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Feelin' bad this morning: why the *British* blues?

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Abstract

This paper considers the Mike Figgis film Red, White & Blues *as a history of blues music in Britain. The film was produced as part of a series celebrating the centenary of the blues, and not unnaturally its British focus begins with the 1950s and 1960s. The paper argues, however, that it is an incomplete history because it fails to consider how the British blues genre and scene developed subsequently. It also argues that the film focuses too much on the memories and performances of the musicians. It fails to consider the industrial context in which any 'new' genre can emerge, and pays almost no attention to the role of its consumers, the audiences and fans across the country that were an integral part of its development. The paper suggests that research into that aspect of the British blues scene would complement the various documentary accounts of the music and musicians.*

That which we confer with authenticity is integral to our own hopes of one day being recognised as authentic.

(R.J. Warren Zanes 1999, p. 62)

In 2003, as part of the celebrations to mark the centenary of the blues (commemorating the occasion in 1903 when the black bandleader and composer W.C. Handy heard an anonymous blues singer and bottleneck guitarist on a Mississippi railroad station [Handy 1969] and was inspired to become the first professional composer of blues songs), Martin Scorsese commissioned various film directors to produce a series of 'personal and impressionistic' documentaries on various blues subjects. One of the films, *Red, White & Blues*, directed by Mike Figgis, focused on the blues in Britain in the 1960s. It consisted of three main elements, archive footage – mostly of black American musicians who had visited Britain – a studio group of British musicians performing blues (and non-blues) material, and a series of talking head interviews with key performers from the British blues scene.

Genre definition is not unproblematic across popular culture, but describing the material in the film as blues and 'non-blues', in the context of a focus on the British scene of the 1960s, requires clarification. I am using blues in the sense that it is generally represented today in the specialist sections of the major music stores. This is a predominantly African-American music ranging historically from Blind Lemon Jefferson or Bessie Smith in the 1920s, through the work of musicians like Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters and BB King, and in the modern world including the electric guitar of someone like Joe Louis Walker or an acoustic 'revivalist' like Eric Bibb. There will be few white artists in these sections, but those included often began recording in

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the 1960s, including John Mayall, Peter Green's Fleeetwood Mac or Paul Butterfield from the USA.

The Figgis film is about *British* blues, which was heavily influenced by existing American blues recordings – especially post-war amplified Chicago blues. In this paper, however, I shall argue that the British 'blues' scene of the 1960s also drew more broadly upon a range of associated American styles, including rock 'n' roll, black rhythm & blues, jazz and the new soul music, and is more accurately described as a rhythm & blues scene. In this strict sense only a handful of major British bands can be described precisely as blues bands. They include Alexis Korner's Blues Incorporated from the early 1960s, John Mayall's Bluesbreakers from the mid-1960s, and Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac formed in 1967.

The DVD sleeve notes of *Red, White & Blues* describe the 'vibrant social' and 'musical revolution(s)' of the 1960s – the latter 'influenced by the *authentic* black blues of the USA' (my emphasis). Among the film's contributors were Chris Barber, Humphrey Lyttelton, Lonnie Donegan and George Melly from the 1950s jazz and skiffle scene, and 1960s performers including Eric Clapton, John Mayall, Eric Burdon, Peter Green, Steve Winwood, Georgie Fame, Jeff Beck and Van Morrison. Rather oddly, the studio band featured contributions from two 1960s pop singers, Tom Jones and Lulu, neither of whom made any contribution to the British rhythm & blues scene of the 1960s. This may have been a marketing strategy.

As a fan of the music and the period, I found the film enjoyable, but two key omissions resulted in it falling short of being a comprehensive account of the British blues. Firstly, while the film offered an account of the preceding decade, it paid no attention to the subsequent development of the British blues scene. There was no mention of its impact on rock music in the guise of post-1960s Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin or the various metal sub-genres of the past thirty years. Neither was there any consideration of the unexpected impact of *The Blues Brothers* in the 1980s, which Davis (1995, p. 242) described as 'a real turning point', because it spawned a host of imitators in a new phase in British blues. By the 1990s the Blues Brothers' mix of soul, rhythm & blues, and blues could be found in many performances on the British blues scene – sometimes accompanied by an imitation of the pair's dark suits, pork pie hats and shades. Furthermore, the film offered no sense that the British blues scene still exists, even though most of the film's participants moved away from blues in the 1970s.

Since the film presented itself as a documentary on 1960s blues, it was not obliged to take the extended historical view. Within its own temporal focus, however, there was a second omission. The film drew wholly on the performances and recollections of musicians, but offered no clear explanation of the infrastructure of club owners, promoters, record companies, critics, historians and – most importantly for my interests in this paper – the fans and audiences, without whom no British blues scene could have existed. The contributions of Georgie Fame, Eric Clapton and Chris Farlowe seemed to imply that the scene existed only in London with an audience consisting principally of West Indians or black American GIs, but that discrete group could not, and did not, create the considerable popular acceptance of the music in that decade. The only fans we hear from are the musicians themselves recounting how they first discovered and explored the music through records, radio and early playing experiences.

Nevertheless, the film's existence is a remarkable testimony to the musical transformation of British popular music over the past fifty years. Had there been any

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similar marking of the fiftieth anniversary of the blues, no one would have thought to include Britain in the celebrations, but in the past fifty years the British blues scene has been literally *vital* in sustaining and giving life to the form. Russell quotes Muddy Waters in praise of the Rolling Stones:

> Before (them) people didn't know anything about me . . . I was making records that were called 'race records' . . . Then the Rolling Stones and all those other English bands came along playing this music, and now the kids are buying my records and listening to them. (Russell 1997, p. 31)

The careers of many black American blues singers were revived or boosted significantly as a result of the creation of a new, young, white audience by the 1960s blues boom, although Muddy Waters is somewhat over-generous in his identification of the impact of the 1960s. In fact, by the 1950s the 'race' market in the USA was renamed the R&B market, and he enjoyed a number of hits with his new amplified band. Muddy Waters' first concert tour of Britain with Chris Barber's band was in 1958, and in 1960 he made a famous appearance at the Newport Festival – both events recorded for live albums before the formation of the Rolling Stones. In Britain, as well as Waters and Otis Spann, there were tours by Leadbelly (1949), and through the 1950s Big Bill Broonzy, Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee and others complemented a very British version of acoustic blues known as skiffle, with its main star Barber's banjo player, 'Lonnie' Donegan. A modest foundation for the later blues 'boom' was thus established in Britain in the previous decade.

In this paper I want to take some tentative steps towards exploring the question of *why* the 'boom' occurred in the 1960s. As in the film, this exploration will be undertaken partly from the point of view of the musicians, but attention will also be given to the 'kids' who began buying Muddy Waters' records and who became the audience and fans whose broad interests made it possible. I want to suggest that the film begs further research into the reasons why individuals and sub-groups identified so strongly with the genre and period, and how that identification operated. Such research might develop the approach of the film in asking how particular individual recollections intersect with dominant accounts of particular events, issues and periods. In the context of this initial piece on British blues, the memories are principally my own, although I shall draw on some published views of other musicians and fans. For example, Rod Stewart, an active participant in the 1960s blues scene, suggested that the attraction was 'the romance of it', while Keith Richards commented that the Rolling Stones started as 'a white London imitation of South Side Chicago blues' (Russell 1997, p. 31). These two responses are typical of the distinct ways that British blues musicians often explain their motivation. Stewart hints in vague terms at a sense of excitement, while Richards is prosaically descriptive about a specific sub-genre. Neither attempts to tell us *why* the blues were romantic or why that particular Chicago style had such an impact.

Similarly, in *Red, White and Blues*, the film ends with most of the participants trying to explain what the blues means to them. The earlier jazz musicians tend to explain it structurally, but otherwise we hear them identify the importance of music that is uplifting, real or natural, and expressive of feelings, truth or emotion. Our problem is that presumably musicians working in many classical, jazz, vernacular and popular genres might make the same claims, so this reveals very little about the specific importance of the blues in 1960s Britain.

One explanation may perhaps be found in the history of imitation of black American styles by white popular musicians. In the USA, as Russell (1970) and others

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have shown, this history is a long and intricate one. In Britain the story was not quite so complex, but nevertheless by the 1950s a small group of British jazz/blues musicians (Melly, Donegan, Barber and Ken Colyer) were already immersed in the imitative approach of revivalist and traditional jazz (see Melly 1974), and while there was usually a degree of interpretation in their approaches, imitation did seem to signifiy authenticity. It also encouraged what we might consider a peculiarly British puritanical factionalism which also surfaced in the British blues scene around arguments over authenticity. In the Figgis film, Melly recounts how the particularly fierce Colyer regarded Louis Armstrong as 'the devil' for his corruption of New Orleans jazz in the 1920s.[1]

This imitative approach had already been established by the pre-war British dance bands and crooners and readily adopted first by the range of post-war jazz musicians and then, from 1955, by young British rock & rollers. In these cases, imitation was undoubtedly rooted in flattery but also, surely, in a lack or absence. The old British variety and 'light' entertainment had survived from the pre-war years, the BBC had changed very little, and the new 'teenagers' sought cultural forms to reflect their new circumstances. In the 1940s and 1950s it seemed that there was nothing *essentially* British that might fulfil that requirement, but America offered many possibilities in its films, comic books, fashions, television and popular music. Oliver suggests that when blues singers began touring British 'rhythm and blues clubs' in the 1960s,

> . . . many of the young dancers hardly knew who they were dancing to; they liked the music and a generation in revolt found that the music of a segregated minority was the symbol of gulf between themselves and the values and attitudes of their parents. (Oliver 1997B, p. 193)

There are two key points here. The second is broadly sociological, although we need to ask why, if this role for rhythm & blues was so significant, it was also so short-lived. There was a second-phase blues 'boom' in 1968, the year of 'revolution', but by then the oppositional soundtrack was rather more a combination of protest, rock and psychedelics. For example, only a couple of white blues bands (Canned Heat and Ten Years After) featured in the Woodstock Festival of 1969.

Oliver's first brief but significant point is that the fans were 'dancers (who) liked the music'. In the 1950s many blues/jazz performances were in concert halls or to seated audiences – as opposed to the dance bands and dance halls. By 1963 this had changed and perhaps dancing is an important reason why they liked the music and why the British blues scene of the mid-1960s featured a very broad range of black American and Caribbean musical styles.

In addition, throughout the 1950s, American rock 'n' roll was always close in form to the three-chord, twelve-bar blues. As a consequence it may be that in this formal sense, blues was less exotic or unusual than we might think to audiences and musicians raised on British skiffle and American rock 'n' roll. The influence of blues-derived 1950s rock 'n' roll underpinned all the most inventive British popular music in the period from 1962–1966. It can be heard in the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Who, Animals, Kinks and Small Faces, as well as the more specific (authentic?) blues bands.

In his largely factual, chronological history entitled *Blues in Britain*, Bob Brunning suggests that distinct groups of participants opposed and oppose each other on the 'naïve yet controversial question: can white musicians play the blues *authentically*?' (Brunning 1995, p. 9; emphasis added). My emphasis proposes that in formal,

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stylistic and structural terms this is not an issue, since for many years British blues musicians have played in the classic mode, employing 'blue', bent and sliding notes, amplified sub-dominant harmonica, AAB song structure, percussive back beats and all the other characteristics of the blues. But 'authenticity' is a notoriously more complex question and one that is too often asked only of the performers or their musical texts with insufficient regard to the audience for the British blues. In this respect, Brunning contrasts the British musicians and their audience with 'the kind of blues fan who prefers matrix numbers to musicians', dismissing the latter as part of a 'sterile academic branch of American culture' (*ibid*., p. 9). Since Brunning was one of those active musicians from the mid-1960s, he might be expected to say such a thing, but his criticism ignores the substantial work of those dedicated fans whose love of the music may have involved 'matrix numbers' but also took them into ethnographic research and the rediscovery of original recordings and musicians. In Britain, Paul Oliver, Mike Leadbitter and others were a part of this influential group.

In one attempt to explain the music's attraction, Brunning acknowledges the 'deceptively easy structure' of the blues but suggests that it '. . . has allowed musicians everywhere to express their feelings through the songs, which return again and again to the themes of oppression, sadness, poverty and emotional deprivation' (*ibid*., p. 9). This explanation, however, begs two questions: What about other forms of expressing these themes in song besides blues?? And if blues has this ability to express timeless themes, why was it so important to some people in the 1960s but has since lost that significance? It is in any case never easy to identify how cultural and artistic practices with shared codes and conventions allow individual expression. Further, we cannot ignore the fact that the black blues singers were more familiar with such difficulties than were post-war British musicians. Does this imply that authenticity of expression is dependent on the intensity of experience? If so, who measures that intensity, and what happens to those unhappy individuals who for whatever reason are unable to express themselves musically?

Since I am concerned here with the British blues scene, I am content to identify these broader issues without pursuing them. The question for me is whether the British blues gave form to feelings that were expressive of both the makers' and consumers' experiences. Was there a brief period, principally in the 1960s and to a lesser degree since, when some British people found the blues (one of) the most appropriate and eloquent forms of cultural expressions? Before looking at this I want to suggest an obvious but too often overlooked addition to Brunning's ideas.

It might be inferred from Brunning that the blues is an unhappy music. Those of us who love it as makers and/or consumers know that while it often addresses personal problems, it is always far more than that. In the best blues, the exuberant performance contrasts starkly with its content. In addition, the blues has always had a role as entertainment, playing a central role in times of relaxation, celebration, catharsis and barely concealed sexual flirtation. For more than eighty years it has also been a commercial, recorded popular music. The blues has an awkward but intimate link to gospel music and though it may belong to the Devil, it can be equally uplifting. Any explanation of the impact of the blues on British popular music needs to acknowledge that fact. As Oliver noted, we 'liked' it.

In a broader consideration of the notion of authenticity, Gracyk tells us that the representation of 'real life' in rock music is 'to be contrasted with the artificial, the fake, the plastic' (Gracyk 1996, p. 219). The unexpected popularity of British blues in the 1960s is often characterised as a direct consequence of some young people's

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rejection of what they perceived as the artifice of pop music at a time when they needed a more real mode of cultural expression. In this sense, the blues played a key role in the search for authenticity and the rejection of artifice, which were part of the development of identity – personal and collective.

Gracyk identifies Joe Cocker as one 1960s British singer who has been praised for his 'authenticity', but suggests that in his case what we are really offered is a 'mere sign of authenticity' (*ibid*., p. 220). This is principally because Cocker's authenticity was dependent upon his ability to appropriate and replicate the styles and sounds of black American music – a sign of authenticity that was especially prevalent in much of the most innovative British popular music of the 1960s. Often, the greatest critical tribute to the singers in particular was to suggest that it was impossible to tell whether they were black or white. Any such comment almost certainly meant that the singer was white since no one would ever think of complimenting Ray Charles or Solomon Burke with such an observation – even when they were singing 'white' country songs.

Zanes[2] suggests that authenticity is 'that which rock fans and performers are forever struggling to define', stressing that authenticity can be located in fan groups and subcultures, not merely in the producers of music (Zanes 1999, pp. 37–8). To be a fan of an authentic performer – for example a blues fan – is to bid for a part of that authenticity. Zanes goes on to propose that our contemporary 'postmodern sensibility' suffers from a 'perceived loss' which leads particularly to a 'longing for the authentic' (*ibid*., p. 60).

For many, however, the particular authenticity of the blues performer or fan 'founded on . . . a temporal distance' is 'too nostalgic'. In recent popular culture this can be countered by sophisticated irony 'finally allowing one to take on the features of the sell-out while maintaining authenticity through the acknowledgement that it is all, finally, play' (*ibid*., pp. 51–2). While examples of such practices are now relatively common, there would have been little acknowledgement of 'play' from the British blues participants of the 1960s who were surely seeking a serious, oppositional relationship with the perceived artifice of popular culture. In the context of British blues in the 1960s, the conservative element was in reaching back beyond the pretence of 1950s pop to another place and time, which offered the promise of expressive authenticity.

In the 1960s the search for authenticity by many young white blues musicians meant *sounding* like someone else while simultaneously expressing a deep personal truth. It was a difficult task and blues singer Sonny Boy Williamson II, who toured England with a number of bands in the 1960s, is reputed to have told friends in America that 'those English boys want to play the blues real bad – and they do'. To some extent imitation was rooted in behaviour, for to *be-have* is both to be and to have the characteristics of another. On the other hand, Brunning also reports that Williamson would deliberately mislead his English backing bands about the right key, stop the band and tell the audience, 'You see, these white boys can't play the blues' (Brunning 1995, p. 176).

What was this pop music that the younger generation was rejecting as artificial? In the first three years of the 1960s, thirty-two different acts topped the British charts. Only one, Helen Shapiro, was a woman, and apart from Ray Charles and Danny Williams they were all white. There were instrumentals and British 'trad' jazz records, but most of the successful performers were solo male singers. A few, including Elvis Presley and Cliff Richard, were there as part of a lengthy pop career, but there were a number of one-hit wonders. Most were light entertainers who sang covers or songs by

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professional writers, backed by orchestras or session musicians. They wore neat suits or costumes and appeared live and on TV/radio in variety shows, working happily alongside comedians, magicians and dancers. Then, from early in 1963, these singers were replaced at the top of the charts by northern British beat groups who sang and played their own instruments – and in the Beatles' case, who wrote their own songs. Almost immediately these groups were followed by a new generation of British blues and rhythm & blues bands. Women singers also began to flourish with number one hits for the Supremes, the Seekers, Cilla Black, Sandie Shaw, Jackie Trent and Nancy Sinatra.

At this point I would like to recall what it meant, as a teenage popular music fan in 1963, to discover and engage with the burgeoning British blues scene. In October 1962, I celebrated my thirteenth birthday. In the same month the Cuban missile crisis brought the world to the brink of destruction, James Bond appeared on British cinema screens for the first time, and the Beatles released their first single, 'Love Me Do'. My clearest memory of the first of those events is a teacher predicting that this was likely to be our last-ever Geography lesson. When his prediction proved unfounded I lost my slight enthusiasm for his subject. A year later, when Kennedy was assassinated, I remember less *where* I was, than my mother (one of nature's innocents) announcing that any hope of a peaceful world was over.

In retrospect she seems to have had a point. In the context of this paper, I take those political events to have been important for my generation because they created the stimulus for an existential anxiety in people too young to spell, let alone understand the idea. Initially, the Beatles or James Bond functioned partly as an exuberant alternative fantasy, a means of displacing such anxieties. But ultimately, Connery's Bond was too remote from real teenage life in Britain, while the Beatles shifted briefly from an innovative visual and musical style to something rather safer and more obviously within the traditions of the pop music that preceded them.

Even that safer Beatles style may have provided sufficiently interesting entertainment had there been no musical alternative, in which case other cultural practices may have offered a more focused contemporary expression of anxiety, authenticity and the search for identity. At this point the choice offered to many young people was between two rather superficial routes: a smooth transition from school to adulthood via academic or blue-collar apprenticeships followed by the material aspirations of a premature middle age; or the hedonistic, sex- and fashion-obsessed 'swinging sixties' – certainly entertaining but in truth remotely elitist, elusive, ephemeral and centred upon specific areas of London. In this context, some popular music, including British blues, offered one of the more accessible routes to apparently deeper explorations of personal and (by association) social issues.

For me, there was a precise moment when this alternative first appeared. By the summer of 1963 I was fascinated by popular music and its related cultural manifestations. In particular, I had bought all the Beatles singles and their first LP and had seen them live. They had seemed new and exciting initially, but they still wore suits. They played mostly love songs alongside occasional versions of country & western and 'showbiz' songs, which somewhat diluted the sense of innovation. They quickly became a part of that swinging sixties scene. To a considerable extent, Bob Dylan offered an alternative with his mixture of bohemian style, poetic expression, political protest and the sounds of Woody Guthrie and Blind Lemon Jefferson. But you could not dance to early Dylan – a significant problem for sexually precocious teenagers.

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Then in that summer I bought a magazine called *Pop Weekly* containing the first photograph of the Rolling Stones that I had ever seen. (I later discovered that it was taken at Battersea Park in 1963. Another photograph from the same set appeared in Norman 1985.) In the photograph, the Rolling Stones are performing in daylight at what resembles an outdoor festival, although the venue is much more modest than the term might suggest today. There is no stage, they are playing on the ground with just their Vox AC 30s for amplification and one ribbon vocal microphone tied to a stand. They are all wearing black roll necks while Mick Jagger and Brian Jones are also wearing casual jackets. They all have longish hair and only Charlie Watts sports a parting. The appearance is more beatnik than Beatle and too scruffy for mod (see, for example, Barnes 1979; or Rawlings 2000). Behind the band, in a backstage area, a small group of slightly older men, dressed smartly and conventionally with shorter hair, suits and ties, show little interest in what is happening. The contrast is striking. The Stones are as uniform as the watching men, but their appearance signifies a crucial cultural shift in Britain in 1963. Even before I heard their music they offered a visual promise of challenge and, I now suppose, authenticity. More personally, it offered me a first (visual) sense of an alternative to a mainstream life as a lower middle-class, provincial grammar-school boy.

When I sought out their music I discovered that the Rolling Stones were not simply a visual phenomenon. They also integrated a range of popular musical styles into a sound which seemed absolutely new. Drummer Watts' fondness for 'modern' jazz was one element of the group's interests in a broad range of black American music. Jones had briefly renamed himself 'Elmo' (*sic*) after the Chicago slide guitarist Elmore James, and Keith Richards expressed a particular passion for Chuck Berry. Jagger's performances and diction often drew more on contemporary R&B singers like Solomon Burke and James Brown, while Bill Wyman had been playing more mainstream beat music and had a fondness for rock 'n' roll, and the invisible sixth member Ian Stewart was a good boogie-woogie pianist and blues aficionado. In this sense they embraced the broad range of styles typical of the British rhythm & blues scene of the 1960s.

By 1963, the band were participating in the embryonic British blues scene. Their first single covered Chuck Berry's 'Come On' and Muddy Waters' 'I Want to be Loved', and their first LP was mainly from their live repertoire. It included further covers of Chuck Berry and Muddy Waters (whose 1950 recording 'Rollin' Stone' had given the band their name) plus others of Jimmy Reed, Slim Harpo, Bo Diddley and Rufus Thomas. Their early commercial success enabled them to travel to Chicago's Chess studios where they recorded an EP of mainly blues songs.

In their photographs, the band seemed to exude commitment (see Coral *et al*. 1995 for a collection of these). Even in their brief period in uniforms, in the early days of Andrew Oldham's management, there is an *appearance* of focus upon their work as musicians. In contrast to the Beatles, who by now often posed as loveable, zany 'mop-tops', the Rolling Stones scowled or stared when they looked at the camera at all. If the world was about to be destroyed there was no time to worry about convention or pleasantries, but it was important to express the combination of fear and contempt for those responsible, even when we could find no satisfaction anywhere.

In February 1964 the Rolling Stones appeared on British TV on the *Arthur Haynes Show*. Jagger wore a dark jacket and a high collar shirt. This was buttoned to the top but he wore no tie and his hair was much longer than the contemporary mod styles,

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covering his ears. Within six months they were wearing individual suits for the performance of Howlin' Wolf's 'Little Red Rooster'[3] on another TV show, *Ready Steady Go*, although Jagger sported a crew-neck sweater. They had been transformed by Oldham from beatnik to dandy, adjacent to mod but distinct from it in an elitist way. They would pursue this exotic image through the mid-1960s as they became more successful, moving away from the blues roots which had informed their early years and the 'look' in that first photograph. This transformation culminated in the visual and musical excesses of their 1967 psychedelic album *Their Satanic Majesties Request*. Their next four albums all featured covers of songs by blues singers such as Robert Wilkins, Robert Johnson, Fred McDowell and Slim Harpo, but by the late 1960s the British blues scene had a new generation of performers for whom authenticity through imitation remained a central criterion for judgements of quality. The Rolling Stones became an inventive major rock band with obvious blues roots, but they were never again identified simply as a British blues band.

Within two years of seeing the Rolling Stones' photograph, I was watching similar live bands on a weekly basis. Almost all these bands were on the British rhythm & blues club scene, and like the Rolling Stones they tended to cover a broad range of American music. While the roots of this music may have been in the guitar-dominated, twelve-bar blues *form*, much of it drew equally upon modern jazz, rhythm & blues, soul and West Indian 'bluebeat'. This variety is an important point in any consideration of the British blues boom of the 1960s. Some of these performers featured organs, saxophones and brass sections rather than the Chicago blues instrumentation of guitar, harmonica and piano.

An example of the range is found in a review of the Mike Figgis film by Richard Williams (2003). He offered the following 'British Blues Top 10', drawing entirely on the 1960s period of British blues:

1. Little Joe Cook (pseudonym for Chris Farlowe), 'Stormy Monday Blues'
2. Rod Stewart, 'Good Morning Little Schoolgirl'
3. Them, 'Baby Please Don't Go'
4. Cyril Davies All Stars, 'Countryline Special'
5. Duffy Power, 'It Ain't Necessarily So'
6. John Mayall's Bluesbreakers, 'Telephone Blues'
7. The Animals, 'Gonna Send You Back to Walker'
8. The Rolling Stones, 'Down the Road Apiece'
9. Alexis Korner's Blues Incorporated, 'Early in the Morning'
10. Graham Bond Organisation, 'Long Tall Shorty'

Williams pointed out that this 'British blues boom led directly to heavy metal', although this reasonable point and his temporally limited list ignored the fact that British rhythm & blues as created in the early 1960s has developed for at least forty years in its own right. The list demonstrates that in that very brief period and despite the structural limitations, an influential range of music was created which, although derivative, would lead to a highly inventive post-blues phase in the later 1960s music of Cream, Van Morrison, the Rolling Stones and others. The ten tracks reflect the variety of the British rhythm & blues scene at the time, drawing upon various jazz, blues, soul, garage and R&B styles. Nonetheless, Williams' ten recordings are all by male performers and mainly in an amplified style derived entirely from post-war blues.

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While this British rhythm & blues offered an alternative to early 1960s 'pop', some of these successful club acts also made an impact on the British charts. In the summer of 1964, The Animals reached Number One with their version of the traditional 'House of the Rising Sun'. Over the next two years, a number of other British rhythm & blues acts enjoyed Number One records, including Manfred Mann, the Rolling Stones, the Yardbirds, Georgie Fame & the Blue Flames, the Spencer Davis Group, Chris Farlowe & the Thunderbirds, and the original Moody Blues. Like the beat groups, they had learned to play by performing long live sets in clubs, but while the former had kept one foot in the showbiz camp, the recently established British rhythm & blues scene had developed from the London jazz & skiffle clubs of the previous decade, and the rhythm & blues bands made few concessions to visual style or musical material, even if some wrote new songs for their chart ventures. In addition to the leading recording bands, many other rhythm & blues acts relied on black American music of previous decades for their live sets and recording ventures. Cover versions of the music of artists such as Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, Howlin' Wolf, Jimmy Reed, Chuck Berry and Sonny Boy Williamson provided the core of the live sets of hundreds of provincial British groups in the mid-1960s. In all these ways, the British rhythm & blues scene was supported by an ever-increasing group of fans across the country.

I have stressed that blues was only one (albeit central) element of the rhythm & blues music which was fashionable on the (largely mod) club scene. In addition, what was meant by the specific term blues was mainly a derivation of the styles of post-war Chicago musicians whose recordings in an amplified, ensemble style were most easily available. In 1961 the British Jazz Book Club had published Samuel Charters' *The Country Blues* with an English appendix, revealing that hardly any 'country' (i.e. acoustic pre-war) blues records were then available in Britain. In general, Charters advised the English collector 'to buy the original records from the United States or wait for the re-issues of blues material that have been released irregularly for the last few years' (Charters 1961, p. 188).

Within two years a new British audience had developed and various labels were issuing blues records in Britain that were previously only available on import. Many black American blues singers toured Britain, often backed by the British bands, and Lippmann & Rau's American Folk Blues Festival(s) also toured Europe. These led to annual record releases.[4] By 1963 the poster for the concert in Croydon (called the 'American Negro Blues Festival') described itself as 'a Documentary of the *Authentic* Blues' (emphasis added) – perhaps here in comparison with the growing white British scene.

The mod club scene where most British and American rhythm & blues musicians played was culturally and socially homogenous but musically diverse within the parameters of black American music. For example, Hewitt offers the memories of a number of mods describing the importance of a range of black music, including Ray Charles, Doo-Wop, Tamla Motown, the Impressions, and Jamaican ska. One of the mods dismisses copies of the music by English performers, asking, 'What's the point of having a cover if you're a Mod? You want the original', while another adds that English records were 'a bit uncool', although mods did enjoy live club performances by English groups (Hewitt 2000, pp. 49, 71). In his seminal work on subcultures, Hebdige drew attention to the 'bonds' linking the black working-class to white youth cultures (Hebdige 1979, p. 46). To a certain extent, the more authentically blues element of the rhythm & blues scene in Britain in the 1960s moved away from the

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subcultural interest in visual style and the more commercial soul and ska music, towards a more academic, middle-class form of consumption.

Meanwhile, on the broader scene, the variety of visiting blues, soul and jazz musicians offered a wonderful experience, in which a part was played also by an increasing range of popular (but non-pop) records and British acts who both covered and extended a variety of American styles. Occasionally, blues performers appeared on television specials such as Granada's *Blues & Gospel Train* (1962), or *Ready Steady Go*. Long John Baldry and the Hoochie Coochie Men were regular guests on a folk programme hosted by Robin Hall & Jimmie McGregor and, bizarrely, Alexis Korner's Blues Incorporated were the regular act on Children's *Five O'Clock Club*. I have a vivid memory of the band performing Bessie Smith's 'Back-Water Blues' with puppet Ollie Beak lurking in the background!

I am sure that participating in the mod culture and pursuing a detailed knowledge of the less commercial, more authentic musical forms was fundamental to my adolescent sense of identity, a key aspect of which was that these interests were celebrated in a knowing, elitist way not shared even by most of my friends, let alone my contemporaries. I do not propose to pursue this self-analysis, but such an approach must be considered in any understanding of why the blues became popular in 1960s Britain, as would a thorough examination of female musicians and fans who attended the mod clubs but seemed uninterested in the more obsessive generally male manifestations of 'fandom'. In addition, women were generally excluded from performing on the blues scene. The only real exception in the first phase was the marvellous Jo Ann Kelly, but she worked more regularly in the acoustic folk scene where women performers seemed more readily accepted.

The blues singers on the folk scene, such as Gerry Lockran, Cliff Aungier, Ian A. Anderson, Jo Ann Kelly and her brother Dave Kelly, introduced the British audience to acoustic styles which were different from the Thames/Chicago Delta orthodoxy, although their impact on the development of British popular music was minimal in comparison with the electric bands. Nonetheless, by the mid-1960s, the folk revival had created a reasonable audience in provincial clubs with relatively catholic tastes in acoustic music. Traditional British music had a central place, but people performed a range of British and American styles. It was relatively easy to perform floor spots at such venues, and by 1964 I had begun singing and playing harmonica with a guitar-playing friend, performing versions of the music of singers like Big Bill Broonzy, Josh White and Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee. In part these were typically British versions, following strict structural patterns and with relatively melodic vocals. The re-issue of the Robert Johnson recordings in the mid-1960s, however, rendered our previous styles rather dull and archaic.

This involvement in two musical scenes offered a somewhat contradictory experience. On Saturday nights at the mod club I would dance in my smart clothes to Joe Tex, Smokey Robinson or a live performance by the Action. On Monday evenings at the folk club I would sit silently in my Levis and jumper, perhaps joining in a chorus of 'Last Thing On My Mind' or 'Wild Rover' and occasionally playing a blues song or two. Despite these differences, what united the two experiences was that I was making or hearing music that was always distinct from mainstream pop, with its connotations of artifice and the market place. Further, the differences between the two scenes were eased by my weekly consumption of the *Melody Maker*, which would happily cover pop, R&B, jazz and folk in each edition. In retrospect, I believe that my particular interest in the blues was derived from my activities as a neophyte blues

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player. None of my closest mod friends became musicians and as consumers they were sometimes more receptive to a broader range of styles – particularly black dance music. What I could aspire to was the kind of intensity for musical expression that I believed I had seen in those early photographs and recordings of the Rolling Stones.

In addition, as I have noted above, the blues offered an opportunity for the simultaneous authenticity of embryonic academic work. It is difficult to know now whether an interest in learning about the history and theory of the music was a consequence of my simultaneous experience as a performer or a by-product of a traditional grammar school education. There is no doubt, however, that reading about the blues became an important element of engagement for me and for many other fans of the genre.

In Bob Groom's 1971 account of *The Blues Revival* (in a series of Blues Paperbacks edited by Paul Oliver), he includes a chapter entitled 'The Blues Word' which confirms the importance of reading about the blues in the pursuit of knowledge, understanding, and a sense of authenticity. He notes that, in Britain, information about the blues was available initially 'in the jazz magazines in the early '40s, long before there was any sign of the separate blues literature that exists today' (Groom 1971, p. 88).

Two decades later, in the 1960s, I too discovered writing on the blues, by Paul Oliver and others in jazz magazines such as *Jazz Journal*, but there were also more modest 'fanzine' publications with titles like *R&B Monthly*, *Blues World*, *Blues Unlimited* and *Soul Music Monthly*. Although I shared my tastes with some friends and although I know now that others were doing the same across Britain, I knew no one else who bought these magazines and no one else who pursued this interest to the Public Library. I suppose my behaviour is explicable as a grammar school boy from a literary family, but I cannot explain it in terms of any encouragement from home or school because there was none. Nonetheless, in my mid-teens I read and eventually owned a number of key texts, including LeRoi Jones' *Blues People*, Charles Keil's *Urban Blues*, and Paul Oliver's *Conversation with the Blues*. In an extra-curricular school project at the time I wrote an illustrated a history of the blues, utterly plagiarised but nonetheless an embryonic version of what I now do for a living.

Reading these books introduced me to the idea of music as social and cultural practice, whereas most mainstream 1960s publications encouraged me to believe it was principally a means of self-expression or commercial aspiration. In retrospect, I believe that Oliver's book was seminal. I have never followed his lead down the ethnographic blues road, but methodologically he introduced me to procedures that underpin so much of my professional life. Although I knew nothing of this as a fifteen-year-old, *Conversation With the Blues* was my first encounter with ethnography and, more broadly, qualitative empirical research. Alongside this, Keil introduced me to sociology and Jones to an informed, eloquently polemical style and a clearer sense of music as politics. It was a naive but astonishingly rich education, and since I was simultaneously struggling to play the music, I was innocently introduced to problems of theory/practice.

In his prologue, Oliver quotes a young black man, Robert Curtis Smith, who plays a blues in a Mississippi barber's shop before explaining

> Nothin' work right, when you work hard all day, always broke. And when you get off the tractor, nowhere to go, nothin' to do . . . every time you feel lonely you gets that strange feelin' come up here from nowhere . . . That's the blues. (Oliver 1997A, p. xi)

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I cannot pretend that I have ever understood that feeling *except* analogously. Nor, in retrospect, do I think it is the whole tale. I am sure that part of the connection between British blues of the 1960s and its original black American styles is through the structural form, rhythms and excitement of familiar rock 'n' roll – 12 bars, three chords. In part it was the attraction of these simple formal aspects that enabled these musicians to improvise around a common structure at a time when the shared songbooks of previous generations had been replaced by a bewildering range of original songs by most of the major acts. I am also sure that young British men liked the boasting, aggressive sexuality of some blues, not least those of Muddy Waters like 'Hoochie Coochie Man', 'Mannish Boy' or 'Got My Mojo Working'.

Nonetheless, I also believe that it was possibly for ordinary young British people to identify with Robert Curtis Smith's existential sense of the blues as a cathartic means of expressing anxiety and uncertainty. I have already suggested that political instability might have been one cause of such a need, but personal difficulties were another. In a recent interview with Eric Clapton, Williamson describes how the guitarist had been raised by his grandparents after his mother moved to Germany and how he only discovered his father's identity after his death in 1985. Williamson suggests that 'these events had a profound, destabilising effect that drove (Clapton) to seek solace in music'. Whether verifiable or not, such a causal explanation is almost archetypal and, again, helps to confer authenticity. In the interview, Clapton refers to the possibility of 'something in my soul that recognised the sadness of the music', but he also acknowledged that across Britain in the early 1960s there was 'something unconscious going on with a lot of us at the same time' (Williamson 2004, p. 48). Rod Stewart confirms that 'you thought you were the only one who's listening to it, and then . . . you realise that everyone else was listening to it at the same time' (Russell 1997, p. 31).

When I have hinted at a broad social and political context for the interest in blues in Britain in the early 1960s, I have done so with the historian's advantage of hindsight. It is also clear that the British blues boom of the period was *ad hoc*, unexpected and certainly never planned as a commercial phenomenon. Crucially, an influential but apparently dying musical genre was revived through the efforts of young white musicians and their followers – particularly in its new home, Britain. What the Beatles began as a partial reaction against the older tradition of 'light' entertainment became something broader in the hands of the London-based British rhythm and blues bands; but it was only possible because it became popular.

One aspect of this growing popularity was that as bands like the Rolling Stones, the Animals, Georgie Fame & the Blue Flames, and Manfred Mann enjoyed early chart success, they moved away from the strict blues form and from the clubs that had nurtured them. The Yardbirds lost their star guitarist Eric Clapton because he was critical of the pop sensibilities of their hit record 'For Your Love'. He left them and joined John Mayall's Blues Breakers who, by the mid-1960s, were generally considered the most authentic of the British blues bands because they seemed to draw directly on a range of American blues performers and styles. In this sense, authenticity was not just a matter of expression but also of style and sources.

Mayall's classic British blues album of the period is titled unambiguously *Blues Breakers: John Mayall with Eric Clapton*. It is the kind of album that is often described as in the Chicago style, but it is not simply that. It includes a pared-down Robert Johnson cover, a jazzy version of Ray Charles' 'What'd I Say' which quotes from the Beatles' 'Day Tripper' and features a drum solo, and a 'countrified' version of Mose Allison's

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'Parchman Farm'. It is a fine album and was a key recording at the time, but it exemplifies the fact that British rhythm & blues drew upon a range of influences. The music of the Rolling Stones, John Mayall, the Yardbirds, Graham Bond Organisation, Animals or Zoot Money rarely if ever *sounded* exactly like the original styles, but for a brief period its audience found an authenticity of expression embedded in the sound.

By 1965, the clubs, which had shifted from jazz through blues to rhythm & blues, were also featuring the experimental pop and embryonic psychedelia of the Who, Small Faces, post-Clapton Yardbirds and others. Elsewhere the development of new recording technologies, the Beatles' break with live music and the work of Brian Wilson heralded a far greater interest in studio-based music, and fashions and drugs began to change. In addition, economic imperatives encouraged young musicians to move away from cover versions to their own material in pursuit of prolonged careers. By the mid-1960s many major British musicians, who had begun playing skiffle, blues and R&B, including Lennon & McCartney, Jagger & Richards, Pete Townsend, Ray Davies, Marriott & Lane, and Van Morrison, were now important songwriters and were sounding increasingly English.

One of the key distinctions to be drawn between black blues musicians such as Big Bill Broonzy, Muddy Waters or John Lee Hooker, and almost all 1960s white blues players, is that the former were content to work within that very precise musical form for most or all of their lives. Very few white British blues musicians sustained an exclusive commitment to that form for more than a few years, although some, like Eric Clapton or Peter Green, have returned to it in their later years. In the culture of creativity and self-expression in the 1960s, young musicians and their audiences were keen to explore the possibilities in new forms, styles, venues, studios and technologies. This does not mean that they or their fans abandoned the need to feel authentic, but perhaps they saw the possibility of an alternative authenticity in more contemporary and original work rather than in the imitation of the music of another culture.

In some cases this new music retained a blues influence – not least in Cream, the band formed by Eric Clapton after he left John Mayall. He was joined by Jack Bruce (bass) and Ginger Baker (drums) from the Graham Bond Organisation. They developed a progressive rock and psychedelic style (as, for example, in the album *Disraeli Gears*), but always retained a link to the blues, turning frequently to songs by Skip James, Robert Johnson, Howlin' Wolf and others which they performed in their contemporary style. Unlike many of the British acts, they enjoyed equal success in the USA and helped to remind the Americans of their cultural heritage.

By the time Cream split in 1968, the roots of a new blues-rock style were established, through the Rolling Stones and the Yardbirds connection. The Jeff Beck Group (with Rod Stewart) and in 1969 Jimmy Page with Led Zeppelin continued to trawl the blues tradition, embellishing it with contemporary British performances, the latest technology and other songs which were not blues based. Eventually this would lead to the various styles of rock and metal.

The twelve-bar blues form underpinned so much popular music from Elvis to Led Zeppelin, but it was superseded by punk, techno, hip hop and other styles from the late 1970s and is now a minor influence on contemporary popular music. There are probably as many British (rock) blues bands performing today as there were in the 1960s, but they have almost no major impact on contemporary music. Most trot out the clichéd claim of playing in the Chicago style or reproduce the Blues Brother's 'endless boogie' approach (Davis 1995, p. 243), offering at best merely the sign of an authentic

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recreation of earlier British bands. Occasionally an act like Beck or the White Stripes makes an impact on contemporary music while proclaiming its roots in the blues, but it is difficult to imagine that the blues will ever again have a broad cultural impact like that of forty years ago. British musicians, however, now have a clear place in its history, not least because the British audience for the blues was crucial in reviving and sustaining its life in the second half of the twentieth century.

Before my generation disappears, I am suggesting that there is a case for returning to the participants in the British blues scene, particularly the consumers, to seek accounts of why the blues did matter so much to some people for that brief moment. I have suggested that the questions must consider issues of class, authenticity, romanticism, musical forms and styles, music making, ethnography, history and classification, reading and writing, and record collecting. But its purpose would be to understand more broadly how and why people engage with specific genres of popular music, and any clarification would add much to the work of Figgis, Brunning and others. I have tried to offer a few largely personal thoughts on the question, but a more extensive project might reveal more interesting information.

Endnotes

1. Colyer made a pilgrimage to play with and learn from the pre-Armstrong musicians and came back to Britain to spearhead this formative style. He also recorded a number of blues from 1954 with his skiffle group.
2. Zanes was formerly the guitarist with the Del Fuegos.
3. The only blues song ever to reach Number One in the British charts.
4. Two recent DVDs of these tours (1962–1966) include footage of many of the Chicago artists and other blues performers working in a variety of blues styles (see Discography).

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