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# Male Blues Lyrics 1920- 1965: A Corpus Assisted Analysis

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Submitted for the degree of MA by Research in English Language

February 2011

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## **Abstract**

This study is a corpus assisted investigation into blues lyrics. Using Wmatrix, an online statistical analysis tool, 795 different blues songs from 35 different male blues artists have been analysed quantitatively for information pertaining to key domains, words and parts of speech. This data has provided the basis for further, qualitative analysis of lyrics with reference being made to ideas already established in other studies of the blues and to linguistic theories about narrative, discourse and metaphor. The thesis seeks to define the linguistic features of blues lyrics at different historical points and attempts to interpret them in the light of the social and political conditions of their times. In doing so, it examines the role of blues lyrics within the African-American community as a whole and investigates the extent to which they established a sense of black identity and were part of a linguistic sub-culture. Further to the exploration of the genre as a whole, the dissertation includes a study into the work of an individual artist, Robert Johnson, with the aim of testing the extent to which he is representative of the blues form in general.

## **1. Introduction**

This study is an investigation of blues lyrics with a particular methodological emphasis on a corpus based approach. Using a large body of blues lyrics, I examine some of the defining linguistic features of the genre and use quantitative and qualitative analysis to offer various interpretations of the blues.

Initially, I give an overview of the blues form and a brief account of its historical and cultural background. It will become increasingly clear throughout the study that an understanding of the social tensions of the day and the relations between the African-American population and white hegemony is critical in making valid interpretations about the lyrics.

The literature review discusses the nature of blues criticism in general. It identifies the ethnocentric nature of blues studies and also reveals the lack of quantitative analysis within such studies. In the remaining portion of the review, I discuss different aspects of stylistic criticism which have a relevance to the rest of the study. In doing so, I suggest several concepts, including theories of foregrounding, discourse analysis, narrative theory and metaphor, which inform my own subsequent interpretation of the data. After an account of my research in the methodology section and an explanation for the focus on male artists, I present three sections of analysis.

In section 5.1, I address the following questions:

1. What are the defining features of the blues genre based on quantitative evidence?
2. How can this quantitative evidence be used in support of a qualitative interpretation of the blues in relation to its historical background?

In doing so, I use a corpus based approach to identify key themes in the blues and examine features of the blues performer's relationship with his contemporary audience. I also look at how the lyrics present the difficulties encountered by African-American males in the face of white hegemonic structures.

In section 5.2 I address the following:

1. What are the differences between the pre-war and post-war sub genres and why?
2. To what extent do the lyrics operate as counter-cultural, subversive texts?

Again, this chapter uses quantitative evidence as a basis for investigating ideas of schema, metaphor and anti-language.

Section 5.3 asks:

To what extent can an individual artist be seen as representative of a genre?

In this section, I focus on the work of the pre-war blues artist Robert Johnson and examine the relationship of his lyrics to the previous sub-corpora and the findings of chapters one and two.

In my conclusion, I evaluate my findings and discuss the extent to which corpus linguistics can be an effective method for examining a particular genre and what benefits the application of the aforementioned stylistic concepts have brought to my understanding of blues lyrics.

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## **2. The Blues: An Overview**

The blues is a musical form whose origins and early development are inextricably tied up with the history and geography of the United States. Because this study seeks to investigate the nature of blues lyrics within the ideological frameworks of the times, those ideas of the white ruling class which were imposed upon the black population, it is important that the reader has some idea of the historical and social realities which fostered the art form.

The eighteenth and nineteenth century development of cash crop economies turned the American South into the country's most profitable region. By the eve of the civil war in 1860, southern cotton sales alone represented sixty-per cent of all United States exports. The foundations of the south, both financially and socially, were built upon the crop. Constituting the upper echelons of Southern society were the planters, the new white aristocracy who reigned over the land with considerable power. At the bottom of the social pile were almost four million black slaves. Systematically stripped of both liberty and identity, it was the slave population that was responsible for creating the wealth of the area (Simkins and Charles 1972).

With the end of the civil war in 1865 and the ensuing investment of federal troops and agencies into the former confederacy, slavery was brought to an end. During the period of reconstruction that followed, African-Americans that didn't move away from the region were assisted by the government in claiming the land for their own subsistence. For a short period, blacks in the Southern USA did enjoy a sense of profitable autonomy but the reality of freedom would soon prove to fall far short of its promises; white control shed the coat of the slave master and replaced it with various far more insidious robes.

As slaves, African-Americans had to a great extent been insulated from the horrors that they now found awaiting them as free people. Due to their financial value, plantations had operated systems ensuring that slaves would be housed, fed and rested enough to continue being a productive asset. The threat of attack or death at the hands of whites was also low as any such aggression would in effect be an attack on a white planter's property. With emancipation however, these grounds for security vanished. African-Americans became the scapegoats for a region that bitterly resented its defeat. The political powers from Texas through to Mississippi and on to Florida now worked to create a highly effective system of unofficial slavery as 'racism that may have bubbled anyway became institutionalised and the dominant force' (Cobb, 1999: 90).

The sad irony was that the majority of blacks would find themselves returning to their former plantation owner for a livelihood. This was granted in the form of sharecropping and tenant farming systems that gave corrupt plantation managers the 'legal framework for involuntary servitude' (Cobb, 1999: 104). Massively increased incidences of personal violence and property destruction ensured that, in achieving freedom, the black population was actually in a far worse state than it had been in the ante-bellum days.

It was the period between the two world wars that arguably saw the divide between the dream of freedom and its reality at its greatest; it was a period which, through new media and increased communications, exposed the inadequacies of African American life whilst offering no hope of a change in conditions. It was this era that saw the blues crystallize into a recognized form of expression and saw it reach the height of its popularity. After world war two, the blues was transposed into an urban

environment as African-Americans undertook a mass migration to the cities of the north.

The blues itself is quite a diverse form. Contrary to popular opinion, it is not a branch of jazz, or vice-versa, and the two types of music, though mixing readily, evolved in different geographical centres with entirely different social and cultural demographics. The musical roots of the blues can be traced back to points of origin as diverse as the work songs of slaves, sea shanties, nineteenth century English ballads and traditional African griot songs. When a recognisable musical blues genre appeared is open to argument, but it is generally considered to have a relatively late genesis at some point between the turn of the century and the outbreak of World War One. As a recorded form, it was popular from the 1920s onwards (Trynka, 1996).

Early blues was generally performed on guitar, banjo, mandolin, harmonica and, in urban areas, piano, either in a solo or ensemble format, most readily in the form of ad hoc 'jug bands'. Blues of the post-war period will be recognisable to most listeners as having the same structures, rhythms and sound as rock and roll, which was the name given to blues music when record companies wanted to sell it to white audiences. Musically, it is characterised by simple chord progressions, typically involving 12 bars of music using the tonic, sub-dominant and dominant chords of a key, unusual guitar tunings such as the Hawaiian 'slack-key' which allows for the use of a slide or bottle neck to fret the strings instead of the fingers, and a use of the 'blue note', the flattened 5<sup>th</sup> note of a major scale, which gives it an ambiguous tonal centre, being neither major or minor.

The other defining feature of blues music is the lyrics. The following chapters seeks to discover the key linguistic features of the blues as a whole. On top of this, they aim to identify how those features might reflect or highlight the ideologies of the

time. In doing so, the grounds for testing two critical assertions about the blues will be created. The first assertion is that put forward by Samuel Charters. In considering the blues in relation to its historical and geographic background, he claimed that ‘there is little open protest at the social conditions under which a Negro in the United States is forced to live’ (Charters, 1999: 352). The contrasting view, put forward by Harold Courlander, is that ‘at its base, the blues song is a sort of transmuted expression of criticism or complaint’ (Courlander, 1966: 124).

Initially, I will use a corpus assisted method, as described in the methodology section, to identify salient features of blues lyrics. Examples of these features will then be examined in closer detail to posit theories about how they expose the dominant ideologies of the time.

### **3. Literature Review**

Samuel B. Charters' *The Country Blues*, the first study of blues singers and their music, was published in 1961 and set the pattern for the following fifty years of scholarship related to the blues. Charter divided his analysis into biographical chapters of individual blues men and women, giving an outline of their life and times which he used to dissect particular songs. In doing so, Charters set several precedents for the study of blues lyrics. The first and most fundamental was intrinsic to the book as a whole and this was the acknowledgement that blues lyrics were suitable for study on the page i.e. outside of their original musical environment. The second was that an understanding of the historical landscape that created the lyrics was essential in order to understand the content of the lyrics themselves. In fact, Charters went so far as to say that not only the ideological systems of the time but also the marketing and sales of the records themselves were crucial factors in investigating blues lyrics and in his study he does indeed spend almost as much time discussing the distribution of discs by the recording companies as he does the recordings themselves (Charters, 1961: 11). The third precedent he set was that the lyrics could be understood almost wholly as biographical accounts. This may have been unwitting, as a proper reading of Charters shows that the biography of each bluesman is actually a way of explaining and highlighting the conditions of the time. Subsequent studies have, however, often over-emphasized the biographical aspect in the sense that they fail to acknowledge the potential difference between the blues man and the speaker presented in the lyrics. In doing so, there has been a tendency to try to see all lyrics as autobiographical, almost as if they were diary entries and to give them a one-dimensional aspect. This is

particularly true of studies which investigate the work of one artist, Guralnick's '*Searching For Robert Johnson*' (1998) being a good example.

Charters' establishment of the blues as something which can be looked at as a legitimate piece of research has meant that the form has received the same attention, though to a lesser degree it has to be said, from academics specializing in particular forms of literary criticism. Paul Garon's '*Blues and the Poetic Spirit*' (1975) gives a psychoanalytic reading of the blues based on Freud and focuses on images of violence, sex and superstition and seeks to define the blues wholly as a reaction to the dominant ideology of the time. Houston A. Baker's '*Blues, Ideology and African-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*' (1985) uses a Marxist viewpoint to analyze blues both in terms of the socio-economic structures of the time and in terms of African-American cultural expression as a whole. In doing so, he develops a theory of what he terms a 'blues matrix' which suggests that we can only understand the blues if we are first able to understand the hidden messages symbolized in its vernacular language. Both of these longer studies are typical of the wider sphere of modern blues criticism in that they are powerfully ethnocentric. Hunter's '*The Blues Aesthetic and Black Vernacular Dance*', (2000) Courlander's '*Negro Folk Music USA*' (1966) and the collected essays of Paul Oliver and Tony Russell in '*Yonder Come the Blues*' (1970) all examine blues within the wider context of the African-American experience and blues lyrics are given as examples of the 'black' voice of America as opposed to the 'white'. This overwhelmingly ethnocentric attitude seems to be entirely justified and seems to validate Charters' initial claims that any interpretation of the blues has to be based on a solid understanding of the conditions in which it was created. The background knowledge for this study comes from a

range of texts and there are two non-linguistic areas which have formed part of the research.

The first is the relevant history of the USA and the African-American population. Key texts exposing and analysing the ideological standpoints of the day range from *'The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity'* (Cobb, 1999), *'A History of the South'* (Simpkins and Pierce Roland 1972) and *'The Enduring South'* (Reed, 1986) which provided a backdrop for the era which spawned the blues to anthropological studies like *'From Plantation to Ghetto'* (Meier and Rudwick 1970) and *'Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century'* (Franklin, 1971) which provided examples of contemporary African-American attitudes of the time and also gave statistical information about population and migration figures.

The second area is comprised of those studies into the blues which do not have their basis in literary analysis. Lomax's famous *'The Land Where the Blues Began'* (Lomax, 1993) and *'Portrait of the Blues'* (Trynka, 1986) are amongst the texts which provided an insight into the realities of life for black Americans in the north and south and were useful for highlighting, through interviews, black attitudes towards their conditions and towards the dominant ideology of the time. Other texts like *'Yonder Come the Blues'* (Oliver et al, 1970) *'Chasin' That Devil Music'*, (Wardlow, 1998) and *'Spinning Blues Into Gold'* (Nadine, 2000) provided a chronology and analysis for the rise and fall of the blues as a popular form in the USA and were particularly useful in highlighting some of the reasons for the changes in musical style over the period of the second world war. These texts also played a part in the selection of the lyrics used for the corpora. The lyrics examined are all from male blues singers due to the geographical and historical nature of the study. Though female blues singers were generally more prolifically recorded they operated in an entirely different way to

the male blues singers, especially before the war. Whilst male singers would be found within rather limited geographic areas, often constrained to counties or even single villages and operating with a first-hand knowledge of the locality, 'female blues singers toured the black vaudeville circuits or performed in nightclubs; that is, they all performed in comparatively protected venues' (Lomax 1993). Additionally, it is sometimes difficult to glean whether the lyrics being performed by female singers were written by a female or, as many were, by male writers paid to operate in a tin-pan alley style. Readers wishing to investigate female blues from a linguistic viewpoint are referred to (Watson, 2006).

Where there seems to be a gap in all the works already cited is in an analysis of a large body of blues lyrics which can be used to objectively test in linguistic terms the critical theses already posited. Courlander's book gives an example of the problem. In his chapter on the blues, Courlander seeks to define the style and use of the form. In doing so, he covers the thematic areas the blues deals with. In saying 'homeless, roaming, lonesome, footloose songs constitute another large thematic category of the blues' (Courlander, 1966: 132) he produces what we can only accurately say is a subjective statement. He justifies his assertion by giving only two examples of blues verses and then moves on to the next theme. What we lack, and this is true of all the studies I have mentioned already, is quantitative evidence to support qualitative statements. When Courlander says those types of songs comprise a key category within the blues, to what extent is it key? How frequently do blues songs deal with this theme? Courlander's example is typical of most blues studies. Claims are made as to the meaning or function of the blues as a whole based on, given the evidence displayed on the pages, analysis of a limited number of blues lyrics. Further to this, the absence of a large corpus of blues lyrics means that there is no quantitative

information or analysis about different eras of the blues or, indeed, the relationship between individual blues performers and their genre as a whole. These are gaps which I seek to address within this study.

In order to do so, my initial research is based in the theories of corpus linguistics. In *'English Corpus Linguistics'*, Aijmer and Bengt explain that corpora provide ideal ways of exploring the 'quantitative and probalistic aspects of the language' (Aijmer and Bengt 1991. 2). Through various collected articles, the construction of corpora and their use are dealt with in great detail. Of particular relevance to this study was Greenbaum's description of how the international corpus of English was developed as, although its purposes were quite removed from my own, it gave an idea of how large corpora can be created by collating various sub-corpora (1990). Stenstrom's *'Expletives in the London-Lund Corpus'* (1991) in particular offered an example, in the tabulation of linguistic figures and the use of percentages and fractions within a text to discuss language offered some guidance for my own writing (Strensom, 1991).

However, in terms of the problem within blues research already identified, that of a gap between qualitative analysis and quantitative evidence, Paul Baker's *'Using Corpora in Discourse Analysis'* (Baker, 2008) offered a method of integration which I adopt in my analysis sections. This almost step-by-step guide not only presents practical information on the compilation and quantitative analysis of corpora based on frequency and keyness of items, which is spelled out more fully in the methodology section, but it also offers examples of how quantitative results, for example Baker's analysis into the use of the language used by political opponents in the hunting debate, can be extended with well-informed qualitative analysis. This idea is developed in *'Text, Discourse and Corpora'* (Hoey et al 2007) where the technique of 'corpus-assisted' research, described in the methodology section, is espoused. Other

prominent studies using corpus methodologies include ‘*Keyness: Words, Parts-of-speech and Semantic Categories in the Character-talk of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet*’ (Culpeper, 2009), ‘*Word Frequency, Statistical Stylistics and Authorship Attribution*’ (Hoover, 2009) and *Trust the Text: Language, Corpus and Discourse* (Sinclair, 2004).

The works above show that corpora can be used as effective tools in examining language at quantitative and qualitative levels and allow for the use of other methodologies, such as discourse analysis, which relate directly to my own questions of how the language of the blues reflects or exposes ideological tensions of the times. That the blues, and as far as I could find, songs in general had not been subjected to a corpus assisted analysis meant that the study may also be valuable in highlighting any issues connected specifically to a linguistic type or genre.

Because blues lyrics have been the subject of much ethnocentric and ideology-based discussion, my assessment of the corpora was based upon a range of background information which allowed me to continue to focus on the ways in which the African-American experience might be presented within blues lyrics.

Key to this focus was Leech’s concept of literary foregrounding (Leech, 2008). Leech identifies several methods for identifying the deviant, or interpretatively key, features of language within a text or genre. Important concepts in relation to this study were paradigmatic figures, or those which contrast to normal language use because they are unusual, and syntagmatic figures, those which are deviant due to their overuse, because both of these features can be revealed within raw corpus data through the use of log-likelihood values to identify possible saliency. In terms of sub genres of post-war and pre-war blues and individual artists, Leech’s idea of absolute norms in language as a whole and the relative norms of a genre and the possibility of

secondary deviation, for example an individual artist's work contrasting with the genre as a whole, became key considerations. These ideas were combined with those presented in Lee (1992) which encourage the researcher to look for those elements which are highlighted or back grounded in order to gain an impression of how particular ideologies are being represented. Works on discourse analysis also pointed to relevant areas such as the linguistic representation of the 'anti-society' (Saville-Troike 1989: 274) and the use of anti-language.

Simpson (2004) also proved useful in pointing out potential ways in which narrative and the audience in the blues might be investigated through the voice of different narrators. He explains the difference in distance between audience and narrator created by first and third person speakers. Notions of narrator, text and audience are further investigated in Semino (2008), who makes a distinction between the discourse world, that situation where the communication takes place, and the text world, the situation described in the text; this has a clear relevance to the blues man/speaker/audience relationship mentioned earlier. A further investigation of the speaker / audience relationship can be found in McIntyre (2007) who examines a poem by Seamus Heaney in order to identify shifts in the deictic positions between the speaker and the audience. This prompted my own investigation into the use of pronouns and the way in which relationships are configured linguistically to try and define the relationship between the blues man, the speaker, the audience and the dominant ideology within my own research.

Semino (2008) and Steen (1994) provided an entry point into the close analysis of some of the items within my corpus. In '*Metaphor in Discourse*', Semino identifies the importance of the relationship between target domains and source domains in metaphorical constructions. She notes how important the choice of the source domain,

usually a concrete item, is in terms of the representation of the target domain, or the abstract idea. This seemed particularly relevant in terms of the claims in blues literature about symbolism in the blues. For Baker (1985) and Garon (1975) at least, the metaphors used in blues lyrics constitute a fundamental part of its subversive nature. These ideas also corresponded closely to those of anti-language, the subversive relexicalisation of words from the dominant ideology, and have a bearing on audience reception as they imply the use of schematic knowledge on the part of the audience in order to interpret blues lyrics.

In summary, there are two main findings from this literature review. The first comes out of literature concerned with blues. This is that no linguistic analysis of blues lyrics can proceed without being supported by a knowledge of the ideological and historical conditions of the time. It is also the case that whilst a number of different studies written at different points in the last fifty years generally concur in their interpretation of blues lyrics, there is virtually no quantitative data available to confirm or challenge those interpretations. Additionally, this lack of quantitative evidence makes it difficult to show the ways in which sub-genres and individual artists deviate from the norm.

The second area covered has been that dealing with relevant linguistic concepts which have the potential to address both a lack of quantitative data and to further qualitative analysis of blues lyrics in linguistic terms. These concepts include the use of corpus linguistics, stylistic foregrounding, discourse analysis, deixis, metaphor and anti-languages. These constitute the methods and analytical tools that I draw on in the rest of this thesis.

## **4. Methodology**

In order to examine a large body of blues lyrics, I adopted a corpus assisted approach (Partington 2006). This involves comparing a specific language sub-set, in this case blues lyrics, against a larger body of more general language called a reference corpus. A software program called Wmatrix (Rayson, 2009) processes the language and provides statistical information concerning the frequency of individual words and phrases and also their ‘keyness’ compared to the reference corpus. That is, a word, part of speech or semantic domain which has an unusually high frequency when compared with the reference corpus and has such a statistical keyness is more likely to be a ‘key’ aspect of a text or genre when examined interpretatively. A corpus assisted approach utilizes this quantitative method as a way of creating entry points into a large body of words which can then be expanded with qualitative analysis. The following sections outline the ways in which the initial quantitative research was carried out and then go on to explain the non-linguistic variables that were used as a background for qualitative analysis.

### **4.1 Corpora**

The Wmatrix program is capable of accessing several different reference corpora. The reference corpus and the sub-corpora should have a relevance to each other (Culpeper, 2009). Ideally, as my sub-corpora consist of blues lyrics from the nineteen-twenties to the nineteen-sixties, a reference corpora would perhaps consist of contemporary American English from the same period and possibly from the same regions under discussion. As this was not available, a ‘best fit’ (Baker 2006) had to be found. In fact, it has been suggested that, as long as it is large enough, a bad reference corpus can’t be found (Stubbs 2007). With this in mind, I used the 982,712 word British

National Corpus Spoken Sampler as the closest fit, despite its use of British English, due to the fact that the blues is essentially a vernacular form evolved from an oral tradition and displays features of general spoken language. It also happens that this is the largest corpora that was available for use.

Once the reference corpus had been decided upon, I compiled my own blues corpora. The lyrics were all taken from an online source called 'Harry's Blues Lyrics Online'. This database was chosen for the wide variety of blues artists represented and also for the consistent formatting which helped facilitate collation into a form which could be used with Wmatrix.

Consisting of 104,579 words, the blues corpora I created represents thirty-five different male artists from the nineteen-twenties to the nineteen-sixties and includes 795 separate songs. This 'Full Blues Corpus' was further subdivided into a pre-war corpus, consisting of 55,264 words (333 songs from 22 blues men) and a post-war corpus of 49,315 words (462 songs from thirteen artists). This meant that, just as the Full Blues Corpus could be checked against the British National Corpus Spoken Sampler for any statistically salient features, so the pre and post-war corpora could be checked against the Full Blues Corpus. For chapter three of the research, I also created a sub-corpus limited to the lyrics of only one artist.

#### **4.2 Using Wmatrix**

After collating, organizing and formatting my corpora into a plain text format to make them compatible, I uploaded them to Wmatrix. Once uploaded, each individual word goes through a process of 'tagging'. The computer program assigns every item with a part of speech (POS) tag and a semantic domain (USAS) tag. For example, the name 'Ida\_Belle' is given a POS tag of NP1, indicating a singular proper noun, and a USAS

tag of Z1, indicating the semantic domain PERSONAL NAMES. Alongside this information, Wmatrix also provides information about the number of times the word is used and its frequency relative to the corpus as a whole and also gives a log-likelihood value or 'keyness' factor. This is a figure calculated to show the relative saliency of the word when compared with the reference corpus. Any figure with a critical value of 15.13 gives a 99.99% probability that the item is 'key'. 'Ida\_Belle' has an LL value of 9.35, suggesting that the word in itself is not statistically important enough to warrant further investigation. However, Wmatrix allows me to compare not just words but the types of words. In fact, the program tells me that, whilst 'Ida\_Belle' is of little significance itself, it belongs to the semantic domain Z1. This has a huge LL value of 1920.60, meaning the use of PERSONAL NAMES in the blues is likely to be a key feature.

In addition to providing the above statistical information, Wmatrix helpfully organizes the results by ranking them in terms of the log-likelihood value. This proved a critical feature as many of the log-likelihood values were extremely high. Using only the log-likelihood values would have meant examining over ninety 'key' semantic fields in the Full Blues Corpus alone. Using the rankings, I limited this to a manageable ten key items for USAS and POS tags and twenty for words, given that these can be sub-divided into lexical and functional groups.

Once the key words, USAS and POS fields had been decided, I used Wmatrix to examine concordances of the selected items. By clicking on a word, Wmatrix shows me a list of all of its uses in their contexts, displayed as concordance lines.

Examining the concordances allowed me to identify and test patterns of use, as well as prompting further investigation of related words or fields within the corpus. This established the core data from which further qualitative analysis could be undertaken

and from which my hypotheses could be drawn. Again, the sheer amount of data meant deciding upon a system with which to organize the concordances. Whilst the majority of concordance groups could be checked in full, some ran into thousands of lines. In these cases, I followed the method suggested in Barker (2009: 90) of selecting groups of thirty lines which were compared with each other until no more strong patterns could be found. Examining small sections like this had the added benefit of making any anomalies stand out quite clearly.

### **4.3 Other Practical Issues**

Wmatrix is a program which, once a text has been uploaded, provides an automatic statistical analysis and it is extremely user friendly. There were, however, some technical pitfalls regarding the particular genre I used and, whilst these were relatively easily negotiated, they are worth mentioning here as anyone working with transcripts of oral texts – popular and traditional song and exchanges containing dialects for example – is likely to encounter the same issues.

#### **4.3.1 Z99**

Z99 is a semantic domain tag which translates as UNMATCHED. Essentially, any word which Wmatrix does not recognize falls into this uncategorized field. After initially uploading my corpora, I found to my horror that there were several hundred of these words. Fortunately, they fell into two broad types.

The first group consisted of typographical errors, anomalies and contractions. Some of these were simple spelling or spacing mistakes which were corrected manually. It seems to be the convention when transcribing blues lyrics that spoken contractions are replicated on the page. Whilst this gives a more accurate rendering

of the lyric, it unfortunately means Wmatrix cannot assign tags. So, whilst the program tags 'walking' correctly, 'walkin'' is consigned to Z99. The problem was solved by identifying all the problem contractions, returning to the original documents and, using the 'find-replace' function in MS word, changing the contractions to their full written forms. The files were then uploaded again and Wmatrix was able to assign the correct tags. These minor and necessary modifications were the only changes made to any of the source texts I used.

The second group consisted of words completely alien to Wmatrix. Words like 'mojo', 'jitterbug' and 'Terraplane' had to be assigned tags manually. To do this, a personal dictionary was created. All the problem words were written into a plain text file and manually assigned a POS and USAS tag. This file was then uploaded into Wmatrix as a personal dictionary and merged with the program's existing dictionary. When the corpora were put through Wmatrix after this modification, they were categorized in their correct domains.

#### **4.3.2 Irregular Semantic Domain Tagging**

As already explained, Wmatrix automatically assigns each word a USAS tag. Due to the specialized nature of the corpora I was uploading, there were a number of words which were given an inappropriate tag, initially creating inaccurate overall results within the semantic domain area. Typical of these inaccuracies was the word 'baby'. When originally uploaded, it was tagged as belonging to the T3- group, indicating TIME: NEW AND YOUNG. Whilst this maybe the most common, or at least conventional, use of 'baby', in the blues the word is almost always a synonym of 'woman'. For my purposes then, the tag needed to be S2.1 PEOPLE: FEMALE. Remedying this was a simple matter of following the process above used for

correcting Z99s. The correct tag was assigned to the word manually in a plain text file and this was merged with Wmtarix2's dictionary. Of course, reassigning tags implies a certain amount of subjectivism on the part of the researcher but this was, in this case, based on a pre-existing knowledge of blues lyrics.

#### **4.4 Preface to the Blues Used**

A written study that involves itself with a vernacular and orally transmitted mode of expression must inevitably absorb within itself some potential inaccuracies. In the case of the blues lyrics used in this study, there are several matters to bear in mind. Whilst standard transcriptions have existed for decades, debates still occasionally occur as to the content of individual lyrics. Due to the poor recording technology and conditions of the time, local dialect or accent and the extent to which the performer was inebriated or not, some single words or phrases are indecipherable. Due to the fact that recording companies concerned themselves with exploiting rather than exploring blues music, it appears more than likely that many of these linguistic idiosyncrasies will remain mysteries. The attempt has been made in this study to cross-check any uncertain areas, particularly when tagging items, but it seems unavoidable in a study of the blues that there are some pre-existing faults.

The chronology I present within this analysis of blues is basic and imposed rather than natural. Fifty years of ardent scholarship and research has not been able to agree upon even a rough date when the blues as we know it came into existence. Charley Patton recorded his famous 'Pony Blues' in 1929. By this time, however, Patton was a mature musician and around forty years old and there is no sure way of knowing how long he had been performing this song. However, because record companies

kept good tabs of when their money was being spent on recording sessions, I can be sure that the lyrics presented here as pre-war and post-war were being consumed by audiences of those eras and so it is most accurate to think of the groupings as periods when these lyrics were popular.

Finally, it will be useful to provide a brief note on the structure of the blues. Anyone with even a passing knowledge of stereotypical blues will know that a feature is its often repetitive form. This repetition is, of course, reflected in the Wmatrix results – words which have a high frequency, and thus the possibility of being key, are likely to do so because of the structure of the verses. It is the habit of some blues texts to transcribe blues lyrics in the format of ‘line one (repeat) / line two’. Adhering to this format and deleting the repeated line in the interests of practicality would have assumed the idea that the repetitions in the blues are artless and arbitrary. On the contrary, there must be as much significance in the decision to repeat a particular line rather than another as there is in a poet deciding which particular lines will form the refrain in a villanelle and, for that reason, repetitions have been left intact.

## **5. Analysis**

### **5.1 Key Linguistic Features of the Blues**

This section will use the initial, quantitative data from Wmatrix to examine the Full Blues Corpus for any key areas. The relevant tables relating to the statistics presented here can be found in Appendix 1.

#### **5.1.1 ‘Hey Mama, Hey Gal, Don’t You Hear Me Callin’ You?’: Men, Women and Relationships in the Blues.**

The opening line from Blind Boy Fuller’s ‘Little Woman You’re So Sweet’ encapsulates the areas that the following section will deal with: The presentation of women within the lyric, the relationship between the speaker and the object of the lyric and the relationship between the blues man, the speaker and the audience.

Keyness results from Wmatrix indicate that the main preoccupation of blues lyrics is Men, Women and Relationships. Half of the key semantic fields relate to this area and include PERSONAL NAMES, PEOPLE: FEMALE, PEOPLE: MALE, LIKE and RELATIONSHIP: INTIMACY AND SEX. Further to this, seven of twenty key words link to the theme: ‘love’, ‘mama’, ‘man’, ‘woman’, ‘babe’ and ‘loving’. Looking at these key points in conjunction with one another allows the nature of the topic to be delineated and investigated.

That ‘baby’, with an LL value of 7095.91, ranks as the top lexical word and forms the bulk of the semantic field PEOPLE: FEMALE is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it heralds the preoccupation with the female figure within the lyrics of blues men and secondly it gives us a typical example of the way in which women were conceptualised by the blues men. There are 1685 occurrences of ‘baby’ in the corpus

and the majority are synonymous with the word woman. Examining the concordances of baby shows the full range of uses of women within blues lyrics.

31% of lines treat 'baby' as the possession of the speaker. A large number of these occur with the collocate 'my', with 'my baby' having an LL of 278.76. The top collocate involving baby, 'I baby', also reveals patterns that configure the relationship between the speaker and the woman in terms of possession. The details of the relationships between the speaker and the female figures vary between lyrics but the structure usually configures the speaker as the subject and the female as the object. Additionally, the relationships presented polarise into positive and negative camps. These positive and negative poles are defining features of the relationships presented in the lyrics. In 27% of concordances, 'baby' is part of a construction which represents a positive relationship with the speaker. This can be in the form of praise, 'I love you so much baby, I love you better than I love myself' or an expression of the desirability of 'baby' in lines like 'I can't stop loving my baby'. However, in 42% of concordances 'baby' is couched in an explicitly negative context. In lines like 'my baby stay out all night long, keeps me worried all the time' and 'I work hard for my baby and she treats me like a slave', a grammatical trend showing a dominant male voice is revealed which is evident throughout almost all the lyrics. Generally, the figure 'I' is agentive in blues lyrics and so by extension it is the male voice which is dominant and which has control in the vast majority of lyrics. When referring to a relationship, the familiar dyad where 'men are active, women must be passive' (Cameron, 1992: 84) is adhered to. What is important to note, then, is that, as in the examples above, when the female is agentive, the action is one which has a negative effect upon the speaker. This notion is repeated throughout the corpus to the point where male agentive lines like 'I love you, baby' are inverted when the female is

agentive into negative portrayals exemplified by the oft repeated ‘you done made me love you’. In 31% of lines using the pronoun ‘me’, the speaker is constructed in this way, the victim at the hands of a woman. By comparison, in only 7% of lines where the female is agentive is ‘me’ used in a positive context. Relationships throughout the blues lyrics, both pre and post-war, tend to fit these patterns where either the male is dominant and the female is an object of desire and something which can be controlled, or she is agentive and almost exclusively capable of acts of unkindness or infidelity. Indeed, in the semantic field SAD, the majority of references highlight the suffering of the speaker at the hands of a woman, reflecting on facts like ‘love sometimes leaves you feeling sad and blue’ or lamenting that ‘she left my heart in misery’.

Whilst ‘baby’ is the most frequent item used to describe women, the semantic field PEOPLE: FEMALE reveals a number of synonyms, including ‘woman’, ‘women’, ‘gal’, ‘girls’ ‘mama’ and even ‘thing’. Additionally, of course, there are the huge number of referents ‘she’ and ‘her’. Relatively rarely is a female dignified with a name and the use of ‘baby’ and the like are a dehumanising feature of the blues, subjugating ‘woman’ to a set of distinct archetypes which the blues man uses to define the speaker or the speaker’s condition. Allied to this is the prolific use of qualifying adjectives used to classify the female. By far the most frequent are the infantilising ‘little’ and ‘sweet’ – the top three collocates of ‘little’ across the whole corpus are ‘girl’, ‘woman’ and ‘baby’. Similarly, ‘sweet’ collocates with ‘mama’ and ‘she’s’. Expanding on this, there are a number of typical categories which, again, occur throughout the corpus. Lyrics mention ‘no good women’, ‘love making mama’ and ‘brownskin gal’. The habit of describing sexual profligacy and proficiency is one which will be explored in more detail later, though it is pertinent to mention here that

a woman can be portrayed entirely in terms of her sexual attractiveness or potential as perceived by the speaker, that is, in terms of her 'fruit' or her 'lovin' ways'.

The lyrics involving male and female relationships seem to show both the male asserting his power and the male being subjugated to the unfairness or whims of an anonymous, generic female other. It is extremely tempting at this point to see the relationship as an analogy for the relations between blacks and whites. The female represents white authority, victimising the African American as represented by the (male) speaker. By extension, the predilection for songs in which the (male) speaker has control over the female could represent the fantasy of being in control of the dominant ideology. Certainly, it seems that the lyrics tend to foreground the agency of the male African-American. Or, perhaps in a less tenuous analysis, the mere prevalence of the male asserting authority over the female in songs and not asserting authority over other men (i.e the male 'I' and the female 'you') simply highlights the fact that the chief realm in which a black American could express his 'power' was only in the realm of the domestic, not the political.

### **5.1.2 The Bluesman and His Audience**

The relationship between the male and the female is one of the key explicit themes of the blues but the relationship between the blues man and his audience is one which is particularly important. In studies of the blues, the blues man is regularly afforded the position of community spokesman and the lyrics are seen as a vocalisation of a wider collective feeling, the speaker in the lyrics being 'not a filled subject, but an anonymous (nameless) voice issuing from the black (w)hole' (Baker, 1987: 5). This concept, put forward by Baker as part of his 'blues matrix' theory mentioned in the literature review, implies such a close connection between the blues man and his

audience that he ceases to present an individual voice and is instead a mouthpiece for African-American experience in general. How this is configured within the lyrics themselves is rather interesting, as an examination of the corpus does not immediately reveal this. Rather, the surface features of the relationship seem to be contradictory.

Wmatrix reveals a rather low incidence of the pronouns 'us' and 'our' and 'we'. These are the pronouns we might expect to find if an explicit connection between the blues man or his speaker and the audience and community was being established. Rather, we find personal deixis constructed most often in opposing dyads. Thus, the relationship 'us' is more often constructed within the terms of 'me' and 'you'. 'Our' is expressed as 'mine' and 'yours'. This distance is one which seems to operate in the text world, where the 'me' refers to the speaker and the 'you' refers to the object of the song, and also in the discourse world, producing a separation rather than a joining of speaker and audience. The prevalence of the first person singular viewpoint across the corpus highlights the defining viewpoint – that of a homodiegetic narrator who operates on the same level as the exegesis of the narrative (Simpson, 2004). Once the speaker's position has been established, there is no explicit deictic shift involving pronouns.

However, in the songs which stem from the first person viewpoint, there is often a shift from the specific to the general or vice-versa. This manifests itself in the tendency for part of a blues lyric to deal with a specific situation which develops from or is developed into a more abstract idea. These patterns do not always operate consistently across a whole song but often establish the thematic locus of the song operating on a single stanza level. Hurt's 'Avalon Blues' offers an example. The first two lines outline a specific event in detail without revealing any mood (although we mustn't forget that these lyrics would be performed originally within a melody which

conveyed something of the mood): 'Got to New York this mornin', just about half-past nine / Got to New York this mornin', just about half-past nine'. The final line of then serves to express the emotion associated with the event with the word crying: 'Hollerin' one mornin' in Avalon, couldn't hardly keep from cryin''. The lyric now describes the event which happened to the speaker (the specific) and the emotional response (the general) which can be understood, or empathised with, by the audience. In some songs, the verses apply different specifics to a single general idea, as in Robert Wilkins' 'That's No Way To Get Along', where, after relating the specifics of each individual misfortune, the repeated refrain 'that's no way to get along' expresses the 'general truth' that these are examples of poor treatment which could apply to anyone. Other songs develop a general theme more slowly across several verses. In this way, the distance between the blues man and the audience is lessened.

Reading this specific-general movement in terms of the individual-community pattern has some historical precedent which is embodied in the structuring of the music itself. In the earlier music of African-Americans, in the work songs of the plantations where music performed the role of synchronising individual effort into team work, it was observed that 'the leader sings his first solo line, follows with the response line then sings his second solo line, after which the group picks up the indicated response' (Courlander, 1966. 92). It seems the blues structure internalises this relationship.

How far the black whole can be considered a whole is open to interpretation.

Searching through the semantic fields PEOPLE: FEMALE and PEOPLE: MALE and looking at the subject-object constructions in the blues certainly seems to point to a voice expressing a particularly male community. It is also a voice which seems to exclude another large part of the African-American community – the devout.

### **5.1.3 I Ain't Cryin' For No Religion: God and the Supernatural.**

The conservative social make-up of the South meant that the Church had played a central part in its history. Both racial sections of society had strong church communities and the church was a place many African-Americans looked to for salvation. However, latterly, the church in the South has come to be seen as another part of the ideological state apparatus that was used to keep the African-American population in its place. Indeed, 'white planters supported black churches far more readily than black schools, primarily because they believed that churches reinforced the status quo, while education contributed to black dissatisfaction' (Cobb, 1999: 180). RELIGION AND THE SUPERNATURAL is the key semantic field with an LL value of 2241.49. Anyone with a foreknowledge of the blues might not find this surprising given that the genre has frequently been described as 'the devil's music'. One might expect the lyrics to give some credence to the term but in fact, 'Lord' is one of the top key words in the corpus (LL 2635.30).

The corpus data shows that RELIGION AND THE SUPERNATURAL is a varied lexical field. There are thirty-one different items associated with the area ranging from words with a high frequency like 'Lord' and 'God' to less frequent specific biblical imagery, 'John the Baptist' and 'Jesus', to the occasional acknowledgment of the supernatural end of the scale with items like 'magic' and 'hoodoo'. It is 'Lord' and its derivatives, however, which constitute the bulk of the field and it is that which I subjected to the most scrutiny. There are 566 uses of the word 'Lord' across the corpus and these can firstly be seen as belonging to two distinct groups; the first group uses 'Lord' in an explicitly religious sense and the second does not.

The first group is comprised of lines like 'stand by me, Lord, you never lost a battle' and 'when we get there going to crown him Lord of all'. In these lines, the

word 'Lord' is contextualised within a religious narrative. The story of 'Samson and Delilah' is found within the concordances, along with a divine meditation on the sinking of the Titanic. In fact, 'Lord' in this context only accounts for 21% of its overall use. It is the word 'God' which is used almost exclusively in a religious sense and concordances with 'God' show a much greater intensity of religious feeling. Lyrics range from the apocalyptic 'God done warned you, Jesus coming soon', to the mystical 'can't you see God's movin' by the waters' and 'God in creation, God when Adam fell / God in heaven, God way down in hell'. A key point here is that the concordances showed two areas where these lyrics were located in large chunks. Investigation showed that this was Wmatrix highlighting the fact that the lyrics came from two particular artists from within the entire corpus. One, predictably, was the Reverend Blind Gary Davis. The other was Blind Willie Johnson. The reason I refer to them here is that both are recognised as blues men and, incidentally, ones who were central to the development of key styles. However, their subject matter is far removed from that dealt with in the rest of the blues. In fact, in the book *'Negro Folk Music USA'*, Harold Courlander cites Blind Willie Johnson as a key figure not in blues music at all but in the 'Anthems and Spirituals' section of his work (Courlander, 1966). It seems that his categorisation, lyrically at least, is borne out by the Wmatrix results and that the use of religious narrative and imagery for religious purposes is an exception to the rule in blues music.

Bearing this in mind, it seems pertinent to investigate the use of 'Lord' in the 79% of concordances which do not use it in a religious sense. The most striking thing on looking through the concordances is the regular positioning of the word, in the centre of the line between clauses. In lines like 'Freight train he come rolling by, Lord, and I sure ain't got no loving baby' and 'I hate to see you get away, Lord, I hate to see you

leave me darling’, typical of the concordances, ‘Lord’ occurs at a point where we expect a natural, caesura like pause or musical rest point. The fact that Lord has no thematic connection underlies the sense that it is simply an interjection used for rhythmic purposes. This position is further consolidated by the fact that the variant ‘Lordy’ is used as an alternative two syllable interjection.

The relegation of ‘Lord’ to rhythmic interjection by the blues men implies that it had little of its usual symbolism, or that its use was a conscious rejection of the notions of the church. Certainly, there is evidence in some songs, like Son House’s ‘Preachin’ Blues’ of an out and out attack upon the church, but given that the use seems so arbitrary and is so often used out of context, it seems that the former proposition is more likely. That is, the unconscious use of the word ‘Lord’ as a rhythmic interjection, delexicalisation to the point of reducing it to a sound, suggests that the word and by extension the concept had little relevance to the blues singers. We must also bear in mind that other topics discussed and presented in blues lyrics, such as male and female relationships and sex, do not naturally go hand in hand with notions of religion and it is perhaps further to the argument that ‘Lord’ is so often juxtaposed with profane subject matter. The lack of a significant presence of hellish imagery in the blues (there are only twenty-two references to the Devil in the whole corpus) furthers the argument that the blues was not explicitly ‘Devil’s music’ but gained the reputation by association with vice. Although the key differences between pre and post-war blues are examined in the following chapter, it is worth noting here that, by the post-war period, ‘Lord’ ceases to occupy a key position in the corpus and, where we find it as an interjection in the pre-war period, it has been replaced by interjections like ‘baby’ and ‘yeah’. Certainly, anthropological studies conducted amongst the African-American population picked up on a dichotomy existing within

the lyrical content of its songs, where 'if a man feel hurt within side and he sing a church song then he's asking God for help. If a man sing the blues it's more or less out of himself. He's not askin' no one for help' (Cobb, J 1999. 286).

#### **5.1.4 Woke Up This Morning, Looked Round For My Shoes: Movement in the Blues**

The African-American experience is one which can be thought of in terms of different types of movement and non-movement. Beginning with the slave ships crossing the Atlantic from West Africa to the eastern seaboard of the USA, to the geographical, social and political confinement of the cotton and tobacco plantations, to impoverished families moving from southern farmstead to farmstead, to the great migration north, to the economic immobility generated by the urban ghettos, to the defiant marches of the civil rights movement. Moving, or rather preventing it, was certainly something of a preoccupation of the economic and legal powers of the time. States in the south enforced vagrancy laws, which in its most extreme forms precluded walking down the street for black males: 'If the county needed roadwork done or a levee built, you just didn't walk down the wrong road or get off by yourself in town. You would be on the chain. No trial, no hearing. Vagrancy, even if you're on your way home from the store' (Charters, 1961. P196). The paranoia on the part of the white ruling class concerning black movement, partly justified by the events of the 1940's, was based upon the knowledge that the system in operation was entirely unfair but also essential in the upkeep of the Southern economy. Various payment schemes, using credit with high interest and store tokens redeemable only in certain local stores kept African-Americans imprisoned in the south. A finely tuned system was evolved for tenant farmers to 'keep them dependant enough to ensure that they

would be ready to work wherever labour was needed without creating a sense of hopelessness and frustration great enough to cause them to seek employment elsewhere' (Cobb, 1999: 102-103). It is not surprising that this is reflected in the lyrics of the blues. Both the key semantic domain MOVING: COMING AND GOING and the key word 'going\_to' prompted an investigation into concepts of movement within the blues.

The blues lyrics which deal with relationships are often ones which also have travel as a central theme. As we have already seen, there is a division between the agentive and non-agentive roles of the speaker and this division is perpetuated in the concordances dealing with movement. In fact, reinforcing the ideas presented earlier, when the female is agentive, it is the speaker who is being left. Again, it is the blues man as victim. However, the overriding sense across the corpus is one where the speaker is agentive and mobile. 76% of concordances are composed in the 'I'm leaving here' rather than 'you left me'. Within these concordances, it is the type and direction of movement which proves to be particularly interesting as a number of different patterns emerge.

The concordances show that when the speaker is agentive movement is divided into two broad categories: movement where a destination is specified and those where a destination is absent. 59% of lyrics belong to the latter category. In the concordances of 'leave' and its lemmas, the act of movement itself is foregrounded. The apotheosis of this is the line 'going away to leave'. 'Go' and 'going\_to' bear this out, with very few concordances of 'going\_to' actually mentioning a place and concordances of 'go' showing a proliferation of ambiguous referents. The speaker refers to 'everywhere I go', 'no matter where I go' and 'you gotta go away from here'. Though there are references to real places and actual destinations, many seem to be

symbolic rather than literal: In one line, the speaker urges the woman in the song to go with him to “the edge of town” in a sexual metaphor, whilst another lyrics provides a meditation on death with “I can’t go down a dark road by myself”.

Whilst movement and leaving seem desirable in the abstract, committing oneself to one specific location seems to present difficulties. The foregrounding of ‘going\_to’ as a key grammatical structure is interesting because it suggests the desire, or even the potential, to do something without having any sense that the desire will be fulfilled that the use of present continuous might suggest. Comparison of two examples illustrates the point: ‘I’m going to leave this town’ compared to ‘look here, baby, I’m leaving this town’. The present continuous example has a stronger sense of the event actually happening. The first example, however, is the structure which dominates the blues and seems to emphasise the desire. Certainly, there is a sense of ambiguity as to when the action might be completed that is not present in the immediacy of the second example. This use of ‘going to’, and it is not limited to movement but spreads across a number of different activities as a reference to the future, like ‘I’m going to teach you a little lesson’ or ‘I’m going to shoot you and shoot you four or five times’ seems to play out fantasies rather than relate things which actually have the probability of happening. Between 1930 and 1940, migration of African Americans out of the south was just 4.4 million people. In the following decade, over 13 million left the southern states (Renshaw, P 1996). It is interesting to note that the majority of lyrics which display the characteristics noted above are from the pre-war period and it seems that the reality of moving in the great migration has lessened the need for the catharsis in the post-war blues.

Another distinctive feature is the fact that the goings and leavings of the blues man are complemented by very few mentions of arrivals. ‘Came’, which would suggest a

completed arrival, only occurs eight times across the corpus. Instead, arrivals and returns, like departures, are configured in terms of desire. 33% of the uses of 'come' are as imperatives uttered by the speaker of the song telling someone, usually a female, to 'come back'. The top collocations of come, in fact, are 'back' (LL 385.09) and 'home' (LL 342.77). 'Home' itself is an interesting concept. In 43% of constructions, it is conveyed in a positive light, as 'my happy home'. In others, 49%, we see this happy home broken up. The speaker, in the capacity of illicit lover, worries that 'your man will come home'. On the other side of the coin, the speaker often arrives home to find another man in his place, 'another mule kicking in your stall'. The home, then, aspires to be a place of security but in actual fact is the scene of many of the speaker's dramas of infidelity, pain and insecurity. We might reflect that this is not unlike the reality of life for African-Americans, particularly in the pre-war period.

### **5.1.5 Summary**

Despite the patterns I have found, there will always be some variation reflecting individual artists. However, Wmatrix has proved extremely useful in outlining some of the main features and exposing them for the analysis. According to my findings above, we can see the blues man projecting a first person world view. This is constructed from personal experiences but the lyrics continuously cut the distance between speaker and audience by attempting to move from specific experience to general 'truths'. As a result, there is some credence in asserting that the lyrics present a set of shared community experiences and opinions, although this community, it has to be said, excludes at least females.

The blues lyrics present a world where the speaker has a volatile love-hate relationship with women and is constantly trying to assert power over the female figure through her subjugation in the construction of the lyrics. It is only here, in these female – male constructions, that the speaker shows any ability to assert himself and, given what we know of the conditions of the time, this could be a fictional compensatory factor for general disenfranchisement in social, economic and political life.

This disenfranchisement seems to be highlighted in other ways, with what I have suggested is a suspicion of ideological state apparatus in the form of the church and a text-world which sees the speaker moving or expressing the desire to move in a world which did its utmost to prevent black mobility. Looking at the concordances has also made obvious the fact that the pre and post-war blues seem to differ in style and content.

In the following chapter, I will examine the ways in which blues lyrics can be seen to outline a sense of black identity and the ways in which the subject matter undermined some of the hegemonic tenets of the time. At the same time, I will investigate the ways in which the pre and post-war blues diverge in style and content.

## **5.2 Pre-War and Post-War Blues**

A glance at the semantic field tables, located in appendix 1, suggests that the pre- and post-war blues concern themselves with different thematic areas. In section 5.2.1, I examine the role of KIN, GEOGRAPHICAL TERMS, LIVING CREATURES and GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES in the blues and look at the changes in use between the two eras. In section 5.2.2, I look at the role of folk archetypes and narratives in the pre-war blues and make some suggestions as to why the use of these had died out in the subsequent period. Finally, in section 5.2.3, I look at the subversive features of the pre-war blues and examine the extent to which they are absent in post-war lyrics.

### **5.2.1 Down on the Killing Floor: People and Places in the Blues.**

The pre-war blues man populates his world with references to KIN (LL 14.28). Cousins, aunties, brothers, sons, grandmas and grandpas all feature in the lyrics. As might be expected having read the first chapter, the female is predominant in the lyrics. In fact, it is here that we find another key configuration in the form of the mother. The mother is idealized throughout the corpus and, in every concordance, she is described in positive, affectionate or sympathetic terms. The speaker often relates the hard work the 'poor mother' has to do, or laments the passing of his mother: 'I'm a stranger in this place and I'm looking for my mother's grave'. In one concordance, the speaker asserts with heavy repetition that 'nobody on earth can take a mother's place'. In some cases, this idealized form of the feminine is used as a direct contrast to that other archetype, 'wife'. The concordances show the speaker attacking the wife, 'you've worried my mother until she died' and 'wife' is consistently presented in a negative context, with concordances displaying 'wife done throw me away', 'wife is even cross with you', and warnings to 'keep your wife at home'. Similarly, the

qualifying adjective ‘married’ is used to cast a critical eye over women, again emphasizing what the concordances establish with ‘baby’ and the like, that women are duplicitous and not to be trusted. A single woman is ‘crazy about a married man’ but at the same time a ‘married woman is crazy about a single man’. This continuing preoccupation with women in the KIN field reveals that, for the most part, the pre-war blues lyrics are not intent on offering a description or commentary on family life and that the majority of the concordances are a continuance of the PEOPLE: FEMALE domain so critical to the blues as a whole. However, the fact that other family nouns are used does point to the fact that pre-war blues men were drawing on the world around them to colour their lyrics. By contrast, by the post-war period, the references to KIN have halved in frequency (0.33% compared to 0.64%) and the semantics have been adjusted. In the pre-war blues, for example, ‘daddy’ can refer to ‘father’ or ‘lover’. By the 1950’s, the term ‘daddy’ had come for blues men to represent only the idea of lover. This is one instance of a pattern which we will see repeated throughout this chapter of a reduction in lexical variation as the blues moves away from its rural, pre-war roots towards its urban, post-war climax.

Certainly, the world around the pre-war blues man is geographically far more varied than that of his post-war counterpart. A key field in the pre-war blues, GEOGRAPHIC FEATURES (LL 14.02) has little relevance in the post-war blues, where the frequency of use drops by nearly two-thirds. Not only does the incidence reduce, but, like KIN, the lexical variety differs significantly. In the urban blues, the blues men tend to confine themselves to the superordinate form, whereas the pre-war blues singers make full use of the range of hyponyms and related words. In the post-war blues, for example, we have the words ‘ocean’, ‘sea’, ‘coast’ and ‘river’ used as water features. In the pre-war blues, ‘ocean’, ‘sea’, ‘coast’ and ‘river’ are supplemented

with 'creek', 'bayou', 'shore', 'waves', 'brook', 'riverside' and 'iceberg'. The sense of place, of a geographical reality, is much stronger when reading through or listening to the pre-war blues and, in fact, there are nearly double the amount of geographical feature types mentioned there compared to the post-war blues.

There is a function of geographical features common to both time periods as many of the geographical features act as the source domains for metaphors. Thus, 'river', for example, performs the traditional role as a metaphor for life, as does the word 'road'. 'Sea' and 'ocean' provide the source domains for the universe or the unknowable within both blues corpora. Though both periods use geographic features for figurative purposes, what distinguishes the pre-war blues, apart from the number of items, is the way the features are not only figurative. A case in point is 'High Water Blues' by Charlie Patton. In one sense, the song itself can be interpreted as a tale about triumph in the face of adversity, with the speaker moving from place to place in each verse to escape floodwaters until he 'won't be worried no more'. However, the verses also accurately document the progression of the waters in the 1927 Mississippi flood, which was a national disaster. It is not alone: Blind Lemon Jefferson's song 'Rising High Water Blues' deals with the same flood and the effect on the local population. As such, the song occupies the realms of both the literal and the figurative, as do other songs which comment on surviving the crossing of Death Valley, taking particular roads and railways and surviving particular prisons. By the post-war period, the blues lyrics seem to have lost this descriptive quality and rely on geography as the basis for fossilized metaphors.

Specific places are also much more prevalent in the pre-war blues than the post-war variety. There are 236 references to actual places in the former, in contrast with just 95 across the latter. In the earlier, rural lyrics, place names vary widely from the

international to the national, the regional, local and, occasionally, the biblical. Later blues tend to confine themselves to wider areas, like states and countries, for example, rather than regional localities. The crucial difference seems to be that, whilst the post-war blues names places with a broad brush and affords them little symbolic content, understanding the selection of the specific place in the pre-war blues is crucial to grasping the meaning or the mood of the lyric.

‘Parchmann Farm’ is mentioned several times in different lyrics across the pre-war corpus. One line restricts itself to ‘went down to the depot, they got me ready for that Parchmann train’. The lyrics themselves do not explain what or where Parchmann is. Without knowing, the subsequent lyrics do not convey any particular mood, they merely relate a sequence of events in a journey. However, if the listener knows that Parchmann refers to Parchmann Farm, a notorious county prison farm system where workers were chain-ganged, the sequences in the journey stages take on an impending sense of doom as the speaker moves closer to his destination. Similarly, the song ‘Highway 44’ has little lexical content to explain why the speaker should be sad. However, if the listener knows that ‘Highway 44’ was the road which lead to labour and lumber camps where people were forced to relocate for intensive physical work, we can understand the song. For a modern audience, or even a contemporary one with no knowledge of the region, it is easy to ignore the significance of specific place names and perhaps ascribe ambiguous or generic qualities to them. This is particularly so when place names are not described or, due to being mentioned just a couple of times, they appear peripheral to the rest of the lyric. Perhaps, when hearing ‘Highway 44’, a modern listener would focus on the highway and the journey being taken, or the road as a metaphor. However, I would suggest that a contemporary audience whom the blues man was targeting would be much more likely to focus on

the significance of the destination that Highway 44 leads to. For the lyrics to be understood, the blues man had to operate closely with his audience, relying heavily on their schematic knowledge. In other words, the blues man was constructing songs which were based around the top-down processing abilities of the community. In the previous chapter, I claimed that one way of reducing the distance between the speaker and the community was the movement from the specific to the general. This bonding between the individual and the community seems to be enhanced by the reliance within the lyrics on a shared knowledge specific to different localities. This is a feature not evident in the lyrics of the later, urban blues.

The semantic field LIVING CREATURES mirrors that of GEOGRAPHIC FEATURES and GEOGRAPHIC NAMES and the concordances serve to reinforce the argument above. There are more than double the number of references to animals in the pre-war blues (347 compared to 167) and, again, the variety is much greater. As with geographical features, the metaphoricity of both periods is relatively traditional and not peculiar to the genre, with typical similes including ‘quiet as a lamb’ and ‘my mind was rambling like the wild geese in the west’, with target domains of metaphors generally restricted to relationships. In the pre-war blues, there is the same attention to detail and reliance on schematic knowledge that was observed above. ‘I saw the Bo’ weevil, Lord, circle in the air / next time I seed [sic] him, he has his family there’ is typical. Only if one understands that the Boll Weevil was an insect that regularly ravaged the cotton crop on a biblical scale can one appreciate the dark humour of the speaker in anthropomorphizing the creature.

### **5.2.2 Bad Men: Folk Archetypes**

The blues is a form which favours a first person narrative and the majority of concordances and songs that I have looked at up to now are of this vein. Looking at the personal pronoun use in the pre-war blues which appears as the key POS, however, shows that blues lyrics which do not conform to this pattern are quite numerous. There are a significant number of lyrics which employ a third person heterodiegetic narrator. A close reading of the songs from which these concordances came sees the blues man move from a personal experience narrator to a story teller, and his position outside the action places him alongside the audience. These concordances are relatively easy to spot from amongst the other in the corpus: they make use of the third person form, they use the past aspect rather than the present or perfect which are common to the other blues, and they are built around a central drama rather than a series of verses which might only be connected by mood. They often show the same names repeated throughout or use anaphoric referents and the lyrics often make use of reported speech to vocalize the protagonists' thoughts. These songs also abandon the A1A1A2 rhyme structures that have provided the bulk of the analysis so far. Crucially, they again insist on top-down processing from the audience in order to understand the view-point of the speaker. That is, the schematic knowledge of the audience is a key factor in how the lyrics are interpreted. What is probably most significant, however, is the fact that, though the narratives and the characters vary in detail, they all seem to present the same cultural archetypes.

The persona of Stag O Lee is one example. Stag O Lee can be found in various incarnations in black folklore and is the archetypal trickster figure. He straddles the fence between respectability due to his fearlessness and reprehensibility his almost indefensible immorality. Courlander (1966) relates that in one tale, Stag O Lee (or

Stack O Lee, Staggerlee or Stackalee depending on the source) possesses such power that he is held responsible for the great San Francisco earthquake, having developed a rage in being refused service by a bartender. In the blues looked at here, there is some deictic shifting as, though the narrative progresses in the third person, the refrains involve the narrator asking directly ‘police officer, how can it be, you can ‘rest everybody but cruel Stagger Lee?’ Though the song involves Stagger Lee murdering Billy De Lyon, it is the act of not being caught by the authorities that is central to the song and which is emphasized in the refrain. Indeed, outwitting authority is the one of the key features of these ‘folk song blues’. In another song, Spike Driver, the speaker recalls the murder of John Henry by the white overseer to the audience but also incorporates himself into the song in his refusal to work: ‘Take this hammer and carry it to my captain and tell him I’m gone, just tell him I’m gone, I sure is gone / This is the hammer that killed John Henry but it won’t kill me’.

The songs above are examples of ones that stem from African-American folklore in general and which seek to perpetuate already established community myths, keeping them alive in the black consciousness. At the same time, there are lyrics which introduce figures which seem to be exclusive to the blues men and show them fashioning their own signifiers of the dominant ideology. Predictably, just as black folk figures are presented as heroic, white figures are presented as villains. In one line, the authority of the white man is defined in terms of the black man’s suffering: ‘in prison it ain’t no use to scream and cry / Mr Purvis the onliest [sic] manager, he just pay no mind’. In a similar vein, there is ‘Captain Jack’ who will ‘write his name up and down your back’.

In the hands of the blues men, the folk figures play so persistently on simple notions of good and evil that we can think of them in terms of concrete ‘signals’.

Where these ‘meanings are created by [repeated] recognition of what are then in effect signals: of the properties of an object or the character of a stimulus’, there is no room for ambiguity (Williams, 1977: 38). These signals describe African-American archetypes which have been identified as representing a ‘massive concentration of black experiential energy’ (Williams, 1977:451). In this sense, this particular type of blues adds to the sense of community by creating simple targets for admiration and derision.

Raymond Williams (1977) identifies the significance of both recycling traditional elements and attempting to assimilate new ideas into that tradition. In choosing particular archetypes from the past whilst at the same time creating new signals, the blues becomes ‘an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and pre-shaped present, which is powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification’ (Williams, 1977: 115). That is, the blues is able to identify the imposed power structure and simultaneously, in the creation of its alternative narratives, offer an alternative power structure. In the story of Stag O Lee, the white dominant ideology is represented by the police officer and, in being defied, a version of black authority is allowed to assert itself. These African-American versions of understanding represent a rebalancing of power, not in the political arena but in the cultural and social ones. In the following paragraphs, I will examine how this is complemented by a use of innuendo which was indefinable and incomprehensible within the terms of the dominant ideologies’ understanding.

Looking at the corpus data for the post-war blues is interesting as, in these lyrics, it is very difficult to find either a narrative format or mention of any archetypal figures. The signals seem to have gone out of use almost entirely. The concordances show personal pronoun use is for the most part now female names, and the figures

mentioned above are not reinvented or reinterpreted. The changing socio-political climate of the times seems to offer some explanation as to why and reinforces the ideas above. According to Meier and Rudwick, the '1940's and 1950's were years of gradually improving Negro status and a period in which the expectations of the masses did not greatly outrun the actual improvements being made' (1970: 286). Certainly, it appears that the urban migration to cities that were not as openly hostile to African-Americans as the south (where, as late as the 1930s, one senator exclaimed openly that 'we would be justified in slaughtering every Ethiop on the earth to preserve unsullied the honour of one Caucasian home'(Cobb, 1999: 147)) provided the community with a great deal more economic, social and political freedom. Where those freedoms were not granted, the civil rights movement was to be found. At the time that the civil rights movement grew, blues music seemed to become less relevant to African-Americans, at least in the form it appears in the pre-war blues here. As I have already pointed out, the lexical variation and depth of the pre-war blues seems to be lost in the later styles. I would also posit that whilst in the south the covert use of black and white archetypes in songs had been a necessary form of coding, the greater abundance of freedom of speech and the increasingly vocal Black pressure groups rendered it redundant. African-Americans could by that time look to contemporary figures who were real and not just embodiments of the text world in the form of Martin Luther King, for example, and were already starting to draw on recent historical figures like W.E.B Du Bois and Marcus Garvey when they shaped their past. This is of course conjecture, but the fact is that, by the 1950's, fewer and fewer people from the African-American community were listening to the blues.

### **5.2.3 Banana in Your Fruit Basket: Anti-language and Counter-Culture.**

I have already mentioned that, by association, a popular view of the blues was that it was the ‘devil’s music’ and that this was particularly true in the rural south where the church seems to have been in direct opposition to the blues. As discussed above, some of the narrative pieces express admiration for figures that murdered and defied authority and the general unruliness represented in the lyrics concerning relationships and movement may have served to polarize the church and the blues. Looking through the corpus data, however, does not automatically expose a world of vice and licentiousness. None of the key words or semantic fields explicitly point to this. There are some songs that do mention ‘immoral’ activities in no uncertain terms. Tommy Johnson’s ‘Alcohol and Jake Blues’ and ‘Canned Heat’ blues focus on drinking. The speaker in ‘Blind Lemon Jefferson’s ‘Big Night Blues’ catalogues the symptoms of the morning after the night of a ‘wild party’. Lonnie Johnson’s ‘Low Down St. Louis Blues’ describes a girlfriend who ‘dips her snuff and drinks a good old homemade corn’ and the Mississippi Sheiks warn of the pitfalls involved in running moonshine whiskey in ‘Bootlegger’s Blues’. These songs, and a number of others like them are, nevertheless, exceptions. The majority of concordances do not immediately show a music devoted to fast living and that vice which the blues is most infamous for, sex, is conspicuously absent.

It is here that Wmatrix has really come into its own in assisting in getting a sense of how the dominant ideology of the time might have experienced the blues. If we imagine Wmatrix as a mirror of the white mind set, we can see that the lyrics of the blues are grouped in inoffensive, everyday semantic fields. In the top ten, we have LIVING CREATURES, TASTE and FOOD. The actual meaning of the lyrics contained within these semantic fields has slipped under the radar entirely because what the

majority of the concordances from these semantic fields show is a graphic rendering of sexual mores. Gayle Dean Wardlow (1998: 144) remembers in one study that ‘most of the white executives working for the record companies didn’t understand the double meaning of the black language’. In terms of metaphor, Wmatrix, like the white executives of the time, sees the lyric only in terms of its source domain, FOOD. On the other hand, the black audience would have been able to interpret the metaphor in terms of its target domain, SEX.

FOOD is such a rich vein that it is worth examining in more detail. Returning to the original theme of the blues as whole, it is common for the blues to categorize women in terms of food. A woman can instead be described as a ‘dough roller’ or ‘biscuit roller’. Literally, these refer to the domestic process of cooking. Figuratively they refer to something far less wholesome. Anatomical items are also catalogued in the concordances. The female body is graphically presented as ‘custy pie’, ‘lemon’, ‘meat shaking on the bone’ and ‘ham and eggs’. The concordances show that ‘get’ collocates with these items, in the sense of the speaker being served with them, but it is not only the female anatomy which is focused on. One hilarious sequence of lines suggests how women can look forward to a visit from the ‘candy man’. In one line, the speaker observes that ‘she always takes a candy stick to bed’ whilst in another, a friendly warning is offered: ‘Don’t stand so close to the candy man, / he’ll leave a big candy stick in your hand’. One can only imagine the perplexed white recording engineers standing around wondering why a blues man was singing about purveying confectionary to minors. The speaker often revels in the act of offering the woman in the lyric his ‘jelly roll’, ‘peaches’ or ‘banana’. The sexual act receives the same treatment, with a woman being praised for being able to ‘bake a good jelly roll’ or ‘roast a man’s meat’. In different sets of concordances, the speaker requests that he

can be the woman's 'lemon squeezer' or promises that together they can 'churn the butter'. Nor, as suggested at the start of this section, is food the exclusive source domain. In the semantic field LIVING CREATURES, there are references to the male anatomy, 'black snake crawlin' in my room / some pretty mama better come and get this black snake soon' and sexual advice given to woman in the guise of a race horse and jockey, 'as soon as you get on your home stretch, give your jockey every bit you got'.

Whilst the prevalence of sex and sexual references within the blues seems to be a celebration of a lifestyle deliberately cultivated to enjoy moments of pleasure in an environment that probably offered little else to revel in, its importance in terms of this study is as an example of anti-language, the 'relexicalisation which involves recycling established words in the language into new structures and meanings' (Simpson, 2004: 105). The use of innocent source domains taken directly from the dominant ideology and their mapping onto taboo target domains is an act of cultural subversion. Whilst the period that saw the rise of the blues also saw a worldwide loosening of the moral belt, the insulated white south held onto Victorian moral codes for dear life in an effort to retain the mantle it had held in the ante-bellum period as a model of civilized society. Of course, this was the official line. Just as the south exercised double standards in claiming to be the seat of hospitality whilst simultaneously being the location for a lynching every five and a half months for seven decades, so 'the region most charring of 'cigarettes and whiskey and wild, wild women' (as the hillbilly song has it) produces nearly all of the first and the best of the second' (Reed, 1986: 69). No comment on the third vice is made but it is important to note that whilst the region proclaimed itself god fearing and upright, it unofficially indulged in activities of a horizontal nature to the point where 'every sizeable southern city had its dens of

iniquity and red light districts...men of all classes, including college boys and men from the pious home of small towns congregated there nightly' (Simkins, and Roland, 1972: 385)

The idea of pleasure in the south was something that went on behind the scenes whilst 'outward forms of inherited or imposed ideas' were maintained and sex was a taboo which was 'at the core of a counter culture, standing for and working for a set of values at odds with those of the dominant, respectable culture'(Simkins and Roland, 1972: 378). In its use of metaphor, the blues was not only allied with this counter-culture but became its very manifestation. What was repressed in the South's ideological unconscious was flaunted in the blues.

Again, the divide between the post-war and pre-war blues is distinct here. In fact, the key semantic domains that Wmatrix identifies in the post-war blues, RELATIONSHIP: INTIMACY AND SEX and LIKE, deal exactly with those topics. Looking at food for comparison, the concordances are cloyed with 'sugar' and 'honey' but little else. The candy man has long gone and nobody seems to be cooking biscuits. Sex seems to have been politely back-grounded and the field RELATIONSHIP: INTIMACY AND SEX owes its existence here to the abundance of figures like 'I love you', 'I'm in love with you baby' and 'kiss and hug me'. Along with lexical variation and folk figures, innuendo plays no large role in the post-war blues. The reasons are probably similar to those already noted. After the war, ethnographic studies show that African-Americans had specific social aspirations and the 'desire to be accepted in the larger society' seemed to be a driving force (Pettigrew, 1964: 49). Working hard to integrate themselves meant rejecting some cultural aspects inherited from the days of rural toil before the war. Black Americans who were already established in the north looked down on southern migrants and not only found the 'newcomers' habits

personally offensive but they felt that they diminished the status of all Negroes in the eyes of the white community' (Weinstein and Gatell, 1970: 161). The blues man, as a hangover from the old days, was no longer welcome and nor was his vernacular. As with the folk archetypes, it is reasonable to assume that the value of innuendo as a counter-cultural taboo breaker lessened until it was merely seen as unwanted smut; civil rights movements like the NAACP probably did not consider the stereotypical image of a drunken, lecherous blues man from the white owned plantations a suitable role model.

The post-war era was also the era of rock 'n' roll, (blues music played and sung by white artists), and blues musicians were competing in a new market. Record companies who specialized in blues, like Chess and Cobra in Chicago, were not making the same kind of money that Paramount and Columbia had before the war and could not attract the same large black audiences. It was probably prophetic for the blues as whole, or at least its lyrical content, that some of the biggest hits in the 1950's, like 'Juke' and 'Easy', were instrumentals.

#### **5.2.4 Summary**

Having already identified the main themes of the blues in the first chapter and their relevance to contemporary ideological positions, this chapter has shown how the blues constituted part of a black identity which was both distinct from and in opposition to the white ruling identity. Using language specific to a locality and audience highlights the importance of the community in decoding the blues lyrics as analysis shows that top-down processing using a shared pool of schematic knowledge was required for interpretation. Similarly, the blues lyrics continued a tradition of presenting black archetypes that were in defiance of the dominant white ideology and

developed a subversive, counter-cultural identity in the use of innuendo. I hope this chapter has also clarified the notion, hinted at in the first chapter, that the pre and post-war blues have quite distinct identities that were shaped by the social and cultural attitudes of the times.

Until now, the use of examples from individual artists has served to highlight a foregrounded feature common to the whole of a particular blues corpus. I have essentially dealt in useful generalizations which illustrates the trends of three large corpora. In the following chapter, I will focus on one particular artist and examine his canon in detail. Using the ideas that have already been discussed in chapters one and two, I will examine the extent to which an individual's lyrics display the common traits of the genre and how certain deviant aspects of his language can be seen as part of an individual voice within the blues.

### **5.3 Robert Johnson: Crossroads?**

In the previous sections, I have used a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis to look at the blues genre as a whole and era-related sub-genres. Section 5.1 concluded with an outline of the most significant features of the blues and asserted that these features gave an insight into the ideological conditions of the time and the nature of the oppression of African-Americans. In section 5.2, I made claims that the language used in the pre-war blues undermined these ideological structures. I also showed that there is a marked difference between the pre and post-war blues and that this difference may well have been symptomatic of the changing social and political status of Black Americans, the economic situation and the change in musical taste of Americans as a whole.

Up to now, then, the examples I have used to outline my findings have been ones which are representative of the blues as a whole. That is, I have not considered to what extent the claims noted above manifest themselves in an individual's work. With this in mind, the following section will examine the full canon of one artist and see to what extent the individual represents or is represented by the corpus and how an individual's work can be deviant from the genre as a whole.

#### **5.3.1 King of the Delta Blues Singers**

Robert Johnson is possibly the most famous of all blues musicians. As such, he is one of the few musicians whose entire body of work has been annotated and is available for analysis. The size of his canon, twenty-nine different songs and variations on those songs, makes for a manageable body of work for my purposes. There are other

reasons, however, which make Robert Johnson an ideal figure to look at in the light of the previous two chapters. A brief summary of his life will serve to help illustrate why.

Sources for the date of Johnson's birth vary but his death certificate shows he died in 1938 at the age of 36 (Wardlow, 1998: 87) His actual life is almost a complete mystery, inspiring many grail type studies like Guralnick's *Searching For Robert Johnson*, (1998) and virtually nothing is known about him. Unlike many of the other blues artists who were regularly photographed and interviewed in their recording career, there are only two photographs of Johnson and there is little primary evidence of his existence beyond anecdotes and his actual legacy – the recordings. Accounts suggest that he travelled widely around the South and sometimes beyond, that he was a solitary figure and that the few people who knew anything about him were the women who 'kept' him in various towns throughout the South. Between the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November 1936 and the 20<sup>th</sup> June 1937 he recorded all his sides for the Vocalion label. Only one achieved any popularity, 'Terraplane Blues', and most contemporary musicians or audiences did not regard him as anything special. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of August 1938, he died (or, as the majority of accounts hold, he was murdered) in Greenwood, Mississippi. Johnson's legacy practically sank without trace apart from two songs, 'Sweet Home Chicago' and 'Dust My Broom', which were performed by Elmore James in the 1950's.

It was only in 1961 that two events were to trigger the posthumous re-discovery of Robert Johnson and his subsequent elevation, rightly or wrongly, to his position as the most influential figure in the blues genre. The first was the Columbia recording company's release of 'King of the Delta Blues Singers'. This album anthologised sixteen of Johnson's recordings and sold well. The second event was the publication

of Samuel B. Charter's *The Country Blues*. This was one of the first books to attempt to both give a history of the pre-war blues and its key figures and to offer some kind of critical literary analysis of blues lyrics. Within its covers, there is a very short three-page chapter devoted to Johnson. It is almost as enigmatic as the blues man himself and accordingly did much to whet the appetites of a new generation of folklorists. Johnson's music was subsequently the focus of much debate and very quickly came to be seen as the missing link between the pre-war, acoustic 'down home' blues and electrified and sophisticated post-war blues in terms of his guitar and vocal style. With the release of 'King of the Blues Singers' in the UK, Johnson's ascendancy was confirmed as The Rolling Stones, Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac, Eric Clapton and Cream and Led Zeppelin not only recorded his songs but also based much of their style on his.

One hundred years after his birth, Robert Johnson continues to be 'discovered' by musicians and academics alike but there is also something of a backlash that has developed. In recent years, wider access to the recordings of other blues artists has prompted comparisons and criticism— Johnson's guitar work is far less dextrous and developed than contemporaries like Lonnie Johnson and Blind Blake, he does not have the vocal power of Charlie Patton or Bukka White and his songs are sometimes seen as derivative and taken from the likes of Kokomo Arnold, Son House and Tommy Johnson. As such, the 'King' of the Delta blues singers, some feel, is a title that has undeservedly been bestowed.

These arguments and suppositions make Johnson an interesting study for this paper. Having outlined the key features of the pre and post-war blues, we can now examine on a linguistic level to what extent Johnson belongs to the genre and to what extent he represents either the pre or post-war blues. With that in mind, the following pages

will examine Johnson's work in detail using the previous chapter's findings as a guide for comparison.

### **5.3.2 Semantic Fields and Key Words**

For the most part, the semantic field data relating to Johnson shows a top ten composed of concrete figures in common with the pre-war blues corpus. One point to note here is that analysis of such a small corpus reveals high LL values for items which have a relatively low frequency. So, whilst SUBSTANCES AND MATERIALS GENERALLY is listed as salient in key domain table, the frequency of items within this domain is only %0.12, or just seven mentions. Indeed, the concordances in this field were generated by the sole word 'stuff', used in just one Robert Johnson song. Some other key domains and key words also revealed a similar propensity to skew the themes actually represented in Robert Johnson. With that in mind, I used the key themes already established – Religion, relationships, travel, the community, narrative and archetypes and sexual innuendo to background a more qualitative approach to Johnson's work.

Johnson's work replicates the overall obsession with relationships and women and much of his presentation of these themes is along exactly the same lines as demonstrated in the blues corpus as a whole. In fact all but one of Robert Johnson's songs, 'Preachin' Blues (Up Jumped The Devil)', involves a woman or relationship in at least one of the verses and for the majority of his songs relationships are the focal point. Common to the rest of the blues, females are objectified in Johnson's lyrics. In both versions of 'Come On In My Kitchen', the female is explicitly reduced to the level of a commodity in the following lines: 'the woman I love, took from my best friend / some joker got lucky, stole her back again'. Again, 'my baby' is a prominent

construct and synonyms and qualifying adjectives abound. Johnson categorises females as: 'sweet woman', 'no-good women', 'little sweet rider', 'little girl', 'no good doney', 'little woman', 'good girl', 'biscuit roller', 'evil hearted women', 'kind-hearted woman', 'gamblin' woman', 'fair brown', 'Miss So-and-So', 'pretty mama', 'Saturday night women' 'brown skin woman' and 'close friend'. These references in themselves reveal the attitudes Johnson takes towards females in his songs, varying from the positive to the negative. The majority of Johnson's songs adhere to the familiar tropes already discussed. When the male is agentive, the female is the object of the speaker. When the female has an agentive role, the male is portrayed as the victim. Like a number of pre-war blues, there is a propensity for the speaker to resort to violence and threat towards the female, often for a reason which is not made clear in the song. Four songs, '32-30 Blues', 'Stop Breakin' Down Blues', 'Me and the Devil Blues' and 'If I Had Possession Over Judgement Day' employ violent or threatening imagery. The verses of '32-20 Blues' are little more than reiterations on the fact that the speaker is going to kill his women if she doesn't obey him. Starting with the ominous 'If I send for my baby, man, and she don't come / All the doctors in Hot Springs sure can't help her none', the speaker moves to then detail the calibre of weapon he will use against her (32-20 refers to a gun), subsequently upgrading his pistol for a Gatling gun in order to 'cut her half in two'. The charm does not end here. In 'Me and the Devil Blues', the speaker, in a verse which seems on the literal level to have little to do with the rest of the narrative, interjects with 'I'm going to beat my woman until I get satisfied'. One outstanding feature of Johnson's blues is that fact these outbursts of aggression are countered in some lyrics with an affection not seen elsewhere in the pre-war blues. In 'Come On In My Kitchen', the conceit for the relationship is one where the speaker offers shelter from the rain to a female. 'Love in

Vain' is a short narrative which sees the speaker taking the suitcase of his lover to the train which she is leaving on and expresses the feelings of unrequited love in the imagery of the train moving away: 'When the train it left the station, with two lights on behind / Well the blue light was my blues and the red light was my mind / All my love's in vain'. 'Honeymoon Blues', whilst maintaining the agentive role of the male in the lines 'Betty Mae, Betty Mae, you shall be my wife someday / I wants a little sweet girl that will do anything I say', uses a number of nouns to create a sense of tenderness 'heartstring', 'destiny', 'honeymoon' and the gentle mood created by the verb 'roll' in 'you rolls across my mind, baby, each and every day'. There seems in these songs to be a genuine attempt to create a lyric which conforms to ideas of a love song in a way which other pre-war blues do not share. These songs, however, are outstanding in the Johnson canon and the majority do conform to the prescribed format of 'male in charge' or 'male as victim'.

Johnson continues the tradition of observing the world around him, incorporating occasional place names. Some of these apply to specific localities but in a departure from many other rural blues, these are not central to the meaning of the song and appear as peripheral items. In 'Travelling Riverside Blues', for example, Johnson mentions several place names. One line goes 'I got women's in Vicksburg, clean on into Tennessee / But my Friar's Point rider, now, hops all over me'. The place names are only relevant in terms of highlighting the fact that the speaker has a lot of lovers in different places and it is not important to know where these places are. This is one aspect of Robert Johnson's blues which is significantly removed from the pre-war corpus in general. Johnson's songs are not peopled with different characters, they do not draw upon folk archetypes or reinterpret older African-American narratives, nor do they draw heavily upon local or community based knowledge. That is,

interpretation does not require schematic knowledge on the part of the audience and there is little need for top down processing. Johnson's lyrics play out in a world which is for the most part made up of universally understood signifiers. Perhaps this is the reason that Johnson's songs, twenty years after his death, were accepted so readily by a new audience that was totally removed from Johnson's world on almost every count – racial, generational, economical and geographical. Johnson's songs, to a twenty first century reader, are easy to understand with very little previous knowledge about blues or the environment that created it and very little deciphering is needed. It may well have been that Johnson's contemporary audience also benefited from this universality of reference, but contemporary accounts of Johnson's standing within the musical community, 'just an unknown blues singer trying to make a buck' (Wardlow, 1998: 141), his lack of commercial success at a time when blues music was relatively popular and the subsequent disappearance of his legacy suggest his lyrics did not make much of an impression.

I mentioned that Johnson does not include any folk figures or recognisable African-American archetypes in his songs. However, as the decades have passed, it is the speaker in Robert Johnson's songs specifically which have come to be understood as the archetypal African-American blues man. All but one of Johnson's songs, 'They're Red Hot' (actually a cover of a medicine show hokum song) are written in the first person singular. As with other blues, Johnson moves from the specific to the general in the majority of verses, drawing on what is a personal experience to illustrate or build to the exclamation of a universal truth. What is interesting about Johnson's songs is the extent to which the 'I' seems to represent the same speaker throughout different songs. Due to the lack of folk-style narratives and, indeed, the very few other characters in Johnson's songs, the whole corpus seems to centre

around this one figure. I noted in the first chapter two ways in which the general to specific movement was organized. In some songs, it was through verses which repeated different examples of the same thing. The other type of movement was to build slowly over a narrative. Johnson's songs belong to this latter category and in his lyrics there is often a sense of progression through the verses closer to the Personal Experience Narrative theory expounded by Johnstone (2003). PEN is modelled on Labov and Waletzky's six part narrative schema model (1967) and defines any narrative act as being composed of some or all of six fundamental points:

1. Abstract
2. Orientation
3. Complicating Action
4. Evaluation
5. Result or Resolution
6. Coda

(Johnstone, 2003. 637).

'Drunken Hearted Man' is an example worth looking at in full as it is typical of the both the structure and progression of Johnson's songs.

I'm a drunken hearted man, my life seems so misery.

I'm a drunken hearted man, my life seems so misery.

And if I could change my way of living, it would mean so much to me

I been dogged and I been driven, ever since I left my mother's home.

I been dogged and I been driven, ever since I left my mother's home.

And I can't see the reason why that, I can't leave these no-good women's alone.

My father died and left me, my poor mother done the best that she could.

My father died and left me, my poor mother done the best that she could.

Every man likes that game you call love, but it don't mean no man no good.

Now, I'm the drunken hearted man and sin was the cause of it all.

(Oh, play 'em now)

I'm a drunken hearted man, and sin was the cause of it all.

And the day that you get weak for no-good women, that's the day that you bound to fall.

Johnson (1938)

The first verse offers us an abstract which essentially summarises both the narrative and highlights the depressing tone of the song: the speaker is lamenting his condition and wishing for a way out. The first and second verses complement each other and aid in the orientation stage – we learn something of the history of the speaker and there is some explanation for the causes of his problem. The complicating action, in the sense that this is the point of ‘maximum suspense’ (Johnstone, 2003: 63) is actually contained within the abstract at the beginning. The conditional clause of line three keeps us in suspense throughout the song as we wait to see if the speaker actually is able to change his way of living. The final verse presents the result or resolution, where we see the drunken man left in the same position, unable to do anything but blame bad luck with women and love for his situation. Note how this song contains some of the elements mentioned in chapters one and two: the speaker portrayed as a victim, ‘the day that you get weak for no good women, that’s the day

you bound to fall’, the positive-negative dyad of ‘mother’ and ‘no-good women’ and the use of the first two lines to show personal experience whilst the completing line of the final three verses attempts to offer a comment on a universal situation. Of Johnson’s twenty nine compositions, eighteen follow a similar pattern to above in which the components of orientation, action and result are included in the narrative. The fact that Johnson’s canon, as I mentioned earlier, is preoccupied with women and relationships to the exclusion of almost everything else furthers the sense that the key figure across the canon is Johnson or the blues man as the speaker. All in all, Johnson seems intent on expressing himself rather than his community. I would argue that, in content at least, this is much more in keeping with the post-war blues. The expression of personal feelings about love and rejection which do not seem to transcend the basic female-male relationship are prevalent in both.

### **5.3.3 Sex and Innuendo in Johnson**

Innuendo takes a back seat in Johnson’s canon. There are only five songs which show the same use of innuendo that was detailed in chapter two, in the sense that he uses ‘extended metaphors’, that is using clusters of metaphorical expressions within one song which belong to ‘the same semantic field or evoking the same source domain’ (Semino, 2004). It is Johnson’s source domains that are interesting because they show a considerable amount of inventiveness. ‘Travelling Riverside Blues’ infamously borrows the ‘lemon squeezer’ metaphor and ‘Milk Cow Calf’s Blues’ draws on traditional animal imagery as a source for a particularly explicit diatribe on a woman’s unfaithfulness, but other songs have an individual trait. ‘Dead Shrimp Blues’ explores betrayal through the metaphor of a fishing pond. The speaker complains that ‘someone is fishing in my pond’ and laments his rejection with the

graphic ‘hole where I used to fish, you got me posted out’. In ‘Little Queen of Spades’, Johnson first describes a woman’s anatomy in terms of a pack of cards, ‘every time she makes a spread, hoo, fair brown, cold chill just runs all over me’ and later adds to the effect by using the card and gambling imagery to proposition the woman, ‘since I am the King, baby, and you is a queen / let’s put our heads together, hoo fair brown, then we can make our money green’.

It is in ‘Terraplane Blues’ and ‘Phonograph Blues’, however, where Johnson’s ability to construct metaphors really comes to the fore. The Ford Terraplane was a budget model car built to meet a market crushed by the great depression and must have been a relatively common sight on the roads throughout the 1930s. Johnson uses the source domain of the car to systematically reduce the female figure to the form of a machine. The main metaphor of ‘women are cars’ is developed to accuse his woman of being unfaithful as Johnson maps the use of the car onto infidelity, ‘someone been runnin’ my batteries down on this machine’. He then goes on to describe sexual intercourse with all the attention to detail of a conscientious garage mechanic. He first explains how he’ll fix the problem, ‘I’m gon’ get down in this connection, oh well, keep on tanglin’ with these wires’ and then goes on to explain the desired effect: ‘when I mash down on your little starter, then your spark plug will give me fire’. The explicit effect is heightened as Johnson uses verbs which can be interpreted in the realms of both the source and target domains – ‘get down’, ‘squeeze’, ‘mash down’, ‘tanglin’. Phonograph blues is similarly conceived, explaining sexual intercourse in terms of playing a record and his subsequent equipment related issue: ‘Now we played it on the sofa, we played it ‘side the wall / My needles have got rusty, baby, they will not play at all’.

Whilst belonging to the pre-war genre of innuendo ridden songs, these lyrics stand out because they draw on modern, rather than traditional, sources for the metaphor. The detail which Johnson goes into is also peculiar and these stand out as extreme examples of pre-war innuendo because rather than being a one verse 'joke' which complements the song as in some blues pieces, the metaphor develops and is an integral part of the narrative.

### **5.3.4 God and the Devil**

In all but one song, 'Crossroad Blues', which contains the line 'I asked the Lord above for Mercy', Johnson uses the Lord exclusively as an interjection of the type already examined in the first chapter. 'Preachin' Blues' makes no mention of the church but instead gives a sermon personifying the blues, 'worried blues, give me your right hand', where the speaker relates what it feels like to have the blues.

Johnson's lyrics are distinctive in the fact that they not only mention the devil but in that the devil and hell become integral to the songs. The oddly structured 'Hell Hound Blues', which defies the usual AAA verse pattern and instead seems to be a series of floating lines, contains the verse 'and the days keep on worryin me, there's a hellhound on my trail / hellhound on my trail, hellhound on my trail'. In the third verse, such as it is, we get the sense that the speaker has been cursed by a woman, metaphorically speaking, as she has 'sprinkled hot foot powder, mmm, mmm, all around my door', which, the speaker explains, leaves him unable to focus and doomed to keep moving. It is the final verse which is strange, however. It is added almost as an aside or spoken thought: 'I can tell the wind is risin' / the leaves trembling on the tree'. In the sense of a narrative, we are given nothing, but instead the lyrics (and, remember again, these are complemented with eerie guitar work) create a sense of

anxiousness, doom, not knowing exactly what is coming with the wind but we assume it is the hellhound catching up with Johnson. Oddly, the same feeling of something coming to get the speaker which is not explained in the song is also described in 'Malted Milk Blues', where in the final verse, seemingly unrelated to the rest of the song, says 'My door knob keeps on turning, must be spooks around my bed / I have a warm old feeling and the hair rising around my head'.

It is in 'Me and the Devil Blues' where, as the title suggests, a distinct satanic relationship, one might say partnership, is formed with the speaker. It seems the song is an examination of the speaker's consciousness, of why he commits bad deeds, and the reason seems to be the devil, who comes and knocks on his door and is answered with 'Hello, Satan, I believe it's time to go'. This song further refers to evil spirits in the ground and the speaker wishes, when he is dead, to be buried next to the highway so that his 'evil spirit can catch a greyhound bus and ride'.

Modern listeners associate Johnson with the devil but this seems to be an excellent example of the unfortunate interpretation of lyrics as bibliographic facts. There is a crossroads legend where Johnson supposedly sold his soul to the devil in return for his musical abilities (Guarlnick 1998) and this story seems to garner more interest than the songs themselves. Lyrically, it seems he uses the devil and superstition as a way not of forming a superstitious narrative but as a way of conveying a mood and explaining the psychological or spiritual state of the speaker. It is perhaps, however, important to see his songs, as with the other pre-war blues, as being in direct opposition to the idea of the church in general.

### **5.3.5 Travelling and Movement**

Johnson's blues are distinct from the pre-war blues as a whole in terms of travel. As discussed, the rural blues corpora emphasises the wish to move in the use of going to but illustrates the condition of immobility placed upon black Americans. In Johnson's lyrics, 'going\_to' is only used thirty times and of these only two are movement related. The speaker Johnson projects is actually one who is constantly moving. Twelve of the songs have independence of movement as a key feature. In 'Walking Blues', 'Steady Rollin' Man', 'Ramblin' On My Mind' and 'Travelling Riverside Blues', the speaker celebrates his ability to move as and when he needs to. 'From Four Until Late' and 'Honeymoon Blues' locate the action just before a journey, with the speaker confidently predicting his return in both. In 'Me and The Devil', the speaker suggests that his spirit will travel where ever it wants and 'Last Fair Deal Gone Down' is a work song which sees the speaker 'workin' my way back home on this Gulf Port Island road'. Only in 'Crossroad Blues', where the crossroads seem to represent a personal crisis point and 'Stones In My Passway' does the speaker experience inhibition in his movement.

The attitude which Johnson's speakers have is not unique, but the fact that freedom of movement is so central to the canon as a whole is unusual when compared with the corpus as a whole. Johnson seems to reject the imprisonment to the land. This is supported by the lack of references in Johnson's work to local people, local events, local places and work. It may also explain why Johnson's music originally had such little effect on the rural blues market during his lifetime. Johnson expresses a lifestyle which was impossible for the majority of African-Americans and does not share the recognition of the dominant ideology.

### **5.3.6 Johnson and the Post-War Blues.**

Johnson relationship with the pre-war blues seems to be a complex one. His songs do not share the sense of community that the corpus as a whole has and draw their plots almost entirely from a view point of personal experience. They do not share the concerns about movement to the same extent as the corpus. On the other hand, they seem to be entirely representative of attitudes towards relationships and women. In some lyrics, the use of innuendo is taken to its pinnacle. In terms of folk figures, whilst he does not rely on those figures already within the black vernacular tradition, he seems to have defined, in his rambling, tortured speaker who reappears throughout the canon, an archetype we now recognise without any trouble as the typical blues man.

There are some striking similarities with the post-war blues. The structure of Johnson's verses is one. Stereotypically, the blues follows the A1, A1, A2 rhyme scheme, with almost identical first lines and a distinct closing rhymed line. On listening to, or reading, Johnson's work, this pattern becomes especially noticeable. In fact, 76% of Johnson's songs are written in this way. Across the pre-war blues, this pattern is used for just 50% of songs and there are several blues artists who never adopt it. In the post-war blues, however, the use of the form has risen to over 60%. All of the post-war artists use the structure and some, like Johnson, use it almost exclusively. This increasing fossilisation, popularised by Johnson, suited itself to backing bands, its repetitive and predictable structure being easy to learn and perform with several musician in a way that the often complex and idiosyncratic patterns favoured by the pre-war bluesmen were impossible.

Wmatrix2 revealed another interesting similarity between the post-war blues and Robert Johnson's. In both corpora, the frequency and Log likelihood values of

INTERJECTIONS and the semantic domain DISCOURSE BIN are high compared to the pre-war blues. In the post-war blues, the DISCOURSE BIN is the sixth semantic domain with an LL of 14.30 and INTERJECTIONS are flagged as a key part of speech with an LL of 9.12. In Johnson, the figures are even higher. The DISCOURSE BIN is the most salient semantic domain with an LL of 108.35, whilst INTERJECTIONS are in the top ten with an LL of 82.73 compared to the pre-war blues. Examining the concordances reveals that these fields are primarily made up of paralinguistic features like ‘mmmm’, ‘oh’, ‘yeah’, ‘uh’ and the like. In the pre-war blues, the placement of these features, like ‘baby’ and ‘lord’, tends to be the point where one would expect to find a caesura. In Johnson’s lyrics and the post-war blues, as well as the increased proliferation of these items, their placement can now be anywhere in the song. In several of Johnson’s songs, he uses these devices instead of singing a line, as an extension of his guitar playing. The post-war blues extend this feature.

Though Johnson uses innuendo to spectacular effect a few times, it is not a central feature of his canon overall. Intimate relationships, however, are but, as in the post-war blues lyrics, these are configured in relatively straightforward ways which require almost no specific schematic knowledge on the part of the audience.

Its date of production, in the late 1930s, places Johnson at the historical fulcrum of this study. The evidence I have presented shows Johnson’s work embodying elements of both eras and it seems reasonable to think of him, lyrically, as a bridge figure between the pre and post-war blues. In terms of individuality within a genre, Johnson does not present lyrics which contain paradigmatic figures: there is nothing particularly outstanding or odd about any of his songs beyond the few unusual references to the devil. Where Johnson’s canon reveals its peculiar traits are in the syntagmatic figures that can be identified: the heavy emphasis on the individual, the

almost exclusive use of the first person singular in narratives that are themselves almost exclusively about relationships and the repetition of a particular verse format to the exclusion of others. The deviant feature seems to be how typically 'bluesy' in the stereotypical sense that Johnson's lyrics seem to be. Though the fact that Johnson's lyrics seem to conform so strongly to many of the elements associated with the blues does not have any bearing on the quality of his music, it does perhaps offer further evidence as to why Johnson has been so readily accepted as a key figure in the genre.

## **6. Conclusion**

### **6.1 Answers to research questions**

At this point it is worth reiterating the initial questions this study sought to examine:

1. What are the defining features of the blues genre based on quantitative evidence?
2. How can this quantitative evidence be used in support of a qualitative interpretation of the blues in relation to its historical background?
3. What are the differences between the pre-war and post-war sub genres and why?
4. To what extent do the lyrics operate as counter-cultural, subversive texts?
5. To what extent can an individual artist be seen as representative of a genre?

Section 5.1 dealt with points 1 and 2. Using Wmatrix as a tool to help uncover the salient features of the blues allowed me to identify several key themes in blues lyrics. First and foremost was the broad theme of relationships. Examination of the concordances highlighted a pre-occupation with male and female relationships and showed in particular consistent patterns in the way females are presented; they are both the object of desire and derision and there are distinct differences in the way the agency of the male speaker or female character is characterised. Female agency is consistently negative, often putting the male speaker into the position of the victim whilst male agency configures the female as a passive object. This objectification of the female is emphasised by the use of female archetypes and belittling qualifying adjectives. The constant need for control expressed by the speakers suggested to me

that the realm of the blues lyric was one which offered a chance for males to express a dominance which would have been utterly impossible in the real world where a racist political and social order subordinated African-Americans.

The extent to which the blues man was a mouthpiece for the community was a little harder to ascertain as the initial findings from Wmatrix showed an absence of pronouns normally associated with efforts to outline a sense of community, namely figures like 'we', 'us' and 'our'. However, I was able to identify patterns in the concordances which relate specific, individual experience to expound a universal 'truth'.

The theme of religion was an interesting one as, although Wmatrix highlighted it as a key domain due to the proliferation of the word 'Lord', it was an examination of the use of the word Lord which showed a rejection of religion within the blues. I also suggested that the themes of vice, investigated in chapter two, allowed for the blues to be seen as the 'devil's music by association' and that in allying itself against the church the blues gave a critical reaction to one of the key hegemonic facets of the day.

Themes of moving and the propensity for blues lyrics to focus on the desire to leave or travel suggest that, again, the blues lyric was something which allowed the blues man to fantasize about something which was virtually impossible in real life. In doing so, I suggested that these movement lyrics exposed the harsh realities of the times.

In the literature review, I pointed out that whilst many studies of the blues made assertions about the themes and attitudes expressed across the genre, no quantitative data existed to back these claims up. I think section 5.1 has gone some way to addressing this. Having listened to the blues for a long time and having read a range of critical studies, it was no surprise to me that male and female relationships, religion

and movement have been identified before as key aspects. What this study has done is to perhaps give some qualitative weight to long accepted, intuitive assertions about the nature of the blues in general

In 5.2, I looked closely at points 3 and 4. There are indeed significant differences between the pre-war and post-war blues. To a listener, these differences are obvious in the type of sound which was produced by the acoustic artists of the twenties and thirties and that produced by the all-electric bands of the fifties and sixties. Lyrically though, there is also a difference. The pre-war blues is richer in observational detail than its post-war counterpart and draws on imagery associated with particular localities, communities and historical moments. In its use of folk archetypes, both in the recycling of figures like Stack o' Lee and the creation of new ones, the pre-war blues is significantly different to those blues which came later. The use of these archetypes suggests a music in touch with the past and rooted in the community. I also claim that this sense of community is heightened by the need for schematic knowledge on the part of the audience to be able to interpret the lyrics; without the benefit of having existing knowledge about the people, places and events related in a lot of pre-war blues, the audience can have no hope of understanding the lyric in full. This is not the case in the post-war blues, which require very little top-down processing and, though perhaps being more universal in their appeal (this music was picked up on by white audiences with much more enthusiasm than the pre-war blues (Cohodas, 2000)) the lyrics seem to be vapid in comparison with their earlier equivalents. As I suggest in chapter two, this change is likely to be a result of the blues becoming a less vital part of the community as whole. Much of the social and political inequality of the pre-war years was being eroded after world war two and

changes in circumstance may have meant that the concerns presented in pre-war lyrics were, by the fifties, obsolete.

This change is most readily observable in the use of innuendo. A key component of pre-war blues, I claim that the use of innuendo which could only be interpreted correctly by African-American audiences and which dealt with socially unacceptable subjects like sex was a manifestation of the blues as anti-language. This returns me to the opposing opinions of Charters (1961) and Courlander (1966). Charters' view, that there is little or no open protest in the blues, does not now seem to be at such odds with Courlander's assertion that the blues is an expression of criticism if we focus on the word 'open'. Indeed, there open protest and commentary about the times does seem to be lacking in the data, but if we consider the notion of the blues as a subversive, codified protest represented in part by a use of innuendo, then the statements are not necessarily mutually exclusive. That fact that this element disappears in the post-war blues only seems to reinforce the idea because, by that time, criticism of African-American conditions manifested itself in outwardly visible forms such as mass protest.

In the final section, I examined the place of Robert Johnson's lyrics within the canon. One of the key findings of this chapter was that the use of Wmatrix for the study of a small body of words means that quantitative analysis and statistical interpretation has to be balanced very carefully with qualitative, interpretive analysis. It was in this chapter that 'keyness', as defined in the methodology section, did not correlate as much with items that are interpretively 'key'. Nevertheless, using the other corpora as a basis for contextualising Johnson's work meant that Wmatrix still performed a useful role.

Johnson's lyrics display elements prevalent in both the pre and post-war blues corpora. He uses metaphors to create innuendo and the general obsession with male and female relationships reaches a peak in Johnson, with all but one of his songs touching on the theme. However, the heavy use of paralinguistic features such as 'uh' and 'mmm', the structure of the verses and the absence of archetypal figures are all features in common with post-war blues lyrics.

In terms of any individuality, I point to Johnson's creation of a speaker who seems to be one and the same throughout almost the whole canon as something which distinguishes his lyrics. In fact, due to the fairly restricted themes he touches on and the rambling speaker who appears again and again, I suggest that Johnson creates an archetypal bluesman. Certainly, the common image we have now of pre-war blues men seems to owe a lot to that speaker Johnson presents through his lyrics. The relative simplicity of his lyrics, or, rather, the lack of a need for top down processing, may have something to do with his modern day appeal. In fact, we might see Johnson's songs as being on the cusp of a change in wider modes of expression that remain today as 'the centrality of the singer's individual persona, the highly personalised subject matter of the songs, the thematic shifts toward the material world and the pursuit of pleasure were all characteristic of an emergent modern ethos' (Hunter, 2000: 208).

## **6.2 Suggestions for further research**

'The Blues' as a genre is extremely wide. In this study, simplification of, for example, chronologies, has been necessary in order to make the material manageable. As such, there are several areas which could be researched to test the ideas put forward in this thesis. The most obvious one would be to conduct a similar examination on the

nature of female blues lyrics. If, for example, the male and female roles are simply reversed in songs performed by women, then we would have to consider more carefully the role of relationships in the blues, particularly in terms of representing black and white power roles.

Another aspect to investigate could be diachronic changes in the use of particular features of the blues. This study simply uses pre and post-war groupings but a more detailed chronology of songs may show interesting changes in the use of, for example, terms which refer to women. Alternatively, a diachronic study might be able to pinpoint particular times when a term fell out of use. Similarly, the simplification of pre-war blues as one corpora means that differences in regional blues haven't been investigated. Musically, it is well known that blues from Texas, the Mississippi Delta and the Carolinas are all structurally different. It would be interesting to see if there is a similar difference in the lyrics of these areas.

Finally, a fuller study might include an analysis of more than one individual artist's work. One starting point might be to take those blues men who critics point out Johnson 'borrowed' from, like Skip James, for example, and see if they have a similar relationship to the genre as a whole.

## **Appendices**

**Appendix 1: Tabulated Corpus Data**

**Appendix 2: Song List**

## Appendix 1

### Tabulated Corpus Data

BNCSS – British National Corpus Spoken Sampler

FBC – Full Blues Corpus

PREBC – Pre-war Blues Corpus

POST BC – Post-war Blues Corpus

RJ – Robert Johnson Corpus

### **Tables 1,2 & 3: FBC / BNCSS**

| <b>Key Domain</b>              | No. in FBC | % in FBC | No. in BNCSS | % in BNCSS | LL      |
|--------------------------------|------------|----------|--------------|------------|---------|
| Religion and the Supernatural  | 1085       | 1.02     | 1106         | 0.11       | 2241.49 |
| Personal names                 | 2863       | 2.70     | 9430         | 0.96       | 1920.60 |
| People: female                 | 848        | 0.80     | 875          | 0.09       | 1739.64 |
| Moving, coming and going       | 3026       | 2.85     | 12692        | 1.29       | 1293.81 |
| People: male                   | 841        | 0.79     | 1829         | 0.19       | 963.95  |
| Like                           | 872        | 0.82     | 2255         | 0.23       | 821.07  |
| Relationship: intimacy and sex | 420        | 0.40     | 549          | 0.06       | 742.05  |
| Dead                           | 384        | 0.36     | 501          | 0.05       | 679.33  |
| Anatomy and physiology         | 1079       | 1.02     | 3703         | 0.38       | 676.79  |
| Sad                            | 323        | 0.30     | 400          | 0.04       | 591.87  |

| <b>Key Word</b> | No. in FBC | % in FBC | No. in BNCSS | % in BNCSS | LL      |
|-----------------|------------|----------|--------------|------------|---------|
| baby            | 1685       | 1.59     | 100          | 0.01       | 7095.19 |
| my              | 2537       | 2.39     | 2354         | 0.24       | 5521.69 |
| me              | 2207       | 2.08     | 2861         | 0.29       | 3921.63 |
| Lord            | 566        | 0.53     | 0            | 0.00       | 2635.30 |
| love            | 650        | 0.61     | 249          | 0.03       | 2016.53 |
| i               | 6241       | 5.88     | 31907        | 3.25       | 1607.08 |
| mama            | 355        | 0.33     | 5            | 0.00       | 1601.21 |
| ai              | 542        | 0.51     | 244          | 0.02       | 1599.84 |
| man             | 549        | 0.52     | 333          | 0.03       | 1455.19 |
| woman           | 396        | 0.37     | 113          | 0.01       | 1328.00 |
| 'm              | 1222       | 1,15     | 2887         | 0.29       | 1280.09 |

|          |      |      |       |      |        |
|----------|------|------|-------|------|--------|
| Going_to | 598  | 0.56 | 1003  | 0.10 | 874.17 |
| you      | 4311 | 4.06 | 23869 | 2.43 | 855.45 |
| blues    | 176  | 0.17 | 8     | 0.00 | 755.28 |
| hey      | 231  | 0.22 | 76    | 0.01 | 747.51 |
| babe     | 167  | 0.16 | 7     | 0.00 | 720.29 |
| crying   | 162  | 0.15 | 24    | 0.00 | 616.15 |
| loving   | 142  | 0.13 | 7     | 0.00 | 606.11 |
| gone     | 288  | 0.27 | 321   | 0.03 | 564.32 |
| your     | 928  | 0.87 | 3250  | 0.33 | 562.40 |

| Key POS | No. in FBC | % in FBC | No. in BNCSS | % in BNCSS | LL      |
|---------|------------|----------|--------------|------------|---------|
| PPIO1   | 2207       | 2.08     | 2640         | 0.27       | 4136.76 |
| APPGE   | 3919       | 3.69     | 10384        | 1.06       | 3579.86 |
| NN1     | 13630      | 12.84    | 84446        | 8.59       | 1717.42 |
| VVO     | 5306       | 5.00     | 26118        | 2.66       | 1526.08 |
| VBM     | 1311       | 1.23     | 3173         | 0.32       | 1335.94 |
| PPIS1   | 5961       | 5.62     | 32828        | 3.34       | 1205.44 |
| VVD     | 2747       | 2.59     | 14200        | 1.44       | 683.91  |
| PPY     | 4446       | 4.19     | 26362        | 2.68       | 678.86  |
| VVI     | 5174       | 4.87     | 34201        | 3.48       | 469.23  |
| VVG     | 2206       | 2.08     | 13349        | 1.36       | 308.98  |

**Tables 4, 5 & 6: PREBC / FBC**

| Key Domain                             | No. in PreBC | % in PreBC | No. in FBC | % in FBC | LL    |
|--|--------------|------------|------------|----------|-------|
| Religion and the Supernatural          | 844          | 1.51       | 1085       | 1.02     | 71.75 |
| Grammatical Bin                        | 10871        | 19.51      | 19558      | 18.42    | 22.63 |
| Temperature: Hot, on fire              | 145          | 0.26       | 175        | 0.16     | 16.14 |
| Kin                                    | 358          | 0.64       | 525        | 0.49     | 14.28 |
| Geographical Terms                     | 201          | 0.36       | 269        | 0.25     | 14.02 |
| Living creatures: animals, birds, etc. | 347          | 0.62       | 514        | 0.48     | 12.86 |
| Geographical Names                     | 236          | 0.42       | 331        | 0.31     | 12.64 |
| Dead                                   | 267          | 0.48       | 384        | 0.36     | 12.19 |
| Sensory: taste                         | 137          | 0.25       | 175        | 0.16     | 11.99 |
| Food                                   | 329          | 0.59       | 494        | 0.47     | 10.97 |

| Key Words  | No. in PreBC | % in PreBC | No. in FBC | % in FBC | LL    |
|------------|--------------|------------|------------|----------|-------|
| Lord       | 447          | 0.80       | 566        | 0.53     | 40.71 |
| hey        | 199          | 0.36       | 231        | 0.22     | 25.65 |
| Mama       | 276          | 0.50       | 355        | 0.33     | 23.41 |
| he         | 238          | 0.43       | 306        | 0.29     | 20.22 |
| they       | 207          | 0.37       | 274        | 0.26     | 15.28 |
| it         | 579          | 1.04       | 920        | 0.87     | 11.50 |
| sweet      | 118          | 0.21       | 152        | 0.14     | 9.94  |
| God        | 97           | 0.17       | 120        | 0.11     | 9.77  |
| hot        | 71           | 0.17       | 81         | 0.08     | 9.73  |
| these      | 85           | 0.15       | 103        | 0.10     | 9.31  |
| in         | 598          | 1.06       | 956        | 0.90     | 9.21  |
| glory      | 44           | 0.08       | 44         | 0.04     | 8.98  |
| women      | 108          | 0.19       | 140        | 0.13     | 8.83  |
| will       | 160          | 0.29       | 225        | 0.21     | 8.43  |
| the        | 1407         | 2.52       | 2437       | 2.30     | 7.99  |
| nobody     | 127          | 0.23       | 174        | 0.16     | 7.80  |
| mmm        | 59           | 0.11       | 69         | 0.06     | 7.40  |
| blues      | 127          | 0.23       | 176        | 0.17     | 7.31  |
| Jesus      | 35           | 0.06       | 35         | 0.03     | 7.14  |
| hallelujah | 35           | 0.06       | 35         | 0.03     | 7.14  |

| Key POS | No. in PreBC | % in PreBC | No. in FBC | % in FBC | LL    |
|---------|--------------|------------|------------|----------|-------|
| NP1     | 1203         | 2.16       | 1657       | 1.56     | 71.70 |
| NN2     | 1072         | 1.92       | 1689       | 1.59     | 23.25 |
| PPHS2   | 208          | 0.37       | 280        | 0.26     | 14.07 |
| NNB     | 88           | 0.16       | 97         | 0.09     | 13.52 |
| GE      | 184          | 0.33       | 250        | 0.24     | 11.84 |
| PPH1    | 579          | 1.04       | 920        | 0.87     | 11.50 |
| JJ      | 2705         | 4.85       | 4816       | 4.54     | 7.84  |
| VVD     | 1570         | 2.82       | 2747       | 2.59     | 7.15  |
| CC      | 1176         | 2.11       | 2052       | 1.93     | 5.70  |
| NN1     | 7394         | 13.27      | 13630      | 12.84    | 5.12  |

**Tables 7,8 & 9: POSTBC / FBC**

| Key Domain       | No. in PostBC | % in PostBC | No. in FBC | % in FBC | LL    |
|------------------|---------------|-------------|------------|----------|-------|
| Pronouns         | 11242         | 22.29       | 21898      | 20.63    | 44.40 |
| Like             | 584           | 1.16        | 872        | 0.82     | 40.17 |
| Knowledgeable    | 536           | 1.06        | 815        | 0.77     | 33.33 |
| Size: Small      | 193           | 0.38        | 272        | 0.26     | 17.66 |
| Evaluation: Good | 585           | 1.16        | 1003       | 0.94     | 15.26 |
| Personal names   | 1539          | 3.05        | 2863       | 2.70     | 15.11 |
| Discourse Bin    | 1532          | 3.04        | 2859       | 2.69     | 14.30 |

|                                |     |      |     |      |       |
|--------------------------------|-----|------|-----|------|-------|
| Time: New and young            | 147 | 0.29 | 209 | 0.20 | 12.92 |
| Relationship: Intimacy and sex | 263 | 0.52 | 420 | 0.40 | 12.05 |
| Numbers                        | 340 | 0.67 | 590 | 0.56 | 7.90  |

| Key Word    | No. in PostBC | % in PostBC | No. in FBC | % in FBC | LL    |
|-------------|---------------|-------------|------------|----------|-------|
| baby        | 1166          | 2.31        | 1685       | 1.59     | 94.82 |
| you         | 2547          | 5.05        | 4311       | 4.06     | 74.64 |
| love        | 457           | 0.91        | 650        | 0.61     | 40.09 |
| know        | 483           | 0.96        | 723        | 0.68     | 32.77 |
| darling     | 131           | 0.26        | 147        | 0.14     | 26.66 |
| well        | 426           | 0.84        | 657        | 0.62     | 24.38 |
| i           | 3297          | 6.54        | 6241       | 5.88     | 24.08 |
| me          | 1225          | 2.43        | 2207       | 2.08     | 18.80 |
| little      | 199           | 0.39        | 280        | 0.26     | 18.34 |
| yeah        | 154           | 0.31        | 204        | 0.19     | 18.28 |
| rock        | 67            | 0.13        | 70         | 0.07     | 16.39 |
| babe        | 123           | 0.24        | 167        | 0.16     | 13.23 |
| whoa        | 64            | 0.13        | 72         | 0.07     | 12.94 |
| In_the_mood | 43            | 0.09        | 43         | 0.04     | 11.65 |
| girl        | 125           | 0.25        | 177        | 0.17     | 11.19 |
| yourself    | 44            | 0.09        | 47         | 0.04     | 10.19 |
| In_love     | 39            | 0.08        | 40         | 0.04     | 9.97  |
| goodbye     | 54            | 0.11        | 63         | 0.06     | 9.84  |
| 'm          | 673           | 1.33        | 1222       | 1.15     | 9.35  |
| oh          | 280           | 0.56        | 474        | 0.45     | 8.19  |

| Key POS | No. in PostBC | % in PostBC | No. in FBC | % in FBC | LL    |
|---------|---------------|-------------|------------|----------|-------|
| PPY     | 2612          | 5.18        | 4446       | 4.19     | 72.82 |
| VVO     | 2890          | 5.73        | 5306       | 5.00     | 34.52 |
| PPI01   | 1225          | 2.43        | 2207       | 2.08     | 18.80 |
| PPIS1   | 3117          | 6.18        | 5961       | 5.62     | 18.68 |
| RR      | 1768          | 3.51        | 3287       | 3.10     | 17.52 |
| MC1     | 192           | 0.38        | 294        | 0.28     | 11.47 |
| PNQS    | 72            | 0.14        | 88         | 0.08     | 11.36 |
| UH      | 1058          | 2.10        | 1984       | 1.87     | 9.12  |
| VDO     | 639           | 1.27        | 1169       | 1.10     | 8.03  |
| VBM     | 703           | 1.39        | 1311       | 1.23     | 6.64  |

**Tables 10, 11 & 12: RJ / PREBC**

| <b>Key Domain</b>                  | No. in RJ | % in RJ | No. in PreBC | % in PreBC | LL     |
|------------------------------------|-----------|---------|--------------|------------|--------|
| Discourse Bin                      | 260       | 4.50    | 803          | 2.02       | 108.35 |
| Temperature: Hot/on fire           | 61        | 1.05    | 60           | 0.15       | 10.28  |
| Vehicles and transport on land     | 62        | 1.07    | 151          | 0.38       | 39.94  |
| Business: selling                  | 41        | 0.71    | 83           | 0.21       | 34.35  |
| Drinks and alcohol                 | 33        | 0.57    | 73           | 0.18       | 24.54  |
| Objects generally                  | 69        | 1.19    | 243          | 0.61       | 21.06  |
| Personality traits                 | 8         | 0.14    | 4            | 0.01       | 18.82  |
| Unethical                          | 25        | 0.43    | 56           | 0.14       | 18.26  |
| Getting and possession             | 172       | 2.97    | 822          | 2.07       | 17.30  |
| Substances and materials generally | 7         | 0.12    | 4            | 0.01       | 15.55  |

| <b>Key Word</b> | No. in RJ | % in RJ | No. in PreBC | % in PreBC | LL     |
|-----------------|-----------|---------|--------------|------------|--------|
| Hot             | 58        | 1.00    | 11           | 0.03       | 181.78 |
| Red             | 27        | 0.47    | 16           | 0.04       | 59.00  |
| Got             | 114       | 1.97    | 321          | 0.81       | 57.21  |
| Yes             | 38        | 0.66    | 47           | 0.12       | 52.70  |
| Ooh             | 18        | 0.31    | 5            | 0.01       | 51.55  |
| Milk            | 15        | 0.26    | 3            | 0.01       | 46.49  |
| Them            | 30        | 0.52    | 35           | 0.09       | 43.58  |
| Mean            | 23        | 0.40    | 28           | 0.07       | 32.31  |
| Mmm             | 21        | 0.36    | 24           | 0.06       | 30.99  |
| Kitchen         | 9         | 0.16    | 1            | 0.00       | 30.91  |
| She             | 94        | 1.63    | 328          | 0.83       | 29.39  |
| Ooo             | 8         | 0.14    | 1            | 0.00       | 27.00  |
| Hmm             | 18        | 0.31    | 22           | 0.06       | 25.20  |
| For             | 54        | 0.93    | 171          | 0.43       | 21.31  |
| This_morning    | 16        | 0.28    | 21           | 0.05       | 21.11  |
| 're             | 27        | 0.47    | 59           | 0.15       | 20.42  |
| My              | 194       | 3.36    | 947          | 2.38       | 17.44  |
| Babe            | 15        | 0.26    | 25           | 0.06       | 15.76  |
| Girl            | 16        | 0.28    | 29           | 0.07       | 15.33  |
| Fair            | 9         | 0.16    | 9            | 0.02       | 14.63  |

| <b>Key POS</b> | No. in RJ | % in RJ | No. in PreBC | % in PreBC | LL    |
|----------------|-----------|---------|--------------|------------|-------|
| UH             | 184       | 3.18    | 548          | 1.38       | 82.73 |
| PPHO2          | 39        | 0.67    | 63           | 0.16       | 42.35 |
| FW             | 10        | 0.17    | 4            | 0.01       | 25.60 |
| IF             | 55        | 0.95    | 167          | 0.42       | 23.76 |
| CC             | 164       | 2.84    | 794          | 2.00       | 15.41 |
| JJ             | 341       | 5.90    | 1865         | 4.69       | 14.24 |
| NNU            | 10        | 0.17    | 12           | 0.03       | 14.21 |
| VBR            | 28        | 0.48    | 80           | 0.20       | 13.67 |
| PPHS2          | 40        | 0.69    | 141          | 0.35       | 12.18 |
| APPGE          | 272       | 4.70    | 1533         | 3.86       | 8.66  |

**Appendix 2**  
**Artists and Song Titles in Corpora**

**Pre-War**

**Blind Blake:**

Black Dog Blues  
Detroit Bound Blues  
Diddie Wa Diddie  
Georgia Bound  
Hard Road Blues  
Lonesome Christmas Blues  
Playing Policy Blues  
Poker Woman Blues  
Police Dog Blues  
You Gonna Quit Me Baby

**Blind Boy Fuller:**

Big House Bound  
Cat Man Blues  
Flyin' Airplane Blues  
Hungry Calf Blues  
I Crave My Pigmeat  
It Doesn't Matter Baby  
I Want Some of Your Pie  
Little Woman You're So Sweet  
Lost Lover Blues  
Meat Shakin' Woman  
Stingy Mama  
Thousand Woman Blues  
Walking My Troubles Away  
Weepin' Willow Blues  
You Never Can Tell

**Blind Joe Reynolds:**

Married Man Blues  
Nehi Blues  
Outside Woman Blues

**Blind Lemon Jefferson:**

Big Night Blues  
Change My Luck Blues  
Hangman's Blues  
Electric Chair Blues  
Lonesome House Blues  
Long Distance Moan  
Mosquito Moan  
One Kind Favor

Pneumonia Blues  
Prison Cell Blues  
Rising High Water Blues  
See That My Grave is Kept Clean  
Shuckin' Sugar Blues  
That Black Snake Moan  
That Crawling Baby Blues

**Blind Willie Johnson:**

Bye and Bye, Goin' To See the King  
God Don't Never Change  
God Moves on the Water  
In My Time of Dying  
It's Nobody's Fault but Mine  
Jesus Is Coming  
Lord, I Just Can't Keep From Crying  
Motherless Children Have a Hard  
Time  
Soul of a Man

**Blind Willie McTell:**

B&O Blues  
Broke Down Engine  
Come On Around To My House,  
Mama  
Coolin' Board  
Death Room Blues  
Delia  
East St Louis Blues  
I Got to Cross the River Jordan  
Kind Mama  
Lord, Send Me an Angel  
Love Makin' Mama  
Mama, T'aint Long Before Day  
Old Time Religion  
Runnin' Me Crazy  
Searching the Desert for the Blues  
Scary Day Blues  
Statesboro Blues  
Talkin' To Myself  
The Dyin' Crapshooter's Blues  
Weary Hearted Man

**Bo Carter:**

All Around Man  
Banana In Your Fruit Basket

Don't Mash My Digger So Deep  
My Pencil Won't Write No More  
Please Warm My Weiner

**Bukka White:**

Alabama Blues  
Bukka's Jitterbug Swing  
District Attorney Blues  
Fixin' To Die Blues  
High Fever Blues  
Parchmann Farm Blues  
Pinebluff, Arkansas  
Sleepy Man Blues  
Strange Place Blues  
When Can I Change My Clothes?

**Charley Patton:**

'34 Blues  
Banty Rooster Blues  
Bird Nest Bound  
Down The Dirt Road Blues (Versions  
1 and 2)  
Dry Well Blues  
Green River Blues  
Hammer Blues  
High Sheriff Blues  
High Water Everywhere (Parts 1 and  
2)  
Mississippi Bo' Weevil Blues  
Moon Goin' Down  
Pea Vine Blues  
Pony Blues  
Poor Me  
Revenue Man Blues (Versions 1 and 2)  
Screamin' And Hollerin' The Blues  
Shake It And Break It  
Spoonful Blues  
Stony Pony Blues  
Tom Rushen Blues  
When Your Way Gets Dark

**King Solomon Hill:**

Down On My Bended Knee  
Tell Me Baby  
The Gone Dead Train  
Whoopee Blues (Versions 1 and 2)

**Lonnie Johnson:**

Beautiful but Dumb  
Best Jockey in Town  
Big Leg Woman  
Bill Crowin' Rooster Blues  
Careless Love  
Cat, You Been Messin' Around  
Chicago Blues  
Death Valley Is Just Halfway To My  
Home  
Don't Drive Me From Your Door  
Fine Booze and Heavy Dues  
Go Back to Your No Good Man  
Got the Blues For Murder Only  
Happy New Year, Darling  
Life Saver Blues  
Low Down St.Louis Blues  
Men, Get Wise To Yourself  
Racketeer's Blues  
Sam, You're Just a Rat  
She's Making Whoopie in Hell  
Tonight

**Mississippi Fred McDowell:**

61 Highway  
Bye and Bye  
Early This Morning  
Fred's Worried Life Blues  
Gravel Road Blues (Version 1 and 2)  
I'm Going Over the Hill  
I Heard Somebody Call  
I Looked at the Sun  
I Walked All the Way From East St.  
Louis  
Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and  
Burning  
Kokomo  
Look Way Down That Lonesome Road  
Louise  
My Heavy Load  
Shake 'em On Down  
When I Lay My Burden Down  
Write Me A Few Lines  
You Gonna Be Sorry  
You Gotta Move

**Mississippi John Hurt:**

Avalon Blues  
 Big Leg Blues  
 Candy Man Blues  
 Casey Jones  
 Coffee Blues  
 Corrina, Corrina  
 Frankie  
 Got the Blues, Can't Be Satisfied  
 Lazy Blues  
 Louis Collins  
 Make Me a Pallet on Your Floor  
 My Creole Belle  
 Nobody Cares For Me  
 Nobody's Dirty Business (Versions 1  
 and 2)  
 Payday  
 Richland's Woman Blues  
 Salty Dog  
 See See Rider  
 Spike Driver Blues  
 Stack O'Lee Blues

**Reverend Gary Davis:**

Candy Man  
 Death Don't Have No Mercy  
 Goin' Sit Down on the Banks of the  
 River  
 I Am the Light of This World  
 Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and  
 Burnin'  
 Lord, Stand By Me  
 Moon Is Going Down  
 Oh Glory, How Happy I Am  
 Samson and Delilah  
 There's Destruction in That Land  
 There Was a Time That I Went Blind  
 Twelve Gates to the City

**Robert Johnson:**

Kind Hearted Woman Blues  
 (I Believe I'll) Dust My Broom  
 Sweet Home Chicago  
 Rambling On My Mind,  
 When You Got A Good Friend  
 Come On In My Kitchen  
 Terraplane Blues  
 Phonograph Blues  
 32-20 Blues  
 They're Red Hot  
 Dead Shrimp Blues  
 Cross Road Blues  
 Walking Blues  
 Last Fair Deal Gone Down  
 Preachin' Blues  
 If I Had Possession Over Judgment  
 Day  
 Stones In My Passway  
 I'm A Steady Rolling Man  
 From Four Till Late  
 Hellhound On My Trail  
 Little Queen Of Spades  
 Malted Milk  
 Drunken Hearted Man  
 Me And The Devil Blues  
 Stop Breaking Down Blues  
 Traveling Riverside Blues  
 Honeymoon Blues  
 Love In Vain Blues  
 Milkcow's Calf Blues

**Robert Wilkins:**

Alabama Blues  
 Fallin' Down Blues  
 Get Away Blues  
 I'll Go With Her Blues  
 Long Train Coming  
 Nashville Stonewall Blues  
 Old Jim Canan's  
 Police Sergeant Blues  
 Rolling Stone  
 That's No Way To Get Along

**Sampson Pittman:**

Cotton Farmer Blues  
 I Been Down in the Circle Before  
 John Henry  
 Welfare Blues

**Skip James:**

20-20 Blues  
All Night Long  
Catfish  
Cherry Ball Blues  
Crow Jane  
Cypress Grove Blues

**Son House:**

Country Farm Blues  
Death Letter  
Down Hearted Blues  
Dry Spell Blues (Versions 1 and 2)

**Sonny Boy Williamson I:**

Bad Luck Blues  
Black Gal Blues  
Blue Bird Blues  
Collector Man Blues  
Decoration Blues  
Down South  
Early in the Morning  
Frigidaire Blues  
Groundhog Blues  
Miss Louisa Blues  
Moonshine  
My Little Cornelius  
My Little Machine  
Skinny Woman  
Sugar Mama Blues  
Until My Love Come Down  
Up The Country Blues  
You Can Lead Me

**The Mississippi Sheiks:**

Bootlegger's Blues  
I've Got Blood In My Eyes For You  
Lonely One In This Town  
She Ain't No Good  
Sitting On Top Of The World  
(Versions 1 to 3)  
Stop and Listen Blues No.2  
The World is Going Wrong  
Too Long

**Tommy Johnson:**

Alcohol and Jake Blues  
Big Fat Mama Blues  
Big Road Blues

Bye Bye Blues

Canned Heat Blues

Cool Drink of Water Blues (Versions 1  
and 2)

## **Post-war**

### **Arthur Big Boy Crudup:**

Behind Closed Doors  
No More Lovers  
Cry Your Blues Away  
She Ain't Nothing But Trouble  
Mean Old 'Frisco  
Someday  
That's All Right, Mama  
That's Why I'm Lonesome

### **Bo Diddley:**

Before You Accuse Me  
Bo Diddley (Version 1)  
A Gunslinger  
Bring It To Jerome  
Dearest Darling  
Diddely Daddy  
Hey, Bo Diddley  
Hush Your Mouth  
I'm A Man  
I'm Looking For A Woman  
I'm Sorry  
Ooh Baby  
Pretty Thing (Version 1 and 2)  
Road Runner  
Say Man  
She's Alright  
Who Do You Love  
You Can't Judge a Book By Its Cover

### **Bobby Bland:**

Ain't Nothing You Can Do  
A Touch of the Blues  
Blind Man  
Bobby's Blues  
Call On Me  
Cry, Cry, Cry  
Don't Want No Woman  
Further Up The Road  
Helping Hand  
Honey Bee  
I Can't Put You Down Baby  
I Don't Believe  
If I Hadn't Called You Back  
If You Could Read My Mind  
I'll Take Care Of You  
I Learned My Lesson  
I Lost Sight of the World

I Pity the Fool  
I Smell Trouble  
It's My Life, baby  
Little Boy Blue  
Loan A Helping Hand  
Lost Lover Blues  
Members Only  
Million Miles From Nowhere  
No Blow, No Show  
Poverty  
Queen For a Day  
Share Your Love With Me  
Someday  
Teach Me How To Love You  
Time Out  
Turn On Your Love Light  
Two Steps From The Blues  
Wise Man's Blues  
Wishing Well  
Woke Up Screamin'  
You're Not Worth It All  
You've Got Bad Intentions  
You Did Me Wrong  
You Got Me Where You Want Me

### **Elmore James:**

Baby, Please Set a Date  
Can't Stop Loving My Baby  
Coming Home  
Dark and Dreary  
Done Somebody Wrong  
Dust My Blues  
Dust My Broom  
Early In The Morning  
Early One Morning  
Every Day I Have The Blues  
Fine Little Mama  
Goodbye Baby  
Gotta Move  
Hand in Hand  
Held My Baby Last Night  
I'm Worried  
I Believe  
I Can't Hold Out  
I Can't Stop Loving You  
I Need You baby  
It Hurts me Too  
I Was A Fool  
Late Hours at Midnight  
Look On Yonder Wall

Madison Blues  
Make a Little Love  
Make My Dreams Come True  
Mean and Evil  
My Bleeding Heart  
No Love in My Heart  
One More Drink  
One Way Out  
Person to Person  
Please Find My Baby  
Quarter Past Nine  
Rock My Baby Right  
Rollin and Tumblin'  
Shake Your Money maker  
Sho' Nuff I Do  
Sinful Woman  
Something Inside Of Me  
Standing at the Crossroads  
Strange Angels  
Strange Kind-a Feeling  
Sunnyland train  
The Sky is Crying  
The Sun is Shining  
Twelve Year Old Boy  
Whose Muddy Shoes?

**Howlin' Wolf:**

Baby, How Long  
Back Door Man  
Bluebird Blues  
Built For Comfort  
Cadillac Daddy  
Chang My Way  
Color and Kind  
Come Back Home  
Commit a Crime  
Decoration Day  
Dorothy Mae  
Down in the Bottom  
Drinkin' C.V. Wine  
Everybody's in the Mood  
Evil  
Forty Four  
Going Down Slow  
Howlin' Blues  
Howlin' for my Baby  
How Many More Years?  
I'll Be Around  
I'm leavin' You  
I'm The Wolf

I've Been Abused  
I've Got a Woman  
I Ain't Superstitious  
I Asked for Water  
I Better Go Now  
I Didn't Know  
I Got a Woman  
I Have a Little Girl  
I Love My Baby  
I Walked From Dallas  
Just My Kind  
Killin' Floor  
Little Baby  
Louise  
Moanin' At Midnight  
Mr Airplane Man  
My Baby Walked Off  
My Last Affair  
Natchez Burning  
Nature  
Neighbors  
Oh Red  
Ooh Baby  
Poor Boy  
Rockin' Daddy  
Shake For Me  
Sittin' On Top of the World  
Smokestack Lightnin'  
Spoonful  
Sugar Mama  
Tail Dragger  
Tell Me  
Tell Me What I've Done  
The Red Rooster  
Three Hundred Pounds of Joy  
Wang Dang Doodle  
Who Will Be The Next?  
Who's Been Talkin'  
Work For Your Money  
You'll Be Mine  
You Can't Be Beat  
You Gonna Wreck My Life

**John Lee Hooker:**

Baby, How Can You Do It?  
Baby Lee  
Bluebird  
Blues Before Sunrise  
Boogie Chillun  
Boom Boom

Bundle Up and Go  
 Church bell Toll  
 Cold Chills All Over Me  
 Crawling Black Spider  
 Crawling King Snake  
 Cuttin' Out  
 Democrat Man  
 Dimples  
 Five Long Years  
 Frisco Blues  
 Good morning Little School Girl  
 Groundhog Blues  
 Hello Baby  
 Hobo Blues  
 How Can You Do It?  
 How Long Blues  
 I'll Never Trust Your Love Again  
 I'm Going Upstairs  
 I'm Gonna Get Me A Woman  
 I'm In The Mood  
 I'm Leaving Baby  
 I'm Mad Again  
 I'm Wanderin'  
 I Got The Key  
 I Need Some Money  
 I'm in the Mood  
 I Put My Trust On You  
 It Hurts Me So  
 It's My Own Fault Darling  
 It's You I Love, Baby  
 House Rent Boogie  
 Let's Make It  
 Let's Talk It Over  
 Mama, You Got a Daughter  
 Maudie  
 Mean, Mean Woman  
 My Dream  
 My First Wife Left Me  
 No Substitute  
 One Bourbon, One Scotch, One Beer  
 Pea Vine Special  
 Please Don't Go  
 Queen Bee  
 Rockin' Chair  
 Rock Me Mama  
 Sally Mae  
 Send Me Your Pillow  
 She's Mine  
 That's Alright  
 Think Twice Before You Go

This is Hip  
 Wandering Blues  
 Want Ad Blues  
 Wobblin' Baby  
 You Don't Move Me Baby  
 You're Looking Good Tonight  
 You're So Nice and Kind to Me  
 Lou Della

**Junior Parker:**

Cryin' For My Baby  
 Driving Wheel  
 In The Dark  
 It's a Pity  
 Jivin' Woman  
 Mother-in-law Blues  
 Next Time You See Me  
 Seven Days  
 Sitting and Thinking  
 Someone, Somewhere  
 Sometimes  
 Stand By Me  
 Strange Things Happening  
 Sweet Home Chicago  
 That's All Right  
 The Things I Used To Do  
 Yonder's Wall

**Li'l Son Jackson:**

Evil Blues  
 Freedom Train Blues  
 Gamblin' Blues  
 Groundhog Blues  
 Homeless Blues  
 Peace Breaking People

**Little Walter:**

Blue and Lonesome  
 Blues With A Feeling  
 Boom Boom, Out Go the Lights  
 Crazy Mixed Up World  
 Dead Presidents  
 Everybody Needs Somebody  
 Going Down Slow  
 Hate to See You Go  
 I Got To Find My Baby  
 I Got To Go  
 It Ain't Right  
 It's Too Late Brother  
 Just A Feeling

Just Your Fool  
Key to the Highway  
Last Night  
Mean Old Frisco  
Mean Old World  
Mellow Down Easy  
My Babe  
My Baby's Sweeter  
Nobody But You  
Oh Baby  
One More Chance With You  
Take Me Back  
Tell Me Mama  
Temperature  
Tonight With a Fool  
Too Late  
Up The Line  
Who  
You Better Watch Yourself  
You're So Fine

**Muddy Waters:**

21 Hours  
32-20 Blues  
Baby Please Don't Go  
Blow Wind Blow  
Blues Before Sunrise  
Burr Clover Blues  
Caldonia  
Canary Bird  
Cold Up North  
Corrina, Corrina  
Country Blues  
Crosseyed Cat  
Deep Down in Florida  
Diamonds at her Feet  
Don't Go No Further  
Double Trouble  
Elevate Me, Mama  
Evil  
Five Long Years  
Forty days and Forty Nights  
Good Morning Little Schoolgirl  
Good news  
Got My Mojo Working  
Gypsy Woman  
Honey Bee  
I'm Your Hoochie Coochie Man  
Howlin' Wolf  
I Be's troubled

I Can't Be Satisfied  
I Feel So Good  
I Got A Rich Man's Woman  
I Got My Brand On You  
I Just Want To Make Love To You  
I Love the Live I Live, I Live The Life  
I Love  
I Want To Be Loved  
I Want You To Love Me  
Little Anna Mae  
Lonesome Road Blues  
Long Distance Call  
Look What You've Done  
Louisiana Blues  
Mannish Boy  
Mamie  
Mean Mistreater  
Mean Red Spider  
Meanest Woman  
Messin' With the Man  
My Dog Can't Bark  
My Fault  
My Home is in the Delta  
My Love Strikes Like Lightnin'  
My Pencil Won't Write No More  
Nine Below Zero  
One More Mule  
Ramblin' Kid Blues  
Rock Me  
Rollin' and Tumblin'  
Rollin' Stone  
She Moves Me  
She's Nineteen Years Old  
Soon Forgotten  
So Glad I'm Livin'  
Southbound Train  
Standing Around Crying  
Still A Fool  
Streamline Woman  
Take a Walk With Me  
That's Why I Don't Mind  
The Same Thing  
Thirteen Highway  
Trouble In Mind  
Trouble No More  
Who's Gonna be Your Sweet Man  
When I'm Gone?  
You Can't Lose What You Ain't Never  
Had  
You Don't Have To Go

You Got To Take Sick And Die Some  
of These Days  
You Need love  
You Shook Me

**Slim Harpo:**

Baby Scratch My Back  
Blues Hangover  
Buzz Me Babe  
Don't Start Cryin' Now  
Dream Girl  
I'm A King Bee  
I've Got Love If You Want It  
Late Last Night  
My Home Is a Prison  
One More Day  
Rain In My Heart  
Shake Your Hips  
Strange Love  
Tip On In  
What a Dream  
Wanderin' and Worryin'

**Sonny Boy Williamson II:**

Born Blind  
Bring It On Home  
Christmas Blues  
Cool Disposition Blues  
Don't Lose Your Eye  
Don't Start Me to Talkin'  
Eyesight to the Blind  
Fattening Frogs For Snakes  
Good Evenin' Everybody  
Have You Ever Been In Love  
Help Me  
I Don't Care No More  
In My Younger Days  
Keep It To Yourself  
Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide  
Lonesome Cabin  
Nine Below Zero  
Ninety-Nine  
No Nights By Myself  
One Way Out  
Santa Claus  
So Sad To Be Lonesome  
Take Your Hand Out Of My Pocket  
Temperature 110  
The Key To Your Door  
This Old Life

Work With Me  
Your Funeral and My Trial

**Willie Dixon:**

After Five Long Years  
Earthquake and Hurricane  
Everything's Got A Time  
Flamin' Mamie  
Grave Digger Blues  
Groaning The Blues  
I Can't Quit You Baby  
It Don't Make Sense (You Can't Make  
Peace)  
Pain In My Heart  
Pie in the Sky  
Seventh Son  
Study War No More  
The Same Thing  
Third Degree  
Wigglin' Worm  
You Shook Me

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