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100 BOOKS EVERY BLUES FAN SHOULD OWN

EDWARD KOMARA AND GREG JOHNSON

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INTRODUCTION

Nothing but the Books

THE PREMISE FOR THIS BOOK IS SIMPLE ENOUGH: WHICH books should every blues fan own? As former and present blues archivists at the University of Mississippi (Komara, 1993–2001; Johnson, 2002–present), we are asked that question every day. When our Scarecrow Press editor, Bennett Graff, posed it to us two years ago, we were ready to write an answer.

Why We Accepted This Assignment

Why did we agree to do this project? For one obvious reason, we needed an excuse to read blues books. Contrary to what many blues fans may think, we are not given much time during the workday to read books and listen to CDs. Instead, we have to attend administrative meetings, conduct research appointments, write letters and e-mails, and field telephone calls. During a typical day, we have time to read only as much of a book as necessary to answer a question. Rarely can we read a book from cover to cover. So we couldn't pass up this opportunity to read whole those books that we often use piecemeal. Once the contracts were signed, we arranged relief time from our supervisors to spend on this project, including a sabbatical that Komara obtained from his institution.

For another reason, as research librarians in the field of blues, we welcomed this project to explore various editions of some titles and to exercise our book citation skills. Third, frankly speaking, as librarians working in the “publish or perish” environment of academia, we needed the publication opportunity. Coincidentally, many of the books we selected had been written by college and university professors under similar pressures to publish.

A final reason was that our project was very compelling. Which one hundred books should every blues fan own or at least seek to own? We thought of it as the desert island scenario—which five records would you have if you were living in isolation?—but with many more books allowed than records.

Our Tasks and Criteria for Selection

We began our work by compiling a list of candidates for our “Blues 100.” We took suggestions from the following:

1. Paul Garon's “Historiography” entry in the *Encyclopedia of the Blues* (New York: Routledge, 2006)
2. The Blues Foundation Hall of Fame awardees for Classics in Blues Literature
3. The Blues Foundation Hall of Fame unawarded nominees
4. The book collection at the Blues Archive, University of Mississippi
5. Robert Ford, *A Blues Bibliography*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2006)

We knew that book publishing about the blues has not been as extensive as magazine publishing. Komara remembers that in 1993, the Blues Archive had five or six shelves (or about eighteen linear feet) of books, compared with about seventy-five to eighty shelves of periodicals and newsletters. The book collection doubled in size over the next ten years, but then again, many of the new publications were reprints in response to reader demand during the 1990s blues boom. We had thought about including fiction and plays, but we decided to stick to nonfiction. Eventually, we compiled a list of some three hundred titles to consider.

Our criteria for inclusion in the Blues 100 were:

Substance. Does the author bring new information or a fresh perspective to his or her subject?

Style. Is the content written well? Poetic flair is a plus. Among the academic books, we settled for a readable style.

Discipline. Does the book serve as a fine example of a research approach to the blues, whether it is a work of history, anthropology, journalism, instruction, or transcription (lyrical or musical)?

Influence. Has the work been cited by other books, or does it serve as a building block for later books?

Coverage. Is it a book of quality about a particular historical era or about a geographic area?

Availability. Is it in print or easily available through used book services?

Reasons for noninclusion, on the other hand, comprised:

Research and/or findings were not original to the author.

The writing was unreadable.

The work set a bad example for a discipline (especially true respecting some histories and biographies).

The book has largely been ignored by other writers for understandable reasons.

The work is unfocused with respect to the era or area (a problem from which several folklore titles suffered).

The book is unavailable, out of print, or altogether too scarce.

Some boundaries to the scope of this project were inherent to the topic. For example, there are few books in the Blues 100 published before 1959. Until that year, blues was almost completely within an oral culture. What little that appeared in print through 1958 lived in jazz collector magazines about the “classic” women blues singers on records before 1932. Samuel Charters’s *The Country Blues* (1959; no. 63) and Paul Oliver’s *Blues Fell This Morning* (1960; no. 64) changed all that. In tandem with the nascent folk music revival, those two titles introduced the topic of blues to white literary culture. That these two authors are still alive at the time of this writing (2013) indicates how young blues literature still is.

Also, all of the books presented here are in English. That does not mean that there is no international research on the blues. But for the most part, foreign-language publications have been periodicals: *Jefferson* in Sweden, *Soul Bag* in France, and *Block* in the Netherlands are some of the oldest titles. Moreover, since African American blues are in English, international writers have had to learn English to understand them. So when they have written books about the blues, they’ve tended to write them in English. Guido van Rijn (nos. 42 and 69), Alex van der Tuuk (no. 20), and Gerhard Kubik (no. 7) are recent authors from outside the United States and the United Kingdom who have

written in English.

Other scope limits were placed by us. For the most part, the books treat African American blues and its surrounding cultures. That means we made the conscious choice to set aside works on white British and American blues, including blues-rock, and other musicians around the rest of the world who play blues. We had considered including songbooks, instrumental methods, and notated music transcription books, but we decided midway through the project to exclude them from the Blues 100. We also decided to leave out reference works such as *The Penguin Guide to the Blues* and Routledge's *Encyclopedia of the Blues*. Among discographies, only *Blues and Gospel Records 1890–1943* (no. 41) by Robert M. W. Dixon, John Godrich, and Howard Rye (no. 41) falls within the Blues 100. We had considered including some African American fiction and plays, especially Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* and August Wilson's drama *Seven Guitars*, but at the last minute we decided to not include these works.

Even though we decided not to include all of these books in the Blues 100, nonetheless they have served as books that informed the writing of the Blues 100. Blues fans should be aware that some libraries do have them available for their reference use. To acknowledge and promote these useful and important works, we include a special chapter, "The Books behind the Blues 100."

One admission: we have included some books for which we, as blues archivists, had assisted the authors in researching and a few that we had written ourselves. Familiarity and a little bias were factors in some of our choices. Then again, other works by us or in which we had some role also were subject to the same strictures that eliminated works from inclusion. For those books selected in which one of us had some involvement, the other partner wrote the entries.

After applying these criteria, we had a list of seventy-five books. In order to have a hundred, we relented and relaxed on the criteria of style and availability. That means that some of the books included could prove difficult reading for blues fans. Some of the most important books in the Blues 100 were written by academics for other academics. As such, these works adopt academic, sometimes arcane, terminology (or jargon, depending on how one responds to these things). Our entries here serve as helpful primers to these books.

In their editions of the magisterial discography *Blues and Gospel Records 1890–1943* (no. 41) Dixon, Godrich, and Rye had posed the question: "What is a 'blues' or a 'gospel' record?" The answer was "the whole listing [the discography] itself is a definition of what we mean by 'blues and gospel'—African American secular and sacred musical styles, exclusive of jazz." Likewise, we posed the question "What is a 'blues' book?" Because our list of one hundred books is selective, we do not claim that it is a definition of what is meant as "blues." Furthermore, since the authors of several of the chosen books incorporate African American secular and sacred musical styles *and* jazz with their definitions of "blues," we recognize that a bibliographic sense of blues may exceed a discographic one. However, blues and jazz both make use of the twelve-measure blues form. A book about the blues, therefore, should present, examine, teach, or anticipate the "what," "how," "where," and "why" that the standard blues form is sung and listened to.

Entry Features

Each entry contains four elements. The first is a short "headline" that states briefly the purpose and

appeal of the book. The second is a bibliographic citation for each book. It includes prices for those titles still in print, with the understanding that such pricing is provisional. (To that end, [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), the bibliographic utility WorldCat, and Robert Ford's *Blues Bibliography* have been invaluable sources of citation data.) Here we add a note about author names: we give the name currently used on an author's current book printing so that readers can quickly identify listings for books in bookstore websites, and library catalogs. Therefore, Amiri Baraka for Leroi Jones (for *Blues People*, no. 68) and Julio Finn for Jerome Arnold (for *The Bluesman*, no. 94) are used, but Jon Michael Spencer is retained (for *Blues and Evil*, no. 98), even though he goes today by Yahya Jongintaba. The third is the body of the entry, in which we summarize the contents, compare the findings to the opinions of other authors, and give some collector's points if a book has been published in multiple editions. Finally, at the suggestion of our editor, we recommend a blues recording illustrating or pertaining to the book; these songs should be available on CD, licensed downloads, or streaming media via Amazon, Rhapsody, Pandora, or Emusic, among other digital music vendors.

The Order of the Book Entries

Upon making the choices, we read the books. We began first with Lawrence Cohn's *Nothing but the Blues* (no. 1) and Paul Oliver's *The Story of the Blues* (no. 2). From them as beginning bases, each of us picked, read, and drafted entries on the books where our reading and interests took us. Later, when the first draft was 80 percent complete, we made some changes to the Blues 100 list to improve the balance of coverage among the books. When the first drafts of the entries were completed, we then determined the order of their presentation in this book.

We could have run the entries in the order in which the books had been published, or in alphabetical order by author's last name, or by title. But we decided to proceed in the order of historical coverage, starting first with the overviews, then with the books about the 1890s and 1900s, then those about the 1910s, and so forth. This order reveals a number of things. One is that a kind of literate history of the blues begins to emerge, with much concentration on the pre-1942 (prewar) era. The 1930s and the 1940s were so well represented that, at the 80 percent completion mark, for the sake of balance, we sought for inclusion additional books about the blues after 1950. We hope that the resulting book may be read from beginning to end as a history of the blues as depicted through the best books about the blues.

A second element noticeable in our ordering is the emergence of African American commentary amid that of white critics. For many years up to the beginning of the 1980s, the disciplines of folklore and anthropology had prevailed as those academic fields where the blues was researched and studied. Moreover, nearly all folklorists and anthropologists who have written on the blues have been white. Some of them have cited as their forebears Charles Peabody, Howard Odum, John Lomax, and Alan Lomax. Folkloric and anthropological findings have underscored the abiding and present characteristics of the blues, its musicians, and its audience culture. What had changed or fallen in disuse was of lesser concern—yet they were of most interest to blues historians, just about all of whom are also white.

However, many historians of the blues since the 1960s were and still are independent researchers and record collectors with few ties to colleges and universities. As a result, the folklorists and

anthropologists on the one hand and the historians and collectors on the other, at the very least, vie each other with skepticism and distrust. Only fireworks can produce more sparks than a war of words between these two camps.

Yet African American scholarship in the blues has emerged nearly unnoticed among these white writers, except for scholar/bookseller Paul Garon in his “Historiography” entry for the Routledge *Encyclopedia of the Blues*. Starting with Amiri Baraka and his seminal text *Blues People* (1963; no. 68), the African Americans publishing research and commentary on the blues have been few, but the collective message of the proper appreciation of blues on their scholarly terms stands in marked contrast to the folklore and history factions: if assimilation is to take place, it is going to have to be white adapting to black, not the other way around as has happened for the past four centuries. Folklorists think of Robert Johnson’s crossroads as a sense of place and historians regard it as an intersection, then African Americans (especially Houston Baker, no. 93, Julio Finn, no. 94, and Joe Michael Spencer, no. 98) see it as a place beyond conventional values to turn and return to often for reaffirmation of their values of pride, power, and magic, which are often in danger of becoming obscured by Western-style civilization.

Third and final, the entry order points to gaps in book coverage of blues history. Much more about the blues can and should be written. What cries out most for coverage is the blues since 1980, especially Southern soul blues. Also, most white musicians in the blues have imitated African American bluesmen too well to become masters themselves, but the few who have found their own artistic ways deserve critical recognition through writing.

Some Final Remarks

Because of the limited number of books—one hundred—readers can regard and use *100 Books Every Blues Fan Should Own* as a prescribed canon of blues research, including blues history. Rather than avoid the appearance of canonicity—something viewed with disfavor by liberals and conservatives alike, if for different reasons—this 100 Books volume embraces such a role. The editor’s responsibility in assigning canonicity to blues books is not so much to set standards—although many of the titles will be appraised for the examples they set—but rather to point out contrasting perspectives on the blues, setting up a virtual conversation among the books.

There were some days while writing the entries when our intent was to make *100 Books That Every Blues Fan Should Own* the 101st that every blues fan should own. But sincerely, we wanted to call attention to significant books about the blues. Many of the authors are still alive and may come to regard such attention as formal recognition of their efforts. Some living authors whose works are not included may well complain. All we can say is that we will be glad to introduce them to those who might feel miffed at having been included in the Blues 100.

We suspect there may be a few.

THE BLUES 100

1. The Grand Debate of the Blues

Nothing but the Blues: The Music and the Musicians. Edited by Lawrence Cohn. New York: Abbeville Press, 1993. 432 pp. ISBN 1-55859-271-7 (hardcover), ISBN 0-789-20607-2 (paperback)

Lawrence Cohn's *Nothing but the Blues* may be the most visually attractive book in the Blues 100. It is printed indelibly on heavy paper stock, bound in signatures (this is as true for the paperback version as for the hardbound), and bursting with photographs and record label reproductions supplied by leading collectors and historians. This is not to be mistaken with the anthology of the same title that was edited by Mike Leadbitter and published in 1971 (see "The Books Behind the Blues 100" chapter). The Cohn version is bigger, splashier, and—figuratively as well as literally—weightier. It is an excellent first book for the fan new to the blues to buy.

The main content is given in the eleven essays by ten expert writers. Samuel Charters writes on the African antecedents and early American roots of the blues. David Evans treats rural pre-World War I blues. Richard "Dick" Spottswood surveys women in the blues, focusing on the pre-1942 singers in the cities and in the counties. Mark Humphrey contributes two pieces, one on the relation of blues to black sacred music, the other on blues in the cities from the 1900s to 1970. Bruce Bastin presents Piedmont blues in the Carolinas. The late country music historian Charles Wolfe provides a detailed history of cross-relations between blues and early country music. John Cowley looks at the field recording trips undertaken by commercial labels and folklorists through 1960. Barry Pearson gives a short history of rhythm and blues through the mid-1950s. Jim O'Neal assesses the blues revival of the 1960s, and in the concluding essay, Mary Katherine Aldin sketches the blues history up to the early 1990s. An extra contributor is Frank Driggs, who provides many of the historical photographs of blues musicians and African American culture to illustrate the essays. Thanks to Driggs, *Nothing but the Blues* is the blue counterpart of his great compendium of jazz images, *Black Beauty, White Heat* (New York: William Morrow, 1982; reprint, New York: Da Capo, 1996).

The individual pieces serve as good introductions to other writings by the authors. The Blues 100 contains selected books by Charters (nos. 29, 63, and 82), Evans (no. 14), Bastin (nos. 27 and 28), Pearson (no. 92), and O'Neal (no. 91). The other writers deserve additional comments here. Spottswood compiled and published the authoritative discography *Ethnic Music on Record* (Urban and Schwarzenberg/University of Illinois Press, 1990; 7 volumes), and he continues to host a radio show of pre-World War II music. Charles Wolfe's books on classic country music are too important even for a blues lover to ignore, such as his history of the Grand Ole Opry, *A Good-Natured Riot* (Nashville: University of Tennessee Press/Country Music Foundation, 1999). In addition to blues, John Cowley has undertaken research in Caribbean music, including calypso. Through December 2011, Aldin hosted the radio show "Alive and Picking," and since then she has maintained her music research on her website, <http://aliveandpicking.com>, which among other offerings provides access to her selective index of blues magazines. Mark Humphrey has been a freelance writer since 1979, and for many enterprises he has often been a most thoughtful contributor; a book collecting his best pieces would be welcome.

To be sure, the essays may not combine to form a complete history of the blues. In his preface

Cohn demurs from claiming completeness, stating he is presenting an expert overview of the major aspects of the blues. When several aspects are presented individually and fully in an anthology, discrepancies are bound to occur, and indeed they do in *Nothing but the Blues*. For example, Charters supposes that the blues came from rural Mississippi. Evans thinks instead that it came from the rural southeastern United States. In his essay “Bright Lights, Big City: Urban Blues,” Humphrey asks that the early blues in the cities be given every due consideration, since they appeared at the same time as the kinds of rural blues that Charters and Evans discuss. It would be too easy to criticize Cohn for not editing these and other differences toward achieving a consistent historical narrative like Paul Oliver’s *Story of the Blues* (no. 2). On the other hand, though, these same differences may be viewed positively as questions for debate. Over the past twenty years, these questions have still not been answered, and so *Nothing but the Blues* remains as fresh now for comparison and discussion as it was upon its publication.

The hardcover and the paperback editions are the same in size and content. As of this writing, the paperback edition is still available through Abbeville Books and Amazon. Hardcover editions may be obtainable from online used-book dealers at prices equal to or slightly higher than new paperback copies. However, many libraries purchased the book in the early 1990s, and so some hardcovers on the used-book market may be worn discards, often lacking the dust jacket. —EK

2. A History of the Blues from the Mouths of Many

The Story of the Blues. By Paul Oliver. London: Penguin, 1969. London: Barrie and Rockliff/Cresset Press, 1969. Philadelphia: Chilton Book Company, 1969. Reprint, London: Book Club Associates, 1972; London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1972, 1978; Hammonds Worth: Penguin, 1972, 1978; Radnor, PA: Chilton Book Company, 1975. Spanish translation, Madrid: Nostromo Editoriales, 1976. Japanese translation, Tokyo: Shobunsha, 1978. German translation by Walter Hartmann published as *Die Story des Blues*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1978. Second edition, London: Northeastern University Press, 1997. ISBN 1-55553-355-8 (hardcover), \$50.00, ISBN 1-55553-354-X (paperback), \$22.95

First published in 1969, *The Story of the Blues* was the first in-depth history of blues from its origins to the first decades after World War II. Indeed, all subsequent blues histories owe a huge debt of gratitude to Paul Oliver’s seminal work. While works such as Lawrence Cohn’s edited *Nothing but the Blues* (no. 1) might be easier reads for an introduction to the blues, *The Story of the Blues* still remains the most important solo-authored history of the blues. Anyone interested in a general history of the blues through the first half of the twentieth century should read this book.

As Oliver notes in the introduction, blues has had a profound impact on the development of modern popular music, particularly on rock and roll. As such, people often talk about blues as an influence on other types of music. Oliver determines to examine blues for its own sake and finds it “necessary to place blues in its cultural context” (vii). Oliver seems driven by the need to get to the old-time blues before their memories have faded: “Today it’s no longer possible to hear the history of the blues from the mouths of many of those who shaped it” (2). [A 1960 expedition across the southern United States with his wife and Arhoolie Records founder Chris Strachwitz formed the basis for many of the interviews for this book but receives fuller treatment in *Conversation with the Blues* (1965).]

The Story of the Blues comes out of an exhibition Oliver curated for the United States Information Service at the American Embassy in London in 1964. The more than five hundred photographs used in the exhibition form the basis for the book. The book draws on government data, the emerging body of blues scholarship of others, interviews with blues musicians, and Oliver's already extensive publication record: *Bessie Smith* (1959), *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (1960), *Conversation with the Blues* (1965), and *Screening the Blues: Aspects of the Blues Tradition* (1968).

Oliver begins his blues narrative with an examination of the slave trade and its legacy, looking at African antecedents to the blues as well as how the institution of slavery and its aftermath influenced the development of the blues through field hollers, work songs, and the blending of diverse musical cultures. In chapter 3, Oliver examines the development of the blues techniques in the Mississippi Delta, and, in chapter 4, he looks at guitar and piano music developments in Alabama, Georgia, and Texas. The next two chapters address jug and string bands, as well as the rise of the "classic blues" female singers through vaudeville, tent shows, and minstrel shows. Oliver next examines the migration of southern piano blues styles northward into Chicago and Detroit and then looks at boogie-woogie developments in the midwestern cities. "Hard Time Everywhere" studies the record industry, paying most attention to the post-Depression era. Oliver once again takes us back to Chicago and the major developments of blues there in the 1930s and 1940s. We travel back south in the next chapter to look at rural blues music in Mississippi up to World War II. The Piedmont styles of blues, particularly in Tennessee and the Carolinas, are examined in the following chapter. Oliver then turns to the barrelhouse piano sounds of Kansas City and the migration of blues to California. In "King Biscuit Time," Oliver explains the role of radio in the dissemination and influence of blues in the post-World War II era. The final chapter, "Blues and Trouble," traces the rise of rhythm and blues and other early post-World War II blues sounds and examines the emerging international audience for blues sounds.

If any sections of this blues history seem lacking, gaps get filled in when *The Story of the Blues* is seen as one part of a much larger work, that of Oliver's entire output. African influences are examined in much more depth in *Savannah Syncopators* (no. 6), the meaning behind blues lyrics in *Blues Fell This Morning* (no. 64), or sacred/secular issues surrounding blues and gospel music in *Songsters and Saints* (no. 19).

Despite his primary education and profession as an architecture historian, Oliver does write quite well about music and has established himself as one of the world's top experts on blues. While most of Oliver's scholarship is extremely good, the descriptions of the musical aspects of the blues occasionally miss the mark. When describing the piano, for instance, Oliver writes that it is "tuned to a European diatonic scale and with a purity which is alien to blues" (94). While he was attempting to show that the piano's fixed pitches don't allow for microtones and bending of notes, Oliver should have substituted "chromatic scale" for diatonic, as this is technically accurate. In describing washboard playing, he writes, "The player often wore metal thimbles on his fingers to obtain a crisp rattling sound, more satisfying to the blues ear than the drums" (52, first edition). What exactly is the blues ear? While he drops the subjective comparison in the second edition, he still makes reference to a seemingly unified blues ear (57). He also uses language that sounds poetic but isn't musically clear: "tweed-textured holler" (44) or "rough complaining voice" (49).

The "thrust" of the 1997 edition is "as it was originally conceived," though it does have a few

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