

10-1-1975

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Recommended Citation

Henderson, Stephen E. (1975) "Southern Road: A Blues Perspective," *New Directions*: Vol. 2: Iss. 4, Article 6.

Available at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol2/iss4/6>

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Southern Road



ILLUSTRATION BY LLOYD McNEILL

New Directions, Vol. 2 [1975], Iss. 4, Art. 6
**Woke up this mornin', blues
 walkin' like a man.
 Woke up this mornin', blues
 walkin' like a man.
 Say, good mornin', blues,
 give me your right hand.**

A Blues Perspective

By Stephen E. Henderson

Black poetry in the United States has two main traditions—the literary and the folk (rural and street)—which interact in a manner which has symbolic, spiritual, and even ideological and programmatic significance in Black people's attempts to understand themselves so that they may grow into fullness as a people.

The literary tradition begins in the United States with Lucy Terry's *Bars Fight*, 1746, and extends to the consciously written poetry of the present. The folk tradition—which Richard Wright called “the Forms of Things Unknown”—is incredibly rich in wit, in wisdom, in spiritual insight, and dazzling leaps of the imagination. The two traditions have influenced one another but the chief influence seems to be that of the folk upon the literary. It has been a vital influence, as shown by the work of James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer and Sterling Brown, to name just four of the older poets; and by the work of contemporaries like Imamu Baraka, Carolyn Rodgers, Ahmed Ahlamisi and Ishmael Reed.

The fact remains, however, that the spiritual and technical resources of the folk tradition (and the urban folk, or what I call the “street tradition” or “street poetry”) have scarcely been touched. This has resulted from many things, chief among them being the kind of discontinuity which has resulted basically from the critical neglect of both traditions so that even the important work of the New Negro/Harlem Renaissance period and that of the Second Renaissance of the 60s, to borrow Hoyt Fuller's term, lies fallow. In addition, Blacks have not explored, nor absorbed or sufficiently built upon the living lore of the fields and the streets. In short, Black scholars and educators have defaulted in their debt to the poets. And some poets have defaulted in their obligation to themselves and, by extension, to their people.

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 The chief concern, at least of this writer, is Black readers defaulting on Black poets—of both traditions, by not taking them seriously enough. Certainly, some of them are read and listened to as they talk about Black “oral tradition.” But do Blacks take them seriously enough to encourage them to grow in the skill and wisdom which would ultimately benefit all of them? I think not. This is not to mean that poets would not write without a professional critical response to their work; most do so and have done so, and are also highly suspicious of “professional” criticism. And rightly so, since so much of the criticism has grown out of certain assumptions which the poems and the poets reject or negate.

It seems, therefore, that those who concern themselves with the propagation and understanding of Black culture should systematically examine this important sector of it on its own terms, if for no other reason than to give credit where it is due, but also to call attention to those things which need to be done. One of those things is the examination and evaluation of literary works which have retained their original hold—such works as James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones*, Langston Hughes' *The Weary Blues*, and Sterling Brown's *Southern Road*. If Blacks could more clearly understand and appreciate the special and specific nature of these individual achievements, and if they could honestly record them, perhaps it would not be necessary to be so apologetic or to have to fight the same battles in every generation in the same old way.

With this in mind, I should like to suggest an approach to Sterling Brown's *Southern Road*, first published by Harcourt Brace, in 1932. I choose this work because it was written by a middle-class poet/scholar who has thoroughly absorbed the Black folk tradition, yet who makes no apologies for his comprehensive and detailed knowledge of other traditions.

Southern Road is a Black classic. Yet it is known only to a relatively few Blacks. It is a work by a great artist and educator



at the prime of his life; and though it does not contain all of his best known poetry, it contains a significant portion of it. At the same time it suggests some of the kinds of syntheses of apparently disparate elements, some of the resolutions of "contradictions" in the Black experience which, in this writer's opinion, are too important to be forgotten or overlooked. Let us, then, albeit in fragmentary fashion, as previously stated, consider this work and something of its present relevance.

Southern Road, incorporates the ethos of the Black experience as revealed in the blues and the blues lifestyle; and an understanding of that style is essential to an understanding of ourselves, our spiritual history and our potential. That style is characterized by a head-on confrontation with the harshness, the cruelty, the bitterness of life, with the condition of despair and degradation. Out of that confrontation an affirmation is made, often, but not necessarily, in sexual terms; and through penetrating insight, through wit, through honesty, one realizes that the contradictions of life can be resolved, or at least held in creative suspension. Examine, if you will, these statements from a sampling of blues songs:

In "Preaching the Blues," Robert Johnson personified the blues as a man. Whether friend or stranger, one should offer the right hand of fellowship.

*Woke up this mornin', blues walkin'
like a man.
Woke up this mornin', blues walkin'
like a man.
Say, good mornin', blues, give me
your right hand.*

Although the blues turns out to be a trickster, almost an embodiment of fate, it is unable to overcome the singer's toughness.

*The blues grabbed mamma's child
and they turned me all upside down.
The blues grabbed mamma's child
and they turned me all upside down.
Get along, old fella—just can't turn
you 'round.*

In Leadbelly's "Good Morning Blues," the all pervasive "Spirit" materializes as a familiar companion.

*Woke up this mornin' blues all round
my bed.
Woke up this mornin' blues all round
my bed.
Couldn't eat my breakfast, the blues
was all in my bread.*

*Good mornin', blues. Blues, how
do you do?
Good mornin', blues. Blues, how
do you do?
I'm feelin' all right. Good mornin'.
How are you?*

This familiarity leads some to dismiss the power of the blues, to attribute them to more low down feelings. Thus Babe Stovall says at one time:

*"Blues ain't nothin'; but a good woman
on your mind."*

Another time he continues:

*"Some folks say that the worried blues
ain't bad.
Some folks say that the worried blues
ain't bad.
They must not been the worried blues
I had."*

Johnson likens blues to disease, as in the following:

*Blues ain't nothin' but a low down
shakin' chill.
Blues ain't nothin' but a low down
shakin' chill.
You never had 'em, pardner, I hope
you never will.
Blues ain't nothin' but a low down
heart disease.
Blues ain't nothin' but a low down
heart disease.
Natchul consumption, killin' me by
degrees.*

In one of the most moving passages in all of blues literature, Johnson depicts the ultimate condition of man struggling with Fate.

*I got to keep movinn', I got to keep
movinnn',*

*Blues fallin' down like hail, blues
fallin' down like hail,
Mmmmmmmmmmmmm-mmmm-mmm,
blues fallin' down like hail, blues
fallin' down like hail, blues fallin'
down like hail,
And the days keep on worryin' me,
for a hell-hound on my trail,
Hell-hound on my trail, hell-hound
on my trail.*

At age 24, Johnson was dead, poisoned by an unknown hand.

Sometimes for the bluesman, however, there is resolution in loving, as in Furry Lewis' "White Lightnin' Blues."

*Train I ride, fourteen coaches long,
Train I ride, fourteen coaches long,
She don't haul nothin' but chocolate
to the bone.*

These attitudes, these values are picked up, amplified and elaborated by Sterling Brown. For above all else, *Southern Road* is about Black people, as they go about their work and their play—the tenant farmers, the railroad men, the street-walkers and the dandies. All are presented, young people, old people and babies. They share a hard, oppressive life and a strategy for survival which embodies the blues ethic, the blues style, the blues philosophy. They are the blues people, to use Imamu Baraka's term. Since the people make *Southern Road* and its meaning is implied in their lives, this work can be profitably examined as an exploration of blues sensibility and the relationship of that sensibility to the present state of Black people in the United States. Its four sections are each prefaced with a dedication and an epigraph, both of which affect the shape and the impact of the work.

The dedication roots the particular section in a historical, personal, and spiritual relationship between the poet and the person addressed. It further suggests a relationship between the person addressed and the kinds of situations and experiences and personalities or characters which appear in each section. One, of course, can only speculate about this and,

indeed, the relationship may be so subtle and complex, perhaps intuitive and subliminal, that even a poet may be hard pressed to say very definitely why he chose to dedicate a particular poem or group of poems to someone. And, on certain levels, it may be irrelevant or fallacious to pursue such speculation. However, since many of the characters and events in *Southern Road* are drawn from real life, and since the poet has a comprehensive and detailed historical vision of his people and his generation, it seems likely that—certain poetic license aside—the poet has made conscious editorial choices which on the level of art unify his personal world and the larger one of the race. The epigraphs, in particular the first three, specifically evoke the emotional and spiritual quality of Black life.

PART I

The first section, "Road So Rocky," is dedicated to the fine lyric poet Anne Spencer, who is also the subject of an important poem entitled "To A Certain Lady, In Her Garden." Mrs. Spencer wrote a very different kind of poetry but she encouraged the young writer in his work, she recognized his honesty and his skill.

In "When De Saints Go Ma'ching Home," a poem about another friend of the poet, there is a synthesis of sacred and secular embodied in the figure of the musician. This kind of attitude, tone, and feeling is what is now known as "Soul."

The poem is dedicated thus: "To Big Boy Davis, Friend./In Memories of Days Before He Was Chased Out of Town for Vagrancy." So Calvin Big Boy Davis is an actual person, as Sterling Brown indicates here and in other places. Two other poems in this group are written about this legendary man—"Odyssey of Big Boy" and "Long Gone." Some examination of the three poems may prove useful, since they embody some of the main features of Part One.

The dedication of "When De Saints Go Ma'ching Home" is not without irony—a talented musician, a bearer and preserver

**Woke up this mornin' blues
all round my bed.
Woke up this mornin' blues
all round my bed.
Couldn't eat my breakfast,
the blues was all in my
bread.**

**Good mornin', blues. Blues,
how do you do?
Good mornin', blues. Blues
how do you do?
I'm feelin' all right. Good
mornin'. How are you?**



of the Black lifestyle, being chased out of town for vagrancy, for being dysfunctional, useless. And by whom, one speculates. Certainly not solely by the police. Who complained? White folk or Blacks? Were they the educated Blacks and the "strivers" who sought to forget their roots in the oblivion of the American mainstream? Were they the city planners who felt that street singers cluttered the sidewalks of the nation's capital?

In the 1960s, young Blacks learned to recognize such singers as part of the tradition of the *griot*, though this recognition seemed more "literary" than actual. With Sterling Brown, however, it was an old and intimate knowledge. He numbered among his friends, and helped to immortalize Big Boy Davis. He also knew a man remarkably like him, one with an international reputation—Huddie Leadbetter (Leadbelly), and remembers with pride the fact that the bluesman took elaborate care to exempt him and his household from the general indictment of the Black bourgeoisie which he makes in "Bourgeois Blues," a song about Washington, D. C.

"When De Saints Go Ma'ching Home" is an objectified memory of what seems to be a "typical" Big Boy Davis "concert."

*He'd play, after the bawdy songs
and blues,
After the weary plaints
Of "Trouble, Trouble deep down in
muh soul,"
Always one song in which he'd lose
the role
Of entertainer to the boys.*

The song would be, "When the Saints Go Marching Home." And in his mind he would see "A gorgeous procession to de Beulah Land." "Of saints—his friends—'a-climbin' for' deir wings." Old Deacon Zachary would be there, and Ole Sis Joe, and Ole Elder Peter Johnson, and "de little brown-skinned chillen/Wid dier skinny legs a-dancin', so would "Ole Maunee Annie/Wid huh washin' done,/An' huh las' piece o' laundry/In de renchin' do." And there would be old Grampa

Eli puzzling over the meaning of "de moon in blood." But "whuffolks, will have to stay outside/Being so onery."

He is bound by the hard-headed honesty of the blues life, however, and he has to consider the brakeman "who once let him ride/An empty going home. . . ." He remembers the kind man who "paid his songs with board and drink and bed. . . ." And there was "the Yankee Cap'm who left a leg/At vicksburg. . . ." Maybe, then there's a place for white saints:

*Mought be another mansion fo' white
saints,
A smaller one than his'n . . . not so
gran'.
As for the rest . . . oh let 'em howl
and beg.
Hell would be good enough—if big
enough—
Widout no shade trees, lawd, without
no rain.
Whuffolks sho' to bring nigger out
behin',
Excep'—when de saints go
ma'chin' home."*

As the blues honesty deepens, he has to admit that many of his cronies wouldn't be in that number, and that included Sportin' Legs, Lucky Sam, Smitty, Ham-bone, Hardrock Gene, and "not too many guzzlin', cuttin' shines" and the boot-leggers who kept his pockets clean. Hardest of all, his Sophie—

*An' Sophie wid de sof' smile on her
face,
Her foolin' voice, her strappin' body,
brown
Lak coffee doused wid milk—she
had been good
To him, wid lovin', money and wid
food—
But saints and heaven didn't seem to
fit
Jes' right wid sophy's Beauty—nary
bit—
She mought stir trouble, somehow,
in dat peaceful place
Mought be some dressed-up dudes in
dat fair town.*

The climax of the poem occurs in section five as Big Boy says:

*I'se got a dear ole mudder
She is in hebben I know—*

And he remembers his lil Mammy "with the wrinkled face and the sensitive eyes full of pride in her/Guitar plunkin' boy..."

*Mammy
With deep religion defeating the grief
Life piled so closely about her,
Ise go glad trouble doan last alway,
And her dogged belief
That some fine day
She'd go a-ma' chin'
When de saints go ma'chin' home.
He sees her ma'chin' home, ma'chin'
along,
Her perky joy shining in her furrowed
face,
Her weak and quavering voice
singing her song—
The best chair set apart for her worn
out body
In that restful place. . . .
I pray to de Lawd I'll meat her
When de saints go ma'chin' home.*

His song concluded, Big Boy would shuffle off, pensive, where they couldn't follow him—"to Sophie probably/Or to his dances in old Trinbridge flat." Thus we can see that Big Boy is an itinerant "songster," not merely a bluesman, and he calls to mind Mississippi John Hurt, Charlie Patton, Babe Stovall, and many others.

Babe Stovall, of New Orleans, for example, fits the tradition quite well. A former sharecropper, in his late sixties, he is the father of 10 children. At a 1967 "Soul Roots Festival" at Morehouse College, he played "When the Saints Go Marching In," after a series of blues numbers, and the effect on the student audience was overwhelming. They were close to religious ecstasy.

Lightnin' Hopkins, the great Texas bluesman, reminds one of Big Boy Davis in his perennial concern with his family, especially with his widowed mother. There are few bluesmen who are as tough and

bitter as Hopkins, and none that are tougher. He has recorded tragic, lacerating experiences. He has even recorded some of the dirtiest dozens that one can imagine. Yet when he speaks of his "momma" sitting by the window, waiting for her boys, his voice is ineffably tender. What this means, of course, is that the suffering and brutality and degradation which make up the blues life have somehow been conquered by the power of sympathy and love.

As with Lightnin' Hopkins, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charlie Patton, the call of the road is strong to Big Boy Davis. Blues literature is completely shot through with the names of trains and railroad lines, with Greyhound busses, and highways, and the harsh memories of being "a stranger here, just blowed in your town." But the urge to go is irresistible. In "Long Gone," another of the Big Boy poems, the poet condenses and synthesizes much of his literature and captures its poignance. Big Boy speaks:

*You is done all you could do
To make me stay;
'Tain't no fault of yours I'se leavin'—
I'se jes dataway.*

*I don't know which way I'm travelin'—
Far or near,
All I knows fo' certain is
I cain't stay here.*

*Ain't no call at all, sweet Woman,
Fo' to carry on—
Jes' my name and jes' my habit
To be Long Gone. . . .*

This theme is repeated in a variety of tones in blues literature. Sometimes we get the startling imagery of Son House, for example:

*Don't come here throwin' up your
doggone hands.*

Or Furry Lewis, with a traditional image:
*I left my baby standin' in the backdoor
cryin',
I left my baby standin' in the backdoor
cryin',*

***You is done all you could do
To make me stay;
'Tain't no fault of yours
I'se leavin'—
I'se jes dataway.***

***I don't know which way I'm
travelin'—
Far or near,
All I knows fo' certain is
I cain't stay here.***

***Ain't no call at all, sweet
Woman,
Fo' to carry on—
Jes' my name and jes' my habit
To be Long Gone. . . .***

26 **Goin' to Chicago, sorry but
I can't take you;
Goin' to Chicago, sorry but
I can't take you,
'Cause there's nothin' in
Chicago that an evil woman
can do.**

**When you see me comin',
raise your window high;
When you see me comin',
raise your window high;
When you see me leavin',
hang your head and cry.**

*Sayin', Furry, you got a home as long
as I got mine.*

And Big Joe Williams sang with the Count Basie Band:

*Goin' to Chicago, sorry but I can't
take you;
Goin' to Chicago, sorry but I can't
take you,
'Cause there's nothin' in Chicago that
an evil woman can do.*

And a traditional line, modified by the Basie singers, Jimmy Rushing and Joe Williams:

*When you see me comin', raise your
window high;
When you see me comin', raise your
window high;
When you see me leavin', hang your
head and cry.*

Implicit in this act of leaving is, of course absence, loneliness, change, and death. Joe Williams, in a series of disjunctive images, moves to this position:

*Baby, you're so beautiful, but you
got to die one day;
Baby, you're so beautiful, but you
got to die one day;
All I want is a little bit of lovin' before
you pass away.*

That is the supercool reaction of the post World War II period. In an earlier time, Jenny Pope sang in her little girl's voice:

*I'm a stranger here, just blowed
in your town;
I'm a stranger here, just blowed
in your town;
Just because I'm a stranger, I won't
be dogged around.
It's rainin' here, stormin' way out
on the sea;
It's rainin' here, stormin' way out
on the sea;
I ain't got nobody-y-y here to take
care of me.*

All that is known of Jenny Pope is four recorded songs in that pleading little voice and a brief discographical entry in

Goodrich and Dixon's *Blues and Gospel Records, 1903-1943*, the blues collector's bible.

Son House creates a master piece of the theme of leaving in his version of "Death Letter." The words only suggest the power. One must hear his compelling voice and the somber beauty of his slide guitar. He sings:

*I got a letter this mornin'; how do you
reckon it read?
Got a letter this mornin'; how do you
reckon it read?
It said, Hurry, hurry, the gal you love
is dead.*

*Well, I picked up my suitcase and took
out down the road
When I got there she was layin' on a
coolin' board—Oh-hh,
ummmmmmmmmmm ummmmmmm
ummmmmmm*

*Well, I walked up right close, looked
down in her face—
Good old girl gotta lay there till
Judgment Day—
Oh-hh ummmmmmmmmmm
ummmmmmmmm uummmmm
Good old girl, gotta lay there till
Judgment Day.*

Big Boy, in his turn, confronts the prospect of the last journey, and in the "Odyssey of Big Boy," Sterling Brown raises him as a person to the level of archetypal hero. It is a classic confrontation with death. Like Son House's song, it is a masterpiece of evocation.

*Lemme be wid Casey Jones,
Lemme be wid Stagolee,
Lemme be wid such like men
When Death takes hol' on me,
When Death takes hol' on me. . . .*

All of his hard and varied jobs pass, with blueslike mingling of seriousness and play, before his mind, He's done "Druv steel," "skinned mules," "stripped tobacco" in Virginia, mined coal in West Virginin; "Shocked de corn in Marylan"; cut cane in Georgia and planted rice in "South Caline." He's been a "roustabout

in Memphis/Dockhand in Baltimore . . ."; he's "smashed up freight in Norfolk wharves." He was a "fust class stevedore." He's "slung hash" on the "ole Fall River Line," and he "busted suds in li'l New York. . ."

*Done worked and loafed on such
like jobs,
Seen what dey is to see,
Done had my time wid a pint on my hip
An' a sweet gal on my knee,
Sweet mommer on my knee. . . .*

He's been through the spectrum of Black sweetness—a "stovepipe blond," a "Yaller gal in Marylan'," a "choklit brown" in Richmond, "two fair browns in Arkansas/And three in Tennessee. . . ." And there was a two-timing Creole beauty from New Orleans. But the best gal of all was from Southwest Washington, at "Four'n half and M—"

*Done took my livin' as it came,
Done grabbed my joy, done risked
my life;
Train done caught me on de trestle,
Man done caught me wid his wife,
His doggone purty wife. . . .*

*I done had my women;
I done had my fun;
Cain't do much complainin'
When my jag is done,
Lawd, Lawd, my jag is done.*

*An' all dat Big Boy axes
When time comes fo' to go,
Lemme be wid John Henry, steel
drivin' man,
Lemme be wid old Jazzbo
Lemme be wid ole Jazzbo. . . .*

whelms whites and Blacks alike, as in "Mister Samuel and Sam." And even in the specifically racial poems there are implications of the general destiny.

But it is the strength and wisdom of the common Black man and woman, born of suffering which makes the notable statement. In "Virginia Portrait," the poet presents another of his friends, Mrs. Bibby, the mother of one of his students during his first teaching stint at Virginia Seminary. There is an unsentimental nobility which emerges:

*The winter of her year has come to her,
This wizened woman, spare of frame,
but great
Of heart, erect, and undefeated yet.*

And again:

*She, puffing on a jagged slow-burning
pipe,
By the low hearthfire, knows her
winter now.
But she has strength and steadfast
hardihood.
Deep-rooted is she, even as the oaks,
Hardy as perennials about her door.
The circle of the seasons brings no
fear,
"folks all gits used to what dey sees
so often";
And she has helped that throng about
her glowing fire
Mixed with the smoke hugging her
grizzled head. . . .*

Other qualities of character appear. She has "a wonted, quiet nonchalance, a courtly dignity of speech and carriage. . . ." She, with "slow speech" and "heartfelt laughter," she, though illiterate is "somehow very wise." It is the quality which one finds again and again. It is the wisdom that finds meaning in life, that permits one to "see through death," the last great confrontation.

It is the wisdom, seasoned with a gentle humor which informs "Sister Lou." This poem is also modeled on the mother of Brown's student. And if one needed to find a connection with the blues world, it wouldn't be hard to come by. One need



28 ***“Watcha gonna do when
Memphis on fire,
Memphis on fire, Mistah
Preachin’ Man?
Gonna pray to Jesus and
nebber tire,
Gonna pray to Jesus, loud
as I can,
Gonna pray to my Jesus,
oh, my Lawd!”***

only listen to Lightnin’ Hopkins talking about his mother, for example; or Blind Gary Davis talking about his grandmother. “When she went out to buy pie plates she always would buy two, ‘cause she knew that I was gonna tear one up.” What he meant was that she knew that he would use one to make a homemade banjo. Blind Gary Davis was a self-taught virtuoso at the age of six. Like Big Boy Davis, he played and sang religious music; also sang the blues. Blind Gary Davis could have sung Big Boy’s songs without any contradiction at all. They came from the same world.

Sterling Brown closes all formal readings of his poetry with “Strong Men,” which he projects with masterly skill. This poem compressed much of what he admires in the lives of the people into a powerful statement of the history of Black folk in America. It also synthesizes two important influences upon his philosophy and craft—the folk tradition of the American Black man and the tradition of the common man theme in American literature as expressed by Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Carl Sandburg and Robert Frost. The leitmotif is from Sandburg, the framework too owes something to him. But the substance and the explorations derive from the rich “mulch,” as Sterling Brown calls it, of the Black folk culture. And the stubbornness, the will to life, the patience, the nobility of character, the promise of the race are all there, in powerful counterpoint to Sandburg’s motif. It picks up the theme and amplifies it, in Black terms. The development is “musical.” And, of course, the musical referents are Black. They are from the spirituals, the work songs, and the popular songs. It is fine rhetorical statement suffused by song. It brings part one to a climax and acts as a kind of overture to Part Two.

Part II

The second part is dedicated to Allison Davis, who shared his sympathy with the working class. Part Two begins with another longish poem “Memphis Blues”:

again the perspective is historical. This time, however, the movement is not a relentless forward march, but a series of slow zig zags from the ancient past, to the present, to an apocalyptic future. It is one of his finer poems, and, since it is not well enough known deserves some closer attention.

Although the poem is called “Memphis Blues,” it is not written in typical blues form. It consists of three sections which form an approximate A, B, A, musical form. The enveloping sections are historical statements in colloquial quatrains. There is something of the spirituals in the opening sections, something of the cadence of the folk sermon.

*Nineveh, Tyre,
Babylon,
Not much lef’
Of either one.
All dese cities
Ashes and rust,
De win’ sing sperrichals
Through deir dus’
Was another Memphis
Mongst de olden days,
Done been destoryed
In many ways*

The middle section consists of a series of rhetorical questions which are deeply rooted in sermon literature and the Afro-American religious experience.

The poet puts the question to the Preacher Man:

*“Watcha gonna do when Memphis on
fire,
Memphis on fire, Mistah Preachin’
Man?
Gonna pray to Jesus and nebber tire,
Gonna pray to Jesus, loud as I can,
Gonna pray to my Jesus, oh, my Lawd!”*

The rest of this section raises the same question and states the varying answers of the “Lovin’ Man,” the “Music Man,” the “Workin’ Man,” the “Drinkin’ Man,” and the “Gamblin’ Man,” all familiar types in Black folklore and in Brown’s party. And in the responses we get the distinctive Brownian tone tinged with the blues. For

the "Lovin' Man" is going to "love my baby like a do right man," the "Music Man" is going to "plunk on that box as long as it soun'." Meantime, one notes Brown's reinterpretation of folk technique in his subtle use of the refrain. It is more than "incremental repetition"; its variation is a kind of verbal jazz:

*Watch gonna do when Memphis falls
down,
Memphis falls down, Mistah Music
Man?
Gonna plunk on dat box as long as it
soun'
Gonna plunk dat box fo' to beat de ban'
Gonna tickle dem ivories, oh, my Lawd!*

The third section repeats the somber beauty of the opening in "Memphis Go/ By Flood or Flame," but is jerked into the bitter realism of the blues and Black aphorism.

*Memphis go
Memphis come back
Ain' no skin
off de nigger's back.*

The final statement thus is about the enduring strength, the survivability of the Black Man—one of Sterling Brown's favorite themes. For comparison one looks at Langston Hughes' the "Negro Speaks of Rivers" and the differences between the two men and their approach to historical material becomes apparent.

*I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns
were young
I built my hut near the Congo and it
lulled me to sleep
I looked upon the Nile and raised the
pyramids abov it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi
when Abe Lincoln went down to New
Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
Bosom turn all golden in the
sunset.*

*I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*

and language of the spirituals. The final effect is not unlike a counterpoint to Hughes' poem.

In "Ma Rainey," Sterling Brown returns to the blues for inspiration, this time to the person of the singer and her communion with her audience. The folk come from everywhere to hear her. He sets the stage in a series of rapid pictures.

*Dey comes to hear Ma Rainey from de
little river settlements,
From blackbottom cornrows and from
lubmer camps;
Dey stumble in de hall, jes' a-laughin'
an' a-cracklin'.
Cherrin' lak roarin' water, lak wind in
river swamps.*

Then follows the famous description and account of the song:

*O Ma Rainey,
Sing yo' song;
Now you's back
Whah you belong,
Git way inside us.
Keep us strong. . . .
O Ma Rainey,
Li'l an' low;
Sing us 'bout de hard luck
Roun' our do';
Sing us 'bout de lonesome road
We mus' go*

Ma Rainey is a high priestess of sorrow. She suffers with her people as she purges their hearts. Sterling Brown's presentation is a masterpiece of understatement. There is so much which is understood, especially if one know the music.

Structurally the meaning of the poem is amplified by the musical referent. The poem and its meaning then exist not only in themselves but as a focal point for the various versions and meanings of "Backwater Blues." If one has not heard "Backwater Blues" then a good deal of the meaning must be lost.

She sang Backwater Blues one day:

*'It rained fo' days an' de skies was
dark as night,*

*Trouble taken place in de lowlands
at night.*

***I bathed in the Euphrates
when dawns were young
I built my hut near the Congo
and it lulled me to sleep
I looked upon the Nile and
raised the pyramids
abov it.
I heard the singing of the
Mississippi when Abe
Lincoln went down to
New Orleans, and I've seen
its muddy Bosom turn all
golden in the sunset.***

***I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.***

30 *'Thundered an' lightened an' the storm
begin to roll
thousan's of people ain't got no place
to go.*

*'Den I went an' stood upon some high
ol' lonesome hill,
An' looked down on the place where
I used to live.'*

*An' den de folks, dey natchally bowed
dey heads an' cried,
Bowed dey heavy heads, shet dey
moufs up tight an' cried,
An' Ma lef' de stage, an' followed
some de folks outside."*

*Dere wasn't much more de fellow say:
She jes' gits hold of us dataway.*

"New St. Louis Blues" is a suite of three poems written in blues form subtitled: "Market Street Woman," "Tornado Blues," and "Low Down." The first is a portrait of an aging prostitute. It is reminiscent of D. G. Rossetti's "Jenny" and similar genre pieces, but the realistic treatment and the toughness derive from the folk blues and songs like Lucille Bogan's "Tricks Ain' Walkin No More."

*Gettin' old and ugly, an' de sparks
done lef' her eye,
Old an' ugly an' de fire's out in her eye,
De men may see her, but de men
keeps passin' by—*

An apocalyptic note is sounded in "Tornado Blues," which links the personal lot of the prostitute to a general destruction suggestive of the force of fate.

*De Black wind evil, done done its dirty
work an' gone,
Black wind evil, done done its dirty
work an' gone,
Lawd help de folks what de wind ain't
had no mercy on.*

"Low Down," the final poem in the suite, combines the portraiture of "Market Street Woman" with the more general social and philosophical implications of "Tornado Blues." The speaker is so "low down" that he has to bum a plug of tobacco from

the passer-by. When a man gets that low he might as well be dead. But even Fate is against him. He is too poor to die.

*Wouldn't mind dyin' but I ain't got de
jack fo' toll,
Wouldn't mind dyin' but I'd have to
bum de jack fo' toll
Some dirty joker done put a jinx on
my po' soul.*

A comparison with the lines from Robert Johnson's "Hell-Hound on My Trail Blues" shows the tonal resemblance.

This section also contains two of the brilliant Slim Greer poems, which are portraits of another kind of survival strategy—self laughter.

Part III

Part Three, "Tin Roof Blues," is dedicated to Jesse "Poodle" Williams, another of the poet's friends. The importance of the dedication is suggested by the fact that Williams introduced Sterling Brown to Big Boy Davis. Several poems stand out in this section, the title poem which is in "classic" blues form, "Children's Children," was written in angry resentment at the lack of appreciation which many of his contemporaries had for the folk tradition, "Sporting Beasley," "Cabaret," "Slim Greer," and "Slim Greer in Atlanta."

"Sporting Beasley" shows the poet at his good humored best. It is a fine portrait done from the life. "Cabaret" is an interesting and complex poem in which the reader's mind is guided through various levels of perception, guided through the words and the assumed music. The subtitle reads "1927 Black and Tan, Chicago," and sets the occasion, but if one knows Bessie Smith's version of "Muddy Water Blues," it helps to realize the poem. One should also keep in mind Sterling Brown's "Ma Rainey" and her song, "Backwater Blues." Here again, Bessie Smith's version is a good referent since Ma Rainey's version is not extant and a good deal of Ma Rainey's style, especially phrasing, is subsumed in Bessie Smith's.

The poem opens with a quick scene of

the rich "overlords," and their "glittering darlings."

*Rich, Flashy, puffy-faced,
Hebrew and Anglo-Saxon,
The overlords sprawl here with their
glittering darlings.
The smoke curls thick, in the
dimmed light
Surreptitiously, deaf-mute waiters
Flatter the grandees,
Going easily over the rich carpets,
Wary lest they kick over the bottles
Under the tables.*

Then "The Jazzband unleashes its frenzy." A sardonic voice embodies a resentful consciousness.

*Now, now,
To it, Roger; that's a nice doggie,
Show your tricks to the gentlemen.*

On another level the band plays—the images are pathological.

*The trombone belches, and
the saxophone
Wails curdlingly, the cymbals clash,
The drummer twitches in an epileptic
fit.*

At another level still, we hear the chorus singing the banal Tin Pan Alley song about a flood which left thousands of persons homeless.

*Muddy water
Round my feet
Muddy water*

We move to another visual level as "The chorus sways in." They are anatomized by another sardonic voice, which reveals their real identities. They are not "Creole Beauties from New Orleans." Another ironic voice exclaims or sings:

"O, le bal des belles quarteronnes!"

The voice reflects on the romantic alcoholic images of river life conjured up by the dancers and the music. And remembers Lafitte the pirate, and his modern counterparts.

The original sardonic voice reflects on the virtual slavery of the Black convicts

who have been brought in to strengthen the levees.

*(In Arkansas,
Poor half-naked fools, tagged with
identification number,
Worn out upon the levees,
Are carted back to the serfdom
They had never left before
And may never leave again)*

And one thinks of Bill Broonzy, and Leadbelly, and Richard Wright. Broonzy sang:

*You'll never get to do me like you did
my buddy Shine;
You'll never get to do me like you did
my buddy Shine;
You worked him so hard on the levee
till he went stone blind.*

The trumpet hits a riff which anticipates Be-bop. And the poet captures it in a line which antedates Langston Hughes' "Shakespeare in Harlem" and "Montage of a Dream Deferred." "The girls wiggle and twist" as the sardonic voice puts them on auction:

*What am I offered, gentlemen,
gentlemen. . . .*

The song continues its maudlin way. (Even Bessie Smith had to struggle to give it a semblance of dignity.) Images of destruction mingle with the voices of the chorus girls, and the motions and sounds of glasses being filled.

A counterpoint of images of homeless Black folk in Mississippi and the lyrics "Shelter Down in the Delta: The buzzards flying over the Yazoo glutted, but still peering, their scrawny necks stretching.

The voice from the song:

*I've got my toes turned Dixie ways
Round that Delta let me laze
The band goes mad, the drummer
throws his sticks
At the moon, a papier-mache moon,
The chorus leaps into weird posturings
The firm-fleshed arms plucking at
grapes to stain
Their coralled mouth; seductive bodies
weaving
Bending, writhing, turning*



*My heart cries out for
MUDDY WATER*

*(Down in the valleys
The stench of the drying mud
Is a bitter reminder of death.)*

Dee da dee D A A A H

The final notes of the trumpet, if one must seek a literary comparison, are the equivalent of Hemingway's *Nada* in "A Clean Well Lighted Place." They suggest a meaning of the entire scene. The moral emptiness of prostitution, of denial of identity and roots. The music is prostituted and the women are prostituted.

Part IV

In contrast to the other sections, Sterling Brown dedicates this part, "Vestiges," to his wife Rose Anne. "Vestiges" takes its epigraph from A. E. Housman. It reads:

*When I was one-and-twenty:
I heard a wise man say:—*

The concluding lines of the stanza suggest the tone and style of the entire section.

*Give crowns and pounds and guineas
But not your heart away.*

But the young man in the poem does not heed the advice, and at two-and-twenty he has learned from bitter experience—"Ah, 'tis true! 'Tis true." Here the poems are "literary," written in traditional Euro-American forms, including the sonnet, the pentameter quatrain, the ballad and others. They seem highly personal and are lyrical in character in contrast to the more dramatic treatment in the other sections. Though Brown's reputation does not rest with them, they are an important part of *Southern Road* and should not be slighted. In fact, they were very well received when the book appeared; and they suggest, by their inclusion, something of the complex sensibility of the poet himself.

"Vestiges," therefore, does not conflict with the other sections; it complements them. It contains 10 poems, several of

32 them notable. Especially interesting is "Salutamus," which calls for courage and fortitude and hope in the face of racial hatred. Its epigraph, from Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, "O Gentlemen the time of Life is short," states the classical theme of mutability which evokes the kind of self-confrontation mingled with melancholy which are also components of the blues feeling. It is as though in these poems the educator steps forth and refines the blues feeling, abstracting certain general aspects of it by placing it in a formal literary setting. If these poems were isolated from those of the previous sections, then, with the exception of "Salutamus," they would have to be called non-racial. But in the larger context of the work they are colored by the preceding sections. Some were written earlier; others about the same time. At any rate, their inclusion is a conscious editorial judgment by the poet. They establish a change of pace from the dramatic to the lyrical, from the specific to the general, the historical to the personal. They are less innovative than the "blues life" poems in style and theme, and thus are "vestiges" of another tradition. But the important thing is their inclusion. As an editorial construct they provide a logical and fitting coda to the work. This is achieved through a repetition and echo of theme, dedication, and imagery.

In "To A Certain Lady, In Her Garden," which is dedicated to Anne Spencer, we have a linking of Part One, which is dedicated to that poet, and this final section. In the third stanza of that poem, Sterling Brown contrasts Mrs. Spencer's idyllic garden to the rough mankilling streets beyond. It is the *hortus conclusus* theme:

*A step beyond, the dingy streets begin
With all their farce, and silly tragedy—
But here, unmindful of the futile din
You grow your flowers, far wiser
certainly.*

One asks, of course, the connection between this woman's personality and the blues life, the street world, which

she seems so aloof from. It is evident that she possessed some inner source of strength which the poet recognized and which he associated across class lines and lifestyles with the blues people, such as the unnamed heroine of "Virginia Portrait," (in real life, Mrs. Bibby), who is "Illiterate, and somehow very wise," or Big Boy Davis. That strength is a quiet wisdom which is somehow of the earth. The poet in her gardening clothes is a refined version, as it were, of the Black peasant of "Virginia Portrait." Both have somehow risen above the "farce," "the silly tragedy," "the futile din."

The theme of personal desire to escape the "farce" appears again in "Return," a somewhat Wordsworthian poem, where the poet either in reality or imagination returns to a rustic spot associated with boyhood:

*There I have lain while hours
sauntered past—
I have found peacefulness somewhere
at last,
Have found a quiet needed for
so long.*

This section closes with a long meditative poem, again in the tradition of Wordsworth and the nature poets of the Eighteenth Century. In this poem, "Mill Mountain," the same contrast is made between the "fretting grind" of the city, "its squalor," its "pettiness" and the "peace" and beauty of Mill Mountain, which he shares with a companion. The companion falls asleep and the elegiac voice of the speaker muses, "Sleep on, what else is there for you,—but sleep?" "Elegiac." I choose the word carefully because it seems to me that the movement of selections in *Southern Road* is from the toughness and bitterness of blues struggle and feeling, a feeling comingled with courage, robust humor, gallows humor and sensuality, with stoicism and cussedness to what is essentially a wider, calmer view, where the fever, the fret, the stir of the world is summed not in transcendent vision as in Big Boy Davis' songs, but in the quiet wisdom of the Stoics, one of

whom, Epictetus, was an African and a slave. Thus one sees in the pattern of this work the impress of a complex but unified sensibility, which comprises the scholar, the teacher, the raconteur and the poet, one who is drawn basically to people—not to landscape—one who is drawn to strength though aware of weakness. *Southern Road* is at once a highly personal work and a portrait gallery of a generation and a class. Class conflict is here subsumed in caste conflict, but the poet who knows the blues, of course, knows this as well as anyone else. What he brings out instead is the essential heroism of a maligned and oppressed people. What he demonstrates both in the organization of *Southern Road* and, indeed, in the pattern of his own life (since so many of his portraits are strongly modelled on real-life persons that he knew) is that the process of unification begins on a one-to-one basis; that it begins with self and moves outward by sympathy and identification and love.

To sum up, the contemporary relevance of *Southern Road* lies not only in its virtuoso technique and its faithful renderings of Black life but in its point of view, its blues perspective which in this case is best expressed by the anonymous line:

"I got the blues but I'm too damn mean to cry."

If one substituted for "mean" the word "bad" as it is currently used, then one can easily see that Sterling Brown really had it together almost fifty years ago. □

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