

being shot – to see how much one is loved”. Freud may have publicised the Eros/Thanatos relationship for our own times, but in their own bluff style the Victorians knew about love and death.

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**Note.** The Casebooks of Ticehurst House are in the library of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 183 Euston Road, London NW1.

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## Psychiatry and the media

### ‘The Blues’ and psychiatry

#### Symptomatology and therapy in song lyrics

MATTHEW JELLEY, Senior Registrar in Psychiatry, Glenside Hospital, Stapleton, Bristol BS16 1DD

*In the wee midnight hours, long 'fore the break of day  
In the wee midnight hours, long before the break of day  
When the blues creep upon you and carry your mind away.*

Leroy Carr (i)

In the early years of this century, there arose, in the Negro areas of America, a form of music born out of suffering and segregation, hopelessness and loss. It was music that had developed from ‘field hollers’ and work songs of African slaves in the southern states of the USA; music that had changed with the emancipation of those slaves and their migration to the squalid quarters of large industrial cities; and music that is inseparable from the struggle and sadness of the American Negro. And yet it is music that has become popular throughout the world, and which, despite its sad roots, can be uplifting and exhilarating. It is, of course, the Blues.

This paper is not about music therapy, but rather it looks at the words in the Blues: firstly how they describe the psychiatric symptomatology of the

singer, secondly how they can serve a therapeutic effect, and finally introducing the concept of ‘lexithymia’.

#### *Psychiatric symptomatology*

‘Feeling blue’ or ‘the blues’ is simply another way of describing sadness; terms joining the range of synonyms we already have for that emotion – ‘low-spirited’, ‘down-hearted’, and many more – in short, the lay meaning of the term ‘depression’. Further examination, however, reveals that not only is this depression in its broadest sense but that within the lyrics of the songs can be found described all of the clinical features of a depressive disorder.

The most well-known lyric in the whole tradition is the opening line that has come to epitomise the Blues: "Well, I woke up this morning . . .". This moment of waking is obviously very important for the singer: Robert Hicks describes early waking: "Well I woke up this mornin' gal, twixt midnight and day . . ." (ii), and Ma Rainey describes how in these first few minutes she already starts to ruminate about her problems: "Layin' in bed this mornin' with my face turned to the wall, tryin' to count these blues . . ." (iii). There is not only a diurnal variation to this feeling, but also a consistency: Charlie Lincoln sings "I rise with the blues, I work with the blues" (iv). A more non-specific sleep disturbance and loss of appetite appear in Sonny Boy Williamson's blues: "Been so long till I just can't sleep at night, I couldn't eat my breakfast in the mornin' and my teeth and tongue begin to fight" (v); and when the food is eaten, it doesn't taste the same ("the blues were all in my bread" (vi)). Crying features heavily in the blues, but often the mood goes beyond tears and becomes subjectively different from sadness; Curley Weaver sings: "Went down the street, I couldn't be satisfied, had the No-No Blues, just too mean to, just too mean to cry" (vii). In some Blues uncertainty, low self-esteem and suspicion creep in: "Nobody loves me but my mother, and she could be jivin' too" (viii); and of course suicidal thoughts also emerge: "Honey let's go to the river and sit down, if the blues overtake us, jump overboard and drown" (ix).

From the above it becomes clear that not only do these feelings correspond to lay definitions of the term depression, but they are also equivalent to symptoms we would regard as being part of a depressive illness, although interestingly the sufferers do not see it in such terms: "I lay in bed, I tossed from side to side, I was not sick, I was just dissatisfied" (x). One significant point is that the symptoms outlined above are full of biological features and although Paykel (1971), among others, has shown that biological symptoms that have in the past been thought of as being 'endogenous' can occur as often as a reaction to psychological stresses, it is interesting to find apparent confirmation of this from such an unlikely source. There are two 'biological' features that I have not encountered in the Blues – loss of libido and constipation; but I will return to the former later on.

### *Music therapy v. 'lyric therapy'*

The main part of this paper, however, arises out of the central paradox of the Blues: that although they are unwaveringly concerned with depression and pessimism, they are able to engender happiness and optimism. Part of this centres around the effects that music has on the emotions – for instance, it has been shown that low pitch causes relaxation (Alvin, 1966); that a tempo of 70 beats per minute is soothing; and

that 'sad' music lessens state anxiety more than 'happy' music (Biller *et al.*, 1974) – all characteristic of the Blues. It is the words, though, that take them into the realm of a 'talking cure', of psychotherapy. The rest of this paper attempts to describe the ways in which a psychotherapeutic aim is achieved – firstly by examining five of the elements that Yalom (1970) considered to be curative factors in group therapy: universality; cohesiveness; catharsis; existential awareness; and instillation of hope; and secondly by considering sexuality and creativity. The final part introduces the concept of *lexithymia*.

Universality is one key to the enduring appeal of the Blues. To the original audience the knowledge that they were not alone in their suffering was reassuring, and, although the subject matter is rather arcane to present day audiences, it is still possible to relate directly to the universal experience of tribulation. An interesting way in which universality showed itself in one song was concerning the Boll Weevil which ravaged cotton crops and caused starvation among Negroes, and yet, rather than expressing anger at the weevil, the singer identified with it, and felt that, like himself, it was "just lookin' for a home" (xi). The related concept of cohesiveness explains much of the popularity of the songs for the original audience. The words used were often peculiar to the locality, or at least to the Black population; they excluded others, as well as actively creating a sub-culture of fellow sufferers. Ironically though, the phraseology and symbolism used for this has, in latter days, been partly responsible for the songs' popularity with non-Negro listeners; that is that they create a romanticised picture of the depression suffered and thereby put an emotional distance between the sufferer and the listener which helps make the images acceptable and thus accessible.

Catharsis is an outpouring of emotion which is more important to the actual singer than the listener, although there is a degree to which the singer acts as a surrogate for the listener's personal experience. Existential awareness, however, is central. The theme of the singer bearing the responsibility for his own actions and destiny recurs again and again. There is very little blame in the Blues and when it does occur it is usually directed, for example, at a partner who has left rather than at general 'persecutory' forces keeping the singer in his or her place. This 'oppressed' side of life is usually only mentioned as an immutable fact of life as are physical handicaps or other hardships. Perhaps surprisingly, the Blues are not Protest Songs – they are about acceptance of adversity, about stoicism and 'making the best of a bad lot'; and it is perhaps this ability to avoid the frustrations of trying to change things that are beyond one's control by providing a framework for accepting them that makes the Blues comforting. Despite this acceptance they are not fatalistic, however, and there are ways in

which they instil hope. One way is of 'moving on down the line' – a common sentiment expressed that suggests a new start elsewhere; but by far the most important is by showing there is something to be gained from the suffering. This is summed up by a modern pop singer who says: "The Blues is about dignity, it's about self respect – and no matter what they take away from you, that's yours for keeps" (xii). Some songs deal with this exclusively, usually in relation to relationships, and are most often about women, mistreated by their partners, asserting their independence or autonomy.

There was another way of retaining self-esteem that was commonly used in the Blues – sexuality. The myth of the super-potent black man was a powerful one among white Americans and the perpetuation of this by Blues singers is the only real example of subversiveness directed against whites; Paul Oliver (1972) writes: "In sexual Blues the spirit of revolt was canalised". The importance of appearing sexually potent may explain, therefore, why loss of libido was never mentioned in the Blues. It is interesting to note in this context that the Blues is predominantly an atheistic artform. One might imagine that with the strong traditions of Spirituals and Gospel Music that the Blues itself would use the hope of heaven and eternal joy to provide hope – and yet it doesn't. In fact an intriguing comparison arises with two songs that are very similar. They both begin: "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen . . ." but the Spiritual continues: ". . . nobody knows but Jesus", whereas the Blues conclude: ". . . nobody knows but me" (xiii).

The act of creation is a further mechanism by which the Blues can exert their effect: reframing a situation that has been useless and without form into one that is useful and beautifully formed is a potent method of feeling good about oneself.

### 'Lexithymia'

This final aspect of the Blues is in many ways the most interesting, and relates to the subject matter. Although the Blues have their roots in social oppression, the songs are not only about that, but about much more personal issues – from the break-up of relationships to domestic violence; from infidelity to death. They attempt in a way that had

not been achieved before (or since) to cover a huge range of subjects whose only common factor was that they make the singer sad. It is as if having invented a song-form that permits one to express positively one's depression, a whole variety of sad experiences can be brought out into the open. Sifneos (1972) coined the term alexithymia to describe a person having no words for his/her emotions; the Blues seems to have created for itself the opposite – a 'lexithymia' or even a 'hyper-lexithymia', i.e. a heightened ability to recognise and express feelings and attribute to them their psychological importance. The Blues has provided a form for people to validly and relatively easily express their sadness, and has enabled not just the original singers to benefit from the effects of the songs, but also listeners down the years.

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### Song lyrics

- Lyrics (ii), (iii), (iv), (v), (vii) and (ix) are all quoted in OLIVER, P. (1972) *The Story of the Blues*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Lyrics (vi) and (x) are quoted from SILVERMAN, J. (1964) *The Art of the Folk Blues Guitar*. New York: Oak Publications.
- (viii) "Nobody loves me but my mother" B. B. King: Leeds Music Ltd.
- (xi) "Boll Weevil Blues" Traditional
- (xii) "The Story of The Blues" Pete Wylie: Warner Bros Music Ltd.
- (xiii) "Nobody" B. Williams: Francis, Day & Hunter Ltd.