferson's, "just like you're taking mine, I'll take someone else's too," Blind Boy Fuller "trying to walk my troubles away," Blind Blake "gonna catch that train southbound," or Blind Willie Davis going "back home," the musicians nearly always resolved their problems, often through their mobility.[45]

The segregation in the record industry is important to note because African American artists were not performing for the white gaze, so their production was not intended and packaged to sell to white markets. The 1926 introduction of downhome by blind musicians demonstrates that in some regard the "specter of minstrelsy" was diminishing because they reinscribed a type of Jim Crow character. Though their character involved the idea of a Southern, rural, disabled, African American, their performance was not a farce. On the contrary, they were highly skilled musicians with unique individual styles whose phonograph popularity involved the transmission of the sonic aspect of their performance. The popular vaudevillian blues that preceded the

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[42] Eileen Southern, "Reviewed Works: *Early Downhome Blues. A Musical and Cultural Analysis* by Jeff Todd Titon; *Living Country Blues* by Harry Oster; *Jamaica: Babylon on a Thin Wire* by Adrian Boot, Michael Thomas," *The Black Perspective in Music* 6, no. 1 ((1978): 97.

[43] *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Norton, 1983), 330.

[44] Langston Hughes, *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (New York, NY: A.A. Knopf, 1927), 15.

[45] Blind Lemon Jefferson, "Rambler Blues;" Blind Boy Fuller, "Walking My Blues Away;" Blind Blake, "Georgia Bound Blues;" Blind Willie Davis, "I Believe I'll Go Back Home."

downhome, however, was more theatrical, and their live performances were a major component of their popularity. This is evident through well-documented advertisements and reviews in the Black press.

Titon writes, "Two kinds of blues songs were recorded in that decade: downhome and vaudeville." He continues to describe the general sound of each: "An easily audible but not always reliable distinction is that women sang vaudeville blues, whereas men sang downhome blues accompanying themselves on guitar." While this may be factual generally, the point is complicated by the fact that Ethel Waters' "Down Home Blues" was a vaudeville blues. Musicians like Blind Mamie Forehand and Arizona Dranes were actors in the trope of blindness and downhome which further problematizes Titon's assertion that gender is a defining factor.

The records of the blind musicians were marketed to African American consumers in a manner that suggests that white consumers were a rare exception, and not a consideration in production, marketing, and distribution. The perceptions of white record executives about the marketability of Black popular music decided which musicians had the opportunity to record, but ultimately the continued careers of the artists who had the opportunity were determined by their popularity with African American consumers. "The recorded blues was a music largely by and for Negroes. Throughout the 1920s Negroes bought blues records in large numbers," according to Levine.[46] Wardlow, Titon, and Evans also suggest the centrality of African American audiences as consumers of blues records. Notably, the downhome records from the 1920s Charters encountered in New Orleans in the 1950s had been listened to often enough to wear out their grooves. This may also have resulted in the use of inferior materials used by the record companies

[46] Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 274-75.

that produced the records, supporting the notion that they were unaware of the legacy being documented. Charters speculates consumers would fashion a stylus out of a nail which did little to preserve the sonic quality embedded in the records.[47] Guitarist John Fahey supports the suggestion that downhome records and specifically those by the musicians were heavily played. His description of a Paramount record by Blind Joe Death recorded in 1927 reveals the first side was worn beyond playability. Fahey owned a copy of the uncatalogued record of "John Henry," (Paramount 12522). The record may have sold poorly and not been printed after the first limited issue in 1927.[48]

The "Blind" title was not nearly as distinctive as others—Leadbelly, Honey Boy, Pine Top, and others. Even those that indicate a disability, Peg-Leg, and Cripple, were associated with one artist. The "Blind" title formed a collective and became a presence in the Race record era. It is unclear whether the artists used the "Blind" title before their recording careers. The perception that "(R)ace records may be of the race and for the race, but not fully by the race," may have influenced some artists with the "Blind" title as well as their musical choices for recordings.[49] Most of the artists had the opportunity to record because they were regionally celebrated performers recommended to talent scouts, through requests submitted to dealers or possibly along with mail order purchases to record companies. Paramount Records, the label most closely associated with

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[47] Alex van der Tuuk, *Paramount's Rise and Fall: The Roots and History of Paramount Records* (Denver: Mainspring Press, 2012), xii.

[48]Fahey released an album titled "Blind Joe Death" in 1959, disparaged by Lowenthal as "an absurdist prank of a white suburbanite appropriating the tropes of country bluesmen." https://www.loc.gov/programs/static/national-recording-preservation-board/documents/Fahey.pdf. Accessed November 24, 2017.

[49] William Howland Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life : The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 110.

the musicians, placed advertisements in the Black Press that offered cash-on-delivery record sales through the mail.

Despite the varied production on Race records, the "Blind" appellation during this period is nearly exclusively in the downhome style. The singular sonic represented by blindness produced on Race records implied the condition rendered musicians unable to express anything else but the past, excluding them from modernity. Their popularity complicated this. For the record companies, the musicians had no reason to produce anything else while the downhome was selling! Thus, a modern technology presented blindness as the past. Implying blind musicians were incapable of participating in modernity equally distanced African American audiences from the past, in effect affirming their place in modernity. Despite the marvel that the phonograph transmitted downhome performances into the homes of listeners across the country, the quality of the transmission and sonic artificiality alone was distancing. This relates to other technological innovations of the 1920s that transformed life in the United States, both for the better and worse. Innovations in agriculture, like the tractor, which increased productivity and in so doing devalued markets eliminating employment opportunities for sharecroppers and tenant farmers, and deflated entire agricultural communities' infrastructures.

As agrarian forms of manual labor were minimized through modern innovations, workers' skills became obsolete. The psychological impact of this experience, a factor which impelled the migration of African Americans, relates to the idea of blindness. Production limiting blind musical expressions to a downhome aesthetic paralleled Southern African American laborers whose skills were relegated obsolete by modern technologies. The perceptual limitations which migrated communities experienced as they pursued opportunities in unfamiliar urban landscapes relate to the idea of blindness as a condition which challenges navigating foreign environments.

African American artists, across disciplines, produced work considered transgressive by members *within* their communities during the period, while the communities themselves confronted threats of discrimination and physical violence from *without* them. The "Blind" title positioned musicians in a space that was both marginalized and celebrated— as disabled, African American, popular recording artists. Blindness in this regard was transgressive, disability declared with a capital "B." The title was a bold statement, and in this regard may have been empowering, even as a marketing scheme by artists and record companies. It was also stigmatizing, reflecting the disparaging and derogatory racial epithets used against African Americans. Such terminology is often redefined with its usage from within the community.

Whether musicians self-identified with the title is uncertain, but in marketing and production, both the "Blind" title and the musical expression associated with it were decided by record executives. Willie McTell referred to himself as "Blind" Willie McTell late in his life, suggesting a reimagining of the epithet by the musicians may have occurred after they became celebrated recording artists.[50] Blues is a musical genre well known for its practitioners' titles, or nicknames. Evans' comprehensive study of blues nicknames notes eighteen artists who had the "Blind" title.[51] Along with his decades of field research, he acknowledges Dixon and Godrich's discography as a valuable resource for his study. There are a significantly greater number of instances of the title in this resource.[52] While a number of these names are pseudonyms for

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[50] Michael Gray, *Hand Me My Travelin' Shoes : In Search of Blind Willie Mctell* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2009).

[51] David Evans, "From Bumble Bee Slim to Black Boy Shine: Nicknames of Blues Singers," in *Ramblin' on My Mind New Perspectives on the Blues*, ed. David Evans (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

[52] Robert M. W. Dixon et al., *Blues & Gospel Records, 1890-1943* (Oxford [England]; New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1997).

musicians who recorded as “Blind,” the presence of the title being maintained in this context becomes more meaningful. Its use suggests the title's role as a marker of the expression, not a defining quality of an artist as a pseudonym.

Gilroy writes, “The discourse of authenticity has been a notable presence in the mass marketing of successive black folk cultural forms to white audiences. The distinction between rural and urban blues provides one good example of this.” [53] This recognition of the commercial viability of realness across racial difference may apply to Post-War blues revivals. During the period of the musicians, authenticity was written into the Blind moniker in mass marketing to African American audiences. The musicians were supposedly authentic because they played “old-time” music from the rural South. They became the leading sellers for the companies who marketed them, but how this aspect of realness was relevant to audiences is debatable. Later white audiences were interested in authenticity because it represented quality, and this may be the reasoning behind white record executives marketing tactics of the musicians.

The musicians produced recordings that were immediately labeled old-time, but they were not revivalists. Nostalgia for the “old-time” was a marketing scheme of the record industry used across divisions. However, African American audiences reading of this marketing may have been less about quality than a nostalgia for an idea of the past. Regardless of the presence or absence of comfort and security in the past, the idea of memory was grounding for communities establishing a collectivity that faced an unknown future within the United States. The past was known, and its challenges survived. The musicians’ old-time downhome music signified the familiar.

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[53] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 99.

1.3 GREAT MIGRATION, MOBILITY, AND DISLOCATION

The Great Migration involved African American communities active in the mobility that began after emancipation and continued through the mid-twentieth century. The musicians' described the migration in their recordings. Blind Blake's "Detroit Bound Blues" has the chorus, "I'm going to get a job, up there in Mr. Ford's place, I'm going to get a job, up there in Mr. Ford's place; stop these eatless days from staring me in the face!" This was from a pre-migrated position, the downhome. Other songs describe a migrant's disappointment. This was an internal migration from the rural South to urban centers throughout the country, often reduced to the idea of relocation from the provincial to the cosmopolitan. This sounds very simple, and may have been for some individuals; however, the migration was a much more fluid and complex experience for others in the Southern exodus. Griffin offers that "'Southern' is a metaphor for all sites where black people are dispossessed, disenfranchised, and brutalized" and this was by no means limited to the South.[54]

Inspiring stories in the Black Press portrayed an idealized version of the Migration in the first decades of the twentieth century. Migrants may have read or heard about opportunities and anticipated them. "Yankee land, my future home, O how I long for thee" were two lines from "Bound For The Promised Land," a poem that appeared in *The Chicago Defender* in 1916, 1917, and 1930.[55] The newspaper described the North as the "Promised Land" and credited the poem with causing "more men to leave the Southland than any other single effort." While the poem is moving, the logistics and realities of moving were quite less romantic. By 1935, Charles S.

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[54] Farah Jasmine Griffin, "Who Set You Flowin'?" The African-American Migration Narrative, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). 187.

[55] The poem was written by "Mr. Ward of Jacksonville." "Bound for the Promised Land," *Chicago Defender* December 23 1916, 1.

Johnson's perception of the disillusion experienced by migrants who found conditions only marginally better than the place they left, "This migration has resulted in a serious crisis in Negro life and progress" is contrary to previous idealizations.[56] Audiences of migrants often experienced the musicians outside of the spaces with which they were associated— a dislocation expressed as a sonic nostalgia. Regardless of opportunities migrants created or never realized, a collective disillusion in the possibility of an egalitarian United States was shared that may have charged the nostalgic quality of the musicians' records. A collective disillusion is described in texts produced after what is sometimes considered the first period of the Great Migration (1916-1930); as in Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) and in the journals *The Crisis* (of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), and *Opportunity* (of the National Urban League).

Cornel West identifies the Great Migration as "the central metaphor for Black modernity."[57] This is relevant to the argument that the musicians were vital to affirming this modernity by providing a unique Black expression of a Black past that was impossible to be redefined by whites. Marable asserts, "In a racist society, by this (I mean) a society deeply stratified with 'whiteness' defined at the top and 'blackness' occupying the bottom rungs– the obliteration of the black past is essential to the preservation of white hegemony, or domination."[58] In this context, the recognition that the musicians' records preserved expressions of that "past" is

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[56] Charles Spurgeon Johnson, *A Preface to Racial Understanding* (New York: Friendship Press, 1936), 56. Johnson became chair of the sociology department at Fisk University in 1926.

[57] Clarence E. Hardy, "From Exodus to Exile: Black Pentecostals, Migrating Pilgrims, and Imagined Internationalism," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2007): 739.

[58] Manning Marable, *Living Black History : How Reimagining the African-American Past Can Remake America's Racial Future* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2006), 20.

important. The migration was founded in the desire to migrate social status and was not merely a geographic reference. The Great Migration was an assertion of mobility and autonomy. Levine quotes Pierson who describes the dual meaning of the Migration, "In our lexicon, movement means improvement."[59] Moving on is a common theme in the blues, but moving on also affected a desire for going back, a nostalgia.

While the formation of the past is a fluid, continuing process, a defined moment of this process is identifiable during the period of the musicians' productivity. Their recordings were objects of popular culture that had the effect of unifying African American communities in the process of dispersion throughout the United States. Individuals in this process of mobility often encountered resistance, and were sometimes subjected to acts of violence. A potential break could be imposed when experiencing downhome records within unfamiliar, unwelcoming spaces, and involved a reframing of an African American past. This reconciliation of the memory of the past in the United States was prevalent during the 1920s across race, as in writing of histories previously described, but also manifested in the actions of supremacist and hate groups. Groups like the Sons of the Confederacy and the Daughters of the Confederacy were involved in creating commemorations to Confederate military leaders, including the three-acre Stone Mountain relief that began work in Georgia in 1922.[60] The site previously witnessed the reformation of the Ku Klux Klan. The Confederate leaders' treasonous attempt at secession was founded in the interest

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[59] Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, 267.

[60] Booth; Kizzire Gunter, Jamie; Kent, Cindy "Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy," (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016).

of maintaining slavery, regardless of Confederate groups' arguments that they commemorate heroic legacies.

The interwar period witnessed the fluid existence of a compound-Global North and South for many within the United States, in no small degree as the result of the system of apartheid.[61] In 1925, Locke wrote "A railroad ticket and a suitcase, like a Bagdad carpet, transport the Negro peasant from the cotton-field and farm to the heart of the most complex urban civilization. Here in the mass, he must and does survive a jump of two generations in social economy and of a century and more in civilisation."[62] African Americans who participated in the Migration often experienced traversing the coexistent premodern and modern environments in the early twentieth century and were subjected to contempt from individuals not only of white society but also from established African American and recently immigrated European communities who also arrived with virtually nothing but the memory of their prior existence. They also retained skill sets of rural practices that became obsolete in urban existence, which may relate to the popularity of the musicians because much of their lyrical content involved modern problems experienced by migrants in a sonic that signified the rural.

The period witnessed an increased and renewed marginalization and exclusion of African Americans, through acts of racial terrorism in riots and lynchings to disenfranchisement and limited social resources throughout the United States. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* was released and

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[61] The formation of clearly defined racial structures in the United States occurred by the late nineteenth century. The Black-white binary was one component; however, a complex system of minority status was shared among communities of indigenous Americans, Latin Americans, European and Asian immigrants, and Others. Please refer to Michael Omi, *Racial Formation in the United States, 3rd ed.* (London: Routledge, 2015).for a detailed discussion.

[62] Alain Locke, "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro," *Survey Graphic* 6, no. 6 (1925).

the Ku Klux Klan reformed in 1915, two interrelated events that promoted acts of violence against African Americans.[63] Communities of African Americans across socioeconomic strata that were not personally subjected to acts of violence were unified by the psychological experience of recognizing that they were members of a collectivity ostracized solely based on race regardless of one's experience, education, class, heritage, and abled normativity.

Disabling social constructions, as well as processes that indirectly contributed to impairment, are central to this discussion. However, there is potential for discussion to become overdetermined and circular relating to the musicians. Tremain describes the processes whereby "…during the past two centuries, in particular, a vast apparatus, erected to secure the well-being of the general population, has caused the contemporary disabled subject to emerge into discourse and social existence."[64] This Foucauldian idea of bio-power or bio-politics is relevant to the intersectional marginalizing subjectivities of the musicians– race, class, and disability. The evidence of the convergence of these subjectivities relevant to the study has infrequently been addressed, resulting in what has been described as a "profound silence about race" in disability research.[65] While the experiences of the musicians varied, their appellation could have signified an exclusion with which their audiences could empathize. This empathy is a prominent theme in blues and gospel from the 1920s and remains so in the early twenty-first century.

A number of the musicians were of the first generations of African Americans not born during the era of slavery, and their generation transitioned not only from bondage to freedom but

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[63] D. W. Griffith, *Birth of a Nation,* (1914; Indianapolis: Kartes Productions), Film.

[64] Shelley Tremain, ed. *Foucault and the Government of Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 5.

[65] Alfredo J. Artiles, "Untangling the Racialization of Disabilities," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 10, no. 2 (2013): 331.

from the agrarian to the industrial era. Boster's work discusses slavery and disability in the United States, which has contributed to enriching the field of disability studies both regarding race and its historical period. In this study, the social dynamics and hierarchical formations within African American communities post-Reconstruction are relevant to perceptions of disability.

1.4 PUBLIC HEALTH IN AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

During the Great Depression, blindness became more clearly documented just by the time of approval of Title Ten of the Social Security Act of 1935, which granted a person public assistance based on blindness. Before this definition of blindness, social services, organizations, and accessibility for the blind community were in their nascent stages in the United States. The American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) was founded in 1921; twenty years later in 1941, the National Federation for the Blind (NFB) was formed by members of the blind community. Another twenty years later in 1961, the American Council for the Blind (ACB) formed as a response to dissatisfaction with the NFB. Whether the musicians were affiliated with the AFB during the early period of their recordings is uncertain, but the concurrent establishment of the group of advocates and activists for the blind with the musicians' popularity is notable.

A report from 1943 by the Social Security Administration admits that the 1930 census attempted enumeration "without any precise definition of blindness." In 1940, the census did not attempt to document blindness. While what exactly blindness meant was uncertain, an individual's disqualifications to assistance in the Title were clear. This excluded "any individual who is an

inmate of a public institution (except as a patient in a medical institution) or any individual who is a patient in an institution for tuberculosis or mental diseases."[66]

Communities with access to optometry and ophthalmological care could address correctable visual impairment, a privilege mostly unavailable to underserved African American communities, particularly in the rural South. People with correctable vision without access or means for eyeglasses could be considered blind without them, and legally blind by today's definition. Some of the musicians may have experienced correctable visual impairment that uncorrected was disabling.

The following Table illustrates the disparity in the blind population across racial difference (Table 1). While the variables in conducting, tallying, and understanding of blindness affected these numbers, they are worthy of note. Blindness was calculated as occurring in fifty-eight per one hundred thousand whites compared to ninety-four per one-hundred thousand African Americans. This shows that the blind population within African American communities was roughly sixty percent higher than in white communities in 1910.

[66] Social Security Administration, "Compilation of the Social Security Laws," https://www.ssa.gov/OP_Home/ssact/title10/1006.htm. Accessed November 24, 2017.

Table 1. Census Table of Blind Population 1910

Table 25	POPULATION OF THE UNITED STATES: 1910.				
	Total.		Blind.		
RACE AND NATIVITY.	Number.	Per cent distribution.	Number.	Per cent distribution.	Number per 100,000 general population of same race and nativity.
All classes	91,972,266	100.0	57,272	100.0	62.3
White	81,731,957	88.9	47,585	83.1	58.2
Native	68,386,412	74.4	37,646	65.7	55.0
Foreign born	13,345,545	14.5	9,939	17.4	74.5
Colored	10,240,309	11.1	9,687	16.9	94.6
Negro	9,827,763	10.7	8,849	15.5	90.0
Other colored	412,546	0.4	838	1.5	203.1
Indian	265,683	0.3	804	1.4	302.6
Chinese, Japanese, and all other	146,863	0.2	34	0.1	23.2

A Southern physician addressing the American Public Health Association in 1914 stated, "there was no more healthy a race of people to be found anywhere in the world than the slaves of the South before the Civil War,…It is undoubtedly true that Negro race has deteriorated physically and morally since slavery times." This type of language is common in the era's public health records. As these types of histories were being written, in effect constructing one version of a Black past, the musicians were being described as performing music that expressed another.

In 1892, a doctor from South Carolina declared in his paper, "The Eye of the Negro" to the American Ophthalmological Society that "blindness is rampant among them" and that the diminishing health of the African American community during Reconstruction would impact the white community.[67] Concerning blindness related to congenital infections, Kollock states that "Parents are utterly indifferent to the condition of their children, allowing them to go unattended

[67] Charles W. Kollock, "The Eye of the Negro," *Transactions of the American Ophthalmological Society* 6 (1892).

for months, or, perhaps, using the filthiest of domestic remedies" and that "in too numerous instances, they never consult a physician at all." The suggestion that African Americans were careless because they did not consult a physician neglects the realities of racist health care practices; doctors were costly if they were available in rural communities. The disparities in health care were not limited to rural underserved communities. Lewis describes Du Bois's loss of his two-year-old son to illness related to diphtheria in 1899 after he was unable to locate an African American doctor nor a willing white doctor for treatment in the city of Atlanta.[68] At the time, Du Bois was a professor at Atlanta University researching social injustices against African Americans in Georgia.

The descriptions of African Americans as members of an "uncivilized race" throughout public health documents reveal perceptions within institutions of power. These manifested in the most uncivil acts of terror by white Americans. Sadistic acts of violence and murder against African Americans by white mobs was considered entertainment in the Southern United States during the nadir. In a posthumously published book, Frederick Douglass wrote of violence against African Americans, "Not a breeze comes to us from the late rebellious states that is not tainted and freighted with Negro blood."[69] Any rumor could result in criminal acts of vigilantism including torture and lynching. This was a reality in the Southern communities into which these musicians were born, and indeed, one that affected the blind African American community in unique ways.

Visual determinants of race based on skin color precede audible cues like voice and the musicians who used "lead boys" or guides could have done so merely to navigate the dangers

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[68] David L. Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois--Biography of a Race, 1868-1919*, 1st ed. (New York: H. Holt, 1993), 226-28.

[69] Frederick Douglass, *Why Is the Negro Lynched?* (Bridgwater: John Whitby and Sons, 1895).

posed by racism. Mobility for the blind community is considered fundamental to establishing independence. The musicians traveled with people who assisted and also performed with them. During the period of the musicians as a result of their participation in the First World War, dogs began training in their role as assistants for the blind. This training that almost arrived in the United States in 1928 was to begin with less than one hundred dogs, but the proposal was rejected because of the projected cost of $150 for a trained dog, an enormous sum for the time.[70] Anecdotes about Lemon Jefferson as a young man describe his independent mobility, walking long distances unassisted (his contemporary recalled him walking 7 or 8 miles alone between towns), yet later was said to travel with a companion as an adult in a heightened atmosphere of racial terror that occurred in the first decades of the twentieth century.[71] Josh White recounted assisting and performing with the musicians, although there is skepticism about his accounts, which some felt were merely fantastic self-promotion.[72]

A half-century after Emancipation, a report on the dire condition of public health for African Americans was expressed as a concern of the white hegemony for themselves. A 1913 congress entitled "The Negro's Progress in Fifty Years" provides a vantage into perceptions of the *American Academy of Politics and Social Sciences.* The voice of the hegemony reported a widespread perception that "the Negro race in the United States is fast dying out."[73] One presentation "The White Man's Debt to the Negro" states, "The inefficients of the race, the

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[70] Frances A. Koestler, *The Unseen Minority: A Social History of Blindness in America* (New York: D. McKay Co, 1976), 305-08.

[71] Alan Govenar, "Blind Lemon Jefferson: The Myth and the Man," *Black Music Research Journal* 20, no. 1 (2000): 8.

[72] Wald, *Josh White : Society Blues*, 21-22.

[73] American Academy of Political and Social Science, *The Negro's Progress in Fifty Years*, The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science (Philadelphia1913), 138.

handicapped, the unambitious, the physically and morally degenerate–all these remain in the economic morass which we regard as purely racial."[74] This recognition of the overall economic impact on society as opposed to the effect on African American communities is telling of the systemic racism that was in place. Public health systems became increasingly segregated, affecting the blind African American community. For example, two years after this report, white nurses were forbidden by law to care for African American males in Alabama.[75]

Public health records from the early twentieth-century attribute nearly a quarter of the incidents of blindness in African American communities to hyperacute bacterial conjunctivitis, *ophthalmia neonatorum* often resultant from the neonatal transmission of congenital infections. This occurrence was mostly prevented in affluent communities by adequate medical treatment inaccessible to marginalized communities (and not successfully treated anywhere until 1943 with the introduction of penicillin). A report from 1926, "The Health Problem of the Negro Child" in the *American Journal of Public Health* indicates that in 1915, infant morbidity rates for African Americans doubled those of white Americans. The physicians who wrote the report attributed the prevalence of midwifery in the African American community to this statistic.[76] They ask the question, "Are the deplorable health conditions among the negroes inherent, and due to racial inferiority, to difficulties of acclimatization?" This query seems preposterous considering the extenuating circumstances of centuries of slavery recently abolished. The report states that "Gonorrhea in both sexes is all too frequent in the negro and exacts a large toll in destroying

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[74] L. H. Hammond, "The White Man's Debt to the Negro," ibid.49: 69.

[75] Leslie Vincent Tischauser, *Jim Crow Laws* (Santa Barbara, Calif: Greenwood, 2012), 168.

[76] P. Zentai and J. H. Knox, "The Health Problem of the Negro Child," *American Journal of Public Health* 16, no. 8 (1926): 806.

potential infant life and producing *ophthalmia neonatorum.*" Regardless of the racial politics involved in this assertion, it relates to the musicians whose production began the year of this publication by perpetuating disabling constructions. These dominant perceptions contributed to stigmas that influenced further maltreatment and marginalization within healthcare. Inadequate medical equipment impelled the practice of midwifery in marginalized communities which were often unequipped to address obstetric complications. Indeed, exclusionary practices necessitated the same practices of midwifery that were criticized.

1.5 OBSTETRICS, MIDWIFERY, EARLY BLINDNESS

Bacterial infections of the eye, *trachoma*, usually begin with *conjunctivitis*, commonly known as "pink eye." If untreated, the infections can result in visual impairment and blindness. These infections occur most frequently in children between three and six years of age and are the world's leading infectious cause of blindness according to the World Health Organization and American Academy of Ophthalmology.[77] In underserved African American communities in the rural South during Reconstruction, clean water sources and sanitary environments were often scarce, complicating the treatment of conjunctivitis. This includes the treatment of neonates who experience eye infections. The dearth of documentation of the early (and often entire) lives of the

[77] Van Charles Lansingh, "Trachoma," *BMJ clinical evidence* 2016 (2016). "Trachoma," World Health Organization, July 20017, http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs382/en/. Kierstan Boyd, "What is Trachoma?" *American Academy of Ophthalmology*, October 2015, https://www.aao.org/eye-health/diseases/what-is-trachoma.

musicians of this study, including birth certificates, suggests physicians did not attend their births and if subsequent postnatal eye infections developed, were not treated medically.

The musicians that produced in the 1920s and 30s were born around the turn of the twentieth century into rural poverty in the Southern United States; therefore, as either the children or grandchildren of former slaves, they had few resources for medical care. Blindness may have occurred in marginalized communities as a result of attempts to *treat* neonatal eye conditions by applying poultices to the eyes. While some of these may have healed, others aggravated.[78] The public health documentation from the early twentieth century regarding the prevalence of visual impairment in African American communities, especially in comparison with the descriptions of white communities, served to further racially based devaluation and marginalization.

Midwives functioned as first responders in underserved communities, to care for prenatal and postpartum mothers and children as well as anyone else in need of urgent care. References to midwives as "ignorant" and "evil" and the repeated disparagement of African Americans in a paper presented in 1912 to the American Public Health Association by a physician illustrate the conspicuous racial prejudice within institutions providing public care.[79] In the musicians' communities, health professional shortages and medical technologies were infrequently used to treat conditions of the eyes. This includes *neonatal conjunctivitis* which would have infrequently received medical treatment following births attended by midwives, its prohibitive costs, and

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[78] At the beginning of the twenty-first century, 83 percent of predominantly African American rural counties in the United States are classified as health professional shortage areas (HPSAs), L. Howe, "Note on the Increase of Blindness in the United States," *Transactions of the American Ophthalmological Society* 4 (1887): 537.

[79] Janice C. Probst et al., "Person and Place: The Compounding Effects of Race/Ethnicity and Rurality on Health," *American Journal of Public Health* 94, no. 10 (2004).

inaccessibility in remote communities could have resulted in blindness by the treatable condition.[80] So indeed, there was a prevalence of blindness in Southern economically disadvantaged communities related to conditions that were treated in communities with access.

A number of the aforementioned medical conditions associated with visual impairment were treated in communities with economic means, usually with silver nitrate. The administration of silver nitrate to newborns' eyes to prevent complications in the transmission of bacteria that could result in blindness began decades earlier.[81] A 1910 report indicates that children considered blind from birth sometimes lost their vision during the first three years of life. The report suggests this is related to *ophthalmia neonaturum.*[82] This means that blindness occurred because of a lack of adequate medical care that would have affected the communities of the musicians. A report from 1920 on blindness in the United States indicates that "a notable campaign" was waged against *trachoma* and *ophthalmia neonaturum* which lowered rates of blindness in the Southern states over the decade between 1910 and 1920. Statistics report higher incidents of blind African Americans in Northern states during the first decades of the twentieth century than the South.[83] The report speculates that dangerous workplaces for recently migrated African Americans resulted in eye injuries causing blindness, and more accurate reporting was the cause of this increase.

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[80] National Eye Institute, "Pink Eye (Conjunctivitis)," *National Institute of Health,* https://nei.nih.gov/health/pinkeye/pink_facts. Accessed February 3, 2018.

[81] P. M. Dunn, "Dr Carl Credé (1819-1892) and the Prevention of Ophthalmia Neonatorum," *Archives of Disease in Childhood. Fetal and Neonatal Edition* 83, no. 2 (2000): 158-59.

[82] Reginald L. Brown and Census United States. Bureau of the, "The Blind in the United States, 1910," (Washington Government Document: G.P.O, 1917).

[83] Census United States. Bureau of the and Bennet Loomis Mead, "The Blind in the United States. 1920," (1923).

As ophthalmological and obstetric care were mostly unavailable and unaffordable in underserved communities, so was the prevention of other disease-causing pathogens vertically transmitted in utero between mother and baby attributable to the prevalence of visual impairment during this era. This etiology is speculated about the musicians in current documentation, even within informal discussions on websites made by blues enthusiasts. Paul Oliver supposes the condition of blindness in the musicians could be attributable to congenital syphilis.[84] These discussions' racist implications quickly become problematic in their supposition.

Racist biases in reports of the prevalence of gonorrhea and syphilis in African American communities in the early twentieth century suggest promiscuity and unhygienic behaviors. Public welfare structures were complicit in promoting racialized misperceptions. While that line of thinking was irrational, other suggestions were even more deeply unfounded. In the previously cited paper to the American Ophthalmological Society in 1892, the doctor summarizes, "(I)t may be said the eye of the negro is retrograding, which retrogression is due to three causes, viz. civilization, syphilis, and education."[85] The suggestion that visual impairment in African American communities was the result of integration is astounding. The danger of the absurdity of this report implying that African Americans should not be assimilated into society for their own health offers insight into the manipulation of facts by institutions that resulted in justifying Jim Crow. This unsubstantiated claim that literacy was causing blindness in African American communities is only compounded by the fact that is was generated by a physician. For dominant structures, blindness in the musicians could be the effect of modernity. These implications relate to the musicians' blindness. They were born in the decade that the ideas were presented. However,

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[84] Oliver, *Songsters and Saints : Vocal Traditions on Race Records*, 208.
[85] Kollock, "The Eye of the Negro," 262.

their suggestions impacted all African Americans. In the same article, the doctor states that white people were responsible for syphilis infection in African American communities because it was not believed to be present in Africa. These examples illuminate processes of racial bias and fallacy generated by institutions and academies of medicine which influenced public fear and hostility based on misinformation.

Other racial implications of the mythology of syphilis in medical reports are also worth noting because of their relevance to the musicians. One of these traces the disease to sailors with Columbus first contracting the disease through contact with indigenous populations in the Americas which were then introduced to Europe.[86] These implications of blindness and disease can be traced to the oppressive culture's justifications for slavery and genocide over centuries, but they also relate to the famous eugenic theory of the period. These included a resistance to cholera and malaria in African American communities or in designing new diseases like "*drapetomania aethiopicus* (a disease that compelled slaves to run away repeatedly) and *dysaesthesia aethiopica* (a more general laziness or insensibility.)"[87] These considerations are significant to the discussion of these musicians because of their association with Black disability generally and disabling perceptions based on systemic racism.

Approaching the discussion of the presence of syphilis and other venereal diseases transmitted vertically which resulted in neonatal ocular infections in African Americans is

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[86] V. M. Métivier, "A Study in Syphilis: The Causation of Ophthalmic Disorders in Coloured Races, with Special Reference to the British West Indies," *The British journal of venereal diseases* 13, no. 4 (1937): 246-47.

[87] Dea Boster, "Unfit for Ordinary Purposes," in *Disability Histories*, ed. Michael A. Rembis, Burch, Susan (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 209; Dr. A. Merrill, "Distinctive Peculiarities and Diseases of the Negro Race," *Debow's review, Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial Progress and Resources* 20, no. 5 (1856).

troubling because of its implications of promiscuity and poor hygiene. As propaganda, the subject frequently appears in both historical and current stereotyping of African American communities, while syphilis and other venereal diseases were closeted from discussions of their presence in white communities. For many African Americans subjected to slavery, maintaining a private life would have posed an enormous challenge. If personal privacy existed within their community, it would have been limited to an empty gesture by their captors. Only a few decades after emancipation, skewed statistical information of health issues within African American communities became technologies of exploitation and subordination.

The disparities from the era and which continue to marginalize communities in the twenty-first century serve in a cyclical continuation of social health issues. For instance, higher incidences of infection, infant mortality, and untreated childbirth complications in underserved African American communities continue to reflect structures of institutional racism but are often misrepresented by mischaracterizations by these institutions to suggest a healthier white community. During the period of this discussion, hospitals in the South were segregated, and practices of systemic disparity were not deemed unconstitutional until a 1964 Supreme Court decision, a century after the Thirteenth Amendment.[88] These practices were informed and directed by the public health reports previously discussed.

Blindness was still undefined by the medical community and government in the era of the musicians. The 1934 proceedings by the House of Delegates of the American Medical Association Section on Opthalmology attempted to define blindness at the request of the Department of Public

[88] "Hospital Segregation," *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*, February 18 1928, A2; "Racial Segregation in Hospitals Banned," *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, March 3 1964.

Welfare of the State of Illinois. The Delegates assigned categories of "ability" to the degree of visual impairment that determined blindness. They constructed a hierarchy of blindness by assigning different grades of blindness. This "how blind" gradation further reveals the equivocal nature of visual impairment and what constituted a subject's "ability." The group of ophthalmologists designated four categories of blindness–total blindness, which indicates a subject with no light perception; economic blindness, "is the absence of the ability to do any kind of work" with the visual acuity of one tenth (20/200); vocational blindness, which makes it impossible for one to continue previous work but allows for sufficient sight to learn and maintain a trade providing a job skill; educational blindness, renders one incapable of learning by methods commonly used in schools, necessitating "two types of schooling,…sight saving classes and schools for the blind."[89] The centrality of economic viability to these categories is notable. The same report reminds the reader, "Another important factor to remember in connection with the considerable proportion of blindness among Negroes, is their relatively greater susceptibility to disease in general, together with insufficient care in its treatment." This was the racist climate in which the musicians were producing popular music as blind, disabled, African Americans. In this regard, social structures marked the musicians, and thus their popular music production as vulnerable to disease, uneducable, and better off not participating in modernity.

In an 1887 paper presented to the American Ophthalmological Society, a physician noted that while the general population of the United States increased roughly 30 percent, there was a 140 percent increase in the reported cases of blindness between 1870 and 1880. The data also revealed a higher number of individuals with blindness in the Southeast. The presenter personally

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[89] American Medical Association, "House of Delegates Proceedings, Annual Session" (1934).

inquired the Secretary of the Interior about the drastic increase, the manner in which the statistics were gathered, and according to whom. This is relevant because the time of this increase coincides with the establishment of schools for the blind, both integrated and those established for African American students. These were often first disparaged as institutions and asylums, and students who attended them were considered incapable of self-sufficiency. The 1887 paper describes the students: "(I)t must be remembered, however, that these individuals are not producers."[90] This demonstrates a failure of ocularcentrism, that is the sighted inability to recognize the ability of people with blindness. The dissemination of these misperceptions reinforced them, and likely contributed to criticism of schools for the blind in the early twentieth century as essentially being "conservatories." These schools offered vocational training of limited scope, but did recognize the musical potential of the blind community. Often sighted administrators determined the curriculum of the schools, which neglected the potential of blind students to participate in a variety of occupations.

The first segregated school for African American children with visual impairment opened in 1869 in Raleigh, Virginia, two years before the development of Braille music notation.[91] Other schools for blind African American children followed in many of the states inhabited by the musicians— Georgia (1882), South Carolina (1883), and Texas (1887).[92] These schools were founded earlier than the school in Mississippi (1951), a state often associated with Delta blues.[93]

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[90] Howe, "Note on the Increase of Blindness in the United States," 534.

[91] "Encyclopedia of American Disability History," ed. Susan Burch (New York: Facts On File, 2009).

[92] Charles Buell, "The Education of the Negro Blind in the United States" (Masters Thesis, University of Michigan, 1945).

[93] American Printing House for the Blind, "State Supported Schools for the Blind for African American Children," http://www.aph.org/museum/programs/colored-schools/state-supported-schools/. Accessed June 18, 2017.

Although the Delta shares stylistic similarities to other Southern regional styles from Texas and Southeast, the musicians of this study were rarely from the Delta. Those who were from that region did not experience the acclaim of other musicians and are more obscure.

Blind Boone attended the Missouri Institute for the Education of the Blind in 1872 when the integrated school was only recently an option for the African American blind community. Sighted schools in the state were segregated while the Institute was integrated at that time.[94] Arizona Dranes attended the Institute for Deaf, Dumb, and Blind Colored Children of the State of Texas as a child before migrating north to Oklahoma. Willie McTell attended several schools for the blind as an adult, in Georgia and Michigan.[95] Gary Davis attended the South Carolina Institution for the Education of the Deaf and Blind for six months as a teenager in 1914.[96]

The schools established for African American students were representative of the disparities of segregation and further discredit any notion that conditions were "separate but equal" in the United States including in sectors of those with special consideration. Koestler quotes Helen Keller, who publicly addressed her "shock" at the "meagerness of their education" and the poor conditions of African American schools for the blind in the 1940s, she described the situation as a "disgrace" and an "injustice."[97] These schools received second-hand materials from their white counterparts, with worn books of nearly illegibly flattened Braille notation.

Booker T. Washington said, "(W)e can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand"

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[94] Mary Barile, Christine Montgomery, and Melissa Fuell, *Merit Not Sympathy Wins : The Life and Times of Blind Boone* (Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2012), 13.

[95] Gray, *Hand Me My Travelin' Shoes : In Search of Blind Willie Mctell*, 172.

[96] Zack and ProQuest, *Say No to the Devil: The Life and Musical Genius of Rev. Gary Davis*, 21-23.

[97] Koestler, *The Unseen Minority: A Social History of Blindness in America*, 200. As cited by the American Printing House for the Blind, http://www.aph.org/museum/programs/colored-schools/state-supported-schools/. Accessed February 7, 2018

in his famous Atlanta Compromise in 1895, anticipating the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* "separate but equal" Supreme Court decision the following year.[98] However, access to education, health, and other services was anything but equal for African American communities. African Americans paid the same amount as whites for the same services and accommodations, from public transportation to medical care and taxes, and received treatment that was deemed unacceptable by whites. A New York Times editorial from 1904 describes the inequity of the "abominable" conditions on segregated trains as a fraud, and that "the majority of writers and speakers on the Negro problem are either woefully ignorant of the situation or else willfully pervert to the truth."[99] This is worth noting in considering the public health documentation presented here, as the federal institutions and systems that were to provide care were perpetuating racist practices often related to Southern states in the Jim Crow era.

[98] Booker T. Washington, ""Atlanta Compromise" Speech," in *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, ed. John Hartwell Moore (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 1895), 280-82.

[99] Benjamin Bangs, "'Jim Crow' Car System: Typical Negro Coach Not Fit for White Man's Dog, Says Southerner," *New York Times (1857-1922)*, March 27, 1904.

2.0 AFRICAN AMERICAN BLIND MUSICIANS IN POPULAR CULTURE

In truth, it is always possible,
often urgent to displace oneself,
with the risk of becoming that passerby,
that wanderer, that flaneur, that vagabond, stray dog
that our fragmented contemporary culture
both sets in motion and paralyzes.
Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, and Forgetting*[100]

Blind musicians and ophthalmology are documented throughout history and cultures. Documentation of invasive cataract and ophthalmologic surgery by the Indian physician Sushruta dates to around 800 BC, with representations of blind musicians dated at least a millennium earlier in Egypt.[101] In the second century AD, the Greek physician Galen also documented these practices. Despite this history, technologies did not exist for the treatment of eye conditions, especially neonatal conditions that often resulted in African American blindness in the United States after the transatlantic slave trade and the colonization of the Americas.

The health of African Americans subjected to slavery was a concern of captors, at least to the extent they were protecting an investment; however, after emancipation, the wellness of African Americans was a non-issue for power structures in the South. This neglect lasted until the hegemony feared their own jeopardy from an African American health crisis, as presented in public

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[100] Paul Ricoeur, Kathleen Blamey, and David Pellauer, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

[101] Patric Blomstedt et al., "Cataract Surgery in Ancient Egypt," *Journal of Cataract & Refractive Surgery* 40, no. 3 (2014). Miriam Lichtheim, Antonio Loprieno, and Inc ebrary, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, [2006]. ed. (Berkeley, Calif;London;: University of California Press, 2006).

health reports. Biologic determinist and racial inferiority theories influenced racist practices and teachings since the sixteenth century and were deeply ingrained by the era of the musicians, which was also the height of the eugenic pseudoscience.[102] Despite the adverse environment, African American musicians gained celebrity. The first musicians with the blind epithet were featured in America's most circulated papers, from the New York Times to the Los Angeles Times, the focus of work by Mark Twain and Charles Dickens. Their performance and their blindness fascinated nineteenth-century audiences.

2.1 BLIND TOM AND BLIND BOONE

For musicians with the "Blind" title during the 1920s and 1930s, phonograph technology was a medium for their transformation from mendicant to celebrity. Disabled African American musicians were rarely given a unique status prior to access to the technology. Representations of Black disability in American popular culture date at least to the nineteenth century, with Thomas Daddy Rice's character of minstrelsy Jim Crow. His blackface routine mocking a disabled slave dressed in rags that premiered in 1828 was enormously popular and became the namesake of the century of legal segregation following Reconstruction.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Blind Tom and Blind Boone, two prominent African American musicians with the "Blind" title became popular and were featured

[102] W. M. Byrd and L. A. Clayton, "Race, Medicine, and Health Care in the United States: A Historical Survey," *Journal of the National Medical Association* 93, no. 3 Suppl (2001): 14s-19s.

in the most prominent theaters and newspapers in the United States. Both of them were concert pianists marketed and marked by the "Blind" appellation to white audiences during Reconstruction. The musicians have been the subjects of scholarship particularly related to savant and autistic behaviors displayed by Tom Wiggins in descriptions by the era's most noted personalities.[103] Whether this was the genesis of the appellation is unclear, as the designation of monikers for African American slaves was a common practice. The significance of the pianists' blindness differs from the musicians of the Race record era. The compositions of these musicians from the nineteenth century were infrequently the focus of discussions, and often Wiggins and Boone were applauded for their interpretations of the Western European canon. The musicians of with the "Blind" title during the Race record era performed exclusively downhome music marketed to African American audiences, which differentiates them from their nineteenth-century precedents.

Blind Tom and Blind Boone were both national celebrities in the nineteenth century as concert pianists performing for white audiences. They represent the earliest well-documented African American performers with the epithet. Wiggins and Boone were celebrated in articles in the Black Press and New York Times while Lemon Jefferson, Blake, and others in the 1920s were absent but for advertisements and the rare, brief mention of their successes. Both pianists were well-documented antecedents of the Race record era and differed in their cultural significance. Blind Boone was highly trained and educated at a school for the blind, Blind Tom, who is now labeled an autistic savant was born into slavery and performed after Emancipation under the

[103] Deirdre O'Connell, *The Ballad of Blind Tom*, 1st ed. (New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2009); Barile, Montgomery, and Fuell, *Merit Not Sympathy Wins : The Life and Times of Blind Boone*.

management of his former captor.[104] Blind Boone and Blind Tom performed not on records but rather in concerts well attended by mostly white audiences astounded by the spectacle of a blind Black interpretation of the Western European canon on the piano. In this regard, blindness and the "Blind" appellation from this nineteenth-century manifestation seem unrelated and incomparable to the musicians of Race records.

Wiggins was born with visual impairment but could detect light and shadows, Boone had his eyes removed as a child during an encephalitic fever. While Boone married his manager's sister, blind people were forbidden by law to marry in some states, for fear they might populate the world with people also unfairly perceived as deficient. The prominence of eugenics was pervasive in the interwar era, the period of the later musicians, but also affected the first musicians with the blind title.[105]

The nineteenth-century study of phrenology was not based in science, but often xenophobic discriminatory prejudice. The measurement and the feel of a subject's skull were thought to reveal a psychological makeup and that certain parts of the brain performed specific functions. This involved both racist and disabling preconceptions in examining subjects. While this preceded technology that could verify any of these speculations about brain function, it became popular pseudoscience.[106]

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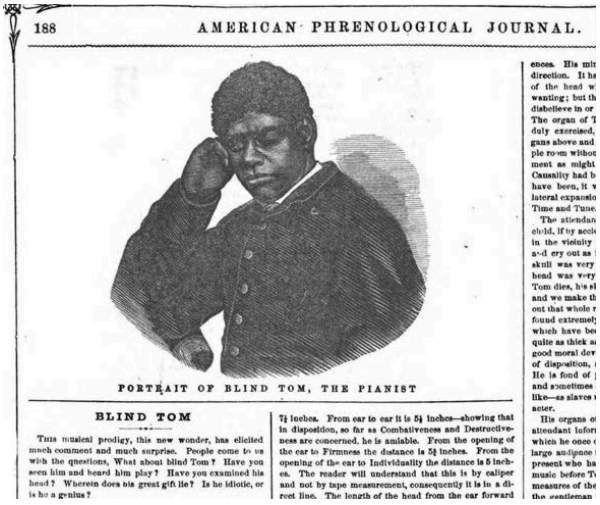
[104] Early Schools for the Blind were integrated. Mary Barile, Christine Montgomery, and Melissa Fuell, *Merit Not Sympathy Wins: The Life and Times of Blind Boone* (Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2012). Stephanie Jensen-Moulton, "Finding Autism in the Compositions of a 19th-Century Prodigy: Reconsidering "Blind Tom" Wiggins " in *Sounding Off*, ed. Joseph N. Straus Neil Lerner (New York: Routledge, 2006).

[105] See David M. Turner, Kevin Stagg, and Medicine Society for the Social History of, *Social Histories of Disability and Deformity*, vol. 25 (New York; London;: Routledge/SSHM, 2006).

[106] Early twenty-first century research on blindness utilizes technologies like MRI to scan brain function and examine similar processes that were speculated a century earlier. From a humanistic perspective, this research appears

Nineteenth-century eugenicists preoccupied with cranial measurements were interested in Blind Tom. His portrait was featured in the American Phrenological Journal in December 1865, the month the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery. The opening paragraph of the article features questions offered by the journal's curious readers, "What about Blind Tom?...Have you examined his head? Wherein does his great gift lie? Is he idiotic or is he a genius?"[107] Five years earlier the same journal proclaimed the then ten-year-old, "He is regarded as the musical wonder of the world."[108] The figure below features the article about Wiggins, featuring his portrait in the *American Phrenological Journal* (Figure 1).


188 AMERICAN PHRENOLOGICAL JOURNAL.

PORTRAIT OF BLIND TOM, THE PIANIST

BLIND TOM

This musical prodigy, this new wonder, has elicited much comment and much surprise. People come to us with the questions, What about blind Tom? Have you seen him and heard him play? Have you examined his head? Wherein does his great gift lie? Is he idiotic, or is he a genius?

Figure 1. Portrait of Blind Tom, *American Phrenological Journal,* December 1865

The images of Blind Tom and Blind Boone, whose pre-phonograph concert careers were part of white popular culture, are documented in multiple photographs. This is in contrast to Blind

to involve similarly controversial ethical issues. While the science this research may reveal insights into cognition and perception, it raises debates because the studies promote disabling positions of difference, abnormalities. These studies can be seen as continuing to objectify as opposed to recognizing "disability is a natural part of human experience." (Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 2000) https://www.acl.gov/sites/default/files/about-acl/2016-12/dd_act_2000.pdf

[107] "Blind Tom," *American Phrenological Journal* 43, no. 6 (1865).

[108] "Tom, the Blind Pianist," *American Phrenological Journal* 32, no. 6 (1860).

Lemon Jefferson, Blind Blake, and Blind Willie Johnson who share a commonality related to their social status despite their prominence as recording artists. Only one photograph of each is known to exist, with the image's impact intensified by its singularity. Occasionally photographs surface claiming to be the image of the musicians and several collectors attest to having acquired photos from family members, but these have not resulted in any publicly available images.[109] One might compare this dearth to the numerous images of popular white musicians, like Bing Crosby or Paul Whiteman, or even to those of African American musicians, Paul Robeson, Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, or especially Louis Armstrong. The following photographs used by record companies feature the only known images of Johnson and Jefferson, the leading Texan musicians of Race records (Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2. Blind Willie Johnson's only known photograph on a Columbia record sleeve

[109] For example, Mack McCormick's archives which allegedly contain an image of Blind Lemon Jefferson remain unpublished since his death in 2015.

Figure 3. Blind Lemon Jefferson's only known photograph on a Paramount record sleeve

The musicians' blindness in the significance of their "Blind" title, then served as a contrast to the technology on which it was reproduced. While ownership of technology serves as a status symbol, during this period technologies also reaffirmed one's location in modernity.[110] This is especially relevant to marginalized communities, and phonograph ownership in African American communities was reflected in Odum and Guy Johnson's estimate that African Americans purchased 5 to 6 million records in 1925.[111] Despite the expansion in manufacturing and agriculture in the United States between 1918 and 1926, nearly two million jobs in these industries

[110] Jonathan L. Walton, "The Preachers ' Blues : Religious Race Records and Claims of Authority on Wax," *Religion and American Culture* 20, no. 2 (2010).

[111] Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life : The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1945*, 126.

were eliminated as a result of technological innovations.[112] This likely affected sentiments for the prospect of inclusion in the prosperity innovations offered to privileged society.

While the role of visual impairment and blindness of musicians in marketing their recordings to African American audiences are key to their significance, the effects of events in their communities were also central to their experience and expression. Their social experience of blindness in a climate of racial terror was their lived reality. The musicians' recordings were a visible presence in Black popular culture at the height of the nadir, a backdrop of the oppression, marginalization, and disenfranchisement sustained through acts of violence and murder committed against people within their communities.

2.2 THE LIVES OF THE MUSICIANS

Anecdotal information collected about the musicians by blues scholars has provided valuable insight in previous studies since the 1950s into the musicians' significance within their communities.[113] Building on that research, the musicians' blindness is analyzed here primarily through speculating how consumers of their recordings imagined it, and generally in public health records and other historical documents. The popular production of the musicians began in 1926, a year marked by a juncture within discourse related to African American cultural expression which

[112] Johnson, *A Preface to Racial Understanding*, 28.

[113] See Robert L. Uzzel, *Blind Lemon Jefferson : His Life, His Death, and His Legacy* (Austin, Tex.: Eakin Press, 2002); Gray, *Hand Me My Travelin' Shoes : In Search of Blind Willie Mctell*; Jas Obrecht, *Early Blues: The First Stars of Blues Guitar* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

has been under-addressed in scholarship. These musicians were disabled by society and circumscribed to the downhome in marketing and their recorded production. However, as actors in the Race record industry and with the agency of the Great Migration, they were relevant in the ideation and formation of a Black past as they participated in a period of modernity.

A sighted misconception of a singular absolute experience of blindness has resulted in a disabling blind/sighted binary. Total blindness is one across a range of varied experiences of blindness. The implication of this binary and a singular blindness results in exclusion, but is collective forming and empowering because it establishes a unique Blind community.[114] This idea manifested in the deaf community as "Deaf" culture which recognizes a powerful collectivity from across a similarly wide range of experiences.[115] The musicians were contemporaries, but were not unitary, nor were they members of a guild as in other traditions. Lubet states that "organizations of blind musicians have existed for centuries on nearly every continent. Blind leadership appears to be the rule in such organizations."[116] The musicians' awareness of other popular blind musicians is certain, but their perceptions of a collectivity among blind downhome musicians are undocumented.

Visual impairment has not limited the blind community to musical contributions nor has it prevented their participation and contribution to society across a range of fields. Blindness was considered limiting, but not disabling in documented accounts from the era of slavery. These points

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[114] Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare, *Disability/Postmodernity : Embodying Disability Theory* (London ; New York: Continuum, 2002), 104-08.

[115] See Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, *Inside Deaf Culture* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2005).

[116] Alex J. Lubet, "Music and Blindness" in Gary L. Albrecht, Jerome Edmund Bickenbach, and Sharon L. Snyder, *Encyclopedia of Disability*, 1 ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications, 2006), 1125.

challenge the perception that musicianship was one of the only opportunities for the blind community to participate in society after emancipation. Blues scholarship has perpetuated this misperception. Oliver's statement in *Barrelhouse Blues* that "Blind people in the South had virtually no way to work and secure even an irregular income" is a problematic ocularcentrism and inaccurate.[117] Wardlow also writes, "(T)he only way for a blind person to make a living was to play music on a street and beg for nickels and dimes."[118] This assertion presents a narrow, victimized view of the musicians. At moments in their careers, the musicians performed on the street, but every day demanded actively pursuing a variety of sources of revenue. This included determining the most lucrative public places to play and creating other opportunities to perform at any number of types of social events, traveling to unfamiliar places to pursue opportunities, like making phonograph records. They became actors in the popular music industry despite various opposing forces—at the interstices of Jim Crow discrimination, poverty, and blindness. The blind community was and is capable of a variety of occupations, limited by disabling societal structures and a sighted inability to recognize and understand the community's abilities and potential.

One could argue that the condition of blindness encouraged these individuals to become musicians, as it was an accepted mode of existence and practice for the blind. Disabling structures From a romanticized misinterpretation of their lives, which is constructible from documented accounts, one could also argue the musicians led a superior life to their sighted counterparts from the rural, impoverished "South." Hubert Harrison described the conditions of Southern life for

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[117] Paul Oliver, *Barrelhouse Blues Location Recording and the Early Traditions of the Blues* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 56.

[118] Gayle Wardlow and Edward M. Komara, *Chasin' That Devil Music Searching for the Blues* (San Francisco, Calif.: Miller Freeman Books, 1998), 191.

underprivileged rural African American communities in 1920, "Now, peonage is slavery unsanctioned by law. In its essence, it is more degrading than mere chattel slavery."[119] This perception by an immigrant (who became a prominent leader in the Harlem Renaissance) is relevant because it reflects on the communities of the musicians and the meaning encoded in their production.

Considering the tedium and physical demands of peonage, hard labor, sharecropping, and domestic work, by contrast, life as a self-employed, itinerant, performer compensated for participating in the celebrations of society would indeed seem preferable. However, this point can be problematic by inferring that blindness was a positive, in effect "invoking oppositional discourse" in ableist/disableism contexts which potentially further pathologization.[120] According to blues musician Josh White, the wage for his position as a child who led blind musicians was more lucrative than adult laborers.[121].

Josh White's recollections of assisting more than thirty different Southern African American blind musicians as an adolescent in the 1920s provide a rare primary source of the artists' personas and their habitus. As a child, his weekly income of four dollars per week accompanying the blind musicians on tambourine was more than adult sharecroppers earned. The data is lacking, and the histories are contradictory about the compensation of the majority of the musicians, but White's wage was a fraction of the musicians he led. After becoming the most popular downhome blues musician of the 1920s, inconsistent accounts about Jefferson descriptions of his

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[119] Hubert H. Harrison and John Henrik Clarke, *When Africa Awakes* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1997), 8.

[120] Fiona Kumari Campbell, *Contours of Ableism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 12.

[121] Wald, *Josh White : Society Blues*.

compensation range of being paid sufficiently to have a chauffeur, a new car, and a bank account with $1500 at the time of his death to only receiving a bottle of whiskey, five dollars, and the services of a prostitute for a recording session of his work.[122] This agreement included no royalties, nor licenses. J.B. Long allegedly bought Blind Boy Fuller an "inexpensive car" to attempt to earn his loyalty to American Record Corporation (ARC).[123]

Gary Davis offers a rare insight into the musicians' perspective on feeling underpaid by record labels in an interview with guitarist and scholar Stefan Grossman. Davis recalled being angered after his first session in New York with Blind Boy Fuller because he was paid only a fraction of the other artists. The question of the perception by African American consumers that the musicians were subjected to this scenario because of their impairment, their social status, or a provinciality (all of these factors somewhat interconnected) becomes relevant. Unlike other prominent figures in Black popular music during the period, like Ellington, Armstrong, Bechet, and Handy, there is very little documentation by the musicians discussing their work and their relevance. McTell's 1940 interviews conducted by Lomax are a rare example as well as Lomax's other interviews of unrecorded blind musicians, Turner Johnson and Charles Haffer.[124] Otherwise, their perceptions generally and specifically about their contributions to popular music are unknown.

The politics of Black expression as an apparatus for cultural enrichment and elevation during the 1920s involved the musicians merely through their mediation and popularization.

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[122] This is Mayo Williams recollection quoted in Samuel Charters, *The Country Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1975), 64.

[123] Jas Obrecht, "Blind Boy Fuller: His Life, Recording Sessions, and Welfare Records," (2011), http://jasobrecht.com/blind-boy-fuller-life-recording-sessions-welfare-records/.

[124] Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 32-38, 48-63.

The records of the artists were transgressive in that their expression resembles no other popular music of the time, neither accommodating nor emulating previous recordings. These were not the Sorrow Songs nor were they coon songs. Influences on the production to make their downhome expression, both sacred and secular, more palatable to broaden its audiences were not imposed on these artists.

While the lacunae of hard documents of artists' compensation results in supposition, accepted narratives (offered by executives like Mayo Williams) describe a policy by which artists were paid a nominal sum for their recording, excluding further royalties and licensing rights regardless of sales. Van der Tuuk quotes Mayo Williams who recalled the best-selling Race record artists of the 1920s earning $75-200 per side.[125] This was likely a practice common in early location recordings which resulted in the production of the many of the artists of this study. Likely they received a one-time payment for recording as a supplement to their income. However, others like Blind Willie Johnson became a primary seller for the race division at Columbia. Artists could settle for a one-time payment or wait for royalties—for emerging artists this required gambling that a record would sell well, and for established artists, that labels would honor their agreements. For musicians struggling in the present and moving locations day to day, these uncertainties would not seem to be a logical option. While many of the artists busked and performed in cities, they lived itinerantly and often in more remote locales which would complicate professional relationships with labels.

The musicians worked independently and were not discussed in the Black press as a group (and rarely individually for that matter) at the height of their popularity other than in

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[125] Gray, *Hand Me My Travelin' Shoes : In Search of Blind Willie Mctell*, 248-49; Tuuk, *Paramount's Rise and Fall: The Roots and History of Paramount Records*, 64.

advertisements, despite their production for the same record labels during the same years. There is little that the musicians often encountered one another as Race record celebrities. However, there are several possible exceptions. Blind Boy Fuller and Blind Gary Davis travelled to New York from North Carolina with talent scout and producer J.B. Long for their first recording session in 1935. According to Davis, he was Fuller's mentor. Later Fuller travelled and recorded with Sonny Terry. Paramount records featured their "All-Stars" on a recording session, "Hometown Skiffle" that included Jefferson and Blake in October 1929. The following advertisement appeared in February in the Chicago Defender, the city where they conducted the session (Figure 4).[126]

[126] "Paramount Hometown Skiffle Advertisement," *The Chicago Defender*, February 22, 1930, 7.

Display Ad 16 – No Title
The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967); Feb 22, 1930;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender
pg. 7

Figure 4. Blind Blake and Blind Lemon Jefferson recording session 1929.

The images of the musicians in the Paramount advertisement for "Home Town Skiffle" contrast with downhome old-time representations three years earlier (Figure 4). They are in formal attire, at their "big, get together" with sheet music on the piano and drapes in the window. This contrasts with the dilapidated settings usually depicted in downhome advertisements. The aesthetic in the advertisement is no longer downhome, but the music remained the same. The advertisement

appeared in the Chicago Defender on February 22, 1930. Art Satherley, who credits himself with introducing Paramount's Black Press advertisements, had left his supervisory position at Paramount This was months after Blind Lemon Jefferson died in Chicago, who is advertised as playing on the record but his participation is questioned. Several sources suggest Blake impersonates Jefferson on the recording, and that Jefferson, who made his last recordings in September of that year, did not participate. Some of the musicians claim to have known other musicians who shared same the blind epithet, like Willie McTell who described Blind Blake as an acquaintance, and Willie Johnson "as a personal friend of mine." Gary Davis recalled playing with Willie Walker around 1910 and in 1935 recorded with Fulton Allen, whose professional name was Blind Boy Fuller.[127] Blues enthusiasts have debated these claims, but they continue to serve the construction of blues mythologies.

The musicians participated in location recordings across the South. The cities that hosted location recordings did not necessarily foster the work of prominent blind musicians but may merely have provided an opportunity for blind musicians who were within proximity to the chosen cities. This is to say; the artists represented on Race records likely were not the only blind Southern African American performers during the era considering the limited opportunities (in roughly ten cities across the entire South) to record.[128] Paramount did not conduct location recordings but produced downhome artists who gained the highest recognition, among them Jefferson and Blake. The company, which began as a furniture company that sold phonographs, also did not require test demos of their artists and contracted them based on a recommendation by regional music dealers

[127] Gray, *Hand Me My Travelin' Shoes : In Search of Blind Willie Mctell*, 19, 218.
[128] Oliver, *Barrelhouse Blues Location Recording and the Early Traditions of the Blues*.

and others.[129] Paramount's decision not to invest in portable recording equipment was in line with the company also continuing to record mechanically after other labels began using electric recording technology. Auditions for local talent were announced in newspapers and record stores, at which a group was selected to record on-site or arranged to travel to a nearby mobile studio. R.T. Ashford, a Dallas record store owner, and Paramount dealer, initially suggested Jefferson to Art Laibly, Paramount sales manager, due to his regional renown. [130]

Laibly would have logically been interested in producing artists from whom he could profit, and artists who would accept substandard compensation yet have high sales. The perception that blindness was a factor in exploiting the musicians is possible, but more likely factors that interrelate are those of race and class. Business documentation of the classic blues era vocalists, like Bessie Smith, who dominated Race records before the Blind artists, as well as the correspondences of Arizona Dranes with Okeh, the label that produced her records, offers insight into exploitative practices against them.[131] The letters Dranes wrote to Okeh executives are preserved at the Archives of African American Music and Culture at Indiana University.[132]

However, just as record labels produced numerous female vocalists after Mamie Smith's success prompting a wave of classic blues records of a parallel format in the early 1920s, after Jefferson's records were well received, labels scouted for other similar artists across the south. Some of whom were stylistically similar and visually impaired. The regional celebrity of blind

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[129] Wardlow and Komara, *Chasin' That Devil Music Searching for the Blues*, 191.
[130] Tuuk, *Paramount's Rise and Fall: The Roots and History of Paramount Records*, 111.
[131] Timothy Dodge, *The School of Arizona Dranes: Gospel Music Pioneer* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), 40-42, 190.
[132] https://aaamc.indiana.edu/Collections/Arizona-Dranes

artists like Jefferson, Blake, Willie Johnson, Blind Boy Fuller, and others may have appealed to record labels based on their popularity with regional record consumers.

The idea that blind musicians were perceived as more exploitable than sighted classic blues singers is unlikely, as both Taggart and Jefferson were described as extremely cautious about their payment. The social position of musicians, as opposed to their disability, may have been perceived as exploitable by companies, as the downhome was not exclusive to blind musicians. Oral histories describe Lemon Jefferson, Joe Reynolds, and Blind Boy Fuller as enthusiastic gun owners. These stories include Jefferson who "always carried a pearl-handled .45 for protection," Fuller who shot his wife in the leg, and Joe Reynolds, who lost his own sight when shot by a shotgun, allegedly "shot and killed a dog with a .45" as he felt it was attacking him.[133] This incident demonstrates the violence that the musicians encountered as itinerant musicians.

The "Blind" title has been described as an honorific, a moniker, an appellation, and an epithet. There is no certainty how the musicians selected the title. If the "Blind" title of these musicians on Race records was not their decision, but a marketing decision of record companies and producers, it was a pejorative reduction of the musicians to their condition. If musicians chose to use this title, it was with the approval of record executives. Regardless of the derivation of their title, the irony lies in that musicians had unique agency as disabled African Americans at the high point of societal exclusion. They were celebrated, mass-mediated recording artists with a deliberate stigmatizing moniker of disability. This would be transgressive regardless of the intended significance of the appellation because it gave celebrity to disability at a time when the disabled community was closeted and even incriminated in an ableist society.

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[133] Wardlow and Komara, *Chasin' That Devil Music Searching for the Blues*, 4, 174, 79.

Unlike the era's practices of closeting blindness and disability, the musicians' blindness was foregrounded in advertisements of prominent Black newspapers, objectifying them under the signifier "Blind." This moniker of dozens of musicians was given with no explanation of the label's significance nor the reasoning for its marker. The premise that impairment denotes a difference often perceived as a deficiency relates to this phenomenon whereby a blind musician simultaneously embodies impairment and exceptional ability.

One can speculate about production decisions for the musicians and the unique musical aesthetic they recorded. There are accounts of directives given by producers Polk Brockman and Ralph Peer, both of whom were active in the Race record industry. Lemon Jefferson recorded for Brockman in Atlanta on his only session for Okeh. Barry Mazor cites a point about Brockman, "(I)f he thought it wasn't blue or in the blues, why, he'd object to having it recorded."[134] Peer selected repertoire for recordings, a practice that shaped musicians' public persona. Fuller, like Jefferson, produced one session outside of their primary label. Whether this indeed broke a contract is uncertain. Mayo Williams scouted Fuller and brought him to New York for a session with Decca in 1937. Similarly, J.B. Long claimed to threaten the company which resulted in few pressings of the Fuller records and ultimately their withdrawal until 1942.[135] Fuller and Jefferson are the most recorded musicians with the blind title, which means their records were also the most widely popular. Both recorded over one hundred recordings; Jefferson's career began in late 1925

[134] Interview by Charles Wolfe with musician Lee Allen quoted in Barry Mazor, *Ralph Peer and the Making of Popular Roots Music*, 1 ed. (Chicago, Illinois: Chicago Review Press, 2014), 136-38.

[135] Bruce Bastin, *Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 226; Robert M. W. Dixon and John Godrich, *Recording the Blues*, The Blues Series (New York,: Stein and Day, 1970), 89-90.

and his last session was in September of 1929, Fuller first recorded ten years after Jefferson in 1935 with his last session in June of 1940.

The suggestion by Kenney and Miller that "(P)honograph companies asked and paid them—them to represent images of Southern culture that little resembled their lives," implies musicians were recording music as directed by producers, often blues, and also that the blind moniker may not have been the decision of the artist, but a marketing manipulation only after recognizing its currency with consumers.[136] Musicians like Blind Joe Reynolds, Blind Willie McTell, and Blind Willie Harris (Richard "Rabbit" Brown) produced records with direction by Peer, and his ideas about the blind epithet and blindness may have influenced the recordings. Others like Art Laibly are described as less restrictive, granting musicians more creative freedom. Laibly produced Jefferson after Mayo Williams left Paramount. Williams resigned from Paramount early in 1927 and started Black Patti records. The label lasted only months, and in August 1927, he began working for Vocalion and Brunswick.[137]

The data are inadequate to determine the specific demographics of consumers of downhome records. One could speculate that African Americans relocated to urban areas were central to the popularization of the musicians because of their access and means, in comparison to rural Southern communities where this access would have been less common. However, recognizing the significance of consumer technologies as social currency, like the phonograph during this era, is of great importance in providing a sense of societal inclusion. This is especially

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[136] William Howland Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life : The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 110-13.

[137] Gray, *Hand Me My Travelin' Shoes : In Search of Blind Willie Mctell*, 249.

relevant in marginalized communities.[138] The Chicago Defender attempted to demonstrate a viable African American consumer base through a petition to establish representation in the record industry. The viability was later verified by Perry Bradford and Mamie Smith in 1920.

The degree of prejudice against African Americans from the rural South was at its height during the era, and the musicians were likely well aware of Jim Crow practices, and that they were part of the African American community and as such subjected to discriminatory violence. Considering the visual cues of race in the United States and the musicians' awareness of the superficial biases and prejudices that they trigger present a discussion that demands supposition. Obasogie's *Blinded by Sight* describes a trial in 1925 which debated the effects of colorblindness and the visual appearance of race and how society determines race.[139] The introduction of the musicians in the mid 1920s coincided with an active engagement to determine and codify racial biases, not only in society but the decisions of the Supreme Court of the United States.

The intersection of blindness and race was active in early twentieth-century discourse. In the United States, the "ocularity" of the "phenomic dimensions of race" and their applications to racial prejudice are clear. However, the corporeality of "race" as a social construction remains a debate. Omi and Winant's assertion that "(B)oth the social construction of race and the ocularity of race are indispensable elements of racial formation" relate to the musicians as an absent

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[138] Lindon Barrett et al., *Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of Western Modernity*, The New Black Studies Series (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 114.

[139] Osagie K. Obasogie, *Blinded by Sight: Seeing Race through the Eyes of the Blind* (Stanford, California: Stanford Law Books, an imprint of Stanford University Press, 2013), 138-43.

presence.[140] Weheliye describes the "centrality of the ocular in Western constructions of race" among African Diasporic scholars regarding the racist "look" of the white subject.[141] This relates to how African American audiences perceived the blindness of the musicians, which reflects the psychological experience of the Jim Crow apartheid of the United States as African Americans, perhaps that they were simultaneously vulnerable to the white gaze yet not subjected to the visual violence from it.

The musicians' awareness of the racist structures and the realities of race-based terrorism in their communities is documented by Gary Davis, Willie McTell, and Lomax, while at the same time audiences may have perceived their blindness shielded them from the visual terror of Jim Crow. This included mass-mediated images of lynchings, "colored" and "whites only" signs, and the critical white gaze which could hardly be avoided sighted or blind. A contradiction existed between the dangers one faced as a blind African American person navigating a society where merely the accusation of looking at a white person was considered reprehensible and could result in lynching, yet the marker of blindness could also be perceived to render one unthreatening. The threats of navigating unfamiliar spaces were only slightly mitigated for sighted musicians, but the potential for being perceived as threatening vagrants was much more significant.

The course of the musicians' lives was influenced by societal perceptions of visual impairment, which compelled their livelihood outside of societal conceptions of normativity in the early twentieth century rural South. This is to say that the itinerant performing musician is, kindly

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[140] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, "Blinded by Sight : The Racial Body and the Origins of the Social Construction of Race: Blinded by Sight and the Racial Body," *Law & Social Inquiry* 41, no. 4 (2016): 1067.

[141] Alexander G. Weheliye, ""I Am I Be": The Subject of Sonic Afro-Modernity," *boundary 2* 30, no. 2 (2003): 107.

stated, sometimes viewed as indolent, and as subversive. Perceptions of the musicians were multivalent in the segregated United States, those from within African American communities and those from the dominant outside culture. This is a reflexive point because it relates to the exclusion of blindness by disabling social structures, yet blindness is in itself an exclusive subjectivity for the blind alone to experience. As discussed here, a subjectivity which can cause the non-blind anxiety both in the inability to conceptualize their engagement with the world as blind and during interactions with members of the blind community.

The experience of blind subjectivity is beyond the comprehension of sighted members of political power structures whose decisions affected the blind community. Similarly, the experience of a Black subjectivity at a time when African Americans were rarely in influential political positions was also beyond the comprehension of white members of political power structures. This paradox was compounded by the sighted white political representation of African American blind communities. Between 1881 and 1967 there were no African American members of the United States Senate and between 1901 and 1929 no African American representatives in the House. No African American mayors were elected in United States' cities between 1888 and 1964. These statistics are a reminder that during this period "African Americans were routinely denied the right to vote and hold office."[142] This may seem remarkable because during Reconstruction and until the end of the nineteenth century there was African American representation in government, yet this ended by the first years of the twentieth century through rewriting laws, racial gerrymandering,

[142] Charles W. Carey and Liz Sonneborn, *African-American Political Leaders*, Rev. ed. (New York: Facts On File, 2011).

poll taxes, literacy tests, and other forms of disfranchisement.[143] African American blindness in underserved communities was often the result of decisions related to institutional racism and this political environment.

The means of surviving Jim Crow and racial terrorism for African American musicians assigned another dimension of alterity to those who were blind. The blind African American musician during the nadir is perceived as a unique class of subaltern within hegemonic stratification. Paradoxically, in some aspects, they had greater autonomy, agency, and occasionally income than other subjectivities in their communities. However, this is not a romanticization, the potential for both blind and sighted musicians living itinerantly to be cheated, robbed, exposed to the elements, and racially terrorized were constant threats. They did not necessarily experience greater economic instability than other members of disadvantaged communities subjugated by white power structures into cycles of limited opportunity, like sharecropping and tenant farming.

The potential for musicians' economic success was increased by African American affluence, some of which resulted from migration, and the resultant opportunities like those for musicians in the Race record industry. This affluence did not always translate to support for the musicians. A segment of the African American bourgeoisie disparaged the music of the musicians for all that it signified, a past and a space that one would conceivably be interested in forgetting or leaving behind. This sentiment is described by Richard Wright related to established members of urban communities' animosity toward recently relocated migrants unfamiliar with modalities

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[143] See Sharon D. Wright Austin, *The Transformation of Plantation Politics: Black Politics, Concentrated Poverty, and Social Capital in the Mississippi Delta* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006); Dewey M. Clayton, *African Americans and the Politics of Congressional Redistricting*, 1 ed., vol. 2;1439; (New York: Garland Pub, 1999).

considered culturally refined.[144] Conservative columnist, George Schuyler writes in "The Negro-Art Hokum" in June of 1926, the time that Jefferson's first records became popular, that while music by Southern African American "peasantry" was unique, it was not representative of African Americans. [145]

Frequently, discussions around this topic surmise that the prevalence of the blind musicians resulted from limited opportunities for blind members of marginalized communities. This hypothesis is loaded with ocularcentric presumptions and requires explanation. While visual impairment may influence people's abilities to navigate ocularcentric systems, it does not exclude people with blindness from successful engagement with them and in no way indicates an incomplete existence. The societal inclusion of people with visual impairment was economically determined, and not until the late capitalist era were disabled people represented, as noted by Dan Goodley, caused by the growth of human service sectors. He writes, "Industrialization deskilled and impoverished disabled people who had previously worked in agrarian communities."[146] This relates to the musicians' reception. Their audiences' may have recognized a parallel position of abjection with the musicians, in both their blindness and downhomeness as markers of exclusion collectively experienced in their records.

The musicians' blindness and downhomeness contrasts with representations of the classic blues stars. Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith and others were presented as glamorous, suggesting they were well-compensated, at least sufficiently to appear so. Whether the lives of the musicians were

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[144] Wright and Rosskam, *12 Million Black Voices; a Folk History of the Negro in the United States*.

[145] George S. Schuyler, "The Negro Art Hokum," *Nation*, no. 1 (1926).

[146] Dan Goodley, "Dis/entangling Critical Disability Studies" in Waldschmidt, Berressem, and Ingwersen, *Culture - Theory - Disability : Encounters between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies*, 83.

altered after becoming Race record celebrities is unclear, if any of their stresses as itinerant mendicant musicians were alleviated by their celebrity. The artists' names and caricatures were circulated in the Black press and their music on records distributed in African American communities throughout the segregated United States. Data related to their performances in the periods between their recordings are nearly non-existent in contrast to their sighted labelmates. The absence of notifications of their performances supports the idea that individuals who made marketing decisions for them did not believe their performances would generate the same sales as their records. This could be related to their authenticity as street performers as well as to their impairment. However, the success and popularity of subsequent blind musicians as performers proves that an ambivalence to promote the musicians' live performances because of their impairment would have been disabling and erroneous.

The musicians did not perform (during this early period) at theaters or other venues. They were deemed too authentic for theaters that wanted glamourous performers and comedians, not an expression that developed in the streets. Theatrics and drama are essential to street performance, but this involves a commitment to attract and command an audience through skill and a tone of desperation. Theater owners were likely not interested in desperation but rather displays of elegance and sophistication like those of the classic blues stars. While revivals led by the popular preachers of Race records were advertised in the Black press, the apocalyptic evangelism sung by the musicians was not. Their absence contributed to the idea that they were street performers not participating in modernity, other than through their recorded performances. This temporal displacement excluded them from an active presence and contributed to the significance of their invisibility, related to both racist and ableist discrimination. The classic blues and jazz musicians of the era were performing in major cities at prestigious venues and along the Theater Owners

Booking Association (TOBA) circuit, with performances promoted both in the Black press and general press. The musicians were not promoting their records through performances yet were the highest selling Race record artists of their era.

2.3 FINDING AUDIENCES

As performers, the musicians' continual search for audiences with sufficient income to support them paralleled itinerant farm workers' migrations following harvests, a livelihood of members of the musicians' communities. Musicians in fact followed migrant farmworkers to harvests, and laborers to lumber camps and boomtowns. This complicates perceptions during the period of blindness as a disability which would preclude individuals from working and participating in society. This is ironic when considering the vagrancy laws during the period, which could permit a blind itinerant musician while prohibiting anyone sighted with no proof of employment, facilitating blind musicians work only through the disabling misperception that they were unable to work. Bryan Wagner describes a romanticization of vagrancy related to blues performance, which he recognizes in W.C. Handy's descriptions. Handy's association of vagrancy with cultural authenticity is a theme that is also found in the work of Harlem Renaissance writers.[147]

Blackmon details the consequences of vagrancy African-Americans faced in the Jim Crow South: "(H)uge numbers of people were being arrested on (these) specious charges, so they could

[147] Bryan Wagner, Disturbing the Peace Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press,, 2009), Pitt users please click through to access via Ebrary Academic Complete Subscription Collection http://pitt.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://site.ebrary.com/lib/pitt/Top?id=10402494. 27-31.

be forced back into labor."[148] Merely standing in public could result in being arrested. This is in addition to railroad tracks being the private property of companies, meaning that walking the tracks was trespassing, which was considered a safer route for African Americans to travel between towns while searching for work. Several decades after emancipation, African Americans who worked in Southern lumber camps, mines, and quarries often became coerced to endure the working conditions simply by the remoteness of their locations. These were patrolled in a manner similar to the slavery era by armed security who would apprehend workers who attempted to leave.[149] This treatment was tolerated due to a scarcity of employment options other than sharecropping and tenant farming, which could result in debt even while it provided for families. This is relevant because it demonstrates that the musicians were subjects from communities in which a position of ableist normativity did not result in a societal position of privilege.

Blindness both real and feigned provided immunity from local vagrancy laws. Unimpaired musicians did adopt the blind moniker and may have also feigned blindness as street performers. While feigned disability is unethical, it is a typical device used by mendicants. Josh White describes Taggart's exaggeration of his impairment. This feigning related to street performance also occurred on records in at least one instance with the musician Ben Covington. His 1928 Paramount recordings list him as Bogus Ben Covington with his 1929 recordings for Brunswick listed as Blind Ben Covington. He is also credited under the pseudonyms Memphis Ben on two unissued recordings for Vocalion from 1928 and as Ben Curry for Paramount in 1932. Wardlow

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[148] "Douglas A. Blackmon," *Contemporary Authors Online* (2010), http://go.galegroup.com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/ps/i.do?p=LitRC&sw=w&u=upitt_main&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CH1000194119&sid=summon&asid=b704cb7e44147798e053f5828d683a42. Accessed November 24, 2017

[149] Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black People in America from the Civil War to World War Two/ Douglas A. Blackmon,* 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 382-84.

writes that Curry was from Arcadia, Louisiana a town near Monroe. However, with his pseudo-surname of Covington, he may have had some association with the town that sits across Lake Pontchartrain from New Orleans.

Wardlow speculates that he was drafted, as the name Ben Curry is listed in the draft registration file. [150] Van der Tuuk notes that Big Joe Williams referred to Curry as "bogus" blind, "pretending to be blind 'to earn more money' on the streets." Curry's profile is consistent with the other musicians in other ways regardless of whether his blindness was feigned or actual (the moniker on his records maintained the same significance). This includes his various pseudonyms, lack of written records about his life, production of phonograph recordings for various companies in various cities, and evidence that suggests a life of itinerancy.

For itinerant, genuinely blind musicians this would indeed pose a constant threat, and vagrancy laws as well as "ugly laws" were instated against mendicancy. During their era, individuals with disabilities were regarded as "defectives." Stereotypes that were considered defining attributes of African Americans categorized the entire race as defective. These perceived attributes are described by Baynton "a propensity to feeblemindedness, mental and physical illness, impaired reason, even deafness, blindness, and other disabilities resulting from 'constitutional deficiencies.'"[151] This suggests that while musicians' downhome disabled positions differentiated theirs from their audiences' experiences, they may have identified with aspects of outside stereotypes signified by the musicians like those previously described.

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[150] Wardlow and Komara, *Chasin' That Devil Music Searching for the Blues,* 4.

[151] Douglas C. Baynton and Inc ebrary, *Defectives in the Land: Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 4.

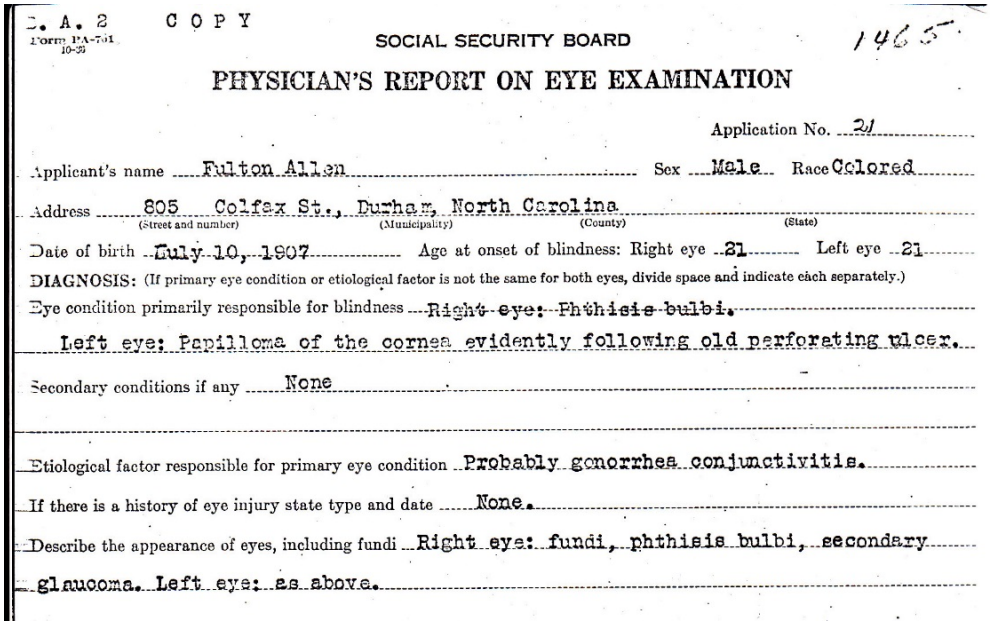
2.4 VAGRANCY AND SOCIAL SECURITY BLUES

Figure 5. Blind Boy Fuller Photograph.

Immunity from vagrancy laws for blind musicians was not always the case and in several instances, formal documents permitted the musicians to perform in the street. Blind Boy Fuller (Figure 5) was furnished a letter permitting him to perform on the street from the superintendent of public welfare to the chief of police of Durham, North Carolina.[152] This allowed him to play on the street but complicated his access to social assistance forcing him to deny income. His Social Security Report blues was not a song, but a reality because he became ineligible for support if he declared his earnings as a performer and recording artist. Gary Davis, Fuller's acquaintance was furnished a similar letter from the same superintendent two years before Fuller. Davis's biographer Ian Zack

[152] Bastin, *Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast*, 217.

notes that Davis was asked apologetically not to play on the streets.[153] This was fortunate for Davis, who could have been prosecuted. Fuller began losing his vision when he was roughly twenty years old. He was born in 1908 in Anson County, North Carolina before they collected birth records.[154] Documentation of Fuller's condition and treatment are of the few primary sources that specify the condition and speculate the etiology of the musicians' visual impairment as the result of a physician's examination (Figure 6).



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SOCIAL SECURITY BOARD

1465.

PHYSICIAN'S REPORT ON EYE EXAMINATION

Application No. 21

Applicant's name Fulton Allen Sex Male Race Colored

Address 805 Colfax St., Durham, North Carolina
(Street and number) (Municipality) (County) (State)

Date of birth July 10, 1907 Age at onset of blindness: Right eye 21 Left eye 21

DIAGNOSIS: (If primary eye condition or etiological factor is not the same for both eyes, divide space and indicate each separately.)

Eye condition primarily responsible for blindness Right eye: Phthisis bulbi.
Left eye: Papilloma of the cornea evidently following old perforating ulcer.

Secondary conditions if any None

Etiological factor responsible for primary eye condition Probably gonorrhea conjunctivitis.

If there is a history of eye injury state type and date None.

Describe the appearance of eyes, including fundi Right eye: fundi, phthisis bulbi, secondary glaucoma. Left eye: as above.

Figure 6. Blind Boy Fuller 1937 Physician's Report

While the suggestion that other musicians' impairment had similar etiology to Fuller's is supposition, documents of the period describe the prevalence of similar congenital blindness and visual impairment related to the unavailability of health care in their communities. The major cause

[153] Zack and ProQuest, *Say No to the Devil: The Life and Musical Genius of Rev. Gary Davis*, 29.

[154] Bastin, *Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast*, 214.

of blindness during the period was related to congenital cataracts and bacterial infections which were likely to have resulted in the visual impairment of the musicians. This includes congenital rubella syndrome which is associated with early blindness.[155]

Gary Davis was born in South Carolina in 1896, where six of his siblings died in infancy. According to doctor's reports, his early blindness was due to "infant glaucoma and ulceration of the cornea," the same conditions described in Fuller's report.[156] Whether these diagnoses were based on examinations or the physician's supposition based on racist biases is unclear, as both cases describe the etiology as "probably gonorrhea conjunctivitis." The probability in both Davis's and Fuller's reports may appear dismissive, but understandable considering the examinations were conducted by Social Security Board physicians simply to confirm their blindness, not to provide a complete diagnosis and treatment of their visual impairment.

One explanation for the prominence of blind African American popular musicians, compared to only few blind white popular musicians relates to the closeting of disability as a result of the commitment of dominant power structures to false narratives of white normativity and the perpetuation of them.[157] A commitment by the Race record industry to reify minoritarian models of Black otherness by commodifying the "Blind" epithet is uncertain, but they were promoting a trope coded with white normativity for consumption by African American audiences. What response this affected during the period is also uncertain, but its popularity is a certainty.

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[155] 469,924 measles cases were reported in the United States in 1920. Center for Disease Control, "Achievements in Public Health, 1900–1999 Impact of Vaccines Universally Recommended for Children–United States, 1990-1998," https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00056803.htm. Accessed February 7, 2018.

[156] Zack and ProQuest, *Say No to the Devil: The Life and Musical Genius of Rev. Gary Davis*, 8.

[157] See Charles W. Mills and Upso, *Black Rights / White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

There were at least four white musicians from this period who had the “Blind” title who remain relatively obscure—Andrew Jenkins, Jack Mathis, Joe Mangrum, and Alfred Reed. Possibly, other blind white musicians were not marketed with the “Blind” epithet, as variously Reed appeared on record both with and without it. They produced for a racially separate but similar record industry division, Hillbilly records. Parallels are drawn between the two divisions because they were often produced at the same location recordings and marketed to internally migrated communities during the era.

“Hillbilly” divisions emerged in the mid-1920s and similarly drew from regionally renowned musicians from the South to appeal to communities with the means and accessibility to make them a viable market. The recordings for these divisions often occurred in conjunction with Race on location with mobile studio equipment. Beyond the racial divisions imposed on the phonograph industry were parallels, as well as similarities to previous successful immigrant markets. Okeh records created an “Old-Time Tunes” division during the same period, which was essentially a hillbilly division. The company played to the nostalgia of old-time in a manner that could equally have been the name of downhome Race recordings. The “Blind” epithet on Race records outnumbered blind white musicians in the Hillbilly by roughly ten times. A blind Mexican violinist, “El Ciego” Melquíades Rodriguez, who recorded nineteen songs on location in San Antonio in 1935 and 1936 used the title in Spanish.[158]

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[158] Discography of American Historical Recordings, s.v. "Ciego Melquíades (instrumentalist: violin)," http://victor.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/talent/detail/135637/Melquades_Ciego_instrumentalist_violin. Accessed November 24, 2017.

Blind musicians on Race records only very rarely did not use the moniker. Arizona Dranes, whose recording career began in mid-1926, the same time as Jefferson, Blake, and Taggart, is one of these exceptions. An advertisement by Okeh in *Talking Machine World* announcing her debut does not mention the Gospel singer's blindness but contains a sketched image of her with closed eyes. Gary Davis first recorded as Blind Gary in New York City in 1935 for ARC, on a trip with Blind Boy Fuller and talent scout J.B. Long.[159] After 1943, he recorded as Reverend Gary Davis.

A tendency in academic studies to situate American popular musical studies within a Black/white binary ignores the heterogeneity of African American communities reflected in vastly diverse musical production. While Radano identifies "the formation of Black modern music" as crucial to Black identity during this period, the cohesion of a singular expression did not occur, but rather an expansion in the range of musical expressions, representative of the fluidity of Black communities. This reduction of "Black" music is common in the essentialization of Black popular music as of a singular character to juxtapose it with white music (in a similar treatment.) This indeed produced music considered reflective of an aesthetic of Black modernity. The producers of this music are considered influential in the construction of the aesthetic of modernity, as with Ellington, Bennie Moten, and others. The period also witnessed the popularization of nostalgic musical expressions. As jazz and classic blues propelled communities into modernity, downhome blues and evangelism inflected the premodern while it remained a current and relevant practice in many communities.

The "Blind" epithet was used in the marketing of Salvatore Massaro, a sighted jazz guitarist better known by his other pseudonym, Eddie Lang. He made ten recordings with Okeh as Blind

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[159] Bastin, *Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast*, 220.

Willie Dunn "to mask his race," during the period of segregated racial divisions in the popular music industry in the United States.[160] Scholars argue that Johnson and Lang's styles were so unique that the pseudonym was insignificant, as if no other guitars could have produced the recordings. The recordings were sold by Parlophone and Odeon in Europe "correctly credited," suggesting that a racially integrated duo were not perceived as problematic by record executives there.[161] However, identifying that integrated bands were problematic is merely the starting point. The idea that record executives deemed interracial production problematic is not nearly as likely as the notion that integrated production complicated marketing. Ultimately, sales dictated marketing decisions and the use of pseudonym. The success of artists, particularly Jefferson, would seem likely for the use of the "Blind" epithet in the pseudonym and the clear categorization of a Race record, despite Lang's recognition as a jazz guitarist. Lang complicated the racial divisions of the industry by accompanying the era's most popular artists, Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Paul Whiteman, and Bing Crosby.

In 1928, Massaro or "Lang" as "Dunn" recorded five duos with Lonnie Johnson and with a racially integrated group, the Gin Bottle Four, that included King Joe Oliver, Hoagy Carmichael, and Lonnie Johnson in 1929. This is notable because of their occurrence a decade before the recordings of Benny Goodman's combo that included Charlie Christian, Fletcher Henderson, and Lionel Hampton, considered the first all-star racially integrated jazz group.

Sighted normativity suggests that blindness provided a sanctuary from visually perceptible acts of aggression against the musicians, based on race, disability, class, or musical expression.

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[160] Obrecht, *Early Blues: The First Stars of Blues Guitar*.

[161] "The Lonnie Johnson-Eddie Lang Duets," (New York, N.Y: NewBay Media LLC, 2015).

Blind production subverted marginalization from dominant positions in these categories. The musicians shared the embodiment of the intersections of marginalizing stigma, so the reception of the musicians by African American consumers who also shared this experience, whether as an aspect of their present or past is significant. Campbell discusses societal constructions of ableism as those which affirm normativity, in contrast to other scholarship on disability.[162] Audiences' assumptions about the politics of blindness at the juncture of modernity and as a mode of stratifying class within racial subjectivity are themselves determining factors in the construction of disability. Popular blind musicians from within African American communities were actors in this construction, but through buying and listening to the music of blind performers, audiences also served to construct Black cultural memory and discourses of ableism. The representations of artists in advertisements, as well as the appellation alone, served as the starting point of the trope of the musicians in popular music, but the sonic representations of blindness as a site of resistance, agency, and autonomy emanating from the downhome communicated a powerful statement to audiences.

In contrast to the manner in which record labels represented the artists and their music, one could argue they were neither limited to a rural existence nor an "old-fashioned" expression. They were songsters whose livelihood depended on a diverse repertoire, including the current and popular. Christopher Small describes the "songster" tradition as a musician well versed in a variety of styles to satisfy a broad audience, which appropriately describes the itinerant musical practice of the artists whose craft developed through a variety of spaces and street performance.[163] Turner

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[162] Campbell, *Contours of Ableism*, 16-29.

[163] Christopher Small, *Music of the Common Tongue Survival and Celebration in African American Music*, (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998).

Junior Johnson, a blind unrecorded street performer, apologized for singing the blues when he mistook Lomax as a reverend, "You mus'n think hard of me for singing one of these little no harm blues. I don't mean um. But this is the only way I gets my sumpin to eat…I keeps my mind off the blues when I sings um…; I don't ever sing um unless they makes me."[164] This apology came after Lomax gave Johnson the first of two half dollars, he received the second half after his apology to Lomax (reverend or not). According to Kernfield, "(W)orking musicians were required to be immediately conversant with hundreds of tunes in order to play different types of jobs and in order to fill patrons requests."[165] Elijah Wald in his description of street performers' versatility states, "(T)heir repertoire could range from older church hymns to gospel shouts, from ballads to minstrel ditties, blues, and the products of Tin Pan Alley."[166] As artists of popular music whose acclaim was derived from a singular, signature, style, their versatility was not a quality relevant to their recording careers. In fact, artists recorded under a pseudonym even within downhome idioms. Often this occurred when musicians recorded across sacred and secular contexts.

Artists who performed in a variety of settings for a range of audiences assumed distinct identities on recordings, yet the use of transparent pseudonyms for popular musicians on recordings is curious if it was intended to deceive consumers. Alternate pseudonyms for the musicians maintain the "Blind" epithet, a practice that suggests record companies were capitalizing on a meaning of the "Blind" appellation which did not relate to an artist's unique identity.

The idea that blind mendicant musicians were versed in a variety of styles to cater to their audiences, yet only produced downhome recordings did not necessarily reflect their versatility as

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[164] Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*.

[165] Barry Kernfeld and Howard Rye, "Comprehensive Discographies of Jazz, Blues, and Gospel," *Notes* 51, no. 2 (1994): 528.

[166] Wald, *Josh White : Society Blues*, 18.

performers. This influenced the limitations placed on their recordings by white, sighted record producers. The confinement of blind artists in their recorded production is indeed vital to the discussion of social formations of disability. This is complicated by the point that white producers presupposed African American audiences interest in their presentation of blindness as disability or extraordinary ability as a musical expression.[167] The suggestion that the musicians were playing to the marketing of their blindness further complicates this and truly is impossible to determine.

[167] Richard Middleton, *Voicing the Popular : On the Subjects of Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 42-43.

3.0 RECORDINGS OF THE MUSICIANS, 1926-1938

> *In the song, the blind man does not receive his sight. The song opens with the cry; it goes through many nuances of yearning, but always it ends with the same cry with which it began. The explanation for this is not far to seek; for the people who sang this song had not received their "sight." They had longed for freedom with all their passionate endeavors, but it had not come. This brings us face to face with a primary discovery of the human spirit. Very often the pain of life is not relieved -- there is the cry of great desire, but the answer does not come -- only the fading echo of one's lonely cry.*
>
> Howard Thurman, *Deep River*

Until 1920, African American popular music was not offered the opportunity to prove its viability in the commercial music industry. This was demonstrated by the sales of Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" record to African American consumers. Perry Bradford, the musician and entrepreneur proposed that project that marked the advent of the Race record industry, and his recollection relates an anticipation of the popularity of blind musicians that occurred six years later. He explained to record executives that consumers "understand blues and jazz songs, they've heard blind men on street corners in the South playing guitars and singing 'em for nickels and dimes…" He was partially right, but the prospective consumers for records of Black popular music he described in this instance was white.[168] Bradford may not have been aware that African American representation in the commercial industry after years of exclusion would have exceptional meaning to African American consumers. The recognition and presence of Black music in the record

[168] Perry Bradford, *Born with the Blues: Perry Bradford's Own Story. The True Story of the Pioneering Blues Singers and Musicians in the Early Days of Jazz* (New York: Oak Publications, 1965), 117.

industry was a validation. The popularity of downhome records in 1926, in effect was similar, because it validated the markers of a Southern rural African American expression. The downhome records of Blind Lemon Jefferson sold exceptionally well, primarily to African Americans consumers. His and other blind downhome musicians' records were not marketed outside of the Black Press, not sold in stores outside of African American neighborhoods, and their high sales were hardly mentioned or documented anywhere.[169]

Race Records were of the first mass mediated objects of Black cultural expression marketed to African American consumers. Jefferson's 1926 recordings were the first of their kind to achieve success. The musicians' prevalence may have resulted from Race divisions attempt to emulate Jefferson's success. *Talking Machine World,* the main trade magazine of the phonograph industry in the early twentieth century, announced his "new sensational hit…. sung to his own guitar accompaniment has proved so popular that it has been necessary for the new company to work overtime filling orders for the latest recording by this popular artist" in July 1926.[170] This apparently sounded a call for companies to search the South for similar artists.

As the classic blues and jazz artists of the mid-1920s were producing records that by all accounts transcended markets despite racial divisions in the record companies, the musicians and the downhome were marketed to a peripheral audience much like the immigrant and hillbilly recordings of the time. These recordings were not produced with the intention to elevate audiences or to demonstrate a command of European classical techniques, conventions associated with some

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[169] Lemon Jefferson was mentioned one time at the bottom of the sports page (49) of Billboard Magazine, July 13, 1927.

[170] "Sensational Seller in Paramount Records," *Talking Machine World*, July 15 1926, 99.

of the production on Black Swan records, the first African American owned and operated record label.

Paramount records bought the catalog of Black Swan records after its bankruptcy in 1923. The label featured Blind Lemon Jefferson in 1926, the first popular downhome blues artist and the first artist with the blind epithet to produce for the Race record industry. The epithet appeared on an Okeh record a year earlier. Andrew Jenkins, a country musician, recorded at a location recording in Atlanta in April 1925 as Blind Andy. Jenkins's discography reveals he produced only two recordings between 1926 and 1928, which could indicate his sales were not impressive to Okeh. While this might also relate to broader trends like the popularity and accessibility of the radio for white audiences, the point that the blind epithet was nearly absent from white popular music divisions during its height of popularity on Race records is notable.

The mass culture which emerged as the musicians began production for Race records is relevant, because indeed the introduction and accessibility of modern technologies forced a dislocation from former modalities. The temporal dislocation performed by the phonograph relates to Paul Ricoeur's thesis on the "end" of memory. The recorded performances of the musicians functioned as a "lived" memory in Black modernity and in the construction of cultural memory as records inscribed with the past. The reproduction, mediation, and inclusion of the symbol of the past in these technologies relate to the reception of the musicians of this discussion.

Baraka describes the consumer culture that developed in post-Migration communities, "Friday nights after work in those cold Jordans of the North, Negro workingmen lined up outside record stores to buy the new blues."[171] Urban environments had access to these records and the

[171] Baraka, *Blues People : Negro Music in White America*, 101.

employment opportunities to purchase them. These audiences waiting in line, in the cold, both literal and figurative, to buy a downhome blues record would have had a unique nostalgic experience. They spent their money, took their new records through the "cold" to their new homes, listened to this newly available sound for play on phonographs. The migrants may have identified themselves as analogous to the records they bought and listened. There was a part of them that was still downhome and as they were spun and worn by modern technologies, they let the sound they heard come from them. This would apply to non-migrants' experiences as well, as society was adapting to technological innovations and the changes they affected across the country.

Ironically, while these musicians performed an imagined past, their music was arguably a modern expression with an "old-time" label. Their sonic and the recorded experience of it was innovative. The mass-mediation of their records had a unifying and collectivity forming value as popular music across a range of communities during the period of demographic fluidity. This relates to Halbwach's conclusion that memory is indistinguishable at the level of the individual and collective because of its impossibility to exist outside of social contexts.[172]

Blues scholar Luis Monge describes the lyrical reference from 1916 in W.C. Handy's "Beale Street Blues" as the "first popular emergence of the image of the blind street performer of blues." This circulation during the same period as Bradford occurred a decade before Jefferson first recorded with the "Blind" title (but after Blind Tom and Blind Boone). The popularity of the musicians was another moment of surprise for the record industry which only recognized a viable African American audience in 1920. Curiously, both Bradford and Handy refer to performances of blind blues musicians before the "Blind" epithet appeared on Race records.

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[172] David Scott, "Introduction: On the Archaeologies of Black Memory," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* 6, no. 1 (2008): 6.

During the 1920s, the musicians produced commercial records for companies interested in a commodity, not a folkloric document. The musicians recorded in urban locations—Chicago, New York, Dallas, Atlanta, New Orleans. Blind Willie Johnson recorded in Dallas, New Orleans, and Atlanta between 1927 and 30. Blind Willie McTell recorded in Atlanta, Chicago, and New York between 1927 and 35. They participated in the fluidity of the period as itinerant performers and recording artists. McTell, Gary Davis, Lemon Jefferson, Willie Johnson, Fuller, and Blake were the most recorded artists, other musicians who recorded only at one session. Their records did not pass test sessions or hit the mark to pay the records printing costs, which resulted in the opportunity to record again. The Piedmont and East Texas regions are recognized as fostering the prominent musicians, but this may have been due to Atlanta and Dallas hosting recording sessions which drew musicians from the region. Fewer of the musicians from the Delta were recorded, which could be related to very few sessions outside of New Orleans in the Delta. The musicians associated with Louisiana and Mississippi include Willie Davis, Richard "Rabbit" Brown who recorded as Blind Willie Harris, Blind Roger Hays, and Joe Sheppard who recorded as Blind Joe Reynolds.

Dixon, Godrich, and Ryes's *Blues and Gospel Records 1890-1943* provides a comprehensive discography of the period and the musicians.[173] Unfortunately, sales and print information are limited for companies that featured the prominent musicians involved in the industry. Dixon and Godrich's *Recording the Blues,* an earlier work, offers details of the 1920s Race series records.[174] Poor bookkeeping by smaller record companies affected musicians across color lines on labels' rosters, but is unsurprising as records were often a means to promote the sale

[173] Dixon et al., *Blues & Gospel Records, 1890-1943*.
[174] Dixon and Godrich, *Recording the Blues*.

of phonographs made by parent companies. This deficiency relates to Paramount records and is contrasted with established companies like Columbia. Perhaps this was an intentional oversight to undercompensate artists, an underestimation of the Race record industry's potential, or a failure to recognize the historical significance of the recordings.

As the effects of the Depression nearly bankrupted most of the record companies by 1932, transitions and takeovers occurred which contributed to the loss of previous company documents. A large number of master records were lost due to turnovers, and shortages in the Great Depression and Second World War. Masters, or "Mothers" were scrapped for their aluminum by some companies, deemed more valuable than the music it documented. This destroyed the primary molds from which records were printed.

The musicians' work would have been lost but for printed records from personal collections sought out by blues collectors and scholars like John Tefteller, Samuel Charters, and David Evans. According to oral accounts, Paramount's masters were thrown into the river by disgruntled employees after the company went bankrupt.[175] Tefteller calls the Race records from the 1920s "the world's rarest records" because of the aforementioned reasons, their small number of pressings, and their heavy usage by consumers.[176] The popular debut of Jefferson in 1926 verified a viable market for downhome expression. Mazor proposes the popularity of downhome demonstrated in "the relatively stronger sales of records among rural audiences, and their tastes; many fans of vaudeville blues and jazz were, at least for the time being, moving on to following

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[175] Tuuk, *Paramount's Rise and Fall: The Roots and History of Paramount Records*, 187.

[176] Interview with Tefteller. Big Road Blues Show 11/12/17: Hard Road Blues- John Tefteller's Rare Blues & Gospel 78's. https://sundayblues.org/?tag=john-tefteller. Accessed February 16, 2018.

the radio."[177] This switch to radio is difficult to demonstrate because the programming of classic blues and jazz in the mid-1920s is not well-documented. Baraka writes that the influence of the radio as a medium of jazz occurred after the Second World War. He bases this on the effect of the war on the record industry, which depleted materials for production.[178]

While the Race record era expanded from 1920 until 1930, the commercial record industry as a whole was mostly in decline. Competition by the radio as a source of music reproduction contributed to this, but that technology was mostly irrelevant as competition for Race records. The dearth of Black music radio programming through the 1920s continued the relevance of Race records for African American audiences. Blind Lemon Jefferson, Arizona Dranes, Blind Blake, and Blind Joe Taggart each debuted records in 1926 and continued to produce until the peak of Race industry blues recording around 1930.[179] Recordings by Blind Boy Fuller and other musicians with the "Blind" title continued through the Depression's diminishing effects on the industry in the late 1930s. The entire record industry overall declined between 1920-25, then improved between 1925-29. After the market economic collapse of 1929, the industry suffered until its low point in 1933 during the Depression, from which it slowly began to improve. Peter Tschmuck details this history in *Creativity and Innovation in the Music Industry.* The record industry boomed in 1921, (100 million records sold); between 1921-25 Victor lost more than fifty percent of its sales ($51 million to $20 million) and tried to reenter the market to compete in July 1926, hiring Ralph Peer (of Okeh Race and Hillbilly record fame.) He focused on downhome blues

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[177] Mazor, *Ralph Peer and the Making of Popular Roots Music*, 136-37.
[178] Baraka, *Blues People : Negro Music in White America*, 169.
[179] Paul Oliver, Tony Russell, and Robert M. W. Dixon, *Yonder Come the Blues : The Evolution of a Genre* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 277.

because he felt the trend in classic blues was subsiding. In 1927, Victor's sales rebounded to $48 million, and 500 blues and gospel records were issued across the Race record industry (a fifty percent increase from 1926).[180]

The first popular downhome recordings were produced in 1926 and the aesthetic remained popular through the peak and collapse of the Race industry. This marks the period of this study, an era when musicians of the downhome style were beginning to be influenced by the distribution of similar recordings. Between 1920 and 1925 the entire record industry lost a quarter of its market partially due to the popularity of the radio and the industry's "slow appropriation of new technologies," like electric recording.[181] During this time the industry was exploring new markets. This change occurred as phonographs became more affordable, recording technologies became portable, and the white middle class increasingly turned to the radio for entertainment. Previously overlooked lower classes of the Southern United States across races became more important to the industry as the viability of "Hillbilly" and "Downhome" markets became apparent. This process began as early as 1923 with the introduction of location recordings. Both "Hillbilly" and "Downhome" records were promoted with similar marketing which appealed to their nostalgic quality. Country, or Hillbilly music was first labeled as "Old-time" music by Okeh records, the company that initiated Race and "Hillbilly" record production.[182]

The technology not only rearticulated Southern music recorded on location but transformed the consumption of music from public performance spaces to one that involved a displaced

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[180] Dixon and Godrich, *Recording the Blues*, 57-59.

[181] Peter Tschmuck, *Creativity and Innovation in the Music Industry*, 2nd ed. (New York; Berlin: Springer, 2012), 46-47.

[182] Ibid., 54.

phonographic performance and an idea of the past.[183] Fixed three-minute recordings became definitive versions of songs. Record companies had previously capitalized on nostalgia with the popularity of recordings of traditional music produced for European immigrant communities in the United States. The production of "ethnic" divisions of record companies before the Race record era targeted working-class immigrant communities of the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe in the United States and constituted a notable portion of the early commercial recording industry. The recordings included Asian languages and were produced in twenty-nine different languages during the period.[184] For migrated African American communities, the downhome was coded with cultural memory, signifying a post-Migration milieu. The Race record industry recognized a parallel consumer audience of internally migrated African American communities after the successful debut of Blind Lemon Jefferson.

3.1 PARAMOUNT RECORDS AND THE BLACK PRESS: BLIND LEMON JEFFERSON, BLIND BLAKE, AND BLIND JOE TAGGART

Paramount and Okeh claimed in advertisements that their labels produced only the most popular and established Race artists, despite the reality that record executives had very little exposure what was popular in the Southern African American communities relevant to the musicians. The

[183] Jonathan Sterne, "The Mp3 as Cultural Artifact," *New Media & Society* 8, no. 5 (2006); Michael Bull, *Sound Moves: Ipod Culture and Urban Experience* (New York;London;: Routledge, 2007).

[184] Lerone A. Martin, "Selling to the Souls of Black Folk Atlanta, Reverend J. M. Gates, the Phonograph, and the Transformation of African American Protestantism and Culture, 1910–1945" (Emory University, 2011), 73.

musicians they recorded were a gamble, and the sales they generated determined their popularity. Companies depended on local scouts and "field executives" for suggesting potential artists.[185] Of the dozens of musicians with the "Blind" epithets that appeared on the labels, many only produced one record demonstrating they were not the most popular. Otherwise, they would have vast discographies like those of Blind Lemon Jefferson and Blind Boy Fuller. Also, based on the number of "Blind" pseudonyms, one could argue that the records of the artists were popular, not the artists themselves.

The popularity of records by blind musicians was evident, but performances by the musicians were nearly never mentioned, despite their records being consistently advertised. This is in contrast to other popular artists on the same labels. The classic blues singers were regularly mentioned in the Black presses for their appearances throughout the 1920s. During the late 1930s, Art Tatum, the acclaimed blind jazz pianist also enjoyed publicity related to his performances. In 1938, Tatum's personal life was detailed in an article followed by a recognition of his international fame. The article even describes his move to Los Angeles and the fact that his attractive wife and mother-in-law would soon join him there. Not only is he not titled with the "Blind" appellation, but his blindness is also not mentioned.[186] The media was ready to support a prominent blind jazz musician, as they had supported Blind Tom and Blind Boone. The "Blind" titled downhome musicians' lives and performances were absent from the Black press which is arguably more related to their type of production than their popularity.

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[185] Dixon and Godrich, *Recording the Blues*, 21-22, 27; Oliver, *Barrelhouse Blues Location Recording and the Early Traditions of the Blues*, 18-19.

[186] Gene Ray, "Art Tatum Off to Hollywood," *Chicago Defender*, September 10 1938.

Art Satherley, a white record executive, describes purchasing these advertisements in *The Chicago Defender* for Paramount.[187] This produced a complex scenario for the musicians. They were promoted as blind, old-fashioned, and old-time through the imposition of dominant ideologies in the marketing, which simultaneously created opportunities for them and exploited them. The musicians became Race record celebrities, regardless, but the advertisements perpetrated violence against them, by aligning their musical authenticity with race and disability. The message communicated to readers in the early advertisements from the Black press, like Jefferson's in 1926, was an association of blindness with the archaic, or premodern.

While the musicians' representations in advertisements in the Black press may have been intended and perceived as a caricature, their popularity and prevalence demonstrate the reception of the work as serious by audiences. They sang the blues and hokum, but did not degrade themselves as comedic entertainers with their disability. This contrasts with other depictions of blindness and Blackness in popular culture during the period. One example is W.C. Fields comedy "It's a Gift" from 1934, which mockingly portrays an obstinate blind man who enters and destroys a store with his cane looking for a kumquat. The scene lasts nearly five minutes. Denigrating depictions of African Americans within popular culture at the time were disabling, also portrayed by the film industry.[188] Al Jolson's 1926 film, "A Plantation Act" depicts minstrel styled Blackface routines.[189] While the impact and influence of widely distributed films featuring the parody of

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[187] Nolan Porterfield, *Exploring Roots Music: Twenty Years of the Jemf Quarterly*, vol. 8 (Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 47.

[188] Charles Sellon, as blind man, *It's a Gift*, directed by Norman McLeod, Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures, November 1934.

[189] Al Jolson, *A Plantation Act*, directed by Philip Roscoe, Burbank: Warner Brothers, October 1926.

blindness and Blackness during this period are not prominently documented, it could reflect disabling perceptions relevant to the musicians.

Because the performances of prominent blind artists were infrequently documented, and often described as informal situations, their recordings were the consistent and primary mode of transmitting their music to national audiences. During the peak of the classic blues era, the prominent artists were often the subjects of articles, as in Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Mamie Smith. In fact, their celebrity was considered so newsworthy that it rendered advertising insignificant because of their otherwise constant coverage in the press. This is in contrast to blind songsters' virtual absence but for record company advertisements. Blind Lemon Jefferson's successful debut was briefly noted in the journal *Talking Machine World*. The bold caption "Sensational Seller in Paramount Records" is followed by a brief description of Rudolph Fractman, the new president of Paramount Record Distributing Company. The company guaranteed "same-day delivery in the Chicago field." The technological achievements of the era reveal a preoccupation with satisfying a hurried consumerism that contrasts with the downhome that it desired.

The entry is the only mention of the musicians outside of advertisements in a trade journal or any other press during the era. "The new sensational hit of Blind Lemon Jefferson, 'Long Lonesome Blues,' sung to his own guitar accompaniment, has proved so popular that it has been necessary for the new company to work overtime filling orders." Based on his popularity, the neglect of other journals to recognize is notable. After this *Talking Machine World* entry, blind artists, if mentioned, are nearly excluded from any press other than advertising.[190] Their absence

[190] "Sensational Seller in Paramount Records," 99.

from coverage in the Black Press related to their performances, however, did not result in marginalization. Record companies regularly advertised the musicians.

Figure 7. Blind Lemon Jefferson advertisement[191]

This advertisement for Jefferson's 1926 recording debut appeared in nationally distributed editions of the black press (Figure 7). The caption states, "Here's a real old-fashioned blues by a real old-fashioned blues singer," and describes Blind Lemon's old-time tunes, and his real Southern guitar style. There is no consensus on Jefferson's *actual* date of birth, but by all accounts, he was in his early thirties when he recorded this song. He was late in his own life and relative to

[191] Display Ad 24, *Chicago Defender*, April 3, 1926, 7.

African American male life expectancy at the time, but if he was playing "old-time" music, it was from before his own time. A number of the musicians also died at a young age, even relative to life expectancy of around forty years during the period of discussion. A gap of nearly twenty years between white and Black life expectancy existed during the period.[192]

The image of Jefferson sitting at the train station lamenting over a missed train and his lover leaving him is described in the song excerpt (Audio 2). In Jefferson's first chorus of the "Booster Blues," he expresses feeling out of place "My right foot itches, must be something going on wrong,…I just can't stay here long." Then in the second, he debates trying to contact his sugar by mail or telephone, concluding with the thought "that fast mail train can carry your sugar so far from home." By the third chorus, he describes resigning to live however he wants, because his woman left and isn't coming back. He packs his suitcase, and in the fourth chorus, he is at the depot (the scene from the ad), and the blues hit him. In the end, he enters the train even though he does not have money to buy a ticket; he just had to leave because his baby was never going back.

Audio 2. Blind Lemon Jefferson "Booster Blues" clip

[192] M. Jermane Bond and Allen A. Herman, "Lagging Life Expectancy for Black Men: A Public Health Imperative," *American Journal of Public Health* 106, no. 7 (2016).

Jefferson's debut is credited as both the introduction of the "Blind" epithet on Race records and the beginning of the downhome trend. Despite previous recordings in the style, his were the first to become popular. Within months, other musicians with the "Blind" epithet produced records and blindness became central in the transformation of Black popular music.[193] With its unlikely origins as a furniture company, then as a phonograph manufacturer, Paramount became the independent label which hosted the prominent musicians in the second half of the 1920s. This production began in early 1926 with Jefferson, Blake, Taggart, and Arizona Dranes. The predominance of Paramount record advertisements in the Black Press demonstrates their national popularity, regardless of their position as a smaller record company.

New York and Chicago recording studios actively produced a variety of Race records in 1926, when the "Blind" appellation first appeared on record. In March of that year, Lemon Jefferson recorded "Booster Blues" in Chicago while Bessie Smith and Fletcher Henderson recorded "Gin House Blues" in New York. He recorded "Long Lonesome Blues" in May of 1926, while Louis Armstrong recorded "Don't Forget to Mess Around" and "Lonesome Blues" a month later in June. Arizona Dranes recorded "John Said He Saw a Number" and "It's All Right Now" also in June. Blind Blake recorded "West Coast Blues" and "Early Morning Blues" in August, Blind Joe Taggart recorded "Take Your Burden to the Lord" and in November and "The Half Ain't Never Been Told" in December. This production demonstrates the range of recordings across the industry in 1926.

The advertisements for two record stores appeared in *The Pittsburgh Courier* in March

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[193] This transformed Black popular music because the influence of the downhome is well documented both in recordings by Robert Johnson, and in accounts by Son House, B.B. King, T-Bone Walker and others.

1927, a year after Lemon Jefferson's "Booster Blues" recording debut (Figure 8). Both listings advertise the companies as "colored music" stores and give top listings to Blind Lemon Jefferson and Blind Blake.

Figure 8. Pittsburgh Race record distributor advertisement.

The blues has been categorized over the century of its recorded production. Some of the designations are based on chronology: pre-war, post-war, classic; some geography: Delta,

Piedmont, Texas, Chicago, rural, urban. These designations often relate to the narrative that describes a break which defines the downhome: country, folk, primitive. Techniques and lyrical themes in the blues often transcended these categorical designations and from the influence of the earliest recordings, technology and mobility influenced the musicians and complicated these categorizations.

The flooding of the Mississippi River began in late 1926 and caused extensive damage and fatalities through the first third 1927. The disaster inspired both Lemon Jefferson and Bessie Smith to record songs describing the event in May of that year. The flood is considered to have "inspired the richest groundswell of recorded blues after a specific environmental disaster in history."[194] Under the name Blue Belle, Smith recorded "High Water Blues" (Ok 8483) with a trio featuring Lonnie Johnson on guitar and probably DeLoise Searcy on piano. They recorded in St. Louis on the second of May.[195] Jefferson recorded in Chicago, not far to the north of St. Louis, on a session for Paramount also in May but when exactly it occurred is undocumented. Jefferson's recording "Rising High Water Blues" (Pm 12487) features George Perkins on piano.[196] The musicians were two of the most popular producers of Race records at the time and the prevalence of records related to the flood that followed may have been related to their work. The other recording about the flood included in blues discourse is Charley Patton's 1929, "High Water Everywhere" (Pm12909) nearly two years after the recordings by Jefferson and Smith.

Several of the musicians were strictly evangelists, which is consistent with practices of street preaching and performing. However, over fifteen evangelists performed gospel as well as

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[194] Richard M. Mizelle, Jr., *Backwater Blues: The Mississippi Flood of 1927 in the African American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 27.

[195] Dixon et al., *Blues & Gospel Records, 1890-1943*, 816.

[196] Ibid., 443.

sexually suggestive, double entendre-filled blues. This style, often called hokum,was previously made popular by the classic blues singers. Victoria Spivey recorded “Black Snake Blues” in St. Louis in May of 1926, nearly a year later Jefferson recorded his “Black Snake Moan” (Ok8455) for Okeh in March 1927 and later for Paramount as “That Black Snake Moan no.2” (Pm12756) in March of 1929. There were at least four other recordings produced with black snakes in their titles between 1926 and 1927.[197] Bessie Smith recorded “Boa Constrictor Blues” (Ok8553) in December 1927 again under the Blue Belle pseudonym with Lonnie Johnson on guitar a year before Blind Blake recorded his “Rumblin’ and Ramblin’ Boa Constrictor Blues” (Pm12657) from May 1928. These examples demonstrate performers circulated popular themes and transcended downhome and classic blues categories. The presence of common themes in recordings also suggests industry practices of following high sales of recordings with similar themes.

Both Blake and Jefferson sing about their innuendo snake situations, a boa constrictor and a black snake respectively. This anticipates the hokum style that peaked a few years later with Blind Boy Fuller and others like Scrapper Blackwell, Leroy Carr, Georgia Tom (Thomas Dorsey), and Tampa Red. Blake sings, “Too tight make you cry, too tight make you wanna die” in October 1926, on “Too Tight Blues” (Pm12824) several years before recordings of “Tight Like That” flooded the Race market. Jefferson participates with the “tight” theme in August 1928 on his “Maltese Cat Blues” (Pm12712), singing “When you get home, buy a Maltese cat and a good strong brownskin, man, it’s tight like that.”

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[197] Martha Copeland, “Black Snake Blues” (Co14161-D) September 1926; Rosa Henderson, “Black Snake Moan” (Pa7529, Pe129) c. May 1927; Viola McCoy “Black Snake Blues” (Ca1158, Ro385, Vr5085) May 1927; Whistlin’ Pete and Daddy Stovepipe, “Black Snake Blues” (Ge6212, Ch15361) July 1927.

Blake sings about "rumblin' and ramblin' from town to town" on "Boa Constrictor" from May of 1928, but by September of the same year, he sounds somewhat road worn. In his fatigued blues "Walkin' Across the Country," Blake plays a descending diminished chord on each beat to harmonize his sung melody, "Sighing and crying, broke down with the blues, My clothes are worn out, holes all in my shoes."[198] Blake's harmonic concepts and right hand technique were unique among the musicians. His guitar arrangements feature clearly defined ragtime counterpoint and swing. Jefferson often creates counterpoint in single note melodic responses to his vocal phrases. Jefferson sings a similar line on "Maltese Cat Blues," "I'm going to start walking, walk the shoes right off my feet," and "I've got to stay drunk to keep me warm, because my clothes so thin." Earlier in October 1926 on his "Bad Luck Blues" (Pm12443) Jefferson is already singing a defeated "I want to go home, but I ain't got sufficient clothes."

The musicians were street performers and understood that if they were not entertaining, they would not attract audiences to earn money. They had to imagine their audiences based not on visual cues, but rather on their awareness of the spaces they played, the time of day, the people who would potentially be walking the streets, and most importantly, willing to pay them. From this speculation, the musicians could determine the repertoire that would attract audiences. This imagining involved with their performance practice may have affected their recordings, resulting in a less inhibited studio performance than other artists new to recording and the unfamiliar spaces where they recorded. Lomax notes Turner Johnson's street performance in which he addresses an audience that was not there, writing "His blindness was an advantage in one respect—he never knew whether he had an audience." While this is a naïve presumption of Lomax, the musicians

[198] Blake also plays diminished passages in his "Guitar Chimes" from 1929, considered one of the most popular and challenging ragtime pieces for guitar, and "Slippery Rag."

may have lacked certain visual cues to determine their audiences' engagement with their performance. Blake's "Southern Rag" (Pm12565) offers some of the impromptu direction for dancing and jokes that would have been ideal for a live performance setting. These gestures could have enhanced the experience of audiences who listened to his records. He says, "Now we're doing that old Southern rag!" This contrasts with sighted performers who would sometimes soberly announce the titles of their songs at the beginning of their records, this resulted in a somewhat awkward performance that suggested a recital. These performances seemingly found musicians preoccupied with the studio setting and lacking the image of a lively audience that Blake may have conceived for his recorded performances.

On "West Coast Blues," (Pm12387) Blake again casually announces dance directions while playing a complex, technical, driving ragtime arrangement on the guitar, and laughing at his own jokes. This time he calls, "Now we're going to do the old country rock, the first thing we're gonna' do is bring your partner, promenade, see-saw to the right." [199] He was able to convey the energy of a live performance in the studio's environment. Producers from Grafton describe keeping liquor on hand to reduce inhibitions of performers distracted by the artificiality of studio performance. Blake, whether sober or intoxicated, sang and called steps for these audiences, which produced entertaining popular recordings. Audiences could conceivably have danced to his records throughout the country, using his direction. Blake's recordings from August 1926 just preceded Jefferson's "Beggin Back" (Pm12394) and "Old Rounders Blues" (Pm12394) also recorded in August 1926 in Chicago for Paramount. The musicians were crossing paths in their recording

[199] Oliver transcribes this as "swing" but to begin the dance with swinging a partner does not seem as likely as bringing your partner to the dance floor before promenading. Oliver, *Songsters and Saints : Vocal Traditions on Race Records*, 31.

sessions. Taggart conducted his first sessions several months later in November, also for Paramount in Chicago.

Blind Joel Taggart exceeded other musicians in recording under an extraordinary number of pseudonyms, although unverifiable, thought to have recorded under at least five, four of them include the "Blind" appellation. Taggart recorded under the pseudonym Blind Joe Amos on "C&O blues" and "Coal River Blues" (both Vo1116) and Six-Cylinder Smith when recording other secular songs. This was the inverse of Jefferson who recorded blues under his own name, and spiritual songs as Deacon L.J. Bates and Elder J.C. Brown. Taggart's records were also released under the names Blind Joe Donnell, Blind Percy, Blind Jeremiah Taylor, and Blind Tim Russell.

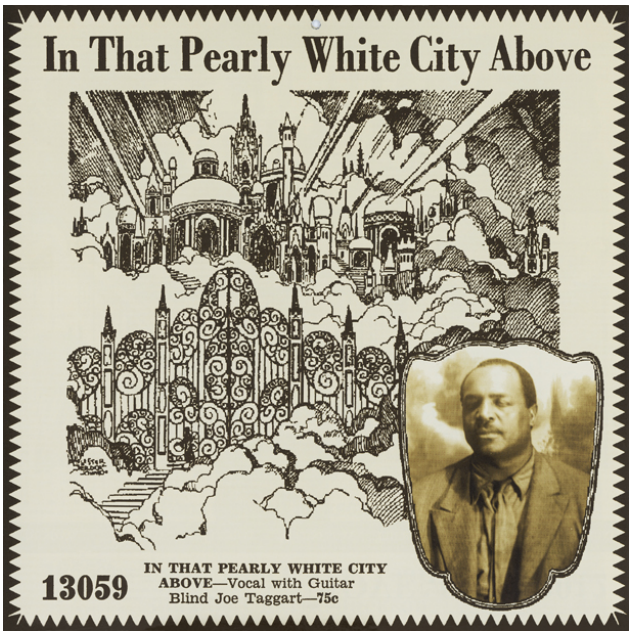

Figure 9. Blind Joe Taggart's only known photograph on a Paramount record sleeve.

Often the use of pseudonym complicates the production history of the musicians, mainly due to the otherwise absence of biographical documentation. For example, Blind Willie Davis, about whom little is known recorded six sides for Paramount. Two of these were also released on the Herwin label (93005, 1929) under the name Blind Willie Jackson. This was typical. However, there were instances when musicians recorded under the same pseudonym. The release of

"Telephone to Glory" by Blind Roosevelt Graves, released under the same pseudonym as Davis, Blind Willie Jackson, during the same year on the Broadway label (5050, 1929.) The only differentiation is Graves often recorded with his brother Uaroy, and on these recordings, both the "Blind" appellation and the inclusion of his brother appear in the description.

While the relationship Graves shared with his recording partner is labeled as brother, whether they were siblings is unfortunately difficult to determine with existing documents. According to Wardlow, Graves was born blind, his brother was blind in one eye and his name was Aaron, not Uaroy.[200] The Dixon Godrich discography goes further to say that there is no specific information confirming that Roosevelt was in fact the guitarist and his brother Aaron or Uaroy was the tambourinist and not vice-versa.[201] This is surprising because Graves recorded nearly thirty sides on two occasions, in 1929 and 1936. While a number of musicians who recorded two sides at one session are virtually unknown, Graves' volume of work suggests there would exist sufficient information to determine such details.

Both Graves and the Blind Willie Davis were among the few of the musicians that were neither from East Texas nor the East Coast Piedmont area. (Blind Joe Reynolds was from Monroe, Louisiana.) They both lived in Mississippi, Graves in Laurel and Davis from McComb according to Wardlow.[202] The proximity of McComb to New Orleans is suggestive considering Davis's debut recording was "When the Saints Go Marching In" and the association of the song with the city's popular traditional jazz renditions of the gospel. This is also relevant to the gospel blues of the musicians, while audiences might associate the song with traditional jazz, it was recorded as a

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[200] Wardlow and Komara, *Chasin' That Devil Music Searching for the Blues,* 191.
[201] Dixon et al., *Blues & Gospel Records, 1890-1943*, 323.
[202] Wardlow and Komara, *Chasin' That Devil Music Searching for the Blues*.

gospel blues in the 1920s. Several Jubilee vocal groups had previously recorded the song as well as a solo voice with guitar accompaniment Robert Hicks, Barbecue Bob in 1927. Davis traveled to Chicago to record the song in January 1928, then recorded at two more sessions there that year in May and December.

Blind Willie Davis's first recording sessions resulted only in a single side; his third studio session produced two sides. His last recording session produced two sides and occurred in Grafton a year later October 1929. Again, this was the month of the market crash which warrants a consideration of the impact the Depression had on these artists. Without the industry, it is possible many of them returned to a life of mendicancy after their record production was interrupted by the economic collapse. Davis's discography includes six issued recordings, each sacred songs.

Davis's rendition of the "Saints" followed at least two previous recordings by solo downhome male vocalist/guitarists. Bo Weavil Jackson's recording from 1926 is similar to Davis's with the use of a slide. Davis recording of "Your Enemy Cannot Harm You" from 1928 credits him with the composition. However, the song was also recorded in 1926 by Reverend Edward Clayborn, one of the early guitar evangelists from Alabama who was living in Pittsburgh at the time of the recording. His rendition is nearly the identical form as Davis's. Clayborn uses a slide and open tunings similarly to the musicians. This is important because it suggests the musicians' were immediately influenced by other downhome Race records. Thus the technology and distribution of Race records influenced and facilitated the development of blind musicians' styles, in this instance as soon as the downhome began production.

Blind Willie Davis was one of the "guitar evangelists" who recorded exclusively sacred songs. Blind Roosevelt Graves production crossed into the secular both under his name and pseudonym. His 1929 release "I Shall Not Be Moved" for Paramount features him playing twelve-

string guitar and singing with his brother along with a pianist and cornetist. The ensemble stays very close to the melody during the entire recording. During the instrumental interlude the cornet is featured restating the melody that had already been repeated numerous times. This decision to restate the melody is worth noting in comparison to Louis Armstrong, Bubber Miley, Freddie Keppard and other cornetists who by 1929 were exploring a variety of improvisational syntax on records. Jazz improvisation may not have been considered stylistically compatible or complimentary to the downhome in this instance, despite the instrumentation. Graves's brother, Uaroy Graves plays tambourine. This instrumentation is notable and unique, as the inclusion of brass instruments were rare on downhome records, especially given the open feeling of the arrangement and all members of the group phrasing the melody or melodic rhythm.

The lyrics of Roosevelt Graves include the verse "I'm sanctified and holy," which is not included in Charlie Patton's recording of "I Shall Not Be Moved" from the same year also on Paramount. Graves inclusion of "sanctified and holy" is relevant to the expansion of the Holiness movement throughout African American communities and the circulation of the term sanctified. A recent division within the Church of God in Christ in 1907 resulted in and influenced both Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal denominations in the Southern United States until the time of the musicians' recordings in the 1920s. The separation occurred despite the leading figure of the Holiness movement, Charles Jones' declaration that "Denominationalism is slavery." In 1920, the Church of Christ (Holiness) was incorporated and in 1927 the Church of God Sanctified and the Original Church of God or Sanctified Church followed. This later fracture in 1927 related to a dispute over the decision to ordain women in the Church of God Sanctified.

Roosevelt Graves recorded fifteen sides at the Richmond, Indiana studio for Paramount in September 1929, one month before the Black Tuesday stock market crash. He did not record again

until 1936 after the record industry rebounded from its low point in 1932. His recordings from the 1929 session were released under three different group names, including Jubilee Male Quartet, Famous Blue Jay Singers, and Black Billy Sunday.[203] He re-recorded "Take Your Burdens to the Lord" in his 1936 session in Hattiesburg, Mississippi but it was unissued. In fact, only one of the six recordings he made that was issued was rereleased under the name Blind Arthur Groom and Brother for three other labels, and as Blind Willie Jackson and Brother for another.[204] Like Willie Walker, he is credited as being featured with his "brother" on his recordings as a leader.

The musicians also recorded with other family members. Taggart recorded with his wife Emma, his son James, and daughter Bertha. Emma sang on six recordings in November in New York with him in November of 1926. Oliver describes her voice as thinner than Taggart's, but rather than her vocal quality is an uncertainty in her participation that produces the overall effect of a spontaneous, unrehearsed performance with her entrances and unison that occasionally anticipates a subdominant chord that never comes. [205] James sang on two recordings with his father a month later in December in New York. On "The Half Ain't Never Been Told," (Vo1070) James joins in the chorus, with his unchanged adolescent vocal unison a dominant feature. The vocal frames a I-IV-V-I harmony while Joe Taggart's guitar accompaniment stays on the tonic chord. His accented upbeat strum gives the feel of the song forward momentum, and an occasional bass pattern he plays with his thumb that also propels it. By the end of the song, the tempo has accelerated to an energetic upbeat from the walking pace at the start. The other song the duo recorded that day, "Keep On the Firing Line" (Vo1070) is nearly the identical song as "The Half

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[203] Dixon et al., *Blues & Gospel Records, 1890-1943*, 323.

[204] Originally Paramount 12874, rereleased as Groom on Broadway 5050, Herwin 92035, and Crown 3326, and Jackson on Varsity 6006-6007.

[205] Oliver, *Songsters and Saints : Vocal Traditions on Race Records*, 209-10.

Ain't Never Been Told" only with different lyrics. Surprisingly the songs were featured on opposite sides of the same record.

3.2 INCARCERATION BLUES: BLIND BLAKE, BLIND JOE REYNOLDS, BLIND BOY FULLER, AND BLIND WILLIE MCTELL.

In Steven Tracy's discussion of performance conditions for African Americans, he cites Blind Blake's "Third Degree Blues" (Pm12867) from 1929 featuring descriptive lyrics of the treatment of African Americans "…they put me in jail, didn't give me no bond. It made me think of my people's that's dead and gone."[206] Tracy reads this as a lyrical reference to the era of slavery, which is plausible, but possibly also displaced by the Migration. Regardless of the "dead and gone" Blake referenced, he was lyrically describing a retrospective event associated with police mistreatment. This was atypical of Blake's usual lyrics that were often humorous, employing gallows humor typical of other downhome blues artists like Jefferson and McTell.

[206] Steven Tracy, " 'Black Twice': Performance Conditions for Blues and Gospel Artists" in Allan F. Moore, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Blues and Gospel Music* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 91.

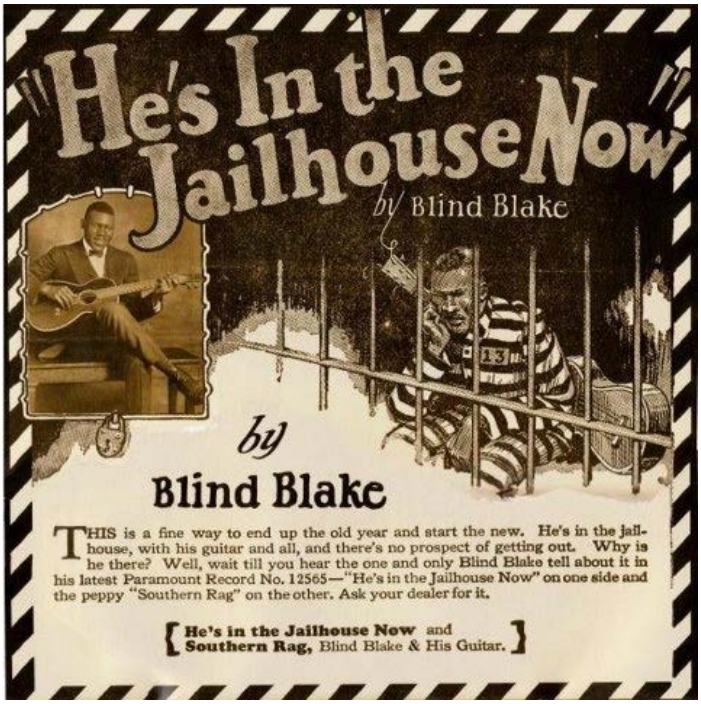

Figure 10. Blind Blake's only known photograph on a Paramount record sleeve.

Audio 3. Blind Blake "He's In The Jailhouse Now" clip

The promotional for Blake's "He's in the Jailhouse Now" (Pm12565) from 1927 features his only known photograph, like many other advertisements for the musicians (Figure 10). The image shows a man who resembles Blake with a guitar. This demonstrates an interest in production that described incarceration by blind downhome musicians. The advertisement has the caption "Why is he there? Well, wait till you hear the one and only Blind Blake tell you about it." The song is in a major key, humorous, and playful with lyrics that describe his brother being imprisoned

for voting twice in a presidential election. In the next verse Blake sings of murdering a woman who tried to pickpocket him at a bar after they had dozens of rounds of drinks, which all sounds quite playful. In a simple melody as he sings, "She's in the graveyard now, She's in the graveyard now" but in the next chorus, he changes his mind and his refrain locates her in the jailhouse. Unlike the image, the narrator, or Blake, is never in the jailhouse.

A year later Jimmie Rodgers recorded his version of the song, "In The Jailhouse Now." The song was circulating by performers across racial divisions despite the segregated era. It served as an excellent platform to tell humorous stories at the expense of foolhardy criminals. Rodgers adds his signature yodel which differentiates his version from the five of other recordings of the song before 1930.[207]

Blake's "What a Lowdown Place the Jailhouse Is" (Pm13016) from 1930 is another example of this, as well as Jefferson's "Blind Lemon's Penitentiary Blues" (Pm12666),"'Lectric Chair Blues" (Pm12608), and "Prison Cell Blues" (Pm12622) from 1928 and McTell's "Death Cell Blues" (Vo02577) from later in 1933. In 1937, Fuller recorded "Put You Back in Jail" (De7903) and a year later "Big House Bound" (Vo04897). These demonstrate the topical prevalence of the unjust legal system as a theme of the musicians' recordings. A year later Fuller went to prison for shooting his wife in the leg.[208] Blind Teddy Darby "spent a year in a reformatory

[207] Jim Jackson "In The Jailhouse Now" (Vocalion) 2/27, Blind Blake "He's In the Jailhouse Now" (Paramount) 11/27, Jimmie Rodgers "In The Jailhouse Now" (Victor) 2/28, Boyd Senter's Senterpedes "In The Jailhouse Now" (Victor) 2/29, Hobo Jack Turner "In The Jailhouse Now" (Columbia) 2/29, Memphis Sheiks "He's in Jailhouse Now" (Victor) 11/30,.

[208] Derek Bright, *Highway 61: Crossroads on the Blues Highway* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2014).

and a year in a city workhouse for illegal moonshine transportation."[209] In an interview with Wardlow, Ishmon Bracey recalls Blind Lemon Jefferson spending time in Parchman farm for "shooting dice and shooting a man."[210] Blind Joe Reynolds was incarcerated multiple time in the Louisiana and Arkansas State Penitentiary and admitted to the "shooting of an uncle, and of one white man" according to Wardlow.[211] These confessions suggest Reynolds' idea of self-promotion included constructing himself as an outlaw, regardless of whether the crimes were committed. His recorded music is filled with misogynistic lyrics of womanizing, yet he feigned to be a preacher. Darby in contrast, became a preacher after his piano accompanist cousin was murdered in 1937.[212]

While imprisonment may have related to the controversial predominant incarceration rates of African American men and women in the United States, the metaphoric space of imprisonment may have been relevant to the musicians. This would involve confinement to spaces of disabling social structures. The musicians' prison-themed blues were preceded by Bessie Smith's 1923 "Jailhouse Blues" (CoA4001) and her 1927 "Send Me to the 'Lectric Chair Blues" (Co14209). This reinforces that the classic and downhome blues had themes in common despite classifications that suggest there were significant differences within the subgenres.

Blind Joe Reynolds recorded shortly after Willie Davis's "I Believe I'll Go Back Home" session in the same Wisconsin studio. He recorded four songs at his first session in November 1929 in the hokum style, singing about "his big fat mama" and "outside woman." However, he also sings of mobility, "Lord I'm going away mama, where you're off my mind, because you keep

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[209] Gerald L. Smith, Karen Cotton McDaniel, and John A. Hardin, *The Kentucky African American Encyclopedia* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 134.

[210] Ishmon Bracey Interview with Gayle Wardlow, Jackson, Ms. May 26, 1968, Center for Popular Music Archives , Middle Tennessee State Univerisity.

[211] Wardlow and Komara, *Chasin' That Devil Music Searching for the Blues*, 171.

[212] Smith, McDaniel, and Hardin, *The Kentucky African American Encyclopedia*, 134.

me worried and bothered all the time." Mobility was a theme present in the musicians' gospel and hokum recordings. Reynolds produced his second and last session in Memphis a year later for Victor records under the pseudonym Blind Willie Reynolds. The musicians who did not sell often disappeared from recording during the Depression years. Reynolds did not experience early blindness but rather was shot in the face with a shotgun as a young man.

3.3 PENTECOSTALISM: BLIND WILLIE JOHNSON, ARIZONA DRANES, BLIND MAMIE FOREHAND

The guitar evangelists reflect the increased presence of the Holiness movement in the African American church. The denominations that emerged reinforce the point that the period of the "Blind" appellation witnessed actions relevant to collectivity formation. The creation of these religious factions relates to the most significant identifying markers related to members of communities. The musicians, many of whom were guitar evangelists produced sacred musical expressions for mass mediation on records. This dissemination parallels expansion of nominations across African American communities, with the central bases of factions in the South. The Church of God in Christ is based in Memphis, Tennessee, and the Original Church of God or Sanctified Church in Nashville, Tennessee, several of the factions began in Mississippi, both in Jackson and Lexington. This is to say that the musicians were active across the South in these locales which suggest they were familiar with the movements and the denominations being established.

Blind Willie Johnson was outselling his Columbia labelmate Bessie Smith before the collapse of the record industry. Johnson differed from Jefferson, his fellow East Texan, in several notable ways. Johnson recorded two unissued secular songs under the pseudonym Blind Texas

Marlin (based on sequential matrices), and Jefferson recorded two sacred songs that were unissued until after his successes. Jefferson's sacred songs were released without the blind epithet under the transparent pseudonym Deacon L.J. Bates. Between December of 1925 and January 1926, Jefferson recorded "I Want to Be Like Jesus" and "All I Want is That Pure Religion" (both on Pm12386) for Paramount. They were his first recordings and not immediately released. He used a tremolo technique and an open rhythmic concept, that result in extended phrases as opposed to a defined groove. The tremolo picking technique doubles the melody on the refrain, which is present in the guitar accompaniment throughout the rest of the song. The music has qualities of the church in this regard; there was no need to satisfy a steady pulse for dancers.

Jefferson's singing is reserved on the recording compared to his blues recordings and even compared to another sacred recording "Where Shall I Be" (Pm12585) as Deacon L.J Bates from October of 1927, and released on Herwin 93004 as by Elder J.C. Brown. By this time, he was a veteran recording artist. His guitar arrangement again features the melody and single strum to define the end of the phrases. However, his conservative approach on his first recordings may also have to do with his perceptions of the tastes and judgments of church-going audiences. His singing was seemed appropriate and sufficiently humble for good church people.

Several months after Jefferson recorded his second session as Deacon L.J. Bates in October 1927, Willie Johnson made his first recordings for Columbia in Dallas. On the session, he recorded six gospel songs. A year later he recorded five more songs also in Dallas, but with the addition of Willie B. Richardson, his first wife. Their work together is reminiscent of the duo recordings of Taggart with his wife and son. The arrangements have the feeling of spontaneity and sound unrehearsed. Johnson's voice and guitar are instantly identifiable, but as a duo, their recordings sound like street performances, but also like Southern African American Pentecostal church

performances during the late twentieth century. Richardson follows cues from Johnson, who may have been distracted by conceiving an arrangement that would accommodate the time constraints of recording. While there is little evidence of his spontaneity, he recorded two takes of "Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning" (Co14425) in his 1928 session. This may have been to solidify an arrangement that conformed to the recording times or simply a mistake.

The period is marked by the transformations in African American Christian practices that resulted from the introduction of various Pentecostal-Holiness denominations. William J. Seymour left Texas to lead the Azusa Street Revival two decades earlier, and Pentecostal denominations and practices were still recent across the South. The movement was marked by the inclusion of transcendent practices of worship. The inclusion of women like Arizona Dranes, and instruments to make a joyful noise, including the guitar, tambourines, pianos, and music for moving the holy spirit, not for a display of repressed stoicism. While the guitarists were prominent among musicians with the blind epithet, the gospel movement that is associated with Thomas Dorsey was transformed and popularized by the blind pianist Arizona Dranes. Okeh was the race record market leader in 1926, according to Dixon, when Arizona Dranes first recorded for the label.[213] She recorded "Lamb's Blood Has Washed Me Clean" (Ok8419) November 15, 1926 in Chicago. The city may have been familiar to her because her collaborator Reverend McGee and his Jubilee singers had a tent for worship set in the city by 1925. As early as 1918, Dranes travelled to Oklahoma with McGee to establish Church of God in Christ congregations.

Dranes and the chorus drive the song bending up on the lamb and Lord then descending to the root of the song, this response establishes the fundamental while Dranes keeps a dominant

[213] Dixon and Godrich, *Recording the Blues*, 26.

seventh chord on the piano. The chorus responds to Dranes powerful strained calls. She is performing the preacher and taken with the spirit while the members of the chorus support her and carry her to continue. Her position, as preaching/singing with the choir, even symbolically would have been unacceptable in traditional nominations but defined the Pentecostal movement.

Audio 4. Arizona Dranes "Lamb's Blood Has Washed Me Clean" clip

In the context of Pentecostal movements throughout the United States during the early twentieth century, blindness might not be a punishment of a wrathful God for one's sins, nor one's parent's sins, but the blessing of those who would see the heavenly kingdom, and were spared casting their eyes upon the temptations and sins of the world. The blind will see and the seeing will become blind, as stated in John 9:39, with all of its metaphor of physical and spiritual blindness. A tradition of blind church organists in Europe and the United States may suggest blindness was a normalized presence, yet these musicians were invisible, often behind curtains and walls, heard and not seen. Dranes was a lead vocalist and pianist in the front of congregations in COGIC churches. Performing the blues is a form of secular testimony, and blues performance in its groove, repeated phrases melodies improvisation resembles being "in the spirit." For conservative denominations, this might resemble some form of demonic possession or hedonism. To others, this may appear to be a cathartic and ecstatic practice.

Hurston describes song transformations in African American spirituals, writing that they exist in "unceasing variations around a theme." She clarifies that the spirituals were not solely a product of the era of slavery, but that they "are being made and forgotten every day."[214] She writes that this occurred across congregations in her "Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals." She refers to the song from Willie Johnson's first recording session, "Jesus Make Up My Dying Bed" (Co14276). She describes the song as "…easily the most popular of the recent compositions." No recordings were produced during the period of the musicians under Hurston's New Orleans Baptist variation, but the song was recorded as "In My Time of Dying," "He's a Dying–bed Maker" "Lower My Dying Head," Jesus is A Dying Bed Maker," and "Jesus is Going to Make Up Your Dying Bed."[215] She notes "The Dying Bed Maker" (a variation) "has been changed to 'He's a Mind Regulator' by a Baptist church in New Orleans." Hurston's "He's a Mind Regulator" may be related to the song "John, The Revelator" on four gospel recordings between 1936 and 1941 by acapella vocal groups.

Johnson produced the only recording "John, The Revelator" (Co14530-D) with acoustic guitar accompaniment in Atlanta six years earlier in 1930 at his last recording session. The song features his wife's vocals again, this time in response to Johnson's sung question, "Who's that writing?" to which she responds, "John, the revelator" in an understated melody. This contrasts with the deep grain of Johnson's tone, which his biographer Blakey describes as "gruff," a "growling chest voice," "that of an ancient gnarled preacher."[216] Hurston writes about a preaching style described as "a good straining voice." This is the essence of Johnson's singing on this

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[214] Zora Neale Hurston, "Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals," in *Negro: An Anthology*, ed. Nancy Cunard (London: Nancy Cunard at Wishart & Co, 1934), 79-81.

[215] Variations of the song were featured on recordings between 1926 and 32 by Rev. J.C Burnett, Johnson, Charley Patton, see Dixon et al., *Blues & Gospel Records, 1890-1943*.

[216] D. N. Blakey, *Revelation Blind Willie Johnson the Biography* (Gardners Books, 2007).

recording, one of several vocal timbres he utilizes throughout the thirty recordings in his discography. The musicians were actors in the transformation of songs described by Hurston, which is demonstrated in their interpretations on recordings.

Blind Willie Johnson would likely have been surprised to know that his music was selected to be sent on a gold record to the outer solar system a half-century after its recording. In 1977, NASA launched the Voyager robotic probes that contained the Golden Record. The disc "contains the story of the Earth expressed in sounds, images, and science," sounds of nature, and a variety of music that includes Johnson's "Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground" (Co14303). The song was an adaptation of a nineteenth-century hymn in the manner described by Hurston. The interpretation is also referred to as "moaning," that involves vocalization. Ethnomusicologist Timothy Ferris and Carl Sagan, both involved in the Voyager project believed Willie Johnson's expression concerned "a situation he faced many times, nightfall with no place to sleep. Since humans appeared on Earth, the shroud of night has yet to fall without touching a man or woman in the same plight."[217] The project agreed that Johnson best expressed the human condition of not having a home, of being on the move out of necessity, for extraterrestrial life. The expression chosen to represent humanity was recorded by chance, on a gamble that it might reward a small profit. The music expresses a feeling (at least to humans) that words do not. The notion by the world's leading scientists that the expression by Johnson could somehow be relevant to extraterrestrial life reveals how the musicians have been romanticized.

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[217] Carl Sagan, *Murmurs of Earth: The Voyager Interstellar Record*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1978), 178. Quoted in Stephanie Nelson and Larry Polansky, "The Music of the Voyager Interstellar Record," *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 21, no. 4 (1993).

The importance of the musicians' recordings of these songs with solo voice and accompanied guitar is that they are considered definitive interpretations. They are references for reinterpretation by musicians across genres. Almost a century later, the album *God Don't Never Change: The Songs of Blind Willie Johnson* features recordings by The Blind Boys of Alabama, Tom Waits, Cowboy Junkies, Sinead O'Connor, and others inspired by Johnson's gospel interpretations. [218] The popular music industry is further transforming the gospels of Johnson, which he adapted to his own style, ability, and experience. These tributes and the manner in which he is personally revered in the early twenty-first century might mean little to him. His music is associated with his experience as a disabled African American man in the rural South who died tragically, destitute, and unknown, not with his message of God and the coming apocalypse. The "end is near" of revelation in "Jesus is Coming Soon" (Co14391) and the "Trouble Will Soon Be Over" (Co14537) is the message across Johnson's recordings.

Blind Texas Marlin, his pseudonym for recording secular blues, was never issued and may have resulted from his opposition to the music, as someone who identified as a religious figure. The pseudonym was taken from the town of Johnson's birth: Marlin, Texas. Johnson was a street preacher who recorded only on location, in Dallas, New Orleans, and Atlanta. So while we have thirty recordings and know he was traveling throughout the South to record, we know very little else other than anecdotes about his life. According to his wife, Johnson died of pneumonia after their house burned in 1949 and he slept under damp newspapers on a rain soaked mattress. According to Samuel Charters, who began researching Johnson the following decade, he

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[218] "Tom Waits, Lucinda Williams Lead Blind Willie Johnson Homage," *UWIRE Text*, February 29 2016.

performed at Mount Olive Baptist Church in Beaumont, Texas around the time of his death.[219] His original recorded masters were lost or destroyed, and his reissues like the one sent on Voyager were copied from distributed pressings.

Blind Willie Johnson began recording during the early location recordings, facilitated through mobile electrical recording technology. Oliver details the history of location recordings in *Barrelhouse Blues,* which Dixon and Godrich detailed in *Recording the Blues* forty years earlier.[220] Ralph Peer claims to have initiated the practice of location recording in 1923, which eventually involved nearly all of the labels involved in the Race industry. Paramount was an exception, which recorded in New York (until late 1926), Chicago, and Grafton, Wisconsin between 1929 and 1932.[221] Polk Brockman remembered arriving with 200 musicians waiting for the opportunity to record during location sessions in Atlanta, New Orleans, and St. Louis. He would advertise, "scout the countryside," and audition for Okeh prior to the recording unit's arrival. [222]

Several recordings of the downhome style by a male voice and self-accompanied guitar preceded Jefferson's 1926 debut. However, they did not achieve popularity. In early 1924, Ed Andrews recorded two sides in Atlanta for Okeh and did not record again, indicating his records did not sell well. Papa Charlie Jackson also recorded in 1924, accompanying his voice on the banjo. He recorded roughly twenty sides in the same format for Paramount before Jefferson's 1926 debut. These musicians are two examples of performers in the format of the downhome, equally

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[219] Samuel Charters, liner notes to *Blind Willie Johnson, His Story, Told, Annotated and Documented by Samuel Charters*, LP, Folkways Records, FG 3585, 1957, 1962.
[220] Oliver, *Barrelhouse Blues Location Recording and the Early Traditions of the Blues*.
[221] Dixon et al., *Blues & Gospel Records, 1890-1943*, xxxvi.
[222] Dixon and Godrich, *Recording the Blues*, 27.

available to present as authentic and "old-time" by record companies that did not amass the output nor popularity of the musicians.

Jefferson's performing partner Huddy "Leadbelly" Ledbetter did not record commercially until 1935 (his recordings in Angola prison from 1933 by Lomax were for the Library of Congress), nearly ten years after Jefferson. Non-blind musicians like Lonnie Johnson and Leroy Carr became popular performing an urban blues style after Jefferson, using the acoustic guitar and piano as accompaniment to the male voice. Papa Charlie Jackson sang and accompanied himself on banjo on eight recordings in 1924, but he was a New Orleans musician (like Lonnie Johnson), and his aesthetic was not downhome. Non-disabled male musicians as significant solo performers were an exception on Race records before the popularity of Jefferson. This calls into question whether a solo male performer was considered may have been too threatening to white normativity for record labels to promote to stardom.

The denial of an African American interior life, reflective consciousness, as well as the potential for cultural expression, was used as a justification for slavery. This positioned blind Black males sufficiently non-threatening to white record executives to promote the blind songsters of Black popular music, yet blind artists countermanded this through their recordings, by affirming the interiority and cultural expression denied for generations by the era's degrading systemic racism. The popular preachers on Race records also support this notion that representing a non-threatening African American male position could have facilitated a presence on labels' rosters. Decisions made by the industry to promote religious and disabled recording artists may have contributed to their successes and may not demonstrate an intentional exclusion but potentially reveals a dormant fear and anxiety of other musicians whose stardom could have threatened white hegemony.

The Kentucky born St. Louis blues singer, Blind Teddy Darby, like Dranes had a refrain calling out "Lord, Lord" on his first recording. Darby became blind at around twenty years of age allegedly due to glaucoma. He appears without the epithet on records of this solo performance, "Lawdy Lawdy Worried Blues" (Pm12828). He later recorded as Blind Squire Turner for Bluebird records, Blind Darby for Vocalion records, and Blind Blues Darby for Decca records. Darby's recording for Paramount was not church music, but a secular blues recorded. The session occurred at the Richmond, Indiana studio of Gennett records that Paramount records frequently used. The studio began using electric recording in 1926. The studio was located at the Starr piano factory and Darby's 1929 recording was his only session at the Indiana location and for Paramount. Jefferson had his only session at the Gennett studio months after Darby in September 1929. The session was Jefferson's last.

The quality of Jefferson's recordings from the session are of noticeably higher fidelity than his Paramount records. Ironically, Gennett's recordings are often criticized for poor quality. This is also due to the materials they used for discs. Darby recorded two years later in Chicago for Victor, followed by sessions for Bluebird in 1933, Vocalion in 1935, and Decca in 1937. He recorded as a duo with Roosevelt Sykes on piano at his first session and Peetie Wheatstraw at his last.[223]

[223] Rick Kennedy and Ted Gioia, *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagy: Gennett Records and the Rise of America's Musical Grassroots*, 2 ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 224-25.

Audio 5. Teddy Darby "Lawdy Lawdy Worried Blues" clip

The popularity of recorded sermons in 1926 demonstrates the market for Black expression that was not merely entertainment, the recordings of sermons served a personal, introspective, experience that was collectivity forming in the perception of its mass mediation. In November 1926, a sermon by Reverend J.C. Burnett sold approximately four times as records as Bessie Smith.[224]

Along with the musicians, another group of solo male performers featured in advertising and production during the mid-1920s was preachers, who were producing popular song sermon recordings. As religious men, they would also seemingly be non-threatening to racist record industry executives, a point that relates to the dominance of women in the early Race record. The recordings of song sermons by celebrity preachers became enormously successful concurrent with the downhome. One may argue the recordings by Reverends J. M. Gates, J.C. Burnett, and F.W. McGee were categorically "downhome" because their content reflected Southern practices. These sermons were unquestionably musical in many aspects, the expression, vocalisms, and tonal variations of these sermons were a contrast to more reserved approaches of conservative African American denominations. The downhome quality of recorded sermons is also derived from their

[224] Dixon and Godrich, *Recording the Blues*, 288.

repudiation of behaviors associated with urban qua modern existence (although present in rural Southern communities) which were associated with leisure time and money to spend which lured and tempted. Martin describes Race records as counter-hegemonic, noncompliance with Protestant African American middle-class propriety, morality, and racial progress prior to the popular production of sermons.[225]

The Race record industry first became popular through female classic vaudeville blues singers, but by the mid-1920s the downhome aesthetic the musicians as well as recorded sermons became popular. Lemon Jefferson first recorded gospel songs that were not immediately released until after he gained popularity with secular recordings. They were then released under the transparent pseudonym Deacon L.J. Bates, Deacon Jackson, and later re-released on Herwin as Elder J.C. Brown.[226] Jefferson recorded in Chicago at eight separate sessions throughout 1926 for Paramount. In March of 1927, he was in Atlanta recording for Okeh records. This was his only session for the company that only issued two of the eight recordings he produced. There is speculation that Paramount threatened Okeh over Jefferson's contract. The next month Jefferson was back in Chicago recording for Paramount and was active the rest of 1927. He produced twenty recordings at eight sessions again throughout the year nearly monthly. His activities in the interim periods between the sessions are not well documented. Whether he stayed in Chicago, returned to Texas, traveled and performed, or how and when he did all of these is speculation. Ultimately Jefferson's discography included over one hundred recordings.

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[225] Martin, "Selling to the Souls of Black Folk Atlanta, Reverend J. M. Gates, the Phonograph, and the Transformation of African American Protestantism and Culture, 1910–1945," 61.

[226] Dixon et al., *Blues & Gospel Records, 1890-1943*.

Mamie Forehand, in contrast to Dranes, but like other evangelist musicians who recorded with the blind epithet is nearly absent from history other than her recordings. Her discography consists of four recordings she made with her husband who was also blind but curiously did not record with the epithet. They lived in Birmingham and later moved to Memphis before her death, which is thought to have been around 1936, a decade after their recordings which also took place in Memphis. They performed gospel, and it is speculated that she played auxiliary percussion and sang while her husband played guitar.

"Bye and Bye We're Going to See the King" (Ok8438) 11/26, "Wouldn't Mind Dying if Dying Was All" (Vi20574) 2/27, and "Bye and Bye I'm Going to See the King," (Co14504)12/29 are the same gospel song with title variations. The song was recorded on separate occasions by three different blind musicians, as listed respectively by Arizona Dranes, Blind Willie Johnson, and Mamie Forehand between 1926 and 1929. The form is a variation of an eight-bar blues with a lyric that repeats three times and concludes with a variation on the fourth phrase. The song's lyrical descriptions of seeing God are a relevant consideration for the performance by blind musicians. Dranes recorded the song for Okeh in Chicago in November 1926, on the same session as "Lamb's Blood" with Reverend McGee. Johnson recorded it as a solo in New Orleans in December 1929 for Columbia; the trip is known by Johnson fans because he allegedly was arrested attempting to incite a riot performing/preaching in front of the customs house.[227]

Forehand recorded the song with her husband in Memphis in February 1927 for Victor. The song was released in her name with the blind appellation. She keeps the time on what sounds like a countertop call bell, while A.C. accompanies with the guitar playing the melody with the

[227] Sam Charter, liner notes to *The Complete Blind Willie Johnson,* CD, Columbia Legacy 52836, 1993.

slide along with Mamie's singing. She sings in a lower, nearly spoken, register. One that compliments the duo setting with the acoustic guitar, but contrasts with Dranes's projection that was necessary to carry over her barrelhouse piano, a Church of God in Christ congregation and choir. Forehand's choice of the key in which to sing may not have been an option because of the open tuning of A.C.'s guitar, for which he may not have had or used a capo. A.C. plays one chorus for an intro which Mamie joins on the refrain before she sings her first verse. A.C. alternates playing the refrain an octave lower and follows the next one in the higher octave. The song maintains the theme of leaving, mobility, mortality, but the everlasting hereafter with sight.

Audio 6. Blind Mamie Forehand "I Wouldn't Mind Dying If Dying Was All" clip

Figure 11. Arizona Dranes advertisement[228]

This advertisement from the *Pittsburgh Courier* features an image of Arizona Dranes in the top listing, above Louis Armstrong. It appeared in the paper two days after she recorded "Lamb's Blood Has Washed Me Clean." At the time her relationship with Okeh was strained, yet she was a featured favorite of Okeh and the Pittsburgh race record distributor. Her letters to the company are archived and contain her requests for better compensation, which was very little compared to classic blues stars like Bessie Smith.[229]

[228] Zentai and Knox, "The Health Problem of the Negro Child."

[229] Dranes' letters are cited by her biographer. Dodge, *The School of Arizona Dranes: Gospel Music Pioneer*. Smith was well-compensated in the 1920s, but by 1931 she was recording for much less compensation, and in some instances for no royalties. Chris Albertson, *Bessie*, Rev. and expand ed. (London; New Haven, Conn;: Yale University Press, 2003), 223-25, 81.

Merging the slide blues guitar and boogie-woogie piano idioms with inspired performances of sacred songs was modern, transgressive, and reflected the expansion of Pentecostalism throughout African American communities during the period. Several of the musicians produced the earliest gospel recordings during a period of dissemination and the establishment of Pentecostalism in African American communities throughout the United States. Arizona Dranes and Joel Taggart reflected the emergence of this movement, and both artists debuted in 1926, the same year as Blind Lemon Jefferson. The aesthetic of the downhome was a vehicle for the sacred and common among the musicians, but possibly troubling to conservative old-line denominations. Associations of the style with the profane, and sometimes downright evil is prevalent throughout the history of the music. A reading of this group of blind guitar evangelists is a significant aspect of this discussion, as they anticipated the emergence of gospel as a musical style.

Taggart's first records in 1926 for Vocalion are considered the first of the guitar evangelist category, and despite his infrequent inclusion in blues discourse, he is often credited as one of the first downhome artists. White, as a child in Greenville, South Carolina served as a guide or lead-boy for itinerant blind musicians. He did not warmly reminisce about some of them. In fact, he described Taggart as lowdown nasty and mean and was skeptical of Taggart's visual impairment, suggesting Taggart's cataracts were an impairment but that he maintained sight. This suggests that blindness may have been exaggerated and capitalized on by performers.[230]

Blind Willie Johnson sings "let your light from the lighthouse shine on me." The song "Let Your Light Shine on Me" (Co14490) or "Shine On Me" is based on the Gospel of Matthew (5:16) which states, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify

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[230] Wald, *Josh White : Society Blues*, 11.

your Father which is in heaven." The social invisibility of the musicians gives added depth when recorded by Johnson. He recorded the song in 1928, but variations of the song were recorded twice before. The first recording is from 1923 by the Wiseman Sextette for Rainbow records. The recording opens with a spoken voice (presumably Reverend Thomas Wiseman) before the accappella group begins. He states, "This is the song that was sung so much by the Negro soldiers both in this country and over in France during the War. We'll line it off in the old-fashioned way." The next recording of the song was by a white Pentecostal preacher from Kentucky. He auditioned for talent scout Ralph Peer in Tennessee and recorded in 1927. Ernest Phipps and The Holiness Quartet includes an introduction of the song as a waltz with fiddle and piano before the chorus enters with clapping and going into a fast two beat. Johnson's recording which resulted from his talent scouting audition in Texas features the same melody, chorus, and tempo change.

Audio 7. Blind Willie Johnson "Let Your Light Shine On Me" clip

Johnson begins rubato with his guitar. When he begins tempo, his guitar accompaniment features pronounced bass figures that counter his vocal. Johnson's recording makes a striking contrast when Johnson starts slapping the body of his guitar in time and starts a semi-spoken growl. He slaps out a fill in the rhythmic figure called a *cinquillo.* This pattern is usually associated with African Diasporic music of the Caribbean and Latin America and by 1928, was present in jazz, *beguine*, and *son*, as well as Johnson's gospel blues.

4.0 COLLECTIVE MEMORIES AND THE MUSICIANS

Memory is blind to all but the group it binds…

Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de Memoire*

In an interview with the literary critic Dorothy Scarborough from her 1925 *On the Trail of Negro Folk Songs*, W.C. Handy said his blues have a basis in folk songs and each one of his was specifically based on "some old Negro song of the South…Some old song that is a part of the memories of my childhood and of my race."[231] This means that before the production of downhome recordings the idea of the blues as an expression of a Black past was in circulation. Handy continued that the blues are "essentially racial, the ones that are genuine, –though since they became the fashion many blues have been written that are not Negro in character, – and they have a basis in older folk-song." This relates to both ableist and classist imaginaries of the musicians as repositories of downhome blues and the proletariat in general as a source and retainer of memory.

This general phenomenon is described in the work of Pierre Nora as "the irrevocable break marked by the disappearance of peasant culture, that quintessential repository of collective memory whose recent vogue as an object of historical study coincided with the apogee of industrial growth."[232] So while folklorists, sociologists, and anthropologists were interested in conducting field recordings, African American record consumers, while not specifically concerned with excavating and documenting an authentic Black expression, were consuming music marketed as

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[231] Dorothy Scarborough and Ola Lee Gulledge, *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1925), 265.

[232] Pierre Nora, tr. Marc Roudebush, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Memoire," *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 7.

reflecting some aspect of a Black past, regardless of whether it paralleled their personal experience. From Alain Locke to W.C. Handy, texts from the period express the notion that the blues signified a past relevant to African American audiences which involved retrospection and collectivity formation.

While African American cultural memory is unique, the formation of a unique collective past is a process that is transcultural. Institutional racism and segregation contributed to the construction of an African American collectivity. During the period of the musicians' production, a dominant narrative of American history was written that commemorated facilitators of the genocide and enslavement while African American experiences were whitewashed. Ricoeur describes this type of erasure and "forgetting" as an abuse of memory.[233] Trouillot describes historical erasure as a silencing, "an incapacity to express the unthinkable."[234] As both Ricoeur and Landsberg assert, the memory and history of the past "are two interarticulating and mutually constructed modalities" forming a dialectic, with memory functioning as a subjectively interactive experience while history involves an external and distant narrative.[235]

As dominant society reimagined an American history that attempted to reconcile its past including other atrocities against African Americans and the Civil War, the musicians produced popular records that countered with the suggestion of an African American past. This may have served as a past for some listeners' to excavate or reflect, but it was also a way to reframe their present. The musicians' popular records affirmed a position in the present and offered a counter

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[233] Ricoeur, Blamey, and Pellauer, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 58-61.

[234] Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Hazel V. Carby, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2015), 96-97.

[235] Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, 19.

memory to narratives of the past in which African Americans were invisible. This is relevant to the expression of the musicians and records as cultural artifacts because their mass circulation provided a unifying, empowering, material symbol of a past.

The past the musicians signified was not historical, but rather a construction of a common, unifying, collective heritage from a "nonhistory" a description Saidiya Hartman credits to Edouard Glissant.[236] In 1925 Du Bois wrote in "The Social Origins of American Negro Art, "whenever a great mass of millions of men have such common memories and experiences they are bound sooner or later to express them, …we all know the Negro has given the world new music, new rhythm, new melody and poignant, even terrible expression of joy, sorrow, and despair."[237] Du Bois's description of a "new music" and expression of common memories and experiences was published months before Arizona Dranes, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Blake, and Blind Joe Taggart became popular for their records that embody these qualities.

The records the musicians produced featured a style that was new to the popular music industry but involved a component of nostalgia. Because this was a theme of the musicians and the downhome, considering other sites of cultural memory relevant to the audiences of the musicians other than that represented by the musicians becomes necessary. This is relevant to the production of the musicians and whether their work as "old-time" involved a nostalgia for a brief period of Postbellum optimism, and not only an affirmation of modernity. If optimism was experienced, it might have dissipated as a result of incidents that occurred between the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision and during the Red Summer after the First World War. The commemoration of

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[236] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 75.

[237] W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Social Origins of American Negro Art," *Modern Quarterly: A Journal of Radical Opinion* 3, no. 1 (1925).

Emancipation, the Day of Jubilee, whether January 1 or Juneteenth served as a marker of liberation, and an early expression of an African American collectivity. The recognition of the historical moment was relevant to collective memory formation and as an originary moment because of the autonomy it implied.[238]

The reminders of slavery and their repercussions were an inescapable presence for African Americans within the same societal structures that instituted and maintained them increasingly after the *Plessy* decision. In spite of this legacy, the idea of a common heritage, a cultural past, was constructed in the early decades after the Civil War and is considered in the discourse of Frederick Douglas and other African Americans.[239] The experience of emancipation was at most a distant memory by the period of the musicians' recordings. The point is that the immediate lived experience of a past event is not mandatory for it to become a part of one's identity and history. Record companies were including nostalgia to the marketing records across Hillbilly, Ethnic, and Race divisions, and the meanings of the records as mnemotechnics was more than accidental. The companies were influencing the writing of history in the production and marketing of the musicians, as well as the entire industry.

Blind musicians have been perceived as documentarians, and that their blindness is related to a capacity for preserving historical narratives by memory. Amiri Baraka writes "Blues (Lyric) its song quality is, it seems, the deepest expression of memory. Experience re/feeling. It is the

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[238] David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001).

[239] See Elizabeth Ann Regosin and Donald Robert Shaffer, *Voices of Emancipation: Understanding Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction through the U.S. Pension Bureau Files* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

racial memory."[240] The musicians' recordings involved an expression of memory. Interestingly, Du Bois described his first experiences of the Sorrow Songs with the same terminology as Handy in his own of downhome blues, as "weird" and "weirdest" respectively.[241] This response suggests that the music was unfamiliar yet elicited a forceful response. Paramount later described Lemon Jefferson's acquisition of "weird" music which influenced his blues from the "sad hearted and weary people of his homeland" in their "Book of the Blues" collection of scores from 1927.[242] Indeed, the contention that the blues is related to memory remained relevant throughout the twentieth century.

Representations of blind musicians have been documented throughout time and across cultures. Lubet recognizes, "Scholars have long regarded blind musicians as an important affinity group." [243] However, besides Merriam's brief acknowledgment of a universal prevalence of blind musicians, this regard is not well represented in musical studies. He cites midcentury scholarship on Japan, the Marquesas, and writes "but so far is known, no specific study of the phenomenon exists for this area…The problem is an extremely suggestive one, but too little is known to allow us to postulate any correlation between the blind and the ascription of the musician's role."[244]

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[240] Amiri Baraka, *Black Music* (New York: Morrow, 1968), 209.

[241] Du Bois, Gates, and Oliver, *The Souls of Black Folk : Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, 250; W. C. Handy and Arna Bontemps, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography* (New York: The Macmillan company, 1941).

[242] "The Paramount Book of Blues," (Port Washington, Wis.: New York Recording Laboratories, 1927).

[243] Alex Lubet, *Music, Disability, and Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 69.

[244] Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 132.

Often this role involves a complicated position of contempt and reverence as a mendicant documentarian.

Historically, blind musicians have assumed a role as performers of historical narrative, from African griot traditions, harpists from Egypt, epic poets of Greece (as in Homer, or the simply the idea of Homer), the Biwa Hoshi of Japan, and the Kobzari and Lirnyky of Ukraine.[245] The idea that blindness has been conflated with memory and the past for supports the basis of the argument that the musicians are indeed aligned with this trope. Their production signified a past during a pivotal period of African American identity formation and represented an artifact to members of a collective whose histories were disrupted by the institution of slavery and the period following its abolition. Indeed, they occupied a unique historical position during their popularity as performers of memory. African American communities were processing the post-traumatic stress of centuries of slavery and the erasure of many aspects of histories and cultural practices central to collective identity. At the same time, the United States instituted racist segregating legislation that served to collectivize African American communities.

Blind musicians are considered archetypal in various contexts. Members of the Biwa Hoshi, the medieval guild of Japanese itinerant blind musicians, are discussed as an archetype.[246] Both Witek and Monge refer to Blind Lemon Jefferson as archetypal, and blind blues singers in

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[245] See Lise Manniche, *Music and Musicians in Ancient Egypt* (London, England: British Museum Press, 1991), 94-103; Simon Ottenberg, *Seeing with Music : The Lives of 3 Blind African Musicians* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996); Natalie O. Kononenko, *Ukrainian Minstrels : And the Blind Shall Sing*, Folklores and Folk Cultures of Eastern Europe (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1998); Hugh De Ferranti, *The Last Biwa Singer: A Blind Musician in History, Imagination and Performance*, vol. 143 (Ithaca, N.Y: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 2009).

[246] Susan Matisoff, *The Legend of Semimaru, Blind Musician of Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

general as an archetype.[247] Sidran, as cited by Luis Monge, describes the relevance of blind blues singers to African American communities as *more* significant than a metaphor for the trauma of the Black experience and sign of authority of "blues techniques." He concludes that neither are adequate explanations of the "importance of the blind blues singer as a dominant image in the psyche of the black culture" because of their involvement with practices of orality.[248] In addition to these practices, the marking of their expression as a sonic past reinforces the dominance of the image of the musicians.

The musicians are not necessarily related to the conception that archetypes are pre-existent, innate, psychological structures but rather to the term's broader meaning, as categorical models related to developmentally produced "image schemas" and "as culturally determined functionary forms."[249] John Merchant suggests a range of various potential meanings of archetype. The social significance of the musicians across African American communities as producers of popular music inscribed with blindness, the South, the downhome, and an old-time authenticity suggests their position as an archetype. This meaning is a relevant consideration of their collectivity.

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[247] Joseph Witek, "Blindness as a Rhetorical Trope in Blues Discourse," *blacmusiresej Black Music Research Journal* 8, no. 2 (1988); Luigi Monge, "The Language of Blind Lemon Jefferson: The Covert Theme of Blindness," *Black Music Research Journal* 20, no. 1 (2000).

[248] "The Language of Blind Lemon Jefferson: The Covert Theme of Blindness," 45.

[249] John Merchant, "The Image Schema and Innate Archetypes: Theoretical and Clinical Implications," *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 61, no. 1 (2016): 341-42.

4.1 TECHNOLOGIES OF THE TIME

The musicians' records were distributed throughout the country by various means; occasionally by train porters who brought records with them to sell, through mail order in the Black press, and more personally by mobile phonograph owners who played the musicians' records. The musicians directly benefited from the accessibility of numerous technological innovations during the era, many of which were rooted in the expansion of rural postal delivery, this facilitated the distribution of the Black press in which Race records were sold by mail order. The musicians also benefited from the accessibility of inexpensive, mass-produced, guitars which could be ordered through catalogs, and delivered cash on delivery. The Supertone brand guitars pictured (Figure 12) were built in Chicago, where Sears and Roebuck was located.[250] Priced between 4 and 7 dollars would be equivalent to between roughly $50 and $90 today. The National Triolian pictured (Figure 13) from the 1930 catalog was a favorite instrument of blues musicians. Nationals were revered for their tone, durability, projection, and construction. The instrument was costly by any standard, (roughly $650) and had the option to be purchased in monthly installments. Whether the musicians purchased these instruments at the onset of the Great Depression is uncertain, but maintaining payments as itinerant musicians as well as their enforcement during the era would have been challenging.

[250] Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers, *Vintage Guitars : The Instruments, the Players, the Music* (San Anselmo: String Letter Publ., 2001), 29.

Figure 12. Supertone parlor guitars, Spring 1920 Sears and Roebuck catalog.

Figure 13. National resonator guitar, Spring 1930 Sears and Roebuck catalog. [251]


P 676. Blind Boy Fuller. Southern Folklife Collection.

Figure 14. Blind Boy Fuller with a National resonator guitar.[252]

[251] http://www.silvertoneworld.net/century/1930s.html. Accessed February 12, 2018.
[252] "Blind Boy Fuller," *Southern Folklife Collection*, 676.

The National guitars pictured in the 1930 Sears and Roebuck catalog and the photograph of Blind Boy Fuller, (Figures 13 and 14) were designed in Los Angeles in the 1920s, a decade after the Azusa Street revival occurred in the city. The guitars became favorite instruments for musicians to amplify their sound with aluminum cones (resonators), by similar principles of a speaker. The guitar would acoustically drive cone/s inside a metal body, with a driving tone somewhere between a guitar and banjo, and volume that could carry over a loud street or a party. The National bodies are durable enough to endure bumps and bangs and could survive the musicians lives on the road. Unfortunately, the records that the musicians' produced playing these durable guitars did not endure the mobility of audiences nearly as well. The message of the Azusa Street Revival was adopted into the repertoire of the musicians across the South and became a message for them to be accompanied by the National resonator guitars. The guitars that appear in the only known photographs of Lemon Jefferson and Willie Johnson (Figures 4 and 5) are similar to the less expensive wooden guitars in the 1920 Sears and Roebuck catalog, also under the Supertone brand name (Figure 12).

As numbers of Southern, rural, African American households benefitted from the postal services, there was still very little access to electricity. In 1925, only 3.2 percent of all rural households received electricity from a central station. By 1934, those with access only increased to 10 percent.[253] This means that if these communities were consuming the records of the musicians who were regional celebrities, they were doing so with mechanical phonographs, and they were. Levine quotes Zora Neale Hurston's report to Franz Boas from her fieldwork in the

[253] Robert T. Beall et al., *Mississippi Valley Committee, Public Works Administration, with the Cooperation of E. Johnston Coil and Robert T. Beall, Rural Electrification Administration*, vol. serial set no. 10004;no. 198;74th Congress, no. 198; (Washington, DC1936).

rural South from 1927 that "The bulk of the population now stands its leisure in the motion picture theaters or with the phonograph."[254] Levine continues by citing Mahalia Jackson's recollection, "Everybody was buying phonographs—the kind you wound up on the side by hand," and that the classic blues singers were the records she recalled being played loud enough to fill the streets of uptown New Orleans during her youth in the early twenties. New Orleans "Uptown" neighborhood was a destination of the migration during the nadir. So, despite the lack of electric phonographs, Race records were a dominant unifying element in African American communities. The imagination of African American consumers during this period negotiating the cultural memory of slavery and navigating the constant presence of Jim Crow were unifying realities for African Americans across classes, who both prospered and those who struggled during this period of pre and post Great Migration.

The downhome sounds of Southern street corners, country suppers, and church picnics reproduced on phonographs in homes and clubs in Harlem, the Bronzeville neighborhoods of Chicago and Milwaukee, Pittsburgh's Hill District, the 'Black Bottom' neighborhoods of Detroit and Philadelphia, and other Northern destinations of the Great Migration served in the construction of African American cultural memory. Ambient sounds of the spaces associated with the performances, the recordings unique transformed and filtered the music which gave it new meanings. Post-migration communities could have played a more significant role in the sales of Race records by the musicians than the Southern regions where they were local celebrities. This is based on access and means. Because of the fluidity during the era, Northern communities may well

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[254] Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, 227.

have been populated by individuals who migrated from the rural South and were aware of the musicians before they became Race record celebrities.

The music of Race records, from blues to evangelical, transformed listening practices. Music provided listeners moments of respite from daily life, yet the phonograph potentially allowed a degree of privacy for contemplation not previously connected with musical transmission. African American consumers did not engage with the artist, interact with their performance, nor were they present in the social spaces of performance. However, through the machinery of the gramophone or phonograph, the consumer activated the performance, controlled it, and repeated it as a reproduction. In the behavior of a deejay, the Race Record consumer became a performer in a novel experience of activating an auditory nostalgia in union with the blind songster and a process repeated within African American communities in the construction of cultural memory.

The musicians became popular during the same period that witnessed the "consolidation in scholarly and public discourse" of collective memory.[255] While Halbwachs was working with collective memory in the early 1920s, Frederic Bartlett was working with "Remembering" as an aspect of memory in the early 1930s.[256] Halbwachs expressed that the function of memory is more effective as a constructive than reproductive process and that "literal recall is extraordinarily unimportant."[257] The former scholars formulated their work in Europe which reflects the interwar era's relationship with markers of progress. These often related to the war, increased

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[255] Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Daniel Levy, *The Collective Memory Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5.

[256] Maurice Halbwachs and Lewis A. Coser, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Frederic C. Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (Cambridge;New York;: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[257] Paul Thompson and Joanna Bornat, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, Fourth ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 133.

industrialization, as well as to the increased mobility that permitted various sociocultural interactions necessitating a reframing of conceptions of solidarity.

In the United States during this period, African American communities affected by the Great Migration and de jure discrimination since the turn of the twentieth century were involved in similar collective forming processes that were reflected in a renaissance of cultural production. This rebirth often involved an act of retrospection, which is present in the period's definitive works. As cited by Bijsterveld and Van Dijk, Halbwachs coined the term collective memory in 1925 explaining "memory needs social frames connecting the individual to larger social circles such as family, community and nation."[258]

4.2 COLLECTIVE MEMORY

The trope of the musicians bestowed agency to consumers relevant in determining an alternate past, one that had not been written into the national narrative but was becoming increasingly vital for African American identity. This is evident in concurrent discourse. This agency has been described as "recognizing and revealing the production of memory as an ongoing process involving inscription and reinscription, coding and recoding."[259] The idea of collective memory was circulated during the period of the musicians' production, Halbwachs published *The Social*

[258] Bijsterveld and Dijck, *Sound Souvenirs : Audio Technologies, Memory and Cultural Practices*, 15.

[259] Michael Rothberg, "Introduction: Between Memory and Memory: From Lieux De Mémoire to Noeuds De Mémoire," *Yale French Studies*, no. 118/119 (2010): 10.

Frameworks of Memory in 1925 and Bartlett *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* in 1932. These works influenced later memory studies relevant to the musicians, and they are mentioned here to address their concurrence with the musicians. The phenomenon of memory became a relevant site both in theoretical discourse as well as in artistic expression during the 1920s. Since the period of this early work on memory, Nora in the 1990s and Assman in the following decade are recognized as two of the main contributors to work related to a renewed interest in memory studies that continues into the early twenty-first century.

The impact of the war on African American communities was profound in at least two aspects relevant to this study. During this era of American apartheid, 367,710 African Americans were drafted into military service in World War I, and increasing demand for locum industrial workers increased the already active period of migration to urban centers within the United States. While compulsory military service and the individual pursuit of employment opportunities are incomparable, they each were manipulated by patriotic rhetoric in the Black press during the war. Du Bois discusses this in the *Crisis* with a striking degree of idealism, suggesting that suspending civil rights protests and participating in the War would affect an egalitarianism across the United States. He wrote of the resulting "right to vote the right to work and the right to live without insult."

Nearly the entire continent of Africa experienced European colonization during the first decades of the twentieth century, and Du Bois alludes to African American participation in the war as a potential process of decolonization and liberation.[260] This is relevant because it demonstrates a degree of optimism present in discourse before the war for an unrealized future even after the

[260] Jennifer Keene, "A Comparative Study of White and Black American Soldiers During the First World War," *Annales de démographie historique* 103, no. 1 (2002).

participation of more than a quarter million African Americans. Du Bois was not alone in this optimism, as Hubert Harrison, an influential African American scholar, similarly envisioned a liberation of Africa as an outcome of the war.[261] The African American patriotic position did not end postwar practices of discrimination and exclusion, a factor in the process of retrospection and the popularity of the musicians.

4.3 THE PHONOGRAPH AND PROSTHETIC MEMORY

The reception of the musicians involves the importance of phonograph technology as a component of their mediation, with which "it becomes possible to have a mediated memory that one experiences as real or genuine."[262] Audiences may have heard music like this or were sufficiently moved by it to identify with it. This is heightened by the musicians, who presented an expression that signified a nostalgia through blindness, which seemingly acted as a veil protecting the memory from modernity.

Nicholas Baer describes the function of the veil as an aspect of media.[263] The musicians represented a Black past through a veiled phonographic reperformance, "within the Veil" as Du Bois might describe it. The sonic of the musicians' records in their grain, and filtered, limited

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[261] Marc S. Gallicchio, *The African American Encounter with Japan and China : Black Internationalism in Asia, 1895-1945* (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2000), 33-35.

[262] Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, 17.

[263] Nicholas Baer, "Veil," *Theories of Media*, The University of Chicago, https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/veil/.

fidelity were veiled. The veil protected the Black sonic past from the white gaze. Baer cites McLuhan's description of the veil serving "as a means to define oneself socially." This relates to the musician's significance in the formation of collective memory.

The popularization of "Blind" musicians did not result from the spectacle of blindness in live performance but through phonographic technology. The phonograph was a recent technology for the transmission of Black popular music for consumption by African American audiences. Katz identifies a triad of mediation in sound technology, from performer to medium to listener, and though the relationship appears unidirectional, its existence was conceptually present for the performer and listener. This effect was dramatic for the blind performer of Race records. African American consumers could engage with the downhome, as performers were likely aware of the expected significance of their production. The assertion that the object, the Race record, was a metaphor for memory is not hard to fathom; fragile, distorted, unreal, spinning, its experience distorted time and the sense of the present, filtered through reproduction. Ramsey writes that "(M)usic works not as a residual artifact of ethnic identity but as an important part of the materiality of ethnicity."[264] This is significant to the reception of the musicians by record consumers who in their individual ownership and engagement were constructing a Black past.

During a period which also witnessed the widespread availability of the telephone, microphone, and radio, the experience of the phonograph transformed the relationship between audition and technology. From a twenty-first-century perspective, exclusions caused by technologies related to the ocular dominate society and continue to disable. Screen technologies continue to develop, and computer technologies slowly become more accessible through senses

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[264] Guthrie P. Ramsey, *Race Music : Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 37.

other than sight. During the interwar period, the innovation and dissemination of sonic technologies were dominant. Emily Thompson cites a New York Times article from 1930 which elucidates an awareness of this prominence during the period; the story declares "Americans were now 'sound conscious' in a way they had never been before."[265] She writes that American engineers intended to modernize the world through the dissemination of their technological innovations, like those in electroacoustic reproduction in 1926.

The period of the musicians introduced a form of audio books for phonograph for the blind community.[266] In 1931 under the Pratt-Smoot Act and the appeal by Helen Keller who appeared before them, Congress approved $100,000 to the Library of Congress to produce books for the adult blind community, which numbered roughly over one hundred and twenty thousand in population. By 1942, $250,000 was allotted to recording audio books for the community through cooperation with the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB.)[267] This was the birth of the "talking book" which allowed the blind community to "read" the audiobooks. The format was revolutionary because nearly eighty percent of the community was untrained in reading embossed print and Braille. This accessibility of literature empowered the blind community but was limited to middle and upper classes. This is relevant to this study because it demonstrates that the federal government and organizations were engaged in technological innovations for the blind community

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[265] Emily Thompson, "Wiring the World: Acoustical Engineers and the Empire of Sound in the Motion Picture Industry, 1927-1930" in Veit Erlmann, *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening, and Modernity*, English ed. (Oxford;New York;: Berg, 2004), 191.

[266] Documenting spoken word and dictation were the initial functions of the phonograph, preceding its role in musical reproduction. See Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past : Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

[267] Leroy Hughbanks, *Talking Wax; or, the Story of the Phonograph, Simply Told for General Readers* (New York: The Hobson Book Press, 1945).

during the period of the musicians, but produced materials for individuals outside of the communities in which these musicians existed. The audiobook was considered the most important innovation for the blind community since the development of Braille.[268]

While members of the blind community with means were able to consume books on record, the musicians produced downhome records. "Very few cultural historians have singled out auditory manifestations as building blocks in the construction of historical collective identity," Kenney noted in 2009. [269] The recordings of the musicians, as auditory manifestations, function as "islands of time" which in their consumption, their re/performance, occupy "memory spaces of 'retrospective contemplativeness.'"[270] This general phenomenon is described by Assman, derived from an expression introduced by Warburg, and applies to the relevance of the blind epithet. Assman lists relevant mnemonic sites as "festivals, epics, rites, poems, images, etc." which curiously does not include musical works, but perhaps they fall into his etcetera. Assman credits Warburg and his major work *Mnemosyne*, with "directing attention to the power of cultural objectivation in the stabilizing of cultural memory…" Relevant to the musicians, the collective experience of cultural memory was facilitated through mechanical reproduction and mass mediation of phonograph recordings.

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[268] Matthew Rubery and Inc ebrary, *The Untold Story of the Talking Book* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), 59-60.

[269] Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life : The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1945*. as cited in Bijsterveld and Dijck, *Sound Souvenirs : Audio Technologies, Memory and Cultural Practices*, 15.

[270] Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique* 65, no. 65 (1995): 129.

Middleton states, “No sooner had blues exploded into popular consciousness, it seems, than it was mythologized as ‘old-time.’”[271] Even if blind artists’ music was perceived as derivative, in a lineage of other similar works- formally, melodically, lyrically, typical of southern Black musical production, this reinforced a unifying quality for listeners, particularly to those unfamiliar with the artists. Blindness, as an aspect of this music, had multiple meanings to African American communities in movement. African American consumers were sharing in the expression of blind songsters, aware that the mass mediation of the records meant a new type of collective act; audiences were separately experiencing and celebrating the same musical performances. The awareness of the distribution of records signifying a Black past being consumed across African American communities is relevant to the formation of cultural memory. The recordings of the musicians in their mass mediation were a unifying mnemonic relevant to the formation of African American cultural memory through representing a reproducible sonic past.

The listeners controlled the reproduction of Black sonic expression on the phonograph. This is relevant because it presented the listener an engagement with artifacts related to Black subjectivity, and the listener controlled the experience. Nora writes “memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present.”[272] This experience of being affirmed in the present through controlling an engagement with the musicians’ records was empowering because it was a distant experience of the past that unified communities.

Aligning these factors with sighted conceptions of an interiority of blindness contributed to the prevalence of the “Blind” appellation and prominence of the musicians associated with it

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[271] Richard Middleton, *Voicing the Popular : On the Subjects of Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

[272] Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Memoire," 8.

but does not address the relevance of blindness to hegemonic structuring during the era. If the mnemonic quality of the blind epithet and the musicians' production affirmed African American inclusion in modernity by displacing the past through technological reproduction, this potentially broadens the significance as a site of memory. The capability of revisiting these transcendent sonic expressions further complicates their meaning. This meant that audiences could study a coded musical expression which had previously been ephemeral.

4.4 PERCEPTIONS OF THE MUSICIANS' AUTHENTICITY

The notion that the blues, like those recorded by the musicians, inflected not only an idea of the past but rather an authentic, unadulterated Black past is the thrust of a range of late twentieth century blues studies.[273] The interrogation of the manner African retentions manifest in the blues as an expression of the past is beyond the scope of this study. However, the possibility that the blues was perceived as an always already foundational Black expression by African American audiences and influenced their reading of the musicians is central to the discussion. Other studies suggest the hybridity of the musicians' concepts from the earliest recordings of Jefferson. The point of importance is the manner in which narratives around the musicians as authentic, especially regarding their blindness, contributed to the idea that their music was drawn from a singular essentialized African American experience that has subsequently assumed its own fabricated

[273] See Samuel Charters, *The Bluesmen: The Story and the Music of the Men Who Made the Blues* (New York: Oak Publications, 1967); Paul Oliver, *Savannah Syncopators* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970); Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England;New York, N.Y;: Penguin Books, 1982); Gerhard Kubik, *Africa and the Blues* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999).

definition. This relates not only to essentialist and disparaging notions of the downhome aesthetic as a rural and unsophisticated expression (as by members of the African American community who appealed for a "high art" assimilationism, present in the production of the Black Swan record company), and the equally belittling view of downhome performers as merely natural geniuses, but also a more important significance.

The discussion of the hybridity of the downhome, from the influence of Hawaiian slide guitar techniques to "Spanish" tunings of the guitar, is less relevant than the significance of the musicians' symbol as performers of a truly authentic Black expression because of their position as producers of culture in this period impacting the formation of African American identity. [274] The music of the musicians signified authentic Black expression, a perception that is more relevant than its actual authenticity, and relates to the construction of the trope of the musicians.

The recordings of the musicians reaffirmed an idea of an authentic Black expression that served in the collectivity formation in African American communities. This is described by Baraka who states that "the blues impulse was a psychological correlative that obscured the most extreme ideas of *assimilation* for most Negroes, and made any notion of the complete abandonment of the traditional black culture an unrealizable possibility."[275] To align this with an ocularcentric notion of blindness, as a mode of alterity, a fully integrated society did not align with the recognition of markers of difference. This is also expressed as a necessary juncture, despite however futile to Baraka, who felt that during the 1920s and 30s, there was a segment of post-migrated African

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[274] See Jeffrey Noonan, *The Guitar in America: Victorian Era to Jazz Age* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 84, 152; John W. Troutman, "Steelin' the Slide: Hawai'i and the Birth of the Blues Guitar," *Southern Cultures* 19, no. 1 (2013).

[275] Amiri Baraka, *Blues People; Negro Music in White America* (New York,: W. Morrow, 1963), 142-43.

American communities "who were beginning to move toward what they could think of as citizenship" who "also moved away from the older blues."[276] Here he is suggesting that there was a perception that identifying with "older" Black expression was inconsistent with notions of patriotism.

Downhome records by the musicians display virtuosity and individual stylistic concepts, but in performances that convey unrestrained emotion and spontaneity. At the height of the jazz age, other popular music influenced *by* downhome expression can seem merely like an irreverent reaction to Victorian America era prudery. The musicians' expressions were not an aspect of the jazz age dominant culture trend towards African American expression. In the segregated record industry, the downhome reflected the experience of Jim Crow, an aspect of which was the traumatic memory of slavery. This phenomenon, which has been described as Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome, and intergenerational trauma, can be read in social markers and cultural practices of the nadir.[277] These were processed and reconciled as a result of the Migration experience. [278] This elision of a spatial distancing from a temporal phenomenon is not uncommon and relates to the process of memory through external artifacts.

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[276] Ibid.

[277] Cindy George, "Do You Have Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome?," (Houston: Johnson Publishing Co, 2015); Shari Renee Hicks, "A Critical Analysis of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: A Multigenerational Legacy of Slavery" (Doctoral Dissertation, California Institute of Integral Studies, 2015).

[278] Jeffrey C. Alexander, ed. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

4.5 THE SECRET AND SACRED SPACE OF BLINDNESS

The period of the nadir involved an introspection relevant to the trope of the musicians involving sighted perceptions of a blind interiority. The idea of a blind interiority represented in downhome expressions by artists is vital to the history of racial prejudice against African Americans. African American interiority that has been denied, unwritten, and "excised" from discourse. Morrison discusses the central role of imagination in the act of writing the unwritten interior life of a Black past.[279] Blind musicians musical expression counters denials of African American humanity, interiority, reflection, and creativity that were used to justify slavery. Morrison identifies figures who presented these fallacies in their work; Immanuel Kant, David Hume, and Thomas Jefferson—all considered profound contributors to Western thought, yet with deep racist biases. The reflectiveness of the blues is a validation of African American interiority. Blindness demonstrated an interiority that was not merely responding to external stimuli, but creative

The institutional subjugation of African Americans during Reconstruction that continued through the period of this discussion resulted in the disillusion of the possibility of achieving equal rights in the United States. This subjugation was not universal and there were African Americans who thrived in the atmosphere of adversity, including (at times) the musicians of the discussion. Williams describes the historiography from the turn of the twentieth century of this psychological phenomenon that in "the consolidation of racism forced many black people to 'turn inward' as they struggled to make sense of the loss of their civil and political rights."[280]

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[279] Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory" in Russell Baker and William Zinsser, *Inventing the Truth : The Art and Craft of Memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 92.

[280] Kidada E. Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 147.

Blind musicians performed from an alternate space on the phonograph, and from a space outside of the visual experience of Black invisibility as well as the white gaze. This is relevant because sight transmitted these signs, one that involves the psychological distress of racism and disablism. Arguably, society disembodies people with impairments through excluding their participation in the constructions that surround them, which results in an invisibility.[281] This is important to the musicians because the medium which transmitted the artists' work disembodied their performance. The notion of Benjamin that mechanical reproduction diminishes the aura of performance conflicts with the sentiments related to the uncanny effect of the phonograph related to the reception of blindness as a component of the past. The solitary blind performer was often listened to by small groups of listeners and phonograph owners. These social experiences were unique from the usual transmission of music, especially downhome music.

Scholarship suggests that African Americans who had relocated to urban areas were vital to the popularization of downhome and therefore the prominence of Blind artists because rural Southern communities often did not yet have the means nor access to records and phonographs. However, recognizing the significance of consuming technologies as social currency, like the phonograph during this era, is of great importance in providing a sense of societal inclusion. This is especially relevant to marginalized communities.[282] The data are inadequate to determine the specific demographics of consumers of downhome records. This is despite early efforts by the Black press, presumably to demonstrate the viability of an African American consumer base to establish a presence in the phonograph industry.

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[281] Waldschmidt, Berressem, and Ingwersen, *Culture - Theory - Disability : Encounters between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies*, 77.

[282] Barrett et al., *Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of Western Modernity*, 114.

Phonograph technology is central to this discussion of Blind musicians, without their records, there is scarcely any evidence of their existence. Kenney cites Calt and Wardlow who state that the "$13.85 suitcase model was the phonograph of choice" for Race records consumers, which would facilitate an owner's mobility. [283] This portable device could be taken with the listener and allowed them to bring the downhome with them. The phonograph had a sleeve to keep records inside. It reflects the period of mobility and modernity, just winding it up allowed playback of these recordings.

Figure 15. 1920s Artophone Talking Machine

Phonograph reproduction was of a past performance, as Alexander Weheliye notes in *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro Modernity*, the technology dislocated the sound from its source.[284] However, the downhome was unique in its reflection of the past. Before the introduction of the downhome, classic blues and jazz musicians adapted to the technology both in its sonic and

[283] Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life : The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1945*, 129.

[284] Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies : Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005).

temporal constraints. This also changed notions of performance, which was limited to a strictly sonic field. For this reason, the purely sonic aspect of this re/performance compelled listeners to create an imaginary visual component, and in relation to the "Blind" appellation, this translated to one of disability.

Weheliye describes the phonograph as a projector of an "aura not of the original musical utterance but in the mode of reproduction."[285] Blindness is a contributing factor to this aura and the construction of cultural memory, which resulted as musical performance transformed from an ephemeral present to a reproduced artifact. Steven Connor states, "Before the development of the phonograph the auditory realm was wholly transient, immaterial and temporal."[286] Through repeated listenings, recorded performances became familiar and embedded in memory. This repetition facilitated by phonograph transformed ephemeral aspects of music consumption in that nuance of single performances could become deeply internalized.

In the phonographic sonic performance of blindness, the listener conceivably constructed a multifaceted displacement beginning with that of the performer. This displacement was a dislocation, a separation from the body, as in the phonographic "disembodied voice" described by Katz.[287] These musicians were born to parents and grandparents who were born into slavery, as were members of their audience. This generation of African Americans born into similar communities faced decisions of how to utilize their agency and mobility to pursue opportunities outside of Southern agrarian sharecropping, tenant farming, and menial labor into which many

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[285] Ibid., 47.

[286] Steven Connor, "The Modern Auditory I." in Roy Porter, ed. *Rewriting the Self Histories from the Renaissance to the Present* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1997), 215.

[287] Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound : How Technology Has Changed Music*, Rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 33, 151.

were indentured from emancipation. Violent acts of dislocation are pervasive in African American narratives—from the forced dislocation from a homeland to the dislocation of families being sold and bought into chattel slavery, both through physical separation and the trauma of the constant threat of this separation. The freedom of ones' thought was dislocated from the physical captivity of ones' body. For African American Race record consumers living a generation after emancipation, the agency to pursue the opportunities in the Great Migration continued to interrupt the stability of families and communities.

David Levin cites Martin Heidegger's equation of sight within philosophical tradition "as access to beings and Being" in *Being and Time,* while Levin describes this as "perpetuat(ing) the very tradition" of ocularcentrism "he is trying to destroy." [288] The ocularcentric notion that sight facilitates an immediate engagement with the material world supports a construct in which blindness is reduced to an absence. Indeed, the disablist primacy of vision renders blindness to a dislocation not only from the visuality of the material world but as a result of this, also disables subjects from being actively involved in the present moment. This relates to the conflation of blindness with the downhome past and gives currency to the idea that consuming these recordings was participating in a community forming act of memory. Levin also describes the elevation of vision to the position of a "paradigm for knowledge and rationality" relevant to perceptions of the musicians and their production as premodern and folk. Ironically, the musical concepts, technical proficiency, and innovations of musicians like Jefferson, Blind Blake, and Blind Willie Johnson have maintained their position as the most significant influences in blues and popular music a century later.

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[288] David Michael Kleinberg-Levin, *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation*, 1 ed. (New York: Routledge, 1988), 7.

The limited aesthetic variety of the production of the musicians reinforced the privileged status of disablist normativity by aligning blindness with a sonic that was perceived as premodern. This expression, while it emanated from within Black culture, was a contrast to other production on Race records. Katz describes the cultural centrality of music, as it functioned in social contexts, which was disrupted by the phonograph.[289] Blindness was sonically transmitted through the displaced performance of the phonograph.[290] This is important in communicating a disabling perception of the rupture of blindness by an ocularcentric society. Jacques Derrida describes the idealized immediacy of the sensory experience of vision, implying that sighted people experience the present moment mainly through sight. This suggests that blind people experience the "present" differently, one might argue absent the immediacy of the external visual world. This work and other texts related to the primacy of vision offer insight into societal constructions of blindness. [291]

In contrast, Sterne introduces *the audiovisual litany* which describes historical debates around the seeing/hearing binary proposing the centrality of the faculty of hearing over seeing. This becomes an otocentrist as opposed to an ocularcentrist view of society, based on the idea that hearing is immersive while seeing is distancing. He points to Jean-Luc Nancy's *Listening* to support this idea of anti-ocularcentricity in recent scholarship. Adrienne Janus identifies this early twenty-first position as an "anti-ocular" turn. Like Levine, Janus similarly refers to the work of

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[289] Katz, *Capturing Sound : How Technology Has Changed Music*, 17.

[290] Kate Cregan, *The Sociology of the Body: Mapping the Abstraction of Embodiment* (Thousand Oaks, Calif;London;: SAGE, 2006).

[291] See David Michael Kleinberg-Levin, *Sites of Vision: The Discursive Construction of Sight in the History of Philosophy*; *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Jay Martin, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, 1 ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Jacques Derrida and Musée du Louvre., *Memoirs of the Blind : The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

Heidegger. [292] She identifies Heidegger's theory of multiple auditory experiences as a basis for Nancy's study *Listening*.

4.6 BLINDNESS AND THE LYRICS

For the musicians, often with no known birth certificates nor death certificates, who were absent from census information, and led itinerant lifestyles, one can only speculate their life experiences during most of their life. This speculation is also related to the "self-conscious aspects" of their production, their decisions about their work, their methodology, and practice. These considerations have not figured as primary foci in previous studies.[293] The times documented with certainty are those they were producing recordings and the recordings themselves. Attempting to draw insight into the psychology of the musicians from lyrical analysis is perilous, although a logical launching point based on the perception that language could offer greater insight into these musicians. Rather, the richness of information embedded in the temporal and sonic gestures of their recordings offers a unique site for musical analysis that could be far more revealing than lyrics.

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[292] Adrienne Janus, "Listening: Jean-Luc Nancy and the 'Anti-Ocular' Turn in Continental Philosophy and Critical Theory," *Comparative Literature* 63, no. 2 (2011): 182-83; Jean-Luc Nancy and Charlotte Mandell, *Listening*, English-language, 1st ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

[293] Eric Porter calls for the inclusion of this type of study in the introduction Eric Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists*, ed. Samuel A. Floyd, 6 vols., vol. 6, Music of the African Diaspora (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2002).

Monge describes potential revelations that may result from "*comprehensive* analysis of Jefferson's lyrics and how they interact" with his personality and psychology.[294] Here one might suggest that considering the performance of this lyrical content in the context of recordings for the popular music industry would provide a much more complete study. One fundamental difficulty in conducting a reading of sight-related lyrical content is that the degree and nature of Jefferson's visual impairment are based purely on anecdotal sources. To offer more than speculation about the meaning of lyrics and an artist's personality and psychological profile based merely on a supposition of the musicians' subjectivity seems precarious.

Rowden writes, "[T]he rarity of songs dealing explicitly with blindness in the repertoires of blind bluesmen is especially interesting when one considers that the overwhelming majority of blues songs are sung from the first person perspective."[295] While this is observation is valid, Rowden's statement is problematic, because the first person perspective in the blues is not necessarily autobiographical, but more often a form of a soliloquy. Otherwise, the same refrains and verbal devices would not have been rearticulated across the history of blues performers.

Blues lyrics are open source; their originality exists in their execution by performers. This is equally true of the melodic and harmonic material of the blues. The blues often consists musically of short repeated forms of eight, twelve, or sixteen measures; I, IV, V, often dominant seventh harmonies; AAB lyrical phrase forms constructed in melodies based on a pentatonic scale. The musicians and other downhome musicians added or deleted measures of the form to

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[294] Monge, "The Language of Blind Lemon Jefferson: The Covert Theme of Blindness."

[295] Rowden, *The Songs of Blind Folk : African American Musicians and the Cultures of Blindness,* 36.

accommodate lyric phrasing or improvisations. Blind Lemon Jefferson added measures while playing melodic counters to his vocal phrases. These practices are fine for solo and small group performances (when the musicians anticipate form shifts) but become hazardous when musicians do not follow these changes. Other than the occasional formal deviations, blues forms become intuitive because of their logical structures and repetition. Drawing from this palette, performers have been astoundingly resourceful in conceptualizing unique individualized styles of expression.

The selected repertoire recorded by musicians with the "Blind" title may reflect only one part of their repertoire, as street musicians depend on their versatility for survival, and that these musicians often chose material at the discretion of record producers. Producers would presumably have discouraged recording songs overtly detailing the experience of blindness; one would imagine that the musicians were also aware that the majority of their abled audiences would likely not be interested in lyrics related to their disability. The blues lyrics of the interwar period were often in the first person, but general enough that listeners could easily identify with them.

4.7 THE INFLUENCE AND CIRCULATION OF THE MUSICIANS' RECORDINGS

Between 1926 and the effects of the Depression in the mid-1930s, blind artists were the highest sellers alongside their classic blues women label mates: Bessie Smith and Blind Willie Johnson were signed to Columbia; Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Blake, and Ma Rainey were on Paramount. How popular were the artists in the field of Race records? Jefferson was *the* most popular Race record artist during his three-year career (1926-29) according to Titon and his

biographer, Uzzel. Blind Blake was one of Paramount's "biggest sellers" by 1927.[296] A decade later, Fuller was the most recorded Race record artist, producing fourteen records in 1938. During the same year, guitar evangelism production stopped, with no gospel blues records issued by the musicians in 1938.[297]

Before the era of tallied jukebox and radio plays, established companies documented their sales. Smaller companies, however, did not. John Tefteller, an avid collector of the musicians' and other Race records of the period states, "The labels at that time did not even keep studio logs, so no information is available on a lot of these recordings…None of these labels even thought this music was important enough to keep records."[298] Paramount's loose bookkeeping provides a less than credible source; however, their advertisements in the Chicago Defender indicate a high level of investment that may have reflected sales. Jefferson and Blake are considered the most popular and productive artists at the height of the blues era.

Race division catalogs featured a broad range, including Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, Louis Armstrong as well as the classic blues artists. The Texas blues singer Sippie Wallace recorded "Jack of Diamonds Blues" (Ok8328) in March of 1926 with Louis Armstrong, whom she had known in New Orleans. Wallace's sixteen-year-old brother, Hersal Thomas plays a boogie-woogie piano part that is credited as the introduction of boogie-woogie piano to Chicago, where the recording took place for Okeh. Two months later Lemon Jefferson recorded his version of "Jack O'Diamonds" (Pm12373) in Chicago for Paramount. Jefferson is seemingly uninfluenced

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[296] Alex van der Tuuk, *Paramount's Rise and Fall: The Roots and History of Paramount Records* (Denver: Mainspring Press, 2012).

[297] Dixon and Godrich, *Recording the Blues*, 90.

[298] Mike Greenblatt, "Read between the Lines with Blind Lemon Jefferson's 'Peach Orchard Mama'," *Goldmine The Music Collector's Magazine* (2013).

by the music in the city around him stylistically, and his lyrics described problems of the downhome encounter with modernity.

Jefferson recorded "Booger Rooger Blues" (Pm12425) in December 1926 in Chicago, which is related if not musically, at least in name to the boogie-woogie style.[299] Lyrically Jefferson is engaging with themes outside of the downhome. He sings "some joker learned my baby how to shift gears on a Cadillac Eight, (repeat); sugar, ever since that happened I can't keep my baby straight." As in his other works, Jefferson describes the blues of a post-Migration situation. Cadillacs would represent a rare luxury downhome. Regardless of the double-entendre of the lyric, his baby was learning an object of modernity. This was problematic, and the modern luxury drew his baby away from him.

Audio 8. Blind Lemon Jefferson "Booger Rooger Blues" clip

Blind artists have not been discussed as being in dialog with music across stylistic divisions within Race records, yet they were recording in the same cities in the same studios for the same companies at the same time. The musicians produced with other well-known musicians outside of the downhome, yet the musicians with the blind epithet produced downhome recordings. There were only a few exceptions to this; Blind Blake is a musician who complicated the downhome

[299] Blind Roosevelt Graves later recorded "Guitar Boogie" for Paramount in 1929, another guitar boogie.

association with blindness. This is both because of his numerous recorded collaborations with classic blues singers and jazz musicians as his fluency as an accompanist and soloist.[300]

Blake was a transitional figure between jazz, classic blues, and the blind epithet of the downhome. Blake performed on piano and guitar, accompanying classic blues singer Ida Cox before he recorded as a soloist several months later. Before he recorded as a leader, he recorded as a classic blues accompanist around July 1926. He was quickly recalled to the studio to record as a leader around August.[301] By the end of the year, he was again a sideman for Ma Rainey. He continued to record as a sideman and a leader throughout his years of production which ended in 1932.

The East Coast musicians continued the influence of virtuosic ragtime and hokum recorded at Southern location sessions. Simmie Dooley recorded on location for Columbia in April 1928 in Atlanta with his performing partner, Pink Anderson. Their recordings are in a two-guitar style similar to Willie Walker and Sam Brooks who recorded for Columbia in Atlanta two years later, but with Anderson and Dooley alternating lead vocals. Both of the duos' recordings feature questions by the guitarist who was not singing lead, prompting the vocalist to sing as if they were in conversation. Interestingly, neither Dooley nor Walker were marketed with the blind epithet, which may have been a decision by Columbia.

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[300] Blake recorded with banjoists Papa Charlie Jackson (Wisconsin, 1929); Gus Cannon, vocalists Ma Rainey (Chicago, 1926); Leola Wilson (Chicago, 1926); Bertha Henderson (Chicago,1928); Elzadie Robinson and Johnny Dodds (Chicago, 1928); Irene Scruggs (Wisconsin, 1930); Laura Rucker (Wisconsin, 1931); and pianist Charlie Spand (Indiana, 1929). Dixon et al., *Blues & Gospel Records, 1890-1943*.

[301] The exact dates of Paramount's recording sessions are unknown. When Art Satherley left the company, he took masters and other information with him to the QRS label and ARC label.

Blind Willie Walker, whom Blind Gary Davis believed "was the best that ever done it" recorded four songs in 1930 for Columbia and did not appear with the blind epithet. Josh White also had accolades for Walker, who made the comparison, "Blind Blake was fast but Walker was like Art Tatum." Two of Walker's recordings were issued. The "South Carolina Rag" and "Dupree Blues." On "Dupree Blues," Walker quotes the line "sitting here wondering would a matchbox hold my clothes" which Lemon Jefferson sang on his recording of "Match Box Blues" in 1927. Blues verses were circulated and transformed by musicians from Texas to Georgia, by both performance and recordings by 1930. The song title "Match Box Blues" was used by four different musicians for recordings featuring a variety of other verses and keys between 1927 and 1941. Walker's "Dupree Blues" is unique because of its otherwise specific description of the last man legally hanged in Georgia in 1922.[302] Walker's "Dupree Blues" is now standard blues repertoire and has also been recorded across styles and eras, from Count Basie to the Grateful Dead. The ballad of Frank DuPre who robbed an Atlanta jewelry store for a diamond ring to offer his girlfriend Betty was popular among musicians. The songs are also unique because African American blues performers celebrated the romantic story of DuPre, a white outlaw who was hanged.[303] According to Bruce Bastin, only 750 of Walker's recordings were pressed. He died three years after his only recording session in 1933 of congenital syphilis, which Bastin speculates was his cause of blindness.[304]

Blind Boy Fuller was born in Wadesboro, North Carolina in 1908. His discography is the largest of the musicians. At 130 recordings he exceeds Lemon Jefferson's 100. He recorded a

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[302] Bastin, *Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast*, 175.

[303] Robert Springer, *Nobody Knows Where the Blues Come From: Lyrics and History* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 128.

[304] Bastin, *Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast*, 176.

decade after Jefferson, 1935-1940 for several labels; Decca, Vocalion, ARC, and Okeh. Fuller played with Saunders Teddell, or Saunders Terry, Sonny Terry who became blind as a teenager. He was from Greensboro, Georgia and recorded "Georgia Ham Blues" with Fuller in 1938. While working on a farm with his father as a child, "he lost the sight of each eye in separate accidents." Like Willie Walker, he did not record with the blind epithet.

The influence of Lemon Jefferson and his records on other blues musicians is well documented. His influence is heard in the music of Robert Johnson and discussed in analyses of Johnson's works. Johnny Lee Hooker's reverence for Jefferson is revealing, "(H)e was my idol, ...That's B.B. King's idol, too. Yeah, I had one of his records, and I loaned it to B.B. King. He said he was going to bring it back, and he ain't brought it back yet, and that's been 12 years ago."[305] The two legendary musicians' dispute over a Jefferson record is illuminating. The musicians' later influence presents a fascinating scenario in which their music was reimagined by musicians outside of their communities for further reinterpretation. Bob Dylan, Led Zeppelin, Cream, and the Allman Brothers were inspired by the musicians. [306] Rock and folk groups of the 1960s performed and recorded their music four decades after the musicians recorded it. The performance practices that defined the styles of these musicians was absent from these early mass mediated written forms. Formulations of blues styles and structures were being developed by sheet music prior to Race

[305] Jim O'Neal and Amy Van Singel, *The Voice of the Blues: Classic Interviews from Living Blues Magazine* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 437.

[306] The Allman Brothers performed and recorded McTell's "Statesboro Blues," Led Zeppelin performed and recorded Willie Johnsons's "Nobody's Fault but Mine," Cream performed and recorded Joe Reynolds's "Outside Woman Blues," Bob Dylan wrote "Blind Willie McTell Blues," and the Rolling Stones borrowed their album title "Get Your Ya Yas Out" from Blind Boy Fuller.

record circulation, but phonograph records have been central to sonically influencing musicians since their production.

Contextualizing the popularity of the musicians within a period of mobility of African American communities realized in the Great Migration suggests its relevance as a site of counter-memory, a construction of a Black past that was in opposition with the narrative of Sorrow Songs. If blindness, or the musicians marked by it, signified the trauma of the African American experience, the mediation and popularity of their records a success of liberation which permitted mobility while maintaining embodying African American subjectivity and the memory of the past.

Record companies with commercial interests, through the use of portable recording technology, inadvertently chronicled musical traditions of obscure artists in the rural South. This act differed from the folklorists and documentarians like Odum, Hurston, and Lomax who later conducted location recordings, yet provide a counterpoint to the Race record industry. While the commercial music industry may have influenced the expression on recordings, folklorists and documentarians equally may have influenced the expressions they documented on location. Therefore, both types of recordings documented expression under the influence of power structures, an occurrence that seems common for these musicians when considering production direction. While companies attempted to capitalize on perceptions of authenticity, folklorists were motivated by their own similar perceptions to preserve these expressions.

One aspect of the sonic mobility of these musicians relates to their mediation on records, but as itinerant blues musicians, who are considered "among the most mobile of African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century," the musicians actively participated in

mobility, expanding their audiences which likely led to their opportunities to record.[307] However, unlike other popular jazz and classic blues Race record celebrities, they were not offered the opportunity to perform in popular clubs and theaters. Other downhome "sighted" recording artists are also absent from these venues, which suggests the style, not blindness, was the cause of their exclusion.

The Southern Black vaudeville circuit was a vital intraracial location of musical expression prior to the 1920s and possibly influenced or included the early popular musicians as intermission entertainment.[308] Despite the dearth of documentation, the fact that the musicians were recommended to record companies prior to their mass marketing suggests they were already established regionally. Because nearly every town featured a segregated theater for African American entertainment, it is plausible that the secular performers became established in theaters as accompanists, but unlikely as solo vocalists/guitarists. The history and influence of solo piano performers of the blues in the Black Southern vaudeville circuit are relevant to Jefferson, with whom he shared common lyrical devices.

As performers of the periphery—medicine shows, church picnics, jukes, and street busking, these musicians would not have provided sufficient visibility to be relevant to record labels. In the case of Jefferson, a fellow musician Sammy Price recommended him to Paramount according to Oliver.[309] This however changed with the implementation of location recordings,

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[307] Moore, *The Cambridge Companion to Blues and Gospel Music*, 14; Titon, "Labels: Identifying Categories of Blues and Gospel."

[308] Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, ""They Cert'ly Sound Good to Me": Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues," *American Music* 14, no. 4 (1996): 412-13.

[309] Oliver, *Barrelhouse Blues Location Recording and the Early Traditions of the Blues*, 18, 57.

which were essentially talent scouting expeditions that resulted in test demos. Even unknown musicians had the opportunity to record and prove themselves because record labels recognized their inability to predict the tastes of record buying audiences.

Among the number of Blind musicians during the Race record era, several were pianists, making them exceptions to the predominant self-accompanied voice and guitar aesthetic. Unlike their popularity of nineteenth century predecessors known by their Blind title, Boone and Wiggins, the piano performances of Blind Leroy Garnett and Blind Clyde Church did not sell well to Race record consumers. They both recorded in late1929, produced only two sides, and did not record again. This suggests the conflation of the "Blind" appellation and the aesthetic of the downhome while enormously popular for recordings of guitarists, did not apply to pianists. This also supports the argument that the blind epithet was associated with the premodern because the guitar was historically perceived as a symbol of low class, itinerancy, and vehicle for uncivilized music. The social acceptability and association of the piano with the modern and upper class made it less typical of downhome performance.[310]

[310] Victor Coelho, *The Cambridge Companion to the Guitar* (Cambridge;New York;: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 173.

Table 2. Blind Musicians on Race records 1926-1942[311]

Name as Credited on Records	Pseudonyms	Companies	Period of Production	Locations
1) Blind Joe Amos	Blind Joe Taggart	Vocalion	7/27	
2) Blind Bobby Baker	Bobbie Leecan	Pathe /Perfect	6 /27	NYC
3) Blind James Beck		Gennettt	4/27, 11/27	Chicago
4) Blind Arthur	Blake			
5) Blind Blake	Gorgeous Weed, Billy James on	Paramount	8/26-6/32	
6) Blind Clyde Church		Victor	9/29	Memphis
7) Blind Ben Covington	Bogus Ben	Paramount, Brunswick	9/28, 10/29	Chicago
8) Blind Teddy Darby	Blind Squire Turner	Paramount, Victor, Bluebird, Vocalion, Decca	8/29-4/37	Indiana, Chicago
9) Blind John Davis		Vocalion	4/38-11/38	Chicago
10) Blind Gary Davis	Blind Gary		1935	
11) Blind Willie Davis	Blind Willie Jackson on Herwin	Paramount	1/28-10/29	Chicago
12) Blind Joe Death		Paramount	c8/27	Unknown
13) Blind Simmie Dooley		Columbia	4/28	Atlanta
14) Blind Joe Donnell	Blind Joe Taggart on Broadway			
15) Arizona Dranes		Okeh	6/26-7/28	Chicago
16) Blind Willie Dunn	Eddie Lang	Okeh	11/28-10/29	New York
17) Blind Mamie Forehand		Victor	2/27	Memphis

[311] These musicians and recordings are documented in Dixon et al., *Blues & Gospel Records, 1890-1943*. with few exceptions. Reissues are not included in the listings of companies. Other blues musicians with the blind epithet noted by Dick Weissman are: Blind Cliff, Blind Johnnie, Blind Bobby Bryant, Blind Homer, Blind Ted. Dick Weissman, *Blues* (New York, NY: Facts On File, 2006), 18. Other musicians that appear in research are Blind Ivory Moore and Blind Log (Lord Randolph Byrd). Bastin, *Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast*, 132, 58-59. LOC (Library of Congress) ARC (American Record Corporation)

18) Blind Boy Fuller	Brother George	ARC, Decca, Vocalion, Okeh	7/35-6/40	New York, Columbia, S.C., Memphis
19) Blind Leroy Garnett		Paramount	10/29	Indiana
20) Blind Gilbert		Columbia (unissued)	10/27	New Orleans
21) Blind Gipson		LOC		
22) Blind Emery Glenn (as listed in files, not on record)	Emery Glen	Columbia	11/27	Atlanta
23) Blind Roosevelt Graves	Willie Jackson, Mississipi Jook Band	Paramount, ARC	10/29-7/36	Indiana
24) Blind Arthur Groom	Roosevelt Graves	Paramount		
25) Blind Jesse Harris		LOC	7/37	Alabama
26) Blind Willie Harris	Richard Rabbit Brown	Vocalion	2/29	New Orleans
27) Blind Roger Hays,		Vocalion	10/28	New Orleans
28) Blind Willie Jackson	(Both Roosevelt Graves and Willie Davis used this pseudonym)	Broadway, Crown, Herwin		Chicago
29) Blind Lemon Jefferson	Deacon L.J. Bates, Elder J.C. Brown	Paramount, Okeh	c12/25-9/29	Chicago, Indiana, Atlanta
30) Blind Joe		LOC	12//34	Raleigh, NC
31) Blind Willie Johnson,	Blind Texas Marlin, Blind Pilgrim on Anchor	Columbia	12/27-4/30	Dallas, New Orleans, Atlanta
32) Blind Log (Lord Randolph Byrd)				
33) Blind Arthur Lowe	Blind Connie Rosemond	Broadway		
34) Blind Mack	Mack Rhinehart	Vocalion	10/35	Jackson, Miss.
35) Blind Texas Marlin	Willie Johnson	Columbia (unissued)	12/28	Dallas
36) Blind George Martin	Blind Blake			
37) Blind Willie McTell,	Blind Sammie on Columbia, Blind Willie on Bluebird,	Victor, Columbia, Okeh, Vocalion	10/27-11/40	Atlanta, New York, Chicago

	Hot Shot Willie			
38) Blind Gussie Nesbit	Blind Nesbit	Columbia, Decca	12/30-10/35	Atlanta, New York City
39) Blind Norris	Norris McHenry	Brunswick, Decca	10/29-2/37	Dallas
40) Blind Benny Paris,	Parrish	Victor	10/28	Atlanta
41) Blind Percy	Blind Joe Taggart	Paramount	10/27, 11/27	Chicago
42) Blind Pete	Willard Artis Burrell	LOC	10/34	Little Rock
43) Blind Pilgrim	Willie Johnson			
44) Blind Joe Reynolds		Paramount	11/29	Wisconsin
45) Blind Willie Reynolds	Joe Reynolds	Victor	11/30	Memphis
46) Blind Connie Rosemond	Blind Arthur Low on Broadway	Paramount, Victor	c6/27, 7/27	Chicago, Camden, N.J.
47) Blind Sammie	Willie McTell			
48) Sonny Terry		ARC, Okeh, LOC	12/37-5/42	New York, Chicago
49) Blind Tim Russell,	Blind Joe Taggart	Herwin		
50) Blind Joe Taggart,	Six Cylinder Smith, among others with the title	Vocalion, Paramount, Decca	11/26-9/34	New York, Chicago, Wisconsin
51) Blind Jeremiah Taylor	Blind Joe Taggart	Herwin		
52) Blind Squire Turner	Blind Teddy Darby	Bluebird	12/33	
53) Willie Walker		Columbia	12/30	Atlanta
54) Blind Richard Yates,	Uncle Charlie Richards	Vocalion, Gennett, Paramount	1/27, c5/27	New York

5.0 THE RENAISSANCE OF THE NEW NEGRO AND THE MUSICIANS

The musicians and their production relate to the contemporaneous Black discourse of the New Negro movement and the Harlem Renaissance. Gates describes the decades prior to the production of the musicians as "the crux of the period of Black intellectual reconstruction," 1895 to 1925.[312] However, a body of literature produced in 1925 and 26 parallels the shifts that were occurring in popular music. This work is explored in relation to the musicians through that produced by Alain Locke, Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston. Thurman writes, "There has been, we are told, a literary renaissance in Negro America." He lists the recognition and awards the writers received, then writes "It is not important or congenial to mention that none of these works have been very good, or that most of the authors have no talent whatsoever." He later refutes the notion of a Renaissance as a "backwash."[313] Thurman's dismissal of the early Renaissance writers may have been related to his perception of accommodations in their works to dominant convention. These would also seem to be absent from the musicians' recordings.

If the "Renaissance" that occurred was not simply a period of intense cultural productivity but indeed a "rebirth" as the etymology indicates, then one must establish the former collectivity that was reborn. Simply forming the idea of a reborn "old" Negro as an antiassimilationist response was inadequate. Gates writes of his image of an African American desire to "reconstruct" their image from the first moment of transatlantic slavery. This point is clear, the New Negro and the

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[312] Henry Louis Gates, "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," *Representations* 24 (1988).

[313] Wallace Thurman, *This Negro Literary Renaissance*, 1st electronic ed., vol. pp. 241-251. (New Brunswick, NJ - eBook: Rutgers University Press, 2009).

Renaissance were movements of liberation. Ideally, African Americans would no longer allow white expectations and racist stereotypes to determine their production, nor concur with a glorified rewrite of the American "past" contradicted by the present for many rural southern underserved African American communities.

As popular performers of the downhome, the musicians are not relevant for anything "new" but as contributors to an always already aspect of African American production. The authors of these movements wrote concurrently with the musicians, whose recordings they described as expressing with an authenticity they sought in their work. Regardless of whether artists were reflecting on the past as it was written in the downhome, reimagining it, or opposing it in their work, the musicians provided a popular cultural expression that was indelible. Their work was permanent, although its significance could be reinterpreted, the recordings were a fixed expression of the "old." Without the recording industry, the music would exist only in imaginative descriptions.

Jefferson's debut in 1926 occurred within months of the publication of the journal *Fire!!*, containing works and interviews by the aforementioned leading figures of Black literary culture. These writers and scholars were closely associated with the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro movements, both identified as vital to African American negotiation of the modernization process. The works' concern for how vernacular expressions were to be regarded by Black society relate closely to the focus of this study. The heritage which the Harlem Renaissance and New Negro writers were negotiating was reified by the musicians as Black popular music on Race records, not as an adaptation, but as an authentic expression.

The musicians were part of a collective of producers of African American cultural expression. Importantly, this recognition does not intend to limit their significance as popular

music artists, but as significant actors within a complex web of cultural influence. The discourse around African American artistic expression during the period of the musicians has been described as "isolated" from "mainstream cultural practice" as a result of racial difference.[314] This is further complicated by the dismissal of mass-mediated popular musical expression as the "antithesis of authentic cultural value."[315]

5.1 VISION, VEILS, AND A BLUES DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

Joseph Witek writes, "(A)s a rhetorical convention of blues discourse, the word 'blind' emphasizes that the singer is different from other people, perhaps more attuned to the Muses of his art, but certainly strange and exotic."[316] While this may be relevant to later readings of musicians with the "Blind" title decades after their production and are common ableist readings of blindness generally, their production suggests a significance of the musicians' blindness that has little to do with exoticization. This involves a correlation of blindness and Blackness as markers of identity within the United States to aspects of the social theory of panopticism, where subjects in the outer perimeter, the marginalized, cannot see one another nor those stationed in the dominant, central

[314] Mary Ann Calo, *Distinction and Denial : Race, Nation, and the Critical Construction of the African American Artist, 1920-40* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

[315] Andy Bennett and Susanne Janssen, *Popular Music, Cultural Memory and Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 2.

[316] Witek, "Blindness as a Rhetorical Trope in Blues Discourse."

position, whose gaze is also not visible. This is also closely aligned with notions of the veil and double consciousness, both of which appear in the Black discourse of the period.

Alexander Weheliye explicates Du Bois's "ocular mechanisms and ideologies" related to "double consciousness," that "if looking at oneself through the eyes of others squarely locates the subject (of double consciousness) within the visual field,…, then for Du Bois the sonic,… provides an altogether different realm for the articulation of Black subjectivity."[317] This sonic realm outside of the visual is pronounced by the idea of blindness, as it was experienced in phonographic performances of the musicians' records. The imposition of white conventions on cultural expressions is a topic present in the Black discourse of the era and relates to the notion that artistic recognition, or visibility, is a validation of humanity. This is relevant to perceptions of the musicians' expressions as unadulterated and authentic, reflecting an ocularcentric perception of a juncture between blindness and the visual experience of the material world that would make the musicians immune to these impositions.

The psychological trauma of the visual experience of "double consciousness" described by Du Bois in 1903, discussed by Weheliye, Paul Gilroy, and other scholars, could have shaped the musicians' reception, but also influenced the musicians' expression. The double consciousness quote in its entirety is presented here because of its relevance to the musicians. "It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness. This sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."[318] Weheliye writes in his discussion of Du Bois that double consciousness originates

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[317] Weheliye, ""I Am I Be": The Subject of Sonic Afro-Modernity," 107-08.

[318] Du Bois, Gates, and Oliver, *The Souls of Black Folk : Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*.

"because of the look of the white subject."[319] This would mean the musicians were not subjected to aspects of the *visual* experience described by Du Bois. Their musical expression was unimpeded by this double consciousness, inflicted by the visual component of the white gaze. However, in this regard, and despite the real presence of blindness amongst the musicians, a figurative "blindness" to this "gaze" could exist within the listeners' imagination. This is vital to understanding what Weheliye describes as an "audiovisual rift" relevant to the musicians, that "blackness necessitated redefinition in relation to this new technology, as it could now be imagined phonographically, it therefore had to be recast in order to fit into the already existing templates for racial formation."[320] The musicians' recordings became popular during a moment of this recasting for African American audiences and a reconsideration of the sound of a Black past.

While Du Bois produced writings at the height of their popularity, he did not speak directly of the music by the musicians, but his involvement in Black Swan records may reflect a sentiment that music served the purpose of cultural uplift. This concern did not seem to affect downhome. His idea of the "talented tenth" would not have included the musical expression on records by the musicians. The notion that "art was propaganda" to Du Bois contrasts with his contemporaries, James Weldon Johnson and Alain Locke, who understood the depiction of the realities of African American existence as essential to Black expression, as noted by Ron Eyerman in his work on African American traumatic memory.[321]

The idea of double consciousness affected the literary movement contemporary with the musicians' recordings. This dialectic was publicly addressed and suggests that African American

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[319] Weheliye, *Phonographies : Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*, 40.
[320] Ibid.
[321] Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity,* 81.

cultural production was impacted by a perception of the white gaze in a continual process in both internally determining courses prior to action and in the external reception of the act. This impact has resulted in a perception of literary production concurrent with the musicians described later by Larry Neal. He argued in 1968 that the Harlem Renaissance was a failure because of its proponents' preoccupation with white reception.[322] Conversely, the types of recordings by the musicians were praised as authentic, unadulterated Black expression during their period of production through the early twenty-first century.[323] The Black Arts Movement called for Black expression *for* African American audiences. This corresponds with the result of marketing practices of the segregated record industry that targeted African American audiences for the downhome and the musicians.[324]

Derrida recognizes a differentiation between the memory of blind artistic production and influence of the visible "present" as a contrast to that of sighted artists.[325] During the era of Race records, blind musicians' awareness that they could be *seen* yet not *see* themselves, relating closely to double-consciousness, became inverted in relation to their musical presence. This relates to the awareness of their being recorded, they were aware their performances were being written on objects drawing the sighted gaze away from them, these objects and this liberation if conscious was an element of their expression. In this aspect, the listeners' inability to see the performance

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[322] Larry Neal, *The Black Arts Movement*, 1st electronic ed., vol. 12 no. 4:29-39 (New York, NY:: New York University. School of the Arts, 2009), 39.

[323] Baraka, *Blues People; Negro Music in White America*, 144.

[324] Margo Natalie Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First-Century Aesthetics* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 147.

[325] Derrida and Musée du Louvre., *Memoirs of the Blind : The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, 49.

signifying a past became an inability to see their own imagined past, as it was expressed to represent the rural southern Black experience.

If downhome, or rural blues was a musical practice that "resisted cultural domination," blindness itself resisted domination.[326] The artists' condition mandated a position outside the conventional through the perception they were unable to participate in proletariat labor. Neither were they subjected to contribute to cycles of poverty as African Americans in the Jim Crow South nor to the psychological trauma of its visual experience. The artists' success would seem to have empowered the marginalized African American and visually impaired audiences and affirmed the potential success resulting from the mobility and autonomy of the underprivileged and disenfranchised. This theme permeates blues narratives of the period.

Themes of human domination over nature related to notions of modernity in the twentieth century are often related to technological innovations that influenced cultural transformations during the 1920s. Many of the technologies that defined this era are perceived as outside of the experience of blind subjectivities, and also outside the experience of economically disadvantaged and marginalized communities.[327] In reality, the abled/disabled rupture affected economically disadvantaged African American communities in the rural South with actual disabling impairments caused by a lack of access to medical care, educational systems, unsafe labor conditions, and other marginalizing factors. Poverty is a disabling position in society, perpetuated by errant disabling perceptions. Black popular music was excluded from the industry until 1920. For African Americans audiences who were excluded from a national dominant "ideal" of normativity,

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[326] William Barlow, *"Looking up at Down" : The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 5.

[327] Middleton, *Voicing the Popular : On the Subjects of Popular Music*, 28.

consuming phonograph technology would have signified participation in equal treatment and access. Audiences of the musicians were often a generation removed from slavery. The Race records of "Blind" musicians were embedded with a past disablement, which became distanced when consumers bought and listened to them.

Lindon Barrett asserts that "racial blackness, the primary enabling point of exclusion for the development of Western modernity, complicates the legibility of modern subjectivity." [328] We may debate the primacy of racial blackness as the enabling point of this exclusion, the concern here is the potential for this perception to be present as an influence on the listeners' experience in the 1920s. In this regard, the relevance of the musical expression itself is shaped by its context. Disability has been appropriated by scholars in the use of metaphor, as Berger cites Davidson that "Metaphoric treatments of impairment seldom confront the material conditions of actual disabled people." The musicians offer little information about their material conditions other than anecdotes for context regarding their communities. In summary, racism is not a form of disability.[329] If blindness is not a metaphor for the trauma of some aspect of the African American experience, but an impairment directly attributable to social exclusion based on class and race, the teleology of the metaphor is removed, and a direct relation with historical violence becomes clear.

Julia Rodas writes "The wealth of meaning that has been fabricated around the idea of blindness, our cultural reliance on blindness as a metaphor, thus metonymizes the blind man."[330] Multiple meanings of blindness are present in discourse throughout history. As a metaphor in common language, blindness has been as closely aligned with physical impairment as ignorance

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[328] Barrett et al., *Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of Western Modernity*, 44.
[329] Tremain, *Foucault and the Government of Disability*, 10.
[330] Julia Miele Rodas, "On Blindness," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 3, no. 2 (2009).

and unawareness. These significations are parallel with centuries of racist rhetoric in the United States denigrating African Americans. The roots of this prejudice predate the United States yet were employed in the justification for the institution of slavery in the Americas.

Blindness was also a marker that simultaneously transcended and signified the institution of slavery and race in the sighted imagination. Blindness, in this regard, is an invisibility, an exclusion, a darkness, as in the dark continent and other disparaging instances, continue to be significant metonyms used to discriminate against African Americans and suggest a deprivation from modernity. In his article "Looking on Darkness, Which the Blind Do See" Patterson describes the sighted imaginary of "blindness and the process of becoming blind as a projection of their own fears" and their "anxious imaginary of blindness as an irreversible, unremitting darkness."[331] Darkness has figured into the sighted imagination of their own experience of blindness, as well as the experience blindness as experienced by others.

Frances Koestler points to Shakespeare to illustrate perceptions of blindness and the idea of sensory compensation which relates to the exceptionality of the musicians.

> "Dark night, that from the eye his function takes,
> The ear more quick of apprehension makes,
> Wherein it doth impair the seeing sense,
> It pays the hearing double recompense."[332]

Historically, individuals closely involved with the blind community published such positivist biased descriptions, "For the Blind, as a class, are apt to be shy and reserved in speaking

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[331] Mark Paterson, "'Looking on Darkness, Which the Blind Do See': Blindness, Empathy, and Feeling Seeing," *Mosaic: a journal for the interdisciplinary study of literature* 46, no. 3 (2013): 160.

[332] William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* Act 3, Scene 2 Koestler, *The Unseen Minority: A Social History of Blindness in America*.

of their own peculiar state,…they are inclined to shrink from contact with the outer world of light, and rarely give expression to their thoughts."[333] Bennett George Johns, a chaplain of a British school for the blind, made this point in 1867. The notion that the blind community disappears from the outer world and prefer not to express themselves could also be read as the blind community is neither seen nor heard in a disabling society that excludes them.

Joy Weeber's statement that the "unconscious beliefs of society that assumes everyone is, or should be, white and able-bodied" describes her perception of parallel experiences of disablism and racism.[334] Her work is cited by Goodley, who elaborates "the elision of whiteness and able-bodiedness fixes the attention on those dominant imaginary and symbolic elements of culture that mark people of colour and disabled people as Other."[335] In the blind appellation, the violent marking of disability does not reveal a condition to evoke sympathy from the normative gaze. However, while sighted empathy may exist for the blind, the sighted recognize the potential of also becoming blind in the presence of blind people. The reality of the possible occupation of this position results in fear and anxiety, as well as the uncanny experience of placing oneself in the unknown position of blindness. This potential for disability does not relate to race and therefore complicates the imagining of the lived experience Rather, the musicians challenged the idea of the blind street corner mendicant, transforming that symbol into a mass-mediated recording celebrity. This is an expression that evokes a Black past free of any gesture of submission or indicating

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[333] Bennett George Johns, *Blind People: Their Works and Ways; with Sketches of the Lives of Some Famous Blind Men* (1867), viii.

[334] Joy E. Weeber, "What Could I Know of Racism?," *Journal of Counseling and Development* 77, no. 1 (1998): 21.

[335] Dan Goodley, *Dis/Ability Studies: Theorising Disablism and Ableism*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 44.

assimilation to white cultural conventions. These artists recorded performances on guitars and pianos with unique, individual techniques.

If blindness functioned as a metonym for the traumatic cultural memory of slavery as a mass reproduced and mediated expression intended expressly for African American consumption, the condition had the effect of a survival narrative. This is because the expression of blindness is being heard, as a Black past, giving agency to disability and more importantly violating normative structures. The antecedents of the musicians were celebrated for their ability to emulate European classical music; however, during the Race record era, the musicians produced music which had not been recorded. The downhome was an influence on prior popular Race records, but the source of this influence was modeled in the framing of the musicians. This leads to the question of whether the musicians, in this framework of presenting and preserving an authentic past, contributed to their popularity.

Traumatic cultural memory is the subject of studies from the 1990s through the early twenty-first century and has origins which often relate to the Holocaust. Alexander offers Erikson's description of cultural trauma as the result of "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality."[336] Indeed, abled perceptions of the impact of blindness imply this phenomenon, which describes the experience of Transatlantic slavery on African communities as a cultural memory of African Americans. However, because the title alone is foregrounded (even before the musicians were heard) and given voice, the narrative transforms from one of trauma to the survival of the traumatic experience.

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[336] From Kai Erikson, *Everything In Its Path* in Alexander, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, 4.

A broader reading of the musicians proceeding from blindness as metonym considers the social context of the musicians in considering the meanings as a metaphor of a Black "past." In the multiplicity of meanings of the blind mendicant itinerant musician, a possible reading is in contrasting the difference of these artists; this reinforced the idea of the listeners' position of normativity in the present. The downhome past was blind, and the observation of its expression from any various location of the present was normalizing.

If blindness was a metaphor for the debilitation of slavery, the experience of the downhome then became personal, regardless of familiarity with the sound, or the experience of slavery itself. The argument that often follows this type of assertion is that no life is always physically or psychologically "abled," and at some point during its existence deviates from the norm; therefore, at least temporarily all humans will experience a position of disability. The field of disability has been defined, likely in its most general terms, "as a multiplicitous field of site- and time- specific constraints that play themselves out on an infinite number of levels simultaneously."[337] This definition is drawn from the idea that all of life exists within a system within systems of constraints.

A reading of the reception of the musicians borrows and reimagines the idea of "technostalgia," introduced by Van Dijk. He states "Technologies and objects of recorded music are an intrinsic part of the act of reminiscence," he uses this definition to describe engagement with previously dominant apparatus of music reproduction as nostalgic. The musicians' production reconfigures the meaning to that of newly accessible (and relatively recent) apparatus for

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[337] Hanjo Berressem, "The Sounds of Disability, A Cultural Studies Perspective" in Waldschmidt, Berressem, and Ingwersen, *Culture - Theory - Disability : Encounters between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies*; ibid.

reproduction of sonic nostalgia.[338] This is supported by the fact that a nostalgia occurred at the height of technological innovation during "the Machine Age," which imposed new listening modalities. Experiencing the "dissociation" of sound from space, and its embedding into a product already decades old, but had not been an aspect of Black cultural production but crucial to understanding the phenomenon of "listening differently."[339]

The recordings of the musicians were set in a technology that preserved them for re/performance. The phonograph provided the listener agency over an imagined past, which enabled African American consumers to reenact and reinterpret cultural artifacts that had not previously been preserved and had been violated by the institution of slavery from transmission across generations of musical practice through typical cultural processes. The phonograph alone was an agent in this transmission, as the "interconnectedness between people and technology" is an idea which Latour discusses in *We Have Never Been Modern*, cited by Sterne.[340] Thus, technologies were an agent in the production and transmission of the musicians.

Despite innovations like electrical recording processes, Paramount's quality of recordings based on the materials they used for 78s records and their recording process produced a heavily filtered, distant sonic. This may have been due to the lack of definition of mechanical recording techniques which did not reproduce as detailed of an artifact than other companies. This is evident in the recordings of Blind Lemon Jefferson for Okeh records. Sterne's *The Audible Past*, "Sound

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[338] Bijsterveld and Dijck, *Sound Souvenirs : Audio Technologies, Memory and Cultural Practices*, 111.

[339] Emily Thompson, "Sound, Modernity and History" in Jonathan Sterne, ed. *The Sound Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge,, 2012), 117-24. See Douglas Kahn quote, 123.

[340] Jonathan Edward Sterne, "The Audible Past: Modernity, Technology, and the Cultural History of Sound" (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1999), 34.

reproduction is a social process."[341] The low fidelity of the era's phonographic reproduction was as significant to the musical text as the lyrical content and performance.

Paramount records use of substandard materials seems to have resulted in surreal, dreamlike audio. While the immediate response by audiences who were first experiencing these records is not documented, the early descriptions of the phonograph as uncanny suggest the type of engagement that transpired. Electronic recording began in 1925, the year before the first recordings of the musicians of this discussion and the popularizing of the downhome. Paramount, the label that produced Blind Blake and Blind Lemon Jefferson in 1926, likely did not use electric recording technology until later. Whether the studios contracted by Paramount for recordings in Chicago utilized electric microphones is unclear because of a technological innovation by an engineer that appeared to be a horn typical in a mechanical process.[342]

Blindness as an appellation relates not only to the reproduction but to the "primitive" sonic dislocated from its modern interpreter, the phonograph. Katz also describes a phonographic effect relevant to the performance of downhome. Spontaneity and inspired performances were transformed by the phonograph by becoming set, each nuance which was drawn from being in the moment became fixed. Multiple-takes variations reveal that performers were spontaneous. Downhome music documented the individual artists' unscripted conceptions, differentiating it from previous music on Race records. Solo arrangements of downhome were open and did not demand formal arrangements required of combo settings. Self-accompanied performances could be spontaneous, only limited by the time parameters and flat atmosphere of the studio. This quality

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[341] Sterne, *The Audible Past : Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, 219.

[342] Tuuk, *Paramount's Rise and Fall: The Roots and History of Paramount Records*, 64-65.

adds to notions of downhome authenticity, its inspired performances differed from the vaudevillian presentations and theatrical quality of classic blues.

During the period of the musicians, the following description related to this was written, "Despite continued familiarity, there is still something almost uncanny in the reproduction of a characteristic human voice or instrumental tone or technique through the medium of the seemingly simple record disc, needle and the other mechanical components of the instrument."[343] The idea that the records provided a familiar sonic via an uncanny technology marked by the "Blind" appellation is suggestive. African American consumers were in a position to afford phonographs and the records of these artists, and the early years of the Race record industry produced a variety of music. The Black Swan label produced a range from operatic to celebratory social music, even the blues. The intention was to elevate society with music that was considered high culture, although it did not prove to be sufficiently popular nor lucrative for the company to maintain production after 1923. Overly ambitious business practices are attributed to the label's inability to survive and Paramount records bought the label's back catalog soon after.

[343] Hughbanks, *Talking Wax; or, the Story of the Phonograph, Simply Told for General Readers*, 17.

5.2 TRAUMA AND NOSTALGIA

Despite Rothe's reduction of trauma theory to a fetishization of "its quasi-sacred object of adoration" that is "unknowable and unrepresentable" and rebuke of trauma theorists who "dispossess victims and survivors of the subject position of witness in order to ascribe it to themselves" and their "self-aggrandizing speculations," the theory inspired a number of influential works from the mid 1990s which remain considerably influential. This is often related to the Holocaust but increasingly present in discourse related to the Transatlantic slavery.

"Trauma theory thus reflects and reinforces the transformation of the genocide into metaphor and metonymy and its appropriation for epistemological purposes other than understanding the historical event itself" in the work of postmodern theorists.[344] Alexander writes "Traumatic status is attributed to real or imagined phenomena, not because of their actual harmfulness or their objective abruptness, but because these phenomena are believed to have abruptly, and harmfully, affected collective identity." This is relevant because across various subjectivities within African American communities, the period of the musicians was rich with discourse around African American experiences.

The musicians became prominent at the height of the jazz age, primitivism, exoticism, and *vogue negre.* White audiences were significant to the production and consumption of Black music

[344] Ann Rothe, "Irresponsible Nonsense: An Epistemological and Ethical Critique of Postmodern Trauma Theory" in Yochai Ataria et al., *Interdisciplinary Handbook of Trauma and Culture* (Switzerland: Springer, 2016).

and art during the period, yet they were not the record executives' intended audience for the downhome.[345]

While the idea that nostalgia was relevant to the records of the musicians related to perceptions of the authenticity of their embodiment of Black expression, the popular culture of the 1920s may also have contributed to the popularity of the musicians. During the jazz era, white artists influenced by Black expression became prominent in popular culture, with Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer* and Paul Whiteman, to the literary works of Eliot and Stein, and the artwork of Matisse and Picasso. The popular culture of the 1920s found its idea of modernity through the influence and appropriation of Black expression. The impact on African American communities who witnessed this faced a complicated scenario, while simultaneously experiencing Jim Crow segregation, race riots, lynching, and a society often otherwise averse to the idea of their inclusion.

Hughes writes, "I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins" in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" first published in *The Crisis* in 1921 and included in his first collection of poetry, *The Weary Blues,* in 1926. In several ways, this work and the effect of the Weary blues parallels the work of Lemon Jefferson which also debuted in 1926. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is in the narrative voice of the "old" as the aesthetic of Jefferson was in his downhome "old-time," while both artists were relatively young men and their work was mediated and consumed in formats that signified the modern period. Both of their works are noted for their departure from previous aesthetics. Hughes broke from former New Negro works that were representative of the ideal of social progress. Jefferson, popularized downhome expression

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[345] This point is drawn from the exclusivity of marketing in the Black press. According to Perry Bradford, in his recollection of his negotiation to contract for the first Race record, as cited by Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life : The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1945*.

within the scope of Black popular music that previously featured elements considered modern or innovative. The artists were from diverse experiences, socioeconomic backgrounds, and parts of the country, yet their work was similarly produced by young African American artists, the consumers of their work, yet they both enjoyed a high degree of popularity with works from 1926. Their production is perceived as reflecting changing ideologies, yet their significance was vastly different at the time.

In a 1926 edition of *The Crisis,* Chesnutt wrote "The prevailing weakness of Negro writings, from the viewpoint of art, is that they are too subjective. The colored writer, generally speaking, has not yet passed the point of thinking of himself first as a Negro, burdened with the responsibility of defending and uplifting his race."[346] The musicians were writers of cultural text produced for the segregated record industry. This narrowed their field. Unlike other musicians, they were not performing or producing for white audiences. Presumably, the musicians were burdened with the instability of survival as itinerant and often mendicant musicians, more occupied with locating work than with the idealistic pursuits of Chesnutt and other writers. Though there were exceptions, the Harlem writers were not raised in abject poverty. They had opportunities that would be rare for individuals in Southern, rural, African American communities, and rarer for those with disabilities. Ironically, the musicians, in representing the past and the downhome, *did* defend and uplift their audiences. Regardless of scrutiny, they may have received related to their low social status, disability, and their expression.

The musicians are not often considered in discussions of their contemporary African American literary and sociopolitical works. Evident parallel transformations occurred within

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[346] Charles Waddell Chesnutt, "Readings from the Crisis 1926: The Negro in Art--How Shall He Be Portrayed: A Symposium," *The Crisis* 107, no. 4 (2000).

popular Race records and literary movements while the musicians were dominant figures. This is not to imply an influence or dialog across these disciplines, but that familiar factors affected African American communities expressed within their production. Whether audiences were consuming these varied works of Black cultural production is unclear. While a mid-1920s admirer of the writing of Langston Hughes and Jessie Fauset may have also been a fan of Blind Lemon Jefferson's records, these types of specific details are not well documented during the period. In the summer of 1926, Hughes wrote that recognition and acclaim of Black artists by white society resulted in acceptance by African American societies in his article "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.[347] This was a sentiment from the Harlem literary scene, but the musicians became popular within African American communities in the summer of 1926. Hughes may have spoken prematurely, as he and other writers from his scene increasingly recognized and exalted what was considered authentic Black expression regardless of dominant acceptance.

The musicians were popular, yet hardly celebrated by white communities. Hughes writes in "The Negro Artist," "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame." The figurative position of blindness excluded the musicians, yet also suggests that blind artists may have been perceived as unimpeded in their expression from both inside and outside of their communities. This is where a parallel can be drawn. Despite seemingly incongruous "genre ideals" and audiences, the musicians' recordings and literary production by African American writers in 1926 share similarities. This is because the production of the musicians was marketed in a manner suggesting it was unaffected by concurrent production, both musical and otherwise, which would compromise its integrity and authenticity.

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[347] Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation*, June 1926.

As Hughes describes this relevance to African American artists, if audiences are pleased "we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter," and that artists producing outside of the social influence of racism are "free within ourselves." Regardless of the decisions of the artists and producers, this message is compelling in its association of blindness with immunity from oppressive forces to which the sighted community is subjected.

These musicians became actors in the popular music industry, and advertising for their records in the Black press often correlated blindness with an authentic premodern sonic. Blindness was inflected not only through the sonic of downhome expression but also through phonographic reproduction which performed both a temporal and spatial dislocation of the recorded performance. This association of memory with blindness is demonstrable through the rupture of the "here and now" of musical performance. The musicians were primarily popular for their phonograph records but continued an extensive historical correlation of blindness and music that preceded this technology.

African American conservative columnist George Schuyler wrote in his provocative "The Negro-Art Hokum" in June of 1926, the time that Jefferson's first records became popular, that an artist's "color is incidental." He writes that racist stereotypes were promoted "because a few writers with a paucity of themes have seized upon imbecilities of the Negro rustics and clowns and pawned them off as authentic and characteristic Aframerican behavior." This is significant because Schuyler's column in the *Pittsburgh Courier* was known to prompt dialog within African American communities.[348] Schuyler argued that the various range of African American expression was simply American and compared labeling it as if it embodied a singular character to grouping

[348] Jeffrey B. Ferguson, *The Sage of Sugar Hill: George S. Schuyler and the Harlem Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 3, 184-87, 202.

all expression by white artists together simply based on race. He considered the idea absurd and supported his argument by describing a shared habitus and modes of living across race. He does not recognize that an African American collectivity was constructed through institutional racism, regardless of socioeconomic status and experience.

Ellison later writes of this that "…there is on the political level one American Negro experience, and it is nationwide."[349] Schuyler dismissed any commonalities of an African American collectivity that would generate a unique artistic expression. While he did recognize the music that included the musicians as unique, he dismissed it as representative of uniquely African American expression. "If one wishes to speak of the musical contributions of the peasantry of the South, very well. Any group under similar circumstances would have produced something similar."[350] This is striking in its suggestion that the experience prior to the dislocation of slavery, enslavement, and following emancipation would have affected any group similarly if these are indeed the circumstances to which Schuyler is referring.

The underplay of a unique African American experience and slavery itself may have been written to counter white racist propaganda during the period, present within scientific and governmental records. In this act, Schuyler sacrifices the idea of a shared collective memory across African American communities. While this did not include subjects of African descent living in the United States whose heritage did not include the erasure effected by chattel slavery, the projection of this history upon anyone with this phenotypic profile by racist power structures. Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," written in response to Schuyler provides a

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[349] Ralph Ellison, Whitney M. Young, and Herbert J. Gans, *The City in Crisis*, vol. no. 4 (New York: A. Philip Randolph Educational Fund, 1968), 10.

[350] Schuyler, "The Negro Art Hokum."

counter position, published precisely at the height of the musicians' popularity. This dialectic reflects a paradigm shift within African American communities and is one of the most important factors to consider regarding the popularity of musicians, as cultural producers and as agents of cultural memory formation.

The idea of a "blues aesthetic" is discussed in studies throughout the twentieth century. Middleton recognizes Baker and Oliver for presenting the notion of the blues as a timeless presence, an "always already" aspect of African American expression.[351] Baraka and others have also elaborated this idea. The musicians' association with a break in the meaning of the blues is relevant to a transformation in Black popular music. This relates to the promotion of an authentic downhome singularity following the popular cosmopolitan hybrid of jazz, blues, and vaudeville. Readings of the musicians by blues scholars have been determined by strategies of the commodification of the downhome trope. This includes the "Blind" epithet, implying that blindness produces unadulterated music, a pure expression. Baraka states "Classic blues was entertainment and country blues folklore."[352] Ellison points to Baraka's distinction between the entertainment aspects of classic and folkloric quality of the country/downhome blues, whereas Ellison finds these elements coexistent.[353] He asserts that in the form of recordings the classic blues was also folkloric.

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[351] See Middleton, *Voicing the Popular : On the Subjects of Popular Music*, 44-45; Baraka, *Blues People; Negro Music in White America*; Houston A. Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature : A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Oliver, Russell, and Dixon, *Yonder Come the Blues : The Evolution of a Genre*; Richard Middleton, "O Brother, Let's Go Down Home: Loss, Nostalgia and the Blues," *Popular Music* 26, no. 1 (2007).

[352] Baraka, *Blues People; Negro Music in White America*, 105.

[353] Ralph Ellison, "The Blues," *New York Review of Books* (1964). Review of Baraka, *Blues People; Negro Music in White America*.

While scholars were documenting and conducting research on African American musical practices in Southern communities, Jefferson and the other musicians' records became a presence in Black popular music industry. The number of record consumers during the mid-1920s interested in the music as folklore is impossible to determine, but the musicians' popularity as producers of downhome expression suggests that nostalgia was a component of their appeal. Their music of the musicians represents a range of production within the downhome, but the most popular records were incredibly entertaining, including solo performances that were virtuosic and inspired.

While these records were popular, audiences *were* also in the process of reimagining the (downhome) spaces the music signified. Millions of African Americans left the physical spaces signified by the downhome, dislocating themselves from their former lives, families, and loved ones in the pursuit of unknown opportunities. The early twentieth century was an era of establishing a Black modernity, with New Negro discourse, Post-Reconstruction and the Great Migration. This necessitated the construction of a "past" to serve the formation of a Black modernity. The blind "folklore" on Race records was marketed as "old-fashioned" and "old-time," which gave them meaning as cultural artifacts. However, this was complicated by their mediation as objects that represented modernity, Race records. Concurrent discourse addressed this, Hurston wrote in 1934, "Negro folklore is not a thing of the past. It is still in the making."[354] This supports the position of this study that the idea of a Black past was constructed during the period through expression that engaged with the past, like that of literary works, but also by the production of Blind downhome musicians.

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[354] Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression."

Despite depictions which portrayed the downhome style in Black press advertisements as old-time, the music was functionally antithetical to previous parodic forms of Black expression, like those of minstrelsy, well documented in works by musicologists Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff.[355] This includes the prominent "coon" songs and African American musical comedy acts which were written and performed by African Americans for white audiences even during the period of the musicians' popularity.[356] For example, the African American musical production *Chocolate Kiddies* did not premiere on Broadway, but in Berlin in 1925 and successfully toured throughout Europe and Russia for over a year.[357] The high era of "Black" Broadway shows, 1921-1924, concurrent with the vaudevillian classic blues, appealed to a diverse audience. This preceded the popularity of downhome and the "Blind" title on Race records. The industry's influence in directing production of Black expression to an intended audience during the 1920s is an important consideration for this study because of the relevance of the musicians to cultural memory. This relates to the influence of Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake and other writers of Black musicals targeting mixed but mostly white Broadway audiences versus white record executives producing records by the musicians targeting mostly African American audiences.

Whether listeners understood the work of the musicians as folklore or art, the aesthetic of authenticity is rarely questioned. Concurrent forms of African American cultural production provide a contrast to the musicians, particularly those of the artists of the Harlem Renaissance.

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[355] Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, "Coon Songs," and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz,* 1st ed. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

[356] James Edward Smethurst, *The African American Roots of Modernism: From Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 217-18.

[357] "'Chocolate Kiddies'," *Chicago Defender (National Edition)*, August 8, 1925.

Hazel Carby questions a late twentieth-century preoccupation with Zora Neale Hurston within the academy, drawing a similar fascination with exoticism and primitivism in the 1920s. In her essay, she contends "the desire of the Harlem intellectuals to establish and re-present African-American cultural authenticity to a predominantly white audience was a mark of a change from, and confrontation with, what were seen by them to be externally imposed cultural representations of black people produced within, and supported by, a racialized social order."[358] She describes a sentiment similar to Hughes in his "Racial Mountain" essay cited, and it relates to the musicians. Their downhome records, while imposed upon by record companies, represented an expression that was not imposed upon by external influences.

Carby's contention differentiates the production of the Harlem Renaissance and the blind musicians. Popular music did not explicitly confront externally imposed cultural representations, yet it arguably accomplished this with the production of the musicians! White record executives, merely by business practice were intent to capitalize on inexpensive talent regardless of its authenticity; they also recognized that by 1926 white consumers were often interested less in the phonograph then in the radio. This necessitated establishing new audiences and locating and producing artists that would appeal to them.

White also noted the desire described by Carby in 1926, the year of central focus as the introduction of the musicians' production on recordings. He writes, "Not so many years ago this folk music was threatened with extinction by the race which gave it to the world. Struggling for survival against great odds, some Negroes felt ashamed of their music because it had grown out of

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[358] Geneviève Fabre and Robert G. O'Meally, *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 30.

their oppression. Now, (African American musicians) have earned for the songs the recognition which they deserve."[359] The musicians, however, did not function as a re-presentation to a predominantly white audience, but rather a disruption from externally imposed representations for African American audiences, specifically consumers of Race records.

In considering a retrospection by the musicians, it is critical to situate their production within other forms of Black music production during the period, particularly music also described as representative of a Black past. The Fisk Jubilee singers' interpretations of the Sorrow Songs and Spirituals are examples of musical forms relevant to the construction of African American cultural memory and American history. Their production differed significantly from the musicians. The Jubilee groups were not mass mediated and consumed by African American audiences. They were noted for and often performed for "elite" white audiences, and like Black Broadway toured and found audiences in Europe. In the twenty-first century, parallel ideas of an encoded Black past continue to be inscribed in Jubilee performance. "By evoking the past, The Fisk Jubilee singers looked forward, to the promise of upward mobility."[360] Unlike the Sorrow Songs and Jubilee, the downhome blues was not labeled as a music of the slavery era, yet this narrowed the "past" from which it came. The period of the past became more of an idea than an era. However, because the lyrics described problems of the nadir, not bondage, the music was an old-time encounter with the present. While instruments and musicianship were imposed on enslaved African Americans for

[359] Walter White, "More Negro Songs," *The Nation* 122, no. 3173 (1926).

[360] Gabriel Farren Milner, "American Vernacular: Popular Culture, Performance, and the Question of National History, 1871–1915" (PhD Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2013).

entertaining those who kept them in bondage, the instrumental styles and techniques, like slide guitar and ragtime were later transformations.

Hurston writes "There never has been a presentation of genuine Negro spirituals to any audience anywhere," merely adaptations "*based* on the spirituals."[361] The essay in which this appeared, along with her "Characteristics of Negro Expression" were included in Cunard's *Negro: An Anthology* from 1934.[362] However, these essays were written between 1926 and the early 1930s according to Bambara.[363] The perception that the audience affected the authenticity of performance, through an intentional adaptation or merely a performer's awareness, is maintained in scholarship across a century of discourse. The authenticity of the musicians was signified through markers, including an exclusive downhome expression and the blind epithet.

5.3 LOCKE AND THE NEW NEGRO

Alain Locke and the New Negro movement recognized a narrative of Black history that preceded the legacy of slavery, including the inheritance of an African Downhome. Locke is credited as one of the first African American scholars to discuss "a 'racial' idiom in art."[364] As the responsibilities of African American artists to a Black aesthetic entered discourse, and the vast complications such a notion involved, blind musicians began recording music that would seem to epitomize these

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[361] Hurston, "Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals."
[362] Nancy Cunard, *Negro: An Anthology* (London: Published by Nancy Cunard at Wishart & Co, 1934).
[363] Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* (Berkeley: Turtle Island, 1981), 11.
[364] Fabre and O'Meally, *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, 229.

ideals. Locke describes the vision of opportunity of post-Migrated communities in his essay "Enter the New Negro" from 1925.

Locke writes:

> The tide of Negro migration North ward and city ward, is not to be fully explained as a blind flood started by the demands of war industry coupled with the shutting off of foreign migration, or by the pressure of poor crops coupled with increased social terrorism in certain sections of the South and Southwest. The wash and rush of this human tide on the beach line of the northern city centers is to be explained primarily in terms of a new vision of opportunity, of social and economic freedom, of social and economic freedom of the Spirit to seize even in the face of an extortionate and heavy toll a chance for the improvement of conditions.[365]

Arthur Schomburg identifies and details the break between memory and modernity in his essay "The Negro Digs Up His Past" included in Locke's *The New Negro*, "The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future….History must restore what slavery took away, for it is the social damage of slavery that the present generations must repair and offset" The idea of *re*-making suggests the intended cultural erasure as a technology of the institution of slavery and the era of the pseudo-science of racial distinctions. This relates to the blues and downhome as artifacts of an African American past with the musicians as custodians of their authentic forms. Schomburg closes his article stating "The work our race students now regard as important, they undertake very naturally to overcome in part certain handicaps of disparagement and omission too well-known to particularize."[366] This position could be significant to the musician's work, while it was disparaged as popular expression, it was aligned with the past, and signified an invisibility.

Eyerman writes, "Hurston and Hughes were part of a new generation of American blacks for whom the past was reconceptualized as cultural heritage, useful for understanding as well as

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[365] Alain Locke and Winold Reiss, eds., *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York:: A. and C. Boni, 1925), 6.

[366] Arthur Schomburg, "The Negro Digs Up His Past" in ibid., 237.

orienting present and future behavior."[367] This relates to the meaning of the downhome as "folk heritage" to the Harlem Renaissance writers. A counter-memory of the experience of slavery and Reconstruction by a younger generation of African Americans emerged in response to dominant cultural narratives. This became relevant during the era of the musicians, who represented the generation that followed those that directly experienced slavery. In popular culture, representations of the antebellum era became romanticized in music and theater. The recordings of the musicians who were characterized as embodying an authentic African American expression of the past, provided a counter, a reconsideration of African Americans described in lyrics and portrayed in films.

The recordings of Blind artists demonstrate the dynamic and technical virtuosity that reflected a unique culture, assimilating little white cultural influence although reflecting the American multicultural milieu, particularly the imposition of European traditions. The concept of counter-memory as a relevant consideration of African American subjectivity is discussed by Eyerman, who recognizes "a distinct gap emerged between the collective memory of a reconstructed minority group and the equally reconstructed dominant group in post-reconstruction America; the one which controlled the resources and had the power to fashion public memory."[368] Eyerman continues asserting that during the 1920s, the decade of musicians, the "two dominant narrative frames took shape" and "collective memory was significantly reformulated." The musicians' popular position during the period suggests their relevance to this reformulation.

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[367] Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity,* 90.

[368] Ibid., 17.

5.4 THURMAN AND *FIRE!!*

Cordelia's story opens the first and only edition of the journal, *Fire!!* She is figuratively blind, interfacing with technology in an alternative way, in the dark, lonely, satisfying a post-migration void with physical touch. Cordelia is a young Southern woman who migrates to New York with her family. She is lonely, looks for the affection of strange men in the darkness of the movie theater. Tragically, she becomes a drunken prostitute through the actions of Wallace Thurman's narrator. While this was a romantic story with a tragic end, its open sexuality of African Americans played into racist stereotypes of promiscuity and sexual deviance like those that appeared in public health reports relating to congenital blindness.

An address to the American Public Health Association in 1914 by a Georgia physician claims that any doctor with the "disagreeable duty of treating any large number of the negro race have found that venereal diseases are present in over fifty percent…How much through the negro race the white race is affected with (syphilis) I am unable to state."[369] Untruths introduced by institutions spread racist fear and paranoia, this statement is exemplary of the types of institutional obstacles encountered by advocates for an integrated and egalitarian society.

Cordelia is the name of the daughter of King Lear in Shakespeare's play. She is banished from the kingdom for her honesty in the first act, saying, "Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave my heart into my mouth." At the end of the play, she returns home to her father whose madness prevents him from recognizing her. This banishment may signify the effect of the Migration, and

[369] L. Lee, "The Negro as a Problem in Public Health Charity," *American Journal of Public Health* 5, no. 3 (1915): 208.

also equally relate to the Biblical story of the prodigal son (daughter here) discussed in the introduction. Thurman may have recognized this relevance for his imagining of Cordelia.

Wallace Thurman and other writers in *Fire!!* and their other works did not express themes of sexuality comically as they were by the hokum blues musicians. Their writing openly and seriously discussed relationships, intimacy, homosexuality, interracial romance, domestic violence, and racism. The classic blues women produced recordings with lyrics that transgressed gender norms in their expression of these themes. They were followed by blind musicians who performed similar themes that were popular and in doing so, transgressed abled normativity. Blind musicians' records featuring themes of sexuality, mobility, and emotion were expressions of humanity that the disabled community rarely had the platforms to articulate. The musicians were contemporaries of the activist Helen Keller, also a Southerner who experienced blindness as a result of an early illness. Keller's extraordinary accomplishments were achieved through her constitution and determination but also facilitated by her privileged position of being white, affluent, and through the support of her family. These factors provided her the opportunity to travel to Boston for schooling as a child and a platform to become an activist. She was visible, influential as a disabled woman activist, not closeted by her family, and not denied a voice similarly to other members of the white disabled community.

The musicians' position as mass mediated members of the disabled community provided them a rare platform, which was apparently limited by record company decisions. Their openness about common sexual tropes of popular music was unique because of their disability, the blind epithet and the musicians' hokum did little to dispel racist fallacies about the spread of syphilis (and its resultant blindness). Blind Boy Fuller's rattlesnakin' daddy "rattled this mornin' bout half past three, half past four he wanted to rattle some more," Blind Teddy Darby boasts "I'm a real

good spike driver, let me drive a spike for you…when I'm driving my spike baby, it sure gets good to me," Blind Willie Reynolds sings "She got something men call stingaree, four o'clock every morning she turn it loose on me."[370] The musicians produced recordings filled with double entendre and irreverent humor from the mid-twenties through the Depression years. The records' popularity may have been related to this humor and inspired similar production, but they were serious demonstrations of resistance to the imposition of dominant conventions. Angela Davis discusses similar themes of sexuality of the classic blues singers who were popular before the hokum records produced by blind musicians, describing the liberating expression as an affirmation of humanity denied of African Americans.[371] This may also be relevant to disabled musicians expressing their humanity through sexual themes. The expression of sex and sexuality and the sense of being that it evoked in its listener validates humanity, freedom of thought, and was an expression of resistance in a society preoccupied with maintaining its thin veneer of prudery.

Farah Jasmine Griffin clarifies Aaron Douglas was not merely the illustrator of the journal *Fire!!* She writes that "he helped establish its rhythm, to provide its pulse, to keep it on the beat, *on time.*" Griffin points to a letter written to Langston Hughes on Christmas Day 1925 in which Douglas addresses "our problem is to conceive, develop, establish an art era, not white art painted black,…Let's do the impossible. Let's create something transcendentally material, mystically objective. Earthy. Spiritually earthy. Dynamic." These descriptors have been used to describe and essentialize African American expression and associated with the musicians' recordings. The work

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[370] Blind Boy Fuller, "I'm a Rattlesnakin' Daddy," (Vo03084, Cq8641, Co30078, 37776), July 23, 1935; Blind "Blues" Darby, "Spike Driver," (De7816), April 30, 1937; Blind Willie Reynolds, "Third Street Woman Blues," (Vi23258), November 26, 1930.

[371] Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).

of Blind Willie Johnson and the other evangelists would seem to define a spiritual earthliness; a "not white art" that was produced as Douglas was writing his letter. Whether the literary community who produced *Fire!!* perceived the significance of blind musicians' production as greater than merely a popular novelty music is uncertain. Hughes was influenced by the blues, titled his works blues, and later performed his works with musical accompaniment.

The always already presence of the blues and downhome expression in African American communities imbues blindness with an anachronistic quality. This contrasts with Hurston and Hughes and others who were conceivably "going back" to the past in search of cultural artifacts. This is even true of Handy and other classic blues musicians, yet while the musicians became popular while representing an authentic past, they were, like the writers, articulating a notion of the past relevant to the interwar period, one of Migration, opportunity, and also racial terror and disfranchisement. Thus, while *Fire!!* is aligned with jazz and the jazz age, its implications and calculated aspirations align more with the meanings in downhome recordings of the musicians than the musical that was also produced in Harlem. The Cotton Club's plantation décor and scantily clad light-skinned African American women dancing for white patrons uptown for a night of slumming is antithetical to the Harlem Renaissance contributors of *Fire!!*. The popularity of downhome records by the musicians may appear as an accidental novelty, and not as calculated or self-conscious in their significance as descriptions by Thurman, Douglas, and Hughes of their work, yet the downhome represented authentic

5.5 THE ART HOKUM AND THE RACIAL MOUNTAIN

The period's commercially viable "jungle" primitivism, as offered by Ellington and Josephine Baker appealed to white consumers. The politics of Black expression during the 1920s was complex, differing ontologies about the presence of vernacular influences, and a sentiment of a futility in integrating Western European conventions, which were demeaned as being simply African American rearticulation. The idea that African American vernacular forms introduced in the production of the musicians affirmed rich and varied, but unique African American cultural practices often unrecognized in racist rhetoric. This was a denial of the existence of an African American culture, a racist dismissal as a collectivity that was merely imitative. A reaction to this can be observed in William Marion Cook's refusal to perform on the violin after being celebrated as able to "get more music out of the violin than any other colored man" in Chicago and as early as 1900 discussing the importance of developing a unique African American music.[372]

Porter offers Ellington's intention from 1939 to create an "authentic Negro music."[373] The marketing of the downhome and the musicians often declared the authenticity using descriptors like "real." One can suppose the musicians were aware of their labeling as authentic by record companies. The musicians were recorded based on their marketability to African American record consumers, and many of them were dependent on a variety of income sources. While Ellington enjoyed the stability of employment at the Cotton Club for the period of this discussion, blind musicians' performances went undocumented. Because of this one can suppose these did not occur

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[372] *The Conservator* (Chicago) September 9, 1893 as cited in: Marva Griffin Carter, *Swing Along: The Musical Life of Will Marion Cook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 26.

[373] Eric Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists*, 1 ed., vol. 6 (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2002).

in venues that featured other prominent Race performers. With this in mind, the musicians were limited not only in their recorded productions but also in their performances.

The idea that the musicians were producing expression that was marketed as authentic in the mode that Ellington describes may seem improbable and that it is unlikely popular downhome recordings were in his purview, but one must consider parallels between the producers at Paramount and the other labels that featured the musicians and the Ellington's audiences at the Cotton Club. They both functioned as dominant societal power structures who imposed an influence on Black expression, production, and representation merely based on their perceptions from outside of the African American community. These decisions affected live performance and the phonograph but were also relevant to the radio, which became a dominant technology for popular culture in the years before the production of the musicians.

When contrasting the engagement with the phonograph and radio during the 1920s by African American communities one must recognize the importance of personal ownership of objects embedded with black expression related to Race records. No music broadcast on the radio was owned by the consumer, nor controlled by the consumer, and African American music was infrequently programmed during the first years of the musicians' production. Radio was programmed and dictated to consumers. This is significant because it gives meaning to the musicians' records as personally owned cultural artifacts, which both served in the formation of self-identity and community.

The consumer culture that arose during the 1920s was relevant to both formations of self and community. This notion has been addressed by Barrett about the radio. For this study, the technology of the phonograph was an apparatus for African American community formation while

Black radio programming was in its nascent stages.[374] The practice of "racial ventriloquy" by white performers was at its height of popularity on the radio during the 1920s, while its American genesis in blackface minstrelsy was in decline. During the period of this study in 1930, fourteen percent of urban African American and three percent of rural African Americans owned radios.[375] However, the regions where downhome musicians resided during this period documented radio ownership among African Americans at roughly one percent, the Southern states where nearly three-quarters of the African American population in the United States resided.[376] This means that the musicians were rarely heard on the radio by African American audiences if by chance they were ever featured performers on broadcasts, especially in their home states. Even with the small percentage of radio ownership, there was a presence of African-American music and musicians being broadcast, particularly that which interested white audiences and by white jazz bands, but by the end of the decade the bands of Duke Ellington and Fletcher Henderson were regularly featured.[377]

The musicians provided no self-reflective documents for posterity of their perception of the role or place of their work, while ironically Handy, the "Father of the Blues," released his ghostwritten autobiography in 1941, at the end of the active period of the musicians.[378] The voices of these musicians are present in their music and rarely elsewhere, which further differentiates them from their literary and artistic counterparts, whose philosophical stances are often aspects of

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[374] Barrett et al., *Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of Western Modernity*, 162.

[375] See William Barlow, *Voice Over : The Making of Black Radio* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1999), 79.

[376] Charles Edward Hall and Census United States. Bureau of the, *Negroes in the United States, 1920-1932* (New York: Arno Press, 1935), 259.

[377] See Aaron J. Johnson, "A Date with the Duke: Ellington on Radio," *The Musical Quarterly* 96, no. 3-4 (2017).

[378] Handy and Bontemps, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography*.

even their most creative works.

Nathaniel Mackey cites a differentiation made by Baraka between Black musical and literary expression relevant to this study. Baraka writes, "(I)t was only in music that the Negro did not have to respect the tradition outside of his own feelings–that is, he could play what he felt and not try to make it seem like something alien to his feelings, something outside of his experience." Whereas, Baraka continues "the Negro writers who usually wanted to pursue what (they) classify as "high art" were necessarily middle-class Negroes (whose art) was, at best, an imitation of what can only be described as white middle-class literature."[379] This sentiment requires contextualization, particularly regarding Baraka's self-reflection as an African American writer reconciling a middle-class background. Baraka and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s are described as focusing on "defining a concretely independent black identity, autonomous from surrounding white culture." This indeed is evocative of the musicians' intraracial relevance. The affinity for musical authenticity of Black expression appears throughout Hughes's writing which coincided with the musicians. This is important because it addresses perceptions within African American artistic communities that regard musical expression as a more authentic form of African American expression than literature. This relates to privileging processes of orality related to musical expression that are not limited by the confines of written language.

James Reese Europe who performed at Carnegie Hall and in France during World War I, upon returning declared, "Negroes should write Negro music. We have our own racial feeling and

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[379] Nathaniel Mackey, "The Changing Same: Black Music in the Poetry of Amiri Baraka," *boundary 2* 6, no. 2 (1978).

if we try to copy whites we will make bad copies."[380] He, along with William Marion Cook, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, and other African American composers were fluent in Western European conventions prior to the Race record era. This anticipates a sentiment within Black aesthetics that reached a pinnacle during the Harlem Renaissance. The incorporation of vernacular was realized with the addition of sonic textures that define the downhome within "high" art authenticity for Reese's Clef Club orchestra at their famed 1912 Carnegie Hall performance. In April 1927, W.C. Handy performed at Carnegie Hall with his arranged blues and a show that featured cakewalks. Handy biographer describes the performance as a "nostalgia act," one that was concurrent with the musicians' downhome popularization on Race records.[381] However, the performance did not include the "hot jazz" that was popular nor the downhome. These only appeared at the celebrated venue a decade later.

Ten years later in 1938, John Hammond produced the "From Spirituals to Swing" concerts at Carnegie Hall. The concert was to feature Blind Boy Fuller, who was then incarcerated for shooting his wife in the leg. In his place, another blind musician without the epithet performed. Sonny Terry, listed in the program as Sanford (his birthname) followed Lester Young and the Count Basie rhythm section. He performed harmonica with an unnamed washboard player, and was followed by a group with pianist James P. Johnson. Each segment was titled, with Young as "Soft Swing" and James P. Johnson as "Blues" with Terry in between simply titled "Harmonica Playing." In the program, Terry is described as "nearly blind" and one of Hammond's "prize

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[380] Quoted in "A Negro Explains 'Jazz,'" *Literary Digest*, April 26, 1919 from Karl Koenig and Societies American Council of Learned, *Jazz in Print (1856-1929): An Anthology of Selected Early Readings in Jazz History* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2002), 132.

[381] David Robertson, *W.C. Handy: The Life and Times of the Man Who Made the Blues* (Tuscaloosa, Ala: University of Alabama Press, 2011), 203-04.

discoveries on a recent trip to North Carolina." He is also credited with accompanying Blind Boy Fuller on his recordings. The producer of the program recognized the potential of blind downhome expression as an addition to a concert that was to chronicle the history of African American music, but how Terry is featured seems awkward. This is because the history of the music was not teleological, the downhome did not sit within a chronology of transformations. This moment of recognition of blind downhome musicians in 1938 marks the end of the period of their prevalence as popular music producers and foreshadows their relevance decades later as cultural treasures during the blues revival. Unfortunately, very few of the musicians survived to witness this. Gary Davis and Sonny Terry were featured in theaters and festivals that included later popular blind musicians like Art Tatum, Ray Charles, and Stevie Wonder. Three musicians whose blindness did not appear in an epithet; however, was still an aspect of their reception.

6.0 CONCLUSION: THE MUSICIANS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Across the layers of centuries stacked in his eyes,

his soul traverses the newly slaughtered brain,

singing benedictions learned from holy birds

Bob Kaufman, *Cranial Guitar*

In the context of music, Blindness is often reimagined by the temporarily sighted not as an impairment, but as if people with sufficiently impaired vision are bestowed with extraordinary musical ability. Other disabled musical performance not involving visual impairment is also read as extraordinary, but often involves a devaluing of impaired individuals. Georgina Kleege writes that these perceptions, "reveal diminished expectations for life without sight, and a superstitious belief that should belong in another era."[382] She describes biases based on an abled inability to comprehend the true *abilities* of the disabled. Devaluing misperceptions are still circulated in the mass media, which William Cheng describes as "supercrip stories," these "involve lauding disabled individuals for accomplishing feats that fall within easier reach of normates."[383]

How do we imagine blindness as a disability within musical discourse? If the sensory condition does not impair musical expression, is the social stigma associated with extraordinary (read abnormal) ability undesirable? Preconceptions about blindness contribute to a construction of the exceptional blind musician, and social constructions perpetuate the idea of the practicality

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[382] Georgina Kleege, *Sight Unseen* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 28.

[383] William Cheng, "Staging Overcoming: Narratives of Disability and Meritocracy in Reality Singing Competitions," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 11, no. 2 (2017): 187.

of a musical vocation within limited ocularcentric social structures. Sighted perceptions place the blind subject position not just as differently abled, but extraordinarily abled. Thus, blind musical performance is heard as transcendent, sourced from an uncanny interiority, a sanctum from which is channeled musical afflatus through voice or hands, often in a spectacle of alterity overshadowing the subject for the sighted gaze. The perception of the phonograph as an apparatus of the uncanny mirrors this perception and possibly magnifies it in regard to the blind epithet.

The trope of blind musicians as exceptional and mysterious remains a presence in popular culture in the twenty-first century. "Blind Boy" Jerron Paxton, a well-known musician from Los Angeles in the blues and Americana folk music scenes chose the blind moniker early in his career as a "joke," and adopted mannerisms of blind musicians but was not blind. Paxton said in an interview, "If somebody said I'm some spook from South Central who plays guitar, I don't think too many people would be interested. But when people start to bring shit that doesn't have anything to do with music, like my vision or my religion or my skin color, into it, it tends to cheapen the music."[384] Paxton may seem disconnected from the musicians, as merely a young fan who adopted the title without considering its implications, as he suggests in his interviews. However, his reception and fame with the title reveal a parallel significance of authenticity to his audiences that may be relevant to the musicians. He often performs in overalls and speaks with a Southern cadence and drawl that is atypical of any regions of Louisiana where his grandparents lived before relocating to California. He sings of cotton fields for Americana and roots music audiences, nearly always primarily white. This feigning of blindness has not affected his reception but seems

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[384] "Digging For The Real Facts About Jerron "Blind Boy" Paxton ..." Web. Accessed Feb 7, 2018 https://www.straight.com/music/577006/digging-real-facts-about-jerron-blind-boy-paxton.

problematic. He claims that he has experienced subsequent visual conditions, and has maintained the epithet. Paxton's persona and his reception are a consideration for further research related to the epithet. Audiences may not perceive the epithet as disabling because of its legacy, yet apparently their interest in Paxton's high level of musical performance obscures the meanings of feigned disability as theater.

How we think about blindness in the early twenty-first century influences our reading of the musicians. Unsurprisingly statistics reveal that more than ninety percent of the cases of visual impairment are in the developing world, and nearly half of these cases of blindness are caused by cataract. Nearly eighty percent of all cases of blindness worldwide is fifty years of age and older, which was a decade beyond the life expectancy for African American males during the era of these musicians.

The early blues have been described in relation to their period of production as a presage of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, that is applicable to aspects of Black cultural production, "stressing individual expression and group coherence at one in the same time blues was an *inward looking* music which insisted upon the meaningfulness of black lives." (italics added) The twenty-first century "Black Lives Matter" movement embodies this same appeal for equality that Levine describes in the blues. In this instance, the notion of "inward-looking" is relevant to blindness.

In a 2011 *World Report on Disability*, the World Health Organization states that they have "argued" that "inequality is a major cause of poor health, and hence of disability." [385] This seemingly obvious observation relates to the musicians and audiences of this discussion, *and* continued racial disparities, marginalization, and disability within the United States. This

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[385] "World Report on Disability," (Malta: World Health Organization, 2011).

intersection is examined in the collection of essays edited by Christopher Bell, *Blackness and Disability*, also published in 2011.[386] The essays primarily relate to mass mediated representations of Black disability. The National Black Disability Coalition founded in 1990 is an organization also working to address these correlations. In 1956, Gabriel Farrell supposed that "one-half, and perhaps three-quarters, of blindness could be prevented by appropriate medical and social services."[387] At the time, two years after the *Brown vs. Board* decision, medical treatment was still segregated in parts of the United States, and the Civil Rights legislation passed throughout the decade that followed fought to realize a post-*Plessy* integrated society.

While scientific studies are conducted in Europe and Canada related to blind musical cognition, the idea that they have the potential to further preconceptions and stereotypes about blindness and the blind community is troubling in the early twenty-first century. This is relevant because it demonstrates a continued fascination with blind musical perception, yet little understanding of its science. In the early twenty-first century, these studies seem at least unethical, objectifying, and in many ways seem dehumanizing regardless of their intention.

The recent science that confirms exceptional aural perception and musical propensities in people with visual impairment are problematized by because it may further alienate blind communities by recognizing exceptionality.[388] Ockelford's research on blindness and music over

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[386] Christopher M. Bell, *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions*, vol. 21 (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011).

[387] Gabriel Farrell, *The Story of Blindness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), v.

[388] See Linda Pring, Katherine Woolf, and Valerie Tadic, "Melody and Pitch Processing in Five Musical Savants with Congenital Blindness," *Perception* 37, no. 2 (2008); Maria Dimatati et al., "Exploring the Impact of Congenital Visual Impairment on the Development of Absolute Pitch Using a New Online Assessment Tool: A Preliminary Study," *Psychomusicology: Music, Mind, and Brain* 22, no. 2 (2012); Marianna Boso et al., "Transposition Ability in a Young Musician

the last two decades and his representation on the internet related to his work with pianist Derek Paravicini are relevant because they offer great insight into sighted perceptions of blind musicians and the stigma of musical "genius." The twenty-first century fascination with relating to music cognition and blindness seems to have changed little from centuries ago. The meta-experience of observing the audience as they observe Paravicini and Ockelford present their 2013 TED talk, "Songs in the Key of Genius" (a play on Stevie Wonder's 1977, "Songs in the Key of Life") in all of its spectacle, resonates of the "Blind" appellation.[389] The pianist has been featured on programs titled "Extraordinary People" in the United Kingdom and "Superhuman" in the United States, both of which would suggest disablism, and further marginalization based on impairment.[390]

While further scientific research on blind perceptions of music continues in ways that appear ethically questionable from the outside, other research conducted by Duckett and Pratt with the blind community reveals their belief in its potential for greater inclusion.[391] Their interviews a call within disability studies and describe the emancipatory potential for scientific research that would include the blind community.

Musicians who were itinerant performers could have found their guitars and their voices useful instruments in perceiving unfamiliar spaces. Responses of the ambient spaces to the sounds of their voice and guitars revealed dimensions, and more importantly, the responses of audiences revealed useful information in developing performance practices. The recording studios where the

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with Autism and Blindness: Testing Cognitive Models of Autism," ibid.23 (2013); Elodie Lerens et al., "Improved Beat Asynchrony Detection in Early Blind Individuals," *Perception* 43, no. 10 (2014).

[389] See https://www.ted.com/speakers/derek_paravicini. Accessed May 31, 2017.

[390] See http://www.channel5.com/show/extraordinary-people/, season 5, episode 2, September 25, 2006. https://www.history.com/shows/stan-lees-superhumans, season 1, episode 4, "Human Speed Bump," August 26, 2010.

[391] Paul Duckett and Rebekah Pratt, "The Emancipation of Visually Impaired People in Social Science Research Practice," *The British Journal of Visual Impairment* 25, no. 1 (2007).

musicians produced their records were artificial spaces, absent the feedback of typical venues and audiences. The nature of these studios as venues for recording music was foreign for performers, as the process of electronic recording was introduced in 1925. The experience of recording and artificial spaces of music production may have seemed less alien for blind performers, particularly for those who experienced minimal to no sight. This is because mendicant blind musicians regularly faced unfamiliar working environments, potentially hostile and dangerous. While sighted performance in front of the microphone introduces a level of artificiality and may interfere with producing inspired performances, visually impaired individuals may experience this differently. Investigating blind musicians' experience of performance spaces could provide insight into the experience of the musicians and be a point of departure for work that gives voice to blind performers and their musical experiences.

Other directions to expand this research relate to embodiment and the use of the guitar as an intermediary object for the musicians. Kenny states "Music is an intermediary phenomenon," a notion that is provocative for further readings of the subjective experience of the musicians and blind performers generally.[392] Exploring their recordings may provide insights into how their guitar techniques permitted them to engage with their environments, to examine the spaces in which they were playing. However, interviewing performers from the blind community that are interested in discussing this topic would be ideal for determining the psychological impact of musical instruments as intermediary objects. Potential interlocutors from the blind musical community that were previously contacted about the research presented were unfamiliar with the scope of blindness in the Race record industry and were reluctant to participate in dialog, but may

[392] Carolyn Kenny, "Time for Integration: Journey to the Heartland" in Kenneth Bruscia, *Readings on Music Therapy Theory* (Gilsum, New Hampshire: Barcelona Publishers, 2012), 648.

be willing to discuss their personal musical experiences. Recent research involving engagements with concepts of body, embodiment, and disability and the invaluable inclusion of musicians' voices from within the blind community will contribute to making such an intervention with blind musical performance.[393]

[393] Chris Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*, 3rd ed., Theory, Culture & Society (London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE, 2012); Rasmus Thybo Jensen and Dermot Moran, *The Phenomenology of Embodied Subjectivity*, 1;2013; ed., vol. 71.;71; (New York: Springer, 2013); Michael W. J. Schillmeier, *Rethinking Disability : Bodies, Senses, and Things* (London: Routledge, 2013).

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