

## Steven C. Tracy: On "The Weary Blues"

In *The Big Sea* Hughes reported that his "Weary Blues," which won him his first poetry prize, "included the first blues [he's] ever heard way back in Lawrence, Kansas, when [he] was a kid."

The blues verse in "The Weary Blues:"

I got de weary blues  
And I can't be satisfied.  
Got de weary blues  
And can't be satisfied.  
I ain't happy no mo'  
And I wish that I had died.

is very close to the "Texas Worried Blues" recorded by songster Henry Thomas in 1928:

The worried blues  
God, I'm feelin' bad.  
I've got the worried blues  
God, I'm feelin' bad.  
I've got the worried blues  
God, I'm feelin' bad.

In "The Weary Blues" Hughes dealt with the blues singer and his song in relation to the speaker of the poem. The poem gave its title to Hughes' first volume, published in 1926.

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Donald Dickinson saw the first verse of "The Weary Blues" as "an alliterative innovation in the style of Lindsay's 'The Congo.'" However, the verse, with its references to crooning, its strategic repetition of the "lazy sway" line, and its description of a blues performer and his

playing, seems to derive partly from the vaudeville blues tradition as well. For example, Richard M. Jones's "Jazzin' Baby Blues," recorded in 1922 by Alberta Hunter and by Ethel Waters, and in 1923 by King Oliver and by Eva Taylor, discussed the way "that old piano man he sure can jazz 'em some":

Jazzin' baby blues are drivin' me insane  
There's nothin' to them but that lonesome blue refrain.  
But when that cornet and that flute begin to play,  
Just make me get right up and throw myself away.  
Just play those jazzin' baby  
Blues for me all night and day.

Bessie Smith's recording of Fletcher Henderson's "Jazzbo Brown from Memphis Town" celebrated the clarinet playing of a man with no professional training:

Jazzbo Brown from Memphis Town,  
He's a clarinet hound!  
He can't dance,  
He can't sing,  
But Lawdy, how he can play that thing!

He ain't seen no music, too.  
He can't read a note.  
But he's the playin'est fool  
On that Memphis boat.

Hughes's poem, too, deals with the singer and his song, but Hughes presents the flip-side of the romantic vaudeville blues image of the wild and celebrated jazz player, good-timing his way through life. It is doubly significant that Hughes gave his volume the title of this poem and

that it is the first poem (following "Proem") in the volume. It suggests that the entire volume begins with and is informed by the "weary blues," and the tradition with which one must come to grips.

The poem itself is a third-person description with some interpolated first-person, eight- and twelve-bar blues lyrics, giving it a sophisticated structure not unlike some vaudeville blues songs.

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Clearly in this poem the blues unite the speaker and the performer in some way. There is an immediate implied relationship between the two because of the ambiguous syntax. The "droning" and "rocking" can refer either to the "I" or to the "Negro," immediately suggesting that the music invites, even requires, the participation of the speaker. Further, the words suggest that the speaker's poem is a "drowsy syncopated tune" as well, connecting speaker and performer even further by having them working in the same tradition. The performer remains anonymous, unlike Bessie Smith's Jazzbo Brown, because he is not a famous, celebrated performer; he is one of the main practitioners living the unglamorous life that is far more common than the kinds of lives the most successful blues stars lived. His "drowsy syncopated tune," which at once implies both rest and activity (a tune with shifting accents), signals the tension between the romantic image and the reality, and very likely influences the speaker to explore the source of the tension between the singer's stoicism and his resignation to his fate as expressed in his blues lyrics. Significantly, the eight-bar blues stanza, the one with no repeat line, is his hopeful stanza. Its presence as an eight-bar stanza works by passing more quickly, reinforcing both his loneliness and the fleeting nature of the kind of hope expressed. This is especially true since the singer's next stanza, a twelve-bar blues, uses the repeat line to emphasize his weariness and lack of satisfaction, and his wish to die.

All the singer seems to have is his moaning blues, the revelation of "a black man's soul," and those blues are what helps keep him alive. Part of that ability to sustain is apparently the way the blues help him keep his identity. Even in singing the blues, he is singing about his life, about the way that he and other blacks have to deal with white society. As his black hands touch the white keys, the accepted Western sound of the piano and the form of Western music are changed. The piano itself comes to life as an extension of the singer, and moans, transformed by the black tradition to a mirror of black sorrow that also reflects the transforming power and beauty of the black tradition. Finally, it is that tradition that helps keep the singer alive and gives him his identity, since when he is done and goes to bed he sleeps like an inanimate or de-animated object, with the blues echoing beyond his playing, beyond the daily cycles, and through both conscious and unconscious states.

Another source of the melancholy aura of the poem is the lack of an actual connection between the performer and the speaker. They do not strike up a conversation, share a drink, or anything else. The speaker observes, helpless to do anything about the performer and his weariness save to write the poem and try to understand the performer's experiences and how they relate to his own. Ultimately he finds the man and his songs wistfully compelling; and he hears in his song the collective weary blues of blacks in America and tries to reconcile the sadness with the sweetness of the form and expression.

The poem is a fitting opening not only to this volume, but to all of Hughes's volumes. It combines traditional blues stanzas that emphasize the roots of African-American experience, touches of vaudeville blues as the roots were being "refined," pride in African-American

creativity and forms of expression, and a sense of the weariness that ties together generations of African-Americans. With the words "Sweet Blues," Hughes strikes upon the central paradox with which the poem attempts to come to terms. It is one of his central themes.

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