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## How Change Started to Come: Examining Rhythm and Blues and Southern Identity

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HOW CHANGE STARTED TO COME: EXAMINING RHYTHM AND BLUES AND  
SOUTHERN IDENTITY

by

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B.A. The Florida State University, 2013

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for the degree of Master of Arts  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This project seeks a better understanding on how blackness has been peripheral to our understanding of the term Southerner. The purpose of this work is to examine an area where the intersection of race and region exists to more fully understand how blacks in the South have presented their sense of Southern identity. The chosen area of examination is the music of rhythm and blues. Rhythm and blues as a genre rose to prominence in the years following World War II. The main reason for analyzing rhythm and blues as an intersecting point of race and region is that the music is both a reflection and celebration of the Southern black musical tradition. Along with the sound there is an aesthetic to rhythm and blues that is distinctly of the black South. Within the scope of this work, the examination of rhythm and blues was done by first understanding the genres of music it was built upon; as a way to show the continuity of the Southern black musical tradition. From there, this work chose to identify three prominent rhythm and blues artist (Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, and Nina Simone) as a means to connect people, music, and region. The point in highlighting these artists is to demonstrate how aspects of black identity and Southern identity have intertwined through an institution like music. Through the prism of rhythm and blues there is evidence that Southern blacks did not see themselves absent of regional identity. In highlighting a point of intersection between blacks and the South that prioritizes their experience and sense of identity, this research represents a step in the importance of fully incorporating blacks into our understanding of the term Southerner

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My sister, Erika, is probably the second-best person I will ever know. I think she would agree that our mom is impossible to displace as number one. Having her as a sister is what makes life tolerable. There is no way I could have done this without her. I do not think I have complained to anyone more than her about this and she has always listened or pretended to listen. My favorite thing in the world is her utter random nature that continues to surprise me in the most wonderful of ways. I will always be funnier, but she has a brilliant sense of timing. I would dedicate this project to her, but what would she really do with that? So, this thank you will have to suffice. I also need to thank her for owning a cat, Meeko, who has forever been adorable and brings joy to my life.

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Finally, world class footballer and in general good person Christen Press once asked if something was triflin'. Other than my primary research questions, the thing I have most pondered about this work is if it was triflin'. I am not sure if I will ever have a definitive answer, but what I realized is more important. Even if something is triflin' that does not mean it lacks merit. This project has challenged and frustrated me to a capacity I did not think was possible, but it has been rewarding. When I question if this topic mattered, if having this conversation mattered, I came to realize that working towards more inclusivity will always have merit.

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## CHAPTER ONE: WHAT IS A SOUTHERNER?

It is 1964 and Nina Simone is playing the famed Carnegie Hall in New York City. The band begins to play the next song; it is fast paced and quirky, and before you can settle in Simone, in a no-nonsense tone, says, “The name of this tune is Mississippi Goddam.”<sup>1</sup> It is imperative to comment on how she says goddam, reading it gives the impression that it just rolled together in one fluent clip, but when you hear it you know that she actually pauses after the god, allowing herself to inhale before saying dam. Her delivery is one of tiredness and exasperation. As Simone’s words fade out you begin to register laughter and a smattering of applause from the audience. Simone then states, “And I mean every word of it,”<sup>2</sup> and the audience laughs. The entire sequence lasts approximately nineteen seconds; for context, the song has a play time of four minutes and fifty-seven seconds. To hear an audience both, laugh and cheer to a song titled “Mississippi Goddam” is bewildering.

There are three perspectives worth considering when listening to Simone’s introduction. The first is that of Nina Simone herself. Why did she choose to perform “Mississippi Goddam” to this audience? How does this performance align with her activism throughout the 1960s? The second perspective is that of the audience. One can assume that a New York crowd watching Nina Simone is both familiar with her music and her Civil Rights activism. That is not to suggest that they all were activists themselves, but they were not perturbed by Simone’s own activism. The third perspective is for listeners who were not at Carnegie Hall. What do we hear and interpret from Simone’s bluntness and exasperation? Should our consideration focus on Simone, the audience, or the entirety of the interaction? What do we make of Nina Simone in 1964 at

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<sup>1</sup> Nina Simone in Concert. Mississippi Goddam. Live In New York/1964. Phillips Records.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Carnegie Hall saying the word “Goddam?” More specifically, what gravitas does it hold that she is pointedly using it as a referendum on the state of Mississippi itself?

As an outside listener, the word “Goddam” feels like the only adequate word to follow the word Mississippi in 1964. There is something astonishing in hearing a Carnegie Hall crowd muster a kind of uncomfortable laughter in response to Simone’s bluntness. The more time spent listening, pausing, and re-listening to those nineteen seconds it becomes less about the crowd’s response and more, forcefully, about Nina Simone and who she was. Angela Davis wrote of Nina Simone’s music that it “guided us, strengthened us, and bolstered the creation of communities of resistance. While many artists have enthusiastically supported the quest for social justice, few have been so relentless in their efforts to dedicate their careers to the goal of collective political transformation.”<sup>3</sup> Davis’ words offer some clarity on why Simone performed the song that night and her use of the word “Goddam.” Simone was at the foreground of black activism and she was relentless in showing her support for equality. In a movement and society where, black women remained in the background, she forcefully compelled everyone to make tangible space for the voices of black women. Nina Simone had an aura that accompanied her musical brilliance. That Carnegie Hall stage saw both in real time, which is why there is a third perspective to consider more than fifty years later.

Simone is one of the greatest rhythm and blues singers. Her music is medicine for the soul, and it allowed her to assert herself as a Southern black woman on her own terms. Simone, at her core, made music for people who looked like her, suffered like her and who demanded more than what they had. Her music is an instrument of collective action. “Mississippi Goddam”

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<sup>3</sup> Angela Davis, “Nina Simone’s music was so much more than the soundtrack to a movement” *Mail & Guardian* September 5, 2016 <https://mg.co.za/article/2016-09-05-00-angela-davis-nina-simones-music-was-so-much-more-than-the-soundtrack-to-a-movement>. Accessed January 27, 2019.

and that New York City crowd's reaction demonstrate the capacity of music to make an audience feel something. Simone's music tethered her to her Southern roots. It was her form of resistance, a tradition of black Southerners harkening back to slavery.

To be from the South is not the equivalent to being a Southerner. To be a Southerner is to embrace a cultural moniker that defines you, both positively and negatively. Southerners are distinct, communal, ancestral, and with convictions of honor and moral sensibilities.<sup>4</sup> The term Southerner rarely, if ever, has applied to blacks. The erasure of blacks from being considered Southerners has a rich history, but the rhythm and blues of Nina Simone and others offers a declaration that the South was theirs to claim.

This paper challenges the conventional sources of black Southern identity by chronicling the influence of rhythm and blues, as a sound and aesthetic, during the 1960s. Rhythm and blues embodies a continuity of black musical tradition at a point when Southern blacks were eager to assert their Southern identity on their own terms. Rhythm and blues offers insight into how Southern blacks claimed their Southern identity through sound. This work has three main objectives: the first seeks to understand the erasure of Southern blacks from discussions of Southern identity. The second objective is to chronicle the popularization of rhythm and blues music during the 1960s, examining how artists used songs to address the conditions of being black in the South. The third objective is to understand the widespread influence of rhythm and blues and its importance in creating a communal place for Southern blacks to exist. Rhythm and blues, unlike literature, was dependent on being both accessible and willing to engage with how black Southerners felt. To borrow from the writer Farzaneh Milani on the idea of "a triple

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<sup>4</sup> The description takes from the work of the following: W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Knopf, 1941); James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History*, 3rd ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2008).

transgression-verbal, spatial, and physical”<sup>5</sup> is what rhythm and blues music was able to provide for black Southerners. It became a way for them to engage in public spaces where both their voices and bodies could occupy physical space, which allowed them to engage with their identity in a way that had not been accessible or acceptable before.

### White Southern Identity

The erasure of blacks from being considered Southerners has a rich history. To understand that erasure we must first understand the origin and proliferation of the term Southerner meaning white. How were black Southerners excluded from discussions of Southern identity when they are an integral part of the American South experience? How has black Southern identity been ignored in-favor of discussions related to blackness? Moving forward how can we re-examine sources, like music, typically used to explain the black experience to acknowledge the experiences of black Southerners? The study of rhythm and blues can stretch our understanding of when Southern blacks began to lay claim on regional identity as being an integral part of how they saw themselves and their greater worldview.

Wilbur Joseph (W. J.) Cash set a precedent for the term Southerner in his seminal text *The Mind of the South*. Cash outlined the Southern protagonist as being male, white and common. They were rural rather than gentry. Cash claimed that this Southerner had been trapped by the Southern aristocracy. Cash believed that the Southern aristocracy had masked itself within patriotism and as a result was able to trap the mind of the rural, white common man. In the preview of *Mind*, Cash acknowledged that one could say there were many Souths, but he

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<sup>5</sup> Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 80.

believed that there was one South. The idea of a one South was defined by traits that could be traced throughout the region. Cash wrote there was “a fairly definite mental pattern, associated with a fairly definite social pattern—a complex of established relationships and habits of thought, sentiments, prejudices, standards and values, and associations of ideas, which, if it is not common strictly to every group of white people in the South...”<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that Cash specifically linked the mental pattern with the social pattern. This is what Cash is observing and writing about throughout his work. Cash’s interpretation is predicated on understanding how Southerners mental and social patterns had not significantly changed after the Civil War. Cash concedes that there are no set standards or values that can be placed on every white Southern person. Cash did believe that there were reasons that kept Southerners from sweeping changes in their thinking and general outlook.

Cash’s text is not the work of a historian. It is and reads as one person’s insight into the psyche of the Southerner. It is both observational and personal from Cash. As a reader it is easy to see many of its flaws and today where ideology once seen as distinctive to the South has become Americanized it makes Cash’s work feel outdated and irrelevant as a text on the South. Where the text still has merit is in his observations of the Southerner and the ties to a distinct ideology. The mental pattern and the social pattern as it relates directly to the term Southerner. Cash’s original distinction about shared characteristics that group white people in the South has rarely been challenged in a historical context. What has been challenged is the evolution of how white Southerners define themselves, is the Southerner that distinct, has the Southerner become Americanized? None of those questions went back to his original observation of how the white

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<sup>6</sup> Cash, viii.

Southern psyche influenced social behavior that Cash believed had stagnated the South's capacity as a region to make progress.

In *The Mind of the South*, Southern blacks exist in an almost invisible manner. Early in the text, Cash described 'the Negro' as "one of the world's greatest romantics"<sup>7</sup> going on to describe 'the Negro' as a "creature of grandiloquent imagination, of facile emotion..."<sup>8</sup> Cash notes that the relationship between whites and blacks was organic, that 'the Negro' had influenced "every gesture, every word, every emotion and idea, every attitude."<sup>9</sup> It seems contradictory to then suggest that blacks are invisible, but Cash is writing on the psyche of white Southerners. In that context, Cash is right to consider how the proximity of blacks has influenced and perpetuated the mental and social pattern of white people. Specific to those quotes, Cash was ruminating on the relationship between blacks and whites that was created by plantations and how that characterization of 'the Negro' stayed with the white Southerner.

Southern blacks in Cash's world are invisible unless they are used to better understand the psyche of whites. It is of note that Cash denounces lynching, but he does not go further and expand on that view. Instead Cash provides some analysis on the decreasing trend in lynching's from 1890 through 1921, but he himself is skeptical as to why lynching's occurred less frequently after 1914. His analysis focused largely on the white mind and notes that the ruling class had not shed their paternalistic views, relating to blacks, but that they now exercised control over policeman and the government, and that lynching had political use. Cash contests that while it was regular whites who participated in the lynching's it was done so "because their betters either consented quietly or, more often, definitely approved."<sup>10</sup> It is an example of how

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<sup>7</sup> Cash, 51

<sup>8</sup> Cash, 51.

<sup>9</sup> Cash, 51.

<sup>10</sup> Cash, 311.

black Southerners exist throughout the text; they are there, but it is really as a means to detail the influence of the ruling class on the common white man. Within the text one can discern that Cash did not consider blacks to be Southerners but saw them as part of the South.

One of the biggest points of contention from Cash's *Mind* was the idea that the South exists in continuity, which is a fair question to ask when discussing the South as a region. What remained largely uncontested was how Cash centered the psyche of the white Southerner and its influence on the shortcomings of the region. Richard King observed that Cash's text was focused on the "cultural psychology in which Southern institutions were grounded..."<sup>11</sup> Long after Cash, the term Southerner was never reimagined or redefined to be more inclusive to blacks.

The most influential detractors of Cash's claim of the South's continuity was C. Vann Woodward. For the purpose of this work it is most relevant to contextualize Woodward's work as it applies to the term Southerner rather than questions of continuity or discontinuity. In *Origins of the New South* Woodward wrote that "One of the most significant inventions of the New South was the 'Old South'... the fabled Southern aristocracy, long on its last legs, was refurbished, its fancied virtues and vices, airs and attitudes exhumed and admired."<sup>12</sup> Woodward pointed out that the South and its inhabitants were different because they had suffered defeat and were driven by a need to justify their position and values. Woodward, like Cash, identified the mythology of The Lost Cause as a symptom that was quite contagious. The idea that the Southerner in the New South was driven by the Old South is a continuation of Cash's investigation in the white Southern psyche.

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<sup>11</sup> Richard King quoted in James C. Cobb, "Does Mind No Longer Matter? The South, the Nation, and the Mind of the South, 1941-1991" *The Journal of Southern History* 57, no. 4 (Nov., 1991): 681-718, 705.

<sup>12</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 154;157.

Where Woodward differs from Cash on the Southerner is what body of evidence they are observing. Cash wrote on the tension between the ruling class and lower classes of men whereas Woodward wrote on the cultural tension between historians, literary figures, and the church. Literary writers “wrote in passionate vindication of the conservative South...,”<sup>13</sup> whereas historians lacked powerful universities that could defend them from both the church and state, and the church, deemed by Woodward as having the most influence, was “a large element in the homogeneity of the people...explained much of the survival of a distinctive regional culture...”<sup>14</sup> Woodward asserts that Southerners at the turn of the century were “totally devoid of any aesthetic achievement”<sup>15</sup> and that as a result, as a region, the South was dependent on importing art and aesthetic from either the North or abroad.

What is of interest with regard to this project is that Woodward devotes the next section to discussing the singers of Fisk University and Hampton Institute who traveled the country singing Negro spirituals. He also notes the sidewalk performers and bands in New Orleans who played in front of theaters and made homemade instruments before he recognizes the contributions of Louis Armstrong and W. C. Handy in the development of blues and jazz music. Everything that Woodward mentioned was specific to black Southerners and confined to half a page at the end of a chapter while contradicting his own earlier assertion that Southerners were not able to produce meaningful art that existed outside of the South. In this approach Woodward reflects Cash in that when they use the term Southern they mean white and blacks are just separate. Because Woodward engaged with the mind of the South in a different approach, he was able to mention black Southerners in a way that showed their agency, specifically with respect to

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<sup>13</sup> Woodward, 432.

<sup>14</sup> Woodward, 448.

<sup>15</sup> Woodward, 453.



music and its influence but Woodward did not take any steps to include black writers, black scholars, or black theology. It is clear that ‘blacks’ are not given the full consideration of ‘Southerner’ in the same way and how different aspects of culture influence thought within a community.

In 1968, Woodward published a collection of essays, *The Burden of Southern History* in which he set out an alternative approach to the notion that Southern heritage was that distinct from the rest of American society. In the preface, Woodward writes that more informative studies of group or national character “go beyond circumstance and purpose, beyond natural environment and public policy, and to stress *experience* as the influence of first importance.”<sup>16</sup> This work corresponds with a shift in how Woodward thought of and critiqued Cash’s *The Mind of the South*. It marks the schism between the two in how they interpreted continuity versus discontinuity in the South, but it also saw Woodward begin to question how distinct the South was in post-World War II America. While Woodward’s approach was different than in *Origins* there are three main points that remained: the first is that he did not refute the characterization of a Southerner put forward by Cash. Woodward continued to apply the term Southern when discussing Southern whites. He went on to assert that Southern heritage was how white Southerners had chosen to memorialize their history. His approach continued to exclude Southern blacks from being attached to Southern identity.<sup>17</sup>

The second point was Woodward’s assertion of literary figures as credible voices of Southern criticism. Woodward believed that criticism from literary figures shaped the overall intellectual movement of the South and that forceful criticism meant a more nuanced discussion

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<sup>16</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), xiii.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

could be had in the debate over whether the South had stagnated, as Cash asserted. In recognizing the contribution of Southern literature, Woodward interwove cultural criticism into intellectual discourse. Woodward acknowledged these writers as stand-ins for historians during the early half of the twentieth century. In his assessment of valid literary critics Woodward did not cite works written by Southern blacks. The third point of significance is how Woodward addressed Southern blacks, which was by discussing the origin of Jim Crow in the South and the Civil Rights Movement.

A moment when Woodward directly engaged with the concept of the Southerner was in an article titled “The Search for Southern Identity.” The article, which was published in 1958, begins with Woodward wondering if the time has come “when the Southerner will begin to ask himself whether there is really any longer very much point in calling himself a Southerner.”<sup>18</sup> Woodward’s assertion in the article is that the regional distinctiveness that had come to define the South such as the farmer, the poll tax, the lynching, one-party politics had vanished or were going to be vanishing. As Woodward wrote of the change that the South’s “faults are growing less conspicuous and therefore less useful for purposes of regional identification.”<sup>19</sup> The larger question Woodward ponders is whether Southerners were giving up one mythology to adopt an American myth that was growing as the United States emerged as a global power. Was it simply a matter of giving up distinguished cultural traits for the national norm?

Woodward explored the answers to these questions in *The Burden of Southern History* most directly in “The Irony of Southern History” and then in a revised edition “A Second Look at Theme of Irony.” In the original chapter, Woodward acknowledged that the South continued

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<sup>18</sup> C. Vann Woodward, “The Search For Southern Identity” *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 34, no. 3 (Summer 1958): 321-328, 321.

<sup>19</sup> Woodward, 323.

to cling onto illusions, fantasies, and pretensions “with an astonishing tenacity that defies explanation.”<sup>20</sup> It was his belief that the unique circumstances of the South had made the Southern historian well equipped to have a detachment that allowed him to better assess American history in the aftermath of WWII. Woodward did little to address the underlying reasons as to why the South and Southerners had clung to their old notions and chose to contextualize the changing America of the 1950s with the South during the 1850s as a comparative study of those defending capitalism and how the South defended slavery.

In the chapter added to the revised edition Woodward takes up the issue of ‘the Negro.’ Again, he presents what was once seen as a distinctive problem of the South and the attitude of Southerners as one where the guilt belonged to the entire country. He details how both the North and the South carried the burden for the continued oppression, segregation, and inequality that blacks across America were dealing with. It was not just ‘the Negro’ issue but also the disgruntled-ness that grew from the war in Vietnam. The idea that movements by a younger generation were not just confined to the South. In both the original and revised editions Woodward’s larger points about how America was dealing with problems perceived to be only the South’s problems it does not erase the cultural and societal implications of the Southerner in post-WWII America. In a way it became more pressing as the Southerner was now being Americanized, but the Southerner remained distinctly white with ties to the Old South and Dixie iconography. Under such parameters it is impossible to fashion how black Southerners could be included with whites under the moniker of Southerner.

Woodward is one of the most strident detractors of Cash’s *The Mind of the South*, but one could contest that they were not in a direct conversation with one another. Cash believed that one

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<sup>20</sup> Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History*, 190.

South existed because the mental and social patterns of white Southerners had not changed since Reconstruction and Woodward believed there had been many Souths because he observed change happening throughout his life. James C. Cobb wrote of Cash's impact on the use of the term Southerner "meanwhile is regrettably but justifiably condemned to eternal identification with a practice still widespread among historians of referring to southern whites as 'southerners' and southern blacks as 'blacks.'"<sup>21</sup> Woodward's work did more to acknowledge the influence of blacks in the South, but his work did little to re-assess how Cash characterized the Southerner as white.

In 1982 John Shelton Reed, a sociologist, published *One South* a text that studied the Southerner as an ethnic identity. Reed argues that the cultural distinctiveness and values of Southerners has the same connectedness as other ethnic identities. Reed's work analyzes the social and cultural values that attract Southerners to identify as such. Reed describes such defining as "The Cultural South" where Southern identity is defined by things that Southerners do like eating grits, listening to country music, hunt, or following stockcar racing. In observing the cultural South, it is about identifying if people who live in southern states are more likely than other Americans to partake in doing certain things. The characteristics of diet, religion, sports and music are less based in economic conditions, but are more indicative of family and the traditions that are passed from generation to generation.<sup>22</sup>

Reed's work is one of the clear links to Cash's approach in studying the cultural psychology of the white Southern mind. Reed's approach as a sociologist was to better understand what mental and social aspects of the Southerner identity kept the distinction afloat

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<sup>21</sup> James C. Cobb, "Does Mind No Longer Matter? The South, the Nation, and the Mind of the South, 1941-1991" *The Journal of Southern History* 57, no. 4 (Nov. 1991): 681-718, 698-99.

<sup>22</sup> John Shelton Reed, *One South: An Ethnic Approach to Regional Culture* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982)

despite the South being less distinct. What Reed found was that it was not the poorly educated, less affluent whites who were concerned with the identity of a Southerner. In a reverse of who Cash centered his text on, Reed found that it was whites who had a better education and were of higher economic class that were referring to themselves as Southerners. Reed believed their tie to the term Southerner was rooted in rejecting the mainstream American. For upscale white southerners the identifier became a way to avoid losing an identity.<sup>23</sup>

A point of analysis that Reed examined was the regional patriotism of white Southerners and the shared experience of the Confederacy. The Confederate heritage is more commonly referred to by using the term Dixie. The role of Confederate symbols as a means to express Southern loyalty and identity continues to exclude black Southerners as well as Appalachian whites and those who have migrated to the South. The intertwining of regional patriotism and Dixie heritage became a popular method of reasserting white Southern identity throughout the twentieth century.<sup>24</sup>

Reed's works on the South and the Southerner have relied on a different methodological approach than a historian would take. His emphasis has largely been on determining the actual geography of the South based on this idea that the identity of Southerners drives where the South is located and in doing so, he has studied cultural things like food, music and language. Reed's approach is dependent on how whites and blacks in the South categorize themselves, which is an apt sociological approach. From a historical perspective it can leave much to be desired in that it picks up on Cash's ideas but does not confront the shortcomings of his work, particularly when it

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<sup>23</sup> Reed, *One South*, 1982; James C. Cobb, "'Does Mind No Longer Matter? The South, the Nation, and the Mind of the South, 1941-1991'" *The Journal of Southern History* 57, no. 4 (Nov. 1991): 681-718.

<sup>24</sup> John Shelton Reed, "The South: Where is it? What is it?" in *My Tears Spoiled My Aim and Other Reflections on Southern Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994): 5-28.

comes to black Southerners. Does Reed equating the term Southerner to an ethnic identity make it a term inclusive to black Southerners? Historian Numan V. Bartley wrote that an ethnic analogy is a method to examine southernness, but “the analogy is also fraught with problems”<sup>25</sup> remarking that an ethnic analogy is indicative of multiple Souths, rather than just one South. Reed’s work better informs us about the white Southern psyche in the latter half of the twentieth century, but it does less in making space for the idea of blacks being seen and considered as Southerners or that black Southerners could also be accepted as an ethnic group.

The creation of the Dixiecrat Party by J. Strom Thurmond stressed the need to protect Southern heritage and values from Washington D.C. Thurmond in accepting the States’ Rights nomination said, “May God forbid that your state and my state, your county and my county, your city and my city, your farm and my farm, shall ever be subjected to Washington Bureaucratic police rule.”<sup>26</sup> Thurmond ended his acceptance by promising to “fight to preserve the freedom secured by our forefathers...”<sup>27</sup> Barry Goldwater and George Wallace would evoke similar rhetoric during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Wallace, at his 1963 gubernatorial inauguration, spoke of his desire to “re-define our heritage, re-school our thoughts in lessons our forefathers knew so well.”<sup>28</sup> He continued, “We can no longer hide our head in the sand and tell ourselves that the ideology of our free fathers is not being attacked and is not being threatened by another idea... for it is.”<sup>29</sup> Goldwater, a non-Southerner, cultivated a Southern following by campaigning on a return to the past and promising moral leadership. In his convention speech

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<sup>25</sup> Numan V. Bartley, “Social Change and Sectional Identity” *The Journal of Southern History* 61, no. 1 (Feb. 1995): 3-16, 5.

<sup>26</sup> J. Strom Thurmond, “Accepting the States’ Rights Democratic Nomination for President of the United States” (Houston: Texas, 1948), 6.

<sup>27</sup> Thurmond, 11.

<sup>28</sup> George C. Wallace, “The Inaugural Address of Governor George C. Wallace” (Montgomery: Alabama, 1963), 4.

<sup>29</sup> Wallace, 4.

accepting the Republican nomination for President, Goldwater remarked “We must, and we shall, return to proven ways— not because they are old, but because they are true.”<sup>30</sup> The Goldwater campaign fostered a community of joyful defiance making “it possible for great numbers of unapologetic white supremacists to hold great carnivals of white supremacy.”<sup>31</sup> The distinction put forward by Cash between Southerner and black was not confined to academic discourse. Numan V. Bartley and Hugh Graham remarked of Southern white voters that their political behavior would have been familiar to Cash and that despite change there was something rooted within them that continuity persisted. The cultural understanding of the Southerner became entrenched in whiteness.

“Southerners are chronically painted as simpletons... boasting beer swigging men in white undershirts with Southern drawls, often engaged in banal conversations while standing around their trucks or riding mowers.” Tom Hanchett, curator of the exhibit of Southern stereotypes, declared that stereotypes have shaped how the South is seen, “whether we see it as a land of nature and tradition or the land of moonshine.”<sup>32</sup> When we see representations of the Southerner in popular media, we often see white Southerners. There is a noticeable absence of blacks presented as Southerners, either in standalone images or alongside whites. One of the clearest examples of that separation comes in the form of Southern literature.<sup>33</sup>

In the 1920s, H. L. Mencken declared that the South had lost its capacity for producing new ideas and had succumbed to ignorance and stupidity. A new, younger generation of

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<sup>30</sup> Barry Goldwater, “1964 Speech Republican National Convention” (Arizona, 1964). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/daily/may98/goldwaterspeech.htm?noredirect=on> Date accessed February 2, 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Richard H. Rovere, “The Campaign: Goldwater” *The New Yorker* (October 3, 1964).

<sup>32</sup> Garret K. Woodward, “The Art of Stereotyping: Have Southerners Gotten A Fair Shake from Pop Culture?” *Smokey Mountain News* (January 20, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History*, 1968.

Southern writers found freedom in Mencken's words.<sup>34</sup> These writers took it upon themselves to criticize the past, write about Southern womanhood, the South as a frontier, and even made an attempt to write about the black experience.<sup>35</sup> Mencken's assessment did not acknowledge the literature of black Southern writers. Their voices and style of storytelling alone was enough to dismiss the notion the South lacked new ideas. Southern black writers existed through the prism of the black experience, not as contributors to the South's cultural re-awakening during the first half of the twentieth century. We have come to understand William Faulkner and Zora Neale Hurston not as contemporaries of a Southern Renaissance, but as two separate writing entities.

The same trend can be observed in post-World War I white Southern literature. Similar to the anxiety that fed Southern politics as society was changing, white Southern writers found themselves grappling with both the anticipation of change and nostalgia for what they had known. Jay Hubbell argued that the postwar literary identity for Southern writers came in the form of contesting gender, race and class with gender becoming a dominant theme. Southern writers found themselves negotiating the public and private roles of men and women through the prism of the South's past. By contesting gender roles white writers engaged with anxieties of past and present without having to engage in race politics.<sup>36</sup> It was not that blacks ceased to exist in the works of Southern writers, but that they existed on the periphery.

Historian Numan V. Bartley wrote that the strength of a culture was measured in its ability to adapt to change. Bartley argued that the structure of the modern South has undergone

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<sup>34</sup> Writers included Frances Newman, T. S. Stribling. Mencken personally influenced writers such as James Branch Cabell, W. J. Cash, Gerald W. Johnson, and Paul Green. Paul Green was responsible for the Reviewer, which had a short run during the Southern Literary Renaissance. See: John Herbert Roper, "Paul Green and the Southern Literary Renaissance" *Southern Cultures* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 75-89 and Joseph M. Flora, "Fiction in the 1920s: Some New Voices" in *The History of Southern Literature* edited by Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985): 279-290

<sup>35</sup> Flora.

<sup>36</sup> Anne Goodwyn Jones, "*Gone With the Wind* and Others: Popular Fiction, 1920-1950" in *The History of Southern Literature* edited by Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985): 363-382.



the most change. He points to the “Americanization of Dixie” or the “Southernization of America” along with the elections of Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter, and Bill Clinton that the South of the late twentieth century is in fact different than earlier Souths. Bartley points to a lack of understanding to which southern cultural values have been beholden to the economic, social, and political institutions and their inherent hierarchies.

The focus of Bartley’s article is that the larger institutional structures of the South were the driving force behind the cultural developments of the South. For instance, Bartley suggests that “peculiar southern social institutions did much to shape white southern racism”<sup>37</sup> as opposed to the idea that white racism shaped southern culture. Bartley’s work lies in deconstructing the institutions that insulated the South and presenting the region as defensive with respect to the rest of America. Insulated leadership that was distrustful of those outside the South was one of the main gripes that Cash leveled against in his seminal text. Bartley cites that the South in the post-World War II era is a story of success as there was an expansion of economic and social roles for both blacks and women in addition to economic expansion that did see the South join the rest of America. For Bartley, the 1970s marked the period where “racial and sectional animosities subsided”<sup>38</sup> as some Southern states elected moderate governors and the mid-1970s saw the emergence of the Sunbelt; the new southern style of life.

Bartley’s work provides insight on how the cultural is interwoven with the economic, political and social aspects of the South. His assessment that the South went from a mindless region in the 1920s and 1930s to one that projected a style of living that was open and accessible to Americans is accurate. Bartley’s work does very little to acknowledge how blacks were no living under the same conditions as Southern whites and therefore his treatment of racism as

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<sup>37</sup> Bartley, 9.

<sup>38</sup> Bartley, 15.

being an extension of white anxiety or fear does little to reflect how that had altered the economic, cultural, political, and social realities of Southern blacks. Even the idea of the moderate South that emerged in the 1970s with race not being at the center ignores the expanding influence of how white Southerners reinforced their Southern identity through the Confederate iconography or politicians invoking statements of protecting the South. A moderate South did not correlate to a more inclusive South for blacks. The privilege of being identifiable specific to region was a concept unknown to blacks in America. Blacks in America were understood to have a monolithic, shared experience based on skin color.

### Black Southern Identity

W.E.B. DuBois characterized the American Negro experience as a double-consciousness, “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”<sup>39</sup> Du Bois argued that for the American Negro the battle was to be seen as both a Negro and an American. While Du Bois was writing specifically about the struggle of blacks in America his words are enlightening in explaining the conditions in which ‘black’ became the lone identifier. The failure to recognize black regional identity facilitated the separation between whites and blacks. In a sense it created another barrier that prevented blacks from seeing themselves as Americans. For Du Bois it was imperative that blacks not allow others to deny that they were blacks first and then Americans.<sup>40</sup>

Historian L.D. Reddick described the Negro in the South as being “a study in attachment and alienation. For him, identification has always been a problem. Inescapably he has found

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<sup>39</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903), 3.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

himself to be a ‘Southerner.’ He may not have preferred the term, but the objective fact could not be denied.”<sup>41</sup> Reddick explained that there was no singular path for blacks to either embrace or reject their Southern identity. The reality for many black Southerners was that they “alternate between love and hate, while a few seem to be capable of loving and hating at the same time. It is a great and confusing frustration.”<sup>42</sup> One of our best examples of that love and hatred comes by analyzing two titans of Southern literature.

Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright are two of the most prominent writers of the twentieth century; contemporaries long studied as rivals. Hurston seen as conservative and Wright a radical.<sup>43</sup> In reality, the South served as a pillar for the work of both. What makes their writing feel so different is rooted in their respective Southern experience and their perspectives on blackness. Hurston’s writing is grounded in black communities and her work enriches our understanding of the nuances of black lives. In contrast, Wright’s writing is abrasive and details the horrors of what it meant to be black in the South. Their work reflected how they came to negotiate race and region. They show that the black Southern experience is not monolithic. Blacks navigate identity through personal experience, oscillating between attachment and alienation.

Hurston spent her youth in Eatonville, Florida. Eatonville was the first incorporated black town in the United States. As its own legal, insular town, it permitted Hurston and others a freedom that was completely unknown in other cities across the South. In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston remembers her childhood quite happily: running around on land her family

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<sup>41</sup> L. D. Reddick, “The Negro as Southerner and American,” in *The Southerner as American* ed. Charles Grier Sellers, Jr. (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1966), 133.

<sup>42</sup> Reddick, 134.

<sup>43</sup> Tiffany Ruby Patterson, *Zora Neale Hurston and A History of Southern Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005)

owned, getting lost in her dreams, and observing adults from the porch of the community store or outside a church. It was here that Hurston developed her interest in studying the people, the behaviors, and the communities that defined black living. Hurston felt a particular resentment toward the idea that it was her responsibility to chronicle the race problem: “there is no *The Negro* here. Our lives are so diversified, internal attitudes so varied, appearances and capabilities so different, that there is no possible classification so catholic that it will cover us all, except My people! My People!”<sup>44</sup> Hurston found that in choosing to nourish her own self-interests as a writer she was engaging in resistance against Jim Crow.<sup>45</sup>

On race and blackness Hurston concluded, “that skins were no measure of what was inside people. So, none of the Race clichés meant anything anymore...therefore I saw no curse in being black, nor no extra flavor by being white.” Hurston’s feelings on race allowed her to value people at a microlevel rather than engaging in a macrolevel discussion about what the Negro ought to be doing or how he ought to be living. The same cannot be said for Richard Wright. Wright’s work grapples intimately with what it meant to be black. Blackness nourished Wright’s self-interest. Wright spent most of his youth in Mississippi where he grappled with where he belonged. A major theme in Wright’s *Black Boy* is his inability to conform his behavior to what was deemed as acceptable behavior for Southern blacks as told to him by his family. Wright grew to disdain the uniformity of the black existence that his family wanted him to conform to “I saw a bare, bleak pool of black life and I hated it; the people were alike, their homes were alike; and their farms were alike.”<sup>46</sup> Wright saw the South as an institution to rebel against “in me was

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<sup>44</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1942), 192.

<sup>45</sup> Hurston, 1942.

<sup>46</sup> Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1945), 137.

shaping a yearning for a kind of consciousness, a mode of being that the way of life about me had said could not be, must not be, and upon which the penalty of death had been placed.”<sup>47</sup>

Wright’s Southern existence revolved around his intense anxiety and fear of white people, “the white brutality that I had not seen was a more effective control of my behavior than that which I knew.”<sup>48</sup> Wright resolved that he needed to escape the South, concluding that anywhere but the South offered a promise of more.

Hurston and Wright allow us to observe how the culture of the Southerner did not extend to blacks. Instead of Hurston and Wright being heralded as writers of the Southern Literary Renaissance they, along with, other black Southerners, Langston Hughes, Sterling A. Brown<sup>49</sup> have been lumped together in the New Negro Renaissance, a renaissance in Harlem. The New Negro Renaissance became saturated in conversations of how to best portray the black masses.<sup>50</sup> Alain Locke observed that “If conditions in the South were more conducive to the development of Negro culture without transplanting, the self-expression of the ‘New Negro’ would spring up just as one branch of the new literature of the South, and as one additional phase of its cultural reawakening.”<sup>51</sup> Even as the South functioned as a character within their works, their personal attachment could not withstand their migrations North for publishing opportunities. As a result, their Southern identity was censored in favor of explaining the conditions of blackness. Reddick stated there was no singular path for Southern blacks to grapple with their identity, but the

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<sup>47</sup> Wright, 169.

<sup>48</sup> Wright, 172.

<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth Davey, “The Souths of Sterling A. Brown” *Southern Cultures* 5, no. 2 (Summer 1999), pp. 20-45.

<sup>50</sup> For more info on the New Negro Renaissance: Maryemma Graham, “The New Negro Renaissance” *African & African Diaspora Transformations in the 20th Century*, 2011. <http://exhibitions.nypl.org/africanaage/essay-renaissance.html>

<sup>51</sup> Thadious M. Davis, “Southern Standard-Bearers in the New Negro Renaissance” in *The History of Southern Literature* ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985): 291-313, 313.

middle of the twentieth century shows the ways in-which Southern blacks began to negotiate between the two.

James C. Cobb, a historian of the South and Southern identity, traced the concept of Southern identity back to Cash writing, “Cash clearly had only whites in mind as he picked his way through the maze of contradiction, delusion, and irrationality...that defined the tortured Southern psyche.”<sup>52</sup> Post Cash, Cobb notes that others simply followed his example in identifying Southern whites as Southerners and Southern blacks as blacks. Cobb credits the reverse migration of blacks back to the South, back home, as one reason blacks felt inclined to identify themselves as Southerners. Following the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling and the Civil Rights Movement, Cobb writes that blacks were allowed to “explore more readily the complexities and nuances of their own lives and communities...that lent a perceptible sense of urgency to their efforts to reclaim their regional heritage.”<sup>53</sup> The cultural norms long associated with white Southern identity are familiar to blacks, but only in the post-*Brown* era did Southern blacks exist outside the immediacy of racism and how it affected their everyday existence.<sup>54</sup>

The notion that Southern blacks existed outside the immediacy of racism in the post-*Brown* era is debatable. The desegregation of the South undeniably allowed blacks from outside the South to travel to the South in greater numbers and the trends of reverse migration have shown that blacks readily moved back to the South once segregation was illegal. So, for those who traveled to the South there would be a sense of claiming a heritage that they had not known. But for Southern blacks who had lived in the South, the perception that they could more readily explore their lives and communities in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement seems like a

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<sup>52</sup> James C. Cobb, “Community and Identity: Redefining Southern Culture” *The Georgia Review* 50, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 9-24, 10.

<sup>53</sup> Cobb, 12.

<sup>54</sup> Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*, 2005.

result of blacks not visibly identifying themselves as Southerners in the same way whites long have. Going back to Reddick, it would seem to be a matter of how Southern blacks have struggled to identify with the term Southerner and one could contest it is reasonable because the term has long been associated with the white South. Cobb's use of the word urgency suggests an understanding that black Southerners were proactive in finding ways to assert their view on the South and share their experience, but it also speaks to their prolonged exclusion from the term Southerner and that being associated with the South did matter to blacks.

The New Negro Renaissance benefited from Southern blacks migrating North in order to find their voices and hope. Since 1950, a shift occurred in both black writers and black writing about the South. Buoyed by a younger generation both unafraid and willing to use the South as the focal point of their work, black writers insisted on maintaining their Southern voices in their work, refusing to be drowned out by their black contemporaries in the North. Previously black writers had to migrate North for publishing opportunities, but this generation of writers benefited from an increased publishing support network within the South.<sup>55</sup> The wave of change after 1950 represented what Locke envisioned Southern black writers could produce if conditions in the South were more conducive toward developing black culture. These works espoused a tone that the possibility of something better existed.<sup>56</sup>

In a 1951 essay for *Negro Digest*, Zora Neale Hurston wrote that Southern blacks had been portrayed through two narratives. The first was that of the simple Negro, who happily picked away at a banjo. The second portrayal was of the Negro sharecropper who cried out at the

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<sup>55</sup> An example of this is *Callaloo: A Black South Journal of Arts and Literature* that was founded by the English department at Southern University in Baton Rouge, which is dedicated to the creative, critical writings, visual arts, culture and life of the black South.

<sup>56</sup> Trudier Harris, "Black Writers in a Changed Landscape, Since 1950" in *The History of Southern Literature* ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985): 566-577.

injustice. This Negro was perceived as the intellectual. Hurston wrote that such narrow characterizations had stigmatized blacks as being devoid of emotional nuance. It was Hurston's belief that the lack of visible emotional depth prevented others, mostly whites, from recognizing that minorities did experience emotions on a spectrum. Hurston was adamant that the pattern of two narratives needed to be broken. Hurston championed folklore as the outlet for blacks to recast themselves before audiences. Folklore, she wrote, allowed blacks to be intimate and incisive showing the existence of blacks who were neither exceptional nor quaint. Folklore could paint the truest picture of what it meant to be black in America.<sup>57</sup>

One of the key elements of the growing literature scope became a willingness of Southern black writers to write about the black experience in the South beyond the despair and despondent. There was a willingness to write about how jarring and isolating the North could be for Southern blacks. The 1950s became a time when Southern blacks were more resolute that hope and change existed in the South and there was pride in staying, "it was better to take a stand where one had roots than to die on the cold, forbidding streets of the North; yes, there was a future south of the Mason-Dixon Line."<sup>58</sup> Understanding of the black Southern experience continued to grow following the end of segregation and more blacks non-native to the South began to explore their Southern roots.

One of the most influential voices of this new younger generation was Nikki Giovanni. Giovanni, who was born in Knoxville in 1943, is recognized as being at the forefront of the black arts movement that celebrated and cherished blackness. Giovanni's poem "Knoxville, Tennessee" explores her love of summer. She lists the fresh food eaten from "daddy's garden"

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<sup>57</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, "What White Publishers Won't Print" *Negro Digest* (April 1950).

<sup>58</sup> Harris, 569.



such as okra, greens, cabbage and the “homemade ice-cream at the church picnic and listen(ing) to the gospel music outside at the church.”<sup>59</sup> Giovanni’s poem conveys the warmth she feels during Knoxville summers. It is a warmth wrapped in family, attachment and tradition as she eloquently writes, it was a time to “...go to the mountains with your grandmother and go barefooted and be warm all the time, not only when you go to bed and sleep.”<sup>60</sup> “Knoxville, Tennessee” is home to Giovanni, but the memories she has of summers would be familiar to black Southerners throughout the South. There is an intimacy to her poem that provides emotional depth while demonstrating how black Southern writers could expand the scope of the black Southern experience.

Thadious M. Davis claimed that black writers were not writing from a nostalgic perspective reminiscing on the ‘good ole days’ but were undertaking a “gut-wrenching revisioning of specifics long obscured by synoptic cultural patterning.”<sup>61</sup> For black writers who were non-native to the South, like James Baldwin, there was an intimacy in claiming a communal and public history on behalf of blacks in the South. Their work emphasized place and the role it plays in identity. Baldwin believed that in order to understand the roots of his identity he needed to go on a journey to the South. Baldwin writes of the constant terror that occupied his mind before he left stating, “I doubt that I really knew much about terror before I went South.”<sup>62</sup> When Baldwin gets to the South, he finds an appreciation for the beauty and strength of those who were once enslaved and for those who lived in such degrading social and economic

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<sup>59</sup> Nikki Giovanni, “Knoxville, Tennessee” in *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni: 1968-1998* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 59.

<sup>60</sup> Giovanni, 59.

<sup>61</sup> Thadious M. Davis, “Expanding the Limits: The Intersection of Race and Region” *The Southern Literary Journal* 20, no. 2 (Spring 1988), pp. 3-11, 7.

<sup>62</sup> James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 55.

conditions. The word he used to describe the black men in the South was “heroic;”<sup>63</sup> heroic for surviving all the horror, tragedy and suffering. He also found himself in awe of Southern blacks who had maintained strength, integrity, purity and sense of identity despite the repressive conditions. One of the jarring aspects of Baldwin’s journey was his awe of the Southern landscape and its beauty. Baldwin proclaimed that he had “at last, come home.”<sup>64</sup> In that trip south, Baldwin experienced the paradox familiar to Southern blacks and astutely described by Reddick. Baldwin discovered an affinity for the countryside, the same type of familiarity expressed by Giovanni. But Baldwin made it clear that the way he was treated as a black man in the South had haunted him. He discerned it was impossible for him to stay under such conditions, a realization that was reminiscent of Wright’s desire to leave and never look back.

Where Baldwin’s work was about his personal experience going to the South there was also an increase in black literature that explored being black in the South during the nineteenth and earlier half of the twentieth century. For writers non-native to the South, whose families took part in the Great Migration, this became their pathway to understand what the South meant to them, personally. Davis suggests that the increase in the number of blacks returning to the South, via temporary or permanent migration, was less about escaping urban life and more about the “laying of a claim to a culture and to a region that, though fraught with pain and difficulty, provides a major grounding for identity.”<sup>65</sup> Writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Margaret Walker picked up from where Arna Bontemps<sup>66</sup> pioneered the idea of intersecting

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<sup>63</sup> Baldwin, 66.

<sup>64</sup> Baldwin, 70.

<sup>65</sup> Davis, 6.

<sup>66</sup> Arna Bontemps was introduced to Southern black culture by his uncle and began Bontemps’ fascination with Southern culture that he would explore throughout his life. Bontemps was the head librarian at Fisk University where he would develop one of the best collections of black literature and culture in addition to his own writing. See:

region and race into historical fiction. Morrison called it the process of reclaiming. These writers worked to validate the home of their ancestors, no longer relegating their lives and labor to a white Southern mythology.<sup>67</sup>

The Civil Rights Movement has had a dominating presence in both Southern and African American history. The influence of mass media, images and video, confronted Americans with the segregation and violence that long plagued the South.<sup>68</sup> These images often showed how Southern blacks were being intimidated, harassed, jailed, beaten and manipulated with fire hoses. Suddenly there was a tangible public record highlighting both how vitriolic whites could be towards blacks and the lengths public officials and citizens would go to ensure that the status quo not be upended.<sup>69</sup> Images became an integral part of civil rights historiography. Photos of sit-ins, protests, burning crosses and freedom riders became an effective tool in chronicling the fight for equality in the South.<sup>70</sup>

While effective, images of protests became the singular prism for Southern blacks to be seen. Protestors were, rightly, celebrated for their courage, but the initial wave of history leaned into stories of heroism; with the history reflecting a biographic approach. This style of history disregarded the majority of Southern blacks and other ways in which one could engage in resistance. As previously noted, Zora Neale Hurston resisted by choosing to write about her

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Charles L. James "Arna Bontemps' Life and Career" *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* ed. William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>67</sup> Davis

<sup>68</sup> William G. Thomas III, "Television News and the Civil Rights Struggle: The Views in Virginia and Mississippi" *Southern Spaces* (November 3, 2004)

<sup>69</sup> Leon F. Litwack, "Fight the Power! The Legacy of the Civil Rights Movement," *The Journal of Southern History* 75, no. 1 (February 2009): 3-28.

<sup>70</sup> Examples of the images cited can be found via Getty Images "Civil Rights Movement 1960s Pictures" <http://www.gettyimages.com/photos/civil-rights-movement-1960s?excludenudity=true&sort=mostpopular&mediatype=photography&phrase=civil%20rights%20movement%201960s>

interests. In addition to focusing on specific people, Civil Rights historiography was encased in what happened at a national level. The most prominent example being Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech at the march on Washington D.C. When the Movement was studied it became a black movement located in the South. There became a disconnect in identifying the aggression experienced by Southern blacks in favor of labeling it a movement of blacks absent of region.<sup>71</sup>

In recent years, historians have challenged the Civil Rights narrative. Historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall stressed that Civil Rights history ought to be harder to digest as it interweaves questions of racism, poverty, militarism, materialism and sexism. Hall wonders how we can advance our understanding with sophistication.<sup>72</sup> One aspect of the Civil Rights Movement that has garnered more attention is the influence of music. Music provides a data point that can be studied at both local and national levels. Music, specifically the black aesthetic of it, highlights the necessity in parsing out the influence of Southern black identity that made music so impactful.

Music of the civil rights movement reflected both black culture and the movement itself. Songs were less about structure and musical correctness and more about creativity and usefulness to the current conditions. It was about conjuring a feeling that moved people. There was often a familiarity with songs that intersected musical traditions of blues, gospel and jazz. "We Shall Overcome" is an example of adaptation. Originally a nineteenth-century hymn, it was transformed by Bernice Johnson Reagon. Reagon changed the structure of the song, purposefully slowing it to allow protestors to join in the song. The improvisation of shouts from Reagon and

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<sup>71</sup> Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997)

<sup>72</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005):1233-1263.

fellow protestors were derived from the black gospel tradition. Reagon saw herself and fellow singers as the singing newspaper. Charles Jones, a field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), said “We could not have communicated with the masses of people without music.”<sup>73</sup> Music became integral to the movement. Julian Bond, communications director of SNCC, said that Freedom Singers were crucial in crossing race and regional divides. Leaders found that music kept tensions low by helping to “bolster the morale of integrationists and disarm the hostility of segregationists.”<sup>74</sup> SNCC found that singers became a way to reach out to their peers on white college campuses to gain more student support.<sup>75</sup>

When one considers the influence of black music during the 1950s and 1960s the tendency has been to analyze songs and artists focusing on their immediate proximity to the Civil Rights Movement. That hyperawareness on the relationship between black music and the Civil Rights Movement has prevented a more complete understanding of the relationship between black Southerners and black sound. Rhythm and blues emerged in post-World War II black America and, through its sound and aesthetic recast black consciousness and pride.

### Rhythm & Blues

Rhythm and blues in the most simplistic definition is the result of infusing specific aspects of blues and gospel music. In early literature on rhythm and blues, it was often described as ‘Southern soul music.’ Southern soul projected the reality of the day to day existence for

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<sup>73</sup> Robert Shelton, “Songs a Weapon in Rights Battle,” *The New York Times* (August 20, 1962), 14

<sup>74</sup> Shelton, 1.

<sup>75</sup> Brian Ward, “People Get Ready: Music and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s” *History Now* 8 (June 2006), The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, accessed November 29, 2017, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/civil-rights-movement/essays/%E2%80%9Cpeople-get-ready%E2%80%9D-music-and-civil-rights-movement-1950s>.

Southern blacks. One of the reasons that the term ‘Southern soul’ was used is that the soul music originating from the North, Motown, was less obvious in borrowing from blues and gospel traditions.<sup>76</sup> For the purpose of this work ‘Southern soul’ is rhythm and blues music because the birthplace of rhythm and blues is the South, but when ‘soul’ is used by other writers I will keep their choice of term in place. What rhythm and blues offered to Southern blacks was a new way to communicate with one another, but also with mainstream America.

Rhythm and blues is a direct point of lineage along the long line of black traditions, specifically black sound, that had been cultivated by previous generations while capturing the energy of the current, more youthful generation.<sup>77</sup> It is black nationalism.<sup>78</sup> Michael Haralambos wrote, “a major function of soul music is catharsis. The listener experiences a feeling of emotion relayed by hearing his problem related in a song. The recognition, appreciation and understanding a singer shows for a problem makes the situation easier to bear.”<sup>79</sup> Haralambos claims that the music reflects rather than directs. Singers sense they are the chosen representatives of the people. Like the maturation observed with black literary writers since 1950, rhythm and blues music marked a departure from the status quo. Rhythm and blues is a synthesis of gospel music and blues, a natural continuity of structure and feeling that existed within black music. Around the mid-1950s, blues came to be interpreted as music of

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<sup>76</sup> Robert W. Stephens, “Soul: A Historical Reconstruction of Continuity and Change in Black Popular Music *The Black Perspective in Music* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1984): 21-43.

<sup>77</sup> Brian Ward, “People Get Ready: Music and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s” *History Now* 8 (June 2006), The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, accessed November 29, 2017, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/civil-rights-movement/essays/%E2%80%9Cpeople-get-ready%E2%80%9D-music-and-civil-rights-movement-1950s>.

<sup>78</sup> Portia K. Maultsby, “Soul Music: Its Sociological & Political Significance in American Popular Culture” *Journal of Popular Culture* 17, no. 2 (Fall 1983)

<sup>79</sup> Michael Haralambos, *Soul Music: The Birth of A Sound in Black America* (New York: Da Capo, 1985), 111.

accommodation and acceptance. Leroi Jones wrote that “*blues* means a Negro experience”<sup>80</sup> distinctly outside the gaze of mainstream, white America. The blues depicted “work, love, poverty, and the hardships freedmen faced in a world barely removed from slavery”<sup>81</sup> or as blues songwriter Willie Dixon stated, the blues are “the facts of life.”<sup>82</sup> The blues carry wisdom.

Rhythm and blues marked a “clear departure from primitive chants and cotton-patch hollers.”<sup>83</sup> Julian Bond remarked that soul music was looked down upon and seen as low-class music.<sup>84</sup> It was not an abandonment of black musical tradition, but an acknowledgement that black Southern attitude had undergone a transformation and the evolution of black music reflected that.

The accessibility and emergence of rhythm and blues make it worth studying. It represents one way in which black Southerners showcased how the black experience across the South could coalesce into an expressive sound and effective communicative tool. Charles Jones noted that without music there would have been a communication barrier amongst blacks. Some Southern blacks could not articulate their experience of living in the South, but “through songs, they expressed years of suppressed hope, suffering, even joy and love.”<sup>85</sup> Music existed in public spaces in ways that literature often does not and cannot. Some of the most influential works of black literature entered the American cultural zeitgeist only after being adapted into photo

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<sup>80</sup> LeRoi Jones. *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music That Developed From It* (New York: William, Morrow and Company, 1963), 94.

<sup>81</sup> Charles E. Cobb, Jr., “Traveling the Blues Highway” *National Geographic*, April 1999  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20090724102711/http://www.nationalgeographic.com:80/media/ngm/9904/fngm/>

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1986), 13.

<sup>84</sup> Guralnick.

<sup>85</sup> Shelton, 14.

essays<sup>86</sup> or movies.<sup>87</sup> Music bypassed the need for adaptation or a third party altogether. It was an immediate conversation between artists and listener or between listener and listener. Peter Guralnick described soul music as representing “another chapter in the development of black consciousness, similar to the Harlem Renaissance, in its championing of negritude, but more widespread in its immediate impact.”<sup>88</sup> From Guralnick’s perspective soul music is a dialogue. A dialogue stemming from the black Southern experience. Music provided a platform for Southern blacks to be at the forefront, forging their own voices despite inhabiting the segregated South. Rhythm and blues are not about the triumph of a singular moment. It is about the artists who gave voice to the hope and anguish of Southern blacks.

Rhythm and blues music rejected the status quo. The status quo had been that secular and gospel music were two different entities that did not intersect at a professional level. Nell Irvin Painter contrasted the two genres writing, “sad and ironic, the blues detailed life’s tragedies, whereas gospel soared with the joy of overcoming those same griefs.”<sup>89</sup> What rhythm and blues did was to banish the notion that joy, and happiness was reserved only for gospel music within black music. It represented the evolution of perspective by black Southerners in post war America to voice the belief that they were not meant to just survive their conditions.

A reason why rhythm and blues is often associated with the term soul is that soul is a term of endearment for the black soul. It is a term that black communities have used to identify themselves, “soul symbolizes the re-evaluation and re-definition of black identity, experience, behavior and culture.”<sup>90</sup> Soul, particularly, in the South has been a common way to separate

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<sup>86</sup> George Karger “Black Boy: A Negro Writes A Bitter Autobiography,” *Life* 18, No. 3 (June 4, 1945): 87-93.

<sup>87</sup> Popular examples include Alex Hayley *The Roots* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*

<sup>88</sup> Guralnick, 18.

<sup>89</sup> Nell Irvin Painter, “The South and the ‘The Negro’” in *The South for New Southerners* ed. Paul D. Escott and David R. Goldfield (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991): 42-66, 57.

<sup>90</sup> Haralambos, 130.



white Southerners from blacks. Black cuisine in the South is often referred to as ‘soul food.’ Music being aligned with ‘soul’ is not evidence of lacking regional identity, but a means to have a recognizable identity outside of ‘black’ or ‘negro.’ Wright, over a decade earlier, proclaimed that blacks needed to embrace the traits that made them who they were. Rhythm and blues became a vehicle for blacks to celebrate those traits while transcending the status quo.

The responsibility falls upon us to recognize the public spaces where Southern blacks have purposefully asserted their sense of Southern identity and in doing so provide the context that the assertion of regional identity matters. It matters that Nina Simone willingly performed “Mississippi Goddam” and it is relevant that the origin of rhythm and blues music is the South. Each acknowledgement is a step of progress for blacks in America. An affirmation that being black is not a monolithic experience and not a singular identity. Ties to region and choice in how one identifies is essential to the American experience.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE SOUNDS OF THE SOUTHERN BLACK CONSCIOUS

“Our music is our Mother Tongue” is how Kalamu ya Salaam began his essay on the significance of African American music. His choice of phrase conveys the depth of the relationship between African Americans and their music by implying it is akin to language. Salaam writes that ‘the music,’ as a language, developed as a result of slaves being deprived of their native languages and being forced to learn the tongue of their masters. ‘The music’ became a solace for blacks to articulate their existence. Salaam claimed that ‘the music’ is where our (African American) soul is and as a result, each era of music has a recognizable rhythm.<sup>91</sup>

Portia K. Maulsby surmised, “African American music translates everyday experiences into living sound, recording the responses of African Americans to their position as a marginalized group in society.”<sup>92</sup> Music is how black Americans have pushed back against a social death in America, serving as equal part outlet and shelter in navigating the trauma of living while being black in America. Salaam’s assertion of music operating as a mother tongue reflects just how interwoven black music is with black lives and black communities. Music has been a singular space where blackness is the focal point: black lives, black living, black love, black men, black women and black struggle take precedent. Music allows a dialogue to exist about the nuances of the black experience. The music exists alongside mainstream American, white, culture without being beholden to it. Throughout the twentieth century, music became a vehicle for blacks to exist more comfortably in public spaces on their own terms.

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<sup>91</sup> Kalamu ya Salaam, “It Didn’t Jes Grew: The Social and Aesthetic Significance of African American Music” *African American Review* 29, no. 2 Special Issues on The Music (Summer 1995): 351-375.

<sup>92</sup> Portia K. Maulsby, “A Map of the Music” *African American Review* 29, no. 2 Special Issues on The Music (Summer 1995): 183-184.

Prior to Emancipation, black worship operated as the lone place where slaves could decompress from their forced labor and have social interactions. Black religious spaces existed as safe spaces to release emotions and to be, literally, free from their reality. Where blacks worshiped were, and remain, a social institution where blacks have built and maintained a sense of community. Churches provided a step into public life for blacks that fostered oral and literary traditions essential in detailing the black perspective and narrative.<sup>93</sup> While music, commonly referred to as spirituals, were an engrained part of the black church it was not uncommon for church elders to outlaw what they deemed to be “fiddle songs, devil songs, jig tunes, and corn songs”<sup>94</sup> along with the violin and banjo. As the black church became more established, it began to resemble the image aligned with the white man’s church and that meant the desire and expectations of blacks changed. A result of the change would be the development of a social hierarchy within black communities where those with prominent roles and those who followed saw themselves as morally superior to the “backslider and the heathen”<sup>95</sup> who were deemed to be at bottom of the social ladder.<sup>96</sup>

The Emancipation Proclamation, in theory, created the necessary conditions to allow blacks to develop a public life and philosophy in America. While Emancipation extended legal citizenship to blacks, it did nothing to affect their general social status.<sup>97</sup> Following Emancipation, blacks constructed their own communities that were connected by footpaths.

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<sup>93</sup> Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>94</sup> LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music That Developed From It* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1963), 48.

<sup>95</sup> Jones, 48.

<sup>96</sup> Jones.

<sup>97</sup> Neal.

These communities were anchored by churches and schools.<sup>98</sup> Church in the American South was “the foremost institution for African Americans.”<sup>99</sup> Church centered around three traditions: survival, self-improvement and liberation. The traditions existed within the secular and spiritual responsibilities of the church: a social, or community, center that broke up the isolation of farm living. In their work on African American rural churches, Lois E. Myers and Rebecca Sharpless wrote “more than three-quarters of the members of rural African American churches managed to attend church at least one Sunday per month.”<sup>100</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham suggested that the importance of ‘the church’ was that it was a place to challenge the struggles of their inhumane existence, which reinforced their sense of selfworth through sermon in addition to a reinforcement of community among rural blacks regardless of class differences.<sup>101</sup> While music remained integral during services, after Emancipation churches were no longer the sole institution for blacks to experience autonomy.

Church had long been *the* singular social institution within black communities, but that began to change as Southern blacks sought out more autonomy. One of the most well documented pushbacks by Southern whites came via Jim Crow laws that promoted segregation between blacks and whites in a concerted effort to rein in black autonomy. Of equal importance is how black Southerners responded to increased public hostilities by creating public social spaces that allowed them to express themselves outside of church.

Not long after Reconstruction, Jim Crow laws were being implemented across Southern states. Jim Crow was the legalization of segregation and disenfranchisement, which created a

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<sup>98</sup> Charles S. Aiken, “New Settlement Pattern of Rural Blacks in the American South,” *Geographical Review* 75, no. 4 (October 1985): 383-404.

<sup>99</sup> Lois E. Myers and Rebecca Sharpless “Of the Least and the Most:’ The African American Rural Church” in *African American Life in the Rural South, 1900-1950* ed. R. Douglas Hurt (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003): 54-80, 55.

<sup>100</sup> Myers and Sharpless, 55.

<sup>101</sup> Myers and Sharpless.

system of apartheid throughout the South. The laws affected nearly every aspect of public life from schools, parks, restaurants, recreation areas, public transportation and extended to denying blacks the right to vote. The legalization of Jim Crow was an extension of ‘separate but equal,’ which was upheld by the Supreme Court in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling in 1896.<sup>102</sup>

Implementation of Jim Crow forced Southern blacks, whether in rural areas or cities, into segregation. The pressures of Jim Crow forced Southern blacks to not just create their own communities but create public spaces that provided both emotional and physical safety. Social institutions such as beauty salons and barbershops allowed blacks to cultivate segregation into a togetherness away from both the eye of white authority and those of the black middle and upper class that, sometimes, morally disagreed with how working-class blacks spent their leisure time.<sup>103</sup>

Juke joints became synonymous with leisure. Juke joints became a primary social institution for working-class blacks. Juke joints could be anything from a shack, to attached rooms or a converted old barn. In some instances, particularly in rural areas, they were often in close proximity to a church. Juke joints were “places for adults to congregate and establish a support system,”<sup>104</sup> a social outlet for both men and women. Estella Thomas described juke joints as being loud and a place to “talk ‘bout all kinds of things and still be a Christian and a decent person.”<sup>105</sup> While juke joints faced opposition from religious leaders and some persons of the middle class, they existed as a public entity that “reinforced their sense of community.”<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896) <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/163/537>

<sup>103</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, “We Are Not What We Seem: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South” *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (June 1993): 75-112.

<sup>104</sup> Valerie Grim, “African American Rural Culture, 1900-1950” in *African American Life in the Rural South, 1900-1950* ed. R. Douglas Hurt (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003): 108-128, 123.

<sup>105</sup> Grim, 123.

<sup>106</sup> Kelley, 84.

Juke joints became social institutions where Southern blacks could share knowledge, kinship, jokes and language away from whites. In the early part of the twentieth century there were not many places where working-class blacks could so freely express themselves.<sup>107</sup>

The music that came to characterize both juke joints and the black Southern experience during the first half of the twentieth century was the blues. Gip's Place, a juke joint, in Bessemer, Alabama, is described as "part concert venue, part church, part fortress of gratitude."<sup>108</sup> Henry Gipson, the owner, said that blues was one of his first loves and he would travel from juke joint to juke joint to hear blues music. Gip's place was born out of Gipson's lifetime love of blues music, but it also came as a result of not always being welcomed to play blues music at certain venues in Alabama. Gipson was once assaulted at a venue in Hueytown, Alabama, after a group of men saw a plate of food passed to him by a white girl; as Gipson noted "white folks don't pass anything to black folks."<sup>109</sup> After being assaulted, Gipson searched for a way to find refuge from the cruelty of being black and living in the South and the violence that constantly lurked. Blues music, either through playing or listening, became a way to bring people together where they were accepted and treated equally. Gipson and Gip's Place exhibit two of the foundational elements of blues music.

There are two distinct points about the blues that are relevant for this work. The first is the blues, as a musical genre, and its cultivation by Southern blacks. The blues is deeply rooted and intertwined with the Southern black experience. The second critical point is the blues ethos.

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<sup>107</sup> "A Historical Look Back: Juke Joints" <http://www.sweetgeorgiasjukejoint.com/history.html>. Accessed May 17, 2018.

<sup>108</sup> Jeremy Burgess, "The Gospel of Gip: How Alabama's last juke joint brings us together" *Birmingham Magazine*, February 9, 2017 [https://www.al.com/bhammag/index.ssf/2017/02/the\\_gospel\\_of\\_gip\\_how\\_alabamas.html](https://www.al.com/bhammag/index.ssf/2017/02/the_gospel_of_gip_how_alabamas.html). Accessed January 29, 2019.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

The blues ethos is how the blues felt. Blues is less about the actual song and more about the feeling it evokes. More pointedly, how does that song serve the black community? Adam Gussow described the blues ethos as “a handful of attitudes and strategies for coping gracefully with the worst that life can throw at you.”<sup>110</sup> Blues became a coping method, offering a togetherness, and a way to grieve the individual and the collective horrors suffered for being black in America. LeRoi Jones marked the beginning of blues as the starting point of the American Negro. Jones noted that it was through blues music when blacks began to translate their American experience.<sup>111</sup>

Lyrics are at the heart of a blues song. According to Gussow, blues songs “state a problem, let it simmer and intensify, then pose a provisional solution”<sup>112</sup> using an AAB verse structure that relies on repetition mixed with variation. The verse structure allows a singer to express a feeling once and then repeats that emotion, but in a way that allows them to vary *how* the lyric sounds and what it is meant to emote. The AAB verse is a necessary component of the call-and-response element that is at the crux of a blues performance. The call-and-response is the direct interaction that takes place between a performer and the audience, creating a dialogue. Call-and-response is not a blues tradition, but an African American musical tradition.<sup>113</sup>

The call-and-response in early blues existed between the artist and the instrument. Bessie Smith created a dialogue with her orchestra. The orchestra served to answer the call from Smith. The interaction between singer and instrument was fundamentally different from church music, which created a dialogue between leaders and members. The blues ethos was about merging

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<sup>110</sup> Adam Gussow, “Blues Expressiveness and the Blues Ethos,” *Study the South*, January 24, 2018, 3. <https://southernstudies.olemiss.edu/study-the-south/blues-expressiveness-and-the-blues-ethos/>. Accessed June 16, 2018.

<sup>111</sup> Jones.

<sup>112</sup> Gussow.

<sup>113</sup> Gussow.

traditions of church in a more open, expressive manner. Church was a place for Southern blacks to relinquish their suffering, but it was an institution. Blues was not an institution. It was an experience where “rather than one person suffering quietly and alone, there’s a conversation going on.”<sup>114</sup> Danny Barker, a New Orleans jazz guitarist, compared Smith’s singing to the Southern black church experience; one where preachers could hypnotize an audience and move people with their voice and presence on stage. Blues was an extension of the traditions familiar to blacks. It became a social institution that demanded black pain be heard, be felt, be expressed to heal and to unburden.<sup>115</sup>

During the early part of the twentieth century, blues music offered a path for blacks into mainstream American society. LeRoi Jones observed that it was through the blues “the Negro felt he was a part of that (American) super-structure.”<sup>116</sup> So much of the historical focus on Southern blacks during the 1920s and 1930s originates from how they responded to the conditions created by an oppressive white society. What is discarded in histories is how Southern blacks cultivated a culture that was predicated on black tradition while professionalizing a genre of music they created.

Blues offers a wedge in between, arguably, the two most prominent black thinkers of the early twentieth century, W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington. The individualistic nature of blues aligned with elements of Washington’s philosophy regarding individualistic ethos. Lawrence W. Levine wrote, “the blues allowed individuals greater voice for their individuality than any previous form of Afro-American song”<sup>117</sup> but notes that the blues kept them attached to

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<sup>114</sup> Gussow.

<sup>115</sup> Susan Scott Parrish, *The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

<sup>116</sup> Jones, 87.

<sup>117</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 238.



the larger black community, “still in touch with their peers and their roots.”<sup>118</sup> Blues music was a production of their hands and a connection to their roots, it was a new way to both understand and represent who they were as individuals and a community in the aftermath of emancipation. Blues music was an acquired skill that had practical usefulness and over time white America would appreciate its qualities, but it would always be the communal property of blacks. With respect to DuBois’ philosophy of the ‘talented tenth’ and middle-class blacks, blues music at its roots was too close of a reminder of slavery. The general belief was that in order to gain access to full citizenship and rights there needed to be a conscious step away from black culture that was inherently too black; being tethered to memories of slavery was deemed unnecessary. Jones remarks that the morality of ‘talented-tenth’ was nurtured and cultivated by aspects of white America.<sup>119</sup>

What we observe, historically, is the celebration of the black, predominantly male, writer during the Negro Renaissance. Writers were of the talented tenth caste and could acquiesce themselves to whites through a medium they understood, and largely controlled. Blues music came to fruition not decidedly pro or anti assimilation while maintaining a black attitude upfront. Blues music demonstrated an elasticity and an inclusiveness that a caste system cannot.

The evolution of blues into a recognizable public entertainment resulted in ‘race’ records in the 1920s. Race records were “commercial recordings aimed strictly toward the Negro market (what large companies would call their ‘special products division’ today, in this era of social euphemism).”<sup>120</sup> Race records were, likely, one of the first times that Southern blacks drove a market as consumers. The recording and selling of blues allowed for the growth and

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<sup>118</sup> Levine, 238.

<sup>119</sup> Jones.

<sup>120</sup> Jones, 99.

development of both blues artists and the blues ethos. Race records were such a success because of the phonograph in black homes, in both rural and urban areas. Zora Neale Hurston noted during her anthropology research, in the South in 1927, that the bulk of blacks spent their leisure time around the phonograph.<sup>121</sup> Mahalia Jackson wrote, “Everybody was buying phonographs—the kind you wound up on the side by hand...and everybody had records of all the Negro blues singers.”<sup>122</sup> The phonograph and later the radio were pivotal in the development of the blues ethos because listening to music was not done in isolation; the music was a common thread throughout black communities.

The first hindrance to the blues as a business occurred during the Great Depression. Race records were the first part of the music industry that collapsed, which meant that almost three years would pass without new recordings from black artists. Because of the depression, blues music became less about the professionalism and commercialization because the ability to make money that spurred it to such possibilities had dissipated. Blues music returned to its most organic form, which was blues within black communities via house rent parties and chitterlin’ drags where the music reflected the life that blacks were currently experiencing. Throughout the 1930s, blues was never just one thing; it was the current experience, there were those who sung about less complicated times of the past, and those who would perform in theaters akin to the grandiose times of the previous decade.<sup>123</sup> The blues was never restricted to just the current conditions of blacks, but its power was in how it built a bridge remembering, and in some aspect respecting, the black struggle since slavery. The communal nature of blues meant that black

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<sup>121</sup> Levine.

<sup>122</sup> Mahalia Jackson, *Movin’ On Up* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1966), 29-30.

<sup>123</sup> Jones.

tradition persisted even though the conditions and attitudes of Southern blacks were changing in a post-World War I America.

The history of African Americans in post-World War II America has focused predominately on the activism and civil protests during the 1950s and 1960s. The history, traditionally, has concentrated on grassroot organizational efforts, the use of legal action and the figures who lead such efforts. This condensing and hyper awareness of action has coalesced into a civil rights historiography that has deprived us of a more complete understanding of how most blacks, particularly Southern blacks, leaned into a black cultural consciousness to create and sustain a movement that was not dependent on, or seeking, the support of white Americans.<sup>124</sup>

World War II represents a watershed moment for blackness in America. It became an opportunity to reflect on the conditions of living in America while being black in America. The sheer size of the war commitment meant that blacks had to participate. America needed black Americans. The war presented a chance for blacks to integrate into a mainstream and urbanized American society. When black Americans attempted to participate, segregation persisted. For black Americans it was a reminder of their status as second-class citizens, more so it was confirmation that they never gained the rights of full citizenship. For black America the concept of the 'Double Victory,' fighting for Democracy on two fronts, at home and abroad materialized. Richard M. Dalifume characterized the campaign as representing hope and certainty in the minds of blacks. Hope that the war provided an opportunity to "prick the conscience of white

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<sup>124</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past" *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233-1263; Anders Walker, *The Burning House: Jim Crow and the Making of Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

America”<sup>125</sup> and certainty that a better life would emerge from revolutionary forces throughout the world.<sup>126</sup> What emerged was a change in the psyche of black Americans.

World War II created an environment that allowed black Americans to experience a world beyond American borders while becoming bolder in questioning segregation at home. There was an impassioned generation of black Americans with both the spirit and opportunity to engage in protests and resistance. James Baldwin, E. Franklin Frazier and LeRoi Jones each surmised that World War II marked a change in how blacks related to America; that a hope died, that discrimination would be met with protest, and that blacks were integral to American society and postwar there was a wider bridge for them to establish a presence.<sup>127</sup>

One aspect of the wider bridge was the physical movement of Southern blacks from rural areas to cities throughout the 1940s, a second Great Migration. The exodus, or Great Migration, by black Southerners to the North following World War I has an extensive and deep historiography. The Migration North has been characterized as a land of new opportunity providing better housing, better jobs and better education.<sup>128</sup> The migration of Southern blacks following World War II saw drastic movement into urban areas throughout the U.S. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census from 1940-1950, only five Southern states saw a decrease in the percentage of blacks. In 1950, there were 27 cities with 50,000 or more blacks with 13 of those cities located in Southern states.<sup>129</sup> In the fifteen years following 1940, more than 750,000

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<sup>125</sup> Richard M. Dalifume, “The ‘Forgotten Years’ of the Negro Revolution” *The Journal of American History* 55, no. 1 (June 1968): 90-106, 96.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Dalifume, “The ‘Forgotten Years’ of the Negro Revolution” 1968; LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music That Developed From It* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1963).

<sup>128</sup> Robert W. Stephens, “Soul: A Historical Reconstruction of Continuity and Change in Black Popular Music” *The Black Perspective in Music* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1984): 21-43.

<sup>129</sup> “Negroes in the United States: Their Employment and Economic Status.” United States Department of Labor. Bulletin No. 1119. December 1952.

Southern blacks migrated from the countryside to the city.<sup>130</sup> The end of the 1940s saw for the first time a black urban population in the South exceed the black rural population.<sup>131</sup> The shift in where black people lived is critical to how resistance could manifest across black communities throughout the South.

Mechanization was one of, if not, the singular driving force of blacks leaving their rural communities behind. One consequence was that migration destroyed tight knit communities within rural spaces that were built over generations. When blacks moved to cities, they sought out how to forge similar community bonds within their new urban environment. Migrants relied on networks of family and friends to ease their transition into cities. There were also clubs organized by churches that provided a sense of belonging that made a city feel livable. Learning the boundaries of public spaces was imperative. Knowing and understanding that public spaces “existed as social construction in the minds of its residents.”<sup>132</sup> One of the most reliable sources documenting the experience of migration is through music.

Blues traditions were a constant companion for those who migrated. That is not to suggest that blues represents a monolithic black experience, but rather provides insight into what it meant to migrate. Buddy Guy’s “Stone Crazy” chronicled the experience of moving North only to end up moving back South because the weather was more suitable for his clothes and Roosevelt Sykes’s “Southern Blues” is about having the Southern blues and wanting to leave Chicago and Detroit for Old Dixieland.<sup>133</sup> The blues informs us that Jim Crow did not entirely

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<sup>130</sup> David Goldfield, “The Urban Crusade: Race, Culture and Power in the American South since 1945” *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 42, no. 2 The South (1997): 181-195.

<sup>131</sup> David Goldfield, *Region, Race, and Cities: Interpreting the Urban South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997).

<sup>132</sup> Luther Adams, *Way Up North in Louisville: African-American Migration in the Urban South, 1930-1970* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 63.

<sup>133</sup> Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

define the black Southern experience. The South was a place of family, friends, traditions and culture where blacks cultivated their identity.<sup>134</sup> Blues was familiar during a time of rapid change. As blacks became more comfortable and familiar in cities, the music changed to reflect their city living. Urban living marked the end of a certain loneliness that had long personified blues, which meant that the sound of black music could not remain passive.

The move to Southern cities did not just alter how blacks lived their lives, the move to cities fundamentally changed the sound of black music and in turn the attitudes of Southern blacks. During the 1940s, black secular music underwent a change and what emerged was rhythm and blues. Nelson George wrote that in the 1940s the ‘rhythm and blues’ moniker was used to describe a synthesis of black music—gospel, blues, big-band swing—that was infused with the electric bass.<sup>135</sup> LeRoi Jones wrote that ‘rhythm and blues’ was an exclusive music that manifested as a “further development of the growing urban tradition”<sup>136</sup> describing the music as “kind of frenzy and extra-local vulgarity”<sup>137</sup> that was never present in older forms of blues music. Richard J. Ripani echoed Jones’ sentiment that rhythm and blues had its home in black communities while noting that the sound was more urban than rural.<sup>138</sup> Arnold Shaw described ‘rhythm and blues’ as being “black ghetto music”<sup>139</sup> that originated in black churches across America, black bands of swing, and the segregation of cities. Rhythm and blues represent a living, organic maturation of the process when Southern blacks began to own their sense of

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<sup>134</sup> Adams.

<sup>135</sup> Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm & Blues* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988).

<sup>136</sup> LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music That Developed From It* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1963), 169.

<sup>137</sup> Jones, 171.

<sup>138</sup> Richard J. Ripani, *The New Blue Music: Changes in Rhythm & Blues, 1950-1999* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006).

<sup>139</sup> Arnold Shaw, *Honkers and Shouters: The Golden Years of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1978), xvi.

identity in public spaces in urban, Southern, America. Rhythm and blues became the outlet of group-oriented communication and expression.<sup>140</sup>

At its core, rhythm and blues is an advancement of gospel and blues music. Its primary function and value are that it serves the greater, black community. In the 1940s, instruments amplified the music. During the 1950s, a rhythm section emerged and the 1960s saw the integration of horns. Both sound and physical movement became components of the music. Rhythm and blues is just louder, but not just loud in a live setting but loud with the intent of being lively even when heard via recording. In a very literal way, rhythm and blues mimicked the change in attitude of blacks while reinforcing their commitment to their roots and traditions. It marked continued progress at the halfway point of the century. Rhythm and blues is a secular music that could not separate itself from its conception in black churches and it did not want to sever that connection. Rhythm and blues marked an identifiable sound that intentionally was something else. It did so by embracing the social schisms of post-WWII America.<sup>141</sup>

Richard Wright in his work *12 Million Black Voices* surmised that America thought they knew who black folks were while concluding, “We are not what we seem.”<sup>142</sup> Wright continues by acknowledging, “Our outward guise still carries the old familiar aspect which three hundred years of oppression in America have given us, but beneath...lies an uneasily tied knot of pain and hope whose snarled strands converge from many points of time and space.”<sup>143</sup> The shift in music during the 1940s was a beginning point for how black Americans could use their peripheral status to their advantage and on their own terms. Music became an open arena for

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<sup>140</sup> Levine.

<sup>141</sup> Jones, *Blues People*; Stephens, “Soul: A Historical Reconstruction of Continuity and Change in Black Popular Music.”

<sup>142</sup> Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1941), 10.

<sup>143</sup> Wright, 11.

resistance even as blacks found themselves making strides within American society. The South's industrial and urban development demanded that black culture change in some capacity. By proxy it created the climate for rhythm and blues emerging. The music came because of the increased ghettos the increased purchasing power of blacks.<sup>144</sup>

The activism of black Americans has focused on how they responded to the overt, or subtle, discrimination that has consistently intruded on their ability to just live. Radio had a profound impact on the lives of Southern blacks. The access to radio had significant influence on how Southern blacks could communicate with others who were not within their immediate communities. Valerie Grim wrote that radio "came to symbolize hope"<sup>145</sup> by allowing blacks to feel less isolated and allowing them to rejoice in the success of other blacks. It took Southern blacks approximately two decades to own radios at the same rate as Southern whites, but owning a radio held significance for them. According to the 1930 census in the rural South only 9.2 percent of households had a radio. The census also showed that only 2.2 percent of Southern black families owned a radio. Even among higher populated cities, the percentage among blacks that owned a radio set topped at 3.7 percent in Memphis, 3.3 percent in New Orleans and 3.2 percent in Atlanta.<sup>146</sup> The 1940 census indicates that there was not a tremendous jump in the number of black households, both rural and urban, that owned a radio with just under 30 percent of households owning a radio set. Prior to 1950, a radio set was a luxury item that most families could not afford. In 1930, the average cost of a radio set was \$78 and in 1940, it was \$38.<sup>147</sup> The 1950 census was less specific in detailing radio ownership, but we know that throughout the

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<sup>144</sup> Shaw.

<sup>145</sup> Valerie Grim, 126.

<sup>146</sup> Steve Craig, "How America Adopted Radio: Demographic Differences in Set Ownership Reported in the 1930-1950 U.S. Censuses" *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 48, no. 2 (June 2004): 179-195.

<sup>147</sup> For reference, the relative value of \$78 in 1930 is about \$1,170 in 2018. The relative value of \$38 in 1940 is about \$680. Samuel H. Williamson, "Seven Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.S. Dollar Amount, 1774 to present," *MeasuringWorth*, 2018.



South 91.7 percent of households owned a radio. We also know that in 1950 the average cost of a radio was \$26 making it more affordable in a postwar America that saw blacks earning higher wages in the South.<sup>148</sup> When Southern blacks were able to afford radios, they bought them at almost the same rate of whites.

Black oriented radio emerged in conjunction with the Civil Rights Movement during the 1950s and 1960s. Earnestine Jenkins wrote that black radio was the “most important mass medium in black communities throughout the south during the height of segregation.”<sup>149</sup> Brian Ward said of black oriented radio that it both defined and legitimized the value of black culture in sharing music, oral traditions, foods, and acknowledging the achievements of leaders and celebrities.<sup>150</sup> WDIA, a Memphis station, adopted an all-black programming format. The decision by owners John R. Pepper and Bert Ferguson was driven by profit. Pepper and Ferguson recognized the potential dollars of the black market and then exclusively hired black on-air staff, so black listeners would identify with the voices they heard. Nathaniel (Nat) D. Williams, a legendary disc jockey at WDIA, said of Pepper and Ferguson, “they are businessmen. They don’t necessarily like Negroes. They make that clear. But they do love progress and they are willing to pay the price to make progress.”<sup>151</sup> The success of WDIA shows us the influence of the black consumer dollar and their willingness to support a black product; that product being the voice/personality of black disc jockeys and rhythm and blues music. It was an exclusively black product. The success of WDIA led to an expansion of black oriented programming throughout

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<sup>148</sup> For reference, the relative value of \$26 in 1950 is about \$271 in 2018. Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Earnestine Jenkins, “The Voice of Memphis: WDIA, Nat D. Williams, and Black Radio Culture in the Early Civil Rights Era,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 254-267, 254.

<sup>150</sup> Brian Ward, *Radio and the Struggle For Civil Rights in the South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004).

<sup>151</sup> Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 33.

the South. By the early 1950s, most of the major Southern cities had at least one black oriented radio station and by 1956, there were 28 radio stations, largely in the South, that had adopted the all-black programming format<sup>152</sup> with another 36 stations broadcasting at least 30 hours a week for black audiences.<sup>153</sup>

Radio stations, in the South, dedicating time to black audiences is arguably the first real instance of Southern blacks being able to claim meaningful public space. Radio became the medium where black culture became accessible to mainstream America, but it was not in service of a mainstream audience. Black radio programming represents a new beginning in the relationship between black culture, black conscious and black consumers. Prior to radio, such a relationship would have existed through the black church or black newspapers. While both have long served the needs of black communities, both were limited in scope of audience and both required the active participation of going to church or having access to a local black newspaper.<sup>154</sup>

The emergence of rhythm and blues made transparent what W. E. B. DuBois' called the "double consciousness," but through the means of vocal expression. There was the underlying acceptance of a new black urban culture that continued to exist both outside and alongside white culture, with little overlap in public spaces because of legalized segregation. The music captured the essence of the evolving black experience that was neither static nor monolithic. Rhythm and blues prioritized the current black experience and those who embodied it. The music offered a national and regional distinction of black consciousness that "helped to revitalize and reshape a sense of common identity which had been severely strained by the successive black migrations

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<sup>152</sup> Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>153</sup> Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*.

<sup>154</sup> Adams, *Way Up North in Louisville*; Neal, *What the Music Said*.

of the first half of the century.”<sup>155</sup> Such an approach allowed for new opportunities at creating dialogue between different types of black people.

What makes rhythm and blues transformative is how the music was able to transcend mediums while not losing the character of the music. Radio and radio personalities demonstrated that there was a demand for dialogue between different types of black people and different black voices. These conversations were between the disc jockeys, the music and those who listened. Another crucial development was the popularization of the jukebox. The jukebox experienced a surge in demand during the 1940s that continued into the 1950s. Arnold Shaw noted that the jukebox “became a vital recreational facility”<sup>156</sup> for the younger generation of high school and college students. During the 1930s and 1940s jukeboxes were associated with unseemly places like bars and brothels, places that were frequented, mostly, by adults. It was during the 1950s that a change in audience and location took place. The jukebox became a facet of restaurants where a younger generation would congregate to spend time together while listening to music. Rhythm and blues music belonged in public spaces just as much as it did on radio. That malleability led to rhythm and blues being on television as well.

Rhythm and blues became the first black music to emerge that was genuinely accessible to most Southern blacks. It was the music featured on radio. Rhythm and blues is not a dilution of blues music, but rather a sonic evolution that prioritized “group and joy music.”<sup>157</sup> The psychology of rhythm and blues is distinct in that it became a way for blacks to enjoy a new notion of freedom for both a younger generation and working-class black people. Julian Bond

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<sup>155</sup> Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 36.

<sup>156</sup> Arnold Shaw, *Honkers and Shouters: The Golden Years of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1978), 128.

<sup>157</sup> Shaw, xvi.

described rhythm and blues as “low-class music, it was wild music, it was sexual music, it was ‘dirty’ music...it was the most glamorous life in the world.”<sup>158</sup> Similar to blues during the 1920s and 1930s, the black middle class who believed it was too lowbrow and vulgar originally shunned rhythm and blues.<sup>159</sup>

What is different between blues and rhythm and blues is that there was no veil for rhythm and blues to hide behind as it grew into mainstream music. The fact that rhythm and blues was widely disparaged by segments of white and black Southerners gave it meaning beyond just a song with horns. How much the music mattered to a generation of Southern blacks who were born during the Great Depression and then grew up during World War II gives some insight into their lives and their mindset. Rhythm and blues came when Southern blacks were more willing to confront societal structures that had long oppressed them. Rhythm and blues in making both Southern blacks and whites uncomfortable while creating a generational schism amongst blacks shows that there was a new Negro and that music could be and would be a mechanism that could formulate resistance outside of the conventional understanding.

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<sup>158</sup> Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1986), 5.

<sup>159</sup> Shaw.

### CHAPTER THREE: WHEN THE PRAISE GOES UP

African American gospel music was described by J. Jerome Zolten as an “artistic expression born out of the need for both audience and performer to dissipate stress, foster hope, and renew the spirit in the face of ongoing oppression.”<sup>160</sup> In the years following World War II, black gospel music emerged as a popular form of music that would come to exist outside the confines of church. In congruence with the emergence of mass media, such as radio and television broadcasts, black gospel music became big business for artists, consumers, and record companies. This infusion of gospel music with greater secular society came as a result of drastic changes that occurred with the both the sound and aesthetic of gospel music. The evolution of sound relied more heavily on rhythm and the piano, which allowed for more hand clapping and foot tapping with the beat. The change in sound led to changes in how gospel singers performed. Performers conveyed greater emotion, moved around on stage and were looking to share their songs with audiences.<sup>161</sup> Gospel music became the collaborative music between artists and audiences.

The black gospel music that began to thrive throughout the 1940s needs to be understood within the context of the spirituals. The spirituals were first used by slaves prior to the Civil War and then carried on by freed blacks to express how they felt about the environment in which they lived. The songs were originally a way for slaves to express their religious beliefs in a way that was deemed acceptable while enslaved. Spirituals “commented on their love for God, desire for freedom, total disdain for the institution of slavery, and plans for secret meetings or escape...”<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> J. Jerome Zolten, “The Media-Driven Evolution of the African American Hard Gospel Style as a Rhetorical Response to Hard Times” *The Howard Journal of Communications* 7 (1996): 185-203, 185.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Joyce Marie Jackson, “The Changing Nature of Gospel Music: A Southern Case Study” *African American Review* 20, No. 2 Special Issues on The Music (Summer 1995): 185-200, 187.

Spirituals were a group event where people were involved by dancing, singing, shouting or providing rhythm by clapping hands or foot stomping. The group participation of the spiritual invokes the same fundamental structure of the call-and-response that has been a steadfast feature of the black musical tradition. The singing of spirituals illustrates how blacks, particularly those in the South, articulated “their definition, understanding, and interpretation of the world that surrounded them.”<sup>163</sup> Modern day black gospel music is a continuation of the larger black musical tradition that is reflective of the black experience.<sup>164</sup> Though there are evolutions of gospel music, sonically its greater purpose functions much in the same way the spirituals did for those enslaved and then those living in the antebellum South.

In the early part of the twentieth century there were two archetypes of churches that Southern blacks attended. There were mainstream establishment churches that were attended by those in the middle-class and then there were smaller, storefront churches that did not have the same constraints as mainstream denominations. Joyce Marie Jackson compared these storefront churches to ‘praise houses’ during the time of slavery where “their official doctrine encouraged a freedom of expression which was manifested in spontaneous testimonies, prayers, and praises from individuals.”<sup>165</sup> Musically, most congregations still did not incorporate instruments into their worship. There were some churches that did employ tambourines or guitars, but neither pianos or choirs existed as part of church singing during this time. The singing was done a cappella keeping in line with the folk tradition. What was transformative about gospel music during the early decades of the twentieth century was the physicality that went into the performance becoming “the foundation of the new gospel music performance style.”<sup>166</sup> The

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<sup>163</sup> Jackson, 188.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Jackson, 189.

<sup>166</sup> Jackson, 189.

emphasis on incorporating the full body into worship practices originated from the Holiness and Pentecostal churches, two storefront denominations.

In the introduction to his text *The Fire Spreads*, historian Randall J. Stephens writes that the origins of Holiness and Pentecostalism “in the U.S. South from the last quarter of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century remains untold...”<sup>167</sup> For the purpose of this work, the intent is to understand how the Southern holiness and Pentecostal movements became the incubator of black gospel music.<sup>168</sup> The black Holiness movement in the South emerged in Arkansas and the Mississippi Delta in the late 1800s becoming “the fastest growing branch of black religion during the twentieth century.”<sup>169</sup> The black Holiness movement was described by Calvin White Jr. as “a conservative religious reaction against those who sought to modernize and refine religious traditions as a part of the racial uplift movement.”<sup>170</sup> Both the Holiness and Pentecostal movement were attractive alternatives to poor, rural blacks who held closer ties and valued traditional forms of worship. Traditional worship included “loud singing, shouting, and dancing”<sup>171</sup> all elements that put an emphasis on exuberant emotion and worship that includes the entire body. The main aspects of the Holiness and Pentecostal tradition that informed and influenced modern gospel music is twofold. The first being that because it existed outside the scope of pleasing others it did not abide by the social codes of the mainstream churches, which meant “their meetings were frequently racially integrated, wild, and loud.”<sup>172</sup> Holiness and

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<sup>167</sup> Randall J. Stephens, *The Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> John M. Giggie, “The African-American Holiness Movement” *Society* 44, No. 1 (November/December 2006): 50-59, 51.

<sup>170</sup> Calvin White Jr., “In the Beginning, There Stood Two: Arkansas Roots of the Black Holiness Movement” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* LXVIII, No. 1 (Spring 2009): 1-22, 8.

<sup>171</sup> White Jr., 16.

<sup>172</sup> Stephens, 9.

Pentecostals members supported “upbeat tempos and emphatic rhythms,”<sup>173</sup> which attracted a broader audience to services. The music brought outsiders to their services. The other vital component is that during the early part of the twentieth century black sanctified performers had incorporated instruments and elements of popular secular music into their sacred music.

Stephens notes that “jazz trumpeters, boogie-woogie pianists, and jug bands”<sup>174</sup> led worship in Holiness and Pentecostal churches throughout the South. It was in the Southern black Holiness and Pentecostal churches that the integration of secular and sacred music began to coalesce.

Sanctified music did not officially crossover into a form of popular music until the “Father of Gospel Music” reimagined what gospel music could sound like and who it could serve.

In the 1930s, Thomas A. Dorsey spearheaded the development of black gospel music. Before Dorsey dedicated himself to gospel music, he was a blues pianist who went by the name “Georgia Tom” and played alongside blues legends Ma Rainey and Tampa Red.<sup>175</sup> Dorsey’s family moved from rural Georgia to Atlanta to escape sharecropping. It would be on Decatur Street in Atlanta, a black commercial district, that would come to shape Dorsey as a musician. It was in Decatur where Dorsey first experienced vaudeville theaters and it was seeing these performers that lead him to believe that music was his way to get his family out of poverty. He got a job working at the theater Eighty-One and began to make friends with the piano players who performed for the moving picture shows. Dorsey would go home and practice the songs he heard, playing the organ his family owned. In 1916, Dorsey relocated to Chicago so he could pursue a career in music. During that time, there were opportunities working in blues music, so Dorsey began composing blues songs and then selling his songs to publishing companies. Dorsey

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<sup>173</sup> Jerma A. Jackson, *Singing In My Soul: Black Gospel Music in A Secular Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2004), 50.

<sup>174</sup> Stephens, 255.

<sup>175</sup> Jackson.



did not fully devote himself to sacred music until 1932 after he survived a serious illness while touring with Ma Rainey. Jerma A. Jackson described Dorsey's illness and its effect "unleashed a profound spiritual crisis that fundamentally changed his life and convinced him to turn to sacred work."<sup>176</sup> What was unique about Dorsey's new found commitment to his faith was that he did not shun secular music, but instead chose to utilize the skills of a blues musician opting to create a new kind of sacred music.<sup>177</sup>

At the heart of Dorsey's gospel was that he wanted his songs to reflect strong emotional expression. The style of gospel music Dorsey chose to pursue, most closely, resembled the style that had existed in Holiness and Pentecostal churches. Dorsey's goal was for a blues styles of gospel music to be played in main denominational black churches. In 1932 at the Pilgrim Baptist Church, where Dorsey was a member, he was asked by the minister Junius C. Austin to organize a gospel choir in the hopes of attracting more people to the church during the Great Depression. Gospel choirs were not a common thing in established churches, but the choir added a foot tapping element that immediately got members to participate in service while also attracting new parishioners. What Dorsey and the gospel choir brought to the traditional hymns was the rhythm of jazz by playing the piano. It was a change in sound not immediately accepted by the Baptist leadership who did not believe Dorsey's style of sacred music served religious purposes.

Dorsey's gospel music "focused on the individual joys and sorrows that so infused blues music, and they were rendered with a polished professionalism that eliminated the rough edges so common among blues and sanctified singers."<sup>178</sup> Dorsey wanted more black Baptist churches to accept his style of gospel music and so he began to publish his songs as sheet music. To

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<sup>176</sup> Jackson, 54.

<sup>177</sup> Jackson.

<sup>178</sup> Jackson, 52.

showcase his music Dorsey “organized gospel singing groups to demonstrate his songs on street corners, over the radio, and at the annual meetings of the National Baptist Convention”<sup>179</sup> in addition to writing to church leaders around Chicago to gain their support. By publishing his songs Dorsey identified that gospel music could represent corporate opportunities for black Americans; through publishing, composing, selling and promoting gospel music Dorsey “created in gospel an economic vehicle that unlike the urban blues, could be contained within the black community.”<sup>180</sup> Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the business of gospel music belonged to Dorsey and some other, smaller scale entrepreneurs. The professionalization of gospel music became Dorsey’s way of doing meaningful work that promoted faith and worship, finding a method that brought people to church and got them to engage in worship. His style of gospel music served the people.<sup>181</sup>

The strongest influence of the blues on Dorsey’s gospel compositions was that the songs reflected his own personal experiences. Lawrence W. Levine described Dorsey’s music by saying, “if his music came from the entire black world around him, his lyrics came from the hope of the Christian message”<sup>182</sup> and it was that innate ability to interweave secular tempo with sacred lyrics that guided his approach to gospel music. Dorsey’s believed that rhythm had long been an aspect of black heritage, so it was natural for rhythm and sacred to coexist. An intended consequence of rhythm was that movement became an essential element to the songs. The inclusion of rhythms elicited physical and emotional responses from listeners. Joan Isbelle described Dorsey’s songs as “spirit filled”<sup>183</sup> and it became known that a Dorsey beat caused

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<sup>179</sup> Jackson, 58.

<sup>180</sup> Marc Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 38.

<sup>181</sup> Jackson.

<sup>182</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 183.

<sup>183</sup> Jackson, 64.

people to shout, run, tap their feet and clap their hands. Through gospel music's popularity during the 1930s expressive worship became increasingly more common at the mainstream black churches, which had long been central to black culture. Because Dorsey wrote from personal experience there was no direct tie to any specific religious doctrine, which meant his music could exist in different religious spaces and hold meaning for a variety of people, whether they believed or not. The foundation of his music was the Bible where Dorsey's songs "revolved around the application of broad Christian principles in everyday life."<sup>184</sup> Dorsey's belief was grounded in the willingness to hold onto his faith during the most difficult moments. "Take My Hand, Precious Lord" is, arguably, his most well-known song and was written after his wife and unborn son died. The song finds Dorsey asking God to guide him through such a hard time:

"Precious Lord, take my hand,  
Lead me on, let me stand,  
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;  
Through the storm, through the night."<sup>185</sup>

At his lowest point, unsure if he can continue moving forward Dorsey is asking God to lead him and guide him by the hand. The intimacy of his lyrics reflects his personal relationship with God and the active role God had in his faith. Dorsey's music cannot be characterized in biblical themes, but in his own journey, which is at once extremely personal while simultaneously accessible to people who have either suffered great loss or who are struggling to get through. There is very much an emphasis on the person and not just the divine. Dorsey in "Take My Hand, Precious Lord" shows the relationship that exists between humanity and the divine, believing that by working together there will be a way through to the other side. Dorsey's style

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<sup>184</sup> Jackson, 66.

<sup>185</sup> Thomas A. Dorsey, "Take My Hand, Precious Lord" *Warner-tamerlane Publishing Corp., Unichappell Music Inc., Warner Chappell Music France*, 1932.

of personal and purposeful allowed gospel music to boom in popularity outside of churches and across denominations.<sup>186</sup> It was both the musical approach and business acumen of Dorsey that provided the conditions for “the renewed influence of the black church”<sup>187</sup> during the 1950s and 1960s; specifically during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, as gospel music emerged as the music of the movement.

Gospel music is personified by the sense of hope and affirmation. If black music is meant to serve black communities, since the late 1940s gospel music has reflected a general change of attitudes among blacks and their place within American society. The radio was a big influence on the popularization of black gospel music. Radio allowed gospel music to exist within black culture. It was because radios were accessible that live gospel shows were able to reach wider audiences and listeners were able to interact with a type of music that maybe existed outside their immediate communities. In 1942, the radio station, WLAC which was a 50,000-watt clear channel station that could be heard throughout the South, was how gospel quartet the Fairfield Four gained notoriety by playing in a morning spot on the station. It was through performances on WLAC that the Fairfield Four became known within black communities.<sup>188</sup> The Fairfield Four “built their song texts around themes that had great appeal and often utilitarian value”<sup>189</sup> to black audiences, but audiences now had certain expectations for how gospel music ought to be performed. The music and performers were expected to take audiences on a journey. The Fairfield Four opted to often begin their songs at a slower tempo before they would gradually pick up the tempo, which fit the modern style of gospel music.

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<sup>186</sup> Jackson.

<sup>187</sup> Neal, 37.

<sup>188</sup> Zolten.

<sup>189</sup> Zolten, 193.

Quartets and the idea of a lead singer, like Sam Cooke with the Soul Stirrers, began to develop around this time. The soloist represented a further evolution of gospel music. Lead singers took on the responsibility of dramatizing their vocals with things like the shout cry or they would improvise speaking parts invoking testimonies like preachers.<sup>190</sup> With respect to performing, we can observe continuity from spirituals, work songs, blues and the Sanctified church in using the cries and hollers that accompanied black music. The music functions best when it works with the people. Though gospel music was professionalized by way of sheet music, improvisation remained at the heart of the music.<sup>191</sup> A feeling cannot be predetermined nor forced, and modern gospel music was less constricting and concerned with adhering to acceptable behavior. It was about establishing a meaningful connection.

Black gospel music would not be what it is without the influence of spirituals, work songs, blues or jazz music. Black gospel music would likely not exist in its current iteration without the Holiness or Pentecostal churches, respectively. While our current understanding of music within the Holiness and Pentecostal movements is still in its infancy, we know that these denominations were at the forefront of accepting a gospel music that was high energy and encouraged freedom of expression or catching ‘the spirit.’ For artists like Mahalia Jackson it was local Holiness churches that introduced her to a different style of music that would alter her own personal relationship with music. Jackson found a freedom in improvising as she sung or using the power of her body to create beats and rhythms, or a willingness to get eye level with her audience as she was performing. Her commitment to performing was in stark contrast with what she had seen at the Baptist church she regularly attended.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Jackson.

<sup>191</sup> Levine.

<sup>192</sup> Levine.

There is a continuation that exists within black music, one that is valued by both artists and audiences in that the music is meant to serve and represent black people. The reimagining of gospel music and the hope it offered to people after the Great Depression and World War II was a musical response to the despair of the blues. It is the hope and joy and willingness to freely expression emotions that would become staples of rhythm and blues music in the 1950s and 1960s.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RHYTHM AND BLUES COMES OF AGE

Understanding black Southern identity is not about seeking out a monolithic black Southern experience. Studying black Southern identity is an opportunity to step away from singular narratives in favor of analyzing how being both black and from the South have led to a fluid experience with identity. It rejects the idea that there is a separation between being black and being a Southerner. The work now ought to show the black Southerner. It should be a proactive pursuit to find spaces where black Southern identity, naturally, exists not just in response to the behavior of white Southerners throughout the twentieth century.

One way to expand that concept is to seek out spaces that have prioritized and valued the black Southern experience. Showing the merging of person and geography in how one expresses themselves; that the uniqueness of the South extends to blacks. Another area to examine are instances where there is an intersection of blacks and whites, but where the value of Southern blacks is not dependent on or seeking the support of whites. It is the latter reason why rhythm and blues could offer a point of study in black Southern identity in the immediate aftermath of World War II and through the Civil Rights Movement. The emergence of rhythm and blues stemming from both blues and gospel aligns with a generation of black Southerners who expressed their sense of self in ways that were decidedly different than previous generations. We have been slower in seeking out other avenues in understanding the complexity of black Southern identity and the many experiences and influences that came to shape their understanding of self with respect to the South.

In examining the intersection of rhythm and blues music and black Southern identity the intent is to pursue a method of understanding outside of the traditional primary sources. The purpose in pursuing rhythm and blues music is that the music itself was accessible, that it had an

audience with both blacks and whites, and that while the genre existed beyond the South, its foundational characteristics stem from the black musical tradition of the South. In pursuing these sources, it allows for the Civil Rights Movement to be a part of the discussion without it being the lone narrative.

To accommodate the size of this work it was necessary to prioritize rhythm and blues artists where the intersection of their music and the South was direct. Those artists are: Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, and Nina Simone. The music of these artists demonstrates how blackness and the South coalesced into the music they created. Each artist had moments where their career existed outside the height of the larger Civil Rights Movement, but each chose their moments to engage with the Movement. Having those points of engagement, in this work, is less about how active they were and more to the broader point of understanding and examining the spectrum of black Southern identity, with the intent to understand the influence of region in their music.

Ray Charles was born in Albany, Georgia in 1930. Sam Cooke was born in Clarksdale, Mississippi in 1931. Nina Simone was born in Tyron, North Carolina in 1933. Of the three only Cooke grew up outside the South; his family moved to Chicago in 1933. Cooke's inclusion in this work is due to his pedigree and influence on rhythm and blues as a genre. Cooke is considered one of the most important singers who has ever sung rhythm and blues. Cooke's influence exists as a vocalist, as a performer, and as a businessman. Most of our understanding of how rhythm and blues developed as a genre is due to Cooke. Cooke, within the context of this work, shows how the relationship with the black South is not solely based in the geography of the South, it is an essence. Cooke's family was one of millions that migrated from the South to the North, but it does not mean that their sense of Southern dissipated because they were no



longer physically living in the South.<sup>193</sup> Sam Cooke's father, Charles Cook, was a Baptist minister and it was through the church choir where Cooke discovered and nurtured his talent for singing. Cooke's early singing career was in gospel music and being part of gospel groups; as a teenager in Teen Highway QCs and later joining the Soul Stirrers in 1950. His years dedicated to gospel music would influence how he sang his own secular songs when he shifted to popular music in the mid-1950s.<sup>194</sup>

Ray Charles autobiography, *Brother Ray*, begins with an early proclamation when he writes, "let me say right here and now that I'm a country boy. And, man, I mean the real *backwoods!* That's at the start of the thing, and that's the heart of the thing."<sup>195</sup> Charles claim on being a country boy was a source of pride throughout his life. Being a black boy and young man in the South was integral to how Charles understood the purpose of music and informed how he played and created music as an adult. Charles was introduced to music at the Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church in Greenville, Florida where "Church was simple: Preacher sang or recited, and the congregation sang right back at him... That's how I got my first religion and my first music."<sup>196</sup> In Greenville, Florida where Charles and his mother lived, Mr. Pit's 'Red Wing Café' was at the center of the black community. Two prominent features of the café were a piano and a jukebox and it these two items shaped the rest of Charles' life.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1986); Bruce Eder, "Sam Cooke Artist Biography" <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/sam-cooke-mn0000238115/biography>

<sup>194</sup> Eder.

<sup>195</sup> Ray Charles and David Ritz, *Brother Ray: Ray Charles' Own Story* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1978), 3.

<sup>196</sup> Charles and Ritz, 7.

<sup>197</sup> Charles and Ritz.

What Nina Simone most remembered about the early years of her life were “tied up with food and music”<sup>198</sup> with her social life revolving around the church. For Simone church was her introduction to music and would become the foundation of who she became as an artist. Simone, in *I Put a Spell on You*, explained “church taught me rhythm, and it’s been a vital part of my music ever since.”<sup>199</sup> While Simone’s family were Methodists it was the music at the Holiness church that she found most attractive; the Holiness church was frequented by both blacks and whites who were lower class. Simone wrote she attended the Holiness services each week to get into the beat of the music, describing the music as “having incredible rhythm, it sounded like it came straight out of Africa.”<sup>200</sup> It is this type of detail that shows how music can circumvent certain societal norms while also showcasing how black music evolved to fit current conditions.<sup>201</sup>

Brian Ward, in *Just My Soul Responding*, described gospel music as a “breathtaking expressive freedom”<sup>202</sup> and it is the expressive freedom that is embedded throughout rhythm and blues. Simone said that, “gospel taught me about improvisation, how to shape music in response to an audience and then how to shape the mood of the audience to my music.”<sup>203</sup> One of the main reasons for including rhythm and blues as a primary source in examining black Southern identity is that this music feels as if it is the property of black people. Rhythm and blues could exist at

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<sup>198</sup> Nina Simone and Stephen Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You: The Autobiography of Nina Simone* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 7.

<sup>199</sup> Simone and Cleary, 17.

<sup>200</sup> Simone and Cleary, 17.

<sup>201</sup> Michael Battle, *The Black Church in America: African American Christian Spirituality* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2006); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken, 1966); C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

<sup>202</sup> Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 184.

<sup>203</sup> Simone and Cleary, 19.

multiple levels by embodying “diversity, ambiguities and paradoxes of the black experience in America, as well as its common features, certainties and essences.”<sup>204</sup> It also, quite literally, creates an active and fluid dialogue between a performer and audience that does not translate to literature.

Rhythm and blues came to the forefront of popular music at a time when a generation of blacks and whites throughout the South were yearning to engage. Rhythm and blues offered a collective sense of pride in black culture while also showcasing a plethora of individual identities. In examining the works of Cooke, Charles, and Simone you can identify their work, their tone, their styles. They did not compromise their sense of self or the collective black culture to make rhythm and blues, instead they found ways to bridge the gap between the traditional and contemporary. For the generation of Cooke, Charles, and Simone the natural thing was to blend the sacred and secular within their music. There was an understanding that gospel and blues music had blurred the lines and they chose to lean into both, embracing the qualities and meaning of both sounds. That sounds of gospel, blues and even jazz was the black South in America.<sup>205</sup>

What we have seen in the study of rhythm and blues in post-World War II America has been a hyper fixation on how the conditions of the South influenced the development of rhythm and blues. Texts vary on the intersection of black culture, black consciousness, and race relations during the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>206</sup> There are works fixated on the relationship between rhythm and

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<sup>204</sup> Ward, 183.

<sup>205</sup> Ward.

<sup>206</sup> David Brackett, “The Politics and Practice of ‘Crossover’ in American Popular Music, 1963 to 1965” *The Musical Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 774-797; Charles Joyner, “A Region in Harmony: Southern Music and the Sound Track of Freedom” *The Journal of Southern History* 72, no. 1 (February 2006): 3-38; Portia K. Maultsby, “Soul Music: Its Sociological and Significance in American Popular Culture” *Journal of Popular Culture* 17, no. 2 (Fall 1983): 51-60.

blues and the Civil Rights Movement. The participation and influence of artists and songs in helping or hindering the work for racial equality and to what extent, if any, rhythm and blues played in softening race relations between blacks and whites in public spaces throughout the South. The South is a focal point because it is often the sight of visible racial tensions during the 1950s and 1960s, but what has been lacking is a broader awareness that the musical foundations of artists developed among a variety of black communities and different personal backgrounds and yet there is a familiarity to their roots. That reflects an identity more so than a movement.

One of the main influences in wanting to analyze black Southern identity through rhythm and blues is that music exists outside of intellectual discourse, unlike literature, about how blacks have coped and found joy in being from the South. The purpose of rhythm and blues was not to judge the merit of other genres of black popular music and for the artists it was not about being *the* sole voice. In a lot of respects, it was the contrary; for the artists it was about grappling with personal afflictions and finding a release, not the notion that any one song could mitigate how people felt. Rhythm and blues celebrated the act of feeling.

Cooke's connections with gospel are the most obvious because of the years he spent as a member of the Soul Stirrers from 1951 till the release of "You Send Me" in 1957. Cooke's early secular music was teen pop, which meant he rarely showcased the vocal prowess that made him such an emotive gospel singer. In 1964, appearing on Dick Clark's *American Bandstand* Cooke said that he shifted from singing spirituals to popular music due to his "economic situation."<sup>207</sup> Marc Neal wrote of Cooke's musical transition that it was a recognition of economic opportunities within the tradition of popular black music. Cooke, like Charles and Simone, would come home to his roots of gospel music to find that sense of soul. Rhythm and blues

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<sup>207</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=exDghW1nyNc>. Quote is at 0:32.

relied on gospel, from the emotive and expressive vocal runs to the ongoing dialogue that came to exist between artists and audiences making performances feel like collaborations. Cooke never abandoned that core black audience who had first heard and supported him singing gospel music and he honored that bond throughout his career.<sup>208</sup>

To find Cooke's gospel you need to find the man himself. Cooke's gospel is subdued on the recorded versions of his songs but comes alive when you hear him performing live. In the live version of "Bring It on Home to Me" Cooke begins in a way that is reminiscent to a preacher warming up his congregation. He starts with a

"Lord, have mercy and I begin to feel alright now" and in the background you hear the audience ready, eager to follow him. He continues "I feel like I can tell you about my baby right now. I feel you in a mood for me to tell you about my baby right now."<sup>209</sup>

Interspersed among this talk/sing you hear him let out a chuckle. It is that familiar call-and-response between Cooke and his audience. The real improvisation comes when he delves into an exchange with the operator as he tries to get his 'baby' on the phone.

"I say who is this. Someone says this is the operator. I say I don't want the operator. I want my baaaby. Ooperator I want my baby. And finally, the operator got my baby on the telephone."<sup>210</sup>

As Cooke takes us on this journey of trying to speak with his baby, the instruments in the background are building along with him, and the audience is getting invested. Cooke then leads us back to a familiar place as he begins to croon "You Send Me." Cooke never delves fully into the song; he instead chooses to *sing* the words "You Send Me" over and over and over. Then

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<sup>208</sup> Marc Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>209</sup> Sam Cooke, *Bring It on Home to Me* BMG Music, 1963 (Live at the Harlem Square Club).

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

when Cooke feels as though the audience is with him, he says, with a light drumming in the background, “I want you to listen to this song right here for me...I got to tell you how I feel right now. This song gonna tell you how I feel”<sup>211</sup> and then he begins “Bring It on Home to Me.” Cooke took two-minutes and thirty-eight seconds to lay that foundation. The song concludes with Cooke engaging in a call-and-response of “yeahs” and him finally saying “I gotta leave that alone” so he can wrap up the song. It is over five minutes of Cooke leading his own congregation inside of club. It was akin to a preacher owning their space, knowing that their audience was listening, looping in a familiar text, and then interweaving it with a new passage to enhance both pieces of text. That is the gospel of rhythm and blues.

Nat Cole was a starting point for who Ray Charles would come to be as an artist. Cole’s “jazz improvisation, pretty melodies, hot rhythms, and an occasional taste of the blues”<sup>212</sup> were musical qualities that Charles appreciated and loved. Charles said of Cole’s voice, “I also loved the way he sang, the way he phrased, the way his voice was deep and romantic and sexy. He caressed a ballad, got under it, and stroked it for all it was worth.”<sup>213</sup> As Charles began to develop his own sound it was his intent to not simply replicate what Cole had perfected. Charles found his own individuality by “playing the blues to different rhythms,” which he described as “pure heart singing...the same mixture of gospel and blues with maybe a sweet melody thrown in for good measure.”<sup>214</sup> In “Hallelujah I Love Her So” Charles’ employs an upbeat instrumental that combines the piano with a horn section giving the song a consistent tempo. The singing is not overly done but rather that of a man telling the story of the ways in which he loves a girl. The

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Charles and Ritz, 45.

<sup>213</sup> Charles and Ritz, 44.

<sup>214</sup> Charles and Ritz, 178.

end verses are simply, “Hallelujah, I just love her so”<sup>215</sup> creating a sweet melody to end the song. In contrast, “Drown In My Own Tears” is that heart singing. In the third verse Charles sings

“Some rain, rain must pour.  
I’m so blue.  
Here without you.  
It keeps raining.  
More and more.”<sup>216</sup>

Interspersed are a few runs of strangled “oh, mmmmm” to really convey that sense of longing he feels. The song ends with him invoking a call-and-response by bringing in women vocalists to take up singing “drown in my own tears.” Charles singing is at once loving and longing while the sadness and plain hurt enhance the familiarity of the blues. As Charles said, “It’s the sort of music where you can’t fake the feeling.”<sup>217</sup> Ward suggests that by including elements of gospel Charles affirmed the “individual worth within the context of black collective identity and pride.”<sup>218</sup> Charles’ choice to seek out elements of gospel stems back to where he first heard and played music, only now he got to be the preacher and the audience sung back to him.

When Nina Simone sought out her own musical voice, after dedicating herself to become a classically trained pianist, she went back to the “lessons learned from gospel”<sup>219</sup> to help her find it. Simone surmised that “gospel music was mostly improvisation within a fixed framework...gospel taught me about improvisation, how to shape music in response to an audience and then how to shape the mood of the audience in response to my music.”<sup>220</sup> Simone

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<sup>215</sup> Ray Charles, *Hallelujah I Love Her So*, Warner/Chappell Music, Inc, 1956

<sup>216</sup> Ray Charles, *Drown In My Own Tears*, Warner/Chappell Music, Inc, Music Sales Corporation, 1956

<sup>217</sup> Charles and Ritz, 178.

<sup>218</sup> Ward, 185.

<sup>219</sup> Simone and Cleary, 19.

<sup>220</sup> Simone and Cleary, 19.

remarked that those lessons learned from playing in church were separate from the classical technique she studied, but those valuable lessons from playing in church seeped into her blood and had become a piece of her.<sup>221</sup> What makes rhythm and blues such a contrast to literature is how the music can exist on its own. The details are in the songs, but it is more about capturing an essence that lingers with people. There is no need for this swell of context because the music will find its proper audience. Rhythm and blues artists could create or stretch the bounds of their music without this critical assault from other artists. There seemed to be an understanding that there was enough space for different aesthetics and musical styles to exist that black literary writers were not privy to.

The inverse could be said about black writers during this same time period. Writers were entangled in the concept of the “New Negro,” which was reconceptualized among different generations of black intellectuals. The root of the construct being a distinct separation from the previous negro; that a reconstruction of black identity was a necessity, specifically to redefine who a black person could be in this modern America.<sup>222</sup> LeRoi Jones suggested that this particular burden fell to the middle-class Negro artist and that their purpose was to create distance between the memory of the poor Negro who was an ex-slave. It was why blues music was not accepted, because it was too closely aligned with the struggles of being black.<sup>223</sup> Alain Locke in reviewing *Their Eyes Were Watching God* wrote, “Progressive southern fiction has already banished the legends of these entertaining pseudo-primitives...”<sup>224</sup> and further contested

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<sup>221</sup> Simone and Cleary.

<sup>222</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., “The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black” *Representations* no. 24, Special Issue: America Reconstructed, 1840-1940 (Autumn, 1988): 129-155.

<sup>223</sup> LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music That Developed From It* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1963).

<sup>224</sup> Stephen Spencer, “The Value of Lived Experience: Zora Neale Hurston and the Complexity of Race” *Studies in Popular Culture* 27, no. 2, Studies in American Culture (October 2004): 17-33, 18.



that Hurston had oversimplified black life. Hurston in writing folk was interpreting black community life as she had both lived and observed. In a similar sense, blues musicians adhered to the people and struggles they intimately knew. Hurston's writing were the images of black self-affirmation and the post-war 'new' Negro did not shy away from confrontation.

In 1951, Paul Leroy Robeson, in *Freedom*, wrote "I submit that our history is exactly what the words say — the history of the *whole Negro people*... But every Negro boy and girl knows and accepts these obligations. We all know that we have a group responsibility."<sup>225</sup> In a modern America, that principle of group responsibility has been intertwined with a willingness to engage in discussing the issue of race. Ralph Ellison approached the conversation of race from the perspective that blacks and black culture were buoyed by not being so easily accepted within American society. Ellison rejected the idea blacks had spent the past three hundred years solely reacting to whites. He posited that black culture ought to be incorporated into the fabric of American identity; that "in Negro culture there is much of value for America as a whole."<sup>226</sup> Arguably Ellison's most well-known work *Invisible Man* works towards showcasing an American experience, not just a black experience. Ellison remarked that *Invisible Man* was not protest literature, but that it was "a failure of perception...to take on an identity imposed upon him by the outside, when we know very well that each individual has to discover himself and the world for himself."<sup>227</sup> The application of the word 'invisible' stands out because blacks are highly visible, but Ellison insists he was not writing about "*the Negro*"<sup>228</sup> and therefore it gives

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<sup>225</sup> Paul Leroy Robeson, "Here's My Story" *Freedom* 1, no. 2 (February 1951): 1-2, 1.  
[http://dlib.nyu.edu/freedom/books/tamwag\\_fdm000003/1](http://dlib.nyu.edu/freedom/books/tamwag_fdm000003/1). Date Accessed October 12, 2018.

<sup>226</sup> Ralph Ellison, "An American Dilemma: A Review" in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964): 303-317, 316.

<sup>227</sup> Ralph Ellison and Richard Kostelanetz, "An Interview with Ralph Ellison" *The Iowa Review* 19, no. 3 (Fall 1989): 1-10, 8-9.

<sup>228</sup> Ellison and Kostelanetz, 9.

significance to the identity struggles whites also deal with. Ellison used *Invisible Man* to put the black experience at the center of the American experience.<sup>229</sup> What Ellison demonstrated with *Invisible Man* is that confrontation was not always tied to anger and outrage. Rhythm and blues managed to center the black experience while also confronting the joys and challenges of being black.

The ethos of rhythm and blues was how it connected the social function of the black church with the attitudes of the black working class. Rhythm and blues became the sound of an entire social movement. The music itself becoming a companion. Julian Bond said of Ray Charles that “The voice, the music, the whole package taken together pulled me in, as it pulled in many, many others” and Anne Moody recalled that after Medgar Evers’ murder and the Birmingham 16<sup>th</sup> Street Church bombing that she put on a Charles record and “It seemed as though I had never listened to Ray before. For the first time he said something to me.”<sup>230</sup> What people were seeking was wanting to feel understood and as though there was a community around them. Neal describes this emergence of the rhythm and blues artist as “the popular representation of an emerging postcolonial sensibility among the black community.”<sup>231</sup> That sensibility derived from the understanding that authentic or legitimate expressions of black culture and consciousness could exist across a wider expression and manifest in different ways. Between the years of 1957 and 1964, music by black artists accounted for 204 of the 730 Top Ten hits on *Billboard’s* best-seller chart.<sup>232</sup> The artist during that stretch of time was Sam Cooke.

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<sup>229</sup> Anders Walker, *The Burning House: Jim Crow and the Making of Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>230</sup> Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 1968), 320.

<sup>231</sup> Marc Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 40.

<sup>232</sup> Ward.

Sam Cooke showed that there was a way. Cooke was an icon of gospel music, but he was not content with being the biggest star of gospel music; he wanted to be the most popular artist in music. In 1957, Cooke released “You Send Me” his debut single as a secular artist. The song became one of the most popular singles of the 1950s. It would go on to sell over one and a half million copies nationwide while also reaching number one on both *Billboard’s Rhythm & Blues* chart and the *Billboard Hot 100*.<sup>233</sup> Buoyed by the song’s success, Cooke became known to white and black audiences, young and old. Bob Gulla wrote of the song that it was “vintage Cooke, fusing elements of gospel, pop, and soul in such a way that had never been heard before.”<sup>234</sup> “You Send Me” captures the charisma and cool of Cooke’s persona while accentuating his ability to *sing*, blending elements of both gospel and rhythm and blues.

The essence of “You Send Me” is a feeling of longing and loving. The third section of the song is Cooke crooning,

“At first I thought it was infatuation. But, woo, it’s lasted so long. Now I find myself wanting to marry you and take you home, whoa.”<sup>235</sup>

Lyrically the song does not take big risks, but it is the simplicity of sentiment that gives it resonance. The feelings of longing and loving work in-cohesion allowing for Cooke’s voice to grow in confidence throughout the song. If there was a hint of shyness at the beginning, by the end it is gone, and he is sure that all he wants is to be with the person that makes him feel loved. Of equal importance is what is happening in the background. It is a simple instrumental that feels familiar quickly and it is because it shares the characteristics of a hymn. In addition to Cooke’s

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<sup>233</sup> Bob Gulla, *Icons of R&B and Soul: An Encyclopedia of the Artists Who Revolutionized Rhythm, Volumes 1 & 2* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008); Ward.

<sup>234</sup> Gulla, 109.

<sup>235</sup> Sam Cooke, *You Send Me*, Abkco Music, Inc, 1957.

vocals you hear the vocals of women to just keep up the record as Cooke expands his vocals. They work to compliment him. Like that of a church choir.

The commercial success achieved by Cooke showed that it was possible for other gospel artists to transition into secular music and find a receptive audience. Cooke's approach to rhythm and blues was familiar in sentiment to the material he had been singing with the Soul Stirrers. Cooke's crossover into rhythm and blues was about his desire for more, but his crossover into secular music did not seek to make him unrecognizable to his gospel fans. The content of his music did not veer into more explicit lyrics and he did not refashion gospel songs with secular lyrics, like Charles did. Cooke had an innate understanding of who he was and the capabilities of his voice. It was the blending of those two traits that allowed him to be so widely respected and desired by both black and white audiences.

Ray Charles did not sing gospel music in the same, formal, way that Sam Cooke or Nina Simone had. But it was during the mid-1950s that Charles had the church going street. Nelson George wrote that Charles broke the division between pulpit and the bandstand "unashamedly linking the spiritual and sexual,"<sup>236</sup> making physical satisfaction and divine enlightenment one in the same. Charles described his successes being exclusively at black clubs and black dances, "my music had roots which I'd dug up from my own childhood, musical roots buried in the darkest soil."<sup>237</sup> Charles brought a harmony between the Saturday night sinner and the Sunday morning worshipper. Charles reinterpretation of "This Little Light of Mine" to "This Little Girl of Mine" was a blatant crossing of the gospel and secular. Charles explained, "I'd always thought that the

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<sup>236</sup> Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm & Blues* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 70.

<sup>237</sup> Charles and Ritz, 174.

blues and the spirituals were close musically, close emotionally - and I was happy to hook ‘em up.”<sup>238</sup>

In “What I Say” Charles casts himself in the role of the preacher where the music ebbs and flows to work as he conducts his congregation. The song features moments of pause where he stops to engage in a back and forth with his female backing group, the Raelettes. Charles lets out a call and they respond in a series of ‘hmms’ and ‘ohhs’ and then Charles picks up the pace singing “and it feels so good.”<sup>239</sup> “What I Say” originated from him improvising at the end of a dance hall gig. He continued to improvise the song for a few nights before deciding that he was ready to record it. The song was initially banned by some radio stations because it was too suggestive. Eventually the song made it to radio after being covered by a white artist, which lifted the ban on Charles original version.<sup>240</sup> This was how Charles understood and expressed pride in who he was. Charles upset people with how he used gospel music to amplify secular music, but he and his music resonated because it was an honest interpretation of the black South he knew.

Nina Simone’s musical ethos was one of response to the question of what does a black female artist sound like? Critics often heralded her as a prodigious jazz musician often comparing her to Billie Holiday. Simone believed the comparisons to be erroneous because her music encompassed a little bit of everything. She contested the view that comparisons happened because critics, “couldn’t get past the fact we were both black”<sup>241</sup> believing that the comparison diminished the completeness of her music. Simone’s response to the notion that black music,

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<sup>238</sup> Charles and Ritz, 151.

<sup>239</sup> Ray Charles, *What I Say*, Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, Warner/Chappell Music, Inc, 1959.

<sup>240</sup> Charles and Ritz.

<sup>241</sup> Simone and Cleary, 68.

particularly black women, could only sound a certain way was to consistently and with fervor cross musical divides to liberate who she was as a black female performer. In 1958, Simone recorded her first popular song, a re-interpretation of “I Loves You, Porgy.” The song would reach number two on *Billboard’s Rhythm and Blues* chart and would become a top twenty song during the summer of 1959.<sup>242</sup> This initial foray into recording popular music was an early indicator that Simone could never be neatly categorized and to do so was an affront to her, personally and artistically. Simone’s pursuit of creating music that allowed listeners to feel free stemmed from her own feelings of isolation and wanting to be free.<sup>243</sup>

Historically, the mid-1950s for Southern blacks has focused on the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* and more generally on the push for integration. The Court’s ruling in 1954 took a step towards integration while also re-shaping the lives and communities of blacks throughout the South. Integration was heralded as the path for blacks to finally be granted access into mainstream American society. The Court ruled in-favor of integrating schools, but they also did not determine a timeline for it to happen.<sup>244</sup> In Tallahassee, the Leon County School District did not start desegregating schools until 1967. The county opted to shut down black schools, letting go of black teachers, and as a result kids lost a critical support system in their schools and their teachers.<sup>245</sup> That was not atypical. The fight for integration and access into mainstream America was a goal, but it was slow moving and there were unintended consequences that left black communities more isolated. What we can gain from examining

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<sup>242</sup> Ruth Feldstein, “I Don’t Trust You Anymore: Nina Simone, Culture, and Black Activism in the 1960s” *The Journal of American History* 91, No. 4 (March 2005): 1349-1379.

<sup>243</sup> Daphne A. Brooks, “Nina Simone’s Triple Play” *Callaloo* 34, No. 1 (Winter 2011): 176-197.

<sup>244</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954). <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/347/483>

<sup>245</sup> Julianne Hare, *Historic Frenchtown: Heart and Heritage in Tallahassee* (Charleston: The History Press, 2006).

rhythm and blues and the influence of artists like Cooke, Charles and Simone is a wider scope of what the black South connected with.

Brian Ward suggested that rhythm and blues “was the sound of a radical democratic vision of individual identities realized and proudly asserted within the context of sustaining a collective culture.”<sup>246</sup> With respect to Cooke, Charles, and Simone each of their early foray into rhythm and blues was reflective of that idea. Each of the three artists had a radical sense of who they were and the belief that they could translate the very personal into music that at-once felt personal and liberating to listeners. None of their early songs, released in the aftermath of *Brown*, addressed any aspect of the Civil Rights Movement. The historical trend of the black South has been to examine pressure points of direct activism in public spaces. Popular examples being the bus boycotts in Montgomery and Tallahassee, the sit-ins in Greensboro or attempts to vote in Mississippi. The enormity of each act leaves little space to explore how people lived outside of these acts. It presents a singular, distinct projection of black communities throughout the South. Rhythm and blues, like direct activism, originated and was sustained at the grass roots level.<sup>247</sup>

In Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*, he writes that living in the South was a skill that needed to be acquired in order to survive and he found it incorrigible to correct his behavior. It was the constant tension of how to be his own individual while not undermining how whites thought he ought to behave.<sup>248</sup> Ralph Ellison in *Shadow and Act* asked “Are American Negroes simply the creation of white men, or have they at least helped to create themselves out of what they found around them?”<sup>249</sup> The behavior most associated with blacks in the South is one of practicing

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<sup>246</sup> Ward, 201.

<sup>247</sup> Ward.

<sup>248</sup> Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944).

<sup>249</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 293.

non-violent protests contrasted against the vitriolic behavior of angry whites. At the crux of black Southern identity is this idea of behavior and the tension that it created inter-generationally among blacks and then the obvious tension between whites and blacks.

If the understanding of black Southern identity is to be intimately tied to this concept of resistance than there is an immediate need to broaden how we define resistance. Currently the concept of resistance is exclusively in political and institutional terms. It is one of the reasons that rhythm and blues is most often discussed to what, if any, role it played in the Civil Rights Movement. There is a desire to find connections between songs and artists to the Movement and explore the concept of ‘freedom songs.’ The underlying problem in examining rhythm and blues to that specific notion of resistance is that it assumes this Southern influenced, black music was created in response to the continuation of Jim Crow following World War II. When the reality is that rhythm and blues offered a reprieve from what Wright identified as self-correcting behavior. There was little correct about the behavior associated with listening, watching or performing rhythm and blues. It shows a resistance that is a less tangible call to action and more a mechanism to “assert their own individuality, aspirations, and sense of being”<sup>250</sup> as Lawrence Levine claimed.

Nina Simone asserted a level of individuality that was radical when she wrote, recorded, and released “Mississippi Goddam” in 1964. The murder of Medgar Evers according to Simone was “the match that lit the fuse”<sup>251</sup> on her political activism. Prior to Evers murder, Simone had not been keen to directly confront racism explaining, “the Waymon way was to turn away from prejudice and to live your life as best you could, as if acknowledging the existence of racism was

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<sup>250</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 239-40.

<sup>251</sup> Simone and Cleary, 89.



in itself a kind of defeat.”<sup>252</sup> Writing “Mississippi Goddam” was her way of coping. The song was born out of fury, out of hatred and out of determination.

Simone’s choice to sing the words “Mississippi Goddam” was, simply unheard of during that time. Dick Gregory remarked that while everyone wanted to say those words it was Nina Simone who actually did. The song begins,

“Alabama’s gotten me so upset  
Tennessee made me lose my rest  
And everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam.”<sup>253</sup>

with Simone singing that two times. Mississippi is *the* punchline in the song. It is jarring. Further along she sings “I think every day’s gonna be my last. Lord have mercy on this land of mine.” Simone throughout the song invokes the first person, which interweaves her personal grievances with the images everyone had seen: the picket lines, the hound dogs, the school children in jail. Simone’s willingness to include herself among those that are visibly outraged and upset was a step that other rhythm and blues artists had been unwilling to take.

Where Simone delivered fire, Sam Cooke provided aspiration during a similar time of despair when he wrote and recorded “A Change Is Gonna Come.” Peter Guralnick wrote that Cooke wrote “A Change Is Gonna Come” a few months after he and his band were turned away from a Holiday Inn in Shreveport, Louisiana in the fall of 1963. Cooke had been arrested and jailed for disturbing the peace.<sup>254</sup> The song would appear on Cooke’s album *Aint That Good News* released in March 1964, but the song was not immediately well known because it was not chosen as single and Cooke never played it in front of live audiences. The song was eventually

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<sup>252</sup> Simone and Cleary, 86.

<sup>253</sup> Nina Simone, *Mississippi Goddam*, Warner/Chappell Music, Inc, 1964.

<sup>254</sup> Peter Guralnick, *Dream Boogie: The Triumph of Sam Cooke* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2005).

released as a single in December 1964, but Cooke had been shot to death in Los Angeles before the song's release.

The song begins with a dominating orchestra instrumental that then settles right as Cooke begins to sing the opening lyric, which really places Cooke's vocals at the heart of the song. The song consists of five verses, with four out of five ending with the lyrics,

"It's been a long time, a long time coming  
But I know a change gonna come, oh yes it will."<sup>255</sup>

The first three verses begin with little sense of hope. Cooke singing that since birth he has been running, like a river. That living is too hard, but the uncertainty of what happens after death has him afraid to die. That when he is out and about someone, in this instance whites, are telling him not to hang around and to keep moving. After each, Cooke reiterates that a change is gonna come. It feels strained and farfetched and closer to a mantra one repeats that has less to do with conviction and more out of habit.

The song shifts during the fourth verse when Cooke sings,

"Then I go to my brother  
And I say brother help me please  
But he winds up knockin' me  
Back down on my knees."<sup>256</sup>

and it serves as *the* moment when Cooke's perspective changes about change coming. After being knocked down you sense that Cooke has picked himself up, brushed himself off, and thought to himself 'enough of that now.' At 2:28, Cooke concludes that in the past there were

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<sup>255</sup> Sam Cooke, *A Change is Gonna Come*, Abkco Music, Inc., 1964.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

times he would not be able to last for long, but “now I think I’m able to carry on” and that is the moment where the song completes its transformation from one of despair to one of hope. When Cooke for the final time sings, “It’s been a long time, a long time coming. But I know a change gonna come, oh yes it will” as a listener you feel a renewed sense of belief in Cooke’s words and that maybe Cooke is right. The song purposefully ends in optimism.

Few songs, if any, have been as impactful as Ray Charles’ “Georgia On My Mind” in capturing the essence of being. Charles recorded his version of “Georgia On My Mind” for his *The Genius Hits the Road* album. Charles chose twelve songs from twelve states for this concept album, picking songs he had always liked and had wanted to put his own interpretation on. When it came to “Georgia On My Mind” it was a song he had heard Hoagy Carmichael sing. Describing it as a “beautiful, romantic melody”<sup>257</sup> Charles, personally, had no plans to release the song as a single but his record company, ABC, wanted to and Charles gave his approval.<sup>258</sup>

“Georgia On My Mind” at its core is a love song. It captures the kind of love that is firmly entrenched and feels assured that it will stand the test of time. That love renders a feeling of comfort. We identify this comfort because we recognize it in Charles’ voice as he sings. There is no rush to it, but it sounds like a hot summer day turning into a warm summer Georgia night when he sings:

“A song of you,  
Comes as sweet and clear  
As moonlight through the pines.”

That love and nostalgia of home radiates when Charles sings,

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<sup>257</sup> Charles and Ritz, 221.

<sup>258</sup> Charles and Ritz.

“Other arms reach out to me  
Other eyes smile tenderly  
Still in peaceful dreams I see  
The road leads back to you.”<sup>259</sup>

It is less a song and more of a testament. Other places and people may tempt him, but he will always come back home. One may physically leave, but that does not break the bond. The peace that he was searching for is overshadowed by the sweetness of Georgia. Charles’ brilliance in “Georgia On My Mind” is that he was just himself. Musically, the track is supported by a piano and a light string orchestra that is consistent throughout. Charles did not employ many vocal runs but was enhanced by background vocals by women during some parts of the song. His choices make the song feel at once grand and intimate. That feeling of wanting to shout your love for everyone to hear and there being a sense of wanting to shield that love because it can lead to trouble.

What I hope to have work towards in discussing these three artists is a basic understanding of how the South influenced their approach to making music and the type of music they pursued. In analyzing their personal backgrounds, the intent was to highlight the commonality of Southern life even though each artist was born and raised in a different state, with different home conditions and different support networks. That sense of Southern familiarity speaks to how black communities had ingratiated themselves to the South even though they were now no longer physically tied to the land. The second point was how the traditions of the black South manifested within their music, performances and general attitude. It is no coincidence that rhythm and blues as a musical genre has a particular tone to it. Tone was purposeful. The music had to meet the needs and demands of black people. Their struggle in the

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<sup>259</sup> Hoagy Carmichael and Stuart Gorell, *Georgia On My Mind*, Peermusic Publishing, Campbell Connelly France, 1930.

South, in post-war America had changed and the music needed to reflect that. So, what we get in artists like Ray Charles, Sam Cooke and Nina Simone are people who grew up seeing the change, reaching for optimism while still being pulled back by the past. Rhythm and blues became a mechanism to carry the stories of the past while infusing them with beats that belonged to the here and now.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CLAIM THE MUSIC. CLAIM THE IDENTITY.

This work has sought to convey that there was no singular point of acknowledgement when blacks identified themselves as Southerners, but rather tried to show how rhythm and blues underlines how black Southerners came to occupy a place that reflects their unique experience while acknowledging that the South, as a region, was critical to maintaining their sense of identity.<sup>260</sup> In the previous chapter, I wrote that rhythm and blues was worth using as a research tool because it operated outside of traditional primary sources. Alain Locke once remarked that the conditions of the South were not conducive to the development of Negro self-expression and if the conditions were to change than a new literature of the South would spring to life.<sup>261</sup> Music is a form of literature.

When we think of writers we think of literature, but arguably some of the best and most influential black Southern writers are musicians. Zora Neale Hurston thought it necessary for blacks to recast themselves in front of audiences.<sup>262</sup> One of the most underrated aspects of rhythm and blues as a source of methodology is that artists during this time were the primary writers of their music. The music, and more specifically the lyrical content was sung in the same language with which black Southerners spoke. In listening to the music, you can hear the influence of the AAVE, which was a further nod that this music was for black communities. Rhythm and blues, outside of the Civil Rights Movement, presented one of the first opportunities for many Americans to actually hear Southern blacks and what they heard reflected a community

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<sup>260</sup> Jimmie Lewis Franklin, "Black Southerners, Shared Experience, and Place: A Reflection" *The Journal of Southern History* LX, no. 1 (February 1994): 3-18.

<sup>261</sup> Thadious M. Davis, "Southern Standard-Bearers in the New Negro Renaissance" in *The History of Southern Literature* ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985): 291-313.

<sup>262</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, "What White Publishers Won't Print" *Negro Digest* (April 1950).

that had long valued telling stories through their voice. Rhythm and blues artists established a new way for black Southerners to express themselves in modern America.

Nikki Giovanni wrote of black people, “We are poets even when we don’t write poems; just look at our life, our rhythms, our tenderness, our signifying, our sermons and our songs. I could just as easily say we are all musicians.”<sup>263</sup> The statement by Giovanni is easy to believe when one realizes the importance and prevalence of music in black communities. Jerma A. Jackson in *Singing in My Soul* wrote that during the twentieth century music was a “vital part of the fabric of daily life, music helped solidify community in rural districts as well as urban enclaves.”<sup>264</sup> By 1955, more than 750,000 Southern blacks had migrated from rural to urban areas<sup>265</sup> and the increase in migration plus limited areas for blacks to move into because of Jim Crow meant that music percolated throughout an entire black community. Jackson explains that music was wherever blacks congregated: barbershops, schools, churches, private parties, barbecues and even city streets.<sup>266</sup>

One example of black life in a city prior to integration is Ashley Street in Jacksonville. This section of downtown Jacksonville ran a stretch of four total blocks and was known as the Harlem of the South. Encompassed along this stretch was a barbershop, fruit-market, pool parlor, The Roosevelt Theater, The Knights of Pythias Hall (Ella Fitzgerald played there), The Strand Theater, Mama’s Restaurant (hamburgers and beer), The Clara White Mission, The Egmont Hotel, The Hollywood Music Store, a taproom and Stanton High School.<sup>267</sup> That list does not

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<sup>263</sup> Nikki Giovanni, “The Weather As a Cultural Determiner” in *The Prosaic Soul of Nikki Giovanni* (New York: Perennial, 2003): 117-127.

<sup>264</sup> Jerma A. Jackson, *Singing in My Soul: Black Gospel Music in a Secular Age* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 2.

<sup>265</sup> David Goldfield, “The Urban Crusade: Race, Culture and Power in the American South since 1945” *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 42, no. 2 The South (1997): 181-195.

<sup>266</sup> Jackson.

<sup>267</sup> Ennis Davis, “Ashley Street: The Harlem of the South” *Metro Jacksonville*, May 13, 2009 <https://www.metrojacksonville.com/article/2009-may-ashley-street-the-harlem-of-the-south>

even factor in the housing for the area, but it all existed in a stretch of four blocks. Hearing or playing music was not something done in isolation and the expectation was that music was communal. It belonged to everyone. The tight confines of a neighborhood demonstrate how rhythm and blues organically emerged from blues and gospel music. Sterling Plumpp remarked that the “first time I heard blues was in my grandfather’s prayers”<sup>268</sup> a reminder that the spiritual music of church and music of the juke joint did not exist in separate worlds. The two coexisted in close proximity. The progression of the urban black sound in the South found ways to interweave the two.

Within the larger historical context of what Southern blacks had experienced since the end of World War II it can be difficult to carve out the space for a musical genre that over the past fifty years has become a staple in the fabric of popular American music. When we go back to the origin of rhythm and blues, originally known as race records, we see that in its infancy it existed solely within black spaces and during those early years its home was with black Southern young people. It reflected a very real split between black Southern generations with respect to how they ought to publicly express themselves. Rhythm and blues, at the time and in subsequent years, was seen as less than “because of its market orientation and basically because it is not a folk art.”<sup>269</sup> It did not rely on the classic AAB form and was instead written by musicians who relied on gospel form.<sup>270</sup> The perception was that rhythm and blues devalued the tradition of blues —what it meant, who created it, how it depicted their lives — rather than being seen as a continuation or evolution of black music and the black South after World War II.

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<sup>268</sup> Charles E. Cobb, Jr., “Traveling the Blues Highway” *National Geographic*, April 1999 <https://web.archive.org/web/20090724102711/http://www.nationalgeographic.com:80/media/ngm/9904/fngm/>. Date Accessed January 4, 2019.

<sup>269</sup> Arnold Shaw, “Researching Rhythm & Blues” *Black Music Research Journal* 1 (1980): 71-79, 73.

<sup>270</sup> Shaw.



One of the main obstacles in using rhythm and blues as a research tool is that the perception of black music is that it lacks regional identity in favor of reflecting the idea of a monolithic African American experience.<sup>271</sup> Larry J. Griffin in studying three nationally representative surveys on American music preferences found that music preferences were not united by region, but rather certain types of music were preferred by certain races.<sup>272</sup> Ashley Blaise Thompson in her study on Southern identity found that her respondents did not all think of music in regional terms, but like Griffin found that musical preferences were divided by race. What Thompson observed was that among black participants gospel was the genre of music most mentioned, but also found that some black respondents were unsure if gospel music was southern. Thompson found that in general black participants were more inclined to associate gospel music with the black religious experience.<sup>273</sup>

Griffin wrote of Southern music that it “has always meant more to southerners than an excuse to shake our booties or, bottle in hand, get downright maudlin”<sup>274</sup> but rather the music of the South “has told us southerners about the hardships of this life and the joys to come in the next, told us who our friends are and enemies were, told us about love, loneliness, and lynching, told us where we came from and who we are. And in the telling, it has also changed us.”<sup>275</sup> What are we then to make of the evidence that suggests that as it pertains to music there is not a connection to regional identity? I think there are a multitude of reasons this could be the case, but

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<sup>271</sup> I would argue that it was not until the emergence of hip-hop that we saw black music as having distinct regional sounds.

<sup>272</sup> Larry J. Griffin, “Give Me That Old-Time Music... or Not” *Southern Cultures* 12, no. 4 The Music Issue (Winter 2006): 98-107.

<sup>273</sup> Ashley Blaise Thompson, “Southern Identity: The Meaning, Practice, and Importance of a Regional Identity,” PhD diss., (University of Vanderbilt, 2007).

<sup>274</sup> Griffin, 99.

<sup>275</sup> Griffin, 99.

most relevant for this work is trying to take a proactive approach in finding ways that Southern blacks articulated their attachment to the South. As Kalamu ya Salaam wrote, music was how blacks articulated their existence and that each era has a recognizable rhythm.<sup>276</sup>

George B. Tindall in an address to the Southern Historical Association said, “that southerners white and black share the bonds of a common heritage, indeed a common tragedy, and often speak a common language, however seldom they may acknowledge it.”<sup>277</sup> Thadious M. Davis, over a decade later, described it as curious that blacks in the South lacked a regional designation instead they were being resigned to the term ‘blacks.’ Davis noted that a shift started to occur in the 1970s “when there was an expansion of the definition of Southern culture based upon insistence that race and region are inextricable in defining a Southern self, society, or culture.”<sup>278</sup> In some respect, both Tindall and Davis were working toward what John Shelton Reed would put forward, which is the Southerner as an ethnic identity. Davis noted that the claiming of both a regional and a racial identity was taking place “in the work of a number of creative artists who are black and Southern” remarking that their work was highly visible but less prominent. For those who study Southern identity it is about identifying an era of music and its surrounding social context that can offer another means to be more inclusive.

Inclusivity and the integration of blacks into the concept of Southern identity remains elusive within traditional histories. Randall J. Stephens’ work *The Fire Spreads*<sup>279</sup> on Pentecostalism in the American South was published with a piece of artwork as the front cover

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<sup>276</sup> Kalamu ya Salaam, “It Didn’t Jus Grew: The Social and Aesthetic Significance of African American Music” *African American Review* 29, no. 2 Special Issues on The Music (Summer 1995): 351-375.

<sup>277</sup> George B. Tindall, “Beyond the Mainstream: The Ethnic Southerners,” *Journal of Southern History* XL (February 1974): 3-18, 18.

<sup>278</sup> Thadious M. Davis, “Expanding the Limits: The Intersection of Race and Region” *The Southern Literary Journal* 20, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 3-11, 5.

<sup>279</sup> Randall J. Stephens, *The Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

that only depicts white Southerners at a Holiness or Pentecostal meeting. Stephens book was published in 2008. Electing to go with such a depiction leads one to believe that Holiness and Pentecostalism was only practiced among white people in the South when we know this to not be accurate. One peculiar feature of these religious sects was that they were spaces where blacks and whites existed together and yet the artwork on the cover does not depict that either. It is choices like this that show how intertwined the ‘American South’ and whiteness continue to be.

In 2018, Zachary Lechner published *The South of the Mind*,<sup>280</sup> which takes an inverse approach to Cash in that he examines how those outside the South thought and wrote about the region. Lechner is upfront that his work is reflective of the relationship between whiteness and southernness and southernness through whiteness, an approach which is fair considering how Cash approached his own work. Even in fairness, the fact remains that black Southerners are not included or given consideration about how the South has been perceived in a wider cultural context. Lechner chose not to include black voices. In explaining his reasoning, Lechner acknowledges he could have offered more of an “interplay between white and black voices”<sup>281</sup> suggesting that other scholars could build upon his work by further exploring nonwhite voices and how they have shaped different minds of the Souths. Lechner’s explanation is one that makes sense; it is a lot to balance the whiteness of southernness while incorporating how nonwhite voices fit into that same southernness. It leads to the idea that blacks, specifically, deserve their own separate texts to understand how they fit into the larger concept of Southern identity, but it also means that black Southerners will continue to be black people who lived in

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<sup>280</sup> Zachary Lechner, *The South of the Mind: American Imaging of White Southernness, 1960-1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018).

<sup>281</sup> Lechner, “A Roundtable Discussion Between Zachary J. Lechner, Darren E. Grem, and Margaret T. McGhee” *Study the South* Center for the Study of Southern Culture, University of Mississippi (March 4, 2019). <http://southernstudies.olemiss.edu/study-the-south/south-of-the-mind/>. Date Accessed March 4, 2019

the South and not as Southerners, people who inhabit and identify with the South. An inverse of Cash's approach is new and exciting, but also presents an opportunity to redefine who fits under the parameters of the Southern mind.

Poet Natasha Trethewey, who was born and raised in the South, wrote "I write to claim my native land even as it has forsaken me, rendered me an outsider. I write so as not to be a foreigner in my homeland."<sup>282</sup> Her words serve as a reminder that black Southerners have a long history of claiming the South as theirs and that they see it as their home. Telling and sharing stories has been a tool of shouldering their sense of place and identity where Southern blacks have made been made to feel without roots. Trethewey says she wants a fuller version of American history to recoup the stories of those who have been marginalized, forgotten, or erased. One path for historians to recoup such stories is to seek out areas where black Southerners articulated their experience and reveled in it as well. The emergence of rhythm and blues are a product of geography as fate and a historical moment.

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<sup>282</sup> Natasha Trethewey, "The Soul Sings for Justice: Why I Write about the South" in Orville Vernon Burton and Edred E. Prince Jr., editors, *Becoming Southern Writers: Essays in Honor of Charles Joyner* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2016): 233-39, 236.

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