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RACHEL A. SZYMANSKI

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BEYOND THE CROSSROADS: BLUES SCENES IN DETROIT AND LANSING

By

Rachel A. Szymanski

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ABSTRACT

BEYOND THE CROSSROADS: BLUES SCENES IN DETROIT AND LANSING

By

Rachel A. Szymanski

This thesis examines the reasons why blues scenes in Michigan cities such as Detroit and Lansing have been mostly ignored in blues history. Chapter 1 explains how blues history has been romanticized and how many who write about blues have come to favor a narrative that privileges the style of rural blues from the Mississippi Delta above all other blues. Chapter 2 explores how the urban blues scenes in Detroit and Lansing have struggled for identity and historical presence in the face of a hegemonic blues narrative that still centers in the Delta and also has a newer center in Chicago. Chapter 3 looks at the similarities and differences between two modern blues scenes in Michigan, the scenes in Detroit and Lansing, explains how these scenes are organized, and explores why blues audiences in Detroit and Lansing go out to hear live blues music. This study concludes that blues scenes in Detroit and Lansing have been continuously active despite a persistent center-periphery narrative that has never allowed them much room in blues history books and suggests that more scholars should challenge the Delta blues-centered tradition to discover overlooked scenes in other locations.

To the people in the blues scenes in Detroit and Lansing
who made me want to start writing,
and to Nate Bliton, Lauron Kehrer, and my mother, Sue Szymanski,
who made me believe that I could finish.

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Introduction

Writers who document blues history have a tendency to include the story of how they became interested in the blues in their books. I did not understand this tendency before I began talking to musicians and fans about the blues. I thought these writers were self-serving and that they were trying to legitimate their own work by making themselves part of the story. However, since I started talking to people about the blues music and blues scenes, I can understand one reason why writers might feel compelled to include their own stories as a prelude to whatever part of blues history they are recounting: they feel that the reader, like musicians or blues fans they have met, might be expecting an explanation for why they are studying the blues.

I know this because as I began my research for this document, the people I spoke to, fans and musicians alike, asked me why I was doing a project about the blues. This question is a fair one, because if there is a stereotypical blues fan, I do not fit the image. I am a woman; many blues fans are male. I was 22 years old when my interest in the blues started and I am 24 now; many fans I have met are over 40. I am not a blues musician; many fans of the genre are either professional or amateur blues players. So what saved this project? Why did my consultants, mostly middle aged men, decide that a young woman who didn't even play the blues could have a part in recording the history of blues scenes? I had to have a good reason prepared for why I wanted to study the blues if I was ever going to hope for honest answers to questions like, "What is it that you like best about going to blues clubs?" or "Why do you listen to blues music?"

In the beginning, I was alarmingly unprepared for questions about my own interest in blues scenes. I would spout off something about the study being important work because little research had been done on blues in Michigan and would add that I also just liked the music. The real story is that I became interested in blues music in an ethnomusicology class at Michigan State, a decidedly unromantic way to become acquainted with the genre. From there, I changed my thesis topic from a study of the career experiences of Michigan jazz musicians to a thesis on blues festivals. One night when the MSU jazz studies department's combos were playing at a local coffee shop, I told Professor Rodney Whitaker, chair of jazz studies at Michigan State, that I was going to write my thesis on blues festivals. He seemed less than impressed and said if I really wanted to write something about the blues I should write about white people going to see traditionally black music. He felt that white fans might be keeping the music alive. After I some consideration, I decided to take his advice and try to include the audience for blues music as a major part of my thesis.

There was one other important thing that I also wanted to do with this thesis: write about Michigan blues scenes specifically. It would not have been too difficult for me to have done this thesis on blues scenes in Chicago as it is only three hours away from where I live in East Lansing, MI. The Chicago scene is huge and it includes a famous, free summer festival. However, many people have written about the scenes in Chicago. Few have written about the scene in Detroit, let alone any

other scenes in Michigan.[1] I knew these scenes existed and wanted to find out why I had not read anything about them.

Aside from the naive desire for scholarly acclaim for having rediscovered blues in Michigan - as though blues scenes in Michigan had gotten lost and needed me to bring them back to civilization - I have realized over the course of this writing that I wanted to write a thesis about Michigan because of who I am. Before I began writing this thesis, I was embarrassed to admit that I had never lived outside the state of Michigan. I have still never lived more than an hour and a half from Detroit, MI where I was born or Dexter, MI where I spent most of my childhood. However, in the course of writing this document I became both proud of being a Michigan native and shocked at all the Michigan history I did not know. I learned history that they never taught us in grade school like how urban renewal destroyed black neighborhoods in Detroit and Lansing or how Berry Gordy built up Motown and then took it all away. I learned more about car companies in Detroit and Lansing than I ever cared to know. I learned how music was intricately related to class and race in Michigan in ways I had not expected. Blues history in Michigan is music history, black history, white history, labor history, Detroit history, and the history of many other Michigan cities.

This thesis is about white writers who wrote blues history to reach a white audience and black writers who include the blues in African American music history. It's about Detroit and Lansing, how the cities are different and how they are the same,

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[1] Some writers who have written about Detroit blues scenes include Lars Bjorn and Jim Gallert in *Before Motown: a History of Jazz in Detroit 1920-60*, (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2001) and several writers in the 2001 Detroit themed issue of *Living Blues* magazine.

and how both cities ended up having two of the strongest blues societies in the state. Most importantly, this thesis is about the professional musicians and blues fans who talked to me about their scenes and their lives. It is about people who made me feel like part of a scene that a young white woman who doesn't even play the blues may have little business being part of. Those people made me feel like I had to finish this document when it was not going well and I am grateful to them for that.

My primary goals with my thesis are twofold. The first is to explain why blues scenes in Michigan are mostly ignored in blues history. I do this through a historiography of blues writing. I argue that blues writers have created a history of the blues that says the Mississippi Delta style and its urban derivative in Chicago are the most significant types of blues. This version of history downplays the importance of early rural scenes in other parts of the south as well as other urban scenes. One possible explanation for this is that the emphasis on the Delta and Chicago styles by early blues writers was duplicated by later writers. As African popular music scholar, Christopher A. Waterman argues "the temptation to read contemporary categories into the past, especially when authoritative scholarly sources do it as a matter of course, is strong."[2] Blues writers in the 1960s created contemporary categories of blues according to region so they would have categories that would encompass the older blues music they discovered. These writers became authoritative scholarly sources whose ideas about the blues have become so pervasive in the blues discourse that scenes that they gave little attention to, like the scene in Detroit, have continually been reduced to footnotes in blues history books.

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[2] Christopher Waterman, "Our Tradition is a Very Modern Tradition", *Ethnomusicology* 4, 1990, 368.

My second goal is to show that although Michigan blues scenes are on the periphery of blues history, there have been urban blues scenes in Michigan for as long as the well-known Chicago scene has existed and that these scenes are still active today. Along with this, I explain what blues fans and musicians in Michigan get out of their experiences in blues communities using some of the modern scenes in Detroit and especially the modern scenes in Lansing as examples. Blues fans are not simply people who occasionally interact when listening to music; they, with blues musicians, have formed communities or blues scenes around their love of listening to and playing blues music. The scenes perspective, as sociologists Richard Peterson and Andy Bennett refer to as the study of musical communities that focuses on scenes, looks at how performers, performance venues, and fans collectively create music.[3] They explain that while the term "music scene" was formerly used only in journalistic and everyday contexts, it is now used in scholarly writing to "designate the contexts in which clusters of producers, musicians, and fans collectively share their common musical tastes and collectively distinguish themselves from others."[4] This perspective emerged in the 1990s out of a desire to avoid connotations associated with the term subculture, e.g. "subculture" presumes that all of a participant's actions are governed by the subculture's standards.[5] In contrast, calling fans part of a "scene" allows for the fluid identities that most people have where they move in and

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[3] Richard A. Peterson and Andy Bennett, *Music Scenes* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), 3.
[4] Ibid, 1.
[5] Ibid, 3.

out of the scene identity.[6] This seems particularly appropriate for blues fans as being part of the blues scene is a leisure activity which forms one part of their identity rather than their entire lifestyle, as well as for blues musicians for whom being in a blues scene can involve work and leisure in the same week or even in the same night. Thus, blues scenes in Detroit and Lansing are places where people connect and interact with blues music as the unifying factor.

In Chapter 1, I will explain how blues history has been romanticized and how many who write about blues have come to favor a narrative that privileges the style of rural blues from the Mississippi Delta above all other blues. Additionally, I argue that the formation of this Delta-centered narrative has created an environment in which the Chicago blues scene, which most closely resembles the Delta blues, has become better known and more popular than other urban blues scenes. I explore this further in Chapter 2 when I draw upon a center-periphery model to explain how the Chicago scene has shifted from being an antidote to the Delta-as-blues-center narrative to being an extension of the same narrative. I will then explain how the urban blues scenes in Detroit and Lansing have struggled for identity and historical presence in the face of a hegemonic blues narrative that still centers in the Delta and also has a newer center in Chicago. I will also explain historical trends and events which shaped African American communities in Detroit and Lansing, especially how urban renewal projects of the 1950s and 1960s devastated African American neighborhoods and contributed to the decline blues scene in Detroit. In Chapter 3, I will describe the similarities and differences between the scenes in Detroit and

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[6] Andy Bennett, *Popular Music and Youth Culture: Music, Identity, and Place* (London: MacMillan, 2000).

Lansing, explain how these scenes are organized and explore why blues audiences in Detroit and Lansing go out to hear live blues music. Blues fans have formed communities around their love of seeing live blues, communities that blues musicians are happy to be intimately involved with.

Chapter 1: *Romancing the Blues: the origins of a Mississippi Delta-centered blues narrative*

Part 1: *Imagining History*

History books are more like paintings than photographs; rather than being an exact record of what happened they are the writer's interpretation of events. Understanding that interpretation and the way it is expressed are central to any study of history. As far as blues history is concerned, writers have a proclivity towards romanticizing the history of the blues. This romanticized view of blues history has not been created maliciously; quite on the contrary, in has been created with the best of intentions. It is difficult to classify those who write about blues history as historians as most are not trained in the art of writing history nor are they generally musicologists. Rather, they are musicians and fans of the music that have been moved by it in a personal way and seem to write out of a desire to show others what they have discovered about blues history and about themselves. In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that the creation of nationalism is not the fabrication of nations where they do not exist, but rather the imagining of nations where they did not exist previously. Futhermore, Anderson says,

> In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.[7]

The history of the blues, then, can be thought of as the history of blues communities which have been imagined by different writers for different reasons. There is,

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[7] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflection on the origin and spread of nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1983), 6.

however, one prevalent explanation of blues history that has been imagined by many white writers, an explanation that focuses on blues from the Mississippi Delta.

Although the audience for and performers of blues music were originally black, many blues historians and critics are white. Many of these white writers, especially those who wrote blues history books in the 1960s, present a view of the blues as a music that originated in the Mississippi Delta. As Elijah Wald, a white blues writer, explains, the tastes of blues audiences after the 1960s have been influenced by the canonization of blues from the Mississippi Delta. This is canon in the true Catholic sense of the word; the artists that are included in the canon are venerated almost like they are the saints of the genre. These musicians who are highly regarded by many white blues writers are a series of black singer-guitarists from the Delta including Charlie Patton, Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, and Howlin' Wolf.[8]

As with all musical canons, the accomplishments and histories of these musicians are emphasized at the expense of other musicians and other music scenes. Some groups notably missing from this canon are jug bands and string bands of the 1920s and 1930s whose music sounded like country and western, blues from other regions of the south like Texas blues and Piedmont blues, and some of the urban blues of the 1940s and 1950s if it did not feature stars like Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf who, although they moved to Chicago, had been born in the Delta and played Delta blues. In addition, vaudeville blues acts and medicine shows of the 1920s and 1930s whose stars were mostly female blues singers are usually discussed

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[8] Elijah Wald, "The Bluesman Who Behaved Too Well," *The New York Times*, 18 July 2004, pp. 22.

in blues history, but they are often set apart as a commercial version of early rural blues. Michigan blues has been missed in blues history, because it is an urban blues tradition that does not fit the romantic view of history that gives precedence to blues that can be easily traced back to the Mississippi Delta.

Unlike many white writers, black writers tend to explore the topic of blues in their scholarship by integrating the discussion of blues with African American music history and African American history, in general. For instance, in his book *Stompin' the Blues*, Albert Murray spends few pages discussing the Mississippi Delta blues and many discussing how Duke Ellington's music is inspired by the blues. Murray calls Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong blues musicians with no reservations about the rigid rules of genre imposed by white scholars and critics which suggest that Ellington and Armstrong were unequivocally jazz musicians. Additionally, Murray speaks about various uses for blues music giving his chapters titles like "Blues as Dance Music", and suggests that in addition to being music, blues can be more than music; blues can be a feeling. Amiri Baraka presents a similar line of thinking in his book *Blues People*, though he favors avante-garde music while Murray takes a more classicist approach. Baraka's ideas about blues are also more explicitly tied to African American history, particularly the history of slavery. For instance, in the early part of the book Baraka states,

> Blues is the parent of all legitimate jazz, and it is impossible to say exactly how old blues is -- certainly no older than the presence of Negroes in the United States. It is a native American music, the product of the black man in this country: or to put it more exactly the way I have come to think about it,

blues could not exist if the African captives had not become American captives.[9]

These and other works by Murray and Baraka are used as evidence to support statements about the intricate connection between blues and other types of music, particularly jazz.[10]

I am not trying to suggest that the romantic view of the Delta Blues that some white writers have constructed is without some element of truth or that black writers have written something that is truer; rather, I want to suggest that it does not matter whether any of these writers are wrong or right. What is important to my study of blues scenes in Michigan is to understand why these writers have chosen to imagine blues history in a certain way. White writers have imagined a blues history that Michigan blues does not fit into and yet there have been blues scenes in Michigan for as long as there have been blues scenes in Chicago. Conversely, black writers have imagined a black music history of which blues is a crucial component and this idea happens to be one that easily accommodates Michigan blues scenes.

Many blues writers are tireless promoters of the blues because of deep personal connections to the music which they illustrate through stories of their personal experiences with blues music or blues musicians. For instance, there is a story that is often re-told about the discovery of the blues. W.C. Handy, an African American songwriter and band leader, explains in his autobiography, *Father of the*

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[9] Amiri Baraka, *Blues People*, (New York: William and Morrow Company, Inc., 1963), 18.

[10] Notably, Murray influenced Wynton Marsalis, jazz trumpeter and creator of Jazz at Lincoln Center, and helped shape Marsalis's ideas about the importance of jazz maintaining a connection to blues.

Blues, how he was awakened while waiting for a train in Clarksdale, Mississippi in 1903:

> A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside me while I slept. His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages. As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of a guitar in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who use steel bars. The effect was unforgettable. His song, too, struck me instantly. 'Goin' where the Southern cross' the Dog.' The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on guitar with the weirdest music I have ever heard.[11]

Handy's depiction is pervasive in blues history texts and each author uses the story to complement their own arguments. For instance, in *Deep Blues*, a text often referenced since it was published in 1981, Robert Palmer gives a lengthy account of Handy's story which connects the music in the story back to late nineteenth century field hollers as well as African roots of the blues.[12] In doing so, Palmer is using Handy's story to reinforce the main point of his book; that the blues has deep roots in both African music and music from Mississippi. Years later, Marybeth Hamilton includes the story in her recounting of her trip to Tutwiler and points out how the story has "become a blues legend, repeated by chroniclers from Robert Palmer to Greil Marcus, all eager to assert the primacy of the Delta in blues history despite the

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[11] W.C. Handy, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 45 in Davis, *History of the Blues*, 24.

[12] Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues*, (New York: Viking Press, 1981), 46

lack of demonstrable proof."[13] Hamilton's use of the term "legend" seems appropriate as Handy's description has been used either as an example of how our perceptions of the blues are overly romanticized or to emphasize the mysterious origins of the genre. Handy himself used this story to legitimize his identity as the first to discover blues. For instance, Handy told the story of the man in Tutwiler in his 1941 autobiography *Father of the Blues* to support the idea that he was the father of the genre. Handy was perhaps the first to use personal experiences to legitimize his claim that he was an authority on blues history, and many have followed in his footsteps.

There are essentially two generations of blues historians and each generation has imagined or re-imagined blues history with his or her own style. The first two blues history books were written by American writer and musician Samuel Charters and British writer Paul Oliver. Although they were not publishing books during this period, it's important to note that John and Alan Lomax are also part of this earlier generation of historians as their some of their experiences collecting blues songs predate even Charters and Oliver's works. The 1960s was also the period of time when Amiri Baraka wrote *Blues People,* a history of African American musical styles and their interaction with culture. A few more books that include blues history were written in the 1970s and 1980s, most notably Albert Murray's *Stomping the Blues* in 1976 and Robert Palmer's *Deep Blues* in 1981, but it was not until the mid-1990s that a new generation of blues historians emerged led by Francis Davis in 1994 and continued with works by several authors in the first decade of the twenty-first

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[13] Marybeth Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues,* (Philadelphia: Perseus Books Groups, 2008).

century. This second generation is largely challenging ideas presented by the first like the primacy of blues from the Mississippi Delta.

Part 2: *The First Generation*

Although several writers in this first generation privilege the Mississippi Delta as the birthplace of the blues, this did not happen immediately. *Country Blues*, Samuel Charters's 1959 book about the lives of several blues musicians from across the country, is his attempt to present a balanced view of blues history along with his own interest in social justice. Charters, like many blues writers, did not make his living primarily as a music historian; he was also a record producer, poet, novelist, and musician. Born in Pittsburgh in 1929, Charters grew up in a middle-class family of jazz fans. Charters's writing often reflects his interest in social justice which began when he went to play jazz clarinet in New Orleans in 1950 and was deeply affected by the Jim Crow laws that he saw in action. For instance, Charters reports that he would play in clubs with black bands and "the police would come and take me away and then they would haul me up and accuse me of reckless driving. I would say, 'I was playing the piano.' And they'd say, 'That's reckless driving and don't you do it again.'"[14] It was his disagreement with this type of discriminatory behavior which led to his participation in the Civil Rights and anti-war movements in the 1960s, as well as his eventual move to Sweden.

Charters's deep commitment to Civil Rights seems to have influenced how he wrote his blues history books, particularly his first book, *Country Blues*. For instance, while other blues historians use the Tutwiler story from Handy's *Father of*

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[14] Interview, Don Swain with Samuel Charters, 1984, New York,NewYork <http://wiredforbooks.org/samuelcharters/>, accessed 15 Nov 2008.

the Blues, Samuel Charters uses another part of Handy's text as an example of what he sees as Handy's opportunistic attitude towards blues.[15] In his critique, Charters calls blues "the music of Handy's own race," yet he believes that Handy's position as a higher class musician meant he was appropriating something that he did not have a strong cultural connection to.[16] It is somewhat audacious of Charters to argue that Handy is disconnected from blues music because of class when he is separated from blues music by both class and race.

Charters was not one to shy away from controversial statements, which we see especially in the 1975 edition of *Country Blues*. Unlike other blues writers, Charters explicitly explained that his writing was *meant* to be a romanticized version of blues communities with the goal of enlightening white Americans about an aspect of black culture. In the introduction to the 1975 edition of *Country Blues* Charters explained that the book was "a romanticization of certain aspects of black life in an effort to force the white society to reconsider some of its racial attitudes."[17] Charters believed that he had a responsibility to open the consciousness of white Americans to "a fuller comprehension of the possibility for new expression and self-understanding through an involvement with black culture."[18] Here Charters suggests that white Americans have little capacity for new expression and self-understanding through experiences in their own culture and need to appropriate another culture in order to be creative and insightful.

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[15] Samuel Charters, *Country Blues*, (New York: Da Capo, 1975), 37.
[16] Charters, *Country Blues*, 37.
[17] Ibid, xi.
[18] Ibid, xiii.

Although Charters exhibits an attitude of white liberal paternalism when he explains that his book was a cry for help and that:

> I wanted hundreds of people to go out and interview the surviving blues artists. I wanted people to record them and document their lives, their environment, and their music – not only so that their story would be preserved but also so they'd get a little money and a little recognition in their last years.[19]

Charters explains that his efforts to

> interest the white intellectual in the larger patterns of black life wasn't particularly successful. Instead of accepting black culture they tended to select certain artists out of it – artists who, generally, came closest to a white concept of what a blues artist should be.[20]

Interestingly, Charters does not elaborate here on what a white concept of a blues artist would look or sound like. However, he goes on to say that he thinks that "this attitude" of white people selecting artists that fit their conception of the blues is not all bad because "We use another culture to build our own just as we use the past, as raw material to build our own present."[21] Charters makes several contentious points with this sentence: first, he sets up an us-versus-them dichotomy in which white culture and black culture are diametrically opposed; second, he condones using black culture as "raw material" to "build" white culture as if black culture is a commodity that can be purchased; and third, he implies that producers of white culture can and

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[19] Charters, *Country Blues*, xv.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.

should use other cultures as building material, but that producers of other cultures cannot or perhaps would not want to use white culture in the same fashion. In a sense, Charters is saying that black culture exists so white people can use it; furthermore, he is saying that his book about the blues exists so white people can learn about an aspect of black culture that they might be able to use to better understand both black people and themselves.

Country Blues remains a significant part of blues historiography, because it was the first in-depth study of blues singers and their recordings by any author. Written in 1959 and released with a new introduction in 1975, the book focuses on musicians that Charters believed were most relevant to audiences. Charters chose to determine the historical significance of blues artists by their popularity, which he measured in record sales. In the introduction to the 1959 edition, Charters notes "it would be artificial to discuss the music on any other level than that of its relationship with its own audience," an audience which he later claims is primarily if not exclusively black.[22] Thus, in an attempt at objectivity despite his admission in 1975 of intentionally romanticizing the narrative, Charters chooses to highlight musicians who were popular among the black recording buying audience in the South, but are not often remembered today.[23] Charters explains his reasoning for this in his preface to the 1975 edition of *Country Blues*:

> Even though I was trying to interest a young middle-class white audience in the blues I tried to give them a somewhat balanced picture of the blues by

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[22] Charters, *Country Blues*, xvii.

[23] For instance, Charters included singer-guitarists Lonnie Johnson and Rabbit Brown and singer Furry Lewis who sold many records in their day but whose records were not sought after by record collectors or white musicians in the late 1950s.

> structuring the book around commercial blues marketing. In other words I tried to keep the emphasis, as much as possible where the black audience would have placed it. So I didn't give much space to artists like Skip James or Charley Patton who became cult figures with young white guitar players. Instead, I was concerned with artists like Lonnie Johnson, who were spectacularly successful with their own black audience.[24]

Consequently, Charters did not limit his study to blues artists from the Mississippi Delta as other writers did in later blues history books. While Charters approach to deciding which musicians to include in his blues history has its limitations and his admission of purposefully romanticizing blues history to entice white readers reduces his credibility, to his credit he does not artificially limit the blues to one regional style.[25] Conversely, we see writers like Paul Oliver focus almost exclusively on musicians from the Delta.

British writer Paul Oliver is one of the best known of the first generation blues historians, and one of the first who accepted the idea of the Delta as the home of the blues. Oliver was not a musician or musicologist; he was an architectural writer with a penchant for record collecting. He eventually wrote nine books about the blues, five of them before 1970, and his scholarship has informed many blues fans and influenced later historians. His first book entitled *Blues Fell This Morning* was

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[24] Charters, *Country Blues*, xv.

[25] Charters approach has limitations, the primary one being that the blues musicians who got recorded were not necessarily those who were most popular amongst black audiences. For instance, Lonnie Johnson, one of the musicians that Charters discusses, had many opportunities to record, because he was based in St. Louis where there was a recording industry. Conversely, Son House is an example of musician who was popular with local audiences in his day, but whose recordings were not widely known.

published before his first trip to the Mississippi Delta to record rural blues musicians in April 1960.[26] His first book to come out after this trip was *Conversation With the Blues*.[27]

Unlike Charters's social justice-centered approach to writing blues history in *Country Blues*, Oliver took a scholarly, research-driven approach in *Blues Fell This Morning*. Oliver acknowledged the fact that he has not yet been to the United States and may have lacked first hand knowledge about the blues by saying, "Though possibly no further removed from my subject in distance than the historian is removed from his in time, I am acutely aware of my remoteness from the environment that nurtured the blues." [28] To justify his ability to write about the blues without personal experience of hearing live blues in the United States, Oliver points out that he has a similar type of knowledge of the music and the scene as a historian looking at ancient manuscripts would have of an ancient culture. Thus, if his readers are willing to believe other history books that they read, what reason should they have to not believe his version of blues history? To further legitimize his authority, he goes on to acknowledge several blues musicians including Big Bill Broonzy, Jimmy Rushing, Brownie McGhee, and Sonny Terry who visited Great Britain and patiently answered his questions.[29]

Oliver's role as an authority on the blues may have been confirmed in many blues fans minds in the glowing commendation he receives in Richard Wright's

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[26] Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, (New York: Horizon Press, 1960).

[27] Paul Oliver, *Conversation with the Blues*, (New York: Horizon Press, 1965).

[28] Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, ix

[29] Ibid.

foreword to *Blues Fell This Morning.* Wright's praise would have been indispensible to Oliver due to Wright's identity as a famous African American author and intellectual. Wright proclaimed, "As a southern-born American Negro, I can testify that Paul Oliver is drenched in his subject; his frame of reference is as accurate and concrete as though he himself had been born in the environment of the blues."[30] Wright found Oliver's perspective as an outsider to the blues scene – as he is not only white, but also British – to be particularly valuable saying,

> [H]is passionate interest in these songs is proof that the songs spoke to him across racial and cultural distances; he is geographically far enough from the broiling scene of America's racial strife to seize upon that which he, conditioned by British culture, feels to be abiding in them; and, in turn, whatever he finds enduring in those songs he can, and with easy conscience, relate to that in his culture which he feels to be humanly valid.[31]

Wright believed that Oliver has the capacity to be accurate and unbiased in his interpretation of the blues and seemed to believe a work that judges blues on aesthetic criteria is needed even though such a work might "come under the racial and political hammer" for not attempting to delve into social issues.[32] The seal of approval from a black intellectual like Wright likely made Oliver's book attractive to liberal white readers and may have given him credibility with black blues musicians when he went to the American South, as well.

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[30] Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, xvi.
[31] Ibid
[32] Ibid

On his 1960 trip to the American South, Oliver was interested in recording music and interviews with as many blues musicians as possible. His goal was to record their stories while they could still tell them and in *Conversation With the Blues*, he presents stories from over 80 of these musicians. While the blues lyrics that Oliver analyzed in *Blues Fell This Morning* came from several regions of the United States, he establishes early in *Conversation with the Blues* that he believes that Mississippi was the likely birthplace of the blues saying,

> Though its reputation is not unassailable, Mississippi has had the most advocates as the source of the blues. Undoubtedly the origins of the blues are far more complex but the 'Mississippi Blues' remains axiomatic as the essence of the blues feeling. Whole traditions have sprung up in Texas, in Georgia, in the Carolinas and Tennessee and Mississippi may owe much to some or all of them. Yet the lifeblood of the blues seems to follow the Mississippi River, feeding and nourishing the blues of Louisiana and Mississippi, parts of Arkansas, Tennessee, Missouri, and Illinois."[33]

Oliver's language in this passage is both noncommittal and romantic. He is careful to say that Mississippi's reputation as the source of the blues is "not unassailable" and that the origins of the genre are "far more complex."[34] Interestingly he then says the "'Mississippi Blues'" – he puts the words in quotations marks as though they are an idea rather than a style of blues – remains "axiomatic as the essence of the blues

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[33] Oliver, *Conversation with the Blues*, 11.

[34] Ibid

feeling."[35] Oliver is less of a historian and more of a romantic philosopher in this passage as he cannot decide whether or not blues music originally came from Mississippi, but is quite certain that it is where "the essence of the blues feeling" came from. While Oliver sees the "'Mississippi Blues'" as a specific abstract idea, the blues in Texas, Georgia, the Carolinas, and Tennessee are "traditions" which "may" have affected Mississippi. He then uses a metaphor of "the lifeblood of the blues" following the Mississippi River and "feeding and nourishing" Louisiana, Arkansas, Tennessee, Missouri, and Illinois. The romantic language Oliver uses to describe a blues sentiment somehow diffusing from Mississippi has become common in blues writing even though it does not mean much.

Oliver expresses his opinions on the blues more strongly in *Conversation With the Blues* than he did in *Blues Fell This Morning*, at least within the short section of *Conversation With the Blues* in which he actually writes original text. Most of the book is Oliver's compilation of short snippets of conversations he had with blues musicians, and the information he included and the way he ordered it is significant. While Oliver claimed the distinction between country blues and city blues was tenuous, he seemed to value rural blues over urban when he stated that he thought the blues were in a cultural decline with the increasing popularity of the urban Chicago style of the 1960s.[36] Additionally, he believed that the blues idiom was being diluted by copying of the music by rhythm and blues groups in the United Kingdom and white folk singers in the United States saying, "Well intentioned though their efforts,

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[35] Ibid

[36] Paul Oliver, review of *Let Me Tell You About the Blues* in Roberta Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues: The Transmission and Reception of American Blues Style in the United Kingdom* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 231.

well played and sung though their performances might be, theirs is essentially a derivative eclectic music. Its prevalence has brought much confusion and has led to considerable misunderstanding of the blues and could inadvertently speed its death."[37] This type of rhetoric paves the way for later blues writers who would continue his tradition of valuing unadulterated rural blues over the blues-influenced popular music he calls "derivative eclectic music".

Section 3: *The Delta Blues Becomes the Center*

One might expect that blues history books after the 1960s to focus less on the Delta blues as the Delta blues had been losing popularity in the Delta in favor of visiting urban blues and rhythm and blues acts. However, this was not the case. One important reason that the Delta blues continues to be in the forefront is the folk revival of the 1960s which included a renewed interest in Delta blues artists among new blues fans.[38]

The blues revival in the United States was a subset of this larger boom in the popularity of folk music. The folk revival included pop-folk artists like the Kingston Trio and Harry Belafonte, folk-rock artists like Joan Baez and Bob Dylan, revivalists like Pete Seeger whose goal was to preserve the integrity of folk styles, and

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[37] Oliver, *Conversation With the Blues*, 21.

[38] There is some debate amongst scholars as to whether revival is an appropriate term to describe the increasing popularity of folk music in the 1960s. For instance, Ralph Rinzler, co-founder of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, prefers to think of it as a folk boom rather than a revival because, although folk music was discovered and commoditized by a new audience in the 1960s, the music had existed in the folk communities all along; therefore, these newcomers to the music could not revive something that had not died.[38] Furthermore, many folk music scholars prefer to think of the folk revival as a process that is still going on today.[38] For that reason, the "great boom," folklorist Neil Rosenberg's term for the surge of interest in folk music during the 1960s, seems an accurate way to describe it.

"genuine" folk musicians who had been discovered.[39] Among the blues musicians who were involved in the revival were singer-guitarists from the Mississippi Delta including Mississippi John Hurt, Son House, Skip James, and Bukka White.[40] These musicians were rediscovered by diligent white revivalists who were either folklorists, musicians, fans, or some combination of all three. The use of the term rediscovery here is important, because it demonstrates that these blues artists had recorded and enjoyed some level of commercial success earlier in their lives. The fact that they had recorded but did not enjoy much commercial success made them particularly attractive to blues revivalists; their earlier recordings proved they had been playing blues when the blues was popular with African-Americans, but their relative obscurity made the music more like the rediscovered folk music from other folk communities.

Here a connection emerged between the blues revival and the construction of blues history. Many white music fans and record collectors were introduced to the blues during or soon after the folk revival. Some of these fans decide to write books about the blues. Since the blues revival was taking place as a subset of the larger folk revival, blues writers looked for a narrative that would show how a modern tradition related to a folk tradition. Building upon the ideas suggested by writers like Paul Oliver who thought the Mississippi blues tradition was the oldest and most important, these new writers went to Mississippi in search of the blues instead of looking in cities where urban blues scenes had started as early as the 1930s.

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[39] Dick Weissman, *Which Side Are You On?: An Inside History of the Folk Music Revival in America* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 144-146.

[40] Weissman, *Which Side Are You On?: An Inside History of the Folk Music Revival in America*, 197.

Another reason the Delta continued to be known as birthplace of the blues is because of the preferences of fans in Great Britain in the 1960s. Musicologist Roberta Freund Schwartz wrote her 2007 book *How Britain Got the Blues: The Transmission and Reception of American Blues Style in the United Kingdom* to explain how and why the blues gained popularity in Great Britain.[41] Although she discusses the history of the blues in Great Britain from the 1930s, it is her examination of the cross-cultural exchange between the musicians and audiences in Great Britain and the United States during the British blues revival of the 1960s that relates to the perpetuation of the Delta blues narrative. Schwartz contends that the revival in Great Britain came about because of two blues audiences of the late 1950s: young hipsters and the traditional (or "trad") jazz cognoscenti.[42] Feeling marginalized by the economic policies of the British government, the young hipsters felt a kinship to black blues musicians.[43] They were also attracted to blues because of its limited commercial appeal, and believed that listening to this music helped to show that they rejected consumerism.[44] When the trad jazz cognoscenti collected blues records in the early 1950s, they chose rural blues considering it the most authentic representation of the African American experience.[45] As American blues performers began visiting Great Britain in the mid-1960s, most British fans had heard

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[41] Schwartz might be seen as the heir to Paul Oliver's legacy, cleverly turning the tables and studying the development of the blues scene in her own country if she were British, but she isn't; rather, Schwartz is Oliver's foil, an American woman studying blues in Great Britain.

[42] Roberta Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues: The Transmission and Reception of American Blues Style in the United Kingdom* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 73.

[43] Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues: The Transmission and Reception of American Blues Style in the United Kingdom*, 74-75.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid, 49.

the blues only on record. Since they were more interested in seeing musicians they recognized, this, too, created an environment in which rural blues were valued over urban.[46]

One writer who exemplifies the tendency to favor Mississippi-born musicians and Delta style blues is Robert Palmer. Robert Palmer is a white American blues, jazz, and rock critic who bridges the age gap between the writers like Paul Oliver who made pilgrimages to the South in search of the roots of the blues and those who began writing about the blues in the 1990s when most rural blues artists had died. The son of a white musician and a white schoolteacher, Palmer grew up in Arkansas.[47] He spent most of his career writing about jazz and rock music, but made a significant contribution to blues literature with his 1981 book *Deep Blues*. In it, Palmer demonstrates his preference for the blues that originated in the Mississippi Delta above the Texas and Piedmont styles saying, "The Mississippi Delta's blues musicians sang with unmatched intensity in a gritty, melodically circumscribed, highly ornamented style that was closer to field hollers than it was to other blues."[48] Palmer argues that the Delta's blues is unique because of its intensity and uses his personal aesthetic preferences and its similarity to older African American music to justify this choice. However, the reason why a type of blues that sounds less like popular music and more like African predecessors should be focused on more than other types is not clear. Palmer says that he wants to compare the blues styles from

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[46] Ibid, 50.

[47] Chris Nelson, "Famed Music Critic Robert Palmer Dead at 52," vH1.com, 11/21/97, accessed 11/15/08.

[48] Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues* (New York: Viking Press, 1981), 44.

different regions to explain what makes the Delta blues style unique which would presumably justify his focus on the influence of this region above the others.[49]

Palmer focuses on several musicians who had been established previously as being important figures in the history of blues, and the way he writes about them that is of particular interest. For instance, the first Delta artist that Palmer discusses in detail is singer-guitarist Charley Patton who performed in the 1920s. Palmer inserts ideas from other blues narratives into Patton's story; for example, when speaking about how Patton's religious father disapproved of his son playing guitar at licentious parties and picnics Palmer mentions that this was "tantamount to selling one's soul to the Devil."[50] It is as though the Mississippi Delta is as much a character in Palmer's narrative of Patton's life as Patton himself. In addition, Palmer justifies Patton's inclusion in blues history because of his influence on three musicians who are considered significant in the blues canon today: Son House, a musician discovered during the 1960s blues revival who is most famous for teaching Muddy Waters; Bukka White, and whose early recordings influenced Bob Dylan; and Howlin' Wolf, who would go on to become Muddy Waters biggest competition in Chicago.[51] By pointing out not only how Patton influenced House, White, and Wolf, but how they subsequently influenced other famous musicians, Palmer establishes a blues lineage that begins in the Delta and spreads to a blues scene in Chicago as well as to folk and rock through Bob Dylan. Palmer's discussion of this particular blues lineage makes

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[49] Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 43.
[50] Ibid, 51.
[51] Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 62.

sense considering he believed that the Delta blues was more pure and, thus, more difficult to master than the blues from any other region saying,

> The fact of the matter is, Delta blues is a refined, extremely subtle, and ingeniously systematic musical language. Playing and especially singing it right involve some exceptionally fine points that only a few white guitarists, virtually no white singers, and not too many black musicians who learned to play and sing anywhere other than the Delta have been able to grasp.[52]

Thus, in choosing a musician who represented a continuation of the Delta style in another area he chooses Muddy Waters, the famous blues singer and guitarist who migrated from Mississippi to Chicago "because he best illustrates the places Delta blues has been and the places it's gone."[53] Waters is the central figure in Palmer's narrative of blues history and his emphasis on Waters means that setting up Charley Patton as a sort of grandfather to Waters would automatically justify Patton's canonization.

Palmer shares an intense interest in Muddy Waters with another blues writer, white American folklorist and musicologist Alan Lomax.[54] Although Lomax published his first book on the blues in 1994, his interest in the Delta blues predates Palmer's. Alan Lomax's fascination with blues began during his childhood in Texas as his father John was a folklorist interested in preserving as much American folk music as possible including blues music. He took his son with him on trips all over the American South during which they collected many types of songs, including blues

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[52] Ibid, 18.

[53] Ibid, 20.

[54] Lomax is credited with discovering Muddy Waters which he did while was on a trip to Mississippi collecting songs and looking for Robert Johnson.

songs. The elder Lomax was especially interested in recording black prisoners' songs and also advocated for their fair treatment as he believed if he did not, no one else would, because the prisoners were "'the forgotten ones who had no influential friends'".[55] The most famous prison protégé that John Lomax advocated for was Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter. He got Leadbelly out of prison early and arranged for him to have many singing engagements. However, John Lomax has been criticized and called a racist because some saw his relationship with Leadbelly one of a master and a servant, but as Marybeth Hamilton points out John Lomax was "a man of his time and place, worse than some and better than many."[56] Nonetheless, Alan's father was known for his incredible song collecting skills which included showing respect for black prisoners; for instance, Harold Spivake, head of the Library of Congress's Music Division went with Lomax to a prison and "watched him sit for hours with a blind banjo player, singing songs and swapping life stories."[57]

After traveling for years with his father, Alan Lomax eventually began collecting songs for the Library of Congress on his own.[58] *The Land Where the Blues Began* is Alan Lomax's 1993 memoir of his experiences collecting folk songs and

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[55] Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, 139-140.

[56] Ibid, 138-139.

[57] Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, 139.

[58] See Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (Pantheon Books: New York, 1993), 6-7. Although Alan was more liberal than his father and disagreed with his father's traditional white Southern mentality, he found that he sometimes had to play the part of a conservative Southern gentleman when dealing with white authority figures in the South during his research. For instance, when Alan was collecting music and stories for the Library of Congress, he had to convince some white police officers that he was not trying to make trouble while interviewing black musicians. Lomax tells of an encounter with two police officers in Memphis when he was recording some singers in a Beale Street shop. He emphasizes the fact that he is from the South which calms their fears about a white man interviewing black musicians until he makes the mistake of referring to one of the black musicians as Mister. This term belied Lomax's respect for the black man, which the police officers did not appreciate.

stories from African Americans in the Mississippi Delta in the 1940s and 1950s.[59] In the book, he chronicles not only his interactions with blues musicians, but his other fieldwork experiences with railroad workers, steam boat workers, levee workers, and his famous recordings of prison work songs at Parchman State Penitentiary in Mississippi. Lomax admired the prison songs so much that he called them "America's most moving song tradition" and said nothing could match the songs for sheer despair.[60]

As for songs outside prisons, Lomax chose to record the music and stories of rural Mississippi blues musicians. As the title of the book suggests, Lomax claims to know where the blues originated: in the Mississippi Delta in the early 1900s.[61] He argues that "Delta blacks" have historically had a harsher experience than other African-Americans and that "through every trial, Delta blacks had been buoyed up and propelled forward by the nourishing river of black cultural practice, maintained in the isolation of the Southern ghetto."[62] Thus, he felt that the Delta was the ideal place for the blues to be born. He extrapolates this point by saying:

> [T]he new song style of the Delta symbolized the dynamic continuance of African social and creative process as a technique of adaptation. Moreover, the birth of the blues and the struggles of its progenitors could be seen as a

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[59] Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, xv.
[60] Ibid, 285-286.
[61] Ibid, ix.
[62] Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, xiv.

creative deployment of African styles in an American setting, the operation of African temperament in new surroundings.[63]

Lomax thought that that the Mississippi Delta was the logical place for the most authentic blues to exist, because its culture was closely tied to African traditions. Thus, he tried to limit his interviews to musicians who were from the Delta, like Muddy Waters and Big Bill Broonzy. Lomax was not always able to limit his research in this way, however. Ironically, the chapter entitled "Blues in the Mississippi Night" contains Lomax's discussion with Broonzy and two musicians from elsewhere in the South: Memphis Slim from Arkansas, and Sonny Boy Williamson from Tennessee.[64] To further complicate this situation, they discussed experiences playing in Arkansas, not Mississippi. Lomax's inclusion of this story shows that regardless of how hard blues historians try, limiting blues history to Mississippi does not reflect reality.

Part 3: *The Second Generation*

Unlike the Lomaxes, the second generation of blues historians largely attempted to lead blues history out of the Delta and Francis Davis is the earliest example of such a historian. An author and journalist, Davis is best known as the jazz critic for the *Village Voice* and a contributing editor for *Atlantic Monthly*.[65] In his book, *The History of the Blues*, Davis sets himself apart from earlier blues historians with his compelling argument that perception of the past is often colored by

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[63] Ibid, xiv.

[64] This reference is to John Lee Williamson, the first singer and songwriter to call himself Sonny Boy Williamson. Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 459.

[65] "Francis Davis", *The Atlantic Online*, accessed 15 Nov 2008, <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/by/francis_davis>

contemporary taste.[66] Thus, the preference for rural blues musicians from the Mississippi Delta and the romanticization of blues in general by historians like Oliver and Palmer shaped public perception of which blues artists were most historically significant. For his part, Davis claims that the history of the blues is the history of folk art in the age of mechanical reproduction.[67] By this he meant that blues history was driven by the development of phonograph records in the 1920s. When Okeh Records released Mamie Smith's version of "Crazy Blues," black Americans became a consumer group and their folk music a consumer product.[68] Davis's book, therefore, focuses on the recorded history of the music and how records affected the musicians and the audience. In this way his work is similar to that of Charters, though Davis is not making the same claim that the he can measure the popularity of a blues artist by the number of records they produced; he is simply making a case for recordings as the main source of blues history. This is likely in part due to his identity as a jazz critic since much of jazz history relies heavily on recordings. Davis's views on blues history also have a different tone than the authors before him and those that follow him like Elijah Wald and Mary Beth Hamilton; for instance, he displays his dislike for typical nonfiction writing that demands a thesis statement saying, "Not only don't I have a thesis as such; my philosophy has always been to distrust anyone who has one."[69] Davis does not exactly succeed in not having a thesis. Although his prose lacks a central thesis, he gives his opinion on what was

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[66] Francis Davis, *The History of the Blues* (New York: Hyperion, 1995) pp. 29.
[67] Davis, *The History of the Blues*, 8.
[68] Ibid, 8.
[69] Davis, *The History of the Blues*, 5.

going on in each section of the book. Thus, he cannot follow through on his promise to be more objective than previous historians; he is simply subjective on a smaller scale.

A way in which Davis does contextualize blues differently from previous writers is by focusing on white blues fans instead of black blues fans. Davis asserts that white blues fans are seeking inclusion in "an oppositional black subculture" which gives them "a privilege denied to other whites."[70] These fans seek inclusion in this subculture out of a desire for interracial solidarity and personal authenticity gained from consuming what they perceive to be authentic music.[71] Davis also asserts that "guardianship of the blues has passed from the black community to white bohemia."[72] Thus, paradoxically, white fans have become deeply involved with the blues community even though it is no longer the oppositional subculture that Davis claims they were looking for.

Unlike Davis who tries to avoid a central thesis in his prose, Elijah Wald is another white blues writer who is not afraid to make a bold, controversial statement: that the history of the blues has been skewed by a focus on iconic figures from Mississippi, especially Robert Johnson. Wald, a guitarist as well as a writer, wrote his blues history book, *Escaping the Delta*, in 2004 and caused a stir in the world of blues scholarship. As Josh Rogers of the Portland Phoenix puts it *Escaping the Delta* is "Not only a great book for blues beginners, but a bomb that explodes all the romantic notion we have about race, class, and the creation of the blues at the crossroads."

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[70] Ibid, 238.

[71] David Grazian, *Blue Chicago: The Search for Authenticity in Urban Blues Clubs*, (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2003), 22-23.

[72] Davis, *The History of the Blues*, 237.

Robert Gabriel of the Austin Chronicle makes a similar, but more concise observation: "*Escaping the Delta* does an extraordinary job of sifting through the myths in order to unearth reality."[73]

What these reviewers fail to realize is how similar Wald's book is to one of the first blues history texts, Charters' *Country Blues,* in some significant respects. Reminiscent of Charters original intention with *Country Blues*, Wald wanted to write a blues history using standards of the original audiences and musicians as opposed to applying the standards of modern fans, experts, or academics. As Wald puts it, "Over and over again, the most influential and acclaimed stars of the period have been belittled or ignored by later writers and fans who happen to find them boring."[74] Wald even duplicates Charters' method of using record sales to measure popularity without any notable changes that would combat the limitations that come from using such a method, i.e. leaving out musicians popular in their communities who did not record and assuming that such a method will measure the standards of original audiences without consulting with anyone who lived through the era.

In *Escaping the Delta*, Wald attempts to demystify the life of Robert Johnson and in doing so shows how myths fascinate blues audiences, particularly white audiences. Johnson is considered by many blues fans to be one of the most important blues musicians of all time. Wald argues that Johnson's dominance has more to do with the myth that surrounds his life than his playing.[75] In doing so he also explains

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[73] The quotations from Rogers and Gabriel are included in the front matter of Wald's *Escaping the Delta.*

[74] Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, (New York: Amistad, 2004), 15

[75] Wald does undermine his argument against romanticizing Johnson when he analyzes Johnson's music and suggests that he is one of the great blues guitar players. While he admits to believing that

why believing in myths seems particularly important to white blues audiences. For example, he says blues fans don't want to believe that rural blues musicians were influenced by other black popular music, because:

> White urbanites, for obvious reasons, are fascinated by a creation myth in which genius blossomed, wild and untamed, from the Delta mud, and are less interested in an unromantic picture of Muddy Waters sitting by the radio listening to Fats Waller, or a sharecropper singing Broadway show tunes as he followed his mule along the levee.[76]

Thus, Wald believes that the main reason that white urbanites are interested in a creation myth where the blues began in Mississippi is because it is a romantic view of history and is in that way more exciting than a commercial view of history, a commercial view being the stance that Wald takes.

All of the historians I have mentioned perceive the story of the blues in slightly different ways. What all of their research shows, however, is a desire to present as authentic a portrayal of blues history as possible. Because of this, many made pilgrimages to cities or even specific clubs they considered influential in blues history. Unfortunately for them, their trips were often not the authentic experiences they wanted them to be. Older musicians in 1960s Mississippi were no longer performing in juke joints and in the 1990s formerly thriving clubs were closed in Memphis and Chicago. Davis explains that his trip to Beale Street in Memphis in the 1990s was like the 1960s trips to the Mississippi Delta for blues historians like

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Johnson's playing is exceptional, he insists that this does not mean he was as influential on the musicians of his day or those that followed immediately after.

[76] Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, 72.

Charters and Oliver. They were all "going to stare at things that aren't there anymore."[77]

The next chapter will provide more detail on the blues scenes in Chicago, Detroit, and Lansing. I will also explain why the scene in Chicago is considered by many white blues fans and blues writers to be more significant to the development of blues music than other scenes in the Midwest, mostly because it is a continuation of the Delta blues tradition. I will also argue that blues scenes in Michigan have been and are currently also important to the history of the blues.

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[77] Davis, The History of the Blues, 5.

Chapter 2: *Standing in the Shadow of Chicago: Blues History in Detroit and Lansing*

Part 1: *Blues at the center, blues at the periphery*

I arrived at the Chicago Blues Festival on June 13th, 2009. It was a beautiful late spring day in Grant Park and I was thrilled to finally be at the festival I had been reading about. As I walked past the three stages they looked much like the descriptions of the stages from the 1997 Chicago Blues Fest as recorded by David Grazian in his book, *Blue Chicago*. There was the Guitar Crossroads Stage (sponsored by Gibson), the Front Porch Stage, and the Mississippi Juke Joint stage, but what really caught my eye was a booth just to the right of the Juke Joint Stage. The booth had a sign above it that read "Mississippi" in bright read script with an outline of the state as it appears on a map. Below the booth's counter were the words "Mississippi Delta" in large black letters set over a partial roadmap of the state's Delta region. I went to the booth and was handed a bag which contained a map of a blues trail through Mississippi, many brochures for different blues tourist attractions in the state, a list of 2009 blues festivals in Mississippi, and a harmonica with the same script letters that were above the booth. I felt as though purpose of the booth was to sell the state of Mississippi to me, a blues fan in Chicago. This was blues tourism at its most obvious and shows an intentional effort by the tourism board from Mississippi to connect Chicago blues and Mississippi blues.

This experience was a demonstration of how blues in Chicago is linked to the Delta blues-centered narrative. As indicated in Chapter 1, blues historians generally show a strong preference for a Delta blues-centered narrative. As the Delta blues was being established at the center and interest in the blues grew among white audiences

through their interest in British musicians and the folk blues revival, some writers began turning to urban blues scenes to look for a different type of scene and, perhaps, connections to the Delta. Many thought they found that scene in the city of Chicago where several Mississippi-born blues artists became popular including Muddy Waters.[78] One way to explain the prominence of rural Delta blues in blues history at the expense of scenes as well as the subsequent success of Chicago blues above other urban blues scenes is through an adaptation of dependency theory.

Dependency theory presents the world as consisting of two poles. There are wealthy countries at the center and poor countries at the periphery. In blues scenes, the center would be the Delta blues scene and the Chicago scene which is included as an extension of the Delta. At the periphery would be all other blues scenes with varying degrees of distance from the center based on the age and size of the scene and any exceptional musicians that came out of them. In Michigan, for instance, a bigger and older scene like the one in Detroit would be closer to the center than a smaller and younger scene like the one in Lansing. In the Memphis scene, exceptional musicians like B.B. King put the scene closer to the center than scenes without such famous artists.

Another part of dependency theory is exploitation which can also be applied to a center-periphery model for blues scenes. In the global capitalist system, center countries exploit periphery countries for their cheap labor and abundant natural resources. In blues scenes today, the Delta and Chicago blues scenes retain a higher status than the scenes in other locations. The Delta and Chicago have cultural capital

[78] Before his settlement in Chicago, had been discovered in Mississippi by Alan Lomax while Lomax was looking for Robert Johnson.

which they will continue to have as long as the Delta blues-centered narrative remains pervasive in blues discourse. This cultural capital can transfer to real capital as my story of the Mississippi booth at the Chicago Blues Festival suggests. Dependency theorists believe that underdevelopment at the periphery is a result of development at the center as the two groups are part of the same global capitalist whole.[79] Because blues scenes in Michigan do not have the same level of cultural capital as blues scenes in Mississippi or Chicago, musicians, club owners, and Michigan cities in general cannot get as much real capital from blues music. The close proximity of Detroit to Chicago has historically kept the Detroit blues from receiving a similar level of national recognition. Furthermore, the Chicago scene has directly exploited the Detroit scene. For instance, Chicago blues musicians often play in Detroit and other Michigan cities at clubs and festivals, but Detroit blues musicians rarely play in Chicago. Thus, of the urban blues scenes in the Midwest, Chicago enjoys real economic benefits at the center at the expense of the Detroit scene and smaller Michigan scenes even further from the center.

Part 2: *Chicago Moves to the Center*

The urban blues scholarship that emerged in the mid-1960s disputed the predominant narrative that privileged rural blues, yet the urban blues that got the most attention was the style that most closely resembles rural Delta blues: Chicago blues.[80] Therefore, while urban blues was recognized by scholars after having existed in many

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[79] J. Timmons Roberts. *From Modernization to Globalization*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 12.

[80] There is a sonic connection between the Chicago blues and the Delta blues, but whether it is a stronger connection than the connection of the Detroit blues and the Delta blues or any other scene is debatable.

cities since at least the 1930s, it is only the type that is linked to the Delta style that gets a significant place in history. The first book to focus entirely on Chicago blues was *Urban Blues* by Charles Keil. Keil's view of blues history is more similar to Samuel Charters's early work with its attention to social issues than to Paul Oliver's aesthetic approach. His choice to write about urban blues and put more emphasis on social issues may have been in part because Keil comes from an academic background; he was an American Studies professor at the State University of New York in Buffalo until his retirement in 2000.[81] Keil's background is significant because he writes from the perspective of an academic who is not trained in music as well as a radical thinker on social issues rather than a liberal thinker like Charters.

In *Urban Blues*, Keil sets himself apart from other blues writers in the first line of the Preface in which he writes, "I have restrained a strong impulse to write a soul-baring autobiographical preface for the simple reason that much of who I am comes out in the book; how I got that way is probably irrelevant."[82] He points out the trend that most blues historians follow: to detail their personal experiences on collecting trips and how those experiences made them feel in their books. Another early indication of the tone of Keil's book is the dedication to Malcolm X, which as he explains in the introduction was not simply because Malcolm X had recently died; rather the dedication was a tribute to discussions he had with Malcolm X when he was in college which he says, "had a profound effect upon my understanding of the American malady."[83] Keil's mention of his relationship with Malcolm X is similar to

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[81] <http://ublib.buffalo.edu/archives/ead/1064/1064.frame.html>

82 Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), vii.

[83] Keil, *Urban Blues*, viii.

Richard Wright's introduction to Paul Oliver's book; it is meant to give more credibility to Keil, and, especially, to suggest that he can speak with authority about racial issues despite his identity as a white male academic.

Keil's book was the first blues history to focus on the urban blues scene in Chicago, and he suggests one reason why previous writers have devoted little attention to this scene. Keil says that several writers including Samuel Charters, Paul Oliver, and Alan Lomax have much in common, most importantly a quest for "real" blues. Keil says that for these authors:

> The criteria for a real blues singer, implicit or explicit, are the following. Old age: the performer should preferably be more than sixty years old, blind, arthritic, and toothless... Obscurity: the blues singer should not have performed in public or have made a recording in at least twenty years; among deceased bluesmen, the best seem to be those who appeared in a big city one day in the 1920s, made from four to six recordings, and then disappeared into the countryside forever. Correct tutelage: the singer should have played with or been taught by some legendary figure. Agrarian milieu: a bluesman should have lived the bulk of his life as a sharecropper, coaxing mules and picking cotton, uncontaminated by city influences.[84]

Although he admits these criteria are exaggerated, Keil insists that blues writing is romanticized and the romantic notion of the blues does not include urban blues. He gives a particularly scathing account of a blues concert he attended in London:

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[84] Keil, *Urban Blues*, 34-35.

> Aside from a slobbery but impassioned harmonica solo by Sonny Boy Williamson, a couple of numbers in which Howlin' Wolf coerced the dilapidated rhythm section into a more cohesive state, and an all too brief display of artistry by Lightnin' Hopkins, the concert might be best described as a third-rate minstrel show.[85]

He then contrasts the experience with the Chicago blues scene in black neighborhoods in 1966.

> The same show presented to a Negro audience in Chicago (assuming they could be enticed into watching a parade of invalids in the first place) would be received with hoots of derision, catcalls, and laughter.[86]

Keil then attempts to explain other blues writers' preference for old, Delta blues by suggesting it is "a semi-liberal variant of the patronizing 'white man's burden' tradition that has shaped white attitudes toward Negroes for centuries. Somehow a 'we-know-what's-best-for-them' or 'we-know-what's-best-in-their-music' attitude helps to alleviate some of the oppressive guilt that many whites cannot help feeling."[87] In blues history in particular Keil saw the writer's intentional ignorance of urban blues as a way to avoid going into black neighborhoods and coming face to face with the urban ghetto.

Keil felt other blues writers were out of touch with the scene in urban areas which Keil thought was a vibrant, emerging tradition that deserved attention. He wrote, "It is so much easier to reminisce with old bluesmen, collect rare records, and

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[85] Keil, *Urban Blues*, 37.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid, 38.

write histories than it is properly to assess a career-conscious singer, analyze an on-going blues scene, and attempt to understand the blues as a Chicago Negro in 1966 understands them."[88] Although this last statement is probably over-generalizing the situation – Alan Lomax, in particular, was a scholar who worked quite hard at documenting an entire folk culture – Keil seems to be the first in the discourse on blues to make the claim that white historians and collectors are suffering from white liberal guilt like many others during the 1960s. In a calculated move, Keil separates himself from these authors by praising *Blues People* by black author Amiri Baraka.[89] However, in keeping with the theme of *Urban Blues*, he also criticizes Baraka's neglect of the contemporary blues scene and his denial of connection between the secular and sacred traditions in black music.[90]

While Keil believed that live blues scenes were alive and well in 1960s Chicago, some later scholars did not agree. In his 1975 book *Chicago Breakdown*, Mike Rowe argues that by the 1960s live blues had begun to die out in Chicago. The book is mostly a history of the blues recording industry in Chicago in the 1950s, and the information it does include about the live music scene in the 1960s and early 1970s is meant to prove that the music had peaked in 1950s and had been on a steady decline ever since. He contends that their lack of radio airplay hurt blues musicians' efforts to develop a following and does not attribute this to a simple change in taste or financial constraints, but the changing social environment. He says,

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[88] Keil, *Urban Blues*, 38.

[89] Baraka was still known as LeRoi Jones when he wrote *Blues People*.

[90] Keil, *Urban Blues*, 40.

> While the 60s reduction in blues programming on the black stations was probably at first due to financial considerations it's certain that the policy was enforced by a militant black establishment, which was attempting to raise 'standards' and viewed with distaste anything which it imagined smack of slavery on 'Uncle Tomism'.[91]

Rowe then concludes that as radio airplay had been a major factor in the growth of the Chicago style that the lack of airplay would lead to its demise.[92] Although Rowe maintains that blues musicians saw making records as secondary to public performances, he explains that the two were intricately connected saying,

> Records were for publicity and if a hit record ensured stead work in clubs or on the road, all well and good; any royalties would then be icing on the cake. So the change in policy of the radio stations meant a serious lack of earning power through fewer jobs.[93]

Although Rowe's assertion that there was a decrease in the popularity of the blues is valid, blues scenes in Chicago did not disappear after the 1960s as Rowe himself admits. When talking about the Chicago blues scene in the early 1970s, Rowe points out that while there was blues music being played, it was of questionable quality saying,

> [T]he main argument concerns the quality of the music and it is true that the sound of Chicago's blues has changed, as most of the younger men play in a pastiche of the B.B. King style, with its inherent limitations, while those older

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[91] Mike Rowe, *Chicago Breakdown*, (New York: Drake Publishers, 1975), 191.
[92] Rowe, *Chicago Breakdown*, 191-2.
[93] Ibid, 192.

singers who still play in the early '50s style obviously do so with less dexterity than they had 20 years ago.[94]

Although he does not make it clear what he thought B.B. King's inherent limitations were that would prevent modern blues musicians from being successful, Rowe was convinced that the Chicago blues style would die out.

The Chicago blues did not die out in the 1970s, however, as David Whiteis documents in his 2006 book *Chicago Blues: Portraits and Stories.* In his introduction, Whiteis states that he intended the book to be "something of a corrective to the pessimistic conclusion on the future (or even the present) of Chicago blues that Mike Rowe draws in his landmark 1973 study *Chicago Breakdown.*"[95] Whiteis recognizes a cycle in the development of the blues where there is tension between traditional values and modernist challenges to those values in succeeding generations.[96] A writer like Rowe pronouncing the death of the genre at a time where the definition of Chicago blues was in flux is a typical example of this cycle. Whiteis shows that blues scenes have persevered in Chicago through interviews with and stories about three different group of Chicago blues musicians: older musicians who helped develop the postwar style and then continued playing in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s who he calls Elder Statesmen; younger blues musicians who were playing in the traditional Chicago blues style at the time of his publication in 2006 who he calls Torchbearers; and Chicago musicians who categorize their modern style of music as

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[94] Rowe, *Chicago Breakdown*, 207.

[95] David Whiteis, *Chicago Blues: Portraits and Stories*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 4.

[96] Ibid.

soul-blues. He also includes in-depth descriptions of several venues in Chicago all of which were active at least into the 1980s, and some of which are still active today.

Another writer who uses interviews with musicians and analysis of venues in his study of blues in Chicago is sociologist David Grazian in his book, *Blue Chicago.* This book also includes a special emphasis on authenticity and the blues audience in Chicago in the late 1990s. Grazian confessed that he became interested in going to blues clubs because they promised an escape from his stuffy life as a white graduate student.[97] He went on to explain the appeal of blues clubs in particular:

> [T]he blues club promised the excitement of real action: the music was loud and fast, the audience was always drunk, and the band was usually even drunker. At the club, the bouncers and bartenders didn't care how many books you had read, only whether you were having fun and paying for another round.[98]

While club staff and audience members seemed excited to talk to Grazian about their experiences in blues clubs, he found it more difficult to gain acceptance with the musicians. However, when he decided to sit in and play saxophone with the bands, he had an easier time building a rapport with them. Rather than focusing on stories of the famous blues musicians who used to live and work in Chicago, Grazian writes about modern working musicians. He also highlights a phenomenon that began after many of the first generation blues histories had already been written: the blues festival. Using the 1997 Chicago Blues Festival as his example, Grazian explains how the festival shows that blues has always been a cultural product in Chicago. In

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[97] Grazian, *Blue Chicago: The Search for Authenticity in Urban Blues Clubs,* 10.
[98] Ibid, 10.

addition to festivals, Grazian's book explores the newer Chicago scene in North Side clubs where wealthier patrons, many of them white Chicagoans or tourists, go to see blues performed by all black or mixed race bands. His experiences in this scene show how the Chicago blues scene has gone from being a subversive urban scene at the periphery to being a Mecca for blues tourism and an urban extension of the Delta blues tradition.

Blues scenes are a big part of tourism in Chicago, but the same cannot be said of blues scenes in elsewhere in the Midwest. While Chicago stands alone as the biggest and most vibrant blues scene in the county, even the most famous of the Michigan blues scenes, the scene in Detroit, is rarely mentioned in blues history, let alone in a discussion of national blues havens of today.

Part 3: *Fighting for recognition in Detroit*

"If you is not a fighter, you won't make it in Detroit. See what I'm sayin'? You will not make it in Detroit, because Chicago has always gotten all of the recognition. You got some super good musicians here, but they trapped. They don't know how to get out."[99]

Blues scenes in Michigan cities are marginalized in most blues history texts largely because these scenes were overshadowed by the scene in Chicago.[100] If the Detroit scene is mentioned at all, it is usually in reference to two musicians who spent the formative parts of their respective careers in Detroit: Major Merriweather, a

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[99] Detroit guitarist Eddie Burns in a 1992 interview with Charles Murray, John Lee Hooker's biographer in Charles Shaar Murray, *Boogie Man: the adventures of John Lee Hooker in the American Twentieth Century*, (New York: Griffin, 2002), 143.

[100] *Before Motown*, a book that details the history of jazz in Detroit before the rise of Motown Records, does include some information about blues in Detroit.

pianist who played in Detroit in the 1920s more commonly known by his stage name Big Maceo, and guitarist John Lee Hooker who achieved fame after WWII. Most blues fans outside Michigan may not even think of Michigan as a place with blues scenes because of musicians; perhaps the only way some fans link blues to Detroit is because of the frequency that the city is mentioned in song lyrics.[101] There are and were blues scenes in Michigan beyond these two musicians and these song lyrics, but few blues fans outside of Michigan are familiar with these scenes. I will discuss the history of blues in Michigan in this chapter and current blues scenes in Chapter 3.

One reason that some use to explain the prominence of the Chicago blues over the Detroit blues is that the Chicago style sounds closer to the Delta blues. This difference in the styles of the post-war Chicago and Detroit blues scenes can be summed up by a former Detroit blues drummer, Tom Whitehead. Whitehead says, "See, the Chicago [blues style] is exactly like it was in the Deep South. Detroit doesn't sound direct from Mississippi or Alabama."[102] Rather, Detroit blues has its own sound which came out of an eclectic musical tradition in Detroit. The difference can be heard when comparing Detroit-based guitarist John Lee Hooker's style to Muddy Water's. Blues scholar Mike Rowe contrasted the styles when he said,

> While Muddy's updated Mississippi blues were a readily identifiable model for younger bluesmen to copy and develop from, Hooker's maverick style was a one-off. In its purest form its impossibility to adapt to a band style was

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[101] Lars Bjorn and Jim Gallert, *Before Motown: a History of Jazz in Detroit 1920-60*, (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), 11.

[102] Murray, *Boogie Man*, 175.

another deterrent. Hooker's blues were archaic and primitive and quite simply defied imitation.[103]

Although Rowe's characterization of Hooker's blues as both "maverick" and "archaic and primitive" is somewhat contradictory and problematic, his assertions that Hooker's style was difficult to adapt to a band style and that it defied imitation are supported by musical evidence. Rather than following a standard blues form with two repeated lines followed by a third line, Hooker sometimes writes in a through-composed style in his verses which would have made him more difficult for other musicians to follow than a guitarist following a standard from.

Hooker's inimitable blues is illustrative of a larger trend in Detroit blues, in particular; live blues shows in Detroit were different from Chicago shows because when they played live most Detroit blues musicians were backed by variety bands that played different genres of music along with blues. This was seen as a necessity in order to satisfy the needs of the audience. As Detroit guitarist Eddie Burns explained it,

> We had that for a long time in Detroit. As a bluesman you featured, but you got this variety band. That's been goin' on here for years. The band is playin' everything, including your thing. See what I'm sayin'? That way, you gettin' a mixed clientele. You was gettin' a mixed crowd when it was like that. Couldn't nobody say, 'Well, I don't like the blues,' because they could say, 'But I like swing music and this rhythm'n'blues.'[104]

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[103] Bjorn and Gallert, *Before Motown*, 176-77.

[104] Murray, *Boogie Man*, 173.

Due to these circumstances, blues in Detroit is not as clearly defined as a distinct genre as blues in Chicago. To further support this idea, in addition to the supporting musicians playing music from various genres, the featured blues musicians also had to learn other styles. According to Burns:

> Unfortunately, Detroit is not the same kind of scene that Chicago was, or is today. You got a lot of great musicians here, but [Detroit is] a strange scene, has always been, still is. To be successful in Detroit you cannot just become a real successful blues musician only; you have to learn to play something else in Detroit. You don't have to do that in Chicago, but here you do.[105]

Burns felt that in Chicago blues musicians could afford to play only blues music, but in Detroit blues musicians could not.

Whatever the reasons for the difference between blues styles in Chicago and Detroit, Chicago has maintained a style of blues that is very closely linked to the Delta style, and they have also maintained a blues scene that is much better known outside the Midwest than the scene in Detroit. As the popularity of Delta style blues increased among white fans in the 1960s as part of the folk blues revival, fans within and outside the Midwest logically became interested in the urban blues that was most like the Delta blues; thus, any later interest in the Detroit scene from white audiences outside of southeast Michigan was less than the interest in Chicago scene. Additionally, there was a better infrastructure for blues recording in Chicago than in Detroit. The recording business in Detroit did not do much to support Detroit blues. Probably more Detroit blues musicians were recorded in Chicago than in Detroit.

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[105] Murray, *Boogie Man*, 175.

Also, blues music has become part of tourism in Chicago. While Detroit is associated with musical styles like techno and Motown, no musical genre is used by the city of Detroit to attract tourists in the same way that the city of Chicago uses its blues scene. For example, although Detroit may sometimes be called Motown, the Motown record company left Detroit in the 1970s and there is no Motown scene like the blues scene in Chicago today.

As a consequence of all of this, there have been blues musicians from Chicago being invited to perform in Detroit since the early days of the genre, but it has never been an even exchange. This is where the center-periphery model can help explain how capital flows from Detroit at the periphery directly to Chicago at the center. Famous Coachman, a recently deceased blues radio host from Detroit, lamented this problem in a 1992 interview:

> Every year we bring Chicago guys in and all through the year we put 'em in places, in the nightclubs here, but Chicago never see fit to book any Detroit acts over to Chicago, not even playin' in a nightclub, or on the festival. Nine years they had a festival; this year is the first they put one guy on there; that was Eddie Burns.[106]

So although Detroit club owners and festival organizers have supported Chicago blues artists by welcoming them to play in the city, people who booked blues musicians in Chicago never reciprocated.

This phenomenon still persists in Detroit and it happens in other Michigan cities, as well. For instance, at the 2008 Old Town Blues Fest in Lansing, MI, the

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[106] Murray, *Boogie Man*, 175.

Saturday night headliner was a Chicago blues singer-guitarist named Carl Weathersby. At Callahan's in Auburn Hills, MI, one of the home bars of the Detroit Blues Society, the club owner prefers to book only national acts meaning Michigan bands generally only open at the club, according to Steve Allen, the bass player in the band Tomas Esperanza and the Boa Constrictors and historian of the Detroit Blues Society. This is not to say these club owners or festival organizers don't support Michigan blues; the 2008 Old Town Blues Festival did have a Michigan-born blues singer, Sharrie Williams, headline on Friday night and Callahan's sponsors competitions for local bands. However, generally speaking, Chicago musicians have an easier time getting gigs elsewhere in the Midwest than Detroit musicians due Chicago's reputation for excellent blues which originally stemmed from a connection to the Delta.

Part 4: *Early Blues Scenes in Detroit*

To understand the history of the blues scenes in Michigan cities requires some knowledge of the history of racial relations, labor patterns, and housing in Michigan. This is especially true in the largest urban area in Michigan, Detroit. From the end of the Civil War until WWI, there was some black migration to Detroit and the black community was largely confined to the Near East Side.[107] As in Chicago, black migrants from the South began to arrive in greater numbers in Detroit when the Great Migration began in approximately 1915. Detroit's particular appeal lay in the number of well-paying job opportunities the auto industry, which brought in southern

[107] Bjorn and Gallert, *Before Motown*, 4.

migrants in droves.[108] This population shift resulted in a housing shortage in the 1920s. Racial discrimination resulted in the black population being crowded into the Near East side neighborhood which became known as Black Bottom. The exact boundaries of the Black Bottom are debatable and have shifted over time, but the largest approximation is that the Bottom went from Russell and Chene streets to the east, Van Dyke to the west, south to the Detroit River, and north to the outskirts of Hamtramck.[109] The influx of black workers into the Detroit area led to the creation and expansion of black businesses, especially restaurants and boardinghouses.[110]

Another type of business that emerged in the black neighborhood during the 1910s and 1920s is specifically connected to the beginning of the blues tradition in Detroit: theaters. These theaters were mostly located in Black Bottom on Hastings Street, though there were a few in the downtown area. The Vaudette and the Koppin Theatre were both part of the black vaudeville circuit, and they were, therefore, an important part of the black music scene in the 1920s.[111] The Theater Owners' Booking Association or TOBA, the vaudeville circuit for African American performers in the 1920s and 1930s, was organized in 1920. Early 1921 the Vaudette became part of TOBA; however, it was quickly replaced by the Koppin Theater in June 1921. Black vaudeville acts that came through the Koppin included blues

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[108] In 1915, Detroit's black population was 7,000; in 1920, 40,000; in 1930, 120,000 or 7.7 percent of the total population in the city. Holli, *Detroit*, 271 in Bjorn and Gallert, 4.

[109] Murray, *Boogie Man*, 97.

[110] Richard W. Thomas, "From Peasants to Proletetarians: The Formation and Organization of the Black Industrial Working-Class in Detroit, 1915-1945" in Bjorn and Gallert, 4.

[111] Bjorn and Gallert, *Before Motown*, 7.

singers like Mamie Smith, Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, Ma Rainey, Clara Smith, and Sara Martin.[112]

At the same time, there was an urban blues scene in smaller venues in Detroit and blues musicians played at house parties, as well. Boogie woogie piano players like Speckled Red (Rufus Perryman), Charlie Spand, Will Ezell, and Big Maceo were the most famous Detroit blues musicians who played in clubs that came out of this period.[113] Of these musicians, Big Maceo is probably best remembered today. A migrant from Georgia, Maceo moved to Detroit in 1924 where he worked as a handyman for the Ford Motor Company during the day and played at house parties and in bars at night.[114] Maceo did not achieve fame until he moved to Chicago to begin his recording career in 1941. Although Detroit may have been a fine place to play for a musician who was content to play the club scene, for those who aspired to record – and thereby become known outside of Detroit – it lacked the record-producing infrastructure of record labels, booking agents, and talent scouts that Chicago had.[115]

Guitarist John Lee Hooker's career mirrors Big Maceo's in that he also cut his teeth in Detroit, but did not achieve his greatest levels of success until he left for Chicago. Unlike Maceo, Hooker did have some experience recording while he was still living in Detroit, both by recording for the small-time label Sensation in Detroit,

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[112] Bjorn and Gallert, *Before Motown*, 11-12.

[113] The term boogie-woogie originated in Detroit according to the patter between Charlie Spand (piano) and Blind Blake (guitar) on their 1929 recording of "Hastings Street." Boogie-woogie was used to refer to music or dancing in Detroit. From Peter J. Silvester, *A Left Hand Like God*, 7.

[114] Prior to World War II, Ford was the only car company that hired blacks in large numbers. See Bjorn and Gallert, 10.

[115] Murray, *Boogie Man*, 93.

by getting some of those recordings sold to the Los Angeles-based label Modern, and by making some recordings for a black record store owner from Detroit, Joe Von Battle, under pseudonyms while still under contract with Sensation.[116] Von Battle was notorious for recording Detroit artists and selling those tracks to Chicago labels; as Famous Coachman, a former Detroit disc jockey, explains: "Joe Von Battle used to feed Leonard Chess a lot of Detroit music. Joe used to get the guys together in his record shop in the back room and cut 'em one a tape, and the next day he been an' sold it to Leonard Chess, and they didn't even known nothin' about it."[117] As with much of the music that was recorded by African-American artists across the country in various genres, Hooker did not actually get paid much for his legitimate recordings, so even though he did not get paid much more from doing side work for Von Battle, he did it because he needed the money.

As time went on smaller venues like bars and clubs completely eclipsed theaters as the place to commonly hear the blues, but even then, not all of the black community was interested in hearing the blues, or at least not only the blues. Some obvious objectors were those who were church going folks who would not go to the rough part of the Black Bottom where some of the clubs were located.[118] There were also some middle class blacks who favored jazz over blues, because they perceived the blues as working class music; consequently, jazz players tended to play more plush clubs and were better compensated. As guitarist John Lee Hooker's brother-in-law Paul Mathis explains it, "Blues was strugglin'. It was jitterbug and jivin' back in

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[116] Murray, *Boogie Man*, 143.

[117] Ibid.

[118] As a neighbor of John Lee Hooker's family mentioned in an interview with Murray, "If you have any type of respect you stay off Hastings." (See Murray, *Boogie Man*, 103)

those days. The blues singers was playin' for a nickel over here, and the guy playin' the jitterbug, he was getting' a quarter, that sort of thing."[119] Consequently in order to make more money, Detroit blues musicians sometimes played other types of music to get higher paying gigs. Despite blues musicians having a necessity to sometimes play other types of music, there were popular clubs that often featured blues in the Black Bottom like the Champion Bar, Sugar Hill, Henry's Swing Club and the Apex Bar, and outside the Black Bottom like the Caribbean Club. More upscale clubs such as Sport Reed's Show Bar and Lee's Sensation would also feature more well-known Detroit blues acts like John Lee Hooker when he began gaining recognition in Detroit in the late 1940s as well as blues players from Chicago. Unfortunately, the popularity of such clubs could not save Detroit blues from becoming a casualty of massive economic and demographic changes that would disrupt everyday life for the city's African American community.

Part 5: *The Urban Renewal Blues*

No story of blues in Detroit and Lansing is complete without an explanation of one of the most significant events that affected the African American populations of these cities: urban renewal. Urban renewal devastated predominantly black neighborhoods in both cities and similar projects destroyed inner city neighborhoods all over the country. The precursors to urban renewal were private and federal lending policies in the 1940s. After World War II, the Federal Housing Administration and private lenders offered loans to white home buyers moving to the

[119] Murray, *Boogie Man*, 102

suburbs while simultaneously limiting loans in older inner-city neighborhoods.[120] After many whites had left cities for the suburbs, federally assisted urban renewal programs began in the 1950s and continued into the 1960s. These projects were justified as programs designed to build more housing for the poor, but often housing units were torn down and new housing was never built. Ninety percent of the units removed for urban renewal were never replaced.[121] Along with urban renewal and white flight to the suburbs came federally funded highway projects. These highways were meant to connect the predominantly white suburbs to employment in the downtown areas of cities, and they also happened to run straight through predominantly minority areas in many U.S. cities including Los Angeles, Houston, and St. Louis.[122] Both urban renewal and federal highway projects affected the Michigan cities of Detroit and Lansing, and the building of I-75 through Detroit had a direct effect on the blues scene.

While urban renewal was only one of several reasons that blues scenes declined in Detroit, I believe it is a significant one because urban renewal destroyed Paradise Valley, the black entertainment center in Detroit. Blues clubs and bars were still active in the Black Bottom in the 1950s when urban renewal plans were announced that would destroy the neighborhood. First came the Gratiot Redevelopment site in 1950 which was a collaboration of the federal government and the city to clear a large area of the Near East Side. This created a severe housing

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[120] George Lipsitz, "The Possessive Investment in Whiteness", *American Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1995), 373.
[121] Ibid, 374.
[122] Ibid.

shortage for the displaced residents, 98 percent of whom were black.[123] To make matters worse, the federal government proposed a highway plan which would extend Interstate-75 through the city of Detroit. The path the government chose was straight through the Black Bottom neighborhood with several blues clubs scheduled for demolition along with many housing units and other businesses. In 1959, the highway was built and Paradise Valley was destroyed.[124]

In Lansing, the apparent lack of a thriving blues scene before the 1960s is probably related to later growth of the black population than in Detroit and the bisection of the existing black community by a federal highway project in the 1960s. I could not find anyone who knew about blues in Lansing before the 1960s. This could be because blues did not take root in Lansing until the folk blues revival in the 1960s, a mostly white movement, brought blues to Lansing. However, considering that blues music was popular at small clubs in Detroit before urban renewal and changing musical tastes led to a decline in live blues in Detroit coupled with the fact that the black populations in the two cities were similar in class status and job functions, it seems reasonable to conclude that there may have been blues music in Lansing before the 1960s. However, Lansing's African American population grew later than that population in Detroit and other Michigan cities. Between 1940 and 1950, the African American population in Lansing tripled from 1,638 in 1940 to 3,290 in 1950.[125] By 1960, the population had increased again to 6,745.[126] Since

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[123] Bjorn and Gallert, *Before Motown*, 107.

[124] Ibid.

[125] Bruce Brown, "Residential Relocation Survey: a case study of highway relocation in Lansing, Michigan", Master's Thesis, Michigan State University, 1965, 2

urban renewal began in Lansing shortly after the 1960, as I will illustrate further, it is probable that a blues scene that would look similar to the club scene in Detroit did not have time to take root in Lansing before the bisection of Lansing's black community.

Black migrants to Lansing came to the city for similar reasons as black migrants to Detroit; they were looking for work. As in Detroit, many of these new Lansing residents had been sharecroppers in the South and came to Michigan after hearing about jobs in industrial plants.[127] As Dorothy Kennedy, a social worker who came to Lansing in 1946, explained in an interview with the Lansing State Journal, "Oldsmobile and Fisher Body went to Alabama, Mississippi and Arkansas and brought workers back to Lansing. That's how the population of Lansing grew."[128] Housing was a major problem for the growing African American population, because when these African American families reached Lansing, they found a shortage of affordable housing that was made available to them. As a result, they lived with friends and relatives or doubled and tripled up in houses meant for one family.[129] The situation was made worse by realtors who restricted African Americans' housing opportunities to the poorer areas of Lansing, especially the area north of the Oldsmobile plant. Eventually they expanded this area further north and an area that had previously been exclusively single family homes turned into two and three family units to accommodate the growing population.[130] In addition, African American

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[127] Ibid, 2-3

[128] Stacey Range, "Lansing in the 1950s: Changing City", *Lansing State Journal*, February 13, 2006

[129] Brown, "Residential Relocation Survey: a case study of highway relocation in Lansing, Michigan", 3

[130] Ibid, 3.

families bought available housing at prices that often exceeded property values by two or three times.[131]

In the 1960s, various corporate, state, and federal building projects began eliminating hundreds of units where African American families lived in Lansing. From 1961-1965, 168 units were purchased and cleared by Oldsmobile. Local officials estimated that 90% of the families displaced by this project settled in the immediate area causing "a critical housing shortage and the overuse of existing facilities."[132] Also from 1961-1965, another 334 units were demolished due to the State Capital expansion code, the Oakland extension project, and private demolition.[133] One project, a road called the Pinetree Connector, would be the first omen of a greater problem to come. Construction of the Pinetree Connector displaced 100 families in the Urbandale area on Lansing's eastside, but it was only the first part of the construction of I-496, the highway that was built straight through the heart of the black community in Lansing.[134] As Lisa Fine wrote in *REO Joe*, her book about the REO auto plant and working class life in Lansing:

> By the early 1960s Lansing had begun vigorously and successfully to pursue federal funds for highway construction and the 'Great Society' programs designed to create model U.S. cities. But what began as an effort to modernize and to eradicate 'urban blight' ended up, tragically, destroying

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[131] Brown, "Residential Relocation Survey: a case study of highway relocation in Lansing, Michigan", 3.
[132] Ibid, 4.
[133] Ibid, 5.
[134] Ibid.

downtown businesses and residential districts where poor, predominantly African American families lived.[135]

The construction of I-496 was a federal highway project, like the construction of I-75 in Detroit. Also, as with the Detroit highway, I-496 bisected Lansing's black community and destroyed 600 housing units. [136] Early estimates suggested that 604 families were displaced by the construction.[137] The federal and state governments took no responsibility for relocating families which left the City of Lansing totally unprepared for having over 600 families displaced even though they had known for years that the highway would be built.

Several different groups designed surveys to determine the needs of the displaced community. The NAACP conducted a survey with the following conclusions:

1) Many of black families in the affected area (39%) were buying their own home in the area that would be destroyed by the highway project.

2) Most of the black families (80%) preferred to relocate to an integrated neighborhood.

3) If it was necessary to move, 75% of the black families indicated a preference to buy rather than rent. Over 50% indicated a preference of buying in the $10,000 to $20,000 bracket.[138]

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[135] Lisa Fine, *The Story of Reo Joe: Work, Kin, and Community in Autotown U.S.A* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 154.

[136] Brown, "Residential Relocation Survey: a case study of highway relocation in Lansing, Michigan", 6.

[137] Ibid.

[138] Ibid, 7.

After the findings of this survey went public, a Human Relations Committee formed in Lansing with the intention of developing a study "for local officials to make decisions based upon documented fact."[139] A meeting took place on June 6, 1964 and at that meeting,

> The Greater Lansing Chamber of Commerce endorsed the survey of the 'vast human problem' and assigned one of its members, its Executive Director, to meet with the Human Relations Committee. The powerful Lansing Board of Realtors also joined the effort by assigning two members to attend.[140]

But very soon after the June 6 meeting,

> The NAACP publically condemned the proposed survey and recommended that 'the [Negro] people refuse to cooperate with any study participated in by an organization we feel is primarily responsible for segregated housing in the City.' Although he did not mention them by name, it was clear that his accusation was directed against the Lansing Board of Realtors.[141]

After the NAACP refused to support the survey, the Lansing City Council voted on July 13, 1964 to unanimously to reject financial support for the survey "on the grounds that public money could not be expended on a survey which wasn't in the best interest of all groups to be affected."[142] Another version of the survey was proposed and was supported by the NAACP; it was never undertaken.

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[139] Brown, "Residential Relocation Survey: a case study of highway relocation in Lansing, Michigan", 7.

[140] Ibid, 9.

[141] Ibid.

[142] Ibid, 10.

Finally, on October 8, 1964, Michigan State University graduate student Bruce Brown offered to carry out a survey on a volunteer basis and the Human Relations Committee accepted. The survey was publicized by local radio and television stations, the State Journal which is now known as the Lansing State Journal, and the NAACP. Despite this publicity Brown remarked, "it was interesting to note that several interviewers reported contacting people who weren't aware of the survey or that a highway was even schedule for construction in their area."[143] Months before their homes were to be destroyed, some area residents had not even heard of the construction project.

The destruction of homes and businesses in Detroit and Lansing devastated black communities and left many people scrambling for housing. Paradise Valley, a significant part of the blues scene in Detroit was essentially eliminated by the construction and the scene never really recovered. The rise of Motown in the 1960s also significantly affected the blues scene in Detroit. While the smooth soul sounds that Motown produced were exported to the rest of the country including Chicago, Motown further diminished the importance of blues to the black community in Detroit. By the time Berry Gordy, the founder of Motown Records, moved the label to California in 1972, the blues scene in Detroit was hurting even more. Not only did urban renewal likely devastate any blues scene that might have been in Lansing, the decline of an important blues scene in Detroit would have had some effect on any blues scenes in Lansing as big name blues acts from Chicago and other cities

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[143] Brown, "Residential Relocation Survey: a case study of highway relocation in Lansing, Michigan", 16-17.

sometimes stopped in both cities in the 1970s and 1980s sometimes hiring local musicians.[144]

Urban renewal also affected neighborhoods in Chicago, particularly on the South Side. In their 1961 book *The Politics of Urban Renewal: the Chicago Findings*, sociologists Peter H. Rossi and Robert A. Dentler discussed urban renewal in Hyde Park, the Chicago neighborhood where the University of Chicago is located. They described the plans for the Hyde Park-Kenwood Urban Renewal Project on the South Side of Chicago in this way: "More than 100 acres are scheduled for acquisition, within which approximately 644 parcels will be acquired for demolition, totaling some 5,900 dwelling units."[145] In their sixth chapter entitled "South West Hyde Park: A Case of Failure to Achieve Popular Consensus" Rossi and Dentler discussed how the African American population in that part of the neighborhood would be affected by the urban renewal plans:

> One distinction between the fifty-four-acre development area of the southwest sector and the acquisition site within it should be kept in mind. In 1956, the racial composition of South West Hyde Park was 54.3 percent Negro [sic], while the population in the acquisition site was 79.9 percent Negro [sic].[146]

Furthermore, the original neighborhood had 660 residential units and the proposed reconstruction was to have only 394 units.[147] Thus, in Chicago, as in Detroit and

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[144] This is according to Randy Gelispie, professor of jazz drums at Michigan State and a professional jazz and blues drummer in both the Lansing and Detroit scenes from a March 2009 interview with this document's author.

[145] Peter H. Rossi and Robert A. Dentler, *The Politics of Urban Renewal: the Chicago Findings,* (The Free Press of Glencoe: New York, 1961), 3.

[146] Rossi and Dentler, *The Politics of Urban Renewal: the Chicago Findings*, 159.

[147] Rossi and Dentler, *The Politics of Urban Renewal: the Chicago Findings*, 159.

Lansing, African American neighborhoods were disproportionately displaced by urban renewal.

The Hyde Park-Kenwood neighborhood is also directly adjacent to the Bronzeville neighborhood, a South Side neighborhood that was until home to several blues clubs including the Checkerboard Lounge until it closed in 2003. Notably, the club was re-opened by Chicago blues musician Buddy Guy and relocated to Hyde Park close to the University of Chicago. This suggests that Guy felt the club had a better chance of succeeding if it reopened near the university's neighborhood where tourists frequent rather than in the Bronzeville neighborhood. In *Blue Chicago*, David Grazian mentions the old Checkerboard as "the South Side's infamous Checkerboard Lounge" in his description of his experience on a tour bus traveling through Bronzeville.[148] Grazian explains what it is like as the bus goes down State Street through Bronzeville's black neighborhood.

> The bus continues to slowly creep down the street as some of the development's black residents turn to stare at the bus in bewilderment, presumably confused by the lingering presence of a chartered bus in front of their homes. Meanwhile, as the bus passengers continue to point and gawk at the residents and their surrounding neighborhood, Mandie persistently delivers her speech on the Stroll's hot jazz cabarets, the local celebrity of Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong, and the vitality of the area's once-heralded Black Metropolis, conveniently ignoring the surrounding blight.

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[148] Grazian, *Blue Chicago*, 204.

The story of a tour bus in Bronzeville recalls an earlier part of Grazian's book where he discussed entertainment zones in the Old Town and DePaul areas of Lincoln Park and how blues musicians and fans remember the area:

> These commercial districts remain emblazoned in their memories as deeply authentic, in part, because they nostalgically remember them – idealistically or otherwise – as bulwarks of community solidarity and bohemian creativity, all while surrounded by the romantic lure of urban danger. But eventually their favorite clubs were transformed along with their enveloping entertainment zones, and the reputations of those places increased among suburbanites and foreign travelers while consequently diminishing among local scene-makers. Indeed, Lincoln Park blues clubs began losing their authentic cache among bohemians because their commercial popularity among mainstream consumers began to soar.

Thus, given Grazian's description of the scene in the late 1990s we see that blues in Chicago has come full circle since Keil's description of a new, vibrant scene in the early 1960s that was not like the tired Delta blues that blues revivalists were interested in. Instead of being a counterpoint to the Delta narrative as Keil originally described it, Chicago has become a blues center itself despite urban renewal.

Chapter 3: *Blues in Motown and the Capital City: the Scenes in Detroit and Lansing*

Part 1: *The State of Blues in Detroit*

City leaders in Detroit could learn a lesson from the entertainment zones that disrupted local blues scenes in Chicago and Detroit's own history of urban renewal, but it seems that history may repeat itself; there has been interest in Detroit of building a new area reminiscent of the old Paradise Valley. An August 2008 Michigan Chronicle article reports that the Kresge Foundation, the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation, and the Detroit City Council were collaborating for the creation of a new Paradise Valley. As Rip Rason, president and CEO of The Kresge Foundation put it, "Whenever a community like ours has the chance to go back and grab its history, its culture, its past civic pride, bring it into the current situation and project into the future, it's something no funder in his right mind would pass up."[149] The new Paradise Valley would try to duplicate its namesake by having retail establishments, jazz clubs, blues clubs, and cafés.

The assumption that a new Paradise Valley is needed in Detroit is an example of a desire to recreate the past. However, in this attempt to regain history, culture, and past civic pride, there seems to be a lack of acknowledgment that there is any current continuation of entertainment in Detroit that is in the spirit of the old Paradise Valley. It also seems eerily similar to the idea that urban renewal could and would clear out urban blight and new and better housing would be built. While it could be beneficial to the city, in order for such a project to be effective it is necessary to recognize there are music clubs and bars that already feature blues in the city and the

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[149] Cornelius Fortune, "New Paradise Valley to Replace Harmonie Park". *Michigan Chronicle*, 6 August 2008, A1.

close suburbs. As my interest is in blues in particular, I will use two bars that I have attended several times as examples of the existing blues scene in Detroit: Mugshot in Detroit and Callahan's Music Hall in Auburn Hills. These bars show that there are, that thriving blues scenes are not only a part of the past in Detroit and metro Detroit, but also the present, and that there are different types of scenes within the larger Detroit scene.

Mugshot is located on the east side of Detroit close to the East English Village neighborhood of the city. The regular Monday night band is a local band, Johnnie Bassett and the Blues Avengers and Monday is the only night of the week that the bar regularly has live music. In the summer of 2009, Bassett and his band played nearly every week at Mugshot as their regular weekly gig in addition to playing all over the city and suburbs. This summer, for instance, they played at places like Memphis Smoke in Royal Oak and Cityfest in Detroit, a festival with food from local restaurants where they played on the jazz and blues stage. Bassett is an older black singer and guitar player who is well-known amongst blues lovers in Detroit. I was encouraged to go hear him at Mugshot by several people including the saxophone player in the band, Keith Kaminski. Along with Kaminski and Bassett, the band has an organist and keyboard player, Chris Codish, and a drummer, Skeeto Valdez.

My first experience with Mugshot began long before I arrived at the bar and culminated before I ever walked through the bar's door. Before I went to Mugshot, several people warned me not to go there alone, presumably because I would be going into the city of Detroit and not to the suburbs. All of the other clubs that blues musicians and fans had recommended to me were in the suburbs. Given the

recommendations about the dangerous neighborhood, I had expected the area around the bar to look more rundown or at least to have more people on the streets. However, once I arrived I did not really understand why people had insisted that I bring a man with me. Like much of the city of Detroit, the businesses around looked old, but in good repair. There was no one out walking near the businesses, but I figured this was because it was 9:00pm on Monday night and people were probably at home watching T.V. or putting their kids to bed. After all, Detroit is still a working class city for the most part. The outside of Mugshot felt no more dangerous to me than being at any other bar.

Aside from the fact that I lived in the East English Village not far from the neighborhood Mugshot is in until I was six years old, my experience is impacted by my realization that the neighborhood I was in is directly adjacent to a suburb. I discovered this when I accidentally drove past Harper, the road Mugshot is located on, and continued driving on Cadieux through a residential area the first time I was going to the bar. There was a row of duplexes and the people on the porches were all African American families who had probably finished dinner and gone outside to see their neighbors. I drove further and passed an old high school with a big lawn separated from the road by a rusty fence. There were several high school age kids standing on the lawn talking and fooling around. I drove a couple blocks further and saw that the street signs had changed and there were more trees along the street. A young white boy rode by me on a bicycle. A new-looking brick building on my left confirmed what I had already begun to suspect: it was a Grosse Pointe elementary school. In a few short blocks, I had left Detroit. While I felt no less safe on one end

of Cadieux than the other, being suddenly in a suburb reminded me why people might warn me about going to a club in Detroit. I am a young, white woman. Although statistics suggest I am probably far safer in a Detroit bar than I am on the campus of Michigan State University, many people have the opposite perception. After I turned around and finally arrived at Mugshot, everything was fine and nothing bad happened to me.

My experience does show something important about this scene. The scene at Mugshot on Monday nights is a particular type of Detroit blues scene: the corner bar scene in the city. Mugshot is a neighborhood bar. There are drink specials every night and you have to spend $25 at the bar to be able to use a credit card. Although the bar does not serve food, there are a couple of regulars at the bar who bring food on Monday nights that anyone can eat which they sometimes charge for and sometimes do not. There are two rooms in the bar, one with the bar and TVs and one with the stage area and dance floor with pool tables in the back. The area where the band is set up is not elevated so there is no stage per se. The ceiling tiles have been taken out in the room where the band plays; Kaminski, the tenor sax player in the band, told me that they are in the middle of remodeling.

Mugshot is a not a music venue most nights of the week, so the one night that it hosts live music it must continue serving the other functions that it serves every other night. The bar tends to see a similar crowd every Monday night. The patrons are mostly black and most of them sit at the bar in the room without music with some wandering in to watch the musicians periodically. If there are white patrons, generally they come to hear or play music. This is because Mugshot is a working

class, neighborhood bar and they are fewer white people than black people who live close to the bar; plus, those that do live close enough to attend might have received similar warnings to the one I got and decided it was not worth it. The bartender, however, is a white woman in her 30s. She typically wears a T-shirt and jeans as do most of the patrons. I have only seen a couple of people dance at Mugshot and I have only ever seen women dance there. Monday nights at Mugshot is not a dancing scene; it is a scene where people go to drink, hang out, listen to music, or play music. Depending on the person they could do one of these things or all four. One Monday night when Bassett's group was playing, there was a small tournament taking place of a card game I had never heard of. The tables were full and the people applauded enthusiastically at the ends of songs, but they had come to the bar to play cards.

In addition to being a place where regular patrons go to hang out and blues fans go to listen to blues, Mugshot serves as a place for local musicians to play blues even if they are not in the band or not blues musicians on an everyday basis. Although Monday nights at Mugshot are not billed as a jam session, the times I have been there local musicians always sit in starting during the second set. Pretty much anyone who knows one of the band members can sit in with the group, and as the band members are all well-connected musicians in the Detroit scenes, most musicians who come to the bar come to play. Bassett will often call musicians out of the audience and ask them where their guitars are. Most are reluctant at first, because they do not want to steal any of the spotlight from Bassett, but eventually acquiesce. To not play when someone like Johnnie Bassett asks you to play personally is considered to be bad manners, because in the blues scenes in the Detroit area, Bassett

is well-respected amongst musicians. For instance, a guitarist named Bobby showed off his amp before he sat in one Monday night and explained to Codish, the Blues Avengers's keyboard player, that the last time he sat in at the bar, Bassett told him to bring his own amp. Bobby said that he was really happy about this, because it meant Bassett had liked his playing. This shows how Bassett is high in the hierarchy of musicians in the scene.

One might think that with his status as the star of the show on Monday nights and his reputation as a great blues player in Detroit, Bassett would be resistant to connecting to his audience, but this is not the case. As the following quote illustrates, Bassett is eager to connect with the audience and expresses the fact that he is happy to be there on the microphone: "I don't know about y'all, but I've had one of those blue kind of days, because it's a Monday. I'm glad to be out here playing for y'all." This exemplifies Bassett's desire to set up a dialogue with audience members during his sets. Bassett also sits in the audience and talks with audience members between sets and when other guitarists are sitting in with the band. The first night I was at Mugshot he implored the audience to tell two people about the band's Monday night performances saying, "I guarantee they'll have a good time and enjoy themselves." Another night Bassett stopped me as I was leaving the bar to personally thank me for coming. I said that I hoped to see him again soon. He said, "We'll be here every Monday night." I would have gone back to the bar to see them play without him saying that, but since Johnnie Bassett told me I should come back I am more likely to return sooner rather than later.

Callahan's Bar in Auburn Hills, MI, a northern suburb of Detroit, is a different sort of scene than Mugshot and it features local blues artists in a different way. First and foremost, Callahan's is not in the city of Detroit, but in the suburbs. As Steve Allen, historian of the Detroit Blues Society and a bass player who plays in a blues band called Tomas Esperanza and the Boa Constrictors, said of Callahan's, "We're kind of out in the middle of nowhere here. This is off the beaten path." Also, Callahan's is blues venue every night of the week instead of just one night. There is a large stage with expensive looking lighting and sound equipment set up. Along with this, when I asked Steve about what kind of blues bands got booked at the club he explained that the owner, Mike Callahan, almost always booked national acts as headliners and that only Detroit-based musicians who had received national attention could headline at the venue. Otherwise, bands like Steve's could only play at the club as openers.[150]

Rather than serving as a neighborhood hangout like Mugshot, Callahan's is a music venue that attracts patrons that are primarily interested in hearing the music. This starts with the set-up of the bar which is meant to direct attention towards the stage. Rather than a two room set-up like at Mugshot, there is one large space at Callahan's with the bar near the front door with a few tall tables with stools near it, booths along the side walls, and long tables that run perpendicular to the stage so that anyone who sits at them can see what's happening onstage. There are no pool tables

[150] I have seen Tomas Esperanza and the Boa Constrictors, the band in which Steve plays bass, open twice at Callahan's, once for Jeremy Spencer, the former guitar player in Fleetwood Mac, and once for Chicago-based harmonica player, Charlie Musselwhite.

at Callahan's and it seems unlikely that anyone would start a card tournament there; aside from a few TVs above the bar, the music is the only attraction at the bar.

Unlike Mugshot, where many of the patrons are African American, the patrons at Callahan's are overwhelmingly white. However, similar to Mugshot's close proximity to Grosse Pointe Woods, the racial breakdown of Callahan's crowd can only partially be explained by geography. Callahan's is in a part of Auburn Hills that borders Pontiac, which is one of the Detroit suburbs with a fairly large non-white population, yet the audience at Callahan's is primarily white. I suspect the mostly white crowd I have seen there has to do with the type of blues that the bar offers – national acts, some of which are white, that overwhelmingly play Chicago-style blues. In other words, the bar books headliners that play the type of music that fits into the Chicago-centered blues narrative rather than regional Detroit style blues.

As webmaster and historian for the Detroit Blues Society, Steve Allen is a blues history buff who is very knowledgeable about the history of blues in Michigan. He explains the recent history of the blues venues this way:

> There aren't very many blues places any more. There are some places up towards Flint that I'll pop into every once in a while. But blues is a real small market and Mike here at Callahan's has done a phenomenal job of capturing that market... Over on the west side for a long time – well, the Penny Street Roadhouse in Dearborn was a real popular place. That was a big venue and that's where all the big stars went. And before that it was Sully's in Dearborn.

There have been a few others like...Dave and Harry's or I don't know the name of the place. It was downriver [meaning south of Detroit].[151]

Steve feels that Mike Callahan has captured the blues market in the Detroit area, and he is right. However, by choosing to book national acts as headliners whenever possible, Callahan often books out of town entertainment that plays Chicago style blues. He does not ignore the regional Detroit-style blues completely. As I will explain in the next section, Callahan's does support local artists through its association with the Detroit Blues Society and as I mentioned they feature Michigan bands as opening acts. However, the blues scene Callahan's is not a Detroit style scene like Monday nights at Mugshot. Johnnie Bassett's band, the Blues Avengers, is made up of three Detroit-based musicians all of whom play jazz and rhythm and blues styles in other bands they are in. Bassett himself is a bluesman who has always been based in Detroit. Consequently, the group is like the old Detroit story of a bluesman playing in front of a variety band. In short, Callahan's and Mugshot are different scenes within the larger Detroit scene.

Part 2: *A Sense of Community: The Influence of Blues Societies in Blues Scenes*

There are not only different scenes within the larger Detroit scene; other scenes in smaller Michigan cities like Lansing differ from both of the Detroit area scenes I have described. One of my consultants, Ben Hall, who has played in the Detroit scene and the Lansing scene suggests that the large geographical area of Metro Detroit has something to do with this:

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[151] Interview with the author.

> In Detroit, it's so spread out. I mean, when you say Detroit, there's Ferndale, Hamtramck, actual Detroit, it was all spread out. So you would have different guys at different venues.[152]

Thus, blues musicians who play in suburbs of Detroit and the city may not see each other often while blues musicians in Lansing get to know each other, because the scene is smaller and not so spread out. In both areas, however, fans and musicians have formed communities which they organize through blues societies

Although I have met people – notably Steve Allen and Ben Hall – who attend events in both the Detroit scene and the Lansing scene, I have found that most blues fans stick to their own scenes for the most part, especially the blues fans I have met in Lansing. Many musicians I have met do the same, especially those who are well-known within a scene. To put it simply, if fans or musicians do not have to travel to see blues or play blues, they will not do so. As Ben puts it,

> The blues scene everywhere in Michigan, the music is hurting, because, like I say, you don't have to leave your house to be entertained anymore. People aren't seeking that out.[153]

I suggest that this speaks to two issues: the poor economic climate in Michigan and availability of at home entertainment with the increasing impact of cable and the internet. Difficultly getting people out to see live entertainment is a common problem and is not exclusive to blues. However, blues fans and musicians all over the country including in Michigan have developed an interesting way to help combat these problems: they have formed blues societies.

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[152] Interview with the author.

[153] Interview with the author.

Blues societies are a segment of the blues scene in Detroit and Lansing. They include many of the people in those scenes who do leave their homes to see the blues and they often have a strong commitment to and investment in blues scenes. Their goal is to make live blues available and to get people interested in going to see it performed. I suggest that these blues fans make this commitment not only out of a desire to support music that they enjoy, but also to maintain what they see as a particularly welcoming community.

The welcoming nature of the blues community in Lansing and blues communities in general appeals to many blues fans in the Lansing area. Two of my consultants in Lansing, Dom Piacento and Bonnie Stebbins, mentioned that they felt they could walk into any bar where a blues band was playing and feel like they could strike up a conversation. Another Lansing consultant, Jim Flynn explains his experience at an Arkansas blues festival this way:

> As a matter of fact, I when I went to that festival in Arkansas in October, I met so many really, nice friendly people. I mean, black and white. Half the people I met at that festival were African-Americans. But you talk about nice people, shootin' the breeze with them. I'm standing close to the stage watching the band from Texas. A couple of fellahs from that area, I got to shootin' the breeze with them, I told them I was from Michigan. Just really nice friendly people.[154]

Bonnie thought that blues fans were more welcoming and friendly than fans of other genres, and drew a particular distinction between blues fans and jazz fans. She relates

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[154] Interview with the author.

a story of her experience at the Lansing Jazz Festival when she had to talk to a friend during one of the performances:

> Like I said, I used to have a bad knee when I was younger, so I said, "I'll sit here if you'll help me get up." And he and I are talking a little bit and this guy next to us goes "Shhh." Okay, that's it. You jazz snobs, this is an outdoor festival. It just blew my mind.[155]

Bonnie felt this type of reaction would be unlikely at a blues festival and much preferred the more relaxed blues environment. She also felt that people in blues scenes formed communities in spite of their differences, "The audience for blues is unique, I think. Young, old, white, black, gay, straight, etc. Everyone is in the community together."[156] As Dom, a Lansing blues fan, amateur bass player, and former president of the Capital Area Blues Society, points out: "Since my getting re-involved in music which was primarily blues I've met so many people. I started going to open mics to just sit in and play. There's such a network of people even locally in the small community of Lansing."[157]

Some of these individuals are so interested in the blues that they work hard to promote blues music in their areas and one way to do so is to participate in blues societies. There are many blues societies in Michigan, but the two societies that I am most familiar with are the Capital Area Blues Society (CABS) which is based in the city of Lansing and the Detroit Blues Society (DBS) which is based in metro Detroit. Blues societies are non-profit organizations formed to promote blues music in a

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[155] Interview with the author.

[156] Interview with the author.

[157] Interview with the author.

particular city or region and they serve several important functions. One function is informing members and other local blues fans about upcoming events with newsletters both paper and online, event postings on Facebook and other social networking sites, and calendars of events on blues society websites. In addition to informing blues society members about blues events in their areas, the DBS and CABS newsletters include articles written by blues society members about trips they have taken to see blues events, pictures of recent events sponsored by the societies, letters from members of the boards, and articles on blues history. The DBS website includes a Who's Who of Blues in Detroit, a historical document that includes many Detroit or metro Detroit-based blues musicians, as well as a history of the Detroit scene and the organization itself. Another function of the organizations is helping to put on blues festivals in the fall or summer as well as other blues events throughout the year which include contests for local bands and benefit concerts.

Another function of blues societies is that, as a result of hosting blues society events, particular bars in the blues society's city or area are more popular places than other bars in the area which also feature live blues. Although those in charge of blues societies may or may not intend to support one bar over others, this is often the result. This is somewhat problematic in Detroit where the Detroit Blues Society holds its monthly meetings at two bars in the metro Detroit area: Callahan's in Auburn Hills and Memphis Smoke in Royal Oak. These locations have likely been chosen partly because they are good music venues and partly because of their proximity to members of the DBS, many of whom live outside the Detroit city limits.[158] These

[158] As suggested by several members of the Detroit Blues Society who I have spoken to.

venue choices do have one significant consequence; the Detroit Blues Society does not actually hold their meetings nor do they tend to hold events in the city of Detroit, yet they continue to call themselves the Detroit Blues Society. This idea is not exclusive to DBS; many businesses and organizations based in the suburbs use the word Detroit in their names, probably for various reasons depending on the business or organization. However, for the blues society in particular, keeping the connection with Detroit comes out of a desire to connect their modern scene to the historical scene that existed in Detroit. In this way, the society benefits from the cultural capital they gain by maintaining a connection to a historical blues scene, while some of their membership does not actually support live blues within the city limits. It would be inaccurate to say that DBS bands do not play in Detroit or that DBS fans do not go to the city to hear music; some of them certainly do. However, DBS has established an environment where many of them would never have to leave the suburbs to play or hear blues. This is part of a larger trend as many people who live in Metro Detroit never have to venture to the city of Detroit for entertainment, which goes along with the idea that I suggest earlier about the scenes at Mugshot and Callahan's; people from the suburbs are unwilling to make an extra effort to go to a part of the scene that is far from them geographically unless they like Detroit-style blues enough to go into the city. If they can get their taste of the regional style from Michigan-based opening acts and blues society events that feature local acts at Callahan's, there is little reason for them to leave the suburbs.

Another function of blues societies in Michigan is to provide help for bands and musicians that become members of the societies. For instance, the blues societies

will sometimes hold fundraisers for musicians who have fallen on hard times because they have gotten ill do not have health insurance or musicians who have a family member who needs financial help. Additionally, a musician or band joining a blues society can help them get work. In the Capital Area Blues Society, bands are listed on the membership list with one of the band members as a contact. According to a Lansing musician I spoke with who prefers to remain anonymous, it can be very beneficial for a band to become a member of CABS because it will increase that band's chances of getting gigs, especially at CABS sponsored events and at CABS home bar, the Green Door. This consultant feels there is something of a divide in Lansing between the bands who are members of the blues society and the bands who are not:

> So the music scene in Lansing can be broken into two parts. There's the Capital Area Blues Society and then there's the people who aren't in the Capital Area Blues Society... I am not in it. And if you check out like the Old Town Blues Festival or just bands gigging around town most of them are in the Capital Area Blues Society. Most of the bands playing at the Old Town Blues Festival have members on the board of the Capital Area Blues Society...I think you find a lot of guys that have good intentions, but kind of use the blues society as a means to promote themselves or to self-promote.[159]

Thus, proven dedication to or earning respect from important members in the blues society can mean the difference between success and failure for a band or musician in the Lansing scene. In this way, blues societies provide cultural capital in Lansing

[159] Interview with the author.

venues. It takes months for a musician to build a relationship with the person who books at a venue, a relationship that can be established much more quickly by getting on the bill of a blues society event. In Michigan's tough economic climate and with all the competition that live entertainment faces from television and the internet, most musicians can use all the help they can get. These are hallmarks of music scenes: fans support musicians and enable them to continue playing and musicians sometimes help each other get gigs as well as sometimes being in competition with one another. The support of an organization of fans like the blues society, especially in a smaller scene like Lansing's blues scene, makes a bigger impact than simply having a less organized following of fans. Whether or not the blues society has as much power as my consultant thinks depends on who you talk to in the scene, but knowing well-connected people in a scene will always help a musician get more gigs.

Part 3: *CABS and Blues in Lansing*

The Capital Area Blues Society was founded in 1994 and the history of the organization was recorded in a 2007 CABS newsletter by Bonnie Stebbins, one of the co-founders. Bonnie's interest in forming the blues society began in the mid-1980s when she joined the Detroit Blues Society. Soon after Bonnie discussed establishing a mid-Michigan blues society that would be an extension of DBS with George Seedorff, then president of DBS, but they realized that a partnership would not be feasible. Bonnie continued her efforts to establish a Lansing-based blues society and explains her desire this way:

> However, like Elwood and Jake in the two *Blues Brothers* movies, I truly, sincerely felt that I was on a mission from God as wacko as that may sound!

> Soon, I decided to take the bull by the horns. My passion for the Blues and dedication to support Blues music could not be denied any longer![160]

After officially registering the name on October 7, 1994, Bonnie bought business cards, got a post office box, ordered address labels and stationary, and used her second phone line for CABS business. All of this money came out of her own pocket. The blues society did not meet for the first time until the following summer on July 30, 1995 and they held their first meeting at the Green Door Blues Bar and Grill. Jim Flynn remembers this first meeting:

> And they were gonna have a meeting at the Green Door Lounge and that's here on the East side. I had never met her. Her name is Bonnie Stebbins. That's the lady that came up with the idea of it all, but I had never met her or her friends, but being a big blues lover and I know a lot of musicians from this area, I went to that meeting. And that's how we got started. Actually the blues musicians nominated me as Vice President, so I've been on the board of directors ever since their inception. Right now I'm their treasurer, of course.[161]

This quote brings up important points about CABS and about Jim. Jim felt comfortable going to this meeting even though he did not know Bonnie or any of her friends that were helping her organize CABS, but he went because he knew that they shared a common interest in the blues.

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[160] Bonnie's reference to The Blues Brothers movie is not uncommon. Another consultant of mine, Ben Hall, who was a kid when the movie came out sites it as one of the reasons he first became interested in blues music.

[161] Interview with the author.

Also, Jim says he knew a lot of blues musicians in the Lansing scene which is typical of many fans in scene, but he also says the blues musicians nominated him as vice president at that meeting and that he has always served on the board of CABS. This shows that fans have an ability to achieve prominent status within the Lansing scene. After the first interview I conducted, my first consultant Dom Piacenti, asked me if I had talked to Jim yet. When I said no, Dom insisted that I had to talk to Jim, because he's the biggest blues fan in Lansing. Since Jim has been on the board of CABS since its inception and is at more blues events within and outside the city of Lansing per month than most musicians I know, he has a high status in the Lansing scene even though he is not a musician. It is partly his involvement with CABS that has created is identity as the biggest blues fan in Lansing.

I went to my first CABS event knowing that the society was part of the scene, but not realizing how crucial a connection to the society would be to my research. The first event I attended was the Old Town Blues Festival in Lansing in September 2008. One of my biggest goals in going to the festival was connecting with CABS. One significant encounter that I had at the Old Town Blues Festival was with Toni Alexander, the president of CABS. She was there the second time I stopped at the booth and Jerry, the man working at the booth, was excited to introduce her to me. Toni was initially my strongest connection to the Lansing blues community. As president of CABS, Toni is in a powerful position in the blues community in Lansing. She was intrigued by my project, and agreed to allow me to access the membership contact list for CABS. She also demonstrated her knowledge of the membership by recommending specific members of CABS that I should talk to. She seemed

genuinely interested in my success, so she chose potential consultants who she thought would have a lot to say about my questions.

The consultants to whom she directed me expressed a great deal of enthusiasm about this project partly because I was a young graduate student studying the blues. For instance, Bonnie saw this as an opportunity to express her concerns about what she sees as a generation gap in the blues audience. Bonnie commented positively that I, as a relatively young person, would take an interest in blues saying that, "That is the one thing that does worry me to some degree, that there aren't enough young people who know about blues."[162]

Everyone on the board of CABS was also interested and excited that I, a young person, would be interested in the blues. On October 8, 2008, I went to the CABS meeting where I got to meet and speak briefly with the CABS board members. Three of the board members I met were Lansing-based blues guitarists Bill Malone, S.J. "Frog" Forgey, and Stan Budzynski. The other members that I met were Jennifer (Jen) Beggs and Jim Flynn. Jen is the youngest member of the board and is not a musician. This meeting was the first time I met Jim. I was very nervous about attending the meeting as I was not sure if the board members would be interested in my project, but when I arrived I soon realized that there was no need to be nervous. Toni greeted me warmly and introduced me to the rest of the board who were very friendly. Bill, a tall, middle-aged, black guitarist hugged everyone when he arrived, including me. When Toni passed out the agendas, I found that I was the first agenda item. I was given the first few minutes of the meeting to explain my project. They

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[162] Interview with the author.

were all enthusiastic about my project and were willing to help in any way they could. For instance, before I left, Bill hugged me again and told me that I could contact him for help if I ever needed it.

One of the board's main functions is to plan CABS events that happen throughout the year. CABS hosts events and fundraisers annually such as the Lansing Blues Challenge which is the local round of a national contest; the Old Town Blues Festival which is held in Lansing's Old Town neighborhood every September; Blues on the Square, a summer tradition of blues music on Washington Square near the State Capital area of Lansing, and Breakin' Bread With the Blues, a yearly fundraiser and food drive held around Thanksgiving. These events are planned and organized by the board of CABS and run by volunteers.

Although CABS events are attended by people who are not members of the blues society, the events are places where blues society members go to interact with other blues society members. There are some members of the blues society who I have seen at CABS-sponsored events, but have not seen at the other blues shows in Lansing. In this way individuals who appear to attend CABS events exclusively are in their own sub-community in the larger Lansing blues scene, a phenomenon Emma Baulch has described as a scenic fragment.[163]

There is one particularly interesting group within this scenic fragment. This group of women who attend most CABS events together is known to CABS members as the Dancing Ladies. The Dancing Ladies are a group of six middle aged women who attend blues events together. Many of the consultants I have spoken to so far are

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[163] Emma Baulch, *Making Scenes: Reggae, Punk, and Death Metal in 1990s Bali*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 178-179.

aware of this group of women and they can be found at a lot of CABS events in Lansing. They can always be found on or near the dance floor; having danceable music seems to be the most important part of these events for them. One of the ladies, Darren, uses a cane when she walks. At Breakin' Bread With the Blues, a CABS event at the Green Door in November 2008, she informed me that she has to sit out some songs, but that she would "be up dancing as much as [she] could" which illustrates how important it is to Darren to dance with her friends. I danced with the ladies at this event and between the times we were on the floor dancing, I spoke with Darren at length. She told me that she used to attend blues events with her sister. After her sister got married, she met the other Dancing Ladies at a CABS event and now always attends blues events with at least one of the other women. This small group within the scenic fragment of CABS serves a significant social function for Darren, a single woman. Through CABS she has found a group of friends that share a common interest which is not only listening to, but also dancing to blues music. Other small scenic fragments within the larger scenic fragment of the blues society and the Lansing blues scene include the CABS board members and the bands which are in the society who are also distinct from bands which are not in the society.

Part 4: *The Green Door and Lansing blues*

The Green Door Blues Bar and Grill is on Michigan Avenue in Lansing, Michigan. Lansing journalist William Pettit wrote of the bar,

> Lansing's east side has much to recommend it, including Lansing's quintessential experience, the Green Door on a Friday or Saturday night. No

place provides the vibration, the gritty character, the blues, and the disparate and eclectic qualities of what Lansing truly is than the Green Door.[164]

The East Side neighborhood is not far from the eastern border of Lansing. This puts the bar quite close to East Lansing, Michigan, the home of Michigan State University. The bar is not a student hangout, however. There are several bars very close to campus in East Lansing, so few students journey to Lansing to go to the bar. East Lansing bars cater to college students with drink specials and music, recorded or occasionally live, that differs from bar to bar depending on the crowd. The Green Door, on the other hand, attracts a crowd of mostly Lansing residents, and the bar is like Mugshot in Detroit in that some people come to the bar to listen to music and some come to hang out. Ben is not shy in his opinions regarding the differences between the live music scenes in Lansing and East Lansing explaining that while finding live music is difficult in either place, this is especially true in East Lansing.

> There's no place to hear live original music [in East Lansing]. There's no place. Maybe occasionally from one of the coffee shops, but there's no place to hear live original music. Rick's has a bunch of crappy, shitty cover bands every night of the week. How many times can you listen to "Sweet Caroline", seriously?[165]

The crowd at the Green Door is different each night of the week and usually corresponds with which band is playing that night. The patrons at the Green Door are generally older than college age, but the average age depends on which night of the

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[164] William Pettit, "Lansing's East Side is Partially a Fable", *Lansing City Pulse*, July 18, 2006. Pettit wrote this article to dispute the idea that Lansing was a bohemian enclave, and instead argued that the East Side, like all Lansing neighborhoods, is essentially a working class neighborhood.

[165] Interview with the author.

week it is. The night that I have most often been at the Green Door is Sunday. This is the night that the band Bad Gravy hosts a weekly jam session and many local blues fans swear is the best place to hear blues in Lansing. Many times on Sunday nights I would be the youngest person in the bar at 23 years old and the oldest people were men in their 70s. The average age of patrons on Sundays is approximately 40. However, on Monday nights when the popular local band Steppin' In It has their weekly gig, the average age of the audience is closer to 30. On the other nights of the week, the average age of patrons varies more from week to week as there is a different band playing every night.

Another important point about the Green Door is that it is one of the only two venues in Lansing that has live music seven nights a week. The only other bar that boasts music every night is Mac's where the crowd is generally college age and the musical selection changes from night to night; at Mac's they might feature folk on one night and metal on another. In addition to marketing itself as place for live music, the Green Door bills itself as a blues bar – most notably the word "blues" was added to the name of the bar at some point in the 1990s as it is now called the Green Door Blues Bar and Grill instead of the Green Door Lounge – but not every patron agrees with this assertion.[166] Ben expresses a sentiment that blues fans have about the Green Door: that the bar always features blues on Sundays and Thursdays, but only sometimes on Tuesday, Wednesday, and the weekend. Ben told me he thought the Door was not really a blues bar and elaborated further:

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[166] Some other ways the Green Door announces itself as a blues bar: the sign outside the Green Door includes a character that is a raccoon playing a guitar; there is a CABS banner on the wall right next to the stage; advertisements in CABS newsletters that call the Green Door, Lansing's Home for the Blues.

> I know they call themselves Lansing's Home for the Blues, but they only probably have blues there three nights a week. I guess they are Lansing's Home for the Blues, because nobody else is.[167]

Ben is drawing a distinction between the Green Door and blues clubs that he goes to when he is Chicago like Kingston Mines. He feels the clubs in Chicago are really blues bars, because they have music that he classifies as blues every night of the week. I should point out that in addition to being a blues musician and fan, Ben is also a DJ on the Michigan State University radio station with a Wednesday night show called Accidental Blues. Ben knows much about blues history from doing research for the show and much about the Lansing scene from interviewing local musicians on the show.

While Jim and Ben both mentioned that some bands that play at the Green Door are not blues bands, the weekly Sunday night blues jam session is considered a blues night by everyone I've spoken to. The blues jam session on Sunday night is well attended by blues musicians and blues fans in Lansing. This is largely because of the musicians in Bad Gravy, the band that hosts the session. The band is a collaboration of musicians who are each in different Lansing area bands in addition to Bad Gravy. For instance, the harmonica and trumpet player Andy Wilson is in Steppin' In It and Those Delta Rhythm Kings. The instrumentation of Bad Gravy is harmonica, guitar, piano/organ, bass, drums, and vocals. Although Andy usually sings a few tunes at the beginning of the set, he always introduces the main vocalist, Freddy Cunningham, as the star of the show. Freddy fronts the band Root Doctor, a

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[167] Inteview with the author.

Lansing-based band that has a national following which makes him the most famous member of the Sunday night jam band. Freddy is also the only African American in the band; all of the other band members are white.

The Bad Gravy jam sessions are a time when other local blues musicians, some professionals and some amateurs, are invited to come on stage with professional Lansing blues musicians. The band plays their first set beginning somewhere between 9:00 and 9:30 depending on when all the members arrive. After a 10 to 20 minute break, musicians from the audience start to sit in. An amateur musician who is a fixture of Sunday nights at the Green Door is a young man in his late 20s or early 30s named Buster. Buster is a harmonica player who has been coming to the Green Door for a couple years to sit in on Sunday nights. Although he usually comes into the bar alone, he is usually joined by several men in their 60s who know him well. If Buster is the only harmonica player in the bar besides Andy he will typically play for all of the second set. When Buster is playing it appears that there is no one on stage enjoying himself more than him. According to Ben, Buster has only played harmonica for two years and has come a very long way in that period of time. Other musicians around Buster's age who I have seen sit in at the Green Door several times include Ben, who plays harmonica and is bi-racial; Twyla Fleming, an African American female vocalist; and Big Willie, a white guitarist who is in several Lansing area bands. All of the musicians who sit on the board of the Capital Area Blues Society – Stan Budzynski, Bill Malone, and Frog Forgey – play at the Sunday night jam session from time to time, as well. The people who attend the Green Door to sit in are a combination of professional and amateur musicians who form their own

scenic fragment of the Lansing blues scene. Most musicians who sit in on Sunday nights do it on a weekly or almost weekly basis, so most of them know each other and have formed friendships with each other. Most of them are also friends with the musicians in Bad Gravy who they will talk to on breaks.

A weekly blues jam session at the Green Door is not a new idea. Jim explains that there was a weekly jam session at the Green Door a decade ago and explains more about the Green Door in the 1980s and 1990s:

> They've had blues [at the Green Door] off and on for damn near 20 years. They had some really good bands that played there. They were kind of the house bands a long time ago, the Blue Avenue Delegates and that band there back in the late 80s, early 90s, they played there regularly on a Monday night and people would be standing there at the front door and back door waiting to get in there on Monday nights, years ago.[168]

The Green Door has been around for many years and was not always a blues venue. Prior to the 1990s, the bar was called the Green Door Lounge, not the Green Door Blues Bar and Grill, and the sign at the back door of the bar still reads "Green Door Lounge." Jim remembers this and says,

> Even though they weren't a blues venue, they always ran great bands through there, I mean, really good bands. That's how that place got so popular and that's why it's still probably, I would say, the most popular place in Lansing

[168] Interview with the author.

as far as, you can go in there and hear a good band. If a band plays in there that's not a very good band chances are they ain't coming back.[169]

Although the Green Door is not the only place to hear blues in Lansing, it is the only place that has blues on more than one night of the week. This means that if a blues band has a bad show at the Green Door or cannot get in to play at the Green Door, the band will have a difficult time finding a venue in Lansing. This is but another example of how important the Green Door is to the blues scene in Lansing. While the Green Door and the other venues I have discussed are crucial components of the scenes in Lansing and Detroit providing places for musicians to play and fans to listen to music, I believe it is important to note that these businesses would suffer without the existence of blues scenes. Thus, there is a reciprocal relationship between these businesses and blues musicians and audiences.

When I began my fieldwork in September 2008, I was initially very apprehensive about talking to the people I met in the blues scenes in Lansing and Detroit. I thought that they would think I didn't know enough about blues music to be asking questions about their interest in it. As I spent more time in these scenes and began doing my interviews, I realized that this was never going to be a problem. I have suggested that people come together in blues scenes not only because they like blues music, but because they feel they are welcoming communities where they meet musicians and fans that they like spending time with. Bonnie explains her feelings about people in blues scenes this way:

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[169] Interview with the author.

> I mean, they're more down to earth, more real, more accepting. Like blues artists, I would say 99% of them are very accessible. Absolutely amazingly accepting whereas you don't find that with any other music genre, I don't think. I mean, I can't tell you how many of them are friends of mine.[170]

Dom explains his interest in the scene this way:

> Blues events are an awful lot of fun and I think the key to it, though, is getting people exposed... Have you ever noticed if you go to a good blues concert or see a good blues band, have you ever noticed people sitting at a table (knocks out a beat on the table), you know, they're getting into it? They're tapping their foot, they're banging the table, they're bouncing their beer bottle... To me, there's nothing like a really good shuffle beat to get people excited. There's just something about it. It's hard to describe, but I think that's the essence of the blues.[171]

In reading Dom's description of the essence of the blues, I recall the idea that fascinated me about blues in the first place: the idea that there might be such a thing as a blues feeling. It is probably too romantic to say that the notes and rhythms in a blues song make musicians and audience members feel a certain emotion; to say that romanticizes the experience like the mythical tales about the blues emerging from the Mississippi Delta as told by writers like Oliver and Palmer or W.C. Handy's story of finding blues at the crossroads there romanticize history. However, the fact remains that it is the kind of language that my consultants use to explain their thoughts about

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[170] Interview with the author.

[171] Interview with the author.

their own scenes. For instance, I asked my consultants what they thought made someone a blues fan and Jim's response evoked this feeling idea:

> Probably I would say, in general, they've got the same feel for the music that I do and, you know, like a lot of them, I don't know if they started listening to it as long ago as I did. A lot of my really good friends are musicians. I'm not a musician myself. I'm kind of jealous of those guys. I can't even whistle...The vast majority of musicians I know are blues musicians and their first love is blues. It's like just the feel of it, they're just really into it, too. It's kind of hard to totally explain it.[172]

Like all music, hearing blues music and being at blues events has various effects on people from different background and walks of life and can have various effects on the same person in a given day. I am not familiar enough with cognitive psychology to say whether or not one can measure how a piece of music makes a person feel at a given moment in time. However, I do know that people in Lansing and Detroit see the blues as energetic and lively, that they value people putting emotion into their playing, and that they keep going to blues events because they like the way being in the community makes them feel.

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[172] Interview with the author.

Conclusion

In his book History of the Blues, Francis Davis made a comment that blues fans, especially those who write about the blues, go to blues clubs, not for the musical experience they hope to have, but to remember the music and musicians who used to be there.[173] In some cases this means that blues fans will miss the blues scenes in their own cities while they go to look at clubs where famous musicians who were born in the Mississippi Delta used to play. In going to "stare at things that aren't there anymore" many blues fans seem ignorant of the scenes that are still active, especially scenes that are not in the places that blues history says were most significant.[174]

In writing a historiography of blues, I learned that it was the Delta scene from the 1930s and 1940s that the writers thought was most significant. This is not only an aesthetic preference, but a preference for the past. In his study of African popular music, Waterman said that it is tempting to read contemporary categories into the past, especially if previous scholars have done so.[175] Thus, since blues historians like Oliver and Palmer developed a strong preference for the traditional Delta blues style that they heard played by older musicians over the contemporary urban blues scenes, they projected this into the past and said the Delta blues had always been the best. Waterman went on to say that if we do not question this type of view presented by previous scholars we "may distort our analyses not only of the past but also of

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[173] Davis, *The History of the Blues*, 5.

[174] Ibid.

[175] Christopher Waterman, "Our Tradition is a Very Modern Tradition." Ethnomusicology 4, 1990, 368.

contemporary sociomusical practices."[176] This phenomenon of reverence for blues music of the past distorts the audience's view of contemporary music and influences which contemporary artists are successful.

This type of thinking causes people to think blues scenes have disappeared or were never present in the areas outside of the blues centers of the Delta and Chicago. Blues scenes in cities like Detroit and Lansing have been around for many years and while they may have changed since they began just as the Chicago scene has changed, these scenes remain active. It is not only the scenes in Chicago or Mississippi but all live blues scenes that keep the genre alive. As David Whiteis wrote when discussing what it takes for a band to succeed in neighborhood clubs, "Music must be an invocation of life in the present tense, an emotional and often physical call to action – not an artifact... Roots are only strong when they nurture something that's alive and growing." [177] In short, live music scenes are crucial for the music to continue developing.

Although they are influenced by past scenes, fans and musicians in Michigan have created blues scenes that are not mere imitations of Mississippi juke joints or Chicago clubs. They have created Michigan blues communities in specific bars on specific nights that maintained the character of the cities they were located in. Mugshot is a working class bar in an East Side Detroit neighborhood that is a local blues scene on Monday night. Callahan's is a music venue in a north Detroit suburb that features out of town entertainment for an audience that consists of Detroit Blues Society members, many of them white. The Green Door Blues Bar and Grill is

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[176] Waterman, "Our Tradition is a Very Moden Tradition", 368.

[177] Whiteis, *Chicago Blues*, 280.

somewhere between a neighborhood bar and a place that is strictly a music venue. This is perfect for the people that come to the bar some of whom are working class people who come to unwind after work and others of whom are blues lovers.

In the end, two things matter most; that Michigan blues scenes are recognized for what they are – vibrant scenes with strong local support – and that more scholars need to be willing to examine views of history that we have come to accept as absolute fact. Scenes in Detroit and Lansing have been continuously active despite a persistent center-periphery narrative that has never allowed them much room in blues history books or much cultural capital and the history of urban renewal which destroyed the scene in Detroit and may have resulted in a lack of an early blues scene in Lansing. I have only scratched the surface of blues scenes in Michigan, and I believe that the Delta and Chicago centered narrative deserves more challenges in face of this evidence. Blues scenes exist in the two Michigan cities I have studied, and there are many other blues scenes around the country that deserve more attention than they have gotten from past scholars.

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