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This dissertation investigates the development of African American identity and blues culture in the United States and Europe from the 1920s to the 1950s through an examination of the life of one of the blues' greatest artists. Across his career, Big Bill Broonzy negotiated identities and formed communities through exchanges with and among his African American, white American, and European audiences. Each respective group held its own ideas about what the blues, its performers, and the communities they built meant to American and European culture. This study argues that Broonzy negotiated a successful and lengthy career by navigating each groups' cultural expectations through a process that continually transformed his musical and professional identity.

Chapter 1 traces Broonzy's negotiation of black Chicago. It explores how he created his new identity and contributed to the flowering of Chicago's blues community by navigating the emerging racial, social, and economic terrain of the city. Chapter 2 considers Broonzy's music career from the early twentieth century to the early 1950s

and argues that his evolution as a musician—his lifelong transition from country fiddler to solo male blues artist to black pop artist to American folk revivalist and European jazz hero—provides a fascinating lens through which to view how twentieth century African American artists faced opportunities—and pressures—to reshape their identities. Chapter 3 extends this examination of Broonzy's career from 1951 until his death in 1957, a period in which he achieved newfound fame among folklorists in the United States and jazz and blues aficionados in Europe. Together, chapters 2 and 3 argue that across three decades Broonzy navigated the music industry in the United States and Europe by cannily creating identities that suited the expectations of individuals who could help sustain his career. Finally, Chapter 4 examines how Broonzy's story has been shaped and reshaped in collective historical memory. It argues that his successful cultivation of white and European folk and jazz enthusiasts toward the end of his career contributed to a historical picture of Broonzy that masks the importance of his identity as a black artist for black audiences.

Big Bill Broonzy and the African American blues musicians of his generation made their lives in a period of

tremendous flux—from the Great Migrations through the emergence of the Civil Rights era. Exploring how Broonzy navigated the shifting parameters of this world illuminates the shifting contours of race, class, and politics in the twentieth century and shows how African Americans forged cultural identities and communities within and around these constraints. These identities and communities, moreover, redefined how the United States and the world would understand African American music and reshaped twentieth century cultural history.

"Just a Dream": Community, Identity, and the Blues of Big
Bill Broonzy

by
Kevin D. Greene

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Approved by

Benjamin Filene
Committee Chair

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To Casey,

For your unending patience and continual support

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____
Benjamin Filene

Committee Members _____
Charles C. Bolton

Loren Schweninger

Donald H. Parkerson

Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

On December 23rd, 1938 Chicago bluesman Big Bill Broonzy participated in one of the most important cultural and social exchanges in American history. In front of a packed house in New York City's Carnegie Hall, Broonzy and a litany of other twentieth century African American musical legends performed in what was essentially a live review of the history of African American music in the United States. Featuring "spirituals, holy roller hymns, harmonica playing, blues, boogie-woogie piano playing, early New Orleans jazz, and soft swing," the 1938 "From Spirituals to Swing" concert promised to educate its nearly all-white audience on "The Music that Nobody Knows."¹ Filled with recording industry giants, music promoters, university intellectuals, and government and academic folklorists, this event represented an important moment for the history of American music and racial integration.

¹ John Hammond, *From Spirituals to Swing: Box Set*. Vanguard Records compact disc B00000JT6C.

The show's rural blues component introduced Arkansas sharecropper and blues recording artist William "Big Bill" Broonzy, a last-minute replacement for a much more vaunted performer, the late Robert Johnson. In front of the packed house, Broonzy performed one of his latest and most popular blues, "Just a Dream," to much acclaim and was expected to play another.² Later that evening, when the time came in the playbill for his second performance, however, Broonzy had disappeared. Following the end of the concert, the show's organizer and promoter, Columbia Records' John Hammond, assumed that the entire cast would leave Carnegie Hall to hit the streets of New York and carry on the air of celebration throughout the night. After all, the circumstances were ripe for a magical musical moment. Christmas was two days away, and it was opening night at the very first integrated music club in the United States, Greenwich Village's Café Society.³

As the audience filtered out of New York's premiere music hall and the performers gathered en masse for their

² John Hammond, *From Spirituals to Swing: Box Set*. Vanguard Records compact disc B00000JT6C.

³ Barney Josephson and Terry Trilling-Josephson, *Café Society: The Wrong Place for the Right People* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

venture into the cold December night, Big Bill Broonzy could not be found. In a panic, Hammond searched the performance hall, asking anyone he could about Broonzy, only to hear that the man introduced simply as "Big Bill" had caught the earliest bus back to Arkansas in hopes of making it home for Christmas.⁴

At this seminal moment in American musical history, amidst dozens of music industry figures and intellectuals eager to make his acquaintance and perhaps bolster his career, why did Broonzy hit the road? Yes, Broonzy did have family back in Arkansas, where he had grown up, lending credence to his role as the replacement for the Delta blues legend Johnson. The realities of Broonzy's story and of his identity, however, were quite different. Broonzy left New York in the early hours of Christmas Eve in 1938 not because he was so overwhelmed by the gravity of his performance's thunderous applause and not because he wanted to go back to Arkansas. In reality, he was heading to Chicago, where he was one of the most significant members of the city's blues community and where December 25th marked the biggest party of the year for the city's blues

⁴ John Hammond, *From Spirituals to Swing: Box Set*, Vanguard Records compact disc B00000JT6C.

stalwarts. December 25th was his close friend and blues colleague Tampa Red's birthday, and every year all of the great Chicago musicians would show up to "eat and drink, talk about different blues songs, and give [Tampa Red] a good beating."⁵

So was "Big Bill" from Arkansas or Chicago? Broonzy made sure the answer to that question remained quite unclear among his audiences and fans. Chicago media personality and Broonzy's close friend Studs Terkel once said that Broonzy "always" told the truth, but skeptically called it "his truth."⁶ In actuality, Broonzy's life was a continual work in progress, one that involved constantly defining and redefining the identities he had created throughout his long career.

Born and raised in Arkansas, Broonzy had by 1939 been living in Chicago's black metropolis for nearly twenty years, participating in important historical and cultural developments for African Americans. Broonzy helped to

⁵ Big Bill Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues: William Broonzy's Story as told to Yannick Bruynoghe* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 117.

⁶ Charles Edward Smith, "Big Bill and the Country Blues" in Big Bill Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues: William Broonzy's Story as told to Yannick Bruynoghe* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 13.

create new cultural pathways for blacks in the United States—identities that transcended their manual labor.

By day, he was black laborer Willie Broonzy who worked hard for long hours with little pay only to be passed over for promotion by the next white trainee who might show only an inkling of promise. At night, however, within Chicago's blues recording and performance community he was "Big Bill," a successful performer who had recorded dozens of tracks for leading national recording labels and who reputedly could out-drink, out-sing, and out-play any musician he came across.

This study uses the life and experience of Big Bill Broonzy to explore the development of African American identity and blues culture in the United States and Europe from the 1920s to the 1950s. Broonzy had multiple professional identities in his career: first he was a rural southern musician; then a black pop entertainer; and, finally, an exemplar of "the folk," embodying the ideals of blues and jazz revivalists. In negotiating these identities, Broonzy navigated among African American, white American, and European communities. Each group held its own ideas about what the music, its performers, and the communities they built meant to American and European

culture. Throughout his thirty year, three-phase career, Big Bill Broonzy negotiated his identity among the blues' emerging national and international audiences. The twists and turns of his career provide a pathway for historians to understand the development of new identities in a new leisure industry in the United States and Europe in which African Americans would play a central role.

History seems to have largely forgotten Broonzy, in favor of other artists whose professional careers were less prolific, and, arguably, less influential and revealing. With his ever-evolving persona, Broonzy does not easily fit historians' pre-conceived narratives, so they have tended to overlook his importance as a man, a musician, and an architect for American culture. And yet the instability in Broonzy's identity makes his career more revealing to historians. Seeing how Bill Broonzy created himself—and the forces he had to navigate to do so—brings into relief the cultural terrain that both constrained and enabled twentieth century African Americans as they lived their lives and shaped their sense of themselves.

This study engages historians' examinations of the development of African American identity in the post-emancipation United States, which have focused particularly

on the emergence of cultural and political identities forged in southern cities and northern centers of industry following the Civil War through the era of the Great Migrations.⁷ These studies, particularly those focusing on northern black centers of industry like Chicago, argue that beyond these cities' racial difficulties, African American urban enclaves experienced remarkable growth on many levels, including community advancement, new cultural pathways, and African American identity development. These studies, moreover, intended to combat an older historiography's tendency to focus on the pejorative connotations associated with twentieth century ghettoization.⁸ By engaging this body of scholarship, this

⁷ Richard R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Terra Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1955* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006); Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, The Great Migration and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

⁸ Early historiography on black Chicago, for example, defined the city as having a "Negro Problem" as a result of the Great Migrations. See The Chicago Commission on Race

study seeks to understand the richness of the African American urban experience during the period by exploring the vitality of its music scene.

As well, this study engages the history of African American vernacular music culture, with a particular emphasis on the blues. Beginning at the turn of the twentieth century, a broad group of academics began documenting the sounds of African American vernacular music and placed specific emphasis on the importance of the blues for understanding the African American experience. Many early studies of the blues and its culture relied on academics' racially biased assumptions about the music and the musicians themselves. These studies often defined the music and how the performers approached performance in

Relations, *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and A Race Riot* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1922); City of Chicago, *City Planning in Race Relations: Proceedings of the Mayor's Conference on Race Relations, February, 1944* (Chicago: Mayor's Committee on Race Relations, 1944); St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1945); Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967); William M. Tuttle, Jr. *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (New York: Antheneum, 1975).

romanticized terms that focused on the authentic nature of the black folk experience.⁹

As African American music gained popularity in the late 1940s and through the 1950s, with help from the growing folk music revival and the emergence of blues-derived genres like rock 'n' roll, scholarship on the blues and its importance began to grow as well. By the 1950s, at least two autobiographies appeared in hopes of setting the record straight on the blues' and its history.¹⁰ As the 1950s evolved into the era of civil rights, counterculture, and folk revival movements of the 1960s, blues scholarship witnessed an explosion in research and publication. These scholars attempted to approach the blues using research grounded in social science inquiry and fieldwork. Rather

⁹ See Howard W. Odum, "Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of Southern Negroes," *The Journal of American Folklore* 24 (Jul.-Sep., 1911): 255-294, 351-396; Howard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson, *The Negro and His Songs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1925); Howard and Johnson, *Negro Workaday Songs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1927); Guy B. Johnson, "Double Meaning in the Popular Negro Blues," *Journal for Abnormal and Social Psychology* 22 (April-June, 1927): 19; John A. Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Leadbelly: "King of the Twelve-String Guitar Players of the World"* (New York: Macmillan, 1936).

¹⁰ W.C. Handy, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography*, Aran Bomtemps ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1941); Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*.

than just listening to the musicians on record and documenting their live performances, these scholars set out with their tape recorders and note pads to interview and document the lives of the performers and the culture of the music they loved so much.¹¹ The approach of these scholars, however, was very much shaped by their devotion to the music, which narrowed their focus. Their investigative methodologies focused on rural and urban aspects of the blues, but failed to reveal the importance of the music's evolving nature and its importance to American history.

Beginning in the late 1970s, scholars of the blues began rewriting the blues' importance to the larger narrative of American history and attempted to give it meaning in this context. These highly researched and brilliantly articulated works paid particular attention to African American race and folk consciousness and the blues' associations with these developments. In their able hands,

¹¹ Samuel Charters, *The Country Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1959); Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (London: Cassell, 1960); LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William and Morrow, 1963); Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966); Paul Oliver, *The Story of the Blues* (Philadelphia: Chilton Books, 1964); *Savannah Syncopators: African Retentions in the Blues* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970).

the blues became more than just a subject reflecting scholars' interests in African American music. Their narratives transformed the meaning of the blues into one that reflected African Americans' agency, creativity, and folk consciousness in the era of Jim Crow segregation.¹² These scholars, however, tended to limit their studies to the United States' Deep South and placed an almost romanticized vision of the Mississippi Delta region as the crucible for the blues' development. Because of this specific focus, their investigations, moreover, led to an explosion in works dedicated to one of the Mississippi Delta's most popular heroes, Robert Johnson, a trend that still persists in the twenty-first century.¹³

¹² William Ferris, *Blues From the Delta* (New York: Doubleday, 1976); Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977); Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues* (New York: Viking Press, 1981); David Evans, *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Doubleday, 1993).

¹³ Peter Guralnick, *Searching for Robert Johnson: The Life and Legend of the "King of the Delta Blues Singers"* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989); Robert Johnson, *The Complete Recordings*, Columbia compact disc C2K 64916; Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the age of*

A new generation of scholars, however, turned its attention toward the blues' development in other regions in the United States. These studies showed that blues music remained vibrant in a variety of urban and rural areas across the United States. They further suggested that black men were not the sole proprietors of the blues' development in these regions.¹⁴

Clearly, blues scholarship blossomed from the 1960s to the 1990s, launching an impressive and important historiographical tradition. The majority of these scholars, however, have tended to use similar methodological approaches and imagery to construct their narratives. For these scholars, the blues emerged from the culture of the folk, a

Jim Crow (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 478; Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), Patricia Schroeder, *Robert Johnson, Mythmaking, and Contemporary Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

¹⁴ Mike Rowe, *Chicago Breakdown: the Roots of Jazz* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1980); Bruce Bastin, *Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Helen Oakley Dance, *Stormy Monday: The T-Bone Walker Story* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987); Daphne Duvall Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988); Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).

pre-industrial mass of poor rural African Americans who, without musical training, gave heartfelt chronicles of their lives in song. At the core of blues scholarship, moreover, remained the Mississippi Delta—a cultural icon of the American folk music landscape.

As blues scholarship continued into the twenty-first century, scholars began to extract new meaning from the history of the blues by engaging its large historiography and pointing out its inherent problems. These problems served as a catalyst for a new generation of blues revisionists to challenge over four decades of blues scholarship.¹⁵ Their investigations directly challenged older blues historians'

¹⁵ Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Mary Beth Hamilton, "The Blues, the Folk, and African American History," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 11, (2001): 17-35; Adam Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004); Patricia Schroeder, *Robert Johnson, Mythmaking, and Contemporary Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Neil Wynn, ed., *Cross the Water Blues: African American Music in Europe* (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 2007); David Evans ed., *Ramblin on My Mind: New Perspectives on the Blues* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2010).

arguments centered on the importance of the Mississippi Delta region, their romanticized emphases on particular individuals, their predetermined notions of "authenticity," and their tendency to mythologize their discoveries. Critical to this new generation's investigations was the idea that the blues, although rooted in southern folk culture, was simultaneously a form of recorded popular music deeply enmeshed within the United States' and Europe's complex recording and performance industries. Placing the music within this context revealed how parameters like race, class, and geographic location shaped how the blues and its history should be understood. These studies, moreover, argued that for black and white Americans in the Deep South and in large metropolitan centers or in cities across Europe, the blues, as it gained popularity, meant many things to many different people. Essentially, these studies addressed how Americans and Europeans have been taught to remember their musical past and revealed the many flaws within the traditional historical narrative of the blues and related vernacular music.

Within this body of historiography, Big Bill Broonzy has received almost no sustained attentions. Recently, however, American Studies scholar Roger House revised his Ph.D. dissertation on Broonzy into the first published biography of

this remarkably complex man, *Blue Smoke: The Recorded Journey of Big Bill Broonzy*.¹⁶ This engaging and richly researched study focuses particularly on Broonzy's life and the vast body of his recorded work, arguing that Broonzy was "both an important artist and archetype of the working-class black man."¹⁷ Covering the length of his career, *Blue Smoke* seeks to "offer a comprehensive account of an important, but undervalued, prewar bluesman."¹⁸ This work should be commended as the first full biography investigating Broonzy's life and his history.

Beyond its biographical aspects, *Blue Smoke* makes two key contributions. First, House has compiled the most extensive and up-to-date discography of Broonzy's incredibly prolific recording career. *Blue Smoke* has compiled over 900 sides credited to Broonzy as a solo performer, an accompanist, and as a songwriter. Moreover, House has rediscovered many published interviews with Broonzy from the

¹⁶ Roger Randolph House, "Keys to the Highway: William "Big Bill" Broonzy and the Chicago Blues in the Era of the Great Migrations" (PhD diss., Boston University, 1999); Roger Randolph House, *Blue Smoke: The Recorded Journey of Big Bill Broonzy*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010).

¹⁷ House, *Blue Smoke*, 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

1950s that offer rich social historical evidence for Broonzy's fans and for historians.

"Just a Dream," however, seeks to challenge *Blue Smoke's* conclusions by suggesting that through a different evaluation of Broonzy's life, larger elements concerning American history, European history, and the African American experience emerge. First, by moving beyond a heavy reliance on the lyrics of Broonzy's songs, this work recognizes the importance of African American musicians' lived experience, not just their navigation of musical expression. Broonzy's song lyrics are important for deciphering his history, but as one scholar contends, music historians need to move beyond a single reliance on song lyrics in their research.¹⁹ Song lyrics are important pieces of evidence but are often taken out of context in a manner that creates a singly interpreted narrative.

Second, this work argues that Broonzy was more than just an example of a working-class African American in the first half of the twentieth century. Yes, Big Bill Broonzy labored most of his adult life within southern and northern labor

¹⁹ Grace E. Hale, panel comments on "New Perspectives on Race and Music in the American South." The Southern Historical Association's Annual Meeting, Charlotte, North Carolina, November 5, 2010.

industries, but simply relying on a socio-economic based argument masks Broonzy's contributions to larger narratives rooted in American history and African American culture. Essentially, the ways in which Broonzy negotiated his identity and what it meant throughout his long career reveal new currents for African Americans that moved beyond their traditional labor roles and racial boundaries. Broonzy was creating, defining, and sustaining a world of leisure in Arkansas, Chicago, New York, and cities across Europe that provided new pathways for African Americans and their sense of themselves. Thousands of African American musicians would follow his lead throughout the twentieth century. Simply focusing on his role as a working-class laborer and part-time musician overshadows his importance as a cultural architect.

Clearly, as historical scholarship moves into the twenty-first century, the blues and American music in general have become important subjects for defining and investigating American history and culture. This study builds on this historiographical tradition while also extending it in some new directions. It engages the folklorists and blues historians' search for "authenticity," the importance of musical memory, the geographic nature of blues identities, the importance of blues communities to the African American

experience, while working to further blur the boundaries between "music history" and "American history." As studies of the blues move beyond stereotyping, mythmaking, demagoguery, generalization, and the quest for "authenticity," they can reveal rich new understandings of American history.

Big Bill Broonzy built his career in a series of communities, each of which was in a state of particular flux in the twentieth century. Chapter 1 traces Broonzy's navigation of Chicago's Black Metropolis. An examination of the parameters in which Broonzy navigated race, class, labor and social norms in Chicago's public and private spheres reveals important developments in the creation of his new identity and Chicago's flowering blues community. As a southern migrant, Broonzy, like thousands of other migrants, arrived in Chicago with southern cultural pathways, which initially guided his navigation of the city. As he became involved in the city's labor industries, blues culture, and burgeoning leisure world, Big Bill Broonzy began to tread lightly between a world of black and white "Old Settler" ideas and those brought from the South by migrant "New Settlers," groups whose approaches to community development, class formation, and

racial respectability often clashed. An examination of Broonzy's life in Chicago, however, demonstrates that the lines of power and personal politics in the city of Chicago were fluid and he learned to navigate the city by pushing the boundaries of race, class, and public respectability. By challenging these social dynamics, moreover, Broonzy developed an identity based on his blues persona that reflects how African Americans' development forged community and identity within an urban environment that moved beyond migrants' manual labor and white patronage.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine Broonzy's thirty-year career and suggest that he continually negotiated the expectations of intermediaries involved in Chicago's performance and recording industries. The navigation of these expectations, moreover, helped forge his identity as an important Chicago bluesman, ultimately shaping his persona and sustaining success as a performing and recording musician. Chapter 2 covers the beginning of his music career in the South and carries through two and half decades of prolific activity until he left for Europe in the early 1950s. This chapter argues that Broonzy's evolution as a musician—his lifelong transition from country fiddler to solo male blues artist to black pop artist to white folk music hero—provides a

fascinating lens through which to view important negotiations occurring within the lives of twentieth century black blues artists and within the ever-expanding landscape of the American music business and its culture. Through an examination of these four distinct phases, moreover, Broonzy emerges as an historical actor representative of Chicago's African American community who shaped and reshaped his own musical identity by adapting to changing trends within blues culture and the music business, only to watch his success wane during the late 1940s.

Chapter three continues the examination of Broonzy's career by examining the last decade of his career. As Broonzy's popularity declined among black American audiences, he discovered newfound fame among white folklorists in the United States and jazz and blues aficionados in Europe. In Chicago, he became associated with the city's burgeoning folk music scene and helped solidify its creditability by performing in the community's folk performance venues and helping to establish a school

for folk music study within the city.²⁰ This period marked a serious transition in Broonzy's career as he reached new audiences of mostly white Americans, and in the process, negotiated a new identity.

Beginning in 1951 Big Bill Broonzy became one of the most important African American bluesmen to tour Europe in the post-WWII era. Europeans had been heavily influenced by African American music during WWII, and African American blues and jazz had developed a small, but loyal following in the United Kingdom and across the continent. These collectors, musicians, and researchers, saw Broonzy as an antecedent to the blues and jazz of the era. Not only had Broonzy recorded in the blues-folk style popular in the 1920s, he had also helped pioneer Chicago's urban blues in the 1930s, a style that mixed elements of jazz and swing. To Europeans, then, Broonzy was an icon whose intimate and powerful performing style became a crucible for their understanding of the history of blues and jazz.

²⁰ The Old Town School of Folk Music's opening night featured Big Bill Broonzy and he eventually lent several guitar instructional sessions for the school. Many of the schools founders give him credit for establishing the school's reputation and credibility. See Old Town School of Folk Music, "Biography of a Hunch: Opening Night" <http://www.OLDTOWNSCHOOL.ORG/history/night.html>.

In Chicago he was "Big Bill," a seminal architect and leader of Chicago's blues community. Broonzy advertised this identity with nearly anyone he came in contact with, especially as he began navigating audiences outside of Chicago. In effect, Broonzy became an important teacher for white American and European blues, jazz, and folk audiences. Throughout the latter stages of his career, especially beginning in the late 1940s, Broonzy began explaining and describing both the history of the blues, how it was constructed, and his opinions on African American vernacular music in the United States.

As he explained these topics, often in intricate detail, he both consciously and subconsciously offered lessons in the African American experience as well and created a new identity as an ambassador of the folk. As white audiences showed increasing interest in his music he seized the opportunity to share elements of the African American experience including southern history, race relations, agriculture, black urbanization, African American music, economic conditions, labor relations, intra-community development, migration, politics, sex, violence, alcohol consumption, and many more. Many of these anecdotes, moreover, became songs topics within the

vast repertoire he shared night after night in cities and countries all over the world.

Chapters 2 and 3 collectively argue that Broonzy navigated the ever-evolving music industry in the United States and Europe by negotiating the expectations of individuals and entities that might further his career. A critical component of his negotiating skills, moreover, were the identities he forged throughout his long career and the community in which each identity was created.

Broonzy's ability to explain African American culture to white American and European audiences became so much a part of his identity that his days as a black entertainer for black artists often seem overshadowed. Chapter 4 looks at how Broonzy has been represented in historical memory. It suggests that because of his successful negotiations of white and European folk and jazz scholars and collectors' understandings of African American music, his identity as a black artist for black audiences has been nearly forgotten. Broonzy began recording in the mid 1920s, and for the next twenty years he became an extremely important black recording artist who recorded and performed hit after hit for black blues audiences. Only in the last ten years of his career did he become an acclaimed artist among American

folk audiences and an international success to European audiences. Yet he is typically depicted as an exemplar of the folk—a touchstone of black music's past when solo black bluesmen performed acoustic southern music in the vein of Blind Lemon Jefferson and Robert Johnson. History seems to have forgotten that Broonzy spent two decades performing and recording jazz-influenced blues on an electric guitar with explicit and humorous lyrics written for black audiences evoking imagery and substance that only they would understand.

In truth, Broonzy's career encompassed multiple personae and musical styles. Until his death, he was an icon in the black Chicago blues community in which he forged his identity; yet to the world he has been remembered as the same rural, folk bluesman who showed up at New York's Carnegie Hall at Christmas in 1938. There may be no one "real" Bill Broonzy, but the tensions and incongruities in his career offer a rich opportunity to explore how African American identity and culture get shaped and re-shaped. More than a musician, Big Bill Broonzy becomes a cultural architect who constructed pathways for his and subsequent generations to follow.

CHAPTER II

"BIG BILL" FROM CHICAGO: IDENTITY FORMATION IN CHICAGO'S BLACK METROPOLIS

Big Bill Broonzy navigated race, class, and the city of Chicago in interesting ways. His journey—from being a southern sharecropper in rural Arkansas to becoming Chicago's own "Big Bill"—reveals much about the nature of African American migrant settlement and identity development in the Windy City. As an African American participant in the Great Migration of the early twentieth century, his experience in one of the nation's booming commercial and cultural centers provides a fascinating example of the cultural transformations that were occurring throughout American cities of the era. Examining his relationships to race, class, labor and social norms within the physical geography of the city highlights cultural negotiations that were critical to urban experiences. Broonzy's negotiation of black Chicago provides a window through which historians can view the important cultural transitions that accompanied urbanization and migration of the era.

A part of Big Bill's legacy was the opening of these pathways to other African Americans to transcend their identities beyond their common labor. Collectively, these cultural negotiations reflect the development and transformation of his identity as a southern sharecropper from rural Arkansas to Chicago's own "Big Bill," one of the most important bluesmen in the city's history.

Broonzy's life was rooted in his experience as a Southerner. Born in the Deep South at the height of Jim Crow segregation, race defined his worldview and guided nearly every negotiation he encountered in the United States and Europe. The descendant of slaves and southern black farmers, Big Bill was one of fourteen children including a twin sister Laney. Like many sharecroppers of the period Broonzy grew up poor. He lacked a formal education, and was forced to work to support the family at a young age. He knew friends and relatives that had been killed by the hands of racial violence and he fully understood the unbridled power of racism in the United States.¹ Nevertheless, his family was a proud Baptist family

¹ Alan Lomax, *Blues in the Mississippi Night*. Rounder Select Records compact disc B00009WVTH.

that, despite its large size, was relatively stable.² This stability may have fostered a sense of equality that many of his peers lacked. It also helped him survive difficult moments in one of the largest and deadliest cities in the country.

Broonzy once told Alan Lomax that his decision to leave the South for Chicago was based on a combination of factors that centered on his inability to take orders from anyone. He expressed to Lomax that he had previously relinquished control of his adult life to the white overseer that controlled his tenant farm, to his wife at the time, who demanded that he improve their lot in life, and most of all, to the U.S. Army. As a soldier in a stevedore battalion stationed in Brest, France, during World War I, Big Bill transformed himself into something vastly different than the Arkansas sharecropper, country fiddler, and preacher he had been before the war.³ In 1918 and 1919 Broonzy served in the U.S. Army, one of the

² Rodger Randolph House, "Keys to the Highway: William 'Big Bill' Broonzy and the Chicago Blues in the Era of the Great Migrations" (Ph.D. Diss., Boston University, 1999), 12-30.

³ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10. American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

200,000 African Americans who served in the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) during World War I.⁴ More important, Broonzy was one of the 150,000 African Americans who served in labor and stevedore battalions that supplied the American operations in France, all along the French coast. Like many of his fellow black soldiers, Broonzy had witnessed both the horrors of war and the open racism that had followed the AEF from the United States to Europe, and he was forever changed by these experiences.⁵

Broonzy received his discharge from the U.S. Army at Camp Pike, near Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1919. When he returned home to his family in Arkansas, he stepped off the train wearing his uniform when he met an old, white acquaintance for whom he had once worked. In this pivotal moment, Bill's life would change forever. The exchange was powerful:

I got off the train...I met a white fellow that I was knowin before I went to the Army. So he told me "Listen boy," "Now you been in the Army?" I told him

⁴ Big Bill's military records were destroyed in the 1973 fire that gutted the National Archives' military service records of U.S Army veterans from WWI to the 1960s.

⁵ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress; Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*,

"Yeah." He says, "How'd you like it?" I said, it's "O.K." He says, "Well...you ain't in the Army now." "And those clothes you got there...take 'em home and get out of 'em and get you some overalls." "Because there's no nigger gonna walk around here with no Uncle Sam's uniform on up and down the streets."⁶

The white man continued to direct Bill towards the commissary where he could buy some overalls and immediately return to sharecropping's debt peonage system. But Bill was no longer oblivious to what was happening. Indeed he would not slip quietly into those overalls. The army had taught returning veterans like Broonzy that even segregated African American soldiers could be "clean" and "presentable" "human beings" who could be "around in public places." Rather than capitulate to the white overseers' racist demands, he left the South completely, landing first in St. Louis and then on to Chicago.⁷

In 1919 W.E.B. Du Bois recognized that this realization would be a recurring phenomenon among returning black veterans. The stalwart black intellectual wrote:

⁶ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

⁷ Ibid.

They began to hate prejudice and discrimination as they had never hated it before. They began to realize its internal meaning and complications. Far from filling them with a desire to escape from their race and country, they were filled with a bitter, dogged determination never to give up the fight for Negro equality in America...[a] new, radical Negro spirit has been born in France which leaves us older radicals far behind.⁸

Like tens of thousands of returning black veterans, he had a new understanding about the nature of race in the United States and this understanding greatly affected his race consciousness and identity.

Broonzy's identity and worldview, then, had been transformed by his experience in the Great War when he arrived in Arkansas in 1919, even before he arrived in Chicago. As he later recalled, "That's why I didn't never stay in the South no more after I come outta the Army. I came out of the Army in 1919, and I couldn't stand that bossing around by anybody."⁹ Why Bill chose Chicago as his final destination remains unclear. He did mention a brother who was already established there when he arrived in 1920 and these well established social networks were

⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, "An Essay Toward a History of Black Men in the Great War," *Crisis* 18 (1919): 72.

⁹ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10 American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

important components of a migrant's journey. Moreover, Chicago was a logical destination for black migrants from Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana given the existing railroad lines during the period. Disillusioned with his life at home, he decided to leave his wife, family, and all he had known for a fresh start in Chicago.

Broonzy left the South for good in January 1920 to navigate a completely new culture and to completely reinvent himself. After a brief visit to St. Louis, Broonzy arrived in Chicago on February 8th, 1920, just months after the Red Summer of 1919.¹⁰ Labor agents from Chicago were certainly responsible for luring thousands of African Americans out of the South and into the city. But by 1920, enormous webs of grassroots network "facilitators" were enticing many more black migrants.¹¹ Perhaps Broonzy had heard stories throughout the South about the promises of northern life and rumors of the "Land of Hope." In 1946, he discussed the clandestine circulation of the *Chicago Defender* and its impact on southern readers who longed for

¹⁰ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10 American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

¹¹ Richard Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 47.

stories about African-American autonomy in the developing black metropolis.¹² Further still, he may have heard stories about the city's exciting nightlife.

Whatever his reasons, Broonzy's evolving race consciousness and changing identity played an enormous role in his decision to leave the South for good, as it had for tens of thousands of black southern migrants of the era. In the decades that followed, Broonzy would write songs, make comments in interviews, and exhibit modes of behavior that reflected his changing ideas about race in the United States.

When Broonzy arrived in Chicago in February of 1920, he found one of the nation's largest and most industrial cities still reeling from one of the deadliest race riots in American history. The city remained almost completely segregated, with newly arriving blacks forced to live in the city's South Side. And yet his new home was quickly becoming an epicenter for African American cultural and economic development. Thousands of African Americans, like Broonzy, arrived in 1920 following one of the more critical

¹² Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 23.02.02. American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

moments in Chicago's racial history. Nearly 1.3 million African Americans migrated from the South to the North following WWI, a trend that continued well into the 1930s. This Great Migration, moreover, was but a part of a larger process that has recently been described as the "Southern Diaspora."¹³

From the first decade of the twentieth century to the 1990s, approximately 29 million Southerners left the South for opportunities in the North, Midwest, and West, including 8 million blacks, 20 million whites, and 1 million southern-born Latinos. The effect of their migration was dramatic. The African American population in the city of Chicago, according to the U.S. Census, increased from 44,103 in 1910 to 109,594 in 1920 (nearly 150%) and ballooned again from 1920 to 1930 to a total of 233,903.¹⁴

¹³ James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How The Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Changed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 14.

¹⁴ The Chicago Commission on Race Relations (CCRR), *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and A Race Riot* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1922), 106; St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York: Harcourt,

Because of the racial violence that swept through the city of Chicago beginning in 1917 with the bombings of black homes and culminating with the 1919 race riot, many Chicagoans concluded that the city did indeed have a "Negro" problem. The response was a series of investigations and studies, beginning with the Chicago Commission on Race Relations' 1922 sociological study *The Negro in Chicago*, the 1944 *Proceedings of the Mayor's Conference on Race Relations* from the City of Chicago's City Planning in Race Relations, and St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's *Black Metropolis*. Sociologists, cultural anthropologists, politicians, community leaders, and concerned citizens were wrestling with race relations in the Windy City.¹⁵ At the heart of their investigations was the Black Metropolis, an area in the city's old South Side known affectionately to residents of the community as Bronzeville.

Brace, and Company, 1945), 8; Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*, 14.

¹⁵ (CCRR), *The Negro in Chicago*; City of Chicago, *City Planning in Race Relations: Proceedings of the Mayor's Conference on Race Relations, February, 1944* (Chicago: Mayor's Committee on Race Relations, 1944); St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1945).

By 1920, African Americans in Chicago were increasingly restricted to a small neighborhood (known as the "Black Belt") marked by State Street in the east, La Salle Street to the west, and between 18th Street and 39th Street to the north and south. Although blacks lived in other areas of the city, this South Side enclave housed nearly 90 percent of the African American population in the city by 1920.¹⁶ By 1930, the South Side Black Belt had pushed south to 63rd Street and east to Cottage Grove Avenue, and by 1950 had pushed east towards Lake Michigan. This expansion, however, came at a price. As thousands of southern African American migrants poured into the city's South Side, blacks were forced to expand their neighborhood in the face of racially restrictive covenants and racial violence.¹⁷ Each of three known Chicago addresses for Broonzy from 1930 to 1946 place him and his family in the city's South Side black belt: on Washbourne Avenue in 1930, on West Washington Boulevard in 1944, and on South Parkway

¹⁶ CCRR, *The Negro in Chicago*, 108.

¹⁷ Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 34.

in 1946.¹⁸

The power of race in Chicago and its omnipresence in Broonzy's world created pivotal moments for his navigation of Bronzeville and its culture. Broonzy's interactions with whites were common, as he was forced to venture out of Chicago's South Side for most of his day jobs. On his first job as a molder, Broonzy recognized that, because blacks were barred from labor unions, whites would always receive higher pay for the same work.¹⁹ On another job as a welder, he later recalled, he "taught this young white guy to be a welder, and as soon as he learned to be a welder they fired me."²⁰

The workplace, however, was not the only place in Broonzy's new life for various racially charged and embarrassing moments. Two of these instances explain much about his identity and its relationship to race. One

¹⁸ 1930 US Census Cooke County, Chicago; *Pullman Company Archive*, Collection 06/02/03, Box 194, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois; Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

¹⁹ Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing, 1993), 442.

²⁰ Louis "Studs" Terkel, John de Graaf, and Alan Harris Stein, "The Guerilla Journalist as Oral Historian: An Interview with Louis "Studs" Terkel" *The Oral History Review* 29, No. 1 (Winter-Spring 2002): 100.

afternoon on his way to meet friend Studs Terkel, Broonzy was running late. He found Terkel on the street corner where he was waiting accompanied by an unidentified white man. When Studs introduced the two men, Broonzy learned that the man was a state senator and friend of Terkel's. The senator shot out quickly to Studs, "So he's your boy, eh?" Before Studs could reply to the increasingly awkward situation, Bill fired right back with "That's right...He may not look it; but he's my father."²¹ With a nervous chuckle, the senator departed down the street with a "So long, boy," directed at Bill.

The same incident in Arkansas would have undoubtedly ended with more than an uneasy giggle. To buffer the uncomfortable situation, Terkel approached his friend to offer his apologies and consoling advice.

Studs turned to Bill and whatever he'd meant to say, didn't come out. For Bill was laughing. He was laughing loud enough to have it reach the senator, who was now near the end of the block - and who only lacked the data to interpret it.²²

Despite having lived in Chicago for some time by this

²¹ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 19.

²² Ibid.

poin, Broonzy had formed his race consciousness, in part, coming of age in the Jim Crow South, and he had learned to navigate racially tinged interactions with caution. In Chicago African Americans more freely applied wit and humor to difficult race moments. Yet, he knew that traveling into the South (which he often did to see his mother) meant that the sharp wit he had demonstrated on Chicago's city streets might not go over so well in Arkansas. As he left Chicago his approach to racist confrontations changed, essentially demonstrating his deep understanding of race in the Jim Crow South and further suggesting that Broonzy's urban race consciousness could only exist inside the city.

Once, on a trip from Chicago to Arkansas to see his mother in Little Rock, Broonzy visited a service station just outside the city limits. Surprised to see a black man driving a nice Cadillac (Broonzy had bought it used), the white attendant asked "[w]hose car is this boy?" Without batting an eye Broonzy replied that it belonged to the man he worked for, his "boss."²³ In Chicago, Broonzy and his peers would have been proud of his Cadillac and the hard-

²³ Big Bill Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues: William Broonzy's Story as told to Yannick Bruynoghe* (New York: De Capo Press, 1992), 19.

earned money he spent to purchase the car. Outside of Bronzeville, however, Broonzy knew all too well that deference to the rigidity of Jim Crow racism could be the difference between surviving or falling victim to violence and intimidation. Although such incidents were undoubtedly less common once Broonzy left the South, segregation was quite different in Chicago and Arkansas, and part of Broonzy's new identity and race consciousness understood racism's geographical nuances.

Complicating the open racism endured by all African Americans during this period was the issue of skin color among blacks. Generally, within the world of race among African Americans and for Broonzy specifically, difference in skin color was an extremely important and highly sensitive issue. He often reflected on the nature of African-American relationships that were based on skin color, noting that skin color could be critical to certain circumstances in the North.²⁴ The variations in skin color were quite important to African Americans in Chicago and the United States, as preferential treatment by whites and

²⁴ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 83-90, 140-144; Don Gold, "Big Bill Broonzy, *Downbeat* Feb 6, 1958:38.

wealthier blacks often depended on the hue of one's skin.²⁵

Issues stemming from skin color often placed urban African Americans in awkward situations between both light-skinned blacks and whites, who, to Broonzy, seemed to share different race etiquette than darker African Americans. To dark African Americans like Broonzy, this etiquette was particularly sensitive to the use of the word "nigger." In the South, this pejorative word was so common that both whites and blacks of all hues used it freely. In the North, however, the use of the word was a violence-inducing, social *faux pas*, especially if used by light-skinned blacks and whites in the presence of darker-skinned African Americans. Broonzy had learned very early in Chicago that "Northern Negroes don't like to be called nigger."²⁶

In 1939, working for Bluebird record agent Lester Melrose, Bill scouted a blues artist from Yazoo City, Mississippi, a musician named Tommy McClennan who refused Bill's advice to change the lyric "nigger" in one of his

²⁵ Mark E. Hill, "Color Differences in the Socioeconomic Status of African American Men," *Social Forces* 78 No.4 (2000): 1437-1460.

²⁶ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 144.

big hits *Bottle Up n' Go*. In typical Broonzy fashion, he suggested that Tommy change the lyrics once they arrived in Chicago from "the nigger and the white man" to "the big man and the little man," suggesting the use of metaphorical double entendre was smarter and just as effective. Broonzy warned McClennan that northern blacks would not like the use of the word and that continuing to use it in an urban environment might cause trouble. Sure enough, when he and Tommy were invited to a rent party filled with fellow blues musicians eager to hear the new sounds of Bluebird's most recent discovery, McClennan was asked to perform. Disregarding his friend's request, Tommy sang the song for the audience, and both men were removed from the party through the closest window!²⁷

The issue of race greatly influenced Big Bill Broonzy's identity and his negotiation of a new urban environment. He had left Arkansas to avoid embarrassing racist confrontations only to find that race also affected the lives of both black and whites in the North. Yet race was not the only rigidly developing social parameter in the city's South Side. Class divisions, too, were becoming

²⁷ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 143.

important among Chicago's African Americans and their community. The African American population in Chicago had grown dramatically from 1880 to the first decade of the twentieth century.²⁸ The "Old Settlers,"²⁹ those African Americans who had arrived in Chicago prior to WWI, established a "[s]everely truncated" position within black Chicago's class structure that relied less on white definitions of wealth and more on ideas of "refinement" and "respectability" that carried over from the Victorian age.³⁰

This group of black middle-class professionals and elite businessmen, although segregated themselves, frequently had ties to white Chicagoans, and represented the upper echelon of black Chicago's community leadership. Black "Old Settler" community ideology was centered on

²⁸ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 127.

²⁹ "Old Settler" was a common term used by both black and white Chicagoans prior to WWI. See St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1945), 66-76. The term is also used frequently in William M. Tuttle, Jr. *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (New York: Antheneum, 1975); James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). Although the term "New Settler" was used by Drake and Cayton, it has been further developed in Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes*.

³⁰ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 129.

public and private social respectability. Notions of "respectability" among black Chicago's old elite, moreover, centered on a combination of social and economic factors that included white patronage, restricted social circles, church membership, club associations, property ownership, and community recognition. Because of "Old Settlers'" close association with white businessmen and their patronage, they dominated Black Chicago's leadership until the turn of the twentieth century. Moreover, they vigorously resisted the development of all black institutions and businesses that operated exclusively in black neighborhoods. To do so would not only erode the status that white patronage had conferred upon them, but would also force these leaders to associate with blacks whom they saw as less refined. They were willing to accept residential segregation to preserve their own integrated social and economic life.

However, from the beginning of the twentieth century to the peak of the Great Migration, which happened to coincide with Broonzy's arrival, a new group of African-American leaders began to emerge within the city. During this period blacks became physically segregated within the city's South Side, due to increasingly racist real estate covenants, organized white opposition, and public acts of

violence. As a result, this new group of leaders, unlike the older elite, was willing to forgo the integration associated with white patronage for stronger, autonomous community development within the Black Metropolis. Within their physically segregated space in the city, black Chicago's New Settlers created a center for black economic and cultural activity that redefined the black experience by creating new opportunities in a "Land of Hope." These new leaders increasingly looked toward Chicago's black community for political and economic support, rejecting the old elite's inclination towards white patronage.³¹

Many of these men, like Big Bill, did not share the same educational background as the old elite nor did they embrace the same genteel notions of respectable behavior. These new leaders shunned white patronage and social integration in favor of black independence within the city's segregated black community. For these new leaders, then, the Black Metropolis needed to promote a "view of racial affairs and a vision of their future in Chicago that differed markedly from the militant integrationism of their

³¹ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 129-130; 66-97.

predcessors."³²

This growing black middle class found golden opportunities for business and development within the greatly expanding landscape of the emerging Black Metropolis. Many of these entrepreneurs, politicians, ministers, editors, musicians, and professionals transformed their community into one of the most important African American business and cultural centers in the United States. As Chicago historian James Grossman notes:

Between 1890 and 1915 they [the new leadership] established a bank, a hospital, a YMCA, an infantry regiment, effective political organizations, lodges clubs, professional baseball teams, social service institutions, newspapers, and a variety of small businesses. The growth of the black community promised to multiply growing political influence and economic activity.³³

Robert Abbott, founder and chief editor of black Chicago's most acclaimed newspaper, *The Chicago Defender*, was one of the more famous members of this emerging "New Settler" leadership. Abbott founded his weekly in 1905 and used it to broadcast throughout the United States (and especially

³² Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 71.

³³ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 131.

in the South) the importance of the emerging black metropolis. As the newspaper circulated throughout Chicago and into the South, *The Defender* urged readers to see for themselves the strides that blacks had made in the Windy City.

While the "Old Settler-New Settler" dichotomy persisted for some time, recent scholarship has suggested that during the 1920s the relationship between these two groups changed as labels such as old and new "became much less about when one arrived in Chicago" and much more about "one's relationship to ideas about industrialized labor and leisure as expressions of respectability."³⁴ In other words, the emerging black middle class began adopting "old settler" notions of respectability and refinement centered on committed and consistent employment along with a external appearance that reflected "economic thrift, bodily restraint, and functional modesty in personal and community presentation."³⁵ By conforming to old settler respectabilities, this new class could advance the race by presenting and adhering to public principles that focused

³⁴ Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes*, 28.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

on labor pursuits and modes of behavior that defied white notions of black inferiority.

Of greatest concern to black Chicago's "Old Settler" sensibilities was new migrants' perceived propensity towards the city's vibrant underworld and nightlife. These "vice dens" of gambling, prostitution, drinking, illicit drugs, and sinful music, were the focus of black middle-class criticism. Black leaders believed that this culture reinforced white fears and stereotypes concerning the black community and perpetuated white hostility towards southern migrants. To reform-minded African Americans, the new generation of young black men and women was spending too much time in the city's cabarets, sporting dens, rent parties, dance halls, vaudeville houses and movie theaters. The young generation's behavior challenged the black bourgeoisie's Victorian ideas about a solid and viable working class.³⁶

As new southern migrants arrived in Chicago, they brought many of their old southern pathways with them. Their outward signs of behavior—speech, dress, body language, manners, foodways, alcohol consumption,

³⁶ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 146.

etiquette, living conditions, and child-rearing practices—were all points of criticism and skepticism that the city's established black leadership regarded as public concern. Led by the Chicago branch of the National Urban League, Bronzeville's own *Defender*, and by civic and social organizations like the YMCA, black Chicago's leadership established dozens of programs "designed to help and pressure the newcomers to adjust" to an urban, northern, and industrial world that would "enhance the reputation of blacks in the larger (white) community."³⁷

If blacks were to gain any respectability in the eyes of whites, Old Settlers believed, migrants must avoid outward and open displays of behavior that reinforced white notions of inferiority. And yet this world of vice, while driving African American leadership in Chicago to reform its working-class, was, at the same time, establishing important cultural currents for African Americans in Bronzeville. This "commercialized leisure world," relied on "alternative forms of labor, routes toward upward mobility, and visions of the racial community."³⁸ Essentially, these

³⁷ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 145.

³⁸ Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes*, 29.

New Settlers embraced this vibrant leisure world in an increasingly segregated Black Metropolis that promoted new racial identities that challenged both Old Settler and white stereotypes of migrant behavior.

Within this world of developing class lines, Big Bill Broonzy traversed a path that often enmeshed both Old and New Settler ideologies of class development. Despite one scholar's description of Bill as a "slum dweller," when he first arrived in Chicago in 1920, he seemed well on his way towards middle-class respectability.³⁹ A man he called his brother greeted him at the train station, as had countless family members of Deep South migrants during the era. Taking advantage of the well-established migrant adjustment networks that existed in Chicago at the time, Broonzy's brother placed a phone call to a friend who found Broonzy a job. Within about four days he was working at the Pullman Company, where he worked for five years from 1920 to 1925. After a brief stint in one of Chicago's most famous industries and a failed two-year attempt to establish a lucrative music career, Broonzy landed a series jobs in

³⁹ Alan Lomax (in Lomax, *Land Where the Blues Began*, 442) affectionately described Broonzy as "slum dweller", when he first arrived in Chicago in 1920.

Chicago's foundry industries from 1927 to 1934. He first worked for the Richicgan Co. in Melrose Park, then moved through several positions at the American Car Foundry, the Phoenix Foundry, and finally, the American Brake Shoe Company, "first as a molder's helper, then as a molder."⁴⁰

Although foundry work paid more than work in the train yards, to Old and New Settlers alike, the Pullman Company was an ideal vocational path to community respectability. To Old Settlers, the reputation accompanying the status of Pullman Porters was widely regarded throughout Chicago with the utmost respect and was believed to be an avenue for financial stability and middle-class sensibilities.⁴¹ Even to New Settlers, such as Robert Abott, whose newspaper was sympathetic to Pullman Porters' struggle for pay increases, the status of Pullman Porter automatically placed African Americans at a higher level of community respectability—so much, in fact, that the *Defender* routinely reported the names of Pullman employees who had achieved the level of porter and considered the occupation one of the most

⁴⁰ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress; Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 442.

⁴¹ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 129, 139.

important in the community.⁴²

Hard work, then, was an incredibly important component of Broonzy's identity. At seven he had been first hired out to a white family in Arkansas where he assisted in the care of the family's children. For the next nineteen years Broonzy worked as a plow-hand, a country musician, a preacher, a levee camp worker, a railroad laborer, a cook, and member of the U.S. Army.⁴³ For the Pullman Company, Broonzy started as a laborer "cleanin cars an' cleanin up the yards," eventually working his way to the position of porter.⁴⁴

Even as Broonzy's music career began to grow in the thirties and forties, he maintained a "day job." From 1925 to 1927 he worked as a grocery boy for \$12 dollars a week; from 1927 to 1934 as a laborer for various foundries including the Richigan Co. in Melrose Park for \$35 dollars a week; for the WPA from 1934 to 1936; and for the

⁴² Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

⁴³ Big Bill Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues: William Broonzy's Story as told to Yannick Bruynoghe* (New York: De Capo Press, 1992).

⁴⁴ *Chicago Defender*, February 13, 1915, May 21, 1910, January 30, April 10, May 8, 1915; January 1, 1916. See also Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 79.

Merchandise Mart from 1938 to 1943.⁴⁵ Throughout the twenties and thirties, then, he remained consistently employed. "I always had money; I never was just plumb flat broke, because before I'd get broke, I'd get a job someplace and work."⁴⁶ Further, it seems that with each change of his places of employment, he increased his weekly wages.

In some ways, then, Broonzy's pursuit of financial stability echoed Old Settler's ideas on the importance of persistent employment and suggests the importance he placed on hard work in the development of his identity. And yet even as he maintained financial stability and community respectability through his industrial and professional labor, Broonzy created a public identity of the sort that the city's Old Settler leadership feared within the Black Metropolis' vibrantly expanding world of leisure.

This new "commercialized leisure world" signaled the

⁴⁵ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Broonzy referred to the Richigan Company where he worked in one of his interviews with Lomax.

⁴⁶ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

emergence of a "'New Settler'" ideology.⁴⁷ This world of leisure remapped ideas about respectability and had an enormous impact on Big Bill Broonzy's identity as an African American bluesman from black Chicago. This new world, moreover, provided work within the black community in which blacks could advance economically while simultaneously displaying pride in their community. Black men and women traded in the dirty coveralls and dusty work dresses they wore in the long hours in Chicago's labor and domestic industries for the latest risqué fashions as they frequented Chicago's dens of vice and boisterous nightclubs.

At the center of this new dynamic was the developing consumer marketplace with its moving pictures, radio and records, advertising, and athletics that openly set off new negotiations of migrant respectability.⁴⁸ Labor had traditionally identified African Americans' sense of themselves. African Americans living in cities from as far south as Birmingham and as far North as Boston were forced to work within each respective city's industries, often

⁴⁷ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

⁴⁸ Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes* 30.

experiencing discriminatory hiring practices, poor wages, and poor treatment. Yet when they left work they were free to participate in autonomous cultural practices outside of the watchful eye of white men, including dancing, drinking, making music, and religious and civic activities that led to identity development based around their time away from their labor.

The emergence of a vibrant consumer marketplace represented a new alternative to the backbreaking physical labor of both the sharecropping South and northern centers of industry. To be clear, this new world was a dangerous one that often pitted unscrupulous business practices and the world of vice against sometimes desperate, naïve, and penniless southern migrants. Within this world, some African Americans were able to seize the opportunity and develop identities outside of their historically traditional labor roles.

Chicago's burgeoning music business, then, underscores the tensions between New Settlers and Old Settlers that existed in the growing Black Metropolis and defines this developing leisure world. For "Old Settlers," the world of cabarets, music halls, recording studios, and rent parties in which Broonzy traveled bolstered white

stereotypes concerning African Americans in Chicago. To some of the emerging New Settler leadership, however, these were points of pride—centers of black creativity and entrepreneurship.

Yet aspects of the city's emerging music business made the growing consumer marketplace and class negotiations bittersweet. The race recording industry represented everything that was difficult, unethical, and unscrupulous within Chicago's developing blues culture. Owned and operated by whites that often held business ties to East Coast elite business interests or the criminal underworld, recording companies and music venues took advantage of African-American performers at nearly every opportunity.⁴⁹ Unfair contracts offering little to no compensation were commonplace, and cutthroat competition led to artistic thievery and little agency for aspiring musicians.

⁴⁹ For the unethical practices of the early recording industry see Paul Oliver, *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); William Barlow, *Looking UP at Down: The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989). For Chicago's music ties to the criminal underworld see Ronald L. Morris, *Wait Until Dark: Jazz and the Underworld, 1880-1940* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Press, 1980).

White-owned, East Coast-based recording companies' interests in Chicago music culture exemplified Old Settler notions about white patronage in the world of black business, while simultaneously challenging New Settler notions about the viability of a completely autonomous black business culture.⁵⁰ This juxtaposition created a path that provided Broonzy and others an opportunity to challenge the rigidity of class lines in Chicago and develop new musical and community identities.

Even as Broonzy embraced an "Old Settler"-style work ethic, he challenged Old Settler notions of respectability by committing himself to the city's growing consumer marketplace for recorded and performed music. Broonzy first rejected Old Settler notions of community respectability by quitting his "respectable" job with the Pullman Company in the 1920s and returning to his musical pursuits. He began palming around with local musicians and vaudeville veterans such as "Papa" Charlie Jackson, Ed Strickland, Theodore Edwards, John Thomas, Jeffrey Moore, Frank Braswell, and "a hundred...different guys" that he

⁵⁰ Nearly all of Chicago's recording companies, except for Paramount, were owned by East Coast businesses, based almost exclusively in New York.

played with during that period. Broonzy had made his first forays into music as a country fiddler in Arkansas, where he had played for segregated weekend picnics. He had never played "for no negroes" until he came to Chicago. Slowly, Broonzy was seduced by this New Settler consumer marketplace as he transformed his identity from a southern laborer—who happened to be a country fiddler—into an urban blues guitarist/singer, who worked a day job to supplement his passion for music.⁵¹

In some ways, the Chicago blues scene confirmed all of the Old Settler's fears about the licentious world of the New Settlers. It was a business with shady ethics. Although self-contained and independent of local white patronage and Old Settler influence, New Settlers, it seemed, were quite willing to exploit the newly arriving migrants eager to participate in new consumer markets. Broonzy's introduction to Paramount records demonstrates that Chicago's developing New Settler spheres of economic and cultural influence made a habit of taking advantage of many recording artists.

⁵¹ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

In 1925, for example, Broonzy and John Thomas entered "Ink" Williams State Street Paramount Records office ready to record their songs. Broonzy had been practicing his guitar licks and blues lines for a year in hopes that he, like his newfound musician friends, might record their blues for Paramount records. Yet when he arrived at Williams' office and began playing for the usual crowd that had gathered there, Williams advised Broonzy that he was not ready and that he needed to continue practicing. Williams then scrapped the cuts that Broonzy and Thomas had performed.⁵² Moreover, Williams, secretly gave one of the takes, a Broonzy original titled "Gonna Tear it Down," to fellow Chicago musician Barbecue Bob.

Broonzy remembered that "Barbecue Bob was a guitar player, a pretty good one at the time, and so he gave it to Barbecue Bob and Barbecue Bob made it, called "'Tear it Down.'"⁵³ Broonzy openly admitted that there were several musicians in Chicago at the time that were better guitarists, singers and musicians, and Paramount had a habit of recording musicians' songs, scrapping the takes,

⁵² Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

⁵³ Ibid.

and giving the songs to "better" musicians whose instrumentation and vocal phrasings might sell records more readily.⁵⁴

When Broonzy was asked what he made off of his first record he simply replied: "Well, he (Williams) didn't pay me anything." It turns out that his partner, John Thomas, had told Williams "some kinda tale that he had to go down home and bury his father."⁵⁵ Williams fronted John Thomas seventy-five dollars in advance, and Big Bill never saw a dime of the money for any of his first recordings.

Over the next thirty years, Broonzy would record or contribute to over three hundred songs. Yet, this moment in 1927 would also mark the beginning of a lifelong struggle Broonzy would have with the music industry and provides a concrete example of the unethical practices of the burgeoning recording industry. An enormous part of his identity as a bluesman was rooted in his mistrust of the industry and those who operated it.

Paramount and "Ink" Williams were not the only recording industry representatives interested in taking

⁵⁴ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

advantage of black blues artists in Chicago's blues world. In 1928 Bill met Lester Melrose, a local Chicago blues talent scout and promoter who helped establish the early success of Bill's friends Tampa Red and "Georgia Tom" Dorsey.⁵⁶ Melrose and his brother Frank had started a record store and music publishing company in Chicago's south side in the 1920s. By 1934, Lester Melrose was heading RCA/Victor's race label Bluebird and Columbia's race label Okeh that would become an important crucible for the developing Chicago sound of the post-depression 1930s and early 40s.⁵⁷

When Broonzy met Melrose in 1928 he had just ended his rocky relationship with Paramount's J. Mayo "Ink" Williams.⁵⁸ But Melrose, picked up right where the Paramount talent scout "Ink" Williams had left off. By only offering "exclusive agent contracts," Melrose gained a

⁵⁶ Broonzy, "Discography," 154, Paramount Records number 12656-A and 12656-B.

⁵⁷ Mike Rowe, *Chicago Breakdown* (New York: Drake Pub., 1975), 17-20; Barlow, *Looking UP at Down*, 134; Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 79-81.

⁵⁸ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

monopoly over local Chicago blues talent from the 1930s through the 1950s. He maintained an immensely talented "stable" of musicians whose songwriting and instrumentation would appear on the records of nearly every artist he recorded. Despite his keen sense for developing blues talent, Melrose's contracts never paid royalties.

Instead, he offered higher upfront payoffs for original compositions per side than did his competition, but ultimately he held greater power over his artists and their music than other labels by owning their publishing rights.⁵⁹ Even though Broonzy was an important architect for Melrose's envisioned Chicago sound and even though he helped define the city's blues and inspired a new generation of artists, he never received any royalties for his work. Nevertheless, he held fond memories of Melrose and once admitted that he never made a cent off his records until he met him. Broonzy suggested that Melrose was the kind of fellow who "would give" a "little something to keep you alive...to live on."⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Lomax, *Land Where the Blues Began*, 401-02.

⁶⁰ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

Despite the "little something" afforded by Melrose, Broonzy never received any returns on his publishing rights until 1939, when he recorded for Vocalion.⁶¹ His depiction of the music industry of the period unveils a world that was extremely difficult and one that took advantage of him whenever possible. Besides facing unscrupulous recording agents, the day-in-day-out grind of a working musician of the period was expensive and exhausting.

Even as the music business confirmed Old Settler's biases against economically irresponsible New Settler behavior, at the same time it offered a degree of economic self-sufficiency that reflected the aspirations of New Settlers. Alongside the cutthroat world of the recording industry and grueling performance circuit was an informal world of rent party, buffet-flat, and street music culture that was critical for the development of the identities of dozens of the city's most famous musicians from the 1920s to the 1950s. To solely focus on the recording industry and the blues records that Broonzy, his friends, and colleagues made, does not tell the complete story of Broonzy's

⁶¹ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress; Broonzy, "Discography," 160.

experience navigating the city in Chicago.

The difficult and dangerous components of the formal business, moreover, were buttressed by promising elements that exemplified New Settler ideologies about black creativity and cultural expression: the rent party, barrel house, and buffet-flat circuits. Most musicians of the period were willing to suffer the vile practices of the blues recording industry just to see their name on a record and hear the magic of their blues captured for all time. Yet nearly all Chicago blues musicians, including Broonzy, affectionately reflected and reminisced about the vibrant underworld of rent-party, buffet-flat culture.

Within this world musicians learned their art, honed their craft, established crucial musical networks, and developed identities outside of their labor pursuits that perpetuated the popularity and growth of Chicago's blues. These dens of leisure pulsed with the sounds of a veritable who's who of famous blues artists. As national touring acts visited Chicago for performances at the Savoy, the Regal and the Club De'Lisa, or to record in the city's recording studios, they often appeared somewhere within the

city at parties that raged all night.⁶² These artists, moreover, enjoyed this world of illegal liquor, prostitution, and down-home cooking while helping to develop new generations of musicians who would follow their respective lead in challenging Old Settler stereotypes of respectability, vice, and leisure culture. Within the hallowed walls of these musical exchanges William Lee Connely Broonzy from Arkansas became "Big Bill," an iconic figure in Chicago's blues community.

Broonzy often reflected on house rent parties and their importance to black musicians and community fellowship:

And those people started to give parties and some Saturday nights they would make enough money to pay the rent, and so they started to call them 'house rent parties' because they sold chicken, pig feet, homebrew, chittlins, moonshine whiskey. The musicians didn't have to buy nothing.⁶³

Chicago's house rent parties and buffet flats helped collectivize the experience of migrants to Chicago.

⁶² The Chicago Blues Museum, "The Soul of Bronzeville: The Regal, Club De Lisa and the Blues," temporary exhibit at *The Du Sable Museum of African American History*. (Chicago: June - December, 2009).

⁶³ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 68-9.

Historian Davarian Baldwin has argued that "[b]uffet flats and rent parties with their soul food dinners and small fees served as alternative sites of cultural production, leisure and labor on the stroll."⁶⁴ Black poet laureate Langston Hughes recalled frequenting many rent party flats:

Where God knows who lived—because the guests seldom did—where the piano would be augmented by a guitar, or an old clarinet, or somebody with a pair of drums walking in off the street. And where awful bootleg whisky and good fried fish or steaming chitterlings were sold at very low prices. And the dancing and singing and impromptu entertaining went on until dawn came in at the windows.⁶⁵

In 1925, still a dedicated fiddle player, Broonzy bought his first guitar for \$1.50 on Maxwell Street's famous open-air market.⁶⁶ For about a year, with the help of his newfound acquaintances, he polished his guitar chops among some of the city's best and brightest blues talents. Within Chicago's boisterous rent party circuit, Broonzy met perhaps the most popular self-accompanied male recording

⁶⁴ Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes*, 165.

⁶⁵ Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes, *The Book of Negro Folklore* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Comp., 1958), 596-600.

⁶⁶ Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 401.

artist of the early blues era: Texas street musician and guitar whiz Blind Lemon Jefferson.

As recording artists like Blind Lemon Jefferson traveled to Chicago to record and perform, they often appeared at informal settings, where aspiring musicians such as Broonzy watched with amazement. Within these dens of leisure, moreover, aspiring musicians like Broonzy were honing their skills and developing identities by asking questions and studying at the feet of many of the country's most popular artists. More importantly, Broonzy and his contemporaries were developing identities within a distinct blues culture based on the individuals who epitomized New Settler notions about black autonomy and cultural respectability. This pattern would carry forward into the future and help make blues one of the most popular music genres of the twentieth century.

Over time, the rent party circuit evolved as Chicago's South Side saw the development of legendary blues clubs in the 1930s following the repeal of prohibition. These clubs would become landmark venues for the performance of Chicago blues. This world of performance, and the venues where it occurred, reveals much about the nature of the leading classes' complaints about respectability and refinement and

provides an example of how Broonzy and others challenged Old Settler notions of class formation.

The tensions between Chicago's Old and New Settlers created by the Black Metropolis are reflected in Broonzy's navigation of the city's public and private modes of behavior. Black leadership in Chicago kept a watchful eye on the behaviors of its inhabitants. For Old Settlers, adherence to their prescribed standards of behavior reflected greatly upon their perceived direction for the race and, more importantly, in the minds of white patrons. Yet to New Settlers, disregard for Old Settler and white patron modes of public respectability became avenues for challenging the racial status quo. At the center of this tension, especially for migrants like Broonzy, rested Bronzeville's social norms.

The gambling houses, rent parties, vaudeville theaters, athletic arenas, and recording studios that made up Bronzeville's public and private spaces became centers of self-expression, personal ambitions, and desires for migrants like Broonzy. Engaged in illegal drinking, gambling, sexually taboo behavior, music, dancing, laughing, and playing, African Americans were involved in actions both old and new that allowed the development of

personalities and identities outside of their traditional labor activities. Moreover, these "informal settings" provided alternative forms of entertainment that were cheaper than the jazz clubs on the Stroll, and featured local blues musicians who offered sounds similar to those they had left behind in southern juke joints and barrelhouses.⁶⁷

More important, these dens of cultural exchange and expression demonstrate that musicians like Broonzy were participating in more than just a world of vice and commercialized consumerism. These bluesmen and women were creating a world that directly challenged Old Settler and white Progressive ideas about the dangers of Black Metropolis' nightlife. Within this nightlife, these artists and musicians eschewed accepted forms of respectability by creating New Settler identities and developing a culture that attracted many black Chicagoans.

Clearly, Broonzy developed a new identity based on his hard work, his challenges to the social order, and his embrace of the city's flowering blues culture. But his disregard of black Chicago's prevalent social norms also

⁶⁷ Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes*, 165.

reveals important navigations of his new identity. On the one hand, Chicago's growing New Settler black bourgeoisie viewed southern migrants like Broonzy as potential clients and congregation members who embodied a new direction for the race. For them, Southern migrants, who left the South for higher wages and greater participation in American democracy, represented the growth of a new working class, whose drive and ambitions would elevate blacks' status to that of a new proletariat.

Sobriety and temperance, for example, were Old Settler social norms that Broonzy and others openly defied. Many of his life's stories and anecdotes in Chicago, New York, and Europe involve an almost continuous consumption of alcohol. One could argue that a bottle of whiskey became as central to Broonzy's "Big Bill" identity as his guitar. Whether fishing with friends, hanging out at rent parties, barrel houses, and juke joints, or passing out drunk with Sonny Boy Williamson at Schorling Park watching Negro League hero Satchel Paige pitch against the Chicago American Giants, Big Bill enjoyed a drink. He was often paid for performances, appearances, and contests with alcohol.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 122.

As a regular street performer on Maxwell Street's open-air market where musicians, patrons, and passersby could purchase anything from used household wares to stolen weapons and illegal narcotics,⁶⁹ Broonzy may also have been an occasional marijuana user. He once reflected:

I found out that in all the five bands I've been the leader of, that a tea smoker is not nosy and don't forget his music and isn't hard to get along with and he always wants to try to learn something new and to improve old songs. A musician who drinks too much, won't listen to his leader and the way he plays tonight he'll play in a different key tomorrow night or start an argument or won't play at all.⁷⁰

Here Broonzy reveals a fascinating and telling assessment of his personal approach to prevalent social norms. Even as an avid drinker, Bill recognized alcohol's affect on professional musicianship by suggesting that marijuana was an acceptable alternative to over consumption of intoxicating liquors.⁷¹ Many of his colleagues, moreover, including, Albert Brand, Leroy Carr, Tommy McClennan, Blind

⁶⁹ The Chicago Blues Museum, "The Soul of Bronzeville: The Regal, Club De Lisa and the Blues," temporary exhibit at *The Du Sable Museum of African American History* (Chicago: June - December, 2009).

⁷⁰ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues* 44-5.

⁷¹ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 144-149.

Blake, and Sonny Boy Williamson, were killed by alcohol's devastating toll on the human body including both alcoholism and alcohol-fueled violence.⁷²

Broonzy's negotiation of social norms adds to an understanding of his identity. Authority figures were common in black Chicago including the police, who employed black officers; African American community leaders; white and black business entrepreneurs, organized crime bosses; and even recording company representatives and executives. Collectively, many of these authority figures could help or hinder a migrant's experience as they navigated a new urban world. These authority figures' worldviews often established black Chicago's social norms.

Through his careful navigation of the city, Broonzy reveals the fluidity of the Old Settler-New Settler dichotomy of social expectations. Often, he applied an accommodationist approach to his interactions with white authority figures in the city's music business and labor industries in a manner that reflected Old Settler notions

⁷² For descriptions of friends Bill lost to alcohol see Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*; 45, 140-44, 120-23; Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress; Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 444.

of proper race etiquette. And yet, as an authoritative figure within the world of Chicago blues, he exhibited New Settler modes of behavior by establishing his own blues persona based on the open recruitment and fostering of young blues talent. Echoing New Settler desires, Broonzy guided this generation of young and up and coming talent in hopes of perpetuating the city's music culture.

His relationship to the power dynamics of the recording industry presents a fascinating window into his personality. Before, as a man in his thirties, he had averted his problems with authority by catching the first train out of town, hobbing his way to Chicago. In his forties and fifties, however, he simply accommodated the unfair treatment from Melrose and the white-operated recording industry. The tension between the personal agency that pushed him out of the South and the professional accommodation that led to exploitation of his talents reveals an important factor in Broonzy's identity.

When asked why he was not assertive in his demand for royalties, he would matter-of-factly explain that he was often told untruths about the number of his sales, even though he could hear the echoes of his records on phonograph machines throughout his neighborhood and beyond.

Yet, as always with Broonzy, his reasoning for not challenging Melrose and others who had taken advantage of him were much deeper and much more personal:

I really don't want to have no connections with a man that I got to fight him and raise sand to try and get anything out of him for what I've done. Until I started in running in this music business, I had never lived around no people that would kill they own brother, like, for a lousy dollar or would rob they own family for a few nickels. I'd always been around people that they making a little something, they'll give you something, too. So, well, these guys would give me just enough to sort of live on and, by me being the way I am, I just let it go.⁷³

Deference in the Jim Crow South was an invaluable tool for African American's safety and survival. Perhaps, like many other black migrants, Broonzy employed this social pathway in his new surroundings. Rather than challenge the merciless world of the recording business head-on, Broonzy seemed much more comfortable accommodating these betrayals by maintaining his integrity, preferring just to "let it go."

Broonzy's reactions to authority were not just limited to the music business. As a laborer for the WPA, Broonzy recalled relishing praise from his white boss "Big George"

⁷³ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

as he laid concrete on 47th street in Chicago. He enjoyed the WPA's manual work during such difficult times and seemed to forge a strong and humorous relationship with his foreman and co-workers. Big George knew Broonzy was a hard worker and could follow orders, even noting the fact in front of all of the workers. Broonzy once reflected that Big George's respect made him "feel good for the boss to say that in front of the other men not knowing that they was going to have fun out of me."⁷⁴ Even though Broonzy had grown tired of deference to plantation bosses in the South, he was more than willing to accommodate to federal employees from the North.

Broonzy's relationship to authority reveals nuances of his experience in Chicago and highlights the tensions between Old Settler and New Settler modes of behavior. Collectively, the authoritative structure of his military experience, the humiliation of Jim Crow segregation, and the demands of his young wife were significant driving forces behind Broonzy's migration to Chicago.

Essentially, his life in Chicago exhibits a more nuanced approach to interpersonal power dynamics. As he

⁷⁴ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 95.

navigated the city he was forced to negotiate power relationships in many ways. Employers, record company representatives, night club owners, and house rent party organizers each held positions of authority over Broonzy, and they held the keys that would unlock his new identity's potential as an artist and entertainer. Often, he accommodated to their needs and suffered hardship, exploitation, and degradation as a result.

In other instances, however, Broonzy was much more assertive. When he first arrived, he completely rejected progressive community leaders' definitions of respectability concerning appropriate modes of dress, public presentation, and the dangers of the city's nightlife as he attempted to establish his urbane blues persona. The Chicago *Defender* revealed these social norms in its "A Few Do's and Don'ts" column that featured virtual laundry lists of suitable and not-so-suitable public modes of behavior. Most of these pieces focused on appropriate conduct on city streets and public accommodations,

sobriety, personal hygiene, public interactions between men and women and authority figures, and manners of dress.⁷⁵

Broonzy admitted that when he arrived in Chicago in the 1920s he would try anything to change his identity in hopes of gaining respect outside of the racial stereotypes that defined black behavior in both the North and South.⁷⁶

At the same time, Big Bill participated in the types of public behavior that challenged Old Settler sensibilities.⁷⁷ As a performer in black Chicago's public leisure world Broonzy openly pushed the boundaries of Old Settler public respectability by challenging characteristics that defined migrant stereotypes, including race, class, gender, and sexuality. At the center of Broonzy's challenges was his external identity. To change his outward appearance, Broonzy bought a Cadillac, a hundred-dollar suit, a forty-dollar hat, and forty-dollar

⁷⁵ *Chicago Defender*, March 24, June 2, July 14, 28, August 4, 11, October 20, November 17, 1917; February 2, March 23, April 6, May 25, July 13, September 14, 1918; June 7 1919.

⁷⁶ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 153-155.

⁷⁷ Baldwin's research focused on outward appearance of "New Settlers" by discussing Madam C.J. Walker's beauty empire and contemporary heavyweight champion Jack Johnson's open displays of race pride. See Baldwin 54-90; 195-204.

shoes; straightened his hair; changed the way he walked and talked; and altered the way he played guitar and sang songs. He even dated white women, he admitted.⁷⁸ Big, handsome, and impeccably dressed, nearly all of Broonzy's publicity photos picture a polished and sophisticated performer.

Broonzy likewise balanced accommodation and assertiveness in negotiating the social norms between Old Settler notions of black womanhood and whites' general belief in black men and women's proclivities towards promiscuity and immorality. African-American women's roles in the development of the black metropolis served as another point of contention between Old Settler and New Settler modes of respectability and social norms. As historian Davarian L. Baldwin notes, during the 1920s and '30s, issues of "[a]ppropriate womanhood and domesticity became...powerful symbols for the success or failure of old settler respectability."⁷⁹ Old Settlers had crafted an image of Chicago's black women that defied stereotypes of black "promiscuity and general immorality" by developing a new

⁷⁸ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 153-55.

⁷⁹ Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes*, 31.

cultural image rooted within "Victorian femininity" and centered on black women's increasing roles as sources of domesticity, morality, and reform.⁸⁰

Throughout his life, Broonzy demonstrated an often contradictory attitude toward women that further reveals the fluidity of Broonzy's Old Settler-New Settler navigation. Although he traveled frequently for both work and his music, he always tried to respect and take care of the women who depended on him. Perhaps the most constant female presence in his life was his mother, who died in 1957 at the age of 102. Mettie Belcher remained a strong influence on Broonzy until her death: "I was the kind of a boy that I was crazy 'bout my mother, I always was."⁸¹ The only man Broonzy ever threatened to kill had called his mother a "damn liar" and had stolen two of her chickens. He demanded an apology, and with the help of a lever-action Winchester, he fired four shots at the man, as the thief ran for his life. While living in Chicago, Bill often returned to Little Rock, Arkansas, to visit his mother, and

⁸⁰ Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes*, 31.

⁸¹ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

in 1939 Bill bought her a house in Arkansas with the money he made as a foundry laborer.⁸²

Even as an itinerant blues performer moving from town to town, Broonzy usually provided financial support for his family in order to help maintain a solid domestic life for his wives and their children. In 1941 he traveled for nearly two months with Lil' Green's Traveling Road Show, making approximately fifty dollars a week. Of that fifty dollars, Broonzy sent his wife whatever he had left over from road expenses, which usually amounted to ten or fifteen dollars. From 1944 to 1945, he often appeared at Harlem's Apollo Theater and Greenwich Village's Café Society, making \$250 and \$165 dollars a week, respectively. Each week he again sent Rosie fifty dollars to help her make ends meet.⁸³ In addition he was not opposed to his wife working to contribute to the family. Records indicate that Rosie worked for the Pullman Company's Chicago North Yard in 1944 and 1945 cleaning cars for \$.66 an hour.⁸⁴

⁸² Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ *Pullman Company Archive*, Folder 06/02/03, Box 194, Newberry Library, Chicago Illinois.

Broonzy's respect for women moved beyond his personal relationships. As a professional musician, Broonzy held deep respect for many female blues singers and had worked with a number of them, including Ma Rainey, Ida Cox, Bessie Smith, Mamie Smith, Memphis Minnie, Georgia White, and Hazel Scott.⁸⁵ Of all of his female blues colleagues, he spoke the most reverently of "Memphis" Minnie Douglas. To Broonzy, Minnie's guitar virtuosity was unparalleled; he believed she could "pick a guitar and sing as good as any man" he had ever heard.⁸⁶

He once faced Memphis Minnie in a blues contest on his birthday in 1933. With a crowded house looking on, Broonzy played two songs, much to the delight of an audience that cheered and clapped for nearly ten minutes. The house fell silent as Minnie took the stage, as the predominantly male audience and judges' panel had never heard her perform. Minnie awed the crowd with her guitar skill and vocal delivery, ultimately winning the contest and Broonzy's respect for the remainder of his life.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ *Pullman Company Archive*, Folder 06/02/03, Box 194, Newberry Library, Chicago Illinois.

⁸⁶ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 138.

Publicly, in a manner akin to Old Settler ideals about public respect for women, Broonzy was never openly aggressive with women on Chicago's city streets, and he often scoffed at others who sexually harassed women in public or coveted another man's wife or girlfriend.⁸⁸ Yet, he insisted to Alan Lomax that he was always slow with women and was never inclined to sleep around. Broonzy always had his own woman and never felt the need to covet another man's girlfriend or spouse. Too often he had witnessed what happened when his friends had "bothered the other man's woman" and insisted that he was never flirtatious with unacquainted women.⁸⁹

Although Broonzy did reflect attitudes toward women akin to Old Settler notions of family devotion and respect for the opposite sex, he exhibited the same modes of New Settler behavior concerning promiscuity that the old elite feared. In his autobiography, he lamented that he wished to be remembered by history as happy when drinking whiskey and partying with women. To be sure, he certainly had many

⁸⁷ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 138-40.

⁸⁸ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

women, as did his contemporaries. Broonzy was married at least three times. He married his first wife Gertrude in 1914, but he appears in the 1930 census with a wife named Annie. At his death, he was married to a woman named Rosie, whom he had married in 1940.⁹⁰ Broonzy's opinions on monogamy, moreover, suggest that he understood the reality and power of seduction, and, if his lady was "sneakin out," he never worried about it as long as she did not make it obvious. Quite bluntly, as long as Broonzy "got service," he seemed little concerned about her transgressions.⁹¹

These assertions suggest that Broonzy's historical trail reveals him as a man who concretized both Old Settler and white fears about black promiscuity, infidelity, and immorality. Although married throughout most of his adult life, he had many lovers, held ambivalent views on the nature of monogamy, and, perhaps, was a serial polygamist.⁹² This evidence suggests that he did not fully subscribe to

⁹⁰ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress; 1930 *U.S. Census* - Chicago, Cooke County.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Michael van Isveldt Collection, Box 1, Amsterdam, Netherlands; Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

Old Settler respectability concerning gender and sexuality. Rather, he chose to uphold only specific elements addressing family and kinship while forgoing those addressing promiscuity and monogamy.

Broonzy's navigation of these social norms within black Chicago reveals significant cultural negotiations taking place in the Black Metropolis. These negotiations, moreover, contribute to a historical understanding of Broonzy, the culture he navigated, and the formation of his identity. Moreover, they provide a lens through which to view the "lived history" of blues entertainers like Broonzy. Like the tens of thousands of southern black migrants who came to northern centers of industry with burgeoning African-American cultures, Big Bill Broonzy was forced to navigate a new way of life that often straddled, clashed, and mirrored prevalent customs of race, class, and acceptable social norms.

As a Chicago blues community icon, however, Big Bill Broonzy was not always reacting to the black community's prevalent social norms. Often he helped establish his own, as an authoritative figure within Chicago's blues community. While Broonzy's reputation grew as a leader of Chicago blues culture in the 1930s and '40s, he stood as an

authoritative voice for dozens of fledging musicians, ultimately playing an assertive role in the development of Chicago blues. The juxtaposition of these power dynamics marks a key facet of Broonzy's identity.

As discussed earlier, Broonzy was not always assertive with those who held power over him. Many in the music business took advantage of Broonzy throughout his career on a multitude of levels, and only later in life did he challenge these abuses. Conversely, as an authoritative figure within Chicago's blues community, his warmth, leadership, and devotion to the blues' younger generations following in his footsteps were critical for up and coming blues musicians. Many younger bluesmen and women viewed him as a father figure and a harbinger of an expanding blues landscape. Broonzy helped guide the early careers of recently arrived musicians, offering sage advice and coordinating important introductions.

Dozens of Chicago's respected bluesmen cite Broonzy as one of the most important figures in their early careers. The second Great Migration sparked thousands of Southerners to migrate to Chicago during the 1940s and many of Chicago's blues artists moved to Chicago during the period. Upon their arrivals, these immigrants found an

older generation of migrants who were well established in the city and its music culture. In *Big Bill Broonzy*, these musicians found a generous and affable veteran of the Chicago scene who knew the appropriate individuals within the city's club circuit as well as the city's evolving recording company market and its transformation from an art form into an industry.⁹³

The list of aspiring artists affected by Broonzy's warmth and generosity is immense: Muddy Waters, Homesick James, J.B. Lenoir, Tommy McClennan, Johnny Williams, Floyd Jones, Jimmy Rogers, Washboard Sam, and Memphis Slim all cited Broonzy as an influence. J.B. Lenoir suggested that Broonzy treated him "like a son," while Muddy Waters once proclaimed that Broonzy "helped me to get my start" when he arrived in Chicago in 1943.⁹⁴ As an authoritative figure for young and upcoming blues artists, then, Broonzy was nothing less than a stalwart, and like other New Settlers of the era, he ushered many young migrant musicians into the city's rapidly developing leisure world. And yet rather

⁹³ Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1955* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 53.

⁹⁴ Rowe, *Chicago Breakdown*, 41.

than lead this new talent astray in the same manner he had experienced, he helped guide them through what could be a difficult transition for aspiring migrant musicians.

By the 1950s, Broonzy had experienced a lifetime of disappointment within the music industry and began taking a more assertive role in his career. By this period, Broonzy had made strong professional and personal relationships with leading figures in the budding, white folk music revival. White men such as Win Stracke, Pete Seeger, and Studs Terkel had taken a keen interest in Broonzy's career and their relationships with organized labor may have rubbed off on Bill.⁹⁵ At his death in 1958 Broonzy was a card-carrying member (#146) of Chicago's Local 208, Musician's Protective Union within the larger A.F.L/C.I.O-affiliated American Federation of Musicians. This association helped Broonzy earn more from his music than ever.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Stracke and Terkel both held strong ties to Seeger's pro-union, left-leaning *People's Songs* organization. See David King Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing?: The Ballad of Pete Seeger* (New York: Villard Books, 2008); Colby Maddox and Bob Reisman's film, *Win Stracke: Chicago's Troubadour* (Chicago: Old Town School of Folk Music).

Through these power relationships, Broonzy reveals much about his personality and his particular identity. With grace and ease Bill often made light of authoritative situations that may have otherwise been quite uncomfortable. To negotiate difficult moments Broonzy outwardly employed a keen sense of humor, even in trying moments that often forced him to accommodate and sacrifice his dignity. To be sure, Broonzy was not like contemporary folk artist Huddie Ledbetter, who could become violent if he felt he was being taken advantage of.⁹⁷ Neither was he like Josh White, who sacrificed his career at its height for his political and social beliefs.⁹⁸ Broonzy's relationship to authority was his own—quietly and subtly both accommodating and assertive.

By the 1940s, when many of the postwar Chicago greats like Waters, Little Walter, and Howling Wolf began arriving, Broonzy had navigated the city and the country's music businesses for nearly fifteen years. He was "Big

⁹⁶ Big Bill Broonzy's Old Town School of Folk Music File 2006.74.25, *Chicago Historical Society*, Chicago, Illinois.

⁹⁷ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 62.

⁹⁸ Elijah Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000).

Bill," one of Chicago's most successful bluesmen and a leader of the city's blues community.

An examination of Broonzy's life from the 1920s to the 1940s demonstrates that the dynamics of African American urbanization were complex. The massive influx of southern migrants during the migrations from 1910 to 1930 happened at almost five times the rate of other cities during the period, leaving long-established whites and blacks in Chicago to face the dramatically changing landscape of America's "Second City."⁹⁹

Within this rapidly changing environment Broonzy negotiated the worlds of black and white "Old Settler" ideas and new mores shaped by "New Settlers," by selectively choosing elements from both groups that fit his new identity. On the one hand, Broonzy worked in the city's various industries throughout his life in the manner that "Old Settlers" believed would be the pathway to racial and social respectability in the United States and Chicago. Furthermore, he maintained close associations with the

⁹⁹ New York, for example, from 1910 to 1930 witnessed an increase in its black population from 91,000 to 327,000, more than tripling during the period. Chicago's black population, however, increased fivefold from 1910 to 1930 from 44,000 to 235,000. See Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*, 119-20.

white-operated recoding industry, maintaining proper relationships to white patronage that Old Settler's deemed critical for the development of black Chicago. On the other hand, Broonzy soon became involved in the music world of black Chicago that many "Old Settlers" believed contributed to a developing "Negro Problem" in the city. The blues clubs, rent parties, and brothels of Chicago that Broonzy frequented and his public modes of behavior provided an example of what some viewed as community degradation. To others, though, these activities represented a new respectability, centers for a new type of leisure industry centered on black creativity and entrepreneurial professionalism that would define the "Black Metropolis" in Chicago and help establish new identities in an emerging black urban consciousness.

To many scholars of the metropolis, African Americans fell into one of these two camps—Old Settler or New Settler. Big Bill Broonzy, however, and probably many others, created a new identity by carefully selecting ideologies from both sides of this paradigm. This navigation was not always a balanced one. Quite often, Broonzy seemed to rely more on New Settler pathways that allowed for African American cultural identity development

than those of Old Settlers that sought to inhibit such development. However, Broonzy exhibited a strong work ethic in Chicago's labor industries and a willingness to financially support his family in a manner that reflects Old Settler modes of respectability. By navigating these cultural and social parameters in black Chicago he was transformed from William Lee Connely Broonzy from Arkansas into "Big Bill" from black Chicago. A laborer by day and musician by night, Broonzy skillfully navigated the social and cultural spheres of Old and New Settlers. In doing so, he helped to create a new component of the Black Metropolis and helped open a new world for the thousands of African Americans who followed him.

CHAPTER III

EXPECTATION BLUES, PART 1: THE STRANGE CAREER OF BIG BILL BROONZY IN THE UNITED STATES

The careers of twentieth century vernacular musicians have often followed a dual path based on ambition and expectations. First, musicians begin learning and performing within an intimate, local community or family group. With a little success and luck they expect to move from being local community musicians to regional touring acts playing in similar communities throughout a defined geographic region. Finally, with hard work, dedication, and even more luck, vernacular musicians hope to become national acts who, at the peak of their fame, experience some sense of success before disappearing into obscurity as the next up-and-coming musicians take their respective place. Unfulfilled expectations have often defined the careers of twentieth century vernacular musicians.

By taking an active and conscious role in shaping his career—mainly his sound, persona, reputation business positioning, and audience—Big Bill Broonzy became one of

the most important blues artists of the twentieth century. While navigating the social constructs of urban Chicago Big Bill simultaneously negotiated American vernacular music in a manner that was unique and important to the larger narrative of American history. The evolution of his identity as a musician—his transition from country fiddler to solo male blues performer to black pop artist “Big Bill” to folk-music hero—provides a fascinating lens through which to view how twentieth century African American artists faced opportunities—and pressures—to reshape their identities. Through an examination of these four distinct phases Broonzy emerges as an historical actor who shaped his own musical identity by negotiating expectations within the blues’ culture. These negotiations highlight important issues in vernacular music history, including the expectations placed on artists by the music industry and the fluid properties of commercial music genres that often framed artistic identity.

Broonzy’s career demonstrates that musicians were not the only active agents in lengthy and successful negotiations of twentieth century vernacular music. Along the way, Broonzy met a number of individuals—musicians, record company agents, talent managers, academics, folk and

jazz music aficionados—that placed expectations on Broonzy. Collectively, they recognized his talent and expected success through their relationships with him, and he knew it. Most of them, moreover, carried distinct visions of what Broonzy, as a musician, should sound like and how his identity should be presented. Some of them viewed Broonzy as a defining part of their own careers and an exemplar of their beliefs about twentieth-century African American music. His negotiations of these expectations defined his identity as a vernacular musician and help to explain his life-long, three-stage transition.

Broonzy pioneered the evolution of the blues as a genre of black pop from its vaudeville and country roots to the distinct jazz-tinged urban sound established in Chicago. Yet, Broonzy's transition from country fiddler to black pop artist to white folk music hero demonstrates that many of these genres in twentieth-century vernacular music were quite fluid and subjective.

Broonzy formed his first musical identity as a country fiddler, playing for white weekend parties in rural Arkansas. As a working musician, Broonzy was able to circumvent the physical and economic hardships that challenged the daily lives of his sharecropping parents,

which ultimately left him with a sense of earning a "pretty good" living.¹ Broonzy once informed Alan Lomax in an interview that he formed an identity as one of the best musicians in his rural community by helping support his nuclear family's aspirations for "a nice home," earning enough money as a musician to help pay for a "plantation."² Yet Broonzy's identity came with personal sacrifices. His musical abilities shared only with white audiences, essentially separating his talents from the rich African American musical traditions shaping in the Deep South during the period.³ Quickly he learned that music could become racialized in the South, ensuring that his race consciousness developed rather quickly.

Broonzy's negotiation of music culture began at an

¹ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

² Ibid.

³ Broonzy told both Yannick Bruynoghe and Alan Lomax that he was not allowed to play with black musicians after local whites had discovered his music abilities in the South. He used this anecdote to explain elements of southern racism. See Big Bill Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues: William Broonzy's Story as told to Yannick Bruynoghe* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 35-6; Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

early age within a relatively small and intimate community. His uncle Jerry Belcher was a blacksmith and local musician who introduced Broonzy to many musical concepts like time and tone using everyday items like plow blades and brooms from his blacksmith shop. Broonzy's first introduction to live performance came from his uncle's blacksmith shop as Belcher and friends created a melody using a washtub, plow points, and a shop broom.⁴

Like many young rural southern musicians, Broonzy made his first instrument, a handmade "fiddle", out of a cigar box. Recalling the "stuff of lore" for Alan Lomax, Broonzy remembered that he had learned how to construct his cigar box fiddle from a local community musician named "See-See Rider."⁵ Apparently, Rider was one of the best performing musicians in the Arkansas River bottoms who took his name from a famous if not notorious blues song of the same name. Rider typically played handmade instruments including a guitar, bass and a fiddle. Broonzy befriended the itinerant musician so that he could "figure out how his

⁴ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 55.

⁵ Big Bill Broonzy, "Baby I Done Got Wise," *The Jazz Record* (March 1946): 9; Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*. (York: Doubleday, 1992), 426.

guitar and fiddle were made," and find the right construction materials at the local commissary.⁶ Once Rider discovered young Broonzy's interest in the instruments, he began teaching Broonzy how to "fix" the strings and even taught the young aspiring musician to play songs like "Shortnin' Bread," "Old Hen Cackle," and "Uncle Bud."⁷

Broonzy's tutelage under "See-See Rider" led to important events that would introduce him to the white community in the sharecropping South as a musician. One afternoon, a white plantation boss learned that Broonzy was a musician and asked him and his friend Louis to perform for his family and friends. Scared to death, Broonzy and Louis obliged and in so doing earned money, respect, and new Sears and Roebuck instruments.⁸ Even in the South, Broonzy quickly learned that music could transform his own sense of self.

By age nineteen Broonzy had learned to play the fiddle and earned tips playing for various white functions including picnics, country-dances, and even church

⁶ Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 426.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 428.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 429.

congregations "through Arkansas, and Mississippi, and some parts of Texas."⁹ Making good money—fifty dollars for a three-day picnic, plus tips—Broonzy performed waltzes, reels, two-steps, and ragtime that often included numbers like "Missouri Waltz," "Sally Gooden," "On the Road to Texas," "Over the Waves," and "Uncle Bud."¹⁰ By his early twenties, Broonzy, who was raised a strict Baptist, served as a country preacher for several Arkansas country churches and married "the first woman he ever knew."¹¹ He stopped playing the fiddle all together and renounced his "devilish ways." That changed, however, when several white plantation owners—who had heard of his talents—approached him to perform at a series of white dances. This opportunity allowed him to make far more money than he could have sharecropping. So as Broonzy put it, "Christian's one thing but money's another."¹² He quickly

⁹ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ William Broonzy. *Big Bill Blues: William Broonzy's Story as told to Yannick Bruynoghe* (London: Cassell and Company, 1955), 61.

¹² Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

learned that negotiating the expectations of whites in the South's proto-music industry could provide significant financial reward, even if it meant challenging his religious beliefs.

Interestingly, unlike Muddy Waters or Blind Boy Fuller, Broonzy never played his fiddle for all black audiences in the Deep South.¹³ He suggested that once the white community found how good he really was, they kept him to themselves. Here Broonzy makes a significant contribution to understanding race and music in the Jim Crow South.

Why didn't I play for Negro dances? Well you see the way [of??] the white man in this South is this. Anything's good, they thinks it's too good for the Negro, see... When I started playing music, white man told me, he says, "You too good to be playing for Negroes." See? "You should be playing for white people." And therefore they wouldn't allow me to play for my own people.¹⁴

Before he even arrived in Chicago, then, Broonzy was

¹³ Broonzy recalled playing for segregated audiences in the South, with whites on one side of the stage and black on the other. See Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 35-6; Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

¹⁴ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

negotiating musical culture and its expectations in ways that would continue throughout the rest of his life. By establishing critical relationships with the musicians who held knowledge of the music itself and expected Broonzy to carry on the southern musical tradition, Broonzy began developing patterns of navigation that would help sustain his long career in its many transitional phases. Moreover, his careful understanding of the expectations of whites that held power in the South taught Broonzy that a little accommodation and deference could produce fruitful gains as a musician. Considering the origins of his relationship to music in the South, then, Broonzy learned that managing others' expectations could help bolster his career. By positioning himself to learn from other performers and by integrating his talents into the white-brokered South, Broonzy learned many valuable lessons that would guide his lifelong transition.

Broonzy's first forays into music happened at a critical moment in the history of African American vernacular music and the black experience. The African American spirituals that Broonzy had heard most of his life (and exemplified by the work of the Fisk Jubilee Singers) became one of the earliest vessels for the expression of

anti-Jim Crow sentiment. The first generation of African Americans to inherit the legacy of emancipation, however, began moving away from the spiritual world of the old sorrow songs to more modern forms of black cultural creativity that expressed their new condition. Emerging from the late nineteenth century South, it is no coincidence that the blues as a genre developed alongside the rise of Jim Crow racism. Historian Leon Litwack has written that

Denied access to the political process, limited in what they could acquire in the schools, and dehumanized in popular culture, black Southerners were compelled to find other ways to express their deepest feelings and to demonstrate their individual and collective integrity.¹⁵

Essentially, the blues moved away from the sacred traditions of spirituals by addressing the secular world of African Americans. By doing so, the blues transformed the meaning and importance of black popular music for migrants like Broonzy in the same manner the spirituals had to an older generation. Sidney Bechet has noted while spirituals looked toward the heavens for hope and relief, the blues

¹⁵ Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), xvi.

commented on the human condition of blacks in a segregated world. "[T]hey were both...people's way of praying to themselves" and "praying to be let alone so they could be human."¹⁶

Because Broonzy's musical experience as a performing musician had been limited to interactions with whites, and his style as a country fiddler reflected their tastes in music, he had not shared in the development of blues in rural Arkansas as a performer. Broonzy's arrival in Chicago in 1920 would initiate the transformation of his first musical identity as a southern fiddler into his next as a solo male blues performer. This transition happened within the first five years of Broonzy's migration to the Windy City. As he navigated black Chicago and its emerging commercialized leisure world he was introduced to dozens of talented male blues performers who were involved in the city's rent party and recording cultures. These individuals introduced Broonzy to the rich culture of the African American vernacular music developing in the South from which Broonzy had been sheltered.

¹⁶ Sidney Bechet, *Treat it Gently: An Autobiography* (New York: De Capo Press, 2002, 2nd Ed.), 212-13.

Through his interactions with these men Broonzy learned that blues songs, despite their individualistic nature, were constructed to share with a group whose common experiences sought "relief and release" from a segregated society. Blues audiences and entertainers, therefore, shared a collectivized experience that transformed the traditional roles of performer and audience into one of whole participation. Chicago migrants like Broonzy were allowed certain successes in the North and Midwest that would not have been possible in the South, and most migrants, including Broonzy, had left the South because of Jim Crow. The blues, then, singer documented this experience through song, transforming the audiences' expressions of sadness, frustration, and fear into a communal experience filled with wit, humor, and passion.¹⁷

Big Bill Broonzy's musical transformation from country musician to male solo blues artist and his deep passion for the blues are critical for understanding his identity transition from country fiddler to solo bluesman. As a black sharecropper, coming of age in rural turn-of-the-

¹⁷ Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture Black Consciousness: Afro American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom, 30th Anniversary Ed.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 237.

century Arkansas playing for whites with their own ideas about southern music, Broonzy was in a sense hidden from the blues. He certainly did not have the mentor/mentee relationship that Muddy Waters experienced with Son House. As he transitioned from sharecropping country fiddler to solo male blues performer, he transformed his identity into a vessel for the expression of the black experience in Jim Crow society.

Of course, not all African Americans accepted the secular nature of the blues or the development of these new identities. To some, the blues challenged African American's cultural heritage and represented the wrong direction for the race. In 1903 W.E.B. Du Bois lamented on the nature of the "sorrow songs" and their growing importance to the African American experience in the United States as "the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people."¹⁸ Du Bois believed that the increasing popularity of black secular music was endangering the legacy of the slave experience with songs that threatened to debase "the moral message of

¹⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*; with a foreword by Randall Keenan, (New York: Signet Classic Printing, 1995), 265.

the Negro spirituals" and reinforcing "stereotypes of racial primitivism."¹⁹

In fact, for many black leaders, echoing the sensibilities of Chicago's Old Settler elite, when the blues became popular it threatened notions of refinement and respectability "because its spokesmen and its ritual too frequently provided the expressive communal channels of relief that had been largely the province of religion in the past. Blues successfully blended the sacred and the secular."²⁰ Recent scholarship on black Chicago in the early twentieth century has suggested that African American music in the Windy City

provides crucial opportunities to consider how notions of race community in the broadest sense register change for black folk, as much as establish the resilience of their identities.²¹

The evolution of the blues popularity in favor of the

¹⁹ Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migrations and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 157.

²⁰ Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture, Black Consciousness*, 237.

²¹ Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 52.

spirituals represents the change of black audiences' tastes from music that reminded them of slavery in favor of music that spoke communally to their present conditions. This sense of change and the development of identities helped make Broonzy's navigation of vernacular music more meaningful. Broonzy, from the start of his identity transition from country fiddler to solo male bluesman, became involved with a community of musicians in Chicago that helped facilitate his migration, cement his identity transformation, and aid his navigation of a new urban environment. At the very moment when Broonzy was introduced to black vernacular music communities in Chicago, an audience dedicated to popular black music was developing as well.

Throughout the 1920s, the blues, as a distinct genre had been transformed from a rural, vernacular music to a form of black popular music, in a manner that would mirror Broonzy's career. But to label it simply as "pop music" does not clearly define its importance to the black community or to musicians like Broonzy. These musicians spoke of this music reverently, if not sacredly. Understanding the evolution of the blues from its rural, vernacular roots to its urban pop music form is critical

for understanding the identities of musicians like Broonzy and the expectations of an industry that was transforming how blues could be understood. In the South the blues remained isolated in segregated communities prompting recording agents to venture into Arkansas, Mississippi, and Texas to discover local artists. In Chicago, however, as musicians like Broonzy arrived by the hundreds from the Great Migrations they became concentrated within and gravitated towards the city's music communities. The freedom that the city offered from the oppressive eye of the Jim Crow South allowed these musicians to develop identities based on their music that were valued within their community and shared by the music industry.

When Broonzy arrived in Chicago, new trends in blues recording were emerging. Beginning in the mid-1920s, the popular emergence of the lone, self-accompanied male performer popularized by entertainers like Sylvester Weaver, Papa Charlie Jackson, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Lonnie Johnson transformed the blues as a form of recorded music. These vaudeville veterans and their jazz-tinged, female counterparts set the early standard for blues

recording and performance that would revolutionize blues songwriting, recording, and culture.²²

In 1926, one artist would create a tidal wave of interest in a new self-accompanied, male derived blues as pop music and serve as a true inspiration for Bronzy: Texas street musician and guitar virtuoso Blind Lemon Jefferson. Jefferson was extremely critical for Broonzy's identity transformation from rural country fiddler to urban pop musician because Broonzy crafted his own expectations and identity as a blues musician through Lemon Jefferson. His relationship with Jefferson suggests that yet again, much like his relationships to Jerry Belcher and "See-See Rider." Broonzy established critical relationships with musicians who held specific knowledge about the music he wished to learn. From 1926 to 1929, Blind Lemon Jefferson had recorded 100 songs, fifty of which were released on record. This placed him as the most successful early solo male blues artist. Jefferson's recordings and his personal influence on Broonzy, moreover, reflect Broonzy's own

²² William Barlow, *Looking up at Down: The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 292-299.

expectations of blues culture of the period that deserve attention.

Blind Lemon Jefferson set the standard for a new generation of blues musicians like Broonzy, by molding their identities and their expectations of the blues and its industry. When Broonzy first met Blind Lemon Jefferson in 1925, the Texas bluesman was already a star in the South. Broonzy recalled meeting Jefferson at a rent party in Chicago when Jefferson had been in town to record for Paramount Records.²³ More important, Jefferson offered Broonzy a template for shaping his musical identity as a solo male blues performer. Jefferson offered tutelage and encouragement to this burgeoning musician trying to gain entry into Chicago's blues world. After all, Jefferson and Broonzy shared a somewhat similar path to the blues.

Like Broonzy in Arkansas, Jefferson began his music career at the rural picnics and weekend dances associated with east Texas farming communities. As his popularity grew, the blind guitar wizard began performing on street corners and in the brothels and bordellos of Galveston and Dallas where he could afford a better lifestyle and

²³ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

appropriate better tips. Jefferson mastered a wide-ranging repertoire in the songster tradition, and quickly established himself in the South as one of the blues' most important artists, often traveling to perform or record in Oklahoma, the Mississippi Delta, Georgia, Virginia, and, most notably, Chicago. Broonzy had bought his first guitar at approximately the same time he met Jefferson, suggesting that Broonzy was just learning how to transform his knowledge of music from fiddle to guitar. Upon their first meeting, Jefferson apparently taught Broonzy about the intonation of the strings on the guitar and offered lessons on, as Broonzy put it, "how to get along with the guitar."²⁴

Broonzy expected that meeting artists like Jefferson would pay off in the form of either musical knowledge or, with any luck, insight into Chicago's music industry. This chance meeting between a future blues giant and one already established demonstrates that rent parties were extremely critical for the development of black pop music and musician's identities in urban areas. In the South, of course, performances in barrelhouses and juke joints, at picnics and parties, and even on back porches were critical

²⁴ Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 65-6.

for fostering young blues talent. Like young Broonzy in Arkansas with See-See Rider or young Robert Johnson in Mississippi with Son House, aspiring young southern bluesmen expected to hone their skills trying to emulate popular community artists whom they may have seen at a local function. These informal social gatherings defined when and where young musicians were introduced to the blues and how their identities as blues musicians could be perceived. These venues for cultural exchange, then, followed African Americans into urban areas as tens of thousands of blacks fled the South during the Great Migration. As Broonzy navigated Chicago's music culture he expected the fostering of such relationships to propel his career.

Chicago's blues community, beginning in the late 1920s, was rife with talented blues artists eager to make a name for themselves. Broonzy recalled meeting several southern bluesmen who had come to Chicago to record and happened to be performing in Chicago's rent party circuit including Jefferson, Blind Blake, Tampa Red, Barbecue Bob, Big Joe Turner, Leroy Carr, Shorty George, Lonnie Johnson,

Jim Jackson, and others.²⁵ These individuals, moreover, had recording experience and persuaded Broonzy to try his hand.²⁶ These chance meetings and the relationships that developed out of them opened doors for young artists looking to break into Chicago's blues performance and recording culture. By befriending individuals with established ties to Chicago's blues culture Broonzy expected to both learn their music and take advantage of their connections within the music industry.

At exactly the same moment when Broonzy was meeting early male blues luminaries like Jefferson, Chicago's recording industry, with expectations of its own, experienced significant growth. The city's recording business in the 1920s was dominated by three major labels; Okeh, Paramount, and Brunswick Vocalion. By the mid-1920s, Paramount Records had clearly established a reputation as the most important label with the most popular talent. In 1924, Paramount hired former football star and A&R man J. Mayo "Ink" Williams to head its race record market. Williams proved to be savvy and ruthless in his pursuit of

²⁵ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

²⁶ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 69.

blues talent and he recorded many of the early blues greats including Ma Rainey, Papa Charlie Jackson, Ida Cox, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Blake, and an upstart named Big Bill.²⁷

As discussed in chapter 1, "Ink" Williams' interactions with Broonzy were extremely important to Broonzy's negotiation of the recording industry's expectations in Chicago and his identity transformation into a black pop artist. Recording under Williams gave Big Bill Broonzy the much-needed "street credit" of a musician who had recorded for the most popular blues label of the period. Even if his records sold poorly and were of poor quality, recording for Williams and Paramount helped establish a reputation that was incredibly important for aspiring black pop musicians in both recording and performance. Working with Williams also prepared Broonzy for the ruthless and unscrupulous world of black popular music and its industry.

While at Paramount, "Ink" Williams became adept at

²⁷ Alex van der Tuuk, *The Rise and Fall of Paramount Records: A History of the Wisconsin Chair Co. and its Recording Activities* (Denver, CO: Mainspring Press, 2003); Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

signing Chicago's best and brightest talent. After all, he had developed lucrative recording relationships with Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Papa Charlie Jackson, and Blind Lemon Jefferson. Given Williams' experience, then, he expected benefits from his recording endeavors and for his discovery of blues talent. In order to manipulate copyright laws, for example, Williams developed the Chicago Music Publishing Company, which was given credit for all of the recordings he arranged. The creation of this company ensured that Williams received payment for all of the royalties generated by his stable of artists, which could then be given to artists as handouts at his discretion.²⁸ One blues scholar has suggested that most of Williams' talent, including stalwarts Blind Lemon Jefferson and Blind Blake, probably never received any money in royalties and were more than likely paid off with flat sums and bottles of whiskey for their work.²⁹ Most recording companies of the era like Paramount frequently took advantage of blues musicians' naiveté concerning copyright laws and Big Bill Broonzy was no exception.

²⁸ William Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 131.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

To be clear, Williams understood well the unique development of the recording industry in the 1920s and used that knowledge for his own advantage. For example, following the 1909 Copyright Act, composers organized themselves within the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers in order to guarantee their rights of ownership of published music. Musicians also relied on the recently developed American Federation of Musicians. Both groups, however, excluded African Americans from their ranks, often maintaining Jim Crow membership practices.³⁰ Broonzy, as an outsider trying to break into the business, did not understand these dynamics.

Williams also knew that black Americans wanted to hear the blues. The recording explosions that occurred following the seminal recordings of several rural blues artists like Son House, Charley Patton, Blind Blake, and Blind Lemon Jefferson, solidified the existence of a national market for black blues that quickly surpassed the popularity of the classic female singers. Ultimately, these events proved that the scene was ripe for a new generation of naïve, southern migrant musicians. Legally, then, the early

³⁰ Greene, *Selling the Race*, 54.

recording industry was created to exploit many of its most gifted talent.

In 1927 Broonzy recorded his first songs for Williams' Chicago Paramount office after several of Broonzy's blues acquaintances suggested that he should record. Two of Broonzy's mentors, Papa Charlie Jackson and Blind Lemon Jefferson, had already recorded for Williams and Paramount records and Broonzy was crafting an identity as a self-accompanied solo blues performer patterned on these two pioneers. The expectations Broonzy had established through meeting these two men were beginning to pay off. Shortly after his introduction to Blind Lemon Jefferson, Broonzy and his friend John Thomas recorded their first Paramount title "Big Bill Blues" and "House Rent Stomp," under the name "Big Bill and Thomps."³¹

Broonzy's first experience in the recording studio was difficult at best and horrific at worst and offers a glimpse into the reality of his expectations. Broonzy explained:

Me and Thomas was sitting down, talking about what we had to do to make a record. They had my head in a horn of some kind and I had to pull my head out of the horn

³¹ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 47.

to read the words and back in to sing. And they had Thomas put on a pillar about two feet high and they kept on telling us to play like we would if we was at home or at a party, and they kept on telling us to relax and giving us moonshine whiskey - and I got drunk. I went to sleep after the recording and when I woke up, on the way home, John Thomas told me that I had signed some paper. I told him I hadn't...And sure enough there the paper was, signed with ink. 'You've let them make you drunk,' Thomas said, 'and you've signed our rights away.'³²

The practice of cheating artists out of their royalties was common throughout Broonzy's recording career and he did not receive any royalties for recordings until 1939, more than ten years after he began recording. At this point, Broonzy was neither comfortable nor talented enough to record and perform as a solo artist, inevitably enlisting the help of his friend to shout and play the guitar with him. The recordings were poor in quality and sales, but were good enough for him to be invited back for more Paramount sessions including the 1928 recording of "Down in the Basement Blues" and a commentary on the Great Depression titled "Starvation Blues."³³

³² Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 47

³³ Robert W. Dixon, John Godrich and Howard W. Rye, *Blues and Gospel Records: 1890-1943* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 59.

Throughout these early recordings, Broonzy's vocal and guitar sounds are far from the polished and sophisticated style that he would develop under the Bluebird label in the mid-1930s. One critic even wrote that Broonzy's early recordings were "terrible" and "probably the most unpromising first records ever made by any blues singer," as he was trying to emulate Blind Lemon Jefferson.³⁴ While this criticism may be harsh if not inaccurate—Broonzy's vocal range and guitar attack were wholly different and less polished—he was learning to become a solo male bluesman, like dozens of his contemporaries, in the same mold as Blind Lemon Jefferson. Just as Broonzy expected, if he could morph his musical identity into a Blind Lemon-type model, he probably had a chance to record.

Just as Broonzy was beginning to establish his identity and fostering critical relationships within Chicago's recording and performing industry, the country's economy collapsed. The Great Depression was devastating for the national recording market and hit the city of Chicago very hard. Recording industry sales had peaked in 1926 at \$126 million and plummeted to only \$6 million by

³⁴ Samuel Charters, *The Country Blues* (New York: De Capo Press, 1959), 171.

1933.³⁵ The situation for Broonzy, however, seemed promising. In 1931, for the first time under his full name, the mistakenly typed "Big Bill Broomsley," Broonzy had recorded his very first record for Paramount as a solo performer, a ragtime/vaudeville-tinged blues number titled "How You Want it Done."³⁶

Nevertheless, the crippling effect of the depression continued. In 1932 Paramount records, the pioneer blues and vaudeville label, failed along with race labels Okeh and Gennett. Most of them had not expected such a quick demise in the historically successful race record market. Paramount's chief rival Columbia was also on the verge of collapse leaving only fledgling retail store affiliate RCA-Victor, Brunswick/Vocalion, and upstart competitor Decca to absorb dozens of smaller subsidiary labels and their artists within a highly unstable market. Fortunately, these new labels found an already established collection of talent and music in the city of Chicago.³⁷

³⁵ Greene, *Selling the Race*, 56.

³⁶ "How You Want it Done," Grafton, WI, May 1931, *Paramount* 13084, in House, *Blues Smoke: The Recorded Journey of Big Bill Broonzy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 166.

Ultimately, Broonzy had learned to play the guitar, sing, and record in the popular style of the self-accompanied male blues performer, an identity wholly different from his country fiddler roots. By navigating the expectations of critical relationships within Chicago's burgeoning recording industry and its informal house-rent party circuit, Big Bill Broonzy had transformed himself from a sharecropping country musician into a solo male blues performer. As a musician, he was nowhere near the performer he would become, but as a songwriter he was making significant strides. At this point, Broonzy's songwriting was beginning to gain enough attention to propel his career in a completely new direction that mirrored the transition of the blues from its rural beginnings to urban pop. His transformation into a new identity as a black urban pop star would occur through negotiating the expectations of one of Chicago's most important early blues industry stalwarts: white music publisher and talent scout Lester Melrose.

Illinois native and WWI veteran Lester Melrose experienced success in Chicago's early recording scene,

³⁷ Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 133-35.

publishing jazz compositions by greats such as Louis "King" Oliver and Jelly Roll Morton out of his Cottage Grove music store. By 1926, Melrose had sold his stake in the music store and publishing business to strike out on his own as a talent scout and record company agent. Beginning in the late 1920s and continuing throughout the 1940s, Melrose held more influence over Chicago's blues music than perhaps any other individual artist or promoter. Melrose once proclaimed that from 1934 to 1951 he "recorded at least 90 percent of all rhythm and blues talent for RCA Victor and Columbia records."³⁸ The list of artists who worked for Melrose was vast and included a who's who of Chicago's early greats including Tampa Red, Memphis Minnie, "Georgia" Tom Dorsey, Washboard Sam, "Big" Joe Williams, and, of course, Big Bill Broonzy.³⁹

When Broonzy first met Melrose he was working as a laborer in a foundry and part-time grocery boy.⁴⁰ Right away, these two future Chicago blues giants recognized the

³⁸ Lester Melrose, "My Life in Recording," *The American Folk Music Occasional* 1, 1970, 59-61.

³⁹ Melrose, "My Life in Recording," 59-61.

⁴⁰ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

other's potential and invested expectations in their relationship. At this point Broonzy had gained some experience recording with Paramount, but was not quite ready to record as a solo artist as, according to one scholar, the quality of his records were almost as poor as his sales.⁴¹ Nevertheless, Broonzy had established somewhat of a reputation and identity at least as a songwriter—enough in fact that Melrose sought him out. Through his relationship with Melrose, Broonzy developed into one of the most important figures in Chicago blues and he began recording for Melrose and Gennett Records in 1930 under the pseudonym Big Bill Johnson.⁴² Recording a series of his own compositions in the self-accompanied male blues artist style including "Cant' Be Satisfied," "Skoodle do do" and "Tadpole Blues," Broonzy demonstrated growth in his musicianship as his vocal delivery seemed more confident, And yet these recordings were eerily similar to Leroy Carr and Lonnie Johnson.⁴³

Melrose and Broonzy met at a critical point for

⁴¹ Charters, *The Country Blues*, 171.

⁴² Robert W. Dixon, et al., *Blues and Gospel Records*, 59.

⁴³ Charters, *The Country Blues*, 171.

American music. As the recording industry began to recover from the Great Depression's devastation in the early 1930s, important developments within American musical culture had begun to change the black pop music landscape. With the repeal of prohibition and the emergence of the jukebox, Broonzy's musical world changed forever.

The New Deal brought a new lease on life to the record business. The repeal of Prohibition revitalized the nightclubs and saloons of urban America. Simultaneously, the demand for popular records was stimulated by a new technical innovation, the jukebox, which began to supplant live music in bars and clubs...[b]y 1939, there were 255,000 jukeboxes in operation using 13 million disks⁴⁴

The Depression-era audiences of newly established saloons and bars were hungry for the sounds of developing urban blues styles, especially those pulsating from the city of Chicago.

While the vaudeville blues popularized by the classic female blues singers of the early recording era had all but disappeared, traditional rural blues and the emerging urban blues sound were becoming popular. The days of expensive ventures into the South with mobile recording equipment to

⁴⁴ Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 133.

record local blues talent was over. Many of the South's best and brightest had left the South during the depression and many found their way to Chicago. New tastes, new record labels, and a large pool of incredibly gifted talent, prepared Chicago for the creation of one of the most vibrant and important music cultures in twentieth century American history. Under these auspices, Lester Melrose and Big Bill Broonzy were becoming a powerful combination within Chicago's blues community. Melrose held expectations for his own vision of Chicago blues markets and Big Bill Broonzy would play an integral part.

Melrose's most important contribution to Broonzy's artistry and identity was his role as intermediary between Broonzy and dozens of local artists. Through Melrose, Broonzy met lifelong friends and musical companions who together built Chicago's distinct blues sound block by block. These blues greats included Tampa Red, Memphis Minnie, Washboard Sam, John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson, Memphis Slim, Black Bob, Joshua Altheimer, Sleepy John Estes, "Big" Maceo Meriwether, Jazz Gillum, and many others.⁴⁵ Together they would become as important to the

⁴⁵ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 107-48.

development and maintenance of Broonzy's identity as Broonzy's own negotiations.

Melrose, moreover, expected his stable of talented musicians to fulfill his vision by creating what one scholar has called the "Bluebird beat."⁴⁶ Bluebird, the race record subsidiary of RCA-Victor had emerged out of the bleak Depression-era music scene and become synonymous with a polished and urbane sound of jazz-tinged blues featuring Melrose's handpicked cadre of musicians. Just like "Ink" Williams before, Lester Melrose expected to get rich from his navigation of his vision of black pop music, and Chicago's urban blues sensation "Big Bill" was an incredibly important component.

Leaning on his music production roots, Melrose paid small sums for original compositions created by his talented group of musicians and copyrighted all songs under his own name. Not only did this ensure that he would receive all royalties for Bluebird songs, it also helped keep his artists active, productive, and, most important,

⁴⁶ Charters, *The Country Blues*, 182-93.

original.⁴⁷ Melrose production philosophy created a sound that shed the blues' country roots by adding jazz instrumentation and swinging beats in hopes of appealing to a wider audience, signaling the artistic roots of what would become the third stage of Broonzy's career—professional urban blues pioneer "Big Bill."

Most of Melrose's musicians appeared on the other's albums, often as instrumentalists or credited as songwriters, a phenomenon that helped create a distinctly recognizable black pop sound. More important, Broonzy and his close friend Washboard Sam were two of Melrose's most prolific songwriters and critical for the development of Melrose's vision. The resulting product, as one scholar has suggested, was quite "formulaic" in its sound.⁴⁸

Beginning in 1934, Broonzy's recordings as an individual performer disappeared as Melrose recognized Broonzy's obvious, but unpolished talent and persuaded him to perform with accompaniment. Essentially, these two Chicago blues pioneers were forging their career successes

⁴⁷ Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 79-81.

⁴⁸ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 80.

and identities by fulfilling their individual expectations of the other. Broonzy expected that Melrose's extensive experience within Chicago's music business and his connections with record companies would provide guidance for his own navigation of black popular music. Melrose anticipated that Broonzy's songwriting, affable personality, dogged persistence, and obvious talent would serve as a critical component for his vision.

Broonzy's solo records had sold poorly, so Melrose began recording Broonzy with ensembles throughout the thirties and into the forties. These "hokum" bands "were made up of guitars, piano, bass, drums, trumpet, saxophone, and occasionally a washboard." They "produced an upbeat, happy-go-lucky sound closer to the black minstrel and vaudeville musical tradition" than Broonzy's country blues roots.⁴⁹ When Broonzy was paired with pianist Black Bob in March of 1934 his career took an entirely different turn, a turn that Melrose had envisioned. Broonzy's musicianship, especially his vocal delivery, had evolved dramatically under Melrose. He had lost the gruff tone and projection of his self-accompanied style in favor of a smooth, jazz-

⁴⁹ Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 301.

like croon. As a result, he quickly began to experience some success as the duo recorded at least on two-dozen different occasions from 1932 to 1937.⁵⁰

By negotiating Melrose's vision for a new urban blues sound, Broonzy had transformed himself from a solo male blues shouter in the Blind Lemon Jefferson mold into a smoothed-over, almost jazz-like blues crooner. His vocal phrasings became relaxed, carefully phrased, and wholly confident while his guitar accompaniment remained a subtle companion to Black Bob's pulsating piano rhythms.

In effect, Broonzy's work with Melrose suggests that he was beginning to understand the importance of vocal style and inflection over the frequently atonal and polyrhythmic guitar and vocal phrasings that had dominated the Mississippi Delta and East Texas sounds. Slowly, he was transforming his professional identity in the same way he had transformed his personal persona in black Chicago. Throughout the 1930s, Broonzy became "Big Bill"—perhaps the most recorded blues artist of the era, lending songwriting, vocal performance, and guitar accompaniment to hundreds of recordings. More important, this new identity reflected

⁵⁰ Robert W. Dixon, et.al, *Blues and Gospel Records*, 61-3.

larger trends in African Americans' identity development occurring outside of their traditional labor. By pursuing his music career with dogged persistence and managing Melrose's expectations, Broonzy made a name for himself not in the traditional role of black urban laborer, but rather as an African American celebrity among an African American audience.

As a seasoned professional veteran of Chicago's blues recording culture, he had relinquished the southern musical identity that he had molded after Blind Lemon Jefferson and had begun creating something completely new: "Big Bill," urban bluesman from Chicago's South Side. Broonzy expected Chicago's growing blues music culture and industry to recognize his importance to Chicago's developing urban blues sound. This transformation was incredibly important for sustaining Chicago's blues community and Broonzy's "Big Bill" identity. Broonzy was becoming a leader within this community and an important architect of the city's evolving blues sound. Indeed, the blues were changing into a more urban sound that featured ensembles that increasingly included piano, guitar, harmonica, and drums, a precursor to the jump blues and boogie-woogie craze of the early forties.

More important, Broonzy was beginning to understand that a successful navigation of Chicago's music business meant recognizing the expectations of those who held power within the world he wished to become a part of and creating an identity around these expectations. Even if fulfilling these expectations did not produce financial gains, they did help build strong reputations for performers and songwriters within the black pop music world.

As Broonzy came into his own as an urban blues performer and recording artist, his songwriting became increasingly prolific and sophisticated, covering a wide array of topics including politics, racism, relationships, city life, agriculture, industrial labor, the Great Depression, natural disasters, religion, alcohol, migration, and WWII. This wide-ranging repertoire helped further establish his popularity and appeal and solidified his "Big Bill" identity. As new migrants arrived in Chicago during the forties, many recognized "Big Bill" as the seminal leader of Chicago's blues community.⁵¹

In a 1946 letter to friend Alan Lomax, Broonzy explained that both his identity transformation into "Big

⁵¹ Mike Rowe, *Chicago Breakdown*, 41.

Bill" and his navigation of the expectations of the music business had paid off. As a black pop artist throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s, Broonzy appeared and recorded all over the country, often crisscrossing from Chicago to New York. He had recorded nearly 300 songs for various record labels including Paramount, Black Pattie, Vocalion, Perfect, Gennett and on the ten subsidiaries of RCA Victor.⁵² The letter further lists over thirty-five artists with whom he had recorded over his long career.

Throughout this period he continued to perform within many of the clubs and bars that developed out of the repeal of Prohibition, further establishing his "Big Bill" identity. Clubs and theaters like Ruby Lee Gatewood's Tavern, the 1410 Club, The Regal Theatre, The 8th Street Theatre in Chicago and the Town Hall, The Apollo Theater, and Café Society in New York were some of Broonzy's best gigs and home to many of the country's best blues and jazz talents. Some of these clubs featured performers for five to six hours at a time and were often quite rough and

⁵² Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

tawdry.⁵³ Broonzy even continued to perform on the Chitlin Circuit in the early forties with Chicago-based female artist Lil Green.⁵⁴

Broonzy's distinct recordings from the 1930s and 1940s, however, should not suggest that he had abandoned his country blues roots. National and local Chicago blues audiences held expectations of their own, outside of those fostered by the recording industry. One of these expectations was "country blues" and Broonzy continued to perform in the rural blues style during this period in clubs, theaters, and parties in the self-accompanied or guitar/piano accompaniment arrangements. In 1938 and 1939, for example, he appeared in John Hammond's New York-based productions "From Spirituals to Swing" a "concert of Negro music sponsored by the leftist New Masses."⁵⁵ In front of an all-white audience, Broonzy, a polished urban blues veteran and crafty industrial laborer, wore coveralls and

⁵³ Rowe, *Chicago Breakdown*, 40-5.

⁵⁴ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 137-9; Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

⁵⁵ *Time*, Jan 2, 1939.

his first pair of "store-bought shoes" as he played the South's latest blues straight from the fields of Arkansas.⁵⁶

Melrose too, remained interested in the country blues of the Mississippi Delta and often expected Broonzy to scout popular southern talent. In the late thirties, Lester Melrose desperately wanted to record Mississippi bluesmen Tommy McClennan, whose distinct style, Melrose believed, would sell readily on RCA-Victor's Bluebird label. Broonzy understood all too well how a northern white man engaging African Americans from the Mississippi Delta would be perceived by local farm and plantation bosses. He suggested that Melrose should find "a Negro out of town" to talk to Tommy in hopes of avoiding any confrontation. Disregarding Bill's warning, Melrose traveled to Mississippi himself only to flee Yazoo City for his life, leaving behind his car and money for Tommy to travel to Chicago. Melrose never again visited the South after the McClennan incident, enlisting Broonzy for those scouting trips.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ One of the first discussions of this contradiction appeared in Sam Charters, *The Country Blues* (New York: De Capo Press, 1975), 177. Recently, blues historian Elijah Wald has revisited the same theme in Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 227.

Broonzy's fulfillment of Melrose's musical expectations, then, had evolved throughout the thirties in a manner that reflected the evolution of a genre. Both men had survived the Great Depression era collapse of the recording industry to create a style of urban-tinged, black pop blues that made one of them rich and provided the other with an incredibly potent identity within Chicago's blues community. The 1940s, however, would present new challenges for Broonzy, his "Big Bill" identity, and his expectations of Chicago's blues and its culture by forcing the last stage of his lifelong, musical transition.

Throughout the 1940s, the blues music that Broonzy and Melrose had pioneered in Chicago was changing. A new generation of younger musicians was augmenting the modes and pathways of recorded blues, adding increased sophistication to the composition and recording process. The development of the black pop sound of the late thirties and the early forties with swing bands, boogie-woogie, and jump blues, respectively, led to a merger of jazz big-bands into the blues realm, essentially meshing both worlds.

⁵⁷ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 142

Jazz, moreover, was slowly becoming the measure of how the blues was understood.⁵⁸

At this point in his career Broonzy was a favorite among African American audiences and was known as "Big Bill," one of the most popular blues entertainers in black pop. His recordings and performances of the period reflect many of these changing trends. In 1939 Broonzy appeared with Benny Goodman and Louis Armstrong in the feature film *Swingin' the Dream*.⁵⁹ By 1946, Broonzy had performed with many of the nation's top jazz bandleaders and musicians who had often crossed over into blues. These included Bennie Goodman, Count Basie, Eddie Vinson, Bunk Johnson, Fats Waller, Fletcher Henderson, and Lionel Hampton.⁶⁰

Within this evolving blues world, however, Broonzy's expectations and identity did not quite mesh with the changing blues landscape.⁶¹ Indeed, he had conformed to the

⁵⁸ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 113-14.

⁵⁹ Vladimir Bogdanov, Chris Woodstra, and Stephen Thomas Erlewine, eds., *All Music Guide to the Blues: The Definitive Guide to the Blues* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2003), 69.

⁶⁰ Alan Lomax Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Folder 09.04.10.

⁶¹ In the epilogue of Broonzy's autobiography Broonzy suggested that he did not expect to be remembered as a jazz

expectations of black pop hit-makers and their targeted audiences by moving away from his Delta and country blues roots. He had learned to alter his vocal delivery and tonal approach, even though he believed⁶² that this was moving away from the power and raw passion of the blues of the late twenties and early thirties. He had grown quite comfortable being known among his peers and the industry as "Big Bill" from Chicago. And he had even learned to perform and record in an ensemble with as many as five additional instruments. Nevertheless, Broonzy reflected on this change rather pensively.

You know they tells me now? These young boys playing this here bebop? They tells me blues is old-fogeyism. They done give it all up. It don't rate in these modernerist times. And they mean it! Don't you try comin in one of those joints on the South Side and singin one of those down-home Arkansas blues. Man

musician or a guitar player and singer in the folk realm. He expected to be remembered as a bluesman. See Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 151-52. He also discussed this problem with Alan Lomax in the 1940s as his career was beginning to decline. See Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 455. In a 1956 interview with Studs Terkel, Broonzy discusses the problem of viewing the blues as a part of jazz history. See Big Bill Broonzy Interviewed by Studs Terkel, Chicago, November 14, 1956. Folkways LP FG 3586.

⁶² Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 454-55.

they'll beat you to death.⁶³

For Broonzy, the recording and performance culture within this new generation of African American musicians was changing for the worst. His own expectations and identity, moreover, were not quite congruent with a newly emerging cohort of studio musicians.

Within the studio a new generation of what Alan Lomax called "half-educated" musicians was taking control of recording culture.⁶⁴ Broonzy was especially concerned over this new generation's jazz and big band reliance on written music. For over a decade, a central component of Broonzy's "Big Bill" identity relied on the expectation that he could walk into the studio, rehearse a few memorized numbers with his accompaniment, and make a record just on the reputation of his name alone.⁶⁵ By the mid forties, however, the process had become much more complicated.

[N]owadays you walk in a studio without no music for

⁶³ Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 454. Lomax seemed, at least in part, to phonetically spell many of Broonzy's answers to his questions.

⁶⁴ Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 455.

⁶⁵ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

the different instruments and they tell you they don't know what to play—they will say that and yet those same guys wouldn't have been eatin around here for a few years ago if they couldn't play the blues by ear...Pete Johnson, Albert Ammons, Count Basie—all of um—they wasn't nothin but barrelhouse blues players a few years ago, playin all night with nothin in the world in front of um but a big drink of whiskey. Now they tell me they can't play blues if it ain't wrote down.⁶⁶

Broonzy's inability to read music within this world of fluent and trained musicians was frustrating for him. By the mid-forties Big Bill Broonzy was one of the most recorded and respected blues stars in blues history, but when he entered the studio he was often forced to alter his playing and personal style for a younger group of extremely professional musicians who were not quite familiar with the atonalities, improvised lyrics, and atonal chord phrasings that defined Broonzy's music. At this point part of Broonzy's identity was framed around his more than decade-long experience as a professionally recorded blues veteran. These professional musicians' newfound approaches to recording slowed his progress as a black pop entertainer and challenged his "Big Bill" identity. European scales, arrangements, transcriptions, and rehearsal—all elements

⁶⁶ Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 455.

that clashed with Broonzy's own expectations and identity—were supplanting the commanding improvisation and whimsical guitar and vocal deliveries that had shaped his blues persona.

You got to be so perfect...the blues ain't no pleasure no more. You're always in a strain, worrying if you gonna make a bad chord. What make me so hot is those guys telling me they can't play nothin. They don't know but one move in the blues and when they through with that, they done. That's why all these records sound so much alike. You can't tell when one leaves off and the next one start, if it wasn't for the nickels dropping in the Rockolas.⁶⁷

To Broonzy, then, this formulaic recipe and the professional musicians who created it were taking the blues into an entirely different direction that did not wholly fit his style and identity.

To a certain degree, Broonzy was simply reacting to the changing landscape of the recording industry of the period. By the mid-1940s, alliances between the recording industry and radio and jukebox companies presented significant challenges for the traditional role of the blues recording industry. By 1940, the radio had become an increasingly dominant force in home entertainment that

⁶⁷ Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 456.

targeted specific demographic groups, including European and Hispanic immigrants, southern and northern African Americans, as well as whites with expectations of their own. Radio programs featuring a wide array of music and acts were emerging in every city in the country.⁶⁸ The creation of Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI) in 1940 established a point of negotiation between radio stations and owners of the publishing rights held by The American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) and the American Federation of Musicians (AFM). These negotiations, in turn, led to a weakening of both musicians' unions—AMF and BMI.⁶⁹

Before the reorganization of the industry in 1940, recordings were only a supplement to live performances. Broonzy and many of his contemporaries expected to land significant stage work because of their recording experience. But their identities, reputations, and finances were enhanced on stage night after night in performance. The industry's expectations were different

⁶⁸ Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 325-30.

⁶⁹ Greene, *Selling the Race*, 56.

after 1940, as recording became the dominant way of forming one's reputation and securing financial success as a musician. New blues musicians were only one hit record away from stardom. Identities were created overnight and live performances were often relegated to supporting acts for a musician's latest hit.⁷⁰

Compounding these events was the explosion of jukebox production from the mid-1930s into the 1940s. The number of jukebox manufactures increased dramatically from 25,000 in 1934 to 500,000 in 1940, with the three leading manufacturers, Wurlitzer, Rockola, and Seeburg, all based in Chicago. Purveyors and purchasers of jukeboxes held their own expectations about music and the blues as well. Essentially, the jukebox allowed club and bar owners to provide house music for pocket change, without having to deal with the higher prices and volatility of live musicians. More important, the jukebox and the radio concretized the power both industries would hold within the popular music business, as jukebox sales comprised over fifty percent of all record sales in 1938.⁷¹

⁷⁰ "Musician's Plight" *Time* May 7th, 1956.

The recording industry's response to these expectations was disastrous to Broonzy's career as a black pop artist. Terrified by the possibility of live music losing prominence to the jukebox and radio programs, the AFM began exercising its newfound power by organizing and professionalizing its constituents. In 1942, responding on the surface to wartime shellac rationings but underneath to the industry's changing landscape, the AMF organized an all-out strike against the recording industry that lasted for two years, until new contracts were written. No artist recorded during this period. Significant changes within the expectations of the recording industry, then, were changing musicians' professional approach to recording. At the heart of these changes stood the relationship between musicians, live performance, and the recording industry.

The result of these new expectations culminated in a complete reorganization of the music industry in Chicago. One scholar argued that

throughout the 1940s and afterward, musicians and producers revised the meaning of blues in Chicago—not only through focus on the urban context, but also a more professional understanding of black music, which

⁷¹ Lester Melrose, "My Life in Recording," 60; Greene, *Selling the Race*, 56.

encouraged artists to view their cultural work in more material terms.⁷²

Lester Melrose, with his affiliation with RCA Victor and Columbia records, was at the height of his power during this period of reorganization. And Melrose's ability to integrate other contemporary music forms into recorded blues ensured that new types of studio musicians were constantly on hand, many of whom were trained jazz musicians. This studio sound and its many nuances drastically affected Broonzy's expectations and identity as an active recording musician. Following the end of the recording strike in 1944 Broonzy's recording output decreased tremendously. As a blues star who had once recorded ten times in one year, he recorded three times in 1945, once in 1946, three times in 1947, and only twice in 1949.⁷³

When recording resumed, following the end of the AMF recording strike in 1944, independent record labels began

⁷² Greene, *Selling the Race*, 72.

⁷³ Mike Leadbitter and Neil Slaven, *Blues Records, January 1943 to December 1966* (London: Hanover Books, 1968), 28; Roger Randolph House, *Blue Smoke: The Recorded Journey of Big Bill Broonzy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 178-79.

to emerge within Chicago's blues community. These labels were eager to capitalize on the city's rapidly expanding population of migrants and newly arrived musicians. Before the strike, RCA Victor, Columbia, and Brunswick Vocalion, all national labels, dominated the black pop market. And, by this point, Broonzy had recorded for the subsidiary catalogues of all three labels. Melrose had maintained tight control over Chicago's RCA Victor and Columbia recordings through his own vision of a studio sound, essentially creating the model that many emerging independent labels would follow when he immediately signed all of Chicago's established talent.

The absorption of the Chicago blues vanguards by Melrose and his associated labels left the city's emerging smaller recording companies to scramble for new talent and new blues identities. This next generation of southern migrants became the impetus for a completely new Chicago sound. Featured in this group of young talent is a list of future Chicago blues masters who had followed the Second Great Migration to Chicago beginning in 1940; Little Walter

Jacobs, Johnny Williams, Jimmy Rogers, Otis Spann, Johnny Shines, Sunnyland Slim, and, of course, Muddy Waters.⁷⁴

Beginning in 1945 and continuing through the rest of the decade, a series of independent labels emerged in Chicago including Rhumboogie, Hy-Tone, Sunbeam, Tempo-tone, Old Swingmaster, Miracle, Regal, and Atlantic.⁷⁵ Many of these labels expected to recruit Chicago blues veterans by churning out the same formulaic, jazz-tinged, multi-instrumental blues pioneered by Melrose's artists and the Bluebird sound.

But most of Chicago's big-name talent—Tampa Red, Big Bill Broonzy, Big Maceo Merriwether, Memphis Minnie Douglas, Washboard Sam, Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup, John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson—immediately signed with Melrose following the end of strike, ensuring that their contracts would remain under major labels RCA Victor and Columbia. In effect Broonzy, Melrsoe, and many other established Chicago blues veterans still held old expectations for a business and a genre that had reorganized around new sets of standards involving new musicians and styles that

⁷⁴ Rowe, *Chicago Breakdown*, 51-69.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

centred on radio and jukebox play.

Even in Chicago's performance world, the blues audience that Broonzy helped pioneer was evolving as a new electric, urban sound began to take hold. By 1940, a second and larger African American migration was in full swing, resulting in a black population explosion in Chicago, particularly in the city's west side. A new generation of southern migrants with their own expectations of migrant life arrived in Chicago looking for work in the city's booming wartime industries at the very same time that Chicago's blues scene was in a state of flux. New names and new faces were emerging on Maxwell Street, in South Side clubs, and in new clubs popping up in the city's West Side.⁷⁶

At this point Big Bill Broonzy had lived and negotiated his musical identity and expectations of Chicago for twenty-five years. He had participated in the first wave of the Great Migrations that had brought the blues to Chicago from the South, and he was a key player in establishing the blues as a substantial form of black popular music with a national market and audience. The

⁷⁶ Rowe, *Chicago Breakdown* 40-51.

blues, as a genre, had evolved from its vaudeville and country roots to become urban, slick, and sophisticated. The leading recording labels featuring veteran artists like Broonzy and Tampa Red of the WWII era continued to rely on the formulaic, jazz-tinged studio sound that emerged out of the 1930s. They paid scant attention to the changing expectations of black audiences.

In essence, the second Great Migration, between 1940 and 1970, brought even more Southerners to cities in the North, Midwest, and West, than had the first wave, and once again cities like Chicago quickly became recognizably southern. This new wave of migrations explains much about the waning of Broonzy's popularity, the transformation of his musical identity, and the evolution of the blues as a genre.

Blues in the South during the 1940s was quite different than the polished sounds pulsating from Northern and Midwestern urban areas that "Big Bill" had helped pioneer. The Mississippi Delta sound was still prevalent in the Deep South, a phenomenon exemplified by Alan Lomax's Library of Congress field recordings of young Muddy

Waters.⁷⁷ To the west in Helena, Arkansas, the KFFA radio station was blasting its daily radio program "King Biscuit Time" featuring Delta artists Rice "Sonny Boy Williamson" Miller, Robert Jr. Lockwood, and Willie "Joe" Wilkins.⁷⁸

Memphis, Tennessee, also began airing live blues shows and radio programs that electrified the Delta Blues tradition on KWEM and WDIA. These stations featured future stars B.B. King, Bobby Blue Bland, Rufus Thomas, Rice Miller, Chester "Howlin Wolf" Burnett, and Hubert Sumlin. All of these younger musicians had cut their teeth on the records of urban artists like Broonzy.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ In the summer of 1941 and again in the summer of 1942, with the help and guidance of Fisk University ethnomusicologist John Work, Alan Lomax visited Waters Stovall Farms, Mississippi, to record McKinley Morganfield, a local farmer and musician. He captured the man known as Muddy Waters on record for the Library of Congress Archive of American Folk-Song. These recordings reflect Muddy's early Delta blues style that was linked to delta traditions established by Charley Patton, Son House, Robert Johnson, and Nemeiah 'Skip' James. See "Country Blues" on Muddy Waters, *The Complete Plantation Recordings*. MCA/Chess Records, 1993.

⁷⁸ Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 330.

⁷⁹ Historian Tony Russell describes the jukebox collection of five jukeboxes in Coahoma County, Mississippi surveyed by Fisk University's Lewis Jones in September of 1941. Two of the machines listed songs by Chicago's own "Big Bill." See Russell, "Clarksdale Piccolo Blues" *Jazz and Blues*, November 1971, 30.

Yet this new generation would challenge Broonzy's role as a leading figure of Chicago's blues community by changing its style. The sounds of these individual musicians were edgier, louder, and rawer than Chicago's urban jazz-tinged blues ensembles of which "Big Bill" was king.⁸⁰ To be clear, Broonzy and others had amplified the guitar as early as 1940 to combat the noisy and bawdy clubs and bars in Chicago.⁸¹ But the sounds emerging out of the South in the 1940s were wholly different—more percussive, driving, and virtuosic—as the harmonica and the electric guitar emerged at the center of the music instead of the Bluebird's formulaic piano.

As southern migrants poured into Chicago beginning in 1940, it is hardly surprising that this rawer and edgier electrified Delta blues would follow them. This is what these migrants had heard on the radio, in juke joints, and in barrelhouses throughout the South during the period, and this is the sound that Muddy Waters mastered in Chicago. These individual artists had listened to "Big Bill's"

⁸⁰ Russell, "Clarksdale Piccolo Blues," 331-32.

⁸¹ Jim O'Neal and Amy Van Singel, *The Voice of the Blues: Classic Interviews From Living Blues Magazine* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 172.

records dating back to the 1930s, and, ironically, their approaches to the urban Chicago sound essentially categorized "Big Bill's" style as outdated. This new generation had returned to the "downhome" style of the Mississippi Delta, but played it louder and faster. They shed the jazz-tinged instrumentation—namely the piano and brass horns—that Broonzy and Melrose had pioneered for stripped-down electrified blues, with new arrangements featuring double bass, drums, electric guitar and an amplified harmonica. Musicians like Muddy Waters, Howlin Wolf, and Willie Dixon and their expectations of Chicago's music industry established the Windy City as home to the blues.

To be sure, Broonzy was an inspiration to this new generation of southern migrants as he had prolifically recorded and performed in Chicago for over a decade. In fact, many of these southern migrants had heard Broonzy's recordings on jukeboxes throughout the South. Yet in 1948, when Muddy Waters recorded his breakthrough hit *Can't Be Satisfied*, Broonzy was twenty years older than Waters and younger audiences and musicians began viewing him as a vanguard of a dying tradition. Jazz enthusiasts and folklorists commented on Broonzy's dwindling influence as

they watched him perform his "country ways" in the late 1940s and early 1950s as younger audience members "walked out on him." Even Muddy Waters admitted to giving intermission spots to Broonzy, essentially recognizing that he had "displaced" Broonzy and older bluesmen in the late forties.⁸²

Although they respected his legacy and identity—no one had more positive and sentimental remembrances of Broonzy than Waters—many of Chicago's young blues talent and audiences believed he was antiquated, if not redundant. Ironically, Broonzy and Melrose had updated the southern blues of the 1920s by meshing the worlds of jazz with the blues into a fresh urban sound. As a new generation of southern migrant musicians in Chicago began transforming the city's blues landscape, however, Broonzy's style was now outdated, suggesting that the musical tastes of southerners were anything but static.

In 1950 Muddy Waters and Chess records were redefining blues culture and its industry in Chicago. Waters had

⁸² Intermission spots were small sets in between a featured performer's full gig, which in this case was Muddy Waters. See Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 13; Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 456; Robert Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied: The Life and Time of Muddy Waters* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2002), 110.

released his seminal classic "Rollin' Stone" on the Chess label and he was quickly emerging as a superstar in Chicago's blues world. Leonard and Philip Chess and Chess Records, moreover, proved that small independent labels had foreseen the changing expectations within blues culture and its audience that more established labels and veteran promoters like Melrose had ignored. Circumstances for Broonzy at this point were bleak.

Faced with both a changing audience and an evolving recording industry, Big Bill Broonzy, one of the most experienced and seasoned blues artists in the country, had few options. In 1949 he recorded twice, cutting eight tracks for Mercury records in Chicago.⁸³ For two decades he had recorded for nearly every major label and their subsidiaries, usually as a lead man, but often as an accompanist. The larger established labels, however, had placed all of their investments in veteran Chicago artists and the city's formulaic sound, failing to foresee the changing tastes of audiences that were then being captured by new independent labels.

By 1950, Broonzy's recording opportunities had

⁸³ Leadbitter and Slaven, *Blues Records, January 1943 to December 1966*, 28.

disappeared, but he still had a regular performing gig at Moore's Lounge, a small tavern off of Cottage Grove Avenue.⁸⁴ Among generations of participants in Chicago's blues world, the man known affectionately as "Big Bill" was a household name and an identifiable mentor for up-and-coming musicians in Chicago. Yet by 1950 he had virtually disappeared. Indeed, had his remaining friends in Chicago—Tampa Red, Waters, J.B. Lenoir, Lonnie Johnson, Little Walter Jacobs, and others—gone looking for him in the city they would not have found him. Big Bill Broonzy had moved to Ames, Iowa to take a job as a janitor at Iowa State College.⁸⁵

How one of Chicago's blues pioneers, who had lived in Chicago for thirty years, ended up in a solidly rural midwestern college town reveals important changes in Broonzy's identity transformation. Part of this story is rooted in the changing landscape of the Windy City's music scene. The blues, its audiences, and its recording industry, all elements he had helped pioneer in Chicago, no

⁸⁴ Box 1 Michael van Isveldt Collection, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

⁸⁵ Personnel Files, Box 1, Record Series 7/4/2, Vice President for Student Affairs, Department of Residence, Special Collections, Parks Library, Iowa State University.

longer recognized the validity of his craft. Broonzy, too, still held an identity and expectations of a music world in Chicago that had changed. Broonzy had nearly abandoned his music career and he, likewise, expected that his recording opportunities were over. Quite simply, unlike dozens if not hundreds of blues artists of the era, Broonzy had lasted long enough in the business to witness a transitional phase in the music industry and the evolution of the blues as a genre.

The second and larger part of the story is that Broonzy, ever crafty and always willing to perform, was navigating a new audience by slowly forging and negotiating an identity with new sets of expectations within a separate music culture. Broonzy had appeared at Iowa State College's Memorial Union Hall in 1949 as a member of Studs Terkel's Chicago-based traveling folk music review, "I Come For to Sing."⁸⁶ Broonzy had joined the group in 1948 and had performed as part of the troupe for several years as its folk-blues exemplar. While visiting Ames, Iowa, Broonzy had fallen in love with the college's quaint community and was

⁸⁶ Personnel Files, Box 1, Record Series 7/4/2, Vice President for Student Affairs, Department of Residence, Special Collections, Parks Library, Iowa State University.

befriended by English Department faculty member Dr. Leonard
Feinberg.

Broonzy expressed to Feinberg that he had grown "tired
of one night stands, traveling all night and day, and
living too high" when he contacted the college to inquire
about potential agricultural work in the area.⁸⁷ A doctor
had told Broonzy that two decades of heavy drinking,
smoking, and sleepless nights traveling the country had
caught up with him. Underneath, however, Broonzy clearly
understood that he would have to change his musical
identity to fit the new expectations of the blues' audience
and industry to continue on as a successful performer and
artist. With his music career at a standstill and his
health waning, he packed a suitcase and his guitar for
Ames, Iowa, to take job as a janitor for Iowa State
College's Finley Hall.⁸⁸

Broonzy did not land janitorial work at a midwestern
agricultural college through word of his ability as a
laborer. To Iowa State, he was a music legend whose

⁸⁷ Personnel Files, Box 1, Record Series 7/4/2, Vice
President for Student Affairs, Department of Residence,
Special Collections, Parks Library, Iowa State University.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

identity as an unmatched blues talent with over 260 recordings lent credence and prestige to the college's own expectations. He was a popular entertainer from Chicago, the closest major metropolitan area, who was extremely affable and always willing to share his music with students, staff, and faculty. In essence, he was a campus treasure, a hidden gem that made the college special for students and faculty.⁸⁹

Ten years earlier the same white, collegiate crowd probably would have never entered the all black clubs and bars in Chicago where "Big Bill" and his blues were king. So, how did a black pop music entertainer from Bronzeville become a folk music hero to white, university intellectuals and students? Quite simply, he did what he had always done—he transformed his identity and his music to fit the expectations of his new audience—a community of academic folklorists, record collectors, music scholars, and college students who were awakening to the importance of the African American musical tradition. Broonzy entered the last stage of his career and identity transformation by

⁸⁹ Personnel Files, Box 1, Record Series 7/4/2, Vice President for Student Affairs, Department of Residence, Special Collections, Parks Library, Iowa State University.

becoming Big Bill Broonzy—folk singer.

Broonzy's move to Iowa can be seen in context of a larger shift in American vernacular music. Beginning in the 1930s, a folk music "revival" had emerged in the United States involving numerous white "folk" aficionados and trained folklorists taking a keen interest in white and African American vernacular music. According to Ronald Cohen, "in the late nineteenth century scholars and collectors in England and the United States began to understand what folk music entailed." Essentially, vernacular music became the subjective focus of trained academics and popular collectors who held their own expectations of American vernacular music. In both Europe and the United States these individuals convinced their audiences that this "traditional" musical heritage was in danger of being lost to modernity and technology. Long before Broonzy left for Ames, Iowa, in 1950, he had begun navigating a new audience and forming his folk music identity.⁹⁰

Central to Broonzy's identity transformation and to

⁹⁰ Ronald Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival & American Society 1940-1970* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 8-19; Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 32-75, 9-46.

the history of the folk music revival is the story of John Lomax and Alan Lomax and their expectations. Beginning in the 1930s, John Lomax and his son Alan had great influence over the collection and study of vernacular music. This influence lasted nearly sixty years. Texan John Lomax took quasi-control of the Archive of American Folk-Song in 1933, succeeding predecessor and avid field collector Robert Winslow Gordon. For the remainder of the decade the Lomaxes would crisscross the country searching on "remote cotton plantations, cowboy ranches, lumber camps," and "segregated southern prisons" for traditional folk songs that they believed still existed in these areas.⁹¹ Critical to their research was the driving belief that the United States had produced its own vibrant folk music culture, outside of the influence of the European traditions transplanted from the Old World. This culture they argued was still very alive throughout the country.⁹²

In 1933, as Broonzy was navigating Chicago's blues scene, the Lomaxes' uncovered one of their grandest discoveries: a forty-four-year-old inmate at Louisiana's

⁹¹ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 50.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 52-55.

Angola Penitentiary named Huddie Ledbetter. Ledbetter, or Lead Belly as he was affectionately known, was a gifted African American guitarist and vocalist, serving a hard labor sentence for murder. Born in 1888 in Louisiana, he was only five years older than Broonzy and these two contemporaries were similar. To the Lomaxes, Lead Belly was a crowning jewel; his repertoire and skill set were large, diverse, and masterly. More important, Lead Belly represented a critical component of the Lomaxes' folklore ethos: he was living proof that "America did have a folk song heritage independent of Britain."⁹³

The significance of Lead Belly's "discovery" for Broonzy's career transition cannot be underestimated. The Lomaxes' true genius and their most significant contribution to the study of American vernacular music was the importance they placed on individual artists. One scholar has suggested that

[B]y dispensing with the secondhand interpreters and foregrounding the rural musicians who created the folk music, the Lomaxes added a new source of authenticity - the performers themselves. Purity was now attributed not just to specific folk songs...but to the folk figures who sang them.⁹⁴

⁹³ Filene, *Romancing the Folk* 55.

With Lead Belly, the Lomaxes publicized their find with fanatical zeal to college campuses, concert and lecture halls, recording companies, and media outlets up and down the east coast. To the Lomaxes Lead Belly was exotic; he was an African American, an ex-convict with an ear-to-ear scar on his throat, a savage, "a killer," and "a nigger to the core of his being."⁹⁵

Even if much of what they advertised was untrue, the juxtaposition between the pure and profane of Ledbetter's life was the exact paradigm the Lomaxes used to market their "discovery." Broonzy was introduced to this community in 1938 in the same manner. On that December night he was no longer "Big Bill" from Chicago. Instead the audience was introduced to a shy and frightened sharecropper who had spent a lifetime singing to his livestock.⁹⁶ The creation of this dialectic in folk music culture not only garnered the fascinated attention of

⁹⁴ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 55.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁹⁶ Big Bill Broonzy, "Truth About the Blues," *Living Blues* 55 (November/December 1982): 19; Stanley Dance, "The Perennial Blues," *Saturday Review*, May 11, 1957, 53.

whites within and without the country's folklore community, it ensured that folk artists, including Broonzy, henceforward, would be viewed in much the same way.

Ultimately, the Lomaxes had created a new cult - the cult of folk authenticity that wholly rested on these ideals.

The cult of authenticity, then, had an effect on the career and identity of Big Bill Broonzy. Beginning in 1938 at the "From Spirituals to Swing" show, and throughout the rest of his life, especially from 1946 until his death in 1958, Broonzy navigated a new identity in the United States' and Europe's folk and jazz music world. Like Lead Belly, he was marketed as a vanguard of a disappearing tradition and often advertised as someone wholly different than who he truly was.

What set Broonzy apart from Lead Belly within the folk cult of authenticity were the conditions in which these two folk music treasures were discovered. When the Lomaxes first discovered Lead Belly, he was a prisoner in a hard labor penitentiary who knew dozens of folk songs that the Lomaxes had sought out. They had combed prisons, plantations, and labor camps expecting to find undiscovered treasures that could be transformed into the embodiment of

their ideals about vernacular music. Lead Belly was the perfect match. Broonzy, however, was something different.

When Alan Lomax first recognized Broonzy's potential, Broonzy had been navigating Chicago's recording and performance culture for over a decade. He had participated in at least fifty-eight recording sessions as a lead performer and dozens more as a guitarist.⁹⁷ He had worked his way through many record labels and their subsidiaries located in the Midwest, specifically Chicago, but as far east as New York City. He had rubbed elbows, performed, and/or recorded with some of the most influential African-American musicians in the country. Photographs of Broonzy during the 1930s, moreover, depict a handsome man; postured, dressed-to-the-nines in fedoras and wing-tipped shoes, with broad shoulders, a shining guitar, and a wide smile. While Lead Belly represented John Lomax's ideas about the pure folk, to Alan Lomax, Broonzy represented a completely new idea that rested more on genre than on repertoire.

Folklorists like Lomax (and John Hammond as well) were drawn to Broonzy's recorded work from the 1920s as a solo

⁹⁷ Robert W. Dixon, et al., *Blues and Gospel Records*, 59-65.

male blues performer in the Blind Lemon Jefferson mold. To folklorists Broonzy was, in effect, a representative of the "primitive blues singer" popularized in the late 1920s.⁹⁸ Broonzy and early contemporaries' race recordings helped define the early blues industry, which had marketed these individuals as a specific genre of black music. Historian Karl H. Miller has suggested that most record companies demanded that African American musicians record material that could easily be defined within the industry's "conceptions of black music."⁹⁹ The market had prescribed the genre that Lomax understood Broonzy as a part of. The recording market had not defined Lead Belly, however, whose vast repertoire moved well beyond the blues when the Lomaxes discovered him. Lead Belly, of course had been exposed to all types of American vernacular music and could play almost anything he heard. But in the tradition of southern songsters who had not yet been limited by the recording industry's perceived notions of genre, he had not been limited how he as an entertainer should be understood

⁹⁸ John Hammond, *On Record* (New York: Summit Books, 1977), 202.

⁹⁹ Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 221.

when the Lomaxes discovered him. The Lomaxes tried their best to limit Lead Belly to a specific genre that they understood as folk so that they could market him as their find of the century to a growing audience of likeminded scholars. Broonzy was a folk treasure because of his work in early recorded blues where as Lead Belly was a representative of the folk because of his vast repertoire.

The white folk music community was not interested in the slick urban, jazz-tinged "Big Bill" identity that defined Broonzy's initial success in Chicago in the same manner that the folk revivalists were not interested in Lead Belly's take on Gene Autry.¹⁰⁰ Core members of the growing folk music revival, including Alan Lomax and John Hammond, knew that Broonzy had experience in the rural, country blues genre of Blind Lemon Jefferson, Son House, and the man he had replaced at "From Spirituals to Swing," Robert Johnson. He was presented at the concert as a vanguard of the "country blues" genre that explained how white folk enthusiasts intended to preserve the heritage of African American music.

Broonzy, as the latter stages of his career would

¹⁰⁰ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 71-2.

revel, demonstrates that the blues as a genre, especially in the male self-accompanied country style, was becoming a critical component of the folk. Like Lead Belly before, who under the stewardship of the Lomaxes was often forced to perform in his prison uniform or coveralls and a bandanna, Broonzy was depicted by the folk community as someone completely different than he really was. Broonzy represented the same otherness the Lomaxes advertised of Lead Belly: naïve, poor, and rural. Lead Belly had been portrayed early on as an anomaly: a violent and rapacious vanguard of a timeless American folk music tradition. Like Broonzy, many of those who knew Lead Belly outside of his public persona, however, have described his mannerisms and disposition as "genteel" and "aristocratic.

Broonzy had learned from his relationships with Ink Williams and Lester Melrose that a black vernacular musicians' career was more or less defined by both sides' expectations. When Broonzy was first discovered by white aficionados of black vernacular music, he had already experienced success as a commercial entertainer for black artists. He had recorded dozens of songs for many of the country's largest labels. He had learned to manage the expectations of the industry in a manner that set him apart

from Lead Belly and placed Broonzy in a better position to transform his identity from a black pop artist to folk music hero.

What Broonzy recognized within the folk community was that a commercially successful and "pure" folk identity could coexist as part of the revival as long as his identity was both rooted in the blues genre and contained within the narrow expectations of the folklore community. Broonzy's mastery of country blues styles and traditional arrangements, most of which were rooted in the rural, African American traditions coveted by folklorists, demonstrates that commercially successful, externally constructed genres like the country blues could become the folk. Broonzy understood this because of his extensive experience in the evolution of the music business and he employed this knowledge as he negotiated the expectations of his new audience and its industry.

Broonzy had considered the Carnegie Hall show as his "first big chance" to crossover.¹⁰¹ When he appeared again in Hammond's second "From Spirituals to Swing" concert the

¹⁰¹ John Steiner Papers, Box 83, Special Collections Research Center, The University of Chicago.

following year, he was booked for a week at Café Society.¹⁰² Café Society, a progressive nightclub in the heart of New York's Greenwich Village, was the first nightclub in the United States to openly feature African American artists before completely integrated audiences. The club quickly became a symbol for black musicians wishing to cross over into integrated audiences.¹⁰³ Opening in 1938, the club featured many famous acts in jazz and blues and frequently showcased talent from Hammond's Carnegie Hall shows.¹⁰⁴ Essentially, Hammond introduced Broonzy to many East Coast folk music entrepreneurs; including one individual (Alan Lomax) who would maintain close ties to Broonzy for the remainder of his life. After all, Hammond was an associate and friend of Alan Lomax.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² John Steiner Papers, Box 83, Special Collections Research Center, The University of Chicago.

¹⁰³ Barney Josephson and Terry Trilling-Josephson, *Café Society: The Wrong Place for the Right People* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

¹⁰⁴ Josephson and Josephson, *Café Society*, 14-15.

¹⁰⁵ In 1939 Alan Lomax was in charge of systematically documenting race record catalogues for all of the major record labels, including Columbia. At this point John Hammond was working for Columbia as a promoter and talent scout. Hammond, apparently, introduced Lomax to Robert Johnson's early Columbia recordings, leading Lomax to

Seven years later, Broonzy cemented his reputation as a representative of African American folk music when he headlined Alan Lomax's *The Midnight Special at Town Hall* series presented by Peoples Songs, Inc. In 1946, Big Bill Broonzy was living in New York, appearing at New York nightspots such as the Apollo Theater, Town Hall, Village Vanguard, and Café Society.¹⁰⁶ He had arrived in June the year before and at this point was corresponding with Alan Lomax.¹⁰⁷ Joe Glaser, a notoriously uncouth manager who had once controlled the careers of jazz greats Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday, had coordinated Broonzy's work in New York up to this point.¹⁰⁸ Whether Broonzy first met Lomax in New York remains unclear. In all probability, Broonzy may have met Lomax at the "From Spirituals to Swing" concerts. Nevertheless, by 1946 Alan Lomax suggested that

conclude that the deceased Johnson rivaled Blind Lemon Jefferson in skill and mastery. Nevertheless, at this point Lomax and Hammond were close associates. See Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 13.

¹⁰⁶ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress; John Steiner Papers, Box 83, Special Collections Research Center, The University of Chicago.

¹⁰⁷ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

¹⁰⁸ Josephson and Josephson, *Café Society*, 58-59.

he had spent "a lot of time with Big Bill Broonzy...in Chicago in a rented single room."¹⁰⁹ Like "Ink" Williams, Lester Melrose, and John Hammond, Lomax held his own expectations for Broonzy, his identity, and what their relationship might produce.

At this point, Lomax was deeply entrenched in New York's socialist political and labor union culture. By the early forties, this culture was beginning to mesh with the emerging folk music revival embodied by the creation of New York's Almanac House and its more organized successor, Peoples Songs.¹¹⁰ Even John Hammond's "From Spirituals to Swing" concert was backed by the magazine *New Masses*, a Communist affiliated publication. Popular artists, including Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie, Burl Ives, Josh White, and Aunt Molly Jackson, immersed themselves in a world that coupled commercialization and politicization with the black and white, rural southern music they loved.

Within this emerging folk culture, musicians were presented with opportunities to perform and record in support of many social issues ranging from class struggle

¹⁰⁹ Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 459.

¹¹⁰ Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 28-41.

to labor organization. Experienced and talented musicians, like Broonzy, lent a significant element of popularity to folk music's growing culture. For the musicians involved in the folk music revival, promoters and leaders offered opportunities for musicians to reach new audiences, make new contacts within the industry, and, for someone like Broonzy whose career and identity were transforming, a chance for greater notoriety. Historian Ronald Cohen has argued that by 1946, with these reciprocal expectations in place and with the help of music recording insiders and folk promoters like Moe Asch and Alan Lomax, "everything was in place for the coming folk music revival."¹¹¹

By the fall of 1946 Broonzy had appeared in at least one People's Songs New York hootenanny, a suitably titled "Union Hoot," and headlined Lomax's *The Midnight Special at Town Hall* series on November 9 with fellow African-American music luminaries Pete Johnson, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, and Sidney Bechet.¹¹² The following year, on March 1, Broonzy again returned to Lomax's *Midnight Special* series with Chicago friends and blues giants, Memphis Slim and

¹¹¹ Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 38.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 51.

John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson. According to Lomax, that night the three men "tore down the house at Town Hall, discovering that their Delta music was appreciated by an audience they never knew about."¹¹³ Broonzy at this point had played for many white audiences and these three men's styles were Delta derivatives but hardly the blues of a Son House or Skip James. But the collaboration of these three men recorded the following day, *Blues in the Mississippi Night*, became one of the most candid and important commentaries on racism ever recorded in the United States.¹¹⁴ Lomax had essentially captured on disc the reflections of three black men who had experienced racism's strong grip on the United States and dared discuss it openly with a white man. Moreover, these recordings reflect Lomax's ideas about the importance of the folk and its African American music heritage to the country's understanding of social issues. For the remainder of his career, Broonzy would incorporate this idea into his identity by performing socially conscious songs and

¹¹³ Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 459.

¹¹⁴ Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Slim and Sonny Boy Williamson, *Blues in the Mississippi Night*. Rounder Select compact disc 82161-1860-2.

providing his audiences with his own narrative of the African American experience.

For at least twelve years before he left for Ames, then, Broonzy had performed and kept company with stewards of the white folk music revival in New York. His negotiations of John Hammond and Alan Lomax's expectations, moreover, were extremely important for his identity transformation from black pop artist to folk music hero. Like the legendary See See Rider from Arkansas and "Ink" Williams and Lester Melrose in Chicago's recording industry, Hammond and Lomax held positions of power within a world that could usher in a new phase of Broonzy's waning career. Broonzy was smart enough and ambitious enough that he easily recognized their potential.

John Hammond held strong connections within New York's club scene and had helped establish the career of folk luminary Josh White. He was also a power broker for New York's Columbia Records.¹¹⁵ Similarly, Lomax was connected to numerous affiliates as a promoter and producer of

¹¹⁵ Dunstan Prial, *The Producer: John Hammond and the Soul of American Music* (New York: Picador, 2007); Barney Josephson and Terry Trilling-Josephson, *Café Society: The Wrong Place for the Right People* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

recordings, radio programs, and concerts; he worked for the Archive of American Folk-Song in Washington, D.C.; and had helped promote the careers of many music luminaries including Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie, Jelly Roll Morton, and Muddy Waters. Broonzy fulfilled white folklorists' expectations of the country blues as the folk; he was a veteran of the Chicago recording scene, he had sold thousands of records, his repertoire was large, and he was warm, charming, and much less volatile than Lead Belly or White. With a little help and polish from the stewards of the growing folk music revival, he could become a star.

Meanwhile, in Chicago, the growing folk music culture was finding a distinct home of its own in the Midwest. *Peoples' Songs'* founders Pete Seeger and Lee Hays visited Chicago in September of 1946 to speak at a CIO-PAC labor school rally in hopes of establishing a local *People's Songs* chapter. In November of the previous year, *People's Songs* had held hootenannies in Los Angeles and had established a loyal following on the West Coast. This signified that the combination of music, labor organization, and leftist politics was a potent mix of interests for many Americans from coast to coast. By October of 1947, *People's Songs'* impressive growth had led

to the coordination of its first national convention at Hull House in Chicago, featuring Guthrie, Lomax, Seeger, and local Chicago folk icon Winn Stracke, appropriately titled "Sing Out America."¹¹⁶

Two members of People's Songs' Chicago chapter, Studs Terkel and Winn Stracke, were incredibly important for Broonzy's identity transformation from black pop musician to folk music hero. They were critical to People's Songs' growth in the Windy City as they helped Raeburn Flerlage, the chapter's chief organizer, coordinate local house parties and hootenannies featuring performances by Lead Belly, Josh White, Woody Guthrie, and, of course, Big Bill Broonzy.¹¹⁷ As Chicagoans familiar with the city's rich blues culture, they knew of Big Bill Broonzy's long history and identity as a blues giant. Moreover, they were two of Broonzy's closest friends during the latter stages of his career, and even served as pallbearers at his funeral.¹¹⁸ Like all of the other figures in Broonzy's lifelong

¹¹⁶ Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 48-49, 55.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹¹⁸ John Steiner Papers, Box 83, Special Collections Research Center, The University of Chicago.

identity transition, they, too, held specific expectations of Broonzy and he of them.

Stracke and Terkel shared a remarkable amount of similarities. Both were the sons of European immigrant families who had moved to Chicago as boys. Both were deeply involved in Chicago's radio, television, and theater communities. The two had first met while working for the Chicago Repertory Group, a progressive theater troupe that often supported pro-union and pro-labor politics. Stracke rose to fame as *Uncle Win*, the host of nationally syndicated children's television programs *Animal Playtime* and *Time for Uncle Win*, featured on NBC. Before landing the 98.7 WFMT *Studs Terkel Program* that made him famous and a folk music icon, Terkel had also dabbled in Chicago-area television as the host of *Stud's Place*, an unscripted, improvisational television drama centered at a local diner and featuring numerous guests, including Win Stracke. Stracke and Terkel had served in the armed forces during WWII and both men held lifelong loves for American vernacular music. Both were quite familiar with Broonzy and Chicago's blues culture, and both men were blacklisted for

their pro-labor activities during the height of anti-Communist fervor created by HUAC in the 1950s.¹¹⁹

Big Bill Broonzy had already met Pete Seeger and Lee Hays when they had visited Chicago to establish a local People's Songs Inc. chapter, and Stracke and Terkel were perfect candidates to lead a Chicago chapter. Their experiences in radio and television allowed access to media outlets that could promote the organization's message. They also knew many locally established musicians and community members who could support their shared ideas about the connection between labor and music and organize Chicago's emerging folk community. Through Seeger and Hays's People's Songs, Terkel and Stracke met an emerging folk star and one of the country's greatest blues musicians, Chicago's own Big Bill Broonzy.¹²⁰

Quickly the combination of Broonzy, Stracke, and Terkel put in motion a folk music culture in Chicago that

¹¹⁹ William Grimes, "Studs Terkel, Listener to America, Dies at 96" *New York Times*, October 31, 2008; Studs Terkel, "Studs Recalls How One Man's Dream Became a Reality," *Chicago Tribune*, November 25, 2007; Lisa Grayson, *Biography of a Hunch: The History of Chicago's Legendary Old Town School of Folk Music* (Chicago: Old Town School of Folk Music, 1992).

¹²⁰ Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 115.

would rival the East Coast. Broonzy songs covered a wide variety of social issues in a manner respected by musical and political collaborators like People's Songs Inc. Broonzy also knew dozens of local Chicago musicians who could lend their music and talents to the cause. Stracke and Terkel held strong connections with many mass media outlets in Chicago that might produce opportunities to perform and record for Broonzy's transitioning identity. With the establishment of a folk community in Chicago, moreover, Broonzy might forgo the grueling traveling schedule that was beginning to affect his health. By 1948 Terkel and Stracke had established a touring folk music revue, initially sponsored by the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago.¹²¹ The "I Come for to Sing" tour became a popular traveling folk revue, narrated by Terkel and featuring music by Broonzy, Stracke, and Larry Lane, that traveled around the country visiting college campuses, often crossing paths with Pete Seeger and the Weavers.¹²² Broonzy was still traveling and performing, but he had exchanged the smoky, alcohol-fueled clubs of the black

¹²¹ Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 115.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 151.

blues circuit for the serene environs of midwestern college campuses. One of the performance dates on the 1949 tour was Iowa State College.

Life seemed easier for Broonzy as his identity transitioned from a blues icon to folk hero. His participation in the "I Come For to Sing" traveling review helped initiate his brief experience at Iowa State. Deciding to get out of Chicago, Broonzy lived a rather peaceful existence in Ames. He had befriended English faculty member Leonard Feinberg and performed in many fraternity houses, dormitories, and faculty members' homes.¹²³ He planted a southern vegetable garden in the Feinbergs' back yard, performed with Louis Armstrong before the 1950 homecoming game, and was continuing to write new blues songs.¹²⁴ To the faculty and students around him, he seemed content with his surroundings and happy to be in a place that appreciated him without having

¹²³ Personnel Files, Box 1, Record Series 7/4/2, Vice President for Student Affairs, Department of Residence, Special Collections, Parks Library, Iowa State University.

¹²⁴ In 1951, Broonzy recorded a blues titled "Moppin Blues," which he wrote while living in Ames. A former student corroborated this story in a letter to the university reflecting on Broonzy's time at the college. See Leadbitter and Slaven, *Blues Records, January 1943 to*

separate agendas.¹²⁵

This peace would not last long. While at Iowa State, Broonzy received a phone call inviting him to Europe. Nearly thirty years had passed since his last visit. As an African-American soldier during WWI, he had visited Europe and enjoyed the more racially relaxed atmosphere even though the army had exploited him for his labor. This time around, Europeans wanted something completely different: they wanted "Big Bill" and his music. In 1951 Broonzy left Ames, Iowa, for England to, as he explained it, "awaken white people to an interest in blues."¹²⁶

By the beginning of 1951, Big Bill Broonzy was nearly sixty years old. For half of his life he had navigated American musical culture and its industry with frequent success. Throughout his career, he fostered critical

December 1966, 28; Personnel Files, Box 1, Record Series 7/4/2, Vice President for Student Affairs, Department of Residence, Special Collections, Parks Library, Iowa State University.

¹²⁵ Personnel Files, Box 1, Record Series 7/4/2, Vice President for Student Affairs, Department of Residence, Special Collections, Parks Library, Iowa State University.

¹²⁶ Personnel Files, Box 1, Record Series 7/4/2, Vice President for Student Affairs, Department of Residence, Special Collections, Parks Library, Iowa State University.

personal relationships with individuals who held power within a world that he was determined to become a part of. From the very beginning of his music career, Broonzy negotiated his musical identity by carefully balancing his expectations and the expectations of others within American music culture in ways that prolonged his career. Above all, Broonzy understood that his music was symbiotically linked to the changing expectations of the industry and its audience, whether black, white, American, or European. Indeed, he was often taken advantage of and his journey was difficult, frequently forcing him to make great social and economic sacrifices. Yet, unlike so many of his peers, he survived many of the industry's drastic changes. Broonzy was a historical actor and his lifelong identity transition from country musician to solo male blues artists to black pop pioneer to folk music hero was not an accident.

In the face of often insurmountable odds, Broonzy was wise enough to employ his skills of negotiation—his charm, wit, good looks, and obvious musical abilities—towards becoming one of the most important blues musicians of the twentieth century. Broonzy was raised as a country musician in Jim Crow Arkansas who played for segregated picnics within the confines of the South's rigidly segregated power

structure. As a WWI veteran and southern migrant Broonzy had recorded in Chicago in the late 1920s only to produce recordings that sold poorly. Yet, Broonzy continued to navigate American vernacular music and its expectations for nearly thirty years, emerging from the latter stage of his identity transformation as popular as ever within white folk music culture. He had helped to pioneer the blues as a form of black popular music recorded for black audiences, only to see his blues transformed into a genre that explained white folklorists' understanding of an African American vernacular music tradition. He could not have foreseen these changes in the music he loved so much, but he managed their expectations nonetheless.

By the beginning of the 1950s, Broonzy was poised to become one of the first blues artists to take American blues to Europe; until his death, he would continue to negotiate his identity and the expectations of the music industry that had helped sustain his long career. At this point, Broonzy was on the verge of becoming a worldwide celebrity; for the last decade of his career he would negotiate a new kind of celebrity identity and what it meant.

CHAPTER IV
EXPECTATION BLUES, PART II: THE STRANGE CAREER OF BIG BILL
IN EUROPE

The last stage of Broonzy's long career reflects his continual navigation of the music industry in the United States and Europe and what his struggle over his identity as a blues musician meant to different people. His career as a recording and performing artist had depended on an impeccable set of navigational skills that allowed him to adapt to the fluctuating tastes of his audience, the industry, and the market. Throughout the 1950s, as Broonzy's popularity among African American blues-pop audiences decreased, he sought other avenues for success to propel his career in new directions and to reach greater heights. Broonzy gained newfound respect from a group of white American folk enthusiasts and European jazz and blues cognoscenti by negotiating an identity that engaged and satisfied their explorations of the history and importance of African American music.

For some white American and European music intellectuals, Broonzy's life and career was a dichotomy

On the one hand, his life explained the history of the blues and black southern music in the United States, giving meaning to a distinctive American folk music tradition rooted in southern history and the African American experience. At the same time, for Europeans, his career as the leader of five and six piece jazz-based blues bands fit their preconceived ideas about the blues as an antecedent to jazz. To Europeans, Broonzy was an identifiable and tangible link that connected the two genres. Yet the tensions surrounding this identity were profound. Was he the slick, urban performer from Chicago who could lead a five piece jazz band through some of the sexually explicit hits he had recorded in the 1930s and 1940s? Or was he the humble part-time janitor steeped in rural folk music who could explain the history of the blues and share aspects of the African American experience through his music and storytelling? Broonzy had navigated this dichotomy for decades in the United States, and he seemed at ease negotiating these networks, their expectations, and these identities throughout Europe. Ultimately, Broonzy became a touchstone for Americans and Europeans' burgeoning interest in African American music. Along the way he became more

than just "Big Bill" from Chicago: he became Big Bill Broonzy, international blues celebrity.

Broonzy's career demonstrates that a musician's talent and skill alone do not make for a long and successful career. His career was often difficult and financially challenging as he traveled around the country and the world, frequently separated from his friends and family. And yet Broonzy understood that he could find and sustain success by continually negotiating both his own identity and the changing tastes' of his audiences and how they understood African American music. Quite successfully and without precedent, Broonzy transformed himself from a rural country musician to a black pop musician to a national and international icon for folk-blues and jazz aficionados. As much as he shared with whites from both Europe and the United States about the blues, its origins, its meaning, and its structure, he equally shared with them important lessons about the African American experience in this country and its history. Ultimately, his career reveals a distinct navigational path for African American blues artists who defined their identities among white audiences and found national and international acclaim.

Big Bill Broonzy first arrived in Europe on July 18, 1951, in Brussels, Belgium. There he met jazz critic and blues enthusiast Yannick Bruynoghe and began participating in one of the most important musical exchanges in twentieth century American history: the dissemination of African American blues and its culture across Europe. With great success, Big Bill Broonzy navigated the expectations of emerging European blues audiences in the same manner that he had navigated the city of Chicago and his thirty-year career. By managing the expectations of Europeans, Broonzy developed an identity and persona based on their assumptions of African American vernacular music. Along the journey, through the last decade of his prolific career, he established important relationships that facilitated his success in a foreign land. His tours of Europe, however, were not without their problems and Broonzy frequently experienced many of the same difficulties he had faced in the U.S.

As Europe rebuilt its physical and cultural infrastructure following the devastation of perhaps the deadliest war in history, the dissemination of African American music and culture provided important building blocks for the continent's musical future. Since the early

twentieth century, Europe had enjoyed the frequent visits of African American entertainers as they toured Europe, satisfying the increasing interests of European jazz enthusiasts. As early as 1920 when the first jazz records were pressed for manufacture in the United States, African American music spread into the Soviet Union, France, Sweden, and Great Britain. After WWII, the United States presence increased dramatically, placing American G.I.'s and the American military industrial complex (and its culture) within an ever-increasing proximity to Europeans. This "Americanization" of European culture would become as important to Big Bill Broonzy's career and legacy as his days as the king of the Chicago blues culture. Broonzy helped establish a path for wave after wave of American blues artists looking to follow in his footsteps.¹

The blues made its first appearances in Europe well before Big Bill Broonzy's trip in 1951. It may have first appeared with Lonnie Johnson's blues-influenced jazz guitar

¹ Roberta Freund Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues: The Transmission and Reception of American Blues Style in the United Kingdom* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 1-45; Neil Wynn, "'Why I Sing the Blues:' African American Culture in the Transatlantic World" in *Cross the Water Blues: African American Music in Europe*, ed. Neil Wynn (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 3-23.

work in a British touring music review in 1917. Classic blues singer Alberta Hunter performed in Europe from 1927-1929 and again from 1933-1934, touring France and Great Britain. It should be pointed out here, however, that the blues performers visiting Europe in the 1930s would have been heavily influenced by the vaudevillian and tent circuit jazz-based blues styles of the classic female blues singers, markedly different than the blues carried over by Lead Belly, Josh White, and Bill Broonzy years later.

American jazz had arrived in Europe following the First World War and had, by the 1950s, established a loyal following despite criticisms of the genre by many music critics and scholars. To this small but growing audience, jazz was an important musical phenomenon that captivated a new generation of Europeans eager for new sounds. The growth in popularity of jazz, moreover, led Europeans to discover a new musical idiom that they believed served as its precursor—the blues.

The appearance of Hunter by the beginning of the 1930s suggests that the French appreciated African American music. Other events added to blues and jazz's popularity in France as well. Columbia records had begun to distribute blues and jazz records throughout France and radio shows

and jazz publications began to recognize the importance of American blues.²

In time, Big Bill Broonzy would help a generation of jazz enthusiasts understand the blues' analogous, but parallel path to jazz. If American audiences understood African American music, including the blues, in terms of race and segregation, then, European artists began to understand the blues through their notions of its relationship to jazz.³ Europeans' deep passion and understanding of American jazz was critical for Broonzy's identity as an international blues celebrity. One of the earliest jazz organizations to recognize the blues' importance and popularity in Europe was the French jazz club, The Hot Club de France, established in 1932 by jazz enthusiasts looking "to promote jazz appreciation."⁴ The Hot Club also served as forum for jazz enthusiasts to discuss, trade, sell, and critique "rare and expensive" blues and

² Robert Springer, "The Blues in France," in *Cross the Water Blues: African American Music in Europe* ed., Neil Wynn (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 236.

³ Neil Wynn, ed., *Cross the Water Blues: African American Music in Europe* (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

⁴ Springer, "The Blues in France," 237.

jazz records throughout France.⁵ One of its most active founders, Hugues Panassie, began writing for the forum's jazz periodical, *Jazz Hot*, covering most of the blues articles published in the paper. Panassie would eventually establish one of the most important careers in early French blues culture as a promoter, organizer, and writer for Hot Club de France and helped propel Big Bill Broonzy's European career forward.

The blues' popularity, however, was not solely limited to the French. In England the blues were also discussed as the springboard for jazz "whose sole vestigial remains were the twelve-bar chorus, blue notes, and the output of the classic blues singers."⁶ Classic female blues singers like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey and boogie-woogie pianists like Fats Waller and Jelly Roll Morton were collectively categorized as jazz in most record outlets. Occasionally, however, young Britons stumbled across the recordings of blues from the likes of Sleepy John Estes whose "a-typical

⁵ Springer, "The Blues in France," 237.

⁶ Roberta Freund Schwartz, "Preachin the Gospel of the Blues in Britain," in *Cross the Water Blues: African American Music in Europe* ed., Neil Wynn (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 148.

form" became the "subject of intense speculation," according to historian Roberta Schwartz.⁷

In short, by the outbreak of the Second World War the blues genre was gaining popularity in both France and Great Britain. But most of its fans were jazz enthusiasts whose understandings of that genre fostered a deep respect for the blues. Many jazz enthusiasts, moreover, were limited in their familiarity with traditional blues—blues recorded during the 1910s and 1920s—as their collections tended to focus on the classic female singers and blues shouters associated with jazz.⁸ With the arrival of American troops in Europe by 1942, the American war machine began manufacturing twelve-inch 78rpm "Victory" Discs or V-Discs, often featuring African American artists Josh White, Lil Green, and Big Bill Broonzy.⁹ American GI's exposed many Europeans to the blues on V-Discs stationed in Europe during WWII and the American Forces Network radio broadcast that arrived with them.¹⁰ By 1942, many British jazz

⁷ Schwartz, "Preachin the Gospel of the Blues in Britain," 146.

⁸ Ibid., 146-47.

⁹ Robert Springer, "The Blues in France," 236.

enthusiasts, including Paul Oliver, Derrick Stewart-Baxter, Ernest Borneman, and Max Jones, began a lifelong fascination with what Oliver described as, "the strangest, most compelling" music they had ever heard.¹¹

European blues and jazz audiences, therefore, were familiar with the blues when the first wave of African American performers arrived in the 1950s. To Europeans, though, pioneering urban artists like Broonzy represented antecedents to the development of their true interest: American jazz. Broonzy tried his best to understand and meet their expectations, often sharing his own recollections on the history of the blues, the meaning of folk music, and the origins of jazz.

When Broonzy received the first call to go to Europe in 1951 his life and career had already changed dramatically. Two years earlier he had left his home and a failing marriage in Chicago, with ailing health and in need of a respite from the city's constant and buzzing

¹⁰ Robert Springer, "The Blues in France," 239.

¹¹ Paul Oliver, "Blue-Eyed Blues: The Impact of the Blues on European Culture," in *Approaches to Popular Culture*, ed. C.W.E. Bigsby. (Bowling Green: Bowling Green Univeristy Press, 1978), 230-1.

lifestyle.¹² When he left Chicago for Ames, Iowa, in the summer of 1950 he had already begun navigating the burgeoning white folk music scene by forgoing the five piece jazz-based blues he had helped pioneer in Chicago to return to the solo acoustic blues of his earlier career that had become popular to white folk audiences. Although he still maintained close contact with Winn Stracke and Studs Terkel back in Chicago, he seemed at ease in Ames when he received the call for his first tour of Europe. Following the "I Come For to Sing" tour, Broonzy's popularity had grown tremendously within the collegiate and intellectual circles that were beginning to recognize the blues as an important component of American folk music.¹³ In Europe, however, Broonzy's appeal originated from a different current, and he would begin navigating a new identity based on Europeans understanding of American jazz.

¹² Broonzy's divorce papers documenting the end of his marriage to his third wife Rose are located in the Michael van Isveldt Collection in Amsterdam, Netherlands.

¹³ Will Davidson, "It's Jazz Week in the City's Cafes and Concert Halls," *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 19, 1947; Claudia Cassidy, "On The Aisle: Gossip About West Coast Music, Singers of Folk Songs, Money Makers, and Some Other Things" *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 6, 1947.

Broonzy had twenty-five years experience performing in many of the largest cities in the United States with his "Big Bill from black Chicago" persona. Yet, as he would soon discover, traveling and touring throughout Europe with its many languages, currencies, cultures, and nationalities could be challenging for a black Chicagoan with virtually no formal education and little precedent to follow. After all, only Lead Belly and Lonnie Johnson (in 1949 and 1950, respectively) had successfully brought American folk blues to Europe before Broonzy. Meanwhile, Broonzy's friend Josh White had toured Europe in 1950 and was now touring in 1951 when Broonzy arrived. European blues audiences throughout the continent, moreover, were still a small, but devoted group of record collectors, jazz writers, and music industry professionals with limited experience managing the European tours of African American bluesmen.

Nevertheless, as Broonzy approached his first European tour, he was well equipped with the negotiating skills that could help him navigate yet another successful phase in his already prolific career. Throughout his career's earlier phases in the thirties and forties Broonzy had relied on many intermediaries and promoters—Charlie Jackson, Lemon Jefferson, "Ink" Williams, Lester Melrose, Lil Green, Joe

Glasser, Alan Lomax, Studs Terkel, and Win Stracke. They had served as important cogs in the development and sustainment of Broonzy's career. From creating important introductions to networking performances and recording sessions to organizing travel arrangements, these individuals were as integral to Broonzy's musical success as his musical abilities and affable personality. And the situation was no different abroad.

Broonzy's first tour of Europe, stretching from the late summer through to the early winter of 1951, relied on the hard work and dedication of one of his most devoted European fans: Belgian writer and jazz critic Yannick Bruynoghe. Bruynoghe was one of several Europeans who were convinced that the blues held an important connection to American jazz. Bruynoghe, moreover, had already participated in blues pilgrimages to the United States' famous blues cities to uncover the origins of both genres. In 1950, for example, Bruynoghe had visited Chicago on his own personal "blues safari" and discovered Broonzy.¹⁴ For nearly a year, Bruynoghe devised a plan to bring Broonzy to Europe in hopes that he might experience the successes

¹⁴ Robert Springer, "The Blues in France," 243.

similar to those of Lead Belly and Josh White, who had toured earlier.

Right from the start, Broonzy began performing for small jazz audiences in France and was presented as an antecedent to American jazz. Although Bruynoghe had arranged Broonzy's trip overseas, a Frenchman organized his earliest successful performances. While working as a janitor at Iowa State College and tending to his garden on Pammel Court, Broonzy received a phone call not from Yannick Bruynoghe, but from Hugues Panassie, founder of the *Hot Club de France* and its periodical *Jazz Hot*. Panassie urged him to leave Ames for his first European tour. Panassie was an avid record collector and quite familiar with Broonzy's music and the blues.¹⁵ Quickly, Panassie convinced Bruynoghe, then a writer for *Jazz Hot*, through the blues forum and jazz publication to help support a small tour for Broonzy.

Like Bruynoghe, Panassie had seen Broonzy in the United States and had a familiarity with African American

¹⁵ Personnel Files, Box 1, Record Series 7/4/2, Vice President for Student Affairs, Department of Residence, Special Collections, Parks Library, Iowa State University; Mezz Mezzrow, "Big Bill," p.4 in John Steiner Papers, Box 83, Special Collections Research Center, The University of Chicago.

bluesmen. In 1938, John Hammond had personally invited Panassie to New York's "From Spirituals to Swing" concert, where he was initially introduced to the blues-singing Arkansas sharecropper named "Big Bill." Panassie and the Hot Club, moreover, had helped bring Lead Belly to France in 1949, the first folk bluesmen to tour Europe. Lead Belly's ailing health, however, had forced him back to the United States, where he died from complications caused by amyotrophic sclerosis a few months later.¹⁶ Panassie convinced Broonzy that despite this setback, an audience for blues was rapidly developing in Europe, especially in France and Great Britain.

Broonzy had experienced some success among white audiences back in the States as a folk-blues performer among both left-leaning intellectual and folk music circles. But Panassie knew that Broonzy was more than just a folk entertainer. He was familiar with Broonzy's earlier recordings from the 1930s and 1940s. As a result, Panassie arranged for Broonzy's first performance to be accompanied by a small jazz band "in fear that he might not go down

¹⁶ Robert Springer, "The Blues in France," 241.

well on his own."¹⁷ Panassie was convinced that Broonzy's first trip to Europe would help European jazz audiences "feel and understand where jazz comes from" and "where it still gets its substance and nourishment."¹⁸ Whatever concerns Panassie may have held about Broonzy's arrival, he could not have anticipated the success and impact that the Chicago blues great would make throughout Europe.

French jazz aficionados were attracted to Broonzy's black urban pop identity, heard in literally hundreds of jazz-tinged jump and urban blues recordings from the 1940s. That was the Broonzy they had heard on record and that was the Broonzy they were determined to introduce to Europe. During Broonzy's first tour of Europe he was presented as a vanguard of the urbane jazz style he had helped pioneer in Chicago. He embraced the role, even though he had abandoned his urban blues identity years before. Frequently appearing on stage with five- and six-piece jazz bands, Broonzy was even depicted in a photograph printed in *Melody Maker* magazine from his first tour wearing a brimmed fedora, dark suit with an open collar displaying gold neck

¹⁷ Springer, "The Blues in France," 242.

¹⁸ Hugues Panassie, "Big Bill Doesn't Sell his Music—He Gives it Away," *Melody Maker*, September 15, 1951.

jewelry, and adorned with two-toned Brogues. Clearly he was willing to "play the part" of Chicago's own "Big Bill." European interest in blues stemmed from a small but active group of enthusiasts who often disagreed with one another about the future of jazz. Soon these devotees began looking backward into the history of New Orleans jazz and found what they believed to be primitive proto-jazz within Broonzy's black pop style from the 1930s and 1940s.

Those in the audience familiar with Broonzy's transition from black pop star to white folk-blues darling seemed shocked by his first European performances. Ron Sweetman was a teenager in 1951 when he attended his first Big Bill Broonzy concert in Menton, France, and he remembered being surprised by the "sophisticated" nature of one of Broonzy's first French performances:

Wandering through the streets of Menton, I was amazed to see a flyer announcing a concert at the Grand Casino in Menton by Big Bill Broonzy on Wednesday August 22nd. I had read about Big Bill in magazines and books, but none of his recordings had been issued in England, so I had only a vague idea of what to expect...The instrumentation was not dissimilar to the groups Big Bill had been recording with in recent years in the United States, but because of my unfamiliarity with these recordings, I was rather

surprised that his accompanists were so numerous and so sophisticated.¹⁹

Clearly then Broonzy was willing to appear as a bridge between European's interpretations of blues and jazz because he understood well what his audience and his tour organizers expected. Moreover, at this point in his career he was a master of negotiating his identity within the expectations of those who placed demands on him.

Broonzy navigated the same black pop, proto-jazz identity in Germany. Beginning in 1941, German jazz enthusiasts, including Horst Lippmann and Olaf Hudtwalcker, had established the Hot Club of Frankfurt after its French predecessor, which offered a community of musicians and enthusiasts the chance to organize and share their passions until the war's end.²⁰ Following the end of the war, the Hot Club of Frankfurt began working in concert with the Hot

¹⁹ Ron Sweetman, "Big Bill Broonzy in France and England," *Jazz Journalist Association Library*, <http://www.jazzhouse.org/library/?read=sweetman2>.

²⁰ Peter Jones, "Horst Lipmann: Giving Musicians a Chance to be Heard," *Billboard*, December 27th, 1980, 4; Carlo Bohandler, "The Evolution of Jazz Culture in Frankfurt: A Memoir," in ed. Michael J. Budds *Jazz and the Germans: Essays on the Influence of "Hot" American Idioms on 20th Century German Music* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2002), 173.

Club de France and the American backed radio network AFN. This network of jazz enthusiasts, like their French counterparts, quickly began organizing and producing radio broadcasts and community performances featuring jazz and blues artists, including Broonzy. Following his performances in France, Broonzy visited Dusseldorf and offered at least one concert at the Robert Schumann Saal with a seven-piece "Hot Dixieland" jazz band.²¹

On September 15th, Broonzy performed with Australian jazz pianist and composer Graeme Bell in Dusseldorf. Offering solo folk blues classics such as "John Henry," 'In the Evening,' 'Trouble in Mind,' and 'Keep Your Hands Off Her' during part of the show, Broonzy then collaborated with Bell's jazz band for more traditional jazz arrangements like 'I Feel So Good,' 'Who's Sorry Now,' 'Mama Don't Allow,' and 'When the Saints Go Marching In.' Emceed by Olaf Hudtwalcker, these shows offered German audiences a chance to witness the breadth of Broonzy's repertoire and live performance capabilities. At this and

²¹ Big Bill Broonzy, *Big Bill Broonzy w. Graeme Bell: In Concert, Germany 1951*. Jasmine Records Compact Disc JASMCD 3007.

other concerts, Broonzy offered the "Big Bill" from black Chicago jazz-tinged blues style he had helped pioneer during 1930s and 1940s.

Big Bill Broonzy's performances in France and Germany suggest that while in Europe he was continually willing to negotiate his identity as a performer and artist. And yet his trip to England created an even greater stir and helped establish the identity that he would share with the world for the rest of his career in both Europe and the United States. England had developed an almost cult-like following of blues music and culture that would praise Broonzy's presence and performances in London and permanently transform his identity into a folk blues icon and the last of the "authentic" blues artists.

The root of this praise was developing in the United Kingdom well before Broonzy's arrival. Historian Roberta Schwartz has suggested that before WWII, blues records remained scarce in England and those who did possess the occasional classic female blues discs of Ma Rainey or Bessie Smith reflected an "isolated passion of a few

interested souls."²² Following World War II, however, the blues gained significant popularity in England that jazz critics and record collectors began holding recitals for rare blues records throughout the war.

These cognoscenti, moreover, were desperately engaged in a bitter campaign that pitted modern jazz aficionados, those who recognized be-bop as a legitimate jazz form, against those who were dedicated to revitalizing more traditional modes of Dixieland and swing jazz. This disagreement between "modernists" and "revivalists" led members of the latter group to dig deep into the history of jazz and track its relationship to the blues. The post-WWII blues boom in England was born of this musicological tug of war, and Broonzy's first concerts would provide important fodder for the revivalists' campaign and their growing understanding of the blues idiom.²³

Roberta Freund Schwartz aptly suggests that the growing "evangelistic" nature of blues devotees in Britain—namely, Ernest Borneman, Albert McCarthy, Sinclair Traill, Paul Oliver, Derrick Stewart-Baxter, and Max Jones—helped

²² Schwartz, "Preachin the Gospel of the Blues in Britain," 146.

²³ Ibid., 147.

fuel the blues growth in Europe.²⁴ And yet beyond the sonic properties attracting British folk enthusiasts to the music itself, the blues and its culture appealed to them as a reflection of the African American experience. Part of these revivalists' interests in the blues as a separate idiom from jazz stemmed from an intellectual current that echoed American folklorists' perceptions of traditional African American blues. To the revivalists, then, the blues represented a window into a fascinatingly alien, but disappearing past—one centered on the tumultuous history of the African American experience. Historian Neil Wynn suggests:

Blues and jazz both could trace their origins back to the music of black slaves and could trace their roots back to Africa, if only indirectly...Their songs reflected a bygone era for most white audiences, a pre-modern era with an oral tradition and references to mojos, black cat bones, and John the Conqueror; they also reflected a life of hardship and suffering. For some British converts to black music there was sense of identification with the socioeconomic hardships of African Americans.²⁵

Broonzy, moreover, understood the fundamental differences

²⁴ Schwartz, "Preachin' the Gospel of the Blues in Britain," 147.

²⁵ Neil Wynn, "Why I Sing the Blues," 14-15.

between jazz and blues and tried his best to accommodate European growing perspectives on blues' parallel path to jazz. What Europeans believed to be the blues' antecedent to jazz, what they expected of him upon his first tour, Broonzy called "the city style."²⁶ He considered the city style with its jazz-like arrangements and delivery as "dressed up blues," and for Broonzy, the "real blues" came from Mississippi.²⁷ Broonzy felt that blues and jazz were "separate" idioms, and to him jazz "belonged to those Creole people...who came from New Orleans."²⁸ In order to explain the true nature of "real" blues to British audiences, Broonzy continued to shed the slick urbane performer persona in favor of the stripped down folk bluesman from Mississippi. His navigational skills had taught him throughout his career to give these "revivalists" what they were looking for. And he relied on more than just their interpretations of his music.

In Great Britain he was introduced as the last of a

²⁶ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, "Preachin' the Blues: Big Bill Broonzy," *Jazz Journal* 6, no.2 (1953): 4.

²⁷ Don Gold, "Big Bill Broonzy," *Down Beat*, February 6, 1958, 15.

²⁸ Gold, "Big Bill Broonzy," 5.

great line of American bluesmen in the folk-blues tradition, but in France and in Germany he offered his "Big Bill," urban identity. After his first European tour, however, Broonzy would eschew his urbane "city blues" persona for good. On September 22nd, 1951, Broonzy performed two concerts at Kingsway Hall in the Holborn district of central London. These two performances were highly anticipated by the burgeoning group of blues aficionados and cognoscenti who, since WWII, were slowly discovering the blues' intricate, but parallel relationship to jazz.²⁹

Periodicals like *Melody Maker* and the *Jazz Journal* featured specific articles anticipating Broonzy's arrival in Britain, containing often-hyperbolic descriptions of a legendary blues musician who was "the finest blues singer living."³⁰ British revivalists were committed to portraying Broonzy in a wholly different manner than the French and Germans. British revivalists introduced Broonzy as a vanguard of the early solo male blues performer now popular

²⁹ Roberta Freund Schwartz, "Preachin the Gospel of the Blues in Britain," in *Cross the Water Blues: African American Music in Europe*, ed. Neil Wynn (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

³⁰ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, "Preachin the Blues," in *Jazz Journal* 4 No. 11, (1951): 13.

among folk communities in the United States—the very identity he had shed decades before. Before he even set foot on British soil, Broonzy was portrayed as a “passionate lover of the blues” whose art “goes way back into the past.”³¹ His success stemmed from his ability to combine an “almost inexhaustible” repertoire, with a “smooth delivery,” and his “conscious artistry,” a feat, which had completely transformed him into an international success.”³²

Broonzy's two September concerts at Kingsway Hall offered revivalist audiences and the general public in attendance a rare and intimate opportunity to discover the blues' of Big Bill Broonzy. Sponsored by the Wilcox brothers, owners and promoters of the London Jazz Club and by Max Jones from *Melody Maker*, the first performance featured Broonzy alone with his acoustic guitar serving up some traditional folk blues for a salivating audience of collectors and fans who had become acquainted with Broonzy's music as his records and reputation spread across

³¹ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, “A date with the Blues,” *Melody Maker*, September 15, 1951.

³² Ibid.

Europe.³³ This first British performance included hits like "House Rent Stop," "John Henry," "Carless Love," and a moving performance of "Black, Brown, and White," which introduced the audience to, as British music journalist Derrick Stewart-Baxter observed, "a man who had experienced racial discrimination, but had come through the ordeal with a smile."³⁴

The second performance on September 22 offered a surprisingly different experience with a rare guest appearance as a special treat that ultimately both confused the European jazz cognoscenti in attendance and bolstered the blues evangelists' understanding of blues. Folklorist and ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax, then living in Scotland, had driven to Kingsway Hall to pay a visit to his old friend and to emcee the second show. Between 1951 and 1957, Lomax had spent a great deal of time investigating Irish, English, and Scottish folk music, which he promoted, and presented to BBC radio listeners. Lomax's presence was critical for Broonzy's and American folk music's acceptance

³³ Ernest Borneman, "One Night Stand: Big Bill Talkin,'" *Melody Maker*, September 29, 1951.

³⁴ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, "Preachin' the Blues," *The Jazz Journal* November, 1951.

in Great Britain and helped explain the blues' divergent path from jazz. One folklorist has suggested that:

Taken overall, Lomax's presence in London certainly altered, mainly for the better, the development of the folk-song revival in England. Many of his BBC broadcasts were magnificent...[t]he revival would no doubt have occurred without him, but its pace would have been slower and its gestation more difficult.³⁵

At the second performance Lomax and Broonzy offered those in attendance, including music critic Ernest Borneman, "a conversation between old friends ... with songs from both and the wonderfully happy air of a family reunion."³⁶ Although several critics found the presence of Lomax "unnecessary"—jazz critics in attendance were "let down" and frustrated by Lomax's self-promoting and what they perceived as the paternalistic tone he used with Broonzy—the two friends shared their respective knowledge of African American folk music, often prodding one another with questions and responses that left the audience feeling "as if they had wandered more or less by accident into one

³⁵ E. David Gregory, "Lomax in London: Alan Lomax, the BBC and the Folk-Song Revival in England, 1950-1958" *Folk Music Journal*, 8, No. 2 (2002); 162.

³⁶ Ernest Borneman, "One Night Stand: Big Bill Talkin,'" *Melody Maker*, September 29, 1951

of those fabulous jazz parties" so prevalent in jazz communities throughout States.³⁷ Overall, those in attendance seemed impressed, with critics suggesting that, despite its low attendance and their frustrations with Lomax, the performances offered British audiences "a rich and rewarding experience" featuring one of "the best and most memorable" concerts "of the last few years."³⁸

Alan Lomax's presence at the concert and his credence as "one of the foremost authorities on folk music in the world" helped solidify Broonzy's reputation as an authority on blues in Great Britain and Europe.³⁹ After all, both French and British jazz audiences were only beginning to differentiate blues and jazz's parallel paths. Broonzy was a master of the blues "as they were sung and played before jazz music really started," and with a personal endorsement from Alan Lomax, Broonzy quickly became a "touchstone" to an obscure and vanishing musical style that was as deeply

³⁷ Ernest Borneman, "One Night Stand: Big Bill Talkin," *Melody Maker*, September 29, 1951

³⁸ Derrick Stewart Baxter, "Preachin' the Blues," *The Jazz Journal* November, 1951; Ernest Borneman, "One Night Stand: Big Bill Talkin," *Melody Maker*, September 29, 1951.

³⁹ Baxter, "Preachin' the Blues," 1.

rooted in American folk music as it was jazz.⁴⁰ The British viewed Broonzy somewhat differently than the French and Germans and Broonzy understood their ideological differences. Throughout subsequent European tours, then, Broonzy began discussing the blues, its history, and what it meant to audiences that he perceived might not understand the blues' origins and historical context. Broonzy left England for Chicago on Tuesday September 25th after two London concerts that were the best ever heard there by *Melody Maker* columnist Ernest Borneman.⁴¹

When Broonzy returned again to England in 1952 his image and performances had changed to fit the identity he was desperately attempting to create as one of the last old time blues singers. Ron Sweetman attended another Broonzy concert the following year and to his amazement, Broonzy had almost completely transformed. Sweetman recalled:

On the afternoon of Sunday February 24th, 1952, Big Bill Broonzy appeared at the Cambridge Theatre in London. The program photo showed him in working clothes, a cigarette in his mouth, and promised "A

⁴⁰ Hugues Panassie, "Big Bill Doesn't Sell his Music - He Gives it Away," *Melody Maker*, September 15, 1951.

⁴¹ Ernest Borneman, "One Night Stand: Big Bill Talkin,'" *Melody Maker*, September 29, 1951.

Programme of Blues, Folk Songs and Ballads." For some numbers he was accompanied by the Crane River Jazz Band, described as "Britain's foremost revivalist band..." [W]hile in France Bill was presented in a setting that mirrored his current urban-style activities in the United States, in England he was presented as the unsophisticated rural artist found on his earliest recordings...After a brief intermission, Bill came on stage in a suit and tie (not overalls) with his guitar, a solitary figure on a vast and imposing stage, but his presence galvanized the audience, whom he held in the palm of his hand throughout the afternoon...After the concert my friend Ron Glass and I somehow managed to infiltrate backstage, where Bill obligingly posed for some photos by Ron Glass, until one of the Wilcox brothers chased us out, claiming that he had a "copyright" on all photos of Big Bill.⁴²

The tension between Broonzy's appearances at the two shows Sweetman attended highlights Broonzy's adaptation to British folk, blues, and jazz audiences. Broonzy openly admitted to jazz writer and musician Humphrey Littleton that much of the repertoire he was performing for his first European dates consisted of songs that his promoters suggested he learn or re-learn in hopes of gaining favor with specific audiences.⁴³

⁴² Ron Sweetman, "Big Bill Broonzy in France and England," *Jazz Journalist Association Library*, <http://www.jazzhouse.org/library/?read=sweetman2>.

⁴³ Elijah Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 221.

An examination of his first European tour is important because these performances set the patterns he would follow for the remainder of his European career. In effect, he relied on a network of producers, promoters, musicians, writers, old friends, and music industrialists to navigate nearly every facet of his first tour of Europe including how he would be presented. In France he was presented as a vanguard and antecedent to French jazz enthusiasts' understandings of jazz's history. In subsequent tours, he would never again perform with five- and six-piece jazz bands of his former "dressed up style." Occasionally he enlisted the help of a blues pianist, if accompanied at all, but he mainly performed night after night alone, with a glass of whiskey, a lit cigarette, and his acoustic guitar. As Europeans began to see the blues parallel as distinct from jazz, Broonzy adopted this rural folk blues identity and never looked back.

On subsequent tours, Broonzy continued to introduce American blues to European artists and project his image as one of the last of the great blues singers. Along the way, by navigating a network of friends, lovers, promoters, managers, and producers, Broonzy became one of the first international blues music celebrities. In a sense he set a

standard that many bluesmen - Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Memphis Slim, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, and others - would follow.

The network that mediated and defined Broonzy's initial European experiences was vast. They included Winn Stracke from the United States helping Hugues Panassie from France; Yannick Bruynoghe from Belgium; Max Jones, the Wilcox brothers, and Alan Lomax from the United Kingdom; and Horst Lippmann and Olaf Hudtwalcker from Germany. And as he toured all over Europe during the decade his network would increase dramatically. As in the United States, Broonzy relied on a network of friends and tour managers to arrange travel plans, hotel accommodations, meals, performance scheduling and fees, recording sessions, record distribution, and the various and sundry social functions Broonzy may have wished to attend.

In return, Broonzy shared elements of his personality, essentially allowing fans and friends a chance to intimately share in the struggles he endured with romantic relationships, financial challenges of the music industry, and Europe's racial undertones. One friend remembered that Broonzy was essentially "human;" "good natured" and

"temperamental" and equally "kind" yet "difficult."⁴⁴ In many ways, these descriptions serve as metaphors for Broonzy's experience and identity as an international blues celebrity. His tours of Europe offered specific challenges that brought to the surface the complex nature of his character and the inherent difficulties he had navigating a celebrity identity. Even with the help of his network, Broonzy's tours of Europe from 1951 to 1957 were not always easy or operated smoothly. Often, Broonzy experienced financial and social difficulties that made his travels and performances in Europe challenging.

But the importance of these individuals in shaping Broonzy's identity in Europe cannot be overemphasized. In Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, Broonzy's network held expectations of Broonzy, both personal and professional, that shaped how he as a man and as a performer might be understood. Most of his professional contacts expected to share in Broonzy's success in Europe, assuming that their support of his career transition would benefit their careers as well. As Broonzy toured Europe nearly every year from 1952 to 1957,

⁴⁴ Alexis Korner, "Big Bill Broonzy: Some Personal Memories," *Jazz Journal* 11, No.3 March 1958; 1.

his network of intermediaries expanded to include many individuals beyond Europe's burgeoning blues and jazz culture. Often, Broonzy found good company amongst his admirers and those who truly accepted his art form and personality and bolstered his celebrity status in Europe. These individuals frequently included romantic interests in nearly every country where Broonzy pursued during his tours of Europe.

By 1951, Broonzy's marriage to his third wife, Rose, was over. As Broonzy's recording career in Chicago had begun to wane, so too had his ten-year marriage. When he left Chicago for Iowa, Rose had disappeared and Broonzy had filed for divorce. Judge Joseph Sabath of the Superior Court of Cook County argued on Broonzy's behalf, arguing that Rose had "willfully deserted and absented herself from the Plaintiff without any reasonable cause for over the space of one year since June 16, 1948."⁴⁵ As Broonzy toured Europe in the 1950s, then, he looked for a fresh start for both his career and love life.

⁴⁵ Henry Sonnenschein, Superior Court of Cook County Decree for Divorce, No. S1S6478. Chicago, IL, June 18, 1951 in box 1 "Michael van Isveldt Collection," Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Broonzy quickly found solace in France. In April of 1953 he lived with a woman named Jacqueline in Paris whom he was ready to marry. Broonzy had written his friend Alan Lomax, then living in Scotland, to find two "white plain" shirts and "2 rings" for their upcoming wedding. Broonzy relied on Jacqueline to mediate financial transactions, suggesting that she would repay Lomax for the purchases upon delivery.⁴⁶ The letter reveals an introspective Broonzy who seemed at ease espousing religious and philosophical quips to his friend and even joking that he was "still alive and still singing the blues... and making love to a beautiful woman."⁴⁷ Though it remains unclear if that relationship ever fully developed, Broonzy sought the comforts of home whenever possible, frequently lodging in the homes of fans and colleagues as he navigated his European tours. Broonzy's love interests were not solely limited to France and he formed perhaps his most intimate and the most important romantic relationship of the

⁴⁶ Big Bill Broonzy to Alan Lomax, April 11, 1953 letter Folder 09.04.10, Alan Lomax Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

⁴⁷ Big Bill Broonzy to Alan Lomax, April 11, 1953 letter Folder 09.04.10, Alan Lomax Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

European phase of his career in neighboring Holland.

The Netherlands became a special place for Big Bill Broonzy as he once proclaimed: "you can't go to a better place than Holland." There he had "been treated the best," better than any other "place in the world."⁴⁸ Broonzy's first appearances in the Netherlands took place on November 7-8, 1952 when he and friend and pianist Blind John Davis appeared in The Hague and in Scheveningen. Broonzy toured Holland in 1953 and again in 1955, appeared in concerts for the Haarlemse Jazz Club in Haarlem, for the Dutch public broadcasting network *Algemene Vereniging Radio Omroep* (AVRO) television and radio programs. He also performed for receptive live audiences in Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and The Hague. Organized by promoter Paul Acket, Broonzy even lodged at the home of famous Dutch jazz critic Michiel de Ruyter where he performed for the intimate crowd.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Big Bill Broonzy, *Amsterdam Live Concerts 1953: Unissued Live Concerts Recorded by Louis Van Gasteren*. Munich Records compact disc 275, "The Recordings and Songs," p.30-31.

⁴⁹ Guido Van Rijn, "Lowland Blues: The Reception of African American Blues and Gospel Music in the Netherlands," in *Cross the Water Blues: African American Music in Europe* ed. Neil Wynn (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 2007) 223-27.

After his first visit to the Netherlands, Broonzy donated the proceeds from at least two concerts to victims of the Zeeland floods, one of the worst natural disasters in Dutch history.⁵⁰ Part of Broonzy's appreciation for the Dutch people and their culture stemmed from the noticeably relaxed racial environment of Holland and the flat, swampy land closely akin to the vistas of his proclaimed Mississippi Delta childhood. As well, Broonzy's admiration of the Netherlands stemmed from a relationship he developed there with a Dutch woman named Pim van Isveldt.

Broonzy met Pim van Isveldt in Amsterdam in November of his 1955 tour at the Doelenzaal Auditorium, a theater designed to promote the interests of the working classes. Pim came from a working class family in Amsterdam, and she worked in the city's municipal theater as a costume designer. She had watched intently from the audience as Broonzy performed at the "Ons Huis" in Amsterdam two years earlier in 1953, admitting in a 2004 interview that she was "crazy about that man" from the very beginning.⁵¹ Pim was an

⁵⁰ Van Rijn, "Lowland Blues," 228.

⁵¹ Pim van Isveldt, interview by Louis van Gasteren, August 1, 2004, published in Big Bill Broonzy, *Amsterdam Live Concerts 1953: Unissued Live Concerts Recorded by*

enormous fan of Broonzy's music and knew of his emerging European celebrity. When Broonzy visited Amsterdam again in 1955 Pim was introduced to Broonzy in his dressing room, fully admitting "it was love at first sight for both of us."⁵²

For the next three years Big Bill Broonzy and Pim van Isveldt maintained a somewhat tumultuous relationship through frequent visits and numerous correspondences, with Pim traveling to Paris and Brussels whenever Broonzy performed there. Their relationship produced a son named Michael on December 4, 1956, who still lives in Amsterdam today. From 1955 to 1957, Broonzy wrote Pim nearly every week in a series of more than fifty phonetically written letters, through which he tried to make sense of their relationship.

Rather quickly, Pim became an important cog in Broonzy's European network, with Broonzy often relying on her to place phone calls, write letters, market records, and promote his shows throughout Europe. Through these

Louis Van Gasteren. Munich Records compact disc 275, "How Did I Come to Make These Recordings," p. 38.

⁵² Pim van Isveldt, interview by Louis van Gasteren, 38.

letters, moreover, Broonzy confided many of his deepest regrets and misgivings about the nature of his blues identity that he tried so desperately to maintain. Pim admitted that one of the only reasons she would date a man thirty years her senior stemmed "from the fact that Bill had something childlike and naïve about him."⁵³ The letters, now in possession of her son Michael, seem to support this interpretation.

Throughout this correspondence Broonzy seems jealous, confused, patriarchal, lonely, mistrusting, and demanding. And yet he is equally kind, gracious, loving, and supportive. This mix of emotions suggests that sustaining his celebrity persona was not easy. He had also learned by that point that childlike deference, naïveté, and volatility could be useful tools for navigating important relationships and fostering tangible identities.

Negotiating his new identity as an international blues celebrity involved more than just the development of personal relationships. Broonzy had to navigate

⁵³ Pim van Isveldt, interview by Louis van Gasteren, August 1, 2004, published in *Big Bill Broonzy, Amsterdam Live Concerts 1953: Unissued Live Concerts Recorded by Louis Van Gasteren*. Munich Records compact disc 275, "How Did I Come to Make These Recordings," p. 39.

professional relationships as well. He often felt "taken advantage of" and occasionally struggled with the demands and circumstances of being an American artist navigating new social and professional networks within several different countries. In 1952 and 1953 Broonzy toured France, Belgium, The United Kingdom, Spain, and the Netherlands with friend and fellow Chicago bluesman Blind John Davis. Throughout his tours, however, he relied on the managerial services of Herbert Wilcox of the London Jazz Club. By the early winter of 1952 their relationship, at least in Broonzy's eyes, had begun to sour. On January 24, 1953, Broonzy sent a typed letter to Winn Stracke in Chicago indicating that his 1952 tour of England had not unfolded as smoothly as he had hoped. The roots of their disagreements, as usual, were financial. Broonzy was upset because he had to pay for both his and Wilcox's travel expenses, including meals, train and cab fares, and lodging expenses.⁵⁴

The tone of the letter was angry and resounds with disappointment. Wilcox had also managed Broonzy's British

⁵⁴ Big Bill Broonzy, Letter to Win Stracke January, 24 1953 Chicago History Museum, Old Town School of Folk Music Items and Sound Recordings, MSM-15,096.

savings account and often suggested that Broonzy keep money available in Britain that Broonzy could access or transfer funds to Chicago if necessary. In one instance, Wilcox cashed a check written to Broonzy without him signing his name. As financial transactions for performances began to accrue from concerts in Belgium, Holland, and London with Mahalia Jackson, the "receipts" did not seem to match the financial statements. Broonzy closed his letter with obvious disappointment:

This is written by William Lee Broonzy known in on records as Big Bill Broonzy and is known all over the world and played all over the world but never was treated by nobody like Mr. Wilcox treated me in my life. I don't think he has a heart in him at all. To say one thing today and change so soon in two weeks time he must have dollar signs for eyes. He has such a good wife and a lot of good friends that while I did not get a receipt for everything because I did trust him, but I trust him too much with my money.⁵⁵

As he toured Europe from 1952 to 1957, money always seemed to be a problem. As he had told Alan Lomax years before about being a traveling musician in the US, the road in Europe was also expensive with a large percentage of his

⁵⁵ Big Bill Broonzy, Letter to Win Stracke January 24, 1953 Chicago History Museum, Old Town School of Folk Music Items and Sound Recordings, MSM-15,096.

earnings covering "rent," "food to eat," and fees for his "clothes to be clean."⁵⁶ Often he relied specifically on Yannick Bruynoghe to manage his money, and in letter after letter, Broonzy seemed concerned about where his money was located and why Bruynoghe was taking so long to move it for him.

The confusion arising from the financial aspects of Bruynoghe and Broonzy's professional association seemed a critical and constant issue between Broonzy and Pim and often created rifts in their relationship. He often relied on Bruynoghe to secure funds for Pim and for his son Michael. He even warned Pim not to completely trust him.

Money problems stemming from difficulties with international financial and labor agreements posed problems for Broonzy as well. Following his first European tour, as he traveled more regularly into other parts of the continent, simply acquiring a travel visa became a consistent challenge without legitimate documentation in

⁵⁶ Big Bill Broonzy letter to Pim van Isveldt, March, 2 1956; April 28, 1956, in Box 1 Michael van Isveldt Collection, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

the form of work contracts.⁵⁷ After his first few tours, and especially after 1955, Broonzy suggested that he was having a difficult time securing contracts to perform in Holland and Europe. By 1956, he was not even allowed to "carry his guitar" into Europe without contractual agreements that he could present to immigration. This fueled his continual frustration over sending money to Pim when she needed it, especially following the birth of Michael.⁵⁸

In Europe, then, Broonzy seemed to experience both new financial frustrations, as well as familiar ones he had once dealt with back in Chicago with American intermediaries. In some ways, Broonzy seemed surprised that his intermediaries would treat him in such a manner; yet by this point in his career he understood the unscrupulous practices of the music industry.

Broonzy was not alone in the difficulties he experienced while navigating European networks. Broonzy's

⁵⁷ Broonzy discussed these logistical problems in multiple letters contained within the Michael van Isveldt Collection, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

⁵⁸ Big Bill Broonzy to Pim van Isveldt, September 26, 1956 in Box 1 Michael van Isveldt Collection, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

friend and fellow bluesman and folk artist Josh White was challenged by the same problems as he navigated his own identity as an international celebrity. White and Broonzy's careers both became deeply enmeshed within European jazz and folk music circles in the 1950s, with some preferring White's more "sophisticated style" and other audiences preferring Broonzy's "earthy style."⁵⁹ Broonzy and White were not competitors on a personal level, but professionally they often toured many of the same European circuits.

Like Broonzy, White had toured Europe beginning in 1950 and found success almost immediately. Throughout the 1950s, White traveled almost incessantly, crisscrossing the Atlantic, North America, and Western Europe. His first tour produced excited reactions from British, French, and Italian fans, but in a manner similar to Broonzy, touring in Europe presented White with troubles. In Italy, White experienced language barrier problems that inhibited his travel plans, punctuality, and his ability to judge his audiences' reactions. Like Broonzy, White soon grew frustrated with his financial difficulties in England

⁵⁹ Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues*, 221.

suggesting that he was intentionally being "ripped-off" by British concert promoters and his British booking agency.⁶⁰

In a letter to his wife, White clearly seemed aggravated:

The people that are paying me or should I say that are supposed to didn't live up to the contract. I am supposed to receive weekly \$1,000 my 11th + 12th week salary in cash given to the Foster agency. Well this is what happened they gave Fosters a post dated check which we know will bounce so if they don't get the cash by Monday I am taking them to court meaning this I won't be working for them after today.⁶¹

From 1956 to 1957, the situation became even more difficult for White as American appearances were beginning to dry up and he sank deeper in debt to British agencies because of "unrealized advanced payments."⁶² On tour in England in 1957, White experienced a problem with a British bank where had deposited 1,500 guilders. His managers suggested he deposit the money for easy accessibility, as the Wilcox brothers had done for Broonzy. In an attempt to withdraw his deposit, White enlisted the help of mutual friends of Broonzy and Pim's, Trixie and David Stevens, who helped

⁶⁰ Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues*, 226; 243-44.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 247.

White discover a suspicious paperwork mistake that had prevented him from obtaining any of his money.⁶³

White and Broonzy, then, experienced similar financial and logistical troubles as they toured Europe and developed their respective international blues celebrity status. These commonalties, moreover, led to the development of a close personal relationship. Broonzy referred warmly to Josh as "the old cotton picker" and the two often shared drinks, song ideas, and general companionship with one another whenever possible in Europe.⁶⁴ Both were quickly becoming icons for Europeans' admiration of African American music given their talent for performance.

Much of Broonzy's frustration may have stemmed from his perspectives on race. While the open system of segregation that existed in the United States at the time did not exist in Europe, racism existed there nonetheless.

⁶³ Trixie Stevens letter to Pim van Isveldt 1957 in Box 1 Michael van Isveldt Collection, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

⁶⁴ Big Bill Broonzy letter to Trixie and David Stevens 1956 in Box 1 Michael van Isveldt Collection, Amsterdam, Netherlands. See also Elijah Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues*, 220-1; In the winter of 1957-58, White found a month-long residency (presumably with the help of Broonzy) at the Gate of Horn in Chicago where he took the time to visit and lend money to his very ill friend, see *Ibid.*, 250-1.

Before one European tour, while waiting for his next contract and payment for the last one, Broonzy expressed disdain and disappointment in a letter to Pim, one with strong racial overtones.

You know I'm and American Negro and over here I can't do nothing without a white man's helping me. I can't get my money I made over there. A white man has to get it for me about the money I made in England. Yannick did get it, but he was to send to the USA, but he hasn't done it yet. All the money he got over there went to his ticket.⁶⁵

Broonzy's race consciousness in Europe was not solely limited to financial interactions. Night after night he performed his most racially combative songs to European audiences who held their own notions about race. One of the songs, "Black, Brown, and White Blues," became a mainstay in Broonzy's repertoire. Broonzy suggested in an interview with Studs Terkel that he had written "Black, Brown, and White" in 1939 after his trainee in a Chicago foundry took his job as foreman because he was white and Broonzy was black. The lyrics give a sensitive depiction of racism in American life:

⁶⁵ Big Bill Broonzy letter to Pim van Isveldt, November 5, 1956, in Box 1 Michael van Isveldt Collection, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

This little song that I'm singin' about
People you know it's true
If you're black and gotta work for a living
This is what they will say to you

They says if you was white, should be all right
If you was brown, stick around
But as you's black, m-mm brother, git back git back
git back

Me and a man was workin' side by side
This is what it meant
They was paying him a dollar an hour
And they was paying me fifty cent

They said if you was white, 't should be all right
If you was brown, could stick around
But as you black, m-mm boy, git back git back git
back⁶⁶

Broonzy once suggested that these lines reflected his life's experience and that he performed this and other socially conscious songs during his concerts as tools for explaining the African American experience in the United States: 'Black, Brown, and White' was "for a fact, written about my life. A lot of people don't like it because of the words 'get back.' Well a lot of people in this world haven't never had to get back but I wrote it because I had

⁶⁶ "Black, Brown, and White." Recorded Paris, September 20, 1951, Vogue Records Vg134, LP30037, in House, *Blue Smoke: The Recorded Journey of Big Bill Broonzy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 179.

to get back.”⁶⁷ “Black, Brown, and White” became one of the most important anti-segregationist songs in Broonzy’s career and in American music. Broonzy regularly performed it as he navigated white American intellectual folk music circles and European jazz and blues audiences. This social consciousness became an integral part of his new identity as an African American musical touchstone and international blues celebrity.

Clearly, Broonzy was quite perceptive about racial encounters as he toured Europe. He remembered that when he arrived in Germany several “white girls” standing on the train platform “looked strange” and as he tried to shake one girl’s hand “she fainted” because he was black.⁶⁸ While in England, Broonzy was turned away from a hotel in Nottingham due to the management’s open admittance that they did not “rent rooms to Negroes.”⁶⁹

During his second wave of sold-out Dutch appearances, organized by Dutch jazz photographer Wouter van Gool, the

⁶⁷ “Big Bill Broonzy - Interview by Studs Terkel,” Chicago November 14th, 1956 transcribed in *Jazz Journal* May 1958, 36.

⁶⁸ *Down Beat*, February 6, 1958, 38.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

Amsterdam Jazz Society, and Hans Rooduijn of the "Le Canard" Foundation, Broonzy visited Amsterdam in February 1953 and performed for a receptive crowd at the capital city's "Ons Huis," or Our House.⁷⁰ Following the performance, Broonzy was taken to a local public house in old Amsterdam where his hosts asked him to sing a few more songs for the crowd gathered there. To their surprise Broonzy refused, claiming, "he was afraid of being arrested for being black."⁷¹ Once his hosts explained with bewildered amusement that the Dutch did not carry such racial pretensions, Broonzy delightfully "played for an hour."⁷²

Even his relationship with Pim created a certain sense of racial uneasiness for Broonzy. Right after they met, Broonzy seemed concerned that because of the racial

⁷⁰ Van Rijn, "Lowland Blues," 224.

⁷¹ Big Bill Broonzy, *Amsterdam Live Concerts 1953: Unissued Live Concerts Recorded by Louis Van Gasteren*. Munich Records compact disc 275, "The Recordings and Songs," p.30-31.

⁷² Ibid.

differences that "living together would be hard."⁷³ After all, interracial marriage and dating were social taboos in the United States, and interracial marriage remained illegal in many states until 1967. Knowing this full well, Broonzy discovered in February of 1956, right after they had begun their courtship, that Pim had lost her job as a costume designer for the community theater. Broonzy, of course, was convinced that she was fired because of their relationship, suggesting that she had lost her job because he was a "negro."⁷⁴ Later, in the summer of 1956, Broonzy discovered that Pim was pregnant with his "brown skinned baby," and he seemed ambivalent about "bringing another Broonzy" in this world."⁷⁵

The letters shared with Pim from 1955 to 1958 are extremely important because they reveal more than just the challenges created by international romance: they reveal

⁷³ Big Bill Broonzy letter to Pim van Isveldt, November 1955 in Box 1 Michael van Isveldt Collection, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

⁷⁴ Big Bill Broonzy letter to Pim van Isveldt, February 26, 1956 in Box 1 Michael van Isveldt Collection, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

⁷⁵ Big Bill Broonzy letter to Pim van Isveldt, June 21, 1953 in Box 1, Michael van Isveldt Collection, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

that establishing and maintaining his identity as an international blues celebrity was extremely difficult. Several letters, for example, focus on a racially charged altercation in 1956 with Dutch jazz critic and producer Michiel de Ruyter that provoked old feelings from a lifetime of being scammed in the recording studio.

De Ruyter and Broonzy had established a significant relationship through correspondence and frequent visits, sharing personal stories and openly enjoying the other's company. Although de Ruyter was an important jazz critic and promoter in the Netherlands, he and Broonzy were first and foremost friends. Broonzy had lodged at de Ruyter's home during his first Dutch appearances. De Ruyter was an enormous fan of Broonzy's music and, likewise, Broonzy admired de Ruyter as a leading European jazz promoter writer, and producer.⁷⁶

In February of 1956 Broonzy was scheduled to record eight songs with de Ruyter in Bearn, Holland for the Philips label, but the session quickly turned sour. Broonzy accused de Ruyter of purposefully intoxicating him

⁷⁶ Michiel de Ruyter, "The Work of Michiel de Ruyter: Big Bill Broonzy" at the *Nederlands Jazz Archeif*, <http://mdr.jazzarchieff.nl/producent/broonzy/>.

in hopes of pushing the contracted eight-song session to a doubled number of sixteen.⁷⁷ De Ruyter, or "Mr. Mike," as Broonzy called him, however, wrote that Broonzy had become too intoxicated to perform and record properly, and rather than confronting Broonzy directly, out of respect he had secretly informed Yannick Bruynoghe of the debacle. Bill, in turn, accused de Ruyter of breaching their trust and friendship, going as far as to suggest that the awkward situation stemmed from Broonzy being a "Negro."⁷⁸ Clearly offended, Broonzy threatened:

I did think you was my friend. You told me you would take care of everything and I trusted you. I know the peoples in Holland like to know you better and to know who you really are. And I'm going to tell them and every newspaper and magazine I know to print this story.⁷⁹

In several letters to Pim, Broonzy seemed openly upset over the incident, justifying to Pim that "Mike" was truly not his friend, that he was not drinking, and that Yannick

⁷⁷ Michiel de Ruyter, "The Work of Michciel de Ruyter: Big Bill Broonzy" at the *Nederlands Jazz Archeif*, <http://mdr.jazzarchieff.nl/producent/broonzy/>.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

laughed at the entire situation.⁸⁰ For several months following the recording incident Broonzy seemed uncomfortable and concerned about how his identity might be affected, as he clearly did not want to jeopardize his professional opportunities. This anecdote, then, suggests that balancing his personal and professional relationships within his new identity was much more difficult than he expected and that the issue of race was clearly on Broonzy's mind as he navigated this new persona.

Despite the social and financial struggles Broonzy experienced while touring in Europe, his tours were highly successful. They had reinvigorated his recording career and quickly ignited an array of new performing and recording opportunities back in the US.

George Adins, a friend of Bruynoghe's, blues revivalist, and frequent writer for *du Hot Club du France*, revealed in a 1957 letter to Pim that his family had been greatly affected by Broonzy's presence in Belgium. Adins explained that through Broonzy he had gained an "intense and deep admiration for the negro population," suggesting

⁸⁰ Big Bill Broonzy letter to Pim van Isveldt, 02/23/1956, 03/02/1956, 04/28/1956, in Box 1 Michael van Isveldt Collection, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

that "they are the most loving and joyful people ever created." To Adins, Big Bill Broonzy was "the best and most kindhearted" man he had ever met and some of the happiest moments he had ever experienced were having Broonzy in his home.⁸¹

Although Broonzy enjoyed the European phase of his career and the identity that stemmed from it, the financial and social challenges he faced in foreign countries on tour served to strengthen his love of Chicago even further. Despite consistently promising Pim from 1955 until his death that he was leaving the United States to move to Europe, Broonzy always returned to his home in Chicago's South Side.⁸²

When he returned to the United States with his new identity, however, his career began to take a different turn. The Chicago blues community where Broonzy was once king, now worshiped at the altar of Muddy Waters, Little Walter, Howlin' Wolf, Sonny Boy Williamson II (Rice Miller),

⁸¹ George Adins letter to Pim van Isveldt, May 6, 1957 in Box 1 Michael van Isveldt Collection, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

⁸² Big Bill Broonzy letter to Pim van Isveldt, May 2, 1957 in Box 1 Michael van Isveldt Collection, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

and Willie Dixon. Their electrified "down-home" styles had superseded the slick jazz-tinged urban blues of Broonzy's past and the rural country folk blues of his present persona.

But just as the preferences of African American audiences and the white-operated recording industry had changed, American academic, intellectual, and left-wing political circles had placed in motion an enormous revival of interest in American folk music, of which blues were viewed as an integral part.⁸³ Broonzy employed his newfound international credibility to refuel his career, becoming incredibly active in the development of the American folk music movement.⁸⁴ The revival's organizers and promoters recognized Broonzy's amazing potential. After all, many of its leaders had helped forge the solo folk-blues persona that Broonzy had perfected among European audiences, dating back to his first stint with "I Come for to Sing" in the late 1940s.

⁸³ Ronald Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival & American Society 1940-1970* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 8-19.

⁸⁴ "Broonzy's Blues Excite British" *Baltimore Afro-American* November 26, 1955.

For this group of burgeoning folk enthusiasts Broonzy could display two identities simultaneously: as an early blues pioneer in the United States and one of the most prolific recording artists in urban blues history and now as an international celebrity who had toured the world sharing the blues and his recollections of the African American experience. Upon his return to the United States, then, his career gained significant momentum. From 1951-1957, Broonzy reappeared in Studs Terkel's "I Come for To Sing" traveling program along with Win Stracke, Larry Lane, and Chet Roble, with Broonzy featured as its folk-blues component. Moreover, gigs in the form of residencies at new folk clubs such as the Blue Note, the Gate of Horn, and the Blue Angel began to emerge with help from Studs Terkel and Win Stracke along with increasing recording opportunities for smaller independent labels like Chess, Verve, and Folkways.⁸⁵ At the same time, however, Broonzy was also

⁸⁵ Elizabeth Rannels, "Have You Heard" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 21, 1951; "Have You Heard" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 13, 1953; William Leonard, "Tower Ticker," *Chicago Daily Tribune* November 28, 1951; "Tower Ticker," *Chicago Daily Tribune* July 2, 1952; "Russell Nype Sings Well in Marine Room," *Chicago Daily Tribune* November 9, 1952; "Moulin Rouge Features Show with Big Cast" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 6, 1953; "Blue Angels Show Lively and Colorful," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 20, 1953;

involved in Chicago concerts explaining the history of jazz that were eerily similar to his first European performances. Similarly, in manner reminiscent of his European identity, he was frequently featured in the New York Times and other national newspapers as a linchpin for understanding jazz's development in the United States.⁸⁶

Occasionally, new opportunities involved more than just music. In Chicago, Broonzy had helped establish a local tavern dubbed Big Bill and Moore's Lounge on the city's South Side.⁸⁷ Broonzy also helped Win Stracke of "I Come for to Sing" fame and local folk musician Frank Hamilton open Chicago's Old Town School of Folk Music, on

"One the Town" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 27, 1955; Unknown Author, "Folk Song Program Hits Roosevelt U. on Dec. 13," *Chicago Defender* December 11, 1956.

⁸⁶ Izzy Rowe's Notebook, "The Postman Rings Twice," *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 2, 1953. A Big Bill Broonzy's performance is advertised in "Jazz History, Concert Set in Park Forest," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 28, 1955; Charles Edward Smith, "Blow Hot, Blow Sweet'" *The New York Times*, November 4, 1956; John S. Wilson, "Country 'Blues': Bill Broonzy's Singing is Living History," *The New York Times*, September 15, 1957; "Unbound Jazz: Invention of LP Gave Jam Sessions Space," *New York Times*, March 16, 1958.

⁸⁷ Broonzy sent Pim a business card in 1957 displaying the name and address of the tavern, in Box 1 Michael van Isveldt Collection, Amsterdam, Netherlands. Initially, it was unclear what this was, but became apparent once corroborated with his obituary from the *Chicago Tribune*; see *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 16, 1958, p.12.

December 1, 1957, providing the school its very first folk music lesson with a demonstration of his masterful guitar work.⁸⁸

Although Broonzy's new identity had provided new musical opportunities in Chicago, he still had to work to supplement his income. But even famous African Americans' opportunities were limited. Nearly every summer from 1953 until his death, Broonzy worked as a cook for a Progressive folk camp in Hastings, Michigan called Circle Pines. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the Circle Pines Center thrived as a progressive, family-centered folk camp where an integrated mix of children and adults from the Midwest participated in a cooperative culture through a specific emphasis on education.⁸⁹ Former campers recalled Broonzy's lackluster cooking skills but incredible musicianship during his residency there, including a remarkable performance with Pete Seeger in 1956 on the lawn of the camp's farm house.⁹⁰ Dr. Vera King, a longtime board member

⁸⁸ Old Town School of Folk Music, "Biography of a Hunch: Opening Night" <http://www.oldtownschool.org/history/night.html>.

⁸⁹ The history of Circle Pines Center is discussed <http://www.circlepinescenter.org/history.php>.

has suggested that Broonzy's presence at the camp was memorable for campers and families. She recalled:

[Broonzy] would sing all night with the kids and couldn't get up in the morning. The kitchen manager was furious with him...[a]pparently he was an alcoholic at the time, but he never drank while he was here, and he never sang any of his off-color songs to the kids.⁹¹

His celebrity in Chicago and in Europe, however, was also quite different. In Europe Broonzy was accustomed to performing in elaborate music halls in front of packed crowds to great acclaim and praise within many of the largest cities on the continent. He was featured in headlines in many major European music publications as an incredibly gifted performer and artist. To the burgeoning groups of devotees of African American music, Broonzy was a core component of their understandings of the music. His fans, moreover, opened their homes, lauded him with gifts and their affections, and captured their respect in

⁹⁰ Stan Schultz, "Send Your Kids to Summer Camp at Circle Pines: A Unique Co-Op Camp That Teaches Great Values," in *Lifestyle; Associated Content* (2007) http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/135622/send_your_kids_to_summer_camp_at_circle.html; Harold Henderson, "Camp Co-Op," *Chicago Reader*, July 27, 1989.

⁹¹ Dr. Vera King interview quoted in Harold Henderson, "Camp Co-Op," *Chicago Reader*, July 27, 1989.

photographs. He developed a network of friends and colleagues that he could usually depend on who seemed to care for his well-being as much as his music.

Back in the United States, however, he played small folk clubs in Chicago, worked as a camp cook in Michigan, and toured small auditoriums on college campuses across the country. This situation reflects important elements of his identity in a country where African Americans were considered second-class citizens. His celebrity in Europe, had granted him unprecedented access to many Europeans' homes and cultures, but back in the United States Broonzy was still just a black musician from Chicago's South Side. While he was an important element of Chicago's emerging folk music community, and although he was a huge and well-respected celebrity in black Chicago, his career seemed small when compared to the electrified blues currently popularized by the Chess sound.

Nevertheless, by 1957 Big Bill Broonzy seemed to have finally established an identity that could sustain success and acclaim and provide sufficient opportunity for recording and performance both at home and abroad. He was in great demand in Europe and to a lesser degree in Chicago, but he was quickly being recognized as one of the

most important national and international blues artists. He had achieved unparalleled success in Europe by continually negotiating his identity and celebrity. His professional associations in Europe, Chicago, and the greater Midwest's folk music revival had kept him constantly on the move.

And yet the sad irony of all of this reinvigorated success and hard work was the fact that this larger-than-life elder statesman of the blues, the man affectionately known across the world as "Big Bill," was slowly dying. His doctor had warned him in the late 1940s that twenty years of traveling and living the itinerant musician's lifestyle was dangerous for his aging body and health. Part of his decision to leave Chicago for Ames, Iowa, in 1950 and his frequent summer stints at the Circle Pines Center's summer camp were based on this suggestion. By 1956, however, Broonzy was becoming increasingly sick.

In letter after letter to Pim, beginning in 1956, Broonzy complained of "feeling ill," ultimately revealing through his correspondence with Pim a two-year battle with cancer.⁹² Initially, his doctors had suggested that he was

⁹² Big Bill Broonzy letters to Pim van Isveldt, January 17, March 2, April 4, June 1, September 7, September 26, November 5, December 11, 1956; March 29, September 18,

eating the wrong foods and that the continuous changes in his diet as he traveled might be the root cause of his problems.⁹³ Emotionally he seemed spent as well; at 60 he had crafted a new identity that had reinvigorated his career, but his identity and vocation was in the hands of many intermediaries he did not completely trust. He was constantly traveling all over Europe and back to the United States. He had fathered a child with his Dutch girlfriend without really being able to be around. His drinking was beginning to affect his ability to work. By June of 1956, he clearly seemed frazzled, explaining to Pim that his "nerves" might be bad.⁹⁴

From 1956 and into 1957, Broonzy's condition grew increasingly worse throughout his last tour of Europe, after which he was diagnosed with cancer in July of 1957.⁹⁵

December 18, 1957; January 1, March 3, 1958 in Box 1 Michael van Isveldt Collection, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

⁹³ Big Bill Broonzy letter to Pim van Isveldt, June 1, 1956 in Box 1 Michael van Isveldt Collection, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

⁹⁴ Big Bill Broonzy letter to Pim van Isveldt, June 1, 1956 in Box 1 Michael van Isveldt Collection, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

⁹⁵ Roger Randolph House, "'Keys to the Highway:' William 'Big Bill' Broonzy and the Chicago Blues in the Era

Despite his ailing health, Broonzy still found time to appear at Circle Pines as a camp cook and performer with Pete Seeger and recorded *The Big Bill Broonzy Story* for Verve Records.⁹⁶

The following September he wrote Pim explaining that he had been in the hospital for two weeks after receiving an operation for cancer that removed a lung.⁹⁷ Ever the optimist, Broonzy tried to convince Pim that he would soon be returning to London, but he would never tour Europe again.⁹⁸ The cancer metastasized from his throat to his lungs. A second operation on his throat in the fall of 1957 severed his vocal chords, silencing his powerful singing voice forever. Although another operation was planned in the early winter of 1958, in hopes of repairing his severed vocal chords, Big Bill Broonzy never performed

of the Great Migration" (PhD dissertation, Boston University, 1999), 214.

⁹⁶ Big Bill Broonzy, *The Bill Broonzy Story*, July 12 and 13, 1957. MGV Record 3000-5, 1960.

⁹⁷ Bernie Asbell, "The Whisper of Big Bill Broonzy," *Melody Maker* February 8, 1958; 13.

⁹⁸ Big Bill Broonzy letter to Pim van Isveldt, January 18, 1958 in Box 1 Michael van Isveldt Collection, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

again.⁹⁹

As Broonzy's hospital bills accumulated, his meager savings began to dwindle. The reputation he had built throughout his long and distinguished career brought together dozens of friends and colleagues eager to help him and his family through these difficult times. In Chicago, dozens of black musicians, folk music enthusiasts, blues aficionados, and jazz cognoscenti organized a benefit concert to help with Broonzy's mounting medical debt. The sold-out show raised approximately two thousand dollars for Broonzy's cause.¹⁰⁰ Broonzy stood onstage with tears streaming down to thunderous applause after the two-and-a-half hour performance, thanking his friends and colleagues in a whisper for "making the evening so memorable."¹⁰¹

Across the Atlantic, two benefit concerts held in London in March featured European jazz aficionados and blues revivalists as well as musicians from across the

⁹⁹ Big Bill Broonzy letter to Pim van Isveldt, January 18, 1958 in Box 1 Michael van Isveldt Collection, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

¹⁰⁰ John Steiner, "Beyond the Impression" *Record Research* 17 (March/April 1958): 7.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

continent.¹⁰² The first, held at the London Coliseum and sponsored by *Melody Maker*, featured Alan Lomax as the master of ceremonies and included over fifty "top stars of British jazz," ultimately raising L500 for the cause. The second concert, promoted by the National Jazz Federation, featured a midnight performance at the Dominion Theatre that included performances from the Lonnie Donegan Skiffle Group, the Chris Barber Band with Otilie Patterson, and the Ken Coyle Band. It also raised approximately L500 for Broonzy.¹⁰³

A comparison of the American and European benefit concerts reveal that to the very end Broonzy's audiences and his respective identities in the United States and Europe were different. In Chicago, the benefit was held at the Pilgrim Gospel Baptist Church in the heart of Chicago's South Side, and included performances from a who's who of local and national blues, folk, and gospel giants. Broonzy's close friend and Chicago media personality Studs Terkel emceed the evening's proceedings and many of his

¹⁰² "Maybe I'll Sing Again Says Big Bill," *Melody Maker* March 15, 1958: 1.

¹⁰³ "Ibid., 1; "Stars all Set to Help Big Bill" *Melody Maker* March 8, 1958: 20.

closest friends—Tampa Red, Mahalia Jackson, J.B. Lenoir, Pete Seeger, Memphis Slim, and many others—were in attendance.¹⁰⁴ The concert reflects Broonzy's identity in the United States as a black musician: "Big Bill" from black Chicago.

Yet in England, Broonzy was recognized as something different than just "Big Bill." The British concerts were held in two of the countries' largest theaters in the heart of London and offered audiences a chance to hear some of the United Kingdom's brightest jazz and skiffle celebrities.¹⁰⁵ Alan Lomax provided emcee services for the events. Most of the performers were white, and *Melody Maker* and the *National Jazz Federation* sponsored the events. Broonzy was treated as an international celebrity at these events in London, whereas in the United States the scope of his influence seemed limited to Chicago's blues and folk communities.

¹⁰⁴ Don Gold, "Big Bill Broonzy Benefit Concert" *Downbeat* January 9, 1958; 37-8.

¹⁰⁵ British musician Lonnie Donegan had helped introduce skiffle - a form of jazz, blues, and folk hybrid originating in the early 20th century US - to British audiences. He was a huge admirer of Broonzy's and helped organize the second of the two British concerts. See "Maybe I'll Sing Again Says Big Bill," *Melody Maker* March 15, 1958; 1.

Broonzy was unable attend the London concerts on the advice of his physicians, despite admitting, "there's nothing I want to do more."¹⁰⁶ Broonzy's last letter to Pim, in March of 1958, revealed just how dire his health had become. Broonzy complained of crippling headaches and failing vision, which were greatly affecting his ability to write. He expressed excitement over his friends in Europe and Chicago who were trying to raise funds for his operations and expenses but seemed overwhelmed by the mounting debt created by his vast medical bills. Ever the optimist, he seemed convinced that he would sing again and that his failing health would return.¹⁰⁷ By July, Broonzy had succumbed to the reality of his prognosis, apologizing to his British friends David and Trixie Stevens:

Please don't think hard of me for not writing you all. I can't see, I am almost blind, and my mind is not so good. I am so nervous. I am writing to let you know that I haven't forgotten you. I am yet thankful for

¹⁰⁶ Bernie Asbell, "The Whisper of Big Bill Broonzy," *Melody Maker* February 8, 1958; 13.

¹⁰⁷ Big Bill Broonzy letter to Pim van Isveldt March 18 in Box 1 Michael van Isveldt Collection, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

all you did for me.¹⁰⁸

One month later, on Friday August 15 amidst a violent thunderstorm, Big Bill Broonzy died of cancer in an ambulance on his way to Billings Hospital from his home at 4716 South Parkway, Chicago.¹⁰⁹ The proud singer affectionately known all over the world as "Big Bill," who had developed an identity and personality around his larger than life blues persona and 6'3", 200-pound frame, had wasted away to a mere 80 pounds.¹¹⁰ News of his death spread rapidly across the United States and Europe as folk and blues media outlets, his social and professional networks, as well as major newspapers and magazines shared the sad news.¹¹¹ After memorial services attended by friends Studs

¹⁰⁸ Big Bill Broonzy letter to David and Trixie Stevens July, 1958 quoted in "L500 'Blues' for Broonzy: Problem for the Jazz Federation," *Melody Maker* August 23, 1958; 1.

¹⁰⁹ "Bill Broonzy, Famed Blues Singer, Dies," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 16, 1958; 12.

¹¹⁰ "L500 'Blues' for Broonzy: Problem for the Jazz Federation," *Melody Maker* August 23, 1958; 1.

¹¹¹ "Bill Broonzy, Famed Blues Singer, Dies," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 16, 1958, p.12; "Big Bill Broonzy Sang, Wrote Blues" *New York Times* August 16, 1958, p.17; "Radio Show Plans Tribute to Bill Broonzy," *Chicago Defender* August 18, 1958, p. A2; "Wake Services Tonight For Big Bill Broonzy" *Chicago Defender* August 19, 1958, p. A6;

Terkel, Win Stracke, Brother John Sellers, J.B. Lenoir, Muddy Waters, Tampa Red, Little Walter, Lil Armstrong, Mahalia Jackson, and Chet Roble in attendance, Broonzy was laid to rest in Chicago's Lincoln cemetery on held on August 19th.¹¹²

Broonzy's long career is extremely important for understanding African American identity in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. When Broonzy first landed on European shores to perform in 1951, he had seen his two-decade career transformed from the hit-making machine Big Bill "from black Chicago" into Big Bill, "folk blues hero." As his music lost favor among black audiences, he navigated folk music's growing influence in

"Big Bill Broonzy Succumbs: 'Even the Elements Know A Great Big Man is Gone'" *Norfolk Journal and Guide* August 23, 1958, p. C1; "Big Bill Broonzy, Famed Blues Singer, Dies at 65" *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 30, 1958, p. 7; "Final Note for Blues Singer Bill Broonzy" *Pittsburg Courier* August 30, 1958; "L500 'Blues' for Broonzy: Problem for the Jazz Federation," *Melody Maker* August 23, 1958, 1; Humphrey Littleton, "There's No Argument - The Money is Big Bill's in *Melody Maker* September 9, 1958, 11; Don Gold, "Tangents: Big Bill Broonzy" *Downbeat* October 8, 1958, 42; David and Trixie Stevens letter to Pim van Isveldt, September 3, 1958; Yannick Bruynoghe letter to Pim van Isveldt October 19, 1958 in Box 1 Michael van Isveldt Collection, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

¹¹² "Tangents: Big Bill Broonzy" *Downbeat* October 8, 1958, 42.

the United States in a manner that helped connect his music to a new audience across the Atlantic with budding interests in African American vernacular music. To a new audience of blues revivalists and jazz enthusiasts he became "Big Bill," the edifying link between blues and jazz history. Along the way he became a celebrity as a black musician explaining African American music and traditions to white audiences around the world. This feat becomes extraordinary given the fact that Broonzy shaped and reshaped his identity as a man and as a musician in a country that maintained a system of legal racial segregation and discrimination.

For almost thirty years Big Bill Broonzy had navigated the music business and its expectations in a manner that led him to unprecedented success as both a national folk icon and international blues and jazz performer. As Broonzy toured Europe and found newfound fame in the United States he encountered new audiences that held different expectations about what his life and career represented. Along the way he carefully crafted, and, at times, re-crafted identities based on his negotiations of these expectations.

CHAPTER V

ESCAPING THE FOLK: MUSIC, MEMORY, AND THE BLUES OF BIG BILL BROONZY

Since Bill Broonzy's death in 1958, folklorists, jazz scholars, blues historians, and younger generations of blues-influenced musicians have defined and redefined Broonzy's history in an attempt to shape his historical legacy. These cultural brokers have held distinct visions of Broonzy's identity and public memory and have intentionally constructed lasting arguments around their perceptions. For each of these interpreters, Broonzy serves as an exemplary figure: they shaped his story to reflect their understandings of African American jazz and blues, the U.S. South, race, and the legacy of a musician's success.

In historical memory, Broonzy's four-phased, thirty-year career has been defined by the last stage of his career. Before the late 1940s, most pieces written about Broonzy focused on his extensive music career in Chicago as a veteran blues musician, his role as a "From Spirituals to

Swing" alumnus, and as a frequent performer in New York.¹ By the 1950s, however, as Broonzy's identity transitioned from black pop to white folk, his public image was changing as well. Focusing on the last decade of his career, chroniclers have tended to trivialize Broonzy's identity as a black pop music entertainer. Key elements of Broonzy's historical legacy reflect as much about these culture brokers' worldviews as they do the identity and significance of Broonzy the twentieth-century blues musician.

First, by positioning Broonzy within the realm of the Mississippi Delta blues tradition, folklorists like Alan Lomax tended to focus on his experience as a victim of southern racism in the Jim Crow South. Through Broonzy, these culture brokers discovered the blues' intricate connections to race and the African American experience in

¹ See H. Howard Taubman "Negro Music Given at Carnegie Hall," *New York Times*, December 24, 1938; *Baltimore Afro-American*, "Spiritual Swing at Carnegie Hall," Dec 2, 1939; *Chicago Defender*, "From Spirituals to Swing to be Heard," Dec 9, 1939; Gama Gilbert, "TAC Jazz Session at Carnegie Hall," *New York Times*, December 25, 1939; Billy Rowe, "Broadway in Glowing Tribute to Negro Music," *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 6, 1940. Big Bill Broonzy, "Baby I Done Got Wise," *The Jazz Record*, March 1946, 9; Bill Isleton, "Big Bill Broonzy: Selected Discography." *Jazzology* No. 2 Jan 1947, 7.

the United States. Central to their understanding of Broonzy was a tendency to zero in on his "otherness"—his large physique, his southern roots, his race consciousness, his ability to survive in Chicago—in a manner that overshadowed Broonzy's own agency as an architect of African American culture and in a way that undervalued his importance to African American audiences. These elements became key components for explaining Broonzy's importance to the white folklore community that Broonzy navigated near the end of his career, and to a certain extent, his memory has remained part of the folk revival legacy ever since.

Lomax became acquainted with Broonzy following the "From Spirituals to Swing" concert in 1939. By the mid-forties Broonzy and Lomax were corresponding through a series of letters in which Broonzy laid out for Lomax his story and influence within Chicago's blues community. Through their correspondence, Lomax recognized Broonzy's value as a nearly two-decade veteran of Chicago's music world and of his deep connections to the Arkansas and Mississippi River bottoms in which Lomax had conducted fieldwork throughout the period.

In 1947, Lomax invited Broonzy and his band (comprised at the time of Chicago legends Peter "Memphis Slim" Chatman and John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson) to perform in front of a New York crowd in Greenwich Village's Town Hall. The following night Lomax invited the men into his home in the Village to record their music and to define the blues as a genre. This recording became what is now known as *Blues in the Mississippi Night*. Originally recorded for New York's Decca Records, *Blues in the Mississippi Night* offers oral interviews and music intended to explain the blues from three of Chicago's most immortalized bluesmen.² Lomax, however, had more in mind that night in New York than simple descriptions of the blues' origins and meanings.

In reality, Lomax applied his philosophy for folk music collecting, his political beliefs, and his understanding of American history to his recording of *Blues in the Mississippi Night*, and these three Chicago bluesmen, for a brief moment, were his muses. What Lomax had intended to discover that night was not an investigation into the

² Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Bantam Doubleday, 1993), 459-79; Anna Lomax and Don Fleming, interview by Julian Marshall, *On Point*, NPR, August 8, 2003, accessed April 6, 2010, www.onpointradio.org/2003/08/capturing-the-blues

ethnomusicology of the blues, but rather, an investigation into one of his true passions—the association between race and music in the development of culture. To Lomax:

Here at last, black working-class men had talked frankly, sagaciously, and with open resentment about the inequities of the Southern system of racial segregation and exploitation. An exposé of that system was on record. Also, a new order of eloquence in documentation had emerged out of a situation where members of a tradition could present their own case to each other. They had themselves stated why and how the blues had arisen in their homeland in the Mississippi Delta.³

More than just a recording of three commercially successful Chicago blues veterans reminiscing on life and music in the South, *Blues in the Mississippi Night* captures what Lomax hoped would be “a real breakthrough” into “a dark period of history that had previously been hidden.”⁴ Lomax, of course, was familiar with Broonzy’s overtly anti-segregationist songs and race consciousness, and he knew that with a “midnight bottle of bourbon” he could push Broonzy into a “Socratic Role,” that would pull “his young friends into deeper and deeper levels of the drama.”⁵ Lomax

³ Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 459.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 473.

intended to bring the "Mississippi night" to New York from this conversation in hopes of capturing unprecedented revelations about racism in the United States.

Filled with frightening anecdotes about the struggles and hardships of southern blacks of the period, *Blues in the Mississippi Night* claims to capture on record the perspectives of blacks themselves about life in the United States. Through their discussions and performances of proto-blues, levee camp and field hollers, prison songs, and gang labor shouts, the three bluesmen discussed southern racism's intrinsic connection to poverty, exploitive agriculture, gang labor, prison culture, and mob violence experienced by African Americans throughout the Jim Crow South. With humor, storytelling, and song, these blues giants offered a glimpse into the sordid world that had driven all three of them and tens of thousands of others out of South along the paths of the Great Migrations and into Chicago.

Of course, Lomax knew that these interviews, and, specifically the subject matter, were highly provocative

⁵ Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 460.

given the racial mores of the period. The sense of danger that this recording created essentially bolstered Lomax's reputation as a folklorist willing to push the edge of race relations in the United States for his craft and gave the project unprecedented appeal to Lomax's audience of folklorists. These recordings posed a threat to all three of the African Americans who participated because they believed their respective southern families might be in danger from such a revelatory interview. Broonzy and his band, at first, were extremely reluctant to answer Lomax's questions and Lomax had to essentially intoxicate the men to get them to participate. Not until 1959, moreover, did any record company agree to commit to production, and even then, Broonzy and Williamson, both deceased, and Memphis Slim, were given pseudonyms in hopes of protecting their southern family members from any backlash the album might create.⁶

What is most striking about the recordings is what Lomax failed to transmit. All three of these men were

⁶ An original transcription of the interview was published in 1948 and each bluesmen's identity was masked by a pseudonym. See Alan Lomax, "I Got The Blues," *Common Ground* 8, no. 4 1948, 38-52.

incredibly important architects in the construction of Chicago's blues community, yet Lomax showed no interest in discussing their new lives in Bronzeville. Broonzy had left the South because of Jim Crow—the very subject of Lomax's investigation—and had created one of the most important careers in Chicago blues. Rather than portray Broonzy, Chatman, and Williamson as active agents in the creation of Chicago's vibrant blues culture, Lomax chose (albeit well-intended) instead to introduce these men as victims of the South's system of apartheid. Lomax knew that the sophisticated urban sounds that these men were producing at the time did not quite mesh with his romanticized ideas about the Deep South and folk music, and therefore, each of the narrators appear as if they had just left the plantation fields of Arkansas and Mississippi. In fact, this recorded conversation would have never happened in the Deep South where these men came of age.

Lomax and Broonzy continued to correspond until Broonzy's death in 1958. They also spent a significant amount of time together in Europe (Lomax at this point was an expatriate hiding from the HUAC purge of the period) in the 1950s when Broonzy became one of the first blues

artists to tour Europe. Throughout the decade the two remained close friends as Broonzy's career transitioned into its final blues as folk phase. Thirty-five years after Broonzy's death, in 1993, Alan Lomax finally published his fifty-year in-the-making *magnum opus*, the National Book Critics Circle Award winner *The Land where the Blues Began*. Included within the books' five hundred-page study of Mississippi Delta folk culture is a revelatory chapter titled "Big Bill of the Blues." Relying on years of interviews and correspondence, Lomax carves out a history of Big Bill Broonzy that has added to Broonzy's historical memory.

With *The Land Where the Blues Began*, Lomax attempts to firmly plant Broonzy within the Mississippi Delta blues tradition, and ultimately, by associating the marriage between folklore and the Mississippi Delta blues culture, folk music. The first half of the chapter "Big Bill of the Blues" retraces Broonzy's southern past through careful discussions of his family, his early music tutelage, his discovery of the opposite sex, his short career as a country musician, his brief stint as a country preacher, and his conscription into the AEF during WWI. Peppered

throughout the first half of the chapter are discussions of the inequality and poverty from which Broonzy had escaped.

The Land Where the Blues Began introduces Broonzy's rural roots in black southern life to readers in an attempt to cement his role within the "cult of authenticity" and its reliance on musicians' "otherness."⁷ To Lomax, Broonzy had survived "all the humiliation and injustice" suffered by blacks in the United States with an "unbroken...spirit" and "undistorted" "vision of life," and more than any other bluesman of the period, he had "struck back against Jim Crow" with his music.⁸ For Lomax, then, Broonzy's appeal was deeply rooted in American racism and stemmed from the respectability and dignity his life experience and personality commanded from all who knew him.

The second half of Lomax's chapter, "Big Bill of the Blues," for the first time in Lomax's long career with Broonzy focuses on Broonzy's migration to Chicago, his transformation from rural musician to urban bluesmen, his

⁷ Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 59-62.

⁸ Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 426.

experience as an urban laborer, his creative songwriting impulse, and his navigation of Chicago's music industry and blues culture. Many of the anecdotes offered by Lomax—Broonzy's migration, his job as a Pullman Porter, interactions with Charlie Jackson, Blind Blake and Lemon Jefferson—suggest that Lomax had finally realized, Broonzy's importance in the evolving and cutthroat world of Chicago's music industry. Yet again, Broonzy emerges from the pages, not as a cultural actor and architect, but rather as one who was continually acted upon.

Lomax portrays Broonzy as a victim of racism and the unscrupulous practices of the recording industry in Chicago that had "cheated black country bumpkins" at nearly every turn.⁹ Broonzy, moreover, had fled the South to settle in an often violent and rapacious city filled with blues musicians who had "lived by violence and died by violence."¹⁰ Broonzy had also emerged from the "ghetto jungles of Chicago and Harlem...basically untouched, still merrily-hearted, strong, and dignified," all

⁹ Lomax, *Land Where the Blues Began*, 446.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 448.

characteristics defining Broonzy's genius as a "true folk composer."¹¹

In a sense, embedded within Lomax's interpretation, Broonzy's career and importance to folk culture stemmed from luck of his survival more than anything else. Never mind that Broonzy had worked extremely hard for nearly two decades traveling the country honing his craft and developing one of the most important blues identities in twentieth century blues history. To Lomax, such a victim could not possibly be an active agent in the development of black vernacular and popular music for black audiences that respected his talents and community identity. To Lomax, Broonzy was a passive agent who was "lucky to be alive," lucky to have survived in an exotic world filled with the "otherness" of less fortunate blacks that "came to Chicago without education or skills to help them."¹²

The second half of the chapter suggests that, for Lomax, what set Broonzy's "otherness" apart from other migrants stemmed from more than just his lack of formal

¹¹ Lomax, *Land Where the Blues Began*, 456.

¹² Lomax, *Ibid.*, 439.

education. Throughout, Lomax seems dedicated to the idea that Broonzy's "otherness" was manifested through his physical presence (6'3", 215 pound frame). For Lomax, this "otherness," along with his undying luck, had defined his survival abilities, suggesting that both Broonzy's imposing physique and charming ways were much more responsible for his success as a Chicago migrant and bluesman than his musical skill, intelligence, and crafty determination. It may also suggest that Lomax, at 5'11", may have been intimidated by Broonzy's large, handsome, and dark physique. This physicality and charm, moreover, highlights Lomax's strong interest in the exotic worlds of violence, sexuality, and physicality of African Americans in black Chicago.

Lomax, for example, romantically discusses the difficult world Broonzy experienced as a performer in black Chicago, with its violence, vice, and open sexuality:

Singing in the dance halls and gin mills where the desperate and the reckless children of the devil come to have their fling, the makers of the blues rub shoulders with violence every night they work...Women are making a play for new men. Men are out looking

for a new girl or a fight to work off steam and liven up a Saturday night.¹³

Lomax's statement reveals that, rather than focus on the ways in which Broonzy's identity as one of Chicago blues' hit making machines had forged an incredibly important path for Chicago musicians' successes, Lomax focused instead on his own understanding of violence and sexuality within African American culture and in doing highlighted his own racial subconscious. Fear of black men and women's perceived tendency towards sexual promiscuity, open exoticism, and violence had defined whites' generalized notions of African American culture since the beginnings of Jim Crow. Lomax's discussion of these elements gave his work an appeal to these dangers of sex and violence. This point of view negated Lomax's chance to view that those "dance halls" and "gin mills," while exhibiting violence and open sexuality, were unbelievably important centers for the creation of new African American identities, cultures and communities.

The Big Bill Broonzy who emerges from the pages of Lomax's work does not reflect the "Big Bill" identity that

¹³ Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 448.

Broonzy had crafted for two decades in black Chicago. True, Lomax did offer anecdotes of his most active years as a recording artist, but Lomax portrays Broonzy as someone who was continually at odds with his success, economic conditions, the music industry, studio musicians, and race relations in the United States. To Lomax, Broonzy had survived changes within these elements because of happenstance and because of his imposing physique. Lomax's work has masked the fact that Broonzy was a cultural actor shaping sounds and tastes for African American and white audiences with diligence, determination, and intelligence.

While folklorists like Lomax have held an undeniable influence over Broonzy's memory, jazz writers, beginning in the 1950s also began molding his image as well. For jazz scholars and enthusiasts, Broonzy was a source of excitement because he represented a figure that clarified one of their earliest misconceptions about the blues—that the blues was not a precursor to jazz, but in fact a distinct genre in its own right. As jazz writers and critics in Europe and the United States began systematically and intellectually chronicling the history of jazz in the 1930s and '40s, they quickly discovered that

blues was not, in fact, a precursor to jazz, but rather, a parallel genre with a history of its own.

As New Orleans jazz of the twenties evolved into the big band and swing jazz of the 1930s and 1940s, European and American interests in African American music had greatly expanded. A crowd of young, middle-class whites in the 1940s had fallen in love with the up-tempo, swinging style of the big band jazz music that American jazz artists (Count Basie is a classic example) and emulating European and American musicians were performing in dance halls and performance theaters in the United States and across Europe. Yet some jazz fans found this new jazz to be a commercially exploited rendition of the older and more pure jazz hailing from New Orleans. This rift became evident as jazz scholars and enthusiasts of the period began writing about the fundamental differences between the two sounds and arguing for a return to the more traditional New Orleans style that had originated in Louisiana at the turn of the century but had been mostly recorded in Chicago during the 1920s.

These "traditionalists" argued, moreover, that real fans of jazz—unlike swing and big band devotees—should know

the history of jazz and its antecedents. Most of these scholars looked towards the blues as a precursor to New Orleans jazz, because of their many tonal and rhythmic similarities. As these traditionalists discovered the history of New Orleans jazz, however, they discovered that the blues, in fact, represented an entirely different genre. Big Bill Broonzy was an edifying link in their discovery. Part of Broonzy's memory then, is tied up in jazz writers' understandings of this distinction.

Broonzy's first appearance in a jazz-related publication happened in the 1940s, when his career was beginning to change from its black pop phase into his role as a representative of white folk culture. In 1946 Broonzy appeared in the Art Hodes-edited jazz magazine *The Jazz Record*, under a featured article titled "Baby Done Got Wise."¹⁴ Written by Broonzy, (the article does not mention any contributors) the article features a three-and-one-half page biography of the famed Chicago blues great.

Although the article begins with a brief description of Broonzy's childhood and introduction to music in

¹⁴ Big Bill Broonzy, "Baby I Done Got Wise," *The Jazz Record*, March 1946, 9;

Arkansas, the majority of the text focuses on Broonzy's important role in shaping Chicago's blues community. The piece offers detailed accounts of Broonzy's experiences navigating black Chicago's incredibly vibrant music scene by describing many of Broonzy's professional relationships as well as the recording companies he had worked for, the venues where he performed, and his experiences in New York as a "From Spirituals to Swing" alumnus. Moreover, the magazine offers anecdotal glimpses of Broonzy's experience in black Chicago, especially the often violent and unscrupulous world of Chicago's underground blues culture.

Essentially, the article reflects jazz enthusiasts' understanding of the development of Chicago's music scene and its deep connection to New Orleans jazz through an interview with one of its more successful artists. As jazz enthusiasts began studying and interpreting Broonzy's career, this idea remained at the core of their investigations. Their main interests resided within the jazz world that developed around Chicago's vibrant performance and recording culture and their often violent and licentious business practices. Like Lomax, Art Hodes was interested in the violent and exotic world that had

produced so many of these urban musicians, even going as far to print Broonzy's anecdote about a rent party that turned into a riotous affair featuring brandished knives, broken furniture, and stolen whiskey.¹⁵

Across the Atlantic Ocean, jazz writers were also discovering the importance of the blues' parallel path to jazz, and Broonzy became an invaluable voice in their expressions. As Broonzy toured Europe in the 1950s he befriended many European jazz critics and blues revivalists interested in his story. At every turn Broonzy tried his best to explain the parallel paths between jazz and blues. By doing so he met yet another close friend, Belgian jazz magazine editor and critic Yannick Bruynoghe, who would help Broonzy write his own autobiography in 1955, *Big Bill Blues*. For several years before 1955, Broonzy corresponded with Bruynoghe in a series of letters, sharing anecdotes, remembrances, and mementos from the past sixty-two years of his life, which the Belgian jazz then writer incorporated into a fascinating, yet limited portrait of a blues legend.

Organized into three chapters, the short book

¹⁵ Broonzy, "Baby I Done Got Wise," 10.

documents Broonzy's multifaceted life in all its splendor and hardship: his life in the South, his experience as a WWI veteran, his participation in the Great Migrations, his navigation of black Chicago and its music culture, his love of women and vice, his interpretations of race in the United States, his involvement in taking blues to Europe, his musical repertoire and influences. But such a broad stroke is undoubtedly filled with holes that have greatly affected Broonzy's historical legacy and the public's memory of him. Collectively, *Big Bill Blues* employs similar analytical devices as those used by folklorists like Lomax.

Examining the book as a whole, there are far more discussions and revelatory anecdotes about rural, southern life in the first two-thirds of the book than about black urban life in Chicago. Similar to the work of folklorists, Bruynoghe and Broonzy employ many devices demonstrating Broonzy's legitimacy and authenticity as a Mississippi bluesman. One reviewer finished the book wholly believing that Broonzy "was a country blues singer" whose "memories are charged with the everyday intimacy that belongs to

country life."¹⁶ Indeed, discussions of Jim Crow, white southerners, agriculture, southern culture, and southern labor run throughout chapters one and two. The majority of the text attempts to firmly plant Broonzy in the Mississippi Delta tradition by focusing on his early life and the creative impetus behind his prolific songwriting. Both folklorists and jazz enthusiasts of the 1950s, then, were committed to finding the next great authentic Mississippi Delta discovery, and both Broonzy and Bruynoghe seemed to understand that fact.

On page one of chapter one, Broonzy explains the importance of his story and the need for a printed work on his life. Broonzy argues:

The reason I'm writing this book is because I think that everybody would like to know the real truth about Negroes singing and playing in Mississippi. I'm one of the oldest still alive and I want everybody to know that we Mississippi musicians care just about our way of singing and playing as anyone else.¹⁷

Right away, the book opens with a revelation that seems

¹⁶ *New York Times*, November 4, 1956.

¹⁷ William Broonzy. *Big Bill Blues: William Broonzy's Story as told to Yannick Bruynoghe* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 29.

oddly ironic. First, Broonzy was born in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, in 1893, but moved outside of Little Rock at age eight, first to Langdale and then to Scott's Crossing, a small agricultural community located twenty miles outside of the state's capital.¹⁸ The fact that Broonzy describes himself as one of the last of a great line of Mississippi bluesmen is a direct reference to white folklorists and jazz enthusiasts' fascinations and interests of the period. More than any other subgenre of the blues, the vaunted Mississippi Delta style, associated with Delta luminaries such as Charlie Patton, Son House, and the legendary Robert Johnson, was becoming heavily popularized and sought after by folklorists, collectors, and enthusiasts because of its inherent "authentic" quality.¹⁹ The Mississippi Delta lineage, moreover, could be traced all the way to the then extremely popular and prevalent style of Chicago blues greats like Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf.

¹⁸ Alan Lomax Collection, Folder 09.04.10, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

¹⁹ John Hammond introduced Alan Lomax to Robert Johnson's "unpublished masters" in the late 1930s when he discovered the recordings working for CBS records. In 1939 Lomax found them again and began tracing Johnson's roots back to the Mississippi Delta. See Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Dell Pub., 1993), 13.

The first chapter, then, carries readers throughout Broonzy's life in the segregated US South, through war-torn Europe, and as a participant in the Great Migration, revealing his complex character and experience. More than just a pioneer of Chicago blues and veteran black musician Broonzy is then portrayed with an identity centered on his southern roots; the son of a slave and a free black, a country musician for possessive and controlling white land owners, a country preacher and family man, a veteran of the First World War, a southern migrant, a borderline alcoholic, a recording industry pioneer, and an urban laborer. For jazz scholars, too, Broonzy's experience reflected their current political and social viewpoints in the same manner as Alan Lomax. Their histories, however, while considering the racialized aspects of Broonzy's life, focused more predominantly on the music of the South and Broonzy's connection to its rich past. Both Bruynoghe and Broonzy understood their target audience and realized that firmly centering Broonzy's legacy in this way would solidify his importance to the history of Mississippi blues and African American vernacular music tradition. From the very beginning, the authors of *Big Bill Blues* constructed the book to cement the "truth" about blues from

Mississippi. Central to this approach is an examination of the Jim Crow South and the complex machinations of black Southerners' daily lives. With the stroke of a pen, the veteran Chicago blues entertainer and recording artist, whose southern musical heritage stemmed from Arkansas, became a Mississippi Delta bluesman!

Broonzy's autobiography was the first in-depth biographical study of any bluesman and an incredibly important piece of evidence establishing Broonzy's historical memory. By 1955, Broonzy was represented by the Mississippi Delta tradition and its connection to African American history, the black experience in America, and the culture disseminating from both elements. Bruynoghe's approach to organizing the autobiography around themes of the U.S. South reflect larger trends in the American history and social sciences that were rewriting the history of African Americans and their culture during the period.²⁰

²⁰ Towering African American intellectuals including W.E.B. Du Bois, Carter G Woodson, E. Franklin Frazier, Booker T. Washington, and others, began writing about the importance of African American culture beginning in the first three decades of the twentieth century. White intellectual circles, however, did not quite engage these elements until the 1940s with the appearance Mellville J. Herskovits highly controversial, *The Myth of the Negro Past*

As new audiences of jazz enthusiasts in Europe began understanding African American culture, Bruynoghe knew that investigating the nuances of life in the Jim Crow South would make Broonzy's story all the more compelling by adding dangerous and provocative elements of black music's past and Mississippi roots.

But *Big Bill Blues* offers more than just an investigation into jazz and blues critics' widespread interest in the Mississippi Delta blues tradition. It also emphasizes his political ideology. Throughout his long career Broonzy had composed some of the most openly anti-racist music of the twentieth century. Bruynoghe's song selection suggests that he understood the audience of white blues and jazz enthusiasts who would be interested in reading an autobiography about Broonzy and, therefore, offer examinations of Broonzy's then current phase as a vanguard of the blues-as-folk tradition. At this point in his career Broonzy had returned to the solo male blues style of the 1920s and early 1930s that had been re-popularized by jazz traditionalists who saw this style as

in 1941. By the 1960s, American historians began rewriting the history of the African American experience.

proto-jazz and by folklorists who saw this early acoustic solo blues as an embodiment of black folk music. Roberta Schwartz has argued that "Broonzy's reception as a representative of the early, primitive blues required some selective memory on the part of critics, collectors and cognoscenti," suggesting that this new audience chose to ignore Broonzy's career as a jazz-tinged blues crooner.²¹ That was the Broonzy Bruynoghe's target audience wanted and expected, and he was willing to give it to them even if it masked other important phases of Broonzy's long career.

In the second chapter "My Songs," for instance, the book analyzes more than fifteen songs, including "Big Bill Blues," "When Do I Get to be Called a Man," "WPA Rag," "Looking Up at Down," "Black, Brown, and White." Here Bruynoghe's interest in his political music shine through, as he seemed to have selected the majority of Broonzy's most political songs. "When Do I Get To Be Called a Man" and "Black, Brown, and White," for example, were highly

²¹ Roberta Freund Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues: The Transmission of American Blues Style in the United Kingdom* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007), 40.

evocative for their direct commentary and criticism of racism in the United States.

What is so striking is the limited glimpse of Broonzy's vast and broad repertoire offered by Bruynoghe's chapter. By the 1950s he had written and recorded hundreds of songs. The songs in the chapter were carefully selected to represent Broonzy's then current image as a folk vanguard, steeped in Mississippi's country blues tradition.²² Moreover, the chapter offers no discussion of the jazz-tinged blues and tin-pan alley songs of the interwar period with their often obscenely sexual and openly misogynistic lyrics such as 1936's "Horny Frog" blues or 1938's "Flat Foot Susie and her Flat Yes Yes" that Broonzy had recorded by the dozens for some of the country's most successful record labels.²³

Big Bill Blues like Lomax's *The Land Where the Blues Began* also suggests that Broonzy's otherness—mainly his

²² Big Bill Broonzy, *Amsterdam Live Concerts 1953: Unissued Live Concerts Recorded by Louis Van Gasteren*. Munich Records compact disc 275; *1955 London Sessions*. Silverline digital video audio 187N; *The Bill Broonzy Story*, 1960 UMG Recordings, Inc.

²³See Big Bill Broonzy ARC Records number 7-05-07 and Columbia Records number 30135.

affable and outgoing personality and his large size—had safely guided the bluesmen through difficult environments and situations. Bruynoghe implied that Broonzy's physical presence defined him and guided his survival, suggesting, moreover, that he was as imposing physically as he was emotionally and intellectually. Broonzy's personality and physical presence, then, helped Bruynoghe's *Big Bill Blues* clarify how Broonzy commanded respect and formed lucrative relationships within Chicago's blues community.

What was it about Broonzy's physical presence that affected those who wrote about him? Of course, Broonzy was large and was addressed affectionately among his peers in Chicago and across the country as "Big Bill." Part of Broonzy's identity and moniker, moreover, was his instantly recognizable size within his community. But such a strong emphasis on his physical presence masks his intellectual prowess as a successful navigator of twentieth century American vernacular culture.

With chapter three, despite the autobiography's strong focus on Broonzy's southern roots and Mississippi Delta lineage, Bruynoghe demonstrates a personal interest in urban blues life. Although the first two chapters of *Big*

Bill Blues reveal Bruynoghe's intrinsic interest in Broonzy's songwriting and the driving forces behind the affable bluesman's creative genius, Bruynoghe was equally interested in investigating an "unknown Chicagoan world" and the dozens of relationships Broonzy had made within Chicago's blues culture.²⁴ Chapter three, then, reveals the scores of friendships Broonzy had fostered throughout his long career as an active participant in the Windy City's blues community. The chapter, moreover, and its focus on the relationships Broonzy established as a pioneer of urban, Chicago blues, contradicts the overall theme of the autobiography by demonstrating that Chicago had really sustained Broonzy's identity.

In a haphazard and non-chronological manner, Broonzy and Bruynoghe provide rich details of the black blues' world that jazz enthusiasts and blues revivalists in the United States and Europe so desperately wanted to understand. To Bruynoghe, a jazz writer and critic, the blues was a key component to a complete understanding of jazz, and if Broonzy could reveal vague elements of the

²⁴ Sinclair Traill and Gerald Lascelles, ed., *Just Jazz* 2 (London: Peter Davis, 1958), 67.

blues' (as well as hokum and boogie-woogie) underworld and recording culture in Chicago, then perhaps he could gain a better understanding of American jazz. After all, Chicago was the epicenter of the recorded New Orleans jazz that had initially drawn these jazz enthusiasts into the investigating the blues. The chapter briefly discusses the blues clubs, dance halls, rent parties, recording studios, and social gatherings that made Broonzy and Chicago synonymous with blues culture.

Rather than describe the structure of Chicago's blues culture, Bruynoghe offers interesting vignettes of Broonzy's relationships with Chicago blues celebrities like Tampa Red, Memphis Slim, Sonny Boy Williamson, Memphis Minnie Douglas, Lillian Green, Lonnie Johnson, Maceo Meriwether, Sleepy John Estes, and many others. Ultimately, the chapter presented whimsical and limited glimpses into the day-to-day operations of performance, recording, rehearsal, and musicians' lifestyles.

In rich sentimental detail, Broonzy described to Bruynoghe the physical and emotional characteristics of each of his closest friends, suggesting that they had remained alive in his mind long after their deaths. This

further ensured that readers could directly relate to his unique experience. Rising from the surface of these mementos, moreover, are Broonzy's personal reactions to the evolving Chicago blues community, the death of his friends, the long hours he spent traveling around the country, and the incredible value he placed on his friendships. The stylistic nuances of this section read more like a memoir than an analytical and informative investigation. Collectively, Bruynoghe presents Broonzy's blues world in Chicago as one of passion, danger, creativity, humor, camaraderie, and exuberance, fused with a highly exotic, folksy, if not romanticized depiction of the world of Chicago blues.

Indeed, Bruynoghe visited the Windy City in 1957 shortly after the book's publication. He had visited at a time when the dangerous throat operation intended to remove the cancer in Broonzy's neck had left the bluesman nearly voiceless. Nevertheless, when he arrived Bruynoghe found Broonzy as cheerful and warm as ever, despite his ailing voice. Bruynoghe recalled:

My first call in town was of course to Big Bill. I could not recognize the voice at the other end of the wire. It was Bill, after the operation that mutilated

his vocal chords. A few hours later I was at his flat, located on South Parkway, just opposite the Regal Theatre. Fortunately, Bill is physically unchanged; just as wonderful and young looking as ever, and in excellent spirits. A short while later, some other guests joined the party: Little Brother Montgomery, Memphis Slim, his wife and four kids, and Tampa Red.²⁵

With Big Bill Broonzy as his tour guide, Bruynoghe was able to venture into "rather rough" Chicago neighborhoods and step behind the velvet ropes of blues clubs like Silvio's, Ricky's Show Lounge, The 708, the Green Door, and Smithy's.²⁶ Through his correspondence with Broonzy, the Belgian jazz writer had been introduced to a world that seemed unimaginable: a place where all of his blues and jazz heroes mingled openly in the city. Bruynoghe was mesmerized as he shook hands and watched the performances of Broonzy's friends like Little Walter, Howlin' Wolf, and Muddy Waters and marveled at the seemingly exotic world these blues royalties took part in.²⁷

Unlike folklorists' socially and politically driven investigations, Bruynoghe clearly was interested in

²⁵ Traill and Lascelles, ed., *Just Jazz Vol. 2*, 69.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 67-76.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Broonzy's community and his importance to black Chicago's music culture. He recognized that Broonzy had unparalleled knowledge that could differentiate the blues that Bruynoghe was discovering from the jazz world with which he was familiar. Chapter three, therefore, recognized Broonzy's importance to black blues and black audiences. But Bruynoghe's interests in black Chicago was employed as a device that unveiled his keen interest in the "otherness" associated with the more exotic elements of black Chicago's rough and tawdry blues culture. The chapter, moreover, moves the reader away from the Mississippi front porches, country picnics, barrelhouses, and juke joints that were the centers of performance for Delta bluesmen like Son House, Robert Johnson, or Skip James.

Big Bill Blues reveals an exotic blues world full of black blues for black audiences with rent parties, theater and club performances, recording studios, and talent competitions in a city where African Americans were free to consume alcohol at Negro League baseball games and fish in Lake Michigan.²⁸ To be sure, Chicago was home to virulent racism and *de facto* segregation. And Broonzy may have been

²⁸ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 116-18; 122-23.

a "country bluesman," born in Mississippi and raised in farm communities around Little Rock, but by 1955 he had lived in Chicago for thirty years. Trying to label Broonzy as a Mississippi Delta bluesman is as contradictory as labeling Robert Johnson as a Chicago bluesman because he performed and recorded "Sweet Home Chicago."

The final pages of the autobiography's epilogue suggest that Broonzy held his own ideas about the public's memory of him, and he wanted the book to be the key for unlocking his importance to future generations. Broonzy writes:

As for me, I would love to pick up a book and read a story about Big Bill Broonzy. I wouldn't care if it's just a story about how I live or how drunk I was the last time that they saw Big Bill...But when you write about me, please don't say I'm a jazz musician. Don't say I'm a musician or a guitar player - just write that Big Bill was a well-known blues singer and player and has recorded 260 blues songs from 1925 up till 1952.²⁹

As much as Broonzy may have wanted to steer his own public memory in a particular direction in the early 1950s,

²⁹ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 151-52.

individuals who held their own understandings of his importance were quickly crafting his legacy and he knew it.

Big Bill Blues' epilogue documents Bruynoghe's decision to reveal Broonzy's frustration with how black vernacular music enthusiasts and folklorists had portrayed Broonzy's legacy. Bruynoghe's choice to include Broonzy's lament, moreover, seems to contradict his own work, given the context of the autobiography. The language is clear and direct. Broonzy does not want to be remembered as a "jazz musician," as European enthusiasts understood him. Nor does he want to be remembered as a "musician or a guitar player" in the way that white American folklorists had intended.³⁰ Rather, Broonzy wishes to be remembered as a "blues singer and player," who, above all, was creatively and commercially successful for nearly thirty years. He wants to be remembered as a good friend who had helped pioneer Chicago blues and was "liked by all the blues singers."³¹ Throughout the epilogue, fascinatingly titled "Envoi," Broonzy chose his words carefully. In effect, Bruynoghe was addressing several key elements that were shaping Broonzy's

³⁰ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 151-152.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 151

career and memory at that moment. Through their close correspondence Broonzy convinced Bruynoghe that how Broonzy lived was just as interesting and important to history as his career in music.³²

First published in 1955 in London by Casell, the autobiography received republication rights in Brussels and Paris, and again in London in 1957, as part of the Jazz Book Club series.³³ *Big Bill Blues* was marketed as a jazz-related European publication for almost a decade. Essentially, Broonzy's autobiography represented a study of what Europeans understood as an element of the larger jazz spectrum.

As jazz writers dug deeper into the history of the blues, they slowly began to change the focus of their investigations by recognizing the blues as a distinct genre deserving attention independent of jazz. Blues writing, then, began to gain significant popularity because jazz writers started abandoning investigations linking blues to jazz in favor of positioning the blues as a separate genre

³² Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 151.

³³ Robert Ford, *A Blues Bibliography* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 179.

altogether. This transition marked a significant shift in how the blues was beginning to be understood and marketed. A new generation of blues revivalists began to challenge the idea that the blues was a backwater derivation of traditional jazz. The successful studies of former jazz traditionalists now turned blues "revivalists" like Sam Charters' *The Country Blues*, Paul Oliver's *Blues Fell this Morning*, and others, seemed to suggest that the moment was right for Bruynoghe to update the autobiography for an American edition of *Big Bill Blues* that firmly planted Broonzy within the "country" blues tradition.

Oak Publications in New York printed the American edition in 1964, six years after Broonzy's death.³⁴ The American edition is fascinating in that Bruynoghe felt forced to address critical issues arising from the first jazz-based edition. Blues revivalists were beginning to approach the blues in a wholly different manner than Bruynoghe had attempted with Broonzy. Indeed, the blues'

³⁴ A revised American edition first emerged in 1964 with an expanded introduction by producer Charles Edward Smith, a new foreword by Bruynoghe, and an up-to-date discography of Broonzy's recorded works. See Big Bill Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues: William Broonzy's Story as Told to Yannick Bruynoghe* (New York: Oak Pub., 1964).

increasing literary audience and growing intellectual community were beginning to expect high standards for investigations of the blues. Jazz critics, scholars, and readers, moreover, had convinced the autobiography's ghostwriter, that Big Bill Broonzy may have not told Bruynoghe the complete truth in their series of correspondence. To this Bruynoghe quips:

More than being the truth about the blues, [Big Bill Blues] is the truth about a man whose psychology it perfectly reflects. This man having been one of the great blues representatives of this time, it is also his truth about the period and all that made his life and his blues.³⁵

In response to these questions Bruynoghe corroborated new evidence and footnotes in the American edition, especially concerning the dates of Broonzy's recordings, the age of his friends, and Broonzy's birth date. Rather than viewing Broonzy as a smart and savvy self-promoter, these additions reveal Broonzy as someone who was subjective with his past and willing to embellish his history for a new audience. More important, the 1964 edition offers a new fourteen-page foreword meant to stand as a brief and objective biography

³⁵ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, "Introduction to the American Edition," 9.

documenting Broonzy's fascinating life and career in hope of providing a similar analytical framework offered by other published blues studies.

Bruynoghe employed jazz critic, Folkways record producer, and *New York Times* reviewer, Charles Edward Smith, to fully illustrate Broonzy's long career in the American edition's foreword. For his new introduction, Smith cements Broonzy's historical memory with analysis rooted in African American history, ethnomusicology, and the history of the blues. To be sure, Smith situates Broonzy firmly within the realm of the then popular "country blues" by deciphering his rural roots and demonstrating how they translated into the evolution of the blues in Chicago.³⁶ Yet, most of Smith's documented sources rely on the same published works of jazz critics and folklorists who interviewed Broonzy throughout the 1940s and 1950s. These resources, moreover, should be

³⁶ Charles Edward Smith was an esteemed early jazz critic and record producer with strong ties to Moses Asch and Folkways Records. See Charles Edward Smith and Frederic Ramsey, Jr. *Jazzmen* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1939); Tony Olmstead, *Folkways Records: Moses Asch and His Encyclopedia of Sound* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Bruce Boyd Raeburn, *New Orleans Style and the Writing of Jazz History* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009).

contextualized within Broonzy's experience and audience of that specific phase of his career.³⁷ For example, many of Smith's conclusions falsely dismiss Broonzy's early commercial success among black audiences and the race record industry in Chicago.

Essentially, Charles Edward Smith's introduction to the American edition negates the earlier periods of Broonzy's career even stating that Broonzy "was hardly known outside the ground floor operation of the 'Rhythm and Blues,'" that had defined Broonzy's "Big Bill" black pop identity.³⁸ Smith also argues that only in 1939, when he appeared at Carnegie Hall's "From Spirituals to Swing" concert, did "blues and jazz enthusiasts" recognize Broonzy's "[u]nforgettable" talent as one of the "great

³⁷ Outside of the advertisements marketing blues records in black newspapers, Broonzy's name does not appear as part of a featured story until 1938 and 1939 when he appeared at Carnegie Hall. See H. Howard Taubman "Negro Music Given at Carnegie Hall," *New York Times*, December 24, 1938; *Baltimore Afro-American*, "Spiritual Swing at Carnegie Hall," Dec 2, 1939; *Chicago Defender*, "From Spirituals to Swing to be Heard," Dec 9, 1939; Gama Gilbert, "TAC Jazz Session at Carnegie Hall," *New York Times*, December 25, 1939; Billy Rowe, "Broadway in Glowing Tribute to Negro Music," *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 6, 1940.

³⁸ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 13.

country blues singers."³⁹ Only upon his discovery by whites, moreover, did his career and music become recognizably important. This element of "discovery," therefore, is critical for understanding folklorists, blues revivalists, and jazz enthusiasts' approach to studying black vernacular music. Moreover, it serves as key evidence for the perpetuation of what one scholar has called the "cult of authenticity."⁴⁰

In reality, by 1939 Big Bill Broonzy had recorded dozens of songs, lent songwriting and accompaniment to countless others, and recorded with scores of blues luminaries in Chicago and New York. In fact, by 1939, Broonzy could be described as a seasoned performer within black Chicago's rent party, blues club, and black theater circuits. He was not, as Smith suggests, an unknown entity. But as jazz scholars pushed the boundaries for new audiences of black blues, Broonzy's music remained popular to a certain degree, even if it resembled the blues as folk element of the folk music revival and even if it omitted earlier stages of his long career. The evidence Smith does

³⁹ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 14.

⁴⁰ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 49.

provide of Broonzy's identity, success, and popularity among black audiences in the 1950s was long after the height of Broonzy's popularity in black Chicago.⁴¹

Smith and Bruynoghe were only beginning to understand that the blues represented a parallel musical genre with a history and ethnomusicology of its own. The country blues featured on the highly coveted recordings of the late twenties and early thirties was only one phase of blues' history. Their collective investigations, moreover, reflect a tendency to highlight white European and American discovery and reactions to the blues culture. Their studies represent mainstream white culture's discovery of an African American vernacular tradition rather than understanding these discoveries on their own terms. In reality, the blues was originally constructed, performed, and marketed as black music for black audiences. And like all audiences, the aesthetic tastes of African Americans continually evolved.

The literature of this period shows that European jazz enthusiasts and emerging blues revivalists were equally

⁴¹ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 11-12.

attracted to Broonzy's otherness, especially as his career evolved from the forties to the fifties. Article after article in European jazz and blues magazines in the 1950s retell the same stories and anecdotes covered in the autobiography and from Lomax's work. Through Broonzy, folklorists and jazz scholars and the respective communities they served discovered that race, the U.S. South, and the African American experience were inextricably linked to the blues, its culture, and African American history. This added a new element to Broonzy's "otherness."

By the time that folklorists and jazz enthusiasts discovered Broonzy in the 1950s, Broonzy understood this paradigm well—the connection between the blues, American racism, and African American history—and he discussed these elements almost as easily as he performed his music. Ultimately, then, a large part of Broonzy's historical memory is tied to revelations concerning the connection between African American vernacular music and race in the United States.

By the 1950s, moreover, Broonzy's absorption into a white American and European folk music and jazz enthusiast

culture, which viewed Broonzy as a link to their understanding of African American vernacular music traditions and the African American experience, began to contradict his own sense of historical significance. Throughout the 1950s, jazz magazines and journals from Europe frequently interviewed Broonzy.⁴² Posthumous biographical articles and anecdotes from these magazines followed throughout the 1960s. By that point, the blues that Broonzy loved so much had become an integral part of explaining the history of folk music in the South and of jazz then popularized in Chicago and New York. Broonzy's public memory was being constructed in a way that firmly planted him in the last stage of his career.

As blues scholarship began to solidify as a field in its own right, the picture of Broonzy began to become more nuanced. One of the first authors to address the dialectic between the last stage of Broonzy's identity as a folk artist and his popularity as an urban African American bluesman among black audiences was Folkways Records field

⁴² Robert Ford's *A Blues Bibliography* contains approximately 160 entries on Big Bill Broonzy alone. Dozens of the entries are from European jazz publications. Robert Ford, *A Blues Bibliography* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 178-82.

researcher, jazz writer, and burgeoning blues historian, Samuel Barclay Charters.⁴³ Charters explains:

There were two Big Bills. There was the Big Bill who described himself as "a well-known blues singer and player and has recorded 260 blues songs up till 1952," and there was the Big Bill who could stand up at a concert stage and sing work songs he'd learned from phonograph records and back country blues he'd picked up from books on country music, and fascinate the audience just talking about himself. They were both the same man, but one was a singer entertaining a Negro audience and the other was a man entertaining a white audience.⁴⁴

Charters' groundbreaking study of what he describes as "country blues" attempts to trace the emergence of rural African American music in the southern U.S. as it evolved from a "rich confusion of music from the fields" into a

⁴³ Sam Charters was initially a jazz enthusiast and historian who in his early twenties moved to New Orleans in the 1950s to conduct field research for a book on jazz see Samuel B. Charters, *Jazz in New Orleans: An Index to the Negro Musicians of New Orleans*. (Belleville, NJ: Walter C. Allen, 1958). Like his European counterparts, however, Charters quickly discovered that the blues was a parallel genre to jazz and was still popular in the African American South. He abandoned jazz all together after his first book to concentrate on the blues and his fieldwork and analysis of recordings comprised the classic *The Country Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1959)

⁴⁴, 179.

popularly recorded "fabric of Negro life itself."⁴⁵ First published in 1959, Charters' work examines the lives of several vanguards of the country blues tradition including Blind Lemon Jefferson, Leroy Carr, Lonnie Johnson, Robert Johnson and one chapter on popular Chicago bluesmen "Big Bill Broonzy."⁴⁶

Charters situates Broonzy's history within the evolution of the blues as an artist emerging out of the reorganization of the record industry following the catastrophic collapse during the Great Depression. Charters introduces Broonzy as a key element of a newly developing style in Chicago and described him as "one of the most prolific blues artists the record business had ever seen."⁴⁷ Rather than trying to cement Broonzy within the Mississippi Delta lineage as folklorists and jazz researchers attempted, Charters understood that Broonzy belonged in a completely different category. In roughly four pages of text, *Country Blues* traces Broonzy's

⁴⁵ Charters, *The Country Blues*, 19.

⁴⁶ Charters, *The Country Blues*, 166-81. In 1931, Big Bill recorded his very first solo tracks "Station Blues" and "How You Want it Done" for Paramount Records 13084 and they mistakenly titled the record Big Bill Broonzy.

⁴⁷ Charters, *The Country Blues*, 169.

transformation between 1927 and 1947 from a "blues shouter in the grand tradition"[solo male blues artist] to a "strutting" and "ingratiating" blues crooner, prolific songwriter and leader of "four-and five piece jazz and swing bands" ["Big Bill," urban blues pioneer].⁴⁸ To be sure, Charter's recognized that Broonzy represented a newer and smarter urban blues musician filled with "bitterness and cynicism" brought on by life in the city.⁴⁹

Country Blues argues that Broonzy was an important component of urban blues culture in Chicago whose success stemmed from his navigation of a newly emerging blues world and changing audiences. Charters' seemed aghast at the bifurcated nature of Broonzy's legacy. Indeed, Broonzy's autobiography clearly resonated within white folk and European jazz culture in its selective memory of Broonzy's commercial success in the 1930s and 1940s.

Despite this groundbreaking approach to Broonzy's public memory, Charters shares culpability with other culture brokers and stewards of Broonzy's historical memory

⁴⁸ Charters, *The Country Blues*, 172-75.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 176.

by limiting Broonzy, and other artists for that matter, in a generalized category known as "country blues." Charters' book, after all, is the first systematic study of the blues and its history as a whole, and it sparked an enormous wave of research in a then fledgling field. Yet *Country Blues* errantly places Broonzy in a subgenre of the blues known as the "country blues" that cannot encompass his entire career. Even if Charters recognized the many phases of Broonzy's four-phased musical identity, his positioning of Broonzy within this blues subgenre ultimately added to other culture brokers' ignorance of the more commercial stage of Broonzy's career and its importance to black audiences.

Studies of the blues during the late fifties and early sixties launched an enormous wave of interest in the blues as a separate and identifiable genre, independent of jazz.⁵⁰ Scholars like Charters and Paul Oliver pushed blues out of the jazz idiom and into a subject of inquiry all its own. Yet this generation of scholarship focused strongly on the

⁵⁰ Samuel Charters, *The Country Blues*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1959); Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (London: Cassell, 1960); LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William and Morrow, 1963)

Deep South and the early solo male blues style Broonzy had recorded in the twenties, essentially ignoring the evolving nature of the blues and its audience. Beginning in the late 1970s, however, scholars of the blues began rewriting the blues' importance to the larger narrative of American history and changed its static focus on the blues' early period by discussing its evolution as a genre.

The first full treatment of Broonzy as an incredibly important representative of Chicago blues for black audiences was published in 1973. Veteran British blues scholar and *Blues Unlimited* editor Mike Rowe offered blues enthusiasts a full-fledged treatment of Chicago's rich blues culture in his *Chicago Break Down*. In a little more than two hundred pages, employing methodology rooted in social history, Rowe documented the history of Chicago blues from its fledgling stage in the late 1920s through the 1960s when blues' popularity began to decline among black audiences. Central to Rowe's understanding of Chicago blues is his assertion that "the nature of the blues is always the result of the mood of the black masses"

and, more specifically, a “commercial interpretation of that feeling.”⁵¹

Chicago Breakdown appropriately places Broonzy as a central figure of Chicago blues from the 1920s until his death in 1958. Rather than offering individual analysis of Chicago’s blues greats, the city and the scene serve as the central characters in Rowe’s narrative. Although Rowe contextualizes African American migrants’ southern roots on a macro level, *Chicago Break Down* focuses on Broonzy’s navigation of Chicago’s uniquely urban blues culture in a wholly different manner.

Rowe’s investigation into Broonzy’s navigation of the city’s rent parties, recording companies, blues clubs, dance halls, and performance theaters negated the “otherness”—the racism, danger, poverty, sexuality, physicality—offered by folklorists and jazz writers by placing Broonzy within a distinct and culturally important community. Broonzy, in Rowe’s hands, for the first time becomes an important architect and leader in Chicago’s blues community.

⁵¹ Mike Rowe, *Chicago Break Down* (New York: Drake Pub., 1975), 15.

For example, Rowe, on more than one occasion, introduces Broonzy as a key figure for guiding young blues musicians' navigation of the blues community. More than just an exotic world that Broonzy had luckily survived, the city's blues community had given Broonzy an identity as a man, as a musician, and as a performer. Throughout the text, Rowe indicates that Broonzy's "ingratiating exuberance" propelled him to become one of the most important vanguards for up and coming bluesmen of the period including Little Walter, Jimmy Rodgers, J.B. Lenoir, and Muddy Waters.⁵² Rowe offers a new component of Broonzy's public memory—his role in successfully providing a pathway to other African American musicians through mentorship and example.

For instance, Rowe reveals an anecdote involving Arkansas migrant and blues musician, Floyd Jones, who had been protected by Broonzy's intricate knowledge of the community. Jones had recently arrived in Chicago in 1945 and had become a regular performer on Maxwell Street. By 1945, Broonzy was an esteemed veteran of the community, and frequently visited Maxwell Street's scene where he had once

⁵² Rowe, *Chicago Break Down*, 40-78.

paid his dues. Floyd Jones had recently written and recorded a song about a labor strike at the Union Stockyards and the difficulties of city life. Broonzy witnessed Jones' impressive street performance of the new hit and instantly recognized the song's potential. Further, Broonzy understood quite well that Maxwell Street and Chicago's blues culture could be ruthless and he suggested to the young bluesman "you better play with me or somebody's going to take it."⁵³ Through this anecdote, Rowe reveals Broonzy's importance to Chicago's blues community and younger musicians and his significance among African Americans eager to follow in his footsteps.

Perhaps more than any other group, the generation of younger musicians affected by Broonzy's music has affected his public memory. Jeff Beck and Eric Clapton, for example, have both perceived Broonzy as an enormous influence on their introductions to the blues, therefore depicting Broonzy as an integral link to the pantheon of black blues artists with connections to British rock. More than the investigations of folklore, jazz, and blues researchers,

⁵³ Rowe, *Chicago Break Down*, 59.

this element of Broonzy's history is perhaps the most important component of his popular memory.

When Muddy Waters first arrived in Europe in October 1958, he was amazed to find how popular Big Bill had become among English audiences and how far removed they were from the changing form of Chicago blues of the period. British audiences expected to hear an acoustic guitar and Broonzy's smooth voice singing songs about plowing fields and damaging plantation floods as he shared anecdotes of his rural past. The folklorists, jazz traditionalists, and blues revivalists in Britain had only introduced their English audiences to Broonzy's older solo male blues style then established within the folk music culture in the United States.⁵⁴ Muddy Waters and his band, however, were far removed from folk music. With a white Fender electric guitar and Otis Spann's billowing piano rhythms, Waters' pulsating first performances must have perplexed British audiences. The electrified, percussive, and wailing Delta

⁵⁴ Alan Lomax, for example, had broadcast *Blues in the Mississippi Night* in February of 1951 on a program titled *Adventures in Folk Song* for the BBC. The following year jazz aficionado Max Jones featured Broonzy on a jazz program for the BBC called *Jazz Club*. See Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 45-46.

guitar sound was light-years removed from Broonzy's folk-blues. Waters candidly admitted that British audiences mistakenly thought he "was a Big Bill Broonzy."⁵⁵ To British audiences, Broonzy had become an icon for black American blues. He represented the last of a great line of blues singers and his music defined the blues and its history.

Muddy equally paid respects to his mentor by fulfilling Chess Records' desire to fill the folk music void caused by Broonzy's death. In fact he offered his first full-length LP as a posthumous tribute to his mentor covering ten of Broonzy's most popular songs in Broonzy's folk-blues signature style.⁵⁶ Waters chose many of the songs Broonzy recorded between 1939 and 1950 including "When I Get to Drinking," "Hey, Hey," and the song Broonzy

⁵⁵Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied*, 158.

⁵⁶ Chess Records became eager to tap into the wave of posthumous fanfare erupting after Broonzy's death, hiring Muddy Waters to record covers of Broonzy's popular folk-blues songs. Both Benjamin Filene and Robert Gordon have aptly discussed the irony in Waters' regressive transformation from the king of Chicago electric blues to Muddy Waters as folk singer. See Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 119-120, and Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied*, 164. To push their analysis further, Waters and Broonzy had been close friends for over fifteen years, and had established a mentor/mentee relationship, and this relationship was as strong personally as it was professionally.

had offered the "From Spirituals to Swing" Crowd, "Just a Dream."⁵⁷ Essentially, the song selections covered blues as folk style as Broonzy's career transitioned into its last phase. Yet the Waters tribute reflected Waters' emerging Chicago sounds as much as it did the blues as folk music of Broonzy. The formulaic "country" piano sound was featured, but so too was the wailing harmonica and up-tempo percussive beats of Water's signature sound.

Nevertheless, no single blues musician has had more influence over Big Bill Broonzy's public memory than Muddy Waters. In a sense their two careers are enmeshed and a large part of the success of Muddy Waters stems from Big Bill Broonzy. Broonzy mentored Waters as the young migrant began navigating Chicago's blues culture. He guided Waters through the machinations of the city's blues world when Muddy arrived in the early 1940s and brokered important introductions, in the same manner that Charlie Jackson, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Blind Blake had done for Broonzy years before. More importantly, Broonzy provided Waters a template to follow that allowed Muddy to

⁵⁷ Muddy Waters, *Muddy Waters Sings Big Bill Broonzy*, Chess Records number 1444.

pursue his musical career. Waters' biographer, Robert Gordon has argued:

For decades Big Bill's character resonated with Muddy. "You done made hits, you got a big name, the little fellow ain't nothing," Muddy said in the 1970s about the star attitude. "But Big Bill, he didn't care where you were from. He didn't look over you cause he been on records a long time. 'Do your thing, stay with it, man. If you stay with it, you going to make it.' That's what Big Bill told me. Mostly I try to be like him."⁵⁸

A famous photograph from the 1940s reveals a smiling Big Bill leaning on the shoulder of a young and nervously excited Muddy Waters.⁵⁹ Broonzy had helped Waters with gigs in Chicago and as Broonzy's career waned Muddy reciprocated, lending opening slots to Broonzy as often as he could. Even as Broonzy navigated new European audiences he spoke highly of Waters, telling blues revivalists in Great Britain that Waters was an authentic representative of the Mississippi Delta tradition.⁶⁰ When Waters arrived England in 1958 Broonzy had helped establish his celebrity

⁵⁸ Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied*, 73.

⁵⁹ *Living Blues* founder and editor Jim O'Neal captured this very famous photograph in the mid-1940s. See Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied*, 204.

⁶⁰ Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 56.

there before he arrived.⁶¹

Despite Muddy and Broonzy's relationship, white European musicians discovering the blues would hold even more influence over Broonzy than Broonzy's own protégé. They ensured that Broonzy's public memory would remain in the last phase of his career. A new generation of white English musicians had heard Broonzy on BBC radio and had even seen him on British television. Eventually, they would push rock music to a worldwide audience, but one of their first blues discoveries was the acoustic folk blues of Big Bill Broonzy. Broonzy's musicianship, especially his guitar playing, seemed to captivate a young white British audience. Jeff Beck, the eccentric lead guitarist of British rock groups the Yardbirds, and the Jeff Beck Group, understood Broonzy's importance to the history of the blues and its connection to rock music. Beck recalled:

My interest in blues began when the Chicago blues albums began to reach England. I grabbed them. Muddy Waters, Buddy Guy ... I think their just great. There's a special way the guitars sound: sort of tinny and rough. The Chicago sound—it's like nothing else. I was listening to Big Bill Broonzy trying to accompany himself, and I loved that thumping crudeness and the stomping foot. It's the kind of guitar playing that

⁶¹ Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 56; Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied*, 157-59.

sounded crude until you tried to play it—you know what I mean? Then I went backwards—I went back to the Deep South, the blues, Cajun music.⁶²

Beck's description of Broonzy's style as crude and the emphasis placed on the stomping foot connotes a sense of primitiveness that had been associated with the Big Bill Broonzy John Hammond had featured at the "From Spirituals to Swing." Jeff Beck, in fact, was describing Broonzy's then current identity as the folk blues performer represented in England during the latter phase of his career. Throughout the period Broonzy was marketed across the United Kingdom as the last of the great Mississippi bluesmen. In 1955, for example, Broonzy appeared on a British public television show *Downbeat*, as a self-accompanied blues performer singing to an audience in a dimly lit nightclub.⁶³

⁶² Anette Carson, *Jeff Beck: Crazy Fingers* (San Francisco, Backbeat Books, 2001), 19.

⁶³ Roger Randolph House, *Blue Smoke: The Recorded Journey of Big Bill Broonzy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 143; House also analyzes images from a 1956 Belgian film (*Low Lights, Blues Smoke*) featuring Broonzy in a dimly lit cellar club in Brussels. See House, xiv.

Beck's reflections, moreover, suggest another component of Broonzy's public memory that moves beyond his image as a popular recording artist, folk hero, or proto-jazz performer. Beck and many others were drawn to Broonzy because of his unparalleled skill as a guitarist. Nearly all of the culture brokers discussing Broonzy's life and career have tended to focus on his personal history, his race conscious, the connections he held within the blues world, and his storytelling and stage presence. Through his connection to young British rock musicians, Broonzy emerges as one of the best and most influential guitarists of the twentieth century and a critical link to the development of rock music.

British guitar legend Eric Clapton first discovered Broonzy in the same manner, and once suggested that he, too, believed Broonzy was "the main man."⁶⁴ Clapton recognized Broonzy's impeccable guitar talent as he toured Europe in the 1950s and because Broonzy was "so ready available during" the period.⁶⁵ In a sense, Broonzy's music

⁶⁴ Eric Clapton, *Clapton: The Autobiography* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007), 30.

helped Clapton find his own identity as he grew as a musician and fan of the blues. Like Jeff Beck, Clapton was drawn to the same raw folk blues style that Broonzy exhibited throughout the 1950s:

I saw a clip of him [Broonzy] on TV, playing in a nightclub, lit by the light from a single lightbulb, swinging in its shade from the ceiling, creating an eerie lighting effect. The tune he was playing was called "Hey, Hey," and it knocked me out. It's a complicated guitar piece, full of blue notes, which are what you get by splitting a major and minor note. You usually start with the minor and then bend the note up toward the major, so it's somewhere between the two...When I first heard Big Bill...I became convinced that all rock 'n' roll—and pop music too, for that matter—had sprung from this root.⁶⁶

Broonzy helped Clapton discover the roots of the music that he loved, and Clapton employed Broonzy's influence to mesh the blues into the British rock music he helped pioneer in the 1960s.

In 1992 Clapton released one of the highest grossing albums of his lengthy and prestigious career, *Eric Clapton Unplugged*. Recorded live in Great Britain for an *MTV*

⁶⁵ Jann Werner, "Eric Clapton," in Pete Herbs ed., *The Rolling Stones Interviews: Talking With the Legends of Rock and Roll, 1967-1980* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), 28.

⁶⁶ Clapton, *Clapton*, 34.

audience, Clapton unleashed fourteen songs covering old blues standards and new arrangements of his own work to a widely accepting audience. Featured in this performance was a note for note tribute to one of his guitar heroes; a searing rendition of Big Bill Broonzy's virtuosic "Hey, Hey." Self accompanied with an acoustic guitar, Clapton performed the exact same song in the exact same style that he had first heard Broonzy thirty-seven years earlier. In effect, Clapton introduced a new audience to Broonzy, but only one of Broonzy's many phases. The popularity of the album ensured that Broonzy's memory would remain in the solo acoustic folk blues he represented in the 1950s. Clapton's influence over Broonzy's memory was enormous, as Clapton is now recognized as, arguably, one of the greatest living guitarists. The *Unplugged* album, moreover, won six Grammy Awards, including Album of the Year, and proved that Broonzy's musical legacy was still relevant thirty years after his death, even if it represented only one aspect of his public memory.

Since Big Bill Broonzy's death in 1958, folklorists, jazz enthusiasts, blues scholars, and a younger generation of musicians influenced by him have defined Broonzy's

legacy in a manner that reveals fascinating elements of twentieth-century culture. Broonzy has been a key figure through which American and European audiences expressed their understandings of African American culture. His memory, moreover, informs history about race in the United States, the blues' juxtaposition with jazz music, its appeal to white audiences, and the adoption of the blues by a new generation of young African American European musicians who devoted themselves to it.

The stewards of Broonzy's public memory, however, have consistently undervalued Broonzy's importance as a pioneer for specific developments in African American history and culture for blacks themselves. Many of these culture brokers have tended to focus on Broonzy's otherness and his importance to their own understanding of African American culture in a manner that has misrepresented his importance to black audiences. Both scholars and musicians have overlooked the stage of Broonzy's career when his performances and recordings reached black audiences across the country. Those who have remembered Broonzy's importance to black audiences—such as Muddy Waters and Mike Rowe—have been silenced by the consistent focus on the last decade of

his career when he became the embodiment of white American and European interest in the folk, proto-jazz, and primitive blues.

Big Bill Broonzy's lived history reflects the mutability of African Americans' identity during the twentieth century by providing an example of how African Americans created identities based on leisure culture instead of their labor. Minimizing this important aspect of Broonzy's historical memory has deemphasized his important contributions to American culture and history.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

I chose the title for this dissertation, "Just a Dream," because this song is an important marker in both Broonzy's career and historical legacy. This song was the one that he performed in front of hundreds of whites at the 1938 "From Spirituals to Swing" concert. As Broonzy himself acknowledged, that concert and this particular song gave him his "first big chance."¹ Deep within the songs lyrics are embedded an idea that, at the time the song was written, would have never been possible. The lyrics lament:

I dreamed I was in the White House, sittin' in the president's chair...I dreamed he's shaking my hand, and he said "Bill, I'm so glad you're here"...But that was just a dream, Lord, what a dream I had on my mind...Now, and when I woke up, baby, not a chair there could I find.

Broonzy, like thousands of blacks in the United States, had dreams about African Americans' participation in America

¹ John Steiner Papers, Box 83, Special Collections Research Center, The University of Chicago.

democracy. After all, he had helped make the "World Safe for Democracy" as a member of the AEF in WWI. And yet for the majority of his life, he remained a second-class citizen, especially as he traveled into the South. Of course, the long struggle for civil rights was underway throughout most of his adult life, and with his music, Broonzy did his best to add his voice to the movement for black freedom. Had he lived longer he surely would have been pleased with the movement's significant momentum during the 1960s as the country's black youth pushed the struggle in an entirely new direction.

But Broonzy's legacy and identity did not end at his death, and his contributions to civil rights, the African American experience, and American culture are still very much alive today. In February 1, 2003, Congress officially designated the Year of the Blues.² Blues enthusiasts and scholars across the country celebrated through a series of events, radio and television broadcasts, festivals, and education initiatives; blues music and culture have never received so much concentrated public attention. Broonzy's

² U.S. Congress, Committee on the Judiciary, *Designating the year beginning February 1, 2003, as the 'Year of the Blues'*, 107th Cong., 2nd sess., 2003, 107.

complex story and rich history were very much a part of this celebration and his legacy is beginning to surface within the annals of history as the blues enters the twenty-first century.³

On January 29, 2009, Big Bill Broonzy's dream finally came true, as the 44th president of the United States, Barack Obama, took the oath of office in front of a record crowd in attendance. Members of the audience and viewers around the world looked on in amazement and elation as one of the most important events in the history of the African Diaspora unfolded before their eyes. The most powerful country in the world had elected a man of African descent. And at this truly remarkable event, Big Bill Broonzy was there. For the closing benediction the reverend Joseph Lowery closed the historical events with a paraphrase from "Black, Brown and White," by Big Bill Broonzy.

Lord, in the memory of all the saints who from their labors rest, and in the joy of a new beginning, we ask you to help us work for that day **when black will not be asked to get back, when brown can stick**

³ Roger Randolph House, *Blue Smoke: The Recorded Journey of Big Bill Broonzy*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010); Bob Riesman, *I Feel So Good: The Life and Times of Big Bill Broonzy*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, forthcoming 2011).

around -- (laughter) -- when yellow will be mellow --
(laughter) -- when the red man can get ahead, man --
(laughter) -- and when white will embrace what is
right.⁴

Broonzy's career-long negotiation of his identity was a fitting reference point for understanding the significance of Obama's ascent. Big Bill Broonzy's lifelong efforts to remake himself highlights the importance of African American cultural actors who employed rich mixtures of accommodation and resistance to advance in the face of the country's social ills.

⁴ Lynn Sweet, "Rev. Lowery Inauguration Benediction. Transcript." *Chicago Sun-Times*, January 20, 2009.

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