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Vincent L Stephens

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A Curriculum Guide to Teaching and Discussing
*Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1963)
by LeRoi Jones

Vincent Stephens, Ph.D.
Bucknell University
Director of Multicultural Student Services
Funded by: Center for the Study of Race, Ethnicity and Gender (CSREG)
Blues People: Negro Music in White America
LeRoi Jones

Abstract:
Blues People depicts the blues as a uniquely American genre born from the ability of enslaved West Africans to adapt elements of their musical and spiritual heritage to their new linguistic, religious, cultural and economic existence in America. As a subordinate cultural class African-Americans, formerly Africans and newly American, experienced profound dislocations and traumas they processed in the cultural realm. Notably they translated their cultural experiences into a musical form that spurred multiple musical subgenres including classic blues, jazz, hard bop, R&B and rock ‘n’ roll.

Jones's critical focus is how the social experiences of African-Americans are imprinted in the content and symbolism of the blues. Some of the touchstones mapped in the music include African-Americans' mastery of the English language and American dialects; the fusing of West African religious elements with Christian ritual practices; developing internal societies and classes; responding to post-bellum social and economic opportunities (and challenges); migrating to the Northern and Western U.S; creating vital urban communities and traditions; and developing identities as professional entertainers and artists.

As a text published in 1963 Jones's analysis reflects political attitudes of the era. Jones rarely discusses the 1950s and 1960s civil rights movements directly. But he continually critiques the way African-Americans have experienced American cultural acceptance as a conditional exercise dependent on a form of assimilation that requires them to forego the uniqueness of their culture. Jones frames the white majority and the black middle class’s artistic dismissals and commercial rejections of the blues, and its richest descendants, as a quintessential marker of how undervalued blues are in the cultural imagination. He juxtaposes this rejection with his contention that the blues are the most vital strain of American popular music, an inescapable musical and cultural force that surfaces in the face of various attempts to eliminate or downplay its importance. Ultimately he questions how and why America resists the creativity and ingenuity of what he defines as “authentic” black culture when such practices are so central to American expression and the premise of Americanness.
Introduction

(Author’s note: Jones uses the term “Negro” to describe Blacks or African-Americans. I employ the term “Black” based on its usage in the contemporary lexicon)

Summary: Jones frames the book as a theoretical endeavor (ix) with a musical, sociological and anthropological emphasis. He sets the stage to focus on questions regarding how the “American Negro” emerged especially since there is no reason to believe Africans thought they would remain in the U.S. (xi-xii). In his estimation if music reveals an essence about black existence it also reveals something about the nature of the country (ix-xi). Jones will look at stages of music as he see themes as the most graphic metric for changes in black reactions to U.S. developments.

Chapter 1: The Negro as Non-American: Some Backgrounds

Summary: Jones recalls the profound strangeness of America and colonial culture for slaves (1-3, 8). He describes how the perceived foreignness of African culture served as the “chief liability in the new world” for Africans (8). Notably Occidental notions of civilized vs. primitive culture were engines for treating slaves as subhuman and dismissing their culture (6-7). Jones sees this as a root for contemporary blacks denying their African ties (8). Despite such stigmas Jones notes that American slaves were still part of a cultural community even if they were not citizens. Ultimately, “The African cultures, the retention of some parts of these cultures in America, and the weight of the stepculture produced the American Negro. A new race” (7-8). Based on this observation, “the development and transmutation of African music to American Negro music (a new music) represents to me this whole process in microcosm” (8).

CRITICAL THEMES:

- What are contemporary premises of “civilization”?
- In what ways does “difference” continue to translate as inferior?
- What is the meaning and relevance of Jones’s argument that Negroes/American blacks are “always ex-slaves”? (4)
- How sturdy is Jones’s notion argument that music is a valid microcosm of cultural accommodation and acculturation?

Chapter 2: The Negro as Property

Summary: The author rejects analogies of enslaved Africans to immigrants since slaves lacked choice and struggled with the willful acculturation and accessible class mobility associated with immigrants (11-13). Jones catalogs key differences between American slavery and Caribbean slavery, emphasizing the intimate contact between slaves and masters (13-15). He also notes the various Africanisms suppressed or lost during slavery. But Jones notes the endurance of aspects of religious practices, dance and musical expression. He asserts that the important issue to consider is how blues, jazz and Negro Christianity potentially derive from African culture (16).

CRITICAL THEMES:

- Immigrant status vs. slave identity in the U.S.
- Questions regarding why it may have been more difficult for Africans in the Americas to become acculturated and “Westernized.”
- Questions regarding how Africanisms survived and have informed American culture.
• Unique elements of U.S. slave experience compared to other parts of the Americas.

Chapter 3: African Slaves/American Slaves: Their Music

Summary: Jones defines the blues as a native American music, derived from black culture, of indefinite age (17-18). He traces the roots of blues to the morphing of West African music into work songs which informed the shape and content of the blues (18). Recalls examples of how African music survived in chants and litanies but increasingly songs integrated American reference sin lyrics and American accents and dialect (18-20). Central to his argument in Chapter 3 is the increased scarcity of African ritual and cultural references (18-19).

Jones then outlines the blues scale and general characteristic of early Afro-American music including highly sophisticated rhythmic approaches (polyrhythmic/contrapuntal), melodic diversity rooted in alterations of pitch, call and response singing techniques and improvisation (25-27). He employs music to contrast what he views as African vs. Western concepts of art notably music as art music compared to African music as functional (30-31). In many ways this argument previews a surfeit of Jones’s cultural assertions about essences in cultural expression based in geographic and cultural differences between African and Western culture (30-31).

CRITICAL THEMES:
• Blues as distinctly American music.
• Unique characteristics of Afro-American music.
• Survival and adaptation of African elements in new context.
• Questions regarding culturally discernible musical values.
• Questions regarding conventional academic wisdom, particularly in the study of music.

Chapter 4: Afro-Christian Music & Religion

Summary: Jones asserts that enslaved Africans adopted Christianity prior to large scale efforts by missionaries and evangelists (33). Though aspects of African religious ritual remained their role diminished over time (36). The Christianized slave emerges as a new type of slave with panoply of social implications including a perception of being more controllable and a more metaphysical sense of freedom (37-40). Jones describes characteristics of Afro-Christian music, traces the ways Christianity itself became Africanized and outlines its influence in secular music (41-47). He concludes by discussing the prominent social role of early Black Christian churches including the development of social hierarchies and distinctions between spiritual and “devil” music—a derivative of Emancipation era possibilities for social lives outside of church life (49).

CRITICAL THEMES:
• Various ways Black music grows from social adaptations of Christianity.
• The complex interplay of elements fueling Christian conversion narratives.
• How and why religion became the center of cultural and social life for slaves.
• The uniquely porous nature of Afro-Christian music in multiple genres of music.
• The circumstances fostering the emergence of Post-Emancipation black secular culture develops.
Chapter 5: Slave and Post-Slave

Summary: Jones rejects reductionist perceptions of the blues as a sociological phenomenon and asserts that it is a form of verse (50). He traces the importance of Emancipation on shaping the form and content of blues (50-51). Central to his argument is the new range of attitudes among blacks toward the value of their culture. Notably he argues that the Civil War and Emancipation created new circumstances including an undefined role for blacks who were more isolated from the mainstream and had to relearn “the most ‘banal of western mores’” (55-57). He also defines what he terms as a divide between ordinary blacks and a new metasociety of blacks consciously aiming to emulate white society via social hierarchies (57-59). Contemptuous attitudes toward blues among the black upper-class are a key marker of an emerging tension between those who want to retain their culture and adapt, and the association of assimilation with progress (59).

CRITICAL THEMES:
- The unique impact of Emancipation on the social role of blacks.
- What are the historical roots of social hierarchies and how much of these roots are attributable to culture?
- What forces defined the philosophy and behaviors of the black meta-societies Jones describes?
- How has the historic tension between cultural adaptation and cultural assimilation influenced contemporary social movements among African-Americans?

Chapter 6: Primitive Blues and Primitive Jazz

Summary: Jones distinguishes blues songs from work songs in terms of function and form (60, 68). One of the key elements he cites as a source of difference are the ways new economic and social circumstances foster mobility and self-determination among blacks (61-63). A greater sense of leisure, individuality, identity and pleasure increasingly inform blues lyrics (64, 66-67). Jones draws on slave songs, early Afro-American slave songs and classical blues to illustrate how musical developments parallel social changes among blacks (65). Jones evaluates the New Orleans-based” origin story of jazz and outlines the ways blues informed the development of jazz. He is adamant that blues was the antecedent of jazz and remained concomitant to jazz rather than framing jazz as a successor to blues (71-79). Drawing from his discussion of New Orleans jazz, and the interplay between Creoles and black culture in the city, he discusses the paradoxes of adaptation and assimilation for blacks (80).

CRITICAL THEMES:
- New economic and social shifts foster the birth and reshaping of blues.
- Blues possess distinct differences in structure, rhythm, lyric and instrumentation from work songs reflecting changing social contexts.
- Blues provide a foundation for jazz (via interplay of blues elements with European instrumentation and technique).
- Blues and jazz forms embody awkward social positioning: blacks are no longer socially isolated but not socially accepted.
Chapter 7: Classic Blues

Summary: The Classic Blues genre, represented by figures like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, emerged in the 1920s and rendered the blues in a more formal professional vein (81-82). Its more universal lyrical themes (i.e. romantic relationships), more layered accompaniment and entertainment function distinguished it from earlier blues forms (94). Jones traces the roots of classic blues performers to the minstrel and Black theater circuits. He notes that despite the racist roots of minstrelsy the genre’s popularity internationalized classic blues and early jazz (83-86). The symbolic importance of the genre is its parallel rise with the rise of jazz. As jazz becomes more cosmopolitan and blues becomes more universal Jones observes a new balance between the emerging Black meta-society and the American mainstream. For the author the meta-society and integration concepts must be evoked in any discussion of Black life in America (87).

CRITICAL THEMES:
- Classic blues as a bridge between blues from and mainstream, professional entertainment worlds.
- Classic blues symbolizes emergence of a Black “meta-society” and integration concepts.
- Entertainment becomes a valid profession for Black performers.
- Classic blues represents maturation and formalization of the blues form.
- Blues becomes gendered stylistically.

Chapter 8: The City

Summary: Chapter Eight traces many important social transitions of the 1910s-1930. Jones places the blues in the center of major historical developments for Blacks including massive Black migration to the North and new urban subcultures, the emergence of Blacks as a consumer market (i.e. “race records”), social divisions between Northern and Southern blacks, WWI and the Depression. Jones believes migration inspires a new psychological realignment for blacks even though they tended to receive the least favorable work conditions in the North (95-97). The move nurtures a sense of a group identity symbolized by a vibrant set of urban rituals such as rent parties. A culture clash also emerges as Northern blacks view Southerners as less refined (97, 106).

They share a status as a target for record companies to market so-called “race records.” More black musicians were being recorded during The Jazz Age which further nationalized blues and jazz as American forms. This fostered new musical idols and the form changed to conform to the timing confines of records (100-04). Musically Jones believes Northern blacks had less of a blues influence in their music than Southerners and migration altered the character of Northern music gradually (109-10). A key figure to emerge in urban circles was the boogie-woogie pianist a blues-oriented improviser that often played at after-hours venues (114-16). This style and urban blues in general were waiting in the wings as successors to the classic blues style which declined after the Depression (117-19). An overarching aspect of Jones’s argument is the increasing sense of self-determination Blacks were developing thanks to the mobility migration fostered and the worldliness blacks developed Post-WWII (112-14). The sense of a shared plight emerged from
parallel worlds where blacks were developing their own subcultural experiences; including organizing resistance to racism (i.e. 1919 Race Riots) while their artist expressions grew increasingly accessible to the mainstream. For Jones this development established a pattern, notably a cultural lag between blacks and white in which black expression, divorced from black experience and rituals, was absorbed in the mainstream and thus new Black culture travels slower to white culture and is usually diluted “an echo of some earlier style” (121).

CRITICAL THEMES:

- City environments offer new economic opportunities and social awareness for blacks (during the Great Migration period).
- WWI informs shape of “Modern” American Negro—opens up consciousness and creates new level of group awareness.
- Blacks emerge as a consumer group (i.e. Race Records).
- Recording helps document and popularize blues and jazz and alters form, lyrical themes, and the emergence of stars/idols.
- New urban/city blues genre, notably the transplanted boogie-woogie, emerges (parallels new northern cultural spaces).
- Northern and southern black archetypes and social divisions intensify.
- Depression curtails classic blues; alters Negro political affiliations.
- Urban blues and boogie-woogie signify ongoing ability of blues music to emerge from black culture.

Chapter 9: Enter the Middle Class

Summary: Jones primarily critiques the rising black middle class of the 1920s and 1930s by lamenting their emphasis on a kind of cultural assimilation that means downplaying black cultural values in favor of mainstream values and stratifying wealthier blacks from poorer blacks (123-27). He views this paradigm as pattern of compromise present in even the most celebrated works of the Black creative class including the Harlem Renaissance and literature of the “New Negro” era (132-35). For Jones music remains the most vital and enduring form of black expression that can flourish without undue compromise. He briefly discusses the fusion of Black and European traditions at the root of jazz. Though he distinguishes it from the blues, noting its different level of cultural and emotional mobility he cites it as a genuine cross-cultural fusion bridging races as well as classes (i.e. rent party and middle class culture) (140-41).

CRITICAL THEMES:

- Questions how rise of the black middle class intensified divisions.
- Addresses cultural adaptation vs. assimilation as a class-based issue.
- Music as most enduring African-American contribution to formal American culture.
- Re-evaluate the roots and rhetoric of the New Negro and the Harlem Renaissance.
- Understanding jazz as the ultimate outgrowth of cultural fragmentation through its mix of blues and Creolized blacks.

Chapter 10: Swing—From Verb to Noun
Summary: In this chapter Jones extends his discussion of the increasing commercial profile of blues and jazz in the '20s and '30s by describing formal changes (i.e. more piano-based and formal in the North [145-47]) and delving deeper into his perception of how race influences the mobility and performance of these genres. Jones believes the blues is so closely tied to Black social experience that whites struggle to perform it authentically and satisfactorily. Comparatively he views jazz as a more imitable form for whites because of its fundamentally hybridized nature (149). But he is careful to distinguish the absorption of formal musical elements from the understanding of black culture.

He laments the rise of “white” jazz bands like the Original Dixieland jazz Band and the Paul Whiteman Orchestra as popularizers of jazz because they lack a strong blues connection (143). However he praises other white jazz bands and musicians for possessing a stronger blues aspect and more organic ties to black culture such as Bix Beiderbecke (151). Still he defines the primary innovators in jazz as black male musicians rooted in the blues. He cites trumpeter Louis Armstrong as a brass innovator and pioneering soloist who shifted the jazz paradigm from collective improvisation to individual expression (147, 154-56) and praises key black bands of the 1925-35 era, including the Duke Ellington Orchestra, as the main evolvers of jazz (160-63). In doing so he dismisses the “swing” era as a diluted form of big band jazz lacking in blues influence and racially exclusionary. He laments the transition of jazz into a commercial entertainment form (164-65).

CRITICAL THEMES:

- Jazz's artistic and commercial evolution occurs via Northern dance bands and technologies (i.e. recordings) that increase transmission and access to jazz nationally.
- Jazz emerges as art and form that can be learned and imitated (unlike authentic blues).
- Is jazz's accessibility more about form that cultural connection? Are these the proper terms for discussing music?
- How deeply did White musicians’ entrance into jazz as rebellion/resistance to mainstream American values cement their affiliations with black people and culture? Is this measurable?
- 1920s and 1930s dance bands evolve into jazz bands that recontextualize the blues.
- New class of pioneers emerges: Louis Armstrong-pioneers solo and brass jazz; Lester Young-makes jazz a saxophone or reed music; Duke Ellington—perfects jazz band via balance of jazz and blues elements.
- Jazz bands peak in 1930s and change shape via white commercial swing bands with limited connection to blues or blacks.

Chapter 11: The Blues Continuum

Summary: Building on his argument in Chapter 9 about the rise of boogie-woogie, Jones focuses on the development of various blues forms among black subcultures. He focuses attention on the “shouting blues” style of the Kansas City based vocalists Jimmy Rushing and Big Joe Turner who were popular with black audiences and precursors to what became Rhythm & Blues (R&B) (166-68). Jones views the popularity of shouting blues and other forms of proto-R&B as additional targets for the black middle class and as another form of black expression that was either foreign to white audiences or misunderstood (169). He notes how radio black-oriented
radio was providing audiences with a continuum of blues forms, including variations of shouting blues singers and country blues (170, 173), and notes how this culminated in R&B as a modern commercial blues style. Jones reviews the formal characteristics of R&B which he views as eccentric (i.e. frenzied, vulgar and shrill elements [171]) and more limited than earlier forms (173). Jones concludes the chapter by connecting musical consumption with social classes. Proto-R&B and R&B resonated with poor and working class blacks and was thus a kind of isolated phenomenon. Big band jazz music brought blues aspects to more elite blacks and whites. But for Jones “swing” continued to dominate and ultimately diluted jazz’s innovations into commercial dance music (173-74).

CRITICAL THEMES:
- Proto R&B and R&B grows out of black subcultures outside of the mainstream.
- R&B develops a unique set of characteristics and performing styles and industrial centers.
- R&B exists on a blues continuum of native black music transmitted via radio.
- R&B is a racially and socially polarizing or puzzling music for blacks and whites
- R&B signifies a greater separation of blues from mainstream music.
- Popular music was growing toward a more polarized cultural state in the late ‘30s-early ‘40s and blues was getting lost in the shuffle.

Chapter 12: The Modern Scene

Summary: Jones concludes Blues People in epic fashion by reviewing the musical roots, formal innovations and social significance of bebop which developed in the early 1940s. He juxtaposes bebop with other modern artistic movements in visual art and literature squarely aimed at questioning and resisting mainstream conformity (231-33). He describes how the post WWII era was a benchmark for black consciousness as the gap between realizing their potential mainstream acceptance and the realities of social discrimination served as a source of frustration for blacks and mobilized them socially and culturally.

Jones views bebop as a willfully anti-assimilationist genre influenced musically by earlier jazz musicians in many ways but more confrontational in attitude and stance and thus polarizing. Musically it had a more limited influence of Western music on its sound including a greater emphasis on polyrhythmics, the restatement of the basic blues impulse, a different role for drummers and pianists, the increased role of string bass, drone-like qualities and daring harmonic and chordal improvisational style (193-197).

The black middle class and the jazz’s critical establishment dismissed bebop as weird (188-89, 199, 234); Dixieland Jazz was revived in the ‘40s; genres increasingly detached from the blues emerged including “progressive jazz” and “cool jazz” (202-10) and third stream jazz (229). As anti-bebop forces mobilized the genre spawned variants notably hard bop and avant-garde jazz. In the 1950s events like the Korean War and legal desegregation stimulated new concerns about the execution of democracy (215). These perspectives ostensibly spawned a desire to push further against the cultural mainstream. Hard bop, pioneered by pianist Horace Silver, had more overt blues and gospel elements though Jones notes that it grew repetitive over time and was never fully realized. He views hard bop as an influence on what became “soul music”—black pop
with a similar confluence of Afro-American elements. He praises avant-garde jazz (i.e. pianist Cecil Taylor and Thelonious Monk, saxophonist Sonny Rollins) as another manifestation of modern jazz innovation laced with the blues (224-28).

Jones ends the chapter by noting the overarching hostility against art in a functionalist American culture (230-31). Such bias is a vital link between white bohemians and artists and blacks (231). Musically Jones believes that most contemporary Black music remains outside of the mainstream and is always radical in the context of formal American culture (235). He sees great potential in black dissent toward what he defines as white middlebrow culture and finds hope in young Blacks beginning to question mainstream values and the West’s reassessment of its relationship to the world (236). Jones ends by asking the provocative question regarding what is American culture, what’s useful and valuable about it and what of it are people being asked to preserve? (236).

CRITICAL THEMES:
- Jones views the process of musical mainstreaming as exposing the secret of black folk expression in mass commercial form. How might musicians themselves view this proposed quandary between cultural authenticity and commercial visibility?
- WWII and post-WWII as eras of possibility for Blacks tied to pronounced social inequities.
- Bebop—anti-assimilationist music influenced by small band jazz, reflecting social discontent and presenting new artistic stance and musical argot.
- Bebop—inspires mainstream and black middle-class rejection; swing jazz revivalism; and sub-genres (cool jazz and progressive jazz).
- Mid-1950s hard bop (and “soul” and “funk” mainstreaming)—signified new re-evaluation and appreciation of Black “roots” music.
- Black avant-garde—further refinement of black music elements.
- U.S.—anti-artistic stance unites white bohemians and young blacks; both question middle class values.
- Modern jazz and related modernist aesthetic movements are misunderstood and rejected in the mainstream.
- Black music as fundamentally radical form in the U.S. context.

ADDITIONAL CRITICAL THEMES for *Blues People*
- What are consistent critical threads in Jones’s overall argument? What are his biases and critical leanings?
- Are his musical and sociological insights given the same weight? Why or why not? How does this affect your embrace of his arguments?
- Is the notion of racialized music (i.e. black music, white music, etc.) operable as a concept for analyzing music?
- If Jones revised *Blues People* what kind of musical and social developments would he incorporate in the post-1963 era?
- How useful is *Blues People* in assessing key aspects of contemporary Black life and parallel musical expression?
Supplemental Bibliography on *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*

**Reviews of *Blues People***


**Surveys of Black Popular Music (featuring *Blues People*)**


**Scholarly Essays on *Blues People***


Nealon, Jeffrey T. “Refraining, Becoming-Black: Repetition and Difference in Amiri


Additional writing on the blues by Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka