

## Summary Chapter From Marie B. Trout's Book: *The Blues – Why it Still Hurts so Good*

In a rapidly changing world, the blues invites us to connect. It is like a good friend that doesn't let you down. Whether we turn the car radio to a blues station, put on an album by a favorite artist, or go out to hear a blues band live, the blues is comforting and always accessible. It allows us to connect to ourselves, each other, to those who came before, and to restorative forays into the experiential. The blues doesn't inspire revolution or protest. It helps us find our equilibrium when the world turns upside down. The blues helps us find cohesion. Artists build continuing blues traditions cumulatively on styles from the past, adapting them through imitation until they eventually claim new blues expressions as their own by merging influences with inspiration.

Befriending the blues invites us to be real and show up as we are. Many blues boomers feel disengaged with—and disconnected from—a world around them that they perceive as filled with phoniness, misunderstood political correctness, superficiality, disingenuousness, and diffuse power structures. For them, blues music serves as an antidote, providing something real, in an environment that is unproblematic, safe, enjoyable and fun. Blues music connects the dots between an inner, often opaque universe of sensations, and an outer shared experience. Engagement and empathy are possible when blues fans feel safe enough to connect with others. The blues is such a safe place. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, blues music thus plays a powerful role in the lives of its fans, although the makeup of its core audience has changed.

In the 1960s, when the main audience for the blues shifted from African Americans to whites, the role of the blues partially shifted with it. In the black community, the blues had been an escape valve, an essential vessel for emotional release. Through “signifyin’,” it provided a safe way to state one’s feelings, while delivering an implicitly understood stab at those in power. The blues form afforded a repetitive, rhythmical, and lyrical structure that helped to induce light, trance-like, or mildly hypnotic states in which one could escape the troubles of the day, at least momentarily. After the Civil Rights Movement, blues music was largely left behind by African Americans who continually brought new styles of music into being, styles that were often more efficient in communicating the direct language of expression that was necessary as the African American community determinedly climbed toward the mountaintop of equality. Blues music was broadly shunned by younger generations of blacks, maybe because it was a reminder of a painful past when the chokehold of racial oppression was an inescapable reality.

Some elements of the blues are adept in capturing and expressing universally felt emotions and this partially explains why this art form has had—and continues to have—such depth of influence in our culture. Blues is well suited to tell it like it is: to express joy, elation, celebration, frustration, confusion, a sense of being stuck, etc., in an uncomplicated and accessible musical form. Blues boomers grew up in times of rapid social change, when the ideal was to be strong, silent, self-contained, and hard-working. Such ideals, however, soon confronted the breakdown of social conventions in the late 1960s. For baby boomers, old morals often conflicted with new ideals. Fear of an individual as well as a collective show of vulnerability, doubt, or weakness in the postwar psyche was ubiquitous. Blues, and many genres built on blues influences, offered a musical language that was able to express the complex emotions that accompanied growing up in a repressed, suspicious, and bottled-up culture, and offered access to a more spontaneous mode of self-expression. Musicians became role models for the new “cool:” a way of being real. Blues musicians showed their courage through emotional straightforwardness and authentic connectedness, both in their musical

performances as well as in their personal appearances. On many 1960s college campuses, and for suburban youths growing up with contact with the blues scene, blues music also offered visceral learning opportunities about social injustice thanks to the ability of the music to deliver emotionally poignant lessons through emotional identification with the plight of bluesmen and women.

In the second decade of the 21st Century, blues fans are overwhelmingly white and middle-aged. They use blues music to relax, have fun, and be entertained. Blues offers them access to an inner universe of immediacy, authentic connection to others—as well as dreamy states of being that open them to realms *slightly* outside normal, everyday awareness. Blues boomers find emotional healing in blues music. Musicians and fans playing the blues help continue a tradition of simple yet sincere, deep, and honest music that requires deep levels of immersion to master. Engaging with blues music creates possibilities for loosely and individually designed, yet collectively celebrated, rituals, which include an experiential inner initiation, a way to work through stress and anxiety, an opportunity for catharsis, and an experience of connection to emotionally connected ancestors.

The blues is dependent on a reciprocal relationship between those who play it and those who listen. It does not “do” anything by itself. It is not therapy although it contains therapeutic elements. It is not merely entertainment, although it is certainly often entertaining. It is not a drug, although it can alter perceptions and offer mood enhancements. It is not a museum piece, although it can connect us to a visceral knowledge about the past. Such study of blues history provides insights into the commonality of human beings through time. It is not a spiritual practice, although the blues can offer access into realms of the experiential. The blues is apolitical, although resonating with the field of other people’s joys, concerns, suffering, and misdeeds can bring about feelings of compassion and resolve that inspire a desire to bring about change. The blues is not a cure for anything, although it can act as a healer of both emotional and mental anguish.

One can speculate that playing and listening to blues music that concerns itself with difficult aspects of human life, could potentially contribute to a

process of self-destruction: that musical immersion through reliving traumatic, sad, or desperate topics could bring about a permanent sense of victimhood, where painful past experiences were reprogrammed into a continuing “story” through repeated exposure to the blues. Here blues music could theoretically aid in the perpetuation of drug addiction, alcoholism, loneliness, and continuing emotional re-injury. One might speculate that this could have been a contributing factor to the early demise of the members of the “27 club”—artists who lived hard and died young. It is important to note however, that these artists didn’t die from feeling and expressing difficult emotions. They died from trying to self-medicate with drugs and alcohol to *prevent* themselves from feeling, or to embellish on what they thought they wanted to feel. They can be seen as examples of what happens when we forget that we do not get to choose only one side of the coin: the road to joy opens more fully when we also dare to boldly walk through our blues. Living a life in wholeness of experience cannot be short cut through a quest for pleasure and comfort, at least not long-term.

This component of blues music aiding in self-destructive patterns was not a discernible factor among blues fans today. Instead, they categorically and enthusiastically talked about benefits they receive from their love of the music. Listeners’ mental benefits were dependent on the blues performers’ musical transparency, honesty of expression, and ability to invite listeners in. The benefits were just as dependent, however, on listeners’ ability to let go, their level of initiation, who they were accompanied by, and where the concert or listening experience took place. Among modern blues fans, the access to something “real”—even if it was around difficult or painful emotions—felt subtly cathartic and was experienced as a relief. This transparency was often referred to as an indirect or subtle way to move *through* emotions rather than getting stuck in them.

The language of blues is both universal and context-specific. It holds the potential to speak the language of the heart universally. It thus helps to further understanding, connection, and a sense of compassion across time, as well as to overcome socially constructed barriers between people. It can

also have a specific relevance and meaning to certain demographic groups when viewed through the interpretive lens of a specific era, ethnic, social, and/or cultural background. Each generation of blues musicians merges influences, inspiration, trends, sounds, musical equipment choices, and lyrical topics with what is going on around them. Fans resonate because the music strikes a chord within them—they perceive it as relevant to their situation beyond obviously enjoying how it sounds.

Blues boomers stated that the blues is fun—helping them connect to a communal experience in which they felt entertained, set free, validated, and accepted. They expressed that their inner landscape was resonated in an outer community, one in which they felt accepted in spite of—or maybe because of—more readily shared imperfections. They talked about the blues milieu as refreshingly unpretentious and supportive. They also wanted to pass on the gift of the blues to others, and to honor those who helped synthesize the genre.

Blues facilitates contact with a language of the heart. In making that contact, fans experience emotions without fear of judgment that otherwise might be opaque or out of reach. Listening to blues music helped them feel that the lowest lows, as well as the highest highs, are part of the human experience that can be shared in the blues. Blues music, and its history, inspired fans to not run away from their own fear, pain, or sorrow, but to find comfort in the fact that others had felt that way too, and that by this realization, feelings of stress and anxiety were often lessened in their lives. Learning about blues ancestors certainly helped them put their own worries and anxieties in perspective. Blues helps those who love it accept that our shared humanity is not easily grasped in sound bites. It is paradoxical and complex, but ultimately it also holds the potential for deep connectedness and authentic beingness including experiences that are spiritual.

Blues boomers use blues music as a vessel in which it is possible to connect to, and integrate, ancient knowledge, as rhythms sync up and the groove carries them through the night. The sound, lyrics, and repetitive rhythm seem deceptively simple, yet are in fact subtly and passionately

complex, musical components that require deep immersion to master. One can speculate that the repetitive and simple—or polyrhythmic and complex—rhythms that have been practiced in indigenous cultures’ rituals and ceremonies for thousands of years, in fact, have been crucial in our survival as a species, because it enabled us to feel united and therefore stronger. Might this sonic and experiential field have connected us internally, as well as to everything around us, as we expressed emotional energy in a shared container that held us, resonated with our deepest feelings, and gave us reason to celebrate, as well as courage to move through our fears, in community? We can only speculate about this evolutionary aspect of grooving together.

But we do know that this is indeed a part of the relevance of blues music for those who love it today. For blues fans, the ancient knowledge and wisdom that survived in this music combine with the potential inherent in modern civilization. And in this combination, modern blues fans have access to an integration of powerful potentiality. The study of blues fans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century hints that Steven Pinker’s claim might be woefully incomplete, when he states that music, evolutionarily speaking, is merely auditory cheesecake. Blues fans agree en masse that blues is, as Iglauer stated, “the most emotionally fulfilling music ever.” And as the music evolves along the blues evolution timeline, it continues to connect us to our roots, our feelings, and to those who play, partake, and listen.

