

**Blues as Secularized Spirituals: Brief Thoughts on  
*Cadillac Records* and the Power and Importance of McKinley Morganfield**

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In Clarksdale, Mississippi as with all Delta towns, the downtown street that houses all the cafés and juke joints intersects with the street that houses all the churches. Though today there are more churches than cafés, the intersection once was a natural crossroad that echoed if not troped the actual crossroad of Hwy 49 and Hwy 61 where Robert Johnson is alleged to have sold his soul to the Devil to be able to play the guitar and where black people still pass fleeing the Delta for economic opportunity or merely looking for less social hell or returning home to commune with a slower pace of life. When I was a kid, it was impossible to walk home from choir practice and not pass, hear, or stop and eat in a café. Blues and juke joint culture were as normal to me as catfish and chitt'lins even though I was constantly told that people who frequented cafés were heathens who were going directly to hell. Funny how all these people would tell me to say hello to my grandmother who always claimed to have only frequented church and work. At the center of my Delta blues life was the shadow of McKinley Morganfield. There was B. B. King. King was/is the superstar and reigning international diplomat of the blues. And I don't know how many times I saw King and others, such as Bobby Rush, Bobby "Blue" Bland, Johnny Taylor, and many other old men in suits and wet hair perform for free. But, McKinley Morganfield, aka Muddy Waters, cast a shadow of the plantation worker who used music to circumvent the hell of Jim Crow. The blues presented secular salvation, and Waters was its chief evangelist. It is to him and my father that I refer in my poem "Black Man," when I say that "I'm going to pull myself up by my wingtips and look good doing it." Muddy Waters died in 1983 when I was 13, but by then he was the apex for a country town of men in suits, silk shirts, and processes. At a gut, blues level, Prince was aesthetically familiar to me. He played a guitar. He wore shiny suits and shirts. He had a process. He sang sex songs that my mother's church friends hated. Being a Prince fanatic never seemed to contradict with my love for the blues. It seemed like a natural extension. The falsetto, screams, grunts, and moans were directly linked to the emotional vocabulary and vocal delivery of churches, cafés, and James Brown.

I've been on a couple of blues panels, but I never had the desire to become an archivist or blues critic. I was probably in my late twenties before I purchased my first blues record. Living in Clarksdale, I was so surrounded by blues—it was blasted from radios through the windows of shotgun houses, it blared from cars up and down the street, and it floated on the night air from the downtown juke joints—that I never felt a need to purchase a record. All I had to do was keep walking up and down the street, and eventually I would hear the song that I desired. LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka's *Blues People* is a very important book for me, but it mostly affirmed things for me rather than taught me anything. It precisely articulated and crystallized general notions that I'd always had. It made me say "amen" or "oh yeah" a lot. The same is true for *Cadillac Records*. For those who are familiar with blues culture, it will not teach them much if

anything. To be clear, *Cadillac Records* is more figurative than factual. As such, the truth is in the spirit of its story rather than the facts. Still, while the film swings between artistic license and out-right lying, it manages to affirm the beauty, intelligence, determination, and influence of black people. In this way, affirmation is as important as revelation as Aristotle asserts that the beauty of the play is man's recognition of himself. For *Cadillac Records* illustrates that blues music was created as an emotional and intellectual response to America's incomplete and abandoned Reconstruction and that the blues is the soil from which springs all other American music, including the style and swagger that goes with it. The movie is, for me, a grade of B+. Having the actors sing diminishes some of the power of the songs, which is important to the story. The blues is emotive on an all-encompassing level. "Manish Boy," probably Waters most noted hit, is as political as it is social. To have a sturdy, confident, massive black man declaring "I'ma a Maaaine" in 1955 just after the murder of Emmett Till with women unabashedly affirming his declaration was a political thing, being as important as a song such as "Big Boss Man." Whenever I see the footage of men wearing the "I Am A Man" signs during the 1960s, I always think of "Manish Boy." So the lost power of the songs affects the power of the film. Yet, the actors do a solid job of capturing and articulating the essences of their characters. Mos Def exudes the wit, intellectual insightfulness, and rambunctious nature of Check Berry. Columbus Short sheds his pretty boy façade to become Little Walter and plays him as the spirit of angry black men whose combustible rage battles but does not completely overshadow his kindness. Beyonce gets the sex appeal and internal conflict of Etta James correct. Eamonn Walker's portrayal of Howlin' Wolf shows that the intelligent, self-sufficient, militant black man did not "jes grew" in California and the North, but that he migrated there from Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Georgia, and from all parts South. And Jeffrey Wright reveals that it is Muddy Waters who brought the blues from the fields to the streets, from overalls to slick suits and even slicker hair with a mountainous swagger equal to the jazz legends before him and the soul, R&B, funk, and hip hop icons after him.

The other flaw of the film is that the beginning is a bit rushed or hurried. The early scenes with McKinley Morganfield in Mississippi seem as if they exist more as an unavoidable obligation rather than being there to lay the foundation of or to articulate the totality of what actually went North when black people went North. Yet, I understand that one of the reasons you cast Beyonce and Mos Def (both of whom I see as fine talents) is to entice a younger, hip hop audience, which based on the audience's lackluster reaction to the actors being on BET's *106 and Park* seems a futile attempt. And since that younger generation is not going to wait forty minutes for a film to establish itself, context (and fact) must be sacrificed so as not to lose their short attention spans. Accordingly, the Hollywood movie houses are not going to fund a three hour feature film about the blues for obvious greenback reasons. This movie needs to be three hours long, but I'm one of the few people with no life who would sit there that long. People refused to patronize Spike Lee's latest effort, *Miracle at St Anna*, citing it as being too long despite the fact that it is well done and an important conversation about the contribution of African Americans to American freedom and democracy. Yet, the actors' ability to deliver and completely fill the screen with the essences of their characters almost compensates for or counterbalances the rushed, underdeveloped beginning.

The strength of the film is that while it is as typical as Clint Eastwood's *Bird* (1988) starring Forest Whitaker as jazz legend Charlie Parker (a movie that I like unlike most of the folks I know), *Cadillac Records* pulls back the monolithic cover of stereotypical down-and-out people to reveal blues music as a complex art form created by complex people. Howlin' Wolf is presented as the unapologetic ideological opposite of Muddy Waters; yet Wolf is also Waters' bookend, proving that the black bodies that were in those southern fields were thinking people that created and embraced various philosophies as to how best survive and/or defeat Jim Crow. For instance, no matter how stylish, humane, and prolific Waters is, he never does escape or transcend the mentality or societal indoctrination of a sharecropper. He accepts the pedagogy of the oppressed: he works, the white man makes money, and he hopes that the white man "breaks him off" a crumb or two. However, both Wolf and Berry are portrayed as the exact opposite. They are black men who verbalize their discontent with the sharecropper systems of the music business and who attempt to remove the heavy hands of white supremacy from the pockets and their lives. But to the film's credit, not even Waters is shown as a flat, one-dimensional character. He is clearly seen as the father figure to Walter, Berry, and James. We see him accept his parental failure in his inability to save Walter from himself, and we see him confront Leonard Chess—his boss and meal ticket—to protect James. Ultimately, we learn that just because a blues man or woman is cheated of their royalties that does not mean that they are innately or completely ignorant and that blues music is intellectual and humane music created by intellectual and humane people. Waters' relationships with Little Walter, Howlin' Wolf, Leonard Chess—Jewish owner of Chess Records, and his love interest Geneva Wade (played by Gabrielle Union) shows that although black life and human neurosis are complicated by the umbrella white supremacy, black art is one of the reminders that black people continue to retain their sanity and dignity even while being forced to live as the wretched of the earth. Thus, blues music is a testament to black people being able to pull beauty from the very bowels of human existence in the same way that soul food and quilting are examples of black people taking the scraps of life and weaving a tapestry of excellence.

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