

AMERICAN POPULAR MUSIC



FROM
MINSTRELSY
TO MTV

Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman

Includes 2 CDs
featuring
43 tracks

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“ST. LOUIS BLUES”

Race Records and Hillbilly Music

As we have seen, many of the bestselling songs of the 1920s and 1930s were produced by professional tunesmiths who worked for a small number of music publishing firms, all situated within an area of Manhattan less than one square mile in extent (the musical equivalent of Wall Street). Although some composers and lyricists were able to work creatively within the constraints of a narrow range of song forms (including the AABA and ABAC forms analyzed in the last chapter), powerful institutions at the center of the music industry—including the recording and publishing companies, Hollywood, Broadway, and ASCAP—were more interested in guaranteeing profits than in encouraging musical diversity or experimentation.

Despite the essential conservatism of the music industry, it was during the years between World War I and World War II (1918–40) that companies targeted some specific new audiences and, in the process, recorded and disseminated types of music—particularly genres derived from the folk traditions of the American South—that had previously been ignored. This process of musical diversification was encouraged by the migration of millions of people from rural communities to cities such as New York, Chicago, Detroit, Atlanta, and Nashville in the years following World War I. These migrants constituted an audience for music that reflected their rural origins and for new, distinctively urban styles of music derived from the older oral traditions. The prevailing economic conditions also encouraged companies to seek out secondary markets. In 1921 the American record industry sold over one hundred million discs for the first time. This peak was followed by a decline in the demand for phonographs and discs, due in part to the expansion of commercial radio, which provided people with a cheaper means of access to a variety of programming. However, throughout the 1920s the market for performers working in idioms related to southern folk traditions continued to grow, countering the overall trend.

The terms *race* and *hillbilly* were used by the American music industry from the early 1920s until the late 1940s to classify and advertise southern music. “Race records” were recordings of performances by African American musicians produced mainly for sale to African American listeners. “Hillbilly” or “old-time” music, on the other hand, was performed by, and mainly intended for sale to, southern whites. The record companies who released this material—including small independent labels and the large record companies of the time—usually advertised it in racially segregated catalogs and brochures. Although there were some exceptions, the music industry in general reflected patterns of segregation more widespread in American society. Paradoxically, as we shall see, these records were also one of the main means by which music flowed across the boundaries of race.

Although a clear distinction was drawn between race music and hillbilly music—each of which comprised dozens of specific styles—the two had a number of important features in common. Both bodies of music originated mainly in the American South and were rooted in long-standing folk music traditions. As they entered the mass marketplace, both blended these older rural musical styles with aspects of national popular culture, including the minstrel show, vaudeville, and the musical forms, poetic themes, and performance styles of Tin Pan Alley pop. Race music and hillbilly music both grew out of the music industry’s efforts to develop alternative markets during a national decline in record sales and were disseminated across the country by new media—including electric recording, radio, and sound film—and by the process of urban migration, which affected the lives of millions of rural Americans during the 1920s and 1930s. And both bodies of music provided the basis for forms of popular music that emerged after World War II (rhythm & blues, country and western, and rock ‘n’ roll), extending their appeal across regional and, in the end, international boundaries.

RACE RECORDS

Although the Victor Company had released records by the Dinwiddie Colored Quartet as early as 1903 (“genuine Jubilee and Camp Meeting Shouts sung as only negroes can sing them”), recorded performances by African American artists in the first two decades of the twentieth century were basically in the Tin Pan Alley mold, including ragtime- and jazz-tinged dance music and “coon songs” aimed mainly at the white market. It was not until the 1920s that the idea of recording material closer to African American folk traditions, and the associated idea of selling it to an African American *audience*, took hold in the record business.

The music industry’s discovery of black music (and southern music in general) can be traced to a set of recordings made in 1920, featuring the black vaudeville performer **Mamie Smith** (1883–1946). Perry Bradford, a successful black songwriter and music store owner, brought Smith to the attention of the Okeh Record Company and suggested that she replace Sophie Tucker—a popular Jewish American vaudeville star who specialized in “Negro songs”—in a recording session. A record that featured Smith performing two of Bradford’s songs was released in July 1920, and although Okeh made no special effort to promote it, sales were unexpectedly high. Smith reentered the studio two months later and recorded “Crazy Blues,” backed with the song “It’s Right Here for You (If You Don’t Get It . . . ‘Tain’t No

Fault of Mine)." Okeh advertised "Crazy Blues" in black communities and sold an astounding seventy-five thousand copies within one month (at that time, five thousand sales of a given recording allowed a record company to recoup its production costs, meaning that any further record sales were almost all profit). Mamie Smith's records were soon available at music stores, drugstores, furniture stores, and other outlets in northern and midwestern cities, and throughout the Deep South.

The promotional catchphrase "race music" was first applied by Ralph Peer (1892–1960), a Missouri-born talent scout for Okeh Records who had worked as an assistant on Mamie Smith's first recording sessions. Although it might sound derogatory today, the term "race" was used in a positive sense in urban African American communities during the 1920s and was an early example of black nationalism; an individual who wanted to express pride in his heritage might refer to himself as "a race man." The term was soon picked up by other companies and was also widely used by the black press. The performances released on race records included a variety of musical styles—blues, jazz, gospel choirs, vocal quartets, string bands, and jug-and-washboard bands—as well as verbal performances such as sermons, stories, and comic routines. Not all recordings featuring African American artists were automatically classified as race records. For example, recordings by black dance orchestras or jazz bands with a substantial white audience—including James Reese Europe's Clef Club Orchestra—were listed in the mainstream pop record catalogs (see Chapter 3). A few records by African American artists even found their way into the hillbilly catalogs.

The emergence of race records set a pattern that has been repeated many times in the history of American popular music, in which talented entrepreneurs, often connected with small, independent record labels, take the lead in exploring and promoting music outside the commercial mainstream. Okeh Records, under the direction of Ralph Peer, was the first label to send mobile recording units into the South, seeking out and recording local talent. Traveling in a car with recording equipment and a team of two engineers, Peer recorded in Atlanta, Memphis, New Orleans, Dallas, and other cities and towns in the South. Paramount Records, the second company to enter the race music market, began in 1922 as a subsidiary of the Wisconsin Chair Company. Although this may seem like a strange sideline for a furniture company, the combination in fact made perfect sense: the company made phonographs and the wooden cabinetry that enclosed them, and the software side of the business (production and sale of discs) reinforced the hardware side (production and sale of phonographs). Helped by the business acumen and community connections of J. Mayo Williams, one of a handful of African American men influential in the management side of the record business, Paramount became one of the most important race record labels. Its records were sold by traveling salesmen and shop owners throughout the country, and a thriving mail-order service allowed the company to cultivate a substantial rural audience.

The large record companies took several years to catch on to the new trend: Columbia Records started its successful race series in 1923, and Vocalion/Brunswick Records entered the field in 1926, while the relatively conservative Victor Company—which had heard and rejected Mamie Smith in 1920—waited until 1927. We will see this same process—in which small independent record labels develop new musical trends and markets, while the big record companies wait several years before moving in to capitalize on the new markets—repeated in the 1950s with rock

'n' roll, in the 1970s with reggae and punk, in the 1980s with rap music, and in the 1990s with alternative rock.

The 1920s also saw the emergence of African American-owned record companies. The first of these was Black Swan, founded in 1921 in New York by Harry Pace, a former partner of the bandleader and songwriter W. C. Handy (see Box 5.1). In announcing the new company, Pace stated that it intended to meet "a legitimate and growing demand" among the twelve million people of African descent in the United States. Bandleader Fletcher Henderson—later to be the inspiration for the big-band swing style of the 1930s and 1940s (see Chapter 6)—was the label's musical director. Black Swan managed to buy its own pressing plant and eventually expanded its catalog to include hillbilly and operatic, as well as race, records. The range of businesses that sold race records is indicated by this announcement, placed by Black Swan in black newspapers in 1923:

We Want Live Agents Everywhere! Music stores, drug stores, furniture dealers, news stands, cigar stores, manicuring and hairdressing parlors, delicatessen shops and all other places of business catering to retail trade.

By 1927 a total of some five hundred race records were being issued every year. Throughout the 1920s African Americans bought as many as ten million blues and gospel recordings a year, almost one per person, an astonishingly high figure when compared with the mainstream record market, especially considering that many black people lived in poverty. Although detailed information on the consumption of recorded music by African Americans during this period is sketchy, it seems clear that even in the most isolated communities, the phonograph was an important part of everyday life. A survey of rural communities in Alabama in 1930 found that 13 percent of Negro families—most of them living in grinding poverty—owned phonographs, bought on installment plans from local merchants. Many young people in these communities thus grew up with the sound of a phonograph as part of their everyday experience. Migrants from rural communities who had relocated to urban centers returned periodically, bringing with them the latest hit records and creating a continual flow of musical styles and tastes between city and country.

It is clear that the music business did not create race music or its intended audience out of thin air. It would be more accurate to say that the basis for an African American audience already existed and the companies, hungry for new markets, moved to exploit (and in some cases to shape) this sense of a distinctive black identity. This process in turn helped to create a truly national African American musical culture—for the first time, people living in New York City, Gary (Indiana), Jackson (Mississippi), and Los Angeles could hear the same phonograph records at around the same time. It was during this period that the first generation of national black music stars emerged, including Bessie Smith, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Robert Johnson.

CLASSIC BLUES

One of the most influential kinds of music disseminated on race records was the blues, a musical genre that emerged in black communities of the Deep South—especially the region from the Mississippi Delta to East Texas—sometime around the

end of the nineteenth century. In the beginning, the influence of this tradition on the American pop mainstream was quite indirect, taking the form of professionally composed “blues songs,” filtered through the sensibilities of Tin Pan Alley and vaudeville, and shaped by the commercial needs of the music industry. In 1914 Prince’s Orchestra, the studio ensemble that provided backing for many of Al Jolson’s early recordings, released the first in a series of “blues” dance arrangements, numbers in a fox-trot style that bore little if any resemblance to the music played in southern black communities but that were nonetheless an important aspect of African American influence on mainstream popular dance (see Chapter 3). The first vocal performance labeled “blues”—“Nigger Blues,” composed in 1912 and recorded in 1916—featured George O’Connor, a white attorney and lobbyist from Washington, D.C. As its offensive title suggests, this was actually a ragtime-influenced “coon song” in blues form (see below). (O’Connor, an amateur minstrel, performed his blackface routines at the White House for every president from McKinley to Truman.)

In this context, it is perhaps understandable that the first blues records by African American singers—including Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues”—were not the country

Box 5.1 “Father of the Blues”: W. C. Handy

The most influential of the classic blues composers was William Christopher Handy, born in Alabama in 1873. The son of a conservative pastor who forbade him from playing guitar (an instrument often associated with the devil, as well as with the lower classes), Handy instead channeled his musical talents into playing the cornet. He went on to receive a college degree and became a schoolteacher. To augment his income, Handy also worked as a freelance musician, taking the job of bandmaster for a minstrel troupe and eventually forming his own dance band. In 1908 Handy cofounded the first African American-owned music publishing house (his partner was Harry Pace, who would later go on to found Black Swan Records).

For a period of some twenty-five years Handy toured the South, where he became acquainted with forms of music not allowed into his house during his boyhood. As we shall see, Handy’s blues actually owed much to Tin Pan Alley song forms but also drew substantially on African American folk traditions. W. C. Handy’s first sheet music hit was “Memphis Blues” (1912), composed as a campaign song for Boss Crump, the famously crooked mayor of Memphis, Tennessee. His biggest hit was the song “St. Louis Blues” (1914), which went on to become one of the most frequently recorded American songs of all time. To capitalize on his success, Handy moved to New York City, where his dance band made a number of recordings and attracted a large, racially mixed audience. Regarded by many white Americans as the originator of the blues, Handy christened himself “father of the blues” and wrote a fascinating autobiography about his career. W. C. Handy died in 1958, the same year that Nat “King” Cole played him in a film adaptation of the autobiography.

Bessie Smith at the Apollo Theatre (Harlem, New York City), 1936. Frank Driggs Collection.



blues performed by sharecroppers and laborers in the Mississippi Delta and East Texas, but blues songs (sometimes called *classic blues*) written by professional songwriters eager to cash in on the national fascination with “authentic Negro music.” Some of the most prominent composers of these Tin Pan Alley-style blues songs were middle-class African American men, who also led popular dance orchestras and composed ragtime songs (a genre that overlapped with blues songs). In many cases these songwriters viewed the folk traditions of the Deep South from a distance and thus came to the blues as partial outsiders.

Classic blues songs were performed by high-class nightclub singers such as **Alberta Hunter** (1895–1984), billed as the “Marian Anderson of the Blues,” and **Ethel Waters** (1896–1977), who entertained the growing African American middle class in New York, Chicago, and other northern cities, and by singers who performed in a somewhat rougher style, including **Gertrude “Ma” Rainey** (1886–1939), popularly known as the “Mother of the Blues,” and **Bessie Smith** (1894–1937), the “Empress of the Blues.” Unlike their more refined middle-class counterparts, Rainey and Smith had developed their singing styles in the rough-and-tumble black vaudeville and tent shows that crisscrossed the country in the early decades of the century. Their early recordings, released during the height of the so-called blues craze (1920–26), sold well among both whites and blacks and signaled the emergence of a style of performance more directly and deeply informed by African American musical traditions than either nineteenth-century minstrelsy or the ragtime-tinged pop songs of the early twentieth century.

LISTENING AND ANALYSIS "ST. LOUIS BLUES"

Bessie Smith's 1925 version of "St. Louis Blues" was the kind of recording that introduced much of white America—and a large section of black America—to the blues. It was typical insofar as it represented a hybrid approach both to blues composition and to blues performance. W. C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues" and Bessie Smith's interpretation of it are both some distance removed from what might today be regarded as the most "authentic," or at least the most roots-conscious, type of blues, namely, the "down-home" rural blues represented by composer/performers such as Charley Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Robert Johnson (all of whom we shall meet shortly). But as we have already seen, it was often the very process of musical hybridization that enabled marginal music to begin crossing over into the mainstream of American popular music.

Bessie Smith, along with other black singers who toured and performed in northern urban centers, adapted her repertoire and performing to suit the tastes of her audiences and came to represent the style called, paradoxically perhaps, classic blues. It was the unprecedented success of the classic blues singers and records that eventually prompted interest in the roots of the blues and led to the later recording of rural southern practitioners of the form. Bessie Smith's 1925 recording of "St. Louis Blues" was an early crossover hit, selling well among whites as well as blacks. Although there were no official industry charts for hit records at the time, it has been estimated that Smith's "St. Louis Blues" must have reached the equivalent of Number Three on the mainstream pop charts. Even more remarkable is the fact that Bessie Smith's first Columbia recording, of "Down Hearted Blues," was the bestselling record in America for four weeks in 1923. Smith's ability to attract an audience that crossed the color line during the 1920s has been credited with single-handedly saving Columbia Records from bankruptcy during that period.

"St. Louis Blues" will also serve as our introduction to the blues. As might be expected, it is more regular and predictable in its use of blues materials than typical rural examples of the form. W. C. Handy, a middle-class African American composer (see Box 5.1), combined elements borrowed from the country blues (see below) with structural elements borrowed from Tin Pan Alley in "St. Louis Blues." And the formal clarity of Handy's composition is respected by Bessie Smith and her accompanists, even as they use the song's structure as a springboard for subtle improvisations.

Basic Description

"St. Louis Blues" is a longer and more complex song than we have encountered heretofore, a result of composer Handy's fusion of blues with Tin Pan Alley elements. Hence, Bessie Smith's performance presents the song just one time through, without any repetitions; this is all she has time for in a record that nevertheless runs over three minutes in duration. The song's lyrics depict a representative blues subject and mood in their lament over love gone wrong and their projection of a desire to escape the scene of unhappiness. The slow tempo of

this performance helps to accentuate the feeling of despair—notice especially the moaning quality of Smith's drawn-out vowel sounds.

Smith is accompanied on this record by reed organ and cornet. The organ is somewhat unusual; a more common choice would have been piano, but the less rhythmically emphatic organ certainly reinforces the singer's projection of hopeless lassitude. The cornet player is jazz great Louis Armstrong (see Box 5.2). Notice how Armstrong's cornet replies to each sung phrase, engaging in *call and response* with Smith in a manner that is typical of much African American music. Call and response is a common feature of blues and jazz performances of all types and periods.

Form

As may be seen in the listening chart, the form of "St. Louis Blues" is based on the AABA model commonly seen in Tin Pan Alley songs. In this instance, the final section is really a C, having a new melody but relating to the earlier A sections by virtue of its identical length and its use of the same basic progression of chords. These A and C sections are representative of *twelve-bar blues*, a formal concept so important in the history of American popular music that it demands our attention here. In Box 5.3 we explain some of the musical elements that make up twelve-bar blues.

The Song

"St. Louis Blues" begins as if it might be a kind of **strophic** folk blues, with two opening presentations of a typical twelve-bar blues format in both lyrics and musical structure. As we shall see, examples of southern rural blues often adhere to this format throughout. A major factor in the impact and complexity of Handy's song is that it sets us up for a repetitive structure and then deviates brilliantly and expressively from our expectations. The A music never returns, and instead we hear a succession of two new sections, B and C, after which the song concludes. (Handy might well have derived the inspiration for the form of "St. Louis Blues" from ragtime music, which often minimized large-scale elements of return or dispensed with them entirely.)

When the lyrics turn from a tone of general lament to the specifics of place and situation with the mention of the "St. Louis woman," the typical blues music of the A sections gives way to a B section of contrasting form and character, and striking length. In one sense, B functions like a bridge, insofar as it separates opening and closing sections based on the twelve-bar blues. But unlike almost all bridges in Tin Pan Alley songs, this B music presents an independent and memorable tune with its own distinctive structure (a-b-a-b; see the listening chart), and it is in fact longer than any other individual section of the song. It is the central core of the song, virtually a song-within-a-song, rather than a transition in any sense; the B tune is arguably the one people most remember and most identify with "St. Louis Blues." And this is only fitting in music to accompany lyrics that identify the villain of the piece and describe her allure.

The music of the B section, with its more graceful, insinuating rhythm (along with its change to a **minor** key from the prevailing **major**) hints strongly at Latin

Box 5.2 Louis Armstrong (1901-1971)

The career of the cornetist and singer Louis Armstrong (a.k.a. "Satchmo," "Satchelmouth") challenges the distinction that is sometimes drawn between the artistic and commercial sides of jazz music. In addition to establishing certain core features of jazz—particularly its rhythmic drive or swing and its emphasis on solo instrumental virtuosity—Armstrong also profoundly influenced the development of mainstream popular singing during the 1920s and 1930s.

The outlines of Armstrong's early life are well known. He was born into poverty in the slums of New Orleans in August 1901 and had his first encounter with the cornet in the band of a Colored Waif's Home at the age of twelve. Armstrong emerged as an influential musician on the local scene in the years following World War I, and subsequently migrated to Chicago to join the band of his mentor King (Joe) Oliver, playing on what are regarded by many critics and historians as the first real jazz records (1923). In 1924 Armstrong joined Fletcher Henderson's band in New York City, pushing the band in the direction of a hotter, more improvisatory style that helped to create the synthesis of jazz and ballroom dance music that would later be called swing (see Chapter 6). By the 1930s Armstrong was the best-known black musician in the world, as a result of his recordings and film and radio appearances. Between 1927 and 1939 Armstrong placed fifty-five singles in the Top 20, including his biggest hit, "All of Me," which was the bestselling record in America for two weeks in 1932.

Although none of the leading jazz-influenced crooners of the 1930s—including the reigning pop superstar Bing Crosby—were able to directly appropriate Armstrong's rough, gravelly tone color, or his rhythmic drive, or his gift for vocal improvisation (a technique referred to by jazz musicians as "scatting"), all were profoundly influenced by Armstrong's treatment of popular songs. His approach was shaped by the aesthetics of early New Orleans jazz, in which the cornet or trumpet player usually held the responsibility of stating the melody of the song being played. Throughout his career Armstrong often spoke of the importance of maintaining a balance between improvisation (or "routining," as he sometimes called it) and straightforward treatment of the melody. "Ain't no sense in playing a hundred notes if one will do," Armstrong is reported to have said on his seventieth birthday. In addition, Armstrong infused all of his vocal performances with his own warm and ebullient personality, making his approach a precursor to the highly personalized treatments of songs typical of later genres such as rhythm & blues and rock 'n' roll. Armstrong himself claimed that if it hadn't been for jazz, there would never have been rock 'n' roll.

Louis Armstrong's professional longevity was astounding. Although his popularity waned somewhat during the swing era and the 1950s, in 1964 Armstrong became the oldest musician ever to score a Number One hit with his version of "Hello Dolly!" (from the Broadway musical of the same name), the first single ever to push a Beatles record off the top of the charts. And

in 1988, some sixty-five years after his first groundbreaking recordings with King Joe Oliver, Louis Armstrong once again broke into the Top 40 with a rendition of "What a Wonderful World." (Originally released in 1967, the song's reappearance on the charts was catalyzed by its inclusion in the soundtrack for the film *Good Morning, Vietnam*, starring Robin Williams. When this, his last hit record appeared, Armstrong had been dead for nearly seventeen years!) In 1990 Louis Armstrong was posthumously inducted into the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame, a fitting tribute to the continuing influence of the man who Bing Crosby claimed was "the beginning and the end of American music."



Louis Armstrong's Hot Five, one of the most celebrated jazz ensembles of all time, photographed in Chicago in 1926 (left to right: Armstrong, Johnny St. Cyr, Johnny Dodds, Kid Ory, Lillian Hardin Armstrong). Frank Driggs Collection.

Box 5.3 Technical Note: Twelve-Bar Blues

A *bar*, or *measure*, is simply a rhythmic unit of music, consisting of one accented beat followed by one or more unaccented beats. *Beats* are equal measures of musical time; when you tap your foot or your finger to a tune, you are sensing and measuring its beats. Most popular music with which Americans are familiar is organized in bars of two, three, or four beats, following one right after another in regular patterns. For example:

MARCH: One, two; One, two; One, two; etc.

↑
[accent]

(In the march, each rhythmic unit of One, two, is a *bar*.)

WALTZ: One, two, three; One, two, three; One, two, three; etc.

↑
[accent]

(In the waltz, each rhythmic unit of One, two, three, is a *bar*.)

BLUES: One, two, three, four; One, two, three, four; One, two, three, four; etc.

↑
[accent]

(In the blues, each rhythmic unit of One, two, three, four, is a *bar*.)

It is the pattern of accented and unaccented beats that creates the characteristic rhythmic organization that we associate with specific types of music. Marches are typically “in two,” to accord with the regular motion of two feet; waltzes are invariably written with three-beat bars; most blues and jazz—and most Tin Pan Alley music of either ballad or uptempo type, for that matter—have four-beat bars.

Twelve-bar blues refers to a particular arrangement of four-beat bars. The bars are themselves grouped in fours, and each group of four bars corresponds to a unit—a line, a phrase—in the lyrics and is also associated with characteristic chord changes. (In an instrumental blues, it is the recurring pattern of chord changes by itself that creates the form.) This is easy to hear in the initial A section of “St. Louis Blues.” Let us consider the lyrics first. In following the chart below, rely on the organ for rhythmic orientation, as it clearly articulates each beat:

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------|----|-------|----|-------|-----|---------|-----|------|-----------|-----------------------------|---|---|----|---|---|---|
| Beats: | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Bars: | 1 | | | | 2 | | | | 3 | | | | 4 | | | |
| Lyrics: | I | hate | to | see | the | evenin’ | sun | go | down. | [cornet response,] | | | | | | |
| Beats: | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Bars: | 5 | | | | 6 | | | | 7 | | | | 8 | | | |
| Lyrics: | I | hate | to | see | the | evenin’ | sun | go | down. | [cornet response] | | | | | | |
| Beats: | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Bars: | 9 | | | | 10 | | | | 11 | | | | 12 | | | |
| Lyrics: | It | makes | me | think | I’m | on | my | last | go-round. | [cornet response] | | | | | | |

The three-line poetic stanza, in which the second line is a repetition of the first, is extremely common in twelve-bar blues and is an obvious clue to its presence. The same pattern is present in the lyrics of the second stanza, the second A section of “St. Louis Blues”:

*Feelin’ tomorrow like I feel today,
Feelin’ tomorrow like I feel today,
I’ll pack my grip and make my getaway.*

The issue of harmony in the twelve-bar blues is obviously a complex one, since the progression of chords, even in examples of classic blues, is by no means absolutely systematic or consistent. Still, the twelve-bar blues does tend to be marked by specific chord changes at particular points in the pattern. The thing to remember is that the chord changes need not be limited only to these typical ones; a given performance may add further changes at other points. If we call our starting chord the “home” chord (musicians would call it the *tonic*), this chart shows the most important, typical points of change in the twelve-bar blues pattern:

| | | | | |
|---------|------------|-------|----------|----|
| Bars: | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Chords: | ↑ “Home” | | | |
| Bars: | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
| Chords: | ↑ Change 1 | | ↑ “Home” | |
| Bars: | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 |
| Chords: | ↑ Change 2 | | ↑ “Home” | |

Note that the chords at “changes” 1 and 2 are different from one another; thus there are three essential chords that define the skeleton of the musical structure. (Musicians call the chord at bar 5 the *subdominant* and the chord at bar 9 the *dominant*.) Although there are additional chord changes, this basic skeleton is clearly in evidence in the two A sections of “St. Louis Blues,” and it is good listening practice to try to pick it out. This same chord skeleton is present in the twelve-bar C section that concludes the song, even though the vocal melody paired with it is different. This is why C is also a twelve-bar blues, even though its pattern of lyrics is different also, presenting three different lines in the stanza instead of having a repeated line.

American dance music, suggesting aspects of both the habanera and the tango. This evokes at once the exotic and cosmopolitan nature of the “St. Louis woman,” with music obviously far removed from the unpretentious, more down-home flavor of the twelve-bar blues sections that portray the jilted singer and her feelings. Precisely at the time Handy published “St. Louis Blues,” ballroom dance stars like Vernon and Irene Castle were making the tango the new definition of urban sophistication and sexiness in dance (see Chapter 3).

As already noted, the C section once again presents a twelve-bar blues structure, providing return on one level while offering yet further variety with its new melody line and lyrics. Handy himself said of “St. Louis Blues,” “here, as in most of my other blues, three distinct musical strains are carried as a means of avoiding the monotony that always resulted in the three-line folk blues.” While we may well disagree with the statement that strophic folk blues are inevitably monotonous, and while we may appreciate that Handy may well have made such a statement primarily to distance himself—as a middle-class, educated, urban black man—from poor, uneducated, rural members of his race, the remarkable

richness of "St. Louis Blues" is indisputable. This piece, which synthesizes aspects of European American music (Tin Pan Alley song form), African American music (twelve-bar blues), and Latin American music (habanera and tango dance rhythms), is as representative as any we could name of the achievements of twentieth-century American popular song.

The Recording

W. C. Handy's published sheet music for "St. Louis Blues" presents a composition using "blue" melodic inflections and rhythmic syncopations to a degree unusual for its time. In notating his song, Handy still needed to balance his interest in evoking effects of pitch and rhythm that originated in African American folk tradition against the inherent limitations of a European-based system of musical notation. Bessie Smith's performance of "St. Louis Blues" adds yet another layer of complexity to Handy's already rich synthesis. Although Smith was by no means a rural blues singer herself, she approached the song as one intimately familiar and comfortable with many of the varied oral traditions of African American music, and consequently her performance treated Handy's composition with considerable—but never inappropriate—freedom.

Handy's published composition contains many written **blue notes**: "bent" or "flattened" tones lying outside traditional European-based scale structures, tones that reflect particular African American melodic characteristics. Blue notes probably reflect the long-range influence of African scales (and have to be notated as "added" flat notes in European-based musical notation). In addition to Handy's written blue notes, Bessie Smith adds *additional* blue notes of her own to her performance, intensifying the African American flavor yet further. The effect of blue notes is profoundly expressive and easy to hear, as blue notes in the melody generally clash poignantly with notes in the underlying chord. To help you locate and appreciate their effect, we will use the first A section of the recording as a source of examples. Below are the lyrics for this section. The particular words and syllables on which Smith sings the most prominent blue notes are marked with asterisks—single asterisks for those blue notes she takes from Handy's own notation, and double asterisks for those she has added on her own to enhance the performance:

** *

I hate to see the eve-nin' sun go down.

** ** ** *

I hate to see the eve-nin' sun go down.

** ** * * *

It makes me think I'm on my last go-round,

Handy's written composition also calls for a great deal of rhythmic **syncopation**, rhythms that play "off" or "against" or "between" the main beats that define the meter of the piece. In fact, Smith's performance goes even farther in playing around the main pulse established by the accompaniment. (For a visual representation of this effect, see the rhythmic diagram of the first A section in Box 5.3.) Louis Armstrong's improvised cornet responses to Smith's vocal

phrases are perfectly aligned with the singer's own stylistic approach; like Smith, Armstrong continually incorporates blue notes and syncopation into his melody lines. Without ever upstaging the singer, he maintains and underlines the pervading feeling of intense melancholy. But notice also how no two of his responses are ever precisely the same.

A further analysis of this performance would necessitate detailed comparisons between Handy's sheet music and the auditory data of the recording; this would become quite academic and is obviously beyond the scope of this book. The miraculous thing is that all the intertwined and overlapping complexities that went into the making of this recording resulted in nothing remotely academic in effect: the performance comes across as immediate, direct, sincere, and emotionally devastating.

LISTENING CHART "ST. LOUIS BLUES"

Music and lyrics by W. C. Handy; published 1914; as performed by Bessie Smith, accompanied by Louis Armstrong, cornet, and Fred Longshaw, reed organ; recorded 1925

| FORM | LYRICS | DESCRIPTIVE COMMENTS |
|------|---|--|
| A | <i>I hate to see . . .</i> | Twelve-bar blues, with <i>call and response</i> between voice and cornet. |
| A | <i>Feelin' tomorrow . . .</i> | |
| B: a | <i>St. Louis woman . . .</i> | The B section has its own distinctive melody and internal form; call and response continues. |
| b | <i>Pulls my man around . . .</i> | |
| a | <i>Wasn't for powder . . .</i> | |
| b | <i>The man I love . . .</i> | |
| C | <i>I got them St. Louis blues . . .</i> | The C section returns to the twelve-bar blues format, but with a new melody; call and response continues to the end. |

The recordings of Bessie Smith and other classic blues singers were an important part of the process by which African American musical styles and musicians shaped the taste of the predominantly white mass audience during the 1920s and 1930s. But it would be a mistake to think that the mainstream popularity of these records means that they were not equally popular in black communities. In her autobiography, the great gospel singer Mahalia Jackson wrote about the classic blues recordings she heard as a child in New Orleans during the 1920s:

Everybody was buying phonographs—the kind you wound up on the side by hand—just the way people have television sets today—and everybody had records of all the Negro blues singers—Bessie Smith . . . Ma Rainey . . . Mamie Smith . . . all the rest. The famous white singers like [Enrico] Caruso—you might hear them when you

went by a white folks' house, but in a colored house you heard blues. You couldn't help but hear blues—all through the thin partitions of the houses—through the open windows—up and down the street in the colored neighborhoods—everybody played it real loud. (Jackson and Wylie 1966, p. 29)

Although American cities, towns, and villages were still segregated along racial lines, recordings like Bessie Smith's version of "St. Louis Blues" created a kind of bridge or middle zone between black and white communities of taste. As we shall see, this middle zone proved to be fertile ground for the growth of distinctively American styles of popular music.

THE COUNTRY BLUES

What was the initial inspiration for the twelve-bar sections and blue notes of popular songs like "Crazy Blues" and "St. Louis Blues"? In his autobiography, W. C. Handy described an encounter with what he called "the weirdest music I had ever heard" at a train station in the Mississippi Delta in the year 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 the guitar in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who used 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 the guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard. The tune stayed in my mind. When the singer paused, I leaned over and asked him what the words meant. He rolled his eyes, showing a trace of mild amusement. Perhaps I should have known, but he didn't mind explaining. At Moorhead the eastbound and the westbound met and crossed the north and southbound trains four times a day. This fellow was going where the Southern cross' the Dog, and he didn't care who knew it. He was simply singing about Moorhead as he waited. (Handy 1941, p. 78)

The music Handy heard that day was the *country blues* (also referred to as "rural," "down-home," or "folk" blues). Although country blues had existed for decades before the first vaudevillian blues songs appeared on record, rural musicians who played in a style closer to the roots of the tradition were not recorded by phonograph record companies until the mid-1920s. Most scholars agree that the folk blues first emerged in the Mississippi Delta, a region of fertile land that stretches some two hundred miles along the river, from Memphis, Tennessee, in the north to Vicksburg, Mississippi, in the south. In the nineteenth century the delta had been the site of some of the most intensive cotton farming in the Deep South, and home to one of the largest populations of slaves in North America. After the Civil War many former slaves were relegated to the position of tenant farmers, or sharecroppers, still tied to the land owned by white farmers, and living in conditions of extreme poverty. Some men were compelled to work on the levees, a huge system of earthworks that protected the fertile delta farmlands from flooding. To escape this exploitative system and gain some measure of freedom, others took to the road, working on the railways and riverboats.

The blues was the music of this impoverished black work force, and it provided a dynamic, flexible framework for publicly recounting aspects of their experience. The earliest blues appear to have been influenced by various types of African American folk music that already existed in the late nineteenth century. These included "jump-ups," songs based on short repeated phrases and often used as accompaniment for dancing; African American story-songs such as "Frankie and Johnny" and "John Henry," that show influences from the English ballad tradition; work songs, rhythmic songs used to accompany and coordinate agricultural labor; and field hollers or "arhoolies," stylized cries sometimes used to communicate across the fields.

As we saw in the analysis of "St. Louis Blues," the basic features of classic blues form are (1) a twelve-bar structure made up of three phrases of four bars each, with (2) a basic three-chord pattern and (3) a three-line AAB text. In fact, the rural blues that provided the inspiration for classic blues songs displayed a much wider range of forms. There are eight-bar and sixteen-bar country blues; a rural blues singer may drop or add a couple of beats in order to better express himself, resulting in 11½- or 12½-bar forms; some blues use more than three chords, while others are based on a repeated rhythmic-melodic pattern (a riff) and do not really use chords at all. In addition, there were distinctive regional styles of blues, based in the Mississippi Delta, in the Piedmont region of the Carolinas and Virginia, in East Texas, and in other parts of the South.

In order to understand the evolution of musical forms such as the blues it is important to consider how songs are produced and how they are disseminated from one person or group to another. In the early twentieth century the country blues was an entirely oral tradition, in which versions of a song were passed down from generation to generation, learned by ear and carried in memory. Because the blues was essentially a personal form of music making, individual musicians could construct their own versions of existing songs or assemble new songs from parts of others. The Tin Pan Alley way of making music, on the other hand, depended on writing songs down in a standardized form. In addition, the music industry's reliance on sheet music as a means of distributing music to the public meant that songs often had to be simplified in order to allow customers without specialized musical training to perform them at home. Thus the neat and tidy form of classic blues songs is in part a by-product of the process of musical notation, which tends to create a standardized and authoritative version of any particular popular song.

The process of recording, which began to affect the blues tradition in the 1920s, was another means of transmission that shaped the evolution of the blues. To take one example, Bessie Smith's 1925 recording of "St. Louis Blues," with its slow tempo and personal expressive touches, became a kind of model on which other performers based their versions. During the early 1920s many blues musicians in the South, having heard the classic blues recordings of Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and other vaudeville-influenced singers, added the songs to their repertoires. Later in the 1920s, when rural blues artists began to be recorded, certain melodies, lines of text, and styles of performance were spread on phonograph records, helping not only to create a nationwide audience for the blues but also to establish shared ideals of an authentic "deep blues" sound. These cases show how sound recording—a process rooted in urbanization and industrialization—can become part of the process of oral tradition.

One of the earliest known pioneers of the Mississippi Delta blues style was Charley Patton (ca. 1881–1934). Patton, the son of sharecroppers, was a charismatic figure whose performance techniques included rapping on the body of his guitar and throwing it into the air. His powerful rasping voice, strong danceable rhythms, and broad range of styles (including not only blues but also ballads, gospel songs, and Tin Pan Alley hits) made him ideal for Saturday night dances and all-day picnics.

Patton's reputation and ability to secure work were boosted by his work as a recording artist. Between 1929, when he was "discovered" by Henry Speir, a white record store owner from Jackson, Mississippi, who served as a talent scout for Paramount and other companies, and 1934, the year he died, Patton recorded nearly seventy songs. His recorded repertoire included not only blues but also African American ballads, ragtime, Tin Pan Alley hits, and even church songs (which he recorded under a pseudonym, Elder J. J. Hadley). Charley Patton's recordings are the best evidence we have of a first-generation bluesman apart from the Texan Blind Lemon Jefferson, whose work is discussed later in this chapter.

The popularity of blues performers and blues recordings in rural black communities throughout the South stemmed from the genre's ability to explore the shared concerns of African Americans through the details of personal experience, often presented in striking poetic images. Unlike European-derived ballads, in which a story is usually presented in narrative fashion—that is, in a linear sequence recounting the actual order of events—blues songs are more frequently like a series of evocative snapshots, assembled around a theme or set of themes: lost love, sexual desire, work, violence, loneliness.

Charley Patton's "Tom Rushen Blues," recorded by Paramount Records in 1929, has a twelve-bar form, three chords, and an AAB text (with a few minor variations, typical of rural blues performances). Patton sings in the rough, heavy voice typical of Delta blues, and his emphatic approach to guitar playing is also representative of the style. The lyrics recount an actual event from Patton's life; Tom Rushen is a sheriff who arrested him for public drunkenness. The story is loosely organized, with the names of two other characters appearing briefly and general observations about life interspersed in between reported events.

*Laid down last night, hopin' I would have my peace
I laid down last night, hopin' I would have my peace
But when I woke up, Tom Rushen was shakin' me*

*When you get in trouble, it's no use to screamin' and cryin'
When you gets in trouble, it's no use to screamin' and cryin'
Tom Rushen will take you back to the prison house flyin'*

*It was late one night, Holloway was gone to bed
It was late one night, Holloway was gone to bed
But Mr. Day brought whiskey taken from under Holloway's head*

*Awow it's boozeey-booze now, Lord, to cure these blues
It takes boozeey-booze Lord to cure these blues
But each day seem like years in the jailhouse where there is no booze*

*I got up this mornin', Tom Day was standin' 'round
I got up this mornin', Tom Day was standin' 'round
If he lose his office now he's runnin' from town to town*

*Let me tell you folkses just how he treated me
I'm gonna tell you folkses just how he treated me
Aw he caught me yellin', I was drunk as I could be*

The basic outlines of this story are not hard to follow: a drunk Charley Patton is rudely awakened by Sheriff Rushen, who unceremoniously carts him off to jail, where he spends the night. But a closer examination reveals additional layers to this text, encoded meanings that any listener in the know—that is, anyone familiar with the conditions of everyday life in small-town Mississippi during the 1920s—would be able to extract.

The use of encoded, or hidden, meaning in the blues has its roots in many earlier genres of African American music. The songs of slaves could embody secret messages that were impossible to state directly in the presence of the masters or overseers; a famous example is the folk song "Follow the Drinking Gourd," which described symbolically certain landmarks on the Underground Railroad, a path runaway slaves could follow to the North and freedom. (The "drinking gourd" was code for the Big Dipper asterism, which could be used in the night sky to locate the North Star and thus to lead the runaway in the right direction.) Work songs or prison songs might contain encoded messages about bosses or wardens that would lead to punishment if stated outright. The presence of encoded meanings was a great source of the blues' power and influence; we will meet this phenomenon at many other points in our survey of American popular music.

In "Tom Rushen Blues" Patton does not attack the institutionalized racism of the times in explicit terms. Nonetheless, it is obvious that several people in the story, including the jail guard and Judge Day, have been imbibing whiskey, and that Patton, the only black man in the story, is also the only one to pay a penalty for drinking. The critique of white privilege in "Tom Rushen," as in many other rural blues, is conveyed within an ironic framework. In the next-to-last stanza, the incarcerated bluesman stly reveals that Judge Tom Day is concerned with losing an upcoming election and thus is being forced to wander "from town to town," much in the manner of an itinerant blues musician. This humorous way of dealing with serious issues—despair (the blues), alcoholism, and at a deeper level, racism and small-town politics—is typical of many blues lyrics. Patton manages to poke fun at everyone, including himself; in the last line, he simultaneously protests his arrest and admits his culpability ("I'm gonna tell you folkses just how he treated me; Aw he caught me yellin', I was drunk as I could be").

This combination of dysphoria and humor, earthiness and philosophy, typifies the best country blues. As in the romantic songs of Tin Pan Alley, we view the world through the window of another person's experience. Unlike the romantic pop song tradition, however, the blues provides a gritty, realistic engagement with everyday

life, offering metaphoric revenge and a mordant sense of humor as the best available antidotes to oppression.

BLIND LEMON JEFFERSON: THE FIRST COUNTRY BLUES STAR

Although the genre appears to have originated in the Mississippi Delta, the first recording star of the country blues was the Texan Blind Lemon Jefferson (1897–1929). Born blind, Jefferson was living the typical life of a traveling street musician by the age of fourteen: wandering from place to place, performing for whoever would listen, living on handouts and the hospitality of friends, while hoping for steadier engagements that could bring in more income. His first records were released in 1926, after an enthusiastic market for blues had been established by more modern artists, and Jefferson's songs were advertised even then as "real old-fashioned blues by a real old-fashioned blues singer." Like Charley Patton, Jefferson recorded popular ragtime numbers as well as blues, and recorded church songs under a pseudonym, the Reverend L. J. Bates. However, Jefferson's East Texas style differs from Patton's Mississippi Delta blues in a number of ways: the vocal quality is generally more nasal and clearer, and the guitar accompaniments are sparser in texture and less rhythmically steady, generally subordinated to the vocal performance. Jefferson often used his guitar as an extension of his voice rather than as an accompaniment to it; he frequently played single-string passages on his guitar to answer a vocal line (another example of call-and-response technique).

Blind Lemon Jefferson.
Frank Driggs Collection.



Listening to a record like Jefferson's "That Black Snake Moan," recorded by Paramount Records in 1926, it is easy to grasp why music like this would have struck a middle-class black musician like W. C. Handy—not to mention the white advertising copywriter for Paramount Records!—as "weird." Jefferson's voice has a moaning quality, sliding among pitches and sometimes sounding closer to speaking than singing. The moaning quality is accentuated by the textless vocalizations, such as "aay," or "mmm," with which Jefferson punctuates the beginnings of many phrases in the song. The melodic character of the vocal part is restricted essentially to brief, repeated ideas; each of the six three-line stanzas (see the text below) is set essentially to the same music, and all the repeated lines of text are set to the same repeated music. These features are probably what led W. C. Handy to refer to the country blues as "monotonous."

Furthermore, there is little feeling of chord progression in "That Black Snake Moan," as the guitar part is characterized more by single-note playing than by the strumming of chords. And the rhythmic feeling of the piece is unpredictable throughout, with individual phrases lasting shorter or longer than expected, according to the performer's pleasure. (The suspicion that Jefferson never played this song exactly the same way twice is validated by the existence of another, quite different recording of "That Black Snake Moan" made by the singer not too long after the one under discussion.) Indeed, as Jefferson is the only performer here, he is not even obligated to keep a steady beat going, since he does not have to keep time with anybody else. While some parts of the song seem to have a clearly marked pulse, others do not, and it is frustrating to try to tap your foot regularly to this record. What establishes this song as a blues is the form of the text and the presence of blue notes in the melody—not the more formalized chordal and rhythmic patterns found in classic blues performances.

If we listen closely to what Jefferson actually *does* with his seemingly restricted materials, we may come to appreciate an expressive intensity in his work that could leave Tin Pan Alley records sounding impoverished by comparison. The variety in vocal timbre and rhythmic approach that Jefferson brings to each successive stanza of his song is remarkable. The repetitive textual and melodic structures are nothing more than a skeleton on which Jefferson builds a largely improvised performance of risky, and striking, immediacy. One can actually feel the pain of the bed-bug bite in the third stanza, and the weariness in the singer's heart as he asks his lover in the fifth stanza, "What's the matter now?"

Of course, lyrics like these demand a completely different approach from those of Tin Pan Alley song. It is instructive to compare the lovers' relationship in "That Black Snake Moan" to the idealized middle-class one articulated in the lyrics to "My Blue Heaven," recorded in New York City the next year (see Chapter 4). There is a blunt realism in Jefferson's words, with their description of poverty and erotic desire. Whereas the "I" who hurries to "my blue heaven" is a kind of generic figure—is it the singer, the listener, the listener's spouse, or an imaginary lover?—there is no question that the person whose life is described in "That Black Snake Moan" is literally the singer himself; when he asks his "baby" for fifty cents, she addresses him by name: "Lemon, ain't a dime in the yard."

The sexual image around which the song is organized—the snake as phallic symbol—is typical of blues lyrics. Sexual puns and the theme of erotic love were an important part of the appeal of blues and other race records—Jefferson's series

of "Black Snake Moan" recordings were his bestselling records, and blues musicians like Bo Carter made a living from double-entendre songs such as "Let Me Roll Your Lemon," "Pin in Your Cushion," and "My Pencil Won't Write No More." The sexual content of blues songs was, of course, also a source of middle-class outrage. The frankness of sexual discourse in rural African American culture, not atypical of farming communities where the facts of life are observed daily, ran counter to the social mores of "respectable" society and of the religious establishment, white and black.

The lyrics of "That Black Snake Moan" are even farther from the tradition of narrative storytelling in Anglo-American ballads than the lyrics of Charley Patton's "Tom Rushen Blues." There is no precise chronological ordering of events here, and certain stanzas could be placed in a different position without affecting our overall understanding of what transpires. Obviously a sexual encounter is being described; apart from that, it is not clear where or when certain exchanges of dialogue actually take place, nor is it important to know. The singer is obviously addressing his woman at times, but other lines seem to be addressed to an outside listener, or quite possibly to the singer himself. This nonlinear approach to storytelling actually relates these lyrics to certain long-standing and sophisticated oral traditions in West Africa, wherein the roots of this approach certainly lie. By learning about varied aspects of an occurrence, the people involved in it, and their surroundings, we gain an overall feeling for what happened. Using relatively few, carefully chosen words overall, Blind Lemon Jefferson manages to convey to us a distinct sense of himself, his environment, his sexual partner, the nature of their interaction, and the way they both feel about that interaction. As we have already suggested, this is a very different way of communicating human experience than that typically deployed in mainstream Tin Pan Alley songs of the 1920s and 1930s.

*Aay, ain't got no mama now.
Aay, ain't got no mama now.
She told me late last night, "You don't need no mama no how."*

*Mmm, black snake crawlin' in my room.
Mmm, black snake crawlin' in my room.
And some pretty mama had better come an' get this black snake soon.*

*Oow, that must be the bedbug—you know a chinch [another small insect] can't bite that hard.
Oow, that must be the bedbug—you know a chinch can't bite that hard.
Ask my baby for fifty cents, she say, "Lemon, ain't a dime in the yard."*

*Mama, that's all right, mama, that's all right for you.
Mama, that's all right, mama, that's all right for you.
Say baby, that's all right, most any ol' way you do.*

*Mmm, what's the matter now?
Mmm, what's the matter now?
Tell me what's the matter, baby. "I don't like no black snake no how."*

*Well, wonder where is the black snake gone?
Well, wonder where is the black snake gone?
Lord, that black snake, mama, done run my darlin' home.*

Blind Lemon Jefferson, like many other race record artists, was denied any share of the profits generated by his hit records, and in the end he died destitute. Jefferson was buried in an unmarked grave in Texas, where a grave marker was finally dedicated by his fans in 1967. A sermon by the Chicago preacher Reverend Emmett Dickinson entitled "Death of Blind Lemon," released by Paramount Records in 1930, gives some indication of his importance in the African American community:

*Let us pause for a moment
And look at the life of our beloved Blind Lemon Jefferson who was born blind.
It is in many respects like that of our Lord, Jesus Christ.
Like Him, unto the age of thirty he was unknown,
And also like Him in a short space of a little over three years
His name and his works were known in every house.*

ROBERT JOHNSON: STANDING AT THE CROSSROAD

If the recordings of Charley Patton and Blind Lemon Jefferson put us in touch with the roots of the blues, those of Robert Johnson (1911–38) seem to point almost spookily toward the future. Indeed, no country blues artist had a greater influence on later generations of blues and rock musicians than Johnson. His work was especially revered by the British guitarist Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones, and by Eric Clapton, whose band Cream released a celebrated cover of Johnson's "Cross Road Blues" in 1968. Eventually, Johnson's posthumous reputation was such that when his complete output was reissued on compact discs in 1990, the set quickly became a surprise million-seller.

Robert Johnson's brief life is shrouded in mystery and legend, much like the history of the blues itself; it is the stuff of which myths are made. Little is known of his early years. His guitar playing was so remarkable and idiosyncratic that stories circulated claiming Johnson had sold his soul to the devil in order to play that way; when performing for an audience, he apparently turned in such a position as to conceal his hands so that nobody could see what he was doing to produce his sounds. Only eleven records (twenty-two songs) by Johnson were released during his lifetime. Yet by late 1938 his fame had spread sufficiently that the American music talent scout and promoter John Hammond sought him out to appear with major African American folk and jazz artists in a "Spirituals to Swing" concert in New York City's celebrated Carnegie Hall—only to discover that Johnson had very recently died, apparently a victim of poisoning by a jealous husband.

Johnson's music, like Charley Patton's, is representative of Mississippi Delta blues, a much heavier, more emphatic style than the Texas blues of Blind Lemon Jefferson. "Cross Road Blues," recorded by Okeh Records in 1936, serves as a fine example of Johnson's artistry. Johnson's guitar here is forcefully rhythmic, and while the song as a whole exhibits the freedom of phrasing also seen in "That Black Snake

Robert Johnson studio portrait. Hooks Bros., Memphis, 1935. © 1989 Delta Haze Corporation. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission.



Moan," there is a much stronger feeling of regular pulse throughout "Cross Road Blues." Unlike Jefferson, Johnson uses the guitar principally as a chordal instrument, and his aggressive, rapid strumming of chords gives his work a flavor that anticipates the electric guitar styles of rock music. This modern feeling is abetted by the wide range of timbres Johnson obtains from his acoustic guitar; note his effective alternations of high-pitched, strained chordal sounds with low-pitched, fuller chordal sounds. He also makes use of the *bottleneck* technique, common among Mississippi Delta blues guitarists. To achieve this effect, the guitarist slips the sawed-off neck of a glass bottle over a finger on his left hand, which allows him to produce smooth glides between individual pitches. In the hands of a great guitarist like Johnson, the bottleneck technique can even be used to imitate the sound of the human voice. Johnson's creative use of guitar timbres is mirrored in his singing, which also veers eerily from high to low, from strained to gruff colors, as if depicting through sound itself the desperation expressed in the words of the song. The expressive intensity of the performance is given shape by the form of the blues, which is heard in the basic chord sequences as well as in the poetic structure of the piece.

Although the lyrics of "Cross Road Blues" are not encoded in a typical way, they are certainly personal. Just where the "crossroad" is, what its special significance might be for the singer, and whether it even refers to a specific place at all or functions just as a metaphor—these are all unknowable mysteries. (The image probably represents a continuity with West African mythologies, in which the crossroad figures as a place of uncertainty, danger, and opportunity, and as a symbol of des-

tiny.) Even in 1936 the name Willie Brown in the last stanza would have been recognized only by those who really knew their country blues (he was a mentor of Johnson's). In terms of narrative technique, "Cross Road Blues" hardly tells a story at all. Like some of the greatest lyric poetry, it uses words to evoke an emotional and spiritual condition, in this instance a condition of harrowing darkness and despair.

*I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees,
I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees,
Asked the Lord above, "Have mercy, save poor Bob, if you please."*

*Mmm, standin' at the crossroad, I tried to flag a ride.
Mmm, standin' at the crossroad, I tried to flag a ride.
Didn't nobody seem to know me, everybody pass me by.*

*Mmm, the sun goin' down, boy, dark gon' catch me here.
Mmm, the sun goin' down, boy, dark gon' catch me here.
I haven't got no lovin' sweet woman that love and feel my care.*

*You can run, you can run, tell my friend-boy Willie Brown
You can run, you can run, tell my friend-boy Willie Brown
Lord, that I'm standin' at the crossroad, babe, I believe I'm sinkin' down.*

EARLY COUNTRY MUSIC: HILLBILLY RECORDS

"Hillbilly music," later rechristened "country and western music" or simply "country music," developed mainly out of the folk songs, ballads, and dance music of immigrants from the British Isles. It would be a mistake, however, to regard early country music recordings as examples of a pure and untouched rural culture. By the end of World War I even the most isolated rural community had felt the influence of urban institutions, tastes, and technologies. The first southern musicians to be commercially recorded grew up under the influence of minstrelsy, vaudeville, circuses, and the medicine show—a traveling spectacle complete with glib-talking "doctors" hawking dubious bottled potions and musicians ranging from Swiss yodelers and Hawaiian guitar bands to country fiddlers. The first generation of hillbilly recording artists was also familiar with the sentimental songs of Tin Pan Alley, and this material became an important part of the country music repertoire, alongside the older Anglo-American ballads and square dance tunes.

Interestingly, it was the race record market, established in the early 1920s, that led to the first country music recordings. The first commercially successful hillbilly record, featuring a north Georgia musician named Fiddlin' John Carson, was made by Okeh Records in 1923 during a recording expedition to Atlanta. This field trip, led by Ralph Peer and a local record store owner named Polk Brockman, was actually aimed at locating new material for the race record market. As Ralph Peer later recalled:

Brockman began scouting around but to my amazement he didn't know of any Negro talent. . . . Finally there was this deal where he wanted me to record a singer

from a local church. This fellow had quite a good reputation and occasionally worked on the radio. So we set a date with this fellow but his father was ill in some other town and he just couldn't make the date. So to take up my time, my distributor brought in Fiddlin' John Carson. He said Fiddlin' John had been on the radio station and he's got quite a following. He's really not a good singer, but let's see what he's got. So the beginning of the hillbilly [recording industry] was just this effort to take up some time. . . . I can't claim that there was any genius connected with it—not on my part, not on his part. (Porterfield 1979, p. 93)

Peer apparently had no inkling of the commercial potential of Carson's fiddle playing and singing on songs such as "The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane" and "The Old Hen Cackled and the Rooster's Going to Crow," which Peer later described as "pluperfect awful." Polk Brockman, having a better sense of the local music scene, ordered five hundred copies of the disc for circulation in the Atlanta area. These sold out within a month, without any attempt to promote or advertise them, and Peer realized that the sales indicated an audience for country music among rural southerners and recent migrants to the city. Although this realization may have been a bolt from the blue for Peer and his northern recording company colleagues, the way had in fact been well prepared: Carson had already spent some forty years touring the South and building a reputation as a championship fiddler, and his fame had recently been reinforced by a series of appearances on radio station WSB in Atlanta.

The new medium of radio was in fact crucial to the rapid growth of the hillbilly music market. In 1920 the first commercial radio station in the United States (KDKA in Pittsburgh) began broadcasting, and by 1922 there were more than five hundred stations nationwide, including eighty-nine in the South. Many farmers and working class people who could not afford to buy new phonograph records were able to purchase a radio on a monthly installment plan and thereby gain access to a wide range of programming. That early radio played a large role in popularizing hillbilly music, and a practically nonexistent role in promoting race music, is not difficult to explain. Most radios, and all radio stations, were owned by whites. There simply were no black disc jockeys until the late 1930s, when Jack Cooper started his race music show in Chicago. This meant that radio played almost no role in popularizing race music, which was much more dependent on the phonograph (and correspondingly suffered more when radio began to eat away at record sales in the 1920s and 1930s).

The first station to feature country artists on a regular basis was WSB in Atlanta, which began broadcasting in 1922. In 1923 WBAP in Fort Worth, Texas, aired the first hour-long radio show featuring country music, an innovation soon copied by WLS in Chicago (*National Barn Dance*) and WSM in Nashville (the famous *Grand Ole Opry*). The "barn dance" format, the predecessor of televised country music shows (a relatively late but famous example is *Hee-Haw*) typically featured a variety of musical performers as well as comedians specializing in comball humor that relied on stereotypes of rural "hicks," "rubes," and "rednecks." The musical performers on barn dance shows included string bands (featuring some combination of fiddle, guitar, banjo, and mandolin), solo and duet singers (performing in a wide range of vocal styles and often accompanying themselves on stringed instruments or piano), white gospel ("Sacred Harp") singers, Hawaiian guitar bands, harmonica players, saw players, whistlers, and yodelers. (One country music radio veteran

has remarked that the first country music radio shows exploited "anybody who could sing, whistle, play a musical instrument, or even breathe heavy"! Radio did more than any other medium to popularize hillbilly music, both among southerners and a wider audience.

Most hillbilly musicians of the 1920s and 1930s did not start out as full-time professional musicians. The country music historian Bill C. Malone has noted that the majority worked as textile mill workers, coal miners, farmers, railroad men, cowboys, carpenters, wagoners, painters, common laborers, barbers, and even an occasional lawyer, doctor, or preacher. One important exception to this rule was Vernon Dalhart (1883–1948), a Texas-born former light-opera singer who recorded the first big country music hit. Dalhart's recording career, which had begun in 1916, had started to wane, and he talked the Victor Company into letting him record a hillbilly number, in an effort to cash in on the genre's growing popularity. In 1924 Dalhart recorded two songs: "Wreck of the Old 97," a ballad about a train crash in Virginia, and "The Prisoner's Song," a sentimental amalgam of preexisting song fragments best known for the line "If I had the wings of an angel, over these prison walls I would fly." Although Dalhart's tenor voice bore unmistakable traces of his experience as a singer of sentimental songs and light classics, he adopted a southern dialect and performed in a plaintive manner that country music fans found appealing. This was the first big hillbilly hit, a million-seller that contributed to the success of the fledgling country music industry, made Vernon Dalhart a major star, and helped to ease the Victor Company's financial woes. From 1924 on, Vernon Dalhart recorded only hillbilly songs, and he did more to popularize early country music than any performer except the "Singing Brakeman," Jimmie Rodgers, whom we shall meet shortly.

It is instructive to compare Dalhart's early success in the hillbilly field to the classic blues recordings of Mamie Smith and Bessie Smith. Each represents a process of hybridization between southern folk music and Tin Pan Alley pop. These singers all stand at some distance from the rural origins evoked by their songs, yet are able to perform in a style respectful of those origins. Finally, recordings such as "St. Louis Blues" and "The Prisoner's Song" are early examples of a phenomenon that will become more important as we move on through the history of American popular music: the crossover hit, that is, a record that moves from its origins in a local culture or marginal market to garner a larger and more diverse audience via the mass media.

PIONEERS OF COUNTRY MUSIC: THE CARTER FAMILY AND JIMMIE RODGERS

Country music has always really been about the relationship between the country and the city, home and migration, the past and the present. This is not surprising if we consider the main audience for this music during the 1920s: rural people whose way of life was being radically transformed by the mechanization of agriculture and changes in the American economy, and migrants who left home behind to find jobs and establish new lives in the city. Early country music records provide us with a stereoscopic image of tradition in a period of rapid change: on the one hand, ballads and love songs, images of the good old days, family, hearth and home; and on



The Carter Family: Sara, A. P., and Maybelle, in 1932. Frank Driggs Collection.

the other, tales of broken love, distance from loved ones, and restless movement from town to town. These two images are perhaps best personified by two of the most popular acts of early country music, the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers. The Carters and Rodgers were both "discovered" by Ralph Peer at a recording session in Bristol, Tennessee, in August 1927. Their fame boosted by hit records and radio appearances, both acts exerted a profound influence on successive generations of country and western musicians.

The **Carter Family**, born in the isolated foothills of the Clinch Mountains of Virginia, are regarded as one of the most important groups in the history of country music. The leader of the trio was A. P. "Doc" Carter (1891–1960), who collected and arranged the folk songs that formed the inspiration for much of the group's repertoire; he also sang bass. His wife, Sara (1899–1979), sang most of the lead vocal parts and played autoharp or guitar. Sister-in-law Maybelle (1909–78) sang harmony, played steel guitar and autoharp, and developed an influential guitar style, which involved playing the melody on the bass strings while brushing the upper strings on the offbeats for rhythm. Their repertoire included adaptations of old songs from the Anglo-American folk music tradition; old hymns from the Sacred Harp tradition; and sentimental songs reminiscent of turn-of-the-century Tin Pan Alley hits. As Bill Malone puts it, "theirs was a music that might borrow from other forms, but would move away from its roots only reluctantly" (Malone 1985, p. 65). Between 1927 and 1941 the Carters made over three hundred recordings for a half-

dozen companies. Their most popular songs include "Wildwood Flower," "Wabash Cannonball," "Keep on the Sunny Side," and "Can the Circle Be Unbroken," all of which are still performed by country musicians today. Rehearsing at home, they crafted traditional materials into three-minute gems designed for the 78 r.p.m. phonograph discs of the time.

The Carter Family were not professional musicians when their recording career started in 1927—as Sara put it when she was asked what they did after the Bristol session, "Why, we went home and planted the corn." The Carters' image, borne out in radio appearances and interviews, was one of quiet conservatism; their stage shows were simple and straightforward, and they generally avoided the vaudeville circuit and promotional tours. Despite their image of being firmly rooted in the rural past, however, the Carters' approach to working with folk music sources set a pattern that would shape the country music business for years to come. Doc Carter went on periodic song-collecting trips, gathering material from both black and white musicians and reworking it to suit the Carters' vocal and instrumental format. At the urging of Ralph Peer, Doc copyrighted all of the songs that the Carters recorded, whether or not he had actually composed them himself. Of course, the line between original compositions and folk songs is a blurry one, since most composition is consciously or unconsciously based on preexisting material, and any folk song is bound to exist in multiple variants, shaped by the tastes and values of particular performers. Ralph Peer published all of the songs through his own Southern Music Company and split the profits fifty-fifty with Doc.

Jimmie Rodgers, in a photograph he signed for the Carter Family in 1931. Frank Driggs Collection.



If the Carter Family's public image and musical repertoire evoked the country church and the family fireside, Jimmie Rodgers (1897–1933) was the quintessential rambler, a footloose man who carried home in his heart but drank deeply of the changing world around him. He was the most versatile, progressive, and widely influential of all the early country recording artists. The ex-railroad brakeman from Meridian, Mississippi, celebrated the allure of the open road and chronicled the lives of men who forsook the benefits of a settled existence: ramblers, hobos, gamblers, convicts, cowboys, railway men, and feckless lovers. Rodgers's devil-may-care personality and his early death from tuberculosis contributed to his charismatic mystique, a sort of white parallel to the black bluesman Robert Johnson. He was early country music's biggest recording star, and his influence can be seen in the public images of Hank Williams, Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, and almost every contemporary male country music star.

THE RECORDINGS OF JIMMIE RODGERS

One major reason for Rodgers's success was his receptivity to African American influences, complemented by his ability to reflect those influences in original compositions and performances that proved appealing to a substantial white audience. In a highly successful series of recordings called "blue yodels," he adapted the poetic and musical forms of the blues, and aspects of blues performance styles, to his own purposes. The first such record, called simply "Blue Yodel" (also known by its opening words, "T for Texas"), was a million-seller; its appearance high on the pop charts in 1928 indicated that its appeal was not limited to a rural audience but had "crossed over" to the mainstream urban audience as well. Some of the later records in this series were provided with specific names (such as "Blue Yodel No. 8 [Muleskinner Blues]" or "Anniversary Blue Yodel," the seventh in the series and another pop hit), while others went just by homely numerical titles (such as "Blue Yodel No. 11"), but all were informed by Rodgers's distinctive approach to what can only be called "white man's blues."

Rodgers's blue yodeling was a "high, lonesome sound" (to use a phrase that has come to be generally associated with white rural music), analogous in certain ways to the textless moans and howls heard in blues recordings by rural black artists, and serving much the same purpose: to underline the intensity and depth of the singer's feelings. Rodgers used this vocal effect on a large number of his recordings, not just those with "blue yodel" in their titles. As for the actual "Blue Yodel" recordings, taken as a group they demonstrate a significant diversity in formal approach, lyric content, and instrumentation. Some of the lyrics conceal encoded sexual messages:

*I believe to my soul, somebody's been riding my mule.
I believe to my soul, somebody's been riding my mule.
'Cause every time I want to ride, she acts such a doggone fool.*

"Blue Yodel No. 11" is particularly close to rural black models. Here Rodgers sings a loosely connected series of stanzas that suggest the familiar poetic and musical patternings of twelve-bar blues. The song has a highly personal tone—a not uncommon characteristic in Rodgers's blue yodels. Rodgers's performance of this

song conveys a sense of freedom through unpredictable phrasing and of course through the yodels that occur between stanzas. These characteristics parallel the techniques of the black bluesmen we have studied. But there are obvious stylistic differences as well. Rodgers uses the guitar strictly as accompaniment, making no attempt to set up any kind of melodic response (as with Blind Lemon Jefferson) or rhythmic counterpoint (as with Robert Johnson) to his vocal. With its simple and repetitive figures, the guitar part also creates a greater sense of chordal and rhythmic regularity than tends to be present in performances by rural black artists. (Even on those infrequent occasions when Rodgers offers a substantial guitar solo, as he does in "Blue Yodel No. 8 [Muleskinner Blues]," it is clear that he is in no sense a guitar virtuoso like Jefferson or Johnson—nor did he aspire to be.) Furthermore, notwithstanding his occasional evocation of blue notes and the sliding effects in his yodels, Rodgers's vocal melodies stay much closer overall to European American scale structures than do the blues melodies of African American performers. This, of course, is unsurprising; what is remarkable is the extent to which Rodgers *did* manage to assimilate elements from black music successfully into his style.

If "Blue Yodel No. 11" has as its subject a typical lover's complaint, "Blue Yodel No. 8 [Muleskinner Blues]" may be regarded as Rodgers's adaptation of the African American field holler, a work song meant to ease the pain and tedium of physical labor. "Muleskinner Blues" uses the typical chord progressions of twelve-bar blues, here accompanying three-phrase stanzas in which the third phrase is an extensive yodel rather than a texted statement. (This recording is included in the Smithsonian's *Classic Country Music* collection.)

Perhaps Rodgers's most enduringly popular record was "Waiting for a Train," released by Okeh Records in 1928. It is a hobo song with a dark mood, reinforced by Rodgers's lonesome yodel. Certainly no record demonstrates his forward-looking versatility more thoroughly. Instead of the typical solo guitar accompaniment, an ensemble consisting of steel guitar, cornet, clarinet, and string bass joins the standard guitar in backing up Rodgers's vocal. The steel guitar is a particularly progressive touch here, and it makes the record sound remarkably modern in comparison to many others of its time; actually it was not until the mid-1930s that the sound of a steel guitar became commonplace in country bands and indelibly identified with the country sound (see Chapter 6). On the other hand, the cornet and clarinet clearly evoke the small jazz ensembles of the late 1920s and link "Waiting for a Train" to the wider spheres of mainstream dance and pop music. The unusual instrumentation gives the record an almost jaunty character at times, effectively counterbalancing the downbeat aspects of Rodgers's lyrics and underlining the resilience of the hobo who at least possesses the will to survive and the wisdom to appreciate "the moon and stars up above."

Although "Waiting for a Train" was recorded over a year before the stock market crash of October 1929, its lyrics seem to look forward as well: to the Great Depression, when countless rural Americans lost their homes and farms and had to live by luck and by their wits, like the protagonist in Rodgers's song. The myth of the *outcast*—the resourceful, lone wanderer—presented so effectively in "Waiting for a Train" has proven to be a potent force in country music up to the present time; the songs and the public personas of Merle Haggard and Willie Nelson, for example, would be unthinkable without it. Yet, with all his progressive qualities, Rodgers

Box 5.4 Southern Gospel Music, Black and White

"Gospel Ship," recorded by the Carter Family in 1935, and "The Sun Didn't Shine," recorded by the Golden Gate Quartet in 1941, exemplify the general importance of sacred music in southern culture and the popularity of commercial recordings of this music. They also introduce us to some of the significant differences between white and black styles of gospel music.

As we have seen, the Carter Family was the first prominent "group" act in country music. Much rural music was heard and nurtured in informal family settings, of course; the unprecedented popularity of the Carter Family as recording and performing artists opened the gates for a succession of family-based acts that is continuing to this day. (Well-known examples from country music include the Blue Sky Boys, the Everly Brothers, the group Alabama, and the Judds.) In the musical culture of a family like the Carters, there was no firm separation between secular and religious music, and they recorded both types extensively. Their gospel recordings typically present their own unpretentious arrangements of old folk hymns; two of the most enduringly famous examples are "Can the Circle Be Unbroken" and "Gospel Ship." The Carters' performance style on such records is an utterly straightforward, unadorned one, whose plainness was seen by the performers, and by sympathetic listeners, as indicative of the humility and devotion that marked authentic religious faith. This aesthetic of plainness was a long-standing feature of the culture of Protestant immigrants from Britain and Ireland.

In African American communities, religious music has tended to be centered more exclusively in the church. Rural black churches made extensive use of music, and this encouraged the development of a distinctive style for African American gospel music and led to the emergence of talented performers in the style. The great black gospel groups like the Golden Gate Quartet were not family acts but typically comprised unrelated individuals who came together through a common interest in, and talent for, singing religious music—often in a local church (or school) choir. Black gospel music thus developed an independent identity—separate from white religious traditions, obviously, but separate also to a certain extent from other musical traditions in the black community itself. Black gospel artists were expected to perform sacred music only, not to indulge in "dirty" music like the blues. This explicit division between religious and secular music remained an important characteristic of African American culture for a considerable time; a major sign of change came in the 1960s, when "soul music" emerged as a new term applied to secular music that consciously incorporated stylistic elements from black gospel.

In contrast to the restrained white gospel music exemplified by the Carter Family, black gospel music tended to favor extroversion and an intense expressivity; this music can be highly ornate, and it emphasizes the personal and ecstatic aspects of religious experience. These characteristics are clearly evident in the Golden Gate Quartet's performance of "The Sun Didn't Shine," with its remarkable displays of vocal virtuosity and rhythmic intricacy. Of

particular interest in this performance is the extended, seemingly improvised, virtually textless buildup to the final chorus. Here the background voices assume the sound and role of insistent percussion instruments (portraying "the hammer . . . heard in Jerusalem's streets"), while the lead vocalist, Henry Owens, hums and moans in a sacred transformation of blues techniques, immersed in his contemplation of the Crucifixion.

Especially when it is juxtaposed with the brilliance of "The Sun Didn't Shine," the homely simplicity of the Carter Family's "Gospel Ship" might strain the appreciative faculties of today's sophisticated, largely urban audience for popular music. We could call attention to the unique dark vocal timbre of lead singer Sara Carter; her voice and the way she uses it call immediate attention to the significance of the words she is singing. And we could cite the firm, clean guitar style of Maybelle Carter, whose "Carter Family lick"—her technique of playing melody on the lower strings of the guitar while strumming higher-pitched chords above it—became one of the most widely imitated guitar sounds in country music. But it might be more to the point simply to quote the final verse of "Gospel Ship" as sung by Sara Carter. These words doubtless expressed the feelings of many "hillbillies" of abiding religious faith who had to endure the scorn of "sophisticated," "higher-class" people:

*If you are ashamed of me, you ought not to be.
Guess you'd better have a care:
If too much fault you find, you will sure be left behind
While I'm sailing through the air.*

remained grounded in tradition. He based "Waiting for a Train" on an old folk song. Reflecting meaningfully on the past while pointing toward the future, "Waiting for a Train" encompasses a duality that is characteristic of much of the finest southern music, white and black.

"Waiting for a Train" is based on a **strophic** form, but Rodgers employs a number of strategies to avoid monotony. He freely varies the basic melody as he goes along—a technique common in music based on oral traditions, as we have already observed in our examples of rural African American blues. (A particularly expressive example of this is the way he bends the melody upward to portray "the moon and stars up above.") In addition, Rodgers achieves a large-scale structural shaping by varying the close of every third strophe to produce a firm **cadence**, while allowing the other strophes to end inconclusively. The cadences are reinforced with a blue yodel, which adds yet another element to the already rich stylistic amalgam. The two groups of three strophes are separated by an instrumental interlude, thus giving the record as a whole a firm and convincing overall form.

Additional facets of Rodgers's extensive contribution to southern music may be illuminated by a quick look at the tender love song "Dreaming with Tears in My Eyes," recorded in 1933. While this was a newly composed song (by Rodgers and Waldo L. O'Neal), it also looks to the past: its prominent triple meter clearly recalls the waltz songs of the late nineteenth century. However, if its rhythm reminds us

of a song like "After the Ball" (see Chapter 2), its homespun and delicate lyrics have little in common with the melodrama and wild coincidences of that earlier pop hit:

*My heart is longing for you, dear, I cared for you more than you knew.
Though you have broken each promise, and yesterday's dreams are untrue,
Alone I'll be yearning tomorrow, when sunshine brings memories of you.
My sunshine will turn into sorrow, as I dream of the love we once knew.*

These lyrics provide a wonderful example of humble, virtually invisible artistry. With their abundant open vowel sounds, they "sing" beautifully, and the triple meter of the music is already explicit in the natural rhythms of the words. Rodgers's melodic line gently rises and falls with the inflections one would use in speaking these lines. While the components that make up "Dreaming with Tears in My Eyes"—words, rhythm, melody, and chords—might seem simple to the point of cliché if considered separately, their synthesis produces an elusive kind of art that achieves an effect of remarkable directness, intimacy, and poignant honesty.

Waltz songs remained popular in country music throughout the twentieth century. And they are frequently songs of sentiment, like "Dreaming with Tears in My Eyes," using straightforward materials and aspiring to the kind of natural yet artful expression achieved so memorably in Rodgers's song. But this is not easy to achieve. Rodgers left country music a rich and enduring, but challenging, legacy when he died of tuberculosis eight days after recording "Dreaming with Tears in My Eyes."

POPULAR MUSIC AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION

The Great Depression (1929–ca. 1939), which threw millions of Americans out of work, had a major impact on the music industry. In 1927, 106 million phonograph discs were sold nationwide; by 1932 sales had plummeted to only 6 million. Many small record companies—including those that had pioneered in the fields of race and hillbilly music—were wiped out overnight. Large companies such as Columbia and Victor were forced to reorganize and consolidate. Most people simply did not have the spare income to spend on records, despite the introduction of discs that cost as little as ten cents apiece, and network radio became even more influential as a result.

The race record market was crushed by the economic downturn, which hit African American consumers particularly hard. During the early 1930s the first black-owned music-publishing and film-producing companies were also wiped out. Increasingly, record companies relied on established artists and cut back on the field expeditions that had characterized the early years of the race record business. The most successful African American musicians of the depression era were those whose records were featured in the mainstream record catalogs, particularly jazz-oriented dance orchestras, discussed in some detail in the next chapter.

Hillbilly record sales were also affected by the depression, although not as severely as race records. However, although sales declined in absolute numbers, hillbilly music actually increased its share of the overall market during the economic downturn. In 1930, as the depression consolidated its stranglehold on millions of families, rural and urban, hillbilly records accounted for fully 25 percent of the total American market. Paradoxically, despite the general downturn in sales, it was

during the depression that the country music business was really established, with the biggest stars signing lucrative advertising contracts and appearing on radio and in Hollywood movies. In 1933 Billy Hill's recording of "The Last Roundup"—a romantic cowboy song—was a huge hit, selling one hundred thousand copies, crossing over to the pop charts, and helping to establish the "western" music market. Hill's success also set the scene for popular cowboy singers such as Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, discussed in the next chapter.

Given that popular music of the early twentieth century tended to scrupulously avoid any mention of social problems, how, if at all, did the terrible impact of the Great Depression on the lives of Americans make itself felt in popular music? During the 1930s, while Tin Pan Alley and Hollywood provided vivid fantasies of life among the elite, some hillbilly and blues singers injected a note of social realism into popular music. They chronicled the suffering of the homeless and unemployed:



Woody Guthrie (reading the *HoBo News*) relaxes in New York's Central Park with fellow folksinger Burl Ives before a radio appearance, 1940. Courtesy Library of Congress.

the Dust Bowl farmers whose way of life was threatened by ecological, as well as economic, disaster; and the textile and mine workers of the South, whose attempts to unionize were resisted—sometimes violently—by big business. Examples of songs that dealt with the depression include the rare down-to-earth Tin Pan Alley song “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” (a Number One hit for crooners Bing Crosby and Rudy Vallee in 1932); hillbilly star Uncle Dave Macon’s “All In Down and Out Blues,” which argued that “Wall Street’s propositions were not all roses”; and Casey Bill Weldon’s “WPA Blues,” which described a government demolition crew destroying dilapidated housing still occupied by African American families.

One of the musicians most closely associated with the plight of American workers during the Great Depression was Woodrow Wilson “Woody” Guthrie. Born in Oklahoma in 1912, Guthrie began his career as a hillbilly singer, performing the songs of the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers. With his father dead and his mother committed to an asylum, Guthrie quit school at sixteen and spent years wandering throughout the Southwest. In the late 1930s he migrated to California as part of the stream of impoverished “Okies” described in John Steinbeck’s novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. These experiences turned Guthrie toward composing songs that were more overtly political in nature, including “This Land Is Your Land,” “Talking Dust Bowl Blues,” and “Ludlow Massacre.” After 1940 he was known primarily as a protest singer—his political orientation summarized by a sign on his guitar that read, “This Machine Kills Fascists”—and was a direct influence on later urban folk musicians such as the Weavers (see Chapter 7) and Bob Dylan (see Chapter 10).

While the Great Depression marked the end of an important period in the development of American popular music, it was also an important time of transition. From around 1935 through World War II, as the national economy began to recover, the music business expanded and underwent certain important transformations. Musical styles and cultural themes that had first emerged in clear form after World War I were updated by a new generation of performers. These musicians, in adapting to new social and historical circumstances, elaborated the long-standing conversation between northern and southern, urban and rural, and white and black musical traditions, and created a style of dance music (and a cultural movement) called swing.