

THE TEXT-MUSIC RELATIONSHIP WITHIN THE BLUES OF ROBERT JOHNSON

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Much has been written about blues lyrics, their origin, and meaning. The same can be said likewise about blues guitar techniques, open tunings, signature licks, and the like. The blues differs from other formally schooled forms of musical expression in that it was originally an orally transmitted folk-like form of entertainment and a release from the hard life of an oppressed underclass. With that in mind, this paper is an endeavor to appropriately explore the relationship between these two aspects of this musical style. To this end, two recordings by the legendary blues artist Robert Johnson; “I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom” and “Travellin’ Riverside Blues” will be examined to consider the correlation between Johnson’s lyrical text and his guitar accompaniment.

Within the genre of early blues (as a form of popular, and often by necessity, improvised entertainment), there existed a common practice to freely borrow lyrical fragments and indeed entire verses from other performers of the day, and it was “relatively rare for rurally based singers to carefully compose a whole blues lyric”¹ of exclusively original text. “A song would thus be made up largely of ‘floating’ verses, rhymed couplets that could be inserted more or less at random.”² Such is the case with the recorded music of Robert Johnson, and it is not difficult to trace many of the phrases and themes of the two songs under examination to earlier recordings by the likes of Leroy Carr and “Kokomo” James Arnold simply by listening to these and others’ earlier recordings.³

Regardless of their origin, the six verses of Johnson’s “I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom” essentially describe a man who is going to get up in the morning, shake off and get rid of his

¹ Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta* (New York: HarperCollins), 132.

² *Ibid.*

³ Such recordings are now widely available either on CD reissues and compilations or even through the internet on websites such as Youtube.com or other various blues-related sites as well.

cheating woman. Although she can mistreat him here, he is going to go back home where she can't mistreat him anymore. By the last verse Johnson sings that he is even going to seek out a better "good girl" (or former relationship) in China, the Philippines, or even Ethiopia. Although the meaning of some of the text could certainly be interpreted somewhat differently, this is the basic drift of the lyric.

In support of this story of leaving his unfaithful woman and moving on to someone else, Johnson's guitar accompaniment is, at its root, driving and almost simplistic in its boogie-woogie shuffle feel. Although on the surface the effect is almost rudimentary, if one considers what he is simultaneously playing in the upper register of the guitar with the slide (along with, and in response to the vocal), his combined performance is quite remarkable even by today's standards. The overall effect really does indeed support and reinforce the thematic essence of the text. The combination of the simple yet driving rhythmic bass-figure, the strong shuffle feel and the accompanying triplets with the slide truly inspire a feeling of getting up and "movin' on" coinciding with the likewise parallel narrative of the lyric. Whereas the text could have been interpreted with a sense of despair, Johnson, through his musical setting brings instead a sense of determination and even proud affirmation to the meaning of the song.

In contrast to the narrative quality of "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom", "Travellin' Riverside Blues" is not so much about travelling as it is a boast of Johnson's sexual prowess and his stable of women from "Vicksburg, clean on to Tennessee."⁴ In this sense the text is more boasting than an unfolding narrative storyline of events. As such there is no need to create quite the musical setting of motion and drive as was the case in "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom". To accommodate the sense of boast and pride of this lyric, Johnson's guitar accompaniment is

⁴ Robert Johnson, *King of the Delta Blues*, Sony B00000AG6X (CD), 1998.

likewise appropriately swaggering in feel as if to signify a rooster strutting about amongst hens in a henhouse. This guitar performance does not feature the steady and constant driving bass-figure so conspicuously employed in “I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom”. Instead, now featuring a much more prominent use of the slide, Johnson freely moves between registers of the instrument, tracking the vocal of each verse’s repeated A-sections in the high register, while matching the final B-sections in the bass. During the final verse Johnson even whimsically perhaps showcases a descending slide sound to emulate the lyric “...juice run down my leg.”⁵ Although the basic guitar arrangement is a recycled version of “If I Had Possession over Judgment Day” from his earlier recording session (which itself was likely “lifted” from Hambone Willie Newbern’s “Roll and Tumble Blues” recorded nine years prior to that), he employs it to his advantage, slowing it down in tempo to reflect the sexual message embodied in the lyric.

In both these examples, one can observe that although lyrics and accompaniment figures are perhaps to one degree or another, combinations of recycled material by other blues artists, this material in the hands of an artist like Robert Johnson is nonetheless re-crafted and reworked to create a new and viable piece of unique musical expression. Blues performers like Johnson may not have had the formal musical training to put poetry to musical settings in the manner or to the degree to which Schubert or Mozart did, but this does not diminish its validity in the arena of human artistic expression. There may certainly exist inferior examples within the blues genre where lyrics and musical setting are perhaps more cavalierly or thoughtlessly paired. Surely similar instances can be found in any form of vocal music. What is clear however is that within the perhaps relatively limited harmonic, structural, and lyrical confines of blues, a vast range of emotional and musical expression is still quite possible.

⁵ Ibid.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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