

Getting the **BLUES**

**What Blues Music Teaches Us about
Suffering and Salvation**

STEPHEN J. NICHOLS



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Prelude

Learning to Hear the Blues

One late January, I was having dinner with friends. The conversation inevitably turned to football. Having severely limited knowledge on that topic, I thought I'd be better off changing the subject, so I interjected a story from a book I was reading at the time, Alan Lomax's saga of the Mississippi Delta, *The Land Where the Blues Began*. The timing could not have been worse, and the particular story that I chose—concerning the squalid conditions of workers in the levee camps along the Mississippi river—could not have been more ill suited for dinner conversation. Even so, I had not anticipated the response, which came quickly: “Why are you reading that book?” I had no good answer. I simply muttered something like “It provides a context for listening to the blues.” I failed to convince my companions.

I have since given a great deal of thought to that question. In fact, I have extended the question beyond the unsavory episodes of Lomax's book. Why read stories and listen to songs of tragedy and loss, despair and alienation? Why look at the darker side of life? The answer I wish I had given that

night, and the answer I'm only beginning to appreciate, is this: I read and listen to the stories of these less-than-pleasant elements of life in order to understand, so that I can hear and see that which I don't always hear and see.

By just about any standard, my upbringing and current status, hovering around middle-class American culture, has made my life far simpler than the lives of hosts of my fellow human beings throughout our common history. This is not to minimize the challenges and trials, ordeals and sufferings of those in my family or circle of friends, or those of us who are (mostly white) suburban Americans. Still, we enjoy many blessings not experienced by previous generations or by all peoples. I'm not lamenting these blessings—simply recognizing that sometimes they come at a price. They can cause us to miss some vital elements of life.

We American evangelicals are as likely as anybody else to be missing something when it comes to a fuller view of life and humanity. In addition, we just might be overlooking something in the pages of scripture. C. S. Lewis wrote hauntingly of Narnia, where it was always winter and never Christmas. For many American evangelicals, life is like always having spring and summer without winter or fall. Or always Easter and never Good Friday. Not everything, however—in life or in the Bible—plays out in a major key.

This book attempts a theology in a minor key, a theology that lingers, however uncomfortably, over Good Friday. It takes its cue from the blues, harmonizing narratives of scripture with narratives of the Mississippi Delta, the land of cotton fields and cypress swamps and the moaning slide guitar. I am not a musician, but a theologian, and so I offer a theological interpretation of the blues. Cambridge theologian Jeremy Begbie has argued for music's intrinsic ability to teach theology. As an improvisation on Begbie's thesis, I take the blues to be intrinsically suited to teach a particular theology, a theology in a minor key.

This is not to suggest that a theology in a minor key—or the blues, for that matter—sounds out utter despair like the torrents of a spinning hurricane. A theology in a minor key is no mere existential scream. In fact, a theology in a minor key sounds a rather hopeful melody. Good Friday yearns for Easter, and eventually Easter comes. Blues singers, even when groaning about the worst of times, know to cry out for mercy; they know that, despite appearances, Sunday’s coming.

My theological interpretation of the blues essentially becomes christological. Ralph C. Wood rightfully titled his book on one of the South’s most engaging writers *Flannery O’Connor and the Christ-Haunted South*. Though working in a different medium and coming from a different socioeconomic place than O’Connor, blues men and women worked in the same “Christ-haunted” South. Well before the blues showed up, Christ inhabited Negro spirituals. According to “Daniel Saw the Stone,” Christ was the stone cut from the mountain without hands. He was the deliverer, the one who could make a way out of nowhere. He was the good shepherd, restoring his lost sheep. When the blues came around, Christ remained. He bore the curse, he suffered exile and abandonment, he was the Man of Sorrows. The blues, like the writings of Flannery O’Connor, need not mention him in every line or in every song, but he haunts the music just the same. At the end of the day, he resolves the conflict churning throughout the blues, the conflict that keeps the music surging like the floodwaters of the Mississippi River. Christ resolves the conflict precisely because he enters the conflict itself. He is Emmanuel, God with us, which ultimately makes him God for us.

In his delightful book *The Smell of Sawdust*, Richard Mouw recalls ever-present memories of the songs and hymns of his fundamentalist background. Similar memories are mine as well. I remember an exasperated Sunday-school teacher as we kids did mocking motions to “I’ll Fly Away.” With its catchy tune and heavenward look, the song held little sway over me.

All I wanted to do was flap my arms like a bird. My life was not hard or sad; it was enjoyable and full of good things and protection and warmth and loving people.

But I can now imagine a congregation in Alan Lomax's Mississippi Delta, a congregation of sharecroppers and slave descendants in the 1930s. A congregation of men who must call the plantation owner's ten-year-old son Mister, while he calls them Boy. A congregation of orphaned children and widowed women and abandoned wives and disillusioned men. A congregation of men and women of sorrows. A congregation of human beings barely clinging to their humanity. And they're singing "I'll Fly Away" in the tiny clapboard church, and they're clapping and stomping out the beat. And they're waiting—waiting for some glad day when they cross the golden shore, waiting for Sunday to come, waiting for the Man of Sorrows whose mercy knows no bounds.

This book is their story. It will never be mine, and I can never pretend that it will be. But I can listen, and I can try to understand. They and the blues gave me back "I'll Fly Away." Both of them can give me and us so much more if we listen. As we listen we also hear the story of the Man of Sorrows, the One who inhabits the world of the blues, Emmanuel who longs to sing the song of Zion with his people.



*Barn on Stovall Plantation,
home of Muddy Waters, near Clarksdale, Mississippi.*

1

What Hath Mississippi to Do with Jerusalem?

A Theologian Explores the World of the Blues

Blues is the roots, everything else is the fruits.

Willie Dixon

In the early years of the third century, the church father Tertullian quipped, “What hath Athens to do with Jerusalem?” His question articulated the challenge that faced the church in his day and throughout the centuries since then. What relationship does the church—do Christians—have with culture? For Tertullian, this question centered on the relationship between philosophy—symbolized by Athens, the home of Socrates and Plato—and faith, whose home was the holy city of Jerusalem. Tertullian answers his rhetorical question with a resounding “Nothing!” Philosophy

is dangerous, he believes. Heretics get their weapons from philosophers. Besides, he adds, it is entirely unnecessary. What need have we for curiosity since we have Christ? A good question—but I can't help thinking that Tertullian came up with the wrong answer.¹

A Christianity closed up in itself might be safe from heresy. For that matter, a life without curiosity might be safe. But such a Christianity and such a life might also be stifling and suffocating. Further, it's worth considering the impact of Tertullian's view on apologetics. His unengaged approach to life and culture leaves the Christian with little ground in common with the non-Christian. The withdrawal from the world he endorses stymies finding inroads and connections for the gospel. The apologetics argument, however, stops short of what may be the most damning indictment of Tertullian. His approach cuts us off from learning anything from others who just might have something to teach us. Engaging culture is a two-way street; we find common ground to speak the gospel to others, and from others we gain better understanding of the gospel. All of which is to say that Mississippi has a lot to do with Jerusalem.

I prefer Dietrich Bonhoeffer's approach to the question of the Christian and culture. He told us, from his prison cell at Tegel, that Christ calls us to "worldliness," to be worldly disciples. He does not mean for us to be accommodated to the world or merged or lost in it. Instead, Bonhoeffer calls us to be fully engaged, to be incarnational, to be aware. Such awareness helps us see what we would otherwise, due to our limited experiences, prejudices, and biases, likely miss. Mississippi, specifically the Mississippi Delta, the home of the blues, can help those of us who live in Jerusalem to be more aware. As Athens is giving way to Mississippi, perhaps Jerusalem is giving way to Wheaton or to Colorado Springs—the former and more recent homes of the American evangelical establishment. There have been plenty of studies of Wheaton and Colorado Springs and of all the other centers of American

**“Black, Blue, & White:
Gettin’ the Blues”**

Johnny Cash, did you get the blues in Memphis?

Or did you get the blues when Jack died and you
were fishin’

And he told you to go on ahead and it’d be
alright?

Or did you get the blues when you realized

June wasn’t so far out of reach after all

And maybe she loved you more than you loved
her?

Did you get the blues in Memphis when you

walked the streets

And you couldn’t pay the rent?

Did you learn your rhythm watching the black

boys shinin’ shoes?

Or did you learn your rhythm pickin’ the cotton
and puttin’ it in the sack?

Or did you learn it from those church songs in
your mama’s hymn book?

Tell us, Johnny Cash, did you get the blues in

Memphis

pickin’ your guitar

for Sam Phillips

while the people walked by

and looked in the window

and thought

just another white boy

in from the fields

thinkin’ he’s gonna sell some records?

SJN

evangelical thought, but theologians have attempted fewer forays into Mississippi. Book-length treatments include James Cone's *Spirituals and the Blues* and Jon Michael Spencer's *Blues and Evil*. In the latter Spencer coins the term *theomusicologist*, putting a twist on the category of ethnomusicology and endorsing the historical, scientific, cultural, and *theological* study of music. A theomusicology of the blues follows in the chapters below. This chapter proceeds with the elusive task of defining our terms and laying out the terrain.²

Getting the Blues

What is the blues? The song "Dallas Blues" tells us, "The blues ain't nothing but a good man feeling bad." Muddy Waters, the prince of the Delta blues, said that the blues has to do with a woman leaving a man, and not under the best of circumstances. A humorous attempt at defining the blues establishes its criteria: traveling by Greyhound counts, but not traveling by plane; driving Chevys, Fords, broken-down trucks, and an occasional Cadillac qualifies, but driving Volvos and BMWs doesn't. The blues may be found in such places as a jailhouse, morgue, room with an empty bed, back highway, or the bottom of an empty bottle, but not at Nordstrom's, the mall, a gallery opening, or the golf course. This is the nonmusical approach to defining the blues, what *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* refers to as defining the blues as a "state of mind." That's not to dismiss it, for *Grove's* adds that this is its "most important extra-musical meaning." Blues is a feeling, and a particularly low, if not moribund, one.³

Alternatively, we could get technical in our definition. The blues is a particular type of music, the twelve-bar tune being the most popular, with distinctive flatted third and seventh notes on the major scale, producing the "blue note," a term coined by W. C. Handy and known nontechnically as that

troubling “minor-key” sound. The twelve-bar tune gives structure to the improvisations of the blues musicians who, though skilled, rarely were able to read music. The twelve-bar tune could accommodate modification as eight- and sixteen-bar tunes, as well. A technical pattern could be ascribed to the lyrics set to the twelve-bar tunes: three-line verses of four bars each. The second line repeats the first, and the third is a response or an answer. Consider Blind Lemon Jefferson’s 1927 recording of an often-heard blues song:

I’m sittin’ here thinkin’ will a matchbox hold my
clothes
I’m sittin’ here thinkin’ will a matchbox hold my
clothes
Ain’t got so many matches, but I sure got a long way
to go.

Or there’s the example that appeared with various modifications in many a blues artist’s repertoire:

I’m a po’ boy, long way from home,
I’m a po’ boy, long way from home,
I’m a po’ boy, ain’t got nowhere to roam.

Some speculate that the first line was repeated to give the musician time to think about the third, since many of these songs were made up as they went along.

Musical and lyrical conventions, however, are meant to be broken. The basic blues lyrical format more often than not met with modification. Just as seasoned writers drift from the basic-essay format dutifully learned in English composition courses, the more skillful musicians quickly find their own way both musically and lyrically.⁴

That said, the blues, and especially the early Delta blues, forms a distinct genre. Rhythmic and haunting as it emanates from the hollows of the Mississippi Delta, it comes punctuated with the pain of the sharecropper, the levee worker, the

railroad worker, the dock shoreman, or the inmate at a hell-hole like Parchman Prison—the prison farm that historians have called an early-1900s form of slavery. Outsiders had more idyllic perspectives, as seen in promotional literature of the Delta by the Illinois Central Railroad. It likened the Delta of the 1910s to the pre–Civil War slave plantations: “Nowhere in Mississippi have antebellum conditions of land holding been so nearly preserved as in the Delta.” Then, like the best of advertising, it added this spin: “The Negro is naturally gregarious in instinct, and is never so happy as when massed together in large numbers, as on the Delta plantations.” This ad copy was written by those, presumably, whose connection to the Delta consisted of looking at it out the railroad car windows. For those living in the Delta, things looked different. The music of this region, like its musicians, would come of age and leave its roots, heading north to the big city. In Chicago, guitars were plugged in and the blues were electrified. Seductive guitar riffs replaced harmonica ballads. The pain of survival in the Delta would be exchanged for the promise of success in the city.⁵

In the 1960s the blues met white suburbanite teenagers, a demographic with discretionary cash. Had Elvis and Johnny Cash and Jerry Lee Lewis and Roy Orbison—record producer Sam Phillips’s cadre—won over white audiences to black rhythms? The Rolling Stones, taking their name from a Muddy Waters line, and Eric Clapton, claiming he owes everything to the legacy of Robert Johnson, have furthered this route of the blues. The blues had a baby, the saying goes, and they named it rock ‘n’ roll. Willie Dixon, himself coming from the Delta, put it more expansively, “Blues is the roots, and everything else is the fruits.”

Muddy Waters personifies this transmigration of the blues. Waters was discovered by Alan Lomax, the ethnomusicologist who recorded disc after disc for the Library of Congress, preserving a music and a culture that otherwise would have been lost. Lomax was looking for the sound of Robert Johnson, one

of the blues' most enigmatic founding fathers. But Lomax was too late, for Johnson had already died, presumably poisoned. Lomax did find Johnson's musical child on the Stovall plantation in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Born McKinley Morganfield, he was nicknamed Muddy Waters for his inability to steer clear of creeks near his family's home. He spent his years picking cotton, usually for fifty cents a day, and humming on his harmonica or strumming a guitar. Looking out the back door of his home, he saw miles of cotton fields; out the front, across the dirt road, stretched the cypress swamps. When he turned left on that dirt road, he went to the mansion house and the barns; when he turned right he would eventually come to the town and the commissary with the porch where he played his music during the day. Further into town was the juke joint where he played by night. In 1941, Waters made his first recording when Alan Lomax pulled his equipment from the trunk of his car. Two years later, Muddy Waters hitched a ride into Clarksdale, purchased a train ticket from the "colored window," and waited for the northbound train to Chicago. After his initial success, Waters reigned supreme at Chess Records studio. The 1950s were his, with such hits as "I Can't Be Satisfied" and "Hoochie Coochie Man." Muddy Waters's tours took him all over America and overseas.⁶

All this came to a man raised by his grandmother in a cypress shack with a tin roof. The blues had come of age. The blues and jazz festivals, album reissues, and concert tours—not to mention Eric Clapton's "Me and Mr. Johnson," Martin Scorsese's *The Blues* PBS series, and Ken Burns's PBS series *Jazz: A History of America's Music*—have all given the blues a prominence, and a market share, it had never dreamed possible. This book, while looking at the full life cycle of the blues, is more interested in the blues Muddy Waters left behind as he headed north. It's more interested in the blues of the 1910s through the 1930s, the years that led up to his singing "I Be's Troubled" for Alan Lomax in 1941. It's about the Delta blues and the culture that gave the blues its life.

Poet Langston Hughes made a migration similar to that of Muddy Waters. Raised in Missouri and Kansas, he moved to the outskirts of Chicago before studying at Columbia University in New York City. He was all the while determined to find his roots in the Mississippi Delta. His quest was fortuitous, producing his poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” before he reached his twentieth birthday. The mighty Mississippi, its bosom turning “golden brown” in the sunset, flowed through his “veins like blood.” It made him who he was. His soul was deeper, fuller, as he connected with his past. Forging links to his heritage, he found ballast throughout his own experiences of being ostracized and standing on the receiving end of racist aggression. He was made strong by his solidarity with the suffering of his past. His piece on the fictional Roy Williams in his collection of stories published as *The Ways of White Folks* (1934) thinly veils autobiography. Roy had been to New York. Roy had been trained on the piano and was a world-class musician, landing a European tour. Roy was beaten and then lynched outside of Hopkinsville, Missouri. His crime? Stopping to talk with a white woman on the street. As Hughes puts it in his poem *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, “I’ve known rivers: Ancient, dusky rivers. My soul has grown deep like the rivers.”⁷

Langston Hughes and Muddy Waters and a host of yet-to-be-considered artists may not be a direct part of the past of many of us, *us* meaning typically white, middle-class, suburban American evangelicals. For *us*, the experience of Mississippi Delta sharecroppers is as distant and foggy as the faded black-and-white photo montage of it on a PBS documentary. But that doesn’t mean that we can’t learn from it, or that we can’t learn something about our theology from it. In fact, because it is so distant from us, what we can learn from it is all the more urgent.

Having sketched an outline and definition of the blues, we next need to understand the land from whence it came: the Mississippi Delta, what James Cobb has called “the most Southern place on earth.”⁸

Lost Delta, Still Lost

We loaded the vans and headed south on Highway 61. I had been with a group in Memphis, a faculty institute on exploring blues terrains, sponsored by the National Collegiate Honors Council. Having trekked the streets of Memphis, we were now going into the Mississippi Delta, the place of myth and legend. In fact, it's not a delta. It is far—a couple hundred miles—from the mouth of the river. It's not even technically the Mississippi Delta, as it is bordered on the east by the Yazoo River. So we went south into the Yazoo-Mississippi alluvial plain, section 2312 of the Mississippi River as declared by the Army Corps of Engineers. Something told me my quest to uncover legend and myth, looking for the lost Mississippi Delta of blues icons Robert Johnson, Son House, and Muddy Waters, would not be all that I had imagined. When we passed by the towering casinos blocking the sun at Tunica, I knew this trip would not measure up. Some things are better left in the imagination; reality has a way of tarnishing the ideal. Robert Gordon and Bruce Nemerov have published a book entitled *Lost Delta Found*. For me, the lost Delta remains lost.⁹

That the Delta may be lost does not detract from its presence in the past. The graves (Robert Johnson has three), the old broken-down juke-joints, the railroad tracks, the dilapidated plantation shacks all quietly testify to a previous era. This era and this region produced one of the most significant accomplishments in American music. No less than the redoubtable *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* states that blues is “the most extensively recorded of all music types.” Others have dubbed it America's only truly indigenous music form. When the 1990 release of *The Complete Recordings*, by Robert Johnson, sold over 500,000 copies, no one could deny the blues its rightful place. What is it about the Delta that gave the blues its life?

Clifford Geertz has spoken of “thick descriptions” in the process of understanding cultures, referring to the multiple

layers that constitute culture and that need to be understood in order to interpret it. Delta life invites such a thick description. There's geography, the cotton fields that stretch for miles, the cypress swamps, and the rivers. There's the plantation mansion, and there are the plantation shacks. There are cotton bins and cotton gins. There are steamboats and railroads. There's the juke joint, the place of letting loose on Saturday night. And there's the church, the place of confession on Sunday morning. There's the food. There's the heat; Bobby Blue Bland, who picked cotton in the Delta before he sang the blues in Memphis and before he toured the world with B. B. King, said of his learning to sing in the cotton fields, "You'd sing to take the heat off you." These descriptions merit exploration beneath the surface.¹⁰

First, there was poverty and exploitation. Though the Delta was rich in soil and water resources, not all the inhabitants equally shared in the wealth. There were the planters, who were white, and the sharecroppers, mostly but not exclusively black. Some of the region lay largely uninhabited prior to the end of the nineteenth century, though many of the Delta's plantations predated the Civil War. By the early decades of the twentieth century, many more large plantations, dotted by the crude sharecropper cabins, filled the Delta, creating what John C. Willis has termed "the plantation empire." In these decades before the levees were built, the Mississippi River's regular flooding had deposited rich soils all along its banks in the region, making it a fertile alluvial plain. One may still encounter five-foot thicknesses of soil before hitting rock. The summer heat would regularly exceed a hundred degrees, and while most crops can't survive such a scorching sun, cotton thrives under it. In the Delta, cotton became king, complete with its subordinated noble and peasant classes. In the days before machines, sharecroppers picked cotton in the heat, barehanded and hunched over, lugging the long cotton bag behind. To pass the time, they sang. Ironically, the machines that one day saved them from such excruciating work led to

their downfall. When the tractors and the harvesters rolled out on to the field, there was no longer any need for sharecroppers, triggering a great migration. No longer able to eke out even a subsistence level of life, they, in the words of Johnny Cash, a cotton picker from Dyess, Arkansas, “rambled north” and “rambled east.” They took their music with them.¹¹

It’s not just the hard work and the economic and racial exploitation that account for the blues. Similarly harsh exploitation happened elsewhere and at the same time in America, such as that of the (mostly) Irish miners in the anthracite coal regions of northeastern Pennsylvania, giving rise to the legendary “Molly Maguires” and their rebellion. What may account for the difference in the Delta and the creation of the blues is the particular past of the sharecroppers in the Delta. They were the first or second generation of freed slaves, counting not a few surviving former slaves among the elderly. Slavery, for them, was not a distant past. In the W. C. Handy House Museum on Beale Street in Memphis—it was relocated there from its original site a few blocks away—there is a picture of a slave ship, underscoring for those who visit the house of the “Father of the Blues” that the blues ultimately comes from slavery. B. B. King’s “Why I Sing the Blues” (1956) eventually gives the answer to his self-directed question: slavery. Yet it’s not just slavery as an institution that contributes to the blues: it’s the *music* of slavery, the spirituals.¹²

In *The Spirituals and the Blues*, James Cone debunks the thesis that while the spirituals are church music, the blues is the devil’s music. In some ways, Cone readily admits, the disjuncture is legitimate. For instance, Son House was confronted with a crossroads decision: Should he take up the guitar and be a bluesman, or should he pick up his Bible and be a preacher? He chose the former, but he sang about the latter in “Preachin’ Blues.” Cone quickly points out how overdrawn the disjuncture is and argues instead for a symbiosis.¹³

The spirituals provided the blues artists with the musical experience to create their art, as well as the content from which

to write their lyrics. The spirituals were filled with hope and longing, all the while facing head-on the realities of sin and the harshness of life. Faulkner titled his work on the conflicts in the Delta *Go Down, Moses* (1942), during the same decades as the birth of the blues. Through the spirituals, the people of the Delta had become one with the grand story of redemption in Exodus. They had appropriated it so often that it had become their story. Blues artists also appropriated the themes of exile and bondage (sin) set against hope (redemption) throughout their music. “They call it stormy Monday,” and, the song continues, “Tuesday’s just as bad, Wednesday’s even worse, Thursday’s awfully sad.” But then “Sunday I go to church where I kneel down to pray,” adding, as if taking a line from *The Book of Common Prayer*, “Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy on me.” The blues artists may have left the church, but the church, and especially the spirituals, hadn’t left them.¹⁴

The exploitation and hard life of the sharecroppers, the not-nearly-distant-enough memories of slavery, and the echoing of the spirituals throughout the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta all conspired to create the blues. No one knows for sure who first sang the blues, but thanks to an official proclamation of Congress, we do know when the blues were discovered. On February 1, 2003, Congress passed a Senate resolution that 2003 be named the “Year of the Blues,” commemorating the hundredth anniversary of its discovery by W. C. Handy. A ragtime bandleader, Handy was sitting on the train platform in Tutwiler, Mississippi, waiting to travel to his next engagement. Next to him, a sharecropper with a guitar, whom Handy identifies only as a “ragged Negro,” began strumming the twelve-bar tune chords and singing the three-line structure that would come to be called the blues. In this version it’s an AAA structure, not the typical AAB pattern:

I’m goin’ where the Southern cross the Dog,
 I’m goin’ where the Southern cross the Dog,
 I’m goin’ where the Southern cross the Dog.

Though a simple line (referring to two railroad lines), it manages to portray the depth of the blues in its expression of restlessness. The train platform where this discovery took place is long gone, yet another victim in the lost Delta. A few yards from where it once stood is a mural depicting the scene of Handy listening to his anonymous musician with guitar in hand. The ideal does not tarnish the real.¹⁵

Why I Wear Black: Theology in a Minor Key

The blues artists were not theologians, unless you want to count Son House's brief stint at preaching. Yet they imbibed a culture that was deeply and astutely theological, and they knew a storyline that began with sin and the fall, followed a road of redemption, and ended at a place of justice and peace and choruses of angels. To be sure, sometimes the blues artists got stuck in the beginning, at sin and the fall, and too often they wandered far off the road of redemption. But the gospel story was always there, and if you listen closely to the music, you can surely hear it. In fact, listening to the blues apart from its theology misses the blues altogether.

An illustrative example that is seemingly disparate from the blues is found in a recent movie on Johnny Cash. The remarkable thing about the film is that *Walk the Line*, with Joaquin Phoenix as Johnny Cash and Reese Witherspoon as June Carter, actually lived up to the hype of *The Wall Street Journal* ("Brilliant. Masterful.") and Roger Ebert ("The music is great, the drama is great, the writing is great, the performances are great."). It is a movie worthy of its subject and worthy of its praise. Punctuated with renditions of some of the best popular music of the second half of the twentieth century, the drama unfolds with intensity and depth. It even has a happy ending, but not a typical Hollywood one; its ending didn't come cheaply, and the movie (thankfully) sidestepped flaccid sentimentalism.

For all its merits, the movie suffers a fatal flaw. The rebel, the outlaw, the Man in Black, was, as he once put it, “a Christian, as I have been all my life.”¹⁶ You don’t get Johnny Cash without religion. Hints are there in the film, such as when he and June hesitate as they enter a country church after his first drug rehab. But the film didn’t nearly do justice to religion in Cash’s life. Its let-down scene was the unprecedented Folsom Prison concert on January 13, 1968, a scene pivotally used to introduce the movie and then returned to near the end. The movie portrays the climax of the concert with Cash belting out “Cocaine Blues” in a glass-smashing, warden-bashing, hard-driving way. No doubt, the Folsom prisoners thought it a highlight. Chalk the glass-smashing up to drama, since during the real concert he had a tin cup. But otherwise the scene is gritty and authentic. June Carter would later say that the prisoners liked Johnny Cash so much because they knew he was the real thing. And, in truth, he had been behind bars (if only for a few days and nights). But in the real concert that night, the part of the outlaw was trumped by the part of the preacher. The concert’s true climax came when Johnny Cash reached over the platform and shook the hand of inmate Glen Sherley, before singing Sherley’s song “Greystone Chapel.”

Glen Sherley was writing and recording songs while doing time at Folsom, one of California’s most notorious maximum security prisons. The night before the concert, the chaplain told Johnny Cash he should listen to a tape he’d brought along. Someone produced a tape recorder, and they all listened silently:

There’s a greystone chapel here at Folsom Prison,
A house of worship in this den of sin.
You wouldn’t think that God had a place here at
Folsom,
But he saved the souls of many lost men.

And then the chorus:

Inside the walls of prison my body may be,
But my Lord has set my soul free.

Cash spent the rest of the night learning Sherley's "Greystone Chapel." He and his band played the song for the first time the next day. He picked it to close the concert.¹⁷ Even without religion, the Folsom Prison scene in *Walk the Line* is one of its most powerful. If the scene had included religion, as had truly been the case, it could have been explosive.

Admittedly, Johnny Cash may appear out of place in a discussion of the blues. He's more country music than blues. And he's white.

"No Black. No White. Just Blues." I first heard this blues motto when Nick Spitzer, host of NPR's *American Routes* program of indigenous American music, read the words off the shirt worn by that day's studio guest, Louisiana bluesman Lazy Lester. Cash and the motto remind us that the blues ultimately has no racial divide. The blues can, however, be a *bridge across* a racial divide if, at the very least, as far as the historical Delta blues is concerned, it helps us understand.

In the final analysis, Johnny Cash isn't so far out of the blues trajectory. He grew up in the cotton fields in the little town of Dyess on the Arkansas side of the Mississippi Delta. In 1954, he found himself in Memphis outside Sam Phillips's Sun Studios on Union Avenue, just blocks away from the blues bars on Beale Street, where he recorded some of the best blues songs of the second half of the twentieth century, such as "Folsom Prison Blues" and "Cry, Cry, Cry." He's only seemingly out of place in a blues discussion. Not the least reason is that he wore black, or more accurately, because of the reason that he gave—in a song, of course. "Ah, I'd love to wear a rainbow every day/And tell the world that everything's OK," he sang, before adding, "But I'll try to carry off a little darkness on my back/Till things are brighter, I'm the Man in Black." As Steve Turner records in his biography, Cash

was then asked if he was turning into a “political liberal.” “No,” Cash replied, “I’m just trying to be a good Christian.” For Cash, too many were left out, too many left behind. He wrote the song “Man in Black” in 1971, with the backdrop of the Vietnam War giving meaning to his line mentioning a hundred dead bodies returning home every week. As long as those on the margins were still in need of a voice, Johnny Cash would wear black—not because he had rejected hope and life in favor of the dark side, but because he realized that grace triumphs in the harshness of life and sin.¹⁸

You can’t get Johnny Cash without religion. Neither can you get the blues without religion. But is the reverse true? Can you get religion without the blues? To say that you can’t is likely not totally true, but it may be partially so. It’s worth considering the question. And it is the question taken up in the following chapters, which explore a theology in a minor key, a theomusicology of the blues. In broad strokes, a theology in a minor key embraces what we so often go to extremes to try to avoid in the contemporary world, the harshness and frailty of life, the presence of sin and evil, the shortcomings and limitations of humanity. In short, all of the realities of life under the curse. Blues invites us to embrace the curse through its articulation of restlessness and despair, longing and disappointment, exile and estrangement—what theologians call alienation. But a theology in a minor key also sounds a note of hope, as it leads us to the Man of Sorrows and the cross. The blues artists sang out of frustration, even vengeance.

The blues artists, however, *sang*, giving voice to their hope for deliverance, their hope that Sunday’s coming. The blues invites us not only to embrace the curse but also simultaneously to embrace the cross. To see the broken made whole, the lost found. We see the exile and stranger make their way back home. “I was blind, but now I see,” says the classic hymn. Not through some cheap happy ending, but in the identification and the defeat of all sorrow and sin in the Man of Sorrows on the cross, the most solemn minor key ever sounded in

human history. In short, the blues helps us understand what theologians call redemption, all of the realities of life under the cross. The following chapters develop this further, harmonizing the blues with the rhythms of scripture and theology. For now, however, we can put the matter directly, returning to some lyrics cited earlier: “They call it stormy Monday,” but, “Sunday I go to church, where I kneel down to pray. Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy on me.”