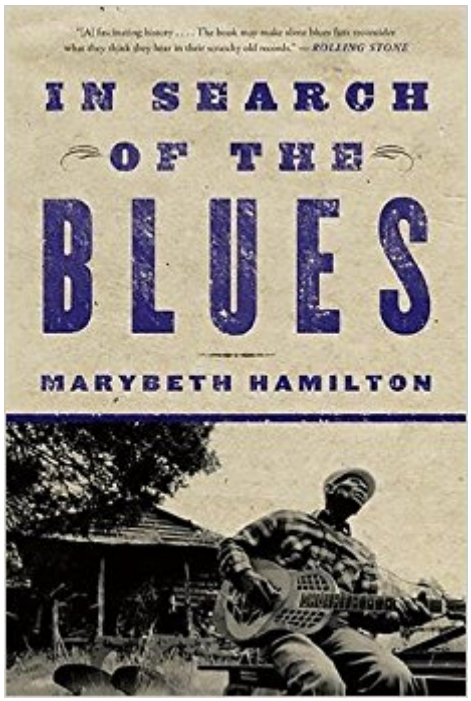
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In Search Of The Blues



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Synopsis

In this extraordinary reconstruction of the origins of the blues, historian Marybeth Hamilton demonstrates that the story as we know it is largely a myth. Following the trail of characters like Howard Odum, who combed Mississippi's back roads with a cylinder phonograph to record vagrants, John and Alan Lomax, who prowled Southern penitentiaries and unearthed the rough, melancholy vocals of Leadbelly, and James McKune, a recluse whose record collection came to define the primal sounds of the Delta blues, Hamilton reveals this musical form to be the culmination of a longstanding white fascination with the exotic mysteries of black music.By excavating the history of the Delta blues, Hamilton reveals the extent to which American culture has been shaped by white fantasies of racial difference.

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Customer Reviews

"Marybeth Hamilton’s gripping new book tells of seekers, ranters, scholars, oddballs, propagandists, and down-and-out loners, united in a search for the Mississippi Delta blues. More than anybody, she says, this quirky and dedicated band not simply recovered the blues but turned Delta music into one of the fundamentals of modern musical culture." -- Sean Wilentz

Marybeth Hamilton is a professor of American history at Birkbeck College, University of London. The author of When I'm Bad, I'm Better, she is also a writer and presenter of features for BBC radio. She lives in London.

After reading some of the posted reviews of this book I was expecting some sort of controversial shoot-from-the-hip myth shattering exposÃƒÂ©. I was disappointed not to find any of that in this book. But what I did find was a well researched, well written book about some of the people that went out looking to record early African American folk music. Closer to the end of the book the author starts getting into the history of early record collectors and this was also fascinating. There has always been a big difference between collecting records and listening to or playing music. I thought the way the author showed the bridge between them was well done.

blues nothing but the blues

This is one of the most interesting, thought-provoking and enjoyable books I have ever read. The author goes behind the scenes and looks at those people who contributed to the popularity of the blues among white people. It is a generous view that reveals the agendas and values driving people such as the Lomaxes and others, in a fair and consistent manner. It gave me a fresh appreciation for the music and the people who lived and sang it, my curiosity to hear more was aroused and I have since been hearing those old performances with renewed interest. I came away with a heightened sensitivity for the complexity and persistence of racism and the need to reflect on our capacity to mythologize and project our desires and needs onto the things we consider exotic and real. Brilliant.Thank you MaryBeth Hamilton.

In her book, "Inventing the Blues" (2008), Marybeth Hamilton advances the provocative claim that the blues, more specifially tbe Delta Blues, is a form of music created in large part by the imaginations of white men. I do not find her argument compelling, to say the least. Nevertheless, I found this book worth reading for the story it tells about how various individuals pioneered in the study of the blues beginning early in the 20th Century to the revival of interest in blues music in the 1960s. Although her book is unconvincing and even infuriating in some respects, it is valuable for those readers with an interest in the blues. Hamilton, born in California, teaches American history at Birkbeck College, University of London, and has written other books on aspects of American popular culture.Early in her book, (p.22) Hamilton says she is not going to cover the development of the Delta Blues as a musical style by analyzing the songs of Charlie Patton, Son House, Robert Johnson and other bluesmen. She points to Robert Palmer’s study "Deep Blues" as among the works that have explored the music. Instead, Hamilton proposed to show how her central characters, all of whom are white, "set out to find an undiluted and primal black music." Hamilton

then asks what it was that drove these indivduals to think that an "undiluted and primal black" music existed and why it was important to these individuals to find it. The way Hamilton frames her question largely presupposes her result. The works of Palmer and other writers such as Ted Gioia in his excellent recent study "Delta Blues" examine the blues by looking at the blues, bluesmen and blueswomen. Hamilton will have little of this and begins with the assumption that the blues was somehow a conceptual creation of whites. Hamilton finds the need for this conceptualization in the racial attitudes and segregation prevailing in the United States up through at least the 1950's. Late in the book, Hamilton introduces another theme. She finds the Delta blues largely a sexist creation by men who were uncomfortable with their masculinity and worried about evolving ideas of gender and egalitarianism. (see pp 240-243).Each of the five major characters Hamilton discusses is well described. Hamilton offers good insight into how the blues were found, in spite of her hyperbolic claim that the blues were invented. She describes the work of the early sociologist, Howard Odum who early in has career travelled in the byways of lumber camps and out of the way fields in the rural South to hear and record on primitive equipment the frequently obscene hollers and calls of laborers and field hands. Hamilton spends a great deal of time on pioneering work of John Lomax, who discovered Leadbelly in a Louisiana prison. She explores John Lomax's racial attitudes and offers a personal portrayal of him through love letters he wrote to a woman named Ruby Terrill. Lomax's son Alan also figures largely in the story as he tried to move away from his father's racial prejudices. Alan Lomax was instrumental in the rediscovery of Jelly Roll Morton as Hamilton points out. She underplays his role in the 1940s in recording and preserving the work of Deltabluesmen Muddy Waters and Son House.Of Hamilton's characters, two are infrequently associated with the blues, and it was worth learning about them in the book. Dorothy Scarborough was a highly-educated woman whose parents had been active in the Confederacy. While living and teaching in New York City, she conceived the idea of studying black music. She travelled south and interviewed many people, mostly the descendants of white plantation owners but some black musicians as well. In 1925, she wrote a book "On the Trail of Negro Folk Songs". Hamilton points out that this book is little read today due to its racial stereotyping. But I think Hamilton is correct that this book has much to teach about early black music.The fourth group of charactrs Hamilton discusses are William Russell, Frederick Ramsey, and Charles Smith who became enamored of New Orleans jazz and of the fabled Storyville district. They published an early study of jazz called "Jazzmen" in 1937 which seemed to conflate jazz and the blues and to find the heart of black music in the urban area of New Orleans rather than in the fields and rural areas that the Lomaxes, Odum, and Scarborough explored.The final characters explored in the book are the record collectors of the

1940s. in particular a lonely and puzzling figure named James McKune. McKune lived in poverty and obscurity for 25 years in a Brooklyn YMCA amassing a collection of race records that he stored in a cardboard box under his bed. As McKune delved into what was then obscure music, he developed a passion for what we now know as the Delta bluesmen, especially for Charlie Patton. Slowly, a small group of collectors coalesced around McKune and shared his interest in this music. In the early 1960s, pioneering reissues of Delta blues music based upon McKune's collection were issued by small record labels and scholars and enthusiasts, in the United States and Britain, began to take note. McKune himself, bedeveled by problems with alcohol, sex, and mental health, was the victim of a bizarre murder in 1971, long after he had lost interest in the Delta blues. McKune, with has fantasies, loneliness and obsessions, Hamilton argues "invented" the Delta blues. Hamilton describes this "invention""the blues revival stands alongside the Beat movement as an opening movement of ... the 'male flight from committment' that percolated through postwar American culture. What united both movement was their almost exclusively male constituency and their romance with outsider manhood, with defiant black men who seemed to scorn the suburban breadwinner's stiffling, soul-destroying routine." (p. 241)I don't see anything in this analysis that supports the conclusion that McKune and his fellow-collectors "invented" the Delta blues. Palmer and others have shown there was a music there to be discovered. Other scholars such as Elijah Wald in "Escaping the Delta" have shown how much other forms of black music influenced the Delta blues. But the influence of other styles of music in the Delta hardly shows that the genre was somehow conceptualized and invented by white fans.In his book, "Delta Blues" which I mentioned earlier, Ted Gioia takes issue with Hamilton's portrayal of McKune's role. He writes:"Perhaps it would have been better for academics such as Hamilton to take the lead on this process during these years of neglect-- although other fears and obsessions might have emerged in this case. But the issue is moot: college professors had no interest in the blues at this time. Moreover, the record collectors were the only people who had access to this music, most of which was available solely on the original 78s in which it had first been presented to the public. As such, we must temper our critcism of these enthusiasts with at least a measure of gratitude for the music they were able to track down, preserve, and share with those open-minded enought to appreciate its virtues." (Gioia p. 349)Although her primary claim in this book lacks support, Hamilton has written a valuable account of the individuals who pursued their passion for the blues and made this music available to all Americans.Robin Friedman

The premise of In Search of the Blues is that "delta blues" is a nothing more than the sham creation

of white men. This is an interesting proposition, and, ever the skilled advocate, Ms. Marshall does a fair job of making her case. But from the beginning, Marshall overlooks the most important "fact" of all: the music is real. Charley Patton, Robert Johnson, Mississippi Fred McDowell, Sonny Boy Williamson, Big Bill Broonzy, etc. -- these are real people who lived real lives playing real music on real instruments and who made real records. It is not the contrived creation of some New York publishing company. To be sure, as Marshall goes to great lengths to point out, many of the records are obscure, produced in limited quantities and sold only regionally, only to be discovered an championed years later by record collectors. So what! What is important is not the contents of a jukebox in 1941, but what has been played and spread in jukes, porches, churches (yes, churches -- consider the Fred McDowell record "Amazing Grace" and Mississippi John Hurt's recording of "I shall not be moved") for nearly a 100 years. This is revisionist blather with an agenda. Avoid.

I've actually read this book.It's a good, thorough, entertaining, and well-written account of the where blues came from and where it fits into the history of music.I found myself at the end before I realized it. There are copious end notes (a good thing), so the text itself comprises only 2/3 of the size.There is no hidden agenda or historical revisionism; you'll find no identity politics or apologists for racism here.Modern blues legends aren't mentioned because this covers the advent of the blues and how those in the midst of its birth wrote about it. Therefore, it does not include any of the many artists of the 60s and onward who were influenced by the original blues artists.Of great interest to me personally was the brief history of recorded music in general, and the views of various strata of society at the time.This book deserves to become part of the cannon for classes on music history.

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