“I BEEN TO HEAR THE HIGHEST KIND OF OPERA GRAND”: BLUES, “GOOD MUSIC,” AND THE PERFORMANCE OF RACE ON RECORD, 1920-1921

BY

ELIZABETH K. SURLES

THESIS

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Advisers:

Associate Professor Jeffrey Magee
Associate Professor Gabriel Solis
ABSTRACT

In the early twentieth century, record companies frequently used the designation “good music” as a catch-all category to describe serious art music selections, and the commercial and cultural value afforded to “good music” becomes audible on early vocal blues records made between 1920 and 1921 by performers including Mamie Smith, Lucille Hegamin, Mary Stafford, Lillyn Brown, Daisy Martin, Katie Crippen, and Ethel Waters. The resultant mixture of “high” and “low” musical styles complicates the definition of the blues as an African American genre, given the historic racial affiliation of “high-brow” music with whites. Musical features related to “good music” include the women’s vibratos, modes of diction and vocal resonance, ornamentation styles, and sometimes their ranges. The ensembles that accompanied the women often, but not always, reinforced the sound of “good music” on early blues records through their uniform approach to dynamics and tempo as well as by changing the instrumental and vocal balance to suit the composition and the constraints of the acoustic recording studio. “Good music” notwithstanding, the women also frequently utilized twelve-bar blues form, took considerable liberty with notated compositions, employed pronunciation that signaled blackness, and emphasized blue notes, syncopation, and dance rhythms. Blues lyrics that contrasted with the values of “good music” included references to sex, dance, animalistic behavior, comedy, Prohibition, youth, coon songs, violence, ragtime, mental pathology, and more. Of all the recordings these women made, Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues” has received the most scholarly attention, but its status in the blues canon has served to camouflage the influence of “good music” on early vocal blues. To re-contextualize early vocal blues within a culture of “good music,” this paper examines the stylistic mélange on the earliest records by African American female blues vocalists in an attempt to understand better the dynamics of performative racial
identity and musical expression at the start of an important era, when African Americans entered the music industry with increasing frequency.
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INTRODUCTION

The December 1920 issue of The Talking Machine World (TMW) excerpts a New York Evening Post article by G.W. Harris titled “What the Talking Machine Has Done to Aid the Cause of Music in America.”¹ Harris asserts, “Due to the fact that every home may now hear the best music by the world’s best artists through the medium of the talking machine, it is evident that this instrument has been a most potent factor in this advancement.” Harris’s views articulate the widespread progressive belief that the increasing accessibility of recorded music was allied with the moral and cultural advancement of the United States. In the first few decades of the twentieth century, the recorded music industry marketed the cultural value of “good music” and emphasized a democratic musical edification, as “every home” could now potentially access what was considered to be “good music” through the “instrument” of the talking machine.

Early record companies frequently used the designation “good music” as a catch-all category to describe serious art music selections understood to be “high-class” and “music of the better sort,” while record players became “musical instruments” in sales parlance.² Despite the opposition of what Harris terms “cheap ragtime, jazz, and the like” to “good music,” Harris maintains “that the public at large demands even in its popular records a higher degree of musicianship than would satisfy it ten, even five, years ago.” He explains:

¹ G. W. Harris, “What the Talking Machine has done to Aid the Cause of Music in America,” The Talking Machine World, December 15, 1920, 18-19.
Some time ago the leading manufacturers, in the interest of better music, began to rescore many of the older, popular compositions. They followed this by substituting for the ordinary piano accompaniment with songs of the popular type and accompaniment for the full orchestra, retaining all of the resources of instrumental tone color used by the great composers of the world. For the purpose of strengthening a voice, of keeping it true to pitch, of lending interest to the pauses between the stanzas of a song, enriching a composition generally, they began to use the counter melody and the obligato. These things are looked for in the popular record of to-day, and if they do not exist even the popular ear is unsatisfied.³

As Harris points out, the persistent emphasis placed on “good music” left an indelible mark on other kinds of recorded music from the same time period, which includes the first large group of recordings ever made by African American women.

African American performers had been making recordings since the earliest days of recorded sound, but black women were not well represented on record before 1920.⁴ However, by 1924, over 150 African American women had made commercial recordings. Mamie Smith was the first to record in 1920, but by mid-1921, a host of others followed Smith’s lead, including Mary Stafford, Lucille Hegamin, Katie Crippen, Ethel Waters, Lillyn Brown, and Daisy Martin. They were breaking ground by demonstrating that vocal quartets, dance bands, and comedians were not the only African American performers who could generate hit records. Many of these women recorded only a few songs, but some achieved lengthy recording careers. Most of the women had stage experience—a formative influence in their performance styles.

³G.W. Harris, “What the Talking Machine has done to Aid the Cause of Music in America,” 18-19.
Except for Mary Stafford, all of the women’s recordings were issued by small start-up labels that operated under the shadow of the three most successful labels at the time: Victor, Edison, and Columbia. The popularity of the recordings led record companies to recognize that increasing numbers of African Americans were buying records, which eventually led to greater numbers of records by black performers across the board, and especially by women.

Mamie Smith’s recording of “Crazy Blues” has received more attention than any other recording from 1920-1921 because of its musical features, the fact that all of the musicians involved in its production were African American, and its considerable popularity among African American record buyers at the time of its release. However, the evidence to support the extent of its popularity is sometimes questionable, and further, its status in the blues canon as the first “authentic” blues recording camouflages the influence of “good music” on early vocal blues. Accordingly, Mamie Smith’s recordings and those of her peers deserve a more critical analysis that takes into consideration the context in which African American women first began to record en masse. Luckily, their recordings have become more widely available as a result of recent CD reissues, making easier the task of accessing the music for close listening and evaluation.

Importantly, the manner in which the women performed and the material they recorded shaped the record-buying public’s conception of blackness. The women were cosmopolitan, highly dramatic, funny, professional, mobile, mostly born in the South, primarily altos, businesswomen, and flashy dressers. Despite the variety of their recordings, several prominent recurring themes emerge: sex, comedy, the South as an idealized location, dance (with an emphasis on the body), and rhetoric about mental pathology (e.g. being “crazy”). These themes are audible in the lyrics of early African American blues records and sometimes in the music, as when the accompaniment is by a jazz or dance band.
The singers, accompanying bands, and songwriters borrow freely from jazz, dance music, ragtime, coon songs, and more. The resultant stylistic mélange and its lowbrow cultural status meant that blues records were excluded from the category of “good music.” Nonetheless, they evidence its influence. A clear example emerges on Mary Stafford’s 1921 recording of “Down Where They Play the Blues” for Columbia Records on which she sings, “I been to hear the highest kind of opera grand.” Although in the larger context of the song, her words are meant to draw attention to the cultural disparity between blues and grand opera, Stafford at least symbolically reveals that she chooses to include opera, then the most popular genre of “good music,” in her soundscape. In short, the commercial and cultural value afforded to “good music” seeps into vocal blues records and complicates ideas about what constitutes “low-brow” and “high-brow” and “black” and “white.” This paper examines how blues and “good music” mingle on the earliest records by African American female blues vocalists. I attempt to understand better the dynamics of performative racial identity and musical expression at the start of an important era, when African Americans entered the music industry with increasing frequency.

First, I consider the mixture of vernacular and classical styles on Mamie Smith’s earliest issued recording, making connections between opera, classical vocal technique, stage performance, and recordings by early blues singers. Secondly, I discuss the sexual lyrical content of many early vocal blues recordings, illustrated by both Mamie Smith’s recordings and Lucille Hegamin’s recording of “The Jazz Me Blues.” I analyze the latter and the reverse side of the same recording, featuring “Everybody’s Blues,” for further evidence of the influence of “good music.” The Arto record label categorized “Everybody’s Blues” as a fox trot, so I explore the connections between early recorded vocal blues, dance, and “good music,” using Daisy Martin’s recording of “Spread Yo’ Stuff” as an example. I then introduce Lillyn Brown’s
recording of “Bad-Land Blues” and her reputation as a singer of “character songs,” a classification that importantly connects vocal blues recordings to the coon song tradition and performative caricature.

Later, I consider Mary Stafford’s recording of the song “Royal Garden Blues” and the manner in which Stafford’s diction conveys racial and geographic cues. Using the animal reference in the first line of “Royal Garden Blues,” I turn my attention to the frequent animal references in early blues and the cultural implications they carry. Subsequently, I explore the complicated mixture of musical styles on Katie Crippen’s first recording for Black Swan Records, a label whose history highlights the conflict between high- and low-brow values. Next, I evaluate Ethel Waters’s first recording in terms of her diction and vocal ornamentation, showing how she makes decisions about performing in a variety of ways that reflect different geographic, racial, and stylistic identities. Finally, I offer a revisionist perspective of Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues” and its place in the blues canon and begin to address questions about the audience for early vocal blues, using images and accounts from music industry publications as sources.
CHAPTER 1:
MAMIE SMITH’S “THAT THING CALLED LOVE”: USING CLASSICAL
VOCAL TECHNIQUES IN THE “COLORED FOLKS” OPERA

When Mamie Smith stood before the recording horn in the Victor Records studio in January 1920, she probably felt scared and excited. Just shy of forty years old, Smith had been performing on stage since she was ten, when she was a “pickaninny” in a coon song act with The Four Dancing Mitchells, but her session in the Victor studio marks the first time she had made a recording. The song she recorded, “That Thing Called Love,” was written by Perry Bradford, whom she knew well from the musical revue Made in Harlem in which both she and Bradford performed during the summer of 1918. Unfortunately, Victor Records did not opt to release the record, but in the early spring of 1920, Smith again recorded “That Thing Called Love” and another Bradford composition, “You Can’t Keep a Good Man Down,” for OKeh Records, which issued the songs in August. The language printed on the record label points to the connection of “good music” with early blues. On it, Bradford’s name is typed in parenthesis immediately under the song title to credit his authorship, while Smith is categorized as a “contralto” accompanied by the “Rega Orchestra.” Such language was not an isolated occurrence on records by dance bands considered to be “orchestras” and singers now considered to be blues artists. Of course, the

6 Although Victor made additional test pressings of other blues singers, the label would not release a vocal blues by an African American woman until 1923. However, many white blues singers recorded for Victor.
7 Most likely, the Rega Orchestra was a generic name for the OKeh studio band directed by the General Phonograph Company’s Musical Director, Fred Hager. Music historian Tim Gracyk believes that Hager used the pseudonym “Milo Rega,” since “Rega” is essentially “Hager” spelled backwards. Discographers Dixon, Godrich, and Rye point out that the backing group may actually be “Hager’s Orchestra” (clearly a reference to Fred Hager) since many copies of the record on other labels list this group instead of the Rega Orchestra. Tim Gracyk and Frank W. Hoffmann, Popular American Recording Pioneers, 1895-1925 (New York: Haworth Press, 2000), 150. Robert M. W. Dixon, John Godrich, and Howard Rye, Blues & Gospel Records, 1890-1943, 3rd ed. (Middlesex: Storyville Publications: 1982), 828.
decision to use terminology oriented towards “good music” was not likely made by the performers but instead by record label personnel. Further, not all early vocal blues records featured these high-brow characterizations, showing that the music industry had not yet determined the most lucrative way to market the records. Ultimately, label descriptions featuring words such as “contralto” provide another example of how the music industry’s emphasis on “good music” extended to recordings outside of the category.

Beyond the language on the record label, Smith’s recording of “That Thing Called Love” demonstrates several characteristic features of many early vocal blues, including affected diction, pronounced vibrato, and frequent ornamentation. Smith’s vocal technique displays a dramatic singing style that verges on the operatic. As Larry Hamberlin explains in a study of the ways in which the period’s popular sheet music resonates with operatic allusions: “solid technique, especially in terms of breath support and diction was required of popular and operatic singers in order to be heard and understood in a performance hall. Most recorded performances before 1920 display some evidence of classical training.”

Hamberlin singles out breath support and diction because of the practical requirements of unamplified live performance, and he connects these features to classical musical training. By extension, Hamberlin’s observations suggest that most performers around the time of Mamie Smith’s first recordings would have had an idea of operatic singing that could have easily affected their performance, especially if they were already using classical technique to project clearly.

If, as Larry Hamberlin asserts, the breath support and diction technique of singers on “most recorded performances before 1920” was derived from classical pedagogy, then what kind of diction and breath support did classical voice teachers advocate in the teens? Given that early

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8 Larry Hamberlin, “American Popular Songs on Operatic Topics, 1901—1921” (Ph.D., Brandeis University, 2004), 443.
blues singers were active performers in the years leading up to 1920, Hamberlin’s claim has relevance for their recorded performances, especially given the exaggerated, affected, and “proper” pronunciation on the records of every blues singer mentioned in this paper. Does their technique reflect classical conventions?

Diction and singing manuals from the same period of Mamie Smith’s recordings provide some possible answers to this question. Although blues singers did not likely entertain operatic ambitions, a few aspects of their diction correspond to the recommendations offered by Dora Jones’s book *Lyric Diction for Singers, Actors, and Public Speakers*, published in 1913.

“Madame Melba,” the famous opera singer, is the guest author of the manual’s preface. In it she encourages readers to sing English with “added distinctness . . . even . . . ‘exaggeration’ to counteract the obscuring effect of the singer’s voice and the piano or other musical accompaniment.”

On early vocal blues recordings singers such as Mamie Smith consistently exaggerated their diction to convey the words of their songs clearly over a small instrumental ensemble.

Dora Jones defines “lyrical diction” as the use of diction to maintain vocal resonance throughout the singing of consonants. Trilling “r’s” and exaggerating voiced consonants such as “m” are two of the many diction techniques Jones recommends to maintain proper resonance, which enables a singer to project into a large space and to sing for a long time without tiring. Many blues singers use both of these techniques on early vocal blues recordings as well as vibrato for additional resonance. Although most of the biographies and autobiographies of early

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10 Ibid., 7 and 14.
blues singers do not mention classical training, the women most likely were influenced by and learned vocal techniques from other performers, some of whom may have had classical training, since music schools and teachers were available to black students. In an article about black concert singers during the Harlem Renaissance, Rawn Spearman identifies at least three schools—Oberlin Conservatory, the Chicago Musical College, and the New England Conservatory—that accepted African American students. Spearman also names several African American and classical vocal teachers active in Harlem during the same time period, including Marie Selika, Abbie Mitchell, Charlotte Murray, and Florence Cole Talbert. In Ethel Waters’s autobiography, she names another African American vocal teacher, “Professor Drysdale,” who taught her to “lift [her] voice” and “sing in another range.”

Lynn Abbot and Doug Seroff provide further evidence of the connection between early blues and opera when they call attention to “the popular saying of the time that the blues was ‘colored folks’ opera.’” The evidence Abbot and Seroff cite from The Freeman, an African American newspaper that was published through the 1920s, is particularly compelling. They explain:

References to “colored folks’ opera” appeared in the “Stage” columns of The Freeman throughout 1910-20. Salem Tutt Whitney’s Smart Set Company reported in 1917 that “The Weary Blues,’ sung by Moana [Juanita Stinette] and others, passed right on to opera—regular opera—having the touch of one of Wagner’s compositions. It was the very height of blues singing.” That same year a correspondent for Wooden’s Bon Tons

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11 For example, Ethel Waters claims she learned to sing from her family and by imitating her favorite vaudeville and stock company performers. Ethel Waters and Charles Samuels, *His Eye is on the Sparrow*, 1st ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1951), 13 and 67.
allowed that their “Miss Ethalene Jordan…deserves much credit for her rendition of popular and classy numbers and remember, she sings the colored folks opera too (The Blues).” Finally, at the Washington Theater in Indianapolis that year, blues composer and future race recording kingpin Perry Bradford was “successful in his pianologue…doing what he calls the colored folks opera.”

Although in some ways the distinction “colored folks’ opera” serves to distance African American musical practice from an operatic tradition that is presumably “white,” Abbot and Seroff’s references unambiguously connect African American blues singing with operatic tendencies. The tongue-in-cheek nature of the phrase “colored folks’ opera” conveys a self-aware understanding that the blues stands apart from Western operatic convention and yet maintains its own sense of musical drama.

Mamie Smith was probably familiar with the idea of blues as “colored folks’ opera,” especially given her close partnership with Perry Bradford, and perhaps the idea shaped her vocal style on “That Thing Called Love” to some degree. Likewise, the instrumental accompaniment of “That Thing Called Love” also links early vocal blues to performance practices in keeping with classical traditions. For one, the accompaniment is carefully arranged from the piano-vocal sheet music and features a range of instrumental timbres. Keeping in mind G.W. Harris’s assertions in the TMW about “retaining all of the resources of instrumental tone color used by the great composers of the world,” the instrumental arrangements of early vocal blues on record appear to reference values associated with “good music” by including

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instruments ranging from violin to cornet. Although the quality of the recording of “That Thing Called Love” makes identifying all of the accompanying instruments difficult, Robert Dixon, John Godrich, and Howard Rye identify cornet, trombone, clarinet, violin, piano, and baritone saxophone in the accompaniment in their discography, *Blues and Gospel Records, 1902-1943*. The balance of six instrumental timbres with voice would have been a challenge given the limitations of early recording technology. The way that the instruments and voice mix together shows both how the performers blended, a valued skill in the performance of classical music, as well as how recording engineers placed the musicians by the recording horns to suit the technological constraints of the recording process, which was no easy task.

The orchestra is well-rehearsed and probably reading from printed music, as evidenced by the group’s approach to dynamics and their coordinated changes in tempo at critical transitions between formal sections. The ensemble plays a synchronized crescendo and decrescendo that punctuate the repeated two-measure vamp that precedes the first verse. Further, the vamp is played at a lower dynamic level than the spirited four-measure introduction. The orchestra slows down slightly in tempo in the second measure of the vamp each time it is repeated, and just before the chorus, all of the performers slow down together during a well-rehearsed and clearly conducted ritardando. These dynamic and tempo changes create drama, while the instrumental texture, which was common to most vocal recordings at the time, adds richness.

The vamp also links “That Thing Called Love” with stage music from the era, as vamps were common in musical productions ranging from operetta to vaudeville. As mentioned above,

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15 Solo piano accompaniments were not used on any of the earliest vocal blues recordings; only instrumental ensembles accompanied the singers. G.W. Harris, “What the Talking Machine has done to Aid the Cause of Music in America,” 18-19.
many of the women, like Smith, had lengthy stage careers. As the mania for blues recordings by black women intensified, the women used their live performances to promote their recordings. Accordingly, listeners would not only have heard music that signified theater music, they may also have seen the women perform on stage at some point, especially if those listeners lived in or near an urban area.

With one or two instruments per line, the Rega Orchestra plays nearly verbatim Perry Bradford’s published piano-vocal sheet music of “That Thing Called Love.” The instrumental accompaniment sometimes conflicts rhythmically with Mamie Smith’s interpretation, due to the lyrical changes she makes. The lyrics become more intimate because Smith shifts from first-person to second-person in the last twelve measures of the chorus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perry Bradford’s published lyrics:</th>
<th>Mamie Smith’s sung lyrics:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>That thing called love, has such a funny feelin’</td>
<td>That thing called love, has such a funny feelin’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thing called love, it’s got my brains a reelin’</td>
<td>The thing called love, will set your brain a reelin’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All alone, feeling blue,</td>
<td>And when you’re alone, feeling blue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never knew how much I really cared for you</td>
<td>You’re thinkin’ ‘bout someone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Cause nobody knows what</td>
<td>that don’t care for you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That thing called love will do</td>
<td>Cause nobody knows what</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The thing called love will do.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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18 The only major difference is that the record is in the key of E flat major, while Bradford’s sheet music is in the key of B flat major.
Smith’s decision to change the words in the third line of the chorus has added impact because the song reaches its climax at the same time. Since Smith does not sing the second verse, her repetition of the chorus lends even more intimacy to the song as a whole.

Although the song sounds little like the style of blues that became popular later in the 1920s, the increased sense of intimacy Smith creates, along with the lyrical changes she makes at the very beginning of the song lend a folk blues quality to the song that contrasts with many of the song’s other musical features. Blues scholar David Evans makes several important distinctions between the folk blues of the later 1920s and the blues recorded by women like Mamie Smith. Evans contends that later blues features more generalized expression, as opposed to a specific narrative story, in a way that allowed listeners to connect more easily the words of recorded folk blues songs to their own experiences. However, in “That Thing Called Love,” Smith’s shift to the second-person establishes an intimate connection between performer and audience in a similar way. Likewise, the changes Smith makes to the lyrics in the first verse point to the traditional AAB pattern of blues lyrics. Bradford’s original lyrics do not allow for this interpretation.

Perry Bradford’s published lyrics:        Mamie Smith’s sung lyrics:
Now I am worried in my mind               I am worried in my mind,
People say that love is blind            I am worried all the time
I fell in love just to see                My friend he told me today
But now my sweetie don’t love me.        That he was going away and stay

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While not the literal AAB pattern found in many blues songs, Smith’s repetition of the words “I am worried” at the beginning of the first verse certainly sounds more like the call and response pattern common to folk blues than Bradford’s original lyrics.

Although Smith’s version lends itself to a folk blues interpretation in some ways, her singing style also evinces contemporary concert practice, most noticeable in her wide and liberally-applied vibrato and the exaggerated diction of her performance. For example, when she sings, “I am worried all the time,” she lengthens and applies vibrato to the voiced consonant “m” at the end of the word “time,” matching the recommendations from Dora Jones’s *Lyric Diction*. When Smith sings the word “love” in the chorus, she emphasizes the articulation of the end of the word by singing what sounds like “luvuh.” The exaggeration of word endings using an “uh” sound is common to many other blues singers contemporary to Smith, including Alberta Hunter and Ethel Waters.

Smith characteristically ornaments phrase endings using a sort of appoggiatura or mordent, which was a widespread practice among recording artists in the early 1920s. Contemporary performers such as Ethel Waters, Marion Harris, Al Jolson, Nora Bayes, and countless others apply this sort of ornamentation frequently. Using non-harmonic tones in an ornamental fashion provides a clear link between early twentieth century concert practice and the recorded performances of vernacular performers. For instance, Nellie “Madame” Melba made several recordings that demonstrate this sort of vocal ornamentation, including her 1905 recording of Henry Bishop’s song “Home Sweet Home.”

In Smith’s recording of “That Thing Called Love,” the first appoggiatura comes at the beginning of the word “today” in the first verse (figure 1). Smith sings the non-harmonic note F before descending to the tonic E-flat. The realization of the appoggiatura is much slower than is

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typical in classical performance practice, for Smith sings the note F for an entire eighth-note, but the effect is largely the same as an appoggiatura sung more quickly. Shortly after the first appoggiatura, Smith sings another one on the notes G and F, this time on the word “say,” which lands at the end of the line on the dominant B-flat chord. She replicates the pattern in the ensuing eight-measure phrase on the words “please” and “disease.” The emphasis of the first verse lands on the word “disease” not only because of the slight ritard on the word and its placement on the dominant just before the chorus, but Smith’s ornamentation further emphasizes her malady.

However, the chorus provides the best example of Smith’s frequent ornamentation, as she applies appoggiaturas no less than four times. Even more, she uses portamento singing to dramatize the very end of the chorus, sliding from the dominant to the mediant on the word “love” before applying a passing note in between the mediant and the final tonic as she sings the word “do.” In contrast to the portamento on the word “love,” Smith sings a crisp three-note descending melisma on the word “do,” adding a somewhat formal-sounding ending to the song.
CHAPTER 2:
DOUBLE ENTENDRES ON MAMIE SMITH’S AND LUCILLE HEGAMIN’S RECORDINGS

The lyrics of “That Thing Called Love” illustrate several themes that appear on numerous other blues records, including one veiled reference to sex in the chorus. Perry Bradford’s version is more explicit than Smith’s. He writes, “That thing called love...‘twill even drive your ‘itty bitty’ mama mad,” possibly referencing female genitalia. Smith sings, “That thing called love...will even drive your mama mad.” Even more explicit is the flip side to the record, on which Smith sings another Bradford composition, “You Can’t Keep a Good Man Down.” Beyond the suggestive title, at the end of the chorus, Smith sings “So kiss him for breakfast, hug him for lunch. For dinner give him lots of lovin’, he’s your honey bunch...” Although later blues singers would take double entendres to an extreme, the earliest example of a vocal blues recorded by a black woman already includes a small amount of sexual content.

The TMW decried lyrics such as those on Smith’s first record in the March 1921 issue by printing excerpts from a letter by E.C. Mills, the chairman of the Executive Board of the Music Publishers’ Protective Association. Mills advocates for “eliminating entirely the suggestive, lascivious, double entendres or ‘blue’ material...the fact is that from now on...such songs are going to barred from the better vaudeville theatres.” Later in the article, its anonymous author tellingly asserts, “It is a source of satisfaction that the lyrics of the type of songs complained of rarely find their way into the record field.” Clearly, music publishers and record labels at least in part defined the blues according to their lyrical content, which flaunted the sexuality of black female blues singers.

22 Ibid.
Mamie Smith was not the only black female blues singer whose records featured suggestive language. The Arto Record label issued Lucille Hegamin’s debut recording featuring Tom Delaney’s songs “The Jazz Me Blues” and “Everybody’s Blues” in March 1921. Delaney was an African American songwriter and performer who wrote several other songs recorded by early vocal blues singers including “At the New Jump Steady Ball,” “Down Home Blues,” and “The New York Glide.” Although “Everybody’s Blues” is not particularly evocative, “The Jazz-Me Blues” is rife with sex, especially in the chorus:

Jazz me, Come on professor and jazz me (jazz me)
You know I like my jazzin’ both day and night
And if I don’t get my jazzin’ I don’t feel right…
Don’t want it fast, Don’t want it slow,
Take your time professor, play it sweet and low
I’ve got those dog-gone low down jazz me, jazz me blues

Hegamin and the accompanying band, listed as “Harris’ Blues and Jazz Seven” on the record label, ensure that the double meaning of the chorus does not escape the listener’s notice. Mimicking the lyrics, the ensemble slows down when Hegamin sings, “Take your time professor, play it sweet and low.” They emphasize the last three words with fermatas, and Hegamin even adds scratchiness to her timbre, slightly sliding up into the notes until she sings “low,” when she slides downwards to release the word, creating a very convincing series of moans. Even more, Hegamin does not sing the second verse, so the salaciousness of the chorus receives even more prominence since it is repeated right away.

Despite the ensemble’s attention to the lowbrow quality of the lyrics, many features of the record demonstrate the ever-present shadow of “good music” on early vocal blues.
Immediately noticeable are Hegamin’s trilled or turned r’s when she sings the words “difference,” “vibrations,” and “everyone” during the verse. The elevated language of the line including the word “everyone”—“Everyone that’s nigh never seems to sigh,” also stands out.

Similar to Mamie Smith’s recording of “That Thing Called Love,” the label description characterizes Hegamin’s record as a “soprano solo” with “orchestra accompaniment,” even though she never sings above the note C5. The “orchestra” includes tuba, trombone, clarinet, trumpet, tenor saxophone, piano, and woodblock. Obviously, the decision to use terminology oriented towards “good music” was not likely made by the performers but instead by record label personnel. Further, not all early vocal blues records featured these high-brow characterizations, showing that music industry had not yet determined the most lucrative way to market the records.

Lucille Hegamin and Mamie Smith ornament their singing similarly, and Hegamin may have been influenced by Smith. Given the myriad of touring singers during the first two decades of the twentieth century, proving a clear lineage between them would be nearly impossible, but the similarities between the Smith’s and Hegamin’s recorded performances are telling and they point back to the music industry’s emphasis on “good music.” Hegamin also uses vibrato ornamentally, but her vibrato cycles a little faster than Smith’s. In the first line of the verse when Hegamin sings the word “clime,” she applies vibrato in a way that ornaments and emphasizes the word, even though it is not the most important word in the phrase nor falls on the highest note.

As a result, the ornamentation comes across as somewhat forced and calls attention to the stylization of Hegamin’s singing. She uses the same kind of ornament on the word “peculiar” later in the verse. Hegamin, like Smith, uses mordent and appoggiatura ornamentation on a

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23 Early recording technology did not record drums well, so many bands substituted woodblock.
24 “Clime” is an abbreviation for the word “climate.”
couple words in “The Jazz Me Blues.” For example, in the verse, she applies mordents on the words “air” and just before the chorus on the word “loudly.” Like her ornamental application of vibrato, the mordents have no clear rhetorical purpose beyond signaling the values of “good music.”

Throughout the song, Hegamin takes many liberties with the published melody to Tom Delaney’s composition, and this improvisatory spirit characterizes every early vocal blues recording to some degree. Of course, classical performers also take liberties with the score. Yet the diversity and quantity of the variations presented by blues performers such as Hegamin sets the style apart from classical genres such as opera, in which the focus is on the observance of the composer’s intentions as expressed by the score. One way that Hegamin modifies the published vocal melody is by incorporating parts of the accompaniment, as in the chorus, where she consistently sings three notes, A G sharp and A, on the word “jazz” instead of what Delaney wrote, the single note C. Delaney’s piano accompaniment shares the same three-note pattern as Hegamin sings. Hegamin is more inventive rhythmically by adding syncopation and anticipating the beat in several places during the chorus. Additionally, the improvisatory spirit of her performance connects it to her career on stage, where improvisation often guaranteed a laugh or covered a mistake.

Harris’ Blues and Jazz Seven’s accompaniment appears to support G.W. Harris’s observations that the accompaniments on popular recordings around 1920 were being influenced by the values of “good music.” The accompaniment to “The Jazz Me Blues” is similar to that played by the Rega Orchestra on Mamie Smith’s first recording because both reveal a fairly well-rehearsed and cohesive ensemble. Harris’ Blues and Jazz Seven play articulations

25 Hegamin sings the song in the key of C major, while Delaney’s sheet music is in the key of E flat major.
26 G.W. Harris, “What the Talking Machine Has Done to Aid the Cause of Music in America,” 18-19.
uniformly throughout the introduction, although no articulations appear in the piano arrangement. When the band plays the vamp, they crescendo together according to the rising melodic line, similar to the Rega Orchestra on “That Thing Called Love.” However, the group was playing an arrangement of “The Jazz Me Blues,” evidenced when they drop out of the texture at important parts in the song. As Hegamin nears the chorus, the band stops playing during the high point of the phrase, when Hegamin sings “You want nothing else but jazzin’, jazzin’.” Although they only drop out for a few beats, the effect is dramatic and adds tension leading in to the chorus. Later in the chorus, when Hegamin reaches the naughty punch line of the song, the band likewise drops out during the middle beats of the measures when Hegamin sings, “Don’t want it fast. Don’t want it slow. Take your time professor play it.” Even the arrangement sharpens the focus on the double entendre in the lyrics.

Added to this, the arrangement of “Everybody’s Blues” is somewhat more complex than other popular songs of the era.27 After a four-measure introduction, the band plays the first six measures of the verse before Lucille Hegamin sings during the last two measures of the eight measure phrase. The band then repeats the verse with a different ending that does not include Hegamin singing, which leads directly to the sixteen-measure chorus, during which Hegamin sings the entire time. However, the band repeats the chorus without Hegamin and then repeats the entire pattern, this time without the introduction (figure 2). The label on the record calls attention to Hegamin’s limited role by crediting the main performers as “Albury’s Blues and Jazz

Seven” directly under the title of the song in the middle of the label. Hegamin is listed in much smaller type above and to the right of the main label information in a small blurb that states, “Fox trot choruses sung by Lucille Hegamin.” The Arto label’s categorization of the record as a fox trot, despite the “blues” in its title, makes evident another important way in which early blues records referenced the body beyond the double entendres so prevalent in the repertoire: dancing.
CHAPTER 3:
DAISY MARTIN’S “SPREAD YO’ STUFF”: BRINGING TOGETHER BLUES,
“GOOD MUSIC,” AND DANCE

The blues were associated with dance music in the minds of listeners and recording industry personnel. In fact, the very creation of the most popular dance of the first half of the twentieth century, the fox trot, is tied to the blues, as demonstrated by the accounts of W.C. Handy, dance celebrity Vernon Castle, and their important musical collaborator, James Reese Europe.\(^{28}\) Although the details are unclear, all of them in some way linked Handy’s song “The Memphis Blues” to the creation of the fox trot.\(^ {29}\) Dancing was a favorite pastime and big business in the United States in the early 1900s, and record companies supplied the demand for dance records by marking those to which listeners could potentially dance most commonly as a “fox trot” or “one-step.” These designations were primarily dependent on tempo, meter, and rhythm, as Rebecca Bryant describes in her dissertation about Chicago’s dance culture between 1910 and 1925.

Bryant suggests that, at first, fox trots were danced to tempos around eighty-four half-note beats per minute, although later tempos ranged anywhere from sixty-six to one hundred and eight half-note beats per minute. Fox trots were always in duple meter, usually notated in 4/4 or 2/2 meter. The emphasis was on the half-note, rather than the quarter note, which corresponded to the series of long and short steps of the dance. Long steps marked the half-note, while short steps corresponded to the quarter-note. Early on, dotted eighth-note and sixteenth-note rhythms were common in fox trots.\(^ {30}\) All of these style features appear in early blues repertoire, and a

\(^{28}\) Rebecca Ann Bryant, “Shaking Big Shoulders: Music and Dance Culture in Chicago, 1910—1925” (Ph.D., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2003), 171-173.
\(^{29}\) Ibid.
\(^{30}\) Ibid., 176-177.
few songs, such as “Spread Yo’ Stuff,” were explicitly labeled as fox trots. Sometimes jazz and
dance bands recorded instrumental arrangements of vocal blues songs, which record companies
then marketed as dance records. Singers frequently took liberties with regards to tempo so that
they could emphasize a song’s lyrics, but a consistent tempo was required for a successful dance
record, which is one likely reason behind many instrumental adaptations of vocal blues songs.

At other times vocal blues records maintained a consistently fast or slow tempo, and this
variety of possible tempo choices marked vocal blues’ affiliations with more than one genre.
Lynn Abbot and Doug Seroff suggest that very slow tempos, commonly notated in sheet music
as “Tempo di Blues,” helped define contemporary understandings of the blues, showing how
tempo complicates the notion of a blues genre, since many early vocal blues records present fast
tempos. The vast difference in tempos on the versions of “Royal Garden Blues” recorded by
Mary Stafford and Daisy Martin, demonstrates that in its realization, a “Tempo di Blues” did not
have to be slow, but instead could be interpreted to suit the genre being recorded. Daisy Martin
recorded the song at a speedy 140 quarter note beats per minute—a fast dance tempo—while
Stafford’s tempo was only 100 quarter note beats per minute and less suitable for dancing.

Emerson Records November 1919 catalog supplement provides another example of the
link between blues, “good music,” and dance. The label describes dance bands as “orchestras”
and names an unlikely instrument, the saxophone, as being able to imitate a full orchestra. The
catalog’s advertising copy echoes G.W. Harris’s statement in the December 1920 *TMW* by using
the rhetoric of good music in emphasizing the quality of Emerson Records’ instrumental
arrangements. The anonymous author writes:

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31 The pseudo-Italian tempo marking offers another clue about the blues’ relationship with “good music”
in that blues composers were self-consciously marking their tempos. The designation both called
attention to the disparity between blues and “good music,” but also lent an air of “legitimacy” to the
music. Abbott and Seroff, “‘They Cert'ly Sound Good to Me’,” 65.
We have found new instrumental combinations that are to the dance what the breath of life would be to a dying man. In most of these numbers you will find that we have used the Saxophone…because…[it] is the perfect instrument for the modern dance. It has the body, the resonance, the dramatic quality that permits the strongly marked emphasis and rhythm…But we have gone further…an in a third [instance] you will be amazed and delighted to hear six Saxophones all going together with a power and flexibility that will delude you for a moment into thinking it is a full orchestra. 

The “six Saxophones” to which the author refers were played by the popular group the Six Brown Brothers, whose version of “Missouri Blues” was among the records Emerson advertised in the catalog, as was a recording of “Virginia Blues” by the Louisiana Five, which Emerson lists as a “‘Blues’ fox trot.”

Early vocal blues is rife with dance terminology, and singers often incorporated dancing into their live performances. Ethel Waters even danced with customers when she was employed at Rafe’s Paradise in Atlantic City, a club whose clientele was primarily white. Early vocal blues repertoire invited dancing, as songs such as “I Wish I Could Shimmy (Like My Sister Kate),” “Spread Yo’ Stuff,” “Royal Garden Blues,” and “The New York Glide,” all emphasized dancing to some degree. Daisy Martin featured two of these songs, “Spread Yo’ Stuff” and “Royal Garden Blues,” on her first record, issued by Gennett Records in June 1921.

“Spread Yo’ Stuff” was written by Jules Levy and Paul Crane with lyrics by white minstrel performer Al Bernard, who incidentally was the first person to record W.C. Handy’s “St. Louis Blues” in 1919. “Spread Yo’ Stuff” was published in 1921 by the Triangle Music Publishing Company, owned by Joe Davis, who, like Perry Bradford, W.C. Handy, and Clarence

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32 New Gold Seal Emerson Records November 1919, 1.
33 Ibid., 2 and 4.
34 Waters and Samuels, His Eye is on the Sparrow, 134.
Williams, owned the copyrights for many early vocal blues songs on record. The sheet music categorizes the song both as a fox trot as well as “blues de luxe,” and the imagery on the cover plainly links dancing African Americans with the blues (figure 3). Bernard’s narrative lyrics depict the dancing of “Wicked Feet” Susie Brown and her dance partner, and the chorus shifts into the imperative, representing the dance instructions Susie gives to her partner, which range from “Spin like a spinnin’ top,” to “Keep on a bluin’ it all over the floor.” Given that “blue” lyrics represented sexual innuendo, Bernard likely meant for “bluin’ it” to conjure up even more colorful images. The suggestive instructions in the chorus culminate in the line “Get busy hon don’t you make a bluff, / Because you know I can’t get enough, / Oh Honey come on ‘Spread Yo’ Stuff’.” The quotation marks around the song’s title highlight its double meaning, which would have been obvious to record buyers who heard Daisy Martin’s recording, even without the benefit of the sheet music in front of them.

Martin’s recording of “Spread Yo’ Stuff” also fits Rebecca Bryant’s fox trot criteria in several ways. First, “Spread Yo’ Stuff” includes dotted eighth-note and sixteenth-note rhythms in all parts of the song: introduction, vamp, verse, and chorus. Both Martin’s vocals and the instrumental accompaniment, played by her “Five Jazz Bell Hops,” include these dotted rhythms. The song is in cut time, and on the recording, the ensemble gives the half note 68 beats per minute, although Martin frequently rushes the beat and has trouble maintaining a steady tempo. During the first part of the verse, composers Levy and Crane give the first and third quarter notes in each measure a marcato accent, emphasizing the meter. The verse is split into a twelve measure blues progression in the key of F major and a sixteen measure section that modulates to the key of C minor. The thirty-two measure chorus modulates again, to the key of B-flat major.
The modulations in “Spread Yo’ Stuff” distinguish the song from other early recorded vocal blues, which tend to modulate less or not at all.

In addition to featuring modulations atypical to early vocal blues, Daisy Martin’s recording of “Spread Yo’ Stuff” shows her singing style to be indebted to classical singing technique. Like Mamie Smith and Lucille Hegamin, Martin frequently uses vibrato on long notes, but she tends to use vibrato operatically on short notes more frequently than Smith or Hegamin. Another difference is that the interval of Martin’s vibrato is slightly wider than that of either Smith’s or Hegamin’s vibrato. Together, Martin’s vibrato and soprano voice make her sound like she is warbling, an effect reinforced by the range of “Spread Yo’ Stuff.” Martin recorded the song in its published key, meaning that the melody stretches from the note C sharp 4 all the way up to F 5, a larger than usual range of notes for a popular song. Like Hegamin and Smith, Martin trills her “r’s” in three words: “Brown,” “rough,” and “right.” However, Martin does not add ornamentation or stray far from the printed rhythm. Instead, she adds considerable parlando, especially during the first chorus during which she speak-sings the entire thirty-two bars. Tag endings are another addition Martin makes to the song. One comes at the end of the twelve-bar blues progression in the verse, where Martin sings the last few words of the phrase again, and the other interjection comes at the very end of the song, when Martin, in her parlando voice, says, “‘S’ ‘T’ ‘U’ double ‘F’ stuff.”

Martin’s use of vibrato, her pronunciation, and her range point to the influence of “good” music on her singing style, but the drama of the parlando most likely originated in the many years she performed on stage before she made her first recordings. Many of Martin’s contemporaries, such as Daisy Martin, also employed parlando on their recordings, and their parlando delivery probably reflects the women’s considerable stage experience. Granted,
identifying the origin of parlando delivery would be difficult at best because recording technology at the time was not sophisticated enough to capture performances in large theater spaces.

Many of the black women who started recording in the 1920s honed their skills during the teens as members of travelling black troupes, an influence that becomes audible on records such as Daisy Martin’s. Her stage career most likely brought about her first acquaintance with Mamie Smith, as both women toured with Whitney’s Southern Smart Set during its 1909-1910 tour.\(^{35}\) The Smart Set was a travelling African American theater troupe that performed for whites and blacks in the North and the South, and Daisy Martin was the leading lady during the 1909-1910 tour.\(^{36}\) She also toured as a member of Dudley’s Northern Smart Set between 1911 and 1912. A press notice about the latter troupe’s performance in Washington, D.C. reveals that Martin was originally from Philadelphia, as were two other early blues singers, Ethel Waters and Katie Crippen.\(^{37}\) In addition to Mamie Smith, Daisy Martin performed alongside Ma Rainey as a member of Tolliver’s Big Show troupe in 1916.\(^{38}\)
CHAPTER 4:

LILLYN BROWN’S “BAD-LAND BLUES” AS A MIXTURE OF “GOOD MUSIC,” CHARACTER SONGS, AND COON SONGS

Both the sexual content and emphasis on women’s bodies present in early blues recordings demonstrate that the long-standing idea of African American women (and African Americans in general) as sexualized remained in the forefront in the music industry. Only this time, real African American women were the ones who were passing on messages about their sexuality, which is a crucial and important point. By inexorably linking their music to their personal lives, scholars such as Daphne Duvall Harrison have emphasized the women’s agency, what messages they passed on, and the connection to their life experiences, almost to the point of essentializing and exoticizing them, as did the early record companies.  

In fact, record companies had a special name for music that was essentialist and performative: “character songs.” A good example is Emerson Records’ categorization of Lillyn Brown’s records as featuring “blues character songs.” Character songs depicted a stereotype that was considered to be comical, or at the very least, understood to be fabricated, as demonstrated by record catalogs from both Emerson and Columbia Records. Emerson Records’ August 1919 record catalog supplement describes the song “Blues, My Naughty Sweetie Gives to Me” as a “Blues Character Song” and warns, “Don’t play this record unless you want to laugh, because you won’t be able to help it if you do.” In Columbia Records’ September 1920

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41 New Gold Seal Emerson Records August 1919, 1919.
announcement of (white) singer Marion Harris’s new status as an “Exclusive Columbia Artist,” the label praises Harris’s “gift of interpretation and impersonation” and explains that “since the advent of ‘Blues’ Miss Harris has risen to preeminent heights as a singer of this character song.”

Judging by Columbia’s frequent and prominent promotion of Harris, who was white, as a blues singer in Columbia’s trade literature and in the *TMW* in 1920, Harris was most likely Columbia’s leading female blues artist, until her celebrity was challenged by the popularity of the label’s issues by black female blues singers, especially by Bessie Smith beginning in 1923. In the list of Harris’s records below Columbia’s announcement, which includes the W.C. Handy song “St. Louis Blues,” the label dubs Harris a “Comedienne,” thereby linking Harris’s humor to her ability to impersonate “blues” characters—African Americans—and showing the connection between blues, character songs, and comedy. W.C. Handy also mentions “character artists” in his autobiography *Father of the Blues*, and Marion Harris may have been one of them since he later talks about her regular performance of Pace and Handy songs. Handy explains that performers like Harris approached the Company for songs because of the firm’s “reputation as publishers of Negro music.”

Like Columbia’s catalog, Handy links singers of character songs to black music.

Despite the understanding that character songs presented fabricated stereotypes, African American performers such as Lillyn Brown were characterizing blacks as such, not as whites in blackface. To some degree, audiences understood “character songs” to be stereotypical representations that were not real because of white performers including Marion Harris, who did not perform in blackface, so decrying the racist stereotypes of black women on early vocal records partially ignores the audience’s cultural understanding that the characterizations were

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42 *Columbia Records September 1920 Supplement*, 1920.

performative, albeit racist. Perhaps more to the point, Lillyn Brown’s character was often that of an African American male impersonator.

Both the Columbia and the Gennett labels also promoted character records as a genre in their respective catalogs. In Gennett Records’ 1922 catalog, a short promotional blurb about Ernest Hare offers perhaps the most clearly articulated definition of at least one kind of “character” song. The catalog features two images of Hare: one of him in blackface and one of him without makeup. Gennett attributes Hare’s talent for blackface minstrelsy and characterization to his status as a native Virginian: “For this reason he has been able through contact with the colored folks in that state to make a study of their humorous mannerisms which has made him invaluable as a recorder of character songs.”

Columbia Records’ October 1920 catalog supplement ascribes Harry Fox’s success at singing character songs to a flexible sense of rhythm, his “peculiar way of just following or just beating the orchestra to it on certain notes, which is the secret of part of his character work.” The record demonstrating Fox’s rhythmic technique features the minstrelsy-indebted songs “Bless My Swanee River Home” and “I Lost My Heart in Dixieland.”

These examples illustrate how character songs were understood to convey comedic stereotypes of African Americans, as well as how performance style figured in the genre. Lillyn Brown’s record debut as a singer of character songs placed her squarely in a tradition in which being “black” was performative, which was reinforced by her recorded performance. Emerson

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44 Eric Lott’s book *Love and Theft* captures the subtle layers of meaning that stem from racial stereotyping. He explores the way that blackface minstrelsy’s audience believed in and was influenced by the parody of African Americans on the minstrel stage, while at the same time, the audience understood the parody to be false. The same dynamic applies to early vocal blues, made evident in categories such as “character records.” Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 314.

45 Hare is depicted in the catalog with and without blackface makeup. *Gennett Records 1922 Catalog*, (1922), 21.

46 *Columbia Records February 1920*, (1920), 13.
Records’ categorization of Brown as a singer of character songs, coupled with the fact that she was African American, means that listeners might have understood that early vocal blues performers like Brown presented blackness with a convoluted authenticity. Listeners would have been better acquainted with white singers who sang character songs and vocal blues (understood to be “black” genres) such as Sophie Tucker, Aileen Stanley, Nora Bayes, and Marion Harris, all of whom were recording stars in the time period just before Mamie Smith’s first records came out.

Columbia Records’ advertisement for Nora Bayes’ February 1920 release exemplifies the kind of marketing approach used in selling blues records by white singers. The ad states, “Nora Bayes never gives the blues. But she sings “Prohibition Blues” and “Taxation Blues” in a way that will make you far from blues if you have the foresight to order big.”

The lyrics to “Prohibition Blues” feature rampant dialect, racial stereotyping, and numerous opportunities for “characterization.” The lyrics are from the perspective of four “characters”: the narrator, “Mose Brown,” his preacher, and his friend “Sam’l Birch.” In the story the characters are sad about Prohibition’s impending certainty, so Birch and Brown decide get a head start by commencing to drink immediately. When Columbia released Bayes’ recording of “Prohibition Blues,” the racial caricature of Bayes’ performance would have served as a contemporary precedent for the African American women who began recording en masse one year later.

When listeners first encountered recorded vocal blues by African American women, they would have associated the women’s repertoire most strongly with records made by white singers who fit more squarely in the performative tradition of racial caricature. The Chicago Defender demonstrates the manner in which music publishers, specifically the firm of Pace and Handy,

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48 Compelling questions worthy of further study surround the precedent set by white blues singers who were recording just before the release of the earliest blues records by African American women.
marketed black and white blues singers to the same audience, in this case the African American readership of the *Defender*. On September 11, 1920, a small blurb announcing Marion Harris’s affiliation with Columbia and upcoming releases appears. The anonymous author writes:

> Lovers of phonograph music will be delighted to know that Miss Marion Harris…now under contract with the Columbia Co., has made a wonderful record of the “St. Louis Blues,” and also one of the Pace and Handy hits, “Long Gone.” The latter will also be sung on the records by Miss Mamie Smith who sang “That Thing Called Love” for the OKeh Phonograph Co.

Either Pace and Handy had an excellent relationship with the *Defender* or the firm paid for the publicity. The ad makes no distinction between the records or any special appeal to readers to support the African American artist, Mamie Smith, over Marion Harris, but it does mention another Pace and Handy song, “That Thing Called Love.”

Emerson Records also advertised Lillyn Brown’s recordings in the *Defender* in a small ad on July 16, 1921. Brown only recorded four sides for the label, and the paucity of her recorded output contrasts starkly with her sixty-odd years on the stage. However, the records are interesting for several reasons. First, Brown’s background as a male impersonator is immediately apparent because she sings in a tenor register. Further, the first-person masculine perspective of “Bad-Land Blues” would have reinforced this association. Brown began working as a male impersonator at the tender ago of eleven, when she was billed as “The Youngest Interlocutor in the World” by the Queen City Minstrels tent show in 1896 and 1897.

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49 Harry Pace and W.C. Handy were the owners of Pace and Handy, although once Harry Pace launched the Black Swan record label, Handy oversaw the publishing company. Black Swan records featured many Pace and Handy compositions.


records she made for Emerson in 1921, her range extends from around D 3 to G 4, but the melodic profiles of her songs tend to remain between the notes F 3 and D 4. Her vibrato is throaty and cycles rapidly, and she overemphasizes her diction, turning or trilling her r’s and adding a strong schwa sound at the end of words such as “land” to make the “d” clear. Like Mamie Smith and Lucille Hegamin, Brown also adds ornamental appoggiaturas. All of these characteristics reaffirm the relationship between early vocal blues and “good music.”

Brown’s second recording for Emerson Records featured the song “Bad-Land Blues” by Shepard Edmonds, one of the first African Americans to establish his own publishing house. “Bad-Land Blues” shows how early vocal blues songs developed from a variety of earlier race-based popular song models as well as how they sometimes echoed classical compositions. In “Bad-Land Blues,” the melody in the introduction and the first part of the verse resembles the melody of Felix Mendelssohn’s “Spring Song,” Op. 62, no. 6. Although not a direct correlate, Edmonds’ melody uses pick-up notes similar to those of Mendelssohn’s melody, and the way these passing notes lead to the tonic on the downbeat followed by a downward melodic contour that emphasizes the dominant and mediant sounds strikingly similar (figure 5). Mendelssohn’s song was widely known in the early twentieth century, and Edmonds may also have been influenced by contemporary uses of “Spring Song” such as in Irving Berlin’s song “That Mesmerizing Mendelssohn Tune” from 1909.52

In contrast to the melody, some of the song’s lyrics are derived from the coon song “The Bully,” which became the signature number of celebrity comedienne May Irwin after she introduced the song in 1895. Coon songs were all the rage in the years roughly between 1890

and 1910. Most coon songs feature syncopation and racist characterizations of African-
Americans as “coons” through the use of exaggerated dialect and stereotyping, a definition
suggested by Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, Thomas Riis, and Alison Kibler.\textsuperscript{53} Shepard
Edmonds wrote several extremely popular coon songs and was in the first generation of black
songwriters who bridged the gap between the coon-song era, ragtime, and the flowering of an
African American musical theater tradition. Similarly, Lillyn Brown started performing on stage
during the chief years of coon song popularity, as did Mamie Smith and Daisy Martin. Although
she was younger than the other three women, Lucille Hegamin was born in 1894, near the start
of the coon-song era. Early performers and writers of vocal blues had strong ties to the coon-
song tradition, exemplified by Brown’s recording of “Bad-Land Blues.”

Shepard Edmonds includes variants of several lines from “The Bully” in “Bad-Land
Blues.” In first verse and chorus, Charles Trevathan, the composer of “The Bully,” writes,
“He’s round among de niggers a layin’ their bodies down. / I’m a lookin’ for dat bully and he
must be found…When I walk dat levee round.”\textsuperscript{54} On Brown’s recording, she sings, “‘Cause he
must be found/ I’m going to walk that levee round/ I’m gonna lay his body down.”

\textsuperscript{51} The intensity of the racism in coon songs and their popularity leads Larry Hamberlin to question the
continued use of the designation “coon song,” and rightly so. The racism fueling the genre certainly calls
into question whether using the “coon song” designation perpetuates the stereotypes of the genre,
especially given that other contemporary genres also based on racial characterization are no longer
identified using their racist language (e.g. “Dago” song). However, I do not agree with Larry
Hamberlin’s suggestion that the term “coon song” be replaced with “negro dialect song.” Eliminating
from scholarship the label “coon song,” as Hamberlin suggests, unfortunately would not change the fact
that the label is rooted in its historic use during a time period marked by endemic racism. It appears
frequently on sheet music covers, on record labels, and in periodicals and advertising from the era. I
choose to use the terminology as it originally appeared. Larry Hamberlin, “National Identity in Snyder
and Berlin’s ‘That Opera Rag’,” \textit{American Music} 22, no. 3 (Autumn, 2004): 380-406. Thomas Laurence
Riis, \textit{Just before Jazz: Black Musical Theater in New York, 1890-1915} (Washington: Smithsonian
Right}, 11.

similarity between the lyrics is striking and points to the connection between coon songs and early vocal blues. May Irwin’s characterization of the bully when she performed the song was familiar to thousands of Americans, and part of the humor of Irwin’s act was the disparity between Irwin’s appearance as a white woman and the “character” of the bully, a brutish African American male who totes around his razor looking for a fight. The adaptation of lyrics from “The Bully” in “Bad-Land Blues” would have called Irwin to the minds of many listeners, thereby linking Brown, a singer of character songs, to Irwin, who was famous for her characterizations as well as her high-class status, given Irwin’s considerable financial success.

An even more explicit connection between May Irwin and early blues singers appeared in The Chicago Defender on March 5, 1921. Mamie Smith was compared to Irwin in a review of her Chicago performance a few days earlier. The author of the review was surprised by Smith’s performance:

The public misjudged her style of entertaining from her records. One would imagine from the records that she was of a rough, course shouter. To the contrary, she was a splendid reproduction of May Irwin, who made this class of amusement what it is today and what it will remain. One of Miss Smith’s features was that she rendered her numbers clean and void of all foreign dancing “slapping-the-finger” acts. The author stresses the refined “class” of Smith’s performance and praises the wholesomeness of her act. Might the author’s emphasis on the class and moral integrity of Smith’s performance point to the relationship between early vocal blues and “good music,” given its associations with moral improvement and the upper class?

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Several different singers and instrumental ensembles recorded “Royal Garden Blues,” including Daisy Martin, as mentioned above, and Mary Stafford. Although many early vocal blues songs reference locations in the South, “Royal Garden Blues” was named after the Royal Gardens Café, a black and tan cabaret located on Chicago’s South Side during the late teens. Spencer Williams and Clarence Williams (who were unrelated) wrote the song together when they lived in Chicago, but the success of “Royal Garden Blues” and two other of their songs enabled Clarence Williams to relocate his music business to New York City, where Spencer Williams would also soon move. Once in New York, Clarence Williams grew his business, earning profits not only from printed music, but even more importantly, from recorded music. He generated income from recordings based variously on his ownership of the rights to recorded songs, his participation in recording sessions as a musician, or his success as a talent scout, manager, and agent. Williams was a bit dishonest, which sometimes got him in trouble, as was the case when Bessie Smith fired him because he had been pocketing some of her royalty money from Columbia Records without her knowledge.\(^\text{56}\) Samuel Charters and Leonard Kunstadt cite figures that Clarence Williams “recorded nearly seven hundred sides for major New York companies,” primarily as a bandleader.\(^\text{57}\) Clarence Williams wrote several songs recorded by other early African American female blues vocalists including “Decatur Street Blues,” “If You Don’t Believe I Love You (Look What a Fool I’ve Been),” “Weary Blues,” and “Oh Daddy!”

Like Perry Bradford, Clarence Williams figured out how to capitalize on the popularity of early blues recordings.

The recording history of “Royal Garden Blues” is interesting because vocal and instrumental versions of the song appeared simultaneously on different labels by Mary Stafford and Bennie Krueger’s Orchestra, respectively. Evidently the song quickly gained popularity as a dance tune after Bennie Krueger’s Orchestra recorded the song for Brunswick, which released the record in April 1921, because “Royal Garden Blues” was later recorded by groups ranging from the Original Dixieland Jazz Band to the Mezzrow Ladnier Quintet.\(^{58}\) Also in April 1921 Columbia Records issued Mary Stafford’s first recording, which featured both “Royal Garden Blues” and “Crazy Blues.” Stafford’s recording of “Royal Garden Blues” is notable because her recordings for Columbia tended to feature songs, like “Crazy Blues,” that were already popularized by other singers who recorded for smaller record labels.\(^{59}\) “Royal Garden Blues” was the only song that Mary Stafford premiered on record; Daisy Martin’s recording of the song did not come out until June 1921, which was the same month that Emerson Records issued Noble Sissle and his Sizzling Syncopaters’ version of the “Royal Garden Blues.”\(^{60}\) Apparently it was a hot commodity in 1921.

Mary Stafford was the first African American woman whose records received wide distribution by a major record label, but she has received less scholarly attention than her competitors (e.g. Mamie Smith and Ethel Waters). The limited information about Stafford may be due to the small number of recordings that she made. After her initial twelve sides for Columbia in 1921, she only made two final recordings for the Pathé label in 1926. The fact that


\(^{59}\) Of the nine songs recorded by more than one blues singer in 1920 and 1921, Mary Stafford recorded six of them.

\(^{60}\) Tim Brooks details Sissle and Blake’s recording career in Tim Brooks, Lost Sounds, 363-395.
approximately half of her repertoire consists of copies of songs recorded first by other singers may also help explain the limited amount of research on Stafford. She was not an innovator. However, Columbia chose to issue Stafford’s versions of songs after other singers had already demonstrated that a song would be a hit, so in some ways, Stafford’s repertoire offers richer clues about the audience for early vocal blues and what was most popular. Even more, Columbia had far-reaching distribution, which meant that Stafford’s records were widely available across the country, as opposed to recordings made by smaller record labels with more limited distribution, such as Gennett, who issued Daisy Martin’s recording of “Royal Garden Blues.”

Comments about Mary Stafford by an anonymous author in the July 1921 issue of the TMW not only call attention to the conventional, but in this case inaccurate, understanding of the blues as Southern but also provide a snippet of Stafford’s obscure biography. The author writes, “Miss Stafford…has a voice particularly adapted to the rendition of the popular “blues” type of songs…and to hear this record one would suppose that this artist had been reared down South with some Alabama mammy to understudy, instead of being a native of Missouri.”

Did Stafford’s voice genuinely sound “Southern” or was the TMW adding to the understanding that the blues were Southern by definition?

The answer is not clear. Stafford was the third African American woman to record a vocal blues record after Lucille Hegamin and Mamie Smith, and Stafford’s voice most closely resembles Mamie Smith’s. Both apply vibrato on long notes, and Mary Stafford even lengthens the note values. Stafford’s vibrato cycles slowly, as does Smith’s, and both women take many liberties in their realization of the songs they record. Like Smith, Stafford’s range shows that she’s an alto, but she can powerfully sing relatively high notes in her chest voice. Stafford’s voice has a dark resonant timbre that is not unlike Mamie Smith’s timbre, and given the other

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61 Qtd. in Foreman, “Jazz and Race Records,” 70.
similarities between their voices and singing styles, I suspect that Columbia invited Stafford to record precisely because her voice resembled Mamie Smith’s voice. Given her rising celebrity, finding a singer with a similar voice might have led Columbia to believe that Smith’s audience would also enjoy Stafford’s records. Even more, both women tended to record songs at tempos on the slow side of the scale in early blues recordings. Stafford’s “Royal Garden Blues” hovers around one hundred quarter note beats per minute.

Another similarity between Stafford and Smith’s singing lies in their diction, and specifically their pronunciation of the letter “r.” In a dissertation about the political and racial implications of diction, Jonathan Ross Greenberg distinguishes between a “hillbilly” and coastal Southern accent and suggests that “singers participating in jazz/swing cultures were careful to use the particular features that coastal Southern speech shares with African American speech.”

Greenberg identifies the absence of a hard “r” sound at the end of words as a tell-tale sign of a “black” Southern accent, and both Mary Stafford and Mamie Smith frequently drop the “r” at the end of words using exactly the kind of coastal accent Greenberg describes. Although Stafford less frequently trills or turns her “r’s,” both she and Smith selectively employ a trilled, turned, dropped, or more regular pronunciation of the letter “r.” Greenberg notes that early blues singer Ethel Waters also varied the pronunciation of the letter “r,” which Greenberg attributes to the way that Waters negotiated genre, race, and geography in her music. Based on Greenberg’s argument, both Mamie Smith’s and Mary Stafford’s voices likely conveyed a Southern, African American identity to their listeners, which might explain why the TMW insisted that Stafford’s voice was well-suited for singing the blues.

61 Ibid., 208.
Mary Stafford emphasizes the diphthongs she creates on many words, in the process calling attention to how affected her diction is. In terms of Stafford’s recordings, most noticeable is the way she sings words with a long “u” sound such as “blues,” “refuse,” and “flute.” Instead of a pure long “oo” vowel, Stafford sings what sounds like “yoo,” sometimes elongating the “y” sound. The result is that “blues” sounds like “blews,” while “refuse” becomes “refews” and so on. Stafford is not the only African American vocal blues singer to do so; both Lucille Hegamin and Mamie Smith also pronounce the word “blues” using a “yoo” sound instead of “oo,” although Stafford is more deliberate about it. Modifying the pronunciation enables Stafford to accentuate the resonance of her timbre since producing a pure “oo” sound places the vocal mechanism in a position where timbre is usually dark and less resonant.

In vocal pedagogy literature of the same period, books including Dora Jones’s *Lyric Diction* and “Super-Diction,” *Twelve Studies in the Art of Song*, emphasize the importance of “forward placement” of the voice to ensure maximum resonance as a core technique. Essentially, the expression “forward placement” means that a singer strives to direct his or her voice to resonate in the front nasal cavities rather than back in the throat or down in the chest. Louis Graveure, the author of “Super Diction,” explains, “It is taken for granted here that most singers and teachers believe that the voice should be ‘placed forward’ (i.e., resounding in the frontal cavities of the mouth or head, or both); and here is where the sustained tone of consonants has its most vital appeal.”64 Graveure advises singers to strive for resonant consonants, and he provides various practice exercises, including ones that teach singers how to trill their r’s as well as take advantage of voiced consonants such as “m,” just like Dora Jones in *Lyric Diction*. Blues

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singers evidently valued vocal resonance and thought about vocal placement, given their many trilled “r’s,” resonant voiced consonants, and rich vocal timbres.

The modification of the long “u” sound common in early vocal blues pointed toward class distinctions based on pronunciation, since substituting “yoo” for “oo” sounds more like a British pronunciation, considered to be better than American pronunciation around 1920. Louise Pound’s 1915 article considering the differences between American and British pronunciation provides good support for this idea. She notes that American English originated in Britain and asserts that British English is the more “beautiful tradition” that is appreciated by “people of education and of cosmopolitan experience.” In short, Pound associates members of the upper class with British pronunciation. Thus, blues singers’ substitution of “yoo” for “oo” not only derives from classical technique, the change may have had class significance for record buyers. Pound was not the only figure in the teens to associate proper British pronunciation with the upper class; George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion* made its Broadway debut in 1914.

Like the blues singers who valued a sophisticated sound made possible by classical vocal techniques, Spencer and Clarence Williams evidently valued a refined approach to writing blues songs, based on the 1919 sheet music version of their song “Royal Garden Blues.” It shows a compositional sophistication that is atypical of other blues songs from the same time, especially in terms of harmony, form, and rhythm. The song is in the key of F major and divided into three main sections, which are preceded by a four-measure introduction (figure 4). Each of the sections offers an inventive modification of a standard twelve-bar progression, which is repeated once each time. For instance, in the fifth measure of the first progression, the typical location for the IV chord, the harmony becomes slightly ambiguous because Spencer and Clarence Williams

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emphasize the note G by featuring it in the melody, which, at first hearing, makes the chord sound like a first inversion G minor chord. However, because the note B-flat is in the bass, the underlying sense of a blues progression is not disrupted (figure 6). The lyrics at this point—“There’s jazz syncopation / blues modulation”—mimic the modulatory feel of the passage since the B-flat in the bass moves in a steady half-note rhythm three times to the note F and back.

Spencer and Clarence Williams feature similar substitutions in each of the three sections, including a modulation to the key of B-flat major in the last section. In terms of rhythm, David Jasen and Gene Jones suggest that “Royal Garden Blues” may be “the first popular song based on a riff.” In fact, the song is based on three riffs—one for each section (figure 7).

Shapiro, Bernstein, and Company published “Royal Garden Blues” in two versions. The first was copyrighted in 1919 and recorded by Mary Stafford, and the second was copyrighted in 1921 and recorded by Daisy Martin. The second version eliminates the middle section and adds another verse to the first section. Perhaps the staff of Shapiro and Bernstein deemed the sparse accompaniment and odd triplet riff of the second section too radical a departure from the standard dotted eighth- and sixteenth-note fox trot rhythms in the beginning section. In any event, the second version of the song reduces its complexity by removing the middle section of the first published version.

The self-referential nature of the lyrics in “Royal Garden Blues” provides a good example of how blues songs call attention to the underlying music. As in “good music,” blues music culture in 1921 valued specific sounds and aspects of the music deemed to be important, but they weren’t always in line with classical standards. For example, the second section in the first published version of “Royal Garden Blues” includes the lyrics: “What’s that familiar strain/that true blue note refrain/It’s drivin’ me insane…There goes that melody/It sounds so

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good to me.” In short, the best music, according to the lyrics of “Royal Garden Blues,” is familiar, melodic, and laced with blue notes.
CHAPTER 6:  
ANIMAL REFERENCES AND RACIAL CONSTRUCTION IN EARLY VOCAL BLUES

Daisy Martin recorded the second published version of “Royal Garden Blues” for the Gennett label sometime around April 1921, and the record was issued in June. Shapiro, Bernstein, and Company published the second version in the same year as part of their “Blues” Song Folio No. 1, which also featured songs such as “Squealin’ Pig Blues,” “Red Headed Mama Blues,” “‘Sippy Blues,” and “Barkin’ Dog Blues.” Two of the ten titles in the collection name animals, which is not surprising given the popularity of animal dances such as the fox trot and grizzly bear. Even the first line of “Royal Garden Blues” references an animal dance: “You’ll start in dog walkin’, no matter where.” In this line “dog walkin’” was a reference to dancing or “walkin’ the dog.” Ronald Radano relates animal dances with a growing “hybrid discourse of primitivism,” which led “Americans [to become] consumed with vivid fantasies of racialized sound that inspired enactments of simian-like ‘animal dances’ and celebrations of a ‘savage’ jazz animated by ‘jungle rhythms.’” Radano connects the musical construction of blackness to conceptions of African Americans as savage and animal, a sentiment that is echoed within commercial blues culture in 1920-1921, despite the traces of “good music” to the contrary.

Animal references correspond to band and performer names and record company descriptions of blues and jazz music. Blues scholar David Evans discusses animal-related nicknames of African American blues singers, attributing the origin of the nicknames to both performers’ physical characteristics as well as nicknames that “are quite clearly chosen on account of the animal’s qualities of wildness, aggressiveness, strength, mischievousness, or

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abilities to …bite, sting, or make honey." Evans points out that many of the names to which he refers also have a double sexual meaning. Evans does not probe the greater social significance of these nicknames in the context of the music industry, but in 1920 and 1921, the industry’s “blues” designation engendered strong associations with other forms of music understood to be black, including jazz and ragtime. Contextualizing animal-related names and depictions within a generic context with no clear distinction between styles suggests that the animal rhetoric is related to larger conceptions of black music as primitive or savage, rhythmic, wild, and jungle-like, according to Ronald Radano’s conception.

Band names and the manner in which they were advertised also associate vocal blues with animal rhetoric. For instance, Mamie Smith’s band was called “Her Jazz Hounds,” and in the June 1921 Columbia Records supplementary catalog, Mary Stafford’s band is described as “her private pet [emphasis mine] jazz band, which she found in Atlantic City.” Daisy Martin recorded with “Her Royal Tigers” in 1923, the same year that cornetist Bix Beiderbecke joined the “Wolverine Orchestra.” Owing to band names such as these, early vocal blues was associated with animals, animal sounds, and animal behavior—as were famous jazz recordings like “Livery Stable Blues.”

Record companies supported this association by describing recorded blues using language that references animals, and sometimes it portrayed music considered to be black as evil. For instance, Victor Records’ November 1922 catalog supplement describes The Benson Orchestra of Chicago’s recording of the song “Those Longing for You Blues” as “humorous in style, with effects like the bleats and baas of Satan’s select own goatyard.”

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70 Columbia Records June 1921 Supplement, (1921), 5.
blues were considered to be “black” music, even if played by a white society band such as The Benson Orchestra, Victor was indirectly connecting blacks with evil via the blues. Further, the juxtaposition in record company catalogs of blues against religious recordings of black vocal quartets and spirituals encouraged the idea of blues recordings as sinful and evil, despite the stylistic interconnectedness of sacred and secular. Tim Brymn’s Black Devil Orchestra’s name reinforced the connection of blues with Satan via the band’s instrumental recording of “Arkansas Blues” for the OKeh label in 1921. Later in June 1922, *The Music Trade Review* describes Mamie Smith and her Jazz Hounds as a “colored organization that produces some wicked [emphasis mine] harmony,” showing that Victor was not alone in describing blues using less-than-angelic terms. Likewise, critics of black music during the same time period abhorred the “evil music” (e.g. black music) that sullied “the homes and hearts” of Americans. In Neil Leonard’s discussion of ragtime’s reception, he conflates dance, black music (in this case ragtime), and critical moral responses to both evil and sexual immorality. Early blues and ragtime were musically related and further connected through the contemporary understanding that both styles were African American. Thus, Leonard’s analysis has important implications for blues reception as well. Leonard writes:

> It [ragtime] seemed to be the entering wedge of licentiousness or, worse, a sign that eroticism had found its way to the heart of the younger generation. And nothing could be better proof of this than the wild movements of the Bunny Hug, Devil’s Ball, Grizzly Bear, or Baboon Baby Dance, whose very names reminded alarmists of Satanic or animal implications whose gyrations seemed more appropriate to the brothel than the dance

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72 “‘Revue’ of Travelers’ Association a Big Success,” *The Music Trade Review*, June 17, 1922.
73 Qtd. in Radano, *Lying Up a Nation*, 236.
hall…the ecstatic eroticism that went along with ragtime seemed sinfully irrational and its associations with the black man…only served to dramatize its diabolical bestiality.\textsuperscript{74}

Given that performers played blues frequently as dance music, Leonard names dances whose reputation for sinfully wild eroticism would have extended to blues. Regardless of the showy vibrato and affected diction of early blues singers, it was considered to be so low a form of entertainment that it bordered on animalistic and evil, an ideology that would have corresponded to the sexual innuendo found commonly in blues songs.

CHAPTER 7

KATIE CRIPPEN’S “BLIND MAN BLUES” AND “PLAY ‘EM FOR MAMMA, SING ‘EM FOR ME”: NEGOTIATING CLASS AND STYLE AT BLACK SWAN RECORDS

Considered together, the lyrics of the two songs on Katie Crippen’s debut record for Black Swan, released in May 1921, show how early vocal blues by African American women may have fueled critical responses linking blacks to the sexual decadence of a younger generation. On her first of only two releases, Crippen recorded “Play ‘Em for Mamma, Sing ‘Em for Me,” by Clarence Williams and “Blind Man Blues” by Eddie Green and Billie McLaurin. Lyricist Eddie Green was on the staff of Pace and Handy’s music publishing firm, having written their hit song “A Good Man is Hard to Find” (Sophie Tucker’s signature number) just before “Blind Man Blues.” Green’s narrative tells the story of a meeting of blind men in Tennessee who lament their blindness because they can’t see the “girls” who “are wearing fewer clothes each day,” so they declare that they’ll never get married and settle down. Crippen sings only as much of the verse and chorus as necessary to convey the basic story, eliminating twenty measures in order to focus attention on the five blues stanzas at the end of the song.

The blues stanzas are sung from the perspective of the blind men, so Crippen’s female voice contrasts with the masculine outlook in most of the song. Because of the blues’ close affiliation with “character songs” and the common practice of female performers singing songs from a male perspective, such as Lillyn Brown’s recording of “Bad-Land Blues,” Crippen’s

75 Mary Stafford recorded “Blind Man Blues” later in 1921 for Columbia Records, and Daisy Martin recorded “Play ‘Em for Mama, Sing ‘Em for Me,” for OKeh the same year, so both songs had a wider circulation than just among the listeners who heard Katie Crippen’s record.
76 In a way, “Blind Man Blues” tells the story of blues performers such as Blind Lemon Jefferson or Blind Willie McTell, both of whom would record numerous blues songs later in the 1920s. The five blues stanzas at the end of the song reflect the folk blues tradition given the manner in which they are strung together without much of an apparent relationship to the song’s narrative. Plus Crippen changes the melody in a way that creates much more of a descending melodic profile and emphasizes blues notes more prominently. Likewise, many of the lyrics are common folk blues tropes.
gender-bending is not particularly remarkable. However, the first blues stanza maintains an ambiguously gendered standpoint through the repeated declaration of the words, “I ain’ goin’ to marry, I ain’ goin’ to settle down, Dog-gone my soul!” The final line of the stanza, “I’m goin’ to stay down here an’ swing these women roun’,” would have reminded the listener of the persona’s Southern masculine identity.

The other side of Crippen’s record, featuring the song “Play ‘Em for Mamma, Sing ‘Em for Me,” makes its sexual content even more explicit. In this song, written by Spencer Williams, the decidedly feminine perspective of “Little Ida Cole” centers on the repeated request that her “papa” play a “blue melody” over and over again. By using the adjective “little” to describe the main character of the song’s lyrics, Williams could have been emphasizing her physical size or possibly her age. Essentially, the double entendres in the lyrics suggest that playing a “blue melody” denotes sex, so when Crippen, from Cole’s perspective, sings, “I love my daddy, good and strong/ That’s why papa syncopates me all night long,” experienced listeners could not have mistaken her meaning. Like Lucille Hegamin in “Jazz Me Blues,” Katie Crippen urges her papa, “Don’t play it so fast,” thereby linking the songs’ intimate directives. Similarly provocative lyrics are ubiquitous to the entire song. Even if listeners did not associate “Blind Man Blues” with youth or understand that “Little Ida Cole” was young, the sexual content of “Play ‘Em for Mamma, Sing ‘Em for Me” would have reinforced critical charges against indecent lyrics.

Crippen’s performance style differs considerably on each side and presents a complicated mixture of musical value. “Good music” makes an appearance in the lyrics of “Play ‘Em for Mamma, Sing ‘Em for Me” when Crippen describes Ida Cole’s musical tastes: “She never cared for opera grand, was wild about blue melody.” Like Mary Stafford in “Down Where They Play the Blues,” Crippen, as Cole, reveals that grand opera is in her soundscape, and
ironically, trills her r’s when sings the words “for opera.” Despite the apparent effects of “opera
grand” on Crippen’s diction, she reserves her passion for her papa’s “blue melody.” Crippen
frequently adorns the melody of “Play ‘Em for Mamma, Sing ‘Em for Me” with mordents,
giving another example of the influence of “good music” on blues. Also, when Crippen sings
“Play it again,” she pronounces “again” as “agane,” which matches Louise Pound’s class-based
analysis of the British tendency to pronounce “again” in a way that rhymes with “rain” in her
article contrasting British and American English. Pound asserts the superiority of the British
spelling as more “educated” and higher-class, both of which also describe “good music.” Later
during the song’s climax, the dramatic ritard when Crippen sings “Won’t you play them blues for
me?” resembles the end of the chorus on Lucille Hegamin’s recording of “The Jazz Me Blues”
when she sings “Take your time professor,” as detailed above. These ritards emphasize the
drama of Hegamin’s and Crippen’s respective performances, and given that grand opera highly
valued dramatic singing, the device may be another connector between blues and “good music,”
as well as between blues and stage performance in general.

On the other hand, the drama in “Blind Man Blues” is largely eliminated because of the
cuts to the published sheet music version of the song’s verse and chorus, which provide much
greater detail about the meeting of blind men and their specific complaints. On Crippen’s
recording of “Blind Man Blues,” she sings no mordents, nor trills her “r’s.” However, her
pronunciation bears Southern traces when she sings the words “here” and drops the final “r” as
well as through her pronunciation of the word “my” as “mah.” Given that the song’s perspective
is that of a Southerner, these diction choices make sense. Despite the song’s lack of Southern
rhetoric, Crippen also drops several “r’s” when she sings “Play ‘Em for Mamma, Sing ‘Em for
Me,” and specifically the words “her” and “hear.” On both sides her vibrato differs from that of

singers such as Daisy Martin, Mary Stafford, and Mamie Smith because Crippen’s forced-sounding vibrato is more throaty than resonant and cycles very rapidly. In this way it is similar to Lillyn Brown’s vocal timbre. Crippen’s and Brown’s singing styles somewhat correspond to the vocal timbre of later blues singers on record, which blues historian Jeff Todd Titon describes in his book *Early Downhome Blues*. Titon writes:

> The tone quality of early downhome blues singing largely resulted from the way the singer enunciated his words. Singing with an open throat, he relaxed his lips and mouth and kept his tongue loose, low, and toward the back of his mouth. This position favored certain kinds of vowels and consonants and made it somewhat difficult to produce others. Thus the singers favored the low, back vowels.”

At the same time, Titon’s description, “toward the back of the mouth,” is the exact opposite of the “forward placement” of the voice and the resonant consonants of several early female blues singers, but Crippen’s throaty vibrato, inconsistent diction, and her use of mordents illustrates the manner in which she uniquely mixes different vocal styles. Given the absence of mordents and trilled “r’s” in Crippen’s performance of “Blind Man Blues” and the fact that the song is blusier than “Play ‘Em for Mamma, Sing ‘Em for Me,” Crippen may have been negotiating diction and style based on the amount of blues content in her varied repertoire. Since blues were understood to be a Southern phenomenon, Crippen most likely employed more of a Southern accent and downplayed classically-indebted diction in her performance of “Blind Man Blues.” Crippen, however, was from Philadelphia.

The underlying accompaniment on both sides provides further evidence of classical music devices on Crippen’s record. First, Fletcher Henderson, the pianist and leader of the

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accompanying band, plays upwards glissandi, a technique much more frequently associated with classical music than blues, in the vamp of “Blind Man Blues.” The violin, not typically considered a blues instrument, is prominent on both sides, and in “Play ‘Em for Mamma, Sing ‘Em for Me,” the trumpet player embellishes his solo with a series of fast mordents during the single instrumental blues progression played in the middle of the other four blues stanzas. The instrumentalists do not swing the syncopated rhythms in the song, so the performance sounds rather formal, despite the trumpet’s brief growl at the start of the instrumental blues section, the numerous trombone smears, and frequent blue notes. In his book about Fletcher Henderson’s career, Jeffrey Magee explains the mixture of styles as central to Henderson’s sound. Magee writes:

Henderson’s blues repertoire reveals a fascinating clash between gutbucket and glitz that captures perfectly the uneasy but exciting position of a black dance orchestra in early 1920s New York. A dance orchestra playing blues in New York had to strike a balance between the exotic and the familiar… As an accompanist for blues singers and as the bandleader of a rising society orchestra, Fletcher Henderson had one foot in each world, and his band’s blues playing reflected that.79

In the case of Henderson’s records for Black Swan, the confluence of “gutbucket,” “glitz,” and “good music” also likely reflected the discord between the label’s class-based and commercial goals.

Black Swan Records was formed by Harry Pace in 1920 on the coattails of Mamie Smith’s successful OKeh releases. Pace was a successful businessman with music industry experience, having worked as the secretary-treasurer for the Standard Life Insurance Company in

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79 Jeffrey Magee, The Uncrowned King of Swing: Fletcher Henderson and Big Band Jazz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 66.
Atlanta and with W.C. Handy as a partner in the Pace and Handy Publishing Company. Pace launched Black Swan Records during the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance, and many of the men who helped Harlem flourish and sided with W.E.B. Du Bois in racial politics were connected to the label. Pace was a graduate of Atlanta University where he studied with Du Bois, who later joined the Black Swan Board of Directors. Harlem real estate maven John Nail, several prominent black medical doctors, and others also became members of the Board.80 The lives of its distinguished members exemplified the values of racial uplift Du Bois espoused, and Black Swan’s goals manifested this value to some degree through records that historian David Suisman describes as “at least forty-five sides of ‘serious’ music, both sacred and secular, performed by African Americans, for whom almost no other recording opportunities then existed.”81 The label itself was named for Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, a famous nineteenth century African American concert singer.

Black Swan promoted its products by encouraging record buyers to support an African American-owned business that provided opportunities to African American artists with limited recording prospects and especially to classically-trained black concert artists who struggled to find an audience without prejudice. Of course, the omnipresence of “good music” in the record industry and the marketing of classical music’s morally uplifting, dignified, and educational qualities also influenced the label’s decision to record serious selections in order to compete with other labels in the early twenties. Nonetheless, like the other labels, Black Swan found greater success recording blues and popular songs, and its output was purchased by whites and African

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81 Suisman, Selling Sounds, 218.
Both in relation to Black Swan’s popular and serious offerings, David Suisman emphasizes the social protest embodied by the recordings, but he acknowledges that commercial concerns became foremost as early as 1921, when the label began issuing records by white performers but not alerting record buyers that the music was recorded by whites. The company struggled financially and was purchased by Paramount Records in 1923.

David Suisman posits that Black Swan provided increasing respectability to the blues because of the label’s recordings by singers such as Isabelle Washington, whose singing sounded more refined and less “black” than later blues singers. Suisman explains that Washington’s “quasi-bluesy renditions of popular songs sounded ‘white,’ that is, her mannered warble conformed to stereotypes about white singers’ thin, controlled trained voices, by contrast with the muscular, rough-hewn singing style ascribed to African Americans.”

Washington, like Daisy Martin, sang in a soprano register, but instead of “thin,” her voice has a frontal resonance and is vibrato-rich like many of her contemporaries. Singing in a soprano tessitura requires the use of a singer’s head register, which has a different timbre than the chest register and probably explains Suisman’s characterization of Washington’s voice as “thin.” Nonetheless, the idea that high voices denoted “whiteness,” while contralto voices signified “blackness” is also promoted by Laurie Stras in her article about the Boswell Sisters racially ambiguous sound.

Several early blues singers who made records in 1921—Daisy Martin, Isabelle Washington, Juanita Stinette Chappelle, and Gertrude Saunders—sang blues in a soprano tessitura, and according to the idea

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82 Ethel Waters wrote in her autobiography that her first record for Black Swan “proved a great success and a best seller among both white and colored,” and Ted Vincent recounts a *Billboard Magazine* account of a Hollywood “matron” whose parties were improved by her collection of Black Swan records. Waters and Samuels, *His Eye is on the Sparrow*, 141. Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 34.

83 Ibid., 234.

84 Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 222.

that higher voices are “whiter,” listeners may have found these women’s racial identities uncertain since their range and its associated whiteness would have been in conflict with the idea of the blues as an African American style.
CHAPTER 8:

ETHEL WATERS’S DICTION AS THE PERFORMANCE OF DIVERGENT GEOGRAPHIC AND RACIAL IDENTITIES

Blues singer Ethel Waters was not a soprano, but her vocal style also presented listeners with a racial conundrum. As mentioned above, Jonathan Ross Greenberg scrutinizes Ethel Waters’s diction as a way to understand how she conveys racial and geographic identity because she variously employs pronunciation that reflects both what would have been considered “Southern” and Northern” and “black and “white” modes of speech. Waters’s recording career took off after her first record for Black Swan became the label’s earliest successful blues release, but she first recorded for the Cardinal label in early 1921, only four months after it began issuing recordings. Cardinal released Waters’s debut record, featuring Tom Delaney’s songs “The New York Glide” and “At the New Jump Steady Ball,” in May 1921, the same month that Black Swan released Katie Crippen’s first record. Waters’s first recording supports Greenberg’s argument about the manner in which Waters sent mixed racial and geographic messages because her diction and vocal ornamentation, both of which were indebted to “good music” practices, contrasted with the more vernacular aspects of the recording, which was relatively devoid of much blues content.

The song “At the New Jump Steady Ball” tells the story of a speakeasy, “the New Hope Hall,” where a jazz band plays Irving Berlin’s song “You’d Be Surprised” and at which a variety of bootlegged libations lead to the death of six male patrons. “At the New Jump Steady Ball” is more or less an alcoholic list song with a long catalog of beverages ranging from “Chicago pop” to a “tincture mixed with turpentine” made “stupefying” by the addition of “black molasses.” The song’s modulation back and forth from the key of G major to the key of E minor conveys
the contrast in the lyrics between the somber threat of potentially deadly bootleg liquor and the Dionysian revels of the speakeasy’s guests. Ironically, Waters was not a drinker; she only performed as one, basing her characterization on her experience growing up in a household with two alcoholic aunts.86

When Waters recorded “At the New Jump Steady Ball,” she was accompanied by “Albury’s Blue and Jazz Seven,” the same band who accompanied Lucille Hegamin’s debut recording two months earlier for the Arto label. The band’s dotted eighth- and sixteenth-note rhythms, half-note accents, snappy woodblock part, and consistent tempo, along with the lyrics, would have signaled “dance record” to listeners. The song’s depiction of alcohol-fueled carousing defies the strict moral codes that typically dictated acceptable behavior at “respectable” dance venues that promoted vernacular dances by pretentiously calling them “balls,” but again the lyrics offer a reminder of the class hierarchy woven into the fabric of popular music in 1921.87 Likewise, Waters frequently trills her r’s in words including “everybody,” “everywhere,” “from,” and “ginger,” thereby offering another foil to the drunken cabaret illustrated by the song’s lyrics and Albury’s Blues and Jazz Seven’s accompaniment.

The prominent passages in the key of E minor, together with the other dance-related musical features, meant that “At the New Jump Steady Ball” may have inspired listeners to shimmy or do the “oriental” fox trot, based on information provided by Rebecca Bryant. In her discussion of the exotic connotations of both dances, Bryant explains that the oriental fox trots and shimmies were frequently scored in a minor key, which evoked the exotic to early twentieth

86 Waters and Samuels, His Eye is on the Sparrow, 278.
century audiences.\textsuperscript{88} Indeed Ethel Waters was particularly proud of her ability to shimmy, and connected her talent to the classy nature of her shimmy style. She writes, “There was never anything vulgar about my fast and furious wriggling. Even in towns where other girl performers were stopped from shimmying by the local bluenoses, no one objected to my doing it.”\textsuperscript{89}

Waters’s vocal timbre is less resonant than many early blues singers, and her voice sounds forced and frequently cracks from the strain.\textsuperscript{90} She attempts to increase her resonance by singing from her throat, although her vibrato was not akin to Lillyn Brown’s or Katie Crippen’s vibratos. Clarinetist Garvin Bushell recorded with Ethel Waters for Black Swan, and he described her timbre as “wide and broad” since “she literally sang with a smile.”\textsuperscript{91} Her vocal timbre and vibrato sound somewhat similar to Lucille Hegamin’s, although their diction is not the same. Both women performed together in New York at the Lybia cabaret in 1920, so they were familiar with the other’s technique. In the Chicago Defender notice announcing their floor show, the anonymous author characterizes Waters as “the comedienne of the hour,” while Hegamin is “the human nightingale.”\textsuperscript{92} The description of Hegamin’s voice as nightingale-like probably led Defender readers and others who encountered this promotional nickname to think of Hegamin’s voice as more cultivated because of the classical music subtext of the zoomorphism.

\textsuperscript{88} Bryant, “Shaking Big Shoulders,” 223. Of the other songs on the earliest records by African American women, Daisy Martin’s “Spread Yo’ Stuff” also features a lengthy passage in a minor key, and given that the song is about dancing, “Spread Yo’ Stuff” was also a likely shimmy song.
\textsuperscript{89} Waters and Samuels, His Eye is on the Sparrow, 109.
\textsuperscript{90} Waters later underwent surgery for vocal cord damage created by poor technique and took voice lessons, as mentioned above, which enabled her to continue singing without further damaging her voice.
\textsuperscript{91} Garvin Bushell and Mark Tucker, Jazz from the Beginning (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 32.
The other side of Waters’s debut record featured Tom Delaney’s “The New York Glide,” an unabashed dance song. The title describes a dance that involves “doing the shimaree,” “buzzin’…like a bumblebee,” and doing the “eagle rock,” among other steps. The “shimaree” was another name for the shimmy, and its association with other animal dance fads is not coincidental since critics condemned them all for being immoral. According to Rebecca Bryant, the most vehement criticism was reserved for the shimmy since the dance’s feminized movements sexualized women’s dancing in a way that threatened notions of acceptable female behavior. Bryant cites city-wide bans of the dance across the country and the vote of the National Association of Dance Teachers in 1919 that deemed the shimmy “the most vulgar and dangerous” of contemporary dance steps. Scorn for the shimmy most likely stood behind Ethel Waters’s insistence that her version of the shimmy was morally acceptable.

Despite the lewd nature of the dances described in the lyrics, the words also associate listeners with “good music.” Delaney writes, “And if you love good music, / Why, you're bound to keep in time,” since the New York Glide “is simply grand.” Evidently learning to maintain a steady tempo was related to an appreciation for “good music.” Thus Delaney can be seen to connect the stable tempos of dance numbers to the influence of classical music, again demonstrating the close relationship between serious and vernacular styles.

Ethel Waters deocrates her performance of “The New York Glide” with an overabundance of mordents at the ends of phrases when she sings the words “sway,” “understand,” “place,” “rock,” “amused,” “time,” “band,” and “waist.” She employs portamento slides in a few places, and as in “At the New Jump Steady Ball,” she frequently trills her “r’s.”

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93 Bryant, “Shaking Big Shoulders,” 228.
94 Ibid., 227.
All of these techniques call attention to the affected style of Waters’s vocal performance and co-exist with the song’s features that were less refined.

Jonathan Ross Greenberg’s comments about Ethel Waters’s diction in her later recording of the song “Dinah” apply also to “The New York Glide,” but the geographic subtext for her choices is less clear in “The New York Glide” than in Greenberg’s analysis. Because Waters was from Philadelphia, Greenberg contends that “as a Northern African American caught between the black culture she had to perform (the blues) and the white one in which she couldn’t fully take part, she treats both accents as equally foreign and worthy of parody.”95 Greenberg demonstrates how Waters self-consciously employed modes of diction that were understood to be Southern in connection with “moments of musical blackness” or alternately, Northern in connection with “‘straighter’ (‘whiter’) musical figures.”96 As mentioned above, Greenberg focuses his argument on dropped “r’s,” but he also calls attention to the varied way that Waters shortens or lengthens the glides in “ai” diphthong sounds, such as in the word “abide” or “I.” Greenberg explains that a shortened glide is “characteristic of Southern and African American speech and is one of the most consistent features of the latter.”97 With a shortened glide, the vowel sounds are more akin to “ah” than a long “i.”

Waters sings both short and long glides in “The New York Glide,” but unlike the songs Greenberg analyzes, “The New York Glide” is unquestionably a song about the North and includes no direct reference to the South or much “black” musical content. As a result, Waters’s arbitrary decision to employ long or short glides does not appear to be based on musical or lyrical content. However, the different pronunciations do not lose their racial significance, so the fact that Waters sings both supports Greenberg’s notion that she was in the middle of competing

96 Ibid., 209, 210.
97 Ibid., 203.
identities. The most notable example of the arbitrariness of Waters’s pronunciation choices in “The New York Glide” is when she sings the word “slide” in the chorus. The first time she sings “slide,” Waters employs a long “i” sound, whereas the second time she sings the same line, she shortens the glide, making her pronunciation sound more Southern. Perhaps Waters developed an increasingly geographically-oriented performance practice as the blues gained popularity and a stronger affiliation with African Americans in the South after 1921.

98 Waters had white relatives on her father’s side, so the notion of competing identities may have been very personal to her.
CHAPTER 9:

RECONSIDERING “CRAZY BLUES”: BLUES PATHOLOGY, “GOOD MUSIC,” AND THE CANON

The first line of “The New York Glide” provides a representative instance of blues pathology: “Everybody’s going crazy about the different dances of the day.” Despite the humorous double meaning of the first words of the song—they do not clarify whether the dancers or their critics are the crazy ones—the connection of mental illness and the blues (via dance in this case) was common to the majority of early vocal blues recordings. Musicologist Peter Muir asserts that commercial blues sheet music in the decade before Waters’s recordings frequently used medical tropes based on contemporary understandings of “the blues” as an illness.99 These tropes continue in the blues well past the teens and are present in many blues songs published and recorded in the 1920s. For example, just before the first chorus in “That Thing Called Love,” Mamie Smith pleads, “I want, somebody please, to cure me of my love disease,” and later in the chorus, Smith adds, “That thing called love, will set your brain a reelin’.” Lyrics such as these occur over and over on 1920s blues records as well as in the sheet music Muir analyzes. What Muir fails to explore is that listeners and sheet music buyers were being bombarded with messages from the music industry associating African Americans with the blues, even before many African Americans were making blues recordings.100 When record buyers were faced with the consistent notion of the blues as a disease, they most likely began to

100 Muir points to the prevalence of nostalgia and longing for a return to the country in many blues songs of the teens, but he does not make the connection.
connect blacks with malady and abnormality, a notion that dated back to slavery.\textsuperscript{101} Rhetoric about mental illness repeatedly pervades blues lyrics, and nowhere is this rhetoric more evident than in Smith’s recording of Bradford’s song “Crazy Blues.”\textsuperscript{102}

The lyrics of “Crazy Blues” detail Smith’s struggles with suicidal and murderous thoughts because she has the “crazy blues.” Smith sings:

I can’t sleep at night, I can’t eat a bite,
‘Cause the man I love, He don’t treat me right.
He makes me feel so blue, I don’t know what to do,
Sometimes I sit and sigh, And then begin to cry
But my best friend, said his last goodbye

[Twelve-bar blues:] There’s a change in the ocean,
Change in the deep blue sea, my baby
I tell you folks there ain’t no change in me
My love for that man will always be

[Chorus:] Now I’ve got the crazy blues, since my baby went away
I ain’t got no time to lose, I must find him today
Now the doctor’s going to do all that he can,
But what he’s going to need is the undertaker man

\textsuperscript{101} See Richard Crawford, \textit{An Introduction to America’s Music} (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001), 123.
\textsuperscript{102} See also “Nervous Blues” by Perry Bradford, recorded in 1921 by Esther Bigeou for OKeh and Edith Wilson for Columbia.
I ain’t had nothing but bad news,
Now I’ve got the crazy blues

[Twelve-bar blues, repeats once:]
Now I can read his letters, I just can’t read his mind
I thought he’s loving me, he’s leaving all the time
Now I see my poor love was blind
I went to the railroad, hang my head on the track
Thought about my daddy, I gladly snatched it back
Now [I?] been gone and gave me the sack

[Chorus:]
Now I’ve got the crazy blues…
I’m gonna do like the Chinaman, go and get some hop
Get myself a gun, and shoot myself a cop
I ain’t had nothing but bad news,
Now I’ve got the crazy blues, the blues.

Ironically in the “Crazy Blues,” the “doctor” about whom Smith sings is not necessary for her psychological malady, but rather for the injuries she plans to inflict on her “daddy.” The violence of the lyrics is striking, especially given that the record became a big hit during a time when many pop songs were topical or sentimental. The average pop song in 1920 did not include the level of violence present in “Crazy Blues,” but except possibly for the fullness of the sound on the record, “violent” would not be an apt term to describe it. Interestingly two other early Mamie Smith releases featured similarly violent lyrics. In “It’s Right Here for You,” the song that was issued with “Crazy Blues,” Smith sings a narrative story about a woman who
threatens to beat her husband with a club if he does not stop his philandering ways. Likewise, in 
“Fare Thee Honey Blues,” on Smith’s third release for OKeh, she sings that she’s going to get “a 
gun, just as long as I’m tall. Shoot myself a man and catch the cannon ball.” These lyrics stand 
out because they are more violent than the lyrics from other blues songs recorded in 1921 by 
African American women.

In terms of the violence of “Crazy Blues,” Southern Studies scholar Adam Gussow 
argues that the brutal attacks on African Americans during the Red Summer of 1919 would have 
made the violence in Smith’s lyrics, and particularly the line in which she expresses a desire to 
“shoot [her]self a cop,” resonate with black record buyers who were angry that policemen did 
little to protect blacks when they were being attacked. Gussow connects the popularity of 
“Crazy Blues” among black record buyers to the violence of Smith’s lyrics. Although Gussow’s 
argument is convincing, the violence of the lyrics of “Crazy Blues” when coupled with Smith’s 
other sides would have been a double-edged sword.

Audience members might also take at face value the idea that African American women 
tended to be violent, or at the very least, the recurrence of the idea of blacks as violent shows it 
tenacity. Dating back to at least the coon songs of the late 1890s, the stereotypical belief in the 
inherent violent nature of African Americans (and their proclivity for “razors”) was disseminated 
via popular commercial entertainment of all sorts. The musical depiction of African Americans 
as essentially violent emerged in the shadow of minstrelsy’s influence, which enabled audiences 
to laugh at blacks because they were grotesquely caricatured, even if they were dangerous. In 
1921, Mary Stafford, the second female blues singer to record “Crazy Blues,” and many later

103 Adam Gussow, “‘Shoot Myself a Cop’ Mamie Smith’s ‘Crazy Blues’ as Social Text,” Callaloo 25, no. 
1 (2002): 10. Similarly, Lynn Abbot and Doug Seroff comprehensively document the trajectory of a 
more purely folk-based blues idiom within the commercial market for blues, exemplified by the career of 
W.C. Handy. Abbott and Seroff, “‘They Cert'ly Sound Good to Me’, ” 430.
singers were categorized as “Comediennes” in advertisements and record catalogs (as opposed to “sopranos” or “contraltos”), showing that for some, vocal blues were broadly understood to be light-hearted and performative in spirit, despite lyrical content to the contrary.

When Mamie Smith recorded “Crazy Blues,” she was accompanied by “her Jazz Hounds,” and the band’s sound differs considerably from the Rega Orchestra on Smith’s first recording for OKeh. The Jazz Hounds do not precisely attack notes together, nor do they apply dynamic markings consistently. Their performance is rhythmically and melodically loose, although they maintain a rough three-part, highly polyphonic texture for most of the song, with the trombone on the bottom, voice and cornet in the middle, and violin and clarinet playing obbligato melodies at the top. The piano, when audible, switches between textural registers. The band has the hallmark sound of early jazz, especially in terms of polyphonic improvisation, “moaning” trombone, clarinet obbligato, and swung rhythm.

The looseness of the Jazz Hounds’ accompaniment to “Crazy Blues” is partially explained in the autobiographies of Perry Bradford and Garvin Bushell. Perry Bradford’s Born with the Blues includes the only first-hand report of the “Crazy Blues” recording session. Although many of his recollections are questionable, his memory that the Jazz Hounds were using a “hum and head” arrangement may account for the band’s looser, more improvisational approach, as might Bradford’s recollection that the band was “feeling good and high” because of the gin they had consumed.104

Clarinetist Garvin Bushell performed with both Smith and Bradford, although Bushell was not the clarinetist on Smith’s record of “Crazy Blues.” However, he played clarinet as a member of the Jazz Hounds on Smith’s fourth recording for OKeh, issued in March 1921 as well

as on sides with Daisy Martin, Lillyn Brown, and several other early blues singers. In short, Bushell’s account of the time period offers another first-hand perspective. In keeping with Bradford’s “hum and head” arrangements, Bushell remembers that the Jazz Hounds did not read music or rehearse and that their arrangements depended on Perry Bradford’s arm motions during the recording session.105 Based on these memories and the sound of the recording of “Crazy Blues,” the Jazz Hounds were evidently not interested in the kind of precision exhibited by the Rega Orchestra and generated by the practice methods, part reading, and written arrangements more common in musical traditions that reflected the values of “good music.” Most importantly, the Jazz Hounds’ sound contrasted with the ever-present vibrato and appoggiatura ornaments of Mamie Smith’s classically-indebted singing style.

In addition to Bushell’s account of the Jazz Hounds’ performance habits, he recalls several details about his time working with Mamie Smith that shed light on her style and reputation. He considers Smith to be a more refined singer than her contemporaries, and his memories correspond with elements of Smith’s vocal performance. Smith’s classically-indebted singing style complicates the manner in which “Crazy Blues” can be seen as a pivotal recording in African American recording history. Bushell suggests:

Mamie wasn’t a real blues singer like Bessie Smith. She didn’t get in between the tones the way Bessie did. Mamie was what we called a shouter. But the white people called it blues! Mamie was…a bit higher cultured than a lot of the singers. She wasn’t a low, gutbucket type of singer that they were wanting on records.106

105 Bushell and Tucker, Jazz from the Beginning, 22 and 149.
106 Ibid., 22.
Although Bushell questions the blues authenticity of Smith’s singing, he asserts that white audience members understood Smith’s singing to be blues, despite the fact that Smith was “higher cultured” and did not sing in a style like Bessie Smith.

Bushell’s appraisal of Smith’s higher cultural status may have related to her concern with “proper” diction, intonation, and classically-influenced ornamentation. All of these are evident in Smith’s recording of “Crazy Blues,” but to a lesser degree than in her recording of “That Thing Called Love” and “You Can’t Keep a Good Man Down.” For example, Smith employs appoggiaturas in “Crazy Blues” both times she sings the word “today” in the chorus, but these are the only examples in “Crazy Blues,” unlike the numerous appoggiaturas in “That Thing Called Love.” Similarly, the recording corroborates Bushell’s observation of Smith’s approach to intonation. On the words “love” and “right” at the beginning of the verse, Smith sings three pitches in succession without sliding in between them, similar to the ending of “That Thing Called Love,” when Smith also sings the word “do” on three pitches. Bradford’s published version of “Crazy Blues” features just one note for the words “love” and “right,” so Smith’s ornamental treatment of the melody using precise intonation would seem to bear out Bushell’s sense that she did not “get in between the tones.” Smith’s concern for intonation and diction is even more audible when she sings the word “ocean” in the first twelve-bar blues progression in the song. She sings a pure and long “o” vowel on the first syllable on the note G and jumps precisely to the note C when she sings the second syllable of the word. Finally, Smith sings the words “blues” and “lose” using the “proper” “yoo” sound that Mary Stafford exaggerates on her recordings. “Blues” becomes “blews” and “lose” becomes “lews.”

Meanwhile, Smith’s singing also carries signifiers of blackness. Using Jonathan Ross Greenberg’s recognition of dropped “r’s” as connoting Southern blackness as described above,
Smith’s “Crazy Blues” features numerous examples that would have led listeners to understand that Mamie Smith was black and from the South. In every word that ends with the letter “r,” Smith favors a less pronounced version of the sound. For instance, in the line “What he’s going to need is the undertaker man,” Smith sings “undertaker man” in a way that sounds like “undehtakeh man.” When she sings the line, “My love for that man,” the word “for” sounds like “foh.” Likewise, when she sings the word “letters,” it sounds like “lettehs.” The only noticeable times when Smith fully pronounces the letter “r” are when she sings the words “railroad” and “crazy.” In the context of early recorded blues, then, Smith’s pronunciation, or lack thereof, of the letter “r” in her recording of “Crazy Blues” invited listeners to make connections among Smith’s racial, gender, and geographic identities.

Although the lyrics in “Crazy Blues” make no mention of the South, Smith’s pronunciation would have led her listeners to make the association. Likewise, Mary Stafford’s recording of “Crazy Blues,” released less than six months later in April 1921, would have reinforced the “Southerness” of “Crazy Blues,” for she also leaves off the letter “r” at the end of words including “undertaker” and “doctor’s.” Yet other aspects of Stafford’s enunciation and diction belie this Southerness. For example, Stafford taps her “r’s” at the end of the word “never” and on the word “treat” near the beginning of the first verse, implying that the blues does not necessarily require a strictly vernacular and Southern identity.

Considered in conjunction with Stafford’s diction, aspects of the Charlie Johnson Orchestra’s accompanying performance of “Crazy Blues” bring to life the echoes of “good music” that were present on early blues recordings. These aspects range from the alto saxophone obligato played by Nelson Kincaid to the arrangement and its form, decorative features, rhythmic style, and relationship to Stafford’s singing. First, the arrangement adds a vamp to
Perry Bradford’s original composition as recorded by Mamie Smith. Again, adding a vamp associates Stafford’s recording with the stage. Within the vamp, the arrangement features a sweeping downward phrase, which is answered by a mordent in the clarinet, similar to the vocal mordents on Mamie Smith’s recordings. When Stafford sings the verse, the Charlie Johnson Orchestra plays a punchy triplet figure that sounds crisp and relatively unswung in comparison to Mamie Smith’s Jazz Hounds’ free and polyphonic approach to rhythm. Because Stafford elongates the note values under which the band plays the triplets, she is able to focus attention on her ornamental vibrato.

Another decorative aspect of the accompaniment is Nelson Kincaid’s extremely legato and somewhat improvised alto saxophone obbligato, which comes to the front of the texture beginning with the song’s first twelve-bar progression. The counter-melody Kincaid plays is not unlike the kind of “obbligato” that was mentioned in the December 1920 *TMW* article about the effect of “good music” on recorded instrumental accompaniments. Kincaid’s choice of notes is rather pentatonic, but he does not really linger on any blue notes except towards the end of the chorus.

Two additional elements remove the performance from blues associations. For one thing, Stafford does not sing two of the blues choruses sung by Smith. For another thing, Stafford eliminates the second chorus with the line about shooting a cop. Perry Bradford claims responsibility for these lyrical changes, since he “left out 24 bars” when the sheet music was printed, but Stafford could just as easily have heard Smith’s recording and learned the words from it or even added her own blues stanzas. Either way, by de-emphasizing the “blue” elements of the song, Stafford, “Her Jazz Band,” and especially Columbia Records offered consumers a recorded version of “Crazy Blues” that smoothed Mamie Smith’s rougher edges and

107 Bradford, *Born with the Blues*, 154
tried to push “Crazy Blues” into the mainstream, where the value afforded to “good music” was part of the commercial framework created by the music industry. The lyrical and formal changes, the limited role of blue notes in Kincaid’s obbligato, the addition of a vamp, the showiness of Stafford’s vibrato, the ornamental clarinet mordents, and elements of Stafford’s diction all point to a more classically oriented performance of “Crazy Blues.”

Importantly, Stafford’s version of “Crazy Blues” would have been more widely available across the country than Mamie Smith’s. Columbia Records had not been in business for long when it established its first multinational branches way back in 1899, but the first OKeh record was not released until 1918. Given the newness of OKeh as a record label in 1920, the fact that Columbia’s sales far outpaced OKeh’s comes as no surprise since record buyers would have been familiar with the Columbia brand given its longevity and big market share. This fact was not lost on Perry Bradford, who complains in his autobiography about Columbia’s initial refusal to pay royalties on Stafford’s recording of his song. Evidently it was very successful in helping to stimulate interest in “Crazy Blues.”

The status of “Crazy Blues” as the record that initiated the era of “race recordings” is understandable given the comments of OKeh’s advertising manager, J.A. Seiber, in the TMW in November 1924. Seiber explains:

About three years ago colored people were considered mighty poor record buyers, and cash visits by colored customers were rare and far between. Then came the original race records issued by our company, and the fallacy that negroes would not buy records was completely put to rout. The first race record, bringing to the colored population of

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109 Bradford, Born with the Blues, 154.
America blues songs recorded by a member of its own race, created tremendous interest and marked the beginning of what is now the important and profitable race record field.  

Seiber’s construction of the chain of events leading to the commercial success of “race records” is more or less the standard version of the story surrounding the release of “Crazy Blues.” Unfortunately, the three years between Seiber’s comments and the release of what he identifies as the first “race records” filtered from his memory several important facts. First, African Americans were purchasing records by other African Americans before “Crazy Blues.” Bert Williams’ blackface comedy earned him tremendous celebrity as well as a record deal with Columbia Records that lasted until his untimely death in 1922. African American vocal quartettes had been recorded since the earliest days of commercial recording and remained popular throughout the 1920s, as had groups such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers and their imitators.

“Race records” was the catch-all category created by the music industry for records made mostly by African American performers that were marketed to African Americans. The use of the phrase did not become common until 1923 and later, but even the earliest vocal blues records by black women were being identified in a special category based on race. For instance, Arto Records publicized Lucille Hegamin’s March 1921 debut as a “Negro Song and Dance Record.” All of the company’s other March releases were categorized under the heading “The Latest Dance and Song Hits.”  

The authentic “black” identity of the performers was of immediate consequence to record labels since before Mamie Smith, blues recordings were made primarily by white singers such as Marion Harris. As mentioned above, Harris’s recordings are advertised alongside Mamie Smith’s recordings in The Chicago Defender in 1921, suggesting that when

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African American women first began recording vocal blues, the genre had already taken hold of African American listeners through recordings by white singers.

More than any other blues record made by an African American woman before Bessie Smith’s record debut in 1923, Mamie Smith’s recording of “Crazy Blues” has become part of the blues canon in a way that obscures the important influence of “good music” on early vocal blues. Its canonical status also masks how Mamie Smith’s recording was only one of many popular blues records from the period, many of which were made by white singers who recorded several years before Smith. In the conventional telling, “Crazy Blues” became a runaway success and demonstrated the existence of a market for black music, which importantly led to many recordings by other black artists as well as to the expansion of an African American market for black music on record—the start of what were termed “race records.” Some version of this chain of events is repeated by most authors who spend considerable time discussing vaudeville blues history. More significantly, the conventional story has been more or less uncritically accepted because it has become part of the canonical narrative of the history of black music, which is rooted in ideas about the authentic rural black Southern identity of the twelve-bar blues. A handful of recent scholars are questioning this definition, but the idea of “authentic” blues is deeply fixed in understandings of American culture.


Upon closer scrutiny, the centrality of Mamie Smith’s version of “Crazy Blues” as the most important precursor to race records with more authentic blues begins to loosen. First, Perry Bradford reports that Mamie Smith’s first record, featuring his songs “That Thing Called Love” and “You Can’t Keep a Good Man Down,” sold very well in Harlem to African Americans upon being released. W.C. Handy also recalls, “The sales on these numbers had been very large…In Chicago large crowds … waited outside Tate’s Music Shop on South State Street to hear us demonstrate ‘You Can’t Keep a Good Man Down.’” However, Bradford’s his account of the timing of the success of Smith’s recording of “Crazy Blues” is questionable at best, given that most record labels required two to three months to record, manufacture, and distribute new releases. Bradford’s recollection is that OKeh released “Crazy Blues” within two weeks of its recording date. The chain of events in Bradford’s autobiography is unlikely, especially given that his recollections come forty-five years after Smith’s recording sessions.

Second, discographical evidence also counters Bradford’s memory. The matrix numbers for the songs on the disc featuring “Crazy Blues” are ten numbers apart, indicating that other songs were recorded between the songs on each side of the record. Russ Laird’s discography of OKeh records shows that eight issued songs performed by five different recording ensembles came between the recording of “Crazy Blues” (matrix number S-7529) and “It’s Right Here for You,” (matrix number S-7539-B). Bradford does not relate the details of the recording session for “It’s Right Here for You,” but he does specify that the recording session for “Crazy Blues” took eight hours and that Fred Hager made an appointment with him for the morning after to


Bradford, Born with the Blues, 126.
Ross Laird and Brian A. L. Rust, Discography of OKeh Records, 1918-1934 (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2004), 74-75.
select together the best take for pressing, a decision typically reserved for music industry personnel. Even if Bradford’s assertion that the recording session for “Crazy Blues” took eight hours is untrue, the sessions for the record featuring “Crazy Blues” may not have occurred on the same day, given the number of sessions occurring between them, and especially not if the session for “Crazy Blues” took eight hours. If Mamie Smith and her Jazz Hounds had not yet recorded the flip side to “Crazy Blues,” would not Hager have waited for both sides to be recorded before selecting the take with Bradford?

Third, sales figures for Mamie Smith’s records are not clear. Several recent authors cite specific sales numbers for “Crazy Blues,” which ostensibly originate in either Bradford’s account or a series of newspaper articles from 1945 by Dan Burley, published twenty years before Bradford’s autobiography. Burley provides conflicting accounts of Smith’s success, twenty-five years after the fact, in that he conflates the success of “Crazy Blues” with sales figures he later attributes to “That Thing Called Love.” In one article he writes that “Crazy Blues” sold 75,000 copies in the first month in Harlem, while in a different article, he writes the same about “That Thing Called Love.”

Admittedly, Smith’s second record was the more popular of her first two releases, given the more numerous “cover” versions of the song that

117 Bradford, Born with the Blues, 126.
119 Burley, “‘Crazy Blues’ and the Woman Who Sold ‘Em,” 1.
120 Burley, “The ‘Crazy Blues’,” February 24, 1940, 20.
came out after hers, yet the unreliability of Burley’s figures and Bradford’s autobiography calls into question the exact sales figures for “Crazy Blues.”

Fourth, Smith’s contemporaries de-emphasize or do not mention the success of “Crazy Blues” as the most important blues record in establishing a market for blues recorded by African American women. Garvin Bushell makes no remark about Mamie Smith’s first two records, while Ethel Waters simply states that Smith was “the first Negro woman singer to make a phonograph record.” W.C. Handy underscores the sales of Smith’s first records, but he contrasts this description with an assertion that Bradford earned fifty-three thousand dollars in mechanical royalties for publishing and writing the song “Crazy Blues,” which would have included payments from Columbia for Mary Stafford’s version, from Emerson for Sissle and Blake’s version, and from the Brunswick label for Al Bernard’s version with the Bennie Krueger Orchestra, all of which came out in early 1921. Although Handy’s figures may be inaccurate, Bradford also recalls receiving large royalty checks for “Crazy Blues,” but what is not clear is whether the royalties were for Smith’s version or for other versions. Alberta Hunter, who made her first records later in 1922, recalls that Smith’s version of “Crazy Blues” was the most important, but then explains Smith’s success in terms of phonograph sales. Hunter remembers, “Mamie was a boon to the graphophone business. When she made her first record, ‘Crazy Blues’…there was a rush for the horned instrument.” Not only does Hunter’s language betray the influence of “good music’s” sales parlance in calling a phonograph an “instrument,” her

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121 Bushell and Tucker, *Jazz from the Beginning*. Waters and Samuels, *His Eye is on the Sparrow*, 141.
122 Handy and Bontemps, *Father of the Blues*, 201. The Original Dixieland Jazz Band also recorded an instrumental version of the “Crazy Blues” mixed with “It’s Right Here for You” for Victor Records, but the arrangement is radically different. Victor may not have had to pay royalties for this reason since the composition was not the same.
focus is on the “graphophone business” and the “horned instrument,” although she does name “Crazy Blues” as Smith’s breakthrough hit.

The large royalties Bradford received from “Crazy Blues” initial sales are substantiated in an interesting *TMW* article about copyright suits brought against Bradford’s claim of ownership of the song. Bradford was taken to court for copyright infringement because “Crazy Blues” was a variant of Bradford’s earlier compositions “Harlem Blues” and “‘Broken-hearted Blues,” the publishing rights to which Bradford had sold to Shapiro, Bernstein and Company, and Frederick Bowers, respectively. Bowers could not produce evidence of his ownership, and Bradford eventually won the suit brought by Shapiro, Bernstein, and Company. In the article, the anonymous author asserts that “thirteen recording companies” were distributing records and piano rolls of “Crazy Blues,” and the fact that the author names multiple versions as the reason behind the litigation suggests that Mamie Smith’s version may not have been the main source of Bradford’s mechanical royalty income. The last paragraph of the article summarizes “Crazy Blues” success:

“Crazy Blues” has had an interesting career. It has scored a great hit, particularly on player rolls and talking machine records and has been cut and reproduced by every recording company of any size in the entire country.

Despite the full page advertisements that had been appearing in the *TMW* for Mamie Smith’s version of the record since late 1920, the article’s author declines to name Mamie Smith as an important part of the success of “Crazy Blues” and focuses on the song instead.

Fifth, “Crazy Blues” never becomes the major focus of newspaper advertisements and articles about Mamie Smith in the *TMW* or in the black press. Instead, articles in black

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125 Ibid.
126 Ibid.
newspapers including *The Chicago Defender, Baltimore Afro-American, and the Norfolk Journal and Guide* focus on Smith’s stage appearances throughout 1921, and until her promotional tour reached Chicago in March, 1921, the *Defender* gives Smith very little coverage at all, except in small ads that are nestled among strikingly larger ads.

In summary, these five factors give rise to weighty questions about the status of Mamie Smith’s version of “Crazy Blues” in the blues canon: the implausibility of Bradford’s report of the chain of events surrounding the release of the record, discographical evidence, unclear sales figures for Smith’s earliest recordings, contemporary accounts that do not emphasize the importance of “Crazy Blues,” and limited press coverage of the record’s success. Given the above, should more attention be focused on the other women who recorded in the months following Smith’s first records in the growth of the market for records by African Americans? If Smith’s recording of “Crazy Blues” was not as popular as it is believed to be, are there more compelling reasons for her stature in blues history besides being the first African American woman to record a blues song, written by an African American composer, accompanied by an African American jazz band, and with a twelve bar blues progression and folk blues lyrics? Is the focus on these “African American” traits the reason why the elements of “good music” in early recorded vocal blues have not been fully explored?

Despite the challenges these questions pose, Mamie Smith’s recording of “Crazy Blues” was extremely popular, but the demographic of Smith’s record buying audience and especially the reasons why Smith’s records sold so well are less clear. Even so, Smith’s amply demonstrated popularity means that her version of “Crazy Blues” should probably retain some status in the canon, simply by virtue of its popularity as the first record by an African American woman accompanied by African American performers playing a song by an African American
composer that features a twelve-bar blues progression. By being the first, Smith had a direct role in enabling many later African American performers to record.
CHAPTER 10:
MARKETING AND AUDIENCE DEMOGRAPHICS

In spite of the uncertainty surrounding the demographic of Smith’s audience and the extent of her success, her earliest records are important in the memories of many of her peers, especially in terms of African American record buyers. W.C. Handy recalls that their desire for Smith’s records left African American music dealers begging for “OKeh agencies in vain.”\textsuperscript{127} Smith recorded more sides than any other early blues performer before Bessie Smith, and her popularity with African American audiences in 1921 is made clear in The Chicago Defender through its coverage of her performance tours.\textsuperscript{128}

Evidence in the TMW also shows Smith to have an African American audience, particularly in the South. A letter that was submitted to OKeh Records by an ostensibly black “jazz enthusiast” appears in the February 1921 TMW. The letter portends the increasing mail order business for blues records, which would follow in the mid to late 1920s. The article about the letter reports:

The advertising department of the General Phonograph Corp. received recently an interesting letter from a Mamie Smith enthusiast in North Carolina. Evidently this admirer…has studied jazz music more carefully than the English language, but the letter itself is an indication of the popularity that Mamie Smith OKeh records have attained in all sections of the country. In fact, this letter is only one of many of similar tenor that the General Phonograph Corp. has received during the past few months. It reads:

‘I rite you to please send me one of your latest catalog of latest popular songs and musical comedy hits popular dancing numbers I got the Crazy Blues all ready and

\textsuperscript{127} Handy and Bontemps, Father of the Blues, 201.
\textsuperscript{128} For more information about the Defender’s coverage of Smith’s performance tours see Foreman, “Jazz and Race Records, 1920-1932,” 58-69.
if you have any other latest Blues sung by Mamie Smith and her jazz hounds send along 2 or 3 C.O.D. with the catalog I want something that will almost make a preacher come down out of the pulpit and go to dancing and hang his head and cry I want all you send to be Blues."129

The poor grammar and mechanics of the reprinted letter, the fact that it came from North Carolina, and the anecdotal story about the preacher who would “hang his head and cry” if the blues were good enough—all of these would have clearly signaled to readers that the letter writer was black. Although the letter could have been bogusly published in jest, it more likely supports the idea that Southern blacks were having trouble purchasing Smith’s records locally, which would make sense given the paucity of Southern OKeh distributors. OKeh contracted with distributors across the country, although its Northern distributors outnumbered Southern ones by around five to one.130 As a result, record buyers in the South would likely have had a more difficult time than their Northern counterparts in purchasing copies of Smith’s recordings.

The record buying audience for early vocal blues is important in determining the manner in which blues performers constructed race and its connection to geography via recorded music. As the recipients of the messages that performers conveyed, listeners would have heard a wide variety of geographic and racial signifiers related both to the music industry’s overwhelming control of popular musical culture as well as the way that individuals within the industry negotiated this control. By making choices about what music had monetary value, listeners also shaped the sound of early vocal blues since record companies presumably tended to issue music akin to what was actually selling. In his book about “race music,” Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr. advocates a similar approach for interpreting black music “by attending to the specific historical

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moment and social setting in which a music gesture appears,” to “avoid the appearance of reifying or ‘essentializing’ cultural expressions.”

Ramsey is interested in the “cultural work performed by music in the process of identity making,” and early vocal blues offers a rich source from which to draw information about the various influences that colored the blues as black during the formative years of the commercial market for black music.

Early vocal blues recordings were appreciated by a Southern African American market, but their popularity also extended to Southern whites as well as Northern audiences made up of both races. Ethel Waters recalls that her recording of “Down Home Blues” and “Oh Daddy” “proved a great success and a best seller among both white and colored,” while Perry Bradford claims that his sales pitch to OKeh Records for recording “That Thing Called Love” and “You Can’t Keep a Good Man Down” centered on the existence of a Southern market of blacks and whites for Mamie Smith’s recorded performance. All of the singers to record in the months immediately following Smith—Ethel Waters, Lucille Hegamin, Lillyn Brown, Daisy Martin, Mary Stafford, and Katie Crippen—performed on vaudeville tours, as members of tent show companies, and/or in stock companies that toured throughout the country for audiences that included whites and blacks. Many singers also performed in cabarets that catered to black and/or white audiences. Although African American women did not record vocal blues before 1920, their voices would have been familiar to many listeners based because of live performances.

Other audience members likely encountered early vocal blues by black women for the first time in a music or department store, where clerks demonstrated records for patrons based on

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132 Ibid., 4.
133 Waters and Samuels, His Eye is on the Sparrow, 141. Bradford, Born with the Blues, 117.
134 For an excellent history of African American touring companies in the early twentieth century, see Abbott and Seroff, Ragged but Right.
their song, performer, or genre preferences. If a customer did not know what record he or she wanted to hear or buy, sales clerks employed suggestive selling techniques, which meant that clerks had tremendous power in influencing popular tastes since as today, many record buyers had no idea what to ask for. A number of clerks apparently did not know how to pronounce the foreign names and titles on many of the recordings of “good music,” so labels such as Victor Records worked to educate clerks about the Victor products. The label provided pronunciation guides for clerks who were unfamiliar with classical composers and performers, thereby implying that many salespeople were less familiar with classical music than vernacular music (or that they were not musically knowledgeable at all). The fact that clerks were not well-versed in classical music likely influenced the records that they suggested to and demonstrated for potential customers, as did their assumptions about what music the customer might like based on his or her appearance and/or reputation.

Sometimes these assumptions could be incorrect, as demonstrated by a story published in the April 1920 *TMW*, titled “Galli-Curci Replaces the ‘Blues’.” The anonymous author recounts:

Mrs. Rose, wife of a Victor dealer at Jackson, Tennessee, tells the following interesting story. One day an old colored woman came in whom Mrs. Rose knew quite well, and asked for some “Blues.” Mrs. Rose happened to be out of the “Blues” asked for, and quite as a venture said: “Mary, why do you colored people get nothing but ‘Blues’? Why don’t you buy some good music?” The old woman looked at her and then said suddenly, “I hate ‘Blues’.” At the time a customer was playing Galli-Curci’s “La Partida.” The old woman pointed at the machine and asked “What’s that piece?” “I want that.” “But,” said Mrs. Rose, “the piece is in Spanish…I’m afraid you won’t understand it.” But the

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135 Self-service store fixtures were only beginning to become fashionable with record-selling merchants in 1920-1921.
old woman insisted…and carried it off. In a few days Mrs. Rose was surprised to see the
old Negress come in again. “Mrs. Rose,” she said, “you know that piece I got Friday;
well, my old man went and set on it and broke it, and I wants another right now.” And
she bought her second copy…and went off happy.\footnote{Galli-Curci Replaces the ‘Blues’,” The Talking Machine World, April 15, 1920.}

The story may be a fictionalized account, but regardless, its allegorical meaning demonstrates
that the record industry considered the quality of grand opera to be such that an African
American record buyer might prefer it over blues and in doing so would be acting in a way that
was inconsistent with mainstream African American behavior. Even if the story is fictionalized,
it demonstrates how record buyers heard a variety of musical styles when they entered a music
store, suggests that Southern music stores owned by whites were not closed to African
Americans, and already in April 1920 the music industry understood very clearly that Southern
African Americans were supposed to prefer blues. Of course, the old woman in the story would
have been requesting vocal blues records by whites since blues songs recorded by African
Americans were not yet available. Even though the story provides but a lone example, the story
shows the relationship between clerk and customer, “white” and “black,” and blues and “good
music.”

Similarly, sheet music covers for blues songs offer other evidence about the music
industry’s messages connecting blues and its related genres with “good music.” For instance, the
cover of Perry Bradford’s “Fare Thee Honey Blues” shows Mamie Smith and her Jazz Hounds
posed in what appears to be a relatively genteel parlor, based on the upright piano, lamp,
carpeted floor, and leather-upholstered chair in the background (figure 8).\footnote{Perry Bradford, “Fare-Thee Honey Blues” (New York: Perry Bradford Music Publishing Company; 1920).} Smith is wearing a
fancy dress and is posed with gracefully dramatic outstretched arms. In contrast, the Jazz
Hounds are posed clowning around by holding their instruments at odd angles in a way that reflects standard jazz band imagery of the time period. The idea of “clowning” and its connection to jazz and blues was both literal and figurative.

Figuratively, jazz was understood to be “good time” and not serious music, so “clowning” jazz bands would have been within the bounds of the genre’s conventions. A more literal interpretation is also possible. White groups such as Ted Lewis and his Jazz Band, the Six Brown Brothers, and Ray Miller’s Black and White Melody Boys frequently performed in clown costumes and also posed goofily for publicity photos when in costume in a way that is similar to Mamie Smith’s Jazz Hounds’ pose. Given the widespread popularity of Leoncavallo’s Pagliacci in the early 1900s, the similarity between Pierrot’s conical hat, large ruffled collar, and white face paint and the costumes of these three bands could not have been a coincidence.

The similarity is all the more apparent in the Six Brown Brothers’ photograph in Emerson’s November 1919 supplementary catalog (figure 9). All of the band members but one, Tom Brown, wears white mime makeup and Pierrot costumes: Tom Brown is made up in blackface and brings the imagery full circle. The photograph strikingly connects opera as “good music” to blackface minstrelsy and whiteface miming through the character of Pierrot, the clown who smiles on the outside but weeps on the inside. Pierrot’s identity as a performer who “characterizes” happiness, much in the way that Lillyn Brown characterizes a man, would have easily found its musical analogue in the many peppy vocal blues songs scored in a major key with depressing lyrics about heartbreak and loneliness.

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138 Bruce Vermazen’s study of the Six Brown Brothers connects Tom Brown’s blackface character with both minstrel and clown characters as well as the ensemble’s connection to the Ringling Brothers Circus, which employed many of the band members early in their careers. Later Vermazen explains that the band’s Pierrot costumes became the standard garb for later saxophone ensembles. Bruce Vermazen, That Moaning Saxophone: The Six Brown Brothers and the Dawning of a Musical Craze (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 46-47 and 251.
Pierrot costumes were not limited to white bands; on the cover of the "Blues" Song Folio No. 1, which includes the song "Royal Garden Blues," all of the song titles are encapsulated in balloons that are held by a smiling whiteface clown cartoon who wears a conical hat and big ruffled collar. Here again the sheet music imagery reminds the viewer of the connection between blues and "good music."

However, on the cover of "Fare-Thee Honey Blues," the band members are wearing formal tuxedos, not Pierrot costumes. The upright piano in the background features a bust of Beethoven and is next to an ornate piano lamp. The design on the back cover, Bradford’s standard image, features a baton-wielding conductor peering down over the musical sample of Bradford’s next offering. The design for "Fare-Thee Honey Blues" is largely the same as the cover of "Crazy Blues," except that Smith stands proudly in the middle of the musicians, still wearing tuxedos, with her hand on her hip on the cover of "Crazy Blues," which also features the pianist sitting at a grand piano, which had just as many class connotations as an upright piano with a bust of Beethoven. Evidently blues pianists, like classical performers, were also concerned with quality instruments and their timbres. The effect of the various elements on the covers of blues sheet music captures perfectly the disparity of styles on early vocal blues.

Examples such as the cover of "Fare-Thee Honey Blues," the Pierrot costumes of the Six Brown Brothers, and the story "Galli-Curci Replaces the ‘Blues’" provide illuminating contextual information about the social context of early vocal blues and importantly demonstrate that the connection between blues and "good music" was not as far-fetched as "Mrs. Rose" may have considered it to be. Together with characteristic musical features of early vocal blues, contextual cues such these reveal the widespread overlapping of blues and "good music" that confronted audience members as the vogue for blues performed by African Americans grew.
CONCLUSION

When blues singers Mamie Smith, Katie Crippen, Daisy Martin, Ethel Waters, Lillyn Brown, Lucille Hegamin, and Mary Stafford helped launch what would turn into a profitable market for “race records,” they did so under the commercial influence of the music industry’s promotion of the values of classical art music. The resultant mixture of “high” and “low” musical styles complicates the definition of the blues as an African American genre, given the racial affiliation of “high-brow” music with whites. Features of the earliest vocal blues records by African American women that conjured up representations of “good music” included the women’s vibratos, modes of diction and vocal resonance, ornamentation styles, and sometimes their ranges. Plus the “orchestras” that accompanied the women often, but not always, reinforced the sound of “good music” on early blues records through their uniform approach to dynamics, tempo, and tempo changes and by changing the instrumental and vocal balance to suit the composition and the constraints of the acoustic recording studio. Further, instrumental soloists sometimes ornamented melodies with classically-indebted figuration, as did the singers they accompanied. These vocal and instrumental performance styles reflected techniques affiliated with classical training and lent a cultivated sound to the first blues records by black women.

Their repertoire was largely written and published by some of the most entrepreneurial and talented African American songwriters and businessmen who lived in the years around 1920 and 1921, including Perry Bradford, Clarence Williams, Spencer Williams, Tom Delaney, Shepard Edmonds, Eddie Green, W.C Handy, and Harry Pace. Their songs variously featured references to grand opera, musical passages indebted to classical songs, relatively sophisticated formal and harmonic schemes, and markings that directed the more or less precise realization of
the music. All of these compositional facets, in conjunction with their realization on record, served to strengthen the tangled kinship between commercial blues and classical music.

“Good music” notwithstanding, the songs also frequently featured twelve-bar blues form, created space for improvisation, and emphasized blue notes, syncopation, and dance rhythms. Blues lyrics that contrasted with the values of “good music” included references to sex, dance, animalistic behavior, comedy, Prohibition, youth, coon songs, violence, ragtime, mental pathology, and more. Folk blues tropes often appear in early vocal blues, especially if a song has a repeated twelve-bar blues passage. All of the earliest vocal blues records by African American women demonstrate some concern with improvisation, and many performers took great liberties with a composer’s original song. All of these traits—disorderly lyrical content, improvisation, syncopation, blue notes, and twelve-bar blues form—tend to be associated with what was considered to be black vernacular music in 1920 and 1921. But considering the strong fundamentally commercial interconnection of blues and “good music,” delimiting the folk blues content from the music industry’s commercially-based racist construction of blackness would not be easy. At what point in the process of becoming commercialized does the folk blues lose its authenticity?

Complicating the issue is that part of the “authentic” blues aesthetic is its Southern identity, but early vocal blues records regularly reference the North through the diction of blues singers, lyrical content, and more. At other times, lyrical content and early vocal blues singers’ diction is decidedly Southern. Sometimes singers employ more than one kind of diction or style on the same record. In reality, the first African American women to record blues were not all from the South but instead came from places as varied as Philadelphia to Cincinnati to Atlanta. They were professional entertainers who travelled the country within a specialized entertainment
industry that had been experiencing explosive growth for the first two decades of the twentieth century. By taking a step back from questions of “authentic” blues and instead considering the sound and context of the first blues recordings by African American women, the manner in which they negotiated a variety of identities—Southern, Northern, black, white, low-brow, and high-brow—comes into focus and provides better terms on which to understand their importance in the larger history of black music.
APPENDIX A: FIGURES

Figure 1

My friend he told me to-day—
That he was going away and say—

Figure 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Chorus</th>
<th>Chorus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 Introduction</td>
<td>6 Band</td>
<td>2 Add Hegamin</td>
<td>16 Band with Hegamin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Band</td>
<td>0 Band</td>
<td>2 No Hegamin</td>
<td>16 Band without Hegamin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 4

**Felix Mendelssohn, “Spring Song,” Op. 62, no. 6, mm. 1-8**

Figure 5

Introduction, “Bad-Land Blues,” cornet and violin melody

Felix Mendelssohn, “Spring Song,” Op. 62, no. 6, mm. 1-8
Figure 6, “Royal Garden Blues,” mm. 5-12

Figure 7, “Royal Garden Blues” riffs

“A” riff:  

“B” riff:  

“C” riff:
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