

Clark Atlanta University

Songs Called the Blues

Author(s): Langston Hughes

Source: *Phylon (1940-1956)*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2nd Qtr., 1941), pp. 143-145

Published by: [Clark Atlanta University](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/271782>

Accessed: 09/05/2014 11:27

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Clark Atlanta University is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Phylon (1940-1956)*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

of *Opportunity*, Journal of Negro Life, in part, as follows:¹

I am not at all satisfied with the position of the teacher in American schools and colleges. We have in our country today a great deal of machinery for education, and when we meet we have a great deal to say about endowments and curricula, and about buildings and salaries, and the length of school terms. Very seldom do we hear about what goes on in the class room, or about what influences surround the individual student. Men who spend a little time in an office and a great deal of time traveling are known as distinguished educators, while the teacher who does the actual work from day to day receives much less recognition and much less pay, no matter how efficient he may be. I suggest that our whole attitude toward the profession of the teacher is in need of radical revision.

The list of great and good college teachers is not long, and that of Negro teachers has had less than a century for its compilation. Yet, in the names for either list's final reckoning there must abide these three—Archer, Hope and Brawley.²

By LANGSTON HUGHES

Songs Called the Blues

THE blues are folk-songs born out of heartache. They are songs of the black South, particularly the city South. Songs of the poor streets and back alleys of Memphis and Birmingham, Atlanta and Galveston, out of black, beaten, but unbeatable throats, from the strings of pawn-shop guitars, and the chords of pianos with no ivory on the keys.

The Blues and the Spirituals are two great Negro gifts to American music. The Spirituals are group songs, but the Blues are songs you sing alone. The Spirituals are religious songs, born in camp meetings and remote plantation districts. But the Blues are *city* songs rising from the crowded streets of big towns, or beating against the lonely walls of hall bed-rooms where you can't sleep at night. The Spirituals are escape songs, looking toward heaven, tomorrow, and God. But the Blues are

¹*Opportunity*, Journal of Negro Life. Vol. VI, No. 2, February, 1928, pp. 56-57.

²I am indebted to Messrs. Russell C. Barbour, John W. Davis, James H. Hubert, James

M. Nabrit and John B. Watson for notes and comments submitted in connection with this subject.

today songs, here and now, broke and broken-hearted, when you're troubled in mind and don't know what to do, and nobody cares.

There are many kinds of Blues. There are the family Blues, when a man and woman have quarreled, and the quarrel can't be patched up. There's the loveless Blues, when you haven't even got anybody to quarrel with. And there's the left-lonesome Blues, when the one you care for's gone away. Then there's also the broke-and-hungry Blues, a stranger in a strange town. And the desperate going-to-the-river Blues that say:

I'm goin' down to de river
And take ma rockin' chair—
If the Blues overcome me,
I'm gonna rock on away from here!

But it's not always as bad as that, because there's another verse that declares:

Goin' down to de railroad,
Lay ma head on de track.
I'm goin' to de railroad,
Lay ma head on de track—
But if I see de train a-comin'
I'm gonna jerk it back!

For sad as Blues may be, there's almost always something humorous about them—even if it's the kind of humor that laughs to keep from crying. You know,

I went to de gypsy's
To get ma fortune told.
Went to de gypsy's
To get ma fortune told,
But the gypsy said, dog-gone
Your un-hard-lucky soul!

In America, during the last quarter of a century, there have been many great singers of the Blues, but the finest of all were the three famous Smiths—no relation, one to another—Mamie Smith, Clara Smith, and the astonishing Bessie Smith. Clara and Bessie are both dead now, and Mamie no longer sings, but thousands of Blues collectors in the United States and abroad prize their records. Today a girl named Georgia White carries on the old tradition of the Blues in the folk manner. And Midge Williams, of the Louis Armstrong band, sings them in a more polished, but effective way. Of the men, Lonnie Johnson is perhaps the finest living male singer of the Blues, although that portly fellow Jimmy Rushing in Count Basie's orchestra is a runner-up. And Lead Belly, of course, is in a class by himself.

The most famous Blues, as everybody knows, is the *St. Louis Blues*, that Mr. W. C. Handy wrote down one night on the corner of a bar on a levee street in St. Louis thirty years ago, and which has since gone all over the world. The *St. Louis Blues* is sung more than

any other song on the air waves, is known in Shanghai and Buenos Aires, Paris and Berlin—in fact, is heard so often in Europe that a great many Europeans think it must be the American National Anthem.

Less popular, but equally beautiful are the Blues, *Troubled In Mind*, *Memphis Blues*, *Yellow Dog Blues*, and the never to be surpassed *Gulf Coast Blues*, which begins with one of the loneliest lines in all the realm of song:

The mail man passed but
He didn't leave no news . . .

Blues are still being made. One of the newest authentic Blues to come up out of the South, by way of the colored boys in the government work camps, is the *DuPree Blues*, that sad story of a man who wanted to give his girl a diamond ring, but had none to give her, so he took his gun and went to the jewelry store where, instead of getting the diamond ring, he got the jewelry man, jail, and the noose.

The real Negro Blues are as fine as any folk music we have, and I'm hoping that the day will come when famous concert singers like Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson will include a group of Blues on their programs as well as the Spirituals which they now sing so effectively.

A young dancer in New York, Felicia Sorel, is already using the Blues as a background for the creation of new dance forms. I see no reason why great dances could not be born of the Blues. Great American dances containing all the laughter and pain, hunger and heartaches, search and reality of the contemporary scenes—for the Blues have something that goes beyond race or sectional limits, that appeals to the ear and heart of people everywhere—otherwise, how could it be that in a Tokio restaurant one night I heard a Louis Armstrong record of the *St. Louis Blues* played over and over for a crowd of Japanese diners there? You don't have to understand the words to know the meaning of the Blues, or to feel their sadness, or to hope their hopes:

Troubled in mind, I'm blue!
But I won't be blue always:
De sun's gonna shine
In my back door someday!