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Bluesman, Guitar, And Migration

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BLUESMAN, GUITAR, AND MIGRATION

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Southern Studies
The University of Mississippi

by

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ABSTRACT

This project examines how the bluesman, guitar, and migration have interacted with each other and brought about transformations to American popular music, based upon scholarly works, magazine articles, and the sound recordings of the prewar blues performers.

In popular theory, the blues sprang out of the cotton fields and articulated the life experiences of the oppressed people in isolated areas, particularly the Jim Crow South. These are certainly truths of the blues. Also true is that the blues was a product of modernization in every way and a representation of the African American bluesman’s aspiring life. The bluesman’s mobile lifestyle was one way of his response to the changes of society.

Chapters One and Two investigate the instruments of African American people past and present and closely look at the pathway of the guitar to become a bluesman’s choice of instrument. Chapter Three focuses on the bluesmanship of the bluesman and meaning of the guitar for him. Chapter Four discusses the bluesmen’s move in contrast with common African Americans’ migration.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

The blues emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century in rural areas in the American South. Around the same time, steel-stringed guitars became more available and a large interconnected railroad network was completed. It was the era when society was facing the growing modernization of transportation, information, and industry, which drove the massive demographic change, the Great Migration. The bluesmen, too, moved within the South and upward North, but in different ways. They rambled or headed to their destinations with their guitars to pursue new sounds, freedom, fame, and fortune, wisely using modernized transportation networks—railroads and highways.

The mobile bluesmen brought significant developments to the blues. Some restlessly moved around within the South to perform music on demand at parties. Others traveled to the urban cities for recordings and performing for wider audiences. Both intertwined with peer musicians and new styles while moving, adapted to new tastes of the audience and industry, and further shaped their creativities, which would carry on in American popular music.

Most of the blues performers mentioned in this study were born between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century and were active before World War II. An important point to clarify is that this study ignores a chronology of the music. The concept of “bluesman,” was, as Elijah Wald claims, invented by the record companies in the 1920s.\(^{1}\) All the performers

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who have inherited and recreated the blues, including those who were born before then, whether professional or semi-professional, men or women, are addressed as “bluesmen” in this work.
CHAPTER I

HISTORY OF THE INSTRUMENTS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSICIANS

One can learn a great deal by studying the transformations of African Americans’ instruments that have played important roles in the blues, both past and present. The primary instrument for the bluesman today is the guitar. Piano and harmonica are other popular instruments. A striking fact is that these instruments are derived from Western culture and relatively new to African American communities. Before then, particularly in the slavery era, the banjo and fiddle (violin) were dominant in plantation music. Slaves played banjo and fiddle for their own pleasure and for their owners’ amusement as well. Sometime in the late 1800s, African Americans stopped, if not completely, using banjo and picked up other instruments: some chose piano and most took up guitar. These transformations were associated with the migrations and changes of the music.

In the beginning

The history of the blues instrument began with the banjo in Africa. The modern banjo was not native in Africa but associated with Africa and fashioned into an American instrument by the people of African descent in the American South, where the banjo played significant roles in pre-blues popular music. Many scholars have already studied the origin of the banjo and its
musical reference between Africa and America. In 1970, Paul Oliver, a British architectural historian and blues scholar, suggested that the roots of banjo lie in the lute played by griots who originally come from Islamic people and that their music was considered as the prototype of blues, based on his research in Africa.\(^2\) Griot is an occupation in the lower caste society in West Africa. They function as storytellers, historians, and musicians. In the kingdom era, a griot often worked for the royal court as a praise singer or interpreter, and when times changed, he rambled with instruments to the bustling streets or isolated villages to deliver songs or stories, responding to his audience. The traveling solo performer on a string instrument resembles the pre-war bluesman.

In 1982, musicologist Michael T. Coolen argued that the plucked lute of four or five strings in Senegambia, xalam in the Wolof, was the predecessor of the banjo.\(^3\) A typical xalam was described as “A boat-shaped resonator carved from a single piece of hardwood…A piece of cowskin is stretched over and nailed to the back of the resonator…. The cylindrical fretless wooden neck…pierces the skin sound table at one end….The five strings made of horsehair are tied at the upper end to tuning rings.”\(^4\) The features of the lute evoke a folk art piece and, except for the shape of the resonator, resemble a banjo or guitar. The most notable aspect is, however, Coolen suggests, the similarity of their playing style. He explains,

Most musicians play the xalam in a righthanded fashion, fingering the notes with the left hand and plucking the playing strings with the right hand. There are only two melody strings, with two or three other strings that are fixed in pitch and are

utilized as drones, as well as being integrated into the main melody at appropriate times—much like the drone string on the banjo. The xalam performer uses the thumb, index finger, and middle finger of the right hand to pluck the strings, and, except in very fast passages, most of the strokes are downward ones.\(^5\)

These playing techniques are known as “frailing,” “claw-hammer,” and “drop thumb” and are still used by banjo players today. To support the theory of the lute as prototype of the banjo, Coolen also points out the connection between Senegambia and the United States:

“During the last quarter century of the colonial era (ca. 1750-1775)…approximately half of the slaves arriving in the southern colonies were shipped from Senegambia.”\(^6\) The term “Senegambia” refers to the area including the two neighboring countries, Senegal and Gambia. Coolen estimates that 500,000 slaves came in directly to South Carolina and other colonies from Senegambia. Senegambian blacks were preferred by South Carolina slave dealers because they were expert horsemen and herders, and they handled the workload well. Oliver remarked the high possibility of griots among the slaves. He argued that the lowest caste griots “would have been expendable” and had existed “in disproportionate numbers among captives” on the slave ships.\(^7\) His hypothesis reveals the complicated status of griots; they were favored by the authority and people as musical commentators but at the same time they were dumped easily. If, as Oliver argues, they were transported in “disproportionate” numbers on the slave trade ships that crossed the Atlantic, their musical tradition was surely transplanted as well.

The arguments by Oliver and Coolen are doubtlessly persuasive. They have identified the

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\(^6\) Ibid., 2.

strong connection between American banjo and African xalam, based on their cultural uses, structures, playing styles, and the historical fact of transatlantic slave trade. However, another possibility emerged in the 2000s. New research brought the three-stringed lute akonting to the forefront. Laemu Daniel Jatta, a Gambian researcher based in Sweden, argues that the akonting lute of the Jola people is a closer relative to the Southern American banjo. The word banjo, Jatta states, originates from the Mandika word “bangoe.” Also the akonting shares the similar structure and the playing style with the banjo, as the xalam does, such as gourd, skin head, a long neck, and claw-hammer technique. The different aspect is that, unlike the xalam that was played by professional musicians, griots, for the high-ranking people, the akonting was played by common Jola people in their own leisure time.\(^8\) Community performers also resembled local bluesmen playing on a front porch or weekend gathering. Akonting players among villages were vulnerable to the enemies. Jatta suggests that the raiding parties looking for captives for the slave traders targeted musicians; “Once the slavers discovered that on-board exercise was essential to reducing the death rate during the Middle Passage, they began to capture Jola musicians living along the mouth of the Gambia River and the Atlantic coastline to provide accompaniment aboard ships bound for the New World.”\(^9\)

If, as Jatta posits, the lute players were purposely captured and transported to the English colonies, the instruments must have come along with them. Questions about the possibility of “lute players on the slave ship” remain, as in Oliver’s griots’ case. The precursor of the banjo also remains unspecified. It was probably the xalam or the akonting or both; however, future study might trace to another possibility. One conceivable thing is that West African cultural

tradition or at least memory of music and instruments were transported as byproduct of slavery along with the people’s involuntary migration to the New World.

BANJO AND FIDDLE

For almost 120 years after the first arrival of slaves at the English colonies in 1619, their string instruments had not appeared in documents. According to Dena Epstein, who uncovered the early description of the slaves’ instruments in the early colonies, most of these early documents were written by travelers and slave owners. The earliest reference to the banjo in North America appeared in 1736 in John Peter Zenger’s The New-York Weekly Journal. He described, in an anonymous letter, blacks playing the “Banger” at a fair held in a “Field, little Way out a Town” to mark an unspecified holiday. Another journal dated 1774 by English diarist Nicholas Creswell described in detail the instrument he saw at “a Negro Ball” in Maryland: “[T]hey amuse themselves with Dancing to the Banjo. This musical instrument (if it may be so called) is made of a Gourd something in the imitation of a Guitar, with only four strings and played with fingers in the same manner.” A surviving illustration supports Creswell’s testimony. The watercolor illustration from around 1790 found in Columbia, South Carolina, and titled “The Old Plantation,” represents a similar gathering to the one Creswell witnessed. In this folk art, a group of African American men and women in decent clothes are having some leisure time with dancing, accompanied by some instruments. The artist was identified as South Carolina slaveholder John Rose. He was certainly skilled and familiar with slave culture, judging from the detailed painting of particularly the instruments and the vigorous

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11 Nicholas Creswell qtd. in Dena J. Epstein, 353.
12 Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum, Williamsburg, Virginia.
body movement. In this illustration, one of the instruments that a sitting black man is playing appears to be a banjo—a round-shaped resonator covered with white skin head and a long fretless neck with four strings. His playing style appears to be “clawhammer,” using his thumb and first finger to stroke the strings in a downward motion. The illustration is a vital demonstration of retention of African tradition.

Not only the banjo but also the fiddle can be traced back to Africa. Several one-string fiddle traditions appear in Ethiopia, in the Savannah belt of West Africa, and in eastern and central Africa. The instrument's feature is similar to the lute, with a round or oval resonator covered with animal skin, neck, and horse hair string, but the string is played with a bow of similar material to the string.\(^\text{13}\) Just as the xalam and the akonting might have sailed from Africa, the one-string fiddle too might have been imported with the captives. Or, as some scholars suggest, the slaves’ crude home-made fiddles might have been imitations of European ones.\(^\text{14}\) Either way, the fiddle would play important roles along with the banjo in the plantation music tradition in the New World.

Unfortunately, the examples of the banjo or fiddle from the slavery era did not survive due to their fragile materials; however, referring to the documents and sheet music covers, the shape of the banjo resonators varied from boat-shape, as described for the xalam, to round-shape, as shown in the watercolor painting. The design depended on the makers and the materials they could get: gourd, wood, or bread pan. Although as early as 1840s some white craftsmen began making banjos,\(^\text{15}\) slaves’ instruments were made and played by themselves. The slaves’

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testimonies expressed what the instruments meant to them, how they enjoyed music with
singing, dancing, and playing several instruments altogether in their leisure time. Sometimes it
was a secret meeting against the masters’ restrictions. For instance, Nancy Williams, born 1843,
mentioned in the ex-slave interview by the WPA (Work Progress Administration) in 1937 that
music gave her a moment of freedom and joyfulness in her oppressive life. She recalled the
secret courting party in the woods, which she slipped from her cabin to join when she was
young; “Anyhow we’d go to dese dances; ev’ry gal had a beau. An’ sech music! You had two
fiddles, two tambourines, two bango [banjo], an’ two sets o’ bones.”16 Here, they were playing
every available instrument—banjo, fiddle, and percussion—for their enjoyment. The
combination of banjo and fiddle was, asserts Epstein, played together as early as 1774 by slaves,
who were the first to play the combination.17 Not knowing its important role in the terms of the
cross-cultural musical interchange in the New World, slaves played banjo/fiddle music for their
own gatherings but also for their owners’ dance parties. Playing fiddle was particularly expected
by European-born whites. Furthermore, according to Robert Winans, who has painstakingly
investigated the thirty-one volumes of the ex-slave narratives collected by the WPA in the 1930s,
fiddles were more identified than banjos in every state, more than 3 to 1 in South Carolina and
Mississippi, and almost 3 to 1 in Texas.18 It is worth noting that more fiddles were referred to in
the blues-birth states such as Texas and Mississippi.

Many of the planters were first or second generation migrants from faraway lands:
Ireland, Scotland, England, and other parts of Europe. In the isolated areas in the antebellum

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16 Charles L. Perdue Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillip, eds. Weevils in the Wheat: Interview with
Virginia Ex-slaves (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1999), 316.
Newsletter 5 (Spring 1982), 2.
South, before radio or phonographs, opportunities of listening to or dancing to familiar music were scarce. To fulfill their desire for the music, people had to wait for traveling musicians to come down to the town, or, like some masters did, found “musicians” among slaves and made them their own “juke box.” Some plantations even had their own resident musicians, who in some cases had been purchased strictly for that purpose. With a few exceptions, learning music themselves was the furthest thing from the slave owners’ mind, because entertaining was not considered gentlemanly but a part of servitude.\(^{19}\) Some whites enjoyed watching slaves playing their own music. In an account by ex-slave abolitionist Henry Bibb, born 1815 in Kentucky, he wrote, “When they [slaveholders] wish to have a little sport of that kind, they go among the slaves and give them whiskey, to see them dance, ‘pat juber,’ sing and play on the banjo.”\(^{20}\)

Others made slaves play the music they wanted to enjoy. Kidnapped and enslaved Solomon Northup, born 1807 or 1808 in New York, was often called into his master’s house and ordered to play fiddle for the drunken master and for the mistress who was hungry for European music.\(^{21}\) Northup utilized his experiences of playing tunes for whites’ dance parties when he was a musician in New York. Those who had not been familiar with different music were demanded to learn it. Some slaves improved instruments or “created the percussion with spoons, bones, pans, and buckets to play songs like “Turkey in the Straw” and other popular tunes.”\(^{22}\)

Looking at the positive sides of the masters’ compelling slaves to play music, it provided slaves chances of getting better food or drink, or tips. The maternal grandfather of the composer W. C. Handy had high musical skills and, while a slave, used to play fiddle for dances and earned

19 Epstein, 112.
extra money.\textsuperscript{23} In some cases, such talent could turn into another advantage when they attempted to escape from the plantation, since skills of playing fiddle led to ready employment.\textsuperscript{24} Indeed, many slaves fetched instruments and fled the plantation despite the instrument’s conspicuousness. In the newspapers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, notices of runaway slaves were often posted by slave owners along with other slave advertisements such as offering slaves for sale or for hire.\textsuperscript{25} In the descriptions of the runaway slaves, the ability to play well on certain instruments, particularly fiddle, were emphasized, among other means of identification. For instance, \textit{Boston Gazette or Weekly Journal}, 1745, carried “RUN AWAY from Capt. Joseph Hale…, short and small, TOOK WITH A VIOLIN, AND CAN PLAY WELL THERON…,” or \textit{Virginia Gazette}, 1767, “RUN AWAY from…very known by most people, plays the fiddle extremely well.”\textsuperscript{26} The masters, who had invested to make slaves fiddlers and bought them or lent them the instruments, hunted for slaves seriously. Some of the notices reveal the chasing dramas. \textit{Virginia Gazette}, May 5, 1767, posted a fiddler slave’s runaway advertisement: “David Grantenread…plays the violin extremely well…owned his own instrument…I believe he carried his violin with him.” Unfortunately, Grantenread was captured, but he ran away again. His second runaway advertisement appeared in 1774. The third one was not found in the newspaper.\textsuperscript{27} He might have succeeded in escaping and lived in another land on his skill of playing violin. The escaping slave musicians with instruments were a prototype of migration of bluesmen. Both were believing in their skills’ advantage and seeking freedom and a place to play and earn. And their travel companion, the instruments, were easy to carry and repair

\textsuperscript{23} W. C. Handy, \textit{Father of the Blues} (New York: Da Capo, 1941), 5.
\textsuperscript{24} Epstein, 113.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{27} Epstein, 113.
or remake.

From a wider perspective, the plantation fiddling music was a significant product in the antebellum south. As Paul F. Wells argues, the fiddle and the dance music played “one of the earliest, most long lasting, and most deeply influential musical and cultural points between European and African people.” The European-derived fiddle and the African-derived banjo played dominant roles as the primary dance instruments in the plantation and later in the minstrel show, which eventually brought about a change to an early stage of African American popular music.

Changes

Unexpectedly, the popularity of the banjo exploded outside of the South in the mid nineteenth century. The banjo was introduced to the wider world by Joel Walker Sweeney, a white banjo player in Virginia. Born around 1810 to a farmer’s son, the musically talented Sweeney learned banjo and fiddle from local blacks and became a traveling one-man show, “singing the doggerel he had learned from Negros or had improved from their tunes, dancing, reciting, or roaring imitation of animals.” Looking for opportunities to perform before a wider audience, he wandered through Virginia and South Carolina and, in 1839 he finally arrived at New York, the center of show business. At that time, minstrelsy was extremely popular. He started the performing job which had influence on other minstrel musicians and soon the banjo became main attraction of the show. By the late 1840s, minstrel troupes began touring the South.

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29 Carlin, 20.
After Emancipation, many freed blacks with musical talent joined minstrel troupes. Minstrel shows offered “the only profitable vocation for black creative talent.”\textsuperscript{30} It became “a vibrant part of black entertainment through these years.”\textsuperscript{31} Furthermore, the traveling troupes, along with the circus and the medicine show, provided blacks the chances to travel with no fear of being chased and see outside of the South. African American musicians were beginning to hit the trail of the voluntary migration with instruments, banjo and fiddle, or just as an initiation of itinerary life. Around 1912, nine-year old Big Joe Williams, born 1903 to the musical family in Crawford, Mississippi, ran away from home with a minstrel troupe and traveled around with them for six or seven years. He recalled their journey; “Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, New York, back to Texas in winter. Everywhere, we went everywhere” and continued that he learned “everything to be done about the show” and how to make money out of the rambling life.\textsuperscript{32}

The musicians who did not join the traveling troupes worked as the local entertainers. In the rural south, where fiddle was identified three times as much as banjo in the WPA’s exslave interviews,\textsuperscript{33} the fiddle kept strong interest among African Americans well into the twentieth century. Combined with other string instruments, guitar and mandolin, fiddle-centered black string bands developed their repertoire. Players often sought out higher-paying white audiences, performing works ranging from Irish ballads and vaudeville to dance music.\textsuperscript{34} A former slave fiddler, Henderson Chatmon in Bolton, Mississippi, continued to play dance music for white folks, such as ragtime music, square dance, breakdowns. His nine sons also became musicians

\textsuperscript{32} Margaret McKee and Fred Chisenhall, \textit{Beale Black & Blue: Life and Music on Black America’s Main Street} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981),195.
\textsuperscript{33} Winans, 2.
\textsuperscript{34} Hoffheimer, 1184.
and formed family string bands, the Chatmon family, and made recordings as the Mississippi Sheiks. In another area in Mississippi, Red Banks, Gus Cannon and his brothers also made up a family string band. The string band tradition even become one germ of the emergence of blues. From the classical music perspective, Michael H. Hoffheimer explains the deep connection of the African-descent fiddling and the blues; “[I]ts distinctive technique was the free use of wildly broad vibrato generated by sliding, not just rolling, the fingertip. This often followed an ascending portamento [a slide from one note to another]—a precursor of the familiar wailing slide employed by blues guitarists.” The combination of fiddle and guitar would carry over into a part of the “race music” and the jug band tradition.

The banjo had, however, a different story. While the banjo became a more and more popular instrument in minstrelsy and attracted white middle-class women in the late 1800s, as discussed in Sarah Meredith’s work, or caught attention of the more sophisticated creole musician Louis Moreau Gottschalk in New Orleans in 1855, some black musicians stopped playing the banjo. Papa Charlie Jackson, who started his career as a minstrel performer, gradually switched his main instrument from banjo to guitar. He first played a six-string banjo, so-called banjo-guitar, and later played mainly guitar, sometime in banjo picking style when he played guitar.

One of the accepted theories of the banjo’s disappearing is, as Bruce Bastin claims, black people’s reaction to the minstrel’s racial idiom. As a matter of fact, in the minstrel show, blackfaced banjo players, both black and white actors, were often caricaturized in the fast and

36 Hoffheimer, 1184.
bright tunes, as grotesquely dancing slaves, which were the main characters in blackface minstrels. Bastin argues, “The stereotyping in minstrelsy, once tolerable as crude but harmless humor, became directly offensive. The banjo, ubiquitous instrument of the minstrel stage, embodied this stereotyping….By the turn of the twentieth century, blacks were reacting against the use of the banjo to parody aspects of their lives which were becoming increasingly less tolerable.”39 Reaching the end of the tolerance, many African American musicians abandoned the banjo, Bastin claims.

Opposing Bastin’s theory of dropping the banjo due to racial connotations, black banjoist Tony Thomas suggests a different idea; African American musicians did not “drop” the banjo but “chose” another instrument due to the changing of dance music. “In both popular and folk music,” Thomas writes, “the banjo’s foremost task was providing rhythm for dances. As the dances changed with the changing of music, they demanded rhythms that were not easily suited to the five-string banjo.”40 According to the WPA’s ex-slave narratives, when slaves played music for whites’ gatherings, the dances were associated with white culture, such as the contradances or square dances, the cotillion, the waltz, and the quadrille. In addition, a number of fancy step dances, which generally seem more African, were also favored, such as “cutting the pigeon wing” or various kinds of “jubas,” “shuffles,” and “jigs.”41 As for the slave dances, they were mainly secret religious celebrations in the early colonial days; however, the dance sites began to carry different aspects: courting and finding mates. “Black dances evolved,” Thomas points out, “from group dancing to couple dancing and in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth

40 Thomas, 144.
41 Winans, 4.
into sensual dances like the slow drag and others seen as sexually scandalous.\textsuperscript{42} New demands were slow but steady rhythm and a seductive melody. The banjo would not function in this purpose. Mike Daley explains the characteristics of the string instrument and banjo’s trait; “A plucked string will produce a note with essentially two parts: an attack and a decay…The attack on the banjo is very loud and the decay is very quick.”\textsuperscript{43} The banjo’s bright and strong sounds would die out soon; however, Daley remarks that the guitar is different because “the decay is longer.”\textsuperscript{44} Sustained sounds of the guitar, and the fiddle as well, allow for more nuanced expressions. The guitar would become an ideal instrument for the new African American music in the end of the late nineteenth century, but before that, some musicians found the piano, which could serve a slow and seductive melody in the wide range of tunes with 88 keys and the player’s 10 fingers. Eileen Southern observes, “In piano-rag music, the left hand took over the task of stomping and patting while the right hand performed syncopated melodies, using motives reminiscent of fiddle and banjo tunes.”\textsuperscript{45} The piano met the needs of the professional or semi-professional musicians who played music on demand or request. The pianists produced the ragtime and boogie-woogie, both of which are associated with the emergence of blues.

\textbf{American piano}

It was not easy for African Americans to take up the piano. Piano was a symbol of European music and the most unfamiliar instrument for antebellum African Americans. In the WPA interviews, ex-slaves referred to piano only 3 times, while they referred to fiddle 205 times.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{42} Thomas, 145.
\textsuperscript{43} Mike Daley, "The Banjo and Guitar in Transition Part 2" \textit{Antique Phonograph News} Sep-Oct (2012).
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{45} Southern (1983), 313.
\end{flushleft}
and banjo 106.\textsuperscript{46} Most of them had never even seen or heard piano until well later in the nineteenth century. A piano was expensive, space-consuming, and exclusively manufactured “furniture.” African American musicians could not easily access it, obtain it, or migrate with it like they did in the case of banjo or fiddle. The piano required the musicians more mobility than other instruments did, which gave way to the emergence of itinerary pianists.

Invented about 1700 in Italy and continuously improved, the piano gradually became associated with North America in the nineteenth century. Some wealthy colonial people in the early 1800s possessed harpsichords or forte pianos imported from Europe, and the first American-made piano was manufactured in the early 1810s.\textsuperscript{47} By the late nineteenth century, piano making in the United States thrived, along with sheet-music publishing. A piano became “a necessary-seeming element of households,” particularly in the urban areas.\textsuperscript{48} By 1890, the retail price of a “medium grade” upright piano was dropped from $400 in 1880 to $200—\textsuperscript{49}the relative value in 2015 is about $4,780—\textsuperscript{50}and learning to play piano became a standard for the young girls of the upper class. Some makers expanded their distribution routes, and American-made pianos eventually headed to the towns and cities in the West and the South.\textsuperscript{51}

Not only the industrial modernization and the salesforce’s efforts but also new methods of merchandising underpinned the growing popularity of the piano. That was an installment purchase plan developed by the leading piano maker, the Baldwin Company. In this plan, a customer was allowed to make a 50\% down payment and pay off the balance in 24 equal

\textsuperscript{46} Winans, 2.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 520.
\textsuperscript{49} “125 Years of Music Industry Reporting.” \textit{Music Trades} 163.10 (2015), 71.
\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Measuring Worth}.
\textsuperscript{51} Loesser, 520.
monthly payments. Only after that, did Henry Ford and General Motors popularize this method with their automotive finance plans. A warning from the head of another piano company indicates the excessive practice of the method: “Sending out pianos for a few dollars cash per month is a dire mistake.”

In the late nineteenth century, pianos were still not within the reach of the common people’s households or schools in the South, but they were affordable for entertainment venues. In 1899, Stark Music Co., a music store in Sedalia, Missouri, famous for its sporting district, advertised a piano sale just before Christmas 1899: “We have pianos that were sold on installments and $25 to $100 paid. This and further discount is yours if you want it.”

Many entertainment places in the red-light districts in the Midwest and New Orleans, and in the labor camps in the Deep South, probably obtained the pianos in this way.

**Piano in the Midwest**

Since lower-class musicians could not easily possess a piano, they had to find a piano in those questionable places, which often brought them tragic fate. That is the case of one of the earliest documented, somewhat mythical, African American ragtime composers, Scott Joplin. Born in 1867 or 1868 in Texarkana, Texas, to an ex-slave father who played fiddle and a freeborn mother who played banjo and sang, Joplin developed his musical talents from a young age. He gained access to a piano in a white-owned home where his mother worked and taught himself. Later his mother managed to purchase a secondhand piano for him and a German-immigrant music teacher in the town gave him free lessons and exposure to European art music. Musically

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52 “125 Years,” 72.
cultivated, Joplin left the hometown where the local church might have been his source of African American musical tradition but did not allow him to play organ for other than sacred tunes. He ran away from home in his late teens and migrated through the South and Midwest as an itinerant pianist, picking the places of pianos, which were saloons and honky-tongs. He lived for several years in Sedalia and St. Louis, both in Missouri, which had especially been the center of vice and ragtime by the 1890s and brought him good opportunities and fame and also a fatal destiny.

Sedalia and St. Louis were major focal points in ragtime history. Sedalia was a smaller and relatively new, founded in 1857, railroad boom town and St. Louis had been a Mississippi river front French trading post since the eighteenth century. The two towns, however, had similar personalities; they both were thriving as the junction and the destination of products and men who were “away from home, men with extra money in their pocket, seeking diversions for their leisure time,” and, consequently, both had popular red-light districts. Ragtime music was their attraction. Many African American pianists, including Scott Joplin, drifted to the barrelhouses in those areas and made them their outposts, while often traveling to perform in the neighboring towns.

In those venues, pianos might not be well-tuned or well-maintained and were often played “by men who had no formal training on the instrument,” which is well illustrated in a piano battle sequence at the brothel in the 1977 movie Scott Joplin. In the movie, one of the

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55 Ibid., 6-8.
56 Ibid., 13.
58 Ibid., 13-14.
barrelhouse “pianists” plays piano using his elbows, bottom, and feet. Although a saloon’s owner made no direct profit on music as he or she did on liquor, the music cost nothing; the owner just installed the piano with small monthly payments. The arrangement for pianists seemed different from district to district. In Storyville, the musicians got no wages; they were “willing to work for tips and it was a point of pride among many men out for a good time.” In the district in small town Sedalia, a madam paid the pianist “$1.50/night, the usual gig price, and the proverbial ‘big spenders’ ‘out of town’ handed over 50 cent and dollar tips, which totaled out $7.00 on a slow night and $10 to $15 on a good night.” The brothel was an important place for African American musicians because it provided both a piano and conduits of needed money directly from white men’s wallets. The red-light districts were their crucial moorings. Even after becoming famous with “Maple Leaf Rag” during the days in Sedalia and moving to St. Louis, Joplin continued to live in the sinful neighborhoods, the hub of ragtime with a piano.

In 1907, Joplin migrated to New York and roomed in a small boarding house with a piano, near the Tenderloin district. When the black cabarets and ragtime clubs began leaving the Tenderloin district for Harlem, Joplin too moved to Harlem. Despite his preference to dwell in sinful districts, Joplin hoped to compose respectable music, and his rag tunes represented rather sophisticated “classic ragtime” as dubbed by Joplin’s publisher John Stark or by Joplin himself. Furthermore, descriptions by journalists or relatives of Joplin emphasized “a good-mannered, modest, and extreme reticence gentleman,” or “quiet and rarely speaking in a voice higher than

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62 H. Loring White, Ragging It: Getting Ragtime into History (and Some History into Ragtime) (iUniverse, Inc, 2005), 122.
63 Berlin, 202.
64 Ibid., 70.
65 Ibid., 122.
Considering these anecdotes, Joplin probably preferred the celestial-light church to the rowdy red-light district. It is tragic that Scott Joplin died of syphilis at the age of forty-nine in the asylum in 1917. His long-time friend pianist Louis Chauvin also died of the same disease earlier in 1908. Syphilis was a widespread infectious disease in America in the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, and is reported to have been particularly prevalent among black entertainers. It was mentioned as the death cause in the death certificate of bluesman Robert Johnson, despite some of his peers claiming that he died from poisoning. The disease had surely been transmitted to Joplin via direct contact; however, Joplin’s pathogeny could be considered a result of his itchy hunger of the access to the instrument. The black man could not find a piano elsewhere than in brothels. In exchange, Scott Joplin, a “King of Ragtime,” contributed to the foundation of distinctive African American piano music heritage, particularly in St. Louis. A number of African American piano players migrated from the South and crafted St. Louis styles of blues and boogie-woogie piano in the 1920s and 1930s.

Piano in the South

While African American musicians in the Midwest found pianos and performing chances in the saloons or brothels in the red-light districts, in the frontier South, musicians found pianos in the similar establishments in the labor camps—lumber camps, turpentine camps, railroad camps, and levee camps—tougher and coarser places. Such environments bore different style from Joplin’s ragtime; it was blues piano, eventually evolved into boogie-woogie around the mid

1920s, which was, summarized by music commentator Roy Carew, “the bad little boy of the rag family who wouldn't study.” ⁶⁹ The exact time and place of the music’s emergence is unclear; however, a boogie-woogie surely offered what fiddle and banjo presented in the plantation dance socials but in more energetic manner. In boogie-woogie, piano played “featuring percussive, right-hand improvisations over a repeating left-hand bass pattern, often known as a ‘walking,’ ‘striding,’ or ‘rolling’ bass” ⁷⁰—right hand played the fiddle role and left hand the banjo role.

The development of piano music in the South proceeded in parallel with the development of the land. The lumbering activity in the southern forest was scarce before the Civil War. Peter Silvester defines the pivotal moment as shortly after 1880; “[E]ncouraged by the planters of the Mississippi Delta who were eager for more forest land to be cleared for the planting of cotton, the lumber boom commenced in the area around Memphis: Tennessee, Mississippi and Arkansas.” The labor force was predominantly black, including the drifters and convict leasing. ⁷¹ They felled the trees with axes or saws in the remote forest and loaded the massive logs on the spur track or boat or wagon to the sawmill. It was hard and dangerous work. The workers too were hard and dangerous, because they were getting through harsh conditions. Makeup of the logging camp was “a half-dozen boxcar-like shacks of weathered wood, two or three bunkhouses to accommodate from seventy-five to 150 men, the cook shack, the foreman’s office and the company store.” Often there was also a barrelhouse or juke joint among the shacks, which functioned as “a combination dancehall, crap-game dive and whorehouse,” where the lumber company furnished drinks and a piano. ⁷² The company store and barrelhouse were designed to

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⁷⁰ Ibid., 27.
⁷¹ Silvester, 22-23.
⁷² Ibid., 25.
make laborers not leave the camp and not spend money outside of the camp for liquor, gambling, or prostitutes. Piano players were expected to glue the men to the spots and loosen their purse strings for the owners and for themselves as in the red-light districts.

Itinerant black musicians were migrating between those sawmill camps, which later grew into the sawmill towns still owned by the companies, and showing up attentively when money was around. David Honeyboy Edwards, a blues guitarist who often traveled around the “barrelhouse circuits,” recalled, “We knew their paydays, and when they paid we was right there. We’re going to leave with some money, too! The sawmill paid off at West Point one Saturday, next Saturday would be in Tupelo, next in Kilmichael.”

Labor camps had been scattered around the whole rural South in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; the sawmills alone numbered 6,640 for the southern states in 1927. A barrelhouse pianist could travel along his favorite route or remain at the camp for several days. Newcomers might gather suspicion and the camp owner resort to the gun for “ill behaved an unknown pianist”; while the owner would buttonhole and protect good entertainers from the incipient violence—fighting, cutting, and shooting—that pervaded the camps. The musician’s arrangements were similar to the brothels in the sporting districts; itinerant pianists relied on “unpredictable generosity of the clientele, who gave tips or, more usually, plied them with drinks.” One different arrangement from the red-light districts was that visiting musicians were given food and a bed as well, probably in one of the shacks where the laborers laid their worn-out bodies. And on weekend nights, they shared a crowded entertainment venue.

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74 Silvester, 22.
75 Ibid., 27.
76 Ibid.
The close interaction between pianists and their audiences was a distinctive characteristic of the barrelhouse entertainment. Such environments often functioned as the cradles of new barrelhouse pianists. For instance, Sunnyland Slim, born 1906 near Vance, Mississippi, first heard the blues piano when he was a twelve-year-old runaway and was working in the lumber camps around the Mississippi Delta. He was “keeping an ear cocked to the music he heard from the itinerant musicians who came by on Saturday nights.”

Slim took up a master-apprentice relationship with the older pianist, Jeff Ward, and learned the rudiments of blues piano. Similarly, Skip James, born 1902 in Bentonia, Mississippi, also a runaway lumber camp laborer, spent his free time learning piano “standing behind the house pianist.”

Young James was influenced deeply by the traveling pianist, Will Grabtree, not only in piano style but also from his rough way of life. In a few years, James began to work as a professional pianist/gambler/pimp like his mentor.

The music in the barrelhouse was dance music to get-down, blow off steam, and court members of the opposite sex. Sunnyland Slim recalled, in the lumber camps, “Everybody was singing.”

Piano players played music responding to the requests or mood of the place. Artfulness was not enough to satisfy the audience. The popularity of certain pianists was determined by the range and variety of repertoires. Some musicians, at the alcoholic climax, “sang their songs falsetto in order to be heard above the general hullabaloo” or demonstrated “his unique rendition of a well-known number.”

Piano players learned techniques from each other when their paths crossed. Little Brother Montgomery, born in 1906 to a barrelhouse owner in

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79 Ibid., 69.
80 Whiteis, 17.
81 Silvester, 28.
Kentwood, Louisiana, spent his early days as a traveling barrelhouse pianist and honed his specialties, such as reworking traditional blues tunes, by learning from other pianists and would throw down in the barrelhouse performance,\textsuperscript{82} before he headed to the North in the late 1920s.

Unlike the middle-class piano players in the North who took lessons, most African American piano players were self-taught and studious learners. They added new twists to their performances by learning techniques from other musicians or teaming up with other instrument players. Even though playing abilities secured them from the backbreaking hard work, piano players were too, after all, hell-bent survivors of the harsh and no promise working conditions of the labor camp environment in the South. By 1927, due to the rapid depletion of the forest, lumber production in the South headed downhill, and, by 1942, the virgin forest had almost gone from the South and “the lumber boom proper was definitely at an end.”\textsuperscript{83} Before the labor camps were shut down, piano players had serially migrated to the northern cities, such as Chicago and St. Louis, where the piano and the playing opportunities were ubiquitous.

In the barrelhouses or juke joints in the Mississippi Delta, however, pianos were less common than in the frontier labor camps. Pianist and guitarist Skip James recalled that in the 1920s “the few pianos he had access to in Yazoo County were spaced ten or fifteen miles apart.”\textsuperscript{84} One reason is simply a difference of business scale. While the barrelhouses in the labor camps were owned by the companies which could invest the furnishing, in the Delta those places were usually ran by individuals in smaller scale. James recalled that he had never seen “bona fide barrelhouses” in Mississippi.\textsuperscript{85} Some juke joints in Mississippi were virtually “juke houses.”

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{85} Calt, 76.
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They could be a part of tenants’ houses on plantations, vacant houses, or even makeshift; Jeff Todd Titon suggests that “jukes” moved to outside, cleared fields, during warmer weather. In many juke joints, pianos or any other instruments were not provided. The musicians were expected to come in with the instruments. The guitar, portable but with loud volume, was the ideal instrument.

CHAPTER II

GUITAR: THE IDEAL INSTRUMENT AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSICIAN CHOSE

The advent of the affordable guitar, after the demise of the banjo and sporadic appearance of the piano, must have been a blessed event for African American musicians who wanted instruments that could accompany their new music. The guitar turned out cheaper and portable compared with the piano, and easy to learn compared with the fiddle or piano. Some might have liked the guitar for its newness. While the banjo, fiddle, and piano held old value and the development of them was closely associated with cultural interaction of Africans and Europeans, the guitar felt to them, as David Evans writes, “something novel with little cultural baggage other than symbolic associations that appeared to conform to notions of progress and success,” and its development was associated with society’s commercialization and modernization. Most importantly, for a bluesman, guitar was an ideal instrument—ineffective, strong, portable, and interchangeable.

Debut of American guitars

The steel-stringed guitar arrived in African American communities at the end of the nineteenth century as one of the embodiments of new age, almost at the same period of emergence of blues. It is worth noting that the guitars were owned by many African Americans in the relatively short period after the war. Although guitars had been on the American continent since colonial days, they were in a different sphere; the players were “rich and fashionable young ladies” who played music similar to those “that graced the drawing rooms of Europe.” There were even guitars in the antebellum South; in ex-slaves’ WPA interviews, guitars were mentioned 15 times: in Mississippi 6 times, in Virginia 3 times, and other southern states each once. Most of the guitar references in Mississippi, though, came from Rankin and Simpson Counties in south central of the states, not the Delta region. The guitars belonged to the white migrants and had gut strings that produced sweet tones. The steel-stringed guitars had different tones and other elements. They played the essential roles for the realization of the new black music, blues, because the steel strings came out with integral merits: the loud and distinctive sound, the lower cost, and the sturdiness, which contributed directly to the development of blues.

The affordable guitar relied on the instrument industry’s accumulative innovations and renovations. Several guitar makers are credited for the early American-made guitars, including C. F. Martin, Gibson, Lyon and Healy (Washburn brand), and Oscar Schmidt (Stella brand). Musical instrument researcher Darryl Martin suggests two possibilities for the earliest steel-stringed guitar manufacturers. One is Orville Gibson, the founder of the Gibson Company, who

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90 Winans, 2.
began to make musical instruments as an amateur during the 1880s in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Another one is Lyon and Healy, a partnership of George Washburn Lyon and Patrick Healy and Chicago-based mass-producing guitar maker, who might have taken the initiative to the Ford Motor Company that launched the mass production of Model ‘T’ in 1913, by installing the moving assembly line. Lyon and Healy boasted in 1889 “25,000 instruments built since they commenced manufacturing a quarter of a century earlier.” Steel strings, however, were not the invention of American guitar makers but of the European luthiers (string instrument craftsmen). By the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, luthiers were already using the metal strings on several instruments, such as chitarra battente, an Italian stringed instrument of the guitar family. Orville Gibson made similar approaches to the steel-stringed battentes and guitars. Martin argues that when Gibson applied steel strings to the guitar, he intended not to design a main instrument in folk or light music but a supportive one for mandolin orchestras, “needing the steel strings to help blend the sound, and to provide greater volume.” On the contrary, Lyon and Healy were making an instrument to aim at a mass audience, employing aggressive marketing strategies. By the end of the nineteenth century, the metal or steel-stringed guitars were the standard models.

The steel strings benefited bluesmen. In the rural South, with no electric amplification or microphone yet, the bluesman needed to make a loud sound to cut through the crowded juke

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94 Ibid., 86.
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
97 “Recapturing.” 152. Lyon and Healy was the first instrument company who advertised in the trade magazines and published illustrated catalogue.
joint and reach the excited dancers’ ears. The power of the song relied on his strong lungs, as bluesman Jonny Shines said in an interview, “[Y]ou just sing out loud as you can,” and the power of the instrument was limited to the ability of the strings. Steel strings worked.

While the sound volume of the steel strings served a role in the music venue, the lower cost of steel strings helped to provide a cheaper guitar to consumers. In the Sears, Roebuck catalog, a gut-stringed guitar in 1894 cost $4.50 (around $128 in 2015’s money) while a steel-stringed guitar in 1905 cost $2.95 ($82 in 2015). From the beginning of human history, every musical string was made of natural materials—vines, horsehairs, silk, and animal’s gut, until the industrial revolution stepped in. Western musical instruments traditionally had gut strings that had undergone a rather troublesome process by the artisans. String makers often set up shops next door to an abattoir to save on transportation time. After an animal was slaughtered, the string maker got approximately thirty yards of material from a sheep. The material would experience further processing—being soaked, rinsed, dried, and sorted for gauge, quality, and length. Once cut in half, the string was separated into smooth side (or ‘rights’) and rough side (or ‘lefts’). The smooth sides are a bit purer and suitable for the treble strings. The rough sides usually ended up as the larger diameter strings. Fermenting the gut took the next four days. The result was uniform white ribbons. The strands were finally twisted into strings. The Acoustic Music Organization states, “The Art of string making is in the process of twisting the strings. Each string maker has their own special method to control the twist angle.” Obviously, properly twisted strings produce even and beautiful sounds. The gut strings are thus expensive.

Similar processes were carried on until gut was replaced with nylon polymer after World War II, when Albert Augustine, an instrument builder in New York, and the DuPont Company, a leading arms company, joined hands in nylon string making. After the war was also the period for many instrument builders to resume production. Although guitar makers were exempted from the production ban, short supply of the metal had reduced the levels of production greatly.

Just as the gut strings and nylon strings were associated with other industries, the gut with the slaughter and the nylon with the ammunition, the development of steel strings was linked with the smokestack industry. In 1858, without any connection to the guitar making business, Henry Bessemer patented the process for making steel. His process enabled steel to be made very inexpensively in large quantities, which brought changes in many things, including guitar making. Steel is a form of refined wrought iron: the result of removing impurities and creating an alloy of iron and carbon. Carbon is the most common choice for an alloy material due to cheap cost and ready availability. Alloys of lower carbon allow more uniformity of the material and therefore create more predictable characteristics of the resulting steel products—the kind that are absolutely necessary for the manufacturing of steel strings for musical instruments. Following the addition of the alloying agents, the hot liquid is cast into ingots or continually cast into slabs, blooms (used for structural steel for buildings), or billets. The billets are rolled into bars, rods and ultimately wires. This is the material that eventually becomes musical instrument strings.

The making of steel strings does not sound simple; however, if we compare it with the processing of animal’s intestines that depends on natural resources and requires subtle artisanship, manufacturing thin lines in the automated factory is probably a promise of uniform

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101 Ibid.
102 “125 Years,” 86.
103 Ibid.
and consistent productions. The earlier methods of steel-making have been improved over the course of years, and the more efficient the production process, the lower the cost of strings.

The third advantage of steel strings is sturdiness. While natural material strings tended to be uneven in thickness, changed tuning with the weather, and frayed or broke easily, steel strings are firm, steady, and strong, enduring certain rough treatments while playing or traveling. This kind of solidity was what the itinerant bluesmen craved. In addition, the bottleneck, the most distinctive playing style in the Delta blues, has developed only with steel strings. Players use a hard object, typically a steel tube, cut-out glass bottleneck, or pocket knife, pressing and sliding over the strings. Gut or nylon strings would not work well.

Once the steel strings were readily available, the instrument needed more sturdiness to withstand the new higher tensions—double to triple compare to gut strings—created by steel strings. One simply cannot apply steel strings to gut guitar. All parts of the guitar, the neck, the joint, and the body structure, needed reinforcement. The neck and the body were particularly important. In 1921, Ted McHugh of Gibson employee invented the adjustable truss rod, a metal rod that runs under the fingerboard and adds reinforcement to the neck. Since the neck of the steel-string guitar became narrower than classical guitar for the users who wanted to appropriate to their fingering techniques, the truss rod was a powerful solution. As for the body, the guitar top or soundboard is usually a flat thin piece of wood such as spruce or red cedar, and the body itself is a cavity resonator. Therefore, guitar is light, portable, and weak against high tension. Orville Gibson developed an interesting scheme to strengthen the guitar body, which turned out

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104 Ibid.
105 Evans and Evans, 260.
106 Ibid., 266.
an arresting design of the arch-top guitar. The new guitar had carved wooden body, both top and back, with f-holes, imitating their successful mandolin design. In this new design, the strings were fastened to the tail block and redistributed all the string force to downward pressure on the soundboard rather than torsional. The new style guitars looked wonderful on the stage. Many jazz musicians and blues musicians, including B. B. King, favored this type. Other guitar makers made a less flamboyant change. In order to reinforce the body strength, they employed an X-brace system that consists of two braces forming an “X” below the top of the sound hole to keep the neck and top from cracking and bending under high pressure, which became the standard for the steel-strung flattop guitars. X-bracing or X-barring was an invention by Christian Friedrich Martin in the 1830s, even though C. F. Martin “didn’t make any mention of building guitars for steel strings until the early 1920s,” except on special orders starting as early as 1900. Some of the steel-stringed guitars such as Stellas, however, were ladder-braced, in which braces are arranged parallel to each other. Guitarist and artist Neil Harpe claims that “not because it was the ‘cheap’ way to build a guitar, but because this was the customary way steel stringed guitars were built in Italy, France and Germany until the mid-twentieth century.”

Both were true. Many of the craftsmen at that time were European-trained immigrants, and Stella brand guitars were the cheapest of all, and often purchased by tight-budgeted African Americans. Neil Harpe also claims that Stella suited blues because the ladder bracing affected a loud and “sort of ‘in your face’ sound quality.” Brought together in this way, by the late nineteenth century, the cheap, strong, and portable guitar furnished with the loud sound of steel-strings took

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107 Acoustic Music Org.
108 Martin, 91.
shape as a bluesman’s instrument.

In the 1920s and 1930s, two other variants were added to American guitar history, aiming to produce louder volume: doubled strings and the new face resonator. Interestingly, both innovations closely associated with the foreign countries and both had huge impacts on blues. First introduced by Stella, the modern twelve-stringed guitar, according to Tom Evans and Mary Anne Evans, descended from the “Mexican double-strung guitar-family instruments.” In this guitar, twelve steel strings are set in the six courses. Typically, the strings of the lower four courses are tuned in octaves and the upper two courses are tuned in unisons. The effects are dramatic; Evans and Evans conclude that twelve strings “give the guitar a very full sound with interesting harmonic possibilities.” Stella’s twelve-stringed guitars became popular with use by blues musicians such as Leadbelly and Blind Blake. Another innovative guitar, the resonator type had a rather strange appearance. The body (resonator) of the guitar was entirely or partly made of aluminum, which transferred the most amount of vibration and produced loud volume almost “three to five times as loud as any made of wood.” In the early 1930s, the resonator type guitars were famous with two brand names, Dobro and National, but they were initially made by Dopera Brothers, whose father was an immigrant violinmaker from Czechoslovakia. The innovative resonator guitar sold at rather high price. The maker’s efforts, nevertheless, appeared in National’s Duolian, a $32.50 competitive all metal resonator. Duolian was offered with two types of neck: the square-section neck model for country music bands and round-section neck model for blues musicians. For bottleneck playing, the resonator type guitar was

112 Evans and Evans, 224.
113 Ibid.
115 Evans and Evans, 255.
particularly befitting. The guitar makers repeatedly improved the instruments to appeal to a wide range of users. In less than forty years, once a genteel society’s parlor instrument, the guitar in America became a key element of the blues.

**Special delivery**

The distribution of guitars, however, required other modernizations, for there were no instrument stores in rural areas. Guitars arrived in unprecedented ways, which were the results of simultaneously improved rural conditions. The conditions that made the instrument available to rural people were “the age of railroad and postal and mail-order expansion.”\(^{116}\) The emergence of the guitar was associated with modernization in multiple realms.

First came the railroad. Railroad construction in the South commenced as early as the 1830s, responding to the demands from the industry such as tobacco, quarries, lumber, and especially cotton, who favored train’s advantage over other types of travel. Cotton had particularly been affected by variable and uncontrollable levels of rivers when they were transported on the river boats.\(^{117}\) After the Civil War, destroyed railroad facilities were rebuilt extensively, and the South was integrated within the national network by 1904.\(^{118}\) An increase of postal facilities followed. Post offices were opened one after another. Rural dwellers privileged the preferential treatment by the government: rural free delivery service (RFD). Although RFD did not start as a nationwide official effort, it grew rapidly. According to historian Bruce Bastin,
“In 1897 rural free delivery served eighty-three routes and 22,272 families; by 1907 it served
37,728 routes and 3,750,000 families.” Improved transportation and postal service brought
traveling salesmen, products, and mail into the rural South. Around that time, manufacturing of
the steel-string guitar flourished in the northern cities. Some guitar makers largely made mail-
order guitars. Lyon and Healy, one of the first steel-stringed guitar makers in Chicago, made
guitars under the name of Washburn and claimed to be making “100,000 guitars a year by the
turn of the century.” They advertised on the music trade magazines and at the same time
supplied their guitars to mail-order companies. A German-origin instrument company, Oscar
Schmidt, based in New Jersey, made Stella brand (later bought by Harmony) for Sears mail-order
and kept up the market demand in the early 1900s. Stella was the most affordable guitar and the
one many bluesmen purchased by mail-order. Mail-order company Sears also had its own
guitar brand, Silverstone. There was, however, no Silverstone factory or even a Silverstone
company. The name of Silverstone was applied to products made by various manufacturers such
as Harmony (which Sears owned), Valco, Danelectro, and Kay.

Mail-order businesses such as Sears, Roebuck Company and Montgomery Ward had their
origin in the United States from the late nineteenth century. The 320-page catalog published in
1894 by Sears, Roebuck became a pivot for the marketing industry. “A new mail order concern,”
Bastin points out, “entered the field and instantly dominated it, controlling the pattern for all
future development.” Compared with prior ones, the new catalog contained a wide variety of
items: watches and jewelry, sewing machines, buggies, silverware, men’s coats, guns, and

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119 Ibid., 15.  
120 Martin, 93.  
123 Bastin, 15.
musical instruments, including piano, accordion, harmonica, ocarina, violin, cornet, and guitar. The next year, they added dolls, icebox refrigerators, cookstoves, and groceries in the catalog.\textsuperscript{124} The mail-order companies had a mission to fulfill the basic needs in farmer’s lives with cheaper prices than local stores, claiming they had “the answer to farmers’ prayers.”\textsuperscript{125} American people’s consumer life hit a tipping point. Along with RFD, the mail-order service mitigated physical isolation of far-flung outpost dwellers. Furthermore, this shopping alternative had deeper meaning for African Americans in the South, because mail-order did not segregate them like country stores often did. For instance, before mail-order, “African Americans held a marginal place at best in the new consuming communities that lit up white rural life around the country stores where both races shopped. In the general store, the local racial and class authority of the storekeeper largely maintained the racial order.”\textsuperscript{126} The white clerks waited on blacks after all the white customers left the store and always served them poor-quality products. Contrary to that, mail-order was impartial because they had next to no idea about customers’ racial identities. In \textit{Making Whiteness}, Grace Elizabeth Hale wrote, “Catalogs placed the consuming practices of blacks beyond local white knowledge and control.”\textsuperscript{127} Also, mail-order was equally generous and friendly to the timid rural folks. Their personal touch messages such as “To our patrons” or “Don’t be afraid that you have made a mistake” appeared often in the catalogs. The reassuring three simple words message—“Send No Money”—was printed frequently in the Sears catalog and in the advertisements of all the leading farm papers.\textsuperscript{128}

Sears’s income from sales increased rapidly—fifty-fold from 1895 to 1907—, and they saw

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 179.
\textsuperscript{128} Louis E. Asher and Edith Heal. \textit{Send No Money} (Chicago: Argus, 1942), 1.
\end{flushleft}
further boom from 1908 to 1923. Throughout the early twentieth century, southern blacks routinely ordered a wide assortment of goods from Sears.\textsuperscript{129} Eventually, by the time a bluesman attempted to buy a guitar, mail-order had become something familiar in the African American communities.

In the Sears catalog of 1894, eight types of American-made gut-string guitars were advertised in a quarter-page with prices from $4.50 to $26.00. Each guitar came with a free instruction book and one-year warranty.\textsuperscript{130} When the steel-stringed guitars became available, the variety of models and service were much improved. In 1897, there was “a page devoted to steel-stringed guitars, offering a year’s guarantee (later extended to a month’s free trial), with prices from $3.25 to $27.00 for a Washburn.”\textsuperscript{131} Over thousand trial guitars were offered. By 1905 there were six pages displaying guitars, including a full-page advertisement of the $2.95 model and a whole range from $4.95 to $21.00."\textsuperscript{132} This $2.95 model was a Stella and sold well. In fact, many bluesmen such as David Honeyboy Edwards, Muddy Waters, Leadbelly, and B. B. King recalled their first guitars were Stella models even in the 1930s.

From 1890 to the early 1900s, the mail-order guitar literally had its peak. “[G]uitar is everywhere in the rural South,” David Evans writes, “especially in black music and especially in the Deep South.”\textsuperscript{133} Guitar players were also ubiquitous, as historian David Cohn depicts, “In 1905, the United States reeked with bucolic and small-town guitarists.”\textsuperscript{134} Then, the assortment in the mail-order catalogs changed. They began to offer fewer options for guitars. In 1908, the

\textsuperscript{129} Bastin, 16.
\textsuperscript{131} Bastin, 17.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{133} Evans (2001), 13.
\textsuperscript{134} David L. Cohn, The Good Old Days: A History of American Morals and Manners as Seen through the Sears, Roebuck Catalogs 1905 to the Present (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940), 18.
guitar pages in Sears catalog were reduced to one page, and the price range narrowed down to from $1.89 to $3.95. In 1925, guitars were again packed in one page. The reason for this change was the transformation of retail business. When guitars became popular, country stores and small town stores sensed the necessity of handling guitars. Now people could buy a new guitar via mail-order or at a retail shop in town, or obtain, as a new alternative choice, a used one from a pawnshop. In that way, Leadbelly purchased a used twelve-stringed guitar. He recalled, “I saw one of the old 12-string Stella sitting in the window of Dallas store…the price of the guitar was $12.” The store where Leadbelly shopped might have been a pawnshop or a retail shop that carried used instruments, but Leadbelly’s biographers Charles K. Wolfe and Kip Lornell suggest that judging from the situation, that twelve-stringed guitar must have been relatively new and in good shape. The twelve-stringed guitar later became Leadbelly’s trademark.

**Guitars hit the South**

Rampant “bucolic guitarists” probably included farmers whose aspiration for playing music had been inspired by the catalogs or evoked a hope of earning money and freedom by the minstrel shows or other traveling musicians. Did they master the guitar? Bruce Bastin doubts it. “The initial delight of having the instrument, even with the month’s free approval, probably soon wore off when it proved less easy to play than had been expected.” He suggests that the instrument would be brought into pawnshops, which were, Bastin claims, “until the late 1910s,

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135 Bastin, 17.
136 Ibid., 18.
138 Ibid., 50.
the main source of consumer credit, which probably reached their maximum growth in 1914.”139

Pawnshops or pawnbrokers or hock shops or fringe banks or just “uncle” were closely related with economic development and urbanism. Samuel Walter Levine counted out the number, which did business in 1911, “New York City, 144; Philadelphia, 94; Chicago, 77, Boston, 58; Kansas City, 42…” and estimated that “the United States apparently possesses one pawnbroker to every 47,000 of population. But there were many cities, towns and villages where no pawnbroker is licensed.”140 If we simply follow his calculation, there would be 38 pawnbrokers in Mississippi but maybe outside of the official commerce and industry. The official directories of Clarksdale and Jackson in the 1920s carry no entries for pawnbroker, pawnshop, or related business.141 Pawnshops, along with music stores, probably operated around the commercial districts. Bastin illustrates an example of farmers’ shopping at pawnshops; they dropped by local urban centers “on seasonal occasion, such as during the cotton or tobacco sales, when they would also have more money than at other times of the year.”142 African American musicians often bought their first guitars at pawnshops and resold them there to get another one. Some were regular customers. Memphis Minnie, an acclaimed blues guitarist and a songwriter, was one of them. When things got tight, her guitars were “constantly in and out of the pawnshop.”143 In rural areas, the exchange took place more directly between an owner and a buyer, as Bastin claims, “the instruments found their way into black hands, maybe more skilled and probably very eager to learn.”144 Young David Honeyboy Edwards got his first guitar in that way. When he

139 Ibid., 18.
141 Clarksdale, Miss., City Directory 1927-28 (Asheville: Ernest H. Miller and Piedmont Directory Co., 1927); Jackson City Directory 1922 (Jackson: Tucker Printing House, 1922)
142 Bastin, 18.
144 Bastin, 18.
was fourteen, a sharecropping man in his neighborhood bought a Stella from Sears for twelve dollars and played it every night, which aroused Edwards’ interest in the guitar and the blues. A few months later, the neighbor got tired of the instrument and sold it to Edwards’ father for eight dollars.\textsuperscript{145} The guitar fell into the right place: an eager guitar student and a future bluesman.

\textbf{Aspirations for guitar}

The first string instrument for a black boy, however, was often a handmade one-stringed instrument, which was often called “jitterbug,” or “diddley bow.” It had a simple structure, consisting of one string attached to wall or box or anything available. The diddley bow evolved into the “cigar-box guitar” or “gas-can bass” that are still used in the American music today. Thus one-stringed instruments largely register to popular music, even though in the black neighborhood, they were mostly children’s toys, imitating their elders playing instruments. In his research in Mississippi in the late 1960s, musicologist David Evans collected the bluesmen’s and non-bluesmen’s childhood memories about the one-stringed instruments. For example, Lonnie McDonald, aged 37 in Carthage, told Evans that he and other boys and girls played one-stringed instruments and some children would slide a pocket knife along the wire.\textsuperscript{146} Bluesman Big Joe Williams, born 1903 in Crawford recalled his childhood “playing a single strand of cotton-bailing wire strung on a wall between two staples with spools for bridges.”\textsuperscript{147} Williams later developed the unique style Delta blues with his nine-stringed guitar, which had three additional strings to a regular six-string guitar. Another blues guitar wizard Rev. Gary Davis, born in South

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[145]{Edwards, 25.}
\footnotetext[146]{David Evans, “Afro-American One-Stringed Instruments.” \textit{Western Folklore}. 29-4. (1970), 232.}
\footnotetext[147]{Ibid., 231.}
\end{footnotes}
Carolina in 1896, also mentioned his handmade guitar in an interview; “I was about 10 years old. I drove me a hole in each end of the pie can, run me up a stick through there; that’s the way I made it.” The relationship of the handmade instrument’s music to that of the guitar is apparent. Hunger for an instrument and the artifice to fulfill it would build up young people’s musical creativity.

Obtaining a first real guitar was a festive moment for any young musician. It was often a gift from a parent or family member. In the case of Big Bill Broonzy, born 1903 in Arkansas, it was a generous white man. According to his story, told to Alan Lomax, Broonzy made himself a “cornstalk fiddle” and later remodeled it into a cigar-box fiddle when he was a boy. Broonzy and his friend, who also had a handmade guitar, made up a string band and played tunes such as “Turkey in the Straw” for kids’ dancing, which a local white man heard and was pleased and bought them a new fiddle and guitar from Sears, Roebuck. Broonzy continued to play fiddle, until he switched to guitar in the 1920s in Chicago. If not as lucky as Broonzy, many blues musicians were fortunate enough to have parents who bought guitars for their children. Skip James’s mother bought James a $2.50 guitar. Mississippi John Hurt’s mother bought her son a $1.50 “Black Annie” when he was nine. Memphis Minnie’s parents bought eight-year old Minnie a new guitar as a Christmas present in 1905. That was a significant event for the later musician and also for blues history, since guitar playing was considered taboo for girls or a

151 Calt, 30.
153 Garon, 14.
devilish act in the Christian idiom.\textsuperscript{154} Young W. C. Handy had to give up the guitar when his preacher father banned him from having “the devil’s box.”\textsuperscript{155} If a black boy spent years hungering for a guitar, a guitar would be what he purchased as soon as he became adult and could afford it.

When an aspiring black man bought a guitar after long years of craving, he wasted little time in playing and earning money with his new investment. For instance, Muddy Waters, born 1913, told Robert Palmer, “When I was seventeen, I put the [French] harp down and switched to the guitar. The first one I got. I sold the last horse we had. Made about fifteen dollars for him, gave my grandmother seven dollar and fifty cents. I kept seven-fifty and paid about two-fifty for that guitar. It was Stella.”\textsuperscript{156} Waters soon made a dollar by playing it and eventually got about three guitars from Sears, Roebuck. The first guitar Son House, born 1902 in Lyon, Mississippi, bought for $1.50 was a broken Stella with only five strings, but somehow he managed to learn the bottleneck playing that he heard in the recordings.\textsuperscript{157} Bluesman and sculpture artist James “Son” Thomas, born 1926 in Leland, Mississippi, bought his first guitar by mail-order. It was a Gene Autry model from a Sears catalog for $8.50. He said in an interview, “I picked cotton to make enough money to get that guitar, and then I played on the post office steps and made my money back.”\textsuperscript{158} The Gene Autry model was the first stencil-painted cowboy guitar introduced in 1932 to connect consumer desires with their heroes who, fans thought, were using the same model. This marketing method has continued up to the present, such as in the \textit{B. B. King Lucille}.

\textsuperscript{154} Lomax, 360.  
\textsuperscript{155} Handy, 10.  
\textsuperscript{158} Obrecht (1993), 42.
By the 1930s, the guitar became the American popular instrument and most prewar bluesmen had already started, or were ready to start, their music careers with guitars.

In addition to the steel string’s advantages, some bluesmen found the guitar versatile comparative to piano. Despite its armload of size, the guitar held enormous possibilities of playing thanks to the combination of six strings and the long (12 or 14 fretted) neck. Blind Blake, Charlie Patton, Mississippi John Hurt, Leadbelly, and Robert Johnson show ragtime or boogie-woogie piano influences in their recordings. Edward Komara argues that Robert Johnson’s innovative guitar techniques, such as improvisation and harmonic elements, are deeply attributed to piano playing, which he heard in the recordings, learned with his guitar teacher, Ike Zimmerman, and picked up from the pianists in Helena, Arkansas, in the early 1930s.\(^\text{159}\) Robert Jr. Lockwood, born 1915 in Marvel, about 20 miles from Helena, had been longing to play piano since he was little, until Robert Johnson appeared in his life as his mother’s boyfriend, impressed the four-year younger boy with his guitar skills, and taught him playing. Lockwood recalled, “I haven’t thought about a piano since I learned to play it [guitar].”\(^\text{160}\) Likewise, Leadbelly, born 1889 near Mooringsport, Louisiana, heard piano tunes out of the barrelhouse in Fannin Street, a famous red-light district then in Texas, and wanted to play the “boogie-woogie bass.” Later he cultivated his bass-running style on the twelve-stringed guitar. Inspired by the piano, both Lockwood and Leadbelly expanded their guitar techniques. As discussed earlier, when new dance music had emerged in the nineteenth century, one advantage of the piano to the banjo was that the left hand and the right hand could take different tasks of basic rhythms and syncopated


melodies;\textsuperscript{161} and when more energetic boogie-woogie emerged, the pianist’s right hand took care of the improvisations and the left hand handled the repeating bass pattern, such as a walking bass.\textsuperscript{162} The guitar players could do those tricks with both hands on the six strings, employing wide range of techniques, which are commonly the fingerpicking, hammer on, pull off, bending, choking, left-hand damping, and bottleneck playing.\textsuperscript{163} The recordings which prewar bluesmen waxed their arts show the guitar’s richness of flexibilities and versatilities even without the amplified effects.

The guitar became a suitable partner. As long as he had a guitar at hand, the bluesman could start playing his music anywhere, on the streets, at the crossroads, even on the post office steps, for the guitar could be always with him, unlike the piano. The guitar was optimal as a traveling companion because it was light, portable, and not fragile, and also an ideal instrument because it was loud and sufficient to accompany to his music. The guitar could even be a psychological support. B. B. King, born 1925 in Berclair, Mississippi, expressed his attachment to the guitar; “If I was feeling lonely, I’d pick up the guitar; feel like talking, pick up guitar; if something’s bugging me, just grab the guitar and play out the anger.”\textsuperscript{164}

\textsuperscript{161} Southern (1983), 313.
\textsuperscript{162} Mathews, 27.
\textsuperscript{163} Evans and Evans, 292.
CHAPTER III

THE ENTREPRENURIAL SPIRIT OF THE BLUESMAN

Prior chapters have discussed the pathway of the guitar becoming a dominant instrument in African American music and the advantages of the steel-stringed guitar, which were that it was affordable, portable, relatively solid, and loud. Some grabbed the guitar and started traveling and playing music. Those itinerant bluesmen were professional entertainers who delivered anything the audience demanded, with his single instrument, which was dominantly the guitar. Nevertheless, the guitar met misfortune; the owners did not always treat their guitars well. Some handled their guitars rough and careless. Also despite the importance in blues music, the guitar could not play the leading character but the supporting character of the blues. For the self-employed bluesmen, the guitars were trade tools.

Music on demand

The professional bluesmen probably appeared soon after the blues was born, because African American musicians played all sort of music. It was sort of business sense to tailor their music to their audience. For instance, the family string band, the Chatmon family in Bolton, Mississippi, mostly played non-blues music for white audiences with fiddle, banjo, mandolin,
guitar, and piano. They were talented nine sons of a former slave fiddler and grew up surrounded by instruments. The seventh son, Sam Chatmon, born 1897, told that he started to play for money when he was seven years old.\textsuperscript{165} The activity of the family band was similar to the plantation music practice, where the musically gifted slaves were called up to the big houses to play dance music with fiddle and banjo and given food and tips. While in the postbellum South, the versatile musicians were hired by white folks for their social occasions or weekend parties. The musicians were paid better in cash and demanded less. Chatmon recalled, “He [the white man] can give me 60 cents a day for plowin’, and give me five dollars for playin’ three or four pieces at his house.”\textsuperscript{166} They were wise enough to split the family band into two or three ensembles and switch them to play at the multiple parties on one weekend. Weekend parties were also held in the private houses and juke joints in the black neighborhood. Occasionally, there were picnics, county fairs, or harvest festivals. The musicians would not be short of places to go.

What was common both before and after Emancipation was that the musicians played for either whites or blacks, but they played different music. The itinerant bluesmen traveled from place to place and played music, non-blues to the white audiences and the blues to black audiences. Those days, white southerners had seldom interest in black folks’ music, and they requested musicians to play danceable tunes, popular songs, or standard numbers. Many recording blues artists, including Charlie Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Big Joe Williams, David Honeyboy Edwards, Johnny Shines, and Robert Johnson, were once or simultaneously the self-employed itinerant musicians. Blind Lemon Jefferson was the powerful example of all in the era. In the 1920 census, his occupation was listed as “musician,” and his employer as “general

\textsuperscript{165} Obrecht (1994), 35.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 38.
The musicians must be able to deliver any kind of live music on demand, since the versatility directly tied to money. Johnny Shines, born 1915 in Frayser, Tennessee, told an interviewer how he and Robert Johnson added a new repertoire, such as polka, while traveling together;

Somebody ask you to play a song, maybe ask you a dollar for that song… And you couldn’t play that song, you miss that money. So you had to learn to play some of everything you heard. If we passed a place, a white dancing hall, and the big bands was playing in there, whatsoever kind of music they was playing, we used to have to listen to. Stood outside and listen to. Hide around outside and listen. So we’d go home, and when we get ready, we’d play those same pieces.168

Good ear and quick learning were basic traits of the itinerant bluesmen. They played the blues only when they got back to the southern rural area, or other blues-favored places. Shines found and surprised that the people in Buffalo and New Jersey were “very interested in the blues.”169

When they stepped into the unfamiliar establishment, they had to catch instantly the ethnicity, people’s preference, or mood of the place. Aside from the readily wide range of repertoire, even just “some of everything,” traveling musicians needed basic common sense and a keen instinct or street-smartness. Making up for his sightlessness, Blind Lemon Jefferson had a skill in identifying the money given to him and often said, “Don’t play me cheap.”170

David Honeyboy Edwards, who lacked formal schooling, opened his eyes and learned things in the itinerant

169 Welding, 29.
170 Govenar, 11.
musician life: things such as “how to get around, how to make it on my own.” He even taught himself the figures and letters so that “nobody could take advantage of me,” picking up a paper or book and studying while wandering.

In Edwards’ experience, a musician could make money only in wet towns, where the people were “getting drunk and feeling good.” In fact, whisky and other vices were often associated with the blues. Some bluesmen were even also bootleggers. Muddy Waters was selling his moonshine in his juke house. Skip James claimed unapologetically to his biographer that he made more money with the bootlegger/gambler/pimp business than playing music, although he played at both occasions: popular music at white frolics and dance blues at black parties. Mississippi was a dry state until 1966, but moonshine was very common. Some of the towns were notorious for illegal liquor and gambling activity. For instance, Leland, near the corner of Highways 61 and 10, was known for its many saloons lined on main streets and nicknamed in 1908 Collier “Hell-hole of the Delta.” Those drinking and gambling establishments often featured the blues with performers such as Charlie Booker and Eugene Powell. At the weekend parties in those nightspots, where drinking, gambling, dancing, courting, and fighting went on for hours, in many cases, until Monday morning, nearby plantation workers gathered there and heard the Delta blues.

\[171\] Edwards, 74.
\[172\] Ibid., 83.
\[173\] Calt, 97.
\[175\] Mississippi Blues Trail.
The mistreatment of guitar

The juke joint settings or any other venues had fatally the wild and violence-prone atmosphere; the guitars tended to be vulnerable. Drunken people would start fighting or acting loony, as Johnny Shines recalled, “People attempt to pour whisky in your guitar, beer in your guitar, anything!” Fires were also common at the unofficial leisure venues. While rambling together, Shines and Johnson once had their guitars burnt up in a juke joint’s fire in West Memphis. Then Johnson brought his harmonica to Highway 61 and started blowing it, in Shines’ words, “slapping his hands—patting his hands, blowing and singing—and in a few minutes the whole highway was almost blocked off with cars. People pitching us nickels, dimes, quarters.” They easily got new guitars with that money.

B. B. King and his guitar were nearly burned up in a nightclub’s fire in Twist, Arkansas, in 1949. The fire was caused by two men’s quarrel over a woman, Lucille. The guitar King rescued just in time was an inexpensive, small-bodied Gibson L-30 arch-top, $44.75 in their 1942 catalog. King named the guitar Lucille and used the accident to make up his iconic image—the bluesman with his guitar. Not only that, King and Gibson joined hands to commodified the iconic image, connecting consumer desires with the hero, like Sears’ Gene Autry model in the 1930s. Gibson’s top of the line product, ES-355 B. B. King Lucille, the same model as King was using until he was retired, is sold at $6,999 in 2016. He was a long-standing Gibson user and had no trouble getting new guitars, which summed up over twenty

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176 Welding, 27.
177 Ibid., 28.
178 Ibid., 130.
180 Acoustic Music Org.
Knowing the guitars were easy to get, some bluesmen treated their guitars roughly. Ted Gioia wrote that the Delta bluesman “treats it [the guitar] with tough love, sometimes slapping it in percussive accompaniment, or playing it with a knife or the neck of a broken bottle.”\textsuperscript{183} In Charley Patton’s case, however, he treated his guitar really tough. As a part of a show-act, he would throw the guitar in the air and catch it, bang on it, play behind his back or between his legs, and even bump on it instead of pick it.\textsuperscript{184} In private life, he beat his women with a handy guitar.\textsuperscript{185} Another Delta bluesman Tommy Johnson tore up many guitars on his woman, according to his brother.\textsuperscript{186} Memphis Minnie’s target was a little old puppy who had ruined her $200 wig. She hit it with her guitar nearby, hard. The puppy ran off and the guitar neck broke off.\textsuperscript{187} The guitar, with a useful neck to grab, was a perfect weapon for the enraged bluesman/woman. Minnie probably got another guitar at the pawnshop. A musician who was close to Minnie noticed that she was a regular customer of the pawnshop, and she changed her guitar often.\textsuperscript{188} If Patton broke guitars when he stomped on it or beat with it, he also must have quickly gotten new ones. His usual guitar was a Stella—an easily available mail-order guitar. Did he purchase a guitar case along with the guitar? Sears offered a $9.50 guitar with case for $11.10 in the 1920s. Even with guitar case, the instrument was easily damaged during the intensive moving. Patton likely did not mind it at all. His guitar must have already covered with cuts and damages.

\textsuperscript{184} Palmer, 66-67.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid., 57.
\textsuperscript{186} David Evans, Tommy Johnson (London, Studio Vista, 1971), 28.
\textsuperscript{187} Garon, 40.
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 80.
dents in his clownish performance and wildish life.

Not only did they treat them rough, bluesmen changed or upgraded their instruments if given the chance. A bluesman started with a cheap instrument or any guitar he could get, which might be a handmade one like Big Bill Broonzy used or a broken one like Son House got, and he still might be using the modest one after he became a professional musician. The music industry sometimes provided “better” guitars to them. For instance, in Charley Patton’s only photo, which has been used repeatedly since his first record was advertised, he is seated holding a stylish parlor guitar in a fashion of the Hawaiian steel guitar playing, but Neil Harpe claims that the guitar in the picture is “simply a prop, not Patton’s own instrument.” In fact, his favorite guitar was a Stella. In the case of Skip James, he was provided guitars before his recordings and probably before the stage performance too. In 1931, he traveled for recording to Grafton, Wisconsin, with a $65 guitar recently given by the local talent scout, H. C. Speir, in Jackson. That guitar was much superior to the one he was usually playing, which probably was, his biographer Calt suggests, a five or ten dollar guitar; however, when James stepped into the Paramount studio, he was told to use “a company guitar,” which turned out to be a marvelous twelve string guitar, James guessed, “worth $350.” James cut 26 songs on the twelve-string guitar, using it as a six-string, and the studio upright piano during the two-day session. He had no problem using unfamiliar guitar and piano since he was accustomed to playing saloon pianos. In his next public appearance in the Newport Folk Festival in 1964 (and 1965), after some years ceasing performances, James was using Martin D-28, a prestigious “white man’s” folk guitar. The guitar had probably been provided by the festival organizers, who also gave a Martin

190 Calt, 4.
191 Ibid., 279.
another rediscovered bluesman, Mississippi John Hurt.192

Along with the rough playing on guitars, the bluesmen’s treatment of their guitars—using them as weapons or accepting whatever they accessed—indicate their carelessness and little obsession or apathy with the instruments. Some African American males were living in rather violent and masculine lives; they never handled the instruments with kid gloves like some classical music players do. Guitars were essential for their trade and creativity, but the instrument did not have to be a one-of-a-kind guitar and the guitars were everywhere around them and in the music industry. In fact, American guitar production exceeded 160,000 instruments in 1929.193 The bluesmen were ready to pose with or play on whatever happened to be available. Rather, as in the case of several blues musicians, they changed their guitars on many occasions, yet kept "the bluesman with guitar” trademark or iconic image as popular figures, if not a world-famous legend, made by themselves or the entourage. The guitar was an essential tool for his trade, but paradoxically it was only a tool.

**The role of the guitar**

Another paradox regarding the guitar is its role in the music. The guitar was an inseparable partner for the bluesman in his travel, performance, and creation; however, the guitar was not the center of the blues. The guitar takes the harmonic and rhythmic background part to the singing, and also “interacts with and answers the voice.”194 The functions of the guitar are

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“background” and “response” to the assertive voice (call). Tom Evans and Mary Anne Evans emphasize the role of the guitar as accompaniment. They wrote,

The guitar accompaniment had to have some of the flexibility of the human voice. The bending and flattering of notes, particularly the third and seventh and often fifth scaled degrees, into the "blues" notes, and the use of droning sound of the guitar with a bottleneck or slide could achieve the necessary interaction of sound.195

The bottleneck is probably the most distinctive blues guitar style among a range of guitar techniques. Its keening sound that is produced by the friction of steel string and hard object characterized the Delta blues.

The first recording of bottleneck was in 1923 by Sylvester Weaver, but the bottleneck technique existed from the early days of blues history. The earliest documented testimony on the bottleneck sound is the reference by a jug band musician, Gus Cannon, who was born in 1883. He heard slide guitar Alex Lee playing around 1900 and learned from him, when he and his family were living in Clarksdale, Mississippi.196 Three years later, the musically-trained bandmaster W. C. Handy heard the “weirdest music” in Tutwiler, 16 miles from Clarksdale. Handy documented it in his autobiography, Father of the Blues, published in 1941; “A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking guitar beside me while I slept… As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who used steel bars. The effect was unforgettable.”197 The steel guitar was heard also in the greater

195 Evans and Evans, 291.
197 W. C. Handy, Father of the Blues (New York: Da Capo, 1941), 74.
Southeast. Jimmie Tarlton, of a country music duo Darby and Tarlton, born 1892 in a musical family in Cheraw, South Carolina, saw the black street musicians playing the Hawaiian style slide guitar, laying the guitar across the knee, using some sort of smooth object, a knife or bottleneck in 1902. Tarlton decided to mimic it and first used a comb but, finding that unsatisfactory, tried automobile wrist pins. He later learned how to play the steel guitar from Hawaiian-born musician Frank Ferera and left recordings of the early country music featuring the steel guitar.\(^{198}\)

Much of the references to bottleneck guitar are associated with Hawaiian music. Although it is unclear whether the term “Hawaiian” Handy referred to was his perception at the point of the first encounter in 1903 or his retrospective at the point of writing the book around 1940, there was a Hawaiian craze in the American South in the turn of the century. The Hawaiian lap steel guitar was reportedly invented by Hawaiian guitarist Joseph Kekuku, born 1874 in Hawaii, when he was age eleven. He introduced this technique—running a steel object on the open tuned strings—to his classmates, and one of them immediately tried it at home “with the aid of his knife.”\(^{199}\) Kekuku later added some inventions to the guitar, such as raising the strings to produce louder sound, which, historian John W. Troutman argues, American guitar makers National and Dobro followed decades later.\(^{200}\) This steel guitar instantly swept the Hawaiian popular music scene. Kekuku arrived in San Francisco in 1904 and toured with the Hawaiian band in West Coast, New York, and the South; however, Troutman points out, some Hawaiian musicians and American musicians who had traveled to Hawaii already introduced the Hawaiian

\(^{198}\) Graham Wickham, “Darby and Tarlton.” *Blue Yodeler Special Edition.*
\(^{200}\) Ibid., 60.
steel guitar technique into America as early as 1899.\textsuperscript{201} In the early twentieth century, the Hawaiian music fad spread throughout America; there were the vaudeville tours named \textit{Bird of Paradise}, recordings, instruction books, and even schools specialized in teaching the steel guitar, one of which was opened by Kekuku.\textsuperscript{202} It is possible that African American musicians saw one of the pacific islanders’ performances and borrowed the technique, which Cannon, Handy, and Tarlton heard. Patton’s guitar holding pose in his only photograph shows that he took in the Hawaiian guitar playing to his blues. Some bluesmen confessed their efforts of translating the steel guitar technique. Tampa Red, born 1904 in Smithville, Georgia, is one of them; “I used two, three, maybe four strings sometimes. It’s got a Hawaiian effect. I couldn’t play as many strings as a fella playin’ a regular Hawaiian guitar, but I got a same effect.”\textsuperscript{203} For B. B. King, the Hawaiian or country and western steel pedal guitar sound haunted him and drove him to practice the guitar to produce the steel guitar’s crying sound, by bending the strings and by trilling his hand,\textsuperscript{204} which turned into his signature sounds.

Some scholars, nevertheless, addressed other possibilities for the slide guitar’s origin. Even Troutman mentioned cautiously that the basic concept of “running an object up and down a string to produce music” was nothing new and “found all over the world.”\textsuperscript{205} Bruce Bastin argues that it is an overstatement to define the blues bottleneck-guitar playing as a “backwash” from the Hawaiian style,\textsuperscript{206} and ethnomusicologist David Evans suggests it was an African cultural retention. Drawing upon his research in Mississippi in the late 1960s, in which he gathered memories of one-string homemade instruments and the slide technique of Delta

\textsuperscript{201} Ibid., 90.
\textsuperscript{202} Ibid., 77-95.
\textsuperscript{203} Ibid., 176.
\textsuperscript{204} King with Ritz, 127.
\textsuperscript{205} Troutman, 39.
\textsuperscript{206} Bruce Bastin, \textit{Bottle Neck / Slide Blues Guitar} (Pacifico: Mel Bay, 1990), 8.
musicians’ and common people’s childhoods, Evans claims that the slide technique had strong kinship to various areas in Africa, where the one-string instrument came from.\textsuperscript{207} One-string instruments, however, existed not only in Africa but also widely in Oceania, parts of Asia, Europe, and even Native America, in various forms, commonly by the name of musical bow. The earliest documented musical bow is in the rock painting from c15,000 BCE in the cave in southwestern France.\textsuperscript{208} As Troutman implies, it is possible that strings and different material had been tied up somewhere on the globe in long human history before connected in Hawaii. The blues is surprisingly relevant to the wider world.

Although the steel guitar technique has been widely used in Hawaiian music, country and western, gospel, and the blues, the playing style, the name, and the role in the blues are significantly different from others. In Hawaiian, country and western, and gospel, the players are usually sitting and using steel bars on the strings of guitars, which are horizontally across their laps or on the stands for amplification, and they call the technique “steel guitar.” While in the blues, the player stands on the stage, or sits on a chair, holding the guitar in the standard vertical position, showing the guitar face to the audience as well as his face and body, and uses the glass or metal tube, instead of the bars, worn on his ring finger or pinky, and the technique is called “slide” or “bottleneck.” One of the effects of not sitting is that the player can deliver louder sound; if the guitar is on his lap, the sound runs out upward rather than out to the audience.\textsuperscript{209} The louder sound had been one of the major concerns in the blues performance from the beginning. Also his posture—holding guitar in style—claims an ownership of his music and his

\textsuperscript{207} Evans (1970), 235.
\textsuperscript{209} Troutman, 60.
music business.

In blues music, the bottleneck creates a whining effect like a human crying, moaning, or weeping sound, which no other genres of music ever do. Since the blues is emerged as a form of expressive music, unlike other music that they might have played at white parties such as polka or square dance, the center of the blues lies the musician’s voice or individuality, not the guitar despite its all important roles in the musicians’ travel, life, imagination, and producing his art. The guitar devotes its accompaniment status, or supporting role, for the bluesman.

The bluesman developed his unique guitar techniques that could support his song, learning from other bluesmen or mimicking other’s performances during the migratory traveling. The bluesman, a professional musician, was doubtlessly a serious learner with entrepreneurial sprit. He might have copied the playing style of his mentor, like David Honeyboy Edwards first did with Big Joe Williams, before meeting many different musicians and building up experiences. Not only the guitar technique but also song repertoires, he boosted them the wide variety of experiences even with white audience, because they knew that the wide range of repertoires and instrumental skills would result a big tip. Unfortunately, the bluesmen’s non-blues recordings do not exist, since the record companies wanted to record and sell only original blues songs.\footnote{Wald, 56.} However, it is fair to assume that playing everything by request for white audiences had a positive effect on their creativity and the original song recordings.
CHAPTER IV

BLUESMEN ON THE MOVE AND THE GREAT MIGRATION

As the guitar played the important role to the development of the blues, bluesmen’s traveling played a driving force for the spread of the blues. Some musicians rambled without any relation to the historical movement, the Great Migration, in which about 4.6 million African Americans migrated from the South to the northern urban areas from 1910 to 1960. Others traveled in parallel with the massive wave. While most African Americans fled the South because of poverty and racial terror and sought the better basis of their livelihood in the North, when the bluesmen headed to the urban areas, the reasons were not so painful. They chased the allures—performing and recording opportunities. Thus bluesmen’s migration left the different traces from the Great Migration, even though both movements were profoundly driven by the modernization and industrialization of the time: the railroad, newspaper, and industries. The bluesmen’s guitars were important elements both in traveling and performing, and played the key roles in the quest for freedom, fame, and fortune, which have transformed the blues from a southern folk music to world music. In every way, the blues sounded as background music during the Great Migration.

Migration and railroad
Almost every scholar and blues lover has shared a seminal but clichéd image that W. C. Handy presented in his autobiography in 1941. On the midnight platform of the train station in Tutwiler, a small town in the Mississippi Delta, in 1903, Handy was woken by a weird music from middle of dosing off while waiting for a nine-hour delayed train; what he encountered was “A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plucking guitar beside me while I slept. His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the age.” The man sang,

Goin’ where the Southern cross’ the Dog.\(^{211}\)

His song along with his guitar struck the African American middle-class bandleader, Handy, who later legitimized the music, “blues,” composed a tune titled “Yellow Dog Blues” in 1914, and named himself “Father of the Blues.” The midnight incident marked a pivotal moment. It changed Handy’s life and the history of popular music. Furthermore, the event underwrites explicitly the inseparable union of blues and the railroad, and the migration and the railroad.

The man told Handy that he was going to Moorhead “where the Southern cross’ the Dog.”\(^{212}\) In fact, Moorhead was the crossing point of two railroad lines, the Southern Railway and the Yellow Dog (officially, Yazoo Delta Railroad), forty miles south from Tutwiler. Tutwiler was and is a small hamlet—whose population counted 142 in 1900 and 3,550 in 2010.\(^{213}\) Today, no train is running through the station, which leaves only a deserted concrete platform and tracks and a brick wall with an illustration of the mythical encounter of Handy and a bluesman. Moorhead too has no railroad today but in Handy’s time it had been “a thriving frontier town …

\(^{211}\) W. C. Handy, *Father of the Blues* (New York: Da Capo, 1941), 74.
\(^{212}\) Ibid.
\(^{213}\) *Census of Population and Housing, 1900*. United States Census Bureau.
built upon the local lumber trade, and an important stop on the Southern Railway.” Lumber was transported either by the east-west bound Southern Railway or north-south bound Yellow Dog. Handy did not mention whether the lone guitarist rode on the arrived train. Was the man going to seek a job of a forest worker or a barrelhouse musician in the lumber camp? The man possibly did not leave the town that night, because if he wanted to get a train, he had chosen most likely a ticketless ride or hoboing, as many poor African Americans did. In that case, he must have been waiting not on the platform but next to the railway, a bit away from the station, such as near the curve or water tower, in order to catch a slow-downed or stopped freight cargo. Therefore, the midnight bluesman was probably easing his burning desire of leaving town in the railroad station that night by repeating the words of exodus. The railroads, the unprecedented gigantic and fastest newcomers in the South in the nineteenth century, were not only providing the function of transportation but also offering creative imagination for artistic minds and evoking and mitigating a range of feelings of African Americans—hope for moving out and freedom, aggravation at being unable to leave, memories of past slavery, and anxiety about the present and future.

**Railroad of memory and words**

The development of the American South has always been associated with migration. Indeed, even before the birth of “the South,” clusters of people were arriving and leaving. “The region itself expanded,” asserts James N. Gregory in *The Southern Diaspora*, “through migrations as white southerners in the early 1800s carved out new states for cotton and

214 Mississippi Blues Trail.
slavery.” Before the Civil War, some slaves were “taken west by slaveholders” who migrated to California or Kansas. A few desperate slaves escaped from their masters on their own. Others, estimates range from sixty thousand to a hundred thousand between 1800 and 1865, escaped northward with the aid of the Underground Railroad, a loose network of secret routes for fugitive slaves. Voluntary migration of African Americans began after Emancipation. At that time, the movement was relatively small and their destinations were mostly unknown western territories or other areas within the South, for information and transportation measures were limited. Railroad expansion in the late nineteenth century brought about the possibility of unlimited and fast mobility; however, for some African Americans, railroads reminded them of negative memories from during the railroad expansion era.

Railroad construction in the South commenced as early as the 1830s, responding to demands from industries such as tobacco, quarries, lumber, and especially cotton, which favored the train’s advantage over other types of travel. In water travel, cotton had particularly been affected by variable and uncontrollable levels of the river. After the Civil War, the destroyed railroad facilities were restored extensively, and the South was integrated within the national network by 1904. This was an achievement by the “Iron Confederacies,” in Scott Reynolds Nelson’s words, of Northern capitalists and the local politicians and industries. The Illinois Central Railroad proudly stated that in 1892, they “came into control of a second line between 215 James N. Gregory, The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 12.
216 Ibid.
218 Aaron W. Marrs, Railroads in the Old South: Pursuing Progress in a Slave Society (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 12.
219 Ibid., 14.
Memphis and New Orleans through the heart of the fertile alluvial delta country of Mississippi, a line widely known for many years as the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad,“221 which was the Yellow Dog. Proceeding with a large-scale railroad project by procuring a huge amount of labor force was “a monumental task everywhere.”222 Some railroad companies used poor whites and slaves, including black women and children, before Emancipation, and the convict lease post-Emancipation. Historian Aaron W. Marrs reveals,

A slave holder hired out 11 women and 16 men to the Mississippi and Pearl River Railroad in 1836. In 1838 one contractor on the SCRR [South Carolina Railroad] had “140 men women & children on the road,” and a commentator noted that “they carry the dirt on their heads in little trays, and of course do not make much or very profitable progress.”223

Given the situation, the toiling slaves might not have known what they were working for or what the completion of the product looked like. Later they learned what the railroad meant. One former slave recalled, “my parents worked very hard and women did same jobs that we would think them crazy for trying now; why my mother helped build a railroad before she was married to my father.”224 For ex-slaves, the railroad came with negative memories; however, the former slave’s words, “helped build a railroad,” indicate a hint of their pride and intimacy for the railroad.

Following Emancipation, slave laborers were replaced with convict laborers or chain

223 Ibid., 58.
224 Ibid.
gangs leased out by the penitentiaries. No more women and children labored in the railroad construction, but actual conditions became worse. The majority of the convicts were black males. Once the whites retrieved control in the South after Reconstruction, the prisons were over-packed with ex-slaves who were arrested for theft, escaping from debt, or just loitering. Convict leasing brought benefits to both parties: the southern states who were facing the high costs of penitentiaries and railroad companies who craved cheap workers.225 At the construction sites, the treatment of laborers by the company’s overseers were more harsh than the antebellum period, because the convicts were not somebody’s “property” like slaves. For the railroad company, a convict was just replaceable labor, as Matthew J. Mancini puts it, “One [convict] dies, get another.”226 The innovation of transportation allowed for the continuity of abhorrent forms of racism.

The arrival of the train was nevertheless an excitement for many. Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad rolled into the Delta towns on June 1, 1886.227 People were stunned and thrilled by the locomotive for its unprecedented gigantic iron body, high speed, whistle, and smoke. Ex-slave farmer Mose [sic] Banks and his neighbors in the Arkansas Delta went to see the first train passing and were very excited by the glimpse of it. Banks recalled, “It was a great show to me and we all had something to talk about for a long time.”228 They saw a “real” railroad, not an “imaginary” one, as they had known the Underground Railroad. They must have discussed the possibility of travel to the North, where everything seemed to shine like the train. Furthermore,

225 Nelson, 169.
the august figure and mobility of the train evoked religious deliverance images in African Americans in the Delta. They hosted “prayer meetings at depots” and, eventually, constructed “new churches near the railroad stations.” Some clergy connected religious stories with the railroad. For example, a Baptist minister in the Delta told his audience that “the development of their denomination depended on the labors of men who, like ‘conductors’ on a special train heading for heaven, took ‘passengers who have purchased their tickets at the Calvary’s union station stamped with the blood of Christ and the insignia of God to meet Christ the Lord’.” The minister also presented an idea of “the train as a modern vehicle to transport Delta blacks literary to the Promised Land of salvation and freedom.” Those railroad sermons stimulated delta blacks’ desire of religious freedom and personal freedom heading north on a train as well.

Elsewhere in the South, the devout and religious people saw God in the movement. As a result, some churches were in big trouble due to the loss of members. At a meeting of the Birmingham Ministerial Alliance in April 1917, a pastor reported that one church had “gone from 300 to 60 members,” and many of his own members had “gone or were thinking of leaving.” In Greenwood, Mississippi, the migration reached its height, in the winter and spring of 1916 and 1917. Since some told friends the time and place of their trains before leaving, there were countless talks in town, “Ten left last night” or “Twelve left last night.” Emmett J. Scott wrote in his book in 1920 that those who would notify their departure were actively connected with some church. He argues, “The type of negro leaving is indicated in the decline in the church membership.” Plantations also faced a shortage of laborers. In the early

229 Ibid., 26.
230 Ibid., 45.
233 Ibid.
1940s, the owner of King & Anderson plantation near Clarksdale sent “two of their white managers to see if they could get some of the sharecroppers who had left to come back home.”

The managers met their former workers and offered them juicy promises in order to pull them back. Nevertheless, the former workers showed no interest in returning, because they knew there were still crucial factors that had caused them flee. While being in the South, they had learned about Chicago from the relatives’ letters, newspapers, and the stories by someone returning home. In the same way, they could get news back home while living in the city. As Nicholas Lemann remarks in *The Promised Land*, “The Mississippi-Chicago grapevine was very active.”

The vernacular culture in African Americans’ lives worked as “needful information” in the Great Migration: in the forms of stories, rumors, letters, and blues. Blues pianist Pinetop Perkins, born 1913 in Belzoni, Mississippi, who often toured in Northern cities during the era, for instance, sang about the grapevine network among them,

If you get to Chicago before I do
Won’t you tell ‘em about me
Everything that you know
Everywhere that you go
You be in Chicago baby
Won’t you tell ‘em about me

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235 Ibid., 48.
Why they left

The ample reasons for African Americans fleeing the South in the early twentieth century have been examined by sociologists, economists, historians, and journalists. While most studies tend to concentrate the reasons of the migrations in economic changes and the desire of blacks for betterment, Farah Jasmine Griffin, in “Who Set You Flowin’?” The African-American Migration Narrative, has closely investigated migrant narratives from a wide selection of literature, letters, and musical and visual work, and asserts that the principal catalyst for migration was violence in the South, including lynching, beating, and rape. Among her meticulous research, letters from men and women in the South to the editors of the Chicago Defender, a popular black newspaper published in Chicago, are particularly significant. The readers expressed more explicitly than any other writers their struggles of life, urgency of fleeing, and fear for Southern terrorism. Their descriptions were such as “Things is awful here in the South…,” “I am enclosing a clipping of a lynching again…,” and “…begging to get away before we are killed…We see starvation ahead of us here…” Griffin also explores the confrontations and negotiations of the migrants’ new life in the northern cities. Her interpretations of African Americans’ voices offer a detailed picture of their experience in the Great Migration are filled with pain, fear, poverty, and frustration.

Not only posting readers’ letters, the Chicago Defender contributed a potent role in promoting and furthering the Great Migration. The paper willingly encouraged the migration of blacks, with vivid North-South contrasts, “advertisements for newly arrival jobs, exciting image

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239 Ibid., 23.
of city life, and reports of ‘migration fever,’” or “editorializing at length on the contrast between freedom and economic independence in the North and lynchings and servitude in the South.” Founded in 1905, the Chicago Defender was owned and operated by Robert Abbott, who was also a migrant from Georgia and son of former slaves. He even launched a campaign called the “Great Northern Drive” in May of 1917. The object of the drive was, as Nicholas Lemann suggests, “to exhort Southern blacks to come to Chicago, in order to make money and live under the legal benefits of citizenship.” According to a 1955 story in Ebony, the Defender covered “every riot, every lynching, every questionable arrest in the South or elsewhere,” and, consequently, the paper was “thoroughly unwelcome among whites in Mississippi.” Abbott employed audacious effort in delivering the paper throughout the South, in which he used the railroad workers. The paper was distributed by “local agents and dining- and sleeping-car crew members who delivered bundles of the paper to small towns.” The Defender had gained the trust of African Americans in the South, and copies were secretly passed from hand to hand until they worn out or read aloud, and discussed thoroughly. For example, at Robert Horton’s barbershop in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, “where community issues could be safely discussed away from the ears of whites,” the neighbors gathered on Saturdays “when the latest copy of the Chicago Defender arrived.” When Horton decided to move to Chicago, he had sufficient information about the destination and forty friends who migrated together with group discount

243 Lemann, 17.
244 Abbott, 74.
246 Ibid., 169.
tickets.\textsuperscript{247}

Not all prepared and checked out of the South like Horton. The would-be migrants sometimes faced challenges at train stations, for white southerners did “all in their power to prevent blacks leaving,” particularly in Mississippi.\textsuperscript{248} Landowners “persuaded sheriffs to yank their sharecroppers off trains” and in other case in Hattiesburg, “police barred them from the ticket office and arrested them who boarded Gulf & Ship Island Island Railroad trains without tickets.”\textsuperscript{249} In an extreme case, passengers were “dragged off” a northbound Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad train arriving in Greenville, and they hiked “12 miles up the line to Leland to board for Memphis.”\textsuperscript{250} Such brutal treatments only resulted in more of a desire to escape.

Some blacks who fled the South on the spur of the moment simply “packed up in the dead of night and hit the road.”\textsuperscript{251} In that case, they might have hopped on a freight train without paying fares. The fares were not inexpensive for those who were struggling on the breadline; in 1940, Jackson-Chicago cost “$15.35\textsuperscript{252} (about $259 in 2015’s money\textsuperscript{253}). Ticketless riders were called “hoboes” or “boes.”\textsuperscript{254} During the Depression, the number of hoboes swelled. One notable feature about hoboes was that whites and blacks generally got along well in the boxcars and in hobo jungles (encampments).\textsuperscript{255} They shared food, drink, sleeping spaces, stories, songs, and tips of travel. Black hoboes were, however, proportionally fewer than whites, especially in

\begin{footnotes}
\item[247] Ibid.
\item[248] Ibid., 181.
\item[249] Ibid.
\item[250] Ibid.
\item[251] Palmer, 9.
\item[252] Rowe, 33.
\item[253] Measuring Worth.
\item[255] Kornweibl, 172.
\end{footnotes}
the South, because, as Theodore Kornweibel points out, “white hoboes caught by local authorities might spent a night in jail, but blacks could end up on the chain gang.” Therefore, African Americans who firmly determined to flee the south would not venture a risky hoboing. Being stuck in the South even one day was something they never wanted to encounter.

**Bluesmen and rambling life**

In the heat of the Great Migration from the 1910s to 1940s, many bluesmen traveled within the South and moved to the North. Some might have followed “the swelling tide of black migration north to Chicago,” like Henry Sloan in Mississippi, who was a guitar teacher of Charley Patton. Migration was not something new for a bluesman. Just as his forefather griot, musical commentator in West Africa, did and runaway slave musician in the antebellum South did, the early twentieth century bluesman was migratory in nature. The bluesmen’s traveling styles and the reasons to leave the South were different from common African Americans. Bluesmen traveled more easily or restlessly, sometimes with no direction. In addition, bluesmen were not unconscious of terror of the South, but they did not flee the South but rather chased the opportunities wherever they were, within and without the region, and distant urban areas. A good example comes from Charley Patton who was considered as an archetype of traveling Delta bluesman. Born around 1891 near Edwards, Mississippi, rambling frequently from plantation to plantation or party to party on weekends and playing whatever asked, occasionally with an acrobatic performance, Patton raised his reputation and earned more money as a local entertainer.

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256 Ibid.
257 Palmer, 57.
than farm workers did.\footnote{Ibid., 52-57.} He also journeyed sometimes to northern cities such as Grafton, Wisconsin, and New York for recordings and performances. Along with musical abilities and high mobility, Patton had an insatiable appetite for opportunities, which enabled him to gain freedom, fame, and fortune, and had deep impact on other African Americans in the South, both oppressed and ambitious. For common people, what Patton provided was, Ben Wynne argues, “a certain type of magic that the common man and woman needed.”\footnote{Ben Wynne, \textit{In Tune: Charley Patton, Jimmie Rodgers, and the Roots of American Music} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014), 3.} For successive bluesmen, Patton became a cultural model.

**Free riders**

Prewar bluesmen traveled by the railroad as the common migrants did; however, unlike most fleeing African Americans, the bluesmen often engaged in hoboing. They would hop on the gondolas, the boxcars, the baggage cars, the reefers (refrigerator cars), the top on the cars, and the brass rods beneath the cars, any place they could find space. Many admitted freely in their autobiographies and interviews that they had done illegal ridings, including David Honeyboy Edwards, Jonnie Shines, Big Bill Broonzy, and Skip James. Even female guitarist Memphis Minnie hoboed. Their hoboing life often began when they ran away from home in their early teens and continued even after they became professional musicians. The bluesman hopped trains with a guitar on his back, as if the guitar was a ticket for the ride. One clear exception is pianist Eddie Boyd, who did not hop trains even though he traveled light, without his instrument, the piano. He described his discipline to an interviewer, “I’d just work till I make a payday and get
me money to catch a bus and ride where I’m going. I never hoboed.”  

Jesse Fuller, born 1896 in Jonesboro, Georgia, made a wise move. After drifting through several kinds of work, he got a job on the railroad, which offered him the privilege of free rides. He could perform on and off as far as the west coast, developing hoboing skill, which became his pride; “I could catch trains running at thirty miles an hour with my guitar strapped behind my back.”  

His multi-traveling experiences turned into a number of railroad songs, such as “Leaving Memphis, Frisco Bound” and “Little Black Train.”

Some regular hobo musicians had experience being arrested and ending up working on chain gangs. For instance, David Honeyboy Edwards, born 1915 in Shaw, Mississippi, was caught when he was a sixteen-year old hobo. Edwards and other hoboes were arrested for “trespassing” by the local cops who were waiting for the hobo-loaded trains coming through their town. They put hoboes on the county farm, where chain gangs worked “from daybreak till sunset.” Hoboes were suitable harvest season hands. Edwards, who was given some new blue jeans and released thirty days later, might be luckier than another Mississippi bluesman, Willie Dixon, born 1915 in Vicksburg. Thirteen-year old Dixon was also forced to work at the county farm for hoboing. Not only that, he was beaten hard by the “Captain Crush,” who was running the farm but monikered so due to his cruelty, which caused Dixon to be deaf for almost four years. While some of the prisoners escaped from the camp, both young bluesmen got by the thirty days and probably later spread the words among other hoboes about the dangerous

261 Jesse Fuller, “The Lone Cat,” Blues World 42 (1972), 10.
262 Ibid.
263 Edwards, 36.
264 Ibid., 39.
265 Ibid., 27.
enforcement.

**Why they rambled**

Dixon made Chicago his home in 1936, but Edwards continued to travel with his guitar almost his whole life, as if moving around was an ingrained habit, if not always hoboing. Robert Jr. Lockwood, born 1915 in Marvel, Arkansas, once told in an interview in 1973; “Musicians don't have a destination. I might go anyplace.”266 “Destination” in his words probably meant a land where he would finally settle down. In his long professional life, he journeyed to many places and lived in several cities. For Lockwood, rootless life was his determination as a black male, liberating himself by being on his own. The title of the autobiography by David Honeyboy Edwards, *The World Don't Owe Me Nothing*, shows similar rhetoric that makes his declaration: The world owes him nothing as he owes nothing or depends on the world for nothing in his rootless life. Edwards believed that the musicians always had places to go and wanted to go, expressing “Guitar kept me rolling.”267 Similarly, in “Hellhound on My Trail,” Robert Johnson, born 1911 in Hazlehurst, Mississippi, repeated, “I got keep moving, I got keep movin’.” The song could be construed as he was haunted by a devil, but he might have been chasing something. Johnson rambled as far as Michigan, New York, and even Ontario, Canada. His other signature songs such as “Sweet Home Chicago” and “Love in Vain” indicate his urban aspiration and further desire to move. Johnson’s onetime travel mate, Johnny Shines, born 1915 in Frayser, Tennessee, recalled of Johnson, “Robert liked to travel. You could wake up anytime of night and

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266 Lockwood, 18.
267 Edwards, 74.
say ‘Let’s go’ and he was ready. He never asked you where or why or anything. He would get up and get dressed and get ready to go.”268 The high mobility and lyrics of rambling represented the young African American musician’s restless life.

The bluesmen were, however, not simply drifters or hedonists. Their mobility was to a degree upward. They were earnestly seeking performing chances, and, accordingly, money. Edwards’s traveling life speaks for itself. His first exposure to the itinerary bluesman was around 1931, when Kokomo Arnold arrived in town with a big Martin guitar and played around town, on street corners, for a couple of weeks, before leaving town just as suddenly and mysteriously. Edwards recalled, “He was hustling and made a lot of nickels, dimes, and quarters. He was a traveling musician, trying to make it, hoboing around, catching freight trains, and laying around in town till the next train came through.”269 One year later, Edwards traveled together with Big Joe Williams, a deep-dyed hobo since six or seven years old, who initiated Edwards into the business during traveling together through the South for nine months.270 Edwards learned from both Arnold and Williams. Eventually Edwards became hoboing itinerant bluesman with his guitar on back; in summer and fall, he played music on the streets or at harvesting on plantations, and in winter he moved around the labor camps, visiting the barrelhouses at the right time, on their paydays.271 Bluesmen were habitual travelers with entrepreneurial sprits, moving in a circuit or penetrating far beyond. Such movements of the bluesmen were different ones from the historical Great Migration that many African Americans participated.

269 Edwards, 34.
270 Ibid., 39-44.
271 Ibid., 84.
Migration to the city

The northern cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and New York, were the industrial centers that attracted the job seeking common African American migrants, but to the aspiring musicians, the cities were the entertainment concentration areas. Many Delta bluesmen headed to Chicago because it was on the straight line of the Illinois Central Railroad, with changing trains at Memphis, and they were familiar with the city by the newspaper and their first guitars, most of which came from Chicago via mail-order. Chicago’s nightlife was especially glaring with the numerous “honky-tonks, cabarets, and dance halls offering live entertainment.”²⁷² Normally, it was not easy to get those nightclub jobs for a newcomer musician, especially if one had no recording careers. Muddy Waters had spent a couple of years before he gained a decent musical job, fifty-two dollars a week, at the Flame Club on Chicago’s South Side, after arriving in town.²⁷³ In the meantime, Waters played music at the small bars and rent parties on weekends. The rent party was one way of survival schemes for the migrants. Apartment dwellers would offer the place to supplement steep monthly rent. They or someone would prepare liquor and food and hire musicians. Many migrants, who were struggling with life in the new environment, sought temporary release in one of those juke-joint like parties, enjoying their country talk and food and music for a moderate admission. The rent was paid. The musicians earned the tips.

Recordings

²⁷² Barlow, 290.
²⁷³ Palmer, 155.
Performing at rent parties or even in glittering nightclubs was less attractive for bluesmen than recordings. The first issued vocal blues recording was Morton Harvey’s “Memphis Blues” (1915) composed by W. C. Handy, but it was not as epochal as “Crazy Blues” in 1920 by Mamie Smith, a black vaudeville singer, from Okeh Records. “Crazy Blues” sold surprisingly well, especially in the black neighborhood, regardless that “no effort was made to draw attention to the fact that it was by a black artist, nor was there a great deal of promotion.” Realizing the importance of black consumer market and also “reportedly facing resistance from some white dealers,” Okeh launched a new series that concentrated on the black music by black artists for black buyers, and coined the term “race record.” Other companies, Paramount and Columbia, followed. By the mid-1920s, they started making records of black male singers, bluesmen. According to ethnomusicologist Jeff Todd Titon, between 1926 and 1930, approximately two thousand race record titles were issued on record. The earliest male blues musician’s recording was an instrumental work of Sylvester Weaver in 1923 for Okeh in New York and the bluesmen’s song recordings had begun with Papa Charlie Jackson for Paramount in Chicago in 1924. Blind Lemon Jefferson and Blind Blake followed in 1926. Charley Patton became the first recording Delta blues artist in 1929. Those days, the bluesmen were paid $50 per side. Patton, who recorded 14 sides in June and 19 sides in October 1929, received a substantial amount of money. Son House and Willie Brown in the Delta also made the recordings around the time. Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters, both born in the 1910s, had grown up hearing those earlier Delta bluesmen’s recordings, live performances, and their stories. Johnson held a dream and told

274 Wald, 18.
278 Stephen Calt and Gayle Dean Wardlow, “Paramount’s Decline and Fall: Part 5” 78 Quarterly 1.7 (1994), 16.
allegedly when he was a teenager that “he was going to go to New York and make records someday.”279 His dream came true in Texas, in the form of remote recording sessions by Columbia’s field unit. Columbia and Okeh often dispatched to the southern states those days to “uncover more black talents”280 and commodify them. Local musicians had chances to make sound recording in one of those makeshift studios in the southern cities set up by the field units. Those recording studios were usually “in a hotel suite or ballroom or empty warehouse or industrial loft, in a city like Atlanta, Dallas, Fort Worth, Memphis, Charlotte, or Jackson, Mississippi.”281 Robert Johnson’s recording sessions in 1936 and 1937 were near the end of the remote recordings and the race record era.

Muddy Waters had missed out on the both waves: north recording and local recordings. In 1941 when Alan Lomax, who was working for the Library of Congress, came to record McKinley Morganfield (Muddy Waters), a 1913-born sharecropper, a juke house owner, and a local bluesman in Stovall, Mississippi, the studio was the front porch of Waters’ house, using a portable recording rig.282 Waters was paid $10 a song and the record was not for sale in the store but for a library. The biggest fruit for Waters was confidence: “I can do it.”283 By the 1940s, commercial field recording had gradually receded, and the proper recording studio in northern big cities became more active with updated equipment, which guaranteed more high-quality recordings. That was the most attractive lure of the city that made Muddy Waters, and other bluesmen, leave the South.

280 Osborne, 51.
281 Palmer, 109.
282 Ibid., 4.
283 Ibid., 5.
As common African American migrants had moments of confrontation and negotiation in the new environment, bluesmen often had moments of frustration and adaptation as professional musicians, most of which were related to the recordings. Above all, they had to understand the importance of signing contracts and the fact that “unscrupulous individuals in the music industry had taken advantage of musicians” like them.\(^\text{284}\) That was the first of numerous lessons Big Bill Broonzy learned. Born in 1903 in Mississippi and raised in Arkansas, Broonzy’s musical style had been nurtured in the string band tradition, and his major instrument was fiddle at first. After rejected at the trial recording, he switched to guitar and learned from the basics. In his first recording in 1928, Broonzy demonstrated his versatilities, “as he played, wrote, and sang in musical styles that differed significantly from each other,”\(^\text{285}\) even though the situation was tougher than he might have expected. His first recording fee was $25 per side, not $50 in Patton’s days.\(^\text{286}\) Broonzy had well endured to the fast changing industry and audience’s tastes in the early and mid twentieth century, constantly adapting his style. Later he developed the sophisticated urban style and left 224 recordings, which is the second highest number among the prewar bluesmen. R. A. Lawson observes that Broonzy offered “the soundtrack of America’s industrial, urban, and technological coming of age.”\(^\text{287}\) Waters too adapted and survived; he switched to the electric guitar three years after arriving Chicago and cut his first commercial recording the following year.


\(^{285}\) Ibid., 54.

\(^{286}\) Ibid., 60.

Another musical modernization that led Waters on the move was the arrival of the jukebox. First appeared in a saloon in San Francisco in 1899, the coin-operated music box for cylinder recordings and later modified for the 78-rpm disks, the jukeboxes became the entertainment venue’s major attraction in the mid-1930s after the player piano boom ceased. Wurlitzer and Seeburg were among the leading makers. Kerry Segrave reveals that the fortune of the jukebox industry was intertwined with the recording industry. Technological improvement in the disk and sales of disks “helped in the the widespread, rapid growth of the juke industry,” and Segrave states that between 1934 and 1940, jukeboxes were more visible all over the nation. In fact, Decca and Bluebird introduced a new blues series in 1934 at a competitive price of 35 cents instead of 75 cents for the standard disks. In Chicago, Memphis Minnie, Big Bill Broonzy, and others cut songs for the low priced records. The jukeboxes along with various records were introduced in the southern juke joints, an informal establishment featuring music, dancing, gambling, and drinking, where the newcomer Seeburg was Seabuhd in the Delta accent or called just “vendors.” The term “juke” originated from the African word “jook,” which meant “to dance,” used commonly in the South as in “juke joint.” Elder Adlum, publisher of Reply, remarked dryly that “a juke joint was a whorehouse, a jukebox kept the patrons dancing.” The primal function of a jukebox was the same as the bluesmen had assumed: entertaining people.

Jukeboxes were simpler for the saloon owners than pianos fifty years earlier, which

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289 Ibid., 48.
292 Palmer, 118.
293 Segrave, 17.
required down make payment and monthly payoffs. The bar owners, who wanted to install a jukebox, could choose a commission agreement, in which an agent took, for instance, “the first $5 and split 50-50 over that with no trouble at all.”\textsuperscript{294} The first machine had only 12 song selections, but the bar owner could select them “to suit all the musical preferences of the folks who lived nearby area and patronize it.”\textsuperscript{295} Accordingly, the electric music maker in the juke joints became threats for the local bluesmen. Stephen Calt wrote, “[T]he once-pervasive jukehouse culture of Mississippi had begun to give way to the jukebox, which all but replaced live performance.”\textsuperscript{296} When Alan Lomax saw a “neon-lit, chrome-plated musical monster,” a Seeburg jukebox, sitting in a bar in Clarksdale in 1942 and looked, at the titles of the discs inside, he found that “all the records were by black artists and nearly all were blues whose roots lay in the Delta. Most of the singers no longer lived down home.”\textsuperscript{297} The Delta people caught up the new songs and also paid attention to the home-town heroes’ work with the jukeboxes, which, however, does not simply mean that the jukeboxes recast the blues scene at least in Clarksdale. The installment data shows that in 1958, Greenville, with population 36,700, had 450 licensed jukeboxes and Clarksdale, with population 16,500, had only 35. The ratios to each 1,000 populations were 12.26 and 2.12.\textsuperscript{298} Clarksdale, the center of blues culture, probably stood up for the tradition of live performance. A bluesman could perform more than 12 tunes for hours, responding the audience’s requests or catching the mood. Nevertheless, Muddy Waters, a local bluesman and also a juke house owner in Clarksdale, noticed that “jukeboxes were becoming the rage, not just in downtown taverns but in country stores and even in little juke joints.”\textsuperscript{299}

\textsuperscript{294} Ibid., 67.
\textsuperscript{295} Lomax, 38.
\textsuperscript{296} Calt, 208.
\textsuperscript{297} Lomax, 38.
\textsuperscript{298} Segrave, 316.
\textsuperscript{299} Palmer, 132.
Jukeboxes also stimulated the zealous bluesmen. Now they could closely listen to other bluesmen’s works and study them: analyzing, copying, mimicking, assimilating, and taking them into own repertoires. Elijah Wald argues that Robert Johnson’s variety of music styles that appeared in his recordings must have come from his extensive jukebox experiences. The jukebox was a messenger, telling the musicians to challenge the endless possibility or recording careers. Muddy Waters decided to challenge when he read the message.

**Stay local**

Not all blues musicians, however, were drawn toward the urban north. Those who stayed in the region gathered the urban areas in the South, while occasionally visiting to the North for recording or performance. Using the railroad lines or taking the recently paved highways that had already connected towns each other, probably hoboing or hitchhiking, musicians also visited urban southern areas where many African Americans fluxed in. In 1900, three quarters of African Americans were living in rural areas in the South, and, by 1960, it reversed; three quarters of them were living in the urban areas in the South. Charley Patton stayed in Mississippi. Skip James had never left the South before he was rediscovered in the 1960s, except one recording trip to Wisconsin. Instead, he often went to Jackson, only 25 miles from Bentonia where he was living in the 1920s. Other Delta bluesmen including Tommy Johnson, Son House, Willie Brown, and Sam Chatmon also showed up in Jackson. One musician remembered Jackson in 1920s as the meeting ground for the musicians; they “brought their songs and styles and

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300 Wald, 59.
301 Rowe, 27.
302 Calt, 99.
exchanged with each other.” The reason why Jackson attracted those bluesmen was that there were many places to perform and audiences to entertain. Samuel Charters suggests that “there was a steady movement of professional entertainers in and out of the small night clubs and variety theaters.” The capital city of Jackson was the musical hub of Mississippi. Driven by modernization, urbanization, and the inter-state migration, the population of Jackson tripled, from 7,800 to 21,300, between 1900 to 1910. Many African Americans and whites as well were waiting for live music to dance and listen to.

Also, in a black neighborhood in Jackson, there was H. C. Speir, a white music store owner and a local talent scout. He was active from 1927 to 1936 and had connection with many record companies that were making the race record, such as Victor, Columbia, Okeh, Paramount, and Vocalion. He had traveled widely in the South and as far as Mexico to discover new talents, but after his reputation was raised, he waited for talented musicians to come and take auditions. Skip James, Son House, Sam Chatmon, Charley Patton, and Robert Johnson, to name a few, got through his audition. James recalled, “In the music store, it was a pretty good-sized office. It was seats for dozen people or perhaps more, at the time that I went through the test.” “The test” was to perform in front of him. Speir recorded it on an electric recording machine, which he usually used for wealthy customers making records for five dollars. If the musician was good and had more than four original songs, Speir introduced him to the record company and sent him out for a recording session, giving a railroad ticket and some expense money. In the case of Skip James, he also provided him a guitar. According to Gayle Wardlow, a similar

303 Evans (1971), 43.
305 Wardlow, 131.
306 Calt, 134.
307 Wardlow, 135.
independent talent scout was in Itta Bena, Mississippi, named Frank Lembo. Local musicians probably heard about those brokers through the grapevine and dropped by to make contacts during the journey. Urban South was a magnet and challenge for the local musicians.

Nevertheless, the demographic changes caused by the Great Migration were dramatic. The African Americans who remained the South witnessed the changes in churches, plantations, and other places that faced the shrinkage of black members or workers. Around 1948, when Skip James came back to the Delta after working in the another region as a minister, the decreases of blues audience and blues performers were tangible. His biographer Stephen Calt wrote, “The population of Mississippi plantations, and with it, the potential audience for local performance, had diminished drastically” and concluded that the state lost Muddy Waters and other blues performers.\(^\text{308}\) Waters, however, had not been a blues giant when he was in the South. He became “Muddy Waters” in the North.

**Bluesmen’s migration**

Muddy Waters was one of the notable Delta bluesmen who made their names in the North. His migration is sometimes considered as a part of the Great Migration; however, it was different from the mass movement, yet he played important roles in the Great Migration. Indeed, he was a well prepared traveler. Before completely leaving Mississippi, he did an unsuccessful short trip to St. Louis and went back soon. After gaining confidence and preparation, putting on his one suit, packing a few belongings in a suitcase, saying good-bye to his grandmother and his

\(^{308}\) Calt, 208.
girl friend, he caught the Illinois Central train out of Clarksdale at four that afternoon. It was May, before the sweltering summer; Waters already knew “by the word of mouth” that when the weather was nice.

Although he was not an itinerant or restless movers like Robert Jr. Lockwood and David Honeyboy Edwards and never engaged in hoboing or street performance because he did not like to “play outside in all the weathers” or “pass the hat around and all that bullshit,” Waters had done wisely to make one big leap to Chicago, when the opportunity came. That was a bluesman’s movement. Upon arriving there, Waters was welcomed by the relatives and other Mississippi migrants from the South. Chicago already had a large black population fluxed from the southern states; by 1930, 16.3% of blacks in Chicago were from Mississippi. They had heard through the grapevine that Muddy Waters was coming to town. Waters entertained them with the southern sound and pepped them with his blues, serving his role as a musician, before gaining a recording chance. Most importantly, Waters represented a symbol of success of the migration—making a name in the North, earned his spot in the celebrities, and driving a shine car. And his songs became a sound track of the Great Migration.

In 1949, Waters traveled down South with his four-piece group, Louisiana-born Little Walter on harmonica, Mississippi-born Jimmy Rogers on second guitar, and Mississippi-born Leroy Foster on drums. “They packed their gear and headed to Helena, Arkansas, in two cars, Muddy's new convertible and Walter's Buick Special.” It was the southern-born musicians’ triumphal return. In Helena, they first had only their radio spot in the King Biscuit Time, a

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309 Palmer, 6-7.
310 Ibid., 143.
311 Ibid., 145.
312 Rowe, 35.
broadcast featured the blues since 1941, but after the program, calls began coming in “from neighboring towns, where people wanted to hire the group they heard on the radio.” They stayed in the Delta for six weeks, performing in small towns, other than the Helena area, across the river such as Clarksdale and Cleveland, taking ferry to across to Mississippi.314 The time had surely changed; the musicians employed modern technologies of transportation and information—automobile, ferry, and radio—to move and gain performing jobs. Furthermore, the blues-birthed rural South was now the place waiting for the blues performers coming down like most other parts of the nation. The blues was already not only a southern music, after the dynamic waves of the movements of the common men and women, and aspiring bluesmen.

314 Ibid.
CONCLUSION

From the beginning, many aspects of the blues had parallels with the wider world. Only tracing back to the history of the instrument and roots of the music can one face its unexpected universality. The people and the first relevant instrument, the banjo, were brought from the African Continent. Other instruments—violin, piano, and guitar—came from Europe. Pre-blues American music was deeply associated with European-born dance tunes. The most distinctive blues guitar technique, the bottleneck, is tied to Hawaii or more distant lands. Many American guitars were built by immigrant luthiers from Europe. Those elements were combined with African American oral tradition and shaped into one rich folk music form, blues. Despite its internationality, the blues was played and heard only in the South before the first blues recording had appeared in the early twentieth century. People outside the South were beginning to pay attention to black music. The blues became a subject of marketing and commercialization in the music industry.

Marketing and commercialization were also part of the lives of the bluesman, especially of the self-employed itinerant bluesman. With the aspiring entrepreneurial spirit, the bluesman created and adapted songs, met people who wanted to hear, and delivered the music to the proper audiences in-and-outside of his communities, in isolated small towns, and in urban cities, in a live format. He had made his own creative use of employing two important mediums—the railroad and the guitar, both of which had come with modernization from the urban areas with a
sense of mobility.

Notably, David Evans mentioned that the guitar, along with the piano and other musical instruments that arrived in African American communities at the end of the nineteenth century, held “prestige for their players and their listeners because they were new, because they were paid for with cash, and because they carried an aura of urbanity, gentility, social status, and upward mobility, precisely because they were not rural and traditional.”\(^{315}\) The guitar was, obviously, a more intimate object for an individual bluesman. The bluesman chose the guitar as a single accompaniment to his music, because the guitar was suitable for his travel and to his music with its loud and bright sounds and innate versatilities. Also the guitar was dispensable, easily available, and served well its supporting role. The guitar’s rhythmic, harmonic, chugging, keening, or enticing sounds worked underneath of the bluesman’s voice of moan, anger, hope, or pleasure. The human voice was the ultimate core of the music and his music business.

The mobile and ambitious bluesmen’s life stories have attested that they were not victims of the isolated racial South or escapees from farm labor. Indeed, they were pros or entrepreneurs of the performing business, who responded to the call of fast-growing commercialization and globalization with their creativity and street-smartness, and the mastery of tools—the guitar and the railroad that were also products of consumerism and industrialism. The bluesmen were willingly or unexpectedly in the forefront of the popular trends and technological advances: popular music, pawnshop, entertainment venue, jukebox, automobile, and new model of guitar. The pre-war blues was the bluesmen’s engagement with modernization and globalization at any price, which brought the transformation of the music to the wider world and beyond.

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