

**Re-imagining Heaven through a Cave: Blues
Music as Institutional & Ideological Criticism in
the Lives & Artistry of Son House & Honeyboy
Edwards**

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Abstract

This thesis explores two twentieth century blues artists, Son House and Honeyboy Edwards, and the confessional and critical voices in their art and lives. House (b. 1902), grew up and became musically competent in the black Baptist church in the American south during a period after reconstruction but before civil rights. When House reached adulthood in the 1920's the blues was prohibited and denounced by the Baptist church. House wrote and recorded "Preachin' the Blues" in 1930 in order to work through his anxiety regarding church ordinances that branded blues music as sinful and evil. In this text, House confesses the reality of his desire for whiskey, many devoted women, and a heaven of his own. In describing his fantasies House effectively criticized and resisted church efforts to promote temperance, chastity, and collective homogeneity.

Honeyboy Edwards (b. 1915) aims his critical gaze at other institutions and ideologies. For Honeyboy, the blues is both an outlet for confession and a means of resisting the interpellative call of sharecropping, prison, police, and the draft; all these institutions view black males as anonymous and exchangeable and seek to collect and co-opt black male individuality for laborious and deathly purposes. Honeyboy's autobiography contains overwhelming evidence of the limited options available to black men from the nineteen-twenties to the nineteen-sixties as well as the brutal nature of work farms and white-operate prisons. Honeyboy's blues allows him to avoid and subvert such systems and, by playing the blues, reassert and recast his own personhood and agency. His song, "Build Myself a Cave," challenges the call of Uncle Sam's World War II draft by depicting the life Honeyboy will be forced to give up: freedom of movement, drinking and partying, and his lover's affection.

Though House and Honeyboy criticize different institutions and each bear different apprehensions, their ultimate goal is very much the same. The two artists use their blues to candidly express desire and fantasy – the way things ought to be – and both men reconfigure their own place and purpose in the world through the blues. In doing this work of reorientation, both men reveal a deep and emotive understanding of the realities and limitations of the institutions and ideologies at work in their lives.

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Introduction

People who enjoy blues do so by virtue of the fact that they have not lost touch with their innermost needs and desires...it is this feeling towards one's own basic desires that makes the blues, in its candor and simplicity, offensive to the prevailing moral code.

- Paul Garon¹

In the above passage the blues is considered the space in which one may, by enjoying the music, chose to privilege an inner need or desire over a given overarching moral code. If scholar Paul Garon is correct, then blues music involves acknowledgment and interaction with desires, fantasies, and needs that would otherwise be tucked away and out of touch. A study of blues music is thus an attempt to unpack and recover the meaning of desire represented in the music and, more specifically, the lyrics. Such dreamy, passionate visions of want and need threaten the 'prevailing moral code' because these alternative realities are presented honestly and without apology. In this thesis I will study the musically creative works of Eddie James "Son" House and David Honeyboy Edwards while paying some attention to their biographical details. These two men are part of a broader category of American blues music conceived and undertaken by the working class black population of the postbellum American south. Over the course of this project I intend to highlight and dwell on the myriad of commonalities and differences between the two men. Both played and recorded the blues during a period after slavery but before civil rights from the 1920's (when House began playing the blues) up to today (Honeyboy is still alive and touring). This period includes both world wars and the

¹ Paul Garon. *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* (New York: De Capo, 1975), 12, 28.

significance of this time frame lies in the fact that both House and Honeyboy come from poor black communities vulnerable to the aggressive intrusion of a variety of institutions.

Perhaps because of this context, both men use the blues as a means of confession and towards the promotion of individual agency. House's work deals with his conflict within the black Baptist church: its dissemination of guilt due to its unwavering articulation of sin as well as the church's clear privileging of otherworldly conjectures over the pleasures of life on earth. Honeyboy, by contrast, focuses his blues voice on predominantly white-run institutions such as sharecropping and the draft; such institutions aim to interpellate Honeyboy as part of the collective and use his body and potential for repetitive and deathly purposes. The aim of this thesis is to place these two linked but distinct voices together and show how the subject and methods of articulation may be different but both men are ultimately bound together due to their common concern regarding the purpose, reason, and desire of living one's only life.

I intend to articulate House's artistic voice as an expression of man's individuality in response to the homogenizing force of institutional religion. Through a close reading of a few of House's songs as texts I have become acquainted with a complex and conflicted artist whose theological and ethical dilemmas were directly engaged and at work in his music. In his song, "Preachin' the Blues," House clearly moves to collapse the blues and Christianity together in service to a uniquely conceived notion of transcendent autonomy. By transcendent autonomy I mean that for House, as a working class black man within the Baptist Church, rising above and challenging the boundaries and circumstances in his life could only be done in the resistant act of establishing his own agency and independence. However, I also pay close attention to the chronicle of

House's long life in which he seems to wrestle with his own deep internalization of the dichotomy of blues and religion imposed upon him by the black Baptist church. House's story is no simple or neat progression of crisis and redemption; it is instead a tale of contradiction, mystery, and strange power.

Honeyboy Edwards was born in 1915, thirteen years after Son House in 1902. These dates account for the beginning of the story in this thesis. House died in 1988 but Honeyboy is alive today, outliving almost all of his peers. Though the two men are both considered authentic bluespeople- and their recordings would certainly be lumped together in the blues section of any record store- the tenuous, even contradictory nature of their lives and careers is the main reason I've chosen to engage each. Honeyboy began playing the blues out of love for the music and his simultaneous rejection of labor and imprisonment; he has not yet stopped. Unlike House, a man plagued by theo-ethical conflicts regarding his affection for blues while preaching in church, Honeyboy displays an indifference to organized religion in his life and autobiography. The term theo-ethical conflict refers to House's anxiety over playing the blues because of his acceptance of a Christian rejection of blues music and themes. I collapse the prefix "theo" (for theological, God) with ethics to demonstrate how the ideologies of the organized Baptist theology and House's own ethical conscience were deeply entangled in "Preachin' the Blues" Pt. 1&2. Honeyboy's critical gaze is not aimed at the Church but instead at sharecropping, police, prison, and, finally in his song, "Build Myself a Cave", the draft. Honeyboy's blues expression is still deeply imbued with a theo-ethical conflict despite his indifference to organized religion. Like House, Honeyboy uses the blues to give voice

to his own opinions and feelings about what is wrong with the world and the limited options available to black men during his time.

It is not the author's intent to collapse the two blues exemplars to the point of losing their individual importance; for neither House nor Honeyboy require a foreign subject to enrich their own narrative and artistic merit. These two bluesmen ought to be considered on their own terms and according to their own productions instead of as elementary parts of a broader blues tradition. Linked but distinct, the profound story of these two bluesmen is in both their points of intersection as well the instances of contradiction that emerge from connecting the two. House and Honeyboy showcase how all case-studies in a field or population ultimately only speak from their own personal experience. Blues history resembles a procession of highly individual and idiosyncratic voices that live and express themselves on their own terms. However, the tradition, as scholars and performers have been quick to point out, is also full of intercommunication, thematic sharing, and interpersonal criticism. By connecting the two artists I will show how the blues itself does not manifest from anywhere or nowhere nor does the blues emerge from a space of sentimental, heirophanic abstraction.

Before fully delving and dwelling in the world of House and Honeyboy's artistry and creativity it is necessary to review the concepts of blues and religion in the American South during the early to middle part of the 20th century. In as much as blues music came from the unique particulars of the African-American experience –and the very term African-American comes from the forced relocation of millions of people from the African continent to the Americas during several hundred years of the slave trade – its ontology is not linked to slavery. Though the blues could never have existed if

“American captives had not become American captives” the music could also never have existed had that captivity not, at least legally, come to an end.² As Kalamu Ya Salaam put it, “the blues ain’t slave music. Didn’t no slaves sing the blues. In essence, the blues aesthetic is the cultural manifestation of former slaves expelled from the land, promised a new land, and ultimately and callously, turned into an easily exploitable surplus, unskilled and semi-skilled... politically unenfranchised labor pool.”³ The blues emerged after emancipation to express the feelings and observations of those caught between new freedoms and new disappointments. After slavery black people had an unprecedented variety of new opportunities – most importantly the freedom of autonomous movement and the right to make personal decisions regarding sexual partnership – but had to deal with prejudice, poverty, and racial violence.⁴

Scholar William Barlow has closely studied the technical definitions of the blues within an African-American cultural context. Blues antecedents, Barlow explains, are rooted in West African musical traditions that feature a myriad of rhythms as well as melodic expressions that utilize bent or flattened pitches to signify emotion; such tonal manipulations are now commonly referred to as “blue notes.” These techniques were adopted into the solo performance style that typifies rural southern blues. The individual musicality of the blues drew on two major sources: exclusive observations about the world and the black oral tradition. The rural blues, Barlow asserts, were simultaneously “a mix of personal sentiments and collective memory.” Coming from poor farming families, blues performers revolted against “the established white social order” by

² LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People: Negro Music in White American* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1963), 17.

³ Kalamu Ya Salaam, *What is Life? Reclaiming the Black Blues Self* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994), 7.

⁴ Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies & Black Feminism*, (NY: Pantheon Books, 1998), 4.

releasing “pent-up emotions and feelings.”⁵ Thus the blues are delightfully contradictory by nature, the art form of both solo articulation and communal sensibility and self-awareness.

Most scholars who research and write about the blues at least acknowledge the role and influence of the church within the same historical and social context. LeRoi Jones notes that the “negro church” was (and perhaps still is) the “social focal point” of black life in that it functions as a space of relative autonomy.⁶ The church served not only as an organizing and generative social force but also as the literal space in which black expression and interaction occurred free of the gaze and often violent intrusions of the white community. As the threat of physical, emotional, and legal harm was an ever-present and urgent threat to the black community in the postbellum early to mid-twentieth century the church adopted a sense of urgency “steeped in music.”⁷ This church music, called the spirituals during and immediately after slavery and the gospels as postbellum freedoms allowed for growth and composition, is concerned with “naming evil and suffering, doing what one can to effect change, and working in concert with a God who cares.”⁸ Church music is collective in origin and practice; the song roster serves to uplift the black community through a celebration of “social and cultural richness preserved within living, beautiful, artistic stories.”⁹ Thus church music serves the distinct purposes of founding and solidifying community and allowing that community to perform sorrow

⁵ William Barlow, “Looking Up At Down:” *The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 4-5.

⁶ Jones, 40, 48-49.

⁷ Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, *Exorcising Evil: A Womanist Perspective on the Spirituals* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 71.

⁸ Kirk-Duggan, 74.

⁹ *Ibid*, 79.

and optimism together. As a collective congregation, church people give voice to both widespread, shared pain and redemptive joy.

While the church did do more than any other institution to cultivate and preserve a sense of solidarity among southern blacks in the 20th century it remained an institution that by nature seeks a certain kind of homogeneity among its members. Church ideology is concerned not only with the souls and well being of the congregation but also a specific pattern of behavior and conduct of each member. Religious historian Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham provides a detailed account of moral codes of presentation put forth by the black Baptist church. Though her chapter “The Politics of Respectability” deals specifically with women’s movements in a particular urban context her arguments and observations are applicable to a more general overview of the goals of the black Baptist church regarding the lives of its parishioners. The black Baptist church was in the early 20th century, according to Higginbotham, largely preoccupied with the reform of individual behavior in an effort to “counter racist images and structures of and among black people.”¹⁰ The church stressed a particular model of discretion and abstinence in disseminating the following: temperance, cleanliness of person and property, strong work, and sexual purity; the church aggressively pursued anyone who failed to meet these standards in order to prevent the deleterious consequences of individual behavior on collective fate.¹¹ Thus the church aimed to curb any strain of individualism that might flirt too closely with pre-conceived notions of sin within and apart from the black community. According to the black Baptist Church, when one individual commits a sin or backslides from faith that wrong is borne by the entire community; the sins of one

¹⁰ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righeous Discontent*. (USA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 187.

¹¹ Higginbotham, 193-196.

black church member affects the way the community was perceived by outsiders. Thus, the church stressed adherence to a prescribed moral and ethic behavioral code.

Much has been written about the commonality between the preacher and the blues artist. Honeyboy Edwards himself is fond of saying, “musicians and preachers are just alike: they ain’t no good! They always want to start some junk.”¹² Here Honeyboy refers to a vibrant and aggressive sexuality germane to both preachers and bluesmen as he recalls an early childhood memory of a preacher eating at his dinner table while flirting shamelessly with his aunt. If, as Honeyboy hints at, both the preacher and the musician are sexually charged characters, then the spaces in which they operate must too be passionately infused. Scholar Albert Murray points out that the church labeled the act of dancing to the blues and the merriment of the blues singer as sinful and “of the devil” because the church itself, on some level, saw a ritual that too closely resembled the actions of the congregation on a Sunday morning. Within the church and the juke house – the latter a term for a pleasure and party house in which blues, dancing, drinking, and gambling all occurred simultaneously on a Saturday night – participating bodies collectively experience “heightened emotion and orgiastic release.”¹³ Though theologian James Cone argues that the church denounced the blues because of fear and ignorance, such a view may be only partially correct.¹⁴ The church may have been aware that people dance to the blues for the same reasons they jump and shout in church: emotional and physical release.

¹² David Honeyboy Edwards, *The World Don't Owe me Nothing: The Life and Times of Delta Bluesman Honeyboy Edwards* as told to Janis Martinson and Michael Robert Frank (Chicago: Chicago Review press, 1997), 12.

¹³ Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (New York: De Capo Paperback: 1976), 23-27.

¹⁴ James Cone, *The Spirituals & the Blues* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972) 111.

Such similarities between church space and juke space as felt by the church congregation or blues audience do not properly account for the reasons men like House and Honeyboy would chose a blues life over a church life. For House and Honeyboy were not audience members, they were blues practitioners. Both men sing and play the blues specifically, because such a music is by nature “self-centered, highly personalized, wherein the effects of everyday life are recounted in terms of the singers reactions.”¹⁵ Both House and Honeyboy sing their own opinions and perspectives that arise in response to a variety of institutions and, more generally, the simple way things were. But where the church, and, by extension, its music, was and is concerned with uplifting the lives of the black population and defeating “the myth that dehumanized the black person’s being” the blues taps into something alternative but equally humanizing.¹⁶ House and Honeyboy are certainly part of an oppressed black population seen by white institutions as essentially worthless and interchangeable; and the black church in a way also perceives and desires homogeneity among black people by positing a universal code of behavior to encourage everyone to act the same. The blues of House and Honeyboy is a response to any call of obedience, abstinence, temperance, or aggregation.

In the next two chapters I will engage directly with lyrics from House and Honeyboy as well as the autobiography of the latter. By sticking close to the text I aim to unpack what the blues does for House and Honeyboy and what the two men do through their particular blues voices. This recovery of meaning is nothing less than the search for the definition of blues space for each artist; the texts considered in this project contain a language and submit a picture of reality that is radically altered in favor of the author and

¹⁵ Garon, 9-10.

¹⁶ Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*. (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1986), 152.

performer. House uses religious imagery and terminology but establishes mastery and ownership of such language and speaks of himself as an omnipotent presence in his own world. Honeyboy uses the blues, in the autobiography of his life and career as well as in one of his songs in particular, to resist the reality of labor imposed upon him and to protect an identity that is firmly in charge of itself. House and Honeyboy criticize different institutions and live very different lives but their ultimate goal is the same: to dwell in and reveal the nature of their own desires and to emerge from the world with their agency intact. By resisting the institutions and laws of society House and Honeyboy privilege their own individuality and live in service to their own basic and unabashed desires. By resisting nearly everything but the blues itself, House and Honeyboy conquer, resist, and transcend the official boundaries of society and nourish their own autonomies.

My reading of House and Honeyboy is guided and informed by the writings of Charles H. Long and Jon Michael Spencer. Long, a professor and scholar of religions, grounds his philosophy in defining religion as “orientation – orientation in the ultimate sense, that is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one’s place in the world.”¹⁷ House and Honeyboy use the blues to reconsider and boldly reorient their standing in the world and both men do so by introducing and engaging with their own personal and even controversial desires. Spencer, another professor and scholar, argues for theology and music to be studied together and offers a disciplinary dialectic called “theomusicology.” This term rests on the premise that “human beings are inescapably religious” and will use any variety of art forms to express their own religiosity.¹⁸ Such a principle of inescapable religiosity is neither essentialist nor a claim that all human

¹⁷ Long, 7.

¹⁸ Jon Michael Spencer, *Re-Searching Black Music* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1996),

beings must necessarily bear an innate religiousness. Instead, religion is simply the best term for describing the expressive meditations on life and purpose in the blues artistry of House and Honeyboy.

Spencer encourages a theological reading of music, especially music that seems to reject or ignore religion, because all music potentially represents “the desire to express ultimate meaning.”¹⁹ Long and Spencer’s work combines together well because Spencer’s notion of theomusicology allows one to uncover the instances of reorientation articulated by Long. By closely reading blues texts by House and Honeyboy, while giving at least a modicum of consideration to their personal lives, I will call attention to the desires expressed by both men and how such desires relate to their imagination of their position in the world. By embracing inner wants and needs, especially the wants and needs prohibited or ignored by institutions and ideologies, House and Honeyboy emerge through their blues with new selves and fresh perspectives.

¹⁹Spencer, 35 - 45.

Chapter 1: Church, Blues, and Son House the Blues Preacher

I'm gonna take my music, back to the church,
Where the blues, been misunderstood
Some people think that it was songs of the devil
But it was the songs of the man for sure.

I'm gonna be a preacher and build my own church,
Take the part in religion and play on my guitar
Use the concept of the blues to feel my way around
Don't stop me till I'm six foot in the ground.

-James Blood Ulmer²⁰

The lyrics above, written and recorded in 2005, provide an excellent conduit for examining the blues ethos of Son House, albeit by starting at the end and working backwards. Ulmer's "Take My Music Back to the Church" is the fully realized extension of House's crisis of consciousness expressed in his own "Preachin' the Blues" first recorded in 1930. In this chapter, I will navigate a close-reading of two versions of House's "Preachin' the Blues" recorded in 1930 and 1965. In these texts, House expressed anxiety and frustration with the black Baptist church and its condemnation of blues music. Though House works with religious language and imagery his "Preachin the Blues" contains both church criticism and a re-ordering of the world in favor of House – a world devoted to and determined by House's own desires and fantasies of control. As Ulmer sings over seventy years after the first incarnation of "Preachin' the Blues," House combines elements of Baptist Christianity and the blues to sing candidly a song for himself, about himself. House establishes a new agency and autonomy with his guitar (and, by extension, with the blues) to transcend the impositions of the Baptist church and begin to 'feel his way around' a world radically altered by his own admission of inner and personal desire. When one solidifies and defends his or her autonomous personhood

²⁰ James Blood Ulmer, "Take My Music Back to the Church." *Birthright*. Hyena Records, 2005.

apart from institutions and their ideologies, one achieves a sense of transcendent autonomy. By radically re-imagining his place in a world reconfigured according to his own desire, House achieves such a transcendent autonomy.

House was born on a farm in 1902 close to Lyon, Mississippi and grew up in the Baptist church where he first learned to sing. House heard his first slide guitar player in his late twenties and was so taken with the sounds of the bottleneck guitar (which had only recently replaced the knife as the means of producing the whining sounds of slide guitar) that he bought his own instrument second-hand and started to play.²¹ House formed a deep musical partnership with Willie Brown in the 1920's and the two were active on the dance and party scene.²² House shot and killed a man in an alcohol soaked dispute in 1928 but fortunately for the musical world he served only two years of his fifteen year sentence and immediately thereafter recorded for the first time in Grafton, Wisconsin in 1930.²³ Though House enjoyed blues stardom in the Mississippi Delta up until the 1940's he gave up music after Willie Brown's death and moved to Rochester, New York.

House cut "Preachin' the Blues" (1930, Paramount) after his release from prison. This particular text narrates House's personal dilemma of feeling caught between preaching the gospel in church and playing the blues. As House described in an interview, "I was brought up in church, I didn't believe in the blues, I was too churchy. I talked against the blues."²⁴ As discussed in the introduction, the church denounced the blues because the content of the music did not adhere to the ordinances and prohibitions

²¹ Barlow, 43.

²² Willie Brown, as casual fans of blues and rock n' roll from the 1960's may recall, is mentioned in Robert Johnson's *Crossroad Blues* made famous by the rock band Cream.

²³ Barlow, 44.

²⁴ Son House, Interview. YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lybo07brzx0> accessed: 4/3/08/.

circulated by the church. House was at one point “too churchy” to take joy in the blues or recognize the positive and honest aspects of the music. House’s early rejection and aversion to the blues is the direct consequence of his own acceptance of church ideologies and theologies. If the church is holy and good then the blues must be, by contrast, evil and bad. House works through this tension in “Preachin’ the Blues” and ultimately articulates his own idiosyncratic vision regarding the dichotomy of the church and the blues.

Over the course of House’s performance, and perhaps because of the act of performing, House conflates the preacher and the bluesman (and therefore the church and the blues) together through a dual embrace of visceral pleasure and a refusal to renounce or repress the truth of his own existence. When performing the blues either for an impassioned Saturday night audience or for an attentive recording engineer, House attempts to wield tremendous influence and command rapt attention, of both the audience and himself, through his lyrical ingenuity and the sheer weight of his voice and guitar playing. In “Preachin’ the Blues” House moves to, as religious scholar Catherine Bell theorized, effectively “reconfigure a vision of the order of power in the world” that “conveys a biased, nuanced rendering of the ordering of power so as to facilitate the envisioning of personal empowerment through activity in the perceived system.”²⁵ The acts of performing and recording make fantasies of power possible. These visions of control in House’s text are ostentatious and bold precisely because they reflect a deep awareness of personal desire and the harshly finite contours of institutional entrapment. While there may have been other options for articulating and mapping an arena of

²⁵ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 81-84.

imaginative autonomy House commits to musical performance. This text stands as arguably the most striking and personal epic of House's career.

On record, "Preachin' the Blues" is captured in two separate tracks titled "Preachin' the Blues" part 1 and 2, respectively. One would be wrong to assume that these two tracks are intended to be separated or without the other, for two reasons. The first reason for the technical division of "Preachin' the Blues" has to do with the limits of recording technology of the time; only a certain amount of space was available per track. The second reason, as blues scholar Elijah Wald points out, is that juke-joint musicians such as Son House were accustomed to playing most songs continuously for twenty minutes or more depending on how long the audience wanted to dance.²⁶ Thus, even the lengthy sides recorded by House and his peers are dramatically reduced in sheer length and lyrical content. House not only had to decide how much to cut from what would normally be performed at a Saturday night party but also where to break up the song within the boundaries of recording equipment.

In part 1, House offers immediately and without preamble his feelings about organized religion and labor: "Oh, I'm gonna get me religion, I'm gonna join the Baptist Church (2x), I'm gonna be a Baptist preacher, and I sure won't have to work."²⁷ One scholar points out that this stanza criticizes the preacher as "tantamount to laziness."²⁸ However, this interpretation ignores the possibility that the term "work" might reflect the limited economic options available to the rural working class black community. Within that context, the Baptist preacher is one of the few in the community who doesn't have to

²⁶ Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: Amistad, 2004).

²⁷ Son House, "Preachin' the Blues Pt. 1" Paramount Records, 1930.

²⁸ Teresa Reed, *The Holy Profane: Religion in Black Popular Music* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University of Kentucky Press, 2003.), 55.

“work” in the backbreaking sharecropping system involving cotton or plowing land behind a mule. Giving sermons and leading a congregation meant escape from the hardships and tedium of agricultural (slightly lessened) slavery. House was also aware of this, having spent time as a preacher during his teenage years in the 1920’s.²⁹

House spoke of his oscillation between preaching and playing blues in one interview, explaining “I’m preaching on this side and the blues is on that side... I says, well, I’ll just put them together and name it “Preachin’ the Blues?”³⁰ By choosing to put preaching and blues together House begins to collapse the church and the blues together; this suggests that after previously accepting the rigid binary between organized religion and blues music House has now become skeptical. His impulse to put preaching and blues together in the song title reads rather matter-of-factly, as if it were logical or even obvious. However, the song does not begin with observance to the solution contained in the title. Religion and blues occupy opposite sides and separate spheres within Son House, it would seem, as he proceeds further with “Preachin the Blues” part 1. Here House sings of his personal crisis of identity and interpellation as well as his anxious existence in a space between two competing factions. House confesses,

Oh, I’m a-preach these blues, and I, I want everybody to shout (2x)
I’m gonna do like a prisoner, I’m gonna roll my time on out.
Oh, I went in my room, I bowed down to pray (2x)
Till the blues come along, and they blowed my spirit away.
Oh, I’d had religion, Lord, this very day (2x)
But the womens and the whiskey, well, they would not let me pray.

²⁹ Francis Davis, *The History of the Blues*. (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 109.

³⁰ Cited in Julius Lester, “Preachin’ the Blues,” *Sing Out!* 15, no.3:46. Cited in Paul Oliver, *Screening the Blues: Aspects of the Blues Tradition* (NY: Da Capo, 1968), 49. Cited in Jon Michael Spencer, *Blues and Evil* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 11.

At this point in the song there are three identities in the arena: the Baptist preacher, the blues preacher (as shown in the line “I’m a-preach these blues”), and the prisoner. The fact that House was himself convicted of shooting another man to death in 1928 further supports an autobiographical reading of the text. House, remember, did only two years in Mississippi’s Parchman Prison (often called Parchman Farm, because it was a *working* prison) before recording in 1930. It is hard to say what House means when he sings “I’m gonna roll my time on out” but I am inclined to think it relates to the linear brevity of his incarceration.

In addition to three identities (the preacher, the blues preacher, and the prisoner) in this stanza there are also three synonymous terms and images of religiosity: bowing in prayer, my spirit blown away, and religion itself. This trilogy is matched and countered by another, oppositional force in threes: the blues, womens, and whiskey. Prayer occurs only before the blues comes along to chase away the spirit. Religion was only a possibility, the route to it etched in prayer, but the “womens and the whiskey” do not allow House a chance to remain observant for long. House may have eluded life in the prisoner posture when he achieves victory over time and the law (via a reduced sentence and likely legal corruption), but he must still confront life alone. This stanza is profoundly introspective, for all the action occurs in House’s room in which he is isolated.

Despite the lyrical flirtations that begin the song – “I’m a-preach these blues” - with a collapsed identity of preacher and bluesman, the two identities are still at odds with each other for House’s conscious attention. His attempts at isolated prayer are thwarted by a blues that force the spirit to retreat. In the next line, House attests that he

would have had religion if not for the “womens and the whiskey.” It is no coincidence that two images of sin forbidden by the Baptist Church that once employed House were the polyamorous lifestyle implicit in the plural “womens” as well as the lure of intoxication chemically promised in drinking whiskey. House at this point accepts the ideology of the church and can only see women and whiskey as distractions and blockades between man and salvation. As Higginbotham has shown, House can only choose between pious adherence and a life of sin.

The significance of House’s solitary positioning is worth further mention. “Preachin’ the Blues” reads as a narrative of contemplative crisis because its universe contains only an anxious and troubled House who despite his bent obeisance cannot muster a prayer. This personal, introspective, unmediated space of House’s room becomes the space in which the blues can thrive. At one of the Newport Folk Festivals in the 1960’s House put forth his own definition of the blues and the space in which that music can and must exist:

“The blues is just by itself... you done got lonesome and worried, thinking bout’ your loved ones. You cry and cry alone... you don’t want no company. You wanna lock your door and get in there and cry good fashion.”³¹

Though this definition comes some thirty years after House’s initial recordings the point of his statement can be traced back to the first stanza of “Preachin’ the Blues” in which House’s musings, troubles, and realizations occur alone. Before House could carry his blues into public performances he had to first develop it, and become used to the blues, in his room behind a closed door.

³¹ House, Newport Folk Festival, as seen on You Tube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xmulkJtL42g> accessed: 4/10/08.

While House recognizes the preacher occupation as an escape from the arduousness of sharecropping and the penal experience, the next stanzas speak of a fantastical space that transcends the church and collective experience in general. This space starkly contrasts the singer's lonesome and ineffective prayer. In the following stanza, House develops his "womens" theme and once again melds worldly realities with religious/spiritual vocabulary and imagery. "I wish I had me a heaven of my own," House declares, "I'd give all my women a long, long, happy home." Here it becomes apparent that even salvation promised in church is not enough; House envisions the possession of his own personal paradise populated by his many lovers. Access to this space seemingly depends on the woman's ability to live up to the criteria of the next verse, in which House tells the audience that, "I love my baby, just like I love myself. Well, if she won't have me, she won't have nobody else." In "Preachin' the Blues" the fantasies of absolute control, individual power, and omniscience come alive; this is not God's Kingdom but rather the territory of the blues preacher. During his time alone, struggling in his room, House was able to realize the extent of his own desire and what exactly such a fantasy might look like.

Fueled by the previous confessional boast, House begins part 2 with an unabashed return to the shattered dichotomy of preacher and bluesman. Here the blues becomes a means of empowerment and a vehicle for contentment. No longer ambivalent or torn, House fully embraces his blues and sings,

Well, I'm gonna fold my arms, I'm gonna kneel down in prayer, (2x)
When I get up I'm gonna see if my blues suit a man's ear.
Well, I met the blues this morning, walking just like a man, (2x)
I said, Good morning blues, now give me your right hand.
Now there's nothing now baby, Lord that's gonna worry my mind (2x)
Oh to satisfy, I got the longest line

Oh I got to stay on the job, I ain't got no time to lose (2x)
I swear to God, I've got to preach these gospel blues.

When House returns to the kneeled posture of prayer he does so in service of his blues; if he prays effectively his blues will be more enticing to his audience. Shortly thereafter in the next stanza, following prayer, House encounters the blues personification and greets him favorably and confidently. The two join hands and by the next stanza House's mind is unworried, despite the process and business of satisfaction having "the longest line." House now fully welcomes his vocation and occupation as a blues preacher; he refuses to waste any more time and is even unafraid to tell God that he must "preach these gospel blues." This section rings with the redemptive clamor of a conversion narrative; House was once in despair but now emerges fresh and invigorated, able to righteously spread his "gospel blues." By the end of this stanza both reality and House's place within it have been reconfigured and freshly imagined.

House ends his "Preachin' the Blues" with a particularly physical reference to women: "I'm gonna preach these blues, and choose my seat and set down (2x). When the spirit comes, sister, I want you to jump straight up and down." As in his address to the audience during the first appearance of the blues preacher – in which House wants others to "shout" in response to his a-preached blues – House recognizes the ability of his performance to catalyze a bodily response among those nearest to him. Of course, House's apparent heterosexuality primarily fixes his performative gaze on women. By preaching the blues House can deliver his own "word" more concerned with tangible, even erotic physicality (women who only love him, women who jump up and down) than any of the cleaner, more abstract beauties evoked in a Baptist sermon. I will return to the

“womens” theme in chapter 3 of this project and discuss the greater significance of the female figure in House’s text.

Within the fantastic space of his blues song and performance, House doesn’t have to feel conflicted, disempowered, or forced to deny the real of desire. House accomplishes in preaching the blues what seems impossible in church: individual agency and fantasies of total control. The most important part is that House performed this song within the bifurcating ideology grafted on him by the Baptist church. Instead of choosing the blues over religion, as the church would have him do, House reconfigures both sides of the dichotomy together to enrich the whole. Though House once played God by shooting a man, his musical “heaven of my own” might be not only less violent but more generative and effective.

In 1965 Son House recorded a new version of his “Preachin’ the Blues;” a version that departs radically from the earlier incarnation recorded over thirty years prior.³² Age, poverty, and hard-drinking had done much separately and together to mangle House’s technical dexterity and to render him incapable of the swift slide lines demonstrated in the past. House’s voice had dropped in pitch and hoarsened by the sixties, and though much of the sonorous power was still there House could only, as with his guitar playing, deploy that force at half speed. The more interesting change in the evolved version of “Preachin’ the Blues” occurs in lyrical content. Perhaps also a reflection of age and the exonerating passage of time, the newest version of the song is not an account of inner conflict but rather a hilarious depiction of church people fully in their sin. Though the song begins with the same attention-grabbing “I’m gonna be a Baptist Preacher, so I

³² Son House. “Preachin’ the Blues” *Father of the Delta Blues: The Complete 1965 Sessions*. Roots n’ Blues, 1992.

won't have to work" the next three stanzas outline a conversation among three church members.

One Deacon jumped up, and he began to grin (2x)
He said one thing Elder, I believe I'll go back to barrel housing again.

One sister jumped up, and she began to shout (2x)
She said I'm so glad, that this corn liquor's going out

Another Deacon, he says sister why don't you hush (2x)
You drink corn liquor, and your lie's a horrible stink

The first Deacon resembles an earlier version of House himself, forced to make a serious decision between the church lifestyle and the "barrel housing" party circuit into which his blues prowess promises him access. This Deacon embraces his own "sinful" desire with the apparent certainty of a grin. Then, a sister responds to the ebullient cry of the Deacon and affirms the call to barrel housing in her praise of corn liquor. The sister's satisfactory view of alcohol is made apparent by the next speaking Deacon, who chastises the sister for her speech, heated by corn liquor, which he rebukes as "a horrible stink."

Were the guilt informed, anxious nomological conceptions of a younger House present here then the Deacon's reiteration of church orthodoxy might have weighed heavily in House's artistry. In this version, House places himself in the pulpit (instead of kneeling in unfulfilling prayer) "jumping up and down," while his, "sister's in the corner, hollerin' Alabama bound." House and his sister - likely a sister in Christ rather than a biological or legal sibling - are joined in open rejection of the church's articulation of sin while his sister tells the world of House's intentions. The following lines reveal authority and certainty present in House's blues autonomy:

I grabbed up my suitcase, and I took out down the road (2x)
I said farewell Church, may the good lord bless your soul

I wish I had, me a Heaven of my own. (2x)
I'd give all my women, and long, long, happy home

I'm gonna preach these blues, and choose my seat and sit down (2x)
When the spirit comes, I want ya'll to jump straight up and down

House finally, in song, bids farewell to the church and his role within it. House does seem to wish the church well, asking for divine blessings for the organization from which he takes his leave. In this stanza House doesn't belittle or wish harm upon the church, he only criticizes it implicitly in his willful and triumphant departure. House resists the church and flouts its authority; he, in the words of Albert Camus, "defies more than he denies. He does not suppress God; he merely talks to him as an equal. It is not polite dialogue. It is a polemic animated by the desire to conquer."³³ House leaves the church and by doing so is able to explore further his fantasy of owning Heaven and populating it with women. The heaven belongs to House, the blues conqueror. Finally, House embraces his role as the blues preacher imbued with autonomy (in choosing his own seat) while able to channel a spirit that solicits a bodily response.

House's 1965 text stands in total opposition to what may or may not have been a truthful account of his diminished physicality and strength. The song rings with the triumphant swagger of a blues champion who has not only resisted the church but come to laugh at the hypocrisy of its members and, finally, to let it all go. Gone are the anxieties brought about by the illusion of fruitless prayer made possible by a bifurcating view of the world imposed by a church eager to position blues as the other or as an evil in contrast to a Christian good. Instead, only House's comfortable individuality and visions

³³ Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Knopf, 1969), 101. Cited in Jon Michael Spencer, *Blues and Evil* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 85.

of how far and wide his own power ought to stretch remain. Gone too are the references to prison placed subtly in the original version of the song; this perhaps shows that House has long since ceased to care about his very real participation in crime and punishment.

Francis Davis provides a highly revealing account of House's personality in the 1960's as remembered by organizers and promoters of the folk-blues revival. "The Blues came naturally to Son House," Davis begins, "yet many who saw House play in the 1960's, and many who interviewed him then, say that he gave the impression that he was less at peace with himself performing the blues than he would have been driving a tractor or punching a time card."³⁴ Davis agrees with these musings and highlights the sporadic nature of House's career and his fall into obscurity for twenty years after recording for Alan Lomax in 1941. Though House was recorded again in the mid 1960's he had to be coaxed into most performances and, finally, in 1966 House was found "drunk, numb, and almost lifeless" by a Rochester snow crew.³⁵ Thus it is difficult to say what caused House to actively resist the blues by consciously avoiding music for long periods of time, such as the last decades of his life until his death in 1988. While it very well may be a recurring crisis of faith brought on by church indoctrination at an early age, House also had serious problems with self-destructive behavior. Of course, self-doubt, guilt, and unconscious suicide can all be theoretically collapsed together; House's personal and physical being might not have been as powerful as his reputation or the blues preacher alive in song.

³⁴ Davis, 107-108.

³⁵ Christopher John Farley, "Son House: Saturday Night and Sunday Morning" in Martin Scorsese, *The Blues: A Musical Journey*, a companion book to the PBS documentary series *Martin Scorsese Presents The Blues: A Musical Journey* (New York: Amistad, 2003), 70.

Given the mysteries and unanswerable aspects of House's life and linear narrative, all one can really engage with and unpack is his artistry. Critical examination and praise for performative and textual genius need not be coupled with retroactive diatribes on what could have been or what House should have pursued. If House's artistic selfhood stands contradistinct from his conventional personality then this only speaks to the wide disparity between blues fantasy and daily life despite the continuous commentary on daily life present in the blues. House's music, as JZ Smith summarized ritual, is primarily "an assertion of difference."³⁶ When "zinging" (House's word for slide guitar playing) on the instrument and singing through the body House not only imitates the archetypes of blues history – recall House's first encounter with a blues musician that sparked his own interest – but enters into such a mythic space by criticizing, abolishing, and reformulating profane time.³⁷ When writing or performing, either alone or for an audience, House enacts a ritual of precise resistance done in order to formulate an identity that privileges desire, accepts no church definitions of sin, and places House in firm control of himself and heaven above.

By using religious vocabulary with egotistical blues visions House revises standard notions of sacred and profane. "Preachin' the Blues" posits a new perspective, a theo-personal collapse envisioned in a heaven of one's own, in which all of the quotidian experiences that occur apart from the musical performance become profane to the sacral realm of the blues. What is sacred is best understood as what is privileged, chosen, and assigned value if not for all time then for a given moment in time. House makes a

³⁶ J.Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 109. Cited in Catherine Bell *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 102.

³⁷ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) trans. William R. Trask. Orig. trans. 1965. pg. 35.

judgment in “Preachin the Blues” that assigns tremendous value to his own independence and fantasized omnipotence; this blues vision stands in opposition to House’s marginalized position in life. More importantly, House’s blues artistry, authorship, and performance created a space in which such a judgment could be made.

Chapter 2: David Honeyboy Edwards and Blues Resistance

Blues musician David “Honeyboy” Edwards was born on the twenty-eighth of June in Sunflower County, Mississippi, in 1915. Part of a large sharecropping family that included a grandmother born a slave and a semi-musician father, Edwards first started playing guitar in the fall on 1929. In addition to a lifelong commitment to writing, recording, and performing blues Edwards dictated his autobiography, *The World Don't Owe Me Nothing*, in 1997. This book stands as an authentic primary source account of both Honeyboy's blues generation in general and his own career in particular. This text in conjunction with Honeyboy's own blues writing articulates a distinct perspective that is equally critical as House. Over the course of his autobiography Honeyboy depicts Southern Jim Crow life with stunning clarity and vision. It is because of this extreme candor that Honeyboy is able to produce a staggering critique of sharecropping, Jim Crow violence, and the emergence of his own brand of blues in opposition to various institutional traps. Finally, Honeyboy's own “Build Myself a Cave” resonates with the triumphant resistance of a blues survivor.

Honeyboy's particular experience in the postbellum south establishes the context out of which his blues career and artistry grew. Honeyboy gives such vibrant detail of the sharecropper's poverty and the vulnerability of all black men to white police and prisons because he means to give insurmountable evidence to his decisions to play music and remain in transit for decades. The motivation *par excellence*, at the heart of Honeyboy's mantra and personal creed, is and has always been resistance; both overt and subtle evasion of the trap of agriculture, labor, and the susceptibility of the black proletariat to abuse at the hands of the police and their prisons. As Honeyboy declares and repeats

throughout his autobiography, “I wasn’t going back to them fields.”³⁸ The musical, and often extra-legal, career of Honeyboy was built around the desire to resist and recast; he had to shirk and sidestep the institutions of Jim Crow in order to reconfigure his own identity apart from and opposed to the role predetermined for all black men of his generation.

It is this author’s intent to consider these blues subjects as agents working to configure and reconfigure their identities in their world. The religiosity of the blues, as considered in this essay, is most simply a matter of “orientation” as phrased by scholar Charles Long. Honeyboy is deeply concerned with his own orientation: how to consider, accept, or rebel against the ultimate significance of his place in the world.”³⁹ Honeyboy, as an autobiographic voice, blues performer, and writer, divulges and contemplates primely personal experiences and introspections. The blues for Honeyboy is not only an escape from societal and institutional oppressors but a means of re-imagining himself in the world. In order to fully ponder his personal significance and purpose on earth, Honeyboy uses the blues to not simply resist but to recast his own sense of self and identity. No simple act of coming to terms, Honeyboy aims to live life according to his own taste and desire and in full service to his own independence.

Unlike Son House, Honeyboy does not directly address the church nor does he seem to be bothered by conflicting emotions or loyalties to organized institutional religion. In the opening pages of his autobiography Honeyboy shares a childhood religious experience that informed and determined his attitude on religion as an adult. Honeyboy remembers feeling “light and like something had lifted off me, a burden had

³⁸ Edwards, 35,45,157.

³⁹ Long, 7.

been lifted off of me. And if that was any sign, then I got converted when I was twelve years old.” Though the moment of conversion bears many of the earmarks of what one might expect such a spiritual feeling to look like – note the burden alleviated by the crucifixion of God’s son – Honeyboy is in his retelling somewhat skeptical: far from evangelical fever and fanaticism the bluesman seems incredulous. *If*, is the word used, “if that was any sign” does not necessarily communicate uncertainty as much as a kind of light irreverence. The experience means a lot to Honeyboy, who suspects that,

Once you got it, that’s something, because God don’t give you nothing and take it back. You have that until you die because that’s what He gives you in your younger days. You may neglect and not go to church, but you lay awhile and you can straighten up with God. Because you already been converted.⁴⁰

Honeyboy’s personal theology, as shown here, rings with a concept of protestant election; he felt God at a young age and there is no intermediary force in the world that may overturn God’s work. One may even backslide – not go to church – and then pause for a little while and “straighten up” with God because of previous grace. While Honeyboy may allow room for skepticism regarding the validity of religious experiences (that might be a sign, if it is a sign) he is resolute in his belief in God’s profoundly ever-present love and one’s individual connection with Him. This theological philosophy allows Honeyboy to live his life and play his blues without the bifurcating ideologies of a church which seeks to convert would-be blues practitioners into congregation members. Honeyboy’s individual awareness of God inoculates him against all pseudo-moral discourses that would make him ashamed to sing the blues.

If Honeyboy’s personal theology allowed him to take church with a grain of salt, it also broadened his horizons. Honeyboy first learned of the exciting popularity of black

⁴⁰ Edwards, 12.

secular music as a child. Every Saturday night Honeyboy's father would hold dances, sell whiskey, and play guitar at home; if not, he was out "playing at jukes."⁴¹ Although these parties were hosted partially for fun they also served to bolster the income in the Edwards family. As Honeyboy asserts, "Papa didn't make no money. He was a sharecropper."⁴² Soon the young boy's role evolved from observer to participant: Honeyboy began working in the field alongside his father by the time he was nine years old. Daily tasks included, "running a plow behind the mule to drag grass out of the middles" (done in order to allow for a path to stand on when picking cotton) and picking cotton. From a young age, Honeyboy knew "all about that farming thing."⁴³

What Honeyboy learned and learned well from his formative years working in the field were lessons in extreme racial inequality and agricultural entrapment. The repetitive and arduous sharecropping system relied upon and perpetuated a hierarchy of white directorial control above black labor. The following passage from Honeyboy illustrates a self-perpetuating neo-slave system that both overtly and subtly entrenches the "boss" (a white male) in a position of gross superiority over the proletariat laborer (the entirety of the black community). Though the excerpt may seem wordy, there can be no substitute for Honeyboy's experiential narration.

I worked the field with him (Papa), doing everything. I followed the plow. We all picked cotton. And when we made that crop, the boss man took all that money back out of there. Every year when you settle up at the end of the year, you settled up with the boss. "Well, you done good this year, old boy. You come out \$250 in debt." That's behind. That's the truth! Then he turn right around and ask, "What you want, boy, for Christmas?" That's to hold you for the next year! "How much you want for Christmas?" "Well Mr. So-and-So, I need about three, four hundred dollars." That's the money you should have cleared from your crop. But he doing that to hook you for next year. He let you have that, and you laugh, go on into

⁴¹ Edwards, 5.

⁴² Ibid, 7.

⁴³ Ibid, 9.

town, get a lot of candies, cakes, and stuff, drink a lot of whiskey. And we stuck for next year. The white folks run it down there. Some of those big plantations was just like little towns and the man who run it just like the mayor.⁴⁴

It is clear from the above passage that sharecropping worked to trap the laborer by convincing him not to “clear from the crop” and settle his arrears. Though the character above reduces his previous debt to \$250 dollars, the white boss offers him *more* money to take home immediately instead of paying off the incurred sum from the year prior. A language of disrespect is also firmly demonstrated here in the owner’s use of the word “boy” to refer to Honeyboy’s father, a grown adult. In order to distract and swindle the laborer the boss also asks “what you want, boy, for Christmas?” This inquiry places the overseer in a position of paternal superiority as both a father to a son (again, with the word “boy”) and, in the Christmas question, as a self-professed Santa Claus.

Honeyboy’s account of sharecropping presents an economic system fueled by a racial hierarchy internalized by both the white boss and the black laborer. The white boss hails the laborer with the generic moniker of disrespect – “boy” – and the laborer, by responding to such a calling and accepting the temporary solution of goods and alcohol, acquiesces. This pattern is precisely how, as Honeyboy puts it, “the white folks run it down there” as if the plantation bosses were “just like the mayor.” The sharecropping system may be a prime example of Jim Crow institutional racism but it is also only one of many models of injustice commented on by Honeyboy. In his autobiography Honeyboy offers incredible detail of two other white institutions that made raids and conducted assaults on black agency and individuality. If the sharecropping system was a legalized manifestation of a racist ideology, then the police force and the prison of that same era provided protection for the entire juggernaut of white supremacy.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 18-19.

Honeyboy spent much of his time during the Great Depression as a vagrant, or a “hobo,” traveling great distances all over the southern United States by illegal means. A favored route in those days was to ride a train without paying. To “ride the blinds” was the most popular method; the “blinds” referred to baggage cars that lacked side doors and could be entered via the front end of the car.⁴⁵ Of course, when one was caught participating in such kinds of travel by the police the most common punishment was placement on a “county farm.” Honeyboy and other black men of his day could be thrown onto such a farm anytime the police decided to enforce the laws against vagrancy. These farms only took men for “small, time (offenses), serving thirty days, ninety days... people on the county farms, that’s for when you jump contracts on the plantation, or steal, or commit some misdemeanor.”⁴⁶

These county farms occupied a perilously curious space between judiciary trials and arbitrary violence. Of course, one might argue effectively that every trial involving a black defendant in a white legal system that enforced Jim Crow laws could only hope to pass a verdict of arbitrary violence based on an arbitrary system of racial discrimination. But the county farm, unlike the prison, teemed with black men placed there at the discretion of the police force rather than the so-called trials of a postbellum but pre-civil rights legal system. The problem is not only that the police were corrupt and violent but that they were inconsistent and unpredictable in their choice between enforcing racist law and accepting various bribes. This could prove advantageous to a hustling musician with charm and quick wit. Honeyboy’s memoir includes more than one tale of him resisting

⁴⁵ Ibid, 218, 222-223. Honeyboy accounts for various definitions of the “hobo” lifestyle including “riding the blinds” as well as alternate methods of stowing away on a train such as “ride the rods” and “ride the reefer.”

⁴⁶ Ibid, 36.

harsh punishment and hard labor by befriending (for extreme lack of a better work) the police. In Greenwood, Mississippi, for example, Honeyboy was known as “Chief White’s nigger” because, as Honeyboy dictates, “if the whites would ask me to do something, if I know it wasn’t for long, I’d go out there and do it. You got to have somebody to speak for you at that time.”⁴⁷

Honeyboy was able to use the blues to speak for himself when he first arrived in New Madrid, a small town in North Missouri, and was immediately picked up by Mr. Stanton, the sheriff. As seen previously in other examples of interactions between whites and blacks at that time, Mr. Stanton began the conversation with the standard means of disrespectful interpellation: “Boy, do you know who I am?” After a brief exchange the sheriff asked Honeyboy to play him a song on his guitar and, apparently enjoying the performance, told the bluesman “you got a place here as long as you want to stay in New Madrid.” The room Mr. Stanton gave Honeyboy was a servant’s quarter in “a little brick jail.” As long as Honeyboy would get up every morning and light a fire in the stove for the cook he was free to busk on the streets for tips. This is an example of the means by which a musician might gain the favor of the local police and subvert the laws against vagrancy. Due to the enticing and resplendent quality of Honeyboy’s blues performance, his blues voice, Mr. Stanton took notice and listened and effectively aided the blues profession.

Yet even more substance exists in a close reading of the story of Mr. Stanton and Honeyboy. First is the rather obvious duality of disdain and desire. Sheriff Stanton does not acknowledge Honeyboy’s humanity and uses language -“Boy, do you know who I am?”-in order to preserve racial difference and distance between the two and reinforce

⁴⁷ Ibid, 47.

his own authority over the bluesman; but the sheriff is clearly taken with Honeyboy's artistic prowess and rewards him with a room and the promise of ignoring the law. The oddity and irony of such contradictory emotions felt by the white sheriff at the presence and performance of the black bluesman is demonstrated rather adroitly in Honeyboy's rent-free stay in the jail. While not a prisoner behind bars, Honeyboy is offered a place where the sheriff can see, and more importantly hear, him the same as he can actual prisoners in the jail; though he may leave the servant's room Honeyboy is still under surveillance. The sheriff requires that Honeyboy complete the uncomplicated task of starting a fire for the cook before beginning his day. While the cook could easily, I assume, start his own fire, if Honeyboy lights up the wood at the break of day then the cook can serve breakfast even faster. More importantly, Honeyboy must begin his own day of autonomous busking with the reminder that it is only the Sheriff who could and did provide the musician with the opportunity to remain out of jail as a prisoner by offering him a room in the jail as a guest.⁴⁸ Of course, Honeyboy's talent and charm allowed him to utilize such an arbitrary system to his advantage.

Like Son House, Honeyboy was no stranger to violence and Parchman Penitentiary. Brutal physical atrocities occurred on the country farms and behind bars; these cruelties in the twentieth century recall earlier forms of slave punishments in the antebellum period. On the county farm, a "driver" oversaw the workers and used a leather strap to beat any man who failed to keep up or otherwise perturbed the white overseer. Beatings were so severe that many men died right on the field from assaults that, in Honeyboy's words, "turned a guy's butt from black to white... they hit him too hard with

⁴⁸ Ibid, 142-143.

that strap and busted his heartstrings.”⁴⁹ Parchman Penitentiary was a similarly dangerous place that housed men convicted of murder and violent crime. Honeyboy nearly served time at Parchman in 1937 for manslaughter. In Vicksburg, Mississippi, Honeyboy got into a fight with a much larger man, Caesar, only to be rescued by an associate, Robert. Caesar fell while running from the two men and was kicked repeatedly while on the ground. Honeyboy delivered a blow because, “I was drunk, and mad too.”⁵⁰ The police took Honeyboy and Robert to jail because “it wasn’t just a fight. They said we was double-teaming him (Caesar). They gave us each thirty days.” Sometime shortly after the thirty days were up Caesar died in the hospital from the gravity of his wounds. Honeyboy left Vicksburg to avoid being captured on a manslaughter charge (for the fight caused Caesar’s death) and quite probably sent to Parchman.

Honeyboy avoided or manipulated sharecropping, the police, and the law over the course of his career. He did this through his skill and determination to play the blues and to use that blues to speak for him. Honeyboy’s autobiography provides the detailed truth about his life of blues resistance, and thus his book functions as a tool of expression analogous to blues songwriting or performance. In song, however, Honeyboy is equally judicious and resilient. In “Build Myself a Cave” (Artist Recording Company, Houston 1951) the U.S. draft initiative during the Second World War becomes the subject of complaint and terror. According to Honeyboy, the song “is about wartime” and was inspired by a variety of verses and ideas from several other bluesmen.⁵¹ The presence of

⁴⁹ Ibid, 37.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 130.

⁵¹ Ibid, 172-173. Often songs are considered “written” by the one who manages to record it first. Honeyboy reminds us however that these songs were not written down as often as they were memorized and passed around among dozens of bluesmen and women. These songs create and continue a tradition but each idiosyncratic artist deploys them in his own way.

the war and the omnipresent reach of the draft certainly contributed to a shared sense of fear and dread among the men of Honeyboy's generation. Particularly among blues practitioners, who put into song the reality of both desire and fear, the abyss of World War II was never far from their daily lives or consciousness. By sharing frustrations, panic, and expressions regarding the war and the draft the bluesmen participated in a particular art form in which articulation and creativity sprang neither ex nihilo nor from phenomenological, hierophantic abstractions.⁵² As Honeyboy divulges in his autobiography,

The government sent me a draft notice in Coahoma at my auntie's. The government sent me a call card, and I was Class number A. That means I was eligible for the draft and "Be ready to go." I had to stay in Coahoma then. They said if I went anywhere they'd pick me up and shove me straight in the army. My friends and me we would listen to the news about the war on the radio stations. We was shook up, worried all the time. People was just scared.⁵³

The government effectively, through draft notices and call cards, tracked Honeyboy down at an aunt's house during one of his countless travels. This is significant because as soon as those materials found their way into Honeyboy's hands his freedom to move around, essential to both his identity and livelihood, was eradicated yet again. If he moved, Honeyboy would be 'picked up and shoved' into service. The only thing to do, then, was to sit with friends afraid and worried.

"Build Myself a Cave" speaks to Honeyboy's uncompromising individualism, artistic hustle, and affection for movement. Contained within the text is a means by which one can move throughout worlds but never lose the prized, protective shell of autonomy

⁵² I would like to thank Professor Joshua Dubler for pointing out the fact that if so many bluespeople shared rough drafts of lyrical and musical ideas then one must believe that blues genius does not come from some otherworldly reality; it does not bubble up and manifest from another world as Eliade would characterize the sacred. Instead, the blues comes in part from shared experiences and conversational reflections.

⁵³ Edwards, 135.

and self-preservation. The blues itself, Honeyboy philosophizes, “is a leading thing, something on your mind that keeps you moving.”⁵⁴ Honeyboy’s “Build Myself a Cave” deals with the intrusion of World War II and America’s decision to enter into it with full intention to draft, use, and deploy the men of Honeyboy’s generation.

The world is in a tangle, baby now
Everybody singing a song
They’re fighting ‘cross the water, baby; ain’t gonna be here long.
I’m gonna build myself a cave, so I can move down underground.
So when I go into the army, darling, won’t be no Japs around.

I got my questionnaire baby, now
I got my class card too
Uncle Sam want me in the army, baby now
Now what’s I’m gonna do
I’m gonna build myself a cave, so I can move down underground.
So when I go into the army, darling, won’t be no Japs around.⁵⁵

The first lines depict a world in crisis (a tangle) and full of people aware of the emergency and singing about it. In the second line Honeyboy acknowledges the popularity of the topic among peer bluesmen that all seem to know that in a war taking place across the pacific the front lines will be comprised of young men.⁵⁶ In the second stanza Honeyboy tells the audience that he is in possession of the questionnaire and the class card: both materials belong to an American governmental bureaucracy aimed at interpellating the men of Honeyboy’s generation as soldier-subjects.⁵⁷ This collectivizing and homogenizing state is personalized in Honeyboy’s reference to “Uncle Sam” and this verse in its entirety may be read as a conversation between symbols and ideological signifiers.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 167.

⁵⁵ Jeff Todd Titon, *Downhome Blues Lyrics: An Anthology from the Post- WW II Era (Music in American Life)*. (USA: Jeff Todd Titon, 1981, 1990) transcription on 42.

⁵⁶ At the recording of the song in 1951 Honeyboy is 36 years old.

⁵⁷ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays* (NLB, 1970) trans. Ben Brewster.

By using “Uncle Sam” as a synonym for the government Honeyboy gives a name to his oppressor and speaks to that legislative institution on a personal, intimate level. Honeyboy effectively talks back to the government and thematicizes the state as another domineering and disrespectful white patriarch. “Uncle Sam” appears much like Sheriff Stanton or any white plantation boss; all three benefit from their societal (meaning white) status which allows them to ensnare Honeyboy and determine his future. When Honeyboy sings “they’re fighting cross the water, baby; ain’t gonna be here long” the operative word also refers to who is involved in combat. In the Pacific theatre “they’re” doing the fighting over *there*, far from the blues life in Mississippi. Notice also that Honeyboy did not use “we’re” to refer to those fighting for America in the Pacific Theatre, for Honeyboy the bluesman does not identify with the nation of Uncle Sam. This word choice speaks both to the distance Honeyboy feels from the war and his own desire to not go. Of course, Honeyboy acknowledges that he won’t “be here long” if the state (personified in Uncle Sam) encroaches upon his life and uses the draft notice to send him into the army. The real fight occurring in the text is not World War II but another battle between Honeyboy the agent and the forces of homogeneity that aim to (mis)treat and handle the bluesman as a soldier-subject.

Honeyboy protects himself by building a cave and moving underground. In the second stanza, the necessity of cave construction answers the seemingly rhetorical “what’s I’m gonna do.” However, such a phrase is no simple transition between verses or a notification to an audience that the real answer is contained in the next line. Far more than mere capillary, the question “what’s I’m gonna go” speaks to Honeyboy’s still-thriving autonomy in the face of draft signifiers and army interpellators. Despite the

efforts of the draft to nullify personhood and convert all men into soldiers, Honeyboy's certain and independent "I" ponders and then formulates a means of resistance. This is the same autonomous "I" that learned to play guitar to dodge the fields, the police, and the prison. Honeyboy's blues music allows him to respond to the interpellative intrusion of the draft and to choose how to handle the situation.

To answer the call of the "I" Honeyboy builds a cave and moves "down underground." What is then most confusing and telling in the final line is the fact that Honeyboy sings of going into the army and finding "no Japs around." Having previously built the cave and moved to subterranean security Honeyboy still recognizes his own linear (meaning real time, daily reality) destiny of military service. One reading would support fantasy: that Honeyboy might literally go into the army enclosed in the protective shell of the cave. Another reading supports a transition into a more complex attitudinal posture in which Honeyboy, having previously established his own unaccompanied personhood within the cave, now re-enters the world with the confident swagger of an autonomy that transcends reality and physicality; though his body may be in the army the previously erected cave both allows and guards Honeyboy's agency.

In the previous chapter I used the term transcendent autonomy to describe the state and selfdom attained by Son House in his performative text, "Preachin' the Blues." By using transcendent autonomy I mean to define the function of blues artistry as an uplifting and empowering method by which one may resist and rise above – to transcend – the homogeneity of daily life bracketed by various institutions and ideologies. While House uses the religious and metaphorical language of a "heaven of my own" to describe his transcendent victory, Honeyboy does the opposite, if only on the linguistic level.

Honeyboy enters his cave, the armor of protection against the interpellative current of the draft, not by rising up but by moving *down underground*. Autonomy is achieved, and the draft is surpassed, but not according to the usual and clichéd image of upward motion. Honeyboy retains and strengthens his own autonomy by any means necessary; and in this text even the accepted metaphors of transcendence are challenged as if language itself inflicts harm on one's agency.

Uncle Sam's infringement of Honeyboy's blues life is so bold and terrifying because that life is full of pleasures presumably procured by artistry and hustle. Honeyboy's autobiography wails with anecdotes about hard drinking and sexual affairs with women; the bluesman both embraces those behaviors and warns of the danger of over indulgence or getting involved with another man's wife. When Honeyboy recorded "Build Myself a Cave" in 1951 he was relatively young (thirty-six) and only recently married four years earlier to Bessie, whom he met in Helena, Arkansas.⁵⁸ Thus Honeyboy was still living, or at least had just lived, a life soaked in white whiskey and robust sexuality. In the blues text, Honeyboy depicts such a life.

I was laying down in my bed, baby, now
Drunk as I could be.
I was laying there drunk
When Uncle Sam started in after me
I'm gonna build myself a cave, so I can move down underground.
So when I go into the army, darling, won't be no Japs around.

I was gonna go to the deep blue sea;
My baby began to cry.
She began to holler, "naw, naw,
Bye, bye, bye."
I'm gonna build myself a cave, so I can move down underground.
So when I go into the army, darling, won't be no Japs around.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Edwards, 157.

⁵⁹ Titon, 42.

As in the earlier verses, Honeyboy addresses his “baby,” or significant other, throughout each vignette of intrusion. Honeyboy told his “baby” that the world is in a tangle, in a war, and that the draft will surely find him (by using the questionnaire and the draft card) and send him to the army and the war. Now, in the final stanzas, Honeyboy continues to speak to his love while building intimacy by placing one vignette in bed before directly quoting his woman in the final verse of the song.

First, Honeyboy recalls, “laying down in my bed, baby, now, drunk as I could be” before Uncle Sam found him. As discussed in his autobiography, Honeyboy was a seasoned and steady imbibor for much of his life and took great enjoyment in partying and drinking. The United States Government, personified and summarized as Uncle Sam, imposes itself unduly and unfairly on Honeyboy’s living “drunk as I could be.” While certainly the intoxicated posture made the draft notices surreal and perhaps questionable, Honeyboy hints that the Uncle Sam took advantage of the bluesman’s inebriation by waiting until the peak of such drunkenness to “start in” after him. Ultimately, if Uncle Sam is the vignette’s villain then the whiskey represents a good life spoiled. Though alcohol may have rendered Honeyboy unable to stand it does not impair his construction of the cave and his successful search for transcendent, yet subterranean, autonomy.

If whiskey’s effect on Honeyboy is questionable, the presence of his woman’s love and devotion are, in contrast, clearly positive and romantic. Reacting to the news of her man’s fate to go across the ocean into combat Honeyboy’s lover begins to cry and “she began to holler ‘naw, naw, bye, bye, bye.’” So stricken with grief and loss, Honeyboy’s woman is rendered unable to even offer a clear and complete sentence and instead can only holler, deny and reject the news, and finally say goodbye. Apparently

unaware or perhaps unconcerned with the cave of protection, the woman's reaction is highly emotional but apparently inarticulate. Instead of firing off a retroactive feminist critique of the lack of a feminine voice in this passage I aim to fully analyze the purpose of its (the passage as a whole) inclusion in the concluding chapter.

Though Honeyboy's cave apparently only accommodates its architect, he nevertheless concludes his song with a reference to the romantic partnership obliquely mentioned in previous passages through the use of the word "baby." Thus, Honeyboy has spent the entire song speaking and explaining his situation both to his audience and to his woman. To end the song it is perhaps fitting that the woman speaks for herself even if grief sharply curtails her linguistic potency; in fact, the very lack of articulation might demonstrate the severity and profundity of her shock and horror at the news presented to her. Honeyboy concludes his song with the familiar theme of the bluesman's woman because, I suppose, he had a woman and the thought that she would love him enough to cry and holler on the day the army trapped him might please the blues singer. The appearance of a physically affected woman in "Build Myself a Cave" recalls the same motif in "Preachin' the Blues" discussed in Chapter 1. Both House and Honeyboy work and utilize this 'womens' theme in their texts; one of the aims of Chapter 3 is to explore at length the motivations at work in each example and the possible connections one might draw and unravel.

Chapter 3: Linkages, Contradictions, and Conclusions

In this concluding chapter I intend to reassess previous evidence, expand upon previous analyses, and incorporate new examples into the story of House and Honeyboy. Such a story resides between the two bluesmen in a space that acknowledges both their striking similarities and their unavoidable differences and tensions. The two do not share the same anxiety over the church and its relation to the blues – this dilemma is born by House alone and his blues writing is full of references to the church, prayer, and the afterlife. Honeyboy's theological problem – his own consideration of his purpose and destiny in the world – rests with other overarching institutions that may be connected or informed by the church but are not directly under church control. Both bluesmen contemplate the realities, both troubles and pleasures, of their own lives and through such meditation come to reconfigure their own identities more closely aligned with independent personhood and carnal desire. The blues is no mere means of resistance to only obvious hegemonic institutions, however, and even patterns of behavior in the black community represent homogeneity and collectivity. One such pattern of behavior encompasses and includes both House and Honeyboy: murderous violence enacted against another black man. I will end this chapter with a consideration of these details in both bluesmen and argue that blues music provided an escape from a personal and communal gesture towards self-destruction.

By placing Son House and Honeyboy Edwards together in this project one begins to see a number of instances of commonality as well as contradiction. Besides the fact that both men were born into and came of age in the black community of the postbellum American south, both, for a variety of reasons and fortunes, picked up a guitar and played

the blues. However, their musical abilities and individual blues careers were drastically different. Honeyboy is more technically versatile than House and, as his autobiography details, a lifelong blues practitioner with no discernable spells of inactivity. Yet recordings made by both House and Honeyboy are considered authentic blues; part of a bygone pre- and immediately post-war era, and would be marketed and arranged as such in any record store or collection. Both men also, due to their shared cultural context, participated in a type of violence that was as much about the assertion of agency and dominance as its murderous content. House and Honeyboy each took another man's life; and although their own introspections and subsequent reflections are unclear about that I will attempt to discuss the significance of such killings.

Similarities and shared qualities between the two bluesmen are even more precisely related to their artistic visions and creative generations. House's blues texts, such as "Preachin' the Blues" (both from 1930 and 1965), and Honeyboy's own "Build Myself a Cave" as well as his autobiographic dictation, *The World Don't Owe Me Nothing*, all converge more than they contradict. In the texts offered by House and Honeyboy (and I do, as defended earlier, consider Honeyboy's autobiography to be a performative text on par with a blues song) I will show and speak about three distinct themes. These three themes are: a critical gaze and consideration of collectivizing institutions such as the black Baptist church (House) or sharecropping, police, prison, and the draft (Honeyboy); the direct mention and interaction with "womens" and "whiskey" and larger mediations on the significance of these tropes; and, finally, a reconfiguration of identity through exquisite images of personal desire and power that foster a sense of transcendent autonomy. Not only three examples of what the blues *does* for House and

Honeyboy, these thematic currents account for why these bluesmen *chose* the blues as a means of action and *doing* in the world.

Although the links between House and Honeyboy are profound and fully fertile, the differences between the two effectively problematize the comparison. Though the artistic works of these bluesmen are exceedingly more relevant and accessible than their biographic and contextual background, the two did know each other personally and Honeyboy has at times been characteristically candid in his thoughts on House. When asked about the iconic author of “Preachin’ the Blues” in a recent interview with *Living Blues* magazine, Honeyboy judged, “He (Son House) just had a name. He wasn’t a hell of a guitar player, he just had a name.”⁶⁰ Given that Honeyboy grew up with Son House and Willie Brown enjoying bonafide celebrity prominences on the delta Juke scene, his retroactive dismissal of House’s musicianship may be something of an oedipal slaying done to announce and cement the act of pupil surpassing the master. The fact that House’s legendary blues career was often coaxed out of his hesitant, reluctant attitude must seem cruelly ironic to Honeyboy who despite never giving up is only recently achieving something analogous to a notoriety first thrust upon House during the 1960’s that has continued posthumously.⁶¹

In ways often ostensible and linguistic, the theological lives of House and Honeyboy appear unrelated and tenuous. House oscillated between preaching in church and playing blues and often felt torn between them before finally working through his anxiety in “Preachin’ the Blues.” Thus, House’s theological musings are quite conservative in that they focus on a contemplation of God as articulated in and by the

⁶⁰ Deitra Farr. “Artist to Artist: Honeyboy Edwards” in *Living Blues Magazine*, #184 May/June 2006: 10.

⁶¹ Davis, 108. According to the author House performed only when cajoled into doing so and made no effort to “capitalize on the adoration of blues fans.”

church. Honeyboy subscribes to a radically different theology that is more a manifestation of his own indifference than a resolution of uncertainty. As introduced in chapter 2, Honeyboy's thoughts on organized religion stem from an early contact with divinity in his childhood that forever instilled within him a sense of spiritual election. My use of the word election refers to Honeyboy's insistence that, "Once God give something, He don't take it away," in reference to that primordial experience as a young boy. Unlike House, Honeyboy does not imagine his soul as something up for grabs; as if it were perched perilously between church favor and the abyss of damnation while the bluesman simultaneously entertains the notion that such a rigid binary is ultimately absurd.

Because Honeyboy is at peace, unconcerned, and indifferent to the ideologies of the church he finds no reason to author or perform a text that might excise the type of crisis present in House's blues vernacular. A potential for criticism and a gaze of resistance sensitive to homogenizing oppression are nevertheless as strong in Honeyboy's blues polemic. Instead of aiming performative rebellion at the subject of church institution and dogma, Honeyboy condemns and defies agricultural labor, corrupt police, brutal racial hierarchies in the prison system and, finally, through song, the United States Government's (Uncle Sam) draft initiative. The critical expressions deployed in the artistry of both bluesmen come in a variety of forms that range from the direct articulation of hypocrisy within institutions to the recognition of the limitations such organizations place on individuality. Critique of such institutions can also come in the form of praise for images and objects denounced and prohibited by the institutions, such as the church or the draft, being rebelled against.

House and Honeyboy not only mention women and whiskey (sex and intoxication) in their material but use these objects in service to a theomusicological viewpoint. Theomusicology is a term, and study, that rests on the supposition that human beings are consistently and “inescapably religious” and are apt to devote much time, energy, and thought as to their purpose and relation to the world.⁶² If human beings are almost excessively theological in many forms and settings, then it is logical to look to attempt a theological exegesis of musical text. In other words, if House and Honeyboy, as church rebel and institutional transgressor respectively, are human first and blues practitioners second, then their artistry is a natural vehicle for more complex and universal meditations and concerns. Such anxieties for these two bluesmen relate to both their position and location in real life as well as within their own personal imaginations. House and Honeyboy work through the problems and often grim realities of daily existence within the personal and imaginative space of their blues songwriting and performances.

Women and whiskey are mentioned and play important roles in both House’s “Preachin’ the Blues” and Honeyboy’s “Build Myself a Cave” and each theme merits inspection. In the earlier version of House’s blues text, the bluesman names “womens and whiskey” as reasons he cannot pray before focusing on the “womens” as citizens in his own personal heaven. These womens, in House’s “heaven of my own” will receive “a long happy home” so long as they love only House and no one else. Finally, by the songs end, House announces his intention to “preach these blues” to an affected and ecstatic female who will, upon hearing House’s performance, “jump straight up and down.” In this first version of “Preachin’ the Blues” House recognizes that his inability to perform

⁶² Spencer, 34.

traditional Christian prayer stems from his embrace of a polyamorous lifestyle (the womens). In a stunning turn, House ultimately imagines his own fantastic heaven as a land full of women in love with him who respond physically to his music and himself as a performer. The later version of “Preachin the Blues” omits the anxious line about ineffective prayer but includes House’s visions of woman-filled heaven and a preached blues able to entice and provoke a dramatic feminine response. By the second incarnation of “Preachin’ the Blues” House’s dilemma has subsided, allowing him to fully accept the identity of the blues preacher.

Honeyboy’s “Build Myself a Cave” consists of four stanzas each addressed to his “baby,” which may or may not be synonymous with a female lover. Honeyboy ends his song with a moving vignette detailing the conversation between himself and a lover. After Honeyboy tells his woman that the draft will force him to “go to the deep blue sea” she responds with anguish and dismay, or as the lyrics read “my baby began to cry. She began to holler, naw, naw, bye, bye, bye.” As pointed out in chapter two, the woman’s inarticulate and guttural reaction tells its own story; the fact that she is unable to even construct a sentence to deal with the news implies her attachment and love for Honeyboy. This image of a lover’s alarm and distress is in some way pleasing to Honeyboy who, though he is bound for the army and certain death on the front, now at least knows how much his woman will miss him and how profoundly hard she took the news.

Scholar John Michael Spencer argues that the meaning behind the presence of women in these blues texts is hard to decipher and the history of blues scholarship on blues men who sing about women begins with a reading of one iconic line. Spencer highlights Nietzsche’s question, “supposing truth is a woman – what then?” as the

ontological moment of confusion among blues scholars attempting to situate women in the male blues singer's epistemology of sin.⁶³ "If truth were a woman," begins Spencer, "then man would be "justified" in loving her so, despite the opposing mandates (or misconceptions) of Christianity. But woman was not "truth," she was the one about whom the truth was told in the blues."⁶⁴ These mandates imposed by the church that Spencer argues were misrecognized by bluesmen (as well as the church itself) stem from the church's construction and dissemination of the Adamic myth, which blames Eve (ontological and archetypal woman) for the fall of mankind (personified in archetypal Adam).⁶⁵ Due to such a widespread and internalized mythology, the church became suspicious of sexuality and passed injunctions against pre-marital intercourse and various forms of supposed sexual lasciviousness. Thus, sexual love between a man and woman can only be justified and truthful when it occurs in a marital union sanctioned by the church.

Spencer refers to the internalization of the sin of sexuality and the original sin of Eve as "misconceptions" either of Christianity itself (in positing such erroneous beliefs) or in church members turned blues practitioners (in writing and thinking within a church ideology) or both. The church bemoaned the unabashed sexual references in the blues as "vulgar and indecent" and thus came to see the music itself as repugnant and sinful for the same reasons.⁶⁶ House and Honeyboy are each informed by such an official directive regarding sexuality promoted by the church and House, at least, struggles with whether or

⁶³ Cited in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufman (1886; New York: Vintage, 1989) 1. Cited in Jon Michael Spencer, *Blues and Evil* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 57.

⁶⁴ Spencer, 57.

⁶⁵ Spencer, 56.

⁶⁶ Cone, 111.

not such a mandate has anything to do with truth. Both bluesmen, in telling the “truth” about women as Spencer notes, deal with the reality of their own human desire and the truth of their own feelings. House begins his “Preachin’ the Blues” of 1930 with an obeisant nod to misrecognized and thus mis-internalized church ideology: women will not let him pray. When House moves away from such adherence into his own independent thought he confesses his own desire to attain a personal heaven, fill it with women who only love him, and use his blues to make women jump and shout. No longer mere stumbling blocks on the road to prayer and church truth, the women in House’s text become symbols of freedom because they are spoken about honestly and incorporated into House’s blatant picture of his own naked desire.

The preached blues of House returns and recalls Nietzsche’s famous phrase that supposedly has baffled many blues scholars. In both versions of “Preachin the Blues” the “womens” attain, or are always-already, tantamount to truth in that they symbolize and personify the total parameters of House’s autonomous desire. Such a desire is autonomous, and even rebellious, in that it contradicts and rejects the church’s imposition of chastity, monogamy, and sexual guilt. Truth is a woman, in House’s text, because the “womens” represent House’s fantasies and desires that function to reorient his status and self-image in the next world (“a heaven of my own”) but are grounded in this world in that those womens love no other men and they are to some degree controlled by House’s potent musicality. If House were to accept the church’s message he would surely not admit and announce openly his sexual desire – a longing felt for a multiple of women – that is so related to a fantastical ability to control both female sexuality and physicality.

This public declaration is most explicitly demonstrated in House's powerful and blasphemous conquest of heaven itself as a space of sexual dominion.

One could easily make the argument that House's apparent chauvinism, as seen in his want to control the sexual destinies of innumerable women, bears the residue of an Adamic anxiety regarding another supposed "truth" about women: their control over male sexuality and human future beginning with Eve's temptation and the fall. As author James Baldwin once brilliantly observed, men speak of the power of women over their lives because such lamentations "stroke the misogynist in them."⁶⁷ In other words, suspicion over human sexuality often really includes a more insidious interpretation of female sexuality in particular (again, Eve) and when men speak to their own love of women they cannot help but recognize their own weakness in the face of such a love and can only make sense of such helplessness through an equation of femininity with mystery, temptation, and sin. The church, aware of and a part of such a tradition, attempted to regulate human sexuality because of a misrecognized male frailty. House therefore must want to command female bodies because of his own deep and irrevocable internalization of an Adamic mythology that places woman before a fall.

This all may in fact be true. House may rebel against certain mandates of chastity and collectivity (we all may dwell in heaven but we do so with God in charge) while still fully operating within more complex Adamic ideologies. Also, in wanting to determine the lives of women, House reinforces the church's suspicion of sexuality in a human world fallen into because of Eve. "Preachin' the Blues" certainly begins familiar enough, for House blames "the womens" for his botched prayer and blocked salvation. However, the text develops into an all out rejection of God's heavenly superiority (for it is House in

⁶⁷ James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, (New York: Random House, 1956), 125.

control of his paradise) as well as House's troublesome omnipotent handling of women. The reality of House's desire is not egalitarian, politically correct, or socially progressive; instead, his desire is offered honestly in a way meant to uplift House and afford him the agency and power denied in the church and the postbellum south. In choosing his own heaven, rather than the one ruled by a Christian god, House takes what might be the first step to overturning other Christian ideologies. House's decision to populate such a paradise with women who only love him suggests a hope that in heaven the presence and validity of love might be easier to detect than on earth. Far from mere misogynist or chauvinist, House is suspicious of the entire world, and though he does not shake off many tired and well-rehearsed Christian anxieties (for House is still a Christian) he is at least upfront about his interest in control within a church that offers so many checks and limitations.

Honeyboy's inarticulate and grieving "baby" in "Build Myself a Cave" represents a similar desire for certainty, proof of love, and control – a kind of truth that exists in a sexual partner and, in Honeyboy's heterosexual case, a woman. As seen earlier, Honeyboy ends his blues text with a verse detailing a conversation between Honeyboy the draft notified, interpellated soldier-subject and the woman in his romantic life. In this conversation Honeyboy reveals Uncle Sam's decision to send him into the war across the "deep blue sea" and, upon hearing such news, his lover breaks down and cries, hollers, denies, and says goodbye. In this vignette Honeyboy shares his lover's inarticulate, emotional response perhaps to stand in for his own feelings and reactions to the war and his drafted participation into it. Draft notices, apparatus' of state ideology, threaten not only Honeyboy's life but also his identity and profession in that they restrict his

movement and force him into the army in which his guitar will be replaced with a firearm. Honeyboy's cave may preserve and protect his independence and foster for him a kind of confidence in the face of homogenization – “Uncle Sam want me in the army, so what's *I'm gonna do*” – but the woman in the text demonstrates a different kind of reaction and an alternative type of truth. Honeyboy's lover's grief is handled starkly and openly so that the bluesman's own sad panic might be avoided or at least concealed from public view.

One of the more remarkable aspects of “Build Myself a Cave” is that Honeyboy's subterranean enclosure seemingly accommodates only one guest: Honeyboy builds the cave, goes underground, and takes the cave with him into the army. Due to the protection of the cave, Honeyboy will never encounter any “Japs” nor will he ever truly encounter or be bothered by anyone else. What the battlefield, Japanese soldiers, southern institutions, and even women have in common is their ability to erode Honeyboy's agency and deprive the bluesman of his autonomy. Regarding women and work in particular, Honeyboy recalls that before he got married he, “had a couple girls beg me to marry them. But I wouldn't marry them because I didn't want to get no job, go out to the field and be tied down because I got a wife. And that's what I'd have to do.”⁶⁸ For Honeyboy marriage comes with an inherent caveat: when you marry you will be restricted (tied down) and ultimately forced into repetitive labor, bound to a particular plot of land in sharecropped obligation. As Honeyboy's blues music served as a rebellion against hard and involved labor so too must it keep him out of matrimony; thus Honeyboy is also indirectly wary and oppositional to the church, which would have encouraged the sanctified union of marriage. When he finally did marry, to Bessie in

⁶⁸ Edwards, 157.

1952, he made sure she did not immobilize him; in fact, the two traveled and worked together. Though he was married, Honeyboy recalls “I had Bessie but the way I lived hadn’t changed.”⁶⁹

Though I name women and whiskey as common themes in House and Honeyboy’s lives and works, alcohol is certainly the lesser of the two. Lesser not in a sense of quantity consumed, for many who knew House spoke of his overindulgences just as Honeyboy details his own relationship with alcohol over the course of his autobiography, but in their limited mention in the two blues texts in question. House names whiskey as a spiritual deterrent in that it inhibits prayer. Honeyboy, immediately before being drafted by Uncle Sam, remembers lying in bed “drunk as I could be.” Both prayer and the draft intrude upon the lifestyles of the two bluesmen – prayer involves a contemplative break from linearity and when one is drafted into the army real life is effectively put on hold. Drinking whiskey, partying, and achieving intoxication are all activities common to House and Honeyboy and account for a particular element of daily life. Thus, whiskey may be mentioned sparingly, even causally, because drinking it is such a common and repeated practice for these specific bluesmen. Despite the denunciation of alcohol by church temperance movements of the time and the logical handicap drunkenness would place on a soldier’s ability to perform warfare, House and Honeyboy both imbibe. Although whiskey is a truth in their lives, it may also be a means of rebellion.

In the introduction I briefly mentioned Honeyboy’s treatise on the correlation between preacher’s and musicians: neither is any good because both aim to “start some

⁶⁹ Edwards, 166-167

junk.”⁷⁰ Though both the preacher and the (blues) musician may share many key traits they exist as diametric opposites in a world informed and discourse inflected by a church ideology that celebrates its preachers and denigrates all bluesmen. Of course, in Honeyboy’s case, the blues practitioner challenges and rebels against Jim Crow ideology that only recognizes black men as laborers. An additional blues text by House, “My Black Mama” recorded in the same session as the first version of “Preachin’ the Blues” in 1930, works with the aforementioned ‘womens’ theme in a theological manner. Two stanzas in particular, previously studied by scholars such as Francis Davis and Jon Michael Spencer, juxtapose praise for women with a staggering critique of (church) ideology. First, House extols the virtues of his lover.

My black mama’s face shine
Like the sun,
Oh lipstick and powder sure won’t
Help her none.⁷¹

As in House’s appreciative verse on the women who “jump up and down” in erotic response to his preached blues, House focuses on the tangible, physical qualities of his woman. House would likely agree with Honeyboy’s own autobiographic reflection that he “had all kinds of girlfriends” over the course of his life and is thus able to ponder on the complex variety of female beauty.⁷² In this stanza House celebrates the ontological, natural essence of femininity that is itself as robust and magnetic as the sun. Cosmetic products that claim to accentuate beauty and hide flaws do just the opposite; lipstick and powder corrupt the natural shine and are ultimately unhelpful because the naked flesh of a woman’s face needs no assistance. Here House sings his own truth in his own way yet

⁷⁰ Ibid, 12.

⁷¹ “My Black Mama” (1930) Son House. (Cited in Francis Davis, *The History of the Blues*. (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 109.

⁷² Edwards, 120.

again. House does here what he does in chapter 1, by using parts of “Preachin the Blues” to convey admiration for female physicality he acts as a spectator of beauty “as a great personal fact and experience, as an abundance of vivid authentic experiences, desires, surprises, and delights in the realm of the beautiful!”⁷³

After the confession of authentic truth learned from a plethora of sexual encounters and wonderment present in the above stanza from “My Black Mama” House transitions his blues gaze on what Spencer refers to as the “otherworldly abstractions” disseminated by the Baptist church.⁷⁴ Heaven and hell, both amorphous and arbitrary imaginaries of the church that translate roughly as reward and punishment (respectively), oppress House because they distract him from the beautiful and horrific realities of black life in the south: the pleasure of women and whiskey and the pain of sharecropping and racial violence. Both posthumous destinations and the people who promote faith in them are cogently dismissed by House,

It ain't no heaven now, and it ain't no
Burning hell
Said I,
Where I'm going when I die, can't no
Body tell.⁷⁵

The truth or reality, as referred to by the word “it,” of life after death has nothing to do with heaven or the “burning” hell reserved for all sinners and blues singers. Such “abstractions” do not exist because they fail to address reality by focusing only on hypothetical destinations for the post-mortem. House rejects such an eschatological framework in favor of focus on the here and now; the eschatological preoccupations of

⁷³Friedrich Nietzsche. *On The Genealogy of Morals*. Trans. Walter Kaufman and R.J. Hollingdale. 1967. (New York: Vintage, 1989.), 104.

⁷⁴ Spencer, 84.

⁷⁵ Davis, 109.

the church only re-enforce the same ideologies of the slave system which, in part, aimed to subvert black interest in their place in this world by focusing only on the next.⁷⁶ This stanza also highlights the level of ignorance and lack of knowledge we (as in we people of earth) all share regarding all stages and locations reached after death. Though the criticism must strike church preachers the hardest, for they have the most to lose in their moral self-righteousness, House takes aim at all who dare to trade contemplations about the next world for honest confessions regarding this one.

Just as Honeyboy evades the ideology of blackness as defined by labor (be it in the field or at war) House rejects certain complex ideologies of the church. House begins by rejecting material apparatus' – lipstick and powder – that function to construct and emphasize an ideology of beauty that credits alteration and concealment instead of the natural hue of his lover's face. To be sure, the church would also reject such a tampering with God's creation. Yet House goes a few steps further. By praising the innate, unaffected, and unadorned appearance of a woman and placing them in the "realm of the beautiful" House locates truth that is firmly and unshakably grounded here, now, in linear and profane time. The story that so requires telling occurs in this lifetime – more specifically House's lifetime – and never in products of misrecognized beauty. Having arrived at this conclusion, House effectively graphs a new framework on the tired conceptions of heaven and hell. These abstractions are replaced with an appreciative and honest discourse on feminine beauty and House's sexuality. Within the framework of the real heaven and hell are nebulous, imaginary, and irrelevant. These cosmic destinations are as dangerous as lipstick and powder because they distract profoundly from genuine

⁷⁶ See Spencer's *Blues & Evil* for further information on the significance of the lack of eschatology in the blues, pgs. 87-93.

experience and present the illusion that either beauty or conjecture about the afterlife can ever be freed from subjective interpretation. Opposed to such idiosyncratic interpretation, these ideological institutions aim to homogenize truth and then teach and market that truth instead of allowing one to encounter it. House began with a meditation on femininity and ended with a revolt against eschatological theology. Truth is a woman, indeed.

The Blues of House and Honeyboy are about truth but also about power or the truth of one's imagination of power. While "My Black Mama" rejects the permeation of false truths (false in that they do not come from House's own mind) "Preachin' the Blues" proclaims the arrival of House's own territorial mastery. The "heaven of my own" places House in a Godly posture and gives him absolute control over his many women who, in order to gain entry into the kingdom, must love only House. On the other end of the spectrum Honeyboy conjures a subterranean cave in which his own agency can reside unharmed and unfettered in, to borrow House's phrase, "a long happy home." This cave freezes out all outside harms, such as the Japanese army in World War II, and thus generates tremendous power and autonomy for Honeyboy. The necessity of the cave becomes apparent for Honeyboy when he realizes what his career as an impressed soldier- subject might take away: the pleasures of intoxication and the real emotion of his woman's love.

Though House and Honeyboy both ponder the significance of women and whiskey in their lives and use each trope as a springboard for a broader theological meditation, the two also share something less benign and albeit harder to accept. Two acts of violence account for a point of commonality and overlap between House and

Honeyboy that stand as both stark and striking. Despite the fact that their legacies remain best preserved in performance and song, these men both directly or indirectly caused the death of another man. This simple and unavoidable fact of murder must not be circumvented because it represents an honest and quotidian dimension of life in the community to which House and Honeyboy belonged. Such acts of murderous violence – House’s shooting and Honeyboy’s ultimately fatal kicking – were alarmingly repetitive in black juke (the Saturday night party) culture at the time. Scholar Adam Gussow characterizes such physical violence among the black rural population of the early to mid-twentieth century as a “problematic sort: what I call ‘intimate’ violence,’ the gun-and-blade-borne damage black folk inflict upon each other.”⁷⁷ Aggressive physicality with often fatal consequences was an essential component of the juke houses conceived and populated by the black labor force. As Honeyboy Edwards put it, quoting the general sentiment of many impoverished black laborers during the period of the twentieth century that hovers around the two world wars, “They’d say, ‘I know I’m going to die, and I’m goin’ to kill that son of a bitch while I’m going. A lot of black folks was like that.”⁷⁸

The music performed in the jukes was undoubtedly influenced by and connected to the intimate violence that occurred in an audience participating in a space in which “the black body is celebrated as an instrument of pleasure rather than an instrument of labor.”⁷⁹ The notion of pleasure is conceptually complicated among abject populations for whom violence may serve as a displaced means of personal assertion of distinction and individuality. Among the subjugated and oppressed black population of the American

⁷⁷ Adam Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002), 4.

⁷⁸ Edwards, 30

⁷⁹ Robin, D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York, 1994). Cited in Gussow, 206. Here Gussow speaks of violence as an “essential constituent of juke sociality.”

south, intimate violence occurs because one wishes to strike the white oppressor but cannot so he strikes another black man.⁸⁰ House and Honeyboy both killed another black man, two other members of the same abject community, and such actions can be explained away through the invocation of “a Freudian hermeneutic:” such crimes ostensibly occur between two oppressed individuals but *actually* reflect a displaced urge to murder those who in their oppressive power cannot be touched.⁸¹ While this is feasible to an extent such a suspicious explanation fails to account for the phenomenon of violence within black culture on its own terms. If the only reason such violence occurs is because of the ubiquity of white oppression then one would be led to believe that there in fact existed no discernable black culture that is not ultimately born out of a reaction to white power.

Before recording “Preaching the Blues” in 1930 House served two years for shooting a man to death during a dispute at a juke joint party. Honeyboy kicked a rival in the head in a drunken rage and later the man died from his wounds. In theorizing such intimate murders Gussow posits an explanation that recalls Charles Long’s model of orientation. Such acts of violence within the juke, Gussow asserts, were “a way in which a man might objectify his presence in the world through the alterability of his world.” House and Honeyboy, by making decisions to modify and revise the world by negating the presence of another, both effectively perform the work of value judgment and punishment normally reserved for god. This would surely make one feel astoundingly re-oriented in the world. In extreme acts of violence one not only declares his own dominant

⁸⁰ James Baldwin, “White Man’s Guilt,” in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985) orig. published 1965. See this essay for a longer discussion of intimate violence as a reflection of a deeper longing to inflict physical harm on one’s oppressor.

⁸¹ Cited in Paul Ricouer, *Freud and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 26, 32-36. Cited in Long, 85, 95.

individuality but literally claims the body of someone else.⁸² The slain body of a perceived rival becomes the capillary through which one reaffirms his own worth and uniqueness; indeed, the murderous actor figuratively and literally “leaves his mark” on another’s flesh and the world in general.⁸³

The problem with such behavior is that it allows certain community members to connect and articulate their own individual power only by removing a peer from the world. In addition, such violence is ultimately disastrous and nihilistic because it produces a slow eradication of an entire group of people from within. The threat of such communal suicide is made real by the recurrent nature of intimate violence and the willing attitude toward murder and felt by many juke participants.⁸⁴ The fact that such juke violence, of which both House and Honeyboy are guilty perpetrators, transpired over and over again places the phenomenon of intimate violence firmly within the bounds of institutional homogeneity in the sense that, to a large extent, everyone participated directly or offered little resistance. Juke joints were violent spaces for a variety of complex and contradictory reasons but the fact remains that such “workplace hazards” happened much of the time.⁸⁵ Violence was characteristic of juke norms: quotidian and representative of the way life simply unfolded and continued on.

Blues composition and performance, particularly in “Preachin’ the Blues” and “Build Myself a Cave” defy and rebel against societal institutions that impose homogeneity of action over individual power. The church and the draft, for example, require certain behavior and obeisance from House and Honeyboy. In order to resist such

⁸² Gussow, 210-211.

⁸³ Ibid, 210.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 5.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 4.

institutions and define their identity on their own terms the two bluesmen write and perform songs that express the real of desire, envision power over others, and commit to living a life insulated from larger forces that seek to determine individual fates and futures. When House reconfigures heaven with himself in charge, when Honeyboy celebrates his cave of protection, the two bluesmen seek to accomplish and express a certain kind of religiousness. In as much as the House and Honeyboy are part of a larger musical tradition they are both aware of the beneficial results of blues participation; by playing the blues one can avoid working for and within oppressive institutions of labor (such as the farm or the army) while also composing a fresh ideology that reflects an honest meditation on the real substance and importance of life on earth. The blues of House and Honeyboy is religious in its critical fearlessness animated by a sincere interest and respect for one's innermost feelings, anxieties, and desires.

Though the blues texts analyzed in this paper serve as a means of empowered identity reformulation for two blues practitioners, I do not mean to suggest that blues authorship and performance allowed for House and Honeyboy to completely ignore the reality of invasive institutions that intended to either define or limit the lives of black people. I am not positing a kind of teleological quota that the blues may or may not fill and I do not mean to suggest that if one would or could simply write and play their blues "well" enough then the frustrations and disappointments of life could be evaded entirely. Such a suggestion would not only display a fundamental misreading of the blues tradition but would also suggest a fundamental lack of understanding of a kind of religiosity and ritual at work here. House's reconfigured "heaven of my own" and Honeyboy's cave stand as imaginative and idiosyncratic concepts that remain unique and well-formed

throughout repeated performances. Such recurring blues expressions and performances reveal a worldview that is concerned with, as J.Z. Smith defined ritual, “the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are... rituals express a realistic assessment of the fact that the world *cannot* be compelled.”⁸⁶ Faced with church ordinances and dead-end agricultural servitude House and Honeyboy expressed their innermost feelings and anxieties about their world and their futures. To wish for a personal heaven, a discontinuation of eschatological discourse, or overarching freedom from the government’s draft is a bold and wild act done with great courage; a brave stab at autonomy that above all else privileges the individual over collectivization.

⁸⁶ J.Z. Smith, “The Bare Facts of Ritual” (USA: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 125-127.

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