

INTRODUCTION

Just Turn That Noise Off . . .



People who despise the blues and those opposed to globalization sing the same lament: it all just sounds the same somehow. Those twelve bars, that age-old motif, standardized and marketed worldwide as the moaning of oppressed souls, inflated with virtuosity and sentimentality. Listeners who remain unmoved by these “blue notes” say it is all just musical mass production, nothing but scattered, aggravating noise. And blues fans? They must belong to some strange species, they are barely competent, introverted outsiders—trendsetters should look different. For many people, the very mention of the blues invokes only fixed stereotypes. The qualities constituting the core of the blues’ identity formation are difficult to grasp from an external perspective—and any attempt to define them by technocratic means is doomed to failure. In order to reveal the varied and subtle ways in which this music is filled with meaning, we must look at its impact on society. Many diverse, symbolically charged and sensually adopted forms are hiding beneath that seemingly standardized surface.

This book provides a descriptive comparison of the cultural practices observed in the different blues scenes in East and West Germany, as well as the ways in which the music was transmitted through the media. The comparative method is a “method often invoked, but far from exhausted” (Lindenberger 2014: 31). Since the fall of the Wall, more and more history scholars have been calling for a reciprocal contextualization of the postwar development of both German states.¹ Even though this approach presents a clear opportunity to increase our knowledge about music’s social mechanisms of action, little interest has been demonstrated within the popular music research field.² The following study examines the specific context of meaning that developed around the blues in the East and in the West. The sounds and images of the blues originated in the US and then traveled around the

world—how were they translated into the daily life of divergent social systems? What social processes were at work? How did blues fans share the blues? What were some of the formative, perception-structuring discourses? What was the influence of the official image created by propaganda and the popular media? More pointedly: did the blues truly sound “the same” across all borders? Or should we instead be speaking of sonic impulses eliciting a great variety of resonances, which find their particular form only through a process of cultural application?

In East and West Germany, popular music developed within two general frameworks that could not have been more fundamentally disparate.³ After World War II, the country was divided into a socialist and a capitalist state. In West Germany [*Bundesrepublik Deutschland* or the Federal Republic of Germany, BRD], democratic conditions and a free-market economy prevailed. They looked to the United States for their mass cultural trends,⁴ but there was still enough room beyond big business for alternative initiatives and scenes. East Germany [*Deutsche Demokratische Republik* or the German Democratic Republic, DDR] was centrally organized and ruled by the primacy of ideology. The state greatly limited the scope of action for private actors and monopolized the production and distribution of popular music. It possessed exclusive decision-making power, which was manifested through a widely ramified network of institutions and legal directives.⁵ The entire media sphere and event sector was under its control. Government gazettes declared who was permitted to perform music publicly. Amateurs had to demonstrate both artistic ability and good political behavior to attain a permit, called a *Spielerlaubnis* [authorization to play], to perform. As a rule, professional musicians also had to complete a degree. Professionalism was therefore not defined by market value, but by the candidates’ training and disposition. An elaborate security apparatus monitored the day-to-day dynamics. Cultural movements that claimed their right to individuality and ran counter to socialist egalitarian principles were identified as political threats. The press, radio, and television were all forced into line. In contrast to Western pluralism, public opinion was censored and polished with party doctrine. Propaganda declared that the songs and records coming out of the nationally-owned recording studios were self-sufficient creations and the socialist answer to the manipulative industrial product of Western capitalism—just because they were written in their German mother tongue. In actuality, however, all of the musicians were trying to copy the sound patterns and standards set by the West.⁶

Even though the state went to great lengths to attain total control, it was repeatedly forced to admit to holes in the system. The monolithic unity suggested on paper was in reality subverted by conflicts of interest, pragmatism, corruption, and resistance—their goal of uniform behavior remained an illusion. And although they had intended to direct daily cultural processes by decree, that never came to be. This state of affairs was also reflected in the music world: even the state's vast arsenal of repressive strategies could not stop fans from continuing to develop niche scenes. The Protestant Church provided a highly politically charged safe space, where the honest truth prevailed and every artist deprived of a license by the authorities found a platform.

Those spaces of free expression are at the focus of my analysis. I would like to shed light on the microstructures that existed beyond the calculated state policy channels and big business, both in the East and in the West. Niches and biotopes played a long-lasting role in West Germany as well. “Blues evangelists” (Schwartz 2007b) and “cultural middlemen” (Filene 2000: 5) ensured the efficient dissemination of the music they idolized and affected ideological patterns. As in other places around the world, they had a decisive influence on the development of the blues. They generated indivisible networks and defined the discursive coordinates—all during a time in which today's technological possibilities were a far-distant reality. One of my core questions is precisely how that communication functioned.

“Identity” is the second category of analysis that guided my research. Popular music functions as a bridge between a reservoir of diverse symbols, behavior patterns, and attitudes that serve as markers of differentiation. Only the circle of initiates can decipher their codes. Their cultural context is a space of self-discovery and self-realization. As the British sociologist Simon Frith rightly claimed:

The first reason, then, we enjoy popular music is because of its use in answering questions of identity: we use pop songs to create for ourselves a particular sort of self-definition, a particular place in society. The pleasure that pop music produces is a pleasure of identification—with the music we like, with the performers of that music, with the other people who like it. (Frith 1987: 140)

More generally speaking: “Identity is not a thing but a process—an experiential process which is most vividly grasped *as music*. Music seems to be a key to identity because it offers, so intensely, a sense of both self and others, of the subjective in the collective” (Frith 1996: 110). The following analysis will discuss the creation of a variety of

blues milieus and communities as acts of identity formation. It will also outline internal structures and outside effects and situate ideological benchmarks.

This study focuses on the blues as one of the fundamental pillars of African American music.⁷ Ever since the blues was captured by the record industry in the early 1920s, it has had an enormous effect on the development of popular music. Still today, the blues functions as an idiom of popular music; its influence on contemporary R&B, soul, hip-hop, or rock⁸ cannot go unheard.⁹ And the blues itself has gone through quite a few metamorphoses, shedding its skin countless times. Adaptation is one of the laws of evolution. Even after almost one hundred years of existence in the public media, the blues retains its vitality—that magical quality—forever remaining an alternative to the breathless pace of modernity.¹⁰ Throughout most of that process, however, the genre has been relegated to the sidelines, failing to attain mass approval. Every now and then, the economic wave washes it back up to the top.¹¹ In 2003, the blues genre was briefly put into the international spotlight when the US Senate declared a “Year of the Blues,” prominently sponsored by the automobile company Volkswagen. They issued an “Official Proclamation,” declaring the blues the “most influential form of American roots music,” and “a national historic treasure, which needs to be preserved, studied, and documented for future generations” (*Year of the Blues*). The year 2003 was the hundred-year anniversary of the supposed “discovery” of the blues by the African American band leader and composer William Christopher Handy, thought to be responsible for sharing the music with the rest of the world.¹² The celebrations included many concerts, forms of entertainment, and media activities, one of which was the seven-part film series *Martin Scorsese Presents the Blues: A Musical Journey*. After that short season, however, the blues disappeared back into the netherworld, only visible and audible to a relatively small, committed community of fans.

At this point, it is important to mention that I belong to that circle of insiders, as it will explain my motivations and perspective, in part. I discovered my love of the blues as a teenager. I was struck by the sounds and the messages, the idiosyncratic mixture of passion and detachment. Living in East Germany, I felt the special power of this music and was part of a youth culture who called themselves *Blueser* [*Bluesers*]. We shunned the mainstream and evaded both the system’s temptations and restrictions as much as possible. When the Wall fell, objectives and options changed—the framework was reset. Political tensions disappeared, edges were blurred. No longer a scarce com-

modity, information and recording mediums were now available on an almost unlimited basis. And with the new freedom of movement, the world had opened up for concertgoers. I have remained faithful to the blues as a journalist, radio moderator, and scholar; but most of all as a fan, maintaining familiarity with the current German blues scene. Of course, my biographical background and expert knowledge have had a significant role in my choice of topic and critical approach. For me, translating my subjective experience into academic understanding, thereby bringing together two different competencies, is an opportunity and a challenge. Colleagues such as Paul Oliver, David Evans, and Elijah Wald have all impressively demonstrated that it is certainly a path worth taking. Their personal, emotional approach to the blues has refined research interest in the genre, not dulled it.

My study is based on an abundance of sources: primarily on publicly available or privately-owned archive documents, in addition to academic literature, journalistic reflections, daily and specialized press contributions, television productions, audio recordings, emails, and oral communications.¹³ Most of these documents will be presented here for the first time, having been left to obscurity until now. Major differences emerge when comparing source materials from the East and the West. The release of the internal records from the SED [*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* or Socialist Unity Party of Germany] and the Stasi provided a vast trove of information. That collection's research value can hardly be overestimated. Provided that the study is conducted in a sensitive and critical way, the reports and analyses put together by East Germany's Ministry of State Security can grant unique insights into both the dictatorship and everyday life there. One cannot escape the irony that, in the end, the secret service and its unofficial collaborators turned out to be historical chroniclers. There is precious data on the character and context of the blues scene in East Germany in the state and security apparatus archives. They compiled mountains of files used to support the surveillance and the *Zersetzung* [corruption and disintegration] of countless nonconformists and dissidents. Today, those records can be seen as testimonies to a nation in decline.

Analogous sources do not exist for West Germany. The fans there had their own ways of recording their daily cultural musical experiences. In contrast to East Germany, they were able to express themselves freely and establish alternative channels of communication, such as fanzines, newsletters, and independent newspapers, which did not function as the industry's mouthpiece or pursue despicable profit interests. They worked tirelessly to create a minority fan group net-

work, fighting to demonstrate their power of interpretation and to attain a profit of distinction, as they received barely any media attention at that time. The German Blues Circle took up the cause most energetically. Founded in 1976 in Frankfurt am Main, it was officially registered as an Association for the Promotion of the Blues. Its newsletter, which would publish a total of 358 installments, refused any form of censure. It had a unique way of reflecting the worldview of a clientele with a desire for self-expression and dialogue. In the end, it dominated both internal discourses and the public perception of the West German blues community. The archived documents from the concert agency Lippmann + Rau are of immense historical value. This company brought the blues to the largest European stages and introduced groundbreaking independent productions, thereby increasing the kinds of records available on the market. As the two company managers had their offices in different cities, all important decisions were made by letter or the telex network—a stroke of luck for researchers.

The opening of East Germany's archive set off a real boom in the process of coming to terms with the past. Since then, quite a few areas of historiography have shown an increasingly clear imbalance between research conducted on the East versus on the West, including subjects concerned with the daily cultural and political dimensions of popular music. There has been a much more precise research effort into those aspects for socialist East Germany. Depending on which area is discussed, an examination of the blues tends to move in diverging directions. Its development east of the demarcation line has been analyzed as a multifaceted, youth culture phenomenon above all.¹⁴ The view to the west is focused on the media coverage, biographical and musical aspects, industrial forms of organization, structures of the live sphere, and regional specifics.¹⁵ Moreover, insights and the flow of information still remain in flux to this day, even though the 1945 and 1990 turning points are considered clearly defined terrain historically-speaking, and the separate development occurred during the era of two German states, something which is very much a thing of the past. Depending on the perspective, different aspects from the many diverse contexts either move into the foreground or recede into the background.

The research discussed here approaches this complex context with the help of four case studies that look at the social relevance of the blues during different time periods and within different societal constellations. The goal of this book is not to deliver a seamless chronology or a sweeping encyclopedic examination; it is more interested in clarifying the relevant constitutive relationships. Some individual actors had a deep and lasting effect on the blues, and will therefore be portrayed in

more nuanced detail. All of the information provided here should not obscure the fact that multilayered realities can be represented only on a case-by-case, ideal-typical, and exemplary basis. There are limits to conducting a comparative analysis of the genesis of the blues in the East and in the West due to the differing dominant frameworks in the two states—disparities are unavoidable. In West Germany, economic relations were met with hegemonic urgency, while under socialist rule, it was the dissemination and reception of music that was more politically charged.

The image we have of the blues—all of our associations, clichés, and expectations—has been historically developed. Chapter one will examine the source of that knowledge. It will highlight the first debates in the United States, pursue the transatlantic transfer of ideology to Europe, and observe the specific modes of reflection in East and West Germany. The second chapter situates early blues discourses in the jazz context. The internationally-networked Hot Club movement solidified longstanding interpretive frameworks and promoted the blues as an art form, bringing it to the concert stage after World War II. Bessie Smith was stylized as the standard for how to sing the blues. In West Germany in the 1950s, pioneers such as Günter Boas and Horst Lippmann cleared journalistic paths for the blues. In contrast, East



Figure 0.1. Transformation processes: blues scholar Walter Liniger (*left*) and Sonny Boy Nelson, Greenville, Mississippi, 1991 (photo by Axel Küstner).

German propaganda barely took it into consideration, concentrating instead on jazz as a supposed means of state sabotage.

The third chapter is dedicated to the American Folk Blues Festival. Launched in 1962, with a last run in 1985, the concert series emancipated the blues throughout Europe as an independent genre. Lippmann + Rau followed their artistic and didactic vision in the promotion of that project while simultaneously developing a sound business model. They exported it to East Germany as well, where it was met with an exceptionally positive response. In the 1960s, the festival series functioned as a powerful ideological podium, delivering catchy marketing slogans for the political and sociological interpretation of the blues. Joachim-Ernst Berendt led the phalanx of opinion makers.

The fourth chapter will investigate how a dichotomy between pop and protest developed within the blues at the beginning of the 1970s. Fueled by the myth of Woodstock and washed up to the top by the waves of rock music declared “progressive,” there was a surge in the popularity of the blues. It became more compatible to the masses in the form of “blues rock” and started gaining the interest of major companies. At the other end of the spectrum, counterculture movements in West Germany reclaimed the blues as a device of anti-capitalist subversion. The industrialists’ embrace of the blues was also criticized by orthodox fans. The East German media identified the blues as the voice of the “other America.” But at the same time, it mirrored the social conflicts in their own country. Songs and performances by the East Berlin musician Stefan Diestelmann demonstrated this in a particularly vivid way; and in West Germany, the band Das Dritte Ohr stood out. Many of their lyrics denounced the distortions of capitalism. In 1979, L+R Records went into business. The independent label dedicated itself to the “real” and aesthetically mature, fringe blues. Its collection includes recordings made during field trips to the US.

Chapter five will discuss how West German fans organized themselves in the 1970s and 1980s. For instance, they began publishing the first German magazine in the field, *Blues Forum*, in 1980. As far as national communication and collaboration were concerned, the German Blues Circle took on that responsibility. Its monthly publication *Info* became a platform for the scene’s opinion wars. Discussions revolving around authenticity, race, and commerce relations went on for years. In East Germany, these kinds of battles of interpretation did not play much of a role. There, the blues was reassessed as the soundtrack of the silent resistance, as a cipher for non-conformist youth whose guiding principles, attitudes, and cultural style repertoire originated in the hippie era. Their objection to the “socialist personality” ideal put them

in the security agencies' crosshairs. Protection was offered by private event organizers and the Protestant Church, which held *Bluesmessen* [blues masses] between 1979 and 1986. In the end, the blues faced radical consequences—but not because of the Stasi's stranglehold—it was competitive pressure from emerging youth cultures that led to the blues' loss of appeal and significance.

Notes

1. For example, see Kleßmann 1993; Bösch 2015. Dorothee Wierling (2015: 117) points to “popular culture” as an area of informational value.
2. For the exceptions, see Poiger 2000.
3. For comparative social analysis, see Burrichter, Nakath, and Stephan 2006; Glaser 1997.
4. On the US's influence on early West German youth cultures, see Maase 1992.
5. For more detail: Wicke and Müller 1996; Rauhut 2002: in particular 5–20.
6. For more detail: Rauhut 2002: in particular 5–20.
7. For terminology, history, and typology, see Hoffmann 1994; Wicke, W. Ziegenrücker, and K. Ziegenrücker 2007: 94–102; Wald 2010.
8. For the definition of terminology specific to popular music, see Wicke, W. Ziegenrücker, and K. Ziegenrücker 2007.
9. It is also possible to see the roots of the blues in punk music's aesthetics and attitude, if you are looking for it. See Rapport 2014.
10. On blues as an expression of the modern, and on the dialectic of tradition and progress, see Grist 2007; Middleton 2007.
11. In parts of the American tourism industry, the blues maintains a significant role; for example, in historical places such as Chicago and Memphis or in the Mississippi Delta (see King 2011).
12. W. C. Handy (1873–1958) called himself the Father of the Blues. Handy's friend and confidant, Abbe Niles, a younger, white wall street lawyer and blues expert played a decisive role in establishing that legend. See Hurwitt 2008.
13. Due to the already extensive number of sources, only the cited material will be listed in the bibliography.
14. See Rauhut and Kochan 2009.
15. See Rauhut and Lorenz 2008; Siebers and Zagratzki 2010.