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# Grinning with the devil: the use of humor in race record advertisements

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GRINNING WITH THE DEVIL:  
THE USE OF HUMOR IN RACE RECORD ADVERTISEMENTS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
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In

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by  
Justin Guidry  
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## **Abstract**

The advertisements that appeared in black newspapers for race records in the 1920s were employed to interest the buying public in a new mode of music: the rural blues. Although blues music is characterized by its sadness and despair, these advertisements employed humor and cartoon illustrations in the advertisements. While at first thought, this method of advertising seems inappropriate, further examination of advertisers' and the public's perceptions of blues music, as well as some of the qualities of the genre itself illuminate these elaborately drawn advertisements.

While older modes of plantation stereotyping informed the advertisers and illustrators producing the ads, many of the more racially offensive qualities associated with previous, antebellum depictions of American-Americans were eliminated because of the black public's emergence as a consumer group. The fact that humor was still used reflects not only the stereotypes that advertisers were working with. It also demonstrates popular perceptions of the blues, which itself frequently incorporated humor and sexual imagery.

## Introduction

The blues began with slavery. It began on plantations and small farms—wherever and whenever African and African-Americans met European and European-Americans. The nature, form, and content of blues music reflect the complex cultural interplay between master and slave in antebellum America. It was inevitable that the blending of these two formerly independent groups would affect the cultural products that they produced, but the peculiar nature of that relationship and the effects that it had after the Civil War produced a kind of cult of hardship that informed the blues tradition.

One of the first cultural products to evidence the extant cultural mingling and achieve wide success in antebellum America was the minstrel show. White southerners were among the first to take advantage of the interplay between the two cultures. White planters and slave traders had been exposed to the music of African Americans for as long as there had been slaves in the United States—about two hundred years before rural blues music became popular. Of course, white slave owners never paid much attention to the music that their slaves produced until they realized its value as entertainment. Eventually, white stage actors and performers realized that they could entertain white southerners by imitating and exaggerating the character and personalities of slaves as well as by singing, dancing, and playing music (all distorted for comic effect). The minstrel tradition was born as a capitalistic endeavor out of the racist sentiments of antebellum whites who never thought that they might ultimately be responsible for helping to preserve that part of African American culture that allowed slaves to deal with their problems in their own, culturally familiar ways.

As more African-Americans got involved in the minstrel tradition, a new form of music began to develop: jazz. The earliest jazz was instrumental, with separate instruments acting as voices to produce different effects when the entire band played together. As the form began to cool down from the fiery syncopations of its earliest expressions, jazz bands played slower, more mournful tunes. Eventually, the addition of a singer produced a different musical arrangement that came to be called classic blues. Black female singers were the most frequent vocalists for this type of music. Finally, in the mid 1920s, record companies realized that there was a vast, untapped market for the music of black Americans who lived in both urban and rural areas. Classic or city blues were popular with the urban crowds, but in order to sell products to the large families of rural blacks making their living on farms in the south, a new type of music was necessary. Record companies sent their agents deep into the south, looking for local blues talent that they could take back with them to the north, record, and sell back to the farmers of the south. What they found was a completely new form of blues music, popular in rural areas of the Deep South. This was the country or rural blues. Unlike classic blues, country blues musicians were usually men who performed alone, accompanied only by themselves on guitar. The result of these voyages was the discovery of some of the most important musicians in the early blues tradition: Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charley Patton, and Son House, to name just a few.

I find it helpful to think of history as the story of competing interests. People are motivated by their interests, be they financial or otherwise, to live the lives that they do and, in the process, make history. Sometimes the interests of several come together and form a symbiotic partnership. Sometimes interests clash in violent and earth-shaking

ways—sometimes in subtle ways that are no less significant. Sometimes history can even be seen as the interplay of interests that are seemingly unrelated. One of the first things that attracted me to the subject of race record advertisements was the seemingly paradoxical dialectic between the humor of the advertisements and the sorrow of the blues. How could advertisers think it would be effective to illustrate their ads as they had, with cartoons and comic fonts? What, then, do the advertisements themselves tell the observer about the period that produced them? What can we discern about both advertisers' and the general public's perceptions of blues music, African-Americans, and advertising itself?

As such, this study finds its foundations in three separate fields: the history of advertising, the history of blues music, and the history of race relations. The interests of the individuals participating in these three phenomena became woven into a full-color tapestry of unforeseen consequences that illuminates the contemporary situation and informs the development of these three areas to the present. As I was unable to find sources that dealt with race records in the precise way that I was interested in examining them, the historiographical context of this study is rooted in the three areas of history mentioned above.

For the history of blues music, Jeff Todd Titon's *Early Downhome Blues* proved to be a critical volume. Titon set forth a simple history of some of the blues' earliest iterations and origins and it was extremely helpful in providing a contextual backdrop for the development of the blue music and the country blues subgenre within it. His chapter on race record advertisements provided the creative spark that this analysis originates from, and his keen insight and interpretations of some of the ads reinforces my

conclusions that the ads, though they seem entirely inappropriate in a modern context, simply reflect the culture that produced them as well as the attitudes of that culture towards blues music, African-Americans, and advertisements.

A more traditionally historical approach to the history of advertising is Frank Presbrey's *The History and Development of Advertising*. Presbrey completed his history in the late 1920s, and so he lived through (and indeed *wrote* through) a period of fundamental changes in advertising concepts. As a historian in the Modernist tradition, he champions the growth of the manufacturing industry and sees advertising as one of the chief motivators in people's daily lives. Still, absent his actual analysis of advertising history, his attitude towards advertising and industry act as an indicator of the dominant trends of the nations. Thus, even though his is a dated source, it is still one of the most helpful.

The body of literature concerning the history of African-Americans is wide indeed. For this study, I focused more on the interactions that African-Americans have had with popular culture in general and with advertising more specifically. Critical to this field is Marilyn Kern-Foxworth's *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus*. In it, the author argues that African-American's relationship with advertising has been primarily detrimental to the black consciousness. In so far as it goes, I feel that Kern-Foxworth's analysis is correct, although it does seem to contradict my own conclusions about both the positive and negative aspects of the race record advertisements featured in this study. This disparity reflects both the extent of Kern-Foxworth's study and the special circumstances tied specifically to rural blues advertisements. Whereas Kern-Foxworth is right to point out that African-Americans have had and continue to have a negative



relationship with advertising, her study ignores some of the circumstances that make advertisements for rural blues records different.

The title of the thesis, *Grinning with the Devil*, is a reference to duality of the humor of the advertisements and the perceived diabolical nature of blues music. Here was a musical form that has very serious overtones of hardship, struggle, loss, and damnation, and yet the visual depictions of the songs provided in race record advertisements, on the surface, appear to mock both the somber nature of the blues and the individual African-Americans that produced them.

The ads examined here are mostly taken from the *Chicago Defender*. I selected what seemed to me to be a good cross-section of all the issues relevant to my discussion: I have included a serious ad, a sexy ad, a funny ad (and so on) in an effort to show all of the techniques that advertisers used. In making my selections, I was also providing analysis for a fair proportion of advertisements in the context of all the advertisements I saw in the *Defender*.

For these types of advertisements, I believe a more thorough study is in order, and that is what I have tried to present here. The contemporary developmental stage of advertising, the problems of advertising new products to an untested, African-American consumer groups, and perceptions of blues music and musicians all affected the way advertisements for these records looked. When seen now, almost a century after their creation, these ads seem like insanely inappropriate capsules of racism and misunderstanding, but a closer look reveals that they were entirely appropriate considering the circumstances of their use.

## 1: The Development of Modern Advertising

In the fifty years or so prior to the publication of the race record advertisements for rural blues records by artists like Blind Lemon Jefferson, America in general, and advertising along with it, underwent a tremendous amount of change. In the period before the Civil War, American society was predominantly agricultural and rural. Few Americans lived in cities, most of them making their living, in one way or another, off the land. They produced what they could, sold what they did not need, and bought at small, local markets what they could not produce at home.

Advertising in antebellum America was, by modern standards, a dubious activity. Restrictions in print media like newspapers and journals provided for only small amounts of advertising space within the publication as well as limits on the size and content of the ads. The cost of fabricating and printing from a steel or copper engraving was too expensive and time-consuming for it to be cost-effective, so ads tended to be text-only affairs, sometimes adorned by a simple woodcut, announcing whatever a local vendor might have to offer.<sup>1</sup>

Because efficient methods of mass factory production had not yet evolved in the first half of the nineteenth century, there was relatively little for sale compared with the glut of products available to the consumer in the twentieth century. The small amount of time, money, and space devoted to advertising in newspapers and magazines of the antebellum period reflects the relative dearth of products on the market. In addition, advertisements tended to focus on local goods, reflecting not just the problems of

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<sup>1</sup> Pamela W. Laird, *Advertising Progress: American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 16.

advertising to a national market, but also the logistical problems of producing for and shipping to such a market in an early industrial society.

Advertisements of this period were essentially simple announcements of marketplace offerings. They frequently began with statements of innocent, highly respectful pretensions, asking pardon for the evidently crass intrusion, and proceeded to describe their offer. The “deferential, almost servile, prose styles” of these ads were rooted in “the social customs of service and self-conscious pretensions of gentility shared by politicians and merchants alike that preceded the Jacksonian era’s revolution in rhetorical styles.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, advertisers did not have to distinguish themselves from their competitors because the products and services being offered were of a “traditional, generic” nature: “both purveyors and consumers in the United States . . . presumed that people already knew what they wanted and that they bought what they could.”<sup>3</sup>

Humor was already a common ingredient in advertising of the antebellum period, personified by the cryer or peddler. Merchants on the streets with items for immediate sale in the early nineteenth century provided a means with which the public, wandering through an area’s commercial districts, might first become acquainted with a product or service. The peddler’s objective was the same as it had been for centuries: attract attention to a product for which people already had a need. Frequently, this was done through the use of humor, such as jokes and anecdotes. Indeed, the reputation of the peddler as a trickster in the nineteenth century has evolved into an identification with the seducer figure, for, as T.J. Jackson Lears notes, the peddler’s efforts were perceived as being mainly directed at women. While this demonstrates the diminished status women

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

experienced during the nineteenth century with regard to being the weaker (and thus more impressionable) sex, these perceptions of the peddler also illuminate early fears of advertising and its capabilities, as well as the consumer sensibilities of the general public. People were afraid that the guileless peddler would effectively seduce their unsuspecting women into buying items that were of poor quality, that failed to perform as indicated, and that were simply unnecessary.<sup>4</sup>

But apart from the force applied by the peddler figure in nineteenth century American popular culture, advertisements from this period were still, by and large, simple announcements of products for sale. The development of a complex, sustainable consumer culture around advertising would not begin until the effects of the Industrial Revolution and the Civil War could be felt. But even in this environment of reduced consumerism, depictions of African-Americans found their ways into antebellum advertisements.

The role of African-Americans in antebellum advertising was purely limited to their roles as slaves. Advertisements reflected both the simple nature of commerce in antebellum society and the perceptions that white slave owners had of their slaves. In the interests of piquing interest from potential buyers, advertisers participating in the slave trade often made note of the many qualities that reflected positively on African-Americans in their role as slaves. Slaves were frequently described as hard-working, capable, and healthy rather than the more negative qualities that contributed to African-American stereotypes that still exist today: laziness, indolence, ineptitude. Still, both the relationship between slave and advertiser and the depictions of African-Americans in the

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<sup>4</sup> T. J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising In America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 69-70; Laird, *Advertising Progress*, 13-14.

advertisements were negative. Visual depictions of slaves in bondage reinforce the contemporary status of nearly all African-Americans living in the United States while the advertisements themselves helped to provide for the financial stability of slavery.<sup>5</sup>

The roots of the modern advertising industry, as it is recognized today, extend back to the period after the Civil War and the nation's great industrial and economic boom. American businessmen after this period were faced with problems of selling consumers far more products than they had before. Greater production capability did not mean that manufacturers could immediately sell all of their products. People were used to buying generic products from local tradesmen, not brand-specific products from national distributors. Fundamental changes in advertising techniques took place in response to business owners' need to sell products in a way that was unfamiliar. In light of their increased product supply, made possible through technological advancements in the means of production, business-owners had to stimulate demand if they were going to stay ahead of their profit margins and not lose money.

The Civil War and industrialization brought a sense of progress to most Americans. The nation was reunited again, and advancements in technology and industry spawned the age of the factory. Even before the Civil War, though, American production capabilities experienced an upsurge that Frank Presbrey, writing in *The History and Development of Advertising* (1929), attributes to the rise in newspaper circulation in the 1850s. Presbrey notes that, by the 1850s, "manufactures had, for the first time, passed farm products in total value."<sup>6</sup> This shift was partially a result of new mechanical

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<sup>5</sup> Marilyn Kern-Foxworth, *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus: Blacks in Advertising, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 3-4, 11-16.

<sup>6</sup> Frank Presbrey, *The History and Development of Advertising* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1929), 227.

inventions and improvements on pre-existing production methods. Presbrey tracks the rise of patents issued in the United States, and reports that their sharp rise in the mid nineteenth century (from ten patents issued between 1790 and 1800 to 33,000 issued between 1850 and 1860) is congruous with the expansion of newspapers throughout the country. The educational effects of reading a newspaper and being informed contributed to the rise in patents during this period, according to Presbrey.

The increasing importance of newspapers also stimulated American business by promoting the communication and transportation technologies that would ultimately make industrialization possible. Simply adding the phrase “By Telegraph” to the top of a newspaper story to indicate that the news was coming over the wire sparked interest in both newspapers and the technology of the telegraph on the part of the general readership. Newspapers also fed the spirit of progress in the American consciousness by championing news stories pertaining to this progress. In an article appearing in the New York Tribune in 1851, Charles Dana described the spirit of the American journalist as superior to his counterparts in Europe and similar to the average “man in the street”;

The American regards nothing with indifference, and even where he does not take sides as a partisan, he carries with him a degree of genuine sympathy in the event and its actors which renders him an excellent observer and reporter. He is no dull analyzer, and sees the thing before he attempts to speculate on its philosophy and consequences.<sup>7</sup>

American newspapers chronicled progress and innovation daily, and Americans responded to it by participating in the emerging producerist/consumerist economy.

Advertising grew to take on increasingly significant importance as the availability of goods skyrocketed. But if all older advertisements had to do was let consumers know what products and services were generally available, newer ads were charged with

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<sup>7</sup> Charles A. Dana, quoted in Presbrey, *The History and Development of Advertising*, 227-228.

creating need in the minds of consumers. Since people obviously did not need anything more than what they could already get, advertisers had to come up with new methods and theories to attract buyers and keep profits up.

Whereas the generic nature of most products before the Industrial Revolution precluded the use of brand names, brands became more popular with the growth and development of the modern advertising industry. Most modern ads focus on introducing a particular brand name into a field where many other brands exist. Brand loyalty is important in a modern advertising milieu because of the myriad manufacturers producing, for the first time, mass quantities of products that were not really that different from one another. Modern advertisers are thus not as interested in business as they are *repeat* business. An ad can inform a consumer of a certain brand of product, but it is that consumer's desire to continue to purchase that product that produces a worthy payoff. In this way, companies are forced to keep their products of a higher quality. If a consumer purchases a product for the first time and finds it to be of inferior quality, he will exercise the power he has as a consumer and stop buying that product. In fact, he is likely to tell others of the inferiority of the product. There are ways around making high quality products, of course, mostly because advertisers know that consumers can relate advertising (particularly especially flashy advertising) to a quality product and advertisers can thus use advertising to project an image of quality where there is none, proving the aphorism that good advertising can kill a bad product: if the product fails to live up to the expectations it generates through advertising, positive feelings towards the product quickly turn to negative ones and the product fails to sell.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion: It's Dubious Impact on American Society* (USA: Basic Books, 1984), 5-10.

This is evidenced in race records, just as in other advertisements, by constant assurances that the particular record company producing the record created only the highest quality sound recordings. Paramount claimed at the bottom of each of their race record advertisements that theirs was the “popular race record.” The association of quality with a particular brand name was a key aspect in the construction of the modern American advertisement.



## **2: Problems of Advertising Blues Music**

One of the first products that manufacturers had to market to a growing core of consumers were recordings, primarily of music. While advertisements for music recordings followed trends set by previous ads and illustrations for sheet music, advertisers found great difficulty in advertising musical forms that were unfamiliar or, as was the case with rural blues music, completely new. The blues had developed out of a multitude of African-American traditions, from field hollers to spirituals, but it wasn't until the popularity of jazz that anyone outside the black community noticed the blues. When record producers realized that there was an untapped market for music by black musicians, record companies invested considerable resources in finding and recording these artists.

All types of "race records," including sermons, classic blues (defined by black, female vocalists fronting traditional jazz bands), and country blues (typically characterized by black males, singing solo and accompanying themselves on acoustic guitar), now had to be marketed to a new demographic with which record companies were completely unfamiliar. These advertisements, directed at the rural black community, employed a level of humor that, at first, seems entirely inappropriate considering the tradition of hardship that the blues expressed. However, it becomes clear how advertisers could choose humor as a way of presenting the rural blues to large audiences when larger issues surrounding the blues are examined.

Race record advertisements indicate a white business culture that, for years, had been advertising the culture and image of African-Americans to white audiences (in the

form of products and images like the Gold Dust Twins and Aunt Jemima) and were now faced with marketing it to a completely different demographic. These advertisements represent seemingly equal instances of change and continuity when juxtaposed with older ads aimed at white audiences. Advertisers struggled with racism, the changes that occurred throughout the period, and the knowledge that the styles of previous advertisements would not work with black audiences like they did with white ones.<sup>9</sup>

Aspects of continuity are evident in minstrel sheet music covers and early advertisements for blues records in that they plainly reinforce antebellum stereotypes. As advertisers continued to market products to the black public, elements of change started appearing in the ads; they used cartoons and caricatures that were inappropriate considering the downtrodden tradition that the blues represented, but there were elements of improvement in that they were more realistic and less grotesque than their forebears. Some aspects of the blues ads were completely changed, such as the inclusion of the artist in the ad, and some ads represented a complete turnaround from the overtly racist ads of the decades before. Still others disguised continuity as change and took advantage of the rural settings that went with rural blues records to place blacks in familiar, antebellum milieus.

In *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion*, Michael Schudson writes that the fact that “advertising is a form of social control can scarcely be denied, but that it was a calculated, class-wide effort at social control is very doubtful.”<sup>10</sup> Advertisements for country blues and other race records were not “class wide efforts at social control,” but rather early exercises in advertising luxury goods to African-American consumers,

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<sup>9</sup> Kern-Foxworth, *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus*, 46.

<sup>10</sup> Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion*, 176.

performed by white record companies. Thus, though they may seem flawed, inappropriately humorous, and, sometimes overtly, sometimes casually, racist to a modern observer, by and large, the ads represent a positive step in depictions of African-Americans in advertising and demonstrate a growing realization on the part of advertisers that employing ads with overtly racist imagery simply would not effectively sell goods to the black consumer market.

By the end of the Civil War, there was considerable market for the music of African Americans. Singers in the minstrel tradition, black and white alike, smeared their faces with a balm made of burned cork and enjoyed great popularity on the vaudeville circuit. “Darky” music was set down on paper and sold to anyone who chose to buy it. Depictions on the covers of these collections of sheet music were indicative of white attitudes to African-Americans and their music. They featured grotesquely misshapen figures with large noses and lips, mimicking the urbane white society that mocked them.

Typical of the minstrel sheet music depictions of African Americans is the cover illustration for “De Coon dat Had de Razor,” printed in 1885. The central figure, and the song’s namesake, is walking down the sidewalk with a menacing expression on his face: his lips, which extend across the whole of his lower face, are distorted into an unfriendly frown while his flashing pupils glare angrily out of the bottom of his large, bulging, white eyes. He is dressed in a mockery of urban fashion with a large, polka-dotted bow tie, stripped pants several inches too short, a white top hat, and an enormous razor blade. His menacing facial expression legitimates the font of the song title, which is angled and pointed like the curve of the subject’s open razor blade. In the background, citizens and police officers, both black and white, as well as a few scattered chickens, run in terror.

This is a typical example of illustrators expressing the threats many white Americans felt by the newly-emancipated African-Americans who had moved to the cities. The practice of whites ridiculing blacks was older than the postbellum era, however, and was popularized in antebellum minstrel characters like Jim Crow who tried and failed to emulate white society.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the history of advertising, the role of the “other” has always been a stereotypical one. Because advertisers had not previously been concerned with the buying power of the black community (or indeed, any other minority community), ads were written by whites with whites in mind. Thus they used stereotypes that conformed to prevailing white opinions. For blacks, this meant subservient roles or any plantation stereotype such as the “mammy,” “pickaninny,” or “sambo.” However, this began to change when African-Americans became a more salient minority group and they gradually entered into the consumer economy that developed in the late nineteenth century. Black activists as early as the ante-bellum period had been working to raise awareness of problems specific to black society. As African-American consumers began to realize the power that they had as consumers, advertisers changed their ads and began to omit earlier, offensive stereotypical images. Overly racist ads began to diminish because advertisers knew that employing ads with racist imagery simply would not effectively sell goods to the black consumer market.

The prosperity of the twenties brought new problems to the advertising industry. Previously, ads had relied on the fact that consumers needed certain products such as food and some basic cleaning products. With greater income for the consumer came the

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<sup>11</sup> Cover Illustration for “De Coon dat Had de Razor,” appearing in Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 270.

increased popularity of luxury goods. Advertisers were now faced with the problem of creating a perceived desire for a product that consumers could simply refuse to buy. And because certain groups wanted luxury goods different from those of other groups, advertisers had to use demographic research to more fully understand their target market. For ads targeted towards African-Americans, this meant even more efforts to reduce offensive material. Previously, an alarming amount of racial insensitivity (likely based on misunderstandings rather than malicious intent) was acceptable because the consumer had a need for a product, even if it was only a perceived need. This is especially true of the myriad of beauty products marketed specifically to African-American women. These products included such items as skin bleachers and hair straighteners. Though some African-Americans may have been offended by the implication that the black community should try to emulate white society, the ads reflected a perceived desire on the part of many African-Americans to take on a more Caucasian appearance.

Among the first of these luxury products that ad agencies had to market to African-Americans were records. The popularity of race records among black consumers had spiked with the introduction of rural blues singers and the creation of the country blues genre. When record companies realized the enormous potential profit in selling these records specifically to African-Americans, they were quick not only to scour the Mississippi Delta region for unsigned singers, but also to begin promoting the records through advertisements in black newspapers. The problem was that at the time race records became popular, no agency had attempted to advertise luxury goods catering specifically to African-Americans. Agencies had to produce quick solutions. Some ads used humor while others emphasized the blues' somber nature; some relied heavily on

visual imagery while others relied strictly on text; some employed cartoonish caricature where others provided more realistic illustrations. Regardless of whatever technique was used, all of the ads used fewer and less-offensive stereotypes than previous ads.

One black-owned record company, Black Swan Records, owned by Harry Pace, demonstrated the situation that both black business owners and black consumers found themselves in. Harry H. Pace, a former protégé of W.E.B. Du Bois, started the Black Swan label as a “powerful means to respond to the hostile conditions African Americans faced, both in the entertainment business and in society at large.”<sup>12</sup> Pace was aiming at racial uplift and was trying to use his record company to show the rest of the entertainment industry that blacks didn’t just listen to the undignified blues records that other record labels were recording. He wanted to show that black audiences were just as interested as white audiences in more formal musical styles like opera. The company achieved its success, however, in large part because of the blues recordings of Ethel Waters, “with her torchy, ‘pop’ style.”<sup>13</sup>

The advertisements that Black Swan ran in black newspapers illustrates the lengths that they were willing to go to in order to promote racial uplift over revenue. One ad, appearing in January of 1923 in the *Crisis*, the monthly journal for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, urged buyers to purchase classical music by black artists in order to demonstrate to shop owners that there was a market for that kind of music. The ad claimed that dealers refused to stock classical music produced by black labels because they thought the records would not sell, considering the African-

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<sup>12</sup> David Suisman, “Co-Workers in the kingdom of culture: Black Swan Records and the Political Economy of African American Music,” *Journal of American History* 90 (March 2004): 1295.

<sup>13</sup> LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1963), 129.

American's desire for only jazz and blues records. Black Swan did not seek to simply provide the black community with another option when choosing whom they should buy their music from; Black Swan wanted to be seen as a progressive force within the entertainment industry that, if supported by the black community, would be able to "help shape popular opinion to produce tangible social, political, and economic benefits for African Americans."<sup>14</sup>

In spite of his lofty goals, Pace's company folded precisely because he refused to cater to an audience that was, as it turned out, more interested in blues and jazz records than classical music or opera as performed by black artists. The issue at hand was dignity, and blues did not seem to have much of it. Eventually, Paramount bought Black Swan records. Because Paramount was a white-owned company and was not concerned with achieving racial uplift through record sales, it had no qualms about recording less-dignified blues musicians, as long as that was what sold. Ultimately, the fate of Black Swan Records demonstrates how blues were perceived by African Americans seeking uplift through music. The blues were not dignified enough to promote racial identity, nor were they taken seriously enough to warrant consideration from those trying to improve the public's perception of black culture. As such, it becomes easy to understand how record companies could have thought to use the cartoon approach to advertising rural blues records: they were bizarre, often funny, and generally not taken too seriously.

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<sup>14</sup> Suisman, "Co-Workers," 1295, 1315; Advertisement for Black Swan Records, *Crisis*, January 1923.

Illustrating them as cartoons and promoting them as novelty was certainly thought to be the only way these records could appeal to anyone.<sup>15</sup>

Shortly after the initial popularity of jazz, bands started backing up singers who sang in the blues style. These singers were almost exclusively black women who sang about life's hardships. As their music became increasingly popular, record companies realized that there was an untapped market for black music: black audiences. Black newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* began running advertisements for blues records by Ida Cox, Bessie Smith, and Ma Rainey. Advertisements for these types of records were scarcely different from earlier depictions of African Americans in minstrel songbooks, although the latter were advertised to white audiences and the former were meant for black audiences.

One advertisement, appearing in the *Chicago Defender* on 19 August 1922, depicted the typical "Mammy" stereotype figure: short in stature, wide in girth, and with large, white lips. The song being advertised, the "Lonesome Mamma Blues," is spelled with two "m"s, reinforcing the "Mammy" stereotype. Though the subject matter of the song is sad (the Mammy figure is weeping in a sloppy, cartoon style), the ad copy reveals the old trend of publicizing black music as petty amusement or novelty. It includes phrases like, "You'll almost get up and shout," "Oh Boy!" and "toe-tickler," hardly accurate when describing a song with as much emotion as the title hinted at.<sup>16</sup>

As blues music grew in popularity among black consumers, record companies realized that there was another type of blues that had been sung in rural areas for years.

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<sup>15</sup> Robert M.W. Dixon and John Godrich, *Recording the Blues*, book 3, *Yonder Come the Blues: The Evolution of a Genre* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 253-55; Jones, *Blues People*, 128-29; Suisman, "Co-Workers," 1323.

<sup>16</sup> Advertisement for "Lonesome Mamma Blues," *Chicago Defender*, 19 August 1922.



Instead of a blues singer fronting a jazz band, rural blues were performed by solo artists, usually black men like Son House and Blind Lemon Jefferson, singing alone and accompanying themselves on guitar. These songs had a distinctly different sound than the urban or city blues that became popular a few years earlier. All of the jazz elements were gone. What were left were the folk sounds of the acoustic guitar and the expressive singing of the artist. The themes for rural blues songs were similar to urban blues, but the focus was on the raw, emotive power that the rural blues singers could achieve. If music critics criticized urban blues singers for being poor musical talents, rural blues singers were much worse. Their rough voices were anything but melodic, and sometimes listeners could not even make out what the singer was saying. The music, in almost every aspect, was very different from the urban blues. To illustrate this difference, advertisers changed their strategies. Traditional stereotyped caricatures had to be altered when advertising rural blues. New cartoons with a different style were included in the advertisements for rural blues records. These ads were elaborately illustrated depictions of the action of the song, yet they frequently failed to capture the mood or meaning of the song.

Cartoon-like depictions of the action of the song were often included. In many ways, these depictions replaced the previous stereotyped figures of earlier ads. While the figures, for the most part, weren't plagued by the disfigurements that earlier renditions of African Americans were, they were exaggerated to a degree that was still wholly inappropriate in light of the nature of the songs.

Divorcing the artist and the singer was a common practice, especially in songs where the two obviously couldn't be the same person (Blind Lemon Jefferson, for

example, as a convict on death row). Still, the two figures were never far removed from one another. The characters in ads for Jefferson's songs always appeared as a portly African American wearing glasses with a vague resemblance to Jefferson himself.

There were some positive steps that advertisers took to rid themselves of some of the more overtly racist aspects of their ads. One method that advertisers used was to include a photograph or sketch from a photograph in the ad. This was especially true of Blind Lemon Jefferson's advertisements, most of which featured a picture of the singer somewhere on the ad. It was certainly a break away from the stock cartoon characters that had previously adorned the ads. Photographs and realistic sketches had been used in advertisements for "race records" before, of course, but rural blues artists were posed in stately, respectable photos, often depicted with their guitars and a grim expression. Previous renderings of the artists showed them grinning or laughing and frequently bearing a striking resemblance to each other. The reason for the change in style may reflect the nature of the music. Rural blues was much more of a solo production than classic blues or jazz before it. Characterized as it was by a single musician, singing and playing guitar for himself, the rural blues found treatment appropriate to this increased level of individuality in advertisements for those records. Indeed, the very act of listening to a recording, still a relatively new invention in the early to mid 1920s, was an intensely personal experience that emphasized the individuality of both listener and musician, whereas before the advent of recorded media, people played their own music at home by themselves or saw live performances where several other audience members would also be trying to enjoy the show. Like the photographs, the nature of the recorded

media utilized by the rural blues did much to emphasize the individuality and identity of the performer.

The rising popularity of rural blues records also afforded the record industry an opportunity to place the African American in safe, antebellum situations with rural settings, such as on a farm, that were not as threatening to white superiority as the “stylish city black man” was. Thinly veiled as humanistic depictions of rural blues artists, the images frequently contain subtle hints to remind the consumer of what advertisers and the record companies thought was the proper place for African Americans. In this way, they were able to disguise continuity in their advertisements of black music under the pretext of change.

Earlier novelty record advertisements were the originators of removing the black figure from the urban setting and placing him in the safer rustic setting. These novelty records were usually recorded sermons or church proceedings that emphasized traditional black values and warned of the dangers of city life. Obviously, this was a message that appealed to many whites. The advertisements stressed the image of the rural black in traditional settings. Appearing in the 1 October 1927 edition of the *Chicago Defender*, an advertisement for a recording of the Reverend A.W. Nixon’s sermon, “Black Diamond Express to Hell” features neither caricatures of black artists nor cartoons meant to illustrate a foolish situation. Instead, the advertisers have included a small photograph of the Reverend in the lower left corner. Above him and taking up most of the ad space is a small map of the metaphorical route of the Black Diamond Express, including stops at “Drunkardsville,” “Conjuration Station,” “Dance Hall Depot,” and “Gambler’s Tower.” These are problems that black preachers often focused on in their sermons, a fact

emphasized by the title and color association of the train itself. Other advertisements for similar records are just as innocuous, but contain an inner message. An advertisement for a recording entitled “Old Time Baptism” performed by the Reverend R.M. Massey featured a group of African Americans standing waist-deep in a river, singing their rite. These ads, though they lack caricature and cartooning depict rural blacks in situations that did not threaten white society. They were not the smart, urban songsters of the city blues. They were relics of the antebellum period and thus no threat to whites at all.<sup>17</sup>

The cover of a Victor Records catalogue from 1930 is an example of the continuity of the message that reinforced the antebellum plantation stereotype behind a change in style towards a more humanistic presentation of blacks. It depicts a young black man, sincerely drawn, playing a guitar and singing soulfully with his head cocked back and his eyes closed—a very humanistic portrayal. Closer examination of the image bears out an antebellum reality: the singer is reclining against what appears to be a bale of cotton while dock workers busily work at either loading or unloading a steam boat in the background. Suddenly, the humanistic depiction of the black rural blues singer has become an image of the stereotypical Jim Crow figure, avoiding work and singing a song.

The changes taking place throughout American society, in industry, in advertising, and in music all aid in an understanding of the levels of continuity and change exhibited in race record advertisements when compared to other advertisements featuring African Americans. Another set of explanations for the appearance of these ads are the impressions, often based on stereotypes, which advertisers had of African-Americans and blues music in general.

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<sup>17</sup> Advertisement for “Black Diamond Express to Hell,” *Chicago Defender* 1 October 1927.

### 3: Perceptions of the Blues

“The delta is this riddle of contradictions,” says Pete Daniel, one of the curators of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History. “You never can quite figure out why things happen the way they do.”<sup>18</sup> This sentiment is an excellent metaphor for the entire blues tradition. The blues’ greatest artists found themselves wrapped up in the inescapable confusion of the delta region. The blues were highly spiritual, yet associated with sin; they were deeply personal, yet they spoke to everyone who heard their eerie moans and soulful licks; they were rooted in a folk tradition, yet they saw enormous commercial success. The believed racial tendency of African Americans to accept the inevitable with a laugh, the fact that the blues were not considered a legitimate musical form and thus were not taken seriously, and the sinful, negative qualities of life associated with singing, listening to, and dancing to blues music all formed an opinion in the minds of record advertisers that shaped their perception of the blues. For them, this was a form of music that, because of its background and the backgrounds of those playing it, could not be presented in a serious light. While advertisers may not have been conscious of these facts when they chose to use humor in rural blues advertisements, they were influenced nonetheless by the music’s nature and reputation when they made the decision to employ humor in their advertisements.

The blues expressed an extremely difficult way of life—the life of rural African-Americans in the first years of the twentieth century. African-Americans were, of course, still struggling with racial prejudices that had plagued them since their first importation to

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<sup>18</sup> *American Roots Music: A Documentary*, dir. Jim Brown, Ginger Group Productions, Inc., 2001, digital video disc.

the American continent, but with their emancipation, they faced a new set of problems rooted in their freedom. Upward mobility was still rare among rural African-Americans after the Civil War, and many found themselves forced into sharecropping or tenant farming relationships with white landowners. It is from these difficulties that the evolution of African music and rhythms took place, coalescing, ultimately, into a form of music that blended African and American influences, creating a music with which both races would come to identify.

The subjects and themes of blues music represented the quotidian life of the black farmer. Harry Oster, in collecting blues lyrics, defined many groupings that most blues lyrics fall into. Their descriptions tell us much, not only about the content of blues songs, but about the daily lives of those who sang them: “Boll Weevil and Bale Weevil—There’s Too Many If’s About Farmin’” concerns the difficulties of rural, African-American, cotton formers, their relationship with their “feudally paternalistic bosses and the generally futile process of trying to make a living raising crops.” “Bad Luck an’ Trouble—Will a Matchbox Hold My Clothes” addresses some of life’s more universal trials: death, poverty, wanderlust. “She Done Caught that Mean Old Train an’ Gone” focuses on the sorrow brought on by a lost lover. Frequently, in the blues tradition, the train is the primary mode of escape. “Troubled Love” includes many of the responses to love and sex. Sentiments expressed in these songs can range from tender and emotional to murderous and enraged.<sup>19</sup>

Noted blues singer Booker White finds that that the blues go back beyond sharecropping and tenant farming to the antebellum period: “The blues came from behind a mule. Well now, you can have the blues sitting at the table eating. But the foundation

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<sup>19</sup> Harry Oster, *Living Country Blues* (Detroit: Folklore Associates, 1969), 113-14.

of the blues is walking behind a mule way back in slavery time.”<sup>20</sup> This expression, though, is not to be taken as literal. The blues, as a musical form, were not as old as White said they were, but in terms of a mythic truth about the music’s origins, the racial experience of slavery certainly shaped the blues in both form and content.<sup>21</sup>

There may be some good reasons why advertisers decided to use humor in their advertisements of rural blues songs. Black artists, whites had observed, often used humor themselves when describing their downtrodden situation, and many record companies may have thought that blacks appreciated a joke at their expense. “After all, didn’t blacks don blackface and play their minstrel shows to black audiences as well as white?”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, to many observers of early twentieth century black culture and blues music, humor seemed to be a thing that African-Americans used to allay their misery. Writing in 1928, Newman White observed that “[the blues] express an individual reaction, usually one of depression, but often . . . one of humorous acceptance of the inevitable.”<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, there is much scholarship that suggests enormous differences in attitudes towards hardship reflected in the blues. Because of the blues’ strong ties to religious spirituals, there is an element of continuity that is expressed in the use of humor. Singing spirituals was a cultural form of personal uplift. Through the act of singing, the singer could experience a cathartic release from the perils of reality. For the antebellum African-American, this almost certainly meant slavery. For the postbellum African-American, the prospects were not frequently much better, especially in the South. In the

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Giles Oakley, *The Devil’s Music: A History of the Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976), 10.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Titon, *Early Downhome Blues*, 219.

<sup>23</sup> Newman White, *American Negro Folk Songs* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928), 387.

new paradigm, the blues musician, beset by the hardships of quotidian life, is able to laugh about his situation because of the blues' cathartic effects. Whether his woman has left him, he has lost his job, or any number of other things has happened to him, the blues musician is able to begin again and in so doing, he "audaciously challenges fate to mete out further blows . . . Such a blues may have all of the jubilation of a shouting, foot-stomping spiritual."<sup>24</sup>

This was the way of doing things as expressed by the blues. Writing in the *Journal of Negro History*, Douglas Daniels notes the protest elements in most music made by African Americans, adding, however, that there are few, if any, songs that encourage violence as a way of handling their problems.<sup>25</sup> Cedric Robinson and Edmund Morgan take this argument all the way back to the plantation era, Robinson noting that slaves almost never used violence and Morgan saying that, when they did, it was because of acculturation, and that it was the elements of white culture that slaves had adopted that drove them to open rebellion. Robinson takes the argument further, stating that most of the violence from this period was reflected inward and expressed as "the renunciation of actual being for historical being; the preservation of the ontological totality granted by a metaphysical system which had never allowed for property in either the physical, philosophical, temporal, legal, social or psychic senses."<sup>26</sup>

Certainly not all blues were funny, and as such, there are more possible reasons for the use of humor in blues advertisements. The respectability of blues music was

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<sup>24</sup> Eileen Southern, *Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1971), 333, 337.

<sup>25</sup> Douglas Henry Daniels, "The Significance of Blues for American History," *Journal of Negro History* 70 (Winter 1985): 18.

<sup>26</sup> Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Press, 1983), 242-43; Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975), 309.



certainly in question, especially among blue-blooded white society types, whose opinions of jazz music were low enough. The rural blues were far beyond the “bad musicianship” of any jazz player because the form of the music was much looser. There were elements of blues music that were solid, of course, as in any musical form. Blues music, as is the case with most black folk music, is syncopated and generally takes on a poetic form. The three-line stanza is most common, with the form A-A-B, the first line presenting a situation, the second line repeating or modifying it slightly, and the final line providing a conclusion:

Gonna' git me religion. Hey, gonna join de Baptist church.  
Gonna' git me religion, now! Gonna join the Baptist church.  
Gonna be a Baptist preacher, and I sure won't have to work.<sup>27</sup>

Each phrase typically occupies four measures, with the entire stanza lasting twelve measures. There are variations of course, stretching the stanza to sixteen measures or shortening it to eight, but the twelve measure stanza is the most common. Interestingly, with blues music, the phrase of melody is usually compacted to be finished by the end of the second measure in the four measure phrase. “This allows for a ‘break’ at the end of each line, for improvisation on the accompanying instrument (guitar, piano, or instrumental ensemble), during which the singer interjects spoken asides such as ‘Oh, Lordy,’ ‘Yes, man,’ ‘Oh, play it,’ etc.”<sup>28</sup> It is these interjections that give the blues some of its more curious characteristics.

Another aspect of blues singing, and one that made it seem less than perfect to traditional musicians and music-lovers, was the practice of bending notes. This could be done on either the instruments or the vocals, giving the melody a mournful sound. The

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<sup>27</sup> Eddie House, “Preachin’ Blues,” *Martin Scorsese Presents the Blues: Disc One*, Universal Music Enterprises, 2003, compact disc.

<sup>28</sup> Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 334.

scale that blues incorporates includes several blue notes that are between the natural pitch of the notes in the major scale, and singers could “scoop,” “swoop,” or “slur” their way around these notes. In addition to bending notes and adding interjections, blues singers typically had a very relaxed singing style, making it difficult or often impossible to tell what is being said. Singers also frequently used certain vocal devices like falsetto, growling, moaning, and shouting to achieve the mood of their songs.<sup>29</sup>

All of these techniques led many observers of the blues tradition to refer to blues as a “weird” style of music. One man credited as the “Father of the Blues” was W.C. Handy. While waiting for a train in Tutwiler, Mississippi, Handy saw a ragged musician playing a blues tune by pressing the blade of a knife on the strings, apparently producing a sliding effect. Handy later described it as the weirdest music he has ever heard.<sup>30</sup>

Advertisers somehow caught on to the idea of blues being a particularly weird music style, which it was, when compared to the standard musical forms of the day. In the *Paramount Book of Blues*, a short description of the life and times of Blind Lemon Jefferson included the word “weird” twice:

Can anyone imagine a fate more horrible than to find that one is blind? To realize that the beautiful things one hears about—one will never see? Such was the heart-rending fate of Lemon Jefferson, who was born blind and realized, as a small child, that life had withheld one glorious joy from him—sight. Then—environment began to play its important part in his destiny. He could hear—and he heard the sad hearted, weary people of his homeland, Dallas—singing weird, sad melodies at their work and play, and unconsciously, he began to imitate them—lamenting his fate in song. He learned to play guitar, and for years he entertained his friends freely—moaning his weird songs as a means of forgetting his affliction. Some friends who saw great possibilities in him, suggested that he commercialize his talent—and as a result of following their advice—he is now heard exclusively on Paramount.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Oakley, *Devil's Music*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Tilton, *Early Downhome Blues*, 110.

This entry tells us that not only were the blues heard on the popular race records a mere commercialization of a deeply-rooted folk tradition, but that they were seen by those not familiar with the blues tradition to be exceedingly strange, even “weird.”

There were other reasons beyond the musical ones that tarnished the reputation of the blues. The lives of a few blues musicians and the themes of their songs led some to believe that the blues was the devil’s music. Indeed, so condemned was any music that wasn’t rooted in classical tradition that even the guitar was seen as a symbol of sin. W.C. Handy, the “Father of the Blues” had been classically trained as a musician, having studied under the direction of Y.A. Wallace, one of the first graduates of Fisk University. Still, he managed to learn less-conventional forms of music where he could, although his parents objected to anything but hymns played on an organ. So adamant were Handy’s parents that when Handy brought home a guitar that he purchased with his own money after much hard work, they forced him to exchange it for a Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary, something his parents considered more useful.<sup>32</sup>

One man that walked the line between the blues’ path of sin and a path of religious righteousness was Son House, one of the most popular of the original delta bluesmen. Son House was not only an accomplished blues musician; he was a minister as well. He incorporated many standard spirituals into his blues repertoire. Some feel that House felt obligated to include these spirituals when he performed to pay for the “misbehavior that blues seemed to be.”<sup>33</sup>

One of the more notoriously devilish of the rural bluesmen was Blind Lemon Jefferson. Jefferson was born on a farm and spent most of his life in Dallas. He was

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<sup>32</sup> Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 338.

<sup>33</sup> *American Roots Music*.

blind from birth. As soon as he was able, he began to play the guitar and did so well enough to be reasonably famous by the time he was twenty three, in 1920. Jefferson was “the archetype of all bluesmen, living the rough life that is grimly portrayed in his songs.”<sup>34</sup> He was, by all accounts, a heavy drinker and gambler and womanizer, although his condition never seemed to hold him back from excess. When gambling, Lemon depended on others to ensure that he was not being cheated by a dishonest dealer. He could tell if anyone had taken any drinks from his whiskey bottle simply by shaking it around a bit. If any was missing, Jefferson would take his anger out on his wife.<sup>35</sup>

Not much is known of Jefferson’s marriage, which was apparently to a woman named Roberta sometime around 1922-23. He kept traveling, though, in spite of his young wife and child (born shortly after their marriage). By the time Jefferson was working with Mayo Williams at Paramount, he was a “dirty, dissolute man, interested in very little besides women and liquor.” Samuel Charters, writing in 1959, reports that Aletha Robinson, a young black girl working for Paramount during Jefferson’s recording days “still remembers Lemon with a shudder of disgust.”<sup>36</sup> The circumstances of his death are mysterious, but what is known for certain is that Jefferson was found frozen to death one morning on a Chicago sidewalk in February of 1930. The situation was sketchy and few seem to know anything about that night. Among the more notable theories was one presented by Alan Lomax, who claims that someone put poison in Jefferson’s coffee. He was thirty three.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Oakley, *The Devil’s Music*, 115.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Oliver, *Blues off the Record: Thirty Years of Blues Commentary* (New York: Hippocrene Books Inc., 1984), 66.

<sup>36</sup> Samuel B. Charters, *The Country Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1975), 64.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 66; Alan Lomax, *Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 13.

Dubious as Jefferson's past was, there is even more uncertainty surrounding one of the delta's most influential musicians: Robert Johnson. Some reports mention that he played and hung around with Son House and one of his contemporaries, Willie Brown. While speaking with Son House in 1942, Alan Lomax managed to tease a little bit of information out of the blues legend about the early years of Robert Johnson's life:

He used to hang around us other fellows at the barrelhouse when we play a dance and when we take a break he pick up our instruments and try to play. We'd laugh and hurraw him about it, and he'd sull up and go off in a corner and pout. . . . So then he went off one day, say he goin to Arkansas and, when he came back . . . that boy could play more blues than air one of us.<sup>38</sup>

According to legend, Johnson had gone out to a crossroads one night and sold his soul to the Devil in trade for his musical talent. The lyrics to his "Cross Road Blues" provide some insight:

I went down to the crossroads, fell down on my knees  
I went down to the crossroads, fell down on my knees  
I asked the Lord above, have mercy, save poor Bob, if you please

Standing at the crossroads, I tried to flag a ride  
Standing at the crossroads, I tried to flag a ride  
Didn't nobody seem to know me, everybody pass me by

You can run, you can run, tell my friend boy, Willie Brown  
You can run, you can run, tell my friend boy, Willie Brown  
Lord, that I'm standing at the crossroads, babe, I believe I'm sinking down<sup>39</sup>

"Sinking down" in the last line is very likely a reference to what Johnson felt was his ultimate destination. Indeed, Johnson's own mother knew that her son was up to no good: "I used to cry over him, cause I knowed he was playin the devil's instruments."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 16.

<sup>39</sup> Robert Johnson, "Cross Roads Blues," *Martin Scorsese Presents the Blues*, Universal Music Enterprises, 2003, compact disc.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 15; George Martin Street, Jr., "Landscape as Folklore: The Mississippi Delta and the Delta Blues" (MA thesis, Louisiana State University, 1998), 75.

Johnson perpetuated the myth that he sold his soul to the devil in other songs as well, including “Hellhound on my Trail” and “Me and the Devil Blues,” but he was not the only blues musician that claimed that special treat. Tommy Johnson (no relation) also claimed to have sold his soul to the devil in exchange for musical talent. He describes how one goes about making this exchange:

If you want to learn how to play anything you want to play and learn how to make songs yourself, you take your guitar and go to . . . where a crossroad is . . . A big black man will walk up there and take your guitar, and he’ll tune it. And then he’ll play a piece and hand it back to you. That’s the way I learned to play anything I want.<sup>41</sup>

There is a little more known about Robert Johnson’s death than there is about Blind Lemon Jefferson’s. Like Jefferson, Alan Lomax claims that Johnson was killed when someone, a jealous girlfriend, poisoned his coffee. Lomax’s account for the death of Johnson, however, comes from a very reputable source: Johnson’s mother. Lomax reports that in 1942 he had gone, at the urging of Willie Brown, to meet with Johnson at his mother’s home in Tunica County, Mississippi. When he got there, Johnson’s mother announced quite casually that Johnson had died in 1938. Johnson was twenty six. His status as a trouble maker and ne’er do well lives on in many modern musicians, including Keith Richards, guitarist for the Rolling Stones, who says that Johnson was “the bark of the blues.”<sup>42</sup>

Obviously, the lives of a few of the delta bluesmen were having an impact on public perceptions of the blues, further strengthening the notion that the blues were not only undignified; they were dangerous. Although some of the more recent legends surrounding figures like Robert Johnson were obviously not well known to the

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<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Street, “Landscape as Folklore,” 75-76.

<sup>42</sup> Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 13-14; Oakley, *Devils Music*, 200; *American Roots Music*.

advertisers of race records in the 1920s, these stories stand as modern-day monuments to the enigmatic personalities their contemporaries perceived. Still, it was not just the lives of the musicians that prompted record companies to treat the rural blues with a humorous and almost dismissive air. The music itself was often rich in sexual imagery, and traditional white audiences found it easy to scapegoat the already undignified blues music as an immoral destroyer of values. In addition, the type of dancing that was done to blues music was an especially erotic mélange of Western European and African dancing styles. A quick look at some of the sexual content of a few blues songs and the dancing that was done to their pulsing beats demonstrates that whites were certainly not simply making wildly false allegations.

The blues, argues James Cone, are inextricably linked to sex. The blues, and indeed existence itself, is a celebration, and experiencing the pains of life is just as important as experiencing its joys. Thus, “[people] cannot appreciate the feel and touch of life nor express the beauty of giving themselves to each other in community, in love, and in sex until they know and experience the brokenness of existence as disclosed in human oppression.”<sup>43</sup> The dance most commonly associated with the blues, according to Alan Lomax, was called simply the Blues or the Slow Drag. African American dances were a mixture of African and European influences. Neither dancing style that coalesced into what became the Slow Drag was especially erotic, but the combination of the two styles was an easy target, especially for black ministers who insisted that dancing was not a habit of the godly. Alan Lomax describes the dance itself, which he witnessed one night, deep in the Delta countryside:

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<sup>43</sup> James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (New York: Orbis Press, 1972), 114.

The couples, glued together in a belly-to-belly, loin-to-loin embrace, approximated sexual intercourse as closely as their vertical posture, their clothing, and the crowd around them would allow. Slowly, with bent knees and with the whole shoe soles flat to the floor, they dragged their feet along its surface, emphasizing the off beat, so that the whole house vibrated like a drum.<sup>44</sup>

Lomax's father, John Lomax, had seen the dance as early as 1902 while recording on the Brazos River. The elder Lomax thought that the dance was so obscene that he refrained from telling his wife about it until years later.<sup>45</sup>

The foot sliding aspects of the dance, as well as the pelvic motions, are African in origin. In the Slow Drag, however, these techniques are combined with the mixed couple arrangement, made even more lewd by the face-to-face positioning of the pair. The facing, mixed sex couple was part of the European influence that made the Slow Drag so provocative. Because of the intervention of black preachers, who attacked the dance (and dancing in general) "even more strongly than their Calvinist preceptors," any African American who played, listened to, or danced to blues music, considered himself a child of the devil.<sup>46</sup>

For whatever personal reasons they may have had, African-Americans went on creating and enjoying blues music. In fact, the content of blues music seemed to encourage the sexually-charged dance moves that came to be associated with it. Blues music was often full of sexual imagery. Sometimes the references were cleverly concealed; sometimes the meaning of the song was pretty obvious. In keeping with the tradition of advertising rural blues records with a great degree of humor and tongue-in-

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<sup>44</sup> Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 364.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 364-65.



cheek attitude, record companies made almost no effort to hide the sexual metaphors present in the songs.

Blind Lemon, who was apparently well-known for his sexuality, also wrote songs with overt sexual imagery. The black snake, a symbol that he used at least twice in his songs, makes a notable appearance in Jefferson's "That Black Snake Moan":

I—I ain't got no mama now  
I—I ain't got no mama now  
She told me late last night, "You don't need no mama no how"

Mmm, mmm, black snake crawlin' in my room  
Mmm, mmm, black snake crawlin' in my room  
Some pretty mama better come and get this black snake soon

Ohh, that must have been a bed-bug, baby a chich can't bite that hard  
Ohh, that must have been a bed-bug, baby a chich can't bite that hard  
Ask my sugar for fifty cents, she said, "Lemon, ain't a child in the yard?"

Mama that's all right, mama that's all right for you  
Mama that's all right, mama that's all right for you  
Mama that's all right, most seen all you do

Mmm, mmm, what's the matter now?  
Mmm, mmm, what's the matter now?  
Sugar, what's the matter? Don't like no black snake no how

Mmm, mmm, wonder where my black snake gone?  
Mmm, mmm, wonder where my black snake gone?  
Black snake mama done run my darlin' home<sup>47</sup>

Other references to the snake are present in the blues tradition, including Blind Blake's "Boa Constrictor Blues," the advertisement for which features a young woman of indiscriminate race being frightened by a snake that is uncoiling itself from a tree in the heart of a deep forest. Jeff Titon, in *Early Downhome Blues*, frankly explicates the imagery: ". . . the snake stands for the penis, while the forest is, of course, rich in

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<sup>47</sup> Lemon Jefferson, "That Black Snake Moan," lyrics, *Harptab.com*, accessed 8 May 2005, <<http://www.harptab.com/lyrics/ly2719.shtml>>.

suggestion.”<sup>48</sup> The copy of the ad itself keeps the comic tone adopted by the illustration and innocently explains: “No wonder she’s afraid! You’d be scared too at a Boa Constrictor the size of that one coming right toward you.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Titon, *Early Downhome Blues*, 253.

<sup>49</sup> Advertisement for “Boa Constrictor Blues,” *Chicago Defender*, 25 August 1928.

#### 4: Advertisement Analysis

One of the most startling advertisements to appear for a rural blues record is the advertisement for “Lectric Chair Blues” by Blind Lemon Jefferson. The song itself is one of the grimmest in the rural blues tradition:

I want to shake hands with my partner and ask him how come he’s here  
I want to shake hands with my partner and ask him how come he’s here  
I had a mess with my family, they goin’ to send me to the electric chair

I wonder why they electrocute a man after the one o’clock hour of night  
I wonder why they electrocute a man after the one o’clock hour of night  
Because the current is much stronger then the folkses turn out all the lights

I sat in the electrocutin’ room, my arms folded up and crying  
I sat in the electrocutin’ room, my arms folded up and crying  
But my baby had to question whether they gonna electrocute that man of mine

Well they put me in a coffin to take me all the way from here  
Well they put me in a coffin to take me all the way from here  
I’d rather be in some new world than to be married to the ‘lectric chair

I seen wrecks on the ocean, I seen wrecks on the deep blue sea  
I seen wrecks on the ocean, I seen wrecks on the deep blue sea  
But my wreck that wrecked my heart when they brought my electrocuted  
daddy to me<sup>50</sup>

Despite the heart-rending sentiment of the song, advertisers saw fit to place the title of the song in a bulging, comic font, surrounded by hash marks, evidently added to give the letters the appearance that they were popping with electricity. In addition, the entire ad is surrounded by dark, jagged lines, no doubt a crass depiction of lightning. These attention-getting techniques are also likely playing on the novelty of electricity, and indicate a desire to appeal to a “modern” sensibility.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Titon, *Early Downhome Blues*, 253.

<sup>51</sup> Titon, *Early Downhome Blues*, 253; Advertisement for “Lectric chair blues,” *Chicago Defender*, 7 April 1928.

Following the title and appearance of the initial glance, the advertisement for “Lectric Chair Blues” continues in the format that would become the standard for race record advertisements. Below the title is a cartoon drawing, done in a meticulous pen and ink style, of the subject of the song: a young, black male sitting nervously on the edge of his prison cot, shoulders slumped, and with a thought bubble containing the electric chair, the very instrument through which he will meet his end, and the switch that serves as a toggle between life and death.<sup>52</sup>

The figure in the cartoon is a caricature of the performer, Jefferson, who himself appears in a photograph to the right of the cartoon. Although this caricature managed to escape some of the more grotesque exaggerations that illustrators frequently incorporated in images of African-Americans (large lips and noses, bulging eyes, etc.), the very caricaturization of Jefferson into a persona reflects the comic genesis of the illustration techniques incorporated in making this and similar race record advertisements.<sup>53</sup>

Following the illustrations and other visual elements of the ad is its copy, the text of the ad. The main descriptive paragraph of the copy reads:

SALTY TEARS—wet tears—big, round tears—all kinds of tears and heart throbs, and you should put yourself in his place to feel just as blue. ‘Lectric chair is the next place he’s gonna sit down in, and he ain’t tired either, so he don’t wanna sit down. Don’t fail to hear Blind Lemon Jefferson, helped out by his snappy guitar, sing and play “Lectric Chair Blues” on Paramount Record No. 12608. . . .<sup>54</sup>

Although the beginning of the paragraph draws on sympathy for the young man and his situation, the use of humor and stereotypes become evident in the second sentence of the copy. The stereotypical mispronunciations and grammatical errors

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<sup>52</sup> Titon, *Early Downhome Blues*, 253; Advertisement for “Lectric Chair Blues,” *Chicago Defender*, 7 April 1928.

<sup>53</sup> Advertisement for “Lectric Chair Blues,” *Chicago Defender*, 7 April 1928.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

attributed to African-Americans are exhibited in the use of vernacular in the copy. The use of vernacular indicates that record companies were eager to “get in touch” with black consumers, and even though advertisers frequently hired black consultants to help them write ad copy, these efforts were based on stereotypical concepts of black speech. Also indicative of humor rooted in stereotypes is the reduction of the issue of not wanting to sit in the electric to a simple matter of not being tired. The contrast between a mortal fear of death and a simple lack of fatigue produces a comic effect, and perpetuates the stereotype that African-Americans themselves use humor in the grimmest situations and cannot resist a joke, even while staring death in the face.<sup>55</sup>

Another ad featuring the persona of Jefferson was the one for “Black Snake Moan No. 2.” The cartoon had the Jefferson figure sitting up in bed, recoiling from a large, black snake, poised and ready to attack. Through a window in the background, two well-dressed figures with Caucasian features can be seen walking along, oblivious to the comic scene. The juxtaposition of the urbane scene outside with the comic scene in the interior of the room might have been thought to heighten the comic effect of the illustration, but the mere presence of these two figures in this illustration certainly raises questions such as what would two upper class whites be doing taking a walk through a presumably black neighborhood? The dominant images of the ad, though not quite as stereotypical as previous advertisements, still reinforce some of the older traditions in advertising and promoting black music. Still, the fact that the artists were given any credit for their creations at all is an improvement from the older forms of advertising. These caricatures were not the misshapen caricatures that had previously been seen in sheet music covers. They were realistic, albeit comic, portrayals.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., Tilton, *Early Downhome Blues*, 221.

These types of comic portrayals were especially common in advertisements for blues songs with overt sexual imagery. In the *Chicago Defender* on 5 December 1925, the race records division of Paramount Records ran an ad for a blues tune by “Papa” Charlie Jackson called “All I Want Is a Spoonful.” The title of the song is not terribly revealing and the lyrics only mildly so, but the advertisement makes the meaning of the song pretty obvious. The font that the song title appears in is a comic adaptation of a standard typeset font. The letters themselves are not situated straight and upright, but rather tilt, bend, and move around, further reflecting the comic style of the whole ad. In the upper left corner of the ad, a young man wields an enormous spoon at about waist level and, holding it straight out, appears to be running after a group of girls. All of the participants seem to be enjoying the situation. Sexuality is in the air: a lusty grin adorns the young man’s face, while the girls smile and exhibit lots of leg and cleavage. The text of the ad coyly asks what the image makes entirely clear: “What does ‘Papa Charlie’ mean by that? You [sic] laugh when you hear the words to this new, big Paramount hit.”<sup>56</sup>

Advertisements for records like these made no effort to hide the humor inherent in the song that they promoted. Although this is a blues record performed by a blues performer, the sexual imagery is too obvious (and, admittedly, funny) to ignore. The other selections mentioned indicate what advertisers thought the person who might buy “All I Want Is a Spoonful” would also like: a bank of other blues numbers, a section for “Inspiring Spirituals,” and one for “Hot-Stepping Dance Tunes.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Advertisement for “All I Want Is a Spoonful,” *Chicago Defender*, 5 December 1925.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

Interestingly, racial characterizations are absent from the surface of this particular advertisement. The figures in the cartoon drawing of the action of the song are clearly Caucasian, a fact evidenced by their dress, skin tone (although because most of the illustrations for race records are done in a pen and ink style, it can be difficult to tell the skin tone of the figures in the drawings. Not so in this case), hair styles, and features. One possible reason for this, though, is that any other combination of races would have been considered unacceptable. Depicting the women as African-Americans, being chased by either white or African-American males, would not have worked because African-American women were almost never sexualized in illustrations or stereotypical situations; to do so would have threatened the sexuality of white women and the ad would not have appealed to a diverse audience. Depicting the male as African-American, chasing after a group of white females would have been completely outrageous.<sup>58</sup>

But while advertisements that dealt with “sexy” blues music freely employed humor to pique the interest of their consumers, the visual and content components of the ads for Black Swan Records reflect Harry Pace’s desires to see his company become a vanguard for black-owned businesses. The ad contains no illustrations, images, or symbols of any kind; the text, enclosed in a neat, decorative border, is the only component of the ad, and its language precisely reflects the ideology upon which Pace founded his company. The headline of the ad, boldly stating an outrageous claim, “Colored People Don’t Want Classic Music,”<sup>59</sup> calls out for the reader’s attention. The ad continues on in an incredulous manner about how record dealers only stock blues and jazz records by African-American artists, presumably because of racist undertones

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Advertisement for Black Swan Records, *Crisis*, January, 1923.

inherent in the belief that African-Americans were somehow too base to “get” classical music. This approach not only reflects Pace’s ideals, but it also demonstrates that many popular conceptions by both African-Americans and whites of blues music were generally negative.<sup>60</sup>

The main paragraph of the copy contains the “pitch” of the ad: that by asking for classical music (from Black Swan Records, of course) at their record dealer’s, African-Americans could breach the racial divide and “Do Something for Negro Music.”<sup>61</sup> An interesting component of this paragraph is its appeal to the principles of supply and demand. Herein is reinforced the notion that African-Americans perceived that they could expect to integrate themselves into American society through their participation in the economy and culture of that society. The record dealer, being forced to choose between his racism and his profits, would ultimately break down and cater to his black consumers’ demands if he expected to keep their business.<sup>62</sup>

The ad goes on to list nine separate records, ranging in price from \$1.00 to \$.75, all of them included to emphasize the fact the Black Swan produced a “better class” of records. Most of the selections are in the classical or operatic tradition (“Caro Nome” from *Rigoletto* and “Ah Fors’E’Lui” from *La Traviata*, both Verdi operas), but all of them indicate that either the performer is performing solo on his instrument (piano or violin) or, through the mention of the particular singer’s range (soprano, tenor, etc.), that the performer is a singer in the classical tradition. Finally, the ad ends by informing consumers of a “special proposition for music teachers” and of job availability “in every

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.



community,” both no doubt included to further project the image of the Black Swan Record Company as a progressive business and a positive influence for black interests.<sup>63</sup>

Like the advertisements for Black Swan Records, some advertisements for race records by major labels showed little to no traces of the racist images that plagued earlier illustrations. Paramount, the same company that released the records of Blind Lemon Jefferson, placed an advertisement in the 23 November edition of the *Chicago Defender* for Charley Patton’s “Down the Dirt Road Blues.” The ad has the song’s title written in sober, block lettering across the top, with an image of a dejected-looking black man slumped on the back of an equally dejected-looking mule. The two are riding away together from a dilapidated farm house. Even the verbal description of the song is deeply sympathetic: “He’s had a lot of trouble at home and he’s decided to hit the dirty, dusty trail for parts unknown. He wants to forget everything and go somewhere else, so he sings this novel blues, as his lazy mule joggles him along the old dirt road. Be sure to ask for Paramount No. 12854, at your dealer’s, or send us the coupon.” Even the ordering instructions sound somber when read after the song’s description.<sup>64</sup>

These advertisements are confusing documents of an early consumer culture. The evident contradictions of the visual imagery of the advertisements belie the problems that advertisers faced when trying to market rural blues records to a new, modern America. The cartoon style illustrations and vernacularized copy are examples of the efforts that record companies and advertisers made in trying to sell their products to their consumers. While many of the racist elements present in earlier advertisements featuring African-American are gone from these new iterations, many of the antebellum stereotypes are still

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Advertisement for “Down the Dirt Road Blues,” *Chicago Defender* 23 November 1929.

present, demonstrating the transitional phase in advertising and blues music that coincides with the publication of these advertisements.

## Conclusion

It's easy to see racism everywhere, especially in a study of history. Race relations in America have become such a central issue that it seems almost impossible to avoid the subject. Our perceptions of race inform so many of our daily decisions and interactions that it is extremely difficult to abandon our own perceptions, and even more difficult to understand the racial perceptions of those living in the past. The past itself and the people who lived through it can no longer say anything about the way things were, and it falls to the historian to glean what information there is in what has been left behind.

The caricatures and cartoons of race record advertisements do little to hide some of the more obviously racist sentiments of the culture that produced them. It's easy to see them and discard them with advertisements featuring the Gold Dust Twins or Aunt Jemima as simply another manifestation of post-bellum racism, alive and well across the country. And it's true: the fact is that at the time the advertisements for rural blues records were produced, many Americans would have felt that the images in these advertisements were, if not wholly accurate physical depictions of African-Americans, at least appropriate to the perceptions that they held concerning African-Americans in general.

Still, there is another side to these ads—a subtle erosion of racism and, in many cases, a radical departure from the starkly racist characterization that older ads, using plantation stereotypes, deployed. There were myriad reasons why this shift started taking place at this particular time. The current state of the advertising industry, the place of the African-American in the world of consumers, and the dominant perceptions of blues

music and blues musicians all played a role in the visual presentation of the advertisements. Interestingly, these shifts began to occur without pressure from outside groups to decrease the racist content of record advertisements. Independent of any effort, advertisements abandoned many of the tropes that they previously operated under and made their advertisements more acceptable to a large buying public. Simply by recognizing the African-American as a salient consumer, advertisers and record companies were forced to rethink their advertising strategies and produce advertisements that could appeal to an ever-changing buying public.

These ads represent one of the earliest and most significant breaks from the standard antebellum stereotypes with which African-Americans were slandered in almost all nineteenth and early twentieth century advertisements. The long tradition of racial exaggeration, begun long before the Civil War and industrialization, was beginning to change for the better. Although the use of humor and cartoons in the advertisements appears inappropriate considering the tradition of hardship presently associated with the blues, in the early twentieth century, perceptions of the blues were such that humor was employed in advertisements both because it was already a feature of the genre and attitude of the blues and also because it helped to deemphasize and lighten the more serious and dangerous aspects of blues music that had so many in America concerned for the moral well-being of blues musicians and fans.

The blues are perhaps the Delta's greatest riddle, and they are endlessly fraught with contradiction. From the earliest iterations of the blues in the field hollers and spirituals of plantation slaves, the blues have been seen as a folk tradition and an immoral pastime that would certainly place any and all people associated with it in the hands of

the devil. Record producers, vying for the untapped market of black record-buyers, employed various degrees of humor and a multitude of cartoon drawings in their advertisements for rural blues records. These advertisements represent some of the earliest attempts that white business owners made at advertising to a black demographic.

Although their use of humor was, in many ways, inappropriate to the mood and feeling of most blues music, a close examination of the blues, placed in the context of the African tradition, demonstrates that public perception of the blues as an undignified and even dangerous musical form was what led advertisers to employ humor and caricature in their presentations of blues records. The believed tendency of African American culture to accept the inevitable with a laugh, the fact that blues music was not taken seriously as a legitimate form of musical expression, and the negative qualities associated with blues music, such as its association with sin and the devil and its frequently overt sexuality, all shaped the public image of the blues—an image that is reinforced by the advertisements for rural blues records.

Advertisements for rural blues records represent the subconscious perceptions that many had towards blues music, and as such, it should not be implied that advertisers were consciously using humor and cartoons in their ads for these reasons. This is illustrated by the small courtesies that blues musicians were afforded and the (infrequent) appearance of ads that abandon the comic tradition in favor of sincerity and sober depictions in their approach to black audiences.

The Delta remains a mystery, but not a wholly unsolvable one. Certain apparent contradictions in blues music may never be reconciled, but close examination of small aspects of the Delta and blues culture may reveal answers that have previously escaped

us. Still, contradictions seem to be at the very fabric of American culture, and the blues, coming as they do out of a blending of African and European musical and dance traditions, are but one expression of America itself.

Appendix

# "Lectric Chair Blues"

by *Blind Lemon Jefferson*

**SALTY TEARS**—wet tears—big, round tears— all kinds of tears and heart throbs, and you should put yourself in his place to feel just as blue. 'Lectric chair is the next place he's gonna sit down in, and he ain't tired either, so he don't wanta sit down. Don't fail to hear Blind Lemon Jefferson, helped out by his snappy guitar, sing and play " 'Lectric Chair Blues" on Paramount Record No. 12608. At your dealer's, or send coupon today!

**[ 12608—'Lectric Chair Blues and See That My Grave is Kept Clean, Blind Lemon Jefferson and His Guitar. ]**

**12614—Mama's Man Blues and Trouble-some Mind Blues,** Bert Mays; Piano Accompaniment.

**12609—No Job Blues and Back Gnawing Blues,** Ramblin' Thomas and His Guitar.

**12587—Sho 'em Up and Jingles (For Dancing) —** Clarence Williams and His Orchestra.

**12597—Wabash Rag and You Gonna Quit Me Blues,** Blind Blake and His Guitar.

**12593—Sunshine Special and Lonesome House Blues,** Blind Lemon Jefferson and Guitar.

**12509—Whiskey Blues and Book Deer Blues,** Elzadie Robinson; Piano Accompaniment by Will Ezell.

**12607 — Pullman Passenger Train and Jig-A-Long Boys,** Pullman Porters' Quartette.

**12603—New Bo-Weavil Blues and Moonshine Blues, "Ma" Rainey and Her Georgia Band.**

**12602—I'm Looking For A Woman Who Knows How To Treat Me Right and Long Gone Lost John, "Papa Charlie" Jackson and His Banjo.**

**Inspiring Sacred Numbers**

**12601—Judgment Day In The Mornin' and Red Cross The Disciple of Christ,** Sermons with Singing by Moses Mason.

**12599—I Have Anchored My Soul and King Jesus, Stand By Me,** Norfolk Jubilee Quartette.

**SEND NO MONEY!** If your dealer is out of the records you want, send us the coupon below. Pay postman 75 cents for each record, plus small C. O. D. fee when he delivers records. We pay postage on shipments of two or more records.

**Electrically Recorded!**  
Paramount Records are recorded by the latest new electric method. Greater volume, amazingly clear tone. Always the best music—first on Paramount!

**The New York Recording Laboratories**  
12 Paramount Bldg. Port Washington, Wis.  
Send me the records checked (✓) below 75 cents each:

( ) 12608 ( ) 12597 ( ) 12593  
( ) 12614 ( ) 12607 ( ) 12599  
( ) 12609 ( ) 12603 ( ) 12601  
( ) 12587 ( ) 12602 ( ) 12599

**Paramount**  
The Popular Race Record

Name.....  
Address.....  
City..... State.....

Advertisement for "Lectric Chair Blues." *Chicago Defender* 7 April 1928.



## "Colored People Don't Want Classic Music!"

So our Dealers write us. "Give 'Em Blues and Jazz. That's all we can sell!"

We Believe the Dealer is Wrong. But unless we furnish him with What he has Demand for, he will not handle our Goods.

If you—the person reading this advertisement—earnestly want to Do Something for Negro Music. Go to your Record Dealer and ask for the Better Class of Records by Colored Artists. If there is a Demand he will keep Them. Try this list of the Better Class. Buy one or all of them:

- \$1.00 7101—Caro Nome (Rigoletto), Antoinette Garnes, Soprano.
- 1.00 7102—Ah Fors'E'Lui (Traviata), Antoinette Garnes, Soprano.
- 1.00 7103—The Bell Song (Lakme), Florence Cole Talbert, Soprano.
- 1.00 7104—The Kiss (Il Bacio), Florence Cole Talbert, Soprano.
- 60004 ( Autumn Leaves, Piano Solo, Donald Heywood. 75c ( Operatic Dream.
- 60005 ( Swanee River, Violin Solo, Kemper Harreid. 75c ( Souvenir.
- 2001 ( At Dawning, Revella Hughes, Soprano. 75c ( Thank God for a Garden.
- 2015 ( The Rosary, Marianna Johnson, Contralto. 75c ( Sorter Miss You.
- 2013 ( Since You Went Away, J. Arthur Gaines, Tenor. 75c ( Who Knows.

You will enjoy these and you will Encourage Us to make more and more of this kind of A Record.

We have a special Proposition for Music Teachers. Write for it.

Agents Wanted In Every Community.

**Black Swan Phonograph Company, Inc.**

HARRY H. PACE, Pres.

2289 Seventh Avenue

New York, N. Y.

Advertisement for Black Swan Records.  
*Crisis* January 1923.





# "All I Want Is a Spoonful"

by "Papa" Charlie Jackson

12320 - All I Want Is a Spoonful and Maxwell Street Blues, "Papa Charlie" Jackson.

WHAT does "Papa Charlie" mean by that? You laugh when you hear the words to this new, big Paramount hit. "All I Want is a Spoonful" combines snappy words, nifty tune and some great guitar strumming by "Papa". Don't miss it! At your dealer's, or send us the coupon (below).

- 12312 - **Go Back Where You Stayed Last Night and Tennessee Blues**, Viola Bartlette, acc. by Lovie Austin's Serenaders.
- 12317 - **Come On, Coot, Do That Thing and Have Your Chill, I'll Be Here When Your Fever Rises**, "Coot" Grant and "Kid" Wesley Wilson, with Fletcher Henderson's Orchestra.
- 12313 - **Craving Blues**, Ethel Waters, acc. by Lovie Austin and Her Serenaders and **Too Sweet for Words**, Lovie Austin's Serenaders.
- 12318 - **Coffin Blues and Rambling Blues**, Ida Cox, Organ and Cornet acc.

- 12311 - **Rough and Tumble Blues and Memphis Bound Blues**, "Ma" Rainey and Her Georgia Jazz Band.
- 12307 - **Long Distance Blues and Lonesome Blues**, Ida Cox, acc. by Lovie Austin and Her Serenaders.

Danny Small and Ukelele Mays, new exclusive Paramount artists, stop the show wherever they go. Hear their first record, 12319 - **Sweet Georgia Brown and Loud Speaking Papa**.

**Inspiring Spirituals**

- 12314 - **You Must Come In At The Door and When I Come Out of the Wilderness**, Sunset Four Jubilee Quartette.

- 12324 - **Where Shall I Be and I'm Gonna Build Right On Dat Shore**, Norfolk Jubilee Quartette.
- 12301 - **Somebody's Always Talking About Me and Sit Down, Sit Down, I Can't Sit Down**, Norfolk Jubilee Quartette.

**Hot-Stepping Dance Tunes**

- 12321 - **Milenberg Joys and Sugar Babe**, Jimmy O'Bryant's Famous Original Washboard Band.
- 12312 - **Everybody Pile and Charleston Fever**, Jimmy O'Bryant's Famous Original Washboard Band.
- 12294 - **Three J Blues and Steppin' On The Gas**, Jimmy O'Bryant's Famous Original Washboard Band.

**Send No Money!** If your dealer hasn't the Paramount Records you want, check the numbers on the coupon and mail to us. Pay postman 75 cents each, plus small C. O. D. fee. We pay postage and insurance on orders for more than one record.

New York Recording Laboratories  
12 Paramount Bldg.,  
Port Washington, N.Y.

Send me the records I've checked ( ) 75 cents each, C. O. D.

- |           |           |           |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| ( ) 12320 | ( ) 12311 | ( ) 12301 |
| ( ) 12322 | ( ) 12307 | ( ) 12321 |
| ( ) 12317 | ( ) 12310 | ( ) 12312 |
| ( ) 12313 | ( ) 12314 | ( ) 12294 |
| ( ) 12318 | ( ) 12234 |           |

# Paramount

The Popular Race Record

Name.....  
Address.....  
City.....

Advertisement for "All I Want Is a Spoonful." Chicago Defender 5 December 1925.





**RUMBLIN' & RAMBLIN'**  
**BOA CONSTRUCTOR BLUES"**  
*by Blind Blake*

**NO** wonder she's afraid! You'd be scared too at a Boa Constrictor the size of that one coming right toward you. Blind Blake and his trusty guitar do themselves proud in this unique Blues and you'll like the unusual story suggested in the words. Be sure to get "Boa Constrictor Blues", Paramount No. 12657, from your dealer, or send us the coupon today.

[ **12657—Rumblin' and Ramblin' Boa Constrictor Blues and Detroit Berud Blues, Blind Blake and his Guitar.** ]

**12655—Lead Hearted Blues & Let Your Love Come Down, Bertha Henderson; Guitar acc. by Blind Blake.**      **12656—House Rent Stomp and Big Bill Blues, Big Bill and Thomps**

**12659—Jimmy Rodgers Blue Yodel and Way Out On the Mountain, Louie Warfield and Guitar.**

**12658—Sunshine Blues and Lonesome Longing Blues, Moanin' Bernice Edwards; piano acc.**

**12650—Piney Woods Money Mama and Low Down Mojo Blues, Blind Lemon Jefferson and His Guitar.**

**12647—Blues The World Forget, Part 1, and Blues The World Forget, Part 2: "Ma" Rainey and Her Georgia Band.**

**12643—Tootle Blues and That Lovin' I Crave, Blind Blake and His Guitar.**

**12649—Lemon's Cannon Ball Moan and Change My Luck Blues, Blind Lemon Jefferson and His Guitar.**

**Inspiring Sacred Selections**

**12652—When All The Saints Go Marching In and Rock Of Ages, Blind Willie Davis and Guitar.**

**12650—His Eye Is On The Sparrow and I Wouldn't Mind Dying If Dying Was All, Norfolk Jubilee Quartette.**

**SEND NO MONEY!**  
 If your dealer is out of the records you want, send us the coupon below. Pay 75 cents for each record, plus small C. O. D. fee when he delivers records. We pay postage on shipments of two or more records.

The New York Recording Laboratories  
 12 Paramount Bldg.,  
 Port Washington, N.Y.  
 Send me the records checked (✓) below 75 cents each.

<input type="checkbox"/> 12657	<input type="checkbox"/> 12659	<input type="checkbox"/> 12643
<input type="checkbox"/> 12655	<input type="checkbox"/> 12653	<input type="checkbox"/> 12639
<input type="checkbox"/> 12656	<input type="checkbox"/> 12650	<input type="checkbox"/> 12658
	<input type="checkbox"/> 12647	<input type="checkbox"/> 12630

**Paramount**  
*The Popular Race Record*

Name.....  
 Address.....  
 City..... State.....

Advertisement for "Boa Constrictor Blues." *Chicago Defender* 25 August 1928.



# "DOWN THE DIRT ROAD BLUES"



by  
**Charley Patton**

**H** E'S had a lot of trouble at home and he's decided to hit the dirty, dusty trail for parts unknown. He wants to forget everything and to go somewhere else, so he sings this novel Blues, as his lazy mule joggles him along the old dirt road. Be sure to ask for Paramount No. 12854, at your dealer's, or send us the coupon.

**{ 12854—Down The Dirt Road Blues and It Won't Be Long; }**  
Charley Patton; guitar acc.

<p>12851—Hot Lovin' and Mama Stayed Out, Barrel House Five.</p> <p>12852—Honey Dropper Blues and Nickal's Worth of Liver Blues, Edith Johnson; piano acc.</p> <p>12792—Pony Blues and Banty Rooster Blues, Charley Patton; guitar acc.</p> <p>12817—Back To The Woods Blues and Good Gal, Charlie Spand; piano and guitar acc.</p> <p>12819—Black And Evil Blues and Broadway St. Women Blues, Alice Moore; piano-trombone acc.</p>	<p>12794—Somebody's Been Using That Thing and It's All Worn Out, The Mokum Boys; piano-guitar acc.</p> <p>12855—Peechin' Boogie and Just Can't Stay Here, Piano Solos by Will Ezell.</p> <p>12822—Uncle Joe and Can I Get Some Of That?—Cool Grant and Socks Wilson; piano acc.</p> <p>12825—Twenty First St. Stomp and Henry Brown Blues; Piano Solos by Henry Brown.</p>
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**Beautiful Spirituals**

12824—Paul And Silas and I Heard My Mother Call My Name In Prayer, South Carolina Quartette.

12818—Way Down In Egyptland and I'm Gonna Serve God TILL I Die, Norfolk Jubilee Quartette.

**SEND NO MONEY!** If your dealer is out of the records you want, send us the coupon below. Pay postman 75 cents for each record, plus small C. O. D. fee when he delivers records. We pay postage on shipments of two or more records.

The  
New York  
Recording  
Laboratories  
12 Paramount Bldg.  
New York, N. Y.

Send me the records checked (✓) below 75 cents each

{ 12854 }	{ 12817 }	{ 12839 }
{ 12851 }	{ 12819 }	{ 12825 }
{ 12823 }	{ 12796 }	{ 12834 }
{ 12792 }	{ 12855 }	{ 12818 }

# Paramount

The Popular Race Record  
ELECTRICALLY RECORDED

Name.....  
Address.....  
City.....State.....

Advertisement for "Down the Dirt Road Blues." *Chicago Defender* 23 November 1929.

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