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Hearts Full of Sorrow

By BEN RATLIFF

DELTA BLUES

The Life and Times of the Mississippi Masters Who Revolutionized American Music

By Ted Gioia. Illustrated by Neil Harpe

449 pp. W. W. Norton & Company. $27.95.

It has been 70 years since Robert Johnson's death and 25 since Muddy Waters's. It has been 16 years since the founding of the House of Blues nightclub chain and eight years since the burning of Junior's Place, in Chulahoma, Miss., one of the last of the great Delta juke joints. We are in the post-history of the blues, and at this point we might as well set some requirements, guards against benign nonsense, for new books on all blues, but especially Delta blues.

Here are some: One, no overwriting and no clichés. Two, a thorough awareness of the notion that blues fetishism, by collectors, producers and writers, has been equally damaging and helpful. Three, the newest discographical and biographical information, as much as possible. (In some cases, it's all we have to rely on — a man or a woman was in such a room at such a time.) Four, no pious implications that the blues always represents righteousness, truth and tradition. These were performers; grant them their artifice. (Also, as little positive use of the word "simple" as possible. Same for negative use. Neutral use is O.K.) Five, a sure fix on the best musicians as both extraordinary artists and ordinary subjects of history.

After that, do what you want.

On the second page of the preface to "Delta Blues," his new survey, Ted Gioia explains his middle-aged transition to a deeper level of interest in the blues. "My attraction to traditional blues," he writes, "was no doubt fueled by my growing dissatisfaction with the overpowering commercialization and commoditization I encountered elsewhere in the music world. Traditional blues' stubborn allegiance to its own guiding lights, its resistance to corporate interference, its blissful ignorance of music videos and trendy radio formats, its affirmation of its own inexpressibly rich heritage. . . ."

No!

But a few pages later, the book starts to be tremendously useful. Gioia, the author of three books on jazz and two books on music as social function ("Work Songs" and "Healing Songs"), keeps jumping between several different levels. He describes the Delta blues as a critic, writing from hard listening. He traces its history through real-life issues — migration, labor, audiences, record sales, nightclubs — pausing every so often to delineate how different the story of this music is, in which someone who was unknown in his own time, like Johnson, can be the king of it.

And he attempts to triangulate a kind of leveled-out truth about the blues, weighing dozens of accounts from both the artists and their associates. In this book you become as familiar with researchers, historians, producers and biographers like Alan Lomax, Stephen Calt, Mack McCormick, H. C. Speir and Gayle Wardlow as you do with Son House, Tommy Johnson, Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf.

As Robert Palmer did in "Deep Blues" (1981) — a slimmer, more mysterious, more urgent book — Gioia fills an early chapter with the findings of Charles Peabody, the Harvard archaeologist who explored Coahoma County, Miss., in 1901, and with the memoirs of W. C. Handy, the composer of "St. Louis Blues." Handy's nickname was "Father of the Blues"; he was also one of its first fantasists, writing about "the beauty of primitive music" after his initial encounters with blues musicians in Mississippi, early in the 20th century, and describing it as "the weirdest music I had ever heard."

Unlike Palmer, Gioia doesn't spend much time connecting the blues to West African performance patterns and rituals. He favors, instead, its evolution from black antebellum work songs. And in general, as he moves along, he uses work to drive the narrative: how economic opportunities affected musicians, what money and motivation the blues might have offered them, and how their own work ethics and aesthetics squared with those of their audiences.

So the chapter on Bukka White and Son House centers on the Parchman prison farm, where both singers served time and where White met the folklorist John Lomax. "Prisons are not supposed to play a role in the history of music," Gioia warns; but in the history of the Delta blues, "everything is the opposite of what one expects." The Muddy Waters chapter is really about the blues' moving north: Waters followed the work force, leaving the Delta around the same time as the first public displays of the cotton-picking machine. The section on Mississippi John Hurt is really about the mechanics of the blues revival of the early '60s, an enlightened orgy of "rediscovery"; it ties Hurt to the awkward second acts in the careers of Bukka White, Son House and Skip James, and to the waning of the blues as a living tradition.

The chapter on John Lee Hooker — and here Gioia really hits his stride — deals with Hooker's endless variations on a one-chord groove, but also with the profligacy of his recording career. He could make dozens of records in a single year, some under different names, sometimes lending himself to producers who had no idea what to do with him. There's an embedded

narrative here about the way certain blues musicians — not just Hooker, but Son House and others — might have taken too much pride in the quantity of their work, and not enough in the quality, as an emotional defense against exploitation. But there's another, too, about the opportunism of both Hooker and his employers. Gioia follows Hooker to the end of his long life with a clear fascination for even some of his lesser achievements, through his '70s recordings with Canned Heat and his Grammy-winning final days.

Robert Johnson naturally gets a whole chapter, but faced with a lack of hard biographical facts, Gioia writes an essay about uncertainty and conjecture in blues historiography. What most people have heard about Johnson is the myth that he sold his soul to the Devil at a crossroads; Gioia responds with a nine-page mini-history on the blues and religion, and on the blues and credulousness. (He doesn't believe the crossroads story, of course, but he argues for its significance; this is his rejoinder to Elijah Wald's book "Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues.") He also recounts the history of the scholars who have tried, and are still trying, to dig up the details of Johnson's life.

Gioia does overwrite at times — not in the moments when he knows something, but when he feels he can't know. "We may never be able to fully explain Robert Johnson's dark night of the soul," he ponders, "but even less should we try to explain it away, or refuse to admit its hypnotic power." (Maybe we should make alternative fuels with it.) Yet tucked into this complex chapter — as with all the others — are small analyses of the music, and by contrast they are well handled: neither too wet with wonder nor too dry with data.

Much of this material has been covered in other books, though without so much synthesis and circumspection. "Delta Blues" is not as contentious as Wald's revisionist "Escaping the Delta" or Marybeth Hamilton's "In Search of the Blues," two books that have caused some soul--searching among music critics. (Gioia does take a few guarded stands: in his scene-setting emphasis on the black American work song over the West African griot song, and in his defense of Alan Lomax against recent blues scholars who claimed that Lomax had obscured the contributions of the black researchers he collaborated with in the 1940s.)

Instead, Gioia uses original research, interviews with reliable sources and his own calm, argument-closing incantations to draw a line through a century of the Delta blues — a history that is probably more over than he cares to admit in his book's final pages. He has balanced the story of the music with that of its reception, and where the truth of either one is inaccessible, he says so. He's in favor of the blues retaining some mystery, but only highly informed mystery.

Ben Ratliff is a music critic for The Times and the author of "The Jazz Ear: Conversations Over Music," which is being published this month.

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