

# Obituary

## Obituary: Paul Oliver (1927–2017)

The headline achievements in Paul Oliver's extraordinary career as a blues scholar are easy enough to list. After all, the body of work he produced in this field is generally accepted as the single most influential contribution; his writings and talks probably introduced more people to blues music, created more fans and inspired more researchers than anyone else's; he pioneered the use of commercial blues recordings as key material for blues scholarship; he played a major role in establishing what became the dominant narrative driving understandings of blues history and of its meanings; and, bringing together textual analysis, archival, documentary and oral history, and anthropology (including fieldwork), he established a persuasive model of interdisciplinary work – the sort of model that most popular music scholars have seen as essential in their field.

All this has been said often enough – for example, in this journal's own tribute to Paul to mark the occasion of his 80th birthday (*Popular Music*, 26/1 [2007]), as well as in the many obituaries – and it merits repeating, often. Here, though, I want to write something with a more personal slant. Despite my huge respect for Paul's work, and affection for the man, it would be false to attempt to disguise the fact that our approaches to blues, and to popular music studies more generally, diverged in several ways. While eulogies from whatever source are entirely appropriate, a tribute from a 'critical friend' is surely particularly telling. The wry grin from the subject that I visualise at this point suggests to me that he would not disagree.

I came to blues as a student in the early 1960s via jazz and then R'n'B – a not unfamiliar story. When the moment arrived to contemplate doctoral study – which I was determined would be in popular music – an obvious focus seemed to me to be the role of blues in the development of pop: from Elvis to the Rolling Stones, its centrality seemed clear; and besides, the music knocked me out. At that point I'm pretty sure I had never heard of Paul Oliver – a measure of the naivety of my enthusiasm (if it had been longer established, I would have discovered the many articles he had contributed to jazz journals during the 1950s). This ignorance didn't last long. I soon discovered *Blues Fell This Morning* (1960) and *Conversation with the Blues* (1965), which were eye-opening, the first for its acute insights into ways in which the meanings of blues lyrics were embedded in the fabric of African American life, the second for its revelations through interviews with singers of the emotional significance of the music to them – its *authenticity*. At the same time, though, I was discovering other material, and some of it was pointing me in different directions. While Paul seemed to portray a very bounded and disappearing culture – a 'folk past' – and had at best mixed feelings about both the white-driven blues 'revival' and the commercialisation of black music, I was interested in the relationship between blues and (mainly white) pop music and was becoming convinced that this could only be understood in the context of a very long history of inter-racial and inter-cultural

encounter. Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), though a black nationalist, took very much this line in his *Blues People* (1963): African American music, while absolutely specific, was – precisely and importantly – an *American* music; and Ralph Ellison, expanding on the message of his wonderful novel, *Invisible Man* (1953), made a similar point in *Shadow and Act* (1967). Then there was Charles Keil's *Urban Blues* (1966) which, far from lamenting the decline of 'down-home' traditions, set its ethnomusicological sights on the present, on the big city, on the glitzy modern styles of B. B. King, Bobby Bland and Ray Charles. This was the world of Soul music, Civil Rights and Black Power, which seemed to me exactly where the blues lineage was headed.

Notoriously, Keil caricatured a certain approach to the quest for 'genuine' blues singers as the 'moldy fig mentality'. To qualify, discoveries had to be old, toothless, blind, obscure, with a small output and connections to one of the legendary figures in the Deep South past. Paul was no 'moldy fig'. His first book was a biography (the first) of Bessie Smith, who enjoyed huge commercial success in the 1920s and a colourful show-biz life-style. Nevertheless, there was an unmistakable tinge of nostalgia in the writing – a sense that the best of the vernacular wonder that was blues had gone and the culture was fading under pressure from mass entertainment. Even if the *otherness* of blues was an important part of what appealed to pop musicians and to white adolescents in general, I wanted to ask if there wasn't a more differentiated, hybridising music culture than was being presented here, and if it wasn't possible for blues to mutate and to maintain an aesthetic and cultural value even within the belly of the commercial beast.

Some of these doubts were assuaged by *The Story of the Blues* (1969) and *Savannah Syncopators* (1970). In the first of these, it's true, the same overall narrative framework, with its decline-and-fall element, is still present, but this is significantly qualified by new emphases on geographical differentiation, on the importance of migration (with a particular focus on the northern city ghettos) and on the broader, often hybrid musical field within which blues developed. The wonderful collection of images, drawn from many different types of source, helps create this sense of a more complicated history. In addition, some musicians who had previously been ignored – T-Bone Walker, Ray Charles, Buddy Guy – now make an appearance. *Savannah Syncopators* had a terrific appeal to me. Influenced by reading the anthropologist, Melville Herskovits, I had myself tried to point to the importance of the likely retentions of African traits in African American music, including blues. Paul now offered a persuasive and innovative theory built on inter-disciplinary research: fieldwork in Ghana, historical data and linguistic and musical analysis. I wasn't qualified then, and am not now, to give an authoritative assessment of the theory – but I trust John Baily when he cites in support the judgement of his fellow ethnomusicologist, Gerhard Kubik, whose expertise in this area is unrivalled (in *Popular Music*, 26/1, p. 21). Over a decade later, in 1984, the sense produced by these two books of a steadily broadening vision in Paul's work on blues was confirmed, and extended again, by *Songsters and Saints*, a pioneering study, drawing on early 20th-century recordings, of African American religious music on the one hand, and the repertoires of black 'songsters', which often included blues but many other song genres as well, on the other. The overall picture of the career that emerges (and continues after the 1980s) is of a capacity to change, to re-assess, to move on, that offers an exemplary model for scholars.

Underpinning this trajectory, there is, I believe, a distinct theory of culture. However, it is never really articulated as theory. This points to the biggest divergence

of all between Paul and myself. Like many coming into popular music studies in the 1960s and after, I was convinced of the need to theorise what I was doing, and was indeed captivated by theory (perhaps too much). Paul, in contrast, insisted on the primacy of the material; he wanted to rescue it and rub our noses (or rather our ears) in it, and he was sceptical about 'theory'. I think we each knew that we would never agree on this.

If I now try to balance the critical edge in my remarks with (in addition to the sheer bulk of the achievements listed in my opening paragraph) a summary of those dimensions of Paul's work that I personally most value, it's actually his 'empiricism' that comes first. However problematic one might consider this position to be, reminders of the irreducibility of the *concrete material*, of the stuff of what Marx liked to call 'real life', are always salutary. Moreover, in a strange way, moves within cultural theory itself – first with post-structuralism, where 'stuff' always evades the rule of the signifier, and even more with the Heideggerian turn (from Lacan to Badiou) – result, ironically, in the sense of a doubling back to an encounter with the sheer 'thisness' of particular experience. A second point of great value arises, again ironically, from the folk model with which Paul worked. Whatever its limitations, the focus on *vernacular creativity*, on what people make for and by themselves, shines ever more brightly as the seemingly unstoppable forces of commodification continue to simultaneously tighten and expand their grip. If in art nothing ever truly dies, we can be confident that the 'archeology' of blues for which Paul strove will continue to have an active effect. This leads me to a third point. For Paul, as for me (and indeed for all popular music scholars), the vernacular is also necessarily the *subaltern*; and validating the culture of the subaltern necessarily involves, in the case of black music, an anti-racist position. It is impossible to over-emphasise the strength of this element within Paul's scholarly life, and in the age of Trump and Black Lives Matter, it could hardly be more significant. At the same time, any white, middle-class scholar engaging with the subaltern, especially the black subaltern, and seeking to enter and interpret that world, is inevitably entering a relationship that unsettles all theoretical assumptions, and I believe that Paul thought about and worried away at this issue at least as much as I did.

Paul was of a somewhat older generation than most of the early proponents of popular music studies and, as I have tried to suggest, his perspective differed in some ways from approaches that became prevalent. Perhaps it's the obvious enduring value of those deeply humane principles that I have just summarised which helps to explain why, nevertheless, he could commit himself so enthusiastically to the emergent institutions and activities of this new area of work. He was a founding and active member of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music, and, coming closer to home, a founding board member of this journal and subsequently a member of the Editorial Group. His wise and thoughtful editorial contributions were as valued as the pieces he published with us. He will be greatly missed.

RICHARD MIDDLETON

Tributes to the life, work and legacy of Paul Oliver came relatively quickly following his passing in August 2017. Obituaries in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian* are a simple but clear indication of the transatlantic reach and influence of his work. Referred to as a 'pre-eminent authority on the blues', the 'scholar who helped spur a blues revival', and someone who 'inspired many people to discover the blues', there is widespread recognition of his role in shaping the appreciation of the blues as a distinct form of African American music and since the late 1950s. Letters in response to *The Guardian's* obituary corroborate these tributes but also commemorate Oliver's generosity, and influence on younger scholars eager to learn more about the blues during the 1960s and beyond.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike many that knew and worked alongside Oliver during the post-World War II blues revival years, I find myself writing about him from a very different generational perspective. Indeed, many of those paying tribute to him are historians, musicologists, cultural critics and even musicians whose work I have also greatly admired since I became interested in the blues as a teenager in the early 1990s. While I had the fortune of interviewing and getting to know Oliver personally between 2009 and 2013 as I worked on my book *Blues, How Do You Do?* (Michigan, 2015), he had made his mark on me many years earlier. It is no exaggeration to attribute my transition from a mere blues aficionado to (eventually) a cultural historian to the work of Paul Oliver.

To explain, I must indulge in the old cliché of reminiscing about my first experience of hearing the blues, much like W.C. Handy's fabled tale of hearing 'the weirdest' sound he'd ever heard while waiting for a train in Tutwiler, Mississippi back in 1903, or even Oliver's story of hearing African American GIs singing while working in Suffolk in 1942. My 'Handy moment' was of the mass media and television age. I first heard Howlin' Wolf's 'Smokestack Lightning' as the soundtrack to a 1995 Budweiser advert (which in itself signals another interesting transition in the use of the blues for marketing and consumer capitalism in the late 20th century), in which a lone man travelled by train across the American desert. Like many blues aficionados, I fell for this romantic imagery and was captivated by the song's eerie and compelling sound. Similar to many adolescents growing up in the 1990s, I was already fascinated by American popular culture in terms of music and movies, but the blues seemed to open up another more mysterious world. Shortly after that, I started down a conventional road of collecting blues records and learning to play the guitar. While at university, I became much more interested in the lives of the musicians I'd been hearing and the places where the music came from, and became

<sup>1</sup> William Grimes, 'Paul Oliver, pre-eminent authority on the blues, dies at 90', *The New York Times*, 17 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/17/arts/music/paul-oliver-authority-on-the-blues-dies-at-90.html> (accessed 13 October 2017); Matt Schudel, 'Paul Oliver, scholar who helped spur a blues revival, dies at 90', *The Washington Post*, 17 August 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/paul-oliver-scholar-who-helped-spur-a-blues-revival-dies-at-90/2017/08/17> (accessed 13 October 2017); 'Paul Oliver, scholar of housing and expert on the blues – obituary', *The Telegraph*, 20 August 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/obituaries/2017/08/20/paul-oliver-scholar-housing-expert-blues-obituary/> (accessed 13 October 2017); Elaine Harwood and Tony Russell, 'Paul Oliver obituary', *The Guardian*, 31 August 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/aug/31/paul-oliver-obituary> (accessed 13 October 2017); Mick Gidley, John Gleinster and Giles Oakley, 'Letters: Paul Oliver obituary', *The Guardian*, 13 September 2017 (accessed 13 October 2017).

particularly curious about the manner in which this music emerged amid the troubled experience of Jim Crow segregation. I was essentially echoing the question asked by the music critic Robert Palmer in his book *Deep Blues* (1981): '[h]ow much history can be told by pressure on a guitar string?' I soon found out that Oliver had gone a long way to answering this question.

Oliver's major books on the subject, *Blues Fell This Morning* (1960), *The Story of the Blues* (1969) and *Conversation with the Blues* (1965) covered almost every aspect about the origins, development and meaning of the music, as has been widely acknowledged in recent tributes. However, there much more to Oliver's work. Central to his blues scholarship was the relationship between the blues and the African American experience from the legacies of slavery to the rise of segregation in the American South. The 'composers of the blues', he argued 'sang of their immediate world: of their work, their personal relationships and private predicaments and in doing so gave expressions to their loves, hopes, repressions, superstitions and fears'.<sup>2</sup> Throughout his work Oliver was determined to bring this world to life, and where possible, to let the musicians and their songs speak for themselves. The pinnacle of this effort was the photo-documentary style *Conversation of the Blues*, based on photographs from his first trip to the USA in 1960 and excerpts from interviews. Very much a product of its age in terms of its emphasis on a social history of the forgotten, the imagery of *Conversation* was indicative of the popular aesthetic of the revivalist impulse of the 1960s. However, it also indirectly challenged the widespread use (or what many believed to be appropriation) of the music by young white, and in many cases British, musicians. In other words, you may be singing about roosters, levees and the Delta, but you know not the world they are from. Oliver's work helped to infuse a healthy dose of historical realism into the powerful romantic imagery of the blues revival. Importantly, one could confidently argue that the imagery Oliver captured in this book still holds a spectral presence in popular understandings of the blues as the music of a fading generation from the rural expanses of the American South. One need only think of the popular appeal of the somewhat controversial self-styled bluesman Seasick Steve.

*Conversation with the Blues* was significant also because it demonstrated Oliver's versatility as a scholar (and this is without even mentioning his academic career in architecture). On his first trip to the USA, he became an astute oral historian captivated by the folkloric impulse of capturing as much direct information as possible from a people and culture that were perceived to be on the wane. He clearly had an ability to form meaningful relationships with blues singers and musicians, something which he had developed during the 1950s when singers like Big Bill Broonzy, Lonnie Johnson and Brother John Sellers first arrived in Britain. This ability was intertwined with his close textual analysis of song lyrics as living texts, and was complemented by a sensitive appreciation of the historical context, what he often referred to the blues' 'cultural milieu'. While Oliver's work is not exempt from criticism, particularly in terms of the folkloric paradigm that shaped a considerable proportion of music scholarship in the first half of the 20th century, his approach was extremely progressive in its interdisciplinarity. It is no surprise that he was widely respected by historians, ethnomusicologists and sociologists, not to mention musicians.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: Rare Recordings of Southern Blues Singers*. (1960). These comments appeared on the liner notes to the record which accompanied Oliver's book.

Aside from being the foremost contributor to knowledge about the blues, Oliver was inspirational in terms of providing a scholarly role model. In the years in which I got to him, I also learned that this was not at the expense of modesty or generosity. I greatly admired his unrelenting patience as he was hounded by telephone calls from those eager to get a moment of his time, and somehow finding the tolerance for my questions. He was therefore not only a unique scholar, but a beautiful human being.

CHRISTIAN O'CONNELL