

MULTI-MEDIA FEATURE ON “SONNY’S BLUES”

# Sonny in the Dark: Jazzing the Blues Spirit and the Gospel Truth in James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues”

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## Abstract

The webs of musical connection are essential to the harmony and cohesion of James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues.” As a result, we must explore the spectrum of musical references Baldwin makes to unveil their delicate conjunctions. It is vital to probe the traditions of African-American music—Spirituals, Blues, Jazz, and Pop—to get a more comprehensive sense of how Baldwin makes use of music from the sacred and secular continuum in the African-American community. Looking more closely at the variety of African-American musical genres to which Baldwin refers in the story, we can discern even more the nuances of unity that Baldwin creates in his story through musical allusions, and shed greater light on Baldwin’s exploration of the complexities of African-American life and music, all of which have as their core elements of human isolation, loneliness, and despair ameliorated by artistic expression, hope, and the search for familial ties. Through musical intertextuality, Baldwin demonstrates not only how closely related seemingly disparate (in the Western tradition) musical genres are, but also shows that the elements of the community that these genres flow from and represent are much more in synchronization than they sometimes seem or are allowed to be. To realize kinship across familial (Creole), socio-economic (the brother), and most importantly for this paper appreciation and meanings of musical genres advances to Sonny the communal cup of trembling that is both a mode and an instance of envisioning and treating music in its unifying terms, seeing how they coalesce through a holistic vision.

**Keywords:** James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues,” blues, spirituals, jazz, brother, drugs

**Multi-Media:** A supplementary performance by the author is available on the JBR website.\*

Since its publication in *The Evergreen Review* in 1957 and reprinting in *Going to Meet the Man* in 1965, James Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues" has been lauded as a masterful depiction of the relation of jazz music and the jazz musician to the African-American community. John M. Reilly rightly points out the regenerative power of the Blues: "[I]n the story of Sonny and his brother an intuition of the meaning of the Blues repairs the relationship between the two men who have chosen different ways to cope with the menacing ghetto environment, and their reconciliation through the medium of this African-American musical form extends the meaning of the individual's blues until it becomes a metaphor of Black community."<sup>1</sup> And Sherley Anne Williams plots a blues progression in that the "emphasis is gradually transformed from pain to survival to life. All are linked together by invisible webs, indestructible bonds of tradition and history, and this heritage, once revealed, becomes the necessary regenerative power which makes life possible."<sup>2</sup> Because these webs are essential to the harmony and cohesion of the story, we must explore the spectrum of musical references Baldwin makes to unveil their delicate conjunctions. It is vital to probe the traditions of African-American music—Spirituals, Blues, Jazz, and Pop—to get a more comprehensive sense of how Baldwin makes use of music from the sacred and secular continuum in the African-American community. Looking more closely at the variety of African-American musical genres to which Baldwin refers in the story, we can discern even more the nuances of unity that Baldwin creates in his story through musical allusions, and shed greater light on Baldwin's exploration of the complexities of African-American life and music, all of which have as their core elements of human isolation, loneliness, and despair ameliorated by artistic expression, hope, and the search for familial ties. Through musical intertextuality, Baldwin demonstrates not only how closely related seemingly disparate (in the Western tradition) musical genres are, but also shows that the elements of the community that these genres flow from and represent are much more in synchronization than they sometimes seem or are allowed to be. To realize kinship across familial (Creole), socio-economic (the brother), and most importantly for this paper appreciation and meanings of musical genres advances to Sonny the communal cup of trembling that is both a mode and an instance of envisioning and treating music in its unifying terms, seeing how they coalesce through a holistic vision.

One key to the notion that the story is intended to evoke aural response is the regular references to listening and hearing in the text—a half dozen explicit instances. For example, Sonny emphasizes that his brother does not listen to him, and that it can be difficult for he himself to listen as well, especially with the onus on Sonny to listen on behalf of others as well as himself, and to translate into music the tempestuous nature of existence: "You can't talk it and you can't make love with it, and when you finally try to get with it and play it, you realize *nobody's* listening. So *you've* got to listen. You got to find a way to listen."<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, Sonny invites him to the club to hear what he has to say—an act of courage since sister-in-law Isabel's family has already humiliated Sonny by complaining about his music, about what they hear, because they don't understand

either the music or his obsessive practicing. While Sonny is a jazz performer, Baldwin is also careful to evoke the gospel music tradition in the text through allusions to the songs “Lord, You Brought Me from a Long Way Off,” “The Old Ship of Zion,” “God Be With You’ Til We Meet Again,” and “If I Could Only Hear My Mother Pray Again” (note the hearing reference here as well), and to make Biblical references such as the “cup of trembling” at the end of the story. By providing a Christian context for the story as well, Baldwin reminds us of the importance of hearing in the Biblical tradition. In Isaiah 22:14 and 50:4, the prophet gives precedence to hearing over seeing, and Deuteronomy 5:1 and 6:30 and Jeremiah 2:4 invoke the Jewish faith with the phrase “shema Ysrael”—Hear, O Israel. What Baldwin does is recognize the relationship between the gospel and jazz traditions—their similar origins, techniques, and even content—and make a case for the sacred nature of what Sonny is doing with the “good-time” music of which his brother was so afraid.<sup>4</sup> The brother must listen to Sonny’s story of painful but holy inspiration: Hear, O Brother, the story of the drinking from the sacred vessel. On the one hand it is the cup from which all the wicked of the earth must drink (Psalms 75:8); on the other the cup of salvation (Psalms 116:13), which variously refers to a cup frequently used for divination, the cup of the Eucharist, or the holy grail. Or perhaps even more crucially: the cup of God’s wrath that is taken from the hands of his people and placed in the hands of their enemies—a message of optimism and reassurance, and an expectation of deliverance (Isaiah 51:17, 22). The blues that Sonny is playing, in a jazz style influenced by Charlie Parker and his generation of boppers, pounds away at a gospel message to which the brother, and the entire community, must listen, not from the standpoint of some sacred-secular dichotomy, which is not always distinct in African diasporic traditions, but from the perspective of the wholeness of the multi-vocal tradition. Stylistically this is strongly reminiscent of the quintessentially musically-oriented African-American writer, Langston Hughes. For example, Hughes claims in “Bop” that the word stems from the sounds of billy clubs on black folks’ heads, making a crucial connection between socio-political awareness and cultural production, and tracing the sources of African-American art to the experiences of the Black masses and a primary purpose of African-American art to unify the family/community that has become fragmented.

Of course, the events of the story take place in an ambience that is not alien to that of the blues, evoking as they do the frequent sensations of darkness, the shadows, the trap, the struggling, the isolation, the icy dread that can be associated with the blues. However, these are by no means the only settings or tones of the blues; neither are they exclusive to the blues. Spirituals, gospel music, and jazz spring from these same settings, the world in which we must live, and thus allude to these elements. All make use of similar modes or performance, distinguished by particular musical characteristics and spiritual values, which identify their origins and relatedness, but preserve an individuality that is much like the soloist’s performance practice: showing relationship to the community traditions, and expressing an important newness and individuality as well. The

troubles of the blues are like the spiritual and gospel songs that describe traveling in the lonesome valley or the lament of the motherless child or the hard road that Jordan is to travel. Furthermore, like the blues, they provide a way to acknowledge, manage, and transcend them through philosophy, attitude, and performance. Set off against the references to darkness, Baldwin makes a half-dozen references to light in the text as well. David Leeming has pointed out that Beauford Delaney was crucial for Baldwin in showing how the various genres of African-American music were related: "Delaney was to reconcile for his protégé the music of the Harlem streets with the music of the Harlem churches." This reconciliation of what some commentators would see as opposites—sacred and secular—is important because the recognition that those supposed opposites exist on a continuum of function and meaning that demonstrates how closely related they are is important to Baldwin's meaning in "Sonny's Blues" and other works. Both Saadi Simawe and Clarence E. Hardy III discuss how Baldwin connects blues to gospel music in Baldwin's *The Amen Corner* for example, and Hardy asserts that the "blues achieves a kind of sacred status" in Baldwin's last novel *Just Above My Head*.<sup>5</sup> However, it is possible to see this as telegraphed at least as early as "Sonny's Blues" in Baldwin's work. Historically, the intergenerational backdrop for Sonny's problems—the murder of Sonny's good-timing singer-guitarist uncle in the South that haunts his father—follows the family North in the migratory pattern and theme of restless movement that was reflected in the lyrics of the first generation of blues singers, whose music partly grew out of new social situations of geographical mobility following the end of slavery. Yet there was also the context of slave spirituals in which people expressed a yearning to escape enslavement and hardships for the journey to the Promised Land that was also a motivator as well, since it was associated, hopefully however faultily, with the North. The historical and social context that Baldwin provides here once again clearly unites the African-American sacred and secular musical traditions in a way that reveals commonality rather than bifurcation. Dealing with pain and suffering through ritual acts is not the exclusive province of either form of music. As Warren J. Carson points out, the joy and suffering in Baldwin's work are expressed in music that "may be gospel or blues, spiritual or jazz—it does not matter which one, or whether it is a combination of two or more forms."<sup>6</sup> The genres of music, like the members of the family and members of the community, transcend the philosophical, spiritual, and artistic differences that characterize them. Like a jam session, they engage each other, not to destroy, but to produce a wholeness that comes from listening and hearing different points of view.

Echoes from various songs found in these African-American musics, as well as to performers whose work is seminal and to performance settings, abound in the story. The earliest reference comes in a section where the brother juxtaposes two scenes from the past that involve his mother. Once again, Baldwin blends musical intimations of this world and the next in his description of the scene. The brother recalls how he always sees his mother when she was younger, on

Sunday afternoons after dinner, with church friends and relatives in their living room, the cruel world crouching threateningly outside. The mother, significantly, is wearing a “pale blue” dress, a reflection of her blues sorrows and powers of endurance consistent with the blues’ philosophy of perseverance in the face of overwhelming odds. She “owns” the blues, and the travails experienced and yet to come, on these Sunday afternoons following church, when they have laid their sorrows and hopes before the Lord. Just as surely, she owns the hope and powers of endurance that are reflected in the traditional blues lyric, “the sun’s gonna shine in my back door someday.” There is a particular dread in the communal silence of things unspeakable in the presence of the young ones in the room that nonetheless evokes the consciousness of mortality in the children, a dread that someone artificially tries to dispel by switching on the lights. But “when the light fills the room, the child is filled with darkness.”<sup>7</sup>

Immediately, the brother switches his narration to the time when he last saw his mother. Dressed in black and “humming an old church song, *Lord, you brought me from a long ways off,*” she has buried her husband and tries to impress on the brother the importance of his watching Sonny by telling the story of their uncle’s death, by using the words unspoken from those Sunday afternoons.<sup>8</sup> The song itself deals with salvation brought by God to a sinner who has experienced “trials” and “tribulations” living “deep in sin.” It reminds, in a concrete way, of Sonny’s words describing his imprisonment: “But now I feel like a man who’s been trying to climb up out of some deep, real deep and funky hole and just saw the sun up there, outside. I got to get outside.”<sup>9</sup> The use of the word “funky” links Sonny to the “friend” who had helped introduce Sonny to drugs, who smelled “funky” and asserts that Sonny will never get better, never kick the habit.<sup>10</sup> The brother is repulsed by him, yet cannot resist the impulse to bestow some kindness on him as well—in stark contrast to the way he ignores Sonny in prison until his own child’s death makes Sonny’s problems more palpable to him. The sun that Sonny sees as he looks up suggests the possibility of transcendence of his situation, Sonny’s seeing himself outside of his prison, in the heavens, liberated from his suffering. Sonny is literally “a long ways off,” but looking for a way home, and it is to his suffering that Baldwin wishes us to compare the father’s loss of brother, a long ways off in the past but still present, still palpable, still contextualizing the trials and tribulations of Sonny and his brother. Sonny and the uncle are the good-timers, Saturday night music makers, “a little full of the devil” though they “didn’t mean nobody no harm.”<sup>11</sup> The father and the brother are the would-be saviors, who might protect and lead them from a long ways off—at least that is the mother’s charge for the brother. Once again the juxtaposition of the “devil’s music” (the blues) and the church song highlight the interaction of the musics and the nuances of their relation to each other. While the mother still relies on the church songs for her faith, Baldwin sees the presence of the gospel truth in the musical soundtrack of Sonny’s life, jazz, and allows Sonny to deliver both himself and

his brother through his own creation and performance, reuniting the family in a way that nothing else could.

Of course, Sonny's generation must negotiate these elements in a way that is meaningful to them, while making their art contextually relevant to other generations as well. Baldwin introduces this imperative into the text when Sonny tries to explain his musical influences to his brother, who has obviously not kept up with contemporary trends in jazz. When Sonny says he wants to play "*with—jazz musicians*" his brother replies, "You mean—like Louis Armstrong?"<sup>12</sup> Sonny is so appalled that his brother would bring up the name of a musician whose revolutionary days of the 1920s and 1930s had given away to pop icon status by the time of the fifties that he almost feels assaulted—"His face closed as though I struck him"—and refers to Armstrong's work as "that old-time, down-home crap."<sup>13</sup> This judgment of Armstrong seems particularly harsh. In the context of the time the story was written, though, Armstrong's seemingly almost Tom-ish antics with his ebullient smile and white handkerchief, connection with the "mouldy fig" establishment of jazz traditionalists, and pop leanings had placed him some distance from a jazz avant garde that sought to project less of an image as entertainers as serious artistes worthy of "proper" respect and consideration. Whereas Armstrong had been the leading revolutionary and virtuoso of his time—and worthy of exalted status—it was necessary for the younger generations of Swing (1930s), Bop (1940's), and even cool, post-bop, and nascent third stream and free jazz movements (1950s) to draw on Armstrong's legacy, even as they were rejecting what they saw as the limitations of his music for expressing the tenor of the times. The boppers heard Armstrong's melodic and rhythmic invention pushing the boundaries of jazz and pop music with virtuosic flair (along with the developments of Lester Young, Duke Ellington, Coleman Hawkins and Art Tatum), and brought the electric, quicksilver nervous despair, searching experimentalism, and supreme command of their instruments to bear in their expression of their own times. To refer to Armstrong as Sonny's brother does is almost to try to press an outmoded traditionalism of style, image, and behavior on Sonny—another method of molding him in the brother's dated, uninformed image of what was appropriate, at a time when Sonny was seeking a newness and individuality, at least something much more current than Armstrong's 1920s style. Sonny goes to great lengths to distance both himself and Parker from the brother, suggesting paradoxically that the brother has never heard of him *because* Parker is so great. Actually, the brother intimates that the standards by which Parker—and he himself—must be considered are so far from conventional, mainstream notions of greatness that it is unimaginable that society could approach an understanding of what and how Parker communicates. Of course, it is the task of society to catch up with its avant garde artists, to understand and cherish their insights and contributions, although by definition the understanding always comes a bit late, at least. But here, it is also the task of Sonny's brother, if he is to succeed in carrying out his mother's wishes to help protect and nurture Sonny, to learn from Sonny as well. Sonny, in

fact, can bring the past—history and culture—to bear on the present, and project it into the future. Thus the brother's protecting and nurturing of Sonny produces an enlightenment in the brother that helps him deal with his own past, present, and future—the relationship is symbiotic. So, while Sonny appears to reject both the brother and Armstrong as models, he in fact does call upon them to forge his own identity, and he invites his brother to hear him play in the hopes that the brother can appreciate and approve of what he has done with their story—his and his brother's *and* his and Armstrong's.

It is clear that the brother wants Sonny to acknowledge the brother's centrality, his importance, to Sonny's life. His feelings of being of peripheral importance, perhaps not only for Sonny but marginal perhaps to life itself as he grows older and loses his daughter, cause him to cry as he splits with Sonny after Sonny moves to the Village. As he leaves Sonny's residence, he hears laughter, and begins to cry and, in an interesting variant of the blues lyric "whistling to keep from crying," recalls another traditional blues lyric, "*You going to miss me, Baby, one of these cold rainy days.*"<sup>14</sup> The phrase echoes, perhaps, a song title that first turned up on a recording by Chippie Hill in 1928, "Some Cold Rainy Day," also recorded under that title by Curley Weaver in 1933, and by Blind Willie McTell and Kate McTell in 1932 as "Lonesome Day Blues." Perhaps more famously and, with regard to Baldwin's limited knowledge of the blues, more directly, a song with a line closer to what Baldwin reproduces here was recorded by Count Basie and Jimmy Rushing as "Boogie Woogie" in 1936:

I may be wrong but I won't be wrong always  
 I may be wrong but I won't be wrong always  
 You gonna long for me, baby, one of these old rainy days.

Significantly, the blues song itself acknowledges something that Sonny's brother has difficulty doing with Sonny—acknowledging his own culpability, his own misinterpretation of events. This is something that Sonny's brother clearly needs to do to repair his relationship with Sonny. The lyric's insistence that "I won't be wrong always" reinforces a dogged determination to persist in getting it right, as well as a prediction that in fact the wrong will be righted, and that Sonny will come back some cold rainy day when the brother does get it right. Of course, it also suggests that the brother is saying that he can't *always* be wrong, differences can't always be his fault, though he still clearly has something to learn about his need for Sonny to come back "missing" him at some low ebb in Sonny's life. Sonny, of course, must learn to accommodate his brother as well, much in the way he learns to accommodate different kinds of music, and different musicians, through the tutelage of life and the bassist Creole. The blues tradition brings its time-tested wisdom in the language of this ubiquitous lyric to express the desire for a familial/communal reunion between Sonny and his brother, beautifully blending the uniting of individual and communal values in a way that perfectly supports Baldwin's aims.

Baldwin's interpolations of lyrics and performances in the gospel tradition demonstrate that Sonny's vision of life is not fragmentary or fragmenting, but holistic. Though Sonny seems to exist at a distance from the traditional faith of his mother and the folks who perform gospel music on the streets of his neighborhood, it is clear that he does not disregard either their experiences or their modes of expression. "The Old Ship of Zion," an old hymn performed on the street corner outside the brother's residence, was first commercially recorded in the African-American tradition 1927 by the Pace Jubilee Singers, though its popularity is revealed in that it continued to be recorded by such groups as the Hallway High School Quartet (1941) and the Roberta Martin Singers (1949) into the post-World War era. With its gloomy depiction of being lost at sea "in sin and sorrow," beckoning refrain, "get on board, get on board," and progressive repetitive calling of family members—"It has landed my dear mother, it has landed my dear father," and so on—it captures the intense imperatives of both of the brothers' experiences, the lure of moving in the direction of salvation, and their desire to be part of a family in both the style and substance of their existences. They seek a vessel to carry them to salvation together, analogous to the sacred vessel, the cup of salvation, provided to God's people for them to drink and be saved. The brothers, however, are clearly seeing the ship of Zion metaphorically, the salvation not in a traditional Christian context but as a social deliverance from the hardship and suffering they endure in their community as African-Americans. The phrase "ship of Zion" itself refers to the Book of Revelation and the Book of Ezekiel, where a New Jerusalem is prophesied at the end of the earthly world (Revelation 21: 2–5), when all is renewed and there is no need of the sun or the moon, no need for a temple; where death, sorrow, and pain are eliminated (Revelation 21: 22–5) and where God's people are united, actually experience a unity and wholeness. Later in Baldwin's story, while Sonny is admiring the performance of the group on the street, he recalls the song "If I Could Hear My Mother Pray Again," another church song recorded by a variety of performers, from the I.C. Glee Club (1930) to Thomas A. Dorsey (1934) to Reverend Anderson Johnson (1953) to Mahalia Jackson (1969). The song itself refers to recalling those almost dreamlike days when the mother prayed for the singer to rely on Jesus, to "walk that bright and shiny way" (Johnson) or "shining gospel way" (Jackson), and they would eventually meet up in heaven: "I shall meet my mother some glad day again" (I.C. Glee Club). Baldwin's use of this song reinforces a number of important elements in the story: the centrality of hearing, the notion of an innocent past intimated in those Sunday afternoon gatherings where it was threatened, and the desire to re-unite the family and bring about a holistic unity out of their fragmentation and suffering. The family is clearly extended, not merely biological. He responds sympathetically to the woman's song, saying it is "*repulsive* to think you have to suffer that much."<sup>15</sup> Even though he finds the song to be "terrible," likely referring to its roughness as well as its recalling times no longer possible, the song does match his description of his own internal feelings a bit later: "It's terrible

sometimes, inside. . . that's what's the trouble. You walk these streets, black and funky and cold, and there's not really a living ass to talk to, and there's nothing shaking, and there's no way of getting it out—that storm inside."<sup>16</sup> Sonny's streets are "black and funky and cold," not the "shining gospel way" that the song posits as possible in its own terrible way. The passage once again connects the secular vernacular that Sonny uses here in referring to the absence of meaningful activity—"there's nothing shaking"—to religious elements in the story. This points us again to the "very cup of trembling" at the end of the story, which refers as we have said to the cup of trembling that God gives to the enemies of Christians to drink. Drinking from the bitter cup is what Sonny experiences in his life, and his listening to the performances reminds him of his heroin high: "sort of warm and cool at the same time. And distant. And—sure . . . It makes you feel—in control. Sometimes you've got to have that feeling."<sup>17</sup> The feelings of detachment, of control, of opposing sensations like warm and cool are, of course, are illusory but, as Sonny says, necessary. To borrow from Marx, religion is their opiate, what gives them a sense of contentment or control in their miserable lives. Their song is terrible because it encourages addiction, dependence on illusion, even if it is cloaked in the holiness of the performance tradition that encourages the unity and wholeness of the aesthetically and spiritually related. As they depart on the street, the performers join in "God Be With You Till We Meet Again," another well-known hymn recorded in 1937 by the Plantation Echoes and in 1947 by Mahalia Jackson. It is a way of dispelling that terrible feeling of aloneness Sonny describes. Still, as Baldwin understands, it is the spirit that is evoked by the performance that unites and sustains the Christians and non-Christians of the story, that makes their unity possible—what people bestow on and share with each other that brings them together. The meeting again produces it.

That meeting between Sonny and his brother finally takes place at the club in the Village—it is just after the invitation that the performance of "God Be With You Till We Meet Again" is mentioned in the text. The setting itself is pictured realistically as a club, though Sonny and the rest of the band treat it as a regal or sacred place. The lights in the club are described as "dim" and "atmospheric," and they are significant for the context they provide for the performance.<sup>18</sup> When they arrive, they are greeted by Creole, a Black man who makes clear Sonny's special importance. Immediately following, another Black man playfully kids Sonny, revealing "the most terrible things about Sonny" in mock criticism. These reactions are like the feeling Sonny ascribes to heroin and the gospel performance earlier on—they make him feel warm (Creole) and cool (an insider who can be kidded by the other musician), and sure and in control of his place in this setting. But these feelings are not illusory, but real, honest feelings from brother musicians who provide what his biological brother has not—sympathy, camaraderie, guidance, fellowship, and the symbiotic ear of the jazz musician. Baldwin uses an image common to both gospel music and blues to describe the musician who kids Sonny: "his teeth gleaming like a lighthouse."<sup>19</sup> There are many references in gospel music to the lighthouse that lights the

way to Jesus and God, and groups such as The Lighthouse Gospel Singers of Athens of the 1940s that used the image in their stage names. It is another image related to the dark and stormy *sea* as was “The Old Ship of Zion,” and the shining gospel way, as was “If I Could Only Hear My Mother Pray Again.” The blues connection here is to a lyric common in the blues tradition:

My baby got teeth like a lighthouse on the sea  
And every time she smiles she throws her light on me.

It is a brilliant bit of compression, bringing together the brightness of a potential partner’s smile with the permanence, guidance, protection, safety, and comfort of the lighthouse on an unpredictable, illusory, threatening, and uncomfortable sea, and asserting not only that these feelings are not only regularly bestowed, but exclusively bestowed upon the singer. And not by God, but by a human being. The singer here asserts a kind of specialness of the type the musicians bestow upon Sonny, but not a Christian singularity as in the gospel tradition, but a spiritual uniqueness that finds significant expression in this setting. This lyric, with its individualization of the light, in turn recalls the gospel song “This Little Light of Mine,” recording by Jim Boyd for the Library of Congress as early as 1934. (As an interesting sidebar, Ray Charles also recorded a non-Christian variant of the song entitled “This Little Girl of Mine.”)

It is truly important for Sonny to have this beacon, to feel the assurance inherent in its guidance, in order to develop the confidence in himself to overcome his weaknesses. To have it from his fellow musicians places them in the role of extended family that helps him not only to hear but express the spirituality of his mother’s prayers in his own language and in his own manner. It is no accident that Sonny’s prime guide among the musicians is called “Creole.” The name has a variety of specific references to people descended from the original French settlers in the United States, related especially to Louisiana, sometimes of mixed Black and European ancestry, who in the African-American tradition produced a style of music mixing cajun and blues known as zydeco. The word also refers to another kind of combining of elements, in this case the blending of two or more languages into a pidgin language spoken in a particular community. The general sense of blending or mixing seems to be behind the naming of Creole here, especially as it relates to the jazz performance in the club. Creole facilitates the communication of Sonny and his brother through his installation of the brother in his own special “dark” booth (dark like Sonny’s world, like the faces of Creole and the other musicians) and the honoring of Sonny’s presence and voice. As the leader of the band, he presides over the stage, with its atmospheric lighting that the musicians negotiate with care—they are most careful not to step into that circle of light too suddenly,” lest they “perish in the flame.”<sup>20</sup> The “ceremonious” way that Creole treats the stage in the club, its play of light and darkness, the rite of passage Sonny faces as he is launched by Creole

into his musical maturity, the way that the club moves frantically toward show time and a sober focus on what is to come, all mark this out as an event of spiritual significance, almost a religious ritual, but without the superficial trappings of Christianity.<sup>21</sup> In this setting, the reference to the Scotch and milk that the brother sends to Sonny at the end as like “the very cup of trembling,” the Biblical reference, seems highly consistent with the “religious” import of the setting, as does the drink.<sup>22</sup> The strange mixture of Scotch and milk combines a recognition of Sonny’s maturity (Scotch) with an acknowledgment of his relative youth and inexperience (milk)—it is a way of, in a sense, launching him into his newly acknowledged place in the world in the way Creole launched him as well.

Sonny is given some warm-up time before he sets out on his serious journey, time that demonstrates that Sonny is still struggling to find his voice and maintain its integrity and strength. None of these songs are named. It is as if there is a special song that has been reserved for Sonny’s coming out, and so there is. Interestingly, since the story is titled “Sonny’s Blues,” the reader might expect something of a more classic blues composition to be the song he plays. However, this song is no conventional 12- or 8-bar composition with the customary repeats or refrains associated with the blues, such as Bessie Smith’s “Back Water Blues” which Baldwin discusses in “The Uses of the Blues” and makes meaningful use of in *Another Country* as well (along with “Empty Bed Blues” which, it should be pointed out, was not the flip side of “Back Water Blues” on the original 78 issue). In “Sonny’s Blues,” Baldwin uses instead “Am I Blue?,” a pop song composed by Grant Clarke and Harry Akst in 1929 and recorded by Ethel Waters in 1929 and Billie Holiday in 1941, among others. The brother finds the choice of the song to be “almost sardonic,” and it is so for several reasons in the text.<sup>23</sup> For one thing, the question can be taken literally as a perceptual question, to be answered in the affirmative. The lights of the stage are switched to “a kind of indigo” as the performers begin, so they are, literally, a violet blue, a blue that is deep and dark—two words that describe Sonny’s life and experiences, and what is about to take place.<sup>24</sup> Second, in a structural sense, one would answer the titular question in the negative—no, this is not the blues in its classic form from the blues tradition. Rather, it is a popular song that makes use of elements that occur in the lyrics and music of the blues. However, third, the words of the song itself—which are not sung in the story—refer to being abandoned, to loneliness, and to tears. The use of various elements of the blues music tradition—blue notes, syncopation, pitch spaces, and the like—which are also, it should be said, common in the gospel and jazz tradition as well, are blended with a somewhat lugubrious pop sentiment to generate a song that may or may not be the blues. It depends on who is playing it, and how it is played. In the story it does, after all, stray a bit from blues territory, perhaps into a more abstract jazz realm, whereupon “Creole stepped forward to remind them that what they were playing was the blues.”<sup>25</sup> Sometimes jazz improvisation can stray from a bluesy way of interpreting a melody of harmony or rhythm, and certainly pop music can: Charlie Parker is frequently described as a very

bluesy jazz performer, whereas Earl Hines is deemed less successful at sustaining a bluesy feel. Creole seems to hit a particularly bluesy bass line, perhaps a walking bass, to set Sonny on his journey, and then provides his own blues story—he, after all, knows it, too, and shares it, too—before allowing Sonny to go back to the beginning of that road that “must have bruised [his mother’s] feet,” “where [his] father’s brother died,” where his daughter died, and where “the world waited outside, as hungry as a tiger.”<sup>26</sup> But one needs to go back to the lyrics of the composition to get something more of the import of the use of the song. In answer to the question “Am I Blue?”, the singer asks, somewhat sarcastically, since we are often directed not to answer a question with a question, “Ain’t these tears in my eyes tellin you?” (Waters). In other words, can’t you see for yourself, isn’t it obvious, can’t you tell? Sonny’s brother seems to have been unable to answer those questions in the affirmative, to deal sympathetically and meaningfully with Sonny’s pain, and to connect it with the long line of sorrow that they shared preceding it. So it is also scornful, derisive, or mocking in that the question, as in the song, ought not even have to be asked. Of course we’re blue. In the club setting, blending these various elements, the performance makes that “I,” that first person singular, a first person plural. It is an individual and personal lament played out again and again, uniting the brothers, the family, the musicians, the community. I celebrates the power of expression, the power of invention, the spirit of unity invoked by the experiences transformed through music in the African-American tradition to a triumph, not just for the church folks, the blues people, the jazz people, or the popular performers, but for all of them, all at once. The spirit of African-American vernacular music, including the blues, imbues them all. Even “Am I Blue?” contains an element common to gospel songs, blues songs, and jazz, an invocation to the deity:

But now I’m the sad and lonely one.  
Lawdy!

However, in a gospel song, this seems to be more directly and meaningfully a Christian reference and, although likely stemming from that tradition, in blues and jazz it seems more of a spiritual exasperation than a Christian evocation.

Ultimately, we can even see Baldwin playing with blues-like progressions or structures in the unfolding of the story. Like the common AAB 12-bar stanza of the blues, we find the brother

A—failing Sonny when the mother dies  
A—failing Sonny when he is arrested and incarcerated  
B—supporting Sonny by going to the club, the scene of his success and resolution

Additionally, we see motifs that function like the call and response episodes so common in African-American vernacular music: the father being unable to protect the uncle, the brother being unable to protect Sonny, the brother’s inability

to get through to his students, Sonny's problems and the school kids' problems, Sonny's problems and the junkie's problems, are all a kind of call, a cry, that need an adequate response—one that is provided in the insight, sympathy, and unity of the final scene. It is the style and substance of the ever-revitalizing tale that, as the story says, is "the only light we've got in all this darkness," what shows us the sunny/Sonny in the dark, and reveals the light of the sacred-secular continuum of African-American vernacular music as it shows the bright and shining way to transcendence.<sup>27</sup>

## Notes

\* The full URL for the multi-media aspect of this article is [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_wi5dnSFJYA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_wi5dnSFJYA)

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- 2 Sherley Anne Williams, "The Black Musician: The Black Hero As Light Bearer," in Kenneth Kinnamon (ed.), *James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice Hall, 1974), p. 148.
- 3 James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," in Steven C. Tracy (ed.), *Write Me a Few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), p. 411.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 404.
- 5 Clarence E. Hardy III, *James Baldwin's God: Sex, Hope, and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 2003), p. 55.
- 6 Warren C. Carson, "Manhood, Masculinity, and Male Bonding," in D. Quentin Miller (ed.), *Reviewing James Baldwin's Things Not Seen* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2000), p. 23.
- 7 Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," p. 400.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 401.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 398.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 396.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 401.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 403–4.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 404.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 407.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 410.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 411.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 409.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 412.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 415.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 414.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 413.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 414.
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