

The Tennessee Williams Annual Review

Tennessee Williams's American Blues: From the Early Manuscripts Through *Menagerie*

Nick Moschovakis



Number 7

Permissions: Copyright ©2005 by The University of the South. Previously unpublished material by Tennessee Williams printed by permission of the University of the South, Sewanee, Tennessee. All rights whatsoever are strictly reserved and all inquiries should be made to Georges Borchardt, Inc., at 136 E. 57th St, New York, New York 10022. Grateful acknowledgment is also made to the Harry Ransom Research Center at the University of Texas—Austin.

Racial issues do not often arise explicitly in the Williams canon, at least by comparison with those of other major Southern writers (Bigsby 98; Adler 4; Kolin, “Race” 204). Whereas African-American characters rarely appear in Williams’s writings, and even more rarely participate in the main action of his plays, it is not so hard to find him alluding to music performed by African Americans, or derived from African-American traditions. Williams’s writings from the 1930s contain various representations of black singers, as in the posthumously published story “Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll,” as well as in unpublished drafts of fiction, verse, and drama. Blues music is specifically called for in the early full-length play *Fugitive Kind*, in the early one-act play *Hello From Bertha*, and later in *Orpheus Descending*. During the 1940s, Williams wrote lyrics that he called “folk-verse,” and that either included the word “Blues” in their titles, or else imitated the dialects and stanzaic forms of blues songs; another of these poems paid homage to African-American spirituals. Jazz and swing music inspired both the subject and the method of one of Williams’s first free-verse experiments, the poem “Tenor Sax Taking the Breaks.” Later, he would employ “hot swing” thematically in *The Glass Menagerie*. The scripts of *Battle of Angels*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* all expressly provide for music made by African-American singers or musicians, either onstage or off.

¶2 In the present essay I make three major claims. First, Williams as a young writer appreciated certain values of blues, jazz, and spirituals, or at least had notions about these values, and aspired to impart something of them to his work. Second, early manuscripts show that his taste for the music was formed in tension with contemporary attitudes toward its African-American cultural origins, attitudes that were primitivist and essentially racist, and that Williams to a large extent shared. Third, some of Williams’s mature works move toward a criticism of these attitudes, provoking scrutiny of the music’s problematized association with blackness. Especially in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Orpheus Descending*, Williams’s uses of blues and jazz tend to disrupt culturally constructed racial binaries, intimating a resistance to emergent, postwar redefinitions of whiteness.

¶3 The third claim above is one that I shall not have the space to advance or defend here, but that I offer tententiously, as an earnest of further exposition in a sequel to this essay.¹ What I shall hope to have proved here is simply this: in Williams’s works before *Streetcar*, his allusions to blues and jazz music raise provocative questions about the racialized discourse of primitivism and its relevance to a modern American identity that was largely defined by ideologies of labor, consumption, and entertainment. We need to trace these implications fully if we wish to comprehend Williams’s “use of music to establish time and place, suggest mood, forward dramatic action, define character, express theme, and achieve poetic unity” (Farfan 157).²

“T for Texas, T for Tennessee”

The year was probably 1938 and Thomas Lanier Williams would have been in his twenty-eighth year when, sitting at a typewriter, he made up two partial lists of short plays that he had written or was then writing. To each of these lists he prefixed the same title, “AMERICAN BLUES.” While their contents differed, both typescripts presented themselves as programs of one-acts “designed to approximate in dramaturgy the mood, atmosphere and meaning of American blues music” (Williams, “American Blues” ms.).^[3]

^{¶15} Williams had conceived of the title “American Blues” as early as the spring of 1937 (Williams, *Selected Letters* 94). He then gave it to the group of four short plays that he entered in a contest during the winter of 1938-39, winning a one-hundred-dollar award for three of them (Leverich 297; Williams, *Selected Letters* 161-62). Years later, the title reappeared on a substantially different published collection of Williams’s one-act plays (1948).^[4] This anthology offered no suggestion that the plays might be thematically related to one another or to the blues as a musical medium. Readers, directors, and performers of the one acts in the published *American Blues* may well take its title to denote an affective state or psychological coloring and not as a specific allusion to the genre. What the typescript tables of contents alone reveal, and what critics have not recognized, is the fact that the idea for *American Blues* was once specifically connected with music in Williams’s mind.

^{¶16} To Williams in the late 1930s, just what “mood, atmosphere and meaning” were connoted by the phrase “blues music”? How indicative is this hint of a “blues” influence in his work? A clue is perhaps to be found in *Fugitive Kind* Williams’s play of 1937. One of the play’s minor characters, a rambling musician named Texas, sings along to a “radio . . . playing the ‘Sugar Blues’ or something similar,” and again “begins to play a doleful blues melody on his guitar” (88, 112). Since he wears “clothes . . . suggestive of the western plains” (4), it would seem that Williams modelled Texas partly on the singing cowboys who emerged in Hollywood during the 1930s. One of them in particular, Tex Ritter, had recently made his first movie appearance in November 1936.^[5] That Texas bears the name and costume of a cowboy, however, makes him none the less a bluesman.

^{¶17} Like the singing cowboys themselves, Texas in *Fugitive Kind* owes his musical sensibility to a group of artists of the later 1920s and earlier 1930s: those who pioneered what we now know as “country” music but whose immediate inspirations included the blues, along with Tin Pan Alley jazz. Their founder, Jimmie Rodgers, had recorded many tunes with the words “blues” and “blue” in their titles; his “first big hit,” in 1928, had been the blues-tinged “Blue Yodel” (Porterfeld). Rodgers had also introduced the yodelling technique that later singing cowboys imitated and that Texas practices repeatedly in Williams’s play.^[6] The resemblance suggests that Williams knew and admired Rodgers’s professional *persona* as a down-and-out, itinerant rounder, cheering himself with song. More certainly, it shows that through one medium or another, Williams had become familiar with the white blues style that Rodgers popularized, with its tangled roots in Appalachian and African-American traditions (Wolfe 9).

^{¶18} Texas was neither Williams’s last nor most compelling depiction of a blues singer; his part is essentially peripheral and choral. However, it is significant that by 1937, Williams already viewed the guitar-slinging wanderer as a worthy representative of the artist’s vocation. Texas incarnates a romantic, bohemian archetype with which Williams consciously identified (Tischler), and as such anticipates the role of Williams’s later heroic fugitive, Valentine Xavier.^[7] In *Battle of Angels* (1940), “Val” strums on a guitar purchased from a black man (Williams, *Orpheus* 184). Still later, in *Orpheus Descending* (1957), Val would be reconceived as a travelling performer, not unlike the “Tex” of twenty years earlier. As Allean Hale observes in her introduction, “Texas is

Williams the voyager, who would flee the workplace through travel and his art” (Williams, *Fugitive* xvii). In 1939 Williams, though no musician, even took to carrying around a guitar of his own (Leverich 138).

¶19 In *Fugitive Kind*, the singer’s name evokes the frontier. At the same time, though, it echoes the blues. “Blue Yodel,” Jimmie Rodgers’s seminal recording, began with the lyrical and memorable country-blues formula, “T for Texas, T for Tennessee.”^[8] Might we not infer that Williams was inspired by the country vocalist’s interpretation of blues music—perhaps even by “Blue Yodel”—when between 1938 and 1939, he himself claimed the creative *persona* of “Tennessee Williams” (Leverich 274-75)?

“The Blues-Singer Shouting the Chorus”: Williams, Jazz, and Swing

If it were to be proved that Williams really did owe his pseudonym to a popular song, the discovery should hardly surprise us. He was an avid listener to phonograph records; in a letter of August 1939 he invoked his “victrola,” alongside his “typewriter,” as a seemingly indispensable writing accessory (*Selected Letters* 193).^[9] Earlier in 1939 Williams had been travelling and living, from New Orleans to southern California, with the jazz-loving clarinet player Jim Parrott (Leverich 288-89).^[10] Apparently, it was during their residence in Laguna Beach that Williams was moved to begin his early experiment in jazz poetry, “Tenor Sax Taking the Breaks,” which includes the lines:

While the drums beat out a quick rhythm
the tango, the rhumba
the blues-singer shouting the chorus!^[11]
She’s in the groove, that baby!
She’s tearing it down!

(Williams, *Collected Poems* 148; cf. 253-54)

Clearly, despite Texas’s “doleful” guitar-picking in *Fugitive Kind*, an artist did not have to evoke melancholy feelings in order to embody the “mood, atmosphere and meaning” that Williams associated with the blues. In the early 1940s, when Williams produced several slight examples of “folk-verse” for musical performance, including “Lonesome Man,” “Kitchen Door Blues,” and “Gold Tooth Blues,” their tones were uniformly humorous and cheerful, despite their speakers’ dejected circumstances (Williams, *Collected Poems* 64-66, 237).^[12]

¶11 That Williams should have used the term “blues” for jubilant as well as mournful music is to be expected, and not just because the African-American blues tradition in fact encompasses multiple emotional registers. Williams’s usage agrees with the chief way in which the blues reached white American audiences of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, which was through lively, danceable, commercial jazz—or, as it became known in the later 1930s, swing music (Stowe 1-9). Williams was an inveterate dancer (Leverich 111). Even when not actually residing in jazz capitals such as New Orleans, Manhattan, and Los Angeles, he found out venues such as Sloppy Joe’s in Key West, which in 1941, according to Williams’s *Memoirs*, “had . . . a really good black dance band” (65).

¶12 When Williams referred to “the mood, atmosphere and meaning of blues music,” he was thinking of the blues not only as a medium for elegy and complaint, but also as a synecdoche for revelry and a metonym for joy. He had lived from the ages of seven to twenty-seven chiefly in St. Louis, a place that nurtured bluesmen as

renowned as Lonnie Johnson and Roosevelt Sykes. We may have little reason to suppose that Williams ever breached racial and social boundaries by visiting the places where such virtuosos could be heard. Still, he was familiar enough with the music to be aware of its range of meanings and uses.^[13] In the words of author, critic, and essayist Albert Murray, “The blues as such are synonymous with low spirits. Blues music is not” (*Stomping* 45).^[14]

¶13 Murray, indeed, makes much larger claims than this for blues music. He calls it a “heroic” genre, proposing that “the blues idiom . . . enables the narrator to deal with tragedy, comedy, melodrama, and farce simultaneously” (*Blue Devils* 14-15). To us, Murray’s formulation may seem strikingly apt as an account of the very combination of values and effects that audiences and readers expect from Williams. At the very least, it should encourage us to consider Williams’s reception of a blues-derived aesthetic as an appreciable influence on his work.

“The St. Louis Blues”: Black Music on the Threshold of Nature and Culture

Williams appropriated the joyous vitality of the blues for his early one-act play, *Hello From Bertha*, which he set in “a notorious red-light section along the river-flats of East St. Louis” (183). Here the music’s affirmative qualities function contrapuntally as part of Williams’s tragic design, much as the sensuality of “hot swing music” informs his depiction of disappointed lives and loves in *The Glass Menagerie*. Bertha is a forlorn, bedridden woman; throughout the play, her suffering is starkly contrasted with offstage sounds of laughter, singing, and dancing. Accompanying the revelry is a “nickel phonograph,” or jukebox, playing some version of W. C. Handy’s jazz standard from 1914, “The St. Louis Blues” (187; cf. 189).^[15]

¶15 With “The St. Louis Blues,” we may find ourselves wondering whether Williams ever gave much thought to the historical and social context of the blues and jazz—and insofar as he did, what he may have made of the music’s largely African-American origins. Before his family’s move to St. Louis, Williams had lived in Clarksdale, Mississippi, where Handy himself was as a bandleader.^[16] Though Williams was then in his childhood, it seems possible that the older writer retrospectively came to appreciate Clarksdale’s musical importance and the cultural vitality of its African-American community.^[17] In the 1930s when he wrote *Hello From Bertha*, Williams may have chosen “The St. Louis Blues,” not just in homage to the play’s St. Louis setting, but with a particular eye to the life of East St. Louis, a historic center of black culture. For all his nominally genteel, racially segregated West St. Louis upbringing, it is not unthinkable that he had heard something about the excitement of the local jazz scene.

¶16 To my proposition that race might have been on Williams’s mind when he wrote “The St. Louis Blues” into a play about East St. Louis, it may be objected that this tune was universally popular in America during the 1930s, lacking any special association with African-American life and society. According to Will Friedwald, “‘The St. Louis Blues’ . . . is by far the most performed and recorded individual blues of all time” (42). With its literate, cultivated black composer, however, “The St. Louis Blues” was not just a singularly influential jazz composition but a prototypical example of the music’s interracial appeal. By the late 1930s, it had accrued a vast legacy of interpretations on record and radio by black and white artists alike (Friedwald 39-40, 48ff.). Indeed, it might be argued that this very transgression of racial barriers is pertinent to the tune’s connotations. When Williams wrote *Hello From Bertha*, it may be that he envisioned the “red-light” district as a marginal world where social restrictions were relaxed, including inhibitions against racial mixing. Possibly he privately

conceived the *dramatis personae*, or at least the party offstage, as a racially integrated group. If so, of course, he did not make this concept explicit in the text.^[18]

¶17

In any event, there is far more concrete evidence suggesting that for Williams, “The St. Louis Blues” did resonate with powerful and unresolved feelings about race relations, interracial tensions, and constructions of black and white identity. The Williams archive at the Ransom Center contains an unpublished typescript, “The Bottle of Brass,” which represents a variant version of the posthumously published story from Williams’s college years entitled “Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll.” In “The Bottle of Brass,” which I take to be a later revision of “Big Black” (and which was certainly completed by the end of the 1930s),^[19] Williams’s juvenile story about race, sex, and violence is elaborated and reworked. Descriptions are extended and particularized; an allusion to *The Arabian Nights* is added (supplying the new title), and details pertaining to the characters, plot, and setting are altered and added. One of the most pronounced innovations in “The Bottle of Brass” is a series of references to “The St. Louis Blues,” which foregrounds and complicates the thematization of music in Williams’s original version of the tale.

¶18

In the earlier, published text, “Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll”—which has been dated to 1931-32 (Williams, “Big Black” 31)—the title character is a road worker in Mississippi. Both to his fellow-workers and to his drunken, brutal “white boss” (26), “Big Black” seems “strange, savage, inarticulate” (27). His fellow “Negroes” on the road gang entertain themselves with “songs or bantering conversation” during the day, and in the evening recreate to the music of “Banjos” (28). Big Black, on the other hand, never sings and rarely speaks. The only sound he is heard to make often is “a savage, booming cry” that is not “human” but rather “elemental, epical” (27).

¶19

Described by the narrator as “a black beast that had taken grotesque human form” (28; cf. 29), Big Black is a virtual apotheosis of white racist caricatures of black masculinity. At the story’s climax he almost fulfills the ultimate implications of the stereotype he exemplifies. Returning from work, he discovers a white girl bathing alone in a river, stalks her, seizes her, and begins choking her cries “with his huge hand.” Then, in what is portrayed as an instance of self-recognition, Big Black stops himself from raping the girl. Condemning himself as “a big black devil,” he throws her into the water (apparently, physically unharmed) and runs away to join another road gang in Georgia (30). The story ends when, momentarily recollecting his near transgression, Big Black stops work to produce his characteristic cry. The sound is habitually amusing to his co-workers and moves them in turn to start singing (31; cf. 27).

¶20

“Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll” symbolically equates blackness with man’s primitive, animal nature. The racism of this premise is, at best, slightly qualified by the narrator’s comparison of the “white boss” himself to a “mad devil” (26): one who gives free rein to his violent urges, whereas even the beastlike Big Black is able to restrain his. Plainly, Williams intended this ironic juxtaposition as a political comment on the hypocrisy of race prejudice,^[20] and it is true that by declining to commit rape, Big Black proves that his skin color does not wholly preclude his subjection to civilized discipline. Nonetheless, “Big Black” is for the most part irredeemably, not to mention banally, racist in its premise and execution. At best, its conclusion testifies to Williams’s jejune efforts to affirm the humanity of African Americans—to himself, as well as to others—however unseemly and embarrassing the result looks now. (Around the age of twenty, Williams entered “Big Black” in a writing contest, but he never approved any version of it for publication.^[21])

¶21

Less obvious than the racist iconography of “Big Black” are the symbolic uses to which Williams puts music in this text. The sounds of work songs and banjos represent the transcendence of man’s innate brutality through artistic expression. The black workers’ music proves that their lives and communities are civilized, if barely so. Conversely, the wordlessness and tunelessness of Big Black’s cry reflects his greater proximity and susceptibility to the bestial urges that tempt and all but master him. His existence is a liminal one, between subconscious and conscious life, between nature and society. Yet even his half-human cry is a step toward art, and it evokes human feelings. If not quite music, it is like music, effecting the same sublimation of desire, suffering, and rage. In releasing Big Black’s violent passions, it becomes an “expression” of the “miseries” shared by the laborers, who feel “accordingly relieved” when they hear it and take up their own song (27).

¶22 In the unpublished, revised draft, “The Bottle of Brass,”²² Williams introduced new refinements into the story’s musical symbolism. In both the published and unpublished texts, before the account of Big Black’s assault on the white girl, the narrator describes the alcoholic boss returning from the worksite at the close of day. In both versions the boss gets drunk, passes out in a ditch, and then rouses himself to walk home to his wife and his bed. In “The Bottle of Brass,” however, Williams expanded this portion of the narrative.

¶23 Williams’s revised story recounts the white man’s progress home past the workers’ “shake-down shelters” and then past another camp, whence he unexpectedly hears the sounds of “The St. Louis Blues.”

Back of the dusky cypress break, way down in the Sunflower hollow where the little river flowed, some white tourists encamped for the night played on their tinny phonograph the same ragtime²³ record, over and over, *The Saint Louis Blues*, and as he trudged up the road the staggering gang-boss began to sing.

Hate to see . . . de evenin’ sun go down

Cause my baby . . . done gone an’ lef’ dis town

A moment later, as he passes by the tourist encampment, the boss resumes the song,

singing louder and more cheerfully to the fading sound of the ragtime.

Gypsy, she tole me . . . Don’t you wear no black

Go to St. Louis . . . You kin git him back

With this, the boss hears “a woman screaming down there-aways in the hollow.” This will later be identified as the woman whom Big Black has assaulted and released, though the incident has not yet been narrated in full. The boss shrugs off her cries, “still singing” until he meets “a group of white men” who give him news of her attack. Their account misrepresents the event to the boss and to the reader (both of whom are now learning of it for the first time) as a rape. From their reference to the rapist, the racist boss concludes that it must have been his own employee, Big Black. He mutters to himself: “God damned howling ape! We’ll have you singin’ a diff’runt tune tonight!”

¶24 At this point in “The Bottle of Brass,” Williams’s frame of vision suddenly shifts away from the gang boss and the narrative chronology is reset slightly, back to the end of the workday.²⁴ In two brief descriptive passages, the narrator surveys and contrasts the two worlds of poverty separated by race: that of the road workers reunited with their “girls” at “quitting time” and that of the “poor white tourists” in the sunflower hollow. With regard to the first, Williams waxes Laurentian. The narrator dwells on the “love of life” and “lazy sensuality” of the “negros” in their “plantation quarters” and “flimsy tarpaulin shake-downs,” where “wet black bodies” meet by night in “slow, unslakeable lust.”²⁵ Though this primitivistic scene is (again) indefensibly

racist and, moreover, would sound lurid to a puritanical ear, nonetheless Williams presents it in pastoral and idyllic terms. Its “seemingly impregnable quiet” after sunset is opposed to the rowdy intoxication of the whites:

All day the group had lounged . . . drinking whiskey and beer and playing their tinny phonograph. Apparently they had only one record, *The Saint Louis Blues*. They played it over and over. Now they were still playing it, but above its weird lamentations and in a startlingly similar key had risen up the hysterical wailing of a young girl.

As the assaulted woman arrives in the camp and the other whites hear her “hysterical wailing” (and, possibly, a false accusation of rape), they too begin to emit “hysterical cries” and “angry shouts.” The shouts are in turn “drowned out by the yapping of blood-hounds.” The sequence of sounds figures the whites’ own descent into bestial passion, as they raise a lynch mob to seek out Big Black among the homes of the “male negros.”

¶125 Now, at last, Williams’s narrative lens shifts its subject and temporal perspective to Big Black himself, at the time of his departure from work. His loneliness is emphasized; his first voyeuristic glimpses of the bathing girl are recounted in detail. His initial determination to rape her is attributed to “some strange animal that had come into possession of his body . . . thoughts which had somehow entered into the quick tide of his blood. . . . He was not himself now, but the beast that was in himself.” At the moment when he begins his physical approach toward his intended victim, it is to the sound of the distant “phonograph . . . playing a ragtime record. The music was loud but here it penetrated scarcely louder than the buzz of a fly. Not half so loud as the sound of the splashing water.” Here, in Big Black’s consciousness, nature has asserted its claims over the bonds of culture symbolized by music, much as it did in the white tourists’ camp.

¶126 However, in “The Bottle of Brass” as in the original story, Big Black resists his compulsion to rape. He releases the girl and escapes to work on another road project, which in this version is located near St. Louis. It is as though Big Black, prompted by the line in the song—“Go to St. Louis”—has resumed the futile quest to satisfy his own “unslakeable lust.” Williams personifies man as a half-conscious, divided, contradictory creature, unable to keep from pursuing what a Lacanian might call the imaginary object of desire and always hoping—hoping even without hope—to “git [her] back.”

¶127 In “The Bottle of Brass,” music has become more prominent than in the earlier text. Most important, its meaning as a symbol of psychological sublimation has now become applicable to the mentalities of all human beings, regardless of color. Whether among blacks or whites, music in “The Bottle of Brass” signifies the boundary between civilized art and primitive, violent nature. In both halves of a society fatally divided by race and racism, and in the minds of individuals from both groups, the instant at which music is interrupted corresponds precisely with a lapse of conscious restraint and a surge of animal impulses.

¶128 More interesting still is the fact that in “The Bottle of Brass,” it is a jazz-blues record that entertains the story’s white, virulently racist characters. The homes of the black workers themselves, unlike those of their counterparts in “Big Black,” are silent at nightfall. Perhaps only the road workers must labor painfully enough by day to be contented with the sheer physical pleasures of sex and rest at night. However, the music that they have made at work, to sustain their own spirits, contains the primitive origins of that which serves to amuse the whites in their comparatively leisured circumstances.

¶129 In the world of the revised story, therefore, African Americans are emphatically the sole (or primary) inventors of music. The boss appreciates “The St. Louis Blues”; he not only knows W. C. Handy’s tune but can even repeat its lyrics; yet the boss is not a musical creator any more than the phonograph is a musical

interpreter. Ironically, the music that soothes the white man's savage breast originates with the very people whom racist whites—including, to an unfortunate degree, the author himself—reflexively associate with savagery.

¶30

Williams's location of music at the threshold of nature and culture, and his identification of the juncture itself with music composed by a black man (and merely admired and consumed by whites), would appear to partake of racist assumptions common to many early twentieth-century white authors. Nature is the cause of generation and change, and black people, being putatively closest to nature, must represent the source of creation. Paradoxically, though, our nature is also idle, and it is only in reaction to the pain of labor that the psychological need for art arises: "The negros themselves would have gladly . . . stretched themselves out comfortably in the shade. . . . But nature and the gang-boss were opposite forces." Big Black's "terrific, blood-curdling cry" is at once an articulation of suffering and the beginning of suffering's progressive refinement into art through work and discipline, the twin forces of repression and civilization:

There was something about it [the cry] which seemed to profoundly stir the other negros. After its periodic utterance the picks always swung more lustily, with a more concentrated rhythm, as though something oppressive to all the negros' spirits had somehow found expression and taken flight in that terrific burst of sound.

Big Black tore his blue shirt open to the waist, arched his huge black chest, flung his gorilla-like arms high above his head. He uttered a strange, savage cry. It began upon a deep, growling note and veered flame-like to a ululating peak . . .

Work along the road was momentarily broken. Wet black faces looked up and grinned at each other with a mysterious relief. A few hoarse notes sprang up and soon the shoulders and arms of the workers were swinging to a song.^[26]

¶31

Both white and black characters in "The Bottle of Brass" are, finally, liminal creatures, living on the border between nature and culture. The difference is that material needs have raised the African Americans from their natural sensuality to the threshold of civilization, while the white group, through its own natural indolence, has nearly declined from culture into a state of nature. In Williams's symbolic order, only "The St. Louis Blues" stands between the whites and the satisfaction of their primal instincts. If it proves inadequate as an escape valve for the violent pressure of those drives, perhaps this is because the song is not their own; they are losing, or have lost, a discipline that the black singers have had to cultivate despite themselves.

"The Black Singer": Primitive Mammies vs. Puritanical Mothers

In the unpublished "The Bottle of Brass," a black protagonist personifies man's primitive nature. Meanwhile, the story represents original musical composition as a prerogative of African Americans, as Williams's decadent whites merely consume what the blacks have created. Together, these aspects of the revised story suggest that when Williams completed it, he was writing under the influence not only of racist ideologies, but also of a primitivist theory of art.

¶33

Williams was scarcely unusual in associating jazz with primitive expression. In the decade following the first World War, jazz had attracted national and international attention. Many white American authors had denounced the music as "savage," meant "to stimulate brutality and sensuality," and "a relic of barbarism," even as they called it "the natural expression of the American Negroes" (Lemke 62-63). In much the same way, though from the opposite camp, an advocate of jazz music in 1926 had written admiringly of the "Negro spirit"

it expressed. He found its value to lie in “a certain spiritual something . . . a certain buoyancy, spontaneity, and joy of living that has re-inspired the staid, mechanical, intellectualized Caucasian . . . causing the blood to course with joyous rhythm through his veins.”^[27]

¶34

Writers on both sides of the jazz controversy during the '20s tended to regard black music-making as primal, passionate, and disruptive of civilized conventions. The “pro-jazz ‘modernists,’” such as the author last quoted, differed from their opponents only in that they “did not fear going back to the jungle since they yearned to end emotional repression.”^[28] In the following decade, the type of big-band jazz known as “swing” became popular among whites, often as performed by white musicians. Even then “an assumption of racial essentialism . . . pervaded nearly all writing about jazz,” where it was taken for granted that blacks on the whole played differently from whites. It might possibly be conceded that the distinction “was not necessarily biological” in origin (Stowe 79). Yet, even with this qualifier, it seemed clear to a writer in November 1936 that blacks played with “a certain vitality and abandon which most white men either lack or are reluctant to express.”^[29] For white enthusiasts of jazz, no less than for its critics, the music’s value was inextricable from a complex of beliefs that Mariana Torgovnick identifies as the “tropes” of primitivism: “Primitives are our untamed selves, our id forces—libidinous, irrational, violent, dangerous. Primitives are mystics, in tune with nature, part of its harmonies. Primitives are free” (8).

¶35

I have shown that in “The Bottle of Brass,” Williams invoked the prevalent view of blues and jazz as forms expressing man’s primitive drives. The racist aspect of this musical primitivism, its habitual attribution of African-American creativity to instinctive, irrational, or pre-rational causes, assumed a different guise in an early poem by Williams entitled “For My Grandmother.” The poem combines autobiographical reminiscence and Romantic symbolism and features a mythically projected image of Ozzie, the “BLACK NEGRO MAMMY” of Williams’s childhood. Here, singing “in a rich contralto,” Ozzie is made to utter lines from another lyric, “Heavenly Grass,” which Williams himself had written in imitation of African-American spirituals (*Collected Poems* 63, 236).^[30] The speaker concludes the poem by glossing the myth that Williams has fashioned:

Memory begins with her—Ozzie—the black singer.
Life. Death. The earth. All wisdom and all understanding.
Who knew the secrets of the sun before time even started.
Ozzie—the black singer—the nurse—where memory begins . . .

(Williams, “For My Grandmother” [ms.])

Williams’s memories of his real “nurse” appear, transfigured, as the primal, chthonic fount of a “wisdom and . . . understanding” that approximate divine knowledge. Ozzie’s song embodies a consciousness that transcends time and rational oppositions, including that of “Life” and “Death,” and, as the poem elsewhere implies, that of body and spirit.^[31]

¶36

Williams’s myth of “the black singer” in “For My Grandmother” adapts and personalizes a nostalgic vision that he would have encountered elsewhere in the works of D. H. Lawrence, with their intimations of “an idealized primitive state” (Torgovnick 170). As Torgovnick points out, Lawrence linked this “oceanic state of cosmic oneness” to “the period of the infant’s closeness to the mother” in Freudian theory (170-71). Though there is no date on the unpublished poem by Williams, its embrace of this Laurentian, metaphysical, and

psychologicistic variety of primitivism accords with what we know of Williams's reading during the mid- to late 1930s, when Lawrence was, in the words of William Jay Smith, "Tom's great god."³² The poem's Ozzie represents a nurturing, maternal influence of the kind that Williams felt his own mother had not been able to provide. Such a fantasy mother would have affirmed nature's values, teaching the cosmic "wisdom" of the generative "earth" and "sun" as opposed to society's rigid and frustrating mores to which Edwina Estelle Dakin Williams adhered.³³

"Hot Swing Music"

Williams gave another voice to the primitivistic, Romantic revolt against restraint and convention in *The Glass Menagerie*. There, too, he associated primitive human impulses with music derived from the African-American tradition. The struggle between nature and culture in *Menagerie* is best articulated when Tom and his mother debate the value of "adventure" and "instinct." Natural man is, in Tom's words, "by instinct a lover, a hunter, a fighter," craving physical sensation and "adventure." According to Amanda, culture and religion repudiate these desires as childish; what "Christian adults want," she insists, is the satisfaction that comes with intellectual and spiritual discipline (421). Shortly before this exchange, Williams has prepared us for Amanda's appeal to religion with some appropriate incidental music, an "Ave Maria" (418; cf. Farfan 157).³⁴ Balancing this, in the following scene, is the "hot swing music" which emanates from the Paradise Dance Hall offstage. The "orchestra" there is performing "All The World is Waiting For The Sunrise," a dance tune that had been popular since the jazz era (Ewen 449; cf. McMurtry 80-82). Speaking over the band's swinging sounds, Tom explains to us how, until the onset of World War II, only "liquor, dance halls, bars, and movies, and sex" could offer American "kids" a badly needed "compensation for lives that passed . . . without any change or adventure" (Williams, *Glass Menagerie* 425).

¶138 Significantly, the "hot swing music" at the Paradise Dance Hall cannot provide the "kids" with "adventure" itself, which according to Tom is what their nature instinctively seeks. What jazz can do, instead, is to arouse and release their pent-up, frustrated desires. Music momentarily suspends the inhibitions that otherwise rule their repressed, workaday lives, to which they will return on the following morning after their fleeting encounters with passion in the "alley" below the Wingfields' apartment (425).

¶139 Tom's analysis of the social function of dance music follows the ideological outlines of a pattern that I have begun to identify in "The Bottle of Brass." Jazz, which putatively originates as a response to suffering among black menial laborers and therefore represents (ostensibly) humanity's first step from nature into culture, facilitates a temporary holiday from discipline for the whiter and more civilized members of America's "lower middle-class." To them, the dance hall offers a pleasant step down from a repressive culture of workplace "automatism" into an idyll of primitive hedonism. Their pastoral hiatus gives them some intermittent relief from the painful mechanism of culture and fortifies them to endure civilization once more upon their return.

¶140 By indulging their "instinct" briefly and vicariously, the swinging young Americans of *Menagerie* may not find real happiness but can at least occasionally gratify certain natural urges. When Jim O'Connor arrives in the Wingfield apartment, shakes Laura's hand, and finds it "cold," he prescribes jazz as a remedy for her condition: "You ought to play a little hot swing music to warm you up!"³⁵ The sexual suggestiveness of Jim's recommendation is, like most other things about him, only half conscious. However, it is strong enough to

disturb Laura's repressed animal nature—or so Williams suggests, comparing her reaction to that of “a frightened deer” (438).

¶41 Laura physically desires Jim, even if she does not fully realize this desire, yet both her timidity and her sentimentalism bode poorly for his effort to teach her the sensual customs of the Paradise Dance Hall. When he hears the offstage orchestra playing and cries delightedly, “Ahhh, a waltz!,” Jim seems to condescend deliberately to her innocence of sex. The decorous waltz is a form to which even Laura might be persuaded to dance. Certainly, it does not qualify as “hot swing music,” even though Williams writes that Jim “swings her into motion” when their dance begins (456).^[36] The clumsiness of the result shows that though Laura could perhaps start learning to waltz, she is by no means prepared to “swing” with Jim. By surrendering to his own impulses here, he makes her confront all too abruptly what is primitive in herself, as well as in him. Their interlude and the climactic kiss that follows disclose to Laura her own physical nature and her kinship with the sexual beings who populate the alley at night, but they also cruelly confirm her sheltered ignorance of their customs. Her unicorn becomes a horse; the emblem of chastity and the symbol of culture's desired harmony with nature is reduced to a sign of erotic desire, the strong beast that civilization is designed to tame and control. The “instinct” of nature, over which Tom clashed with Amanda, is released in Laura, if only to meet with immediate frustration leading to a profound bewilderment and primal anguish that can only find utterance in her helpless scream (464).

¶42 Commentators in the 1930s continued to refer to the “moods and emotions” of swing music as “primitive”; they situated it in an imaginary “jungle” and traced its pedigree to the culture of dark-skinned “savages.”^[37] Of course, this racist view of jazz was not incompatible with a belief that white Americans themselves were innately primitive, possessing their own hearts of “darkness.” Rather, the fear that whites might relapse into “savage” sensuality is implicit in the desire to keep them away from “degenerate” black music, with its putatively corrupting influence. So an early attack on “‘Jazz’ music,” printed in 1918, had claimed that its “savage gift for progressive retardation and acceleration, guided by the sense of swing, reawakened in the most sophisticated audience instincts that are deep-seated in most of us” (qtd. in Lemke 62).

¶43 Amanda would have sympathized with such old-fashioned critics of jazz and with their apprehensiveness of the “instincts” that culture kept at bay. To her son, though, Amanda's defense of predictability and rational progress against primitive impulse and “adventure” looks like nothing but an imprisoning wall of fear masked as propriety. Likewise, in Williams's own view, even young Americans such as Tom and Jim are “fundamentally enslaved” (*Glass Menagerie* 399). Lacking any prospect of real “adventure,” they must expend all their creative energies in moviegoing, drinking, dancing, and sex, if not in unlikely dreams of future advancement within the system.

¶44 Considered with reference to the racialized discourses that surrounded jazz and swing music, Williams's use of the word “enslaved” to describe the white Americans who consume that music may appear ironically, and even deplorably, misplaced. Yet it is wholly consistent with the ideology of primitivism. Tom and Jim are, on a primitivist view, slaves, though they sometimes enjoy transitory pleasures. To the extent that their lives obey industrial discipline, they resemble the road workers in “Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll” and “The Bottle of Brass.” Insofar as they seek relief from that discipline through entertainment, they are like the gang boss, drunkenly singing along to “The St. Louis Blues.” Both Jim and Tom illustrate the sublimation of man's natural drives through work, as well as the dissipation of those energies in the decadent pleasures of consumption.

¶45

To Jim O'Connor, this modern American compromise with "instinct" is fairly satisfactory. To Tom Wingfield, and to Tom Williams, it cannot be enough. Williams uses Laura's memory of a trifling song that Jim sang in high school—"O blow, ye winds, heigh-ho,/ A-roving I will go!" (448)—to represent his illusory adolescent promise, as well as his present grandiose fantasies of importance. Jim's song signifies no authentic wish to escape the trivializing, humiliating confinements of modernity; instead, it mocks Tom's desire for exotic "adventure," from the complacent perspective of a confirmed believer in civilization's benefits. Indeed, the source of the lines is not even a genuine sea chanty but a nonsensical literary parody.^[38] Likewise, Jim unconscionably slights the force of instinctive desires when he toys with the inexperienced Laura's erotic feelings.

¶46

Unlike Jim, who is an absolute creature of society, Tom really wants to escape to sea and will in fact do so. While Jim continues dancing to "hot swing music" and flirting irresponsibly with transgressive pleasures, Tom will arrive on foreign shores. Not improbably, he will someday step ashore on the "South Sea Islands," or even in Africa, "the Dark Continent"—where, according to an opponent of swing music in 1936, the genre that entertained America's swinging youth had its savage, primitive origins.^[39]

Transition: American Blues

Writing about the fascination that African-American music exerted on another white American author during the 1940s, Nathaniel Mackey has shown how William Carlos Williams's attempts at jazz writing reveal a "flawed embrace of otherness" (249). The work of Tennessee Williams, too, is "flawed" in its efforts to manifest the primitive realities that underlie and disrupt civilized life (cf. Farfan 158).

¶48

Historically, Tennessee Williams's racist appropriation of black musical traditions to primitivist ends is unexceptional in a white author of the period, even one who elsewhere mounts an ostensible "criticism of racist politics" (Kolin, "Race" 206). And, as Gerald Early has observed, black commentators also were capable of representing jazz as "primitive music" (180). In fact, W. C. Handy himself employed this very phrase (qtd. in Friedwald 46). Nonetheless, we are and ought to be troubled by Williams's acceptance of the idea that jazz was essentially primitive, with its implication that African Americans naturally lived outside the boundaries of civilization.

¶49

The stakes are high for contemporary Williams criticism in any judgment of his relationship to racial ideology. Recently, more than one critic has alleged or insinuated that his writing courts reactionary responses to prospects of multiracialism, inciting and exploiting white anxieties about racial mixing and miscegenation (Crandell; Van Duyvenbode; but cf. Kolin, "Race"). It is true that when we read a text such as "The Bottle of Brass" (and especially to the extent that we read it literally), we are hard pressed to imagine any possible solution to the race problem—as depicted pessimistically by Williams—short of an enforced segregation between America's barely civilized black subjects and their seemingly lawless white masters, both of whom inveterately fear and terrorize one another. And yet, as should be clear even in this story, Williams did not associate tunes such as "The St. Louis Blues" with savagery by way of alerting cultivated whites to the perils of swing dancing and jungle rhythms or to warn them against the consequences of relaxing racist proscriptions and prerogatives.

¶50

Unlike reactionary racists, who asserted or assumed the natural inferiority of primitive blacks to conquering and civilizing whites, Williams reproduced racist prejudices ambivalently and in key respects critically. Though

he ascribed primitive values to the music of African Americans, the ways and contexts in which he invoked that music subvert the belief that the primitive must, or should, always yield to the civilized. Moreover, he confronts and rejects the conviction that the primitive is a quality naturally less white than black, or brown, or any other color. For Williams, “a follower of Rousseau” (Tischler 160), we are all primitives by nature, taking pleasure in the satisfaction of our instincts. This fact, if not perhaps as it ought to be, only becomes all the more destructive for being denied or forgotten.

¶51 In the planned sequel to this article, I shall further develop and conclude my case for a comparatively progressive reading of Williams’s interest in black music, and by extension, of his work’s political implications within the racialized discourses of mid-twentieth-century American culture. In some of the plays after *Menagerie* that allude to African-American music—and most of all, in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Orpheus Descending*—Williams seems to challenge his master D. H. Lawrence’s position as, in Michael Bell’s words, “at once the major modern primitivist and the most radical critic of primitivism” (181).

To be continued . . .

Notes

¹ This article comprises the first installment of a two-part series; in the concluding installment I hope to deal mainly with *Streetcar* but also with aspects of other texts including *Battle of Angels*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Orpheus Descending*, and *Suddenly Last Summer*. I would like to thank Allean Hale for invaluable assistance with my ongoing inquiries into this topic and Robert Bray for his patience and editorial acumen.

² In an unpublished dissertation, William McMurry (1982) has surveyed musical citations in Williams’s published works, and offered extended thematic readings of music and musicality in *Menagerie* and *Streetcar*. While informative, his work does not take up the main issues with which I am concerned here. More recent, and more immediately relevant to my argument, is Charles Goldthwaite’s dissertation chapter analyzing Valentine Xavier (in *Battle of Angels* and *Orpheus Descending*) as a figure whose relationship to black music—and to white Americans’ discursive constructions of black identity—mirrors that of Elvis Presley (Goldthwaite 31-51). I heard parts of this argument presented by the author at the Tennessee Williams Scholars’ Conference, 2003.

³ Of the two typescript tables of contents in the “American Blues” file folder at HRHRC—both of which include the words quoted above—one indicates that it is “by Tennessee Williams,” while the other is superscribed “T. L. Williams.” It seems probable, therefore, that Williams compiled both lists around the time when he chose the *nom de plume* “Tennessee,” probably in late 1938 (Leverich 274-75; however, for the use of “Thomas Lanier” on manuscripts as late as May 1939, see Williams, *Selected Letters* 253).

⁴ David Roessel and I hope to clarify the differences—which are too complex for elaboration here—in our forthcoming, collaborative edition of previously unpublished one-act plays by Williams, *Mister Paradise and Other One-Act Plays* (New York: New Directions, 2005).

⁵ The movie was *Song of the Gringo* (Logsdon).

⁶ Texas “yodels loudly” (Williams, *Fugitive* 13) after singing a stanza from the folk ballad “Jack O’ Diamonds”—a song which Williams may well have known in its retitled form as “Rye Whiskey,” Tex Ritter’s “trademark” song since 1933 (Logsdon). (In a footnote, editor Allean Hale understandably attributes the lyrics to another traditional song, “Powder River,” which Texas names before singing the verses in *Fugitive Kind* and which Williams himself may well have confused with “Rye Whiskey”—or which may indeed have existed in versions that incorporated these lyrics.) Other verses sung by Texas, again to a yodelling refrain (39), come from “Nobody’s Darling But Mine,” recorded separately by singing cowboy Gene Autry and by Jimmie Davis.

⁷ The surname Xavier was borrowed from Williams’s own family tree (Williams, *Memoirs* 12).

⁸ After the success of “Blue Yodel,” Rodgers recorded variants of the song that also included this lyric.

⁹ Since childhood, Williams had danced with his sister Rose to the victrola (Leverich 78, 143), and Leverich asserts that Williams carried “a windup phonograph” with him in December 1938 when he first moved to New Orleans (275). The importance of the

phonograph in Williams's perspective on twentieth-century American culture is a topic I intend to address at length in the sequel to this article.

¹⁰ Leverich states that Williams's "windup phonograph" again accompanied him to California (304).

¹¹ Williams's successive references to "the tango, the rhumba/ the blues-singer" here are not inconsistent with the poem's jazz form and subject matter. On the one hand, a standard such as "The St. Louis Blues" itself could be performed and recorded in "tango" and "rhumba" versions, as suggested in this case by the "tango tempo" that W.C. Handy had deliberately imparted to sections of his composition (Friedwald 51). On the other hand, Williams's list imitates the alternation of different genres in performances at dances, where bands of the period would have played a broader range of music than in the recording studio (personal communication with David Schiff, 11 October 2004).

¹² "Lonesome Man," though lacking the word "Blues" in its title, is relevant here because it alone is written in a form that makes it a viable blues lyric: i.e., an "inversion of the standard twelve-bar blues pattern" in which repetition occurs in the latter part, rather than the former part of the stanza (Tracy 72). Williams's blues verses bear comparison with contemporary black dialect poems to which he may well have been exposed, such as those included in Langston Hughes's musical drama, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, which was published in *One Act Play Magazine* in October 1938 (Hughes). However, what we hear in Williams's poems is much less like Hughes than like the voices heard in old-time blackface minstrel shows.

¹³ It is therefore entirely wrong to assume, as does one recent critic, that the blues in Williams must necessarily signify "melancholy," "struggle," and "lamenting" (Van Duyvenbode 209).

¹⁴ On the phrase "blue devils," which Williams used to denote his depressive moods as early as 1936, and for remarks on Williams's relationship to "the blues" in both the psychological and musical senses of this term, cf. Leverich (174-75, 608 n. 36).

¹⁵ The jukebox is a recurrent preoccupation with Williams, appearing, for instance, on the sets of *Battle of Angels* and *Small Craft Warnings*, as well as in Carol Cutrere's account of "jooking" along southern roads in *Orpheus Descending* (21-22, qtd. at 21). Like Williams's victrolas, his jukeboxes will figure more prominently in the second part of this two-part series.

¹⁶ Leverich suggests that Williams may even have seen Handy performing in Clarksdale, where his band "was in constant demand for local events, dancehalls, political rallies and white folks' parties" (608 n. 36, citing personal correspondence with Allean Hale; cf. Friedwald 45-6). I know of no concrete evidence to support such speculations.

¹⁷ Ethnomusicologist and blues collector Alan Lomax remembered crossing the railroad tracks in 1942 from "uptown Clarksdale" to "Clarksdale's black business district, the social and amusement center for all the plantation workers for thirty miles around" (Lomax 28). It was in Clarksdale that Muddy Waters got his start, and in Clarksdale that Bessie Smith died—the latter event recalled by Williams in *Orpheus Descending*: "Jim Crow killed her, John Barleycorn and Jim Crow . . ." (37).

¹⁸ Bertha is "blonde" (Williams, *Hello* 183), but this fact arguably leaves even her genetic heritage open to debate. Interestingly, in Handy's lyrics for "The St. Louis Blues," the words "powder and . . . store bought hair" suggest that the speaker's romantic rival "is a black woman who wears a wig and powder to 'whiten' herself" (Furia 36).

¹⁹ Whereas the last page of "The Bottle of Brass" is subscribed "Thomas Lanier Williams," the typescript at HRHRC bears a cover page presenting its author as "Tennessee Williams" (mss.). Therefore, we may be certain that Williams reviewed this version of the story sometime after 1938, at which time he approved of it enough to provide it with a new title page. To my eyes (which are, admittedly, untutored in the study of typewriter fonts and distinguishing marks), both "The Bottle of Brass" itself and its post-1938 title page look like products of the same typewriter, though at different stages in the desiccation of an ink ribbon (or of two different ink ribbons). "The Bottle of Brass," then, may be dated—tentatively—to the later 1930s.

²⁰ As Philip C. Kolin points out, the story's subject and date suggest that Williams probably wrote it in response to the Scottsboro case ("Tennessee" 10-11). The same events lie behind Williams's unpublished script, "Jungle" (HRHRC, Williams collection, box 22, folder 2).

²¹ On the context in which "Big Black" was written, see Kolin, "No masterpiece has been overlooked."

²² The phrase "Bottle of Brass" appears elsewhere in the Ransom Center collection, as a rejected alternate title on one of two drafts of "Escape" (the short script in box 4, folder 10, about African-American convicts on a chain gang; not to be confused with the other "Escape," also titled "Summer at the Lake").

²³ Williams's use of the term "ragtime," here and in the following quotation, is not technically wrong: "Handy . . . made a point of incorporating ragtime-like syncopation . . . the 'SLB' contains clear touches of ragtime as well as the blues" (Friedwald 49-50).

²⁴ Williams's narrative technique in "The Bottle of Brass" is even more noticeably "cinematic" than in the earlier version, where this quality has already been remarked (Kolin, "Tennessee" 11).

²⁵ I reproduce the word "negro" without capitalization, as it appears here and at other points in Williams's unpublished typescript.

²⁶ These two quotations from "The Bottle of Brass" (mss.) correspond closely to passages in the earlier "Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll" (27, 31). Yet "The Bottle of Brass" makes it clearer that the men work only under compulsion and that work is abhorrent to nature—not only the nature of blacks but also that of the more privileged whites, whose drunken, idle ways are newly emphasized in Williams's revised story.

²⁷ Early 167, quoting J. A. Rogers in *Opportunity*; cf. Lemke 67.

²⁸ Lemke 65, citing Neil Leonard's *Jazz and the White Americans* (1962) for this sense of "modernist."

²⁹ Stowe 78, quoting Reed Dickerson in *Down Beat*.

³⁰ Williams admired "Heavenly Grass" more than most of his own verse, not only publishing and republishing it but using and re-using it in his dramatic writings (Debusscher; Williams, *Collected Poems* 236). On Ozzie and her importance to Williams, see Leverich 37, 40, 43-44.

³¹ "For My Grandmother" reflects on man's fall from a childhood state of innocence into the dualistic and divided consciousness of maturity; its message can seem either Gnostic or neoplatonic, depending on how one reads it. Its preoccupation with the problem of dualism appears in the words of the "Youth," a character who evidently speaks for Williams: "Yes, the earth was ours—/ And all of it was covered with heavenly grass—/ Later it grew to be the grass of earth—much later." On these themes in Williams, see Tischler 155-56, 160.

³² Leverich 182, citing Smith's memoir, *Army Brat* (1980).

³³ Of his mother Edwina's opposition to pleasure, Williams once claimed: "My homelife was dominated by a very wonderful but rather puritanical mother, who was in conflict with a very wonderful but rather profligate father. First I sided with the mother's side and then after my father's death, for some strange reason, I began to see his point of view better" (Devlin 79). In a poem that Williams began at least as early as 1940—and that he would later work into *Night of the Iguana*, where he sought to come to terms with his mother's "puritanical" asceticism—the fall from life into death is associated with the earth in much the same way as in "For My Grandmother" and is expressed in terms of sex: "the plummeting to earth, and then/ An intercourse not well-designed/ For creatures of the golden kind/ Whose native green mists arch above/ The earth's obscene, corrupting love" (Leverich 379; on this poem's history cf. Williams, *Collected Poems* 259).

³⁴ If Williams had a particular piece with this title in mind, he did not specify which one he meant. According to McMurry, "Two quite popular musical settings of the prayer exist: Charles Gounod's adaptation of Johann Sebastian Bach's Prelude in C . . . and Franz Schubert's setting of Sir Walter Scott's 'Lady of the Lake,' which was made popular by the singer Perry Como" (79-80).

³⁵ Given that Laura has just put on a record of "Dardanella"—a 1919 tune described as a "syncopated fox trot with a recurring bass pattern later known as 'boogie'" (Ewer 80)—it appears to McMurry that "Jim makes a joke concerning the song Laura has been playing. . . . It is obvious to both Tom and Jim that 'Dardanella' is . . . in essence, 'hot swing music'" (85).

³⁶ Williams calls the tune "LA GOLONDRINA" (*Glass Menagerie* 456); McMurry, noting that this was not "originally" a waltz, guesses that it has been "modified into a waltz by the dance-hall band" (87). Williams could be fallible when identifying the genres of particular, historical compositions, as in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, where the "Varsouviana" is referred to both by Blanche and in the stage directions as a "polka"; in fact, the word names a waltz (McCraw 769). However, there can be no question that Williams really meant a waltz in *Menagerie*, where the stage directions indicate "WALTZ MUSIC" and call for the two to dance "a clumsy waltz" (456). The composer Virgil Thomson defined swing music as "a form of the two-step" (qtd. in Stowe 4); if jazz bands of the 1930s ever played in triple time, they were not playing swing music (thanks to David Schiff for confirming this difference in personal communication, 11 October 2004).

³⁷ Bindas 14-15, quoting respectively: B. S. Rogers in *Esquire* for April 1939, the *New York Times* for 3 November 1938, and Joseph Rubba in *Metronome* for August 1936.

³⁸ See the annotation by Gussow and Holditch (Williams, *Plays* 1049). My own notes concerning the attribution of this lyric vary slightly from theirs, identifying the poet as Charles E. Carryl (rather than "Caryll") and the title of the song as "A Capital Ship (The Walloping Window Blind)." Reportedly, its humorous words were commonly sung by early twentieth-century schoolchildren: a circumstance which, if true, would ironically accentuate the childishness of the feebly egotistical fantasies that keep Jim happy.

³⁹ Bindas 15, quoting Joseph Rubba in *Metronome* for August 1936.

Works Cited

- Adler, Thomas P. *A Streetcar Named Desire: The Moth and the Lantern*. Boston: Twayne, 1990.
- Bell, Michael. "Lawrence and Modernism." *The Cambridge Companion to D. H. Lawrence*. Ed. Anne Fernihough. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. 179-96.
- Bigsby, C. W. E. *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama. Volume 2: Williams/Miller/Albee*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984.
- Bindas, Kenneth J. *Swing, That Modern Sound*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2001.
- Crandell, George. "Misrepresentation and Miscegenation: Reading the Racialized Discourse of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*." *Modern Drama* 40: 3 (1997): 337-46.
- Debusscher, Gilbert. "Tennessee Williams's Black Nativity: An Unpublished Libretto." *Costerus New Series* 66: *American Literature in Belgium*. Ed. Gilbert Debusscher. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988. 127-33.
- Devlin, Albert J., ed. *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1986.
- Early, Gerald. *The Culture of Bruising: Essays on Prizefighting, Literature, and Modern American Culture*. New York: Ecco, 1994.
- Erenberg, Lewis A. *Swingin' the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998.
- Ewen, David. *American Popular Songs From the Revolutionary War to the Present*. New York: Random House, 1966.
- Farfan, Penny. "Music." *The Tennessee Williams Encyclopedia*. Ed. Philip C. Kolin. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. 156-58.
- Friedwald, Will. *Stardust Melodies: The Biography of Twelve of America's Most Popular Songs*. New York: Pantheon, 2002.
- Furia, Philip. *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley: A History of America's Great Lyricists*. Oxford, Eng.: Oxford UP, 1992 [1990].
- Goldthwaite, Charles Anderson, Jr. "The Magic Carpet Ride: The Evolution of Rock 'n' Roll in American Prose Literature." Diss. U of Virginia, 2003.
- Hamm, Charles. *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America*. New York: Norton, 1979.
- Hughes, Langston. *The Plays to 1942: Mulatto to The Sun Do Move*. Vol. 5 of *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*. Ed. and intro. Leslie Catherine Sanders, with Nancy Johnston. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2002.
- Kolin, Philip C. "'No masterpiece has been overlooked': The Early Reception and Significance of Tennessee Williams's 'Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll.'" *ANQ* 8:4 (1995): 27-34.
- . "Race." *The Tennessee Williams Encyclopedia*. Ed. Philip C. Kolin. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. 204-08.
- . "Tennessee Williams' 'Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll' and Race Relations, 1932." *RE Arts & Letters: A Liberal Arts Forum* 20:2 (1995): 8-12.
- Lemke, Sieglinde. *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism*. Oxford, Eng.: Oxford UP, 1998.
- Leverich, Lyle. *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams*. New York: Crown, 1995.
- Logsdon, Guy. *Tex Ritter: High Noon*. Compact disc booklet notes. Hambergen, Germany: Bear Family Records, 1992.
- Lomax, Alan. *The Land Where the Blues Began*. New York: New Press, 1993.
- Mackey, Nathaniel. *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing*. Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge UP, 1993.
- McCraw, Harry W. "Tennessee Williams, Film, Music, Alex North: An Interview with Luigi Zaninelli." *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Culture* 48:4 (1995): 763-75.
- McMurry, William Joseph, Jr. "Music in Selected Works of Tennessee Williams." Diss. East Texas State U, 1982.
- Murray, Albert. *The Blue Devils of Nada: A Contemporary American Approach to Aesthetic Statement*. New York: Vintage International, 1997 [1st ed. 1996].
- . *Stomping the Blues*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1976.
- Porterfeld, Nolan. *Jimmie Rodgers, The Early Years: 1928-1929*. LP sleeve notes. Cambridge, MA: Rounder Records, 1990.
- Stowe, David W. *Swing Changes: Big-Band Jazz in New Deal America*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994.
- Tischler, Nancy. *Tennessee Williams: Rebellious Puritan*. New York: Citadel, 1961.
- Torgovnick, Marianna. *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990.
- Tracy, Steven C. *Langston Hughes and the Blues*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988.
- Van Duyvenbode, Rachel. "Darkness Made Visible: Miscegenation, Masquerade and the Signified Racial Other in Tennessee Williams' *Baby Doll* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*." *Journal of American Studies* 35:2 (2001): 203-15.

- Williams, Tennessee. "American Blues." Ms. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, Tennessee Williams Manuscript Collection, box 1, folder 8. N.d.
- . *American Blues*. New York: Dramatists Play Service Inc., 1948.
- . "Big Black: An Mississippi Idyll." *Collected Stories*. Intro. Gore Vidal. New York: New Directions, 1985. 26-31.
- . "The Bottle of Brass." ms. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, Tennessee Williams Manuscript Collection, box 4, folder 10. N.d.
- . *The Collected Poems of Tennessee Williams*. Ed. David Roessel and Nicholas Moschovakis. New York: New Directions, 2002.
- . "For my Grandmother Rosina Maria Francesca von Albertzart-Otte Dakin (Or Rose)." Ms. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, Tennessee Williams Manuscript Collection, box 13, folder 8. N.d.
- . *Fugitive Kind*. Ed. and intro. Allean Hale. New York: New Directions, 2001.
- . *The Glass Menagerie*. Williams, *Plays* 393-465.
- . *Hello From Bertha. 27 Wagons Full of Cotton & Other One-Act Plays*. New York: New Directions, 1966. 183-93. [1st ed. 1953].
- . *Memoirs*. New York: Doubleday, 1975.
- . *Orpheus Descending with Battle of Angels : Two Plays by Tennessee Williams*. New York: New Directions, 1958.
- . *Plays 1937-1955*. Selected and annotated by Mel Gussow and Kenneth Holditch. New York: The Library of America, 2000.
- . *The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams. Volume I: 1920-1945*. Ed. Albert J. Devlin and Nancy Tischler. New York: New Directions, 2000.
- . *A Streetcar Named Desire*. New York: New Directions, 2004 [1st ed. 1947].
- Wolfe, Charles K. *White Country Blues, 1926-1938: A Lighter Shade of Blue*. Compact disc booklet notes. New York: Sony Music Entertainment, 1993.