



Fences : A Technical And Analytical Perspective On Blues

Ana Maria BASARABĂ

Universitatea de Limbi Străine din Tianjin, China
Tianjin Foreign Studies University, China
Personal e-mail: basaraba_anam@yahoo.com

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The author seek with this paper to bring clarity in Troy Maxson's favorite song throughout the whole play. What at a first glance would seem perhaps easy, proofs in fact to embody a wide connotative meaning. The complexity of the Old Blue song will be brutally decomposed into pieces and analyzed as an allegory, as a piece of music and as a comparison to Willie Nelson Ol' Blues song "Hear it ring!"

Keywords: Blues, frame story, improvisation, deconstruction, harmony, rhythm



Listen to: Dexter Gordon - The Shadow of Your Smile

Various writers of music theory or even professors trying to provide some accessible information for students have expressed their understanding and interpretation of the structure, history and popular themes used in Blues songs in shelves of books worth reading. In chapter 27 of his book "Theory for Today's Musician" Ralph Turek, for instance, assigns Blues with a remarkably succinct one-sentence definition: "a repeating harmonic pattern that serves as the basis for a succession of melodic, rhythmic and textural variations". Mark C. Gridley develops his belief in "Concise Guide to Jazz" and declares that "Blues refers to several kinds of music", therefore he implies that the vocal forms that have origins in Blues are "(1) field hollers, which slaves devised from highly varied pitches and rhythms for the purpose of communicating among themselves while working in fields; (2) ballads, which come partly from European tradition for songs that tell stories; and (3) music desired for dancers, such as the ring shout". Without doubt the themes in a Blues song may extend from "Some makes you want

to dance" to "Some is slow and mellow", as Gridley would argue in answering the question of "What is Jazz?"; although "Introduction to Jazz History" echoes a deeper understanding by suggesting that "secular songs dealing with loneliness, infidelity, rootlessness, or repression began to appear." Far from being a too precise theory though the most adequately one, Joseph Kerman believes that loneliness, trouble and depression as subjects for Blues songs are an "essential expression of the African-American psyche". Having an accurate definition of Blues may be hard to obtain, however one thing can be sure: without the existence of Blues, Jazz music would not be the same or even more frightening, the human ear would have never heard a pitch of the so-called Jazz music.

Blues, the music of African people from America, has highly influenced Wilson's writings, therefore this music plays a crucial role in understanding properly the play. Apart of being an African-American cultural element in Fences which will be later discussed in this paper, I strongly believe the Blues sung by Raynell and Cory towards the end of the play could be considered as a frame story, where each verse from "I had a dog his

name was Blue” to “Blue’s gone where the good dogs go” reiterate without any mistake Troy’s life in form of an allegory.

“Hear it ring! Hear it ring!
I had a dog his name was Blue
You know Blue was mighty true
You know Blue was a good old dog
Blue treed a possum in a hollow log
You know from that he was a good old dog Hear it ring!

Blue treed a possum out on a limb
Blue looked at me and I looked at him
Grabbed that possum and put him in a sack
Blue stayed there till I came back
Old Blue feet were big and round
Never allow a possum to touch the ground
Old Blue died and I dug his grave
I dug his grave with a silver spade
Let him down with a golden chain

And every night I call his name Go on Blue, you
good dog you Go on Blue, you good dog you

Blue laid down and died like a man
Blue laid down and died like a man
Now he’s treeding possums in the Promised Land

I’m gonna tell you this to let you know...
Blue’s gone where the good dogs go.”

Considering the first line “Hear it ring! Hear it ring!”, Wilson’s intention is inarguably a method of drawing the attention of the reader that a story will be narrated. Furthermore, the words carefully chosen to encompass the very first sentence carry a remarkable musicality guiding the reader to a scenery where one rings a bell announcing the starting point of an event. Even without any knowledge in music or without the descriptive action in the brackets “Cory (singing)”, the reader will undeniably recognize that the sentence is not random but is a line with the aim to create a song.

Wilson’s capacity to write Blues is definitely represented by the second line “I had a dog his name was Blue”. The few words serve as an introduction to the past life of the once living father. The past tense of the verb “to have” shows Troy’s absence from the family, while “a dog” mirrors the troubled life this man was having. Obviously, by using this metaphor August Wilson presents himself as both capable of writing a comedy and a tragedy. The personification “Blue” is a name of façade that in fact discloses the feeling of sadness that Troy was unmistakably suffering from towards the end of his life.

No lines exhibit a eulogy better than “You know

Blue was mighty true/ You know Blue was a good old dog”, where Troy praises himself for being a good man and not a disappointment or disgrace to his family. However, these words coming from Cory and Raynell mark a feeling of forgiveness, a sudden realization that Troy, although he did not seem to, was always trying to do the best for them.

“Blue treed a possum in a hollow log” is a metaphorical line describing his active intimate relationship with his loving wife. Despite Bono’s friendly advice not to hurt Rose, Troy’s extra marital affair is also underlined in this sentence; affair that will not only result in losing Rose’s trust but an innocent child will be born. Throughout the play Troy’s need of having an affair is exposed from the first pages of the play “I eye all the woman. I don’t miss nothing.” Wilson’s response to this line could be considered rather ironically, as the song will continue with “You know from that he was a good old dog”.

The first stanza ends abruptly with the repetition of the first line “Hear it ring!”, albeit the meaning is now distorted. On the account that Blues regards the voice as the most important instrument, I presume this last ringing bell concludes the ending of a one stanza prayer with what sounds as a strong pitched “Amen!”, similar to the African-American churches.

The following stanza can be regarded as an elegy where Wilson unveils Troy’s story since the appearance of the baby until his death, moreover having a total of 9 lines, the stanza could be fractioned in 3 parts each of 3 lines.

The first part: “Blue treed a possum out on a limb/ Blue looked at me and I looked at him/ Grabbed that possum and put him a sack” portrays the epic scene of Troy’s homecoming with the baby and Rose accepting to take care of the motherless, innocent child. The possum introduces metaphorically the baby.

“She hears the back door open and looks toward the porch. Troy is there, holding a small, fair-skinned infant in his arms.
(...)
Rose: From right now... this child got a mother. But you a womanless man. ”

The second part includes the next 3 lines: “Blue stayed there till I came back/ Old Blue’s feet were big and round/ Never allow a possum to touch the ground” and depicts Rose’s detachment from her husband during the scene where Rose leaves the house to attend a bake sale at the church; it metaphorically represents the loss of the essential women in his life, his wife and his daughter. Troy’s “feets” being “big” as



Wilson illustrates portrays a visual representation of Troy having an affair, while the word “round” clarifies that at night he was always returning home. The word “possum” as mentioned in “Never allow a possum to touch the ground” employs a different meaning than the baby, but as I deduct it points out to Cory, therefore the upper sentence makes reference to Troy turning Cory from his door as a result of a quarrel that turned into a catastrophic father- son fight.

In the end of the second stanza: “Old Blue dies and I dug his grave/ I dug his grave with a silver spade/ Let him down with a golden chain” represents the third part and the most aesthetic one, and which ultimately can be associated with the death of Troy. The “silver” and the “gold” colors the song and incarnates the image of death and life. With “silver” symbolizing the moon therefore the night, Wilson illustrates his point that the head of the family is dead through letting the reader imagine the darkest tragic night of the play where a silver moon shines over Maxson’s family. The word “spade” is not randomly chosen, as it may be the reflection of Troy’s negative part, hurting people with his words and actions. Acting in opposition with “silver” is “golden” which undoubtedly serves as an example for the richness in one’s life. Although Troy has never been materially rich and had a troubled, miserable life with nothing more than disappointment for his work; Wilson underlines that having a loving wife, a talented child and a good friend one could be rich. The reunion at the end of the play is exemplified by Wilson’s choice of word “chain”.

Troy’s wish to be a football player has not been forgotten by Wilson when he created this Blues song, therefore the third stanza embodies cheering language significant for any typical football game “Go on Blue, you good dog you/ Go on Blue, you good dog you”. Troy Maxson’s death is described as being an honorable one: “Blue laid down and died like a man”, therefore it was obvious for his soul to reach the Gate of Heaven “Blue’s gone where the good dogs go”.

Creating, performing and listening are major characteristics of Jazz music as Donald D. Megill and Richard S. Demory explain in “Introduction to Jazz History”. These artistic activities, as designated by the two authors, are significant for Jazz music. “In Jazz, however, it is necessary for the performer to combine all three at the same time. Musical creation is an active part of any jazz performance and depends on the performers’ understanding of the developing creation, an understanding gained only by their ability to listen well”. The Blues sung by Cory and Raynell, except being a proof of August Wilson outstanding creation abilities, the reader’s only way to truly understand the song was to go stanza by stanza and imagine listening to the African-American singing voice, “a bit breathy, with a little vibrato”, as Charles R. Hoffer assumes,

behind the lines.

I suspect this Blues to be August Wilson own creation due to the major differences in structure and meaning it displays from Willie Nelson Ol’ Blues song,

“I had a dog and his name was Blue I’ll tell you what
old Blue would do Yeah Blue, Yeah Blue, Yeah Blue

He’d go out every night about dark
And it wouldn’t be long ‘til you’d hear
him bark Yeah Blue, Yeah Blue, Yeah Blue

And I’d go out to see what he had
It’d be a great big opossum up a black-
jack tree Yeah Blue, Yeah Blue, Yeah Blue

I’d get a stick and I’d knock him down
I’m going to bake the opossum good and
brown Yeah Blue, Yeah Blue, Yeah Blue

Ol’ Blue he died and he died so hard
That he graveled little holes all over the
yard Yeah Blue, Yeah Blue, Yeah Blue

I dug his grave with a silver spade
And I lowered him down with a golden
chain Yeah Blue, Yeah Blue, Yeah Blue

And when I get to heaven, I’ll tell you what I’ll
do I’m gonna get my horn and call Ol’ Blue
Yeah Blue, Yeah Blue, Yeah Blue”

“The roots of jazz reach back to black Americans’ African heritage” is the statement Charles R. Hoffer began his Chapter 28 in “A concise Introduction to Music Listening” and he goes on by mentioning: “They shifted the emphasis from the strong to the weak beat, and the players launched into a decorated version of the melody”. According to his belief, harmony “was as conservative as any church hymn” while the cords were “the same three that form the backbone of traditional tone harmony: tonic (I), dominant (V), and subdominant (IV)”. The confusion is abolished when Ralph Turek provides the reader with more information on harmony. He points out that Blues was originally vocal where “a rhymed couplet with the first phrase repeated, yielding the three-phrase structure aa’b”. As an example to his theory, he provides the following scheme:

Text phrase a (voice).Response (guitar)

I

Text phrase a (voice).Response (guitar)

IV

Text phrase b (voice).Response (guitar)

V

Improvisation was the key to any Blues, and according to Ralph Turek “the guitar response that

punctuated each vocal phrase may have initially allowed the singer time to make up the next lyric". Having a close look to Willie Nelson's song, one would agree that the aa'b form stanzas are being taken into consideration, although in Wilson's song only the fourth stanza "Blue laid down and died like a man/ Blue laid down and died like a man/ Now he's treeting possums in the Promised Land" respects the twelve-bar blues (three measure phrases). The first line serves as introductory statement, the second line is a repetition of the first and it ends with a result in the third line. Besides the obvious repetition of the lines, the aa'b form stanza can be recognized also from the rhythmic ends of the lines, consequently the couplet take the form of a well-rhymed poem too.

Wilson attempted to break this rule and deconstruct the lines in the third stanza: "And every night I call his name/ Go on Blue, you good dog you/ Go on Blue, you good dog you" into a reversed version of the aa'b form stanza. The obtained result is a a'bb form stanza with the second and third line repeated and the first one being the result of the two verses. I regard this ingenious attempt as August Wilson's touch of modernism to both the song itself and the play.

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As Hoffer mentions, improvisation is indeed a fundamental component to the jazz music; however "Traditionally jazz is not written down because it is made up on the spot" is a fact that, in the present case, does not apply. In contradiction with the previous theory, think Donald D. Megill and Richard S. Demory that Blues lyrics were passed down orally: "Since most were composed and played by unschooled musicians, they were not written down but passed on orally, as is the case with most folklore." The "unschooled musician" in Wilson's play *Fences* is Troy Maxson, about whom later in the play the reader finds out that he cannot read, particularly in the scene where Rose accuses him for signing some papers to send Gabriel to the hospital :

Troy: "I told you I ain't signed nothing, woman! The only thing I signed was the release form. Hell, I can't read, I don't know what they had on the paper! I ain't signed nothing about sending Gabe away.

The fact that the lines of the Blues song were passed orally is applicable to the Blues in the play too, as Bono admits to remember the song and Troy himself confesses that the song was made up by his dad:

Bono: Hell, I remember that song myself.

Troy (singing): You know Blue was a good old dog, Blue treed a possum in a hollow log.

That was my daddy's song. My daddy made up that song."

The tragi-comic flavor Blues, an African-American cultural element, used by August Wilson's in the play, is a frame story that perfectly retells Troy's life in

form of an allegory. Wilson plays with the lines and the rhyme scheme in such a way that creates a unique interpretation of the old folk song. In understanding the song, one must read aloud the song and use one's power of imagination to recreate the African-American breathy voice. Wilson's song creation abilities exhibit a harmonic pattern, a colorful or rather an aesthetic image of Troy's life by playing with metaphors, cheering language, religious connotative words, applying at the same time the themes of loneliness and infidelity, as well as decomposing the song into eulogy and elegy. Without doubt, Wilson's talent is best expressed in the song.

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