JUKE JOINTS AND SATURDAY NIGHTS
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This is a short article about juke joints and their part in African American music, in particular the blues. But it also sheds some insight on the proverbial innate musicality of Americans of African descent. What seems forgotten here (conveniently once again) is the whole specter of slavery and what that dictated. Some of you blues fans may find this interesting. Let me know.

Juke Joints

The term Juke (or Jook) Joints is probably derived from the Creole "juk" meaning to be disorderly and rowdy. Juke joints are said to have arisen after the emancipation when Jim Crow laws forbade blacks from entering white establishments. The facts show that they existed long before that, probably as early as there were plantations and slaves. In other words, even after the emancipation when slaves were free to leave the plantation they were not allowed in any establishment in town. Proscribed from white society and white establishments of any kind, juke joints arose wherever blacks could gather, socialize, eat, drink, and dance; many also sold grocery items, moonshine, and some even had rooms to rent and other conveniences.

Jook joints were shacks originally built by the plantation owners themselves on their own property to give slaves a place to socialize and blow off steam. Most were open only on Saturday nights and were not much maintained. And juke joints always had music, which meant at least one musician and often two or three. Historically tagged as 'blues' joints, the music originally played in these places was not blues but dance music -- ragtime, slow-drag, etc. What we know as blues today did not actually appear until the early 1900s. In fact musicians were not the focus early on but rather were there just to enable the dancing. It was all about dancing. It could be one happy drunk person dancing and clapping their hands with maybe someone hitting a table along with them or perhaps a harmonica – anything with a beat.

And juke joints could be held anywhere, in someone's home, an abandoned sharecropper's house, any old shack of a building - wherever. In slavery days (and even after) blacks had no transportation, so juke joints had to be within walking distance or reachable by tractor, bicycle, or mule. And there was no law at juke joints.

On plantations the authorities never came unless the owner himself called them in to break something up. It was private land. Later during prohibition and the sharecropping days the sheriff was actually paid to stay away so that the illegal whisky would get sold and everyone in power got a piece of that. The law only came when they were called in on purpose. They never just "showed up."

Most early juke joints were one-room shacks, seemingly always too small for those who filled them. And they were not open the rest of the week, just Saturday nights, so they didn't get much upkeep and they weren't much at all, just some kind of roof, four walls, and a dirt floor.

I did not grow up down south and I am not African American, but as a musician I have played in plenty of bars both black and white. In fact I played more often in black bars than white ones.

Older blacks liked the kind of blues our band played – Chicago-style blues. I never knew the Deep South juke joints but I am sure that most any small bar on a hot summer night after a long week will hit the same pitch, if only for an hour or two. As for the rough quality of juke joints, I have seen knives, guns, clubs, whatever, and actually witnessed one fight (hiding behind our amplifiers) that it took nine police cars to break up.

A juke joint was often an open shack in the back yard with a tin roof. It didn't take much of a place to draw a crowd. People were looking for somewhere to go and any excuse for a place would do. If you have ever found it hard to wait until Friday night when you got off work to visit 'the scene' at some local bar, imagine if that one Saturday night a week was your only chance to let it rip and socialize AND if there were no other opportunities for you than hard work the rest of your entire life aside from singing in church Sundays. That was the case for African Americans before emancipation. Consider that.

I am reminded of the poem "Black on a Saturday Night" by Rita Dove of which this is an excerpt:

"… and an attitude will get you
nowhere fast so might as well
keep dancing dancing till
tomorrow gives up with a shout,
'cause there is only
Saturday night, and we are in it -
black as black can,
black as black does,
not a concept
nor a percentage
but a natural law.

We all can identify with a wish to socialize, especially after a difficult work week. Just imagine if that Saturday night once a week was your only chance to do anything other than what you were told to do AND for your entire life this would be the case. That Saturday night and the following Sunday church service would take on a whole different meaning. And history records that blacks that could sing or play music were more valued than ones that could not.

African-American Music

I find it interesting to read comments about the innate musicality of African Americans. I don't question that. What I question is the myopic view that manages to ignore two-hundred years of slavery when blacks were basically restricted to one night of social gathering and what that might actually mean in their history.

What seems forgotten here (once again) is the whole specter of slavery and what it infers, so I am asking readers to please think about this for a moment. And I am going to repeat some of what I presented earlier.

You are twenty-five years old, young, bright, full of promise, and a slave to some owner of 'you'. While you have your whole life before you, in the slave's case that life is already mapped out in terms of the possible. You work at what you are told from morning until night and what is left? Perhaps you have Sundays off and maybe something like a Saturday night. That's it. You don't have college, schooling, or even trade school. You have no hope of seeing the world or even

this country because you are not free to travel anywhere. You are not free. You are somebody's slave. And depending on how far back we go, you can't even read and write and your owner likes it that way.

I spent a good part of my young adult life studying black music so I know full well blacks are great musicians. Wouldn't you be too if your parents and their parents before them had nothing to look forward to but Saturday night music and Sunday-morning services? Instead of a myriad of possibilities and choices you had no choice and two possibilities. The only social outlet you had each week was perhaps getting together with your own kind on Saturday nights and singing the Gospel in church Sunday mornings. Music and dance were one of the few outlets open to Black Americans and to their forbearers. Everything else was scripted. No wonder blacks know music and dance! It didn't all come from Africa my friends.

Song and Dance

My point is that aside from any traditional culture carried over from Africa centuries ago, plantation life (slavery life) left only a few opportunities for free time; music and dance were often the only social outlets open to slaves and then only at certain times. Life as a slave in America gave African Americans generations of training in music and dance in addition to whatever culture they actually brought with them from Africa. Think about it and I will reiterate please.

You are young, hopeful, energetic, and you have zero plans that involve freedom on your part. Your whole life is already entirely scripted leaving only Sunday church service and perhaps a Saturday night at a juke joint open to you. No wonder black Gospel music is so powerful. And no wonder blues music is so powerful. These were the only outlets open to many black Americans for generations – Saturday nights and Sunday mornings. The rest of the time they were slaves! And the transition from slavery to tenant farming did not change things much for most blacks. In fact as often as not the black tenant farmer ended up owing the plantation owner money at the end of the year – another form of slavery.

There was one break each week. Work stopped for most blacks in the slavery (and tenant) years sometime Saturday afternoon and that is when barbecues and social getting-together began. By Saturday night workers were headed for the juke joints on foot, by tractor, and by mule. Early on the juke joints were right on the plantation itself and black workers would even drive the plantation tractor right to the juke joint with the understanding that as long it was on the plantation they could use the tractor.

I am not going to go into extreme detail on juke joints and what happened there. That has been covered elsewhere but suffice it to say that these places were where the work-week steam was let off, and the later the night got, the more out of control these joints could become. It is said that after 11 PM anything could happen and usually did, everything from bar fights to shootings and knife fights.

My main point is that these Saturday night juke joints were the focus of music, dancing, and celebrating. This is where the blues were born and grew up. This is where dancing was permitted and drinking took place. This was your one night out. And (as mentioned) the law never went to juke joints unless it was called in. That was understood by all. So there was the juke joints music and dancing Saturday night and the gospel singing in church Sunday morning. That was it.

I have pointed out that juke joints or Barrelhouses as they were also called originally were set up on plantations as a place for blacks to socialize on their one night off, which was Saturday. Later on, after the emancipation, when tenant farming had replaced slavery blacks were not allowed at bars and saloons in town so juke joints sprang up just outside of town at crossroads or wherever it was convenient. These joints were often hardly anything at all except a place to meet, drink, gamble, and dance. They were essentially shacks hastily thrown together and often with not enough room for but a few to dance - jammed.

It is true that juke joints were later moved into town, urbanized by whites in the south, and called "Honky Tonks." But the original juke joints were hardly any kind of building at all, with no running water, and so on – just a roof and some side walls. That's it. But juke joints were where everything exciting happened socially for black Americans way back then.

So when we say that blues music and blues musicians were popular with blacks, understand that it means a lot more than just 'popular'. The juke joint scene was all the freedom there was to let off steam and have a good time. Period. That and Sunday morning church service and gospel singing.

The main point here is not to just describe the juke joint scene but to highlight that the skill of black Americans in blues and jazz, in dancing and having a good time, did not only come from Africa. It had generations of extreme focus right here in this country to hone those skills into a veritable lineage. And those who believe that the emancipation changed all that had better get out their history books because tenant farming changed things very little at first and often made things even worse. In slavery African Americans had nothing to lose because they had nothing. As mentioned, with tenant farming they most often went into debt to the plantation owners on top of struggling to make a living.

If your whole life was work unending until you died and that one Saturday night a week of celebration followed by Sunday church were your only social outlets, what would that mean to you? How important would that music be and the musicians that played it? That is my question and also my point.

If blacks are master singers, musicians, dancers, and entertainers it is not just because they brought these skills from Africa. African Americans have had 200 years to refine these skills. It's no wonder that some say that white Americans can't dance and blacks can. And it is no wonder that popular music (especially jazz and rock 'n roll) in America finds its roots in the blues.

And it is not only about dancing and playing music; it is about having a good time in the midst of whatever your situation is, about letting go and grabbing time to celebrate in the moment – being here now. There is wisdom here.

And it's all right there embedded in the music. You can hear it. Growing up I could hear the wisdom in the blues music and it pulled me to it. The music of Pat Boone didn't grab me that way but Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf did. There was something in the music that spoke to me beyond the sounds. These blues musicians knew something that I knew little of and I hungered for it and it was not just the sound of poverty or deprivation.

Later, when I had an opportunity to interview scores of the greatest blues musicians, I got to know these players often on an eyeball-to-eyeball basis. What I heard in the music was backed up by the persons they were. Blues greats like Big Momma Thornton, Arthur Big-Boy Crudup, and Howlin' Wolf were incredible beings that made me feel accepted and welcome.

They had wisdom and life experience I did not have and that my teachers in school did not have. They had what I wanted to learn and I yearned for it. I more or less studied rural folk music, blues, and jazz from the late 1950s until around 1971. And it was an inspiration.

In the early 1970s I found the Tibetan Buddhists, who had the same joy and insight that I found in the great blues artists. And they were also devoted to knowing the true nature of the mind and life. While I never abandoned my blues teachers, I did begin to study and practice with the Tibetans and am still doing that today.

It was never the down-and-out nature of the blues that caught my attention. It was the wisdom of life and the ability to seize the day and find joy in any situation, the ability to master extreme circumstances and still have a life. We all owe a great cultural debt to African Americans.