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Interview with Paul Oliver

DAVID HORN
Devon, UK
E-mail: dhorn87506@aol.com

DH: Perhaps I could begin in the present and ask you how you see the status of the blues today in the black community in the US.
PO: There are a number of black writers who are interested in the arts, but I don't think blues has any significance for the black community as a whole, as gospel still has. Gospel is held together by the religious side, it's a different kind of structure. Rap seems to have taken over, at least as far as the younger generations are concerned.
DH: Do you sense any connection between rap and hip hop and the blues?
PO: There are connections, certainly, but I don't know how significant they are. There are superficial connections – for example the 'Stackolee' theme runs through several rap songs – but I'm not sure that is of any depth of significance. But rap songs do provide opportunities for people to express themselves as individuals; otherwise, there isn't a music that does that. As much as anything it's a functional connection, therefore, rather than a stylistic one.
DH: Rap lyrics are more outspoken in many ways than blues lyrics.
PO: Yes, they do reflect their times, of course. But in a way I think it's a pity, because in a curious kind of way, the conventions and limitations of the blues made the singers more interesting and more original, more amusing and so on, and you're continually confronted with the question of precisely what they are getting at, when the references are oblique. The directness of rap, and also often its viciousness, I don't personally find myself attracted to.
DH: There is a strain of violence, obviously, in blues lyrics.
PO: There is, yes. The targets of the violence are maybe more outwardly expressed in rap. But I also think it's a kind of fashion. What I've always found interesting about blues is that people sing about themselves and their responses to things in ways that very few other song forms do.
DH: Do you find your views have changed about particular things, over the years? About the ways blues should be understood for example?
PO: I'm not sure that my views have changed very much, it's just that I'm disappointed that there are so many aspects of the subject that have been either completely ignored or forgotten and not followed up. That seems to me to be a great mistake because the generation of the really creative blues singers has now almost entirely passed on, and therefore you get a kind of overburdened adulation of two or three people, more because they've survived than because they're of exceptional quality. And anyway, that's partly the star system now operating with blues, and one of the things I like about earlier blues is that anybody off the street might turn out to be interesting.
DH: Yes, even someone who only made two sides. You say some things might have been forgotten. Not just ignored or never done, but forgotten.

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PO: Yes, I used the word deliberately. In other words it isn't that writers have never noticed something, but that it's been noticed and been forgotten. I'm doing this book at the moment. I've been working on it for years, very slowly, partly because there have been other things, and partly because getting the material together is very difficult. The book is called *Blues the World Forgot*. It's a Ma Rainey title from 1927 – funnily enough it's the only one in which she doesn't sing; she talks all the way through! – but the point about it is that I'm trying to draw attention to some aspects of the music which have been overlooked and need not have been. To a large extent the history has been skewed, in a way. I'm interested in what the music meant to the people at the time, rather than to us now. So I'm trying to focus on that. But because these aspects have been ignored, research is extremely difficult. The generations have passed on and finding references and so on is proving very hard.

DH: Your book *Songsters and Saints*, which was published in 1984, was another attempt to put the record straight, in a way, and to give a more accurate reflection of what the music was actually like than to cherry pick the bits that appeal more to people today.

PO: I was also trying to show the kind of formative elements. Within the space of ten years of the birth date there is an extraordinary change. For the generation that was only a few years older, the songster generation, blues for them was another song type. What was interesting to me was their amazing diversity, and in a way some of that got lost in the development of blues. I'm not sure it's necessarily because of the motivation of the singers, I suspect it's because of increasing commercial interests. The book required a great deal of research. I greatly enjoyed doing it, but nobody had really transcribed any of the recorded sermons, for example, and I think they're intensely interesting, I hoped that that would inspire other attempts, but as far as I know it hasn't. Bruce Rosenberg did a study of one particular preacher [1970], and there have been some other things, but nobody has really looked at the spectrum, or taken someone like Reverend Gates and examined his whole corpus. That work just hasn't been done. But all this represents an enormous amount of recorded material. That also applies to the women singers.

DH: What reasons do you think exist for this tendency to plough the same furrows and ignore new ones that have been suggested?

PO: This will be part of the point of the Introduction to *Blues the World Forgot*. I'll be trying to show what I think has happened. Encapsulated, it's that the adulation for Robert Johnson, the perception of Robert Johnson as being the grandfather of rock, has led to a peculiar kind of history, which Robert Palmer's *Deep Blues* [1981] was the first to articulate, which channels everything from Mississippi through a very narrow group of people. It's one way of looking at it but it's not an accurate picture of the music that was contemporary with Robert Johnson when he was recording. The 1930s singers on the East Coast are almost completely forgotten. And Robert Johnson made a remarkably small number of records, whereas someone like Tampa Red made an incredible number – about 360 titles. He wouldn't have been making that number if he wasn't popular. I feel in a way it has all been skewed to be an argument or a justification for rock. Obviously it has its own justification, I don't mean that it hasn't. But this justifies its lineage.

DH: Gives it a kind of authenticity.

PO: Yes, and I feel that's altogether too limited.

DH: With *Songsters and Saints* you had a very broad compass, including vaudeville singers, preachers and hokum singers. With *Blues the World Forgot* are you keeping the

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same broad approach? Is it blues as defined in *Blues and Gospel Records* [Dixon *et al*. 1997] or is it blues more narrowly defined?

PO: Blues as defined in *Blues and Gospel Records* is closer to it. The only thing is, I think *Blues and Gospel Records* has gone a bit overboard in its latest edition. It isn't intended to be a discography of black entertainment, and I would have thought that Josephine Baker and Bert Williams were very tangential. I'm not looking at those, but I am looking at vaudeville singers – and incidentally I didn't really deal with vaudeville singers in *Songsters and Saints*, but I'm endeavouring to do so now. The only thing is, there are just so many. So at the moment what I'm concentrating on is the vaudeville duets, because they at least can give a frame.

DH: Performers like Butterbeans and Susie?

PO: Yes, there are quite a lot of them. So I can look at how they function, and how they structure their songs, and it's a manageable sector. There have been a few books on women singers, but they all plough over the same ground.

DH: There seem to be big issues at stake, don't there, in some of them – books on Ma Rainey for example looking at whether the songs are proto-feminist, and so on. It's sometimes as if the subject was being studied in order to get at the big issue.

PO: I think that's true, and I think that it's a similar thing to the Robert Johnson issue. It's more a question of an agenda which carefully selected examples will justify rather than an examination of the role of music.

DH: Was there an agenda, early on in blues writing?

PO: I had an agenda, yes, but mine was to get blues recognised as a music that was distinct from jazz, rather than a constituent of it or a formative element of it, because I felt both concepts were wrong. So I suppose, at least for my early broadcasts, that was clearly an objective of mine. If it was an agenda it was an open-ended one, just trying to learn more about the music, the singers, their lives and so forth. And I think that applies to the early magazines like *Blues Unlimited*. I don't think they were trying to push a particular position or justify something else.

DH: Do you think anything happened as a result? Vis-à-vis attitudes towards black American society?

PO: I think it probably did – I don't quite know. I've often wondered about that. Whether one sees it from one perspective only, and whether on a larger scale that made a great deal of difference I don't know. The way the music was picked up, by white British groups for example, that had some kind of impact, but how profound that was I'm not sure. What I do fear is that there are things that are going to be looked at with regret because they were not tackled when they could have been.

DH: Are there resources out there that still need to be investigated?

PO: I'm sure that the kind of work that Doug Seroff and Lynn Abbott have been doing is very useful, but they've been focusing on the period in the 1890s, roughly to 1895, in their most recent book [2003], whereas I think that a very intensive study of the black press of the '20s and '30s would be worth doing. Obviously some like the *Chicago Defender* have been gone through, but I feel that the messages that are there have often been missed because people are looking for the mention of a particular person, whereas there is a lot more in those reports. If I had time I would like to do more on that.

DH: Are there any collections, archives, of interviews that have never been fully used?

PO: It's difficult to know whether there are collections as such. There are certainly collections of black ephemera, like the Schomburg Collection [at New York Public Library], but unpublished collections from blues research, I'm not sure how extensive

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they might be. Everybody has their own collection of material, but there is no central resource.

DH: When you look back over blues studies, what sort of key issues did it raise? And does it still raise? If we think of blues scholarship as a prototype of popular music studies, there are some subjects that have been run time and time again. And one of them might be the tendency for certain things to be selected and prioritised, a kind of canonisation process in a way.

PO: I think it's not so much a question of what issues have emerged; there are whole areas that have never been attempted. For example, if somebody had made a really intensive study of a particular region or parish, to get an overall picture of the music making, without a particular objective in view, just to find out how representative it was. Just the other day I came across some reviews of *Blues Fell This Morning*. One of them, which I have no recollection of having read at the time, was by Eric Hobsbawn, who of course wrote on jazz and blues as Francis Newton. I was quite astonished at it and felt sure he wouldn't want to have it reprinted today. What he said was that blues is not representative of black society, that blues singers were not representative of members of the black community, and were more likely to be pimps or drug addicts and so on. That suggests there were already clichés as to what black culture and the people within represented – all untested. One of the most influential books for me, many years ago, was *Roll, Jordan, Roll* by Julia Peterkin and Doris Ulmann [1933]. It was a collection of writings and reminiscences about one community, and I found that approach fascinating. It was largely on sacred rather than secular music but it did give a far more in breadth view of the importance of music in a region. I think that Zora Neale Husrston in *Mules and Men* [1935] did that in a way as well, but she was a little volatile and it's sometimes difficult to see how broad her perspective was. The narratives make the reading very entertaining, but we don't know how representative they are; it's difficult to tell.

DH: There is a considerable interest within popular music studies in these kind of micro studies, often of towns, such as the one on Austin, Texas [Shank 1994]. But they tend to be studies of the scene as it is, or maybe how it got to be the way it is just recently, without any great sense of history. One of the problems clearly with a more historical approach is that of documentation. If you wanted to study a small town in, say, Georgia, in 1925, the problems are going to be immense.

PO: Certain records do exist, but to take Georgia as an example, the focus at that time was on the Sea Islands. They were conveniently isolated, and there was a more or less recognisably distinct culture, and so we get to know about Gullah and Geechie culture but we know precious little about what was happening a few miles to the west away on the mainland. There was a romantic feeling about the perpetuation of attitudes of a much earlier generation. How rich musically the other areas were there is really no documentation. Another stereotype that has developed is about the locuses – Atlanta, Memphis or Shreveport and so on – but what they are is just a reflection of when the travelling units of the record companies happened to set up for two or three days. If they had chosen a totally different pattern we would probably now be talking about different traditions.

DH: Doesn't tell us anything about the distribution of music making.

PO: No. The units were obviously travelling immense distances, several hundred miles between locations. I did talk to Lillian Glinn about this. She did travel with them quite often. They would travel three or for hundred miles without stopping, then they would record for a couple of days and move on.

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DH: Has that particular history been told?
PO: No, not really. I'm doing something on my talks with Lillian in *Blues the World Forgot*. Other people worked with them, but they tend to be overlooked, and it seems to me that she was trying to see the music in one kind of context, the social one. I did interviews with a trombonist named Slides Harris who never recorded. A very good trombonist. He's been a traveller travelling with the carnivals and road shows, led by the singers. He had a whole perspective of his role as a carnival musician that is not normally touched upon.
DH: Some singers, like Blind Willie McTell for instance, had a very extensive repertoire and were influenced by all kinds of styles and trends. That would have been quite common, presumably – for someone's musical knowledge, even in a quite small community, to be very varied.
PO: What puzzles me about that is how such music got around. When you even have Charley Patton coming up with 'Running Wild' – it's really quite extraordinary. That's why I got interested in Irving Jones, because to me he seemed the one of the later vaudeville-cum-minstrel entertainers who had most influence on black singers. I've learnt more about Irving Jones and he was certainly a most extraordinary man. But it's almost too late to research it now, although Abbot and Seroff have come up with some tiny fragments of information on him [2003].
DH: To connect this back to what were key issues and areas that have been neglected: a lot of blues scholarship was based on the study of recordings. It must have been one of the first areas of study to develop where the primary material was acknowledged to be records. I know it wasn't to start with. The first people to comment on blues were folklorists who wouldn't have anything to with commercial recordings, and it wasn't until scholars like yourself came along that the commercial recording was established as valid.
PO: That's true up to a point. Milton Metfessel did some of his musicological analyses from commercial records [1928] and Odum and Johnson in 1925 do refer to them two or three times, not often, but at least they are recognising that blues are being recorded. But it is true, for example, that (Alan) Lomax had a very stuffy attitude to recording, and the fact that he was going around doing his own field recording didn't seem to come into that picture. He adjusted his image in later years but really he was very against research based on commercial recording, and yet commercial recordings are part of the reality.
DH: Was there ever any dispute among later blues scholars about using them?
PO: No, I don't think so. The next generation, as it were, looked at the records as a hard resource. But writing from Europe that was the only way you could do it. There was very little in the way of live music.
DH: Do you think that because jazz studies developed in Europe it developed in certain ways because this was the material to which people had access?
PO: One might be able to pursue that argument in terms of the study of the music itself. And jazz writing has always put a lot of emphasis on individual performers. But jazz writing did not involve itself much in the role of jazz in society, and that's always been a question mark in my mind – what it is that is actually being referred to. For example, there may be something about the travelling of a certain band, but no attempt to look at it from the other point of view – being in a particular place with different bands coming in. How many of the community were involved, with what protest or what enthusiasm they were welcomed – we just don't know. I feel it's not been studied at all. For my own part I was interested in blues singers in relation to

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society, and had I pursued jazz research I think it would probably have been along similar lines.

DH: On the question of the relationship between blues and jazz, a lot has been taken for granted and things have been reiterated without much evidence. Would you say that's another area where much needs to be done but where it's difficult to do?

PO: It is difficult. I've got two chapters about this in *Blues the World Forgot*, one of which I've already done. I think that probably the whole picture has been very distorted. I've been looking for any hard evidence and it's most extraordinary that in the big archives in New Orleans, with all those interviews, the questions were hardly ever about blues. It became a word for some playing, but what were they really playing – slow drags and so on – whether it was blues, had a blues structure, or quite what it was we just don't know. I have tried to discuss those issues – just at what point blues entered jazz, whether it was in New Orleans or not.

DH: Migration could presumably have been a factor, to cities like New Orleans from areas that are thought today to have been important in early days of blues – not from Mississippi in New Orleans' case, but from Louisiana.

PO: Yes, but a lot of people went west. I have figures for migration movements, and they're very complex. For example, a surprising number migrated from Mississippi to Arkansas, but you never hear about that. Others travelled far greater distances. Arkansas is almost completely left out of blues studies, just as Florida is. Alabama is pretty thin. That's really just a reflection of where record companies went – they didn't go to Florida, they didn't go to Arkansas. So we have no picture of those areas at all. I made that point in my article on possible lines of future research, which is before I'd finished *Songsters and Saints*, and I also did a final chapter in *Songsters and Saints* trying to suggest directions for research, but I don't know that any of those have been taken up.

DH: Although you see problems within blues scholarship itself, in the way that particular avenues of exploration haven't been followed up, do you think that blues studies has nevertheless been influential more widely, on popular music studies for example?

PO: It's an interesting question. I can't say that I've given it any thought! In the area of musicology, for example, research in blues has been very thin. That's not answering your question. It's just that it seems to me there are whole areas of blues that have not been adequately researched, and I'm not sure whether those that have been more fully researched have influenced anything, or whether they could. The aspect that has always interested me most, as I've said before – the relationship of musicians and their music to their social context – is something you find also in popular music studies, but whether that has anything to do with blues research I can't say.

DH: It's hard to trace direct lines of influence, and people coming into popular music studies who were interested in social context were often coming from a background in sociology, or a related area, so we may be talking about a parallel rather than direct influence. But it's often seemed to me that blues scholarship is one of the first in this lineage to point to music that had not previously been considered to have any value, and to say that it's valid to study this, this is the community's music. You can understand the people by understanding their music, and vice versa. In order to establish popular music studies people had to do similar things, and they already had a body of literature that did that. It hadn't gone in with an agenda, as we were saying, but it had insisted on the validity of this form of study.

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PO: Yes, I can see that. Blues scholarship itself had its influences upon it. For me, I was interested anyway in British folk song and folk cultures generally, and there had been, in the case of Scotland in particular, a tradition not just of collecting but of interpolating information about the singers – though not that much sometimes. In general, though, it was a whole new field, a clean canvas as it were. When I think about it, I don't know that many of the techniques of handling traditional song were actually transferred to blues studies. There are other areas where blues studies hasn't fully explored an existing method – until Guido van Rijn's book on Roosevelt came out [1997], for example there had been little, in the form of books, on the content of blues songs. The current tendency is for biographies. It's always quite interesting which stratum of singers it is that's being subjected.

DH: One of the areas of blues literature that I've often wished there was more of is one you get in Keil's *Urban Blues*, where he has the chapter on Bobby Blue Bland on stage [1966]. That kind of social-anthropological reporting of an event. I've always found that description fascinating.

PO: I did find it a bit irritating that he was using Bales' structural analysis, which was intended to be an analysis technique for company directors. It was standard of sociological study at the time. It's probably an unfair judgement, but that's how I perceived it then. But it's certainly true that the performance aspect has not been written about enough, and it raises a number of issues which have also not been examined to any great extent. Such as the range between a street singer or worker just singing songs at one end and the highly professional entertainer at the other, and the various stages in between. There seems to me to be a huge spectrum, awaiting research.

DH: If a young blues scholar came along and knocked on your door now, what directions might you point them in, where there is material waiting to be examined?

PO: It would depend on what the scholar came with. For example, one thing I was going to do – I did some writing but never got it completed – was take further the issue of African retentions. If one argued that there were African retentions in the blues, as I did, were they retentions of particular African traditions or were the African traditions themselves representative of a larger frame of attitudes? What I was looking at in particular was African carvings. There are certain aspects that I find very interesting, relating to the kind of variance on certain kinds of normative approach to the design of particular sculptural pieces, which seemed to me to have some correspondences with the ways in which blues was invented or devised around a normative framework. It's still something I'd like to write about. I've done various pieces but I can't quite bring them together, probably because of the lack of musicological knowledge that I think it demands.

DH: So we're talking about a fairly unusual scholar who would have extensive knowledge of and interest in African visual art and be musicologically competent.

PO: You have to be aware of the small regional differences, particular cults and so on, in African art. But there are still considerable problems. For example, the actual creative process has rarely been studied. The work is always retrospective. I tried to document some of the masks of the Ngere-Wobe (Ivory Coast) but it was very difficult to do: to know what image was being retained in their minds.

DH: What about the thorny question of improvisation?

PO: One of the things I've been doing for *Blues the World Forgot* is something we made a remark about earlier – I've been making a list of all the people who only recorded two titles and I've been working on a study of those. In addition I've got

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more and more interested in those where there were two takes. Reissues have made these available. The degree of improvisation and the degree of rehearsal comes over much more in them, but you don't find a tremendous difference between them always. With Robert Johnson, for example, his are so finely honed there's no real difference between the takes.

DH: I've sometimes played students two takes of Blind Lemon's 'Matchbox Blues'. In that case, the whole feel of the thing is quite different between the two.

PO: Yes, one or two other people are rich in that aspect too.

DH: Do you think improvisation and blues is still a subject that needs investigation?

PO: Yes, I do, but Alyn Shipton for example has been critical about what is seen as improvisation in jazz [2001]. Having played in a lot of jazz bands himself he feels that the amount of improvisation is actually quite small.

DH: Going back to what you were saying about the creative process, Berliner is probably the only person to have looked at it in that amount of detail in the jazz context [1994].

PO: Again, we're dependent on the available material, and it tends to be on the records, but for example Robert Pete Williams seems to have had an improvisational skill that is quite different from any other figures. On the other hand he wasn't really a professional singer till quite late in life. It's interesting to hear his quite rambling extemporisations on a theme – waiting in a hospital clinic or something. It's great that Harry Oster recorded them [at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola in 1959 and 1960] but he didn't analyse them much. I do find them very interesting but what I don't know is whether what we have in Robert Pete Williams was common to a lot of people who never recorded or whether it was very singular.

DH: We have talked a lot about what your current concerns are, which seems right! But if you look back on yourself writing *Blues Fell This Morning*, is anything different about that person to how you work today?

PO: Not a lot of difference, really. Research for *Songsters and Saints* was certainly very close to my approach today, but that was forced a little bit by the nature of the subject. Also, I suppose I've developed an interest which I had less at an early stage in printed resources, the degree to which singers are drawing upon published material, or whether there was a common repertoire. I've always been interested in that problem as far as the songsters were concerned. I did try to draw up the songsters' repertoire at one time. That's totally conditioned by the recordings, but I tried to do that in comparison with early writings. I don't think the methods have been very different – the differences are ones that have been forced on me. At one time I could talk with the singers and that was immensely important, and I could get to talk with Richard Wright, Langston Hughes and so on.

DH: I don't know whether you think this is true, but the image that blues has in popular music circles seems to me to be of something that is quite precisely defined and has a certain element of purism in the approach to it, and yet when one looks at your writing – and maybe this is something that increased as time went on – your feeling is that the blues is many things and that tying it down is the worst thing you can do.

PO: I think again it's the relationship between the music, the song and the community that I'm really interested in, and therefore the perception of the music changes as you understand what was happening in the community contemporaneously. The degree to which singers were singing for themselves and the degree to which they were singing for others is an interesting and not easily answerable question. But one that I'm still working on.

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Discography

Blind Lemon Jefferson, 'Matchbox Blues'. Okeh 8455
Charley Patton, 'Running Wild Blues'. Paramount 12924
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