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Baudrillard's Blues

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Abstract

In his book, America, Jean Baudrillard characterised the United States as a nation created for the sole purpose of escaping history, a place that has purged itself of all negativity, and whose citizens live life in a perpetual present. Baudrillard's study of America provides an ideal framework with which to examine the ways that blues is both congenial and antithetical to postmodern America, and how the significations and meanings of blues have changed as the music has passed from modernity to postmodernity. Of particular interest is the question of whether African-American interpretations of blues can remain privileged. Examining blues music in the context of America provides clear cultural examples that support many of Baudrillard's often obscure metaphysical observations.

Introduction

A musical style will typically undergo changes in signification and meaning when it endures beyond its original historical milieu. The nature and extent of those changes is often influenced by whether the music had been part of a continuing performance tradition or was revived after a period of obscurity. Over the last three decades music that was a product of early 20th century modernity has also become part of the new and still developing social, economic and cultural context loosely defined as postmodernity. Tracing the changes in the style, signification, interpretation and reception of a musical genre as it moved from modernity into postmodernity is a complex undertaking, but in the case of blues, the original music of America's African-American underclass, the task is more difficult as the genre is saturated with racial and political meanings beyond what is typical for a popular style. Blues is also an extraordinary example because it is considered the primary progenitor of most other forms of popular music. The radical social and cultural changes that occurred in the US throughout the 20th century provide another layer of complexity when discussing blues in a modern versus postmodern context, as the first half of the modern era was morally one of the most repugnant periods in American history, marred by brutal racial oppression, while during the second half, the nation became the epitome of what Guy Debord (1995) called a 'society of the spectacle'.

Of all the European philosophers who have shaped postmodern thought, Jean Baudrillard perhaps displayed the most fascination with American culture. Baudrillard's philosophies have their basis in Marxist economic thinking, and his writings explore questions regarding the human condition and the nature of being in a world of hyper-consumerism and unprecedented economic change and instability. Baudrillard's style is often challenging for the reader, filled with fragmentation

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and cutting insightful hyperbole. Such language, however, is necessary to express to the reader how simulation and hyperreality impact our intellectual and emotional lives. Baudrillard's concepts, in Rex Butler's words, 'are not empirical descriptions that can be objectively evaluated, but a kind of undemonstratably yet irrefutable doubling of the way things are. The [real] they speak of and want to reveal cannot be directly pointed to but only alluded to metaphorically' (Butler 1999, p. 19). During the end of the Reagan era, Baudrillard turned his attention to the United States. The result was *America* (1988), an accessible text that applied many of the ideas he previously developed in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994) and *Fatal Strategies* (1990). *America* takes the form of metaphysical reflections and witty observations from his travels across the country, which he characterised as the fount of hyperreality, a nation whose character is defined by wide-open spaces that emphasise speed and freedom, and a vastness that swallows all depth and meaning. To Baudrillard the United States represents pure circulation, which he contrasted with 'the melancholy of European analysis' (Baudrillard 1988, p. 27). Baudrillard saw America as the model for emerging and future societies, a place of extreme ironies and excesses, and a nation without any historical or cultural depth. The continuing relevance of *America* is indisputable as most, if not all, of the social and technological phenomena described by Baudrillard continue to exist, often at an accelerated level. *America* focuses exclusively on life in the US from the 1970s onwards – a social environment that is obviously different from that which spawned the various forms of blues. Baudrillard's critique therefore provides a useful intellectual framework with which to examine how the significations and meanings of this distinctly American art form have changed as blues has moved into a new media-saturated environment, as well as the ways in which the genre is both congenial and antithetical to the values and culture of America in the postmodern age. *America* examines the national character of the US on a macro rather than micro level. It does not present an in-depth analysis of any single philosophical, economic or sociological issue. The present study is similarly broad in scope, examining blues both as a historical body of recorded music and as a continuing performance style against the backdrop of the postmodern American ethos, and it strives to maintain a degree of the style and spirit of Baudrillard's book. It is hoped that this paper will prompt many to reconsider some of the criticisms that scholars have raised against *America* as this study provides cultural examples that lend support to Baudrillard's often obscure metaphysical observations.[1]

A question of particular interest to this study is whether African-American interpretations of blues, formulated by writers such as Charles Keil, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Samuel Floyd Jr and others, can be privileged in postmodernity. It should be noted that Baudrillard did not dwell on racial issues in *America*, perhaps because no-one can escape the effects of electronic and visual media, or perhaps because he felt that racial politics, like feminism, environmentalism, labour activism, etc., have all been neutralised by being absorbed into the media spectacle of late-capitalist consumption. According to Baudrillard, race relations in America 'still gives the impression not of a heteroclite mish-mash, but of converging energies, not of unity or plurality, but of intensity born of rivalry, of antagonistic power,

[1] Douglas Kellner, for example, finds Baudrillard's tone in *America* condescending, and believes that the work suffers from a metaphysical tunnel-vision.

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thus creating a complicity, a collective attraction, beyond culture or politics, in the very violence or banality of the way of life' (Baudrillard 1988, p. 82).

The relevance of classic and contemporary blues in postmodern America

The specific years that mark the end of modernity and the start of postmodernity are not universally agreed upon, nor are the specific characteristics that signalled the change from one era to the next. From Terry Eagleton's Marxist viewpoint, postmodernism is not about leaving modernity behind since both are linked by the metanarrative of oppression. He argues that the dawn of postmodernism began when the politics of gender and ethnicity became more important than economic struggles; not because inequality ever went away, but because the problem 'proved intractable' (Eagleton 1996, p. 24). Blues sits awkwardly in the Marxist narrative as it was born from both economic struggles and identity politics in almost equal measure. To Robert Dunn, the modern/postmodern eras are each defined by their different approaches to identity; modernity was about overcoming internal conflicts that divided the self, whereas postmodernity celebrates fragmented identities (Dunn 1998, pp. 29–33). In Cornell West's definition, postmodernity is 'the Americanization of the world and its political contestation' (West 2006, p. 387), and his scholarship similarly emphasises identity politics. Baudrillard was never fond of terms like modern or postmodern. He described the first half of the 20th century as the age of the industrial bourgeoisie, and its last three decades (extending into the present) as the age of simulations. The threshold was crossed when media representations began to exist independently of any tangible referent, and when simulation became more important than lived culture. All of the aforementioned modern/postmodern distinctions have validity and a bearing on the present study.

However, there are, in fact, difficulties in discussing blues in modern or postmodern terms because for most of the 1900s African-American communities were segregated and not directly a part of the project of Western modernity. Nevertheless, blues during the early 20th century did exhibit a number of broad characteristics associated with modernism, albeit in a modified form. The modern idea of novelty, or staying up-to-date, can be heard in the influence of jazz on California jump-blues, or in the transition from city blues (Big Bill Broonzy, Tampa Red) to electric urban blues (Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed) in Chicago. Modern faith in progress was expressed as hope for progress. The modern idea of heroism, with architects, entrepreneurs, intellectuals and others serving as the builders of a new and improved civilisation, was manifested in black communities through the veneration of their ecclesiastics and entertainers. The modern ideal of artists as outsiders who comment on society from a special vantage point had a parallel in blues musicians who served a similar role in African-American societies.

Segregation and disenfranchisement also kept blacks from having a major role in shaping the industrial and technological forces that gave rise to the era of simulations, and there has been much speculation about whether blues – the music of a minority culture rooted in a specific set of oppressive social circumstances – can continue to maintain its relevancy and survive in a postmodern environment; articles such as Mary Katherine Aldin's (1993) 'Standing at the crossroads: the blues today' come to mind. African-American scholars sometimes view black rock'n'roll artists of the 1950s as early examples of postmodernism because they undermined

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the political foundation of modernity, brought sex into the public spotlight, and paved the way for popular culture to be taken seriously (Floyd 1995, p. 179). If one accepts this proposition then one must question how blues fits into the equation as well. In many respects, blues is well suited to the character of postmodern America as described by Baudrillard in spite of having its basis in the rural poverty of modernity. To begin with some obvious examples, the myths and legends surrounding blues – from voodoo curses, to pacts with the devil, to tales of murder and sexual adventure – have proven to be successful marketing gimmicks for the music, so much so that the cultural meanings of blues often get eclipsed by its advertising. Another common example is the way that blues serves as the ultimate signifier of musical authenticity and lived culture and experience, since it was composed by and for people who endured great hardship, and reflected a sense of community that culture rarely exhibits in postmodernity. Blues was seen by the 1960s counterculture as true and wholesome, and was popular with whites who were 'seeking authenticity in a society that was organized to frustrate and deny it' (Pratt 1986, p. 55). In recent decades, however, society has become organised to absorb and simulate authenticity, and thus requires simulation models that are vibrant and easy to augment and renew. In that respect, blues is a uniquely American example of Baudrillard's famous quote: 'when the real is no longer what it was nostalgia assumes its full meaning' (Baudrillard 1983, p. 12). The popularity of blues ebbs and flows in the fashion cycle of the music industry and, for Baudrillard, fashion serves several unhealthy purposes: it 'represents the triumph of the artificial and of models, and the seizure of the living by the dead' (Kellner 1989, p. 96). It reverts all forms to a non-origin, which obliterates the past (Baudrillard 1993a, p. 88), and is more about the act of recycling for its own sake than with making a statement about the present. Baudrillard believed that because of the fashion system, nothing newly created has an intense immediacy because it imagines a second life in the future, not unlike people who waste their present lives by being preoccupied with an afterlife (Baudrillard 1993a, p. 88). Blues, like other fascinating simulation models, was originally created by people who were too absorbed in the present to be overly concerned with the future; a value that runs parallel with the nature of blues expression. Nevertheless, the genre has had an uneasy relationship with the postmodern obsession with nostalgia, as it was the product of a less than idyllic past. As with any style or culture that is the subject of fashion and revival, blues has struggled to avoid being viewed as a dead language; becoming a dull cliché if it remains the same, or losing its identity if it opens itself up to eclecticism. In that sense, blues can be considered part of 'the end of history', or the idea that all that needs to be said has been said, all the good ideas have been taken, and there is nothing left to do but recycle. The question then becomes: can blues teach us anything new about ourselves, and keep moral ideas in play each time it completes a turn through the fashion cycle?

Blues complements the social landscape of postmodernity as both are characterised by a unique sense of alienation. In blues, the fieldwork of David Evans has documented how blues lyrics and improvisation practices addressed alienation in its most specific and intimate form, both individually and within black communities at large (Evans 1982, pp. 112–13).[2] Mark Humphrey has similarly detailed how the

[2] Although the positivistic ethnomusicology of scholars such as Evans might seem out of place in an essay based on the theories of Baudrillard, it should be noted that I am not attempting to combine distinct and

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works of some urban blues artists, such as Leroy Carr, are without peer in their unique ability to vividly capture feelings of intense alienation (Humphrey 1993, p. 163). Abject and defuse alienation was also a major focus of Baudrillard, who argued that although people might seem more interconnected than ever through the media, technology only serves to make people so self-absorbed that they see nothing around them (Baudrillard 1988, p. 38). Baudrillard was particularly astonished by the loneliness he observed in America:

> There is a certain solitude like no other – that of the man preparing his meal in public on a wall, on the hood of his car, or along the fence, alone. You see that all the time here. It is the saddest sight in the world. Sadder than destitution, sadder than the beggar is the man who eats alone in public. Nothing more contradicts the laws of man or beast, for animals always do each other the honour of sharing or disputing each other's food. He who eats alone is dead. (Baudrillard 1988, p. 15)

Another aspect of postmodern alienation is that people are starved for communal interaction but simultaneously too frightened and de-socialised to connect properly with others. Baudrillard wrote:

> They do not look at other people here. They are much too afraid they will throw themselves upon them with unbearable sexual demands, requests for money or affection. Everything is charged with a somnambulic violence and you must avoid contact to escape its potential discharge. Now that the mad have been let out of the asylums everyone is seen as a potential madman. Everything is so informal, there is so little in the way of reserve or manners that you feel anything could blow up at any moment. (Baudrillard 1988, 60)

Although blues was not always a product of the type of solitude described here, the vivid melancholy and humour of blues makes it a particularly relevant form of music in postmodernity, partly because of the depth of the problems that results from widening inequality, and because people are used to responding to media entertainment that generates high emotional intensity. The atmosphere of community and surrogate intimacy that blues provides is a reminder of how strong human connections once were and how strong they could be. In this way blues fulfils what Baudrillard considered the ideal role of art in society, which is to help people grasp the world and refresh ways of seeing (Kellner 1989, p. 111).

Although the commercialisation of blues and its use in advertisements has played a part in the tendency to make alienation an 'aesthetic spectacular delight' (Baudrillard 2010, p. 7), there remains, in the words of Amiri Baraka, 'still enough intimacy between the real world and the artefact to make that artefact beautiful and unbelievably moving' (Jones 1963, pp. 88–9), even though the thread between the real and the artefact has snapped in so many other aspects of postmodern life. Postmodern alienation is not just a result of the *anomie* created by media technologies, it is also caused by the way poverty is perceived and understood. 'It is as though the last judgment has already happened, the good have been found virtuous, and the others have been cast out. No need for goodwill anymore. No need to feel guilty. Utopia has arrived and if you aren't part of it, get lost' (Baudrillard 1988, p. 112). In Baudrillard's view, achieving wealth and success in America is not an ideal but

disparate methodologies. The work of Evans is utilised here for its insights into the nature of African American blues expression and for the many quotations that Evans collected from his informants.

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a moral law, and those who are unsuccessful are condemned as pariahs: 'The disenfranchised have no voice and are condemned to oblivion, to abandonment, to disappearance pure and simple. The ultimatum issued in the name of wealth and efficiency wipes them off the map' (Baudrillard 1988, pp. 111–12). When Baudrillard declared that the poor have disappeared, or that utopia has been achieved and the poor are no longer relevant, he was not saying that poverty no longer exists but rather that the poor are seldom discussed or mentioned in the media so they might as well not exist: 'You lose your rights one by one, first you lose your job and then your car. And when your driver's license goes so does your identity. This way entire swathes of the population are falling into oblivion' (Baudrillard 1988, p. 112).

This is the face of postmodernism's unique alienation and the continuing social context for blues. It should be noted, however, that even though the context may be new, blues has always been a music that made it possible to know the poverty of that other America not shown in the advertisements, the music for people who have disappeared. Ralph Ellison believed that the black man and woman are invisible to the white world that surrounds them, 'I am an invisible man … I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me' (quoted in Charters 1977, p. 21). In postmodernity, poor people of all races are disappearing and blues now has more people to speak for. The music's well-known history, however, serves as a reminder that while all poverty is oppressive, some groups experience more levels of disenfranchisement than others.

If one reads Baudrillard's philosophy as a challenge to contemporary society rather than a pessimistic dirge, then blues still has the potential to signify more than nostalgia and consumerism. In this scenario, part of blues' privileged meaning must be as a signifier of the humanity and worth of those on the lowest rungs of society, of the inhumanity that people are capable of inflicting on one another, or as a music that pleads for humanity.[3] Such a role for blues would be nothing more than a return to one of its original functions. Richard Powell argues that 'artistic statements whose reason for being is humanistic' is as much a part of the blues aesthetic as its connection to African-American issues and ideals (Powell 1989, p. 21). Jon Michael Spencer notes that Afrocentric culture in general is distinguished by its desire to 'assist in the humanizing of the world' (Spencer 1993, p. xxiv). The statements run in sharp contrast to Baudrillard's view of the current state of culture, which he characterised as little more than 'the chain of discriminations with which to brand others with inhumanity and therefore with nullity' (Baudrillard 1993a, p. 125). However, Baudrillard was referring to the general state of the greater late capitalist American culture whose discriminations and branding serve the predominant structures of power; his analysis did not examine the ability of minority cultures to keep humanitarian values in the collective consciousness. If blues can serve as a testament to inhumanity that transcends its historical situation, then, over time, the music may lose a measure of its overt African-American signification but its humanising influence will be a far-reaching African-American legacy.

Tainting its humanitarian impulses, however, the American ideas of wealth and success serving as moral imperatives have unquestionably affected how blues music

[3] Theorists such as Hardt and Negri would probably interpret blues as something that could contribute to bringing about a state of imminence. In their view, any type of affective labour has positive value.

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is understood. During the civil rights era, popular bluesmen could be commercially successful without losing the support of the African-American community or compromising their status as civil rights icons. This was because social relations were not rooted exclusively in media representations; bluesmen had not yet become hyperreal icons of authenticity and the godfathers of rock; race differences were not simulated; and material conditions and freedoms were restricted for all African-Americans. Samuel Charters notes that even though many blues artists gained more wealth and security than most other African-Americans, they did not alter the picture of poverty within their music, and remained involved with their audience and did what the audience expected of them (Charters 1977, p. 14). Many famous African-American blues artists have claimed that the 1970s and 1980s were lean years for the genre, but in recent decades prominent musicians have increasingly become representatives of the idea of success as a moral law, and conspicuous consumption. This is not to say that the iconic blues artists do not deserve the fame and financial rewards that have been their due for countless years, but rather that a major part of the symbolic value of blues entertainers is fading. Keil notes that previously, in African-American communities, the entertainers helped blacks establish and preserve their humanity and dignity by fulfilling a ritualistic and cathartic role (Keil 1966, p. 76). Currently, successful blues artists (even those who have attained fame but not great wealth) can be interpreted as endorsing a system that has no time for humanity, only a preoccupation with earnings and the prestige of occupation – their symbolic value lost in the sea of media stories, signature guitars, corporate sponsored blues festivals, 'King of Blues' contests, and endorsement deals. That a blues artist can now function as an example of success as a moral imperative is a strong point of irony as African-Americans had previously been severely penalised for displaying achievement (Spencer 1993, p. 102).

Postmodern transformations

As blues moved from modernity to postmodernity, from an era of industrialisation to an era of simulations, the most superficial aspects of its style and imagery have been emphasised (not to mention the way that blues has been exploited to sell a wide variety of unrelated merchandise). At the same time, much of what the music meant and signified to African-Americans is not necessarily compatible with the postmodern mindset, and is therefore ignored or de-emphasised. More typically, however, the original meanings and significations have been altered, redirected or appropriated in order to conform to postmodern American values. This transformation has come about not just because of how the music has been marketed and merchandised by the music industry, festival promoters and the artists themselves, but also because of the way that people have become used to experiencing music and the meanings that they bring to the music as a result of living in a late capitalist society. It is worth exploring the nature of these changes to blues signification.

For African-Americans involved in the great Northern migrations, blues that connected travel with the promise of greater prosperity had a special poignancy ('Sweet Home Chicago', 'Going to Kansas City', etc.). Such music was a symbol of freedom and mobility and signified the search for a 'place where blacks could begin again, this time on more human footing' (Jones 1963, p. 96). Later, the migrations became a source of irony when blacks discovered that they were just

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exchanging exploitation by southern plantation masters for that by northern industrialists (Oliver 1960, pp. 30–2), as anyone versed in American history well knows. In the postmodern era blues centred on travel cannot have the same meaning for most audiences as it did for previous generations of African-Americans, so what does it signify? What is now heard as the music's message? On the one hand, blues of travel and migration, particularly when performed by contemporary blues festival artists, can be read as a device to promote American Dream mythology as America continues to be a nation of immigrants. Such an interpretation fits well in a culture characterised by wide-open spaces – astral America, to use Baudrillard's term, the land of pure circulation. On the other hand, blues of travel and migration could also have considerable poignancy in postmodernity as a musical signifier of collective disillusionment as contemporary listeners have the benefit of historical hindsight, knowing what an expression of false hope the songs turned out to be. The despair and decay concealed beneath the glamorous veneer of California jump blues, or the cynicism eloquently veiled amidst the bustling kinetic energy of Memphis blues, could have profound resonance in a contemporary context when so many people face overwhelming economic uncertainty, and sense that optimism is unrealistic. The American Dream is conspicuous by its absence in *America*. Perhaps Baudrillard did not address it because he no longer felt the concept was relevant in this perceived banal utopia, or maybe because postmodern economies no longer afford the kind of economic security that the term implies. Baudrillard (1988, p. 111) described American citizens as mildly enchanted, motivated, but not impassioned, perhaps too passionless for the American dream concept to have any real meaning.

We have not yet fully experienced how blues will change musically, and how traditional blues will be received and interpreted in lieu of postmodern racial tensions that are of a different nature from those of the pre-civil rights era. Many different races are of course still in cut-throat competition for a place in utopia; but, as Baudrillard notes, conceptions of otherness and difference have changed markedly since the 1960s, primarily because late capitalism has made blacks and whites (as well as men and women, and adults and children) increasingly similar. Everyone is now a being defined only by ceaseless needs and desires – the perfect corporate citizen of the multinational global economy. He wrote:

> Subjugated peoples, from the depths of their slavery, far from resembling their masters less and less and taking their liberatory revenge, have begun to resemble them more and more, have begun to mimic their model grotesquely, piling on thick the marks of their servitude – which is the other way of taking one's revenge – a fatal strategy which we cannot term victorious since it is lethal for both. (Baudrillard 2010, p. 10)

In Baudrillard's view, those who are Other are completely foreign, alien, strange; there is no scale with which to judge them. Otherness generates mystery, passion, often violent confrontation induced by the desire to exterminate or subjugate the Other. Blues was obviously born from this type of passion in whites. That which is different, however, can be recognised on a known scale. It has elements of familiarity but is equally threatening albeit for different reasons. Baudrillard believed that 'without the Other as mirror the self is threatened by a void' (Baudrillard 1993b, p. 125). When someone becomes 'different' a panic response triggers an impulse to turn that which is different into that which is Other through violence and simulation in order to create an otherness that must be kept at bay with no chance for

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transformative encounters. This is 'not hatred of the other, as a superficial interpretation of racism would have it but the loss of the other and resentment for that loss' (Baudrillard 2002, p. 94). 'Hate is not just a rejection of the other but a radical desire for otherness' (Baudrillard 2002, p. 94). Baudrillard was not pining for violent racism in this statement, obviously, but was summarising the postmodern race dynamic, which is considerably different from that which gave blues a large measure of its spirit, energy and meaning. Baudrillard's ideas concerning the cause of racism are different from writers such as Frantz Fanon who feel that racial tensions derive from a white desire for wholeness. In this interpretation, the otherness of blackness stimulates a fear in whites that blacks may be similar to them (Waksman 1999, p. 191). Baudrillard's view argues against such an interpretation because of the way that whites freely appropriate black culture. He wrote:

> blacks are merely the distorted mirror of the negrification of whites, self-mystified from the outset by their own mastery. So the whole decor of modern multiracial civilisation is merely a *trompe l'oeil* universe in which all particularities of race, sex and culture can be said to have been falsified to the point of being parodies of themselves. (Baudrillard 2010, p. 9).

Blues does help maintain racial distinctions to some degree as most whites understand that blues is an African-American genre regardless of some white influences on its production and formulation. It is a genre that non-blacks can never entirely own regardless of how many white performers have been commercially successful. Because blues has elements of both familiarity and otherness for both races, the music has played a role in making blacks different rather than Other. Baudrillard believed that once the logic of difference was pushed to the point that it became a simulation of otherness that which is Other can often become a valued commodity, celebrated and coddled rather than attacked (Grace 2000, p. 89). The continuing white fascination with blues in a post-civil rights environment can be interpreted as a part of this trend. Black blues artists themselves have seldom made a drama of difference and have historically treated their white imitators with incredible generosity. However, the connotations of cooperation and humanitarianism that blues contains stems partly from this generosity, which can only be maintained by blacks remaining different from whites, but this in turn feeds the panic that is caused from not having an Other. Baudrillard warns that racism cannot be countered by the passionate humanitarianism of difference (Grace 2000, p. 91), but it was the racism of otherness and not the cool digital racism of difference that was responsible for the emotional intensity that audiences find appealing about blues from the 1930s through the 1960s. The perceived sterile banality of much post-1960s blues could be caused by the effects from the weakening of difference.[4] Baudrillard declared that

> When the obsession with judging others or with social prejudices has been left behind, there is greater tolerance, but greater indifference too. No longer wishing others to see them, Americans end up not seeing one another. So people pass in the street without looking at one another, which may seem a mark of discretion and civility, but which is also a sign of indifference. At least this is not affected. It is both a quality and the absence of a quality. (Baudrillard 1988, pp. 94–5)

[4] For example, the endless parade of Stevie Ray Vaughn imitators, and the majority of white blues festival circuit performers.

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The harsh social realities that gave blues its cultural identity have largely been purged from the genre. One major theme that appeared continuously through Baudrillard's oeuvre was his observation that negatives do not exist and are not permitted in the age of simulations. Of course Baudrillard was not suggesting that tragedies and negative events never happen, but rather that negativity does not register in late capitalism because all things negative acquire a positive charge by becoming media spectacles or commodities. As examples, Baudrillard cited everything from the way that auto accidents are presented on television, to wars serving as the basis for movies, to the Holocaust Museum, which presents genocide as a Disney-fied attraction (Baudrillard 1994, pp. 49–51). Baudrillard believed that America is unparalleled in its ability to transform negativity into positivity, a place where anything can be redeemed. One could cite blues as another example of transformation since the music is popular in and of itself and is celebrated not only as the foundation of rock'n'roll, but was, as Baraka points out, created by the descendants of the only people who were not happy to come to America (Jones 1963, p. 12). The music is in an awkward position within the American ethos as blues is typically characterised as part of a continuing dialogue between the country's past and present (Humphrey 1993, p. 202), despite the United States being the land where history stopped existing without realising it (Baudrillard 1990, p. 15). As an example of this disparity, Spencer explains that blues was originally conceived with a strong religious, moral and humanitarian basis (Spencer 1993, pp. xi–xxx). But Baudrillard observed that currently 'lewd systems of fashion and advertising break apart moral energies and liberate immoral energies. They feed gaily on the signs of things alone in defiance of their truth' (Baudrillard 1990, p. 74). The spiritual and moral dimensions that were once a part of the music have been negated by virtue of being absorbed into the system of fashion and advertising, nullifying the music's moral energy and burning the bridge between past and present. When signs are broken apart and used in defiance of their truth this paves the way for reinterpretation, appropriation and re-signification. In order to be compatible with the age of simulations, blues needs new interpretations and new meanings; it needs to be heard and understood differently from how it has been in the past. For instance, Keil (1966, p. 43) asserts that white appropriation and commercialisation of black music inspires blacks to innovate and create new music of their own, but this is not the same as what Baudrillard referred to as America's 'evil genius of modernity', which creates 'fantastical liberty' by pushing innovation to the point of extravagance (Baudrillard 1988, p. 94). And yet, this is how black musical creativity must be understood in order to be compatible with postmodern America.

Baraka has noted that blues did not just grow out of work songs; the genre was shaped by the type of work that blacks performed in the South, and the music would sound considerably different if the work had been unrelated to agriculture (Jones 1963, p. 68). Most audiences understand the basic origins of blues as the music of the black working poor, and blues still functions to some degree as a signifier of 'labour'. But this is not the labour of Jim Crow exploitation, not the labour of sharecropping or the breaking of strikes for Henry Ford, but good old-fashioned American elbow grease. Blues is the sound of the American 'live to work' ethic, music for people who get the job done without unions, and who drive the biggest pick-up trucks. Such an interpretation of blues is highly congenial to the logic of late capitalism, particularly as blues offers 'no commitment to an overall plan of action' on how to improve one's material (or emotional) conditions (Evans 1982, p. 32). Blues is

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typically not a music of resignation, but late capital benefits if the music is heard and understood as politically benign.

Blues music, one could say, has become one of so many things in America that Baudrillard characterised as having 'the light irony and neutral humour of things that have become banal', such as mobile homes and giant billboard hamburgers. He describes such artefacts as being characteristic of the atmosphere of America where 'things almost seem endowed with a certain indulgence toward their own banality' (Baudrillard 1988, p. 86). Baudrillard would probably have expressed similar sentiments toward the polished refinement and eloquent expression of B.B. King's music being used in fast-food-chain commercials, blues contests sponsored by large music store conglomerates, blues festivals funded by multinational banks, Beale Street in Memphis reborn as a tourist trap, or the recent hologram-like performances by Buddy Guy filled with the same songs, the same jokes with the same clichéd sexual double entendre that he has been using for decades. None of these things, as Baudrillard would say, claim to be extraordinary; they simply are extraordinary. How is all this activity different from previous commercial enterprises involving blues, such as the King Biscuit Time radio show during the 1940s and 1950s? To begin with, blues, and all the signs associated with it, were not used in defiance of their truth, were not part of 'the fascination with the debauchery of signs', the pure delight gained through the perversion of reality (Baudrillard 1990, p. 74). When blues began to be recorded, when it became a popular rather than folk music for African-Americans, it became 'modern' in the way that Charles Baudelaire used the term, in that it gained greater artifice, and 'offered both the most moving profundity and at the same time the total simulation of that profundity' (Baudrillard 1988, p. 70). Now the first half of that equation has been arguably lost, and blues has become a parody of itself in the same way that Baudrillard characterised Los Angeles as a parody of cities, and Silicon Valley as a parody of technology. But Baudrillard (1988, p. 104) did not view parody as a negative but as an affirmation of value, stating, 'when something ceases to be parodied then it no longer has any importance'.

In that sense, much blues, since the 1960s, represents the same 'mania for asepsis' as works in the Getty Museum, 'where old paintings look new, bleached and gleaming, cleansed of all patina, with an artificial lustre that echoes the fake Pompeii and decor all around them' (Baudrillard 1988, p. 33). In blues, this same mania for asepsis, for example, can be heard by comparing two versions of 'So Many Roads' by Marshall Paul: the first, recorded by Otis Rush in the Chicago West Side style in 1960, and the other, a relatively recent version by Joe Bonamassa (*You and Me*, 2006), a young American guitarist widely celebrated as one of the finest blues players of the last two decades. The song's lyrics describe a person abandoned by a lover who departed on a train – a common occurrence among African-Americans during the first half of the 20th century.[5] The lyric persona expresses emptiness from the separation and despair to the near impossibility of reconciliation in the vast network of rails and train stations. The piece contains a humorous note with the persona characterising the fireman and engineer as wicked for

[5] For a more complete discussion of the significance of railroad themes in blues, see Houston Baker Jr's *Blues: Ideology and Afro-American Literature*, pp. 11–13.

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taking away the persona's love. The Rush version has depth, blending melancholy with bittersweet humour in a way that represents the collective despair of his audience, but is also in line with the music's dance/entertainment function within the black urban community. Rush's interpretation is characterised by a sense of extreme agitation that is apparent even in the opening guitar solo and turnaround, with frantic tremolo picking figures, raked arpeggios signifying confusion, and phrases that unfold in unpredictable, erratic, asymmetrical bursts. His blue-note bends are quick and strong, and his vibrato is narrow and intense, all of which creates a strained sensation. The overall sound resembles that of a dry, spontaneous field recording, and this makes the drums come across as particularly harsh and forceful, which adds to the angst of the music. Rush's passionate gospel-influenced singing elevates the emotional content of the lyrics. His voice often breaks into a falsetto, which to African-Americans was a symbol of masculine power (Keil 1966, p. 27), but here signifies impotence in the face of futile circumstances. All of the aforementioned techniques produce anxiety, and also make for a stronger sense of contrast when the lightly humorous final verse is sung. The humour here provides a sense of stiff-upper-lip dignity in the face of adversity, which was an important component of the music's communal significance.

While Rush sounds like he is preaching to a choir, Bonamassa's postmodern interpretation is that of an isolated, self-absorbed voice. Like America itself, 'the irony of community is missing here, as is the playfulness of social life' (Baudrillard 1988, p. 85). All the charm is 'transferred outwards into the advertising of life, seeking to vindicate itself' (Baudrillard 1988, p. 85). Bonamassa chose to record the song as a slow minor blues rather than Rush's mid-tempo shuffle. The decision removes all of the bittersweet humour, which he replaces with cinematic sentimentality. The ambient production and the unnatural evenness and balance in the mix give the song a high fidelity sound that does not match the music's original function (i.e. entertainment for the poorest members of society) or the archaic lyrics. The intense phrase punctuation provided by the horn section in the Otis Rush version is replaced by the electronic sheen of the keyboards in the Bonamassa recording. The use of heavily distorted guitar timbres, particularly during the pounding, mannered turnarounds, imparts a self-absorbed, brooding, single-minded gravity rather than the frantic mix of anger, melancholy and pessimistic humour of Otis Rush. Bonamassa's rendition is about artificial sensuality, stating truths 'that have absorbed all of the energy of the false' (Baudrillard 1990, p. 9), whereas Rush expresses the agonising shock of a lyric persona who suddenly hears a whistle that signals the departure of his love. This artificiality extends to Bonamassa's guitar soloing that unfolds like a stockpile of licks and phrases gleaned from British players like Eric Clapton and Jimmy Page (which amounts to a forceful, aggressive, humourless version of the BB King style) than the sentiments of a bewildered spirit. The way that Bonamassa punctuates his guitar phrases with stuttering slurs or glissandi is especially reminiscent of Eric Clapton's early work with John Mayall. Even during the 1960s, critics often commented about the one-dimensional character of British blues; one reviewer remarked that, 'it is played bitingly and with feeling but it's all one feeling. It's joyless and savage and gives grim satisfaction' (*Melody Maker*, 1966, p. 12) and Bonamassa retains this distinctly British character. Like his English predecessors, Bonamassa's lyricism is subordinated to his virtuosity. The aggressive, melismatic speed of their playing is evocative of Baudrillard's observation that:

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> speed creates pure objects. It is itself a pure object, since it cancels out the ground and territorial reference points, since it runs ahead of time to annul time itself, since it moves more quickly than its own cause and obliterates that cause by outstripping it. Speed is the triumph of affect over cause, the triumph of instantaneity over time as depth, the triumph of the surface and the pure objectality over the profundity of desire. (Baudrillard 1988, p. 6)

One of the preferred myths of late capitalism is the concept of American 'rugged individualism', and everywhere the visual and musical signifiers of blues have been appropriated and recontextualised to promote this ideal. For example, blues, as a manifestation of the ability of African-Americans to create a place for themselves in Jim Crow society (Jones 1963, p. 55) can now be interpreted simply as an example of American self-reliance. The way that blues always turns 'for its impetus and emotional meaning to the individual, to his [or her] completely personal life-and-death' (Jones 1963, p. 67), is now just an example of America's entrepreneurial spirit. The resilience expressed in blues, the sense of empowerment that serves as the music's foundation (Andrews 1989, p. 39), is now a symbol of American optimism (what Baudrillard called the Reagan smile). The interest that African-Americans showed in freedom and self-respect over integration (Keil 1966, p. 185) now signifies the American Dream. These new meanings make it difficult to see how postmodern audiences can hear the music without romanticising it in the way that African-American scholars deplore (Spencer 1993, p. 5). However, it is still important for blues to be interpreted as adhering to the romantic artist model – the player/performer who expresses personal subjective emotions – since this de-emphasises the communal aspects of blues music making, and emphasises the individual. A form of music such as blues that relies heavily on formulas, quotations and borrowing would seem to contradict the uniqueness of an artist modelled on romantic lines, but this dichotomy can now be understood as a part of the postmodern fascination with creating lists, compiling a catalogue of all aspects of life. The way that blues is typically constructed from a limited number of musical materials further supports the romantic image of blues artists because, to many listeners, minimalism equals truth and honesty.

The instrumental solo (particularly the guitar solo) in blues songs has also become an especially powerful signifier of American individualism. Amiri Baraka affirms that originally the solo in blues music 'spoke singly of a collective music', writing that 'the blues that developed at the house parties was collective communal music. So the jam sessions of the late 20s and 30s became the musician's collective communal expression' (Jones 1963, p. 158). The solo in blues music continued to serve this role in later blues music as well. Evans (1982, p. 165), however, characterises improvisation and soloing as a way for performers to feel distinct and original. Ben Sidran believes that blues improvisation represents the individualism that remains in a destroyed personality (quoted in Pratt 1986, p. 64). How did the solo become a signifier of American individuality and freedom? Francis Davis (1995) and Robert Palmer (1982) point to the influence of rock and its instrumental virtuosity on blues music, but the reason probably lies with American conservatism and its celebration of individualism, masculine power, freedom (from regulations on commerce) and its disdain for collectivism. Writing at the end of the Reagan presidency, Baudrillard concluded that:

> the glory of American power is most often described as an effect of freedom and its exercise. But freedom does not of itself generate power. Freedom understood as public action, as the

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collective discourse of the society and its own undertakings and values, has in fact disappeared in the individual liberation of mors and agitation. (Baudrillard 1988, p. 89).

It is ironic that in the postmodern social context, improvising solos signifies individual freedom; but if one defines freedom in Baudrillard's terms, the original communal soloing and jamming in blues music was a more powerful symbol of freedom. Needless to say, reading blues as a signifier of American individualism requires selectivity because the often expressed attitude of 'ain't nothing I can do but let whatever is going to happen, happen' (Spencer 1993, p. 98) is out of place in a country where everyone supposedly controls their own destiny.

Another aspect of the American character that affects the way that blues is performed, interpreted and perceived in postmodernity is the country's mania for 'compiling inventories of everything, stocking everything, memorising everything, determined to reconstitute everything of a past in a history which were not their own in which they have largely destroyed or spirited away. Renaissance castles, fossilised elephants, Indians on reservations, sequoias as holograms, etc.' (Baudrillard 1988, pp. 40–41). Blues should also be included on this list as African-Americans were not the drivers of late capitalism and black culture has been destroyed, reconstituted, or spirited away to varying degrees.

Paul Oliver (1993, p. xiv) has been criticised by African-American scholars such as Spencer for starting another process that serves to spirit away history – the transformation of bluesmen into hyperreal folk heroes. In hyperreality entertainers are not really celebrated but emptied of meaning to the point that they only signify mindless thrills based in the glow of advertising. This hyperreality was not something that Keil anticipated when he expressed hope that black entertainers would help African-Americans understand the price that was paid for civil rights, help them to cherish their cultural identity, and make them wise and astute citizens rather than joining the ranks of conformist materialists who refuse meaning in favour of spectacle (Keil 1966, p. 192). America reconstitutes, or makes history disappear, in other ways as well. Blues is part of the American tendency to be nostalgic for the sake of being nostalgic in the most general sense, perhaps reflecting a specific sincere nostalgia for a time when the country was made up of genuine communities. Another example can be seen in a music press that mostly shuns blues in favour of blues-based rock artists, which serves to emphasise the late capitalist-friendly topic of technical innovation. In other words, it is chic to reference blues artists but not dwell on the history behind their music. This provides yet another clear example of audiences giving up trying to understand what the world was like in previous time periods and simply surrendering to signs (Baudrillard 1990, p. 52). The problem is exacerbated by the way that postmodernity destabilises music as a historical marker. According to Baudrillard, the media presents history as a single tracking shot that blends different eras, events and ideas together to the point that one loses all historical meanings and it becomes impossible to tell where one is or from whence one came. Media influences also desensitise audiences to the emotional content of the music. For example, Baraka characterised blues as the most plaintive and melancholy music imaginable, but postmodern listeners do not hear it that way after having been exposed to too much melancholy and melodrama in film and television music. Blues is caught in the media cycle where emotionalism is stripped of its potency and made banal.

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Conclusion

In *America*, Baudrillard focused his theories on the United States exclusively to describe the character of the nation as he experienced it. If any statement in that diffuse book could be considered a thesis, the following would be perhaps the most fitting: 'America ducks the question of origins and lives solely in the present' (Baudrillard 1988, p. 76). Baudrillard (1988, p. 76) saw this way of thinking as a strength, for, in his opinion, 'power is in the people with no origins and can exploit it to the full'. He asserted that America's past is full of violence, events, people, and ideas, but none of these constitutes a history in and of itself (Baudrillard 1988, p. 80). This, however, is of no consequence to Americans because America was created for the sole purpose of escaping history (Baudrillard 1988, p. 80). Baudrillard's assertion is problematic for blues, and for Afro-centric interpretations of the music in particular, because history is the key to the music's expressivity. The music's message of a moral responsibility can never be equal to its ability to induce pleasure in postmodernity. Blues cannot become a means to escape history without the music undergoing a major change in signification – from humanitarianism to disappearance. Changes and augmentations to the fundamentals of the blues style also cannot be undertaken without coming into conflict with the music's history. For example, many current blues artists believe that the music's origins must be respected, but also feel that the music must be 'modernised', presumably through eclecticism.[6] Postmodern eclecticism, however, typically involves bringing in new elements in order to interrogate the genre or to create ironic juxtapositions for effect. Neither of these approaches seems compatible with music that advocates moral responsibility based on the wisdom of history. However, one should not believe that even in a land without history the past serves no purpose. Perhaps blues is now intriguing to postmodern listeners because they have a basic idea of the music's history; its staging and presentation (as Baudrillard would say) may disappoint the audience's demand for meaning but is simultaneously so enchanting that they cease to care.

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[6] For a good discussion of how new blues players view their responsibility to history, see Alan di Perna's interviews with Doyle Bramhall II and Derek Trucks in *Guitar World*, November 2006, pp. 70–72, 110–13.

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