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Review Article
Interpreting Paul Oliver

***Blues, How Do You Do? Paul Oliver and the Transatlantic Story of the Blues*. By Christian O'Connell. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2015. 251pp. ISBN 978-0-472-0567-7.**

When the English blues scholar Paul Oliver, who died in 2017 aged 90, was interviewed for a special issue of *Popular Music* in his honour, on the occasion of his 80th birthday (issue 26/1, January 2007), it was striking how much of the conversation revolved around a recurring flow of ideas for future research, to be undertaken by him or by anyone else who came with credentials appropriate to the enterprise (such as musicology, a discipline that he never considered himself well enough versed in to allow engagement). It didn't enter his mind that he might become a research subject himself. Now, with Christian O'Connell's book, he has; and it is his own methods that are under scrutiny, not, or not directly, the blues that he spent a long adult lifetime investigating (and for which he was such a knowledgeable and, for many who read his books or heard him speak live or on air, inspiring advocate), nor the social and economic life of the African American working class who created the music that continued to fascinate him. What is under the microscope is how he depicted both of those things.

The extent to which Oliver's achievement is held in high esteem by both scholars and fans (and those who are both!) is evident in the valedictory tributes to him, by Richard Middleton and O'Connell, that appeared in 2018 in *Popular Music* 37/2. O'Connell's purpose in the present study, however, is not, or not merely, to recognise an achievement; it is to offer a critique of part of that achievement in a particular context, that of the work of recent US revisionist historians. While, as we shall see, O'Connell will espouse their critique, his starting point is a criticism of revisionism for omitting Oliver and European blues writing in general from its catchment area. In rebalancing the study of blues historiography by insisting on the importance of Oliver's writing, he also insists on that of what the subtitle calls the 'Transatlantic story', the way European and US writers in particular collaborated in the formative days of blues study, and how 'ideas and conceptualizations were actively constructed in a transnational context' (p. 211).

So far so commendable, and in its execution O'Connell's study is often insightful and sophisticated, with a strong grasp of many theoretical ideas (for example, on deconstructionist ideas of historical analysis), but for this reviewer at least it is also rather frustrating, for a number of reasons. For all its virtues the book often seems more likely to close down directions of research that are based on Oliver's writing rather than open them up – something he would not have liked – and to discourage the further use of Oliver's own texts as a research tool, other than as a salutary warning; for although, in concluding his study, O'Connell is at pains to stress the

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importance of Oliver's work, he (Oliver) in effect stands accused, with others at this point unnamed, of misrepresenting, manipulating and inventing the past (p. 212). In the context of the blues, that, in O'Connell's view, is what characterised the blues revival of the 1950s and 1960s.

Other frustrations with the way Oliver's work is represented begin to creep in early on, when the limitations imposed on the writings chosen for study are made clear. O'Connell restricts his study to the four books published in the 1960s: *Blues Fell This Morning: The Meaning of the Blues* (1960) (hereafter BFTM), *Conversations with the Blues* (1965) (CWTB), *Screening the Blues: Aspects of the Blues Tradition* (1968) and *The Story of the Blues* (1969) (SOTB). The first and third are studies of the connections between blues lyrics and the daily life of working-class rural and urban African American society; the second is based on interviews Oliver collected on a field trip in 1960; and the fourth is a profusely illustrated narrative, with a chronological structure that frequently overlaps with itself, of the development of the blues. Each of these receives its own chapter, preceded by a chapter in which Oliver's 'beginnings' as a blues writer and enthusiast are outlined.

The rationale for this approach is twofold. First, Oliver 'published the main bulk of his books by the end of the sixties'. Unfortunately, this is not an accurate assessment. *Savannah Syncopators: African Retentions in the Blues* (1970) was a bold and influential move into a closely related but as yet underexplored area, aiming to shed new light on the challenging question of the possible continued presence of African practices on African American musical culture in the formative years of the 20th century. *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records* (1983) not only ranks alongside the earlier work in its originality and its typically exhaustive research, but also, importantly, complements previous work by investigating what the title of the book's Introduction refers to as 'the half (that) ain't never been told' – the African American vocal music, secular and sacred, recorded on 'race' records that previous scholarship, including Oliver's own, had overlooked. This is vitally important, for it underlines how Oliver's own view of the subject was never static – if others had chosen to settle into one particular set of ideas and representations, he had not. He was also acknowledging that blues belonged within a wide sphere of vernacular music-making, and that an overriding emphasis on blues had produced a distorted picture.

O'Connell might well respond that here is where the second element of his rationale comes into play: 'the period [I have selected] corresponds with [Elijah] Wald's assertion that revivalist conceptions of the blues had become fully established by 1970' (p. 16). One of the book's stated aims, therefore, is to assess Oliver's role in the creation and establishment of a particular set of views of the blues, characteristic of the blues revival. There are two significant problems with this, First, when in the book we come towards the end of the 1960s, with SOTB, O'Connell feels no obligation to offer a developed account of what the 'fully established' conceptions were (he gives a partial picture halfway through the decade), or to investigate in contemporary sources how flexible they might or might not be, what arguments were circulating, what were the political motives if any, and so forth. He is clearly a little concerned that the centrality of this objective might not be fully grasped, for he repeats it on the book's final page, but by then it is clear that 'the blues revival' has played second fiddle throughout, so that making this the ultimate objective does not entirely ring true.

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The second problem is with the way revisionist arguments are accepted almost without demur. Wald (2000 and 2004) and another author, Marybeth Hamilton (2007; a book that, it has to be said, Oliver himself did not much like), are the principal sources of the 'revisionist' approach to previous blues scholarship that provides O'Connell's study with much of its underlying rationale. The gist of the argument is that blues as described by the first generation of blues writers 'has been as much about "invention" as it has been about discovery' (p. 2), that a distorted picture has been created of a music and a culture at odds with popular culture and the commercial music industry, that blues musicians have been set up as folk heroes in opposition to the consumerism that the writers themselves despise (for one thing, blues aficionados have overlooked the fact that musicians saw blues as a way of 'making it'; p. 65), and that the temporal and, often, geographical, distance between the writers and their subjects has led to blues research being, in Wald's words, 'permeated with a romanticism that obscures as much as it illuminates' (p. 6).

Because US revisionists have hitherto neglected writing such as that of Oliver, it does not follow that their account of the perceived failures of blues historiography is the best one to use when it comes to remedying the error, but that is what happens. With the exception of their omission of the so-called Transatlantic element, which the author is justified in wishing to correct, and a later expression of surprise that the question of how images are used in blues history has also escaped revisionists' attention, O'Connell does not reflect on the revisionists' ideas themselves – which, given that he concedes at one point that Oliver is a 'not a straightforward candidate for revisionist analysis' (p. 12), would seem an advisable thing to do – and makes no attempt to critique the approach. On pages 2 and 3 Wald and Hamilton are twice described as 'arguing convincingly' and this use of revisionist ideas appears regularly in the book.

If the lack of any critique of revisionism is disappointing, at least in introducing Oliver into this context O'Connell immediately points to some differences – for example, Oliver did not privilege the Mississippi Delta in quite the same way as other contemporaries; and he was always interested in the 'relationship between the music and the social environment in which it emerged' (p. 12). The problem is that, even with these qualifications, once the presupposition has been made at the outset – before any evidence has been mentioned or considered – that revisionist analysis will demonstrate some fundamental flaws in Oliver's approach, this reader could not avoid the sense that the same presupposition persistently hovers, somewhat threateningly, over the rest of the book. As a method of critiquing someone for whom, as Middleton notes in his tribute, empiricism was a crucial dimension of his work, it seems a rather strange choice, and one can't escape the sense that is a self-fulfilling approach: things are interpreted in ways that demonstrate the rightness of the presupposition.

As an example, on several occasions in the critique of BFTM it is noted that African American agency is a casualty of Oliver's selection of lyrics, that in the world he describes 'there is little beyond "having the blues" that African Americans are able to do to ameliorate their condition' (p. 83). However, that is not entirely true. Many selected blues do indeed speak of disillusionment and disappointment, but they are not without hope, as, for example, in a blues by Bukka White quoted on p. 199 of BFTM, describing life in Parchman Farm, which concludes 'I hope someday I will overcome'. Nor are they all passive, as we discover from Victoria Spivey's 'Bloodhound Blues', quoted on p. 207, where she sings of how

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she broke out of jail after being beaten by her jailer. Neither song appears in O'Connell's selection.

As noted already, Connell's approach – unintentionally, one imagines – often tends to close down avenues that suggest themselves for examination, or re-examination, which is unfortunately quite the reverse of what Oliver considered his own work as doing: as being part of the *process* of understanding the blues and its creators. As one brief example, in the chapter on BFTM, one of O'Connell's criticisms, developing the revisionist charge of history being invented, is that Oliver's method of presenting a selection of blues lyrics on a particular theme (railroad, prison, disease, etc.) involves the use of 'semi-fictionalized descriptions', which 'blur the boundaries between the real and imagined', help create a romantic image, and, ultimately, support a 'prevalent depiction of African Americans as downtrodden victims of an oppressive and disenfranchising worlds' (pp. 80–2). The use of third-person narrative is one of the techniques by which Oliver seeks to enter the world of the society and culture that produced the blues; it doesn't make it fiction, or even semi-fiction (unless the latter is actually a synonym for narrative), but it does ask the reader to make an imaginative leap – as the blues singer her/himself often does. In any case, a more common technique is a more impersonal, one might say de-personalised, kind of writing, and one of the fascinating things about the overall methodology is how, when and why the two are used alongside each other. The problem for the reader of O'Connell is that s/he is discouraged from examining the technique further, from considering its pros and cons, by the knowledge that 'semi-fictionalized' suggests manipulated suggests ...

A slightly different problem arises in connection with the revisionist accusation, largely accepted by O'Connell in the case of Oliver, that in its depiction of the blues influential early writing inaccurately portrayed blues culture as being at odds with the commercial industry. The difficulty here is twofold. First, if we were to put together the many places where the subject of the role of the industry occurs in Oliver's writing we would find that they reveal a relationship that is acknowledged as complex, subtle, sometimes creative and sometimes not and often, unfortunately, obscure – and one that cannot be summed up in this way. It is also an area, as Oliver explains in his concluding chapter in *Songsters and Saints* (omitted from this study, as we have seen) on 'Past Recordings and Future Research', that involves the researcher in trying to answer demanding questions such as 'how representative the music was that *did* appear on record' (p. 271ff – he is speaking of non-blues, but the same question applies to blues) – a question that is only answerable using a wide range of sources. Oliver's identification of the question as a significant one at the very least suggests the subtleties of research and argument necessary to understand the relationship.

O'Connell's chapters on CWTB and SOTB are perhaps the best reads in the book, and it is significant that he observes at one point that 'it is remarkable that the role of images and photography has received no attention from revisionist scholarship' (p. 115). Here is an opportunity to take a fresh look at this as a historiographical method, and to some extent he takes it. Yet that too can distort his perceptions. In the SOTB chapter, for example, we learn that 'the range of sources and types of image used appears as a pastiche that complicates and destabilizes the narrative'. They 'blur the historical specificity of the story'. What is more, 'they reinforce the narrative by strengthening the triumph-over-tragedy motif' (pp. 181–2). To begin at the end of those criticisms, it is questionable whether that motif has actually been given the

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prominence O'Connell thinks it has. Look, for example, no further than his Introduction, which speaks of the blues not only as the 'wail of the forsaken … the despair of the jobless', but as 'the cry of independence … the passion of the lusty', and as 'entertainment … music for dancing and drinking by' (*sic*). Even if the motif were as guiding as O'Connell maintains, isolating it as such takes away from – does a disservice to – the many individual situations and more general themes that are treated, factually, without evidence of any such agenda. Many pages, chosen at random in SOTB, could offer examples. Take p. 138, where Oliver outlines the contrasting careers (and fates) of two local Texas barrelhouse pianists, Buster Pickens and Robert Shaw, for both of whom legal changes and police pressure on the barrelhouse circuit undermined their livelihoods. Pickens, 'intense, unable to adapt to changing circumstances', was the antithesis of Shaw, who was 'ebullient, resourceful and ultimately successful', establishing a profitable business in Austin. Oliver comments that the two represented 'the polarization of personalities within the blues, but both shared music in a strong localised tradition'.

As regards the photographs themselves, two points need to be made. The first concerns the genesis of the book. As O'Connell notes, although not in the SOTB chapter, the book's title was originally that of a photographic exhibition Oliver put painstakingly together for display at the US embassy in London in 1964. The point is important, for from its earliest beginnings the SOTB was a bi-media conception – and when the accompanying LP was added (an important aspect of blues publishing, and one in which Oliver was a pioneer) a multi-media conception, in which photographs, text and sound complement and inform each other. To describe the result as one of introducing instability seems to be giving undue regard to theory. Second, when O'Connell suggests that the images selected 'contradict the seemingly separate and isolated "Negro world"' (i.e. that Oliver's text describes), one could argue that one of the roles of the images is precisely to bring home to the reader what O'Connell himself wishes to see but thinks is absent, namely that the blues is made up of a 'multitude of histories' (pp. 182–3). Oliver's Introduction puts it this way: 'blues is all these things and all these people, the creation of renowned, widely-recorded artists and the inspiration of a man known only to his community, perhaps only to himself'.

Throughout his book, at the level of detail, O'Connell makes many interesting and perceptive points, which are best appreciated and thought about if they can be divorced from the underpinning rationale. It is possible that the book would have worked better constructed mainly around a thematic approach, gathering ideas and examples together in one place – for instance, to look in an uninterrupted way at important subjects such as the tension between folk and popular in Oliver's writing, or that between the past and modern eras of the blues, or his use of images across his writing, including his own sketches (thus bringing together CWTB and STOB), and so on. It might have led to some fieldwork on the revival. It might also have given greater scope for Oliver's work to be compared with the contributions and approaches of other contemporary British writers, such as Robert M.W. Dixon and John Godrich (1970), who pioneered work on the blues recording industry, and Tony Russell (1970), whose study of the relations between blacks and whites around blues was also trailblazing. Both books are essential complements to Oliver's own work.

Oliver's writing, centred as Middleton observes on his belief in 'the primacy of the material' (2018, p. 292) and founded on the long hard slog that was necessary to

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discover that material in the first place, was scholarly in an area where to begin with there was little or no pre-existing scholarship. It was also – maybe still is – an exercise in discovery and evangelism, especially in the cause of revealing the creativity of a hitherto undervalued underclass (whose achievements in vocal music were hitherto thought confined to the 19th century spiritual). There is no doubt that some passages, in BFTM in particular, seem dated (as he himself acknowledged in the 1990 revised edition). One would be surprised if it were otherwise, almost 60 years later. That his achievement was not without flaws and omissions is something Oliver himself would have been among the first to acknowledge, and he was invariably keen to support all forms of blues scholarship, especially those that, like his own work, were deeply and widely informed about the subject and used that as a starting point. While it is always unlikely with an aural phenomenon that the written word is more potent than the phenomenon itself, his books no doubt provided a selection of reader/listeners with a framework for that listening, guiding them through an increasing, otherwise hard-to-navigate mass of material. In the process they often discovered a musical culture to be valued – loved, even – across cultures. Were their revelatory discoveries based on receiving misguidance? Writing informally to Paul Oliver on the occasion of this 80th birthday, British writer Dave Allen remarked that as the discovery of R 'n' B, followed by that of Oliver's books, led him ever more deeply into vernacular music, 'it is no exaggeration to describe those experiences as life-changing – aesthetically, socially, politically' (personal communication). While not ignoring the first two, the third of these is especially interesting. If Oliver's books were (re-)read today, with an open mind and a modern global view, one wonders what the impact would be of the revelation of the characteristically inventive approach to personal testimony, via words and music, of the culture of a particular proletarian group, living in difficult social and economic circumstances, in an era in which there was not only rising prejudice, divisiveness and dispossession, but also a continuous attempt for political reasons to challenge and undermine distinctions between the factual and the 'fake'. Oliver's books, to this writer, revealed a remarkable and complex creative response to an often sour daily reality and it is incorrect to think of them as in any way manipulative.

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