Popular Music (2007) Volume 26/1. Copyright © 2007 Cambridge University Press, pp. 15–22
doi:10.1017/S0261143007001092 Printed in the United Kingdom

Paul Oliver's contribution to ethnomusicology

JOHN BAILY

Department of Music, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW, UK
E-mail: j.baily@gold.ac.uk

Abstract

Paul Oliver never described himself as an ethnomusicologist but much of his work is strongly ethnomusicological in approach. This article looks at his pioneering research in these terms, re-examines some of his ideas about African retentions in the blues as put forward in his book Savannah Syncopators, *discusses critically the reliability of sonic evidence for establishing historical connections between different kinds of music, and concludes that such evidence is acceptable when supported by other kinds of data.*

My urge to contribute a short essay to this special issue of *Popular Music* to celebrate Paul Oliver's eightieth birthday was prompted by the fact that the blues, in part as mediated by Paul's work, had such an important role in shaping my experience of music as a teenager in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and eventually in my entering the world of ethnomusicology. This essay is intended as an homage, not as a detailed critique of Paul's work – a task for which I am not qualified – nor as a biography, or even a biographical note. Rather, it presents some musings on what we have gained from his work in the world of musicology. Paul is obviously recognised primarily as a major influence on the study of popular music, a role expressed not only in his work, but also in his being a founder member of the editorial board that established *Popular Music*, and of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music. Notwithstanding these accomplishments, he is also recognised as having made a significant contribution to ethnomusicology, broadly defined by Alan Merriam in 1960 as 'the study of music in culture', using methods of investigation adopted from anthropology, notably fieldwork combined with participant observation, an approach pioneered by John Blacking (see the Blacking interview in Howard 1991).

In his writings, Paul Oliver does sometimes mention ethnomusicology, and the entry in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (2nd edition) describes him as having 'applied ethnomusicological methods to the blues' (Vol. 18, p. 393), although as far as I am aware he has never described himself as 'an ethnomusicologist'. But if ethnomusicology is 'what ethnomusicologists do' – as shown by the kind of work they produce – then Paul's work on the blues is strongly ethnomusicological in both theoretical orientation and methodology.

It is important to mention two aspects of the socio-cultural context of Paul's work. He grew up during World War 2, when there was a strong American presence in Britain. I always enjoy reading his account of his first encounter with 'the blues', in 1942, when his young friend Stan told him, 'I'm going to take you to hear something

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143007001092 Published online by Cambridge University Press

you won't forget'. Stan took him to secretly watch African-American soldiers as they wielded their mattocks constructing a military base in Suffolk:

> . . . suddenly the air seemed split by the most eerie sounds. The two men were singing, swooping, undulating, unintelligible words, and the back of my neck tingled. 'They're singing a *blues*,' Stan hissed at me. It was the strangest, most compelling singing I'd ever heard . . . I wanted to know from Stan how he knew what they were singing, and what it was? Stan, it turned out, had a collection of records which he kept in an orange box [a large wooden crate used by greengrocers in those days]. They were blues records, he explained, and when we got back from the camp he played them to me over and over again. (Oliver 1984, p. 3)

Paul had just turned fifteen at the time. This was surely one of those life-changing musical experiences that Sloboda *et al*. (1994) write about as crucial in motivating the child towards music. The 1940s and 1950s was the era of a revival of interest in New Orleans jazz, both in the United States and Britain. It was the time of the 'trad bands', of Humphrey Lyttelton, Ken Colyer, Chris Barber and many others, a scene wonderfully captured by George Melly in his autobiography *Rum, Bum and Concertina* (1977). There was a new interest not only in playing and hearing New Orleans jazz, but in the origins and history of the music. This brought about a spate of writings by amateur enthusiasts. It was also the time of the second folk song revival, inspired by political song in the United States and the involvement of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger in leftist politics. Developments in Britain were catalysed by the presence of Alan Lomax, wisely absenting himself from the anti-Communist hysteria in the USA of the 1950s.

As for the academic institutionalised context, ethnomusicology was in its infancy. Jaap Kunst had coined the term 'ethno-musicology' in 1950, replacing the older term comparative musicology (Kunst 1950). The Society for Ethnomusicology was established in 1955, Mantle Hood (1960) had just published 'The challenge of ''bi-musicality'' ', and Lomax (1959) and Merriam (1960) had recently published pioneering papers that located ethnomusicology as the study of music in its social and cultural contexts. In Britain there were very few ethnomusicologists based in the universities, and no academic courses in ethnomusicology as such.

Paul studied painting at Harrow School of Art and went on to train as an art teacher at Goldsmiths College. He taught for a spell at Harrow County School while at the same time taking a part-time degree in the History of Art at the University of London. He was invited to become Public Lecturer at The National Gallery and later had the same appointment at the Tate. He was then appointed to the arcane post of 'Drawing Master' at the Architectural Association and was soon asked to plan a new course in History and Theory in Architecture. This led to a highly distinguished academic career in architecture, especially vernacular architecture, and architectural history. His major contribution in this field has been the massive *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World* (Oliver 1997).

At the same time it seems that Paul was nurturing his passion for blues. It was possible to buy old jazz and blues records in junk shops, which raises questions about how they got there in the first place. And there were visits to Britain by blues artists such as Big Bill Broonzy, Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry, who provided direct contact with blues culture in the broader sense and who must have been important sources of information about the recorded history of the music. Paul was a tireless writer of record sleeve notes and articles in specialist magazines such as *Music Mirror*, *Jazz Journal* and *Jazz Monthly*. His distinctive graphic depictions of musicians and aspects of blues life were widely published in such publications.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143007001092 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The emergent ethnomusicologist

Paul's first book, *Bessie Smith*, was published in 1959. His second, *Blues Fell This Morning*, was published in 1960, accompanied by an eponymous LP containing fourteen tracks of rare recordings of southern blues singers, recorded between 1927 and 1940. These were some of the first examples of early downhome blues most of us had heard, and were a revelation. As for the book, it was based on an analysis of the texts of 321 blues songs, arranged under the following chapter headings: 'Got to work or leave', 'Railroad for my pillow', 'Pains in my heart', 'I'm a rooster baby', 'The jinx is on me', 'Let the deal go down', 'Evil and mean and funny', 'Goin' to take a rap', 'World black as midnight', 'Going down slow' and 'Blues like showers of rain'. This is an invaluable compilation, a dictionary of blues texts, with an examination of the meaning of the songs. 'A social study alone cannot explain the blues: one has to try to enter the Negro's world and explore the background of his themes in order to understand the singer' (LP notes), a statement which is very much in the spirit of ethnomusicological inquiry, with its emphasis on exploring the 'folk view', discovering the people's own understanding of their culture, trying to 'grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise *his* vision of *his* world', as the founder of social anthropology Malinowski put it (Malinowski 1922, p. 25). It is also worth mentioning that Paul was a pioneer of music multimedia, publishing coordinated printed text and audio recordings. Most of his books have an LP to go with them, in some cases more than one LP. This in itself was innovative; today it is hard to find an ethnomusicological monograph which does not have a CD of illustrative materials in a pocket in the back cover. Paul's multi-media approach also covered numerous radio broadcasts on the blues.

The republication of early blues records, a long-term project with which Paul was much involved, has had some remarkable consequences. In due course much of the corpus of blues recordings originally released as 78 rpm records were published on LP, on labels such as Matchbox and Yazoo. It is a very specific corpus, a *canon* in fact. Remarkably, much of the canon has remained in print ever since, now in CD form, published by small specialist labels such as Document, and available through dedicated outlets like Red Lick. It was not a very profitable commercial proposition, more a labour of love on the part of blues enthusiasts. It was in a sense also an early example of the world music phenomenon.

Soon after the publication of *Blues Fell This Morning*, Paul and his wife Valerie made an extended visit to the USA to conduct what today would be called fieldwork. They visited Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis and Memphis, and travelled through Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, the West Coast and Washington (Oliver 1984, p. 11). Many years later he wrote:

> We went with considerable trepidation, not for our safety – though it was a difficult time in the South – but fearing that the world described in the book [*Blues Fell This Morning*] would prove to be misleading. As it turned out though, we found that it was often too painfully accurate, as we encountered the humiliation of racial discrimination, the poverty and deprivation of Blacks in the urban ghettoes and the country, the conditions in which many blues singers lived . . . Of course we learned much more: that was the purpose of the trip. We heard, interviewed, and recorded blues singers and musicians, record promoters, veterans of the shows; black writers, historians and Civil Rights leaders too. (Oliver 1990, p. xix)

The substance of the interviews and many beautiful photographs were published in *Conversation with the Blues* (1965) and the field recordings appeared on a number of LP records. This must have been a very important experience: it is one thing to have the music come to you, through the visits of exotic musicians from across the Atlantic,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143007001092 Published online by Cambridge University Press

giving concerts somewhat out of their usual context, and something else to observe it in its home ground. Fieldwork in the USA perhaps paved the way for a different kind of fieldwork experience in West Africa.

African retentions in the blues

Paul Oliver's ideas about the African roots of the blues build on the research of Melville Herskovits on African retentions in the African-American musics of North and South America and the Caribbean, which was carried out in the 1930s and 1940s. Herskovits held the idea that music is one of the most stable elements of culture. 'In comparison with other aspects of culture, music is one that presents the most stability and continuity' (quoted in Merriam 1964, p. 304). Herskovits (1941) proposed that music is particularly stable in the contact situation because it is 'carried subliminally', thus making it resistant to direct 'attack'. He also argued that the particular value of the study of music is that, even more than other aspects of culture, it tends to lodge on the unconscious level, and allows one to establish historical connections between cultures that seem in many ways very different.

Herskovits devised what he called the 'scale of intensity of New World Africanisms' (Herskovits 1945), a way of measuring the imprint of African traits in African-American cultures. In many parts of the New World, notably Brazil and some of the Caribbean Islands like Haiti and Cuba, African survivals are obvious, most clearly in the ritual music of African-American religious cults such as *candomblé*, *santeria* and *vudun*. All three employ complex polyrhythmic drumming from a 'three drum choir', and involve spirit possession. Herskovits devoted much of his academic research to making connections between these New World forms and the parts of West Africa from which they are derived. These and other examples show the transportation of music from the West African coastal areas to the Americas. In terms of vegetation, this coastal area is equatorial rain forest. It is very much 'drum country', with large trees for making large drums.

However, in the case of African-American musical genres that developed in the USA around the end of the nineteenth century, African retentions are much harder to identify. There has been much debate in the past about what is African about jazz as it developed in New Orleans. In the case of blues, African retentions have been even more difficult to pinpoint. What is African about blues music in the USA? This is the question Paul seeks to answer in *Savannah Syncopators: African Retentions in the Blues*, published in 1970, along with an LP of sixteen music examples from USA and Africa chosen to support the case. *Savannah Syncopators* was republished as part of *Yonder Come the Blues* (Oliver *et al*. 2001), and the accompanying CD of the same name contains seven of the sixteen tracks on the LP. I will refer to specific tracks on this CD below.

Savannah Syncopators is a model of succinctness. In it Paul states, with characteristic modesty: 'I cannot claim to have solved the problems surrounding the question of African retentions in the blues . . . the following is a sketch of the lines of research that might be pursued, and which, given the opportunity, I hope one day to undertake' (Oliver 1970, p. 9). Later he described this as the book 'I'm most glad to have written, though some found its challenge to the received ideas about the relationship of African music to that of Afro-America hard to accept' (Oliver 1984, p. 5).

The breakthrough came during a visit to Ghana in 1964 when Paul had a spell of teaching at the School of Architecture at the University of Kumasi and in the Department of Music of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143007001092 Published online by Cambridge University Press

where the distinguished ethnomusicologist Professor Kwabena Nketia was Director. Working with students in the Department of Music who were familiar with their own indigenous African music, and with Western techniques of music analysis, he was surprised how hard it was for them to identify sonic connections between jazz and West African music. Even less so with blues.

But then one day . . . Once again, Paul recounts a life-changing encounter with live music. In this case it was a visit to a rural area of Ghana, far to the north of the tropical rain forest, in the much drier savannah area. There he heard the playing of two musicians, Kunaal (calabash rattle) and Sosira (two-stringed fiddle), and was struck by what he perceived to be a 'fragile link with the music of the blues' (Oliver 1970, p. 9). 'Here was a combination of vocal, rhythm and stringed instrument which hinted at a link with the blues' (*ibid*., p. 38). (We can hear their playing on track 4 of *Yonder Come the Blues*.) On the basis of this experience he became convinced that there was an historic connection between the west central Sudanic savannah region and the blues. Much of *Savannah Syncopators* is spent in exploring this connection.

Here are some of the areas he covers:

(1) The music culture of the savannah is very different to the coastal tropical forest areas. Rather than drums, this is an area for chordophones, notably the five-stringed *halam*, played with thumb and first two fingers, a technique later used in blues guitar (Oliver 1970, p. 49). There is a strong Muslim influence, and perhaps associated with that fact, it is also a region where musical performance is largely in the hands of hereditary musicians, often known in the west as Griots, and known to themselves as *jali*.

(2) Detailed examination of the slave trade shows that many slaves came not from the coastal areas but from the inland savannah region, to be shipped from the coast to the English speaking colonies of North America. There were certainly Muslim slaves in the USA, and they were often favoured as domestic slaves, being in some cases educated and literate (*ibid*., p. 75).

(3) Linguistic evidence shows that many words used by African-Americans in the United States derive from West African languages, including some musical terms (*ibid*., p. 69). The following are cited:
   a. Shout, from Bambara *saut* (actually an Arabic word meaning sound).
   b. Juke, from Georgia Sea Islands Gullah *joog* meaning 'disorderly', traced to Bambara *dzugu*, 'wicked'.
   c. Jive, from Wolof *jev*, 'to talk disparagingly'.
   d. Hip, from Wolof *hipi*, 'to open one's eyes'.
   e. Jam, from Wolof *jaam*, 'slave'.

(4) When we look at the music of the slaves in the Americas we note some significant differences between north and south. The predominantly Protestant environment of North America was very different to the Catholic environment in South America, which was much more tolerant of African culture. In the north there was a fear of slaves having recourse to drums, which were suspected of being used to incite insurrection. However, plantation owners often had small bands of slaves to provide music, notably fiddle and banjo (*ibid*., p. 24). This practice was later to form the basis of 'minstrel show music'. Some plantation owners encouraged their slaves to make music, to keep them happy (*ibid*., p. 88). *Halam* type instruments were transformed into the banjo in the USA (Epstein 1975). Paul makes the suggestion that the guitar came to combine elements of fiddle and banjo (*ibid*., p. 25).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143007001092 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(5) The sonic evidence: the comparison of recordings of West African and blues from the United States. The *Savannah Syncopators* LP has sixteen tracks, seven of which are re-released on the *Yonder Come the Blues* CD. On the LP sleeve notes, Paul invites us to listen to paired tracks from Africa and America. Only two of these direct comparisons are possible with the CD compilation. So, we can compare Kunaal and Sosira (#4) with Butch Cage and Willie Thomas performing 'Forty-Four Blues' (#5). Paul writes that Kunaal and Sosira had 'the swing and integration of a blues performance. They called to mind the playing of Butch Cage and Willie Thomas in Louisiana a few years before. 'Forty-Four Blues' had the same persistent 'bothering' of the notes in Butch Cage's playing that Sosira achieved on his horse-hair and calabash fiddle, and both Cage and Thomas pitched high above their speaking voices when they sang' (*Savannah Syncopators* LP sleeve notes 1970). We can also compare a *halam* improvisation (#6) with Lonnie Coleman singing and playing banjo (#7).

The reception of Paul Oliver's theory about African retentions

How convincing is the *Savannah Syncopators* audio evidence? There is an important theoretical issue here.

> Appearances are often deceptive. For instance, two cultures may appear to employ the same scale structure, but this structure might be interpreted differently by the members of each culture. Conversely, the music of two cultures may employ very different materials, but the underlying mechanism governing the organisation of these materials might be the same for both. (Meyer 1960, pp. 49–50)

John Blacking made a somewhat similar statement in a critique of Merriam's book *The Anthropology of Music*:

> Statistical analyses of intervals . . . are all very well, provided that we know that the same intervals have the same meanings in all the cultures whose music we are comparing. If this is not certain, we may be comparing incomparable phenomena. In other words, if we accept the view that patterns of sound in any culture are the product of concepts and behaviours peculiar to that culture, we cannot compare them with similar patterns in another culture unless we know that the latter are derived from similar concepts and behaviour. Conversely, statistical analyses may show that the original music of 2 cultures is very different, but an analysis of the cultural 'origins' of the sound patterns may reveal that they have essentially the same meaning, which has been translated into the different 'languages' of the 2 cultures. (Blacking 1966, p. 218)

Just because two kinds of music from very different areas seem to have plainly audible characteristics in common, does that mean they have an historical link? If two instruments have similar structures, does that mean there is a historical connection between them? The answer is no. Some of the music from Afghanistan, an area with which I am particularly familiar, perhaps sounds more blues-like than music from inland west Africa, but I do not entertain the idea that there is any kind of historical connection. Thus I do not find the juxtapositions on the *Savannah Syncopators* LP convincing in themselves. On the other hand, if we do not accept this kind of evidence, then how can we ever demonstrate connections between two pieces of music from different parts of the world?

The solution to this problem is, as Blacking implies, that the sonic evidence has to be evaluated in the light of other kinds of evidence, and in the case of the other four categories of data presented above, the evidence for a connection between the music of the Savannah and blues becomes stronger. Perhaps it indicates that some of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143007001092 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Herskovits' ideas about the 'durability' of music culture were correct after all. Perhaps music *is* one of the most stable elements of culture, because it is carried at the unconscious level. Those 'deep structures' are unlikely to be manifest in specific music forms or structures, but in terms of more general processes. African retentions in African-American music of the USA may reside more in terms of the process of music making than in the sound of the product.

In *Africa and the Blues*, Gerhard Kubik, the doyen of Western researchers on African music, substantially corroborates Paul's theory, supporting it with a mass of further evidence. Kubik states:

> In his book *Savannah Syncopators – African Retentions in the Blues*, Paul Oliver (1970) laid out his conclusions, which then revolutionised the search for historical connections between African-American music in the United States and that of west Africa . . . Oliver's work was the first attempt to paint an interconnected profile for the west central Sudanic region, pointing among other things to the importance of chordophones (lutes, fiddles, etc.) in this region, in contrast to the dominant role of idiophones (bells, rattles, etc.) and membranophones (drums) in the cultures of the Guinea coast. He also drew attention to the much simpler rhythmic framework in the music of the 'savanna' peoples, without complex Guinea-Coast-style polyrhythm in the accompaniment, and to specific melismatic vocal techniques. (Kubik 1999, p. 64)

> . . . He also discovered in this music something that could be compared to 'swing', an important kinetic element in African-American music of the United States (*ibid*., p. 65).

> . . . Although the presentation of his thesis drew some criticism with regard to methodology and the very small African sample upon which he based his conclusions . . . Oliver's intuition did hit the mark, and his ideas have become generally accepted and have been followed up (*ibid*., p. 66–7).

Conclusions

It does not really matter whether Paul Oliver is identified as a musicologist who has made an important contribution to ethnomusicology, or as an ethnomusicologist *manqué*, or even as an ethnomusicologist in the making. He has achieved in his research on the blues most of the things that ethnomusicologists do, and done them very well. There is only one respect in which I think his approach diverges sharply from mainstream ethnomusicology, and that concerns the question of learning to perform, which is recognised as an important research technique in ethnomusicology (Baily 2001). Although being involved in what was presumably a skiffle group in the 1950s, Paul became discouraged. He writes:

> I had a strong feeling that it wasn't for me to try and play guitarist (or mandoline player) – I had no association with the world of blues singers nationally, racially, environmentally, even by class . . . I never met one [of the British blues singers of the time] who seemed to be remotely like a blues singer in background, approach or personality, apart from Cyril Davies. Cyril was a laconic . . . working-class panel-beater who made a living taking the dents out of wrecked automobiles; he had a devotion close to total identification with Leadbelly. It seemed to me that he had bridged the impossible gulf between the cultures in a way no other blues-singing Britisher did or could. (Oliver 1984, p. 58)

And even here, from his own account of his early experiences as a performer, it could be argued that, as with many ethnomusicologists who learn to perform as part of their research but subsequently give it up, active engagement of this kind served its purpose, providing important insights into the structure of the music and the context from which it arose.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143007001092 Published online by Cambridge University Press

References

Baily, J. 2001. 'Learning to perform as a research technique in ethnomusicology', *British Journal of Ethnomusicology*, 10/2, pp. 85–98
Blacking, J. 1966. Review of *The Anthropology of Music, Current Anthropology*, 7, p. 218
Epstein, D.J. 1975. 'The folk banjo: a documentary history', *Ethnomusicology*, 19. pp. 347–71
Herskovits, M. 1941. 'Patterns of Negro music', *Transactions, Illinois State Academy of Sciences*, 34(Sept), pp. 19–23
1945. 'Problem, method and theory in Afroamerican Studies', *Afroamerica*, 1, pp. 5–24
Hood, M. 1960. 'The challenge of ''bi-musicality'' ', *Ethnomusicology*, 4/2, pp. 55–9
Howard, K. 1991. 'John Blacking: an interview', *Ethnomusicology*, 35/1, pp. 55–76
Kubik, G. 1999. *Africa and the Blues* (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi)
Kunst, J. 1950. *Musicologica (A Study of the Nature of Ethno-Musicology, its Problems, Methods and Representative Personalities)* (Amsterdam, Koninklijke Vereeniging Indisch Institut)
Lomax, A. 1959. 'Folk song style', *American Anthropologist*, 61/6, pp. 927–54
Malinowski, B. 1922. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (New York, E.P. Dutton)
Melly, G. 1977. *Rum, Bum and Concertina* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson)
Merriam, A.P. 1960. 'Ethnomusicology – discussion and definition of the field', *Ethnomusicology*, 4, pp. 107–14
1964. *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston, Northwestern University Press)
Meyer, L.B. 1960. 'Universalism and relativism in the study of ethnic music', *Ethnomusicology*, 4, pp. 49–54
Oliver, P. 1959. *Bessie Smith* (London, Cassell)
1960. *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (London, Cassell) (2nd edn, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990)
1965. *Conversation with the Blues* (London, Cassell) (2nd edn, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977)
1970. *Savannah Syncopators: African Retentions in the Blues* (London, Studio Vista)
1984. *Blues off the Record: Thirty Years of Blues Commentary* (Tunbridge Wells, Baton Press)
(ed.) 1997. *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press)
Oliver, P., Russell, T., Dixon, R.M.W., Godrich, J., and Rye, H. 2001. *Yonder Come the Blues* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press)
Sloboda, J., Davidson, J., and Howe, M. 1994. 'Is everyone musical?', *The Psychologist*, 7/8, pp. 349–54

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143007001092 Published online by Cambridge University Press