Sweet Home Chicago: From the Delta to Bronzeville

Notes

Part I. Delta Artifact to Urban Legend

Research for this essay began with reading the literature on Robert Johnson and the Mississippi Delta blues as well as listening to Johnson’s music, its roots and that of his contemporaries. The plan was to follow the blues trail up to Chicago. Months into the project I realized that the starting point was the destination, the Black Metropolis/Bronzeville.

History is always subject to revision. The earliest commentaries on Robert Johnson were thin since little was known of his life. Later works added substantial information, insight, correction and dispute. I have added original publication dates for those interested in following the story of the search for Robert Johnson, his legend and his photographic image. Conceptualization of the Black Metropolis also has been subject to revision and new commentary with each reissue of the Drake and Cayton study.


For “Sweet Home Chicago” as one of the most covered songs in history, see Noah Berlatsky, “From ‘Sweet Home Chicago’ to ‘Yesterday,’ the most-covered songs in history,” *Salon*, July 26, 2014, available at [http://www.salon.com/2014/07/26/from_sweet_home_chicago_to_yesterday_the_most Covered_songs_in_history/](http://www.salon.com/2014/07/26/from_sweet_home_chicago_to_yesterday_the_most_covered_songs_in_history/).


**II. Building the Black Metropolis**


On making the Black Metropolis, see Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, p. 174-213; Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes*, p. 22-38. Spear writes “During the next decade, the black belt became the ‘Black Metropolis.’ The prosperity of the 1920s made the dream of a truly self-sufficient Negro city seem close at hand. The South Side’s halcyon days had arrived.” Spear, *Black Chicago*, p. 222.

For statistics on Chicago’s black population, see Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, p. 8.


The 1919 race riot was a most violent episode during the first wave of the Great Migration to Chicago. There were 58 racially inspired bombings between 1917 and 1921. The 1919 riot was a major impetus behind the Chicago Commission on Race Relations which issued its report in 1922. See Spear, *Black Chicago*, p. 130, 211, 214-221. Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, p. 65-76; Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes*, p. 15, 35, 207.


Employment and distribution of city work, see Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, p. 218-235; Spear *Black Chicago*, p. 151-158.


On Overton, Walker and Joyner, see Spear, *Black Chicago*, p., 184-185; Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes*, p. 54-90;

Bronzeville unemployment and the Great Depression, Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, p. 217-223


**Depression Blues**


**Policy Wheels (4-11-44)**

4-11-44 designates a policy wheel station.

Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, p. 470-494, provide a detailed discussion of policy and the policy racket.


Baldwin discusses policy gambling and argues that Drake and Cayton only grudgingly acknowledge that policy was a significant financial underpinning of the Black Metropolis; see Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes*, p. 45-51.

III. **Jazz and Blues on the Stroll**

“Female blues vocalists were the biggest performing and recording stars of the era...,” Sandra Lieb, *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), p. xi.

Drake and Cayton’s *Black Metropolis* is the classic study of Bronzeville, the city within a city. While providing an in depth analysis of social, economic and political life, their study does not delve into the details of the communities’ entertainment and leisure culture. Davarian L. Baldwin provides that research with his in depth analysis of Bronzeville culture production exemplified by the music and performance arts of the nighttime Stroll, entrepreneurs of beauty culture, urban film culture, Gospel music and the sporting life.

Elijah Wald’s discussion of the music that Robert Johnson might have heard builds on the research of Alan Lomax, John Work, Fisk University Sociologist Lewis Jones and one of Jones’ graduate students, Samuel Adams. Their research, conducted in 1941 and 1942, was sponsored by Fisk University and the Library of Congress. Jones’ unpublished manuscript reports on interviews with generations of residents in Coahoma County which includes Clarksdale, Mississippi. Adam’s master thesis reports on favorite songs heard locally and on the radio by older and younger informants as well as jukebox record titles from five of Clarksdale’s black amusement places. See Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, p. 86-102.

**That Bright Light City**


Black and tan clubs, see Kenny, *Chicago Jazz*, p. 17.

Vetted by the Musician’s Protective Union Local 208, see Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes*, p. 164-165, 170.

Stroll venues and performers, Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes*, p. 46-50 (Map of the nighttime Stroll, p. 46); Kenny, *Chicago Jazz*, p. 5-26; and Chicago Jazz Archives available at [https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/su/cja/jazzmaps/maphome.htm](https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/su/cja/jazzmaps/maphome.htm).

“Black musicians were models of sophistication,” Kenny, *Chicago Jazz*, p 37.

“The Stroll suffered financially in late 1920s” and Savoy as “most elegant, elaborate and expensive entertainment complex,” Kenny, *Chicago Jazz*, p. 16,162.

Mayor Thompson and the Volstead Act, Kenny, *Chicago Jazz*, p. 151

Bessie Smith “No one wants to hear the blues no more, times is hard,” quoted in Ken Burns, *Jazz, Episode 4: The True Welcome: 1929 to 1934*, (PBS, 2001).

Archibald Motley and the nighttime Stroll, see Baldwin, ’Midnight Was Like Day,’ p.47-52, 63-70. Motley’s paintings of the nighttime Stroll are displayed throughout Baldwin’s chapter.


Flexibility to work with diverse group of vocalists, see Kenny, *Chicago Jazz*, p. 47.

Mayo Williams hired Dorsey, Parham and Austin; see Kenny, *Chicago Jazz*, p. 126.


**I’m Going Home on the Morning Train**


Arizona Dranes, Sister Rosetta Tharp and Elder Lucy Smith, see Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes*, p. 165-166, 169-170.
Rosetta Tharp was a favorite among young listeners in the Delta, Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, p. 93.


“Low down dirty blues,” see Handy, *Father of the Blues*, p. 216.


Dorsey and attitudes toward proper church music, see Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes*, p. 156-158;


**IV. Blame it on the Blues**


For Ma Rainey as performer, see Lieb, *Mother of the Blues*, p. 4-5, 7-13, 16-17, 31-33. Lieb provides the first detailed biography of Gertrude “Ma” Rainey including a discography of her recordings.

Ma Rainey claimed to have first heard the blues in 1902 from a girl who began to sing about the “man” who had left her, quoted in Lieb, *Mother of the Blues*, p. 3. Handy claims to have first heard the blues around the same time; see Handy, *Father of the Blues*, p. 78. The (Yellow) Dog refers to the Yazoo Delta railroad that crosses the Southern railroad at Moorhead, Mississippi. Handy published the “Yellow Dog Blues” in 1922.

Dorsey played in juke joints and rent parties in Atlanta and later at buffet flats and rent parties in Chicago, Marovich, *A City Called Heaven*, p. 72; Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes*, p. 164-165, 170.


“Riverside Blues,” performed by King Oliver, see Marovich, *A City Called Heaven*, p. 74. “Loveless Love,” performed by Erskine Tate and Alberta Hunter, see Handy, *Father of the Blues*, p. 154.


Dorsey marries Nettie Harper Marovich, *A City Called Heaven*, p. 75,


Robert Johnson in early 1930s, see Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, p. 121 (proud of first records), 127 (influenced by most prolific Chicago recording artists), 130-185 (influences on his recordings). Charlie Patton bought a new car every year; David Evans, *Charlie Patton Biography*, Part I, 2005, p. 13 available at


Scrappin’ Blackwell and “Kokomo Blues;” see Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, p. 133, 139.


Charlie Patton’s trip to Grafton; see Palmer, *Deep Blues*, p. 82-83.

**V. I’m a Steady Rollin’ Man**


**Ramblin’ on my Mind**

Biographical source on Robert Johnson used here (which are at times in disagreement over the facts of Johnson life) include, Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, p. 105-125; Graves, *Crossroads*,


It is interesting to consider the version(s) of “My Blue Heaven” Johnson might have heard. It was a Count Basie favorite. Crooner Gene Austin had a best-selling hit with it in 1928. Jimmie Lunceford recorded a version in 1935 that would have appealed to Johnson (https://youtu.be/zuVna91Zv4Q). Artie Shaw’s version was released in 1941 and on the jukebox at Lucky’s in Clarkdales in 1941-42, but too late for Robert to have heard it. See Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, p. 98, 279.

Delta blues innovators; settlers preparing for a move to Chicago; Chicago only city mentioned; Ward, *Escaping the Delta*, p. 85, 90, 102.

Generation that came of age in 1920s to 1940s; see Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, p. 87-91.

Robert Johnson’s generation that moved to Chicago; see Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, p. 86, 90.

**Me and the Devil Blues**

Demonic terms; see for example Pete Welder, “Hell Hound on his Trail: Robert Johnson,” p. 73-74.

Story of Son House and selling soul to devil; Pete Welder, “Hell Hound on his Trail: Robert Johnson,” p. 103. Son House reportedly would wave away requests to repeat the story.


“My old evil spirit can catch a Greyhound,” noted in Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, p. 177-178.


If I had Possession

Don Law on Johnson first recording session; see Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, p. 120-121; Graves, *Crossroads*, p. 32-35.

The legal feud over ownership of the two confirmed photos of Robert Johnson (the Hooks Brothers and “dime store” photographs) is discussed in Graves, *Crossroads*, p. 87-96. A fuller discussion of the agreement between LaVere and Carrie Thompson and subsequent disputes over ownership of Robert Johnson’s songs and the photographs is provided in the Estate of Carrie Thompson et al. versus Stephen C. LaVere et al. before the Supreme Court of Mississippi; available at [https://courts.ms.gov/images/HDList/..%5COpinions%5CCO92269.pdf](https://courts.ms.gov/images/HDList/..%5COpinions%5CCO92269.pdf).

For legal dispute as to whether Claud Johnson is son and heir to the estate of Robert Johnson and testimony of Eula Mae Williams, see In RE: the Estate of Robert L. Johnson, Deceased, before the Supreme Court of Mississippi, available at http://caselaw.findlaw.com/ms-supreme-court/1439960.html.


The third photo is available on the Getty Images website with the following description: “Legendary American blues singer-songwriter and guitarist Robert Johnson (1911-1938), left, with fellow blues musician Johnny Shines (1915-1992), circa 1935. This image, one of only three known photographs of Johnson, has been extensively retouched. (Photo by Robert Johnson Estate/Hulton Archive/Getty Images).”

On the cover of Escaping the Delta, Elijah Wald adds a cigarette to the Hooks Brothers photo of Johnson.
VI. Back to that Same Old Place

“Sweet Home Chicago” recordings; early versions include Tommy McClennan (1939), Walter Davis (1941), Junior Parker (who had a hit in 1959 that included the lines “back to that same old place, sweet home Chicago”); see Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, p. 139.


Ida B. Wells homes as haven for lower middle class; see Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, p. 660.


On Robert Taylor; see Chicago Municipal Agency for Planning (CMAP), *A Feasibility Study for Black Metropolis National Heritage Area*, 2013, p. 43.


Bronzeville housing units and the Plan for Transformation; see CMAP, *A Feasibility Study for Black Metropolis National Heritage Area*, 2013, p. 16.

Impact of Great Recession on foreclosures, vacancies and abandoned properties; data from Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University Data Portal available at https://www.housingstudies.org/dataportal/.


“Savvy attempt to claim ownership of community heritage,” see Baldwin, “Chess Moves on a Checkerboard,” 2015, p. 244.


Mariano’s and housing issues, see “Bronzeville Residents Slam CHA For Giving Public Housing Land To Mariano’s,” CBSLocal, February 5, 2015, available at http://chicago.cbslocal.com/2015/02/05/bronzeville-residents-slam-cha-for-giving-public-housing-land-to-marianos/.


Harold Washington Cultural Center programs; see [http://hwccchicago.org/](http://hwccchicago.org/)

**Trick you one time, sure gon’ do it again**


Updated January 3, 2016