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“Searching for Satan in the Pre-War Devil Blues”

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in American Studies from  
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by

Kyle Joseph Mahoney

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# Searching for Satan

in the Pre-War Devil Blues

Kyle Mahoney  
Prof. McGovern  
AMST 496  
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## Introduction

In 1924, Clara Smith released “Done Sold My Soul to the Devil” for Columbia Phonograph Company, marking the first commercial blues recording which referenced the devil by name.<sup>1</sup> In the nearly 100 years since its release, associations of the blues with the devil have grown to the point of legend, becoming the source of academic literature, advertisements for CD re-releases,<sup>2</sup> documentaries,<sup>3</sup> and a tourism industry.<sup>4</sup> This association has earned the blues the moniker of “the devil’s music,” but its branding, especially in the years before the second world war, did not extend as extensively to Satan himself. In fact, according to Michael Taft’s *Blues Lyric Poetry: An Anthology*, which catalogs pre-war blues lyrics, there is only one instance of “Satan” being used, marked, in contrast, by 57 usages of “devil” and its variants.<sup>5</sup>

This great disparity between the two words informs the core questions of my research. Why is the devil so much more prominent in the lyrics of the pre-war blues than Satan? What difference in meaning is there between “devil” and “Satan?” Considering the cultural landscape of the inter-war era, what was the goal of the blues singers who invoked the devil in their music? In the very limited appearances of “Satan,” what does its appearance convey that “devil” might not? The answers to these questions might not just illuminate the possible intentions of pre-war blues artists, but also demonstrate the interplay between the sacred and secular music forms, as well as generational differences in the communities that serve as audiences for the music. Over the course of my research, I will survey recordings and academic literature on the devil blues to

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<sup>1</sup> Clara Smith, “Done Sold My Soul to the Devil,” Columbia, 1924.

<sup>2</sup> Spencer, Jon Michael. *Blues and Evil*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1993, XIII.

<sup>3</sup> *ReMastered: Devil at the Crossroads*. Netflix. Netflix, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Gussow, *Beyond the Crossroads: The Devil and the Blues Tradition* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 255-303.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Taft, *Blues Lyric Poetry: An Anthology* (New York, New York: Garland Publ., 1983).

answer these questions, which, so far, have not all been directly addressed by scholars in the field.

## **Chapter 1: Why does the Devil Appear in the Blues?**

### *Blues Beginnings*

Tracking origins of the devil in blues music is, in essence, an exercise in tracking the origins of the blues. Much scholarly attention has been devoted to the genre's origin, but for the sake of this paper, I will focus on the cultural landscape from which the blues emerged as it pertains to the devil and Satan. Such a venture leads back to antebellum South.

The African American music tradition precedes the birth of the blues, emerging out of the South before the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation. Born out of the violent system of Southern chattel slavery which dominated the US economy, spirituals arose from praise meetings and reflected the desire for deliverance from oppression. In 1867, William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison published the first collection of the black music of the antebellum South, titled *Slave Songs of the United States*.<sup>6</sup> From this collection, later scholars have been able to analyze the music and lyrics of antebellum African-American music, and it is from this collection that I am able to point to uses of “devil” and “Satan” which predate the blues but emerge from a similar cultural milieu. Both terms are found in the collection, although weighted heavily to “Satan,” a phenomenon which will later evoke a lengthier discussion from me.

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<sup>6</sup>William Francis Allen, Lucy McKim Garrison, and Charles Pickard Ware, *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York, New York: A. Simpson & Co., 1867).

An account on the songs of the enslaved is provided by Frederick Douglass in his memoir *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Of the songs sung on Col. Lloyd's plantation, Douglass writes, "they were tones, loud, long, and deep, breathing the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains." He continues "the songs of the slaves represent the sorrows, rather than the joys, of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears."<sup>7</sup> Douglass's first-hand account of hearing the songs of the enslaved, and the emotion he conveys in his recollection, begins to illuminate the feelings which informed the work songs of the antebellum South.

The sorrow Douglass chronicled surfaces again in the final chapter of W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, titled "Of the Sorrow Songs." Published in 1903, Du Bois writes in reflection of the songs not just with despair, but with admiration, "the Negro folk-song— the rhythmic cry of the slave— stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas." Of their recognition, Du Bois references the efforts of those who cataloged *Slave Songs of the United States* "...Miss McKim and others urged upon the world their rare beauty. But the world listened only half credulously until the Fisk Jubilee Singers sang the slave songs so deeply into the world's heart that it can never wholly forget them again." Du Bois does not just admire the beauty of this music, he also writes of their haunting nature and sorrowful origins, "they are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world...." Despite understanding the sorrow song as the music of an unhappy people, Du Bois points, still, to the glimmer of hope that remains present in the music, "through all the

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<sup>7</sup> Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York, New York: New York and Auburn: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855), 99.

sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things.”<sup>8</sup>  
This hope prevails in the music sung by the Jubilee singers.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers, as Du Bois notes, were wildly popular in their presentation of the African American spiritual to a white international audience. Founded to help fundraise for Fisk University, the group eventually toured the north, even to international audiences in Europe to widespread acclaim. Their repertoire consisted of African American Spirituals, but also music written by European and white American composers. Generally received well by northern audiences, the Jubilee Singers are credited with exposing many white northerners to the quality of African American music and culture outside of the form of minstrelsy.<sup>9</sup> While the commercialized spiritual, at least in its fundraising context with the Fisk Singers, was able to capture a white audience, the blues did not have the same effect on white audiences for decades into its recorded lifespan. The blues remained rooted in African American folk tradition. Even as it emerged on recordings in the 1920s and 1930s by record companies, they were so-called “race records” primarily marketed to black audiences until the folk revival of the 1960s, although there was a small contingent of white listeners to the music with growing appreciation for it in the 1930s and 1940s. In the postbellum years, the spiritual, through the Fisk Jubilee Singers, enabled African Americans to emerge nationally with a distinct cultural form and influence. The roots of the spiritual and its cultural prominence are the same roots from which the blues emerged.

However, the spiritual is just one aspect of the antebellum African American oral tradition. Beyond music, family histories, verbal games, riddles, folktales, proverbs, sermons, hexes, and jokes all contributed to black antebellum oral tradition, each resisting the system of

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<sup>8</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago, Illinois: A.C. McClurg and Co., 1903), Chapter XIV.

<sup>9</sup> Eileen Southern, *Music of Black Americans* (New York, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1983), 226.

slavery and building a “separate black national culture.”<sup>10</sup> Musically, in addition to the spiritual, secular songs served as a method through which the enslaved fostered a culture of resistance.

The secular song, as Lawrence Levine writes in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, “gave a sense of power, of control” and “revealed a culture which kept large elements of its own autonomous culture alive, which continued a rich internal life, which interacted with a larger society that deeply affected it but to which it did not completely succumb.”<sup>11</sup> Both the secular and the spiritual, as aspects of the antebellum black oral tradition, inform the music which would become known as the blues in the early 20th century, and in its performance, its performers are able to maintain control over their cultural creation and contribution.

From where, specifically, did the blues originate? The earliest renditions of blues music were sung by “nameless African Americans living and working in the South’s cotton belt in the 1880s and 1890s.”<sup>12</sup> From the Mississippi Delta to East Texas, these rural blues were of the African American working class. Delta bluesman Son House describes the blues as emerging out of field hollers, “all I can say is that when I was a boy we were always singing in the fields. Not real singing, you know, just hollering. But we made up our songs about things that were happening to us at the time, and I think that’s where the blues started.”<sup>13</sup>

In her book *The Music of Black Americans*, Eileen Southern writes of the field hollers of the antebellum South, predating House’s personal experience. She notes that the songs of the

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<sup>10</sup> William Barlow, *Looking up at Down: The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple Univ Press, 1990), xi.

<sup>11</sup> Levine, Lawrence W.. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. Cary: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2007. Accessed March 17, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central, 296.

<sup>12</sup> Barlow, 3

<sup>13</sup> Barlow, 18



enslaved were sometimes “merely cries in the field” including “cottonfield hollers,” “whoops,” and “water calls.” Southern writes that such a cry could mean a variety of things such as “a call for water, food, or help, a call to let others know where he was working, or simply a cry of loneliness, sorrow, or happiness.”<sup>14</sup> Accounts regarding the vocal qualities of these hollers describe “a long, loud musical shout, rising and falling, and breaking into falsetto, his voice ringing through the woods in the clear frosty night air, like a bugle call.”<sup>15</sup> Singing while working was encouraged by the overseers and masters, as it let them know where the enslaved were and that they were continuing to work, though the types of songs sung were regulated. One planter wrote of the issue, “When at work I have no objection to their whistling or singing some lively tune, but no *drawling* tunes are allowed in the field, for their motions are almost certain to keep time with the music.”<sup>16</sup> The work songs sung by the enslaved were adjusted, especially in regard to tempo, to the task which they had to accomplish. William Allen writes in *Slave Songs of the United States* that,

On the water, the oars dip “Poor Rosy” to an even *andante*; a stout boy and girl at the hominy mill will make the same “Poor Rosy” fly, to keep up with the whirling stone; and in the evening, after a day’s work is done, “Heab’n shall-a be my home” [the refrain of *Poor Rosy*] peals up slowly and mournfully from the distant quarters.<sup>17</sup>

The music of the enslaved had great range in rendition, adapting to the situation at hand, and Southern writes that they “recorded the circumstances of [their] daily life in song just as assuredly as if [they] had kept a diary or written [their] biography.”<sup>18</sup> The hollers and work songs

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<sup>14</sup> Southern, 156.

<sup>15</sup> Frederick Law Olmstead, *Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, as quoted in *The Music of Black Americans*, 156

<sup>16</sup> Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 160.

<sup>17</sup> Southern, 164

<sup>18</sup> Southern, 165

of the antebellum South were the predecessors of the hollers which House noted were at least some part of the origins of the Delta blues.

In the decades following the immediate post-Civil War work done by Allen, Garrison, and Ware, black music began to gain a national audience. While the Fisk singers and other professional jubilee singers attained some success, black performers of the late 19th century found more success in touring minstrel troupes. It was from this minstrel tradition that W.C. Handy, eventually known as the “Father of the Blues,” got his start.<sup>19</sup> In Handy’s 1941 autobiography *Father of the Blues*, he recounts the story of first hearing the blues sung by a lone musician at a railroad station in Tutwiler, MS.

A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside me while I slept. His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages. As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who used steel bars. The effect was unforgettable. His song, too, struck me instantly. ‘Goin’ where the Southern cross’ the Dog.’ The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard. The tune stayed in my mind.<sup>20</sup>

After hearing such music, Handy drew from street blues performers in his compositions of blues songs like “Memphis Blues” and “St. Louis Blues.” Handy’s adaptations helped start the first blues craze of the 1910s, quickly earning his “Father of the Blues” title. Though, at the turn of the century, the most popular form of black music was ragtime.

Ragtime was a black form of music that was only made possible as a result of changes and continuities in a post-emancipation United States. Ragtime was characterized by “a regular, straightforward bass and a lightly syncopated melody,” with the pianist’s left hand playing a march-like bassline and chords on the down beats and the right hand playing the melody, usually

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<sup>19</sup> Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 228-240.

<sup>20</sup> William C. Handy, *Father of the Blues an Autobiography* (New York, New York: Da Capo Pr, 1985) 74.

accenting the upbeat.<sup>21</sup> Rag songs since their inception were mostly associated with the piano, a necessary instrument as free black Americans were building their own churches. Access to pianos for slaves was an uncommon occurrence, so only with freedom could such a development occur. The continued social segregation along the color line was also necessary in the emergence of ragtime in the Jim Crow era. Eileen Southern writes about its inception, "...the black music maker developed a distinctive style of entertainment music, fitted to his own personal needs and expressive of his own individuality. It was not intended to be heard or understood by whites. Ragtime was one of the earliest manifestations of this distinctive music. The other was the blues."<sup>22</sup> The first piano rags were published in 1897, though the improvisational music was played by black musicians for years prior to any official notated release.<sup>23</sup> Early professional blues musicians drew upon ragtime, and some of musical characteristics, like syncopated rhythms, are shared between the two genres and point to their shared origin in the African American musical tradition.<sup>24</sup>

### The Sacred Music of Black Americans

The African American spiritual, despite being the most well-documented of 19th century black music, shares the same questions of origin as the blues. One scholar wrote in 1959 discussions surrounding their origin, "there is no trustworthy evidence before the Civil War. There are too few examples of American Negro tradition that we can accept as pure. Too little is

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<sup>21</sup> Southern, 311-15.

<sup>22</sup> Southern, 308

<sup>23</sup> Southern, 316

<sup>24</sup> Southern, 311, 344.

known of the African song, and analyzable elements seem to prove too little.”<sup>25</sup> More than 60 years later, much more scholarly research has been done into African music, but the issue of minimal accounts of black antebellum music remains. While these origins are unclear, Dena Epstein, in her book *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals*, emphasizes the importance of understanding the religious forces which informed the spiritual.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, in understanding the presence of the devil and Satan in the blues, it is important to acknowledge the religious traditions and forces at play for African Americans in the 19th century to attain context for both the music and religion of the culture from which the blues emerged. From this understanding of religion and the spiritual, we can understand how religion shapes the blues and the negative attention it garnered from black Christian leaders.

The religious exercise of the enslaved in the antebellum South varied from depending on location and the attitudes of masters. Many slave owners opposed any religious instruction to the enslaved. An 1837 account from former slave Charles Ball writes, “There has always been a strong repugnance amongst the planters against their slaves becoming members of any religious society.... They fear the slaves, by attending meetings, and listening to the preachers may imbibe the morality they teach, the notions of equality and liberty contained in the gospel....”<sup>27</sup> Though this attitude was common, other planters had differing opinions in regard to slave religion, ranging from indifference to encouragement of Christian teachings, to the even the rare encouragement of African tradition and the promotion of secular music.<sup>28</sup> All perspectives taken

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<sup>25</sup> Wilgus, D. K. *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1959, 345-64.

<sup>26</sup> Dena J. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2003) 192.

<sup>27</sup> Ball, *Slavery* 164-5, as quoted in Epstein, 193.

<sup>28</sup> Epstein, 193.

by planters were aligned with their ultimate interest in maintaining control over the enslaved and ensuring that they do not seek and achieve freedom.

In the early 19th century, many slave owners maintained opposition to missionaries seeking to teach religion to the enslaved. An 1822 account from a Charleston resident states, “the swarms of Missionaries, white and *black*, that are perpetually visiting us... scatter... the fire-brands of discord and destruction among our Negro Population, the seeds of discontent and sedition.” While missionaries were met with vocal opposition, this resident did approve of religious instruction in local churches with specialized segregated services.<sup>29</sup> Missionaries brought with them the threat of enabling insurrection, though later in the antebellum era, religious fervor, the growth of evangelical sects by the end of the second great awakening, and the atmosphere of camp meetings made opposition to missionaries a near untenable position.<sup>30</sup>

Camp meetings, outdoor protestant religious services popular during the Second Great Awakening which, in part, consisted of singing hymns, were attended by black and white people both. These meetings demonstrate the intersection of music and religion in the 19th century, and accounts of these meetings reveal experiences of white exposure to black music. One such account from a camp meeting in South Carolina describes the vocal abilities of the black participants, “the hymns were... fervent and beautiful on the side of the negroes’ camp....Their musical talents are remarkable. Most of the blacks have beautiful, pure voices, and sing as easily as we whites talk....These religious camp-meetings...are the saturnalia of the negro slaves.” Remarkable musical and religious exchange came out of such camp meetings, though tracing the cultural origins, whether black or white, of the music sung at these meetings is a task not yet accomplished by scholars. These meetings likely were the first long-form exposure of many

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<sup>29</sup> Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals*, 195

<sup>30</sup> Epstein, 195-6.

African Americans to Christianity, but also created a space for the limited expression of adapted African cultural traditions. Epstein writes of the experience of African Americans at the meetings, “the call and response style of singing so familiar to them was ideally suited to the participatory service of the camp meeting, where cast numbers of people required musical responses that they could learn on the spot.”<sup>31</sup> Camp meetings and their religious music undoubtedly influenced, in part, the slave songs and spirituals eventually recorded by musicologists William Francis Allen, Lucy McKim Garrison, and Charles Pickard Ware in *Slave Songs of the United States*, as well as those transcribed by Thomas Wentworth Higginson in 1867.

The music sung by southern African Americans near the end of the antebellum era was nearly all spiritual. Researchers noted the difficulty they faced in finding secular songs to record and transcribe. Allen, Garrison, and Ware write of their extensive research “[W]e had hoped to obtain enough secular songs to make a division by themselves; there are, however, so few of these that it has been decided to intersperse them with the spirituals under their respective States.”<sup>32</sup> Another researcher faced rejection when inquiring about hearing corn songs “Nuffin’s good dat aint religious madam. Nobody sings dem corn-shuckin’ songs after dey’s done got religion.” This attitude against secular music, Epstein wrote, is not of African origin, but rather a result of white Christian evangelism stemming from the Great Awakening.<sup>33</sup> Such an attitude demonstrates that African American music of praise was different by nature than music that spoke of the world.

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<sup>31</sup> Epstein, 199

<sup>32</sup> Allen, *Slave Songs of the United States*, xx

<sup>33</sup> Epstein, 207-8.

By the Civil War, the spiritual was the dominant public-facing African American musical form, and its dominance was influenced by white Christian morality. Some of this music was clearly directly influenced by white hymns, which were remembered by those who attended camp meetings, though most tunes were, in some manner, distinct from any white predecessor.<sup>34</sup> The origin of the slave spiritual was a topic of much scholarly curiosity in the 1860s. Col. Higginson writes about his experience in inquiring about the composition of spirituals,

I always wondered whether they had always a conscious and definite origin in some leading mind, or whether they grew by gradual accretion, in an almost unconscious way. On this point I could get no information, though I asked many questions, until at last, one day when I was being rowed across from Beaufort to Ladies' Island, I found myself, with delight, on the actual trail of a song. One of the oarsmen, a brisk young fellow, not a soldier, on being asked for his theory of the matter, dropped out a coy confession. "Some good sperituals," he said, "are start jess out o' curiosity. I been a-raise a sing, myself, once" ... Then he began singing and the men, after listening a moment, joined in the chorus as if it were an old acquaintance, though they evidently had never heard it before. I saw how easily a new 'sing' took root among them.<sup>35</sup>

Higginson's account of the origin of the spirituals sung by African Americans in the South illuminates the spontaneity in their creation, and how their structure, often call-and-response with a repeated refrain, allowed them to be learned quickly. An account from 1862 by J. Miller McKim provides another explanation to the origins of some spirituals,

I asked one of these blacks... where they got these songs. 'Dey make 'em, sah.' 'How do they make them?' After a pause, evidently casting about for an explanation, he said: 'I'll tell you, it's dis way. My master call me up, and order me a short peck of corn and a hundred lash. My friends see it, and is sorry for me. When dey come to de praise-meeting dat night dey sing about it. Some's very good singers and know how; and dey work it in--work it in, you know, till they get it right; and dat's de way.' A very satisfactory explanation; at least so it seemed to me.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Allen, xx

<sup>35</sup> Allen, xvii-xviii

<sup>36</sup> Allen, xviii

The spirituals sung by enslaved African Americans were born out of the violence unleashed upon them by the system of chattel slavery. The McKim account describes some of this process. The spirituals sung by the enslaved, while the lyrical content might be religious, is also a direct response to the worldly oppression they faced. Through the sacred, enslaved African Americans were able to achieve agency and push back against oppressive systems and those who uphold them.

While *Slave Songs of the United States* is an instrumental source in understanding the antebellum music of African Americans, some scholars felt obliged to apologize for its editors' "understandable ignorance," as, "they were not folklorists, anthropologists, or musicologists. They knew little of the South, their acquaintance with the 'Western and Southern Camp-meetings' must have been superficial, and they knew nothing of folksongs among the white population."<sup>37</sup> Epstein rebukes such apologies, pointing to the lack of academic discipline pertaining to folklore and musicology at the time. She instead praises the editors, "[they] displayed a concern for a music that they could not fully understand, but that they recognized as valuable, attractive, and eminently worth preserving from the hazards of time and historic change." She also had harsh words for scholars who felt the need to apologize for the editors, writing that the scholars "knew nothing about them, or they would have realized how unnecessary such apologies were."<sup>38</sup> Regardless of 20th century scholarly perspectives on the work, it is evident that *Slave Songs of the United States* provides an invaluable resource in the collection of the spiritual, and its catalog of lyrics will provide a strong basis for my analysis in tracking the usage of "Satan" and "devil" in African American folk music.

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<sup>37</sup>Wilgus, D. K. *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898*, 303.

<sup>38</sup> Epstein, 303-4



W.C. Handy and “Blues-Spirituals”

In his book *Father of the Blues*, W.C. Handy writes about his first impressions with the music which would influence his blues. He recalls a time in 1903 when he was traveling in Mississippi and came across a man playing guitar at a train station. He called the performance of the man playing guitar “the weirdest music I had ever heard.” He specifically notes the guitar player’s technique of using a knife to fret the strings, similar to Hawaiian guitarists with a steel bar, creating an “unforgettable” effect.<sup>39</sup> He does not specify what particular aspect of the effect stood out to him, but he was clearly struck by the left-hand guitar technique, similar to the bottleneck slides used by later country blues performers. Using a knife to bar strings would have allowed the performer to achieve an infinite number of notes between each fret, with the frets on the guitar existing as suggested destinations for striking glissandos, not limited by ideas of western 12-tone pitch correctness and not unlike the capacity of the voice.<sup>40</sup>

Handy later released and copyrighted “Memphis Blues” in 1912,<sup>41</sup> and in 1914, released one of the most popular blues compositions of all time “St. Louis Blues,” which immediately captivated audiences. Of “St. Louis Blues,” Handy writes in his autobiography, “Well they say that life begins at forty—I wouldn’t know— but I was forty the year *St. Louis Blues* was composed, and ever since then my life has, in one sense at least, revolved around that composition.”<sup>42</sup> The song’s notability comes from its “low-down blues” and the use of the black

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<sup>39</sup> Handy, 74.

<sup>40</sup> Tracing the origin of the slide guitar was a popular practice among African-Americanist blues scholars in the 1960s and 1970s. While tracing their origin to monochord zithers and the “diddley-bow” folk instruments of Africa and Afro-America was popular in the field, accounts of bluesmen from the pre-war era indicate the influence of the slide to be entirely from Native Hawaiian guitarists. John W. Troutman. “Steelin’ the Slide: Hawai‘i and the Birth of the Blues Guitar.” *Southern Cultures* 19, no. 1 (2013): 26–52.

<sup>41</sup> Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 106

<sup>42</sup> Handy, 122-3

vernacular with rhythms of the tango, which Handy notes was “the vogue” at the time. Handy uses a seventh chord to start out the song, and he included a shift from the subdominant to the tonic to create a “spiritual effect.” Handy said that his goal was “to use all that is characteristic of the Negro, from Africa to Alabama.”<sup>43</sup>

While Handy was the first musician to popularize the blues, it is obvious that he was not the first to play it. He recognizes his blues compositions as a result of influences from black people across the United States and Africa and notably, from his time in the South as both a child and adult. Accounts from old-timer blues musicians from Baltimore to New Orleans dismiss the thought that the blues started somewhere, or with someone, specific. One fiddler responded to a question of the origins of the blues, “The blues? Ain’t no first blues! The blues always been.” Scholar Eileen Southern writes of the blues “From the time of its origin... the blues was generally associated with the lowly—received with warmth in the brothels and saloons of the red-light district, but rejected by “respectable people.”<sup>44</sup>

So how then, does the blues compare to the spiritual which preceded it? Eileen Southern argues that the distinction between the two is not always clear. She writes of their differences, “[m]any spirituals convey to listeners the same feeling of rootlessness and misery as do the blues. The spiritual is religious, however, rather than worldly and tends to be more generalized in its expression than specific, more figurative in its language than direct, and more expressive of group feelings than individual ones.”<sup>45</sup> Despite these stylistic differences, Southern adds that some songs had such “vague implications” as to be classified as “blues-spirituals,” sharing characteristics of both musical forms. In her book *Preaching the Blues: Black Feminist*

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<sup>43</sup> Polenberg, Richard. “St. Louis Blues (1914).” In *Hear My Sad Story: The True Tales That Inspired “Stagolee,” “John Henry,” and Other Traditional American Folk Songs*, 1st ed., 9–17. Cornell University Press, 2015. 9-17.

<sup>44</sup> Southern, 330-1.

<sup>45</sup> Southern, 331

*Performance in Lynching Plays*, Maisha S. Akbar uses Southern's blues-spiritual terminology to describe "Preaching the Blues" by Bessie Smith, arguing that her performance combines "sacred performance traditions of a church preacher with a secular performance of women's intimate sex talk and a woman's seduction of a woman, 'undermining the coherence of categories.'"<sup>46</sup> Additionally, Southern points to secular folksongs of the 1890s and early 1900s, such as those collected by archaeologist Charles Peabody, as songs which modern listeners would likely understand to be blues, but which were collected before the name for the genre was popularized.<sup>47</sup> Regardless, the lines drawn between the blues and the spiritual, as well as other black folk songs of the time, are often blurry.

Not every scholar of the blues agrees to grant the blues and the spiritual such a close relationship. David Evans, in his seminal book *Big Road Blues*, lends more moderate credit to the spiritual as an antecedent to the blues. While he credits singing in church as the first singing experience of many bluesmen and thus it is likely an influence, he claims that these "stylistic features would be those that characterize black vocal music in general." Evans continues "There is very little actual similarity between the blues and church songs in respect to stanza patterns, melodies, or lyrics."<sup>48</sup> Indeed, there are many differences between the structures of the blues and the spiritual (the difference in lyrics being the basis of my research), but even the similarities of "black vocal music in general" provides an interesting foundation from which to compare the two. In addition, while it is true that many blues folk musicians and their audiences understand there to be a "strong distinction" between religious and secular songs in performance, and even might maintain "mutually exclusive lifestyles,"<sup>49</sup> as Evans suggests, works by later scholars

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<sup>46</sup> Akbar, *Preaching the Blues: Black Feminist Performance in Lynching Plays*, 4.

<sup>47</sup> Southern, 332

<sup>48</sup> Evans, David. *Big Road Blues*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1982.

<sup>49</sup> Evans, *Big Road Blues*, 106

criticize such a stark division (such critiques will be explored further in the following section). Evans does note, however, that performers of blues music were seldom limited only to the blues; and their repertoires, even if not recorded, often expanded into other genres including the sacred.<sup>50</sup> So, the influence of religious music on the supposedly secular blues is probable.

### The “Devil’s Music”

Extensive scholarly attention has been granted to the discussion of the blues as the “devil’s music,” but from where does this term arise? In his book *The Devil’s Music: A History of the Blues*, Giles Oakley points out that this term arose from the church.<sup>51</sup> Another blues scholar, Paul Oliver, used the term “devil’s music” to be ascribed to the blues without identifying the tendency of whites to use such terminology to validate stereotypes of black Americans as immoral and sexually deviant. In the introduction to his book *The Blues and Evil*, Jon Michael Spencer denounces irresponsible blues scholarship from white ethnomusicologists, arguing that Oliver clearly intended “devil’s music” to mean “evil music” based on his claim that the blues was “somewhat bereft of spiritual values.”<sup>52</sup> Spencer is also critical of the perpetuation of taletelling regarding the devil-lore of the blues. He calls it “a kind of escapism in that it distracts scholars from the task of establishing a society in which black people are no longer the subject and objects of evil.” Spencer’s criticism is directed toward the white scholars who fail to “demystify” the mythologies and devil-lore behind the blues, pointing to the scholars’ failure to recognize the “synchronous duplicity” of the music—both its profane and sacred nature.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Evans, 107-110

<sup>51</sup> Oakley, Giles. *The Devil’s Music: A History of the Blues*. New York, New York: Da Capo Press, 1997, 50.

<sup>52</sup> Spencer, xii

<sup>53</sup> Spencer, xiv

Then, in my venture as a white scholar studying the devil of the blues, it is important to not just cut through the tale-telling mythologies but understand who the devil of the blues is. The African American religious traditions differ from those of Euro-Americans. Even in regions which are strongly evangelical protestant like the Deep South from where much of the blues originated, African American Christianity maintained a level of syncretism. While evangelical Christianity does not maintain the same pantheon of saints as Catholicism, the devil provides the opportunity for the syncretic transfer of African deities.<sup>54</sup> African-Americanist and blues scholars alike point to the Yoruba deity of Elegba as an influence, or some part of, the African American devil. Elegba, a trickster god often associated with the crossroads, is described as “the only wholly unpredictable god in the Yoruba pantheon,” and Elegba’s sense of humor and pursuit of chaos aligns him with depictions of the devil in the folklore of the enslaved.<sup>55</sup>

Robert Farris Thompson’s book *Flash of the Spirit* provides in depth detail on the African influence and origin of Afro-American art and culture, including discussions of the messenger god Elegba (or Eshu-Elegbara, Eshu, Legba). According to legend and due to his status as the messenger of the gods, Elegba came to be known as “the very embodiment of the crossroads.” In presenting the beginning to characterize the personality of Elegba, Thompson writes, “outwardly mischievous but inwardly full of overflowing creative grace, Eshu-Elegbara eludes the coarse nets of characterization.” While the focus of his book lies on African and Afro-American art and not necessarily the syncretism that informs this study, Thompson does also note that, due to his provocative nature, Elegba “has been characterized by missionaries and Western-minded Yoruba

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<sup>54</sup> Katrina Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin': The Old African American Hoodoo System* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 45.

<sup>55</sup> Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 1982) 60.

alike as ‘the Devil.’”<sup>56</sup> In a footnote, he elaborates “Hence the pitchforks of Satan, horns of the Devil, and other infernal images that cloud his true role as messenger of the deities and principle of originality....”<sup>57</sup> The supposed devilish equivalent in the polytheistic Yoruba pantheon is then, according to Thompson, a provocateur, an original, and the crossroads themselves. Notably absent is the notion that Elegba is evil, at least in the stark if not two-dimensional sense often attributed to the devil of Christianity. Consistent with his mischievous trickster persona, the wandering Elegba can be both hostile and favorable, and his association with the devil in African American folk tradition incorporates a non-Christian understanding of the devil, featuring traits that might have been more alluring for blues artists to emulate.

The Christianity of the Southern African American tradition differs from the spiritual understanding of the white Christian tradition, a difference derived in part from its West African origin. In his 1926 *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, Newbell Niles Puckett wrote of African religious survivals in America, “while the Southern Negro believes much more firmly in a single deity than does the native African, yet his intense recognition of ghosts, ethics, angels, devils, and other secondary supernatural beings, gives his religion a decidedly polytheistic turn.”<sup>58</sup> Puckett’s quote seems to be dismissive of the intelligence of black Americans and plays into negative stereotypes of them as credulous and childlike. Still, relevant to the central questions of this paper, he uses the plural form in reference to the “devils” of African American folklore. While every mention of the devil in the lyrics of the pre-war blues is singular, (“the devil”), Puckett’s plural “devils” suggests a multiplicity to the figure. This mention underlines the plural

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<sup>56</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York, New York: Random House, 1983), 19.

<sup>57</sup> Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 273

<sup>58</sup> Puckett, Newbell Niles. *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1926, 523.

understandings of who the devil is, as influenced by West African polytheism. While Puckett does not name any particular deity in his book, Elegba is likely one of the deities that influenced his understanding.

The devil of Southern African Americans, of the blues, is then not the devil of white American tradition—not the biblical devil. Describing the devil of the African American tradition, Newbell Niles Puckett writes “[t]he Southern Negro... gives the devil as a personage considerably more attention than is paid to him by the present whites.”<sup>59</sup> The African American devil is “a very real individual, generally anthropomorphic, but capable of taking almost any form at will... always interfering with human affairs.”<sup>60</sup> The African American devil is, then, an active force in daily life. The influence of Elegba in the devil of the blues provided “an emulative model of heroic action,” and this devil, according to Jon Michael Spencer, is “a being of synchronous duplicity... both malevolent and benevolent, disruptive and reconciliatory... yet the predominant attitude toward him is affection rather than fear.”<sup>61</sup> Perhaps due to the devil’s intervention in human affairs and shape-shifting tendencies in African-American folklore, the devil is as much a personality as he is any specific figure. Such personality came to be strongly associated with the music and talents of bluesmen such as Robert Johnson, Peetie Wheatstraw (who called himself the “the Devil’s Son in Law”), and Tommy Johnson, among others, some of which were explicitly linked to the “crossroads,” also associated with Elegba.<sup>62</sup>

The mythological crossroads is essential to the devil-lore of the blues. It is at the crossroads where, according to his younger brother LaDell, bluesman Tommy Johnson (1896-1956) “said he sold hisself to the devil.” LaDell recounted that Tommy would claim “you have

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<sup>59</sup>Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, 548

<sup>60</sup>Puckett, 558

<sup>61</sup> Spencer, 10

<sup>62</sup> Gussow, 10

to go by yourself and be sitting there playing a piece. A big black man will walk up to you there and he'll tune it. And then he'll play a piece and hand it back to you. That's the way I learned to play anything I want."<sup>63</sup> While Tommy Johnson may be one of the only bluesmen of his era to directly claim that he sold his soul at the crossroads, Robert Johnson (1911-1938, no relation) is the man whose legacy is most prominently tied to that same transaction. It is Robert's mythologized associations with the devil of the blues which prompted the 1990 USA Today article "Was His Greatness due to Satan?"<sup>64</sup> and the construction of a road sign in Clarksdale, Mississippi, marking "*the* crossroads."<sup>65</sup>

The devil of the blues predates the tales about Tommy and Robert selling their souls at the crossroads. The first instance of "devil" in recorded blues lyrics is Clara Smith's "Done Sold Myself to the Devil" in 1924.<sup>66</sup> Smith's song, while not mentioning the crossroads central to the mythologies of the Johnsons, does explicitly mention a similar transaction in selling her soul. Later recordings by Casey Bill Weldon, John D. Twitty, and the Yas Yas Girl (Merline Johnson) sang of selling their souls to the devil.<sup>67</sup>

Adam Gussow's book *Beyond the Crossroads: The Devil and the Blues Tradition* provides much of the inspiration for my course of inquiry, and in his first chapter, he attempts to trace the origins of the devil's associations with the blues. He argues that a proper genealogy of devil's music necessitates an acknowledgment of its "African antecedents," but ultimately argues that

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<sup>63</sup> Evans, *Tommy Johnson*, as quoted in Gussow, *Beyond the Crossroads*

<sup>64</sup> Gussow, 194

<sup>65</sup> Gussow, 297

<sup>66</sup> Clara Smith, "Done Sold My Soul to the Devil," Columbia (1924)

<sup>67</sup> Gussow, 337



the demonization of the blues is best understood not (or not primarily) as an African survival but rather as a racially inflected modern instance of an enduring conflict: fundamentalist religion, with its constricted behavioral protocols, pronouncing on a younger generation's yearning for pleasure, freedom, and moral license.<sup>68</sup>

Gussow links the proclamation of the blues as the devil's music to a cyclical phenomenon of youthful resistance to older generations' moral sensibilities. Gussow continues this claim by connecting the "stigmatizing— or attempted stigmatizing— of the black slave fiddler by fervent Christian converts in the aftermath of the Great Awakening" as the "prelude to the blues' castigation as the devil's music."<sup>69</sup> Conceptualizing the blues as the devil's music, then, requires an understanding of the fiddle and its demonization in the antebellum South.

Perhaps the most notable association of the devil and musicians, even more so than the bluesman, is through the violinist. Dating back to at least the 16th century, violinists with extraordinary technical skill were associated with the devil. One 1658 story from German violinist Thomas Baltzar recounts a review from an Oxford professor of music, who humorously sought "to see whether [Baltzar] was a Devil or not, because he acted beyond the parts of a man."<sup>70</sup> Most famously, Niccolò Paganini was rumored as early as 1824 to have earned his virtuosic musical ability from a deal in which he sold his soul to the devil—a tale which predates blues musicians who were rumored to have undergone the same transaction.<sup>71</sup>

In America, after the Great Awakening of the 18th century, the fiddler was met with associations with the devil and sinning, partially due to the promotion of dance. "Among some," Theresa Jenoure writes, "fiddling was a skill of which only Satan was capable, hence its playing

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<sup>68</sup> Gussow, 25-6

<sup>69</sup> Gussow, 26

<sup>70</sup> Robert W. Berger, "The Devil, the Violin, and Paganini: The Myth of the Violin as Satan's Instrument," *Religion and the Arts* 16, no. 4 (2012): 313.

<sup>71</sup> Berger, 319

implied some level of association with the Devil.”<sup>72</sup> Gussow concludes that by the end of the century, the fiddle had been permanently painted as the devil’s instrument to many black Southern Christians. Though, he notes that the violin itself was not the issue, rather the problem was “what happened when the violin went rogue, kicking off its shoes in a fit of Saturday night syncopation and conjuring up the ghosts of a raffed and uncivilized past.”<sup>73</sup> The 1979 Charlie Daniels Band hit “The Devil Went Down to Georgia” echoes this fiddler-devil association, as it tells the story of a battle between the devil and a young fiddler for possession of his soul.<sup>74</sup> Though, the guitar would soon replace the fiddle as the main target of devil accusations and Southern Christian ire, Gussow writes “without the emergence of Afro-Christianity as a core element of black culture and the accompanying demonization of the fiddle, it is impossible to imagine blues emerging as ‘devil’s music.’”<sup>75</sup>

### The Recorded Sermon and the Devil

The explication of the African American devil as a syncretic being not explicitly bound by the confines of biblical interpretation, and the accusations of the blues as the “devil’s music,” helps us understand why he<sup>76</sup> was invoked by the genre’s most prominent artists. Pinpointing the exact identity of the blues-devil<sup>77</sup> and the multitude of influences which inform his existence

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<sup>72</sup> Theresa Jenoure. “The Afro-American Fiddler.” *Contributions in Black Studies* 5 (September 2008), 73.

<sup>73</sup> Gussow, 31

<sup>74</sup> Charlie Daniels Band, “The Devil Went Down to Georgia,” Epic, 1979.

<sup>75</sup> Gussow, 27

<sup>76</sup> Every account of the devil I have come across uses masculine pronouns to refer to the figure (see: Mr. Devil Blues), though his invocation is indiscriminate of the gender of the performer, songs such as “I Am the Devil,” “I Got Ways Like the Devil,” and “If I Was the Devil” which include a claim to be, or to be like, the devil, are all sung by male performers. Thus, I will continue to use the masculine forms in reference to the devil.

<sup>77</sup> Adam Gussow uses the term “blues-devil” in *Beyond the Crossroads*. I will use it as a shorthand for the devil of blues lyrics and culture.

may be an impossible task but looking to African American religious attitudes by the early 20th century is essential. The black religious beliefs of the era make the identification of this devil clearer.

While African survivals influenced the religious and spiritual traditions of black Americans, their Southern religious tradition was undoubtedly Christian, and by the turn of the century, influential. As membership in African American churches, primarily Methodist and Baptist congregations, emerged in the South, they became centers of their communities, and their preacher the focal point. W.E.B. DuBois writes, “the Preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, a politician, an orator, a ‘boss,’ an intriguer, an idealist—all this he is, and ever, too, the center of a group of men, now, twenty, now a thousand in number.”<sup>78</sup> The preacher became the local leader of black communities, and in some form, an advocate of his race and a liaison of sorts to white society. In *Songsters and Saints*, Paul Oliver wrote, “throughout the South, black churches in localized communities were focused on the preacher, whose persuasive abilities and power to influence and shape attitudes was not challenged by any other community. He was the one member of the group who could command respect from whites, and who spoke for the blacks within his society.”<sup>79</sup> In a similar sense, preaching was one of the only ways black folk could enter public life.

After the advent of the phonograph in the 1890s and the subsequent popularity of what became known as “race records,” kicked off by Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues” in 1920, the interwar period brought forth an increase in American recreational spending and increased secular competition with sacred entertainment. Lerone A. Martin, in *Preaching on Wax: The*

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<sup>78</sup> DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 141.

<sup>79</sup> Paul Oliver, *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 142.

*Phonograph and the Shaping of Modern African American Religion*, he writes of this period of change, “the phonograph sat at the center of an emerging black recreation and entertainment industry that rivaled the church for the time, authority, and patronage of black communities.”<sup>80</sup> Martin continues by arguing that the phonograph, and particularly the race records that emerged on labels like Okeh Records “disrupted and challenged not only the church’s entertainment monopoly, but also its cultural hegemony.”<sup>81</sup> The black entertainment industry, and its working class, folk expressions, did not subscribe to the notions of acceptable activities supposedly conducive to racial progress as dictated by black intelligentsia and ministry. The success of the industry posed a direct challenge to the legitimacy of this hegemony, especially on the lines of Christian morality, and it provided a platform for cultural leaders outside of the church.

In response to the boom of the race record industry, some African American pastors used the phonograph to record their sermons. Previously, sermons were only able to be heard live or read through published transcriptions. Each had their own obvious limitations, as live sermons were accessible by time and location to a relative few, and written transcriptions could not capture the vocal characteristics of the sermons, even when in dialect. Though in 1926, six preachers were recorded, by the end of 1927, thirty were recorded, and by the late 1930s, at least seventy preachers had made recordings, accounting for 750 sermons.<sup>82</sup> After facing failure in confining the black entertainment being produced in favor of more “consecrated bourgeois entertainments,” preachers began to join the black entertainment industry and their church work emulated the commercialized race records. Martin quotes a phonographer preacher, “If the Devil

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<sup>80</sup> Lerone A. Martin, *Preaching on Wax: The Phonograph and the Shaping of Modern African American Religion* (New York, New York: New York Univ. Press, 2014), 32.

<sup>81</sup> Martin, *Preaching on Wax*, 33

<sup>82</sup> Oliver, *Songsters and Saints*, 145

could make such success with this popular invention, there is no reason why the Lord can not do the same!”<sup>83</sup>

Many preachers found success in the late 1920s and into the 1930s, but there was perhaps none more captivating than Reverend A.W. Nix. Advertised as the “Power in Jehovah’s Quiver,” Nix’s hoarse, raspy voice rumbles throughout his sermons.<sup>84</sup> His two-part 1927 sermon “Black Diamond Express to Hell,” displays his vocal prowess. Nix lambasts the tendencies of those who indulge in sinful lifestyles like those that the blues encourages:

The Black Diamond has taken on a fresh supply of brimstone  
 And now she's ready to pull out for Hell  
 Sin is the engineer  
 Pleasure is the headlight  
 And the Devil is the conductor

Next station is Dancing Hall Depot!  
 Wait there, I have a large crowd of church members to get on down there!  
 Some of you think you can sing in the choir on Sunday  
 And Charleston on the ballroom 'fore Monday  
 But you got to go to Hell on the Black Diamond Train<sup>85</sup>

Nix strongly opposes the notion that congregation members can justifiably engage with the urban dance halls which housed blues performances. Doing so would land you a ride straight to hell led by the devil himself. In Nix’s sermon, the devil is the literal driving force which sends people hellbound. His characterization of the devil resembles that of white protestantism, with the devil acting as a force of evil and sin, directly opposed to forces of good. Stopping not just at the dance hall, but also the first station of “Drunkardsville,” and later stations like “Conjuration

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<sup>83</sup> Martin, *Preaching on Wax*, 61.

<sup>84</sup> Oliver, *Songsters and Saints*, 151-2

<sup>85</sup> *Black Diamond Express to Hell- Part 2*. Vocalion, 1927.

Station” and “Gambler’s Town,” the devil, guided by the “headlight” of pleasure, leads all those who engage in earthly pleasures, mystic indulgences, and sinful behaviors.

Sermons such as “Black Diamond Express to Hell” take aim directly at the nightlife and culture which the blues, recorded and popularized on phonograph race records, encouraged. The “devil’s music” earned that term through its association with the lifestyles of blues performers and audiences as seen in black religious communities. Though the sinful lifestyles which came to be associated with blues culture were opposed by religious folk prior to the explosion of race records, the emergence of black entertainment culture as a threat to the cultural hegemony of the church and the stature of preachers created an additional incentive for their fierce opposition. The phonograph amplified an existing culture war and gave it a new battleground.

## **Chapter 2: Where is Satan in the Blues?**

In understanding the devil of the blues as a syncretic, trickster figure placed at the center of a culture war between young and old and a target of the Black Protestant establishment, it becomes clearer why he appears so frequently in the lyrics of the pre-war era. However, still absent in this understanding is the distinction between the devil and “Satan,” and any explanation as to why this vast disparity in their usage exists. In this chapter, I will analyze lyrics from blues songs which include “devil” and the few examples which include “Satan.” I will also reach back to 19th century spirituals and pre-war gospel music in order to compare the usage of the two words between the “secular” and sacred.

In this chapter, I draw upon the influences of other scholars in the field, as many blues historians center lyrics in their work. In *Blues & The Poetic Spirit*, Paul Garon emphasizes the

poetic value in the blues and its departure from white bourgeoisie ideology “The revaluation of the blues will contribute to the revaluation of all poetic values by helping us to view the whole development of English-language poetry from a new perspective.”<sup>86</sup> He also points to the surrealist movement and its understanding of the poetry of bluesmen, “Surrealism will demonstrate why the blues singers Robert Johnson and Peetie Wheatstraw are greater poets than T.S. Eliot or Robert Frost or Karl Shapiro or Allen Ginsberg....”<sup>87</sup> Such a claim demonstrates the significance of the content and the potential for scholarly discussion in the lyrics of the blues. Beyond a poetic interpretation, blues scholars use lyrics in the body of their work to support their arguments from Jon Michael Spencer, to David Evans, to Eileen Southern. Adam Gussow heavily draws upon blues lyrics as the basis for some of his research in *Beyond the Crossroads*, and his discussion of the devil in the blues lyrics informs my work with Satan and the blues.

“Hello Satan, I Believe it’s Time to Go”

When searching for “Satan” in Michael Taft’s *Pre-War Blues Lyric Concordance*, only one result appears, Robert Johnson’s “Me and the Devil Blues.” This singularity is the source of my research and the basis of my inquiry. Though, just as important as the question “why are there so few instances of ‘Satan’ in the pre-war blues?” is the discussion of the context which informs Johnson’s singular invocation of Satan by name. While much of my work in this section heavily involves an inquiry into one song, “Me and the Devil Blues” represents the entirety of the pre-war “Satan blues” catalog, so an extended analysis of it, especially in comparison to the

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<sup>86</sup> Paul Garon, *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* (London, England: Eddison, 1975), 10.

<sup>87</sup> Garon, 32.

use of Satan in sacred music, is necessary to understand how Satan is used in the blues and why it appears so relatively infrequently.

Notable regarding the distinction between the usage of “devil” and “Satan” is Satan’s status as a proper noun. The two words are often used as synonyms, which makes their distinction difficult. The modern English words are derived from two different languages, the Hebrew ‘*ha-Satan*’ meaning “adversary” and the Greek ‘*diabolos*’ meaning “accuser” were the origins for Satan and devil, respectively. In his book *The Devil: A New Biography*, Philip C. Almond writes that within the western theocratic tradition, “...the convention has become to use ‘Satan’ rather than ‘Devil’ as the proper name of the leader of the demons, and ‘the Devil’ to describe his role as the adversary of both man and God.”<sup>88</sup> Though it is highly unlikely that the blues artists of the early 20th century were concerned with the words’ differing origins, there exists a clear disparity in the use of “Satan” by those affiliated with and not affiliated with the church. The position of the devil as an adversary might make the figure more appealing to those bluesmen attempting to assume a controversial image, than the more specific, proper noun of “Satan.”

So, then, what was the occasion of the singular use of “Satan” in the pre-war blues? It is placed in a song which uses both of our terms of interest, even favoring “the devil,” as it appears in the song’s title. The first two stanzas of “Me and the Devil Blues” goes as follows:

Early this morning, when you knocked upon my door, (x2)  
 And I said “Hello, Satan,” “I believe it’s time to go.”  
 Me and the devil, was walking side by side, (x2)  
 And I’m going to beat my woman, until I get satisfied.

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<sup>88</sup> Almond, Philip C. *The Devil: A New Biography*, 23



Within the opening AAB verse of the song, Johnson suggests that he is singing his dialogue to Satan himself. This second-person interaction is notable, as Johnson appears to have a personal relationship with the leader of the demons. While some blues scholars use “Me and the Devil Blues” as a primary example of the intimate evil of which the bluesman is capable, others see it differently.

Complementing the intimate associations Robert Johnson maintains with Satan in “Me and the Devil Blues” is the tale of his supposed crossroad origins. Legends about the crossroads are prevalent in black folklore, and they are a syncretic blending of African and Anglo folklore. In their book *Up Jumped the Devil*, Bruce Conforth and Gayle Dean Wardlow cite accounts of the soul-selling legend of the crossroads, “If you want to know how to play a banjo or guitar or do magic tricks, you have to sell yourself to the devil.”<sup>89</sup> Johnson’s associations with this crossroads myth are amplified by his song “Cross Road Blues.” Despite having no mention of the devil, Elegba, or any supernatural occurrence in the song, blues fans and even blues scholars attempt to link “Cross Road Blues” to such a bargain. Conforth and Wardlow acknowledge that the prevalence of the legends in the southern black community means Johnson would have been aware of it, but they argue that the song can also be read, perhaps more accurately, as protest and social commentary regarding sundown laws than anything devilish.<sup>90</sup> Regardless, the dramatic origin story stuck in the minds of many blues fans, evidenced in part by Adam Gussow’s book cutting through clichéd understandings of the devil blues being titled *Beyond the Crossroads*.

In his book *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues*, Elijah Wald also aims to dispel excessive devilish mythologies and points to the humor in “Me and the

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<sup>89</sup>Bruce M. Conforth and Gayle Wardlow, *Up Jumped the Devil: The Real Life of Robert Johnson* (Chicago, Illinois: Chicago Review Press Incorporated, 2019) “12. Kind Hearted Woman.”

<sup>90</sup> Conforth and Wadlow, “12. Kind Hearted Woman.”

Devil Blues.” He writes, “Disturbing as it may be, even lines like ‘Me and the Devil was walking side by side/I’m going to beat my woman until I get satisfied’ would have been more likely to provoke chuckles than horror in a juke-joint crowd.”<sup>91</sup> Wald likens such lyrics to that of modern comedians or artists—while they might receive some scorn from outsiders, that is not the response of their fanbase which understands the artist’s humorous intent. Wald’s discussion of “Me and the Devil Blues” lies in the afterthought of his book where he addresses those he dubs the “Devil-seekers.” Wald’s focus is in better understanding Johnson as a poet and a musician, and cutting through the Devil legend which surrounds him. Johnson’s sole use of “Satan” likely only increases the difficulty of such a cause.

Adam Gussow argues that any reading of this song must be informed by the cultural contexts which inform its creation. The conflict of sensibilities between young and old, which I have previously mentioned, is one of the primary tensions present in the devil blues. Gussow writes of sociocultural contexts of “Me and the Devil Blues,” “above all, the emergence of the young moderns onto the stage of the black Delta, animated by a restless irreverence through which they distinguished themselves from the humorless religiosity of their elders.”<sup>92</sup> The “humorless religiosity” of the church-going older generation which lambasted the blues as the devil’s music was easy to provoke, and Gussow’s and Elijah Wald’s reading of “Me and the Devil Blues” understands the song as humorous, designed to amuse young modern audiences and offend older ones.

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<sup>91</sup> Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York, New York: Amistad, 2005).

<sup>92</sup> Gussow, 69

Gussow also points to lyrics of later stanzas as oppositional to older audiences, the last one goes

You may bury my body... down by the highway side  
 [spoken] Baby I don't care where you bury my body when I'm dead and gone  
 You may bury my body... ooh... down by the highway side  
 So my evil spirit... can catch a greyhound bus and ride

Just as the first stanza, the last sets out to subvert the cultural expectations of the older, pious generation. The spoken aside's utter lack of care for Johnson's burial location is a "direct affront to church elders" who cared deeply about their burial site and intended to be buried in the graveyards of their churches. The final line of the last stanza also places the modern aspects of Johnson's generation in conflict with older expectations. Johnson sings about a Greyhound bus which, Gussow notes, distinguishes "the restless young of Johnson's generation from the railroad generation and stodgy Pullman coaches they aspired to be."<sup>93</sup> By singing that his "evil spirit" can catch that Greyhound bus, Johnson is also inserting his proclaimed evilness into the modern mode of transportation, an association of modernity with evil that would provoke the morally conservative, older generation already weary of the social change. As a whole, "Me and the Devil Blues," like much of the devil blues, centers generational tension in its lyrics, and beyond the mythology surrounding Robert Johnson and the supposed evil of his music are clever, witty observations which prod at the sensibilities of an older, culturally dominant, churchgoing population.

It is fitting that Robert Johnson is the only pre-war bluesman to mention the dark lord by name, as Johnson is a singular figure himself. He has become the subject of much fascination

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<sup>93</sup> Gussow, 70

among blues scholars and enthusiasts and has even been rejuvenated among mainstream audiences. The plot of the 1986 fictional drama *Crossroads* centers a teenage guitarist seeking Willie Brown, Robert Johnson's friend and musical influence, in the pursuit of a lost Robert Johnson song. The film's climax arrives when Brown must fulfill his deal with the Devil at a crossroads in Mississippi, and the teenage protagonist has to prove his guitar ability to the Devil (also referred to in the film as Legba).<sup>94</sup> The film brought the soul-selling legend of Robert Johnson into popular culture and helped ignite a new interest in Johnson. Amidst the blues revival, the 1961 release of *King of the Delta Blues Singers* by Columbia Records and its cover depicting a faceless black man hunched over a guitar was instrumental in characterizing Johnson as a shadowy, elusive figure. Such a depiction was challenged in 1990 with the release of a photo of Johnson facing the camera in a pinstripe suit, smiling.<sup>95</sup> Still, decades of mythologizing by white blues enthusiasts elevated Johnson into a figure of mystery, linked with the worldly darkness of a blues lifestyle as well as linked with the Prince of Darkness himself.

Such fascination from blues enthusiasts regarding Johnson and the devil and the commercial success from publishers indulging the legends has long dissuaded Johnson's family from speaking publicly about Robert. That is, until his sister Annye Anderson published her memoir *Brother Robert: Growing Up with Robert Johnson* in 2020. The book is filled with intimate, domestic stories of life with Robert Johnson which cut through the mystification. She reflects on the media representations of Johnson after his death:

Over the years, I saw the books, magazine features, and documentary films about Brother Robert come and go, and I never wanted to participate....The stories of his dealing with the devil took away from his real talent. I thought if that's how it's going to be, they can't have him. I always turned down interview requests, because I didn't want to be mixed up with lies.... I felt that I had

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<sup>94</sup> *Crossroads* (Columbia, 1986).

<sup>95</sup> Wald, 247-8

to protect the real Brother Robert that I knew. He didn't get his abilities from God or the Devil. He made himself. People have stuck Brother Robert's family off to the side, because it makes him more interesting to be a vagabond or a phantom. And it makes him easier for someone else to make money off of if we're out of the picture.<sup>96</sup>

Clearly, Anderson views the devil branding of Johnson after his death as an act which diminishes him as an artist and uses him for commercial gain. As someone who personally knew Robert Johnson, Anderson dispels the devil myths perpetuated by the branding of commercial endeavors.

In considering the song's lyrics as a whole and the cultural contexts from which they emerge, let us return to Robert Johnson's singular use of "Satan" in "Me and the Devil Blues." Johnson's casually cordial greeting to Satan would undoubtedly anger the older black Christian crowd of the Delta. Though, many pre-war blues artists had this goal, at least in their embrace of the blues lifestyle, which was the target of much black Protestant ire, and pre-war blues lyrics which sang of the adversary of God and man, even in a biblical context (see: "Devil in the Lion's Den"), used "devil" over "Satan."<sup>97</sup> Devil was obviously the word of choice among the blues crowd, especially considering the "devil's music" reputation which it gained, so it is safe to assume that Johnson's use of "Satan" had a slightly different intention than the word choice of his contemporaries.

Using Gussow's evaluation as a starting point, we can begin to understand what makes "Me and the Devil Blues" exceptional. He argues that the stanza in which "Satan" appears "establishes an intimacy with a devil figure or devil principle in a startlingly bold way, one calculated to offend religious pieties and, not coincidentally, to accrue cool-points among young

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<sup>96</sup> Anderson, 112

<sup>97</sup> Sam Collins "Devil in the Lion's Den," Gennett, 1927.

moderns.” It is Johnson’s two-fold calculation which informs his bold embrace of the devil in his music, but his primary intention to offend is what inspires his use of “Satan.” As I have already noted, the proper noun is prevalent across spirituals dating back to their first transcriptions through the turn of the century and the gospel music which is contemporary with Robert Johnson’s recording of “Me and the Devil Blues” in 1937. The next sections will present such instances before returning to Johnson in order to gain a stronger understanding of his usage.

### The Devil and Satan in the Spiritual

In Allen, Ware, and Garrison’s *Slave Songs of the United States*, “Satan” appears in 15 of the 136 songs they recorded, while “devil” appears in just two. One of the two occurrences is in the song “You Must Be Pure and Holy.”<sup>98</sup> The song, like Robert Johnson’s “Me and the Devil Blues,” uses both “the devil” and “Satan” in its lyrics. The relevant verses go as follows:

3. The Devil am a liar and conjurer too,  
*My Lord, bretheren, ah my Lord!*  
 If you don't look out he'll conjure you,/cut you in  
 two,/cut you through,  
*My Lord, bretheren, ah my Lord!*  
*You must be pure and holy,*  
*You must be pure an'-a Holy,*  
*You must be pure and holy*  
*To see God feed his lambs.*

6. The Devil's mad and I am glad,  
*My Lord, etc.*  
 He lost his soul, he thought he had,  
*My Lord, etc.*

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<sup>98</sup> The other of the two is “On To Glory,” in which the devil is mentioned once and Satan not at all. Allen notes the tune as seemingly having significant influence from white praise music. Allen, 66.

7. Go 'way, Satan, I don't mind you,  
*My Lord, etc.*  
 You wonder, too, that you can't go through,  
*My Lord, etc.*<sup>99</sup>

Accompanying the song's transcription is a note which indicates that this tune is popular among some northern black communities, being brought up from the South. It also references the music's performance, "It is sung on *all* occasions, and without any regard to the *order* in the verses; you may not be able to see any connection between any of them."<sup>100</sup> So, I will make no attempt to include the sequence of these verses in my analysis.

At first glance, the two terms for the adversary seem to be used, for the most part, interchangeably. Though, like in "Me and the Devil Blues," "Satan" is used when the lyrics are in the second-person perspective. When the lyrics turn to speak to the dark lord directly, they call him by his proper name, "Go 'way Satan, I don't mind you." Of course, in "You Must Be Pure and Holy," the lyrics are telling Satan to leave on his own, while Johnson goes alongside him.

The third verse, "The Devil am a liar and a conjure[rer] too," is a verse of particular interest. For one, because it seems to reference the act of conjuring, a part of African American folklore tradition, depicted prominently in Charles Chesnutt's collection of short stories *The Conjure Woman*.<sup>101</sup> In his book *The Conjure in African American Folklore*, Jeffrey Anderson calls conjurers the "most important representative of African survivals in America."<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Allen, 107-8.

<sup>100</sup> Allen, 108.

<sup>101</sup> Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman* (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1899).

<sup>102</sup> Jeffrey E. Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 43.

Additionally, he looks to the God of late 19th century African American hoodooists as “a creole combination of more than one tier of African spiritual hierarchies,” and points to their understanding being “neither African nor European.”<sup>103</sup> While certainly not every black American from the late 19th and early 20th century viewed spirituality in the same manner, African influence in the African American view of Christianity molds the religion into a belief distinct from European Christianity. Such an association underscores the fact that the devil of the African American tradition is not exactly the same as that of the Euro-American Christian tradition. More pertinently to the content of this chapter, however, is that this verse can be found in other songs.

In Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s *Negro Spirituals*, contains songs he recorded by black soldiers during the Civil War. One such tune is “Blow Your Trumpet, Gabriel,” the third verse of which goes as follows:

O, Satan is a liar, and he conjure too,  
 And if you don't mind, he'll conjure you.  
 So blow your trumpet, Gabriel.<sup>104</sup>

The lyrics of this verse in “Blow Your Trumpet, Gabriel” nearly mirror the lyrics of the third verse of “You Must Be Pure and Holy” aside from the oft-repeated chorus and, notably, the replacement of “the Devil” with “Satan.” It is unclear whether one song might have been sung before the other. Both accounts were from the 1860s but in different regions and based on the noted popularity and reach northward of “You Must Be Pure and Holy,” the song would have

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<sup>103</sup> Anderson, 36.

<sup>104</sup> Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “Negro Spirituals,” June 1867, XXV.



been sung for some considerable time before its documentation. Therefore, it is a pointless endeavor to speculate as to which rendition of the verse came first.

The use of the same verse in two different spirituals from the same time frame with “Devil” and “Satan” swapped indicates that, in the tradition of the spiritual, the words were indeed interchangeable to some extent. Unlike the internal difference of perspective in “You Must Be Pure and Holy,” there is seemingly no distinction in relation to the use of the proper noun across the two songs. The two appear to be used as synonyms, though in appearances in later spirituals, uses of the verse seem to most often use “Satan.”<sup>105</sup> Using the two songs as recorded in *Slave Songs* and *Negro Spirituals*, it is safe to assume that “Satan” and “the devil” were effectively the same in the 19th century African American tradition.

What, then, leads to the disparity between “devil” and “Satan” in the spiritual? I posit that it is due to the religious nature of the music, with its closer ties to religion and the biblical making reference to the Lord’s adversary by name more common. In Higginson’s *Negro Spirituals*, only one reference is made to the devil. The song “The Driver” was created by a man that Higginson encountered, who said about his inspiration,

“Once we boys went for tote some rice, and de nigger-driver, he keep a-callin' on us; and I say, 'O, de ole nigger-driver!' Den anudder said, 'Fust ting my mammy tole me was, notin' so bad as nigger-driver.' Den I made a sing, just puttin' a word, and den anudder word.”

The lyrics of his “sing” are as follows:

O, de ole nigger-driver!  
 O, gwine away!  
 Fust ting my mammy tell me,  
 O, gwine away!  
 Tell me 'bout de nigger-driver,

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<sup>105</sup> See: Mahalia Jackson, “Elijah Rock”

O, gwine away!  
 Nigger-driver second devil,  
 O, gwine away!  
 Best ting for do he driver,  
 O, gwine away!  
 Knock he down and spoil he labor,  
 O, gwine away!

Higginson observed that, “although this song is quite secular in its character, its author yet called it a ‘spiritual.’”<sup>106</sup>

“The Driver” reveals the potential of secular utility of the “devil” in the lyrics of African American music. As Higginson points out, the song appears to be secular, as it is not only born out of a real world, secular experience, but it also makes no reference to biblical figures, stories, or locations which are often characteristic of spirituals. That is, except for the “second devil,” who is explicitly the “nigger-driver” by whom the song’s creator was personally slighted. The man’s explicit language relieves the need for conjecture or assumption as to what the “devil” might represent, as is often the case with the need for coded language in African American music.

The “second devil” phrase is also of interest, as it implies a multiplicity to the devil. One might assume that the term “second Satan” would not work as well, given Satan’s status as a proper noun. The word “devil,” however, gives its user greater freedom, not bound by the stricter biblical associations of “Satan.” The devil may be the overseer, someone who the singer interacts with in the real world. Although, this soldier did not sing about *the* devil. The man’s choice to refer to the “second devil” might reveal the willingness of the singer to indulge a polytheistic understanding, consistent with west African religious survivals in the United States. The driver

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<sup>106</sup> Higginson, XXXVI.

exists in addition to the devil, as a second devil and a living manifestation of him. Though, such a claim cannot be verified, as his word choice may also be purely metaphorical, or lie somewhere in between. Regardless, the devil's sole appearance in Higginson's collection being in a "quite secular" song emphasizes that there may be greater utility in relating real-world experiences with the devil rather than Satan, since the devil leaves the singer free from biblical implications but is still able to be presented as his adversary.

### Satan and the Religion of Spiritual

In order to make clearer the biblical associations of Satan in spirituals, let us explore a few examples of spirituals which sing of Satan in a religious manner. From *Slave Songs*, the song "I an' Satan Had a Race" places Satan in direct opposition to both the singer and Jesus. The lyrics are as follows:

1. I an' Satan had a race,  
Hallelu, hallelu,  
I an' Satan had a race,  
Hallelu, hallelu
- 2 Win de race agin de course.
- 3 Satan tell me to my face
- 4 He will break my kingdom down.
- 5 Jesus whisper in my heart
- 6 He will build 'em up again.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Allen, 40

Here, the singer is placed in competition with Satan, singing of a race between the two. The song also points out Satan's direct opposition to Jesus, presenting Satan as the direct adversary of the Lord; while Satan tears down the singer's "kingdom," Jesus builds it back up. Even though this spiritual sings most directly about Satan, being the subject of its title and the opposition of the singer, it seems to be more strongly a song about Jesus. Its message centers Jesus's support for the singer as being strong enough to reverse any damage done by Satan as well as the competition between the devil and Jesus for the singer. When presented as the opposition to Jesus, the proper "Satan" seems to be the term of choice for the prince of darkness.

Another spiritual from the *Slave Songs* collection is the well-known "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Had." General Oliver Howard, who heard a crowd of southern Black Americans sing this song soon after the end of the Civil War, reported that he "was so affected by the plaintive words and melody, that he found himself melting into tears and quite unable to maintain his official sternness." The lyrics of the refrain and fourth verse, most relevant to the work of this paper, are as follows:

Nobody knows de trouble I've had,\*  
 Nobody knows but Jesus,  
 Nobody knows de trouble I've had,  
 (Sing) Glory hallelu!

4. What make ole Satan hate me so?  
 Because he got me once and he let me go.<sup>108</sup>

Again, the song describes a close relationship between the singer and Jesus, a relationship to which Satan is directly adversarial. Satan is depicted as hating the singer because he seems to no longer have any relationship or power over the singer, "he got me once and let me go." Of

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<sup>108</sup> Allen, 55.

course, to read the lyrics of this music purely literally is to read them ignorantly. The religious songs of enslaved African Americans were used more than any other to possess double meanings and operate as code songs.<sup>109</sup> Considering the setting of the song's performance in the immediate postbellum South, it seems natural to relate the "Satan," who hates the singer after having them once and letting them go, to the formerly slaveholding white men of the South.

While Satan is the adversary, the antihero of the spiritual, the Satan of the spiritual is not purely a biblical figure. As Eileen Southern writes of the stories of the spiritual, "Into these stories the slaves put all the drama and excitement lacking in their own lives, but at the same time reshaped the original material to their own concerns." The stories of the spiritual were crafted to adequately represent the conflict faced by enslaved African Americans. "Satan," the more explicitly biblical of the two terms I am studying, makes his appearance more often in the music which reshapes biblical stories to relate to real world conflict. The Satan of this music is both the literal adversary to Jesus and the representative of the real-world adversaries to the singer.

So, then, what of my proposal that "there may be greater utility in relating real-world experiences with the devil rather than Satan" since "devil" is freer from biblical implications? Since coded language is used to convey real-world conflicts through the biblical, a counter argument can be made that "Satan" in the spiritual has more utility because he may be used to represent material conflicts with the shroud of religious devotion. Considering this, evaluating which word may have "greater utility" on the matter is not the appropriate line of questioning to pursue. Spirituals with biblical stories can effectively worldly conflicts, just as those with more explicit language like "the Driver." However, it is clear that in the stories of spirituals Satan is

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<sup>109</sup> Southern, 199.

frequently balanced out by biblical heroes like Jesus and Gabriel. Such a balance is not maintained in much of the devil-blues, especially not Robert Johnson's "Me and the Devil Blues."

### Satan in Later Sacred Music

Much of my focus thus far has been on the vast accounts from Allen, Ware, Garrison, and Higginson. Their catalogs are expansive and extremely valuable in understanding the essence of the difference in language used relating to Satan and the devil. It is, however, notable that the accounts are from nearly 50 years before W.C. Handy published his first blues and 70 years before Robert Johnson recorded "Me and the Devil Blues." Looking forward to the blues era, the sacred music contemporary to the pre-war (World War II) blues echoes many of the same distinctions as the spirituals of the 1860s. In looking to the sacred, to spirituals and gospel tunes, we again find Satan much more than in the secular blues.

One song that highlights the use of Satan in sacred music is "Satan, Your Kingdom Must Come Down," first recorded by Blind Joe Taggart in 1931, although the gospel song was recorded by a variety of artists. The Moore Spiritual Singers recorded one edition of the tune for Bluebird Records under the title "Satan" in 1939.<sup>110</sup> The Spartanburg Famous Four recorded "Satan, Your Kingdom Must Come Down" for Decca Records in the same year.<sup>111</sup> Each rendition is slightly different from the other with differing arrangements and the inclusion of a spoken verse by the Moore Spiritual Singers, but both are sung by small groups of male singers. Even more different is one gospel and country blues artist's performance of the song.

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<sup>110</sup> Moore Spiritual Singers, "Satan," Bluebird, 1939.

<sup>111</sup> Spartanburg Famous Four, "Satan, Your Kingdom Must Come Down," Decca, 1939.

Blind Joe Taggart released “Satan, Your Kingdom Must Come Down” on Paramount records in 1931. The song’s refrain goes as follows,

Oh, Satan, your kingdom must come down  
 Oh, Satan, your kingdom must come down  
 Lord, I heard that voice of Jesus say,  
 "Satan, your kingdom must come down."<sup>112</sup>

Characteristic of much of the spiritual music which includes Satan by name, he is placed in opposition to Jesus, with the title being presented as a quote from Jesus himself. The style of the music is much different from the gospel quartet groups or 19th century spirituals. Taggart’s voice is accompanied by a single guitar, much like many country blues artists of his time. This creates a blend of genre and melding of a somewhat secular music form with sacred messaging. Traits of this sacred message prevail in the lyrics, as they present “Satan” in much the same way as older spiritual music.

Another example of this blur of genre comes in Bessie Smith’s “Moan, You Moaners” released by Columbia in 1930. While Bessie Smith is known best for her blues singing, with songs like “Black Mountain Blues,” in which she sings of having the “devil in [her] soul,”<sup>113</sup> “Moan, You Moaners” is a stylistically distinct track. Smith is joined on the song by the Bessemer Singers, a gospel quartet from Alabama, and a piano. The song’s composition is significantly different from that of “Black Mountain Blues” and its blaring horn responding to Smith’s vocals. Adam Gussow points to the notable departure from her secular recorded work, describing “Moan, You Moaners” as “a straight-up call to repentance addressed to an imagined

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<sup>112</sup> Blind Joe Taggart, “Satan, Your Kingdom Must Come Down,” Paramount, 1931.

<sup>113</sup> Bessie Smith, “Black Mountain Blues,” Columbia, 1930.

congregation and couched in ministerial language.”<sup>114</sup> The song opens with Smith giving an impassioned spoken introduction to this imagined congregation, and her first verse opens with the following:

Hear you sinners, hear my call  
 Satan's waitin' for you all!  
 Better get your souls washed white  
 Better see the light! (Amen!)

A later chorus sings,

Yes, send your head way down and pray, (mmm-mmm)  
 To have the devil chased away, (oh yes!)  
 And let your soul be saved today  
 Moan, you moaners!<sup>115</sup>

Bessie Smith’s track uses both “Satan” and “the devil” seemingly interchangeably and in opposition to the audience—the “you” about which Smith sings. This is largely consistent with the lyrics of spirituals analyzed in previous sections, and it reflects the words of gospel preachers as she channels their ministerial language. While the devil makes an appearance on several Bessie Smith records, she only mentions Satan by name on the track on which she is singing gospel with a gospel quartet. Again, Satan’s usage is nearly entirely limited to the spiritual and the sacred.

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<sup>114</sup> Gussow, 8.

<sup>115</sup> Bessie Smith, “Moan You Moaners,” Columbia, 1930.



Satan, the Devil, and Robert Johnson's "Me and the Devil Blues"

While most of the recorded music from the pre-war era that includes "Satan" is sacred, it is clear that does not mean "the devil" is mostly secular. The devil appears in a substantial number of lyrics for sacred music, often interchangeably with Satan, as with the oft-recycled line "the Devil/Satan's a liar and a conjure too" and Bessie Smith's "Moan, You Moaners." The devil was also evidently in the vernacular of religious folks as they rail against the "devil's music" and sinful behavior. Rev. A.W. Nix's "Black Diamond Express to Hell" makes this association quite clear, describing the metaphorical train to hell with the lines "Sin is the engineer... the Devil is the conductor."<sup>116</sup>

As we return to Robert Johnson, the question of why his mention of Satan by name is unique remains. Upon exploring the sacred music and secular music of black Americans in the from the Civil War until the late 1930s when Johnson recorded, it is evident that Satan was much more likely to be referenced in religious contexts. It is also possible the more secular a song was, the more likely it would be to reference the devil rather than Satan, as was the case in the seemingly secular "spiritual," "The Driver."<sup>117</sup> Maybe some part of it is that the "devil's music" moniker was self-reinforcing, a counter-cultural embrace of the name-calling from the dominant culture. Answering the question of exactly why no other recorded blues song used "Satan" in its lyrics is an impossible task, but the word was clearly only popular among those who would use his name in biblical contexts.

The more interesting question is the one which I posed at the start of the chapter, what was Robert Johnson's intention in invoking Satan by name in "Me and the Devil Blues?" I return

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<sup>116</sup> Rev. A.W. Nix, *Black Diamond Express to Hell*, Vocalion, 1927

<sup>117</sup> Higginson, XXXVI

to Gussow's generational interpretation, that his intentions were to provoke the older, pious religious folk, while simultaneously gaining respect among the young moderns of his day.

The lack of references to Satan in the secular supports Johnson's primary intention being to offend. In addressing Satan by name, Johnson steps into the realm of the sacred, using the language of the religious. Though, unlike the spirituals which reference Satan, Johnson aligns himself beside, instead of directly against him. Nearly every occurrence of Satan in the spiritual presents him as the ultimate adversary, to not just Jesus, but the singer themselves. "I an' Satan Had a Race" also places Satan next to the singer, but they are in direct competition with each other. Johnson's closeness, casual demeanor, and total lack of conflict with Satan is what sets his lyrics apart from the sacred. This intimacy is reinforced in the perspective of his line "hello, Satan, I believe it's time to go," as it suggests Johnson is on a first name basis with the dark lord.<sup>118</sup>

None of my work in reviewing the usage of "devil" and "Satan" in the lyrics of the spirituals and the blues provides any direct insight on whether the word would "accrue cool points among young moderns" as Gussow puts it, although, Johnson's dark humor, noted by Elijah Wald as characteristic of the bluesman, likely would.<sup>119</sup> Satan's absence in the vocabulary of the secular, especially in relation to the presence of "the devil," would seem to indicate that Satan was generally not as "cool" of a word to use. Its proximity to the religious crowd certainly would not help its cause among those of Johnson's generation. Johnson's pointed use of the word in his apparent intent to offend, in addition to the song's humorous tones, creates a "cool" setting for a word otherwise used by "uncool" people. It is only these specific conditions which allow for Satan to make his singular appearance in a way authentic to the blues crowd.

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<sup>118</sup> Robert Johnson, "Me and the Devil Blues," Vocalion, 1938.

<sup>119</sup> Wald, 274

### **Chapter 3. Reflections on Satan, the Devil, and “Me and the Devil Blues”**

#### Why “the Devil” in the Blues?

What of the devil then? What makes the term the clearly preferred option to pre-war bluesmen? In my review of the lyrics of both sacred and secular music, it is clear that Satan is rooted in the sacred and in stories of the bible. Its utility in the coded language of the enslaved was vast, but it was bound to an explicitly sacred lyrical setting. After emancipation and reconstruction, the conditions of life for black Americans improved, but violent systems of white supremacy still necessitated the use of coded language in the music of the early 20th century. The devil sometimes served as a vehicle for this code. However, the devil and associations with the devil allow the bluesman to embody a trickster persona with roots to West Africa in a way that the proper, biblical Satan do not allow.

Returning to Jon Michael Spencer, he calls the blues devil “a being of synchronous duplicity... both malevolent and benevolent, disruptive and reconciliatory... yet the predominant attitude toward him is affection rather than fear.”<sup>120</sup> This devil with the influence of Elegba, the crossroads-associated trickster deity, is not the same devil of the Euro-American Christian tradition. In the West African traditions, there is no absolute good or evil in the same sense that white American Christians might understand it.<sup>121</sup> Just as the blues devil is neither absolutely good nor absolutely evil, so is the bluesman who invokes him. The Euro-American Christian

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<sup>120</sup> Spencer, 10

<sup>121</sup> Coleman, Will. "West African Roots of African American Spirituality." *Peace Review* 9, no. 4 (12, 1997): 533-539.

understanding of the devil purely as the antagonist of Jesus and the antithesis of good is not applicable to the blues.

The blues devil is not wholly evil and adversarial, and this may be part of the reason why Satan so infrequently appears. While Eleggba may be “devilish,” the descriptor “Satanic” is less fitting. I argue that Satan’s biblical origins and specifically Christian contexts make him a figure less moldable to the persona which the bluesman might attribute to him. Eleggba survives in the devil, the devil which is understood by the greater blues crowd to be a dynamic figure. Invoking the devil could bring the creator the persona of a “supernatural trickster,” but invoking Satan does not evoke the same multiplicity, rather it targets pious Christians, as it uses their language. The blues devil is “the devil,” but there is no “blues Satan,” at least, to any significant extent.

This multiple understanding of the blues devil has its roots in the spirituality and vernacular of the enslaved. As previously noted, the (somewhat secular) spiritual “The Driver” indicates that “devil” can have a plural understanding in the African American tradition. A similar example can be seen in other accounts of the enslaved. Eugene Genovese’s *Roll Jordan Roll* cites one such account by an enslaved man named Henry Cheatam in Mississippi, who spoke of his of his black overseer, “Dat was de meanest devil dat ever lived on de Lord’s green earth.”<sup>122</sup> Again, the enslaved man’s superlative use of “devil” suggests that the devil is a figure which presents himself in multiple forms.<sup>123</sup>

Also notable in *Roll Jordan Roll* are the appearances of “devil” and “Satan” in its text. While consisting only of a small portion of the book’s history of slave culture in the South, discussions of the devil, particularly the “devil-as-trickster” in the black beliefs of the antebellum

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<sup>122</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 372.

<sup>123</sup> Also notable is the later use of “white devils” by the Nation of Islam and its leader Elijah Muhammad. Devil is used in the metaphorical sense, and it is also used with the plural form.

South, are occasionally prominent. In such sections, the devil (at times written in vernacular) is the term of choice in direct quotes from slaves as well as in the author's discussions of the influence of the West African trickster. The only instances where "Satan" appears comes from the mouths of white men. One such example comes from Edward A. Pollard, author of *The Lost Cause*, who uses the term as a synonym for the "Debble" of whom an enslaved man spoke. The other comes from a white minister named William E. Barton who, in respect to black demonology, is quoted as saying "Satan is a decided convenience." Genovese follows this quote by noting that the minister "missed the African trickster in this demonology..."<sup>124</sup> While these examples are limited in their scope, there existed a racial divide in the understanding of the devil. The African American understanding of the devil was syncretic, the biblical Satan infused with the devil-as-trickster persona from west African traditions. The white Christian perspective does not recognize these multiple influences, and as such does not understand the African American devil. Within this misunderstanding is the imperfect reference to the figure as Satan, a term never used with the same plurality as "devil."

Though, it would be dishonest to suggest that the African American devil, the blues devil is not at all Satanic. "Me and the Devil Blues" refers to the character by both names, so there is obviously an understanding of the two figures as the same to some degree. Bessie Smith's "Moan, You Moaners" similarly uses both terms to refer to adversarial figure. However, the blues devil is not *just* Satanic. The multiple associations of the blues devil, including its west African trickster roots, creates a figure that can be drawn upon for multiple purposes, whether as a matter of branding,<sup>125</sup> as a subject of humor, or as a representative of real-world adversaries.

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<sup>124</sup> Genovese, 219

<sup>125</sup> See: Peetie Wheatstraw "The Devil's Son-in-Law"

“Doing Things” with the Devil and Satan

J.L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* can provide an insightful perspective on how “the devil” and “Satan” are used across the African American vernacular music that I have already analyzed. Austin’s series of lectures from 1955 demonstrate his theory of speech acts. Austin breaks down speech acts into three main categories: the locutionary act, which is the act of uttering something “with a certain sense and reference;” the illocutionary act, which is the implied meaning presented by the locutionary act— “utterances which have a certain (conventional) force;” and the perlocutionary act, which is the effect on the feelings of the listener or speaker, or “what we bring about or achieve *by* saying something.”<sup>126</sup> These three categories are foundational in understanding the act of speech and how our language functions.

In reviewing the lyrics “Me and the Devil Blues” through Austin’s framework, the work might be better understood. When Johnson utters the line “And I said, ‘Hello Satan,’ I believe it’s time to go,” he is performing a locutionary act, which is the line he explicitly sings himself. The illocutionary act is a bit more challenging to conceive. Austin repeatedly returns to the thought that “in saying something, we do something,” which is a concept essential to understanding illocutionary acts. One might say that in declaring that he spoke to Satan, Johnson is welcoming an association with him—presenting an intimacy with Satan. The perlocutionary act might then be the incitement of outrage from churchgoing folks, amusement from young moderns, or considering the longevity of his recordings, intrigue and further research from later music enthusiasts. The perlocutionary act is separate from Johnson’s active performance and refers instead to the impression made by the listener.

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<sup>126</sup> John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (London, England: Oxford University Press, 1971), 108.

So, when asking the question “why did Johnson use ‘Satan’ in his lyrics?” I am in a sense asking what the illocutionary act of Johnson’s lyrics was. The perlocutionary acts can be observed, or at least inferred given the cultural contexts of Johnson’s time—such a lyric would likely provoke outrage or disdain from a religious community lambasting the sins of the blues and its perceived lifestyle. The perlocutionary acts may reflect Johnson’s illocutionary act; perhaps Johnson was primarily seeking to offend in his utterance of the line. Determining what his illocutionary act is when placed in the context of a song, being dependent on his intent, is a largely speculative endeavor.

In evaluating the difference between the use of “Satan” and “devil” in blues lyrics, the locutionary act is inherently different, but the acts of interest to my research are the illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. What different intent do lines using the two different words carry? What different effect do lines involving each word have on its audience? The illocutionary and perlocutionary acts in the performance of the devil (and Satan) blues are the elements of the speech act which might explain the great disparity in usage between the two words. Future analysis by linguists might explore these categories of speech acts in relation to the blues to a greater depth.

### What of the Music?

What significance does a lyric analysis hold over other methods to study the blues? Some blues scholars might argue that lines of inquiry which I have pursued seek meaning in the wrong places. In his book *Stomping the Blues*, Albert Murray writes,

“Folklore-oriented social historians and tone-deaf lexicographers—not blues musicians and Saturday night revelers—seem most inclined to ascribe primary significance to the literal content of blues lyrics. Blues singers almost always seem to be much more preoccupied with vocal subtleties than with rendering the lyrics as written.”<sup>127</sup>

Murray’s chapter “Singing the Blues” does not totally dismiss the importance of blues lyrics, but it does place primary significance to the music of the blues, including its vocal performance.

Let us, then, engage with the vocal subtleties of blues singers. In Robert Johnson’s “Me and the Devil Blues,” the vocal performance of his singular utterance “and I said ‘Hello Satan,’ I believe it’s time to go” is compelling. The first half of the phrase sustains unresolved, with Johnson holding onto the word “Satan.” Johnson quickly closes to the ending consonant and releases into a wide yet somewhat fast vibrato. Singing on the closed “n” of Satan with such a vibrato gives his sound a strained quality, evoking a sense of instability before its subsequent resolution. The second half of the line reaches its resolution near the bottom of Johnson’s vocal range. The final words “to go” are sung without the same bright resonance present in the rest of the phrase. It seems that Johnson attempts to sing “go” with his wide vibrato but given the low pitch at which he is singing, he lacks the volume to be heard well, especially as his guitar plays a turnaround at the end of the verse. This quieter delivery creates a sense of intimacy with the listener and perhaps implies a sense of intimacy with Satan himself. Regardless of interpretation, it is clear that his vocal performance is dramatic, spanning a wide range in pitch, dynamic, and tone over the course of one line. Johnson’s “vocal subtleties” and the musical drama of the line seem to reinforce the importance I have placed upon these lyrics in my research.

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<sup>127</sup>Albert Murray and Paul Devlin, *Stomping the Blues* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 79.



Robert Johnson, Mack McCormick, and *Biography of a Phantom*

In April of 2023, *Biography of a Phantom: A Robert Johnson Blues Odyssey*, the work of musicologist Robert “Mack” McCormick on Robert Johnson, was published by Smithsonian Books. The book is the culmination of McCormick’s life work into Johnson, only made public after his death and after edits by John Troutman. In his preface and afterword, Troutman places McCormick’s work into context, opening with two quotes in reference to the scholar:

“His work is a tribute to the untrammelled imagination.”

–Peter Guralnick, on Mack McCormick’s study of Robert Johnson, 2002

“The biggest problem came from Mack McCormick.”

–Annye Anderson, sister of Robert Johnson, 2020<sup>128</sup>

These quotes capture the nature of McCormick’s work. His field work from 1969-1975 is set in a compelling narrative prose and provides never-before-published accounts on Robert Johnson from people who knew the man. Troutman writes in the afterword “Moments in the book command great suspense; others convey extraordinary beauty. Some convey humility and self-reflection; others are laced with a sense of superiority and disdain.”<sup>129</sup> McCormick’s research is muddied by his battles with mental health and his renegeing on agreements made with Johnson’s living relatives, particularly in not returning family photographs of Robert.

Still, McCormick’s long-awaited work is of scholarly interest to the field, as it illuminates the stories about Johnson and his life in rural Mississippi. One such account is a time that Johnson took a particular interest in religion—an intriguing matter for those studying

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<sup>128</sup> Mack McCormick and John William Troutman, *Biography of a Phantom: A Robert Johnson Blues Odyssey* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2023) Editor’s Preface.

<sup>129</sup> McCormick and Troutman, Afterword.

Johnson and his devilish associations, especially in his potentially pointed comments toward church folks in his lyrics. Equally, McCormick’s research presents warnings of the “human hellhounds and psychological phantoms that affected everyone involved,” as Troutman reflects in the afterword.<sup>130</sup> The white supremacy in the American corporate and legal systems, as well as unethical actions in the research process, have long dispossessed those most intimately related to Robert Johnson from having agency over his story—one forever marked by placing his talent and ultimate demise in a shroud of devil mythology.

The recency of *Biography of a Phantom*’s release, in addition to a number of books which have discussed Johnson deeply, including Gussow’s 2017 book *Beyond the Crossroads*, Conforth and Wadlow’s 2019 *Up Jumped the Devil*, and Johnson’s sister Annye Anderson’s 2020 memoir *Brother Robert*, indicate the current scholarly intrigue into Robert Johnson. Somehow, more than 80 years after his death, Robert Johnson remains as relevant as ever, a testament to his artistic influence and his personal and musical complexity. *Biography of a Phantom*’s release in the late stages of my research process has limited the content that I was able to pull from it for the purposes of this paper, but future research adjacent to my line of inquiry should engage with it more deeply.

### The Origins of this Inquiry

The question “why are there so few appearances of ‘Satan’ in the blues?” has not, to my knowledge, been posed in any scholarly context before this paper. The dearth of occurrences has been noted by scholars, but it only receives a passing mention before returning to different lines

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<sup>130</sup> McCormick and Troutman, Afterword.

of analysis.<sup>131</sup> My line of inquiry is borne out of an unsatiated curiosity—a question raised in my mind without any easily accessible answer, let alone one with any definitive consensus. Such an absence in answers led me to reach out to Prof. Adam Gussow by email in the Fall of 2021, well before any conceptualization of a long-form scholarly project was on my mind. In his reply was the mention of his musical partner Sterling “(Mr.) Satan” Magee. He recounts, “when people would come up and ask him why he called himself the devil, he would quickly correct them: ‘No no no, there ain’t no D-E-V-I-L in S-A-T-A-N.’” Such an exchange, albeit with someone from outside of the timeframe of this paper, is perhaps the only distinction in meaning that I have come across between the devil and Satan. Gussow echoed sentiment, writing to me that “his case is very rare, even singular.”<sup>132</sup>

Adam Gussow’s correspondence with me provided valuable insight, and a great starting point for my research. He suggested that it “just wasn’t cool for a blues artist to sing about Satan—unless, as I argued in the case of Johnson, you were very pointedly trying to outrage church people.” His reply pointed to Robert Johnson’s line invoking Satan in “Me and the Devil Blues” as that work, “tweaking their sensibilities.”<sup>133</sup> It was from this exchange that I found the launch pad for my work with the lyrics of the blues, and his insight encouraged me to search for more instances of “Satan” in black folk music and explore the contexts in which it was used.

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<sup>131</sup> Gussow, 69.

<sup>132</sup> Gussow, email

<sup>133</sup> Gussow, email.

## Limitations

While I am confident in the significance of my research, there are several limitations to my work that should be considered. Perhaps the most obvious limitation of my research is the miniscule percentage of recordings and transcriptions of songs compared to the vast body of blues music that existed. Even at the time “race records” were gaining popularity, many obstructions stood in the way of a bluesman who wrote and performed getting recorded. Those who did record were in the minority, especially at a time when record production was still a new industry. Larger, still, is the gap of information accessible about the African American spiritual and secular song. Accounts like *Slave Songs of the United States* are an amazing resource, but there are countless other songs, whether communally sung with some regularity, or hollered just a few times spontaneously, that have been lost to time. All my conclusions are dependent on those records that have been preserved, though there is no telling what influence additional accounts might have on my findings.

Another inherent limitation of my research is the scope of its time frame. In restricting the blues music that I evaluated to the pre-war era, I miss a plethora of uses of “devil” and “Satan” in post-war blues, and blues-derived music. Sterling “Satan” Magee, while receiving a moment of consideration in my final chapter, would be essential to future research which explores the eras this project neglects. Expanding the scope of research to the post-war era would also potentially provide valuable insight on that of the pre-war era, providing another point of contrast and comparison. Additionally, blues-derived rock and metal music of the second half of the 20th century at times featured devilish and Satanic imagery and lyrics. Future projects might

seek to evaluate if there is a disparity in later genres as there is in the pre-war blues, and whether there exists a distinction in the use of “devil” and “Satan.”

The cultural content that I did research for this paper was also limited. There is a large body of literature, stage plays, poetry, and other artforms which include the use of the words devil and Satan that I did not analyze. In addition, despite dedicating some of my research to the religious world via recorded sermons and gospel music, I did not immerse myself as deeply in that content as I did with the blues music which is its contemporary. A deeper understanding of the black religious world and its warnings against the devil in the same vein as “Black Diamond Express to Hell” might provide an improved analysis of the countercultural response present in the blues.

The lens through which I approach my research also limits it. With my background as a scholar of American Studies, my focus is on the cultural elements of my work. My knowledge does not extend to the field of linguistics, though such an expertise would be helpful, as the core of my work has to do with the selection of one word over the other. The brief exercise I have undertaken with speech acts and J.L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* could be expanded upon by a researcher with a greater background in the field. An expanded understanding of the theories behind the function of language and word choice would provide a greater insight into the questions I have attempted to answer with a mostly cultural lens, and future research by a different researcher could pursue such an approach.

In my mind, the most significant limitation of my research, and the clearest avenue for future research endeavors, is my lack of field work. Given the constraints of my project, pursuing field work was an impossibility. However, future research might seek those who have a better knowledge of the body of work with which I am engaging, those in the tradition. As someone

with no connection to the blues tradition, I rely entirely on the existing academic literature on the blues and its sociocultural contexts. Contacting those of the tradition who are active performers of blues music, or who have knowledge to share about the outlook of earlier blues performers, is essential in beginning to understand the disparity between Satan and the devil and the intentions behind the use of each word. Until such work is pursued, any findings rely heavily on evaluations from outsiders and are more significantly reliant on speculation.

### Conclusions

As I reach the end of my research, it is relevant to return to the most basic of questions: so what? After examining the lyrics of songs dating back to the antebellum South and until the start of World War II, what is the significance of the great disparity between “devil” and “Satan” that I have repeatedly pointed to in the blues?

First, it is important to understand the devil blues as an expression. In the blues, the devil figure, Gussow writes, was “an extraordinarily useful icon for helping black southerners navigate the challenges of post-Reconstruction blues life... [its creole origins and multiple uses] allowed it to signify simultaneously in several dimensions, and in ways that sometimes defy easy ideological or theological parsing.”<sup>134</sup> The devil was a blues figure used to such a wide extent because of its shrouded meaning. It is the metaphor of choice for many blues singers not because of its controversial nature, though that undoubtedly prompted some of its use, but because of its versatility and simultaneity. As Spencer writes, the blues devil is a being of “synchronous duplicity.”<sup>135</sup> His malevolence and benevolence are central to his invocation, despite the

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<sup>134</sup> Gussow, 8

<sup>135</sup> Spencer, 10

attributions of evil or mythologized supernatural encounters that some blues listeners might hear in it. Its infusion of African religious survivals makes the blues devil figure distinct from the Euro-Christian understanding of the devil.

Satan, and the singular Satan of the blues, cannot be wholly distinct from the devil, given how the two terms reference the same figure in “Me and the Devil Blues.” However, the proper noun, biblical term of “Satan” is much more prevalent in sacred music. From as early as the spirituals of enslaved African Americans in the South through the early 20th century, “Satan” outweighed “the devil” in use. This vast contextual difference indicates that there are differences in the connotations of the two words, with “Satan” being of an explicitly religious crowd, while “devil” might be used more broadly. “Devil” also more easily possesses a multiplicity that “Satan” does not obtain in its status as a proper noun. Satan in the blues is, then, in a less natural setting, only to be used with a pointed intention. Such is the case in “Me and the Devil Blues.”

In beginning to understand the differences between “devil” and “Satan” in the pre-war blues, the intentions behind the lyrics start to become clearer. To my knowledge, no previous scholarly work has sought to explain the reasons for the disparity in usage. For all the discussion of the devil in the blues of the pre-war era, there has been very little of Satan’s place, or lack thereof, in it. I argue that Satan’s lone appearance in the genre is the act of placing an “uncool” word in a “cool” setting. This view of Johnson’s “Me and the Devil Blues” highlights the subversion inherent in the blues lyric. It centers a generational difference between the churchgoing elders and young moderns but uses the language of the other in an attempt to provoke. This conception of Satan in the blues focuses on the music as a cultural expression reflective of an era of transition, posing the two groups in opposition to each other but pulling from the same cultural tradition.

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