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Blues People and the Poetry of Amiri Baraka

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> Blues is *not*, nor was it ever meant to be, a strictly social phenomenon, but is primarily a verse form and secondarily a way of making music.
>
> —*Blues People* (50)

In the downtown world of 1960s New York City, LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) was primarily a poet. He was associated with various avant-garde groups, a diverse assortment of nonacademic outsider writers from Allen Ginsberg (the Beats) to Charles Olson (Black Mountain), Frank O'Hara (New York School) and other Black writers (Umbra and Ishmael Reed), and an unclassifiable group of poets, such as Paul Blackburn and Diane DiPrima, who seemed to fit in everywhere and nowhere at once. Besides his poetry, Jones wrote regularly about jazz and had a burgeoning playwriting career. He was a key figure socially in the Lower East Side and the Village, his home often a gathering place for writers and artists (painters, musicians, dancers, etc.). The poet's eclecticism was most apparent in the Joneses' (LeRoi and his then wife Hettie's) incredibly catholic magazine *Yugen*. I still think that *Yugen* #7 is the best magazine I've ever read. That issue included work by Gilbert Sorrentino, Robert Creeley, Kenneth Koch, George Stanley, Frank O'Hara, Gregory Corso, Stuart Z. Perkoff, John Ashbery, Philip Whalen, Larry Eigner, Max Finstein, Joel Oppenheimer, Diane DiPrima, Charles Olson, Edward Marshall, Allen Ginsberg, and LeRoi Jones himself. The cover was by the artist Norman Bluhm, who figures in a later short story of Amiri Baraka's

called “Norman’s Date.”[1] To put that list of people in perspective, today it is a who’s who of prominent writers; in 1961, the year *Yugen,* no. 7 was published, none of the writers was known outside these small alternative literary circles.

I first encountered Jones’ poetry around 1961 when I ran away from home and wound up on the Lower East Side. I was fifteen years old. One night I wandered into the old Eighth Street Bookshop at the corner of McDougal Street in Greenwich Village, went down into the basement, and found an assortment of small press poetry books to purchase—or steal—and then read, including *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, Jones’ first book of poetry, which quickly became my favorite book. The following year (1962), Jones’ name came up again when I ran away for the second time, in a stolen car with a childhood friend who wanted to visit his mother in Elmira, New York. The car was stolen from one of my older brothers, so was not likely to be reported; my friend lured me to Elmira on the unlikely pretext that Mark Twain had lived there. As he visited his mother in an out-of-the-way part of town, I went into a corner general store and began looking at the magazines, improbably coming upon one called *Kulchur*, in which LeRoi Jones’ play, *The Toilet*, was published. By the time my friend found me, I had read the entire play and was already a different person than the one he left moments earlier. Elmira was certainly an unlikely place to expand my reading knowledge of LeRoi Jones, and yet it shows how far afield his work was disseminated. I was already a daily reader of Jones’ poetry by that point. The year before, when I first ran away, I had encountered one other genre of writing he practiced, and that was the essay form.

The essay was “Cuba Libré,” about his trip to Castro’s Cuba in the summer of 1960, and it had been published in *Evergreen Review* at the end of that year. Until I read “Cuba Libré” I had this poet’s belief that prose was a second-rate kind of literature—that poetry was everything. Now I had to grapple with the idea that prose could be as energetic and powerful as poetry. During that first foray into running away from home, I was holed up on the Lower East Side for a few weeks in an East 11th Street and Avenue B crash-pad for runaways, then managed to secure a single-room-occupancy in a hotel on Bleecker Street. In order to conceal my age, I grew an unconvincing mustache, the kind a fifteen-year-old boy might grow. With some beer and pizza slices from McDougal Street, I sat in the Bleecker Street hotel room

reading Jones and his compadres in books of poetry by Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, Gilbert Sorrentino, and Diane DiPrima. Besides purchasing LeRoi Jones' poetry book, I also bought a copy of *Evergreen Review* for one dollar, which is how I came to read the essay about Cuba. In the *Evergreen Review* I read work by Samuel Beckett, Kenneth Koch, Arrabal, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti; then that magnificent essay about Cuba by LeRoi Jones.

The trip to Cuba had been arranged for July 1960 by the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. The editor's introduction to the essay states: "While there, he went to Sierra Maestra in Oriente province to attend a mass anniversary rally of the July 26th movement" (139). For me, it was the best piece of literary journalism I had encountered; it was right up there with James Baldwin's essays, which I had read in a high-school class. What I took away from the essay was the detailed, vivid descriptions—the long progression of travel from Havana into the boondocks of Cuba for the massive celebration at which Fidel Castro was to speak. Jones has to travel by train, cattle car, and truck, and then walk to get to the foothills of the Sierra Maestra to attend the rally. On the train, he has a political discussion with a Mexican graduate student. He says to her: "I'm a poet … what can I do?" (141). The woman calls him a "cowardly bourgeois individualist," and other Latin writers berate him too. In theatre, this is what is known as the "recognition scene," in which someone suddenly has an epiphany, and this encounter on the train was LeRoi Jones' political awakening. In the mountains where Fidel speaks, Jones writes that sixty or seventy thousand people showed up to hear their leader. The entire essay is about that teeming, energized, beaming, celebratory humanity. The endless celebration had been interrupted at one point by five minutes of rain.

After three days, he arrives back in Havana, without having bathed or slept very much, exhausted and yet exhilarated by what he has seen. This horde of near biblical humanity is contrasted with what Jones faces when he returns to the city and reads the headline from a Miami newspaper: "I came out of the terminal into the street and stopped at a newsstand to buy a newspaper. The headlines of one Miami paper read, 'CUBAN CELEBRATION RAINED OUT.' I walked away from the stand as fast as I could" (159).

Blues People was published a few years after the Cuban essay. It is often said that Jones changed after that trip to Cuba, that he became

more radicalized. “Cuba Libré” is carefully observed and factually reported journalism; *Blues People* is scholarship, erudite writing in musicology, sociology, anthropology, Black Studies, American Studies, and Urban Studies. In order to understand *Blues People*, one needs to understand its voice, and how it relates to Jones’ other writing. The impulse of *Blues People* is a lyrical one, which comes from the inherent poetry in the prose. Poetry is at the heart of all of Jones’ writing, and social justice is its theme. Though primarily known for his angry street persona, that particular voice was just one of many registers in LeRoi Jones’ poetry. He also could be tender and lyrical, and was a sublime writer of love poems. There are two poems, in particular, that I was drawn to early on in reading this poet, and if Jones was considered one of the angriest poets in the *lit biz*, these two poems were counterweights. One of those poems inaugurated his first volume, and was the eponymous “Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note.”

> Lately, I’ve become accustomed to the way
>
> The ground opens up and envelopes me
>
> Each time I got out to walk the dog.
>
> Or the broad edged silly music the wind
>
> Makes when I run for a bus . . .
>
> Things have come to that. (*Preface*, 5)

It ends with the poet observing his daughter seemingly talking to someone in her room, and when he tiptoes up to her room, he observes: “Only she on her knees, peeking into / Her own clasped hands” (*Preface*, 5). Marvelously, wondrously, the poem was written in March 1957, two years before his daughter Kellie was born (May 16, 1959).

The other poem that caught my attention, and which I found myself reading regularly in the 1960s was one entitled “For Hettie” (she was his then wife). It begins:

> My wife is left-handed.
>
> which implies a fierce de-
>
> termination. A complete other
>
> worldliness. ITS WEIRD, BABY.

> The way some folks
>
> are always trying to be
>
> different. (*Preface*, 13)

He goes on to note that his wife is a bohemian … black stockings … refusing to take orders … writing left-handedly … But to no avail. He says that it shows: "Left-handed coffee, left-handed eggs…it's her left hand offered for me to kiss." It ends:

> & now her belly droops over the seat.
>
> They say it's a child. But
>
> I ain't quite so sure. (13)

Blues People is unique in the Jones/Baraka literary canon because it is not obviously lyrical nor particularly angry, though anger comprises some part of its construction. Its lyricism is the result of an overall effect, not individual moments in the narrative. Researched and written in the late Fifties/early Sixties, it was published in 1963. It is the almost academic account of Black American history told by way of its music, especially the blues and jazz, which are the result of the experiences of slavery. Its tone is scholarly and its command of its subject is monumental. Though not a long, thick volume—my copy is only 236 pages long—nonetheless, it is well researched and full of new ideas and insights: "It was, and is, inconceivable in the African culture to make a separation between music, dancing, song, the artifact, and a man's life or his worship of his gods. *Expression* issued from life, and *was* beauty" (29).

The voice of *Blues People* is, at times, that of the sociologist or anthropologist from the New School of Social Research in Greenwich Village. It is no doubt derived in part from Jones' education at Rutgers and Howard, and possibly his mentors from that time, as well as the classes he took or sat in on at Columbia University and the New School. It is also a product of his encyclopedic knowledge of blues and jazz, and his years spent as a jazz critic in the fifties and sixties. I suspect there is also a bit of Charles Olson in the writing; Jones puts on a different hat, more worldly, less ethereal and ideal, more hard-nose observer, like the Olson of the Mayan anthropological travels in Mexico. Charles Olson is even quoted in *Blues People*:

> … the race
>
> does not advance, it is only
>
> better preserved (122)

In the Introduction to *Blues People*, Jones modestly states: "I am trying in this book, by means of analogy and some attention to historical example, to establish certain general conclusions about a particular segment of American society" (ix). What this book is *about* comes into focus on its opening page in that Introduction, in which Jones further observes:

> The Negro as a slave is one thing. The Negro as American is quite another. But the *path* the slave took to "citizenship" is what I want to look at. And I make my analogy through the slave citizen's music—through the music that is most closely associated with him: blues and a later, but parallel development, jazz. And it seems to me that if the Negro represents, or is symbolic of, something in and about the nature of American culture, this certainly should be revealed by his characteristic music. (ix)

The intellectual idea of joining up the journey of a people—their very history—with their music is *sui generis*, but in the case of the African slaves in America, it is an almost necessary conflation, as these slaves had little or no artifacts to study. It was their oral traditions that allowed such a history to survive. The blues were a long time coming, and they were distinctly, uniquely African American in their origins and practice. This is what LeRoi Jones traces in his study.

> Only religion (and magic) and the arts were not completely submerged by Euro-American concepts. Music, dance, religion, do not have *artifacts* as their end products, so they were saved. These nonmaterial aspects of the African's culture were almost impossible to eradicate. And these are the most apparent legacies of the African past, even to the contemporary black American. But to merely point out that blues, jazz, and the Negro's adaptation of the Christian religion all rely heavily on African culture takes no great amount of

> original thinking. How these activities derive from that culture is what remains important. (16)

So how did the blues happen? Jones writes: "The African slave had sung African chants and litanies in those American fields. His sons and daughters, and their children, began to use America as a reference" (18). In another section of the book, Jones refers to it as "European words cast into an African grammatical mold" (22). However way it is described, the outcome is eventually the blues, the indigenous music of Black America. How that came about is the point of *Blues People*. The forced journey of Africans to America, and their subsequent assimilation of American rhythms into their own speech patterns is yet another way to put it. Jones gives a Dahomey river god ceremony as an example; it probably had no chance of surviving after the Africans arrived in America, except for one thing: that it resembled the Christians in the New World with what they called baptism. (27)

It is not just the blues that African Americans introduced into American life. They were also the carriers of unique instruments never seen in the New World, including "the banjo (an African word)" (27) and "the xylophone," (27), which were brought over from Africa. It was not just the musical instrumentation, it was the stories themselves, which people conveyed orally, person to person, generation to generation that were important: "folk tales in song lyrics, riddles, proverbs, etc., which, even when not accompanied by music, were the African's chief method of education, the way the wisdom of elders was passed down to the young" (28). The knowledge in *Blues People* is cumulative, steadily accreting page to page. The story journeys through religion and geography, early Black Christian churches, and how "the converted slave had only to alter his lyrics to make the song 'Christian'" (45). Once the end of slavery arrives in the 1860s, "there was now proposed for the Negro masses a much fuller life *outside* the church. There came to be more and more backsliders, and more and more of the devil music was heard" (49).

Now migrations started to occur primarily towards the North because of new opportunities (jobs and housing in places such as Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, and New York). A people who had lost the family unit because of being torn away from loved ones during slavery were now seeking new definitions of how to live and work together. Though women often had second-class status in some African

societies, as Jones notes, “certain traditions that were usually given their impetus by the male members of an African community could, in the strange context of the slave and post-slave New World society, be developed equally by women, and in some cases could be brought to their perfection by women. Blues, at a certain point of its development, was one of those traditions” (56-57). The blues was a direct result of the shout-and-response and the spiritual (62). “Blues was a kind of singing that utilized a language that was almost strictly American” (63). But what is the point of the blues, especially in the context of a people brought, against their will, to the New World? LeRoi Jones tells us: “The movement of the Negro into a position where he would be able to escape even this separation from the white mainstream of America is a central theme of this book.” (65)

In the autumn of 1966, I was working at the Music Library at the newly opened Lincoln Center and living in a sixty-dollar a month three-room cold-water railroad flat on East 10th Street. It was half a block from the St. Mark’s Church in the Bowery, and its newly formed Poetry Project. For the next couple of years I regularly attended the various writing workshops. I now had another LeRoi Jones book, *The Dead Lecturer* (1964), which I walked around reciting aloud to my Lower East Side poetry friends. I probably said the line—“I will fuck you even if you don’t like art”[2]—so many times that people must have thought that it was my own. But it was pure LeRoi Jones. 1966 was a year of absences and ghosts. That previous summer, just a few months earlier, the poet Frank O’Hara had been killed in a freak accident by a dune taxi on Fire Island; his ghost pervaded the new Poetry Project. LeRoi Jones was nothing if not conspicuous by his absence from the East Village, too. He was uptown in Harlem, running an arts center, and when that ended, he migrated back to his hometown of Newark across the North River, where he would live for the rest of his long, fruitful life.

The year before, Malcolm X had been assassinated at the Audubon Ballroom at 165th Street and Broadway in Washington Heights. Nineteen-sixty-six was the year that Black Power became prominent with national figures such as Stokely Carmichael; the Black Panthers became a force, introducing new leaders like Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver. In LeRoi’s old stomping ground, the Lower East Side was now being called the East Village. He would soon rename himself and eventually be called Amiri Baraka. Another absence was

Blues People: copies of the book were impossible to find, the publisher having let it come and go without much fanfare and/or commitment to its promotion.

By the time I arrived on East 10th Street, LeRoi had already moved away from the Lower East Side. In those days, my own take on writing was influenced by my friends and teachers; all of us were on the same page with regard to literary taste. With one exception, we were young, educated, white poets living in America's version of bohemia. (The African American poet Tom Weatherly was the only Black member of our group of young writers.) We all knew each other because of the free poetry workshop we attended at the new Poetry Project. The Black Mountain poet Joel Oppenheimer was the director and also our poetry teacher. We attended his class in the Old Courthouse at East 2nd Street and Second Avenue. The Poetry Project rented it from the City of New York for—we were told—one dollar a year. It was Joel Oppenheimer who kept the flame of LeRoi's poetry alive at the table, because Joel had once been a close friend of Roi's, the name which Oppenheimer called his old drinking buddy and fellow Lower East Side poet.

The mid-1960s was a time of urban riots, in Detroit, Harlem, Los Angeles (Watts), and Philadelphia. Newark was one of those cities in upheaval as whites fled to the suburbs and the urban poor—mostly Black—were left behind. By the time of the riots, Amiri Baraka was living back in Newark, his hometown. 1967 was the year that Newark experienced its own riots. Ten years later, in the eastern part of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, the 1977 riots transformed Broadway from a bustling commercial district into a ghost town. I note this community because that is where I grew up, and the riots in Newark a decade earlier were identical to those in Brooklyn in their effect upon a poor community. After the whites fled, businesses packed up and never returned. East New York and that part of Bedford-Stuyvesant became known as the most dangerous neighborhood in New York City. What was Newark like? It was like that war-torn neighborhood in Brooklyn, only larger, poorer, angrier. That is the Newark to which Amiri Baraka returned. I may have known him for his poetry, plays, and nonfiction, but in Newark, Baraka became known as a community organizer, a local who knew how to get things done. He would be arrested and charged with possession of firearms during the riots. A famous Fred McDarrah photograph shows Jones/Baraka in prison stripes, handcuffed, a huge

gash in his forehead that was inflicted by the Newark police. When Baraka was in jail after the Newark riots, I had demonstrated with some other writers outside of Columbia University, handing out a broadsheet with his poems and the 75-point headline: POETRY IS REVOLUTION / REVOLUTION IS POETRY. At Baraka's trial, the judge read his poetry aloud and accused the poet of inciting the Newark riots because of those writings. Later, Amiri Baraka would say that he was convicted of possessing two revolvers and two poems.

What does this have to do with *Blues People*? The answer is "everything." There may be a different voice in this nonfiction work, but that does not mean it is much different from Jones' other work, in his public persona as a community organizer or in his role of the gifted Black poet. *Blues People* is not a narrative with an ending; it brings the reader up through Charlie Parker and bebop and then the various jazz greats of the Sixties, including Miles Davis, Ornette Coleman, and Thelonious Monk, but its story, being a history of Black America as told through its music, goes on and on. The music is the story of social justice—or its lack thereof—in contemporary America. Violence is its backbeat. Both Basil King, the Black Mountain painter, and Gilbert Sorrentino, the poet and novelist, recounted to me, almost verbatim and on different occasions, the story of LeRoi Jones' encounter with some white thugs outside of McSorley's Alehouse on East 7th Street when all of them were young men on the Lower East Side. Jones was not a big guy, but he certainly was tough and streetwise. He grabbed a garbage can lid and wailed on the white men as they shouted racial slurs against him. Having witnessed similar kinds of fights in Brooklyn many times, I was thrilled with the tale. Jones/Baraka enjoyed a mythical place in my mind, somewhere between Martin Luther King and Muhammad Ali, Hubert Selby and William Butler Yeats. Baraka's poetry, more and more, verified these mythological stories, as the poems were often violent and street smart. That is not the tone, not the voice, of *Blues People*, though there is a subtext in which this dissonant rhythm may be found.

In the 1960s, it was almost impossible to find a copy of *Blues People* to read, although I knew several young poets who had read it. The book seemed to go out of print quickly, without a trace. I once saw a copy in a tiny bookshop on West 4th Street, but I didn't have the money to buy it. *Blues People* would have to wait more than fifty years before I found a hardcover copy of the British edition in a used

bookshop in Camden Town, when I was living in London. Just before I found that copy, I attended a reading by Amiri Baraka at the British Library on Euston Road, just a few blocks from where I lived. The interview and short reading took place in March 2013. (He died on January 9, 2014.)

He read "Somebody Blew up America," a section of which reads:

> Who got the tar, who got the feathers
>
> Who had the match, who set the fires
>
> Who killed and hired
>
> Who say they God & still be the Devil (*SOS: Poems* 425)

It was a brilliant performance, dramatic, funny, an energy field, as Charles Olson would call it, full of street-smarts and toughness. Performance was a cornerstone of all Lower East Side poetry, and LeRoi Jones was no exception to that rule. That reading at the British Library was testament to Amiri Baraka's great performance abilities. Hip-hop and rap no doubt came from this poet almost the same way that jazz came out of the blues.

After reading *Blues People*, I thought it should be read by all people who wish to become U.S. citizens. It is a story of becoming an American, but people who became Americans against their will, through no fault of their own, because of slavery, and then became the backbone of American history and culture. Without Black music there is no blues, no jazz, no rhythm & blues, no rock 'n' roll, no hip-hop, no rap, no distinctly American musical style, no American history, even no American language.

> The twist is that if you are black and believe in the supernatural, and are issued from an ecological determinant that does not permit of such a psychological extreme as American Puritanism (which, said William Carlos Williams, is a "thing, strange, inhuman, powerful, like a relic of some died out tribe whose practices were revolting"), the circumstance of finding yourself in a culture of white humanist pseudo-Puritanical storekeepers must be revolting. And if you

> are a slave of such a culture, your sorrows must be indeterminable. (*Blues People* 10)

Reading *Blues People* for the first time all these years later was a life-affirming experience; very much akin to the energy I felt when I first read LeRoi Jones' poetry as a fifteen-year-old runaway on the Lower East Side. At the British Library talk and reading, Baraka was mellow in a way I had never seen him, although he did resemble the person that his downtown friends (Joel, Gil, Basil, et al.) told me about, time and time again. He was erudite, witty, literary, occasionally bristly, but mostly that energetic wordsmith, the poet of particulars, of music and social justice, of feet and measures, the open field, of breath and syllable, the poet of the street.

Notes

[1] Story published in *Tales of the Out and the Gone*.

[2] The line appears in Baraka's poem "The Politics of Rich Painters" (*SOS: Poems* 72).

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