

## **“Black snake crawling in my room”: Surrealism and the Blues**

**by Paul Garon**

Today I want to show you some surrealist approaches to the blues, as well as the results of these approaches. We won't be able to completely define Surrealism, but I think you will get a lot from this analysis.

Contemporary blues fans have had an opportunity to know about surrealist interest in the blues since 1970, because that was the year that the first issue of *Arsenal: Surrealist Subversion* came out and at the same time, the special surrealism issue of *Radical America* came out. I had blues articles in both magazines.

*My Blues and the Poetic Spirit* came out in 1975. That was the real “coming out” party for the blues and Surrealism. The book has been reprinted many times by three different publishers, and it's currently in print at City Lights Books.

*Living Blues*, No. 25 was a special issue devoted to Surrealism (to the dismay of several people, who thought it was a terrible idea). That was 1976, the same year the World Surrealist Exhibition in Chicago hosted a blues concert with Eddie Shaw and Honeyboy Edwards. The show was also going to feature the comeback of Claude Smith, known as Blue Smitty, but Blue Smitty did not come back.

The points I hope to make today are elaborated in the publications I just mentioned. If you want to read more about Surrealism and the blues, those sources are highly recommended. All of my books are available online in the used book market and I recommend the most recent editions of all of them.

There are 4 aspects of the blues that drew the attention of the surrealists. The first was the revolutionary potential of the blues; the second was the poetry in the blues; the third aspect was the way blues exposed certain psychological processes, and finally, we saw a common ground between Surrealism and the blues.

Indeed, the surrealists were the first Europeans to hail the triumph of so-called primitive art from Africa and Oceania. The surrealists detected an immediate affinity in these strange new objects, an affinity that I have heard best described by Senegalese surrealist Cheikh Tidiane Sylla. Before I begin, remember that from the earliest days, surrealists thought of their activity as a *collective* one; indeed, that is the only way they could conceive of it. When the earliest surrealists invented the game of Exquisite Corpse—where each person added a word to an unknown, incomplete sentence—much of the significance lay in the fact that it was a *collective* activity.

**"In the ecologically balanced tribal cultures of Africa, the surrealist spirit is deeply embedded in social tradition. [African philosophy presupposes] a highly charged psychic world in which every individual agrees to forget himself or herself in order to concentrate on the least known instances of the mind's movement—a thoroughly *emancipatory* experience...."**

**He refers to "This psychical world...is a superior transcendence of the "real functioning of thought" over ordinary reality, something that vulgar materialists can never perceive...." Arguing that black Africans enjoyed the practice of poetry "throughout the totality of their traditional social life," Sylla calls such a social life "the *living experience of surreality*" and concludes that "Surrealism and black African art remain irreducible examples in the development of the complete unfettering of the mind." This is the best description I've heard of the common ground shared by surrealists and African American musicians, as well.**

**Surrealism was founded by poets, but when Surrealism came to the US, it was treated as only an art movement, and not the poetical psycho-political experiment that it always has been.**

**Many people's knowledge of Surrealism begins and ends with Dali's melting clocks in his painting, "The Persistence of Memory." But poetry as an attempt to bring together the dream and reality, to reconcile reality and imagination with a revolution in language, poetry and Surrealism as collective activities, this is a Surrealism that never came to America. But in the blues, many of us found the kind of poetry we were looking for.**

**Lately the notion of desire has been so fetishized in academia that I am hesitant to introduce it. Let me only say, once again, the surrealists were there first. Desire and fantasy were key concepts for the blues singers and the surrealists. Both could produce the wondrous image that prepared the ground for revolution. Everyday life inhibits desire and fantasy, but poetry in the blues often over-rides these inhibitions.**

**I'm the only one in my family  
to take a biscuit to pieces  
Put it back just like it was. Victoria Spivey**

**We think it is the authentic poet's job, i.e., the surrealist poet's job, i.e., the blues singer's job, to restore language to its poetic function by assisting in formulating these images of illumination. The poet Saint-Pol-Roux called this kind of image "the match that one strikes on the unknown." This is one of the tasks carried out by the best of the blues songs.**

**Blues singers have at their fingertips yet another means to attract attention and especially the attention of the surrealists as well, and this is by the use of nicknames and pseudonyms. The examples are numerous, from Howlin' Wolf and**

**Magic Sam to King Solomon Hill and Mud Dauber Joe. But I have two favorites: One was a gentleman by the name of James Sherrill. He made two records, four sides, and on one side of each, he gave an excellent imitation of bluesman Peetie Wheatstraw, The Devil's Son-in-Law and The High Sheriff of Hell. But in the artist credit, Sherrill called himself Peanut the Kidnapper. And a final example: Dave Bluntson and his band recorded as Three Fifteen and His Squares. He was captured on record during a field trip to Hot Springs, Arkansas, in 1937, and in his "Three Fifteen Blues," he finished with the verse,**

**"I may get over this, baby, but it's sure been doing me mean.  
I've been having trouble and worry, since my name's been Three Fifteen."**

**I won't even mention Elmore James, who lived from 1918 until 1963, singing that "I ain't seen my baby since 1839."**

**How could the surrealists *not* be attracted to the blues?**

**Blues and blues singing evolved from a people oppressed by slavery and then Reconstruction and Jim Crow. The creative energies of oppressed peoples respond barometrically to their circumstances, and the instruments and techniques of their measure are the tools of freedom.**

**"Bring my pistol, shotgun and some shells  
I've been mistreated and I'm gonna raise some hell." PW**

**Humor was one of these instruments:**

**"I had money on the horses, money on one, two, three.  
My water got muddy and my horse run into a tree."**

**How could the blues be anything but of the most startling interest to us? Or to any group for whom poetry and liberation are the two guiding principles?**

**Surrealists approached the blues from another perspective I mentioned, a perspective that evoked Freud and psycho-analysis. The surrealists were intrigued by Freud's new ideas as early as WW I, before they were in fact surrealists. Andre Breton had attended medical school where he developed an interest in psychiatry, but his education was interrupted by World War I. He served in the medical corps, and he witnessed many diverse symptoms of shell shock and other mental disorders. Freud's theories were beginning to penetrate European thought at the same time, these concepts nourished the surrealist notions of the dream, unconscious mentation, and by extension, revelation. The surrealist conception of the marvelous was a blend of these ideas, stirred with a few others.**

Freud's theory of symbolism—crudely represented by the notion that if you dream about a snake, or a cigar, or even the Washington Monument, you are preoccupied by the penis—this was the part of Freud's thinking that drew the most protest from non-psychoanalytic audiences as too arbitrary and simplistic, not to mention too outrageous. And yet here's Blind Lemon Jefferson's *The Black Snake Moan*, with a verse like "HmMMM, black snake crawling in my room; some pretty mama better come and get this black snake soon." You would have a very hard time convincing anyone that Blind Lemon was *not* granting a complete confirmation to Freud's theory of dream symbolism.

This example is one of hundreds one could cite—just think of the many blues songs about food that are really about sex.

I am thinking of Memphis Minnie

"I'm gonna bake my biscuits, I'm gonna bake my biscuits,  
I'm gonna bake my biscuits, Ain't gonna give nobody none."

We see that material that Freud insisted was unconscious in our normal lives but was revealed cryptically in dreams, was revealed rather clearly in the blues. This same facility occurs in jokes and folklore as well, and art itself has been said to "reveal the forbidden wishes of human kind," but it's clear that part of the charm of the blues is that it does this in such a revealing way. And part of its revolutionary impact is its ability to deal with what is normally repressed in a distinctly non-repressed manner. How incongruous it seems when one wholeheartedly accepts such an assertion about a song, but refuses to accept it when it is about their dream content.

Because of the manner in which it deals with material that is normally unconscious, we see the blues as a relatively *unalienated* art form, one that can give us insight into creativity itself. For example, you could investigate the whole question of how and why we gain pleasure from contemplating pain, as we do when hearing a sad song. The blues seemed an excellent medium in which to analyze forces like these.

In his *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art*, the analyst Ernst Kris gave an interesting example. A group of soldiers were dug in on a Pacific island, waiting for a Japanese attack that was certain to come. An officer heard voices coming from a foxhole, and he went to investigate. There were three men in the hole listening to a radio program where US Marines were waiting for a Japanese attack. Kris called this process the "aesthetic disguise," the way art can disguise reality to hide its true nature or its pain. Plainly, the anxiety of waiting for an attack could be alleviated by experiencing the attack as art.

**Singing about being in jail can allow you to artfully experience jail without the pain of actually going there. That's why there's a song called, "Christmas in Jail, Ain't That a Pain." (Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell)**

**Or "Bloodhound Blues," with its lyric,**

**"Bloodhounds, bloodhounds, bloodhounds are on my trail,  
they want to take me back to that cold cold lonesome jail." Victoria Spivey**

**To end the psychological part of our analysis, I would like to talk a bit about paranoia, especially paranoia with the absence of disorganized thinking This is an ideal type, not something from DSM 5. You have a very stable delusional system, outside of which the personality is fairly normal. But once you touch on the delusional system, you are suddenly in another world. The surrealists seized this other world for self-cultivation, combining it with a special form of obsession, and calling this the paranoiac critical method. By dwelling yourself in such a system, in such a delusion, in such an obsession, it can become an interpretive schema, or a matrix, for analysis, even for analyzing something like the blues. This method was inspiring to me when I was writing the Eros section of *Blues and the Poetic Spirit*.**

**I also mentioned that the blues compelled our attention by its revolutionary potential and significance. This is another point that many people have difficulty understanding. Looking at this form of poetic activity in historical context is helpful. I'm not suggesting that most or even many blues lyrics call directly for the overthrow of society. But a different form of negative thinking takes place here.**

**"Want to set this world on fire,  
that is my mad desire...**

**If I could see blood running in the street...**

**Give me gun powder, give me dynamite  
I'm gonna wreck this city,  
I'm gonna blow it up tonight." Julia Moody**

**At the heart of the blues is the fundamental principle of opposition. The black working-class blues singer rejects and ridicules the repressive aspects of white bourgeoisie society, negating bourgeois ideology by the act of non-acceptance.**

**I am not saying that this kind of negative thinking will or was even meant to change society's structure, but it was a principal vehicle of poetic revolt for blacks during the first third of this century. Other forms of revolt existed but they didn't relate to the black working class as broadly as blues did. Thus the blues had a significant function in relation to black revolutionary activity today, by**

preserving the critical function of negation during that period by providing a sustained poetic attack on the superstructure of an exploitative society.

As oppositionists, blues singers have great appeal to surrealists. The significance of opposition to the surrealist adventure is made clear by Andre Breton: "(M)ore than ever before, the very principle of opposition needs to be fortified. All triumphant ideas head for disaster. Men (and women) must be convinced that once general agreement has been won on a given question, individual resistance is the only key to the prison. But this resistance must be informed and subtle. By instinct I would contradict a vote by any assembly which does not itself intend to contradict the vote of a more numerous assembly; by the same instinct I will give my vote to those who rise. to all programs not yet subjected to the test of fact and tending toward the greater emancipation of man." Once an idea becomes agreeable to a majority, individual resistance to this idea is the only way out. By instinct, he would vote against any majority that was not itself against an even larger majority.

Looking for forms of revolt, of opposition, in Chicago, the surrealist group "has already brought to light an extensive *accursed tradition* in US culture," and I use the word accursed in that it is ruled 'out of order' by the existing authorities, neglected by scholars, and not taught in the schools". Yet the subversive function of such accursed figures—blues singers included—is beginning to come to light.

It's not for nothing that the blues artists have been called practitioners of "the Devil's music," i.e., the music of the damned, the music of the excluded.

Church people did not want to hear Sippie Wallace singing,

"I dreamed I was in the dance hall where the devil danced at night."

Not only is the blues most often in direct opposition to all things holy, but often finds itself associated with evil in various forms. Surrealism's hostility to all forms of religion made the blues a welcome genre.

Another of these forms is crime. The blues critique of the church and bourgeois society is especially evident in the songs dealing with crime, for crime itself serves as a critique of bourgeois society.

We are not equating blues singers and criminals, but such a stereotype has long existed. In America, street musicians were specifically identified as criminals by the early 18th century. In 1727, for example, one reason given for the need to immediately construct the New Haven workhouse was that the number of rowdy and disorderly persons had increased so rapidly. Those to be committed included "vagabonds, and *common pipers*, [and] *fiddlers*," i.e., street singers. Despite the low repute in which these musicians are held, they still occupy an important

functional position in their native communities. You can see here that music came to be a locus of subversion.

Two hundred years later, Blind Willie Johnson was nearly arrested for singing the spiritual, *If I Had My Way I'd Tear This Building Down* because he was singing it in front of a New Orleans Custom House! ut the most ardent articulation of the notion of the street musician's subversive potential came from the Russian anarchist, Bidbei, who asked,

"Who, if not the vagabond, can be the demon...midwife, of history? From where, if not from the dismal slums, can seep the noxious poison of derision for the whole callous and cold code of shameful bourgeois morality?"

The blues singer can be the carrier of this derision, the messenger to the whole callous and cold code. The way the surrealists see it, blues singers are representative spokespersons for their community, and the clearest light in which to view the blues artists and their songs's relationship to the criminal is to see them as the legitimate heirs of Bidbei's speculation. They will carry this derision.