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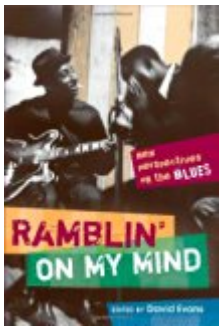
David Evans, ed. *Ramblin' on My Mind: New Perspectives on the Blues.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008. 430 pp. $27.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-252-07448-6.



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Ramblin' on My Mind sets out to accomplish no small task: inject fresh avenues of exploration into the multidisciplinary study of the blues. This collection of essays, edited by distinguished blues scholar David Evans, approaches this noble mission by compiling contributors from various disciplines, including folklore, psychology, English, musicology, and history, who explore and interpret primary research in innovative ways. Although blues scholars continue to churn out a prodigious array of musings on the blues and its history and culture, Evans believes that most current scholarship does not contribute new modes of analysis nor bring new methodologies and theories to the field. In short, Evans's desire to gather essays for this collection is an outgrowth of his assertion that blues scholarship is stagnant, and, in some cases, reverting to oversimplistic understandings of previous conclusions. If the field is, in fact, languishing, many of the essays in ***Ramblin' on My Mind*** could easily move conversations forward, sparking new debates and reinvigorating old ones.

In the first essay, Gerhard Kubik, a musicologist who specializes in Africa and the United States, sets the tone for the rest of the collection by reminding scholars that because the blues can be complex, stepping outside of established modes of analysis can prove beneficial. Kubik asserts that using Western music theory to analyze the blues can be futile, and, more important, that by comparing some blues music to that of performances found in west-central Sudan, the blues cease to be a "homogenous expression" (p. 15). Kubik establishes a theme carried throughout the book that the blues are anything but monolithic. Playing style, regional punctuations, instrumentation, and themes all vary within the genre we know as the blues.

Essays by Andrew M. Cohen, John Minton, and Evans underscore the importance of analyzing regional variation and colloquialisms in instrumentation, nicknames, and blues offshoots. Cohen evaluates regional style by analyzing photographs of blues guitar players, specifically tak-

ing note of their picking hand postures. Cohen challenges scholars who say that individual ingenuity accounts for picking variation and asserts that regionality explains the vast majority of technical variations. At the same time, however, Cohen complicates the notion of regional variation by stating that there are more variations in the Mississippi Delta and east Texas regions than many blues scholars are willing to allow.

Similarly, Minton examines the blues offshoot known as zydeco and its regional identities. Minton attempts to debunk the notion that zydeco is the musical syncretism of African American and Afro-French cultures in rural southeast Louisiana when blended with a dash of R & B. Instead, what Minton concludes is that zydeco emerged in the urban Texas landscape first and came to southern Louisiana only after displaced Creoles returned to their ancestral homeland. This "confrontation," rather than blending, of Creole sounds and R & B in southeastern Texas gave birth to zydeco (p. 359). As Minton emphatically declares, "at the beginning Texas zydeco *was* zydeco--period" (p. 358).

Evans is also concerned with the origins of the blues in his essay. Evans examines the nicknames of over three thousand African American blues musicians who recorded between 1920 and 1970 to underscore the fallacy of reducing blues performers to monolithic caricatures. Evans emphasizes that nicknames come from a variety of sources, including individual persona or attributes and regional colloquialisms. To name but one example of Evans's numerous analytical categories, some nicknames that seemingly denote second-class status or offensive stereotypes, such as those used by Black Boy Shine or Po' Joe Williams, were often used to confound a particular stereotype and proclaim a performer's autonomy. Evans compares this to a similar practice in current hip-hop culture. Speaking of both blues and rap performers, Evans argues, "these artists express solidarity with and appeal to the most alienated, marginalized, uprooted, poor, and lowdown individuals in black American society and serve as spokespersons for them through their songs and recordings" (p. 196). Cohen, Minton, and Evans contribute to the scope of this collection by demanding that blues scholars evaluate assumptions about regionality and the blues. In so doing, the blues emerge as more complex and vibrant than ever before.

As the essays by Cohen and Evans illustrate, many essays in ***Ramblin' on My Mind*** demonstrate that getting creative with primary sources can prove rewarding. Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff reveal how a hidden history of early blues rests in sheet music and the entertainment columns of black newspapers touting vaudeville acts. This essay supports two important developments in blues scholarship. First, Abbott and Seroff read sheet music as historical texts and see landmarks for the progression of the blues as viable commercial pop music. Second, they argue that vaudeville was a platform from which the commercial popularity of the blues was launched. "Blues in its various twentieth-century expressions was shaped by the historical interaction of two separate impulses and the dynamic tension between them," Abbott and Seroff claim, "all under the influence of a confounding outside force--commercialization in a racist society" (p. 49). The first impulse by black vaudevillians and early blues performers was to maintain African American heritage while the second impulse found black performers feeling the need to demonstrate a profound knowledge and command of Western music. These two impulses led to the creation of African American vaudeville theaters throughout the South and Midwest by 1910. Although independent of each other, once a circuit was established, these local vaudeville venues brought popular blues out of the rural South and to the masses. Fred Barrasso's Tri-State Circuit was central to the establishment of the blues because it attempted to organize an African American vaudeville theater chain that

supported a rotating list of performers. As blues performers played these theaters, first in Memphis, then moving elsewhere, popular blues spread and solidified "Memphis's identity as the 'Home of the Blues'" (p. 81). As contemporaries of W. C. Handy, musicians and businessmen fused savvy business acumen with cultural identity while performing blues on the vaudeville stage and became some of the first purveyors of this burgeoning popular genre.

Elliot S. Hurwitt's biographical sketch of blues advocate and Handy's lawyer, Abbe Niles, sheds new light on how Handy became such a formidable figure in the blues pantheon. Niles was many things including a music critic and Handy's legal advisor, often interceding on Handy's behalf. Hurwitt concludes that Niles's legacy, in addition to his ability to effectively promote the blues to the intellectual corners of the world, was his role in making Handy synonymous with the commercial rise of the blues. "Clearly, in his commentary for ***Blues: An Anthology***," asserts Hurwitt, "Niles was inventing a history for the blues in which a central place was reserved for Handy" (p. 113). Not insignificantly, Hurwitt certainly has a bone to pick with Jelly Roll Morton and those who might defend him. The author points out that any degradation of Handy's reputation over the years may have started with Morton's attacks on Handy in the late 1930s. Hurwitt is clearly sympathetic to both Niles and Handy, but what is particularly striking about this chapter and Abbott and Seroff's essay on vaudeville is that the essays contain vibrant, human characters essential to the understanding of historical moments. Too often essays on the blues focus on the technicalities of musicianship without grappling with the individual personalities who shaped the music. Through discussions on such characters as H. Franklin "Baby" Seals, the authors convey the motivations and human emotions behind the early days of the blues. In part, this accomplishment is due to exhaustive research methods by Hurwitt in personal papers and Abbott and Seroff in newspaper archives.

The blues, of course, possess a history bursting with vivid characters. Aside from Handy, Robert Johnson may be the most deified individual in the blues pantheon and apparently no serious collection of blues scholarship is complete without ruminations on Johnson's life and music. James Bennighof, however, avoids the temptation to sanctify Johnson and instead ponders why Johnson's music is praised for its emotional and technical achievements. Bennighof accomplishes this task by exploring Johnson's first recording of "Rambling on My Mind," applying a critical analysis to the song like other music critics may apply to a classical concert music piece. In other words, Bennighof applies that ever-slippery notion of the aesthetic to Johnson's performance and attempts to approach it in an objective manner. The result is rewarding and Johnson's music is elevated to its rightful place, refreshingly bereft of subject judgments.

As Bennighof demonstrates, in-depth and nuanced analysis of individual songs or performances that might usually be reserved for other fields can lead to innovative conclusions. Luigi Monge takes textual linguistic analysis, a methodology popular to those studying the written word, and applies it to Son House's "Dry Spell Blues" to explore the dichotomy between the sacred and profane in the blues. Monge finds that the sacred and profane, although opposite forces, are not always inseparable in blues lyrics. Not long ago the question was raised on the H-Southern-Music listserv about whether or not churches considered the blues to be "the devils' music." Monge reminds scholars that one possible area to look for answers is in the musicians themselves. After all, Son House was not the only blues musician who stood in a pulpit. Moreover, much has been made of the trickster persona prevalent in the blues and one wonders how this interpretation might alter Monge's conclusions, if at all. Incidentally, this re-

viewer found Monge's analysis of House's "Dry Spell Blues" to be of great use when explaining the environmental devastation that struck the American southeast in the late 1920s and early 1930s--as well as the effects of Prohibition--to a classroom of college undergraduates.

Topical songs are also the focus of Bob Groom's essay on disillusionment in post-World War II blues and gospel. Groom notes that, in contrast to the optimism of the interwar years, the postwar years were marked by pessimism in blues and gospel songs because of racial and labor tensions at home and continued warfare on the Korean peninsula. By examining blues and gospel lyrics, Groom explains an interesting way to analyze post-World War II African American thought. No doubt, music reflected a profound disillusionment during this period, yet Groom's choices seem too selective. Many gospel songs of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s burst with hope. Other African American music from this era, including soul, promoted an abiding faith in progress embodied in Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come." Additionally, although not the overall focus of his essay, Groom's interpretations of several topics, including the House Committee on Un-American Activities hearings and the onset of the civil rights movement, are too simplistic for a collection of this caliber.

A couple of examples notwithstanding, this collection, regrettably, contains too few instances of blues musicians speaking for themselves. While information culled from oral histories cannot solve every question posed in the field of blues scholarship, close attention to what subjects have to say about their music should remain essential to understanding the blues. Certainly this criticism is more appropriate for some essays than others. Those dealing with blues musicians long deceased do not usually have this luxury.

This omission, however, points to a prevailing preference for blues scholars to focus on the music of the rural past. In exploring urban zydeco in Texas, Minton makes a strong case for more research into urban blues and its hybrid offshoots. Thriving blues communities exist outside the rural South and they deserve more attention. Urban blues pockets outside the South can shed light on patterns of migration, musical and racial integration, and constructed notions of the authentic. Recent studies have begun to explore these topics but much of the work in this area lies ahead.

Like any field of study that values interdisciplinary approaches, it is all too common for scholars to write around one another, never fully engaging with the arguments of other disciplines. Scholars not trained in music performance or theory may find explanations to complex notations frustrating to decipher. Likewise, some not familiar with the methodologies of folklorists might consider their studies too elusive and unable to draw larger conclusions from their focused analysis. This work addresses these concerns by forcing scholars from distinct fields to converse with one another. Often these complaints are an outgrowth of constricted training and occasionally the result of engrained notions that one discipline is superior to another. ***Ramblin' on My Mind*** alleviates some of the babel, yet it also makes us acutely aware of our limitations as scholars of the blues. Although ***Ramblin' on My Mind*** flows cogently from one essay to the next, it does not provide specific strategies for how to combat this trend. The very nature of this collection, however, does press scholars to imagine the palate of possibilities at our fingertips. By simply drawing essays from several disciplines, ***Ramblin' on My Mind*** is a call to arms for those who may describe current scholarship in the field as inert. This is, however, a small step in that direction. This collection is an opening salvo for the work that is yet to be done. The contributors might imagine an interdisciplinary conference conceived around these essays where their methodologies and sources are discussed in rich detail, the result of which could be

a second volume that interweaves several approaches into a longer, even more nuanced discussion on the culture, history, and future of the blues. And yes, we need more of the musicians to weigh in about important questions regarding the history and culture of the blues.

This is an important collection for the future of blues scholarship and for the interdisciplinary study of music and the arts. Instructors of courses on the blues could successfully integrate the book into their curriculum, either as a supplemental reader or by assigning individual essays to suit specific topical needs. Moreover, Evans realizes that this collection could serve as a road map not only for the future study of the blues but also as an example for research in other genres of music. Scholars in other fields should take ***Ramblin' on My Mind*** seriously and cull strategies from its pages.

Finally, although this collection is touted as "new perspectives on the blues," it is striking that many of these authors have been working on a form of their research for over a decade. Even so, some of these approaches and topics have still not been fully integrated into the overall approach to the study of the blues. What might be most important about ***Ramblin' on My Mind*** is that these ideas are housed in the same collection for the first time. Current and future blues scholars should take heed and build on what Evans and company have ably begun.