

# Nothing But the **BLUES**



**The Music  
and the  
Musicians**

**Lawrence Cohn - Introduction by B.B. King**





# Nothing But the **BLUES**



THE MUSIC AND THE MUSICIANS

EDITED BY LAWRENCE COHN

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# PREFACE

LAWRENCE COHN



My earliest American vernacular music memories center around the radio when I was nine or ten years old. Saturday evenings—quite late, after my father had (without success) insisted that I go to sleep—I would pull the covers over my head and lovingly, if surreptitiously, take the radio with me.

What distant pleasures! Country music from WWVA, Wheeling, West Virginia, the “World’s Original Jamboree,” and if and when I could or would stay awake past midnight, the rocking, rousing, roof-shaking church services from Baltimore, Washington, and Philadelphia, which made the adrenalin pump so that sleep was an oh so distant concept. And then, during the week, a radio program devoted to boogie-woogie, hosted by (of all unlikely individuals) a classical pianist. Imagine, boogie-woogie for the masses presented by a “longhair.” A wondrous wonder of wonders for a young boy, to be able to hear the likes of Albert Ammons, Pete Johnson, and Meade “Lux” Lewis—the vaunted Boogie-Woogie Trio—to hear solo performances by these artists as well as by others and, on occasion, to be blessed by blues vocals from such as Big Joe Turner, magnificently accompanied by Pete Johnson.

This, for me, was the beginning of a journey that has yet to end, and when I bought my very first 78-rpm disk, Freddie Slack’s “Down the Road a Piece,” at a used-record store, my indoctrination was completed, my addiction already established, and the die cast for the rest of my life.

Many years have passed, ever so quickly, as I look back, hoping as we all do on occasion, to retrieve my life. Needless to say, time is irretrievable, but the memories are there. I count myself extremely fortunate to have had an all-consuming passion for the blues since I was youngster. All of the missed lunches, movies, and other sacrifices in order to save enough to buy one or two 78s, and later on perhaps an LP or

two, are assuredly things that I would most agreeably repeat if I were able to start all over again. Just the opportunity to have savored the varied and several emotional levels of the blues has been, I not immodestly propose, payment enough for my addiction and dedication.

The blues has helped me through troubled times, blessed me with meeting countless interesting and fascinating individuals associated with the genre, afforded lessons in American history that could not be gained through books, given me a rich insight into society—and societies—through music and poetry, and has thoroughly ingrained the concept that blues is not only a people’s music, blues is the music of the people.

What we have tried to achieve in this volume is an expert overview of the major aspects of the blues. We do not delude ourselves for a moment into thinking that what is presented is either complete or the final word on the subject. For “complete,” we would require a work the size of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. However, the writers whom we have enlisted in this work have written their chapters with a view toward educating, entertaining, and engendering interest on the part of the reader, who will, we hope, be encouraged to further exploration, reading, and listening. As to the “final word,” we are most thankful that, as John Lee Hooker said to me more than thirty years ago, “The blues will always be here; sometimes more popular than at other times, but it will always be here!”

From your lips to God’s ears, John!

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project started a few years ago with Ann Shields, the Abbeville editor to whom I first brought the project, a wonderful lady who has since become a friend. Ann never stopped believing in the value of the project, and, without her, I would never have continued with it.

Alan Axelrod, our editor, is a gentle, brilliant man who always displayed patience and understanding, and who contributed enormously to the entire undertaking, always making my life significantly easier and his infinitely more difficult.

Molly Shields is just about the best designer one could ask for and, thankfully for me, loves the subject matter. She has been an absolute joy to work with. She also has a great sister.

To my sister, Gloria Cohn: I apologize for having held you prisoner when you were a young girl, forcing you to listen endlessly to Leadbelly—and to my inane and indecipherable explanations of the same. Yes, there is life after Huddie Ledbetter!

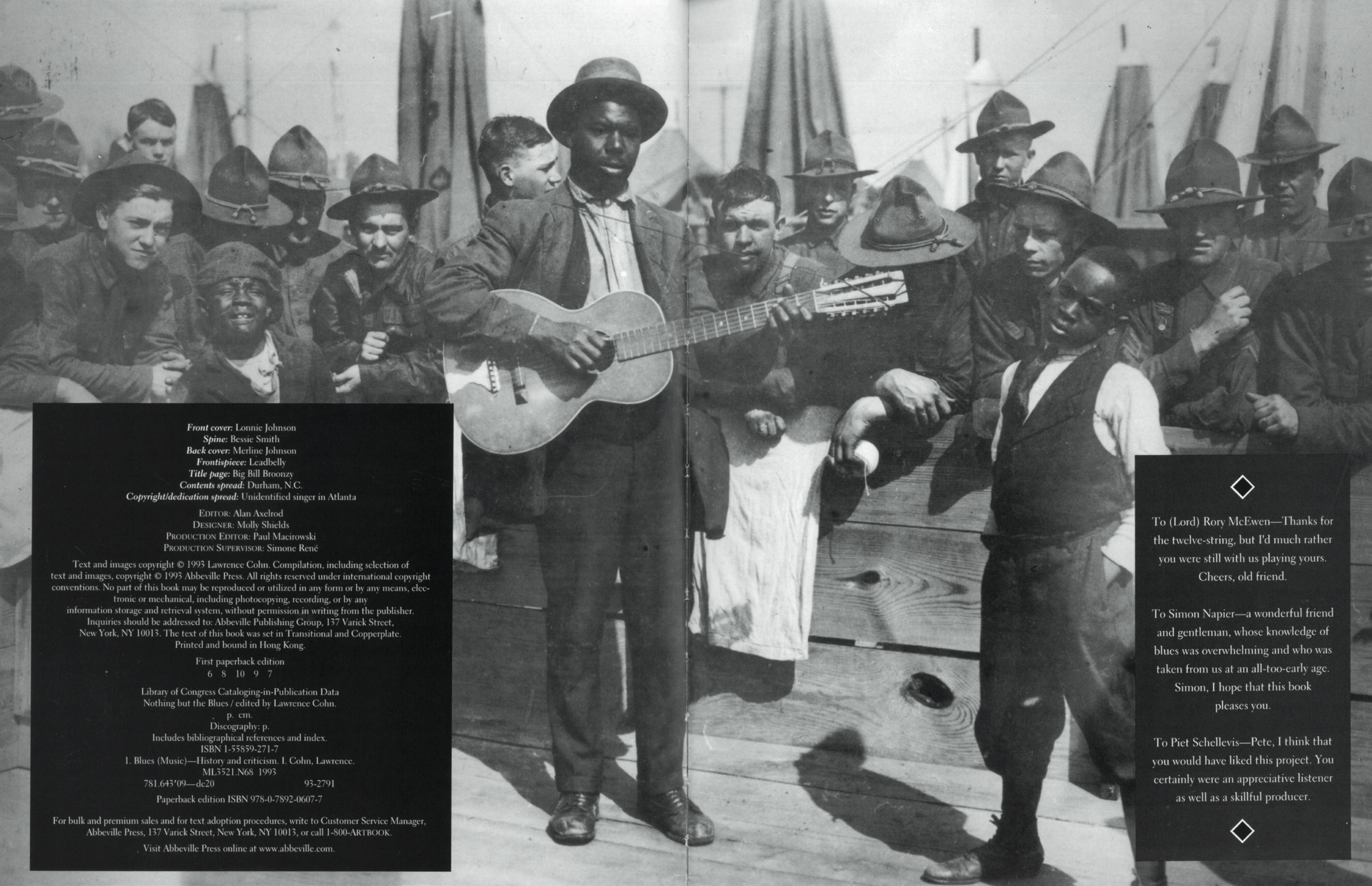
To Frank Driggs, who provided an endless treasure trove of rare photographs for this undertaking. Here’s to our next thirty-eight!

To my family: Lee and Laurie, my children, you have taught me as much as I (think) I have taught you. And to my ex-wife, Beverly Cohn, who predicted that we would win a Grammy for the Robert Johnson project before we had even begun it, and who loves Blind Willie McTell, Lonnie Johnson, and Jelly Roll Morton as I do. The woman does have taste!

And finally, to Harold Potter, my dear departed “brother,” without whom this effort would never have seen the light of day.

Lawrence Cohn  
Beverly Hills, California  
January 1993





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*Spine:* Bessie Smith

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◇  
To (Lord) Rory McEwen—Thanks for the twelve-string, but I'd much rather you were still with us playing yours.

Cheers, old friend.

To Simon Napier—a wonderful friend and gentleman, whose knowledge of blues was overwhelming and who was taken from us at an all-too-early age.

Simon, I hope that this book pleases you.

To Piet Schellevis—Pete, I think that you would have liked this project. You certainly were an appreciative listener as well as a skillful producer.

◇



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1

# WORKIN' ON THE BUILDING

ROOTS AND INFLUENCES

SAMUEL CHARTERS



*People keep asking me where the blues started and all I can say is that when I was a boy we always was singing in the fields. Not real singing, you know, just hollerin', but we made up our songs about things that was happening to us at that time, and I think that's where the blues started.*

*Son House, 1965*

The singer was sitting on the faded linoleum that covered the uneven dirt floor of the small hut close to the mouth of the Gambia River in West Africa. A handwoven rug was spread under his dark robes to keep them out of the dust. A handful of people who had heard the music as they passed by were crowded into the small space. Since there was no door, they only had to push aside the flowered cloth curtain that hung in the door opening. He was half singing, half chanting in long, free, poetic lines, reciting a story about a local king before the Europeans came, a king who was fighting against another tribe coming into his territory. As he sang, the people clustered in the room, most of them in shirtsleeves and rumpled cotton trousers, murmured and nodded.

In his hands he was holding a small, homemade string instrument that he played in a series of rhythmic figures, over and over, the soft, muted tone of the strings a light, scurrying accompaniment to the deep resonance of his voice. There was a gentle sound of bare feet tapping against the linoleum, following the movements of his fingers. In each of the West African languages there is a different word for singer, but each of them also uses a more general word, griot. The singer in the open hut was a griot of the Wolof tribe, and it is possible that someone like him first



began to shape the music we know today as the blues. In the many years that have passed since songs like the one he was singing made their long journey to the United States, much in the griots' music, in the instruments they play, and in the songs themselves have inevitably changed. Some of the changes can still be traced; other elements that shaped the modern blues have been lost, probably irretrievably, somewhere in the harsh years of African-American experience.

Early travelers along the west coast of Africa—the area from which almost all of the slaves who were brought to the United States were taken—described the griots and their songs, though they sometimes used the local word for “singer.” In 1745 a compendium of travel writings published in London, Green's *Collection of Voyages*, included descriptions of the singers by an English voyager named Jobson:

*Of the role of the musicians in the society there seems to be considerable agreement, although there are differences in the name. Those who play on the instruments are persons of a very singular character, and seem to be their poets as well as musicians, not unlike the Bards among the Irish and the ancient Britons. All the French authors who describe the countries of the Jalofs and the Fulis call them Guiriots, but Jobson gives the name of Juddies, which he interprets fiddlers. Perhaps the former is the Jalof and Fuli name, the latter the Mandindo.*

*The traveler Bardot says the Guiriot in the language of the Negroes toward the Sanaga, signifies Buffoon, and that they are a sort of sycophant. The Kings and great men in the country keep each of them two or more of these Guiriots to divert them and entertain foreigners on occasion.*

The three tribes mentioned in the passage are known today as the Wolof, the Fula, and the Mandingo. Since the tribes had no written languages until recent years, the spelling of the names varies. In Senegal alone more than thirty spellings can be found of the name Wolof. The word Juddies, which Jobson interpreted as “fiddlers,” is probably the Mandingo word Jali, the term for singer. Since the word is interpreted as fiddlers, however, it is possible that he was referring to Fula griots, who are known as Jelefo. The Fula singers accompany themselves on a small one-string fiddle called the riti.

The instrument the singer was playing for the informal cluster of listeners in the little house in Gambia in his compound was made from an elongated gourd that had dried to the hardness of thick plastic. It had five strings cut from a length of plastic fishing line tied to the rubbed wooden stick that worked as the instrument's neck. Four of the strings went to the end of the stick, and the fifth was tied close to the body of the instrument, shortening its length and raising its pitch. There was a hand-carved bridge holding the strings off the taut piece of goatskin that covered the opening cut into the side of the gourd. In the singer's own language, Wolof, the instrument was called the halam. In the language of the African musicians who brought it to the American South, it had a different name, the banjo.

Like everything else brought from Africa to the South, the banjo changed in the years that passed between the time it arrived and the moment, perhaps a century and a half later, when the first banjos were played into a cylinder recording machine. There is an eighteenth-century painting of a slave dance in Virginia that shows an instrument that still looked very similar to the African banjo, but by the 1830s and 1840s, as more and more entertainers on the crude stages of the nation's small cities

*A young Mississippian plays the rural version of the one-string slide guitar. The instrument and this approach to it were common throughout the South during the 1920s and 1930s; many of our greatest blues artists started in this fashion. CHAPTER OPENER*



*Son House—one of the most important blues artists of all time and quite possibly the genre's greatest singer.*

began to blacken their faces and perform the songs and dances they appropriated from African-American musicians, the instrument began to change.

One of the most popular of the pre-Civil War performers of banjo specialties, “Picayune” Butler, still used an instrument made out of a gourd as late as the 1840s, but when the first band of blackface performers appeared on the stage of what was to become the first minstrel show in 1853, the banjo had been Americanized. The skin head was now stretched over a round frame, first made of wood, and later metal. The rounded stick had been replaced by a flat neck, and the short string was fixed to the side of the neck with a peg. The long strings were also attached to the neck with pegs, first wood, as on a violin, then metal screw pegs. The skin head was now like the head of a marching drum, and, as it changed, the clamps and the ring holding it tight also became metal screws.

The instrument was the same small five-stringed halam—or konting, as a larger version of the same instrument is called—but instead of the soft plucking sound, it was now louder, and since the strings could be drawn tighter, it was played at a higher pitch. It had become the banjo, its sound usually described as “ringing.” It was the banjo, along with the ubiquitous fiddle, that became the most common instrument of the plantation South. The banjo was not, finally, the instrument that would shape the blues, but it was the instrument that helped develop the techniques that became part of the background of the blues. It could be thought of as the halfway step from the music of the griots to that of the first blues singers.

It is difficult to follow this development because, by the time southern vernacular music was being extensively recorded, the banjo had been largely taken over by white singers like Buell Kazee, Dock Boggs (also called Doc Boggs), and Clarence Ashley. Nearly all of them spoke freely about the influence of African-American neighbors who had taught them how to play. They learned not only all of the playing techniques, which had come directly from the finger styles of the griots, but also some of the songs and rhythm patterns. Many old banjo songs, performed as “old folk





*This photograph of Papa Charlie Jackson, with its lovely filigree, is taken from a Paramount Records catalog of the 1920s.*

melodies" by white banjo players, still have the shape of their original African melodies, and some of the "nonsense" verses of the songs contain African words and phrases. It is possible, in fact, to trace, without a break in continuity, the development of the banjo from the Bambara basin of West Africa, one of the areas from which many slaves were taken, to the "bluegrass" style of musicians like Earl Scruggs. What is sometimes thought of as a distinctly southern white cultural expression is actually one of the most vigorous survivals of the African cultural influence on American music.

By the 1920s, however, when record companies first began to document the blues, only a few singers were still using the banjo. One of them, Papa Charlie Jackson, who began recording for Paramount Records in 1924, was very popular, but he used the instrument in a band style, for, by this time, the banjo was usually thought of as a rhythm instrument in jazz and dance orchestras. Only one country banjo player, Gus Cannon, who led a jug band for Victor Records in the late 1920s, recorded extensively. In one of his recordings, "Jonestown Blues," it is possible to hear how the banjo style had developed to accommodate the specific qualities of the blues. In his accompaniment, Cannon uses the precise chords of the early blues to follow the vocal line, then he ends each line with a banjo flourish. The flourish could be a fragment of the earlier kind of embellishment that is more characteristic of halam playing, though it had to be fitted into the regular rhythm that is also one of the elements that distinguished the blues (see Example 1, p. 28).

It seems obvious that part of the reason the banjo lost its central role in rural African-American musical life was because much of its repertoire had been taken over by white performers and because it had become associated with the white minstrel shows and their pervasive racism. Also, the changes in the instrument—the higher pitch and the tension of the strings, which could not produce a sustained note—meant that the banjo wasn't as useful as an accompaniment instrument. It still served that function for white singers, however, since they used higher vocal pitches, often falsetto tones, and sang with a hard nasal quality that gave a sharp clarity to their song texts. African-American singing style, in contrast, used lower vocal pitches and emphasized slower tempos, making the banjo's short, bright "plink" awkward to sing against.

The solution to the problems of the banjo was the guitar, which has a deeper bass sound and, especially if it is tuned below standard concert pitch, produces a tone that sustains long enough to fill in the pauses of a slowly sung vocal line. The guitar also has all the other characteristics necessary for a folk instrument to become widespread: it is cheap, easy to carry around, relatively durable, and can be played with a variety of other instruments. It was the guitar that became the instrument of the blues, but many of the early blues styles were built on the rhythmic and harmonic patterns that had been developed and sustained on the banjo. In the first blues recordings, one hears many accompaniment styles clearly derived from banjo techniques.

While it is possible to follow some of the developments in the instruments that became part of the blues background, the emergence of the blues itself is almost impossible to trace. This is in large part because the blues is defined as a specific musical form. Ragtime and jazz, styles that developed at about the same time, are easier to follow, since they were both considered a way of performing as much as they were a separate body of composition. Although there is a kind of vocal and instrumental style associated with the blues, it is the form of the blues itself, a unique

verse form and harmonic structure, that defines it. And this is precisely what has been impossible to find: the moment when this unique pattern developed.

Late-nineteenth-century folk-song collectors documented much of the music of the newly freed African-American population, and although there are brief melodic patterns with some similarity to what we know of the early blues, as well as lines and phrases of textual material that became part of the blues vocabulary, there is nothing with the distinctive form of the blues.

As it developed and first appears in notated form, the blues was a strophic song built of three short musical phrases that accompanied a lyric verse as specific as the harmonic sequence of the phrases. The classic form of the blues is the well-known three-line verse, in twelve measures of 4/4 rhythm, with an A-A-B rhyme pattern and a line length usually measured by five stressed syllables. There was some early use of shorter—eight-measure—verses on blues themes and texts, but they were so quickly and completely superseded by the twelve-measure verse form that the later form came to be one of the definitions of the blues. Of course, there have been many variations on the basic twelve-bar verse, but it was survived as a distinct musical expression for most of this century. The meter of the three lines of text is accentual, since there is no effort to count the five stressed accents by syllables. It is the repetition of the first line and the use of the verses as thematic building blocks rather than narrative units that give the blues verse its unique character.

The term blues itself was a common American word long before the birth of the music. It can be traced back to Elizabethan English, and by the middle of the

*Cannon's Jug Stompers, one of the classic jug band aggregations of all time, consisted of (left to right) Gus Cannon, Ashley Thompson, Noah Lewis. Cannon lived not quite to an age of one hundred, but Noah Lewis died prematurely in abject poverty.*





«Der Blues wird immer präsent sein, zu manchen Zeiten populärer als zu anderen Zeiten, aber er wird immer hier sein!» — *JOHN LEE HOOKER*

Lawrence Cohn

## NOTHING BUT THE BLUES THE MUSIC AND THE MUSICIANS

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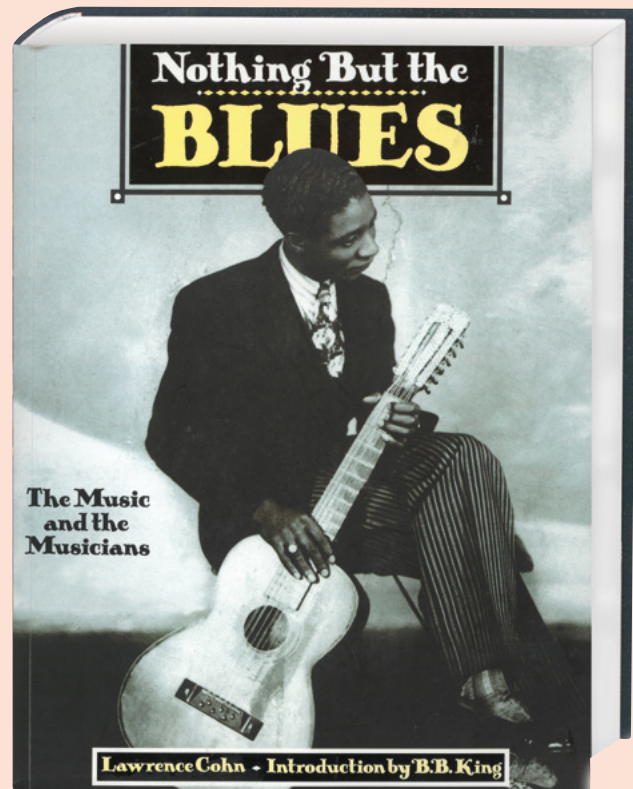


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➔ Liebeskummer, Armut, harte Arbeit, Verfolgung und Erschöpfung, Ironie, Einsamkeit und Verrat, Sünde und Seelenheil, Trunkenheit, Verzweiflung, sexuelle Lust und pure Freude: über diese Zustände und einige mehr erzählen die Blues-Musiker mit grosser Leidenschaft.

➔ Im Ursprung besticht die Blues-Musik durch geniale Einfachheit und ist über die Jahre erstaunlich reich an Varianten und Komplexität gewachsen. Keine andere populäre Musik spricht so viele Hörer an wie der Blues, es braucht aber ein gewisses Know-How, um die Feinheiten zu verstehen. Aufgegliedert in elf Kapitel, speziell für dieses Werk erarbeitet, geht NOTHING BUT THE BLUES den afrikanisch-amerikanischen Ursprüngen auf den Grund, erkundet seine frühe Entwicklung als publikumswirksame Unterhaltung, die ersten Tonaufnahmen, seine regionalen Unterschiede (Mid-South, Tidewater-Piedmont, Chicago, Detroit, New York, Los Angeles), seine stilistischen Eigenheiten und gegenwärtige Situation. Country Blues, Urban Blues, die Entwicklung des Rhythm and Blues, der Rock 'n' Roll, und das erstaunliche Blues Revival in den 60ern werden ausgiebig erläutert.

Aber das geschriebene Wort bietet nur einen Teil der Geschichte. Blues-Fans verehren Ihre Musiker und schätzen die Fotos sehr. Darum präsentiert NOTHING BUT THE BLUES zahlreiche, zum Teil nie gesehene rare Archiv-Fotos und Abbildungen von Dokumenten, z.B. Leadbelly's NYPD Strafregisterblatt oder Verträge der Plattenfirmen



mit den Musikern. Hinzu kommt ein Vorwort der Blues-Legende B.B. King und eine handverlesene Diskographie, eine Auswahl für Sammler mit Best of the Best-Empfehlungen, die man hören sollte. Der Blues ist besonders heute in Europa wieder so populär wie nur in den 60ern. Konzerte mit Buddy Guy, Bobby Rush oder John Mayall aber auch jüngeren Künstlern wie Lilly Martin, Christoph „Kingfish“ Ingram und Shemekia Copeland sind stets ausverkauft.

### ➔ Über den Autor:

Lawrence Cohn war Vize-Präsident von CBS/Epic Records und ist bekannt als Mitbegründer des Labels Legacy Recordings bei Sony Music und hat die Serie Roots'N'Blues produziert. Er erhielt acht Grammy Award Nominierungen und gewann den Grammy Award für das «Best Historical Album» 1991 für sein Projekt „Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings“.



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