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What They Sang: The Religious Roots of Spirituals and Blues

Abstract

This paper investigates the religious themes in spirituals, the religious songs sung by enslaved people in America, and the blues, a predominantly Black genre from the early Twentieth century. This work aims to answer if spirituals influenced the lyrics and musical structure of the blues or if the two genres developed independently. The paper covers the origins of spirituals and the blues, their appearance in the WPA Slave Narratives, and concludes with a close analysis of the religious influence on the work of famous Blues artists. Primary sources referenced in this project include the WPA Slave Narratives, famous Blues songs, Library of Congress recordings, lyrics from early spirituals, and several secondary sources. A thorough thematic investigation of these sources revealed a clear connection between the two genres, as both take a strong influence from Christianity. Additionally, spirituals and blues follow similar lyrical patterns. While spirituals emerged as a way to reckon with the horrors of slavery, the blues spoke to the reality of sharecropping and poverty. Religion remained a constant theme throughout this evolution, with prevalent references to God, Heaven, Hell, and the Devil in both genres. Both spirituals and blues speak to Southern Black Americans' resistance, achievements, and spirituality.

Keywords

Blues, spirituals, religion

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What They Sang: The Religious Roots of Spirituals and Blues

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To listen to the blues is to hear pure human emotion. These songs tell stories of joy, suffering, love, and death through twangy guitar strings and sliding vocals. Blues music exploded in the early twentieth century in predominantly Black areas of the United States, such as Chicago, Mississippi, and Tennessee. Blues became a dynamic art form as singers often borrowed lyrics and tunes from others. These shared ideas created a uniquely American musical genre characterized by the sliding bottleneck guitar and longing lyrics that expressed dreams of better days. The blues reflect the continuing evolution of Black music after the end of slavery, despite tensions between secular and sacred themes, and the genre owes an obvious debt to the musical forms and lyrics of antebellum spirituals.

African American spirituals created during the antebellum period heavily influenced the early blues. Religion permeated African American culture through services, sermons, and songs. Music was the easiest way enslaved people could remember the Bible's teachings through its call-and-response patterns since many could not read. One person could lead a group by singing a verse,

and the rest could join by echoing the lead singer. This method spread Christian ideas and a love for music throughout the community.

Scholars have connected the spirituals and blues through countless journal articles and books on the two subjects. Prominent literature includes James Cone's *The Spirituals and the Blues* and Adam Gussow's *Beyond the Crossroads.* However, much of the previous research does not incorporate the Work Progress Administration (WPA) Slave Narratives or thoroughly examine lyrics for religious themes. Therefore, this paper seeks to determine the extent of the relationship between these two genres based on testimonies from formerly enslaved people and lyrical analysis of spirituals and blues.

Singers wove many religious themes of earlier spirituals into early blues music. References to God, the devil, Heaven, and Hell are abundant. However, most African American communities viewed the blues as the devil's music and disapproved of the genre because singers played at brothels and juke joints. Additionally, blues lyrics often referenced taboo subjects like romantic relationships, adultery, and alcohol. Several blues singers admitted they felt torn between their love of Jesus and the blues. Despite this tension, it is clear that there is a strong religious presence in the blues, often reminiscent of antebellum spirituals.

James Cone, an American theologian, was the first Black scholar to highlight the similarities between the two genres. He asserted that the blues "depict the 'secular' dimension of the black experience" because they dealt with love, lust, and other human emotions.[1] Blues music contained the same passion and intensity as spirituals, but instead of praising the Christian God, they paid homage to the human experience. Historian Jon Michael Spencer echoed Cone's argument. He determined that the blues were not profane or immoral but "secular spirituals."[2] Spirituals followed similar structures and emotions but traded the religious ideology for secular problems. Spirituals are closely linked with the Black experience and the experiences of enslaved people. This argument for the connection between the two genres is compelling.

Despite the connection between Christian spirituals and the blues, some scholars argue that the latter musical genre does not encapsulate the African American experience. Historian Adam Gussow claims that the spirituals and, later, the blues evolved from West African spiritualism. Crossroads and deals with the devil were popular symbols in early blues music. Scholars like Gussow argue these symbols are reminiscent of the African trickster gods Esu and Legba. Enslaved people brought stories about them from

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[1] James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 97.
[2] Jon Michael Spencer, *Blues and Evil* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 38.

Africa, but they largely disappeared until after the Civil War. Esu and Legba are considered potential inspirations for a crossroad devil, but their origins are unclear. However, according to Gussow, it is unknown whether these stories' West African roots are the reason why southern Black Christians condemned the blues.[3] Therefore, scholars argue that there is a strained relationship between the blues and spirituals despite both their religious tones.

Putting these sources in conversation is crucial to fully understanding these genres. Cone and Gussow's analyses of how religion impacted the blues spirituals provide an essential framework for discussing songs from these eras. Additionally, the WPA Slave Narratives provide an abundance of information surrounding the lived experiences of formerly enslaved people. These stories offer crucial insight into the relationship with spiritual music.

Spirituals are religious songs developed during slavery that blend European hymns with African musical styles. These songs tell stories of perseverance, strength, and hope, and many enslaved people used them as an outlet to convey their pain. They were passed down orally from generation to generation, while the lyrics often evolved. Christianity helped shape these songs. Most songs chronicle the life or part of the life of a Biblical figure, such as

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[3] Adam Gussow, *Beyond the Crossroads,* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 23.

Adam and Eve in the garden, Paul in jail with Silas, or Noah surviving the great flood on his ark.[4] These songs abounded in proverbs with lessons preachers could quickly transform into sermons in church.

Enslaved people brought their love of music with them from Africa. They quickly adapted their rhythm, voice, and instrumentation to create spirituals and field hollers.[5] Field hollers were work songs enslaved people sang while working in the fields. They used these songs to communicate, keep pace, and pass the time during the long hours they spent picking cotton, chopping wood, or completing other tasks on the plantation. These songs also contained Biblical references and veiled mockery of their masters. The pieces began with one person singing a verse and the rest of the group echoing it. Frederick Douglass recounted that "'Slaves are generally expected to sing as well as to work. A silent slave is not liked by masters or overseers.'"[6] These songs allowed enslaved people to communicate with each other slyly and share their love for music while appeasing their masters.

Religion was integral to American society, especially in the nineteenth century. Most people attended church and professed

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[4] Paul Oliver, *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions of Race Records* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 148.
[5] Miles Mark Fisher, *Negro Slave Songs in the United States* (New York City: Carol Publishing Group, 1990), 10.
[6] Dena J. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 162.

Christianity. Many northern Christians opposed slavery and used the Bible to attack the institution. However, southern Christians weaponized the sacred text to defend enslavement. The Second Great Awakening affected both White and Black communities as religion quickly spread across the United States.[7] Preachers became pinnacles of the Black community. Church, when allowed, gave enslaved people an outlet to escape the grim reality of their lives, seek refuge and strength with others, and sing.[8] They believed in a higher being who would one day free them from slavery, just as Moses led the Israelites to the Promised Land.

The spirituals sung at these churches reflected this view. For example, the spiritual "Remember Me" tells the story of an enslaved person pleading for his freedom and for God to have mercy on him. It follows the same musical pattern as a European hymn.[9] European hymns follow a simple structure of verses (usually rhymed) and a chorus, all focused on religious content. This is typical for a spiritual; it combines the desire for emancipation with a strong belief in a higher power, and singers perform it in a typical European fashion. This similarity to European hymns made spirituals appear less dangerous to overseers and masters because it was similar enough to their

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[7] Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2021), 180.
[8] Giles Oakley, *The Devil's Music* (London: Da Capo Press, 1997), 49.
[9] Fisher, *Negro Slave Songs in the United States,* 15-16.

church music. Mass conversions to Christianity after the Second Great Awakening facilitated a renewed interest in music in the enslaved community. They began to sing hymns independently of their White masters. These songs took on a different meaning as enslaved people changed the lyrics to accommodate their lived experiences, added repeated refrains, and sped up the tempo.[10] Although spirituals began as a reflection of European hymns, African American influence transformed them into their own genre.

Spirituals continued to be an essential part of African American culture after emancipation. During the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt founded the WPA as part of his New Deal program. One of the WPA's subsections was the Federal Writer's Project (FWP), which undertook a project called the Slave Narratives. Employees collected stories from formerly enslaved people in southern states through this project. This program focused on recording what life was like in slavery, and interviewees frequently discussed religion and music.

One compelling aspect of the Slave Narratives is that they highlight the differences in how masters treated the relationship between their enslaved people and religion. Some masters forbade religion altogether. One man recalled, "Master never 'lowed us

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[10] Portia K. Maultsby, "Folk Spiritual," A History of African American Music, Carnegie Hall, 2021, https://timeline.carnegiehall.org/genres/folk-spiritual.

slaves go to church but they have big holes in the fields they gits down in and prays. They done that way 'cause the white folks didn't want them to pray. They used to pray for freedom."[11] This statement illustrates that White people did not force religion on enslaved people and that they sought religion and Christianity independently. Enslaved people used their labor to their advantage; they knew the landscape well enough to discover ditches where they could practice secretly. Another formerly enslaved man, Jak Aldredge, recounted, "No white folks didn't learn me to read and 'rite. Nobody didn't read the Bible to me. Us n[ ]s didn't go to school or hear no preachin down on Marsa Turnipseed's farm. Slaves worked Saturday afternoons same as other days. On Sundays we just set round de house. Marsa didn't low us to have no parties and picnics."[12] Aldredge's account is different because it does not address his belief in Christianity but implies that others on his plantation might have believed since his master forbade it. His testimony also highlights that masters kept enslaved people from learning to read and write. This prohibition was a significant barrier for those who wanted to understand Christianity from the Bible.

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[11] *Federal Writers Project: Slave Narrative Project,* Volume One: From Sundown to Sunup The Making of the Black Community, 1936, 35.
[12] *Federal Writers Project: Slave Narractive Project,* Volume Six: Mississippi Volume One, 21.

However, many accounts in the Slave Narratives demonstrate the importance of religion in everyday life. For example, Jim Allen recounted, “I members lots of my favorite songs. Some of dem was, ‘Am I Born to Die’, ‘Alas and Did My Saviour Bleed’, ‘Must I to de Judgement be Brought.’ The preacher would say, ‘Pull down de line and let the spirit be a witness, working for faith in de future from on high.’”[13] Allen’s recollections reveal the power of spirituals. These songs’ influence remained long after emancipation; Allen could recount the names of his favorite songs, all spirituals, even after seventy years. Manda Boggan also spoke about his experience with religion during his enslavement. He said, “De fields would be full o’ slaves a wukin’ hard. Us would look up an see Mars acomin’ across de field wid his bible under his arm. He would walk along what us wuz a wukin’ an’ read a text, den us would sing an’ pray. De song us leaked bes’ wuz, ‘De Day ob Jubilee es come.’”[14] This account is unusual because Boggan’s master brought religion to the fields. Other reports only detail interactions between masters and enslaved peoples at Sunday services or holidays. Instead, Boggan’s master chooses to evangelize in the fields. Additionally, Laura Clark, a formerly enslaved woman originally from North Carolina,

[13] *Federal Writers Project: Slave Narrative Project,* Volume Six: Mississippi Volume One, 59.
[14] *Federal Writers Project: Slave Narractive Project,* Volume Six: Mississippi Volume One, 156-157

recalled that "I can't read no songs to comfokt me, jes' ketch Ism from de preacher on de stan' and hole ' em, dat's de way I ketch larnin.'"[15] This also demonstrates the importance of religion on the plantation. Clark recalls that she had little formal schooling outside of religious education. For many enslaved people, listening to preachers speak about the Bible was the only way they could receive instruction.

The blues emerged in the early twentieth century, over fifty years after the end of slavery, although they bore a strong resemblance to spirituals. Southern Black field workers developed the genre, which gained popularity in the 1920s. The blues became a new voice in the black community, one that updated the social concerns and critical vernacular of African Americans.[16] Blues singers now sang about the trials of sharecropping, relationships, and unemployment. These songs became an outlet for Black men and women to express secular concerns involving debt and racial discrimination rather than those relating to their spiritual lives.

After the end of the Civil War, many newly freed Black men did not know where to go. Some moved off their plantation, while others stayed and farmed the land. This movement gave rise to sharecropping. In the years immediately following the war,

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[15] *Federal Writers Project: Slave Narractive Project,* Volume One: Alabama Volume One, 75.
[16] William Barlow, *Looking Up at Down: The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 3.

Black people still did not have rights such as citizenship and suffrage.[17] This meant many Black families had to find work wherever they could, which led them to sharecropping contracts. As they continued to farm, they fell further into debt because of crop failure or unfair landowners.

Many blues singers grew up in sharecropping families. For example, Robert Johnson's stepfather was an illiterate sharecropper.[18] These men grew up in the shadow of slavery, and they felt its effects generations after the Emancipation Proclamation. Their fathers and mothers worked long hours and often made them work in the fields with them for money. These dismal conditions inspired the heartfelt emotional lyrics of the early blues which reflected the bleak conditions of Black Southern farmers.

Religion remained an essential social pillar in Southern Black communities in the early twentieth century. Many early blues singers began as Christian preachers, and most singers attended church frequently. For example, famous blues singer Blind Lemon Jefferson did not play the blues on Sundays, and Charley Patton's stepfather was a preacher.[19] These men respected

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[17] The 14th Amendment was not passed until 1868 and the 15th was ratified in 1869.
[18] Bruce M. Conforth and Gayle Wardlow. *Up Jumped the Devil: the Real Life of Robert Johnson* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2019), 45.
[19] Oliver, *Songsters and Saints,* 204.

religion and spent considerable time surrounded by it. The blues navigated a line between secular and religious subject matter. Many Christian singers used blues instruments and intonation in their spiritual music, while blues singers borrowed Christian themes and vocabulary.[20] Ideas surrounding the Devil, the prodigal son, and the two versions of the afterlife appear in almost all blues songs.

Additionally, almost all blues songs reference God through lyrics like "O Lord," "Good Lord," and "So help me God."[21] These constant references to a higher being illustrate some level of belief in the Christian God. Scholars also consider the blues a religious expression for Black people; they did not have the means to articulate their faith in "scholarly language" and instead used their vernacular to illustrate their belief.[22] However, many songs also discuss secular issues like relationships and drinking, which contradicts the Christian language in other songs.

References to sins such as sexual lust, jealousy, and adultery earned the genre the nickname "the devil's music." Additionally, many blues singers sang at juke joints. Older religious Black people disapproved of the juke joints because drinking, dancing, and other scandalous behaviors occurred there.

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[20] Oliver, *Songsters and Saints,* 204.
[21] Spencer, *Protest and Praise,* 111-112.
[22] Spencer, *Protest and Praise,* 107.

Renowned blues artist Son House went to jail after shooting a man in self-defense at a juke joint. Many blues singers could not keep steady jobs either. They played music on the street, hoping a record company would notice their songs. The lyrical content, coupled with the venue, helped earn the devil moniker. However, blues artists disagreed with this assessment. One singer, Henry Townsend, said that the blues were "just as good as gospel" and that "the only difference is the gospel people singing about biblical days and what they done, but I'm not at biblical times."[23] He went on to say that he sang the "truth" and that "I just stick to the truth, and if you can condemn the truth, then I haven't got a chance, because that's all I'm telling. And the "devil's music"- I don't think the devil cares much for the truth."[24] Townsend viewed the blues as a form of gospel; although it did not praise God like a hymn, it spoke the truth about his experiences and beliefs.

Another blues singer, Mance Lipscomb, echoed Towsend's sentiments. He discussed how people told him he "ought not go to church" because of his occupation. Lipscomb argued that "'God knows everything. God knows why I'm doing this. He know I needs to pay my bills.' They say you can't serve the Devil and the Lord, too. But my belief about it is that God spared me and

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[23] Gussow, *Beyond the Crossroads,* 18.
[24] Gussow, *Beyond the Crossroads,* 18.

brought me this far."[25] Lipscomb was making a living while the people who praised Jesus for spending time with adulteresses and prostitutes judged him.

The blues usually followed a simple lyrical structure. Most songs used the AAB structure, in which the second line repeats the first. An example is Robert Johnson's song "Cross Road Blues.": "I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees/I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees/Asked the Lord above, 'Have mercy, now, save poor Bob if you please."[26] This is different than the spiritual structures. Spirituals usually have two to three verses with a refrain. Blues songs do not have a repeating chorus, and each verse is different. However, the rhyming scheme is still prevalent in spirituals. An analysis done by Portia K. Maultsby reveals that most spirituals follow either an AAAB or ABAC form.[27] Although the lyrics have more lines, they still have a similar format. This reveals a direct connection between the two genres, supporting that the blues evolved from spiritual structures. Additionally, both lyrical structures are accessible for listeners to follow and eventually sing along to. Blues lyrics usually express an individual's feelings by repeating single lines, as seen in the AAB

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[25] Gussow, *Beyond the Crossroads,* 41.
[26] Robert Johnson, vocalist, "Cross Road Blues," Vocalation Records, 1936, Audio.
[27] Portia K. Maultsby, "Black Spirituals: An Analysis of Textual Forms and Structures," *The Black Persepctive in Music* 4, no. 1 (1976): 61.

structure.[28] This repetition emphasizes the importance of the singer's feelings and invites the listener into their emotions.

The Library of Congress hired Mississippi native John Lomax during the Great Depression to travel across the American South to collect folk and blues songs. Lomax and his son Alan set off to record songs and hopefully preserve a dying part of American culture. They traveled to several state penitentiaries throughout the South, and recorded hundreds of songs sung by Black inmates. The Lomaxes documented how the spirituals and blues coexisted in prisons; inmates lived and worked in secular spaces (prisons), but their music retained their religious ideas.

The blues emerged as a genre around the same time of Lomaxs' travels. Interestingly, many of the songs the father-son duo recorded contained religious themes, and several were spirituals. John Lomax recalled in his biography a set of lyrics that stuck with him: "I'm troubled, Lord, I'm troubled/Troubled about my soul."[29] This set of lyrics follows the same structure as other spirituals, and they directly speak to God. The inmates in these prisons continued to turn to the Lord for assistance through song and prayer, demonstrating that their relationship with Christianity remained strong.

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[28] Giles Oakley, *The Devil's Music: A History of the Blues* (London: Da Capo Press, 1997), 37.
[29] John A. Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017, 18.

Not all of the songs Lomax recorded were spirituals. The blues penetrated the prison walls and influenced the music inmates sang. For instance, Lomax captured a song performed by Steen Williams, Will Broadnax, J.D. Elliot, and Madison Green while he was at the state penitentiary in Parchman, Mississippi, called "The Dying Bed Maker." They sang, "He's a dying bed maker/Jesus gonna make up my bed."[30] This song may appear to be a spiritual at first, with its repetitive lyrics and reference to God, all aspects indicative of spirituals. Charley Patton and Blind Willie Johnson both recorded versions of this song later, where they included more secular themes, like adultery, in the lyrics.[31] This instance reveals how closely connected the two genres are; Patton and Johnson took a religious song and changed the lyrics to become a blues song. Additionally, the song "Be Ready When He Comes," performed by a large group of convicts, says, "Don't you let him catch you in the gamblin' room/ he's coming again so soon."[32] The "He" in the title refers to the second coming of Jesus, but the lyrics about gambling

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[30] John Lomax, Avery, Steen Williams, Will Broadnax, J. D Elliott, and Madison Green, "The
Dying Bed Maker," Parchman, Mississippi, 1936, Library of Congress Reel 43 613B, n.d., Audio.
[31] Charley Patton, vocalist, "Jesus is a Dying Bed Maker," Paramount Records, 1930, Audio.
[32] John A. Lomax, Unidentified Negro Convicts, "Be Ready When He Comes," Parchman, Mississippi, Library of Congress Reel 43 621A3, n.d, Audio.

illustrate the secular ideas the singers are concerned with. This mix of secular and religious ideas is a clear mark of the blues genre.

One of the most famous blues singers was Muddy Waters, a blues giant. He grew up working on a plantation picking cotton in the Mississippi Delta.[33] He received little formal education, as he primarily focused on his fieldwork. However, the local Oak Ridge Baptist Church provided him an escape and a chance to learn. The church hymns also cultivated his love for music; he said, "In order to sing the blues you 'had to go to church to get this particular thing in your soul.'"[34] Religion provided him with the passion for music that listeners can feel through his songs. This initial introduction to music impacted Waters' music; his blues tunes often incorporated religious elements. Alan Lomax recorded his songs and speeches in 1941 and 1942 on a plantation in Clarksdale, Mississippi.

"I Be's Troubled" is one of the songs Lomax recorded. The lyrics harken back to Black Southern identity at the time. The first verse includes, "Lord I'm troubled, I'm all worried in mind/And I'm never being satisfied, and I just can't keep from crying."[35] Here, Waters calls to God for help, illustrating his continued trust in his faith. "I Be's Troubled" expresses the narrator's sorrow

[33] Rutkoff and Scott, "Preaching the Blues" 136.
[34] Rutkoff and Scott, "Preaching the Blues" 136.
[35] Muddy Waters, vocalist, "I Be's Troubled," Testament Records, 1966, Audio.

surrounding the loss of his girlfriend and his desire to travel to escape the situation. This song encapsulates the connection between secular and religious tones in blues music. Rutkoff and Scott assert that "songs about spiritual and physical weariness, about being troubled and wanting to travel beyond the present, nurtured the blues."[36] "I Be's Troubled" demonstrates weariness and a need for spiritual fulfillment during uncertain times. Waters puts his trust in God in this song, mirroring how spirituals were a way for Christians to illustrate their belief in the Lord through music.

Spirituals were a way for enslaved people to connect with God during slavery while demonstrating their anguish and sorrow. Through spirituals, they also praised God during the good times. The Bible gave enslaved people hope that their situations would improve one day. Additionally, spirituals allowed them to express themselves through music and connect with their African roots. The blues emerged about fifty years after the end of slavery. These songs included religious imagery, prayers, and the same joys and sorrows as spirituals. Blues singers performed outside the church, on street corners, and in juke joints. Early twentieth-century Black culture remained deeply religious and viewed the blues as the "devil's music" because it glorified drinking and openly discussed

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[36] Rutkoff and Scott, "Preaching the Blues" 132.

romantic relationships. However, spirituals greatly influenced blues music as they followed similar lyrical structures and content.

There is a close connection between the two genres. The blues reflect the American South's changing social structures after the end of the Civil War but retain the same religious ideas as spirituals. While spirituals emerged as a way to reckon with the horrors of slavery, the blues spoke to the reality of sharecropping and poverty. However, religion remained a constant theme throughout this evolution, and both spirituals and blues speak to the Black Southern spirit.

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