

Charlton Oral History Research Grant, Baylor Institute for Oral History
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Talking the Blues: An Oral History of Blues Musicians in Austin, Texas

Project Description

Background and Purpose of the Research¹

Despite its rich blues history, Austin, the capital of Texas, is better known in the popular imaginary as the seat of Texas country music and home to the “cosmic cowboy” and “progressive country” movements of the 1970s. The central goal of my oral history project is to chronicle the under-documented history of Austin’s evolving blues scene through oral history interviews with artists who have been an integral part of it and, in the process, better understand the complex history of the city itself, especially desegregation and its impact on contemporary race relations there. A secondary, but no less important goal is to use oral history as a methodology for exploring the philosophical and rhetorical/symbolic dimensions of authenticity, a concept that scholar Hilde Heynen describes as “one of the important driving forces of our culture.”² Austin’s blues scene is a prime example of what rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke calls a “representative anecdote” for the ways that blues authenticity is always articulated to specific, localized scenes.³ Austin race relations in the twentieth century were inextricably yoked to the local blues scene there, making it a particularly fecund site for analyzing the identity politics of authenticity in the blues and shedding light on our larger cultural fascination with authenticity today—a concept that is also of particular interest to oral historians.

Since its emergence in the mid-1970s, rap has grown to become the dominant form of contemporary African American musical and cultural expression in the U.S., but the blues, an older African American musical idiom with West African roots, continues to enjoy widespread popularity around the globe. In his introduction to *All Music Guide to the Blues*, Cub Koda describes the blues as “a bedrock musical form” that “has *always* been here.”⁴ Its origins can be traced back at least as far as the early 1900s, when artists such as Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and W.C. Handy claimed they first heard songs that were representative of the genre.⁵ Over the past century the blues has evolved into a powerful cultural force: it is performed by both black and white musicians (and increasingly by whites), it has a worldwide (and since the 1960s predominantly white) audience, and its widespread influence on popular music is evident in genres such as jazz, rock, funk, and, most recently, rap and hip-hop.

¹ Portions of this narrative previously appeared in Roger Davis Gatchet, “‘I’ve Got Some Antique in Me’: The Discourse of Authenticity and Identity in the African American Blues Community in Austin, Texas,” *Oral History Review* 39, no. 2 (2012).

² Hilde Heynen, “Questioning Authenticity,” *National Identities* 8, no. 3 (2006): 299.

³ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1945), 59-61.

⁴ Cub Koda, *All Music Guide to the Blues*, 3rd ed., eds. Vladimir Bogdanov, Chris Woodstra, and Stephen Thomas Erlewine (San Francisco: Backbeat, 2003), vii (original emphasis).

⁵ Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: Norton, 1971), 332.

The regional variety blues fans enjoy today—from the fingerpicking style known as “Piedmont” blues on the East Coast, to the swinging jump blues of the West Coast, and everything in between—developed largely because of the two Great Migrations, the diaspora of black laborers out of the South and into urban centers in the North, West, Midwest, and Northeast U.S. that took place from 1915 to 1930 and 1940 through 1970. As a result, a unique style developed in and around Texas, a state that has a long and rich blues history. Although there is no shortage of books in both the academic and popular press detailing the history and development of the blues in cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and Memphis, less work has been done on Austin. Several excellent studies have been published in recent years that focus on Texas cities, including Houston, Dallas, and San Antonio, but to date there has been no comprehensive study of the musicians who have contributed to the storied blues scene in Austin.⁶

In 1928, city planners called for the creation of a “Negro district” in East Austin as part of efforts to segregate the city along the East Avenue corridor, now the site of Interstate Highway 35. “It was segregated here hard,” recalls East Austin blues artist Donald “Duck” Jennings, one of the musicians who will be interviewed for this project.⁷ Within this segregated community, however, blacks created spaces where they could enjoy music and forge strong social ties. By the 1950s, a vibrant blues scene had developed there, based around popular black-owned clubs. Decades before Austin christened itself the “Live Music Capital of the World,” the city held a small yet prominent place on the national blues scene by virtue of its location on the Chitlin’ Circuit, a loose collection of venues throughout the country where touring black performers could play for enthusiastic black audiences. As historian Allen O. Olsen argues, Austin’s unique reputation on the Chitlin’ Circuit was fortified by the success of similar black clubs in San Antonio, where artists were “continuing an age-old tradition of bringing fresh musical ideas into black neighborhoods and helping to create the kind of communal events that brought people together to share in a dynamic cultural exchange.”⁸ Internationally known artists, such as B.B. King and Ike and Tina Turner, were among some of the more prominent musicians who frequented East Austin during this time. This cultural enclave included numerous black-owned blues clubs or “juke joints,” such as the historic Victory Grill, venues that provided gainful employment for local artists and touring musicians alike.

East Austin juke joints, particularly Charlie’s Playhouse, were also some of the first sites to experiment with desegregation in Austin, years before the city began the official, legal process of integration. Although it was rare for Jennings and other artists to find work playing in West Austin clubs when the city was legally segregated, he was one of the few black musicians who got booked regularly for fraternity and sorority events for white students. Jennings was a

⁶ See Roger Wood, *Down in Houston: Bayou City Blues* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003); Alan Govenar, *Texas Blues: The Rise of a Contemporary Sound* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008); and Bill Minutaglio, *In Search of the Blues: A Journey to the Soul of Black Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

⁷ Donald “Duck” Jennings, interview by Roger Gatchet, February 16, 2008, Project in Interpreting the Texas Past: African American Texans Oral History Project, Austin, TX.

⁸ Allen O. Olsen, “The Post-World War II ‘Chitlin’ Circuit’ in San Antonio and the Long-Term Effects of Intercultural Congeniality,” *Journal of Texas Music History* 7, no. 1 (2007): 24.

member of Bluesboy Hubbard and the Jets, an all-black band fronted by Henry “Bluesboy” Hubbard, another musician who will be interviewed for this project. The Jets’ popularity at Greek social events led many white university students to venture into East Austin to watch Hubbard and his band perform at Charlie’s Playhouse. Speaking of this era, Hubbard remembers, it got “to the point where if you went to Charlie’s on a Friday or Saturday, the place was completely white. It would be like ninety-eight percent white.”⁹ Jennings, who continues to play in a band with Hubbard today, agrees. “They’d be in there like flies,” he says, referring to the large number of white students that visited the club operated by Charlie and Ira Gilden.¹⁰

For Jennings, blues music carried the potential to help facilitate the complex process of integration throughout Austin, especially after Clifford Antone, who was white, opened his famous namesake blues club in East Austin in the summer of 1975. “So the music helped bring people together,” Jennings says, “people of different color and people of color, it brought us all together because it didn’t matter about you being there white, and I’m being there black. We come for the entertainment.”¹¹ One of the unfortunate consequences of desegregation in Austin, however, was the closing of the more prominent clubs that anchored the East side blues scene. As these clubs faced greater competition from white-owned venues like Antone’s, many struggled to stay open as black blues musicians sought more and higher-paying gigs in clubs throughout the city.¹² Increasing numbers of whites were now not only attending blues performances, but were playing blues professionally as well. Cultural scholar Barry Shank has argued that “the African-American community in East Austin nurtured a blues culture that would come to reinforce the developing white blues scene in the late sixties and seventies—even as one remained clearly and firmly separated from the other.”¹³ Even as East Austin’s blues scene waned, white artists like Stevie Ray and Jimmie Vaughan, Kim Wilson, Angela Strehli, and others found success performing their own interpretations of black music to mixed-race audiences throughout the city. This continues to be true of the larger Austin blues scene today; no longer delimited by the boundaries of the East side, it is a largely integrated scene where musicians from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds perform in mixed-race bands together.

The interviews that will be conducted for this project will help document Austin’s integrated blues scene and in the process explore a number of other potential topics such as class, race, and gender, and their relationship to authenticity; racism and race relations in Austin; segregation and desegregation; politics and the Civil Rights Movement; domestic and military service; and the history of East Austin’s black community.

⁹ Henry “Bluesboy” Hubbard, interview by Roger Gatchet, February 19, 2008, Project in Interpreting the Texas Past: African American Texans Oral History Project, Austin, TX.

¹⁰ Jennings, interview.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Jonny Meyers, “Juke Joint Blues: Bluesboy Hubbard Remembers Austin’s Chitlin’ Circuit,” *Austin Chronicle*, July 13, 2007, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/story?oid=oid:501917>.

¹³ Barry Shank, *Dissonant Identities: The Rock’n’Roll Scene in Austin, Texas* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 12.

I will be targeting a variety of potential narrators, all of whom have made significant contributions to the Austin blues scene, with the goal of interviewing at least twelve of the individuals listed below:

- Henry “Bluesboy” Hubbard
- Donald “Duck” Jennings
- Hosea Hargrove
- Mel Davis
- Big Pete Pearson (phone interview; Pearson now lives in Arizona)
- “Blind Orange” Jefferson
- Major Burkes
- Greg Izor
- Eddie Stout
- Mike Keller
- Corey Keller
- Jason Moeller
- Johnny Moeller
- Marcia Ball
- Derek O’Brien
- Sarah Brown
- Eve Monsees
- Mike Buck
- Mel Davis
- Mark “Kaz” Kazanoff
- Kim Wilson (phone interview; Wilson no longer lives in Austin)
- Mark Hays
- J.P. Whitefield
- Gary Clark, Jr.

Previous Research on the Topic and Proposed Outcomes

Between 2008 and 2010 I conducted oral history interviews with eleven Austin blues musicians (two artists, Matthew Robinson and Henry Hubbard, were visited twice). These interviews, which were conducted as part of the Project in Interpreting the Texas Past under the direction of Dr. Martha Norkunas, were used in research that became part of my 2011 doctoral dissertation at the University of Texas at Austin, titled “The Struggle for Authenticity: Blues, Race, and Rhetoric.” I later published an analysis of some of those interviews in an essay published in the Summer-Fall 2012 issue of *Oral History Review* titled, “I’ve Got Some Antique in Me’: The Discourse of Authenticity and Identity in the African American Blues Community in Austin, Texas.”

Those interviews focused on many of the topics that this current project will focus on as well. Indeed, this grant is intended to help me greatly expand the collection of oral history narratives I collected between 2008 and 2010. In addition to presenting a paper at the 2015 or 2016 Oral History Association convention, the new interviews that will be supported by the

Charlton grant will allow me to achieve three potential public outcomes: First, they will be used to expand a chapter on authenticity and Austin blues musicians in a scholarly book I developed out of my doctoral dissertation (working title: *I've Got Some Antique in Me: Blues, Race, and the Rhetoric of Authenticity*). The full manuscript has already been peer reviewed at The University of Alabama Press, and Editor-in-Chief Daniel Waterman has requested that I submit a revised manuscript based on those reviews; the addition of a dozen new oral history interviews will greatly strengthen the book as I work on revising it for publication. Second, I plan on editing a new book for a more general audience that focuses specifically on Austin's blues scene. The book will open with an introduction that surveys the history of this scene, but its primary content will be a compilation of the interviews conducted for this oral history project. I plan on submitting a proposal for this project to the University of Texas Press.

In addition to these two book projects, I intend to develop a public lecture or program to be held either at my current institution (Eastern New Mexico University) or, if possible, at an alternate location in Austin, Texas, that focuses on key themes and memorable excerpts from the interviews. I continue to have close contact with colleagues at the University of Texas at Austin and DiverseArts Culture Works, a non-profit multidisciplinary cultural arts organization dedicated to the long-term development of the Austin African American Cultural Heritage District. DiverseArts has organized public oral history programs in the past, and I believe they would be very interested in collaborating with me on a new program that features the artists I will be interviewing.

Planned Arrangements for Conducting the Interviews

I write for the national magazine publication *Living Blues*, I play blues harmonica, and I volunteered as a disc jockey at radio station KVRX in Austin, Texas, where I hosted a weekly blues radio program for six years. Therefore, I have deep connections to the Texas blues community, particularly in Austin, and have established contacts with blues musicians, club owners, and record label owners there. I already know most of the narrators I hope to interview, and several have already agreed to record an oral history interview with me.